



# Further clarification on how perceived brand origin affects brand attitude

A reply to  
Samiee and  
Usunier

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a rejoinder. The rejoinder is written in response to the commentaries provided by Saeed Samiee and Jean-Claude Usunier on the authors' original research piece: "‘What? I thought Samsung was Japanese’: accurate or not, perceived country of origin matters".

**Design/methodology/approach** – The rejoinder is organized into three separate sections. The first section identifies areas of agreement between the authors, and Samiee and Usunier. The second section responds directly to the empirical and conceptual criticisms levied by Samiee and Usunier and clarifies the authors' contribution. The rejoinder concludes by identifying areas of future research that may help further advance the field.

**Findings** – In addition to responding directly to the criticism of the original study, perhaps more importantly, the authors note several areas of common ground. First, there is agreement that future country-of-origin (COO) research designs must be careful to not artificially expose subjects to country cues that the consumer otherwise may not have considered. Second, in a globalizing world, brand origin perception appears to be more important than "made in" labels.

**Originality/value** – The authors do not consider the COO field outdated or irrelevant, but rather that it is a vibrant field of considerable interest to both practitioners and researchers. There is much still to be learned, and the authors hope the original research study and the ensuing debate have sparked fresh ideas and will lead to a continued effort in this interesting research field.

**Keywords** Country of origin, Consumer attitudes, Consumer behaviour, Perception

**Paper type** Viewpoint

### Introduction

The country-of-origin (COO) phenomenon continues to engage the international marketing community. A recent count identified more than 100 studies examining some aspect of the COO phenomenon in the past decade (Magnusson and Westjohn, forthcoming). With such a large volume of ongoing COO research, it is appropriate to evaluate the relevance and usefulness of continued attention to this research area. Usunier and Samiee consider the topic somewhat outdated and no longer relevant in a globalized economy. For example, Samiee *et al.* (2005, p. 379) concluded that "past research has inflated the influence that country of origin information has on consumers' product judgments and behavior and its importance in managerial and public policy decisions." Further, Samiee (2010, p. 444) concluded that recent research "clearly point to the apparent insignificance of CO as a consideration in purchase decisions in the vast majority of cases." Usunier (2006) adds that the COO research field



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is suffering from a progressively widening relevance gap. These views by Usunier and Samiee are reinforced in their latest commentaries. At the same time, we view the continued interest in the COO phenomenon by researchers, editors, reviewers, and practitioners as expected given the large number of firms that use COO information as part of their overall marketing strategy and increasing attempts by countries around the world to manage their image (Anholt, 2010).

Whereas there are certainly some differences in the interpretation of the literature and the relevance of the COO field between our view and those expressed by Samiee and Usunier, we also believe that we share common ground. Thus, we organize our response in three major sections:

- (1) we highlight several areas of agreement;
- (2) we respond to the criticisms raised by Samiee and Usunier and clarify the contribution of our original research study; and
- (3) we attempt to raise a few new issues with the goal of stimulating further discussion and research into this exciting research area.

### **Common ground**

First, we agree with both Usunier and Samiee that the relevant concept in today's interconnected global economy is brand origin perception. Early research focussed on the "made in [...]" label (e.g. Schooler, 1965) where a product's brand origin was the same as the manufacturing home of the product, and thus, country of origin *was* viewed as the same as a product's "made in [...]" label. In response to an evolving global economy where "made in [...]" is no longer the same as the brand's home country, researchers have attempted to separate the COO construct into different components, such as country of design, manufacture, assembly, and parts (e.g. Insch, 2003; Li *et al.*, 2000; Quester *et al.*, 2000). Although researchers have demonstrated that country of assembly, parts, and design each significantly affect consumer perceptions of product quality (e.g. Insch and McBride, 2004; Chao, 2001), others have found that products' country of manufacture and country of components had no significant bearing on quality evaluations when the country of brand's origin was included in the evaluation (Thakor and Lavack, 2003).

It is almost impossible for consumers to keep track of design, part, and assembly origins. This difficult task can be illustrated with the following anecdote. At a recent visit to the electronics store, Sony products, whose brand origin is Japan, were found with "made in [...]" or "assembled in [...]" labels from Mexico, China, and even USA, but not Japan. In addition, parts used to make Sony products are sourced from an undisclosed number of countries. Accordingly, we agree with Usunier's assertion that "manufacturing origin has become largely irrelevant (at least for most product categories) (Liefeld, 2004; Pharr, 2005; Usunier, 2006; Phau and Chao, 2008; Samiee *et al.*, 2005; Samiee, 2010), and brands have progressively taken the lead in suggesting product origin." Consistent with this perspective, Samiee *et al.*'s (2005) original BORA study as well as our study asked consumers to identify brand origin, not manufacturing origin.

We also agree with Usunier and Samiee's criticism of the COO literature as being overly reliant on experimental research designs, which artificially force consumers to evaluate products based on the COO cue. This research design issue was illustrated by Verlegh and Steenkamp's (1999) meta-analysis, which found that effect sizes were

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smaller for multi-cue and between-subject designs than for single-cue and within-subject research designs. Accordingly, we were inspired by Samiee *et al.*'s (2005) original BORA study to develop a research design that did not artificially force respondents to incorporate the country cue in their product evaluations. We fully agree with Samiee's (2010, p. 444) assertion that there is a need for "more creative ways of designing research that does not artificially expose subjects to manufacturing location of products and brands included in the study" and believe this is pivotal to the further advancement of the field.

Usunier acknowledges that consumers "live in a cluttered environment, with overabundant information which far exceeds their information processing capacity." This perspective is consistent with our paper's discussion of learning theory (Alba and Hutchinson, 2000; Hutchinson and Alba, 1991), which has concluded that consumer learning is often incidental, rather than intentional. Accordingly, we are not surprised that brand origin recognition rates are often modest. Samiee suggests that a valid examination of recognition rates should only include relatively obscure brands and criticizes our study for including well-known brands. We agree with Samiee and Usunier that brand origin recognition rates for the total "population" of brands is expected to be relatively modest. An examination of relatively unknown brands, such as those used by Samiee *et al.* (2005) should be expected to produce lower recognition accuracy rates than an examination of more well-known brands, such as those included in our study. However, we are not attempting to extrapolate our accuracy rates to a "population" accuracy rate; rather, we are demonstrating that brand origin perception matters, regardless of perception accuracy.

Samiee and Usunier devote considerable time in their commentaries arguing for the importance of understanding consumers' brand origin knowledge. We agree with this suggestion, yet, we feel considerable information regarding consumers' brand origin knowledge has already been gained through Samiee *et al.*'s (2005) seminal study, and complimented by additional work by, for example, Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2008), Zhuang *et al.* (2008), and Zhou *et al.* (2010). For example, variability in consumer knowledge of brand origin can be predicted by consumer-related factors such as age, gender, education, and international experience. Thus, we do not consider this area to be a complete "black box," as described by Usunier, and our research was designed with a different objective.

Nonetheless, one suggestion for future research would be to shift the focus from consumer-related attributes to brand-related attributes. From a brand manager's perspective, in addition to understanding consumer segments for which country information is salient, it may be valuable to explore and understand brand attributes that lead to differences in origin perceptions. For example, why do only 8 percent of consumers identify Philips as a Dutch brand, whereas over 80 percent identify Audi as a German brand? Usunier suggests that language and linguistic cues are the most important factors. The importance of language is indeed supported by Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2008) who found that brand names that are linguistically incongruent with the brand's home country lead to lower recognition rates. Beyond linguistics, there may be other brand attributes that lead to variability in recognition rates. For example, no known studies have examined the effect of COO marketing effort on recognition accuracy. Audi and Volkswagen have very high recognition rates and, as Usunier observes, they use slogans like "Das Auto" and "Vorsprung durch Technik." Recently, Vizio (American TV brand) added a slogan calling itself "America's #1 LCD HDTV Company." In our study, only about 40 percent recognized Vizio as an American

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brand. It would be interesting to find out whether more consumers recognize Vizio as an American brand thanks to this recent promotional campaign.

Finally, Samiee suggests understanding that consumers' perceptions matter regardless of accuracy is absent of managerial practical utility. However, a few sentences later, Samiee discusses Nokia and appears to identify a practical utility for managers to understand consumers' (incorrect) brand origin perceptions. Samiee writes that Nokia may be unlikely to "falsely boast a Japanese designation. However, there are ways that the firm can skillfully leverage off customers' uniformly wrong knowledge and develop a coherent strategy without the introduction of unnecessary falsehood or a lapse of ethical marketing. This option can actually become attractive if Nokia determines that customers' view of products with a Finnish origin is a liability to the firm." In line with this perspective, Usunier's table 1 is a useful contribution to help international marketing managers understand the process and suggests managerial guidelines for how to deal with various scenarios. In a  $2 \times 2$  matrix, Usunier delineates the various broad options that are available to marketing managers based on the accuracy and favorability of consumers' origin perception. Usunier illustrates his framework with a new brand development example and concludes that if "the BOR process does not work properly, the brand can be redesigned before it is launched." In our opinion, this clearly suggests the practical utility of our study.

The preceding section has discussed what we perceive to be similarities in perspective between us and Samiee and Usunier. This is highlighted by an agreement on the demands and challenges that future COO research must meet, the shift in focus toward brand origin, and recognition of several managerial guidelines that Usunier helps convey as a result of our study. In the next section, we turn our attention toward addressing the criticism of our work levied by Samiee and Usunier.

### **A reply to criticisms of the original study**

While we find common ground with both Samiee and Usunier, they identify several areas of perceived weakness in our original study. We make no claims of perfection in the original study; however, we believe we can address specific criticisms levied by Samiee and Usunier.

#### *Artificial respondent bias*

We suggest some inconsistencies in Samiee's criticism of our methods. On the one hand, Samiee credits our study for being creative and using a data collection method that does not "bias the respondent regarding the COs of brands being used in the study." On the other hand, Samiee also criticizes our study for being "pro-discovery oriented by focussing respondents' minds on issues they may not have thought of in natural settings." Naturally, we suggest that our research design did not bias respondents, nor did it focus respondents' minds on issues artificially. With the use of online survey software, we were able to design a survey that did not allow respondents to move between the pages of the survey. On the first page, respondents were asked to provide brand attitude ratings. Respondents were not provided with a cue as to brands' origin nor were they asked to explicitly consider the brand origin. On a subsequent page, respondents were asked to identify brands' country origin in an open-ended format. Samiee *et al.* (2005) and Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2008) used a multiple-choice matrix format to assess respondents' brand origin perceptions. Presumably, both an open-ended text format and a multiple-choice matrix format would lead to

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some guessing by respondents. However, the ability to guess correctly is probably higher in a multiple-choice format than in an open-ended text format. Thus, we do not believe that our open-ended format upward biased brand origin recognition rates. On a third page of the survey, we asked respondents to rate country images. Brand origin perception and country image ratings were subsequently combined to create an “intersection” construct, which we called product country image of perceived country of origin. All of these data points were used to examine whether brand origin perception matters (*HI*).

The second hypothesis examined whether learning a brand’s true origin would lead to changes in brand attitude. To test this, we asked each respondent to reevaluate all brands and this time, each brand’s true home country was provided (e.g. Samsung – South Korea). However, at this point, it was impossible for the respondent to return to an earlier part of the survey and alter their initial ratings. Thus, in our examination of *HI*, we had not provided or asked the respondent to consider any country-related information and, consequently, we believe Samiee’s criticism of our study as “pro-discovery” and artificially focussing respondents’ minds on issues they otherwise would not have thought of to be unfounded.

*Research context: choice of brands*

Samiee suggests that our choice of “well-known, high involvement product categories and brands poses perhaps the most serious threat to the reported findings.” He further suggests that we “do not offer an explanation for these large differences” (higher BOR accuracy rates in our study compared with Samiee *et al.*, 2005). In our study, we indeed do suggest that an examination of large and well-known brands would be expected to lead to higher correct BO identification rates than an examination of more obscure brands. However, our objective was not to discover if brand origin identification rates for the brands in our study were higher than those found by Samiee *et al.* (2005) or Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2008). Instead, our contribution is focussed on illustrating that brand origin perceptions influence brand evaluations, regardless of accuracy. Further, a re-analysis by Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011) of their data of UK consumers and microwave ovens in a forthcoming *Journal of International Marketing* article also reinforces our findings. Although the correct classification rate in their sample was considerably lower (27 percent) than in our sample, their findings show that brands that are incorrectly perceived with a favorable country association can benefit whereas brands that are misclassified being from an unfavorable country suffer. It should be noted that Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011) use average country images, whereas we elected to use each respondent’s individual country image perception. The fact that two distinct approaches lead to largely similar results increases the confidence in the interpretation of both studies’ findings.

*Brand attitude or purchase intention*

We elected to focus on brand attitude as key-dependent variable. Samiee suggests that our results would be more valid if we had also included a measure of purchase intention. Past research has clearly found that COO effects have the strongest effect on quality evaluations, followed by brand attitude, and the weakest effect on purchase intentions (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). This is not surprising given that there are many factors that influence actual buying behavior, perhaps most notably budget constraints. Nonetheless, there is strong theoretical and empirical evidence that consumers’ behavior is influenced by their attitudes (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

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Further, Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011) include both attitude and purchase intention measures in their study. Their findings were very similar and, as expected, slightly weaker for purchase intention. Thus, while one can argue that purchase intention is an important outcome variable to assess, brand attitude is still a relevant variable reflected by the amount of resources firms devote to managing their brand images. Further, COO research has repeatedly found that attitude measures and purchase intentions are closely related (Josiassen, 2011).

*Single-item measures and an (un)representative sample*

Our original study was also criticized for using single-item measures to measure brand attitude and country image. Samiee cites some very well-established scholars to argue for the multi-dimensionality of the constructs (Aaker, 1996; Aaker and Joachimstaler, 2000; Keller, 1993, 2003). In contrast, a growing stream of research has empirically established that commonly used multi-item measures of brand attitude perform no better than single-item indicators (e.g. Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007, 2009; Drolet and Morrison, 2001; Rossiter, 2002). In an effort to minimize respondent fatigue and maximize data validity, we employed single items. We welcome replications of our study with multi-item measures, but based on previously published comparisons of single- vs multi-item scales, we do not expect findings significantly different from ours.

The sample in our original study was also criticized for not being representative. We adopted a data collection technique in our study similar to the one proposed by Bitner *et al.* (1990). In this method, students served as the gateway in procuring additional non-student subjects. Thus, our final sample was a mix of students (about 25 percent) and non-students (about 75 percent) and the sample had a mean age of 37, which is quite similar to the mean age in the sample collected by Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2008) (the mean age was not reported in Samiee *et al.*, 2005). In sum, although a portion of our sample is made up of students, the majority is not, and we believe that our sample is reasonably representative of the general population and externally valid.

In sum, we agree with Samiee's assertion that a flawless study is a rare species and we acknowledge that our study is subject to its own limitations. Nonetheless, we believe that the methods that we employ are rigorous and adequate for examining the objectives proposed in our study. Thus, we now turn our attention to addressing some of the broader, conceptual criticism of our work.

*Clarifying our contribution – does brand origin recognition accuracy matter?*

Central to both Samiee and Usunier's commentaries is the conviction that country associations are only relevant if they are accurate, and since correct country associations are rare, COO is no longer relevant. The basic premise and core contribution of our study is that the favorability of a brand's perceived home country affects brand attitude. We demonstrate that this finding holds true regardless of the accuracy of consumers' brand origin perceptions. To illustrate, we ask how "the association of a brand with Germany could be any less influential for a consumer who incorrectly perceives Volvo to be German than for the same consumer who correctly perceives Mercedes to be German?" The answer from our empirical examination is no difference at all, as illustrated in our table 2. Further, the bivariate correlation between brand origin recognition accuracy (BORA) and brand attitude is only 0.06, which can be compared with a correlation of 0.32 between product country image for perceived country of origin (our key-independent variable) and brand

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attitude. Thus, from a consumer perspective, we maintain that accurate COO knowledge is not a prerequisite for COO to affect brand attitude.

In contrast, Samiee and Usunier seem to be primarily viewing it from a different perspective. From a managerial perspective, accuracy and uniformity may indeed be desirable, although not in cases where managers are attempting to disguise the brand origin. To provide examples of COO-related marketing, we mention brands like Budweiser, Chevrolet, IKEA, and Volkswagen in our original study. These are all examples of brands that have chosen to use marketing messages that incorporate country-related stimuli in their advertising. Budweiser has used a “Great American Lager” slogan; Chevrolet has used “Our Country” and “American Revolution” slogans; Volkswagen reminds consumers of its “Germanness” through the “Das Auto” slogan and with frequent references to “German Engineering;” and IKEA promotes its “Swedishness” through the colors of the store and product names. For these brands and untold others who explicitly choose to incorporate country-related features into their promotion, consumers’ ability to correctly identify the brand’s origin would be an important metric in the evaluation of advertising effectiveness.

Some insights into the effectiveness can be discerned in our study. Volkswagen (Das Auto) and Audi (Vorsprung durch Technik) explicitly use German language slogans in their English (and other languages) advertising to associate their brands with Germany. In our study, more than 80 percent of consumers identified these brands with Germany. While we cannot credit the accuracy rate solely to a German slogan, in our view, it still serves as an indication that the brands’ marketing is meeting its objectives. While we attribute high level of brand identification with correct country to effective marketing efforts, Samiee views this kind of marketing as redundant since consumers have “always” associated the brands with Germany. Further, Samiee suggests that this kind of marketing “at best only reconfirm what the vast majority of consumers already know.” We believe that a lot of marketing activities are aimed at reinforcing and reminding the consumers of attributes they “should” already know. In effect, an extreme extension of Samiee’s logic would suggest that all advertising expenses for Audi and Volkswagen are redundant and wasted since consumers already believe they are good brands and have favorable attitudes toward them.

Usunier suggests that “accuracy matters because companies with non-classified or incorrectly classified brands may end up in cell 4 of table 1, that is, with an *unfavorable* association” (emphasis added). This may be true for brands originating from countries generally perceived favorably. However, for brands from “less favorable” countries, an accurate classification means they would end up in Cell 3 in Usunier’s table 1, i.e. an accurate yet still unfavorable association. There is no evidence to suggest that being accurately perceived with an unfavorable country association, i.e. Cell 3, is any better or worse than being inaccurately perceived with an unfavorable country association, i.e. Cell 4. Again, what matters is the favorability of the association, not its accuracy, which in Usunier’s table means that Cells 1 and 2, i.e. those with favorable associations, are preferred over Cells 3 and 4, i.e. those with unfavorable associations. However, it matters little whether the brand is in Cells 3 or 4 since both situations are unfavorable. Nonetheless, we agree with Usunier that it is important to understand the process that determines which cell the brand ends up in and that understanding consumers’ brand origin perceptions provides useful information in designing the firm’s marketing strategy. Further, we concede that brands falling in the inaccurate/unfavorable Cell 4 perhaps at least have an opportunity to correct the misperception,

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assuming that the correct country association would lead to an improvement in brand evaluation.

Finally, based on the follow-up analysis examining what happens when consumers are informed of a brand's true origin, Usunier concludes that "origin knowledge seems to be a prerequisite for PCI of COO to affect brand attitude." Again, we draw a different conclusion. We agree that when consumers learn a brand's true origin, it leads to a shift in brand attitude. When the correct brand origin is more favorable than the prior perceived origin, attitude becomes more favorable. Alternatively, when the correct origin is less favorable than the prior perceived origin, brand attitude becomes less favorable. In reference to Usunier's table 1, this suggests that Cells 1 and 2 are superior to Cells 3 and 4. However, it does not provide any evidence to suggest that Cells 1 > 2 or that 3 > 4.

In sum, we believe that understanding consumers' brand origin perceptions is an important component of international marketing strategy and we recognize both Samiee's and Usunier's independent contributions to knowledge in this area. However, we believe that a confused perception nonetheless remains a perception, and our study provides evidence that brand origin perceptions affect brand attitude, regardless of perception accuracy.

#### **Future research and conclusion**

To conclude, we offer a few ideas on how our study and this discussion may spur future insights into this interesting and important research field. First, there seems to be strong agreement among the authors involved in this discussion that future COO studies need to consider ecological validity. We support Samiee's request for research designs that do not artificially force respondents to incorporate country associations. Traditionally, many COO experimental studies have explicitly disclosed a "made in country X" to respondents, which may not necessarily reflect consumer buying behavior and risks contaminating the data. Thus, future research needs to creatively design studies that avoid this bias.

Second, although we believe that we have provided evidence that accuracy of brand origin perception does not matter, we agree with Samiee and Usunier that there is a need for a better understanding of how and why consumers form brand origin perceptions. Indeed, if some companies continue to deliberately promote a particular country association, understanding how consumers use those associations should enable those companies to more effectively accomplish their goals. To date, most BORA research has focussed on consumer attributes (e.g. Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2008; Samiee *et al.*, 2005), and we suggest that exploring brand attributes may be a fruitful avenue. However, consistent with our previous suggestion, this type of research may also require creative research design that avoids accidentally biasing consumers. In effect, there is a need for more implicit measures to evaluate the strengths of the associative links between product/brand and their perceived country of origin. Anyone who has ever conducted a focus group with consumers regarding country-related associations would probably support this idea. Consumers are often quite unwilling to disclose that they are biased toward certain products because of its country association. Consumers often believe that incorporating country-level information on brand purchase decisions may be irrational or even discriminating, and may thus feel vulnerable by disclosing such "short comings."

Third, Samiee suggests that studying COO issues with large, high-involvement, high-familiarity brands is problematic and undesirable because these brands are

inseparable from their country and potentially biases the data. This may seem logical but is actually contrary to some research findings. Josiassen *et al.* (2008) found that COO effects were actually larger in low-involvement and low-familiarity product categories. This contradiction suggests that there are still uncertainties about when, where, how, and why country-related associations affect product evaluations and buying behavior.

In closing, we thank the editors of *International Marketing Review*, as well as Samiee and Usunier for engaging in a constructive discussion that we hope will further advance the COO field. Although there are certainly some differences in perspective between this research team and Samiee and Usunier, we have noted a number of areas of common ground. We are in agreement about several of the research-design challenges that future COO-related contributions must overcome. We also agree that consumers' brand origin recognition accuracy is indeed relatively modest, which poses several challenges for marketing managers in knowing when and how to effectively incorporate country-related features in their marketing strategies. We view this lack of knowledge and understanding not as an indication that COO is irrelevant, but rather as a motivation for researchers to further pursue these issues through creative ideas and research designs.

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**Further reading**

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