

## Do the Media Portrayal of a Brand’s Sweatshop Exploitation Affect Consumers’ Causal Attribution: Kelley’s Attribution Theory-based Account.

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*Background and Problem Statement.* News coverage of unfair business practices such as sweatshop exploitation may portray a brand as a wrongful beneficence of the resources of developing countries. Once individuals are exposed to news of a brand’s exploitation of sweatshops, their cognitive processing of blame assignment may go through causal attributional reasoning. Kelley’s causal attribution (1967) literature identifies three dimensions of information, which are distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. The consistency dimension, which is the encapsulation of the degree to which communicators are found to be stable and consistent in blaming the same brand across time and situations (Kelly, 1967, Laczniak et al., 2001), is related to the communicator, which is print and electronic media in this study context. On the other hand, the content of news in terms of encapsulation of the extent of experts’ agreement (high or low consensus) and the degree to which a communicator associates the negative information with a brand (high or low distinctiveness) may lead receivers to go through the process of blame attribution and negative attitude formation towards the brand.

*Purpose.* The general purpose of this study is to investigate the mechanism for consumers’ blame attribution and evaluation towards an alleged brand depending on the variability of information dimensions of news which are distinctiveness (high versus low) and consensus (high versus low).

*Theoretical background.* Considering previous attribution research that deals with high and low occurrence of the three dimensions, two conditions, which are high consensus- high distinctiveness and low consensus- low distinctiveness, provide theoretically unambiguous information (Laczniak et al., 2001). In contrary, high consensus- low distinctiveness and low consensus-high distinctiveness provide ambiguous information (see fig. 1). Unambiguous conditions are the representation of focused and cogent arguments that may lead receivers to from stronger attribution than other two configurations that are less logical, thus less persuasive.

### *Consistency in allegation.*

Given that news published in print and electronic media are perceived as non-commercial and voluntary, and that people consider media as credible sources of news and volunteer in serving the news (Dickson & Eckman, 2008), any print and electronic media is not scrutinized for its consistency of news. Therefore, a receiver rules out the concern for consistency dimension in interpreting the news information.

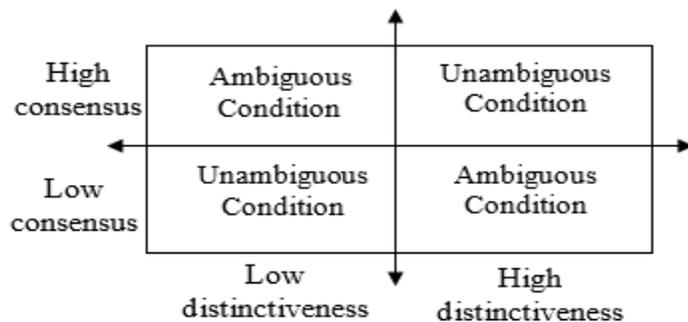


Figure 1: Unambiguous and ambiguous conditions respective to distinctiveness and consensus dimensions

*Distinctiveness in allegation.* Mayer (2007) discussed structural versus discretionary exploitation of sweatshops where the same exploitation can be treated from two viewpoints. Structural exploitation occurs when exploiters are locked in competition, and competitors lose their competitive advantage without exploitation. In contrary, discretionary exploitation occurs when there is no survival issue related to the company, and short-term profit gain is the main reason for it (Mayer, 2007). Therefore, a firm's engagement in exploitation either can be presented as structural exploitation, which will make the firm less distinctive from other firms, or can be discretionary which will make the firm more distinctive from the others.

*Consensus in allegation.* A perceiver's belief would have changed based on the arguments provided in the experts' opinions, which is consensus condition. In high consensus condition, a perceiver's belief that exploitation is a violation of the rights of workers will become strengthened. On the other hand, in a low consensus condition, perceivers' will have the belief that exploitation to some extent add some positive aspects to the country's economy and to the workers. For example, when investors come to a developing country with physical capital and technology, it gives an opportunity to develop human capital of that country. These three capitals are the direct contributor of the process of development (Powell, 2014); thus, "sweatshops themselves are part of the very process of development that will lead to their own elimination" (p. 120). According to the heuristic-systemic model of persuasion of information processing theory (Chaiken, 1980), to judge the quality of, and to form an attitude towards an object, consumers consider consensus as a heuristic cue.

*Causal attribution as a response.* The high distinctiveness- high consensus condition in news dimensions will hold a brand responsible whereas a low distinctiveness and low consensus condition in news dimensions will attenuate the responsibility to other brands and to the situation. Previous literature on attribution theory suggests that a high distinctiveness- high consensus and a low distinctiveness- low consensus conditions are the most persuasive configuration, thus producing unambiguous information to receivers, whereas high distinctiveness-low consensus and low distinctiveness- high consensus are the least persuasive configuration, thus producing ambiguous information to receivers (Laczniak et al., 2001). Therefore, the study proposes:

**P1.** Consumers exposed to a brand's wrongdoing information configured as high distinctiveness and high consensus will form a less favorable attitude towards the brand than those receiving other configurations. **P2:** Consumers exposed to a brand's wrongdoing information configured as low distinctiveness and low consensus will form a more favorable attitude towards the brand than consumers who received the other configurations.

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