Country stereotypes as mediators of the countervailing influences of consumer xenocentrism and animosity on purchase behaviors

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Abstract

The current study assesses the role of country stereotypes (in terms of competence and warmth) in mediating the countervailing influences of xenocentrism and animosity on purchase intentions at both product and brand levels. Based on a survey of Italian consumers (N=204), and France as the target of animosity feelings, we show that both xenocentrism and animosity influence the stereotype of the target foreign country. Moreover, country competence-related associations are better predictors of consumer purchase intentions than warmth for products in general, whereas warmth-related associations are better predictors of purchase behavior for specific brands. Thus, the mediating role of the country stereotype dimensions on the influences of xenocentrism and animosity is contingent upon the level of specificity in the focal outcome variable (products in general vs. specific brands). Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed, and future research directions identified.

Keywords: Country stereotypes, consumer xenocentrism, consumer animosity

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1. Introduction

Several studies in international marketing literature have sought to investigate the reasons behind consumer preferences for domestic or foreign products (e.g., Verlegh, 2007; Riefler et al., 2012; Sharma, 2015). However, extant research has yet to explain incisively why consumers prefer foreign products even if domestic products are of similar or even better quality (Diamantopoulos et al., 2019). This gap is important considering the tendency of considerable segments of customers, from both emerging (e.g., Mahmoud et al., 2021) and advanced markets (e.g., Mueller et al., 2019; Gaur et al., 2015) to prefer foreign products regardless of high prices or inferior quality to domestic offerings. Recent literature has thus been devoting attention to *consumer xenocentrism*, which has been found to explain consumer preferences towards foreign products and brands and the refusal of their domestic equivalents (e.g., Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016; Diamantopoulos et al., 2019; Mueller et al., 2016). Originally developed in the sociology literature (Kent & Burnight, 1951), in the context of consumption, the conceptualization of the construct is based on system justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994), which portrays xenocentric consumers as preferring products from a foreign country they perceive superior to their own and, at the same time, rejecting products from the home country (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016). Thus, unlike other well-established constructs - such as consumer ethnocentrism, consumer cosmopolitanism, global/local identity - explicating either ingroup *or* outgroup favoritism, consumer xenocentrism can simultaneously and consistently explain *both* types of biases (Balabanis et al., 2019).

Surprisingly, however, extant research seems not to have considered the specific feelings harbored towards the foreign country, whose products are favored by xenocentric consumers over domestic ones. Only a very recent study by Diamantopoulos and Milivojevic (2021), using a sample of Serbian consumers, has empirically investigated xenocentric behavior in a setting where the foreign country (USA) was an animosity country. Results showed that the overall willingness to buy products from the "superior" foreign country was (negatively) driven by Serbian consumers' animosity feelings, whereas consumer intentions to purchase specific foreign brands were driven solely by consumer xenocentrism. Moreover, while past studies have demonstrated that consumer xenocentrism is a consistent predictor of preferences for both domestic and foreign products (Balabanis et al., 2019), the potential mediating role of country stereotypes in the relationship between xenocentrism and purchase intentions has not yet been systematically investigated. Nevertheless, research has shown that consumers transfer their beliefs about country stereotypes to foreign products and brands and that these stereotypical opinions are effective predictors of behavioral responses (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al., 2021). According to the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002), individuals tend to

organize their beliefs towards out-groups (including countries) along two key dimensions: competence and warmth. Competence captures consumers' cognitive appraisals of a country's capability, efficiency, and intelligence, whereas warmth refers to notions of friendliness, kindness, and good-naturedness (Cuddy et al., 2008). Therefore, whether country stereotypes can provide an explanatory mechanism of the influences that animosity and xenocentrism exert on consumer behavior is an issue of theoretical and managerial relevance.

Against this background, the current study examines xenocentric consumer behavior in a setting where the "target" foreign country is an animosity country, namely a country towards which consumers nurture hostile feelings (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). Consumer animosity is defined as "antipathy related to previous or ongoing political, military, economic and diplomatic events" (Klein et al., 1998: 90), and there is considerable evidence that it can significantly reduce the sales of the hostile country's products to the importing nation (e.g., Gineikiene & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Nes et al., 2012). The framework adopted in this study seeks to shed light on the joint effects of consumer xenocentrism and consumer animosity on intention to buy foreign products and brands through the mediating influence of consumers' stereotypical perceptions of the animosity country. To this end, we (a) juxtapose consumer xenocentrism and animosity as drivers of country stereotypes, and (b) assess the influence of stereotypical dimensions of competence and warmth on the overall willingness to buy products from the animosity country as well as purchase intentions towards specific brands originating in the latter.
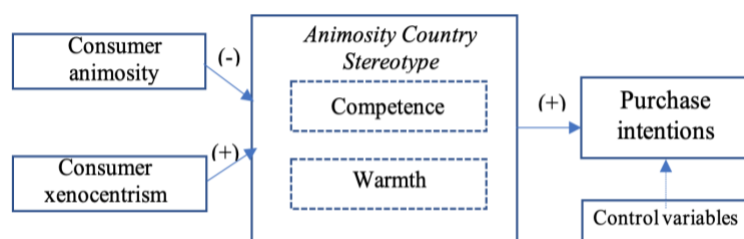
2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

We draw from system justification theory (SJT; Jost & Andrews, 2011) and the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) to conceptually underpin our study and related hypotheses. Specifically, we hypothesize that consumer xenocentrism will positively influence the stereotype of the animosity country in terms of competence and warmth, whereas consumer animosity will have a negative impact. Country competence and warmth will, in turn, positively affect purchase intentions of products and brands from the animosity country. Formally:

H1: *Country competence and warmth mediate the (a) negative effect of animosity, and (b) positive effect of xenocentrism on purchase intention of products originating in the hostile country*

H2: *Country competence and warmth mediate the (a) negative effect of animosity, and (b) positive effect of xenocentrism on purchase intention of specific foreign brands from the hostile country*

Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. Empirical Study

We conducted an empirical study in Italy with France as the target animosity country. While historically and culturally France and Italy are close, relations between the two countries have, in recent times, deteriorated for several reasons. Key among these reasons have been the comments of the then Italian deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, that France should be blamed for the migrant crisis in Europe, stating that "If today people are leaving, it's because certain European countries, chief among them France, never stopped colonizing dozens of African countries" (The Irish Times, Jan. 24, 2019). In response, Paris recalled its ambassador to Italy for consultation (Centre for European Reform, 12 February 2019). Furthermore, many Italians had developed animosity sentiments toward France since the 2006 world cup semi-finals between the two countries when the former football player and captain of France, Zinedine Zidane, gave a "headbutt" to the chest of the Italian defender Marco Materazzi. Indeed, the political animosity between the two countries can be traced back to the early 1940s when Benito Mussolini declared war on France in 1940. These, among other factors, are making France a target for animosity sentiments by Italians.

In addition to providing an appropriate empirical setting for studying the effects of animosity, Italy is a highly advanced economy in the world with many global brands. Italy is positioned in the very high development category in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI, 29th out of 189) (UNDP, 2017). Also, Italy ranks 23rd on the KOF Globalization Index (Gygli et al., 2019), indicating a developed and globalized economy. It thus provides a "conservative" setting for testing xenocentric behavior.

Two hundred and four consumers (52% men, $M_{age} = 47$ years, $SD = 15.98$) participated in an online survey conducted by a professional marketing research agency and asked to fill in a questionnaire in Italian (developed following established translation and back-translation procedures by native speakers – see Behling & Law, 2000). The measures in the questionnaire captured consumer animosity (5-item scale, $\alpha = .918$; based on Klein et al., 1998 and Gineikiene and Diamantopoulos, 2017); consumer xenocentrism (Two composite items, $\alpha = .907$; based on averages of the five perceived inferiority and five social aggrandizement of original items of Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016); consumer ethnocentrism (4-item scale, $\alpha = .920$; based on Verlegh, 2007); country warmth (3-item scale, $\alpha = .929$; based on Diamantopoulos et al., 2017); and country competence (4-item scale, $\alpha = .943$; based on Diamantopoulos et al., 2017). Moreover, respondents were asked to indicate their purchase intention toward French products in general (on a probability scale ranging from 0-100%) as well as their purchase intentions for a specific brand of cars, namely Citröen (on the same probability scale). In addition, the following brand-level control variables were included in the questionnaire: brand familiarity (3-item scale, $\alpha = .927$; based on Diamantopoulos et al., 2017), product category involvement (3-item scale, $\alpha = .900$; based on Mittal, 1989), and price

sensitivity (3-item scale, α = .858, Wakefield and Inman, 2003). Cars were selected as a product category because both Italy and France are highly industrialized economies producing and marketing cars with both domestic and foreign (including French) brands of cars available in the Italian market. Furthermore, cars are a high product with high social signaling value and consumption visibility (Davvetas and Diamantopoulos, 2016). Citröen was selected as a focal foreign brand based upon a pretest (N = 21) which revealed both high brand awareness and high brand origin recognition accuracy (all pretest respondents identified Citröen as a French brand).

To evaluate the quality of our construct measures in terms of dimensionality, reliability and convergent/discriminant validity, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using LISREL 8.80. The fit of the CFA model was very satisfactory (χ^2 = 562.068 (d.f. 296; p < 0.000); RMSEA=0.07; NNFI=0.96; CFI=0.97; GFI=0.83; RMSR=0.05). All factor loadings well exceeded the 0.60 minimum threshold (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), and all constructs exceeded the recommended cut-off points of 0.70 for CR and 0.50 for AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Further, our measures meet the Fornell and Larcker (1981) discriminant validity criterion since the inter-construct correlations for all construct pairs are smaller than the corresponding square roots of the AVEs.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Products in general (cars)

We run a structural equation model (SEM) using LISREL 8.80 with purchase intention of French cars as the dependent variable, country warmth and competence as mediators, and consumer animosity, xenocentrism, and ethnocentrism (control variable) as predictors (Table 1).

HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIPS	Standardized coefficients (t-values)	Results
Animosity > Country competence	-0.403 (-7.209)	*Supported*
Animosity > Country warmth	-0.418 (-7.213)	*Supported*
Xenocentrism > Country competence	0.390 (6.532)	*Supported*
Xenocentrism > Country warmth	0.605 (8.903)	*Supported*
Country competence > Purchase intention	0.673 (1.914)	*Supported*
Country warmth > Purchase intention	0.146 (0.463)	*Not supported*
Control variable		
CET > Purchase intention	-0.208 (-1.656)	
Fit Statistics: χ^2 = 318.202 (d.f. 142; p<0.001); χ^2/d.f. = 2.86; CFI= 0.97; NFI= 0.95; NNFI=0.97; RMSEA=0.07		

Table 1. Parameter estimates (Purchase intentions of French cars)

Animosity is negatively and significantly related to both country competence (*B= -0.403, p < 0.001*) and country warmth (*B= -0.418, p < 0.001*). This implies that the more people feel animosity towards a foreign country, the less they perceive this country as competent or warm. In contrast, xenocentrism positively and significantly influences both country competence (*B= 0.390, p < 0.001*) and country warmth (*B= 0.605, p < 0.001*), indicating that an animosity country enjoys a more positive stereotype among highly xenocentric consumers. While country competence is positively

and significantly related to purchase intention ($B= 0.673, p < 0.001$), the effect of warmth is not significant ($B= 0.146, p > 0.05$). These results resonate with previous literature regarding the diagnostic role of competence versus warmth (Chen et al., 2014). Finally, consumer ethnocentrism ($B= -0.120, p > 0.05$) showed no significant effects as a control variable. The model explains 37% of the variance in country competence, 46% in country warmth, and 17% in purchase intention.

To formally test the mediating relationships (H1*a* and H1*b*), we used Hayes PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2018). Regarding animosity, the PROCESS results revealed that the direct effect (*animosity → purchase intention*) was not significant but the indirect path *animosity → competence → purchase intention* was significant with an estimate of -0.286 and a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (BCCI) between -0.462 and -0.137, indicating that only competence stereotypes mediate the effect of animosity on purchase intention. Regarding xenocentrism, the direct effect (*xenocentrism → purchase intention*) was again not significant, while the indirect path *xenocentrism → competence → purchase intention* was significant, with an estimate of 0.256 and a 95% BCCI between 0.125 and 0.401, demonstrating that only competence stereotypes mediate the effect of xenocentrism on purchase intention.

4.2 Specific brand (Citröen)

To test H2, we specified a second structural equation model using consumers' stated intentions to purchase the Citröen brand as the dependent variable. We maintained animosity, xenocentrism and ethnocentrism as predictors but included brand familiarity, product category, involvement and situational (i.e., product-specific) price sensitivity as additional control variables (Table 2).[1]

In line with the results relating to general product purchases, animosity is negatively and significantly related to both country competence ($B= -0.401, p < 0.001$) and warmth country stereotypes ($B= -0.415, p < 0.001$). Xenocentrism positively and significantly influences both country competence ($B= 0.397, p < 0.001$) and country warmth ($B= 0.608, p < 0.001$).

HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIPS	Standardized coefficients (t-values)	Results
Animosity > Country competence	-0.401 (-7.244)	*Supported*
Animosity > Country warmth	-0.415 (-7.220)	*Supported*
Xenocentrism > Country competence	0.397 (6.778)	*Supported*
Xenocentrism > Country warmth	0.608 (9.176)	*Supported*
Country competence > Purchase intention	-0.054 (-0.151)	*Not supported*
Country warmth > Purchase intention	0.667 (2.024)	*Supported*
Control variables		
CET > Purchase intention	-0.120 (-0.953)	
Product involvement > Purchase intention	0.015 (0.111)	
Brand familiarity > Purchase intention	0.526 (5.104)	
Price sensitivity > Purchase intention	0.135 (0.890)	
Fit Statistics: χ^2 = 644.579 (d.f. 325; p<0.001); χ^2/d.f. = 2.86; CFI= 0.96; NFI= 0.92; NNFI=0.95; RMSEA=0.07		

Table 2. Parameter estimates (Purchase intentions of Citröen)

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[1] Clearly none of these brand-specific controls are relevant for testing H1 which focused on products in genera*l* (hence their exclusion from the first model analysis).

In contrast to the results relating to French products in general, while country warmth is positively and significantly related to purchase intention for Citröen ($B= 0.667, p < 0.001$), the effect of competence is not significant ($B= -0.051, p > 0.05$). Brand familiarity also positively influences purchase intention ($B= 0.526, p < 0.001$), however, neither product category involvement ($B= 0.015, p > 0.05$), consumer ethnocentrism ($B = -0.120, p > 0.05$), nor price sensitivity ($B= 0.135, p > 0.05$) showed any significant effects. The model explains 47% percent of the variance in country competence, 54% in country warmth, and 33% in purchase intentions.

We again used PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) to formally test H2*a* and H2*b*. Regarding animosity, the direct effect (*animosity → purchase intention*) was not significant but the indirect path *animosity → warmth → purchase intention* was significant, with an estimate of -0.132 and a 95% BCCI between -0.477 and -0.109, indicating that only warmth stereotypes mediate the effect of animosity on purchase intention of Citröen. Regarding xenocentrism, the direct effect (*xenocentrism → purchase intention*) was not significant, whereas the indirect path *xenocentrism → warmth → purchase intention* was significant, with an estimate of 0.154 and a 95% BCCI between 0.043 and 0.318, indicating that only warmth stereotypes mediate the effect of xenocentrism on purchase intention of a specific brand.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Extending the extant research streams on consumer xenocentrism and animosity, the current study offers insights into the behavior of xenocentric consumers under conditions of animosity. Our findings show that the impact of both consumer animosity and xenocentrism on consumers' purchase intentions of product in general and specific brands from the animosity country are fully mediated by the stereotype of the latter. More specifically, while at the general product level (cars) consumers' competence judgments fully mediate the influence of xenocentrism and animosity on purchase intentions, the opposite holds at the specific brand level; that is, warmth judgments fully mediate the effect of animosity and xenocentrism on consumer brand purchase intentions. Thus, it seems that the mediating role of the country stereotype dimensions is contingent upon the level of specificity in the focal outcome variable (i.e., general products vs. specific brands). Our findings support recent studies (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019; Diamantopoulos et al., 2017; Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020) that highlight the importance of the warmth dimension in the evaluation of foreign products or brands as well as the ability of warmth-related country associations to predict purchase intentions of specific foreign brands (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020; Diamantopoulos et al., 2017). At the same time, our findings support studies that highlight the diagnostic role of

country competence in influencing consumer evaluations and judgments of foreign products (e.g., Chen et al., 2014).

A theoretical implication of our results is that specifying xenocentrism and animosity as direct predictors of purchase behavior may lead to an incomplete depiction of how their effects are transported to consumer behavioral outcomes. Incorporating country stereotypes as mediating variables provides an explanatory mechanism of such effects but also shows that the impact of the stereotypical dimensions is contingent on the nature of the dependent variable. From a managerial perspective, a key implication of our findings is that firms from animosity countries with comparatively higher status than the host country can capitalize on the xenocentric tendencies of the latter by leveraging both competence-and warmth-related associations of their countries in their brand communication and positioning strategies. Given that – to our best knowledge – this is the first study to examine the routes through which consumer xenocentrism and animosity influence consumers' purchase intentions for products from a given animosity country, our results are suggestive and not conclusive, requiring further validation in future research. Future efforts may replicate our study in different animosity settings with different product categories and brands. Moreover, it would be interesting to replicate our study but replacing the animosity setting with an affinity setting to gain a more fine-grained understanding of the mediating role of country stereotypes.

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