Country-Of-Origin Effects on Consumers’ Attributions and Word-Of-Mouth Communications About Services

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Drawing on theories of attribution and linguistic bias, we examine the effects of country-of-origin (COO) stereotypes on consumer’s attributions and word-of-mouth communications about a service encounter. In two experiments, we manipulated the COO of a fictitious bank (USA vs. Japan) and its service quality (good vs. bad), and demonstrate that the congruency between COO stereotypes and service quality leads to a strong dispositional attribution to the traits of the employee, which, in turn, prompts consumers to describe the encounter at a high level of language abstraction.

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be greater toward the scarce product cue versus the non-scarce product cue, but given biculturals’ chronic cultural identity goal their intentions toward the scarce non-dominant culture (Hispanic) product should be greater than for the scarce dominant culture (American) product.

The stimuli were fictitious movie promotions: the movie title and plot theme was Hispanic (“Los Hermanos García”) or American (“The Murphy Brothers”). The movie premier was a select city limited engagement (scarce) or a nationwide (non-scarce). Purchase intention was operationalized as likelihood of seeing the movie and biculturalism was assessed with a single-item self-report measure. Manipulation checks were successful.

A 2 x 2 factorial ANCOVA was conducted on purchase intentions. To eliminate potential extraneous influences psychological reactance and movie quality are covariates.

The product culture x scarcity x biculturalism interaction was only marginally significant (F(2, 74)=2.78, p=.10), perhaps due to the heterogeneity of the biculturals in our sample (e.g., African American, Portuguese, Hispanic, etc.). Biculturals are more likely to see the scarce Hispanic movie (M=3.31) than the scarce American movie (M=2.04) and more likely to see the non-scarce American movie (M=2.46) than the non-scarce Hispanic movie (M=1.99). Biculturals were more likely to see the scarce (M=3.31) than the non-scarce Hispanic movie (M=1.99). Monoculturals were more likely to see the scarce American movie (M=2.48) than the scarce Hispanic movie (M=1.96) and slightly more likely to see the scarce (M=2.48) versus non-scarce (M=2.67) American movie.

These results support our cultural identification motive activation account. Both biculturals and monoculturals reported greater purchase intentions toward scarce movies matching their cultural background than toward non-scarce movies matching their cultural background, supporting the idea that scarcity increases the salience of product culture and its likelihood of triggering a cultural identification motive resulting in greater purchase intention. More importantly, consistent with the culture identity activation hypothesis, biculturals had greater purchase intentions toward the non-dominant cultural product (i.e., Hispanic movie) than the dominant culture product (i.e., American movie) and monoculturals had greater purchase intentions only toward the dominant culture product than the non-dominant culture product, suggesting that differential effects for the cultural identification motive activation by the cultural product cues exist between bicultural and monocultural consumers.

References

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What do you think of when you hear about a person’s bad experience with a Japanese bank, a French airline or a Turkish hotel chain, as opposed to an American counterpart? Research on country-of-origin (COO) effects suggests that consumers’ inferences about the experience should differ depending on beliefs about the country (e.g., Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dubé 1994; Maheswaran 1994). Knowledge of a product’s COO promotes category-based processing, which influences cognitive inferences about quality and performance (Hong and Wyer 1989, 1990), Whereas past research focuses on products, there is little research on service-related COO effects. Yet, consumers’
inferences about services may differ in some important ways from inferences about products, depending particularly on stereotypes about individuals. Our research examines COO effects on consumers’ attributions for service quality. Further, we relate those inferences to consumers’ descriptions of a service encounter to shed light on COO effects on consumers’ word-of-mouth communications.

We propose that the congruency between service quality (good vs. bad) and COO stereotypes (favorable vs. unfavorable) influences the types of causal attributions consumers make about a service encounter as well as how they describe those encounters to others. Stereotype-congruent scenarios lead to dispositional as opposed to situational attributions, which, in turn, reinforce existing COO beliefs. Drawing on the linguistic bias literature (e.g., Maass, Montalcini, and Biciotti 1998; Wigboldus, Semin, and Spears 2000), we further propose that such congruency leads to greater use of abstract language as opposed to concrete language when describing that encounter to others.

The linguistic bias model has shown a tendency to describe expectancy-consistent information at a higher level of abstraction than inconsistent information. The definition and operationalization of language abstraction are based on the linguistic category model (Semin and Fiedler 1988), which categorizes words into different levels of abstractness. At the most concrete, verbal descriptions maintain an immediate reference to concrete behavioral events. At the most abstract, descriptions maintain an abstract reference to a person’s psychological properties (i.e., their traits and dispositions). For example, a service episode can be described in concrete terms (“it takes the server 5 minutes to get the bill”) as well as in abstract terms (“the server is slow and forgetful!”). Testimonials that differ in abstraction level may prompt recipients of that information to differ in their conclusions about and use of the information. We hypothesize that COO stereotype-congruent scenario will be encoded abstractly whereas incongruent scenario will be described concretely. We conducted two experiments to examine COO effects on evaluations, attributions and linguistic biases.

In study 1, 80 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (COO: USA vs. Japan) x 2 (quality: positive vs. negative) between-subjects design. Participants were given brief background information about a fictitious bank, which was based in either USA or Japan. Separate pretests confirmed that USA was a favorable whereas Japan was a less favorably COO for banking services. Participants then listened to a recording of a telephone conversation between a customer and a bank representative. The service encounter rolls were enacted by two Caucasian voice-talents who remained constant throughout all conditions. Service quality was manipulated via the manner in which the employee handled the caller’s complaint. In the good service condition, the way the employee handled the problem was polite and empathetic, whereas in the poor service condition, she was rude and unconcerned. After listening to the recording, participants received a questionnaire asking for evaluations of service quality and causal attributions for the outcome (e.g., causality attributable to the bank versus to the employee).

Causal attributions ratings were submitted to a 2 (COO) x 2 (quality) ANOVA. The expected 2-way interaction (F(1, 76)=9.83, \(p=.002\)) emerged such that the positive service was more likely to be attributed to the employee’s traits in the American bank compared to the Japanese bank (\(M_{\text{USA}}=7.38\) vs. \(M_{\text{Japan}}=6.00\); \(t(76)=2.26, p=.03\)). Conversely, the negative service was less likely to be attributed to the employee in the American bank compared to the Japanese bank (\(M_{\text{USA}}=6.39\) vs. \(M_{\text{Japan}}=7.56\); \(t(76)=-2.19, p=.03\)). The results suggest that when the service was congruent with the COO stereotypes, consumers are inclined to make dispositional inferences and attribute the cause to the intrinsic traits of the agent (Reeder et al. 2004). An activated COO stereotype on the firm level should have triggered a corresponding stereotype about individuals.

We conducted another study (\(N=68\)) to further explore the COO effects on consumers’ communication. The procedure and manipulations were the same as in study 1. In addition, participants provided a verbal description of the service encounter immediately
after they listened to the recording. Their open-ended responses were classified as to whether they were bank or employee-specific and then coded on the basis of the linguistic category model (Semin and Fielder 1988). The mean levels of abstraction were computed for the bank and employee-specific descriptions respectively, ranging from 1 (the most concrete) to 4 (the most abstract). A 2 (COO) x 2 (types of description) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 64)=8.15$, $p<.006$). Whereas the average abstraction level of the bank-specific descriptions was not statistically different between the American and Japanese bank ($M_{USA}=2.62$ vs. $M_{Japan}=1.97$; $p=.12$), employee-specific descriptions exhibited a significant difference in abstraction level ($M_{USA}=1.72$ vs. $M_{Japan}=2.89$; $t(64)=-3.22$, $p=.002$). The descriptions associated with the Japanese bank’s employee were high in abstraction, implying a stable, dispositional attribution to the employee. The positive correlation between the abstraction levels of employee-specific description and employee attribution ($r=.24$, $p=.05$) provides converging evidence to support the effects of attributions on linguistic biases.

In conclusion, consumers evaluate service quality through the tinted glass of COO stereotypes. When the outcome is congruent with existing beliefs, they tend to make a stronger dispositional attribution and describe the encounter more abstractly than when the outcome is incongruent. Future research should explore how the match/mismatch between the ethnicity of employee and COO moderates the effects. An important implication of this research is that the biased use of language by communicators may prompt recipients to make stronger dispositional attributions. Additional research should investigate the role of biased use of language in stereotype maintenance and dissemination in consumer’s networks.

References


