

Anything but Typical: How Consumers Evaluate Origin Products Based on Their Cues

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◦*Purpose:* A recent stream of research has focused on typicality associations – those that bring origins and products together. Most of the research has focused on typical products but atypical products have received very little attention, even though they are more and more present on the market. Yet to be reviewed, the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic product cues and product evaluations is examined in this paper for typical and atypical origin products.

◦*Design/methodology/approach:* Wine was used as the stimulus and consumer evaluations of typical and atypical products were reviewed. Consumers were also segmented based on their knowledge of the product category. 370 French respondents participated in an online questionnaire regarding the product cues they found most important depending on if the wine was from the new world or the old world.

◦*Findings:* The results show that extrinsic cues are most important in the evaluation of origin products, contrary to what prior research would have suggested. As well, an overview of consumer evaluations of atypical origin products confirms the CoO-ELM model proposed by Bloemer, Brijs and Kasper (2009) but that typical products are evaluated differently, and this depending on their level of knowledge.

◦*Practical implications:* Managers who work with origin products can use these results to their advantage as long as they understand the perception of their product in the marketplace, either as typical or atypical.

Key words: origin, typicality, wine, France

1. INTRODUCTION

A significant body of literature focuses on how products are evaluated and how consumers categorize and subsequently evaluate products. Products can be evaluated holistically (Bloch 1995) or they can also be evaluated in terms of the extrinsic (central) and intrinsic (peripheral) product characteristics or cues. Place designations play an important role in shaping perceptions of products (Spielmann and Babin 2011; Viot and Passebois-Ducros 2010). This has led to origin-product associations, or perceptions of typicality - the degree to which a product is perceived as representative of its origin (Tseng and Balabanis 2011).

While extant research provides many guidelines for product design and packaging (Garber 1995; Orth and Malkewitz 2008) the literature is sparse on how intrinsic and extrinsic product features serve to reinforce or attenuate origin-product associations. Rather, most of the literature focuses on how country name and brand name influence product evaluations (Teas and Agrawal 2000), or how brand name and origin are often confused, with brand often usurping origin or vice versa (Usunier 2011). Certainly, the ability to evaluate origin product features will depend as well on the other types of product cues available (e.g. product content, packaging features), as well as the individual features of the consumers such as prior knowledge and experience (Bloemer et al. 2009). As well, globalization has created emerging economies capable of producing quality products, but due to their novelty on the market, these products may face a typicality bias. This paper focuses on product features and their ability to dis/confirm typicality associations. It also examines the ability or motivation of consumers to focus on certain product features in concordance to origin.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Origin Typicality

Product ethnicity or nationality perceptions help consumers make associations between product categories and origins (Usunier and Cestre 2007). Due to their production capacities, countries can encourage specific images, which in turn means that specific product categories become stereotypically associated with certain origins (Kotler and Gertner 2002; Roth and Romeo 1992). Consumers then categorize these products as being country typical, in that the product category represents the country's products (e.g. wine is from France or the French make wine) (Loken and Ward 1990; Tseng and Balabanis 2011).

1.2. Product Cues

Consumers analyse origin products using the numerous physical and non-physical product features. Physical features are also referred to as peripheral cues, those that are intrinsic, tangible and often more obvious. Intrinsic cues allow consumers to confirm their presence with their senses. Product shape, touch, scent and sound all contribute to perceptions of reality and in consequence are easier to evaluate. However these are product features that cannot be changed without altering the physical characteristics of the overall product (Olsen and Jacoby 1972).

Non-physical features are central and extrinsic such as brand name, symbols used on the packaging, label details on the packaging, advertising, price, guarantees, warranties, etc. as signals (Bearden and Shimp 1982; Han and Terpstra 1988; Steenkamp 1990). Research has found that country-level origin is an extrinsic product cue, similar to price, brand or other packaging cues (Teas and Agrawal 2000; Watson and Wright 2000). In this sense, origin is evaluated as a label, Made in France, rather than as a source of physical resources required for the product.

1.3 Consumer Evaluations of Origin Products

How consumers evaluate origin products will depend on numerous features, such as prior

knowledge and experience tendencies. Much research has focused on consumers' prior knowledge of origin specific information (Bloemer et al. 2009; Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000; Han 1989). Globally the results show that origin knowledge increases confidence in the evaluation of origin products. This confidence then influences the way consumers evaluate origin products and the features they place more weight on (Pecotich and Ward 2007).

Specifically, origin can act as a halo by influencing beliefs about the product and hence attitudes toward origin-products (Han 1989). When consumers use one product cue to evaluate origin products, the halo effect is observed. Just like a brand name, origin can become a shorthand cue for product perceptions (Zeithaml 1988). Thus origin becomes a proxy indicator - this is often the case when consumers have little knowledge and experience of the product (Laroche et al. 2005). Alternatively, when consumers have experience or have been exposed to products from a certain origin, they use their accumulated information to confirm beliefs about an origin product (Han 1989). The summary construct occurs when consumers amalgamate product impressions to have a more holistic attitude toward the targeted product. They do so as a means to limit cognitive effort and to simplify evaluations (Han 1989). Finally consumers can evaluate the origin and other product cues concurrently. This interaction between beliefs and product information, entitled the default heuristic, leads to more cognitive processing and thus a more detailed evaluation of the origin product (Bloemer et al. 2009; Manrai et al. 1998).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bloemer et al. (2009) propose that prior knowledge of the product category moderates the evaluation of origin products but they do not specify whether the evaluative process differs between typical and atypical origin products. Another stream of research that reviews country typicality of products per origin considers neither product cues nor level of consumer knowledge (Tseng and Balabanis 2011). It could be assumed that the use of simple heuristics for origin products would be even more prevalent for amateur rather than knowledgeable consumers, as stated by Bloemer et al. (2009). However this past research does not clarify *which* product features would figure in either simple or complex evaluations.

RQ: Does typicality of a product influence the choice of product cues (intrinsic/extrinsic) used in the evaluation of origin products, and does the choice depend on the type of consumer segment?

4. METHODOLOGY

Wine was selected as the main product category for this research project, because as a product category it can be segmented as having a typical and atypical origin. Much of the media attention regarding wine has often focused on the duality between old world and new world wines: “‘old world’ refers to the traditional winegrowing regions of Europe, while ‘new world’ refers to everything else” (www.winespectator.com). Furthermore, as a product category, wines are always strongly linked to their origin (Guidry et al. 2009) and origin at the country level is a key evaluative feature for wines (Atkin and Johnson 2010; Balestrini and Gamble 2006).

A list of intrinsic and extrinsic product cues was devised for wine using the definition from Olsen and Jacoby (1972). The list consisted of the features most often discussed in the media as well as those most often used by wine experts. An intrinsic product cue for wine was defined as one that consumers could touch and affected product performance. Extrinsic product cues for wine were defined as those pertaining to the origin as well as features related to the packaging and brand (Han 1989; Wall, Liefeld and Heslop 1991).

A Master of Wine as well as three marketing researchers verified the list for validity and relevance. Extrinsic features were: brand, origin, label, back label, corkage, bottle shape, and graphics. Intrinsic features were: grape variety, appellation, vintage, producer and organic.

Price was specifically excluded because not all outlets practice the same prices for wine (i.e. wines in supermarkets may be less expensive than in specialty stores). As such, this extrinsic cue was determined as being too biased, and was excluded. Wine type (i.e. red, white, sparkling) was also excluded because grape variety is a better and more accurate indicator of wine quality than colour and because prices will also fluctuate based on wine type and regions.

4.1. Questionnaire

Survey sampling with a questionnaire was used. The beginning of the questionnaire asked respondents an open-ended question about what they perceived to be the differences between old and new world wines. Respondents then were asked to cite examples of new and old world countries. The questionnaire then randomly presented two blocks – one asking questions about new world wines and the other about old world wines. Respondents answered both blocks. The multiple product cues of wines were placed in a matrix-type question where respondents answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all important to very important. An attitudinal measure with a five-point Likert scale was created, including these items: “I take pleasure in drinking these wines”, “I like the taste of these wines” and “I like to discover these wines”. A cognitive measure, entitled originality, was also created using a five-point Likert scale and included the following statements: “These wines have a sense of place”, “These wines are complex”, “These wines are structured”, “These wines are original”, “These wines are typical”, “These wines have specific aromas”. An open-ended willing-to-pay for these types of wines item was also included in order to measure value perceptions. Finally, respondents assessed their own level self of wine knowledge (novice, intermediary and expert) and answered wine hobby questions (e.g. do you read wine magazines, do you participate in wine clubs, etc.) and socio-demographic questions.

4.2. Sample

France was selected as the sampling country of choice as wine is typically associated with this country (Bastien et al. 2011). In consequence, French consumers would be more likely to perceive wine as typical when it comes from France and neighbouring countries in Europe. The questionnaire was sent out to a Qualtrics sample of 320 French citizens over the age of 18. The same questionnaire was sent out to 500 randomly selected readers of a professional wine web site (www.vitisphere.com). A total of 395 questionnaires were returned (48% completion rate) and 370 were retained after removing incomplete responses. Respondents were 58% men, 66% were between 18 and 50 years old with over 50% having studied in higher education. Thirteen per cent work in the wine industry.

In terms of wine statistics, the sample consumed an average of 1.9 bottles of wine per week per household and spent an average of €18.89 per bottle. Over 97% of the sample has already consumed old world wines and 69.5% have consumed new world wines. Chile, Argentina, the United States, Australia and New Zealand are the most cited new world countries whereas France, Italy, Spain and Germany are the most cited old world countries. Level of knowledge was established by using the self-measure and then compared with the wine hobby questions. Consumers were split up into three categories: 19% low knowledge (those who rated themselves as not knowledgeable and who participated in two or fewer wine activities), 63% medium knowledge (those who participated in three wine related activities) and 18% high knowledge (those who stated they were experts and participated in at least four wine related activities).

4.3 Results

An overview of the respondents’ verbatim description of new versus old world wines shows that they have a clear understanding that these two categories are distinct. Measure reliabilities for the measures were good for both the old world and new world blocks

(Cronbach alphas ranging from .788 to .865). Stepwise regressions were conducted using the product cues with the dependent variables of attitude and originality for both typical and atypical products. For all the regressions, 70% of the sample was used and then the regressions were retested with 30% of the sample in order to ensure that the results were generalizable. Results presented here are for the entire sample. The variables were also checked for collinearity and the condition indexes were all under the limit of 15. These regressions were conducted depending on the level of knowledge level of the respondents. Appendix A illustrates the findings.

For typical products, low knowledge consumers focus on product cues such as brand, label, appellation, country and grape. Whereas four product cues positively influence attitude and originality perceptions, brand negatively impacts willingness-to-pay. For medium knowledge consumers, grape is important in determining attitudes and originality. Country and label also influence attitudes whereas vintage reinforces originality perceptions. No product cues are predictive of willingness-to-pay. High knowledge consumers use few cues in their evaluation of typical products: grape and country. For atypical products, low knowledge consumers use only one product cue for all types of evaluations: brand. Medium knowledge consumers use four key extrinsic product cues when evaluating atypical origin products: label and bottle shape as well as country and winemaker. These product cues are only relevant in determining attitudes and originality perceptions. Medium and high knowledge consumers do not use product cues in order to set price expectations for atypical products. High knowledge consumers do, however, use brand and grape to positively shape their attitudes whereas graphics negatively influence their attitudes. In terms of originality, brand is the single most important product cue.

5. DISCUSSION

The results presented in this paper showcase some interesting findings. The first set pertains to the use of product cues for origin products. Prior research suggests that intrinsic cues are most influential for attitudes (Kozup et al. 2001; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Our results show that this relationship does not apply to origin products – both typical and atypical origin products are evaluated using most extrinsic features.

The second set of results pertains to how the level of knowledge of consumers influences their evaluations of origin products. For low knowledge consumers, multiple product cues, mostly extrinsic, seem to be used. These consumers may engage in a progressive analysis: a wine from Burgundy would be from France and would be pinot noir and would be from a specific brand as outlined on the label, indicating a default heuristic to evaluate a product they are familiar with. For atypical products however, the halo effect is in full evidence by focusing on the brand - either it is a surrogate indicator of origin or because consumers simply do not have enough knowledge in order to accurately disentangle brand from origin (Usunier 2011; Zeithaml 1988).

For medium knowledge consumers, typical products are evaluated using a blend of extrinsic and intrinsic product cues. When consumers are familiar with products, they have a certain proximity to them. In the case of the stimulus used, one could argue that French consumers would have a good understanding of what certain vintages yield, and this for most old world wines. Also, the increased level of experience of a moderate knowledge consumer is likely to explain why they value grape - experience likely helps them isolate different varietal taste profiles that they like, and thus seek them out. As for atypical products, moderate knowledge consumers value country and label as for typical products. However they focus also on bottle shape and winemaker. Bottle shape may be a cue of the extrinsic quality of the wine - reliance on product packaging for unfamiliar products helps augment confidence in product evaluations (Underwood and Klein 2002). Specifically for wine, the shape of the bottle may be

a way for consumers to categorize unknown products into schemas they are more familiar with (Loken and Ward 1990; Mandler 1982; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). If it has the shape of Bordeaux wine bottles, it might be close to the style of Bordeaux wines. Medium knowledge consumers use multiple cues to go beyond their knowledge set, and probably engage in default heuristics.

Finally, expert consumers use very few intrinsic features (versus extrinsic features) when evaluating origin products. For both typical and atypical products, these consumers rely mostly on extrinsic product cues for all of their evaluations. Specifically, they use country for typical products whereas they use brand for atypical products. For both typical and atypical products, experts use a summary construct; the difference lies in the cue that sets off this process. Experts use country for typical products perhaps because they have a clearer understanding of how old world countries will produce different wines. For example, they know how and why French cabernet sauvignon wines are not the same as Italian cabernet sauvignon wines. Experts are likely to make origin-product associations for typical products (Tseng and Balabanis 2011). The origin supports the association and is confirmed by a few other product features. However, atypical products have an origin that has less meaning and established associations, and in consequence, the origin becomes represented by specific brands (Gabriel and Urien 2006). When faced with atypical products, experts first focus on brand as a cue, thus making brand-product associations (Thakor and Kohli 1996).

5.1. Managerial Implications

Managers who work with origin products can use these results to their advantage as long as they understand the perception of their product in the marketplace, either as typical or atypical. What may be perceived as typical in one country may not be in another. Once this is established, marketers should emphasize the product cues that are most likely to augment attitudes and value perceptions. Globally it appears that extrinsic cues are most relevant, certainly because they allow consumers to establish their own subjective notion of product value. Although marketers should be aware that when products are perceived as typical, consumers are likely to use more product features than when they are perceived as atypical. In consequence, product cues should be coherent in transmitting a homogenous product image. In the case where the product is atypical, the use of origin and brand is prevalent by consumers. As such, marketers should work to capture positive origin stereotypes and include them in their branding in order for consumers to properly identify the origin and to encourage positive country-brand-product associations.

As for accounting for the differences between low, medium and high knowledge consumers, it is without a doubt that distribution points, prices and types of promotion should be tailored in consequence to the desired target market. When the product is perceived as typical, low and medium knowledge consumers use many product cues. When the product is atypical, medium knowledge consumers continue to use multiple features that help boost their evaluative confidence. However low knowledge consumers need to be reassured by one cue: brand. As for expert consumers, managers should reinforce the country-product association when the product is typical and the brand-country-product when the product is atypical would be recommended.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

It would be fair to state that a replication study should be conducted in other European countries such as Germany or Italy. A second limitation would be that although most obvious product cues were tested, there are many more that are present on wine packaging.

Appendix A: Typical X Knowledge Regression Results

| | | | Product cues | Beta (t-score) | F Stat |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|--|---|--|---------------------|
| Low Knowledge | Typical | WTP | Brand | -.364 (3.126 ^b) | 9.771 ^b |
| | | Affective-attitude | Label | .369 (3.477 ^a) | 12.923 ^a |
| | | | Brand Appellation | .239 (2.189 ^a) .231 (2.173 ^b) | |
| | Originality | Grape Country Label | | .336 (3.037 ^b) | 14.181 ^a |
| | | | | .279 (2.511 ^b) | |
| | | | | .217 (2.074 ^b) | |
| Atypical | WTP | Brand | .654 (3.560 ^b) | 12.677 ^b | |
| | Affective-attitude | Brand | .574 (2.889 ^b) | 8.349 ^b | |
| | Originality | Brand | .512 (2.460 ^b) | 6.050 ^b | |
| Medium Knowledge | Typical | WTP | - | - | - |
| | | Affective-attitude | Country | .394 (5.866 ^a) | 30.516 ^a |
| | | | Grape Label | .181 (2.680 ^b) .128 (2.191 ^b) | |
| | Originality | Vintage | .293 (4.028 ^a) | 22.695 ^a | |
| | | Grape | .183 (2.521 ^b) | | |
| | Atypical | WTP | - | - | - |
| Affective-attitude | | Country | .277 (3.768 ^a) | 15.265 ^a | |
| | | Label Winemaker | .214 (2.957 ^b) .170 (2.439 ^b) | | |
| Originality | Country | .306 (4.406 ^a) | 16.183 ^a | | |
| | Bottle shape Winemaker | .239 (3.442 ^a) .184 (2.588 ^b) | | | |
| High Knowledge | Typical | WTP | - | - | - |
| | | Affective-attitude | Country | .346 (2.809 ^b) | 7.892 ^b |
| | | | Originality | Country | |
| | Grape | .296 (2.393 ^b) | | | |
| | Atypical | WTP | - | - | - |
| | | Affective-attitude | Brand | .503 (3.700 ^a) | 8.065 ^a |
| Grape Graphics | | | .398 (3.299 ^b) -.288 (2.040 ^b) | | |
| Originality | Brand | .377 (2.959 ^b) | 8.754 ^b | | |

a = $p < .001$, *b* = $p < .05$

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