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# Dynamics of country image: evidence from Malaysia

Dynamics of  
country image

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Previous research has posited country image to operate at two levels: the country's macro image, based on general politico-economic descriptors of the country, and the country's micro image, based on perceptions of products from the country. The purpose of this paper is to further explore this premise in a practical study, using a psychometric assessment of macro and micro country images by ascertaining the nature of differences in macro and micro images of leading exporters, the USA and China, for consumers in Malaysia, a top import destination of US and Chinese goods; the images of Malaysian goods were similarly assessed.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study used a systematic sample, with questionnaires distributed to adult respondents using a street intercept. Interviewers asked every other passer-by to fill out a questionnaire, and stood in close proximity to address any questions from respondents. The study hypothesized that there is a significant difference between country macro and micro image, respectively for the USA, China and Malaysia, and that there is significant relationship between country macro image and country micro image in each country, respectively, USA, China and Malaysia.

**Findings** – The study found support for the reliability of existing country micro and macro image measures, and further refined them for increased validity. The study compared between the countries and found significant differences on both macro and micro dimensions of country image. The US scored highest on technological research, high quality products, standards of living, labor costs, welfare system, industrialization, civilian government, development, literacy, free-market system and democracy, followed by China on technological research, industrialization, development and free-market system, with Malaysia scoring higher on product quality, labor costs, welfare system, civilian government is civilian/non-military, literacy, free-market system and democracy.

**Research limitations/implications** – A broader study of countries that share geopolitical and cultural similarities might offer additional insights into country macro and micro image.

**Practical implications** – The study cautions marketers to assess the acceptance of their products in the context of their country's macro and micro image perceptions in target markets, and steer those perceptions in a manner that would be beneficial to their marketing efforts.

**Originality/value** – The conceptualization of the *macro* and *micro* aspects of country image has been one of the less studied dimensions of country image. This study is the first to address these dimensions from an emerging-market perspective, suggesting that, at the *macro* level, country perceptions regarding technology, economy, and politics contribute to an overall impression of the country, which would then influence the desirability of its products originating there. For the *micro* country image, products from countries perceived as innovative, excelling in product design, and producing prestigious products, are likely to be perceived as desirable.

**Keywords** Country of origin, Country image, Country macro image, Country micro image

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

With the swift increase in global commerce, country of origin (COO) has become an important heuristic measure of quality for consumers. The role of COO information in consumer decision-making has been studied extensively: since Schooler's (1965) and Nagashima's (1977)



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classic studies on the comparative attitudes of consumers toward foreign products, numerous aspects of COO information have been considered, along with their effect on country image and resulting impact on product perceptions and purchase decisions.

Country image has been described as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (Martin and Eroglu, 1993, p. 193). Country image is distinctive and different from country of origin; it is a multidimensional construct (Johnson *et al.*, 2016), with dimensions such as brand origin, country of design (COD), country of technology (COT) and country of manufacture (COM) serving as informational cues that create the overall COO image (Garrett *et al.*, 2017; Johnson *et al.*, 2016). This paper presents a practical study that investigates country image as a multidimensional construct influencing perceptions of countries and their products. It addresses macro and micro image effects on consumers’ perceptions of countries, and explores the relationship between macro and micro country images. With Malaysia as the setting for the study, we investigate the macro and micro image perceptions of the USA, China and Malaysia.

### Literature review

Consumer choice is influenced by numerous factors, including the image of a product in the mind of the consumer (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990; Thorelli *et al.*, 1989; Chen-Yu and Kincade, 2001; Laroche *et al.*, 2005; Koubaa, 2008). Nagashima (1970, p. 68) defined image as the “ideas, emotional background and connotations associated with a concept.” A positive product image, based on consumer perceptions of product quality, branding and COO and manufacture, has the capability to enhance its appeal to consumers. A positive image casts a positive effect on retailer choice, allowing for a premium price charged based on the image alone (Chen-Yu and Kincade, 2001).

Further, the product’s image exerts influence in the different stages of consumer decision making in different ways. Product image influences the perception of quality and expectations of performance primarily when considering product alternatives, but this effect may not carry over to actual purchase – nor does a positive product image influence the outcomes in the post-purchase stage (Chen-Yu and Kincade, 2001).

#### *Evolving definition of country of origin*

COO has been defined and operationalized in different ways: it was originally conceptualized as a unidimensional construct that identified the country where the product was made. While some researchers continue to use this definition, global competition, outsourcing and bi- or multi-national products have led to the conceptualization of COO as a multidimensional construct (Johnson *et al.*, 2016). The most commonly used COO dimensions are brand origin, COD, COT and COM, each serving as an informational cue that creates the overall COO image (Garrett *et al.*, 2017; Johnson *et al.*, 2016).

A challenge of this composite definition of COO is that components parts could, potentially, be incongruent. For example, Toblerone chocolate is branded as European, with a picture of the Swiss Matterhorn mountain peak in the background, but the brand belongs to Mondelez – a multinational corporation headquartered in New Jersey, USA. Johnson *et al.* (2016) created a COO-fit model to determine congruence between brand origin and COM and concluded that consumers who are ambiguity intolerant rated brands less favorably when the relationship was incongruent. Therefore, multiple dimensions can become a source of ambiguity, which can lead to unfavorable product evaluation. Furthermore, Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) examined the fit between COD, COM and product category, and found that, overall, global COD image is less influential than global COM image on perceived product quality. However, the influence of COD image increases when evaluating status-symbolic products, such as automobiles, but not when assessing private goods, such as televisions.

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Therefore, each component can be weighted differently depending on the product being evaluated, with country image influence greater for more expensive products (Balabanis and Siamagka, 2017).

Multiple dimensions can also blur the true COO effect. Because brand origin is not necessarily equivalent to COO or manufacture, consumers might misidentify the COO. Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta (2016) suggest that the true measurement of the COO effect is the strength of brand associations to countries based on the consumers' perceptions – even if those perceptions are wrong. Their study underscores earlier studies' findings, suggesting that origin is conceptualized based on associations, rather than on objective criteria, such as corporate headquarters. Even when these associations lack an objective basis, they appear to influence consumers' evaluation of the brand, as the strength of the associations have a moderating and predictive effect on brand evaluation. Therefore, Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta (2016) suggest that COO should, instead, be defined based on the subjective brand associations perceived by consumers.

#### *Factors that affect the influence of the country-of-origin effect*

Several factors can manipulate and possibly reduce the COO effect on product evaluation. Garrett *et al.* (2017) compared the relative effects of COO image and store image on consumer product evaluation and purchase intention, and found that store image has a stronger direct effect. Specifically, the COD dimension marginally influenced product evaluation, but neither COT, nor COM influenced product evaluation, and no COO dimension had a significant effect on purchase intention. Conversely, store image did not influence product evaluation, but had a significant effect on purchase intention. The study suggests that extrinsic cues that only peripherally relate to products can offer a heuristic to purchase decisions and could weaken the overall effects of COO (Garrett *et al.*, 2017).

Ngoma and Ntale (2015) also suggest that it is possible to reduce the effects of COO on the evaluation of product quality and purchase decision influence: when examining COO influence on perceived quality, along with brand and brand affordability information, they found that COO had the smallest effect. Customers consider brand affordability and other available brand information in making an evaluation before they consider COO. Their findings supported earlier studies suggesting that promotion and marketing of other product quality attributes could decrease the effects of COO on quality perception (Kalicharan, 2014). With regard to Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta (2016) argument for country of brand, Basfirinci (2013) found that product familiarity and product involvement negatively moderates the influence of country of brand on the evaluation of brand personality.

Different decision-making frameworks and situational conditions can also influence product judgements. Dongjin *et al.* (2014) distinguished between COO effects examined from a cognitive country image perspective, such as a country's economic-development-related beliefs, standard of living and technological advancements and an affective country-image perspective, such as attitudes toward a country's culture and people. They also suggest a product's image can be evaluated based on either a general country product image or on a category-specific image, such as the image of clothing from the respective country. Finally, the nature of the decision-making situation can also come into play: for instance, rational decisions refer to logical, process-oriented decisions, whereas experiential decisions refer to emotional, outcome-oriented decisions. Dongjin *et al.* (2014) thus suggest that product image mediates the effects of country image on the consumer purchase intention, and therefore has a more direct impact on consumer purchase intention. Affective country image is thought to directly influence category product image with a small mediating effect through general product image in experiential purchases. However, this influence is mediated by general product image in rational purchases.

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On the other hand, individuals may have incongruent cognitive and affective responses to countries, but a positive cognitive image could offset losses from a negative affective image (Dongjin *et al.*, 2014). Costa *et al.* (2016) further split the geographic and human aspects of the cognitive dimension, positing that COO effects will vary across distinct country image facets, and each facet will have different effects across different products. In addition, research suggests that there may be even different tendencies in each country's image (Katsumata and Song, 2015). These findings suggest that marketers in countries with opposing cognitive and affective responses can influence brand evaluation by emphasizing the positive framework in the decision-making cues.

#### *Factors affected by country of origin*

Among the factors that influence COO are brand image, product quality and product safety, as described below.

*Brand image.* Some studies argue that the more important dimension of the COO effect derives from the country brand effects, or origin cues embedded within a brand that cause consumers to perceive its association with a particular region or country (Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta, 2016; Thakor and Kohli, 1996). Basfirinci (2013) similarly suggests that some consumers buy brands rather than products, and research the extent to which brand origin associations transfer to brand personality perceptions. Thus, information on the brand's COO influences brand personality. Basfirinci (2013) argued that the general characteristics of a country could translate into the personalities of its brands.

Hanaysha and Hilman (2015) found support for positive effects of COO on overall brand equity, especially on brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand image and brand leadership (Norouzi and Hosienabadi, 2011; Azuizkulov, 2013; Alipoor *et al.*, 2015; Koubaa, 2008). The positive effect on brand image suggests that COO affects consumers' perception and evaluation of brands, and the positive effect on brand leadership indicates positive perceptions of country image could increase customer purchases and create barriers to competition, leading to stronger brand equity. Yasin *et al.* (2007) also found that country image influences the brand equity dimensions of brand distinctiveness, brand loyalty and brand awareness/association. They suggest that a positive country image leads to a more favorable brand image, and thus to stronger brand distinctiveness, customer loyalty and perception of product quality – and, as a result, to stronger brand associations. They confirm the relationship between brand equity and COO image, mediated by brand equity dimensions. Sanyal and Datta (2011) found an indirect relationship between brand equity and country of origin image, mediated by variables such as brand strength and brand awareness.

*Product quality.* As mentioned above, Ngoma and Ntale (2015) found that some of the variation in perceived brand quality is due to COO image. Ha-Brookshire and Yoon (2012) also concluded that COO image is an extrinsic product cue that positively influences consumer quality perceptions and purchase intentions, and Ngoma and Ntale (2015) found that consumers expect higher product quality and higher prices from developed countries, which have a more positive country image than developing countries (Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012; Kalicharan, 2014). Kalicharan (2014) found that the higher evaluation of product quality for products produced in developed counties is due to technological advancements and the nature of competition there; similar conclusions were drawn in previous studies (Garma *et al.*, 2008; Hsieh, 2004).

Researchers have also studied the relationship between knowledge of product COO and perceived quality. Knowledge of a product's COO image and reputation affects consumer's perceptions of quality and purchase intention (Kalicharan, 2014). Extrinsic cues, such as knowledge of country image, become more relevant in product quality evaluations and perceived

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price when product familiarity or expertise – i.e., knowledge – is limited (Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012). Therefore, COO effects on quality are strongest when knowledge of COO image is high and when knowledge of product is low.

*Product safety.* COO information also influences product safety evaluations, especially for food and pharmaceuticals. US consumers generally perceive that meat produced in the USA as safer and fresher than meat from lower-income countries, such as Mexico, and these inferences affect consumer purchase intentions (Berry *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, French consumers perceived fruit from lower-income countries (China and Brazil) to be of lower quality, less safe and cheaper than fruit produced in higher-income countries, such as Spain and the USA (Zhifeng *et al.*, 2014).

For pharmaceutical products, COO also acts as an indicator as to which drugs consumers might perceive to be counterfeit. A low-priced drug from a country with a positive country image (Switzerland) is considered by both US and Indian consumers to more likely be counterfeit; conversely, a high-priced drug from a country with a negative image (India) is considered by both US and Indian consumers more likely be counterfeit (Majid, 2017). Thus, low-priced drugs from a country with a positive image can harm product perceptions because they violate expectations, whereas high-priced products congruent with expectations for positively perceived countries are trusted: the perception of a drug in relation to COO is based on the congruity and divergence in price and country image, and not simply only on price (Majid, 2017).

Labeling that suggests that developing countries' processing systems are equivalent to developed countries' systems appears to equalize the perception of the product safety (Barry *et al.*, 2015). However, consumers still tend to misinterpret the information on COO labels, which may exacerbate the assumptions they hold about the source of the brand (Insch and Jackson, 2014). Interestingly, even when consumers are made aware that they have misclassified the COO and then are informed of the brand's correct origin, they continue to have a favorable country image if they have a high affinity for the respective country (Cakici and Shukla, 2017). That affinity can take the form of religious affiliation, among others. For example, for Muslim consumers, products produced in Muslim countries are perceived as higher quality, as they are guaranteed to subscribe to *halal* processing – a clear indicator of product quality for Muslims, – whereas, *halal*-labeled products from non-Muslim countries are perceived to be of lesser quality (Nasution and Rossanty, 2018).

COO is, thus, a multidimensional construct that influences consumers' perception of brand, quality and safety. However, the influence of COO could vary based on the product features emphasized, or the nature of the country environment.

### *Country of origin and country image*

COO has been recognized over the years as an important influence on consumer choice and purchase decisions (e.g. Schooler, 1965; Nagashima, 1970, 1977; Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Hong and Wyer, 1989; Maheswaran, 1994), with researchers exploring various aspects of COO influence on consumer perceptions of products and on product-related decision-making (Usunier, 2006). Usunier (2006) identified over 400 journal articles on the topic, and the literature has acquired a greater breadth and depth of inquiry since, converging on the conclusion that COO serves as a signal for product quality (Li and Wyer, 1994; Kochunny *et al.*, 1993), influencing consumer decision-making (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000; Maheswaran and Chen, 2006). This has led to the realization that the origin of a product creates and influences perceptions of the product through the COO image (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Specifically, consumers develop country images through their formal and informal learning, as well as through personal experiences; country images

then influence consumers' perceptions of products from these countries through the cognitive and affective components of attitudes that develop toward the respective country (Laroche *et al.*, 2005).

These images, or country stereotypes (Maheswaran, 1994), reflect individuals' perceptions about country traits and are developed through socialization and exposure to country information (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2017; Magnusson *et al.*, 2019). Thus, country image acts as a schema, or knowledge structure, summarizing our knowledge about a country, synthesizing all that we know about it (Magnusson *et al.*, 2019). Within this schema, country image is composed of "all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs" about a particular country (Martin and Eroglu, 1993, p. 193) and can be further refined into two dimensions, macro and micro country image. The macro image is the summation of the all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country, whereas the micro image is the image of products produced in that country (Martin and Eroglu, 1993).

In a similar vein, Han (1989) posited country image as two alternative constructs: a *halo* and a summary construct, with the constructs differing from each other based on the consumer's level of understanding of the country's product. A *halo* country image forms when knowledge about the country exists, but there is a lack of information and knowledge about a product and its attributes and quality (Johansson *et al.*, 1985; Han, 1989; Agarwal and Sikri, 1996; Laroche *et al.*, 2005). The *halo* then casts an image on the products sourced in a particular country (Maher and Carter, 2011; Woo *et al.*, 2017). A summary evaluation is created based on attributes of products associated with particular countries (Han, 1989); it forms due to consumers' limited information processing, which compels them to resort to heuristics (Laroche *et al.*, 2002). The summary evaluation is due to generalized, product-specific beliefs (especially for well-known, familiar product categories) that become associated with products from certain countries (Agarwal and Sikri, 1996). When the consumer has little familiarity with a product category, the *halo* image is dominant, and, in case of high familiarity with a product category, the summary evaluation becomes dominant (Martin and Eroglu, 1993).

The macro country image, corresponding with the operation of the *halo* evaluation, is, in turn, explained as comprising of three dimensions – economic, political and technological (Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993). Table I lists these dimensions with their underlying attributes.

On the other hand, the micro country image comprises the totality of beliefs held about the products of a given country (Nagashima, 1970), and is said to include dimensions of innovation, prestige and design of a particular product-country (Pappu *et al.*, 2007). A study

Dimension	Component
Political	Democratic vs dictatorial
	Capitalist vs communist
	Civilian vs military
	Pro-western vs pro-communist
Economic	Free market vs centrally planned
	Standard of living
	Economic stability
	Quality of products
	Existence of a welfare system
Technological	Labor costs
	Level of industrialization
	Level of technological research
	Level of literacy
	Technology deployed in product – hand-produced or mechanized

**Table I.**  
Dimensions of macro  
country image

conducted with Saudi consumers found that the effects of macro and micro country images differ by product category, whereby both micro and macro country image are relevant when it comes to consumer intention to purchase symbolic goods, such as handbags, whereas micro image appeared to play a more important role in the purchase of functional goods, such as cellphones (Byounggho *et al.*, 2018). See Table II for these dimensions and their underlying attributes.

In summary, both the macro and micro images of a country influence the perceptions of products originating in that country. It is likely that, for consumers in a particular country, the image they have of other countries at both of these levels would factor into their decision to purchase products made in the respective countries.

### *Research premise and hypotheses*

The dimensions of the macro country image include aspects of the political and economic landscapes of the country in question, while the dimensions of the micro country image reference the nature of products made in that country, especially their innovativeness and the desirability of ownership of the products (Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993).

We thus opted to investigate images of countries with different economic and political characteristics, specifically images of the USA, China and Malaysia, as assessed by Malaysian consumers. China is Malaysia's leading source of imports, amounting to \$15.4bn, and the USA is Malaysia's third largest source of imports, amounting to \$14.2bn (World Bank, 2017). The USA is the only western country among the top five sources of imports for Malaysia, the rest being Asian countries. China and the USA rank, respectively, second and fourth among the leading destinations for Malaysian exports (World Bank, 2017).

Given the context of the three countries, USA, China and Malaysia, it is expected that their macro country image, comprised of economic, political and technological dimensions (Pappu *et al.* 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993) will differ. The USA is a high-income country (World Bank, 2019) and a constitutional federal republic (World Factbook, 2019), with highly advanced technology, ranking 6th worldwide (Countryeconomy.com, 2019), whereas China is an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2019) and a communist-party-led state (World Factbook, 2019), ranking 17th in terms of innovation (Countryeconomy.com, 2019). Malaysia, also an upper-middle-income country (World Bank, 2019), is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy (World Factbook, 2019), ranks 35th worldwide in terms of innovation (Countryeconomy.com, 2019), although advancing rapidly as a technology adopter, with one of the fastest-growing mobile penetration rate in the world (Ghazali *et al.*, 2018). It is thus expected that, given their different levels of economic development, technological capabilities and their very different political systems, there should be a difference between the three countries' macro image:

*H1.* There is a difference between country macro image among the USA, China and Malaysia.

Dimension	Component
Innovation	Innovative Technically advanced
Design	Reliable Excellent finish Dependable
Prestige	Proud-to-own Up-market High status

**Table II.**  
Dimensions of micro  
country image



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Similarly, the micro country image of the three countries, comprising the totality of beliefs held about the products of a given country (Nagashima, 1970), including dimensions of prestige, and design of a particular product-country (Pappu *et al.*, 2007) are also thought to differ. The US country micro image should be more positive, as consumers expect higher product quality from developed countries, which have a more positive country image than developing countries (Ngoma and Ntale, 2015; Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012; Kalicharan, 2014; Garma *et al.*, 2008; Hsieh, 2004) – China and Malaysia, in this example. In other comparisons, as mentioned, a greater degree of innovation is expected in the USA compared to China, and in China, compared to Malaysia (Countryeconomy.com, 2019). It is thus expected that there should be a difference between the three countries' micro image:

*H2.* There is a difference between country micro image among the USA, China and Malaysia.

Country macro image, consisting of economic, political and technological dimensions (Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993) is likely to be related to the country micro image, comprised of the totality of beliefs held about the products of a given country (Nagashima, 1970; Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993). This would be in line with consumers' expectations for higher product quality and performance from developed, high-income countries with advanced technological capabilities, which tend to have a more positive country image than developing countries (Ngoma and Ntale, 2015; Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012; Kalicharan, 2014; Garma *et al.*, 2008; Hsieh, 2004). We thus advance the following hypothesis:

*H3.* There is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image.

It is also likely that the country macro image and country micro image might be related in the case of each of the three countries studied herein, USA, China and Malaysia. For this reason, *H3* was further refined to test for the correlation between the macro and micro country images of the USA, China and Malaysia separately, as follows:

*H3a.* There is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image of the USA.

*H3b.* There is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image of China.

*H3c.* There is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image of Malaysia.

## Research method

A questionnaire adapted from Pappu *et al.* (2007) was used for this study. The questionnaire assessed the extent of the respondents' agreement with statements about the three countries studied – the USA, China and Malaysia – and their products. It examined characteristics of the countries and their products using a five-point Likert scale. Pappu *et al.* (2007) modified the Martin and Eroglu (1993) and Nagashima (1970) scales, transforming them from semantic-differential to 11-point rating scales and providing additional items. We opted to adapt the more comprehensive Pappu *et al.* (2007) scale into a Likert scale, which is more in line with Malaysian respondents' social desirability tendencies: indicating less agreement would be preferable to selecting a negative rating or a negative semantic-differential option. Moreover, we found that Malaysian respondents are familiar with Likert scales.

The questionnaire was pretested using 20 respondents. A total of 590 questionnaires were distributed to adult Malaysian citizens in the proximity of universities to insure a

greater response rate. The data were collected in Seri Kembangan, a city that belongs to the broader Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area, using a street intercept, asking every other passer-by to fill out a questionnaire, with interviewers situated within close proximity to address any questions from respondents. A systematic sample was used in the study.

### Analysis and results

Data were collected from 543 respondents, with a 92 percent response rate. The high response rate is attributed to the face-to-face contacts with respondents and the ability of those engaged in the data collection to convince potential respondents to participate. It could also be attributed to social-desirability bias, the need for social approval, which could be achieved through culturally acceptable behaviors of conforming to the values of society to which they belong (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964; Mick, 1996). Research has found that Malaysians exhibit much higher levels of social desirability bias compared to, for example, consumers in the U.S. or France (Keillor *et al.*, 2001). On the other hand, after an initial screening of the responses, only 424 questionnaires were deemed usable for analysis, with 119 incomplete questionnaires discarded. The breakdown of respondents' characteristics is presented in Table III.

Table III shows that the sample was skewed toward women, ethnic Malays, younger consumers, bachelors'-degree holders and students. The data were collected in Seri Kembangan, a city that belongs to the broader Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area; Seri Kembangan has a leading

Demographic characteristics	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	162	38.2
Female	262	61.8
<i>Race</i>		
Malay	235	55.4
Chinese	155	36.6
Indian	23	5.4
Others	11	2.6
<i>Age (years old)</i>		
18–29	388	91.5
30–39	27	6.4
40–49	8	1.9
50–59	1	0.2
<i>Highest level of education attained</i>		
Secondary/High School	48	11.3
Diploma/Advanced Diploma	28	6.6
Bachelor Degree	208	72.6
Master Degree	28	6.6
Doctorate	0	0.0
Professional Certification	4	0.9
Others	8	1.9
<i>Occupation</i>		
Student	331	78.1
Non-Executive	47	11.1
Junior Executive	27	6.4
Middle Management Level	7	1.7
Senior Management Level	6	1.4
Others	6	1.4

**Table III.**  
Respondent profiles

university, is home to many young professionals, and boasts a hip, urban living environment. We believe that this area offers a reasonable context for the phenomena under study.

#### *Perceptions of macro image*

In total, 11 items were used to capture macro country image. They were level of technological research, producer of high quality products, high standards of living, high labor costs, welfare system, high level of industrialization, the extent to which government is civilian/non-military, highly developed economy, literacy, free-market system and democratic (Pappu *et al.*, 2007, derived from Martin and Eroglu, 1993). Table IV summarizes the mean scores on questionnaire items that elicited consumer's perceptions of macro image elements for the USA, China and Malaysia.

The US scored highest on level of technological research, producer of high quality products, standards of living, labor costs, good welfare system, level of industrialization, the extent to which government is civilian/non-military, developed economy, literacy, free-market system and democracy. China scored second highest – below the USA, but above Malaysia – on level of technological research, level of industrialization and development, and free-market system, but Malaysia scored higher on product quality, labor costs, good welfare system, the extent to which government is civilian/non-military, literacy, free-market system and democracy. The differences were significant, as evidenced by a one-way analysis of variance ( $F = 357.63$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), offering support for *H1*, positing that there is a difference between country macro image of the USA, China and Malaysia.

#### *Perceptions of micro image*

The perception of the country micro image reflects respondents' beliefs about the products produced in a country (Pappu *et al.*, 2007). In total, 12 items were used to capture the perception of Malaysian consumers toward country macro image of the USA, China and Malaysia; these items assessed products' quality workmanship, technical advancement, innovativeness, pride in owning products from the respective country, products' advertising support, brand name recognition, reliability, extent to which the products were expensive and high-status, with an excellent finish, dependable and up-market (Pappu *et al.*, 2007).

Products from the USA were rated higher on all micro dimensions than products from China and Malaysia. Chinese products were rated higher on technical advancement, innovativeness and brand-name recognition, compared to Malaysian products, whereas Malaysian products were rated higher than Chinese products on quality workmanship, pride in owning products from the respective country, products' advertising support, reliability, extent to which the products were expensive and high-status, with an excellent

Item	Element of country macro image	Mean score USA	Mean score China	Mean score Malaysia
1	This country has a high level of technological research	4.60	3.69	2.98
2	This country is a producer of high quality products	4.52	2.99	3.22
3	People in this country enjoy high standards of living	4.52	3.21	3.40
4	Labor costs are high in this country	4.51	2.83	3.35
5	This country has a good welfare system	4.15	2.98	3.36
6	This country has a high level of industrialization	4.53	4.20	3.58
7	This country has a civilian non-military government	3.73	3.12	3.56
8	This country has a highly developed economy	4.59	4.03	3.41
9	More people in this country are literate	4.26	3.45	3.69
10	This country has a free-market system	4.07	3.58	3.40
11	This is a democratic country	4.07	3.00	4.01

**Table IV.**  
Mean scores on  
dimensions of country  
macro image

finish, dependable and up-market. A one-way analysis of variance reveals significant differences ( $F = 441.91$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), thus providing support for *H2*, positing that there is a difference between country micro image of the USA, China and Malaysia. Mean values are presented in Table V.

*Construct assessment*

A reliability analysis found that the macro and micro image constructs were reliable, with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  higher than the 0.7 value deemed as adequate for measures (Nunnally, 1978; Hair *et al.*, 1998) (see Table VI).

Next, the validity of country macro and micro image was tested using a confirmatory factor analysis – the macro and micro measures had been previously tested and validated (Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Nagashima, 1970; Pappu *et al.*, 2007). For the validation of the macro and country image measure, a path diagram specifying a measurement and structural model was created based on the dimensions proposed by Pappu *et al.* (2007). A total of three separate confirmatory factor analyses were conducted, one for each country, for country macro image. Figures 1–3 show the initial path diagram for the measurement model for macro image.

Goodness-of-fit was assessed using the initial models to determine dimension validity. The path diagrams were modified based on the standardized regression weights where needed, and country macro and micro image measures were assessed as valid. The initial macro image model (Pappu *et al.*, 2007) did not achieve the minimum acceptable value for goodness-of-fit (the RMSEA value for both China and Malaysia did not indicate a good fit); consequently, after reviewing the modification indices, product quality and literacy measures were removed from the path diagram. The measurements for the revised model are presented in Table VII.

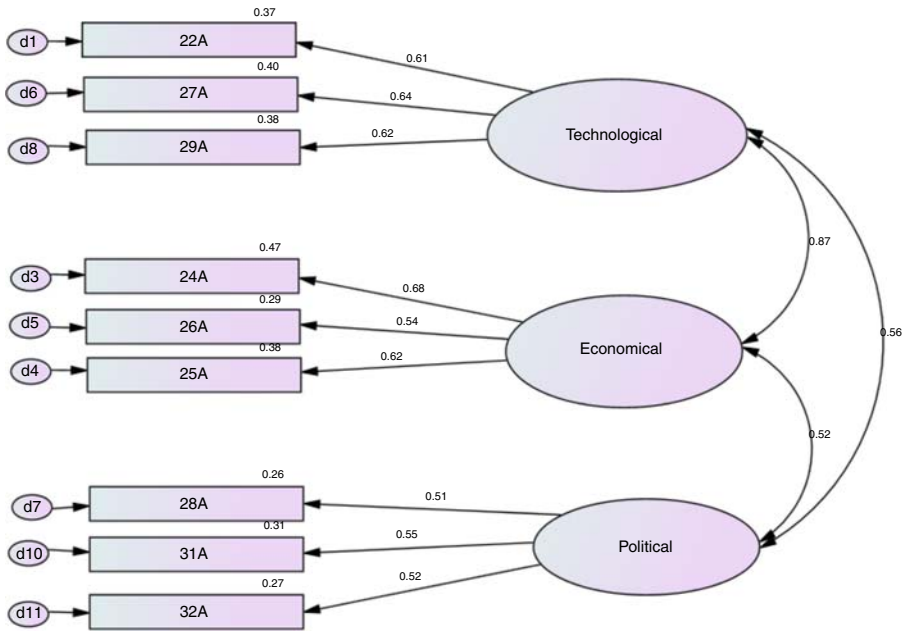
Table VIII summarizes the standard regression weight and the goodness-of-fit measures of country macro image. The CFA results show that country macro image is comprised of

Item	Element of country micro image	Mean score USA	Mean score China	Mean score Malaysia
1	Products from this country have excellent quality workmanship	4.34	3.18	3.38
2	Products from this country are technically advanced	4.55	3.55	3.25
3	Products from this country are innovative	4.49	3.70	3.33
4	I feel proud to own products from this country	4.28	2.91	3.66
5	Products from this country are supported by lots of advertising	4.43	3.34	3.56
6	Products from this country have recognizable brand names	4.62	3.37	3.35
7	Products from this country are reliable	4.32	3.03	3.43
8	Products from this country are expensive	4.61	2.66	3.25
9	Products from this country are "high status" products	4.54	2.91	3.22
10	Products from this country have excellent finish	4.38	3.14	3.34
11	Products from this country are dependable	4.20	3.11	3.39
12	This country offers "upmarket" products	4.40	3.24	3.33

**Table V.**  
Mean scores on dimensions of country micro image

Country image types	No. of items tested	USA	China	Cronbach's $\alpha$ Malaysia	All three countries
Country macro image	11	0.776	0.824	0.851	0.876
Country micro image	12	0.887	0.917	0.913	0.945

**Table VI.**  
Reliability assessment for country image measures



**Figure 1.** Path diagram for the US country macro image

**Notes:** 22A – technological research; 24A – high standards of living; 25A – high labor cost; 26A – good welfare system; 27A – industrialization; 28A – civilian government; 29A – developed economy; 31A – free-market system; 32A – democratic

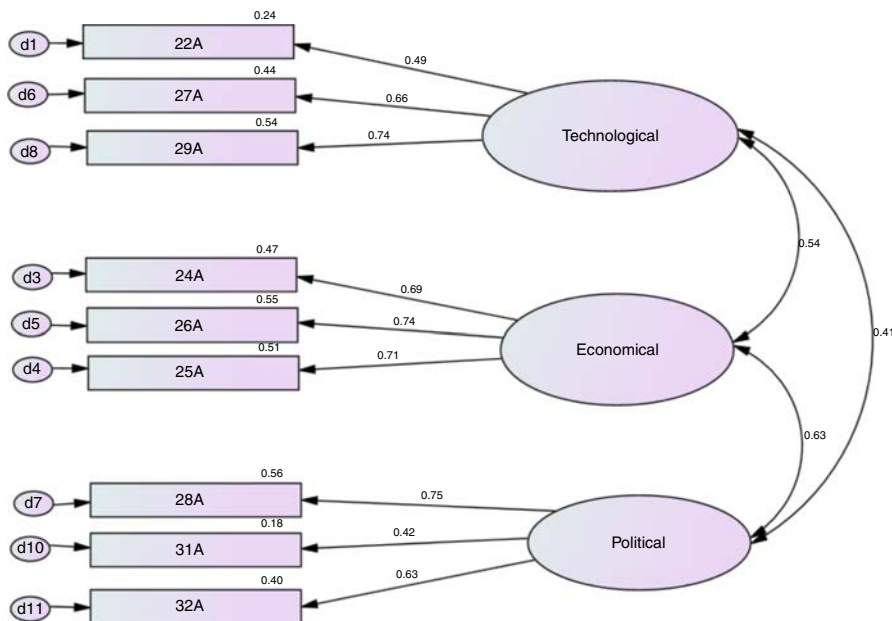
three dimensions, i.e. technological; economic; and political. The final elements of each of the dimensions of the adjusted model are summarized in Table VIII. Table IX shows the final dimensions of the country macro image used in the study.

A similar analysis was performed for ascertaining the dimensionality of the country micro image, using the previously validated (Pappu *et al.*) 12 items, and a second path diagram was created. Three separate confirmatory factor analyses were conducted for country micro image, one for each of the three countries. Figures 4–6 show the initial path diagram for the measurement model for micro image.

Table X shows the goodness-of-fit measurement of the initial country micro image model for each of the three countries, and Table XI summarizes the standard regression weight and the goodness-of-fit measures of country micro image. The results from CFA confirm that measurement for country micro image comprises three dimensions: innovation; prestige; and design. These broad dimensions for country micro image are similar to the dimensions tested and proposed by Pappu *et al.* (2007); however, unlike Pappu *et al.* (2007), we were able to retain all of the items of the Nagashima (1970, 1977) studies in the model. The dimensions and elements for the measurement of country micro image as supported by our study are presented in Table XII.

*Relationship between the macro and micro country images.*

The relationship between the macro and micro country images was also assessed in the study. Separate correlations were performed to test this relationship, one for each of the countries under study. The three correlations were highly significant, at  $r=0.645$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) for the USA;  $r=0.695$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) for China; and  $r=0.766$  ( $p < 0.01$ )



**Notes:** 22A – technological research; 24A – high standards of living; 25A – high labor cost; 26A – good welfare system; 27A – industrialization; 28A – civilian government; 29A – developed economy; 31A – free-market system; 32A – democratic

**Figure 2.**  
Path diagram for China macro image

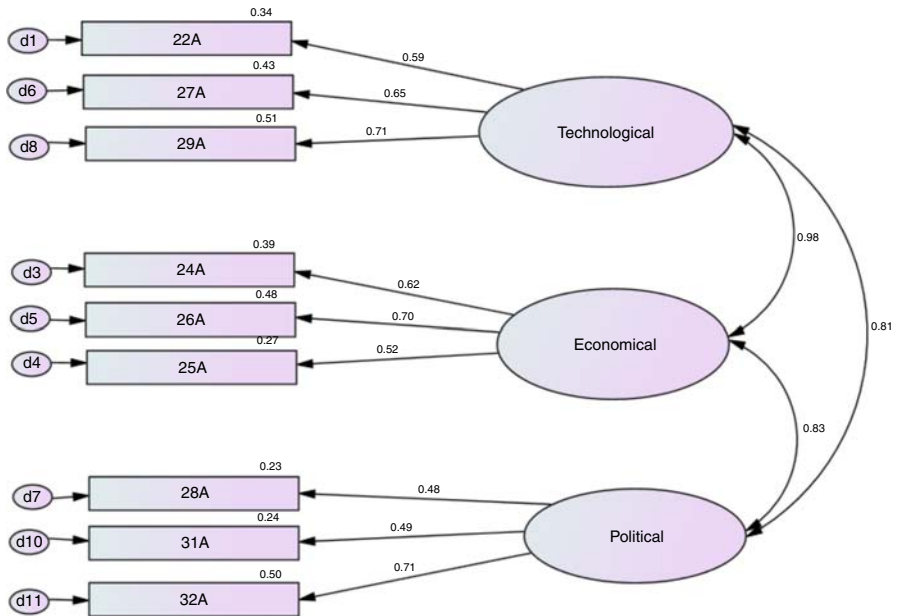
for Malaysia. The findings offer support for *H3* and sub-hypotheses, positing that there is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image in the case of each of the three countries.

### Discussion and study limitations

The conceptualization of the macro and micro aspects of country image has been one of the less studied dimensions of country image and COO research. Prior research (Nagashima, 1970; Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Pappu *et al.*, 2007) sought to identify the components of these country image aspects. In this practical study, we sought to find further support for both the macro and micro country image dimensions in an emerging market, and to explore the relationship between the two.

The study found support for the following dimensions of country macro image: technological, economic and political. Perceptions of a country on these dimensions contribute to an overall impression of the country, which would then influence the acceptability and desirability of products originating in that country. In a time of political uncertainty and fluid political alignments, it is important for countries to be perceived as democratic, with a free-market system and free from authoritarianism. It is also important for countries to be perceived as technologically advanced, which would create confidence in the country's products. A strong economy is also an advantage, as it would encourage higher product development expenditures. Products from countries perceived not to have the above traits are likely at a disadvantage.

The study also found support for the micro country image dimensions. A country that is perceived as being innovative, excelling in product design and performance and producing prestigious products is likely to have a positive image in the minds of global consumers.



**Figure 3.**  
Path diagram for  
Malaysia macro image

**Notes:** 22A – technological research; 24A – high standards of living; 25A – high labor cost; 26A – good welfare system; 27A – industrialization; 28A – civilian government; 29A – developed economy; 31A – free-market system; 32A – democratic

**Table VII.**  
Goodness-of-fit  
assessment for *macro*  
image – revised model

Goodness-of-fit measurements	Country			Recommended value
	USA ( <i>n</i> = 424)	China ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Malaysia ( <i>n</i> = 424)	
<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	–
$\chi^2$	60.050	67.994	54.968	–
df	24	24	24	–
$\chi^2/df$	2.502	2.833	2.290	Equal or below 5.00
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	0.969	0.966	0.972	Equal or above 0.90
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.060	0.066	0.055	Equal or below 0.08

A country with a positive micro image is a fertile ground for the development of products that have a high franchise with consumers worldwide.

Finally, the study confirmed that there is a relationship between country macro image and country micro image in the case of each of the three countries studied herein, USA, China and Malaysia. The study found that country macro image, consisting of economic, political and technological dimensions (Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993) correlated highly with the country micro country image, comprising the totality of beliefs held about the products of a given country (Nagashima, 1970; Pappu *et al.*, 2007; Martin and Eroglu, 1993). These findings support consumer expectations for higher product quality and performance from developed, high-income countries with advanced technological capabilities, which tend to have a more positive country image than developing countries (Ngoma and Ntale, 2015; Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012; Kalicharan, 2014;

Dimensions and constructs	USA	China	Malaysia	Dynamics of country image
<i>Technological</i>				
1. Technological research	0.610	0.491	0.587	
2. Industrialization	0.636	0.660	0.654	
3. Developed economy	0.630	0.737	0.714	
<i>Economic</i>				
1. High standards of living	0.683	0.684	0.623	
2. Good welfare system	0.535	0.745	0.696	
3. High labor cost	0.619	0.715	0.516	
<i>Political</i>				
1. Civilian government	0.507	0.746	0.483	
2. Free-market system	0.552	0.423	0.491	
3. Democratic	0.522	0.630	0.709	
<i>Goodness-of-fit measures</i>				
<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	
$\chi^2$	60.050	67.994	54.968	
df	24	24	24	
$\chi^2/df$	2.502	2.833	2.290	
GFI	0.969	0.966	0.972	
RMSEA	0.060	0.066	0.055	

**Table VIII.**  
Country macro image – standard regression weight and goodness-of-fit measures

Dimensions	Elements
Technological	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This country has a high level of technological research</li> <li>2. This country has a high level of industrialization</li> <li>3. This country has a highly developed economy</li> </ol>
Economic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People in this country enjoy high standards of living</li> <li>2. This country has a good welfare system</li> <li>3. Labor costs are high in this country</li> </ol>
Political	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This country has a civilian non-military government</li> <li>2. This country has a free-market system</li> <li>3. This is a democratic country</li> </ol>

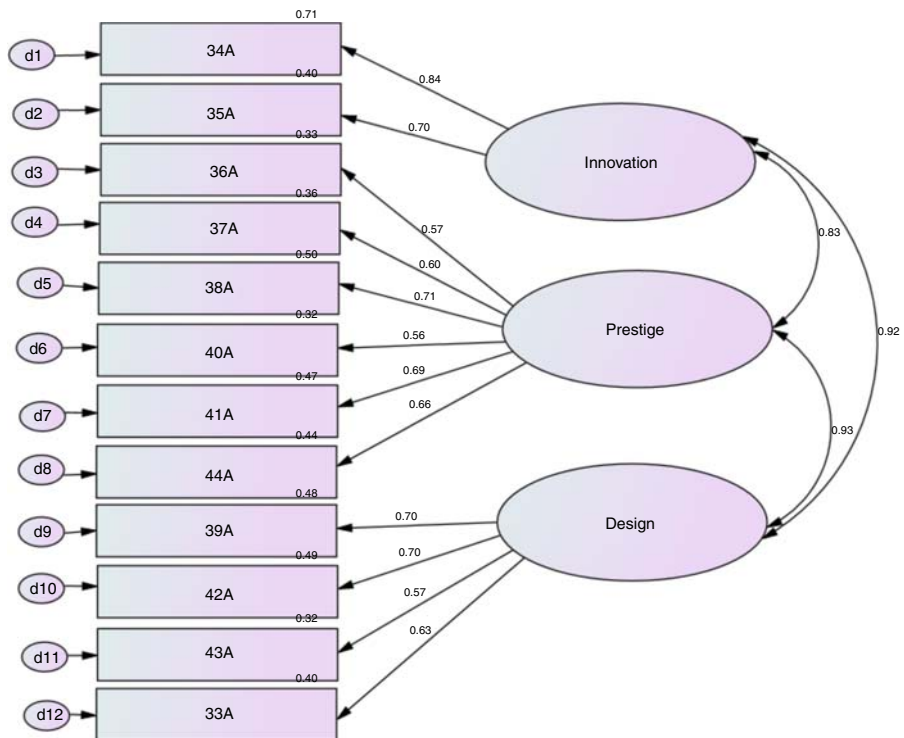
**Table IX.**  
Final dimensions of country macro image

Garma *et al.*, 2008; Hsieh, 2004). Alternatively, they expect lower product performance from lower-income countries, in proportion to the countries' development.

The study was conducted in an urban area dominated by a national university, and populated by primarily by students and young urban professionals. The data, thus, were skewed toward younger respondents. The advantage of this strategy, however, was that most respondents very willing to participate. The high response rate was attributed in this study was attributed to the face-to-face contacts with respondents and to the social-desirability bias characterizing Malaysian society. However, when faced with a longer questionnaire and greater demand on their time, a large proportion (one-fifth) opted to only partially complete it, rendering the questionnaire unusable.

The study would have benefited from a higher representation of older consumers, which would have made it more representative of the population. Similarly, a random sample would have helped produce a sample that would have better represented the Malaysian population; however, considering the time and implementation costs, using a systematic sample produced valuable insights for the study.





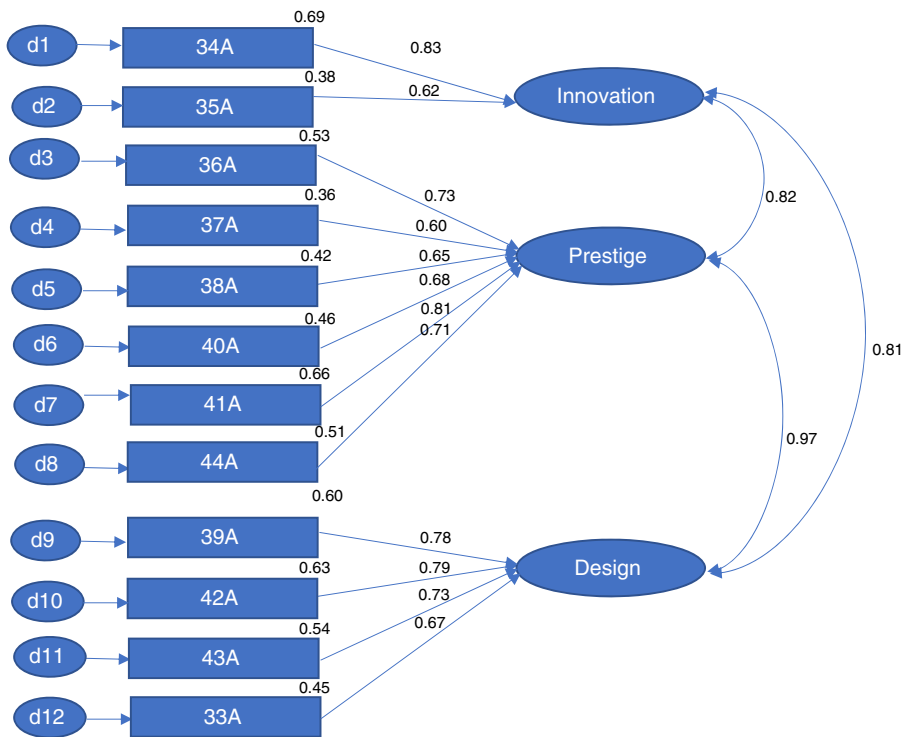
**Figure 4.**  
Path diagram for the US micro image

**Notes:** 33A – excellent workmanship; 34A – technically advanced; 35A – innovative; 36A – proud to own; 37A – advertising; 38A – recognizable brand name; 39A – reliable; 40A – expensive; 41A – high status; 42A – excellent finish; 43A – dependable; 44A – upmarket

### Implications for researchers and practitioners

The study expands on existing theory by examining macro and micro country image dimensions from the perspective of emerging markets. While the topic has been examined in other countries – e.g. Saudi Arabia (Byoungcho *et al.*, 2018), a high-income country (World Bank, 2019), – this topic is particularly important for the study of emerging market consumers. The present study expanded the literature by using Malaysia as the context for the study. The study assessed, from the perspective of Malaysian consumers, Malaysian products, products from the USA, a highly developed country with a longstanding reputation for innovation and design, China, which has a reputation for producing cost-effective, but not as innovative, products. With Chinese firms ramping up their design capabilities and attempting to penetrate more upscale markets, our research suggests that Chinese firms would benefit if they were to create a more positive product perception across global markets. Perceptions of being undemocratic and lagging economically could potentially serve as a barrier to the acceptance of Chinese products in higher-priced sectors, even for high-technology products.

Managers in the emerging markets such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam and other Asia-Pacific countries would benefit from leveraging economic development and political stability, as well as local technological skills to enhance macro country image. The positive image will then extend to products manufactured in these countries, creating positive country brand associations. Managers could emphasize both macro and micro country image dimensions in their marketing communications to solidify an overall positive country image.



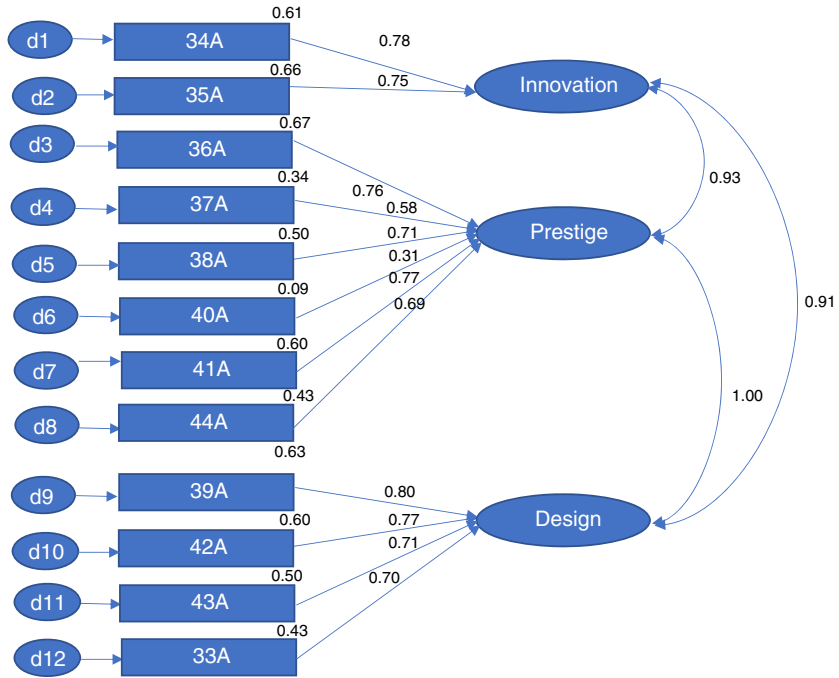
**Notes:** 33A – excellent workmanship; 34A – technically advanced; 35A – innovative; 36A – proud to own; 37A – advertising; 38A – recognizable brand name; 39A – reliable; 40A – expensive; 41A – high status; 42A – excellent finish; 43A – dependable; 44A – upmarket

**Figure 5.**  
Path diagram for China micro image

The positive relationship between the macro and micro established in the present study constitutes an area of possible future research inquiry. Future research might similarly assess the relationship between macro and micro country image for other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and assess differences between countries of different economic development level, and with different economic systems. Such research might also assess the dimensionality of macro and micro country image for individual countries, as well as for the region itself, potentially developing measures for assessing the macro and micro Asia-Pacific region image with the purpose of devising strategies for enhancing desirability for products from the region. In addition, research could address macro and micro country image in situations where there is ethnocentrism and animosity in two or more societies that share cultural, historical, ethnic and geographical characteristics – recent research suggests that ethnocentrism and animosity may have substantial effects on country image (Souiden *et al.*, 2018).

### Conclusion

Despite the recent waves of nationalism, isolationism and protectionism, global trade is unlikely to slow down. The COO of a product is, unquestionably, likely to influence perceptions of products and their desirability in global markets, even in those where access to good is limited, as is the case, for instance, in Iran (Esmailpour and Abdolvand, 2016). Historically, the USA, Japan and industrialized countries in Europe have benefited from the



**Notes:** 33A – excellent workmanship; 34A – technically advanced; 35A – innovative; 36A – proud to own; 37A – advertising; 38A – recognizable brand name; 39A – reliable; 40A – expensive; 41A – high status; 42A – excellent finish; 43A – dependable; 44A – upmarket

**Figure 6.**  
Path diagram for  
Malaysia micro image

Goodness-of-fit measurements	Country			Recommended value
	USA ( <i>n</i> = 424)	China ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Malaysia ( <i>n</i> = 424)	
<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	–
$\chi^2$	148.251	166.718	145.885	–
df	51	51	51	–
$\chi^2/df$	2.907	3.269	2.860	Equal or below 5.00
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	0.945	0.937	0.944	Equal or above 0.90

**Table X.**  
Goodness-of-fit for  
country micro image –  
initial model

positive images held by their countries at both the macro and micro levels of consumer perception. However, with emerging markets attempting to sell more of their products globally, business leaders and policy makers in these counties must aware of the image that their countries have worldwide.

Emerging economies such as that of Malaysia, home to a rising and all-important global middle class, must be keenly aware of country images they project to the world market. Managers and policy makers need to assess the acceptance of their products in the context of their country’s perceptions among consumers in various markets, and attempt to steer those perceptions in a manner that would be beneficial to their marketing efforts.

	USA ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Standard regression weights	
		China ( <i>n</i> = 424)	Malaysia ( <i>n</i> = 424)
<i>Dimensions and constructs</i>			
Innovation			
1. Technically advanced	0.844	0.829	0.779
Innovative	0.698	0.620	0.747
Prestige			
2. Proud to own	0.571	0.726	0.756
3. Advertising	0.600	0.601	0.584
4. Recognizable brand name	0.710	0.647	0.708
5. Expensive	0.564	0.677	0.307
6. High Status	0.686	0.811	0.773
7. Upmarket	0.661	0.711	0.690
Design			
1. Reliable (39)	0.695	0.777	0.796
2. Excellent finish (42)	0.700	0.794	0.775
3. Dependable (43)	0.565	0.734	0.710
4. Excellent workmanship (33)	0.634	0.672	0.696
<i>Goodness-of-fit measures</i>			
<i>p</i> -value	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001	<i>p</i> < 0.001
$\chi^2$	148.251	166.718	145.885
df	51	51	51
$\chi^2$ /df	2.907	3.269	2.860
GFI	0.945	0.937	0.944
RMSEA	0.067	0.073	0.066

**Table XI.**  
Country micro image  
– standard regression  
weight and goodness-  
of-fit measures

Dimensions	Elements
Innovation	1. Products from this country are technically advanced 2. Products from this country are innovative
Prestige	1. I feel proud to own products from this country 2. Products from this country are supported by lots of advertising 3. Products from this country have recognizable brand names 4. Products from this country are expensive 5. Products from this country are “high status” product 6. This country offers “upmarket” products
Design	1. Products from this country are reliable 2. Products from this country have excellent finish 3. Products from this country are dependable 4. Products from this country have excellent workmanship

**Table XII.**  
Final dimensions and  
elements for  
country micro image  
(same as initial)

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