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MECHANISMS FOR COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECTS (COE)

Summary: This paper aims to provide definitions for country of origin (COO) and country-of-origin effect (COE). The paper also analyzes how abstraction, discrimination, and generalization can clarify the country-of-origin phenomenon and its effects. As a result of the analysis, these processes may be considered elements that directly or indirectly explain the COO and COE phenomena.

Słowa kluczowe: efekt kraju pochodzenia, koncepcja kategoryzacji

Keywords: country-of-origin effect, concept categorization

INTRODUCTION

In today's market, the country of origin is a significant factor in establishing a brand's image as a market item. For experts, it serves as a strategic tool that enables brand differentiation and adds significant symbolic and functional value for consumers. This paper discusses the definitions and mechanisms of the country-of-origin effect (COE).

The primary objective of this paper is to offer a definition of country of origin (COO) and its effect. Secondly, it seeks to determine the possibility of using the concepts of abstraction, discrimination, and generalization as mechanisms to explain the country-of-origin phenomenon and its effects.

When defining COE, it is necessary to provide a broader outline of concepts such as "effect" and "country of origin." The term "effect" is trendy but vague. The Polish language dictionary states that it may be used interchangeably with terms like impression, consequence, and outcome, or as a way to cause an impression.¹ In the context of country of origin, the term "effect" refers to the outcomes or ramifications of the influence of the country-of-origin phenomenon on a consumer's choice to buy a product.

COO AND COE DEFINITIONS

This paper involves scientific literature in marketing, management, psychology, sociology, and related sciences concerning COO and COE. In the literature, the country of origin (COO) is defined in various ways. Initially, COO was identified with the label "Made in..." on product packaging, indicating the country of origin of the product.² A. Ahmed and A. d'Astous³ define COO as the country where the corporate headquarters of a given product or brand are located. According to these authors, COO may be inferred from the country of design, assembly, and production, which represents the origin of the product's

¹ E. Sobol, *Polish Language Dictionary*, Warsaw 2006.

² D. Israel, D. Nebenzahl, E.D. Jaffe, I. Lampert, *Towards a Theory of Country Image Effect on Product Evaluation*, „Management International Review” 1997, no. 37 (1), pp. 27–49.

³ A. Ahmed, A. d'Astous, *Country of Origin and Brand Effects. A Multi Dimensional and Multi Attribute Study*, „Journal of International Consumer Marketing” 1996, no. 9 (2), pp. 93–115.

real creation. This definition falls under the category of nominalistic definitions,⁴ describing the country of origin in descriptive terms and enumerating its components, i.e., the dimensions of the country of origin.

However, M. Hereźniak⁵ defines COO as the country that a consumer identifies with a specific brand or product, regardless of the actual place of brand or product creation. In contrast to Ahmed and d'Astous, Hereźniak puts more focus on the consumer's associations with the place of origin they have assigned to the brand or product.

S. Lampert and E. Jaffa⁶ understand the country-of-origin effect (COE) as the influence of general perceptions and opinions on the evaluation of products or brands from a given country. In other words, consumers' perceptions of the country of origin affect the image of brands and products originating from it. S. Roth and J. Romeo⁷ assume that COE refers to how consumers generally perceive items from a given country based on preconceived notions about the country's production capabilities. Consumers may use the gross domestic product to learn more about a country's capacity for output.⁸

A. Figiel⁹ explains that COE is the impact that the image of a specific country has on consumers' assessments of products or brands from that country. Therefore, consumers' evaluations—which may be defined as a collection of thoughts and information about the country, including feelings and perceptions associated with it—are greatly influenced by the country's image.¹⁰ The factors influencing the formation of a country's image include economy, culture, society, internal policy, and external imagination (see Table 1). For

⁴ A. Kłoskowska, *Sociology of Culture*, Warsaw 2007.

⁵ M. Hereźniak, *National Brand. How to Effectively Build a Country's Image and Reputation*, Warsaw 2011, p. 64.

⁶ S. Lampert, E. Jaffa, *A Dynamic Approach to Country of Origin Effect*, „European Journal of Marketing” 1998, no. 32, p. 61.

⁷ S. Roth, J. Romeo, *Matching Product Category and Country Image Perceptions. A Framework for Managing Country-Of-Origin Effects*, „Journal of International Business Studies” 1992, no. 23 (3), pp. 477–497.

⁸ P. Krugman, R. Wells, *Macroeconomics*, Warsaw 2014.

⁹ A. Figiel, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁰ B. Tarczydło, *Methodology of Brand Image Formation*, Cracow 2013, p. 20.

instance, literature, music, cinema, and art enhance a country's image by idealising it and giving it an ethereal, magical quality.¹¹

Table 1. Factors Influencing a Country's Image

Category	Criteria
External imaginations	Distance, landscape, climate, natural conditions, tourist attractiveness, international affairs involvement, international status, mutual relations between countries in the past
Economy	Economic system, stability, relations, economic potential, structure, GDP, growth, tax system, scientific and technological progress, production costs, FDI conditions, famous brands, exchange rate, natural resources, level of infrastructural development
Culture	Traditions, customs, language, norms, values, literature, music, cinema, art, history
Society	Attitude to life and work, education level, trust, hygiene, standard of living, income level, personality traits, morality, national structure, attitude to other nations, social order
Internal policy	Political system, connections, stability, human rights, rule of law, social welfare, environmental protection, crime rate, development prospects

Source: Own elaboration based on E. Duliniec, *International Marketing*, Warsaw 2009, p. 272; T. Taranko, *Consumer Attitudes Towards Brands of Polish and Foreign Origins*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 30–32.

To sum up, the country of origin serves as a national brand, a mental shortcut, a stereotype, and an association with a specific country and its manufacturing specificity.¹² The above-mentioned¹³ definition of COE by A. Figiel is concise and straightforward but overlooks the complexity of COE, which has affective, cognitive, and normative roots.¹⁴ These mechanisms collectively influence consumers' opinions about the country of origin, but scientists

¹¹ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice. How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World*, Warsaw 2006.

¹² K. Gad, *Polish National E-brand. Poland's Promotional Spots on the Internet as an Element of National Branding*, Kraków 2016, p. 40.

¹³ A. Figiel, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁴ K. Liczmańska, *Building Strong Product Brands in the Conditions of Public Advertising Bans on the Example of the Spirits Sector*, Toruń 2015, pp. 107–108.

consider them separately for analytical purposes. Consumers may be influenced by these mechanisms both consciously and unconsciously.¹⁵

Table 2. Important Mechanisms of the Country-of-Origin Effect

Conditions	Description	Assumptions	Example
Affective (also: emotional); a consumer's emotions are related to the symbolic value of information about the country of origin of a brand or product.	Country of origin has emotional and symbolic meaning for the consumer.	Country of origin is an attribute of the brand image which allows it to be given emotional and symbolic meanings in the form of social prestige.	Consumers sometimes associate Gucci's products with prestige. Purchasing products brings back pleasant memories from holidays in Italy.
Cognitive (also: rational); consumer's knowledge about a given country's ability to produce a product category. Consumers reduce their purchasing risk by choosing products from highly developed countries.	The country of origin is an indicator of the quality of certain products.	The country of origin serves as an indicator of product quality and its features, such as durability and reliability.	Consumers rate the technology and quality of German Mercedes cars highly because they were created by reliable German engineers.
Normative (also known as: social and individual norms); consumers sometimes demonstrate their support for the policy pursued by a given country by purchasing products from this specific country.	Country of origin is identified by consumers with compliance with or violation of social norms.	Purchasing local products may be perceived as economic patriotism. Consumers may reject foreign products from countries engaged in activities inconsistent with their moral code.	Polish consumers may avoid purchasing products from China where human rights are violated, because it is inconsistent with their axionormative system.

Source: Own elaboration based on T. Taranko, *op. cit.*, and E. Duliniec, *op. cit.*

G. Aiello et al.¹⁶ define COE as the impact of knowledge about a particular country on the assessment of products and/or brands associated with it.

¹⁵ T. Taranko, *Consumer Attitudes Towards Brands of Polish and Foreign Origins*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 181–185.

¹⁶ G. Aiello, R. Donvito, B. Godey, D. Pederzoli, K. Wiedman, N. Hennigs, A. Siebels, P. Chan, J. Tsuchiya, S. Rabino, S. Ivanovna, B. Weitz, H. Oh, R. Singh, *An International*

According to this definition, evaluation is a viewpoint on a subject conveyed in a positive, negative, or neutral manner regarding a product or brand.¹⁷ The country of origin is supposed to distinguish products from different places and carry a message, added value, and an intangible factor.¹⁸

M. Hereźniak presents the most extensive and precise definition of COE.¹⁹ According to her, COE is “[...] a phenomenon of a positive or negative evaluation of a product (brand) by a consumer, in which the perceived place of origin of the product is an important criterion for making consumer decisions.”²⁰ When consumers evaluate a product, they combine its features with the characteristics of the product’s perceived place of origin, affecting their choice to accept or reject the product.²¹ Hereźniak views COE in evaluative terms.²² In contrast to other researchers, she defines the positive COE, which occurs when the image of the perceived country of origin “provides” the product with symbolic and functional values important for the consumer.²³ The symbolic function refers to expressing belonging to a specific social group by purchasing a product of a specific origin.²⁴ For instance, Polish immigrants display connection to their roots by acquiring products made in their home country.

The positive COE is an element of trust in a product with a specific brand,²⁵ Consumers pay for trust when they select a specific product from a specific

Perspective on Luxury Brand and Country-of-Origin Effect, „Brand Management” 2008, no. 16, pp. 323–337.

¹⁷ K. Tomkiewicz, *Fallacies on the Road. Types of Fallacies Formulated by Persons Controlled in Road Traffic* „The Police Review” 2015, no.3, p. 171.

¹⁸ K. Gad, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁹ M. Hereźniak, op. cit., p. 65.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ M. Hereźniak, J. Morawska, *National Marketing Programme in the Context of Poland’s Membership in the European Union*, „Journal of Marketing and Market Studies” 2005, no. 12 (8), pp. 8–15.

²² M. Filipiak, *Sociology of Culture: Outline of Issues*, Lublin 2003.

²³ M. Hereźniak, op. cit.

²⁴ K. Gad, op. cit., p. 18.

²⁵ P. Kotler, *Marketing Insights from A to Z*, Warsaw 2004, p. 80.

country,²⁶ to avoid a defective product.²⁷ The positive country-of-origin effect saves time and money for consumers.²⁸ Moreover, the positive country-of-origin effect acts as a promise of quality.²⁹

The country of origin refers to the country that a consumer identifies as the actual or hypothetical location where a product or brand was created. The country from whence a specific product originates is determined by the consumer's beliefs.³⁰ It is assumed that the essence of the country-of-origin effect is in the opinions and ideas about the country which are attributed to products and brands originating from it.

The terms "country of origin" and "country-of-origin effect" lack a single, valid definition in the scientific literature. Based on the above considerations, COE is a phenomenon impacting a consumer's opinion of a product or brand due to its real or perceived place of origin. COO refers to the specific country a consumer identifies as the actual or presumed country of origin of a brand or product. COE may positively or negatively affect a consumer's opinion of a brand or product, significantly influencing purchase decisions.

The author developed his own definitions of country of origin based on these concepts and their implications. Consequently, COO refers to the specific country that a consumer identifies as the actual or presumed country of origin of a given brand or product. Due to its real or imagined place of origin, COE is a phenomenon that may affect a consumer's opinion of a brand or product in a positive or negative way. Purchase decisions may be significantly influenced by a product's place of origin.

The definitional overview presented above does not cover all possible meanings of the terms "country of origin" and "country-of-origin effect." Additionally, it establishes the fundamental conceptual framework, highlighting characteristics unique to each term through the introduction of several

²⁶ B. Beemer, R. Shook, *The Customer Rules*, Warsaw 2010, p. 270.

²⁷ P. Bickerton, M. Bickerton, U. Pardesi, *Cybermarketing. How to Use the Internet to Market Your Goods and Services?*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 175.

²⁸ P. Kotler, op. cit., p. 80.

²⁹ B. Beemer, R. Shook, op. cit., p. 270.

³⁰ K. Al-Sulaiti, I. Al-Sulaiti, *Country of Origin Effects on Service Evaluation*, Doha 2023.

definition formats. A summary of the considerations, including the author's types of COO and COE definitions, is included in Table 3.

Table 3. Definitional Overview of “Country of Origin” and “Country-of-Origin Effect” Concepts

No.	Authors	Definition Types	Definition for „Country-of-Origin” Concept
1	A. Ahmed, A. d'Astous	Nominal-locational definition	The country where the corporate headquarters of a product or brand is located. The COO may be inferred from the country in which the product was assembled, manufactured, and designed.
2	M. Hereźniak	Associative definition (psychological)	The country with which the consumer associates a given product as its source, regardless of the actual place of production.
3	Management encyclopaedia	Locational definition	The country in which the products were manufactured in accordance with the criteria established for customs tariff, quantitative restrictions, or other trade criteria.
4	R. Baran	Locational definition	The country in which the enterprise's headquarters is located.
5	S. Lampert, E. Jaffa	Associative definition (psychological)	The influence of general ideas and opinions on the evaluation of products or brands from a given country.
6	S. Roth, J. Romeo	Associative definition (psychological)	Consumers' generalized perceptions of products from a given country based on the country's production abilities.
7	A. Figiel	Associative definition (psychological)	The influence of the image of a specific country on consumers' evaluation of products or brands from that country.
8	M. Hereźniak	Evaluative definition (psychological)	A phenomenon of a positive or negative evaluation of a product (brand) by a consumer, in which the perceived place of origin of the product is an important criterion for making consumer decisions. It occurs when the consumer, while assessing a given product, combines its attributes with the attributes of the product's perceived place of origin and when this relationship influences the consumer's decision to purchase or reject the product.

Source: Own elaboration based on sources cited in the text.

ABSTRACTION, GENERALIZATION, DISCRIMINATION, AND CATEGORIZATION VERSUS COE

The mechanism of the country-of-origin effect (COE) can be explained using the concept of categorization, as elaborated in “A Study of Thinking” by J. Bruner, J. Goodnow, and G. Austin.³¹ Despite extensive research on COE, the Polish scientific literature in management and marketing does not typically refer to this concept. Therefore, it is appropriate to address it in this paper, adapting it to COE.

Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin discuss mental operations, including concept learning, such as the country of origin of a product. They identify three elementary mechanisms—abstraction, generalization, and categorization, including discrimination—that influence consumers’ perspectives on specific products. These mechanisms are briefly discussed below as important elements explaining the COE.

Abstraction (Abstracting), a term first used by J. Piaget in his theory of cognitive development and learning,³² involves omitting differences between items in a specific set (category) and isolating their common features. The subject consciously ignores differences to assign items to one or more common categories. The abstraction process can be dichotomously divided into negative abstraction (removing unnecessary characteristics) and positive abstraction (isolating important features). For example, consumers might claim that most domestically produced food products have undergone less modification than foreign ones, illustrating positive abstraction.³³

Generalization (Generalizing) means that when we classify a specific product (e.g., Wedel chocolate) into a specific set (e.g., food sector, country of origin: Poland), we assign it the features (attributes such as taste, freshness) of that set. All characteristics, even those that are not entirely compatible, are

³¹ J. Bruner, J. Goodnow, G. Austin, *A Study of Thinking*, New York 2017.

³² J. Piaget, *The Psychology of the Child*, Warsaw 2006.

³³ N. Cakici, P. Shukla, *Country-of-Origin Misclassification Awareness and Consumers’ Behavioral Intentions. Moderating Roles of Consumer Affinity, Animosity, and Product Knowledge*, „International Marketing Review” 2017, no. 34 (3), pp. 354–376.

transferred to the product. After new experiences with the product, consumers may generalize about it again.³⁴

Discrimination (Eliminating) is a mechanism within the categorization theory that explains the COE.³⁵ Initially, the consumer classifies a new product into a specific category based on its identified country of origin, assigning it specific attributes. Over time, as the consumer learns more about the product and recognizes mismatches with the category, the product is reclassified. This enables more accurate and in-depth categorization and illustration of particular products.³⁶

Categorization (Classifying). According to Gawrysiak (2009), categorization is the process of assigning items to suitable categories based on their particular properties (attributes). This process simplifies information processing because items are perceived as common entities rather than separate ones. This accelerates the processing of information for already known items and develops an attitude toward them, which can be neutral, negative, or favorable.³⁷ The product varies in detail but is common to a specific category—brand. For example, analyzing the product life cycle at various stages shows that the identity of branded products differs due to marketing strategies adapted to each phase, but remains common to the brand image.³⁸ Thus, brand image evolves over time and is perceived differently by consumers, yet it still concerns the same brand. Sometimes, the brand is the only common element within a product category. A brand may transfer values to a product category

³⁴ A. Diamantopoulos, A. Florack, G. Halkia, J. Palcu, *Explicit Versus Implicit Country Stereotypes as Predictors of Product Preferences. Insights from the Stereotype Content Model*, „Journal of International Business Studies” 2017, no. 48, pp. 1023–1036.

³⁵ J. Ma, J. Yang, B. Yoo, *The Moderating Role of Personal Cultural Values on Consumer Ethnocentrism in Developing Countries. The Case of Brazil and Russia*, „Journal of Business Research” 2020, no. 108, pp. 375–389.

³⁶ J. Brunera, J. Goodnow, G. Austina, op. cit.

³⁷ J. Gineikiene, B. Schlegelmilch, R. Ruzeviciute, *Our Apples are Healthier than your Apples. Deciphering the Healthiness Bias for Domestic and Foreign Products*, „Journal of International Marketing” 2016, no. 24 (2), pp. 80–99.

³⁸ F. Kock, A. Josiassen, A. Assaf, *Toward a Universal Account of Country-Induced Pre-dispositions: Integrative Framework and Measurement of Country-of-Origin Images and Country Emotions*, „Journal of International Marketing” 2019, no. 27 (3), pp. 43–59.

that is otherwise unrelated. Similarly, the country-of-origin effect affects individual goods from this country.

CONCLUSIONS

The country of origin of a product is imagined by consumers, who associate brands and products from a certain country (e.g., Austria) with certain products (e.g., cheesecake). Depending on the position and strength of the brand, they may create independent and strong entities that exceed national brands. For some consumers, Ikea is synonymous with Sweden, and Mercedes with Germany. In the examples mentioned above, the country of origin of a product is constructed based on the image of commercial brands. A two-way process of imagining a country is possible: from the perceived country of origin of the product to the image of the brand (product) or from the image of the brand (product) to the perceived country of origin of the product. A strong brand image is a barrier to entry into markets for other brands.

Consumers' views of products are influenced by the processes of abstraction, generalization, and discrimination. Consumers may overlook distinctions between products made in the same country and mistakenly associate them with similar qualities. Generalizations might result in products being given qualities that do not match their true characteristics. In turn, the discrimination mechanism enables consumers to more accurately categorize products based on their place of origin. Product values and brand impressions may be impacted by categorizing products according to their country of origin.

In conclusion, the mechanisms of abstraction, generalization, discrimination, and categorization are important in categorization notions that may affect how consumers view products originating from various countries. This could significantly affect their decision-making regarding purchases and how they evaluate the quality of products.

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