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# Table of content

Human Resource and Quality Management and Colliding Gyroscopes. An Alternative Way of Looking at Value Creation in Organizations .....	<b>203</b>
<i>Joop VINKE</i>	
<i>Loredana ORHEI</i>	
General Considerations on Leadership in the Hospitality Industry. Conceptual Analysis and Practical Studies .....	<b>213</b>
<i>Andreia ISPAS</i>	
Why Financial Strength Comes from People. The Case of IBM .....	<b>221</b>
<i>Liviu ILIEȘ</i>	
<i>Melinda PLEȘCAN</i>	
<i>Ioana Natalia MUREȘAN</i>	
Study on the Impact of Economic Instability in Mehedinti County SMEs Management .....	<b>227</b>
<i>Ecaterina Cristina AVRAM (CACALICEANU)</i>	
Diagnosing the Potential of Renewable Energy in Romania .....	<b>237</b>
<i>Ionuț-Cosmin BĂLOI</i>	
Design Challenges for Innovation Management on Agro-Food Sector .....	<b>247</b>
<i>Gianita BLEOJU</i>	
Considerations on Performance Management Models of Work Teams in the Context of Globalization .....	<b>263</b>
<i>Daniela HAȘ</i>	
Country-of-Origin Effect in International Trade .....	<b>271</b>
<i>Andreea APETREI</i>	
<i>Claudia PETRUȘCA</i>	
Strategic Approaches Within the Mobile Telecommunications from Romania Using the Pehrsson Model .....	<b>277</b>
<i>Georgeta-Mădălina MEGHIȘAN</i>	
Contingency Factors of Virtual Organizations' Emergence .....	<b>285</b>
<i>Alexandru Ionuț ROJA</i>	

# COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECT IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Andreea APETREI \*  
Claudia PETRUȘCA \*\*

*Due to the globalization tendency, the companies are faced with the situation of responding to identical or increasingly similar needs that evolve in the same direction on different markets. However, at the same time, within the new markets, the companies are confronted with the situation of their products' rejection due to the fact that the physical or economic access of the consumers to the product, the purchasing behaviour, the consume characteristics and the manner in which consumers can dispose of the product, greatly depend on the culture of each country. This article presents the basic elements of the country-of-origin effect. First, it presents the characteristic of this effect. Secondly, it analyzes the forms in which the country-of-origin effect can have for different specialists or different fields of research. This effect can be called the "prism effect" for the global management, "the made-in principle" for marketing management or "country's brand" for marketers. Thirdly, the present study analyzes the causes which determine the appearance of this effect. There can be social, economic, environmental, development causes but the most important factor of the country-of-origin effect represents the cultural issues. The fourth part consists of a personal analysis of the causes of the problem, and the fifth presents some ways to overcome a negative effect. In conclusion, we suggest that international companies must pay special attention in analyzing the prism effect of their products on the new market in order to adjust certain perceptions by an adequate marketing.*

## Key Words:

Country-of-origin  
effect,  
stereotype,  
international  
management.

JEL Classification: **D21, F23, M16, M21.**

## 1. Introduction

They say that any behaviour occurs based on a culture (Guiso *et al.*, 2006) because the cultural factors are those that may lead to a correct explanation of the consume models and of the behaviour of different products' consumers (Andersen & Chao, 2003). That is why, in order to appropriately evaluate the cultural impact on a business, any manager must determine the role that culture plays on the market of his products. The culture can influence the success of a company through the *consumer's culture*, which comprises those cultural factors that determine the behaviour and the buyer's

manner of taking decisions, and the *business culture*, which represents those cultural factors that influence business behaviour.

In the international management, this situation is even more complicated since the cultural differences between the consumers and the decision people in the companies, may lead to different perceptions and behaviours even within similar markets. In the search of international similar markets of products, it is very important that the responsible person and the international strategy understand the cultural differences and speculate the similarities between them (Mulhbacher, 2006). The latter represents the source of adaptation, the premise of

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standardization and personalization of international marketing (Danciu, 2001).

## 2. Country-of-origin effect

An aspect regarding global marketing is that, the perceptions and attitudes of a certain country extend on its products. These perceptions contribute to what is called "the country of origin effect", these impressions and stereotypes become part of the brand image and contribute to its labelling. People can distinguish what is foreign as something different and potentially threatening for their existent behaviour models. That is why companies minimize their foreign character and try to adapt it to the local market. However, when they want to introduce a worldwide-recognized high quality product, foreign identification offers an advantage on the market. Thus, the success on the market may depend on the company's capacity to adapt to the local scene or the capacity to convince the local buyers that foreign products are better. In the international trade, when products are delivered from one country to the other, the producers must label their products with the country of origin, this operation is generally required in the export/import documents as well.

The country-of-origin will influence admissibility, the customs taxes, their rights to special taxes or preferential trade, antidumping programs or different governmental decisions. Currently, many products represent the result of an assembly of a large number of pieces and parts that belong to different countries and all these may be assembled in a third country. In such cases, it is very difficult to decide which the country of origin of the product is, and different rules are applied in order to correctly determine the country of provenience. Generally, the goods change their country of origin only if the work or materials added are from a second country, the products have been substantially modified and the goods change their name, price or even use. The added value from the second country can be a problem.

The country of origin effect represents that perception on a certain country that is extended a priori on the products fabricated in that country (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000). The country-of-origin effect on a product is, practically, the perception of an individual on a good, which is influenced by the brand nationality, perception that is reflected on any attribute of the product. This effect is influenced by the brand of the country of origin as well. As any company may become a brand, a country may become a brand too. These impressions or stereotypes of a country of origin become a part of the brand image and contribute to labelling the brand.

## 3. The forms of the origin effect

### a. The prism effect

In intercultural management, the country of origin effect is encountered with the denomination of "prism effect". The perception of a certain good or service is the product of the interaction between the physical aspects of the universe and the manner of thinking resulted after the

past experiences. In this manner, it is emphasized the fact that, the prism effect appears as a result of an already existent perception on a country, perception that is also reflected on the products achieved by that country. The prism effect is defined as the "modification of strong points and weaknesses of the product of a company by crossing over the regional or national limits (borders)" (Zait, 2002).

The effects of this crossing over can be of strengthening, reduction, transparency and darkening. The strengthening effect characterizes a product that benefits from a positive perception of the consumers' part on a new market (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000). When a product is launched on a new market, the potential clients have a perception on it, on which is based the image on the product country of origin. The success elements are especially derived due to the positive stereotypes that the country which produces the product enjoys within the new market, and also due to a well-achieved marketing campaign, "personalized" to the market where the product is launched.

*The reduction prism effect* is the opposite of the strengthening effect and appears when the products launched on the new market are perceived as being unqualified. The prism effect that the products benefit from in this situation is a negative one, the citizens of the receiving country having an unfavourable perception on the country where the goods are fabricated.

*The transparency effect characterizes* the situation when the products are perceived as such, the closest to reality as possible, without a reduction or augmentation of their opinion of these. As the name explains, the perception of a good is transparent, through which it can be clearly seen that this effect equals with zero.

*The opaque prism effect* is the most inappropriate effect that a producer's product might have. As the opaque denomination expresses, the effect is a null one, through which the light does not penetrate, which does not allow forming a perception or an image. When a product determines such an opaque effect, the company must be aware that that product represents nothing for the new market, says "nothing" about the country of origin or about the brand. The darkening appears in the case of products which have no impact on population, due to the lack of information about the country of origin and the product, which determines this barrier in the creation of a perception.

### b. The "Made in" Principle

*The country of origin effect* influences the image of a product because of the perception that the consumer has on the country where the good was fabricated. Thus, the notions of country of origin effect and the principle "Made in" are, in fact, names of the same experiences; the perception of an individual on a country influences the manner in which this regards the products of a country a priori.

The principle "Made in" was introduced for the first time in trade by England, in 1877. After the First World War, very many German products invaded the British market. In

order to throw obstacles in the German merchants' way whose number grew more and more and whose business were going better and better, the Englishmen forced them to write on their products "Made in Germany", convinced that would no longer sell. Only that the German products were of good quality and the population continued to buy them and even especially look for them. Thus, Germany became a strong brand and a guarantee of quality, reliability and even perfection.

In the products' labelling, there are origin rules under different national laws and international treaties. While many products of the European Union bear the label of the country of origin and are marked with the expression "Made in EU" or made anywhere else in Europe but not in the European Union. This may include any country with geographical proximity to Europe or the borders of the European Union, which wants to adhere to the union, or Made in Europe, made anywhere in the world, except Europe or the European Union. These tactics are intended to disappoint the consumer, because a buyer who is not an expert in English may believe, looking at the label, that the respective product is made in Europe.

The label "made in" is an intangible attribute distinguished from the tangible characteristics of the product or service. This does not decrease the potential impact on the product's success on the market. Ussurier (2000) considers that the label "Made in" is not the only one that contributes to the perception on a product, but the following aspects as well:

- The image of the imported products versus the national products, or the image of national products versus the image of international products;
- The national image of some generic products: perfume evokes France, the blue jeans remind of the United States of America, fashion reminds us of Italy;
- The national image of the manufacturing company;
- The image diffused by the brand name.

Along time, because of the quality of their products, some countries have managed to create favourable images recognized in the entire world. Thus, as many marketing experts appreciate (Keegan, 2005), the "German word is a synonym with engineering quality", "Italian with style" and "French with the chic". The labelling of products with the manufacturing country of the respective products assists the consumer through the specification "Made in".

#### **c. The country of origin, element of the marketing strategy**

From the marketing perspective, „the country of origin" is a manner to differentiate a product from another product belonging to competitors, by creating a product identity different from the competitors', in order to make it more attractive for a certain target market, because the difference is a competitive advantage (Hastak & Hong, 2006).

People think that the country of origin has an impact on the desire of purchasing the product (Kinra, 2006) and

the studies have shown that the consumers tend to have preferences for the products in their own country or are at least tempted for variants of some products made in other countries but which do not resemble those from their own country. The perception of a country is reflected as well on the products made in that country, but it is possible that that country perception has nothing in common with the product itself. Thus, if a country has a good image, a positive country brand influences the sales of the own products in a positive way, even if they are not qualitative, fact decided after the product consumption. Therefore, we ascertain that the country brand becomes more important than the own image of a product.

Studies carried out by Peterson and Jolibert (Bridgewater & Egan, 2002) have shown that 26% of the consumers change their purchasing decision in a positive or negative way as a result of the country of origin of the product. However, the studies tend to emphasize the negative prism effects. In addition, it was proven that the strongly industrialized countries benefit from positive effects in comparison with the developing ones. Thus, the image of any product labelled with "factory in a developing country" is a weak one. That is why it is not beneficial to emphasize the country of origin in such cases, risking having a product failure, before it is even tested by the consumers.

From the marketing perspective, an on-line research performed in the United States of America on a sample of 1000 students during the semester of the autumn of 2006 by Anderson Analytics, is very interesting. This research emphasizes the fact that the students do not know where their favourite clothing brands come from, although they all love to use the most recent gadgets and wear the most fashionable clothes. Thus, 52% of the students believed that Nokia, the Finnish mobile telephone company is Japanese, while 57.8% believed that the Samsung Electronics Korean company is a Japanese company. In addition, 48.5% believed erroneously that Adidas clothing brand comes from the United States, and not Germany. As regards the field of mobile telephones, the country of provenience does not seem to affect the perception on the product itself. This fact determined, as the researcher Andersen declares, that the "Korean trademarks, such as LG and Samsung equally compete with companies such as Nokia and Motorola." A special category is that of luxury products, for which the country of origin seems to play an important role.

This study should draw even the marketing specialists' attention who should realize that the country of origin could have a positive impact on their brand equity, especially if they are luxury goods or motor vehicle producers. „However, if we don't take measures to educate a new generation of American consumers, this impact could be lost, completes Andreson.

#### **4. The sources determining the country-of-origin effect's occurrence**

The main sources determining different perceptions on different countries are represented by the cultural

differences. The cultural specific of each country or region is so deeply imbued within the consciousness and patterns of thinking of that population, that it influences their thinking, education, way of living and, obviously, their behaviour during the purchasing process. The studies on the country-of-origin effect have also revealed certain reasons for which the perception of the country-of-origin affects the purchasing process for that country's products. Thus, some authors such as Bridgewater and Egan (2002) consider that this effect is based on the following elements: confusion as far as the product is concerned, patriotism, specific knowledge on a country. However, this enumeration does not include the cultural differences between the countries; it divides the country-of-origin's effect in three elements: the products, the (new) country, the country of origin. The above classification seems to highlight only the main "actors" on which a prism effect is based, but the reasons leading to this effect are complex and significantly influenced by the cultural aspects.

The sources determining the occurrence of this country-of-origin effect consist in the cultural differences. The cultural specific of each country or region is so deeply imbued within the consciousness and thinking of that population that it influences their thinking, education, way of living and, obviously, their purchasing behaviour. When a company wants to expand its activity outside the borders of its country, it must take into consideration an analysis of the environment where it is about to carry out its activity by a cultural, social, political and economic point of view. When starting an activity on an international market, the company faces on the new market points of view, customs, preferences and attitudes, other than the ones it shares.

Some other authors consider that the following elements are the sources that determine the occurrence of these effects:

- *familiarity*, it refers to the fact that the lack of information on a product or service can cause a lack of enthusiasm in taking it into consideration;
- *assumed risk* points out the fact that those customers who assume risks are more willing to try a new product;
- *ethnocentric attitude*, when consumers are strong believers in patriotism and they would rather purchase products or services from their own country;
- *political influences*, trade treaties or international agreements can encourage the purchase of goods and services from a certain country or, on the contrary, the political tensions can inhibit the trade with another country

## 5. Results of personal analysis

The cultural particularities causing these effects can be the following: "the experience of the host-country, the risk

contained by the product and the level of economic involvement represented by the provided SATISFACTORY" (Zait, 2002). The satisfactory represents all the attributes that are transformed in satisfaction by consumption. The perceptions on a country vary from one state to another and it would be rather simplifying considering these differences only from a cultural point of view. Consequently to the study of this effect, we can admit that not only the cultural specifics can influence the prism effect, but also the factors of the macro-environment.

There is no doubt that cultural differences are the basis on which a people's impressions, attitudes, customs and beliefs are founded, but in analysing the sources of the prism effects there are other reasons as important as those and which concern: the glorious or significant history of the analysed country, the superiority of one country compared to another from the point of view of the development stage, the geographical placement of one country compared to another, the relationships between countries along the history or present trade relationships.

*The glorious or, on the contrary, insignificant history of the country.* The case of Europe is convincing for this opinion. Each European country studies its own history within the context of its continent. Thus, all European citizens, no matter the stage of economic development of their country, learns about the big powers of Europe, the empires from the past, such as France, England, Germany and Italy. Information on the glorious history of European empires, conquered and expanded territories, the increased development, the available resources influence the image one of the above-mentioned countries may have. It becomes normal that, on the continent, France should be immediately associated by European citizens with "chic", "luxury" or "refinement" as along its great history was a real centre of luxury, opulence, last trends.

*The superiority of one country compared to another from the point of view of the development stage.* The countries with reduced incomes or with a bimodal distribution of incomes consume most of the times from their own production. It seems again normal that a citizen from one of these countries should have a favourable image about a more developed country. The prism effect in this case – of a developed country within a less developed one – seems like an "inferiority complex" of the poor one.

*The geographical placement of one country compared to another.* The geographical placements of two countries, the extent to which they are close or far from each other, influence the mutual perceptions. For example, the Belgian beer benefits from a positive prism effect in France while in Brazil the prism effect is negative. This can be explained by the geographical positions of the involved countries: from the contact point of view, Belgium and France are adjoining so the trade or cultural exchange is easy. Nevertheless, compared to Belgium, Brazil is part of another hemisphere, of another system, the insular one, and for many centuries it had been a country isolated from the rest of the world. We must mention that from this

point of view there can be exactly opposite situations when neighbour countries have mutual negative perceptions due to the competition between them.

*The relationships between the countries along the history.* The relationships along the history are important in order to “feel” a country closer to one’s own culture or, on the contrary, in order to feel that there is no bridge between the two countries. Romania can be an example here. Supposing that a Romanian would have to choose between two products, one made in Italy and one in Norway, it would definitely be easier to choose and trust the Italian brand due to the positive prism effect the Italian products have in our country. That is because the perception is based also on the ancient “Latin” connections of the Romanian people with the Italian one, compared to the Norwegian product which, for a Romanian individual with a medium education, it “brings about” no emotion or idea, having thus an “opaque” effect.

*Present trade relationships between countries.* The existence of strong trading relationships between two countries helps the import-export activities between them to get more extended. Thus, each of the two countries comes in contact to a multitude of products of the other one and finally the decisions to purchase as well as further purchasing customs are influenced. This may lead to a case when the lack of strong trading relationships causes or at least influences the perception on that country.

## 6. Ways of overcoming a negative origin effect

The overcoming of the negative prism effect is done by correctly informing the consumer, creating the credibility belief in the provided information on the product that is to be launched, creating a fundamental intangibility perceived, shared and approved by the consumer. These intangibilities: functionality, security, quality, continuity, honesty and conformity are connected to the environmental physical conditions, but also to the values, ways of communicating, customs, relationships and beliefs shared by the consumers.

### a. Ways of understanding

In order to be successful on the international market, the marketers must know and understand culture. The analysis of cultural elements must lead to the cultural knowledge and understanding. This knowledge can be achieved in two ways. One refers to *facto knowledge of culture*, usually obvious and relatively easy to achieve, while the other one is the interpretative knowledge, much more difficult to study and “absorb”.

The factual knowledge is “given by the awareness of the different senses of colours in different cultures, the understanding of aesthetic tastes and preferences, and the awareness of the existence of more religions in one culture” (Danciu, 2001). This is about the elements we notice directly, we find in statistics or we find out apparently easily from ordinary market researches. Besides the facts, the deep explanations and reasons can be provided by interpretative knowledge which supposes the ability to un-

derstand and the complete appreciation of the nuances of different cultural models and features such as understanding time, attitudes towards the others, social roles, meaning of life etc. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the important differences between cultures and within the same culture.

### b. Cultural Marketing Strategies

In order to eliminate the cultural opposition to change the moment new services and products are suggested for a market with a different culture, we must first of all detect those cultural factors that might conflict with innovation (religion, tradition, local pride). When innovation is suggested to a culture, the marketer needs to choose between two possible ways of action: wait passively or try a change. By its conclusions, the intercultural analysis allows to approach marketing policies, strategies, mixes, managerial structures, plans or programs in accordance with the company’s relationships with the markets’ cultural elements.

The cultural distance determines a different approach of markets and, consequently, the practice of a differentiated marketing. The cultural empathy allows two types of market approaches:

- a) *differentiated approach of markets* (Danciu, 2001) should there be important differences between cultures, the marketing will be adapted according to this cultural diversity;
- b) *uniform approach of markets* based on cultural resemblances, especially of the similar or identical behaviour of markets which leads to a standardized marketing, on global basis (Danciu, 2001).

When getting into contact with another culture, we must distinguish the important differences both between cultures and within the same culture. Based on this principle, taking into account the cultural similarities and differences, new ideas or products can be introduced in different cultures. In the international marketing, certain cultural marketing strategies can be chosen, such as:

- a. „*Strategy of cultural competition*” (Zait, 2002) refers to the introduction of new products, but similar with the ones already existing in that culture which leads to a decrease of the resistance to novelty.
- b. *Strategy of unplanned change*” refers to the introduction of products on the market without planning, only hoping they would be successful.
- c. „*Strategy of planned change*” (Zait, 2002) is done when the company introduces on the market the new products adapted to the cultural specific of the new country consequently to market and marketing researches.

People can see something foreign as something different and possibly threatening for the existing models of action and behaviour. That is why the companies minimize their foreign character and try to adapt it to the local market. But when they try to introduce an internationally known



high-quality product, the foreign identification provides an advantage on the market. Thus, success on a market may depend on the company's ability to adapt to the local specific or the ability to persuade the local customers that the foreign products are better. "Intercultural marketing can not be successful without developing cultural sensitivity and tolerance. The cultural sensitivity or empathy will give the chance to "adapt" to that culture, to share their opinions and that is why it must be cultivated, developed (Zait, 2002).

## 7. Conclusions

Both the country-of-origin effect and the „Made in” principle are still studied by the marketing specialists as the studies on this subject have not shown clearly whether the original design (for example: Dior or Nike) becomes more important than the country of origin. There are studies that prove that the brand of the country of origin is more important than the product's brand, but they were carried out in 1995, while nowadays the big brands in terms of cars, clothes, phones have their factories in totally different countries than the ones they represent, obviously due to financial reasons. This last fact has not lead to sales decreases or a weakening of the brand's image on

the international market. Consumers have got used to buying clothes signed by Dolce&Gabbana or Nokia phones labelled "Made in Romania". There are few products for which the "Made in" label still has an impact on the consumer. For example, the Swiss watch, the Belgian beer, the Swiss chocolate and of course the French perfume. This labelling will lose its value eventually and that is why I consider, consequently to the studies carried out, that the image of the product's mark has become stronger than the "Made in" label, not only for Romanians.

The prism effect represents a very important element for the marketing activity since it plays an ultimate role in the marketing campaign of a new product. Thus, should a company find that its products are seen as non-qualitative on the new market it has to improve its image by a promotion campaign which should decrease or correct the negative effect. In this case, a marketing research becomes absolutely necessary in order to clearly identify the elements determining the negative perception on the company's products. Therefore, when they want to enter a new market, the international companies must pay special attention in analysing the prism effect of their products on the new market in order to adjust certain perceptions by an adequate marketing campaign.

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