

Where Does Our Food Come From?—The Relevance of Source of Origin in International Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Regulations requiring the identification of the Source of Origin (SofO) of food products in most developed countries offer a potential source of competitive advantage to firms by using the SofO as part of a branding strategy. This study investigates the different images held by consumers for an SofO in a target market and how these images compare with those held for other SofOs both within and across markets. The findings suggest that SofO is a complex concept that potentially offers a source of competitive advantage but that it should not be studied in isolation from other competing SofOs.

INTRODUCTION

Regulations regarding food products in most developed markets now require firms to clearly identify the Source of Origin (SofO) for their products at the point of sale (Loureiro & McCluskey 2000). EU regulations 2081/92 and 2082/92 provide for the protection of geographic indications and designations of origin for agricultural products and by the end of the year 2000 526 names had been registered, including Parma Ham, Champagne and Galician Veal (Dimara & Skuras 2003; Loureiro & McCluskey, 2000). WTO negotiations on the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights allow non-EU countries to apply for protection of their products and to object to EU product registrations where there is a legitimate interest (Dimara & Skuras, 2003).

As well as official, regulated designations of SofO and quality, there are also designations established by industry bodies to infer origin or to act as a guarantee of quality from a specific place, region or country. These include the Tartan mark of the Scottish Quality Salmon Association and the Parmigiano Reggiano mark stamped on Parmesan cheeses by the Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano Reggiano. Individual firms also use specific place names in their produce to infer origin or to act as a brand, but sometimes they do not genuinely correspond with an actual geographic origin. Differentiation by SofO should allow a product to command a premium price, but consumers must be able to perceive a higher quality as well as being able to differentiate the product from others (Loureiro & McCluskey 2000).

In marketing research the SofO has been viewed variously as a product cue, a product attribute, or a brand (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Several studies have compared the effect of different SofOs on products, but few studies have compared the effect of different SofOs across multiple target markets. The work of Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) has illustrated that national markets can be very different and that international marketing more often than not requires customised strategies (Usunier, 2000; Roth, 1995).

Given the increasing relevance of SofO to food products, this paper addresses the importance of understanding the different consumer perceptions faced in export markets for food products. First consumers in different target markets may have different perceptions of the same SofO. Second, in each target markets there may be several competing SofOs, which constitutes a unique competitive context of multiple exporters on each market. We therefore argue that we need to know both the absolute and relative

position of an SofO in a target market to be able to determine whether a specific SofO have the necessary leverage and competitive position to benefit from the SofO in the marketing mix.

First we give a brief introduction to the importance of SofO to food products in international markets. Then we discuss how an SofO can be used as part of a branding strategy. To explore our propositions we use data from an attribute elicitation study, which we conducted among a small sample of consumers in three different target/country markets. The data—a multi source and multi target country data matrix (3x3)—gives us a unique opportunity both to explore one country's image across multiple markets, and to study relative position of different sources of origin in different target markets.

IMPORTANCE OF SOURCE OF ORIGIN TO FOOD PRODUCTS

Even if food products would appear to embody strong associations with places as they have a geographic origin by nature the body of research on SofO with respect to food products is scarce (Juric & Worsley, 1998; Tregear et al, 1998). Evidence suggests that there are often strong historical and symbolic links between places and foods due to the interactions between natural resources and people's lifestyles (Tregear et al, 1998). Consumers can use SofO as surrogate information for unfamiliar products and in evaluation of intrinsic food characteristics that are difficult to define (Juric & Worsley, 1998). Perceived quality is related to a product's ability to provide satisfaction and a consistent level of performance, taste, freshness, aroma and other properties (Dimara & Skuras, 2003). Perceptions of taste are formed on experience, so consumers use general country attitudes to evaluate the taste of unfamiliar products (Juric & Worsley, 1998). Geographic associations may be considered quality cues by making reference to socially constructed attributes such as being authentic, healthy, and traditional (Dimara & Skuras, 2003).

A change in labelling or information can change the consumers' perceptions and behaviour (Loureiro & McCluskey, 2000). One element of success for the protected EU designation PGI (Protection of Geographic Indication) is the collective reputation of the products covered. When the reputation is good, the label becomes a powerful tool signalling quality, especially where the firm is unknown (Loureiro & McCluskey, 2000). In particular PGI can play an important role for the higher quality/higher value products and may facilitate the identification of more specific SofOs that are perceived to affect the taste and quality of the product (Loureiro & McCluskey, 2000; Bjørkum, 1999).

SOURCE OF ORIGIN AS A BRAND

Some firms attempt to develop competitive advantage based on familiarity with SofO, using an SofO and its secondary associations as a kind of branding strategy (Keller, 1993). Both brands and SofO provide identification and allow a degree of protection from imitation. They also both influence consumer perceptions and, in so doing, assist in the reduction of perceived risk in a purchase. It is therefore important for a firm seeking to adopt such a branding strategy to learn about and understand the associations and images

that the consumers in a target market have for a particular SofO. These associations and images are in the minds of the consumers in the target market, and it is therefore important to study them in the target market where these images exist (Roth 1995). An SofO image can be viewed as the “total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs about a particular country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993, p193). The concept of SofO Image corresponds to the concept of Brand Image, and can be defined as: “the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country based on their prior perceptions of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses” (Roth & Romeo, 1992, p480).

Like a Brand Image, SofO Image is a knowledge structure, with associations varying in uniqueness, favourability, strength and salience (Papadopolous & Heslop, 1993). When consumers have a high depth of awareness of an SofO and strong, favourable and unique associations, there is an opportunity for value to be created by using the SofO to differentiate the product. Elicitation of both SofO Image associations and other target market characteristics are crucial to create an optimal match (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 1993). This process may be influenced by the degree of sophistication and maturity of both the production culture and the consumption culture. There are many good examples of products where this can be seen, with some notable examples being Havana cigars, Champagne, Parma ham, Scottish malt whisky, and Norwegian salmon; all products with mature production and sophisticated consumption cultures.

Developing an understanding of the image held by consumers in a target market of a specific SofO is not enough in itself for a firm seeking to find and leverage competitive advantage. Firms are rarely alone in a target market. There are usually many competing exporters within a target market and consumers in the target market have SofO Images for these other exporters as well. Before deciding on a branding strategy that uses SofO a firm needs to know the relative position of their SofO Image when compared to the images of the competing exporters/sources held by target market consumers. Comparing the strength, favourability and uniqueness (Keller 1993) of competing SofOs both between and within target markets will allow the identification of the competitive landscape of SofOs. A strong and favourable image is a prerequisite for any successful branding strategy (Aaker 1995). However, when competing with other suppliers unique associations are crucial in addition to strength and favourability of associations (Keller 1993). If the relative SofO Image is weak or negative, there is no competitive advantage in using the SofO as part of a branding strategy.

- Proposition 1: Customers in different target markets may have different associations of one Source of Origin
- Proposition 2: The strength and favourability of customer associations of one Source of Origin may differ across target markets
- Proposition 3: One Source of Origin may have different competitive positions relative to other sources of origin in different target markets

Together the three propositions define the cross-national competitive landscape of multiple sources of origin that operate on the same international markets. Leverage associated with SofO in one market requires strong, favourable, and unique associations compared to the competing sources of origin. It is also expected that the relative position of one SofO may differ across target markets (Roth 1992).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Salmon aquaculture case study. The seafood industry is increasingly organised through a variety of international relationships, with fish drawn into trans-national commodity chains and with global expansion creating new relationships among production strategies (Mansfield, 2003). For these reasons the aquaculture industry makes an interesting case study to look at the applicability of an SofO co-branding strategy. This study compare and contrast the strength of SofO Awareness and the SofO Images for three source countries (Canada, Chile and Norway), who are major suppliers of salmon on international markets (Bjørndal, 1990). The three target markets studied-France, Japan and Sweden-are major importers of salmon (Bjørndal, 1990).

Primary data from a multi-country study forms the core of this paper. We organised a team of researchers with local knowledge of each target market (Paris: Doctoral student fluent in French; Gothenburg: Master student at a Swedish University; Tokyo: Japanese employee at the Norwegian Embassy in Tokyo). The questionnaire consisted of two parts: a structured questionnaire and a free elicitation part. In the free elicitation section the consumers were asked to come up with as many country associations as possible. The countries were presented in the following order; Canada, Norway, Chile, for half of the consumers, and in reverse order for the other half. The respondents were then asked to mark the valence of the associations listed in the free elicitation. The respondent marked positive associations by drawing a circle around them, underlined neutral associations, and drew a box around negative associations.

In the structured part the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which he or she agreed with 17 statements about the source countries. The respondents were asked to answer on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) and asked to indicate an answer even if they were not very familiar with the countries. Six of the statements were concerning the respondents’ attitude towards the country in general, five about attitude towards products of the country, two statements about attitude toward visiting the country, one statement about purchase intentions for products and two statements about purchase intention for salmon.

This required a lot of effort from the respondents and the sample in each country is therefore rather small-a total of 120 consumers in France, Japan and Sweden (40 in each) were questioned about three source countries (Canada, Chile, and Norway). In each target country half of the respondents were recruited outside a supermarket and the other half were recruited outside a travel agency. In this way the sample included respondents both in the mood for food and international experiences. The sample is not statistically representative. Our focus and priorities were to achieve qualitative rich data that gave us the opportunity to discern complex patterns of variation in country associations (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The questionnaire was translated from English into Swedish, French, and Japanese by people with proficiency in these languages. The questionnaire was then translated back to English by different language experts before being issued to ensure it was unambiguous and equivalent to the English version. The data was collected in the spring of 2000.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The image of the SofO was evaluated in terms of Attributes and Attitudes. The relative strength and favourability of the SofO association were compared for each target market and any strong, unique associations for each source country were identified. Additionally, a special attention was given to products associated with each SofO.

Image attributes were measured by associations written in the free elicitation of the questionnaire. The five most important associations were identified to recognise image attributes strongly or uniquely associated to the source countries in the target markets. The relative importance of associations was identified by the number of total mentions and the five most important ones are presented in an ordinal scale of relative strength 1-5 (15 or more mentions=5; 11-14 mentions=4; 7-10=3; 4-6 mentions=2; 4 or less mentions=1). Each of the associations is also presented with a valence given by the consumers themselves (+=positive, -= negative, "blank"=neutral) and with a reference to whether it was unique for the SofO in the particular target market or not. In addition, we comment on the awareness of each SofO based on the number of associations mentioned for each source country.

Attitudes were evaluated from the 17 statements about the source countries the consumers responded to. They were examined on five sublevels; attitude toward the country in general, attitude toward products of the country, attitude toward visiting the country, attitude toward purchasing a product of the country, and attitude toward purchasing salmon originating from the country. As there were different numbers of questions behind each sublevel of attitude, the results were made more easily understandable and comparable by creating an index of attitude on an interval scale ranging from 0 to 1.. A 0 then represents a very negative attitude in the individual index (or the most negative answer possible in each question in the sublevel) and a 1 represents a very positive attitude in the index (or the most positive answer possible in each question in the sublevel). These are compared within and across target markets for each source country.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings are summarised in two tables and presented separately for each market. Table 1 depicts the results from the elicitations and Table 2 depicts the results from the attitudes measured in the questionnaire.

Sweden: An open and knowledgeable market. In Sweden the strength, favourability and uniqueness of the associations that comprised the SofO Images for the source countries differed somewhat. Canada had relatively strong associations and these were regarded very favourably by the Swedes. Canada and Norway also shared many associations (for example fish) but some unique associations existed for Canada. Ice hockey was a strong one and there were several nature related ones as well depicting Canada as a large, wild, untouched country, with bears another unique association.

The SofO Image associations for Norway were very strong and quite favourable, although the closeness of Norway and Sweden probably leads to the Swedes being more open and associating a lot of negative things as well as the positive ones to Norway. For Norway the close relationship and similarity between Norway and Sweden, the fjords and the very strong association with salmon gave some unique associations.

The strength of associations was relatively low for Chile compared to the other source countries and a lot of the associations were negative. Chile had mostly negative unique associations but the Swedish consumers did relate wine to Chile, unique to Chile in this study.

These findings could suggest that Swedes would be more likely to buy Norwegian products than Canadian or Chilean products, with Canadian products in turn being favoured over Chilean products. This should be more so in the case of salmon.

The Swedish consumers had a similar attitude towards Canada and Norway (although slightly more positive for Norway), but they

differed in purchase intention and intention to visit. They were much more likely to visit Norway than Canada which was probably closely related to the geographical closeness of the two countries.

The Swedes had a more neutral attitude toward purchasing Norwegian products than products of the other two source countries, with both Canada and Chile receiving negative purchase intentions. The picture was very different with regards to salmon purchase intentions. Swedes were very strongly positive towards Norwegian salmon, neutral towards Canadian salmon and negative towards Chilean salmon. Even though the Swedes had quite favourable product associations for Chile, they did not seem to want to purchase Chilean products.

France: A positive attitude and interested in Source of Origin. The strength of associations in France was relatively high for Canada and was medium for the other two source countries. The image associations for Canada and Norway were very favourable and for Chile they were fairly favourable. This suggests that the French did have a strong and very positive image of Canada, giving Canada a strong position relative to the other source countries. Norway had a better position than Chile did due to greater favourability, even though the strength of the image associations was at a similar level.

The unique associations linked with Canada were again linked to the big territory, but also maple syrup and salient places such as the Niagara Falls, Quebec and Montreal. Norway is uniquely linked strongly to salmon (although it is mentioned under Canada as a weaker association). Chile has unique associations linked to wine, fruit, the Andes, adventure, the Incas, and also to poverty. These findings would suggest that French consumers would be more likely to purchase Canadian products than Norwegian or Chilean products, but that Norwegian salmon would be the most positively received of the three source countries. They also suggest that Chilean products would be the least best received of the three source countries.

With respect to attitude towards the source countries and intention to visit, the French consumers' attitude toward Canada was very positive, perhaps reflecting the historical (and lingual) relationship between the two. The French were positive towards Norway as well and would like to visit the country. Chile on the other hand did not engender a positive attitude in France at all, but the French seemed to be slightly positive towards visiting Chile. Even though the French were positive towards products of Canada, they were only moderately likely to purchase. In fact they seemed just as likely to buy products from Norway as products from Canada, if salmon was excluded. Norwegian salmon seemed to have a very strong position in France and the French were eager to purchase it, as was apparent in the SofO Image associations and Product-SofO associations. Attitude toward Canadian salmon did not come close to that for Norway, but was still much preferred over Chilean salmon. Attitude towards purchasing Chilean products or salmon was negative.

Japan: Limited Source of Origin knowledge and simple images. The Japanese recorded much fewer associations about the source countries than the Swedes and French did. Knowledge about the three source countries therefore appeared to be limited in Japan, but differences between the images held by Japanese consumers for the three SofOs could be seen. The strength of image associations in Japan was higher for Canada than for the other two source countries. Both Norway and Canada had favourable associations, with Norway having slightly more favourable image associations. The associations for Chile were mostly neutral, although there were much more negative associations than for the either Canada or Norway.

TABLE 1
Summary of SofO associations from the free elicitations

	Canada			Norway			Chile					
Target markets												
Sweden		S	F	U		S	F	U		S	F	U
	Big and wild nature	5	+	U	Rich and expensive	5	-	U	Dictatorship	4	-	U
	Ice Hockey	5	+	U	Mountains and fjords	5	+	U	Violence and misery	4	-	U
	Snow and cold	4	+		Oil and resource	5		U	Poverty	3	-	U
	Fish and salmon	3			Salmon and fisheries	5			Wine	3	+	U
	Bears	2	+	U	Skiing	4	+	U	Mountains and beauty	3	+	
France		S	F	U		S	F	U		S	F	U
	Big, beauty and woods	5	+		Salmon	5	+		Poverty	4	-	U
	Salient places	5	+	U	Cold and snow	5	+/-		Mountain range	4	+	
	Hospitality and open	4	+		Fjord and beauty	4	+	U	Adventure tourism	3	+	
	Snow and cold	4	+/-		Hospitality	3	+		Chilean food	3	+	U
	Maple syrup	2	+		Positive economy	1	+	U	Old civilisations	1	+	U
Japan		S	F	U		S	F	U		S	F	U
	Maple syrup	5	+	U	Salmon	5	+		Wine	5	+	U
	Salient places	5		U	Aurora, midnight sun	4	+	U	South America	5		U
	Lakes and mountains	4			Cold and snow	4			Long and narrow	4		U
	Cold, ice and snow	4			Skiing	4	+		Chilean food	3	+	U
	Salmon	2			Fjord	3		U	Andes	2		U
Note: S= strength of association (5= strongest), F=favourability of association (+=favourable), and U=uniqueness of association (U=unique)												

The product associations for the three source countries were very simplistic, with the Japanese having strong and somewhat favourable associations about maple syrup from Canada (there were also a few about salmon), strong and quite favourable associations about Norwegian salmon and strong and not quite so favourable associations about Chilean wine. These strong, favourable product associations and the weak overall images for the source countries indicated that the Japanese consumers had an almost one-dimensional view of the source countries.

These findings would suggest that Japanese consumers may not favour one of the three source countries over the other, except when the product concerned fits the one-dimensional image the consumers have for the source country. This is backed up by the Japanese consumers' purchase intentions. Attitude towards Canada and Norway and their products was positive, with Canada being slightly more so than Norway on both counts. The Japanese were

positive towards visiting Canada, and slightly positive about visiting Norway. They were neutral about Chile, products of Chile and visiting Chile. When the purchase intentions were examined, it could be seen that the Japanese consumers were equally negative towards all three source countries. With the specific product salmon this was not the case. The Japanese were slightly positive about the intention to purchase Norwegian salmon, neutral regarding the intention to purchase Canadian salmon and negative towards purchasing Chilean salmon.

SOURCE OF ORIGIN BRANDING IS A COMPLEX ISSUE

Together these results indicate that SofO does not influence consumer purchase intentions in a simple way, but instead that SofO is a rather complex branding tool that can influence and interact with consumers at different levels. These findings appear to

TABLE 2
Summary of SofO attitudes from the questionnaire

			Producer countries			
	Canada		Norway		Chile	
Target markets						
Sweden		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>
	Country	0.71	Country	0.71	Country	0.44
	Products	0.61	Products	0.67	Products	0.45
	Visit	0.69	Visit	0.85	Visit	0.44
	Product purchase	0.33	Product purchase	0.48	Product purchase	0.33
	Salmon purchase	0.40	Salmon purchase	0.63	Salmon purchase	0.17
France		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>
	Country	0.85	Country	0.73	Country	0.54
	Products	0.73	Products	0.74	Products	0.49
	Visit	0.91	Visit	0.78	Visit	0.62
	Product purchase	0.54	Product purchase	0.55	Product purchase	0.38
	Salmon purchase	0.60	Salmon purchase	0.79	Salmon purchase	0.27
Japan		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>		<u>Mean</u>
	Country	0.72	Country	0.68	Country	0.51
	Products	0.63	Products	0.59	Products	0.48
	Visit	0.76	Visit	0.64	Visit	0.51
	Product purchase	0.42	Product purchase	0.39	Product purchase	0.36
	Salmon purchase	0.53	Salmon purchase	0.55	Salmon purchase	0.30
Note: Attitude separated by 5 categories for each topic in questionnaire. Results converted to an index.						

be in line with the notion that some consumers are more likely to be influenced by SofO than others, and that the level of this influence is reliant on how much these consumers know about the SofO. SofO brand equity and its influence on consumer purchase intentions is therefore a complex concept which is difficult to assess with simple indicators. Selecting an appropriate target market may not be enough in itself for an SofO co-branding strategy to be successful. It is important to quantify the actual level of SofO Awareness in a target market or segment and to qualify the actual SofO Image that consumers in that target market or segment have for an SofO.

With regard to using both SofO Awareness and SofO Image when assessing the viability of an SofO co-branding strategy, the results presented above appear to show that neither feature on their own is sufficient to predict the consumer response to SofO in terms of purchase intentions. SofO Awareness appears to be a less reliable predictor of consumer purchase intentions on its own than SofO

Image. Using an SofO with both strong SofO Awareness and a negative SofO Image could have disastrous effects for a company launching an SofO branding strategy. The example of Chile in Sweden illustrates this point. Strong awareness of Chile was linked to a fairly negative image, although in some areas the image was positive. This shows the importance of a thorough analysis of all the influencing factors before embarking on an SofO Branding strategy. Emphasising the Chile brand on wine in Sweden may be a winning strategy as Swedes appear to be aware that Chileans make wine, but marking distinctively Chilean salmon could potentially be disastrous. Would Swedes be prepared to purchase salmon from a country they do not currently associate with salmon but instead associate with poverty and economic problems?

On the other hand, a positive SofO Image that is not backed up with a reasonable level of SofO Awareness in the target market or segment may not deliver the results expected. This may be the case

in the results from Japan. Norway is strongly identified with salmon and yet the consumers' salmon purchase intentions were only slightly positive, and not that far ahead of either Canada or Chile. There may be other factors at work in Japan as well (e.g. culture), but it does appear that weak SofO Awareness may handicap potential competitive advantage for Norway in the Japanese market.

Another feature of SofO Image is the non-product related associations, such as those concerning politics, nature, the state of the economy, or the level of economic development. Consumers may seek to avoid purchasing or being very positive toward purchasing products from certain SofOs because of such non-product related associations. For example the Swedes may be hesitant in purchasing Chilean wine because negative associations with former Pinochet regime and French consumers may try to avoid American products due to their opinions regarding the current US involvement in Iraq. These are purely political reasons for not purchasing products from countries, but there can be other reasons as well. Both Swedish and French consumers may not be so keen to purchase salmon from Chile because of perceptions about the current level of economic development or of food safety standards in Chile and therefore the perceived risk in purchasing food products from there. Then again, positive associations about political and economic stability or positive associations about beautiful, clean and safe surroundings can invoke or increase a sense of trust in a particular SofO even though no particular product is associated to that SofO, just as positive associations about one product or category can potentially be extended to another product or category. Associations about tourism, famous persons or about sports can also have positive effects on unrelated products. All these elements illustrate the complexity involved in evaluating the potential benefit of pursuing an SofO branding strategy.

DISCUSSION-LINKAGE BETWEEN PRODUCT AND SOFO IMAGES

One interesting finding in this study is the consistency with which Canada was associated with maple syrup and Chile with wine across the three target markets. Although the strength of these associations varied between target markets, the associations were evident in all of them. As was mentioned in the introduction, food products by nature imply a geographical source of origin. This special link between food and place appears evident in this study as many of the Product-SofO associations identified for all the source countries in all the target markets were for foods products.

The link between SofO and product highlights the importance of ensuring that there is a match between a positive SofO image and the consumers' perceptions of the product (or Product Image) or that they at least complement each other. This would be especially the case when there is weak consumer Product Knowledge and/or a weak parent brand. The main issue here would be that with any Product-SofO Image that is developed by marketers and promoted to consumers in a target market in an attempt to capitalise on this effect, the products would have to meet the expectations developed by consumers. With less control over an SofO brand than with a traditional brand, ensuring delivered quality meet or exceed consumer expectations requires some degree of control over who can use an SofO label. The use of the EU-PGI registration scheme offers one approach to limit the use of SofO labels to genuine suppliers, and the approach taken by industry associations and quality certification bodies like Scottish Quality Salmon and Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano Reggiano offer an even more controlled method of ensuring the quality of the product matches the consumers' expectations raised by the product source.

The Product-SofO Image phenomenon also raises interesting possibilities for SofO "Brand extension". For example could positive associations about adventure, the Andes and the Incas be leveraged to sell a range of brightly coloured Chilean fleece jackets in France, would a maple syrup flavoured ice cream marketed by Canadian ice hockey players be a success in Sweden, or could Norway launch a range of packet fish soups in Japan? This is another area that requires further research.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis and results indicated that consumers have different levels of awareness and different images for different SofOs, much like they would for different brands. The results would also appear to show that SofO influences consumers' product purchase intentions. This does not appear to be a simple relationship, but is instead a complex connection with many variables that may affect the degree to which SofO influences consumer purchase intentions.

One of the implications of this complex relationship between SofO and consumer purchase intentions is that not all markets are the same. There are differences between markets in the degree to which consumers are influenced by SofO. Culture appears to play a part in this, but so too do the level of Product Knowledge, the level of awareness consumers in each market have for an SofO and the image they hold for the SofO.

There are also differences in the way that consumers across markets perceive the same SofO. Although there were some commonalities in the images that consumers in the different target markets had of the SofOs in this study, there were also great differences. It is therefore important to be aware of not only the SofO Brand Equity of competing SofOs within a market, but also of the difference in SofO Brand Equity across markets.

Consumer perception is important. For an SofO to have a high level of awareness amongst consumers is not in itself enough for it to have a positive influence on consumer purchase intentions. The SofO must also have an image that the consumer perceives as beneficial to the product it is attached to or linked with. The example of Chile in Sweden illustrates the point that for an SofO to be easily recalled and relatively well known does not necessarily guarantee that consumers wish to purchase products from it.

SofO and its influence on consumer purchase intentions may be a complex concept, but it also offers the companies the opportunity to leverage Brand Equity from an existing source and differentiate their products without the large investments required to build an entirely new brand. In the food industry this opportunity is very real as consumers associate food with geographic places. Leveraging an SofO as part of a co-branding strategy merely builds upon the perceptions the consumer already has and can build value in the process.

SofO co-branding is a complex issue and decisions should not be made on simple indicators alone. It offers a source of low cost value creation, but the key is to understand the needs and perceptions of consumers in each market or segment.

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