

Selling the nation: nationalist marketing, foreignness and consumer loyalty

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Abstract

Purpose – This commentary aims to examine nationalist marketing as a neglected form of corporate political activity in international business. It argues that firms may turn nationalist and populist politics into consumer-facing marketing claims.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors develop a conceptual argument by linking recent critical international business debates on politicisation, corporate power and foreignness with international marketing research on country-of-origin effects, consumer nationalism and animosity. The paper draws on Habermas's work on communicative action and the public sphere, as well as discourse and power perspectives on marketing communication.

Findings – The paper argues that nationalist marketing can move beyond country-of-origin marketing towards country-of-enmity marketing, where foreign origin becomes a marker of suspicion, hostility or disloyalty. It shows how nationalist marketing may operate through threat framing, patriotic differentiation and misleading origin claims.

Research limitations/implications – The paper identifies a need for further research on how firms use national symbols, origin claims and consumer identities to shape political meanings and perceptions of foreignness.

Social implications – Nationalist marketing may weaken democratic debate by shifting political claims into consumer markets and framing purchase as a test of national loyalty.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to critical international business and marketing scholarship by theorising nationalist marketing as a form of discursive corporate political activity.

Keywords Country-of-enmity-marketing, Nationalist marketing

Paper type Viewpoint

Nationalist marketing and the politics of consumption

International business scholars have begun to take politics more seriously, and we believe the two CPoIB viewpoint collections clearly show why this matters. The first collection examines how Trumpism and economic nationalism politicise tariffs, foreign direct investment, foreignness, and the legitimacy of multinational enterprise (Burmester *et al.*, 2026). The second shows how rule-of-law backsliding, sustainability rollback, and business-and-human-rights contestation weaken the institutional and normative ground on which responsible international business depends (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2026). While we agree with this



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diagnosis, we suggest that one major corporate function remains under-explored: the marketing of products and services.

We believe this omission is problematic because populist politics does not stay in speeches, tariffs, rallies or executive orders, but enters markets, brands, shelves, labels, advertisements, sales pitches and social media campaigns. Firms do not only adapt to nationalist politics, but may also package and sell it. In doing so, they can turn ordinary consumer choice into a test of loyalty to a politically constructed idea of the nation, drawing everyday consumption into what [Castelló and Mihelj \(2018\)](#) term consumer nationalism. We argue that nationalist marketing is a form of discursive corporate political activity that does not merely promote domestic products but allows firms to construct the meaning of the nation, the foreigner and the good consumer ([Burmeister et al., 2026](#)). We use the term discursive corporate political activity to emphasise that firms may act politically not only through lobbying, campaign donations or regulatory influence, but also through market communication. We suggest that this nationalist marketing is discursive because it works through symbols, narratives, labels, images and consumer identities and that it is also political as these communications shape how consumers understand national belonging, foreignness, loyalty and threat. In its stronger forms, nationalist marketing does not simply say “our products are made here”, but explicitly or implicitly says “their products do not belong here”.

From country-of-origin to country-of-enmity marketing

Trumpism has been one clear example of this logic, but not the only one. Similar appeals appear in many populist projects, including “America First”, “Buy British” appeals, “Make in India”, “Buy European Food”, and frequent calls to favour domestic or regional products. These campaigns differ in history, content and moral force, and even where they may be justified as defensive, developmental or harmless, they might push firms beyond country-of-origin marketing into country-of-enmity marketing: the use of foreign origin as a marker of suspicion, hostility or disloyalty ([Shimp and Sharma, 1987](#); [Klein et al., 1998](#)).

International marketing has long studied country-of-origin marketing, based on the idea that consumers use country cues to judge products and services. Claims such as “German engineering”, “Italian design”, “Swiss precision”, “Japanese quality” and “Made in America” help consumers reduce uncertainty and link origin to quality, authenticity or expertise. We do not reject this form of country-of-origin marketing, since it can be harmless and useful when origin tells consumers something real about production, labour standards, craft or regional expertise.

We argue, however, that nationalist marketing goes further because it tells consumers what their purchase says about who they are. It links consumption to loyalty and moves from information to identity, and then from identity to moral pressure ([Shimp and Sharma, 1987](#); [Klein et al., 1998](#)). In the terms of [Castelló and Mihelj \(2018\)](#), this marks a shift from symbolic consumer nationalism, in which national symbols are woven banally into everyday consumption, towards political consumer nationalism, in which the act of buying is recast as a conscious demonstration of national allegiance. At the lowest level, firms may use country of origin as a product cue, as in “Made in the USA”, “Made in Austria” or “Made in Germany”. At the next level, they may use patriotic affiliation, with appeals such as “support local jobs”, “back our workers” or “choose domestic”. At an even stronger level, however, they use nationalist differentiation by urging consumers to choose domestic firms over foreign competitors. At the strongest level, firms use moral exclusion by implying that foreign products hurt the nation, that buying imports betrays workers, or that real patriots buy domestic. Chrysler’s 1980s appeals under Lee Iacocca illustrate this logic as Japanese

automakers were not simply treated as competitors, but as symbols of a wider threat to American industry and workers. A more recent example can be seen in Patanjali Ayurved's use of swadeshi appeals in India, where the firm positioned domestic consumption of its products as support for Indian self-reliance, cultural authenticity and national economic renewal, while competing directly with multinational consumer goods firms (Singh, 2015). In this final level the foreign product is no longer merely different, but becomes suspect; the foreign firm is no longer merely a competitor, but becomes a political problem; and the consumer is no longer merely a buyer, but is invited to act as a loyal defender of the nation through purchase. We believe that at this level, country-of-origin marketing becomes country-of-enmity marketing.

Nationalist marketing as discursive corporate political activity

The first CPOIB collection argues that firms do not only respond to political environments, but also help shape them (Burmester *et al.*, 2026). This is especially clear in the discussion of tariffs as symbolic acts. Tariffs do not only raise prices; they also tell a story about who has been cheated, who must be punished, who belongs, and who must pay (Burmester *et al.*, 2026). We suggest that marketing extends this symbolic work by taking this "story" from policy to consumers. A politician's speech on tariffs may frame foreign trade as theft, while a firm's campaign may frame the purchase of (its) domestic products or services as recovery, pride or revenge.

While corporate political activity is usually understood as lobbying, campaign donations, coalition building or regulatory influence, we suggest that firms also act politically when they shape public meaning (Burmester *et al.*, 2026). Firms do exactly this when they tell consumers what counts as fair trade, responsible production, national loyalty or a foreign threat. We thus see nationalist marketing as corporate political activity because it tries to shape the public meaning of domestic products, foreign competitors and consumer choice.

When firms use nationalist marketing to shape how consumers interpret domestic products, foreign competitors and consumer choice, they also shape legitimacy. A foreign firm may comply with the law, employ local workers, pay taxes, and produce high-quality goods, yet nationalist marketing by domestic firms can still cast it as harmful. A domestic firm may depend on imported inputs, foreign labour, offshore finance and global supply chains, yet present itself as the firm that loyal domestic consumers should support. We suggest that nationalist marketing hides this complexity by recasting global value chains as a moral conflict, with the domestic firm as hero, the national worker as victim, the foreign competitor as villain, and the consumer as the person expected to take the nation's side through purchase.

This is where nationalist marketing also links to the self-preservation perspective of the MNE: firms seek survival, defend their market position, and try to shape rules, norms and expectations (Freund *et al.*, 2026). In a populist climate, nationalist rhetoric gives firms a ready-made language for protecting market share, weakening foreign rivals, and aligning themselves with powerful political actors. This links to Mohr and Schumacher's (2019) finding that patriotic rhetoric can benefit firms when nationalist sentiment in the home country is high. Nationalist marketing can therefore allow firms to present commercial self-interest as national protection. Table 1 shows the mechanism, consequences and future research questions of nationalist marketing.

When patriotic appeals become manipulation

We do not claim that every appeal to domestic production is wrong, since local production can matter and consumers may reasonably want to support local jobs, reduce transport,

Table 1. Extending corporate political power into nationalist marketing

Existing IB insight	Extension through marketing	Discursive mechanism	Political consequence	Future research question
Firms do not only respond to political environments, but help shape them	Firms use marketing to translate nationalist politics into consumer-facing claims	National symbols, origin labels, patriotic stories and consumer identity appeals	Consumer choice becomes framed as national loyalty	How do firms use marketing to shape consumer understandings of nation, loyalty and foreignness?
Foreignness is a liability for internationalising firms	Domestic firms may actively make competitors appear more foreign or less legitimate	Emphasis on ownership, origin, supply chains, workers or cultural distance	Foreign competitors become framed as threats rather than ordinary market actors	How do firms impose or amplify liability of foreignness through marketing?
Corporate political activity is usually studied through lobbying, donations and regulation	Marketing can also operate as corporate political activity	Branding, advertising and social media shape public meanings	Corporate self-interest can be presented as national protection	When does marketing become a form of discursive corporate political activity?
Populist politics politicises trade, investment and foreignness	Nationalist marketing carries this politicisation into everyday consumption	Appeals to fear, resentment, pride and belonging	Markets become arenas for political identity	How do consumers respond when buying is framed as loyalty to the nation?

strengthen regional resilience, or avoid suppliers linked to abuse. We do, however, argue that we should be concerned when firms move from truth to pressure, from pride to blame, and from information to manipulation, and that IB and marketing scholars are needed to identify and examine the drivers and consequences of this transition. Research needs to gauge whether a firm’s marketing campaign builds a hard boundary between loyal domestic consumers and disloyal foreign-oriented consumers, attaches moral guilt to buying foreign products, or distorts the facts through inflated domestic-content claims, selective silence about foreign inputs, suggestive use of flags and national symbols, misleading “local” language, or insinuations that foreign competitors are unsafe, corrupt, unfair or hostile without providing evidence. The Williams-Sonoma case illustrates this second form of nationalist marketing: the firm was sanctioned for advertising some foreign-made products as “Made in USA”, showing how nationalist appeals can mislead by overstating the domestic character of products rather than by directly attacking foreign competitors ([Federal Trade Commission, 2024](#)).

We thus suggest IB and marketing scholars pay greater attention to firms’ use of misleading information implying that buying products and services of foreign competitors may further a suggested national decline. Such deceptive marketing does not ask consumers to reason, but asks them to identify, fear, resent and prove their loyalty through purchase. A Habermasian perspective helps us clarify the harm. For Habermas, democratic debate depends on communicative conditions in which public claims can be questioned, justified and challenged. Nationalist marketing weakens these conditions when it shifts political claims from the public sphere into consumer markets and presents them as branding, loyalty or common sense. Rather than inviting consumers to assess validity claims about truth, fairness, safety or sustainability, it uses strategic communication to attach moral and political

meanings to purchase. It does not invite consumers to ask whether a product is better, fairer, safer or more sustainable, but whether buying it proves their loyalty to a politically constructed idea of the nation.

We use Habermas to clarify the democratic harm of nationalist marketing, while drawing selectively on discourse and power perspectives to explain how marketing communications construct political meanings, identities and subject positions. These perspectives help explain how corporate communications do not merely transmit messages but help produce categories such as the loyal consumer, the national worker, the foreign threat and the patriotic buyer. This is consistent with the argument by [Skålén et al. \(2006\)](#) that marketing discourse can operate as a form of governmentality, shaping how consumers understand themselves and their choices. Because Habermas and post-structuralist approaches rest on different theoretical assumptions, we use these perspectives to complement rather than replace the Habermasian critique.

Implications for critical international marketing and IB

Against this background, we believe critical international marketing should not only ask whether nationalist appeals work, but what they do to societies. We also need to ask why and how firms use national symbols to shape consumer judgement, how they turn country-of-origin into a moral cue, how they frame foreign competitors as unfair or disloyal, and how they hide global value chain complexity behind domestic imagery. IB and marketing scholars should also examine how consumers respond when purchase is framed as loyalty, and how foreign firms might respond to such marketing campaigns without reproducing the same nationalist logic.

These questions also show why international marketing and international business need to be brought closer together. IB research has long studied firms' liability of foreignness when expanding internationally, but nationalist marketing adds a twist, because this foreignness is no longer only a liability that internationalising firms suffer, but also a liability that domestic competitors may force upon them. A domestic firm may actively make its rival foreign by stressing the rival's origin, ownership, supply chain, workforce, political ties or cultural distance; it may turn normal foreignness into suspicious foreignness, which turns nationalist marketing from mere positioning into a political attack on foreign competitors through marketing. We suggest that the same logic applies to country image, which is not stable but can be built, damaged, weaponised and manipulated ([Klein et al., 1998](#)). The boycotts of French wine in the US during the Iraq War showed how geopolitical conflict can enter consumer markets and similar dynamics can now spread faster through social media, influencer networks, partisan media, and targeted online advertising ([Klein et al., 1998](#)).

Nationalist marketing as political practice

We believe the current debate on populism among international business scholars rightly focuses on tariffs, regulation, investment, rule-of-law backsliding, sustainability rollback, human rights and the politicisation of foreignness ([Burmester et al., 2026](#); [Sinkovics et al., 2026](#)). Yet these processes do not manifest themselves through policy alone, but also become powerful when they reach everyday life through firms' marketing. We argue that firms' nationalist marketing turns the market into a stage for political identity by turning origin into virtue, foreignness into suspicion, and consumer choice into a loyalty test. In its deceptive forms, nationalist marketing hides global interdependence while feeding national resentment. We therefore suggest that critical international marketing scholars should treat nationalist marketing as a political practice, rather than as a harmless branding tactic. Firms that use national identity to sell their products and services are not merely reflecting the

political climate, but actively shape this political climate. A simple origin claim may inform, and a patriotic appeal may persuade, but nationalist marketing can manipulate. It can teach consumers to distrust outsiders, punish foreignness, and mistake corporate self-interest for national duty. That is where critical international marketing scholars should draw the line.

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