

PRODUCT EVALUATION AND PURCHASE INTENTION: IMPACT OF COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN AND EXPERIENCE IN LIVING IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an experiment that compares the perceptions of product quality and purchase intentions of foreign versus home products by Chinese consumers who have had experience living in a western society compared to those living in China. The results indicate experience does affect purchase likelihood for home versus foreign products. Chinese, generally, find country of parts as the best cue in evaluating product quality and purchase intentions.

Keywords: Country of Origin, Country of Design, Country of Manufacture, Country of Parts

INTRODUCTION

As globalisation of the world's economies proceeds at a rapid pace, an area of ongoing interest in international marketing is the influence of the country of origin (COO) on prospective product purchasers. The COO construct is generally defined in the marketing literature as the country where a given product is made (see Tse and Gorn, 1993; Elliott and Cameron, 1994). With over 750 major publications on COO (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002), the motive driving various marketing scholars to study this field is due to the important role COO plays in the formulation of manufacturing, marketing and investment strategies for global and multinational firms (Chinen *et al.*, 2000). In addition, academics are interested in COO because it enables consumers to make inferences in relation to product quality as well as impact on consumers' beliefs about product attributes (Han, 1989).

Economic reform in China has enabled the country to become one of the most attractive consumer goods market in the world (Kaynak and Kara, 2002; *People's Daily*, 2003). Moreover, the economic transformation of the economy has brought a flood of foreign goods and investment into the country (Li, 1997; *People's Review*, 2003) although, initially, these were high prices and not necessarily readily available to all consumers. There was also an increased exposure to western ideas (Li, 1997). As a result of these changes, many Chinese consumers are increasingly likely to travel and study abroad, which enhances Chinese peoples' interaction with international communities. Therefore, it is important to understand Chinese consumers' perceptions concerning the origin of products between their home versus foreign countries, especially as it appears that COO has some influence on consumer

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assessment of products and purchase behaviour (see Liefeld, 1993; Elliott and Cameron, 1994; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Zhang, 1996; Chao, 1998).

The Impact of Country of Origin

The impact of COO on consumer behaviour has been examined in the business and marketing literature for many years (see Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Dinnie, 2004). Empirical studies show that COO can affect consumers in a number of ways, including social status, store or product choice, perceived risk, and, in particular, product evaluation such as quality perception, product attitude or purchase intention (see Liefeld, 1993; Papadopoulos, 1993; Kaynak *et al.*, 2000; Li *et al.*, 2000; Brodowsky, 1998; Chao, 1998; Huddleston *et al.*, 2001).

COO effect is concerned with how consumers perceive products sourced from a particular country (Chinen *et al.*, 2000). Empirical studies have indicated that the influence of COO exists in both product assessment and decision making processes (Reiersen, 1966; Bilkey and Nes, 1982; LaTour and Henthorne, 1990; Jaffe and Martinez, 1995; Zain and Yasin, 1997; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Solomon, 2004) where consumers predict the likelihood that a product manufactured in a certain country will have certain features (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Yu and Albaum, 1999). Moreover, substantial studies have pointed to a systematic bias in favour of products from developed countries such as Germany, US, Japan or Australia. The positive stereotype held by consumers of developed countries is usually associated with high levels of economic and technological development (Wang and Lamb, 1983; Ahmed and d'Astous, 1999; Chinen *et al.*, 2000; Huddleston *et al.*, 2001; Hsieh, 2004). As such, consumers perceive that products from highly industrialized countries are of better quality and perform better.

There is also research to suggest that the level of importance consumers placed on COO depends on the product type (Liefeld, 1993; Zhang, 1996; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001). The majority of COO studies confirm that products that exhibit high complexity or are considered luxury items (i.e. cars, personal computers, cameras, VCRs, TVs, and home theatre systems) are more likely to be affected by the product's made-in origin (see Liefeld, 1993; Ahmed and d'Astous, 1993; 2001; Okechuku and Onyemah, 1999; Piron, 2000).

Although a significant number of studies have been carried out in the COO field, there are two major limitations that have been highlighted by some scholars. Firstly, much of the past research works are wholly based on the made-in label or sometimes referred to as country of manufacture (COM) to investigate consumer behaviour towards products from different countries. Fewer studies have taken into account the fact that global sourcing involves multiple sourcing locations/countries, although an increasing number are investigating COO as a multifaceted construct (Chao, 1993; Samiee, 1994; Li *et al.*, 2000). Secondly, the majority of COO research has been conducted in developed countries, mainly US, Canada and Europe (Zhang, 1996; Wang and Chen, 2004). There are limited studies relating to developing or non-western countries, especially Asian, although studies of these countries are growing. As a consequence of this, our knowledge of COO effects beyond western societies is limited (Li *et al.*, 2000).

Transformation of the Country-of-Origin Concept

Some studies have suggested that globalization has become necessary in today's competitive marketplace with firms often outsourcing various parts of their production and operations to different countries in search of the lowest possible cost and greater expertise (Chao, 2001; Cheung, 2004). This phenomenon has led to products being designed, manufactured and component parts supplied from different countries (Ettenson and Gaeth, 1991; Tse and Lee, 1993; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001). As an illustrative example, a General Motors (GM) car could be designed in Italy, have the engine and transmission components produced in Japan and be assembled in Mexico (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001). Such multinational production has generated a vast number of hybrid goods not only in the automobile sector but also for many electronic items such as TVs or computers (Ettenson and Gaeth, 1991; Tse and Lee, 1993; Li *et al.*, 2000).

The practice of global sourcing has motivated several researchers to focus on multiple facets of COO by making distinctions between countries where products were manufactured, designed or where parts/components were made (Chao, 1993; Tse and Lee, 1993; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001). While various studies have confirmed that each of these production locations have different levels of influence on consumers' perception of product quality (Insch and McBride, 1998; Brodowsky, 1998; Chao, 1998; 2001), it is becoming clear that a decomposition of the COO construct into more specific parts such as country-of-design, country-of-assembly, and country-of-parts/components is essential given the current global marketplace. In general, country-of-design (COD) can be defined as the country where the product was conceived, designed or engineered; country-of-assembly (COA) can refer to the country where the product is assembled or manufactured; and country-of-parts/components (COP) is the country where the parts/components are made (Insch and McBride, 1998; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001).

It is important to identify the origin of aspects of products as these may influence consumer decision making and behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that highly industrialized countries such as Japan, US or Germany are being evaluated as more superior in the case of design capabilities compared with assembly/manufacture and components/parts aspects (Insch and McBride, 1998; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001). While newly industrialized countries (e.g. Mexico, Indonesia and China) are generally viewed as inferior across design, assembly and parts abilities; these countries are perceived somewhat less negatively in regard to the capability of assembly and parts (Insch and McBride, 1998; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001). This lends further support that consumers do make a cognitive distinction on the COO sub-components in their product decision making process. Based on the above elaboration, the following hypotheses have been developed:

- H1: Consumer perceptions of product quality is influenced by
- a) Country-of-Design (COD);
 - b) Country-of- Assembly /Manufacture (COA) and;
 - c) Country-of-Parts/Components (COP)

- H2: Consumer purchase intentions is influenced by
- a) Country-of-Design (COD);
 - b) Country-of- Assembly /Manufacture (COA) and;
 - c) Country-of-Parts/Components (COP)

Experience With a Foreign Country

We believe that *experience* in living in a western country will moderate Chinese consumers' perception of product quality and purchase intention. We liken this experience to acculturation. Acculturation occurs when one's culture is expected to become more like the dominant majority ethnic identity from the original ethnic identity (Quester and Chong, 2001). There have been extensive studies that examine the impact of acculturation on marketing (Burton, 2000), although few focus on country of origin related issues such as individual's view of country capabilities or products sourced from specific countries.

In many cases, acculturation looks at how consumers from one country adapt their attitudes and behaviours of a host culture (Dion and Dion, 1996; Jamal and Chapman, 2000; Suri and Manchanda, 2001). Several works have examined aspects of acculturation and the impact on marketing (Burton, 2000; Seitz, 1998; Chung *et al.*, 2005; Song and Shin, 2004; Steenkamp, 2001). These include issues such as information search (Quester *et al.*, 2001), price sensitivity (Suri and Manchanda, 2001), shopping behaviour (Gentry *et al.*, 1995; Jamal and Chapman, 2000; Ownbey and Horridge, 1997; Xu *et al.*, 2004), response of advertising effort (Palumbo and Teich, 2004) and personal influences (Kim and Kang, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, there is no study, thus far, that looks at how acculturation and, more specifically, experience in a foreign country affects the view consumers have of their home product against foreign products. Yet, a recent study found that Chinese consumers who are acculturated to foreign environments have more positive feelings toward foreign countries' capability in terms of design, assembly and parts/components aspects against those non-acculturated counterparts (Wong *et al.*, 2005). Consumers' experiences in foreign countries therefore shape their consumption as well as attitudes toward products from different countries (Chen *et al.*, 2005; Song and Shin, 2004) and these will be different to those in their home country, even though consumers located in their home countries are increasingly exposed to foreign goods at the same time.

We recognize that categorizing consumers as acculturated or not, based on their residing in a foreign country or otherwise, is an over simplification of the operationalization of the construct and thus a potential limitation of the research. However, we suggest that those studying overseas would be 'receptive' to trying new products and new ideas, which is one core component of acculturation (Schiffman *et al.*, 1981). The reason being is that university students tend to be young and have higher English language proficiency as they are specifically those studying overseas in a foreign language (i.e. English), as well as exposed to local students, Faculty and the local media (Mouw and Xie, 1999; Kashima and Loh, 2006). In fact, the education process may in some cases accelerate acculturation for international students as they become immersed in the local learning environment (Gonzales, 2006).

As such, it is anticipated that adaptation to 'foreign' views would also impact on consumers' evaluation of products sourced from home country versus foreign ones with respect to design

and assembly location, as well as parts/components supply country, and thus modify purchase behaviour (Ownebey and Horridge, 1997, Xu *et al.*, 2004). Such effects would possibly be moderated by attitudes towards home and host countries in general, similar to ethnocentrism (Yagci, 2001), although this is not included within this study. Thus, we also examine Hypothesis 3:

- H3: Consumers, who have experience with a foreign country (i.e. living overseas), will have different perceptions of product quality and purchase intention toward home country source against foreign ones with respect to (a) design (b) assembly and (c) parts/components in compared with consumers in China.

METHODOLOGY

A 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design was used to examine the effects of the three sub-components of COO with two levels of sourcing location. Each respondent was presented with a copy of an advertisement of a car describing product features and information regarding product origin with respect to country of design (China or Germany), country of assembly (China or Germany) and country of parts/components (China or Germany). A realistic market price was specified within the advertisement in order to minimise any price bias. All respondents received identical information with respect to product attributes and price. Only the COO information was manipulated in the experiment. Germany was chosen as a sourcing location because of the long history of trade with China, with over 2,000 projects invested in the last two decades (*People's Daily*, 2000). China was included as the consumers 'home' market. As was discussed earlier on, experience with a foreign country was defined based on where the sample was located at the time of the experiment; those studying in Australia were categorized as experienced with a foreign country.

Respondents were required to make product quality judgments and indicate their purchase intentions for the product. The dependent variables used throughout the experiment were 'overall perceived product quality' and 'purchase likelihood', which are the most commonly employed measures in COO studies (Okechuku and Onyemah, 1999; Chao, 2001; Wang and Chen, 2004).

Data Collection

A self-completion questionnaire was used to collect the data. Chinese students studying a range of English and university programmes in Australia were selected for the 'experience with a foreign country' group of consumers. Approximately 150 surveys were distributed to these students and 133 usable completed surveys were collected. The other sample comprised of university students studying in China through a programme operated by an Australian university. This resulted in 283 returned surveys, with 272 being useable. Ninety percent of the sample was in the 20 to 22 age category. Some researchers have been concerned that student based samples may produce biased findings and limit the levels of applicability in actual consumers (Liefeld, 1993; Samiee, 1994). However, several studies have reported that there was no difference in responses between students and actual consumers (Liefeld, 1993; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To examine the overall impact of the three COO sub-components toward consumer product evaluation and purchase intention, this research employed Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). The multivariate test for main effect and interactions are summarized in Table 1. The results indicate significant effects for COP on both product evaluation and purchase intention (H1c & H2c are supported); while there is no direct main effect for COD and COA (H1ab & H2ab are not supported). Also, experience with a foreign country appears to have a direct impact on purchase intention. However, there is no statistically significant interaction between experience with a foreign country and three COO sub-components (H3abc are not supported). This result reflects that 'experience with a foreign country' does not moderate differences in product perceptions between sourcing from home country versus foreign nations.

The Effect of the COO Sub-components

Previous studies found that the three COO sub-components have a significant impact towards consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions (Insch and McBride, 1998; Chao, 1998 & 2001; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2001). Findings from this research can only confirm that the COP is a significant indicator of quality perceptions and purchase likelihood for high involvement products in the context of the Chinese market. There is no support for either COD or COA. The results imply that the effect of the COO sub-components with respect to design location, assembly/manufacture location and components/parts location on consumer product evaluation and likelihood of purchase may not be a universal phenomenon. This anomaly in regards to previous research may illustrate that differences in culture and market structure between Western and Asian nations could generate different results.

Several studies indicate that the COD, COA and COP were found to have an influence on quality perception for high involvement products (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1993; Brodowsky, 1998). However, our findings seem to suggest that Chinese consumers do not place the same value on these COO sub-components in discriminating product quality as per those studies found in the West, at least for automobiles. There are several possible reasons for this finding. One is that Chinese consumers perhaps perceive components origin information as more related to a set of product attributes in comparison with other origin information of COD and COA, and thus they tend to rely on this dimension (i.e. COP). Indeed, some studies revealed that COD seems to have a greater effect on the aesthetics dimension or symbolic quality evaluation rather than functional quality, while other proposed that COP may have a relatively larger influence in forming quality perception over COA (Tse and Lee, 1993; Li *et al.*, 2000). This may partly explain why the present study only detected COP as the important factor in judging product quality and purchase likelihood across different countries for Chinese consumers. Another possible reason is that the strong presence of multiple country production in China may have complicated the consumers' product evaluation process by using the COO information, while consumers possibly hold different perceptions across COO sub-components to convey a sense of true quality associated with a product. As such, globalization of products may reduce the value of COO components, as consumers may increasingly only experience hybrid products (i.e. those with multiple COO dimensions) and thus these become the norm in regards to consumers' expectations.

The Effect of Experience With a Foreign Country

As indicated in Table 1, experience with a foreign country was found to have a significant impact on the likelihood of purchase. This suggests that consumers' purchase intentions between domestic sources versus foreign ones are influenced by whether a Chinese respondent has experience with a foreign country (living overseas) or not (living in China). However, such direct effects of acculturation only reflect that there is a difference in intention to purchase between products from home country against overseas for Chinese consumers living overseas versus those residing in China. It appears that experience with a foreign country respondents (living overseas) versus 'locals' made no distinction in quality ratings for products from local design, assembly and components against foreign countries since there is no interaction observed between 'experience with living overseas' and various COO sub-components.

According to Wong, Polonsky and Garma (2005), Chinese respondents temporarily living in Australia have shown to be more favourably disposed toward capability of foreign design, assembly/manufacture and components/parts compared to home country, over those counterparts living in China. Researchers attempt to attribute this phenomenon to the fact that Chinese respondents living overseas were exposed to westernized customs, political ideology, or being exposed to a greater variety of foreign products and this may affect their view of China and foreign countries. Therefore, closer contact or direct interaction with other countries might change the perception of country image of some Chinese consumers (Song and Shin, 2004). However, such a modified view does not necessary translate into concrete product evaluation and purchase behaviour decisions. The somewhat equivocal finding implies that Chinese consumer's feelings towards a given country (affective component) can be inconsistent with product judgments (cognition component).

CONCLUSIONS

In decomposing the single COO cue into COD, COA and COP, our study has measured the effects of these components on consumer product evaluation and purchase likelihood. Although earlier general studies have suggested that each of the COO dimensions has an impact on product judgment and purchase intention, this does not seem to be the case for Chinese consumers since COP is the only factor found to be significant in the present study. In the Chinese market, consumers may perceive origin information of components/parts as the most likely to capture the true quality for high involvement products rather than COD and COA. As a result of this, firms with the intent to adopt COO information in its marketing strategies for the Chinese market may need to be less concerned about sourcing decisions for design and assembly locations because such origin information has limited influence on consumer evaluation of product quality and purchase intention. Thus, firms can feel relatively free to explore production sites of design and assembly at any country which may provide competitive costs. In addition, our findings also offer some future research opportunities in understanding how different consumers regard the COO sub-components between western and oriental markets. Given that the majority of COO studies are largely conducted in the West or developed countries, this could offer a challenge as to whether existing theories in

COO field are applicable to consumers from non-western countries. Hence, further studies are needed in the context of the oriental market.

As for the impact of experience with a foreign country, Chinese experience with a foreign country respondents (living overseas) may be distinguished from local Chinese on purchase likelihood for products domestically sourced versus foreign country across design, assembly and components/parts aspects. However, we are not able to claim that such difference is due to the source of origin (i.e. domestic versus foreign) as no relationship exists for experience with a foreign country and the three COO sub-components. Although some studies indicate that people who have cross-cultural exposure appear to have more positive perceptions of that country's capability or are more aware and receptive to its products, practices or ideas (Paswan and Sharma, 2004; Wong *et al.*, 2005), our results do not seem to support these earlier findings. Such phenomenon may be attributed to the fact that production in China has become more sophisticated and has absorbed the technology and style of Western products (Li, 1997). Chinese respondents who have traveled abroad and have exposure to other countries may not be at all impressed by foreign production nowadays. This may explain why the two groups display no difference towards local versus overseas sourcing.

There are, however, some limitations with this work. Acculturation was based on the location of the respondent rather than a more complex multidimensional construct related to cultural assimilation as has been suggested in the literature. Other variables could have been included such as ethnocentrism which would also theoretically impact on how consumers view products from their home and foreign countries. The other issue that may require further research is the sample being used. A more diverse sample may produce different results. We used two student samples and, as such, the views of these groups of people may be similar, whether they are abroad or in their home country. These young people are very much into technology, using the internet, sending SMS, watching cable TV or YouTube.com, and are therefore much more connected to a world beyond their geographic region. Therefore, exposure to foreign products which traditionally would have occurred at the retail level or viewed on television, is available in greater numbers and via multiple media. The respondents surveyed would be the group most likely to access these media channels.

Table 1. Summary of MANOVA Results: The Impact of COD, COA, COP and Experience With a Foreign Country and the Interaction

Source	Factor	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Level of Sig.
COD	Product Quality	.005	1	.005	.002	.148
	Purchase likelihood	23.025	1	23.025	2.099	.966
COA	Product Quality	5.055	1	5.055	1.801	.462
	Purchase likelihood	5.959	1	5.959	.543	.180
COP	Product Quality	9.437	1	9.437	3.363	.041*
	Purchase likelihood	46.175	1	46.175	4.209	.067**
'Experience' with a foreign country	Product Quality	20.712	1	20.712	7.380	.311
	Purchase likelihood	11.273	1	11.273	1.028	.007*
COD X COA	Product Quality	.646	1	.646	.230	.720
	Purchase likelihood	1.411	1	1.411	.129	.632
COD X COP	Product Quality	1.768	1	1.768	.630	.376
	Purchase likelihood	8.615	1	8.615	.785	.428
COA X COP	Product Quality	.226	1	.226	.081	.354
	Purchase likelihood	9.438	1	9.438	.860	.777
COD X COA X COP	Product Quality	.205	1	.205	.073	.386
	Purchase likelihood	8.258	1	8.258	.753	.787
COD X 'Experience'	Product Quality	.202	1	.202	0.72	.200
	Purchase likelihood	18.061	1	18.061	1.647	.789
COA X 'Experience'	Product Quality	2.023	1	2.023	.721	.206
	Purchase likelihood	17.574	1	17.574	1.602	.396
COD X COA X 'Experience'	Product Quality	1.223	1	1.223	.436	.819
	Purchase likelihood	.576	1	.576	.052	.510
COP X 'Experience'	Product Quality	2.731	1	2.731	.973	.554
	Purchase likelihood	3.845	1	3.845	.351	.324
COD X COP X 'Experience'	Product Quality	2.855	1	2.855	1.017	.587
	Purchase likelihood	3.234	1	3.234	.295	.314
COA X COP X 'Experience'	Product Quality	6.655	1	6.655	2.371	.277
	Purchase likelihood	13.023	1	13.023	1.187	.124
COD X COA X COP X 'Experience'	Product Quality	1.877	1	1.877	.669	.715
	Purchase likelihood	1.460	1	1.460	.113	.414

Notes: Statistically Significant ($p < .05$); ** Statistically Significant ($p < .10$).

COD = country of design

COA = country of assembly

COP = country of parts

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