

**Relevance Versus Convenience in Business Research:
The Case of Country-of-Origin Research in Marketing**

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Abstract : COO research is a popular research topic in international marketing which addresses the issue of how Countries-Of-Origin of products influence consumer evaluations. The purpose of this contribution is to explore how COO research has developed over time in growing disconnection with both consumers and corporate concerns. We offer a number of possible explanations to this 'relevance gap', with the caveat that these explanations may be contingent on the COO case study.

Introduction

A large body of research literature in marketing deals with the influence of the country-of-origin (COO) of products on consumers' evaluations. More than 300 articles have been published over 35 years, with a great deal of diversity in countries (as origins), product categories, and consumers surveyed (in terms of demographics and nationality). Little change has occurred as concerns research methods which are based primarily on psychometric instruments and survey data. However, the issue of origins in international marketing has dramatically changed over the 35 year period as a consequence of major evolution in international trade regulations, sourcing and branding policies of multinational corporations, and decreasing consumer sensitivity to manufacturing origin. COO effect is no longer a major issue for international marketing operations: multinational production, global branding, and the decline of origin labeling in WTO rules tend to blur the COO issue and to lessen its relevance. Moreover many consumers are unaware of the manufacturing origin ('Made in') of the goods they buy and, if aware, tend to use

the origin information in conjunction with a number of other information cues such as price, brand, retail store image, etc. Except for the latter (i.e. that consumers do not use solely COO for evaluating products, which is rather self-evident), these changes have been ignored by academic researchers in marketing.

Using the example of COO research, this contribution investigates how academic literature in marketing and consumer behavior may develop over time in partial disconnection with consumers, regulators, and global businesses. COO is a popular research topic in international marketing which has grown based on a disputable experimental design used in one of the first studies (Schooler and Wildt, 1968) that gave COO its initial credibility (first section). After analyzing the growth of COO research over a 35 year period (section two), a content analysis of about 120 research papers published over the period 1966-2001 will be used as an empirical basis for describing how the literature has evolved over time (described in section 3). It is compared with major evolution in world business related to the increasing globalization of manufacturing and marketing operations and the relaxation of barriers to international trade. A mixed picture emerges whereby academic COO literature adapts to some transformations in the global business and consumer environment, but with lag and only on selected business issues, that is, only on those issues which fit with the academic nature of the research undertaking and seem relevant to marketing academics (e.g. branding, multi-attribute models of consumer decision making).

This article does not question the relevance of research in management and marketing as a whole. Most of its elaborations are based on a particular example, that of COOs, and the opinions expressed as well as their empirical support derived from the content analysis of the COO literature should be viewed as contingent to this particular research topic. However, it sheds some light on a key issue for management research which is whether the choice of research topics is mainly motivated by their academic value or by their managerial relevance. Relevance to consumers and companies should be a key determinant of research topics in an applied science domain as marketing. However, COO research tends to develop over time with relative disregard *vis-à-vis* the concrete consequences for companies and consumers. It is our contention that

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research feasibility and convenience have dominated over positive description (in the sense of Auguste Comte) of the research objects. In some areas of management research, the constraints of academic life (e.g. limited funding), its processes (such as peer-review), and its performance criteria (e.g. publications) may bias research undertakings towards the application of replicated conceptual frameworks to relatively poor data sets. This may result in little progress for the advancement of knowledge as well as few implications for managerial decision making.

2 - Country-of-origin (COO) research in international marketing

The founding COO experiment

This is the story of a small branch of academic literature within the field of marketing. The example of COO research illustrates how a narrow research issue developed into a full-fledged track with its specialists, reviews of literature and its own 'theory'. COO research is a topic that has gained academic recognition as a significant topic in the field of marketing and consumer research, despite its limited conceptual and managerial scope. As Bilkey and Nes (1982) point out, the initial objective of COO research was to demonstrate that the country-of-origin cue actually influenced consumers' evaluation. Attempting to determine in which direction and why, was only a secondary objective in the first studies (Schooler, 1965; 1971; Reiersen, 1966, Schooler and Sunoo, 1969; Dornoff *et al.*, 1974; Etzel and Walker, 1974; Wang and Lamb, 1980). Schooler and Wildt (1968) asked their subjects to rate two identical drinking glasses which were supposed to be 'Made in USA' versus 'Made in Japan'. They clearly evidenced an evaluation bias due to the effect of the country of origin. This 'founding experiment' was based on a quasi-experimental design, where the two glasses only differed by COO. However, the subjects could have asked the interviewer whether she was making a fool of them as the two glasses were absolutely identical (and had in fact the same manufacturing origin). But the respect for scientific manipulation is such that experimenters are allowed to fool their subjects and/or respondents. In

process and thanks their help for data analysis.

this context, a menial lie is considered as a way of proof, not as disputable manipulation. It is true that identical goods could be produced in different countries. But this was not the case in Schooler and Wildt's experiment (1968). As they state:

Each group examined two pieces of glassware, one of which was labeled "Made in Japan," the other "Made in U.S.A." The labels were authentic, but the pieces were identical pieces of a domestic producer. Respondents examined the products and evaluated on a comparative, equal interval, ordinal scale questionnaire. Since the groups were homogeneous and the products identical in all respects except country of origin designation, significant differences in the products' evaluations should indicate preconceptions based on country of origin. (1968, p. 79).

Given that COO mattered, more than 300 articles have been published over 35 years (Nebenzahl et al., 2003). Probably, around 1000 studies have been presented on the topic when all conference papers and PhD dissertations are included. These studies are overwhelmingly based on questionnaire survey featuring hypothetical goods and countries-of-origin and asking respondents to self-report about their evaluation of good X made in country Y. Often questionnaires have been administered despite little respondent familiarity with both the goods and origins mentioned in the research instrument. Several books have been published on COOs as well as compilations of research studies, review articles, and meta-analyses (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999).

The initial research design overestimated the influence of COO on consumer evaluations by 1/ creating an artificial design where this information cue was overemphasized by neglecting other information cues that are generally more meaningful to consumers such as price, brand, quality and store (Dawar and Parker, 1994); 2/ manipulating people by saying that the two glasses were manufactured in different countries. Country of origin is only one attribute among the many that characterize a product. A product possesses intrinsic attributes (size, color and quality, for example) as well as extrinsic attributes (such as price). COO is therefore only one criterion of evaluation (Erickson *et al.*, 1984). The influence of the COO evaluation cue is stronger where the consumer is unfamiliar with a product category. In this situation, the COO serves as a sort of proxy variable that facilitates evaluation in the absence of other criteria. It also serves to sum up diversified evaluation criteria within a sort of global evaluation (Morello, 1984). In the absence of

other information cues, the consumer may use the COO to evaluate the product. Therefore single-cue studies (presenting COO as the sole evaluation criterion to respondents) tend to over-estimate the impact of COO. Real world consumer decision making is based on multi-cue evaluation processes that take into account other product attributes, including the image of the store where it is purchased (Morganosky and Lazarde, 1987; Thorelli *et al.*, 1989). After Bilkey and Ness (1982) in an early review of the literature insisted that multi-cue COO research should be the rule rather than single-cue studies, most COO researchers tried to introduce some elements of a multi-attribute setting in their research design.

Originally, the concept of Country-of-Origin (COO) was considered as the *Made-in country* (for Nebenzahl *et al.*, 1997), or the COM, country-of-manufacture (Samiee, 1994), that is, the country which appeared on the “made-in” label, generally that country where final assembly of the good took place. Other concepts have progressively emerged in the COO literature, such as Country of design (COD) or DCI (*Designed-in country* for Nebenzahl *et al.*, 1997), which is the country where the product was designed and developed. With multinational production, there is a growing discrepancy between COMs and CODs. Moreover, global companies tend to manipulate brand names to suggest particular origins (COB, country-of-brand, effects). Thus **country-of-origin** tends more and more to be considered as that country which consumers typically associate with a product or brand, *irrespective of where it is actually manufactured*. Country image as such (CI) may also have a certain influence on consumer evaluation. For instance, a poor country image in terms of democracy may backfire on the image of goods made in that particular country (Martin and Eroglu, 1993).

The relevance gap

Apart from its academic relevance, we need also to assess whether COO research makes sense for business life: does it depict actual consumer attitudes and behavior? Does it provide managers with relevant analyses and recommendations for their marketing decisions? In order to assess possible discrepancies between COO research and the ‘real world’ (i.e. consumer decision making on the one hand, and corporate marketing strategies on the other hand) several issues have to be addressed.

- Do consumers still attach importance to the country where a product is manufactured?

- Is this piece of information still available and accessible to consumers?
- To what extent does brand image tend to blur origin labeling information?
- Are companies willing to promote origin labeling on their products?

Do consumers still attach importance to the country where a product is manufactured?

Despite a comment by Samiee (1994) that the relevance of COO for consumers should be better assessed, few studies have addressed the issue of the importance of origin information for consumers. Their findings tend to question the basic assumption underlying COO literature according to which consumers consider this information cue as an important and salient product attribute. Hugstad and Durr (1986) have shown that 60% of American consumers (70% under 35) consider as unimportant to assess where their purchases come from. However, this varies across product categories: 74% of the sampled consumers consider country of origin as relevant when buying cars, but only 20% for the purchase of tee-shirts. Hester and Huen (1987) have assessed the degree of knowledge of American and Canadian consumers as concerns the manufacturing origin of goods (clothes) just after they had been purchased. Only 25% of Canadian and 20% of American consumers were aware of the origin of their purchases. 65% of the Canadians and 52% of the Americans surveyed had no idea of the manufacturing origin. They clearly stated that they had no interest in being informed about where it was produced. Overall, only a small 11% of consumers were both concerned that their purchase was made in their own country and knew where the piece of cloth they just bought was manufactured. In a survey based on consumers electronics and a sample of French consumers only 35% knew the origin of the last purchase they had made and only 16% of them had a preference for the national manufacture at the same time (Usunier, 2002).

The gap between consumers' perception and behavior as concerns COO importance

The initial quasi-experimental design by Schooler and Wildt was followed by surveys where respondents were forced into cognitive elaborations with COO as single cue. It has resulted in a large over-estimation of COO's importance for consumer decision making. A meta-analysis of 52 COO studies by Peterson and Jolibert (1995) showed that the average effect of COO as concerns **quality and reliability perception** was .30 when considering only *single cue* studies. However, it

dropped to .16 for multi-attribute studies (*multiple cue*), with brand, price, store, etc. added to COO. The effect of national manufacturing origin on *purchase intentions*, which was .19 for single-cue studies with COO as sole attribute, collapsed to a low .03 when origin was considered in combination with other attributes. In another meta-analysis of COO research, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) have confirmed that COO has a much larger effect on perceived quality than on attitude toward the product or purchase intention. In the same vein, Ulgado and Lee (1998) show that American as well as Korean consumers use information related to key product attributes, rather than COO information, to form their purchase intentions. Consequently, there is now a body of evidence showing that consumers attach little importance to COO especially in final phases of the purchase cycle (purchase intention, actual buying behavior).

Is 'Made-in' information still available and easily accessible to consumers?

Origin labeling is a minor concern in domestic markets. Each company is free to indicate the origin provided it does not make false claims and does not infringe origin labeling for products such as wines. Some countries (e.g. the United States) have regulations concerning labels such as «made in the U.S.A.» or «An American Product» to avoid that foreign products are «disguised» into US products (Calderwood, 1999 ; Spezzano, 1999). In contrast to domestic markets, rules of origin are a key element of international trade regulations. It is necessary for custom officers to know where a good comes from to levy duties based on the certificate of origin. Certificates of origin are tightly linked to the origin label marked on the products (the "made in" tag). 40 or 50 years ago, the average level of custom duties was fairly high even between industrialized nations (about 40%), whereas after several rounds of Multilateral Trade Negotiations they have fallen to a historical low of about 3% between developed countries. This contributes to the decline of importance of the origin of goods.

Originally, the GATT treaty left each member state free to define its own rules of origin². This led to a great many rules for defining the origin of imported goods, which could be applied by the same country under different circumstances. After the Uruguay round in 1994 and the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1995, the global harmonization of rules of origin started. The freedom of each member state to define its own rules of origin was progressively curtailed.

According to WTO policy, rules of origin should no more be used as protectionist trade instruments; in particular, origin labeling should not discriminate against the exports of particular countries, nor should it create distortions in international trade flows. Origin labeling for countries with weaker images as manufacturing nations (which is the case of developing nations) is increasingly associated with discrimination against the exports of newly industrialized countries. Compulsory origin labeling on the product itself may therefore be considered a sort of non-tariff barrier. As a consequence, there is less and less marking of origin labels on products in world trade. Furthermore, multinational corporations do not support origin labeling on their manufactures. They prefer consumers to remain uninformed of the origin of goods since their system of global sourcing is partly based on low-cost manufacturing countries with weaker quality images.

Consequently 'country of origin' information is increasingly fuzzy and ambiguous in international trade. For customs officers, it is now enough to have the origin mentioned in custom documents rather than on the merchandise itself. Consequently, consumers see less and less the origin of products, especially when it is unfavorable. New, uninformative labels emerge such as *made in Europe*, or *made in Asia* as well as humorous origin labels such as *made in nowhere*, or complex indications such as «*assembled in...*» *from* «*US made (parts)*» (Samiee, 1994, p. 594). The made-in label progressively disappears as a systematic element of product labeling. Moreover, sales people in department stores, when asked for by customers, most often ignore the national origin of the household appliances or consumer electronics they sell.

Does the influence of brand image tend to blur the origin information?

There is a gulf between the world of 1968 and that of 2003. Companies have grown globally by delocalizing part of their manufacturing operations, following the international product life cycle (Vernon, 1966). As a result of the expansion of multinational firms, companies sell the same products under identical brand names in different countries throughout the world. These products actually have widely differing national manufacturing origins, generally not the COO of the parent company. Sony products, for example, can be just as easily 'Made in France', 'Made in

² Rules of origin also help establish international trade statistics and enable the implementation of a number of trade-

Germany' or 'Made in Thailand' as 'Made in Japan'. In this sense, one must increasingly distinguish between COO and country of manufacture (Samiee, 1994), especially when product design (COD) and brand name (COB) originate from the parent company's home country.

Consumer evaluations related to the brand name (and its COO, when it is identifiable) may differ from those related to the country of manufacture (Johansson and Thorelli, 1985). Han and Terpstra (1988, p. 244) sought to determine which of the two effects had more influence, and their conclusion was that: 'the sourcing country has greater effects on consumer evaluations of product quality than does the brand name'. However, Eroglu and Machleit (1989), concluded that consumers accord a similar influence to brand and country of manufacture respectively. Ahmed *et al.* (1994), in the case of industrial products, show that country of design is a more important cue in organizational purchase decisions than country of assembly and brand name. Many Multinational Companies de-emphasize manufacturing origin as much as possible and emphasize country-of-brand. For instance, Daimler-Benz emphasizes in its corporate advertising 'being at home in more than 200 countries'.

2 - COO: an attractive research domain for marketing academics

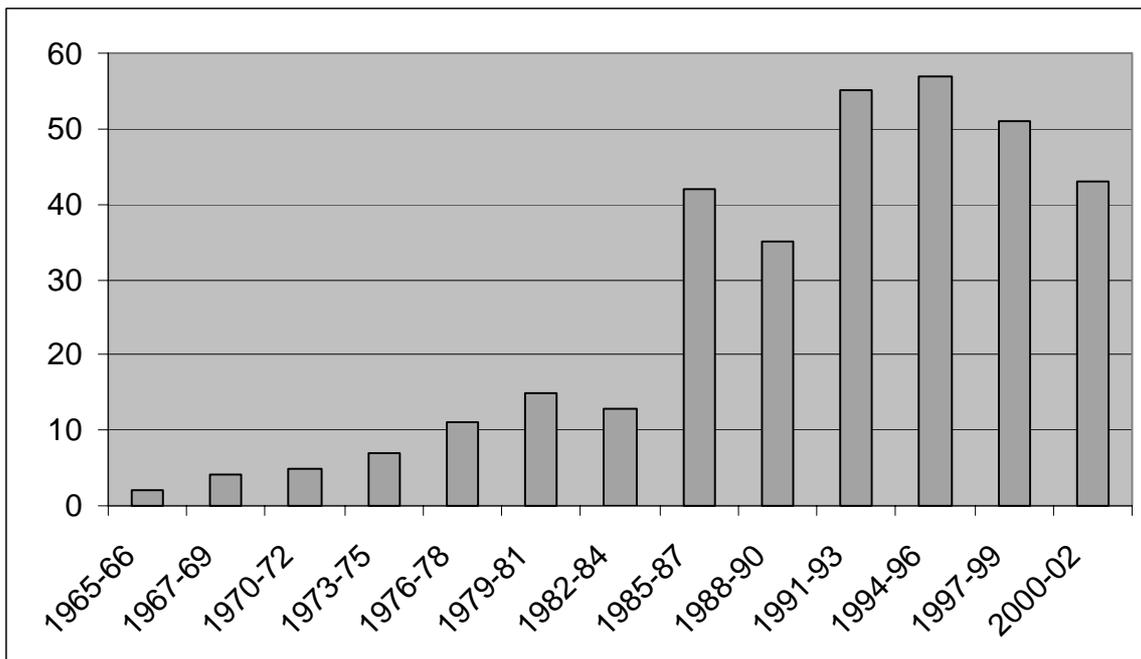
As scientific literature tends to be cumulative, COO has been an attractive area for marketing researchers (including myself, I must confess). Academics generally prefer to work on well-researched topics rather than to tackle unexplored research issues. The cumulative nature of the COO literature is evident in several reviews of literature (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993, Samiee, 1994; Nebenzahl *et al.*, 1997; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Jaffé and Nebenzahl, 2001). This makes COO an attractive area for marketing researchers, easy to access and to implement.

This may explain why COO research has been growing over a 35 year period, despite its decreasing relevance since the 1980s. In order to assess empirically the body of COO literature, an information search has been made on ABI-Inform which is the largest database for business studies. Only published studies in peer-reviewed publications have been retrieved over the period

related measure such as anti-dumping, safeguard clauses, bilateral trade agreement, and trade within a free-trade area.

1968-2002. The keywords used were ‘country of origin’, ‘country image’, ‘country of manufacture’, ‘country of brand’, and ‘made in label’. After eliminating duplicates and checking the content of the articles reviewed for relevance, a first base of 210 COO research articles was generated. A second database was created on the basis of the author’s extensive knowledge of this literature since 20 years, and the references cited in reviews of literature (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Samiee, 1994; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Nebenzahl et al. 1997, Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993; Jaffé and Nebenzahl, 2001). Overall, the merger of the two COO databases resulted in 340 COO articles (59 articles were common to the two databases). Figure 1 shows how this literature has grown over the survey period.³, especially in the 1990s, despite its diminishing relevance.

Figure 1: COO research publications



3 - A content analysis of COO research in marketing

³ The small apparent decline in the period 2000-2002 should be interpreted with caution. Early 2003, not all 2002 articles had been indexed by ABI-Inform. Thus this figure is slightly underestimated.

COO research is convenient: it offers a wide variety of research undertakings according to countries of survey, hypothetical countries of origin, product categories, attributes examined alongside COO, etc. Potential contributors may therefore claim for an original contribution as soon as they have enough differentiation from previous research, even when they simply replicate existing research designs and instruments.

Research propositions and methodology

In order to highlight elements of convenience in COO research, we have undertaken a content analysis of COO research over a significant period of time (more than 30 years). The propositions we want to test are the following:

- *Proposition 1:* Research is undertaken at home, that is, the countries where surveys are administered are generally the home country(ies) of the researcher(s).
- *Proposition 2:* Surveys are based on a large variety of hypothetical foreign origins, and there is substantially more variety in countries-of-origin than in countries-of-survey.
- *Proposition 3:* Respondents are generally students, less frequently consumers (general population) or professional buyers.

Our quantitative content analysis is based on 124 COO empirical articles which were published over a 35-year period. The early generation of coding categories has been prepared by the researcher himself. Later the content of coding categories has been discussed with two research assistants who were working on the research project. We started with a triple coding procedure for the first 40 articles, then proceeded with double coding. All disagreements were solved by discussing the most appropriate coding (Bardin, 1996, Muchielli, 1998).

The categories coded are authors' nationality, country(ies) of survey (where questionnaires were actually administered), countries of origin (hypothetical COOs used in survey items), product categories considered, respondents, the type of Country Image studied, and the kind of stimuli used in the research design. For each article coded, the journal, year, and the first 4 authors were

retrieved, as well as the nationality of each author (based on the alma mater mentioned in the article), the countries-of-origin considered (up to 15 countries), and the countries-of-survey (where the survey was actually administered, up to 4 countries). Three categories were created for subjects (either respondents of the survey in most cases or subjects in laboratory experiments in a small number of cases): students, general consumer population, and professional buyers (generally purchasing managers). Product categories were coded as 0 or 1 according to whether this product category had been explicitly mentioned in the article as a prototypical product proposed to respondents for evaluating COO image. The categories were those most often found in COO research: consumer electronics household appliances, cars, cameras and video, textile/apparel/shoes, industrial/capital goods, food and beverage, luxury goods, other non-food consumption goods, services (including leisure). Consumer durables were coded as 1 in categories 1 to 4.

The type of COO image surveyed by the paper was coded according to whether a particular research piece had considered this type of image or not. Type of images considered were: traditional broad country image, country of manufacture (MC or COM), country-of-design (DCI, COD), the image of brands as they relate to countries (country-of-brand, COB), country image as such (CI), that is, independently of the products manufactured in this particular country. Type of stimulus was coded 0 (not studied) or 1 (studied). The range of stimuli included price, quality, brand, warranty, store, style/design, and advertising. Perceived risk (Baumgartner and Jolibert, 1977; Hampton, 1977; Lumpkin *et al.*, 1985), and patriotism/consumer ethnocentrism were grouped in an “other stimuli” category.

Content analysis is an important research tool for the social sciences media scholars, and intercoder reliability is "near the heart of content analysis; if the coding is not reliable, the analysis cannot be trusted" (Singletary, 1994, p. 294). In our case, intercoder reliability (Kassarjian, 1977) ranged from to .81 to .99, with an average of .94 (the minimal mentioned in the literature level being .8). Categories with highest disagreement rates were Type of image (.89 on average with lowest at .83) and Stimuli (.88 on average with lowest at .81) indicating possibly lower reliability.

A first comment based on the findings of this content analysis relates to country-of-authorship. COO research is mostly U.S. literature. What drives marketing literature in the U.S. drives it world-wide. Table 1 presents the countries of authors on average, taking into account that papers may have several authors (the average is about 2). The retrieving of authorship may be slightly biased due to the impossibility of asking them their nationality. This slightly overstates the number of US authors since foreign researchers may have published when being in a US university as a PhD student or a faculty member. With this caveat in mind, the percentage of US authors among first authors is 55,65%. In fact, most authors, irrespective of their position in the list of authors, come from North America (66%, of which 54% from the U.S. and 12% from Canada). Comparatively, the U.S. are a survey country in only 36% of the studies (43% with Canada) and one of the COOs among other countries in a small 13% of the articles surveyed (16% with Canada). This suggests a literature where very often the researcher's own country is the importing country and local manufactures have to compete with foreign products which are cheaper and/or of better quality. It is not so much a literature based on exporting countries which try to investigate the image of their products abroad (as is the case for Korea which counts for 2,9% of authors and 3.8% of COOs).

Table 1: main national origin for authors of COO articles

Authors	Number	Frequency
U.S. authors as lead author	64	55,65%
U.S. authors total	131	53,91%
Most represented authors' countries	USA	53,91%
	Canada	12,35%
	France	9,05%
	UK	4,12%
	Korea	2,88%
	Total	82,30%

4 – Is COO research in marketing convenience research?

Where is research undertaken? Doing international research at home

Table 2 presents the countries where COO surveys were administered. The country of survey is that of the respondents (e.g. students, consumers, or professional buyers). Our research proposition is that COO researchers, for convenience purposes, tend to do research in their own country and generally with their own students. The percentage of authors who have undertaken COO research solely in their home country, that is, researcher's and survey countries are one and the same is 42%. While 42% of research studies take place 'at home only', 49% do it 'at home also', that is, they have undertaken COO research in joint collaborative work with foreign colleagues (who do not co-author the paper in all cases) and the countries of survey were the researchers' home countries. In the case of 'at home also', the original questionnaire is sent to foreign colleagues by mail with some guidance for the administration of the survey as well as for sampling and translation procedures. Quite often in practice, the team has met in conferences. Convenience as regards location is confirmed by the fact that authors have **not used** their own home country for survey purpose in only 9% of the surveyed articles (i.e. a non-convenience attitude). This supports proposition 1.

Table 2: countries of survey (most represented countries)

Country-of-survey	Overall Percentage
USA	36,31%
France	10,12%
UK	6,55%
Canada	6,55%
Japan	5,36%
Germany	4,76%

What are the origins considered?

Hypothetical locations and self-report data offer a large choice of possible manufacturing origins as evidenced by the full listing of countries-of-origin presented in Table 3. Overall there are 583 hypothetical countries of origin: many countries were considered several times, some of them in only one research piece. Hypothetical locations (i.e. origins considered in survey research) are more diversified than actual locations (i.e. where the questionnaire is administered): 62 different countries and regions of the world were used as possible countries where the goods were supposed to have been manufactured, versus 35 countries where surveys were administered. This abundance and diversity of hypothetical foreign origins is to a certain extent typical of low cost contributions to the knowledge base in the field. It is a simple line added to the text of a questionnaire. All studies reviewed use a questionnaire format, while a small minority of them (about 5%) uses at the same time advertising stimuli (fabricated advertisements showing the product and emphasizing different possible origins) before interviewing subjects with a traditional COO questionnaire. The data is collected on the basis of self-report and the issue of familiarity of the local respondents with the product, countries and manufacturing origins mentioned in the research instrument is rarely, if ever, questioned. What about Finnish respondents elaborating about French household appliances that they may never have seen in a store or in their countrymen's homes?

Table 3 – countries-of-origin considered

USA	76	13,04%	Belgium	5	0,86%	Honduras	2	0,34%
Japan	75	12,86%	Poland	5	0,86%	Iran	2	0,34%
Germany	61	10,46%	China	5	0,86%	N. America	2	0,34%
France	41	7,03%	South Amer.	5	0,86%	Nigeria	2	0,34%
UK	31	5,32%	Greece	4	0,69%	Egypt	2	0,34%
Italy	25	4,29%	Philippines	4	0,69%	Other countries	2	0,34%
Korea	22	3,77%	Asia	4	0,69%	Finland	1	0,17%
Mexico	20	3,43%	Africa	4	0,69%	Norway	1	0,17%
Taiwan	17	2,92%	Australia	4	0,69%	Malaysia	1	0,17%
Canada	16	2,74%	Czeckoslov.	4	0,69%	Scandinavia	1	0,17%
India	13	2,23%	Turkey	3	0,51%	Romania	1	0,17%
Russia	13	2,23%	Austria	3	0,51%	Chile	1	0,17%
Sweden	12	2,06%	Indonesia	3	0,51%	Cuba	1	0,17%
Brazil	12	2,06%	Argentina	3	0,51%	Venezuela	1	0,17%
Netherlands	10	1,72%	El Salvador	3	0,51%	Haiti	1	0,17%
Hong-Kong	9	1,54%	Israel	3	0,51%	Guatemala	1	0,17%
Switzerland	7	1,20%	Morocco	3	0,51%	Pakistan	1	0,17%

Spain	6	1,03%	Ireland	2	0,34%	Algeria	1	0,17%
Singapore	6	1,03%	Danemark	2	0,34%	Costa Rica	1	0,17%
Hungary	6	1,03%	Yugoslavia	2	0,34%	New Zealand	1	0,17%
Europe	6	1,03%	Thailand	2	0,34%			

Subjects surveyed: convenience research is not confirmed

Table 4 presents the data on the type of respondents. Our expectation was that student samples would account for a majority of the samples used since it is clearly the most convenient. Two types of student populations can be used, either the researcher's own students or their foreign colleagues' students. Cross-border cooperation in management research (including marketing) are quite frequent. However, among the possible informants, students samples account for a mere 22.6% (only 12.7% when taking into account sample size), the general consumer population accounts for 56.5% (often, students are the interviewers . . . they must learn!) and 73% when taking into account sample size. Professional buyers account for 20,9% (14.3% when taking into account sample size) and they are interviewed about industrial goods. It seems that convenience as concerns the sampling unit is somewhat curtailed by the need for a certain degree of 'academic decency.' Strong criticisms have been voiced in the 70s and 80s about researchers studying the social psychology of 20 to 25 years students that do not reflect the attitudes of the general population. This applies particularly well to marketing issues. As marketing academics often have a background as a psychologist or a social psychologist, this seems to have prevented them from being too openly convenience-oriented. Proposition 3 is not supported.

Table 4 – Informants

Number of samples according to survey respondents	absolute	%age
Students	26	22,61%
Consumers	65	56,52%
Professional buyers	24	20,87%

Total number of respondents based on sample size	52589	
Students	6662	12,67%
Consumers	38433	73,08%
Professional buyers	7494	14,25%

5 - The besieged fortress scenario

When reading these articles, a rather dominant picture emerges whereby manufactures of developed industrial nations are challenged by newly industrialized nations offering more competitive prices. This started in the 70s with Nagashima's studies (1970, 1977) and Kamins and Nagashima, (1995) which involved the image of Japanese product, and was later transferred to Korea (Khera, 1986). One of the key issues for researchers is to reassure their western readers about a favorable image differential compensating for an unfavorable price differential. For instance, Johansson and Nebenzahl (1986) demonstrated that a change in the place of car production (e.g. for Chevrolet, Buick, Honda or Mazda) to West Germany is always positively perceived by American consumers. On the other hand, the status and quality image of these makes have suffered when a change has been envisioned in the place of their production to a country where low salaries are paid (e.g. Mexico, South Korea or the Philippines). This change clearly resulted in a loss of image in terms of social status and quality-price ratio. Johansson and Nebenzahl (1986, p. 120) determined the levels of monetary discounts (dollar values) at which consumers were prepared to purchase products from a 'less favourable' COO. They were, for example, willing to buy a Buick manufactured in the United States for \$10,258 rather than pay \$7,351 for the same car made in the Philippines.

We call this emergent picture, 'the besieged fortress scenario'. It is relative to particular product categories; it basically emphasizes price versus quality image, and it prominently relates to the competitive upsurge of Asian exports in the 70s and 80s. This scenario entails the following propositions:

- *Proposition 4*: Product categories do not cover the whole spectrum. Cars, consumers electronics, and clothing are the most frequently cited categories.
- *Proposition 5*: The conceptual framework privileges a simple price-quality framework even though some additional stimuli and information cues may be considered at times.
- *Proposition 6*: The dominant scenario is related to the emergence of East-Asian competitive exports over the last 30 years which is surely the most significant challenge experienced by western industrial countries over this period.

Product categories considered: the besieged fortress scenario(1)

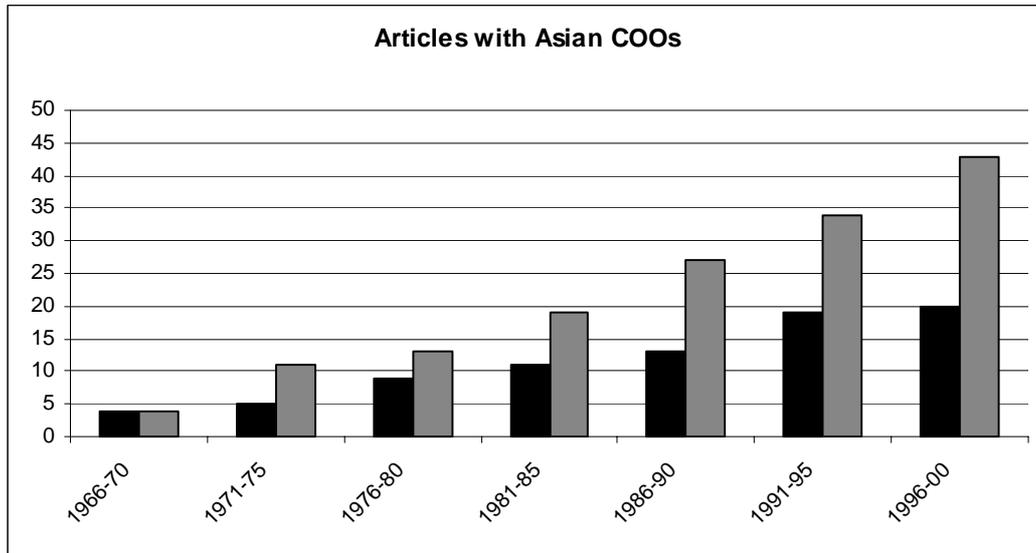
Table 5 presents the data by product category. Most research findings in COO studies are in fact contingent on the product category(ies) considered. There is an over-representation of a basic competitive scenario of international trade: in consumer electronics, cars, and textile and apparel, traditional western (US and European) products have been challenged by Asian-made products, first by Japanese makes, then by Korean brands and nowadays by many other Asian countries. The percentage of articles that consider cars, or consumer electronics or textile/apparel/shoes reaches more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the articles which mentioned product categories (115). Furthermore, they are the three most frequently cited product categories.

Table 5 – product categories considered

Consumer electronics	36	31,30%
Cars	35	30,43%
Textile/apparel/shoes (T/A/S)	34	29,57%
Non-food Consumer goods	27	23,48%
Food & Beverage	25	21,74%
Industrial Goods	22	19,13%
Cameras and Video	18	15,65%
Household Appliances	14	12,17%
Luxury goods	5	4,35%
Services, etc..	4	3,48%
Consumer electronics or Cars or T/A/S	89	77,4%

When looking at the case of Asian countries we see in figure 2 that there is a constant increase in the number of Asian countries considered as COOs (left bar for articles, right bar for total number of Asian COOs).

Figure 2



Low conceptual complexity

Traditional COO is present in 95% of the articles surveyed while COM (country of manufacture) is considered in 23,5% and COD (country of design) in only 9% of the articles (Table 6). Price and quality are considered simultaneously in 59% of the articles surveyed. As evidenced by the figures in table 6, the dominant scenario is that of cars, consumer electronics or apparel, with East-Asian countries (e.g. China, Japan, Korea) as competitive origins (i.e. about half of the articles with identified product categories). The type of image studied shows that, because of growing conceptual complexity in terms of COM, COB, COD, and CI, a general COO model was out of reach. Moreover there has been an increasing discrepancy between complexity due to the effect of brand and product design, and the need for empirical simplicity. As a result despite early comments on the need to distinguish between COO, COM, COD, and COB only few studies have been keen enough to develop complex research designs involving both multiple product attributes and different types of country images.

Table 6 – sophistication in research issues

Image/Stimuli	Absolute	%age
Traditional country-of-origin	109	94,78%
COM	27	23,48%
COD	10	8,70%
Country of Brand	28	24,35%
Country Image	18	15,65%
Price	78	67,83%
Quality	86	74,78%
Brand	54	46,96%
Warranty	38	33,04%
Store	24	20,87%
Design	54	46,96%
Advertising	24	20,87%
ethnocentrism, risk...	15	13,04%
price and quality	68	59,13%
no price and no quality	19	16,52%

The besieged fortress scenario(2): explaining citation of countries as COOs by trade-related variables

In the besieged fortress scenario, old industrial nations are challenged by newly industrialized countries whose exports are price-competitive, yet supposed to have a poor quality image. To test whether this is consistent with our data, we have regressed the number of citations of a particular country as COO over a number of external trade-related variables as shown in Table 7. The dependent variable, CIT/EXP, is the number of citations of a country as country of origin divided

by its share in world exports 1999 (to account for country size). Size effects can be accounted for by four different independent variables: the total Value of Exports for a nation (EXP), its Share of World Exports (SWE), as well the total Value of its Imports, and its Share of World Imports (SWI). Furthermore, we hypothesize that the most frequently cited nations will be those which tend to experience a positive disbalance in their balance of trade. If COO studies are prominently concerned with challenged imports, we should see statistical significance on the side of import and trade-balance rather than export-related variables. The other possible independent variables are Absolute balance (AB), that is, the share of world exports minus the share of world imports, and RB, the relative balance of trade ($RB = (SWE - SWI) / (SWE + SWI)$). A variable related to the Nationality of authors (NAT) was also introduced to account for possible ethnocentric biases in the choice of countries considered as possible COOs. In a first run of multiple regression of CIT/EXP as endogenous with imports, AB, RB, and NAT as possible explanatory variables only RB appears as a significant factor explaining the choice of countries as COOs ($p < .05$). We further dropped AB and NAT, and introduced export and import related variables alongside with relative balance. The absolute number of citations is taken as the independent variable since Import and Export-related variables can account for country size in world trade. The results are shown in table 7.

Table 7: Regression of the number of citations as a country-of-origin (NB_CITATIONS) on external trade-related indicators

NB_CITATIONS	B	Stand. Dev. B	T (34)	P threshold
Intercept	-1.193	1.432	-.833	.41 (NS)
Value of Exports	-.625	.616	-1.015	.32 (NS)
Share of World Exports	44.95	34.95	1.286	.21 (NS)
Value of Imports	.254	.0476	5.326	.000006
Share of World Imports	-17.79	3.33	-5.342	.000006
Relative Balance of Trade	16.45	7.798	2.109	.042

$$R = .942 - R^2 = .887 ; \text{adjusted } R^2 = .871$$

$$F(5.34) = 53.651 \text{ } p < .00000 ; \text{St. Err of the Estimation: } 6.774$$

Table 7 shows that imports dominate over exports as explanatory variable of a country's citation as COO. The absolute value of the imports of a particular country very significantly explain its being considered as a possible country-of-origin. The relative position of countries in world imports negatively influences their probability of being considered as possible countries of origin. The trade balance indicator positively influences the likelihood that a country will be considered as a manufacturing origin worth of being included in the reference set. Overall, this depicts three different effects on the choice of countries-of-origin by marketing researchers :

- An absolute scale effect, related to the size of imports, rather than exports: the larger the imports of a country, the more likely it is to be included in the reference set in comparison with foreign competitive origins.
- A relative scale effect in the opposite direction: the greater the share of world imports, the less likely it is that a country will be included in the reference set of competitive origins.
- An effect related to the strength of a country as an export manufacturing source: countries with a large trade surplus are more likely to be included in the reference set in as much as they compete with established origins.

In conclusion, COO research conveys a rather simple global message which comes after the event (the rise of Asian manufactures and the relative decline of Western industrial nations), rather than before. Furthermore, COO research describes, rather than explains, changes in the competitiveness of nations as they seem to be perceived by consumers through the filter offered by marketing researchers. Let us now turn to **why** marketing researchers pursue such a research undertaking when the topic is of minor importance to consumers and to companies as well, and when the kind of market situations described (export competition) does not correspond any longer to the global market of the 21st century where sourcing is made wherever it is the most competitive, and generally irrespective of COM image.

6 - Convenience research: the cheap dynamics of academic professionalism

The relevance gap can be explained by what we call 'convenience research'. But convenience is not the only reason for such a gap. The extreme division of labor in the academic world induces a fragmented view of issues which is not conducive to a true understanding of the phenomenon under study. When this phenomenon is composed of interrelated issues that would require a cross-disciplinary approach, research approaches that focus on too narrowly defined paradigms may lead to relevance gaps. A way out of the relevance gap, would be to increase the frequency of questioning about the continued relevance of the research topic which has been studied over more than 30 years. In other terms, rather than indefinitely relying on 1968 relevance, it makes sense to regularly reassess whether a research topic is still relevant. In this respect, a lack of falsificationist concern is evident in the COO literature. This calls into question the ritual side of academic research. Rather than questioning the validity of the research topic (at the risk of being critical) it is socially more acceptable for academics to work on the basis of replication with (some) extension. Finally, a last possible reason for the relevance gap, may be the reward and sanction system within the academic community.

A definition of convenience research

The academic context of convenience research is that of professionals that must achieve rather quickly, in comparison to what is necessary for full scale research undertakings as in the natural sciences. Convenience research is undertaken with limited budgets. This precludes research tracks isolated from main-stream research that are more difficult to develop and require larger resources. Therefore, a key issue is the progressive building of a consensus through conferences, academic associations, PhD dissertation committees, etc. on what is mainstream research. COO is mainstream research in marketing and consumer behavior because it has been accepted as such by the research community in the field.

The level of relevance must be sufficient but it is not a major issue. It is generally assessed at face value or on the base of citing important papers that have earlier considered the topic as relevant.

In convenience research, feasibility is more important than relevance, given small budgets and little time for research. Average faculty members teach, administer programs, select students, participate in faculty life, etc. so that, except in major schools that emphasize top publications, research is not their main task. Though it remains an important one since higher education cannot be divorced from academic research. For standard academics, it must always so appear that they are some kind of ‘researchers-only’ (even though they are ‘researchers-also’). The final criterion for hiring and promotion is research publications, teaching excellence being only a secondary criterion, and a necessary but not sufficient condition for career tracks.

Convenience research takes place preferably ‘at home’ (e.g. in proximate and familiar settings), with easily controllable subjects for data collection purposes (e.g. ‘my students’). It is based on fashionable topics in terms of managerial implications. Convenience research is based on ‘in the press’, up-to-date and fashionable topics that may not resist the test of time, but are presently considered as key research issues. It is simple from a conceptual point of view. The data is collected overwhelmingly by the means of self-report about hypothetical questions (survey research with close-end questions). At the end of the process, convenience research produces ‘conferencable’ papers and research findings that are socially acceptable within the research community (in our case, marketing and consumer research). The research design must be easy to find in the existing literature, easy to replicate with minor modifications, thus excluding a change in the research instrument itself. Convenience research is a little bit like convenience food: easy to prepare, looking like the real recipe, and still reasonably tasty. Convenience research results in cumulative scientific findings that provide the academic system with outputs which are needed for it to effectively work from a social and professional point-of-view. However, beyond formal achievements, content relevance should be more critically assessed.

COO research in marketing as convenience research

One may wonder why the marketing literature is so replete with a topic which is now inconsequential for the two key actors of markets, consumers and marketers. A reason is that the topic appeared as salient based on a few anecdotes, often used to start research papers and suggest

relevance on the base of saliency . Khanna (1986), for instance, recounts that Indian consumers, when they examined color TV sets assembled in India, opened them to make sure that essential components were imported from countries with a high quality manufacturing reputation and not from other origins, much less favorable in their view. However, very few consumers world-wide take apart a TV set they are willing to buy. It is likely that such a behavior (i.e. checking the origin of TV parts by destructive quality control) would generate negative reactions from the store personnel.

The influence of the country of origin of goods on consumer evaluations is well suited to academic achievements in marketing: it provides an opportunity for the academic study of consumer behavior without much concern for business implications. It offers indeed a number of methodological conveniences, such as the use of student samples, taken directly in one's own classes or by asking students to interview the general population against some grading credit. As we have seen above, COO researchers are limited in their convenience orientation as concerns the use of students samples by academic decency. Furthermore, there exists many published research instruments which can be used at the expense of a simple citation while changing only the countries of origin, the product categories surveyed or the type of stimuli (used in combination with COOs to avoid a criticizable single-cue approach). Foreign colleagues are key resources in the process: collecting data through cross-national samples of students requires little or no research budget, making it an ideal undertaking for those with limited research funding.

Since the COO effect has been «proven» in 1968 by Schooler and Wildt, no real need has been perceived to question its very existence. The COO literature has prudently avoided empirical studies that aimed at assessing COO's relevance to either consumers or companies. The two critical North American papers (Hugstad and Durr, 1986 and Hester and Huen, 1987) were conference papers and, to the best of my knowledge, they were never published in journals, whatever their ranking. An overwhelming proportion of the subsequent COO studies were undertaken on the basis of survey data with close-end questions which focused the respondent's mind on the issue of manufacturing origins. This has led to a gross overestimation of the effect of

COOs on consumer behavior (see Peterson and Jolibert, 1995) and of its effect on the competitive advantage of nations (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999).

Research in marketing may at times generate artificial knowledge as it is often based on self-reported data preframed by a questionnaire which reflects the researcher's worldviews, not the respondent's concerns. Self-report variables based on perceptual cues are indeed very far from observed behavior and may not even reflect true consumer attitudes. The absence of other variables such as price or warranty in the early single cue studies, produced research findings that would probably have been disconfirmed by observing and interviewing consumers openly, in natural settings where the respondents' minds were not activated towards the COO information cue by the survey questions.

The piecemeal logic of academia: relevance should be heightened by cross-disciplinary work

Do marketing researchers cover enough aspects of the topic to produce meaningful analyses for international marketing decisions makers? The investigation of the full COO issue is partial, due to the high level of specialization in the academic world. The divide between international marketing (a business discipline) and international trade (an economics discipline) is fairly radical. Academics in the two fields do not work in the same buildings; they do not attend the same conferences, and they do not publish in the same journals. Additionally, they rarely look at each other's academic elaborations. Rules of origin, and therefore the issue of the visibility of made-in labels, are under the auspices of international trade specialists, whereas the issue of its influence on consumer evaluations is the concern of international marketing specialists. They have little opportunities for communication, little in common as concerns their background (economists versus psychologists), and little intellectual affinities. As a result, partial pictures of the origin issue are never assembled within a larger picture that could provide more relevant and accurate knowledge.

Is the publishing imperative conducive to knowledge relevance?

A key issue is the publish or perish system: COO research may be a convenient way to get published in order to avoid perishing. The journals and academic publications in marketing have largely developed over the period under survey, that is, over 35 years. Early in the period, only 5 academic journals existed in marketing, especially the *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research*. Despite having the largest publishing history⁴, these top journals have never published much of COO research: only 6 articles for the *Journal of Marketing* and 13 articles for the *Journal of Marketing Research* (out of 340 articles). In contrast, some second-tier or third-tier journals later established a strong record of COO publications. *International Marketing Review* (MCB University Press) has published 36 COO studies and the *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* (Haworth Press) has released 32 COO studies over a much shorter period than both *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research*.

To be fair, the top marketing journals together with the *Journal of International Business Studies* (23 articles) have published COO studies that have some significant consequences for the understanding of consumer behavior and for research methods in marketing, even if they are of little influence on international marketing management. Despite the lack of managerial relevance, the top journals have published the most significant pieces, those that had consequences in conceptual terms, as well the reviews which contained critical questions such as Samiee (1994) or Peterson and Jolibert (1995). Spillovers cannot be neglected but they are essentially for internal use by marketing academics. Fine-grained cognitive issues such as how COO works in terms of consumer evaluations as a halo or a summary effects (Johansson et al., 1985 ; Han, 1990), the relative weight of different attributes in consumer decision making, categorization processes and product typicality, have advanced through studies on country of origin. Similarly, the understanding of consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987), consumer patriotism (Han, 1988) and the assessment of the inefficiency of 'Buy-National' campaigns (Ettenson and Gaeth, 1988; Fenwick and Wright, 2000) have progressed through COO research.

In the picture that emerges from the analysis of academic journals where COO research has been published, two journal publishers have been highly active in creating publication outlets for convenience researchers: a British publisher of second-tier journals, MCB University Press (*International Marketing Review*, *European Journal of Marketing*) and an American publisher of mainly third-tier journals, Haworth Press (*Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, *Journal of Global Marketing*, *Journal of Euro- Marketing*, *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*). Most of the papers published in these journals were, with few exceptions, replications with extensions, without any real conceptual or critical contribution. This highlights a major mistake of ‘smaller journal’ publishers. They tend to publish cheap (and lagged) imitations of top-tier journals articles. Doing this, they miss the opportunity to do ‘other research’ by being more critical, more concerned with relevance, and more original than mainstream top-tier journals actually are. What they do mostly is to provide additional publication outlets where authors rejected in top-tier journals important can publish. Doing this, they participate to the big ‘ranking business’ in academia. Teachers rank students, students rank teachers, academics are ranked according to the ranking of the journals where they publish, universities are ranked according to the rankings of their faculty members, and so on. Ranking people and institutions is actually useful to help assess some aspects of quality in education and research. Rankings may also be used to allocate resources where it is supposed to be the most productive. However, the ranking of intellectual production is more debatable.

This kind of sport competition oriented regulation of society cannot fully apply to the production of knowledge. A key ingredient of sports is that every competitor has to follow some strict rules and pre-set standards as to how they are going to compete against each other. The setting is standard and every competitor has to comply with the rules. People are trained to achieve their best within a narrowly defined framework. However respectable, this has little to do with some key requirements for the production of knowledge, such as the need for exploring new research avenues, for critical views, for open debate, and for thought-provoking contributions which typically break the rules of the game (a taboo in sports competitions).

⁴ For instance, the first issue of the *Journal of Marketing Research* appeared in 1964 while the first issue of the

Conclusion

Consequences of COO research are fairly small as concerns marketing management, since companies, especially multinational corporations, can manipulate consumer evaluations either by avoiding to display a made in label when it would be unfavorable or by using brand names which suggest a favorable national origin (Leclerc et al., 1994). On the mere basis of common sense, the way companies should act is rather straightforward and it is perfectly legal. But this may not matter . . . if academic research is mainly for internal use, that is, for the hiring, promotion and careers of faculty members, then relevance is a minor issue. Obviously (and fortunately), our conclusion is based on a single case study and may not apply to other fields of research in marketing and management. Let us hope that it is the case.

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