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Author(s): Gregory R. Elliott and Ross C. Cameron

Source: *Journal of International Marketing*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994), pp. 49-62

Published by: [American Marketing Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25048542>

Accessed: 14/10/2013 06:19

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# Consumer Perception of Product Quality and the Country-of-Origin Effect<sup>1</sup>

*Consumer attitudes to local and foreign products and the likely "country-of-origin" effect in "Buy Local" and "Made In . . ." campaigns are surveyed. First, the importance of country of origin in relation to other product attributes is considered. Second, country of origin is assessed as a surrogate indicator of product quality. Third, the likely effect of country of origin on consumer choice across a range of product categories is studied with brand name and price held constant.*

*Across the product categories studied, respondents rated country of origin as significantly less important as a choice determinant than product quality and price. In addition, clear country-of-origin effects are identified. Consumers rate products as being of significantly different quality when the only variation between products is stated country of origin. Further, consumers express a marked preference for locally made products when price, technical features, and brand name are invariant, and where the locally made product is perceived to be superior or, at least, not significantly inferior to an overseas-made product. Where the locally made product is perceived to be of inferior quality to the imported product, consumers generally prefer an imported product.*

*Thus, while consumers rate country of origin after product quality and price, when these other factors are equivalent, the fact that the product is promoted as locally made is a positive influence on product choice.*

Encouragement of consumers to "buy local" has long been practiced by governments. In recent times this goal has assumed increasing prominence as many long-established industries in the developed economies come under threat from products manufactured in "protected" economies, trade blocs, and/or newly industrialized nations. In Australia, threats to many long-established manufacturing industries have recently emerged, *inter alia*, from the EC, the United States (in retaliation over the tactics of the EC), and the low-cost economies of South America. These are additional to the long-standing threat from the booming ASEAN economies. The response in Australia, instigated or endorsed by government, has been the adoption of numerous "Buy Australian" campaigns, which date from 1923 when the *Australian Natives Association* introduced a "Made in Australia" Week (Conley 1986).

## ABSTRACT

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**Gregory R. Elliott**  
**Ross C. Cameron**

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*Submitted August 1992  
Revised July 1993  
November 1993*

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© *Journal of International Marketing*  
Vol. 2, No. 2, 1994, pp. 49–62  
ISSN 1069-031X

Typically the objective of “buy local” campaigns is to encourage consumers to purchase locally made products in preference to imported goods. While the objectives of such campaigns enjoy widespread community and government support, the actual impact on purchasing behavior and as a result in favorably impacting on the country’s balance of trade, often remain matters for conjecture.

This article explores the impact of such campaigns on consumers’ purchase predispositions and purchase preferences across a range of structured purchase scenarios. The obvious need to measure the impact on consumers’ purchase behaviors is beyond the present scope.

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## COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECTS

The place of manufacture of products and its effect on consumer preferences has long been discussed in the marketing and international business literature as “country affiliation” (Chao 1989), but more generally under the rubric of the “country-of-origin effects” (COE).

COE have been broadly defined as “*any influence, positive or negative, that the country of manufacture might have on the consumer’s choice processes or subsequent behavior*” (Samiee 1987). Concerned that COE constituted invisible or informal barriers to trade, Schooler (1965) was the first to identify product bias on the basis of national origin in his seminal work. Since then, COE have been identified in numerous consumer studies in many different countries (Reier-son 1967; Nagashima 1977; Baumgartner and Jolibert 1977); across nations at various stages of economic development (Gaedeke 1973; White and Cundiff 1978; Morello 1984; Cordell 1985; Papadopoulos et al. 1990); and in industrial purchasing (Hakansson and Wootz 1975; White and Cundiff 1978).

On the other hand, a number of studies have argued that COE do not exist, or that if they do, they are of only minor significance in the wide array of influences on the purchase decision. Johansson et al. (1985), Samiee (1987), Olson and Jacoby (1972), and Erikson et al. (1984) all cast doubt on the significance of COE. There is evidence that COE can have negative impacts on consumer brand awareness and choice (Fields 1990). However, the majority of published studies support the assertion that COE do exist, although the magnitude and the mechanism of influence remains unresolved.

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## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AS AN INFORMATION CUE

A major difficulty pervading this field of research is to isolate the impact of COE independent of all the other information cues impinging on consumer decision making. One can group the range of information cues to which the consumer is exposed into those which are intrinsic to the product (such as design, taste, and performance), and those that are *extrinsic*

(such as price, brand name, packaging, and warranties). Since it may be difficult to interpret intrinsic cues prior to purchase, the consumer will often resort to using extrinsic cues as the basis on which to make inferences regarding the product. Country of origin is an extrinsic informational cue. Consumers display a tendency to rely upon extrinsic cues where they have little prior knowledge of the product (Cattin et al. 1982) as frequently may be the case with foreign-made products. An important issue for this research, as with COE research generally, is the isolation of the influence of COE from the other extrinsic and from intrinsic cues.

In the present context, the influence of the country-of-origin effect on perceived risk, on perceived quality, on information processing (Johansson 1989), and on ultimate purchasing behavior are relevant. Both Hampton (1977) and Baumgartner and Jolibert (1977) found an increase in perceived risk for products made abroad. Gaedeke (1973) and White and Cundiff (1978) found significant relationships between country of origin and perceived quality. Hugstad and Durr (1986) found that a significant proportion of consumers were interested in country-of-origin information before making purchases, and Hong and Wyer (1989) found that COE have some bearing on consumers' product interest and lead them to think more extensively about product information and its evaluation implications. Thorelli et al. (1989) also considered the roles of country of origin, product warranties, and store image as they relate to product evaluations.

The link between the broad COE literature and the "Made In . . ." campaigns lies in the suggested bias that may arise in the consumers' evaluations of products from various countries, and specifically in the suggested bias in favor of home-country products (Modic 1990). The published research in this area is not, however, unequivocal. For example, Johansson et al. (1985) and Papadopoulos et al. (1987) found little evidence of such bias. In contrast, studies by Reiersen (1967), Gaedeke (1973), Baumgartner and Jolibert (1977), Hampton (1977), and Cordell (1985) support the proposition. Other studies suggest a strong tendency for consumers in more developed countries to evaluate their own products more favorably than do foreigners (Nagashima 1970, 1977; Lillis and Narayana 1974; Bannister and Saunders 1978; Bilkey and Nes 1982; Toyne and Walters 1989).

Generally, it has been established that products made in different, more developed countries are not all evaluated equally (Schooler 1965 and 1971; Schooler and Wildt 1968; Tongberg 1972; Lillis and Narayana 1974; Hampton 1977). Further it is suggested that a systematic bias exists since there is a positive correlation between product evaluations and the level of economic development of the country of origin

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## HOME COUNTRY BIAS AND THE HIERARCHY OF BIAS

(Gaedeke 1973; Wang and Lamb 1983; Toyne and Walters 1989). Results of this study, reported later in this article, bear directly on this question.

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## GENERAL NATIONAL PRODUCT EVALUATIONS AND SPECIFIC PRODUCT EVALUATIONS

Products in general, both product classes and specific product items, have different images deriving from their country of origin (Morello 1984; Erickson et al. 1984; Hooley et al. 1988). Consumers often display a bias in their overall evaluations of a country's products regarded collectively (Reiersen 1967; Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Gaedeke 1973; Lillis and Narayana 1974; Nagashima 1970 and 1977; Bannister and Saunders 1978). This also holds for general classes of products (Nagashima 1970 and 1977; Gaedeke 1973; and Reiersen 1975). Hugstad and Durr (1986) found that sensitivity to country of origin varies by product category but is highest for durable goods.

However, there is also evidence of differences between general national product evaluations and specific product evaluations. Schooler and Wildt (1968) found differences in evaluations of products similar in every respect save their country-of-origin label—an issue further explored later in this discussion. Han and Terpstra (1988) warned, however, that generalization of COE should be treated with caution, as consumers do not perceive all foreign products or all products from a given country as being the same. This is supported by Schooler (1971), Tongberg (1972), Hampton (1977), White and Cundiff (1978) and Hong and Wyer (1989). Etzel and Walker (1974) noted the relevance of this to marketers who promote their products on the basis of general national product attitudes, and urged caution as specific product evaluations appeared more relevant.

It should also be recognized that these biases in perception may be transient and may be influenced by communications and promotion such as a "Buy Local" campaign (Perry et al. 1976), or may reflect changes in the intrinsic product cues (Reiersen 1967; Nagashima 1970 and 1977; Samiee 1987; Cordell 1989). In addition, the issue of perception of country of origin is further clouded by the emergent phenomenon of hybrid or binational products, especially automobiles (Ettenson and Gaeth 1991).

A common difficulty when studying consumer information processing and decision making is that of identifying the individual contribution of any single attribute in a decision that is based on the consideration of a complex range of attributes and, further, where the decision itself may be based on equally complex decision rules. The evaluation of the individual contribution of single attributes must adequately reflect the complexity of consumer decision making. At the same time, the managerial interest in consumer decision making naturally focuses on an assessment of the contribu-

tion to that decision making which is made by the “control-  
lable” factors or attributes—the marketing mix inputs.

The research discussed herein is part of a broader study designed to assess the impact of the current “Australian Made” promotional campaign. An attempt was made to simulate the consumer’s decision making and to examine the influence of various “extrinsic” information cues (product categories, brand names, price, and country of origin) and, in particular, to isolate the effects of country of origin on perceptions and judgments of “intrinsic” product quality and product choice.

A professionally conducted shopping mall intercept survey of 401 respondents was conducted “face-to-face” across the Melbourne metropolitan area during June 1990. Respondents, all over 18 years of age, were selected from 20 shopping malls to provide a wide socioeconomic spread.

In addition to a range of questions that examined awareness, recall of, and attitudes toward the “Australian Made” campaign, the survey examined the following issues:

- the importance of country of origin relative to other product attributes
- whether country of origin can serve as a surrogate indicator of product quality, and
- the relationship between country of origin and purchase intentions, under the restrictive assumption that other product attributes (product features, brand name, and price) are equal.

Respondents were asked to rank six product attributes—quality of manufacture, price, style/appearance, country of origin, brand name, and technical advancement/innovativeness—in order of importance across a range of six product categories (computers, cars, tires, dishwashers, shoes, and jam). Table 1 shows the mean importance rankings, with highest ranking as 1, and the lowest as 6.

Product	Quality of Manufacture	Price	Style/ Appearance	Country of Origin	Brand Name	Advanced Innovative
Tires	1.9	2.7	5.2	4.3	3.5	3.4
Dishwasher	2.2	2.9	4.4	4.3	3.9	3.4
Jam	2.3	2.6	4.0	3.4	3.2	5.6
Car	2.4	2.8	3.6	4.3	4.2	3.6
Shoes	2.4	2.7	1.9	4.3	4.2	5.4
Computer	2.5	3.1	5.1	4.4	3.7	2.4

1 = High, 6 = Low, n = 401  
Kendall’s Coefficient of Concordance (W) = .16

Using Kendall’s Coefficient of Concordance (Siegel and Castellan 1988) these rankings are shown to be not signifi-

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## THE PRESENT STUDY

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Table 1.  
Product Attribute Mean  
Importance Rankings



cantly different, especially those for “style” ( $R = 24.2$ ), “country of origin” ( $R = 25.0$ ), “brand name” ( $R = 22.7$ ), and “advanced, innovative” ( $R = 24.0$ ), although “quality of manufacture” ( $R = 13.7$ ), and “price” ( $R = 16.8$ ) are consistently ranked more highly. For each of the range of products studied, “country of origin” ranked lowest of these six product attributes.

Thus, as can be seen, when stated in non-specific terms, “country of origin” is generally ranked as being of significantly lower importance than “quality of manufacture” and “price.” This finding generally accords with past research (Johansson 1985; Samiee 1987; Olson and Jacoby 1972; Erikson et al. 1984). Further, this result supports the practical contention that encouraging people to purchase locally made products is likely to be effective only when “other things are equal”—in particular, quality of manufacture and price.

These results highlight a major difficulty confronting “Buy Local” campaigns: it seems highly unlikely that quality and price will be commonly regarded as being equivalent across competing brands. Thus, country of origin will only rarely be a prominent, and even less often the dominant, cue in a purchase decision.

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## QUALITY RATINGS AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

The relationships between country of origin, perceived product quality, and purchase intentions were explored using a series of structured purchase scenarios. Respondents were shown descriptions of three versions of a range of six products (computers, cars, tires, dishwashers, shoes, and jam). The three versions of the same product are as shown in Table 2. That is, each version was described as being identical in brand name, product type, and price, varying only in country of origin. Respondents were asked how they would rate the quality of each product on a five-point scale ranging from “very poor” to “very good.”

Next they indicated their choice ranking (1st, 2nd, and 3rd) assuming these products were identical in all respects other than quality. Product quality and purchase choice were treated separately to investigate the hypothesis that the “extrinsic” cue of country of origin might serve as a “surrogate” indicator of “intrinsic” quality in consumers’ product evaluations. This allowed examination of the relationship between perceived quality and product choice, as shown in Table 2.

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## INTERACTION EFFECTS

The “artificiality” of the choice scenarios described in this study is readily acknowledged as a limitation of this study. The use of conjoint techniques (Ettenson et al. 1988) or a complex factorial design could certainly have improved on the design of the study, but would not have made respondent choice more realistic nor their procurement more manageable in the field.

Product Type	Quality		Z Value	Choice	
	Rating	Rank	/Sig	Rating	Rank
<b>Computer—IBM-PC \$3,000</b>					
Singapore	4.1	3	2.35  P < .05	2.6	3
Australia	4.2	2		1.7	1
U.S.	4.3	1		2.1	2
<b>Car—Ford Laser \$15,000</b>					
Japan	4.3	1	7.14  P < .005	1.6	1
Australia	3.7	3		1.8	2
UK	3.8	2		2.7	3
<b>Tires—Dunlop Steel \$80</b>					
Japan	4.1	3	1.91  P < .1	2.3	2
Australia	4.2	1		1.4	1
UK	4.1	2		2.6	3
<b>Dishwasher—Bosch \$900</b>					
Korea	3.4	3	18.57  P < .005	3.0	3
Australia	3.8	2		1.9	2
Germany	4.7	1		1.4	1
<b>Shoes—Florsheim Brogues \$120</b>					
Brazil	3.9	2	2.0  P < .05	2.26	2
Australia	3.9	3		1.6	1
U.S.	4.0	1		2.28	3
<b>Jam—IXL \$2–\$50</b>					
Philippines	2.9	3	23.0  P < .005	3.0	3
Australia	4.4	1		1.2	1
UK	4.0	2		2.0	2

Table 2.  
Quality and Choice Ratings for  
Six Product Types

In designing this study it, was resolved not to pursue complex purchase scenarios in which product, brand, price, and country of origin might be simultaneously manipulated using, for example, conjoint analysis. Such an approach was not employed because the prime objective of the analysis was to test consumers' responses to the campaign proposition:

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**do consumers prefer the local product over the import when price and quality are comparable?<sup>2</sup>**

In attempting to treat a range of product attributes as discrete influences, there is an obvious danger in ignoring important interaction effects—for example those between “quality” and intrinsic and extrinsic product cues (Enis and Stafford 1969). In particular, the relationship between price and quality has been explored exhaustively (Gabor and Granger 1966; Leavitt 1964; McConnell 1968; Scitovsky 1944, 1945). Other factors such as branding and product composition also play some role in consumers’ choices.

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## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND QUALITY

Previous research (Gaedeke 1973; White and Cundiff 1978; Eroglu and Machleit 1989) has strongly suggested a close link between country of origin and perceptions of quality. The proposition that country of origin may act as a surrogate indicator of quality can be seen by examining the Z statistics (Boyd et al. 1985) in Table 2, showing the difference between the highest and lowest quality ratings for each product category. With the exception of tires (significant at 0.1), the difference is significant at the 0.05 level or better. Where products differed only in their country of origin, the difference in perceived quality was significant.

This reinforces the notion that information about country of origin may indeed act as a surrogate of quality, especially where all other “intrinsic” or “extrinsic cues” (such as brand name, technical features, or price) do not give a more positive indication of quality.

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## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND PRODUCT CHOICE

**(a) Computers.** The results for computers indicate that a personal computer built in the United States was rated as being of the highest quality. However, respondents indicated first choice for the Australian-made computer, followed by the U.S. computer and, lastly, the Singapore-made product.

**(b) Cars.** Respondents rated the quality of Japanese cars highest, followed by British-made cars, with Australian-made cars rated last. In terms of purchase preferences, Japanese cars are chosen first, followed by the Australian-made model, with the British-made car least preferred. This result is at variance with the results for the computer example, although it conforms with criticisms of the quality of Australian-made cars (Gillies 1990) and also perhaps reflects a “love affair” that Australians have with Japanese cars.

Clearly, the Japanese car is judged to be appreciably better than both the Australian and British-made models. There may be a number of reasons for the preference expressed for the Australian-made model over the British, such as the availability of spare parts or patriotic sentiments. Regardless, the findings suggest that Australian car manufacturers may well

be able to compete effectively against European manufacturers in Australia, but that they are clearly losing ground to Japanese manufacturers in terms of quality and consumer preferences. Local manufacturers still have much to do to overcome the perceived quality gap and to gain consumer preference over imported Japanese cars.<sup>3</sup>

**(c) Tires.** The results for tires should be very encouraging for the local tire manufacturing industry. Australian-made tires were most highly rated for quality and also were first choice by a considerable margin. The fact that quality differences were marginal would suggest at best a high degree of loyalty for the Australian-made product. This loyalty is probably not based on any perceived superiority of the Australian product. Interestingly, although Japanese-made tires were ranked second purchase choice overall, they were ranked third in terms of perceived quality, while the reverse applied for British-made tires, although this may be partially explained by the marginal difference in quality perceptions. These findings do suggest, however, that where the quality of the Australian-made product is at least comparable to that of foreign-made competitors, there is a marked consumer preference for the Australian-made product.

**(d) Dishwashers.** The results for dishwashers show a marked difference in the perceived quality of machines manufactured in Germany, Australia, and Korea. These differences are reflected in consumer preferences, with the German-made machine being most preferred, followed by the Australian-made model, with the Korean-made machine least preferred by a considerable margin.

It should be noted that this exercise assumes that all the dishwashers are of an equivalent price. These results suggest that, as the Australian-made machine is seen to lag significantly behind the German machine in terms of quality, a significantly cheaper price would be required to enable the Australian-made machine to be consistently preferred over the German product.

**(e) Shoes.** The results for shoes are also encouraging for Australian manufacturers. Despite being ranked third in terms of quality, Australian-made shoes were the most preferred purchase choice by a considerable margin. The adverse judgments of quality reflected in these results are tempered by the fact that the differences in ratings of quality between shoes made in Australia, the United States, and Brazil were the closest of all the product categories studied. The strong overall preference for the Australian shoe is a very clear indication that the public is prepared to accept the message of the "Australian Made" campaign in this case. This study suggests that for some products Australian consumers will indeed support the local product where the quality and price are comparable to imports.

(f) **Jam.** The results for jam (preserved fruit conserve) suggest that, when price is equivalent with competitors, Australian food products of this kind are ascribed the highest quality and are the choice of Australian consumers. The intuitive appeal of high health standards, an environment perceived to be less polluted, and a general view of Australia as an agricultural producer would be likely to affect such judgments. While comforting for local food producers, the challenge for the Australian food processing industry is to build on its strong popularity and to ensure that, as far as possible, prices are competitive with imported products. This finding is also very topical in the light of the ongoing protests by Australian fruit growers against the claimed “dumping” of foreign fruit juice concentrate and the deceptive labeling of such juices as “Made in Australia.”

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## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study suggest that consumers express a general preference for locally made products. Clearly, when the price and quality of the locally made product is equivalent or better, consumers have a strong preference for the product, as shown for tires and jam. There is evidence also that consumers are prepared to make allowances for the locally made product, as long as quality is comparable, as shown for computers and shoes. Even in cases where the quality is considered to be only average, as long as it is comparable to alternatives, the local product will still be preferred.

In those cases where the perceived quality difference is significant, as with cars and dishwashers, there is a marked expressed preference for the highest quality product, assuming that price is equivalent. Where the perceived quality difference is significant and the Australian-made product is not the quality leader, consumers will rate cars and dishwashers from the more developed economies (Japan and Germany) to be of higher quality. The results suggest that imported products generally need to be of markedly superior quality or attractively priced relative to their locally made counterpart if consumers are to give them first purchase preference.

Nevertheless, in cases where quality of the local product lags significantly behind the imported product (cars and dishwashers), consumers prefer the imported product. If local manufacturers improve the competitive quality levels of such products, then based on these findings, consumers are likely to give the local product a chance. However, in the absence of substantial improvement in quality levels, the locally made product will need to compete on the basis of price.

The implications of the present findings on the extant country-of-origin literature can now be summarized. The study suggests that consumers do, indeed, have a preconceived, stereotypical view of products identified as being made in certain foreign countries (Schooler and Wildt 1968; White

and Cundiff 1978). The results also support the assertion that there is generally a direct relationship between product quality evaluations and the perceived degree of economic development of the country of origin (Gaedeke 1973; White and Cundiff 1978; Wang and Lamb 1983; Morello 1984; Toyne and Walters 1989; Cordell 1989).

This study also shows that, relative to other product attributes, and particularly those of quality and price, country-of-origin information is generally of low importance. However, the results offer support for the proposition that, where it is not possible objectively to distinguish between products on the basis of intrinsic quality, consumers will resort to the use of the country-of-origin cue as a surrogate quality index (Cattin et al. 1982; Erikson et al. 1984; Han and Terpstra 1988). This finding contrasts with those of Johansson et al. (1985) and of Samiee (1987) and suggests that scope remains for further research.

An important general conclusion of this study is that country-of-origin effects generally, and "Buy Local" campaigns in particular, are indeed potentially important influences on consumers' purchase decision making behavior.

1. This study was made possible by a grant from the Advance Australia Foundation; their assistance is gratefully acknowledged.
2. The fact that such attributes are commonly quite different is a matter essentially beyond the scope of this study.
3. In this context the decision by Nissan Australia to abandon local automobile assembly in favor of a fully imported product can, in isolation, be seen to have considerable appeal with Australian buyers.

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## THE AUTHORS

**Gregory R. Elliott** is senior lecturer in management at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

**Ross C. Cameron** is associate professor of marketing and head of the School of Marketing, Hospitality, and Management at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

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## NOTES

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