

Influence of demographic variables on the perceptions of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a part of a previous study of perception of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder in which influence of demographic variables of rural and urban consumers such as education, age and gender on perception of quality cues of foreign and local milk powder was considered. The sample consisted of 268 consumers chosen from rural and urban areas of Matara, Galle and Hambantota districts. The sample was chosen based on the convenience sampling procedure. Personal interviews were held with a formal questionnaire to collect data for the study. Perception was measured using five point semantic differential scales. To analyze data, mean comparisons of independent samples were used. Study identified that less educated rural and urban consumers accepted foreign milk powder than highly educated rural and urban consumers, older rural and urban consumers accepted foreign milk powder than younger consumers and rural and urban male consumers accepted foreign milk powder than local milk powder.

Keywords: Demographic variables, rural and urban consumers, milk powder, quality attributes

Introduction

Considerable effort has been made in ascertaining whether the country, of origin affects product evaluations (Thorelli *et al*, 1988; Bilky and Nes, 1982). Tse (1999) noted that large volume of studies have been done on perceived product quality, which together point to a multitude of factors affecting it including price, brand name, store name, country of origin, advertising and source credibility. Since the mid 1960s, numerous studies have been conducted on country image and they have found that consumers have significantly different country images or general perceptions about products made in different countries (Han, 1989). Food choice behavior and consumers' perception have been studied in many disciplines (Sijtsejema *et al*, 2002).

This study is a part of a previous study perception of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder (Samantha, 2004). Depending on the problem identified in the previous study, it was intended to examine the area of country image perception. It examined the influence of demographic variables rural and urban consumers on the perception of country of origin of two brands of milk powder. The expected outcome of this study is to explore the extent to which demographic variables of two consumer segments affect the perception of country of origin of foreign and local brands of milk powder.

Research hypotheses

'The perception of the country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder (Samantha, 2004) identified significant influences of demographic variables of consumers on perception of country of origin of foreign and local milk powder. Based on the conclusions of that study, it was intended to examine the extent of the influence of demographic variables of rural and urban consumers on the perception of the country of origin in two brands of milk powder. Respective demographic variables of rural and urban consumers; age, education level, and gender may influence on different perception of the quality cues of two brands of milk powder. The study derives the following research question in order to elaborate the identified research

problem of the study of perception of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder (Samantha, 2004).

- What demographic variables of urban and rural consumers influence on perception of country of origin as a quality attribute most significantly?

The hypotheses of the study were developed from above research question and through the analysis of the data it is expected to accept or reject the following three hypotheses.

H_1 = Higher the education level of rural and urban consumers, higher the acceptance of foreign made milk powder

H_2 = Higher the age level of rural and urban consumers, higher the acceptance of foreign made milk powder

H_3 = Rural and urban male consumers accept foreign made milk powder than female consumers

Study design and concepts related to the study

The sample of this study is same as the previous study on perception of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder (Samantha, 2004) and, in order to collect data the same questionnaire was used. Data analysis was focused on identifying how demographic variables of rural and urban consumers influence perception of country of origin of milk powder. The mean values of perceptions of each quality cues identified were compared in order to accept or reject the hypotheses developed for this study.

Present study dealt with the following concepts related to quality, perception of quality and country of origin.

a) Food Quality

Though the concept of food quality has been given lots of attention, there was no clear accepted definition for it. Quality is complex and relates to the observation that quality results from many classes of factors, not just one (Meiselman, 2001). Bremner (2000) noted that there is still no general agreement on what is meant by the term food quality and how it can be measured (Acebron & Dopico, 2000:229-238; Lawless, 1995).

Food quality and food acceptability were judged from the aspect of product alone in the early 20th century, and from the product and consumer, beginning from the middle of the 20th century (Meiselman, 2003). This study considered the concept of quality from the consumers perspective and hence the interpretation of the quality concept based on the consumer was relevant. Quality is defined as 'the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements' (Davidson *et al*, 2003). Brunso *et al* (2002) identified quality from the consumers' point of view as 'the quality of a food product is in the mind of the consumer-some aspects of the product are perceived as good and others as bad. Meiselman (2001) defined quality from two perspectives: quality based on the product and quality based on the consumer. Quality based on the product, views that quality is a product attribute and look at the physical characteristics of the products i.e. intrinsic cues. Quality based on the consumer, views quality in terms of consumer perception rather than based on product characteristics. Accordingly, Cardello (1995) noted that quality does not reside in the product but in the eye of the beholder: quality is perceptual and evaluative.

However, it seems that many attempts have been made in defining and clarifying food quality from the consumers or end-user's point of view. Focusing on objective and subjective quality, which is important in terms of perception of food quality from consumer point of view, Brunso *et al* (2002)

distinguished four types of food quality; product oriented quality, process oriented quality, quality control (controlled quality) and user oriented quality (Figure 1).

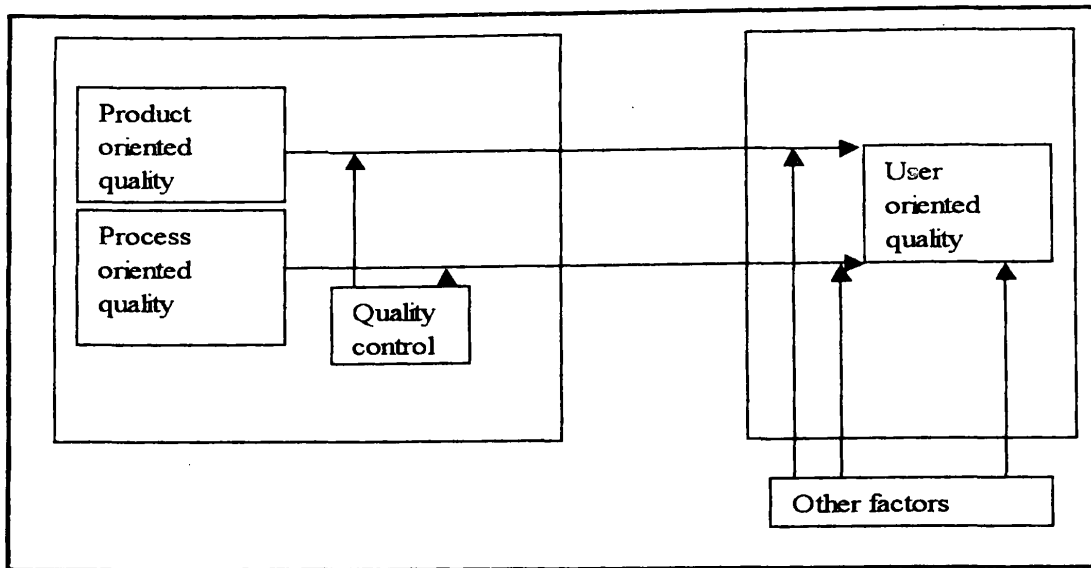


Fig. 1: Types of quality

Source- Brunso *et al* (2002), 'Consumers Food Choice and Quality Perception', MAAP Working Paper, No. 07, The Aarhus School of Business: 6

Accordingly, based on the model-types of quality, to distinguish the objective and subjective quality the basic model can be revised as follows (Figure 2) for this study. Objective quality constitute product oriented, process oriented and controlled quality. Much of the discussion on quality in the food industry is concerned with product and process oriented and controlled quality while the consumer evaluates and pays subjectively perceived quality, which is related to but not the same as objective quality (Brunso *et al*, 2002).

In other words this subjective quality or user-oriented quality is emotionally involved with extrinsic quality cues such as safe, hygiene, cleanness, appearance etc. and also these subjective quality cues were identified as invisible quality characters.

Further, based on objective and subjective food quality, it was possible to distinguish four types of reality, which have significant influence in perceiving quality of food product: objective reality, constructed reality, reality of other consumers and subjective reality (Sijtsema *et al*, 2002).

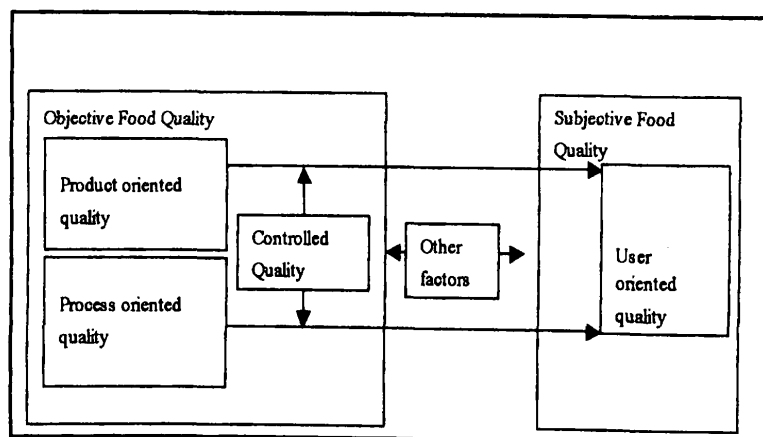


Fig. 2: Revised model of types of food quality

a) Food Perception and Perceived Quality

The process of food perception always consists of an actor, the consumer or purchaser, an object and the food product, which are inextricably related to each other (Sijtsejema *et al*, 2002). Further, perception can be explained and supplemented with different variables and characteristics describing consumers, food products and the relationship between these. Sijtsejema *et al*, noted:

“Consumers’ perceive product while they buy, prepare and consume it. Perception is based on sensorial observations of individual (preceptor) and product characteristics (stimuli). So product characteristics like package, appearance, taste and smell are part of what has influence on perception by the consumer. Besides these characteristics other aspects influence the perception such as experiences, atmosphere while perceiving the product and indirect product characteristics like environmental-friendly breeding and production methods. Perception is a complex process of the senses and the brain that is influenced by many variables that are hard to disentangle” (Sijtsejema *et al*, 2002).

Consumers often judged the quality of a product or service on the basis of a variety of informational cues that they associate with the product (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995).

Perceived product quality is defined to include the consumer’s response to the entire evoked set of judgments about quality comparisons among competitive brands (Lavenka, 1991). Consumers often judged the quality of a product or service on the basis of a variety of informational cues i.e. intrinsic and extrinsic that they associate with the product and either singly or in composite such cues provide the basis for perceptions of product and service quality (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995). Steenkamp (1989) has developed a model called ‘three stage model of quality’: cue acquisition and categorization (intrinsic or extrinsic to the product), quality attribute belief formation (experience and credence quality attributes) and integration of quality attribute beliefs to yield perceived quality. Important thing of this model was that it identifies different quality cues more than intrinsic and extrinsic which can be perceived differently by consumers i.e. experience and credence. Thus, in the absence of actual experience with a product, consumers often evaluated quality on the basis of extrinsic cues such as country of origin (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995). Intrinsic quality cues are the product attributes related to the physical product i.e. appearance, color, shape, size and structure. Extrinsic quality cues are the attributes, which can be manipulated without changing the physical product or the attributes which are external to the product i.e. price, brand name, country of origin, packaging etc. Experience quality attributes can be experienced only after consuming or using the product i.e. taste, freshness, flavor, oiliness, temperature etc. and credence characteristics are not visible and cannot be validated before or after purchasing or consuming the product as a matter of credibility and trust: desirable product benefits which are based on believing others i.e. environmental friendliness, healthiness, animal friendliness, wholesomeness etc. Another aspect in this regard is that these product attributes are useful in defining or clarifying product quality too.

b) Country of Origin

As the volume of world trade has increased, it has become more critical to investigate the extrinsic cue, ‘country of origin’ (Thorelli *et al*, 1988). Johansson *et al* (1985) defined country of origin as “the country where corporate headquarters of the company marketing the product or brand is located”. The ‘made in’ indication communicates the image i.e. reputation, stereotype etc. attached to the country where product comes from. ‘Country of origin’ is an intrinsic product cue, a class of intangible product traits, which include a product’s brand, price and warranty (Cordell, 1992). The term, ‘product country image’ is a broader, more accurate descriptor than country of origin or ‘made in’ and defines the image of the country and the thoughts such images create in the minds of the consumers

(Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993). The image is shaped by mass communication, personal experience and views of national opinion leaders (Nagashima, 1970). Country image is consumers' general perceptions of quality for products made in a given country (Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Further, Halfhill (1980) suggested that such perceptions are typically specific to product categories. It is generally understood that the impact which generalizations and perceptions about a country have on a person's evaluations of the country's products and/or brands (Lampert and Jaffe, 1998). Consumers hold stereotyped images about countries and these images were used as information cues in judging products from different origins (Lots and Hu, 2001). Consumers use country of origin data as stereotypical information in making evaluations about a product (Maheswaran, 1994). Given the growing range of products now available in the market place, marketers can use country of origin cues in order to add value to their products and differentiate them by specific positioning, e.g. useful country of origin information can be provided by advertising, packaging and branding etc. (Baker and Ballington, 2002). The availability and consistency of other extrinsic cues and their interaction with the country of origin cue, affects consumers' product evaluation (Thorelli, 1988). Han (1989) identified country image in two views: as a Halo and as a Summary Construct. Country image as a 'Halo' views that consumers use country image in product evaluation because they often are unable to detect the true quality of a country's products before purchasing and country image as a summary construct views that consumers record and abstract individual elements of information into higher order units of 'chunks'. According to Lampert and Jaffe (1998) country image may be an asset when it is positive and a liability when it is negative and country image may be shared by one or several types of product, but not all product categories. Further they highlight that a given country's product may have varying images across countries. 'Made in Japan' technical products have a more positive image in the USA than in Europe (Bilkey and Nes, 1982).

Conceptualization of the study

Randall and Sanjur (1981) have developed a model, consisting three basic factors, which influenced food preferences: individual, food and environment. Accordingly, the model has been developed to ascertain the relative importance of characteristics of the food, the individual and the environment and the relationship between food preference and consumption. Gains (1996) model of factors influencing food choice showed that any form of food related behavior is the result of the interaction between three things namely the food itself, the consumer and the context or the situation within which this interaction takes place. This is actually another modification of the model of Randall and Sanjur (1981). Khan's (1981) model identified seven groups of factors, which influenced food preferences. Compared with the model of Randall and Sanjur (1981) the seven groups of factors are connectable to the division of terms related to the food, the individual and the environment (Sijtsejema *et al.*, 2002).

This study concentrated on studying the perception of country of origin in two consumer segments i.e. urban and rural consumers. Accordingly, quality of milk powder is perceived basically on the country of origin cue, considering the cues i.e. aroma, hygiene, safe, solubility, milkiness and flavor. Thus, perception is also influenced by demographic variables i.e. age, gender and education level of the respondents in two segments i.e. urban and rural. In general, all considered quality cues were interrelated. Based on products' country of origin image, the perception of these quality cues varied from product to product. Another feature of these quality cues was that quality cues overlapped in some cases i.e. high safety level and high hygiene level was positively correlated. The relative importance of these quality cues was determined by individual differences: quality perception is characterized by individual differences

Consequently the 'Model of Perceptions of Country of Origin of Milk Powder' used for the study of 'perception of country of origin as a quality attribute of milk powder (Samantha, 2004) was used for this study too.

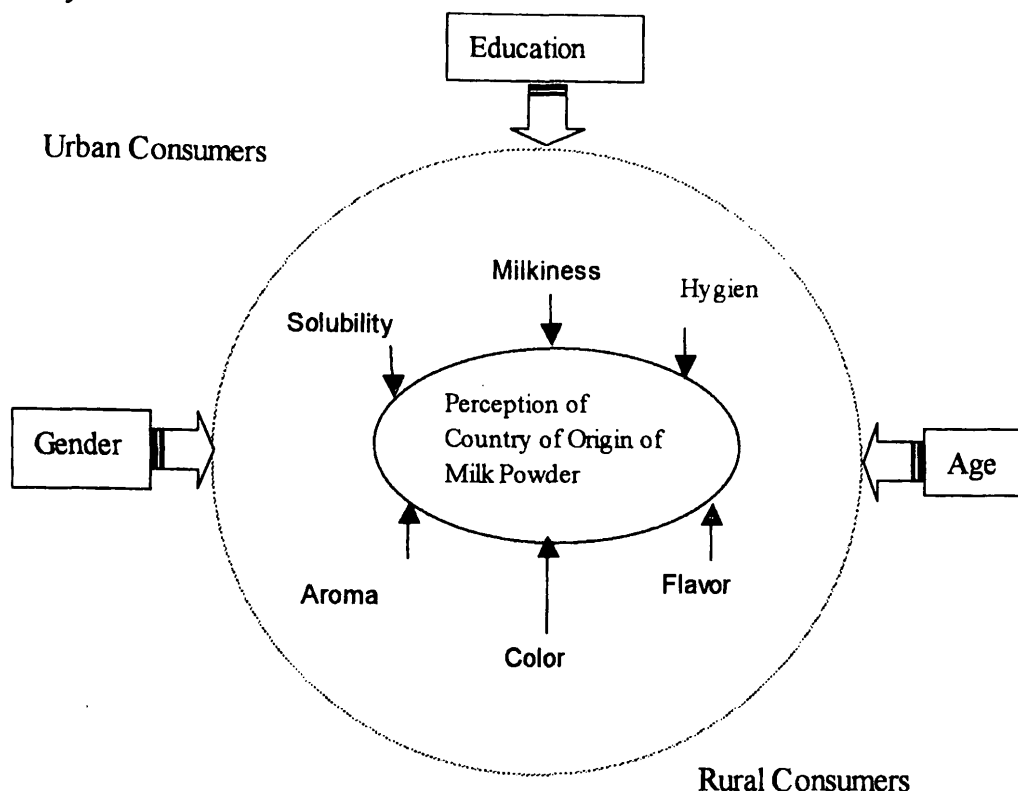


Fig. 4.5: Model of perceptions of country of origin of milk powder

Data analysis and Discussion

Comparisons of Means of Relevant Quality Cue Perceptions¹

Mean values of perception of quality cues corresponding to different demographic variables of rural and urban consumers were used to analyze how demographic variables of two consumer segments influenced the perception of the country of origin of milk powder.

Consequently, education levels of rural consumers and their perceptions of different quality cues relating to the foreign and local milk powders are shown in Table 01a. It showed that the relevant mean values based on three levels of education. Accordingly, rural consumers rated quality cues (except milkiness) of foreign milk powder positively than of local milk powder. Further it showed that rural consumers who belong to the higher education category (above A/L) have less positive image on foreign milk powder. That is lower the education level of rural consumers (up to O/L and up to A/L categories) higher the rate of quality cues (except milkiness) of foreign milk powder than the higher educated (above A/L etc.). In case of quality cue of milkiness, rural consumers of all three categories of education level highly rate local milk powder than foriegn milk powder.

Table 01a. Mean Value of Education levels of Rural Consumers

Education	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
Upto O/L	4.04	3.88	4.31	3.77	4.00	3.54	4.12	4.12	4.23	3.62	4.08	3.73
Upto A/L	4.18	3.93	4.18	3.86	4.39	3.39	4.04	4.29	4.25	3.89	4.18	3.93
Above A/L	3.57	3.38	3.86	3.68	4.24	3.11	3.70	3.81	3.95	3.59	4.08	3.51
Total	3.89	3.69	4.09	3.76	4.22	3.32	3.92	4.04	4.12	3.69	4.11	3.70

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

Table 01b depicts the education levels of urban consumers and their perceptions of quality cues of local and foreign milk powders. It clearly indicated that urban consumers have a positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder than of local milk powder. Moreover it showed that all three categories of educational levels of urban consumers have almost similar positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder than local milk powder. When compared with the total mean values of urban consumers' perceptions with the total mean values of urban consumers' perceptions, it showed that urban consumers have a higher positive image on foreign milk powder than local milk powder.

Table 01b. Mean Value of Education levels of Urban Consumers

Education	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
Upto O/L	4.08	3.54	4.38	3.69	4.31	3.31	4.31	3.75	4.58	3.46	4.42	3.54
Upto A/L	4.45	3.45	4.82	3.55	4.64	3.27	4.09	4.09	4.64	4.00	4.64	3.45
Above A/L	4.11	3.42	4.16	3.42	4.47	3.16	3.95	3.74	4.58	3.53	4.42	3.63
Total	4.19	3.47	4.40	3.53	4.47	3.23	4.09	3.83	4.60	3.63	4.48	3.56

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

Table 02a showed how gender differences of rural consumers and their influence on the perception of quality cues relating to foreign and local milk powders. It showed that male consumers have a more positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder than of local milk powder: all mean values of perception of quality cues of foreign milk powder were greater than the perception of quality cues of local milk powder.

Table 02a. Mean Value of Gender of Rural Consumers

Gender	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
Male	4.05	3.77	4.27	3.85	4.33	3.55	4.10	4.08	4.28	3.77	4.22	3.76
Female	3.58	3.55	3.74	3.58	4.00	3.26	3.58	3.97	3.81	3.55	3.90	3.58
Total	3.89	3.69	4.09	3.76	4.22	3.32	3.92	4.04	4.12	3.69	4.11	3.70

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

In contrast, Table 02b showed that the perceptions of quality cues of two brands by urban consumers. It revealed that male urban consumers perceived quality cues of foreign milk powder positively than of local milk powder. Moreover comparing Tables 2a and 2b, it can be concluded that though two gender categories of rural consumers have a positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder, two gender categories of urban consumers have a higher level positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder than rural consumers.

Table 02b. Mean Value of Gender of a Urban Consumers

Gender	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
Male	4.19	3.55	4.55	3.55	4.58	3.26	4.19	3.73	4.57	3.52	4.57	3.39
Female	4.17	3.25	4.00	3.50	4.17	3.17	3.83	4.08	4.67	3.92	4.25	4.00
Total	4.19	3.47	4.40	3.53	4.47	3.23	4.09	3.83	4.60	3.63	4.48	3.56

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

Table 03a showed how rural youngsters (18 years and 40 years) and adults (41 years and above) perceived the quality cues of foreign and local milk powders. It showed that the all consumers rated quality cues of foreign milk powder than of local milk powder (total mean values of quality cues of foreign milk powder are higher than of local milk powder). It also revealed that the rural youngsters have a higher level of positive image on quality cues of foreign milk powder than rural adults (in case of quality cue of milkiness youngsters perceive local milk powder positively than foreign milk powder).

Table 03a. Mean Value of Age of Rural Consumers

Age	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
18 and 40	3.91	3.78	4.14	4.00	4.29	3.50	3.93	4.14	4.07	3.86	4.17	3.79
Above 41	3.85	3.55	4.00	3.33	4.09	3.00	3.91	3.88	4.21	3.39	4.00	3.53
Total	3.89	3.69	4.09	3.76	4.22	3.32	3.92	4.04	4.12	3.69	4.11	3.70

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

Moreover Table 03b showed how urban youngsters and adults perceived quality cues of local and foreign milk powder.

Table 03b. Mean Value of Age of Urban Consumers

Age	Hyg1	Hyg2	Col1	Col2	Sol1	Sol2	Milk1	Milk2	Fla1	Fla2	Aro1	Aro2
18 and 40	4.25	3.57	4.64	3.64	4.57	3.25	4.00	3.89	4.63	3.54	4.56	3.46
Above 41	4.00	3.14	4.00	3.21	4.29	3.07	4.36	3.64	4.57	3.71	4.43	3.64
Total	4.17	3.43	4.43	3.50	4.48	3.19	4.12	3.80	4.61	3.60	4.51	3.52

Source- Consumer Survey, June/July 2004

Accordingly the total mean values of perception of quality cues of both products revealed similar results, as in Table 03a. That is quality cues of foreign milk powder were highly rated than of local milk powder. Moreover it showed that the urban youngsters perceived quality cues of foreign milk powder positively than urban adults. Comparing two Tables (03a and 03b) it can be concluded that both urban and rural consumers perceived quality cues of foreign milk powder positively than local milk powder.

Conclusion

Comparison of means of relevant quality cue perceptions provided a basis for acceptance or rejection of the following hypotheses (second, third and fourth hypotheses) of the study.

$H_1 =$ Higher the education level of rural and urban consumers, higher the acceptance of foreign milk powder

Based on the data (Table 1a and 1b) this hypothesis cannot be accepted. That is since less educated rural consumers (up to O/L and A/L) highly rated quality cues of foreign milk powder than well

educated consumers (above A/L). Thus it also can be concluded that almost less educated urban consumers accept foreign milk powder than highly educated urban consumers.

$H_2 =$ Higher the age level of rural and urban consumers, higher the acceptance of foreign milk powder

According to the results, this hypothesis can be accepted. That is higher the age level of rural and urban consumers, higher the acceptance of foreign milk powder than local milk powder.

$H_3 =$ Rural and urban male consumers accepted foreign milk powder more than female consumers

The results of the data analysis showed that the rural and urban male consumers rate quality cues of foreign milk powder over local milk powder. That is the results led towards the acceptance of this hypothesis.

Moreover, literature review identified that highly educated consumers rated foreign products more than less educated consumers, female consumers rated foreign products more than male consumers and older consumers rated foreign products higher than younger consumers (Schooler, 1971). In addition, Anderson and Cunningham (1972) found that educated consumers rated foreign products higher than less educated consumers. Accordingly, the conclusions of these two previous studies do not confirm the results of this study: the reasons may be the cultural differences of the respondents. So that it is worth to conduct further studies on the perception of country image differences along with the socio-economic and cultural differences of the respondents.

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