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Where are you from? The influence of an unfamiliar sub-national region of origin from familiar and unfamiliar countries on quality perceptions and purchase intentions

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Abstract: This paper examines how consumer quality perceptions and purchase intentions are influenced by country of origin level, specifically for an unfamiliar region of origin (ROO) and by parent country familiarity. We conducted an experiment among Norwegian consumers testing products from Germany (familiar) or Bulgaria (unfamiliar) versus unfamiliar sub-national regions in these two countries. We found that a strategy to help overcome initial negative reactions for products from unfamiliar countries, specifically among younger consumers, may be to add the unfamiliar sub-national region to the product information. However, simply labelling a product with an unfamiliar sub-national region when the product comes from a familiar country is inadvisable. To our knowledge, no previous research has used a trivial COO attribute, (i.e., unfamiliar sub-national region) to influence perceptions for products from unfamiliar countries. The current research finds communication of an unfamiliar ROO can influence quality perceptions and purchase intentions in a foreign market entry.

Keywords: region of origin; ROO; country of origin; trivial attributes; purchase intentions; familiarity.

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1 Introduction

Foreign expansion is a common and necessary growth strategy for many firms (Grimstad et al., 2022; Lehrer et al., 2009), yet many products and brands struggle to gain a foothold in foreign markets (Ghouse, 2020; Johnson and Tellis, 2008; Karakaya, 2000). Using a country of origin (COO) designation is an often-used communications strategy that eases this process as a product's COO can influence the perceptions about a product and have an impact on international market performance. This effect can be positive, such as when products come from a favourably viewed country (Han, 1989; Thøgersen et al., 2020). However, this effect can also be negative as foreign products are often less preferred than domestic brands, such as when there is animosity toward the foreign country (Klein et al., 1998; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007), high consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Siamagka and Balabanis, 2015), a negative image of the country (Han, 1989; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012), large geographical distance (Kim et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2018), products are labelled as coming from a developing country (Ahmed and D'Astous, 2008; Karimov and El-Murad, 2019; Nes and Bilkey, 1993; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999), or when the country is unfamiliar to the consumer (Khan and Lee, 2014; Thøgersen et al., 2020), among other reasons (for a review, see Wilcox, 2015).

Product sales can be influenced by the level of COO used to describe them (i.e., basic-origin, product-origin or category-origin) (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021; Josiassen

et al., 2013; Lopez and Balabanis, 2021; Thøgersen et al., 2020; Thøgersen and Pedersen, 2021). An alternative way of viewing COO levels is that a company may focus on a product's origin using the country level (e.g., made in Switzerland) or cross-national level (e.g., made in Europe). However, it is also possible to use a more granular regional level, such as a sub-national regional approach (e.g., made in Bavaria). Limited research has examined the effect of a sub-national regional origin approach as a COO communication strategy when entering international markets, although we find that manufacturers may use a regional origin approach in marketing. This may be exemplified by wine where labels promoting origins such as Alsace, Burgundy or Bordeaux are often used. Luxury watches manufactured in Geneva are a similar case, with the CEO of Roger Dubois saying "We are not Swiss made, we are made in Geneva" (Saha, 2012), exploiting Geneva's global pre-eminence in this industry. These examples show how sub-national labels may be used as part of the customer communication strategy. This article presents empirical evidence from an experimental study that focuses on the similarities and differences between a country versus unfamiliar sub-national regional approach. This article also outlines how an unfamiliar sub-national region may influence quality perceptions of products from unfamiliar countries compared to familiar countries.

Prior research has called for more COO research using theory derived from established research traditions (Diamantopoulos et al., 2017; Samiee and Leonidou, 2011). In response to this call, we use both communication theory and literature focusing on trivial attributes. The choice of the irrelevant/trivial attributes literature follows from the observation made by Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) suggesting that county of origin may be regarded as a cognitive cue with information about product attributes and quality. Combining trivial attributes theory (Albrecht et al., 2011; Baskin and Liu, 2021; Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003; Carpenter et al., 1994; Chadd et al., 2020; Shoham et al., 2017; Sun, 2010; Xiao, 2016) and communications theory (Carston, 2008; Cherry, 1966; Clark, 1985; Gruenfeld and Wyer, 1992), we argue that an unfamiliar sub-national region of origin (ROO) can influence quality perceptions and purchase intentions in much the same way as trivial attributes. Our primary contribution is towards the possible use of an unfamiliar sub-national regional origin approach for firms entering international markets.

The following section discusses previous literature and presents hypotheses related to the role of a product's country of origin versus a sub-national regional origin on perceptions of quality. This is followed by a description of the experiment we conducted and the results. The article concludes with implications for theory and management and recommendations for future research.

2 Literature review

Consumers have expectations regarding the quality of products coming from specific countries – the COO influence (Moon-Yong and Il, 2017; Pharr, 2005; Thøgersen et al., 2020; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). A meta-analysis of COO research suggests that the COO construct has been seen as a cognitive cue providing information about product attributes and quality (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999), which can be useful in decision making. A product's COO can enhance the image of a weak or unknown brand (Profeta et al., 2008), influence attitudes and purchase intentions (Dholakia et al., 2020; Hui and Lianxi, 2002; Moon-Yong and Il, 2017; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009) and be an

indication of product quality (Bruwer and Johnson, 2010; Han, 1989; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Teas and Agarwal, 2000; Yasin et al., 2007). Familiar regional origins have also been found to influence perceptions in much the same way (McCutcheon et al., 2009; Smith, 1993; Van der Lans et al., 2001). Inferences about a product's quality are likely to be based on multiple confirming intrinsic cues, including colour and smell, and extrinsic cues, such as price, brand and COO (Steenkamp, 1990). Perceptions of quality regarding attitudes and purchase intentions, in particular, have been seen as influenced by COO, with the influence of COO being stronger for perceptions of quality compared to attitudes and purchase intentions (Pharr, 2005; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999).

Several factors have been shown to influence product quality perceptions and resulting purchase intentions for foreign products, including consumer ethnocentrism, product involvement, country stereotypes and product familiarity (for an extensive review, see Pharr, 2005; Usunier, 2011). For example, consumer ethnocentrism – the belief that purchasing foreign products is wrong – is known to influence purchase intentions (Shimp and Sharma, 1987), although this influence appears to depend on the product category (Balabanis and Siamagka, 2017). Prior research has shown that COO cues are more likely to be observed by ethnocentric consumers (Shimp and Sharma, 1987) and that greater attention to the origin cue among ethnocentric consumers leads to an increase in the importance of the origin attribute for these consumers (Chattalas et al., 2008). Consumers who are more involved are also more likely to attend to and place importance on a product's COO (D'Astous and Ahmed, 1993; Famularo et al., 2010).

For many categories, such as new product entrants from an unfamiliar country or region, it can be difficult to determine the quality of a product or service without having prior information (Bettman et al., 1998; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012). When very little information is provided, more involved consumers tend to be more attentive to any available attributes that can provide information or cues about a product's quality, and they elaborate more on their decisions. This leads to the use of origin as a quality cue (Albrecht et al., 2011; Steenkamp, 1990). Consumers may seek cues about expected quality to help simplify their decision-making process. For example, choices can be difficult when differences between the quality of competing products is uncertain. To reduce this uncertainty, consumers may look for cues about a product's attributes, such as quality, in order to make a better decision (Bettman et al., 1998). One way consumers can do this is by making inferences about irrelevant or *trivial* attributes and treating them as cues (Albrecht et al., 2011; Baskin and Liu, 2021; Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003; Carpenter et al., 1994; Chadd et al., 2020; Sun, 2010). Trivial attributes are attributes that on the surface appear to be useful but are not actually relevant to creating a point of differentiation for a product (Carpenter et al., 1994). Research regarding trivial attributes suggests that a trivial attribute can be seen as unique, influencing consumers' decisions by providing a means for differentiating between competing products (Brown and Carpenter, 2000; Carpenter et al., 1994; Meyvis and Janiszewski, 2002; Shoham et al., 2017; Xiao, 2016). The uniqueness provided by the trivial attribute can positively influence preferences and purchase intentions for the product/brand (Albrecht et al., 2011). However, the presence of trivial attributes can also be negative. Baskin and Liu (2021) found that trivial attributes can decrease expectations of quality for food products. Meaningless descriptors were tested relative to standard category descriptors (e.g., 'zal fried chicken' versus 'fried chicken'). Products with meaningless descriptors were seen

as lower quality in relation to those without the extra descriptor (e.g., 'zal fried chicken' was seen as lower quality than just 'fried chicken'). The authors argued that the use of a meaningless descriptor increased distance from a familiar prototypical category and led to an increased perceived risk from the non-prototypical product. Using this logic, we have extended this expectation of lower quality to country-of-origin effects for familiar versus unfamiliar countries.

When consumers are presented with products from familiar countries, a similar effect is expected as shown in Baskin and Liu (2021), with the addition of a trivial and in this case *unfamiliar*, ROO designation, lowering quality expectations (e.g., 'Denion French bread' versus 'French bread'). For a familiar foreign country, we can assume that consumers see the COO as a summary construct (Han, 1989) as they already have some knowledge of the country and its well-known sub-national regions. Hence, these consumers are likely to have formed preferences regarding products from that country, including origin-based quality cues. A product labelled as coming from an unfamiliar sub-national region, albeit within a familiar country, may suggest to these consumers that the region's products are perhaps unique but deviate from their expectations of a prototypical product from that country (i.e., an indication of lesser quality). This should lead to a decrease in perceived quality and purchase intentions in accordance with Baskin and Liu's (2021) finding that perceived deviation from prototypical products leads to lower quality expectations. In this case, the addition of a trivial attribute serves only to detract from the origin effect. Hence,

H_1 Perceptions of quality will be lower for products labelled as coming from an unfamiliar foreign sub-national region within a foreign country, relative to products labelled only as coming from the foreign country *when coming from a familiar country*.

It is well established that perceptions of quality are associated with higher purchase intentions (Albrecht et al., 2011; Carman, 1990; Tsiotsou, 2006; Woodside and Taylor, 1978). We expect quality perceptions to be lower for products coming from an unfamiliar sub-national region within a familiar foreign country compared to products labelled only at the country level, thus we also expect lower purchase intentions for sub-national regional products compared to country labelled products.

H_2 Purchase intentions will be lower for products labelled as coming from an unfamiliar foreign sub-national region within a foreign country, relative to products labelled only as coming from the foreign country *when coming from a familiar country*.

The hypotheses above assume consumers are familiar with the foreign country, but what happens when the country is unfamiliar? It is likely that the decrease in perceptions of quality observed by Baskin and Liu (2021) are at least partly due to consumers being familiar with the products. If consumers are unfamiliar with the products, the COO may serve as a halo (Han, 1989) that consumers use when seeking cues about product quality. There are at least two reasons consumers may be unfamiliar with a country: geographical distance (Kim et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2018) and the country is a developing country (Karimov and El-Murad, 2019; Nes and Bilkey, 1993; Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2019). Consumers have been shown to evaluate products from countries in these categories to be of lower quality (Karimov and El-Murad, 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Nes and Bilkey, 1993; Pedersen et al., 2018). This is a particularly strong issue for brands from developing countries as exporting has been described as the main international entry

mode for firms from developing markets (Hoque et al., 2021). Hence, consumers' intentions to purchase products from unfamiliar countries should be lower than for familiar countries. However, trivial attributes could increase quality perceptions and subsequently eventual purchases of products from these unfamiliar countries, at least in some cases. We suggest that products coming from a sub-national region of an *unfamiliar* country can lead to a reversal of the effects observed by Baskin and Liu (2021). The literature on trivial attributes theory and communications theory are potential explanatory mechanisms for developing two additional hypotheses.

Carpenter et al. (1994) used communications theory to explain the influence of trivial attributes (referred to as *irrelevant attributes* in their work) on brand favourability judgements, which is relevant to our current research. Communications theory suggests that the purpose of communication is to transmit new information (Cherry, 1966). This is referred to as the *informativeness principle* (Clark, 1985). Communication can be said to be made up of at least two parts, *semantic* and *pragmatic* (Carston, 2008). The semantic is the literal meaning of the communication, whereas the pragmatic relates to why the communication takes place. When the semantic component does not inform, the receiver relies on the pragmatic (Gruenfeld and Wyer, 1992). For example, saying that a product comes from an unfamiliar sub-national region of an unfamiliar country does not provide any semantic meaning because the country and its sub-national region are both unfamiliar. The receiver then turns to the pragmatic, or the reason why we are being told this. The consumer infers that this additional information (the product comes from a specific sub-national region) is being conveyed for a reason. This reason could be that the sub-national region, while unfamiliar to the current consumer, must be known to others: others may find this information useful because this sub-national region produces higher quality products than competing products from other sub-national regions within the country. For example, a consumer who is unfamiliar with products coming from Albania when presented with bread labelled from an unfamiliar sub-national region of Albania may speculate on why this unfamiliar sub-national region is being communicated to them. Does communication of the regional origin suggest the sub-national region produces higher quality products? If not, why mention the region? Similarly, Albrecht et al. (2011) argue that a trivial attribute that is new to a consumer (e.g., a new market entrant), can gain attention because it is seen as novel, salient and/or unique. We posit that increased attention to the origin provides a diagnostic cue regarding quality that can help the consumer make a better perceived decision. Hence, consumers that notice the origin attribute should place more importance on the origin attribute and use it as a differentiating quality cue. Upon considering the attribute, consumers may infer that the information is an indication of quality. For example, why would marketers promote the attribute if it were a negative feature? In accordance with this logic, an unfamiliar sub-national region origin should be perceived as new to the consumer; hence gaining attention for the origin attribute may result in positive quality inferences. If this product is negatively viewed, as is often the case for a foreign product entering a market, this positive quality inference from the sub-national regional origin will essentially serve to make the product's quality seem better than when only its country of origin is communicated. These lines of reasoning suggest that a product from an unfamiliar foreign sub-national regional origin will gain attention, be considered in decision-making processes and be seen as higher quality than those more generically denoted with only a country of origin. Hence,

H_3 Perceptions of quality will be higher for products labelled as coming from an unfamiliar foreign sub-national region within a foreign country, relative to products labelled only as coming from the foreign country *when coming from an unfamiliar country*.

H_4 Purchase intentions will be higher for products labelled as coming from an unfamiliar foreign sub-national region within a foreign country, relative to products labelled only as coming from the foreign country *when coming from an unfamiliar country*.

The following sections will discuss the methodology and results of the experiment designed to test the hypotheses regarding the influence of an unfamiliar ROO on quality perceptions and purchase intentions.

3 Methodology

This experiment was designed to test for ROO effects in several product categories. A total of 292 Norwegian respondents were assigned from a web panel, of which 250 completed the online survey. Women comprised 52.4% of respondents, with a median age of 66 for all respondents. Respondents were presented with stimuli from one of four conditions from a 2 (country: familiar versus unfamiliar) × 2 (level: country labelled products versus country plus unfamiliar sub-national region labelled products) experimental design. The two countries were Germany, representing a country with which respondents were likely to be familiar, and Bulgaria, about which Norwegian consumers were likely to have limited knowledge. Fictious sub-national regions ('Gießhausen', Germany and 'Botevnova', Bulgaria) were created to ensure respondents would be unfamiliar with them. Prior research shows that the size of the COO effect varies across product categories (Cleveland et al., 2009; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Tseng and Balabanis, 2011). Hence, five product categories were tested for generalisability. These included two typical food products, cheese and ham, that are used in COO research (Krystallis and Chryssochoidis, 2009). Since involvement has been shown to influence COO effects (D'Astous and Ahmed, 1993; Famularo et al., 2010), we also used three non-food products that vary on involvement, cars (high) vacuum cleaners (medium) and leather belts (low).

A single cue experiment can inflate COO effects, as discussed above. However, we specifically wanted to distinguish between COO effects at different levels in the current study. It was therefore appropriate to use a single cue (i.e., products described only by their origin) to increase the probability of observing the hypothesised effects in this experiment.

Respondents were randomly split into four groups and shown all five product categories in random order from within their condition (e.g., cheese, ham, etc. for familiar country, country labelled products). They were asked to indicate their likelihood to purchase, awareness of origin, and expected quality of each product in turn. After answering these items for all product categories, respondents completed the rest of the survey.

3.1 Measurement of variables

The following variables are included in this experiment: involvement, perceived quality, awareness of origin and country image. All variables below were measured by seven-point Likert-type scales unless otherwise noted. Scales were translated to Norwegian in the survey:

- *Perceived quality:* Perceived quality was measured as a single-item scale adapted from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Respondents were asked about the likely quality of each product.
- *Involvement:* Involvement was measured on a four-item scale adapted from McQuarrie and Munson (1992). For each product category, respondents were asked to rate the importance of the product to them, their interest in the product, how much the product means to them and how relevant the product is to them (*Cronbach's* $\alpha_{cheese} = 0.939$, $n = 250$; *Cronbach's* $\alpha_{cars} = 0.943$, $n = 250$; *Cronbach's* $\alpha_{ham} = 0.947$, $n = 250$; *Cronbach's* $\alpha_{belt} = 0.907$, $n = 250$; *Cronbach's* $\alpha_{vacuum} = 0.926$, $n = 250$).
- *Familiarity:* Familiarity was measured as a single item adapted from Milberg et al. (2010) in which respondents were asked how familiar they were with the foreign countries (Germany and Bulgaria). Familiarity was assessed at the country level, rather than the sub-national regional level because we discriminate between familiar and unfamiliar countries and the names of the sub-national regions are fictious.
- *Country image:* In testing the influence of COO, it is common to operationalise the country-of-origin construct as country image. Country image can be defined as 'the overall perception consumers' form of the products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country's production and marketing strengths and weaknesses' [Roth and Romeo, (1992), p.480]. Country image was measured by a four-item scale adapted from Roth and Romeo (1992) and Koschate-Fischer et al. (2012). Respondents were asked to rate the innovativeness, attractiveness of design, prestige of products, and workmanship of products from each country (*Cronbach's* $\alpha_{Germany} = 0.941$, $n = 250$; *Cronbach's* $\alpha_{Bulgaria} = 0.916$, $n = 250$).
- *Purchase intention:* Purchase intention was measured as a single seven-point Likert item for each origin (sub-national regional versus country) in which respondents were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would purchase the product from the specified origin.

4 Results

Before conducting our primary tests, we checked that our conditions for variation in familiarity and involvement were met. Germany was seen as highly familiar ($M_{Germany} = 5.30$, $n = 250$), whereas Bulgaria was seen as unfamiliar ($M_{Bulgaria} = 2.09$, $n = 250$). Of the three categories designed to vary on involvement, involvement for cars was higher ($M_{Cars} = 4.75$, $n = 250$), followed by vacuum cleaners, moderate involvement ($M_{Vacuum} = 3.92$, $n = 250$), and leather belts, lower involvement ($M_{Belts} = 2.62$, $n = 250$). Product involvement was high ($M_{Cheese} = 4.47$, $n = 250$) to moderate ($M_{Ham} = 3.97$,

n = 250) for the food products. We concluded that we had met our criteria for variation on familiarity and involvement.

Table 1 Perceived quality for sub-national region vs. country labelled products

Familiar country		*All respondents*		*Under retirement age*		*Over retirement age*	
		Country (n = 65)	*Region (n = 61)*	*Country (n = 36)*	*Region (n = 37)*	*Country (n = 29)*	*Region (n = 24)*
Cheese	Mean	4.57	4.07	4.64	4.08	4.48	4.04
	SD	1.13	1.18	0.93	1.04	1.35	1.40
	p-value		***0.008****		***0.009****		*0.125*
Car	Mean	5.68	4.57	5.50	4.62	5.90	4.50
	SD	1.03	1.35	1.11	1.44	0.90	1.22
	p-value		***0.001****		***0.003****		***0.001****
Leather belt	Mean	4.45	4.10	4.42	4.11	4.48	4.08
	SD	1.03	1.08	0.87	1.20	1.21	0.88
	p-value		***0.033****		*0.107*		*0.093*
Ham	Mean	4.60	3.90	4.64	3.86	4.55	3.96
	SD	1.20	1.11	1.02	1.16	1.40	1.04
	p-value		***0.001****		***0.002****		***0.046****
Vacuum cleaner	Mean	5.28	4.30	5.25	4.30	5.31	4.29
	SD	1.14	1.09	1.13	1.18	1.17	0.95
	p-value		***0.001****		***0.001****		***0.001****
Unfamiliar country		*All respondents*		*Under retirement age*		*Over retirement age*	
		Country (n = 65)	*Region (n = 61)*	*Country (n = 41)*	*Region (n = 29)*	*Country (n = 23)*	*Region (n = 31)*
Cheese	Mean	4.05	3.93	3.85	3.90	4.39	3.97
	SD	1.06	0.97	1.11	1.05	0.89	0.91
	p-value		*0.268*		*0.436*		***0.047****
Car	Mean	2.89	3.35	2.90	3.55	2.87	3.16
	SD	1.29	1.19	1.30	1.09	1.29	1.27
	p-value		***0.021****		***0.016****		*0.205*
Leather belt	Mean	4.17	4.10	3.95	4.34	4.57	3.87
	SD	1.15	0.92	1.09	0.77	1.16	0.99
	p-value		*0.351*		***0.050****		***0.011****
Ham	Mean	3.81	3.92	3.61	4.03	4.17	3.81
	SD	1.17	0.96	1.09	0.63	1.23	1.19
	p-value		*0.295*		***0.032****		*0.138*
Vacuum cleaner	Mean	3.28	3.58	3.24	3.83	3.35	3.35
	SD	1.13	1.08	1.11	1.00	1.19	1.11
	p-value		*0.066*		***0.014****		*0.491*

Note: Significant differences between means for perceived quality at the $p < 0.05$ level, one-tailed, are indicated with an *.

Table 2 Purchase intensions for sub-national region versus country labelled products

Familiar country		*All respondents*		*Under retirement age*		*Over retirement age*	
		Country (n = 65)	*Region (n = 61)*	*Country (n = 36)*	*Region (n = 37)*	*Country (n = 29)*	*Region (n = 24)*
Cheese	Mean	3.85	3.13	4.14	3.05	3.48	3.25
	SD	1.57	1.55	1.38	1.47	1.74	1.70
	p-value		***0.006****		***0.001****		*0.314*
Car	Mean	4.97	3.46	4.94	3.43	5.00	3.50
	SD	1.47	1.75	1.39	1.83	1.58	1.64
	p-value		***0.001****		***0.001****		***0.001****
Leather belt	Mean	3.57	2.98	3.75	3.00	3.34	2.96
	SD	1.36	1.51	1.20	1.55	1.52	1.49
	p-value		***0.012****		***0.012****		*0.178*
Ham	Mean	3.74	2.90	3.86	2.92	3.59	2.88
	SD	1.81	1.60	1.81	1.72	1.82	1.42
	p-value		***0.004****		***0.013****		*0.063*
Vacuum cleaner	Mean	4.68	3.26	4.69	3.32	4.66	3.17
	SD	1.48	1.53	1.43	1.47	1.56	1.63
	p-value		***0.001****		***0.001****		***0.001****
Unfamiliar country		*All respondents*		*Under retirement age*		*Over retirement age*	
		Country (n = 65)	*Region (n = 61)*	*Country (n = 41)*	*Region (n = 29)*	*Country (n = 23)*	*Region (n = 31)*
Cheese	Mean	3.27	2.97	3.10	3.45	3.57	2.52
	SD	1.47	1.60	1.46	1.50	1.47	1.59
	p-value		*0.140*		*0.166*		***0.008****
Car	Mean	1.91	2.32	2.10	2.66	1.57	2.00
	SD	1.23	1.43	1.30	1.45	1.04	1.37
	p-value		***0.046****		***0.048****		*0.104*
Leather belt	Mean	3.80	3.20	3.51	3.72	4.30	2.71
	SD	1.59	1.75	1.57	1.56	1.52	1.81
	p-value		***0.025****		*0.289*		***0.001****
Ham	Mean	2.84	2.90	2.78	3.38	2.96	2.45
	SD	1.56	1.65	1.35	1.45	1.89	1.73
	p-value		*0.423*		***0.041****		*0.157*
Vacuum cleaner	Mean	2.50	2.65	2.63	3.24	2.26	2.10
	SD	1.45	1.49	1.48	1.43	1.39	1.35
	p-value		*0.286*		***0.045****		*0.332*

Note: Significant differences between means for purchase intentions at the $p < 0.05$ level, one-tailed, are indicated with an *.

When we analysed the dataset, we noticed that the age of respondents appeared to matter. Respondents were relatively older in our sample, with a median age of 66. Prior research suggests that COO effects are stronger among older adults (Good and Huddleston, 1995; Josiassen et al., 2011; Schaefer, 1997; Smith, 1993) and that retirees differ from others in their preferences and evaluations (Bruning, 1997; Lawrence et al., 1992). To further clarify our results, we compared results for those over retirement age with those under retirement age. We created a binary age split at 67, the age of retirement in Norway. This is both close to the median age of our respondents, but theoretically more appropriate given differences in attitudes toward COO between the retired and those working. This is a similar approach to Smith (1993). Results for the means tests for each quality perception and product category labelled from both the familiar country (Germany) and unfamiliar country (Bulgaria) are presented in Table 1.

Table 3 ANOVA testing moderating effect of age by condition on purchase intentions

		Familiar country (n = 126)			*Unfamiliar country (n = 124)*		
		df	*F*	*P*	*df*	*F*	*P*
Cheese	Condition	1	6.007	*0.016**	1	3.383	*0.068**
	Age	1	1.159	0.284	1	3.667	*0.058**
	Condition X Age	1	3.165	*0.078**	1	5.074	*0.026**
Car	Condition	1	0.864	0.354	1	0.001	0.970
	Age	1	0.577	0.449	1	18.686	*0.001**
	Condition X Age	1	0.307	0.580	1	0.390	0.533
Leather belt	Condition	1	5.058	*0.026**	1	4.168	*0.043**
	Age	1	0.787	0.377	1	0.705	0.403
	Condition X Age	1	2.739	*0.100**	1	7.740	*0.006**
Ham	Condition	1	1.640	0.203	1	5.200	*0.024**
	Age	1	0.589	0.444	1	3.415	*0.067**
	Condition X Age	1	0.280	0.598	1	5.273	*0.023**
Vacuum cleaner	Condition	1	1.049	0.308	1	0.020	0.887
	Age	1	0.856	0.357	1	21.156	*0.001**
	Condition X Age	1	0.216	0.643	1	0.183	0.670

Notes: Significant differences between means for purchase intentions at the $p < 0.1$ level, two-tailed ($p < 0.05$, one-tailed), are indicated with an *.
Age moderated the influence of condition (sub-national region vs. country origin) on purchase intentions (condition x age) in several cases for the unfamiliar origin. Age did not moderate the relationship between condition and purchase intentions for the familiar country.

We noticed that all product categories had a significantly higher score when quality perceptions of the country level were compared with sub-national regional levels in a familiar country. Looking at the results in the unfamiliar country, cheese, ham, and leather belts had small and non-significant differences when comparing a country versus sub-national regional approach. The mean score for vacuum cleaners was higher (0.3), but still not significant when using a sub-national regional approach, while the product category, cars, had a significantly higher score when comparing sub-national region to

country. These results support H_1, but do not support H_3 as the difference is significant for just one out of five product categories.

Table 2 includes the results when focusing on purchase intentions. Where Germany is the COO, all product categories are significantly different as expected in H_2, with higher purchase intentions when Germany is used compared to Gießhausen, Germany, supporting H_2. Purchase intentions for products originating from Bulgaria showed three product categories with no significant differences and one that was opposite to expectations in H_4 (the leather belt), whereas using a regional approach significantly increased purchase intentions for cars: H_4 is therefore rejected.

Age was found to moderate the relationship between conditions (sub-national region versus country origin) and purchase intentions in the unfamiliar country conditions. As predicted by Hypotheses H_3 and H_4, products with the sub-national ROO were seen as higher quality (for four out of five products) and more likely to be purchased (for three out of five products) amongst those under retirement age. All results were in the direction of the hypotheses. Table 3 presents ANOVA tests for purchase intentions for each product category between sub-national region and country labelled products in familiar versus unfamiliar countries. We conclude that age does not influence the result pattern observed in the familiar country.

5 General discussion and implications

Our findings contribute to research regarding trivial attributes (Albrecht et al., 2011; Baskin and Liu, 2021; Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003; Carpenter et al., 1994; Chadd et al., 2020; Shoham et al., 2017; Sun, 2010; Xiao, 2016) by showing that an unfamiliar origin attribute can influence choices in a similar way to a trivial attribute. We also add to the current discussion regarding the influence of COO level on COO effects (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021; Josiassen et al., 2013; Lopez and Balabanis, 2021; Thøgersen et al., 2020; Thøgersen and Pedersen, 2021) in that how a product is described on its COO attribute can influence consumer acceptance of the product. This influence differs depending on consumers' ages and familiarity with the product's origin. We identified three issues in our study, discussed below.

5.1 Under certain conditions, a sub-national COO approach makes sense

First, our starting point was that it may be relevant to use a sub-national COO approach and that quality perception and purchase intentions might be different depending on whether a country level or sub-national approach is used. Overall, our results support the relevance of a sub-national approach if two criteria are fulfilled:

a if a product originates from an unfamiliar country from the perspective of consumers in a specific international market

b the target consumer group is under retirement age.

From the perspective of exporters established in countries unfamiliar to many international consumers, this result makes it relevant that they further explore how to balance possible cross-national approaches, national approaches and sub-national origin approaches when communicating product origins to consumers in international markets.

5.2 The trivial attribute approach is relevant when examining COO effects

Second, we also expected that research related to trivial attributes could be extended to include unfamiliar origins. Our findings confirm this expectation; an unfamiliar origin attribute can differentiate in much the same way as a trivial attribute. The results of our experiment suggest that an unfamiliar sub-national regional origin designation can influence perceptions of quality and purchase intentions. Specifically, consumers were found to differ on perceptions of quality and purchase intentions for products coming from a sub-national region within an unfamiliar country compared to products coming solely from the country itself. Our findings are in line with previous research showing that consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions can be influenced by a trivial attribute (Albrecht et al., 2011; Sun, 2010). Much of our reasoning was inspired by the recent results presented by Baskin and Liu (2021), demonstrating that meaningless descriptors made consumers assume that a product was less prototypical than its category. It should be noted that these results are only valid for consumers under retirement age, as we discuss next.

5.3 Country familiarity and consumer age are important when examining COO effects

Third, familiarity with the foreign country appears to moderate the results. When we examine the five product types and purchase intentions as well as perceived quality in the familiar country all ten of the significance tests suggest that it is preferable to choose the country approach as this resulted in significantly higher scores than a regional origin approach. Inclusion of the two consumer age groups also indicates that the country approach is better suited, as 14 of the 20 tests performed show a significant difference, while the remaining six are not significant. None of these tests have a mean score, suggesting that a sub-national regional origin approach results in higher scores on product quality or purchase intentions.

Examining the unfamiliar country, our results are much more mixed. Only three out of ten tests are significantly different between the countries versus sub-national region groups. More specifically they suggest that when considering the product group cars, both purchase intentions and perceived quality are higher when using a sub-national regional origin approach. In the case of leather belts, a country approach is significantly positive when focusing purchase intentions. If we include age groups, seven out of ten tests suggest that a sub-national regional origin approach is preferable for the under-retirement age group, the three remaining are not significantly different. The opposite pattern is observed for the over retirement age group; four out of ten differences are significant, suggesting that it is preferable to use a country level origin approach. Hence, our work extends the findings of Thøgersen et al. (2020), showing that unfamiliarity can have effects other than a reduction in COO influence.

5.4 Managerial implications

From the perspective of managers, we first address the strong effect of origin. If we look at mean scores from Table 1 and Table 2, we notice the difference in scores for perceived quality and purchase intentions between Germany and Bulgaria. If we focus on perceived quality (Germany versus Bulgaria) the mean scores are: car ($M_{Germany}$ = 5.68 vs.

$M_{Bulgaria}$ = 2.89, n = 250); vacuum cleaner ($M_{Germany}$ = 5.28 vs. $M_{Bulgaria}$ = 3.28, n = 250); leather belt ($M_{Germany}$ = 4.45 vs. $M_{Bulgaria}$ = 4.16, n = 250); cheese ($M_{Germany}$ = 4.57 vs. $M_{Bulgaria}$ = 4.05, n = 250) and ham ($M_{Germany}$ = 4.60 vs. $M_{Bulgaria}$ = 3.81, n = 250). This is not a new result, but it demonstrates how international consumers look for indications of quality differences between products and use origin information in their decision processes.

Our results have a clear implication when products come from a country familiar to international consumers: it is advisable to focus on COO, not unfamiliar ROO. This is a robust conclusion, valid across the product groups we included, and for both age groups.

Considering the unfamiliar country setting, a possible strategy could be to promote the sub-national regional origin of products to limit the negative effects of products from an unfamiliar country, thus increasing acceptance. If successful, such a strategy might increase familiarity with the country itself over time, that is, country image becomes a summary construct. Our findings are in-line with Smith's (1993) finding that a regional origin can influence acceptance of a foreign product entrant, although we assume a different mechanism. Such an approach may be regarded as negative from the perspective of consumers over retirement age, indicating that if this is an important target group, firms need to carefully assess whether to use a COO approach.

5.5 Limitations and future research

This study included only two countries, one representing a familiar country and the other, an unfamiliar country. There may be other differences not related to familiarity that could explain the results between these countries, such as those discussed in Wilcox's (2015) review. This experiment has not tested for these. We have also not directly tested a familiar versus unfamiliar sub-national ROO, or explained why we did not find the hypothesised effect among people of retirement age in the unfamiliar country contexts. Future research could explore these areas to shed further light on our observed effects.

Further research should also address countries less developed than Bulgaria. In doing so, it could extend research on COO effects to firms from developing countries trying to enter developed country markets. Our results are complementary to work by Karimov and El-Murad (2019) who suggests developing countries should prioritise strengthening their image to become a halo for products from their country. Our research suggests an alternative approach, in which uses an unfamiliar sub-national region origin as a cue for quality can ease acceptance into new markets.

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