



## Effect of Marketing Mix Antecedents on Consumer Brand Preference of Milk Powder

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### ABSTRACT

Milk powder has become an essential component of the diet of Sri Lankan consumers. However, recent information related to the contamination of imported milk powder with hazardous elements has made a considerable impact on the preference of milk powder brands among consumers in Sri Lanka. Thereby, the current study aims to explore the effect of selected marketing mix antecedents on consumer brand preference for milk powder. Primary data was collected through an online survey using a Google form-based structured questionnaire. The convenience sampling technique was used in selecting the sample of 100 milk powder consumers. The collected data were analyzed by SMART PLS using partial least squares. The findings revealed that brand personality and country of origin have a significant effect on milk powder brand preference. Furthermore, the study suggests a significant positive influence of brand preference on brand loyalty to milk powder. Moreover, results revealed that consumers prefer domestically produced milk powder brands over imported brands. The findings of this study are of great significance for local milk powder companies and marketing practitioners to implement strategies in order to enhance the availability and marketing of domestically manufactured milk powder. Further, marketers should pay more attention to the brand personality in order to attract more consumers to their respective milk powder brands.

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## INTRODUCTION

Milk powder is a manufactured dairy product through evaporation of the water in milk to dryness to extend the shelf life without refrigeration and for the easiness and cost-effectiveness of transportation. Importation of milk powder, mainly in the form of full cream and non-fat, is of great concern today in particular in developing countries like Sri Lanka, because a considerable amount of foreign exchange is spent. Domestic milk production in Sri Lanka meets only about 38% of the national requirement (Central Bank, 2019). Hence, milk products, primarily in the form of powdered milk, are imported to Sri Lanka (Ranasinghe and Shamil, 2021). As a result, per capita consumption of milk powder in Sri Lanka exceeds that of liquid milk. According to reports, Sri Lanka imports milk powder worth \$300 million per year (Lugoda, 2020). Hence, the country spends around Rs.55 billion per year on the importation of milk, mainly as milk powder, without evaluating Sri Lankan consumers' preference for such products extensively. The research findings will contribute to re-think this situation and initiate a policy dialogue in this regard.

Even though past and present governments of Sri Lanka initiated steps from time to time to increase the availability and popularize liquid milk consumption in the country, Sri Lankan consumers have already used the consumption of milk powder rather than liquid milk (Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2020). As such, it is evident that milk powder has become an essential food item among Sri Lankan consumers. At this juncture, evaluation of consumer brand preference comes first, which describes the reasons for the choices people make when selecting products and services.

As Fuller *et al.* (2008) reported, consumers' preference for a brand eventually enhances its market strength by uplifting the brand value. Evaluating and analyzing the underline factors influencing consumer brand preference aid business organizations to enhance the quality of their products, introduce new products and assist in successfully catering requirements of specifically targeted consumer segments. It contributes to the understanding of why some

product brands become more successful and gain higher profit margins in the business context amid a high market competition. Interestingly, loyal consumers expressed a deeply held commitment to re-purchase their preferred brand resulting in repetitive purchases, which is the most important scene in business organizations' point of view (Knox and Walker, 2001; Thiele and Mackay, 2001). This denotes that brand loyalty exists when there is a strong bond between a brand and a customer (Keller, 2008).

Further, concerning milk powder brands, the actual preferences for local and foreign milk powder brands are quite questionable, as it has been reported that imported milk powder has numerous quality problems. For instance, it has recently been found that imported milk powder has been contaminated with hazardous chemicals and foreign fats that create a threat to human lives (Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2020). In 2014, a famous New Zealand company that operated in Sri Lanka faced a crisis of detection of dicyandiamide in their milk powder (Ranasinghe and Shamil, 2021). Therefore, on one hand, this study helps to better focus on significant marketing mix antecedents attached to powdered milk brand preference from consumers' point of view, and on the other hand, it may support the development of the social and economic status of the domestic producers. Furthermore, analyzing and understanding consumer brand preference is important to build and sustain strong customer loyalty towards a brand which is highly beneficial in terms of building a loyal customer base. Therefore, the present study aims to identify the effect of marketing mix antecedents on consumer brand preference for milk powder while highlighting consumer preference for locally produced milk powder brands.

## Hypotheses formulation

### Price perception

Price perception generally refers to the value of money (monetary) and sacrifice (non-monetary) given by the customers to get a product (Petrick, 2004). Price as an extrinsic cue is encoded by the consumer to constitute an important component of monetary value

perception (Zeithaml, 1988). It is an important factor in brand purchase and consumer choice (Erdem *et al.*, 2006). Several previous studies have also proven the role of price as an independent factor in consumers' brand preference (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010; Alamro and Rowley, 2011; Hwang and Chung, 2019). Furthermore, researchers have explored that price perception has a significant effect on brand preference (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2016; Yasri *et al.*, 2020). Previous literature further documented that there is a significant influence of the price of dairy products on consumer preference (Hatirli *et al.*, 2004; Alwis *et al.*, 2009; Gulseven and Wohlgenant, 2014; Senadisai *et al.*, 2014; Kumar and Majumder, 2017; Gulseven, 2018). Accordingly, this study postulates;

H<sub>1</sub> – Price perception has a significant and positive influence on brand preference of milk powder.

### **Exposure to advertisements**

Advertising is the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive about products, services, or ideas by identified sponsors through various media (Bovee and Arens., 1992). According to Tuan *et al.* (2013), there is a significant impact of advertising on the purchasing behaviour of imported powdered milk in Vietnam. However as reported by Perera *et al.* (2018), there is a negative impact of advertising milk powder for the consumption of fresh milk among Sri Lankan consumers. According to Kenyan consumers, advertising tactics used by dairy companies such as television and radio advertisements, posters and billboards minimally influence purchase decisions making however, those can be considered effective reminders of brands existing in the market (Adede and Kinoti, 2016) Previous literature suggested that there is a significant influence of advertising on consumer brand preference (Ayanwale *et al.*, 2005; Kotwal *et al.*, 2008; Daniel, 2019). Therefore, for this study, it is assumed that there is a significant influence of exposure to the advertisements on consumer brand preference for milk powder.

H<sub>2</sub> – Exposure to advertisements has a significant influence on consumer brand preference of milk powder.

### **Perceived quality of the brand**

The role perceived quality plays in consumer decision processes is much more important for branded food products than for unbranded products (Steenkamp, 1986). Furthermore, previous literature suggests that there is a significant influence of product quality on consumer brand preference (Zia and Sohail, 2016). Manufacturers/processors and marketers must understand consumers' perceptions of dairy product quality.

H<sub>3</sub> – Perceived quality of the brand has a significant influence on consumer brand preference of milk powder.

### **Country of origin**

A study carried out in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam revealed that the country of origin significantly influenced the buying behaviour towards imported milk powder (Tuan *et al.*, 2013). Most importantly, Vietnam consumers prefer imported milk powder to domestically produced milk powder. Adam and Ali (2014) proved that country of origin positively and significantly influenced consumer buying behaviour. Moreover, the results of that study have proven that consumers often check the country of origin when purchasing packed milk because consumers were more conscious of the credibility of the country of origin of the product. Based on such reasoning this study proposes that;

H<sub>4</sub> – Country of origin has a significant influence on consumer brand preference of milk powder.

### **Brand personality**

Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a given brand and tends to serve a symbolic or self-expressive function rather than a utilitarian function (Phau and Lau, 2000). Brands with strong and positive brand personalities tend to influence consumer perceptions and preferences (Freling and Forbes, 2005a). It

will lead to an increased willingness to repeat buying of a given brand and to pay premium prices for a brand (Freling and Forbes, 2005b). As reported by Balakrishnan *et al.* (2009), brand personality has a strong effect and influence on consumer brand preference and brand loyalty. Based on such facts below hypothesis is formed.

H<sub>5</sub> – Brand personality has a significant influence on consumer brand preference of milk powder.

### Effect of consumer brand preference and brand loyalty

When customers possess a high relative attitude toward the brand, the actual brand loyalty exists and shows repurchase behaviour. This kind of loyalty is a great asset for a firm (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2016; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Previous studies have supported a positive relationship between brand preference and brand loyalty (Keller, 2008; Wijesinghe *et al.*, 2020). Based on such reasoning, the present study hypothesizes that:

H<sub>6</sub>– Consumer brand preference has a significant influence on consumer Brand loyalty of milk powder.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study was designed to find out the effect of marketing antecedents on consumer brand preference for milk powder. A Google form-based structured questionnaire was developed for the data collection. All the constructs taken into account within this study are comprehensively discussed in the past literature (Table 1). Consequently, the study adopted the scale of price perception (Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2016), perceived quality of the brand (Pappu *et al.*, 2005, 2006), brand personality (Aaker, 1996), exposure to advertisements (Li *et al.*, 2002), Brand preference (Cheng *et al.*, 2017) and brand loyalty (Heinberg *et al.*, 2016) based upon the past literature. All the measurements were taken using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha, and each item has more than 0.7 Cronbach's alpha value which verifies the higher reliability of the questionnaire (Table 1).

The target population was milk powder consumers in Sri Lanka. The sample was derived using a convenient sampling technique. The total sample size was 100 respondents. The Google form-based questionnaire was emailed to the respondents. The link was disabled after three days of circulation, and 100 responses were obtained.

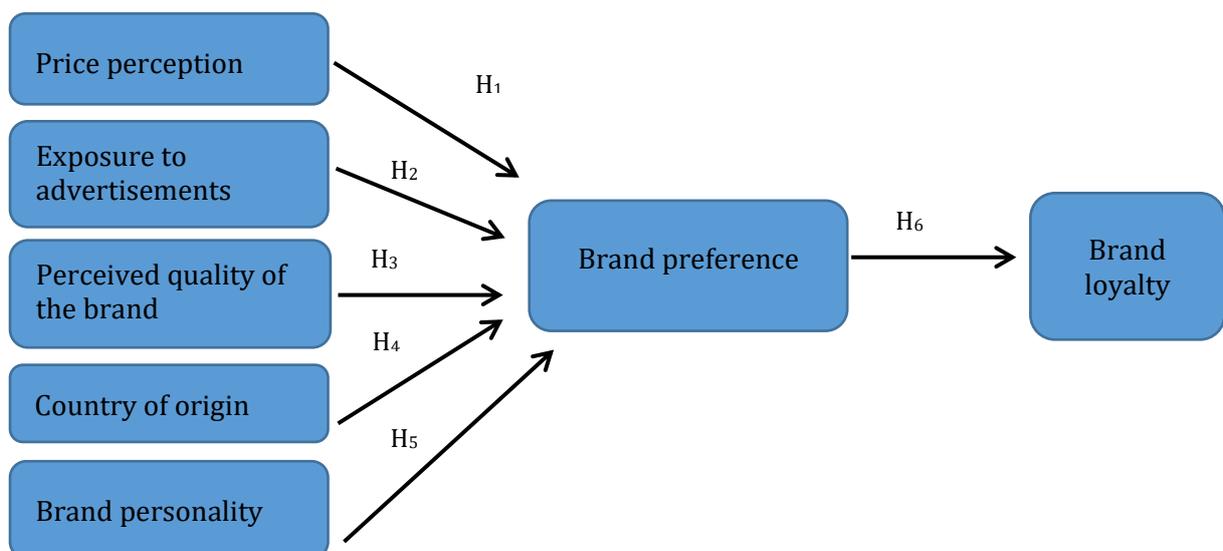


Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

Secondary data were collected from the Central Bank reports, research articles, newspaper articles, and other relevant web sources. The relationship between main constructs was examined in the data analysis using Partial Least Squares (PLS). Path significance was determined using SMART PLS 3.0 and the bootstrap re-sampling method (using 500 samples). PLS has become a popular data analysis tool in the current research context for a variety of reasons. PLS has proven to be advantageous in terms of data size, measurement scales, and model complexity (Ringle *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, when the researcher is primarily concerned with predicting the dependent variable, PLS is the best-fitted technique for data analysis (Acedo and Jones, 2007).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demography of the sample

From the consumer profile, 25% of the respondents were males while 75% were females. The majority of them were between 21-30 years old pertaining to 94%. 30% of the consumers' earnings were below Rs.20000, and 22% and 18% belonged to the 41000-50000 and 31000-40000 income categories, respectively.

Regarding the occupation of the respondents, 33% of the sample comprised private sector employees, while 30% and 25% were government employees and unemployed people, respectively. Out of these respondents, the majority of 73% had higher educational qualifications. In the case of the size of the families, 40% of the households consisted of four (4) members, while 31% had five (5) members.

### Milk powder consumption

#### Effect of marketing mix antecedents on consumer brand preference

The majority, 82%, of the respondents stated that they are consuming milk powder, and 18% stated that they do not consume milk powder. Of the 12% who do not consume milk powder, the majority (56%) mentioned health concerns as the reason for not consuming.

Furthermore, 18% do not consume milk powder owing to its high price, while 15% have given up milk powder because of fresh milk intake. In the case of frequency of milk powder consumption, 35% of the sample expressed that they drink milk powder once a day, while 28% of the respondents stated that they consume milk powder twice a day, and 18% consumed milk once a week.

#### Measurement model analysis

Measurement models were examined by the key statistics including outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity. The composite reliability and convergence validity results are presented in Table 2.

All the factor loadings of the constructs showed a value of more than 0.5. Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to examine the convergent validity of the constructs. As per the results, Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for all concepts was recorded above 0.7 (Table 1), the composite reliabilities were greater than 0.8, and the average variance extracted was over 0.5 (Table 2). These values depicted favourable convergent validity for the constructs considered for the present study.

As almost all the constructs tested recorded values more than the threshold value. Therefore, there was no need to remove factor loadings to refine the model. Table 1 present the variables, measurements, standardized factor loadings, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values.

**Table 1: Measures, standardized factor loadings and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values.**

Item	SFLs	$\alpha$
<b>Price perception</b> (Source: Koschate-Fischer <i>et al.</i> , 2016)		0.952
The price is fair.	0.946	
The price is acceptable.	0.964	
The price is right.	0.957	
<b>Perceived quality of the brand</b> (Source: Pappu <i>et al.</i> , 2005, 2006)		0.968
Brand I prefer offers very good quality.	0.957	
Brand I prefer offers products of consistent quality.	0.976	
Brand I prefer most offers very reliable products.	0.934	
Brand I prefer offers products with excellent features.	0.951	
<b>Brand personality</b> (Source: Aaker, 1996)		0.936
Brand I prefer has a personality.	0.945	
Brand I prefer is interesting.	0.963	
I have a clear image of the type of person who would use brand I prefer.	0.917	
<b>Exposure to advertisements</b> (Source: Li <i>et al.</i> , 2002)		0.965
I felt emotionally involved in the ad.	0.944	
The ad was moving.	0.904	
The ad affected me emotionally	0.948	
I was connected to the ad emotionally.	0.967	
This ad hooked me in terms of my feelings.	0.917	
<b>Country of origin</b>		1.000
I am considering country of origin when I am purchasing milk powder.	1.000	
<b>Brand preference</b> (Source: Cheng <i>et al.</i> , 2017)		0.958
I like to buy my preferred milk powder brand more.	0.914	
I will buy the brand I prefer on my next (shopping) trip.	0.947	
I am more favorable toward my preferred milk powder brand.	0.944	
It is more likely to buy my preferred milk powder brand.	0.964	
<b>Brand loyalty</b> (Source: Heinberg <i>et al.</i> , 2016)		0.875
I consider myself to be loyal to the brand I prefer.	0.925	
Brand I prefer would be my first choice when purchasing milk powder.	0.933	
I will not buy other brands of milk powder if my preferred brand is available at the store.	0.821	

Note: All significant at 0.05 level. SFLs, Standardized Factor Loadings;  $\alpha$ , Cronbach's Alpha.

**Table 2: Internal consistency and convergent validity.**

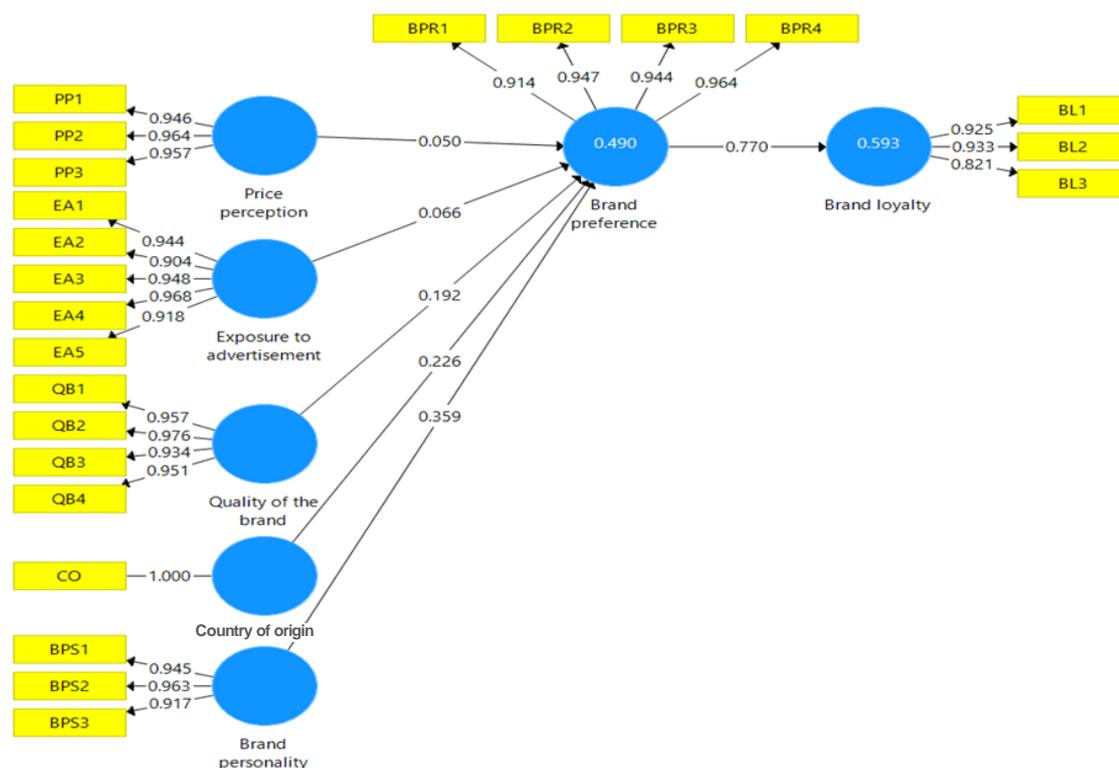
Construct	CR	AVE
Price perception	0.969	0.913
Perceived quality of the brand	0.976	0.911
Brand personality	0.959	0.887
Exposure to advertisements	0.973	0.877
Country of origin	1.000	1.000
Brand preference	0.969	0.888
Brand loyalty	0.923	0.800

Note: CR; Composite Reliability, AVE; Average Variance Extracted.

**Table 3: Fornell-Larcker criterion analysis of key constructs.**

Constructs	Brand loyalty	Brand personality	Brand preference	Country of origin	Exposure to advertisements	Price perception	Quality of the brand
Brand loyalty	0.894						
Brand personality	0.682	0.942					
Brand preference	0.770	0.641	0.942				
Country of origin	0.449	0.357	0.454	1.000			
Exposure to advertisements	0.369	0.358	0.352	0.260	0.936		
Price perception	0.361	0.356	0.304	0.184	0.430	0.955	
Perceived quality of the brand	0.658	0.831	0.619	0.388	0.400	0.292	0.955

Note: The diagonals represent the square root of AVE and the off-diagonals represent the correlation.



**Figure 2: Structural model.**

Note: PP; Price perception, EA; Exposure to Advertisements, QB; Perceived Quality of the brand, CO; Country of Origin, BPS; Brand Personality, BPR; Brand Preference, BL; Brand Loyalty.

Construct level discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Table 3 shows that all items are loaded higher on the construct they were measuring than on any other construct in the model. Therefore, the second criterion of discriminant validity was met. Based on the outcome, the result of

the measurement model has provided satisfactory empirical support for the reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity for reflective constructs and subsequent analysis.

## Structural model analysis

Figure 2 depicts the structural model of the variables derived through the SMART PLS.

Table 4 present the hypotheses testing of the data analysis.

**Table 4: Hypotheses testing results.**

HP	PR	B	SE	T-V	P	DE
H <sub>1</sub>	PP--- BPR	0.050	0.091	0.555	0.579	Not supported
H <sub>2</sub>	EA---BPR	0.066	0.073	0.067	0.322	Not supported
H <sub>3</sub>	QB---BPR	0.192	0.133	1.443	0.120	Not supported
H <sub>4</sub>	CO--- BPR	0.226	0.090	2.506	0.013	Supported
H <sub>5</sub>	BPS---BPR	0.359	0.143	2.507	0.012	Supported
H <sub>6</sub>	BPR---BL	0.770	0.066	11.679	0.000	Supported

Note: HP  $\frac{1}{4}$  Hypotheses, PR  $\frac{1}{4}$  Path Relation, B  $\frac{1}{4}$  Path Coefficient, SE  $\frac{1}{4}$  Standard Error, T-V Test Value, DE  $\frac{1}{4}$  Decision.  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*1.96 (significance level  $\frac{1}{4}$  5% ( $p < 0.05$ )). PP; Price Perception, EA; Exposure to Advertisements, QB; Perceived Quality of the Brand, CO; Country of Origin, BPS; Brand Personality, BPR; Brand Preference, BL; Brand Loyalty.

The structural model test results are presented in Table 4. Three paths have proven significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, 3 of the hypotheses were supported (H<sub>4</sub>, H<sub>5</sub>, and H<sub>6</sub>). H<sub>4</sub>, which was predicted to have a significant influence of country of origin on brand preference, is supported ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.226$ ; SE = 0.090;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 2.506$ ), at 5% significant level. It confirms that country of origin significantly influences customer brand preference of the milk powder. Statistical analysis revealed that brand personality has a statistically significant impact on brand preference for milk powder ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.359$ ; SE = 0.143;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 2.507$ ). This is in line with the findings of Banerjee (2016), who found that brand personality positively influences consumer brand preference. The influence of price perception ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.050$ ; SE = 0.091;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 0.555$ ) on brand preference of milk powder found insignificant. However, Ebrahim *et al.* (2016) confirmed a positive influence of price perception on consumer brand preference. Furthermore, the impact of exposure to advertisements ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.066$ ; SE = 0.073;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 0.067$ ) on brand preference confirmed insignificant. But previous researchers have stated opposite findings in this regard proving there is a significant impact of exposure to advertisements on brand preference (Daniel, 2019; Lema, 2016). Moreover, the influence of the perceived

quality of the brand ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.192$ ; SE = 0.133;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 1.443$ ) on brand preference for milk powder has proven statistically insignificant. Most importantly, H<sub>6</sub>, which was expected to have a significant influence on brand preference on brand loyalty to milk powder proven statistically significant ( $b \frac{1}{4} = 0.770$ ; SE = 0.066;  $t \frac{1}{4} = 11.679$ ). This embellishes the findings of Keller (2008), who proved that brand preference significantly influences brand loyalty.

## Consumer Preference for Local and Imported Milk Powder Brands

Consumers were asked to choose between preference for local and imported milk powder brands available in Sri Lanka. When considering local milk powder brands, the majority of 67% of respondents stated that they love local brands while 11% stated that they moderately love them. However, 11% of the respondents expressed that they slightly hate local brands. Only 4% of the respondents highlighted that they hate domestically produced milk powder brands.

In the case of preference for imported milk powder brands, 35% of the respondents stated that they hate imported milk powder, while 26% had a neutral perception of it.

However, it is worth noting that 10% of the sample showed a moderate preference for foreign milk powder brands in particular. The results imply that Sri Lankan consumers prefer domestic milk powder brands compared to imported ones denoting patriotism. By proving that, 95% of the respondents have stated that they prefer Sri Lanka as the country of origin when purchasing milk powder. Only 18% of the respondents preferred New Zealand as the country of origin of milk powder, while 8% preferred Australia.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to identify the effect of marketing mix antecedents on consumer brand preference for milk powder. In terms of factors influencing consumer brand preference of milk powder, brand personality and country of origin are proven to be significant contributors to brand preference, while price perception, exposure to advertisements, and perceived quality of the brand are not insignificant. Furthermore, the study concludes significant and positive influence of brand preference on brand loyalty to milk powder. Results concluded that Sri Lankan consumers show strong patriotism towards domestically produced milk powder brands over imported brands. This study provides insights to local milk powder producers to increase the local milk powder production and marketers to enhance the availability and marketing of domestically manufactured milk powder. Further, marketers should pay more attention to the brand personality to attract more consumers to their respective milk powder brands.

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