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### Assessing the Relationship between Country-of-Origin Image, Brand Image and Product Involvement with a Focus on Indian Consumers

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to attempt to address the effect of country of origin (COO) on brand image in case of different product involvement levels, Further to identify the influence of consumer characteristics on product evaluation based on country of origin image to measure the extent of Indian consumers' country of origin knowledge with respect to different products and brands. In today's globalized world there are no boundaries and the world is becoming global market or a "Cultural Bazaar". Where consumer can pick and choose brands based on their beliefs about the quality of the product originating from certain country. Consumer from anywhere in the world chooses to use any product from their own country as well as they have access to the foreign brands in the same product category.

In context of India, the new policy system drastically pushed the concept of more open & market oriented economy, which makes COO image an important cue which the producers have to keep in mind while serving their end users. Considering this global scenario our research is directed towards analysing the relation considering brand image as one variable because number of new brands entering Indian market in both low and high involvement product categories.

So this study could help the marketers to understand how COO effect impact the brand image, also, this study also helps in comparing and contrasting various antecedents of country of origin image in order to explore the relationship between CoO image, brand image and Product involvement which could help the manufacturers and marketers in their decision making. Hence, this study is an attempt to fill the gap identified above and focuses upon assessing the relationship between three variables.

**Keywords:** Brand image, Country-of-origin, Product involvement, Product evaluations.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Many organizations have this major marketing concern to build a strong brand as it yields some of great advantages. It has been so long that a brand image research has been recognized as one of the major area of the marketing research field. Because it plays an imperative role in building long term brand equity also it lays down the strong foundation for strategic marketing mix issues (Keller 2011). Alternately, there is rise in hybrid products because of current global scenario (Miller, 2007; Gu and Harrison, 2007). Hybrid product is the one that engage a manufacturer of one country but carrying a brand of some other country (Xie 2012 and Koubaa, 2008).

It has been observed in the past researches that consumer's perception about the brand is always influenced by the product's country of origin. The existing literature having a number of supporting research evidences in context with above statement (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009 Liefeld, 1993; Baughn and Yaprak, 1993; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001). It has been observed that products origin has considerable strategic implications for both domestically and internationally engaged firm as it has impact on the perception of consumer.

The focus of this study is on products country of origin as an aspect of product information with the complex effect on consumers perceived brand image with respect to their product involvement (Askegaard & Ger, 1998; Verlegh and steenkamp, 1999; Vida and Reardon, 2008; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). The primary argues was given by DICHTER (1962) explains the reception and success of the product is tremendously influenced by the products COO. In 1965 scholar conduct first empirical test on this view point and he found that name of the country specified on a "Made in label" has significant effect on product evaluation when all products are identical in all respects. Many studies have focused on accessing the effect, extent and significance of COO for different categories but still consent with this regard has not be reached.

Brands having favorable COO generally find that their products are readily accepted then those with less favorable COO. Since COO could be one of the influencing factors in determining the consumer's choice, eventually it impacts the consumer's choice of product from different brands when there are different product involvements (Yasen, Noor and Mohamad, 2007).

In investigating the role of COO image nearly or previous researches explained and viewed COO image as a halo that consumer use to infer the quality of an unfamiliar foreign brand (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Bloemer, Brijs and Kasper, 2009 and Phillips, Asperin, Wolfe, 2013) whereas summary construct consider as the production information which is contained in brand image (Jacoby, Olsen, and Haddock, 1971; Han CM, 1982; Lin and Chen, 2006; Batra, Ramaswamy and Alden; 2014).

In this aggressive brand marketing era, some scholar suggested that when brand is well established in the market then the effect of co diminishes and some proposed that brand with similar COO have very similar product attributes and consumer use COO information as a quality cue however, the outcomes are inconsistent whether the consumer perceptions of brand has reliance on COO or not (Chu, Chang and Chen, 2010 and Wang and Yang; 2008).

Many researchers (e.g. Lim et. al., 1994; Ozsomer and Cavusgil, 1991; Pappu et. al., 2006) have mentioned that the conceptual and empirical finding in this area has been mixed. Few studies (e.g. Ahmed, Johnson & Yang, 2004; Liu and Johnson, 2005; Small and Melewar, 2006; Tse and Gorn, 1993) conclude

that consumer evaluation of the product has been impacted by COO used as a cue in making product decisions.

Few researchers (Eroglu and Machleit, 1989; Laroche et. al., 2005) have concluded that there different arguments are the outcomes of context specific factor that moderate the effect of COO in consumer product evaluation process such as product involvement (Ahmed et. al., 2004; D’astous and Ahmed, 1999). The role of this context specific factor remains unclear and further research is needed (D’astous and Ahmed, 1999; Laroche et. al., 2005; Pharr, 2005; Phau and Suntornnond, 2006; Wang and Yang, 2008).

Consumer quite often evaluate the product on the basis of Brand and COO while considerable research has taken place on effects of COO on product evaluation, there is less research on the relationship between brand image and COO. Therefore, marketers need to understand the relationship between COO and brand image of a product to develop marketing strategies. At the same time it is imperative to understand the in context of product involvement.

In the present study, we attempt to explore the relationship of products country of origin image and its brand image, in the context of low & high involvement product category.

## **2. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION**

In today’s globalized world there are no boundaries and the world is becoming global market or a “Cultural Bazaar”. Where consumer can pick and choose brands based on their beliefs about the quality of the product originating from certain country. Consumer from anywhere in the world chooses to use any product from their own country as well as they have access to the foreign brands in the same product category. These days many MNC’s have moved their manufacturing units to low cost locations usually developing countries.

In context of India, the new policy system drastically pushed the concept of more open & market oriented economy, the term globalization refers to open market where economics integrated through trades and financial flows, in such markets technology & knowledge is also mutually exchanged.

In 1990s and beyond there is a major structured changed characterized the Indian consumer market evolution, the product availability in terms of both quality and quantity has increased competition and level of awareness and prosperity to consumer. One third of 300 million populations have been rapidly growing urban, middle and upper class consumer market, 8 percent per annum growth in the branded consumer goods has been estimated. 12 percent per annum growth has been demand for several consumer products (Indian Market Demographic Report 2002).

Western brand has been magnified by the transfer of status and yearning to scarce (a) Western culture has been followed by the large number of Indians due to relatives living or working there, or traveling there. Media played very influential role for the widespread knowledge of English, Cultural and entertainment medium, propagating exposure to western lifestyles. Foreign brands have huge impact on Indian market for both market share and the psychological mind share of consumer, even while widening the range of brand under consideration. In a similar way many researchers have been conducted to get better understanding of attitude and preference of Indian consumers with regards to foreign versus local brands and differentiating features to evaluate their relative strength.

According to the survey conducted by ASSOCHAM, Indian's youth is getting crazy for brand. Every day new brand entering Indian market if we talk about Indian market scenario. On average of ₹4000-5000 every month, brand conscious urban teenagers, belonging to the upper middle- class segment have been found spend do upgrade their wardrobes. ASSOCHAM however claimed that consumption of branded goods was related directly to the person's individuality.

“Today, terms end up spending a major chunk of their allowance on clothes and have strong desire for their self-expressions. A latest UN report claims that, 356 million, 10-24 year olds after china India has the world's largest youth population. It is evident from the past researches that a product's country of origin influences consumer's perception about the brand. For example German cars, French wines, Korean cars, Mexican electronic, Japanese electronics and Israeli fashion are generally perceived differently from say. Therefore, marketers need to understand relationship between COO and brand image of a product to develop marketing strategies in both high and low and high involvement product categories.

### **3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In the existing literature, Marketers can make out that consumer decision making is influenced by brand's country of origin (COO). Consumer behaviour researchers also consider these factors important in consumer purchase behaviour (Khachaturian and Morganosky, 1990; Knight, 1999; Piron, 2000; Krystallis and Chrysochoides, 2009; Vukasovic, 2014 and Kim, Yang and Chao, 2016). Since consumers evaluation of the product is influenced by the consumer perception of COO effect from that particular country (Yaser et. al., 2007); This has implication on the products brand image because COO effect influence consumer preference, purchase intention and choice of a particular brand.

Different countries has different brand reputation, Each product from all these different countries has to face different opinions and attitudes from consumer, The opinions and attitudes that consumer tend to generalize are based on consumer's knowledge and background of that particular country and their experiences of the different product attributes such as technical dominance, quality of product, credibility of COO, value for money, status and esteem of the product and brand. Favourable perceptions of linked attributes such as quality of product generated when there is favourable COO effect or country perception thereby, that product evaluated by consumer are governed by COO effects with other product attributes (Peterson and Jolibert 1995; Ahmed et. al., 2004)

### **4. BRAND IMAGE**

Brand image is always recognised as important concept in marketing. Keller (2008) explained brand image as brand association held in mind of consumer which is reflected in consumer's perception. These brand associations comprises of perception of brand in the mind of consumer and attitudes toward the brand. Likewise, Aaker (1991, 1996) proposes that brand associations are anything held in the memory to a brand. It consists of functional and symbolic brand beliefs (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990 and Koubaa, 2008), brand image is the emotional and consistent perceptions consumers attach to specific brand. Anything linked in memory to a brand are categories of brand associations inform of brand assets and brand liabilities (Aaker, 1996). Although measuring a brand image is always debatable among the marketers and they have not always agreed about how to measure it (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990 and Koubaa, 2008). In this context one commonly accepted view, consistent with associative network memory model.

The associative network memory model explains that consumer memory consists of connecting links and network of nodes in which stored memory and strength of association (positive or negative, weaker or strong), represents nodes and connecting links respectively between information and concept (e.g. brand associations) (Keller et. al., 2003), Stored information in the memory network can be of any type including verbal, visual, abstract or contextual information. Keller also explains that the brand knowledge is the stored information in the memory of the consumer with variety of association linked to it whereas brand association is other information node in the memory and contains meaning of brand for consumer.

Consumers are continuously confronted with wide range of product information, which has influence on the network nodes & the connecting links in the memory, this information in consumer memory plays important role in forming preferences (Verlegh et. al., 1999), but it also forms positive or negative emotions, feelings, imagery and imagery depends on the information cue consumers receive and quality of that cue in the memory of consumer (Kwok, Uncles and Huang, 2006). Association in memory of consumer comes in all forms may reflect characteristics of the product or aspects independent of the product such as COO.

Keller explained that COO of brand always linked with it and generated secondary association. In today's globalized world there are no boundaries and the world is becoming global market or a "Cultural Bazaar". Where consumer can pick and choose brands based on their beliefs about the quality of the product originating from certain country. If customers have an idea about brand they would tend to rely less on COO. Number of studies has examined whether product evaluation has any moderated effect of COO in presence of brand knowledge; however, the outcomes were inconsistent.

A number of researches have recommended that bigger brands which are highly regarded in the market are tend to improve the negative COO effect in the memory of the consumer effects (Prendergart et. al., 2010; Lin and Chan, 2006; Pysarchik 2000; Lee and Ganesh, 1999; Tse and Lee, 1993; d'Astous and Ahmed, 1992; Han and Terpstra, 1988;). Whereas other studies have reported that brand could not overcome the bad COO impact (negative secondary association in the mind of Consumer) (Chu, Chi, Chen and wang, 2010; Chao, Wijhrer and Weranj, 2005). Recent studies focused on these inconsistencies and trying explore more closely that how COO influences the brand image in different contexts.

## **5. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN IMAGE**

Nagashima (1970) was first one to conceptualize the COO phenomenon; He defined the COO image as reputation, picture, stereotype, that the consumer associates to the product and brand of the specific country. This study further added the product of the country, their national, economic & political characteristics, and tradition are the variables which help in creating that image in the mind of customer. In 1999 Eroglu and Machleit explained that COO is an extrinsic cues such as price or product quality that may become the part of product's total image. Results of previous researches explains that consumer buying decision is impacted if COO of the product is known (Becker, Benner, & Glitsch, 2000; Sismanoglou, 2011; Vukasovic, 2014). Consumers tend behave differently (negative or positive) for different COO's as it generates different associations in the memory of consumer (Bilkey and Nes, 1982).

So many studies have shown that COO as Cue and it act as a signal for product quality in mind of consumer (Krystallis et. al., 2006; Steenkamp, 1990; Dawar & Parker, 1994). Few Studies, however, have shown that COO effect is not just a cognitive cue (Prendergast et. al., 2010). Also the impact of COO effect cannot be explained completely by quality signalling process (Hong & Wyer, 1989, 1990; Li & Wyer,

1994), in addition it has symbolic and emotional connect with the consumers (Kwok et. al., 2006; Balabanis and Diamanlopoulos, 2004).

The overall assessment of product from a particular country is influenced by the image of that country in the in mind of consumer (Lin et. al., 2006; Yaser et. al., 2007; Bilkey and Nes, 1982) and also it depends on the consumers prior perception of the country's product's quality and its marketing strengths and weaknesses based on their prior perceptions of the country's production and marketing strengths and weaknesses (Roth and Romeo, 1992).

Many researches explained COO as a halo that consumer use to infer the quality of unknown foreign products (T Singh, 2012 and Bilkey et. al., 1982). The reason behind this notion is when consumers have less knowledge about the attributes of the product originating in a certain country they use indirect evidence such as COO to evaluate the product and make inferences regarding the quality of product. In other case when consumer is familiar with the product category, then their dependence on cues like COO should lessen (Lin et. al., 2006).

Johansson (1989) and Batra et. al., (1999, 2014) attempt to explain these finding proposed that COO Image could also play vital role as a "summary" variable. As per this consumers use COO image Cue to summarize information about product attributes. Botschen and Hemettsberger (1998) and Prendergast (2010) explained that consumers linked with COO not only to product quality but also have tendency to connect it with national pride and past memories.

## **6. PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT**

Involvement concept first comes into play through the studies of social psychology. Krugman (1965) was first researcher who introduced the concept of involvement in marketing. He also explained that how television commercial effect impacted the involvement concept. (Dijkstra, Buijtelts and Raaiji, 2005). This involvement concept brings big influence on advertisement commercials but also on consumer behaviour theory related researches. Traylor (1981) stated that how consumer recognize and understand the specific product explains their involvement. If consumers are having higher level consideration for the product then that means they are having high level of involvement and lower consideration level means low involvement. (Lin et. al., 2006).

Zaichkowsky (1985) explains involvement as their demand for certain product, their interest & conception. Whereas Engel et. al., (1995) stated involvement as, under a particular atmosphere, a consumer is encouraged by own recognition or curiosity about the product attributes. Product involvement refers to "the person's common level of interest in the object or the focus of the person's ego structure on the product. As per Lueg (2006) involvement also may be moderated by goals. When a consumer is naturally motivated to find the right product then they are more involved in the decision. At the point in time with affect, involvement can influence motivation.

Few COO-image researches (Phau, Chao, Jasiassian and Lukas, 2008) stated that consumers relied more on COO image when their product involvement is on lower side because COO of the product is a significant and very accessible cue which plays important role in consumer buying decision. From this point of view, rather than being just another piece of information, COO image acts as a stand-in for other, perhaps more specific, product information.

Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) explains that when the product involvement of consumer is on lower side, than the COO image plays important role in consumer buying decisions, in this case consumer tend rely on COO image. Verlegh et. al., (2005, p. 128) explained that: “COO has a larger influence on product evaluations when consumers are less motivated to process accessible information, for example when involvement is low.”

## **7. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

As we have seen, country of origin (COO) and brand image have been well researched through the years. It is well understood and accepted by marketers that COO and brand image plays vital role in product evaluation process. The rise in the complexity of products has increased the importance of these informational problems.

Different country has different product reputation, Each product from all these different countries has to face different opinions and attitudes from consumer, The opinions and attitudes that consumer tend to generalize are based on consumer’s knowledge and background of that particular country and their experiences of the different product attributes such as technical dominance, quality of product, credibility of COO, value for money, status and esteem of the product and brand.

Number of consumers in developing countries goes beyond brand quality assessments, brands COO has impact on attitudinal preference of consumers. Since consumers’ perception of a particular COO influences their product evaluation from that country, this will influence their preference, purchase intention and choice of a particular brand. Obviously, this has lesser or higher implications on the brand’s image in both high and low involvement products.

India ranks third in GDP in terms of purchasing-power-Parity; Global Brands entering Indian Markets, The new global Indian youth is on a natural high and prefer branded goods to any sub-standard goods or products. The global brand market in India is experiencing a high in the market change in spending patterns of the youth, globalised lifestyle, culture, the consumption pattern is moving towards a more sophisticated and polished taste for good things in life. As per ASSOCHAM survey, brand-conscious urban teenagers, belonging to the upper middle-class segment, have been using branded products.

Few researchers (Eroglu and Machleit, 1989; Laroche et. al., 2005) have concluded that there different arguments are the outcomes of context specific factor that moderate the effect of COO in consumer product evaluation process such as product involvement (Ahmed et. al., 2004; D’astous and Ahmed, 1999). The role of this context specific factor remains unclear and further research is needed (D’astous and Ahmed, 1999; Laroche et. al., 2005; Pharr, 2005; Phau and Suntornnond, 2006; Wang and Yang, 2008).

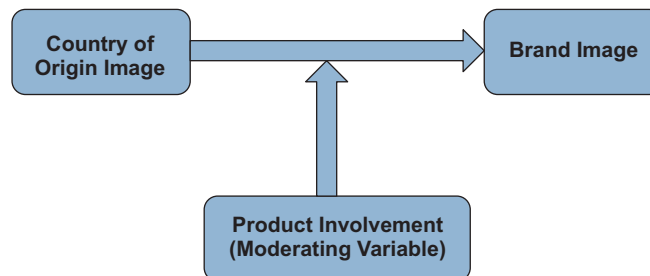
Consumer quite often evaluate the product on the basis of Brand and COO while considerable research has taken place on effects of COO on product evaluation, there is less research on the relationship between brand image and COO. Therefore, marketers need to understand the relationship between COO and brand image of a product to develop marketing strategies. At the same time it is imperative to understand the in context of product involvement.

The discussion above shows that COO image is an important cue which the producers have to keep in mind while serving their end users. Therefore research on country of origin and its antecedents is of great importance. In Indian context, not much work on country of origin image is done, therefore,

necessitating an in depth study keeping in mind the various demographic, psychographic and behavioural patterns of Indian consumers. Further, researchers have suggested that in this global scenario the future researches may be directed towards analysing the relation considering brand image as one variable because number of new brands entering Indian market in both low and high involvement product categories. They have also suggested comparing and contrasting various antecedents of country of origin image in order to explore the relationship between Coo image, brand image and Product involvement which could help the manufacturers and marketers in their decision making. Hence, this study is an attempt to fill the gap identified above and focuses upon assessing the relationship between three variables.

## 8. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - COUNTRY OF ORIGIN IMAGE, BRAND IMAGE AND PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT

COO and brand image studies has been always researched regularly. Brand image is a contribution of different associations held in the mind of consumer about brand, which eventually contributes, to structure a specific brand image. Brand associations are complex and linked to one another, and made up of several thoughts and information that set up a solid set of connections of brand knowledge (Yoo et. al., 2000). It is shaped as a effect of the consumer's brand belief in memory, which is created by the marketer, created by the consumer himself through direct experience with the product (Aaker,1991).



In the studies of international marketing research, number of scholar considered the COO image as important issue. Consumers are continuously confronted with wide range of product information, which has influence on the network nodes & the connecting links in the memory, this information in consumer memory plays important role in forming preferences (Verlegh et. al., 1999), but it also forms positive or negative emotions, feelings, imagery and imagery depends on the information cue consumers receive and quality of that cue in the memory of consumer (Kwok, Uncles and Huang, 2006). Zaichkowsky (1986) summarized scholars' research about product involvement and point out that product characteristic affects how a consumer perceives a product.

## 9. THE MODERATE EFFECT OF PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT

A moderating variable is a third variable that affects the potency of the association between a dependent and independent variable. In correlation, a moderator is a third variable that affects the correlation of two variables. Few COO-image researches (Phau, Chao, Jasiassian and Lukas, 2008) stated that consumers relied more on COO image when their product involvement is on lower side because COO of the product



is a significant and very accessible cue which plays important role in consumer buying decision. From this point of view, rather than being just another piece of information, COO image acts as a stand-in for other, perhaps more specific, product information.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To measure the extent of Indian consumers' country of origin knowledge with respect to different products and brands.
2. To assess the relationship between a product's country of origin image and its brand image within the context of different product involvement levels.
3. To identify the influence of consumer characteristics on product evaluation based on country of origin image.

## **10. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS**

As we have seen, Country of Origin (COO) and Brand image have been well researched through the years. It is well understood and accepted by marketers that COO and brand image play important role in product evaluation process.

So this study could help the marketers to understand how COO effect impact the brand image, Also their relationship with each product involvement perspective discussed in review of literature. All recent studies of Consumer Involvement, however, have concentrated almost exclusively on high-involvement products, and "there is no one study which explicitly compares both levels of involvement" (Ahmed et. al., 2004), this study also focuses on comparison of different level of involvement.

Further, this research will help in analysing the relation considering brand image as one variable because number of new brands entering Indian market in both low and high involvement product categories. This study also helps in comparing and contrasting various antecedents of country of origin image in order to explore the relationship between Coo image, brand image and Product involvement which could help the manufacturers and marketers in their decision making. Hence, this study is an attempt to fill the gap identified above and focuses upon assessing the relationship between three variables.

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