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Does Environmental, Social, and Governance Performance Moderate the Effects of Country-of-Origin on Brand Awareness: A Focus on Managerial Guidelines for Exporters*

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Abstract

Purpose - A brand's country-of-origin (COO) could influence a behavior of consumers in a country. Nevertheless, there have been few studies of how exporters overcome the barrier of a negative COO effect and what can be a useful strategy for an exporter to alleviate the effect on consumer behavior. Against this background, it is essential to present a factor moderating the effect on consumers' brand awareness. Therefore, suggesting that environmental, social, and governance (ESG) management would be such a factor, we attempted to develop a model showing that the management could moderate the relationship between the COO effects and consumers' recall and evaluation toward a foreign brand.
Design/methodology/approach - Using the stakeholder theory, the categorization, and the attribution theory as underlying theories, our study developed an empirically testable model that explains and predicts consumers' behaviors.
Findings - We posited that positive ESG information influences consumers' brand recall and evaluation. In addition, we posited that positive ESG information moderates the COO effects on consumers' brand recall. Finally, we posited that positive ESG information moderates the COO effects on consumers' brand evaluation.
Research implications or Originality - This manuscript filled a knowledge gap of none of alternative strategy toward COO effects in export marketing and provided implications regarding exporters' branding strategy in a foreign country.

Keywords: Brand Awareness, Country-of-Origin Effects, ESG Management, Export Marketing
JEL Classifications: F23, M16, M31

Ⅰ. Introduction

As the world economy has become internationalized and globalized, many exporters desire to pursue developing their brands on a global basis with some adaptation in local markets. Still, the effects of country-of-origin (hereinafter referred to as COO) could be a barrier of

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consumers' purchase behavior toward foreign brands. In essence, because of the COO effects, some exporters' brands may psychologically gain premium or discounts. A COO effect often functions as a non-tariff barrier. Nonetheless, many exporters little know how to overcome the barrier and what can be a useful strategy toward the COO effects on consumer behavior.

Recently, because firms' environmental, social, and governance (hereinafter referred to as ESG) management has been globally highlighted, exporters' ESG efforts could be a critical strategy in local markets. In effect, an exporter's failure or success in a foreign economy is considerably attributable to how consumers in the economy view the exporter's ESG management. Because of the important role of exporters' management in market competition, previous studies (e.g., Fatemi, Glaum and Kaiser, 2018; Deng and Cheng, 2019) have focused on the effects of ESG efforts on performance. In addition, researchers have been interested in whether ESG strategy helps to develop legitimacy and brand equity and investigated effects of ESG on consumers' purchase behavior (Marquina and Morales, 2012; Polonsky and Jevons, 2009). Nevertheless, few studies have addressed the effects of ESG management on international consumer behavior, specifically in export markets.

Firms with well-established ESG initiatives often engage in doing business well not just in developed markets (Singh, Kristensen and Villasenor, 2009) but also in emerging markets (Hadjikhani, Lee and Park, 2016; Khan, Lew and Park, 2015). These firms' successful strategies of ESG could be replicated by domestic firms (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2019). Previous research has revealed that a firm's ESG efforts could lead to marketing performance (Katsikeas, Leonidou, and Zeriti, 2016; Leonidou et al, 2013), consumer brand advocacy (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001), customer-brand identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Torelli, Monga and Kaikati, 2012), and brand loyalty (Pfitzer, Bockstette and Stamp, 2013). In addition, ESG initiatives could be a critical factor in consumer behavior and encourage customers to switch brands even with similar price and quality (Smith and Alcorn, 1991).

An exporter's ESG could lead to the exporter's trust that helps to enhance the reputation and consumer-based brand-equity in a local market. On one hand, exporters may consider a range of brand-related features. On the other hand, an exporter could incorporate its brand awareness with its ESG efforts. In effect, exporters' ESG strategy could enhance their reputation, trust, brand development, positional advantage, and financial outcome (Barney and Hansen, 1994; Brammer and Millington, 2008; Elg, Ghauri and Tarnovskaya, 2008; Fang, 2019; Nelling and Webb, 2009). Moreover, an exporter's ESG management could favorably influence consumer behavior and its long-run success (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Lichtenstein, Drumwright and Braig, 2004; Nelling and Webb, 2009). Nonetheless, a few studies has addressed relationships among ESG efforts, COO effects, and brand awareness.

Against this backdrop, our study attempted to develop a model showing that exporters' ESG management could moderate the relationship between the COO effects and consumers' recall and evaluation toward a foreign brand. In addition, we aimed to identify the possibility that an exporter's ESG practice would be a useful marketing strategy for exporters suffering from country-of-origin effects.

The rest of our current manuscript is organized as follows. In the following chapter, theoretical perspectives are presented. Next, we proposed a model explaining relationships among exporters' ESG efforts, COO effects, and brand awareness. Based on the model, we develop propositions. Finally, this manuscript is concluded with a discussion of academic and practical implications of the current study, limitations of the research, and directions for future studies.

II. Theoretical Perspectives

1. Stakeholder Theory

The stakeholder theory states that an organization should deal with the wants and needs of the relevant stakeholders such as, governments, shareholders, employees, consumers. These stakeholders could indirectly or directly influence or be influenced by the organization's activities. This theory could be used to revisit which stakeholders may draw the attention of firms that engage in ESG practice (Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Waller and Lanis, 2009).

According to the stakeholder theory, a firm could be depicted as a constellation of cooperative and competitive interests possessing intrinsic value (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Moreover, stakeholders in a firm could be described as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman, 1984). While the economic view of the firm states that a firm is responsible only for its shareholders, the stakeholder theory points out that a firm is a multi-fiduciary entity that is responsible not only for its shareholders but also for customers, employees, governments, suppliers, communities, and political groups (Goodpaster, 1991; Freeman, 1984). In short, various stakeholders' decisions could affect the process of managers' decision-making.

The stakeholder theory is useful in developing a theoretical framework clarifying relationships among an exporter's ESG engagement, COO effects, and brand awareness. In line with the framework, exporters are asked to maximize profits for shareholders and to minimize risks for them. In addition, exporters are often expected to contribute to their environments. Furthermore, the stakeholder theory could be employed to clarify the word of 'social' in ESG. Being responsible to the society in a local country, exporters should be responsible for specific groups with identifiable interests in the country (Carroll, 1991).

The stakeholder theory could apply to exporting marketing. The applications include the role of ESG-attributions of an exporter's internal stakeholders as the employees (Vlachos, Theotokis and Panagopoulos, 2010), the role of institutionalization of a multi-stakeholder view generating a brand insurance effect, during the decision making processes (Werther and Chandler, 2005), and the effects of ESG engagement toward certain stakeholders groups on global brand equity (Torres, Bijmolt and Tribo, 2012).

2. Categorization Theory

The categorization could play a crucial role in consumer behavior. In addition, COO constitutes a critical category toward consumers. In short, the categorization may be the inner act of developing to think of some object as a circumstance of the category. According to the categorization theory, people could prefer to organize their knowledge of detailed brand alternatives in categories. Especially, consumers use category structures to differentiate and organize brands (Gregan-Paxton and John, 1997; Gutman, 1982; Johnson and Lehmann, 1997; Punj and Moon, 2002; Ratneshwar et al., 2001).

COO may function as a proxy for other product characteristics (i.e., halo effect) or as a stereotype (summary construct or coding function). A certain mechanism through consumers' category-based information processing toward COO could affecte brand evaluations (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011; Han, 1989). The categorization theory proposes that categorization would be a process involving the determination of 'belong together' items. Categories may influence consumer information-processing and may lead to efficient decisions by serving as a heuristic (Hadjimarcou and Hu, 1999). Alba and Hutchinson's (1987) and Cohen and Basu's (1987) have contributed to building the theory.

The categorization theory can be useful in the process of establishing the concept of a brand. Typicality, or strength of the connection with the COO of a brand, represents the closing level of an object and its a category (Barsalou, 1983; Rosch, 1978). The typical member of a category is likely to be named first in the examination of free recall and become the benchmark for the brand class while brands are compared. Research on COO effects has suggested that when a brand appears to be typical of some specific countries, this would be implemented in the construct of country typicality. When a brand fits the stereotype for the COO, the more favorable evaluations of the brand could be developed. Accordingly, customers' likelihood of buying the brand would be increased (Tseng and Balabanis, 2011). For example, brands originated from developed countries would be more favorably evaluated than those from emerging countries (Pappu, Quester and Cooksey, 2007; Reardon, Vianelli and Miller, 2017).

3. Attribution Theory

People often make an effort to maintain or to achieve a positive social identity. In part, a person's self-concept often derives from his or her knowledge of the membership in single social group or groups together with the emotional significance and value attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978). According to a tendency known as inter-group bias, a consumer does not always assess behaviors objectively. Instead, the consumer could make attributions that favor the in-group over the out-group (Hewstone, Rubin and Willis, 2002). For instance, consumers tend to attribute positive out-group behaviors to external causes and positive in-group behaviors to internal causes (Hewstone, 1990).

Because of a lack of trust or information, the attributions could occur (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Consumers' attitude toward an exporter could draw considerably on the attributions of them making toward the exporter's behavior (Ellen, Webb and Mohr, 2006). If trust is limited because of a lack of information, then suspicion of hidden motives would encourage people to present much thought to reasons. In short, the reasons could lead consumers to think more about why firms are doing rather than what they are doing (Fein, 1996; Gilbert and Malone, 1995).

Many researchers and marketers are alike interest to revisiting ESG attributions because such attributions could elucidate consumer psychology and directly influence consumer behavior as attitudes, purchase intentions, and word of mouth toward a foreign brand(Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill, 2006; Choi et al., 2016; Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013).

Consumer attributions toward an exporter's ESG engagement could lie in two broad categories. The first category refers as altruistic attribution, when consumers believe that an exporter's ESG engagement could benefit individuals outside the exporter and suggest that the exporter would have a sincere interest in contributing to society. As an egoistic attribution, when consumers believe that an exporter's ESG engagement fundamentally benefit the exporter and that it is acting deceptively or focused on achieving financial performance and profits lavishly (Barone, Miyazaki and Taylor, 2000; Choi et al., 2016; Fang, 2019; Foreh and Grier, 2003).

Ⅲ. Model Development

1. ESG and Consumer Behavior

Consumer perceptions toward an exporter's ESG may consist of buyer loyalty toward the exporter's brand(s), the influence of consumer nationality toward conceiving ESG dimensions, and consumers' price premium for ESG claims (Eisingerich and Rubera, 2010; Loose and Remaud, 2013; Maignan, 2001). In addition, consumer retaliation toward an exporter's ESG engagement is another issue. In reality, consumer-sought benefits or consumer demographics could influence consumer sensitivity toward ESG issues (Zalka, Downes and Paul, 1997). An exporter's ESG engagement may positively influence consumer attitudes and behavior toward its brand. (Öberseder, Schlegelmich and Murphy, 2013; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Williams and Zinkin, 2008). Accordingly, consumers' low awareness and unfavorable attributions of an exporter's ESG engagement could negatively affect consumer behavior (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010; Madden, Roth and Dillon, 2012).

2. COO Effects and Brand Recall

If consumers gain information about the COO of a foreign brand, they may be positively or negatively aware of the brand (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Hsieh, Pan and Setiono, 2004). Because COO are often related to brand image, COO could shape consumers' awareness of such a brand. In effect, it is widely accepted that there are considerable relationships among COO, brand image, perceived quality, and purchase intention (Han and Terpstra, 1988).

In essence, consumers could develop COO associations based on their awareness of the brand and of its origin. The origin of a brand could be communicated either explicitly (e.g. origin labeling) or implicitly (e.g. brand name). On one hand, explicit communication could promote the learning of accurate origin information. On the other hand, implicit signals could complicate it, thereby leading to greater COO confusion (Magnusson et al., 2014; Zhuang et al., 2008).

3. COO Effects and Brand Evaluation

As we mentioned above, the categorization theory could be useful to explain and predict the relationship between COO effects and brand evaluation. In effect, categorization plays a cruciall role in consumer behavior. In addition, COO constitutes an essemtoa; category for consumers (Gregan-Paxton and John, 1997; Ratneshwar et al., 2001). To make a long story short, "categorization is the mental act of coming to think of some object as an instance of the category" (Smith, 1995, p. 27). According to the categorization theory, people are likely to organize knowledge of certain brand alternatives in categories. In particular, people use a category structure in order to differentiate and organize brands (Gutman, 1982; Johnson and Lehmann, 1997; Punj and Moon, 2002).

In the COO context, categorization could serve as a stereotype measure or as a proxy for other product attributes (Han, 1989). In short, the specific mechanisms may influence consumers' brand evaluations through which the category-based information processing of COO.

4. Model Specification

Our study employed a time-lag analysis model in order to investigate the impacts of an exporter's ESG engagement on the relationship between COO effects and brand awareness for several reasons. First, a time-lag analysis could allow us to track the life history of the exporter's brand awareness and present analytical results of drivers of the occurrence of its ESG engagement. Second, this analysis could enable us to utilize information provided through right-censored cases and thereby to avoid biases from not contemplating whether brand awareness increases or decreases after the ESG engagement (Allison, 1982; Oh, 2015; Yamaguchi, 1991). Accordingly, we developed the following model:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1_{t-1}} + \beta_2 X_{2_{t-1}} + \beta_3 X_{1_{t-1}} X_{2_{t-1}} + \epsilon.$$

where Y_t denotes the level of brand awareness at the t period; X_{1t-1} indicates the level of brand awareness at the t-1 period; and X_{2t-1} represents the level of ESG management at the t-1 period.

IV. Propositions

Drawing heavily on the stakeholder theory, categorization theory, and the attribution theory, our study develop propositions of ESG engagement, COO effects, and brand awarenss in export marketing. In effect, COO effects go as far as an intangible barrier of consumer bias. Because of the COO effects, many exporters' products and brands could psychologically get premium or discounts. The COO effect frequently factions as a nontariff barrier in the context of exporting marketing or global marketing. Prior studies have substantially provided an understanding of the COO effects on consumers' purchase of foreign brands and products. Nevertheless, many of the studies have not addressed how an exporter could overcome the barrier of COO effects. Accordingly, we attempt to propose an alternative strategy for exporters toward the COO effects on consumer behavior; ESG engagement could be such a strategy.

In addition to COO effects, ESG engagement could be a useful export-marketing strategy. Therefore, our study indicate that ESG engagement could be a strategic choice for exporters suffering from country-of-origin effects.

According to consumer-based brand-equity, brand awareness as the first crucial step of establishing brand equity has been highlighted. In addition, brand recall could be a key aspect of brand awareness that has been explored how significant toward consumer behavior (Keller, 1993; 2013; Macdonald and Sharp, 2000). Moreover, according to the stakeholder theory suggesting that an organization's philanthropic responsibility makes the organizaiotn be a good corporate citizen, a desire of stakeholders (Carroll, 1999; Carroll and Shabana, 2010). Furthermore, pragmatically, people often use a country image as an integrated cue to assess and understand foreign brands (Moon and Oh, 2017).

Even though ESG engagement is view as a pro-social act, consumers in a local country may little view all exporters that engage in ESG equally positively. When consumers in a local market develop mainly altruistic attributions for an exporter's ESG engagement, these consumers tend to believe that the exporter holds a sincere interest in contributing to society; they may build favorable attitudes toward the exporter. Nevertheless, when altruistic attributions seem low, consumers in a local country could be skeptical of the exporter's sincerity and thereby perceive it less favorably (Fein, 1996). Morevoer, although the altruistic ESG attributions are related to favorable purchase behavior, not all exporters that engage in ESG initiatives could achieve the same outcome. Consumers in a local country tend to buy an exporter's brand when its ESG engagement is well aligned with its core business because of the favorable attributions that these consumers make for its initiatives (Ellen, Webb and Mohr, 2006). Likewise, consumers in a local country could have higher purchase intentions and favorable attitudes toward exporters that reveal proactive or reactive ESG strategies because these consumers tend to make altruistic attributions for such strategies (Groza, Pronschinske and Walker, 2011). Thus, we posit that:

P1: Positive ESG information influences consumers' brand recall and evaluation.

The attitude theory states that consistency among the beliefs consumers hold about particular attitudes objects such as brands increase cohesiveness (Tse and Lee, 1993). In effect, brands from a foreign country could influence consumers' attitudes toward brands and their purchase behavior. Prior research has presented that consumers show more favorable image of brands from developed countries than emerging countries (Eng, Ozdemir and Michelson, 2016). Brand origin could be like brand personality associated with brand image (Aaker, 1996). In addition brand orign could be held in consumers' memory that reflects consumers brand attitudes (Keller, 1993). Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) concluded that COO as an extrinsic informational cue could influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward a brand. Therefore, we posits that:

P2: Positive ESG information moderates the COO effects on consumers' brand recall.

There are three aspects of COO effects. First, the effects may be a signal to infer other attributes of the brand when available information is limited. Second, the COO effects may function as a comparison standard for the brand and lead to a contrast effect on evaluations when sufficient information about the product category and the brand is available. Third, the effects can be one of several attributes of a brand used in the evaluation process (Li and Wyer, 1994). Moreover, the prior categorization of brands to COO effects could lead to the formation of an "initial evaluative concept" of the brand based on the COO (Hong and Wyer, 1990). Next, this evaluative concept is often used as a basis for overall brand evaluations and affects the evaluation of information of the brand's other attributes. Erickson, Johansson, and Chao (1984) argued that COO affects brand evaluations through the effects on beliefs regarding such attributes as workman- ship, durability, and reliability.

A considerable change in consumers' attitude can be made when the consumers are informed of a brand's true COO. According to D'Antone and Merunka (2015), novices in such a situation are unable to engage in a schema-based transfer process, which is a transfer associations related to France as a producer of luxury apparel brands to the French-sounding brand. Rather, customers would transfer associations held about Chanel to the French-sounding brand, adopting a similarity-to-exemplars process likely to increase the salience of brands that share or simulate the same origin. The salience of these brands could affect influence the brand evaluation favorably or unfavorably according to their positioning. A strategy could be useful to conceal the true origin and cue instead a favorable COO (a country) likely to prompt strong exemplars (a luxury brand). The success of this strategy relies critically on consumers' familiarity with the category. Consumers with low brand-related experience would tend to be manipulated. In contrast, consumers with high brand-related experience and a more refined category structure should hold more accurate COO-brand associations in memory in addition to as strong beliefs of brand quality and equity. Accordingly, we posit that:

P3: Positive ESG information moderates the COO effects on consumers' brand evaluation.

V. Discussion

There are twofold contributions in our study. The first contribution is theory-building. From a theoretical perspective, we explored an integrated model of ESG engagement and COO effects in the area of export marketing. In effect, ESG management, COO effects, and brand awareness could be subjected in a systematic investigation. In this regard, our study filled knowledge gap of exporting marketing with the results of the study. In essence, out study proposed a conceptual understanding of ESG engagement toward export marketers. In addition, we developed another conceptual understanding of COO effects toward export marketers as extrinsic COO and intrinsic cues. Moreover, our study provided an understanding of the moderating effects of ESG engagement engagement on the relationship of COO and brand awareness in the context of export marketing. Furthermore, we proposed a research platform for further studies on export marketing by developing an empirically testable model. Second, we might contribute to the field of export management. From a managerial perspective, our study suggested that branding in a country with favorable ESG information could improve customers' brand recall and evaluation. In other words, customers' recall and evaluation of a foreign brand could be enhanced through favorable ESG engagement.

Despite these contributions, our current study could suffer from limitations. The first potential limitation is that we have not yet tested thee model incorporating ESG engagement, COO effects, and brand awareness. Therefore, a natural next step is to empirically test the model. Second, our study has not considered various dimensions of COO effects. In effect, COO effects could be derived from country image, animosity toward a certain country, and country intimacy. Thus, future studies should focus on specific segments of COO effects to examine the impact of ESG engagement. Third, we have not distinguished emerging countries from developed ones. In essence, export marketing could be done in various countries. In addition, consumer behavior in a country would be different from one in another country, according to the level of economic development of the country. Therefore, researchers should try to explain and/or predict the effects of exporters' ESG engagement by reflecting different country contexts. Finally, our study has little considered our factors affecting the effects of exporters' ESG engagement on their marketing performance in the circumstance of COO effects. Accordingly, further studies should be conducted to test our model with a wide variety of constructs regarding export marketing.

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