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Quest for purposefully designed conceptualization of the country-of-origin image construct

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ABSTRACT

While hundreds of studies have investigated the impact of country image on quality evaluation of foreign products, results have been mutually inconsistent. This study carefully addresses the conceptualization of the country image construct, since poor construct conceptualization may be one of the roots of the controversial results in the literature. We argue that the proper conceptual delimitation and respective operationalization of the construct should consider the theoretical arguments that relate it to other constructs in each given study, instead of deriving from a generic “one-size-fits-all” model. We illustrate the procedure of developing a measure for country image within a specific setting and empirically validate the new measurement model. The main contribution of this study is the theoretical discussion and empirical testing of the domain map and the levels of analysis of the country image construct, thereby increasing construct validity.

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1. Introduction

While researchers have studied the effects of country-of-origin (COO) and of country-of-origin image (CI) on consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward foreign products for almost 50 years (cf. [Usunier, 2006](#)) and published in excess of 700 empirical articles on the theme (cf. [Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002](#)), research on the topic has not yet reached saturation.

Given the vast body of work on the subject published to date, one has to outline clearly the contribution of a new study. Therefore, the present study aims at overcoming some of the flaws that have plagued empirical research on COO and CI effects, in particular:

- *Casual construct conceptualization.* [Usunier \(2006:60\)](#) complains that scientific research has often been “based on a neopositivist approach which privileges data analysis over conceptualization.” [Roth and Diamantopoulos \(2009\)](#) regret the lack of uniformity in the conceptual definition of the CI construct across studies and, in particular, the often-careless manner in which several studies have conceptualized the construct. As a response to these contentions, this study not only adheres to sound statistical analysis but also employs a careful definition of the conceptual domain and level of analysis of CI, and performs a rigorous empirical assessment of its measurement model.
- *Predominance of feasibility over scientific and managerial relevance.* [Usunier \(2006\)](#) complains that feasibility concerns have often led

researchers to collect data from (i) students, who (ii) live in the researcher's home country. In this study, the sample is more representative of the population of consumers, and respondents are not from the researchers' home country. Although the main contribution of this study is of a conceptual rather than empirical nature, these methodological precautions are important for construct validity assessment and generalization of the results.

- *Lack of managerial relevance.* [Samiee \(2011, p. 473\)](#) argues, “[c]ountry of origin research is not as relevant in customer choice process as some scholars believe and is generally void of meaningful managerial guidelines.” On the other hand, [Josiasen and Harzing \(2008, p. 265\)](#) argue that “COO is still a very relevant area of research, but one that does need to address several critical challenges,” such as tests of stability, the contingent nature of the COO effect, refinement of measurement scales, the need to provide guidelines for managers, and investigation of antecedents to COO. Additionally, recent studies have reinforced the relevance of COO and CI on consumers' preferences, attitudes, evaluations, and behaviors. For example, [Diamantopoulos et al. \(2011, p. 509\)](#) provide evidence that “COO still is a relevant cue impacting consumers' purchase intentions.” Alternatively, [Wall, Liereld, and Heslop \(1991\)](#) report that COO, while relevant for product quality assessment, appeared to be unimportant for determining purchase intentions. The present study has addressed these concerns by carefully defining the conceptual domain and level of analysis of the construct, and testing the respective measurement scales and by focusing on (product) quality evaluations rather than on purchase intentions. As a secondary contribution, this study offers explicit managerial recommendations that address how managers can use the expected impact on quality evaluation as part of their marketing strategy to influence purchase intentions.

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The main contribution of this study is the careful discussion of how to define properly the conceptual domain and the level of analysis of CI that would be relevant for a given research setting (specifically, type of product under evaluation and particular consumer attitude under investigation, for example, quality evaluation, purchase intention, loyalty). Furthermore, by taking a purposefully delimited conceptual frontier for CI, this study carefully addresses the levels of analysis and the dimensionality of the construct.

2. The conceptual delimitation of the country image construct

CI is a key construct in the study of country of origin effects, but there has been little uniformity in how to define it conceptually (in fact, researchers often fail even to present explicitly the conceptual definition) or represent it operationally in empirical research.

Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) review the literature on COO and CI research and identify three main groups of definitions of the focal image object: “(1) definitions of the (general) image of countries (i.e., country image); (2) definitions of the image of countries and their products (also referred to as product-country images); and (3) definitions of the images of products from a country (i.e., product image)” (p. 727). In a similar vein, Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono (2004) argued that country image comprises three levels: (1) overall country image, (2) aggregate product-country image, and (3) specific product-country image. Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 192) contend that “from a conceptual perspective most of the scales presently used do not clearly distinguish between the image objects; that is, whether it is country image or product image that is being measured.”

A review of the literature indicates three general levels of abstraction regarding the delimitation of the domain map of what has been loosely called “country image”:

- *Country image (CI)*. This delimitation refers to general aspects/facets of a country, that is, “descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs [and feelings and intentions] one has about a particular country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993, p. 193), irrespective of any specific product category or any particular product—and has been referred to as overall country image (Hsieh et al., 2004), global assessment of country image (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Murali, 2005), or macro country image (Pappu & Quester, 2010). Recent research has tried to identify specific traits (dimensions) of country image (e.g., economic, political) instead of treating country image as a “bulk” construct.
- *Product(s) country image (PCI)*. This delimitation involves “the entire cognitive ‘feel’ associated with a particular country’s products or with the perceived overall quality of the [whole set of] products from that particular country” (Hsieh et al., 2004, p. 253) or “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about the products of a given country” (Pappu & Quester, 2010, p. 280). Zeugner-Roth, Diamantopoulos and Montesinos (2008, p. 578) used the expression “country brand equity” to refer to “the (aggregate) customer-perceived value of products originating from a specific country,” thus mirroring the conceptual frontier just mentioned—for example, Italian products. While this frontier of the construct considers the joint image of a country and its products, it does not refer to any specific product category or any particular product. This level of conceptualization of CI has been referred to as aggregate product-country image (Hsieh et al., 2004) or micro country image (Pappu & Quester, 2010). Pappu and Quester (2010, p. 279) contend, “[c]onsumers are known to have associations toward countries both at the country level and at the product level (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Papadopoulos, 1993). Consequently, measures for the country-of-origin associations should include measures for macro country image [CI] and micro country image [PCI].” Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002, p. 299) argue, “consumers clearly distinguish between their view of a country’s products and those of the country itself.”

- *Product category country image (PCatI)*. This delimitation refers to the image about a generic product category from a given country, that is, “the overall perception consumers form of *specific product categories* from a *particular country*” (Hsieh et al., 2004, p. 253, emphasis added), for example, American electrical appliances or German food. Unlike PCI, which refers to the entire set (or majority) of products from a given country, PCatI encompasses a narrower view—of a particular product category from a given country. The particular product category may encompass a broader level (e.g., Korean electronic products, British home appliances, German food, Brazilian agricultural products, or French luxurious products) or a narrower level (e.g., Korean TVs, British refrigerators, German sausages, Brazilian fruits, or French perfumes) and even the rather narrow level of a specific product from a given country (e.g., Brazilian bananas), which has sometimes also been inadvertently designated as PCI. This narrower conceptualization is what Ittersum, Candel, and Meulenber (2003) called “*product-specific* image of a product’s region of origin” (p. 216, emphasis in the original). As argued by Laroche et al. (2005), certain product-country associations may escape the general image of their country (CI) or the general product-country image (PCI): “Iranian rugs, for example, are generally accepted as being of high quality, while Iran itself [and its products in general, for that matter] often suffers from a negative image” (p. 111).

The next section presents a critical review about the representation of each of these conceptual frontiers of the country image construct in empirical research.

2.1. Country image (CI)

Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) argue that country image comprises two dimensions: a cognitive component, which “includes consumers’ [informational] beliefs about a particular country,” and an affective component, which “describes [consumers’ feelings or emotions toward the country and therefore] the country’s emotional value to the consumer” (pp. 733–734). They also argue that several authors have inadvertently used a conative component (“capturing consumers’ behavioral intentions [or actual behavior] with regard to the sourcing country”) to represent country image, but “[t]he conative facet (intended/actual behavior toward the country) represents an outcome of these two [i.e., of the cognitive (beliefs) and the affective (feelings or emotions) components] and, hence, is a separate construct” (p. 736). Therefore, the conative component (e.g., intention to visit the country or to invest in the country) should not be included in the conceptual definition of country image, since it is a consequence of country image—but several studies have inadvertently ignored this recommendation.

Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 193) defined country image as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country.” They measured the construct along three dimensions:

- political—democratic versus dictatorial system, civilian versus military system, free market versus centrally planned system;
- economic—standard of living, stability of economic environment, quality of products (but this indicator inadvertently confuses PCI with CI), existence of a welfare system, level of labor costs, economic development; and
- technological—level of industrialization, level of technological research, level of literacy, mass-produced vs. handcrafted products, exporter vs. importer of agricultural products.

Martin and Eroglu’s (1993) scale may be appropriate to compare or rank countries along the proposed dimensions, but it may not be suitable to test consequences of country image – such as, perceived quality of foreign products – since some of the facets (e.g., the political

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