

Exploring the influence of country-of-origin information to Generation Ys' perception towards international fashion brands

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore whether and how country-of-origin information influences the perception of Generation Ys from twenty one countries towards international fashion brands. With approximately 1.38 billion Generation Ys are currently in the job market or about to enter the job market, they are increasingly taking over the spending power of the previous generation, the Baby Boomers. This study was conducted in the context of fashion products, one of the key interests of the Generation Ys. As Generation Ys are internet savvy, this study was conducted by using semi-structured interviews in an online chat room and structured email interviews. This study highlighted that fashion products made in highly industrialised countries or countries of the brand origin were still preferred by the majority of the interviewed Generation Ys. Country-of-origin information was used by Generation Ys to judge the quality, price and ethical issue of the products. However, as the majority of the international fashion brands currently manufacture their products in the less industrialised countries, country-of-origin information hardly influenced the majority of the Generation Ys' perception towards the brands. This research hopefully can bring a valuable insight to global fashion marketers about how country-of-origin information influences Generation Ys' perception of international fashion brands. Qualitative studies which investigate the perception of Generation Ys towards country-of-origin are scarce. Thus, this study can contribute to the development of research into country-of-origin.

Keywords: Country-of-origin, brand, fashion, consumer behaviour

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore whether and how country-of-origin information influences Generation Ys' perception of international fashion brands . Generation Ys is also known as Gen Y, Millenials, Echo Boomers, Why Generation, Net Generation, Gen Wired, We Generation, DotNet, Ne(x)T Generation, Nexters, First Globals, iPod Generation and iYGeneration (William and Page, 1994). Generation Ys are individuals born during the period 1977-1994 (Nayyar, 2001; Paul, 2001). There are approximately 1.38 billion Generation Ys in the world (US Census Bureau, 2012). They are in the 18-35 age range in 2012.

The majority of country-of-origin studies to date only involve customers from one or a small number of nationalities. It has been claimed that country-of-origin information is used by customers to predict the quality and performance of products (Cai *et al.*, 2004; Muchbalcher *et al.*, 1999; Olins, 2004). To the best of the authors' knowledge, studies that investigate the influence of country-of-origin information to Generation Ys' perception of international fashion brands are scare. Fashion is mentioned as one of the key interests of Generation Ys (William & Page, 2011; Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011; Gronbach, 2008). Therefore, international fashion brands are deemed to be an appropriate context in evaluating how country-of-origin influences Generation Ys' perception towards brands. Furthermore, recently more international fashion retailers manufacture their products in countries that offer cheaper production costs (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003; Khan, 2003). This trend often results in inconsistency between brand and product country-of-origin.

It has been identified that differences between the markets of different countries exists because of factors such as culture, history and geography and there are differences between the many regions in the world in the way consumers perceive products and brands (Lim and O'Cass, 2001). Therefore, many country-of-origin studies were often conducted in the context of specific countries (Bannister and Saunders, 1978; Cai *et al.*, 2004; Chao, 1998; Hahn *et al.*, 2006; Kaynak *et al.*, 2000; Knight, 1999; Lawrence *et al.*, 1992; Lim and O'cass, 2001; Pappadopoulos *et al.*, 1989). However, there has been a growing awareness that

considerable similarities exist in the needs of consumers around the world (Domzal and Unger, 1987). Factors such as cross-border population mobility (Quelch, 1999) and electronic mobility facilitated by telecommunication technology (Domzal and Unger, 1987; Quelch, 1999) such as film, television and internet influence this convergence of needs. This suggestion is especially relevant for Generation Ys who were born into a technological, electronic and wireless society with global boundaries becoming more transparent (Daniels, 2007). Recognising this convergence of similarities, instead of looking at the perception towards country-of-origin from one specific country basis, this study looks at the issue from the basis of Generation Ys from 21 countries.

Most country-of-origin studies employ quantitative research because the purpose of these studies is to measure the effect of country-of-origin on customers' perception and behaviour. Nevertheless, because of its focus in measuring causal relationships, quantitative studies usually are not able to capture the reasons for customers' perception and behaviour towards country-of-origin. Therefore, this paper provides an alternative approach to country-of-origin studies by employing a qualitative research. By employing a qualitative approach, this paper will not only be able to investigate whether country-or-origin information influence Generation Y's perception towards fashion brands but also explain why it influences or does not influence their perception. This paper is structured as follows: a literature review, research methods, research results and discussion with reference to relevant literature. The study is concluded by summarising the findings, highlighting research limitations and suggesting the managerial implications.

2. The relationship between country-of-origin and brand

Studies indicate that brands are used by customers as a cue to determine the quality of a product (e.g. Douglas *et al.*, 2004; Holt *et al.*, 2004). Customers tend to believe that the more global the brand, the better the quality that was offered (Holt *et al.*, 2004). The reasoning is that customers believe that global brands continually upgrade their standards and product innovation. However, this does not necessary mean that global brands are better than others. It is simply because people tend to believe based on the promise, acceptance, trust and hope offered by leading brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Customers are eager to pay higher prices if they have positive attitudes and feelings towards brands (Kapferer, 2004). By examining the arguments above, it can be seen that in the customers' mind brands help to

differentiate one product from another and global brands gain more benefits and favour than non-global brands.

Aaker (1991) emphasises that consumers' feelings and attitudes towards brands are not factual; they are more likely shaped by their own and public opinions. Their attitudes and feelings towards a brand are shaped by *brand associations* (Aaker, 1991). Brand association is the informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory that contains the meaning of the brand for consumers, which includes the perception of brand quality and attitudes towards the brand (Keller *et al.*, 2008). These associations are usually formed by media, word of mouth and experience of using the products (Swystun, 2007). Country-of-origin is one of nine elements of brand associations (Aaker, 1991). Koubaa's (2008) research indicates that country-of-origin has an impact on brand perception.

Country-of-origin is usually communicated by 'Made in' or 'Manufactured in' labels and can be understood as the image of a country in the consumers' mind which influences their evaluation towards the products or brands that are offered by that country (Chapa *et al.*, 2006; Shlomo & Jaffee, 1996). According to the Revised Kyoto Convention (**international convention on the simplification and harmonization of international customs procedures**) if a product has been produced or modified in two or more countries, the country-of-origin of the product will be the last country in which the product has been substantially processed (United Nations Statistic Division, 2007). Based on this regulation, country-of-origin can be defined as the last place where a product was manufactured or substantially modified which is usually informed by 'Made in' label and its image might influence consumers' perception towards products and brands.

It has been suggested that country-of-origin can express both positive and negative messages about the product to the consumers (Kim and Chung, 1997; Omar, *et al.* 2009). According to Aaker (1991) country-of-origin can shape consumers' perception towards the brand. More importantly, inaccurate brand-country-of-origin (brand origin) and country-of-origin knowledge can lead to a confusing and somewhat negative image about country-of-origin (Paswan and Sharma, 2004). However, very little research has been dedicated in investigating whether country-of-origin information can influence Generation Y's perception towards international fashion brands.

3. **Inconsistency between product and brand origin**

Studies show that both a products' country-of-origin and brand origin influence consumers' product evaluation (Hui and Zhou, 2003; Thakor and Kohli, 1996; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Knight; 1999). Inconsistency between brand and product country-of-origin may bring confounding effects to consumers' product evaluation (Tse and Gorn, 1993; Lee and Ganesh, 1999). Information about where the products were made influences consumers' perception towards the brand, and positive preconceptions about country-of-origin will increase the brand value (Lindstorm, 2005). In contrast, when product country-of-origin is less favourable than brand country-of-origin it is more likely consumers will create a negative evaluation towards the products (Hui and Zhou, 2003). Han and Terpstra's (1988) survey on cars and TV sets and Knight's (1999) survey on microwave ovens highlight that for bi-national products country-of-origin is more important than brand. Tse and Gorn's (1993) research finds that it is almost impossible for famous brands like Sony to reduce the impact of country-of-origin. Drozdenko and Jensen's (2009) quantitative study to 767 customers in USA indicates that customers are more willing to pay a premium price for 11 product categories made in advanced markets (USA and Germany) over products made in emerging markets (India and China).

Nevertheless, the findings of Leonidou *et al.*'s (2007) research show different indications. They conclude that brand plays a primary role on country-of-origin evaluation when customers are given specific brand names. This is because customers can estimate the specification and offers given by the brands. The results demonstrate that brands can overshadow the effect of country-of-origin to product evaluation. Other studies also indicate that in terms of quality judgement, brand is more important than country-of-origin (Hui and Zhou, 2003; Hamin and Eliot, 2006).

Gaedeke's (1973) research on consumers' perception of the quality of general products shows that country-of-origin does not significantly influence their perception of quality of branded products. Research finds that brand "has a serious moderating role to play, either positive or negative, on country-of-origin evaluations" because "every known brand has certain equity determined by its popularity, reputation and associated beliefs in consumers mind" (Leonidou *et al.*, 2007, p.811).

Different results obtained in identifying the relationship between brand and country-of-origin research can be caused by different products categories that were used in the research or other factors such as nationalities. Therefore, this research investigates the relationship between brand and country-of-origin in the context of international fashion brands

4. Country-of-origin of fashion products

There are a number of reasons why this study is conducted in the context of international fashion brands. Firstly the majority of international fashion brands have been outsourcing their products to emerging markets (Gereffi and Memedovic, 2003; Khan, 2003). Secondly the fashion industry is a multimillion pound industry, and many consumers, including the Generation Ys, use fashion brands as a way of creating identity (Jugessur and Cohen, 2009).

International fashion retailers typically position themselves in international markets by virtue of their marketing effort and product offering, which contributes to their overall brand appeal (Moore, 1996). The impact of this strategy is that many of the fashion brands are transformed into international, universal or worldwide brands which are not only known by both those who use the products but also by those who will never use the product. In the fashion industry, the design and trademarks of fashion products represent intangible assets which become an invaluable competitive advantage (Završnik and Mumel, 2007). It is recognised that customers have better perception of clothes that have a strong brand name as well as clothes that are made with better materials (Davis, 1985). However, the fast fashion trend may change consumers' concentration on high quality and long lasting fashion products to having a focus on the newest model at an affordable price allowing them to be able to always be seen to follow the fashion trend (Hines and Bruce, 2007; Newbery and Barnes, 2005).

In this industry, labour makes up somewhere between 30% and 60% of the cost of a product (Hines and Bruce, 2007). Lower labour costs can be found in emerging markets. In some countries such as Vietnam, the labour cost is 20% to 30% cheaper compared to a £7 per hour labour cost in the United Kingdom, and although the labour cost is lower, the labour skills are often comparable with the skill of high-labour costs countries (Hines and Bruce, 2007). In the fashion industry, consumers' demands are unpredictable and the fast fashion trend requires quick responses to changes in the market place (Newbery and Barnes, 2005), it is very appropriate for international fashion retailers to manufacture their products in countries

that offer low manufacturing costs so that they can maximise the production capability and minimise manufacturing costs. Considering all of these factors, it is a question whether country-of-origin information which is used to predict product quality and performance and to understand the rationality of their purchasing behaviour (Cai et al., 2004), can influence Generation Ys' perception towards international fashion brands.

5. Generation Ys' perception towards fashion brand and country-of-origin

Each generation has unique expectations, experiences, generational history, lifestyles, values and demographics that influence their buying behaviour (Williams and Page, 2011). A generation is a product of the current time and is uniquely shaped by technologies, media, social marker and events (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011). Thus, it can be argued that because each cohort travels through life together and experience similar events at a similar age, they can share a common social, political, historical and economic environment.

Generation Ys grew up in a time of immense and fast paced changed including virtually full employment opportunities for women, dual-income households as standard, wide array of family types seen as normal, significant respect for ethnic and cultural diversity including a heightened social awareness, and computers at home and in schools (Williams and Page, 2011).

Generation Ys' individuality and image centricity make brands and products customisation very important (Daniels, 2007). Fashion is one of the mediums with which to reflect their individuality. Generation Ys do not pay attention to quality and require competitive pricing and may want to negotiate based on the competitors' advertised prices or search results from the internet (Himmel, 2008). Generation Ys demand the latest trends in record time and get bored easily (Yarrow and O'Donnell, 2009). Because of this characteristic, affordable fast fashion retailers are popular among the Generation Ys.

Empirical studies that focus on how country-of-origin influences Generation Ys' product evaluation are scare. A study that touches upon this issue indicates that Generation Ys' awareness of country-of-origin is higher than the awareness of brand-origin because country-of-origin information is usually attached to the products (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011).

Generation Ys also associate the image of the country to the quality of the product categories.

Country-of-origin appears to play a more important role in their perception of quality in certain industries such as food, health and beauty, technology (durables), cars and clothing (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011).

Generation Ys believe that they can make the future better (William and Page, 2011). They want products and services that serve their functional needs as well as those that have a purpose and meaning. They support brands that they perceive to be good to their employees, good for the environment and are doing something positive for the future (Yarrow and O'Donnell, 2009). Ethical issues, such as, labour mistreatment and animal abuse, influence this generation's perception towards country-of-origin (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011).

It is important to note most of the marketing studies related to Generation Ys have been undertaken in the Western World such as USA and Europe. Therefore, empirical research which focuses on the perception of Generation Ys from both advanced and emerging economies towards country-of-origin can contribute to the development of marketing knowledge.

In the context of this study, global outsourcing by international fashion retailers may change Generation Ys' product evaluation and attitude towards international fashion brands and country-of-origin. Thus, in this early stage, two consumer behaviours can be predicted. First, since consumers are faced with many choices of fashion products in the market, they have a tendency to make purchasing decisions based on the associations that are created, rather than its actual attributes (Schroiff and Arnold, 2004). Thus, country-of-origin can be used more intensively by consumers in order to avoid their confusion and to help them decide when it comes to purchasing. Secondly, because the majority of international fashion retailers manufacture their products overseas and brand is the major cue used in the fashion industry, the effect of country-of-origin on Generation Ys' evaluation towards international fashion brands is diminished. Therefore, this current research will be an opportunity to provide the most updated results regarding whether country-of-origin will directly influence Generation Ys' perception towards international fashion brands.

6. Research methods

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate to be adopted (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The strength of qualitative research is that the researchers can emphasize subtleties in participants' behaviours and responses. They can also gain depth information from the participants and highlight the reasons for their actions or perspectives that cannot be achieved by a quantitative research method (Burns, 2000).

MSN Messenger (chat room) and email interviews were employed in the primary research. There are two main reasons why chat rooms and email were considered as the most appropriate mediums to be employed in this study: firstly, the participants live in different countries; secondly, the participants are Generation Ys who are familiar with the use of technology and chat rooms (Tapscott, 2009). It has been argued that computer-mediated communication such as chat rooms and emails allowed the researcher to collect rich data from isolated, geographically dispersed, and/or stigmatized groups who are often overlooked or ignored (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). Processing and analysing online interview data is generally quicker than offline interviews because online interviews can automatically generate transcripts (Gruber *et al.*, 2008).

Email interviews are seen to be more complete as they tend to include more self-reflection by participants and are likely to be more candid (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). This was also reflected in the current research. However, this method might lead to caution on the part of the participant. It can also lead to the researcher failing to pick up cues about sensitive issues (Gillham, 2005). The pilot interviews undertaken in the research partially resolved these problems as the feedback from the pilot studies was used to improve the questions. Two pilot interview sessions were conducted for the purpose of this research:

1. ***Semi structured pilot interviews (using chat room)***

The first session was conducted semi-structurally by using a chat room. During the semi-structured pilot interviews, similar core questions were given to the participants and different additional questions were given based on the participants' answers (Gillham, 2005). The aim of the semi-structured pilot interviews was to explore the participants' opinions, develop the questions based on the participants' answers for use in the actual interviews and explore other possible theories that were missed in the literature review. These one-to-one interview sessions involved six participants which took approximately 30 to 120 minutes to complete.

2. ***Structured pilot interviews (using emails)***

The second pilot session was conducted by using email. The feedback during the semi-structured pilot interviews were used to develop structured pilot interviews that were sent by email to six participants. In structured interviews ‘the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees were asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format’ (Patton 2002, p.349). The aim of the structured pilot interviews was to estimate the time needed to answer the questions, to check spelling, grammar and wording mistakes, and to consider possible questions to be added or removed for the actual interview sections. The pilot email interviews were sent to six participants. According to the participants, it took approximately 30 to 60 minutes to answer the questions. A similar time frame was also used by the participants in the actual email interviews. There were 10 main questions posed to the participants. Some questions had between two and four sub-questions. The feedback of the second pilot interviews was used to develop the actual email interview questions.

In order to create and test new interpretations that require information richness, qualitative research usually uses small samples but samples that are selected purposefully (Kuzel, 1999). Therefore, non-probability self-selection sampling was employed in this research. The participants in this research were generated from the author’s social circle. Using this sampling method, the participants were invited or asked personally to participate in the research. The samples were heterogeneous by nationality (figure 1). There were 21 nationalities involved in the research. The participants were born between 1977 and 1994, have been in full time or part time employment and educated at the university.

Table 1 – The list of the respondents (53)

Belgium (1)	Czech Republic (1)	Malaysia (3)	Netherlands (2)	Thai (2)
Brazil (2)	Finland (2)	Indonesia (8)	Spain (2)	Turkey (3)
Canada (1)	France (3)	Italy (2)	Sweden (1)	United Kingdom (8)
China (5)	Germany (2)	Japan (1)	Tanzania (2)	United States (1)
				Vietnam (1)

Female: 29

Male:24

In order to identify a pattern and to create classifications for the answers, this research aimed at a minimum of 30 participants. To determine a sample size in a qualitative research study a theoretical saturation strategy is usually adopted. Theoretical saturation occurs when “no new or relevant data seems to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 212). Therefore, in qualitative research the researcher would continue expanding the sample size until the data collection supplies no new information or pattern (Thomson, 2011). By employing this approach in this research, the process of undertaking interviews was stopped after patterns in the answers were identified.

In total there were 70 email interviews sent out which led to 53 interview responses that were valid including the pilot interviews. After the completed email interviews were received by the researcher, a follow up procedure was conducted. This was undertaken by asking the participants about their opinion of the interview questions, their difficulties when answering them, the length of time they took in completing the full interview and to find out if there was any other questions that they would have been liked to ask about.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study specifically employed theoretical thematic analysis where the themes were developed from the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area (Braun and Clark, 2006). The thematic analysis involved the process of creating and applying codes to the data. When a new theme was found in the data but was not mentioned in the literature review, the new themes were used to feedback or develop the literature review. This iterative and reflexive process meant the analysis was not only theoretically sound but also reflected the researched phenomenon.

7. Results and analysis

1. *The Generation Ys’ priority of factors when buying international fashion products*

A considerable amount of research indicates that country-of-origin affected consumers’ product evaluation (e.g. Chao, 1998; Hahn *et al.*, 2006). It has been mentioned that country-

of-origin was used to predict quality and performance of products (e.g. Cai *et al.*, 2004; Hamin & Elliot, 2006) and to understand the rationality of their purchasing decision (e.g. Khachatuarian & Morganosky, 1990). However, the current research conducted in the context of Generation Y indicated different findings.

The respondents were asked to rank order the factors involved with purchasing international branded clothes: brand, design, country-of-design, country-of-origin, price, and other issues (if any). The results show that many respondents put design as the most important factor, followed by price, brand, country-of-origin, and lastly country-of-design. According to the majority of the respondents, design was the most important factor when buying international branded clothes because design was the main reason for buying clothes.

'I like to have my own style and choose clothes which have unique designs. Thus, design always attracts me most (Stephanie – Dutch)

This could be because the design of clothes is the symbol of the customers' identity as was mentioned by the following respondent. It has been mentioned in the literature review that individuality is important for the Generation Ys.

'...many times people would look at what you wear based on how it looks and attract people eyes and give them opinion on what are we trying to show who we are' (Daniel - Indonesian).

Price was the second most important factor when buying international branded clothes. However, the majority of respondents also indicated that they would not buy clothes that were excessively expensive. The price must be affordable or reasonable when related to the clothes design:

'If it doesn't cost an arm and a leg, and looks good, that's all I need' (Peter – German)

When this research was conducted, many of the respondents were studying at the university, just completed their university degree or at the early stage of their career. Therefore, affordable fashion products that suit their personality is the most reasonable option for Generation Ys. When their income increases, this preference may also change.

Furthermore, the preference of the Generation Ys' in this study for design and affordable price can be related to the fast fashion trend. Fast fashion trends might change these consumers' preferences from high quality and durable products to the newest model and affordable prices (Hines and Bruce, 2007; Newbery and Barnes, 2005).

The perception towards the importance of brands when buying international branded clothes were somewhat mixed. The majority of the respondents indicated that brand was used to evaluate the quality of fashion products. This finding was similar with Holt *et al.*'s (2004) findings that brand was used to evaluate the product quality. Some of the respondents highlighted that their favourite brands would offer designs that normally suit their styles and preference. Thus, brands were used by these respondents to narrow their product choices.

'Brand gives me an opinion for the quality of the clothes. I always have some brands in my mind when I go to shopping' (Buket – Turkish)

2. ***When buying international branded clothes brand overshadows country-of-origins***

Country-of-origin came as the fourth most important factor when the respondents bought international branded clothes. The current study revealed there were a number of reasons why respondents paid attention to country-of-origin of fashion products with international brands, such as ethical trading, quality perception and expensive price qualifier:

2.1. ***Ethical trading***

The first reason is ethical trading. Some of the respondents would try to avoid buying clothes which were made in the countries known for manufacturing their products unethically.

'I paid attention even from the country of origin, I prefer don't buy products from the developing countries because most of the time the people are exploited' (Laura – Italian)

These findings indicated that since consumers are presented with many choices of fashion products in the marketplace, they have a tendency to make purchasing decisions based on the associations that are created, rather than its actual attributes (Schroiff & Arnorld, 2004).

However, the current findings also emphasised that the unethical trading issue would not influence their purchasing decision even though they are aware it may be the case.

'If I like the product it doesn't matter to me, I just want to buy that. Maybe I think that I can't affect on that if the product is made in some "bad" country or illegal way etc. I mean if I am the only person who ignores the product like that, it doesn't help. it doesn't make things better' (Pinja – Finnish).

More importantly, some respondents also emphasised that unethical trading would not make them disliking the fashion brands:

'Yes but it is not a strong influence... I will like a brand even if I know they employ young children to produce their product' (Nazih – French)

Based on the analysis above, it is suggested that Generation Ys pay attention to the humanity and ethical trading issues which can be evaluated by country-of-origin information. However, because the majority of international branded fashion products are now made in less industrialised countries which are often associated with negative humanity and ethical trading issues, Generation Ys pay less attention towards the issues and the impact of this is that they pay less attention to country-of-origin information. Although some Generation Ys believed that they should wear ethical products, others believed that not buying fashion products from less industrialised countries that had a negative image of humanity and ethical trading would not change the situation.

7.2.2. Quality perception

A small number of respondents indicated that another reason why they paid attention to country-of-origin information was to judge the quality of the fashion products. The Generation Ys believed that different countries provide a different quality of products. Some also argued that cheap labour and materials could reduce the quality of products. They perceived that outsourcing to countries other than brand origin and/or in countries that were not well-known for producing high quality fashion products might lower the company's quality control as was mentioned in the statements below:

‘Country of origin highly influences my perception about product quality, especially if the country is infamous for acceptable or even poor quality of products. For example in the last couple of years China has been well-known for producing poor quality of products. Thus, if I want to buy Nike shoes I will check and look for the one made in US or Europe though I know that originally Nike shoes are made in Bandung (Indonesia) or Vietnam’ (Anthony – Indonesian).

However, the majority of the Generation Ys in this study emphasised that it was brand not country-of-origin that should be used to judge the quality of international fashion products:

‘It is the brand which promises the level of quality etc, not the country where it is produced. If anything goes wrong, you blame the company, not the country. In other words, even though Nike is produced in Taiwan, it is a global brand. So, you don’t blame Taiwan if any product of Nike does not satisfy your expectations’ (Ahmet – Turkish)

Based on the findings above, it can be seen that country-of-origin has little influence on Generation Ys’ evaluation of the quality of international branded fashion products. The current findings contradicted what had been suggested by Van den Bergh *et al.* (2011) that Generation Ys considered country-of-origin to play a more important role in certain industries such as the clothing industry. Instead of country-of-origin, brand was used by the majority of the Generation Ys to establish the quality of the fashion products.

2.3. Price qualifier

The current research findings also indicated that the majority of the Generation Ys in this study would use country-of-origin to predict the quality of products only if the brand was not well-known or if the fashion brand is categorised as luxurious or the price is expensive:

‘...when something has no brand but is made in China, then I probably think twice but if it's famous brand but made in China... for some reason it will be different. Because, I think with a famous brand it is more checked, that everything is OK’ (Kim – Belgian)

This finding confirmed research by past researchers (Gaedeke 1973; Leonidou *et al.*, 2007) who concluded that brand played a primary role on country-of-origin evaluation. When consumers were given specific brand names they could estimate the specification and offers given by these brands.

Drozdenko and Jensen's research (2009) indicated that customers were more willing to pay a premium price for products made in advanced markets. However, for the Generation Ys in this research, country-of-origin would have a more powerful influence if the price of the fashion products was expensive and/or if the brand was luxurious.

'Only in expensive and exotic brands, for instance if I was buying a designer suit I would rather it came from Italy than China! So perception is important but I would only say it is important if I was spending a lot of money' (Paul – British)

'Yes, it does for the high-end brands, but if for the high street fashion, I prefer the design and don't pay attention from where it is made' (Vivian – Chinese)

Based on the findings above, it can be seen that country-of-origin was least used by the Generation Ys in analysing the quality of international fashion products. Globalisation and global outsourcing trends have been mentioned as factors that drive this phenomenon (Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998; Chao, 1998; Gereffi and Memedovic, 2003; Hines and Bruce, 2007). Confirming this suggestion, the majority of the Generation Ys in this study emphasised that the main reason that they did not pay attention to country-of-origin of fashion products was because the majority of these products had been outsourced to less industrialised countries:

'It used to [matter], but with increasing globalization (when most of the main retailers source their products in East Asia, eventually Eastern Europe) has reduced these perception differences' (Radomir - Czech).

8. Conclusion

This study has developed a new insight on the influence of country-of-origin information to the Generation Ys' perception. This study revealed that country-of-origin information hardly influence Generation Ys' perception towards the international fashion brands. Generation Ys

in this study considered brands had a more important decision making role than country-of-origin in evaluating fashion products.

Many Generation Ys in this study said that unethical trading issues would influence their perception towards the fashion brands. However, it might not be enough to make them dislike or not buy the fashion brands. The analysis also shows that Generation Ys perceived that fashion products made in highly industrialised countries or countries of the brand origin had better quality. However, since the majority of international fashion retailers manufacture their products overseas and brand is the major cue used in the fashion industry, it is suggested that the effect of country-of-origin evaluation towards the international fashion brand has diminished. The findings also indicated that if the international branded fashion products were made in less industrialised countries, but were sold at a very expensive price, Generation Ys would have negative perception towards that brand.

9. Limitations and future research

This study only used a single qualitative method which explored different responses and the reasons behind these responses. Thus, it might not be qualified for generalising Generation Ys behaviour in general. However, the study has identified many values and indications that can be tested in larger and more specified samples. Therefore, the findings can be used as the foundation of developing future quantitative research or complementing available quantitative research on a similar topic. There may also be some minor language comprehension issues involved. While depth interviews can compensate for this potential problem, the use of internet-based medium may have a slight impact.

10. Managerial implications

This research shows that design is the Generation Ys' priority when buying international clothing brands because fashion design reflects their identity. The Generation Ys also understood that global companies could manufacture fashion apparel less expensively. Therefore, they expected the international fashion retailers to offer designs that suit them and sell their products at a reasonable price, regardless where the products were manufactured. In terms of judging the quality of the fashion products, Generation Ys perceive brands to have a more important role than country-of-origin. Even though, Generation Ys would prefer

products which were made ethically, unethical trading issues would not be adequate to make Generation Ys dislike the brand. However, it is important to note that unethical trading can create negative publicity which eventually may damage a brand's image.

Even though country-of-origin was not considered important in evaluating international fashion brands in general, Generation Ys made an exception for luxurious international fashion brands. The Generation Ys suggested that country-of-origin was important for luxurious brands or expensive fashion products. Therefore, it is suggested that luxurious fashion brands should be manufactured in the country of the brand origin as it seemed that country-of-origin still matters for this type of product category.

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