

THE IMPACT OF “NEED FOR VARIETY” ON COUNTRY IMAGE EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

This study applies the concept of product typicality to account for graded country images effects across products of a country on consumers' purchase intention. Consumers need for variety impacts consumer purchase intentions when the perspective of product typicality is applied. A two-by-two between subjects experiment was conducted in Taiwan with 152 undergraduate students. The results of the experiment suggest that typical products of a country attract more purchase intention and possess more positive country images than atypical products. Moreover, consumers with a high need for variety exhibit lower purchase intention to products, especially to atypical products of a country, than consumers with low need for variety. However, consumer need for variety is independent of the evaluation of country images.

JEL: M3

KEYWORDS: Country-of-Origin, Product Typicality, Need for Variety

INTRODUCTION

Country image or Country-of-Origin (COO) effects play an important role in international marketing (Ahmed et al., 2004; Clarke III et al., 2000; Hsieh, 2004; Laroche et al., 2005). Many product categories, such as cars, software, perfume, are strongly identified with certain countries (Kotler, and Gertner, 2002) (e.g., French perfume; German cars, etc.). However, only limited research to date explores the implications of the product-specific COO phenomenon. Product typicality is a concept which provides a new way to explain the product-specificity character of COO effects (Tseng, and Balabanis, 2011; Usunier, and Cestre, 2007). Using product typicality to express COO effects can easily incorporate certain product information with COO images in one construct and can introduce more psychologically meaningful explanations to the product-specific phenomenon of COO effects. This research applies the construct of product typicality instead of traditional measure of COO images to test product-specific COO effects.

When using product typicality to test COO effects, some factors that may impact the effects can emerge. For instance, consumers with a high need for variety may show different attitude patterns to typical products. Typical products are usually the most common and popular products in the market. However, consumers with a tendency to seek variety may find these products attractive. For example, iPhone, a typical smartphone brand, is losing some attractiveness in Asian countries in part because of consumer “iPhone fatigue”. Data from StatCounter (gs.statcounter.com), which measures traffic collected across a network of 3 million websites, show a decline in Apple's share of mobile devices in 2012 in affluent Asian countries (e.g., Singapore: from 74.83% in January 2012 to 50.32% in January 2013, refer to gs.statcounter.com/#mobile_vendor-SG-monthly-201201-201301).

Evidence also reveals that many consumers switch to other Android devices which provides more mobile phone varieties. Many consumers feel bored with a brand when it becomes typical and common in the market. Nevertheless, we do not know if the story repeat for typical product categories of a country?

Existing variety seeking studies mostly focus on distinguishing between variety seeking and other purchasing behavior (e.g., Fishbach et al., 2011; Punj, 2011; Sharma et al., 2010), finding the determinants of variety seeking (e.g., Desai, and Trivedi, 2012; Ha, and Jang, 2013; Levav, and Zhu, 2009), and testing the impacts of variety seeking on different marketing mixes (e.g., Kim, 2013; Seetharaman, and Che, 2009). However, no known study examines the impact of need for variety in a

COO context. This gap may lead to problematic issues for practitioners who use country images to promote typical products. They do not know how variety seekers would react to typical country products. The current experiment explores possible impacts of need for variety on consumer purchase intention toward products of different levels of typicality concerning COO images. The article will first provide a literature review to develop several hypotheses for the objective. This section is followed by the methodology section which describes the experiment. The results of the analysis is presented with some discussions, and the conclusion section will manifest implications of this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of typicality derives from prototype theory of category learning in cognitive psychology. Based on the prototype theory, typicality is defined as the degree to which an item is perceived to represent a category (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011; Loken, and Ward, 1990). A product which is considered more typical than others means the product properties are more central (i.e., similar to the prototype of the product category) in consumers' perception than those of other product members in that category (Michel, and Rieunier, 2012). This is consistent with research in cognitive psychology that argues categories have graded structure (Lingle et al., 1984).

Similar to the argument of graded category structure, COO images have a graded structure as well. Usually, there are many different products produced in a country, but not all can possess equally high COO images in the market. Japanese consumer electronics may be attached a very positive COO image by consumers, but not Japanese shoes. COO images are graded across various products of a country. Products from the specific country possessing properties more central (i.e., closer to the prototype of COO images) are more typical, and thus have more positive COO images, than other products of the country. We define the typicality of products to the country as country typicality (Tseng, and Balabanis, 2011), which can help us speculate different levels of typicality and graded COO images across products of a country. According to the inference here, we can have the following hypothesis:

H1: Typical products of a country (i.e., products possessing high country typicality) have more positive COO images than atypical products of that country (i.e., products possessing low country typicality).

Previous studies have demonstrated positive relationships between typicality and consumer attitudes or purchase intention in a variety of product categories (Loken, and Ward, 1987; Nedungadi, and Hutchinson, 1985; Roest, and Rindfleisch, 2010). This result can also apply to country typicality. On one hand, products with a high level of country typicality have more positive COO images than others. On the other hand, products possessing positive COO images induce consumers' purchase intention (Chai et al., 2004; Peterson, and Jolibert, 1995; Verlegh, and Steenkamp, 1999). Moreover, Usunier and Cestre (2007) also find evidence to support that "willingness to buy a particular product is positively related to the degree of congruence between the product's COO and its ethnicity" (p. 42). We propose typical products of a country can evoke consumers' purchase intention as the following hypothesis:

H2: Typical products of a country can induce more positive consumers' purchase intention than atypical products of that country.

Variety seeking theory suggests that people sometimes prefer more alternatives when stimulation falls below the optimal stimulation level (Driver, and Streufert, 1965; McAlister, and Pessemier, 1982; Raju, 1980). The optimal stimulation level (OSL) is an ideal level of stimulation that a consumer seeks (e.g. novelty, incongruity, complexity, change, and so on). This ideal level exists in the consumer's mind and may reach different degrees among different consumers. As stimulation falls below the ideal level, cognitive action produces more input (e.g. exploration, novelty seeking). As the stimulation increases beyond the ideal level, cognitive action will attempt to reduce or simplify input (Sharma et al., 2010). The optimal level is positively related to a consumer's desire for unusual products and services (Raju, 1980). Based on the above arguments, when given the same product stimulation, consumers with high OSLs (i.e., consumers with a high need for variety) may show lower purchase intentions toward the products than do

consumers with low OSLs. Specifically, for consumers with high OSLs, the products may not be able to provide a satisfactory level of stimulation, and can drive consumers to seek some more varieties (Ha, and Jang, 2013). Hence, their purchase intention toward the given products can be mitigated in general. However, consumers with low OSLs may easily be satisfied by the given product stimulation, and will not engage in the action of seeking other alternatives. Therefore, we can have the following hypothesis:

H3: In general, high OSLs (i.e., high consumer need for variety) may mitigate consumers' purchase intention toward products of given countries.

Although the study argues that high OSLs could mitigate consumer purchase intentions toward products as mentioned in H3, we believe that the mitigation effects of OSLs can be different across product categories. This is especially true between typical and atypical products, of a given country since product typicality could play an important role in evaluating a new product (Hong, and Kang, 2006; Tseng, and Balabanis, 2011). Typical products are usually more familiar and popularized, thus reducing their stimulation potential for the buyer because the product is no longer novel or complex for the consumer (Berlyne, 1960). This characteristic leads to a perception of boredom (or lack of stimulation), and the consumer may then attempt to increase stimulation by switching to something different or novel in choice of a product (Menon, and Kahn, 1995). However, the story may be different in the context of COO effects. When a product is atypical of a country, the industry of that product in the country usually does not thrive and cannot provide many varieties of that product. This may cause consumers with high OSLs to feel even more boredom and further reduce their purchase intention. On the contrary, the industry of typical products of a country is usually prosperous in that country, and can therefore supply many varieties and alternatives of the products. This may reduce the perception of boredom for consumers with a high need for variety and lessen the mitigation effects on their purchase intention (Tuu, and Olsen, 2013). Hence, the mitigation effects of consumer need for variety on purchase intention may be stronger for atypical products of a country than for typical products of a country.

H4: Consumers with high OSLs will exhibit much lower purchase intention toward atypical products of a country than will consumers with low OSLs. However, such a mitigation effect on purchase intention will be slight or insignificant for typical product of the country.

While this research claims need for variety could mitigate consumers' purchase intention toward products of a country on the one hand, some literature notices that variety seeking can be independent of preferences for a particular item (Feinberg et al., 1992; Givon, 1984; Kahn et al., 1986; Lattin, and McAlister, 1985). For instance, a consumer may choose a glass of Spanish wine following a choice of a glass of French wine not because his or her preference for French wine has changed but just because s/he wants something different. Thus, variety-seeking behavior can occur when preferences for the items remain constant but a need for increased variety or stimulation exists. Similarly, variety-seeking behavior can also occur when COO images of the items remain constant. People may possess a positive COO image of Italian pizzas but sometimes may want to try some Mexican alternatives, especially for consumers with high OSLs. Therefore, we propose the degree of OSLs does not change consumers' evaluations of COO images of products as stated in the following hypothesis:

H5: Different degrees of consumers' OSLs will not change their COO image evaluations of products.

METHODOLOGY

A two-by-two between subjects factorial design was applied to the experiment. Country typicality (typical product of a country vs. atypical product of a country) and consumer need for variety (consumers with high OSLs vs. consumers with low OSLs) were the two factors considered.

Several studies suggest that variety seeking is germane to hedonic products, such as restaurant, music, or leisure activities. Individuals tend to spread their choices across available alternatives among hedonic products (Ratner et al., 1999; Read, and Loewenstein, 1995; Simonson, 1990; Van Trijp et al., 1996). To

avoid possible bias due to product hedonism, we controlled for this variable and used only hedonic products for the tests. South Korea was selected as the country of origin in this study since Taiwanese students are familiar with products from this country. LCD TV and wine were selected as typical and atypical hedonic products of South Korea respectively for Taiwanese consumers according to a discussion with some experts. A pilot test was launched to check the selection of typical and atypical hedonic products of South Korea. A separate pool of undergraduate students attended the pilot test. They rated their perception of hedonism and typicality on the two selected products of South Korea. Results showed that Korean LCD TV was regarded as a typical hedonic product while Korean wine as atypical hedonic.

The study subjects were 152 undergraduate students at a college in Taiwan who enrolled in two marketing classes. Subjects were required to rate their need for variety on the Exploratory Acquisition of Products (EAP) scale (Van Trijp et al., 1996) in early October 2012. This occurred one month before the formal test. Seven-point Likert scales were applied to the measure. Based on the scores, we classified subjects into two groups, high-OSL and low-OSL, on the basis of a median split (3.4 in this case). Thus each group included 76 subjects. The 76 subjects in each group were randomly assigned to the conditions of typical or atypical products in a balanced way. This measure also assured manipulation of consumer need for variety in the experiment. The mean OSL value (mean=5.06) for the high OSL group was significantly higher than the mean OSL value (mean=2.26) for the low OSL group ($p < 0.01$). The difference between groups of typical and atypical products in the mean value of OSL was insignificant ($p > 0.9$).

Two weeks before the formal test, all subjects were required to evaluate the level of country typicality of the product assigned to them (Korean LCD TV or Korean wine). They rated the product on the 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree” with three descriptions (“extremely good example”, “very typical”, and “very representative”), respectively (Loken, and Ward, 1990). The results of this test assured the manipulation of country typicality. The mean typicality value for the high typicality groups was 5.32, which is significantly higher than the mean of 2.16 for the low typicality groups ($p < 0.01$). There was no significant difference between high-OSL and low-OSL subjects in the mean value of typicality ($p > 0.3$).

In the formal experiment, all subjects were asked their purchase intention and their perceived COO images toward the product assigned to them. Purchase intention was evaluated by the following items: “Do you intend to buy...?”, “How likely is it that you would buy...?”, and “Do you like the idea of owning the...?” Participants also rated on scales modified from Nebenzahl, Jaffe, & Usunier’s (2003) questionnaire that measured product-specific COO images of each category. Seven-point Likert scales were applied to all items.

We separated the three tests weeks apart from each other to minimize demand effects. In each test, participants were instructed different research purposes and needed to rate on some extra measures irrelevant to this study in the first two tests. In a short interview with participants after the formal experiment, most subjects did not associate the three tests with each other as a single study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents means of purchase intention and COO images for each condition in the experiment. ANOVAs (analysis of variance) with between-subjects factors of country typicality (typical versus atypical) and consumer need for variety (high-OSL subjects versus low-OSL subjects) were performed separately for purchase intention and country image evaluation (see Table 2).

This research argues that products with different levels of country typicality may possess different degrees of COO images even if the products are from the same country. The more typical a product is to the country, the more favorable the COO image of that product can be. The significant main effect of country typicality ($F(1, 148) = 130.33, p < 0.01$) on COO images showed that COO images of Korean LCD TV’s (mean = 4.57) are more favorable than are COO images of Korean wine (mean = 2.81). This supports the argument of H1.

Table 1: Means of Purchase Intention and Country Image Evaluations

	Purchase Intention			Country Image Evaluation		
	Typical product	Atypical product	Total	Typical product	Atypical product	Total
High-OSL	4.83	2.48	3.66	4.50	2.86	3.68
Low-OSL	5.22	3.64	4.43	4.64	2.76	3.70
Total	5.03	3.06	4.04	4.57	2.81	3.69

This table shows the means of consumers' purchase intention and country image evaluations in different conditions. The column labeled Typical product indicates Korean LCD TV and Atypical product indicates Korean wine. The row labeled High-OSL indicates consumers with high need for variety and Low-OSL indicates consumers with low need for variety.

The significant main effect of country typicality on purchase intention provides empirical support for H2 ($F(1,148) = 188.26, p < 0.01$). Korean LCD TV's (mean = 5.03) induce more positive purchase intention than do Korean wine (mean = 3.06). This indicates that although products are from the same country – South Korea, consumers may tend to show a preference for buying products typical rather than atypical to the country. Further, the main effect of consumer need for variety on purchase intention is significant ($F(1,148) = 29.05, p < 0.01$). Subjects with higher OSLs (mean = 3.66) show less purchase intention than do subjects with lower OSLs (mean = 4.43), which supports H3.

Table 2: ANOVAs of Country Typicality and Need for Variety on Purchase Intention and Country Image Evaluation

	Purchase Intention			Country Image Evaluation		
	df	F	Sig.	df	F	Sig.
Corrected model	3	74.85	0.000***	3	43.65	0.000***
Intercept	1	3190.17	0.000***	1	2281.88	0.000***
CT	1	188.26	0.000***	1	130.33	0.000***
NV	1	29.05	0.000***	1	0.02	0.890
CT x NV	1	7.26	0.008**	1	0.62	0.433
R ²	0.60			0.47		

*This table shows the ANOVA results of country typicality and need for variety on consumers' purchase intention and country image evaluation. The column labeled df indicates degree of freedom, F indicates F value, and Sig. indicates p-value. The row labeled CT indicates country typicality, NV indicates need for variety, and CT x NV indicates the interaction between CT and NV. The notation *** means $p < 0.001$; ** means $p < 0.01$; * means $p < 0.05$.*

The interaction between country typicality and consumer need for variety on purchase intention was also significant ($F(1,148) = 7.26, p < 0.01$). Among the four experiment cells, subjects with a high need for variety exhibited the lowest purchase intention toward Korean wine (mean = 2.48); subjects with a low need for variety showed the highest purchase intention to Korean LCD TV's (mean = 5.22). For atypical products, subjects with a high need for variety presented a significant lower purchase intention than did subjects with a low need for variety ($t(74) = -6.70, p < 0.01$). For typical products, however, the difference of purchase intention between high-OSL and low-OSL subjects was insignificant ($t(74) = -1.69, p > 0.01$). The results support H4.

We proposed that consumer variety seeking behavior can be independent from their evaluation of COO images. The results of insignificant main effects of consumer need for variety and insignificant interaction effects between consumer need for variety and country typicality on COO images supports the argument. Consumers with high OSLs held similar COO images of products with consumers with low OSLs. This situation did not change for typical or atypical products of the country. Therefore, different levels of need for variety will not change consumer perception of a product's COO image, supporting the H5 argument.

CONCLUSION

We tested our theory using a two-by-two between subjects factorial experiment. As expected, participants show higher purchase intention to typical products than atypical products of a country in the experiment. This is consistent with typicality studies that maintain more typical examples tend to be favored more by human beings (Barsalou, 1983; 1985; Loken, and Ward, 1987; Nedungadi, and Hutchinson, 1985). Our

experiment extends the argument to the context of COO images. The experiment also confirms the proposition that COO images are graded across products of a country. As we proposed, typical products of a country received more favorable COO images than atypical products of that country.

Participants with different levels of consumer need for variety showed different degrees of purchase intention to the products in the experiment. Specifically, subjects with high need for variety showed a significantly lower purchase intention to the atypical product than did subjects with low need for variety. But the difference of purchase intention between subjects with high OSLs and low OSLs toward typical product was insignificant. Typical products of a country are usually superior and have many varieties in the market. For example, French perfume is a typical French product. Many kinds of French perfume exist in the market. Consumers with a high need for variety can easily find novel or different French perfumes in the shop. Therefore, their strong innate drives for variety seeking can be satisfied by those various typical products of a country and will not greatly mitigate consumers' purchase intention to those products. On the contrary, atypical products of a country are usually less popular and not a lot of varieties can be found in the market. Consumers with high OSLs tend to have a perception of boredom and eagerly try to switch to something else. However, there is no significant difference in the evaluation of COO images between subjects with high OSLs and low OSLs. Subjects with high OSLs will not modify their COO images of a product although they may reduce their purchase intention of products, especially to atypical products of a country.

We controlled product types and used only student samples in the experiment to avoid possible bias and noise. Although a controlled experiment setting can offer benefits and opportunities for researchers (Kardes, 1996), future research is encouraged to use different stimuli and samples of consumers to further establish external validity of our theory.

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