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A means-end-chain (MEC) perspective of country of origin (COO) effects among elites in emerging Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This is a first quantitative study to test to what extent the MEC-based product COO images influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions towards local and foreign made products across different product categories. The study focused on two product types namely hedonic and utilitarian. Firstly, the study investigated the COO effects on consumer evaluation of local and foreign (hedonic vs. utilitarian) products in terms of product attributes, perceived consequences and personal values. Thereafter, the effect of two antecedents (consumer ethnocentrism and consumer need for uniqueness) on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions were also investigated. The data for the study was gathered via a self-administered survey conducted in Sri Lanka among 311 elite professionals. The hypothesis and a conceptual framework were developed. The data is currently being analysed.

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Key Words: Country of Origin Effects; Means-End-Chain Theory; Local vs. Foreign; Elite Consumers; Sri Lanka; Survey.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The academic literature that focuses on the influence of perceived COO on consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions has a long history that dates back to 1960 (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Since then over 1600 pieces of research have been carried out to investigate the link between products and place related images that consumers attached to products focusing on variety of aspects (Papadopoulos, 2012). Nevertheless, Samiee, Shimp and Sharma (2005), Samiee (2010), Samiee and Leonidou (2011) and Usunier (2011) have argued that in the era of globalisation, the COO cue has become largely irrelevant. Samiee et al. (2005) also emphasises that consumers do not seek COO knowledge or possess limited accurate knowledge of product origins. Usunier (2011) also argues that COO research needs to shift from examining the effect of manufacturing origin to brand origin effects.

Nevertheless, in the light of the growing criticisms of COO research, Samiee and Leonidou (2011, p.82) call for future COO research to integrate "theories established in other disciplines such as international business, consumer psychology or strategic management and to transfer them to explain CO (O) effects".

A study by Khan, Bamber and Quazi (2012) points out a very powerful yet largely ignored theory in COO research that can be used to explain why consumers hold varied attitudes towards products made in different countries, namely the Means-End-Chain (MEC) theory developed by Gutman (1982). The MEC theory suggests that consumers perceive products as a means through which they can achieve their end goals (Gutman, 1982). However, except for the study by Khan et al. (2012), the research on COO effects lacks any serious attempt that has explored to what extent MEC theory can be utilised to develop a deeper understanding of how consumers evaluate local versus foreign products belong to different product categories and purchase occasions. Thus, building on the work of Khan et al. (2012), this study seeks to integrate the MEC theory, to determine how products that originate locally and in foreign countries are perceived by consumers.

The study will be conducted in emerging Sri Lanka. During the last few years, the country context of Sri Lanka has changed rapidly. With the end of the ethnic conflict, the macro

economic conditions of Sri Lanka have improved (C.B.S.L., 2014) . Even though the country is classified as a middle-income country, Sri Lanka maintains a strong growth rate (about 5% per year) (C.B.S.L., 2014). For international marketers, two significant opportunities exist in the emerging Sri Lankan market. Firstly, the rise of consumer demand for different types of consumer goods such as fashion, electronics and food in Sri Lanka provides firms particularly those manufacture such goods to target Sri Lankan consumers, particularly the elites who have the ability to purchase imported goods at a higher price. Secondly, the combination of the healthy economic and political environment, growth in infrastructure, the strong government support given to investors in Sri Lanka, provides international marketers a profitable opportunity to target consumers and gain entry into Sri Lanka at a lower cost, compared to other emerging nations in south Asia such as China and India (Rodrigo et. al., 2011).

Thus, it is expected that the findings of the present study will provide valuable insights for marketers seeking lucrative markets outside BRIC and will enable them to determine how COO can be utilised to target elites in emerging markets.

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Country of origin effects – A tale of five decades

In general, findings of COO studies suggest that consumers demonstrate a hierarchy of bias where products made in developed countries are perceived to be better than products made in less developed countries. On the other hand, it has also been found that consumers in some countries rate products made in their home country favourably than those made in other countries (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). This tendency has been found in consumers from Japan, Germany, and USA. Furthermore, consumers in developing countries also hold a more positive attitude towards products from developed countries than products from developing countries (Gao & Knight, 2007). Papadopoulos and Heslop (1993, p.67) argues that this is due to the belief that products made in developed countries are made by people with more refined taste, and are likeable, trustworthy and admirable for their role in world politics.

A study conducted by Papadopoulos (2012) which used content analysis to identify place related cues in over 6000 business and consumer magazines revealed that more than 80% of

all the ads contained at least one place cues. Furthermore, the COO "made in label" is a legal requirement in some countries and for some products it is used as a marketing tool that enables marketers to leverage strong country images for the products. All these examples signal that the "made in" label still plays a significant role in the field of international marketing. However, the area is suffering from many conceptual, methodological discrepancies that need to be addressed by future researchers.

2.2. Means- end- chain (MEC) theory

Means-end-chain (MEC) theory suggests, "All consumer actions have consequences and consumers learn to associate particular consequences with particular actions" (Gutman, 1982, p.61). This suggests that consumers associate different meanings which are personally relevant with products or services (Ha and Jang, 2013). Thus, the actions of each individual in the same situation will vary according to the meanings attached. On the other hand, the consumers may utilise the personally relevant meanings in selecting products or services to satisfy their different needs (Ha & Jang, 2013). Overall, the MEC theory focuses on the links between products' attributes, perceived consequences and personal values that consumers desire through products and services (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

The MEC consists of three level of cognition structure, namely attributes, perceived consequences and values (Gutman, 1982; Wu and Fu, 2011; Nunkoo & Ramkisson, 2009). Moreover, Olson and Reynolds (1983) modified the components of MEC by including sub-levels under each component. Thus in the extended MEC, the attributes consist of abstract and concrete attributes. The perceived consequences include functional and psychological consequences. Finally, the personal values include instrumental and terminal values.

However, to date no quantitative study has been conducted to test to what extent the MEC-based product COO images influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions towards local and foreign made products across different product categories. Therefore, in the present study MEC theory will be integrated to determine to what extent the MEC based product image perceptions influence elite Sri Lankan consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions of local versus foreign products.

In the following sections, key hypotheses that will be tested utilising the MEC theory as a guiding lens will be presented.

2.3. Attitude and purchase intentions of products local vs., foreign products

Attitude towards a product is defined as "consumers' overall evaluative judgment of a product's attributes, such as style, brand, and quality" (Erdogan & Uzkurt, 2010, p.394). COO is considered as one of the cues that affects consumer product evaluations (Elliott & Cameron, 1994; Mitchell& Greatorex, 1990; Watson & Wright, 2000). Kinra (2006) suggests that consumers tend to generalise their attitudes towards products from a given country based on their familiarity, experiences with country background and product attributes such as technological superiority, quality, and value for money, status and esteem. However, many meta-analyses have indicated that COO effects are stronger for attitude and quality than for purchase intentions (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Lim et al., 1994, Bilkey & Nes, 1982).

On the other hand, intentions refers to an individual's "sense of his or her conscious plan to exert effort to carry out a behaviour" (Eagly and Chaiken , 1998, p.68), Thus, purchase intentions indicate the possibility of planning or buying a product/service in future (Wu, Yeh, & Hsiao, 2011). As per Trandis (1997) intentions refer to self-instructions to conduct actions to accomplish certain goals . On the other hand, intentions indicate to what extent individuals are committed or willing to make an effort to perform behaviour (Ajzen 1991; Webb & Sheeran, 2005).

In the context of consumer behaviour and psychology, it has long been established that consumers' behavior directly depends on their attitude about the behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Accordingly, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) argue that it should be expected that COO effects are stronger for attitudes than buying behavior, due to other external factors such as budget constraints. In effect, even though consumers may like a product very much and prefer to buy it, they may not be able to afford it. Josiassen and Harzing (2008, p. 265) acknowledge this situation and suggest that "any good research design in COO research will need to anticipate and accept that COO has a stronger effect on consumers' product evaluations than on their purchase intentions. Against this backdrop, it is hypothesised that

H1a: There is a significant positive relationship between attitudes towards local products and purchase intentions towards local products.

H1b: There is a significant positive relationship between attitudes towards foreign products and purchase intentions towards foreign products.

2.4. MEC component I – Product attributes

Simply, attributes can be defined as "features or aspects of products or services" (Valette-Florence & Rapacchi, 1991, p.31). These attributes provides a direction and foundation to product evaluations. According to Gengler, Mulvey, and Oglethorpe, (1999), attributes include concrete meanings, which may include physical or perceptual characteristics of products.

In the context of COO research, findings indicate that consumer perceptions of product attributes differ according to the COO of the products (Khan et al., 2012; Kaynak et al., 2000; Watson & Wright, 2000). Kaynak et al. (2000, p.1227) also suggest that consumers "weigh domestic and foreign made product attributes differently and choose the combination of product features which are found optimum and most attractive with given resources of the consumers". Kaynak et al. (2000) found that products with developed COO are associated with attributes such as good or very good quality, performance and workmanship.

Conversely, products made in developing countries were less desirable in quality. Moreover, electronic goods from Japan, foods from USA, fashion products from England, USA and Germany, and household goods from England, Germany and USA were perceived favourably (Kaynak et al., 2000). Similarly, in their study, Khan et al. (2012) found that cars, stereos, watches and household electronic appliances from Japan and Germany were regarded as high quality and reliable products. Furthermore, watches and banking services in Switzerland were rated high in terms of luxuriousness and products made in Japan were considered to be value for money (Khan et al., 2012). Against this backdrop it is hypothesized that

H2a: There is a significant positive relationship between product attributes of local products and attitudes towards local products.

H2b: There is a significant positive relationship between product attributes of foreign products and attitudes towards foreign products.

2.5. MEC – component II - Perceived consequences

Perceived consequences are in the middle of the MEC and have a higher level of abstraction than attributes (Gutman, 1982). Perceived consequences are defined as physiological or psychological outcomes that a consumer may desire to gain by consuming products in a specific context (Gutman, 1982). They are the results that a consumer may perceive because

of product use by consumers (Vriens & Hofstede, 2000). On the other hand, it is assumed that consumer values act as guidance for these desired consequences (Gutman, 1982).

Concerning the local products, it has been found that local products are bought due to ethnocentric benefits such as protect domestic manufacturers, help local economy (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). On the other hand, concerning foreign products, Batra et al., (2000) found that consumers in developing nation's desire foreign made products, not only because of high quality, but also due to the symbolic values such as status. Khan et al. (2012) and Kinra (2006) who found that consumers in developing nations associate products made in foreign countries with self-identity, image and prestige further support these findings. On the other hand, Kumar, Lee and Kim (2009) found that Indian consumers' preferences behind local brands are driven by emotional benefits rather than benefits related to quality. Kumar et al. (2009) also found that consumers' attitudes towards perceived emotional value and quality attached with American (foreign) products have a negative impact on their attitudes towards local brand. Against this backdrop, it is hypothesised that

H3a: There is a positive relationship between consumer evaluations of perceived consequences of local products and attitudes towards local products.

H3b: There is a positive relationship between consumer evaluations of perceived consequences of foreign products and attitudes towards foreign products.

2.6. MEC - component III - Personal values

The highest level of abstraction of the MEC consists of values. Following Rokeach (1973), the MEC subdivides values into two categories, namely instrumental and terminal values. Instrumental values refer to "beliefs about desired modes of action, such as being independent, ambitious or honest" (Allen, Ng, &Wilson, 2002, p.111).On the other hand, terminal values refer to the end goals or final states of existence such as "freedom, comfortable life, and mature love" (Allen, et al., 2002, p.111).

In the context of COO effects, very few studies have attempted to investigate if there is a relationship between personal values and attitude towards foreign products and consumer intention to seek COO when making purchase decisions. Among these very few studies, the study conducted by Balabanis, Muller and Malewar (2002) which employed the personal values scale of Schwartz (1992) showed that there is a strong relationship between consumer

personal values and attitude towards products' COO and purchase intention. Furthermore, most of the studies have focused on the relationship between social values and personal values.

However, no prior study has investigated to what extent elite consumers' personal values influence their attitudes towards product COO and purchase intentions. Hence, in the present study, to what extent elite Sri Lankan consumers' personal values exert an influence on their attitude towards local versus foreign made products and purchase intentions of local versus foreign made products will be investigated.

H4a: There is a positive relationship between personal values that consumers attach to local products and attitudes towards local products.

H4b: There is a positive relationship between personal values that consumers attach to foreign products and attitudes towards foreign products.

2.7. Moderating effect of consumer traits on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions of local versus foreign made products

Pharr (2005) suggests that COO effects on consumer product evaluation are influenced by endogenous and exogenous variables. While endogenous variables explain traits that are within consumers that affect consumer product evaluations, exogenous variables refer to variables that are outside a consumer, but affect consumer product evaluations. These include factors such as countries' economic development (Pharr, 2005). In the present study the effect of two such consumer traits, namely consumer ethnocentrism, consumer need for uniqueness, will be investigated. The following section will present the hypotheses that will be tested in line with these factors along with a brief discussion of literature from which the hypotheses were derived.

2.7.1. Consumer ethnocentrism (CE)

CE entails the general tendency among consumers to avoid buying products made in foreign countries, since buying foreign products negatively affects the local economy, contributing to unemployment (Shimp & Sharma 1987). On the other hand, non-ethnocentric consumers evaluate products on the basis of multiple cues regardless of product COO (Watson and Wright, 2000).

In the context of emerging nations, Bandyopadhy et al. (2011) and Mockaitis, Salciuviene and Ghauri (2013), Batra et al.(2000) ethnocentrism influences consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. Moralities, et al (2013) also found that CE has the ability to explain a larger proportion of the differences in consumer evaluation of product attributes than demographic variables. They also found that COO of product is more important for ethnocentric consumers than non-ethnocentric consumers and ethnocentric consumers evaluate domestic products more positively than non-ethnocentric consumers do. Therefore, concerning ethnocentrism and consumer attitudes towards local and foreign made products, it is hypothesised that

H5a: There is a positive relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and attitudes towards local products.

H5b: There is a negative relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and attitudes towards foreign products.

2.7.2. Consumer need for uniqueness (CNFU)

CNFU is defined as the trait of pursuing differences relative to others, through the acquisition, utilisation and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's "self-image and social-image" (Tian, Bearden and Hunter., 2001, p.52). Concerning products made in different countries, Batra et al. (2000) indicate that Indian consumers prefer American products due to their modernity and non-conformity with traditional values. With reference to global elites, Hassan and Katsanis (1991) suggest that global elite consumers tend to purchase products that are exclusive and that differentiate them from general consumers. He further suggests that global elites express a need for exclusivity (a form of displaying uniqueness) and tend to select products that fit with this exclusive image Focusing on COO effects, Kumar et al. (2009) found that CNFU has a direct positive relationship to Indian students' attitudes towards foreign products. Their findings indicated that when there is a higher need for uniqueness, Indian consumers have a positive attitudes towards products made in USA, compared to local brands.Therefore, concerning attitudes towards local products and the effect of the consumer need for uniqueness, it is hypothesised that

H6a: There is a negative relationship between consumer need for uniqueness and attitudes towards local made products.

H6b: There is a positive relationship between consumer need for uniqueness and attitudes towards foreign made products.

3.0. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The figure 1 presents the conceptual frameworks of this study.

FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE.

4.0. METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was gathered via a self-administered survey conducted among 311 elite Sri Lanklan consumers in Colombo. The respondents were selected based on the database held by Sri Lanka Telecom and resplondents were selected using a simple random cluster sampling approach. The directory consists of 600 pages with 50 names per page. Of these, 12 pages belong to Colombo district were selected randomly and the questionnaires were send to them using multiple distributions modes (in person, mail, and email) appropriately. All to gather 600 questionnaires were distributed and 311 usable questionnaires were returned yielding a 51.8% response rate.

5.0. COO AND PRODUCT TYPE SELECTION

Following the approach used by Martin and Cerviño (2011), a pre-test was carried out among 25 elite respondents to select most suitable COOs based on consumer familiarity and five COOs were selected namely, Sri Lanka, India, Sri Lanka, China, USA and South Korea. On the other hand, the MEC based COO perceptions were measured for two product categories, namely hedonic and utilitarian products. Hedonic products (also referred to as symbolic or social identity products) are products, which are purchased and consumed to satisfy symbolic needs of a consumer (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Ryu et al. 2006). In contrast, utilitarian products refer to products that satisfy the functional or practical needs of consumers. (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Based on a pre-test, clothes were selected to represent hedonic products and washing machines were selected to represent utilitarian products.

6.0. QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT

The questionnaire for the primary study was developed following the questionnaire development process outlined Wilson (2006). The questionnaire involved five parts. Part I gathered the demographic data. Part II and Part III focus on clothes and washing machines. Considering each product, focusing on five COO's that are of interest of the present study, the respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions on (a) product attributes, (b) perceived consequences (c) personal values, (d) attitudes and (e) purchase intentions . In the part IV, the respondents were asked to indicate their need for uniqueness. Finally, in the part V, the consumers were asked to indicate their level of ethnocentrism for each product. All items were measured using likert scales anchored 1 to 5.

7.0. KEY CONSTRUCTS AND MEASUREMENTS

The table 1 present the key constructs and measurements of this study.

TABLE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE

8.0. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION

It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge of COO by providing a mean-end –chain based perspective on the role played by COO on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Moreover, from a managerial perspective, it is believed that the findings generated from this study will assist MNEs seeking new markets to determine how elite consumers in an emerging market utilise COO as a means to achieve their desired end goals or values. Such insights will also enable MNEs to determine how COO could be utilised as an effective element in in their marketing strategies to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage

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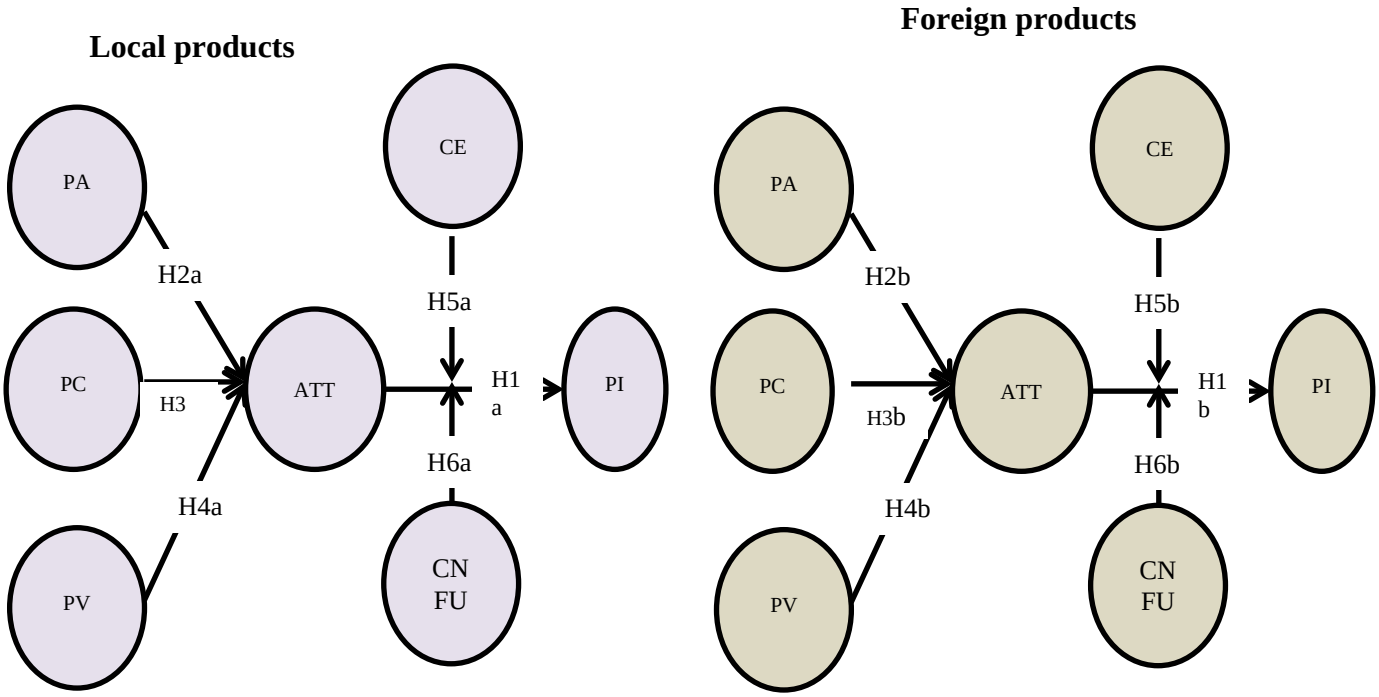
FIGURE -1



PA= Product Attributes; PC= Perceived Consequences; PV = Personal Values; ATT= Attitudes; PI= Purchase Intentions; CE = Consumer Ethnocentrism; CNFU = Consumer Need for Uniqueness

TABLE 1

Construct	**Source**	**No of items**	**Example of items used**
Product attributes	Pilot study	5 items	Clothes made in country X are high quality.
Perceived consequences	Pilot study	5items	Clothes made in country X enhance my appearance.
Personal values	Kahle and Kennady, 1988	9items	buying products made in country X gives me a Sense of accomplishment
Attitudes	Ajzen (1991)	5items	I love it when (clothes/washing machines) made in (country X) are available, when I am looking for (clothes /washing machines).
Purchase Intention	Ajzen (1991) Dodds et al., (1991).	4 items	The likelihood I would purchase clothes washing machines made in (country X) is very high.
Consumer Need for uniqueness	Tian et al. (2001)	12 items	I tend to buy products to create an everyday image that cannot be emulated.
Conmsumer Ethnocentrism	Shimp and Sharma (1987)	17 items	Sri Lankans should buy Sri Lankan clothes/washing machines instead of imports..