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Is it all or nothing? Testing schema congruity and typicality for products with country origin

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ABSTRACT

For numerous products, brand cues are used to signal the origin of the product. Yet, in some cases, consumers are faced with products carrying brand cues that are not necessarily congruous with the origin of the product. For example, Belvedere is Polish vodka but has an English name and a castle symbol; neither cues may be considered stereotypically Polish. This research tests how origin-typicality interacts with origin-typical brand cues on products. It shows that completely origin-congruous brand cues are more effective in improving attitudes than mild incongruity between brand cues. It also shows that product typicality is a significant factor influencing consumers' evaluations of origin products with origin-congruous/incongruous brand cues. Using multiple studies across two product categories, this research demonstrates that origin-typical products should brand with origin-congruent cues whereas origin-atypical products should avoid using origin-congruent cues in their branding. The implications of the findings for international brand management are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Open borders have created numerous opportunities for companies to increase their presence in international markets. However, these promising market conditions have also paved the way for a new category of products: those whose origins are not necessarily congruous with the brand cues they carry. For example, Grey Goose Vodka is a French brand but vodka is associated with Eastern European countries (e.g. Poland). Recent research shows that country of origin misattribution is quite common; a brand can signal an origin that is different from its actual origin (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011). For example, Häagen-Dazs may signal a Scandinavian or Hungarian origin, despite the brand being American.

Origin is a retrieval cue for consumers and may signal product qualities to consumers (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Keller, 1993). Consumers use country of origin image (COI) and product beliefs to establish attitudes towards products, and they categorize products based on predefined stereotypes and COI (Knight & Calantone, 2000). Consequently certain product categories are stereotypically associated with specific origins (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Despite the enormous amount of research investigating origin effects, there are two research gaps that remain unaddressed. First, exactly how origin-based branding cues amplify (attenuate) origin and product associations remains unknown. For many product categories, origin associations are important (Kotler & Gertner, 2002) and language, symbols, and other brand cues and tools often reinforce origin associations (Bartikowski & Singh, 2014; Usunier,

2011). However, there is a lack of research on congruity among a set of brand cues, including those that suggest product origin. Second, a growing body of research reviews origin-typicality of product categories but does not consider the origin-typicality of brand cues (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011). Thus, this paper examines the interaction of typicality and brand cues using the schema congruity framework (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

The objective of this research is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how consumers use origin as a basis for evaluation. Specifically, it seeks to understand how origin schemas can be dis/confirmed by branding cues such as language and symbols. This paper examines typical and atypical origin products and how brand cue congruity and incongruity interact with origin, impacting product attitudes. The article contributes to the COI field by specifying ex post facto the outcomes of typicality perceptions on branded origin products. The results highlight when imported origin products, those that clearly indicate their origin in their marketing, should use or avoid origin congruent brand cues to enhance attitudes. Overall, the results suggest that brands that are perceived as origin-typical should use origin congruent brand cues whereas origin-atypical brands should abstain from using origin congruent brand cues.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Country of origin image (COI)

COI operates in much the same way as brand image: associations related to the origin become meaningful to consumers and consumers subsequently come to see the origin as a brand (Gabriel & Urien,

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2006). Usunier and Cestre (2007) point out that perceived product ethnicity/nationality helps consumers make easier associations. Thus, origin becomes a diagnostic cue for consumers that signals qualities regarding the product in question (Erdem & Swait, 1998). For example, engineering prowess has often been associated with Germany and many German car manufacturers (e.g. Audi, BMW, Volkswagen, Opel) use this origin association to market their products. By default, Made in Germany has become a representation of efficiency. Consumers evaluate origin products based on established beliefs about the origin, the product, and the brand (Knight & Calantone, 2000) and the COI and a consumer's beliefs work simultaneously in influencing attitudes toward origin products. As a result of this interweaving of origin and product image, and consumer and brand beliefs, certain stereotypes can become associated with an origin (e.g. femininity is associated with France (Rosenthal, 1999)). However, in the extant literature, there is frequent confusion between the image of a specific country and the image of products from that country (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Other than recent research on typicality (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011), very little research focuses on COI information and stereotypes as being product-specific (e.g. wine is French) as opposed to origin-specific (e.g. France makes wine) (Johansson, Ronkainen, & Czinkota, 1994). The difference between these two types of COI is important to uncover because countries can be described by their product categories and brands within these product categories may use cues to reinforce subjective and objective perceptions related to the country.

2.2. How language and symbols are critical in forming COI

Other than the 'made in...' identification on a product, consumers use cues such as brand name, symbols on the packaging, labels on the packaging, advertising, price, guarantees, and origin as origin signals (Steenkamp, 1990). Brand cues are frequently used to create, confirm and/or conceal product nationality and consumers are prone to using multiple packaging signals when categorizing origin products (Usunier, 2011). Origin indicators can come in the form of an explicit identification of the origin within the brand name (e.g. Swissair), or subtler origin insinuations via language branding or symbol (e.g. Swatch); making it harder for consumers to identify the origins of products (Samiee, Shimp, & Sharma, 2005).

Product origin can be (dis)confirmed with a foreign-sounding name or by including foreign language spelling in the brand name (e.g. letters with umlauts are associated with the German language). Likewise, certain words become associated with countries and with product categories representative of these countries (e.g. *domaine* and *château* are associated with French wines) (Heslop, Cray, & Armenakyan, 2009; Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dubé, 1994). Foreign-sounding brand names can even lead consumers to use origin stereotypes as a key feature when evaluating a product (Thomas & Pickering, 2003). Brands with foreign-sounding names can garner improved product perceptions and, in some cases, even non-origin congruent foreign-sounding names can positively influence consumer product perceptions because they represent appealing stereotypes (e.g. French-sounding names sound more hedonic and are more appealing for cosmetic brands) (Leclerc et al., 1994). Therefore linguistic cues become key drivers for origin recognition but can also lead to erroneous origin product associations, for example Samsung is Korean, though many consumers believe that the brand is Japanese (Magnusson et al., 2011; Usunier, 2011).

Origin of a product can also be identified via the use of brand symbols (Thakor & Kohli, 1996). Brand symbols become figurative ways to represent the brand and thus can evoke a certain origin (e.g. the Statue of Liberty for the USA) and confirm the link between a product category and an origin (Usunier, 2011). Furthermore, brand symbols can be more powerful in influencing product selection than written content because images are easier to process than verbal content (Jarvis, Mueller, & Chiong, 2010).

2.3. COI, product typicality and schema congruity

Consumers have perceptions of products they think can and should be produced in a specific country. When faced with origin products, consumers can categorize these as being country (a)typical, in other words (in)congruous with their existing country-product schemas (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011). Roth and Romeo (1992) explain this phenomenon by noting that the important features associated with a country (e.g. efficient workforce, quality materials, know-how, etc.) must be congruous with the most important features of the product from that country. For example, Japanese technological savvy makes associating computers with Japan much more coherent than associating cheese with Japan (especially since dairy foods are not part of the typical Japanese diet). Products that are perceived as typical of an origin result in more favorable consumer attitudes than atypical products from the same origin (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011).

Explaining how consumers establish typicality depends on their cognitive knowledge, structures or schemas. Schemas allow consumers to see relationships between attributes of a stimulus, as they are "conceptual abstractions that mediate between stimuli received by the sense organs and behavioral responses" (Casson, 1983, p. 430). Consumers encode, decode, categorize and act according to the schemas they construct – and this in a subconscious fashion (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984). The theory of schema congruity suggests that cognitive accommodation can produce greater affect than cognitive assimilation or contrast. While congruity also leads to positive attitudes, these attitudes are often stronger when there is mild incongruity (Mandler, 1984). The u-shaped evaluative curve relating to schema congruity is the norm for non-origin products, as has been shown consistently across product categories (Meyers-Levy, Louie, & Curren, 1994; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

However, for origin products, the research on consumer perceptions of schema congruity between brand and manufacturing origin is mixed. Much research supports complete congruity (Hamzaoui-Essoussi, Merunka, & Bartikowski, 2011; Häubl & Elrod, 1999; Hui & Zhou, 2003; Tseng & Balabanis, 2011). Yet other research demonstrates that mild incongruity between brand and manufacturing origin is most influential on attitudes (Carvalho, Samu, & Sivaramakrishnam, 2011). Much of the research examines the effects of incongruity for origin products, however these studies aim to uncover levels of brand recognition rather than nature of consumer perceptions of the origin product (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Zhou, Yang, & Hui, 2010). Thus, the studies presented here seek to examine how attitudes are shaped by the interaction of origin-in/congruent brand cues and origin a/typical products.

3. Conceptual framework

Currently, the marketplace includes numerous types of origin products that do not always represent origin-congruous schemas, which can be confusing for consumers. For example, Sharp is the name of a Japanese electronics manufacturer. Often brands will use incongruent brand cues as a means to capture more positive stereotypes (Kelly-Holmes, 2005). Likewise it is possible for a symbol to be incongruous with the product origin in order to reinforce a branding story that is not necessarily related to the origin (e.g. the puma symbol on Puma shoes is not related to Germany but is meant to reference feline-like speed). Alternatively, brand can reinforce their origin with language cues. The French origin of the cosmetic brand Lancôme is suggested by the circumflex accent in its name, and further reinforced because product category of cosmetics is associated with France. Thus, brand selects appealing visual cues to accentuate or attenuate product origin stereotypes.

The literature on the diagnosticity of brand symbols is limited to the evaluation of brand origin confidence as an individual trait (Zhou et al., 2010) or of the recognition of brand origins based on their names or

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