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Image and Information effects on consumers' evaluations of symbol-intensive products

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Abstract

This study examines image and information effects on consumers' quality perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions with respect to two kinds of symbol-intensive products, namely formal attire and jeanswear of fashion designers. Respondents provided quality, attitude and purchase intention ratings. Information does appear to be more important for consumers. Information effects were found to be stronger than image effects for quality, attitude ratings and purchase intentions of formal attire. Interestingly enough, there was an inverse relationship between images of formal attire and quality perceptions, attitudes and purchase intentions. On the other hand, image effects were found to be stronger than information effects for purchase intention of jeanswear, while information effects were more significantly correlated with quality and attitude. Implications for the communication strategy of a brand, tied to a region or a producers will be drawn.

Key words: *Country- of- origin; Brands; images.*

Introduction

Every day, consumers are exposed to images countersigned by specific information (for example the brand). Our research investigates what factors influence product evaluation. In the past, a variety of contributions have analyzed the effects of country of origin and brand on the product evaluations, often with conflicting results. Our study deepens this stream of research and extends it by investigating the effects of images on consumers' choices.

The results are of relevance for practitioners and future research. Our research contributes to deepen the understanding of how factors, such as the country-of-origin, the brand, and the images influence consumers' choices, in terms of perception of the quality, attitudes and purchase intentions. Moreover, our research investigates how interaction effects between brand and country of origin amplify the results.

We've chosen the fashionwear sector for our study. In particular we investigated consumer responses in regard to formal attire and to jeanswear. Informations used in the study have been the country of origin of the product and the brand. Images of attire have originated from specialized magazines in the fashion sector and represent elegant suits and jeans. Within elegant attire we have chosen Giorgio Armani (Italy) and Calvin Klein (Usa) for the respective brands, while for the jeans sector we opted for Energie (Italy), Levi's (Usa) and Diesel (Italy).

Literature Review

Products may be conceived of as an array of information cues, both intrinsic (i.e., physical product characteristics) and extrinsic (i.e., non-physical product characteristics) (Olsen and Jacoby, 1972). Country of or origin, brand, and visual image are commonly attached to products.

There's a variety of studies on the importance of country of origin effects (e.g., Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Johansson, Douglas and Nonaka, 1985; Han and Terpestra, 1998; Ozsmer and Cavusgil, 1991; Baughn and Yaprak, 1993; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Johansson (1989) suggested that individuals who consider themselves familiar with

brands in a product class are more willing to let country-of-origin cues enter their evaluation process, because they use these cues as a short-cut to information processing (Maronick, 1995). Han (1989) argued that country image perceptions affect individual attribute beliefs, which in turn impact brand attitudes. Overall, the studies support a clear country of origin effect.

However, other studies (e.g. Han and Terpstra, 1988) suggest that, when additional cues are entered into the equation, such as a well-known brand, the relative effect of country-of-origin diminishes. Brand image management is a critical part of a company's marketing program; communicating a clearly defined brand image enables consumers to identify needs satisfied by the brand (Park *et al.*, 1986). Research into brand image and brand equity management (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Keller, 1993; Park *et al.*, 1986) has shown that brand image strategies should be determined before other elements of the marketing mix (Nebenzahl and Jaffe, 1996). It has been suggested that brand associations will have higher source credibility because of the maker's implied warranty; when the product carries a famous brand, it can counteract consumers' negative CO perceptions of less developed countries (Cordell, 1993).

Country-of-origin (CO) effects, too, are of particular interest to international marketing researchers because of their impact on the product evaluations that help to influence customers' purchase decisions. We often hear comments like "Japanese cars are more reliable", and that Germany leads the world in engineering technology. Hence, we can infer that CO perceptions help to form overall attitudes on certain product attributes and also have some impact on customers' evaluation of a product's performance (Han, 1989; Bruning, 1997). Bruning (1997) suggests that CO is a cue that consumers use to make inferences about products and product attributes; CO has a direct influence on product attributes, which in turn affect product evaluations, and the CO effect may also result in perceptions of the general quality of products from a particular country. The effect of product brand image, too, has been of increasing interest in the international marketing research literature. Studies have investigated the combined impact of CO and brand on consumers' attitudes towards products and their perceptions of product quality(e.g. Erickson *et al.*, 1984; Eroglu and Machleit, 1988; Haubl, 1996); they found that information effects, such as the brand name can affect quality ratings; a highly regarded

brand can overcome a negative CO effect of the country of manufacture and/or final assembly.

An important, though neglect aspect of these studies is the influence of image effects. We communicate through images. Visual communication is a central aspect of our lives, and much of this communication is done indirectly, through symbolic means: by words and signs and symbols of all kinds (Berger, 1989).

Imagery is part of everyday experience, it is not just a visual world that we inhabit, but one filled with selected, carefully cropped images that carry symbolic and emotional meanings. It is the use and effects of imagery in advertising and packaging that are of particular relevance for market research (Branthwaite 2002). Its role is to understand, and predict, the way this imagery is perceived and processed, as well as its impact on mind and body. In this climate, market research has an important role in finding appropriate imagery to impress customers. As an aside, it is worth acknowledging that imagery is not only a target for market research, but imagery can also be a tool in market research to act as a vehicle that enables consumers to express their ideas, intuitive perceptions and feelings about brands. Indeed, we frequently use pictures, collages, drawing and even clay modelling to facilitate the expression of brand personalities and subjective images. (Branthwaite *et al*., 2001; Toiati, 2001).

The potency of imagery from the point of view of communication and persuasion is that it has the capacity to transcend the boundary between the outside world and what is happening inside us. External objects and events can impinge on us as if they are inside of us. Extensive research has demonstrated that viewing real objects, pictures or scenes, and the same imagined objects have almost identical properties in the workings of the mind (Eysenck and Keane, 2000; Richardson,1999). On a very different basis, the same conclusion has been drawn by Greenfield (2000) using neurophysiological evidence that we use the same areas of the brain for vision and visual imagination – imagination is vision running backwards''.

Visual consumption has been introduced as a concept to cope with the visual aspects of consumption (Schroeder, 1998). It refers to engaging with, reading, and responding to signs, symbols, and images; it encompasses critical ways that people experience their world and represent themselves through action, word, and image (Schroeder, 2002).

Marketing communication works in a broad context to influence the construction of the world through representation and advertising images (e.g., Wells, 1997). Advertising operates with a system of visual representation that creates meaning within the circuit of culture, often beyond what may be intended by the photographer, advertising agency, and company whose product is advertised (e.g., Ritson and Elliot, 1999). Advertising is no longer a means of merely communicating content about products, it is a major player in the political sphere, too. Goldman and Papson state "….[t]he power of advertising lies in its ability to photographically frame and redefine our meaning and our experience and then turn them into meanings that are consonant with corporate interests. This power to recontextualise and reframe photographic images has put advertising at the centre of contemporary redefinitions of individuality, freedom, and democracy in relation to corporate symbols" (1996: 216). Our study complements the research on country-of-origin and information/brand effects by incorporating the potential influence of image effects.

Hypothesis

When forming judgments about a product, consumers typically process information about same of the product's physical attributes, e.g., its performance and appearance. However, they hardly ever use all the available information abaut a product in a systematic manner, mainly because they tend to economize on cognitive effort (Macrae *et al*., 1994) because it is difficult to detect the true quality of a product even with substantial effort (e.g., Huber and McCann, 1982). Instead, consumers typically resort to selected pieces of information that they can use as a basis for heuristic evaluation strategies. The latter simplify the formation of quality judgements by allowing the retrievial of pre-established overall evaluations from memory (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994).

Brand name and country-of-origin are two commonly used heuristic cues that facilitate simplified evaluation strategies. The findings of many studies indicate that consumers tend to use brand name as a basis for making inferences about product quality (e.g., Jacoby *et al.,* 1971; Dodds *et al*., 1991). Similary, there is ample evidence that a product's country-of-origin, typically conveyed as the "made in" information, also serves

as a signal for product quality, even in multiattribute context (e.g., Johansson *et al*., 1985; Maheswaran, 1994). Thus, information effects influence positively product evaluation.

The visual and verbal elements complement each other, for the advertisement is an exemplar of consistent integration, in which resonance between the words and picture is established. The resonance consists reiterating the basic verbal form in visual terms to repeat the brand benefit in a dual-channel approach. The slogan itself explicitly states that memorability is the brand benefit, and the visual imagery and status symbols repeat its connection to brand use and attractiveness (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992)

Visual imagery has potentially powerful effects on human psychology and physiology, affecting ideas, perceptions,beliefs, feelings, behaviour and health. It plays a central role in most advertising, especially posters, print and TV, but also radio through the ability of language and description to conjure up images internally.

The mechanism for processing images is different to that for verbal material, and this distinction has been incorporated into many theories of perception and information processing (Branthwaite and Swindells, 1995; Richardson, 1999). In particular, images have a more direct connection to feelings and unconscious ideas. Images have an immediate impact, as they are perceived holistically rather than in the linear-sequential fashion of verbal accounts.Whereas verbal messages are processed rationally and consciously, visual imagery is perceived and partially processed preconsciously. There is evidence that pre-conscious processing is very powerful by evading critical scrutiny through conscious, rational appraisal (Eysenck and Keane, 2000). Image effects contribute to product evaluations; still, there's a relatively larger body of literature on information effects.

We thus formulate:

H1.Information effects are more important than image effects in product evaluation:

H1a. Information is more important than images in quality rating.

H1b. Information is more important than images in attitude rating.

H1c. Information is more important than images in purchase intention ratings.

METHODOLOGY

Survey instrument

The questionnaire was in divided four parts. In the first and in the second part, a series of images were shown to consumers. In a first series, respondents were exposed to formal attire images worn by models; then, the same respondent was exposed to images of jean wear. The images were taken from established fashion magazines. The images were shown with and without information; in specific the sequence was: first exposure only to the image; in the next step, the respondent was shown the image that incorporate information on the country-of-origin; then, the original advertising, composed of the images and the brand name was shown. For the formal attire, we used the associations (Italy-Giorgio Armani and USA- Calvin Klein), while for the jeans wear (Italy-Energie, USA-Levi's and Italy-Diesel). Giorgio Armani and Calvin Klein have been selected for the elegant attire; they both represent sober and classic elegance. The choice to employ three brands for the study of the sector jeans is owed to the ampleness of the offer proposed by the Levi's, for such reason we are retained opportune to introduce two Italian brands with the purpose to be able to allow to every consumer the execution of a judgment of more truthful comparison.

Based on McGuire's (1968) multi-dimensional conceptualization of attitude structure, respondents were asked to rate on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1) their perception of the quality of the formal attire or jeans wear shown in images and (2) their overall attitude toward the formal attire or jeans wear, using the information and image presented. The respondents rated each image on their perceptions of its quality and their overall attitude towards the dress or jeans. Then the images were shown again, in the same order, and this time the respondents were asked to indicate their overall intention to purchase the dress or jeans. In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were first asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert-type scale the extent to which the brand of formal attire or jeans are important to them when purchasing a dress or a jeans. They were then asked about their attitude towards and preferences between Giorgio Armani

and Calvin Klein for formal attire, while Energie, Levi's and Diesel for jeans wear. The final part of the questionnaire gathered demographic data and information about the respondent' prior experiences.

Sample and data collection

A total of 420 respondents took part in the survey: 120 from the South and Center of Italy, 120 from North Italy, 90 Japan and 90 from other residuals nationalies. Data was gathered via personal interviews with consumers at five locations in Italy. Respondents were screened for prior experience in order to ensure that they were familiar with formal attire and jeans wear products (Johansson et al., 1985; Johansson and Nebenzahl, 1986).
The researchers sought to obtain a sample that was evenly balanced by demographic characteristics such as nationality, age group, sex, marital status, and gross annual income (Table 1).

Table 1: Demografic breakdown of the sample

	South -Middle Italy (%) (*n* = 120)	North Italy (%) (*n* = 120)	Japan (%) (*n* = 90)	Other nationalities (%) (*n* = 90)
Gender				
Male	44	57	58	56
Female	56	43	42	44
Age				
<18 years old	9	9	8	9
18-24	24	24	24	27
24-34	19	21	19	22
35-44	24	23	23	19
45-55	16	14	18	16
55 years old above	8	8	8	8
Marital status				
Single	52	56	71	51
Married	40	36	24	40
Divorced	5	5	3	6
separate	2	2	1	2
Widower/Widow	2	2		1
Educational level				
Primary	8	6	8	7
Secondary	18	13	18	9
Polytechinic/two-years college	46	53	47	39
University	20	18	20	30
Postgraduate	4	3	3	6
Occupation				
Professional	4	8	6	6
Managment	5	7	7	21
Sales	3	6	2	4
Skilled worker	45	44	44	28
Self-employed	2	4	1	3
Retired	3	1	1	
Unemployed	7	6	6	8
Student	30	26	32	29
Gross income				
Below €10,000	45	43	44	40
€10,000 - €20,000	14	12	11	9
€20,000 - €40,000	28	28	29	30
€40,000 - €60,000	10	9	9	13
Above €60,000	3	8	7	8

Analyses and results

Using χ_2 tests, the effect of demographic characteristics on the respondents' evaluations of CO and brand effects was assessed but, in most cases, there were no significant result. However, one demographic factor were statistically significant ($\chi_2 < 0,05$): the relationship between nationality and the use of informations and the relationship between nationality and use of images.

A MANOVA tests (see table 2) examined the individual effects of information and image effects on product evaluation (quality, attitude, and purchase intention), and the interaction of information*image effects on product evaluation. For formal attire, both information and image effects, individually, had a significant main effect on quality and attitudes ($p< 0,01$), while information effects had a significant effect also on purchase intentions. Besides, there was a significant influence between information and image effects on product evaluation.

Different results were found for jeans wear: information and image effects were significant on all three measures of product evaluation ($p < 0,001$), as was and the interaction between information and image effects.

Next, tests of paired comparisons (Bonferroni tests) were conducted to assess whether there were significant differences in the means of the product evaluation scores across Country of origin, Brand and CO no information given (control level). For all three product evaluation measures, ratings for the Brand were significantly higher than for Country of origin and no CO (Table 3).

To compare the relative effects of informations and images, three regression analyses were performed, with informations and images as the independent variables in all cases and product quality, attitude toward product, and intention to purchase as the successive dependent variables (table 4 regression analyses). In the analysis on the formal attire in all cases, the regression coefficients for informations were positive and statistically significant ($p<0,001$), but for images the regression coefficients were negative and statistically significant on quality and attitude. Thus for the formal attire, there is an

inverse relationship between quality perceptions and attitudes with images. Thus, the data indicated that H1a, H1b qnd H1c were supported.

Table 2. Manova: main effects and interaction effects of information and image

FORMAL ATTIRE			
Main Effects		df	F -value
INFORMATIONS			
	Quality perceptions	2	195.488**
	Attitudes	2	76.765**
	Purchase intentions	2	61.786**
IMAGES			
	Quality perceptions	1	129.060**
	Attitudes	1	24.046**
	Purchase intentions	1	0.702
INFORMATIONS*IMAGES			
	Quality perceptions	2	7.882**
	Attitudes	2	4.263*
	Purchase intentions	2	5.641*
JEANSWEAR			
Main Effects		df	F -value
INFORMATIONS			
	Quality perceptions	2	157.442**
	Attitudes	2	71.766**
	Purchase intentions	2	67.233**
IMAGES			
	Quality perceptions	2	32.593**
	Attitudes	2	32.200**
	Purchase intentions	2	120.553**
INFORMATIONS*IMAGES			
	Quality perceptions	4	7.871**
	Attitudes	4	3.467*
	Purchase intentions	4	6.881**

*** p < 0.001; * p < 0.05*

As for jeanswear the regressions coefficients for informations and images were positive and stastically significant (p<0,001). For product quality and attitude to product, the effect of informations were greater (standardized coefficient beta = 0.264, 0.176) but, for purchase intentions, images had a greater effect (standardized coefficient beta = 0.228). Thus, the data indicated that informations and images affect different aspects of product evaluation, providing support for H1a, H1b and for H2c.

Another important result is shown in tables 8 and 9, which show the effects of the information and the images on the base of the different nationalities.

Table 3. Bonferroni multiple comparisons of information and image effects

FORMAL ATTIRE				
Dependent Variable	(I) Informations	(J) Informations	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error
Quality perceptions	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.17*	0.069
		Brand	-1.26**	0.069
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.17*	0.069
		Brand	-1.09**	0.069
	Brand	No Informations	1.26**	0.069
		Country-of-origin	1.09**	0.069
Attitudes	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.19	0.083
		Brand	-0.97**	0.083
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.19	0.083
		Brand	-0.79**	0.083
	Brand	No Informations	0.97**	0.083
		Country-of-origin	0.79**	0.083
Purchase Intentions	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.30*	0.088
		Brand	-0.96**	0.088
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.30*	0.088
		Brand	-0.66**	0.088
	Brand	No Informations	0.96**	0.088
		Country-of-origin	0.66**	0.088
JEANSWEAR				
Dependent Variable	(I) Informations	(J) Informations	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error
Quality perceptions	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.26**	0.061
		Brand	-1.04**	0.061
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.26**	0.061
		Brand	-0.77**	0.061
	Brand	No Informations	1.04**	0.061
		Country-of-origin	0.77**	0.061
Attitudes	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.11	0.067
		Brand	-0.75**	0.067
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.11	0.067
		Brand	-0.64**	0.067
	Brand	No Informations	0.75**	0.067
		Country-of-origin	0.64**	0.067
Purchase Intentions	No Informations	Country-of-origin	-0.20*	0.071
		Brand	-0.80**	0.071
	Country-of-origin	No Informations	0.20*	0.071
		Brand	-0.59**	0.071
	Brand	No Informations	0.80**	0.071
		Country-of-origin	0.59**	0.071

*** p < 0.001; * p < 0.05*

Table 4. Regression coefficients of information and image on product quality, attitude to product, and intention to purchase

FORMAL ATTIRE	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value
Quality perceptions				
(Constant)	4.586	0.048		94.607
Informations	0.615	0.015	0.361	42.039**
Images	-0.643	0.024	-0.228	-26.542**
Attitudes				
(Constant)	3.912	0.064		60.791
Informations	0.494	0.019	0.234	25.413**
Images	-0.295	0.032	-0.085	-9.177**
Purchase intentions				
(Constant)	2.261	0.072		31.367**
Informations	0.571	0.022	0.242	26.228**
Images	-3.27E-02	0.036	-0.008	-0.909
JEANSWEAR	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value
Quality perceptions				
(Constant)	2.405	0.090		26.718
Informations	0.518	0.031	0.264	16.935**
Images	0.232	0.031	0.118	7.591**
Attitudes				
(Constant)	2.442	0.100		24.513
Informations	0.375	0.034	0.176	11.072**
Images	0.269	0.034	0.126	7.941**
Purchase intentions				
(Constant)	1.382	0.106		13.055**
Informations	0.398	0.036	0.173	11.088**
Images	0.525	0.036	0.228	14.611**

*** p < 0.001*

Table 5. Information and image effects on nationality

INFORMATIONS		South-Middle Italy	North Italy	Japan	Other nationalities
Quality perceptions	Formal Attire	++	+	+++	++++
	Jeanswear	++	+	+++	++++
Attitudes	Formal Attire	++	+	++++	+++
	Jeanswear	+	++	+++	++++
Purchase intentions	Formal Attire	+	++	++++	+++
	Jeanswear	++	+	++++	+++
IMAGES		South-Middle Italy	North Italy	Japan	Other nationalities
Quality perceptions	Formal Attire	Ns	--	-	---
	Jeanswear	Ns	+++	Ns	++++
Attitudes	Formal Attire	++++	+++	---	--
	Jeanswear	Ns	+++	++	++++
Purchase intentions	Formal Attire	Ns	++++	----	Ns
	Jeanswear	+	++	+++	++++

- = effect negative and statistically significant
+ = effect positive and statistically significant
Ns = no significant effect

Discussion and conclusions

As for formal attire, our study of information and image effects evidences the preponderant role played by informations (brand and country of origin). The influence of the information results to be meaningful and of great weight for all measures of product evaluation (quality perception, attitude toward the product, and purchase intention). Images, therefore, are of an inferior degree in regard to informations in this product category; especially they do not result meaningful as concerns the purchase intention.

We tentatively propose that the elevated perception of the social risk in the evaluation of formal attire could have an effect: information cues offer particular product guarantees. We can be hypothesized that the difficulty to appraise the intrinsic attributes of this product category invokes consumers to rely on information cues, and above all on the brand.

As for jeanwear, we found that image cues have a strong effect on consumers' purchase intention. Perceived quality and attitude towards the products, on the other hand, are rather influenced by information than image effects. This helps us to understand that consumers evaluate the peculiar images of every specific jeans model when it comes to the acquisition intent. A "brand of jeans" is synonymous of quality, but in the situation of choice the expression of the personality and the life style of the particular product comes to weight in.

In general, brand effects emerged to contribute more strongly to quality perception, attitude toward the product, and purchase intention. Country of origin effects, though of smaller intensity, nevertheless contribute significantly the perception of the quality and on the purchase intention in both product categories object of study.

In the analyses on the elegant attire for all the measures of evaluation the made in Italy and the Giorgio Armani have shown to have a increase effects in comparison to those respectively practiced by the made in Usa and from the Calvin Klein. As it regards jeanses there is a compensation of effects among the two countries of origin selected (Italy and Usa), while from the evaluations on brands, a predominance of the Levi's and the Diesel emerges in comparison to the Energie.

Advertising that promotes typification of identity and ontology also instructs and informs (Bristor et al., 1995). Our study has shown that image effects vary across product categories and customer segments; further research warrants these aspects.

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