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Marketing Mix Standardization/Adaptation and Export Performance

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Abstract. The standardization versus adaptation of the international marketing strategy (marketing mix) and its relationship with export performance has been a focus of many researchers in last five decades. In existing literature there are many arguments, presented by different authors, favouring standardization, but on the other hand there are also numerous studies that support advantages of marketing mix adaptation. The main purpose of this paper is to develop research propositions for marketing mix standardization/adaptation and its relationship with export performance focusing on firms in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: marketing mix; standardization; adaptation; export performance.

Introduction

In order to compete successfully in ever more globalized markets, multinational as well as small and medium size enterprises recognize that a critical condition for long - term growth is international presence. The most important aspect for success in reaching global competitive advantage for firms is to propose additional value for international customers by providing them with benefits that are expressively better than those delivered by the competitors. In practice, firms achieve competitive advantage by using strategies that are suitable to their own situation and providing the different degree of standardization or adoption of the various elements of international marketing strategies (Doole & Lowe, 2012). In this sense the concept of international marketing strategy standardization versus adaptation and its effect on export performance, has been a research area of growing concern for both academics and practitioners (Rosenbloom, Larsen, & Mehta, 1997; Viswanathan & Dickson, 2007; Waheeduzzaman & Dube, 2004). Kahn(1998) sees this topic as one of the most relevant marketing topics for the twenty-first century.

Even though many studies have been written about standardization/adaptation of the international marketing strategy and the possible connection with export performance, again there is a certain need for further research consideration (Katsikeas, Samiee, & Theodosiou, 2006; Lages, 2000; Shoham, 1999; Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003; Waheeduzzaman & Dube, 2004; Zou, Andrus, & Norvell, 1997).

Also, many researchers in international marketing field focused on the influence of the standardisation/adaptation strategy of a particular marketing mix element on export performance. Most of them considered *product* (Akaah, 1991; Dawar & Parker, 1994; Du Preez, Diamantopoulos, & Schlegelmilch, 1994; Hougan, Hung, & Wardell, 2000; Hult, Keillor, & Hightower, 2000; Jain, 1989; James & Hill, 1994; Johnson & Arunthanes, 1995; Kreutzer, 1988; Littler & Schlieper, 1995; Sands, 1979; Shoham, 1996b; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, & Varadarajan, 1993; Wind, 1986) or *promotion* (Colvin, Heeler, & Thorpe, 1980; Greer & Thompson, 1985; Harris, 1994; James & Hill, 1994; Laroche, Kirpalani, Pons, & Zhou, 2001; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1999; Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997; Shoham, 1996b; Whitelock & Rey, 1998) while influence of *price* (Baalbaki & Malhotra, 1995; Bellur, Chaganti, Chaganti, & Singh, 1985; Botschen & Hemetsberger, 1998; Brandt & Hulbert, 1977; Chang, 1995; Jain, 1989; Samli & Jacobs, 1995; Theodosiou & Katsikeas, 2001) and *distribution* (Dow, 2001; Gielens & Dekimpe, 2001; Lages & Montgomery, 2004; Rosenbloom et al., 1997; Shoham, 1999) standardisation/adaptation on export performance received less attention.

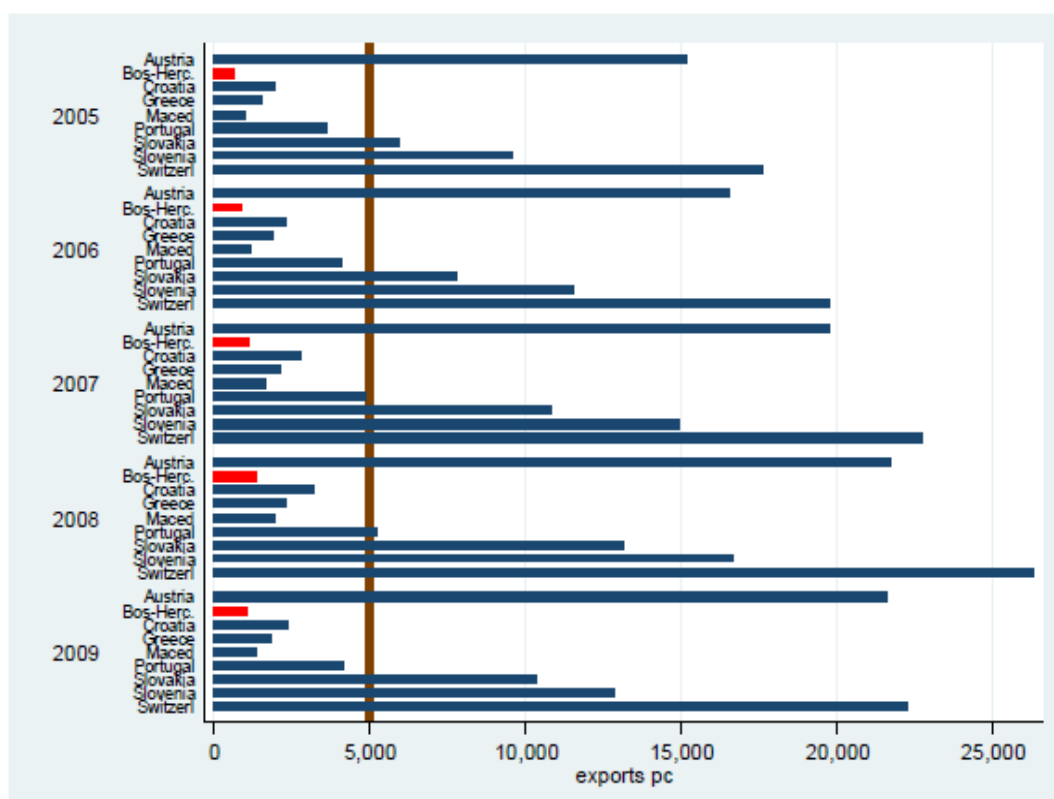
Most of the studies on international marketing have focused either on companies centered in the United States of America (USA) (Calantone, Kim, Schmidt, & Cavusgil, 2006; Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003; Waheeduzzaman & Dube, 2004) or on the Anglo-Saxon background in overall, as current studies on export performance expose (Lado, Martínez-Ros, & Valenzuela, 2004; Sousa, Martínez-López, & Coelho, 2008; Sousa, 2004). Considering this situation research that will pay special attention to European firms is highly needed. Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the European economic locations which got partial research consideration in the export centered literature. Similar to many other European countries Bosnia and Herzegovina has to focus on international trade, particularly the increase in the volume and value of its exports in order to grow the economy, to create jobs and increase economic welfare of its citizens. To say that the export requirement for survival may sound dramatic, but there can be no doubt that our country needs to improve its trading result in a short period of time (Export Council BiH, 2011).

A key challenge for the BiH economy is weak supply side, or low levels of production, especially for export. Low level of GDP per capita and its growth rate of 5-6% in the period before the global economic crisis were disappointing. The economy suffers of inefficiency, both static (poor distribution of existing resources, especially labor), and dynamic (low capital accumulation of all kinds, primarily infrastructure). This is the reason why the per capita GDP and export value per capita at such low levels. (Export Council BiH, 2011).

Obstacles to economic growth and export growth, and reduce trade deficits are numerous, but they mostly originate from a very small private sector, low competitiveness of the economy, and therefore its low profitability and a small number of investment activities. The result is the very low value of exports and GDP per capita. (Export Council BiH, 2011).

Values of exports per capita are small even compared to the transition countries. They are lower than those in Macedonia for 1.4 times, in Croatia by 2.5 times, the Slovenia by 9.6 times, and in Slovakia to 13.1 times. Value of exports per capita, which are less than \$ 5,000 should be seen as a failure (see Figure 1). (Export Council BiH, 2011).

The research focus of this paper is to investigate the relationship of marketing mix (product, price, distribution, communication) standardization/adaptation and export performance of firms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to provide possible research propositions. Even though there are number of studies exploring the degree of standardization of individual mix elements, in order to increase our understanding of the relative "importance" of each of the marketing mix elements, studies incorporating all the four elements to a single study are needed.



Source: Export Council BiH, Export Growth Strategy 2012 - 2015

Figure 1: Exportsper capitacomparativecountries, 2005-2009

In this study the will relevant literature review on the relationship between the standardization/adaptation of the international marketing mix elements and export performance is highly explored in the following section. Propositions for possible research on marketing mix standardization/adaptation and its relationship with export performance will be proposed as well as conceptual model. As final sections of this paper, conclusions and a review of the implications for academia and practitioners will be presented as well as limitations of the study and directions for future research.

1. Literature Review and Research Propositions

1.1. Historical Trend by Decade

Standardization vs. adaptation of the marketing mix elements has been a topic of research during fifty years that received a lot of interests by researchers and practitioners. First articles that have been discussing the issue of marketing mix standardization/adaptation were published in 1960s. Elinder(1965) argued in his study that advertising have to be harmonized to appropriate the all-European media, and have to take benefit of border-crossing tourists, readers, and viewers. In explaining the advertising standardization he noted that if several national advertising themes are used for the same product it will bring a loss of efficiency. That's why advertising campaigns could be standardized across European countries in the same way they were standardized across states in the USA.

In addition to advertising standardization, Buzzell(1968) protracted the debate to cover also other marketing mix elements. He noted that standardizing various elements of the marketing mix tools used in different areas will gain range from substantial cost savings and more consistent dealings with customers to better planning, control, and exploitation of ideas with universal appeal. Among the articles that were published in 1970s, the one prepared by Sorenson & Wiechmann (1975) received most citations.

A few review papers were published in 1980s (Bellur et al., 1985; Boddewyn, Soehl, & Picard, 1986; Walters, 1986). Also, some theoretical models were developed and tested in this period (Jain, 1989; Rau & Preble, 1987). A comprehensive review of the topic in the international marketing field started from 1990s on. In this period many papers have been published (Akaah, 1991; Baalbaki &

Malhotra, 1993, 1995; Cavusgil, Zou, & Naidu, 1993; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Samiee & Roth, 1992; Shoham, 1996a, 1996b, 1999).

Waheeduzzaman & Dube, (2004) in their study used content analysis to investigate trends and developments in standardization/adaptation by analyzing 130 articles in 26 journals published in the period 1960 to 2002 year. Most of the papers that were published in these 26 journals were the papers that are published in *Journal of Global Marketing*, *International Marketing Review*, *Journal of World Business*, and *Journal of International Marketing* (21, 18, 13, and 11 articles).

They also identified five phases of international marketing strategy standardization/adoption research. In *I phase* that belongs to the period from 1961 to 1970, advertising and promotion standardization strategies were mainly investigated, in a sense whether to standardize or adopt. In *phase II (1971-1980)*, number of empirical studies increased, and these studies had focus at both, promotion and product. Papers published in phase III (1981-1990) continued researching promotion and product by advancing certain theoretical models. Complex theoretical models, comprehensive studies, multiple relationship studies were conducted in *phase IV (1991-2000)*, and all 4P's were included. And *phase V (2001-)* was remarked by publications of complex models and comprehensive papers, as result of increase of knowledge in the area (Waheeduzzaman & Dube, 2004).

1.2. International Marketing Strategy Standardization/Adaptation and Export Performance

1.2.1. Product Strategy Standardisation/Adaptation

During the past four decades, the field of international marketing strategies has paid specific attention to the forces that drive adaptation or standardization of particular marketing mix elements. Following this context, numerous studies (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003) have concentrated on the reasons that influence the level of product adaptation. (Hultman, Robson, & Katsikeas, 2009). There are many studies that provide positive relationship between adapting products to the local market and export performance (Calantone et al., 2006; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Lee & Griffith, 2004; Shoham, 1999), but on the other hand some scholars argued in their studies that standardized products are more successful (Christensen, Da Rocha, & Gertner, 1987; Zou et al., 1997).

In their detail analyses of 36 empirical studies Theodosiou & Leonidou, (2003) found that product element of the marketing mix and product related issues appear to be the most standardized marketing mix element. Beyond this study, Michell, Lynch, & Alabdali, (1998) in their study found that the degree of standardization of product-related variables was greater than the other marketing mix elements by UK firms exporting to the six Gulf States. Similar results we can find also in Quester & Conduit, (1996) study. The study investigated this issue, based on a mail survey of some 200 Australian subsidiaries of MNCs. And findings enabled the researchers to conclude that standardisation is usually consistent across products and services within any one firm.

Studies that were recently published (Doole & Lowe, 2012; Katsikeas et al., 2006; Siraliova & Angelis, 2006; Vrontis, 2003), again support the claim that companies standardize most product element in their marketing mix.

In their study Theodosiou & Leonidou, (2003) provided several potential reasons for the higher degree of standardization of the product element that can offer number of benefits, like: a) the greater motivation to gain the benefits from economies of scale in research and development and production, b) the wish for fastdispersal of new products in the market, particularly following the fact that product lifecycles are increasingly becoming shorter, and c) the necessity to accomplish better harmonization through the application of more constant internal production controls and quality standards.

Considering mentioned studies that are supporting positive correlation of product standardization with satisfaction of export performance, a following proposition can be proposed:

P1. Standardization of product strategy enhances export performance. The more standardized the product component to export markets, the higher the export performance.

1.2.2. Pricing Strategy Standardisation/Adaptation

Even though price standardisation versus adaptation has been neglected in the literature (Lages, 2000), again the results obtained in relationship with export performance are mixed (Shoham, 1996b). Supporting this concept, there are numerous studies that recognise a positive relationship between price strategy adoption and export performance (Das, 1994; Lee & Griffith, 2004; Shoham, 1996b). When we talk about export sales volume than we can find in Leonidou,

Katsikeas, & Samiee, (2002) literature review a strong positive relationship between price adjustment and export performance. Alternatively, there are other studies that indicated negative relationship between price adaptation and export performance (Lages & Montgomery, 2005; Ozsomer, Bodur, & Cavusgil, 1991; Shoham, 1999; Sousa & Bradley, 2008). Studies about price standardization/adaptation have showed diverse results. While Shoham & Albaum, (1994)described in their study that price adaptation enhanced profitability, later on Shoham, (1996b)stated a negative impact.In the same way, it was presented in Koh & Robicheaux, (1988)study that price adaptation enhanced performance, but only when it was higher than domestic prices; it harmed it otherwise.

P2: Price adaptation is positively related to the export performance.

1.2.3. Promotion Strategy Standardization/Adaptation

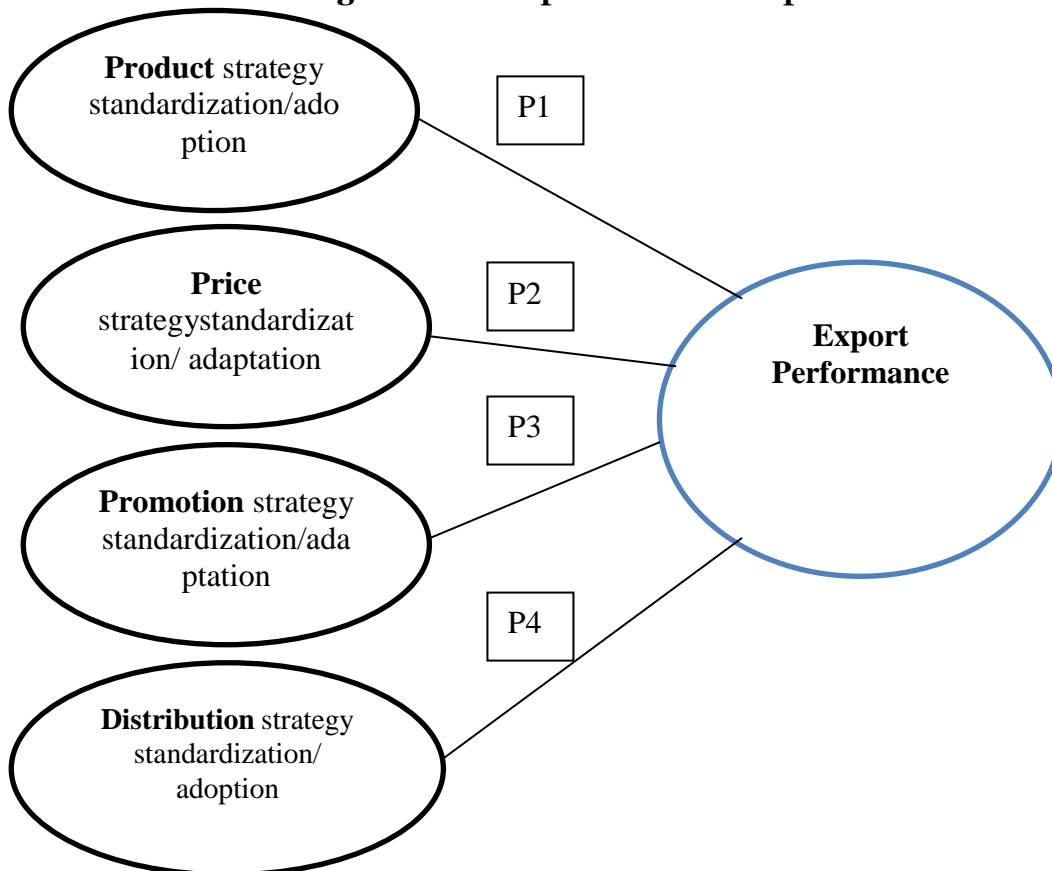
When we talk about promotion standardisation/adaptation we can find many studies reporting that firms that adapt their international promotional strategies faces improvements in export performance(Cavusgil et al., 1993; Poulis & Poulis, 2011; Shoham, 1996b, 1999).

In the same way, in Leonidou et al., (2002) study, findings showed positive association between promotion adaptation and overall performance, but on the other hand Cavusgil & Zou, (1994),stated a negative association between promotion adaptation and export performance, arguing thatcompetitive pressure in the export market leads to promotion adaptation. Still, there are some other studies that did not find any significant relationship between promotion export strategy and export performance(Lages, 2000; O’Cass & Julian, 2003; Samiee & Roth, 1992).

P3: Adaptation of promotion element of marketing mix enhances export performance. The more adapted the promotion component of the marketing mix to export markets, the higher the export performance.

1.2.4. PlaceStrategy Standardization/Adaptation

Figure 2. Conceptual Model Proposed



Compering the international place strategy standardization/adoption with three discussed above we can say that this marketing mix element received particularly little attention in the context of standardisation versus adaptation controversy (Rosenbloom et al., 1997; Shoham, Brencic, Virant, & Ruvio, 2008; Zou & Stan, 1998). Leonidou et al., (2002) stated in their study that the few research which studied distribution standardization/adaptation strategy, mainly explained that the exporting enterprise's channel design should be adjusted in the export markets. In their comprehensive review they revealed a strong positive relationship between distribution adaptation and export performance, mostly when measured as export intensity and export profit level.

Shoham (1996b), in his study supported the positive influence of distribution adaptation on export performance, but the same author revealed a positive significant association between distribution standardisation and static export performance in his study from 1999 (Shoham, 1999). But also some other studies did not recognize any substantial connection between distribution export strategy and ensuing export performance (O'Casey & Julian, 2003; Samiee & Roth, 1992)

Rosenbloom et al., (1997) in their study found relationship between distribution strategy and export performance, but they argued that high standardization of export distribution strategy might not bring profit to organization and might be infeasible. Therefore, researchers have standard that firms mostly adapt their distribution strategy for export markets (Shoham et al., 2008). Accordingly:

P4: Distribution adaptation enhances satisfaction with export performance. The more adapted the distribution component of the marketing mix to export markets, the higher the export performance.

Implications and Conclusion

Standardization vs. adaptation of the marketing mix elements has been a topic of research during last fifty years that received a lot of interests by researchers and practitioners. The research focus of this paper was to investigate the relationship of marketing mix (product, price, distribution, communication) standardization/adaptation and export performance of firms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to provide possible research propositions. Combining both theoretical and empirical studies in international marketing, international business, and strategic planning, a model for making the standardization/adaptation decision is proposed.

Marketing mix standardization/adaptation can be reviewed with reference to product, price, promotion, and distribution decisions. Previous research has focused primarily on marketing mix adaptation of price, promotion and distribution element of marketing mix, while the product strategy is proposed to be standardized.

Considering propositions mentioned in the study following managerial guidelines can be proposed: First, exporting companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina should pursue a high degree of standardization of the product component of the marketing mix. This will improve export performance (e.g., sales and profits). Second, exporting companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina should pursue a high degree of adaptation of the channel, price and promotion component of the marketing mix. This would result in improved objective performance and improved satisfaction with performance.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

There are several limitations that can be highlighted in the study. First limitation is that the conceptual model proposed in this paper is not formally tested i.e. by means of questionnaire, surveys, interviews etc. Second limitation is that the study is focused only on marketing mix standardization/adaptation and its relationship with export performance, but different factors that can influence (Jain, 1989) or moderate (Shoham, 1996b) this relationship are neglected. Third limitation is that our proposed study is focusing on a single country organization, future research should be constructed to consider other countries' organization. A broad context such as the one proposed here has been missing. This context is expected to be beneficial in upcoming studies in directing research attention to key variables and relationships.

In order to bring more benefits into the standardization versus adaptation debate, future research would be most efficient when several of mentioned guidelines are combined into a single

design. Once more, research that incorporates determinants discussed in Jain, (1989) should have far-reaching managerial implications. That's why the need for further research on the impact of numerous drivers of the decision to standardize or adapt components of the export marketing mix is highly required (Jain 1989).

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