

**Drivers of willingness to buy:  
a comparison between country-of-origin and brand.**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to compare the impact of country of origin and brand's aspects on young consumers' willingness to buy international brands. The country chosen was the United States because this country arouses contradictory opinions and feelings, and reactions of love and hate, besides being the country of origin of the most valuable brands in the world. The chosen brands were Apple and McDonald's, representing products and services, both iconic US brands: the first one has been admired and followed; the second has been used as a symbol in political demonstrations against the United States or against globalization. The tested constructs include aspects of the country (Country Image and Country Affinity), and of the brand (Brand Personality and Self-Brand Connection). We conducted a survey with 367 students who were also potential consumers of the brands, and applied Structural Equation Model to analyze the impacts of the constructs on their willingness to buy. The results indicate that the consumer-brand relationship showed greater strength and significance than other constructs, indicating that during purchasing it is more important how the consumer perceives himself in relation to the brand than the way he perceives or feels about the country of origin of the brand. We deliberately chose brands of high brand equity for analysis, but in the future, the model could be applied to low brand equity brands, not-iconic brands, other countries and its brands, and other product categories.

**Key words:** Country of Origin, Brand, Consumer Behavior

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The overall objective of this paper is to compare the impact of issues relating country of origin (COO) and brand over young consumers' willingness to buy US brands.

The effects of COO image on acceptance and sales volume of a product in foreign countries has intrigued marketing researchers since Schooler (1965) which concluded that "the attitude toward the people of a nation is related to prejudice against the products of that country."

However, recent contributions to the literature on COO effect criticized the dominant research approaches on the field, questioning its importance (Samiee et al, 2005); its relevance (Usunier, 2006); the design of the research environment (Samiee, 2010); the emphasis on cognitive rather than affective aspects (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009); the lack of market segmentation (Samiee, 2010; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2010); the relationship between the concepts of COO and brand nationality, the lack of theoretical basis (Samiee, 2011); the consumer accuracy in recognizing the brand origin, and the importance given to this knowledge at the time of purchase decisions (Samiee et al, 2005; Usunier, 2011).

Some authors, on the other hand, claim that the COO effect would still be relevant, since it would affect consumers' attitudes towards a brand, even if they do not know its origin (Magnusson et al, 2011); or the COO effect would still be an important driver for building brand image, and it would affect the purchase intentions even if indirectly (Diamantopoulos et al, 2011). Anyway, the study of COO effect could no longer be carried out without taking into account aspects concerning the brand, at least regarding consumer goods and some services.

This study attempts to answer these questions about the strength of country of origin and aspects of the brand on the willingness to buy, approaching it in a situation closer to the "real world". That for, on one hand we were concerned about the consumer decision process; on the other hand, with the marketing strategies of companies. To this end, the research studied real brands, within their target market, in a current context, translating constructs for application in day-to-day consumer situations, seeking discoveries that can be widely applied in the context of international marketing.

The United States was the chosen country for two main reasons. First, the U.S. is a country that arouses conflicting feelings of love and hate, animosity and admiration, sometimes coexisting in the same person (Russell et al, 2011); and secondly, is the country of origin of the most valuable brands in the world (Interbrand, 2011), with high American origin recognition (Russell et al, 2011), involving symbolic values related to the identity of the United States in communicating with their target audiences (Martin, 2007), besides being highly consumed by young people, which is the segment of interest of this study. The US brands chosen for the research are very well known, to eliminate lack of familiarity with the brand and its country of origin, and are strongly associated with American culture: a) Apple, whose products releases are all great commercial success, and mobilize media, retail, and especially consumers (ILEX, 2011); b) McDonald's, which is one of the most attacked brands in anti-American and anti-globalization protests, along with Coca-Cola (Lindberg and Nossel, 2005). In the ranking of the most world valuable brands McDonald's is in the 6th position, and Apple takes the 8th place, with an impressive improve of 58% in brand value from 2010 to 2011 (Interbrand, 2011). Russell et al (2011) points out Apple as the brand with the ninth highest rate of "Americanism" among French consumers, in a ranking led by McDonald's, the most "American" brand to the French.

The product categories studied, in turn, fit into the group of the most frequent in research on country of origin (computers and consumer electronics - Apple), or, on the other hand, the least studied (services – McDonald's) (Usunier, 2006).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES**

Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) delimit the beginning of studies on national stereotypes and the perception of the nations in the 30s, but only Schooler' (1965) seminal article demonstrated empirically that consumers discriminate products that are identical in everything except in their country of origin, and this information influences their judgment about a product.

### Country image

Most recent studies have sought for antecedents on evaluations of country of origin (Klein et al, 1998; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Verlegh, 2001; Balabanis et al, 2001; among others). The recent review of the literature on country of origin is more focused on the discussion about the relevance of this research topic (Usunier, 2006), or moves toward new constructs, such as Country of Image (COI) (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009) or the discussion on the issue of country image.

Ayrosa (2002) developed a scale to measure the elements that contribute to building the image of the country, comprising mainly cognitive aspects, divided into five dimensions: a) attitudes toward products and services; b) attitudes toward the arts; c) affective response; d) marketing; e) importance in the global community.

Based on these studies, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- *H<sub>1</sub>= The country image has positive impact on the willingness to buy products and services from the country.*

### Country affinity

The mainstream research on COO effect considers the attitudes towards a country as a univalent construct, ranging from negative to positive. The literature notes that the positive/negative attitudes in relation to a country may lead consumers to make positive/negative inferences on country products' quality, and this inference is reflected in purchases of products (Russell et al, 2011).

Most studies on COO effect, however, focus primarily on negative feelings about one or several countries (Klein et al, 1998; Klein, 2002; Nijssen and Douglas, 2004; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007; Oberecker et al, 2008). At the other end of the attitudes concept, positive views of a country can also have an impact on consumer decisions. The construct of country affinity, that captures favorable specific feelings to certain foreign countries, has more power than the ethnocentric consumption, still widely used in research, to explain the willingness to buy, and would be more influential than cognitive evaluations on a country intentions for visiting and investing (Oberecker et al, 2008). The country affinity construct highlights the importance of positive affect in shaping consumer behavior, thus complementing previous studies that focus exclusively on the behavioral implications of negative affect (more notably the consumer animosity) (Oberecker and Diamantopoulos, 2011).

The country affinity construct was first formulated in the context of International Marketing by Oberecker et al (2008), and defined as:

A feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer's direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer's decision making associated with products and services originating from the affinity country (Oberecker et al, 2008).

The authors distinguish the country affinity concept from other uses of the term affinity in the literature. Unlike Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006), who opposed affinity to animosity, Oberecker et al (2008) followed the psychological literature that shows that

positive and negative affect dimensions are different and have different responses (Larsen et al, 2001), being treated independently, rather than as antagonistic feelings (Verlegh, 2001).

Although recent (2008), the concept of consumer affinity for a country and its influence on consumer decisions has been cited frequently in research on consumer behavior (Maher et al, 2010; Schweig and Silveira, 2010; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011; Bandyopadhyay et al, 2011; Hoffmann et al, 2011; Sankaran and Demangeot, 2011; Al Ganideh and Al Tae, 2012), while receiving criticism for a lack of empirical tests of the construct (Maher and Carter, 2011).

The influence of negative feelings about the country (animosity, ethnocentrism, patriotism/nationalism) has been studied in the literature for COO effect, unlike the positive feelings (affinity, internationalism, xenophilia), which would be highly neglected (Oberecker et al, 2008). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- •  $H_2$  = *The country affinity has a positive impact on the willingness to buy products from the country.*
- •  $H_3$  = *Country image and country affinity are strongly correlated.*

### Brand personality

While the emphasis of research on COO effect is on the purchase of products made in the domestic market or on the place where the products are made, the globalization of markets suggests that the research focus should be on international or global brands spread around different countries and cultures.

The operational decisions about where to produce are made more in terms of cost and logistics advantages, and should not characterize the country of origin. It is important to know whether the consumer believes the brand offers a unique message, or if just carries the COO effect on the brand name (Pecotich and Ward, 2007). The Apple brand, for example, conveys

a strong message of innovation to the consumer, is an American company, Californian, from Silicon Valley, recognized hub of innovation (Kapferer, 2008), even if their main products (iPad, iPod and iPhone) are manufactured in China.

The concept of brand identity in marketing is relatively new, having been disseminated only in the last fifteen years, but today it is "essential to define the brand and establish guidelines for its management and development" (Semprini, 2010). The brand identity refers to how the company sees its own brand, the "vision, the key beliefs and core values of the brand" (Kapferer, 2008). On the other hand, on the consumer side is applied the concept of brand image, which is "the way the groups [of consumers] decode the signs originated in product, services and communication covered by the brand" (Kapferer, 2008).

Among the categories of assets and liabilities that build the brand equity there are the associations made about the brand, beyond perceived quality. The associations made by consumers with a brand can be identified and measured in several ways. Aaker (1991) cites interpretation of figures, free association, indirect approaches, among others, besides the brand association with persons ("If this brand were a person"), in order to assign human personality traits to brands.

In 1997, Jennifer Aaker published a scale for measuring brand personality, based mainly, but not only, on the "Big Five" (set of human personality traits), opening a new field of research, and increasing the interest in the metaphor of brand as a person, especially at a time when marketing heavily emphasizes the importance of building relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). The widespread use of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale increased criticism regarding its validity (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003), non-generalizability (Austin et al, 2003), and the non-replicability of the five factors cross-culturally (Smit et al, 2002; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003).

In order to reply the criticisms on the brand personality scales, Geuens et al (2009) developed a new scale based only on items related to personality (New Brand Personality Measure), which was used in this study to test the following hypothesis:

- *H<sub>4</sub>= Brand personality has a positive impact on the willingness to buy products of the brand.*

#### Self-brand connection

A positive brand image is built by creating strong, favorable and unique brand associations in consumer memory (Keller, 1993) including user imagery and psychological benefits (Aaker, 1991). The question of psychological benefits refers to the research dealing with the meanings of consumer possession of products and brands, and with the concept of self.

Greenwald (1988) discussed four facets of self: the diffuse self, the public self, the private self and the collective self. Each of these reflects a different ego task and basis for self-evaluation with relevant audience of the self of others. The public and private facets of self are important in understanding the role of possessions in the definition and maintenance of the adult self. In Greenwald's (1988) social-cognitive approach, the public self is characteristic of other-directed individuals, its ego task is the social recognition and status, and self-esteem is the basis for the approval of others. The private self, in turn, seeks individual achievement based on some personal standard, plays to private, inner audiences in support of the self-worth, and is characteristic of self-directed individuals (Ball and Tasaki, 1992).

According to Fournier (1998), the relationship between a consumer and a brand can be based on meanings that are central to the self-concept of the individual. For the social identity theory (Huffman et al, 2000), the consumer behavior is based on two main concepts: a)



people act and consume products to enact identities consistent with their ideal self-image; b) people do not just enact one, but multiple identities, triggered by different social contexts within which people move (Kleine et al, 1993). Brands, then, have meaning and value not only for their ability to express themselves, but also for their role in helping consumers to create and build their self-identity, and in building connections with them (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). In this respect, Escalas and Bettman (2003) deal with brands the same way as the concept of possessions is treated in literature. Thus, the consumer builds its identity and presents it to others through their brand choices based on the congruence between brand image and self-image (to the extent that individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept), which leads to the following hypotheses:

- *H<sub>5</sub> = The connection between the consumer self and the brand (self-brand connection) has positive impact on willingness to buy;*
- *H<sub>6</sub> = Brand personality and connection between the consumer self and the brand (self-brand connection) are strongly correlated*

The model that represents the hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

**HERE: Figure1. Hypotheses.**

## METHODOLOGY

The research approach was quantitative and used a non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure, resulting in a sample of 401 college students, predominantly 17-25 years old, upper-middle- and high-income, from the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

The students chosen for this study can be considered as a sample of consumers, as part of the target audience of the studied brands, and not just a non-representable sample of college students, chosen only for researchers' convenience.

The questionnaire included age, gender and family income as control variables. The scales used in the study to measure the respective constructs are all validated and replicated in several researches, and were employed in full, without reductions. All of them have, in their original validation studies, at least satisfactory Cronbach's alpha indexes (0.60 to 0.94, see Figure 2).

### **HERE: Figure 2. Constructs Operationalization**

The authors translated the scales, and reverse translation procedures were applied by marketing experts who are fluent in English, which translated the scales back to the original version, except for Country image scale, which had already been translated into Portuguese in previous studies (Giraldi and Carvalho, 2009; Strehlau et al, 2010). The next step was the content validation, which is assessing the degree of correspondence between the selected items to compose a multi-scale and its conceptual definition (Hair et al, 2009). To this end, four experts were consulted in the areas of Marketing and Psychology, due to the particularities of self and personality scales. Minor adjustments were needed in the scales that use adjectives (country affinity and brand personality) to approximate the translated indicators to their original sense. Data were collected through an online survey.

Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Model (SEM). This technique is used for specification and analysis of interdependencies between variables observed and theoretical constructs, called latent variables, and became the most used in marketing research, mainly because of its analytical flexibility and generality (Hwang et al, 2010). The constructs were modeled with reflective indicators, which is the most common form of SEM, in which the direction of causality is from construct to the indicators, i.e., the latent variable influences the observed variables, accounting for dependency relationships (Jarvis et al,

2003). The data processing of SEM was performed using software AMOS 20, produced by IBM-SPSS. The path diagram representing the model of this study is in Figure 3.

**HERE: Figure 3. Path Diagram**

The estimation method used was Maximum Likelihood (ML), which is mostly used for SEM because it provides parameter estimates and standard errors that are consistent and efficient, showing that variables are normally distributed, the model is correctly specified and the sample size is large enough (Schermelleh-Engel et al, 2003).

The evaluation criteria of goodness of fit (GOF) for the SEM indicate the extent to which the specified model fits the empirical data (Schermelleh-Engel et al, 2003). The GOF depends on characteristics of the model, such as sample size and complexity, and its assessment must include multiple levels, and measures of various kinds (GFI, CFI, RMSEA, etc.) (Hair et al, 2009). To evaluate the GOF of the study model were used GFI, CFI, RMSEA and ratio chi-square/degrees of freedom.

## **RESULTS**

From the initial 401 questionnaires, those that not filled out completely were discarded (34), resulting in 367 valid questionnaires for analysis, which is a good sample size to run the SEM (Hair et al, 2009). The data were analyzed for missing data, outliers, normality and multicollinearity, and no problem was detected.

The final sample consisted of 367 college students from the city of São Paulo. All they knew Apple and McDonald's and were able to identify them as brands from the United States. These students do not work (82.3%), or do internship or part-time work (9.0%). The demographic profile of the sample features a predominance of women (54.0%), which is in

line with the profile of Brazilian university students, composed of 55.1% of women (INEP, 2009); very young, with 72.8% of components with up to 19 years; and high- or upper-middle-income. This profile configures a homogeneous group of young people dedicated to the study, with little connection to the professional life, which lives with their parents, and are capable of affording the brands used in the study.

In order to build the SEM more accurately, we developed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to check how well the measured variables performed according to theory. The EFA was conducted for each of the constructs related to country (country image, country affinity) and brand (self-brand connection, brand personality and willingness to buy). The method used was principal component, based on the correlation matrix with Varimax rotation and extraction of factors with eigenvalues greater than one, checking the percentage of explained variance and reliability (Cronbach's alpha). The factor loadings considered were all above 0.50, although loads above 0.30 could already be significant, given the sample of 367 components (Hair et al, 2009). The criterion for acceptance was Cronbach's alpha above 0.60 (Hair et al, 2009).

The EFA results for country image showed a perfect match of the search results to the dimensions identified in the development of the scale. All variables were grouped in five factors: product, marketing, arts, importance and affect. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 and the explained variance for the country image construct was 62.6%. The average for the 15 variables ranged from 3.30 to 4.66 (maximum = 5), which can be considered high - the respondents had a positive image of the United States.

Factor analysis for country affinity resulted in a one-dimensional construct, with 63.7% explained variance and Cronbach's alpha of 0.94. The average, after discarded the variable "passion", which was far below the others, ranged from 2.43 to 3.09, indicating an intermediary degree of affinity, just below the midpoint of the scale. The results of factor

analysis of constructs related to the country were in line with the theory on which they were based, indicating no need for adjustments for the next steps of the SEM.

The EFA for the brand personality scale (Geuens et al, 2009) resulted in an explained variance of 63.5%/70.6% and Cronbach's alpha of 0.61/0.75 (Apple/McDonald's). We obtained five factors, in line with the original scale: responsibility, activity, aggressiveness, simplicity, and emotionality.

The EFA for the self-brand connection scale (Escalas and Bettman, 2003) resulted one-dimensional, like the original scale. The variables of this construct were averaged between 2.67 and 3.83 for Apple and 1.86 and 2.81 for McDonald's (maximum = 5), showing a much greater identification of respondents with Apple than with McDonald's. The explained variance was 54.8%/58.0%, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.86/0.88 (Apple/McDonald's).

The EFA for the willingness to buy scale (Putrevu and Lord, 1994) resulted one-dimensional, as in the original scale. The averages ranged between 3.37 and 4.24 (Apple) and between 3.90 and 4.01 (McDonald's), on a scale of maximum = 5, showing a high intention of respondents to purchase products from both brands. The explained variance was 66.3%/71.7%, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.73/0.80 (Apple/McDonald's).

After estimating the SEM, the indicators I3 (products from USA are easily available), P3 (bold) e P4 (ordinary) resulted in regression weights not statistically significant (at the 0.05 level) and were excluded.

The results for GOF are shown in Table 1.

#### **HERE: Table 1: Goodness of Fit (GOF)**

The first GOF index considered is the  $\chi^2$  (chi-square). As  $\chi^2$  is affected by the sample size, it is recommended to analyze the relationship between the  $\chi^2$  and the degrees of freedom

( $\chi^2 / df$ ) that must be between 0 and 2 for the fit to be considered good (Schermelleh-Engel et al, 2003) as the result for the model (1.71 Apple / 1.82 McDonald's).

The goodness of fit index (GFI) is a measure of the relative amount of variance and covariance of the empiric matrix that is explained jointly by the matrix implicit in the model (Smith, 2006). The values obtained in the model (0.85 Apple / 0.83 McDonald's) are below the criterion of good fit (0.90) (Hair et al, 2009) suggesting that the sample is not fully explained by the model.

The comparative fit index (CFI) is an incremental corrected fit index, derived from the comparison between the hypothetical model and the independent model (Silva, 2006). A maximum value of 1.00 for CFI would indicate that the hypothetical model is the best possible improvement over the independent model (Schermelleh-Engel et al, 2003). The result (0.90 for both brands) is below the acceptance criterion (0.95), pointing to a weak improvement of the model in relation to the independent model. In the case of CFI, however, Hair et al (2009) states that values below 0.90 are not *usually* associated with a model that fits well – i.e., not necessarily values below 0.90 indicate poor fit.

The final GOF index considered is the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) one of the most informative criteria with respect to modeling covariance structures (Silva, 2006), and that best represents how well a model fits a population and not just a sample used for estimation (Hair et al, 2009). The result (0.044 Apple / 0.047 McDonald's) is within the criterion of good fit, suggesting that the model fits well with population, even if not fully explaining the sample, as indicated by GFI.

The GOF of the model was good only for the indexes RMSEA and  $\chi^2 / df$ , resulting in levels below the acceptable for all other indicators. However, the values can be considered close to the minimum criteria for acceptance. In addition, the sample size and complexity of the model had negative impacts on these indices (Hair et al, 2009). Therefore, overall, the

measurement model has a reasonable (though not high) degree of compatibility with the empirical data.

The result of SEM (Figure 4) shows that the major force to boost the intention to buy is the self-brand connection ( $WILL \leftarrow CONN = 0.65$  Apple /  $0.58$  McDonald's), statistically significant, with a value of  $p < 0.001$  (Table 2). Also with regard to the brand, brand personality has a positive impact for both brands ( $WILL \leftarrow PERS = 0.14$  Apple /  $0.12$  McDonald's), but the results were not statistically significant for Apple ( $p = 0.15$ ), and close to be significant for McDonald's ( $p = 0.07$ ).

Regarding the country's influence in willingness to buy, the results differ depending on the brand. For Apple, the country affinity had a positive result ( $WILL \leftarrow AFFI = 0.23$ ), and close to being statistically significant ( $p = 0.06$ ). The country image had a negative result ( $WILL \leftarrow IMAG = -0.10$ ), but not statistically significant ( $p = 0.41$ ). As for McDonald's, the situation is reversed: country affinity had a positive impact ( $WILL \leftarrow AFFI = 0.14$ ) and country image had a negative impact ( $WILL \leftarrow IMAG = -0.05$ ), but both results were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.25$  and  $0.69$ , respectively).

## **HERE: Table 2: Hypotheses Testing**

Our results did not provide complete empirical support for hypotheses 1 ( $WILL \leftarrow IMAG$ ) and 2 ( $WILL \leftarrow AFFI$ ), contrary to what is pointed in the literature about COO - it seems that the importance of the COO depends on the brand analyzed (Table 2). The third hypothesis ( $IMAG \leftrightarrow AFFI$ ), in turn, was strongly supported, with a correlation of  $0.86$  and  $p < 0.001$ , showing that both constructs related to the country are very close to each other. The fourth hypothesis ( $WILL \leftarrow PERS$ ) was not supported (Apple  $0.14$  / McDonald's  $0.12$ ), but in a borderline situation ( $p = 0.15$  Apple /  $0.07$  McDonald's), close to be statistically significant.

The fifth hypothesis (WILL  $\leftarrow$  CONN) was not only strongly supported, as highly statistically significant (Apple: 0.65,  $p < 0.001$  / McDonald's: 0.58,  $p < 0.001$ ). It is certainly the most important finding of the study. The sixth hypothesis (PERS  $\leftrightarrow$  CONN) was supported (Apple 0.43 / 0.40 McDonald's) and statistically significant ( $p = 0.03$  Apple /  $p < 0.001$  McDonald's).

The confirmation of the hypotheses 3 and 6 characterizes the proposed model with two sides - the country side and the brand side, the latter being the one with stronger results in terms of influence in willingness to buy.

**HERE: Figure 4. Results (Standardized Regression Weights – Apple/McDonald's)**

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results showed significant differences between country and brand in the willingness to buy brands from the USA.

The impact of the brand side of the model on the willingness to buy (personality and mainly self-brand connection) was not only positive and statistically significant (or close to it), but much stronger than that related to the country. Consistent with these results, most surveys have found that consumers tend to separate political opinions from purchasing habits: protesters against globalization and capitalism wear Levi's jeans (Lindberg, Nossel, 2005).

On the other hand, the results did not show any relevant impact of the country side of the model (affinity and image) on the willingness to buy. Instead, the effect of the country image and affinity seems to be mediated by the brand image, at least in the case of brands with high equity, such as those studied here.

The consumers' self-brand connection is important to build their purchase intention. Indeed, this is the most important element identified by the model, more than any other is.



The brand expresses what the individual is, both to himself and to the others, and this identification is directly related to the high purchase intention. The Apple brand, for example, has an important component of visibility; it is widely used in public, which directly influences the other-oriented individuals (other-directed). McDonald's also has this character of visibility, not only because its consumption is observable, as can be carried out in groups. According to Greenwald (1988), the main task of the public-self ego is the recognition and status, and the basis for self-esteem is given by the approval of others. The use of the brands studied here contributes to this task.

Moreover, unlike the tradition of studies on COO effect, even a negative image of the country could not prevent the consumer to have the intention of buying branded products from that country, since the relationship between the two constructs can be negative, even though not statistically significant (Apple) - anyway, country and brand would be dissociated. In addition, one would expect that lack of affinity for a country would decrease the likelihood of buying goods from that nation, but the results tend not to support this conclusion (McDonald's).

The COO effect, then, would be less powerful than the brands, at least when it comes to brands with high brand-equity, such as those studied here. Thus, the country image construct, so studied in the literature of international marketing, can be fragile in face of strong and well-built brands. Besides that, one could not consider only aspects of the country to assess the COO effect regardless of brands in the mediation process to influence consumer decisions, what is in line with recent literature on the COO effect (Usunier, 2006, 2011; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2008, 2011; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009, 2010; Samiee, 2010, 2011; Diamantopoulos et al, 2011).

Thus, we conclude that it seems no longer an appropriate research design to carry out studies that aim to measure the COO effect on purchase intentions or product image building

without the mediation of the brand in the research model. In this respect, Diamantopoulos et al (2011) show that the research of COO effect has been predominantly product-centric, matching certain countries with particular product categories, but the brand image also needs to be taken into account explicitly in this type of research.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

From the theoretical and empirical standpoint, this study is in line with the recent research on the COO effect, which indicates that the country of origin of the brand could be more important to consumers than the country of manufacturing (Usunier, 2006). Apple is an American brand, even if the iPod is manufactured in China; McDonald's is American too, even if all the ingredients, packaging and processes originate in the country where the meals are consumed. Another contribution is the use of the country affinity scale, recently validated (Oberecker et al, 2011), which introduces the affective aspects in the research on COO effect, dominated by cognitive aspects (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Finally, we studied a case from the service sector, which is not very common in research on COO (Usunier, 2006).

The main managerial contribution of the study is the importance that emerged from the data and the model of the self-brand connection, which can guide strategic decisions of communication, mainly to build strong relationships of the brands with consumers in experiential marketing activities and social networks. This finding answers to questions raised by Usunier (2006), that asks whether the research on COO effect still make sense for the business life; if consumers still give importance to the country where the product is manufactured; and if this field of research would provide the managers with analysis and recommendations that are relevant to marketing decisions. The brand and the individual's connection with it would be the key influencers of purchase intention, rather than country, at least for high brand equity brands.

The study has some limitations. The first one is the lack of sample representativeness that prevents the findings to be generalized to a population. Second, the model built for analysis did not reach a GOF that can be classified as good, but was close to an acceptable level when compared to the null model and the independent model, and, especially, the model represents well not only the sample as well as the population. Finally, the brands studied were all of high brand equity, which may restrict the scope of the conclusions.

On that point, the first recommendation for future studies emerges, that would be to investigate low brand equity brands. Second, brands that are not emblematic of a country could also be studied. Finally, the model could be applied to other countries, product categories and brands.

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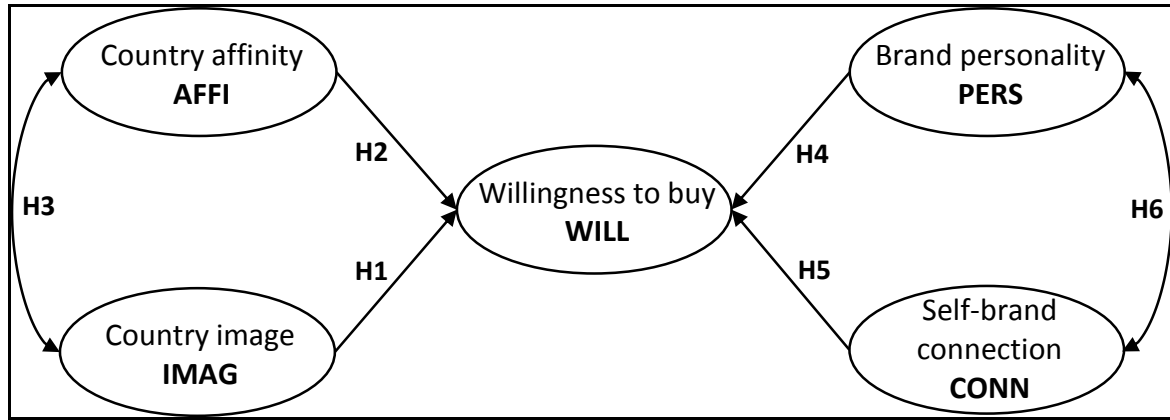
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## FIGURES AND TABLES



**Figure 1. Hypotheses**

Construct		Source	Indicators	Dimensions	Scale
IMAG	Contry Image	Ayrosa, 2002	15	5	5-point Likert
AFFI	Contry Affinity	Oberecker, Diamantopoulos, 2011	10	1	6-point intensity
CONN	Self-Brand Connection	Escalas, Bettman, 2003	7	1	5-point Likert
PERS	Brand Personality	Geuens, Weijters, De Wulf, 2009	12	4	7-point intensity
WILL	Willingness to Buy	Putrevu, Lord, 1994	3	1	5-point Likert

**Figure 2. Constructs Operationalization**

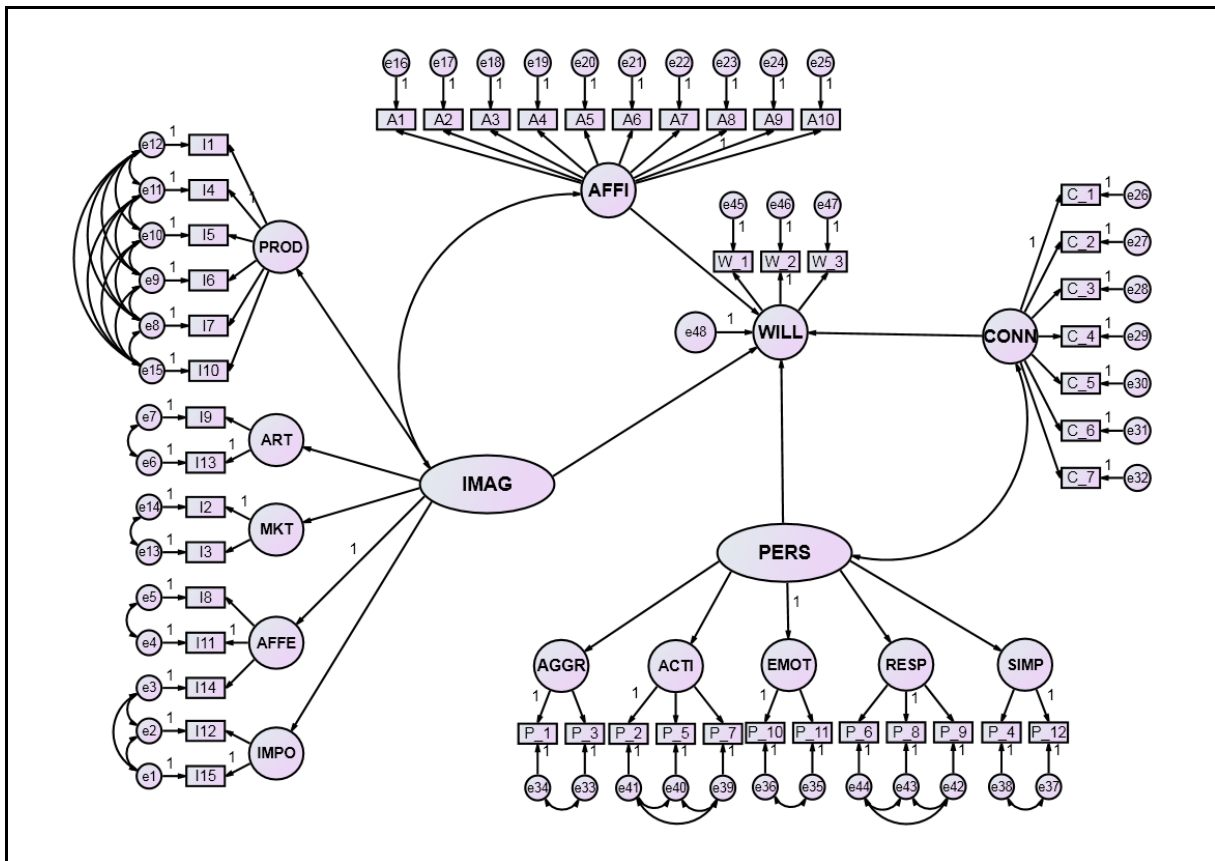


Figure 3. Path Diagram

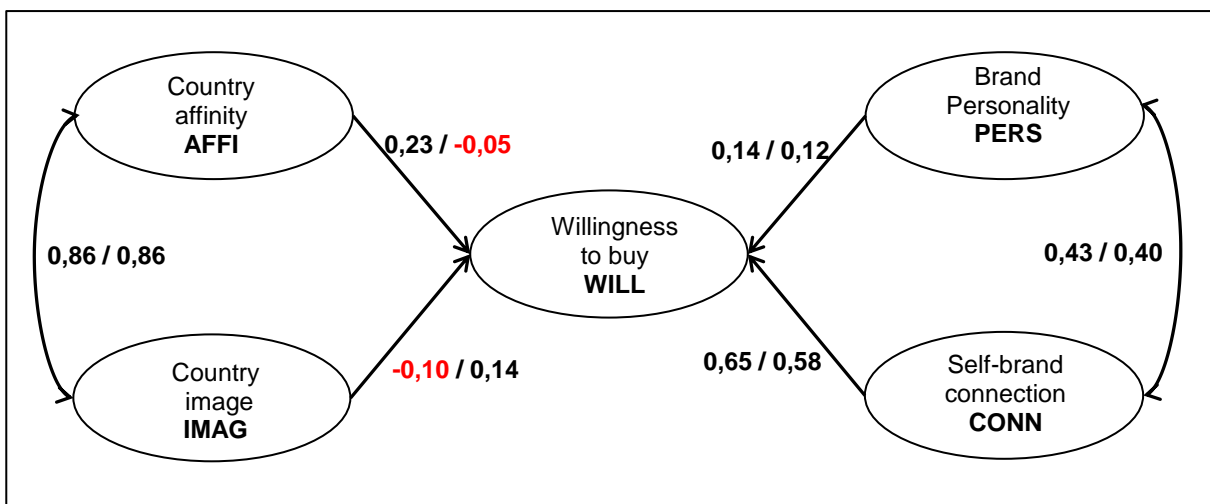


Figure 4. Results (Standardized Regression Weights – Apple / McDonald's)



**Table 1: Goodness of Fit (GOF)**

<b>Index</b>	<b>Recomended</b>	<b>Apple</b>	<b>McDonald's</b>
CMIN/DF	$\leq 3,0$	1,71	1,82
GFI	$\geq 0,90$	0,85	0,83
CFI	$\geq 0,95$	0,90	0,90
RMSEA	$\leq 0,05$	0,044	0,047

**Table 2: Hypotheses Testing**

	<b>Hypotheses</b>				<b>Brand</b>	<b>C.R.</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Standardized</b>	<b>Result</b>
H1	WILL	<---	IMAG	positive	Apple	-0.83	0.41*	-0.10	Not supported
					McDonald's	1.15	0.25*	0.14	Not supported
H2	WILL	<---	AFFI	positive	Apple	1.92	0.06*	0.23	Not supported
					McDonald's	-0.41	0.69*	-0.05	Not supported
H3	IMAG	<-->	AFFI	strong	Apple	10.72	<0.001	0.86	Supported
					McDonald's	10.73	<0.001	0.86	Supported
H4	WILL	<---	PERS	positive	Apple	1.46	0.15*	0.14	Not supported
					McDonald's	1.84	0.07*	0.12	Not supported
H5	WILL	<---	CONN	positive	Apple	8.09	<0.001	0.65	Supported
					McDonald's	8.05	<0.001	0.58	Supported
H6	PERS	<-->	CONN	strong	Apple	2.14	0.03	0.43	Supported
					McDonald's	4.45	<0.001	0.40	Supported

\* not statistically significant