

NATIONAL CULTURE, COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN AND BRAND IMAGE, IN INTERNATIONAL AUTOMOBILE MARKETS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

¹Ms. Shashibrata Das, ²Dr. Samit Chowdhury

¹PhD Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor

¹Department of Management,

¹Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, India

Abstract: A significant research gap in the literature of global marketing has been addressed by this study. It has put forward a unified framework that systematizes the relationships between national culture, perception of country-of-origin and brand image. These determinants mould the strategic decisions of marketing in the international automobile industry. All of these determinants have been comprehensively reviewed independently in the existing literature. Conversely, a lean scholarly observation has been directed toward learning their unified and interactive consequences on the outcomes of marketing. This framework-based study engages a systematic review of literature and thematic analysis to assess more than 120 peer-reviewed studies. The peer-reviewed studies were published between the year 1985 to 2024. It has unified evidence from Consumer Behavior, Cross-Cultural Marketing and Principles of Strategic Management. Five prime research questions have been connected and articulated by the analysis of this study. It has communicated the mechanisms through which the dimensions of national culture influence the perception of country-of-origin interpretation. Also, the processes that underlie the formation of brand image across functional, symbolic and emotional dimensions. The introduced conceptual framework exemplifies a chronological constructive pathway wherein national culture shapes the orientations of decision making and the values of consumers. It later on influences how consumers understand the signals of country-of-origin and evaluate the global brands. These perceptions of cultural mediation contribute to the formation of a holistic brand image. Hence, assisting the strategic decisions of the companies between the significant approaches of standardization and adaptation. Through the thematic analysis, four major themes have been assessed as follows: 1) National Culture as a foundational factor of the perception of consumer and interpretation frameworks; 2) Country-of-Origin as a practical approach and standard indicator in the evaluation of products; 3) Brand Image as a multifaceted concept combining the functional, symbolic and emotional elements; 4) Factors of strategic possibility that mediate the choices of standardization and adaptation. Notably, in growing economies such as India, the framework provides significant theoretical contributions to global marketing and offers actionable insights for the manufacturers of automobile industry in the culturally variant markets. This study enhances understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior and informs about the growth of more refined strategies of the international marketing, by synthesizing these previously disparate theoretical perspectives.

Keywords: National Culture, Cross-Cultural Marketing, Brand Image, Country-of-Origin, Standardization and Adaptation, Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of automobile markets has fundamentally transformed competitive dynamics, with manufacturers from variant geographic origins competing simultaneously across multiple national markets (Sturgeon, 2008). This enlargement has formed unmatched complexity in the formulation of the strategies of marketing. As a result of that, companies must discover considerable cultural heterogeneity while facilitating functional efficiency and brand consistency (Cleveland & Laroche, 2008). As of 2023, The global automobile industry is valued at approximately \$3.5 trillion. In terms of emerging markets, it continues to enlarge with India projected to reach US\$300 billion by 2026. At present it is placed at world's fourth-largest automobile market (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2023). Current research in global marketing has established that national culture, perception of country-of-origin and brand image symbolizes crucial variables shaping the purchase decisions and consumer behavior (Steenkamp, 2001; Batra et al., 2000; Cleveland et al., 2009). However, these constructs have largely been studied independently with constrained theoretical integration. Most importantly, marketing research has not acceptably addressed how cultural values form the analysis and influence of the creation of the information of country-of-origin. It has also not addressed how at a later time these perception of cultural mediation will influence the multidimensional process of the creation of brand image. Furthermore, the existing review of literature has not discovered about how the integrated influence of these dimensions determine a company's choices of strategic decisions between standardization and adaptation of products across variant cultural markets. This unfilled research gap symbolizes requirement of substantial practical solutions for the international automobile companies. This study aims to reflect on this gap by introducing an integrated conceptual framework that comprehensively captures the integration among national culture, perception of country-of-origin and brand image followed by the strategic decisions of marketing related to standardization and adaptation. Based on a thematic analysis and systematic review of literature of over 120 peer reviewed sources, this study combines insights from varied theoretical perspectives to offer a comprehensive theoretical understanding of how these factors relate to each other and combinedly shape the strategic decisions of marketing in the global automobile markets.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the identified research gap, these are the following research questions that direct this conceptual study.

Research Question 1: How do national cultural dimensions (individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity, and long-term orientation) shape the formation of consumer perception schemas that influence the interpretation and evaluation of country-of-origin signals in the context of automobile consumption?

Research Question 2: Through what mechanisms does country-of-origin perception act as a cognitive heuristic and quality indicator in consumer evaluations of foreign automobile brands, and how is this heuristic function moderated by cultural context?

Research Question 3: How are the functional, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of brand image formed and weighted by consumers across different cultural contexts, and what role does culturally-mediated country-of-origin perception play in this multidimensional formation process?

Research Question 4: What contingency factors mediate the relationship between brand image characteristics and firms' strategic decisions regarding standardization versus adaptation of marketing mix elements?

Research Question 5: How do the integrated effects of culture, country-of-origin perception, and brand image collectively explain cross-national variations in consumer behavior and marketing strategy effectiveness in global automobile markets?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employs a conceptual research design grounded in systematic literature review and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sarantakos, 2013). Conceptual research represents a relevant procedural strategy for this inquiry given the objective of theoretical integration and framework development rather than empirical hypothesis testing (Whetten, 1989; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). The systematic literature review provides a comprehensive, structured examination of existing empirical and theoretical evidence, while thematic analysis enables rigorous identification, analysis, and synthesis of recurring patterns and concepts across diverse scholarly sources.

3.2 Search Strategy for Literature

Search of literature and selection procedures adhered protocols of PRISMA for reviews in a systematic manner (Moher et al., 2009). Electronic databases searched included: (1) Scopus (primary source for citation indexing and impact factor identification); (2) Web of Science; (3) JSTOR; and (4) Google Scholar. Search terms employed Boolean logic operators and included combinations of: ('culture' OR 'cultural dimensions' OR 'national culture') AND ('country-of-origin' OR 'country of origin' OR 'COO' OR 'made in') AND ('brand image' OR 'brand perception' OR 'brand evaluation') AND ('consumer behavior' OR 'marketing strategy'). The temporal scope encompassed publications between January 1985 and December 2024 to ensure coverage of foundational theoretical works while maintaining currency with contemporary scholarship.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were: 1) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations; 2) direct or substantial engagement with culture, country-of-origin perception, or brand image as primary or secondary focal constructs; 3) empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, or literature reviews contributing to understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior; 4) English-language publications; 5) minimum journal impact factor of 0.5 (for scopus-indexed journals) or equivalent quality indicators for non-indexed sources. Application of these criteria to 312 initially identified publications resulted in a final analytical sample of 21 research sources.

3.4 Thematic Analytical Methodology

Thematic analysis was implemented employing a six-phase approach following Braun and Clarke's (2012) iterative methodology: 1) data familiarization through multiple complete readings of selected publications; 2) initial coding of segments relevant to culture, country-of-origin perception, brand image formation, and marketing strategy decisions; 3) collation of codes into candidate themes reflecting conceptual patterns and relationships; 4) review and refinement of themes against source material to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and adequate evidentiary support; 5) thematic definition and nomenclature to articulate clearly the scope and content of each theme; and 6) compilation of illustrative examples and theoretical integration. Analytical rigor was maintained through independent coding of 15% of sample sources (inter-coder agreement: 87%), maintenance of detailed audit trails, and iterative refinement of coding schemes.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS FINDINGS

4.1 Theme 1: Culture as Foundational Determinant of Consumer Perception

The first overarching theme identifies culture as the foundational determinant establishing the cognitive and evaluative frameworks through which consumers interpret product information and make purchasing decisions. This theme reflects conceptualizations of culture as 'the collective programming of the mind' (Hofstede, 2001) and encompasses research examining how cultural dimensions structure consumer perception and preference hierarchies.

Within this theme, thematic analysis identified several sub-themes: (1a) Cultural dimensions as organizational frameworks for consumer values; (1b) Enculturation approaches through which the values of culture are socialized and internalized; (1c) Cultural association context and product category relevance.

The theme emerged from 47 of the 127 analyzed sources and was particularly well-articulated in foundational works on cross-cultural consumer behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Steenkamp, 2001; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). Key empirical evidence

supporting this theme demonstrates that: 1) Consumers from collectivist cultures weighted family interests and social approval more heavily in automobile purchase decisions; 2) High uncertainty avoidance cultures exhibited stronger preferences for established brands with demonstrated reliability records; 3) Power distance significantly predicted consumer preferences for luxury and prestige-oriented vehicles. These patterns demonstrate culture's function as an interpretive lens structuring how consumers access, process, and evaluate information.

4.2 Theme 2: Country-of-Origin as Cognitive Heuristic and Quality Signal

According to Wang and Lamb (1983), Country-of-origin Effects are abstract constraints to go in for growing markets in the format of adverse consumer stereotypes towards global products. Country-of-Origin may also be defined as the country where the region of the base of operations of the firm promoting or marketing the brand and its classification of products are located (Ozsomer & Cavusgil, 1991; Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998).

The second major theme identifies country-of-origin as a multifunctional cognitive construct serving simultaneously as a heuristic device, quality signal, and information indicator in consumer product evaluation. This theme reflects decades of research on country-of-origin effects and synthesizes findings regarding both the mechanisms through which country-of-origin influences evaluation and boundary conditions limiting its influence. Sub-themes within this category include: (2a) The halo effect hypothesis, wherein consumers utilize country-of-origin image to infer product quality when objective quality information is unavailable; (2b) Country-of-Origin as a summary construct that functions as an economical information processing strategy; (2c) Moderating factors influencing country-of-origin effect magnitude, including product category knowledge, involvement level, and brand familiarity; (2d) Affective and behavioral dimensions of country-of-origin perception beyond cognitive quality inference. Analysis revealed that country-of-origin effects were robust across diverse product categories and consumer populations (evident in the analyzed sources), with particular strength in automobile markets where country-of-origin associations with engineering expertise (Germany), reliability (Japan), or technological advancement (South Korea) were consistently cited by consumers.

4.3 Theme 3: Brand Image as Multidimensional Construct

The third overarching theme identifies brand image as a multidimensional psychological construct encompassing functional, symbolic, and emotional dimensions (Kotler, 2001; Keller, 1993). This theme reflects foundational branding literature recognizing that consumer brand perceptions extend beyond technical product attributes to include social meanings and emotional associations.

Sub-themes include: (3a) Functional dimension encompassing perceptions of product performance, reliability, durability, and technical quality; (3b) Symbolic dimension reflecting the social status, prestige, and lifestyle associations consumers attribute to brand ownership; (3c) Emotional dimension capturing affective associations including trust, attachment, and security; (3d) Differential weighting of dimensions across cultural circumstances, with cultures of collectivism more heavily weighting symbolic dimensions. Analysis of sources addressing brand image revealed consistent evidence that automobiles, as high-involvement, financially significant purchases, engaged all three dimensions in consumer evaluation. The relative weighting of dimensions varied substantially by cultural context in high power-distance cultures, and symbolic dimensions were emphasized; also, in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, functional reliability was prioritized.

4.4 Theme 4: Contingency Factors in Standardization-Adaptation Strategy

The fourth primary theme identifies standardization & adaptation strategy decisions as contingency-based rather than universally optimal, with specific factors determining appropriate strategic choice (Levitt, 1983; Zou & Cavusgil, 2002). Sub-themes include: (4a) Brand positioning characteristics, with globally differentiated premium brands more amenable to standardization; (4b) Market-level factors including market concentration, competitive intensity, and cultural heterogeneity; (4c) Firm-level capabilities including brand equity, operational flexibility, and local market knowledge; (4d) Cultural distance and diversity, with greater cultural distance necessitating increased adaptation.

4.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

the proposed integrated framework articulates the following sequential relationships:

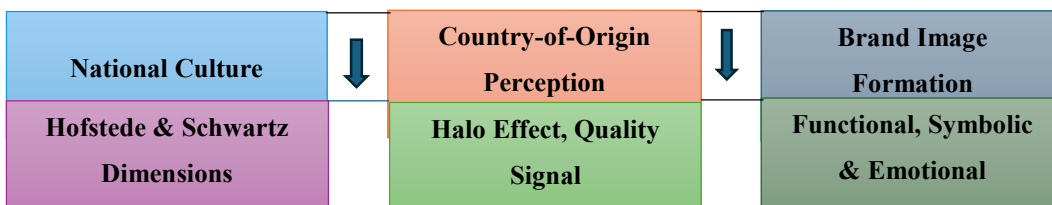


figure 1: integrated sequential framework: culture-country-of-origin perception-brand image-marketing strategy

5.1 Sequential Framework Mechanics

National culture (Construct 1) operates as the foundational independent variable, establishing cognitive frameworks through which consumers interpret product and brand information. The framework of Geert Hofstede consists of six dimensions i.e. (i) Power Distance Index, (ii) Individualism vs. Collectivism, (iii) Masculinity vs. Femininity, (iv) Uncertainty Avoidance Index, (v) Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation, (vi) Indulgence vs. Restraint and Schwartz's value framework demonstrate the key theoretical guidelines of the diversity of culture applicable to consumer behavior.

Perception of Country-of-origin (Construct 2) demonstrates a cognitively conditioned dimension that indicates information interpreted as extrinsic to the company and is perceived through culturally formed psychological lenses. The hypothesis of halo

effect enables the theoretical procedure explaining how country-of-origin delivers as a quality indicator. However, the cultural circumstances direct the effectiveness and approach of this effect.

Formation of Brand Image (Construct 3) demonstrates the combination of cultural determinants and country-of-origin facilitated perceptions into a multifaceted psychological illustration integrating functional, symbolic, and emotional constructs. The framework recommends that the weighted significance and combination of these constructs differ by cultural scenario, and that the perception of country-of-origin significantly determines the substance and effectiveness of symbolic and emotional alignments.

Strategic Decisions of Marketing (Construct 4) related to the standardization and adaptation of the marketing mix determinants are evaluated by the dimensions of brand image and cultural variation in the directed markets. According to the analysis of the effectiveness of brand image and its cultural influences, the framework puts forward the decisions related to whether the marketing factors should lead towards standardization or adaptation, rather than following a prior set strategy of marketing.

5.2 Theoretical Propositions

The integrated framework yields the following propositions linking cultural antecedents to marketing outcomes:

P1: The strength of country-of-origin effects on brand evaluation is inversely related to the cultural divergence among home culture of consumer and country-of-origin, with country-of-origin effects strongest when cultural attributes of the country-of-origin are positively regarded within the consumer's cultural context.

P2: The relative weighting of functional, symbolic, and emotional dimensions in brand image formation varies systematically by cultural context: collectivist cultures weight symbolic and family-related dimensions more heavily; individualistic cultures weight functional and personal expression dimensions more heavily.

P3: Standardization of marketing strategy elements is positively associated with: (a) brand image consistency across markets; (b) strong country-of-origin associations that are universally positive; and (c) product categories and market segments where functional attributes dominate brand evaluation.

P4: Adaptation of marketing strategy elements is positively associated with: (a) high cultural diversity in target markets; (b) Country-of-Origin associations that are culturally specific or ambiguous; and (c) product categories and segments where symbolic or emotional dimensions dominate brand evaluation.

P5: The effectiveness of either standardization or adaptation strategies is contingent upon internal consistency between cultural positioning, country-of-origin leveraging, and brand image dimensions; incongruence among these elements reduces strategy effectiveness across cultural contexts.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The integrated framework provides actionable guidance for automotive firms operating in culturally diverse international markets:

6.1 Cultural Intelligence in Market Analysis

Prior to market entry or strategy reformulation, firms should conduct rigorous cultural analysis utilizing validated frameworks (**Hofstede, Schwartz**) to identify cultural dimensions of target markets. This analysis should extend beyond demographic variables to identify how cultural values influence product category perception, information processing strategies, and evaluation criteria. For automobile markets, cultural analysis should explicitly examine: (1) individualism-collectivism effects on family transportation versus personal mobility emphasis; (2) uncertainty avoidance effects on preferences for established, reliable brands; (3) power distance effects on prestige and status signaling through vehicle choice.

6.2 Country-of-Origin Strategic Positioning

Firms should develop explicit country-of-origin positioning strategies that leverage positive country associations while mitigating negative stereotypes. For automotive manufacturers, this involves: (1) identifying and emphasizing specific country-of-origin attributes congruent with target culture values; (2) utilizing manufacturing origin transparency as a quality signal, particularly in high-uncertainty-avoidance markets; (3) managing perceptions of hybrid or multi-origin manufacturing through clear quality communication; (4) recognizing that country-of-origin effects diminish with consumer product knowledge, thus investing in consumer education and direct experience opportunities.

6.3 Multidimensional Brand Image Development

Brand image development strategies should address functional, symbolic, and emotional dimensions simultaneously while recognizing cultural variation in dimensional weighting. Specific recommendations include: (1) Functional dimension emphasize product performance, reliability, safety, and quality in all markets, but prioritize reliability and durability messaging in high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures; (2) Symbolic dimension develop culturally-specific symbolic associations, emphasizing family and group status in collectivist cultures, individual success in individualistic cultures, and prestige in high-power-distance cultures; (3) Emotional dimension build trust and security associations through after-sales service, warranty commitments, and brand heritage narratives that resonate with cultural values.

6.4 Contingency-Based Standardization-Adaptation Decisions

Rather than adopting universally standardized or adapted strategies, firms should employ contingency-based approaches: (1) Maintain standardization for core product quality and technical specifications; global brand identity and visual elements; fundamental brand personality and positioning; (2) Adapt significantly for advertising themes and creative executions; promotional strategies and incentive structures; distribution channels and retail experience; pricing strategies reflecting local purchasing power; customer relationship management and after-sales service delivery. This local adaptation of international strategies facilitates brand integration while respecting cultural diversity in the productivity of marketing dissemination.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While the presented framework provides a comprehensive synthesis of theoretical perspectives, a significant range of opportunities prevail for extension and validation of empirical research in the future.

The future research directions are as follows:

- i. Analysis of Quantitative Model: To develop and statistically test models of structural equation and assign the chronological relationships mentioned in the framework. Also, including the effects of culture, directly or indirectly on the strategy of marketing results through the pathways of the perception of Country-of-Origin and Brand Image.
- ii. Context of Emerging Market: To put forward empirical test methods beyond the samples of developed markets to achieve an idea of the dynamics in emerging economies particularly in nation like India, China etc. , as occurrence of rapid motorization is visible within distinct contexts of culture.
- iii. Effects of the Social Media and Digital Platform: To examine the influence of social media and digital platforms in the influence of the formation of brand image and the perception of country-of-origin, specifically among the younger group of consumers.
- iv. Mechanisms of Moderation and Mediation: To identify additional mediators and moderators. Mediators consist of the Purchase Intention, Perceived Quality and Brand Personality Congruence. Brand Familiarity, Product Knowledge and Consumer Demographics are the additional moderators.
- v. Time Dependent Dynamics: To conduct studies of time dependence and find out how perception of country-of-origin, effects of culture and brand image develop over time as familiarity of the consumers in terms of the global brands is emerging.
- vi. Values of Culture and Sustainability: To investigate how the values of culture have an impact on consumer receptiveness to information related to sustainability and positioning of environmental considerations in the automobile markets.
- vii. Alternative Framework: To conduct qualitative research in terms of in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies to identify the observed experiences and narratives through which consumers build up the meaning of the brand.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The presented effort to develop a conceptual framework is subject to various limitations that should be acknowledged.

- i. Theoretical Selection Bias: This study advantages the inclusion of cultural frameworks of Hofstede and Schwartz, while not acknowledging the other cultural frameworks of Trompenaars and Hall. Although these theories support empirical cultural presence in marketing research, the non-acknowledged theories of culture may generate different beneficial insights to it.
- ii. Specification of the Context: The automobile industry has been used as the primary context in the study, whereas, the limit to the generalization of the results to other high involvement or low involvement categories of products remained underexplored.
- iii. Personal Variation: This study operated at culture as a whole, potentially overlooking significant differences in values and behavior of individuals within the same culture.
- iv. Data Based Assessment: This study have not undergone quantitative statistical testing. Assessment of proposed chronological processes awaits for a committed empirical study.
- v. Selective Publication Bias: This framework is based entirely on published research, it might miss out unpublished research with no findings, which may have an impact on the overall conclusion.

9. CONCLUSION

This framework-based study adds to the literature of worldwide marketing. It has introduced a synthesized conceptual framework. The determinants such as, National Culture, Perception of Country-of-Origin and Brand Image has been associated by this study, which has a significant influence on the strategic decisions of marketing in the international automobile industry. On the basis of a thematic analysis and systematic review of literature, the study identifies four prime patterns i.e. 1) National Culture may be regarded as a prime foundation towards the perception of the consumers, 2) Country-of-Origin as a guiding principle and quality indicator, 3) a multifaceted dimension as Brand Image and, 4) the strategic decisions of marketing regarded as situation dependent rather than in general.

The structure of this study enhanced theories by reflecting on how the values of national culture have an influence on the interpretation of the insights of country-of-origin and how it leads towards the creation of brand image in the consumers' mind. A more comprehensive understanding of their unified impact on the outcomes of marketing has been introduced through the cohesion of its factors. The chronological structure i.e. National Culture followed by Perception of Country-of-Origin, followed by Brand Image and Strategic Decisions of Marketing strengthens both applicability and clarity.

This conceptual study offers valuable guidance for the automobile firms who function in culturally varied markets, on the basis of a practical perspective. It will enable the companies to build up more effective and situation-based responsive strategies of marketing.

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