

Country-Of-Origin and Its Impact On Brands

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Abstract

Companies all over the world are looking to expand their businesses into foreign markets. With the dropping of trade barriers and improvements in communication, many firms aspire to “go global”. The safest approach is to build brands with relevant differentiation and value proposition that would encourage customer loyalty. However, the consumer’s brand evaluation process is a complex one with a number of variables. One key, albeit often ignored, factor is the Country of Origin (COO) of the brand. COO has been an important factor in consumer purchasing decision making as well as in industrial purchasing. With organizations looking at the world as their market, marketers need to understand the implications of COO effects on their brands and develop strategies to counter / leverage (as the case may be) the impact of COO on its brand. This paper looks at the influence of COO on brand evaluations through a study of frameworks available in current management literature. It also focuses on the factors that affect the degree of the influence of the COO on the brand. This analysis then leads to the developing of strategies depending on COO image as perceived by the consumer. The other issue that is addressed is what factors impact the COO image of a brand. The exercise was carried out for India and a few other countries. This analysis led to recommendations on how to tackle the COO impact for Indian firms who aim to expand to overseas markets.

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Introduction

The fast developments in telecommunication and transportation means are bringing geographically remote countries closer to each other. Countries are encouraged to contribute actively in this trend by relinquishing communication and trade barriers, which prevent the exchange of services and products among nations in the global marketplace. Countries are beginning to open more communication channels with the rest of the world.

With increasing globalization, consumers are presented with a greater array of product choices, and their potential product selection will include a higher proportion of products from non-domestic sources. In such a competitive scenario, branding is used extensively to differentiate one's product from the competitors.

The issue this paper attempts to address is the impact of the Country Of Origin on brand strategy for global firms, with specific focus on its implications for Indian firms and MNC's planning to target the Indian market. The aim is to understand how country-of-origin images affect behavior, and how they can be placed in the marketing strategy.

Country-of-Origin (COO)

Country of origin refers to information pertaining to where a product is made (the "made in" concept). It is also defined as the positive or negative influence/associations that a

product's country of manufacture may have on consumers' decision processes or subsequent behaviour.¹

Country of origin² is defined as the country where corporate headquarters of the company marketing the product or brand is located. Though we recognized that the product might not necessarily be manufactured in that country because of multinational sourcing, we assume the product or brand is identified with that country.

For example, France is associated with fashion, Japan with hi-tech/electronic goods and Germany with high level of technology.

Roth and Romeo³ give another definition of country of origin as the overall perception consumers form about products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country's production and marketing strengths and weaknesses.

The traditional approach

The COO is considered to be an extrinsic cue of the augmented product. It may serve as a heuristic to reduce perceived risk. It summarizes information about that product and functions as a gatekeeper to more information.

But previous studies (Bloemer, Kasper et al)⁴ have shown that this existing approach fails while giving the true COO image. Rather it simply measures the image of the product under consideration from the particular country, no more, no less.

A new approach

¹ Elliott, G. R., and Cameron, R. C. (1994). Consumer perceptions of product quality and the country-of-origin effect. *Journal of International marketing*, 2, (2), 49-62.

² 130.195.95.71:8081/www/ANZMAC1998/Cd_rom/Phau296.pdf

³ Roth, M. S. and Romeo, J. B. (1992), "Matching Product Category and Country Image Perceptions: A Framework for Managing Country-of-Origin Effects", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Third Quarter, pp. 477-497.

⁴ Blomer, J. Kasper, H., *Country of origin and the Euregion*

The problem with the traditional approach is that the COO effect hinges upon the image a product has from a particular country. Instead it has to do with consumer's evaluation of a particular product originating from a particular country.

So, alternatively COO can be defined as the evaluative tendencies (these can be beliefs, attitude and preferences) towards a product from a particular country.

Significance of COO studies in today's environment

As the manufacture of products and the search for new markets increases globally, understanding consumer choice preferences related to a product's country-of-origin becomes increasingly important. Success in the changing global marketplace will require firms to more fully understand their position in this regard. Given the rapid growth and market opportunities that are available in developing countries, it becomes important to obtain information for these markets.

This positive or negative country stereotyping is an important factor for international firms to attempting to enter foreign markets. Consumers' attitudes toward imports from various countries can vary significantly from one country to another. Even consumers in the same country can have significantly different perceptions of the country-of-origin. It follows that it is necessary to identify country-of-origin impacts on each country that a firm is considering exporting to and doing this on a timely basis.

In general, a product is analyzed along two kinds of variables:

1) *Intrinsic variables* (e.g.: taste, design, performance, etc.) which are an integral part of the product

2) *Extrinsic variables* (e.g.: price, brand, warranty, country of origin etc.)

which are potential sources of information to the consumer before consumption.

COO image is defined as “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country’s *production* and *marketing strengths and weaknesses*”. Thus, COO represents a critical information cue to consumer’s attitude and likelihood of purchasing products.

There are several guidelines in considering the country of origin⁵

- First, consumers in developed countries have a general preference for domestic products.
- Second, consumers do not use the country of origin as an isolated evaluation criterion.
- Third, the influence of country of origin tends to be stronger when the consumer is not familiar with the product or manufacturing company.

⁵ Niss, H. (1996) “Country of Origin Marketing over the Product Life Cycle: a Danish Case Study,” *European Journal of Marketing*, 30 (3): 6-22

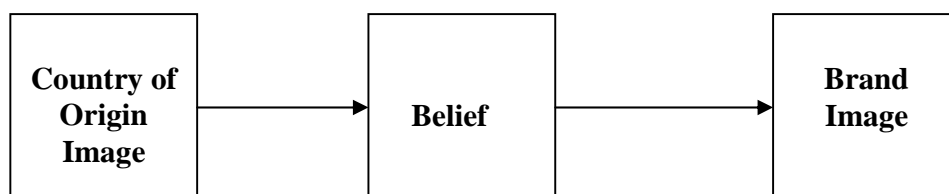
Effect of Country Of Origin on Evaluation of Products

(A) Influence of COO towards customer brand evaluation: Conceptual Frameworks⁶

1. Tri-Component Model: COO cue can enter the consumer behavior process in three stages: cognitive stage, affective stage and behavior stage. If the COO cue is perceived at the cognitive stage, it will affect to the consumer's understanding toward the country's characteristic⁷. In the affective stage, COO cue is reflecting to the attitude or feeling of buyers toward the country building up through contact, association or past experience with them. The last stage is behavior stage, whereby COO cue will help to either reinforce the product attributes or beliefs, or maybe negate these

2. Halo Model (Halo effect will be presented when consumer has no familiarity with the product made in the rated country)

Due to the limited knowledge of the product, consumers use country image as a product cue to form individual belief of product's attribute, which will formulate the overall brand attitude. A belief about one product trait (in this case, the country in which the product was made) produces a belief structure about unknown traits that are congruent with the known trait.

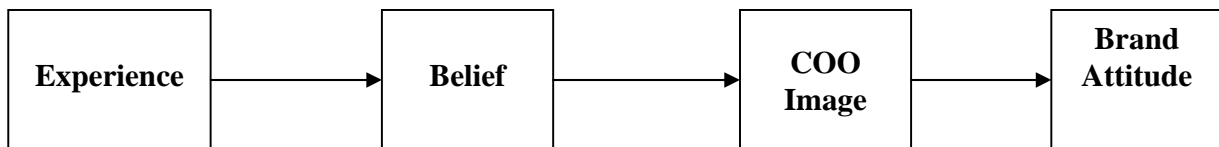


⁶ Jaffe D. E. and Nebenzahl D. I., National Image and Competitive Advantage: The Theory and Practice of Country-of-Origin Effect, 1 st edition, Copenhagen Business School Press, 2001

⁷ Samli, C. A., International Consumer Behavior: Its Impact on Marketing Strategy Development, 1st edition, Quorum Books, 1995.

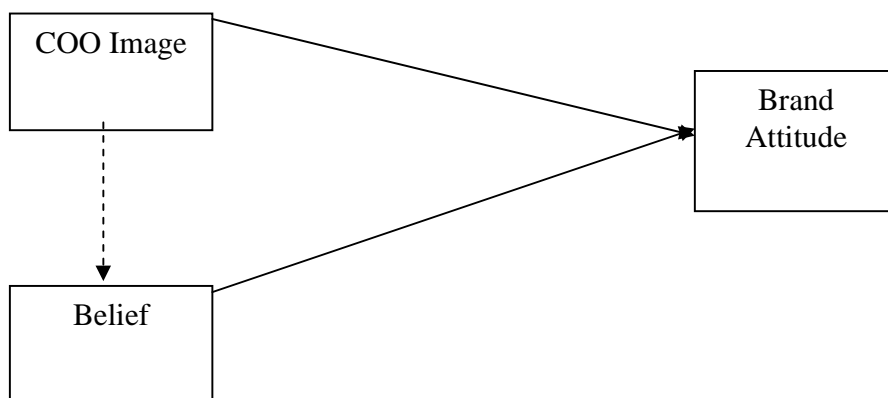
3. Summary Construct Model

(Experience is not necessarily that of the individual, but individuals are influenced by the experience of others through information flows such as word of mouth and mass media)
The consumer's experience on the particular country image can simplify the perception to attributes of unfamiliar products by using the information on the other familiar products to form their perceived country images. This country image directly affects Brand Attitude



4. Single Flexible Model

Unlike the previous model, both country image and belief can simultaneously affect to the consumer's attitude in varying degree. However, country image can directly affect to brand attitude itself or it might indirectly affect brand attitude through creating the belief before formulating the attitudes.



(B) Influence of COO on brand evaluations

Country and Cultural Signifiers: Many products and brands send out signals that can be traced back to their country of origin thus acting as cultural signifiers. That origin cues are already firmly imprinted within successful brand names. For example, IBM strongly suggests American, and Fosters is purposefully emphasized as being “Australian for Beer”.

Thus merely manipulating the different dimensions of the country of origin construct does not eliminate the effects of these cues. Country of origin of brand should not change with a change in manufacturing location. For example, Reebok, an American brand, is manufactured in Korea. Sony products are made in Malaysia and Indonesia but are still considered as Japanese products. The perceived origin of a brand need not be the same as the country shown on the “made-in” label. This difference is particularly relevant in light of the growing trend towards offshore manufacturing by multinationals.

(C) Factors affecting influence of COO effects on brand evaluations:

1. Time

Country images will change when consumers become more familiar with the country or when the product’s actual quality improves over time. A good example is with Japanese made cars, where COO effects changed from negative to positive during the last couple of decades.

2. Consumer Expertise⁸:

(Related to the above point), COO influences will be stronger when the consumer is not familiar with a product category, which can be categorized in novice group (Novices are

⁸ Usunier, J., *Marketing Across Cultures*, 3 rd edition, Prentice Hall, 2000.

the consumers who have the time limitation and lack of sufficient product knowledge). They possibly use COO cue under any circumstances. On the other hand, expert consumers only rely on COO cue when the product attribute is vague.

3. Demographics

The consumer perception toward COO can vary by demographics i.e. the effect of gender, age group or education and income. Studies⁹ have shown that COO influences would be strong among the elderly, less educated and politically conservative consumers.

4. Similarity between countries

The consumer perception of COO varies from country to country. Such variation is due to the extent of similarity of belief, cultural and political systems between home country and COO of products¹⁰.

5. Product Categories

The usage of COO cue is primarily determined by the specific type of product. Therefore, COO effect varies by product category. Typically, those products that can be categorized as “high involvement” products (such as durables) are more relevant to the concept of COO than “low involvement” goods.

6. Economic Development

In developed countries, national products are likely to be preferred than imports. On the other hand, in developing countries domestic products are likely to be evaluated less favorably than foreign made products especially from developed countries.

⁹ Kotabe, M. and Helson, K., *Global Marketing Management*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1998.

¹⁰ Zhang Y. (1996), “Chinese consumers’ evaluation of foreign products: the influence of culture, product types and product presentation format”, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 30, No.12, pp.50-68.

7. Ethnocentricity

However, in the context of economic development given above, the issue of “*ethnocentricity*” of the host country becomes critical. Customers who are ethnocentric are likely to feel that it is inappropriate and wrong to purchase foreign made products¹¹. It is argued by LeVine and Campbell¹² that in developed countries, consumer ethnocentrism is seen as the most important factor because they more knowledgeable therefore they prefer to buy domestic to keep domestic jobs and thus increase their country’s GDP, and as a result, COO effects have a minimal role to play.

Hence,

- Low ethnocentric consumers are more likely to use COO cue to infer product quality

whereas,

- high ethnocentric consumers looks at COO as a means to express loyalty as so reflected in their purchasing behaviour

(D) The Special case of ‘Hybrid’ Products

A hybrid product is defined as one that is branded or designed by one country but manufactured in another¹³. This has been made necessary by the need to look beyond one region to be able to compete in the global marketplace.

For such brands, image is a combination of a multiple country sources. For example, automobiles may source raw material from one country, assemble it in a different country, with the headquarters of the parent company being in another country.

Generally there are four components of such industries:

¹¹ Schiffman, L.G., Kanuk, L.L., *Consumer Behavior*, Pearson Education, 2002, pg. 108

¹² LeVine, R.A, Campbell, D.T., 1974, “Ethnocentrism: theories of conflict”, *Ethnic Attitudes and Group Behavior*, John Wiley, New York, NY

¹³ Chao, P (1993), “Partitioning Country of Origin Effects: Consumer Evaluations of a Hybrid Product”, *Journal of International Business Studies* Second Quarter (1993), Pg. 291-306

1. Country of association, that is, the country associated with the brand. For example, Honda is associated with Japan.
2. Country of design / engineering
3. Country of assembly
4. Country of components / parts

There are conflicting opinions on the relevance of the above four points. For example, on this topic, Philip Kotler¹⁴ says:

“While brands must be supported by product quality, their identity is independent of the sources of production or ownership. GAP produces many of its apparel lines in Central America. But its contemporary style for young Americans has no association with Costa Rica or Guatemala. Hugo Boss produces its shirts in China for American career oriented urbanites. These shirts carry no Chinese association. Brand equity is built upon the emotional meanings of brand design and brand promotion. It is not dependent upon its sources of production or the source of its company ownership.”

Though there are mixed results from a number of studies, exporters should not overlook the possible negative impact of sourcing countries, which potentially affects consumer’s product evaluation.

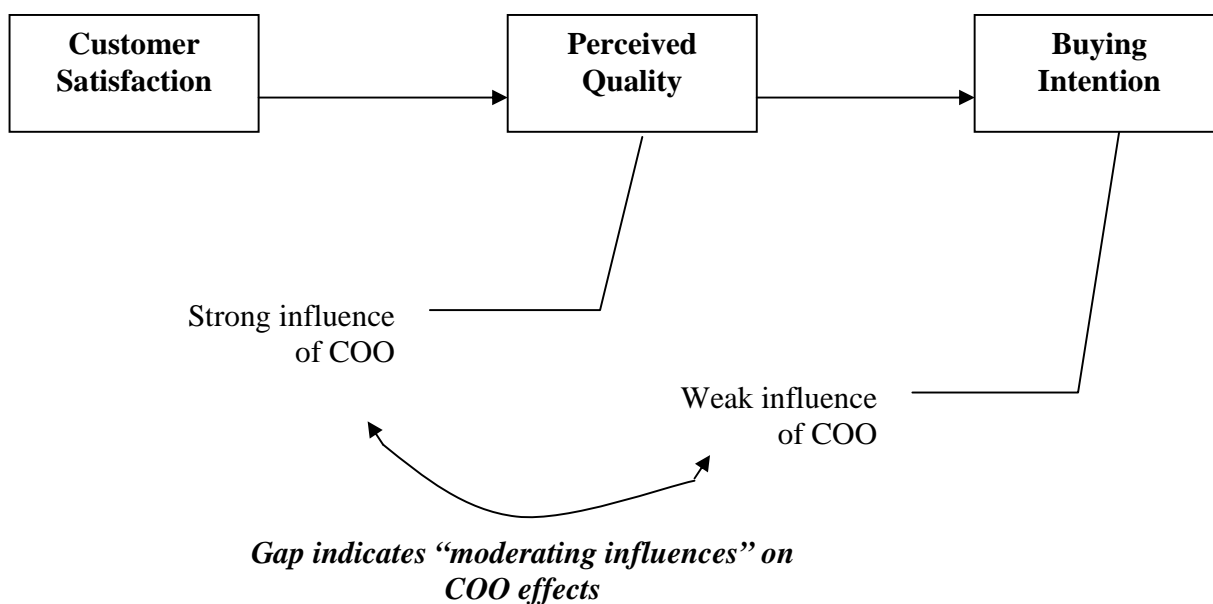
¹⁴ <http://www.kotlermarketing.com/resources/miltonkotler/pearls/p38.html>

Strategies targeting COO effects on brands

(A) Presence of Moderating Factors in COO influence

The effect of country of origin on the evaluation of products is only one among many pieces of information taken into account by consumers.

Measures of the effect of country of origin have generally included the two following dependent variables: *perceived quality* and *buying intention*.



The effect of country of origin is more important on perceived quality than on purchase intention. This is also confirmed by the results of a study carried out by Nooh and Thomas¹⁵, which examine the perception of Bangladeshi consumers about products from different countries vis-à-vis their actual consumption pattern. It was observed that while

15 www.intlimport-export.com/journal/sp99d.PDF

products from India were rated the lowest in terms of parameters of quality, maximum imports into Bangladesh were from India. This deviation was attributed to the perceived price of Indian products being much lower than that from other countries. It is therefore likely that some moderating variables may be involved during the evaluation process of the consumer.

A list of the possible moderating influences are:

1. Price level and associated financial risk

A less favorable country of origin results in a higher buying risk for the consumer; therefore a lower financial risk is tolerated. "There is a significant interaction between country-of-origin and price... there is some indication that for a poor image country, price concessions are needed to sell a product"¹⁶.

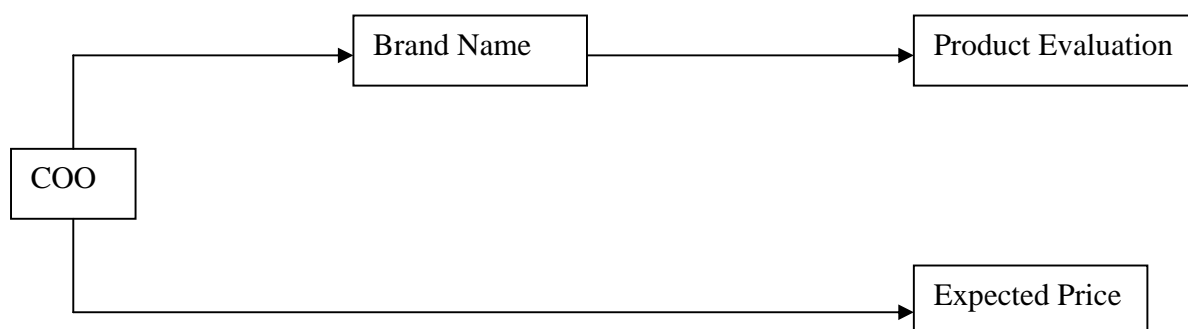
2. Level of warranty, reimbursement, after-sale service

The higher risk of buying associated with a less favorable country of origin can be offset by additional warranties of satisfaction.

¹⁶ Johansson, J. K. and I. D. Nebenzahl (1986), "Multinational Production: Effect on Brand Value", *Journal of International Business Studies*, 17 (3), 101-26

3. Level of brand name prestige and reputation

A negative country of origin can be offset by a prestigious brand name. A product by Sony made in Hong Kong is still a Sony even though its image is somewhat lowered. Hence, using a prestigious brand name may offset the negative image of the country of origin as far as the product evaluation is concerned **but not** in terms of price expectations. The following figure shows the moderating role played by the brand name



4. Degree of product familiarity

The impact of the country of origin appears to be influenced by the degree of familiarity of the respondent with the product. Studies¹⁷ have identified that the effect of the country of origin is higher for products that are less available on the market. The reason for this could be that awareness and evaluation of these products is not widespread, and the less the product is known, the higher the effect of the country of origin.

Implication: These moderating influences can be used to the advantage of the marketer, depending on the nature of Country of Origin effects. For example, if the COO image is negative, the company might reduce prices of its brand to compensate for this negative image (based on point 1 above).

¹⁷ Parameswaran, R. and A. Yaprak (1987), "A Cross-National Comparison of Consumer Research Measures", *Journal of International Business Studies*, 18 (2), 35-49.

(B) Product Category based Strategy

Marketers need to be aware of the Product-Country fit to create positive results.

The possible combinations of these two factors are presented as a 2 X 2 matrix below.

		Country Image Dimensions	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Product Feature Dimensions	<i>Important</i>	<p>Favourable Match</p> <p>COO association beneficial</p>	<p>Favourable Mismatch</p> <p>COO association might cause harm, need to disassociate</p>
	<i>Not Important</i>	<p>Unfavourable Match</p> <p>COO association not important, but may be positive; need to purposefully emphasize COO</p>	<p>Unfavourable Mismatch</p> <p>COO not relevant, don't emphasize</p>

Strategies for each combination:

Quadrant I: COO can be a positive influence on the brand

- brand name / packaging (and other external cues) should reflect the COO
- Promote the brand's COO

Quadrant II: 'mismatch'.

- Association with COO likely
- Reduce emphasis on COO, emphasize other benefits
- Joint venture(s) with companies from more favourable COO.

For example, Pepsi tied up with Lehar Foods to help its entry into the newly liberalized Indian market, which was still quite strong on *ethnocentricity*.

- Communication campaigns to enhance COO. This is a suspect area as perceptions of country image are built up over a long period of time, and might not be easy to reverse.

Quadrant III: Unlike in quadrant IV, the COO cannot be ignored for these products

- Presently, customer not interested in COO
- Alter importance of product category image dimensions
- Promote COO as secondary benefit

Quadrant IV:

- Ignore COO information- this information is not beneficial to the company

(C) Using Product Life Cycle Approach

The degree of COO image usage varies through the stage of product life cycle (PLC).

- Introduction Stage: characterized by low product information in terms of function and quality. Hence, consumers rely more heavily on COO cue because they may not be familiar with the product.
- Growth and Maturity Stages: Consumers' information requirement declines, and other product attributes are more important than COO cue.

Implication:

- COO marketing enables a company to facilitate the market penetration in short term
- Brand name marketing, which is longer-term perspective, is more effectively employed when a company becomes more established

Use of National Image

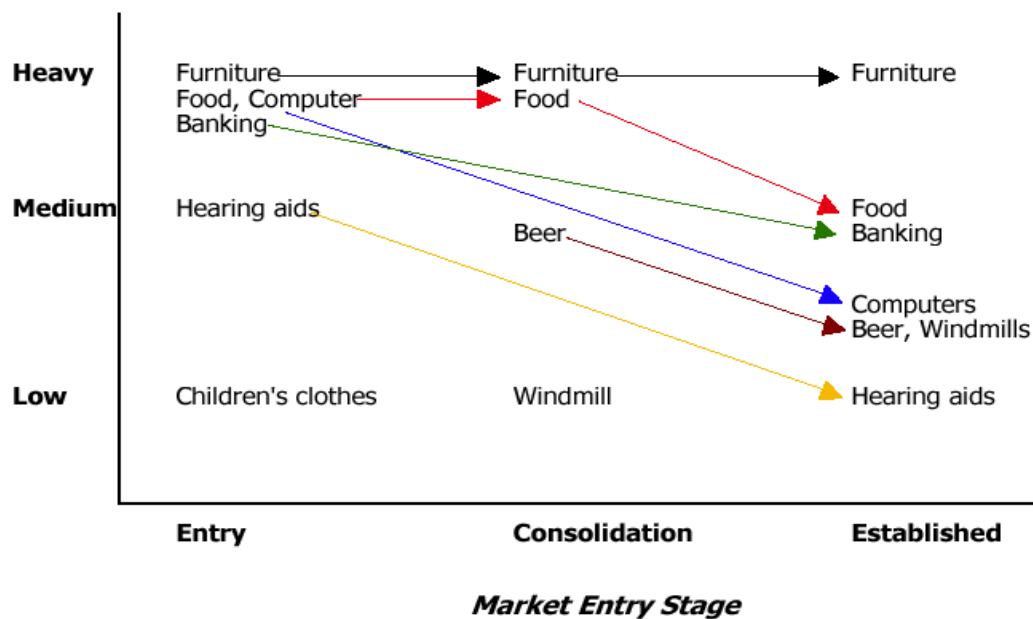


Figure 2

Country Image Measurement

At the start of the 1990's it was confirmed that country-of-origin has three facets¹⁸.

- The first facet refers to *general country attributes (GCA)*, which include, political system, economic style, culture, education level, technical skills, and standards of living.
- The second facet is the *general product attributes (GPA)*, which include the general offering of products of the country, such as, prestige, availability, value, service, and attractiveness of the country's products. For example, Japanese products are more trusted than Taiwanese products and German products are more respected than Russian products.
- The final facet is the *special product attributes (SPA)*, which consist of the specific aspects of the product itself.

The success of the brand is dependent on all of the above. In some cases, products with low GCA and GPA evaluations sell very well because of their high SPA performance.

The first facet, the GCA, is a multi-dimensional construct which portrays the country image, irrespective of the product.

To address the need of clarifying the measure of country image, Martin and Eroglu¹⁹ developed a scale adapted to a multi-dimensional construct. They originally generated a series of 29 items and tested the scale for two countries (West Germany and India) using a sample of students. A factorial analysis allowed them to reduce the scale to the three main dimensions:

- Political dimension
- Economic dimension
- Technological dimension

¹⁸ Parameswaran Ravi, and Pisharodi Mohan (1994), "Facets of Country of Origin Image: An Empirical Assessment," *Journal of Advertising*, (March), 43-56.

¹⁹ Martin, I. M. and S. Eroglu (1993), "Measuring a Multi-Dimensional Construct: Country Image", *Journal of Business Research*, 28, 191-210.

The above framework has been applied to India to estimate its country image. The details of this are given below: A primary survey of 30 respondents, was conducted on the model, and the results have been tabulated below.

Table 1: Country Image rating of India, US, and China (on a Likert scale of 1-7)

		India		USA		China	
Political Parameters	Weights						
Democratic vs. dictatorial system	0.713	6.84	4.877	6.8	4.848	1.84	1.312
Capitalist vs. communist system	0.612	4.12	2.521	6.36	3.892	2.92	1.787
Civilian vs. military government	0.631	6.52	4.114	6.76	4.266	2.28	1.439
Pro-Western vs. pro-Communist	0.708	4.28	3.030	7	4.956	2.12	1.501
Free market vs. centrally planned system	0.573	3.8	2.177	6.08	3.484	2.96	1.696
Economic Parameters							
High vs. low standard of living	0.535	4.36	2.333	6.24	3.338	4.12	2.204
Stable vs. unstable economic environment	0.443	4.04	1.790	5.68	2.516	4.56	2.020
Quality of products	0.359	2.92	1.048	6.08	2.183	3.32	1.192
Existence of a welfare system	0.278	4.12	1.145	5.2	1.446	5.84	1.624
Level of labor costs	0.834	4.6	3.836	2.12	1.768	6.04	5.037
Technological Parameters							
The technological dimension	0.429	3.72	1.596	6.84	2.934	4.32	1.853
Level of technological research	0.247	4.2	1.037	5.96	1.472	3.96	0.978
Level of literacy	0.381	3.84	1.463	6.4	2.438	3.88	1.478
Mass produced vs. hand-crafted products	0.285	3.96	1.129	6.16	1.756	4.08	1.163
Total			32.10		41.30		25.28
Count (on a scale of 7)			4.59		5.90		3.61

Critique of the model: The above model does not incorporate the special ‘Most Favoured Nation’ status given to China by America. The above analysis shows India to have a better Country image than China even though it is ahead of India in terms of its exports.

The Indian Context

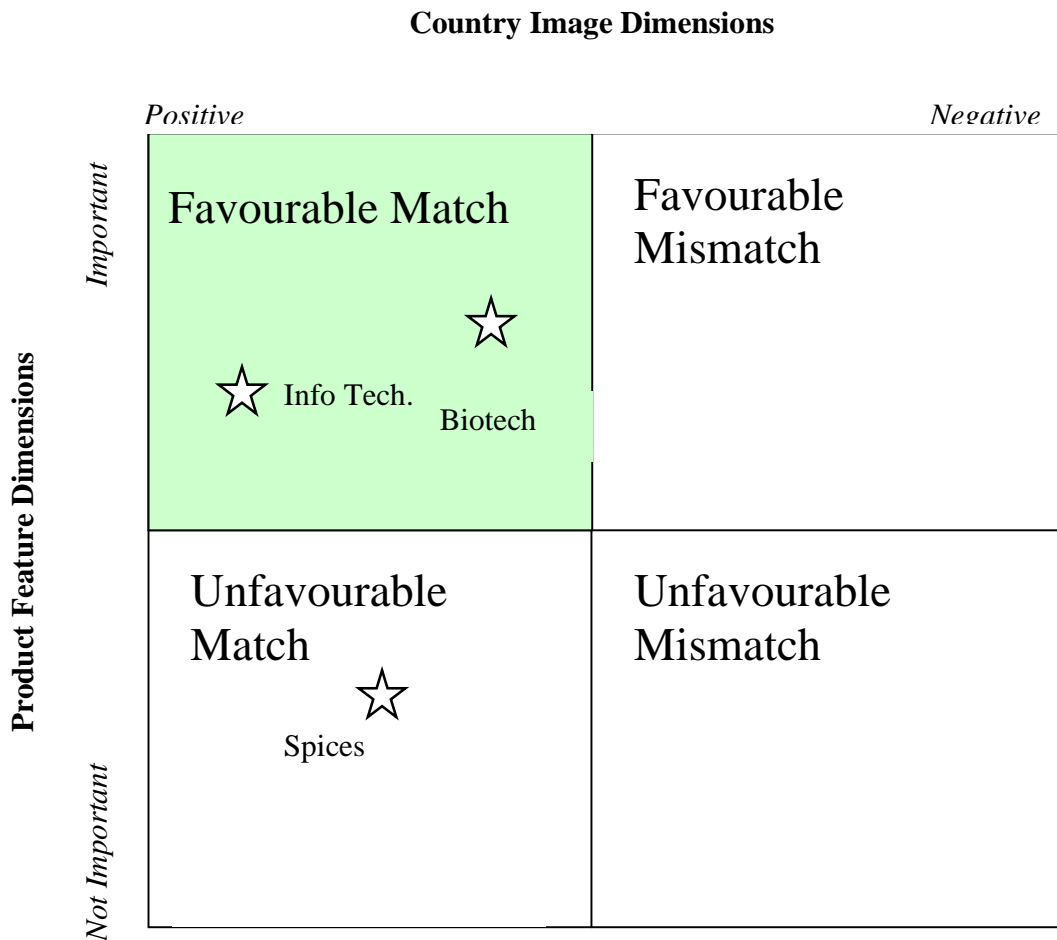
Post liberalization, India has emerged as an attractive destination for a number of MNCs, looking for a share of the growing middle class.

Based on the analysis from table 1 above, we obtain that India's Image rating is below that of America and above that of China (India scored better primarily on the 'political parameters' while China did better on the 'economic' and 'technological' fronts).

The following points are concluded for India as a Country of Origin:

- High rating (good image) on Political Parameters
- Overall, not a high rating.

Analysis of India's Product-Country congruence:



Infotech sector: The Indian software sector has built a reputation for itself over the past 5 years. With the availability of qualified software professionals and world class companies like Infosys and Wipro making a mark globally, India has positive overall country image in this sector.

Spices: India is the largest producer and exporter of spices in the world, and is a dominant player in the market. It enjoys positive image in this sector. However, the product category does not require brand features to be important. Hence it falls in quadrant III.

Biotech sector: The Indian Pharma sector is known for high process development skills and low manufacturing cost base.²⁰

Recommended strategies:

Those flows from the above conclusions are:

- Pricing: Cannot charge a premium
- Need to focus on building brands that can offset negative impact of COO associations
- Reduce emphasis on COO
- Promote other product attributes and benefits; e.g., lower price, more extensive guarantee and service
- Introduce private label or secondary line of cheaper products
- Assemble or conduct parts of manufacture in a positive COO
- Create strong brand equity to minimise negative country image
- Select brand name that disguises negative COO
- Set high price if possible in circumstances where consumers perceive high price equals high quality

²⁰ 'Business Practices of Successful Indian Exporters', Export-Import Bank of India, Quest Publications, 2001

Conclusion

With increasing globalization, MNCs are becoming stateless players, detached from individual nation states. The growth of strategic international alliances and joint ventures, cross-national mergers, the rise of business divisions headquartered outside the 'home' country, and so on stand testimony to that.

In light of this, the question faced by MNCs is how to tackle the deep-seated impacts of the 'nationality' variable from those that are more contingent and transient. More specifically, in which markets to retain and home country image and in which to adapt to the local settings?

The knowledge about the country of origin plays a decisive role when not so much is known about the product and its country of origin. Understanding the processes in consumer decision making and taking care of them will help to encourage the international trade between the people and firms of different countries.

International marketers could use COO marketing as an instrument to facilitate the entry of new market. However, complementary marketing strategies (e.g. brand name marketing) should be employed to sustain market position because reliance only on COO in long term may lose its effectiveness.

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