

The effect of implicit versus explicit country-of-origin cues on consumers' willingness to pay  
for a brand

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# **The effect of implicit versus explicit country-of-origin cues on consumers' willingness to pay for a brand**

## **ABSTRACT**

Extant research is unclear as to whether implicit country-of-origin (COO) cues influence consumers' responses to the same extent as explicit COO cues, particularly if the former are presented to consumers through unconventional lettering, that is, a foreign language script distinct from the consumers' mother tongue. In the current study, we examine the effect of implicit (unconventional lettering) versus explicit ("made in" label) COO cues on consumers' willingness-to-pay (WTP). Contrary to expectations, our findings show that consumers are *not* willing to pay a price premium if a brand adds an implicit COO cue (unconventional lettering) to product packaging; their WTP is the same as for packaging without any COO cue. At the same time, consumers are willing to pay more for a brand that uses an implicit COO cue versus an explicit COO cue on its packaging.

***Keywords:*** *Implicit Country-of-Origin Cues, Explicit Country-of-Origin Cues, Willingness to Pay*

## 1. Introduction

When highlighting the country-of-origin (COO), namely “the country in which the product is manufactured or assembled” (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Merunka, 2006, p. 412) to consumers, companies can use either explicit (direct) or implicit (indirect) strategies to benefit from positive country associations. Explicit COO cues directly communicate the product’s origin through maps, flags or country/city names in “made in labels” and brand names (Aichner, 2014; Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020). Implicit COO cues, on the other hand, only suggest the origin through reference to monuments, landmarks, national characters, colors and language (Aichner, 2014; Hornikx & van Meus, 2017; Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020).

Amongst communication strategies based on implicit COO cues, the use of foreign languages (FLs) has become very popular. A well-known example is the slogan that the car manufacturer Audi uses in several non-German speaking countries: “*Vorsprung durch Technik*”, which means “lead through technology” (Kelly-Holmes, 2005). Another example is the Greek slogan “*παρθένο ελαιόλαδο*” (in English, “virgin olive oil”) used by the brand Plakias on its product packaging in non-Greek speaking countries.

In this context, there has been growing academic and managerial interest in FLs’ consequences on consumers’ responses. Past research (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017) has shown that consumers do not only associate FLs with COOs that are relevant/typical for a certain product category, but the associations evoked by a FL are similar to those evoked directly by the COO. Indeed, several studies have revealed that consumers may respond either positively or negatively when a FL is added to a product packaging or to an ad (e.g., Gopinath & Glassman, 2008; Yener & Taşçıoğlu, 2020; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021). In particular, a FL congruent with a certain product category generates more positive consumer responses (e.g., brand attitudes, perceptions of quality, purchase intentions) than a FL incongruent with the category (e.g., Hornikx, van Meurs & Hof, 2013; Huettl-Maack & Schwenk, 2016; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021).

In spite the above insights, several issues remain unexplored, particularly concerning the role of FLs foreign as implicit COO cues. First, only a few scholars (de Run & Fah, 2003; Ho, Chiu, Jiang, Shen, & Xu, 2019; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021) have examined FLs using so-called unconventional lettering, that is, a FL with a script distinct from the consumer’s mother tongue and thus not commonly encountered (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021). This is surprising as language associations might become more salient to consumers if the language is unexpected within the context in which it is used (Khan & Lee, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Second, although extant literature suggests that FLs act as implicit COO cues (e.g., Aichner, 2014; Melnyk, Klein, & Völckner 2012; Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020), to the best of our knowledge, only a single empirical study (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017) has attempted to compare an explicit (COO flag) versus an implicit (foreign language) COO cue, but without specifically focusing on unconventional lettering or considering other influential factors (e.g., product category) at the same time.

Finally, previous research on FLs has typically examined “soft” outcome variables, such as product quality perceptions (Huettl-Maack & Schwenk, 2016), product evaluations (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021) or purchase intentions (Ho et al., 2019). This is problematic because such outcomes neglect the financial sacrifice incurred by the consumer when purchasing a brand (Monroe, 2003); indeed, it is possible that the use of a FL can draw

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<sup>1</sup>Prior research has often included English as one of the languages displayed in the packaging along with a specific unconventional lettering. This is a noteworthy limitation as English is an international language (Yener & Taşçıoğlu, 2020) and already carries pre-established associations, such as modernity (Khan & Lee, 2020).

consumers' attention to a brand but not necessarily affect their willingness to spend more money to acquire this brand.

Against this background, the current study investigates the influence of implicit versus explicit COO cues on product packaging and consumers' willingness-to-pay (WTP), namely "the maximum amount of money a customer is willing to spend for a product or service" (Homburg, Koschate & Hoyer, 2005, p. 85). We employ unconventional lettering as the implicit COO cue and a "made in" label (displayed in the consumers' mother tongue) as the explicit COO cue.

From a theoretical perspective, we extend prior research on implicit COO cues by revealing (a) whether consumers are willing to pay a price premium if unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) is added to the packaging of a brand, and (b) whether unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) has a stronger influence on consumers' WTP than a "made in label" (explicit COO cue).

From a managerial perspective, we reveal whether there is potential for implementing a premium (discount) price strategy based on unconventional lettering and also highlight the type of COO cue (implicit or explicit) that is more influential on consumers' price responses. As displaying unconventional lettering or a "made in" label on product packaging is easily done at low cost, companies can exploit financial benefits with comparably low effort.

## 2. Conceptual background and research hypotheses

We draw on sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives on FLs to develop our research hypotheses. The sociolinguistic perspective links FL use to characteristics of the country where the language is typically spoken (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017). Grounded on foreign language display theory, this perspective proposes that FLs are used for the associations they evoke rather than the literal content they convey (Haarmann, 1989; Kelly-Holmes, 2005). Thus, a FL generates ethnocultural associations with the country in which the language is spoken or with its speakers (Haarmann, 1989; Piller, 2003). Importantly, consumers do not need to *understand* the literal meaning of the FL displayed on a packaging or advertisement (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021; Yener & Taşçıoğlu, 2020). However, to produce positive consumers' responses, it is crucial that consumers *recognize* the language displayed (Hornikx et al., 2013) and perceive this language to be congruent with the country where it is spoken, the so-called product-language match (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017).

Bearing the above in mind, we argue that even if consumers are not able to understand the meaning of unconventional lettering in the packaging due to the different script of the FL, they can still recognize the lettering and associate it with a specific country, particularly if this country is congruent with the product category at hand. Extant research shows that consumers are able to link FLs to a particular COO that is relevant for a specific product category (Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Melnyk et al., 2012). Even if a certain language is spoken in more than one country, consumers are still capable of recognizing the language and correctly match it with the typical country associated with a certain product category (see Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017). For instance, German is spoken in more than one country but when this language is displayed in car advertisements, it is more likely to be associated with Germany rather than Austria or Switzerland, which are also German-speaking countries.

Given that consumers retrieve origin information from the FL, this language becomes a COO cue that generates symbolic associations (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021) which are transferred to the product (Hornikx et al., 2013). If a language is added to a congruent product category, the associations elicited are favorable and translate into positive product evaluations (Huettl-Maack & Schwenk, 2016). In the case of unconventional lettering, recent empirical

evidence (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021) shows that a bilingual packaging displaying such lettering produces more positive attitudes towards the brand than a product packaging with a single language (no unconventional lettering included).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, COO research has revealed that a product-country match, that is, a strong association between a product and a particular COO (Usunier & Cestre, 2007), positively influences consumers' responses, such as brand attitudes (e.g., Tseng & Balabanis, 2011), purchase intentions (e.g., Usunier & Cestre, 2007) and quality evaluations (e.g., Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Merunka, 2006).

Based on the above, we propose that consumers will be willing to spend more for a brand that includes unconventional lettering on its product packaging in a congruent product category than if the packaging does not include any COO information.

*H1: Adding unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) to product packaging in a congruent product category will generate a higher WTP than not including any COO cue on the packaging.*

We further argue that unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) may foster more attention and curiosity than a conventional "made in" label (explicit COO cue), as this lettering leads to a deeper mental information processing and perception formation regarding the brand (Ho et al., 2019). This argument is based on the psycholinguistic perspective on FLs, also called information-processing perspective (Harris, Sturm, Klassen & Bechtold, 1986). This perspective focuses on how consumers mentally process FLs (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017) and assumes that FLs are linked differently to concepts in the mind compared to the consumer's mother tongue (Kroll & de Groot, 1997). FLs constitute distinctive information, drawing more attention than consumers' native language and arousing more curiosity (e.g., Domzal, Hunt & Kernan, 1995; Petrof, 1990). This, in turn, leads to a greater cognitive effort by consumers while processing origin information in a FL than when processing the same origin information (e.g., a "made in" label) in their mother tongue.

Contrary to psycholinguistic perspective, preliminary insights in advertising (see Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017) suggest similar perceived quality, attitudes towards the product and purchase intentions of an implicit COO cue (congruent foreign language) and an explicit COO cue (country flag). However, these findings are questionable as consumers in the aforementioned study were exposed to both ads including the different origin communication strategies (implicit vs. explicit), but each strategy was linked to a different product and a different slogan, inevitably creating confounds and preventing consumers from making direct comparisons based solely on the COO cue. Furthermore, the Hornikx & van Meurs (2017) study employed only FLs with the *same* script as the language spoken in the consumer's home country (e.g., used Spanish as a foreign language in The Netherlands – both Spanish and Dutch are based on Latin script). However, according to the psycholinguistic perspective on FLs mentioned above, if a FL is displayed through unconventional lettering, the level of distinctiveness of such a language and its attention-grabbing power is higher than a foreign language based on the same script.

We therefore argue that adding a congruent unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) to product packaging will be more influential in terms of affecting WTP than a "made in" label (explicit COO cue) in the consumer's mother tongue. Because unconventional lettering arouses more attention and curiosity and requires a deeper mental information processing,

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<sup>2</sup>We are aware of the mixed findings in extant literature when bilingual packaging is compared to monolingual packaging in terms of product evaluations, purchase intentions, etc. (e.g., Yener & Taşcıoğlu, 2020; Gopinath & Glassman, 2008; Ho et. al, 2019). However, the majority of these studies employs English either as the native or as a foreign language, and the use of this language is problematic (see footnote 1).

consumers might be willing to pay a higher price for a brand with unconventional lettering than just with a “made in” label on the product packaging.

*H2: Adding unconventional lettering (implicit COO cue) to product packaging in a congruent product category will generate a higher WTP than adding a “made in” label (explicit COO cue) to the packaging.*

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Research design and stimuli*

Two hundred and eighteen Austrian consumers participated in an online experimental study on the crowdsourcing platform *Clickworker*. The questionnaire was first designed in English and then uploaded online in German after back-translation procedures (Behling & Law, 2000).

We employed a between-subjects design in which respondents were randomly exposed to one of three versions of a fictitious vodka brand with identical packaging and differing only in terms of the COO cue. The first (baseline) version had no COO cue, the second version included an implicit foreign COO cue (unconventional lettering), and the third version included an explicit foreign COO cue (“made in” label). Importantly, the product packaging included information on other attributes (e.g., the amount of vodka) so as not to unduly prime consumers to make their evaluations based only on the COO cue. Such information was written in German (native language of the respondents).

We chose Russia as the stimulus country and the Cyrillic language to implement the implicit COO cue (“*Русская водка*” – in English “Russian vodka”) for three reasons. First, Cyrillic is a FL based on a distinct alphabet script than German (Latin alphabet) and can thus be classified as unconventional lettering to Austrian consumers. Second, there is wide presence of Russian products in the Austrian market (e.g., vodka, cookies). Third, a pretest (N = 44) found a high rate of recognition of this alphabet when displayed in a congruent product (86.4%). To avoid confounding effects due to the use of the English language (Khan & Lee, 2020), the explicit COO cue (i.e., “Russian vodka”) was presented in the mother tongue of the respondents (i.e., “Russischer vodka”).

Vodka was selected as a focal product category as another pretest (N = 30) revealed that this product category is congruent with the Cyrillic alphabet. Specifically, vodka was mentioned by 21 respondents (70%) when they were asked to indicate the products they associate with the Cyrillic alphabet; 30 different products were cited by respondents. A congruent product category is important as the display of a FL on product packaging results in more favorable consumer responses than in the case of an incongruent product category (see Hornikx et al., 2013; Huettl-Maack & Schwenk, 2016; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021). In addition, there are both domestic and foreign brands of vodka available in the Austrian market. We opted for a fictitious brand name (“Vodron”) randomly generated to eliminate confounding effects on WTP due to brand equity and familiarity (Dimofte, Johansson & Ronkainen, 2008). The chosen brand name was also tested to safeguard against possible associations with a specific country. In a pretest study (N = 43) with an open-ended question, 40 respondents (93%) could not indicate any origin for the brand; France and Russia were mentioned only once.

### 3.2. Procedures

Following brand exposure, participants revealed their WTP by answering the four questions on Van Westendorp's (1976) price sensitivity meter (PSM), which captures the prices for which they would find the focal brand to be (a) *too cheap* (i.e., raise concerns about its quality), (b) *cheap* (i.e., seem like a bargain), (c) *expensive* (i.e., not cheap but would still consider buying it), and (d) *too expensive* (i.e., a price so high that would prevent purchase). In answering these questions, respondents could freely choose the price (in Euros) without any restrictions. To get an estimate of the maximum price that each respondent would be willing to pay to actually buy the product, the mean of the stated *expensive* and *too expensive* prices was calculated.<sup>3</sup>

Next, only in the condition that *did* include the unconventional lettering, participants stated their recognition of, and familiarity with the foreign (Cyrillic) alphabet. They also completed established scales on product involvement (Mittal & Lee, 1989,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ), price sensitivity (Wakefield & Inman, 2003,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ), consumer cosmopolitanism (Riefler, Diamantopoulos, & Siguaw, 2012,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ), product ethnicity (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ) and country image (Roth & Romeo, 1992,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Finally, respondents replied to standard demographic questions (gender, age, income).

After data cleaning (i.e., inconsistent price responses, extreme values, or incorrect recognition of the unconventional lettering), the final sample consisted of 151 Austrian consumers (60% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 31.46$ ,  $SD = 10.06$ ).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Manipulation checks

As expected, most respondents correctly recognized the Cyrillic alphabet; those who did not (19 respondents) were excluded from the analysis as suggested by Wagner and Charinsarn (2021). Respondents' familiarity with the Cyrillic alphabet was low, as they scored well below the mid-point on the relevant seven-point scale ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ). This was expected, as the unconventional lettering used was not only based on a distinct alphabet but also less spoken and understood by the country's inhabitants. Indeed, past research has indicated that unconventional lettering can be correctly recognized but at the same time perceived as (highly) unfamiliar (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021).

Importantly, Russia's country image evaluations were similar across experimental conditions, as a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed no significant differences between the three experimental groups ( $F_{2,148} = 1.60$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{NoCOO}} = 4.01$ ,  $M_{\text{ImplicitCOO}} = 3.72$ ,  $M_{\text{ExplicitCOO}} = 4.15$ ).

### 4.2. Hypotheses testing

To test H1 and H2, we initially performed an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with WTP as the dependent variable, COO (No COO vs. Explicit COO vs. Implicit COO) as the independent variable and product involvement, price sensitivity, consumer cosmopolitanism,

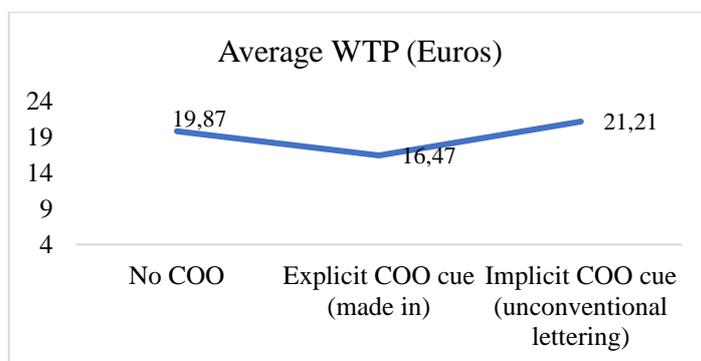
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<sup>3</sup>Although this average did not include the *too cheap* and *cheap* prices, the latter are part of the set of prices considered by a consumer when evaluating a product and serve as an orientation to the consumer when contemplating the other two prices (see Diamantopoulos, Matarazzo, Montanari, & Petrychenko, 2021). Note that, before calculating the WTP, we removed inconsistent responses (i.e. violating the *too cheap* < *cheap* < *expensive* < *too expensive* sequence) and extreme values based on a boxplot analysis (Field, 2018).

and product ethnicity as covariates. As none of the covariates turned out to be significant, they were subsequently removed and followed by an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Games-Howell pairwise comparisons.

The results showed a significant main effect of COO on consumers' WTP ( $F_{2,148} = 5.38, p < 0.05$ ). Specifically, pairwise comparisons revealed that consumers were willing to pay significantly *less* for the brand when the explicit COO cue (i.e., the packaging with the "made in label" in German) was included in the packaging than when no COO information was displayed ( $M_{\text{ExplicitCOO}} = 16.47$  Euros vs.  $M_{\text{NoCOO}} = 19.87$  Euros,  $p < 0.05$ ). The average difference in consumers' WTP was 3.40 Euros. Furthermore, the implicit COO cue (i.e., unconventional lettering) did not significantly differ from the condition without a COO cue ( $M_{\text{ImplicitCOO}} = 21.21$  Euros vs.  $M_{\text{NoCOO}} = 19.87$  Euros,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, H1 was not supported.

Consumers' WTP in the condition including unconventional lettering in the packaging was significantly higher than in the condition including a "made in" label ( $M_{\text{ImplicitCOO}} = 21.21$  Euros vs.  $M_{\text{ExplicitCOO}} = 16.47$  Euros,  $p = 0.000$ ). The average WTP for the implicit COO cue exceeded the WTP for the explicit COO cue by 4.74 Euros (28.8%). Thus, H2 was supported. Figure 1 summarizes the results and the average WTP across the experimental conditions.



## 5. Discussions and conclusion

The current study sought to offer empirical evidence on the role of FLs as implicit COO cues influencing consumers' WTP. Specifically, we aimed to advance international marketing literature by comparing unconventional lettering based on a FL that differs substantially from the alphabet script of consumers' mother tongue with a widely known explicit COO cue (i.e., a "made in" label).

Surprisingly, and against the sociolinguistic perspective and foreign language display theory (Haarmann, 1989; Kelly-Holmes, 2005), our study shows that adding a FL (unconventional lettering) to a packaging in a congruent product category does not increase consumers' WTP; consumers' WTP for a packaging containing such lettering was the same as for a packaging without a COO cue. This finding might be related to the fact that Russia's country image favorability is not high (the average image evaluations is about 4 on a seven-point scale). Indeed, the COO effect varies across product categories (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011) and consumers do not necessarily allocate price premiums or discounts based on COO (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1999). An alternative explanation might be that COO information is only relevant for consumers who frequently buy a certain product (Barrena & Sanchez, 2009) whereas Austrians do not often purchase vodka; their alcoholic consumption is mostly beer or wine (Bachmayer, Strick, & Uhl, 2021).

On the other hand, and in line with the psycholinguistic perspective (Harris et al., 1986), our findings reveal that consumers are willing to pay more for a brand that uses an implicit

COO cue (unconventional lettering) versus an explicit COO cue (“made in” label) on its packaging. However, given that, as noted above, consumers were found to be insensitive to unconventional lettering display in the packaging (vs. a packaging with no COO cue), one could speculate that this lettering does not work as a COO cue, while the “made in” not only acts as a COO cue but also results in a negative COO effect (and a reduced WTP) as a consequence of weak image of Russia.

From a practical perspective, our findings imply that managers should not be overly concerned with an unconventional lettering (as this does not necessarily lead to an increase in consumers’ WTP). However, companies should consider including an implicit cue in product packaging, not least because such COO communication can be easily implemented at a relatively low cost (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021). Specifically, brands could do either a minor relaunch of existing packaging or add an ad hoc sticker to it (Wagner & Charinsarn, 2021) thus taking advantage of unconventional lettering at least against traditional “made in” cues. Importantly, the unconventional letterings chosen should be congruent with the specific product category to generate positive origin associations.

With regards to future research, there is a clear need for replications of the current study with respondents from other nationalities, different product categories, and other FLs as stimuli to particularly confirm (or otherwise) the lack of an effect of unconventional lettering on WTP as compared with a packaging with no COO cue. Whether these effects can be reproduced in other settings is an important question as consumers’ nationality influences the link between products, countries and languages (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Usunier & Cestre, 2007); every FL is capable of eliciting different associations (Hornikx, van Meurs & Starren, 2007) and exerts different impacts on consumers (Yener & Taşcıoğlu, 2020).

Attention should also be paid to potential moderating influences such as consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and consumer xenocentrism (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2016) as these consumer characteristics might, respectively, strengthen or weaken the relationship between explicit/implicit COO cues and consumers’ WTP. For instance, bearing in mind that a country’s language is also a component of its culture, ethnocentric consumers could favor communication messages using the local language (Riley 1975; Tseng & Balabanis, 2011) and be willing to pay less for a foreign brand.

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