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Country-of-origin and competitive market dynamics: Italian biscuits and German cutlery, 1870–1920

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ABSTRACT

Business historians have for long described the marketing value of country-of-origin (COO), often foregrounding the advantages of goods from a particular region. We argue that to fully understand COO, we also need to explore the impact of market competition on its evolution. This study compares two examples: the market category of Italian *biscotti* and the use of *Made in Germany* in the cutlery export business with India (1870–1920). In both, the perceptions of COO evolved as an advantage derived from competitive market dynamics, showing different ways of how competition mattered for COO. While Italian *biscotti* emerged out of imitation of British first movers, the value of cutlery *Made in Germany* was realised through a process of distinction from British competitors. Hence, we criticise approaches that isolate COO from its competitive environment or naturalise its advantages as timeless and absolute. Instead, we suggest a research agenda that pays attention to the way COO narratives incorporate comparative perspectives and commercial rivalry.

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Introduction

Country-of-origin (COO) highlights the characteristics of goods from a specific place and the reputation associated with them. Even though COO does not always require a demonstrable and inimitable link between geographic entity and goods (Higgins, 2018), consumers often perceive such indications, independent of their concrete legal status, as proxies for quality, reputation, or unique local features. In this article, we apply a historical comparative approach to challenge the focus of COO on innate characteristics of a place, stressing instead the importance of competitive market dynamics and continuous comparisons for the evolution of COO. We connect our findings to recent scholarship on commercial myths (Ostberg, 2011; Thompson & Tian, 2008) and uses-of-the-past (Suddaby et al., 2023; Wadhvani et al., 2018) that shows how culturally resonant stories make COO meaningful and valuable.

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Empirically we draw on two examples to explore the relevance of competition for COO: the origin and evolution of the category *biscotti* in the Italian bakery market and the role of the *Made in Germany* label in the export cutlery business with India. The first example investigates the emergence of the category Italian *biscotti*, inspired by British competitors. Building on archival sources, we show how Italian *biscotti* first emerged as knockoffs of British tea biscuits. Over time, they evolved into what was perceived as an explicitly Italian treat, changing interpretations of both Italian and British COO in the biscuits market. The second example shows the emergence and interpretation of *Made in Germany* in the cutlery export market in India. Here, the label emerged through a process of explicit distinction, rather than imitation. German manufacturers were required to mark their products as originating in Germany, thus stressing the difference to their British competitors. Over time, this process of distinction created a novel market opportunity for German cutlery manufacturers in the context of India's political struggle for independence.

In both cases we find that COO evolved over time into an abstraction, serving as a shorthand for consumers' expectations of quality, taste, or geographic embeddedness. Yet, in both cases, these yardsticks did not emerge as advantages unique to Italian food entrepreneurs or German cutlery manufacturers. Rather they evolved out of a competitive market situation and based on comparison with rivals. This occurred either through a process of explicit imitation, as in the case of Italian *biscotti*, or a process of explicit distinction, as in the case of *Made in Germany*. Over time, the meaning of the respective labels evolved beyond the market competition that first propelled them. They became increasingly perceived as timeless and inimitable advantages of the place they referenced, disguising COO's evolution in the context of competitive market dynamics.

Building on our analysis, we argue that studies of COO should engage more systematically with competitive market situations and comparisons of origins—and how they are being narrated—rather than focusing primarily on perceived qualities of goods from a specific place in isolation. The fact that these labels, over time, become valuable independent of competition makes it even more important to recognise their link to competitive market dynamics as a critical corrective. Such argument protects stakeholders from the false assumption that COO advantages are eternal and stand above market competition. It reminds us that COO is not only continuously open to change but often even dependent on rivalrous business dynamics for its emergence and acceptance.

Literature review

The COO concept explains how place acts as a cue for consumers when evaluating a product or service (Castro & Sáiz, 2020; Higgins, 2018). COO is essentially a trade description. Historically, it has been communicated in a number of different ways, including as registered trademarks, as labels directly expressing origin, such as 'made in' and 'product of', and as indicia that serve as shortcuts for COO, such as names of cities or regions which are known for specific products or services. Hence, the discussion of COO intersects with brands, trademarks and also country image (Castro & Sáiz, 2022; Barnes & Higgins, 2020). Geographical indications enable producers in a particular region to use the name of that location, such as Bordeaux wine (Lopes et al., 2020) or Danish butter (Higgins & Mordhorst, 2008), and can be legally enforced. Research shows that trademarks emphasise specific values related to tradition and culture through names, logos, and images (Suffia et al., 2018). They are important for establishing reputation

and protecting from competitors and fraud (Higgins & Mordhorst, 2008). By contrast, origin labels, such as 'made in' or 'product of', may translate into a premium in specific markets due to consumers' associations, even if they cannot be legally enforced, and there is no legal requirement for the product or service to have a specific characteristic other than being from that location (Hansen, 2010; Higgins, 2018; Higgins & Mordhorst, 2008). Finally, COO can also be communicated through signs or names of places, such as 'Sheffield' referring to the cutlery produced in the British city of Sheffield (Higgins & Tweedale, 1995), 'Danish modern' for furniture produced in Denmark (Hansen, 2006), indicia for the quality of textiles (Higgins, 2012), or even forms of packaging as in the case of packaged oil as a proxy for Mediterranean olive oil (Ramon-Muñoz, 2020). Some of these indications of origin become legal trademarks, while others derive their value from consumer expectations.

COO is related to branding practices. However, the term branding is generally understood to be broader. Branding encompasses a set of cultural principles and symbolic meanings conveyed through marketing (Barnes & Higgins, 2020) that may include but is not limited to perceptions of origin. Business historians have shown that registered trademarks have strengthened the link between COO and branding in the past (Belfanti, 2018; Lopes et al., 2022; Lopes & Duguid, 2010; Wilkins, 1992). Legislation of trademarks was introduced in most countries during the nineteenth century. In the related debates, transparency about origin was one central concern and a common branding strategy. It was also during that time of expanding global trade that indications of origin and their fraudulent uses became widespread (Higgins & Verma, 2009; Lopes et al., 2020; Ramon-Muñoz, 2020). While misrepresentations that are actively misleading consumers can infringe a trademark, look-alike or copycat products do not necessarily do so. In the literature, the important process of imitation, which is also relevant for this paper, has been studied extensively, either as an illicit practice, a productive entrepreneurial activity, or a driver of innovation (Casson & Dodgson, 2019; Lopes et al., 2020; Lopes & Casson, 2012).

Both in marketing and business history, research of COO has made great strides (Pharr, 2005). Today, single-cue studies are shown to be of limited use because multiple intersecting factors shape how consumers perceive and value geographic origins. Scholars have emphasised the complex and multifaceted relationship between brands and trademarks on the one hand and consumer perceptions (Barnes & Higgins, 2020), negotiated compromises between consumers and producers (Conca Messina et al., 2019), and national identity (Saiz & Castro, 2022) on the other. Moving past notions of 'made in', scholars have teased out a more nuanced understanding of COO as influenced by selective readings of the past, the reputation of brands and goods, and consumer perceptions of country image, which are captured in narratives and commercial myth (Hansen, 2006, 2010; Ostberg, 2011; Thompson & Tian, 2008). Based on the case of Parmigiano cheese, Magagnoli (2017, p. 165) finds that designation of origin was shaped by a historical process of trading channels and communication rather than production techniques. Narratives of heritage provide intangible assets for firms from a given country (Pinchera & Rinallo, 2017). For example, Miranda (2020) has shown that COO works when a positive association with the country already exists, intersecting the generic country image with the specific image of the products of this country (similarly also, Font, 2012). On the other hand, the association between product and country image may only be valid in some markets but not others (Umemura & Slater, 2017). Consumer perception of a country's image depends on a variety of factors (see Pharr, 2005), including familiarity with (Lee et al., 2016) or the animosity towards a given country (Harmeling et al.,

2015), which are shaped by experiences as well as socio-political context. For that reason, country image can also become a liability, as shown in the example of the underdevelopment of the organic food market in New Zealand (Jones & Mowatt, 2016).

In addition, the literature has clearly established a link between COO and nationalism (Higgins, 2018); and scholars have described governments as important managers of COO (Higgins & Mordhorst, 2008, 2015). 'Buy national' campaigns, for example, are often designed to trigger consumption patterns that support one particular nation or political alliance, with varying and often underwhelming results on consumer behaviour (Clayton & Higgins, 2022; Thackeray, 2019). Thus, historical studies have advanced our understanding of how COO evolves and connects with different existing cultural narratives, chief among them narratives of nationalism.

In sum, the literature has firmly established that COO matters for purchase decisions but that multiple intersecting factors shape *how* it matters. Scholars have also shown that COO is constructed as a narrative and often links to already existing images and stories. However, by and large, the literature shares an understanding that COO is based on perceived qualities of goods that are unique to their geographical origin. It focuses on the perception of resources and capabilities linked to a place and usually understood as determined by soil, technology, people, form of production, recipe, history, or traditional way of operating (Barnes & Higgins, 2020; Hansen, 2010).

Yet, so far, few scholars have pointed to the relevance of market competition and the relative evaluation of different origins that we focus on in this article. Our approach is inspired by the work of cultural geographer Bronwyn Parry (2008, p. 379) who argues compellingly that the evolution of some origin indicators has less to do with geographical characteristics, such as soil or traditional ways of operating, and more with politically motivated narratives. According to Parry, the emphasis on place is outmoded and may hinder the development of 'more outward-looking and progressive approaches', thus challenging historians of COO to more explicitly address the dynamic processes that shape evolving understandings of COO. Furthermore, the uniqueness and stability of modes of production are anything but obvious. Scholars have shown that migration and mobile labour forces can affect the development of indications of source (Higgins, 2018; Ramon-Muñoz, 2020). Evolving identity constructions shape the perception of country of origin as well, as Barnes (2018) pointed out by looking at how the Lancashire boycott of Australian produce redefined the very notion of 'Britishness' in the textile trade between Australia and Britain. All these critiques indicate that COO is neither static nor fully determined by characteristics of place.

We complement these critical voices by highlighting the role of market competition for understanding COO. We argue that COO often emerges from direct comparison of producers with their rivals, shaping the evolving narratives of origin and how they are being valued by consumers. In that context, it is important to understand COO also as 'an engagement with the mythology of certain places' (Andéhn et al., 2020, p. 327). Market myths are culturally resonant stories promoting a selective view of the past that shapes COO and related consumption practices (Pirani, 2022, Thompson & Tian, 2008, Ostberg, 2011). This literature addresses a similar point than studies of 'rhetorical history' (Lubinski, 2018, 2023b; Smith & Simeone, 2017; Suddaby et al., 2010; Wadhvani et al., 2018), which explore how stakeholders narrate their past selectively. Combining both approaches, we argue, helps to better understand the role of competition in the development of COO and how COO connects to specific and selective interpretations of the past.

Materials and methods

We draw empirical material from two historical examples of COO: Italian biscuits and German cutlery in the period roughly from the 1870s to the 1920s. These are product categories which are not commonly associated with COO, as is the case for Italian fashion (Pinchera & Rinallo, 2017) or German precision engineering (Barnes & Higgins, 2020). They were chosen because they represent everyday products of low to medium cost, are easy to trade, ship and store, and are important products in the export trade, where indications of origin are most relevant. We also purposefully chose product categories from Italy and Germany, two catch-up countries of industrialisation, for which market competition is particularly relevant during the time period we study. Finally, the cases were also selected based on the availability of archival sources, which allow a comparative analysis of COO.

We explore these two cases using historical archival material from Italy, Germany, Great Britain, India, and the United States as summarised in Table 1. For Italy, we use archival sources on and from Italian biscuit manufacturers, including Biscottificio Guelfi (Barsotti family private collection, Cascina), Lazzaroni (Archivio Storico Lazzaroni, Saronno, hereafter ASL), and Gentilini (Archivio Storico Gentilini, Rome). These sources were triangulated with Italian documents on the biscuit trade, reports from international exhibitions, published accounts on other biscuit manufacturers, and sources from a large British competitor, Huntley and Palmers, accessed at their archive at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, United Kingdom. For German cutlery in the Indian market, we rely on archival sources from the city archive of Solingen (hereafter: CASol), the centre of cutlery manufacturing in Germany. We complement them with consular reports by the US consulate in India, statistics and reports by the British Indian Government, and testimony by business professionals and legal experts

Table 1. Consulted sources.

| Location | Materials | Contribution |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Huntley and Palmer Archive (Reading, UK) | Trade reports, export reports advertising material, branded material, trademark disputes. | Mapping the export market from the point of view of the global market leader. |
| Barsotti family private collection (Cascina, Italy) | Trade reports, published history of the company, advertising material on the Biscottificio Guelfi factory. | Understanding the emergence of industrial biscuit production in Italy. |
| Archivio Storico Lazzaroni (Saronno, Italy) | Company legal documents, Internal correspondence, unpublished history of the company written by Mario Lazzaroni, awards, suppliers' advertising material, trade reports. | Outlining the evolution of the Italian bakery in the national and international market. |
| Archivio Storico Gentilini (Rome, Italy) | Published history of the company, advertising material, trade reports, industry awards. | Following the evolution of a family bakery to an industrial production with regional and national outreach. |
| Digital archives | Published industry documents, such as international Exhibition official reports, industry trade reports, national consumption statistics and reports. | Framing Italian biscuit industry in the broader context of national reputation, consumption and trade. |
| City Archive Solingen, Germany | Letters, informal company histories, marketing material | Analysing the market for German cutlery in India |
| West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, India | Political reports, descriptions of bazaar dynamics | Showing the impact of the swadeshi movement and Indian nationalism on bazaar sales |
| Federal Archives Germany, Berlin | Deutsches Handels-Archiv: Publication of the German export industry | Analysis of trade between Germany and India |

reporting to the British Merchandise Marks Act Select Committee in charge of reviewing legal regulation on origin labels.

We compare both cases following standards of historical source criticism (Heller, 2023; Kipping et al., 2014). We triangulated the archival sources with contemporary published accounts and secondary sources to multiply perspectives, judging their validity and credibility based on their closeness in time to the events and the context of their creation. Guided by our literature review, we then engaged with the sources to explore the importance of competitive market dynamics for the evolution of COO. In a second step, we identified and contrasted the processes of imitation and distinction as two development paths for the historical evolution of COO. In our discussion we draw on the insights from our examples to argue that a historically sensitive understanding of COO must pay more attention to the competitive market situations that frequently shaped the evolution of COO.

Findings

Italian biscotti: category emergence by imitation

In 1928, a local newspaper visited Guelfi, a biscuit manufacturer located near Pisa, Italy. The journalists praised its range of produce and modern mills, calling it ‘the pride of the Italian biscuit industry’ (Elle, 1928). What the article did not mention is that Guelfi, and the Italian biscuit industry at large, had been developed on the blueprint of British technologies, imitating both British knowhow and production processes. While ‘made in Italy’ was never a popular designation of origin for biscuits, the following section will show how the category Italian *biscotti* became distinguishable through specific recipes, packaging, and design decisions, which imitated British first movers and became known as biscuits ‘the British way’.

Biscuits ‘the British way’

The technologies that allowed to move from an artisanal to an industrial production of biscuits originated in Great Britain. The first industrial biscuit manufacturer, Huntley and Palmer (hereafter H&P), started in Reading in 1822 and registered as a trademark in 1876 (Corley, 1972). Thanks to the development of integrated machinery, H&P was the first firm, which pioneered continuous production (Corley, 1972), while also developing tins as a preferred form of packaging (Franklin, 1979). By 1865, H&P was the leading international biscuit manufacturer, with a continental trade and occasional exports to Italy (Corley, 1972). Structural conditions contributed to Italy’s delayed industrialisation in the confectionary industry (Chiapparino et al., 2002). Novel machinery allowed for the mechanisation of biscuits modelled after the British tea variety. The same technology was less efficient for the alternative recipes that had for long circulated at the regional level (Chiapparino et al., 2002), thus creating a situation in which the well-established but regional traditional recipes did not shape the modern biscuit industry in Italy.

British tea biscuits were sold and consumed in Italy as a premium product. They took their names by their intended mode of consumption, as an accompaniment to tea. They had three essential characteristics shared across brands: (1) the specific range of biscuits on offer, all labelled tea biscuits, (2) the fact that they were pre-packed in assortments, and (3) the use of decorated tins. A brochure by Peak Frean & Co, advertising ‘assorted, dry and sandwiched

biscuits, wafers, and biscuits covered in chocolate [sold] in special decorated tins' (ASL, n.d.) foregrounds precisely these three characteristics. The tins were an important component of the British biscuit industry both in Britain and in export markets like Italy. However, they did not show iconic British landmarks but rather reproduced fashionable styles, such as flower patterns or Japanese-inspired prints (Franklin, 1979). Both the elaborate tins and having tea would hint at an upper middle-class aspirational consumption. Pre-packaged tea biscuits in decorated tins came to define what was known as biscuits *all'uso Inglese* ('the British way'). The term British referred not only to the product but also to the packaging, listing 'tins covered by a label the British way', among the packaging options (ASL 1900). This trade description emerged in Italy and is featured in industry reports ('Atti del Comitato', 1870–1874) and advertising. Notably, it did not appear in H&P's advertising material for the British market but was common for Italian consumers.

The growing popularity of biscuits *all'uso Inglese* eventually persuaded Italian entrepreneurs to venture into this trade. In 1856, Gaetano Guelfi came up with his own recipe for a biscuit, which closely resembled British tea biscuits (Barsotti et al., 2010). Even if similar, locally produced biscuits did not yet have the same premium reputation and allure as their British counterparts. Guelfi admitted that he had falsely claimed that his products were produced in Britain for 5 years ('Atti del Comitato', 1870–1874). Three decades later, the counterfeit of British biscuits was still widespread enough that the Ministry of Agriculture suspected that the reason why Italian biscuits compared so favourably with imported British ones was that the majority of biscuits sold as British imports were actually produced in Italy (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1895).

Anglo-Italian ventures

The second Italian firm capitalising on the British origin of biscuits was D. Lazzaroni & Co, becoming the most prominent Italian biscuit manufacturer of the late nineteenth century (Chiapparino et al., 2002). While Guelfi had lacked the connections to network with British producers, Lazzaroni managed to build personal links with British firms, gathering knowledge and expertise to start his biscuit business (ASL, n.d.). In 1888, Luigi Lazzaroni registered D. Lazzaroni & Co as an 'Anglo-Italian company', specialised in English Biscuits (ASL c.1890). Rather than any direct participation of British manufacturers, the name reflected the myth of Britain as the homeland of afternoon tea and refined middle-class consumption.

Both Lazzaroni and Guelfi invested in the acquisition of British technology and the participation in international exhibitions. British machines were instrumental in establishing Italian biscuits as an imitation, or adaptation, of British brands. While Guelfi opted for Wicors & Co. (Barsotti et al., 2010), a whole Lazzaroni plant was built around Baker Perkins (1925) machines and workers were trained under 'British technical direction' for 2 years to learn how to operate them (ASL, 1959).

These technological innovations allowed Italian manufacturers to feature in national and international exhibitions. At the international exhibition in Dublin (1865) Guelfi won a gold medal and gained the confidence to first market his biscuit as Italian ('Atti del Comitato', 1870–1874). In the report from the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, Guelfi was praised for the best biscuits the British way to be produced in Italy (Orosi, 1868). Lazzaroni was enlisted as an Anglo-Italian firm in national exhibitions, such as the Fiera-Concorso Nazionale prodotti alimentari' (national food exhibition) held in Rome in 1895, where it was awarded a gold medal for its 'perfect imitation of British biscuits' (ASL, 1895).

While Lazzaroni and Guelfi are the most established examples, the increased automation of production processes affected the biscuit industry at large, with a growing number of firms starting to produce biscuits the British Way. One example is Saiwa, a biscuit manufacturer that began as a pastry shop in Genova, specialising in *sugar wafers* (Piccardo, 2010). In Rome, Gentilini was the most prominent producer of biscuits the British way and other foreign produces, such as *American cracker* and the *Swiebak* (Brignone, 2015). Smaller manufacturers also started to produce tea biscuits, often selling them in in-house cafés. Urbanisation and industrial development contributed to the popularity of cafés and confectionery consumption. Manufacturer of this kind included Dora in Turin, Salza in Pisa, and Digerini e Marinai in Florence (Lazzaroni, 1978).

However, trade policies impinged the development of a domestic biscuit industry. After national unification in 1861, Italy opened its market to France and England as a payback for the military help (Zamagni, 1993). Guelfi was one of the first entrepreneurs who lobbied for a protection of the Italian confectionery industry. In 1874, he lamented how his biscuits ended up costing more than British ones, since British producers took advantage of legal benefits as well as illegal practices, such as bribing custom officials to avoid paying the sugar tax ('Atti del Comitato', 1870–1874). While these bribes are not documented, H&P was particularly well versed in liaising with local politicians to negotiate favourable trading conditions. In 1874, the lead export manager of H&P visited Italian politicians, among them the Director of Customs, to lobby for the brand's biscuits to be traded with a lower duty, and for duties to be paid on the net weight only (Leete, 1912ca).

Nationalising biscuits

Despite these adverse contextual circumstances, the overall expansion of the Italian biscuit industry led to a progressive yet significant decline in the import of British biscuits. Already in 1867, Guelfi was reported to be successful enough to affect the import of British biscuits (Orosi, 1868). Between 1885 and 1894, imports of biscuits from England dropped from 1,132 to 320 quintals (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1895). Imported biscuits from countries other than England also dwindled, dropping from 757 to 62 quintals between 1887 and 1889 (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1895).

The rise of Italian specialties and the growth in reputation of Italian producers tarnished the COO premium of British manufacturers while giving rise to a newly emerging Italian identity. Italy became a symbolic resource of national pride, as 'the Risorgimento and the birth of the Kingdom of Italy had brought a wave of nationalism, which was reflected in all aspects of the country's social and cultural life' (Scarpellini, 2016, p. 24), including food consumption and branding. This cultural shift provided the material for commercial myths (Thompson & Tian, 2008), enhancing nationalist feelings and pride in Italian national identity, which counteracted previous understandings of Italy as a backward nation. Moreover, the confectionery industry became more consolidated. In 1903, an industrial census counted 876 industrial plants of 'considerable relevance' operating in Italy, including producers of chocolate, jams, syrup, and biscuits (Conca Messina, 2021). This reflected both the increased availability of food production technologies, as well as the broader effort of the government to stimulate and emphasise the industrialisation of national production.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Italian biscuit manufacturers started to adopt national symbols and tropes to market their products. Examples included biscuits dedicated to Italian

colonies and to the Italian Royal Household. *Assabesi*, unbranded biscuits made with chocolate that started to appear in 1885, took their name from the Italian colony of Assab (Abbattista, 2004). The *Eritrea*, a chocolate biscuit produced by Lazzaroni, and the *Tripolini*, a hazelnut-based biscuit by Gentilini, both evoked colonial ventures. Saiwa celebrated the start of the Italo-Abyssinian war with a tin resembling two Eritrean Ascarì soldiers riding their motorbikes (Piccardo, 2010). Usually based on chocolate, these biscuits racialised the colonies while asserting Italian identity as the civilised coloniser engaging in international trade. The second category is biscuits dedicated to the Royal Family, which spurred patriotism while creating a proximity with upper class tastes. For example, Gentilini dedicated some of its most popular creations to the members of the Royal Family, such as the Regina, Margherite, Umberto, Vittorio, and Jolanda, while becoming official suppliers of the Royal Household (Brignone, 2015). Other producers, such as Dora from Turin, dedicated their biscuits to public figures, such as Cavour and Garibaldi, who had been involved in the unification of the Italian Kingdom in 1861.

Promoting Italian biscottis

Italian manufacturers emphasised national identity and heritage by adding Italian monuments on tins and publicising the endorsement by Italian celebrities. Tins were particularly effective in visualising the connection of the brand with its origin. Guelfi used the neighbouring Pisa, more recognisable than its native Navacchio, to embellish its tins. Gentilini printed its catalogue with the map of Rome on the back, while the tins showed iconic landmarks and claimed that the biscuits were a specialty of Rome (Brignone, 2015, p. 64), presenting them as a good souvenir. Furthermore, endorsements enriched biscuits with relevant cultural connotations. The most striking example was the seal as Official Supplier of the Royal Household, which Lazzaroni used for their promotional material. Manufacturers also relied on Italian celebrities. The music composer Giuseppe Verdi thanked Gaetano Guelfi for having sent him biscuits, suggesting that they were 'compositions even more valuable than mine', a praise later used in promotional material. Likewise, the writer Gabriele d'Annunzio sent a note to Saiwa after having received a box of newly developed 'fine biscuits', praising the novelty as even finer than British counterparts. The transformation of tea biscuits from expensive delicacy to popular souvenir, along with endorsements by key figures of popular culture, demonstrates the democratisation of leisure consumer practices connected to travel, shopping, and cultural life. In times of societal shift towards new ways of being, commercial myths provided new frames which could help resolve ideological tensions (Crockett & Davis, 2016). A more widespread, everyday consumption of biscuits was marketed as a way of participating in this new consumer culture and linked to the support of national values and heritage.

The rise of Italian manufacturers and the advancing reputation of their products occurred in lockstep with falling imports from Britain. The rise of the Italian COO paired with the dwindling of the term the British Way confirm the connection between nationalism and COO (Higgins, 2018). By 1921, none of Lazzaroni's commercial materials used the term 'British' anymore, even though the range sold was still consistent with the past. The term slowly disappeared from commercial categories, possibly also in light of efforts by the Fascist government to eradicate foreign names from the Italian language, and to turn food consumption into as a nationalist and political effort (Garvin, 2022). In 1931, commercial categorisation moved to using *tipo Lazzaroni* (the Lazzaroni type) rather than the British Way to label tea

biscuits ('Bollettino', 1931), possibly reflecting fascist nationalist policies and de facto erasing the origin of this product.

Cutlery made in Germany: category emergence by distinction

While Italian biscuits were the result of a process of imitation of British competitors, cutlery *Made in Germany* was a product category that emerged from distinction from British rivals. German cutlery manufacturers had for long been experts of the export trade. The industry had its centre in the city of Solingen in the Western part of Germany (United States Tariff Commission, 1938). From there, German manufacturers exported their products overseas as early as the seventeenth century (Lohmann, 1934, pp. 13–15). 'Those knives, which were needed ... in East and West India ... are called good of the sea [Seegut] because they were sent to Antwerp and from there out to the sea' described an expert of the Solingen trade the trade route in the early nineteenth century (von Daniels, 1802, pp. 39–40, translation from German by the authors.)

One of the bustling export markets was India, where manufacturers of cutlery sold their products in the local bazaars (Ray, 1988). Especially, since the late nineteenth century, German firms made headway in this market and competed fiercely with their British rivals. The primary German players in the Indian cutlery business were Henry Kaufmann & Sons and Carl Schlieper, selling low-cost penknives, scissors, and razors (Department of Commerce & Baker, 1915, p. 216; Lohmann, 1934, p. 22; Tesche, 1931). Cutlery together with paper and matches belonged to the few necessities that not only European expats but also Indians bought, according to a market report by the US consul in India (Department of Commerce & Baker, 1915, pp. 13–15).

The main competitors for Solingen's entrepreneurs came from the British town of Sheffield (Higgins & Tweedale, 1995). For decades, Sheffield and Solingen competed fiercely for India's cutlery market. As a late mover in India, the German manufacturers first imitated British trademarks and provided lower-cost goods to Indian buyers. Frequently, British business executives took these cases to court, accusing their German competitors of trademark infringement and fraud (Lubinski, 2023a, pp. 55–58). To eliminate such fraud, British manufacturers lobbied for the British Merchandise Marks Act, which was eventually passed in Great Britain in 1887 (Higgins, 2018, pp. 29–56; Payn, 1888). Two years later, in 1889, the British Indian Government implemented an Indian version of this law, which was modelled after the British precursor. The goal was to distinguish British high-quality goods from inferior German ones (Government of India, 1902).

The Merchandise Marks Act stipulated specific conditions under which imports to Britain and the British Empire had to be marked with their origin. The law required origin labels if any pictures or writings on the goods bore resemblance with existing British trademarks, names of British manufacturers, or British towns. As a matter of law, all other imports did not require origin labelling and could be imported as 'blanks' until 1926, when a new law was passed (Higgins, 2021). Yet, in practice, custom officials often did not want to make the determination if a product met these conditions. Often, they took any English language marking as proxy, rather than evaluating labels for resemblances with British producers, products, or places. Frank Safford, a British legal expert on the Merchandise Marks Act, found that custom officials 'have given a wider interpretation to the Act than the Act actually bears' (Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 54). Executive instructions for the

guidance of customs officials in India even explicitly spelled out this practice: 'Goods manufactured on the Continent of Europe should be detained if the manufacturer's name and the trade description are expressed in English, unless the name and description are accompanied by the name of the country of manufacture' (Executive Instructions for the Guidance of Customs Officers, 1889, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 271). While this was not strictly legally required, it established a practice among all parties involved.

Foreign manufacturers proactively marked their products with their origin to avoid confiscations and, just as importantly, delays, because products arriving late in India could often not be sold anymore or prices had to be readjusted. Moreover, collecting information on the regulations and practices in different export markets resulted in higher transaction costs than indicating origin. William John Craig, the senior partner of the wholesale company Craig, Williamson, and Thomas, based in Melbourne, rationalised this behaviour. 'I take it that the foreigners are not acquainted very well with the Customs Acts of the different colonies and to insure the avoidance of waste of time at the Customs they stamp these articles' (Testimony William John Craig, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 186). It became ubiquitous German practice to apply the indication *Made in Germany* conscientiously on all export items for Britain and the British Empire.

Eventually, British competitors found that *Made in Germany* developed into a competitive advantage for the German companies, rather than the stigma it was originally designed to be. Giving evidence before the Select Committee of 1897, one witness argued, '[t]he 'Made in Germany' which it was intended should vilify German goods in foreign lands has become a mark of honour for the same in the furthest markets' (Testimony Charles Henry Wilson, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 203). Similarly, the above-mentioned legal expert Frank Safford found that 'Made in Germany' is growing up to be a kind of trade mark for Germany; we have created a kind of international trade mark for her, so that she puts 'Made in Germany' quite readily' (Testimony Frank Safford, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 58). *Made in Germany* rose to prominence in the British domestic market not least because journalist Ernest Edwin Williams (1896) published a collection of articles as a book under the same title, amplifying the fear of German competition in Britain. Yet, in the Indian cutlery market, the value of *Made in Germany* only became fully realised as competition started to heat up.

British-German competition in cutlery

In India, cutlery was a highly competitive industry. Both British and German manufacturers regularly exported cutlery products, such as penknives, scissors, and razors, to the Indian bazaar. These products were also available from domestic Indian producers. The town of Shahjahanpur, located in today's Uttar Pradesh in northern India, was home to several cutlery craftsmen and the city of Meerut, in the same region, was a well-known centre for scissor manufacturing (Chatterjee, 1908, pp. 130–131). Yet, despite some local producers, most cutlery sold in the bazaar had been exported to India. The English writer Robert Ernest Vernede (1911, p. 147) reported from a visit to the bazaar, 'though there were some local industries represented, 'Made in Birmingham' or 'Made in Germany' stared at one from most of the stuffs and wares'.

German and British-Indian trade statistics both reflected the growth in Indo-German trade in cutlery in the years leading up to World War I. The values provided in German and

British Indian statistics, respectively, do not match because the underlying trade year was defined differently, and the German statistics frequently showed higher values because they included (some) exports *via* third countries that were missing in the British Indian statistics (Statement of Trade 1886/1887). The import statistics reflect an intense Anglo-German competition in the years leading up to World War I. Germany provided between 30% and 43% of cutlery imports, while Great Britain accounted for between 41% and 57% (Tables 2 and 3).

In this competitive situation, the British Indian government passed a law, modelled closely after the British Merchandise Marks Act of 1887, in India in 1889. Like the developments in Great Britain, the British-Indian government introduced it to protect British manufacturers from low-quality imitators, with German knockoffs being perceived as the biggest threat. The law provided a basis for legal action. In the following years, the overall number of cases in which shipments were detained ranged from 894 to 1,622 annually. While detainment was common, confiscations under the Indian Merchandise Marks Act were overall rare (0.65% 5-year average). About two-third of the detentions resulted in a monetary fine; the remaining one-third were released without penalty. Yet, the possibility of detentions created uncertainty and delayed shipments; and exporters were dependent on timely delivery. Typical fines for not properly indicating country of origin ranged from Rs. 1 to 25 (Appendix, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 247), making the top fine slightly higher than the average monthly wage of a skilled blacksmith in Kolkata at the same time (Commercial Intelligence Department, 1907, p. 236). Yet, for manufacturers, the increase in uncertainty and the delays were the more severe problems, leading manufacturers to print *Made in Germany* even on products for which it was not strictly legally necessary (Table 4).

In the longer run, the Merchandise Marks Act, which was introduced to protect British manufacturers from imitators, had at least two further consequences. First, it promoted direct trade between India and Germany; a problem that the Select Committee on Merchandise Marks (1890, 1897) highlighted early on. Second, it provided German manufacturers with a political advantage in the Indian market, which was made more visible and

Table 2. British-Indian trade statistics on cutlery exports to British-India, 1908–1914.

| Year | Cutlery total (in 1,000 GBP) | Cutlery from Ger. (in 1,000 GBP) | % of total | Cutlery from GB (in 1,000 GBP) | % of total |
|-----------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| 1908/1909 | 117 | 41 | 35.0 | 61 | 52.1 |
| 1909/1910 | 98 | 29 | 29.6 | 56 | 57.1 |
| 1910/1911 | 142 | 45 | 31.7 | 74 | 52.1 |
| 1911/1912 | 146 | 50 | 34.2 | 73 | 50.0 |
| 1912/1913 | 150 | 59 | 39.3 | 70 | 46.7 |
| 1913/1914 | 189 | 82 | 43.4 | 78 | 41.3 |

Lubinski (2023a, p. 52).

Table 3. German trade statistics on cutlery exports to British-India, 1906–1913.

| Year | Value (in 1,000 RM) | Value (in 1,000 GBP) ^a |
|------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1906 | 652 | 31.9 |
| 1907 | 1,053 | 51.5 |
| 1908 | 1,143 | 55.9 |
| 1909 | 970 | 47.5 |
| 1910 | 1,078 | 52.8 |
| 1911 | 1,138 | 55.7 |
| 1912 | 1,180 | 57.8 |
| 1913 | 1,601 | 78.4 |

^a 1 British Pounds = 20.429 Reichsmark (see Bidwell, 1970, pp. 22–24; Lubinski, 2023a, p. 52).

Table 4. Activities under the merchandize Marks Act of India, 1891–1896.

| | Detention ordered | Detention followed by confiscation | % | Detention followed by release with fine | % | Detention followed by release without fine | % | Unaccounted for | % |
|---------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------|--------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------------------|-------|
| 1891–1892 | 894 | 6 | 0.67% | 318 | 35.57% | 563 | 62.98% | 7 | 0.78% |
| 1892–1893 | 1,208 | 15 | 1.24% | 844 | 69.87% | 347 | 28.73% | 2 | 0.17% |
| 1893–1894 | 1,287 | 11 | 0.85% | 1,046 | 81.27% | 225 | 17.48% | 1 | 0.08% |
| 1894–1895 | 955 | 3 | 0.31% | 729 | 76.34% | 216 | 22.62% | 7 | 0.73% |
| 1895–1896 | 1,622 | 3 | 0.18% | 1,343 | 82.80% | 253 | 15.60% | 23 | 1.42% |
| Average 5 yrs | 1,193 | 8 | 0.65% | 856 | 69.17% | 321 | 29.48% | 8 | 0.64% |

Official reports and papers respecting the proceedings taken by Customs officials in different parts of India in the years 1894–1895 and 1895–1896 under the Merchandise Marks Act of 1889 (Appendix, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, 244–271).

therefore more valuable by the label *Made in Germany*. These consequences cannot be understood if we conceptualise origin labels solely as advantages derived from one place in isolation. They require a better understanding of the competitive market situation that provided the context for their emergence.

Made in Germany as trailblazer of direct trade

The British Indian Merchandise Marks Act triggered a new interest in direct trade between India and Germany because it highlighted for Indian traders that many of their goods were sourced in Germany, where they could buy them directly at cheaper prices, cutting out the British commission agents. The Commissioner of Sind, a province in North-East India, reported in 1890 about a large wholesale importer who informed him that

the stamping of goods ‘made in Germany’ has opened the eyes of native merchants to the fact that an immense proportion of the cheap showy shoddy which they are addicted to on account of its cheapness, and which they used to order from London, is really of German manufacture, and they are now going direct to Germany for it. (Memorandum Commissioner in Sind, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 268)

Talking about the cutlery trade with India in particular, Jeremiah Lyon of the eponymous firm reported that the trade in cutlery from Germany and Belgium increased, to the disadvantage of manufacturers in Sheffield. Asked if he believed that the indication of foreign origin ‘has acted as an advertisement of foreign goods’ he responded with an unequivocal yes. (Testimony Jeremiah Lyon, Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 89). To Lyon, it was the Merchandise Marks Act that ‘put it into the heads of merchants to do business direct’ (Select Committee on Merchandise Marks, 1897, p. 92). This concern was well known, and the Select Committee on Merchandise Marks (1890, 1897) discussed it frequently. Whereas prior to the universal use of *Made in Germany*, bazaar agents bought most of their products from British agency houses, the label made it more visible to Indian buyers that German and British manufacturers competed over market share in India and that direct trade came with price and bargaining power advantages for Indian buyers.

Made in Germany as political statement

In addition to giving an incentive for direct trade, *Made in Germany* also took on an unintended political quality in India, derived from nation competition. Since approximately the mid-nineteenth

century, Indian independence activists advocated boycotting British goods and consuming indigenous products instead, to enable the economic development of India and ultimately realise political independence (Lubinski, 2023a, pp. 69–74). India played a central role in imperial trade and took in the lion share of British exports, but it was also a controversial topic of debate in discussions about trade advantages or preferential tariffs within the British Empire (Thackeray, 2019, pp. 42–45). The nationalist ‘Swadeshi’ movement called on Indians to consume indigenous goods, rather than imported ones, claiming that foreign imports stalled India’s economic development. Swadeshi ideas existed since approximately the mid-nineteenth century, but the political movement intensified with the anti-partition campaign of the province Bengal after 1903 (Carlyle, 1905). The Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, had decided to divide the province of Bengal because he claimed it was too large to be governed. His partition plans were deeply unpopular with Bengalis because they suspected it was a measure to restrain the growing power of Bengali Hindus (Sarkar, 1973, pp. 8–12). As Indian nationalism rose, activists called for a boycott of foreign goods. The province of Bengal was most affected by the protests, where a large number of self-proclaimed Bengali enterprises emerged (Bhattacharyya, 1986). Yet, Swadeshi also became a rallying cry in other parts of the country and continued to shape the politics of consumption for decades (Thackeray, 2019, pp. 102–105).

In this deeply politicised context, *Made in Germany* turned into a political statement. While it had initially been forcefully imposed on German exporters (Payn, 1888), it now publicly declared products ‘non-British’ and thus allowed consumers to showcase their non-cooperation with the British Empire economy. Although Swadeshi theory condemned all foreign products because they delayed India’s industrial development, early activists argued that while India was dependent on imports from abroad, they should come from countries *other than Britain* (Aurobindo & Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2002). Thus, the nationalist movement put British goods at a disadvantage. Charles Stevenson-Moore (1905), Inspector-General of the Police of Bengal, observed in 1905 that, ‘A distinction is being made between English and Continental goods, adverse to the former’. German business profited from the Swadeshi context because customers paid more attention to the origin of goods, actively avoiding British products. By the early 1920s, the British trade commissioner reported that, ‘[P]olitical feeling is entering into every branch of trade and economic life as the ‘swadeshi’ movement grows in strength’ (Department of Overseas Trade & Ainscough, 1921, p. 11).

As debates in Britain turned towards changing the British legislation on origin labels, a Select Committee (1919–1920) explored new options. In the meantime, public opinion had hardened towards Germany during and after World War I. There was political support for obligatory indications of origin, which would allow British consumers to exercise a preference for British over foreign goods. The new Merchandise Marks Act of 1926 ensured that products could no longer be imported ‘blank’. This law, however, required only foreign products to be marked with origin indications. It was not designed to support Buy British campaigns or to signal the quality of British manufactures (Higgins, 2018, p. 154). In India, however, the value of *Made in Germany* even increased further as the Indian nationalist movement continued to push for Indians’ right to control their own government (Lubinski, 2023a; Thackeray, 2019).

Concluding discussion

While COO can emphasise a link between a place and the goods that originate from it, we argue that it should not rely on an understanding of origin as static and inward-looking. Our article investigates the role of competition for the evolution of COO, exploring how

relationality helps defining and shaping COO narratives. The examples of Italian *biscotti* and German cutlery show how COO operates as a reputation system, in which narratives give meanings and value to one origin in relation to others. Both examples illustrate how a specific COO acquires influence not because of a quality advantage of goods coming from a specific place, but because of how this origin relates and compares to competitors.

In our study, we find two development paths for the evolution of COO within competitive markets: by imitation and by distinction. In both cases, the repeated comparison with rivals was necessary for understanding the evolution of COO. The trajectory of Italian *biscotti*, starting from imitation and knockoff to emancipation and national prestige, cannot be understood without examining the relationship of Italian producers with their British counterpart. Our findings support the literature that has pointed to technology as a form of knowledge transfer across indications of origin (Lopes et al., 2020). We also show the process by which Italian origin developed eventually into a competitive advantage. Italian producers leveraged those elements that formerly indicated a British premium offering, i.e. the type and range of biscuits and the packaging in tins. Over time, the meanings attached to this type of biscuits changed through different abstractions and links to commercial myths, leveraging for example heritage landmarks, historical milestones, and eventually emerging Italian nationalism. Together, this created what Foster et al. (2011) call 'social memory assets'.

While the category Italian *biscotti* emerged from imitation, the label *Made in Germany* acquired its meaning in India by distinction from British rivals. While many of the comparative factors that mattered for the emergence of the label had not been predicted by the stakeholders involved, the label became a frequently used abstraction because of the way it reframed German-British competition. While *Made in Germany* was initially designed as a stigma, it evolved into a competitive advantage by creating opportunities for direct Indo-German trade and by publicly showcasing support for India's political and economic independence. These findings support prior research about the link between nationalism and COO (Clayton & Higgins, 2022; Higgins, 2018; Miranda, 2022) but add to it the relevance of market and, importantly, also nation competition.

Future research, we posit, should explore the link between nation competition and COO more explicitly. Given that many registered trademarks emerged in the nineteenth century, during a period when several new nations, including Italy and Germany, emerged, it is interesting to note that the competition with British first movers propelled both COO developments. The context for the emergence of both labels is the rapid growth of international trade in the first global economy of the nineteenth century (Higgins, 2018), an environment in which misuses and abuses of origin labels were frequent. Our two examples fit this pattern, as both arise from growing cross-border trade through, respectively, imitation and distinction. But it is also no coincidence that in both cases the competitor in question was Great Britain, the birthplace of industrialisation. In fact, this signals the importance of origin labels especially for the newly industrialising 'catch up countries' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Reinert, 2005), such as Italy and Germany but also the United States, Japan, and others. It suggests that COO scholars should look closely at competing nation states and in particular the catch-up countries that first challenged British commercial supremacy. This finding supports the call for a historically sensitive conceptualisation of origin narratives which moves from static and essentialised understandings of place (Parry, 2008) towards those explicitly accounting for globalised trade and competition.

Both cases also indicate that the evolution of COO is closely related to commercial myths (Castro & Sáiz, 2020; Thompson & Tian, 2008), while adding how narratives of origin become constructed relationally. They are stories told in the context of other stories (Lubinski, 2018). Suddaby et al. (2023) have shown how convincing narratives connect the 'intradiegetic level' of individual characters and plots with the 'extradiegetic level' of collectively held accounts and cultural myths. In the Italian example, the circulation and evolution of COO narratives was ensured by marketing events, such as international exhibitions, operated by few individual firms. There is no evidence for collaboration within the industry to shape this process strategically, but we saw how these firms were influential in strengthening narratives of origin. While historical information on consumers' understandings of products and their origin is notoriously hard to come by, our sources reflect how the initiatives of few firms over time assigned meaning and value to Italian-made biscuits. Similarly, the *Made in Germany* label acquired its worth by its ability to connect to and reinforce much older Indian nationalist narratives. The idea of boycotting British products and producers to advance a political agenda played into the hands of German manufacturers. The Indian Swadeshi movement had its own agenda and there is no evidence that German entrepreneurs felt inclined to support this political turn during this time. However, within the competitive market situation, the narratives of Indian independence activists bestowed additional value and meaning on products *Made in Germany*. This shows how ambivalent emotions across stakeholders towards a given country (Clayton & Higgins, 2022) can alter the meanings of indications of origin. Taking inspiration from recent research in rhetorical history, we suggest that future COO research could explore the concrete mechanisms that connect the intradiegetic (the level of individual characters and plots within a narrative) and extradiegetic (the level of collectively-held and repeatedly-used story elements of communities or cultures) to further clarify the evolution of COO within competitive market dynamics. This would help the field move towards a more historical and more contextualised understanding of origin.

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