

# UNIQUENESS PERCEPTION AND WILLINGNESS TO BUY PROTECTED GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN VERSUS DOPPELGÄNGER BRANDS

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**Abstract.** *This study explores what drives consumers' judgments and decisions – uniqueness perception of a foreign product with protected geographical origin cue or uniqueness perception of a domestic doppelgänger product. We find that uniqueness perception of domestic brands has greater impact on willingness to buy domestic brands compared with the uniqueness perception of the brand holding geographical origin labels. Next, our data shows that uniqueness perception of domestic doppelgänger brands has influence not only on willingness to buy such brands (positive influence) but also negative influence on willingness to buy true and unique brands denominated by protected origin. Thus, by perceiving the uniqueness of a domestic brand positively, consumers discount the original, unique and legally protected brand and are less willing to buy such a brand. The study offers theoretical implications for ingroup positivity and outgroup negativity research as well as managerial implications for managers and policy makers indicating how to improve marketing efforts and regulatory support to geographical origin labels.*

**Key words:** *uniqueness perception; protected geographical origin; doppelgänger product.*

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## Introduction

A number of international marketing studies established that product origin cues can have important influence on consumer behavior (see for example, Pharr, 2005; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). Usually, countries enjoying a strong country image benefit from origin cues, and consumers abroad embrace such foreign products (Roth & Romeo, 1992). However, some studies indicate that the processes behind the country of origin effects are not fully understood (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). In this context, COO effects related to food products constitute a particularly important knowledge gap and remain underresearched (e.g., Gineikiene et al., 2016; Krystallis & Chryssochoidis, 2009; Orth & Firbasova, 2003). Food origin cues can influence purchase decisions independently of other cues (Holdershaw et al., 2013; Loureiro & Umberger, 2005; Hoffmann, 2000). One specific area that recently attracted researchers' attention relates to the positive effects of origin cues when products originate from protected geographical origin (Fontes et al., 2012; Espejel et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2011; Requillart, 2007; Espejel et al., 2011, 2009, 2008; Menapace et al., 2011, 2010, 2009; Santos et al., 2005).

However, on the other hand, literature documents a number of studies showing that consumers favor domestic products as unique, authentic and genuine, and such perceptions are subjective and socially constructed (e.g., Lusk & Briggeman, 2009; Dimara & Skuras, 2003). Since products with protected geographical origin first of all offer the benefits of uniqueness and traditionalism to the consumers, it remains unclear how to reconcile those two propositions and what will drive consumers' judgments and decisions – uniqueness perception of the foreign product with protected geographical origin cue or uniqueness perception of the domestic doppelgänger product.

This paper aims to fill an important gap in understanding the differences in consumers' perception of uniqueness between foreign products with geographical indication and domestic doppelgänger products. Simultaneously, we control for the influence of consumer ethnocentrism.

The current paper aims to contribute to the existing literature in three ways. First, to our knowledge, this study is among the first to document the effects of uniqueness on domestic doppelgänger products versus foreign products holding protected geographical origin. None of the previous studies attempted to clarify how consumers perceive uniqueness of original protected origin products and their domestic doppelgängers (domestic products which either formerly had the same generic names or follow a similar way of manufacturing and communication), and this study aims to fill in this research gap. Second, we seek to provide wider theoretical implications in terms of how effects of ingroup positivity and outgroup negativity can be mitigated by perception of uniqueness of domestic versus foreign products. Thus, we shed additional light and offer a better understanding of how different uniqueness related factors manifested in consumer

preferences for unique and doppelgänger brands. Third, our findings may provide additional insights for policy makers as well as open further avenues for research trying to answer questions as to what drives preferences for unique and doppelgänger brands.

## **1. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development**

In 1993, the EU introduced the Protected Food Name scheme that aimed to identify products produced, processed and prepared within a specific geographical area, and with features and characteristics attributable to that area. One of the first and well-known brands joining the protected geographical origin scheme was Italian cheese Parmigiano Reggiano. Subsequently, in 2008, the European Court of Justice clarified that only Italian cheeses bearing the protected designation of origin Parmigiano Reggiano can be sold under the name of Parmesan or similar names. After these EU decisions a number of domestically produced brands had to change their names and consumers encountered two types of products: original products (with protected geographical origin such as Parmigiano Reggiano) and their doppelgängers (domestic products which either formerly had the same generic names or follow a similar way of manufacturing and communication).

Geographical origin cues were developed to attest to the specific traditions and qualities of food and mark specific link to the region where the product comes from (e.g., the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) widely used in EU) or define a traditional production process (e.g., Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) used in EU) (European Commission, 2016). Ittersum et al. (2007, p. 2) defined the protected geographical origin product as “a product whose quality and/or fame can be attributed to its region of origin and which is marketed using the name of the region of origin”. Labels of protected origin have been introduced in order to assist consumers in recognizing traditional quality which relies on their regional origin (Pharr, 2005), for example, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese from Italian Parmigiano region or a sparkling wine Champagne from French Champagne region. Consumers trust protected origin brands more because they perceive that the producers are committed to developing quality products through productive processes with strict quality controls (Espejel et al., 2011). Moreover, brands registered under these geographical origin schemes are legally protected against imitation or misuse of the product name (European Commission, 2016) and are marketed as unique products.

Brand uniqueness is defined as “the degree to which customers feel the brand is different from competing brands – how distinct it is relative to competitors (Netemeyer et al., 2004, p. 211). International marketing studies identify uniqueness as one of the most important concepts in consumers behavior area and a significant attribute of brand equity, which let them stand out of a great variety of comparable products (Christodoulides et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2008; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Brands which are perceived as unique, usually are better memorized by customers, and it leads to greater brand awareness, favoritism or price premium (Aaker, 1996).

International marketing literature identifies uniqueness as an important factor in consumer decision making, and companies across the world widely use uniqueness in their marketing strategy to create positive associations and position their brands in a wide range of products. Another literature stream focuses on analyzing the situations when consumers choose non-unique goods. Most widely researched non-unique goods are counterfeit goods – illegally made products that resemble the genuine goods and often are lower-quality and lower priced replicas of products that typically possess high brand value (Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999). Such products are usually made with the intention to deceive (Ha & Lennon, 2006). In contrast, doppelgänger brands are legally produced brands that resemble genuine goods, but they are not necessarily of lower quality and price, and they do not seek to deceive consumers. Doppelgänger brands mimic various aspects and capitalize on similarities with the original brand, however, they are also able to build up their own brand positive associations. Indeed, prior research provides some evidence that doppelgänger brands can introduce a competing set of brand meanings and alter the consumer behavior (e.g., Giesler, 2012).

The literature on imitating and doppelgänger brands mainly concentrates on showing the negative effects of these brands. More specifically, doppelgänger brands try to capitalize on established associations between the original brands and consumers by using various marketing instruments (i.e. names, slogans, labeling), and this connection can undermine the perceived original brand's or product's authenticity (Thompson et al., 2006). Moreover, doppelgänger brands can harm reputation of genuine brands (Wang & Song, 2013) or undermine the legitimacy of a technological innovation (Giesler, 2012). Such factors as individual-level motives, product price, uniqueness, and availability can contribute to the decision to purchase imitation products (e.g., Wilcox et al., 2009; Bloch et al., 1993).

Looking deeper, consumer's perceptions of uniqueness and the associated buying behavior related to the origin of a product can partly be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). More specifically, people achieve a positive identity through ingroup favoritism – alignment with positively valued in-groups and differentiation from negatively valued out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1982). Because in-groups are viewed as belonging to the self, people have “the systematic tendency to evaluate one's own membership group (the in-group) or its members more favorably than a non-membership group (the out-group) or its members” (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 3). Through a social comparison process, domestic products are associated and identified with own products and represent the in-group; by contrast, protected origin products are seen as foreign products and thus are regarded as belonging to the out-group. Thus, by thinking about the uniqueness of domestic products, people reflect on the self and tend to evaluate these products as more unique than foreign products and, in turn, are more willing to buy domestic products. As a result, we expect that:

*H1a: Consumer perceived uniqueness of the domestic doppelgänger brand will be positively related to willingness to buy the domestic doppelgänger brand.*

*H1b: Consumer perceived uniqueness of the domestic doppelgänger brand will be negatively related to willingness to buy the original (foreign) brand with protected origin.*

In contrast, previous research suggested that country of origin cues can assist in associating a product with exoticness and uniqueness (Batra et al., 2014; Li & Monroe, 1992) and, for example, products from the original factory are perceived as more authentic (Newman & Dhar, 2014). Similarly, research in protected origin area shows that consumers are willing to pay the highest price for a product with a PDO label, followed by a product with a PGI label (Aprile et al., 2012; Menapace et al., 2011); consumers are willing to pay more for PGI-labelled than non-PGI-labelled products (Menapace et al., 2009; Santos & Ribeiro, 2005). Value of the origin depends on and is moderated by such attributes as commercial brand, price, type of bottle and variety of grape for wines (Perrouy et al., 2006). In addition, some studies show that such antecedents as knowledge, loyalty, and beliefs about protected origin influence consumers' decision-making and purchase behavior directly or through the perceived quality (e.g., Sepúlveda et al., 2010; Ittersum et al., 2007; Van der Lans et al., 2001). Since in our case consumers recognize the uniqueness of protected origin brands, they should in turn denigrate the value of their doppelgänger domestic brands. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H2a: Consumer perceived uniqueness of the original protected origin (foreign) brand will be positively related to willingness to buy the original protected origin (foreign) brand.*

*H2b: Consumer perceived uniqueness of the original protected origin (foreign) brand product will be negatively related to willingness to buy the domestic doppelgänger brand.*

In the current study, consumer ethnocentrism serves as a control variable for the effects of uniqueness on willingness to buy domestic and foreign products. Consumer ethnocentrism is defined as "beliefs held by (American) consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products" (Shimp & Sharma, 1987, p. 280). Consumers with high sense of ethnocentrism consider purchasing imported products as being wrong because it hurts the domestic economy, causes loss of jobs, and is unpatriotic (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Ethnocentrism is positively linked to preferences for domestic products and negatively linked to purchases of all foreign products (Klein, 2002; Klein & Ettenson, 1999). A substantial body of research shows that consumer ethnocentrism has a significant negative impact on foreign product judgment (e.g., Klein, 2002; Klein et al., 1998; Sharma et al., 1995; Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and foreign product ownership (e.g., Klein, 2002; Klein et al., 1998). We, thus, expect that consumer ethnocentrism will be negatively related to willingness to buy a foreign product holding a protected origin label and positively related to willingness to buy a domestically-made doppelgänger brand.

## 2. Study setting, measures and data collection

The study is based on a quantitative research method, where the core construct is protected designation of origin products and their doppelgänger products. For the quantitative empirical study, we selected Lithuania – a developed, open economy and trade intensity country that has a wide variety of domestic and foreign products with a protected designation origin and their doppelgänger products in various product categories.

The respondents were presented with two well-known brands of cheese and a given number of questions related with feelings, evaluations, perceptions and intentions. The study included Parmigiano Reggiano (a widely available PDO cheese in Lithuania) as a brand holding protected geographical origin. To represent the doppelgänger brand, we selected a Lithuanian-made brand Džiugas, which was formerly using a brand name Parmezanas.

For the operationalization of the constructs, we used scales that had been validated and tested in previous research. The main criterion to select our scales was the principle of scale validity and parsimony. We used scales validated by previous research and some scales coming specifically from PDO literature. Brand uniqueness was measured using Christodoulides et al. (2009) scale uniqueness factor (a 3-item scale asking to evaluate the uniqueness of the brand (example item: *very different*; see the Appendix for a complete list of scales and items). Buying intention was measured using a scale previously tested in PDO research: Espejel and Fandos (2009) 3-items scale (example item: *I have the intention of buying this cheese brand again*). Consumer ethnocentrism was measured using a 4-item scale (example item: *We should buy from foreign countries only those products that we cannot obtain within our own country*) (Klein et al., 1998, Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Two hard cheese brands were selected for the research: Parmigiano Reggiano (as a unique and original PDO cheese) and Lithuanian-made brand Džiugas (as a doppelgänger brand, formerly known as Parmezanas).

Data for this study were collected using a convenience adult sample between the period of April 27 – May 7, 2013. The sample consisted of 312 consumers, 39% of which were men. The age of respondents ranged from 16 years old to 78 years old with a mean of 34.91 years (SD=12.16). Most survey participants (78%) came from the biggest city in Lithuania, had a higher education (76%) and had an average or above average income per one family member (79%). Compared to the general population profile of Lithuania, the sample included more women, younger and urban respondents with higher income (Statistics Lithuania, 2016).

### *Measurement and structural model*

We investigated the dimensionality, reliability and validity of our construct measures via a confirmatory factor analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Composite reliabilities ranged from 0.86 to 0.92, while average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.66 to 0.79. To test our hypotheses, we estimated a structural equation model with

LISREL 9.1, which produced an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 278.73$ ,  $df = 94$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.079$ ,  $CFI = 0.964$ ,  $SRMR = 0.053$ ) (for results see Figure 1).

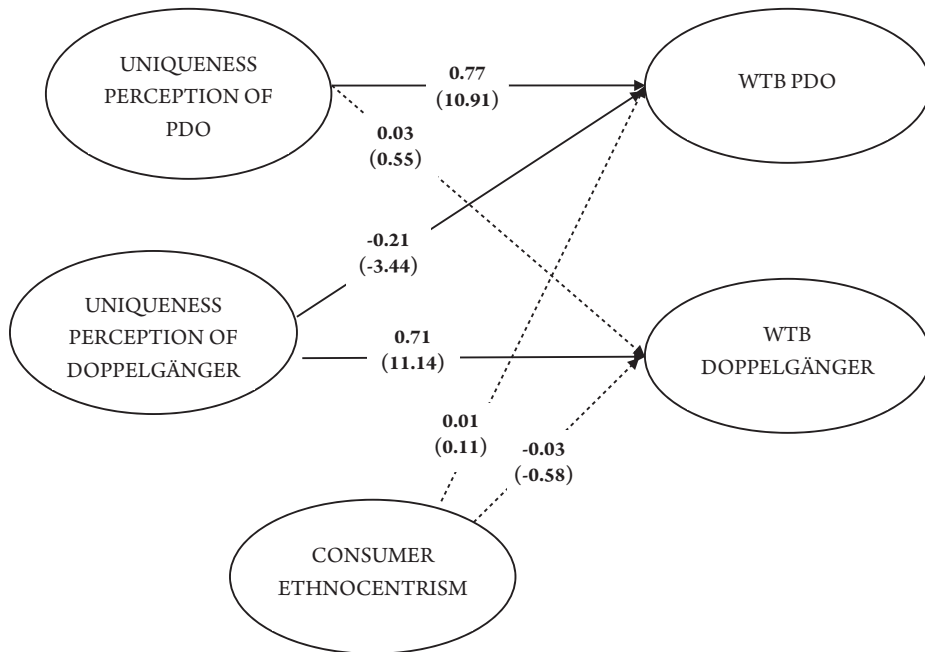


FIGURE 1. Uniqueness perception and willingness to buy protected geographical origin versus doppelgänger brands

Note: standardized estimates shown (t-values in brackets), non-significant paths are dashed; all p-values <0.01

Uniqueness perception of the doppelgänger product has a positive impact on willingness to buy the domestic brand ( $\beta = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a negative impact on willingness to buy the unique original PDO brand ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). It means that consumers who perceived a doppelgänger product as unique tend to choose and are willing to buy it more than products with protected designation of origin. Thus hypotheses H1a and H1b are confirmed. In contrast, uniqueness perception of the original PDO product is positively related to willingness to buy the PDO brand ( $\beta = 0.77$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which confirms hypothesis H2a. However, we found non-significant effect of uniqueness perception of the original PDO product on willingness to buy the domestic doppelgänger brand, and hypothesis H2b is therefore rejected. These results show that consumer perceived uniqueness of brands with protected designation of origin is related and leads to willingness to buy these products. On the other hand, this perception also means that consumer perceived PDO product uniqueness is not related with willingness to buy doppelgänger products. To sum up, uniqueness perception of the domestic doppelgänger brand is a stronger predictor of willingness to buy

compared with uniqueness perception of the PDO product. Finally, consumer ethnocentrism has no impact on willingness to buy the original PDO brand or the domestic doppelgänger brand.

### **3. Theoretical discussion and implication**

Our study answers the call for more research into importance of country of origin information on brands holding protected geographical origin (Pharr, 2005). Such origin cues seek to secure the product's uniqueness. However, our results demonstrate that uniqueness perceptions of domestic products have greater impact on willingness to buy domestic and foreign brands compared with the uniqueness perception of the brand holding geographical origin labels. Such findings offer several theoretical implications. First of all, based on social identity literature, we, indeed, find support for proposition that people evaluate own membership group and its products more favorably than a non-membership group and its products (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2010). Next, our data shows that uniqueness perception of domestic doppelgänger brands has a positive effect on willingness to buy such brands and negative influence on willingness to buy true and unique brands denominated by protected origin. Thus, by perceiving positively domestic brand uniqueness, consumers discount the original, unique and legally protected brand and are less willing to buy such a brand. However, our results also show that positivity towards ingroup products exceeds the negativity towards the outgroup products, which is in line with studies showing stronger evidence for rewarding the ingroup rather than derogating the outgroup (Mummendey & Otten, 1998).

Second, Pharr (2005) proposed that origin cues can become even more salient for products holding protected geographical origin labels. Our data provide evidence that uniqueness perception of a brand holding geographical origin is strongly related to willingness to buy such a brand. However, no negative effect towards the doppelgängers brands was obtained – thus, even though people value uniqueness of Parmigiano Reggiano, this does not deter them from buying the doppelgänger brand Džiugas.

Our study findings show that ethnocentrism effects are non-existent in the case of protected origin products and their doppelgängers. This is somewhat in line with the suggestions by Balabanis & Diamantopoulos (2004) who propose that ingroup positivity and negativity effects may not be limited to national frontiers but be dependent on such transnational groupings like the EU. In our case, it might be that consumers associate protected origin products with the products belonging to own group (because Lithuania is part of EU, as Italy is) and in contrast, they see domestic doppelgänger brands as not purely domestic since they portray and resemble foreign brands. Another explanation can be offered by Herche (1992): the effect of consumer ethnocentrism diminishes for foreign products that are culturally, politically, and socially similar to the consumers' home-products. Thus, because doppelgänger and protected origin brands are similar, consumers may not necessarily have moral or economic concerns in buying both types of brands.



#### **4. Managerial implications**

The EU recognizes the importance of the geographical origin of a product as a source of competitive advantages through the protection of registered brands (Orth et al., 2005). Our study shows that even legally protected PDO brands do not necessarily enjoy uniqueness benefits, and their doppelgänger can still build much stronger positions in consumers' minds. Several managerial implications may be derived from the findings of the current study.

First of all, taking into account fierce competition for consumer's preferences among brands, PDO products should confidently exploit all opportunities in order to enhance their competitive advantage. Our study findings suggest that PDO product managers should improve attention and efforts to brand positioning, advertising messages and the whole marketing strategies to PDO orientated communication. Enhanced knowledge about PDO product uniqueness, PDO label awareness would help consumers to better understand the differences between PDO and doppelgänger products. Thus, companies should pay attention to wider marketing activities and educate their potential consumers about the PDO product: what it is like, its benefits, how to recognize it, etc.

Second, our findings confirm that there is intergroup bias effect when consumers perceive ingroup members (domestic doppelgänger product) as more positive than outgroup members (foreign PDO products). However, research shows that this intergroup bias might be reduced using dual-identity strategy (Gaertner et al., 1996). Dual-identity refers to a situation, when a product has associations with both local and foreign origin, e.g. German bread manufactured according to a Lithuanian (domestic) recipe (Gineikiene et al., 2016). In our case, certain domestic country associations with PDO products, i.e. specific packaging, local celebrities in advertising etc., might diminish or enhance the value perception of such brands.

Finally, this study and its outcomes can be useful for policy-makers trying to protect manufacturers' and consumers' rights. In many cases, doppelgänger products get added value by using direct and indirect associations with PDO products. Policy-makers should consider how to better inform consumers about benefits of PDO products as well as doppelgänger products.

#### **5. Limitations and directions for future research**

Our study sheds additional light on understanding how uniqueness perception is related to willingness to buy protected origin brands versus domestic doppelgänger products. Several issues merit attention for further research. First of all, for greater generalizability and validation, future research would benefit from replicating this study in different research settings. Results may be different in other areas, where educational level as well as familiarity with foreign products may be different. As consumer preferences for foreign brands may be related to different levels of country development, a cross-cultural

study with multi-country data may provide additional insights into understanding this phenomenon. For example, Batra et al. (2000) demonstrated that consumers in developing countries perceive foreign brands as status-enhancing.

Moreover, this study considered only one product category – cheese. More product categories should be addressed by future research, as previous studies found that country of origin effects are product-specific (e.g., Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2004; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). To test the generalizability of our findings, future researchers could examine whether current findings apply to a broader set of products, such as wines, beers, hams, olives, breads etc. Also, it would be interesting to determine the effects for product categories that vary on several dimensions, for example higher vs. lower involvement products or conspicuous vs. non-conspicuous products.

Next, alternative explanation to our findings can be that attitudes toward familiar brands are stronger and more accessible (Fazio et al., 1989; Kardes et al., 1986) and have more extensive associations (Bettman & Sujan, 1987). Therefore, another promising research area would be further analysis of the effect with reference to brand names and the possibility of brands to moderate or intensify this phenomenon. Also, in the light of current results, future research should consider making use of hypothetical brands that would strengthen the internal and external validity of the findings.

Furthermore, scholars might take interest in additional influencing variables, such as individual traits. It would be useful to approach the issue considering more factors of psychological nature, such as consumer susceptibility to normative influence, uncertainty avoidance, cosmopolitanism. Finally, further research could focus not only on the influence of uniqueness on purchase intention, we encourage future researchers to examine its real impact on final purchasing behavior and other similar outcomes, such as recommendation, positive word of mouth, etc.

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### Appendix. Study scales

<b>Intention to buy PDO product. Scale adopted from Espejel, &amp; Fandos (2009)</b>	$\alpha=0.85$
bp1: I have the intention of buying “Parmigiano Reggiano” again.	0.83
bp2: I would recommend “Parmigiano Reggiano” to other people in the future.	0.93
bp3: Providing that I buy under the same buying conditions I will prefer “Parmigiano Reggiano”.	0.78
<b>Intention to buy doppelgänger product. Scale adopted from Espejel, &amp; Fandos (2009)</b>	$\alpha=0.90$
bd1: I have the intention of buying “Džiugas” again.	0.92
bd2: I would recommend “Džiugas” to other people in the future.	0.96
bd3: Providing that I buy under the same buying conditions I will prefer “Džiugas”.	0.81
<b>Uniqueness of PDO product. Scale adopted from Christodoulides et al. (2009).</b>	$\alpha=0.92$
up1: Cheese “Parmigiano Reggiano” is very different.	0.90
up2: Cheese “Parmigiano Reggiano” is valuable.	0.92
up3: Cheese “Parmigiano Reggiano” is rare.	0.95
<b>Uniqueness of doppelgänger product. Scale adopted from Christodoulides et al. (2009).</b>	$\alpha=0.89$
ud1: Cheese “Džiugas” is very different.	0.86
ud2: Cheese “Džiugas” is valuable.	0.89
ud3: Cheese “Džiugas” is rare.	0.91
<b>Consumer Ethnocentrism. Klein et al. (1998).</b>	$\alpha=0.84$
cet1: Lithuanian products first, last, and foremost.	0.80
cet2: We should purchase products manufactured in Lithuania instead of letting other countries get rich at our expense.	0.90
cet3: We should buy from foreign countries only those products that we cannot obtain within our own country.	0.85
cet4: Lithuanian consumers who purchase products made in other countries are responsible for putting their fellow Lithuanian out of work.	0.82