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THE EFFECT OF COUNTRY OF ORIGIN IMAGE ON HIERARCHICAL PROCESS OF CONSUMER BASED BRAND EQUITY

The paper presents empirical data on the extent to which the country of origin (COT) is affected by the specific stage of the hierarchical process of creating a fair consumer brand (SBS). The study evaluates seven hypotheses that postulate: 1) the relationship between the country of origin (COT) and the four brands of the Common Security Policy; and 2) the relationship between the four brand constructions in the hierarchical process of creating a fair consumer brand.

Keywords: consumer brand; country of origin; Y. Korea; consumer brand products.

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Рене Б. Кім

ВПЛИВ КРАЇНИ ПОХОДЖЕННЯ НА ІЕРАРХІЧНИЙ ПРОЦЕС СТВОРЕННЯ СПРАВЕДЛИВОГО СПОЖИВАЦЬКОГО БРЕНДУ

У статті представлено емпіричні дані про те, в якому ступені на конкретний етап ієрархічного процесу створення справедливого споживчого бренду (СПБ) впливає країна походження. В дослідженні оцінено сім гіпотез, які постулюють 1) відносини між країною походження і чотирма брендами СПБ і 2) взаємозв'язок між чотирма конструкціями бренду в рамках ієрархічного процесу створення справедливого споживчого бренду.

Ключові слова: споживацький бренд; країна походження; Ю. Корея; продукти споживчого бренду.

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ВЛИЯНИЕ СТРАНЫ ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЯ НА ИЕРАРХИЧЕСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС СОЗДАНИЯ СПРАВЕДЛИВОГО ПОТРЕБИТЕЛЬСКОГО БРЕНДА

В статье представлены эмпирические данные о том, в какой степени на конкретный этап иерархического процесса создания справедливого потребительского бренда (СПБ) влияет страна происхождения. В исследовании оценено семь гипотез, которые постулируют 1) отношения между страной происхождения и четырьмя брендами СПБ и 2) взаимосвязь между четырьмя конструкциями бренда в иерархическом процессе создания справедливого потребительского бренда.

Ключевые слова: потребительский бренд; страна происхождения; Ю. Корея; продукты потребительского бренда.

Рис. 1. Табл. 4. Лит. 36.

1. Introduction. Globalization of the market place provide consumers with more choices for products, and this results in increasing competition among brand products from different country origins which may be substitutable in the consumer mar-

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ket. In this market circumstance, brand loyalty increasingly become a critical element for success and sustainable long term market positioning. Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is claimed to be essential for driving customer equity, differentiating brands, assessing brand performance and gaining competitive advantage in the marketplace (Cifci et al., 2016; Sun et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2010). D. Aaker (1991) and K. Keller (1993) describe the CBBE as cognitive brand equity concept in which brand equity results from what consumers know about a brand and how they evaluate the knowledge. Thus, the CBBE is proposed to be an evaluative or behavioral response such as commitment, trust, reputation or recommendation (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000) which affects consumers' brand choice (Grohs et al. 2016).

As the number of foreign brands increase in the consumer market, country of origin may play as an important antecedent affecting consumers CBBE development process. Brands from countries that have a favorable image generally find that their brands are readily accepted than those from countries with less favorable image. Various studies confirmed the important role of the COO in consumers decision making process (Khachaturian and Morganosky, 1990), as the COO acts as a salient attribute in consumer product evaluation (Johansson, 1989), stimulates consumer's interest in the product (Hong and Wyer, 1989), affect behavioral intentions through social norms and influences buyer behavior through affective processes as in the case of consumer's patriotic feelings about their own country (Han and Terpstra, 1988). Yet, few researchers attempt to study the country of origin effect specifically on the hierarchical process of brand equity formation by consumers (i.e. the CBBE process). Our study provide empirically based insights into the extent to which particular stage of the CBBE process are influenced by the country of origin image. These insight are of value to international marketers who need to design a series of branding program to gain consumer's brand loyalty in international market in which brands from different country origin compete.

2. Literature review.

Country of Origin (COO). The concept of Country image was first introduced by A. Nagashima in 1970 with a definition: 'Consumer holds particular picture, reputation, and stereotype towards products of a specific country' which is formed by the country's representative product, political and economic background, and historic tradition variables, which means overall country image (Nagashima, 1970). In addition, the definition of the COO was further elaborated as 'Consumer forms his/her understanding to specific country based on his/her recognition of advantages and disadvantages of manufactured and marketed products from a specific country in the past' (Roth and Romeo, 1992), suggesting that country image should clearly reflect its relation with product recognition. In short, country image means consumer's general conscience for product quality manufactured from a specific country (Han, 1989).

Z. Ahmed et al. (2004) link country-of-origin (COO) with a country in which a manufacturer's product or brand is originated, typically calling this country as the home country. For example, the COO of Sony is Japan, and of Samsung is Korea as these countries conduct manufacturing or assembling. C. Han (1989) suggested that the COO (or a brand) operate in either of two ways. First, the COO has a 'halo' effect in which consumers infer beliefs about attributes that make up the attitude towards a product or service, i.e. consumer evaluations of products and services are based on their perception of the country. Second, consumers abstract previous beliefs about

attributes of products and services from a particular country into a chunk of information called the 'summary' construct based on the COO, and the summary construct is in turn used to infer product attitude. M. Roth and J. Romeo (1992) further state that the COO effect may imply consumer's stereotypes of a specific country. A country's stereotype means people in a country (or specific people) have stereotypes and preferences for products of another country (Johansson 1989). In short, a product's national origin acts as a signal of product quality (Han, 1989; Li and Wyer 1994, Diamantopoulos et al 2007), and also affects perceived risk and values as well as likelihood of purchase (Liefeld, 1993).

M. Chattalas et al. (2007) examined the impact of national stereotypes on the country origin effect, and conceptualized the relationship between national stereotype contents and COO-based consumer evaluations of products. P. Chu et al. (2010) examined whether brand image and evaluation mode could alleviate a negative COO effect, and reported that a strong brand image was not sufficient in overcoming the negative effect of COO. N. Fischer et al. (2012) examined whether consumers are really willing to pay more for a favorable country image, and whether consumers familiarity with the brand (i.e. brand awareness) moderate this relationship. Their study found that COO indeed has a positive impact on willingness to pay, and the moderating effect of brand awareness was different for high and low involvement settings. N. Fischer et al.'s study evaluate how brand construct play a moderating role for the relationship between the COO and consumers purchase intention. J. Lee et al. (2013) examines the effect of country of origin (COO) fit on consumer brand attitude and finds that cross border strategic brand alliance is a viable market entry strategy for host and partner brands, brand alliance can be largely effective if both brands are favorable.

Brand Equity. D. Aaker conceptualizes brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers". He postulated brand equity as a hierarchical process in which the relationship between a brand and a consumer is being developed through a series of interaction.

G. Gordon et al (1993) state that brand equity evolves in a hierarchical pattern from brand awareness to brand loyalty, more specifically brand awareness makes an effect on brand associations, and consequently brand associations affect perceived quality, resulting in brand loyalty. High perceived quality occurs when consumers recognize the differentiation and superiority of the brand relative to competitors' brands (i.e. positive brand association). This will influence their purchase decisions and would drive them to choose the brand rather than competitors brands, which can be interpreted as brand loyalty (Norjaya, 2007).

Since the introduction of the Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) concept by D. Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), this brand equity model has been widely acknowledged by academic and business community (Kim et al., 2014; Buil et al., 2013). D. Aaker (1991) four dimensional brand equity model has been applied in analyzing various type of brand products (Jung & Sung, 2008; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Many brand equity research focuses on the effect of antecedents such as marketing mix variables (advertising, distribution, price and product quality) on CBBE outcomes (Yoo et al., 2000). Country-of-origin (COO) has been suggested to be an important variable

influencing perceived brand image (Ahmed et al., 2002; Yasin et al., 2007; Singh and Mittal, 2017). Yet, limited study examine the COO's influence on the hierarchical process of the CBBE development. The COO may have differential effect on each stage of the CBBE hierarchical process and it is important to have understanding of the relationship of the COO with each stage of CBBE in developing effective branding strategies.

Brand Awareness (BAW). Brand awareness is considered as a crucial first step in customers readiness to develop a brand preference (Rossiter, 1997). Brand awareness is defined as 'the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category. A link between product class and brand is involved. (Aaker, 1991: 61). The role of brand awareness in brand equity process depends on the level of brand awareness which is acquired by a consumer. The higher the level of brand awareness, the higher probability of the brand being considered by the consumer in many purchase situations. Thus, brand awareness increases the likelihood that the brand will be in the consideration set (Nedungadi, 1990) which may influence consumers' decision making. For a familiar image of country-of-origin, customer experience causes multiple traces in memory, which lead to higher levels of brand recall and recognition (i.e. brand awareness) (Hoch, 2002). Thus, there may be a potential relationship between the country of origin and brand awareness constructs.

Brand Association (BAS). D. Aaker (1991) defined brand association as "anything linked in memory to a brand", which consumers make with a brand, which contributes to a specific brand image thereby supporting brand equity. B. Yoo et al. (2000) describe brand associations as "complicated and connected to one another, and consist of multiple ideas, episodes, instances, and facts that establish a solid network of brand knowledge", which is formed as a result of the consumer's brand belief, which can be created by the marketer, formed by the consumer himself through direct experience with the product, and/or formed by the consumer through inferences based on existing associations (Aaker, 1991). K. Keller (1993) described brand image as "a set of consumer brand associations organized in a meaningful way". Thus a bidirectional relationship between country image and brand image may exist, and a relationship between the COO and brand association can be postulated further. Many researchers investigated the importance of brand associations and their impact on brand equity/brand strength, and on consumer response (Malar et al., 2012; Grohs et al., 2016).

Perceived Quality (PQ). Perceived quality is defined as 'customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose relative to alternatives' (Aaker, 1991: 85). Perceived quality is an important determinant for consumers purchasing decision since consumer may exhibit a clear preference for a brand when he/she perceive or recognize differentiation or superiority in the quality of the brand. Studies reported that the COO influence consumers perception of quality. G. Haeubl and T. Elrod (1999) examined the relationship between consumers quality perceptions of the Slovenian brand and the county of origin (i.e. Germany), and reported that consumers brand equity was higher when the brand was made in Slovenia than when the brand was made in Germany. D. Lee and C. Schaninger (1996) confirm the importance of origin of manufacture in determining the success of global brand in addition to consideration of perceived quality.

Brand Loyalty (BL). Brand loyalty is a consumer's preference to buy a particular brand in a product category, as consumer perceive a positive value in product features, attributes, image, and quality. The perception may translate into repeat purchase or purchase intention or attitudinal preference resulting in loyalty. It may occur due to a long history of using a product and trust that has developed as a consequence of the long usage. B. Yoo & N. Donthu (2001) defined brand loyalty as 'the tendency to be loyal to a focal brand, which is demonstrated by the intention to buy the brand as a primary choice'. Brand loyalty can be considered as the final stage of CBBE process, in which consumers experience a series of stages regarding the relationship with a brand. Brand loyalty has been examined in two different typologies, assessment of behavioral measures (i.e. repeat purchases) and assessment of attitudinal measures (purchase intentions or willingness to buy).

Several studies report findings on brand loyalty using the behavioral approach (repeat purchases), yet some researchers argue that behavioral measures may not be sufficient to elicit consumers' true loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994). Thus, attitudinal loyalty concept has been included in the brand loyalty construct to reflect more comprehensive concept of brand loyalty. K. Kim (1995) suggested that favorable country image could lead to brand popularity, which may translate to brand loyalty. D. Lee et al. (2013) have suggested that consumers tend to be loyal towards a country, just as they are loyal to brands.

Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE). In terms of attributes, brand equity can be decomposed into two categories: customer-based brand equity and financial asset-based brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995). While the former refers to "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Kamakura and Russell, 1991), the latter is "the additional discounted future cash flow achieved by associating a brand with an underlying product or service" (Biel, 1997). Also, it can have a "discernible value on stock price" (Loomis, 1998). In this research, we will focus on the customer-based brand equity. Consumer-based brand equity is defined in this study as 'the value consumers associate with a brand, as reflected in the dimensions of: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty'. This definition was adapted from D. Aaker (1991). D. Aaker defined brand equity as a set of assets (or liabilities), and found brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty to be its four most important dimensions from a consumer perspective. Based on extant literature, we developed seven hypotheses which postulate 1) the relationships between the Country of origin (COO) and the four brand constructs of the CBBE; and 2) the relationship among the four brand constructs in the hierarchical process of the CBBE (Table 1).

Table 1. **Research Hypotheses, authors'**

No.	Hypothesis Statement
Hypothesis 1	Brand awareness has a positive effect on brand associations
Hypothesis 2	Brand associations have a positive effect on perceived quality
Hypothesis 3	Perceived quality has a positive effect on brand loyalty
Hypothesis 4	Country of Origin has significant impacts on brand awareness
Hypothesis 5	Country of Origin has significant impacts on brand association
Hypothesis 6	Country of Origin has significant impacts on perceived quality
Hypothesis 7	Country of Origin has significant impacts on brand loyalty

3. Research method

Research Model. This study assesses the relationship between country of origin (COO) and the determinants of the Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model, and assess the relative importance of COO construct on consumers brand equity formation process. The CBBE model consists of four determinants which contribute to brand equity process: Brand Awareness (BAW); Brand Association (BAS); Perceived Quality (PQ); and Brand Loyalty (BL).

In this study, D. Aaker (1991)'s CBBE model is applied to assess the impact of COO on the CBBE formation process, and beer brands are selected for the brand equity assessment. Given that beer product is a widely accepted consumer product for which consumers primarily evaluate functional aspect of brands, D. Aaker's CBBE model is an appropriate framework. Figure 1. presents structural model, postulating the path relationships between the COO and the CBBE model. In total, we used 26 items for the four constructs of the CBBE process and the construct of COO to implement the measurement model that support the SEM in Figure 1.

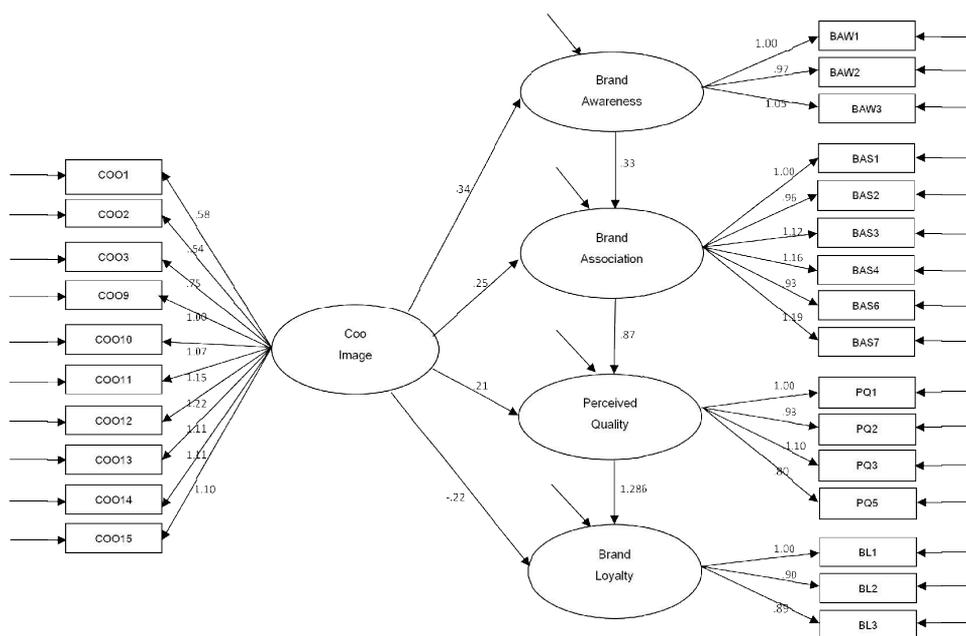


Figure 1. Measurement Model of COO-CBBE, authors'

Reliability & Validity Tests. Using Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α), items with value smaller than 0.6 were removed in order to establish scale reliability, and the values of Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) for five constructs were higher than 0.8, indicating good internal consistency among the items of a scale (Table 2). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to verify validity of the model, and test whether items load sufficiently high to relevant factors. A total of 9 items (6 items from COO, 1 item from BAW, 1 item from BAS and 1 item from PQ) were removed. The final factor loadings show convergent validity of the items.

Table 2. Reliability Test, authors'

Variables	Items	Remove items	Cronbach's coefficient α
Country-of-origin image	15	6	.889
Brand awareness	4	1	.852
Brand association	7	1	.890
Perceived quality	5	1	.887
Brand loyalty	3	0	.910

Data Collection Methodology. Consumer survey was administered in order to elicit 26 items of the measurement model for four brands of beer products which are originated from different country (five-point “strongly disagree/strongly agree” Likert scale). Four brands of beer (Hite, Heineken, Budweiser, Asahi) from four country-of-origin (Korea, Netherlands, U.S.A, Japan) were included in the survey. These brands are considered to have high levels of consumer recognition in Korea. Korea is selected for the survey study since Korea has an extensively developed consumer market in which significant proportion of population consume beer products, and Korean consumers are considered to be brand-conscious and segment in beer consumption.

The popularity of imported beer has been soaring in Korea in recent years. For example, the percent of import beer sales in one of the major retailer-Lotte Mart continue to increase from 34.5%, 40% and 51.1% in 2015, 2016 and 2017, respectively (Y.H.N. 2017). Thus, the competition of beer market continues to rise, and imported beer rapidly gain market position in Korea. Data was collected in the capital city of Korea, Seoul and reasonable sample size was obtained with 400 respondents, with 351 valid data points. The demographic profile of the respondent showed 45.3% male and 54.7% female; 92% of the respondents aged between 20 to 29 years old who represent student group.

4. Results. The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical evidence concerning association between the COO and the CBBE process. Table 3 presents the standardized SEM coefficients for the measurement model. Overall, the model had a reasonable fit as the goodness of fit statistics such as RMSEA, GFI, RMR and χ^2 showed sufficient value (Table 3). For example, RMSEA value is 0.04 which is below 0.5, indicating a close fit of the model to the data (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996); CFI is 0.978, exceeding 0.90 for the model fit to be acceptable (Schermeh-Engel et al., 2003); and CMIN/DF (i.e. relative χ^2) is 1.560, which is less than 2, suggesting a good fit (Ulman, 2001).

All statistically significant coefficients in the measurement model are in the expected direction for the path relationship, showing positive coefficients (Table 4). Regarding the COO construct, the path coefficients of COO→COO12 (Up-market); COO→COO11 (High status); COO→COO13 (Reliable) were the three largest values. These three aspects of country image were found to be most influential in forming country image. In terms of the BAW construct, the path coefficient of BAW→BAW3 (I can quickly recall the logo of brand X) was found to be the largest, suggesting the importance of brand logo in raising consumer awareness.

Table 3. SEM Estimation Results, authors'

Items	Path	Estimate	P
Highly developed economy	COO→COO1	.583	***
High level of industrialization	COO→COO2	.641	***
Level of technological research	COO→COO3	.748	***
Innovative	COO→COO9	1.000	
Technically advanced	COO→COO10	1.072	***
High status	COO→COO11	1.151	***
Up-market	COO→COO12	1.220	***
Reliable	COO→COO13	1.114	***
Excellent finish	COO→COO14	1.109	***
Pride in ownership products from this country	COO→COO15	1.102	***
I know how the symbol of brand X looks like	BAW→BAW1	1.000	
I know well about this brand	BAW→BAW2	.969	***
I can quickly recall the logo of brand X	BAW→BAW3	1.060	***
Sophistication	BAS→BAS1	1.000	
Distinctiveness	BAS→BAS2	.958	***
Excellence	BAS→BAS3	1.117	***
Prestige	BAS→BAS4	1.184	***
Proud to own brand X of the company	BAS→BAS6	.926	***
Trust the company which makes brand X	BAS→BAS7	1.191	***
Brand X is of very good quality	PQ→PQ1	1.000	
Brand X is reliable	PQ→PQ2	.935	***
Brand X has excellent taste	PQ→PQ3	1.119	***
Brand X offers consistent quality	PQ→PQ5	.799	***
Brand X would be my preferred choice	BL→BL1	1.000	
I consider myself loyal to brand X	BL→BL2	.898	***
Brand X would be my first choice	BL→BL3	.893	***

*** P<0.001 **P<0.05 *P<0.10

CMIN/DF= 1.560; GFI= 0.926; RMR= 0.57; CFI= 0.978; IFI= 0.978; TLI= 0.970; RMSEA= 0.040

For brand association, the path coefficients of BAS→BAS4 (Prestige); BAS→BAS7 (Trust the company which makes brand X); and BAS→BAS3 (Excellence) were the three largest values. Thus, prestige, trust, excellence are found to be the three most important values leading to positive brand association. In term of perceived quality, the path coefficients of PQ→PQ3 (excellent taste) and PQ→PQ1 (very good quality) are found to be most important, suggesting importance of taste and quality for beer brands.

Hypotheses for the path relationship among five constructs were statistically tested to determine the relative importance of selected constructs in the structural model (Figure 1). Hypotheses 1 to 6 were found to be statistically significant and supporting the proposed path relationship, while hypothesis 7 was rejected (Table 4). Hypothesis 1 to 3 evaluate statistical significance of the hierarchical process of the brand equity

building among four major brand constructs. The path coefficient of the PQ→BL shows the largest value, implying the importance of perceived quality of beer products in determining consumers' brand loyalty. BAS→PQ was found to be the second most important path in the brand equity process.

Table 4. Results of hypotheses, authors'

Effects between constructs	Estimate	P	Conclusion
Hypothesis 1: Brand awareness → Brand association	.328	***	Supported
Hypothesis 2: Brand association → Perceived quality	.868	***	Supported
Hypothesis 3: Perceived quality → Brand loyalty	1.286	***	Supported
Hypothesis 4: Country-of-origin → Brand awareness	.335	***	Supported
Hypothesis 5: Country-of-origin → Brand association	.246	***	Supported
Hypothesis 6: Country-of-origin → Perceived quality	.209	***	Supported
Hypothesis 7: Country-of-origin → Brand loyalty	-.222		Rejected

Hypotheses 4 to 7 examined statistical significance and importance of COO on four brand constructs. COO→BAW was found to be most meaningful path; followed by COO→BAS, while COO→BL was found to be statistically insignificant. These findings suggest that country origin image have major impact on initial stages of the brand equity process, affecting brand awareness and brand association constructs. On the other hand, country origin was found to have no direct effect on consumers' brand loyalty. Thus, brand loyalty of consumers are largely formed by their perception of quality of beer products, and country origin do not directly translate into brand loyalty.

5. Discussion and conclusions. In this study, we investigated the influence of country of origin (COO) image on the brand equity constructs and the CBBE process in Korean consumer market. Four beer brands are selected which originated from four different countries. We found strong support for the importance of COO construct on each step of hierarchical process of brand equity, particularly COO plays an important role in the early stages of the brand equity forming process. The COO construct had large effects on brand awareness and brand association stages. S. Hoch(2002) indicated that a familiar image of country-of-origin causes multiple traces in customer's memory, which lead to higher levels of brand awareness, and D. Aaker(1991) stated that country-of-origin generates secondary associations for brand, and could thereby influence consumer's brand association, and our empirical findings support these studies.

The COO construct also had some positive effect on the PQ, but to a lesser extent, which is also suggested by D. Lee and C. Schaninger (1996). They emphasized the importance of manufacture of origin (MOO) in addition to brand name as determinants for perceived quality of consumers. However, the COO construct did not show direct effect on the final stage of the brand equity process, (i.e. brand loyalty stage). The COO is an extrinsic cue and extrinsic cue-based evaluation is likely to take place when intrinsic cues are not available (Huber and McCann, 1982). When intrinsic cues such as perceived quality of the product is readily available, consumers' brand loyalty is likely to be influenced by intrinsic cues such as perceived

quality, thus, COO plays an insignificant role at the final stage of brand equity process. In terms of the CBBE process, the path relationship between PQ→BL was found to be most significant, and BAS→PQ was also found to be important in the CBBE process.

These findings have important managerial implications. Establishing positive country of origin image seems to be especially effective when consumers are at early stage of forming brand equity, thus having positive impact on brand awareness and brand association. Marketers may need to emphasize 'Up-market', 'high status' and 'reliable' aspects of the COO image and connect these attributes in raising brand awareness and enhancing brand association. Having positive COO image may help consumers' perception of brand association in terms of 'prestige', 'excellence' and 'trust in the company for brand X'.

In addition, marketers and companies could develop marketing and promotional strategies which stress 'brand logo' to raise brand awareness and 'excellent taste' and 'quality' of beer products which are important attributes of the PQ construct. The perceived quality was found to be a critical dimension for the brand equity process, leading to the final stage- brand loyalty. Findings from this study show the importance of country of origin image in building consumers' brand loyalty, particularly at early stages. Marketers who are interested in global market positioning and competing with brands from different country of origin, must consider country of origin as essential part of building brand loyalty. Companies could marketing or communication campaign that enhance not only product quality, or brand elements, but also country of origin image. Producers of brands from countries with favorable image can also capitalize positive image in their brand naming strategy. In addition, marketers who want to benefit from a favorable country image should highlight the brands of superior quality that originate from the country. This emphasis may help consumers to form positive brand awareness and brand association.

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