

## **“PLAY IT, SAM”<sup>1</sup>, AGAIN AND AGAIN: FURTHER INSTANCES OF FAMILIARITY EFFECTS IN THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST**

***Georgios Abakoumkin***  
*University of Thessaly, Greece*

**Abstract:** Previous research on voting patterns in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has examined the role of various factors in voting, like cultural proximity or reciprocity between countries. Fewer studies have examined the role of less obvious factors in this context. One such line of research has identified familiarity (as a result of mere exposure) effects in the ESC, that is, songs that were more (vs. less) familiar to the voters did better. In the present study the aim was to extend the familiarity attribute to the country that was represented by the corresponding song. Demographic and economic characteristics of countries were used as indexes denoting familiarity or non-familiarity. Familiarity was found to be related to the countries' results in the ESC, whereas non-familiarity was not. The present findings are discussed together with previous relevant evidence with regard to familiarity effects in the ESC.

**Key words:** Country-of-origin, Eurovision, Familiarity, Voting, Mere exposure

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**Address:** Georgios Abakoumkin, Laboratory of Psychology, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Thessaly, Argonafton & Filellinon, 382 21 Volos, Greece. E-mail: gabak@uth.gr

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from the film “Casablanca” (1942).

## INTRODUCTION

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is a song competition held annually. It is a very popular event. The live broadcast of the ESC attracts some hundreds millions viewers worldwide (e.g., Charron, 2013; Ginsburgh & Noury, 2008; Haan, Dijkstra, & Dijkstra, 2005). The outcome of this competition is determined through voting. Voting patterns in the ESC have been the subject of several academic research endeavors. For example, a factor that has been identified to play a role in voting is reciprocity tendencies between countries (Doosje & Haslam, 2005). Moreover, research has also investigated more subtle factors in this context, like familiarity with the presented songs (e.g., Abakoumkin, 2011). In that research it was demonstrated that more familiar songs to the voters had better outcomes than less familiar songs. The present study pursues this line of research further. It was examined, whether general familiarity with the country that was represented by a song played also a role in voting, that is, whether there might be a bias in favour of countries that are more (vs. less) familiar to the voters.

In the present paper I first describe the main characteristics of the ESC. Next, I review literature on voting patterns in the ESC where I focus on studies that investigated familiarity effects. Finally, I present data examining the question whether familiarity effects can be found when the familiarity attribute is extended to the level of the represented country.

### *Main characteristics of the Eurovision Song Contest*

The ESC is the “longest-running annual TV music competition (international)”, as has been recognised by Guinness World Records in 2015 (Lynch, 2015). It is held since 1956 and is organized by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). It is broadcasted live, mainly over television, but also over radio and the Internet. Contestants are, with few exceptions, member countries of the EBU. Each country that participates in a certain contest is represented by one song. In each event the candidate songs are performed live. After all songs have been presented, a voting session begins, where countries vote for the contestant songs. Upon the end of the voting session, the vote results are presented. The song that gathers the most votes is declared the winner of the competition.

The ESC has several features and rules (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016a). For example, the choice of the songs' language is free. However, this, as well as other rules, changed several times. As an example, the choice of language was free from 1956 until 1965. From 1966 to 1972 songs had to be sung in a country's official language, then language was free until 1976, from 1977 to 1998 the official language

restriction was imposed again and from 1999 onwards language choice was free again (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016b). One feature that is relevant in the context of the present paper is the introduction of semifinals in 2004. Until 2003 the contest comprised one session, the final. From 2004 to 2007 a semifinal round was added, while from 2008 onwards there were two semifinal sessions and the final. Accordingly, since 2004 a varying number of countries has to qualify through a semifinal round in order to participate in the final. In addition, there is a number of countries that is allowed to participate directly in the final (for more details, see Eurovision Song Contest, 2016b).

With regard to the competition outcome, this was always decided through voting. The votes that each country distributed to other countries were initially determined by a national jury. Since 1998 televoting has been introduced, that is, it was possible for the general public to vote via telephone. Since 2009 the votes that each country distributed is a combination of the votes of the general public and the jury. Both these votes are usually weighted equally (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016b). A basic voting characteristic has not changed over the years: Each country gives a number of points to candidate songs of the participating countries, except for the contestant of the own country. This set of points is fixed since 1975; each country gives points to 10 other countries (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12 points). For more details on voting and other features of the ESC, see Eurovision Song Contest (2016b) or Haan et al. (2005).

### ***Voting patterns in the ESC: Empirical evidence***

#### *Factors related to voting outcomes in the ESC*

There has been research on the ESC that investigated voting patterns. A relevant question is whether voting outcomes in the ESC are related to factors other than song quality, that is, whether there are voting biases at play. A number of studies has examined whether there are blocs of countries voting systematically for each other. Initially, Yair (1995) identified three such blocs and called them the Western, the Northern, and the Mediterranean Bloc. Subsequent research consistently yielded patterns identifying blocs or cliques of countries and, more generally, collusive voting or vote trading (Charron, 2013; Doosje & Haslam, 2005; Fenn, Suleman, Efstathiou, & Johnson, 2006; Gatherer, 2006; Ginsburgh & Noury, 2008; Spierdijk & Vellekoop, 2009). These biases were shown to be related to cultural similarity between countries (Ginsburgh & Noury, 2008; Spierdijk & Vellekoop, 2009), to religious, linguistic and geographical closeness between countries (Spierdijk & Vellekoop, 2009) or simply to reciprocity based on countries' bilateral voting history (Doosje & Haslam, 2005). Charron (2013) even found that

collusive voting is related to countries' socio-political impartiality: More (vs. less) impartial countries, that is, countries with societies favouring meritocracy, are less prone to collusive voting.

Besides research on voting patterns that are based on cliques or friendships between countries, less obvious factors influencing voting outcomes in the ESC have been investigated as well. Two such factors have been the songs' presentation order (Abakoumkin, 2011; Bruine de Bruin, 2005; Haan et al., 2005) and the songs' familiarity (Abakoumkin, 2011, 2016, in press; Verrier, 2012). Concerning presentation order, recency effects have been found: The later a song was performed during the final session the better was its outcome (Abakoumkin, 2011; Bruine de Bruin, 2005; Haan et al., 2005). Familiarity effects, which is also the subject of the present research, are reviewed in the next section.

#### *Familiarity effects in the ESC*

A line of research has been concerned with familiarity (as a result of mere exposure) effects in the ESC. Before reviewing the respective evidence, I will briefly introduce mere exposure and familiarity effects. Zajonc (1968) found that the more one is exposed to a stimulus the more one tends to like it. One explanation of this effect is based on stimulus familiarity (Zajonc, 1968; see also Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Finkel et al., 2015). Generally, then, familiar stimuli are liked more than non-familiar stimuli. The association between familiarity and likability is empirically well established (e.g., Bornstein, 1989). What's more, effects of familiarity on liking can be observed beyond effects of other dimensions that might be assumed as more central with regard to liking. For example, familiarity as a result of housing proximity has been found to be associated with interpersonal attraction (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). Or, both obese as well as children with average weight assign more positive attributes to average weight (i.e., familiar) than to obese figures, despite the body weight group membership of the former (Kornilaki, 2014). A marked characteristic of the research concerning familiarity is that it is mainly laboratory research, even in fields that are rather applied, like advertising (Grimes, 2008). At the same time, a need for validation of laboratory findings in the field has been identified (Mitchell, 2012). This applies to psychology in general and social psychology, in particular. With regard to familiarity effects there are only few studies that have been conducted in natural settings (Abakoumkin, in press) and some of these studies examined familiarity effects in the ESC.

The semifinal round that has been introduced in 2004 in the ESC has been utilized as a natural experiment feature towards studying familiarity effects (Abakoumkin, 2011). About half of the songs appearing in the final had qualified through the semifinal, whereas the rest participated directly in the final. Thus, some songs were performed

and broadcasted twice within the contest week, whereas the rest were performed and broadcasted only once. Moreover, it should be noted, that assignment of songs directly to the final or to the path via the semifinal is rather arbitrary with respect to song quality (it is based on the respective country's result in the ESC of the preceding year) and thus it can be assumed as effectively random. Comparing the competition results from the years 2004-2008 between songs of countries that appeared in the semifinal and the final and songs that appeared in the final it was found that the songs that appeared twice did better than the songs that appeared once (Abakoumkin, 2011). This was evidence for a familiarity effect even at this rather subtle level of familiarity, although, after all, such subtleness is characteristic for mere exposure effects.

After this initial demonstration of familiarity effects in the ESC, there was another attempt (Verrier, 2012) making use of the introduction of a second semifinal round in 2008. The central idea in this attempt was that there is a different audience in each semifinal. Each semifinal would be viewed mainly by viewers/countries who participate in these semifinals. This would result in differences in viewers' familiarity with finalist songs/countries depending on whether they qualified through the semifinal with the viewers' own country or through the other semifinal. This different viewing scheme that would lead to different levels of familiarity would then be reflected in different voting patterns towards songs from the semifinal where the own country participated versus songs from the semifinal where the own country did not participate. It was claimed that the data from the years 2008-2011 revealed familiarity effects that were compatible with the assumed viewing patterns (Verrier, 2012). However, there were some problems with this study (Abakoumkin, 2016, in press). The problems that were identified regarded analytical issues as well as an alternative explanation (for more details, see Abakoumkin, 2016, in press). However, in a newer investigation it was possible to counter these problems using still the central idea of this approach and to demonstrate after all familiarity effects in the ESC (Abakoumkin, 2016, in press).

Taken together, familiarity effects based on mere exposure in the ESC were demonstrated with two different data sets and two different operationalizations of familiarity (Abakoumkin, 2011, 2016, in press).

### *Overview*

The present study was set up to examine further instances of familiarity effects in the ESC. To this end, this study went one step further with the subtleness of familiarity as compared to previous studies. It examined whether familiarity effects could be obtained if the familiarity attribute would be extended to the countries that are represented by the respective songs. In other words, countries differ with regard to the degree to which

people are familiar with them, that is, some countries are more familiar to people than are other countries. Would this characteristic, namely, country familiarity, be enough within the context of the ESC in order to observe voting biases? For example, when voting for Sweden, does one vote for the song that represents Sweden or does it, also, play a role how familiar one is with Sweden? Specifically, would countries that are more familiar to voters earn more votes than less familiar countries? Note that if this were the case, it would show that a factor would be associated with songs' vote outcomes without taking into consideration any characteristic of the respective songs.

The general question whether attributes of the songs and the respective countries might be connected in such a way that the preferences for songs are affected, is conceptually close to the domain of the country-of-origin (COO) effect. This effect, which has been identified by Schooler (1965), denotes that the evaluation of a product is affected by its country of origin, that is, even identical products are evaluated differently depending on the country they, allegedly, come from. That is, the attitude towards a country is extended to products of this country. The conceptual similarity to the present question regards the possible extension of the (familiarity-based) attitude towards a country to the attitude towards songs from this country. The COO has been researched extensively in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour (Pharr, 2005). Various country or consumer variables have been examined in order to track down the COO. When country familiarity was considered, it was rather seen as a moderator and as a variable that stands for experience with or knowledge of the country (e.g., Lee & Ganesh, 1999). Would one examine the direct effect of country familiarity within the COO, one could expect to find similar effects like in the case of product familiarity, namely, that familiar products are preferred over non-familiar products (e.g., Coates, Butler, & Berry, 2006).

To examine the association between country familiarity and voting, a task that has to be accomplished is to operationalize country familiarity in the context of ESC data. A direct measurement of voters' familiarity with countries would be the best solution. That's how country familiarity is usually assessed in COO research (e.g., Lee & Ganesh, 1999), which is usually controlled laboratory or field research. However, such data are not easily available in the context of the ESC. Another approach would be to use some more indirect index that captures country familiarity. Candidates for such index might be selected from the data that describe a country, like population or area size. Population size would seem to be indeed a satisfactory indicator of familiarity. The a priori probability of being exposed to a citizen of a country (i.e., a country's national) is directly related to this country's population. This exposure might be of any kind, be it over the media or directly through, for example, work or social encounters. Thus, a country's familiarity is assumed to be directly related to its population size. This index is general and simple and is independent of individual difference factors,

like geography knowledge or personal travel history, which might, after all, be a source of considerable variance with respect to country familiarity. Moreover, as already Schooler (1965) found when identifying the COO, the COO effect is directly related to the attitude towards the people of the respective country.

In sum, there are several reasons that speak in favour of population size as a familiarity index of a country. Nevertheless, its use in the present context is based on assumptions only. Therefore, it would be useful to have also indexes that can be assumed to be not related to country familiarity. Such indexes would be a country's common demographics like population density and area and a common economic index, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which is often used as an index of a country's economic power (e.g., Doosje & Haslam, 2005). These characteristics might influence the way a country is perceived, nevertheless they should not be related to country familiarity nor to respective effects.

To recap, the aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between songs' country familiarity and the songs' outcome in the competition. To this end, the relationship between population size, population density, area, and GDP per capita, with song outcome in the competition was examined. Among these country's indexes only population size was assumed to reflect country familiarity. Therefore, it was expected that population size would be related to song outcome, whereas population density, area and GDP per capita would not be related.

## **METHOD**

### ***Data set***

ESC data from 1957 to 2003 were considered. For the contest in 1956 the voting scores were not published. The contests from 2004 onwards included one or two semifinal rounds. Data from these contests have been used in previous studies that examined familiarity (Abakoumkin, 2011, 2016, in press). Furthermore, these data included familiarity features related to the semifinal rounds, which would confound the population size feature of the present study.

The data from 1957 to 2003 included 47 finals with 903 participations from 38 countries. Over the years more and more countries entered the ESC for the first time. In 1957 ten countries participated at least once, whereas this number increased to 38 in 2003. Because of this steady change of participating countries, data were analyzed for all years, but a division of the time interval in two was considered as well, that is, from 1957 to 1980 and from 1981 to 2003.

## Measures

### *Demographic and economic indexes*

The demographic indexes *population* (number of citizens), *area* (Km<sup>2</sup>), and *population density* (number of citizens per Km<sup>2</sup>) for each country were obtained from a list for European countries (Area and Population of European Countries, 2016). The economic index *GDP per capita* (in US \$) as estimated by the IMF for 2014 were used (List of Sovereign States in Europe by GDP [Nominal] per Capita, 2016). For non-European countries similar lists for world countries were used.

### *Songs' outcomes*

Two variables were used: *Number of votes* earned by a song and *outcome percentile ranks* (for the latter see also Abakoumkin, 2011, 2016, in press).

## RESULTS

To examine the hypotheses of the present study, zero-order Pearson correlations between the country demographic and economic indexes and the variables representing song outcomes were calculated. Before describing the main findings, the correlations among the country demographic and economic indexes for the current sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Correlations among country indexes (N = 903)**

Variable	Pop. density	Area	GDP
Population	-.13**	.45**	-.25**
Population density		-.04	.21**
Area			-.14**

**Note:** Pop. density = Population density; GDP = GDP per capita.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

The Pearson correlations between the country indexes and the song outcomes were calculated for all the contest years covered by the present study (1957-2003) as well as for two time-intervals that emerged after halving the whole-time interval. This was done to take into consideration the change in participating countries over the years, as mentioned in the Method section. Thus, the individual time intervals 1957-1980 and 1981-2003 were considered in addition to the whole-time interval 1957-2003. The respective correlation coefficients are depicted in Table 2.

The countries' population size was consistently correlated with the outcomes of the songs representing these countries in the ESC. This is consistent with the



**Table 2. Correlations between song outcomes and country indexes for three time intervals**

		Population	Pop. density	Area	GDP
Votes	1957-1980	.10*	.01	.00	-.02
	1981-2003	.09*	.10*	.05	.07
	All years	.09**	-.04	.06	-.03
Perc. rank	1957-1980	.23**	.06	.04	.04
	1981-2003	.10*	.10*	.05	.05
	All years	.15**	.05	.04	.05

**Note:** Pop. density = Population density; GDP = GDP per capita; Perc. rank = Percentile rank. Interval 1957-1980 ( $n = 389$ ); interval 1981-2003 ( $n = 514$ ); interval "All years" = 1957-2003 ( $N = 903$ ).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

respective hypothesis. The index denoting country familiarity was related with two variables indicating song outcome in the contest. In other words, the more familiar a country is, the better does its song in the ESC. Moreover, the indexes that were assumed to be not related to familiarity (population density, area, GDP per capita), were not related to the song outcome variables either. An exception is the correlation between population density and song outcome in the time interval 1981-2003. Thus, the hypothesis that indexes not related to familiarity would not be associated with song outcomes was mostly supported, as well.

In order to examine further the relationship between country indexes and song outcomes, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. The song outcome variables were regressed on the country indexes. In a first step, the index indicating familiarity, namely population, was entered into the equation and in a second step all other indexes were entered into the regression equation (Table 3).

**Table 3. Hierarchical regression analyses of song outcomes on country indexes**

Predictor variable	Outcome	
	Votes <sup>a</sup>	Perc. rank <sup>b</sup>
Step 1		
Population	.09**	.15**
$R^2$	.01**	.02**
Step 2		
Population	.07	.19**
Population density	-.03	.05
Area	.02	-.04
GDP per capita	-.00	.08*
$R^2$	.01	.03**
$\Delta R^2$	.00	.01*

**Note:** Beta coefficients are displayed. Perc. rank = Percentile rank.

<sup>a</sup>For Step 1,  $F(1, 901) = 6.81$ ; for Step 2,  $F(4, 898) = 1.94$ ,  $F_{\text{Change}}(3, 898) < 1$ . <sup>b</sup>For Step 1,  $F(1, 901) = 20.63$ ; for Step 2,  $F(4, 898) = 7.66$ ,  $F_{\text{Change}}(3, 898) = 3.28$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

The findings from the regression analyses corroborate further the pattern that was evident from the correlations. The familiarity index (population) did predict song outcome, whereas the non-familiarity indexes did not. There was an exception here, as well. The GDP index entered the equation predicting the songs' percentile rank. Accordingly, next to population, the higher a country's GDP the higher the country's song outcome measured by its percentile rank. In this case, GDP seems to play a suppressor role. In the context of regression analysis, a suppressor variable is a predictor variable that correlates with another predictor and that does not correlate with the criterion. Through this correlation pattern the relationship between the predictor and the criterion is cleaned by removing ("suppressing") from this relationship error variance that arises from the correlation between predictor and suppressor. In the present case, GDP is correlated with population (Table 1) but not with percentile rank (Table 2). Thus, when GDP enters the equation for the prediction of percentile rank (Table 3) it simultaneously cleans the relationship between population and percentile rank and thereby increases the weight of population.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study examined whether familiarity effects that were previously observed in the ESC could be extended to the countries that were represented by the songs that participated in the contest. That is, whether songs from countries familiar to voters would do better than songs from non-familiar countries. The data from the present study give an affirmative answer to this question. The benefit that might arise from a country's familiarity attribute is transferred to a song that represents it.

To arrive at this answer, four variables for country familiarity and two variables for song outcomes were considered. The country familiarity variables were of two kinds. One variable indicated familiarity (population) and three variables were familiarity irrelevant (population density, area, and GDP per capita) and were used as control variables. Further, two different song outcome measures were used (votes, percentile ranks). The data consistently showed a relationship between country familiarity and song outcomes. In addition, with only few exceptions, there were also consistently no relationships between country familiarity irrelevant indexes and song outcomes.

A limitation of the present study can be found at the use of the country indexes as proxies for familiarity or non-familiarity. The choice of population size as indicator of familiarity was logically well grounded on the a priori probability of exposure to individuals from a certain country. The reasoning that this index might contain much noise, because a country might be familiar to someone due to various other factors

would mean that the discovery of familiarity effects would be made difficult by this multitude of factors. Thus, a familiarity effect under these conditions would be much more convincing. After all, this is very similar to mere exposure effects that emerge in spite of the presence of other relevant factors. Nevertheless, population as a familiarity index was in the present study only assumed. One could opt then for a respective direct measure, such as assessing country familiarity. Still, a further step would be to test the present relationships in a more controlled study applying direct measures for various country facets that might or might not relate to familiarity.

As was noted earlier, the present research question has similarities to the COO issue from the field of marketing and consumer behaviour. According to the COO effect, attitudes towards a country are transferred to the country's products. It is interesting, after all, how various subtle factors may influence one's evaluation of a product (Coates et al., 2006; Pharr, 2005; Schooler, 1965). This applies even to evaluations that are very important to someone, like to choose a day care centre for one's child, and still evaluation criteria seem not to be straightforward (Kelesidou, Chatzikou, Tsiamagka, Koutra, Abakoumkin, & Tseliou, 2017): Parents' evaluations of day care centres seem to be unrelated to evaluations deriving from validated instruments or expert assessments. Nevertheless, the research that is concerned with COO typically examines attitudes towards countries that are based on stereotypes, personal experiences and the like, but not attitudes derived from mere exposure and familiarity. The present study did this in the context of the ESC, that is, it examined the inferred attitude towards countries based on their assumed familiarity and its relationship with the evaluation of these countries' representatives. In sum, a question that emerges from the present study for future research is whether familiarity effects based on mere exposure might not only apply to the attitude object, but might also extend to other attitude objects that might somehow be related with the primary attitude object.

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