Runway logic: "Y" Generation Y prefer fashion brand over country-of-origin

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Abstract

With approximately 1.38 billion, Generation Y are currently in the job market or about to enter the job market, they are increasingly taking over the spending power of the previous generation, the Baby Boomers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact country-of-origin information on the perception of Generation Y towards international fashion brands. This study was conducted in the context of fashion products, one of the key interests of the Generation Y, and covered a sample population of twenty one countries. As Generation Y are internet savvy, this study was conducted by using semi-structured interviews in an online chat room and structured email interviews. 53 interviews were conducted with the participants from Generation Y cohort. This study highlighted that most Generation Y ignored country-of-origin information. This study explored the reasons why Generation Y ignored or paid attention to the country-of-origin information. It brings valuable insight to international fashion marketers about how country-of-origin information influences the Generation Y's perception towards international fashion brands. Qualitative studies which investigate the perception of Generation Y towards country-of-origin of international fashion brands are scarce. Thus, this study can contribute to the development of research into country-of-origin and Generation Y.

Keywords: Generation Y, country-of-origin, brand, fashion, consumer behaviour.

Introduction

This study was aimed at exploring the impact of Country-Of-Origin (COO) information on Generation Y's perception of international fashion brands.

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Generation Y are individuals born during the period 1977-1994 (Nayyar, 2001; Paul, 2001) and in 2013 are aged 19-36. There are approximately 1.38 billion Generation Y in the world (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Country-of-origin information can be used by customers to predict the quality and performance of products (Cai, Cude, & Sadler, 2004; Muchbalcher, Leihs, & Dahringer, 1999; Olins, 2003; Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012). Even though fashion is mentioned as one of the key interests of Generation Y (Williams & Page, 2011; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011; Gronbach, 2008), studies that investigate the influence of country-of-origin information on Generation Y's perception of international fashion brands are scarce. Recently, more international fashion retailers are increasingly manufacturing their products in countries that offer cheaper production costs (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003; Khan, 2003). This trend often results in the inconsistency between brand and product country-of-origin (Prendergast, Tsang, & Chan 2010). Therefore, international fashion brands are deemed to be an appropriate context in evaluating how country-of-origin influences Generation Y's perception towards brands.

Differences between the markets of different countries exist because of factors such as culture, history and geography (Lim & O'Cass, 2001). Furthermore, in many regions in the world, differences also exist in terms of the way consumers perceive products and brands (Lim & O'Cass, 2001). Thus, many country-of-origin studies often were conducted in the context of specific countries (Bannister & Saunders, 1978; Cai, Cude, & Sadler, 2004; Chao, 1998; Hahn, Eckhardt, & Choi, 2006; Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, & Hyder, 2000; Knight, 1999; Lawrence, Marr, & Prendergast, 1992; Lim & O'Cass, 2001; Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Beracs, 1989). However, there has been a growing awareness that considerable similarities exist in the needs of consumers around the world. Factors such as cross-border population mobility (Quelch, 1999) and electronic mobility facilitated by telecommunication technology (Quelch, 1999) such as film, television and internet influence this convergence of consumer needs. This is especially relevant for the Generation Y, who were born into a technological, electronic and wireless society with global boundaries becoming more transparent (Daniels, 2007). Recognising this convergence of similarities, instead of looking at the perception towards country-of-origin from one specific country basis, this study addresses the knowledge gap by looking at the issue from the basis of Generation Y from 21 countries.

Most country-of-origin studies employ quantitative research method because the purpose of these studies is to measure the effect of country-of-origin on customers' perceptions and behaviour. Nevertheless, because of its focus in measuring causal relationships, quantitative studies usually are limited in their ability to capture the reasons for customers' perception and behaviour towards country-of-origin. Therefore, this paper provides an alternative approach to country-of-origin studies by employing qualitative research. A qualitative approach enables investigation of whether country-or-origin infor-

26

mation influences Generation Y's perception towards fashion brands as well as explanation of why it influences or does not influence their perception. This paper is structured as follows: a literature review, research methods, research results, and discussion with reference to relevant literature. The paper concludes by summarising the findings, highlighting research limitations and suggesting the managerial implications.

The definition of country-of-origin

A product's country-of-origin usually is communicated by 'Made in' or 'Manufactured in' labels (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). It can be understood as the image of a country in a consumer's mind, which influences their evaluation of the products or brands that are produced by that country (Chapa, Minor, & Maldonado 2006; Morello, 1993; Samiee, 1994; Lampert & Jaffee, 1996). Based on this definition, country-of-origin information is used to reflect the origin of a brand, as well the origin of a product. However, nowadays most products are manufactured in countries other than where the corporate headquarters of the company or brand are located. Thus, defining country-of-origin is complicated (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998; Prendergast, Tsang, & Chan, 2010). The growth of multinational companies and the evaluation of hybrid products which consists of components from different countries can blur the accuracy and the validity of the "Made in" label (Baughn & Yaprak, 1993; Chao, 1993). This definition complexity phenomenon takes place within the global fashion industry.

27

The Revised Kyoto Convention (international convention on the simplification and harmonization of international customs procedures), which aimed to standardise the labelling system for product country-of-origin information, stipulates that if a product has been produced or modified in two or more countries, the country-of-origin of the product portrayed in the "Made in" label will be the last country in which the product was substantially processed (United Nations Statistic Division, 2007). This rule has been adopted by countries that enforce country-of-origin regulations such as the USA, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, European Union, and South Africa. In these countries, it is a requirement that country-of-origin information on clothing products must be displayed in a position that can be seen clearly by consumers when examining the item. It is suggested that without disclosing country-of-origin information, customers may be deceived regarding the true origin of the products and therefore may not be able to make an informed buying decision (European Parliament, 2011). Hence, as long as these regulations are enforced, country-of-origin still becomes an important field to research because it may influence the customers' perception towards products or brands.

The relationship between country-of-origin and brand

Studies indicate brands are used by customers as a cue to determine the quality of a product (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004a, 2004b). Customers tend to believe that the more global the brand, the better the quality that is offered (Holt et al., 2004b). The reasoning is that customers believe global brands continually upgrade their standards and create innovative products. However, this does not necessarily mean that global brands are better than the other non-global brands. It is simply that people tend to make judgements based on the promise, acceptance, trust and hope offered by leading brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Customers are eager to pay higher prices if they have positive attitudes and feelings towards brands (Kapferer, 2004). Hence, in the customers' minds, brands help to differentiate one product from another and global brands gain more benefits and favour than non-global brands.

Aaker (1991) emphasises that consumers' feelings and attitudes towards brands are not factual; they are more likely shaped by their own and public opinions (i.e. by brand associations) (Aaker, 1991). Brand association is the informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory that contains the meaning of the brand for consumers, which includes the perception of brand quality and attitudes towards the brand (Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008). These associations usually are formed by media, word of mouth and experience using the products (Swystun, 2007). Country-of-origin is one of nine elements of brand associations (Aaker, 1991) and indeed country-of-origin has an impact on brand perception (Aaker, 1991; Koubaa, 2008). Country-of-origin can express both positive and negative messages about the product to the consumers (Kim & Chung, 1997; Omar, Williams Jr, & Lingelbach, 2009). According to Aaker (1991), country-of-origin can shape consumers' perception towards the brand.

Inconsistency between product and brand origin

Studies show that both a products' country-of-origin and a product's brand origin influence consumers' product evaluation across various product categories (Hui & Zhou, 2003; Thakor & Kohli, 1996; Han & Terpstra, 1988; Knight, 1999). Whilst country-of-origin means the location where the products were substantially manufactured or were last modified before being sold to consumers, brand origin refers to where the brand originates. When brand origin information is attached to a product, it is usually communicated to consumers as country-of-design (Hamzaoui & Merunka, 2006). This is because most products are often designed in the country where the brand's headquarters are located.

Inconsistency between country-of-origin and brand origin may produce contradictory effects on consumers' product evaluation (Tse & Gorn, 1993; Lee & Ganesh, 1999). Inaccurate brand-country-of-origin (brand origin) and

country-of-origin knowledge can lead to a confusing and somewhat negative image about country-of-origin (Paswan & Sharma, 2004). Information about where the products were made influences consumers' perception towards the brand, and positive preconceptions about country-of-origin will increase the brand's value (Lindstorm, 2005). However, consumers' opinions about countries may be unrelated to the product features and have roots in macro factors such as history, culture, and politics (Maheswaran, Chen, & He, 2013). For instance, issues such as human rights violence, child labour and low manufacturing costs, can blur the perception towards the features of the product (Muchbalcher et al., 1999; Paswan and Sharma, 2004). In contrast, when product country-of-origin is less favourable than brand origin, it is more likely consumers will create a negative evaluation towards the products (Hui & Zhou, 2003; Lee, Phau, & Roy, 2013).

Studies highlight bi-national products' country-of-origin is more important than brand (Han & Terpstra, 1988; Knight, 1999). Tse and Gorn's (1993) research finds it is almost impossible for famous brands to reduce the impact of country-of-origin. Drozdenko and Jensen's study (2009) indicates customers are more willing to pay a premium price for product categories made in advanced markets (USA and Germany), rather than products made in emerging markets (India and China). However, the findings of Leonidou, Palihawadana, and Talias (2007) indicate otherwise. Their research on the effect of country-of-origin for general products targeted to British and Chinese consumers concludes that brand plays a primary role in country-of-origin evaluation, when consumers are given specific brand names. This is because consumers can estimate the quality and benefits offered by the brands. Similarly, other studies also indicate that in terms of quality judgement, brand is more important than country-of-origin (Hui & Zhou, 2003; Hamin & Elliot, 2006). However, the opposite effect may occur for weak brands (Ahmed & d'Astous, 1993; Kim & Chung, 1997). This is because consumer evaluations will be influenced by factors such as brand awareness, brand knowledge or brand loyalty (Ettenson & Gaeth, 1991). As summarised by Leonidou, Palihawadana, and Talias (2007), a brand "has a serious moderating role to play, either positive or negative, on country-of-origin evaluations" because "every known brand has certain equity determined by its popularity, reputation and associated beliefs in the consumers mind" (p.811).

Country-of-origin of fashion products

There are number of reasons why this study is conducted within the context of international fashion brands. Firstly, the majority of international fashion brands have been outsourcing their production to emerging markets (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003; Khan, 2003). Secondly the fashion industry is a multi-million pound industry, and many consumers, including the Generation Y, use fashion brands as a way of creating identity (Jugessur & Cohen, 2009).

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International fashion retailers typically position themselves in different markets by virtue of their marketing effort and product offering, which contributes to their overall brand appeal (Moore, 1996). The impact of this strategy is that many of the fashion brands are transformed into international, universal or worldwide brands which are not only known by both those who use the products, but also by those who will never use the product. In the fashion industry the design and trademarks of fashion products represent intangible assets which become an invaluable competitive advantage (Završnik & Mumel, 2007). It is recognised that customers have a better perception of clothes which have a strong brand name, as well as clothes that are made with better materials (Davis, 1985). However, the current fast fashion trend may change consumers' concentration on high quality and long lasting fashion products to a focus on the newest model at an affordable price, allowing them to be able to always be seen to follow the fashion trend (Hines & Bruce, 2007; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). In this industry consumers' demands are unpredictable, and the fast fashion trend requires quick responses to changes in the market place (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Thus, it is very appropriate for international fashion retailers to manufacture their products in countries that offer low manufacturing costs so that they can maximise the production capability and minimise costs.

Considering all of these factors, a question exists as to whether country-of-origin information, used to predict product quality and performance and contributing to rational purchasing behaviour (Cai, Cude, & Sadler, 2004), can influence Generation Y's perception towards international fashion brands.

Generation Y's perception towards fashion brand and country-of-origin

A generation is a product of the current time and is uniquely shaped by technologies, media, social marker and events (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011). Because each cohort travels through life together and experiences similar events at a similar age, they can share a common social, political, historical and economic environment. Thus, each generation has unique expectations, experiences, generational history, lifestyles, values and demographics that influence their buying behaviour (Williams & Page, 2011).

Generation Y grew up in a time of enormous and fast paced changes including virtually full employment opportunities for women, dual-income households as standard, a wide array of family types seen as normal, significant respect for ethnic and cultural diversity, a heightened social awareness, and widespread use of computers at home and in schools (Williams & Page, 2011). Generation Y has a tendency to believe that they can make the future better (Williams & Page, 2011). They want products and services that serve their functional needs as well as those that have a purpose and meaning. Therefore, they support brands they perceive to be good to their employees, good for the environment, and which are doing something positive for the

future (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). Ethical issues, such as labour mistreatment and animal abuse, influence this generation's perception towards country-of-origin (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011).

Many consumers, including the Generation Y, use fashion brands as a way of creating identity (Jugessur & Cohen, 2009). Generation Y's individuality and image centricity make brands' and products' customisation very important (Daniels, 2007) and fashion is one of the mediums which reflects their individuality. Generation Y does not pay attention to quality, and requires competitive pricing; they may want to negotiate based on the competitors' advertised prices or internet search results (Himmel, 2008). Generation Y demands the latest trends in record time and gets bored easily (Yarrow & O'Donnell, 2009). Because of these characteristics, affordable fast fashion retailers are popular among Generation Y.

It is suggested that Generation Y associates the image of the country with the quality of the product categories (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011). However, the number of studies which investigate how country-of-origin information impacts on Generation Y's brand evaluation are limited. One study that touches upon this issue indicates that Generation Y's awareness of country-of-origin is higher than the awareness of brand-origin because country-of-origin information is usually attached to the products (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011). Another study conducted with undergraduate students in the US indicates that country-of-origin significantly influences Generation Y's product judgment. Their judgement is influenced by the quality of information about the product and their involvement with the product (Zdravkovic, 2013). Nevertheless, it has been suggested that country-of-origin appears to play a more important role in Generation Y's perception of quality in certain industries such as food, health and beauty, technology (durables), cars and clothing (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011). As most of the marketing studies related to Generation Y were conducted in the Western World, such as USA and Europe, our study is an opportunity to explore how country-of-origin information may impact on the perception of Generation Y in both advanced and emerging economies towards international fashion brands.

Research methods

Because the nature of this study is exploratory, a qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate to be adopted (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The strength of qualitative research is that the researchers can provide explanation for participants' behaviours and responses. By adopting a qualitative methodology, researchers can gather in-depth information from the participants and highlight the reasons for their actions or perspectives that cannot be achieved by a quantitative research method (Burns, 2000).

The primary research of this study employed MSN Messenger (chat room) and email interviews. There are two main reasons why chat rooms and email were considered as the most appropriate mediums to be employed in this study. Firstly, the participants live in different countries. Secondly, the participants are Generation Y who is familiar with the use of technology and chat rooms (Tapscott, 2009). Computer-mediated communication, such as chat rooms and emails allowed the researcher to collect rich data from isolated, geographically dispersed, and/or stigmatized groups who are often overlooked or ignored (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Furthermore, processing and analysing online interview data is generally quicker than offline interviews because online interviews can automatically generate transcripts (Gruber, Szmigin, Reppel, & Voss, 2008).

Email interviews are seen to be more complete as they tend to include more self-reflection by participants and are likely to be more candid (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). This was also reflected in the current research. However, this method might lead to the researcher failing to pick up cues about sensitive issues (Gillham, 2005). The pilot interviews undertaken in the research partially resolved these problems as the feedback from the pilot studies was used to improve the questions. Two pilot interview sessions were conducted for the purpose of this research.

The first pilot session was conducted semi-structurally and synchronously by using a chat room. During the semi-structured pilot interviews, similar core questions were given to the participants and different additional questions were given based on the participants' answers (Gillham, 2005). The aim of the semi-structured pilot interviews was to explore the participants' opinions, develop the questions based on the participants' answers for use in the actual interviews and explore other possible theories that were missed in the literature review. These one-to-one interview sessions involved six participants.

The feedback during the semi-structured pilot interviews were used to develop structured pilot interviews. In structured interviews "the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees were asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format" (Patton, 2002, p. 349). The structured pilot interviews was aimed at estimating the time needed to answer the questions, to check spelling, grammar and wording mistakes, and to consider possible questions to be added or removed for the actual interview sections. The pilot email interviews were sent to six participants.

In order to create and test new interpretations that require rich information, qualitative research usually uses small samples but purposefully selected (Kuzel, 1999). Therefore, this study employed non-probability self-selection sampling. The participants in this research were generated from the author's social circle all of whom were (to varying degrees) personally known by the author before the interview and registered in the author's email address

book. The main criteria used in generating the sample were the participants' year of birth and that they had been educated at the university level. By choosing the participants who were known to the author, the author could draw upon the advantages of interpersonal relationships, such as participants' trust, honesty and openness when answering questions (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011), enhancing the quality of the interviews. Using this sampling method, the participants were invited or asked personally to participate in the research.

In order to identify a pattern and to create classifications for the answers, this research was aimed at a minimum of 30 participants. To determine a sample size in a qualitative research study a theoretical saturation strategy is usually adopted. Theoretical saturation occurs when "no new or relevant data seems to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 212). Therefore, in qualitative research the researcher would continue expanding the sample size until the data collection supplies no new information or pattern (Thomson, 2011). By employing this approach in this research, the process of undertaking interviews was stopped after patterns in the answers were identified.

In total there were 70 email interviews sent out which led to 53 interview responses that were valid including the pilot interviews. Asynchronous approach was adopted in the email interviews, in which the participants were given a list of questions by email which could be answered at their own convenience. By adopting this approach, the participants were given an opportunity to reflect and edit their answers (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Thus, the participants' answers could fit more closely with their own constructions of reality (James & Busher, 2006). After the completed email interviews were received by the researcher, a follow up procedure was conducted. This was undertaken by asking the participants about their opinion of the interview questions, their difficulties when answering them, the length of time they took in completing the full interview and to find out if there were any other questions that they would have been liked to ask about. Therefore, it is concluded even though the participants were generated from the author's social circle, the heterogeneity of the participants' occupation and nationality and the relatively large sample size adopted in this study ensured the reliability of the data.

33
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Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study specifically employed theoretical thematic analysis where the themes were developed from the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area (Braun & Clark, 2006). The thematic analysis involved the process of creating and applying codes to the data. When a new theme was found in the data but was not mentioned in the literature review, the new themes were used to feedback or develop the literature review. This

iterative and reflexive process meant the analysis was not only theoretically sound but also reflected the researched phenomenon.

Results and analysis

The study participants were heterogeneous by nationality (table 1), with 21 nationalities represented. Out of a total of 53 respondents, the breakdown by gender was 29 female and 24 male involved in the research.

Table 1 – Respondents country location (53)

Belgium (1)	Czech Rep. (1)	Malaysia (3)	Netherlands (2)	Thailand (2)
Brazil (2)	Finland (2)	Indonesia (8)	Spain (2)	Turkey (3)
Canada (1)	France (3)	Italy (2)	Sweden (1)	United Kingdom (8)
China (5)	Germany (2)	Japan (1)	Tanzania (2)	United States (1)
				Vietnam (1)
		Female: 29	Male: 24	

The participants were born between 1977 and 1994, were employed full time or part time, and university educated. The occupations of the participants and their level of knowledge about the country-of-origin subject varied. The participants' knowledge of country-of-origin information could be derived from whether the participants were working or studying within the business or marketing field. In comparison to the number of participants who worked in the business or marketing field (22), the number of participants who worked or studied in the non-business or marketing field were higher (31). During the interview the subject of country-of-origin was represented by the "Made in" label, a concept familiar to all participants. Therefore, their level of knowledge about the subject did not present an obstacle when answering the interview questions.

Studies indicate that country-of-origin (COO) affects consumers' product evaluation (e.g. Chao, 1998; Hahn, Eckhardt, & Choi, 2006). It is used to predict quality and performance of products (e.g. Cai, Cude, & Sadler, 2004; Hamin & Elliot, 2006) and to understand the rationality of their purchasing decision (e.g. Khachatuarian & Morganosky, 1990). However, this current research conducted in the context of Generation Y indicated different findings. It was identified that the majority if the participants ignored country-of-origin information. Table 2 (below) summarises the reasons for participants of ignoring, or paying attention to, country-of-origin information.

Table 2: Reasons for ignoring, or paying attention to, country-of-origin information

Reasons for ignoring COO information n=37		Reasons for paying attention to COO information n=16	
Brands ensure product quality	18	Quality perception	7
Design and price were more im-	12	Price qualifier	6

portant			
Credibility of emerging markets	7	Ethical trading	3

a. Reasons for ignoring country-of-origin information of fashion products

More than half of the participants (37) indicated that when evaluating a product from an international fashion brand, they did not pay attention to country-of-origin because of the following reasons:

Brands ensure product quality

Eighteen participants believed that even though the majority of the international fashion brands manufactured their products in countries other than their brand origin, the quality of their products would be the same:

> *"Because it is the brand which promises the level of quality, not the country where it is produced. If anything goes wrong, you blame the company, not the country. In other words, even though Nike is produced in Taiwan, it is a global brand. So, you don`t blame Taiwan if any product of Nike does not satisfy your expectations" (Ahmed – Turkish).*

These findings were similar to Holt et al.'s (2004b) findings that a brand was used to evaluate the product quality. Some of the participants commented that their favourite brands would offer designs that normally suit their styles and preference. Thus, brands were used by these participants to narrow their product choices:

35

> *"Brand gives me an opinion for the quality of the clothes. I always have some brands in my mind when I go to shopping" (Buket – Turkish).*

Design and price are more important than COO

Twelve participants mentioned that the country-of-origin did not influence their purchasing decision because design and price were the main elements that they evaluated when buying an international fashion brand: *"If it doesn't cost an arm and a leg, and looks good, that's all I need" (Peter – German).* The preference of the Generation Y in this study for design and affordable price can be linked to the fast fashion trend. Fast fashion trends might change these consumers' preferences from high quality and durable products to the newest model and affordable prices (Hines & Bruce 2007; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

The credibility of emerging markets as manufacturing locations

Seven participants mentioned that because the majority of the international fashion brands have manufactured their products in emerging countries that

offer cheaper material and labour costs, they did not think that country-of-origin had significant importance in evaluating international fashion brands anymore:

> *"To be honest, personally I feel country of design and manufacture is becoming less important, or certainly not so significant in today's world. I mean, the majority of clothes manufactured today are likely to be in countries where materials and labour are cheaper, this is the case with most brands today. Is a jumper made in UK better quality than Peru? Probably not"* (Dave - British).

These findings confirmed past authors' suggestions that globalisation and global outsourcing make country-of-origin information less important (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998; Chao, 1998; Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003; Hines & Bruce, 2007).

b. Reasons for paying attention to country-of-origin information of fashion products

Although the majority of the Generation Y in this study believed that country-of-origin was not important in evaluating international fashion brands, it was necessary to understand the reasons why the rest of the participants still believed that country-of-origin was important in evaluating the brands.

Quality perception

Seven participants indicated that the main reason why they paid attention to country-of-origin information was to judge the quality of the fashion products. They believed that different countries provide different levels of product quality. Some also believed that cheap labour and materials could reduce the quality of products:

> *"Country of origin highly influences my perception about product quality, especially if the country is infamous for acceptable or even poor quality of products. For example in the last couple of years China has been well-known for producing poor quality of products. Thus, if I want to buy Nike shoes I will check and look for the one made in US or Europe though I know that originally Nike shoes are made in Bandung (Indonesia) or Vietnam"* (Anthony – Indonesian).

However, as has been discussed in the earlier section, the majority of the Generation Y in this study emphasised that it was brand, not country-of-origin information that should be used to judge the quality of international fashion products. Thus, it can be seen that country-of-origin has little influence on Generation Y's evaluation of the quality of international branded fashion products. The current findings contradict what has been suggested by previous study that country-of-origin has a significant influence on Generation Y's product judgement (Zdravkovic, 2013). In addition, the findings are inconsistent with Van den Bergh and Behrer 's (2011) findings, that Genera-

tion Y considered country-of-origin plays a more important role in certain industries such as the clothing industry. The current study identifies that instead of country-of-origin, brand was used by the majority of the Generation Ys to establish the quality of the fashion products.

Price qualifier

Six participants would use country-of-origin to predict the quality of products only if the brand was not well-known or if the fashion brand is categorised as luxurious or the price is expensive:

> *"…when something has no brand but is made in China, then I probably think twice. But if it's famous brand but made in China... for some reason it will be different. Because, I think with a famous brand it is more checked, that everything is OK" (Kim – Belgian).*

The evidence above confirms the suggestions that country-of-origin information has a weaker impact on a strong brand (Hui & Zhou, 2003; Hamin & Elliot, 2006). On the other hand country-of-origin information has a stronger impact on a weaker brand or a product with no brand (Ahmed & d'Astous, 1993; Kim & Chung, 1997). When consumers were given specific brand names, they could estimate the specification and offers given by these brands. Drozdenko & Jensen's research (2009) indicated that customers were more willing to pay a premium price for products made in advanced markets. However, for some Generation Y in this research, country-of-origin would have a more powerful influence if the price of the fashion products was expensive and/or if the brand was luxurious:

> *"Only in expensive and exotic brands, for instance if I was buying a designer suit I would rather it came from Italy than China! So perception is important but I would only say it is important if I was spending a lot of money" (Paul – British)*

Therefore, to some extent country-of-origin is used by some Generation Y to justify whether the price that they pay for a certain brand matches the status of the brand. These Generation Y respondents would hesitate to buy luxurious brands that were made in less industrialised countries.

Ethical trading

Three participants stated that they avoided buying clothes which were made in the countries known for manufacturing their products unethically:

> *"I paid attention even from the country of origin I prefer; I don't buy products from the developing countries because most of the time the people [there] are exploited" (Laura – Italian)*

Based on these findings, it can be noted that since Generation Y are presented with a vast choice of fashion products in the marketplace, they have a tendency to make purchasing decisions based on the non-functional attributes of the brand, rather than its functional attributes (Chen, 2001). However, the current findings also emphasised that the unethical trading issue would not influence their purchasing decision even though they are aware it may be the case:

> *"If I like the product it doesn't matter to me, I just want to buy that. Maybe I think that I can't affect on that if the product is made in some "bad" country or illegal way etc. I mean if I am the only person who ignores the product like that, it doesn't help. It doesn't make things better" (Pinja – Finnish).*

More importantly, some participants also emphasised that unethical trading would not make them dislike the fashion brands: *"Yes but it is not a strong influence... I will like a brand even if I know they employ young children to produce their product" (Nazih – French)*

Based on the analysis above, it is suggested that Generation Y pay attention to the humanity and ethical trading issues which can be evaluated by country-of-origin information. However, because the majority of international branded fashion products are now made in less industrialised countries which are often associated with negative humanity and ethical trading issues, Generation Y pays less attention towards these issues, and the impact of this is that they pay less attention to country-of-origin information. Although some Generation Y believed that they should wear 'ethical' products, others believed that not buying fashion products from less industrialised countries that had a negative image in terms of humanity and ethical trading would not change the situation.

Conclusion

This study develops new insight on the influence that country-of-origin information has on Generation Y, by revealing that country-of-origin information has minimal influence on Generation Y's perception towards international fashion brands. The analysis also showed that Generation Y perceives that fashion products made in highly industrialised countries or countries of the brand origin had better quality. Generation Y's perception can be in part put into context when analysing their reasons for lack of country-of-origin importance, such as high brand value and credibility of emerging countries as a base of manufacture. Since the majority of international fashion retailers manufacture their products overseas and brand is a major source of value in the fashion industry, this suggests that the effect of country-of-origin evaluation towards the international fashion brand has diminished. The findings also indicated that if international branded fashion products were made in less industrialised countries, but were sold at a very expensive price or held a luxuri-

ous brand status, some Generation Y would hesitate to buy the brands. Indeed, many Generation Y in this study said that unethical trading issues would influence their perception towards the fashion brands. However, it might not be enough to make them dislike or not buy the fashion brands.

Limitations and future research

This study only used a single qualitative method which explored different responses and the reasons behind these responses. Furthermore, although the participants' background and level of knowledge about country-of-origin varied, non-probability sampling method was adopted in this study. Thus, the findings may not be adequate in generalising Generation Y's perception. However, the study has identified many values and indications that can be tested in larger and more specified samples, therefore the findings can be used as the foundation for developing future quantitative research or complementing available quantitative research on a similar topic. Because the sample size for each country included in this study was small it was not appropriate to examine cross-country differences on how customers evaluate country-of-origin of international fashion brands, nor gender difference. It is recommended that with a larger sample size future research can focus on analysing differences as to the process customers from different countries use to evaluate country-of-origin information. Finally, we believe that the perception of country-of-origin in general could change over time and the effect of country-of-origin would be different for each product category and consumer generation (such as Baby Boomers or Generation X). Therefore, further research on country-of-origin in different product categories and consumer demographic groups could benefit the development of marketing literature research.

39
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Managerial implications

Generation Y understands that global companies can manufacture fashion apparel less expensively than single country companies. Therefore, they expected international fashion retailers to offer designs that suit them, and offer their products at a reasonable price, regardless of where the products were manufactured. In terms of judging the quality of fashion products, Generation Y perceive brands to have a more important role than country-of-origin. Even though Generation Y would prefer products which were made ethically, unethical trading issues would not in themselves be enough to make Generation Y dislike the brand. However, it is important to note that unethical trading can create negative publicity which eventually may damage a brand's image. Even though country-of-origin was not considered important in evaluating international fashion brands in general, Generation Y made an exception for luxurious international fashion brands. Some Generation Y suggested that country-of-origin was important for luxurious brands or expensive fashion products. Therefore, it is suggested that luxurious fashion brands, which the majority came from highly industrialised countries, should be manufactured in

the country of the brand origin as it seemed that country-of-origin still matters for this type of product category.

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41

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