

Customer's Perception Towards Buying Chinese Products: An Empirical Investigation in Malaysia

¹Abdullah Sarwar, ¹S.M. Ferdous Azam, ¹Ahasanul Haque,
²Ghassan Sleman and ³Sayed Rajab Nikhashemi

¹Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, Department of Business Administration,
International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Faculty of Business Administration, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia

³Department of Management and Consumer Studies, University Putra Malaysia

Abstract: The emergence of Chinese products and its growing popularity has been a phenomenon for social science researchers. In addition, the “cheap” image of Chinese products together with their product quality have raised the issue to investigate further why customers buy Chinese products and what they perceive before buying. A number of studies already been conducted on the effect of country-of-origin image on customers’ purchase behavior which are mostly in the context of developed countries. Hence, this study attempts to fill the gap that rarely been studied on the consumer’s perception towards buying Chinese products especially on the Malaysian context. The present study has enhanced the understanding of how the customers perceive the Chinese products while making the buying decision. It explores how different perception tools can positively influence their purchase decision. In addition, this study provides practical insights into how the customers use and perceive different product information in different perspectives which may be alien to their cultural background. This study suggests that, the Malaysian consumers are very conscious about quality and price of Chinese products. Therefore, marketers of Chinese product in Malaysia should be very careful about the price, quality and technology advancement of product they are offering in the market place. Finally, although many significant findings have been reported in this study, there are several other tangible and intangible issues that can be improved in future studies.

Key words: Price • Product Quality • Product Type • Country of Origin • Customer’s Perception

INTRODUCTION

China is the most productive nation that integrating into modernity very soon and every other country are curious to know the magic of its progress. They have already adopted a refined set of trade policies to establish their products [1, 2]. As consumers’ buying power of Chinese product is of high percent of the world’s population, thus, this massive consumer industry will have a tremendous impact on the world economy through international trade [3, 4]. Moreover, as the labor costs are increasing in the western world, many international companies had already setup their factories in China to

benefit from its economical labor costs while maximizing their profits [5]. On the contrary, China, being the second largest economy after the US has ventured into many product developments to compete with the international giants [6, 7]. Few of the products originated from China such as Lenovo computers and Tsingtao Beer had already gained world class reputation. Moreover, a big number of Chinese companies are listed at the Forbes Global 2000 (e.g. China Shenhua Energy, Baoshan Iron and Steel, China Telecom, China Coal Energy, Dongfeng Motor Group, SAIC Motor, Suning Appliance, ZTE, Kweichow Moutai, Tingyi, Wuliangye Yibin, Want Want China and Jiangsu Yanghe Brewery) [8]. According to Thomas, even

Corresponding Author: Abdullah Sarwar, Department of Business Administration,
Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

during the last decade, Chinese products were not much available in the market place; however, the world has seen a sudden boom of 'Made in China' throughout the international market in recent times [9].

The emergence of Chinese products and its growing popularity has been a phenomenon for social science researchers. Nevertheless, the reputation for the "Made in China" still needs a long way to earn the customers confidence as their reputation is not much positive in terms of their product quality. The "cheap" image of Chinese products together with their product quality have raised the issue to investigate further why consumers buy China products and what they perceive before buying. A huge number of studies had been conducted on the effect of country-of-origin image on consumers' purchase behavior [10-13]. However, the majority of the studies regarding consumer's perception on buying foreign products were much concentrated in their proactive influential role in the country of origin image formation and [14-18]. Hence, this study attempts to fill the gap that rarely has been studied on the consumer's perception towards buying Chinese products especially on the Malaysian context.

The objectives for this study are: (i) to understand the perceptions of customers toward buying Chinese products, (ii) to examine the effectiveness of country of origin effect on customers' perception towards buying Chinese products, (iii) to recognize whether is there any difference between product types and customers' perception towards buying Chinese products, (iv) to determine whether Chinese products can be satisfied in terms of quality or not and (v) to figure out whether buyers of Chinese products perceive the China products as affordable or not.

However, due to this limited literature and empirical evidence, this study believes that, other related studies focusing on the consumers' perception towards buying foreign products would provide with some constructive insights and information on the Malaysian consumers' perception towards buying Chinese products. The findings from this study will benefit a number of researchers in the marketing and manufacturing industry and the people involved in such industry in understanding of how consumers perceived towards buying Chinese products in Malaysia. In addition, this study will provide information for marketing researchers, managers, governmental and non-governmental institutions and organizations and of course social

scientists which can help them in recognizing the proper marketing strategies as well as formulating special marketing techniques.

Literature Review

Customer's Perception towards Buying Chinese Products: Buying a specific country's products (e.g. Chinese products) sometime depends on ethnocentrism. As Klein, Ettenson and Morris have mentioned in their research, "Ethnocentrism is a part of attitude that a consumer possess" [19]. Therefore, if Chinese people buy its own manufactured products even though it is not as good as other country's one, this is called ethnocentrism. In the context of China, Shimp and Sharma stated ethnocentrism as "the beliefs held by specific country's consumers like Chinese consumers about the appropriateness, as well as an understanding of what purchase behavior is acceptable or unacceptable for China in regard to products produced outside the country" [20]. Many researchers in recent years were focusing on the outcomes of consumer ethnocentrism and the related issues. They found, ethnocentrism, the country of origin and country image have an important role on buying behavior [21]. Besides, most studies focused ethnocentrism models in different countries as well [22, 23].

Nowadays, consumer ethnocentrism is becoming a major part of the product bundle. Besides, consumer ethnocentrism also can be explained as a reluctance to buy foreign products [24]. According to Verlegh and Steenkamp, consumer ethnocentrism influences the buying behavior where issues are concerned to the perceived quality of domestic products [25]. However, there are few related factors that influence the consumers' perception of country of image. There also has a direct relationship between buying behavior and made in effect. Usually, consumers from developed countries prefer their own country's products [26]. According to Wang and Lamb (1983), country image influences the consumers' willingness to purchase a product. They further elaborated that, consumers do often assume that, the developed country products are of better quality than the products from the developing countries [27]. Nagashima found out that, "made in" represents the reputation or the brand personality [28]. However, in this study, we have focused on the Chinese manufactured products and how Malaysian consumer's perception is affected for purchasing Chinese product.

Product Quality: The quality and purchase intention are inarguably related to each other [29]. In this global era of business, compromising product quality is simply unthinkable. Thus, to remain competitive, delivering high quality products will be the key competitive advantages for any companies in gaining positive and increased market share. For instant, Chinese mobile phones are very cheap and designs are attractive. However, there are customers who do not buy Chinese mobile phones because of quality issue. In that case, it can be said that, this specific product may not fulfill the customers' expectation. Freling and Forbes had also mentioned that, it is the perception of product quality at the time of the next buying decision that may better explain again purchasing behavior [30]. Hence, what is a quality product to one customer may not necessarily be a quality product to another customer. Therefore, as with the same example of Chinese mobile phones, there are few customers are satisfied with the product even though they may not have a good perception on it. Therefore, in Malaysian context, the issue of quality can be reckoned as the fundamental issue when Malaysian consumers are interested to consume Chinese products at the outset. Thus, the following hypothesis is drawn;

H1: There is a direct positive relationship exists between the product quality and customers' perception towards buying Chinese products.

Price Sensitivity: Price is the core and considerable factor when consumers think and do have a transaction with purchase intention. There are few recent researches which confirm that several factors are the influential tool for the consumers' including price sensitivity and price fairness [31-34]. Additionally, it also can be said that, consumers usually show the optimistic approach towards the product. For example, if homogeneous products do have the price variations, customers will purchase the lower price product. The economics theory also expresses the same way of customer attitude. Now if Chinese products are concerned over Malaysian domestic product, with this parallel market inside Malaysia, if the multiracial issue is ignored, people form Malaysian market will buy the comparatively cheap products and it is logical. In this regard, the focus on a negative international event like importing high cost Chinese products in Malaysian domestic market, it will be particularly destructive for the domestic market whenever the price issue is concerned.

On the other hand, purchasing products from a certain country can be expressed in defensive attribute [35]. Thus, pricing issue can be viewed as a consumer's anger by complaining the issue of fair price when animosity comes to pass radically as well. Hence, the following hypothesis is drawn;

H2: There is a direct positive relationship exists between the price and customers' perception towards buying Chinese products.

Country of Origin Effect: Country of origin generally refers the products are made from where. This means the origin of the country that the products are manufactured. This basically effects on consumers' perception of buying a product. Papadopoulos mentioned that, the country of origin has a potential effect on product evaluations and it is related with the environmental and individual factors that may assist on purchasing intention [36]. In the case of buying the Chinese products, there are some issues are concerned. People usually think that, the Chinese products are cheap regardless of quality. Here, the country of origin effects is strong and clearly observed on buying decision. However, several important decisions must be made while buying Chinese products. This is basically explained through country of origin effects. Besides, consumer knowledge plays a significant role in purchasing certain products. However, it can be said that, previous experience and knowledge about a product plays an important role in buying a certain product. Product knowledge is the main factor sometime for the consumer, which gives a pre-image and which contains the knowledge of brands and product attributes [37]. Where consumers are faced with a branded product, they take a quick decision on that brand, as they are aware of the brand image [38]. In such circumstances, customers take the decision for the products that they are looking for since this is known. Thus, it seems reasonable to rely on the products; for example, Chinese products. However, product information is the main factor sometime in choosing situations. Thus, country of origin plays an important role in the mind of the consumers while making purchase decision. According to Zhou, presently, China is considered as one of the key manufacturing base for many multinational companies due to its cheap labor [5]. Thus, China's impression in terms of country of origin effects is not as dreadful as researchers sometimes think. From the above discussion, the following hypothesis is drawn;

H 3: There is a direct positive relationship exists between the country of origin and customers' perception towards buying Chinese products.

Product Type: Product type is a significant issue especially in buying decision. Sometimes, consumers prefer to buy some specific country products as they have passion to buy such product. For instance, Italian fashion or German automobiles are the preferences that consumer look over. However, it can be defined as the image and reputation that consumer perceive towards a particular country [39]. It is also sometimes related to the country's production capabilities and technological advancements [40]. Usually consumers prefer the products based on price, brand or the manufacturing country [41-43].

In related with Chinese products, customers have an intention and perception which can be said as pre-perception for the products. When Chinese products are viewed as foreign products, buyers take the country image as how China is seen in the market for the specific product. The country image of China has some advantages for certain products (e.g. purchasing or buying some common electrical goods). In contrast, knowledge and education for the consumers can be reckoned as an important tool for buying a specific product. This should be based on the knowledge and learning. Generally, a higher level of knowledge regarding a product can be expressed as this will increase the amount of buying. It is also assumed that, knowledgeable consumers are more likely to connect with more considerable hunt for information which will contribute to a higher level of product selection [44]. Basically, consumer purchase intention and product classification is an active process even in this context of buying Chinese products. Usually customers are found selective and choosy to engage in a transaction while buying Chinese products. Thus, the product identification and its internalization processes affect the behavior change of buying habit of the customers. Moreover, Assael has mentioned that, customer's intention on buying foreign products and customer purchase habits are interlinked [45]. Therefore, types of products with many instant circumstances do have the vital role on the consumers mind as well as buying the Chinese products. From the above discussion, the following hypothesis is drawn;

H 4: There is a direct positive relationship exists between the product type and customers' perception towards buying Chinese products.

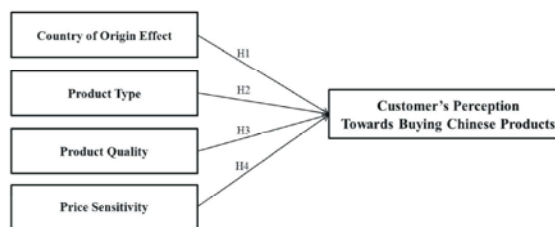


Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework: As the purpose of this study was to assess the consumer's perception towards buying Chinese products, thus, the theoretical framework leading to the development of this study is based upon the previous literature review and the gap that has been identified.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a descriptive/correlation study of the consumer's perception on buying the Chinese products. A survey using a self-administered questionnaire was conducted to collect quantitative data for the purpose of this study. Based on the variables under investigation, a self-explanatory questionnaire was carefully developed basing on the literature review. The design had been structured in such a manner as to make it easier for the respondents to proceed from one question to the next without being confused on what to do next. The wording of the questions was also fundamental, simple and straight forward while the language was maintained as simple as possible. A five point Likert Scale were used in the questionnaire. All the questionnaire items were developed in English.

A pre-test instrument was considered to be necessary to verify its clarity and dependability before it was used on the sample population. Therefore, the study had conducted a reliability analysis to identify whether or not; accurate and precise results could be obtained from the measurements made on the study's variables from the instruments used. A random sample of 52 students from the International Islamic University Malaysia had been selected for the purpose mentioned. Based on their feedbacks, further modifications were made in the final version of the questionnaire.

The target populations were the Malaysian customers who prefer or at least brought Chinese products once. However, due to the unavoidable time constraints arising from this study, the researcher had depended only on the students of various universities located around Klang Valley, Malaysia.

The probability random sampling technique was used which was considered to be most appropriate for this study [46].

In order to obtain better and easily approachable respondents, the researcher personally distributed the questionnaire. The distribution of the questionnaire was started in the middle of September 2012 and continued till the middle of October 2012. The approach of collecting the data was very slow and as usual, quite difficult. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents during the period mentioned above. 194 questionnaires (65%) were found valid for the further analysis. Finally, after collecting the data, internal consistency was performed by applying the Cronbach's Alpha (α) test, the principal axis factor analysis and the regression analysis respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study used the internal consistency for the questionnaire. Hair, *et al.* has suggested that, an Alpha value of 0.70 is considered reliable; however, it may decrease to 0.60 in an exploratory research [47]. The result of the Cronbach's coefficient Alpha reliability test for the present study is shown in Table 1, where the Reliability test obtained is (0.912). Thus, the questionnaire is highly reliable.

Factor analysis was conducted using the principal axis factoring with varimax rotation with a cut up point of 0.6. Factor loading was applied for underlying structure of 24 items related to consumers' perception towards buying Chinese products in Malaysia. Total four factors were extracted which explained 65.319% of the variance (Table 2).

The KMO value was 0.780 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was 4.350E3 and significant at 0.000 ($p \leq 0.000$) (Table 3).

The study also investigated the respondent's perception towards the overall preference of buying Chinese products. The result indicated that 77.8% ($n = 151$) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they like Chinese products (Table 4).

Finally, multiple regressions were conducted subsequently on consumers' perception towards buying Chinese products as dependent variable with each of the four factors that constituted the independent variable to indicate the relationships among these dependent and independent variables. The model summary in Table 5 shows how much of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the model. In this research, the value is .735 which means this explains 73.5% of the variance.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No of Items
.912	.913	24

Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
COE2	.895			
COE4	.845			
PT1	.826			
PT4	.892			
PS3	.690			
COE1		.893		
COE3		.845		
COE5		.770		
PT2		.765		
PT3		.889		
PT5			.623	
PT6			.768	
PQ2			.663	
PQ3			.819	
PQ4			.627	
PS5			.660	
PT8				.895
PQ5				.768
PS1				.789
PS2				.772
PS4				.698

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.780
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4.350E3
	df	276
	Sig.	.000

Table 4: Overall Perceptions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
	Neutral	40	20.6	20.6	22.2
	Agree	67	34.5	34.5	56.7
	Strongly Agree	84	43.3	43.3	100.0
Total		194	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Model Summary^a

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.802a	.743	.735	.51929

a. Predictors: (Constant), Product Quality, Price, Country of Origin, Product Type

Table 6: ANOVAb

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	91.756	4	22.939	85.066	.000a
Residual	50.966	189	.270		
Total	142.722	193			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Product Quality, Price, Country of Origin, Product Type

b. Dependent Variable: Overall Perception

Table 7: Coefficientsa

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1 (Constant)	.594	.290		2.044	.042
Product Quality	.254	.061	.226	4.149	.000
Price	.717	.056	.690	12.864	.000
Country of Origin	-.075	.062	-.060	-1.197	.233
Product Type	-.062	.076	-.042	-.826	.410

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Perception

The ANOVA table (Table 6) explains the statistical significance of the result which is statistically significant at 0.000 which means $p < 0.05$.

The Coefficients Matrix table (Table 7) shows the standardized beta coefficients that gives a measure of the contribution of each variable to the model. The largest beta coefficient is .690, which is for price. This means that this variable makes the unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable when the variance explained by all other variables in the model is controlled for.

H1: There is a Direct Positive Relationship exists between the product Quality and Customers' Perception Towards Buying Chinese Products: In this study, product quality (H1) is significant at 0.000 which means $p < 0.05$. Thus H1 is accepted which means that, product quality does have significant impact on consumers' perception towards buying Chinese products. This also proves that, though the general impression of the Chinese products seems to be low to many customers, however, all the Chinese products are not of lower quality. Thus, many customers do prefer made in China products due to their durability.

H2: There is a Direct Positive Relationship Exists between the Price and Customers' Perception towards Buying Chinese Products: Price (H2) is also significant at 0.000 which means $p < 0.05$. In consequence, H2 is also accepted which confirm that price does have a significant impact on customers' perception towards buying Chinese products. This may be due to the buyers' affordability of

Chinese products as these are comparatively cheaper than other country products. Moreover, in this ever competitive market, China has gained a big market share due to their low pricing strategies. Consequently, Chinese products have become much popular to the middle and lower income groups. In this study, the majority of the respondents fall under the lower income group. Thus, this seems positive to their perception as they can afford the Chinese products.

H3: There is a Direct Positive Relationship Exists between the Country of Origin and Customers' Perception towards Buying Chinese Products: Country of origin (H3) is significant at 0.233 which means $p > 0.05$. Thus, H3 is rejected which as country of origin does not have a significant effect on the customers' perception towards buying Chinese products. This may be due to the affordability to this group of customers. This means, the middle or lower income group does not care regarding the country of origin of the product. Thus, they buy the affordable products which are produced by China in this case.

H4: There is a Direct Positive Relationship Exists between the Product Type and Customers' Perception towards Buying Chinese Products: Product type (H4) is also significant at 0.410 which means $p > 0.05$. Thus, H4 is also rejected as product type also does not have a significant effect on the customers' perception towards buying Chinese products. This is due to the lower or middle income customer groups. In this study, the respondents were students and majority of them belongs to lower income group. Thus, they buy the affordable products which are produced mostly by China.

CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that price and product quality are the most important concern that have been frequently used by the respondents in this study while buying Chinese products. In addition, the findings also confirm that, price and product quality have positive significant influences on buying the Chinese products. Other the two independent variables (country of origin and product type) do not have significant influence on the customers' perception towards buying Chinese products. However, it can be readily seen that price influences on the purchase decision represents a separate effect apart from the other factors that influence the customers' perception towards buying Chinese products. Although, the

contributions of the product quality on the purchase decision vary, the price conclusively gives the most weight. However, country of origin and product type did not have positive significant relationships.

The present study has both practical and theoretical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the survey questionnaire used for the quantitative component of this study, the types of variables used to capture the customer's perception regarding the Chinese products are the contribution to the literature gap. This methodology had not been exactly presented in previous studies in the context of Malaysia towards buying Chinese products. From a practical perspective, the present study has enhanced the understanding of how the customers perceive the Chinese products while making the buying decision. It explores how different perception tools can positively influence their purchase decision. In addition, this study provides practical insights into how the customers use and perceive different product information in different perspectives which may be an alien to their cultural background. Consequently, it should allow for the development of specific marketing programs, or improvement of the current marketing programs for the Malaysian market.

In conclusion, this study confirms that, the Malaysian customers are very conscious about quality and price of Chinese products. Therefore, marketers of Chinese product in Malaysia should be very careful about the price, quality and technology advancement of product they are offering in the market place. It is also recommended in future research that sampling size should be increased. Moreover, sampling from higher income group might explore different issues which had been ignored in this study.

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