

An Evaluation of Malaysian Consumers' Perceptions Towards Products Made in Korea: An Asia Pacific Marketing Perspective

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⟨Abstract⟩

The objective of this paper is to examine the country of origin effect of products made in the Republic of Korea. The study focuses on the questions of the sources of information in evaluating products; the evaluation of specific product dimensions by Malaysian consumers; and consumers' assessment of different product categories. It reports on the findings of a survey conducted in which 244 responses were obtained. The most common product information source was found to be through advertisements in television and radio. Products made in Korea had been rated highly for its product style. Consumer electronics were generally found to be the popular preference of product category by Malaysian consumers. The managerial implications of our study are discussed and the limitations of the study are also examined.

Key Words: Korea, consumer behavior, consumer, Country of origin, Malaysia

I . Introduction

The impact of country of origin (hereafter called as COO) on the consumers perception of products has attracted significant attention from researchers and practitioners across the globe for decades (for example Schooler, 1965; Samiee, 1994; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Ahmed et al. 2003, Ahmed et al. 2002, and Ahmed and Xia Yang et al. 2003). Consumers even in the developing

countries have a multitude of options while choosing products. Consumer and marketing researchers have extended considerable effort to have a better understanding of such perceptual decisions are framed by consumers. It has been reported that COO may be used by consumers as an attribute to evaluate products (Johansson, Douglas and Nonaka, 1985; Hong. and Wyer, 1990; Parameswaran and Pisharodi, 1994). Secondly, consumers' attention and evaluation of other product dimensions may be influenced by COO, which may

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create a 'halo effect' (Erickson, Johansson and Chao, 1984; Han, 1989). Thirdly, COO may also act as a source of country stereotyping, directly affecting consumers' attitudes towards the brand of a country instead of through attribute ratings (Wright, 1975).

Existing research on "country-of-origin" has contributed substantial knowledge of consumer attitudes in various countries towards foreign products and matching marketing strategies. Further, it has provided significant insights into the importance of such knowledge for the determination of successful international marketing strategies. However, empirical research on the attitudes of consumers in developing countries towards foreign products, and associated marketing practices, is rather limited. Few conclusions and implications can be drawn from the existing research on country-of-origin effect, of consumers in developing countries. Firstly, most of these studies have been conducted in the USA with foreign students, on the assumption that foreign students in the USA behave similarly to the broader populations of their respective native countries (Samiee, 1994). Secondly, the few studies that have been undertaken outside the USA mostly included other industrialized countries in the West, and Eastern European countries (Bhuiyan, 1997). Expressing similar opinion, Leonidou *et al* (1999), while examining

the Bulgarian consumers' perceptions of products made in Asia-Pacific, assert that most researchers have adopted a general approach in their investigations, in the sense that they have examined consumers' perceptions of products made from a wide array of countries, thus minimizing the level of detail gained on specific countries or regions. With the exception of Japan and South Korea (e.g. Erickson *et al*, 1984; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Hong and Wyer, 1989; Kaynak and Cavusgil, 1983; Li and Wyer, 1994; Tse and Lee, 1993), other countries in the Asia Pacific region have received limited empirical attention.

Most studies have examined consumers' perceptions of products from a wide range of countries. While this may be helpful in undertaking a comparative analysis, it minimizes the details on a specific country. While a number of studies have been conducted on COO effects on consumers in a wider context, few comprehensive studies has been conducted relating to Korean made products and consumers' preference and perception in overseas markets. A thorough review of literature reports a study undertaken in South Korea that examines the impact of consumers' three cross-national individual difference variables — country-of-origin perceptions, consumer ethnocentrism, and country attitudes — on their responses and attitudes toward foreign advertisements and advertised products

(Moon and Jain 2002). Malaysian consumers' preferences and perceptions of products made in Republic of Korea (hereafter called Korea) has been chosen for analyses, as there is a growing evidence of an increasing involvement of regional cooperation between these two nations. Given the significant volume of Malaysia's imports from Korea (for some background information on Malaysia-Korea trade, see Appendix 1), the aim of this paper is to investigate the effect of COO on Malaysian consumers' perceptions. More specifically, this study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are the sources of information used by Malaysian consumers in evaluating products originating from Korea, and how does this differ in accordance with consumer demographics?
- How do consumers in Malaysia evaluate specific dimensions of products made in Korea and how do these factors vary in relation to consumer demographics?
- What is the Malaysian consumers' assessment of different product categories?

II . Literature Review

While, early studies in COO can be

traced back to 1960s, when one of the conceptualizations of the COO phenomenon was published by Nagashima (1970). He concluded that consumers' associate with a given country of origin as, "the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businesspersons and consumers attach to products of a specific country. This image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history, and traditions". Since then, a wealth of literature has been added to the study of COO effects. Samiee (1994) regards the country-of-origin effect as any influence or bias that consumers may hold, resulting from the country of origin of the associated product or service. The source of the effect "may be varied, some based on experience with a product(s) from the country in question, others from personal experience (e.g. study and travel), knowledge regarding the country, political beliefs, ethnocentric tendencies, (or) fear of the unknown".

Studies have mainly focused on reflecting consumers' general perceptions about the quality of products made in different counties (Leonidau *et al* 1999; Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995). For instance, Leonidau *et al* (1999) found that in Bulgaria, products made in Japan were liked the most, followed by products from Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and India. Cattin *et*

al (1982) found that the Americans favored West German products over French and British goods. Darling and Kraft (1977) found that consumers in Finland preferred West German goods to English goods, but that these were more highly regarded than French products. In another study, Baumgartner and Jolibert (1976) found that French consumers favored domestic products first, German second and British goods last. Zain and Yasin (1997) found that Uzbek consumers perceived products from Japan and USA as having higher quality than products from developing countries such as India and Indonesia. Similar results were reported in a study of the Azerbaijan market (Kaynak, Kara and Nakip, 1995) and the Polish market (Lascu and Babb, 1995).

Other consumer demographics may influence the exact nature of COO effects. For example, older consumers and females were found to provide higher ratings for foreign products (Schooler, 1971; Johansson *et al*, 1985). In another study, it was observed that respondents with college education viewed foreign products more positively than less educated respondents (Anderson and Cunningham, 1972; Dornoff, Tankersley and White, 1974; Wang, 1978). However, consumer demographics did not play a serious differentiating role in the evaluation of products from the five different countries

in a study under Bulgarian context (Leonidou *et al*1999).

The proximity of the sourcing country in relation to the importing country, both in physical and cultural terms, has been a determining factor in the consumer perceptions. Closer proximity tends to stimulate more favorable perceptions for that country's products (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Samiee, 1994; Wall and Heslop, 1986; Wang, 1978; Wang and Lamb, 1980). Similar results have been reported with respect to economic and political proximity (for example, Gaedeke, 1973; Iyer and Kalita, 1997). COO effects occur over a wide range of consumer and industrial products (Liefeld, 1993, Baughn and Yaprak, 1993; Samiee, 1994).

In summary, previous research suggests that the COO plays a significant role in overall product evaluation. There is an overwhelming support for the existence of COO effects on consumers' evaluations of products. COO has impacted consumers over many product categories; some other studies have also shown that COO effects may vary according to demographic variables, although there is lack of consensus in that regard. Finally, consumers seem to have a positive or a better perception of products from developed countries, as compared to products from developing countries.

III. Research Methodology

Malaysian consumer perceptions towards products made in Korea were measured on multiple-item scales drawn from previous research. For this purpose a survey was conducted among the Malaysian consumers. Our survey instrument was adopted from Leonidou *et al* (1999), who used multiple scaling to measure Bulgarian consumers perception towards, products made from a range of Asia Pacific countries. The scaling technique in the present study was revised. A number of other changes were made to suit the needs of the present study, for example, information on the ethnicity of the respondents was sought as Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society. Other instruments which also formed a basis of this survey included those developed by Darling (1981), Darling and Wood (1990) and Nagashima (1977). The survey instrument focused on the following areas:

- The sources of information for evaluating foreign products,
- Consumers evaluation of different product dimension,
- The product preferences of Malaysian consumers,
- Demographic profile of consumers,

As for the sources of information for

evaluating foreign products, alternative responses provided; included experiential knowledge, friends' opinion, packaging, television, radio, magazines, and salespeople. The sources of information were an adaptation from the instrument developed by Leonidou *et al* (1999). The list of the product dimensions examined included design, style, quality, branding, packaging, support services, delivery, price, and credit facilities. COO effects were assessed with respect to foodstuffs, household cleaning products, personal care items, clothing and footwear, furnishings, electrical appliances, and electronics. Another section of the questionnaire explored the demographic profile of the consumer in terms of gender, age, education, income, occupation and the racial background, considering that Malaysia is a multiracial society with people from three distinct ethnic backgrounds: Malay, Chinese and Indian.

The study was conducted among 244 consumers from Malaysia. Eligible respondents were individuals aged 18 and above, residing in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. This region comprises the city of Kuala Lumpur and the neighboring suburbs of Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Shah Alam and Klang. This region was chosen due to its proximity and the high density of population; it is home to over a million people and comprises major business and commercial activities. This

region is widely considered as representative of Malaysia and therefore the best alternative for generalizing the findings.

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data from the respondents. Six assistants were used as interviewers, under the close supervision of the researchers. The assistants were trained for a week prior to the data collection activity.

Data were collected by using the mall-intercept survey technique (Bush and Hair, 1985) on the main squares of Klang Valley region that also comprises Kuala Lumpur city's main shopping districts and complexes. While by no means perfect, the mall-intercept approach can result in "a sample, which, while not strictly representative, may nonetheless be relatively free of any systematic bias" (Douglas and Craig, 1983). The mall intercept technique has been used in a number of similar studies (for example; Balabanis *et al*, 2001; Andrews *et al*, 1999; Griffin *et al*, 2000).

All participants in the study were at least 18 years of age and voluntarily participated in a mall intercept study. To collect the data, shoppers were interviewed as they were leaving the shopping malls in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. Every third shopper was intercepted at various shopping malls in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia.

Shoppers were informed that the interviewer was interested in their perceptions of the current shopping trip and asked to respond to the questionnaire that was provided. Almost two-thirds of those consumers approached agreed to participate in the study, resulting in 244 usable questionnaires.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

Of the 244 respondents, 106 were males and the remaining 138 were female respondents. In terms of age grouping, almost half of them were between the age of 18 and 25 years. As for a grouping based on the respondents' educational qualifications, a third of the respondents had pre-university qualifications, while another third had obtained university degrees. In terms of ethnicity, over two-thirds of the respondents approached belonged to the Chinese race. Table 1 provides an overview of the respondent characteristics.

The study presents the results with respect to each of the research questions, namely,

- Product information sources;
- Evaluation of product dimensions; and
- Evaluation of product categories.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	106	43.4
Female	138	56.6
Total	244	100.0
Age		
18 25	120	49.2
26 35	55	22.5
36 45	32	13.1
46 55	23	9.4
56 and above	14	5.7
Total	244	100.0
Race		
Malay	46	18.9
Chinese	166	68.0
Indian	26	10.7
Others	6	2.5
Total	244	100.0
Education Level		
Completed Primary	26	10.7
Completed Secondary/SPM	37	15.2
College/Polytechnics/STPM	89	36.5
University (Bachelor's)	85	34.8
Postgraduate/Higher	7	2.9
Total	244	100.0

Product Information Sources

Respondents were asked to identify the sources of obtaining information for evaluating products made in Korea from the alternatives that were provided. The alternatives being, experiential knowledge; friends' opinions, packaging, television, radio, newspapers/ magazines, and salespeople. Table 2 provides an overview of the findings.

An examination on the effect of the demographic parameter in the selection of information source revealed that opinion from friends was more preferred by

female respondents, as compared to male counterparts (*p value*, 0.02). There was no significant effect of gender on the remaining items related to product information sources. The information sources analyzed in different age grouping revealed that respondents in the lower age group relied more on opinion from sales representatives, as compared to the respondents in the higher age groupings (*p value*, 0.001). Age of respondents had generally not affected consumers' preferences for the remaining product information sources.

As for the ethnicity of respondents, it was observed that respondents of Indian ethnicity relied more on friends' opinion, as compared to respondents of Malay and Chinese ethnicity (*p value*, 0.06). On the other hand, the Malays had a greater preference for obtaining product information through advertisements in television and radio (*p value*, 0.001). Ethnicity of respondents did not have an effect on the respondents' preferences of remaining items of product information source.

As for the level of educational qualifications of the respondents, it was observed that there is a significant effect of literacy level on three of the six items examined. Respondents who had pre-university qualifications, relied more on experiential knowledge in evaluating

Table 2: Product Information Sources

Variables	Experiential Knowledge	Friends' Opinions	Package of product	Television/ radio	Newspaper/ magazines	Sales Represent atives
Gender						
Male	3.87	3.04	3.08	2.50	2.92	4.65
Female	4.17	2.82	3.07	2.61	2.78	4.87
p value	.198	.02**	.912	.599	.441	.349
Age						
18 25	4.94	2.84	3.03	2.80	2.75	4.88
26 35	4.15	2.93	3.04	2.85	2.96	4.80
36 45	4.13	2.94	3.12	2.50	3.31	5.00
46 55	4.65	2.96	3.30	2.17	2.78	5.13
56 and above	4.14	3.14	3.21	1.57	2.29	5.14
Chi square (p value)	.030	.990	.952	.050	.245	.001*
Race						
Malay	4.02	3.26	3.04	1.72	2.41	4.61
Chinese	4.07	2.89	3.07	2.86	2.92	4.72
Indian	4.19	2.77	3.31	1.81	2.69	5.23
Others	2.67	1.50	2.50	4.17	4.67	5.50
Chi square (p value)	.292	.061***	.617	.000*	.20	.370
Education Level						
Completed Primary	2.69	2.50	2.73	2.12	3.08	3.04
Completed Secondary/SPM	4.27	2.78	2.92	2.92	2.92	4.89
College/Polytechnic/STPM	3.97	3.16	3.04	2.45	2.89	5.02
University (Bachelor's)	4.34	2.96	3.24	2.64	2.67	4.98
Postgraduate/Higher	5.00	1.43	3.57	2.86	3.14	5.00
Chi square (p value)	.001*	.032**	.386	.316	.656	.001*
Overall Ranking	5	3	4	1	2	6

Notes: mean scores based on a ranking of preference ranging from 1 = of most preferred and 6 = least preferred *, **, and *** denote significant at 1%, 5% and 10% respectively

product information source (*pvalue*, 0.00). Another revelation was that, the preference for television and radio for product information was generally to a lesser extent (*pvalue*, 0.001). Another revelation was that, the preference for information through sales representatives was more by respondents having higher qualifications (*pvalue*, 0.001).

In terms of overall rankings, commercials through television and radio

were the most preferred source of information, followed by advertisements in newspaper and magazines. Opinion from friends was ranked third, while product information through package of product ranked fourth. The least preferred source, having the lowest ranking was information from sales representative.

Evaluation of Product Dimensions

Respondents were asked to evaluate the

product dimensions that included, design of the product, style, quality perception, packaging, support services, delivery, price and credit facilities. The results are presented in Table 3.

An examination of the effect of demographic factor in the evaluation of product dimension revealed that male respondents were more driven by quality consideration in the evaluation of products as compared to the female respondents (*p*-

value, 0.09). It was observed that gender of respondents did not have any significant effect on the evaluation of the remaining dimensions.

The evaluation of production dimension analyzed in different age groupings revealed that respondents in the age group of 18 to 25 had the greatest degree of preference for quality. On the other hand, the respondents in the age group of 26-35 had the least degree of preference

Table 3: Evaluations of Product Dimensions

Variables	Design	Style	Quality	Branding	Packaging	Price	Support Services
Gender							
Male	3.18	3.09	2.85	4.03	4.26	4.01	5.42
Female	3.26	3.04	3.24	3.64	3.86	4.01	5.28
<i>p</i> value	.742	.832	.09***	.123	.109	.994	.607
Age							
18 25	3.07	3.06	2.91	3.71	3.92	4.08	5.37
26 35	3.27	3.15	3.60	4.25	4.31	4.07	5.31
36 45	2.94	2.69	3.09	3.78	4.34	4.31	5.72
46 55	3.39	3.48	3.17	3.96	4.17	4.17	5.65
56 and above	3.14	2.57	3.07	4.36	3.14	4.36	5.36
Chi square (<i>p</i> value)	.146	.528	.062***	.018**	.365	.055***	.252
Race							
Malay	2.80	2.89	3.13	4.13	4.26	4.70	5.43
Chinese	3.43	3.25	3.04	3.77	3.94	3.66	5.24
Indian	2.62	2.38	3.08	3.58	4.12	4.92	5.54
Others	3.33	2.33	3.33	3.50	4.50	4.33	6.67
Chi square (<i>p</i> value)	.76	.91	.975	.599	.717	.006*	.393
Education Level							
Completed Primary	3.69	3.08	2.62	3.08	3.50	2.85	4.58
Completed Secondary/SPM	2.95	2.86	3.41	4.03	3.89	4.43	4.97
College/Polytechnic/STPM	3.15	3.04	2.75	3.87	3.78	4.22	5.84
University (Bachelor's)	3.24	3.06	3.42	3.94	4.42	4.09	5.14
Postgraduate/Higher	3.86	4.43	2.71	3.14	5.29	2.29	6.29
Chi square (<i>p</i> value)	.521	.376	.053**	.234	.044**	.010*	.030**
Overall Ranking	3	1	2	4	6	5	7

Notes: mean scores based on a ranking of preference ranging from 1 = most preferred and 7 = least preferred **, and *** denote significant at 5% and 10% respectively

for quality in the evaluation of product. (*p value*, 0.06). A number of studies point out that customers have been using quality as a key attribute in evaluating products in recent times (for example, see Crosby 1989). The findings of this study point out that quality as an attribute has been used more by the younger generation. There was an overall consensus of opinion on the extent of preference for evaluating the dimension of branding (*pvalue*, 0.01). Similar results were in evidence, relating to the price factor (*pvalue*, 0.05).

On the basis of ethnicity of respondents, it was observed that there is no significant effect of the races of respondents on the evaluation of product dimensions. The only exception being that of price of products, where there has been an agreement of a moderate degree of preference for this (*pvalue*, 0.006). As for the level of educational qualifications of the respondents, it was observed that there is a significant effect of literacy level on four of the six items examined. Respondents having comparatively lower qualifications had a greater preference for the packaging of the product (*pvalue*, 0.04) and support services (*pvalue*, 0.03). There was an overall consensus of opinion on the extent of preference for evaluating the dimension of quality (*pvalue*, 0.05).

In terms of overall rankings, price of

products have been the most preferred item, in evaluation of Korean products. Products made in Korea had been rated highly and stand out for its style. The quality of products has been ranked second, followed by design, brand, price, packaging and support services.

Evaluation of Product Categories

The final area addressed was to seek respondents' evaluation of different products from Korea. The product categories listed in the survey instrument included, electrical appliances; consumer electronics; personal computers and motor vehicles. The responses were measured on a five point scale (ranging from 1= poor to 5=excellent). Consumer electronics were rated as the most excellent (mean = 4.52), the small standard deviation score further indicates that there is a greater uniformity in the responses. In contrast, motor vehicles that include cars were rated lower. Table 4 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 4: Evaluations of Various Product Categories

Product Category	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
Electrical appliances	4.09	.45
Consumer electronics	4.52	.39
Personal computers	3.91	.96
Motor vehicles	3.88	.83

Note: Mean scores based on a five point scale ranging from 1=poor to 5= excellent

Following the overall evaluation of

product categories, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted between each product category and the respondents grouped under different ages. One way ANOVA results revealed no statistically significant differences across the different age groups for all the four product categories. Likewise, ANOVA results between each product category and the educational attainment of respondents confirmed no significant differences for all but one (electrical appliances) category

V. Marketing Implications and Conclusions

The main objective of our study has been to examine consumer attitudes towards products made in Korea and marketing practices in developing countries. Specifically, this study has sought to assess the attitudes of Malaysian consumers towards products and the associated marketing practices. The study has utilized a number of general approaches, as product information sources, the evaluation of different product dimensions and product categories. The study sheds light on Malaysian consumers' perception to products originating from Korea. Results suggest that Malaysian consumers take note of products originating from Korea and they

are able to critically assess products from different dimensions.

As for the product information sources, results indicate that, in general, information through commercials in television and radio are the most preferred information source of consumers in Malaysia. Advertisements in newspaper/magazines and opinion of friends follow in that order of preference. In general, Malaysian consumers did not make any substantial distinctions among the information source when separated between gender and ethnicity. As Malaysian consumers tend to rely more on television and radio advertisements, this implies that managers should focus more on developing effective advertisements.

On evaluation of product dimension, the study reveals that products made in Korea have been preferred for its style. It is clear that products originating from Korea derive their competitive advantage through innovation in product development. However, marketing managers from this region should take note of the fact that the customers have seen the support services in poor light. Efforts must therefore be made to improve such services. On the choice of products from Korea, Malaysian consumers have shown a preference for consumer electronics and personal computers as compared to motor vehicles.

Unlike in previous research studies, this study has focused mainly on COO effects for a product from a single country alone. However, there are certain limitations in this study. While this exploratory research has revealed some interesting results, readers should be cautious on some of its limitations. Firstly, the regional context of this research is certainly a limitation to generalize its findings for whole of Malaysia. Secondly, sample size is another limitation. Therefore, findings of this study are tentative and needs further verification. Further study with a larger representative of all regions is suggested for a rigorous analysis. Other issues that are suggested for analysis are to investigate into the underlying information processing heuristics employed by consumers. Psychological and behavioral parameters of segmentation and its effect on COO perceptions could also be examined. It would also be interesting to see the COO effect form the point of brand names and alternative products.

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Appendix I

Malaysia - Background Information

Malaysia progressed with a decade of uninterrupted economic growth until 1998 when the economy experienced a sharp, short lived recession in 1998 as the Asia Pacific financial and economic crisis intensified. The real GDP then contracted by 7.4% to U.S. \$74.5 billion in current prices. However, the economy rebounded the next year in 1999, growing 6.1% that year and further growing to a stronger 8.3% in 2000.

In 2001, the value of imports from Korea amounted to a little over RM 11 billion (RM, Ringgit Malaysia 3.75=1 US\$), which accounted for 11.17 percent of total Malaysian imports from North East Asian countries. Overall, Korea was the sixth largest source of imports for Malaysia, accounting for roughly about 5 % of total Malaysian imports in 2002. As for the composition of consumer merchandise imports, electrical appliances, motor vehicles, consumer electronics and consumer durables have been the major items of imports to Malaysia.

<Abstract>

An Evaluation of Malaysian Consumers' Perceptions Towards Products Made in Korea: An Asia Pacific Marketing Perspective

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The objective of this paper is to examine the country of origin effect of products made in the Republic of Korea. The study focuses on the questions of the sources of information in evaluating products; the evaluation of specific product dimensions by Malaysian consumers; and consumers' assessment of different product categories. It reports on the findings of a survey conducted in which 244 responses were obtained. The most common product information source was found to be through advertisements in television and radio. Products made in Korea had been rated highly for its product style. Consumer electronics were generally found to be the popular preference of product category by Malaysian consumers. The managerial implications of our study are discussed and the limitations of the study are also examined.

Key Words: Korea, consumer behavior, consumer, Country of origin, Malaysia

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