

**Stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria: Development of a measurement instrument
for country-of-origin effects in B2B marketing and generation of supplier country
profiles**

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Abstract

When assessing a foreign supplier, customers might use country-of-origin (COO) information of the supplier as a cue to infer relevant evaluation criteria, referred to as COO effect. Several studies in the business-to-business area have examined this COO effect, but thus far none have provided or applied a reliable and valid measurement of it. Using a previous study that outlines a system of nine categories reflecting stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria, the authors generate a measurement instrument and submit it to a scale development procedure. In addition, they use the same data set to draw country profiles of stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria.

Keywords: country-of-origin effect, organizational competences, scale development

Working paper

Introduction

The search for suppliers has become increasingly international and sourcing from suppliers in foreign countries might imply that a supplier's country of origin (COO) has an influence on its evaluation by potential customers. Therefore, the perception of a supplier's COO might serve as a cue for purchasing agents to infer characteristics of this supplier. Such inferences are also referred to as COO effect: Based on the information of a supplier's COO the COO effect describes the mechanism when customers infer characteristics or criteria of that supplier.

When considering suppliers, the result of the inference from a COO cue, i.e. the criteria, are referred to as stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria (e.g. Andersen & Chao, 2003). Several studies investigate these COO-related stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria in various contexts. For example, Chang & Kim (1995) find that Japanese suppliers are rated more favorably regarding delivery, technological advancement, and communication than the United States and South Korea. Turnbull's study (1985) shows that whereas customers rate British suppliers very low on delivery service, product technology, and quality and criticize French suppliers for their product technology and delivery service, they generally regard German suppliers favorably. Saghafi and Puig (1997) asked U.S. purchasing agents how they perceive suppliers from Latin America, Germany, and the United States and conclude that Latin American countries scored lowest with regard to workmanship, reliability, and technical advancement. The authors find that Japan and Germany ranked first and second in reliability, technical advancement, and workmanship.

However, none of the aforementioned studies use an empirically established instrument to precisely measure the COO effect. Extant research has applied stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria (for an overview, see Andersen & Chao, 2003) that are either developed conceptually (e.g., Chang & Kim, 1995; Güdüm & Kavas, 1996; Saghafi & Puig, 1997; Turnbull, 1985) or based on the results of interviews (e.g., Ghymn & Jacobs, 1993; Quester, Dzever, & Chetty, 2000; Thorelli & Glowacka, 1995). As no study provides or applies a reliable and valid measurement of COO effects in the B2B area measurements of this effect might be vague and imprecise. Our research questions address this gap and are as follows: What constitutes a reliable and valid measurement for COO effects in B2B? And can this measurement be used to establish country profiles?

The current paper contributes to the literature by developing a valid and reliable measurement of COO effects in B2B markets. It is based on a previous study that empirically and inductively establishes a system of nine categories capturing COO-related stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria in the automotive industry (Jacob, Schaetzle & Zerbini, 2015). Following established scale development procedures (Churchill, 1979; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), we subject our instrument to reliability and validity tests to determine whether the scale's dimensionality should be broader or more condensed. In addition, using collected data, we build country profiles of these stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria as perceived by purchasing agents. We conclude by comparing and discussing the generated profiles.

To address this purpose, we review existing literature on COO effects in the B2B context, focusing on stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria. Then, we describe the exploratory study on which our quantitative study is based and then present the latter. We conclude with a discussion of the measurement and the country profiles. Finally, we identify limitations and point to further research possibilities.

Literature review

COO effects in B2B marketing

The theoretical foundation of COO effects originates from stereotype literature in social psychology. The COO effect is rooted in stereotyping, generally understood as the inference of evaluative beliefs about a person (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) or an object, e.g. a company (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). The inference is based on a perceptual cue referring to an object of assessment and evokes a stereotype. The COO effect uses the same mechanism of inference making. Here, a COO cue stimulates a country stereotype linked to a product or supplier and then triggers inferences toward this product or a supplier (Bloemer et al., 2009; Magnusson, 2011), resulting in a COO stereotype (Maheswaran, 1994).

Researchers have investigated COO effects in B2C marketing, where it became a popular research field (Mai, 2011), as well as in B2B marketing (for an overview, see Andersen & Chao, 2003). In the B2B context, COO effects refer to purchasing agents responsible for industrial sourcing instead of consumers. Furthermore, in B2B, the object of assessment is not solely the product in question but the supplier as a whole company is assessed by their potential customers (Håkansson & Wootz, 1975) whereby supplier evaluation criteria facilitate the assessment. Thus, B2B customers take a more holistic perspective and evaluate the supplier organization's characteristics because they are interested in the supplier's knowledge base. They aim to access knowledge and capabilities that they often do not have themselves (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 1995). In addition, a supplier's knowledge and capabilities indicate its future value potential, whereas products and services are only central in assessing a supplier's current value (Zerbini, Golfetto, & Gibbert, 2007). The COO effect in B2B hence relates not just to products but rather to stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria.

Stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria in COO research

Andersen & Chao's (2003) literature review of COO effects identifies ten studies that apply stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria to investigate COO effects. They list all criteria from the respective studies and arrange them into four broad categories to facilitate comparison: delivery/reliability, supplier support, technical competence, and commercial competence. However, a closer examination reveals that only three of those studies base their criteria on empirical investigation (Ghymn & Jacobs, 1993; Quester et al., 2000; Thorelli & Glowacka, 1995), and these studies use qualitative interviews to identify relevant supplier evaluation criteria, which result in few empirically established criteria. None of these studies provides a comprehensive examination of stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria that are currently relevant in supplier assessment. To address this gap, Jacob et al. (2015) aimed to properly establish stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria inferred from perceived COO information. This study further introduces the postulation that these criteria can be construed as supplier competences.

Supplier competences as stereotypical criteria for supplier evaluation: An empirically established system of nine categories

Jacob et al.'s (2015) exploratory study yielded a system of nine categories of stereotypical supplier competences inferred from perceived COO information. They find those criteria to be construed as supplier (i.e. organizational) competences, which are generally defined as "complex bundles of skills and accumulated knowledge, exercised through organizational processes that enable firms to coordinate activities and make use of their assets" (Day, 1994, p. 38). According to Jacob et al. (2015) purchasing agents infer such competences when

presented with a COO information cue. The authors substantiate their postulation with two factors.

First, in the course of supplier assessment, purchasing agents are especially interested in identifying a supplier's competence profile. Customer companies not only procure products and services; they are also interested in accessing to competences they deem important but do not have (Goffin, Szwejczewski, & New, 1997; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Zerbini et al., 2007).

Second, several potential constraints may inhibit the detection of the supplier's competence profile. On the one hand, suppliers may be unwilling or unable to disclose their competences. Competences are key to competitive advantage, and suppliers might fear backward integration when customers access their competences. On the other hand, customers may be unable to acquire, process, or use the knowledge from the supplier competence profile. In either case, they cannot assess the potential value of a supplier's competence profile to their firm. In addition, competences are a bundle of sticky and tacit knowledge that may be difficult for customers to recognize. Hence, the tacit nature of competences hampers a purchasing company from identifying and assessing its potential supplier's competence profile. Purchasing agents therefore might be inclined to use more implicit modes of assessment (Möller & Törrönen, 2003) and thus be more susceptible to COO stereotypes.

To examine their postulation, Jacob et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative and exploratory study to empirically identify relevant stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria construed as supplier competences. Using a sample of 17 purchasing agents from different car manufacturers in three countries, the study applies the repertory grid method (Fromm, 2004) to elicit constructs which consist of stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria. This method involves a semi structured interview technique, which is especially useful to uncover a person's implicit repertoire of constructs (Jankowicz, 2004); its indirect way of interviewing overcomes the shortcomings of other techniques such as focus groups and in-depth interviews (Lemke, Goffin, & Szwejczewski, 2003). The results of this study provide a more fine-grained and complete picture of stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria that emerged when interviewees were presented with a COO information cue of supplier countries. The authors outline a system of nine categories and conclude that their categories indeed can be construed as organizational competences of suppliers (see Table 1 for a description). The results reflect a broad range of abstract organizational competences. In comparison to other studies on, for example, supplier management (e.g. Möller & Törrönen, 2003) that investigated supplier competences and also yielded a list of competences it can be concluded that the list encompasses a rather broad range of abstract organizational competences for business suppliers.

Table 1: Stereotypical supplier competence categories (Jacob et al., 2015)

Category	Description of categories
Process orientation and efficiency	Describes suppliers' ability to create processes aiming at improving the cost-benefit relation. It refers to all business areas and contains factors that foster or hinder this relation.
Innovation orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to develop new products.
Customer orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to interact with customers and handle their expectations.

Project management orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to plan, steer, and control projects.
Quality orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to fulfill customers' requirements concerning a product or service.
Supplier–manufacturer relationship orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to manage a supplier - customer relationship.
Solution orientation	Describes suppliers' competence to find customized solutions to problems during cooperation.
Sustainability orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to manage ecological and social issues.
Technology orientation	Describes suppliers' ability to produce technologically complex products.

With regard to COO research Jacob et al.'s study (2015) lays the foundation for establishing an empirically derived measurement for future COO studies in the B2B area. No study thus far uses or provides a reliable and valid scale to measure the COO effect. As stated above most studies use criteria based on plausibility; a few identify criteria and apply them directly in their research on the COO effect. However, none of these studies submitted their criteria to a scale development procedure as recommended in Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988) and Churchill (1979). Accordingly, it remains unclear whether these criteria indeed serve as an adequate, valid, and reliable measure for COO research to differentiate supplier countries from a purchasing perspective. Hence the measurement of COO effects might still be vague and imprecise.

To address this research gap, the current paper's contribution is twofold. First, we examine whether the suggested system of nine categories can be used to develop a reliable and valid measure to differentiate supplier countries with respect to their perceived COO. On the basis of existing scales derived from literature on, for example, supplier management, we compose an item pool and submit it to a scale development procedure. The result yields a measurement to examine the COO effect more precisely with regard to supplier evaluation criteria in the B2B area.

Second, using the same data set, we further aim to draw supplier country profiles of stereotypical competences for the countries involved in this study. They may show the strengths and weaknesses of the countries in this study from a purchasing agent's perspective.

Empirical study¹

Using the conceptualization of the category system as introduced previously, we offer a proposal of how to measure the COO effect in B2B with regard to supplier evaluation criteria.

¹ As data collection is not finished yet we apologize for not being able to present data analysis and discussion. However, for the conference in September, the study will be finished completely.

According to the formal process of scale development as established by Churchill (1979) (see also Parasuraman et al., 1988), we follow the recommended steps. First, we develop a questionnaire based on the aforementioned category system. Next, we collect data with this instrument, and finally, we test for its reliability and validity.

Generation of the measurement instrument

To develop a questionnaire, we created an item pool representing all nine categories and comprising 36 statements (see Table 2). Each category is represented by four items derived from an extensive literature review on organizational competences, supplier management, and other related areas. Scale items were adapted when necessary and some categories were operationalized using items of two different scales. Scales measuring competences often take the perspective of employees within a firm; therefore, we changed the formulation of those items so that purchasing agents could answer them. We measured all items using a five-point Likert scale with answers ranging between “strongly disagree” (=1) and “strongly agree” (=5). The operationalization of the nine categories thus formed the first part of the questionnaire. To check for construct validity, we also included a direct measurement for all categories. Respondents indicated their level of competence ranging from “not competent at all” (=1) to “very competent” (=5) on a five-point Likert scale. Each category was listed in the questionnaire together with a short description of its meaning (see Table 1). Last, several questions addressed respondent demographics and described a sweepstakes in which they could participate as an incentive.

Before collecting data, we conducted a pretest with five people to ensure understanding and clarity of the questionnaire. The results prompted us to adapt several items’ formulation.

Table 2: Scale items for questionnaire

Author and year	Adapted scale items
Customer orientation competence	
Narver & Slater, 1990	Suppliers from this country have a high customer commitment. Suppliers from this country create high customer value. Suppliers from this country understand customer needs. Suppliers from this country are highly interested in satisfying their clients.
Innovation competence	
Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002	Suppliers from this country frequently try out new ideas. Suppliers from this country seek out new ways to do things. Suppliers from this country are creative in their methods of operation. Suppliers from this country are often the first to market new products and services.
Relationship competence	
Paulraj, Chen, & Flynn, 2006; Wang & Feng, 2012	Suppliers from this country expect relationships with key customers to last a long time. Suppliers from this country are good at creating relationships with key customers. Suppliers from this country use well-developed methods to improve our relationships. Suppliers from this country are good at maintaining relationship with key customers.
Solution competence	
Jacob, 2006	Suppliers from this country have the competence to design products and services for individual problem solutions.

	<p>Suppliers from this country have the competence to communicate with customers about individual problem solutions.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have the competence to create individual problem solutions efficiently.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have the competence to successfully implement problem solutions.</p>
Project management competence	
<p>Stratman and Roth, 2002</p> <p>Hillson, 2003</p>	<p>Suppliers from this country have clearly defined tasks and responsibilities of project team members when implementing a project.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country consider effective project management as critical to business success.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have a high level of familiarity and expertise in using the practical skills and techniques of project management.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country regularly apply project management processes.</p>
Process capabilities and efficiency	
<p>Möller & Törrönen, 2003;</p> <p>Nasution & Mavondo, 2008</p>	<p>Suppliers from this country strive for improvements in production capabilities.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country strive for continuous cost reduction in core processes.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country constantly update work practices to increase productivity.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country use their resources efficiently.</p>
Quality competence	
<p>Blocker, Flint, Myers, & Slater, 2011;</p> <p>Lopez-Cabrales, Valle, & Herrero, 2006</p>	<p>Suppliers from this country provide customers with excellent quality products and services.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have a strong commitment to quality at all organizational levels.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country consider ongoing quality improvement as a key objective.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have employees that critically analyze the quality of their output.</p>
Technology competence	
<p>Knight & Cavusgil, 2004</p>	<p>Suppliers from this country are at the leading technological edge of their industry.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country are recognized for products that are technologically superior.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country are highly regarded for their technical expertise in their market.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have production facilities that are equipped with advanced technology.</p>
Sustainability competence	
<p>Sharma & Vredenburg, 1998</p>	<p>Suppliers from this country have the ability to collaborate with stakeholders to find solutions to environmental problems.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have the ability to look for solutions to environmental problems from fresh angles.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have the ability to spot opportunities concerning changes in social expectations and environmental regulations.</p> <p>Suppliers from this country have the leadership in environmental regulatory compliance.</p>

Sample selection and data collection

If in quantitative research it is not possible to identify all members of the population, researchers are not able to systematically sample respondents with the aim of obtaining a representative sample as in probability sampling (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2003). In this case, purposeful sampling for quantitative research provides an alternative way of sampling. This non-probability method of sampling aims to identify information-rich subjects. Purposeful sampling selects respondents from a prespecified group, i.e. respondents are purposely sought out and sampled (Patton, 1990). Especially when access or resources are limited, this method is appropriate to find respondents.

In this research, we are interested in the purchasing agents' stereotypical perception of supplier countries. Thus, we had to systematically choose an industry sector, customer companies, and respondents to take part in our survey. We decided to use the automotive and the machinery and equipment industries. In these sectors, producers act as customers and component manufacturers act as suppliers. We included the machinery and equipment industry, even though the category system originates from the automotive sector, because our study requires a larger sample ($n > 100$), which would be difficult to attain because the automotive industry population is limited and access to respondents is difficult. Thus, we enlarged the population to increase the probability of a larger sample. As discussed previously, our category system encompasses competence categories that are not specifically typical to the automotive industry and are rather more general business supplier competences (see Möller & Törrönen, 2003). Both industries deal with development, construction, and production of complex physical products. Furthermore, for both industries supplier competences are of great importance, as manufacturers often must decide whether to possess certain competences or to access their suppliers' competences (Grant & Baden-Fuller, 1995).

We selected supplier countries on the basis of the industries chosen. The automotive supplier industry is dominated by European countries (Statista, 2012), among which France and Germany are most important with regard to total supplier turnover per year (Eurostat, 2014). We further included the United States and Japan because they directly follow the European countries in importance. Concerning the machinery and equipment industry these countries' industries are of great importance as well (Statista, 2014).

Purchasing agents or employees that work closely together with the purchasing department and also frequently interact with suppliers are those typically responsible for supplier assessment. Therefore, we targeted these persons as key informants and potential respondents of our survey.

Data were collected from the beginning of April until mid-June 2016. We carried out data collection electronically using the Limesurvey website, a popular and secure site frequently used by researchers.

Data analysis and results

Using the data collected from the online survey, we first conduct a factor analysis. In an attempt to identify underlying variables to explain the origin of correlations within all the variables, we use principal component factor analysis. Second, when factor analysis yielded the underlying factors we continue by determining whether the newly established factor structure indeed facilitates the discrimination of supplier countries in this study. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) calculation provides insights and leads to the generation of supplier country profiles showing each country's expression of the (newly established) factors.

Exploratory factor analysis yielding a revised system of competence categories

Before factor analysis, we use tests to assess the suitability of the data sample. Because the data might include substantial intercorrelation among the items, we calculate correlation coefficients of all items and provide a table showing all correlation coefficients for all items. We presume to find substantial intercorrelation, and we verify this presumption using the Bartlett test of sphericity, which tests the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. Furthermore, to conduct a factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy must be greater than 0.5. This measure varies between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 being better and 0.6 a suggested minimum we hoped to reach. The results suggest that the data could be reliably tested using factor analysis.

We then apply exploratory factor analysis to extract factors underlying our item pool using principal component analysis. A table shows the factors with all items and its loadings on the factors. Eigenvalue of all factors should exceed the threshold of 1. We also test the internal reliability of this measure. The table also presents Cronbach's alphas, which show internal consistency of the measure and item-to-total correlations.

In addition, we plan to assess discriminant validity of the resulting factors by calculating the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This criterion measures the average variance extracted and ensures that reflective constructs (e.g., the factors) have the strongest relationship with its own indicators in comparison with other constructs.

The interpretation of the results of the factor analysis might show that some competence categories which have been part of the category system yielded by the qualitative study before disappeared as they might not be able to discriminate supplier countries. In turn, new factors might emerge showing a combination of different (initial) categories or completely new factors arise that have not been detected in the qualitative study.

Analysis of variance and country profiles

In the second step of the data analysis, we aim to clarify whether differences in perception of supplier countries exist, specifically investigating the differences in categories between the four supplier countries as perceived by purchasing agents. With the revised category system quantitatively established, we next examine potential differences between supplier countries.

We conduct an ANOVA, which tests the hypothesis of equality of means of all newly established competence categories among all four supplier countries involved in this study. We suppose that this analysis results in significant differences (significance levels below 10 %).

Our newly established factor structure/revised competence category system and confirmed differences among the four supplier countries in this study enable us to build country profiles.

Conclusion

Discussion

The contribution of this paper is the development of a measurement instrument for future research on COO effects in B2B. With our instrument we enable COO researchers to measure the effect more precisely.

Second we generate supplier country profiles reflecting stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria. These profiles show the strengths and weaknesses of the countries in this study from

the perspective of purchasing agents. Thus, suppliers might recognize where they can exploit a positive image of their country as a sourcing country and adapt in areas where they are perceived as weak.

Limitations and further research

Our study solely focusses on the automotive as well as machinery and equipment industry in four countries. To sustain our results, replication in other countries is necessary. As the list of competence traits may be different in other industries further research might also modify and test the instrument with data from other industries.

(Note to Reviewers: The sections on data analysis and conclusion will be finished by middle of June and ready for the IMP conference in September.)

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