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MASS CUSTOMIZATION AND COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECTS IN B2B

Cipriano Forza, Thomas Aichner, Alessio Trentin

University of Padova, Department of Management and Engineering, Vicenza, Italy

Abstract: *Both country-of-origin (COO) effects and Mass Customization (MC) have received extensive attention in research. However, there have not been assessed nor identified COO effects in MC literature. In practice, a number of MC companies both in B2B and B2C are communicating the COO of their products on their website and/or during the configuration process. Through a number of expert interviews, this exploratory research study aims to assess if there may be COO effects in B2B MC, and to determine the B2B research subjects to be able to investigate COO effects in MC. This paper presents preliminary results of an ongoing research study.*

Key Words: *Mass Customization, Country of Origin, COO, B2B, expert interviews*

Table 1. *Trend in product variety (number of models) for some products in the USA [17, based on 18]*

Product	1970	1998	2012
automobile models	140	260	684
newspapers	339	790	>5,000
TV screens (size)	5	15	43
movies (at the cinema)	267	458	1,410
breakfast cereals	160	340	4,945
types of milk	4	19	>50
mouthwash	15	66	113
sports shoes	5	285	3,371
brands of mineral water	16	50	195
types of tights	5	90	594

1. INTRODUCTION

Customers are becoming more and more demanding and discriminating when it comes to finding the right product for them [1, 2]. On the other hand, companies are increasing their product variety [3, 4]. Product variety is defined as the diversity of products provided by companies to the marketplace [5, 6].

Additionally, competition has become truly global and companies from different countries are now trying to win the same customers both in their domestic market and in foreign markets [7]. These companies are aware of the fact that the origin or the perceived origin of the product plays an important role in the purchase decision of customers, [8] and that customers have stereotypes about nations and nationals from certain countries. The fact that customers are thinking in stereotypes about regions, nations and people from these areas and/or countries is both confirmed in academic literature [e.g. 9, 10, 11] and a popular topic in non-academic literature [e.g. 12, 13, 14]. Ethnicity is, in fact, also a frequent targeting variable in advertising [15].

Despite an overwhelming increase in product variety over the past decades (see Table 1) and a facilitated access to products from all over the world, customers are still facing difficulties in finding what they want. In order to satisfy these more demanding customers and to escape from the pressure of competition, companies are not only offering more variety but also customization [16].

Product customization means to fulfil the customer's individual requirements, and involves several corporate functions such as manufacturing, procurement, engineering and/or design [19]. The ability to offer customized products is viewed as an essential requirement for many companies to remain competitive in a world of constant innovation and rapid change, that is characterized by an increasing number of individual customer requirements [20].

2. MASS CUSTOMIZATION

One of the customization strategies that has recently received a growing interest both from academics and from practitioners is Mass Customization (MC). According to the two major streams of definitions, the term MC is used to describe the strategy of mass producing customized products [21] and, more visionary, the ability of companies to provide their customers with anything they want profitably, any time they want it, anywhere they want it, any way they want it [22]. MC seeks, as its goal, to develop, produce, market, and deliver affordable goods and services with enough variety and customization that nearly everyone finds exactly what he/she wants [23]. To be successful mass customizers, companies must achieve both the design and realization of the product variety and customization in an effective and efficient way [6].

However, customers must be willing to participate in the process of product design or product configuration. Following the Social Exchange Theory, customers

participate in one or more of the value adding process because they expect to be rewarded for it [24, 25]. The participation will be considered worthwhile if the perceived benefit exceeds the personal expenditure of time and money. The motives that are responsible for the customer participation can be substantially divided into economic participation motives, e.g. saving of costs, and psychological participation motives, e.g. risk reduction or more control [26].

Studies show that MC companies have evolved from companies with a mass production or custom manufacturing strategy [27, 28] (see Figure 1). Lampel and Mintzberg [29] provide a more detailed classification of standardization and customization strategies that is not related to the evolution of companies. It is ranging from pure standardization over segmented standardization, customized standardization and tailored customization to pure customization. Pure standardization means that the customer has no direct influence over any of the company's value chain activities, while pure customization means that design, fabrication, assembly and distribution are customized. For example, the underlying idea is that when a company is changing its strategy from segmented standardization to customized standardization, the point of customer involvement is moving upstream along the value chain from the distribution phase to the assembly phase [29].

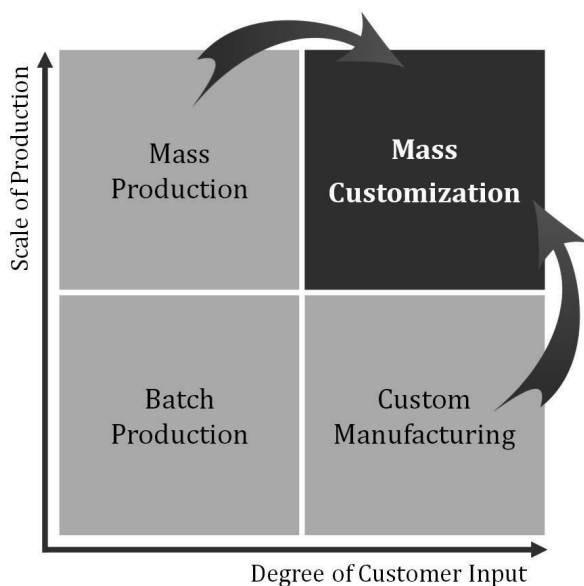


Fig. 1. Positioning Mass Customization [28]

B2B companies usually start as a custom manufacturer, which means that they offer and/or require a high degree of customer input at a low scale of production. As they grow, and when competition is increasing, B2B companies are often forced to combine a high degree of customization with an improved operational performance at a higher scale of production [30]. To put it another way, the custom manufacturer needs to develop MC capabilities in order to reduce the trade off between customization and operational performance. B2C companies evolve from mass producers, where the degree of customer input is close or equal to zero, and the scale of production is high. A MC

production strategy has the advantage of being able to offer a high to nearly infinite product variety, and to be able to adapt faster to changes in trends. However there is the challenge of developing and realizing suitable production facilities, as well as interfaces for customer integration, such as product configurators [31]. Two concepts that are strongly related to MC are form postponement [e.g. 32, 33] and solutions buying [e.g. 34, 35].

Fogliatto et al. [36] provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of MC research, which may be complemented by the work of Kumar et al. [37].

3. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Traditionally speaking, the country of origin (COO) is the country where the product has been made. As a result of globalization of production the concept of COO has been criticized to be narrow, because products may be designed in one, manufactured in another and assembled in a third country. Therefore, two major argumentation streams have evolved in COO literature. On one hand, researchers are trying to be more specific in identifying the origin of the product by introducing terms such as country of design, country of assembly, country of parts, country of manufacture and country of brand [38]. On the other hand, the term of product-country image (PCI) has been introduced, which is the "place" with which a marketer may associate a product in order to enhance its appeal [39]. In this paper, COO and PCI are used as synonyms.

Globalization, competition in international markets and the selection of the country in which the product is produced are fundamental challenges and difficult decisions for companies today, and in the future. In this context, the origin of the company and/or of its products becomes more and more important and, in many cases, a central element in the marketing strategy of the global company. In fact, some companies such as Apple Inc. choose to advertise the country of design ("Designed by Apple in California") rather than the country of production, because they think that it has positive effects on their brand reputation, perceived quality and on their overall sales and financial performance.

When a company is using a foreign-sounding brand name or when a company is trying to imply that its origin is from a more favourable country than its actual origin, researchers call this foreign branding [40]. Examples include the American ice cream producer Häagen-Dazs, which is using a Danish/Scandinavian image and the German manufacturer of luxury writing instruments Montblanc, which is using a French image.

Irrespective of whether the company is really from the specific country or not, it can employ a number of explicit and implicit COO strategies, such as embedding the COO name or typical COO words in the company name, using COO language or using COO flags and symbols [41]. Only the use of the phrase "Made in..." and quality and origin labels is usually regulated, and is only allowed if certain criteria are met which are prescribed by laws and/or regulations [41].

To sum up, the COO is an important cue in consumer choice behaviour because the product's origin has a

significant impact on the consumer's purchase intention, willingness to pay and product evaluation [42, 43]. This impact is called country of origin (COO) effect.

An overview of the state of the art and past research on COO and COO effects is provided by Peterson and Jolibert [44], Verlegh and Steenkamp [45], Pharr [46], Josiassen and Harzing [47], Roth and Diamantopolous [48] and Mai [49]. None of these articles mentions a potential relationship between the COO effect and customization, personalisation or product variety, respectively.

4. EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The purpose of this exploratory research is to assess whether there may be COO effects in B2B MC and if practitioners are generally interested in the topic as well as to determine the research subjects in B2B environments. B2B includes wholesale trade of consumer products, and is defined as sales of goods and services among businesses [50, 51, 52].

Studies about the COO of industrial products are generally very scarce, and there have not been assessed nor identified COO effects in MC literature. In practice, there are several MC companies, both in B2B and B2C communicating the COO of their products on their website and/or during the configuration process. Examples of such companies include but are not limited to *timbuk2.com* ("Made in San Francisco"), *berlinbag.com* ("Made in Berlin"), *create-a-mattress.com* ("Made in USA"), *my-belt.de* ("Made in Germany") and *mycustomizer.com* ("Built in Montreal").

In order to find out whether there might be COO effects in MC, three semi-structured interviews were conducted in medium-sized Italian companies in February 2014. The companies were selected amongst all companies with a number between 200 and 1,000 employees in a Northern Italian region, using the theoretical sampling method in order to build conceptual categories and not with the goal to build a representative sample of a given population [53]. The companies are operating in the construction engineering, snowmaking machines and food sectors, respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Company information*

	Corporate Business Area	Size of the Company	Sales in €
1	construction engineering	250 employees	63 M
2	snowmaking machines	350 employees	130 M
3	food	700 employees	238 M

The interviewees' roles within the companies were purchasing manager, product manager and sales manager, respectively (see Table 3) which allowed assessing the situation from different perspectives, namely from an industrial buyer's, an industrial seller's and an internal perspective.

A total of 6 major topics (the interviewee, the company, the products, the customers, the production strategy, the country of production) were assessed, with 20 sub-questions including international trade, employed COO strategies and the comparison of different production strategies such as mass production, custom manufacturing and MC, to mention just a few. The interviews had an average length of two hours.

Table 3. *Interviewee information*

	Interviewee's Role	Nationality	Experience in Italy abroad
1	purchasing manager	Italian	7 yrs none
2	product manager	Italian	8 yrs 2 yrs
3	sales manager	Italian	6 yrs none

All three companies design, produce and assemble 100% of their products in Italy, sell at least 50% to international customers with a strong focus on the European market, especially on Italy, Germany and Austria (see Table 4).

Table 4. *COO and international trade*

	Made in Italy	Export	Top 3 selling markets
1	100%	50%	Italy (50%) Germany (24%) Austria (9%)
2	100%	90%	Austria (55%) Switzerland (20%) Italy (10%)
3	100%	64%	Italy (36%) Germany (18%) Spain (11%)

The three companies are working mainly or exclusively in the B2B area in their respective field, and produce 90%, 80% and 50% of their products according to the specifications of their customers, with MC efficiency (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Production strategy*

	B2B	MC	Remaining
1	80%	90%	custom manufacturing
2	95%	80%	custom manufacturing
3	100%	50%	mass production

The products that are not produced in MC are made in custom manufacturing (companies 1 and 2) and mass production (company 3).

5. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

On average, the three companies evaluated the importance of their Italian origin with 3.67 on a scale from 1 to 5 (see Table 6). This construct describes the impact on sales that the selling company attributes to their own origin, which, in this case, is Italy.

The importance of the COO of purchased products was evaluated as a 4 on a scale from 1 to 5 by all three companies (see Table 6). This scale measures how important the COO of the company's suppliers and/or of their products is for the decision to purchase from the supplier in question or from a specific supplier amongst a number of competitors that originate from or produce in different countries.

Table 6. *Importance of the company's own origin and the COO of purchased products*

	Importance: company's own origin	Importance: COO of purchased products
1	3	4
2	4	4
3	4	4
\bar{x}	3.67	4.00

It is consistent with the relatively high attributed importance of the company's own origin that all three companies are using both explicit COO strategies (e.g. "Made in Italy") and implicit COO strategies (e.g. an Italian-sounding brand name) to advertise their B2B products. The sales manager from the company operating in the food sector indicated that, rather than the Italian origin, they are using regional captions in advertisement and commercialization, which is somewhat typical for the food sector. According to the product manager from the producer of snowmaking machines, the company's two major competitive advantages are innovative solutions and its Italian origin. This is understandable because, especially in foreign markets, products with an Italian PCI benefit from a very high-quality image in a large number of different product categories.

The interviewees reported that they have no specific evidence whether or not the COO has an amplifying or mitigating impact on the perceived quality of their MC products in comparison with their custom manufactured products and, for company 3 only, with its mass-produced products. However, they underlined that this lack of information is a problem from a strategic perspective and that it would be important to know in order to adapt their marketing and communication strategy.

With regard to the interviewees or, in other words, the informants in B2B environments, it is recommended to focus on both purchasing and sales managers in order to cover both the buyers' and the sellers' perspectives. First, purchasing managers are essentially representing the customers in B2B, and will be able to tell more about their personal perception of foreign products and of products from specific foreign countries. This is essentially in line with COO research because personal stereotypes determine not only the purchase behaviour of private customers, but also of industrial buyers [54]. The

present study showed that the role of the purchasing manager is strongly influenced by national thinking, which may be influenced by both personal experience and national stereotypes. The purchasing manager indicated that he generally prefers German suppliers. Second, sales managers who represent the producer and/or supplier in B2B, will give an insight into the development, execution and success of their marketing and communication strategy in domestic and foreign markets for both custom manufactured and MC products. It is recommended but not imperative, to choose MC companies not only on the supplier's and/or producer's side, but also when assessing the customer's side in order to increase the potential contribution to MC literature. In other words, it might be sufficient to select a producer of MC products on one hand and any industrial buyer on the other hand, but if the buyer/customer itself is a MC company, this might have an impact on the perceived COO effects with regard to differences between custom manufacturing and MC.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Given that this is an exploratory study that presents preliminary results, there are two major limitations that need to be pointed out. First, the sample size of three companies is small and therefore a great caution should be placed in generalising the results reported in the present paper. Second, the information and data presented in this paper are self-reported and consequently could be biased by selective memory, telescoping, attribution and exaggeration. In other words, the responses of the interviewees could depend partly on individual judgments. Future research should address these limitations and find ways of combating them as potential sources of errors.

The present exploratory research on MC and COO effects in B2B could be advanced not only through additional quantitative and qualitative research that involves many more observations than the present one, but also by considering additional questions. One very important question that can be addressed is related to differences of the COO image (e.g. perceived quality) of custom manufactured products and MC products from specific countries and/or in specific markets. It should be the goal of researchers to investigate under which conditions a favourable or a non-favourable COO has a higher or lower impact in an MC environment compared to a custom manufacturing environment and to describe the differences in the industrial customer's attitudes towards the same foreign and national product for custom manufactured and MC products. Practitioners will profit from possible findings as they will be able to decide whether or not to advertise a specific COO for custom manufactured products only, for MC products only, for both custom manufactured products or neither for custom manufactured nor for MC products, depending on the results.

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CORRESPONDENCE



Dr. Cipriano Forza, Full Prof.
University of Padova
Dep. of Eng. and Mgmt.
Stradella S. Nicola, 3,
36100 Vicenza, Italy
cipriano.forza[at]unipd.it



Thomas Aichner, M.Sc.
University of Padova
Dep. of Eng. and Mgmt.
Stradella S. Nicola, 3,
36100 Vicenza, Italy
mail[at]thomasaichner.eu



Dr. Alessio Trentin, Ass. Prof.
University of Padova
Dep. of Eng. and Mgmt.
Stradella S. Nicola, 3,
36100 Vicenza, Italy
alessio.trentin[at]unipd.it