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Brothers in blood, yet strangers to global brand purchase: A four-country study of the role of consumer personality

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ABSTRACT

Although personality traits have repeatedly been shown to influence consumer behavior, their impact on willingness to buy global brands has yet to be empirically investigated. Based on a four-country sample (N = 4539) of South East European consumers, we test alternative pathways linking consumer personality traits to global brand purchase intentions. Our findings show that extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness and openness to experience impact purchase intentions mediated through consumers' global brand associations, domestic country bias and price sensitivity. Implications of the findings for theory and practice are considered and future research directions identified.

1. Introduction

The globalization of the marketplace plays a viable role in softening national borders with its encouragement of economic, political, and personal interaction (McDonald, Spears, & Parker, 2004). Through the process of globalization, once fragmented country markets have been significantly changed in (a) economic (enormous growth in investments), (b) technological (rise of Internet and modern communications technology), and (c) social terms (world travel) (Steenkamp & de Jong, 2010). A key marketing implication has been the rise of global brands, that is, brands that enjoy “global awareness, availability, acceptance and desirability” (Özsomer & Altaras, 2008, p.1) and are associated with consumer perceptions of high quality, enhanced prestige and various functional, symbolic, and identity-strengthening benefits (Dimofte, Johansson, & Ronkainen, 2008; Özsomer, 2012; Xie, Batra, & Peng, 2015). Consequently, internationally-active companies have shown great interest in understanding and fostering consumer motivations regarding responsiveness to global brands. In this context, personality traits may play an important role in understanding how people adopt global and national identities not least because such traits are in charge of shaping people's worldviews and ideological attitudes (Sibley & Duckitt, 2009). As Westjohn, Singh and Magnusson (2012, p. 71, original emphasis) observe, “a better understanding of global and national identity and consumer personality traits can help marketers be proactive and anticipate aspirations and self-construal of the target market”.

While the adoption of global and national (local) identities has attracted considerable research attention (for a recent review, see Bartsch, Riefler, & Diamantopoulos, 2015), there is scant research of the role of personality traits in shaping consumer responses to global brands. To the best of our knowledge, other than the study by Westjohn et al. (2012) on the link between agreeableness and openness to experience and global and national identity (as a mediator of responsiveness to global and local consumer culture positioning strategies), no other investigation of consumer personality traits has been conducted in a global branding context. This is surprising, not least because personality traits are an important construct in marketing (Bosnjak, Bratko, Galesic, & Tuten, 2007; Gountas & Gountas, 2007) and frequently part of segmentation strategies (Barry & Weinstein, 2009). Furthermore, prior research – albeit not specifically in a global branding context – has demonstrated links between personality traits and behavior (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009; Lastovicka & Joachimsthaler, 1988).

The focus of the present study is on advancing our understanding of the role and relevance of personality traits in influencing global brand purchase. Specifically, we propose a mediational model involving different pathways through which personality traits may drive consumers' willingness to buy global brands while controlling for consumer demographics. We subsequently test our model on a four-country sample (total N = 4539) drawn from Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B & H hereafter).

We contribute to global branding literature by offering the first

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study assessing the extent to which innate and inherent characteristics of human nature – the development of which is autonomous and not tied to environmental conditions (McCrae et al., 2000) – impact key drivers of global brand purchase. Furthermore, we identify the routes through which different personality dimensions influence the likelihood of buying global brands as well as the relative importance of such routes. Finally, we investigate the potential existence of cross-country differences in the impact of personality traits and their implications for international market segmentation.

2. Background and conceptual framework

Several studies have shown that personality traits can explain an important part of perceptions, judgments, and behavior of consumers (Gountas & Gountas, 2007; Kassarjian, 1971; Thompson & Prendergast, 2015). Personality traits are defined as “endogenous dispositions that follow intrinsic paths of development essentially independent of environmental influences” (McCrae et al., 2000, p. 173) and can be assessed, for example, by asking individuals to assess the degree to which short descriptive sentences describe them (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998) or by rating themselves on trait adjectives (Goldberg, 1990). In the prominent Big Five/FFM model of personality, such ratings are assigned to five key factors, namely extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and either openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 1987) or intellect (Goldberg, 1990). However, different number of factors have been used in previous studies to describe the personality structure of individuals; for example Eysenck (1991) refers to three factors, namely psychoticism, extraversion and neuroticism (for an overview of different personality models, see Sautier & Srivastava, 2015).

Personality traits are particularly relevant for the study of the effects of global brands on consumer behavior since research in psychology shows that the personality of individuals affects their behavior through cognitions, affect and motivations that are linked to personality (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). In particular, the cognitive-affective personality system theory of Mischel and Shoda (1995) argues that the same situation might be differently encoded, be differently related to beliefs and values, and might evoke different emotional responses for individuals with different personality traits. For example, for individuals scoring high in neuroticism, winning a trip to a distant foreign country in a lottery might not evoke great pleasure or the belief that this will be an exciting trip. Such highly neurotic individuals might instead think about the possible risks involved, such as the need for vaccinations, visas etc.

Highly relevant for the present research is the reasoning that personality traits direct the cognitive and affective system of individuals according to two basic motives from which one was already alluded to in the lottery trip example above (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Gray, 1987; Gray, Hanna, Gillen, & Rushe, 2016): (a) the experience of safety and the reduction of uncertainty and ambiguity, and (b) the experience of advancement, sensations, and novelty. More specifically, individuals high in neuroticism are motivated to reduce uncertainty and individuals high in openness to new experience are motivated to seek advancement and sensations (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Such differences in motivational orientations between individuals with different personality traits explain why individuals differ in how much they prefer what is already established and why they oppose changes (Higgins, 2000; Jost, Glaser, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

Individuals who attempt to keep a pleasant state and reduce uncertainty prefer choice options that are less risky and uncertain (Florack & Hartmann, 2007; Herzstein, Posavac, & Brakus, 2007; Yeo & Park, 2006) are more persuaded by concrete information than by abstract arguments (Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005) and are less likely to apply simple heuristics (Florack, Friese, & Scarabis, 2010; Pham & Avnet, 2004). In contrast, individuals who focus on advancement often display stronger purchase intentions

towards novel high-tech goods as well as ownership of newly launched high-tech products (Herzstein et al., 2007).

With specific reference to branding, it has been shown that motivational orientations can affect consumers' brand perceptions (Florack & Palcu, 2016). For example, Yeo and Park (2006) found that consumers who focus on positive consequences of decisions are more open to brand extensions very dissimilar from the parent brand than those who are very sensitive about potential negative consequences. Global brands are, by definition, more “distant” from the consumer than local brands, and global brands are more abstract and less concrete in their meaning (Dimofte et al., 2008). Hence, global brands bear more uncertainty than local brands. Furthermore, global brands often explicitly promise extraordinary experiences most relevant for individuals who seek such sensations, and they address the simple heuristic that global brand positioning means success (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). Therefore, consumers scoring high on extraversion and openness to experience are likely to associate global brands with positive attributes and consequently report stronger intentions to purchase global brands than consumers with personality traits that are linked to reducing uncertainty. Thus a first expected pathway linking personality traits to purchase intentions is through (positive) *global brand associations* (GBA); the latter refer to associations of quality, prestige, value-for-money, etc. that consumers make when confronted with global brands (Özsoyler & Altaras, 2008; Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003; Swoboda, Pennemann, & Taube, 2012). Consistent with prior literature (e.g. Dimofte et al., 2008; Riefler, 2012), we expect GBA to result in positive responses towards global brands thus enhancing willingness to purchase the latter.

Furthermore, research indicates that the motivation to reduce uncertainty increases the identification with the in-group (Grieve & Hogg, 1999) and that unambiguous and clearly structured high entitativity groups are better suited for reducing uncertainty (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2009). Hence, personality traits motivating uncertainty reduction (e.g. neuroticism) are likely to lead to more favorable attitudes towards the own (home) country and its products and adversely affect purchase intentions for global brands. On the other hand, personality traits that reflect receptiveness (e.g. openness to experience) are likely to be negatively related to a preference of brands from the home country at the expense of global brands. In line with this reasoning, previous research revealed that in-group favoritism tends to be related positively to neuroticism but negatively to openness to experience (Lewis & Bates, 2014). Thus, a second expected pathway linking personality traits to purchase intentions for global brands is through *domestic country bias* (DCB); that is a “bias against foreign products and in favor of domestic ones” (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2004, p. 80). Country-of-origin literature has repeatedly shown that DCB positively impacts the purchase likelihood of domestic brands at the expense of foreign brands (e.g. see Pharr, 2005; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Wilcox, 2015). Foreign brands, in turn, are often associated with globalness (e.g. Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000; Winit, Gregory, Cleveland, & Verlegh, 2014) and, therefore, the negative impact of DCB is expected to apply also to purchase intentions for global brands.

Finally, while GBA represent consumers' expectations of brand benefits, such benefits can only be enjoyed by consumers at a cost, that is, consumers must be willing and able to pay for them (Davvetas, Sichtmann, & Diamantopoulos, 2015; Winit et al., 2014). In this context, price is a very concrete and clear attribute of a product offer that can be used as an argument for purchasing. For example, neuroticism which is a personality trait related to uncertainty reduction is likely to lead to increased price sensitivity which may subsequently hinder global brand purchase. Price sensitivity might be also high among consumers who make careful decisions because of their high conscientiousness, as well as those who strive for reward (i.e. consumers high in extraversion). Thus, a third expected pathway linking personality traits to purchase intentions of global brands is *price sensitivity*

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