Effects of Situational Versus Representative Attributions on American Brands

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Past research has shown that consumers’ perceptions of product quality can be affected by the country of origin of the product. This paper explores how perceptions of a country’s actions (e.g., international policy, war, etc.) can affect evaluations of products that originate from that country. Specifically, this study examines evaluations of Middle East consumers on American brands depending on how they attribute the actions of the U.S. in Iraq (situational vs. representative), the relative salience of the brand as being from the U.S (salient vs. ambiguous), and the relative message strength (strong vs. weak) of the brand description.

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Past research has shown that consumers’ perceptions of product quality can be affected by the country of origin of the product. Recent research suggests that brands can be affected not only by country-of-origin effects, but by the general affect one feels towards a country (Maheswaran and Chen 2006). Positive (negative) affect towards a country can transfer to brands that originate from that country, resulting in positive (negative) brand evaluations. Certainly the actions of a country can influence affect, whether it is from being involved in a military conflict or giving aid to a neighboring country. This study examines perceptions of Middle East consumers on American credit card brands depending on their attributions of U.S. actions in Iraq (situational vs. representative). In addition, the relative salience of the brand as being from the U.S (salient vs. ambiguous) and the relative message strength (strong vs. weak) of the brand description are examined to determine the overall effect on brand evaluations.

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (attribution type: representative vs. situational) x 2 (salience of country of origin: highly salient vs. ambiguous) x 2 (message strength: strong and weak) between-subjects design. Participants began by writing an essay on the United States’ involvement in the Middle East. Participants were then asked to evaluate a credit card brand relative to other prominent credit card brands based on a product comparison from a fictitious third-party source. They were then asked for their overall opinion on the credit card brand. After answering several manipulation check questions, participants were debriefed.

The attribution condition was manipulated by asking those in the representative attribution condition to write about how the United States’ involvement was representative of American aggression in the Middle East and by asking those in the situational condition to write about how the involvement was due to situational factors. The salience of the country of origin was manipulated by using American Express as the salient American brand and Visa as the ambiguous American brand. Finally, message strength was manipulated by claiming the credit card brand was superior on four important attributes and inferior on four unimportant attributes for the “strong” condition and as superior on four unimportant attributes and inferior on four important attributes for the “weak” condition. Manipulation checks verified that participants in the representative attribution group rated higher agreement with the statement, “The war in Iraq is a typical example of American hostility against Arab countries,” (Mrep= 5.62) than participants in the situational condition (Msit=4.58), (t(71)=2.944, p<.005). American Express was confirmed as being more salient (recognized as American 99% of the time) than Visa (recognized as American 64% of the time) as being an American brand, (t(73)=5.95, p<.001). Finally, regarding the message strength manipulation, participants rated the brand under the strong message condition as being superior than the brand under the weak message when compared to other leading credit card brands (Mstrong=5.78 compared to Mweak= 3.94, t(71)=11.17, p<.001).

The dependent variable was an evaluation index that came from three evaluation items. An ANOVA on the evaluation index yielded a significant main effect for message strength (F(1, 64)=4.37, p<.05) and a significant three-way (attribution type by country-of-origin salience by message strength) interaction (F(1, 64)=5.07, p<.05).

With respect to the three-way interaction, under the strong message condition there was an attribution type by country-of-origin salience interaction (F(1, 31)=4.61, p<.05). Evaluations were significantly higher for the salient brand in the situational condition (M=6.07) than in the representative condition (M=4.80), (t(17)=3.245, p<.01), but there was no difference in evaluations for the nonsalient brand between the two attribution conditions (t(17)=.33, p>.70). Under the weak message condition, there were no differences among the evaluations as evidenced by an insignificant ANOVA model (F(5,31)=1.18, p>.30).

The findings from this study imply that a brand’s country of origin can potentially be an asset or liability depending on how consumers interpret a country’s actions. If consumers attribute a country’s negative actions to situational factors, having a salient brand name could be a benefit, assuming consumers originally had positive feelings for the country. However, if consumers attribute a country’s negative actions as being typical of its behavior, then having a salient brand with respect to country of origin could damage the brand image. For brands that are considered relatively weak, the impact of country of origin was found to be minimal in this study. This is likely because consumers do not even consider “weak” brands as viable options for purchase or consumption. Also, the impact of a country’s negative actions seems to have minimal impact on brands with nonsalient countries of origin.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study is that countries have to consider the economic impact of their actions. Negative consumer affect towards a country based on its actions can go beyond negative feelings towards the government and its policies; it can damage the brand image and equity of brands that have become closely associated with the country in consumers’ eyes.

References
