

International Marketing Trends Conference - Doctoral Colloquium 2018 (Proposal):

***Provisional Title:** “Country of Origin Ecological Image: Dimensions of the Construct and their Impacts on Consumers’ Evaluation of Eco-Products.”*

***Ph.D. Candidate:** Omar EL MOUSSAWEL.*

***University:** EM Strasbourg Business School - HuManiS, University of Strasbourg, France.*

ABSTRACT

In the latter part of the twentieth century, people have been suffering from enormous environmental problems (pollution, global warming, natural resources depletion, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, water pollution, etc.,) caused by their increased pressure on resources that is mostly related to industrial manufacturing (Yan and Yazdanifard, 2014). These environmental issues have led to an emergence of an environmentalism trend around the world and a raise in concern for environmental protection culminated in an increasing demand for ecological products (Azzone and Noci, 1998). But, with this growing demand on ecological products all over the world (Chen, 2008), and with little knowledge on environmental and social practices taken by foreign companies, consumers may tend to evaluate environmental and social assertions from the ecological image they have for the country of origin of an eco-product (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014). Hence, this study aims to explore the dimensions of the country of origin ecological image and how could they impact consumers’ evaluation of ecological products, where to the best of our knowledge, no research in the country of origin field has studied this dimension before.

KEYWORDS

Country of Origin Ecological Image; Consumers’ Evaluations; Responsible Consumption.

ACADEMIC AND MANAGERIAL MARKETING ISSUE

From an Academic point of view, the literature is insufficient in considering the ecological image of country of origin, where to the best of our knowledge, no research has studied the dimensions of the COO ecological image. While from a Managerial point of view, managers are not totally aware of the way their consumers react toward their eco-products regarding the different ecological aspects and different considerations of consumers. Hence, this study proposes to treat this academic and managerial international marketing issue, and specifically, in the country of origin field.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study proposes the following question: *What are the dimensions of the country of origin ecological image, and how could they impact consumers' evaluation of eco-products?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

With this growing demand on eco-products all over the world (Chen, 2008) followed by an increased awareness of products' country of origins (Usunier, 2006) and with little knowledge on the environmental practices of foreign businesses, consumers may tend to evaluate environmental assertions from the different ecological images they have for each country of origin of an eco-product (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014).

It is well known that countries vary on their seriousness toward protecting the environment (Shrivastava, 1995), where they are ranked differently based on their environmental performance (EPI, 2016). Hence, there seems to be strong evidence that different countries project different ecological images (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014). These images could be created from various environmental and social efforts taken by countries of origins (Lozano et al., 2010).

However, and despite this large body of literature in marketing dealing with the products' COO and its significant impacts on consumers' reactions and perceptions, few studies have attempted to assess the impact of country of origin by means of ecological considerations (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014). Where in his study on environmental advertising for electronic products in China, Chan (2000) examined how environmental claim type could influence the effectiveness of environmental advertisement communication. He used the country's origin green image as a

moderate role for the claim type-effectiveness relationship for the case of USA and Japan. His findings suggested that the country of origin environmental image had a significant moderator role in the relationship between the type of environmental claim and the advertisement effectiveness. While in their study of eco-labelled products, Dekhili and Achabou (2014) studied the influence of the country of origin ecological image on European Ecolabelled products. They interviewed French consumers and tested washing-up liquids. Their findings indicated that mentioning a country of origin having an unfavorable ecological image (Spain) for products presenting an ecolabel, led to a negative influence on consumers' evaluations. Whereas mentioning a country with a favorable ecological image (Switzerland), did not have any significant effect on consumers' evaluations.

Hence, with this paucity in studies and the insufficient literature considering the country of origin ecological image, and to the best of our knowledge, no research has studied the dimensions of the country of origin ecological image construct.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main constructs in the research are: first, the Responsible Consumption, which is about consumers' behaviors and buying decisions that are in line with ecological issues and are roused not just by one's needs and desires, but by paying attention to conceivable outcomes of their ensuing impacts (Antil, 1984). The second construct in the study is the country of origin, where COO effect can be defined as the consumers' perceptions and reactions toward the attributes of a product which is manufactured in a specific country, it is also about the sentiments toward the country image and the perceptions yielded about the desirability of purchasing these products (Nebenzahl et al., 2003).

Country image is considered as a multidimensional construct consisting of several dimensions that were widely explored and tested by researchers; Political (Wang and Lamb, 1980;1983; Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Allred et al., 1999; Knight et al., 2003; Hong and Kang, 2006; Pappu et al., 2007), Economic (Dornoff et al., 1974; Han, 1990; Wang et al., 2012; Karunaratna and Crouch, 2016), Technological Advancement (Donald and Davis, 1995; Agbonifoh and Elimimian, 1999; Ahmed et al., 2002; Pappu et al., 2007), Culture (Cattin et al., 1982; Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Ahmed and D'astous, 1993; Ittersum et al., 2003; Hsieh et al., 2004; Brijs,

2006), Know How (Verlegh, 2001; Allred et al., 1999; Lee and Ganesh, 1999), Price (Nagashima, 1970; 1977; Papadopoulous, 1986; Hus el al., 2017), People's Characteristics (Ger, 1991; Laroche et al., 2005; D'astous and Boujbel, 2007), Social Environment (Kuhun, 1993; Ittersum et al., 2003).

However, and despite all this huge literature in the COO field, the ecological image has not been considered sufficiently so far. And consumers are still having little knowledge on the environmental and social practices of foreign businesses from different countries (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014). These countries, in fact, vary on their seriousness toward protecting the environment (Shrivastava, 1995), where they are ranked differently based on their environmental performance (EPI, 2016). Hence, there seems to be strong evidence that different countries project different ecological images (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014), and consumers tending to evaluate environmental assertions from the ecological image they have for each country of origin of eco-products (Dekhili and Achabou, 2014).

In addition, researchers have always considered the Cue Utilization theory as an effective framework through which they can assess consumers' reactions (Richardson et al., 1994). Based on this theory, consumers view a product as consisting of several arrays of cues serving as quality indicators (Olson and Jacoby, 1972) and as an important basis for the product evaluation (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). A cue is considered by an individual as an external measurement which can be encoded and used to classify a certain incentive. Consumers mainly use cues when they form beliefs about certain products or objects (Ahmed et al., 2002). These cues can be classified by consumers as either intrinsic or extrinsic to the product (Olson and Jacoby, 1972). Intrinsic attributes are the inherent cues of the physical composition of the product that cannot be manipulated such as ingredients, color, texture, materials, design, style, workmanship, and smell (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). While extrinsic attributes are those related to the product which are not part of the physical composition such as price, label, packaging, guarantees, warranties, brand name, retailer reputation, promotional and advertisement messages, and country of origin (Yong, 1996; Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

Moreover, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) which is used to predict deliberate behavior, since the latter can be deliberate and planned (Ajzen, 1991). It is a widely applied expectancy-value model of attitude-behavior relationships that has predicted a variety of consumer behaviors (Godin and Kok, 1996). The TPB will be used in the research as it is widely

used to explain sustainable consumption behaviors (Davies et al., 2009, Han et al., 2011; Paul and Rana, 2012; Dean et al., 2012; Chen and Zhou et al., 2013; Tung, 2014) and in order to gain insights into consumers' behavior in light of the country of origin aspect.

Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957) will be used as well to study the inconsistencies between the attitude-behavior gap that may arise when an individual is characterized to have two different attitudes or beliefs. This theory has been widely used as the TPB in studying attitude-behavior gaps in responsible consumption (Szmigin et al., 2009; McEachern et al., 2010; Gregory-Smith et al., 2013).

SUGGESTED EXPLORATORY STUDY METHODOLOGY

As an initial step in the research methodology, a qualitative exploratory study is conducted by considering the views of professionals and consumers.

Objectives: To better understand companies' strategy in terms of origin labeling in the case of eco-products, to identify the main eco-product categories concerned by mentioning the origin attributes, and to explore the main dimensions that constitute the Country of Origin Ecological Image Construct.

Samples of the Study:

- Interviews with professionals in the field of sustainability (experts, consultants, managers):
The main reason for conducting interviews with professionals is to know more about the marketing strategies adopted by companies in communicating their eco-products to consumers in terms of country of origin. This method has been widely used by many authors in the country of origin research field (Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Li et al., 1997; Allred et al., 1999; Ittersum et al., 2003). 11 interviews have been conducted until now.
- Focus groups with consumers: The main reason for conducting the focus groups is to explore consumers' preferences for certain origins in the case of eco-products, and to determine the dimensions of the ecological image construct. This method is relevant for a researcher in acquiring broad range of information, and specific information about personal and group opinions, perceptions, and behaviors at the same time (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The researcher can make some efforts in contacting and try to manage the dominance of speaking during the group interview by assigning times for each speaker. It also saves money and time compared to other qualitative methods like personal interview which consumes a lot of time

and cost (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). In addition, the focus group method has also been widely used by researchers in country of origin literature (Ittersum et al., 2003; Mittelstaedt et al., 2004; Brijs, 2006; d'Astous and Boujbel, 2007). 1 Focus group has been conducted until now. After that, a quantitative study will be conducted to measure the weight of the different COO ecological image dimensions and identify their impacts on consumers' evaluation of eco-products.

EXPECTED RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Expected Theoretical Implications:

This study proposes to fill the gap in the literature review of COO by exploring the dimensions of the country of origin ecological image construct. Then, it will measure the weight of the different COO ecological image dimensions and identify their impacts on consumers' evaluation of eco-products. In addition, this study contributes to the responsible consumption literature by exploring the country of origin ecological image as an attribute that could affect consumers' evaluation of eco-products.

Expected Managerial Implications:

From a managerial side, the dimensions of the country of origin ecological image is an important issue for marketers and policymakers. Studying consumers' behavior in the light of this dimension will allow managers to know how consumers really react toward eco-products that are coming from different countries that present different ecological images. When knowing the country of origin ecological dimensions, managers could work on enhancing favorable ones and managing the negative dimensions

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