SWEDISH CONSUMERS ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMPORTED PRODUCTS

by

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Abstract

Today the country of origin is one of the most important factors influencing the product image for imported goods in a particular country. This study investigates the attitudes and biases of Swedish consumers towards imported products from: West Germany, England, France, Italy, USA, Japan and Taiwan. A selfadministered questionnaire is used in Stockholm and Uppsala regions, using the 'drop-off call back' method. The Study reveals that Swedish consumers have a rather strong bias towards imported products due to country of origin. The products from Japan, England and Taiwan are considered less desirable. The German products are considered to have best workmanship and there is a general bias towards Taiwanese products.

Introduction

Elements of marketing mix have always been considered as the most important tactics/strategies in a marketing plan for consumer goods. An equal importance is given to these factors in international marketing. Today, however, the country of origin is one of the most important factors as regards to the product image for imported goods in a particular country. This concept is not quite new, already in 1960's some studies suggested that it should be added to as one more factor in the marketing mix model, as the concept "made in.." effects the acceptance of imported goods (1).

Some studies suggested that the quality and the image of foreign products are stereotyped (2). A number of studies revealed that the image of the products is based upon perceptions regarding attitudes towards the people of a particular country (3), its perceived cultural similarity (4), and the status of a particular country as regards to its level of industrialisation (5). It is particularly true for the products coming from developing countries (6). The consumers attitudes are also said to be effected by the level of like and dislike associated with a particular country (7). Some authors related characteristics of consumers, socio-economic and psychological factors (8). Another study corelated product image with brands (9).

Several authors, however, recommend that each individual product should be studied individually, while others advocated that utilising only one product category shadow the influence of country of origin (10). It has also been put forward that attitudes towards imported products vary from one country to another (11), between men and women in the same country and across time (12). Inspite of all these studies and ongoing research in the field, there is no study in print which analyses the attitudes of Swedish consumers towards imported products.

In Sweden a number of studies have been performed to study the internationalisation of the Swedish firms, their product and marketing strategies in Europe and developing countries. This study investigates the other side of the picture, the perceptions of Swedish consumers towards imported products from different countries. It would thus fill the gap in the Swedish literature on international business.

The study investigate the attitudes and biases of Swedish consumers towards imported products from seven countries: West Germany, England, France, Italy, USA, Japan and Taiwan. These are the countries, other than Scandinavian countries, having intensive trade with Sweden. Due to lack of literature as regards to the attitudes of Swedish consumers, the exploratory nature of the study, and an over-whelming previous findings out of Sweden, it is decided to adopt a general product approach instead of specific products and brands.

Methodology

A structured self-administered questionnaire is used in Stockholm and Uppsala regions, using the 'drop-off call back' method. A stratified random sample is used in order to represent the different socio-economic strata so that it would be possible to generalise findings at least on the basis of economic and demographic characteristics.

The questionnaire was distributed among people between the ages of 15-65 years, as this group is considered as active consumers for the purpose of this study. Moreover, this group is easy to locate, accounts for a very large percentage of total consumption and are rather independent in their decision making.
A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to selected households. Out of these 129 were returned, some 12 of the questionnaires could not be used as they were not properly filled in. The number of questionnaires used in this study is thus 117.

The attitudes of consumers are recorded on a five point likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Based on previous studies, the following image statements, are used (13).

Price and value = Expensive, reliable, luxury goods.
Advertising and reputation = Volume, recognisable brand names, prestige in ownership.
Quality and service = Technically advanced, mass-produced, workmanship.
Design and style = Choice of models and sizes, outlook, use of colours.
Perceived consumer = More for old people, more for women, more for upper class.

The questionnaire consisted of three demographic questions on age, gender and income. Further two questions on respondents predominant behaviour regarding the information on country of origin and brand names were also included. A total of twenty-one, five categories, questions were asked for general products of each country. There was no alternative in the five categories which could give "do not know" respond.

Refering to the literature which advocated that specific product categories do influence the attitudes towards foreign products, this study would probe that whether the general product categories, for each country, can provide with the information on biased attitudes towards imported products in Sweden. Whether it may be possible to generalize the results, would be discussed after presenting the results.

The findings of the study would be of great interest to the exporters from the seven countries and to the Swedish importers of consumer goods from these countries. It is believed that an understanding of biases and attitudes would benefit the local marketers in preparing their purchasing policies and marketing strategies. Moreover, the results of this study would be useful for Swedish authorities dealing with trade barriers, import licences, tariffs and other policy matters as regards to import of consumer goods.

Findings of the study

The findings of the study are presented in accordance to the image statements mentioned earlier; price and value, advertising and reputation, quality and service, design and style, and perceived characteristics of the consumers.

Table 1 shows that products from West Germany and USA are considered more expensive than other similar goods, as perceived by 60 and 63 percent respectively. Products from Japan and Taiwan are considered to be reasonably priced by 68 and 73 percent, respectively.

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<th>Attitudes</th>
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<td>More expensive than</td>
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<td>Reliable</td>
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<td>Luxury products</td>
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G = Germany, E = England, F = France, I = Italy, U = USA, J = Japan, T = Taiwan

Furthermore, goods from England and Italy are also considered reasonably priced by 41 and 47 percent respectively. As revealed earlier goods from Germany and USA are considered most expensive but only products from Germany are considered most reliable by 84 percent. The products from Japan are considered reasonably priced and at the same time reliable by 64 percent. The products from France are perceived as luxury goods by 65 percent of the respondents, while it is only 34 percent who considered French products as reliable and only 40 percent who considered them as more expensive. Taiwan products, as expected, are not considered expensive and luxury goods.

Table 2 reveals that 79 percent of the consumers believe that products from USA are widely advertised. The next is Japanese products which are perceived as much advertised by 57 percent of the respondents.