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Consumer affinity for foreign countries: Construct development, buying behavior consequences and animosity contrasts

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Our purpose is to extend affinity theory in construct domain, scale development, model testing and by discerning affinity and animosity.

Design/methodology/approach: We carry out exploratory and empirical research in order to explore the domain and to test the factor structure and the hypotheses through confirmatory analysis.

Findings: We find (1) four target country affinity dimensions, (2) consumer affinity impacts micro country image, buying intentions and actual product ownership, and (3) affinity and animosity are distinct constructs with partly shared and partly unique dimensions.

Originality/value: The study is the first to empirically test the four dimensions, the first to establish a positive relationship with actual product ownership and micro country image, and the first to contrast the role of the dimensions in affinity and animosity.

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While many scholars have drawn attention to international business inhibiting constructs like animosity (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998), consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), and liability of foreignness (Slangen, Beugelsdijk, & Hennart, 2011), the impact of positive country affection and devotion on international business is much less understood. For example, anti-Americanism and Francophobia and their negative business effects have been studied (Amine, 2008). However, there is also an international Francophile community that loves French cuisine and French culture, and consumes French products as a way of expressing their identity. Our study provides new insights into consumer affinity, which are feelings of liking and fondness for a specific foreign country. The objectives of the study are to further develop the conceptual basis for consumer affinity and its domain and measurement scales, to provide insights into how general consumer affinity and its dimensions relate to intentional and actual buying behavior, to test whether consumer affinity and consumer animosity are unique constructs or just bipolar opposites of the same construct, and to discuss the potential role of consumer affinity in international business.

We endeavor to achieve the objectives through a series of qualitative and empirical studies. The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on affinity and related concepts. Next, we present the findings of qualitative studies, followed by quantitative studies for scale development and verification of constructs. Measurement scales are finalized and hypotheses of causal relationships are developed and tested in a final study.

1. Literature review

In this section, we review consumer affinity and extract gaps in the literature, compare affinity with the closely related animosity construct, and discuss other constructs that are related to affinity.

1.1. Consumer affinity

The theoretical roots of consumer affinity can be traced to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982). This theory distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups. In Social Identity Theory, a person has not only one “personal self,” but also several social selves. These selves correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel, and act based on different levels of selves. The consumer ethnocentrism construct is a prime example of in-group favoritism in a business context. Identity is not deterministic (Schlenker, 1986), and often it is chosen by individuals of their own will (Swann, 1987). Hence, people who develop affinity toward a

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foreign country may do so because they identify with the country's culture, they consider the country to be one of their in-groups because they find it attractive, or they find that their identification with the country contributes to their social identity.

The term "affinity" has been used in at least three contexts in marketing and management in addition to consumer affinity for foreign countries (affinity marketing, cultural affinity, intercultural communication affinity). First, the term "affinity marketing" is used in the marketing literature to describe a concept of combining benefits for an affinity group with benefits for the individual (Woo, Fock, & Hui, 2006). Second, findings within the international marketing and management literature suggest that "cultural affinity" is related to psychic distance (Swift, 1999), to adaptation to foreign market needs and wants (Hallén & Johanson, 1985), to perceived ease of adoption of new Western technology in China (Phillips & Calantone, 1994), and to global umbrella brands and responsible marketing (Wood, Pitta, & Franzak, 2008). Third, Kupka, Everett, and Cathro (2008) developed the intercultural communication affinity scale to assess expatriates' affective fit in host countries. Furthermore, the concept of international affinity captures a central place in international relations research in political science (Maoz, Kuperman, Terris, & Talmud, 2006).

Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) introduced the term "consumer affinity" but their model was not empirically tested. Oberecker, Riefler, and Diamantopoulos (2008) expanded the concept in a qualitative study. They suggested that the underlying sources of affinity could be categorized into four macro drivers and three micro drivers. Their macro drivers seem to express *what* respondents like about the affinity target, and the micro drivers seem to express *how* they developed this affinity. In a recent study, Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) conceptualized affinity as a higher-order construct with two first-order dimensions (sympathy and attachment). They found that affinity was positively related to willingness to buy, negatively related to perceived risk of products from the affinity target, and they found no relationship between affinity and consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) nor between affinity and micro country image. Following Nagashima (1970), the image that one has about products from a given country has been termed the *micro* country image by Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey (2007).

We conclude there is a void in the affinity literature concerning several issues. First, the conceptualization of affinity in Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) depicts affinity as a purely affective higher-order construct where the two first-order dimensions also are feelings (sympathy and attachment). However, feelings are often anchored in cognitive considerations. Cognitive appraisal theory has emerged as a dominant theory to understand emotions in the psychology literature (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). Appraisal theories assume that emotions come from evaluation of events, and it can be seen as the "cognitive approach" to emotions (Silvia, 2005). In the case of affinity, the events that are appraised have to do with the dimensions of the country that is the target of the feelings. For example, a foreign country has a political initiative (event) that is considered desirable (appraisal), and this stimulates positive feelings toward a political dimension of the affinity target. Different appraisals of the same situation (e.g. political initiative) may evoke different emotions (Roseman & Smith, 2001), and our understanding of the dimensions is pivotal in our understanding of the appraisals.

Second, for the future role of the affinity variable in theory development and in business we need more insight into whether affinity is a unique construct or just the bipolar opposite of animosity. Third, Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) did not find a link between consumer affinity and micro country image. However, the affinity target country in their study was operationalized as the country toward which the respondents felt the

highest affinity. Thus, all evaluations were in a high affinity setting, and the findings may or may not be valid when a specific country is the affinity target. Fourth, Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) was a single cue study in their measure of willingness to buy, and such studies have generally higher effects than multi-cue studies (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). The impact of consumer affinity on willingness to buy in Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) needs to be confirmed in a multi-cue setting or by actual product ownership.

We endeavor to contribute to these issues in several ways. First, we develop the dimensions and scales to measure the dimensions empirically through qualitative and quantitative studies. Second, we empirically discern the affinity and animosity constructs. We find that some dimensions are shared between animosity and affinity and some are uniquely affinity. Third, we test relationships between affinity and micro country image and affinity and buying intentions when two specific countries are affinity targets. This is different from Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) who had the respondents choose the affinity targets. Finally, we extend the impact on buying behavior from single cue buying intentions to actual product ownership, and demonstrate how the affinity dimensions may give new insights into the behavioral consequences of affinity.

1.2. Animosity and other related concepts

Consumer affinity is related to the sociological concept of xenocentrism, which is the view that a group other than one's own is the center of everything and that all others, including one's own group, are scaled and rated with reference to it (Kent & Burnight, 1951; Perlmutter, 1954). Consumer affinity is different from xenocentrism, as consumer affinity does not imply that the foreign country is the center of reference nor does it imply that the foreign country is preferred above the home country.

Affinity is most closely related to animosity. The animosity concept in a marketing context was introduced by Klein et al. (1998) and has since been applied in a series of studies, most of which are reviewed in Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007) and in Nes, Yelkur, and Silkoset (2012). Most of the bi-national studies that followed the Klein et al. (1998) study built on one or both of their two animosity dimensions (war animosity and economic animosity). Nes et al. (2012) expanded the animosity concept, and found that animosity is related to four dimensions: war animosity, economic animosity, political animosity, and people animosity. Animosity was recently applied in several contexts outside the consumer marketing domain, for example, in trade economics (Fisman, Hamao, & Wang, 2012), organizational buying (Edwards, Gut, & Mavondo, 2007), international production shifts (Funk, Arthurs, Treviño, & Joireman, 2010), role in economic recovery in emerging markets (Jimenez & Martin, 2012), and cross-border acquisition success (Fong, Lee, & Du, 2013). These studies illustrate that animosity toward specific foreign countries has an important role in a wide range of international management problems.

2. Development of constructs and scales

This study followed Churchill's (1979) eight steps in the measurement process for developing the affinity construct: (1) the study specified the domains and gave the meaning of the affinity constructs, and (2) generated a sample of indicators that captured the domains defined. The study then followed the process of (3) collecting data, (4) purifying measures, (5) collecting data, (6) assessing reliability, (7) assessing validity, and (8) developing norms.

We used the linked emic model in our information collection to reduce single culture bias (Douglas & Craig, 2006). We did this by

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