THE INFLUENCE OF COUNTRY IMAGE ON PRODUCT BRAND IN THE ROMANIAN SHOES INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT The current research study aims to analyze and identify the impact of the consumers' perception on the brand image in the case of Romanian shoes products. The authors' goal was that of shaping a multifactor model which underlies the consumers' behavior on the brand image of a product. The study also provides top management strands of the Romanian light industry enterprises. The research is based on a study conducted in Romania shoes products. The quantitative research has been carried out using the online questionnaire consisting in: brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty dimensions. Analyzing the results of the present research there has been outlined a multifactor model showing the influence of the country image on shoes brands. The findings confirm the assumptions that the country's image has a crucial role on the consumer's behavior in choosing different brands of shoes.

Keywords: country brand image, brand image, product quality, consumers' loyalty

JEL Codes: M31,M30

Introduction

The starting point in explaining the concept of brand image is clearly defined to the way consumers perceive it in close relation to a set of attributes and values. Aaker defines the brand image (Aaker 997, p.347) as a set of characteristics associated to brand, and later on, after 2000, the brand's characteristics have been considered in close relation to the physical aspects. Bosjnak *et al* (2007) argue that brand personality attributes are anchored in specific culture, and express the cultural specific aspect of the brand personality by encompassing both positive and negative brand personality dimensions. Sweeney and Brandon (2006) propose an alternative approach to define and model brand personality by relying on interpersonal theory to describe a brand as a relationship partner. The brand personality represents the perceived image of a brand. In the same way, Keller (1993, p. 3) defines brand image as'perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory's. In any case, there is an agreement in branding literature that a brand is a multidimensional construct and could be described with adjectives that characterize a brand ' s personalities from the consumer's perspective (Caprara *et al* , 2001 ; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003).

Generally speaking the specialized literature focuses on the influence the brand image has in products evaluation, on the one hand, and, on the way the origin country's image can affect the perception of the product quality, on the other hand (Chao 1993).

An study empirically (Quin Sun, Audhesh Paswan, 2011) investigates the relationships between perceived product quality, image and purchase intention. They collected the data in two countries – USA a representative developed country, and China, a fast growing emerging economy – to replicate and validate the hypothesized relationships in two different contexts The results indicate that

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perceived product quality clearly has a positive influence on country-of-origin image (Quin Sun, Audhesh Paswan, 2011).

The consumer's perception on a brand is directly influenced by his own perception concerning the quality of the product and the origin country, as well. In the case the consumer has a positive image on the products' quality, he will have a favourable attitude regarding the origin country, and, if he manifests a positive perception on the country, than he will accept easier a brand originating from that particular country. These suppositions are considered to be the work hypotheses in this research paper, the authors' intention being that of checking them in the case of shoes consumers in Romania, as well.

Research Methodology

The data registered as result of a quantitative research have been collected from respondents from the counties of Alba, Cluj, Sibiu and Hunedoara, Romania using the online questionnaire.

Work hypotheses

H1 The consumer's perception on the product quality –PQ influences directly the country brand image-CBI.

H2 The perception of the country brand image – CBI has a direct influence on the purchasing intention.

H3 The perceived product quality has a direct and positive influence on the purchasing intention- PI. As far as the specialized literature is concerned, one may notice that there have been made such research studies in different other countries; for example, Wang and Lamb (1983) talked about the impact the economic development level and the cultural climate have on the consumers' intention of purchasing foreign origin products. There is a variety of factors interacting to the country image, which have a significant impact on the intention of purchasing imported products; taking into account all these aspects, we have discussed our hypotheses pattern which includes three basic pillars: Product Quality –PQ, Country Brand Image - CBI , Purchase Intention (fig.1)

The current research paper is based on a study focusing on the Romanian shoes products. The quantitative research has been conducted using the online questionnaire concerning: the brand awareness, the perceived quality and the brand loyalty dimensions.
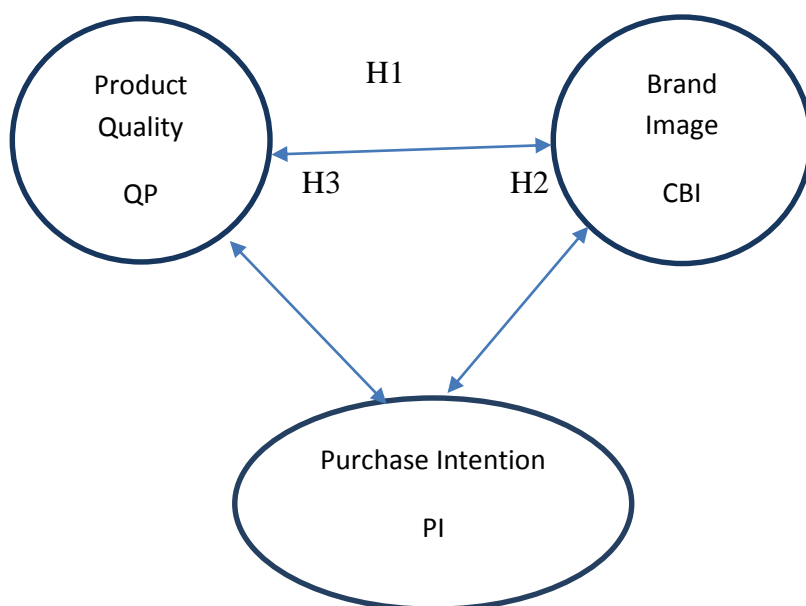

Fig.1 Hypotheses model

In order to carry out this research study Romanian shoes products have been chosen due to the fact that one can speak about the contradictory status of this industry branch. On the one side, Romania deals with the lohn market of significant world wide brands, and, on the other side, the Romanian consumer is oriented towards purchasing products made in other countries, even if he appreciates the high quality of the local products. The products studied in our research paper are shoes products for adults.

Sampling Procedure

The sample we have used consists in 185 respondents belonging to different professional categories, aged of 18-67 years, with different educational levels (table 1).

Table1.

Population Demographic Characteristics

Demographics	Measures	Percentage
Gender	*Female*	112
	Male	73
Age	18-25	103
	26-35	32
	36-45	21
	46-55	17
	56-65	12
Education		
	Secondary	21
	High school	62
	BA programs	79
	MA programs	23

Source: Results Interpretation

There has been used a questionnaire structured on three hypotheses. For the hypothesis H1 we have used 4 items, H2 aimed 3 items, H3 aimed 3 items. The questions referred to two shoes brands well-known in Romania, to the origin country of these two brands and to the consumers' perception on Romanian products, as well. The answers have been measured with LIKERT scale, scale anchored between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5).

After the respondents have been exposed to the products' description, they have been questioned about the origin countries of these products, the scale used for these measurements being LIKERT scale 5. The consumer purchasing intention has been measured using a question like the following one: "Taking into account the product quality, would you like to buy Brand A or Brand B, using a scale with *most unlikely* (1) and *most likely* (5)?"

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The ANOVA analysis has been used and this confirmed the general hypotheses according to which products are considered to be of high quality if they are known brands. The international shoes product used in the questionnaire has been considered to be of higher quality compared to the national product, in spite of the fact that each product has similar features (table2).

Table 2

Analysis and Interpretation

Product	Average quality	Excellent quality
Product A	*2.23*	3.57
Product B	*2.11*	3.39

Source: Results Interpretation
Note: PRODUCT A- INTERNATIONAL BRAND, PRODUCT B – ROMANIAN BRAND

For analyzing H2 and H3 hypotheses we used the test χ^2 … and as a result of the tests both hypotheses have been confirmed (table 3).

Table 3

Analysis and Interpretation

	Country Brand Image - CBI,	P Q
Product A		
PQ	0.69	-
Country Brand Image - CBI,	-	0.47
Product B		
PQ	0.49	-
Country Brand Image - CBI,	-	0.26

Correlation is significant at 0.01.

Source: Results Interpretation

CONCLUSIONS

The current research study investigated the close relations between the perceived product quality, the country brand image and the consumers' purchasing intention.

The results show that the perceived quality of the product has a positive and direct influence on the consumers' intention to purchase goods, and the country brand is influencing the consumer's both perception on quality and purchasing intention, as well.

The interviewed persons appreciated Product A belonging to an international brand as being of high quality and Product B has been seen as one of lower quality. In fact both products are produced in Romania. Analyzing deeply their answers and making correlations between variables, we could notice that they have been satisfied by both products. The persons aged around 35 years are highly influenced by brand, and those aged between 35-45 years consider that the origin country is influencing them in more.

The perception on the product quality can influence negatively at a small extent the country brand image; in this respect, one can demonstrate for the case of Romania the theories which Wang and Lamb in 1983, or Qin Sun and Paswan in 2011 demonstrated for countries such as the USA , China or other countries.

The current study can be also used for other categories of products and contrastive analyses should be made in the case of Romania and other countries, as well.

Research limitations/implications: The work is limited to shape and influence factors in determining the dimensions of the Romanian market. There is the possibility of extending the present research on other product categories and of making comparisons between countries, as well.

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