Competent Versus Warm Countries of Origin: the Influence of National Stereotypes on Product Perceptions

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While there is evidence for consumers’ reliance on country-of-origin information when evaluating products, we currently know very little about how systematic differences in the content of national stereotypes associated with a particular nation impact product perceptions and evaluations. This research shows that the stereotypes consumers hold concerning a country’s perceived warmth versus competence affect the degree to which its products are perceived to be relatively more hedonic versus utilitarian. In particular, using both U.S. and Japanese samples, we show that a product made in Germany is perceived to be more utilitarian than the identical product made in Italy, whereas a product made in Italy is perceived to be more hedonic than the identical product made in Germany. Additionally, we demonstrate an asymmetric impact of familiarity with a nation’s products on perceived warmth and competence, which is shown to moderate only differences in perceived warmth, but not in perceived competence. Further analyses of the differences in perceived utilitarianism demonstrate that this effect is driven by differences in perceived competence. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this research, we propose that the differences in hedonic versus utilitarian product perceptions are driven by distinct dimensions of national stereotypes associated with a country of origin’s people.

There is evidence for consumers’ reliance on national stereotypes when evaluating products, suggesting that such schemas triggered by country-of-origin information set up expectations about product properties or features (e.g., Maheswaran 1994). For example, Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dubé (1994) showed that a French (vs. English) brand name or pronunciation activates properties associated with “Frenchness,” such as perceived aesthetic sensitivity and refined taste of France and the French, which result in consumers evaluating a perfume to be more hedonic.

However, while a large body of research has documented the importance of country-of-origin effects (e.g., Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999; Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2006), the literature is currently lacking an investigation into how systematic differences in the content of national stereotypes associated with a particular country of origin impact product perceptions and evaluations. This paper seeks to address this shortcoming. Since to the best of our knowledge this is the first study to investigate the differential effects of two distinct dimensions of national stereotypes on product perceptions, our objectives in this research are to document their importance, test a moderator of warmth versus competence perceptions, and suggest avenues for future research based on our findings.

Drawing on research concerning stereotype contents and, in particular, Fiske et al.’s (2002) Stereotype Content Model, we propose that the stereotypes consumers hold concerning a country’s perceived warmth versus competence affect the degree to which its products are perceived to be relatively more hedonic versus utilitarian. Our studies demonstrate the existence and the differential impact of distinct stereotype dimensions on product perceptions, the asymmetric impact of familiarity with a nation’s products on warmth versus competence perceptions, and the underlying mechanism for the influence of perceived competence on utilitarian product properties. Formally, we hypothesize and test:

H1: Products from countries high in competence (warmth) are perceived to be relatively more utilitarian (hedonic).

H2: Perceived competence (warmth) mediates the effect of country-of-origin on utilitarian (hedonic) product perceptions.

In study 1, following Fiske et al. (2002), U.S. subjects (N=95, undergraduate students) indicated how competent, capable, and efficient (competence index, \( \alpha = .86 \)) and how warm, friendly, and good-natured (warmth index; \( \alpha = .90 \)) they perceived Germans (Italians) to be, where 1=not much and 7=a lot. In particular, our subjects perceived Italians (M=5.15) to be significantly warmer \([F(1, 91)=8.79, p<.01]\) than Germans (M=4.40). Further, subjects perceived Germans (M=5.51) to be significantly more competent \([F(1, 91)=15.31, p<.001]\) than Italians (M=5.03). Interestingly, and extending previous work on the stereotype content model and national stereotypes, knowledge of or familiarity with a nation’s products moderated only differences in perceived warmth, but not in perceived competence.

In study 2, we show that a product made in Germany is perceived to be more utilitarian than the identical product made in Italy. As expected, U.S. subjects (N=123, undergraduate students) perceived Germans to be more competent than Italians \([M=5.05 \text{ vs. } 4.53, p<.01]\). Conversely, they perceived Italians to be warmer than Germans \([M=5.02 \text{ vs. } 4.35, p<.01]\). Importantly, however, and consistent with our hypothesis, subjects rated the German (vs. Italian) bike significantly more utilitarian \([M=4.41 \text{ vs. } 3.81, F(1, 121)=4.18, p<.05]\).

Subsequently, we tested if perceived competence mediated the relationship between country of origin and perceived utilitarianism, using the procedure suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). As discussed above, country of origin was a significant predictor of perceived utilitarianism \((B=6.03, t=2.04, p<.05)\) and perceived competence \((B=4.58, t=2.16, p<.05)\). Next, perceived competence had a significant effect on perceived utilitarianism of the bicycle \((B=3.67, t=3.01, p<.01)\). Lastly, when both country of origin and perceived competence were included in the regression, perceived competence remained a significant predictor \((B=3.32, t=2.68, p<.01)\), while country of origin became insignificant \((B=4.52, t=1.54, p>.10)\), providing evidence for complete mediation.

In study 3, a product made in Italy was perceived to be more hedonic than the identical product made in Germany. As predicted, Japanese subjects (N=49, undergraduate students) rated the German (vs. Italian) bike significantly more utilitarian \([M=5.52 \text{ vs. } 4.04, F(1, 45)=14.84, p<.01]\), replicating the results of the U.S. study. Furthermore, subjects rated the Italian (vs. German) bike significantly more hedonic \([M=4.60 \text{ vs. } 3.52, F(1, 45)=5.41, p<.05]\). Additionally, they also perceived Germans to be more competent than Italians \([M=5.01 \text{ vs. } 3.58, F(1, 45)=31.09, p<.01]\). Surprisingly, there were no differences in perceived warmth between Germans and Italians \((M=4.26 \text{ and } 4.28, p>.1)\), respectively; \(F<1\).

Testing for mediation effects, country of origin was a significant predictor of perceived utilitarianism \((B=1.48, t=3.65, p<.01)\) and perceived competence \((B=1.42, t=5.61, p<.01)\). Next, perceived competence had a significant effect on perceived utilitarianism \((B=6.85, t=3.84, p<.01)\). Lastly, when both country of origin and perceived competence were included in the regression, perceived competence remained significant \((B=4.47, t=1.97, p<.055)\), while country of origin became insignificant \((B=0.57, t=1.66, p>.05)\), providing proof for complete mediation, and replicating the results of the previous study.

A series of studies introduced the stereotype content model (Fiske et al. 2002) and its two distinct national stereotype dimensions of perceived warmth versus competence to the consumer behavior literature. We further found that knowledge of a country’s products impacted differences in perceived warmth but not in perceived competence. Notably, we demonstrated the effect of a country’s perceived warmth versus competence on hedonic versus utilitarian product perceptions. In particular, we showed that a product made in Germany was perceived to be more utilitarian...
than the identical product made in Italy. Additionally, a product made in Italy was perceived to be more hedonic than the identical product made in Germany. Importantly, mediational analyses found that greater perceived competence of Germans (vs. Italians) was driving the effect of a product’s country of origin and its perceived degree of utilitarianism.

While our experiments supported the hypothesized relationship between national stereotype contents of perceived competence and the perceived utilitarianism of products associated with a nation, we were not able to test for the mediational role played by perceived warmth on a product’s perceived hedonism. Future research should therefore generalize the effect to other nations that differ in how warm their citizens are perceived to be.

Additional research could confirm the psychometric properties of the perceived competence and warmth scales as well as measure perceived utilitarianism and hedonism using multiple item scales (Voss et al. 2003). Further studies could explore the effectiveness of marketing communications (i.e. themes, symbols, models and endorsers, etc.) in shaping consumers’ views of a country. The roles of country versus product familiarity and their interaction effects should be further delineated. Finally, it would be interesting to further examine the dynamic nature of the relationship between national stereotypes and COO-based product evaluations over time.

References


