

Consumer Ethnocentrism: A Comparison of Arab and Western Audiences

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Abstract

The subject of consumer ethnocentrism is discussed in the context of advertising country-of-origin effects. The literature and suggestions concerning the phenomenon in the Middle East are brought up and a study using U.S. and Egyptian samples is described. The findings show some evidence of consumer ethnocentrism in both countries, though statistical significance is only achieved with U.S. data, generally consistent with prior writing and research focused on developed versus developing countries. Special attention is given to the construct of worldliness and though not statistically significant, results suggest it may be a factor deserving additional study.

Introduction

In the literature on international marketing and advertising, “country-of-origin effects” relate to how the mention of where a product comes from can impact consumer perceptions of quality, value, and intention to purchase. The concept was initially proposed by Schooler (1965), and over 40 years of research have documented instances of both positive and negative effects.

General findings and predictions from country-of-origin studies suggest that advertisements and media messages associating products with developed countries are likely to produce more favorable attitudes and increase purchase likelihood, while those linking products to a developing country may have the opposite effect (Dinnie, 2004). As noted by Hamin (2006), though, most research in the area has been conducted among populations from developed countries (particularly the U.S. and Europe), with consumers in the developing world receiving less attention.

Explanations of the country-of-origin phenomenon usually focus on the psychological notions of consumer ethnocentrism (Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995) and animosity (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). The concept of consumer ethnocentrism involves message receivers having a certain set of feelings or pride that leads them to prefer products and brands from their own country. Animosity is rather the reverse, with consumers actively disliking products from a country they have negative feelings about, due to historical, political, cultural, or other factors. Thus, the mention of a product’s country-of-origin may have both positive and negative effects on different audiences, depending on whether it triggers ethnocentrism or animosity.

Writing on topics of country-of-origin, consumer ethnocentrism, and animosity is quite extensive (a February 2010 Google-scholar search for articles including all of the three terms produces over 1,100 hits). However, there has been very little attention to how they might be applied in the Arab world. There

has also been only minimal comparative work done to consider differences among various countries.

Of the limited country-of-origin research done in the Middle East, Keenan and Al-Kadi (2004) suggest that animosity toward the U.S. and the West is responsible for certain negative findings about advertisements for American products in Egypt. Keenan and Pokrywczynski (2009) reach similar conclusions in a separate study of Egypt, while Bahae and Pisani (2009a, 2009b) find evidence of both animosity and consumer ethnocentrism among audiences in Iran. Albarq (2007) attributes results found in his study of Jordan to consumer ethnocentrism, and shows such effects being stronger among those with less interest in travel outside their home country, something Bahae and Pisani (2009b) also suggested in their study of Iranian consumers. Thus, it would seem that both of the generally established explanations of country-of-origin effects found elsewhere, animosity and consumer ethnocentrism, might have some application in the Arab world under certain circumstances.

Prior studies using comparative approaches indicate that there are likely to be variations in how country-of-origin works in different parts of the world, though still, few of them have included Arab populations among their comparisons. Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) find differences between Japan and the U.S., while Meng, Nasco, and Clark (2007) show the same kind of differences between China and the U.S.. In both cases, the authors suggest distinctions between collectivist and individualist cultures may explain their findings.

Some writers have begun to wonder what kind of an impact increases in the globalization of media, marketing, and cultures may have on country-of-origin effects. Political and economic developments of recent years also raise the possibility of such factors interacting with consumer decisions in situations where beliefs about a nation's policies and actions are taken into account when making

product decisions more than they may have been in the past. This might be especially important in the context of understanding between Arab and Western countries or in considering Muslim and non-Muslim relations.

Suh and Smith (2008) point out that a number of issues related to modern globalization may influence the importance of country-of-origin as a determinant of consumer behavior and propose examination on both psychological and broader levels. De Mooij (2004) has argued that recent trends toward globalization are not enough to offset established national ties and the kind of feelings which underlie country-of-origin behaviors. With changes brought on by globalization, and shifts in the status of nations related to animosity and consumer ethnocentrism, and other matters having to do with country-of-origin effects, it would seem that nearly half a century after such ideas were first proposed (Schooler, 1965), continued and additional work in the area is called for.

A focus on consumer ethnocentrism

To understand the factors related to country-of-origin effects in the 21st century, with particular interest in how the construct might function in the Middle East, this study focuses almost solely on the subtopic of consumer ethnocentrism. It primarily deals with comparisons involving Egypt, a developing collectivist Arab country and the United States, a developed individualist country. The research examines antecedent and explanatory variables that may play a part in consumer ethnocentrism processes.

Several generalizations can be drawn from the growth of the literature in the area of consumer ethnocentrism, both as a component of country-of-origin hypotheses and as its own research pursuit. Most basic of these is the nearly universal nature of the phenomenon. Whether for reasons of loyalty, patriotism, or genuine belief in their home country's superiority, many consumers the world over tend to exhibit consumer ethnocentrism. It should be noted, though, that

while this finding is consistent with country-of-origin ideas for those from developed countries, Hamin (2006) points out that it is somewhat contradictory in less developed countries. That is, the country-of-origin conclusion that consumers prefer products from more developed countries is divergent from the consumer ethnocentrism tendency of people having positive attitudes towards their own country when considering the less developed world. This point may have particular relevance for many nations in the Middle East, and calls for assessment of populations in that part of the world.

Another fairly straightforward finding, which seems to hold across developing and developed countries, involves intra-country variation among individuals in terms of their levels of consumer ethnocentrism. Phrased variously as “cultural openness” (Shankarmahesh, 2004), “global consumption orientation” (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 2006), “cosmopolitanism” (Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009), or simply a broad receptiveness to foreign cultures, people in the same country tend to differ in terms of how welcoming they are to things beyond their own country and experiences. Quite aside from product preferences and matters related specifically to their consumer roles, individual differences in what might be thought of as *worldliness* appear related to consumer ethnocentrism. Those exhibiting more worldly tendencies are likely to have lower levels of consumer ethnocentrism than their less worldly countrymen and countrywomen.

Research on consumer ethnocentrism in the Middle East has been limited, but is generally consistent with findings from other parts of the world. Evidence of something like the worldliness variable discussed above is shown in two studies of Arab nations, both of which use foreign travel experience as a measure of the construct, finding reduced consumer ethnocentrism among samples in Jordan (Albarq, 2007) and in Iran (Bahae & Pisani, 2009b) for respondents who express interest in or past instances of travel outside their home country.

A comparative study of Arab and U.S. university students, looking not specifically at *consumer* ethnocentrism, but at more general cultural ethnocentrism, finds differences in the type and extent of ethnocentrism among the two groups (Abdulla, 2008). While issues of economic dependency and lifestyle factors such as product choice are touched on, one of Abdulla's key conclusions is that "intercultural experience," a factor much like the worldliness suggested here, reduces ethnocentrism.

Considering the literature and topics raised to this point, it should be interesting and useful to consider consumer ethnocentrism among Egyptian audiences in comparison to that of Americans. Developments in global media and advertising, changes in audience perceptions, and strategic decisions on the part of marketers all call for the examination of similarities and differences between the Middle East and the West in terms of consumer ethnocentrism. The research reported below is meant to be exploratory and to offer some initial points for discussion.

Methodology

As part of an ongoing project on cross-cultural advertising copy factors, convenience samples of U.S. and Egyptian consumers were asked a set of closed-ended questions. Of particular relevance to this study are items measuring preference for home country products on a five point scale, and separate dichotomous items about having lived or traveled outside their home country. Worldliness was calculated by combining the two items about living or traveling abroad, with those who had either lived or traveled outside their country coded as "worldly" and those who had neither lived nor traveled outside their country treated as "not worldly."

A total of 100 university students were included in each sample, with 93 usable instruments resulting from the U.S. group and 99 usable instruments

obtained in Egypt. English was the language used for both samples. The use of a students in a convenience type sample design, while not preferred for reaching firm conclusions about the phenomena studied, was justified given the exploratory nature of this research.

The two samples were equivalent in terms of their gender distribution ($\chi^2=.074$; $p=.786$), with 21 males (22.6%) and 72 females (77.4%) included in the U.S. sample, while the Egyptian sample consisted of 24 males (24.2%) and 75 females (75.8%). The questionnaires were administered in group settings with one of the two primary researchers present, and took from 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Respondents were debriefed after completing the instrument and all items were determined to be understood clearly.

Results

Although the data structure does not allow direct comparison of consumer ethnocentrism in the two countries, there is some evidence that it exists among both Egyptian and American consumers. Using an index constructed from the questions about preference for products from four additional countries as a standard for comparison with their preference for home country products, the U.S. sample showed consumer ethnocentrism in the form of a clear preference for U.S. products (own country=4.172, other country=2.718; $t=12.783$, $p=.000$). For Egypt, differences were in the same direction, with home country products preferred, though results were not statistically significant at the .05 level (own country=2.939, other country=2.667; $t= 1.925$, $p=.057$). A test of differences between the U.S. and Egypt in terms of preference for other country products was not significant ($t= .593$; $p=.553$), suggesting the computed index variable was a valid proxy measure for use in the above analyses. Straight comparison of own country preference between the U.S. (4.172) and Egyptian (2.939) samples was significant ($t=8.060$; $p=.000$).

To evaluate the relationship of worldliness to consumer ethnocentrism, separate analyses considered respondents from the U.S. and Egypt who had traveled outside their own country, lived outside their own country, and traveled or lived outside their own country. None of the resulting six tests produced statistically significant results, though all six non-significant findings were in the same direction. Egyptians showed a slightly lower preference for home country products if they had traveled abroad (yes=2.900, no=3.333; $t=.983$; $p=.328$), lived abroad (yes=2.836, no=3.068; $t=.909$, $p=.366$), and traveled or lived abroad (yes=2.890, no=3.500; $t=1.317$, $p=.191$). For the U.S. sample, there was also lower preference for home country products among those who had traveled abroad (yes=4.130, no=4.291; $t=.861$, $p=.533$), lived abroad (yes=4.077, no=4.188; $t=.467$, $p=.642$), and traveled or lived abroad (yes=4.130, no=4.292; $t=.861$, $p=.391$).

Discussion, conclusions, and limitations

While aspects of this research lack the kind of rigor necessary to reach definitive conclusions, the findings offer some points to note and consider in discussions of consumer ethnocentrism. Particularly relating to the Arab world and to comparisons of the phenomenon across countries and regions, there are a number of things to build from here.

It would seem that consumer ethnocentrism is present in both the U.S. and Egypt. Results comparing preference for products from their own country with preference for products from other countries is evidence of this. Given that the dataset used was assembled for purposes beyond the examination of consumer ethnocentrism, the construction of an index representing other country preference appears to have served as its purpose. Further research among Arab populations would do well to concentrate on the topic of consumer ethnocentrism and to move beyond the single item measures relied on here to draw from established gauges

and devices for studying it, including the consumer ethnocentrism tendencies scale (CETSCALE) developed by Shimp and Sharma (1987) and validated in a number of studies.

Among the present results that deserve closer attention is the seemingly greater level of consumer ethnocentrism in the U.S. than in Egypt. This is consistent with prior literature, which points out that the propensity of all consumers to prefer products from the developed world, found in most country of origin research, makes consumer ethnocentrism almost contradictory in the developing world (Hamin, 2006). Certainly, the concept is less stable, harder to predict, and probably somewhat weaker in a country like Egypt, and further research is needed. Taken in combination with past findings of animosity toward the West in that country (Keenan & Al-Kadi, 2004), there would seem reason to consider both explanations, consumer ethnocentrism and animosity, for consumer choice concerning imported products and advertising in Egypt, or to take something of a pan-Arab approach in evaluating how products from other Middle East countries are perceived.

Also calling for future consideration is the variable we have referred to as "worldliness." While none of the six analyses concerning worldliness produced statistical significance (lived, traveled, lived or traveled outside own country, for both the U.S. and Egypt samples), the fact that each was in the direction that would be predicted from prior writing may hint that there is some merit to continuing to pursue the idea. With more careful thought given to the construct of worldliness and to its measurement, this may be an area from which to build studies of consumer ethnocentrism and other communication research questions in the Middle East.

Related to the notion of worldliness, and relevant to broader consumer ethnocentrism and country-of-origin questions, it would be interesting to investigate how preference for products from one's own country may vary by

other socio-economic factors. With changes in global perspectives, marketplaces, consumption processes, and national dynamics, it is likely that consumer ethnocentrism will become a more important and interesting concept for study and for business decision making over the next several years.

While the factors covered in this study have universal application and consequences for describing and understanding consumer behavior, they may be especially important as related to the modern Middle East and to turmoils faced in that part of the world. It is quite likely that ethnocentrism and worldliness impact general feelings of conflict between Arabs and westerners and the inclusion of these matters in thinking about broader topics such as international relations and clashes of cultures may contribute to understanding of issues well beyond how product choices are made.

Finally, it is suggested that future studies take the topic beyond university student samples to consider consumer ethnocentrism among broader populations in the U.S., Egypt, and elsewhere. While regulations and cultural factors can make parallel sampling and methodological procedures problematic in different parts of the world, it is worth striving for results that may be more widely generalized.

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