

# **Descending from the ivory tower: Reflections on the relevance and future of Country-of-Origin Research**

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# **DESCENDING FROM THE IVORY TOWER: REFLECTIONS ON THE RELEVANCE AND FUTURE OF COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN RESEARCH**

## **Abstract**

In a provocative article in this journal, Jean-Claude Usunier (2006) summarises the critique on country of origin (COO) research and proclaims it to be ivory tower research that is of little relevance for consumers and businesses. Against this background, our paper comments on recent studies criticising both past COO research and the relevance of the COO concept itself. We systematically counter the critique on COO research and provide reflections on the way forward for the field. Despite acknowledging Usunier's (2006) views that research in this area might be guided by feasibility, rather than theoretical and practical relevance, and suffers from self-referential dynamics and overspecialization, we are critical of his conclusions with regard to the extant literature, its achievements, and future research. We argue that COO is still a very relevant area of research, but one that does need to address several critical challenges.

**Keywords** – International marketing, Country-of-origin, Country-of-origin facets, Product involvement, Product familiarity, Brand origin recognition accuracy, Product origin congruency

## **Introduction**

Consumers see the 'Singapore Airlines girl' smiling softly; they see a brand new Volkswagen driven in a scenic hilly terrain while the narrator tells us that they do it all "aus Liebe zum Automobil". For many products, such as Colombian coffee, Chinese vases and Russian caviar, the brand is clearly a supporting actor to the country-of-origin (COO). Many marketing practitioners will argue that COO stereotyping plays a vital part in their marketing strategies (Colyer, 2005, p. 64). Yet, there seems to be a perception in academia that COO is a problematic area of research; a perception that questions both the relevancy of the COO concept for consumers and businesses as well as the relevancy of the extant COO literature.

Since Schooler's (1965) seminal article, the effect of COO image on consumer attitudes has been of continuing interest in marketing research. Over the years, the focus has shifted from simple demographic explanations to COO images (e.g. Schooler, 1971) and the reasons why consumers often prefer domestic products (e.g. Shimp and Sharma, 1987) to include more sophisticated research issues such as products with multi-national origin (e.g. Li et al., 2000) and the congruency of these multiple origins (Josiassen et al., 2008). However, in spite of more than 40 years of research on this topic, the advancement of country-of-origin knowledge has not occurred without friction. Indeed, a large number of researchers have criticized the field for a lack of a solid theoretical framework (Chen and Pereira, 1999; Ger et al., 1999; Kleppe et al., 2002; Knight and Calantone, 2000; Lampert and Jaffe, 1998; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Thakor and Kohli, 1996; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999) as well as lack of clarity in generalisability and strategic implications (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002). Johansson (1993) further explains that there is a growing tendency among academics to mistrust and underestimate the relevance of COO research. More recently, the scepticism has regained momentum and some researchers question whether a COO effect even exists (Pharr, 2005). In a recent literature review Pharr (2005 p. 42) concludes that "the pendulum has swung full circle and additional research is now needed to determine if such a 'non-COO effect' [...] is [...] generalizable across products and countries". The main issues facing this field of research are summarized in two recent papers by Samiee et al (2005) and Usunier (2006). In this short commentary, we will assess the strong criticism implied in these papers and argue that COO is still a relevant and viable area of research, but one that does need to address several critical challenges.

### **An assessment of the recent criticism on COO research**

Samiee et al. (2005) empirically tested whether consumers are able to recognize the origin of a number of branded products. For this purpose the brand origin recognition accuracy (BORA) concept was developed and employed in the study. Their results showed that consumers only have modest knowledge of the objective national origin of brands. In other words, "the evidence provided, based on a broad

spectrum of product categories and brands, suggests that consumers either have limited recognition of brand origins, or find such information relatively unimportant and thus unworthy of retention in memory” (Samiee et al., 2005, p. 392 ).

Usunier (2006) argues that there is a relevance gap between academic COO research and marketing practice, and that COO research is of little relevance because consumers and companies are not informed by the research. He proclaims that COO research is ivory tower research that takes place with little consideration for its practical implications. Since Usunier’s (2006) article provides the most comprehensive presentation of the general critique in this field, we will use it as a starting point for our commentary. In the following, we will comment on each of the five key issues that he has identified in turn.

### **(1) Do consumers still attach importance to the country where a product is manufactured?**

Usunier argues that consumers attach little importance to the country where a product is manufactured. To substantiate his arguments, he refers to a study which shows that 60% of Americans consider it unimportant to assess where their purchases come from (Hugstad and Durr, 1986). However, the flip side is that 40% of Americans *do* find it important to assess where their purchases come from. What is more, the same study finds that this varies by product categories; for instance 74% of the sampled consumers considered COO important when buying cars.

The study by Hugstad and Durr (1986) that Usunier (2006) references for consumer importance ratings was published more than 20 years ago. In contrast, a recent practitioner study carried out by Grey Worldwide shows that 93% said that it was “important to know the origin of a product” (Winter, 2004, p. 42). Although the methodologies and samples used in the two studies might differ and hence the studies might not be completely comparable, we would argue that there seems to be little evidence that consumers are indifferent to country of origin. Moreover, recent scares about the health risks of food (Stern and Springen, 2007), toys (Maurer, 2007) and personal care products (Alexander, 2007)

manufactured in China have brought the “made in” debate to the forefront of attention.<sup>1</sup> One of the most prominent COO researchers (Papadopoulos, 1992) even indicates that “[t]he available evidence suggests that, if anything, the higher the level of globalization, the greater the significance of product country image “. Hence, there is no reason to believe that consumers attach less importance to product origin than has historically been the case and as a result country of origin is still a very relevant area of research.

## **(2) The gap between consumer perception and behaviour as concerns COO importance.**

This critique claims that COO image has been shown to have a stronger effect on consumer perceptions than on intentions, and that such a difference is a sign of the inherent lack of relevance of COO research. Indeed, it is quite common in the COO literature to observe that the effect of the origin cue is found to be higher for quality perceptions and product evaluations than for purchase intentions (see for instance a meta-analysis by Peterson and Jolibert (1995)). However, we disagree that this is a useful argument against the relevance of COO research.

Most effect hierarchies in marketing assume that attitudes precede intentions which in turn may lead to behaviour (e.g. Brown and Stayman, 1992; Bruner II and Kumar, 2000). Firstly, a recent meta-analysis (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999, p. 530) argues that COO should affect quality perception more than product evaluations because “ the attitude concept is ‘broader’ than the quality construct, encompassing more and different factors. This should reduce the effect of country of origin.” Secondly, Verlegh & Steenkamp (1999, p. 530) argue that it is to be expected that the effect of COO on product evaluations is higher than the effect of COO on purchase intentions because “purchase intentions do not only represent a trade off between consumer needs and product features, but also incorporate several ‘external’ influences, of which budget constraints are the most important. Specifically, consumers may perceive a product to be of high quality, and like it very much, but they may simply not be able to af-

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<sup>1</sup> Of course these cases might have drawn special attention because of the nature of the products and the current issues surrounding the political and economical relations between the US and China. However, they do indicate that COO is very much alive and well in the consumers’ mind.

ford it. Hence, the impact of country-related inferences should be smallest for purchase intentions”. As such, the difference between perceptions and intentions is a common and theoretically sound finding for many constructs in marketing (e.g. Yi, 1993). Consequently, any good research design in COO research will need to anticipate and accept that COO has a stronger effect on consumers’ quality perceptions than on their product evaluations. Secondly, any good research design in COO research will need to anticipate and accept that COO has a stronger effect on consumers’ product evaluations than on their purchase intentions.

### **(3) Is ‘made-in’ information available and accessible for consumers?**

The critique implied here relates to findings that a majority of consumers does not have accurate knowledge concerning the product’s country of origin and hence leads to the conclusion that COO is irrelevant. There is, however, an increasing consensus that the relevant COO facet is the country of *association* (e.g. Li et al., 2000). In other words, consumers will have an image of Lamborghini as an Italian car (even though it is not owned by an Italian company) and Nike products are seen as American (even when they are produced in China). Usunier acknowledges this emerging consensus and states: “Thus COO is increasingly considered as that country which consumers typically associate with a brand, *irrespective of where it is actually manufactured*” (Usunier, 2006, p. 62, emphasis in original). If the country of *association* is the relevant country of origin that is considered by consumers and managed by companies, then it is less relevant whether consumers are (made) aware of the manufacturing origin of the product.

Supporting the argument that it is problematic that ‘made-in’ information is not easily accessible for consumers, Usunier states that “[c]onsequently, consumers are less informed about the origin of products, especially when it is unfavourable” (Usunier, 2006, p. 64). This is undoubtedly correct. However, is this not part of what marketing is: Focusing on the product’s strengths and downplaying its weaknesses? The concept *Foreign Branding*, for instance, focuses on this particular aspect of the COO literature (e.g. Leclerc et al., 1994). A key focus of foreign branding is ensuring that the product appears to originate from a more favourable origin than it actually does. For example, Häagen-Dazs – the Scandinavian sounding name adopted by an American company for its ice-cream – is an example of success-

ful foreign branding. The fact that companies actively and successfully employ origin positioning strategies that focus on emphasizing, downplaying or even altering consumers' origin perception is hardly evidence of COO being irrelevant for practice. Rather the opposite. The aim of product origin management is *not* to ensure that consumers have objectively accurate knowledge of the actual origin of a product; it is to manage the stereotypical images of product origins that consumers form. As such, consumers may have objectively inaccurate knowledge of the origin of a pair of Nike sneakers. This, however, does not show the irrelevance of origin stereotypes and, as a result, the irrelevance in origin image management. Instead, the fact that Nike has developed such strong associations with their US brand origin that consumers still associate a pair of Nike sneakers with the USA, is a sign of successful origin management – rather than an indication that consumers consider origin information irrelevant. Given that the COO literature increasingly considers the relevant COO as the country of association, increasing consumer reliance on country of association and decreasing reliance on country of manufacture cannot be used to support an argument against the relevancy of COO-research. Therefore, we argue that for most research questions, COO research focusing on the country of association would be more appropriate than focusing on an increasingly irrelevant country of manufacture.

At this point it is pertinent to look in more detail at the second recent paper that is very critical about COO research: the brand origin recognition accuracy (BORA) study (Samiee et al., 2005). This study measures how well consumers can recall the actual origin of 84 different brands and aims at measuring the country of *association* or country of brand. This to some extent negates our critique of using factual consumer knowledge of made-in origins to draw conclusions with regard to the relevance of COO. There are, however, several other problems associated with this measure and its purported implications.

First, it seems that the study included products that some of the respondents would never consider using. Samiee et al. (2005) argue that consumers should be expected to know the origin of branded products that are on the market, regardless of whether or not they are relevant to them. They claim that for a spelling test students are expected to know words regardless of whether or not they would use them. We do not subscribe to this analogy. When students take a spelling test they know what range of words may come up and hence are motivated to study them. However, when a brand is irrelevant to a

consumer, they have no motivation to acquire or retain knowledge about the origin of that brand. This irrelevance, however, may have little to do with the product origin being irrelevant, but rather with the product category itself. For instance, one would in general not expect young single males to retain brand or origin information for the product category “menopause relief” or consumers over 60 to retain such information about “games consoles”. Consequently, the BORA is likely to significantly understate consumers’ product origin knowledge. Hence, we would argue that high-quality research designs in the study of COO knowledge should only ask consumers for information on products that they would actually consider using.

Second, extrinsic product information such as brand and origin information may be used by consumers at the point of purchase, and influence consumers only in the actual purchasing situation. A consumer may search the Internet for information immediately prior to purchasing for example a Notebook or he/she may receive recommendations from the sales people or other consumers in the specialty store claiming that product X from country A is the high quality choice relative to products from other countries. As such, the consumer is influenced, but may forget this information after the purchase has been made. We argue that the origin may still have been a contributing factor at the time of purchase. As a result, we would recommend high-quality research designs should focus on the importance of COO *at the time of purchase* rather than assessing this at any other time. Alternatively, longitudinal studies that investigate the importance of COO before, during and after the purchase seem to be an interesting avenue for future research.

Third, brand and origin cues may also influence consumers’ implicitly rather than explicitly. Explicit memory retrieval occurs consciously through the episodic system, while implicit knowledge occurs automatically through the semantic system (Richardson-Klavehn and Bjork, 1988; Schacter, 1987; Tulving, 1982). Research into memory access shows that implicit memory correlate strongly with judgements, even in situations where explicit memory does not (Kardes, 1986). Consequently, we recommend that recent calls (e.g. Grimes and Kitchen, 2007; Shapiro and Krishnan, 2001) for more research into the role of implicit memory are extended to COO research.

Fourth, the importance of a cue might not even rely entirely on memory. The sales pitch used by the sales person may rely on in-store cues (such as for instance a poster advertising high quality prod-

ucts coming from a particular country) that the consumer may otherwise not have remembered or have been aware of. We therefore strongly recommend future research investigating the importance of the COO cue in influencing consumers' buying behaviour to take the role of the sales person into account.

Fifth, as we have already pointed out earlier, active and successful product origin management does not equate to conveying actual origin information to consumers. Indeed, one of the most common recommendations with regard to origin management is to downplay or alter consumers' perception of the firm's product origin when the firm comes from an origin that is negatively perceived (Mohamad et al., 2000; Okechuku and Onyemah, 1999). However, origin management is not just about brands that come from unfavourable origins. There are many other brands that purposefully wish to use origin branding to change product origin perceptions, and several of those were included in the study in order to "[...] push the envelope in examining consumers' BORA" (Samiee et al., 2005, p. 383 ). If Häagen-Dazs believes that brand-origin information is crucial in their marketing efforts and the company succeeds in tying the company to a Scandinavian origin, then the BORA results would be interpreted as supporting the irrelevance of origin information simply because the consumers did not know the actual origin of this brand. Hence, even though in this case brand origin is very significant for consumers and for the company itself, the conclusion of the BORA measure would be the complete opposite. The BORA is therefore prone to underestimate consumers' *relevant* product origin knowledge and as a result we recommend further development of this tool before using it in future studies.

#### **(4) To what extent does brand image tend to blur origin labelling information?**

Usunier (2006) here pits brand and origin against each other. The argument here is that whilst older studies showed that brand and origin were equally important (Eroglu and Machleit, 1989), recent studies have found brand to be more important than origin (Leclerc et al., 1994; Samiee et al., 2005). We have two concerns with this line of argument.

First, the conclusion that brand image is increasingly blurring origin labelling information seems to depend on the choice of references. There are recent (e.g. Lin and Kao, 2004) and not so recent studies (e.g. Liefeld et al., 1996) that argue that COO is an insignificant or weak cue, and there are recent (e.g. Teas and Agarwal, 2000) and not so recent (e.g. Reiersen, 1967) studies, published in pre-

mier marketing journals, that show the opposite – that COO is a very important cue. Another recent study (Liu and Johnson, 2005, p. 95) found that “COO may be more important than what has traditionally been thought and detected”. Several recent studies have found that COO has a strong effect on attitude rankings (e.g. Ahmed et al., 2002; Han and Terpstra, 1988) or found a congruency effect, such that brand image and country image have an interdependent and largely similar effect on product beliefs and attitudes (Hui and Zhou, 2003). Only a couple of studies have sought to establish over time whether COO information is getting more or less important for consumers. Papadopoulos (1992) for instance argues that COO information is becoming more important with increasing globalisation. Supporting this, Verlegh (1999) found in a recent meta-analysis that “the effect of country of origin does not change substantially when a product is designed and manufactured in different countries. Thus, the growing importance of multi-national production and international sourcing (Yip, 1995), which has been viewed by some as the end of the country-of-origin effect, does not seem to affect the relevance of country of origin”.

Second, it is important to note that ‘brand name’ and ‘country-of-brand’ are conceptually distinct constructs. Usunier (2006, p. 64) indicates that “Eroglu and Machleit (1989) concluded that consumers accord a similar influence to brand and country of manufacturing, respectively. However, recent research shows that country of brand has become more significant for consumers than country of manufacturing (Leclerc et al., 1994; Samiee et al., 2005)”. In the same paragraph Usunier (2006) discusses the impact of hybrid products (products with multiple origins – e.g. design, manufacture and parts). However, Eroglu and Machleit (1989) do not investigate the influence of country-of-brand, but rather the impact of the ‘brand name’ cue. Leclerc (1994) investigates the impact of ‘foreign branding’, which is not the same as ‘country-of-brand’. Foreign branding is the case where a product is branded such that it exploits existing COO stereotypes in the market place by alluding to another origin than the actual COO of the product (Leclerc et al., 1994). Country-of-brand on the other hand is a facet of COO and is defined as the country from which the brand originates (often the location of the headquarters of the company) (Phau and Prendergast, 2000).

Any high quality study will acknowledge that the COO concept is multi-faceted. Recent studies are proactively taking this into account, rather than seeing it as a weakness of COO research. The con-

gruency amongst these different product origin facets is an increasingly important aspect in COO studies (e.g. Chao, 2001; Josiassen et al., 2008). However, not all research questions necessitate a multifaceted approach and as argued above in these instances COO would be best conceptualized as the country-of-association (Li et al., 2000; Usunier, 2006).

Finally, the debate pertaining to which of the two – brand or country-of-origin – is the more important cue may point towards a relevance gap not identified by Usunier. Consider the vastly larger number of books written about brand management in comparison to the number of books written about origin management. Consider the enormous difference in the attention given to brand management in comparison to origin management in tertiary marketing subjects. If there *is* a gap, we argue it lies in the discrepancy between the attention that Marketing academia lends to brand relative to origin, even though both cues are very important for consumers (and consequently for firms).

#### **(5) Are companies willing to promote origin labelling on their products?**

Usunier claims that multi-national companies (MNCs) prefer to de-emphasize the origin of goods as most of them are manufactured in low-cost locations. Singapore Airlines, Rolex and Werthers Echte? Holden means a lot to Australia? These *real-life examples* seem to imply that some high-profile companies are certainly willing to promote origin as a distinctive selling point. Or to take an entirely different product than the examples used in this paper so far: beer. “[Concerning the marketing of beer] it is hard to tell products apart so tying in strong emotions to differentiate products is important. The country of origin is nine tenths of the magic” (Colyer, 2005). In addition, some companies promote a supernational origin (e.g. Scandinavian furniture) or a subnational origin (Bordeaux wine). Further evidence of companies’ willingness to promote origin labelling on their products can be observed from the ongoing elaborate efforts that companies and industry organisations exert in battles over the right to protect certain product origins under European Union (EU) rules. The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Rooker) explained to the British Parliament on March 29 2007 that the scheme of the EU provides producers “with a way to add value to their product and to meet consumers’ demand for more regional and local food” (UK Parliament Publications and Records, 2007). More than 750 products have, to date, have been afforded protection under the European Union’s pro-

tected product origins scheme (UK Parliament Publications and Records, 2007). Although we acknowledge the growth in global outsourcing and the effect this may have on where products are actually manufactured, this does not create a relevance problem for COO or COO research. The important country-of-origin cue with regard to origin management is the country-of-origin that consumers' associate with the product or the brand. This means that even if for instance the Apple Company outsources a large part of the activities that goes into making an iPod, consumers are likely to still view the end product as an American product. Many companies are not only willing to promote the origin of their products, but even insist on doing so.

Over the past decade researchers have found that COO consists of several facets. With several ways to conceptualize and measure COO, the question that researchers face is which one to choose for their particular study. We propose that there are at least three possible answers to this question, depending on the purpose of the research. First, to pick one or more of the COO facets if the study is concerned with the influence(s) of this or these COO facet(s) in particular. Second, to measure all the facets and estimate their individual influence as well as their joint influence, if the study is concerned with measuring the influence of all COO facets individually and jointly. Or third to measure COA, given that this can be seen as a kind of proxy for the general COO concept. High quality research designs will therefore either conceptualize COO as the country-of-association or seek to measure the different product origin facets and/or their joint effects.

### **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

In this paper we commented on the recent critique of (1) the extant COO literature and (2) the relevance and the importance of the concept itself for understanding and guiding international marketing reality. Usunier (2006) summarized and expanded on this critique, and as such represented a helpful vantage point from which to address the criticism. Our main conclusion is that the concept of COO is important to business and therefore should be important to academic thought and research. However, that does not imply that COO research could not and should not do more to carry out studies that are of the highest relevance to practice. Whereas many important contributions have been made over the years, there is still much that we do not know about the concept and its causes and effects. In the following we will

draw attention to some unresolved challenges in the COO literature.

One important challenge pertains to boundary testing the COO effect. Is the COO effect stable, and if not, does its influence depend on certain contingencies? An important potential contingency variable is product familiarity. Usunier (2006) claims that “it has been shown that the influence of the COO evaluation cue was stronger when consumers are unfamiliar with a product category” (Usunier, 2006, p. 62). However, other studies argue that higher product familiarity will lead to more rather than less use of the COO cue (Johansson, 1989). A recent attempt to clarify the effect of product familiarity showed no difference between high and low familiarity conditions (Laroche et al., 2005). In other words, the impact of product familiarity is far from a decided issue and hence merits further investigation.

A second challenge is the continued development and refinement of scales – such as the brand origin recognition accuracy (BORA) scale (Samiee et al. 2005) – that measure the degree to which consumers remember COO information after a purchase. In this context, we have argued that it is of little value to ask consumers for product information that is not relevant for them. Therefore, any future attempts to measure origin knowledge should a priori ensure the fit of product categories and respondents. In the short term, a way to mitigate some of the problems stemming from this data irrelevance issue would be to introduce involvement as a moderator. Additionally, the BORA should be further developed to be able to capture a reality where consumers do not only relate brands to countries, but also to super- and subnational entities. Further development of such a measure should not only entail focusing on consumers’ recognition accuracy, but also on whether consumers can recall origin information. Recall of information is generally considered a more demanding memory task than information recognition (Keller, 2003). It is debatable whether the brand origin recognition accuracy measure (Samiee et al., 2005) is a recognition measure or a recall measure. BORA is measured by asking consumers to complete a form stating what they think the origin is of 84 different brands. Thus, consumers are asked to recall (aided) rather than to recognize and as such it seems that the concept is in fact a Brand Origin Recall Accuracy measure.

A third challenge is to present business practice with more useful guidelines for origin management. Currently, the strategic use and limitations of origin management remain unclear (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2002). Whereas companies have a wide array of tools for managing their brand images, the

set of tools for managing origin images is still rather crude and based on anecdotes and advice which do not stem from a holistic framework of COO effects. As a result, organisations lack the tools to manage their most basic image. With regard to the importance of brand image vs. origin image debate the answer to which cue is more important (1) seems to depend on a number of contingencies and (2) is not the essential question that research should focus on. Rather, research involving both cues should focus on how they can be managed together in an optimal combination to yield the highest benefit for the consumer and the organisation.

A fourth challenge pertains to the antecedents of COO stereotypes. Research into the background for consumers' COO stereotypes is limited (Balabanis et al., 2002) and we believe that this is a fertile area for future research. One avenue would be to focus on whether increased social and environmental awareness among consumers has repercussions for their perceptions of product origins depending on for example the extent of pollution control and ecological production.

In conclusion, we would like to mirror Usunier's (2006) concern that COO research is currently not able to inform marketing practice adequately. We concur that this is at least partially caused by the focus on feasibility rather than theoretical and practical relevance in the study of COO effects. We also subscribe to his concerns about the dangers of self-referential dynamics in academia and the pitfalls of highly specialized research topics. If COO indeed only had a small or insignificant effect on consumers' buying behaviour, then practitioners, and in turn international marketing research, could possibly accept this lack of a guiding conceptual framework. Yet both practitioner usage (Winter, 2004) and empirical data (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999) show that the product origin significantly influences consumers' buying behaviour. Therefore, whilst we do not share the concerns over the relevance of the COO concept, we concur that this research area is facing several critical challenges. These present challenges must be overcome in order for academia to be able to inform international marketing practice better. To this end, we believe *more* research is the answer. We would like to call especially for more *ambitious* research taking into account both the recommendations for high quality research designs provided in this article, and the unresolved challenges identified in our discussion.

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