

Study Regarding the Influence of Country of Origin (COO) over the Consumer Decision-Making Process in Buying Food

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Abstract. The country of origin effect (COO) is considered to be the influence (positive or negative) that the country of origin of one product has for the consumer, during the buying decision-making process. The COO could act as a barrier for the consumer or as stimuli for purchasing and is stronger when it comes of food products. The general aim of the research is to determine the Romanian consumer's perceptions of local products and to determine how the COO effect influences the consumers. Two focus groups were organized in Cluj-Napoca. Participants were asked to mention for different food products the country of origin they prefer to be the producer from. The interview consisted also in asking the participants to rank attributes such as: price, brand and country of origin, important to them in the buying decision-making process. Results indicate that for some food products such as (cheese, meat and vegetables) the consumers prefer local Romanian products while for others (sweets, wine) they are willing to buy foreign products. Results indicate that price and brand are more important than the country of origin when it comes of some food products like sweets and wine, while for products like dairy, fruits, vegetables, it is important their country of origin. The COO effect is necessary to be studied among the Romanian consumers because of the future implementation of labels of origin for different food products which will be sell on different markets. Therefore, it is important that first of all, the country of origin influence should be studied over the Romanian consumers.

Keywords: extrinsic attribute, buying decision-making process, food products, label of origin

Introduction. The country of origin effect (COO) is the positive or negative influence that the country of origin of a product has over the consumers' buying decision, often being more important that the brand, price or quality (Watson and Wright, 1999). Major preoccupations regarding the country of origin effect were mainly determined by the globalization and the increasing influence of Asian markets (Chryssochoidis *et al.*, 2007). Schnettler *et al.* (2009), consider that the COO effect represents the consumer action of differentiating a product from another, based on the country of origin as the main indicator for quality. Because of the lack of time during the buying decision-making process, this effect is stronger in the case of food products. The COO effect is considered an extrinsic attribute, being a substitute for quality in the absence of any knowledge about it (Watson and Wright, 1999; Lobb and Mazocchi, 2006; Dmitrovic and Vida, 2008).

Studying the COO effect over the Romanian consumer is obviously a necessity because of future implementation of labels of origin. Before entering on new foreign markets, it is important to study the COO effect of Romanian products over the Romanian consumers.

Aims and objectives. The general aim of the research is to determine the Romanian consumer's perceptions of local products and to determine how the COO effect influences the Romanian consumers. The objectives are: to indentifying the consumers' preference for the country of origin of different food categories, to determine the importance of the COO effect in the buying decision-making process for different food categories.

Materials and methods. Two focus groups were organized: one in April and one in July 2013 in Cluj-Napoca with two groups of 7 participants. They were chosen according to different socio-demographical characteristics: different age, status and gender. The interview guide was elaborated after studying the scientific literature related to the subject, and also similar studies from different countries, such as Croatia, U.S.A., Chile and Great Britain.

Results and Discussion. The focus group participants expressed a high attachment for Romanian products, for almost every food category. The preference towards Romanian products is stronger in the case of vegetables, fruit, meat and bread. Each respondent mentioned the preference for Romanian origin in those four cases, but they also added their place of birth or place of residence as a favorite place of origin. In the case of fruit, Romanian products are the most desired, but also the Mediterranean ones (oranges, lemons). The origin of tea has to be an exotic one (Japan, Ceylon, China) while coffee is preferred to come from Germany or Ostrich. Respondents consider that for dairy products, cheeses and bread, the Romanian origins not enough, they specified their region (North-West of Transylvania) or their County (Cluj). The arguments for their choice are related to products freshness, which in their opinion depends on the distance towards the producer. Focus group participants were asked to highlight the importance of attributes such as: price, brand and country of origin for categories of food products. The attribute “country of origin” was least important in the case of sweets, tea and coffee, brand and price being decisive in the decision-making process. Similar results obtained Dosen *et al.* (2007), in a study conducted in Croatia about chocolate. Price and brand were more important than the country of origin. Country of origin has a major influence over the consumer in the case of fruit, vegetables, dairy product and bread, meaning daily products. Schnettler *et al.* (2009), identified that a significant percent (47%) of the residents from Temuco, Chile buys rice considering the attribute “country of origin” more important than price or package.

Conclusion

The use of focus group as a starting point in building a questionnaire, but also for identifying the consumers’ preference regarding the country of origin for different food categories is very adequate. Respondents could easily express their interior motivations. In order to build marketing strategies for each type of food category is necessary studying the consumer buying behavior and the importance offered to the country of origin attribute. The study proved that the COO effect, is often more important than other marketing instruments as price or brand.

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