Manufacturing relocations in the footwear industry: a comparison between Italy and Spain

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Abstract

This paper concerns the relocation of manufacturing activities earlier off-shored, considering both back-shoring (relocations to the home country) and near-shoring (relocations to the region near the home country) decisions. 41 relocation events implemented by 25 Italian and Spanish footwear manufacturers are analysed according to a "3Ws" approach investigating: a) the content of the reshoring decision (WHAT), b) the host countries (WHERE) and c) the motivations for relocations (WHY). Among other contributions, the authors enlarge the concept of "selective reshoring" in terms of "width" (number of back-/near-shored product lines) and "depth" (number of production phases relocated). Several differences between the two country-based sub-samples were found and are discussed.

Keywords: Reshoring, Off-shoring, Footwear

Introduction

One of the most remarkable and novel features of recent decades is that firms have reconsidered their value chain, slicing it into different tasks and looking for the most adequate provision mode (in-house or externally) as well as the optimal location of each of these parts. One of the consequences has been that many of these activities, or sets of them, have been moved to countries where a cost advantage may exist, especially in terms of labour cost. However, recently firms have been re-evaluating their initial decisions and redefining their location strategies (UNCTAD, 2013, section b), which has led to the relocation of some of the activities previously off-shored. In so doing, the possible alternatives are: a) further off-shoring (i.e., to move production to even more distant countries), b) back-shoring (relocation to the home country) and c) near-shoring (relocation to the "home region") (Fratocchi et al., 2014).

Following Bals et al.'s (2016) suggestion, in this paper the authors assume a contingency approach by focusing on a specific industry (footwear), which has been significantly characterized by off-shoring strategies. In this respect, Martínez-Mora and Merino (2014) showed that 10 of 15 Spanish major companies located in the Alicante industrial district in the previous five years decided to back-shore, independently of their product lines (e.g. dress shoes vs. sport ones) and market targets (mid-range vs. mid-high and high ones). At the same time, Baraldi et al. (2017) and Di Mauro et al. (2017) found evidence of manufacturing relocations, especially in the Italian mountain shoes industry.

However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no published research based on comparisons among data belonging to different countries. Moreover, there is not any research comparing back-shoring and near-shoring strategies in the same industry. Consequently, this paper investigates features of the relocation decisions implemented by 25 Italian and Spanish companies operating in the footwear industry.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section summarizes the extant literature on location decisions regarding the production activities in the footwear industry. The methodological issues are discussed in the third section while findings are then analysed in the next section. The final section contains conclusions, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Back- and near-reshoring decisions have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars, especially those in the supply chain management (SCM) and international business (IB) research fields, at least since the seminal work of Kinkel et al. (2007) (for an up-to-date literature review, see Barbieri et al. (2018), Stentoft et al. (2016), Wiesmann et al. (2017).

Back-shoring decisions have been conceptualized as one of the alternatives belonging to a "non-linear internationalization process" (Vissak, 2010; Vissak and Francioni, 2013; Vissak et al., 2012) of production activities (Fratocchi et al., 2014; 2015). As a consequence, they represent one of the available alternatives to the company after the decision to off-shore manufacturing activities (Joubioux and Vanpoucke, 2016; Murat, 2013). The preference toward back-shoring, instead of near-shoring or further off-shoring, depends on the managerial appraisal of "push factors" (discouraging remaining in the host country, such as poor product quality) and "pull factors" (fostering back-shoring, such as co-location of engineering and manufacturing activities).

In recent decades, the footwear industry has been characterized by the adoption of two strategies: out-sourcing and off-shoring. These two strategic decisions are strictly interconnected since in the production internationalization processes the "why issue" (off-shoring motivations) has to be coherent with the "how" one (governance mode) (Camuffo et al., 2006). Being a mature industry, the decision to off-shore production activities is aimed at reducing costs ("why"). Therefore, independent sub-contractors ("how") are the most suitable alternative (Gereffi, 1999), at least in the first instance. Later on, the internationalization process may evolve towards "co-ordinated subcontracting" (when the company owns its organizational unit abroad which coordinates local sub-contractors) and "supply system relocation" (i.e. a foreign direct investment) (Camuffo et al., 2006). However, in the last few years off-shoring decisions were often re-evaluated by shoe manufacturers, sometimes inducing companies to repatriate their production activities.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, the first research regarding the back-shoring strategies adopted by shoe manufacturers was proposed by Martínez-Mora and Merino (2014) who investigated 14 out of 15 Spanish major companies located in the Alicante industrial district, the largest in the country for shoe production. Ten of the 14 companies decided to (partially or totally) off-shore production to China and other Asian countries between 1990 and 2006. However, in the last five years, all of them have decided to back-shore their production activities. Such relocation decisions were implemented by companies producing different product lines (e.g. dress shoes vs. sport ones) and serving separate market targets (mid-range vs. mid-high and high ones). As a consequence, drivers for repatriation were highly differentiated among the investigated companies (e.g. delivery times, order size, quality). It is worth noting that none of the investigated companies decided to repatriate production as a correction of prior misjudgement. On the contrary, all of them declared they were induced to relocate by changes in the environment, such as the reduced gap in manufacturing costs between China and Spain and the lower orders from retailers since the global financial crisis. It must be noted that the theoretical literature on Transaction Cost Economics, with contributions from the literature on Organizational Buying Behaviour, provide a valuable framework to explain both off-shoring and back-shoring strategies (Foerstl et al., 2016). These decisions are analysed on the basis of the cost differential between the two alternative locations as well as the inherent costs to manage a geographically distant external supplier. So, those results are consistent with Casson's (2013) insights that back-shoring is due to changes in the external environment. At the same time, this finding is in contrast to analyses such as those of Gray et al. (2013) and Kinkel (2014) who state relocation strategies are generally implemented after recognising an earlier managerial mistake.

Other useful insights were recently proposed by Di Mauro et al. (2017) who examined – among others – two companies producing mountain shoes and placed in the Montebelluna district. Based on the theoretical framework developed by Fratocchi et al. (2016), Di Mauro et al. (2017) compared both off-shoring and back-shoring motivations. In so doing, they found that while in the initial relocation (i.e. off-shoring) the most relevant motivation is cost reduction, the following repatriation is boosted by a strategic shift aimed at increasing the customer's perceived value. In contrast with Martínez-Mora and Merino (2014), Di Mauro et al. (2017) found that back-shoring is not implemented in the case of price sensitive low-end product lines, since the efficiency advantages gained by off-shoring would vanish. Moreover, irrespective of the governance mode (out-sourcing vs. in-sourcing) implemented for the initial off-shoring, back-shoring strategies of higher-end segments are implemented according to a 'captive' approach. Di Mauro et al. (2017) also found that a positive "made in effect" and belonging to an industrial district, push off-shoring companies to back-shore instead of near-shore. This "made in" effect is also observed in some case studies (see Robinson and Hsieh, 2018, for luxury clothing supplies) and finds support in the perceptions and preferences that Italian consumers have (Grappi et al., 2015). Finally, other authors confirm Martínez-Mora and Merino's (2014) findings that back-shoring was not the correction of a prior managerial mistake. However, they suggest that the initial off-shoring decision was implemented on the basis of a "bandwagon" (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993), i.e. they followed the strategies earlier pursued by larger companies belonging to the same industrial district.

Baraldi et al. (2017) developed some further insights analysing a single case study of an Italian mountain shoes producer belonging to the Montebelluna district. Authors noted that both off-shoring and back-shoring decisions may be implemented according

to a "selective" approach, i.e. locating only certain "fine-sliced" activities at different points in time. In this respect, they specify that "selective reshoring concerns not whole manufacturing operations, or a certain set of tasks, but rather specific individual ones or even only their single manifestation for a particular product" (Baraldi et al., 2017, p. 9). This finding is completely opposite to the widely diffused conceptualization of back-shoring as a "binary phenomenon". Similarly to Martínez-Mora and Merino (2014) and Di Mauro et al. (2017), Baraldi et al. (2017) provide evidence that the back-shoring decisions are part of a change in the firm's strategy (i.e. development of its own brand, also for the medium-end segment). Moreover, such a strategic shift was prompted by the business interaction with the main client, which pressed to have even lower prices. Facing the alternative to further off-shore to even lower cost countries, the company decided to invest in its own brand and back-shore production to the Montebelluna district. In this respect, Baraldi et al. (2017) suggest studying the back-shoring phenomenon, by also considering the company's transnational network, both in the home and host country. Robinson and Hsieh (2018) analyzed a similar case in a similar industry (luxury clothing), confirming that reshoring is part of a change in the strategy to reinforce the firm's brand, reconsidering its international partnerships.

Research methodology

In order to reach the research aim earlier presented, data obtained from previous surveys conducted within the footwear industry in both countries were used as a starting point. Such data allowed us to define the two subsets of companies which implemented near- and/or back-shoring strategies. As far as the Spanish companies are concerned, a questionnaire was addressed to footwear manufacturers across all the country (even though 60% of them are located in the Alicante industrial district). The average size of the responding firms is similar to the one of the whole population (80% with less than 20 employees) and with a high presence in international markets (50% of the firms export over 50% of their sales). After receiving 103 completed questionnaires, the companies that had off-shored (33) were more deeply questioned about whether they had back- and/or near-shored; 25 out of these 33 had relocated their production activities after the initial off-shoring decisions.

With respect to the Italian companies, the list of the 17 that implemented reshoring decisions (including the further off-shoring one) was obtained from the Italian Association of Shoemakers; the list was derived from a previous survey among the 600 members of the Association (response rate higher than 30%). After contacting each of the 17 reshoring companies, 10 declared they had back- and/or near-shored their manufacturing activities. All of them were individually contacted and asked to complete the same questionnaire adopted for the Spanish companies. Consequently, the sample data are suitable to be compared.

A total number of 41 relocation decisions was found, of which 31 are regarding back-shoring and 10 are near-shoring ones. Such decisions were implemented by 25 companies, of which 10 are Italian and 15 are Spanish. Italian firms are larger and implemented the two relocation strategies under analysis almost equivalently (8 back vs. 7 near); in contrast, Spanish companies were mainly micro and small ones and rarely near-shored (23 back vs. 3 near) (Table 1).

It is worth noting that each surveyed company implemented 1.6 decisions on average. This finding enlarges previous evidence by Fratocchi et al. (2015), showing the multiple relocation decisions regarding the near-shoring phenomenon. In this respect, no differences were found among the two countries; however, the multi-relocation decisions implemented by Italian companies were generally hybrid, since they

contained a mix of back- and near-shoring evidence. Moreover, with respect to the Spanish sub-sample, the higher ratio belongs to medium and small firms (2.3), while in Italy only to medium ones (1.8) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characterization by firm's size and relocation strategy

Size	Italy (N. of decisions)			Spain (N. of decisions)			Total (N. of decisions)		
	Firms	Back	Near	Firms	Back	Near	Firms	Back	Near
L	4	1	5				4	1	5
Me	4	5	2	4	7	2	8	12	4
S	2	2		4	8	1	6	10	1
Mi				7	8		7	8	
Tot	**10**	**8**	**7**	**15**	**23**	**3**	**25**	**31**	**10**

Note: L: Large, Me: Medium, S: Small, Mi: Micro

Italian companies are characterized by a higher level of exports as a percentage of total sales, which may be – at least partially – explained with their larger size (Table 2).

When considering the market positioning, Italian companies are more focused on the medium and high targets while Spanish ones are generally focused on low-end ones (Table 3). Such findings are indirectly confirmed by statistics on the average price of exported footwear which, in 2014, was 16.40 €/pair for Spain and 26.73 €/pair for Italy (www.worldfootwear.com). Even if companies from both countries are mainly focused on a single product line, Italian firms offer a wider product mix (4 out of 10 have a multi target offer vs. 4 out 15 in the Spanish case). This finding may be, at least partially, explained in the lower size of the latter companies.

Table 2. Sample characterization by export intensity and relocation strategy

% export	Back-shoring			Near-shoring			Total		
	Italy	Spain	Total	Italy	Spain	Total	Italy	Spain	Total
0%		4	4					4	**4**
< 10%		1	1		1	1		2	**2**
10-25%	1	5	6	2	2	4	3	7	**10**
25-50%	1	6	7	2		2	3	6	**9**
> 50%	6	7	13	3		3	9	7	**16**
Total	**8**	**23**	**31**	**7**	**3**	**10**	**15**	**26**	**41**

Table 3. Sample characterization by targets (companies may operate in more than one)

	Italy	Spain	Total
Economic	1	9	10
Medium	3	7	10
Medium/Fine	7	3	10
Fine	4	2	6
Luxury	1	1	2
Total firms*	**16**	**22**	**38**

The "off-shoring time", the year when the company started to relocate their production activities abroad, emerges as another difference between Italian and Spanish firms (Table 4). Out of two isolated cases in the '70s and '80s (one for each country), Italian firms have generally off-shored during the '90s (8 out of 10) while Spanish ones have done so in the first decade of 2000 (7 out of 15). Since Spain was generally

considered one of the low labour cost countries in Western Europe (along with Portugal and Greece), the latter evidence might be explained with the opening of World Trade Organization to China in 2002. This event increased the price pressure on European companies (especially those that had in their low labour costs a source of competitive advantage) and pushed them to off-shore (Verdu et al., 2012).

Table 4. Sample characterization by year of off-shoring

Year of off-shoring	70s	80s	90s	2000-2009	2010-14	Not available	Total
Italy	1		8		1		10
Spain		1	2	6	1	5	15
Total	1	1	10	6	2	5	25

In order to characterize the two relocation decisions under investigation, available data were analyzed and discussed according to the "3Ws" perspective. This is consistent with the research methodology recently adopted to conduct an up-to-date structured literature review on the manufacturing reshoring literature (Barbieri et al., 2018). More specifically, the following issues were considered: a) the content of the reshoring decision (WHAT), b) the host country (WHERE) and c) the motivation that induced companies to change their manufacturing locations (WHY).

Findings

With respect to the WHAT question, two analyses may be conducted characterizing relocations decisions in terms of the number of both product lines and production activities (e.g. upper, assembling, finishing) relocated at the home/"near the home" country. In so doing, we apply the concept of "selective reshoring" proposed by Baraldi et al. (2017) enlarging it also to near-shoring decisions. At the same time, we differentiate it in two sub-concepts:

a) "selectivity in terms of width": in this case the "selectivity" is regarding the number of back-/near-shored product-lines;
b) "selectivity in terms of depth": in this case "selectivity" refers to the amount of production phases involved in the relocation process.

Based on such a conceptualization, available data were analyzed in order to verify any difference among the two country-based subsets. While both Italian and Spanish firms mainly back-/near-shored single product lines (low relocation's width selectivity); Spanish ones appear quite selective also in terms of specific production activities ("relocation's depth selectivity") (Table 5). These findings could be – at least partially – explained by their smaller size.

Table 5. Breakdown in terms of "relocation selectivity"

Width select.	Depth select.	Back-shoring			Near-shoring			Total		
		Italy	Spain	Total	Italy	Spain	Total	Italy	Spain	Total
HIGH	HIGH		4	4					4	4
HIGH	LOW	1	3	4	1	1	2	2	4	6
LOW	HIGH	7		7	6		6	13		13
LOW	LOW		16	16		2	2		18	18
Total		**8**	**23**	**31**	**7**	**3**	**10**	**15**	**26**	**41**

In order to investigate the WHERE issue, a separate analysis was conducted for back-shoring and near-shoring evidence. For the latter option (near-shoring) two levels of the host country must be studied: those of the initial off-shoring decision and the near-shore relocation.

Among the firms that back-shored, China is the most frequently chosen host country at the time of off-shoring decisions for companies from both countries. Differences may be found with respect to other destinations. More specifically, while Italian companies preferred to concentrate their initial relocations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans (mainly in Romania, as already pointed out by Di Mauro et al. (2017) and Baraldi et al. (2017), Spanish ones preferred to move production to a larger array of countries; in other words, the supply chain of Spanish companies becomes more widespread from a geographical point of view. In this respect, the case of a medium sized company which simultaneously off-shored in China, India, Morocco and Tunisia is interesting, in that it located in each country a specific type of production activity (for instance, braids in India and accessory cutting in Tunisia) (Table 6).

Table 6. Breakdown by host country (off-shoring phase) (only back-shoring evidence)

Host country	Italy	Spain	Total
China	3	8	11
India		6	6
Eastern Europe and Balkans (Bosnia)	5		5
Asia		3	3
North Africa (Morocco & Tunisia)		3	3
Western Europe (Portugal)		2	2
South America		1	1
Total	**8**	**23**	**31**

Near-shoring companies of both countries generally preferred China as the host country for the initial off-shoring decision. However, while Italian companies preferred to subsequently near-shore in Eastern Europe and the Balkans (mainly Romania), Spanish ones chose Northern Africa. The latter findings may be explained, for Italian companies, with the long-lasting tradition of relocations to shoemakers in Romania and the lower physical distance between the two countries. As noted by Baraldi et al. (2017), it is quite easy to find Italian entrepreneurs who established production facilities in Romania to offer a manufacturing platform for Italian firms interested in off-shoring and/or near-shoring production in that country. As far as the Spanish data are concerned, the preference for North Africa seems to be explained by the short geographic distance as well as the lack of tradition of Spanish firms in doing business in Eastern Europe.

As far as motivations (WHY) are concerned (Table 7), the back-shoring decisions of both subsets of companies were mainly addressed to leverage on the positive “made in effect”. This finding was quite expected for Italian companies (as pointed out by Di Mauro et al., 2017, Baraldi et al., 2017 and Grappi et al., 2015) but not for Spanish ones. The presence of a lower – but still relevant – value for the “made in” effect, also in the case of near-shoring strategies implemented by Italian companies, may be explained by the selective off-shoring adopted by some companies. More specifically, according to European Union legislation, shoes may be defined as “made in Italy” if the most relevant production phases are implemented in the home country. However, phases such as upper manufacturing may be still realized off-shore, as in the case studies discussed by Di Mauro et al. (2017) and Baraldi et al. (2017). Based on such opportunity, Italian firms preferred to near-shore some production activities when the

new host country offered skilled human resources (3.5 out of 5) and contractors (3.5) together with lower production costs (3).

Spanish firms were induced to back-shore also because of the large orders that off-shoring in distant countries require. This request was not consistent with their small size and the request of their business customers which have adopted a "fast fashion" business model, which calls for a quicker response. Since 16 out of 23 Spanish decisions are regarding China and other Asian countries (the corresponding data for Italy are 3 out of 8), the delivery time was considered a relevant dimension in their competitive strategy since production in China takes about 5-6 weeks till it arrives at the European market. This finding is consistent with Robinson and Hsieh (2018).

Table 7. Breakdown by relocation drivers

Drivers	Back-shoring				Near-shoring			
	Italy		Spain		Italy		Spain	
	Decisions	Value	Decisions	Value	Decisions	Value	Decisions	Value
Coordination cost	8	2.5	19	3.0	7	2.7	2	2.0
Minimum quantity order	8	1.8	23	4.2	7	3.0	3	4.6
Delivery time	8	2.0	23	4.2	7	2.8	3	4.0
Production cost			21	3.7	3	3.0	3	2.6
Made in effect	8	4.5	22	4.3	4	2.5	2	3.5
Skilled contractors	8	2.2	21	3.7	4	3.5	3	3.0
Duties	8	1.5	18	3.3	4	3.2	3	2.6
Social pressure	8	1.7	18	3.0	4	2.5	3	3.0
Government aids	7	1.5	18	1.5	4	1.0	3	1.3
Customer service improvement	8	3.1	22	4.0	4	2.2	2	4.0
Logistics cost	8	1.5	20	3.8	7	2.8	3	3.0
Skilled HR at home	7	3.0	19	4.0	7	3.8	3	2.6

Concluding remarks

The paper analyzes and discusses evidence of back- and near-shoring decisions implemented by Italian and Spanish companies within the footwear industry. Some differences emerged confirming the usefulness of Bals et al.'s (2016) suggestion to adopt a contingent approach based on the home country. However, further research should be implemented to generalize findings regarding the impact (if any) of home country on relocation decisions.

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