

Abstract

Ever since the early days of civil air transport, the reference to the country-of-origin and its influence on the overall service design is a common practice observed at many renowned airlines such as Air France, Austrian Airlines or British Airways. For airlines as service operators, branding functions as a mean of communicating service quality and therefore is of substantial importance to be well managed. When a company positions and markets itself with a strong country-of-origin reference, an immediate reference to the country-of-origin effect is drawn in marketing literature. This phenomenon has been extensively studied and indicates that consumers evaluate products differently, and consequently show purchase intentions, based only on their country-of-origin. The country-of-origin as a purchase cue has an influence on several factors of a brand including its image, its safety rating, or quality expectations of products and services offered. This study aims to explore and disclose whether the country-of-origin effect also applies to airlines and influences potential consumers' booking intentions. Although the use of country material is more ubiquitous in airlines than in any other comparable industry, there is no detailed and focused study in the existing body of knowledge.

To test the posed causal relationships and effects of country-branded material on an airline's booking intention an exploratory and quantitative research approach was chosen. Primary data collection was conducted employing an online experiment with an appended survey that aimed at showing significant differences between a country-branded and a neutral airline advertisement as stimuli. The experiment was published for around three weeks in April-May 2023 and was distributed over social networks and personal invitations. Participants expressed their opinions on airline brand image, trust levels and booking intentions. Further, participants' ethnocentric airline buying behaviour was taken into consideration. All items were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale. A total sample size of 167 answers was obtained out of which 148 qualified for valid analysis.

The subsequent statistical analysis of the data already showed average tendencies in favour of the country-branded advertisement, reaching significant scores for brand image and trust. Moreover, the multiple regression analysis validated the researcher's assumptions that the higher the brand image is perceived, and the more trust consumers have in an airline, the higher the booking intentions are. Lastly, no significant interaction effect between consumer ethnocentrism and the evaluation of the advertised airlines could be reported. Therefore, the study is in line with previous studies on the country-of-origin effect and expands its scope to the large industry of international airlines. Airlines are advised to keep a close eye on their home country's image internationally and, at best, maintain or design a well-rounded and thoughtful branding structure.

Key words: airline branding, brand image, brand trust, booking behaviour, country-of-origin effect, country image, purchase cue, country image