Navigating Consumer Perceptions: The Influence of Country of Origin, Brand Image, and Product Involvement in the Indian Market

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: This study investigates the complex interplay between product country of origin (COO), brand recognition, and the level of consumer's product involvement, particularly within the Indian context. The research specifically focuses on the mobile phones and fashion clothing sectors, aiming to understand how consumer characteristics and COO knowledge influence product evaluation.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study follows a quantitative research methodology, using a purposive sampling technique to conduct surveys among college and university students hailing from Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir.

Findings: Results exhibit a significant variation in perceptions of brand image based on differences in states and educational qualifications. Similarly, COO image perceptions vary across geographical regions. These findings underscore the role of regional and educational variations in understanding consumer behavior towards brands in the Indian context.

Research, Practical & Social Implications: The study's findings emphasize the importance of understanding regional variations and consumer characteristics in the Indian market. The significant roles of COO image and brand recognition suggest that marketers need to account for these factors when formulating strategies, hence highlighting the complexity and nuanced nature of the Indian consumer market.

Originality/Value: The originality of this study lies in its focus on the nuanced and intricate relationship between COO, brand recognition, and product involvement in the Indian market. Prior studies have investigated these factors independently, but the exploration of their interaction within specific sectors (mobile phones and fashion clothing) in the context of India, provides valuable new insights. The study is also unique in its emphasis on the role of regional and educational variations in perceptions of brand and COO image. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of consumer behavior in emerging markets, and the value of the study is evident in its practical implications for marketers seeking to better tailor their strategies to the specific needs and characteristics of the Indian market.

Keywords: Country of Origin; Brand Image; Product Involvement; Indian Market; Consumer Perceptions; Marketing Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The present era of globalization has intensified the commercial competitiveness of nations and corporations alike. This increased rivalry has brought the strategic implications of a product's country of origin (COO) to the forefront, a phenomenon that forms a key component of product information (Hien et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Usunier, 2011). Studies illustrate that consumers' perceptions of a product's COO significantly influence their acceptance of the product and, consequently, the brand. Over the years, researchers have emphasized the role of brand image as an instrumental factor for business success (Motameni and Shahrokhi, 1998; Kim et al., 2017). In today's competitive market, a robust brand reputation not only aids businesses in selling their existing products but also facilitates the introduction and acceptance of new offerings. Furthermore, it provides a solid foundation for strategizing marketing mix concerns. For instance, as discussed in Yasin et al. (2007), a product's COO image might influence how buyers view the brand.

With due consideration to the factors presented, the aim of the current investigation is to delve into the complex connection between brand awareness, consumer product involvement, and the influence of Country of Origin (COO). The ongoing debate within this sphere centers around the degree to which the COO bears influence on prominent brands, with a faction of scholars suggesting that brand-related information might diminish the consumer's dependence on the COO in their perception formation (Chu et al., 2010; Prasasti et al., 2020; Usunier, 2006).

The setting for this research is India, an intriguing marketplace owing to its substantial youthful demographic and burgeoning economic landscape, making it a crucial stage for both indigenous and international brands. The expansive Indian market, typified by its heightened exposure to an array of brands and demanding an extensive level of information processing, serves as an optimal backdrop for this study. Specifically, the investigation zeros in on two product categories, namely, mobile phones and fashion apparel, both of which have seen an explosive demand and rigorous competition.

This manuscript endeavors to bridge a significant lacuna in the existing body of literature by scrutinizing the consumers' cognizance of the product's COO and the considerations they make when appraising products. We contend that these elements are vital for marketers when formulating strategic business decisions. Furthermore, the study takes into account the varying degrees of product engagement among individual consumers, which can significantly affect their perception of brand and COO image.

The principal objectives of this study are three-fold: (1) to measure Indian consumers' COO knowledge across different products and brands, (2) to identify how consumer characteristics influence product evaluation based on COO image, and (3) to assess the relationship between a product's COO image and its brand image within the context of different product involvement levels.

The study ultimately aims to aid marketers in understanding the significance of COO image, brand recognition, and brand associations, particularly in the context of the Indian market. It strives to shed light on consumer behavior towards products and brands from various origins, thereby providing insights for formulating effective marketing strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The strategic intersection of a product's country of origin (COO) and brand reputation is crucial in global marketing (Adenan, 2018). Consumers associate products not only with their manufacturing place, but also with their originating country, which significantly influences purchasing decisions. Consumers' perception of a brand's COO often influences their overall product evaluation, making it a key element in their selection process (Yaser et al., 2007; Jin et al., 2015). COO effects are dynamic, varying from one country to another, as consumers form their opinions based on several product characteristics and their prior knowledge about a country. This includes aspects like technical superiority, quality, affordability, utility, and prestige of the product (Dinnie, 2015).

Recent years have seen an increased interest in COO research due to global competition among suppliers and growing consumer exposure to imported goods (Izmir, 2019; Banerjee et al., 2018; Wibowo et al., 2021). As such, businesses are leveraging positive COO associations in their marketing strategies (Papadoupoulos, 2018). Consumer behavior towards COO is also influenced by their level of product involvement. High-involvement consumers often prioritize detailed product knowledge over COO when evaluating products, focusing more on aspects like brand name and price for expensive items (Winit et al., 2014; Tabassi et al., 2013). In contrast, low-involvement consumers, with limited product understanding, may not trust COO information as much (Shahzad, 2014; Tabassi et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding these dynamics can be instrumental for marketers in developing effective strategies.

The concept of the COO as an empirical fact was first proposed by Nagashima (1970); He emphasized that the COO image is the public's impression of a country's products and brands based on common perceptions about that country and its exports. The evolution of the nation, its national, fiscal, and governmental characteristics, and its cultural history, he continued, are the factors that help shape that perception in the minds of consumers. Country of origin (COO) is an important stimulus, which including price or product quality that could also form a component of a product's entire image, as described by Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, in 2000. Results of preceding research explain that consumer purchase intention is impacted in case the consumer is aware of the COO of the product (Aboah et al., 2020). Existing literature has shown that the COO is a Cue, and it acts as an indication of product quality in the memory of customers (Banovic et al., 2019; Krystallis et al., 2009).

Table 1: Some Examples of the Terms Used to Describe a Product's "Country of Origin"

Author	Definition
Phau and Cheong (2009)	COO "is the country where the corporate headquarter of a company marketing a product or brand is situated. Typically the brand origin is attached to a brand name, even if the product is not designed, manufactured, or assembled in that country".
Aiello et al. (2009)	The COO "is commonly considered the country that consumers typically associate with a product or brand, regardless of where it was manufactured. Country of Manufacture (COM) was the country that appeared upon the 'made-in' label. It was represented as the country where the final assembly of a product was completed and was identified as synonymous with the COO. The country of design (COD) refers to the country within which the product was designed and developed. Global companies use brand names to suggest a specific origin (country-of-brand – COB – effects)".
Lee et al. (2014)	"Consumer ethnocentrism looks at the degree of loyalty of consumers to products manufactured in their home country and the responsibility and morality of purchasing foreign-made products (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). Consumer ethnocentrism may also lead to an overestimation of the attributes, features and overall quality of domestic products and an underestimation of such traits in foreign products".
Jung et al. (2014)	Country Image (CI) "refers to the totality of the descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs one has about a particular country".
Gerke et al. (2014)	The COO effect "describes the notion that the COO is an informational cue extrinsic to the product which affects the evaluation of the product, its attributes, and the consumer's overall perception of the product".
Tjandra, et al. (2015)	Country of Origin "as the image of a country in a consumer's mind which influences their evaluation of the products or brands that are produced by that country".
Esmaeilpour and Abdolvand (2016)	The COO image "is the picture, the reputation and/or the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country, as people in one country may prefer goods that originate from another country".

Source: Author's Compilation

"Ego involvement" in social psychology describes the connection individuals form with an issue or product, becoming more emotionally invested when they perceive the product as an extension of themselves (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2006; Zaichkowsky, 1985). This concept affects various behaviors such as perceived risk, information search, and evaluation of product characteristics. According to Shirin and Kambiz (2011), product involvement is the lasting significance a consumer assigns to a product based on their emotional, cognitive preferences, and demands. This involvement influences the consumer's propensity to purchase, affecting the time and effort they spend on research and decision-making (Sharma and Klein, 2020; Bauer et al., 2006).

Product involvement varies between high and low levels, influencing the time spent on information gathering and evaluation (Shirin, & Kambiz, 2011). High product involvement positively influences consumer choice (Lin et al., 2018). In the global context, the level of involvement can impact recognition of a product's country of origin (COO), as this requires adequate product information (Rossanty et al., 2022). High product involvement can lead to a stronger focus on product attributes, including COO and its image (Chin, 2002; Banerjee, 2014). In contrast, consumers with low product involvement may show limited interest in product information and COO (Chen et al., 2016).

The concept of involvement has been significant in advertising and consumer behavior research (Krugman, 1965; Yang, 2019). It's influenced by consumers' product familiarity, contemplation about purchase, and intrinsic motivations (Lueg, 2006). The term involvement signifies an internally experienced arousal, which affects purchase inclination (Trivedi et al., 2020; Andrew et al., 1990). High involvement consumers typically seek more product information and stick to a single brand, while low involvement consumers may place more emphasis on price over COO (Zaichkowsky, 1987; Moriuchi, 2021). Overall, consumer involvement shapes how they perceive and interact with products, including recognition of COO. Based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses are framed:

H1: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image and brand image of mobile phones concerning to different residential states.

H2: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image, the brand image of mobile phones concerning to different geographical regions.

H3: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image, the brand image of mobile phones concerning to different educational qualifications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative research approach that comprises a methodical empirical assessment of social phenomena with the help of statistical, mathematical, or numerical data

or computation techniques (Caputi, & Balnaves, 2001). This type of research concentrates on numbers and is mainly concerned with the statistical information and facilitates proving or disproving the proposed research hypothesis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Accordingly, the purposive sampling technique, which comes under the umbrella of convenience sampling, was used to reach the respondents. Primary data for this study came from a survey that participants filled out on their own time. Students from colleges and universities in the Indian states of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh and the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir made up the study's sample population. Participants in the study were made aware of the fact that their participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and that they could opt out at any time. The respondents were assured that their information would remain private. They were also reassured that the information they provided would be used only for research. Participants spent an average of 15 minutes answering questions, and their privacy was guaranteed throughout the process. From November 2018 through February 2019, we gathered the data used in this study.

DATA ANALYSIS

To test the proposed hypotheses, the researchers used ANOVA analysis. The analysis of the study is explained hypothesis wise.

H1: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image and brand image of mobile phones concerning to different residential states.

Table 2: Descriptives

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Punjab	423	4.3593	.99537	.04840	4.2642	4.4545	1.80	7.00
	Jammu and Kashmir	22	3.8727	.82933	.17681	3.5050	4.2404	2.60	6.00
	Himachal Pradesh	55	4.2764	.92335	.12450	4.0267	4.5260	2.60	6.60
	Total	500	4.3288	.98456	.04403	4.2423	4.4153	1.80	7.00
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Punjab	423	5.0817	1.13192	.05504	4.9736	5.1899	2.00	7.00
	Jammu and Kashmir	22	4.9091	1.07136	.22841	4.4341	5.3841	3.29	6.86
	Himachal Pradesh	55	4.8312	1.10762	.14935	4.5317	5.1306	2.14	7.00
	Total	500	5.0466	1.12765	.05043	4.9475	5.1457	2.00	7.00
Brand Image	Punjab	423	4.8712	1.27520	.06200	4.7493	4.9930	1.25	7.00

(Mobile Phone)	Jammu and Kashmir	22	4.7841	1.25664	.26792	4.2269	5.3413	2.25	6.50
	Himachal Pradesh	55	4.3091	1.25366	.16904	3.9702	4.6480	1.00	7.00
	Total	500	4.8055	1.28163	.05732	4.6929	4.9181	1.00	7.00

Table 3: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	5.122	2	2.561	2.659	.071
	Within Groups	478.584	497	.963		
	Total	483.705	499			
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	3.491	2	1.745	1.375	.254
	Within Groups	631.037	497	1.270		
	Total	634.528	499			
Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	15.387	2	7.693	4.754	.009
	Within Groups	804.261	497	1.618		
	Total	819.647	499			

The One-way anova test shows that the mean value for product involvement does not vary significantly across the various states of residence (p-value > 0.05). However, at a 0.10 confidence level, the p-value is statistically significant. The same kind of outcome was seen in the country of origin. There is no statistically discernible variation between COO and residential states when comparing their respective mean values (p-value > 0.05). The probability value of ANOVA test concludes that the average score for reputation of the company score varies discernibly between states.

Table 4: Multiple Comparisons

LSD

Dependent Variable	(I) Domicile	(J) Domicile	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Punjab	Jammu and Kashmir	.48661[*]	.21458	.024	.0650	.9082
		Himachal Pradesh	.08297	.14066	.556	-.1934	.3593
	Jammu and Kashmir	Punjab	-.48661[*]	.21458	.024	-.9082	-.0650
		Himachal Pradesh	-.40364	.24754	.104	-.8900	.0827
	Himachal Pradesh	Punjab	-.08297	.14066	.556	-.3593	.1934
		Jammu and Kashmir	.40364	.24754	.104	-.0827	.8900

Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Punjab	Jammu and Kashmir	.08707	.27818	.754	-.4595	.6336
		Himachal Pradesh	.56207*	.18234	.002	.2038	.9203
	Jammu and Kashmir	Punjab	-.08707	.27818	.754	-.6336	.4595
		Himachal Pradesh	.47500	.32090	.139	-.1555	1.1055
	Himachal Pradesh	Punjab	-.56207*	.18234	.002	-.9203	-.2038
		Jammu and Kashmir	-.47500	.32090	.139	-1.1055	.1555

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Multiple comparisons were used to examine whether or not there was a significant change in the mean for each region. Using a post hoc test, we see that there is a statistically discernible variation in the means of the respondents' ratings from Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir on the product involvement scale (p-value 0.05). It can be seen that there is a statistically discernible variation observed between the average scores for reputation of the company in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh (p-value 0.05).

H2: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image, the brand image of mobile phones concerning to different geographical regions.

Table 5: Descriptive

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Urban India	119	4.1529	.80157	.07348	4.0074	4.2985	2.60	6.60
	Semi Urban India	98	4.3020	1.06886	.10797	4.0877	4.5163	1.80	7.00
	Rural India	283	4.4120	1.01646	.06042	4.2931	4.5309	1.80	7.00
	Total	500	4.3288	.98456	.04403	4.2423	4.4153	1.80	7.00
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Urban India	119	4.8367	1.05164	.09640	4.6458	5.0276	2.43	6.57
	Semi Urban India	98	5.2128	1.11249	.11238	4.9898	5.4359	2.14	7.00
	Rural India	283	5.0772	1.15433	.06862	4.9422	5.2123	2.00	7.00
	Total	500	5.0466	1.12765	.05043	4.9475	5.1457	2.00	7.00
Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Urban India	119	4.7164	1.16487	.10678	4.5049	4.9278	2.50	6.75
	Semi Urban India	98	4.9260	1.24313	.12558	4.6768	5.1753	1.00	7.00
	Rural India	283	4.8012	1.34119	.07973	4.6443	4.9582	1.25	7.00
	Total	500	4.8055	1.28163	.05732	4.6929	4.9181	1.00	7.00

Since the p-value for the one-way Anova test is greater than 0.05, the results show that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean values for product involvement across the various regions of the country. However, at a 0.10 confidence level, the p-value is statistically significant. The same pattern of outcome was seen with the perception of a brand. Statistically, there is no discernible variation in the means of reputation of the company across regions as shown by the ANOVA test (p-value > 0.05). Furthermore, a p-value of less than 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between the means of COO image in each of the geographic regions from which respondents were drawn.

Table 6: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	5.710	2	2.855	2.969	.052
	Within Groups	477.995	497	.962		
	Total	483.705	499			
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	8.215	2	4.107	3.259	.039
	Within Groups	626.313	497	1.260		
	Total	634.528	499			
Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	2.374	2	1.187	.722	.486
	Within Groups	817.274	497	1.644		
	Total	819.647	499			

In order to check the differences in the mean value for different hometown locations of the respondents', multiple comparisons were used. A discernible variation between urban and rural India respondents' means on the reputation of COO was found using the post-hoc test, with a probability value of lower than 0.05 indicating statistical significance. Also, the same is the case with urban India and semi-urban India as the p-value is less than 0.05.

Table 7: Multiple Comparisons

LSD							
Dependent Variable	(I) Home Town	(J) Home Town	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Urban India	Semi Urban India	-.37609[*]	0.15313	0.014	-0.677	-0.0752
		Rural India	-0.2405	0.12265	0.05	-0.4815	0.0005
	Semi Urban	Urban India	.37609[*]	0.15313	0.014	0.0752	0.677

India	Rural India	0.13559	0.13158	0.303	-0.1229	0.3941
Rural India	Urban India	0.2405	0.12265	0.05	-0.0005	0.4815
	Semi Urban India	-0.13559	0.13158	0.303	-0.3941	0.1229

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

H3: There is no significant difference in the mean value of product involvement, source country image, the brand image of mobile phones concerning to different educational qualifications.

Table 8: Descriptive

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Diploma	31	4.671	0.69579	0.12497	4.4157	4.9262	3.6	6.4
	Graduate	396	4.3141	1.02481	0.0515	4.2129	4.4154	1.8	7
	Postgraduate	73	4.263	0.83591	0.09784	4.068	4.458	2.8	7
	Total	500	4.3288	0.98456	0.04403	4.2423	4.4153	1.8	7
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Diploma	31	4.553	0.82044	0.14735	4.2521	4.8539	3	6.29
	Graduate	396	4.9885	1.16691	0.05864	4.8732	5.1037	2	7
	Postgraduate	73	5.5714	0.81197	0.09503	5.382	5.7609	3.43	7
	Total	500	5.0466	1.12765	0.05043	4.9475	5.1457	2	7
Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Diploma	31	4.8871	1.02437	0.18398	4.5114	5.2628	3	6.25
	Graduate	396	4.6976	1.31722	0.06619	4.5675	4.8277	1	7
	Postgraduate	73	5.3562	1.02649	0.12014	5.1167	5.5957	3	7
	Total	500	4.8055	1.28163	0.05732	4.6929	4.9181	1	7

One-way Anova results show that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean values for product involvement based on the level of the programme they are enrolled in (p-value > 0.05). To the contrary, the probability value is statistically discernible at the level of certainty of 0.10. In contrast, the ANOVA test shows that there is a discernible variation between the mean values of reputation of the brand and COO for each level of the programme the respondents are enrolled in (p 0.05).

Table 9: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Product Involvement (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	4.03	2	2.015	2.088	0.125
	Within Groups	479.675	497	0.965		
	Total	483.705	499			
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	28.999	2	14.5	11.901	0
	Within Groups	605.529	497	1.218		
	Total	634.528	499			
Brand Image (Mobile Phone)	Between Groups	26.953	2	13.476	8.449	0
	Within Groups	792.695	497	1.595		
	Total	819.647	499			

In order to check the differences in the mean value for different levels of a programme in which the respondent is studying, multiple comparisons were used. Since the p-value for the post-hoc test is less than 0.05, we can conclude that the difference between the means of the scores given by respondents with a Diploma and those with a degree is statistically significant for the COO image. In addition, the situation is similar between Diploma and Postgraduate students (p-value 0.05) and between Graduate and post Graduate students.

Table 10: LSD Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable	(I) Level of Programme	(J) Level of Programme	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Country of origin image (Mobile Phone)	Diploma	Graduate	-.43546*	0.20586	0.035	-0.8399	-0.031
		Postgraduate	-1.01843*	0.23663	0	-1.4833	-0.5535
	Graduate	Diploma	.43546*	0.20586	0.035	0.031	0.8399
		Postgraduate	-.58297*	0.14059	0	-0.8592	-0.3067
	Postgraduate	Diploma	1.01843*	0.23663	0	0.5535	1.4833
		Graduate	.58297*	0.14059	0	0.3067	0.8592

DISCUSSION

For hypothesis H1, which stated that there was no significant difference in the mean values of product involvement, source country image, and brand image across different residential states, the ANOVA analysis revealed different results for each factor. While there was no significant difference found in product involvement and country of origin image across the

states, a significant difference was found in the brand image. This suggests that perceptions of the brand image of mobile phones differ significantly depending on the state of residence. Further, post-hoc comparisons indicated significant differences in product involvement between Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, and in brand image between Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. Thus, the hypothesis can partially be rejected as differences exist in brand image across states and also in product involvement between specific states.

Hypothesis H2 posited no significant difference in these factors across different geographical regions (urban, semi-urban, and rural). The analysis showed no significant differences in product involvement and brand image across these regions. However, the country-of-origin image varied significantly among different geographical regions. More specifically, post-hoc tests revealed significant differences in the country-of-origin image between urban and rural areas and urban and semi-urban areas.

Hypothesis H3 posited that no significant disparity would be found in these factors concerning varying levels of educational qualifications. However, the findings indicated a considerable discrepancy in brand perception and Country of Origin (COO) image among respondents of diverse educational backgrounds, while product involvement showed no meaningful divergence. Hence, the hypothesis is only partially supported. The derived data intimates that educational qualifications do impact the perception of brand image and COO image, but not necessarily in the case of product involvement.

On a broader scale, these findings underscore the imperative of accounting for regional and educational disparities when studying consumer perceptions of mobile phone brands. It becomes apparent that the interpretation of different factors could vary depending on an individual's state of domicile, geographical position, and educational attainment.

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