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Brand Tracking on Social Media: The Role of Country of Origin Perceptions

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Abstract

Marketers are now almost a decade into using social media as another outlet in developing brand relationships with consumers. Yet an understanding of how consumers interact with brands online is still in its infancy. This paper compares the social media and brand-tracking habits of consumers in three parts of the world: Asia, the Middle East and the USA. In addition, the study attempts to explain what motivates consumers to follow brands on social media, focusing on the role of products' country of origin in explaining the relationship. The results show that US consumers spent the most time on social media and tracked the most brands, while Thai respondents did the least of both. Four dimensions of social media brand tracking were identified and ratings compared across groups. Significant differences among groups were found for one of the four factors, 'brand experience', with US consumers experiencing significantly more positive 'brand experiences' than Thai consumers, and Egyptian consumers falling somewhere in between. The results also indicate that the country of product origin can have some effects on brand tracking.
Keywords: social media, branding, product origin, brand tracking

Introduction

Marketers are now at least five years into using social media as another channel for developing brand relationships with consumers. A watershed moment is almost upon us, as it will not be long before top U.S. brands are spending in excess of US$5bn on social media every year. Yet an understanding of how consumers interact with brands online is still in its infancy. This study will attempt to explain what motivates consumers to follow brands on social media, looking specifically at the role played by products' country of origin in explaining the relationship. In addition, this work will compare the social media and brand-tracking habits of consumers in three parts of the world: Asia, the Middle East and the USA. Given that people are attracted to social media to build personal relationships, it is hypothesised that social media users are more likely to track and develop relationships with brands that originate from the same country.

Literature review

Social media use for brand information

Web 2.0 technologies have bred a wealth of social media websites, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These platforms provide opportunities for companies to foster relationships with customers as well as for customers to search for information to help make informed purchase decisions. Facebook's penetration is around 70 per cent of the US population, and greater than 50 per cent in other parts of the world, resulting in about 1.5 billion active monthly users. Instagram, meanwhile, has 400 million active monthly users, and Twitter some 320 million.[1,2] Mass adoption of social media is an international phenomenon. In China, for example, over 500 million registered Tencent Weibo users and 400 million Sina Weibo users were recorded in 2013.[3]

Here, a few statistics help to put the situation in context. In 2011, at least 50 per cent of social media users were following brands on social media,[4] while companies around the globe were spending about US$25.1bn per year on social media marketing.[5] The top 100 advertisers in *Advertising Age* have all established Facebook pages for their brands.[6] In 2014, more than half (58 per cent) of the adverts broadcast during the Super Bowl contained hashtags (#), up from 50 per cent in 2013 — a trend which has subsequently continued.[7] YouTube is generating 700 million monthly views worldwide, with a significant proportion relating to fashion and beauty content.[8] Nearly one-quarter of US social media network users have made a purchase on a retail website after clicking from a social media network.[9] According to a study into the average spend generated via social media links, Pinterest generates the highest average order value (US$123.50) compared with Facebook's much lower average order value (US$54.64).[10]

Companies can use various marketing strategies to target social media users who might be potential customers. One specific way of establishing a social presence and engaging customers is to create brand fan pages on social media channels. Companies can place brand posts containing photos, videos, messages, quizzes, anecdotes and other materials on these brand fan pages, while customers can become fans or followers of these brand fan pages, and indicate that they like the brand posts, comment on, or retweet them. These dedicated brand pages offer brand fans a place to express their passion about the brand and unite them by their shared interest in the brand.[11] Brand fan pages also showcase part of the customers' relationship with the brand,[12] help to strengthen the brand–customer relationship,[13] serve as a source of information[14], and sometimes provide social benefits to the fans.[15] Customers' interactions with brands on social media have a much stronger impact on their behaviours than traditional forms of marketing and advertising.[16] Those who become fans of brand fan

pages are more likely to be loyal and committed to the company, and are more willing to receive information about the brand.[17] In certain marketing circles, these loyal brand advocates have come to be known as 'loyads'. Most importantly, these brand fans are inclined to visit stores that sell specific brands more often, generate more positive word of mouth, and feel more emotionally attached to the brand than those who are not brand fans on social media.[18]

Past studies examining the relationship between brands on social media and their customers have focused on the strategies adopted by different companies[19,20] and user-generated content[21–23] rather than the effects of brand involvement on consumers.[24,25,] While knowing what strategies different companies are using to target potential customers helps build a more comprehensive landscape of what customers are confronted with on social media, it is more important to have a better understanding of what effects, if any, these strategies might have on customers. We are beginning to see these efforts, starting with an experiment focused on studying the effects of negative, neutral or positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on brand attention[26], but more work is needed.

By surveying 220 social media users across two Pakistani cities, Naveed's study examined the impact of social media on consumers' brand involvement, brand commitment and purchasing behaviours.[27] The results indicated that although less than half of the respondents believed that social media channels were a more trustworthy information source than traditional mainstream media, social media played a significant role in affecting most respondents' brand involvement.

To examine the influence of user motivation to engage in online social networking in response to social media marketing, Chi surveyed 502 college-aged Facebook users in Taiwan on their perceptions of two different social media marketing strategies, social media advertising and virtual brand communities.[28] She found that the development of virtual brand communities was an effective marketing strategy because respondents had higher trust and better attitudes toward virtual brand communities and the brand that built the community. According to Chi, the findings could be partially explained by the fact that social media users' online social needs were gratified by the content provided in the virtual brand communities.

Kim and Ko interviewed 362 South Korean consumers to examine the impact of the social media marketing activities of perceived luxury products on value equity, relationship equity, brand equity, customer equity and purchase intention.[29] Their study found that five marketing activities for perceived luxury brands (ie entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and word of mouth) had positive relationships with value equity, relationship equity and brand equity, while purchasing intention was positively affected by value equity and relationship equity.

Yousif examined the extent to which 384 Jordanian Facebook users were interested in the advertising messages posted by companies, the effect of these messages on users' willingness to purchase, and their evaluation of Facebook as a medium for advertising.[30] The result showed that the content of the advertising messages was viewed as both exciting and reliable, that these messages motivated participants to buy, and that Facebook was regarded as a successful medium for product promotion.

To explore the role of individual-level factors in consumers' decisions to follow brands on Facebook, a study by Logan surveyed 502 social media users in the USA.[31] The results showed that young adults (aged 18–34) are willing participants in brand-related activities on social media and most of them have a generally favourable attitude toward brand messaging on Facebook. Moreover, this study indicated that participants' perceived social media self-image, subjective

norms about social media, perceived usefulness of social media advertising, and attitudes toward advertising in general have positive relationships with intent to follow brands on Facebook.

Many of these studies have focused on international consumer markets, but few compare social media brand-tracking habits across countries and cultures. Indeed, more studies across groups with different cultural and social media influences, such as the USA, Asia and the Middle East, may provide valuable insights on why brand tracking across social media is different. Product country of origin — a concept that has been studied extensively for decades in traditional marketing contexts — is a good starting point for trying to explain regional differences in brand tracking.

Country/Region of product origin

As it relates to marketing, the concept of country-of-origin effects suggests that including mention of where a product comes from in marketing messages may have some influence on how it is perceived and on audience response to the marketing efforts. Originally proposed by Schooler, country-of-origin research has identified instances of both positive and negative effects based on identification of the country a given product is associated with.[32]

Quite an extensive literature has developed since Schooler's initial study, to the degree that a search of the ProQuest library article database for any mention of the term 'country-of-origin' since 1965 results in over 100,000 hits. Indeed, as of February 2016, ProQuest contains over 29,000 journal articles and over 7,000 theses and dissertations that include the term, meaning that the volume of writing on the topic is so great to be nearly unmanageable. Thankfully, a number of literature reviews conducted over the years can be leveraged to bring some order to the area. Bilkey and Nes cover over a decade of initial research on country-of-origin and conclude that basic distinctions between less-developed and more-developed countries explain the findings of many of those studies.[33] A second literature review by Verlegh and Steenkamp looks at studies through the late 20th[34] century, finding that country-of-origin tends to affect perceived quality more than attitude or purchase intention. Like Bilkey and Nes, they also point to a country's level of economic development as explaining much in the literature. Finally, Dinnie reviews 40 years of country-of-origin writing and research, organising it into three eras, the last of which essentially covers the years after Verlegh and Steenkamp's work and includes recognition of services as well as product marketing and adds notions of post-industrial economies to the developed and less-developed distinctions of the two earlier reviews.[35]

Lost among the large quantity of research in the general area of country-of-origin is the fact that much of the original writing on the topic referred to effects of regional as well as country-specific effects.[36] For example, China, with the world's largest population of 1.3 billion, is experiencing extraordinary growth, especially in consumer spending power. Although extremely brand loyal and loyal to Chinese-made products, a growing number (25 per cent) express scepticism towards their country's products.[37] Now, with globalisation a reality, the European Union growing in size and importance, and the increase of 'hybrid' products that may actually be produced, assembled or identified with several countries,[38] the notion of regional effects may have new relevance, as consumers may use factors other than national boundaries in assessing a product's origin.[39] Thus, an objective of the research reported here is to examine region of origin as a variable that may influence consumer decisions and advertising effectiveness, with a particular focus on Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the USA as regions, as consumers from the three regions tapped for this research are either from there or are big supporters of products from there, according to prior research.

Incredibly, there have been very few empirical investigations into region effects. Van Ittersum *et al.* use the term 'region of origin' in research that considers how regional images and attitudes toward a region can affect food product choices.[40] Leonidou *et al.* provide survey data looking at consumer perceptions of product quality by region,[41] concentrating mainly on self-perceptions of Asia as a region. Nes and Ghauri treat Eastern Europe and Western Europe as distinct regions in a region-of-origin framework, but there appears to be no published research that deals specifically with the EU or larger Europe as a region of product origin.[42]

As an additional interest in the present study, data from sub-samples of Eastern, Arab and Western populations are included in the research design. Prior work by Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran[43] and Meng *et al.*[44] based on comparative approaches, has found cultural variations in the level of country-of-origin effects and it has been suggested that differences may be due to the individualistic versus collectivistic nature of different nations. Thus, the use of Thailand and Egypt (like all of the Arab world a collectivist culture) and the USA (like most of the West an individualist culture) will allow consideration of such a hypothesis.

While the number of studies related to country-of-origin effects done in the USA is voluminous, much less is known about the phenomenon in Thailand and the Arab Middle East. A study in Thailand of Thai apparel found that low involvement products (eg socks, t-shirts) were related to lower country-of-origin effects than apparel products like high-level fashion.[45] Ratings of Thai product quality and preference were higher than ratings for products from China and the Philippines among US and Egyptian consumers, but below products from Japan.[46] Experimental research by Keenan and Al-Kadi[47] suggests that animosity toward the USA is responsible for certain negative country-of-origin findings in Egypt. This has likely been enhanced after the Arab Spring of 2011. Bahaee and Pisani reach the same conclusion in their study of Iranian consumers.[48]

Albarq attributes results found in Jordan, another Arab country, to consumer ethnocentrism, a sort of home-country preference found repeatedly in country-of-origin literature. Albarq further reports findings which indicate that this ethnocentrism is lower for those with travel or living experiences outside of their own country, another factor that has been raised in studies beyond the Arab region and that is generally accepted to be the case.[49]

There are, then, a number of questions to be considered concerning how the identification of the region from which a product comes might influence response to advertising. There are also values to be gained by considering how different cultures might interpret the same region-of-origin information differently, by taking different product categories into account, and to identify particular attributes associated with other regions. While no specific hypotheses are formulated for testing here, and the work described subsequently ought to be treated as more exploratory than definitive, some initial queries into topics related to region of origin are clearly called for. Advertisers, advertising agencies, advertising regulators and advertising scholars are all likely to have interests in such matters. As a means of addressing them, a primary research study is offered and a few tentative conclusions will be suggested.

The selection of Asia as a region of focus and comparisons of region ratings to ratings of specific countries (more common in past research) offer additional benefits to this research. Thailand, a relatively small eastern country, shows spurts of growth mixed with economic, political and climatic challenges (eg Thailand's tsunami and political unrest) that make for an insightful mix of origin-of-product effects. It also shares collectivist cultural values with other Asian cultures, making it

likely a more ethnocentric relationship drives social media brand-tracking decisions. This contrasts with a more individualistic approach for US respondents.

Research questions

The above literature suggests the following research questions should be pursued to better understand global brand tracking on social media:

RQ1: Do patterns of following and acquiring brand information through social media vary by country and region of the world with the accompanying cultural differences that are a part of these areas?

RQ2: What role, if any, does country of product origin play in the decision to follow certain brands through social media?

Procedure

One way to study these questions is to ask consumers directly about their brand-tracking habits, motivations for brand tracking and attitudes toward products from different parts of the world and their reputation. In this instance, a questionnaire was distributed to English-speaking college students in Thailand, Egypt and the USA via a website link in spring 2013. The inconsistency in response rates across the three countries made a quantitative approach to reporting results less meaningful than a more qualitative look at specific insights shared from respondents across the different cultures. Measures (five-point Likert agreement scales) captured social media habits generally and specific to acquiring product brand information, and attitudes toward following brands through social media using measures adapted from previous research addressing social media habits and interactions with brands.[50] Respondents were asked to list all the brands they followed through social media. Specific enquiries were made with respect to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram usage and their international equivalents (eg Weibo, Hi5, Twoo). Measures of country of origin focused on five product categories (motor vehicles, clothing, computers, food and appliances) which provide a range of purchase involvement conditions and have been studied in previous research.[51–53] The six regions of the world studied were: Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, South/Central America, and the USA/North America. Respondents rank-ordered each country for the five product categories. Overall ratings of product quality, price/value and preference were also taken for the three countries represented in the sample: Egypt, Thailand and the USA.

Trends and insights

Social media usage habits overall revealed some interesting, but not always surprising results. Unsurprisingly, when respondents were asked to rank their top three sites, Facebook and Twitter were the two most frequently used sites regardless of the respondents' country of residence. Pantip, Sanook, Hi5 and Weibo were often ranked third among Thai consumers, again unsurprisingly, given those sites' greater focus on Asian topics and culture (see Table 1).

Table 1: Top three ranked social media sites used

Social media sites	Ranked no. 1 (*n*)	Ranked no. 2 (*n*)	Ranked no. 3 (*n*)
Facebook	213	58	19
Twitter	62	129	48
Instagram	25	53	106
Pinterest	13	29	61

4Square	3	8	36
Pantip	9	6	32
Sanook	6	1	34
Hi5.com	5	1	30
Weibo.com	13	3	31
Twoo.com	4	1	32

Per research question one, Egyptian respondents' average weekly social media hours were almost double ($n = 26.8$) the hours spent by Thai and US respondents (about 14.5). The political and social turmoil surrounding the Arab Spring may be a factor in this discrepancy among groups. However, it appears that Egyptians are not just sharing political information on social media as numerous brands were followed, and few were political in nature. In fact, Egyptians averaged 1.4 brand mentions, compared with only 13 brands in total mentioned by Thai respondents. US participants averaged over two brand mentions each, with some listing up to 12 brands followed, making them the most active brand trackers among the sample groups. Clothing and apparel were the brands most often followed, with food/drink and computer/electronics brands cited most often after that. Nike was far and away the most followed individual brand, followed by Starbucks and several clothing brands (Forever 21, J Crew and Urban Outfitters) (see Figure 1). All but Urban Outfitters are found throughout the world, making them attractive brands to follow no matter what country the products come from.

Figure 1: The five top-mentioned brands (frequencies)

Analysis to determine the underlying factors motivating social media use and gratifications identified four factors. Factor 1 was called 'emotion' because it included measures that linked following a brand to 'expressing one's personality' and 'feeling committed' to a brand. Factor 2 was called 'purchase-related inquiry' because it included measures such as 'finding beneficial information' and 'sometimes changing my mind about a brand after following'. Factor 3 was called 'brand experience' as 'clarity', 'reliable info' and 'pleasing brand site' measures were loaded here. In addition, an item measuring willingness to recommend a brand to a friend also loaded on this factor, although it had the lowest factor score of the four items. Factor 4 was called 'entertainment value' and had only two items, but these focused on 'entertainment that makes me laugh' and 'fashionability' gained from a brand website. One of the four factors, 'brand experience', revealed differences across the three groups, with US consumers experiencing significantly more positive 'brand experiences' than Thai consumers, with Egyptian consumers in between. Further quantitative analysis was limited by the sample size.

To investigate research question two, related to the role that country and region of product origin play in brand tracking on social media, brands tracked by participants were sorted as either local (to them) or foreign and showed the following:

- *Egyptian respondents:* 15 of 59 brands tracked were local (about 25 per cent);

- *Thai respondents:* of 13 brands tracked two were local (about 15 per cent); and

- *US respondents:* 57 of 68 brands tracked were local (84 per cent).

Furthermore, the 75 per cent of foreign brands tracked by Egyptian respondents were from seven different countries, while the Thai respondents tracked 11 non-local brands from seven different countries.

Digging deeper into individual responses revealed some interesting insights. Although female Thais often tracked global fashion brands, male respondents also tracked fashion brands as well as luxury goods including vehicles such as BMW. Income had no effect on brand tracking, with luxury goods and high fashion followed by both upper-income and modest-income individuals. For Egyptian respondents, fashion accessories such as jewellery, watches and shoes were

brands often tracked. Again, income made no difference to the luxury brands tracked. For US respondents, sports brands (eg equipment, shoes, sports teams) were often mentioned, especially among males. Media brands, particularly television shows were tracked by US respondents, revealing a different outcome, entertainment, from brand tracking behaviour in other cultures.

For region ratings, Europe was consistently rated top for motor vehicles and clothing/fashion across the three groups, while Asia was ranked first for computers/electronics, and the USA for food. Africa, the Middle East and South America consistent ranked fourth, fifth or sixth for all product categories across the three sampled groups, even among Middle Eastern respondents.

Country ratings showed clear distinctions among the three cultures. Thai consumers clearly favoured Japan, with China a close second in overall ratings of product quality, value and preference, even over goods made in Thailand. With rare exceptions, Thailand was rated average or below average on all three dimensions. Egyptian respondents almost unanimously rated products from Egypt low, clearly favouring European products followed by US goods. For US respondents, the ratings of products originating from outside the USA depended on product category, with electronics from China and Japan scoring highly, and motor vehicles from Europe and Japan scoring well. However, for overall product quality, value and preference, US respondents rated US products rated as superior.

Conclusions and implications

As the results related to research question one suggest, brand-tracking strategies do not vary much across cultures, at least with the three groups of consumers involved in this study. Only brand experiences, manifested in the ratings of official brand pages as 'clear', 'reliable' and 'pleasant', and triggering a willingness to act as brand ambassadors by recommending brands to friends and family, were rated differently across the world. Thai consumers were least likely to have such brand experiences while tracking brands, which may conflict with cultural preferences for gaining information from personal experience by trying and using the brand.[54] US consumers are most likely to serve in this brand ambassador role, although they may seek rewards in the form of special access, promotional discounts or other perks to play that role.

Consumers across the world track international brands, no matter where they come from, as long as they are perceived as brands they can connect with emotionally, have useful and reliable information on their brand account pages and can provide occasional entertainment that results in 'buzz' that can be shared with friends, family and other social media followers. The type of brands followed differed across the world, although clothing and fashion, whether brands or clothing retailers, were by far the most popular brands to track. This is similarly observed with YouTube, which enjoys 700 million unique views per month, with a significant proportion relating to fashion and beauty content.[55] Egyptian respondents almost exclusively followed fashion brands, both clothing and jewellery, naming Armani, Michael Kors, Zara, Rolex and Longines among others. US consumers added fast food and sports brands to their brand tracking. Thai brand mentions were exclusively clothing brands or retailers, unless one considers celebrities as brands, as celebrities garnered the highest number of followers. This condition is particularly interesting given the globally practised tactic of linking celebrities to brands. A study of sports celebrities and sponsorships on social media showed significant increases in consumers' congruity with brands, brand relationship quality and enhanced brand image when sports and celebrities they like are linked to a brand.[56]

The differences in time spent on social media for Egyptian respondents relative to the other two groups show how social media use may rise and fall with breaking news developments in much the same way that television news viewing

changes. Where appropriate, brands using social media may consider pushing messages relevant to current affairs to followers, such as electric generator brands, repair and clean-up services have done in the aftermath of extreme weather events in the USA.

Links between social media habits and product country/region of origin were strongest among US respondents. Thai respondents exhibited fairly strong ethnocentrism or loyalty to products from their region (Asia) but not their own country as indicated by positive ratings with respect to product quality, preference and value for Japan and China. However, average ratings for products from their own country suggest that local news or personal experience with brands influence consumers to track alternatives, no matter how far from home they may be made. Advertisers for Asian brands may benefit from highlighting where products are made in their advertising and social media messages. Egyptian respondents were less inclined to reveal such tendencies, although in one product category, clothing, they recognise that the cotton and other fabric manufacturing in their country contributes to quality clothing. US respondents showed strong favouritism with regard to US goods, especially cars, food and appliances. This may be an outcome of marketers' recent emphasis on buying American as a response to a ballooning trade deficit and an economy that continues to struggle with growth.

Brands continue to see the importance of using social media to build relationships with consumers worldwide. United Airlines uses social media worldwide to help consumers work through the complicated decisions regarding who to trust for their travel.[57] United Airlines has identified that its best customers follow the company on social media and provide valuable feedback that the airline can act on. Other brands have recognised the emotional relationship that can be built with consumers through social media, developing characters or using existing brand advocates to deliver messages via social media as Mr Peanut does for Planters, Wendy Thomas does for Wendy's hamburgers, and Tiger Woods used to do for Nike sports products.[58]

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to the research conducted here. First, the use of college students from universities in the three countries limits the generalisability of findings to the countries or regions involved, although the age group is among the highest users of social media worldwide. The small samples from Egypt and especially Thailand limited the conclusions to be drawn for those countries, especially given that the 23 Thai participants followed only 13 brands in total. In addition, the definition of 'brand' being followed in social media may have lacked consistency across the three respondent groups. For example, US respondents took a liberal definition of 'brand', mentioning media or sports teams they followed, but none of the other groups mentioned such brand followings.

Future research must find a richer mix of consumers with more varied brand-tracking habits to better link the types of brands followed to motivations for doing so. Especially among cultures with varied approaches to consumerism and society in general, additional insights beyond the role of product origin and gratifications sought from social media interactions may emerge. For example, different governing styles across regions, different regulations related to marketing brands and access to social media and a host of additional variables may emerge in painting a more detailed profile of the brand-tracking experience through social media across the world.

However, research using Big Data analytics that often rely on click-throughs representing one-in-a-thousand brand impressions are 'nice to know' instead of valuable consumer engagement motives[59] and usually limited to single social

media channels. This provides a far more limiting picture than reaching out to consumers through surveys and other interviewing means.[60] That said, survey research is more expensive.

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