Impacts of Marketing by Multinational Firms on Country Image, Corporate Image and on Consumers' Use of Products in Transitional Economies

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INTRODUCTION

How are attitudes of customers in transition economies towards Western culture and products? Are consumers in transition economies likely to be acculturated by Western culture? Do they have a favorable attitude toward Western Multinational firms and therefore, are more eager to purchase their products? Do they have any preference in purchasing specific brands, products, and companies? What are those channels through which they are learning Western cultures and developing a favorable attitude towards Western products?

Globalization results in the international liberalization of trade, capital, technology, and human resources and, in turn, they are further driven by economic, demographic, technological and political changes and accelerated by advanced communication networks. It is commonly understood that the development of international business opens up new markets; opening new market creates wealth, which, in turn, stimulates a culture of conspicuous consumption and the integration of the world economy. Achieving the conceptual clarity on such an all-encompassing relationship is probably impossible, but pragmatic view of the challenges and opportunities faced by business in the era of globalization may help put the relationship into context. In practice, companies of all shapes and sizes throughout the world accept the globalization of business and economics as a fact of life. However, because globalization has its own momentum, businesses must recognize its potential and meet its challenges. The challenge is to find innovative ways to harness the business potentials of globalization and to mould their effects for the benefit of consumers.

The Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) are the new transition economies created after the successes of former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. The populations and GDP of these countries are substantial and are likely to exert major influence on and offer significant opportunities to the international marketers. It is often believed that business ties between the Western world and these nations are a new phenomenon. However, the subsequent limits on business contacts were the result of an ideological wariness on both sides. The former Socialist countries often perceived multinational corporations (MNCs) as "aggressive business organizations developed to further the imperialistic aims of Western, especially American, capitalists over the world" (Lauter and Dickie 1975). Over the last decade, this rigid stance was modified somewhat by both sides. Decision makers in these former centrally planned economies recognized the need to purchase products and technologies that were unavailable domestically in order to achieve economic growth, and to improve the very much-neglected standard of living in their societies. As a result, government planners in former socialist economies began to include much more market considerations in their activities and opened up their economies to Western businesses. At the same time, the greater openness on the part of these transition economies resulted in more flexibility for the free trade among these CIS and Western countries. Their drive toward modernization of production and growing consumer demand greatly raised the attractiveness of doing business with the transition economies.

The continuing progression from a world of distinct national markets to one of linked global markets is being fueled by the persistent forces of the homogenization of customer needs, gradual

liberalization of trade, and the recognition of the competitive advantages of a global presence. The pressure of change in the transition economies offers vast opportunities for the future expansion of international marketing activities. Their large populations offer potential consumer demand for production supply unmatched by any other regions in the world. However, one major challenge for the international marketer is the lack of information about end users, since capable market research organizations specializing in this region are developing slowly and gradually. The entire marketing discipline is founded on the basic objective of satisfying the needs and wants of consumers. Unable to ascertain their desires directly, the international marketer must use secondary information to their best. Key concerns to the international marketer must be the degree to which the established Western marketing focus, objectives, and techniques fit in well with the transition economies. For MNCs in the West, their marketing objectives, such as achieving the highest levels of customer services, the best product quality, timely delivery, and/or individual convenience, may at this time simply not be valued highly in transition economies. Perhaps the importance of time, place, utilities, appearance, and design are not the same for all countries. In this regards, this study first investigates the underlying values within the relevant market. What are the values that are held strongly within the market and the intended market segment? What factors influence consumers' purchasing decisions? Second, this study evaluates the product concept as it relates to the culture of transition economies. Can a particular product concept harmonize with current values? What needs are satisfied by this product for members of this culture? How do competitive products and brands satisfy these needs currently? Third, this study tries to determine characteristics of purchase decision-making patterns. What purchase criteria and sources of information do consumers use in making their purchase-decisions for these products? What cultural values might be in conflict with purchase and use of this product?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some studies reported in the marketing literature have confirmed the importance and dynamics of cultural influence on consumer behavior (e.g., Erickson, Johansson, and Chao 1984). "Cultures" as a variable does matter in marketing decision-makings. It makes a difference in problem identification and in motivating objectives choice, and makes a difference in the communication of problems and recommendations, particularly in the decisiveness of recommendations (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, and Wehrung 1988). The prime question we want to address is to what extent these cultural characteristics influence the marketing decision-making process of multinational firms. Knowing the impact of different cultures on marketing decisions enables these firms to accommodate and adapt to cultural differences so that errors in decision-making and cultural noisy communications among managers can be reduced (Montgomery and Weinberg 1979). Recent trends in international trades and foreign direct investments have increased not only the global role of Asian and Western multinational firms operating in CIS significantly but also increasing the salience of understanding cultural impact on a firm's marketing activities.

Country Image and Consumer Behavior

Consumers often take "country of origin" into consideration in making purchase decisions and choices. Researchers have shown that consumers use their knowledge of where products are made in the evaluation of their purchase options (e.g., Merrit and Staubb 1995; Mort, Winzar, and Han 2001). Such country-of-origin effect seems to come about because consumers are often aware of a particular firm or brand name that is associated with a particular country. Moreover, consumers tend to have an attitude or even a preference toward a particular product with regard to where it is made in a particular country (Roth and Romeo 1992; Shimp, Samiee, and Madden 1993). This attitude might be positive, negative, or neutral depending on their perceptions or experience. Such country-of-origin effects influence how consumers rate quality and which brands they will select (Nebenzahl, Jaffe, and Lampert 1997). Recent research further suggests that when a specific product

model is being evaluated, consumers are less likely to base judgments on country-of-origin information if their motivations are high (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000). Another research suggests that, not only "country of manufacture" is reflected in their perception of products' attributes; some consumers may even refrain from purchasing products of particular countries due to animosity (Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998). In this study, we define country image as consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward a country.

Consumers' attitudes towards domestic and foreign products have often been investigated by applying the dichotomy of developed and developing countries (LaTour and Henthorne 1990). Wang (1978) found that U.S. consumers tended to give positive evaluations to products from developed Western countries and were more willing to buy products from those countries. Kaynak and Cavusgil (1983) found that U.S. consumers attributed higher quality to products from developed countries than to those from developing countries. Compared to consumers in developed countries, consumers in developing countries tend to have more favorable attitudes toward products from developed countries than domestic products (Hu 1994; LaTour *et al.* 1990). In Shanghai, the largest city in China, Hu (1994) investigated consumers' evaluation of identical shirt that varied only in country-of-origin label. She found that Chinese consumers tend to perceive the quality and price of dress shirts as well as willingness to purchase them significantly higher if they are labeled as "made in France" or "made in U.S." than those labeled as made in China. When consumers in Singapore were studied, Tan and Farley (1987) found that consumers' attitudes toward products of local made were less favorable than attitudes toward imports from U.S. or from European countries. Thus, we assume Kazakh consumers have favorable attitudes towards products made in Western (developed) countries. Based on these previous researches, the following hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 1: The image of a country has some positive effects on the images of products manufactured in the country.

The Image of Multinational Firms and Consumer Behavior
"Corporate image" can be defined in terms of functional and emotional dimensions. Functional ones include tangible aspects of corporations such as quality, service, price, and size. Emotional ones are consumers' subjective feeling toward a corporation. Different researchers provide various definitions of corporate image: it is "the mental picture people have of the company (Stern, Zinkhan, and Jaju 2001, p.212);" and "It is the overall impression of the company held by the segments of the public (Johnson and Zinkhan 1990)." In this study, we define corporate image as consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward a company.

Corporate image, often interchangeable with corporate identity, works as the summary or reference information in consumers' decision-making process (Erickson *et al.* 1984). Perceived corporate information can influence brand image perception by transferring consumers' attitude toward the corporation to their attitude toward the product (Homer 1990). Alternatively, corporation information perceived by customers can influence their behavior by creating new beliefs (Simmons and Lynch 1991), which subsequently affects their preferences and product choice (Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono 2004). For example, when Toyota positions itself as the corporation concerned with quality, consumers tend to associate Toyota's quality corporate image with their knowledge of Toyota products. In other words, a positive impression toward a corporation can results in a positive attitude toward a particular brand frequently associated with the corporation, and can create a positive change in consumers' subsequent behavior (Hsieh *et al.* 2004).

Multinational firms who enjoy a favorable corporate image generally find that their new products or services are more readily accepted than those multinational firms who posses a less favorable image. Today's companies are using advertising, exhibits, and sponsorship of community events to enhance their corporate images, and favorable corporate image can add value or create a halo effect for all of a company's products (Han 1989). This study assumes that the amounts of marketing activities of multinational firms from home countries into a host country create favorable attitudes

toward their products in the host country. As a result, marketing activities should have some positive effects on the images of the multinational firms. The logic described above suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The images of a multinational firm have some positive effects on the images of products manufactured by the multinational firm.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Questionnaire

To achieve an appropriate sample size and statistical power, between September and November 2004, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, 500 survey questionnaires were distributed to KIMEP undergraduate and MBA students in classes and retrieved 498 respondents. The missing values, non-response errors, and intentional respondent's error in the survey have been screened and removed from the data set. As the result, this study had employed 495 samples for data analysis.

A questionnaire was designed to measure consumers' perceived attitudes towards Western countries, multinational firms, products, and brands of 13 countries (e.g., Italy, Switzerland, Japan, UK, France, Germany, Canada, South Korea, Netherlands, Austria, USA, Russia, Turkey, CIS, and China). These countries have been selected through the secondary data analysis of gross foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into Kazakhstan during the last decade from 1995 to 2004. To capture the perceptions of consumers' attitude towards countries image, corporate image and brand image, this study employs the interval scaled (Crask and Fox 1987) questions. The scaled-response form used in this study is a modified Likert scale, in which respondents are asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a symmetric scale for each of a series of statements relating to attitudes (1=Not agree, 9=Strongly agree). In addition, this study also included some open-end questions designed to obtain information about products and brand names, and other relevant demographic items. The demographic profiles of the sampled consumers are generally young, college-educated with rather high family incomes. That is, they are under 20 years old (33%), 21-25 years old (59%), over 26 years old (8%); 40% of male and 60% of female; and the average family income was US$1,200 per month (US$14,400 annually), which was considerably higher than the GDP per capita of USD 2400 for the year of 2004 in this country.

Attitudes toward Countries-, Corporate-, and Products from Western

To explain Kazakh consumer behaviour regarding Western products, it is important to determine Kazakh consumers' attitude towards Western products and to identify factors that influence attitude formation. A majority of consumers (students) in this study were looking for Western products and exhibited a favourable attitude toward Western products and brands: 414 out of the 495 students, or 83.4%, provided answers about products to which they want to purchase; and the remaining 16.6 % of students responded with "under consideration." Overall, students showed a favourable attitude toward Western countries, especially Italy, Switzerland, UK, France, and Japan. For the country origin of multinational firms, they showed a preference in order of Japan, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and UK. At the same time, they showed a highly favourable purchasing intention to the products of Japan, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, and UK (see table 1).

Table 1   Country images, corporate images, and Product Images in Kazakhstan

Country	Country Image	Corporate Image	Product Image	Overall average
Italy	7.6	7.0	7.7	7.43
Switzerland	7.6	6.9	7.3	7.27
Japan	7.5	7.5	8.2	7.73
UK	7.3	6.8	7.2	7.10
France	7.2	6.6	7.3	7.03
Germany	6.7	7.2	7.9	7.27
Canada	6.6	5.9	5.7	6.07
South Korea	6.5	6.6	6.9	6.67
Netherlands	6.3	6.0	6.0	6.10
Austria	6.1	5.5	6.2	5.93
USA	5.7	6.8	6.6	6.37
Russia	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.43
Turkey	5.2	5.1	5.1	5.13
CIS	4.9	4.3	4.2	4.47
China	4.9	4.6	4.1	4.53
AVERAGE	6.4	6.1	6.4	6.30

Hypothesis Testing

The researchers conducted hypothesis testing of the 2 hypotheses stated earlier by the uses of correlation analysis and regression analysis, and we conclude that there are significant correlations exist between the country images and products images, and between the company images and product images:

Hypothesis 1: The image of a country has some positive effects on the images of products manufactured in the country. The test result indicates that the null hypothesis can be rejected. Therefore, the empirical data does support the hypothesis that the overall images of a home country have some effects on the perception of host-country consumers toward the images of those products manufactured in the home country.

Hypothesis 2: The images of a multinational firm have some positive effects on the images of products manufactured by the multinational firm. The test result indicates that the null hypothesis can be rejected with the data set. Therefore, the data set provides a strong empirical evidence for us to conclude that the overall images of a multinational firm have some effects on the perception of host-country consumers toward the image of its products.

The researchers obtained Pearson Correlation Coefficients from the data set and found that the correlation coefficient between country image and company image is 0.548, correlation between country image and product image is 0.556, and correlation coefficient between company image and product image is 0.680. These correlation coefficients are all significant at the 0.001 probability level, see Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2   Correlations between Country Image, Corporate Image, and Product Image

	Country Image	Corporate Image	Product Image
Country Image	1.000		
Corporate Image	0.548***	1.000	
Product Image	0.556***	0.680***	1.000
*** Correlation Coefficient is significant at the 0.001 probability level (two-tailed)			

Table 3   Regression Analysis between Product Image and Country image and Corporate Image

Dependent Variable: Product Image	Unstandardised Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t-values	Results
Variables	B (S.E)	Beta		N/A
(Constant)	1.068 (0.183)		5.838	N/A
Country Image	0.272 (0.029)	0.262	9.384***	Accepted
Corporate Image	0.581 (0.030)	0.536	19.196***	Accepted
*** The coefficient is significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed)				

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the correlation coefficients among country images, company images, and product images are significant at the 0.001 probability level. Thus, this study results indicate that there are positive relations between country images and corporate images, between country image and product image, company images and product images by the applications and interpretations of scatter plots of regression standardized residuals.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study results presented in the above section are consistent with several previous studies, which found that consumers in developing countries tend to evaluate foreign products from developed countries more favorably than domestic products (Hu 1994; LaTour *et al.* 1990). Given these results, the next logical step is to explain why they have favorable attitudes toward Western products?

The managerial implications of these findings relate directly to the positioning and advertising strategies of multinational firms. The results of our study strongly suggest that consumers in transition economies form their value perceptions based on the intangible and tangible cues, such as brand and price. It is very important for marketers, especially for global marketers, to consider subtle differences in the needs of customers of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds since taking into account of these differences may result in more refined segmentation strategies. Although brand image itself is intangible, it does appear to have tangible effects on the mind of consumers about the real quality of a product or service. Thus, "global branding" the intangible dimensions of the benefit package might be an attractive way to appeal to the consumers of transition economies.

Just because an organization has a successful product with a strong brand image in its home country, it does not mean that the same success will come automatically in a foreign country. However, by analyzing new consumers in the culture of the new environment and seeing the brand image of other products in the same industry, an organization can get a clearer picture of the possible outcome of expanding a product globally. As discussed earlier, past researches have shown that consumers hold more negative perceptions toward products made in developing countries than in developed countries. Because of this stigma, many multinational firms heavily emphasize the brand name's country of origin.

A common feature of global brands is that they are strong in their home market and have a geographical balance in sales, that is to say "a global brand has at least a minimum level of awareness, recognition and sales all over the world (Quelch 1999). Another common feature is that global brands address similar consumer needs in different countries worldwide and have consistent positioning, by making reference to the same values in all markets. Brands may be global but their consumers associate them with their country-of-origin, so that paradoxically, the country-of-origin is therefore a factor in making them global. A band is associated with a particular product and is identifiable with a corporate name, such as Toyota, Mercedes, BMW, Versace, Christian Dior, and D&G.

The benefits of global branding may be identified as: global branding add value for consumers, because certain consumers perceive a value added when an international or global brand name is attached to an emotionally "aspirational product" (Quelch 1999). The unique nature of this historic investment, coupled with the variability of the relationship between a brand and its individual

consumers, suggests that a successful brand cannot be imitated easily (Capron and Hulland 1999). Simultaneously, it is likely that brand managers seek to capitalize their brand as symbolic of global consumer culture. The objective would be to have consumers identify the brand as a sign of the membership in the globally cosmopolitan segment. Asking high-status Central Asian consumers to co-use a product might present that individual with a face-losing situation that reflects a cultural heritage of high sensitivity to status. Advertising that emphasizes the availability of world brand might be more efficient in attracting Central Asian consumers whose cultural backgrounds reflect large power distance. Messages focusing on prestige seeking might be more effective in reaching status-seeking Central Asian consumers.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that the Kazakh market is and will be an attractive one for products made in Western countries, since results of this study demonstrate that Kazakh consumers have favorable attitudes toward Western made products, see Table I and testing hypothesis 1. However, attitude is not the only factor dictating consumers' purchase decisions, and it should also be recognized that many Kazakh consumers might not have high enough income to purchase Western products, which in general are higher priced than local products.

With regard to marketing focus, Western countries and corporations have traditionally placed the individual consumer on a pedestal. This focus on individuals contrasted markedly with the former Soviet socialist economies when economic plans were developed by the central governments and when the group and society were of the key concern. On the contrary, the newly transiting economies such as the current Kazakh system are bringing freedom of choice in consumptions, and are displaying more concerns about the individual. Therefore, our proposal is that, rather than encouraging the transition economies to become a simple replication of a consumption society, it may be wiser for Western countries and corporations to help countries of transition economies achieving an improved standard of living while also emphasizing on consumption focus.

The possibility for a firm to success in marketing a product or service to a number of foreign countries is likely to be influenced by the degree of similarity in the beliefs, values, and customs that govern the use of the product in the various countries. To illustrate the importance of cultural differences or orientation, we have demonstrated that Central Asia is one of the largest markets for prestige and luxury brands from the West (Lee and Tai 2005). Indeed, to fine tuning international marketing, the luxury brand marketers need to be especially responsive to cultural differences that compel luxury purchases in the CIS markets. Western consumers tend to use a prestige item to enhance their sense of individualism or serve as a source of personal pleasure, whereas the purchase of the same prestige item by an Asian consumer might be for the purpose of joining the individual with others who have made it in the society and to provide visible evidence of the person's value to others (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998; Lee *et al.* 2005).

The key paradigm guiding behavior in the Western countries is utilitarianism. It has been argued that utilitarianism encourages a cost-benefit approach to the decision by the decision maker based on one's preferences. The decisions in assessing alternatives are made from an individual's perspective rather than from a societal point of view. In Central Asia countries, the value of "face saving" regulates responsibilities and interpersonal relationships in the family and society. It prescribes that the dignity of the individual must be defended and respected. This responsibility for the preservation of dignity ensures the maintenance of hierarchies and elucidates the responsibilities of persons with the hierarchy. In the marketing context, the global approach implies a concern for consumers that exceeds the usual rational considerations of costs and benefits. In transition economies, a product represents part of the person's face that purchases and uses it.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study are exploratory and preliminary in nature and should be reviewed with a good care. Because this study was conducted within the two products, validation of applying these findings to other products will require further research. In addition, the particular sample group clearly limits the generalisabilility of the findings. Different product attributes as factors need to be tested for further validation.

Acculturation variables may not influence attitudes toward all types of products. For example, if the products are not culture-oriented, acculturation variables may not affect the attitudes of consumers toward the products. Thus, the effects of acculturation variables on attitudes toward a product may be a function of product types. For a better understanding of the global consumers, further cross-cultural research clearly is warranted. Further research could involve identifying which consumer segments are most responsive to global consumer segmentation strategies. In summary, understanding the effectiveness of different types of positioning in different countries may require additional analyses that involve product type, country, and characteristics of the target segment.

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