MODELING SPANISH CONSUMERS’ RELUCTANCE TO BUY CHINESE APPAREL PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the role of environmental and social issues—owing to their growing importance in Western societies—in country-based anti-consumption—along with other potential antecedents of consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products. The authors draw on the literature on country-of-origin (COO) effects and anti-consumption to propose and test an integrative research model of country-based reluctance to buy foreign products (i.e., Spanish consumers’ reluctance to buy Chinese apparel). The findings reveal a new dimensionality of the country image (COI) scale, encompassing politic-economic, social, and environmental issues of the COO. Likewise, tests of the research model confirm the importance of the three COO influence mechanisms—i.e., cognitive (foreign product judgments), affective (country animosity) and normative influences (consumer ethnocentrism)—for consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products.

Keywords: Reluctance to buy, Anti-consumption, Social and environmental issues, country-of-origin (COO), country image (COI)

1. INTRODUCTION

China is worldwide recognized for its increasing manufacturing and exporting power. However, China has also been criticized in Western societies, with regard to its product quality and safety standards, and to a wide range of political, economic, social, and environmental conditions surrounding manufacturing processes (Heslop, Nadeau & O’Reilly, 2010). Country of origin (COO) effects on consumers’ product evaluation and purchasing decisions are widely acknowledged in the international marketing field (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Yet, much less is known about consumers’ reluctance to buy as a consequence of COO. Previous research shows that the reasons for anti-consumption will not necessarily be the logical opposite of the reasons for consumption (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012). In fact, the term ‘anti-consumption’ comprises a wide range of practices (Iyer & Muncy, 2009), which can be either targeted against consumption in general, or against specific products/brands, companies, or even countries (Lee et al., 2009). Hence, more work is warranted to
better understand the antecedents of a variety of consumer resistance and anti-consumption manifestations, such as consumers’ reluctance to buy Chinese products.

The literature on country-based anti-consumption—i.e., COO studies analyzing the antecedents of reluctance to buy or rejection of foreign products (Lee et al., 2009)—has focused to date on constructs, such as: negative images of foreign countries in general, or specific products from a specific foreign country (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), and country animosity (Klein et al., 1998). Interestingly—although different in nature and scope—, these constructs have something in common: social and environmental issues are largely ignored (in conceptualization and measurement). This is surprising in view of growing social and environmental concerns in most Western societies (Iyer & Muncy, 2009); arguably, some consumers may choose to avoid products or brands from countries perceived as enacting unacceptable or unsustainable policies in social and environmental terms (Lee et al., 2009).

This paper delves into the role of social and environmental considerations in country-based anti-consumption—along with other potential antecedents of consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products (i.e., Chinese apparel). The authors draw on the literature on COO effects and anti-consumption to propose and test an integrative research model of country-based anti-consumption. The findings will hopefully extend our understanding of how different COO factors relate to consumers’ reluctance to buy Chinese products (in Spain).

2. THEORY & HYPOTHESES

2.1 Outcome variables: reluctance to buy & product ownership

Chatzidakis & Lee (2012) define anti-consumption as “phenomena that are against the acquisition, use and dispossession of certain goods”. Anti-consumption phenomena can comprise a wide range of different practices and activities (Iyer & Muncy, 2009), that can be directed against different agents (Lee et al., 2009). In this study, the main outcome (or dependent variable) of interest is consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products, which can be described as “perceived guiltiness and tendency to avoid buying foreign-made products” (Suh & Kwon, 2002).

2.2 Antecedents of reluctance to buy

As a consequence of globalization and the increase of international sourcing, COO is generally considered as the country to which the brand is perceived to belong by customers—in contrast with earlier international marketing research, which considered COO as the nation where the product is manufactured (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Extant literature agrees on the importance of COO effects, which have been quite effective in predicting consumers’ product evaluations (about quality, risk, or value) and consumption decisions in general (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Three different mechanisms have been described as being responsible for COO effects on consumers’ decision-making: cognitive, affective, and normative ones (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). The interaction of such COO effects can manifest simultaneously (Brijs et al., 2011), but it is also possible to find inconsistent effects of cognitive, affective, and normative COO factors—i.e., exerting opposite or
conflicting effects on consumers’ willingness or reluctance to buy (Maher & Carter, 2011).

*Cognitive* COO effects comprise beliefs about a specific country which may be based on information and/or past experiences (Brijs et al., 2011). Consumers use COO as an ‘external cue’ or signal for judgments about product quality; such judgments will, in turn, translate either into willingness or reluctance to buy (Wang et al., 2012). For example, consumers may tend to avoid products from countries regarded as ‘less developed’, owing to more negative beliefs about their competence and experience in manufacturing products (Papadopoulos et al., 1990). The literature has adopted three different, although related, approaches for measuring cognitive COO effects depending on the level of analysis adopted: general country image, product-country image, or product image (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). The more general concept of country image (COI) appeared with the aim of improving the understanding of the reasons behind consumers’ evaluation of products originating from different countries (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Most extant research considers COI to be cognitive in nature and to comprise “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). In addition to most commonly applied measures of COI—covering political and economic aspects—, this work emphasizes the need to account for social and environmental issues in the conceptualization and measurement of COI. For example, Heslop et al. (2008) considered the impact of social issues through the construct ‘country people character’; this construct demonstrated being a useful antecedent of people and product evaluation and—through them—in willingness to buy.

Regarding environmental issues, it is interesting to consider literature about tourism image destination. Hence, beliefs about environment have been shown to play an important role in tourism destination image works (Jenkins, 1999) and then—indirectly through tourists’ evaluation—on intention to select vacation destinations (Nadeau et al., 2008). On the other hand, individual’s awareness for environmental and social issues is increasing, and as previously mentioned, brand/product avoidance is often motivated by ethical concerns (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). As a consequence of that, public visibility of ‘irresponsible’ environmental and social policies put forward by governments may, in many cases, drive consumer boycott of foreign products—the main feature of boycott as anti-consumption behavior stems in its ‘transitory’ character; that is, individuals will stop avoiding products from that country once it refrains from that behavior that is currently punished (Lee et al., 2009). Due to awareness campaigns, individuals may discover unsustainable practices developed in certain countries; if consumers disagree with certain country policies, or if they think that these practices are a consequence of country excessive permissiveness, they may choose to avoid products from that country (i.e., Etenson & Klein, 2005; Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011). This aforementioned evidence would imply that consumers—in a similar fashion than they do with companies—evaluate countries not only in terms of affluence or political stability, but they will also consider environmental protection and social achievements when forming country images.

**H1:** Social and environmental will contribute significantly to the COI scale.

*Foreign product judgments.* As previously noted, product-specific variables have been used in COO research to measure consumers’ perceived image of certain product categories from certain countries. There is evidence that COO effects differ across different product categories coming from the same country (Leonidou, et al.,
2007). This work accounts for consumer foreign product judgments, as part of the more specific cognitive component of COO.

*Country animosity.* The affective COO mechanism refers to the symbolic meaning, emotional value, and feelings that consumers may attach to a country (Brijs et al., 2011). Despite not being as widely implemented on country of origin literature as cognitive effect, previous studies have documented the role of emotions and emotion-based evaluations on consumer responses even in presence of product and country beliefs (Heslop et al., 2008). As present study is focused on examining the antecedents of country-based reluctance to buy—instead of willingness— this phenomenon may be better explained from the perspective of negative feelings than positive ones. Hence, the affective COO effect will be represented by country animosity. Country animosity can be conceptualized as feelings of antipathy and dislike toward a foreign country (Klein et al., 1998). Curiously, despite the acknowledged importance of country animosity for predicting foreign product avoidance (Nijssen & Douglas, 2004), this concept has been mainly regarded as a—negative—antecedent of consumption behavior (Klein et al., 1998). Moreover, past literature has not yet analyzed in depth additional animosity’s possible interactions with different country effects, such as country image (Heslop et al., 2008).

*Consumer ethnocentrism.* Normative COO effects refer to the existence of social or personal norms or values regarding the purchase or consumption of foreign products (Brijs et al., 2011). Despite different normative constructs have also been employed (i.e., Huang, Phau and Lin, 2010; Maher and Mady, 2010), the most widely researched normative COO construct is consumer ethnocentrism (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 2009). Consumer ethnocentrism traces back to Shimp and Sharma’s (1987) work, and refers to consumers’ judgments of the (in)morality of purchasing foreign products as a result of their perceived negative impact on national economy. Previous works have discovered that consumer ethnocentrism is an important antecedent when considering consumer foreign country willingness to buy (Ettenson and Klein, 2005; Klein et al., 1998) and avoidance (Nijssen and Douglas, 2004; Suh and Kwon, 2002). Hence, consumer ethnocentrism is selected here as representative concept for normative country of origin effects.

**H2a:** Foreign product judgments (cognitive COO) will exert a negative, direct effect on country-based reluctance to buy.

**H2b:** Country animosity (affective COO) will exert a positive, direct effect on country-based reluctance to buy.

**H2c:** Consumer ethnocentrism (normative COO) will exert a positive, direct effect on country-based reluctance to buy.

It is important to understand how these effects are organized among them and in this sense, expectancy value theories (i.e., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) seem to offer a useful framework for modelling country-based reluctance to buy. Under the expectancy-value lens, the cognitive component of the model will affect product reluctance to buy. It is widely accepted that foreign product judgments mediate the relationship between COI and purchasing intentions (Heslop et al., 2008; Oberecker &
Diamantopoulos, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). Thus, cognitive COI will be an external cue directly influencing consumers’ foreign product judgments that, in turn, directly and positively should influence reluctance to buy foreign products (Wang et al., 2012).

Consistent with expectancy-value theory, the effect of cognitions on intentions will be mediated by affect (Brijs et al., 2011). That is, country animosity should mediate the effect of COI on consumers’ reluctance to buy Chinese apparel (Heslop et al., 2008; Maher & Carter, 2011; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011).

H3a: COI will exert a positive, direct effect on foreign product judgments
H3b: COI will exert a direct, negative effect on country animosity.

Figure 1. Proposed model and hypothesis

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Product category & country selection

COO studies have shown that country effects are specific for every country dyad; in addition, COO effects may vary across product categories (Roth et al., 2008). Thus, this work focuses on a specific country dyad (Spain–China)—i.e., Spanish consumers’ evaluations of Chinese products—and a specific product category—i.e., apparel (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Apparel products were deemed appropriate for this study for two main reasons: first, clothing is an important means of self-expression and image creation for consumers (Hogg & Bannister, 2001); second, Spanish consumers were expected to be highly familiar with imported Chinese clothing products.
Spain was selected as the host country. Despite not being especially conscious consumers—as compared to consumers from other European countries—Spanish people tend to show high awareness of social differences and environmental problems. For instance, sales of fair trade products continue to increase in Spain despite the severe current economic crisis (Informe Comercio Justo en España, 2011). Spanish consumers have also been found to be influenced by country effects such as consumer ethnocentrism (Luque-Martinez et al., 2000), and animosity toward other countries—which may be salient without the need of previous hostile relationships (Jimenez & San Martin, 2010).

The selection of China as COO was the result of a pretest carried out within a sample of 21 Spanish average consumers. Participants identified China as target country to avoid due to a wide range of effects. Moreover, some respondents also pointed to China as the target country of product avoidance because ‘unacceptable or unsustainable’ production practices, which they thought implied the exploitation of both human and natural resources. Also, China is currently the first provider of clothing and shoe products in the Spanish market; this situation has influenced a growing anti-Chinese-commerce movement in advertising and social media in Spain.

3.2 Sampling method

Data were collected between April-May 2012 in collaboration with a market research company. The final sample consists of 400 adult people, being representative of the Spanish population in terms of age and gender. Participants were randomly selected, contacted and interviewed by telephone until the desired number of completed interviews was achieved. To meet the objectives of representativeness, 15 contacts were necessary on average to obtain each valid interview.

3.3 Measures

11-point Likert scales (from 0 to 10)—indicative of respondent’s level of agreement and disagreement with the different statements included in the questionnaire—were used for most measurement items and scales, except for foreign product ownership and demographic indicators. All interviews were conducted in Spanish; thus, translation and back-translation were performed to ensure cross-language equivalence between the Spanish and original English-language version of most measurement items.

The measurement of COI comprised 12 items. The majority COI measures were adapted from the available COI scales (i.e., Heslop et al., 2008; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011); other COI items were derived from related theory bases—such as corporate environmental image (Chang & Fong, 2010; Chen, 2008)—, so as to capture the consumers’ social and environmental COI.

Country animosity was measured through 8 items; 6 items stem from extant (economic and general) country animosity scales (Klein et al., 1998), whereas the other 2 items were developed from the pretest qualitative data. The other measurement scales were adapted from previous COO literature; consumer ethnocentrism was measured using a shortened version of CETSCALE (Shimp & Sharma, 1987); foreign product judgments was adapted from the product judgment scale, available in the country animosity literature (Klein et al., 1998; Nijssen & Douglas, 2004), and reluctance to buy was measured through items from both
4. RESULTS

4.1 Psychometric properties of scales

First, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS v20 was used to check the dimensional structure of the proposed factors. Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)—using the EQS v6.1 statistical software—was applied to examine the psychometric properties of the scales. As a result of CFA, 3 items were dropped from their respective scales—one from consumer ethnocentrism, one from politic-economic COI, and one from reluctance to buy—, so as to increase the internal consistency of the scales. Once refined, the internal consistency coefficients (alpha and rho) for the majority of scales were well above the recommended level of 0.8 (Straub, 1989).

As expected, both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses provided support for the second-order structure of the COI scale, comprising three politic-economic, environmental, and societal subscales (support for H1). The three COI subscales had significant and strong contributions to overall COI—with social image showing the strongest effect, followed by the politic-economic subscale. Exploratory and confirmatory analyses also supported a second-order structure for country animosity, comprising two subscales: one factor capturing explicit (or specific) motives for country animosity, and a second factor covering more general animosity feelings.

To tests were sequentially performed for discriminant validity assessments between each pair of factors: first, a confidence interval test was used; next, chi-square difference tests (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) were applied only to ‘problematic’ pairs of factors in the (previous) confidence interval tests. Both tests were indicative of a satisfactory level of discriminant validity between all pairs of factors.

4.2 Descriptive results: knowledge about the COO & reluctance to buy

Frequency analyses were performed with SPSS v20 to gain a better understanding of the level of respondents’ knowledge about key features of the COO (i.e., China) and their reluctance to buy products from that country. The average score for high general knowledge about China was 4.92, whereas the respective scores for high knowledge about politic-economic, environmental, and social issues were somewhat lower (4.47, 4.35, and 4.78). Interestingly those issues that participants believe to be more knowledgeable about (social) were the ones exerting a greater influence in country image formation. The contrary was also true, that is, environmental issues were the willingness and reluctance to buy scales from COO literature (Josiasen, 2011; Nijssen & Douglas, 2004; Suh a& Kwon, 2002).

Foreign product ownership was operationalized through two variables, namely: (1) the number of apparel items purchased by respondents in Chinese-owned stores during the last 6 months; and (2) the (perceived) share/percentage of clothing products—owned by respondents—from Chinese apparel stores. Questionnaire included four items for measuring the perceived knowledge of China held by participants. Participants rated the extent to which they had a high level of knowledge about China’s politic-economic, social and environmental issues, and general knowledge about the country.
least influential items in country image formation and the ones receiving a lower score on average in perceived knowledge.

As for respondents’ overall reluctance to buy Chinese apparel, the results show that (on average) most participants try to avoid Chinese apparel (mean=7.13; 33% of the sample ‘totally agrees’ with this statement), are more willing to pay higher prices for Spanish products (mean=6.9; 34.3% ‘totally agrees’), and do not like Chinese apparel in comparison with products from other countries (mean=6.35 mean; 20.5% ‘totally agrees’). On the contrary, respondents are not likely to feel guilty in case of purchasing Chinese apparel (mean=3.91; 24% ‘totally disagrees’), and do not appear to agree with the statement that ‘they will never purchase Chinese apparel’ (mean=4.01 mean; 23.3% ‘totally disagrees’). Less clear is whether participants like the idea of owning Chinese clothing, or not (mean=5.26).

4.3 Country-based reluctance to buy & product ownership

Correlation analysis—again using the EQS v6.1 statistical software—was performed between product ownership and country-based reluctance to buy measures in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the scope of the avoidance phenomenon and to what extent reluctance to buy translated into real purchase and ownership of Chinese items. Results showed a moderate though significant negative relationship (std. $\beta=-0.198; p<0.01$) between both constructs.

4.4 Explaining country-based reluctance to buy

Structural equation modeling (SEM)—again using the EQS v6.1 statistical software—was applied to test the hypothesized relations in the proposed research model. The assessment of absolute fit showed that the scaled chi-square ($\chi^2$) was significant at $p<0.01$. Given the sensitivity of the chi-square statistic to samples with more than 200 observations, alternative indices were examined. RMSEA (0.055) fell below the recommended threshold level of 0.08. Incremental fit measures also indicated a good model fit (NNFI=0.837; NFI=0.896, CFI=0.903).
Figure 2. Proposed model with path coefficients’ results

The results provided support for nearly all the hypothesized relationships (see Fig. 2). The model was able to explain more than half of the variance (51.9%) of reluctance to buy. The strongest effects on reluctance to buy were exerted by country animosity (std. $\beta=0.676; p<0.01$), followed by consumer ethnocentrism (std. $\beta=0.147; p<0.01$), and foreign product judgment (std. $\beta=-0.122; p<0.01$); these results lend support for H2a, H2b and H2c. The model also helped to explain the 21% of the variance in foreign product judgment. As hypothesized, COI had the strongest, direct effect on product judgment (std. $\beta=0.435; p<0.01$); however, COI did not significantly contribute to country animosity—these results provide support for H4a and no support for H4b. An additional, non-hypothesized negative effect of country animosity on foreign product judgment was also identified (std. $\beta=-0.169; p<0.01$) during the process of model testing and comparison of competing models.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This work attempted to shed light on the influence of environmental and social issues in country-based anti-consumption decisions and behavior. To achieve this goal, an integrative research model of reluctance to buy foreign products is proposed and tested for Spanish consumers’ reluctance to purchase Chinese apparel products.

The results confirmed the importance of considering environmental and social issues in COI scales—along with the more traditionally researched issues, such as politico-economic issues. As expected, COI appears to be a key antecedent of foreign product judgments and—to a lesser extent, mediated through foreign product judgments—of consumers’ reluctance to buy, rejection, or avoidance of foreign products. Social issues appear to play a more important role in consumers’ cognitions of COI; in
contrast, environmental issues, though significant, were not as important in forming the overall COI. These findings—in conjunction with the observed level of respondents’ knowledge about ‘Chinese issues’—raise the possibility that the structure of COI depends on consumers’ degree of knowledge about the different politic-economic, environmental, and social issues, concerning the specific COO (i.e., China, in the present study).

Contrary to expectations, COI had no significant effect on country animosity. These findings suggest that country animosity works differently than other affective constructs previously used in COO research (Heslop et al., 2008; Maher & Carter, 2011); that is, country animosity is likely to have alternative antecedents. Moreover, country animosity had an unexpected, negative effect on foreign product judgments; despite its moderate-to-low strength, perceived threat of Chinese products and reduction of dissonance may help in explaining this phenomenon (Huang et al., 2010).

The results provided support for the ‘three COO influence mechanisms’, identified in prior research (e.g., Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999); that is, cognitive (foreign product judgments), affective (country animosity) and normative effects (consumer ethnocentrism) are all important in shaping (Spanish) consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products (i.e., Chinese products). Country animosity stood out as the most influencing factor on reluctance to buy foreign products; foreign product judgments and consumer ethnocentrism had similar (moderate-to-low) effects on reluctance to buy, though in the opposite direction.

Taken as a whole, the findings reported here are largely in with Nijssen & Douglas’s (2004) study of Dutch consumers’ reluctance to buy foreign products. Interestingly, the present study focused on consumers’ reluctance to buy (foreign products) as the key outcome of interest, in contrast with most other studies paying attention to willingness to buy (foreign products) (e.g., Klein et al., 1998, Ettenson & Klein, 2005). Observable differences in the analysis of consumers’ willingness vs. reluctance to buy foreign products—e.g., greater saliency of foreign product judgments in the prediction of consumers’ reluctance to buy, as compared to willingness to buy foreign products—may suggest that, as posited in the anti-consumption literature (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2012), the reasons for foreign product avoidance are not necessarily the logical opposite of the reasons for foreign product consumption.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

This work reveals that Spanish consumers may be reluctant to buy Chinese apparel products; however, behavioural intentions (i.e., consumers’ reluctance to buy) do not completely translate into behaviour (i.e., avoidance of foreign products). Widespread availability and comparatively lower prices of Chinese products may account for such ‘intention–action’ gap in country-based anti-consumption.

Social and environmental issues appear to shape consumers’ perceived image of foreign countries; the salience of such (social and environmental) issues—and that of politic-economic and issues—may be contingent on consumers’ level of knowledge of foreign governments’ policies in different areas. For instance, informing about the environmental policies of the COO might increase the importance of environmental
issues in COI; consequently, environmental COI would play a more salient role in consumers’ decision-making, and be more predictive—albeit as a distal antecedent—of foreign product judgments and reluctance to buy foreign products.

The findings also supported the consideration of country animosity as the most important antecedent of Spanish consumers’ reluctance to buy Chinese apparel products. Consumer animosity feelings (towards certain foreign countries) are likely to evolve and change over time; however, it is by no means easy to counteract these. Animosity feelings towards China, among Spanish consumers, may be largely attributable to the proliferation of Chinese products and businesses across Spain—and are likely to be exacerbated by the current economic crisis and unemployment rate (over 25% in 2013). A fruitful strategy in this regard may be to strengthen current relationships between Chinese and Spanish governments and businesses. Yet, it is necessary to remark that consumer animosity feelings are likely to evolve and change over time; however, it is by no means easy to counteract these. A fruitful strategy in this regard may be to strengthen current relationships between Chinese and Spanish governments and businesses, and stressing and communicating the positive effects that this collaboration may operate on Spanish economy—i.e. work opportunities, possibility of Chinese-Spanish alliances, etc. For business it may also be beneficial to develop strong brands; the development of such brands should put attention not only in product features, but also in environmental consequences of product manufacturing and workers welfare.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work can be improved and extended in several ways. First, the low percentage of the variance explained in the final outcome variable of the study (i.e., product ownership) could be increased by considering alternative factors or moderating variables. Variables such as perceived risk, economical constraints, or availability of alternatives might be helpful in explaining the acquisition and actual ownership of Chinese garments.

Second, the study should be extended to alternative country settings and product categories. It is likely that different culture settings will affect the proposed relationships in dissimilar ways (Suh & Kwon, 2002). Recent research has shown that the relative importance of COO influence mechanisms tends to vary across consumers and country dyads (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). Moreover, the present study has focused only on Chinese (apparel) products that were manufactured in China, and distributed through Chinese-owned stores in Spain. Future research should address alternative, mixed situations—e.g., Chinese manufacture and Spanish-owned store.

Lastly, it would be interesting to examine differences in salience of social and environmental country images among average consumers and more specific consumer/citizen segments, such as social or environmental activists.

8. REFERENCES


