

Bicultural Brand Positioning in International Markets: Exploring Potential Challenges in the Context of Consumer Cultures Associated with Human Rights Controversies

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Brands operating in multiple countries face diverse competitive landscapes and consumer preferences, making it challenging to devise an appropriate positioning strategy. This complexity increases further as brands may face criticism when their activities relate to markets that current or prospective customers perceive as violating human rights. This article discusses the concept of bicultural brand positioning, an approach that integrates two consumer cultures that either represent individual countries or span across multiple countries (i.e., local, foreign, and global consumer culture), in relation to markets characterized by human rights violations. Drawing on prior research on consumer ethnocentrism, con-

sumer animosity, and brand opportunism, we offer several propositions on how the association with markets accused of human rights violations may affect brands that engage in bicultural positioning. Additionally, we suggest potential avenues for future research and offer managerial implications regarding brand-oriented social impact assessments.

1. Introduction

Globalization, digital transformation, and growing middle classes in markets like China and India, the states of the Arabian Peninsula, and several countries in Africa accompanied by rising disposable incomes, are among



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the mega-trends fostering the internationalization of companies and brands. Despite the common assumption that markets and consumer preferences have been steadily converging and merging (e.g., Levitt 1983), brands continue to face diverse competitive landscapes and consumer preferences across various countries (e.g., He and Wang 2017). Against this background, the development of an appropriate positioning strategy in international markets is a key challenge and one of the most crucial success factors for brands operating in multiple countries (e.g., Batra et al. 2017). Brand positioning involves establishing specific brand associations in consumers' minds through promotional messages and other marketing activities, thereby shaping the brand's image (Keller 1993; Magnusson et al. 2019). As part of their international activities, companies often position their brands in alignment with a specific consumer culture that represents individual countries or spans across multiple countries. This strategy is referred to as consumer culture brand positioning (Alden et al. 1999). For example, a brand can highlight the consumer culture of its home country (resulting in positioning as a foreign brand in other countries), adopt the local consumer culture of the target country, or align with a global consumer culture that is grounded in universally shared meanings and exists across several countries. Brands may also employ a combination of these approaches and recent research in marketing indicates that such combinations can lead to more favorable brand evaluations compared to exclusively global, local, or foreign positioning concepts (e.g., Hu et al. 2023; Schmidt-Devlin et al. 2022). Building on the idea of combining references to more than one country in a brand's positioning, Weisskopf and Uhrich (2024) recently introduced the concept of bicultural brand positioning. This concept originally refers to a positioning approach that integrates the consumer cultures of two countries, for instance, by establishing associations with both the brand's home country and the target country. One example is the Japanese car brand Toyota in the United States: the brand emphasizes its reliability and quality as a reflection of its Japanese heritage, while also showcasing its SUVs and trucks in rugged outdoor settings, thereby reflecting the love for adventure and exploration as elements of US car owners' consumer culture. Initial evidence suggests that bicultural brand positioning can positively influence consumer evaluations of the brand (Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024); however, questions remain about whether, how, and under what conditions brands should adopt this approach.

In this article, we discuss the concept of bicultural brand positioning in relation to markets characterized by problematic human rights situations (Our World in Data 2024). On a broader level, global brand activities are increasingly interwoven with disparate market conditions, posing challenges when aligning a brand with controversial countries or regions. Our rationale for studying human rights violations in the context of bicultural brand positioning is that this approach incorporates country-

specific aspects and, therefore, becomes a pertinent concept to discuss. In addition, today, assessing the relationship between marketing activities and human rights controversies plays a key role in a brand's marketing in general, and international brand positioning in particular (e.g., Lamberton et al. 2024). While there is still no universally shared understanding of what constitutes human rights issues (Donnelly 1982; Lamberton et al. 2024), it has been suggested that brand managers need to be mindful of their marketing activities in terms of the brand's relation to markets potentially associated with human rights violations. Prior research has shown that even corporations that explicitly commit to supporting human rights often fail to uphold these commitments (Salcito et al. 2015). These issues can significantly impact the brand's reputation and success, both domestically and internationally. This is because consumers worldwide are becoming increasingly aware of brands' environmental and social conduct and expect them to act responsibly (e.g., Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Kotler 2011). Taking this into account is particularly challenging in situations where brands seek to integrate or evoke associations with markets accused of human rights violations as consumer interpretations of such violations vary widely.¹

The issue of perceived human rights violations relates to the concept of bicultural brand positioning in two ways. First, a brand that is connected to a country that is not associated with human rights violations, may integrate a new consumer culture into its positioning that is associated with a country accused of human rights issues. Second, a brand that originates from a country accused of human rights violations and is associated with this country may target a new international market and establish associations with this market's consumer culture. We propose that brands may face criticism when they associate with the consumer culture of a country that at least parts of their current or prospective customers perceive as violating human rights. Indeed, research has shown that a negative attitude towards a country can reduce the consumption of products and brands related to this country (e.g., Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999).

Therefore, the current research addresses the interrelations of bicultural brand positioning and human rights issues. We identify and discuss existing research relevant to bridging these two topics, which has received considerable attention as a foundation for brand-oriented considerations. Specifically, we focus on the literature on consumer ethnocentrism, consumer animosity, and brand opportunism. Our rationale for studying these concepts is that consumer ethnocentrism significantly influences international market selection, entry mode, and positioning decisions for companies and brands, while consumer animosity and brand opportunism encapsulate consumer re-

¹ We focus on the consequences of consumer behavior for the focal brand, intending to avoid discussions of ethical considerations that necessitate value-based judgments and moral assessments, especially given the uncertainty of achieving clear results.

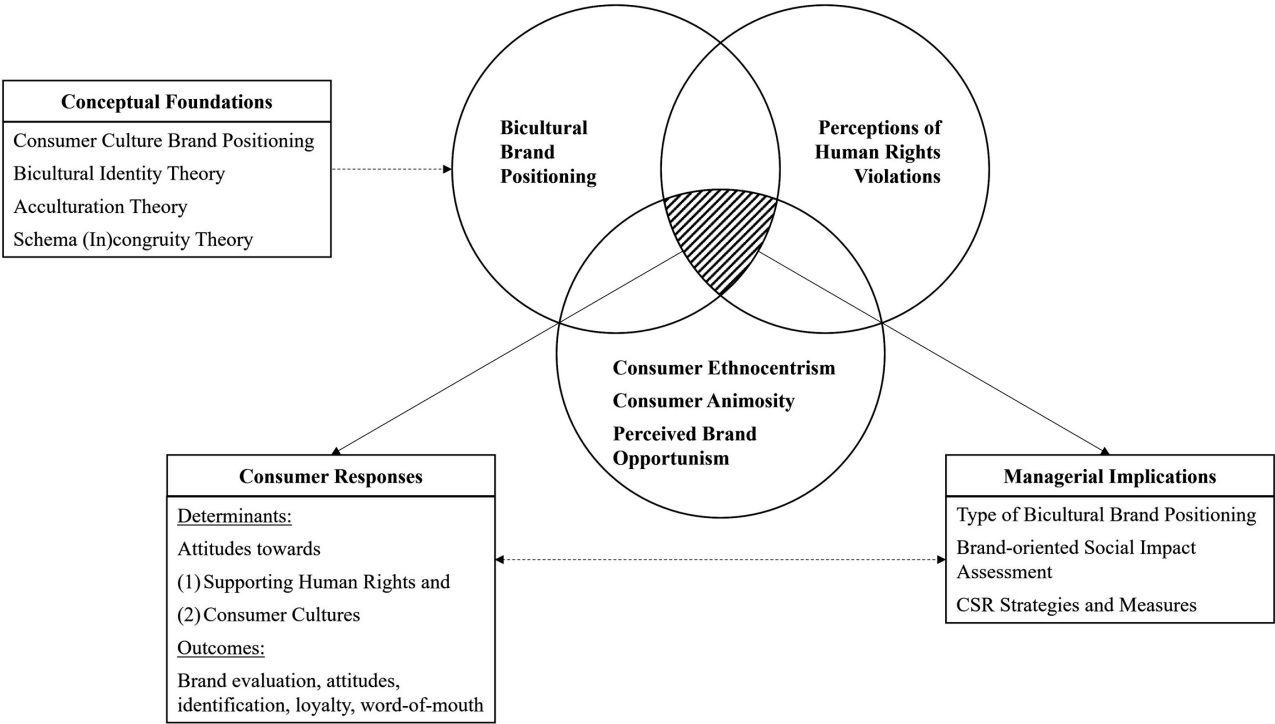


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

sponses arising from these decisions, in particular in situations where these decisions face criticism. Thus, while markets exhibiting high levels of consumer ethnocentrism may prompt brands to adopt bicultural brand positioning, brands might also anticipate perceptions of consumer animosity and brand opportunism as a consequence. Moreover, as illustrated in this article, these three concepts also have relevant connections to markets and brands associated with human rights controversies.

Our analysis attempts to contribute to both the literature on international brand positioning, in particular, bicultural brand positioning, and the literature on the intersection of marketing and human rights issues (Fig. 1). First, the only study examining bicultural brand positioning focuses on sports league brands that integrate elements of the target country into their positioning (Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024). This research does not consider potential controversies (e.g., human rights violations) relating to either the home or the target country of the sports brands. We extend this research by highlighting how the concept of bicultural brand positioning may create as well as resolve challenges in terms of a brand’s social responsibility. That is, as we detail below, bicultural brand positioning can involve a brand in human rights issues (i.e., when the consumer culture of a doubtful country is adopted) or represent a way to tackle such issues (i.e., when a brand from a country associated with human rights problems adds the consumer culture of another country to its positioning). Second, regarding the literature on human rights issues and marketing, extant research has examined how brands tackle social issues like human rights violations primarily focusing on the configuration of im-

pact assessments, which involves evaluating marketing strategies and actions to ensure they respect human rights (e.g., Esteves et al. 2017; Esteves et al. 2012; Kemp and Vanclay 2013; Lamberton et al. 2024). While this also addresses considerations arising from a brand’s value chain activities in relation to human rights guidelines, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (e.g., Kolben 2019; Methven O’Brien and Dhanarajan 2016; Shabrokh and Rodriguez 2023; van der Ploeg and Vanclay 2017), research on how consumer attitudes and behaviors are influenced by brands associated with countries accused of human rights violations remains scarce. Our analysis adds to this stream of literature by providing an in-depth discussion on how brand positioning can create linkages between a brand and a country accused of human rights violations, and how such linkages affect consumer attitudes and behavior.

In what follows, we briefly review the approach of consumer culture brand positioning and discuss the concept of bicultural brand positioning. Next, we integrate the concept of bicultural brand positioning with the issue of human rights violations. We discuss the possible challenges that may arise, particularly focusing on the different perspectives of local and global consumers, and explore how bicultural brand positioning could relate to and address these challenges. Furthermore, we propose an agenda for future research and provide managerial guidance.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Consumer culture brand positioning

The approach of consumer culture brand positioning conceptually draws on consumer culture theory. This theory has been mainly used to elucidate how “tribal aspects of consumption” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 874) influence consumers’ processing and interpretation of symbolic meanings encoded in brands, advertisements, or other forms of communication (e.g., Holt 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Mick and Buhl 1992). In the context of branding, Steenkamp (2019) defined “consumer culture as a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are globally (locally) conceived and are mediated through deterritorialized, global (geographically anchored, local) markets” (p. 3). Consumer culture can be influenced by a variety of factors, including social, economic, and cultural factors that may be unique to a country or region. These factors can shape consumers’ attitudes, behaviors, and preferences in distinct ways. Thus, consumption practices are based on shared meanings, beliefs, and social practices or rituals, and therefore, can be deeply interconnected with a country’s or region’s economic and social systems (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Thus, consumer cultures may emerge in specific parts of a country or refer to larger marketplaces across several countries. In the context of brand positioning, consumer cultures typically refer to countries, nations, or a globalized community (e.g., Alden et al. 1999). In our research, we adopt this perspective by referring to country-specific, consumption-related symbols, cues, or practices when using the terms “local” and “foreign” consumer culture positioning, and to a globalized view of consumption when using the term “global” consumer culture positioning. For example, many brands have become synonymous with their country of origin and may emphasize attributes, lifestyles, and symbols of their home country in foreign markets (Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999). This approach is labeled foreign consumer culture positioning because the brands are clearly recognizable as stemming from a foreign country (Alden et al. 1999; Nijssen and Douglas 2011). One example is the Italian beer brand Peroni, which in its international marketing activities evokes the lifestyle and associations of the Italian “Dolce Vita” (sweet life) by emphasizing aspects of relaxation and leisure associated with the Italian consumer culture. Local consumer culture positioning is another positioning approach in international marketing. In this case, brands adapt to the local consumer culture of the target country, aiming to establish a strong fit between the brand image and consumer preferences. For example, in Indonesia, the Unilever food brand Knorr is known as “Royco” and it is specifically tailored to suit the tastes and preferences of Indonesian consumers. A brand’s positioning can, however, also refer to a consumer culture that spans across multiple

countries (Alden et al. 1999). For instance, many brands have become symbols for consumers who align themselves with a universally shared lifestyle and cosmopolitan values, thus adopting a global consumer culture positioning approach. Such “global brands are perceived as creating an identity, a sense of achievement and identification for consumers, symbolizing the aspired values of global consumer culture” (Özsomer and Altaras 2008, p. 1). One example is the brand Apple, whose marketing and advertising strategies resonate globally, contributing to a cohesive brand identity and a consistent brand image related to globally shared values such as openness and innovativeness across different countries.

2.2. Bicultural brand positioning

While studies have shown that brands can benefit from associating with the consumer culture of specific countries or with a global consumer culture (e.g., Batra et al. 2000; Sichtmann et al. 2019), other research has demonstrated that consumer preferences may not necessarily be exclusive and unidimensional (e.g., Steenkamp et al. 2003). Brand positioning concepts that integrate more than one consumer culture into a compatible and harmonious brand image may also be a favorable approach. Conceptually, the concepts of brand image and brand positioning are highly interrelated, as both rely on subjective consumer perceptions and interpretations (Keller 1993; Magnusson et al. 2019). These can be formed by promotional activities that communicate the types, favorability, strength, and uniqueness of brand associations. Indeed, recent research indicates that combining global or foreign attributes with target-market associations can result in more favorable brand evaluations compared to relying solely on global or foreign appeals (e.g., Hu et al. 2023; Schmidt-Devlin et al. 2022). Building on the idea of combining two consumer cultures, Weisskopf and Uhrich (2024) recently introduced the concept of bicultural brand positioning. The authors built on bicultural identity theory (Benet-Martínez and Haritatos 2005; LaFromboise et al. 1993) to suggest that brands can be positioned biculturally, that is, they integrate their inherent associations with the consumer culture of a specific country or market with associations referring to another country’s consumer culture (Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024). Bicultural identity theory suggests that individuals who have experienced diverse cultural environments are able to internalize multiple cultural influences. Such individuals, known as biculturals, embrace the values, attitudes, and interpretations associated with two distinct cultural backgrounds (Benet-Martínez and Haritatos 2005; Rodas et al. 2021). For example, many Hispanic and Asian Americans maintain strong connections to both their ethnic heritage and the US American culture. While previous research has predominantly examined biculturalism as a personality trait of consumers who express affiliation with two cultural backgrounds (e.g., Rodas et al. 2021), bicultural brand positioning proposes that brands can also combine and integrate references to

two consumer cultures within their brand image. One example is the brand McDonald's in Japan, which offers seasonal and regional specialties like the "Teriyaki Burger" or "Sakura Cherry Blossom McFlurry." Thus, McDonald's, generally positioned as a global brand, attempts to align with local tastes and cultural events, thereby reflecting the local consumer culture. As this example shows, while Weisskopf and Uhrich's (2024) research primarily focused on country-related consumer cultures, bicultural positioning also denotes a combination of country-specific and global consumer cultures.

Research has provided ample evidence for the benefits of consistent global (e.g., modernity), foreign (e.g., quality), and local (e.g., trustworthiness) brand image aspects (e.g., Alden et al. 2006; Mandler 2019; Mandler et al. 2021; Steenkamp et al. 2003; Xie et al. 2015). However, consumers may also respond negatively to such standardized positioning approaches, potentially leading to negative effects on their brand evaluations and attitudes (e.g., Mandler 2019). For example, recent research has identified a particular trend: as a backlash against globalization, consumers in international markets show a rising tendency to prefer products and brands with a local image (e.g., Mandler et al. 2021). While such findings suggest that local consumer culture positioning would be the superior strategy, there are situations where retaining the brand's primary image associations can be advantageous or is even unavoidable. The latter is the case for brands that cannot dissociate from their country of origin because their origin is either well-known (e.g., IKEA) or the brand is strongly tied to a certain region or country (e.g., sports team brands). The concept of bicultural brand positioning aims to integrate these findings. By combining two consumer culture references, this approach retains the benefits of global, foreign, or local brand image aspects while simultaneously creating the potential to capitalize on the advantages of a second cultural reference, thereby avoiding the potential downsides of a purely standardized approach.

The concept of bicultural brand positioning receives further theoretical support from acculturation theory (Graves 1967). Acculturation refers to transformations individuals and groups undergo when exposed to different cultures. The literature on acculturation offers valuable insights into how local consumers may respond to global consumption trends that are introduced into their native cultures into how local consumers may respond to global consumption trends that are introduced into their native cultures (Sam and Berry 2006). Examining the dynamics of globalization and localization at the individual level, acculturation theory proposes that consumers, in general, not just biculturals, can identify with more than one consumer culture simultaneously (e.g., Berry and Sam 1997). As LaFromboise et al. (1993) conclude, when exposed to another culture, individuals from one culture can cultivate bicultural competence. Bicultural brand positioning takes this explicitly into consideration as the concept describes a flexible approach to address

diverse consumer types, needs, and preferences in international markets.

There are two aspects that likely determine consumer responses to bicultural brand positioning. First, a key factor is consumers' attitudes toward the two respective consumer cultures integrated into the bicultural positioning (Steenkamp 2019). For example, in the aforementioned example of McDonald's in Japan, consumer responses will likely depend on both how much they like the global character of the brand and how much they appreciate the Japanese local consumer culture.

Second, another important factor is the perceived compatibility of combining the two consumer cultures. According to schema (in)congruity theory (Mandler 1982), consumers inevitably align marketing communication with their pre-existing knowledge and expectations. Thus, schema incongruity arises when the brand image does not align with consumers' pre-existing perceptions of the brand's cultural identity, potentially diminishing consumers' brand attitudes (Halkias et al. 2017). Within the context of bicultural brand concepts, Weisskopf and Uhrich (2024) demonstrated that the way in which a brand integrates associations of two cultural references influences consumers' perceptions of bicultural brand image integration (BBII). BBII refers to how compatible and harmonious consumers perceive the combination of two consumer cultures and this variable has been shown to be positively related to downstream consequences like brand usage intentions.

2.3. Bicultural brand positioning and human rights issues

It has long become essential for businesses and brands to consider human rights issues in their impact and risk assessment (Kemp and Vanclay 2013; van der Ploeg and Vanclay 2017) and this assessment may also have ramifications for a brand's international brand positioning strategy. Although several international human rights treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations 1948), the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP) (United Nations 2011), and others have aimed to define and codify the concept of human rights, there is still no global consensus on what constitutes human rights issues. As many international markets exhibit significant differences in cultural values, competitive contexts, and consumer preferences (e.g., Batra et al. 2017; He and Wang 2017), these markets may also differ in terms of consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward supporting human rights (Lamberton et al. 2024; Torney-Purta et al. 2008). For example, Donnelly (1982) stated that "a concern for human dignity is central to non-Western cultural traditions, whereas human rights, in the sense in which Westerners understand that term – namely, rights (entitlements) held simply by virtue of being a human being – are quite foreign to, for example, Islamic, African, Chinese, and Indian approaches to human dignity" (p. 303). According to Lamberton et al. (2024), hu-

man dignity, which can be defined as “the inalienable, inherent, and equal value possessed by all humans” (p. 1), is the underlying foundation of what treaties such as the UDHR refer to as a concern for human rights. The ambiguity surrounding the questions of what to consider and how to target human rights issues constitutes a significant challenge in international branding (Esteves et al. 2017). In what follows, we discuss human rights issues as they relate to the concept of bicultural brand positioning. In so doing, we consider two main situations that can pose a challenge regarding human rights in the context of bicultural brand positioning. In both of these situations, the focal brand is associated with a specific consumer culture, for instance, the culture of its home country or global consumer culture, and intends to expand into a new international market. In this case, there are two scenarios why human rights issues can pose a challenge. First, the new consumer culture that is intended to be integrated into the brand’s positioning is associated with human rights violations. Second, the brand can also originate from a market perceived as violating human rights and now intends to integrate another consumer culture into its positioning.

We discuss the consequences of these two situations and mainly derive our arguments from prior literature on three pertinent concepts, namely consumer ethnocentrism, animosity, and brand opportunism (Fig. 1). Moreover, we propose potential avenues for future research that can advance the understanding of the concept of bicultural brand positioning as it relates to human rights issues and may also contribute to the literature on consumer ethnocentrism, consumer animosity, and brand opportunism.

3. Bicultural brand positioning under conditions of consumer ethnocentrism

Research indicates that consumers from markets characterized by problematic human rights situations might exhibit a stronger tendency towards nationalism, patriotism, and thus, consumer ethnocentrism (Balabanis et al. 2001; McFarland 2010; McFarland and Mathews 2005; Yazici 2019). We therefore discuss bicultural brand positioning as it relates to consumer ethnocentrism. Consumer ethnocentrism refers to “the belief held by consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products” (Shimp and Sharma 1987, p. 280). Ethnocentric consumers tend to favor brands from their home country, thereby exhibiting aversive reactions towards non-local products and brands (Cleveland et al. 2009; Siamagka and Balabanis 2015). Therefore, consumer ethnocentrism is particularly relevant to global branding (Alden et al. 2013; Guo 2013), market entry mode decisions (Fong et al. 2014), and the issue of positioning, especially for brands associated with a global or foreign consumer culture (Magnusson et al. 2014; Nijssen and Douglas 2011; Westjohn et al. 2012). More-

over, previous research has shown that consumer ethnocentrism negatively influences the effects of perceived brand globalness and foreignness on brand attitudes (Steenkamp et al. 2003).

3.1. Bicultural brand positioning within a country exhibiting conditions of consumer ethnocentrism

We propose that bicultural brand positioning can be an effective approach in markets characterized by problematic human rights situations, as such markets may exhibit conditions of consumer ethnocentrism. While local consumer culture positioning may seem to be the best choice under conditions of consumer ethnocentrism, there are several reasons why brands might choose to forgo this option. For instance, full local integration could dilute the global or foreign brand’s image, which can be a strategic asset (e.g., Apple or IKEA). We assume that by integrating references to the local consumer culture, bicultural brand positioning enables brands to simultaneously capitalize on global or foreign associations while mitigating the negative effects of ethnocentric tendencies. That is because adaptations to the local market may reduce ethnocentric consumers’ aversion to global and foreign brands. Support for this proposition comes from research indicating that non-local brands that adjust to the local culture and consumer preferences can enhance their performance (e.g., Akram et al. 2011; Davvetas and Diamantopoulos 2018; Punyatoya 2013). These adjustments can establish perceptions of brand localness, which refers to how well the brand image is integrated and connected with the local market culture (Liu et al. 2021; Özsoy 2012; Steenkamp et al. 2003; Swoboda et al. 2012). Further support comes from research indicating that signaling country-culture affiliation can be an effective approach under conditions of consumer ethnocentrism in foreign markets. For instance, foreign and global brands might implement local production and employment, engage in social responsibility activities, or participate in local consumption practices (e.g., Mandler et al. 2021; Shankarmahesh 2006; Sichtmann et al. 2019). Other studies propose that brands should integrate aspects of the target market’s cultural values and norms to bond with local consumers (e.g., Ger 1999; Prince et al. 2020; Safeer et al. 2022; Westjohn et al. 2012). While these aspects may pertain to rather abstract concepts, research also suggests that more concrete tactics, such as affiliation with local celebrities and using local slogans, can increase perceived brand localness. By doing so, foreign and global brands can demonstrate their sensitivity to the local culture, creating emotional connections that also positively relate to consumer attitudes under conditions of ethnocentrism (Kaynak and Kara 2002; Safeer et al. 2022). Moreover, as nationalism and patriotism are positively related to consumer ethnocentrism, establishing associations that address consumers’ nationalistic sentiments is also considered a promising approach (Ishii 2009). Research indicates that foreign and global brands can target local consumer preferences, expectations, and

tastes by integrating associations related to local appeals such as symbols, colors, and other national country artifacts (e.g., Shankarmahesh 2006; Westjohn et al. 2012). Additionally, as consumer ethnocentrism is positively related to materialism (Cleveland et al. 2009), brands can capitalize on this concept by emphasizing aspects like high quality or prestige, which are often attributed to foreign or global brands (e.g., Ahmed et al. 2013; Akram et al. 2011; Cleveland et al. 2009; Moon and Jain 2002; Supphellen and Rittenburg 2001). Thus, building on these arguments and research showing that perceptions of brand localness and foreignness or globalness can coexist (He and Wang 2017; Liu et al. 2021), we argue that bicultural brand positioning may be a suitable approach to reconcile the negative effects of ethnocentrism in markets accused of human rights violations. Brands that succeed in establishing a bicultural image that is perceived as compatible, harmonious, and well-integrated as reflected by high levels of bicultural brand image integration (Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024), can leverage both local and foreign or global appeals, even under conditions of consumer ethnocentrism (Keane and Morschett 2016, 2017).

3.2. Future research

While existing research has provided some insights into how combinations of local and global or foreign brand positioning influence consumers in ethnocentric markets, there are still research gaps. For example, previous studies have suggested that integrating and connecting global or foreign brands with the local market has the potential to reduce the negative effects of consumer ethnocentrism; however, the comparative effects of different types of local adaptations and the influencing conditions remain unclear. Thus, it would be helpful to examine how different types of adaptations to the local consumer culture within a bicultural brand positioning influence consumer response. For example, brands could signal country-culture affiliation by participating in local consumption practices, integrating local celebrities, using local slogans, or adapting to the local community by engaging in social responsibility activities. As the success of bicultural brand positioning is mainly reflected in consumers' perceptions of bicultural brand image integration (i.e., the degree to which consumers perceive the combination of two consumer culture references as harmonious and compatible) and cultural compatibility, these variables would be important measures to investigate. Moreover, research indicates that symbolic (e.g., national artifacts) as well as functional (e.g., quality) image aspects can mitigate the influence of consumer ethnocentrism (e.g., Cleveland et al. 2009; Westjohn et al. 2012). Thus, it would be interesting to examine how combinations of functional and symbolic adaptations within a bicultural brand image perform under conditions of consumer ethnocentrism. Research suggests that signaling cultural respect by foreign or global firms directly enhances consumer attitudes toward that brand (Guo et al. 2019). Cultural respect refers to "the extent to which global/foreign

brands/firms skillfully and tactfully take account of local consumers' feelings about local traditions, symbols, and cultural heritage" (Guo et al. 2019, pp. 85–86). Therefore, future studies could investigate the conditions under which bicultural brand positioning leads to perceptions of cultural respect. In addition, future studies might examine whether perceptions of cultural respect explain the effects of a specific type of bicultural brand positioning on perceptions of BBII. As we propose that bicultural brand positioning enables firms to leverage both local and foreign or global associations, it would be interesting to investigate how a biculturally positioned brand would perform compared to a brand with a purely local image. Therefore, future research could explore ethnocentric consumers' brand evaluations in terms of outcome variables such as brand loyalty, brand usage, and word-of-mouth intentions.

4. Bicultural brand positioning under conditions of consumer animosity

We propose that associating a brand with a country accused of human rights violations can lead to negative perceptions of that brand. Support for this proposition stems from numerous studies demonstrating that a brand's home country significantly influences consumers' brand evaluation (e.g., Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999). Like commercial brands, consumers often associate specific meanings and images with the names of countries, forming a nation brand image (Kotler and Gertner 2002). It has been proposed that as with any other brand, the image of nation brands depends on the perceptions and beliefs held by individuals, rather than any objective reality (Govers and Go 2009). These perceptions are influenced by various factors, including the country's geographical location, historical events, cultural achievements such as art and music, notable figures, and other cultural elements (Kotler and Gertner 2002), as well as consumers' attitudes toward a country's government and policies (Li et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2012).

Consumer animosity is a construct in international marketing research that aims to capture such negative consumer perceptions of a foreign country (Klein et al. 1998). Unlike consumer ethnocentrism, which primarily evaluates attitudes toward purchasing local and foreign products and brands, animosity pertains to consumer attitudes directed directly toward a foreign country or culture (Klein and Ettensoe 1999; Shimp and Sharma 1987). Thus, consumer animosity relates to a brand's country of origin and denotes a negative sentiment directed towards this country (Harmeling et al. 2015; Jiménez and San Martín 2010). It has been shown that a negative country image that is based on consumers' perceptions of the political system or human rights violations can result in feelings of consumer animosity (Campo and Alvarez 2019; Riefler and Diamantopoulos 2007). In turn, these feelings have the potential to negatively affect purchase

intentions of foreign products and brands, regardless of other determinants like quality (Hoffmann et al. 2011; Klein et al. 1998).

4.1. Bicultural brand positioning and consumer animosity towards the brand's country of origin

We propose that brands originating from a country perceived as violating human rights might encounter difficulties in using a country-of-origin positioning in foreign markets. When entering a new foreign market, such brands may be associated with human rights violations, simply based on consumers' country image perceptions (Torney-Purta et al. 2008), potentially causing consumer animosity. While detaching the brand image from its country of origin may appear to be a reasonable countermeasure (i.e., avoiding foreign consumer culture positioning), this strategy may prove challenging or even unfeasible. For example, for some brands, their country of origin is integral to their identity and heritage. Leveraging this heritage can help reinforce the brand's authenticity and credibility, especially if it has a long-standing history and reputation in its home market (e.g., German or Japanese car brands). Detaching such brand images from their country of origin could dilute this authenticity and undermine the brand's core values. Further, the origin of many brands is well-known around the world, hence making it difficult to dissociate from their country of origin. Thus, such brands will necessarily be related to two countries when they make references to other countries in their positioning. Additionally, some brands may capitalize on cultural aspects related to their country of origin to appeal to consumers who identify with or admire that culture. Cultural elements such as traditions, craftsmanship, or lifestyle attributes can enhance the brand's appeal and resonate with consumers on an emotional level (e.g., Harley Davidson or Levi Strauss). Detaching such brand images from their country of origin could potentially diminish these cultural connections and weaken the brand's emotional or iconic appeal. We assume that bicultural brand positioning holds the potential to improve brand evaluations even under conditions of high levels of consumer animosity and could therefore provide superior alternatives. That is because integrating country-of-origin associations with target market associations may mitigate negative effects caused by the brand's home-country image. Indeed, Magnusson et al. (2019) recently demonstrated that although perceptions of cultural authenticity (i.e., congruency between brand image and country image) are generally positively related to brand evaluations (e.g., Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024), these effects reverse under conditions of high animosity. Thus, when targeting consumers who reject the brand's country of origin, a positioning approach that creates a certain level of incongruence between the brand's image and country image stereotypes can lead to more favorable evaluations. Bicultural brand positioning may help to create perceptions of incongruency (i.e., low cultural authenticity) by integrating references to the consumer cul-

ture of the target country. The references to the target country should enable the brand to partially dissociate from the stereotypical (negative) associations with its country of origin. In this respect, the bicultural brand image mitigates the negative effects of consumer animosity on brand evaluations. Further support comes from research indicating that under conditions of consumer animosity, a brand's level of commitment (i.e., integration) to the target market can positively influence consumer preferences. By emphasizing the identity of the target country (i.e., perceived localness), the brand can weaken associations with its home-country image, thereby reducing negative consumer attitudes towards the brand (Fong et al. 2014). In line with this idea, research has suggested that foreign brands might utilize corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to establish a connection with local consumers, enhance credibility, and thus mitigate the negative effects of consumer animosity (Song 2024; Yong and Tseng 2014). Moreover, brands originating from a country associated with human rights violations might create positive emotions by communicating favorable aspects of their home country. In combination with local adaptations, such communications might be helpful to detach the brand image from negative aspects of the country stereotype, thereby improving brand evaluations (Hong and Kang 2006; Russell and Russell 2006). Research has also shown that emphasizing the cultural characteristics of the target country, even when they are inconsistent with the brand's home-country culture, might be an effective approach to fostering positive emotions and connections with local consumers (Magnusson et al. 2014; Westjohn et al. 2021).

4.2. Bicultural brand positioning and consumer animosity towards the brand's target country

Adverse brand perceptions can also occur when the target market of a biculturally positioned brand is accused of human rights violations. Globalization and the widespread adoption of digital communication channels have significantly increased the visibility of brands' international activities (Gürhan-Canli et al. 2018). Thus, when a brand adopts bicultural positioning by integrating associations with a market accused of human rights violations, the brand's existing consumer base (e.g., the global consumer community or consumers from the brand's country of origin) is likely to become aware of such activities. In this case, bicultural brand positioning may cause backfire effects for the brand among consumers in established markets. Consider, for example, Real Madrid, a Spanish La Liga football club, and its adaptation of its emblem for Middle East markets in 2014. Since 1920, the club has been allowed to refer to itself as "real" (i.e., royal), including the permission to bear the "royal crown" in the club's emblem. As the "royal crown" emblem includes the Catholic Cross, the club decided to omit the cross to avoid offending the predominantly Muslim customers in the Middle East. This effort to adapt to the consumer culture of the target market caught

the attention of the club's mainly Western fans, causing criticism. Part of this criticism may have rested on the perception that omitting the Catholic Cross signified a lack of religious freedom in Middle Eastern countries. Theoretical support for the proposed backfire effects of such adaptations comes from research showing that the simultaneous activation of two cultural identities can draw consumers' attention to the distinctive aspects of both cultures, which may cause a perceptual contrast (Chiu and Cheng 2007). This phenomenon referred to as the bicultural exposure effect, directs consumers' attention toward the stereotypical attributes of each consumer culture, thereby enhancing the perceived disparity between the two cultures (Chiu et al. 2011; Torelli et al. 2011). Building on these insights, we propose that the integration of references to a country perceived as violating human rights may increase consumers' focus on such stereotypical aspects of this country's image (He and Wang 2017), thus activating feelings of consumer animosity. While establishing associations related to the host country's culture might yield more favorable brand evaluations from local consumers, it could also have negative repercussions, potentially leading to adverse spillover effects on brand evaluations from consumers outside the target country.

4.3. Future research

Consumer animosity is a multidimensional construct caused by various factors, including religious, political, economic, or even personal reasons. Additionally, feelings of animosity can vary in terms of their stability (e.g., Riefler and Diamantopoulos 2007). For a more detailed understanding of the relationship between human rights violations and consumer animosity, and as a foundation for effective bicultural positioning, it is important to investigate the effects of different types of human rights violations. For example, future studies could explore qualitative differences in the effects of various human rights issues, such as the disregard for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQ+) individuals, freedom of religion and belief, or the use of the death penalty, on feelings of consumer animosity. Research could delve deeper into more fundamental factors such as religious or cultural peculiarities of a country and examine if and how these factors relate to specific human rights violations as well as the subsequent consumer reactions. Moreover, research is needed to examine whether feelings of animosity caused by different human rights violations vary in terms of their stability. For instance, negative attitudes towards country-related characteristics are likely to be more stable when they are based on culturally determined, deeply rooted behavioral patterns (e.g., the behavior of men towards women). Depending on the reasons for consumer animosity, possible mitigating strategies through bicultural brand positioning would need to be designed accordingly. For example, research has suggested that emphasizing aspects associated with global consumer culture can mitigate the adverse effects

of consumer animosity by minimizing the spillover effect from country image to brand evaluations (Mandler et al. 2023). Thus, it would be beneficial to examine the comparative effects of bicultural brand positioning that integrates foreign and global references vis-à-vis approaches that combine either foreign or global associations with local market appeals. This is particularly relevant as a biculturally positioned brand combining local integration with references to a country accused of human rights violations may be perceived as opportunistic, thus triggering negative consumer responses (we return to this issue in the next section).

5. Bicultural brand positioning and perceptions of brand opportunism

We posit that brand opportunism (Yang and Mundel 2021) is another concept that may help to explain consumer perceptions and evaluations of a biculturally positioned brand associated with a country perceived as violating human rights. To the best of our knowledge, the concept of opportunism is typically used in the marketing context to analyze exchange relationships (e.g., Crosno and Dahlstrom 2008). However, we propose that this concept can also be applied to explain adverse effects on brand evaluations caused by bicultural brand positioning (Mundel and Yang 2021). Recent research in cause-related marketing demonstrated that perceptions of brand opportunism arise from incongruity between the brand-cause and image fit (Yang and Mundel 2021). Moreover, the combination of cultural references within a bicultural brand image can be perceived as more or less harmonious and compatible (i.e., BBII), thereby influencing consumers' brand attitudes (He and Wang 2017; Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024). Thus, in the context of bicultural brand positioning, perceived brand opportunism refers to a consumer's perception of a brand's efforts to align with a specific consumer culture or market involved in ethical controversies, such as human rights abuses, as driven by self-interest.

We propose that bicultural brand positioning, which establishes or evokes associations with a country accused of human rights violations may result in perceptions of brand opportunism. This should be the case when consumers perceive references to the respective country as a questionable activity that the brand performs despite reasons to avoid the association with that country (i.e., human rights violations). In this case, the establishment of associations with the country accused of human rights violations is likely seen as opportunistic, that is, driven by mere self-interest. A purely local consumer culture positioning should reinforce such perceptions of brand opportunism. Thus, global or foreign brands likely benefit from retaining references to marketplace cultures from outside the target country in their positioning. For instance, a car manufacturer originating from a country not accused of human rights violations that adapts to a coun-

try accused of human rights issues may integrate country-of-origin references to avoid an exclusive association with the doubtful target market, thus mitigating perceptions of opportunism.

In general, negative reactions due to perceptions of brand opportunism may be avoided by developing and integrating activities or communications that address the issue of human rights violations (Hilton 2003). This can help to align the brand's positioning with consumers' attitudes, under the condition that such activities and communications are trustworthy (Frankental 2001). That is because when a brand's intentions and motives to address social issues are perceived as trustworthy, these activities can result in a higher brand reputation and positive evaluations (Marin et al. 2009; Mohr and Webb 2005). However, communication activities that proactively address the issue of human rights violations carry the potential for backlash. For example, even if the intentions behind such activities are non-opportunistic (e.g., not solely based on economic considerations), brands that fail to align their messages with genuine practices risk being accused of "woke-washing." According to Tressoldi et al. (2024) "woke-washing" can be defined as "the perception that the brand is misleading its customers with illegitimate arguments or is inconsistent in its practices" (p. 55). For example, in 2018, American footballer Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem as a protest against human rights infringements associated with police violence. When Nike featured Kaepernick prominently in their advertising campaigns, some perceived it as a strong stance for justice. Conversely, others criticized it as hypocritical, pointing to Nike's controversial labor practices (Lamberton et al. 2024). Another example of backlash is the PepsiCo advertising campaign in 2017, which featured Kendall Jenner handing a Pepsi to a police officer during a protest demonstration. This campaign was heavily criticized for attempting to co-opt social concerns (such as the fight against discrimination) for commercial gain and was subsequently withdrawn by the company. Such negative perceptions can severely undermine the brand's efforts to position itself as socially responsible or progressive, leading to negative reactions such as negative word-of-mouth or brand boycotts.

5.1. Bicultural brand positioning within a country accused of human rights violations and perceptions of brand opportunism

Following this general reasoning, we propose that a brand employing bicultural positioning by associating with a country accused of human rights violations might face perceptions of brand opportunism, particularly from its consumer base outside the respective target country, that is, its global consumer community or consumers in its home country. This may likely be the case because literature points out a trend that consumers around the globe become increasingly aware of brands' environmental and social behavior (e.g., Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Kotler 2011).

As political and social attitudes are reflected in consumption (Balabanis et al. 2001), consumers expect brands to act responsibly and the consideration of such expectations has become integral to the global consumer culture (Gürhan-Canli et al. 2016; Gürhan-Canli et al. 2018; Holt et al. 2004). Moreover, consumers not only expect brands to act responsibly concerning social issues (here: human rights violations), but also penalize brands that they perceive as acting unethically (Gürhan-Canli et al. 2016; Holt et al. 2004). For example, Google's decision to re-enter the Chinese market faced intense scrutiny and backlash from consumers concerned about censorship and human rights violations. While Google aimed to expand its market reach and tap into China's vast consumer base, its compliance with the Chinese government's censorship policies sparked outrage among its U.S. consumer base, known for its advocacy of free speech and internet freedom (Porter and Kramer 2006). Consequently, while local consumers may appreciate the brand's alignment with their consumer culture, consumers outside the target market may question the brand's trustworthiness and suspect opportunistic motives (Frankental 2001; Yang and Mundel 2021).

5.2. Bicultural brand positioning of a brand originating from a country accused of human rights violations and perceptions of brand opportunism

Another situation where bicultural brand positioning may result in perceptions of brand opportunism relates to brands originating from countries perceived as not supporting human rights. When such brands expand to international markets and establish associations with the consumer culture of other countries, this step may be perceived as opportunistic. That is because consumers may view the adoption of a second consumer culture primarily as a means to disguise the brand's origin, and less as an attempt to satisfy the target market. As consumers might appreciate such brands' efforts to address social issues, without such initiatives, the bicultural positioning could be seen as an attempt to flatter local consumers by aligning with their cultural values (Thorne McAlister and Ferrell 2002), aiming to strategically distance the brand from associations with its home country (Polonsky and Jevons 2009). As a result, such a bicultural brand positioning effort may be perceived as an opportunistic and exploitative promotional activity. Consider, for example, a popular brand from a country accused of human rights violations that decides to expand its business to a country or region with a strong emphasis on human rights. To appeal to consumers in the new target market, the brand starts to incorporate elements of the market's consumer culture into its brand positioning. However, consumers in the target market may be aware of the human rights issues in the brand's home country. They might perceive the brand's adoption of their culture not as a genuine attempt to cater to their preferences but as an opportunistic move to distance the brand from its origins and negative

associations. This could lead to perceptions of the brand as being exploitative or insincere, particularly if the brand does not make any efforts to address the human rights issues associated with its home country. Huawei, for instance, has recently faced such accusations because it is said that the brand's emphasis on initiatives promoting women in leadership positions or fostering diversity (values increasingly important in most Western consumer cultures) sharply contrasts with human rights violations in its home country.

5.3. Future research

As we have argued, bicultural brand positioning may result in perceptions of brand opportunism when it involves a consumer culture associated with human rights violations. While the consideration of social issues appears to be almost obligatory for globally operating brands to address consumers' expectations of brand social responsibility (Schlegelmilch and Pollach 2005), little is known about how such expectations can be fulfilled in the context of brand positioning (Lamberton et al. 2024). This presents a particular challenge for international brand positioning, as various cultural contexts may perceive specific activities in divergent ways (Arthaud-Day 2005). Future research could investigate how biculturally positioned brands, when confronted with human rights issues, can mitigate perceptions of brand opportunism by actively supporting social causes relevant to the respective human rights topic. For example, when the human rights issue involves persecution of members of the LGBTQ+ community, support of this community may or may not be an effective countermeasure. While directly addressing the issue at hand appears to be an obvious strategy, it may also strengthen perceptions of opportunism if the support is perceived as insincere. Future studies could also explore the conditions under which bicultural positioning in relation to human rights issues triggers a potential "woke-washing" backlash, resulting in perceptions of brand opportunism. Various types of human rights violations could influence perceptions of brand opportunism in different ways. Moreover, we propose that brand opportunism is a construct that can assist researchers and practitioners in understanding the factors influencing consumer perceptions of bicultural brand image integration. As the type of bicultural brand positioning influences consumers' perceptions of BBII (Weisskopf and Uhrich 2024), brand opportunism might have the potential to negatively impact this relationship. For example, a brand associated with a country accused of human rights violations might establish symbolic references to a target country (e.g., national artifacts) to signal cultural proximity. However, without adequately distancing the brand from its home country image, such attempts might be perceived as incongruent and hypocritical. Consequently, this type of bicultural brand positioning may lead to perceptions of brand opportunism, thereby reinforcing the negative effect on consumers' perceptions of BBII. Thus, future research is needed to examine

the moderating role of perceived brand opportunism on the effect of the type of bicultural brand positioning and consumers' perceptions of bicultural brand image integration.

6. Conclusion

This article explores possible consequences for bicultural brand positioning in the context of markets accused of human rights violations. We acknowledge that the relationships between bicultural brand positioning and the theoretical constructs of consumer ethnocentrism, consumer animosity, and brand opportunism are selective, rather than being an exhaustive analysis of human rights controversies as they relate to brand positioning. However, as demonstrated in this article, these concepts are applicable to connecting the realms of international brand positioning and perceptions of human rights violations. This understanding can have practical consequences for companies applying bicultural brand positioning. The interaction between bicultural brand positioning and human rights issues can pose complex challenges for brands operating in diverse international markets. It should be noted that human rights issues are often expressed in legalistic language that may not be easily comprehensible in a business context (Kemp and Vancley 2013). In this article, we focus on consumer behavior consequences for the focal brand. We did not intend to discuss ethical considerations that would necessarily involve value-based judgments and make moral assessments, such as whether brands should establish connections with a consumer culture potentially perceived as not supporting human rights (e.g., based on a "legal" definition). Moreover, we acknowledge that perceptions of human rights controversies may vary depending on one's national, regional, or cultural background. While striving to avoid making value judgments, the examples within this article may primarily reflect a "Western" perspective and, therefore, might not be representative of consumers from other parts of the world, such as the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, or several countries in Asia and Africa. As such issues will, at least to some extent, always depend on the eye of the beholder, we argue that a discussion of the consequences of human rights violations as they relate to brand positioning is relevant, because brands operating internationally are likely to touch upon such issues. The ambiguity surrounding questions of what to consider and how to address human rights issues constitutes a significant strategic challenge in international branding. To mitigate potential pitfalls and backlashes, and to reinforce potential positive effects, brands should carefully and, if possible, proactively consider cultural sensitivities and consumer perceptions when establishing or evoking associations with consumer cultures perceived as violating human rights.

Against this background, we put forward several propositions that are based on prior research on three relevant

theoretical concepts (i.e., consumer ethnocentrism, consumer animosity, and brand opportunism). According to these propositions, bicultural brand positioning can serve as a potential approach to alleviate or mitigate negative consequences related to human rights issues; however, it can also be a potential cause for backlashes. We made several suggestions for future research, guiding researchers to delve deeper into the effectiveness of various bicultural positioning strategies and their impact on consumer attitudes. Additionally, we aimed to derive suggestions that could enhance our understanding of the interdependencies between international social issues, such as different types of human rights violations, and consumer reactions based on consumer ethnocentrism, consumer animosity, and brand opportunism. Since companies regularly deal with these issues, we will briefly address selected management implications of our results. The findings are important for various brand-related management tasks, including the development of basic brand strategies, the planning of measures for their realization, and the implementation of controls and audits to review the brand policies of companies. Because interconnections between the constructs in question may often emerge slowly (and initially receive little attention), taking these findings into account can fundamentally support a company's strategic early detection efforts regarding its brands. We will delve into this as a central use case from a company perspective within the next section.

7. Managerial implications

We assume that companies in many industries have a strong interest in intensifying and conceptually substantiating their efforts in early detection, especially given the considerable turbulence in their environments. The early detection of brand-related threats and opportunities represents a significant strategic concern for companies and brands entering new foreign markets. The concept of early detection refers to the timely identification of developments that either threaten the success potentials of companies and brands or present opportunities to enhance or establish new potentials (e.g., Ansoff 1976; Neef 2005; Porter and Kramer 2006). This proactive approach allows sufficient time for the involved stakeholders to react effectively. It should be noted that negative repercussions, especially of a social nature, such as actions by local citizens' initiatives or internationally operating institutions like Amnesty International, against companies, are rarely attributable to single, linearly understandable causes. Such negative repercussions often stem from a complex network of interconnected factors, including rumors and ambiguous perceptions, making analysis challenging (Esteves et al. 2017). The selection of analytical approaches and indicators for early detection programs in companies aiming at strengthening their brand-related success in environments with complex social structures should consider these unique characteristics.

While we acknowledge the absence of empirical evidence, our examination of the interdependencies between bicultural brand positioning and perceptions of human rights violations allows us to outline some tentative practical implications. Given the significant dependencies of firms on environmental influences and the potentially negative effects of stakeholder activities, various approaches to environmental or social impact assessment have emerged (e.g., Becker 2001). These approaches support the implementation of the aforementioned early-detection concept as part of an impact assessment. The increasing importance of human rights, along with their potential violations by companies or state institutions, has led to a heightened focus on social impact assessments on human rights and related factors as they are integrated within socio-technical systems (Esteves et al. 2017). The methodological essence of such approaches typically involves a phased sequence (with participatory implementation being recommended) comprising four or five stages, each associated with information acquisition and processing, essentially requiring feedback loops (Esteves et al. 2012). However, these procedures are often generic and provide a more general orientation. In principle, it is recommended to anticipate the social changes and effects triggered by corporate activities (in relation to a defined baseline) as a starting point, before assessing the significance and probability of occurrence of the predicted changes (considering various affected parties and their mutual connections). Finally, priorities for action could be defined (Esteves et al. 2017). Most of these impact assessment approaches focus on directly considering business activities and human rights issues, such as local production and labor or the impact of global value chains (e.g., Götzmann 2019). The implementation of our research proposals suggests options for further targeting brand-oriented social impact assessments to proactively consider human rights issues, particularly addressing the scoping phase of such activities.

We focus on two situations of brand-oriented actions by firms: (1) proactive design of market entry into a country with suspected human rights violations, and (2) continuous monitoring and adjustment after market entry. (1) In this scenario, given the potential presence of consumer ethnocentrism in the target country, suitable indicators (e.g., acceptance and effectiveness of symbolic positioning elements among target groups and the influencing factors affecting them) can be employed to evaluate whether bicultural brand positioning makes market development adequately appealing, as negative effects could be alleviated or mitigated. The information regarding the viability of bicultural positioning in this context can also serve as premises for strategic planning, which is incorporated into the strategic monitoring that accompanies the subsequent implementation of strategic plans. In the case of consumer animosity, the question arises as to the extent to which bicultural positioning and accompanying measures can make emerging negative effects manageable and render a brand introduction economical-

ly viable as well as ethically justifiable. Given the findings about the specific drivers of consumer animosity, it would be prudent to employ appropriate indicators (e.g., experiences of stakeholders in the target country with international companies, orientation of media coverage on social conflicts) to assess the extent to which CSR measures could be credibly implemented and perceived by target groups and stakeholders in the intended manner. In this context, gaining insights into the potential evaluation of CSR measures regarding the possible promotion of brand opportunism would also be crucial. This understanding could constrain a brand-leading company's options for implementing effective countermeasures. (2) For continuous monitoring and adjustment after market entry, the aforementioned information base provides an opportunity for firms to conduct systematic surveillance and implement corrective actions if targets are not met or if there are deviations from the initial premises.

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