

The country of origin: a brake or an accelerator when buying a car

Teodora ROMAN*, Adriana MANOLICĂ**, Ionela MANOLE***

Abstract

This research aims to analyse the perception of the country of origin effect on the choice of a future car by the holders of a driving license, which are already possessing a car at the present moment. To solve the research problem, we can say that the results of this study would aim to answer the following questions: To what extent is the car's brand country of origin and manufacturing country known by its owners? Is there a relationship between the perceived car's brand country of origin image and its perceived quality? Are the brand's country of origin and the country of manufacture factors influencing the decision to purchase a car? Is there a connection between the perceived reliability of a car and the perception related to the country of its origin? To respond to these questions, a street survey on 100 subjects (50 men and 50 women) from Iasi, aged between 18 and 65, having a driving license and a personal car was conceived. The sampling method is random, the study being exploratory. The results can be used to issue a series of assumptions about the country of origin effect on the decision to purchase new cars and other goods.

Keywords: country of origin, car purchasing

Introduction

Over the years, communication technologies have developed at a rapid pace, and consumer information and access to a variety of international products has increased (Carter, 2009). This has greatly influenced Ernest Dichter's little "made in" phrase (1962), and the country of origin and its effects in purchasing decisions have received increased attention in international marketing and communication research (Kramer and Takada, 2008; Evanschitzky, 2008; Bloemer, 2009). Before 1918, most consumers purchased products without knowing where they came from. Only after Germany lost World War I the mandatory "Made in Germany" label was introduced for each exported product. This punishment was aimed at informing foreigners about the country of origin of the purchased product. Which led to the association of Germany with a symbol of quality (Morello, 1984).

The country of origin is a criterium used by consumers to evaluate products. Also, according to the specialty literature, it has different effects on the perception of purchasing of the consumers, especially on

*Teodora ROMAN is professor at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, e-mail: throman@uaic.ro.

**Adriana MANOLICĂ is professor at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania, e-mail: manolica@uaic.ro.

***Ionela MANOLE is student at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, e-mail: ionela.manole@uaic.ro.



the quality of the products themselves. The country of origin is defined by Bilkey and Nes (1982) as the general perception of consumers on the quality of products made in a particular country.

The importance of the country of origin has led to the development of countless studies of its impact on the decision to purchase of the final consumer. Schooler produced the first home country study in 1965 and argued that the attitude of the consumer is reflected in its purchasing decision or a product specific to a particular country.

Consumers are constantly confronted with a variety of product information, information provided through packaging, branding, advertising and other channels. These references are used by consumers to form preferences and buying decisions, but also cause emotions, feelings, images and fantasies.

The home country has both a direct effect on product evaluation and an indirect one by analysing the perception of the various attributes associated with the goods. In addition, the geographical origin of the product represents an influence on a product, to the detriment of another (Wall, 1991). It also showed that the perception towards a country where a product is produced affects the idea of consumer quality and the intention to buy products in that country. Predominantly, this literature implied that the country in which a product is made is also the country to which the brand will be traced. Due to the globalization of production and the fact that many companies outsource and produce to neighbouring or associated countries with lower manufacturing costs, there is a delimitation of the country of origin in: country of manufacture (COM) and country of origin brand (country of brand, COB). A product may be branded in country X but manufactured in country Y or Z.

The country of origin effect is defined by Bilkey and Nes (1982) as the general perception of consumers about the quality of products made in a particular country.

Over the years, communication technologies have developed at a rapid pace. The global information of consumers and the access to a variety of international products has increased (Carter, 2009). This has greatly influenced Ernst Dichter's common "made in" phrase (1962), so the country of origin and its effects in purchasing decisions have received increased attention in international marketing and communication research (Kramer and Takada 2008, Evanschitzky 2008, Bloemer, 2009).

Thus, the country of origin and its effects on product evaluation received great attention in international marketing (Bloemer, 2009; Bruning, 1997; Kramer and Takada, 2008; Dagger and Raciti, 2011; Evanschitzky, 2008; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Shimp and Sharma, 1995; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Most of these studies have focused on consumer perceptions for different product categories. Despite a large number of researches, their results on how the country of origin affects product evaluation are largely inconclusive.

Deductions regarding the country of origin are based on consumer experience with the country and products produced in that country or on their own ethnocentric trends (Hamin Elliott, 2006).

Consumers use country image as a quick link to information processing. They also prefer to adapt what they see to fit what they already know (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

A study by Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) suggests three areas of different interest in the image, focus, or object, namely:

1. The country's overall image as a country image (C.I.);
2. The image of the country and its products associated with the product image of the country of origin (P.C.I.);
3. The image of a country-specific product is defined as an image of the country-defining product (C.R.P.I).

The first point puts the individualist ideas and stereotypes formed about a particular country at the forefront. This image is formed by the representative products of the country, the level of industrialization, the technological development, the economic, cultural and political situation (Pappu, 2007).

In contrast, the image of the country of origin product refers to individual attitudes to the production system in the country of origin. In other words, the PCI expresses the consumer's general awareness of the quality of the products (in terms of design, innovation, prestige or production) manufactured in a particular country (Visbal *et al.*, 2017).

The image of the defining product for a country puts in the forefront the preference of individuals for a product category specific to a country. This construction includes a wider range of information compared to PCI, the latter providing analysis based on non-specific products in a particular country.

The latest studies (Johnson *et al.*, 2016) have highlighted another important element, namely FIT, defined as a logical connection or the distance between perceptions of the country image and the product designed and manufactured from a particular country (Essousi and Merunka, 2007). The product evaluation is not only affected by the image of the country of origin, but also by the logical perception and the continued capacity of a country to produce a category of products from a particular country. If the FIT between country and product category is positive or negative, the image of the product will also be positive or negative. In other words, only the expansion of a brand to other products can take advantage of the positive effect of the main brand, in the same way the positive effect of the country can be transferred to a product if the latter is logically correlated with the country of origin.

Acquisition of products depends on the power of their country of origin on the perception of the final consumer, as the country is very important when deciding to buy a product. A common example is the purchase of a car because the customer (consumer) is very interested in both the country of origin and the country of manufacture because it distinguishes between these two notions:

while the country of origin is where the idea starts and the manufacturing model, the country of manufacture may be the country where the product itself is produced. The two concepts may coincide, but there are situations where it is decided to manufacture a product in another country due to lower costs and higher human resources. The most plausible example for this statement is Volkswagen, which has both home and manufacturing countries in Germany.

The image of the country does not overlap with the image of the brand, each influences in one way or another the buyer's intention to buy, but also his behavior on different products in one area or another. First of all, the personal experience of a country you acquire during holidays or business trips plays a crucial role in the image of the visited country. When an interlocutor did not have a first experience with the country being discussed, the words and impressions of the other participant in the discussion influence the image of the country created in the mind of the other. In addition to this, the pre-existing national stereotypes, the performance of teams in national sports, political events, and portraits created in the minds of consumers about some countries in films, television or the media, the quality of the emanated brands, the behavior of individuals associated with a particular country and the list can continue indefinitely. These inputs can lead to a positive / negative image of the country image, even before considering the effect these factors have on the image and implicitly on the purchasing power.

The most representative examination of the image of the country takes precedence over Nebenzahl, Jaffe and Usunier (2003) who have defined the image of the country as "the impact of a country's perceptions and generalizations on the individual's individual rating on a product category, and / or country-specific brands." Usunier and Lee (2005) confirm how quickly the image of the country is affected by the multitude of impressions / opinions created during conversations combined with: the influence on the brand and the country of origin on the image of a generic product, the national image of the production, the image of the country, the image of the brand distributed on the label of each product. An example of the importance of the national image of the country over the product categories can be seen in the Whiskey Association, which aims to prosecute and punish companies trying to sell a supposedly scotch product on the market, a product that does not meet the rigorous criteria for the generic product, "Scotch".

1. Research Premises

Many countries have become appreciated for the experience they have shown in various areas, product categories, or for the transmission of a particular image. An enterprise, to build a brand image, can

use a very important element, namely the country of origin. The image of a product, perceived in the minds of consumers, is influenced by a number of factors, including the country of origin of the brand.

Thus, when a brand is associated with its home country, consumers may consider that certain country-specific features are succeeded by the brand. In the mind of the consumer one can build the idea that, in a certain aspect that can be true about the country of origin, automation must also be true about the brand. These global associations depend on the country-recognized reputation and on the level of information held by consumers. The more the similarity between the brand and the country of origin is perceived as stronger, the more likely it is for individuals to make more associations between the two components. For example, some countries have run ad campaigns to promote their products. Puerto Rico promotes the value of rum produced in their country by advertising, and Germany supports BMW, Mercedes or Audi brand cars.

The fact that the country of origin of a product may influence consumer behavior to some extent requires a deeper debate, especially among the citizens of Iasi. Because although there have been many studies on this issue, but not at the level of our country, further studies are still needed to provide meaningful implications. Through this study, we want to find out if the country of origin contributes to the purchasing decision of consumers in Iași and also the importance they have given it. Another aspect to be attained is to establish the level of knowledge of both the country of origin and the country of manufacture that 'made in'. The country of manufacture of a product may be multiple (for example Audi manufactures both in Slovakia, Belgium and China, Sony assembles electrical equipment in Malaysia, Volkswagen assembles German cars in Mexico, Ikea manufactures Swedish furniture in Thailand and the major French perfume companies also produce in Italy).

2. Purpose, objectives and hypotheses of the research

Starting from the above-mentioned idea, the research aims to highlight possible links between the perception of the country of origin of the brand and the choice of a car, as well as the determination of the degree of importance of this perception among the criteria for choosing a car.

Thus, the main objective of the research is to analyse the impact of the country of origin on the decision to purchase a car taken by persons in possession of a driving license and a family car.

As far as the secondary objectives are concerned, they are:

- Establishing the level of acquaintance with the country of origin of the car brand owned by the respondent's family;
- Determining the degree of acquaintance with the country of manufacture of the car model owned by the respondent's family;

- Determining the extent to which the image of the country of origin of the car brand determines its perceived quality;
- Determining the factors that influence the decision of the respondents to purchase a car;
- Determining perceptions of the reliability or accessibility of a car according to its country of origin.

Starting from the study of the specialty literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. The level of acquaintance with the country of origin of the family owned car brand is high (Kramer et.al, 2008);

H2. Knowing the country of manufacture of the car model owned by the respondent's family is on a lower level (Usunier, JC, 2006);

H3. The perceived image of the country of origin of the brand influences consumer perception of product quality (Han and Qualls, 1985);

H4. There is a link between the perception of the country of origin of the brand and the decision to buy a car (Laroche et.al, 2005);

H5. Germany has the strongest perception of the country of origin, being the leader in terms of reliability and affordability of cars (Bhaskaran and Sukumaran, 2007).

3. Research methodology

Starting from the research theme and the established objectives, we used the street investigation as a method, and the questionnaire as a tool, which was applied in three of the busiest areas in Iasi city. The run-off was 10 April - 17 April 2017. The questionnaire was applied to 100 people, 50 male and 50 female, aged 18 to 69, from Iasi. Only the legal adults were chosen because according to the law in Romania 18 years is the minimum age to hold a category B driving license. According to the Romanian police, there is no maximum age in our country, but with the passage of years the reflexes or the sight of the people become weaker, they do not have the same concentration of strength, and the risk of a heart attack is high. We wanted to analyse both young people, second-age and third-age people. According to a recent study in the UK, the threshold at which people begin to feel "at the age of two" is 55 years old. Thus, we consider that the maximum age of 69 years of the chosen sample is optimal and representative to achieve the objectives of the study.

Another reason for age-based sample selection is defined by the fact that they have the potential to own at least one family car and the likelihood of having minimal knowledge of cars is high. There

is also the possibility of wanting to purchase a new car, especially among young people who want to be always fashionable.

4. Research results analysis and interpretation

H1. The level of acquaintance with the country of origin of the family owned car brand is high (Kramer et.al, 2008).

73% of respondents, accounting for more than half, know the country of origin of the car brand owned by their family. Of those who do not know the country of origin of the car brand (27%), 25% consider the availability of information about it to be low and 5% even accuse their lack of interest.

Thus, due to the high level of knowledge, it can be said that the country of origin is part of the respondents' interest.

By analysing the gender distribution of responses, we see that it is relatively balanced, yet having more men (38/50) familiar with the country of origin than women (35/50).

The main reasons for this difference can be determined by the lack of attention paid by female people to the automobile domain, seeing the cars as just a simple means of transport. According to the Daedalus Millward Brown study, women drive on a smaller scale than that of men, while males have a higher affinity for cars, representing their most important possession.

A study by the European Consumer Organization (BEUC) states that most consumers want to know the country of origin of the food. Thus, if the value of small products is to know the country of origin, then for a high value product (car, house), the second stage of the purchasing decision process (Searching for information) is more important and requires a longer time.

Thus, we can say that the H1 hypothesis is confirmed.

H2. Knowing the country of manufacture of the car model owned by the respondent's family is on a lower level (Usunier, 2006).

The fact that surveyed people have a 65% knowledge of the country of manufacture of the car model owned by their families shows their active orientation to the defining elements for the purchase of a car. As it is important to know what we buy, it is just as precious to know where to buy.

Firstly, it should be noted that the country of manufacture is different from the country of origin. Thus, the country of origin is the "mother" of the brand (being only one), whereas the country of manufacture may differ and may be one or more (a product may be manufactured in a country x and assembled in a country y). So some car manufacturers prefer to manufacture cars in cheap labor areas (India, China) in order to reduce their costs.

A proportion of 35% respondents do not know the country of manufacture, that "made in ". One reason behind this percentage is determined by the fact that either in the mind of the consumer the gap between the country of manufacture and the country of origin is not clear either because of the carmakers presenting factories in several countries, making the consumer a bit disoriented, or simply does not want to attach importance, considering other aspects as being fundamental.

We notice that 39 out of 50 men know the country of manufacturing of their car, compared to 32 out of 50 women. Although the difference is clearly in favor of men, in both cases more than 50% of respondents know it, so H2 hypothesis is not confirmed.

H3. The perceived image of the country of origin of the brand influences consumer perception of product quality (Han and Qualls, 1985).

The questioned people totally agree in a 42% ratio with the fact that the image of the country of origin reflects the quality of the products in the present car. Thus, if the image of the country of origin of the car brand is poor, there are people who immediately make a correlation between this image and the quality of the car and may end up refusing to purchase just for that reason. Since Germany is one of the most developed countries in the world, occupying a well-established place in the European Union, its image is positive and well-built, and 75% agree to buy a car, with only information on country of origin. At the moment, according to the 2011 Automotive Market Analysis study, more than 50% of second-hand cars are purchased from Germany, and according to the Daily Mail, the top of the cars that do not rapidly lose value in time are German.

The opposite is the Czech Republic with only 13% (total disagreement). Although it has a diversified industrial economy, its image is not one that could influence the quality of the car, and the consumer's decision to purchase is minor. Perhaps this percentage is due to political instability or the Czech Republic's level of deeper knowledge is low. The opposite is the Czech Republic with only 13% (total disagreement). Although it has a diversified industrial economy, its image is not one that could influence the quality of the car, and the consumer's decision to purchase is minor. Perhaps this percentage is due to political instability or the level of deeper knowledge about the Czech Republic is low.

Regarding the number of individuals that are between the decision to purchase a car or not to, with only information about their country of origin, only 2% is present for Germany, and for France they are on a 34% ratio. Thus, it can be said that they are people who are hard to influence or need more information when they want to purchase a car, considering the procurement process more branched. There is also the possibility of not understanding the question or simply not knowing what to answer.

40% strongly agree that the image of the country of origin is an indicator of product quality, to the detriment of those with only 1%, a total disagreement, as 42% totally agree that the image of the country of origin reflects the quality of the car, and 40% strongly agree that the country of origin is an indicator of the quality of the car. The differences are minor, which means that the respondents kept their opinion to a certain extent. It can be noted that individuals regardless of the form of addressing the image of the country of origin consider this a defining factor for the quality of the products, in the present case the car.

When we want to buy a car we show interest in its country of origin (41%). This element is of utmost importance on our part. The fact that we want to know the origin of the purchased product can either say that we are either looking to associate the product with its home country, or whether this element is one of the factors that could influence our purchasing decision.

As far as the country of manufacture is concerned, it accounts for only 30%. A reason behind this percentage could be defined by the fact that individuals consider the country of origin to be more important and more influential at the expense of manufacturing.

The percentage of 21% is represented by the respondents who totally disagree with the statement "The image of the car brand does not depend on its country of origin" and the opposite is 11%. One reason could be due to the level of notoriety and information held by the country of origin. Also, the more perceived the resemblance between the brand and the country of origin is stronger, the more likely it is for individuals to make more associations between the two components.

H4. There is a link between the perception of the country of origin of the brand and the decision to buy a car (Laroche, 2003).

Safety is a fundamental factor for people questioned when buying a car (85%). Individuals want to gain confidence in their car. Thus, those who have given this high degree of importance either have families and want to protect their children, or consider a decisive factor in the acquisition process.

On a 58% ratio, the respondents consider the exterior design important, so it can be said that the "packaging" of the car can trigger emotions and wishes, to make that purchase. As the brand of the car can determine the personality of the owner, design can also lead to the definition of the personality (Diamantopoulos, 2004). According to Daily Mail, a person who has a sports car can be a young person who loves adrenaline and has no major responsibilities, while an individual holding a limousine car can be considered a serious person with a peaceful driving style.

50% of the respondents believe it is very important that the interior of a car is comfortable, considering it a very important factor for the desired car. Many of us are looking for convenience at home, where we spend most of their time, choosing the right furniture, but also at work or in our own

car, as we spend at least one hour a day in traffic. Thus, more and more car manufacturers invest millions of euros in studies seeking to provide consumers with the highest degree of comfort.

Due to either fuel rises or the economic crisis and not only, the Romanians' budgets have been affected. We all want that when we are buying a product, it does not require much money to support it. According to *Promotor.ro*, a Romanian spends on average 30% of the salary with car maintenance. So, in the decision of the respondents to purchase a car, the "convenient maintenance" factor also contributes to 58%.

The percentage of 50%, representing the "country of origin of the brand" factor, is important in the decision of respondents when purchasing a car. This factor positively influences their decision. A reason for these answers can be determined by individuals who want to know their country of origin in order to make an association with the car brand, because for some the product depends on the power of their country of origin.

In terms of car price, it is given a very high importance (57%), especially by people with income between 1001-2001 Ron. One reason why people with pay between 1001-2001 Ron is determined by the fact that they represent 51% of the respondents.

It can be noticed that for men the exterior design is important to be attractive (34%). One reason that determined this percentage is that the car's design can form an image of the holder or a higher status. Likewise, men tend to attribute a nickname to their car, thus establishing a close relationship between the car and its owner. At the opposite end there are 24% females. These consider other factors with a higher degree of importance that could influence their decision to purchase a car.

In terms of the "comfortable indoor" factor, the major percentage is given by the female, considering it very important (26%) in the purchase decision of a car, compared to the male giving 24%. An argument behind these percentages may be that women require more space to store certain items, for example a study in the UK states that female people take a double number of luggage to men in holidays.

Both female and male consider very important the "convenient maintenance" factor, giving each one a 29%. Both genders believe that safety for a car is very important, since the difference between the percentages granted is minor (female - 43%, male - 42%).

As I mentioned above, the country of origin influences the purchase decision of a car, as the male claims that it is a very important factor in the purchasing decision process of 17%, to the detriment of the females at a higher level low percentage (13%).

In conclusion, the decision to purchase a car for females is more diverse than that of the males. Also, for the people surveyed, the country of origin again plays an important role in the decision to buy a car. Thus, 80% of the respondents totally agree to purchase a German car, and the opposite is

the case of the Czech Republic. The fact that individuals have given 80% is not accidental, because 39% of people questioned have a family car made in Germany, such as Opel or Volkswagen. One reason could be the price of cars, their reliability or accessibility. Germany has also built a strong image of the car market over the years, imposing stronger brands on the market.

The second place is Japan with 37% among the countries of origin where it would be totally agreeable for the respondents to buy a car. Japan is considered one of the most powerful countries in the world. Cars such as Honda, Toyota or Mazda are sought after by the surveyed individuals.

H5. Germany has the strongest perception of the country of origin, being the leader in terms of reliability and affordability of cars (Bhaskaran and Sukumaran, 2007).

Of the people surveyed, after learning that the country of manufacture is different from the country of origin of the brand, some continued the acquisition, but not all. So, if individuals were totally willing to buy a 80% car from Germany after they found out that the country of manufacture was different, the percentage dropped to 46%. So it can be said that not everyone is interested in which part of the world the car is made of, as long as it is a German brand. Again, Germany is the leader in the country of origin from where the 18-69 year olds surveyed in Iasi are totally agreeing to complete a car purchase process.

When we want to buy a car, the decision-making process is more rigorous. Reliability is among the first three elements taken into consideration in the purchase decision of a car. Germany is the country that dominates the ranking with respect to the reliability of the cars in terms of tracks (79%). One reason that has led to the definition of this percentage can be determined by the specific features of the German people (civilized, strict, punctual, etc.), but also by the great luxury brands for people with higher income (Mercedes, Audi etc.) and middle-income (Opel, Volkswagen).

At the opposite 4% of the respondents fully agree with the fact that the Czech Republic is the country of origin for reliable cars (Skoda). An argument that determined this percentage could be the image of the Czech Republic is not a country that could influence the quality of the car, and the consumer's decision to purchase is minor or the persons questioned do not see in the Czech Republic the cars to provide their safety to travel for a while without any malfunctions.

Maintaining a car is an important aspect to consider when purchasing it. Thus, 50% of surveyed individuals totally agree with the fact that Germany is the country of origin, which has conveniently-maintained cars in terms of parts. So, Germany gets the crown in the rankings followed by: Japan, France, Italy and the Czech Republic.

Conclusions

As a result of the research on the impact of the country of origin on the decision to purchase a car, by the holders of a driving license and a family car, it emerged that the country of origin reflects a positive influence on the choice of products, in this case cars. Consumers thus form a general perception of the products in a particular country, depending on their previous perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the country's production and marketing.

The image, the reputation, the stereotypes that consumers attach to products in a particular country can be induced by their country of origin. This image can be created by representative products, national characteristics, economic and political situation, history and traditions.

Over the years, information gathering methods have changed, becoming more and more modern. A study by the European Consumer Organization (BEUC) states that most consumers want to know the country of origin of the food. Thus, if for small value products it is desired to know the country of origin, then for a product (car, house) of high value, the second stage of the purchasing process, "Searching for information", is more important and requires for a longer time to process.

73%, more than half of the respondents, know the country of origin of the car brand owned by their family. The concept of the country of origin of a product in the present case has maintained its popularity among the people surveyed.

In terms of gender differences, these are significant, meaning male people have a higher level of knowledge of the country of origin of the family car brand owned by the family compared to female people. This is due either to the fact that women drive less than men and their interest is diminished regarding the car (according to a study by Daedalus Millward Brown), or the male has both an affinity for cars and a high level of interest in their characteristics.

The buyer's intention to purchase various products may change from year to year due to various economic or social changes, but the country of origin remains the only item that cannot be changed, on the other hand, the country of manufacture can also be changed, but again the country of origin remains the same regardless of cultural change.

Another interesting element is the fact that male people have a high level of knowledge of the country of manufacture of the family-owned car model, to the detriment of females who lack the same degree of knowledge. An argument that could be the basis of this result could be determined by the fact that the number of car dealers is largely represented by the males, since working in this field requires knowing the characteristics of your products, to be as best as possible working as a sales agent.

As we know the image is of great importance, because it is the one that defines us. It can be said that in some cases, countries use their name to promote their products. Even if countries of origin do not use their own name as a conscious brand, their image influences individuals' decisions.

The image of the country of origin reflects the quality of the products, in this case the car. The reasons can be determined either by the fact that the persons questioned associate the image of the country with products (cars) in order to judge and classify them according to the perceived quality and the levels of risk, so it is likely that the country of origin will influence a future acquisition (aspect confirmed in hypothesis 4). Or, in some cases, individuals use the image of the country of origin of that product as a quick link to processing information, preferring to adapt what they see to fit what they know.

A total of 75% agree to buy a car from Germany only having information about its country of origin. At the opposite end, the Czech Republic is only about 13% on a scale of interest. It can be said that the country of origin, besides the role of signal of quality, it has a symbolic and emotional sense for individuals. Thus, respondents are likely to link the country of origin not only to product quality but also to feelings, national pride and memories of holidays.

This percentage is also based on the country image that has a decisive influence on the acquisition process. It has been built over many years, as well as stereotypes and culture, affecting consumer opinion of products in one country or another.

40% of respondents strongly agree that the image of the country of origin is an indicator of product quality, to the detriment of those with only 1% total disagreement. The respondents kept their opinion to a certain extent. It can be noted that individuals irrespective of the form of addressing the image of the country of origin, they consider it a defining factor for the quality of the products, in this case the car.

Safety is a fundamental factor for people questioned when buying a car (85%). Also, in 58%, respondents consider the important external design, so it can be said that the "packaging" of the car can trigger emotions and wishes, to make that purchase. As the brand of the car can determine the personality of the owner, the design can also lead to the definition of the personality (Diamantopoulos, 2004).

The percentage of 50%, representing "the country of origin of the brand" factor, is important in the decision of the respondents when buying a car. This factor positively influences their decision. A reason for these answers can be determined by the fact that individuals want to know the country of origin in order to make connections between them and the brand of their car or for some the product depends strictly on the power of the respective country of origin.

As we know in everyday life there are personal differences between opposite sex. When it comes to buying a car, the desires and factors that influence buying decisions differ from gender to gender. Thus, it was concluded that the decision-making process to purchase a car for females is considerably different to that of the males.

For those questioned, the home country plays an important role in the purchase decision of a car, since 80% of the respondents are totally agreeing to purchase a car from Germany, and the opposite is the Czech Republic. One reason could be the price of cars, their reliability or accessibility. Germany has also built a strong image of the car market over time, imposing stronger brands on the market.

It should be noted that respondents, although they learned that the country of manufacture (in a developing country) is different from the country of origin, some of them continued to make the acquisition, but in a smaller percentage. So, it can be said that the people questioned rely on the country of origin of the brand and do not care about where in the world the car is manufactured as long as it is a German brand. Again, Germany is the leader in terms of the country of origin from where the 18-69 year old surveyed in Iași totally agree to carry out a car purchase process. The country of origin plays an important role in the five analysed countries: Germany, the Czech Republic, Japan, Italy and France, and each acquisition decision is influenced by cultural stereotypes and not only.

When we want to buy a car, the decision-making process is more rigorous. Reliability is among the first three elements taken into consideration in the purchase decision of a car. Germany is the country of origin that dominates the reliability of cars in terms of parts (79%). One reason that has led to the definition of this percentage can be determined by the features specific to the German people (civilized, strict, punctual, etc.), but also to luxury brands for high-income (Mercedes, Audi, etc.) and middle-income (Opel, Volkswagen).

In a 4% ratio, respondents totally agree that the Czech Republic is the country of origin for reliable cars (Skoda). An argument that determined this percentage could be the image of the Czech Republic. It is not a country that could influence the quality of the car, and the consumer's decision to purchase is minor or the persons questioned do not see in the Czech Republic the cars to provide their safety to travel continuously without any malfunctions.

Maintaining a car is important to take into consideration when purchasing it. Thus, 50% of the surveyed individuals are totally in agreement that Germany is the country of origin, which has conveniently-maintained cars in terms of parts. So Germany gets the crown in the rankings followed by: Japan, France, Italy and the Czech Republic.

In conclusion, according to the confirmed assumptions (hypothesis no.1, no.3, no.4 and no.5), the country of origin of the brand has a well-defined role and generates a positive effect on the decision-making process of purchasing a car. It is used as an overall product quality symbol, it is also an image attribute that links a product to the symbolic and emotional benefits, including social status and national pride.

Future research may investigate which processes lead to a positive or negative association with the product. Is the country stereotypes helping an association? Or is about the national identity? Also,

further analyses can follow the image of the European countries in the current political context (Brexit or the Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union activation).

References

- Bhaskaran, S. and Sukumaran, N. (2007), Contextual and methodological issues in COO studies, *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 25(1).
- Bilkey, W. and Nes E. (1982), Country of Origins Effects on Product Evaluations, *Journal of International Business Studies*, 10(1).
- Bloemer, J., Brijs, K. and Kasper, H. (2009), The CoO-ELM model: A theoretical framework for the cognitive processes underlying country of origin-effects, *European Journal of Marketing*, 43(1/2).
- Bruning E. R. (1997), Country of origin, national loyalty and product choice- The case of international air travel, *International Marketing Review*, 14(1).
- Carter, L. L. (2009), Consumer receptivity of foreign products: The roles of country -of -origin image, consumer ethnocentrism and animosity, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Dagger T. S. and Raciti M. M. (2011), Matching consumers' country and product image perceptions: an Australian perspective, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 28(3).
- Diamantopoulos A. (2004), Domestic country bias, country-of-origin effects, and consumer ethnocentrism: A multidimensional unfolding approach, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 32.
- Dichter, E. (1962), *The World Consumer*, Wiley Periodicals, Inc., Hoboken, NJ.
- Evanschitzky, H. (2008), Consumer ethnocentrism in the German market, *International Marketing Review*, 25(1).
- Hamin, E. G. (2006), A less-developed country perspective of consumer ethnocentrism and "country-of-origin" effects: Indonesian evidence, *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 18(2).
- Hamzaoui-Essoussi, L., Merunka, D. and Bartikowski, B. (2010), Brand origin and country of manufacture influences on brand equity and the moderating role of brand typicality, *Journal of Business Research*, 64(9).
- Han, C. M. and Qualls, W. J. (1985), Country of origin effects and their impact upon consumers perception of quality in Historical Perspective, in: Jagdish N. S. and Chin T. T. (eds.) *Consumer Research: National and International Perspectives*, Singapore: Association for Consumer Research, pp. 162-167.

- Johnson, Z. S., Tian, Y., and Lee, S. (2016), Country-of-origin fit: When does a discrepancy between brand origin and country of manufacture reduce consumers' product evaluations? *Journal of Brand Management*, 23(4), pp. 403–418
- Kotler Ph. And Gertner D. (2002), Country as Brand, Product, and Beyond: A Place Marketing and Brand Management Perspective, *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 9
- Kramer, T., Takada, H. and Chattalas, M. (2008), The impact of national stereotypes on the country of origin effect: A conceptual framework, *International Marketing Review*, 25(1).
- Laroche, M. (2005), The influence of country image structure on consumer evaluations of foreign products, *International Marketing Review*, 22(1).
- Morello, G. (1984), The 'Made In' Issue: A Comparative Research on the Image of Domestic and Foreign Products, *European Research*, 12 (January).
- Nebenzahl, I. D., Jaffe, E.D. and Usunier J. C. (2003), Personifying Country of Origin Research, *Management International Review*, 43(4), pp. 383-406.
- Pappu R., Quester P. G. and Cooksey R. W. (2007), Country image and consumer-based brand equity: Relationships and implications for international marketing, *Journal of International Business Studies*, 38(5).
- Roth K. P., Diamantopoulos A. (2009), Advancing the country image construct, *Journal of Business Research*, 62(7).
- Roth M. S., Romeo J. B. (1992), Matching Product Category And Country Image Perceptions: A Framework For Managing Country-Of-Origin Effects, *Journal of International Business Studies*, 23(3).
- Shimp, T. A. and Sharma, S. (1995), Consumer Ethnocentrism: A Test of Antecedents and Moderators, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(1).
- Usunier J. C. (2006), Relevance in business research: The case of country of origin, *Research in marketing European Management Review*, 3(1).
- Usunier, J. C., and ee, J. A. (2005), *Marketing Across Culture*, 4th Edition, Prentice Hall.
- Verlegh, P. W. J and Steenkamp, J. (1999), A review and meta-analysis of country-of-origin research, *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 20(5).
- Visbal, O, Herrera-Mendoza, K., Orozco-Acosta, E. and Herzberg, M. (2017), The Influence of Country of Origin Cues on Product Evaluation: Evidence from Swiss and German Consumers, *Journal of Technology Management & Innovation*, 12(2).
- Wall M., Liereld J. and Heslop L.A. (1991), Impact of country-of-origin cues on consumer judgments in multi-cue situation: A covariance analysis, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 19(2).