

Chinese consumers' purchase intention of fresh cherries: Modeling of relations between satisfaction and perceived quality

Intención de compra en cerezas frescas de los consumidores chinos: modelando relaciones entre satisfacción y calidad percibida

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to model Chinese consumers' intention to purchase fresh cherries through direct and indirect relations and mediating role between perceived intrinsic quality, perceived extrinsic quality and satisfaction. The analytical method used was a structural equation modeling (SEM). Surveys were applied to 388 buyers in three traditional markets in Beijing, China. A confirmatory factor analysis was performed, which presented an adequate goodness of fit to accept the model, according to the literature, which confirmed the relations. The results showed, that perceived extrinsic quality and satisfaction are directly and significantly related to Chinese consumers' intention to purchase fresh cherries. Additionally, an indirect and significant relationship was found between perceived intrinsic quality and purchase intention, through the mediating role of satisfaction.

Keywords

consumers • fresh cherries • perceived quality • satisfaction • purchase intention • China

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RESUMEN

El propósito de este estudio fue modelar la intención de compra de los consumidores chinos de cerezas frescas a través de relaciones directas e indirectas y un papel mediador entre calidad intrínseca percibida, calidad extrínseca percibida y satisfacción. El método analítico utilizado fue un modelado de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM). Se aplicaron encuestas a 388 compradores en tres mercados tradicionales en Beijing, China. Se realizó un análisis factorial confirmatorio, el cual presentó una bondad de ajuste adecuada para aceptar el modelo, según la literatura, confirmando las relaciones. Los resultados mostraron, que la calidad extrínseca percibida y la satisfacción están directa y significativamente relacionados con la intención de consumidores chinos de comprar cerezas frescas. Adicionalmente, se encontró una relación indirecta y significativa entre la calidad percibida intrínseca y la intención de compra, a través del papel mediador de la satisfacción.

Palabras clave

consumidores • cerezas frescas • calidad percibida • satisfacción • intención de compra • China

INTRODUCTION

Chile is the main supplier of fresh cherries in China, which receives more than 85% of the total exports of this fruit (6). An important leap forward considering that more than 10 years ago it was the 22nd supplier for the fruit industry in China (35). In addition, in 2018 Chile exported more than one hundred thousand tons of fresh cherries to China, almost quadruple the tons for all of 2012 (32). Such rapid growth can raise questions about certain factors and behavioral patterns that can provide information about the reasons for fruit consumption and, in particular, fresh cherries in China. Yet few studies have been published about the Chinese consumer generally and the way in which they buy food (19). It has been stated that the Chinese consumer's behavior is essentially different from other countries due to its unique cultural, social and economic roots (3).

From this perspective, concepts such as purchase intention have been used in the specialized marketing literature as a measurement for predicting behavior and subsequent repurchase. The concept reflects consumers' likely behavior in future purchase decisions in the short term (7). Purchase intention is the possibility that determines customers' willingness to buy the product; the greater the chances, the stronger the purchase intention (25). It is crucial to recognize customers' purchase intentions, since their behavior can generally be predicted according to their intention Hsu *et al.* (2017) suggest that purchase intention is a combination of the concentration of consumers in the purchase of a product and the likelihood of buying. For a complete representation of consumers' purchase behavior, their attitudes, preferences, motivations and perceptions of income must be considered. It is also noted that purchase intention is a future projection of the consumer's behavior, which will significantly help form his/her attitudes (15).

In this area, the fresh fruit market in China has grown significantly, driven by growing demand from consumers increasingly concerned about healthy diets, food quality requirements and availability of fruit all year round (40), which has opened the Chinese domestic market to influence by international trade (3).

Although, perceived quality cannot be determined objectively, there are currently four main approaches to explain it: The economics of information approach, the means-ends chain approach, integrative approaches and multi-attribute approaches (12, 28), with the last being the one used in this study. The multi-attribute approach understands quality as a dichotomous phenomenon between intrinsic and extrinsic cues (12, 19, 33, 48).

Intrinsic signals measure the quality objectively. These qualities pervade the product with their functionality and are related to its physical appearance (1, 30). According to Olson and Jacoby (1972), the intrinsic attributes are specific to each product, disappear when they are consumed and cannot be altered without changing the nature of the product itself (1, 5). Conversely, extrinsic signals are not physically part of the product, but they

represent information related to the product, which can be modified externally, for example use by dates, information related to the origin and information related to production and processing practices (20, 30). Generally, high perceived quality reflects superiority, greater reliability or greater functionality of a product. Therefore, when consumers favorably perceive the quality of a product, they are more willing to buy it, *i.e.*, a greater potential intention to determine the mentioned behavior (11).

Satisfaction is the psychological state where the emotions that contain unconfirmed expectations are combined with the consumer's previous feelings about consumption experiences (23). It is considered a cognitive and affective response by consumers to a food product in a purchase context (14). The important factors for consumer satisfaction when consuming foods appear before, during and after eating. For example, before eating, the important factors are: expectations and desires based on memories of previous food experiences and the context in which the meal is perceived (4). One of the most studied approaches in the literature is the paradigm or theory of the disconfirmation of expectations. This theory indicates that disconfirmation is a post-purchase process, in which the consumer establishes a comparison between the results obtained and the previously created expectations, and it is the difference between these two magnitudes that leads the consumer to form judgments about a product or service (42). Consequently, customer satisfaction can lead to a later behavioral intention as a purchase and a positive communication. Several authors have shown a direct relation between consumer satisfaction and the consumer's behavioral intention (22).

Additionally, the perceived quality of and satisfaction with food are highly correlated, with the former concept being a precursor of the latter (12, 14, 15, 31, 36).

Therefore, the main aim of this study was to model the purchase intention of Chinese consumers of fresh cherries through direct and indirect relations and mediating role between intrinsic perceived quality, extrinsic perceived quality and satisfaction. On this basis, the following hypotheses were tested:

H₁: Perceived intrinsic quality has a direct and significant relation with the satisfaction of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries.

H₂: Perceived extrinsic quality has a direct and significant relation with the satisfaction of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries.

H₃: Perceived intrinsic quality has a direct and significant relation with the purchase intention of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries.

H₄: Perceived extrinsic quality has a direct and significant relation with the purchase intention of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries.

H₅: Perceived intrinsic quality has an indirect and significant relation with the purchase intention of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries through the mediating role of satisfaction.

H₆: Perceived extrinsic quality has an indirect and significant relation with the purchase intention of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries through the mediating role of satisfaction.

H₇: Satisfaction has a direct and significant relation with the purchase intention of the Chinese consumer of fresh cherries.

The structural model is shown in figure 1.

Indirect relations: H₅ and H₆ are provided in the body of the text.
Direct relations; H₃ and H₄ are provided in the body of the text.

Relaciones indirectas: H₅ y H₆ se proporcionan en el cuerpo del texto.
Relaciones directas; H₃ y H₄ se proporcionan en el cuerpo del texto.

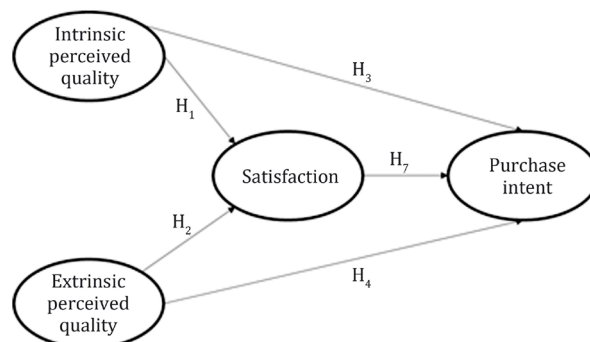


Figure 1. Causal model on purchase intention in Chinese consumers of cherries.

Figura 1. Modelo causal de intención de compra en consumidores chinos de cerezas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample and questionnaire

A survey was applied to a non-probability convenience sample in Beijing, China (12, 28, 37) comprised of 388 people of Chinese nationality. The survey was developed in Chile in Spanish and then sent to China for translation. After the completion of this process by the specialized agency in Chinese, possible issues were identified and the writing was modified to adjust to the local cultural contexts in terms of vocabulary, idiomatic and syntactic equivalence where it was corrected and translated again back into Spanish. The two versions were compared, ensuring their consistency.

To improve the survey-taking process, a user manual was designed in Chinese, which was meant to instruct and guide the Chinese surveyors, reducing the likelihood of errors in the data collection due to reports of similar studies conducted in China, warning of people there being less familiar with surveys (19). The field work was conducted in two phases: the first consisted of applying a pretest, where 30 individuals were surveyed in the Yuyan Daxue market in Haidian district in Beijing, through which errors were detected that could affect the result, and these surveys were thus excluded from the analysis. The second stage consisted of applying the survey on a massive scale. The buyers of fresh cherries in three characteristic sectors of Beijing were defined as the sampling unit: i) the Sanyuanli food market, with 125 valid surveys, located in the international sector, is ample, with a good infrastructure and location, and has fruits of different origins and qualities; ii) the Wuluju market, with 128 valid surveys, located in the city's southwest, is in a sector far from the international area and focuses more on suburban life, and the prices of fruits are lower than in the Sanyuanli market; and iii) the Wudaokou sector, with 135 valid surveys, in the Haidian district, has a young population, as it is located near Tsinghua University and the Beijing Language and Culture University. Data were collected on different days.

The evaluation instrument included questions corresponding to perceived extrinsic quality (PEQ), perceived intrinsic quality (PIQ), satisfaction (ST) and purchase intention (PI). The method used to collect the information was quantitative based on a structured survey of 16 statements, (1: not important; 5: very important) for perceived quality, 5 statements for satisfaction (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree), and 6 statements for purchase intention (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree).

For the construct PIQ, attributes were used based on the studies by Zeithaml (1988), Grunert *et al.* (2015) and Chiang *et al.* (2018). The items used were: color, size, aroma, juiciness, flavor, texture and freshness. For the construct PEQ, attributes were used based on the studies by Ness *et al.* (2010), Grunert *et al.* (2015) and Chiang *et al.* (2018). The items considered in this study were: price, region of origin, seller's recommendation, seals of quality, commercial brand, packaging and bulk sale.

The construct satisfaction included statements used in previous studies by Sanzo *et al.* (2003), Espejel *et al.* (2009) and Chiang *et al.* (2018). The statements included in the study were: I feel satisfied with the product, I feel happy with the product, the product fulfills my purchase expectations, I am satisfied with the seller of the product and the product satisfies my needs.

Finally, for purchase intention, statements were included such as: I intend to continue buying the product (15, 21); if I couldn't find the product in my usual store, I would look for it another one (17); I want to buy the product (41); I intend to increase the size of the purchases (11); I intend to increase the frequency of purchases (11), and I am going to make an effort to buy the product in the near future (46).

To perform the exploratory factor and confirmatory factor analyses and the structural equation model, the software SPSS Statistics v.21 was used with its complement Amos, employing maximum likelihood extraction (27).

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses

The exploration of dimensions, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity (BTS) were applied, which must be significant, *i.e.*, less than 0.05, being obtained from the reduction of dimensions (44). In the confirmatory analysis, two tests of construct reliability were determined: Cronbach's alpha, which measures the internal consistency of

the constructs individually, and the composite reliability index (CRI), which considers the interrelations of the constructs, both with an accepted minimum value of 0.7 (8). In order to obtain the validity of the latent variables, a convergent validity analysis was performed. The convergent validity is verified through the average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs, with the recommended minimum of 0.5, with which it may be stated that the variables explain more than 50% of the variance of their constructs, there being convergent validity (38).

Structural equation model

Once these tests were completed, the goodness of fit of the model was estimated. For this study, the following was determined: a) Relative Chi (X^2/df), which must be less than 2, b) Mean root error of approximation (RMSEA), with the maximum accepted value less than 0.05, c) Index Goodness of Fit (GFI), which must be greater than 0.95, d) Comparative Adjustment Index (CFI), which must be greater than 0.95, and e) Average Goodness of Fit Index (AFGI), which must have higher values at 0.80 (29).

Finally, based on the approach suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), the *bootstrap* technique was used to evaluate direct and indirect relations as well as the mediating role of the variables on purchase intention with a 95% confidence level and a P value less than 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With respect to the sociodemographic profile of the sample, table 1 illustrates greater participation in the purchase and consumption of fresh cherries by women. Generally, they are more aware of the implications of foods for health and the benefits of eating healthful foods (34).

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the sample.

Tabla 1. Perfil sociodemográfico de la muestra.

Item	Type	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	172	44.3%
	Female	216	55.7%
Age	Between 18 and 24 years	116	29.9%
	Between 25 and 34 years	120	30.9%
	Between 35 and 49 years	76	19.6%
	Between 50 and 64 years	51	13.1%
	More than 64 years	25	6.4%
Monthly income	Less than 4000 (RMB)	151	38.9%
	Between 4000 and 4999 (RMB)	25	6.4%
	Between 5000 and 6000 (RMB)	39	10.3%
	More than 6000 (RMB)	173	44.3%
Education level	Primary education	7	1.8%
	Secondary education	43	11.1%
	Technical professional	49	12.6%
	University education	289	74.5%

Williams, Ball and Crawford (2010), indicates that women have a greater gustatory preference for fruits and vegetables, and even have greater self-efficacy when it comes to following a healthy diet. Conversely, men worldwide consume fewer fruits and vegetables than what is recommended (2, 13). With respect to monthly family income, Florkowski *et al.* (2014) states that consumers with a higher income have greater chances of acquiring good quality fresh fruits. On the other hand, for purchaser of imported food in supermarkets of Beijing, Grunert *et al.* (2015) quantify a mean monthly family income of 7897 renminbi (RMB) and over 84 percent of those surveyed have a higher education. This is consistent with the results found in this research, especially if the data were collected in high-income sectors and with many universities.

Given that the sample obtained a value of 0.848 on the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index, a result above the minimum of 0.5 established by Williams, Brown and Onsmann (2010), it was valid to perform a factorial analysis.

Bartlett's test of sphericity was 0.00, indicating that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. The individual reliability of the indicators (table 2) determined that the observable variables of Chinese origin (ATRI01), Chilean origin (ATRI02) and US origin (ATRI03) were significant for the construct PEQ, and the variables texture (ATRI10), size/caliber (ATRI11) and color (ATRI16) for the construct PIQ.

Table 2. Exploration of dimensions.

Tabla 2. Exploración de dimensiones.

Construct	Attribute	Code	Critical ratio
Perceived extrinsic quality (PEQ)	Origin China	ATRI01	nd
	Origin Chile	ATRI02	15.307***
	Origin U.S.A	ATRI03	15.664***
	Seller's recommendation	ATRI04	ns
	Packaging	ATRI05	ns
	Bulk	ATRI06	ns
	Commercial brand	ATRI07	ns
	Seals of quality	ATRI08	ns
	Price	ATRI09	ns
Perceived Intrinsic Quality (PIQ)	Texture	ATRI10	nd
	Size /caliber	ATRI11	9.851***
	Aroma	ATRI12	ns
	Juiciness	ATRI13	ns
	Taste	ATRI14	ns
	Freshness	ATRI15	ns
Satisfaction (ST)	Color	ATRI16	9.971***
	I feel satisfied with the fresh cherries purchased	ATRI17	nd
	I feel happy with the cherries acquired	ATRI18	16.353***
	The fresh cherries meet my expectations	ATRI19	18.202***
	I feel satisfied with the seller of fresh cherries	ATRI20	14.447***
Purchase Intention (PI)	The fresh cherries satisfy my needs	ATRI21	18.207***
	I intend to increase the frequency of purchases of fresh cherries	ATRI22	nd
	I want to buy fresh cherries	ATRI23	18.716***
	If I couldn't find the product in my usual store, I would look for it another one	ATRI24	ns
	I intend to buy a greater amount of fresh cherries	ATRI25	20.668***
	I intend to continue buying fresh cherries	ATRI26	ns
	I am going to make an effort to buy fresh cherries in the near future	ATRI27	21.297***

***p < 0.05. nd: not determined, because this regression coefficient was adjusted to 1 to identify the model. ns: not incorporated as a variable to the model because it is insignificant.

*** p < 0,05. nd: no determinado, porque este coeficiente de regresión se ajustó a 1 para identificar el modelo.

ns: no incorporado como variable al modelo porque es insignificante.

Intrinsic quality results are consistent with another study on fruits like goji conducted in China by Yao *et al.* (2018), who reported that the Chinese consumer prefers fruits associated with good quality based on color and texture. Liu and Niyongira (2015) also detected that color generates the perception of safety that Chinese consumers have about foods. In another study, Sun (2010) established that the buyers of fresh cherries at online food markets prefer cherries according to their size and country of origin.

The indicators I feel satisfied with the fresh cherries purchased (ATRI17), I feel happy with the cherries acquired (ATRI18), the fresh cherries meet my expectations (ATRI19), I feel satisfied with the seller of fresh cherries (ATRI20) and the fresh cherries satisfy my needs (ATRI21) were part of the construct satisfaction, confirming the studies conducted on foods by Espejel *et al.* (2009) and Bech-Larsen and Tsalis (2018), which yielded results similar to those found in this study. Finally, the construct purchase intention was comprised of the indicators: I intend to increase the frequency of purchases of fresh cherries (ATRI22), I want to buy fresh cherries (ATRI23), I intend to buy a greater amount of fresh cherries (ATRI25) and I am going to make an effort to buy fresh cherries in the near future (ATRI27),

obtaining results similar to the studies by Buaprommee and Polyorat (2016) on meats and Fandos and Flavián (2006) on food products with denomination of origin.

The reliability of the constructs was determined in the confirmatory analysis (table 3). Cronbach's alpha was above 0.7 for the five constructs; thus, they can be reliably measured individually. At the same time, the composite reliability determined that the constructs were reliable to measure as a whole. The convergent validity of the construct indicated that the attributes of the latent variables share more than 50% of the explained variance. The goodness of fit of the model was good and fulfilled what was stipulated in the literature: $X^2/d.f = 1.887$, RMSEA= 0.048, GFI= 0.940 and AFGI= 0.915 and finally, CFI= 0.971.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity of the constructs.

Tabla 3. Fiabilidad y validez convergente de los constructos.

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Perceived intrinsic quality	0.745	0.751	0.503
Perceived extrinsic quality	0.860	0.863	0.679
Satisfaction	0.891	0.895	0.633
Purchase intention	0.889	0.890	0.672

With respect to the direct and indirect relationships between the variables (table 4), it was found with 95% confidence ($p < 0.05$) that only the intrinsic perceived quality in fresh cherries is directly and significantly related to the satisfaction of Chinese consumers, generating indirect effects on the purchase intention through the mediating role of satisfaction, which is opposed to the results obtained in extrinsic perceived quality. Other authors such as Ness *et al.* (2010), achieve partial support in the indirect relationship between perceived quality and behavioral intentions, possibly due to the behavioral duality of intrinsic and extrinsic perceived quality.

Table 4. Type of mediation. Direct, indirect path coefficients and totals by construct.

Tabla 4. Tipo de mediación. Coeficientes de trayectoria directa, indirecta y totales por constructo.

Construct	Satisfaction			Purchase intention		
	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE
Perceived intrinsic quality	0.333*	nd	0.330*	Ns	0.175*	0.175*
Perceived extrinsic quality	ns	nd	ns	0.267*	ns	0.267*
Satisfaction	nd	nd	nd	0.228*	nd	0.228*

It was found statistically that there is a direct and significant relation between the PIQ and satisfaction. Fan *et al.* (2017) and Chiang *et al.* (2018) showed that the signals of intrinsic quality present a direct and significant relation with Chinese consumers' satisfaction when preferring fresh fruits. This statistical relation was also demonstrated in other food types, *e.g.*, Espejel *et al.* (2009) in ham and Grunert *et al.* (2015) in pork ribs in China. This result means that hypothesis H_1 is accepted.

There was no statistical significance between PEQ and satisfaction, which means hypothesis H_2 is rejected. In this respect, studies like those conducted by Espejel and Fandos (2009) on wine and Chiang *et al.* (2018) on fresh cherries concluded that there is no positive and significant relation between PEQ and satisfaction; however, Grunert *et al.* (2015) determined that only in a narrow age group do the extrinsic attributes reach significance in Chinese consumer satisfaction.

Little information is available in the scientific literature linking PIQ and PEQ purchase intention; rather, various authors analyze it as a perceived general quality. For example, Buaprommee and Polyorat (2016) demonstrated that there is no direct and significant

* $p < 0.05$. nd not determined.
ns: not significant. DE: Direct effect. IE: Indirect effect. TE: Total effect.

* $p < 0,05$. nd no determinado.
ns: no significativo. DE: Efecto directo. IE: Efecto indirecto. TE: Efecto total.

relation between perceived quality and purchase intention in Thai consumers of red meats; however, Ness *et al.* (2010) concluded that in 5 of 6 European countries a direct and significant relation does exist between the two variables. The differences in the results obtained by both authors might not only be due to cultural diversity, but also because there was no dissociation between extrinsic and intrinsic attributes. The results obtained in this study determined that PIQ presents no direct and significant relation with purchase intention, a result in conflict with that obtained in PEQ. Therefore, hypothesis H_3 is rejected and H_4 is accepted.

A similar context occurs when the indirect relations of PIQ and PEQ on satisfaction are measured. Ness *et al.* (2010) determined that perceived quality has an indirect relation on the behavioral intentions of European consumers of fruits like tomatoes. Also, in the services sector, researchers like Wu and Li (2017) demonstrated that quality is a precursor of satisfaction and a good predictor of behavioral intentions. In this study it was demonstrated statistically that PIQ has an indirect and significant bearing on purchase intention through the mediating role of satisfaction; therefore, hypothesis H_5 is accepted, on the other hand, no indirect and significant influence was found between PEQ and purchase intention as a result of the mediating role of satisfaction. Therefore, H_6 is rejected.

Satisfaction has a direct and significant relation on the purchase intention of Chinese consumers. Thus, hypothesis H_7 is accepted. This is consistent with studies conducted by Espejel and Fandos (2009) on wines, Ness *et al.* (2010) on tomatoes and Konuk (2018) on organic foods, which shows a direct and significant relation between satisfaction and purchase intention.

In addition, the results obtained from hypotheses H_1 , H_5 , and H_7 confirm that there is complete mediation between PIQ and purchase intention from the mediating role of satisfaction. The results of this research seem to be in line with the marketing initiatives developed by ASOEX, enhancing the attributes of intrinsic quality, color and size, and linking it to celebrations and traditions, through activities such as "Super Cherries days", "Chilean Cherries dance" and "Cherries from Chile", activities that have also been enhanced by public policies and agreements such as the free trade agreement between the two countries in force since 2005.

The limitations of this study, considering the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, are that the results cannot be generalized and that the sample is not representative according to the population distribution.

CONCLUSIONS

The main aim of this study was to model the purchase intention of Chinese consumers of fresh cherries through direct and indirect relations and mediating role between perceived intrinsic quality, perceived extrinsic quality and satisfaction. It was found that Chinese consumers' satisfaction with fresh cherries is related directly and significantly to purchase intention, and that in turn satisfaction acted as a mediator of the intrinsic perceived quality variable, indirectly and significantly affecting purchase intention.

The study also found a direct and significant relationship between the latent variable of perceived extrinsic quality with purchase intention, and although it is not explained by the mediating role of satisfaction, it manages to be the variable with the best correlation in total effects on the intention to purchase.

The attributes that comprise the latent variables are worthy of study for exporters of fresh cherries to China, as the country of origin stands out for perceived extrinsic quality, and the color, size and texture for perceived intrinsic quality. It is important that these attributes are not neglected, because combined they can help generate the construction of quality in consumers, who will be willing to acquire fresh cherries when they perceive a greater value and useful life of the product than for the money they pay.

In summary, the exporter of fresh cherries should focus his strategy on the intrinsic attributes of the product that directly satisfy the Chinese consumers (color, texture and size). These attributes have a direct and significant relationship on the purchase intention these consumers, through the latent variable of satisfaction. On the other hand, the exporters should highlight the origin attribute (such as Chilean origin), because it shows direct

and significant relationship with the intention of purchase, through of latent variable of perceived extrinsic quality.

Future studies could include in the model variables related to the consumer's purchase intention such as: loyalty, sacrifice and perceived risk. Additionally, studying the moderating role of these variables in consumers can be a feasible suggestion to delve more deeply into the study discussed here.

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