

For the Love of Country: How Origin-related Affect Influences Consumer Wine Evaluation and Preference

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Abstract:

Purpose - This paper presents a cross-national investigation of how the affect consumers hold towards a country (Australia) influences their evaluation of and preference for wine from that country.

Design/methodology/approach - Seated in seven countries around the globe, two studies, one qualitative (21 focus groups, N=138) and the other quantitative (an online survey; N=2,039) examine how country of origin influences consumer evaluation (and, ultimately, preference) through affective (warmth) and cognitive (country, people, and food associations) pathways.

Findings - Study 1 yields initial evidence that the affect consumers hold towards an origin, jointly with origin-related associations about the country, its people, and foods influences consumer response. Study 2 shows origin-related affect relates positively to consumer preference for wines from Australia, but the study also shows that associations (country, people, and food) can lower preferences. Cultural similarity enhances the effect of warmth on wine evaluation, whereas subjective wine knowledge has no such moderating influence.

Practical implications - Given the impact country affect has on wine preferences with both novice and expert consumers, especially in more similar cultures, wine marketers may be interested in benefitting from the findings by joining forces with tourism managers to create more positive affect towards their wines' origin.

Keywords: Competence, country-of-origin, stereotype-content model, warmth

1. INTRODUCTION

Governments and tourism managers worldwide spend large amounts of money to generate positive feelings towards their countries, regions and cities. Nevertheless, country of origin (COO) research has predominantly focused on consumers' conscious thoughts, associations, cognitions and assumptions about places and the products originating from those places (Josiassen et al., 2013). Whilst COO influences have been studied extensively for decades (Bilkey and Nes, 1982), only recently has the notion emerged that affect toward countries can influence the evaluation of products (Chen et al., 2014). In spite of a long history of research investigating the power of COO based beliefs on consumer response, this area of investigation remains relevant and continues to yield powerful results for managers. The increasingly integrated global marketplace has resulted in the proliferation of 'hybrid' products and services branded and/or designed in one country but manufactured or assembled in many. Wine remains essentially a 'single-origin' product and one where the respective COO remains a significant cue to consumers for quality.

Drawing from the literature on COO and the stereotype-content (SC) model (Fiske et al., 2002), we propose that origin-related affect (warmth), jointly with origin-related cognitions (competence), influences consumer evaluation of wine from a specific country, with effects ultimately extending to preference. Warmth captures the (positive) affect consumers hold towards an origin (Chattalas et al., 2008). For example, U.S. consumers may have positive feelings towards Australia and those feelings will flow on to positively influence their evaluation of Australian wines. Over time countries may also gain strong reputations for producing certain products (e.g., China for silk or Scotland for whiskey); a strong association or 'congruence' between these products and their COO develops, leading consumers to strongly believe in their competence to produce high quality in these categories (Srikantanyoo and Gnoth, 2002). Hence, consumer cognitions will reflect their own experience, associations and assumptions respective to a country, its people and products (Chen et al., 2014; Han, 1989, 1990). For example, consumers associate France and the French with competence in fine foods and fine wines and, thus, will evaluate wines from France more favorably.

In addition, we test the prediction that two consumer attributes will moderate the relationship between country affect and consumer evaluation of wine. Subjective wine knowledge (differences between novices and those that see themselves as experts) should attenuate the effect, as novices may rely more on country affect in evaluating wine than experts (Veale, 2008). On the other hand, perceived cultural similarity with the country of wine origin should moderate the relationship such that the influence of country affect will be stronger when consumers perceive their own culture as more, rather than less, similar to the culture where the wine originated (Alden et al., 2009).

2. LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Country Stereotypes and Affect

Stereotypes are fixed impressions that people hold (Katz and Braly, 1933) and can be defined as a socially shared set of beliefs about traits of people (Steele et al., 2002) or places (Herz and Diamantopoulos, 2013). Country stereotypes are formed directly via experiencing a country and/or its products and services, or indirectly via media exposure and personal communications (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Notably, country stereotypes can evoke not only cognitive, but also affective responses (Chen et al., 2014), influencing consumers' evaluation of products and brands (Chattalas et al., 2008).

Originally developed in an interpersonal relationship context, a key property of the SC model is that it includes two primary dimensions of people's response to stereotypes: warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002). Adaptations and extensions of the SC model have been proposed to explain not only a person's evaluation of other people, but also consumer response to firms (Aaker et al., 2010) and brands (Aaker et al., 2012). The SC model has even been suggested to explain response to national stereotypes for general products and consumer electronics (Chattalas et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2014). Given the unanimously positive influence of country affect on consumer evaluative judgment, we expect:

Hypothesis 1a: Positive affect towards a country will positively influence consumers' evaluation of wine from that origin.

A substantial body of research has focused on COO effects in general (Chattalas, et al, 2008; Han, 1989, 1990; Piron 2000; Srikantanyoo and Gnoth, 2002) and in the context of wine (e.g., D'Alessandro and Petotich, 2013; Moulard et al., 2015). Those studies converge on the finding that the associations, cognitions, and conscious thoughts people infer from an origin are powerful predictors of their evaluation of and response to wines from that place. Integrating the general and the wine-specific COO literature with recent advances of the SC model, we maintain:

Hypothesis 1b: The positive influence of country affect on wine evaluation will persist when cognitions about country, people, and food are included as additional predictors.

2.2. Knowledge and Cultural Similarity

The knowledge people possess about a product category (their objective knowledge) and how much they believe they know (subjective knowledge) can be a major differentiator in their response to offers from that category (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987), including their evaluation of products from a specific origin (Schaefer, 1997). In the wine category, individual knowledge has been shown to influence what cues (including information about the origin) consumers rely on to infer quality (e.g., Viot, 2012), and the preferences they form based on those inferences (Guidry et al., 2009). Integrating the SC model with reports that novices rely more on COO cues than do those that rely more on their own experience and knowledge (D'Alessandro and Pecotich, 2013), we expect:

Hypothesis 2a: Subjective wine knowledge will attenuate the effect of country affect on evaluative judgments.

Much research attests to self-continuity or self-verification as a key motivator in an individual's efforts to maintain a clear and functional sense of who they are (Swann, 2012). This need for a consistent and stable sense of 'self' is met typically through assessments of similarity between one's sense of self and others (Seih et al., 2013). Culture researchers have pointed to the important role of the perceived difference (or similarity) between one's own culture and other cultures (e.g., Sousa and Bradley, 2008). Integrating cultural similarity studies with the affect-as-information (Schwarz, 2013) and affect infusion models (Forgas, 1995), we argue that country affect should lead to more favorable evaluation when consumers perceive the culture of the origin of a product is perceived to be similar to their own because related affect will be perceived as more diagnostic. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2b: Perceived cultural similarity will enhance the effect of country affect on evaluative judgment.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

We tested these predictions in the context of country affect to Australia and consumer judgment of Australian wines via two studies. In Study 1, we examined consumer narratives of perceptions of, and responses to, wine origins through focus group discussions in seven countries (China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Korea, the USA and the UK). In Study 2, we collected data from wine consumers recruited via an international commercial market research company in these seven countries.

3.1. Study 1: Focus Groups

The purpose of Study 1 was to generate initial evidence for and against the notion that the affect consumers hold towards a country influences their evaluation of and preference for wine from that country. In addition, the study identifies individual and cultural difference variables that possibly moderate (i.e., mute or enhance) the impact of affect on preference.

3.1.1. Method

Study 1 employed three focus groups of wine consumers in each country (N = 138). There were six to eight participants in each group, which was generally balanced in gender. Consumers were screened to ensure that each purchased wine at least four times per month. Local facilitators from each country conducted the group discussions according to a consistent discussion guide. Consumers were first asked their opinions regarding the attributes they considered essential in a very high quality wine. Then they were asked to identify countries that, in their view, were highly likely to produce wines of this high quality, and alternatively, those countries they felt less able. Participants also provided descriptors and their feelings specific to these countries, their people and the foods eaten there.

3.1.2. Analyses and Results

Content analysis of the transcribed group discussions revealed that whilst there were some minor differences noted in terms of opinions respective to each country discussed, results were generally consistent with regard to what constituted a 'fine wine', where those wines were most likely to be produced and the identification of those countries less likely to consistently produce the fine wines. France was cited by the majority of consumers, in each group in each country, as the country that produced the 'best wine' with Italy typically cited as producing almost as good, and sometimes superior wines. Following these two leaders, Germany and Spain were reported but with much more mixed results. After that, countries like Australia, South Africa, New Zealand (for white wines), Chile and Argentina were listed in varying order of expectations. Some individuals in the UK and the USA were 'fans' of Australian wines and, indeed, wines from other new world producers as well. However, it was clear that these wine consumers strongly believed that the 'best' wine comes France or Italy – otherwise you risked being disappointed. Moreover, there was also a consistently strong belief (strongest in the UK and the USA) that the ability to produce 'fine wine' was inalterably linked to a country's ability to produce fine food – and to understand what fine food is. For example, a respondent in the USA stated emphatically, "*People who know nothing about fine food, can know nothing about fine wine!*" It was also important to note that some negative country associations were not seen to impact on a country's ability to produce top quality wines. Whilst respondents believed, for example, that Italy was a bit 'chaotic' and old and inefficient and Italians can be 'temperamental' and 'emotional' – they were also described, overall, as 'passionate' artisans that knew what high quality was and how to produce it across a number of product categories including food and wine. Similarly, beliefs regarding France and French nationals were not always complimentary. But, there too was common agreement that world famous, high quality brands came from France and they had a clear understanding of the 'finer things in life' and had a long history of producing them. These responses reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of the COO associations for these countries and contrast sharply with the strongly uni-dimensional impressions and stereotypical beliefs about Australia, Australian wines and Australians. Generally, Australia enjoyed strong support in every country as a highly desirable holiday destination - a very action oriented and exciting place to be. Those that had visited Australia spoke highly of their visit and the highly stimulating experiences they had enjoyed. Terms such as 'hot', 'rough', 'beautiful', 'strong' and 'exciting' were used often. As people, Australians were described as 'tough', 'tanned', 'hardy', 'loud', 'friendly', 'humorous' and 'big and strong'. However, terms such as 'passionate', 'romantic', 'sophisticated', or 'well educated' were not heard. Importantly, it was clear from the active and open feedback of participants in each country that these discussions evoked clear COO based imagery, associations and emotive reactions – both positive and negative. It was also evident that beliefs about Australia were not generally congruent with those same beliefs and/or emotional reactions found to be associated with countries where a fine wine could be consistently produced. Overall, the focus groups strongly endorsed quantifying cognitive and emotional reactions to COOs and their ultimate effect on the evaluation of and preference for wine from that country.

3.2. Study 2: Cross-national Survey

The purpose of Study 2 was to formally test the hypothesized relationships through a quantitative survey of consumers in the seven countries.

3.2.1. Method

Australia was chosen as the country of origin of interest, but other wine origins (e.g., Argentina, Chile, France, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the U.S.) were also examined. Data was obtained through an online survey from 2,039 wine consumers (mean age = 38.6 years, 48.3% females) in China (N=301), India (N=302), Indonesia (N=279), Korea (N=270), the U.K. (N=301), the U.S.A. (N=284), and Vietnam (N=302).

Because countries are multidimensional stereotypical constructs (Chen et al., 2014), we assessed country-related associations at three levels: cognitions related to the country's competence in general, cognitions on the competence of the country's people/workforce, and cognitions related to the country's competence in food specifically. Established and previously validated scales include Aaker et al.'s (1986) four-item measure of warmth to assess country affect (enthusiastic, happy, pleased, excited; $\alpha=.87$, $M=5.37$), seven items of d'Astous and Boujbel's (2007) country personality scale to assess associations with Australia's competence overall ($\alpha=.91$, $M=5.01$), a second group of 12 items to assess associations related to the competence of Australian people ($\alpha=.81$, $M=5.16$), and a third group of nine items to assess associations on Australia's competence in food ($\alpha=.91$, $M=5.01$). Additional measures included Heslop et al.'s (2010) scale to assess consumers' evaluation of wine ($\alpha=.92$, $M=5.10$), Souse and Bradley's (2006) six-item measure of cultural similarity ($\alpha=.94$, $M=4.40$), Flynn and Goldsmith's (1999) nine-item measure of wine knowledge ($\alpha=.92$, $M=4.89$), and a single-item measure of preference for wine from Australia (Zikmund and Babin, 2009).

3.2.2. Analyses and Results

The predicted effects of country-of-origin were analyzed through a series of regressions. Wine evaluation was the dependent variable; country associations, people associations, food associations, country affect, and its interaction terms were the independent variables. Variables were mean-centered before computing the interaction variables (Jaccard et al., 1990). The results of the hierarchical regression model appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Hierarchical Regression Model for Wine Evaluation

	Main effects only		Main effects + two-way interactions *	
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	.11	1.51	.03	-.15
Country Associations	.23	12.21	.21	11.34
People Associations	.24	10.31	.22	9.68
Food Associations	.42	19.21	.39	18.10
Affect	.09	5.54	.08	1.71
Cultural Similarity (CS)	.02	1.91	.06	1.39
Wine Knowledge (WK)	.07	6.60	.02	.45
Affect x CS			.08	3.14
Affect x WK			.01	1.07
Adjusted R		.71		.77

Note: B=unstandardized coefficient, bold entries denote $p < .05$

Country affect had a significant positive effect on wine evaluation, supporting hypothesis 1a. This effect persisted in the presence of cognitive predictors (country associations, people associations, and food associations), hereby supporting hypothesis 1b. We further expected country affect to interact with cultural similarity and wine knowledge to influence wine evaluation. Conforming to our expectation in hypothesis 2a, the interaction term of Affect x Cultural Similarity was significant, indicating that a greater cultural similarity enhances the influence of affect on wine evaluation. Wine knowledge, in contrast, had a significant direct effect on wine evaluation, but did not interact with country affect. This finding does not support hypothesis 2b.

4. DISCUSSION

Our study confirms that, in addition to cognitive reactions to COO, country affect has the power to influence consumer evaluations of wine and their wine preference developing from those evaluations. The study also reveals the need to investigate the respective power of product country associations and those strongly linked to the primary product under investigation (food and people). Our results also highlight that in the case of products, such as

wine, where there is believed to be more than a need for objective competency in the producer, consumers are engaged by the emotional make-up of the wine makers themselves and their cultural associations, for example the '*passion*' and '*sophistication*' of the French and the Italians – their history as '*artisans*'. Whilst in past, country associations alone have been investigated or country product image with country person image largely under explored, this research accounts for these constructs as well as for two consumer characteristics found to be influential. In support of previous studies, consumers in this research also showed a positive bias due to cultural similarity highlighting the opportunities and the challenges for international wine exporters. The insignificant result for knowledge when assessed with cultural congruency further illustrates the strong ability of COO factors to overcome a cognitively based consumer attribute.

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