

# International marketing strategy of emerging market firms: the case of Bangladesh

Maria Fregidou-Malama, Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury and Akmal S. Hyder

Maria Fregidou-Malama, Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury and Akmal S. Hyder are all based at the Department of Business and Economic Studies, Faculty of Education and Business Studies, University of Gävle, Gävle, Sweden.

Received 16 December 2021  
Revised 22 April 2022  
22 June 2022  
Accepted 31 August 2022

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The authors would like to thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. Authors are grateful to the University of Gävle and the librarian Anna Hillström for all their support during the publication process.

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to increase understanding of factors influencing the international marketing (IM) strategy of products from emerging markets (EMs) to international markets.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study conducted case studies by collecting qualitative data through semistructured interviews with respondents from four food product companies in Bangladesh.

**Findings** – This study finds that the firms employ local Bangladeshi people who are knowledgeable in the company culture. They strategically focus on countries where the Bangladeshi diaspora lives and initially target them, approaching natives later. They adapt and customize products to the importers' requirements to make them visible and increase understanding between product providers and local customers. The findings show that EM firms encounter a mentality that poor countries produce poor quality products; this mindset makes the internationalization of their business difficult.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research contributes to international product marketing of EM firms by constructing a model of a modern people-oriented marketing strategy for food products. This study contributes to literature on culture by illustrating that the cultural dimensions of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance enhance the development of networks and trust and impact marketing strategy.

**Originality/value** – This study theorizes the importance of context and an innovation-driven modern people-oriented IM strategy that adapts to customers' preferences for food products and emphasizes the contribution of diaspora. This research reveals that Bangladeshi firms face challenges both because customers link the country and the companies to low-quality products and because governmental regulations prevent them from establishing a local presence in other countries. This study analyzes challenges EM firms face in the process of IM and the factors affecting Bangladesh in particular.

**Keywords** Product marketing, Bangladesh, Customization, Diaspora, Emerging markets

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

This study deals with marketing products from an emerging market (EM) to other international markets. International marketing (IM) strategy labels how the firm fulfills the needs and wants of its customers in international markets (Ferrell *et al.*, 2021). The development of emerging economies and their growth is important for the globalization of business (Hitt *et al.*, 2000; Cavusgil, 2021). Researchers estimate that by the year 2035, the gross domestic product (GDP) of EMs will exceed that of all advanced markets (Wilson and Purushothaman, 2003). These markets have special characteristics and institutional structures that do not exist in developed markets (Rottig, 2016). They suffer from institutional instability, informal social institutions or institutional pressures and expectations from different stakeholders, all of which affect the way they do international business. Further, Rana (2020) and Rana *et al.* (2021) maintain that EM firms have limited resources and access to information and lack of experience from advanced markets, which affects their IM capacity. Sheth (2011, 2020) argues that studying EMs offers opportunities to discover new

theoretical perspectives and practices in marketing that can be interesting even for firms in advanced markets.

Kotler *et al.* (2019) found that the decision to go international affects firms' choice to take into consideration different factors. International Business Strategy directs firms to think about which markets they will enter, learn about the conditions in those markets and choose an appropriate entry strategy, such as exports, contractual agreements or foreign direct investments, to compete in the market. According to Gaur *et al.* (2013) and McCormick and Somaya (2020), exporting is a low-risk strategy that can be changed if new resources become available. Milanovic (2003) discusses how globalization matters for businesses and argues that a policy that does not take into consideration the situation that people live in is insufficient. Globalization of agribusinesses affects governments, consumers and producers, constituting an important but complex problem to manage (Jerzak and Smiglak-Krajewska, 2020). The production and processing of food products is linked to such questions as food safety or rules and regulations in different countries (Brenes *et al.*, 2020).

Rana *et al.* (2021) studied multinational manufacturing companies' IM strategies in EMs. They found that the challenges firms meet depend on the cultural, social and economic environment they operate; the authors suggest a model with four variables to be taken into consideration to formulate a successful IM strategy. The variables are beneficial impacts, for example to learn about the country firms enter and evaluate their own resources; operational efficiency, for example the process firms follow to overcome barriers by developing their own capabilities; IM strategic choice, for example to analyze the behavior and culture of the consumers and think about government regulations; and beneficial outcome, which indicates the relationship and impact of the other three variables on the profitability and growth of the firm. Fregidou-Malama and Hyder (2015) have developed a model for the IM of health-care services, highlighting that cultural values, trust and networks are important factors for performing in international markets. Further, Srivastava *et al.* (2020), in a structured literature review of 118 articles on cultural research in international business, indicate areas for research from EM theoretical perspectives, for example analyzing how uncertainty avoidance performs at the firm and country levels, as most research concentrates on developed economies. Zeithaml *et al.* (2020) advocate the development of knowledge in marketing by using the theory in use, which analyzes data linked to special contexts and asks for new theoretical contributions and theory construction in marketing. Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) argue that we know little about how EM firms grow internationally. As far as we know, no model of product marketing strategy for EM firms exists and there are limited studies on this topic. By studying the process of product marketing to different markets among EM firms, we aim to fill these identified gaps and develop new knowledge by analyzing the influence of context, trust and networks on developing a product-marketing strategy. We pose two research questions:

- RQ1. How does institutional and cultural context influence the product-marketing strategy of emerging market firms across borders?
- RQ2. What are the challenges emerging market firms face in developing a product-marketing strategy across borders?

In our research, we present results of an empirical study examining the IM of food products by four Bangladeshi firms operating across borders. Bangladesh is a promising emerging economy (Taufique and Islam, 2021). Bangladesh's market was chosen because of its high rate of annual growth in GDP, about 8% (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Bangladesh is one of the fastest-growing economies of the world (Karim and Qi, 2021). Exports from Bangladesh to other countries of products in the processed food industry increased from US\$3.93mn in 2009–2010 to \$700mn in 2018–2019, and the annual turnover of the agro-processing industry is \$3.2bn (Ahmed, 2020). This makes Bangladeshi firms consider expansion to foreign markets. Moreover, Bangladesh is a middle-income country in South Asia, with a large migrant population. About ten million Bangladeshi people live and work in other countries. Six million of them work in the middle east and southeast Asian countries (Chowdhury and Chakraborty, 2021).

We focus on four leading agrofood producer firms: alpha, beta, gamma and delta (names changed for confidentiality). Alpha is part of a family-owned conglomerate whose main products are agrofood products, agro equipment, chemicals, bicycles, automobile equipment, building materials, construction services, electronic products, footwear, fashion, furniture, kitchenware, toys, paint, stationery products and industrial solutions. We concentrate on alpha's agrofood products; their main food products are fruits and fruit processing products, dairy, snacks, biscuit and bakery, culinary and sugar confectionary. Beta is part of a conglomerate; their main products are broiler chicken, layer chicken, chicken-based products and eggs. Gamma is part of a family-owned conglomerate that deals with such food products as processed milk, snacks, candy and tea. Delta is also part of a conglomerate that deals with innovative consumer food products, such as rice, noodles and spices.

Our study makes the following unique contributions. First, it adds to literature on culture theory showing the effect of cultural context on the international product marketing strategy of EM firms. Second, it contributes to marketing theory building by offering a model of international product marketing strategy grounded on empirical data. Third, it indicates the advantages of a people-oriented marketing strategy highly based on the contribution of the Bangladeshi diaspora.

## Theoretical background

### *Definitions of institutional and cultural context*

EMs comprise countries with poor infrastructure, poorly developed formal institutions, local institutional pressures and governmental policy regarding local firms' internationalization. They tend to have low and middle income and are characterized by rapid growth (Hoskisson *et al.*, 2000; Rottig, 2016). We assume that the concept of the institutional void, that is, underdeveloped formal institutions and infrastructure that characterizes EMs (Boso *et al.*, 2018), can influence how EM firms perform marketing activities and formulating marketing strategies. Al-Kwafi *et al.* (2020) argue that governmental support for EM firms in host countries provides constructive environment and contributes to positive performance. The authors further suggest that EM firms analyze information, define impact factors and invest in required resources to develop their competitive capacity in international markets.

Michailova (2011) maintains that it is important for international business to refer to context to present trustworthy organizational and management studies. North (1994) argues that humans develop institutions that structure human behavior. He found that interaction between institutions and organizations forms and influences the development of an economy and contributes to economic growth. Oliver (1997) reasons that socially constructed limits restrain economic behavior. Institutions in firms' internal and external environment affect decision-making; managers are bounded by social judgments and need to consider the social context. Tripathi and Kaur (2021), while comparing developed and developing markets' contexts have pointed out the importance of socially responsible investments for international market expansion. Rahman *et al.* (2017) developed a barrier model for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from Bangladesh, concluding that economic barriers such as political instability, legal procedures, corruption and bureaucracy are most important when a firm expands to international markets.

Hofstede (1991) developed a well-known theory for studying the influence of cultural contexts in international business. He presented four original dimensions of culture that characterize different nations and their cultural distance. According to Hofstede *et al.* (2010), the national culture of Bangladesh is characterized by high power distance (score 80), collectivism (score 20), uncertainty avoidance (score 60) and masculinity (score 55). According to this theory, the dimensions of culture affect organizational behavior and the way companies make decisions and develop relationships with stakeholders. Dewasiri *et al.* (2021) discuss the importance of understanding cultural dynamism and consider

differences between cultures to develop a successful IM strategy. The laws, regulations and rules in the host country also influence the business environment for an international firm and the IM strategy of a firm (Fregidou-Malama *et al.*, 2019). The literature shows that relationships between stakeholders are affected by social norms and the culture distance between them, and connections are necessary for the development of networking across countries (Narooz and Child, 2017). We agree with Sheth (2021), who states that a cross-cultural marketing strategy is required to counter the cross-cultural consumption pattern of consumers influenced by their own cultural and institutional context.

### ***Network development***

Network researchers discuss three aspects within the network perspective: namely, actors, resources and activities (Ford, 2004). They comprehend IM as a process focused on the relationships and interactions between the actors in a network. Jarillo (1988) suggests that networks are a resource that managers can use to gain competitive advantage. The actors in the network can decide how to complement their resources from the network, and the behavior of the firms depends on their relationship with the actors (Chang *et al.*, 2012).

Networking is helpful in this regard, but to develop a network, trust must be developed (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The authors argue that it takes time to develop trust between actors, as they need good relationships. Vahlne and Johanson (2017) emphasize that not only products and services are exchanged through relationships; they highlight the importance of knowledge exchange in relationships as well. In this sense, trust is an important factor for the successful development of relationships and networks. Bhushan *et al.* (2020) maintain that the characteristics of networks change in different stages of the growth of the firm and affect social and business relationships, the development of trust and the performance of the firm. Hingley and Lindgreen (2002) state that trust is important when business relationships are developed, and Bianchi and Saleh (2010) and Fregidou-Malama and Hyder (2021) emphasize that trust is the basis for relationships and cooperation. Based on that, we reason that development of successful networks is influenced by interactions and requires product marketers to invest in the development of relationships and trust.

### ***Trust perceptions***

Fulmer and Dirks (2018) argue that trust is a dynamic construct with reference to relationships between individuals, groups or organizations. One definition of trust is the willingness and confidence between people and firms to rely on each other (Bianchi and Saleh, 2010; Rousseau *et al.*, 1998), linked to positive expectations (Kataria and Saini, 2020). Trust is one of the most important factors to influence consumers' consumption intentions (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2021). Absence of positive expectations is defined as distrust (Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018). McKnight *et al.* (1998) define initial trust as trust between parties not based on earlier experience, but it can be high in the beginning of a relationship. They argue that we need knowledge about how distrusting beliefs influence peoples' trusting intentions, and they call for more research on this subject. On the negative side of perceptions, Fong *et al.* (2014) discuss how consumers' animosity based on specific actions linked to a country can be a burden and a country-specific disadvantage when entering a new market. To gain trust, marketers need to take into consideration the complexity of the market and be proactive to identify the external factors that influence customers' uncertainty (Khan, 2020).

Fregidou-Malama and Hyder (2021), discussing health-care services marketing, argue that trust must be considered even at the national level to understand how it develops and acts. Their model presents multilevel trust as a process developing at three levels – country, company and individual – and indicates the importance of cultural context and country of origin (COO) in trust building. Vijaranakorn and Shannon (2017) maintain that a country's image affects consumer perceptions about the quality of products. Pappu *et al.* (2007)

argue for the importance of to consumers' perceptions and stress that products from developed economies are more positively evaluated than products from less developed countries. We conclude that the sources of trust and distrust constitute an important aspect when developing trust in product marketing in an international context and must be handled when marketers from EMs aim to enter the international field.

### *Marketing strategy*

[Rottig \(2016\)](#) finds that because of lack of information about consumers as well as lack of infrastructure, multinational companies (MNCs) operating in EMs face uncertainty. He further states that managers who understand the EM context choose to adapt to its political, social and economic conditions. [Rana et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Manotas and Gonzalez-Perez \(2020\)](#) indicate that EM firms' internationalization capacity is often influenced by lack of resources, unfavorable government policies and weak and poor institutional infrastructure. Standardization versus adaptation in IM has been an important issue when marketing globally ([Ryans et al., 2003](#)). If firms apply the same marketing mix (product, price, promotion and place) to all markets, it is referred to as standardization. Adaptation refers to changes in the marketing mix based on the local context ([Vrontis et al., 2009](#)). [Dangi et al. \(2020\)](#), [Rana \(2020\)](#) and [Rana et al. \(2021\)](#) specify the importance of understanding consumer behavior to be successful as a marketer. [Constantinides \(2006\)](#) and [Fregidou-Malama et al. \(2019\)](#) further extend that view by arguing that to succeed with a marketing strategy, marketers should take into consideration the behavior and needs of the customers, competition in the market, market trends and the macro environment, specifically the political, economic and cultural environment. They further argue for a shift from a firm-centric view to a customer- and stakeholder-centric view when discussing IM strategy. The perception of customers and consumers of the COO of a product strongly influences customer perception of the quality of the product and their trust in products ([Nguyen and Alcantara, 2020](#)). [Upamannyu et al. \(2021\)](#) specify that consumers' perceptions of corporate and brand image affect their willingness to buy, their trust, their loyalty and their word-of-mouth communication about the brand to others, which is important for the firms to consider while developing an IM strategy.

[Wernerfelt \(1984\)](#) discusses resource-based perspective and maintains that firms' unique competences are developed of distinctive resources that they possess. This strategy emphasizes dynamic resource management and the importance to exploit firms' specific assets, tangible and intangible, for example know-how, brands or technologies and skills to develop new resources that are difficult for competitors to imitate. [Teece et al. \(1997\)](#) advocate for the dynamic capabilities approach to specify factors that contribute to competitive advantages for firms. They recommend that firms examine their internal resources and the market environment to find specific capabilities that can be used to integrate, restructure or adapt internal and external organizational resources to match the changing environment and develop competitive advantages to compete in international markets. They divide the dynamic capabilities in firms' processes, i.e. the way they do things in the firm, positions that is specifying as specific assets and paths the firm follows as a result of its history or current position. We conclude that firm-specific competences and knowledge of the local and international context can be necessary for EM firms for organizing and acquiring resources to perform in international markets and for their choice to apply a specific marketing strategy ([Taneja et al., 2012](#); [Khan, 2020](#)).

[Khan and Khan \(2021\)](#) confer that EM firms exporting to advanced markets need to develop unique marketing skills to face the host country's dynamic environment. By considering responsiveness to the external environment the firms can develop dynamic capabilities to respond to the competitive intensity of the markets, they can use their resources effectively and enhance their marketing performance. Further, [Khan et al. \(2021\)](#) discusses how EM firms can succeed with the introduction of new products by focusing on strategic marketing. They discussed two strategies for EM firms that are customer driven, concentrated on the

needs and wants of current customers and customer driving, concentrated on market offerings for customers' future needs. Neither strategy alone can be best for the EMFs, but ambidexterity (meaning being adaptive and combining both strategies) helps the firms to continually introduce radical innovations and at the same time meet existing customers' needs, making effective use of their limited resources.

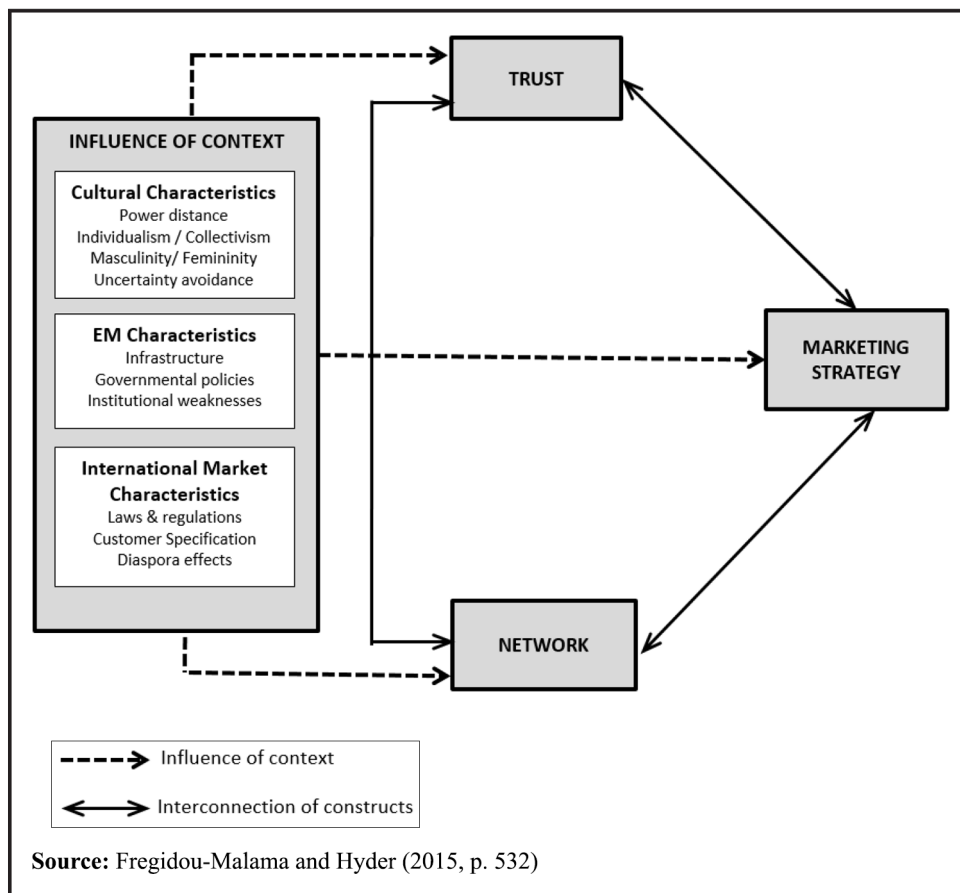
Wegapitiya and Dissanayake (2018) emphasize that a firm's COO exerts positive or negative influence on consumers' perception of the products or services of the firm which needs to be taken into consideration by EMFs while developing their IM strategy.

### Theoretical framework

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, our theoretical framework in Figure 1 shows the links among four constructs: context, trust, networks and marketing strategy. The context construct considers culture characteristics (Hofstede et al., 2010; Michailova, 2011; Vijaranakorn and Shannon, 2017) characteristics of EMs (Boso et al., 2018; Rana, 2020; Rana et al., 2021; Manotas and Gonzalez-Perez, 2020) and characteristics of international markets (Rahman et al., 2017).

Context interacts with and affects trust (Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018), networks (Chang et al., 2012; Bhushan et al., 2020) and marketing strategy (Constantinides, 2006). Trust affects the development of relationships (Bianchi and Saleh, 2010) between different actors in the context of a firm and is necessary for the development of networks. The framework also illustrates that network development (Fregidou-Malama and Hyder, 2021)

**Figure 1** Process of international product marketing for EM firms





affects trust development, and both of them affect the marketing strategy of a firm.

Marketing strategy that firms perform is directly related to trust and network development (Fulmer and Dirks, 2018; Jarillo, 1988) in the new market context, customer perception of the COO of the products and the institutional environment. The choice of marketing strategy impacts trust and network development (Vrontis *et al.*, 2009; Constantinides, 2006; Taneja *et al.*, 2012; Fregidou-Malama *et al.*, 2019; Upamannyu *et al.*, 2021) and how firms succeed with their product offerings and can survive in the new ecosystem.

In sum, Figure 1 illustrates the relation between the four constructs and their integration to facilitate the fit of the companies in the new environment to resolve problems they face in the IM of products.

## Methodology

### *Research approach, context and case selection*

A qualitative research and inductive method were applied to understand and explore the process of international product marketing from EMs. Yin (1981, 2009) states that when a business process is complicated, as international business is, it is suitable to use a qualitative approach and case study. A multiple case study is used to allow for analysis of a phenomenon in a real-life situation and to provide in-depth insight (Silverman, 2011).

The cases used in this study are good examples of such a phenomenon. Our cases justify this method because we investigate firms in the EM of Bangladesh, which is complex, new and challenging for the marketers. Bangladesh was selected as a case study because it is a growing emerging economy (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

We concentrated on the food industry, as this sector has historically been a marketing sector in South Asia and is important for employment and income generation for people (Dewasiri *et al.*, 2021). In selecting the organizations to gather information from, we gave priority to organizations dealing with product marketing, involved in the food industry and in operation for at least ten years, with experience in international markets to ensure they have insights into the Bangladesh and foreign markets (Cassia and Magno, 2015). Though the permission was received from the case firms regarding using their actual names, to maintain the confidentiality of the participating firms, they were conceptualized as alpha, beta, gamma and delta in our study. Table 1 presents information on the selected firms.

### *Data collection, processing and analysis*

We applied a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002) which is a nonprobability judgmental sampling technique (Campbell *et al.*, 2020) and face-to-face and digital semistructured interviews. The criteria we used when selecting the respondents were their knowledge of business issues, their education and work experience in international business and their fluency in the English language. We used a research protocol covering the research topic, ethical issues and questions related, for example, to challenges faced by the firms from Bangladesh, how they cope with those challenges and what product marketing strategies they perform (Richards and Schwartz, 2002). Five face-to-face

**Table 1** Information on the agro-based food product firms selected for this study

<i>Firms</i>	<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>No. of employees</i>	<i>Business form</i>
Alpha	1981	84,000	Privately owned
Beta	1996	10,000	Privately owned
Gamma	1989	17,000	Privately owned
Delta	2008	2,000	Privately owned

interviews were conducted by one of the researchers in 2017 and 2019, two Skype interviews by one of the researchers during 2019 and 2020 and one respondent answered the questions in written form (Pagliaro, 2020). In one of the interviews, there were three respondents involved, who complemented each other. In that way we got interesting insights into the way the firms do international business. All interviews were conducted in the English language. Table 2 presents information about the respondents.

We complemented the interview data by direct observation, and by using documents the respondents provided or the authors obtained from other sources, such as the websites of the firms and the Bangladesh Agro-processors' Association (2016), for cross-checking of the data to allow triangulation and increase the credibility of the study (Jick, 1979).

The three researchers together coded, organized, and analyzed the data (Table 3). We began the analysis of the data by identifying important topics from the transcribed interviews as quotes. Based on the quotes, we developed memos (Glaser, 1978), helping us to theorize our thinking and ideas. By developing memos, we identified four subthemes: relying on cultural context, networking process, trust by tailoring brands and targeting customers. We linked those constructs to the product marketing strategy of EM firms.

Considering the relationship among the emerging lthemes and their characteristics, we categorized the findings into two main themes:

1. market context, networks and marketing strategy; and
2. trust, networks and marketing strategy.

We compared the findings with theories to highlight the process of EM firms' IM of products. Figure 2 presents the empirically grounded theory we developed.

## Empirical results

### *Relying on cultural context*

According to the respondents, they rely on their own people's experience to ensure the standard quality of the products and the brand strategy of the firm. They send their own employees to manage the work team they have in other countries as they do in Bangladesh. They believe that experienced employees who have been working for five to ten years know how they manage the company, what the mission and vision of the company is and the business policies. If they decide to employ people from other countries, for example from India or Bhutan, they bring the new foreign employees to Bangladesh to train them for one to three months and send them back to manage the business in their respective countries. One respondent confirms:

It is more effective sending Bangladeshi-experienced people to other countries. It is more effective, more efficient (interview, 2017).

**Table 2** Information about the respondents

<i>Firms</i>	<i>Professional roles</i>	<i>Industry experience in years</i>	<i>Company experience in years</i>
Alpha	Marketing Director	21	9
	Head of Marketing	10	8
	Brand Manager (South Asia)	6	4
	Brand Manager (International Market)	6	6
Beta	Chief Executive Officer	15	4
	General Manager – SCM	6	2
Gamma	General Manager – Exports	9	6
Delta	Senior Export Manager	15	11



**Table 3** Process of developing themes

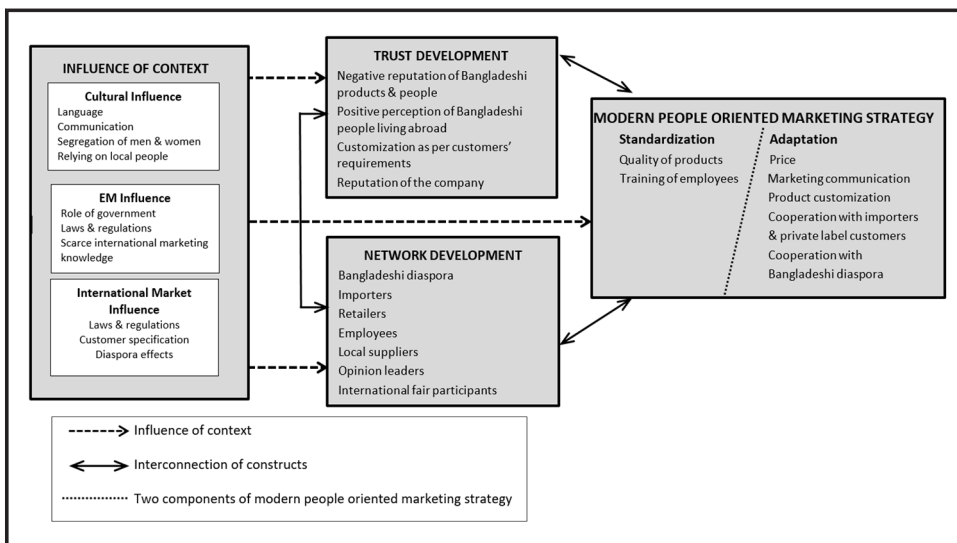
<i>Illustrative quotes from interviews</i>	<i>Memos</i>	<i>Developed subthemes</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Our main market is the Middle East. We sell with our brand name in different markets but also produce products for international clients under their brand name	Reflecting on why they choose those markets and why they produce using buyers' brand names	Local context impacts product development	<i>Relying on Cultural Context</i>
Our biggest challenge is to target nonresident Bangladeshi and South Asian customers. They do not have high purchasing power and are not loyal. To deal with this challenge, we try to communicate the quality of our products and to provide a variety of products based on differentiation of quality and price	Reflecting on the impact of culture when entering markets	Culture matters	
We export to retailers and distributors targeting South Asian people. Culture is important, as our products are targeting customers influenced by Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Nepali, Sri Lankan and Indian customers	Thinking about stakeholders in relationships and the networks they develop	Adapting to customers' product requirements	
We also give priority to our business-to-business customers, as their actions are influenced by their culture to have smooth business relations and negotiations. Product matching, difference in taste and consumption patterns, reliable and capable partners and culture and language barriers are big challenges	Thinking about whom they develop relations with; culture matters and can influence cooperative and friendly relations	Cultural context influences trust and marketing	
We attend food fairs around the world. Through these, we get connection with potential importers	Reflecting on what they do to relate and connect with customers in international markets	Process of relationships and Network development	<i>Networking Process</i>
We participate in fairs around the world to meet people and develop networks with distributors and retailers			
We communicate with customers through emails and international fairs	Discussing the importance of the diaspora for marketing	Stakeholders	
We promote our products through Bangladeshi living abroad and local opinion leaders			
To match the asking price of buyers is the highest challenge in export markets. We try to meet this challenge through quality, services and minimizing our profitability	Discussing difficulties and solutions to succeed	Construction of marketing strategy and Marketing mix	<i>Trust by Tailoring Brands</i>
To understand and follow rules and regulations in international markets is a challenge. We ask customers to help us with specifications. As we are selling food products, we try to keep social responsibility in mind	Discussing the importance of following rules and regulations and being responsible	Adapt to market infrastructure	

*(continued)*

**Table 3**

<i>Illustrative quotes from interviews</i>	<i>Memos</i>	<i>Developed subthemes</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Product matching, difference in taste and consumption patterns, reliable and capable partners and culture and language barriers are big challenges	Reflecting on why they are open to production with names and specifications partners ask them about	Importance of the customers for the product	
We maintain the quality of the products following market regulations or per instruction of retailers and distributors. Import clients help to fix the prices	Reflecting on the willingness to adapt to and follow regulations	Focus on customers' requirements for price setting	
We develop trust in the market through quality and design of the label. We focus on international certificates and maintain the quality we promise	Thinking about factors that can influence customers' perceptions about Bangladeshi firms and products	Factors influencing trust development	<i>Targeting Customers</i>
We try to update the importer at every step so that he could feel we deliver not only products, rather we try to deliver him hope so that he could deliver satisfaction to consumers and through that he feels confidence in our brand	Maintaining the importance of trust for good relationships to the customers	Nurturing competence for trust development	
To build trust, we give priority to commitment, as we know trust influences long-term relationships	Discussing how they can sustain trust	Making efforts to understand the eco-environment to maintain trust	
To be responsible, we produce products following Bangladeshi standards, and for the export market, we try to understand the social responsibility criteria of the country we will export to	Informing about their willingness to understand social rules in the markets they operate	Trust development by being responsible	

**Figure 2** Modern people-oriented international product marketing strategy of EM firms



The firms apply an equal opportunity policy for all. There are many women working in the

production industry, but not in sales and marketing. The respondents consider Bangladesh to be a small market and claim that the purchasing power of the people is not adequate to fulfill their supply capacity; they need international markets.

In the international markets, they give priority to countries where the culture is similar to Bangladeshi culture. To create a good image among international consumers, the EM firms often get quality certifications from international and local organizations.

### ***Networking process***

To enter other markets and countries, the firms participate in conferences and fairs around the world and try to identify procedures through which they can meet prospective international customers. Companies send the same person to the same fair and country and add some new people so they can learn. By seeing the products displayed in international fairs and visiting the company websites, customers ask if the firms want to sell products to them. They then use digital communication platforms for developing a relationship with international customers. After effective negotiations, they appoint importers and cooperate with them.

Language and cultural barriers present a big problem to the firms. In some countries, language barriers are tough, as English is not accepted and people use their own languages, especially in India or other South Asian markets. Another problem is that some countries do not accept Bangladeshi people and do not treat them nicely while doing business with them, and they have negativity towards Bangladesh products. One respondent explains:

In [...] in some states they treat us as pariah[...] they do not like Bangladeshi people and Bangladeshi products. This is their mentality, that poor country, poor products. Poor country's people produce poor-quality products (interview, 2017).

The initial challenge has been that there is a negative perception in international markets regarding the Bangladeshi people, as well as Bangladeshi product quality and production processes. To manage and change this perception, the firms offer good-quality products with a commitment to good business transactions and delivery.

They focus on special markets, choosing markets where Bangladeshi diaspora live and work and trying to target expatriates. Beyond the diaspora, they focus on other Asian people such as Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalis and Sri Lankans and then target the countries in the middle east, Cyprus or Australia. One respondent states:

Culture is given priority by us as our products are mainly targeted to customers who are influenced by Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Nepali and

Indian culture.[...] We give priority to the culture of our business-to-business customers [...] and try to study their culture to have smooth business negotiations and relations (interview, 2019).

Trading with other countries is challenging, as firms must understand local rules and regulations on product quality. In such situations, the importers help by informing about local rules and tastes to avoid problems when customizing products. It is important to know local people in international markets to avoid mistakes and link the businesses to others for a win-win situation. The companies develop networks with their own employees, Bangladeshi diaspora, dealers, consumers, shopkeepers and suppliers or importers. They select local opinion leaders and provide a variety of products based on differentiation of quality and price.

### ***Trust by tailoring brands***

To gain trust within the foreign markets, informants emphasize the importance of giving priority to commitment; they believe that trust influences long-term business relationships.

They follow the social responsibility rules for Bangladesh but try to understand the social responsibility criteria of the countries they export to and act accordingly.

Before launching the products to other countries, the firms investigate the market. They examine what products are available in the market, judging consumer interest and their preferences. That helps companies adjust the products to customers' preferences. There are also customers that have retail shops but do not have their own products. Those customers can order products with their own brand names and quality specifications, and the Bangladeshi companies produce the products for them. They customize the products, as customers' tastes and needs can differ. They also try to be competitive in the new markets by modifying the prices. One respondent mentions:

Meeting the buyers' asking price is the biggest challenge in international markets. We try to meet this challenge through quality, offering good services and cutting our profits (interview, 2019).

They analyze the international market, gather information and knowledge regarding the competitors' prices, and based on that, they price their products, sometimes in negotiation with local importers. Occasionally, they need to sacrifice margins to get the opportunity to enter the market. To promote the products, they use mass media, television advertisements or social media. One problem they face can be to identify the right person to develop network and trust with, for which they often use local contacts in international markets. One respondent states:

It is important to think about quality. Then to understand the local interests. Then you must understand the local rules and regulations. Then to have good connections with the market, with a lot of people, because all is about relationships and good networks. Without a good network it is difficult to sell anything (interview, 2017).

### *Targeting customers*

The respondents find that the only way to survive and thrive is to be competitive and stand on their own feet. They must communicate that they are a local company, with local products.

Despite their desire to be local in other countries, the Bangladesh Government creates problems. These EM firms would like to invest in manufacturing plants in other countries to be local, employ local people, invest money in those countries and affect the economy of those countries. Yet, they cannot, as there are restrictions in the foreign payment and investment policy for other countries imposed by the Bangladesh Government. As one respondent specifies:

Nowadays most of the governments are focusing on local production. So, by transporting products from one country to another, it is possible to do business on a small scale. But to increase the scale of business we need local production facilities (interview, 2019).

Therefore, they must rely on exports and good relations with importers and relations with people they meet at fairs. The respondents state that the credibility of Bangladeshi products internationally is an important issue. The perception of the country is not good, and this poses problems and constitutes a future challenge. One respondent suggests:

You need to work as ambassador of the country and the brand you represent. Give assurance or spread out the confidence and belief to the people of your environment by offering quality products (interview, 2019).

The respondents affirm that another challenge is to invest in research and development to produce quality products and target prospective customers and develop long-term relations with them. To maintain quality, they focus on international standards, and they follow the rules of the social context.

## Discussion

This section presents two main themes and then an empirically grounded, modern, people-oriented international product marketing strategy for EM firms.

### *Market context, networks and marketing strategy*

This study indicates that the Bangladeshi firms prefer and rely on the knowledge of their own people. [Upamannu et al. \(2021\)](#) point out that training of employees enhances customer loyalty and positive word of mouth. This can be linked to the collectivistic characteristics and uncertainty avoidance of the culture in Bangladesh ([Hofstede, 1991](#)). By cooperating with the diaspora ([Bahar, 2020](#)) and employing local people, the firms can learn about the consumers and their tastes in foreign countries, as [Khan \(2020\)](#) also indicates. This helps firms to customize their products to the customers' needs and preferences and introduce new ideas, new products and promotional activities to improve and maintain their position in the foreign market. The theoretical literature argues for the importance of culture ([De Mooij and Hofstede, 2011](#)) and the need to follow local rules in IM ([Ryans et al., 2003](#)). Our research also shows the need to follow the local laws and rules and the influence of culture, especially language barriers and problems communicating with foreign people and markets, as [Michailova and Holden \(2019\)](#) and [Constantinides \(2006\)](#) point out as well.

The EM firms facilitate awareness of their products by using their cultural closeness to diaspora in the foreign markets. The companies develop relationships with Bangladeshi diaspora, importers, retailers and other stakeholders to run their business smoothly by following local laws and regulations to develop networks and share resources with them and avoid uncertainty. These actions are all in line with Hofstede's cultural dimension of collectivism and high uncertainty avoidance for Bangladesh ([Hofstede et al., 2010](#)). The fact that companies cannot employ females as salespeople, as one of the firms discusses, can be related to the masculinity dimension in Bangladesh; we also point to [Upamannu et al. \(2021\)](#), who mention the influence of gender on corporate image and word of mouth.

### *Trust, networks and marketing strategy*

Our research shows that EM firms develop relationships with their own employees, Bangladeshi diaspora and expatriates, people of similar cultures, importers, suppliers and retailers, and international fair participants. Ensuring and communicating product quality and adopting customization all create trust for the companies in the foreign market ([MacMillan et al., 2005](#)). By adapting and tailoring their products to local needs ([Jiao et al., 2003](#)), EM firms enhance both consumers' trust of the firms and the product quality.

The respondents complain about the perception in foreign markets that a poor country and people cannot produce quality products and are distrusted. This can be linked to multilevel trust ([Fregidou-Malama and Hyder, 2015, 2021](#)), highlighting the importance of developing initial trust. Bangladeshi firms have succeeded in creating a positive image for their firms and their products and gaining the trust of foreign markets by attracting the diaspora, developing relationships with local actors, adjusting prices, improving marketing communication and customizing products to the customers' needs, as also suggested by [Upamannu et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Rana et al. \(2021\)](#).

Customization can have a positive impact on firm, country and product image because consumers can identify the products as of good quality and value for them ([Demirbag et al., 2010](#); [Dangi et al., 2020](#)). What firms standardize is the product quality ([Constantinides, 2006](#); [Vijaranakorn and Shannon, 2017](#); [Fregidou-Malama et al., 2019](#)) and the training of employees, so the products are of high quality and tailored for the customers' needs, which is the focus of the marketing process. [Figure 2](#) shows the empirically based model we developed for product marketing. We conceptualize the IM strategy EMs firms develop as a modern people oriented (MPO) international product marketing strategy, which is the *raison d'être* of the study. The strategy is driven by innovation and adapted to the customers' reality.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore product marketing strategy for EM firms. The empirically grounded MPO international product marketing strategy model stresses creativity and focuses on people and customers' preferences (Figure 2). This study suggests that the cultural context and the cultural dimensions of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance influence trust, relationships and product marketing strategy. Collectivism influences relationships and interaction with people, authorities and government. Collectivism requires good relationships with and the empowerment of a firm's own employees and business partners. Uncertainty avoidance influences the companies' adaptation to laws, regulations and rules of the host country by developing relations with the diaspora and importers, relying on their knowledge about what customers prioritize and what the context requires. The femininity issue raises the question of how to engage women in IM.

This research indicates that the focus on tailoring products following local requirements, along with the desire for high quality, establishes trust and networks and enhances consumers' acceptance of the products in the local market. Customizing products affects and changes distrust and negative conceptions, linked to the perception of poor country – poor products, by developing value for customers. The study demonstrates that the reputation of the EM context influences the development of trust between the companies and actors in the foreign market as well as the local society. Distrust results in distraction and lessening of the reputation of the companies' brands. To develop trust in their products, firms change this perception by heightening their own business advantages as adapting and producing what the customer wants and regards as high quality, which was also specified by Khan (2020, 2021) as an essential area of focus in complex market conditions.

One conclusion is that EM firms dealing with international markets need to consider developing local networks to boost their reputation as producing high-quality products. It is essential for firms to adapt their marketing strategy to people's needs and market requirements for successful operation in foreign markets (Sheth, 2011). To affect customers' perception of products as being of high quality can impact not only the corporate image but even the future image of a COO positively by developing initial trust (Fregidou-Malama and Hyder, 2021). The study reveals that product development and features, local context, price and promotional activities must all be adapted to people and the host country context to make the products visible to customers.

Our study shows that the marketing mix factors for EM firms differ from the 4Ps marketing mix approach. Important components of the winning adapted marketing mix are the following: tailoring product solutions focusing on value for customers for local use, physical presence (Hitt *et al.*, 2000), appreciation of the company's own country nationals and local partners, modified prices and face-to-face cross-cultural interaction. Vrontis *et al.* (2009) maintain the importance of a contingency approach for marketing strategy, focusing on the underlying forces of the market where MNCs operate. Two important components revealed and emphasized by this study are the development of customized products and networking with diaspora and expatriates, importers and distributors. The study highlights the establishment of a customer-driven product marketing strategy and sharing of knowledge as important elements for trust development and market adaptation that need to be followed by EM firms to be successful in IM, as Sheth (2021) asserts as well.

The main original aspects of this research on international product marketing strategy are:

- offer insight into the value of a people-centric international product marketing strategy for EM firms in the international environment;
- highlight that the international market context, involving different cultures, strongly affects EM firms' IM strategy for food products; and
- emphasize the value of diaspora for the success of the strategy.



### *Theoretical and managerial implications*

This study makes several contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on cultures by illustrating that the cultural dimensions of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance enhance the development of networks and trust and the marketing strategy. The masculinity dimension of Bangladeshi culture makes it difficult for women to work with product promotion. Thus, can the development of a modern people-oriented international product marketing strategy facilitate female participation in IM of products? This could be a productive research question for further theoretical contributions.

Second, our research contributes to the IM literature in two principal ways. First, by developing an empirically grounded model for product marketing of EM firms, based on the context of emerging economies, culture and market, trust and networks and adaptation/standardization and second, by highlighting the following marketing strategy elements:

- the tailoring of products to customers' needs;
- the innovation of marketing structure emphasizing the role of the diaspora; and
- the dynamics of focusing on the specific knowledge of people both in the home country and the host country of operation.

In addition, this study is unique by indicating a customer-driven international product marketing strategy for food products from the EM perspective.

Third, our research stresses that the context of EMs drives EM firms to standardize the marketing process and take steps to develop and coordinate networks. Successful EM firms adopt all the other components of a marketing mix, emphasizing the importance of people as the main underlying success element. These findings contrast with classical marketing theory, which highlights the characteristics of the firm and its resources (Abraha and Hyder, 2021; Khan and Khan, 2021; Teece *et al.*, 1997).

The results of this research have important implications for managers and governments. For the managers, the introduction of our MPO international product marketing strategy model shows how successful marketing of products from EMs requires adaptation to the international local context and the development of networks and trust for success. Further, managers should recognize that the needs of people should be the basis for marketing strategy formulation and execution. To meet the challenges of EM firms in product marketing, we advise managers to promote their own products, countries and people skills, as well as communicating about them physically and electronically for positive trust development.

For government policymakers, we suggest that they can contribute to successful IM strategies and strengthen country and corporate image by promoting institutional structures, initiating supportive policies and providing facilities to develop competitive advantages for EM firms.

For society as a whole, our research reveals that a successful international product marketing strategy can greatly facilitate the development of trust for EM firms and countries and prevent distrust of poor countries and their products. In the long run, it can reduce poverty and sustain business and international relations.

### *Limitations and future research*

Our limitation of research to the EM of Bangladesh and the four firms opens new avenues for research. We examined four firms with different food products but the same COO. This limitation makes the generalization of the findings difficult. The validity of the study can be questioned because of the focus on one EM and four agrofood products companies. We suggest further research on different emerging economies, different markets, different product industries and firms of both Asian origin and others, to compare with the findings of

our study. Furthermore, the influence of geopolitical catastrophes on IM strategy of emerging economy firms and the diaspora should also be explored in forthcoming studies.

In this study, we found that product quality should align with customers' requirements, but future studies could investigate the quality of customized products while adapting and relying on local expertise and skills. Furthermore, a new contribution could be to include the perspective of foreign firms and consumers by applying a mixed quantitative and qualitative study to cross-check our results and add new insights. This research found that EM firms follow the customers' demands and innovate products by producing brands that the customers want. We suggest research on the long-term effects of this tailoring strategy for IM of products on firm sustainability. Furthermore, the results show that the investigated firms use digital tools in their communication strategy. We propose future studies should examine the consequences of digitalization on the marketing strategy of EM firms under global pandemic situations like COVID-19, which Ghauri *et al.* (2021) and Dewasiri *et al.* (2021) focus on as well.

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### Corresponding author

Maria Fregidou-Malama can be contacted at: [mma@hig.se](mailto:mma@hig.se)

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