The Country of Origin or The Brand Image, Which One

by Herning Indriastuti

The Country of Origin or The Brand Image, Which One Comes First? The Study of Consumer Purchase Intention in East Malaysia

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Abstract

This study's main objective is to investigate the effects of a product's brand image and its country of origin (COO) on East Malaysian consumers' purchase intentions. Results from past studies regarding these effects were initially explored to develop early hypotheses, which formed the basis of this study. The constructs of the COO and brand image are studied to gain a better understanding of their relationships and effects on consumer purchase decision. These effects and relationships are then analysed and explored alongside the moderating variables of a product's high and low involvement levels. A quantitative research method was used, whereby questionnaires were collected from 255 East Malaysian consumers aged 20 and above. Statistical analyses, which include descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, were used to analyse the collected data. The main results indicate that consumers put slightly more importance on the COO compared to the brand image when purchasing a product. East Malaysian consumers have been observed to put more emphasis on the COO and brand image when purchasing high-involvement products. Nonetheless, one limitation of the study has been observed in terms of the product samples that can represent the country of origin, brand image, and low and high involvement levels. This should provide the respondents with a better picture of what the study is investigating. This study attempts to understand the reasoning behind consumers' behaviour when exposed to certain brands from particular countries of origin, which may help marketers to plan their promotional strategies, especially when entering an international market. Possible future research and marketing implications are also discussed in this study.

1.0   Introduction

The global market has grown rapidly in the past 30 years, which has created an increase in opportunities, resulting in high competition among international businesses. Thus, to obtain an upper hand in the global market, marketers have been searching for a fool-proof strategy to leverage their brands. The COO and brand image are among the elements that marketers include in their strategy. International marketers are focused on understanding how consumer preference can be influenced by a product's COO (Herz & Diamantopoulos, 2013). With the ever-increasing number of international products being made available in different countries, consumers' decision-making has grown more complex as they are exposed to products of various brands that seem almost identical. Saleh et al. (2017) stressed the importance of decision-making styles as an important consumer personality that changes constantly when exposed to various goods and situations. Thus, this study attempts to understand how brand image and the COO are used to differentiate between these identical products by studying their effects on consumers. According to Muniady et al. (2014), Malaysia has developed into a highly diversified economy, being the 19th largest trading nation. The increase in the country's urbanisation has led to a shift in consumer purchase behaviour that focuses on modern retail channels such as hypermarkets and pharmaceutical businesses. Thus, brand competitiveness has grown at a higher rate as more businesses from different countries concentrate their sales within these channels. Moreover, Muhamad Yunus and Wan Rashid (2016) also implied that consumers' views on a product's country of origin have changed in tandem with the growing global market. Therefore, in order to stay ahead in this competitive market, international marketers must understand Malaysian consumer purchase decision based on a product's brand image and its country of origin.

To survive in the fierce competition between international businesses in the international market, marketers must be able to understand the cues that can convince consumers to choose their brands instead of their competitors'. This study deems the COO and brand image as important cues to be focused on as they can affect

consumer purchase behaviour. Consumers are likely to purchase such a product even at a premium price. Accordingly, various studies have been conducted to evaluate these cues, and several arguments have been posited with regard to the effects of product involvement levels as well as the influence of the COO and brand image on consumer purchase decision. Studies performed by Maheswaran (1994), Verleigh et al. (2005), Nugroho et al. (2014) and Indriastuti et al (2020) demonstrated that consumers tend to be directly persuaded by a product's country of origin as its information source, especially in low-involvement products, because minimal effort is required in their decision making. However, studies by Shahzad (2014) and Krupta and Arezina (2017) argued that information from the COO is given more emphasis when purchasing a high-involvement product since more effort is required for consumers to make purchase decisions. Tabassi (2013) highlighted that the effects of the COO can be better understood not only based on the different levels of product involvement but also based on the inclusion of brand image to explore Malaysian consumers' purchase intentions. Thus, this study attempts to understand and corroborate the arguments made in past research from the perspective of East Malaysian consumers' buying decisions. The key objective of this study is to investigate the effects of the COO and brand image on the purchase intentions of East Malaysian consumers. The study will also assess how product involvement levels moderate the effects that the COO and brand image have on consumer decisions.

2.0   Literature Review

2.1   Country of Origin (COO)

There has been a discussion on country-image being the primary theme of COO, where the origin country of a product influences consumer purchase intention. Different nations will have varying perceptions of consumers. Thus, these results for the terms "product country image" and "country equity" were included in the study of COO by Shimp et al. (1993) and Laroche et al. (2003), with the most recent studies referring to both terms as the COO image. Chen (2009) underlines the importance of studying the COO image as a component of consumer behaviour since consumers form perceptions and respond differently when presented with different COO cues. Said et al. (2011) implied that these cues consist of a country's general image and

consumers' perceptions of the quality and reputation of the COO within a product category. Furthermore, Anwar et al. (2013) noted that different brands belonging to various nations are also viewed as the country of origin. The country of Switzerland, for example, is known for producing high-quality watches and has a reputation as a country that is trustworthy and knowledgeable in the watchmaking industry.

According to Ahmed et al. (2002), additional research has revealed that the COO has a direct impact on consumers' perceptions of product attributes, which in turn influences their decisions. Additionally, Parkvithee and Miranda (2012) asserted that consumers are aware of the country of origin in which the products they purchase have been manufactured. The COO is one of the many channels through which consumers receive a great deal of product-related information that influences their purchasing decisions. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989) developed a framework to explain the COO's effects on product decisions based on cognitive, affective, and normative processing of the COO's cue. The study explains that in cognitive processing, consumers will choose the COO information as their source when no other information is available. However, when other information is available, they will choose it because they perceive it to be a better indicator of the product. This can also occur if the products are identical in every way, whereas Wilcox (2015) states that the country of origin will be used to determine their value in this case. The framework by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989) also explains that the affective processing is highly dependent on the stereotypes of the country and that the weight of the consumer is deemed more significant than other COO cues. The normative pressure exerted on the consumer is explained by normative processing, which is closely related to the ethnocentricity study of a country. For example, the Malaysian government's initiative to purchase local goods to support local businesses.

Later research by Chattalas et al. (2008) concluded that cognitive processing of COO cues is used as an assumption on the quality of the product and that affective processing is COO cues that relate to the positive or negative associations in a country. This is also supported by Wang et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2014), where the positive country image affects the positive or negative purchase intention of the consumer. Normative processing, on the other hand, uses COO cues to provide consumers with a socially desirable behavioural norm. The study by Chattalas et al. (2008) also implied that

should these processing cues and behavioural norms favourably present themselves, they will have a direct impact on the effect of the COO on consumer purchase intention. Should international marketers understand these COO cues processing frameworks, they would be able to understand how to leverage the cues favourably.

2.2 Brand Image

A study by Keller (1993) defined brand image as the perceptions developed by consumers about a brand due to the brand associations that they have stored in their memory. This association can be in terms of its product quality, aesthetics, and even the country it originates from, where a favourable association could lead to a favourable brand image. To better understand how the brand association works, Farquhar and Herr's (1993) model of the associative network, as cited by Koubaa (2008), will be used to explain how the memory of a person is composed of links and nodes. Links are represented as relationships of either strong or weak, positive or negative, while nodes are represented by objects such as brands and the concept of brand associations. In summary, a brand that has a strong and positive relationship with a consumer will strengthen the brand association being stored in their minds. Keller (1993) further elaborated that the way to differentiate brand associations is through the abstraction level of how much information regarding the association is stored in a consumer's mind. Thus, Keller (1993) further divided these associations into three classifications, mainly benefits, attributes, and attitudes toward the brand. Attributes are the features that differentiate a product or a service, which can be product-related or non-product-related attributes, for example, design, function, and packaging. The benefit is the value perceived by consumers on the attributes of the said products, while attitude consists of the overall consumer's thoughts on the brand itself. Therefore, it can be concluded that a brand that has all these elements will make the brand association stronger.

The strength of the associative network model's node-to-node and node-to-link connections plays a significant role in determining consumer purchase decision. A study by Gong et al. (2020) indicated that a brand's awareness can increase if its brand association is stronger. Though Keller (2001) mentioned that a desirable brand association is insufficient if it is not strong enough to make consumers recall the brand and attempt to form an association with it, this is not the case. However, the strength would also depend on the quantity of

information processed and the quality perceived by the individual. Apple is one such example, since its products are renowned for their fast smartphone operating systems and are immune to viruses. This perception or information lends a positive connotation to the brand, as consumers are aware that they will benefit from the product's attributes. It would then result in a favourable attitude towards the brand, and the benefit that comes with the brand, as perceived by the consumers, would undoubtedly strengthen the brand association, as consumers would recall the attributes, attitudes, and benefits that they held towards the brand. According to Davvetas, Sichtmann, and Diamantopoulos (2015), a positive attitude toward a brand would increase the tolerance for premium-priced brands. This explains why Apple has so many devoted consumers despite charging a premium for its products. For marketers to improve their brand image, the ability to understand how to create a positive and strong association is a key takeaway.

2.3 The Effects of Brand Image and the Country of Origin on Consumer Purchase Decision

According to Gao and Knight (2007), one of the biggest influences on consumer purchase behaviour is the COO's effect on the brand and the country's image. Their research also concluded that consumers would be willing to pay a high price for products that are manufactured in a developed country, such as the label "Made in Germany" or "Made in Japan," which shows a high-quality product, similar to the country's reputation. This is due to the perceived competence/strength of that country towards the product that is being made, which contributes to a positive effect on purchase intention (Halkias et al., 2016) Thus, this literature will discuss the effect of COO image and brand image on consumer purchase intention.

The main question that has always been highlighted in research is whether the COO image leverages the brand image of the product or does the COO have the same function as other external cues found on a product? According to Pappu et al. (2006), the COO only serves as the secondary association for a product, like other external cues, and a consumer would relate a product to its country on their own without having the presence of COO information. In addition, research by Saydan (2013) also highlighted that the country of origin can have a positive influence on the brand of the product. On the other hand, the brand can use many other external cues to establish a secondary

association in the consumer's mind. A study by Keller (1993) stated that the brand image can be connected to other different cues such as places, people, events, and even the country of origin. The external entities will then establish favourable product attributes, benefits, and attitudes of the products, which will give off a positive and strong association, leading to a favourable purchase intention.

Research by Kouba (2008), however, emphasises the concept of umbrella image, where the COO is leveraged to help consumers identify the product's brand image. The research explained that the perception of the brand image of a product will depend on the perception of the country's image as contained in the COO information. If the products are a famous brand, produced in a reputable country, they will have a high effect on the country's image perception as compared to products produced in a country that is not well known with any attribute that consumers can relate to. This situation explains the affective processing of COO in early literature as consumers use country stereotypes to improve the product's brand image. Research by Scott and Keith (2005) and Hui and Zhou (2003) supported the explanation that consumers would usually relate to and recall the brand information and its COO to conceptualise the brand image, and this would lead to evaluation of the product and consumer purchase intention. Therefore, based on these discussions, the following are the hypotheses suggested in the study:

HI: There is a positive relationship between purchase intention, brand image, and COO image.

H2:   COO image has a greater effect on consumer purchase decision compared to brand image.

2.4   Effects of Different Levels of Product Involvement on COO and Brand Image

Consumers purchase products to fulfil their needs and wants, and some to improve their image. However, different levels of involvement will be made by consumers towards different products they have purchased. Saed et al. (2013) stated that involvement is termed as consumers' level of comprehension of a product, which is divided into the categories of purchasing, advertising, and product involvement, of which, in this study, the latter category will be focused upon. According to Zdravkovic (2013), the level of product involvement

relies on the amount of involvement of the consumers and interest in the product. This means that the more knowledge a consumer has about a product, the more they rely on cues such as COO information in their purchase intention (Rezvani et al., 2012). Thus, the more consumers are involved in the product, the higher the product involvement level will be higher.

Other researchers, such as Verlegh et al. (2005) and Tabassi (2013), have investigated the effects of various levels of product involvement on COO image. Their studies concluded that COO image has a greater impact when product involvement is low, as consumers are less motivated to seek out product-related information. As there is less information available to the consumers, they would automatically turn to the COO to explain quality of the product before making a final decision. In terms of product involvement at a high level, consumers are more engaged and would seek out additional information, relying less on COO data for evaluation. Shahzad (2014) argued, however, that the effect should be the opposite because, at a high level of product involvement, the COO has a greater influence on consumer purchase behaviour since they would use and seek out as much information as possible, which includes the COO. This is supported by Tabassi et al. (2013) and Krupka and Arezina (2017), who explain that when product involvement is low, consumers tend to exert less effort in their purchase intentions and rely less on COO information. As different countries are exposed to different levels of information, the effects of product involvement at high and low levels may vary, particularly between developed and developing countries. Thus, the following hypotheses are developed based on the reviewed literature:

H3: The effect of the COO and brand image on the purchase decision is moderated by a high level of product involvement.

H4: The effect of COO and brand image on purchase behaviour is moderated by a low level of product involvement.

2.5 Theory of Planned Behaviour

This study aims to delve deeper into the consumer purchase decision, which Dodds et al. (1992) defined as the likelihood of a consumer purchasing a desired product. This literature will discuss the theory of planned behaviour in order to comprehend why and how consumers make decisions as they do. Ajzen (1991) explained that the

theory of planned behaviour is guided by a person's plan to perform a specific behaviour and is assumed to have motivational factors that will affect the behaviour, thereby indicating how much effort a person is willing to exert towards the execution of said behaviour.

According to Ajzen (2015), the intention of executing the behaviour is determined by three beliefs or considerations, which are the "behavioural belief," "normative belief," and "control belief." Behavioural belief is defined as a person's perception of the result of performing a behaviour, either negative or positive. This belief is stored in a person's memory and will result in an "attitude towards the behaviour." The second consideration of normative belief is the person's perception of how important it is that a referent group would expect a person's behaviour to comply with the referent's expectations. This will result in a perception of social pressure on the person to perform the said behaviour. Finally, control belief refers to the person's perception of the factors available that can influence his or her ability to execute a certain behaviour. The research by Ajzen (2015) also implies that the availability of the three considerations will assist in either performing or stopping the behaviour, which will then lead to self-efficacy in executing the said behaviour. Thus, we can conclude that favourable considerations or attitudes and subjecting norms to performing the behaviour and great perceived control will increase the chances that the person will execute the behaviour.

By relating this theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) to the current study, the consumer's buying intention as affected by the brand and COO image of the product will be discussed. According to the theory, the COO cues received by consumers or the brand image of a product will create an attitude towards the behavioural belief. For example, consumers perceive a Rolex product as a high-quality watch due to the brand's COO, good reputation, and brand image. This in turn will create a positive attitude toward the product and consumers will believe that they will attain favourable "consequences" when purchasing the product. The brand itself represents a positive image that makes consumers perceive that it would improve their social standing, which brings about the improvement of their subjective norm. With sufficient information on the COO and brand image information of the product, consumers will believe that they possess the perceived behavioural control that leads to their buying decisions. Thus, understanding how consumers behave when making purchase

decisions is important for international marketers should they want to utilise their COO and brand image in their strategy.

3.0   Methodology and Data Analysis

A quantitative approach was employed to conduct this study. The samples comprised East Malaysian consumers from Sabah and Sarawak. To ensure that the data collected came from legitimate sources, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. A 5-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) was used as the measurement for the independent and dependent variables. Sample size estimation was determined using G*power 3.0 analysis (Faul et al., 2007). Using G-Power Analysis software yielded an effect size (f2) of 0.15, α error pro 0.05, and power Gf of 0.95 with 2 tested predictors. Therefore, 107 respondents is the minimum sampling for this study. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed across different regions in Sabah and Sarawak (the states within the east of Malaysia). The completed and usable copies were then reviewed and checked for any incomplete submissions received, and 255 completed and usable copies were recollected. Figure 1 depicted the research framework that contained statements about two variables under investigation. The variables were examined using multiple items (Hayduk & Littvay, 2012), and the data was then analysed using Smart PLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015) to assess the hypotheses.
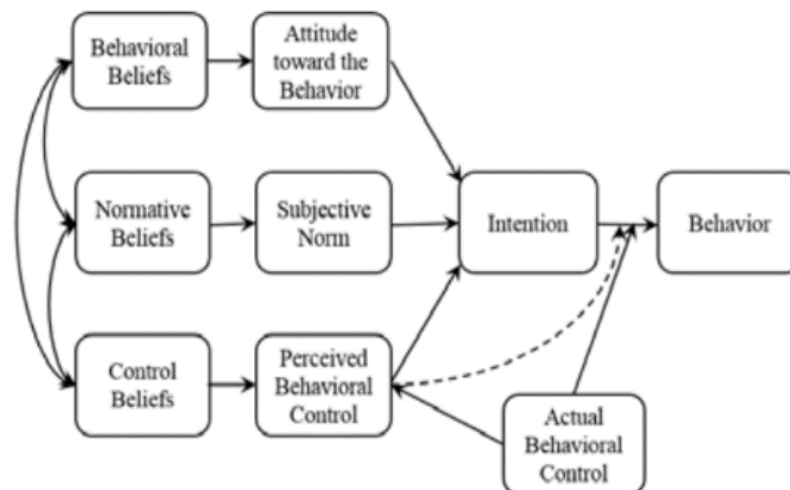

Figure 1 : The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2015)

3.1 Framework and Hypothesis Development

Prior research has demonstrated that brand image and the country of origin can influence consumer purchase intention, with the effect being moderated by product involvement. Based on the above literature, this study suggests a conceptual model, which is shown in Figure 2.
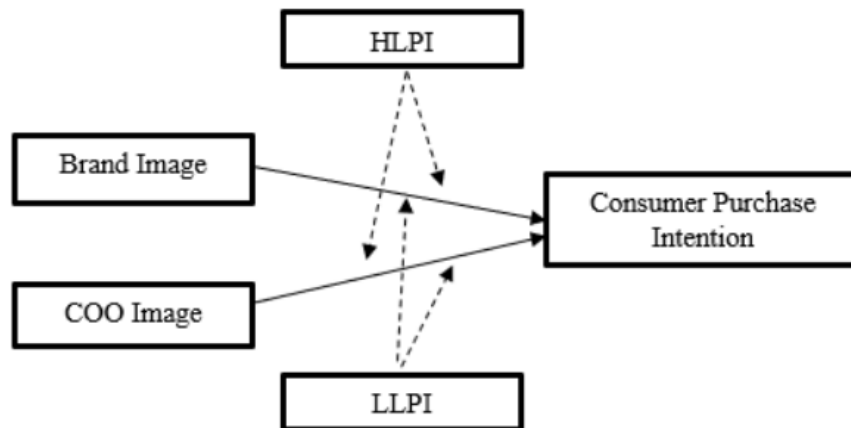

Figure 2 : Research Framework

4.0 Findings and Discussion

According to Table 1, 60.8% of the study's 255 respondents were male, while 39.2% were female. In terms of age group, the majority of respondents were aged 51 or older (42.4%), followed by those aged 41–50 (22.7%), 31–40 (20.4%), and 21–30 (14.5%). The majority of respondents held master's degrees (38%), followed by those with bachelor's degrees (34.5%) and diplomas (25%). Only 2% of people have doctorates. The majority of respondents to this survey earned more than RM6,000 (43.1%), followed by those earning between RM4001 and RM6000 (25.5%), RM2001 and RM4000 (20%), and those earning less than RM2000 (11.4%). Therefore, it could be concluded that the majority of those who participated in this study were mature, highly educated, and well-off. The study's respondent profile is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 : Respondent Profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage of Total (%)
Gender		
Male	155	60.8
Female	100	39.2
Age		
21 to 30	37	14.5
31 to 40	52	20.4
41 to 50	58	22.7
51 and above	108	42.4
Education Levels		
Diploma	65	25.5
Undergraduate	88	34.5
Postgraduate	97	38.0
Doctorate	5	2.0
Income Levels per Month		
2 000 or less	29	11.4
2 001 to 4 000	51	20.0
4 001 to 6 000	65	25.5
6 001 or more	110	43.1

4.1 Measurement Model

Table 2 demonstrates the findings of constructs' composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity testing. The results confirm that the constructs have high internal consistency (Roldán & Sánchez-Franco, 2012) and sufficient average variance extracted (AVE) to validate their convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Three indicators were deleted, as Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were below 0.708 (Hair et al., 2017). Most indicators measuring each construct achieve a satisfactory loading value that is higher than the threshold value of 0.708 as advocated by Hair et al. (2017). Two indicators were below 0.708. However, these indicators were not deleted if the AVE was equal to or above 0.500 and the respective indicators were above 0.400 (Hair et al., 2017). The composite reliability (CR) value for the brand image (BI) is 0.856, the country of origin (COO) is 0.877, high-level product involvement (HLPI) is 0.814, low-level product involvement (LLPI) is 1.000, and consumer purchase intention (PI) is 0.839, respectively, implying that these constructs possess high internal consistency. In a similar vein, these constructs also indicate satisfactory convergent validity with the average variance extracted (AVE) value for respective constructs being higher than the threshold value of 0.500, which demonstrates that the indicators

explain more than 50% of the constructs' variances. The result shows an existing relationship between brand image, the country of origin, and purchase intention. This is in line with the study by Hui and Zhou (2003), implying that consumers would recall and evaluate the information about the brand along with its COO, which then leads to the purchase intention.

Table 2 : Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE	Convergent Validity (Ave
BI	BI1	0.739	0.856	0.502	Yes
	BI2	0.753			
	BI3	0.714			
	BI4	0.779			
	BI5	0.731			
	BI6	0.501			
COO	COO1	0.766	0.877	0.642	Yes
	COO2	0.817			
	COO3	0.779			
	COO4	0.840			
HLPI	HLPI1	0.824	0.814	0.686	Yes
	HLPI2	0.833			
LLPI	LLPI4	1.000	1.000	1.000	Yes
PI	PI1	0.827	0.839	0.572	Yes
	PI2	0.819			
	PI3	0.535			
	PI4	0.803			

*BUE3, BUR3 and BUR4 items were deleted due to poor loading Composite Reliability < .708 (Hair et al., 2010, & Hair et al., 2014)

Table 3 displays the HTMT criterion to evaluate discriminant validity (Ringle et al., 2015). The result specifies that discriminant validity is well-established at HTMT 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001). In assessing discriminant validity, this study applied Henseler's (2015) heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation criterion. The result suggests that the correlation values corresponding to the respective constructs do not violate the conservative criterion (HTMT 0.90), which implies that the discriminant validity issue is of no concern. According to the results, since there is no multi-collinearity issue with items loaded on distinct constructs in the outer model, it is acceptable to proceed with the structural model evaluation to test the study's hypotheses.

Table 3 : HTMT Criterion

	BI	COO	HLPI	LLPI	PI
BI					
COO	0.670				
HLPI	0.485	0.861			
LLPI	0.039	0.120	0.225		
PI	0.619	0.650	0.431	0.138	

Criteria: Discriminant validity is established at HTMT0.90

4.2   Structural Model

The structural model assessment examines the proposed relationship between the variables in the research framework. Before measuring the structural model, this study addressed the issue of multicollinearity using a collinearity test. The VIF values below 3.3 (Diamantopoulous & Siguaw, 2006) for each of the constructs suggest that the issue of multi-collinearity is not a concern. Next, a 5000-bootstrap resampling of data was conducted to examine the hypotheses of this study (Hair et al., 2017). Table 4 demonstrates the assessment of the path coefficient, which is represented by Beta values for each path relationship. The results show that both hypotheses were indeed supported. The results for direct effects indicate that the brand image (BI) and the country of origin (COO) indeed have a positive influence on the consumer purchase intention (PI). Specifically, the study found support for H1a (Brand Image → Purchase Intention, β = 0.319, $p < 0.000$, LLCI = 0.139, ULCI = 0.442) and H1b (Country of Origin → Purchase Intention, β = 0.348, $p < 0.000$, LLCI = 0.183, ULCI = 0.524).

Table 4 : Path Coefficients

Direct Effect	Beta	S.E.	t-value	p-value	5.00%	95.00%	Decision
H1a: BI -> PI	0.319	0.075	4.278	0.000	0.139	0.442	Supported
H1b: COO -> PI	0.348	0.089	3.923	0.000	0.183	0.524	Supported

Path Coefficient 0.01, 0.05 (Hair et al. 2017)

Table 5 displays the quality of the model. We assess the effect size (f2), the coefficient of determination (R2), multi-collinearity issues (VIF values), and the predictive relevance (Q2) of exogenous variables on the endogenous variable in this study. Brand image (H1a) is shown to have a medium effect size (f2) on consumer purchase intention. On the other hand, the country of origin indicates a small effect size (f2) on

consumer purchase intention (Cohen, 1988). The coefficient of determination represented by R2, which explains whether the brand image and the country of origin could explain the consumer purchase intention, indicates a substantial effect (Chin, 1998). Besides, multi-collinearity between indicators was assessed. All indicators for variables satisfy the VIF values and they are consistently below the threshold values of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2014) and 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). Therefore, it can be concluded that collinearity issues do not reach critical levels in all variables and are not an issue for the estimation of the PLS path model.

Specifically, the R2 value for consumer purchase intention is 0.340, suggesting that the brand image and the country of origin can explain the endogenous variable. The results also show that brand image has a medium effect size on attitude (f2 = 0.106). This implies that brand image is a moderate variable affecting consumer purchase intention. Meanwhile, the country of origin exerts a small effect size (f2 = 0.095) on consumer purchase intention. Therefore, the relationship was considered small. This is supported by Pappu et al. (2006), which discovered that the COO is only a secondary association toward a product, similar to other external cues that a consumer would use to relate to a product. Other findings by research by Schneller and Swanson (2018) also supported this result, where consumers would only perceive the COO as an important part of their product evaluation until it is brought up. This shows that the COO affects consumer purchase intention, albeit a small one. The predictive relevance values of all exogenous (independent) variables towards endogenous (dependent) variables were larger than 0, indicating that the independent variables (brand image and the country of origin) could predict the consumer purchase intention, as presented by Q2 using a blindfolding procedure (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 5 : Model Quality Assessment

Direct Effect	f^2	R^2	VIF	Q^2
H1a: BI -> PI	0.106	0.340	1.455	0.177
H1b: COO -> PI	0.095		1.927	

Lateral Collinearity: VIF 3.3 or higher (Diamantopoulos & Sigouw 2006)

$R^2 \geq 0.26$ consider Substantial (Cohen, 1989)

$f^2 \geq 0.26$ consider Substantial (Cohen, 1989)

$Q^2 > 0.00$ consider large (Hair, 2017)

4.3   Moderation Assessment

Table 6 demonstrates the assessment of the moderating effects represented by Beta values for each path relationship. The results show only one of the four hypotheses was supported. The results for moderating effects indicate that the country of origin (COO) has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention (PI) moderated by high-level product involvement (HLPI). Specifically, the study found support for H2b (High-Level Product Involvement*Country of Origin → Consumer Purchase Intention, $\beta = 0.090$, $p < 0.000$, LLCI = 0.000, ULCI = 0.172). Nonetheless, this study did not find support for H2a, H3a, and H3b.

Table 6 : Moderation Assessment

Moderating Effect	Beta	S.E.	t-value	p-value	5.00%	95.00%	Decision
H2a: HLPI*BI -> PI	0.016	0.059	0.271	0.786	-0.092	0.132	Not Supported
H2b: HLPI*COO -> PI	0.090	0.043	2.092	0.037	0.000	0.172	Supported
H3a: LLPI*BI -> PI	0.055	0.066	0.830	0.407	-0.082	0.175	Not Supported
H3b: LLPI*COO -> PI	0.078	0.071	1.091	0.276	-0.048	0.215	Not Supported

Path Coefficient 0.01, 0.05 (Hair et al. 2017)

5.0   Conclusion and Future Research Direction

According to the correlation analysis, the COO image has a substantial and favourable association with purchase intent. This link illustrates that as the COO's image improves, its influence on consumer purchase intention increases. This can be explained by the research conducted by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989), who demonstrated that in an emotive process, the presence of the COO label serves as a stimulant for consumer purchase behaviour. Products with a positive COO image are likely to impact consumers more than those with a negative COO image. As an illustration, past data indicates that East Malaysian consumers are familiar with the Seiko watch due to Japan's reputation for creating high-quality goods.

In the literature, it is explained that brand image would affect consumer purchase behaviour. Shimp (2010) explained that consumer behaviour depends on the brand association's strength and favourability that consumers store in their memory. The stronger and more favourable image the brand gives off, the more likely it will affect consumers' product evaluations. This explains the positive association results between brand image and purchase intent found in this study, indicating that both have a positive link.

The interaction between the COO and brand image has always become an issue among researchers. Pappu et al. (2006) implied that the COO is a secondary association to a product similar to other external cues. However, Kouba (2008) and Scott and Keith (2005) argued that the COO is important information that helps consumers identify the product's brand image. The regression result of this study supports the statements by Kouba (2008) and Scott and Keith (2005), as it was found that the COO has a larger influence on purchase intention by a small difference. This means that both the COO image and brand image interact with each other to influence consumer purchase behaviour. Therefore, it can be concluded that East Malaysian consumers tend to use the COO image of a brand to further strengthen their brand associations in their memory.

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the implications of low and high levels of product involvement on the COO and purchase intention. The findings indicate that moderation occurs at a high level of product participation but not at a low level of product involvement. This indicates that when East Malaysian consumers purchase products requiring a higher level of involvement, the COO image has a greater impact on their purchase intention, and vice versa for products requiring a lower level of involvement. Consequently, this finding corroborates the findings of Shahzad (2014) and Tabassi et al. (2013), according to which a high product involvement purchasing decision is substantially influenced by COO information. In the event of low product engagement, purchase decisions are made with less effort due to the product's low cost or familiarity, and so the COO is not relied on.

The findings of this study indicate that the same results were obtained as with previous COO moderation effects and purchase intention studies. A high level of product involvement is found to moderate the effect of brand image on purchase intention, while a low level of product involvement has no moderating effect. These findings are consistent with the findings of Cyril et al. (2011) and Zdravkovic (2013), which found that involvement is contingent on the social and financial consequences involved. This includes the brand image of the product.

One of the limitations of this study is that its research did not focus on a particular sample of products. However, doing so would have resulted in a more accurate depiction of products' involvement levels and how they can be distinguished based on their country of

origin. Additionally, respondents would have been able to answer the questionnaire more effectively if they had a product in mind to compare. In addition, the sample size is a limitation because it focuses primarily on East Malaysia. A larger sample representing the entirety of Malaysia would provide a more accurate picture of how Malaysians as a whole perceive the impact of COO on their purchasing intention.

This study highlighted the COO, brand image, and product involvement levels as moderators of consumer purchase intention. Future research may include other variables, such as consumers' level of knowledge, product pricing, and brand equity, as independent variables or moderating variables. This recommendation is based on this study's findings, which indicate that consumers' level of knowledge about the country of origin and the price of a product may also influence their perception of the country of origin. In the future, co-branding should also be investigated to see how it affects consumers' perceptions of a product's country of origin. Given that many businesses engage in joint ventures with other companies, this could affect how consumers perceive the country from which the products originate.

The effect of cultural intention on the effect of the COO image on the purchase intention of East Malaysian consumers is another area of study that can be conducted on the topic of country of origin. Ethnocentrism and xenocentrism are relevant to this topic because they may influence how consumers perceive foreign products' country of origin compared to their own locally made products. Finally, it is suggested that future research should include a comparison study between consumers in a developing country and a developed country in order to determine the differences in the effects of the country of origin on their purchase behaviour.

In conclusion, the current research shows that consumers in East Malaysia place a large importance on the COO image to help them leverage or improve the brand image that they have towards a certain brand or product. The effect of the COO's image of a product would decide whether East Malaysian consumers have a negative or positive brand association with the product. According to the current study, East Malaysian consumers place more emphasis on the brand and the COO for high-involvement products such as watches, and little or no emphasis on low-involvement products such as drinks and beverages. The researcher hopes that the findings of this study will assist international firms and marketers in developing strategies that

will eventually increase their turnover and international trade in Malaysia.

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