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The Impact of Cognitive and Affective Country Image on Consumers' Rational and Experiential Purchases

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Drawing on a sample of over 1,200 consumers throughout Mainland China, this research examines how cognitive and affective country image influence consumer judgment of and purchase intention toward rational and experiential products. The findings demonstrate that the impact of country image on consumer purchase intention is mediated by general and category product image. Particularly, the impact of cognitive country image on category product image is fully mediated by general product image in both rational and experiential purchases. However, affective country image has a direct impact on category product image in experiential purchases but not in rational purchases.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has long shown that a product's country-of-origin often influences consumers' product judgment and purchase intentions (e.g., Bilkey and Nes 1982). However, it is unclear whether country image influences different types of purchase (e.g., rational vs. experiential purchases) in a similar way. For example, a young professional is thinking of buying a new car and needs to decide whether to buy a German, Japanese, Korean, or American one. At the same time, this person would also like to purchase some athletic apparel for leisure activities and is faced with a number of brands from these same four countries. Does the image of each country influence consumer judgment of automobiles the same way as it influences the judgment of athletic apparels, to what extent and how does country image influence purchase intentions?

In order to answer these questions, we develop a framework to examine how country image influences consumer product judgment and purchase intention for rational and experiential products. We differentiate and examine two distinct dimensions of country image i.e., cognitive and affective country image. Cognitive country image represents consumers' beliefs about a country's industrial development and technological advancement, whereas affective country image relates to consumers' affective response to a country including its government, policies, culture and people (e.g., Laroche et al. 2005). Given that different consumption patterns and thinking systems exist for rational and experiential purchases (e.g., Novak and Hoffman 2009), we expect that cognitive and affective country image influence consumers' product judgment and purchase intentions differently in rational and experiential purchases. The majority of research in the area of country image has largely focused on consumers' cognition of a country and how such cognition influences evaluation of product quality (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995). Differentiating between affective and cognitive country image therefore makes it possible to closely examine the relative effect of consumer thoughts and feelings toward a country in light of both rational and experiential purchases.

In order to examine the effect of cognitive and affective country image on consumer product judgment, we include the construct of product image in our research framework. Distinct from country image, product image refers to consumers' general perceptions or beliefs of a country's products (e.g., Parameswaran and Pisharodi 1994). Consumers often associate some stereotypical beliefs of product attributes with a country's product image. For example, they may believe that U.S. products are innovative. Previous research has found that several product image dimensions such as innovativeness, design, prestige, workmanship and serviceability exist across different product categories and researchers use these dimensions to measure the general product image associated with a particular country (e.g., Han and Terpstra 1988). However, as products are category specific, consumers may not associate the same stereotypical attribute beliefs with all product categories from a particular country. For example, Nagashima (1977)

maintains that a country's distinctive product image is strongly associated with specific product categories. Therefore, it is necessary to consider category product image, in addition to the general product image of a country when assessing the overall country-of-origin effect. Particularly, does general and category product image mediate the relationship between cognitive and affective country image and purchase intention? If this is the case, would the effects potentially differ in rational and experiential purchases?

Based on the literature of the country-of-origin effect (e.g., Bilkey and Nes 1982) and the affect-as-information theory (e.g., Pham 1998), we propose that both cognitive and affective country image influence general product image which in turn affect category product image, leading to consumer purchase intention in rational purchases. We also expect that general and category product image sequentially fully mediate the effect of cognitive and affective country image on consumer purchase intentions. However, in experiential purchases, we predict that affective country image has a direct impact on category product image in addition to the mediated effect through general product image, and category product image also mediates the effect of affective country image on consumer purchase intentions.

Data were collected from adult consumers in major cities from five different regions of China, i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Qingdao, Shenyang and Wuhan, with approximately 20% of the respondents coming from each of the five cities. We selected a major shopping center or department store in each city and used a mall intercept technique to recruit participants. Upon agreeing to participate in this study, the respondents were randomly assigned to complete a survey based on their perceptions of U.S., German, Japanese, or South Korean automobiles and athletic apparels. 1,257 participants completed the questionnaires. The median age group was between 18 to 24 years (ranging from 18 to 50+) and the median monthly family income ranged between 2,000 – 4,000 RMB. We chose Japan, South Korea, the U.S.A. and Germany as the target countries because they are the four largest trading nations of China. The two product categories were selected based on focus group studies and a pre-test. The results of these studies suggest that Chinese consumers consider automobiles to represent more of a rational purchase and athletic apparels to be more of an experiential purchase. Items measuring cognitive and affective country image, general product image and purchase intention were adapted from the existing scales of Nagashima (1977), Laroche et al., (2005), and Martin and Eroglu (1993). We also measured the category product image of automobiles and athletic apparels. The research instrument was translated into Chinese followed by a back-translation procedure to verify its status.

We first assessed the measurement models for the automobile and athletic apparel samples respectively and both models provided a good fit. We then assessed the structural models by using eight samples with different

countries and different product categories. The models depict good levels of fit for the corresponding data (GFIs range between .90 and .92, CFIs between .94 and .96, and RMSEAs between .04 and .06). For each sample, the hypothesized relationships were significant. Further analyses also confirmed the proposed mediated relationships in all the samples except for the U.S. samples. The U. S. automobile sample showed that cognitive country image had a direct impact on general product image, whereas the U.S. athletic apparel sample showed that affective country image did not have a direct impact on general product image.

The current research shows that affective country image influences consumer product judgment and purchase intention differently in experiential and rational purchases. Affective country image seems to have more direct impact on consumers' judgment of a product category from that country and subsequently their purchase intentions, which provides managerial implications for marketers.

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