The challenge of publishing research about a never-ending subject for marketing scholars: the country of origin

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Abstract

The Country of Origin (COO) represents one of the main topics in the marketing literature and a large body of knowledge about it has already been published. This commentary essay tries to explain why it seems to be a never-ending subject for marketing scholars and the reason why the paper we published in this Journal few years ago contributed to the literature and has achieved the Google i-10 high citation-impact ranking. Analysing the effect of COO on a specific factor such as brand associations, the use of a methodology that cope with the critics of some scholars about the overstressed of COO in the past research, and the selection of an emerging market - the Chinese one - as country in which testing the COO have helped our paper to be cited. Based on these elements, some future research topics are also suggested.

Keyword: Country of Origin, China, Brand associations

The reasons why the Country of Origins is still an interesting subject

In the marketing literature, the Country of Origin (COO) represents one of the most studied topics and the emphasis seems not decrease along the years. In fact, looking at the number of Google Scholar and Scopus indexed' papers mentioning COO in their title, it is still possible to observe a positive trend in recent years even if a large body of knowledge about this phenomenon has already been produced and published. This flourishing research activity mainly depends on the following five reasons: 1) findings are not consistent and criticisms regarding the COO usefulness in marketing and communication strategies have emerged after years of study, fuelling the debate again; 2) brands can be affected by different aspects that made up the COO and, as a result, scholars had not completed yet all the spectrum of analysis which would help marketers in managing brands in international context; 3) consumer behaviour is affected by COO information, hence also this stream of literature with its many theories and aspects to be analyzed is involved in the topic development in order to better understand behavioural patterns and psychological mechanisms; 4) the economy of new emerging countries (such as China, India, Brazil, etc.) has become so important and different from the "old" economies that research about COO involving these new settings are needed; 5) in the globalized world, the country of production is often different from brand origin and many researchers are trying to evaluate whether and how this discrepancy impacts on product evaluations (e.g. Johnson, Tian, & Lee, 2016).

Our position in the literature

Published in 2013, our research (Checchinato, Disegna, & Vescovi, 2013) examined the effect of the COO of Italian products on spontaneous brand associations in the Chinese population. A sample of Chinese students was asked to freely associate thoughts that come to their minds generated both reading the descriptions of six

real branded products and looking at their pictures. In half of these descriptions, information about the Italian origin of the product was added, in the other half, instead, no information about the COO of the product was mentioned. Correspondence analysis and Chi-square test of independence suggested that Chinese consumers were not affected by the "made in Italy" when this information was added to products' description. Comparing spontaneous associations generated by respondents aware and unaware of the COO, we demonstrated that COO was not a real cue in the brand association formation. In the debate about the influence of COO, these results position our paper with scholars affirming that past research has inflated the influence of COO information because of the methodology used to test this impact (see for instance Samiee *et al.*, 2005). In fact, in most of the published research the COO is artificially exposed and stressed, forcing consumers to not respond to the stimulus as they would do if it was a real buying situation. Since we agreed with this opinion, we tried to respond to the call of designing research where consumers are not forced to evaluate products based on the COO cue (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011a). Our research did not stress the COO cue, but used it as one of the main features of the products, as it happens in a real-life shopping situation.

Our research contributed to the existing literature in two ways. Firstly, because it analysed how COO affects one specific and understudied variable, i.e. brand association, instead of over studied ones such as the generic "product evaluation", or more specific product quality, the purchase intention, or the willingness to pay. Secondly, because of its methodology, since we used a new way to measure whether and how spontaneous brand associations can change on the basis of the COO cue, trying to encompass the bias of some existing experiments mentioned in the literature (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011b; Samiee, Shimp, & Sharma, 2005; Samiee, 2010). As acknowledged by the literature, brand equity depends on brand association, defined by Aaker (1991) as any thoughts linked to the brand in the mind of the consumer, but measuring these thoughts is still difficult both for scholars and practitioners (Till, Baack, & Waterman, 2011). Therefore, developing either new ways or new scales to measure this relationship represents a challenge in the marketing literature, also beyond the COO field. Our paper represents one of the first attempts in which brand associations' measures have been constructed, even if in a multiple categories setting as highlighted by Gordon, James, & Yoshida (2016), hence more research are needed. For example, new brand association scales, such as the one proposed by Gordon et al. (2016) for goods and services, as well as more comprehensive methodologies to capture the multiple facets of them (Supphallen, 2000), have to be considered and analysed. Research should be carried out trying to simulate both real-life and buying situations, without stressing the COO cue to avoid biased results.

Research of the Country of Origin effects in an emerging Country: the China case

Moreover, since previous research highlighted that the COO effects depends on the countries involved in the study, the aim of evaluating the effects on the COO in the Chinese population was an attempt to fill a gap in the literature, because the majority of research are related to Western countries only. However, why researcher should think that emerging countries' consumers judge and consider the foreign origin of products

in a different way? Two main reasons can be suggested: 1) the consumer knowledge of the country of origin features; 2) the ability of these consumers to evaluate branded products based on multiple cues.

Many consumers use COO stereotypes to evaluate products, but the knowledge of stereotypes linked to distant Countries is sometimes very weak, so adding this cue could mean nothing for certain populations. For instance, in our research we analysed Italian brands, but what does Italian origin mean for Chinese people? Are they able to add values to products thanks to this information? Some studies revealed that Italy has a strong image in some categories. Moreover, previous research also indicates that consumers in less developed economies prefer foreign brands coming from more developed countries or regions, because these brands are thought to represent high-quality and fashionable styles (see for instance Zhuang et al., 2008; Zhou and Belk, 2004). Given these assumptions, in our research we expected to find at least these stereotypes attached to the "made in Italy" products presented to the sample, but this was not the case. One possible reason, that needs more investigations, is that our Chinese sample was not so aware of Italian stereotypes. Therefore, our findings revealed a need in studying whether the COO perception is affected by cultural, geographical, economic and/or historical distance between the two analysed countries. In fact, in our research we highlighted that some scholars recognize that the awareness of a COO would also differ according to the geographical distance. A hierarchy of COOs seems to exist in the people's mind and it ideally start from the macro level (multi-country areas), go through the micro level (countries) and finally to the nano level (regions, provinces). This fact has been successively remarked by Stoenescu, Capatina and Cristea (2015, 2677) who stated "for a low COO affinity a positioning as 'Western European' rather than of a specific country could be more effective", as well as by Hu and Checchinato (2015), where the "Made in Italy" association was found not clear for most of the observed Chinese consumers who considered more comprehensible the idea of the "Made in Europe".

Concerning the consumers' ability in the evaluation of branded products based on multiple cues, it should be noted that consumers generally base their evaluations on various descriptive, inferential or informational cues and one of them is the COO. The ability of evaluating products also depends upon the consumer's education and their knowledge about the product category. In comparison with Western consumers, the Chinese ones have only recently begun to compare and judge brands, due to their institutional and political situations, and this can affect their evaluation process in different ways. Consistently with their culture, Chinese people give great importance to the functional elements of products as much as to the well-known brand. Brands are a signal of status, so their image and positioning gain greater importance because the cultural dimension of power distance and the relevance of the opinions of others (linked to collectivism in the Hofstede framework) are higher than in other countries. The importance of COO is therefore affected by the cultural context. As demonstrated in a cross cultural studies by Godey et al. (2012), in China the COO is less important than design, brand itself, price and guarantee.

Future research suggestions

Therefore, future research should consider the hierarchy level of the origins but also the population preferences in evaluating brands. New comparative studies which involve other developing or emerging countries are needed both to explore whether any cultural bias exists and to verify our findings beyond the Chinese market.

Moreover, the COO has been considered such a complex element that some scholars have preferred to divide it in Country of Design, Country of Brand, Country of Manufacturing and so on, to highlight the differences in the phenomenon. Concerning this vision and the scarce knowledge of developing countries' population about stereotypes of foreign countries, we embrace the notion of brand origin confusion (BOC) developed in the last decade literature. In fact, as highlighted by Magnusson et al. (2011a), it is almost impossible for consumers to keep track of design, part and assembly origins. Future research may analyse the COO effect on brand associations and the BOC, comparing more countries both as the country of origin of the brand and as the country in which consumers evaluating these COO(s) live.

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