



ANALYTICAL PROBLEMATICAL PAPER

AUTOMOBILE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN RELATED ASSOCIATIONS
IN LITHUANIAN MARKETSigitas Urbonavičius¹, Vytautas Dikčius², Ramūnas Časas³*Dept of Marketing, Vilnius University, Saulėtekio al. 9, LT-10222 Vilnius, Lithuania,**Phone: +370-5 2366146, Fax: +370-5 2366150.**E-mails: ¹sigitas.urbonavicius@ef.vu.lt, ²vytautas.dikcius@ef.vu.lt, ³ramunas.casas@ef.vu.lt**Received 3 January 2007; accepted 2 May 2007*

Abstract. Automobile is a high-involvement product that typically requires significant buyer's attention when purchased. It is typical that country of origin (COO) of a purchased car is considered among other product characteristics. Though COO concept is analysed for decades, many factors allow to explore this issue again. First, globalization factors influence importance of COO. Second, products have certain specifics, and COO is not equally influencing buyers' decisions in all cases. Third, countries have some stereotype images, which vary among different groups. And finally, buyers themselves are 'products' of certain historical and economic developments of their environment, which predetermine their beliefs and associations. Analysis of attitudes about automobile COO and related associations among Lithuanian middle-level managers represents specifics of a country that was fully exposed to products of the international automotive industry just for about a decade.

Keywords: country of origin, automobiles, country associations.

1. Introduction

The process of product choice and evaluation is always among the key issues in marketing. Typically, physical characteristics of a product play here rather a significant role. However, many other influences of more intangible type also are considered there. One of more complex considerations is product country of origin (COO) criteria, which often influences product choice rather noticeably.

The very construct – country of origin (COO) was developed by Robert Schooler in 1965 [1], and eventually has become one of the most widely researched concepts. In the very beginning, prime purpose of studies was to determine whether or not a country of origin effect existed. During the next 20 years, research evolved through studies involving different manipulations. Country of origin existence was tested towards different product classes, brands, purchase risks, prices, individual product attributes and the influence of the social and economic development of countries where products are produced [2]. Later works either included more sophisticated approaches and more specific research settings, or related COO concept with various

mental processes, typically – processing of purchase information [3–6].

Many of newest studies are summarized into a holistic model of COO influence by Julie M. Phar [7]. The model is based on a narrative review of empirical studies of country of origin evaluations, conducted during the period of 1995–2005, when significant changes were occurring in international markets. The model depicts COO evaluations as subject to a number of culturally derived antecedents, moderated by both product-based and individual consumer factors.

This is not the only way to group factors that make up the concept of COO or outline its influences. Country of origin may be viewed as a combination of two processes – cultural stereotypes and personal beliefs [8]. More specifically, country of origin of a product can affect its evaluations in four different ways: (a) as a product attribute whose implications combine with other attributes to influence evaluations, (b) as a signal to infer more specific product characteristics, (c) as a heuristic (to simplify the evaluation task), and (d) as a standard relative to which the product is compared. Research findings disclosed that country of origin appeared to function in three of the four ways considered,

but there was little evidence that it served as a heuristic in any condition [9]. Other findings show that “country of origin not only has a direct influence on product evaluations, but also tends to stimulate subjects to think more extensively about other product attribute information, augmenting the latter’s effect” [10].

2. Structure and developments of COO concept

It is obvious that COO is a general construct that may be subdivided in numerous ways. Probably the most obvious step includes separating out COO of the brand, and a country of product manufacturing [11]. This can be extended into a combination of three elements: (1) country of origin for parts, (2) assembly, and (3) design [12]. Other studies use terms of partitioned country of origin and binational brands. In this case, country of origin was divided into three subconstructs: (1) country of manufacture product specific image, (2) country of manufacture overall image, and (3) country of brand overall image [13].

However, static models can hardly take into account all real-life considerations. Both brand and country images change over time, and perceived attributes of products associated with a country also is subject of change [14]. In other words, there are two-way interactions between these constructs that both change over time [15].

One of the most discussed influences on COO concept is globalization. With the global economy stretching geographic borders and redefining alliances, the world has become a more connected and interdependent place. Though there are many disputes about influences of globalization, it can not be neglected. Numerous previously isolated countries suddenly are exposed to the World economy, and their inhabitants start forming attitudes about international brands and their COO. Studies confirm importance of COO in consumer decision making in these countries often opposing international products against domestic [16, 17]. A very special place among newly opened economies is taken by a large group of Eastern European countries and some countries of the former Soviet Union. However, COO studies in these countries are rather limited. One of the earliest works was performed in Hungary [18], later – in some other countries of this group [19–21].

3. Country of automobile origin importance

Many of mentioned COO studies concentrated on non-durable, low-involvement product categories. However, COO construct is more important when durable, high involvement and high differentiation goods are considered [15]. A good example of these is an automobile. Studies show that here the COO effects are not only product specific, but also vehicle category specific [22].

Both automobile manufacturing and consumption are of truly international nature. Direct consequence of global alliances in the automobile market results in the emergence of the “hybrid” or bi-national product – a vehicle manufactured in one country and branded by a firm from another country [23].

Consumer attitudes towards foreign and domestic cars are typically analysed in highly developed countries [24–26]. Broader international studies yet are rather limited, though existing ones suggest importance of more international directions for further research. For example, car-related study suggests that “the COO effect in consumers’ purchase behaviour is also evident in emerging markets, and this includes former Socialist countries where related research is scarce” [27]. All this gives good reasons to perform a descriptive study of automobile COO effects in one of not analysed Eastern European countries – Lithuania.

Lithuania experienced significant changes during the last 15 years. During that period, Lithuanian population was not only involved into social and political developments, but also very rapidly went through some specific economic cycles that prepared the ground for growth within a frame of already rather typical market economy [28]. This opened possibilities for Lithuanian population to get into contact with products of international automotive industry and develop certain opinions and product/country associations. First official dealerships of international producers occurred in Lithuania in 1991 (Hyundai), and currently 41 brand is presented through dealerships that are located in Lithuania. However, contact with international automobile industry is broadened up not just through them, but also by individual acquisitions of cars abroad (mainly – used ones). In any case, number of registered cars that were made in countries of former USSR currently went down to less than 10 %. The Lithuanian market is heavily dominated by German cars, having stable 53 % during the last 5 years, almost stable proportion of USA cars (close to 10 %), and increasingly growing share of Japanese and French automobiles (from 10 % to 13 % and from 3 % to 7 % in 5 years respectively) [29].

4. Research model

In this study we analyse: 1) how important country of origin is to buyers when they purchase products of various categories; 2) whether the country of manufacturing is considered differently than country of origin; 3) how often specific countries are associated with automobiles; 4) which attributes of automobiles are linked to specific countries; 5) if this linking depends on overall COO importance to the customer. Since other authors [30] observed demographic influences on analyzed questions, we included analysis on the basis of gender where appropriate. This is specifically important, since other authors admit that there are no consistent tendencies or trends for cars of different national origins or specific attributes [31].

The survey was performed in Lithuania, among middle-level managers of various companies. Sample size was 148 persons and included 69 males and 79 females. By age, respondents ranged from 22 to 48, and 48.6 % of them were 26 or more years old. Sampling procedure was judgemental, and included master grade students of a business school.

5. Research findings

Survey disclosed that respondents pay different attention to the country of product origin when considering products of different types. Out of seven analyzed product groups, automobiles and wine were more often mentioned as categories, in which respondents always pay attention to COO. These two product groups are clearly leading by buyers' attention to their country of origin – in case of automobiles 92.6 % of respondents 'always' or 'more often' pay attention to product COO, and in case of wine – 91.8 % of respondents (Table 1).

Differences between judgments of male and female respondents occurred just in case of automobiles (men indicated "always" more often), cosmetics, and clothing (women indicated "always" more frequently). In all cases differences were statistically insignificant.

Analysis of responses towards country of manufacturing of products of the same categories disclosed rather a similar picture. Although respondents indicated answer "always" less frequently, leading groups of products remained the same: automobiles and wine. In case of automobiles 85.7 % of respondents "always" or 'more often' pay attention to the country of product manufacturing, and in case of wine – 83.3 % of respondents. This gives good reason to concentrate further analysis just on automobiles, as a product category, in which COO as well as country of manufacturing play an important role in buyers' considerations.

The importance of country of origin in automobile category probably can be explained by relatively high price, status and durability of the product. However, importance of COO in wine category suggests also another interpretation: perhaps there is a direct link or strong association between certain countries and certain product categories. Also, they might be stronger in some product groups.

Continuing analysis of a product category, in which COO is considered important (automobiles), we analyzed which countries are automatically associated with automobiles as a product category. Respondents were asked to indicate associations with as many countries as they consider relevant. Leaders in this list are obvious (Table 2).

Some country associations differ between men and women. Women associate Japan with automobiles significantly more often than men, though with Italy and Russia – less often. In case of other countries differences on gender basis are insignificant.

Associations between countries and a product group (in our case – automobiles) may be generated by numerous influences. First, the three leading countries in Table 2 correspond with the top three countries in the world car manufacturing, just in different order – Japan, USA and Germany [32]. Therefore, respondents may reflect their knowledge about the main car manufacturers.

Second, this can be related with local expertise: the number of cars that are purchased or are used in Lithuania (or in Europe). In this case, associations are not perfectly linked with numbers. About a half of cars that are registered in Lithuania are of German origin. The next three countries (Japan, Russia and USA) are lagging well behind. However, not all the same countries are leaders in terms of newly registered cars – here Germany is followed by Japan and France. Taking into account only brand new cars, we might get yet another sequence: Japan, Germany and France [29]. Again, all this data just partially supports the assumption about importance of respondents' local expertise for associations.

And third, associations may be generated by personal expertise of respondents, mainly reflecting relationship with currently owned car, generating trial effects [33]. However, it can not be directly confirmed by the current study. Nevertheless, though small number of respondents in some groups does not allow making reliable statistical evaluations, even this data creates serious doubt about this assumption. Here are some interpretations.

Table 2. Associations of countries with automobiles

Countries	% of respondents
Germany	95.9
Japan	83.1
USA	71.6
Sweden	43.9
Korea	43.2
France	41.9
Italy	36.5
Russia	27.0

Majority of the respondents (almost 70 %) owned German, Japanese or French cars, and this part of data allows somehow more reliable analysis. However, owners of German and Japanese-made cars associate these countries with automobiles less than the sample's average, while those of French – more. Despite the

Table 1. Importance of COO when buyers purchase various products

Do you pay attention to COO when purchase?	Automobile, %	Wine, %	Cosmetics, %	TV set, %	Mobile phone, %	Furniture, %	Clothing, %
Never	1.4	2.0	5.4	2.7	9.5	6.8	8.8
More often no	6.1	6.1	19.7	17.0	27.9	25.2	27.2
More often yes	25.9	34.0	38.1	49.0	38.8	47.6	44.9 %
Always	66.7	57.8	36.7	31.3	23.8	20.4	19.0 %

COO of the owned car, the most frequently associated with automobiles country in all columns of Table 3 remains Germany. All this does not allow supporting the idea that owned car makes strong influence on associations between countries and automobiles, which was sometimes observed by other authors [34].

As a result, we propose that country association with a product group is a combination of the above mentioned influences in conjunction with some others that are attributed to a specific country. These can be either general (“good quality”) or rather specific (“modern design”, etc.). Together they produce some “automatic” association with a country [35]. However, this combination can be at least partially decomposed into associations with certain characteristics that a person associates with automobiles from a certain country.

On the basis of in-depth interviews with car owners, seven important characteristics of automobiles were identified. They included: “good quality”, “prestige”, “reliability”, “durability”, “high price”, “convenience in use”, “modern design” (we purposely excluded “price”, since part of in Lithuania purchased cars are second-hand). Respondents were asked to indicate what characteristics can be associated with a specific country. The number of associations per country was not limited, also there was a possibility to indicate “none”.

High quality is most often associated with German and Japanese cars (Table 4). Swedish cars are significantly behind these two leaders, but also much ahead of associations with any of another country made automobiles. Respondents, who always pay attention to COO, associate

quality with Japanese cars and less – with USA-made cars than those who do not pay attention to COO.

Prestige is most often mentioned in association with German and USA-made automobiles. In general, prestige association with cars was indicated much less frequently, and survey showed that cars of two countries (Korea and Russia) are not associated with prestige at all. Interestingly enough, statistically significant differences were observed between male and female responses regarding some countries. Men much more often associate prestige with German automobiles, while women – with USA-made cars. Also, women much more often associate prestige with Japanese and French automobiles (34.7 % and 22.2 %), while in both cases only 9.2 % of men associated prestige with cars of these countries.

In terms of reliability, associations with German automobiles are mentioned most frequently, while Japan and Sweden are well ahead of all other countries. Respondents, who always pay attention to COO, almost never associate reliability with French cars (only 4.5 %). The only significant difference in evaluations of men and women occurred in case of Swedish automobiles, whose reliability men mentioned more often than women.

In terms of durability German automobiles are again by far ahead of others. However, though Japan and Sweden are mentioned less often, these countries are well ahead of all others. Likewise, men were mentioning both Japanese and Swedish car durability significantly more often than women. There was one more significant difference by gender regarding durability:

Table 3. Associations between countries and automobiles by car owners by COO

Countries	Owned cars are made in (%)								No car
	Germany	Japan	USA	Sweden	Korea	France	Italy	Other countries	
Germany	94.2	93.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Japan	28.8	51.2	25.0	25.0	50.0	71.4	33.3	40.0	42.1
USA	26.9	46.5	25.0	25.0	50.0	57.1	66.7	40.0	21.1
Sweden	40.4	46.5	0.0	100.0	0.0	42.9	100.0	80.0	36.8
Korea	21.2	32.6	0.0	0.0	50.0	42.9	33.3	20.0	26.3
France	82.7	95.3	25.0	75.0	50.0	85.7	66.7	80.0	78.9
Italy	46.2	48.8	25.0	50.0	25.0	57.1	33.3	20.0	26.3
Russia	65.4	74.4	25.0	75.0	100.0	85.7	66.7	80.0	73.7

Table 4. Associations of countries with car characteristics

Country	Good quality, %	Prestige, %	Reliability, %	Durability, %	High price, %	Convenience in use, %	Modern design, %
Germany	81.3	57.7	73.1	70.8%	48.1	49.2	30.2
Japan	70.8	22.6	60.0	41.5	28.1%	58.5	50.4
USA	17.4	42.3	11.0	13.8	35.6%	42.3	32.4
Sweden	49.3	29.9	55.9	42.3	47.4	27.7	9.4
Korea	2.8	0.0	4.1	2.3%	1.5	11.5	10.8
France	6.9	16.1	5.5	1.5	13.3	33.8	53.2
Italy	10.4	23.4	6.2	3.1	29.6%	12.3	51.1
Russia	0.7	0.0	4.8	18.5	2.2	3.8	1.4

Russian cars were associated with durability by 26.1 % of women and only by 9.8 % of men.

German automobiles lead in many quality-related categories, but are also most often associated with high price (closely followed by Swedish cars). This association is the only “negative” one in the list. German and Swedish cars are more often associated with high price by men, while Japanese and USA-made automobiles – by women.

Respondents associated Japanese automobiles with convenience in use more often than cars from any other country. However, German and USA-made cars in this association are not far behind. Respondents, who always pay attention to COO, almost never associate convenience with Russian automobiles (only 3.3 %).

Three countries – France, Italy, and Japan – are most often associated with modern design of automobiles. In case of the first two, we believe that they are well related with design of many other products, i.e. “modern design” is part of the country image without linking with a product category. In case of Japan, this association perhaps goes more specifically through the products category and is more directly linked with automobiles. However, we can only speculate about this, since this issue was left beyond the current research.

6. Discussion and suggestions for further research

Product COO is to some extent a surrogate of overall product quality, and often does not allow more concrete analysis. Despite numerous limitations of the current descriptive research, it analyses some more detailed associations between countries and car characteristics and allows summarising some findings.

Frequent associations between countries and product groups suggest that despite globalization influences, products still are strongly related with their COO. Differences in associations between automobile COO and country of manufacturing were just minor. However, many more analysis has to be performed to clarify whether brand associations and COO associations in countries like Lithuania work in the same way as in industrial ones, where the country-of-origin effect was found to be predominantly indirect [11]. This can be extended into studies of modified COO concepts: country of origin of brand [2] or brand locations [36], which are not existing in Eastern Europe yet.

Lithuanian respondents most often associated positive automobile characteristics with Germany, Japan and Sweden. We assume that in case of Germany and Sweden respondents partially showed acceptance to products originating from countries in the same region [27]. Associations with Japan lack this advantage and are mainly built on perceived characteristics of Japanese automobiles.

Study showed that some differences in associations occur on the basis of demographic characteristics of respondents. It would be logical to develop analysis including more demographic characteristics or using

sub-cultural aspect, which was done on the basis of other product categories [37, 38].

Although increasingly competitive global market makes it more and more difficult to establish a sustainable competitive advantage, positioning brands in associations with their COO might offer an opportunity both in foreign and domestic markets [39]. There are possibilities for global marketing strategies featuring country of origin [40], and car manufacturers perhaps could pay attention to associations that are disclosed in this study.

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