The Impact of Country of Manufacture and Brand on Consumers’ Attributions of Blame in a Product-Harm Crisis

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Previous research on product-harm crises has examined how the characteristics of the observers of the crisis, such as gender or nationality, can influence blame attributions (see Laufer et al, 2005; Laufer and Gillespie, 2004; Laufer, 2002). This study enhances our understanding of the impact of product-harm crises on consumers by examining how situational factors impact consumer blame attributions. Three experiments were conducted involving three different product-harm crises to examine how two extrinsic cues, brand and country of manufacture, impact the assessment of blame by observers to a product-harm crisis where ambiguity is present.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous research on product-harm crises has examined how the characteristics of the observers of the crisis, such as gender or nationality, can influence blame attributions (see Laufer et al., 2005; Laufer and Gillespie, 2004; Laufer, 2002). This study enhances our understanding of the impact of product-harm crises on consumers by examining how situational factors impact consumer blame attributions. Three experiments were conducted involving three different product-harm crises to examine how two extrinsic cues, brand and country of manufacture, impact the assessment of blame by observers to a product-harm crisis where ambiguity is present.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on extrinsic cues in three ways. First, extrinsic cues rarely have been examined in the context of blame assessments. To the best of our knowledge, country of manufacture has never been examined in this context. The country-of-origin literature has focused almost exclusively on the impact of the country-of-manufacture cue on pre-purchase decision-making, particularly in the context of quality assessments and purchase intentions. Second, our study examines the issue of which of the two extrinsic cues, country of manufacture or brand, plays a greater role in influencing consumers’ assessment of blame. Previous studies in the context of pre-purchase decision-making have found conflicting results regarding which of these two extrinsic cues plays a greater role in influencing consumers (Gaedeke, 1973; Cordell, 1992 and Jo, Nakamoto, and Nelson, 2003). Our study examines this question in a new context and adds to this debate. Finally, this study investigates the mechanisms underlying blame attributions by examining whether extrinsic cues cause biased information processing of evidence relating to culpability in the context of a product-harm crisis. To our knowledge, previous research has not examined biased information processing in relation to blame attributions associated with product-harm crises.

The findings of all three experiments demonstrate that extrinsic cues impact consumers’ assessment of blame for a product-harm crisis. In experiment 1, an unknown brand caused the participants to place more blame on the company for a product-harm crisis. In experiment 2, a negative country of manufacture caused the participants to place more blame on the company for a product-harm crisis. Finally in experiment 3, when multiple extrinsic cues were available (brand and country of manufacture) both a well-known brand and a positive country of manufacture reduced blame to the company. In this experiment we found that a well-known brand eliminated a negative country-of-manufacture effect such that there was no significant difference in blame to the company between the positive and negative country-of-manufacture conditions. We also found that a positive country of manufacture reduced the negative implications of being an unknown brand such that there was significantly less blame to the unknown company for the positive country-of-manufacture condition when compared with the negative country-of-manufacture condition. In an analysis of effect sizes we found that brand had the greater impact on shielding the company from blame when compared with country of manufacture. The brand effect explained 11.1% of the variation in the dependent variable, blame to the company, whereas the country of manufacture explained only 4.2%.

Recent research on multiple category membership can help us understand why brand information may have a greater impact than country-of-manufacture information in a product-harm crisis. Bodenhausen & Macrae (1998) found that category salience, chronic accessibility, and goal relevance are factors that influence which stereotype will command the most influence. Brand information is more likely to be chronically accessible to consumers than country of manufacture because of the dominance of brand information in both advertisements and product packaging: Advertisers focus on the brand name much more than country of manufacture in their advertising campaigns, and brand information is displayed more prominently on a product’s packaging than country-of-manufacture information. As a result, brand information should be much more accessible to consumers than country of manufacture during a product-harm crisis.

Our study also demonstrated that extrinsic cues impact not only overall assessments of blame directly, but also indirectly through the assessment of evidence associated with company culpability. An unknown brand caused observers’ to assess evidence associated with company blame as more important, when compared with a well-known brand. We did not find a similar effect for country of manufacture, which perhaps can be explained by the strong brand effect in the experiment. Future research should examine whether country of manufacture can impact the assessment of evidence associated with company culpability in other contexts.

REFERENCES