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THE IMPACT OF CONSUMER NEED FOR UNIQUENESS ON COUNTRY OF ORIGIN EFFECTS

Ting-Hsiang Tseng, Feng Chia University

ABSTRACT

This study, through a two by two between-subjects experimental design, attempts to clarify the possible impacts of consumer need for uniqueness on country of origin effects. Product typicality and consumer need for uniqueness were adopted as the two factors of the experiment. The recruitment of 416 participants confirmed that although typical products of a country are evaluated more positively than the less typical ones, in general, consumers with a high need for uniqueness are keener to purchase atypical products of a country than consumers with a low need for uniqueness. Thus, international marketers can promote their products by stressing the unique features of products that are not typical of their country of origin.

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KEYWORDS: COO, Country of Origin, Product Typicality, Country Typicality, Consumer Need for Uniqueness, Purchase Intention, Product Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

A country of origin (COO) image is defined as the subjective perception of a consumer about products of a country and provides important observations, such as belief, ideas, and impressions, before making a buying decision. COO research began about five decades ago and has grown rapidly to become one of the most important fields in international marketing and the theory of business. Most studies believe that the COO cue can influence consumers' preferences and behavioral intentions (Kock et al., 2019). However, despite being abundant, the observed effects are subject to contextual variations that remain unexplained. As research evidence shows, the variation of COO effects across product categories is one such instance (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Kaynak and Cavusgil, 1983; Roth and Romeo, 1992). Some product categories are strongly associated with specific countries, for example, German cars and French perfume (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). However, not all products from a country can benefit equally from its strong COO image. For example, Germany is well-regarded for the quality of its engineering and technological products, but this strong COO image may not have the same effect on other products, such as German fashion. The limited available research that we found, tried to explain variation by matching different products to different aspects of COO image that consumers perceived as important (Roth and Romeo, 1992). Accordingly, the highest COO effects were expected when aspects of the COO image which were perceived strong, were also perceived to be important for consumers of that product category. Another approach was to examine how the COO effects varied by broad categorizations of products (i.e., classified into shopping, convenience, consumer-packaged, and luxury products) and different levels of COO economic development (Manrai et al., 1998). According to that approach, the highest COO was expected when the COO was a developed one and the product was a luxury, or a shopping or packaged good. For developing COOs, the highest COO effects were expected in consumer-packaged and convenience goods. However, there are some cases which are related to traditional products like Persian rugs, or Chinese porcelain, or technological products from newly industrialized countries (for example, Samsung TV sets from South Korea), that do not always fit the predictions of the previous studies.

This paper focuses on the variation observed in products coming from the same COO. Why are certain products of a country evaluated higher than others? Building on previous research, the paper tries to explain variation by focusing on an important product attribute (product typicality), and a consumer characteristic (the need for uniqueness). Typicality can provide more theoretically grounded explanations of product-specific variations of COO effects (Tseng, 2014; Tseng and Balabanis, 2011). Country typicality (CT) reflects how representative a product is of a country. The consumer need for uniqueness (CNFU) is a characteristic that we expected to impact the variation of COO effects caused by typicality. Need for uniqueness, together with product typicality, can better explain product-based variation of COO effects. Based on the above, this paper describes an experimental design to determine the roles of typicality and CNFU in consumer evaluations and purchase intentions for different products of a country. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in the next section, literature about typicality and consumer need for uniqueness are presented; in the following section, the paper discusses the methodology used in the study and how the data were collected; then, statistical analyses and hypotheses examinations are presented in the results section; finally, the paper presents some conclusions and suggestions for marketing scholars and managers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Typicality is defined as the degree to which an item is perceived to represent a category (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011; Loken and Ward, 1990). A product is considered more typical than others when its properties are perceived to be more central, or are more similar, to the prototype of the product category. This distance from a prototypical member of a category explains the graded structure of typicality (Lingle et al., 1984). Similar grading applies to the product typicality (Hsu et al., 2014). In this study, product typicality is defined as the degree to which a product category is considered representative of a COO. It is evident that not all products are equally associated with or representative of their COOs. Some products are more representative of the country than others. Electronics are considered a representative or typical product of Japan. However, the same does not apply for shoes, which are perceived a less typical product of Japan. Typical products are closely identified with their COO and encapsulate some of the competitiveness and skills that the country has developed over time (Spielmann, 2016). From the perspective of a consumer coming from another country, these products are better known and evoke the COO. Due to their higher visibility and familiarity to the outside world, a mere exposure effect is in operation; these products will enjoy more positive evaluations than other less typical products. Previous studies have established the existence of a similar positive relationship between typicality and attitudes or selection decisions towards a product (Loken and Ward, 1987; Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985). The same is expected to apply to the context of COO effects.

H1: The typical products of a country will receive more positive general evaluations than the less typical products of the same country.

Ceteris paribus, based on reasoned action theory premises we expect a similarly increased influence of the COO to be present in purchase intentions when country typicality is high. Several meta-analytical studies (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999) have empirically confirmed this relationship of COO to intention. Moreover, Tseng (2014) and Reinholtz et al. (2015) pointed out that typical products of a country can attract higher purchase intention among consumers. To confirm and verify this argument, the current study would like to propose that:

H2: Purchase intentions will be higher for the typical products of a country than the less typical ones.

The influence of typicality on product evaluations does not remain the same across the board. It appears that some important consumer characteristics may influence this effect. The uniqueness theory of Snyder and Fromkin (1979) asserts that people have a basic need to feel moderately dissimilar to other people.

According to the theory, the need to see oneself as being different from other persons is aroused and competes with other motives in situations that threaten the self-perception of uniqueness (i.e., situations in which individuals see themselves as highly similar to others in their social environments). Individuals will then attempt to reclaim their self-esteem and reduce negative effect, through self-distinguishing behaviors (Tian and Mckenzie, 2001). Material expressions of one's differentness from others are particularly valued because they satisfy the need for uniqueness without risking severe social penalties (Snyder, 1992). When need for uniqueness is dominative, consumers tend to purchase products that allow them to distinguish themselves from other people (Bozkurt and Gligor, 2019; Chan et al., 2012).

Human beings may execute their desire to be unique in various ways, for example, through possession displays (Belk, 1988), style of interpersonal interaction (Maslach et al., 1985), domains of knowledge where they establish expertise (Holt, 1995), or conspiracy beliefs endorsement (Lantian et al., 2017). Moreover, many studies such as Snyder and Fromkin (1977) and Geng et al. (2019) have found that different individuals can show different degrees of uniqueness motivation. Therefore, it follows that consumers are likely to vary in their tendency to satisfy uniqueness motivation, through consumer behaviors and possessions. The high need for uniqueness leads to consumer tendency to avoid rehashing common arguments, and instead use novel, less conventional rationale. This results in innovative and less conventional choices (Sadik-Rozsnyai and Bertrandias, 2019; Simonson and Nowlis, 2000). Therefore, such consumer need for uniqueness (CNFU) should reflect individual differences in consumer counter-conformity motivation – differentiating the self via consumer goods and visual display of these goods – and the volitional or willful pursuit of differentness relative to other people, as an end goal (Nail, 1986; Tian and Mckenzie, 2001). In other words, consumer counter-conformity motivation is conceptually defined as an individual's pursuit of differentness relative to other individuals that is achieved through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods to develop and enhance one's personal and social identity. Therefore, CNFU is operationally defined as an individual's tendencies to engage in consumer counter-conformity behaviors by making creative counter-conformity choices, unpopular counter-conformity choices, and choices that reflect avoidance of similarity to others (Tian and Mckenzie, 2001).

Logically, consumers who have a high need for uniqueness would avoid purchasing popularized commodities, and favor unique products in a mass-market (Sun et al., 2017). Such a trait might moderate the effects of typicality across products so that consumers with the trait tend to avoid possessing typical products of a country and prefer to try some atypical products of that country. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: The purchase intentions for typical products from a COO will be lower in consumers with high CNFU than consumers with low CNFU.

H4: The purchase intentions for atypical products from a COO will be higher in consumers with high CNFU than consumers with low CNFU.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We used a two by two between-subjects factorial design in the experiment. Country typicality (typical product of a country vs. atypical product of a country), and consumer need for uniqueness (consumers with high CNFUs vs. consumers with low CNFUs) were the two factors of interest. We selected Japan as the country of origin in this study since Taiwanese students are quite familiar with Japanese products. To avoid possible bias due to different product types, this experiment controlled the variable; hedonic products were selected for one set, and utilitarian products for the other. Responses to hedonic and utilitarian products were analyzed separately to check for different response patterns between the two types. We followed the recommendations of some experts to select 'console games' and 'earrings' as typical and atypical hedonic products of Japan, for the respective groups of Taiwanese student consumers. Similarly, 'refrigerators' and

'kitchen knives' were selected as typical and atypical utilitarian products. We launched a pilot test to check the selection of typical and atypical products of Japan. A separate pool of undergraduate students attended the pilot. They rated their perception of hedonicity and typicality on the two selected products of Japan. The results showed that the students regarded Japanese console games as typically hedonic products, and Japanese earrings as atypical ones. Also, they considered Japanese refrigerators typical utilitarian products, and Japanese kitchen knives atypical.

Subjects were 416 undergraduate students at a college in Taiwan. Those subjects were required to rate their need for uniqueness on the CNFU scale (Tian and Mckenzie, 2001) during the first week of May in 2016. Seven-point Likert scales were applied to the measure. According to the scores, we classified subjects into two groups, high-CNFU, and low-CNFU, based on a median split (4.36 in this case). Thus, we had 208 subjects in each group. The 208 subjects in each group were randomly assigned to the conditions of typical or atypical products, in a balanced way. This measure also assured the manipulation of CNFU in the experiment. The mean CNFU value (mean = 5.13) for the high CNFU group was significantly higher than the mean CNFU value (mean = 3.01) for the low CNFU group ($p < 0.01$).

During the third week of May in 2016, all subjects had to evaluate the level of country typicality of the product assigned to them (Japanese console games and refrigerators, or Japanese earrings and kitchen knives). They rated the product on the seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree" with three descriptions ("extremely good example", "very typical", and "very representative"), respectively (Loken and Ward, 1990). The results of this test assured the manipulation of country typicality. The mean typicality values for the high typicality groups were 5.83 (Japanese console games) and 5.70 (Japanese refrigerators), which were significantly higher than the means of 2.68 (Japanese earrings) and 3.55 (Japanese kitchen knives) for the low typicality groups respectively ($p < 0.01$).

In the formal experiment during the second week of June in 2016, all subjects were asked to indicate purchase intention and product evaluation of the products which had been assigned to them previously (i.e., Japanese console games and refrigerators for the high typicality groups, and Japanese earrings and kitchen knives for the low typicality groups). Purchase intention was gauged by the following questions: "Do you intend to buy…?", "How likely is it that you would buy…?", and "Do you like the idea of owning the…?" Participants were told to identify the level of their purchase intention, based on the COO of the products and supposing that they had the need and ability to buy the products. Participants also rated their level of purchase intention on scales modified from Nebenzahl, Jaffe, and Usunier's questionnaire (2003) that measured evaluation of a country's product. Seven-point Likert scales were applied to all items. We separated the three tests by several weeks, to minimize demand effects. In each test, participants were briefed about different research purposes. Also, in the first two tests, they had to rate their responses with extra measures irrelevant to this study. In a short interview with participants after the formal experiment, most subjects did not associate the three tests with each other, as a single study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the means of purchase intention and product evaluations for each condition in the experiment. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with between-subjects factors of country typicality (CT) (typical vs. atypical) and CNFU (high vs. low CNFU) were performed. Table 2 shows the results of ANOVAs for utilitarian and hedonic products on the two dependent variables. The significant main effect of country typicality on purchase intention provides empirical support for H2 ($F (1,412) = 290.35, p < 0.01$ for utilitarian products; $F (1,412) = 316.20, p < 0.01$ for hedonic products). Purchase intentions for Japanese console games (mean = 5.53) are more positive than for Japanese earrings (mean = 3.92). Similarly, purchase intentions for Japanese refrigerators (mean = 5.68) are more positive than for Japanese kitchen knives (mean = 3.91). This indicates that although products are from the same country, consumers show a preference for typical products of that country.

Table 1: Means of Purchase Intention and Product Evaluations for Each Condition

	Purchase Intention						Product Evaluations					
	Typical		Atypical		Total		Typical		Atypical		Total	
	C	R	E	K	Hedonic	Utilitarian	C	R	E	K	Hedonic	Utilitarian
High CNFU	5.35	5.48	4.03	4.16	4.69	4.82	5.49	5.46	3.79	3.98	4.64	4.72
Low CNFU	5.71	5.88	3.82	3.63	4.76	4.76	5.38	5.38	3.71	3.65	4.54	4.51
Total	5.53	5.68	3.92	3.91	4.73	4.79	5.43	5.42	3.75	3.82	4.59	4.62

This table shows means of purchase intention and product evaluations for each condition in the experiments. The meanings of the abbreviations in the table are as follows: C: Console Games, R: Refrigerators, E: Earrings, K: Kitchen Knives, CNFU: Consumer Need for Uniqueness. The "Total" line in the last row shows the means for respective products regardless of the level of CNFU. The "Total" columns in "Purchase Intention" and "Product Evaluations" represent the means for hedonic and utilitarian products regardless of the level of typicality.

Table 2: The Summary of ANOVAs for Utilitarian and Hedonic Products

Utilitarian Products

	Purchase Intention					Product Evaluations			
Source	df	MS	F	p	Source	df	MS	F	p
CT	1	330.83	290.35	0.00***	CT	1	266.73	262.80	0.00***
CNFU	1	0.40	0.35	0.56	CNFU	1	4.49	4.43	0.04**
CT X CNFU	1	22.62	19.85	0.00***	CT X CNFU	1	1.67	1.64	0.20
Error	412	1.14			Error	412	1.02		

Hedonic Products

	Purchase Intention					Product Evaluations			
Source	df	MS	F	p	Source	df	MS	F	p
CT	1	268.70	316.20	0.00***	CT	1	293.91	355.29	0.00***
CNFU	1	0.54	0.64	0.43	CNFU	1	1.02	1.24	0.27
CT X CNFU	1	8.37	9.85	0.00***	CT X CNFU	1	0.01	0.02	0.90
Error	412	0.85			Error	412	0.83		

This table summarizes the results of ANOVAs on purchase intention and product evaluations, separately. Analyses for utilitarian products include subjects' purchase intention and product evaluations, with regard to refrigerators and kitchen knives. Analyses for hedonic products include subjects' purchase intention and product evaluations, with regard to console games and earrings. The meanings of the abbreviations in the tables are as follows: CT: Country Typicality, CNFU: Consumer Need for Uniqueness, MS: Mean Square, F: the value of the F-test. The table also reports p-values (Probability), and df (Degrees of Freedom) for each source in the ANOVA tests. ***, ** and * indicate significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent levels, respectively.

The main effects of CNFU on purchase intention are insignificant for both hedonic and utilitarian products. However, the interaction effects between country typicality, and need for uniqueness, on purchase intention are statistically significant: $F(1,412) = 9.85$, $p < 0.01$ for hedonic products in Figure 1; $F(1,412) = 19.85$, $p < 0.01$ for utilitarian products in Figure 2. For atypical products, subjects with a high need for uniqueness present a higher purchase intention than subjects with a low need for uniqueness: The t-test value for hedonic products in Figure 1 was $t(206) = -1.41$, $p = 0.159$; for utilitarian products in Figure 2 was $t(206) = -2.93$, $p < 0.01$. Although the difference for hedonic products is insignificant, consumers with a high CNFU tend to show higher purchase intentions than those with a low CNFU, providing some empirical support for H4. For typical products, however, the difference of purchase intentions between high and low in CNFU subjects is significant in a reversed direction: $t(206) = 3.51$, $p < 0.01$ for hedonic products in Figure 1; $t(206) = 3.81$, $p < 0.01$ for utilitarian products in Figure 2. The results further confirm the argument for H3. This research argues that products with different levels of typicality are evaluated differently, even when the products come from the same country. According to Table 1, the more typical products receive more favorable evaluations than the less typical ones, in general. The significant main effects of product typicality ($F(1, 412) = 262.80$, $p < 0.01$ for utilitarian products; $F(1, 412) = 355.29$, $p < 0.01$ for hedonic products) on product evaluations showed that Japanese console games (mean = 5.43) and refrigerators (mean = 5.42) are more favorably evaluated than Japanese earrings (mean = 3.75) and kitchen knives (mean = 3.82), respectively. This supports the argument for H1. Moreover, different from purchase

intention, the results indicate that there is no significant interaction between CNFU and typicality. Consumers with high CNFU show slightly more positive evaluations than those with lower CNFU, no matter whether products are typical or atypical.

Figure 1: The Interaction between CNFU and Country Typicality on Purchase Intention for Hedonic Products
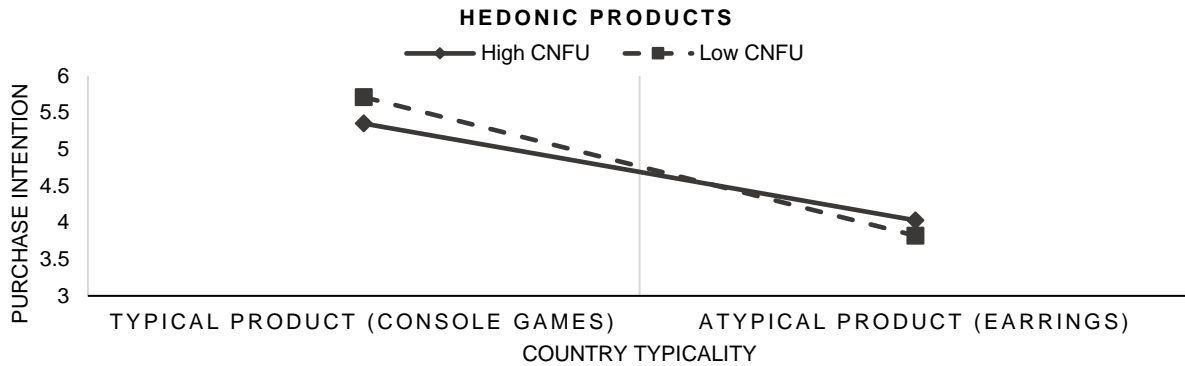
This figure shows the interaction between CNFU (Consumer Need for Uniqueness) and Country Typicality, on Purchase Intention for hedonic products, including Japanese console games(typical) and Japanese earrings(atypical). The differences between high and low CNFU are significant for the typical product only.

Figure 2: The Interaction between CNFU and Country Typicality on Purchase Intention for Utilitarian Products
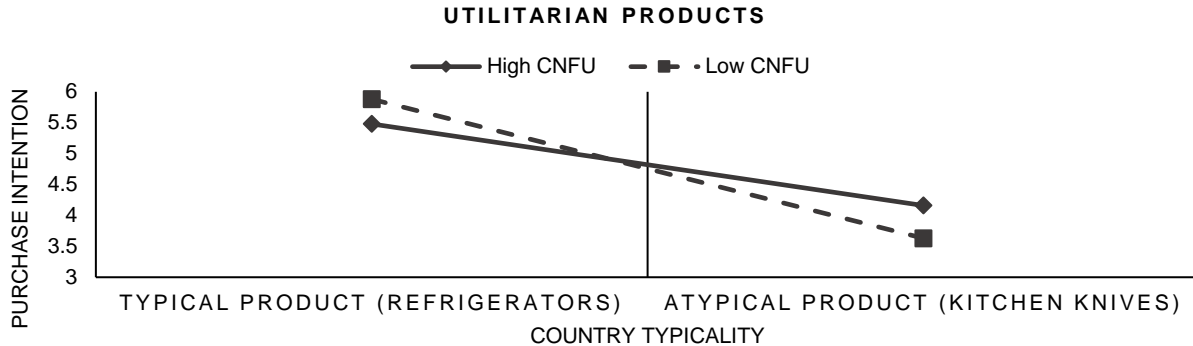
This figure presents the interaction between CNFU (Consumer Need for Uniqueness) and Country Typicality, on purchase intention for utilitarian products, including Japanese refrigerators(typical) and Japanese kitchen knives(atypical). The differences between high and low CNFU are significant for both typical and atypical products.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The current study attempted to investigate the impacts of personality (i.e., need for uniqueness) on the effects of COO image. We tested our theory using a two by two between-subjects factorial experiment with 416 undergraduate students in Taiwan. As expected, participants showed higher evaluation and purchase intentions regarding typical products than atypical products of a specific country in the experiment. The results are consistent with previous studies of typicality showing that individuals tend to favor typical examples more strongly (Barsalou, 1983; Barsalou, 1985; Loken and Ward, 1987; Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985). Our experiment extends the argument to the context of COO image. As we proposed, typical products of a COO received more favorable evaluations and purchase intention than atypical products of the same COO. Only typical products of a country can enjoy the benefits of strong COO images.

The results replicate and confirm the recent efforts (e.g., Tseng, 2014; Tseng and Balabanis, 2011) to apply this categorical and product-specific viewpoint (i.e., typicality) to the field of COO research. Practitioners are, thus, encouraged to promote COO in international marketing if the COO products are perceived as typical ones. In addition to the positive effects of typicality that we found in this study, we showed that consumer need for uniqueness (CNFU) also plays a role in moderating the effects of typicality on purchase intention in the context of COO image. This finding complements the research of Asshidin et al. (2016) in clarifying the impact of CNFU on consumer behaviors toward international products. Specifically, for typical foreign products, consumers with high CNFU show less purchase intention than those with low CNFU. For atypical foreign products, however, the situation is reversed. Since typical products of a country are usually those common and popular in the market, the results reveal some consumers' tendencies to engage in consumer counter-conformity behaviors despite their favorable evaluation toward typical products. This provides an opportunity for marketers to promote a country's uncommon products (especially utilitarian ones). Those marketers can focus on the market segment of consumers with high CNFU and try to make those consumers feel 'unique' or 'special' when possessing the products. This study uses student samples in the experiment to reduce possible interference of other uncontrolled factors, which may limit the generalizability of the results. We would like to suggest that future researchers use other samples, and include more control variables, to increase the generalizability of the results. Moreover, we would encourage the examination of the impacts of other personality types on COO effects, which could be very helpful for practitioners to segment the market when using COO strategies.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ting-Hsiang Tseng, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of the Department of International Trade, Feng Chia University. He focuses on international marketing and publishes in *International Marketing Review, Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, and other publications. Dr. Tseng received his doctoral degree from City, University of London, United Kingdom.