

What does your language mean to me? A sociolinguistic study of the Country-of-Origin effect of various languages in the Singaporean linguistic landscape.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a multicultural country like Singapore, there is bound to be a host of different languages intertwining with each other to form our linguistic landscape; unsurprisingly, multilingual shop signs and product advertisements are extremely common. However, the use of minority languages, which a majority of the general population cannot comprehend, has been increasing. In particular, Romance languages such as Spanish, Italian and French are tied to the residential, food and beauty industries, not only in affluent and central such as Orchard, but in the heartlands as well (Ong et al., 2013; Tan, 2011). This research intends to investigate how different European and Asian languages (French, German, Spanish and Japanese) affect Singaporeans' impressions toward a product. Specifically, whether the use of foreign languages appeal to Singaporeans only if the product is congruent with the country-of-origin of the language will be studied.

2. RATIONALE

As Singapore gets increasingly cosmopolitan and globalised, the use of these minority languages is also increasingly prevalent. However, there is still a large knowledge gap in the understanding of Singapore's "fetish" for these minority languages; there have been conflicting arguments put forward to explain why our local commercial register responds this way, but to many researches our response remains "partially peculiar" (Serwe et al., 2013). Therefore, more needs to be deliberated upon, so as to index Singapore's ethnographic habits.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What products do Singaporeans associate with French, German, Japanese and Spanish countries? What assumptions do Singaporeans have about the product quality of these items?
2. Does the use of foreign languages in product advertising affect the Singaporean consumer's purchase intention and perceived quality of the product?
3. Does the effect of foreign language use on Singaporean consumers change according to the perceived congruence between the language used and the product advertised?

4. VALUE OF RESEARCH

Currently, most papers have established and analysed sellers' and retailers' motivations behind the use of foreign languages in shop signages across Singapore and the world. This paper intends to complement current sociolinguistic research in this field by investigating this trend from the consumer's point of view; this will be done in two parts. First, this paper seeks to identify specific products and common attributes consumers associate with the basket of

languages. Following this, it will investigate the applicability of the Country-of-Origin effect to this set of products. With this, it will aid current literature in understanding the Singaporean commercial register.

5. HYPOTHESIS

Though the use of foreign languages on product advertisements affects the Singaporean consumer's attitude towards the product positively, the congruence between the language used and the product advertisement does not play a significant role in influencing their consumption of the product.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1 LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Foreign languages find their way into our signages, and form part of what is called the "linguistic landscape" of the area. According to Gorter's linguistic landscape (LL) framework, this refers to language that is "visibly spotted" in an area (Gorter, 2006). Following the LL quantitative framework, this can also be a representation of the ethnocultural composition of an area, as communities would naturally imprint themselves on the linguistic landscape; in addition, different languages would appeal themselves differently to audiences (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Factors influencing language perception, therefore, includes the education level; exposure to different languages; age, et cetera. This serves as a basis of variables survey data can be stratified against, and using this, attempt to dissect what exactly each language appeals to the Singaporean consumer and how the ethnocultural composition of Singapore affects the linguistic landscape.

6.2 COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECT AND THE LINGUISTIC FETISH

First identified by Schooler (1965), the Country-of-Origin (CoO) effect lies on the basis that product biases form as a result of the product's country-of-origin. These stem from factors such as the country-of-origin's economic development, which consequently has a direct impact on consumers' perception of quality of the item. (Elliott & Cameron, 1994). While it was first applied specifically to describe the effect of the location of manufacture, it was mentioned by Liu & Johnson (2005) that the CoO effect is triggered automatically once enough information can be gathered to ascertain the location of production; this includes the use of language to connect a product with a country. Therefore, the use of foreign languages to appeal to consumers is, in of itself, an extended form of the CoO effect, or is also known as the linguistic fetish.

The presence of a "linguistic fetish", where preconceived perceptions about particular languages can cause an audience to associate languages with certain symbols, and is a result from the process of understanding foreignness from the point of view of one's own habitus (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In this respect, the use of language can convey symbolic meaning to an audience in addition to its literal meaning. This has been exploited commercially; using languages in multilingual signs for symbolic purposes rather than only utility has become increasingly ubiquitous (Kelly-Holmes, 2014). Kelly-Holmes's study found that the function of linguistic fetish differed according to the profile of the language in the context of the audience's society. Particularly, the use of minority languages, as is the case of French and German in

Singapore, is “driven by the quest for authentic marketing”, to “index the brand’s credibility in terms of a culture that is different to that of the notional addressee of the advertising or marketing message”. This “credibility” usually comes in the form of a heightened perception of quality supplemented by the diffusion of positive connections drawn from the country-of-origin of the language (Hult & Kelly-Holmes, 2017).

6.3 CONGRUENCY AND THE SINGAPOREAN COUNTERPOINT

Adding nuance to the concept of the linguistic fetish, Hornikx & van Meurs (2016) stated that consumers link foreign languages positively to their country-of-origin, for products that are “congruent to their country-of-origin”, or products that are typically associated with high quality of production in that country, like wine in France or beers in Germany (Usunier & Cestre, 2007; Hornikx & van Meurs, 2016). It was found that people were more likely to buy and better liked the advertisements of products that had a congruent foreign language and country-of-origin than otherwise.

Newer local research, however, points to evidence that the Singaporean commercial register does not conform to Kelly-Holmes (2014) or Hornikx & van Meurs (2016)’s hypothesised importance of congruency between language used and product relevance. Serwe et al. (2013) notes a different usage of French in Singaporean signs, stating that it is used instead “as a symbol to distinguish new local Asian cuisine from its traditional counterpart”. This suggests that other than the concept of “authentic cultural marketing”, Singaporean consumers see more value in a language other than just its association with its country-of-origin. The cosmopolitanism of the city-state is undoubtedly a factor at play, perhaps arising from the constant exposure to foreign cultures building toward a sense of national inferiority, leading to an antipathy towards one’s local culture and glorification of foreign cultures (Kent & Burnight, 1951). Further research by Bablanis & Diamantopoulos (2016) evinced that this *xenocentrism* annuls the CoO effect, as any indication of alienage immediately appeals to the consumer as a foreign item, not as a result of a positive correlation between specific countries and languages.

Naturally, there is a simpler conflicting argument that can be put forward that lines up with Serwe et. al’s research. The use of incongruent foreign language in product advertisement could conceivably also be resulting from the ubiquity of positive FL-CoO correlation, where items deviating from the norm catch the consumers’ attention instead- perhaps what can be known as a *post-CoO effect*.

However, Serwe et al. (2013)’s research only covered the effects of French use in F&B signs which could have skewed their results, as the use of French may be congruent with F&B in general, rather than the cultural profile of the shop. While this aspect of the Singaporean consumer register is fascinating, it renders more to be elaborated upon them. Therefore, this paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap between the Singaporean commercial register and linguistic landscape.

7. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the framework drawn up by Hornikx & van Meurs (2016), as the aims of the study are similar to some extent. The project will be done in two parts, in one survey.

To get a rough gauge of the Singaporean commercial register, a survey is carried out to determine the products perceived to be congruent to France, Germany, Spain and Japan in the eyes of Singaporean consumers. To acknowledge the impacts to demographic on respondents' answers, the results of this survey will be stratified, if needed, according to language exposure, age, and education level, in case a huge discrepancy arises between respondents of different demographic groups.

To investigate the impact and the variations of the impact according to congruity, there is a second section to the survey, where images of five products are pitted against each other, with one in all English, and four others with English and each of the different languages. For each section, the product, design and word meanings will be kept the same, and there will be a mix of products with congruent foreign languages and products that are not; this will not be made known to the participants. For each product, respondents will have to rank the five products according to their willingness to buy and the perception of quality of the two products.

Figure 1- Example of a set of 5 images



For analysis of results, the average and the deviation from the average will be used in order to determine the impact of the foreign language and the impact of foreign language congruency on respondent opinion of the product.

8. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

8.1 SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

The survey conducted had 78 respondents, of which 51% was below 20 years of age, 18% between ages 21 to 40, 30% between 41 and 60, and 1% over 60. 41% of respondents had graduated from university, while 10% had completed pre-university studies; the remaining had graduated or is currently studying in secondary schools. A summary of these results can be found in **Table 1**.

Table 1- Summary of Demographics

Gender	Male	Female	Total		
	31 (40%)	47 (60%)	78 (100%)		
Age Group	Below 20	21-40	41-60	Above 60	Total
	40 (51%)	14 (18%)	23 (30%)	1 (1%)	78 (100%)
Education Level	Primary	Secondary	Post-Secondary	University	Total
	-	38 (49%)	8 (10%)	32 (41%)	78 (100%)

Respondents surveyed also have stayed long-term in various different countries; of note, one had stayed in Japan; one in Switzerland; none in France, Germany or Spain; and 37 in various other countries like China, Malaysia and the United Kingdom. In addition, respondents have learnt, could understand, and could speak various languages, including French, German and Japanese. A summary of these results can be found in **Table 2**.

Table 2- Count of respondents' exposure to certain languages

	French	German	Japanese	Spanish	English	Chinese	Malay	Hindi
<i>Learnt</i>	8	9	13	1	77	76	30	1
<i>Can understand</i>	3	5	8	0	73	76	23	1
<i>Can speak</i>	0	1	0	0	77	65	15	1

8.2 DETERMINATION OF PRODUCT-CoO LINKS

The data retrieved from the survey can be first be analysed by type of product. As the number of consumers finding a correlation between a product and a country-of-origin can be said to be the strength of the correlation (as consumers themselves are making the correlation), correlations resounding with a supermajority of the population are considered a significant congruency, and are marked in bold; if at least one-third of the population finds a correlation, then it is considered somewhat congruent, and underlined; anything less is considered incongruent. It was found that products pertaining to the beauty, electronic, health and instant food industries were significantly congruent to Japan, while products of the automobile and beer industries were significantly congruent with Germany. Lastly, luxury items like bags, jewellery as well as desserts were significantly congruent with France. **Table 3** gives a summary of results.

Table 3- Count of country-product associations made by respondents

	France	Germany	Spain	Japan	Spain
Automobiles	5 (6.4%)	55 (70.5%)	0 (0.0%)	<u>48 (61.5%)</u>	0 (0.0%)
Bags	63 (80.7%)	7 (9.0%)	8 (10.2%)	11 (14.1%)	8 (10.2%)

Beauty Products	<u>43 (55.1%)</u>	2 (2.6%)	2 (2.6%)	52 (66.7%)	2 (2.6%)
Beer	8 (10.2%)	64 (82.1%)	6 (7.7%)	18 (23.1%)	6 (7.7%)
Desserts	60 (76.9%)	3 (3.8%)	8 (10.2%)	<u>48 (61.5%)</u>	8 (10.2%)
Electronics	2 (2.6%)	<u>35 (44.8%)</u>	1 (1.3%)	61 (78.2%)	1 (1.3%)
Health Products	6 (7.7%)	18 (23.1%)	1 (1.3%)	54 (69.2%)	1 (1.3%)
Instant Foods	3 (3.8%)	4 (5.1%)	4 (5.1%)	70 (89.7%)	4 (5.1%)
Jewellery and Watches	55 (70.5%)	<u>37 (47.4%)</u>	9 (11.5%)	19 (24.3%)	9 (11.5%)

In order to find out what exact effects a product's relationship to a country has on the consumer's attitude toward a product, multiple adjectives were pitted against the four countries, with the count of associations shown in **Table 4** below.

Table 4- Count of country-attribute associations made by respondents

	France	Germany	Japan	Spain
Cool	<u>37 (47.4%)</u>	<u>36 (46.1%)</u>	<u>35 (44.9%)</u>	23 (29.5%)
Cheap	1 (1.3%)	3 (3.8%)	<u>45 (57.7%)</u>	21 (26.9%)
Convenient	3 (3.8%)	7 (9.0%)	68 (87.1%)	6 (7.7%)
Cute	12 (15.4%)	1 (1.3%)	69 (88.5%)	3 (3.8%)
Durable	8 (10.3%)	60 (76.9%)	<u>32 (41.0%)</u>	7 (9.0%)
Efficient	7 (9.0%)	<u>42 (53.8%)</u>	58 (74.4%)	7 (9.0%)
Expensive	58 (74.4%)	<u>45 (57.7%)</u>	22 (28.2%)	12 (15.4%)
Of Quality	<u>32 (41.0%)</u>	55 (70.5%)	59 (75.6%)	11 (14.1%)
Reliable	22 (28.2%)	53 (67.9%)	59 (75.6%)	8 (10.3%)

It could be seen that France was most greatly attributed with lavishness, and somewhat with quality and coolness as well. Germany, on the contrary, was attributed with durability, quality and reliability, while Japan was attributed to most of the adjectives, particularly with convenience and cuteness. This, combined with the data from Table 3, provides us with a more complete understanding of the Singaporean's conceptualisation of foreign countries and their products. France, which creates an image of luxury among Singaporeans, is most commonly attributed to luxury goods, products and foods as a result. Germany, apparently perceived to uphold durability, quality and reliability, is more congruent with cars, electronics and watches, which have these qualities as a focus. Japan is greatly associated with its efficiency and cuteness,

likely as a result of its work and *kawaii* culture, respectively. Consequently, it was seen to be more congruent to industries requiring efficiency (instant products, for example) or promoting beauty. It is also interesting to note that Spain has not made many inroads into the Singaporean consumer's mindset, and can serve as a control in the subsequent section when analysing the effect of the CoO effect.

8.3 INVESTIGATION OF THE LINGUISTIC FETISH

In the second part of the survey, respondents ranked their choices according to their willingness to buy the item, as well as their perceived quality of the product. In order to determine the existence of a linguistic fetish, the results for the congruent product-language match was compared against the pure English image. These results were compared through the average ranking they gave to the product (where a five is the best product, one for the worst). A summary of the results can be found in **Table 5**.

Table 5- Results of congruent FL products against and pure-English products

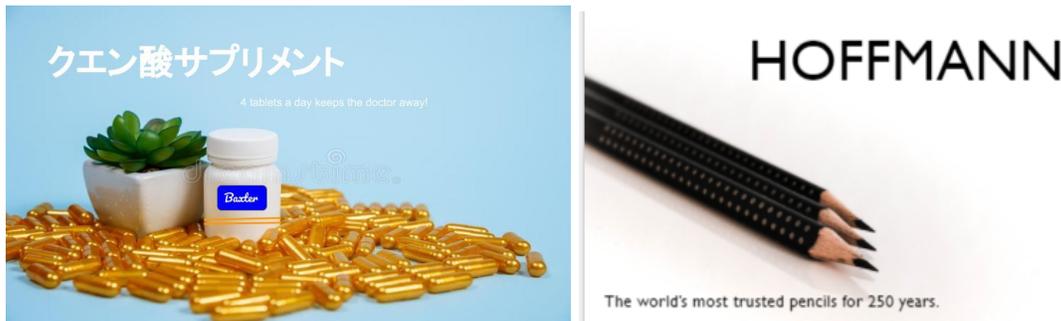
	Willingness to Buy (Rank out of 5)		Quality (Rank out of 5)	
	Average net rank increase	Average percentage increase of rank	Average net rank increase	Average percentage increase of rank
Overall	+0.33	+12.00%	+0.39	+15.38%
<i>Below 20</i>	+0.30	+11.12%	+0.33	+14.53%
<i>21-40</i>	+0.23	+8.84%	+0.40	+14.96%
<i>Above 40</i>	+0.44	+18.10%	+0.50	+20.23%

Linguistic Fetish was shown to be present across all matrices, as there was a significant increase in net rank and percentage increase of rank in the performance of product advertisements using significantly congruent foreign languages. However, when the data was scrutinised further, it could be seen that while foreign languages generally had a positive impact on product reception by consumers, some actually depressed consumers' willingness to buy products. This appeared to be irregardless of the language used: the use of German in the Electronics set (significantly congruent) decreased net rank by -0.58 points, a -16.3% decrease; the use of Japanese in the Health Products set (significantly congruent) decreased net rank by -0.11, a -3.4% decrease.

The reason for this surfaced in the open-ended questions, where respondents who ranked the pure-English product the highest said that they were "more comfortable with a description that they were able to comprehend" and that they they could "understand the utility of the product best". An answer was more specific, saying that "it [is] better to buy things advertised in the language they know for expensive products". 12 out of 35 respondents cited language familiarity as a concern in the Electronics set, while 34 of 63 respondents did the same in the Health Products set.

This also explains why certain sets had congruent FLs with significantly better impacts on consumer item perception than others; for example: the use of German in the Automobiles set (significantly congruent) increased net rank in willingness to buy by +0.77, a +27.1% increase; and the use of German in the Pencils set, increasing net rank in willingness to buy by +0.83, a +31.1% increase. In these sets, only the brand name was changed while the description of the product remained in English, as was the case in the aforementioned Electronics and Health Products set. This therefore evinces that while the Linguistic Fetish exists, the extent to which English is replaced with a foreign language must also be taken into account, in order to maximise the effectiveness of the LF.

Figure 2- Example of advertisement in Health Product set (left) and Pencil set (right)



Additionally, this also explains why the impact on FLs on perception of quality was more pronounced than that of willingness to buy, as seen in **Table 5**, as consumers may shy away from buying products they do not understand, although they might subconsciously opine that it is of a higher quality. It serves as a reminder that, while foreign languages may aid products in their appeal towards consumers, languages still have to play a practical role in conveying literal information understandable to the consumer.

8.4 INVESTIGATION OF THE COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN EFFECT

To establish the existence of the country of origin effect, the four foreign languages were compared with each other according to the perceived congruence and their individual performances against the pure-English advertisement. For this, the average net rank difference, as well as the average percentage difference for both matrices (willingness to purchase and quality) were plotted against the foreign language used’s perceived congruence to the product.

Figure 3- Congruence perception against performance (Willingness to Buy)

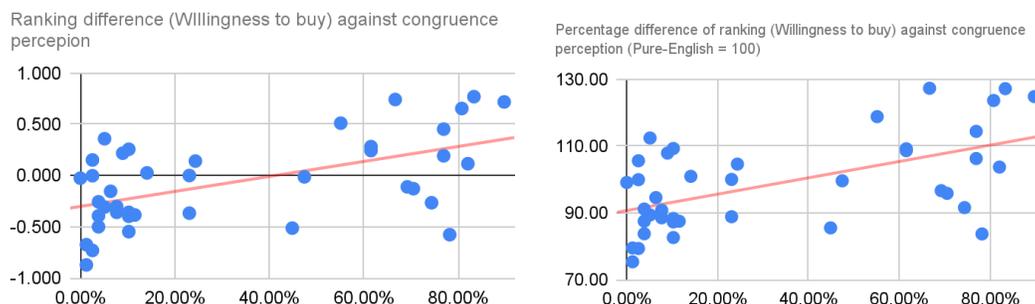
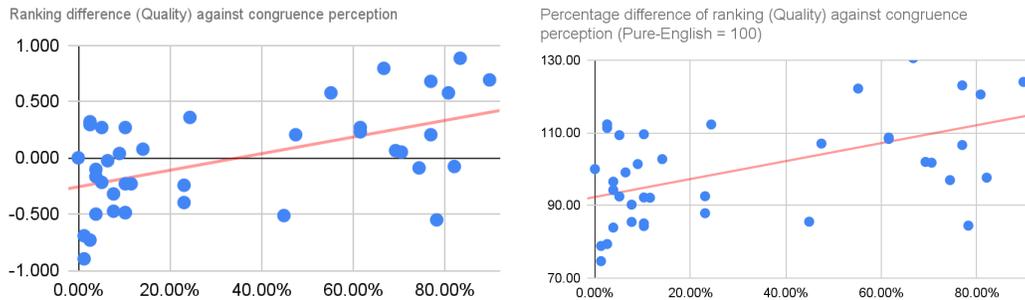


Figure 4- Graphs of congruence perception against performance (Quality)



As shown from **Figures 3 and 4**, although there is a slight trend showing the increase in product performance with congruence; it seems slightly uncertain, given the many data points below the pure-English baseline even at 70% congruency.

Figure 5- Graph of congruence perception against performance (Quality, over 40s)

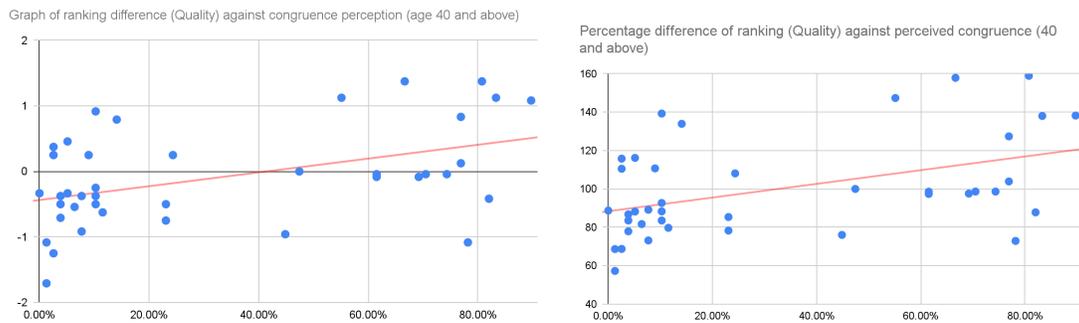
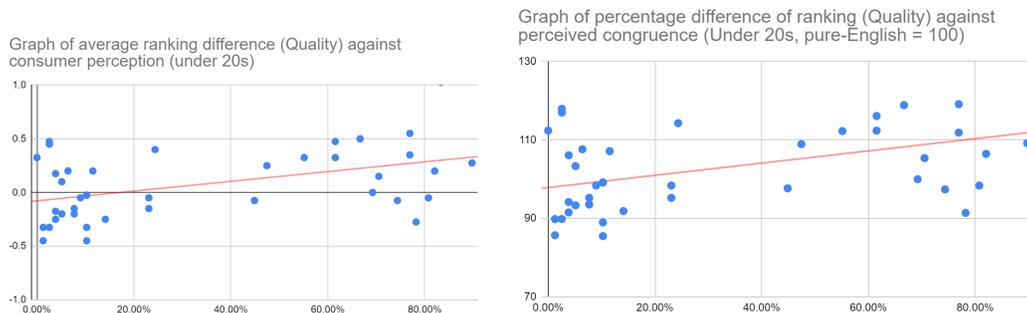


Figure 6- Graph of congruence perception against performance (Quality, under 20s)



However, when the data is stratified by age, it could be seen that in terms of quality (thereby removing pragmatic considerations like price) the trend in those above 40 was much more significant than younger age groups (it should be of note that the vertical range in **Figure 5** is double that of **Figure 6**). Additionally, the range of maximum and minimum values is also significantly wider for the over 40s age groups than the under 20s; the percentage difference in

over 40s ranges from 57% to 157% (mean = 100.4%, standard deviation = 25.5%); the same data from the under 20s group yielded a range from 85% to 119% (mean = 103.0%, standard deviation = 11.4%). Two conclusions can be drawn from these data: one, foreign languages *in general* appeal to the youth more than the older generation; two, the country-of-origin effect is nonetheless much stronger in the older adult population, as languages *not congruent* to the product do significantly worse than the pure-English product, while languages *significantly congruent* to the product do significantly better (resulting in the large standard deviation). It can therefore be concluded that, at least in Singapore, the country-of-origin effect is weakening with the younger generation; consequently, it is unsurprising that incongruent foreign language-product associations are increasingly being seen in the Singaporean linguistic landscape as shown by Serwe et al. (2013)'s research done on French in F&B signs.

This weakening CoO effect can be attributed to a multitude of factors. First and foremost, as alluded to in section 8.3, the extent in which foreign language can be replaced is limited, as there is the practical constraint of message transmission to the target audience. This might therefore limit the extent in which the foreign language use can evoke an image of the target country-of-origin, constraining its resultant effects. For example, a simple product name (such as *Kaisoku*- speed in Japanese) may not be able to create a link between the product and Japan, as much as a product description in Japanese or the use of Japanese *hiragana*, *katakana* or *kanji* script.

In addition, there is a growing number of people who are aware of their inherent biases and choose to shy away from explicit CoO-product linkages. This was apparent when respondents were asked for an explanation of their choices in ranking the images (they were asked to answer only if a reason stood out clearly to them). One particular respondent said that “when the language is too obvious.... [it is] also obvious that the product is not actually authentic and the sellers are trying too hard”. Another separate respondent also said that (referring to their choices in the Health Product set) “[they have] seen MLMs market supplements with foreign languages on them to create reputability, thus [they would] be less willing to purchase those.” It is also of note that both respondents are under the age of 40, reflecting a certain mentality shift toward the CoO effect. In fact, an interesting observation would be that many open-ended respondents in the under 20 category recognised the role the CoO effect played in their decisions, or how their decisions were unaffected by the CoO effect, even when not prompted to do so. This suggests the ubiquity of the use of CoO effect in product marketing in the modern day, to the point where implicit hints are immediately noticeable and detected by audiences. This paves the way for a post-Country-of-Origin effect, where the exploitation of the CoO effect becomes frowned upon (as seen in the two responses cited above), and incongruent foreign languages are used to “distinguish items from their traditional counterparts”, in the words of Serwe et al. (2013)'s findings.

A final factor leading to the diminishing CoO effect might also be attributed to the rise of the post-CoO effect; as companies stray away from using overly obvious foreign languages in their advertisements, they end up choosing languages that are generally popular among the masses. What this paper picked up is that images that are interlaced with Japanese do consistently well

as compared to the three other languages; in fact, considering all 11 sets, products advertised using Japanese do better than products with somewhat congruent languages, as shown in **Table 6**.

Table 6- Performance of advertisements using different languages

		Japanese	Significantly Congruent	Somewhat Congruent
Willingness to Buy	Average Rank Difference	+0.15	+0.33	+0.10
	Average Percentage Difference	+5.99%	+12.22%	+4.33%
Quality	Average Rank Difference	+0.20	+0.39	+0.15
	Average Percentage Difference	+7.80%	+14.53%	+6.33%

With the rise of these languages, consumers and merchants alike are more inclined to use and be appealed by these languages. The reason for this success is attributable to the findings in section **8.2**, where Japanese is associated with all attributes with the exception of “expensive”, making it an ideal choice to market cheap-to-medium priced goods and products while maintaining an image of quality in the eyes of consumers, already a marketing technique prevalent in our society with shops like *Miniso* or *Daiso*. This would diminish the importance and the applicability of the Country-of-Origin effect when it comes to advertising in the long run. With the combination of these factors, the CoO effect can be seen to weaken in the coming years.

9. CONCLUSION

After a thorough analysis and investigation of the Singaporean consumer landscape, it was found that France depicts luxury, and is attributed to luxury items; Germany is associated with durability, quality and reliability and is therefore attributed to sectors in which these are important; Japan is associated with its efficiency and cuteness, resulting in its associations with the beauty and instant-product industries.

It was also shown that though the Linguistic Fetish was present in the Singaporean linguistic landscape, it was constrained by practical concerns, namely the need for languages used to be understood by the consumer before they were willing to buy a product.

Finally, the country-of-origin effect, while it still currently still exists in the Singaporean consumer landscape, is slowly diminishing due to basket of different factors, including an increasing awareness of the pervasiveness of the exploitation of this effect for heightened market performance, the growth of a post-Country-of-Origin effect, and the increased prevalence of catch-all languages such as Japanese which pander to all audiences. This rise of the post-CoO effect is a novel finding, and deserves more academic attention in order to understand it better.

In summary, the evolution of the Country-of-Origin effect and the Linguistic Fetish serves as a reminder that language is fluid; trends rise and fall, and so do consumer perception toward certain languages and marketing techniques. With the hastening pace of globalisation and cultural exchange, the field of sociolinguistics and its findings will find an increasingly principal value in bridging the gap between us and our grasp on and interactions with our languages.

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