

Effects of country of origin and country brand attitude on nonprescription drugs

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Abstract Using Korean college students as a sample, this study explores the role of country of origin and country brand attitude on purchase intention of nonprescription drugs. The results showed that country of design and country of assembly have significant effects on quality perception and purchase intention of nonprescription drugs between the United States and China, and country brand attitude has significant effects on the purchase intention of nonprescription drugs between United States and Germany, and between China and Malaysia, according to the degree to which consumers have a favourable attitude toward the specific country brand.

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INTRODUCTION

Why do people prefer a particular country to another one? Is there any way to explain why consumers prefer products from some countries to those from other countries? When consumers are in the purchase environment, they sometimes use country information as a simple cue of decision making. It is true that some countries have strong associations with certain products¹ — the standard example is that car buyers often prefer Japanese cars to US cars when other conditions are equal.² Even though Russia has a low-quality image for general products, caviar

from Russia is regarded to be of a higher quality and a higher price than other countries' caviar.³ This situation can be applied to French wine and cheese, German beer and cars and Swiss chocolate and watches — these are favoured simply because of the country where the products originated. The country of origin plays a leading role in brand identification for those products.

In this situation, we can raise a question. Are these country effects generalisable to all product categories? Specifically, is it effective when a consumer buys a medical product? Prior literature suggests that the effect of country of origin varies depending on the product categories,^{4–6} but there have been few studies relating country of origin to medical products. This study will examine the country of origin effects on nonprescription drugs using the concept of country brand attitude.

Country image has an important role as a country of origin information in marketplaces.

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It can be easily assumed that a positive country image benefits manufacturers, especially when the country image matches the product image. But this leads to another question: does the effect of country of origin still exist between countries both having positive images and matching images with the product from international consumer? The current study started with this question.

The main purposes of this study are: (1) to explore the country of origin effects on medical products, (2) to provide information about the role of country brand attitude between similar countries (ie United States vs Germany and China vs Malaysia), and (3) to examine effective information source of medical products. Finally, this study intends to help both marketing scholars and industry practitioners in suggesting localised marketing strategies for medical products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Country of origin

The effect of country of origin has been a popular issue in the advertising and marketing fields. It is said that country of origin is one of the important components constituting a product's brand identity.⁷ In the literature, we can find results that show that country of origin is identified as an important factor affecting the product or company images, quality perception and purchase intentions. Normally, country of origin information is used as an indicator of quality, and so country of origin information can lose power when other quality indicators are present.⁸ It is also supported that country of origin effect is applicable under low motivation.⁹

Specifically, country of origin cues have been found to influence consumers' quality perception in VCR products.¹⁰ In that study, the reasons why consumers give low importance to country of origin effect were examined, using both salesman and consumer samples. Conjoint analysis, however, leads to opposite empirical results from consumers' thoughts. Kleppe *et al.*¹¹ suggested that a country of origin strategy has benefits even if consumers of target markets do not have enough or do not know anything about the country of origin. There is other research stating that the

strategic use of country of origin is contextual.¹² Hsieh *et al.*¹³ suggested that corporate image and country image are among the main effects on brand purchase behaviour, and the sociodemographics and characteristics of national culture moderate the effects of certain product-image appeals.

Sometimes, the concept of brand origin is used considering its distinction from country of origin, and brand origin is defined as 'the place, region or country to which the brand is perceived to belong its target consumers'.¹⁴ Thode and Maskulka¹⁵ suggested the concept of place-based strategy as an extension of the country of origin strategies testing the possibility of vineyard-designated wines.

Country of origin is not always strong. There exist various moderating factors of country of origin. Cultural variation is an important factor in the country of origin effect.¹⁶ In individualist cultures, the home country product is favourably evaluated only when the product is superior to another country product, but in collectivist cultures, the home country product is favourably evaluated regardless of product superiority. Country of origin effect has a strong power in entering a new marketplace. Undesirable country of origin can negate the advantage of the first mover in the marketplace.¹⁷ Niss¹⁸ examined the country of origin effect with the product lifecycle using Danish products, and suggested that country of origin marketing is particularly important in the initial stage of the product lifecycle. Also, he stressed as a prerequisite that the image of product and country should be compatible.

In this regard, the single cue model has some problems in measuring the exact effect of country of origin. Lim and O'Cass¹⁹ suggested the importance of the culture of brand origin (COBO) over the country of origin as the most effective origin influence factor by consumers in the brand perception. Cultural origin was recognised more easily than country of origin. Thakor and Lavack²⁰ found effects of 'country of component source', 'country of manufacture' and 'country of corporate ownership'. In their study, country of manufacture was not effective in

evaluating product quality when the country of corporate ownership was added. Ahmed *et al.*²¹ examined country of origin effect using technological complexity and a multi-cue approach, and divided the country of origin into country of design and country of assembly. Kim²² used similar concepts like country of original branding (country of origin) and country of manufacturing (foreign direct investment). He investigated their impacts on market share in the perspective of brand equity. This research found that a country name like a Japanese name positively affected brand value in the car market.

In addition, county of origin effect varies depending on the product category. Generally, durable goods such as automobiles²³ and agricultural products²⁴ are regarded as more sensitive to a country of origin. Beverland and Lindgreen²⁵ examined the effect of country of origin through investigating the Norwegian fish industry in the Asian market. Ahmed *et al.*²⁶ broadened the adaptation of country origin effect to the service industry, such as a cruise line. Owing to the variations of the effect of country of origin in different product categories, Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran²⁷ have recommended further research of country of origin effects in various product categories. In that vein, this study extended product categories to examine the country of origin effect in the medical product category that was comparably neglected in country of origin studies, and specifically nonprescription drugs were chosen as a target product category. Compared to general medical products, nonprescription drugs (hereafter referred to by the acronym 'NPD') are commonly consumed in everyday life. It would be quite fruitful for marketing practitioners or academic scholars to investigate the NPD industry due to the growing importance of the health industry. According to the FCB grids Ratchford²⁸ suggested, a product like a headache remedy is classified as a think product and positioned in the middle of the involvement scale. This means that NPD belongs to the rational product category, but normally consumers do not process much information when deciding to purchase those products. These characteristics mean that

consumers use peripheral or heuristic cues — such as country of origin or country brand attitudes — rather than message arguments in information processing.

Based on the literature review, we divide the country of origin into two concepts such as country of design/development and country of assembly/manufacture and postulate the first set of hypotheses investigating country of origin effects on NPD products.

H₁₋₁: Favourable country of assembly/manufacture has a positive effect on quality perception and purchase intention of NPD products.

H₁₋₂: Favourable country of design/development has a positive effect on quality perception and purchase intention of NPD products.

Country brand

Nowadays, products have become standardised, and global companies have adopted the country brand concept as a differentiating marketing tool. Further, companies have become interested in the strategic applications of country brand because they now realise the power of the country brand to their companies or products. The concept of brand is extending the range of adaptation, from the brand as a product or company to the brand as a person, a culture and a country. The concept of brand, which originated from the marketing perspective, is now used from the individual to the country. In this study, we posit that a country can be marketed and branded like general products are, and so we will use the term 'country brand' to represent a country's equity, containing all assets an individual country has in the marketing perspective including country image.

From the points of view of marketing and advertising, the important concept representing country brand is country brand image, and researchers have recognised brand image research as crucial. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bird *et al.*²⁹ regarded brand image as just an attitude about a certain brand. Keller³⁰ has more recently

defined brand image as a 'perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory'. Keller also stressed the importance of brand associations, defined as 'the other information nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers'. Finally, Keller³¹ stressed the importance of favourable, strong and unique associations to build a strong brand image in the mind of consumers. This proposition can also be applied to the country brand image. Country brand image is generally defined as 'the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country'.³² Country brand image provides proper associations to consumers, and affects their behaviour.³³ Han³⁴ found that the country brand image functions as a halo effect and a summary effect. The halo effect is that the country brand image indirectly influences attitudes toward products through inferential beliefs; the summary effect refers to the accumulated product experience of a particular country over time. Kleppe *et al.*³⁵ saw country brand image as an associated knowledge structure that varies in uniqueness, favourability, strength and salience.

Country brand image is said to be a critical factor influencing decision making in product purchasing, business investing, changing residence and travelling.³⁶ Kotler and Gertner³⁷ also suggested that country brand image may be used as a heuristic cue for information processing and decision making. The important thing in managing country image is that the desired country image should be close to 'reality, believable, simple, appealing and distinctive'. The present study focused on this country brand image affecting NPD purchase intention especially focusing on countries having similarly favourable country brand images. Based on the discussions about country brand, country image, country of origin, we can postulate the second set of hypotheses.

H₂₋₁: People who chose the German rather than the US nonprescription drug will have a more positive attitude toward Germany.

H₂₋₂: People who chose the US rather than the German nonprescription drug will have a more positive attitude toward the US.

H₂₋₃: People who chose the Chinese rather than the Malaysian nonprescription drug will have a more positive attitude toward China.

H₂₋₄: People who chose the Malaysian rather than the Chinese nonprescription drug will have a more positive attitude toward Malaysia.

In addition to the investigation of country of origin effects, further explorations of particular international markets would be quite informative for marketing practitioners and academic scholars. Specifically, studies of information source are beneficial to marketers because marketing communication channels have great impact on consumers. Given the importance of communication strategy in the marketing of NPD and prescription drugs such as direct to consumer (DTC) advertising,³⁸ we can raise a research question to explore the most effective information source for heavy users of NPD products.

RQ: What are the important information sources for frequent users of nonprescription drugs?

METHOD

Sample selection

Asian consumers are regarded as the most image-conscious in the world.³⁹ Particularly, Koreans are sensitive to country of origin, and are more prejudiced against less favourable country products than Americans.⁴⁰ Another reason for selecting Korean sample stems from the growing potential of the Korean market. The Korean medical products market is the 10th largest market in the world at \$3.8bn, and the

market share of foreign companies is already over 40 per cent and still increasing.⁴¹ With respect to international marketers, this growing market could attract considerable attention, and research would be helpful to the marketers concerned. In this regard, this study selected Korea as a target country.

Country stimuli selection

Since the effects of country of origin between a favourable and an unfavourable country are confirmed among Korean consumers, it would be quite interesting to compare the favourable countries regarding the perspective of country of origin. Indeed, as far as could be ascertained by these authors, there is no research comparing countries having favourable images or between countries having less favourable images to a certain product.

Before the main test, a pre-test was conducted using a survey questionnaire to find out which countries are the most credible with respect to nonprescription drugs. Participants were asked to pick from a list of ten countries the two with the most credibility and the two with the least credibility with respect to purchasing nonprescription drugs. The ten countries on the list are the top ten largest trade partners with the United States except Korea, because this pre-test was completed by Korean consumers. Instead, the United States was included in this list. The list included Canada, China, Mexico, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Taiwan, France and Malaysia. NPD was described as pain relievers, cold remedies and digestives. Participants were also asked to list information sources that they frequently use. Overall, the United States scored the highest and Germany scored the second highest. China scored the lowest and Malaysia the second lowest. Based on the results from this pre-test, we refined our research model, the research hypotheses and the survey questionnaire, and selected the United States and Germany for the high-quality country of origin, and China and Malaysia for the low-quality country of origin as the target countries to be studied.

Data collection

We used an experimental design using self-reported data and additional survey methods to examine the effects of country of origin. Through a pre-test, the United States, Germany, China and Malaysia were chosen as target countries for this study, and South Korean consumers were surveyed for their attitude toward the countries and their purchase intentions. One-hundred and six Korean college students from a large South Korean university participated in the survey. The questionnaire was translated into Korean and was completed during class time.

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first section asked about various information sources from which NPD information may be obtained, such as television advertising, magazine advertising, the internet, press releases, acquaintances and pharmacists. The second section asked about country brand attitude for the United States, China, Germany and Malaysia. The third section asked about differences between the United States and China regarding quality perception and purchase intention. The last section included two pairs of purchase intentions of NPD between two countries (ie the United States vs Germany and China vs Malaysia).

A total of 106 respondents took part in the experiment. The mean age of the participants was 22.1 years. Among the 106 respondents, 44 were male (41.9 per cent) and 61 female (58.1 per cent), with one respondent not identified.

Research design

To test the hypotheses, this study used an experimental design using a within-group factorial design. For the set of first hypotheses, within-group factors were country of origin (country of assembly/manufacture vs country of design/development) and the dissimilar countries in the favourability of country brand (the United States vs China). Dependent variables were quality perception and purchase intentions of NPD products. For the second set of hypotheses, within-group factors were the pairs of the similar countries (Germany vs the United States and

China vs Malaysia), and dependent variables were attitude toward countries.

Measurement and instrument

Quality perception: Quality perception was measured by the single-item, seven-point Likert scale. The questionnaire asking about quality perception of the country's COD was 'I trust the quality of the NPD that the United States/China developed', and the questionnaire asking about quality perception of the country's COA was 'I trust the quality of the NPD that the United States/China manufactured'.

Purchase intentions: Purchase intention was measured by the single-item, seven-point Likert scale. The questionnaire asking about purchase intention of the country's COD was 'I have an intention to buy the NPD that the United States/China developed', and the questionnaire asking about purchase intention of the country's COA was 'I have an intention to buy the NPD that the United States/China manufactured'.

Attitude toward the country: The questionnaire asking about attitude toward country was 'to me, the United State/Germany/China/Malaysia seems like', and attitude toward the country was measured utilising a three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale such as favourable, good and positive. These measures of attitudes toward the country were adopted from prior brand attitude scales. The reliability scores of the three scales were 0.92 for the United States, 0.92 for China, 0.82 for Germany and 0.93 for Malaysia, respectively. The three country attitude scales were computed by the average of summated items, and used in data analysis.

RESULT

As Table 1 illustrates, when the COA and COD effects were evaluated, both COA and COD effects were statistically significant as between the United States and China, and there was no interaction effect between COA and COD. Hypotheses H_{1-1} and H_{1-2} were supported.

In general, as predicted by our hypotheses, country of origin was an important factor for consumers when purchasing NPD. MANOVA was used to test the joint effects between

purchase intention and two pairs of country brand attitudes. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the results of MANOVA, showing means, standard deviations and Hotelling's Trace, etc.

The multivariate test indicated that the effects were statistically significant for both the Germany-US and the China-Malaysia groups (Hotelling's $T = 0.09$, $F = 4.74$, $p < 0.05$ and Hotelling's $T = 0.12$, $F = 5.75$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). In individual effects of the first pair, attitudes toward brand Germany ($F = 8.85$, $p < 0.01$) were statistically significant, but attitudes toward the brand US ($F = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$) were not statistically significant. Hypothesis H_{2-1} was supported, and hypothesis H_{2-2} was rejected. In the second pair, both attitudes toward brand China ($F = 4.10$, $p < 0.05$) and brand Malaysia ($F = 4.22$, $p < 0.05$) were statistically significant. Both hypothesis H_{2-3} and hypothesis H_{2-4} were supported. This means that people who chose the NPD from Germany have a more positive attitude toward brand Germany, but people who chose the US NPD do not necessarily have a more positive attitude toward brand US. On the other hand, people who chose the NPD from China or Malaysia have a more positive attitude toward those country brands, respectively.

The research question was to find out which are the important information sources for frequent users of nonprescription drugs. Important information sources of NPD were pharmacists (mean = 5.52), acquaintances (mean = 4.46), press releases (mean = 3.35), television advertising (mean = 3.28), the internet (mean = 2.62) and magazines (mean = 2.40) in order, but through stepwise regression analysis, it was found that magazines were the only statistically significant information source for frequent users of NPD ($t = 2.62$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 4).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The data provided by 106 Korean consumers supported the hypotheses, and gave answers to the research question. The findings of the current study are: traditional COA and COD effects on quality perceptions and purchase intention were confirmed in NPD products (H_{1-1} and H_{1-2}), and

Table 1: Multivariate results and MANOVA table — US and China

Group		Quality perception			Purchase intention		
COA	COD	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
US	US	4.73	0.72	26	4.73	0.83	26
	China	3.81	1.44	27	3.37	1.62	27
	Total	4.26	1.23	53	4.04	1.45	53
China	US	3.81	1.24	27	3.56	1.28	27
	China	2.62	.94	26	2.54	1.17	26
	Total	3.23	1.25	53	3.06	1.32	53
Total	US	4.26	1.11	53	4.13	1.23	53
	China	3.23	1.35	53	2.96	1.47	53
	Total	3.75	1.34	106	3.55	1.47	106
Variables	Hotelling's trace	F					
COA	0.233	11.75*					
COD	0.260	13.13*					
COA × COD	0.038	1.92					
Effect	Dependent variables	d.f.	MS	F	Sig.		
COA	Quality perception	1	29.64	23.36	0.000		
	Purchase intention	1	26.68	16.74	0.000		
COD	Quality perception	1	29.64	23.36	0.000		
	Purchase intention	1	37.43	23.49	0.000		
COA × COD	Quality perception	1	0.53	0.42	0.519		
	Purchase intention	1	0.78	0.49	0.486		

* $p < 0.001$.

Table 2: Multivariate results and MANOVA table — Germany and United States

Group	Attitude toward Germany			Attitude toward the United States		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Germany	4.87	0.78	70	3.93	1.18	70
United States	4.39	0.78	36	3.97	1.17	36
Total	4.70	0.81	106	3.95	1.18	106
Effect	Dependent variables		d.f.	MS	F	Sig.
Purchase intention	Attitude toward Germany		1	5.43	8.85	0.004
	Attitude toward the United States		1	0.03	0.02	0.888

Hotelling's trace = 0.09, $F = 4.74$, $p < 0.05$.

country brand attitudes influenced the purchase intention of NPD products from favourable countries, with the exception of the United States (H_{2-1} , H_{2-3} and H_{2-4}). In addition, this study found that magazines represent the most important information source to frequent users of NPD among younger Korean consumers (RQ).

This study contributes to the growing literature on country of origin effects by extending the

investigation to medical products, and by using the concept of the country brand. First, COA (country of assembler, but meaning the country of manufacturer in this study) and COD were effective in the medical products. This result confirmed the existing propositions that highly industrialised countries (HICs) are evaluated more favourably than newly industrialised countries (NICs) as designers and assemblers of consumer

Table 3: Multivariate results and MANOVA table — China and Malaysia

Group	Attitude toward China			Attitude toward Malaysia		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
China	3.77	1.30	48	3.75	1.06	48
Malaysia	3.27	1.19	53	4.18	1.05	53
Total	3.51	1.26	101	3.98	1.07	101
Effect	Dependent Variables	d.f.	MS	F	Sig.	
Purchase intention	Attitude toward China	1	6.31	4.10	0.046	
	Attitude toward Malaysia	1	4.71	4.22	0.043	

Hotelling's trace=0.12, $F=5.75$, $p<0.01$

Table 4: Regression model – information source

Variables	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.23		5.71	0.000
Magazine	0.39	0.25	2.62	0.010

$R=0.25$, R -square=0.06, $F(1, 104)=6.87$, $N=106$, $p<0.05$.

products.⁴² The current study has academic implications in that the concepts of country of design and country of assembler also have an effect on NPD products among younger consumers.

Second, the findings of this study support the hypothesis that younger Korean consumers who chose to buy a certain country's NPD have a more positive attitude toward that country brand (such as Germany, China and Malaysia). Country of origin even worked between similarly developed countries with respect to medical products. This study failed to find the effects of attitudes toward the United States on purchase intention. This can be explained by the fact that some Korean university students have negative attitudes toward the US.⁴³ In this study, the mean score of attitudes toward the brand US was 3.95 — higher than the mean score of attitudes toward brand China (3.51), but lower than the mean score of attitudes toward brand Germany (4.70), and even below the mean score of attitudes toward brand Malaysia (3.95). It means that even though younger Korean consumers have a positive attitude toward the purchase intention of US NPD products, they did not have a positive attitude toward the brand US. This result

suggests a special need for US government officers and marketers to foster a favourable country brand image, in order to achieve success in international NPD markets.

Lastly, this study indicated the importance of magazine advertising in the Korean NPD market (RQ). This runs counter to the common belief that television is the most effective medium in advertising for almost all product categories in Korea.⁴⁴

This study provides some notable managerial implications for marketers of medical products. Marketers should consider their own country image as a brand when they launch or promote an NPD in international markets. As Chen and Pereira⁴⁵ recommended, if the product has a negative country brand image, it is better to hide country of origin information. On the contrary, positive country brand image should be taken advantage of by marketing efforts such as brand naming, advertising and sales promotion. In reality, marketers compete with similarly developed countries, not with less developed countries, particularly in the market of medical products. In this situation, it is crucial to develop a favourable country brand image to international consumers. This job is not limited to product

marketers; government officials should also understand the impact of country brand on product exports.

Another managerial implication that can be taken from the results of the current study is that global NPD marketers should consider magazine advertising as the first choice in the Korean market. Magazine advertising can be purchased at comparatively reasonable prices in Korea, and so this is quite an informative result.

There are some limitations to this study. The sampling might be a limitation — this study only used a student sample, and the target country was limited only to Korea. A clustered group of Korean students might have produced somewhat different behavioural patterns of NPD consumers from general populations, and could have weakened methodological robustness because country of origin effects are said to be consumer specific. Specifically, even though a traditional study could not find systematic differences between a student and a housewife sample,⁴⁶ it is suggested that a consumer sample instead of a student sample is required when a country of origin study deals with such variables correlated with age or education as consumer ethnocentrism.⁴⁷ Given, however, that the main variables of this study are purchase intentions and attitudes toward a country and college students are one of the core consumers of the NPD products, a student sample might be appropriate even though generalisation of the findings of this study is limited to younger consumers. To generalise the current results, replication of this study is strongly recommended both to a national sample and to other countries. In addition, this study did not control other variables that might influence the results, such as pre-existing knowledge about countries and past experiences of related products. Finally, it is also recommended to carry out further research on the country of origin effect in the general prescription drug market, for the upcoming opening of DTC advertising in the Korean drug market.

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