

## CONSUMERS' RESPONSE TO FOREIGN MADE PRODUCTS: THE EFFECT OF PRODUCT CATEGORY INVOLVEMENT

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*This study investigates the role of enduring involvement with a product category in consumers' evaluation of foreign made products. Consumers tend to embrace certain ideas and stereotypes of foreign countries as producers of goods and services and then use these ideas to evaluate the qualities of these products. Building on prior literature and using the involvement-commitment model and the elaboration likelihood model, we propose that the level of consumers' involvement with a particular product category moderates the relationship between country of origin and perceptions of quality of foreign products. Results supported this proposition and suggested that highly involved individuals base their foreign product evaluation on the desirability of product attribute information despite the country of origin while individuals with lower product category involvement have a higher propensity to use the country of origin cue as the basis for evaluative judgment despite the product attribute information.*

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### INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalized business, international competitiveness has become a necessity for the survival of many firms. To acquire such competitiveness in international markets, firms need a clear understanding of how consumers in different countries evaluate the quality of their offerings. Every product or service that is sold globally has an attached "made in" image. This "made in" label or country of origin, may have potential significance in the evaluation of the product or service attributes (Liu and Johnson 2005). As Papadopoulos and Heslop (1993) described "...the image of an origin may lead to a range of reactions, from simple awareness to attitude formation to intention to buy". In other words, perceptions of a product may depend on the image of its country of origin as well as the product's intrinsic characteristics (Papadopoulos and Heslop 1993). Despite the importance of the topic and the extensive research, there have been mixed findings in the literature. According to previously published results, country of origin may be important to some consumers but not to others (Johansson 1989). Peterson and Jolibert (1995) suggested that the conditions under which the country of origin cue operates have

not been fully explained and called for further research. Similarly, Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) claimed that there are still important areas of country of origin research that have not been fully investigated. To address this gap in the literature, the present study seeks to explore the role of consumers' product class involvement defined as "an internal state variable that indicates the amount of arousal, interest or drive evoked by a product class" (Dholakia 2000) in the evaluation of foreign made products. Specifically, we investigate how consumers' level of involvement with particular product categories (i.e., cars, computers or mp3 players) affects how much attention is given to the country of origin cue versus the product's intrinsic attributes upon evaluation. We build on prior research on social cognition and use the elaboration likelihood model and the involvement-commitment model to suggest that highly involved consumers are more influenced by the desirability of the product attribute information while less involved consumers tend to rely more on the country of origin cue.

The balance of this research is organized as follows: In the next section, we present an overview of the literature on country of origin. Then a discussion of the research problem and presentation of hypotheses follows. We then describe the data, methods and measures that are used in conducting the study, followed by

the presentation of the results. Finally, we conclude by identifying possible limitations and discussing several implications for scholarship and practice

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The country of origin effect refers to the potential bias in product evaluation that results from the knowledge of the country in which the product was made (Hong and Wyer 1989). Interest in the effect of country of origin on consumers' product evaluations has risen significantly in recent years. The beginnings of this interest started with the work of Nagashima (1970). It has thereafter evolved to become a significant area of investigation in the field of consumer behavior (Maheswaran 1994). The findings of this research stream show that both consumers and industrial buyers build up images of countries and their product and service offerings based on stereotyped information and these images affect buyers' perceptions and behavior (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Yaprak 1987; Hooley, Shipley and Kreiger 1988).

The consumer behavior literature on country of origin effects has focused on consumers' affect, attitude formation and information processing in reaction to country of origin stimuli (Amine et al. 2005). Han (1989) posited that country of origin may be used as a stereotype measure that acts as an external product evaluation cue. This claim has found support in the work of Johansson (1989) who suggested that country of origin is often used as a salient proxy or heuristic for other more intrinsic product characteristics such as quality and performance (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Parameswaran and Pisharodi 1994).

Hong and Wyer (1989) examined the cognitive processes that mediate the effect of country of origin on product evaluation. They suggested that country of origin may affect product evaluation in four possible ways. First, it could influence how other product attribute information is interpreted causing these attributes to have a different effect on evaluation than they otherwise would have.

Second, country of origin could act as a heuristic cue for inferring product quality without giving consideration to other product attributes. Third, it could be viewed as one of the product attributes by itself. Lastly, it could affect the attention given to other product attribute information. Results of their study lent support to the contention that country of origin stimulates consumers' interest in the product and leads them to think more extensively of the other product attribute information.

Other studies have found that the effect of country of origin on product evaluation is context dependent. Rao and Monroe (1988) argued that consumers will use extrinsic cues (i.e., country of origin) for evaluation when they do not have enough knowledge to understand the intrinsic attributes, while Maheswaran (1994) found that experts and novices differ in the extent to which they use country of origin stereotypes. Similarly, Li et al. (1993) claimed that country of origin will be used to infer product quality only when consumers are presented limited product information. Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein (1987) found that stereotypes (i.e., country of origin) are used for judgment when the subjects anticipated the evaluation task to be complex or difficult.

Eroglu and Machleit (1989) confirmed the relationship between country of origin and product evaluation. The results of their research demonstrated that such relationship exists but the effect of country of origin on product evaluation may vary by individual and product differences as well as by product category. Previous research has also considered the role that individual characteristics may play in the relationship between country of origin and product evaluation. Factors such as age, income and the level of education have been studied as influencing this relationship but results have been inconclusive (Wang 1978).

Despite the extensive research that documented the effects of country of origin on consumers' evaluations of foreign made products (Han 1989), there have been some mixed findings regarding how country of origin information is

used to form consumer's perceptions and evaluations (Maheswaran 1994). Major questions about the way consumers acquire, process and use the country of origin information have been raised (Hong and Wyer 1990). For example, it has not yet been clear to researchers the conditions under which country of origin information influences evaluations (Li and Monroe 1992) and why this process holds in certain cases and not in others. In what follows we explore the role of consumers' product category involvement in the country of origin effect.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Product involvement is an important construct in consumer behavior and has received considerable theoretical and empirical examination dating back to the work of Sherif and Hoveland (1961) on social judgment theory. The construct has since been adopted in the field of consumer behavior by investigating the role of involvement in consumers' purchase behavior and decision making (Funk et al. 2004). The centrality of the involvement construct in the marketing literature is a result of its potential role in various aspects of consumers' cognitive and behavioral responses such as information search, information processing, preference and decision making (Josiam et al. 2004).

The domain of the involvement construct has been described as "long-term interest in a product, which is based on the centrality of the product to important values, needs, or the self concept" (Bloch 1981). In the current research, we distinguish between the stable enduring involvement described as a long term internal state and situational involvement described as a short term transient state. These two different types of involvement were shown to have different effects on subsequent consumer behavior (Dholakia 2000). Our interest in this study is in involvement with a product class which is represented by long term enduring involvement. Unlike situational involvement, enduring involvement represents a long term interest in a product category that is not necessarily connected to specific purchase

occasions. This interest is associated with a consumer's self-identity, needs and values and differs from one individual to another. (Richins and Bloch 1986; Bearden and Netemeyer 1999).

Enduring product category involvement has been linked to the intensity, comprehensiveness and complexity of a consumer's cognitive and behavioral responses during product evaluation and choice. Similarly, high product involvement has been associated with a sophistication of the decision process (Houston and Rothschild 1980), a greater motivation to process product information (Warrington and Shim 2000) and greater levels of cognitive activity during product evaluation (Celsi and Olson 1988; Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; Petty et al. 1983). Likewise, enduring involvement has been shown to directly influence purchase involvement (Dholakia 2000). This idea is supported by the involvement-commitment model, which postulates that a consumers' ego involvement –reflecting enduring involvement – affects his/her level of involvement with the purchase decision. The involvement-commitment model as proposed by Beatty et al. (1988) suggests that when a product is closely related to an individual's self concept, ego and values, the individual is more likely to care about any action that involves the product category and consequently will have a greater motivation to make a more careful purchase decision. (Dholakia 2000).

Furthermore, Gardner et al. (1985) suggested that the level of involvement is related to elaborative processing. When consumers have an enduring involvement with a product category, the product becomes of greater personal relevance and represents an integral part of their self-concept. Hence, involvement represents a motivation to expend the cognitive effort to evaluate the product's intrinsic attributes (Petty et al. 1983). Highly involved consumers are thus expected to engage in a piecemeal processing of the product attribute information to reach an overall product judgment. A piecemeal processing strategy involves the evaluation of the product on an attribute by attribute basis which underscores the importance of intrinsic product

characteristics to consumers characterized by high enduring involvement. In the present study, we argue that inconsistencies in prior results regarding country of origin effects may be partly explained through understanding the role of product category involvement. Given the greater cognitive and behavioral effort utilized by highly involved consumers, we contend that for these consumers intrinsic product attributes will play a greater role in product evaluation than those who have low enduring involvement. The following hypothesis summarizes the preceding discussion:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** For consumers characterized by high product category involvement, perceptions of the quality of foreign made products will be based on the product's attribute information despite the country of origin.

On the other hand, under low enduring involvement, consumers do not have the motivation to expend the cognitive effort for piecemeal processing for product evaluation. Given their lower motivation to process product attribute information, consumers with low enduring involvement are expected to rely on a heuristic that simplifies decision making represented by the country of origin cue for product evaluation. Intrinsic product attribute information will be of secondary importance to less involved consumers. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model of attitude change, as an issue decreases in personal relevance, peripheral routes should be more effective than the central routes to persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Thus, consumers characterized by low product category involvement are expected to use the country of origin cue as a substitute for other product attribute information. Their preferences and overall product evaluation will be shaped by the stereotype they hold of the country in which the product was made. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** For consumers characterized by low product category involvement, perceptions of the quality of foreign products will be based on the product's country of origin despite the product's attribute information.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

An empirical study was conducted to test the role of enduring product class involvement as a possible moderator to the effects of country of origin on consumers' evaluation of foreign made products. Our hypotheses were examined using a 2 (product class involvement) X 2 (country of origin) X 2 (product attribute strength) factorial between subjects design.

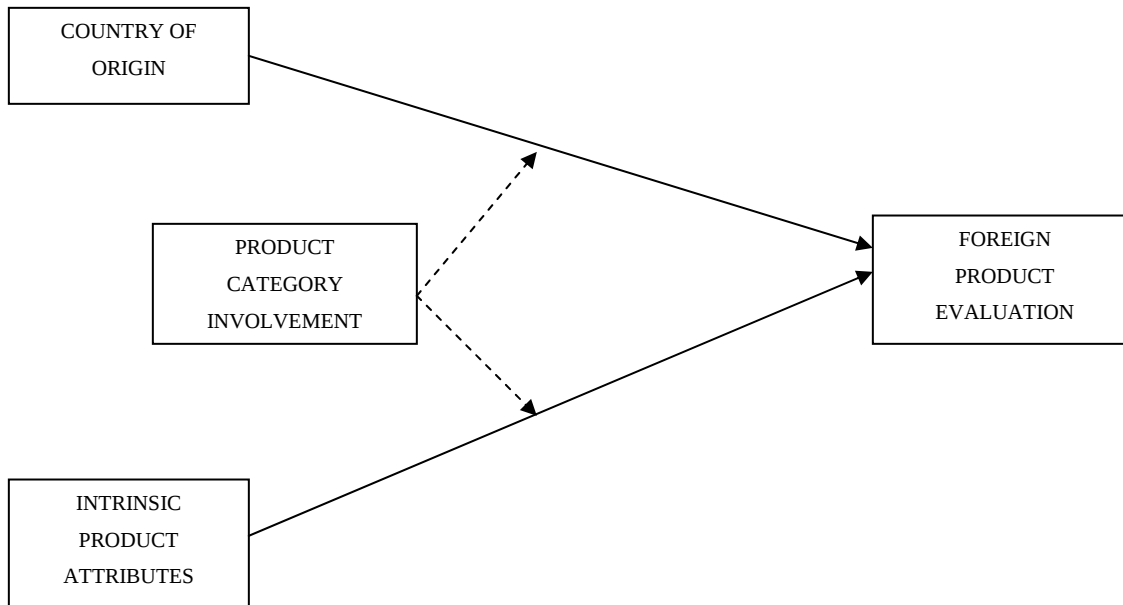
### Method

**Subjects.** One hundred and fifty undergraduate business students at a private university in Egypt were recruited to participate in the study. There were 88 males and 62 females. In order to qualify for participation, all subjects had to either own or use a car. Participants were randomly assigned to groups in a 2 (product class involvement) X 2 (country of origin) X 2 (product attribute strength) factorial between subjects design.

**Product.** In order to test our propositions, we needed a product for which evaluation requires some cognitive effort. Additionally, it needed to be a product that study participants had some familiarity with. The automobile was chosen as the test product for this study. Using a car as the test product is appropriate and consistent with previous research. We chose the car as the focus for this empirical study for several reasons. First, it is a product with which college students may have some familiarity and interest. Second, it is a product that requires the utilization of cognitive effort in order to evaluate.

**Procedure.** Study participants were randomly assigned to eight different groups including the combinations of the country of origin, strength of attribute information and level of involvement. The study was portrayed as pertaining to a new automobile. Subjects were categorized as being of high involvement or low involvement based on their responses to the automobile involvement questionnaire (Bloch 1981). The median of the respondents on their level of involvement was sixty-two, which was used as a cut off point. Seventy-three subjects scored above the median and thus were

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Framework Representing the Role of Product Category**  
**Involvement in the Evaluation of Foreign Made Products**



classified as highly involved with the automobile category. Seventy-seven subjects scored below the median and accordingly were categorized as of low product category involvement. In the favorable country of origin condition, subjects were presented a description of an automobile that was manufactured in the United States. In the unfavorable country of origin condition subjects were presented a description of an automobile made in South Korea. The strength of the automobile's intrinsic characteristics represented in the car's description varied between the strong attribute information condition and the weak attribute information condition.

### Measures

*Country of Origin.* A pretest was conducted to choose the country of origin used in the study. Subjects were asked to evaluate the favorableness of automobiles manufactured in each of six different countries on a seven-point scale ( $n=41$ ). South Korea ( $M=3.4$ ) was identified as the country with the most unfavorable associations. The United States ( $M=5.6$ ) was the country with the most favorable evaluations.

*Involvement.* To measure the subjects' level of involvement with the automobile category the Automobile Involvement Scale (Bloch 1981) was used. Minor changes were introduced to the instrument to suit the context of the current study and the specific sample being targeted. The final instrument was composed of fifteen Likert-scale items anchored by "No agreement" to "Complete agreement" scored on a seven-point format. These instrument items were self-administered and were assumed to have an overall score.

*Strength of Product Attributes.* Subjects were presented a small pamphlet that described the attributes of the automobile. In the strong attribute information condition, subjects were told that a new medium sized car is being produced in the United States by a recognized American car manufacturer. They were then presented with a strong description of four major car attributes. The attributes were horsepower, cylindrical capacity, maximum speed and the car's interior finishing. In the weak attribute information condition, subjects were given the same information except that they were presented with a weak description of the above-mentioned attributes. They were told

that the car did not perform well on these attributes. The same scenario was replicated for the unfavorable country condition but the country was changed. In the strong attribute condition, participants were informed that a new midsize car was produced in South Korea by a well-known South Korean car manufacturer. They were then presented with a strong favorable description for the same product attributes mentioned above. In the weak attribute condition, subjects were given the same information about the country of origin except that they were given a weak description of the attributes. The choice of the attributes was based on a pilot study, which asked the respondents to generate a list of car attributes and rate them in order of importance. Finally, in all groups, the respondents were asked to rate their evaluations of the car's quality based on an eleven-dimension questionnaire in a seven-point bi-polar scale.

*Product Evaluation.* A questionnaire instrument was developed to measure subjects' product evaluation ratings. The questionnaire was composed of eleven items measured on a seven-point bipolar scale. These items were compiled from prior research particularly from the work of Johansson and Nebenzahl (1986), Nagashima (1970) and Parameswaran and Paisharodi (1994). The instrument used to capture the respondents' product evaluations included the following eleven items: reliability, exterior styling, workmanship, innovativeness, comfort, style, quality, durability, maintenance, performance and overall excellence. The product quality evaluation ratings were averaged to form a quality evaluation index ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

### Manipulation Test

*Checks Concerning the Manipulation of the Strength of Product Attributes.* Subjects were asked to rate the desirability of the automobile's attribute information they were presented on two seven-point scales "very desirable" and "not at all desirable", "very attractive" and "not at all attractive". These items were averaged to form an attribute strength index ( $r = .81$ ). A two-way ANOVA (involvement x attribute strength) was

conducted on the attribute desirability ratings. Attribute strength had a significant main effect on attribute desirability ratings. Subjects in the strong product attributes condition reported higher desirability ratings than subjects in the weak product attributes condition (desirability ratings: strong attributes = 5.45, weak attributes = 3.01,  $F = 45.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Involvement and involvement x attribute strength interaction had no significant effect on desirability ratings.

### Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (level of involvement) X 2 (country of origin) X 2 (attribute strength) ANOVA. The cell means are presented in Table 1 and the following main and interaction effects were found:

*Main Effect Results.* The results of ANOVA generated two main effects. The results showed both a country of origin main effect and attribute strength main effect. Country of origin had a significant effect ( $F(1,142) = 309.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on product evaluations. Similarly strength of product attributes had a significant effect ( $F(1,142) = 166.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on product evaluations. This result indicates that respondents had a more positive evaluation for strong attribute information and favorable country of origin versus weak attribute information and unfavorable country of origin.

*Interaction Effect Results.* The results revealed an interaction effect between the level of involvement and attribute strength ( $F(1,142) = 89.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and between the level of involvement and country of origin ( $F(1,142) = 120.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Further analysis of the interaction between level of involvement and attribute strength uncovered that subjects in the high involvement group reported more positive quality evaluations when attribute strength was strong ( $F(1,142) = 354.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, country of origin was not significant in influencing their quality evaluations. The results were consistent with Hypothesis One, which predicted that those who are highly involved would use the strength of attribute information to evaluate the quality of the product rather than the country of origin cue. They evaluated quality more positively

**TABLE 1**  
**Means for Evaluations of Product Quality Categorized By the Independent Variables**

|                                                                           | High Involvement               |                    |                                  |                    | Low Involvement                |                    |                                  |                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|
|                                                                           | Favorable<br>Country of Origin |                    | Unfavorable<br>Country of Origin |                    | Favorable<br>Country of Origin |                    | Unfavorable<br>Country of Origin |                    |
|                                                                           | Strong<br>Attributes           | Weak<br>Attributes | Strong<br>Attributes             | Weak<br>Attributes | Strong<br>Attributes           | Weak<br>Attributes | Strong<br>Attributes             | Weak<br>Attributes |
| <b>Product<br/>Evaluation</b>                                             | 5.99                           | 3.69               | 5.44                             | 2.77               | 6.16                           | 5.76               | 3.00                             | 2.60               |
| Note: Higher scores indicate higher evaluations of the product's quality. |                                |                    |                                  |                    |                                |                    |                                  |                    |

when presented with strong attributes than those who were presented weak attributes. Furthermore, results support Hypothesis Two, which expected that low involvement consumers would use the country or origin information despite the strength of product attribute information. Analysis of the interaction between the level of involvement and country of origin showed that subjects from the low involvement group reported more positive quality evaluations when country of origin was favorable versus unfavorable ( $F(1,142) = 326.06, p < .001$ ). Strength of product attribute information was not significant in affecting product quality evaluations.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of product category involvement in moderating the effect of country of origin on consumers' foreign product evaluations. From a theoretical perspective this study extends prior country of origin research by connecting it to research on the involvement construct. We proposed that a difference exists between high and low product category involvement consumers in the extent to which they use country of origin information versus product attribute information for product evaluation. Results supported our contention and revealed that consumers who were highly involved with the product category used attribute information to form their evaluations while less involved consumers relied more on the country of origin cue to form their product quality evaluations. These results complement earlier results by Maheswaran (1994) on the role of consumer

expertise in moderating the effects of country of origin.

From a managerial perspective, this research may aid international marketers in formulating more focused communication strategies. Negative evaluations and perceptions based on country of origin stereotyping comprise a substantial market barrier (Schooler, Wildt and Jones 1987). Marketers may overcome these negative effects through understanding the role of product category involvement in forming perceptions of foreign-made products. By having a better understanding of underlying factors affecting the country of origin-product evaluation relationship, international marketers would be more able to position their products and customize their communications accordingly.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As always, the results of one study should be treated with some caution. Even though the data was consistent with the hypotheses, nevertheless, this study suffers from several limitations. First, the student sample used represents a segment of young adults belonging to middle to high social class. Generalizations of the results to other age groups and social classes should be approached very cautiously. This research needs to be extended to include a more representative sample from the total population. Second, subjects evaluated the written description of a product rather than shown the actual product. A third limitation was the use of only one product category to test

our hypotheses. These three limitations represent potential for future research. Further research may also be needed to determine how the country of origin stereotypes affect consumers' foreign product evaluations in an era of outsourcing and multinational production? Even though researchers have recognized that the "hybrid product phenomena" requires additional research (Samiee 1994), only a small number of research studies have been designed to investigate this area (Chao 1998).

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