

NATIONALISM AND FAMILIARITY IN CONSUMER ATTITUDES TO TOP-OF-MIND CORPORATE BRANDS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN ITALIAN AND SPANISH STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the strength of country-specific attitudes to top-of-mind brand perception in two different EU Countries: Italy and Spain.

Starting from a literature review on “country-of-origin” (COO) effects and ethnocentrism, the role of these elements is studied within Italian and Spanish contexts in a preliminary empirical research conducted on 184 students.

The results show that the most referred to top-of-mind corporate brands appear to be of foreign origin, though in some product categories this is primarily due to a lack of viable national alternatives.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Italian students could be considered relatively more nationalistic, showing higher values on the two “country-related” items, while Spanish students seem to present a propensity to use brands related to the habit within their families.

Key-words:

Country of Origin (COO) effect, consumer ethnocentrism, top-of-mind brands, country-specific attitudes

1. Introduction

The economic crisis and the globalization phenomenon are accelerating the competition between local and imported products. Suh and Kown (2002) argued that the globalization processes will not standardize consumer behavior around the world and a number of researchers proposed that it may be dangerous to consider that consumer buying behavior is globalizing and the assumption that consumer psychological characteristics are becoming less important as predictors of consumer behavior is questionable (Keillor and Hult, 1999).

Consumers' decisions process when choosing a brand in their purchase behavior have been widely studied and previous studies identified different factors that may affect to their particular needs or preferences. Culture seems to be an important matter to consider as it seems to influence individuals' perceptions about brands and products (Gurahn-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000). Individuals with similar cultural values might have some preferences related to nationalism feelings, meaning they are influenced by the perception of collective national identities which makes them to favor or reject products from other countries (Wang, 2005), but they can also differ across countries considered within the same cultural typology – individualistic vs. collectivist – (Kaynak and Kucukemiroglu, 2001).

A number of marketing academics have focused their studies on the negative attitudes toward foreign products that can be due to the believe that products from certain countries are of inferior quality (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos 2004), to hostile feelings toward a country, its people, and products (Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998) or because of the believe that it is better to buy domestic and morally wrong to buy foreign products (Klein 2002; Shimp and Sharma 1987). These antecedents are better known as country-of-origin effects, animosity, and consumer ethnocentrism.

When thinking about brands, consumers' purchase intentions are affected by the Country of Origin (COO) effect, thus their behavior may vary depending on the type of product and country we are referring to, making them trust in some specific countries when buying. Customers use their previous perceptions regarding to quality influenced by these COO beliefs (Papadopoulos, 1993).

In the last decades, the debate on COO effect has attracted the attention of numerous academics, but empirical research is needed. The present study aims at measuring the magnitude of the country of origin effect on top of mind brand perception in Spain and Italy, across several categories of products. In the following section we discuss the literature related to this particular topic. Subsequently we describe the methodology for the exploratory study and discuss the results. Finally, we highlight the conclusions according to the data obtained.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The 'country of origin' effect

Many country-of-origin (COO) studies conducted in various countries, such as the United States (Shimp and Sharma 1987), Canada (Hung, 1989), France (Baumgartner and Jolibert 1977), the United Kingdom (Bannister and Saunders 1978), and Korea (Sharma, Shimp and Shin, 1995) have illustrated that consumers with ethnocentric tendencies tend to assess domestic products unreasonably favorably compared to imported products.

This phenomenon indicates a definite positive association between ethnocentrism and evaluation of products made domestically, and a negative association between ethnocentrism and evaluation of imported products.

During the last three decades, numerous articles have examined various aspects of COO effect. Some authors considered COO as an overall perception of a country (Nagashima, 1977; Wall and Heslop 1986; Papadopolous and Heslop 2003) and other authors considered that there is some evidence that COO is contingent on a specific product category (Gaedeke 1973; Cattin, Jolibert and Lohnes 1982; Eroglu and Machleit 1988; Han and Terpstra 1988).

In spite of the current proliferation of global brands, COO remains an important factor in consumer product evaluation (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop and Murali 2005). Consumers' perceptions of a foreign country (economic prosperity, technological advances, etc.) are often translated into consistent perceptions regarding the quality of products from that country (Bilkey and Nes, 1982).

There is a substantial body of research on consumers' evaluation of products based on the country-of-origin (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993; Maheswaran 1994; Liefeld 2004; Ahmed, d'Astous and Champagne 2005; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop and Murali, 2005; Liu and Johnson 2005; Speece and Nguyen 2005). A product's COO is an informational cue which, like other informational cues such as price, brand name, etc., helps consumers evaluate products and develop attitudes towards them (Papadopoulos and Heslop 1993).

The research on COO continues to provide value for several reasons. Firstly, COO plays an important role in the perceptions of product quality and influences consumers' choice of brands. Secondly, COO research that provides generalizable strategic guidelines on how to successfully compete in a global market is especially useful (Kim and Chung 1997; Ahmed, d'Astous and Champagne 2005).

The 'country of origin' concept is based on the idea according to which people usually make stereotyped judgments with regard to other countries and, as a consequence, towards the products manufactured in those countries (Balabanis *et al.*, 1999).

Pharr (2005) considered that the literature on this topic seems to lead to the same conclusion: the product's or brand's country of origin may influence the consumers' assessment of this product/brand. Moreover, the studies have indicated that the country-of-origin effect may be analyzed according to intrinsic (related to the physical composition of the product) and extrinsic (related to other product characteristics) information about the product, and also environmental and cultural factors.

Although there is an apparent consensus on the positive influence of the 'country of origin' (COO) on the evaluation of products and brands, the debate about the COO and the magnitude of its effect is still ongoing.

2.2. The ethnocentrism

There is still little academic research into how cultural differences among consumers influence their perceptions of different countries. An important cultural aspect to take into account in the study of the country-of-origin effect is the degree of ethnocentrism of the culture in focus. The 'ethnocentrism' could be defined as the way in which a group sees itself as the reference framework, classifying other groups according to its own characteristics.

Shimp and Sharma (1987) define Consumer Ethnocentrism (CET) as the belief held by consumers about the appropriateness and morality of purchasing foreign-made products. These authors considered that ethnocentrism "represents the universal proclivity for people to view their own group as the center of the universe, to interpret other social units from the perspective of their own group, and to reject persons who are culturally dissimilar while blindly accepting those who are culturally like themselves" (Shimp and Sharma, 1987, p. 280).

CET derives first from the love and concern for one's own country and the fear of losing control of one's economic interests from the harmful effects of imports (Sharma, Shimp and Shin 1995). According to these authors, the more ethnocentric the consumers are the more they will tend to see the purchase of foreign goods as something harmful, because their consumption would harm the domestic economy and be unpatriotic.

Consumers who are highly ethnocentric are unwilling to purchase foreign products and tend to look at the issue of buying foreign goods as a moral rather than just an economic problem. From a managerial perspective, ethnocentrism refers to consumers' preference for domestic products and prejudice against imports. Ethnocentric consumers tend to purchase domestic products even if the quality is lower than that of imports (Wall and Heslop, 1986). However, high

ethnocentrism scores found in developed countries may mean that consumers in these countries prefer domestically-made products first, followed by products from other highly developed countries, followed by products from less developed countries (Wang and Lamb 1980; Okechuku, 1994).

Kaynak and Kara (2002) supported the idea of a direct relationship between the openness of certain societies to foreign cultures and the acceptance of foreign goods and services, whereas patriotism, conservatism and ethnocentrism represent important barriers to the acceptance of those products.

We may consider that CET represents an alternative response to globalization. Suh and Kwon (2002) examined effects of global openness on consumer ethnocentrism and reluctance to purchase foreign-made products. They concluded consumer ethnocentrism was an important factor in determining the magnitude of reluctance in the purchases of imported products. Following this theoretical framework, Klein *et al.* (1998) stated ethnocentric consumers tended to purchase domestic products due to the belief that products made in their own country were considered superior.

3. Methodology

The main research object was to explore the attitudes and habits of - both Italian and Spanish - students to a consideration set to well-known top-of-mind brands, thereby measuring their perception of country of origin factors. To reach these goals a quantitative instrument was designed and issued. The questionnaire included seven questions, predominantly open, divided into three parts (top-of-mind brands in different product categories, preference for local/foreign products and companies, opinions about current trends in branding/advertising).

The questionnaires were distributed to a sample of students both at the University of Salerno (Italy) and the University of Granada (Spain). The selection of respondents was not made according to probabilistic criteria. The exercise was conducted face-to-face in between June 2010 and April 2011. Resulting in a completed set of 184 valid questionnaires, equally distributed in the two countries. A statistical analysis of the data was implemented using SPSS software in order to scientifically structure and map the responses gathered from the questionnaires.

4. Results and Findings

Respondents were asked to supply unprompted recall of top-of-mind brands in seven distinct categories (Colas/sodas, Computer, Cell phones, Cars, Restaurants, Media, Internet services). Table 1 illustrates the principal differences expressed between those brands listed by students in Italy and the Spain, and the percentage on valid responses.

The brands that achieved the highest values are those related to the following product categories: beverages (Coca Cola), mobile phones (Nokia), restaurants (McDonald's) notably non-indigenous to both Countries. Except for "media", in which they constitute nearly the totality of responses, national brands factors appear to be marginal. Interestingly, there are two exceptions: Fiat (cars) for Italy and Movistar (internet services) for Spain, however both are mentioned by less than 40% of the informants.

TABLE 1
Top-of-mind brands in different product categories (%)

CATEGORIES	TOP-OF-MIND BRANDS – ITALY	TOP-OF-MIND BRANDS – SPAIN
Colas/sodas	Coca cola 48.9%	Coca cola 89,1%

Computer	Acer 26.1%	HP 26.1%
Cell phones	Nokia 69.6%	Nokia 27.2%
Cars	Fiat 33.7%	BMW 21.7%
Restaurants	McDonald's 49.5%	McDonald's 26.1%
Media	Mediaset 25.3%	TVE 29.3%
Internet services	Google 51.6%	Movistar 39.1%

In addition, questions were posed to examine three of these categories (beverages, mobile phones and restaurants) to verify the purchasing behaviour of selected consumers. These three categories show the same three top-of-mind brands selected by students in Italy and in Spain (see Table 1). These questions, therefore, allowed us to verify if the top-of-mind brands match or not with the preferred purchased brand (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Congruency between top-of-mind brands and purchase choice

CATEGORIES	TOP-OF-MIND BRANDS	PURCHASE CHOICE
Beverages	Coca Cola 69% (IT 48.9% - Spain 89.1%)	Coca Cola 48.9% (IT 44.6% - Spain 53.3%)
Cell phones	Nokia 48.4% (IT 69.6% - Spain 27.2%)	Nokia 59.8% (IT 75% - Spain 44.6%)
Restaurants	McDonald's 37.5% (IT 49.5% - Spain 26.1%)	McDonald's 31% (IT 26.1% - Spain 35.9%)

The results show that there is a clear congruency between the same top-of-mind brands and purchase choice. Among the three brands in question, Nokia is very often selected as the predominant brand of choice (nearly 60% of respondents), while the other two brands suffer a decline, also due to the choice of local alternatives (e.g. the choice of local or typical restaurants is about 30% of cases).

In addition, the following similarities are present in Italy and Spain samples in the brand selection (purchase choice) with regard to the following categories:

- *Sportswear*. Over 75% of respondents in both samples refer to the two main global brands (Nike and Adidas) in this industry;
- *Cosmetics*. In both samples, respondents choose commercial brands (low price products) in more than 50% of cases;

- *Breakfast cereal*. About 60% of both samples chose as a preference for buying the same global brand (Kellogg's).

In the above three categories, the presence of national brands is very limited: the only exception is represented by some store brands (e.g. Deliplus and Hacendado for Mercadona).

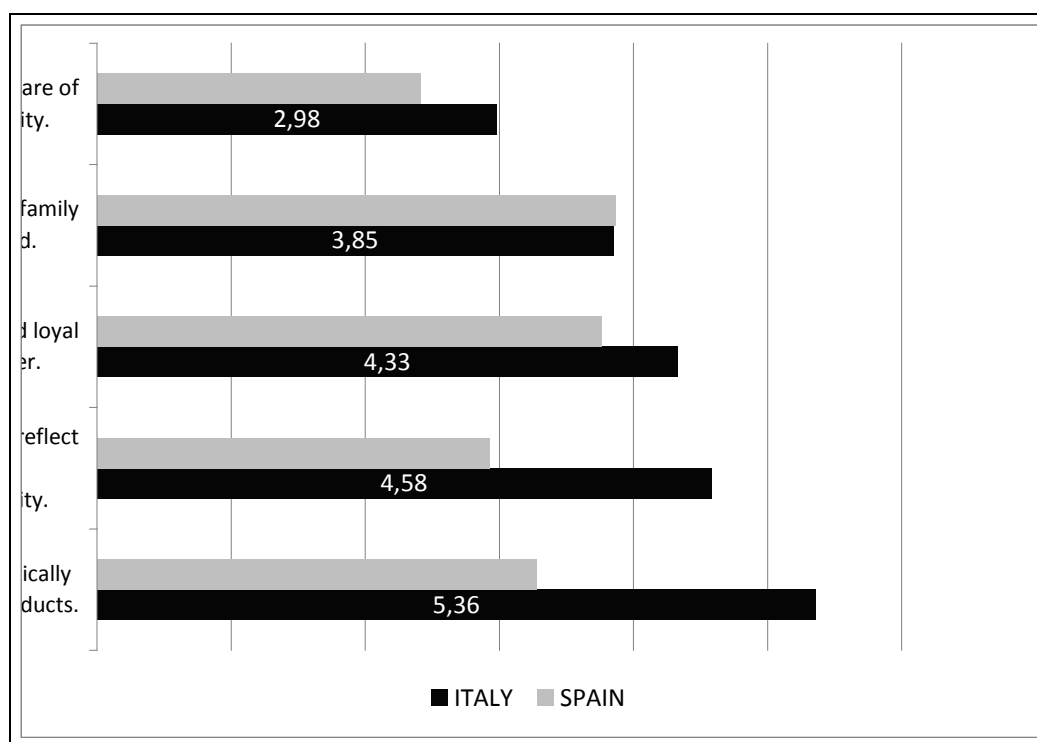
Most significant observable differences between the two samples we witnessed in the “sweets” category; while in Italy Ferrero (35.7%) predominated, in Spain the preference for typical/local pastry is significant (63%) but unrelated to a specific brand name.

Furthermore, the fact that food is much more prone to be country-related is confirmed by results on the “what product/brand would you miss in a foreign country”: namely, in both samples over 60% cite typical food products (mainly “pasta”, “pizza” and “mozzarella” for Italy, “jamón” and “aceite” for Spain).

Furthermore, we employed two makers (“I buy domestic products” and “I used brands that reflect my national heritage/identity”) to express the consumer nationalism and the propensity to consumer ethnocentrism; in relation to the following elements: brand loyalty, the perception of inferior quality of foreign brands, and the use of brands in a familiar context.

In Figure 1 we can see the difference between the means in Italy and the Spain in relation to these items. The analysis demonstrates that Italian students could be considered relatively more nationalistic, showing higher values on the two “country-related” items (5.36 and 4.58).

FIGURE 1
Mean (7 point Likert)- Country-specific attitude



Alternatively, the Spain sample seems to present a propensity to use brands related to the habit within their families (3.87). The Likert scale items were subsequently subjected to factor analysis to identify the latent factors. Through factor analysis (Table 3), the most relevant factor loadings of variables on the two components are highlighted in bold.

TABLE 3
Factor analysis (consumer nationalism/consumer ethnocentrism)

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component	
	1	2
I buy domestically produced products.	.867	.011
I use brands that reflect my national heritage/identity.	.863	.102
I am a brand loyal customer.	.183	.783
Foreign brands are of inferior quality.	.565	.262
I use brands that my family uses or have used.	.156	.798

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Quartimax with Kaiser Normalization.

^a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Based on the variables that show the highest factor loadings, we decided to name the first factor “propensity to consumer nationalism/ethnocentrism” and the second “propensity to brand loyalty and familiarity factor”.

Drawing on theories of consumer ethnocentrism and country-of-origin effect, this study tested the moderating role of country-specific attitudes to top-of-mind brand perception.

The sample explored the nature of COO influence on intentionally recollected memory input (top-of-mind brand). Consistent with existent literature, the paper highlights that mechanically activated country-specific consumer attitudes play an important role in influencing corporate brand judgments. In addressing the consequence of the consumer ethnocentrism - on a theoretical point of view - it was further predicted that country stereotypes would produce both facilitative and interfering effects on corporate brand judgments (Maheswaran, 1994).

The findings thus go a step beyond previous COO research and demonstrate that the effect can be, to some extent, widespread to other situation involving COO.

Prior research has established the role of COO in consumer attitudes, and suggested that the COO effect is nation and corporate brand specific. However, only few existing research (e.g. Kim and Chung, 1997) has examined the underlying factors. This study has found that favourable COO is positively related to the actual corporate brand purchased, and the strength of the relationship is contingent on same brand’s associations.

This research aimed to investigate the attitudes and habits of Italian and Spanish students towards a consideration set to well-known top-of-mind brands, thereby measuring their perception of country of origin factors. In order to reach these goals, an exploratory study was carried out. The results suggested that Italian students are more nationalistic as they show higher values on the two ‘country-related’ items. On the other hand, Spanish students seem to have the propensity to use the brands related to the habit within their families.

5. Conclusions

Drawing on theories of consumer ethnocentrism and country-of-origin effect, this study tested the moderating role of country-specific attitudes to top-of-mind brand perception. The sample explored the nature of COO influence on intentionally recollected memory input (top-of-mind brand). Consistent with existent literature, the paper highlights that mechanically activated country-specific consumer attitudes play an important role in influencing corporate brand judgments (Maheswaran, 1994).

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