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Product Origin and Consumer Perceptions: How Country of Origin Information Affects the Evaluation of Multiple Products

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Abstract

This study examines the effect that a country of origin (COO) can have on consumers' evaluation in a multi-product setting. Combining previous findings on COO with the concepts of differentiation and discrimination learning I expected a reduction of impact on product evaluation when multiple products are encountered. In an experiment, participants randomly were exposed to different personal care products with varying COO labels ("Made in France" vs. "Made in China") which had to be evaluated sequentially. I found that a favorable COO label leads to a significantly higher product evaluation compared to an unfavorable COO label. Contrary to the expectations, the interaction between COO and product position, with product evaluation as dependent variable, was not significant. However, for products with a favorable COO cue, the collected data did show a positive effect of product position on product evaluation. More precisely, with a favorable COO cue third position products were evaluated significantly higher than first position products. These findings highlight the importance of a targeted approach when trying to promote a product using a COO label in the presence of several alternatives, as it remains a strong cue to shape consumers' preferences. Marketers should clearly put their focus on advertising products with a favorable COO cue. For products originating from a country with an unfavorable reputation, switching to alternative approaches in marketing might help mitigate negative perceptions. Concluding, this study provides practical implications to optimize marketing strategies while future clarification on differences across product categories or cultures is needed.

Keywords: Country of Origin, COO, Made in, Multi-Product Evaluation, Position, Consumer Behavior, Differentiation

Product Origin and Consumer Perceptions:

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Introduction

Numerous countries, such as Switzerland (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2002), Germany (Diplomatisches Magazin, 2019) or Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), invest a great deal of resources in pushing their own country's image in order for it to turn into a brand. If a country's reputation is deliberately promoted to be perceived similar to brand images of products this is called *nation branding* (Anholt, 2011). It plays a crucial role in achieving global competitiveness (Lee, 2011; Silvanto & Ryan, 2014), in boosting the economy (Appiah-Adu & Bawumia, 2015) or even in advancing sustainable development efforts (Frig & Sorsa, 2020), when executed effectively. With an established nation brand - besides several other factors - whole countries, including their services and products, are seen in a certain, often stereotypical way. For instance, Swiss services are known for high-quality standards, while "Swiss made" products evoke a sense of prestige internationally (Allen, 2018; Globeone, 2016). Furthermore, when faced with purchase decisions, such as choosing a vacation destination or selecting which bottle of shampoo to buy, preconceived beliefs about the country of origin often influence an individual's evaluation.

At an institutional level, marketing representatives leverage those so-called *country-of-origin (COO) effects* by deciding whether or not to display 'Made in' labels prominently. In that respect it is important to note that within the European Union, it is not mandatory to declare designations of origin (WKO, 2024), and strong national brands are often strictly regulated (Made in Germany, n.d.; Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2022). As a result, the declaration of COO can be applied strategically, either emphasized or withheld, depending on the company's particular needs.

If the country where a product, service, or brand originates from affects its perception or influences consumer decision-making, this is referred to as the *COO effect* (Maheswaran & Chen, 2009). This effect is an already widely investigated phenomenon (for a review see Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999 or Maheswaran and Chen, 2009). After Schooler (1965) pioneered COO research by exploring consumer attitudes towards products only differing in their labels, many others followed. Johnson et al. (2016) for example, found that a discrepancy in brand origin and country of manufacture reduces product evaluations. Further, Suter et al. (2021) connected the until then mostly external COO image to an internal perspective. However, previous research remains unclear on whether or how presenting multiple products or brands within the same product category affects the influence of COO.

Today, digitalization and globalization present consumers with an abundance of similar products to choose from all over the world (Maheswaran & Chen, 2009). When deciding on which one to buy, stereotypical beliefs about a product's COO, at least partly, guide purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2017). But what happens when multiple products carry a "Made in" label? Do consumers continue to consider this cue for each product, one after the other? Or is a possible effect the biggest for the first product with a COO label encountered, as the impact of the COO gradually fades with each additional product perceived?

There indeed is reason to believe that the impact of COO stereotypes (such as assumptions about quality, innovation, reliability, etc.) on a product, decreases as more products within the same category are perceived. As Alves et al. (2020) have found, humans shape their attitudes towards objects primarily by evaluating their distinguishing characteristics. In that case, when there are multiple COO labeled products presented, the first one encountered may still be assessed based on where it originates from. However, for subsequent products, COO no longer stands out as a unique feature, which then might lead consumers to focus on other attributes when making a purchase decision.

Yet, given the current state of research, studies have mostly either systematically varied COO only within a single product or, when looking at multiple products, they have focused largely on correlational data. This study tries to uncover the present blind spot, by experimentally examining how consumers' choices evolve when they are confronted with several products within the same category displaying a COO label.

Constantly being surrounded by a plethora of products, brands, or services from various countries, understanding how consumers process COO cues across multiple products is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies. By investigating this topic, this study aims to provide a deeper insight into COO and its effects on consumer's purchasing decisions, especially in multi-product environments.

Theoretical Development

Country of Origin

The country of origin is a key aspect to look at when considering marketing any product, brand, or service. As early as in the 1960s Schooler (1965) found variations in product evaluations of identical products with only one thing differing: their country label. This implies that a country's reputation is transferred onto products or services which are associated with that specific country, *inter alia*, because of their place of manufacture (Fichter, n.d.). According to Maheswaran and Chen (2009) long-term country associations with the product itself can partly evolve because of aspects which do not relate to product performance itself such as for example political, societal or economic issues. Yet, they also develop because of previous encounters and experiences (personal interactions, media, word-of-mouth) with that country. Indeed, COO effects develop and reinforce themselves through certain conditioning processes. Repeated exposure fosters the associations between a COO and certain attributes which then are reinforced through further personal experiences. Kim et al. (1996) for example have shown that conditioning procedures can deliberately be utilized

in marketing to acquire desired brand attitudes. Associative learning processes play a key role in attitude formation in general (Olson & Fazio, 2001) and therefore also when it comes to creating and consolidating beliefs about countries. The development of associations might occur naturally, e.g. when individuals are confronted with a country-information of any kind, or as previously mentioned through targeted marketing strategies.

Once stereotypical beliefs or associations have been elaborated, the COO effect can simply be seen as the impact a COO exerts on a person's cognition and on the evaluation of a specific product, brand, or service (Al-Sulaiti & Al-Sulaiti, 2023). For example, people broadly see and recognize a "Made in Switzerland" label as an indication of high quality, prestige and trustworthiness (Globeone, 2016), while Hungary suffers from an unfavorable image in terms of innovativeness (Maheswaran & Chen, 2009) or consumers tend to perceive India produced products to be lower in quality (Nandi & Prasad, 2023). In marketing, country-induced positive effects are important for improving brand satisfaction, brand commitment, and brand trust, as well as to establish a long-term brand connection (Bruhn et al., 2012).

COO is an extrinsic product attribute, such as price, brand, or labeling in general. As a result, the various effects that the declaration of a product's COO can have on a product during the entire purchasing process attracted scientific attention. Firstly, Veale and Quester (2009) found that external cues, more precisely, pricing and COO labels shape consumers' perceptions of quality. Secondly, Maheswaran (1994) discovered that when faced with unclear or ambiguous information, both novices and experts tend to rely on COO cues to guide their evaluations and decision-making. Thirdly, Diamantopoulos et al. (2011) showed an important indirect effect of COO on purchase intention, facilitated by its influence on brand image. These findings are further supported by a meta-analysis of 69 independent studies, which acknowledged that while COO indeed affects purchase intentions, it has an

even stronger impact on evaluations, such as perceptions of quality and reliability (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995).

Summing up, COO and its effect on services, products, or brands has already been well-examined from many different angles (for more information see: Al-Sulaiti & Al-Sulaiti, 2023; Chattalas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Maheswaran, 1994; Suter et al., 2021; Y. Zhang, 1997). In general, a favorable COO can be seen as a good predictor of more positive product evaluations (Maheswaran & Chen, 2009).

Accordingly, the first hypothesis intends to replicate preceding findings and reads as follows:

H1: COO exerts an influence on the evaluation of products: Products with a favorable (unfavorable) COO are evaluated more positively (negatively).

Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been an increasing discussion around the concept of COO and its relevance (Bulik, 2007; Samiee, 2011). Usunier (2006) denounces the relevance of COO *inter alia* by stating that many individuals are not aware where a product originates from. In contrast, a more recent study by Halkias et al. (2022) using eye-tracking methods found that about 81% of the 35 participants indeed did detect the “Made in” label placed directly on the product. Further shortcomings of the COO concept arise from findings pointing out that a possible effect is mitigated or even vanishes completely under certain conditions, again supporting Usunier's (2006) view that its relevance is overestimated. Diamantopoulos et al. (2021), for example, found that country stereotypes cannot be considered in isolation when investigating on differences in behavioral intentions, as these are completely mediated by brand stereotypes. Krupka and Arežina (2017) looked at different product categories and discovered that while COO might be considered in purchase decisions when a car is about to be bought, but most likely not when choosing between confectionery products. Thus, according to them consumers' level of involvement serves as moderating

influence in the decision-making process. Additional variations in COO efficiency arise, with consumers' product category familiarity and involvement, as lower levels of both factors have been shown to amplify the importance of the COO image in consumers' minds during purchase decisions (Josiassen et al., 2008).

With increasing evidence that COO might not yield any benefits under certain circumstances, a better understanding of the phenomenon is needed, which can only be achieved by continuous investigation of this topic. Acknowledging the existing room for improvement in state-of-the-art COO research, future focus has to be put on refining theoretical development as well as enhancing study designs, including validity rather than dismissing this essential field entirely (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2010).

Attribute Formation through Differentiation

In light of current studies, it is unclear whether the COO exerts an equal influence on all products presented when there are multiple products within the same product category perceived sequentially. In connection with the associative learning theory discussed earlier, its subset, *discrimination learning*, focuses on how „an individual must learn to make choices between alternative stimuli, some of which may be highly similar” (“Discrimination Learning,” 2018). With this kind of learning process, differentiated COO stimuli will more easily be discriminated over time, reinforcing a possible favorable or unfavorable image with each confrontation in several contexts. From this, one might infer that the related effects will be intensified with each additional product encountered.

However, a consideration that strongly suggests the opposite – namely a reduction of COO effect strength – arises with the notion of attitude formation being due to differentiation (Alves et al., 2020). Therefore, when various products are presented, it is their distinct features that will be used for evaluation while shared characteristics will be cancelled out. This has already been the focus of preceding research (Dhar & Sherman, 1996; Houston &

Sherman, 1995; Sanbonmatsu et al., 1991; Tversky, 1977). More specifically, when objects are perceived sequentially, as is the case when evaluating consumer products or making purchase decisions, order effects occur. Houston et al. (1989) describe a direction-of-comparison (DOC) effect, which means that when two objects are presented sequentially, the first one evaluated is seen as a referent. Consequently, the second object introduced then is compared to the first one, mostly based on its unique (positive or negative) features. Even when looking at a shelf stocked with multiple different products presented at the same time, order effects still occur when judgments are made one after the other, namely sequentially (Bruine De Bruin & Keren, 2003).

In conclusion, while learning processes do result in a more elaborate picture of certain countries and corresponding associations, differentiation being based upon unique features might be the key driver causing a potential suppression of the original COO's effect strength when perceiving a series of objects or products. Linking discrimination learning combined with the principle of differentiation and the existing understanding about the influence of COO might offer new insights to the expression of the COO effect under specific circumstances leading to the second hypothesis:

H2: The influence of COO on product evaluation, as predicted in H1, is moderated by the number of COO labeled products previously evaluated within a product category: with an increasing (decreasing) number of already evaluated products within the same product category, the influence of COO becomes weaker (stronger).

The Present Study

The overarching goal of this study is to uncover possible differences in COO effect strength depending on the number of competing brand products perceived within a single product category. I address the following central research question: *How does the effect of*

COO manifest when multiple products within the same product category are presented with a COO cue?

Relevance

Currently, COO literature lacks a solid foundation that considers product position as a factor influencing the impact of COO on product evaluation, even though there is empirical evidence which clearly suggests doing so. I assume that after evaluating the first COO labeled product, COO effects will weaken with the evaluation of each additional COO labeled product. Hence, the pioneering brand being the one who benefits the most from a favorable country image or who suffers the most from an unfavorable country image.

The findings of this study will help gain a better understanding of the COO effect. Further relevance is added by proposing practical implications for companies through clarifying whether an additional, prominent declaration of COO will lead to the desired effect or whether they would be better off using the space available for other marketing cues, consequently enabling a more targeted approach. From a methodological perspective, this present study adds value to existing COO research due to its experimental design in combination with a multi-product environment compared to the current field of predominantly correlational points of view.

To the best of my knowledge, this planned study represents a novel contribution to the field.

Design Overview

Participants were provided with relevant information about the online study, before they had to answer a few questions about their demographics. Subsequently, a short attention check intended to prepare the individuals for the upcoming study part. To test the actual hypotheses, respondents were asked to evaluate six different, fictional personal care products with varying COO labels. The product presentation, including their COO labelling, was fully

randomized. Following the evaluations, participants had to assign each previously viewed product with its corresponding COO, serving as a verification check. After data collection a short debriefing provided additional information about the study's purpose and was used to thank participants for their contribution.

Method

Sample and Data Collection

Potential participants received the link to the questionnaire designed for this investigation online. I conducted an a priori power analysis based on an F test to determine the required sample size for a within factors repeated measures ANOVA. Looking at the data of a meta-analysis by De Nisco and Oduro (2022), an overall mean effect size of COO on consumer behavior (such as product evaluation) can be found ($r = .40$). However, in this study, the COO is represented by a "Made in" label so I used the COO sub dimension called *country-of-manufacture (COM)* as a reference point. In line with the meta-analysis I then assumed a decreased correlation of Cohen's $r = .27$, that has been found for the COM cue, which equates to Cohen's $f = 0.28$. To detect a medium sized effect according to Cohen (1988), specifically $f = 0.28$ ($\alpha = .05$), while ensuring sufficient power ($\geq 80\%$), the analysis indicated a recommended sample size of at least 126 participants.

Inclusion criteria consisted of fluency in German language to ensure accurate comprehension of the entire survey as well as at least 18 years of age to guarantee data privacy for minors. To prevent missing data and subsequently biases or decreased statistical power (Enders et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2004), the current study employed a protocol where all fields of interest have been mandatory to fill in. Cases, in which participants selected an incorrect option and consequently failed to provide the correct response to the attention check question (for further information see below) were excluded from the analysis.

After attaining the required number of participants, I did not close the survey immediately and due to the link still circulating online, additional people did take part. I had to exclude 17 out of the 166 complete cases collected due to the reasons mentioned above, resulting in a final sample of 149 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.92$, $SD = 8.49$, for further details on the sample, see Table 1 in the Appendix A).

Stimuli

In order to investigate the given hypotheses, I provided six personal care products (deodorant, shower gel, soap, lip balm, sunscreen and toothpaste) with favorable (“Made in France”) or unfavorable labels (“Made in China”) as COO cues. In the personal care section, COO effects have previously been found to be significant. More specifically, products in this category originating from France profit from a beneficial reputation (Baran, 2018; Rebufet et al., 2015) whereas in China manufactured products have been shown to suffer in this aspect (Pilelienė & Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2014).

For the attention check, I used shaving gel, another product from the personal care category. It was labeled with product characteristics, such as for example “suitable for all skin types” but no COO cue has been present.

The complete questionnaire, including all of the products that were designed specifically for this study can be found in the Appendix B.

Study Design and Procedure

When clicking on the provided link, participants were led to the instructions page, including general information about the study’s purpose as well as a request for acknowledgement of the informed consent. Then demographic information has been collected, before the attention check was presented. The goal of the latter was to direct the focus towards the upcoming product evaluations. For the shaving gel presented, participants did not have to make an evaluation but rather answer a question about the product. They were

asked to look at the picture carefully and were informed beforehand that they would have to answer a question about it on the next page of the questionnaire. The question was in a single-choice format (“Which of these characteristics applies to the product presented above?”) and respondents had to choose between three possible answers (“for dry skin”, “for all skin types”, “for sensitive skin”) which aimed at a characteristic that has been visibly declared on the previously seen product.

Next the six different, fictional personal care products were presented and had to be rated sequentially based on a semantic differential scale. This means that participants evaluated each product on three different 7-point bipolar continuums (positive vs. negative, like vs. dislike, good vs. bad) used to describe attitudes towards objects. I averaged the ratings across those three continuums for each product which led me to a product score representing the dependent variable product evaluation. The chosen measurement method has previously shown good psychometric properties (Crites et al., 1994). In this study, Cronbach’s α values ranged from .92 to .96 across all scales for the six products presented, indicating an excellent internal consistency (Blanz, 2021). I applied product presentation as a 2 (COO favorable vs. unfavorable) x 3 (1st vs. 2nd vs. 3rd product position) within-subject design. Therefore, for each participant, three products were randomly labeled with a favorable COO cue (“Made in France”) and three products with an unfavorable COO cue (“Made in China”) and presented randomly as first, second or third product. This complete randomization in product and country pairing combined with the randomized product position across participants eliminates the possibility that observed effects might be ascribed to undesired product-specific effects or bias. Participants had to make the evaluations with the respective product still observable but before the next product appeared.

After the evaluation process, the respondents were once again exposed to the products but this time I changed the COO label to “Made in XXX” for all of them. For each product,

participants were given a list of ten countries and they had to choose the country of manufacture for every seen product. The intention behind this step was to verify whether the COO cue has been recognized. After this part I concluded the survey with a debriefing of the participants while thanking them again for their participation.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Out of the 149 participants taking part in this study, only 45.6% remembered the exact COO for all six of the individually presented products. However, still 83.2% chose either France or China as COO for all six products (compared to the distractor countries such as for example USA) leading to the conclusion that the label indeed has consciously been recognized by the majority of people participating.

Prior to conducting the analysis, I reviewed the respective model assumptions. A repeated measures ANOVA as well as *t* tests for dependent samples require normal distribution, which was not given in the present sample (according to the Shapiro-Wilk test, for further information see Table 2 in the Appendix A). However, due to the sample size (> 30) and because both procedures are considered to be robust against potential violations of this assumption (Salkind, 2010) I did not make any adjustments. To counteract the increased probability of a possible alpha error occurring due to the assumption of sphericity not being given for the position within subjects effect (Mauchly's test: for the position effect in general $\chi^2(2) = 10.60$, $p = .005$, for the position effect in the unfavorable condition $\chi^2(2) = 10.18$, $p = .006$) I used a correction using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates ($\epsilon = .94$) when required.

Main Results

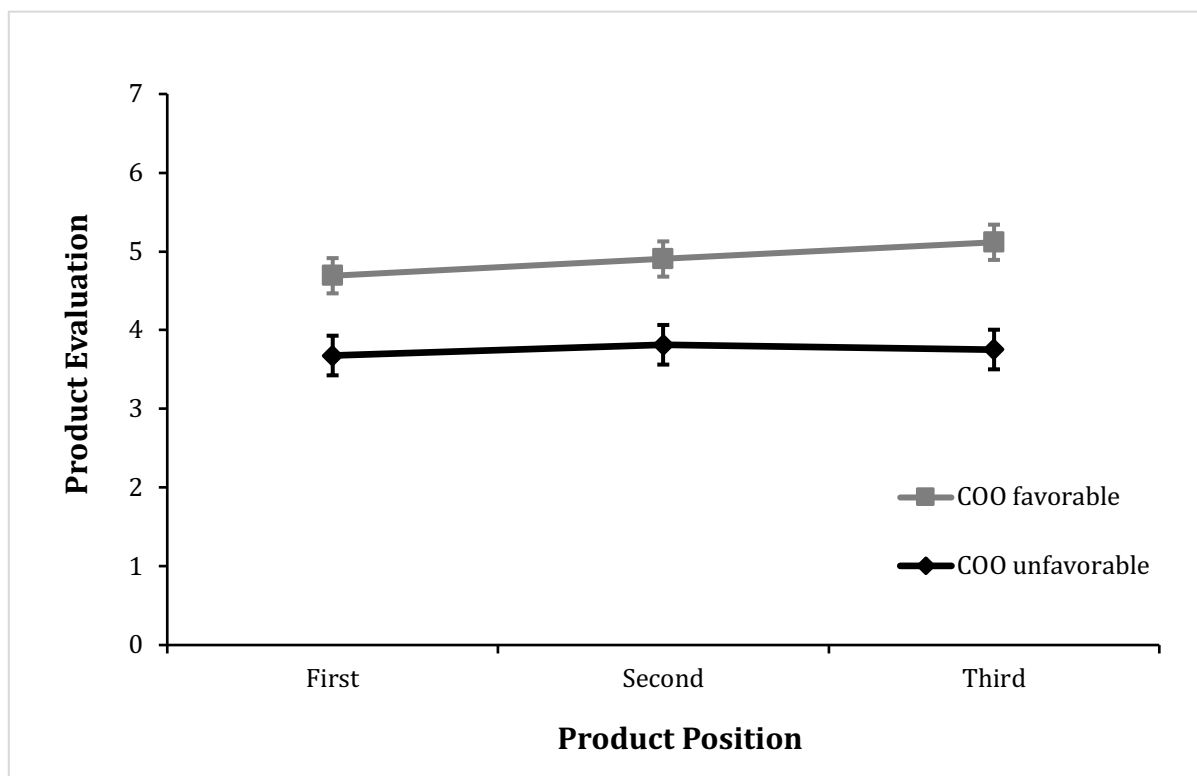
Based on the current state of research I assumed that COO (= independent variable) exerts an influence on product evaluation (= dependent variable) which is at the same time moderated by product position (= moderator variable).

Effect of COO Cue and Product Position on Product Evaluation

I conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with two within-subjects factors, namely COO (favorable vs. unfavorable) and position (1st vs. 2nd vs. 3rd) to test these hypotheses by estimating their effects. I did expect that effects of COO on the dependent variable product evaluation would be reduced with an increasing number of product position. However, the interaction of COO and product position with product evaluation as dependent measure was not significant, $F(2, 296) = 2.28, p = .104, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants' mean product evaluations as a function of COO image and serial position are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Changes in Product Evaluation as a Function of COO Image and Product Position



Note. Mean evaluations are shown for products with favorable COO cues and products with unfavorable COO in function of their serial position. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Effect of COO Cue on Product Evaluation

As expected, the main effect of COO on product evaluation, as shown in previous studies, was replicated, $F(1, 148) = 108.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .42$. Thus, participants did evaluate

products with the favorable COO cue (“Made in France”, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.07$) significantly higher than products with the unfavorable COO cue (“Made in China”, $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.29$).

In addition, I did conduct three paired sample t tests comparing the dependent variable product evaluation between products with favorable COO cues and products with unfavorable COO cues at first, second and third position considered individually. Those results provide further support by showing significant main effects of COO at all three positions (see Table 3).

Table 3

Paired Sample t Tests: Comparison of Product Evaluation per COO Favorability by Position

Product evaluation	Favorable COO		Unfavorable COO		$t(148)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
1 st position	4.691	1.367	3.678	1.531	7.213	< .001***	0.591
2 nd position	4.904	1.400	3.814	1.545	7.285	< .001***	0.597
3 rd position	5.116	1.342	3.754	1.537	8.757	< .001***	0.717

Note. For each position (1st, 2nd, 3rd) the product evaluation measured within-subject is contrasted per COO (favorable vs. unfavorable). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Effect of Product Position on Product Evaluation

In addition, I examined the results of the repeated measures ANOVA with the two factors COO (favorable vs. unfavorable) and product position (1st vs. 2nd vs. 3rd) as well as product evaluation as dependent variable more in depth. This uncovered a significant effect of a product's position on its evaluation, $F(1.87, 276.76) = 4.66$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Products presented in first position ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.17$) were evaluated significantly lower compared to products presented in third position ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.09$) regarding the dependent variable product evaluation. To investigate this in greater depth, I conducted further paired

sample t tests comparing the dependent variable product evaluation between different product positions (1st vs. 2nd, 2nd vs. 3rd, 1st vs. 3rd) regardless of COO favorability. By doing so I found that the effect of position is only significant in the comparison of first and third position product evaluations, not for any of the others (see Table 4).

Table 4

Paired Sample t Tests: Comparison of Product Evaluation per Position

Product evaluation	1 st position		2 nd position		3 rd position		$t(148)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
1 st vs. 2 nd position	4.185	1.171	4.360	1.158			-1.869	.064	-0.153
2 nd vs. 3 rd position			4.360	1.158	4.435	1.086	-1.028	.306	-0.084
1 st vs. 3 rd position	4.185	1.171			4.435	1.086	-2.983	.003**	-0.244

Note. The product evaluation per position (1st vs. 2nd vs. 3rd) measured within-subject is contrasted regardless of COO favorability.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Further, I performed multiple simple contrasts for the favorable and unfavorable COO conditions separately to explore the effect of product position on product evaluation within each condition. Hence, I contrasted the product evaluations for all positions (1st vs. 2nd, 2nd vs. 3rd, 1st vs. 3rd) within solely the favorable COO condition. I then repeated the same contrasts for the unfavorable COO condition. Only products with the favorable COO cue in the first position ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.37$) have been evaluated significantly lower than third position products with the same cue ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.34$), $F(1, 148) = 11.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. None of all the other contrasts did show any significant effects. Thus, these results indicate that the effect of position which I have found is primarily driven by the favorable COO cue (for more details see Table 5 and Table 6 in the Appendix A).

Discussion

With the upcoming inconsistency of COO research findings, improvement of methodological issues is strongly encouraged (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2010). Additionally, distinct studies are needed to specify under which circumstances the concept of COO does indeed work and under which circumstances it in fact is not helpful. With this study, I intended to uncover a blind spot in previous research by investigating how the COO effect develops when multiple products within a single product category are perceived and have to be rated. In an experimental design, I presented different personal care products, all labeled with an either favorable or unfavorable COO cue, to the participants. They then had to evaluate those products sequentially. While the assumed interaction effect between COO and product position with product evaluation as dependent variable did not turn out to be significant, I did find a significant main effect of COO on product evaluation. Further, I uncovered a significant positive effect of product position on product evaluation for products labeled with a favorable COO cue.

The current study combines preceding findings on the effect a COO can have on product evaluations with learning theories on differentiation and the differentiation principle. It presents a novel contribution to the field while adding depth to current body of research. The experimental setup exposed participants to multiple personal care products (seven exposures in total including one attention check item, without COO cue) which I created specifically for this purpose. I deliberately implemented it this way to avoid potentially existing brand preferences which have been established prior to participation, during regular everyday interactions.

Does COO Information Influence Product Evaluation?

In the present study I found that COO had a consistent effect on product evaluation. Participants evaluated products with a favorable COO cue significantly higher than products

with an unfavorable COO cue. The observed difference in product evaluation between products with a favorable COO and products with a unfavorable COO is congruent with previous research (De Nisco & Oduro, 2022; Maheswaran & Chen, 2009; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). More specifically, this for example also aligns with previous studies in the personal care industry showing that “Made in France” can be seen as a strong selling point for cosmetics (Rebufet et al., 2015) or beauty products (Pilelienė & Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2014).

Does Product Position Influence a Possible Effect of COO on Product Evaluation?

As shown by Houston et al. (1989) or Alves et al. (2020), the sequence in which different objects are perceived is another one of the multiple factors influencing attitude formation towards objects. According to them the first object, or in this case product, is evaluated based on the entirety of its properties. For the products that follow, mainly their unique features are considered when forming a certain attitude towards them. I also hypothesized that discrimination learning further supports this proposed effect, by refining a person’s capability to better differentiate between similar and distinct cues with each additional product encountered.

Summarized, the scientifically based assumption was that while COO does exert an influence on product evaluation, this influence is diminished in a multi-product environment partly because of differentiation processes. Again, I found an overall effect of position on product evaluation. However, looking at the dichotomy of COO cues (favorable and unfavorable) separately, I did not find such a position effect for products “Made in China” in the data collected. That is, product evaluations for products labeled with an unfavorable COO cue did not differ significantly based on their position of perception. This finding aligns with research by Josiassen et al. (2008) where they suggest an amplification of COO strength for low involvement products, which is often the case for low-cost items such as the presented

products from the personal care sector. Hence, either the low involvement products might automatically trigger an evaluation accordingly to an available COO cue (in this case a negative one) or the COO's enhanced strength due to product category counteracts possible other factors such as product position. Another possible explanation stems from the so-called *negativity bias*, which suggests that in the course of evolution humans evolved a susceptibility to be more sensitive towards bad or negative information compared to good or positive information (for a review see Baumeister et al., 2001). What also is known about this bias, is that negative stereotypes are not only stronger (Mullen & Johnson, 1990) but also quicker to form and more resistant to change (Rothbart & Park, 1986). This implies that products produced in countries with unfavorable country stereotypes or perceptions might elicit more stable consumer attitudes. Consequently, this then again might overshadow other, unique product features and situational factors such as the sequence of perception.

When examining the favorable COO cue in isolation, I found a positive effect, which was contrary to the theoretically based expectation. Hence, participants did not evaluate "Made in France" products more neutrally when presented at a later position. Conversely, third position products even did profit from a significantly higher evaluation compared to first position products. This development is contradictory to the originally suggested hypothesis. One phenomenon which might at least partly account for this increased liking of products in the later position could be the so-called *mere exposure effect*. The latter states that merely the repeated exposure to a certain object or stimulus leads to an amelioration of one's attitudes towards this object or stimulus due to familiarity (Zajonc, 1968). In this study, participants already had a preference for the first position "Made in France" products (when compared to "Made in China" products). Consequently, being exposed to an already favorable stimulus, simply a repeated exposure might have increased its liking across the two additional presentations even more, in the end elevating the product evaluations significantly

for third position products. This study's results are in line with research from Robinson and Elias (2005) and Delplanque et al. (2015) which state that this effect does apply for neutral and positive stimuli, however it does not apply for negative stimuli. This is a pattern which I also found in the present data, as the effect of an unfavorable COO did not become significantly stronger with multiple exposures to "Made in China" products. The main factor limiting an increase in liking due to familiarity is boredom according to Bornstein (1989). Yet, this should not be relevant for the present study, since the stimuli presented did vary in product type and design while also providing a certain level of complexity. Further, I did keep the methodological approach in general rather concise in order to avoid participant fatigue as a result of an excessive number of products.

In general, I fully randomized product presentation to avoid order effects. However, depending on the sequence in which participants rated the products carryover effects might still have influenced the final outcome. More precisely, contrast effects occur when the evaluation of a product on one side of the spectrum (e.g. the more negative side), leads to a following evaluation being on the opposite side of the spectrum (e.g. the more positive side) (Shen et al., 2010). For example, a light object is subjectively perceived and judged to be even lighter when compared to heavy objects. So, in our case, when a "Made in France" product was presented after one or more "Made in China" products, participants might have contrasted the favorable cue to the unfavorable one and therefore were influenced even more positively. These findings also align with the notion that such effects can arise from shifts in consumer's mental representations of stimuli or different anchoring of certain rating scales (Lynch, Jr. et al., 1991). In the present study, the contrast effect is the strongest for the third position since chances are the highest to have perceived the most unfavorable COO products beforehand. On the other hand, this does not account for ratings of unfavorable COO products because the negativity bias leads to lower ratings overall anyway.

From a business perspective the presented findings suggest that COO indeed is a relevant concept to consider when marketing a product, brand, or service. In the personal care sector, emphasizing on the promotion of products with a favorable COO cue can foster positive perception, even in a multi-product environment. On the contrary, concealing manufacture in an unfavorably reputed country, if possible, mitigates an otherwise accompanying negative effect over several products. Hence for the latter, putting the focus on other marketing strategies such as for example storytelling or the use of carefully selected testimonials might offer more advantages.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First of all it needs to be mentioned that due to economic reasons this study was implemented in the form of an online questionnaire where fictional products have been presented and rated one after the other. This simplified, isolated setting did not entail any real-life consequences while also neglecting aspects of an on-site presentation such as store ambiance or consumer involvement. All of this might have led to changes in effects and reduction of ecological validity. In a real-life situation humans are presented with stocked shelves and an abundance of products to be compared simultaneously which also might influence evaluation patterns. Additionally, there are many other important factors involved in product evaluation and purchase decision, such as for example product pricing (Wadhwa & Zhang, 2015; Winer, 1986). Despite the efforts made to establish a maximum of ecological validity, the experimental setting evokes caution when generalizing the present results. Future studies in a more natural environment (e.g. directly in a store setting) are needed to look closer at the various additional influences shaping not only product evaluations directly but also modifying an existing effect.

Secondly, I did design the products and their properties to be complex enough in order for the “Made in ...” labels to blend in well with other product characteristics while not

overstimulating participants with information. Unfortunately, there still is a possibility, that over time or with repeated product presentations participants have become aware of a common factor, the COO cue. While this should not be the case, it might still be argued that participant awareness could partly have distorted the present results (Corneille & Lush, 2023).

Thirdly, especially with a phenomenon such as the COO effect, when dealing with country-specific stereotypes, cultural differences arise naturally (Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007; Fong & Burton, 2008; Laforet & Chen, 2012). For instance, Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) draw attention to varying approaches in product evaluation between individualist cultures (e.g. United States) and collectivist cultures (e.g. Japan). Therefore, when looking at this study's results it must be noted that the majority of participants (95.3%), are either Austrian or German citizens, both being countries which are generally characterized by individualism. It would be interesting, to investigate whether the current findings can also be observed within collectivist cultures.

Finally, follow-up research is needed to refine the present findings by modifying the product categories being evaluated. As a first-time investigation the current products served to provide an initial overview. Even though I already varied COO stimuli between favorable and unfavorable in this study, I did only use one country for each characteristic (France vs. China). A more nuanced variation in terms of multiple countries within both conditions might lead to clearer results in the future. In addition, extending studies are needed to clarify differences in product categories, such as high-involvement vs. low-involvement products.

Concluding, further clarification is needed on whether the outcome would change for individuals with more diverse cultural backgrounds, within other product categories or with varying COO stimuli.

Conclusion

I designed this study to be a predecessor in the field of experimentally looking at COO effects in multi-product environments. Its contribution to the existing field of research therefore builds a foundation, paving the way for a better understanding of COO combined with purchasing behavior in a globalized market. The present findings are of importance not only for companies, but also for individuals and even for whole nations. Summing up, the patterns found do affirm that COO can to a certain extent be used as a reliable predictor of product evaluation, whereas product position did not demonstrate a significant moderation effect. Given the importance of replication studies, this study provides a decisive contribution to the current body of research on COO effects, as it reconfirms the link between COO and product evaluation. Moreover, it advances our understanding of consumer behavior in the COO context. Future studies should now put their focus on further exploring the relationship between COO and the presentation of multiple products while specifying the numerous facets of operating mechanisms behind such an effect.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	46	30.87
Female	100	67.11
Diverse	2	1.34
No Specification	1	0.67
Education		
No educational qualification	0	0.00
Compulsory education	2	1.34
Completed apprenticeship	11	7.38
High school diploma	50	33.56
University degree	86	57.72
Nationality		
Austria	84	56.38
Germany	58	38.93
Switzerland	1	0.67
Other EU country	3	2.01
Other non-EU country	3	2.01

Note. $N = 149$. Participants were on average 28.9 years old ($SD = 8.5$).

Table 2*Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality*

COO	Position	Statistic	df	<i>p</i>
Favorable	1	.97	149	.006**
	2	.96	149	< .001***
	3	.94	149	< .001***
Unfavorable	1	.97	149	.006**
	2	.98	149	.008**
	3	.97	149	.004**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.**Table 5***Repeated Measures ANOVA: Within-Subjects Contrasts per Position for the favorable COO**Condition*

Product evaluation	1 st position		2 nd position		3 rd position		<i>F</i> (1,148)	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1 st vs. 2 nd position	4.69	1.37	4.90	1.40			2.85	.02
2 nd vs. 3 rd position			4.90	1.40	5.17	1.34	3.73	.03
1 st vs. 3 rd position	4.69	1.37			5.17	1.34	11.36***	.07

Note. Simple within subject contrasts have been performed separately for all positions of the favorable COO cue condition. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 6

Repeated Measures ANOVA: Within-Subjects Contrasts per Position for the unfavorable COO Condition

Product evaluation	1 st position		2 nd position		3 rd position		$F(1,148)$	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
1 st vs. 2 nd position	3.68	1.53	3.81	1.54			1.08	.01
2 nd vs. 3 rd position			3.81	1.54	3.75	1.54	0.34	.00
1 st vs. 3 rd position	3.68	1.53			3.75	1.54	0.86	.00

Note. Simple within subject contrasts have been performed separately for all positions of the unfavorable COO cue condition. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Appendix B: Material

1 Startseite

Liebe Teilnehmende,

herzlichen Dank für Ihre Bereitschaft, an dieser Studie des Instituts für Arbeits-, Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie der Universität Wien teilzunehmen.

Im Rahmen dieser Studie beschäftigen wir uns mit Ihren Einstellungen und Vorlieben bezüglich verschiedener Produkte. Ihre Aufgabe wird es sein, eine Reihe von Produkten zu bewerten. Mit Ihrer Teilnahme leisten Sie einen wertvollen Beitrag zu unserer Forschung.

Bitte unterbrechen Sie die Umfrage nicht (z.B. durch etwaiges Schließen oder neu Laden der Seite) und führen Sie diese in einer Sitzung durch, da ansonsten bereits erfasste Daten verloren gehen können. Die Beantwortung des gesamten Fragebogens wird in etwa fünf Minuten in Anspruch nehmen.

Die Befragung wird vom Institut für Arbeits-, Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie der Universität Wien durchgeführt.

- Die Teilnahme an der Studie ist **freiwillig** und mit **keinen bekannten Risiken** verbunden. Sie können den Fragebogen jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen abbrechen. Eine Löschung Ihrer Antworten zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt ist nicht möglich.
- Ihre Teilnahme ist **anonym**, Ihre Antworten können nicht auf Sie zurückgeführt werden. Das bedeutet ebenfalls, dass Ihr persönlicher Datensatz nach Abschluss der Befragung für uns **nicht identifizierbar** ist.
- Ihre Daten werden ausschließlich für **wissenschaftliche Zwecke** verwendet.
- Die Forschung folgt keinem kommerziellen Interesse. Wir behandeln alle Ihre Daten **streng vertraulich**. Auch bei einer möglichen Veröffentlichung der Resultate gehen die Daten **anonymisiert** ein.

Für die Teilnahme an dieser Erhebung müssen Sie mindestens 18 Jahre alt sein.

Bei Fragen wenden Sie sich bitte an Katja Müller (a11826286@unet.univie.ac.at)

Vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme vorab!

Ich habe die oben genannten Informationen gelesen und verstanden und erkläre mich mit den Teilnahmebedingungen einverstanden.

☐ Ja, ich stimme zu.

☐ Nein, ich stimme nicht zu.

2.1 Kein Consent

Vielen Dank für Ihr Interesse an dieser Umfrage. Leider dürfen Ihre Antworten ohne Ihre Zustimmung nicht aufgenommen oder weiterverarbeitet werden, weshalb die Erhebung hiermit beendet wird.

Sollten Sie unabsichtlich auf die "Nein, ich stimme nicht zu."-Taste gedrückt haben, können Sie den Fragebogen gerne auf einem anderen Gerät erneut über denselben Link (<https://ww3.unipark.de/uc/produktevaluation/>) aufrufen und an der Umfrage teilnehmen.

3 Demografische Daten

Wie alt sind Sie?

 Jahre

Welchem Geschlecht fühlen Sie sich zugehörig?

- ☐ Männlich
- ☐ Weiblich
- ☐ Divers
- ☐ Keine Angabe

Was ist Ihr höchster Bildungsabschluss?

- ☐ Kein Bildungsabschluss
- ☐ Pflichtschulabschluss
- ☐ Abgeschlossene Lehre
- ☐ Matura/Abitur/Hochschulreife
- ☐ Hochschul-/Universitätsabschluss

Welche Staatsbürgerschaft haben Sie?

- ☐ Österreich
- ☐ Deutschland
- ☐ Schweiz
- ☐ Anderes EU-Land
- ☐ Anderes nicht EU-Land

4 Attention Check

Nachfolgend sehen Sie ein Produkt abgebildet.

Bitte betrachten Sie dieses genau. Im Anschluss wird Ihnen eine Frage dazu gestellt werden.



Klicken Sie erst auf "**Weiter**", wenn Sie sich bereit fühlen. Es gibt keine Zeitbeschränkung.

5 Attention Check Frage

Welche dieser Eigenschaften trifft auf das vorher präsentierte Produkt zu?

- ☐ für empfindliche Haut
- ☐ für alle Hauttypen
- ☐ für trockene Haut

6 Instruktion

Es werden Ihnen im Folgenden nun sechs weitere Abbildungen verschiedener Produkte präsentiert. Jedes dieser Produkte soll hinsichtlich diverser Aspekte bewertet werden. Bitte nehmen Sie sich Zeit und setzen Sie sich mit den einzelnen Abbildungen der Produkte auseinander. Es besteht keine Zeitbeschränkung. Bei der Bewertung geht es um persönliche Einstellungen und Präferenzen, es gibt also weder „richtige“ noch „falsche“ Antworten.

Klicken Sie auf „**Weiter**“, wenn Sie die Instruktion verstanden haben.

7.1 Produktbewertung



Bitte bewerten Sie den Auftritt dieses Produktes anhand der folgenden Kriterien:

negativ	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	positiv
nicht mögen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	mögen
schlecht	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	gut

8 Ländercheck



In welchem Land wurde dieses Deodorant hergestellt?



In welchem Land wurde dieses Duschgel hergestellt?



In welchem Land wurde diese Seife hergestellt?



In welchem Land wurde diese Lippenpflege hergestellt?



In welchem Land wurde diese Sonnencreme hergestellt?



In welchem Land wurde diese Zahnpasta hergestellt?

9 Endseite

Liebe Teilnehmende,

Sie haben das Ende des Fragebogens erreicht, vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme!

Damit haben Sie uns sehr geholfen, mehr über die differenzierte Wahrnehmung von Konsument*innen zu erfahren.

Ziel dieser Studie ist es zu untersuchen, ob die Präsentation mehrerer Produkte einer Produktkategorie einen Einfluss auf den sogenannten „Country-of-Origin“-Effekt hat.

Falls Sie weitere Fragen zum Inhalt und Zweck sowie der Forschungsethik dieser Erhebung oder Interesse an den Ergebnissen der Untersuchung haben, wenden Sie sich bitte an Katja Müller (all826286@unet.univie.ac.at).

Sie haben die Studie erfolgreich abgeschlossen und können das Browser-Fenster nun schließen.

Wir danken Ihnen nochmals herzlich für Ihre Zeit und Mühe!

Appendix C: Summary in German

Die vorliegende Studie untersucht den Effekt eines Herkunftslandes (COO) auf die Produktbewertung in einem Umfeld, in welchem mehrere Produkte präsentiert werden. Aufgrund bisheriger Forschung zum COO-Effekt sowie in Anbetracht von Differenzierung und Diskriminationslernen habe ich angenommen, dass Auswirkungen auf die Produktbewertung abgeschwächt werden, je mehr unterschiedliche Produkte wahrgenommen werden. Im Rahmen eines online Experimentes mussten Teilnehmende verschiedene Produkte aus dem Bereich der Körperpflege sequenziell bewerten. Alle diese Produkte waren mit einem COO-Label („Hergestellt in Frankreich“ vs. „Hergestellt in China“) versehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass vorteilhaft wahrgenommene COO-Labels zu signifikant höheren Produktbewertungen führen. Entgegen der ursprünglichen Annahme war die Interaktion zwischen COO und Produktposition mit der Produktbewertung als abhängige Variable, nicht signifikant. Ein positiver Effekt von vorteilhaften COO-Labels auf die Produktbewertung zeigte sich hingegen dadurch, dass Produkte an dritter Stelle signifikant besser bewertet wurden als Produkte an erster Stelle. COO-Labels bleiben damit weiterhin starke Schlüsselreize in Bezug auf Produktbewertungen. Demzufolge ist es im Marketing essenziell, potenzielle Effekte eines Herkunftslandes im Zusammenhang mit mehreren Produkten einer Produktgruppe zu betrachten. In erster Linie sollten Produkte aus vorteilhaften Herkunftsländern vermehrt entsprechend vermarktet werden. Bei Produkten aus unvorteilhaften Herkunftsländern sollte hingegen verstärkt auf andere Marketingstrategien gesetzt werden, um negative Effekte zu mindern. Die vorliegende Studie liefert erste Implikationen zur Optimierung von Marketingstrategien. Zukünftige Forschung sollte sich auf Unterschiede zwischen Produktkategorien sowie kulturelle Differenzen konzentrieren.

Schlagerwörter: Herkunftsland, COO, Hergestellt in, Produktbewertung, Position,

Konsumentenverhalten, Konsumentinnenverhalten, Differenzierung