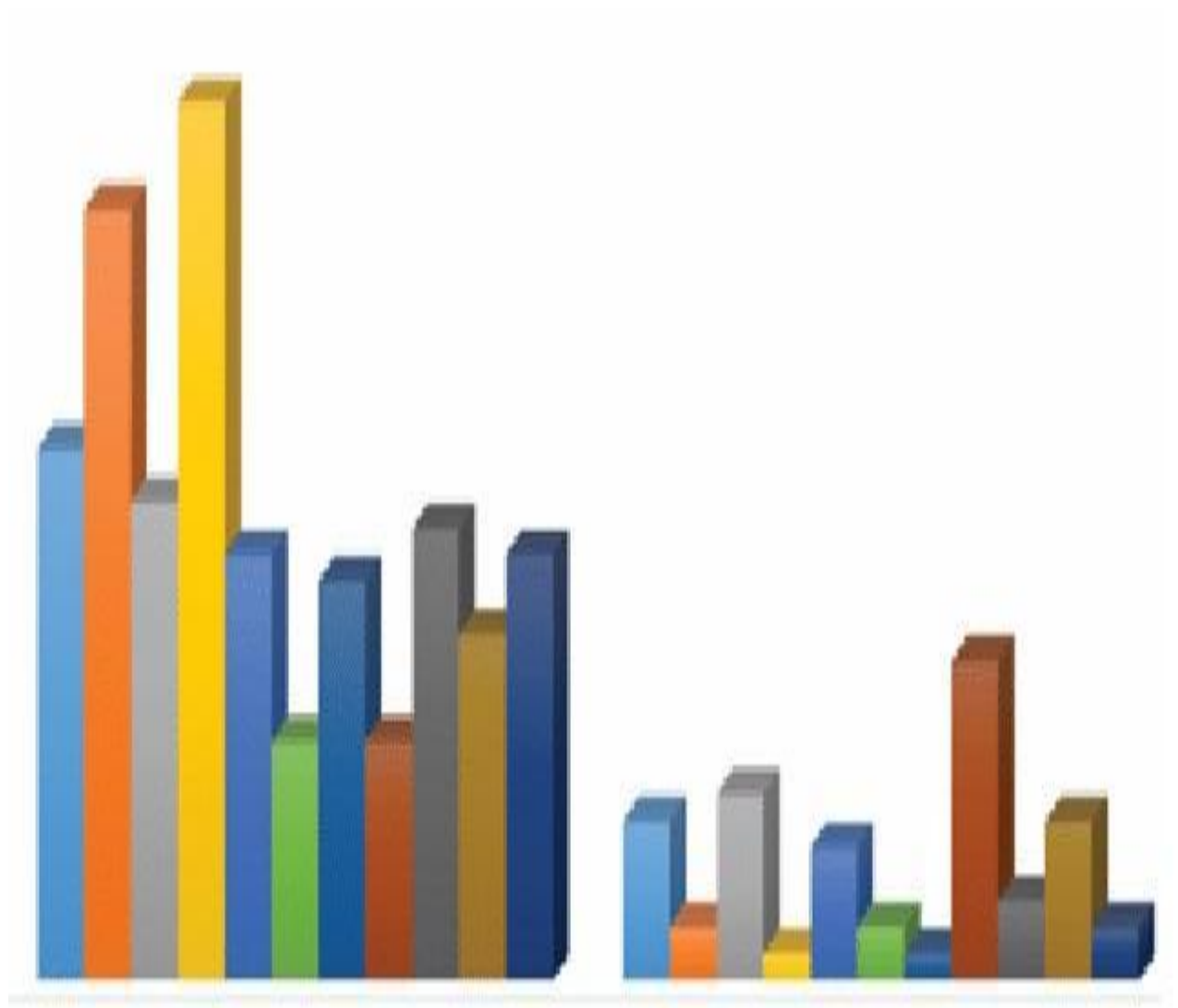


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## Research Article

# The Role of Country of Origin in Fashion Brand Perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of country of origin (COO) in shaping consumer perceptions of fashion brands within an increasingly globalised and digitally mediated marketplace. Drawing on a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study synthesises existing literature, industry insights, and theoretical perspectives to explore how COO functions as both a cognitive cue and a symbolic resource. The findings reveal that COO significantly influences perceived quality, brand prestige, and identity construction, while also interacting with factors such as brand equity, cultural context, and consumer knowledge. The study further highlights the evolving nature of COO in response to global supply chain fragmentation, where distinctions between country of design, manufacture, and brand origin complicate traditional interpretations. Additionally, ethical and sustainability considerations are identified as emerging dimensions of COO evaluation, reflecting a shift in consumer priorities. The research contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive qualitative synthesis that integrates classical theories with contemporary developments, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for fashion brand management in global markets.

**Keywords:** country of origin, fashion branding, consumer perception, brand image, globalisation, sustainability, qualitative analysis

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## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalised marketplace, the fashion industry has undergone a profound transformation characterised by the expansion of international brands, cross-border production networks, and globally interconnected consumer cultures. Within this context, the concept of Country of Origin (COO) has emerged as a critical determinant influencing consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions. Country of origin refers to the country where a brand is perceived to originate, which may or may not correspond to the location of manufacturing or design (Pharr, 2005). In fashion branding, the COO serves as a symbolic cue that shapes consumer evaluations of quality, authenticity, prestige, and desirability.

The importance of COO in consumer behaviour research has been widely documented across various industries, yet its role in the fashion sector remains uniquely complex due to the symbolic and identity-driven nature of fashion consumption. Fashion products are not merely functional goods but are embedded with cultural meanings, social signals, and aesthetic values (Kawamura, 2005). As such, the perceived origin of a fashion brand often carries connotations of craftsmanship, heritage, innovation, and status. For instance, countries such as Italy and France are frequently associated with luxury, high-quality craftsmanship, and sophisticated design, while other countries may be linked to affordability or mass production (Kapferer, 2012).

The COO effect operates as a heuristic that simplifies consumer decision-making in environments characterised by information asymmetry and product proliferation (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). When consumers lack complete information about a product's intrinsic attributes, they often rely on extrinsic cues such as brand name, price, and country of origin to infer quality and value (Zeithaml, 1988). In fashion markets, where trends evolve rapidly and product differentiation is often subtle, the COO becomes a particularly salient factor in shaping brand perceptions.

However, the contemporary fashion landscape presents new challenges to the traditional understanding of COO. The rise of global supply chains has blurred the boundaries between design, production, and branding. A single fashion item may be designed in one country, manufactured in another, and marketed globally under a brand associated with a third country. This phenomenon complicates the notion of COO and raises questions about which aspect of origin-design, manufacturing, or brand heritage holds the greatest influence on consumer perceptions (Jin, Park, & Ryu, 2010).

Moreover, the increasing prominence of emerging markets and digital platforms has diversified consumer bases and altered the dynamics of brand perception. Consumers in different cultural contexts may interpret COO cues differently based on their own socio-economic backgrounds, cultural values, and exposure to global brands (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008). For example, consumers in developing countries may perceive Western

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brands as symbols of modernity and status, whereas consumers in developed markets may place greater emphasis on sustainability, ethical production, and local sourcing.

In addition, the growing awareness of ethical and environmental issues in the fashion industry has introduced new dimensions to the COO effect. Consumers are increasingly concerned about labour conditions, environmental impact, and sustainability practices associated with different countries (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2009). As a result, COO is no longer evaluated solely in terms of quality and prestige but also in terms of ethical responsibility and transparency.

Despite the extensive body of research on COO, there remains a need for a comprehensive qualitative synthesis that integrates findings from diverse studies to better understand its role in fashion brand perceptions. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative approaches, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the nuanced and context-dependent nature of consumer perceptions. A qualitative analysis based on secondary data can provide deeper insights into the symbolic meanings and interpretive processes underlying the COO effect.

This study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of the role of country of origin in shaping fashion brand perceptions. Drawing on secondary data from academic literature, industry reports, and case studies, the research seeks to identify key themes, patterns, and theoretical perspectives that explain how COO influences consumer attitudes and behaviours in the fashion context.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it aims to examine the theoretical foundations of the COO effect and its relevance to fashion branding. Second, it seeks to analyse how the COO interacts with other factors such as brand image, price, and cultural identity to shape consumer perceptions. Third, it intends to explore the implications of globalisation and sustainability trends for the evolving role of COO in the fashion industry.

By providing a comprehensive qualitative synthesis, this research contributes to the existing literature by offering a holistic understanding of COO in fashion branding. It also offers practical insights for fashion marketers and brand managers seeking to leverage country associations in positioning and communication strategies. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring significance of COO as a powerful symbolic resource in the global fashion marketplace.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of country of origin has been a central topic in international marketing and consumer behaviour research for several decades. Early studies defined COO as the country where a product is manufactured (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). However, subsequent research has expanded this definition to include multiple dimensions such as country of design, country of assembly, and country of brand origin (Pharr, 2005). This multidimensional perspective reflects the complexities of modern global production systems.

Roth and Romeo (1992) proposed that COO influences consumer perceptions through associations with specific product attributes, such as quality, innovation, and prestige. These associations are often shaped by stereotypes and generalisations about countries, which may or may not reflect reality. For example, Germany is commonly associated with engineering excellence, while Italy is linked to fashion and design.

In the context of fashion, COO is particularly significant because of the symbolic and experiential nature of the products. Unlike utilitarian goods, fashion items are closely tied to identity, self-expression, and social status (Kawamura, 2005). Therefore, the perceived origin of a fashion brand can enhance or diminish its appeal depending on the associations it evokes.

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of COO Effects

Several theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the COO effect. One of the most prominent is cue utilisation theory, which suggests that consumers rely on extrinsic cues such as COO when evaluating products under conditions of uncertainty (Zeithaml, 1988). COO serves as a heuristic that simplifies decision-making by providing a shortcut to infer product quality.

Another important framework is signalling theory, which posits that brands use COO as a signal to convey information about quality and credibility (Erdem & Swait, 1998). In fashion branding, emphasising a prestigious country of origin can enhance brand equity and differentiate the brand from competitors.

Social identity theory also provides insights into the COO effect by highlighting the role of consumption in expressing group membership and identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Consumers may prefer brands from certain countries because they align with their desired self-image or social aspirations. For example, wearing a French luxury brand may signal sophistication and cultural capital.

Additionally, consumer ethnocentrism theory suggests that consumers may favour domestic products over foreign ones due to a sense of national pride and loyalty (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). This tendency can influence perceptions of foreign fashion brands, particularly in markets with strong national identities.

### 2.2 COO and Fashion Brand Perception

Research indicates that COO significantly influences key dimensions of brand perception, including perceived quality, brand image, and purchase intention. Studies have shown that products associated with developed countries are generally perceived as higher in quality compared to those from developing countries (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008).

In the fashion industry, COO is often used as a strategic branding element. Luxury brands frequently emphasise their heritage and origin to reinforce their exclusivity and authenticity (Kapferer, 2012). For example, the “Made in Italy” label is widely recognised as a mark of superior craftsmanship and design excellence.

However, the relationship between COO and brand perception is not always straightforward. Some studies suggest that strong brand equity can override negative COO perceptions (Jin et al., 2010). In such cases, the brand itself becomes a more important cue than its country of origin.

### 2.4 Globalisation and the Evolving COO Concept

Globalisation has significantly altered the relevance and interpretation of COO. The fragmentation of production processes across multiple countries has led to the emergence of concepts such as “country of brand origin” and “hybrid products” (Pharr, 2005). Consumers are increasingly aware that a brand’s origin may not correspond to its manufacturing location.

This complexity has led to mixed findings in the literature. Some studies suggest that COO remains a powerful influence despite globalisation, while others argue that its importance is diminishing as consumers become more brand-oriented (Usunier, 2006).

Digitalisation has further transformed the COO effect by increasing access to information and enabling consumers to research brands more thoroughly. Online reviews, social media, and influencer marketing can either reinforce or challenge traditional COO perceptions.

### 2.5 Cultural and Contextual Influences

The impact of the COO is highly context-dependent and varies across cultures. Cultural values, economic conditions, and

levels of globalisation influence how consumers interpret COO cues (Ahmed & d’Astous, 2008). For example, consumers in emerging markets may associate Western brands with higher status, while consumers in developed markets may prioritise local and sustainable products.

Furthermore, generational differences also play a role. Younger consumers, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, tend to be more globally oriented and less influenced by traditional COO stereotypes. Instead, they may focus on factors such as sustainability, inclusivity, and brand authenticity.

### 2.6 Ethical and Sustainability Considerations

Recent literature highlights the growing importance of ethical and sustainability considerations in shaping COO perceptions. Consumers are increasingly concerned about labour practices, environmental impact, and corporate social responsibility (Dickson et al., 2009).

Countries associated with unethical labour practices or environmental degradation may negatively impact brand perceptions, even if the products are otherwise high in quality. Conversely, countries known for strong environmental regulations and ethical standards may enhance brand credibility.

### 2.7 Research Gap

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain in the literature. First, there is a lack of qualitative studies that explore the subjective and interpretive aspects of COO in fashion branding. Second, existing research often focuses on single-country contexts,



limiting the generalizability of findings. Third, there is a need to integrate traditional COO theories with contemporary issues such as globalisation, digitalisation, and sustainability.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative synthesis of secondary data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the role of COO in fashion brand perceptions.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the role of country of origin (COO) in shaping fashion brand perceptions requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from consumer behaviour, branding, and social psychology. This study draws on five key theoretical lenses: cue utilisation theory, signalling theory, social identity theory, consumer ethnocentrism theory, and country image theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for analysing how COO functions as both a cognitive shortcut and a symbolic resource in fashion consumption.

Cue utilisation theory posits that consumers rely on both intrinsic and extrinsic cues when evaluating products, particularly under conditions of uncertainty (Zeithaml, 1988). Intrinsic cues refer to the physical characteristics of a product, such as material and design, whereas extrinsic cues include brand name, price, and country of origin. In the fashion industry, where consumers often cannot fully assess product quality before purchase, extrinsic cues become especially influential. COO operates as a heuristic device, enabling consumers to infer quality,

reliability, and aesthetic value based on their perceptions of the originating country. For instance, fashion brands associated with countries known for craftsmanship and design excellence are often perceived as superior, even in the absence of direct product experience.

Complementing cue utilisation theory, signalling theory provides a strategic perspective on how brands leverage COO to communicate quality and credibility. According to signalling theory, firms use observable attributes to signal unobservable product characteristics to consumers (Erdem & Swait, 1998). In fashion branding, emphasising a prestigious country of origin serves as a signal of authenticity, heritage, and expertise. For example, labels such as “Made in Italy” or “Paris-based design” function as markers of excellence and exclusivity, enhancing brand equity and consumer trust. This signalling mechanism is particularly important in global markets, where consumers may lack familiarity with specific brands but recognise country-level reputations.

Social identity theory further enriches the understanding of COO effects by highlighting the symbolic role of consumption in identity construction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to this theory, individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups and use consumption practices to express and reinforce their identities. Fashion products, as visible markers of personal style and social status, are especially relevant in this context. COO contributes to this process by associating brands with particular cultural

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meanings and social connotations. For instance, wearing a fashion brand perceived as originating from a culturally prestigious country may signal sophistication, cosmopolitanism, or elite status. Thus, the COO not only influences cognitive evaluations of quality but also shapes the symbolic value of fashion brands.

Consumer ethnocentrism theory introduces a contrasting perspective by emphasising the role of national identity and moral considerations in consumption decisions. Ethnocentric consumers tend to prefer domestic products and may view the purchase of foreign goods as inappropriate or harmful to the local economy (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). In the fashion context, this tendency can influence attitudes toward international brands, particularly in markets with strong nationalistic sentiments. However, the impact of consumer ethnocentrism is often moderated by factors such as brand prestige, product category, and individual differences. For example, even ethnocentric consumers may favour foreign luxury brands if they perceive them as superior in quality or status.

Country image theory provides an overarching framework that integrates the cognitive, affective, and normative dimensions of COO perceptions. Country image refers to the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that consumers hold about a particular country (Roth & Romeo, 1992). These perceptions are shaped by a variety of factors, including historical reputation, cultural exports, economic development, and media representation. In the fashion industry, country image plays a crucial role in shaping

brand associations. Countries known for innovation, creativity, and cultural richness tend to confer positive associations on their fashion brands, whereas countries associated with low-cost production may face challenges in establishing premium brand perceptions.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives highlights the multifaceted nature of COO effects in fashion branding. Cue utilisation theory and signalling theory emphasize the informational and strategic functions of COO, while social identity theory and consumer ethnocentrism theory highlight its symbolic and normative dimensions. Country image theory serves as a unifying framework that captures the broader context within which these processes operate.

Importantly, these theories also allow for the examination of moderating variables that influence the strength and direction of COO effects. Factors such as consumer knowledge, cultural orientation, product involvement, and brand familiarity can shape how COO cues are interpreted and utilised (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008). For instance, highly knowledgeable consumers may rely less on COO as a heuristic and more on intrinsic product attributes, whereas less experienced consumers may depend more heavily on country-based stereotypes.

In addition, the theoretical framework accommodates the evolving nature of COO in the context of globalisation and digitalisation. As production processes become increasingly fragmented and consumers gain access to more information, the traditional notion of COO as a single,



fixed attribute becomes less relevant. Instead, consumers may consider multiple dimensions of origin, such as design, manufacturing, and brand heritage (Pharr, 2005). This complexity underscores the need for a flexible and integrative theoretical approach.

Overall, this theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for analysing the role of COO in fashion brand perceptions. By combining insights from multiple theories, the study is able to capture both the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of COO effects, as well as their contextual variability. This integrative approach is particularly well-suited to a qualitative research design, which seeks to explore the nuanced and interpretive aspects of consumer perceptions.

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on the analysis of secondary data to explore the role of country of origin in fashion brand perceptions. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex, context-dependent phenomena that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the symbolic and interpretive nature of fashion consumption, qualitative analysis provides valuable insights into how consumers construct meaning around COO.

The study employs a systematic qualitative literature review combined with elements of thematic analysis. This approach enables the synthesis of existing knowledge while

identifying recurring themes, patterns, and theoretical insights across diverse sources. By integrating findings from academic literature, industry reports, and case studies, the research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of COO effects in the fashion industry.

#### 4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study are derived from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, industry publications, and credible online reports. The use of secondary data is justified by the extensive body of existing research on COO and fashion branding, which provides a rich foundation for qualitative synthesis.

The selection of sources follows a purposive sampling strategy, guided by relevance, credibility, and recency. Key inclusion criteria include:

- Studies that explicitly address country of origin effects or related concepts such as country image and brand origin.
- Research focusing on the fashion industry or closely related sectors such as apparel, luxury goods, and lifestyle branding.
- Publications in reputable academic journals or by established publishers.
- Studies published within the last two decades, with the inclusion of seminal works for theoretical grounding.

Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar are used to identify relevant literature. Keywords include

“country of origin,” “fashion branding,” “consumer perception,” “brand image,” and “global fashion.” This systematic approach ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives and minimises selection bias.

### 4.2 Data Analysis Technique

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used qualitative technique for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involves several stages:

- **Familiarisation with the Data:** The researcher reviews the selected literature to gain an overall understanding of key concepts and findings.
- **Initial Coding:** Relevant segments of text are coded based on their content and meaning. Codes may include themes such as “perceived quality,” “brand prestige,” “cultural identity,” and “ethical concerns.”
- **Theme Development:** Codes are grouped into broader themes that capture recurring patterns across the data.
- **Theme Review and Refinement:** Themes are reviewed to ensure coherence and distinctiveness, and refined as necessary.
- **Interpretation and Synthesis:** The final themes are interpreted in relation to the research objectives and theoretical framework.

This systematic approach allows for the identification of both explicit and implicit

meanings in the data, providing a nuanced understanding of COO effects.

### 4.3 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative research is essential for establishing the credibility of the findings. This study adopts several strategies to enhance rigour:

- **Triangulation:** The use of multiple data sources, including academic and industry literature, helps to corroborate findings and reduce bias (Denzin, 1978).
- **Transparency:** The research process, including data selection and analysis procedures, is clearly documented to ensure replicability.
- **Theoretical Consistency:** The integration of established theoretical frameworks provides a coherent basis for interpreting the data.
- **Critical Evaluation:** Sources are critically assessed for quality and relevance, ensuring that the analysis is based on reliable evidence.

### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

As the study relies exclusively on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. Therefore, issues related to informed consent and confidentiality are not applicable. However, ethical standards are maintained by properly citing all sources and avoiding plagiarism (Mannan & Farhana, 2026). The study adheres to academic integrity guidelines and respects intellectual property rights.

#### 4.5 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the chosen methodology has certain limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data means that the findings are constrained by the scope and quality of existing research. Second, the absence of primary data limits the ability to capture real-time consumer perspectives. Third, qualitative analysis involves a degree of subjectivity, which may influence the interpretation of findings.

However, these limitations are mitigated by the systematic and transparent approach adopted in this study, as well as the use of multiple sources and theoretical frameworks. Overall, the methodology is well-suited to achieving the research objectives and providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of COO in fashion brand perceptions.

### 5. Findings and Analysis

The qualitative analysis of secondary data reveals that the role of country of origin (COO) in shaping fashion brand perceptions is multifaceted, dynamic, and context-dependent. Through thematic analysis, several key themes emerge: perceived quality and craftsmanship, symbolic value and brand prestige, interaction between COO and brand strength, the fragmentation of COO in global supply chains, cultural and market-specific interpretations, and ethical and sustainability considerations. These themes collectively illustrate the evolving and nuanced influence of the COO in the global fashion industry.

#### 5.1 COO as an Indicator of Perceived Quality and Craftsmanship

One of the most consistent findings across the literature is the strong association between COO and perceived product quality. Consumers often rely on country-based stereotypes to evaluate the craftsmanship, durability, and aesthetic appeal of fashion products (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008). Countries with established reputations in fashion, such as Italy and France, are frequently perceived as producing high-quality garments characterised by superior materials and skilled workmanship.

This perception aligns with cue utilisation theory, which suggests that consumers use COO as an extrinsic cue when intrinsic attributes are difficult to assess (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of fashion, where tactile and experiential evaluation is often limited in online or pre-purchase settings, COO becomes a critical heuristic. The association between certain countries and high-quality fashion is reinforced by historical narratives, media representations, and branding strategies.

However, the analysis also reveals that these perceptions are not universally consistent. Some studies indicate that consumers are increasingly willing to reconsider traditional quality hierarchies, particularly when exposed to emerging fashion markets. For instance, countries previously associated with low-cost manufacturing are gradually gaining recognition for design innovation and quality improvement (Jin et al., 2010). This

shift suggests that COO perceptions are not static but evolve in response to changing global dynamics.

### 5.2 Symbolic Value, Identity, and Brand Prestige

Beyond functional attributes, the COO plays a significant role in shaping the symbolic value of fashion brands. Fashion consumption is inherently linked to identity construction, and COO contributes to the social meanings associated with brands (Kawamura, 2005). The analysis indicates that consumers often use COO as a proxy for cultural capital, associating certain countries with sophistication, creativity, or exclusivity.

Luxury fashion brands, in particular, leverage COO to reinforce their prestige and authenticity. Emphasising heritage and origin allows brands to create narratives that resonate with consumers seeking status and distinction (Kapferer, 2012). For example, a brand perceived as originating from a culturally rich and historically significant country may be seen as more desirable, even if its products are manufactured elsewhere.

This finding is consistent with social identity theory, which posits that consumers use brands to express their self-concept and social affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). COO enhances this process by embedding brands within broader cultural and symbolic frameworks. As a result, consumers may prefer brands from certain countries not only for their perceived quality but also for the identity they help construct.

### 5.3 The Moderating Role of Brand Strength

Another important theme is the interaction between COO and brand strength. The analysis reveals that strong brands can mitigate or even override negative COO perceptions. In cases where a brand has established a strong global identity, consumers may prioritise brand reputation over country associations (Jin et al., 2010).

This finding highlights the importance of brand equity as a moderating variable. While the COO serves as an initial cue, its influence diminishes as consumers become more familiar with the brand. Well-known fashion brands often develop distinct identities that transcend their country of origin, allowing them to compete effectively in global markets.

Conversely, for lesser-known or emerging brands, COO remains a critical factor in shaping consumer perceptions. In such cases, emphasising a favourable country of origin can enhance credibility and facilitate market entry. This dual role underscores the conditional nature of COO effects and the importance of considering brand maturity in analysis.

### 5.4 Fragmentation of COO in Global Supply Chains

The globalisation of production has significantly complicated the traditional concept of COO. The analysis reveals that consumers are increasingly aware of the fragmented nature of fashion supply chains, where design, manufacturing, and branding may occur in different countries (Pharr, 2005).

This fragmentation gives rise to multiple dimensions of COO, including country of design, country of manufacture, and country of brand origin. Consumers may assign different levels of importance to each dimension depending on the context. For example, the country of design may be more relevant for evaluating creativity and style, while the country of manufacture may influence perceptions of quality and ethics.

Despite this complexity, the analysis suggests that consumers often rely on simplified narratives when interpreting COO. Brand origin tends to remain the most influential dimension, as it is closely tied to brand identity and marketing communication. However, increased transparency and access to information are gradually encouraging consumers to consider multiple aspects of origin.

### 5.5 Cultural and Market-Specific Variations

The influence of COO varies significantly across cultural and market contexts. The analysis indicates that consumers in different regions interpret COO cues differently based on their cultural values, economic conditions, and exposure to global brands (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008).

In emerging markets, foreign brands are often associated with higher status and modernity, leading to a preference for products from developed countries. This phenomenon reflects aspirational consumption, where consumers seek to align themselves with perceived global standards. In contrast, consumers in developed markets may exhibit a stronger preference for local brands,

particularly in the context of sustainability and ethical consumption.

Generational differences also play a role in shaping COO perceptions. Younger consumers tend to be more globally oriented and less influenced by traditional country stereotypes. Instead, they prioritise factors such as brand authenticity, inclusivity, and social responsibility. This shift suggests that the importance of COO may be evolving in response to changing consumer values.

### 5.6 Ethical and Sustainability Considerations

A growing body of literature highlights the role of ethical and sustainability considerations in shaping COO perceptions. The analysis reveals that consumers are increasingly concerned about the social and environmental implications of fashion production (Dickson et al., 2009).

Countries associated with poor labour practices or environmental degradation may negatively impact brand perceptions, even if the products are of high quality. Conversely, countries known for strong regulatory frameworks and ethical standards may enhance brand credibility. This trend reflects a broader shift toward responsible consumption and the integration of ethical considerations into purchasing decisions.

The findings suggest that COO is no longer evaluated solely in terms of quality and prestige but also in terms of ethical responsibility. This expanded role underscores the need for brands to align their COO strategies with sustainability initiatives and transparent communication.



## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of the country of origin in shaping fashion brand perceptions. By integrating insights from thematic analysis with established theoretical frameworks, this section offers a deeper interpretation of the results and their implications for theory and practice.

### 6.1 Reinterpreting COO in the Contemporary Fashion Context

One of the central insights of this study is that the role of COO has evolved significantly in response to globalisation, digitalisation, and changing consumer values. While traditional research emphasised the direct relationship between COO and perceived quality, the findings suggest that this relationship is now mediated by a range of factors, including brand strength, cultural context, and ethical considerations.

This evolution can be understood through the lens of cue utilisation theory and signalling theory. COO continues to function as an important heuristic and signal, but its effectiveness depends on the broader informational environment. In an era of increased transparency and access to information, consumers are less reliant on single cues and more likely to consider multiple sources of information (Zeithaml, 1988; Erdem & Swait, 1998).

### 6.2 The Dual Role of COO: Functional and Symbolic Dimensions

The analysis highlights the dual role of COO as both a functional and symbolic attribute. On the one hand, the COO influences perceptions of quality, craftsmanship, and reliability. On the other hand, it contributes to the symbolic value of fashion brands by shaping identity and social meaning.

This dual role aligns with social identity theory, which emphasises the importance of consumption in identity construction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the fashion context, COO enhances the ability of brands to serve as markers of social status and cultural affiliation. This finding underscores the importance of considering both cognitive and emotional dimensions in understanding consumer behaviour.

### 6.3 The Conditional Nature of COO Effects

Another important implication of the findings is that the influence of the COO is highly conditional. Factors such as brand equity, consumer knowledge, and cultural context can significantly moderate COO effects. This complexity challenges the notion of COO as a universally applicable determinant of consumer behaviour.

The moderating role of brand strength is particularly noteworthy. Strong brands can transcend their country of origin, creating identities that resonate with global audiences. This phenomenon reflects the increasing importance of brand-driven strategies in the fashion industry. However, for emerging



brands, COO remains a valuable tool for differentiation and positioning.

### 6.4 Globalisation and the Fragmentation of Origin

The fragmentation of COO in global supply chains presents both challenges and opportunities for fashion brands. On the one hand, it complicates the communication of origin and may create confusion among consumers. On the other hand, it allows brands to strategically leverage different aspects of origin to enhance their value proposition.

For example, a brand may emphasise its design heritage in one country while highlighting its manufacturing expertise in another. This multidimensional approach reflects the need for more nuanced and flexible branding strategies in a globalised marketplace (Pharr, 2005).

### 6.5 Cultural and Generational Shifts

The findings also highlight the importance of cultural and generational differences in shaping COO perceptions. The variation across markets suggests that COO strategies must be tailored to specific contexts. What works in one market may not be effective in another.

The growing influence of younger consumers is particularly significant. As digital natives, these consumers are more exposed to global cultures and less influenced by traditional stereotypes. Their emphasis on authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability represents a shift in the criteria used to evaluate fashion brands. This trend may lead to a redefinition

of COO in the future, where ethical and cultural values play a more prominent role.

### 6.6 Ethical Implications and Sustainability

The integration of ethical and sustainability considerations into COO perceptions represents a major shift in consumer behaviour. This finding has important implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, it suggests the need to expand traditional COO frameworks to include ethical dimensions. From a practical perspective, it highlights the importance of responsible sourcing and transparent communication.

Brands that fail to address ethical concerns may face reputational risks, regardless of their country of origin. Conversely, brands that align their COO with positive ethical associations can enhance their credibility and appeal. This dynamic underscores the growing importance of sustainability as a strategic priority in the fashion industry.

### 6.7 Implications for Fashion Branding Strategy

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for fashion brand managers:

- **Strategic Use of COO:** Brands should carefully consider how to leverage COO in their positioning and communication strategies, emphasising aspects that align with their brand identity.
- **Integration with Brand Equity:** The COO should be integrated with broader branding efforts to create a

cohesive and compelling brand image.

- **Adaptation to Market Contexts:** COO strategies should be tailored to the cultural and economic characteristics of target markets.
- **Transparency and Ethics:** Brands should address ethical and sustainability concerns associated with their COO to build trust and credibility.

### 7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive qualitative exploration of the role of country of origin in shaping fashion brand perceptions, highlighting its enduring relevance as well as its evolving complexity in the contemporary global marketplace. The findings demonstrate that COO remains a powerful determinant of consumer evaluations, influencing perceptions of product quality, brand prestige, and symbolic value. At the same time, the study reveals that the impact of COO is not uniform but contingent upon multiple factors, including brand strength, cultural context, and consumer characteristics.

One of the key contributions of this research is the identification of the dual role of COO as both a functional and symbolic attribute. While it continues to serve as a heuristic cue for assessing product quality, it also plays a crucial role in identity construction and social signalling. This duality underscores the importance of integrating cognitive and sociocultural perspectives in the analysis of consumer behaviour in the fashion industry.

The study also highlights the transformative impact of globalisation on the concept of COO. The fragmentation of production processes across multiple countries has led to a more nuanced understanding of origin, where country of design, manufacturing, and brand heritage may carry different meanings for consumers. Despite this complexity, brand origin remains a dominant factor, suggesting that strategic branding can effectively shape consumer perceptions even in a globalised environment.

Furthermore, the research emphasises the growing importance of ethical and sustainability considerations in shaping COO perceptions. As consumers become more aware of social and environmental issues, the evaluation of COO increasingly incorporates concerns related to labour practices, environmental impact, and corporate responsibility. This shift signals a broader transformation in consumer values and highlights the need for fashion brands to align their strategies with ethical standards and transparent communication.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that fashion brands should adopt a strategic and context-sensitive approach to leveraging COO. This includes emphasising favourable country associations, integrating COO with overall brand identity, and adapting strategies to different cultural markets. Additionally, addressing ethical concerns associated with production locations can enhance brand credibility and consumer trust.

In conclusion, while the traditional significance of COO as an indicator of quality and prestige persists, its role is

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becoming more complex and multidimensional. Future research may build on this study by incorporating primary data and exploring emerging trends such as digital branding and sustainability-driven consumption. Overall, COO remains a vital yet evolving element in the formation of fashion brand perceptions.

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