Decomposition of Country of Origin Effects in Education Services: A Conjoint Analysis Approach

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Abstract Research in the area of international marketing has shown that consumers' assessments of product quality may change (positively/negatively) according to country of manufacture, country of design and/or country of parts of the products. While this notion has been established in the product context, no research has attempted to isolate similar effects of the country of origin construct in relation to service offerings. This research deconstructs the country of origin (COO) construct for international services along country of origin of the brand (COB), country of origin of where the service is delivered (COSD), and country of origin of the person providing the service (CPI). A total of 143 respondents participated in the online survey undertaken in Australia. The service to be evaluated in the experiment was education service. Results of conjoint analysis in education service confirmed the effects and the importance of the proposed COO dimensions on consumers' expectations of service quality. More specifically, the experiment revealed that CPI is more important than COB and COSD on consumers' expectation of service quality.

Keywords Country-of-origin · Education · Conjoint · Service delivery · Image

Introduction

Today's products may result from a series of design and production processes in more than one country (so-called hybrid products), hence, the COO of a product can be multiple. For example, a computer can be designed and manufactured in different

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countries so that the product has a different COO in terms of design and manufacturing. In that case, the term 'COO' is no longer the same as the country of manufacture. Instead, the product has multiple countries of origin. A number of scholars have examined COO elements such as country of design, country of manufacturing/assembly, country of parts and country of target (Chao 1998, 2001; Essoussi and Merunka 2007; Insch and McBride 1999, 2004). They found that consumers' perceptions of quality change when a product is manufactured or designed in a country different from its brand origin (Erickson et al. 1984; Han and Terpstra 1988). For example, when a product is manufactured in a country with less reputable image than its brand origin, that information can impact negatively on quality evaluations. On the other hand, when a product from a less reputable image country is designed in a more favourable image country, that information can serve as quality assurance and increase quality evaluation (Chao 2001; Chetty et al. 1999). For example, Ssangyong, a Korean car company, communicates to the market that the engineering technology of their products was designed by Mercedes Benz, a reputable car company from Germany (Morley 2000). A study by Chao (2001) found that consumers have positive attitudes towards and prefer to buy products which are assembled in the U.S. rather than in Mexico, if the parts are also from the U.S. rather than from Mexico. When the product is assembled in the U.S. with some of its parts from Mexico, consumers' attitudes and likelihood to buy are lower than when both the product's parts and assembly are U.S. based. A similar finding was also reported by Johansson et al. (1985), in relation to different types of products.

Few studies have sought to understand the theoretical foundation of the COO effects associated to hybrid product or services evaluation. The principle of congruity assumes that when congruent and incongruent information presents, the congruent information is preferred because incongruent information creates dissonance in the mind of consumers (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955). Consumers will react more positively to congruent conditions than to incongruent conditions. Further, Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955) posit that when two paired objects of judgment are incongruent, they tend to shift in the direction of congruence with their evaluation of the other. This means that when a negatively valued object is paired with a positively valued object, the evaluation of the negatively valued object becomes less negative, and vice versa, the evaluation of the positively valued object becomes less positive. Jacoby and Mazursky (1984) reported that a combination of a strong brand and a weak store resulted in a dilution of the brand image and an improvement in the store image. An experiment by Chao (2001) found that perceived congruency positively moderates COO effects on consumers' product evaluation. Similarly, Jossiassen and Assaf (2010) reported that a greater perceived congruency between a product and country increases the relationship between COO image and product evaluation.

In the context of hybrid product evaluation, the perception of congruity can be understood as perceived fit (similarity) amongst the country images of a product's multiple COO. For example, a perception of fit between the country of manufacture and country of design influences perceptions of product and design quality

respectively, because country of design can affect product quality through reflection of symbolic meanings, such as prestigious brands (Essoussi and Merunka 2007).

Furthermore, the magnitude of the effects of each COO dimension varies based on the aspects of quality. For example, it was found that the effect of country of design is greater on the functionality and brand image aspects (Chao 1993; Essoussi and Merunka 2007; Insch and McBride 2004), while country of manufacturing and country of parts have a stronger impact on product quality (Chao 2001; Essoussi and Merunka 2007). Whilst the effects of COO dimensions are also found to vary according to product category, the extent to which such effects vary according to product category is yet to be concluded. Some scholars found that on durable products such as TVs and radios, country of manufacture has stronger effects than country of brand (Chao 2001, 1993; Knight 1999). Others argue that country of brand has stronger effects than country of manufacturing, on the basis that through the brand name, consumers can infer quality more quickly, thus making country of manufacturing or country of parts irrelevant (Hui and Zhou 2003; Leclerc et al. 1994; Usunier and Cestre 2007). The above discussion demonstrates the multidimensionality of COO construct, where each dimension contributes differently according to product types and situational factors.

COO Effects in the Services Context

It appears that very few studies have examined the difference of COO influence between product and services (Elliott 2006; Michaelis et al. 2008). However, among those few empirical studies, scholars argue that COO effect varies according to product and services characteristics. A study by Michaelis et al. (2008) conducted a direct comparison of COO effects on consumers' trust between products and services evaluation. Their Polish findings revealed that the effects of COO on perceived trust is stronger in services than in products. Another direct comparison study conducted by Elliott (2006) also found that the COO effect for services is more important than for tangible goods. Further, in association with perceived risk, COO effects on service evaluation seem greater than those on product evaluation (Berentzen et al. 2008). Greater perceived risk associated with service provision is actually related to the nature of service characteristics, such as its intangibility and inseparability from consumption, thus making it difficult to evaluate their quality prior to purchase (Bebko 2000; Bitner et al. 2008; Grewal et al. 2007; Lovelock and Gummesson 2004). In addition, consumers have fewer choice alternatives in services (Brand and Cronin 1997) and higher exit barriers imposed by service providers (Mittal and Kamakura 2001) which leads to a greater perceived risk when compared to products. Therefore, in order to reduce risks, consumers seek additional external cue information such as reputation and COO (Keh and Xie 2009; Michaelis et al. 2008).

Gaps in the Existing Literature

In the product context, many COO studies have investigated the effect of COO on hybrid products evaluation (Chao 2001; Essoussi and Merunka 2007; Sharma et al. 2009). Those studies have proven demonstrated that consumers' perception of quality and purchase intentions are affected by the interplay of COO dimensions effects such as country of manufacturing (assembly), country of parts, country of design and country of brand. They also indicated that incongruent image information among the COO dimensions affects consumer attitudes towards the product. Yet, the extent to which this premise applies in the context of hybrid service is still not widely known. Prior research has put attempted to identify potential important dimensions of COO for services, such as country of service delivery image (Roggeveen et al. 2007; Walsh et al. 2011). They found that inconsistency of this country image can change consumer attitude towards service offered. Whilst Speec and Pinkaeo (2002) examined consumers' assessment on the quality of COO dimensions, such as quality of brand, quality of design and quality of the service provider in educational services, they did not examine which dimension is more important than another in forming overall image. This present study addresses this issue by investigating the possible dimensions of COO that might influence on consumers' expectations of service quality. Particularly, this present study examines the extent to which consumers' expectations of service quality varies according to country of origin of the brand (COB), country of origin of where the service is delivered (COSD), and country of origin of the person providing the service (CPI).

Country of Service Delivery (COSD)

Prior research has indicated the importance of the location of services delivery as one key attribute in consumer evaluations of services, particularly in the course of offshore services. Hence, the image of COSD can significantly change consumer expectations of quality as has been indicated in several types of services, such as education, cruise lines, and call centres services (Ahmed et al. 2002; Sharma 2012; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth 2002). A negative COSD image can reduce consumers' perceived quality of the services, experienced or expected (Acton 2007; Roggeveen et al. 2007; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth 2002), leading to an unwillingness to purchase the services. For example, a U.S. medical school offering offshore programs in Belize suffered from quality denigration because U.S. consumers perceived that this country was not able to provide adequate facilities and human resources service as well as its counterparts at home (Acton 2007). Similar findings are also reported that consumers of cruise line holidays considered the services provided by American providers to be better than those provided by Malaysians under the same brand name (Ahmed et al. 2002). In call centre services, consumers' perceptions of quality towards an offshore call centre (India) were found to be lower than an

onshore call centre (the U.S.) due to the unfavourable image of India as a less developed country, which in turn reduced consumers' expectations of the service quality provided by Indian staff (Sharma 2012; Walsh et al. 2011).

Unlike products, the production/delivery of services must occur at the same time as they are used. Hence, in the context of hybrid services, where the country of service delivery is different from the country of brand, at least two countries are involved in the provision of that service, thus the images of those 'participating' countries would enter into consumers' minds. In addition, consumers' dependence on COO cues when evaluating expected quality is more critical in the service context than in the tangible product context. However, which COO dimension, COB or COSD, would exert the most influence on consumers' expectations remains unclear since the discrimination between them has never been tested before.

Country Person Image (CPI)

The literature has demonstrated that consumers possess stereotypical beliefs about people from various locations. For example, consumers in the U.S. perceived services provided by Indian or Mexican providers to be 'less serious' in providing good services than their American counterparts (Acton 2007; Ouellet 2007). Hence, consumers have low expectations of the quality of services provided by these people and, consequently avoid using their services. Therefore, consumers' stereotypical beliefs about a country are also likely to be transferred to people from that country. For example, less developed countries are believed to have lower capabilities in terms of technology and skill, so that service providers (people) from less developed countries are also perceived as having lower skill levels and less expertise in providing the same services relating to technology compared to those from developed countries.

Furthermore, the literature has shown the influence of CI on product evaluation (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009). County image, which is conceptualised as the overall perception of a country, includes not only a country's economy, politics, and technology, but also includes a people factor. This people factor is known to be associated with the characteristics of individuals, such as friendliness, likeability, artistry, responsibility and technical skills. Prior studies have employed these characteristics as attributes of the people factor (or CPI) in evaluating the quality of foreign products (Parameswaran and Pisharodi 1994; Parameswaran and Yaprak 1987), thus indicating its importance.

Country of Brand (COB)

As products can increasingly be designed and manufactured in different countries, the COO of a product now consists of more than one country; thus country of origin

of a brand (COB) may no longer be the same as the country of production. For example, Chevrolet, an American brand car, is manufactured in several countries such as Vietnam, India, Korea, and Brazil. Thus, the COB of Chevrolet is the U.S. and the country of manufacturing relates to countries where various stages of the production process take place. Prior research has indicated a change in consumer perceptions of the quality of a product when the country of manufacturing and/or country of design or brand are different, and COB has been found to be a strong predictor of quality (Bae 1999). Similar to tangible products, this research argues that COB also has important effects on the evaluation of hybrid services.

The focus of this research is to investigate the extent to which the service COO dimensions (COB, COSD and CPI) serve to drive in consumer expectations of service quality and purchase intentions. This research examines three dimensions of COO deemed important for hybrid service evaluations:

H1a: COB will significantly influence consumer expectations of service quality.
H1b: COSD will significantly influence consumer expectations of service quality.
H1c: CPI will significantly influence consumer expectations of service quality.

Research Methods

This research employs full-profile conjoint analysis to measure consumer preferences. The full-profile approach has the advantage that each profile is presented individually, allowing respondents to focus only on one profile at a time. Full-profile analysis was chosen because this approach can best accommodate the aims of this research, which is not only to identify which profile is considered the most desirable, but also to investigate the strength of each attribute (and level) affecting perception of service quality and subsequent intentions to purchase.

In designing a full profile conjoint analysis experiment, a researcher decides a set of related product or service attributes (real or hypothetical) in which each attribute has varying level of choices for evaluation. From every possible combination of these varying levels, a set of product bundles (so-called profiles) is generated and presented to respondents. Respondents then assess each profile by scoring them. By doing this, the researcher can identify respondent's preference structure on the basis of the relative importance of each attribute and the 'worth' (utility) of each level within an attribute that determines a respondent's overall preference. The total worth for a profile will be obtained from the accumulation of part-worth of each level (Hair et al. 1998).

The part-worth of a level represents the utility a respondent can gain from that level expressed in a common scale, where the total worth (utility) of levels in that attribute is zero. In other words, the utility of a level in an attribute is relative to other levels within that attribute (Dean 2004; Orme 2006). The difference (gap) between utility levels in an attribute indicates the importance of that attribute for the respondent in assessing the product or services. A higher gap between the

maximum and minimum utility levels indicates a higher level of importance of that attribute for the respondent because changes from one level to another leads to significant impact on respondent's overall assessment in differentiating between profiles. Therefore, the relative importance of an attribute can be obtained by dividing the gap of that particular attribute with the total gaps of all attributes in that product or services (Jaeger et al. 2001; Kupiec and Revell 2001).

A combination of three dimensions of country of origin (COB, CPI, and COSD) was examined for—education services. The attributes for education were university name, campus location, and nationality of lecturers. Each attribute had three levels: Australia, Indonesia and Singapore. In this scenario, respondents were asked to imagine a situation where they, as a student, they are being supervised for a long period in order to get a university research degree. Respondents were then asked to rate the quality of service expected from each alternative university from low quality to high quality. This approach will support, or otherwise, the degree to which results may be generalised across service types and COO.

In selecting brands, the researcher sought to ensure that those chosen were available, and real. To achieve equality across services, the brands also needed to have a brand name that consumers in all locations could identify with the country of origin of that service. The brands used were Australian National University (Australia), University of Indonesia (Indonesia) and National University of Singapore (Singapore) were selected (Table 1).

There were 27 or (3^3) possible combinations that could be generated from the full-profile method. To reduce the number of combinations, a fractional factorial design was applied. A fractional factorial design calculates and estimates only the main effects of the attributes, assuming that the composition rule applied is the additive model (Table 2). By employing fractional factorial design, only nine profiles (plus two holdouts) were necessary to show respondents for their evaluations. A hold-out is a profile presented to respondents to be assessed but it is not included in the analysis in the calculation of part-worth scores. The purpose of a hold-out is to test the internal validity of the data. Part-worth statistics obtained from the hold-outs were compared to those in the fractional factorial design to check for the consistency of both sets of data.

Non-probability sampling was employed in this research, resulting in a convenience sample. The unit of analysis in this research was defined as individual

Table 1 Attributes and levels for each service

Attributes	Levels
University name	Australian National University University of Indonesia National University of Singapore
Campus location	Canberra (Australia) Jakarta (Indonesia) Singapore
Nationality of lecturers	Australians Indonesians Singaporeans

Table 2 Combination of profiles

Profile No	University name	Lecturers nationality	Campus location
1	University of Indonesia	Indonesian	Canberra
2	Australian National University	Singaporean	Jakarta
3	University of Indonesia	Australian	Jakarta
4	Australian National University	Indonesian	Singapore
5	National University of Singapore	Indonesian	Jakarta
6	University of Indonesia	Singaporean	Singapore
7	National University of Singapore	Singaporean	Canberra
8	National University of Singapore	Australian	Singapore
9	Australian National University	Australian	Canberra
10 (holdout)	Australian National University	Singaporean	Canberra
11 (holdout)	University of Indonesia	Singaporean	Canberra

Australian consumers, male or female, aged between 18 and 70 years old. Also, the individual needed to be a citizen of their country. A web based survey was used to collect the data.

Respondents were approached through electronic invitations (emails and social networking websites), and a variety of communications (telephone, and face-to-face). They were asked to go to the link and participate in the survey. They were also guaranteed confidentiality. They were further informed of the nature and purpose of the research and were invited to ask for further information, if they needed it. The survey used Qualtrics software, a web based professional survey panel that provides survey templates enabling the researcher to exclusively customise the questionnaire.

Results

In total 148 respondents completed the online survey (Table 3). The sample was determined based on gender and age. Around 65 percent of the respondents were female, distributed almost equally in five age groups. Compared to the general Australian population (ABS 2010), these variations are not expected to substantially limit results.

Conjoint Analysis Validity Testing

Pearson's R, Kendall tau and Kendall tau for holds-out correlations were used to test the internal validity of the model as shown in Table 4 The correlation coefficients signify the degree to which the correlations between predicted and observed ESQ.

Table 3 Demographic profile based on age and gender

Variables	Count	%	National stat. (%)
Age			
20–29	38	25.4	14.69
30–39	33	22.3	14.13
40–49	27	18.5	14.12
50–59	24	16.2	12.57
60 up	26	17.7	18.98
Gender			
Male	51	34.5	49.2
Female	97	65.5	50.8
N=	148		

Table 4 Conjoint analysis validity testing

	Corr.	Sig.
Pearson's R	0.966	0.000
Kendall-tau	0.944	0.000
Kendall-tau (hold-out)	1.000	

The table shows that the correlations were high and significant. Hence, internal validity was achieved. Internal validity signifies a causal-effect relationship between predictor and criterion variables. The table shows high coefficient correlations in all categories, confirming the internal validity. Thus, COO dimensions and ESQ conform to a significant causal-effect relationship.

Part-Worth Utilities and Attribute Relative Importance

Table 5 shows that the utility scores for Australia level were high and positive for all COO dimensions, indicating respondents' preference for Australian services in

Table 5 Summary of part-worth utilities and relative importance

	Level	Part-worth utilities	Relative importance
COB	Australia	0.539	30.86
	Singapore	−0.220	
	Indonesia	−0.320	
COSD	Australia	0.462	28.63
	Singapore	−0.179	
	Indonesia	−0.284	
CPI	Australia	0.880	40.50
	Singapore	−0.197	
	Indonesia	−0.684	

all dimensions (COB, COSD and CPI). Part-worth utilities of Indonesia were the lowest. Negative scores suggest that services provided by Indonesian service providers were viewed unfavourably. These low scores were consistent for all services, indicating that Australian respondents perceived services provided by Indonesian brands, Indonesian people and processed in Indonesia relatively inferior than those provided by Singaporean and Australian service providers. On the other hand, Australian services received the highest positive scores for their COB and CPI attributes. Such scores indicate that services provided by Australian providers were preferred by Australian respondents.

For relative importance, the table shows that respondents relied highly on CPI (40.50 %), followed by COB (30.86 %) and COSD (28.63 %) respectively. This research provides some clarity about the multidimensionality of COO in the context of hybrid services. Respondents placed CPI as the most important predictor of quality of service (around 40 %), while COB was considered more important than COSD. CPI was most important in this service because consumers tend to be more selective and more risk averse in order to minimise associated risks. Respondents were asked to imagine that they were research students with a supervisor seeking a degree from a university. In this scenario, respondents may have thought that the perceived risk associated with the supervisor (a person) would be greater than that associated with university name (a brand). For example, respondents might have thought that they would encounter communication problems. This finding was consistent with that of (Harrison-Walker 1995), who investigated consumers' preferences in choosing ophthalmologists and found that patients relied heavily on the nationality of service providers (CPI) rather than other cues (e.g. warranty, availability, facilities, etc.). Overall, based on these findings, it could be concluded that COB, COSD, and CPI serve as important dimensions of COO in predicting consumers' expectations of service quality with variations according to service category, thus confirming the hypotheses.

Theoretical Contributions

This research adds to the literature by providing evidence that COB, COSD, and CPI are important dimensions of COO effects for service quality evaluation. Although research established the significant influence of COO dimensions on consumers' evaluations of hybrid products, this research confirmed the dimensionality of COO in the context of hybrid service. Researchers have examined the effects of COO only as a single or separate dimension such as location (COSD) or personal stereotypes (CPI) on expected quality or purchase decisions (Ganguli and Roy 2010; Thelen et al. 2011; Walsh et al. 2011). Whereas the effect of a single COO dimension does not ignite conflict in consumers' minds, the effect of multiple COO dimensions can trigger conflict particularly when the country images of those dimensions are not congruent. This research, therefore, is the first study to examine the extent to which each COO dimension has a simultaneous effect on consumers'

evaluation of hybrid services when varying country image combinations are presented to consumers Managerial Implications.

This research supported a recommendation related to service marketing and brand management, especially for firms launching offshore strategies. Service managers must understand that COO is not merely a single dimension (COB) as traditionally thought. COO is a multidimensional construct that consists of COB, COSD, and CPI. They must identify which dimensions are important to the perception of the quality of their services and then allocate resources and act accordingly.

Specifically, firms engaging in education sector should be aware of CPI and treat it with great care. For example, educational institutions such as universities can provide to the public information about their academic staff such as background, qualifications, research publications and interests, professional experience, awards, and so on. Consumers might weigh this information more heavily as an added value to reduce level of perceived risk (Ostrom and Iacobucci 1995). Service firms can also provide reviews and testimonies about their professional staff through neutral media or open free-session seminars to provide further physical and tangible cues to the public.

Future Research Directions

This research may provide an impetus for further research on this important topic. First, further research could expand on the development of the COO construct—for example by generating items for the COB, COSD, and CPI dimensions. Second, it might be useful for future studies to introduce other dimensions that might serve as important COO dimensions, such as country of training image and other extrinsic cues such as price and reputation, in order to achieve a more accurate measure of COO dimensions as determinants of hybrid services evaluation.

As this research focused on the assessment of consumers' expectation of service quality, future research might also compare the effects of COO on expected and perceived quality and on potential and real customers. Lastly, further research might also apply the model to a wider area of services—for example by examining COO effects according to level of contact between consumers and service providers.

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