The Role of Prototypical Brand Image on Shaping Country Image and Product Quality
Evaluation: A Cross-Cultural Examination

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Keywords: Prototypical Brand Image, Country Image, Product Quality

Background and Objectives "Creating a strong country image" is of immense interest for companies and governments, especially in countries whose images are less distinctive (van Ham, 2001). Yet, very few studies have examined its specific antecedents empirically despite the proven importance of country image in consumers' product evaluation. As an important antecedent of country image, this study paid attention to the role of a corporate brand that most represents the country, referred to as prototypical brand, in shaping country image. Since the role of the prototypical brand (e.g., Samsung) in creating positive image will be critical in newly industrialized countries (NIEs), this study will examine in the context of Korea. Built on prototype, schema, and cue theories, this study proposes a research model that examines the impact of prototypical brand image on shaping the overall country image (i.e., macro country image) and product-specific country image (i.e., micro country image), which influences consumers' evaluation of product quality of Korean cosmetics and empirically tests the model with the U.S. and Chinese consumers. This study tests the model in two cultures to see if the proposed model is robust across two cultures: high collectivism and individualism cultures.

Research Framework and Hypotheses: When individuals lack substantial information about a given country, they may rely on factors available to them to form their perception of the country. According to schema theory, existing schemata determine how new information is structured, organized, and interpreted. This study posits that prototypical brand image serve as schemata for consumers to infer Korea's macro and micro image. In addition, prototype theory assumes that people determine the attributes of a category based on prototypical exemplars. That is, to increase cognitive processing efficiency, individuals may categorize the prototype (brand) and the object (country image) together. This can give way to potential transfer of associations from prototypical brands to the brand's country of origin in the minds of consumers. Further, drawing on schema and prototype theories, we argue that if prototypical brands in a country become linked to a country image in the consumer's mind, associations connected to the entire country image may be carried over to the product-specific country image (i.e., micro country image). Taken together, this study hypothesizes: The prototypical brand image of a country positively influences its *macro* country image (H1) and *micro* country image (H2). Macro country image positively influences its micro country image (H3).

This study further postulates links from macro and micro country image to product quality evaluation based on cue theory. That is, country image functions as an extrinsic cue of the product (e.g., Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Merunka, 2007) from which consumers infer

information about the product's quality. Based on this, this study posits: *Macro* country (H4) and *micro* country image (H5) enhance the perception of quality of products from the country.

This study further proposes cultural differences in the proposed model because of frame of reference and ways of thinking differ by two cultures. That is, while collectivistic consumers (i.e., Chinese consumers) tend to seek an external frame of reference and have holistic view while individualistic consumers (i.e, the U.S. consumers) tend to adopt more of an internal frame of reference and have discrete view (Heine, 2003). That is, East Asians tend to experience the world more from the perspective of those around them and more attentive to contextual information. Doney et al. (1998) also suggested that consumers in a culture of collectivism and high uncertainty avoidance (i.e., China) are more likely to form trust via a transference process (i.e., trustor draws on proof sources from which trust is transferred to a target) than are consumers in a culture of individualism and low uncertainty avoidance (i.e., U.S). Based on these, Chinese consumers may infer more from prototypical brand (i.e., external frame of reference, contextual cue, and proof source of trust) than the U.S. consumers do. Based on this, H6: The positive links of H1, H2 and H3 will be moderated by culture such that the relationships will be stronger among Chinse consumers than the U.S. consumers.

Method: A total of 500 data were collected from the U.S. (250) and Chinese (250) consumers ages 20 and older via a professional online survey firm that ensured the representation of diverse age, education, and income levels of respondents. Constructs included in this study were measured by multi-item scales adapted from previous studies. Respondents were asked to choose one Korean brand that best represents Korea among six Korean global brands given (Samsung, LG, Hyundai, Kia, Daewoo, and Amore Pacific) and answer the subsequent 15 items measuring prototypical brand image with the chosen brand in mind. Psychometric properties of the measures (i.e., reliability, discriminant validity, etc.) were good to test the proposed model.

Results and Implications: The findings of structural equation modelling largely supported the proposed framework (Figure 1), except H4. The findings confirmed image transfers from prototypical brands to macro (H1) and micro country image (H2), and from macro country image to micro country image (H3). Only micro country image of Korea positively influenced the quality evaluation of Korean cosmetics (H5). As anticipated, H1 (.57*** (US) vs .77***(China)) and H2 (.24*** (U.S) vs .49***(China)) links were stronger among Chinese than among the U.S consumers. Conversely, H3 (.57***(U.S.) vs .34***(China)) were stronger among American than Chinese consumers. The findings collectively suggest that prototypical brand image (i.e., Samsung) does help in shaping overall country image (i.e., Korea) as well as product-category specific country image (i.e, Korean cosmetic industry), and varying degrees exist in such impacts by cultures. Useful implications for practitioners and policymakers, especially in NIEs, and multiple theoretical implications of this study were discussed based on the findings.
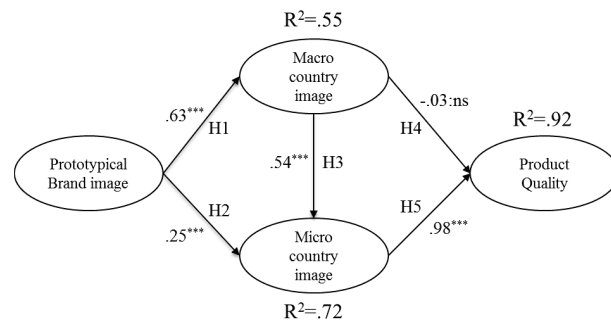
Figure 1. SEM results