

Country-Of-Origin (COO) Impact and Product Categories' Evaluations: The Case of an Emerging Market

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This study assesses the impact of culture on the perception of COO and consumer decision-making processes in Morocco, as an emerging market and a non-Western and North African nation. In general, the findings confirm that product categories from more developed countries receive more favorable evaluations than products from developing nations. The results from this exploratory study confirm other researchers' conclusions that economically developed nations and economies have the highest perceived quality image and that there is a bias against products from less advanced countries and markets. Managerial implications are also discussed.

Keywords: country of origin, emerging market, product categories, consumer behavior, culture

INTRODUCTION

The country of origin (COO) label is one of the many factors that affect the quality perception of a product. Typically, the COO label is communicated to consumers by the phrase "Made in (country)." COO can convey either a positive or negative quality perception to the market. Consumers form stereotypes about products and nations through their experiences, hearsay, and myth (Cateora et al., 2019). These stereotypes also become critical dimensions and attributes of a product category and are associated with a country's image (Andéhn and Decosta, 2016). Researchers have attempted to define a country's image as consumers' general perceptions of quality for products made in a given country (Andéhn and Decosta, 2016).

Since Robert Schooler framed the country-of-origin (COO) construct in 1965, COO has become one of the most widely researched concepts in marketing and consumer behavior, yielding more than 1,000 published studies (Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). It is described as the most researched international aspect of consumer behavior and as one of the most widely studied phenomena in international business, marketing, and consumer-behavior literature (e.g., Samiee, 2010; Apil and Kaynak, 2010; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). The expanse of COO literature includes at least five comprehensive meta-analyses (Liefeld, 2004; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Kaynak and Cavusgil, 1983; Bilkey and Nes, 1982) as well as several frameworks for categorizing findings or extending research efforts (Roth and Romeo, 1992).

Research findings reported by Broda and Weinstein (2005) and Kaynak et al. (2000) argue that, in recent years, consumers worldwide have had increased access to a wide variety of products and services from other nations. Researchers (e.g., Usunier, 2006; Samiee, 2010) have identified difficulties related to establishing a solid theoretical grounding for the understanding of COO, including issues relating to the

conditions necessary for the effect to occur (Usunier, 2006). Also, some authors (e.g., Nebenzahl et al., 2003) believe that COO needs to be examined on a category-by-category basis, since an overall theory for all products may not be feasible. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the behavior of the sub-dimensions across a broader range of product categories. Hsieh (2004) also emphasized that it is therefore desirable to conduct further empirical investigations to validate research findings in a multi-product, multi-origin, and multi-nation context. Thus, according to Hsieh (2004), it is desirable to conduct a further empirical investigation as a means to validate research findings in a multi-product, multi-origin, and multi-nation context.

Current research seems to have originated from a call for a study issued by Peterson and Jolibert (1995) after they completed a comprehensive meta-analysis. In an analysis of more than 1,500 separate COO effects used in empirical research during the previous decades, they found that single-cue studies with verbal product descriptions produced the most significant results. The authors concluded that "the true conditions under which COO influence is operative have not been adequately or fully delineated" (p. 100). Following Peterson and Jolibert's study, many researchers investigated the antecedents of COO evaluations (e.g., Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000; Apil and Kaynak, 2010). The research effort has helped to identify and provide a better understanding of the antecedents of COO evaluations.

A review of pertinent literature shows that developed countries, mainly U.S. and European Union (E.U.) countries were the most common geographical locations for studies in cross-cultural marketing research. As a result, the African regions/cultures have been ignored by researchers (Okazaki and Mueller, 2007). Given the recognized global impact that culture and the country of residence have on the marketing strategies and practices, this western framing preference may lead to incomplete marketing practices outside the U.S. and Western Europe (e.g., Okazaki and Mueller, 2007).

In light of the evidence mentioned above, the goal of this study is to assess the impact of COO on consumers from a North African and Mediterranean culture and an emerging market (i.e., Morocco). Also, this research study was implemented in the country of Morocco to assess the extent of the effect of COO image on product categories within a multi-nation context. That is, the focus of this exploratory study is to determine how respondents from Morocco compare products originating from the U.S. versus other countries.

Our study provides some of the first known empirical evidence regarding a comparison of the COO impact in establishes the link between countries and multi-origin product categories within the Moroccan consumers' framework.

This research study assesses the impact of culture and the country of residence on the perception of COO and consumer decision-making processes in Morocco, as a developing non-Western and North African nation. As noted, Morocco works with the U.S., the European Union (E.U.), and other countries on trade issues within the World Trade Organization (WTO), the U.S.-Morocco Free-Trade Agreement (FTA), the European Union (E.U.) Association Agreement and trade treaties with other countries. These initiatives toward market openness and trade liberalization make Morocco an attractive destination for direct foreign investments by international firms. As global trade and business opportunities continue to expand in Morocco, U.S. businesses will increase commerce in Morocco. This presents an exciting challenge to coordinate business and marketing-mix strategies such as product policy, pricing, distribution, and communications. The study results provide the international business organizations' executives with a better understanding of the consumer mindset of their Mediterranean/North African (i.e., Moroccan) market.

This paper reviews the literature related to COO effects and product category and national stereotyping. It also presents research objectives, describes the research methodology, presents the results and discussion, and discusses managerial implications.

COO Effect, Product Category, and Nation Stereotype

COO can have an impact on specific product categories and a variety of products (de Mooij, 2004). The relative effect of the COO construct varies by product category (see, for example, Balabanis and

Diamantopoulos, 2004) and by the type of attributes under consideration (Eroglu and Machleit, 1989). For example, consumers may relate fashionable clothes with France and quality automobiles with Germany, but not associate either with well-crafted cameras. The reviewed research already is in support of this principle.

Since the pioneering work of Schooler (1965), research findings still support the existence of COO effects as a product-informational extrinsic cue (Liefeld, 1993). Documents show that consumers give more preference for products from particular nations than the same products from others (Cateora et., 2019; Bandyopadhyay and Banerjee, 2002; Cordell, 1992). Specifically, consumer attitudes toward industrialized nations are more favorable when compared to consumer attitudes toward less industrialized countries (Ali and Kaynak, 2010; de Mooij, 2004; Saunders, 2010). Furthermore, consumer preferences in developing nations for non-local COO, especially from developed Western countries, are in favor of reasons not only for perceived quality but also for social status (Batra et al., 2000). Additionally, studies have revealed that consumers from economically advanced, developed nations tend to prefer products from their own countries first, and then from other developed nations, and lastly, from less developed nations (Okechuku and Onyemah, 1999). However, studies also showed that this consumer bias in favor of domestic products is not universal across product categories (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004).

As indicated, consumers from less economically developed nations prefer non-domestic products (Bandyopadhyay and Banerjee, 2002; Cordell, 1992). For example, Bandyopadhyay and Banerjee's (2002) study analyzed Indian consumer perception of two product categories: electronic and electrical products made domestically in India and those made in the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The findings revealed that locally made products rated lower than similar products from all five foreign nations. Manrai et al.'s (1998) research examined the COO effect of product categories in 21 countries. Results demonstrated that product-category evaluations were highest for the most developed and industrialized nations, followed by newly industrialized nations and then developing nations.

Klenosky et al. (1996) analyzed the COO effect on Czech Republic consumers for two product categories, color televisions, and automobiles, made by Western firms. The findings reported that as in other nations, Czech consumers are sensitive to COO information relating to product categories. Elliott and Cameron (1994) constructed shopping mall intercept surveys of Australian consumer attitudes of domestic product categories, and those made in Japan, South Korea, Germany, Philippines, the U.K., and the U.S. Study results suggested that Australian consumers preferred locally made products.

Alden and Hoyer (1993) examined U.S. respondents' evaluations of non-durable product categories. The results revealed that consumers evaluate new products from a frequently purchased, non-durable product category differently, depending on how consumers perceive the product category concerning the nation's COO.

Roth and Romeo (1992) examined COO in terms of the fit between nations and product categories. They proposed a framework that matches the significance of product-category dimensions with the perceived image of the COO. The study found that consumers are more willing to buy a specific product when its COO is significant in the product category. Therefore, consumer preferences vary depending on how well consumers perceive a nation's production and marketing strengths in the product category.

Though these studies vary in focus and interest, they indicate a connection between COO perception and the potential for the production of quality products in specific countries. This perception is susceptible to several factors, including the perceived technical understanding of the COO, the economic state of the consumer's nation, and the consumer's general perception of the products.

As previously indicated, a review of pertinent literature shows that developed countries, mainly the U.S. and E.U. members, were the most common geographical locations for studies in cross-cultural marketing research. According to Okazaki and Mueller (2007), researchers have ignored the African regions/cultures. Given the recognized global impact that culture and country of residence have on the marketing strategies and practices, this western framing preference may lead to incomplete marketing practices outside the U.S. and Western Europe (e.g., Okazaki and Mueller, 2007).

Study Objectives

Marketing literature has focused more attention on the reasons why COO influences purchase decisions. Roth and Romeo (1992) reported several explanations, including product-category involvement, knowledge of a particular country, and patriotism. According to Ming-huei Hsieh (2004), it is desirable to conduct a further empirical investigation to validate research findings in a multi-brand and multi-origin context. Past COO research often has treated country quality as a summary construct, rather than as a defined set of dimensions to describe quality is inferred (Crawford et al., 1988; Hong and Wyer, 1989). A country image may be a more appropriate summary construct, and perceived quality, maybe just one dimension. Our study focuses on a single cue COO format to assess the interaction between COO effects and product categories, including multi-product categories and multi-origin context within Morocco. The use of the single-cue form to assess COO effects on product categories is in congruence with existing literature (e.g., Ali and Kaynak, 2010; Kaynak et al., 2000; Lim et al., 1994).

Based on our extensive review of COO literature, we believe that the majority of consumer behavior frameworks and models were developed from a Western market perspective, mainly U.S. consumers, leading to an incomplete understanding of COO effects. There has been some interest among scholars on cross-cultural aspects, but the focus has been mostly on Asian nations/consumers. Furthermore, of the reviewed studies, only a handful have focused on the Mediterranean countries, and even fewer have focused on North African nations.

Our research study assesses the impact of culture and country of residence on the perception of COO and consumer decision-making processes in Morocco, as a developing/emerging market and a non-Western and North African nation. As stated, Morocco works with the U.S., the European Union (E.U.), and other countries on trade issues within the World Trade Organization (WTO), the U.S.-Morocco Free-Trade Agreement (FTA), the European Union (E.U.) Association Agreement and trade treaties with other countries. These initiatives toward market openness and trade liberalization make Morocco an attractive destination for direct foreign investments by international firms. As global trade and business opportunities continue to expand in Morocco, U.S. businesses will increase commerce in Morocco. This situation presents an exciting challenge to coordinate business and marketing-mix strategies such as product policy, pricing, distribution, and communications.

Our study includes the physical as well as service components, such as consumer service of the product categories: automobiles, cameras, stereos, televisions, major appliances, small appliances, Haute Couture, casual clothes/wear, and wine and spirits. Products are from 17 countries, including the U.S., Japan, Italy, France, Germany, the U.K., South Korea, China, Taiwan, India, Mexico, Israel, Greece, Brazil, Argentina, and the Eastern European countries (i.e., Poland and the Czech Republic). The U.S., Japan, South Korea, France, Germany, UK, and Italy are considered to be industrialized nations. But China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Israel, and Taiwan are classified as in the process of industrialization and emerging economies. And, Argentina, Greece, and East European countries (i.e., Poland and the Czech Republic) are considered to be developing nations. By relating national images to product category characteristics, decision-makers can better understand consumer preferences for their products, including insight into what underlies consumer attitudes toward products manufactured in particular countries.

Research Proposition

This exploratory study offers a new perspective on COO effects and examines the impact in terms of the match between countries and product categories within a multi-origin context. A review of the existing literature on COO effects demonstrates that there is a general bias by surveyed consumers against products from developing nations, while more industrialized countries have the highest quality product image (e.g., Cateora et al., 2019; Kaynak et al., 2000). Additionally, the existing literature has indicated a need for this type of research (for example, see Ali and Kaynak, 2010; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Ming-huei Hsieh, 2004). In light of this research need, the focus of this exploratory study is to assess how respondents from Morocco compare products originating from the U.S. versus other countries on dimensions such as durability, style, workmanship, quality, reliability, user-friendliness, customer service, price, luxury/comfort, prestige, and overall customer satisfaction.

Research Proposition is as follows: **There is a negative bias against products from developing nations, while industrialized countries have the highest perceived quality image by North African (Moroccan) Consumers.**

This study was conducted to shed light on the extent of the effect of the COO image on product categories within Morocco. Other than desire for products, little is known in the West about Moroccan consumer marketplace behaviors. This study tests previous researchers' conclusions that industrialized nations have the highest quality image and that there is generally a bias against product categories from developing countries, such as Morocco. Specifically, this study will confirm or refute the following existing belief. The more technical the product, the less favorable the perception of quality will be when made in a less developed nation(s) or nation(s) in the process of industrialization (for example, see Cateora et al., 2019; Kaynak et al. 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Research Instrument

Data for this research was collected mainly through a consumer survey. Before the study, two consumer focus-group interviews were held to develop a feel for the markets and the issues involved and to provide input for the development of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed based on the existing literature, as well as from the firm managers representing local and multinational firms. The survey questionnaire was structured to address the proposed research objectives. The structure of the questionnaire allowed the respondents to rate all stimuli: 17 countries and nine categories, one at a time. This format has proven to be stable over time (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 1984; Ali and Kaynak, 2010). It is consistent with the format used in previous country image studies (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Ali and Kaynak, 2010). The order of stimuli and dimensions was randomized throughout the questionnaire.

Sample, Data Collection, & Analysis

The present study was designed to determine which dimensions consumers most commonly associate with a country's image and how important these characteristics are to different product categories. The Back Translation method was used to translate the research instrument from English to French for the Morocco sample. The Back Translation method is considered highly effective in international marketing/business research (Kumar, 2000). Before the administration of the survey, a pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with a small group of respondents with satisfactory results.

The data were gathered from participants who were natives of the Country of Morocco. The sample was a convenience sample because of the availability and easy access of subjects for data collection. The response total was 89 for Morocco (Gender: 49% Female, 46% Male, and 5% no response; Age: 45% "40 – 49 years of age", 35% "Less than 20 years of age", 16% "20 – 29 years of age", and 4% no response; Education: 32% High School Graduate, 23% College Graduate, 21% Master's Level, 11% Some College, 3% Some High School, 1% Elementary, and 9.0% no response).

As previously noted, the main objective of this exploratory study is to examine the impact of the COO on the consumer decision-making process. Data were analyzed using *SPSS* procedures. Information gathered from the survey questionnaires was tabulated and analyzed using bivariate analysis. Line item percentages and the frequency tests, along with Cross-Tabulation analysis, to analyze the data.

RESULTS

Country-of-Origin Effects and Product Categories: Frequencies Analysis

As stated, data collected from Moroccan consumers were analyzed using bivariate analysis. Line item percentages and the frequency tests, along with Cross-Tabulation analysis, to analyze the data. The results showed the country-of-origin effects on product categories, along with the total number of respondents

about each product category. The percentages of responses for each country's preference also are reported.

- For automobiles (N = 89), Germany was favored (59.1%), followed by Japan (35.2%), the U.S. (3.4%), and France (2.3%).
- For major appliances (N = 89), Japan was most favored (38.4%), then Germany (23.3%), the U.S. (20.9%), and France (15.1%).
- For small appliances (N = 86), Japan was most favored (37.2%), then France (33.7%), Germany (11.6%), and the U.S. (11.6%).
- For cameras (N = 89), Japan was most favored (88.8%), then the U.S. (4.5%).
- For televisions (N = 89), Japan was most favored (86.5%), then Germany (6.7%), and the U.S. (4.5%).
- For stereos (N = 89), Japan was most favored (84.3%), then the U.S. (9.0%).
- For Haute Couture (N = 89), France was most favored (76.5%), then the U.S. (16.5%).
- For casual clothes/wear (N = 89), the US was favored (40.2%), then France (32.2%) and developing nations (10.3%).
- For Spirits (N = 89), France was most favored (63.3%), then the U.S. (18.3%), and East European nations and the U.K. (8.3%).
- For wines (N = 89), France was most favored (79.7%), then East European nations (6.8%).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In light of the evidence mentioned above, the goal of this study is to assess the impact of COO on consumers from a North African and Mediterranean culture and an emerging market (i.e., Morocco).

Considering this research need, the focus of this exploratory study is to assess how respondents from Morocco compare products originating from the U.S. versus other countries. Our study provides some of the first known empirical evidence regarding a comparison of the COO impact, and it establishes the link between nations and multi-origin product categories within the Moroccan consumers' framework. The current study's results offer international business organizations' executives with a better understanding of the consumer mindset of their Mediterranean/North African (i.e., Moroccan) market.

This study assesses the impact of culture/country of residence on the perception of COO and consumer decision-making processes in Morocco, as a developing non-Western and North African nation. As reported, Morocco works with the U.S., the European Union (E.U.), and other countries on trade issues within the World Trade Organization (WTO), the U.S.-Morocco Free-Trade Agreement (FTA), the European Union (E.U.) Association Agreement and trade treaties with other countries. These initiatives toward market openness and trade liberalization make Morocco an attractive destination for direct foreign investments by international firms. As global trade and business opportunities continue to expand in Morocco, U.S. businesses will increase commerce in Morocco. This situation presents an exciting challenge to coordinate business and marketing-mix strategies such as product policy, pricing, distribution, and communications.

In general, the findings confirm that product categories from more developed nations receive more favorable evaluations than products from less developed nations. In looking at the COO effects and respondents' perceived quality of the countries under consideration, the results from Morocco reveal that the top four countries with the most significant impacts are considered technologically advanced. Thus, Research Proposition is supported. The findings from this exploratory study confirm other researchers' conclusions that developed nations have the highest quality image and that there is a bias against products from less advanced countries (e.g., Cateora et al., 2019; de Mooij, 2004). Based on the study results, one can conclude that there is a general bias regarding the more technical the product. That is, the more specialized the product the less favorable the perception of the quality of the product(s) if it is made in a less developed nation(s) or nation(s) in the process of industrialization (see Cateora et al., 2019; Ali and Kaynak, 2010; Kaynak et al., 2000).

Our study results may be beneficial to marketing academicians and practitioners to have a better understanding of the underlying reasons and explanations for the differences in consumer preferences and to set more appropriate marketing strategies.

These findings have managerial implications in assisting multinational organizations in their market segmentation and positioning strategies. Precisely, they can segment the market of Morocco and other African and Mediterranean nations, based on the sourcing countries. From a managerial perspective, understanding the country/cultural context will contribute to the success of a business organization's overseas operations. This understanding will help show how respondents from a non-Western, Mediterranean/North Africa country and culture (i.e., Morocco) evaluate product categories from various nations on specific dimensions.

In particular, acquiring this type of understanding can assist business/marketing managers (e.g., the U.S., European, and Chinese/Asian business managers) to be more in-tune with the realities of their international (i.e., Morocco) business environment. The motivation behind this aim is the established belief that Morocco may serve as an example of other Mediterranean/North African countries. As these findings demonstrate, COO does influence product category evaluation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results from this exploratory study face the same limitations as other survey research. For example, participants were given only verbal references to product categories, instead of showing an actual product/product category (i.e., respondents evaluating the quality of an intangible product category rather than the quality of a tangible product category). This is an area that may be of interest for further research. Another possible area for a new study is to assess the impact of other product category cues, such as the role of a prestigious retailer, to compensate for the adverse COO effects. In this exploratory study, the determinants of COO effects were a function of source country consideration (i.e., the degree of economic development). Consideration can be given in future research if the sources/determinants of COO effects are a function of something else, such as cultural similarity/affinity with exporting nations.

However, our exploratory study's findings confirm the conclusion that advanced countries have the highest perceived quality image, and that there is a bias against products from less developed nations. These results are consistent with other researchers' conclusions (see, for example, Cateora et al., 2019; de Mooij, 2004; Kaynak et al., 2000).

Thus, the findings should be viewed in this context. The topical area of the country-of-origin effect on consumer behavior is timely, significant, and controversial. Continued research efforts to include comparisons of buyers in cross-cultural/nations setting are needed, and it may prove very beneficial.

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