EFFECT OF CONGRUENCE BETWEEN BRAND ORIGIN COUNTRY AND PRODUCT NATIONALITY ON PERCEIVED PRODUCT QUALITY

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Abstract - Drawing on congruence theory, this study examines the effect of congruence between brand origin country and product nationality on perceived product quality. We conduct a laboratory experiment to test two sets of scenarios, one representing congruity and the other representing incongruity, between brand origin country and product nationality. The results indicate that consumers perceive a product to be of higher quality when the brand origin country and product nationality are congruent than when they are incongruent. This study contributes to the literature about product country of origin, and has practical implications for global businesses designing localization strategies.

Index terms - Country Of Origin; Brand Origin Country; Product Nationality; Perceived Product Quality; Congruence Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

To reach consumers from diverse countries and cultures, multinational firms often create "culturally hybrid" products that enhance consumers' familiarity and identification with their products (Nabil & Imed, 2013). For example, McDonald's introduced rice burgers in Taiwan, launched a teriyaki pork burger in Japan, and provides beer options in Germany, while Starbucks combined the drinking habits of Chinese and Western countries and serves lattes made with soymilk. Beyond adjusting the taste and packaging of existing products, some businesses launch products drawn directly from the culture of the local market: Kentucky Fried Chicken sells deep-fried Chinese donuts in China and sesame flatbread in Taiwan; McDonald's serves curry rice meals in India; and Starbucks offers spicy meals in China's Sichuan province. Although these international corporations retain the brand images from their countries of origin, their regional products also have a clear local spin. However, it remains unclear whether a product is still perceived positively when the image of the brand's origin country is incongruent with the product's nationality. It is doubtful that people truly believe, for example, that McDonald's can serve an authentically delicious Chinese Kung Pao chicken. Therefore, a brand's origin country is a substantial factor influencing consumers' brand evaluation, perceptions, and purchasing behaviors (Adina, Gabriela, & Roxana-Denisa, 2015). The origin country of a brand is defined as the country to which the brand is perceived to belong by its customers (Hamzaoui-Essoussi, Merunka, & Bartikowski, 2011). Several previous studies on the associations among brand images and brand country images have determined that country of origin is a crucial criterion for consumers during product evaluation (Hsieh, Pan, & Setiono, 2004; Huber & McCann, 1982; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995; Steenkamp, 1955; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). This is because a brand is usually associated with its country of origin, and easily invokes the image of that country. Narayana (1981) defines country image as the overall impression of that country in consumers' minds. When a product's brand has a well-recognized country-of-origin image, this image can significantly influence consumers' evaluations of its quality and value, as well as their purchasing intention (Manrai & Manrai, 1993; Phau & Chao, 2008; Schooler, 1965). For example, because consumers usually have a favorable impression of developed countries, evaluations of their products are generally the most positive, followed by newly industrialized countries and then developing countries (Schooler & Wildt, 1968; Tse & Gorn, 1993; Wang & Lamb, 1983). When conducting product evaluations, consumers not only focus on the country of origin, but also on the product's quality and attributes (Johansson, Douglas, & Nonaka, 1985). Roth and Romeo (1992) argue that consumer perception about the country of origin should align with the quality of the product features that they are concerned with. When these are congruous, consumer purchasing intention increases. For example, a consumer might value the design and prestige of a pair of shoes, but consider these aspects irrelevant when buying beer; thus, a French shoe brand may be perceived as high quality (because France is famous for its fashion design) in a way that French beer is not. Similarly, Han and Terpstra (1988) note that the economic

development of a country can influence the perceived quality of that country's products. For example, people generally think that developed countries are more proficient at technology creation, while less-developed countries produce crops; thus, Japanese electrical products are perceived to be of higher quality than Japanese crops. Product nationality, which applies to products that characterize a local culture, is another notable product attribute (Roth & Romeo, 1992). For example, curry is readily recognized as Indian food, ramen as Japanese food, and hamburger and fries as North American food. Thus, the congruence between country of origin and product nationality can also influence the perception of product quality. According to Collins and Quillian (1969), semantic memory is a network that combines nodes, such as events, concepts, and impressions. If any two nodes are primed with similar concepts, congruence theory indicates that the congruent situation is preferable because it matches consumer expectations about the information (Dahlén & Lange, 2004). When evaluating a product, the brand origin country and product nationality can be seen as two nodes in a memory network; thus, if these two nodes become interconnected through a priming effect, they can produce a positive attitude and perception of high quality toward a product when the brand origin country and product nationality are congruent. However, if these two nodes conflict, a perception of low product quality is produced. This study conducts a laboratory experiment wherein the congruence between a product's brand origin country and nationality are manipulated, to clarify whether the congruence of these two variables influences perceived product quality. We extend the work of previous studies that discuss the affiliation between brand origin country and product category in product evaluations (e.g., Dagger & Raciti, 2011; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Saydan, 2013), and examine how the congruence (or lack thereof) between a brand's country of origin and product nationality influences perceived product quality. We hope that the results of this study can assist international businesses in designing new products as part of localization strategies for foreign markets, and enable them to maintain a strong brand image.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Country-of-Origin Effect

The effect of country of origin on product choice has been discussed by several scholars in recent years, and has been identified as one of the most crucial variables in the global market and in consumer behavior (Rezvani et al., 2012). Numerous histories and cultures from around the world invoke a variety of perceptions in consumers, which can influence their product assessments and consumer purchasing behavior. Additionally, country of origin is considered to be an exogenous cue for product perception and assessment (Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999), and consumer evaluations are based on background knowledge of the country of origin, including the degree of economic development, history, culture, and the cognitive representation of the product. Studies by Wang and Lamb (1983) and Khachaturian and Morganosky (1990) suggest that, compared with developing countries, developed countries enjoy a more favorable overall product image and competitive advantage. After considering a variety of country-of-origin cues, Yasin, Noor, and Mohamad (2007) contends that the public tend to believe that German cars are higher quality, Swiss watches are more precise, and Japanese electronics are more trustworthy than their counterparts from other countries. This phenomenon (the "country-of-origin effect") occurs because consumers typically look up the "made in" statement on the label of desired products, and incorporate the country-of-origin image into their attitude regarding the quality of the product (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Salciuviene, Ghauri, Streder, & De Mattos, 2010) and their evaluations of the brand (Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos, & Oldenkotte, 2012). In a global market with free movement of goods and products that originate from many diverse countries, an inability to identify the country of origin decreases the influence of the country-of-origin image. However, Phau and Prendergast (2000) indicate that in international markets, the image of the brand's origin country is already replaced that of the country of manufacturer. Although products may not be manufactured in the brand origin country, consumers still evaluate products according to the brand origin country (Johansson et al., 1985). Furthermore, both Reierson (1966) and Samiee (1994) have found that many products or brands invoke the culture of the country of origin among consumers (e.g., Gucci is an Italian brand, Louis Vuitton is French, Sony is Japanese, and HP and DELL are both American) (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Some brands even include the country of origin in their name, such as Donna Karen New York (DKNY) or Pierre Cardin Paris, although the products of these brands are often produced in other countries.

B. Product Nationality

Product information consists of both intrinsic and extrinsic cues (Insch & McBride, 2004), which

consumers combine to derive product information and consider perceived quality before making a purchasing decision (Peter & Olson, 2008). Intrinsic cues include product knowledge (Olson, 1977), which comprise the basic features of a product (e.g., product design, function, flavor, and texture) (Liefeld, 1993). However, if these cues cannot be obtained before using the product, consumers use extrinsic cues (e.g., price, packaging, and warranty) to judge the product's quality (Maheswaran, 1994). In addition to country of origin, product nationality is also a decisive extrinsic cue for determining product quality (Ahmed et al., 2004). Products can be categorized to one specific culture through their country of origin (Hsieh et al., 2004). They also invoke an impression if they have a close connection with a particular nationality or country (e.g., Italian pasta, French wine, Indian curry, Belgian chocolate, and Russian vodka). Although vodka is produced by many countries, consumers still perceive vodka as having Russian origins. Thus, both the product nationality and the brand origin country can cause consumers to associate a product with a country.

C. The Congruence between Brand Origin Country and Product Nationality

posit that semantic memory is a type of network composed of interconnected nodes, wherein each node represents a concept (Anderson, 1983). Once a concept is encountered, it invokes other nodes; the initial encounter is called priming, and the subsequent phenomenon is called spreading activation. For example, the concept "birds" is connected to "fly" and "wings." In short, spreading activation starts from one concept node and spreads to other linking nodes in the network. Questions about spreading activation are usually discussed through priming studies. Priming involves showing one word or concept first so that specific related nodes are aroused. For example, the word "student" comes to mind more quickly than "worker" after seeing the word "teacher."A considerable variety of information is stored in this way, and both brand origin country and product nationality represent separate nodes within an individual's memory. When these two nodes are invoked through spreading activation, an effective knowledge network forms and enables further cognitive processing of a new product. According to congruence theory, the congruity between the brand origin country and product nationality prompts a more positive attitude toward a product than incongruity (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) offer congruence theory, which discusses and forecasts how people adjust their original attitude when they receive new information and focuses on consumer perceptions of similarity (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004). Numerous studies suggest that congruent information significantly enhances consumers' memory of, attitude toward, and evaluation of products compared with incongruent information (Dahlén & Lange, 2004; Sengupta, Goodstein, & Boninger, 1997). This is because consumers seem to prefer congruence, as well as having their expectations met with regard to the information (Dahlén & Lange, 2004) Nevertheless, incongruent information or conflicting attributes can also elicit a positive reaction and a higher level of memory because consumers have to carefully access this new information, which is inconsistent with existing beliefs, and adopt the new knowledge to resolve the imbalance and conflicting feelings (Dahlén & Lange, 2004). However, if new information is extremely inconsistent with existing beliefs, the information is rejected or subcategories are formed to avoid directly influencing the original schema (Mandler, 1982) and a negative attitude results. Roth and Romeo (1992) demonstrate that product category and country of origin can also produce the congruence effect if consumers sense a favorable match between country and product. That is, consumers regard brand origin country or product nationality as product's extrinsic cues. When consumers encounter the extrinsic cues of the brand origin country or product nationality, the respective other node may be aroused. According to congruence theory, when the concepts of two nodes are congruent, the product is perceived to be of greater quality. For example, matcha (ground green tea leaves) is recognized as Japanese; if a matcha product is made by Suntory (a Japanese brand), the brand origin country and product nationality are congruent, and the evaluation of product quality is enhanced. By contrast, if Coca-Cola launches a matcha product, there is incongruity between the brand origin country and product nationality, and consumer evaluations of this product are likely to be poorer. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is posited:

H_1: Congruence between the brand origin country and product nationality images results in a higher perceived product quality by consumers than when these are incongruent.

III. METHODS

Procedure

This study employs a laboratory experiment to measure the effects of congruous and incongruous situations on perceived quality. First, realistic print advertisements are created to introduce a new meal

product, including an advertising slogan, description of the meal, and price. Next, the advertisements are altered by applying characteristics to manipulate the congruence between brand origin country (western & eastern) and product nationality (western & eastern). Each participant is randomly assigned one of the four ads, and then asked to measure their perceived quality of the product.

Stimulus Material

The measurement of participants' goal orientation is adapted from the study of Lockwood et al. (2002). Participants were asked to fill out the 18 7-point question items in the prevention/promotion scale (Lockwood et al., 2002), which measured individuals' goal orientation level as a personality trait. Subjects were dichotomized into prevention-focused and promotion-focused groups based on a median split (median= 76). Participants whose scoring below the median were classified as the prevention-focused group, whereas those scoring above the median were classified as the promotion-focused group.

Manipulations of Underdog and Top Dog Brands

The Experiment Brands. Brands with obvious cultural impressions are selected for the experiment, based on several considerations. First, widely known international brands are chosen to avoid vague impressions of countries of origin. Second, brands that are connected with a specific product were avoided; for example, people may perceive that Burger King should only sell burgers, which can confound the relationship between brand origin country and product nationality. Third, global culture has assimilated many products over the years but food usually maintains its specific nationality; thus, food brands specifically are used.

Given these considerations, the experiment requires widely known food brands selling diverse products. Therefore, we select McDonald's, originating from the United States, and Din Tai Fung, originating from Taiwan.

The Experiment Products. Although a brand origin country can be clearly defined by a country name, product nationality is based on ethnic and cultural identities that become gradually integrated over time, which makes it challenging to attach to any one particular country. To avoid confusion, this study uses the broader terms Western and Eastern. Therefore, we use a product with a Western product nationality by a Western brand origin country (and an Eastern product by an Eastern brand) for the congruity situation, and a Western product by an Eastern brand (and an Eastern product by a Western brand) for the incongruity situation. Furthermore, to circumvent confounding factors from participants' past consumption experiences, we invent two products for the experiment that are not actually on the market in Taiwan. Specifically, the congruity situations are McDonald's (Western brand origin country) selling a submarine sandwich (Western product nationality), and Din Tai Fung (Eastern brand origin country) selling Kung Pao chicken (Eastern product nationality). The case of incongruous situations like McDonald's selling Kung Pao chicken and Din Tai Fung selling a submarine sandwich.

Pilot Test for Experimental Material Preparation. We conduct a pilot test to confirm that the experiment brands and products discussed above are suitable for this experiment. A total of 42 participants are recruited, of whom 25 are men and 17 are women. The average age is 23.34 years (standard deviation [SD] = 2.41). We first ask the participants to identify the experiment brand's country of origin from four provided countries (America, France, Taiwan, and Japan) to ensure that all of them recognize the companies. In total, 36 participants believe that Din Tai Fung is Taiwanese and McDonald's is American; thus, we are justified in using these brands for the experiment. Similarly, all participants correctly associate a submarine sandwich with a Western product nationality and Kung Pao chicken with an Eastern product nationality, which justifies using these products in our study.

We consider a submarine sandwich by McDonald's and Kung Pao chicken by Din Tai Fung to be congruent situations, and Kung Pao chicken by McDonald's and a submarine sandwich in Din Tai Fung to be incongruent situations. To confirm that these inferences of the experimental material are accurate, we conduct another pilot test. A total of 38 participants are recruited for this second test, of whom 16 are men and 22 are women; additionally, the average age is 22.68 years (SD = 3.12). The participants then rate the congruity levels of the four situations on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very congruent) to 7 (very incongruent). The results reveal that a McDonald's submarine sandwich (M = 6.08) has a higher congruence level than McDonald's Kung Pao chicken (M = 2.57) (p = .001). Similarly, Kung Pao chicken at Din Tai Fung (M = 5.54) has a higher congruence level than a Din Tai Fung submarine sandwich (M = 1.68) (p = .001).

Dependent Variable Measurement

Subsequently, the participants are asked to rate perceived product quality using a measurement method that we modified from (Jang & Namkung,

2009). First, we employ a 7-point Likert scale to evaluate four statements: (a) "This product is a healthy option"; (b) "This product is tasty"; (c) "This product is attractive"; and (d) "This product is a traditional delicious and fresh food." The participant evaluations range from 1 (very disagreeable) to 7 (very agreeable) on each statement, and we generate an index by averaging the responses to the four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9212$).

IV. RESULTS

Participant Descriptive Statistics

Our study comprises 238 participants (112 men and 126 women), with the average age of 23.32 years (SD = 5.176). The participants are divided between the two congruous situations (127 participants, comprising 53 men and 74 women) and the two incongruous situations (111 participants, comprising 59 men and 52 women).

Hypothesis Tests

To determine the congruence effect between brand origin country and product nationality on consumers' perceived product quality, we employ an independent samples t-test. The results are outlined in Table 1. Overall, the participants' perceived product quality is higher in the congruous situations (a submarine sandwich from McDonald's and Kung Pao chicken from Din Tai Fung) than in the incongruous situations (Kung Pao chicken from McDonald's and a submarine sandwich from Din Tai Fung); therefore, our hypothesis is supported.

The t-test results also indicate that the participants' perceived quality of Kung Pao chicken from Din Tai Fung (Eastern brand origin country) is higher than that for a submarine sandwich (p = .001), whereas the perceived quality of a submarine sandwich from McDonald's (Western brand origin country) is higher than that for Kung Pao chicken (p = .002) (Table 2).

Table 1. Congruence effect between brand origin country and product nationality on perceived product quality.

Dependent variable	The congruence between brand origin country and product nationality	*n*	M	*sd*	*p*
perceived quality	The congruity situation	127	5.07	1.66	.0001*
	The conflict situation	111	3.82	2.34	

Note: n = participants in set; M = average; sd = standard deviation; t = t-value; p = p-value

Table 2. Effects of Eastern and Western brand origin country and product nationality on perceived product quality.

Dependent variable	brand origin country	product nationality	*n*	M	*sd*	*p*
perceived quality	Din Tai Fung (east)	Kung-Pao chicken	58	5.12	1.16	.0001*
		submarine sandwich	60	3.90	2.10	
	McDonald's (west)	submarine sandwich	69	4.26	1.26	.0020*
		Kung-Pao chicken	51	2.77	1.83	

Note: n = participants in set; M = average; sd = standard deviation; t = t-value; p = p-value

V. DISCUSSION

Of the many factors that influence consumer purchasing decisions, several previous studies verify that country of origin can influence consumers' evaluations of and attitudes toward products (Rezvani et al., 2012; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Salciuviene et al., 2010). Similarly, this study examines the country of origin concept in conjunction with product nationality to determine the influence of congruence between country of origin and product nationality on product quality perceptions. The results of our experiment suggest that consumers perceive higher product quality when the brand origin country and product nationality are congruent than when they are incongruent. Furthermore, we find that Kung Pao chicken is perceived to be of higher quality than a submarine sandwich when it is served by an Eastern brand; similarly, a submarine sandwich is perceived to be of higher quality than Kung Pao chicken when it is served by a Western brand. Previous studies also demonstrate that the country of origin forms part of a consumer's product evaluation process (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011; Schooler, 1965; Sinrungtam, 2013; Souiden, Pons, & E., 2011). For example, some studies discuss the effects of product attributes (luxury products versus necessity products) and country of origin (e.g., Piron, 2000), whereas others discuss economic development levels and product types on product evaluation (e.g., Manraia, Lascub, & Manraia, 1998) or demonstrate the influence of congruence between country of origin and products on product evaluations (e.g., Dagger & Raciti, 2011; Roth & Romeo, 1992). However, this study is the first to also explore product nationality, and verify that congruity between the brand origin country and product nationality results in higher perceived product quality than when these factors are incongruent. In short, our experiment extends the literature by offering a new perspective on the country-of-origin concept. Congruous and

incongruous situations between brand origin country and product nationality are common in real markets. For example, the American brand KFC sells not only fried chicken and burgers in the Asian market, but also offers sesame flatbread, deep-fried Chinese donuts, and soymilk. In Taiwan, McDonald's offers a rice set, and Japanese restaurant brand Yoshinoya also serves Chinese dishes, such as Dong-Po pork, in the Chinese market. To expand global market share, these enterprises adopt localization strategies and provide products that fit local cultures and preferences to attract consumers and maintain their recognition. However, localization strategies are not always effective, and most are short-lived; for example, both Yoshinoya and McDonald's have removed some Chinese dishes from their Chinese market menus. We suggest that the images of local food and the original restaurant are too varied, and this large gap leads to negative product evaluations. To ensure that global consumers feel a connection with a brand's products, multinational corporations must adjust product features (e.g., taste) according to local preferences or provide products that fit with local habits. However, they must also consider product nationality. Where product nationality does not exist, a product can be designed with any flavor to match the variety of taste preferences in diverse markets (e.g., flavors of bread and juice); however, if product nationality has an obvious image that is incongruous with the country of origin, this conflict may generate a negative response. Thus, this study also offers practical suggestions for business's developing product strategies. General businesses must be aware of disparities between nationality and culture in their brand and products. In addition, multinational corporations in foreign markets must also understand how consumers identify a brand origin country before implementing marketing strategies to ensure that their products' nationalities are congruent with their brand origin country. If a new product's nationality and brand origin country are congruent, consumers tend to perceive the product to be good quality. By contrast, consumers tend to experience cognitive dissonance about products in incongruous situations, which triggers a lower perceived quality and increased risk of failure. Few consumers would believe that McDonald's can serve delicious Taiwanese beef noodles, or that Starbucks can serve smooth and mellow Chinese green tea. Finally, this research focuses on discussing local food with different countries of origin, but product nationality is still consistent with country of origin. However, localizing a product does not mean it has to be the same as a local product; rather, it only needs to retains the characteristics of the country of origin or combine the characteristics of the two countries. For example, McDonald's in Japan launched a teriyaki pork burger to merge American and Japanese foods. How such hybridization influences consumers' perceptions of product quality should be considered in follow-up studies. Furthermore, because this study only considers one product category (food), the results could be generalized with some caution to other products. We suggest that future research explore other products with strong ethnic characteristics, such as clothing.

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