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Reasons for ignoring versus paying attention to country of origin among consumers of durable goods brands

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Abstract

Purpose – The objective of the study is to identify both reasons for ignoring and for paying attention to the country of origin (COO) by consumers when choosing brands of durable goods.
Design/methodology/approach – In this paper a qualitative approach was applied, i.e. 25 in-depth semistructured interviews with Polish consumers of durable goods purposively selected out of those who had previously participated in a quantitative survey conducted by the authors.
Findings – Among the reasons for paying attention to the COO when choosing brands of durable goods, cognitive (rational), affective (emotional) and normative factors have been identified, while among the reasons for ignoring the COO by consumers, the authors identified only cognitive (rational) and affective (emotional) factors.
Research limitations/implications – The conclusions can be applied by brand managers, e.g. when making decisions whether and why to communicate COO dimensions.
Originality/value – This paper contributes to the international marketing literature as it develops a deeper insight into consumer behavior with reference to the consumers' reasons for paying attention to and ignoring the COO, with very little published on the latter in particular. Furthermore, it is one of still relatively few qualitative studies conducted so far on COO taking a perspective of a consumer, especially the one from an emerging market from the European Union (EU).

Keywords Country of origin (COO), COO dimensions, Consumer perception of the COO, Durable goods, Qualitative study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a growing interest in the phenomenon of the country of origin (COO) and its dimensions (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2019), along with the impact of the COO on consumer behavior (Thøgersen, Pedersen, Paternoga, Schwendel, & Aschemann-Witzel, 2017). Stereotypes about countries affect their image, translating into the COO effect (COE), i.e. attitudes toward and perceptions of brands/products/companies originating from that country (Josiassen & Assaf, 2010). Therefore, scholars indicate the importance of place

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branding and its effectiveness (Hereźniak, Florek, & Augustyn, 2018). Importantly, the COO and its dimensions serve as extrinsic cues, which consumers can consider alongside intrinsic cues when making decisions (Qu *et al.*, 2021).

Companies increasingly manufacture, assemble and source parts/components outside of their home countries, often in low-cost countries (Steven & Britto, 2016). There even appeared a special term for them: "factoryless manufacturers" (ADB, 2021). Many companies, both from developed and emerging countries, acquire foreign firms or brands (Wang, He, & Barnes, 2017). This results in the emergence of so-called "hybridization" or "hybrid products" linked with different COO dimensions, e.g. various countries of brand, design or manufacturing origin (Nieroda, Mrad, & Solomon, 2018). Moreover, studies notice the growing role of companies from emerging markets (McKinsey, 2018), which not only offer low-cost products but also create strong global brands (Pillania, 2009), competing with brands from developed countries. According to Statista (2021), although leaders in smartphone sales in Europe in 2021 were Samsung and Apple, they were followed by brands from China: Xiaomi and Huawei. Among the 100 best global brands according to Interbrand (2021), there are two brands from emerging markets: Corona (Mexican beer) and Huawei. These phenomena may impact consumer behavior, including their consideration of the COO and its dimensions in purchase decisions.

Some studies (Touzani, Fatma, & Meriem, 2015) confirm that consumers may not consider COO when making decisions or even ignore it. However, there are fewer articles on the COE based on qualitative methods (Touzani *et al.*, 2015) that consider the reasons for paying attention to or ignoring the COO, especially while choosing between foreign versus domestic brands (Tjandra, Omar, Williams, & Enson, 2013). Most studies on the COO from a consumer perspective used quantitative methods (Lee, 2020) and were conducted on samples of consumers from developed countries like the United States of America (USA) or Asian emerging markets, mainly China or India (Chen, Wright, Gao, Liu, & Mather, 2021), while only few consider consumers from emerging EU markets, including Poland (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2021). However, consumer behavior may vary by country, also with reference to the COO (Ho, Liu, Tarabashkina, & Volery, 2022). We should also keep this in mind when reading the literature review below that it largely refers to the results of studies on Asian brands.

Given the above, our study will seek to answer the research questions: (1) What are the reasons for ignoring the COO or its dimensions by the consumers who buy household durables brands, in particular those who choose foreign brands? And (2) what are the reasons for paying attention to the COO or its dimensions by consumers who buy household durables brands, particularly those who choose foreign brands?

As a research method, we conducted qualitative research by applying semistructured in-depth interviews with 25 poles selected from the participants of a quantitative study we conducted earlier using the computer-assisted web interviewing method (CAWI).

The study complements international marketing literature by contributing to in-depth insights into consumer behavior in terms of the COO, i.e. reasons for ignoring versus paying attention to the COO. Another contribution is that this phenomenon is studied based on semistructured in-depth interviews, while relatively few qualitative studies were so far conducted from the consumer perspective. As we included cognitive, affective and normative mechanisms responsible for shaping the COE, it also supports the means-end theory as presented below.

The article will be structured as follows. First, we will present the literature on the COO and its dimensions. Next, the research method will be described, followed by a presentation of the study results. Then, we will summarize the article and discuss the study findings, limitations and recommendations for future research.

Literature review

COO was initially considered as a one-dimensional construct, identified with the country of manufacturing (COM) and the "made in" label. With numerous changes in the global economy – e.g. global supply chains, relocation of production to other countries, outsourcing of production of finished products/components/parts abroad (Pegan, Vianelli, & de Luca, 2020) – scholars called for a reconceptualization of the COO as a multidimensional construct (Mostafa, 2015). Consequently, the following dimensions can be indicated: COM (Nagashima, 1970), country of assembly (Insch & McBride, 1998), country of design (Chen & Su, 2012), country of parts (Fan, 2008), country of brand origin (COBO) (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011) and country of technology origin (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2019).

Researchers emphasize that the COO and its dimensions should be considered extrinsic cues, which consumers can consider alongside intrinsic ones when making decisions (Han & Terpstra, 1988). The COE means that the country image influences buyers' perception/evaluation of products/brands that originate from a country, which may translate into purchasing behavior (Kim, Chun, & Ko, 2017).

The COE can be considered from the perspective of the means-end theory, which holds that consumers' cognitive-motivational structures influence decision-making (Olson and Reynolds, 2004). Consumer attitudes toward products/brands are structured on three interrelated levels (Dibley & Baker, 2001): (1) attributes, which convey product features and characteristics; (2) consequences of use which include effects of using a product/brand and (3) personal values. Therefore, the COE is shaped by three mechanisms (Sharma and Sharma, 2011): (1) cognitive – or rational – which entails consumer knowledge of a country's experience in producing certain product/brand categories, possibly influencing the products/brands' quality assessment; (2) affective, which involves symbolic/emotional value of information about the COO, as it may have symbolic/emotional meaning for consumers, e.g. status, authenticity, exoticism, sense of national identity, pride (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999); and (3) normative, which stems from social/personal norms, e.g. consumer ethnocentrism (preference for domestic products), support for policies, practices and actions of a specific country (Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Talias, 2007), animosity (dislike for another country due to past military/political/economic conflicts; Amine, 2008), affinity or positive feelings and attachment to foreign countries resulting from personal experience or normative exposure and home-country bias (Verlegh, 2007).

Studies on the COE and its dimensions from the consumer perspective address such issues as the evaluation of brands originating from the domestic versus foreign market (Kim *et al.*, 2017); the impact of the COO and its dimensions on brand equity, including brand image (Zdravkovic, 2013); asymmetric effects of a brand origin confusion (BOC) from the perspective of consumer preferences and attitudes toward brands, along with purchase intentions toward brands from domestic versus foreign markets, as well as the factors that determine and moderate the purchase intentions (Hamin, Baumann, & Tung, 2014).

Numerous studies, also many quantitative, on the COO phenomenon from the consumer perspective scrutinized the impact of COO and its dimensions on consumer behavior (Safeer, He, Lin, Abrar, & Nawaz, 2021), including COBO. Interestingly, although the COBO strongly affects brand attitudes, consumers often indicate it incorrectly (Magnusson *et al.*, 2011).

Attitudes toward a country and its people are strongly related to the occurrence of the COE, as country stereotypes affect the country's image, possibly translating into perceptions of brands/products (Kim *et al.*, 2017) and attitudes toward them (Rashid, Barnes, & Warnaby, 2016). According to Zhou, Yang and Hui (2010), foreign customers, especially in developed countries, often perceive companies/products/brands originating from emerging markets as representing lower quality and not meeting international standards. Consumers from emerging markets tend to display stronger preferences toward brands from developed markets (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Negative perceptions of brands from emerging markets decrease consumer trust in them and their eagerness to pay higher prices for these products (Rajavi, Kushwaha, & Steenkamp, 2019).

Many studies on the COO phenomenon also consider consumer ethnocentrism and materialism, usually as moderators in quantitative studies. Vuong and Giao (2020) indicate that consumer ethnocentrism may decrease the perceived quality of foreign brands, as consumers from developed countries are usually more ethnocentric than those from emerging markets (Zeugner-Roth, Žabkar, & Diamantopoulos, 2015). For instance, Polish consumers are moderately ethnocentric according to most studies (Hat & Smyczek, 2016), albeit older consumers are more ethnocentric (Awdziej, Tkaczyk, & Włodarek, 2016). Referring to consumer materialism, Demirbag, Sahadevm and Mellahim (2010) identify its negative moderating effect on high-value products and brands originating from emerging markets. Poles are identified as more materialistic than, e.g. Americans, revealing a stronger link between their materialism and compulsive buying (Tarka, 2020).

Some studies suggest that globalization and global outsourcing make the COO information less important (Hines & Bruce, 2007). A qualitative study by Tjandra *et al.* (2013) on Generation Y consumers from 21 countries shows that most of them ignore the COO in fashion products, because for them brands ensure quality or price better than the COO. Moreover, the COO seems to be ignored by consumers when selecting halal brands from Muslim and non-Muslim countries, which was found in interviews with 35 consumers from Saudi Arabia (Borzooei & Asgari, 2015). In turn, according to Yang, Ramsaran and Wibowo (2018), 46 out of 55 interviewed Chinese consumers of dairy products declared that the COO is important for their purchase decisions, as most preferred foreign brands. According to Smaoui, Kiilani and Touzani (2016, p. 151), who interviewed 36 Tunisian drug consumers and 15 experts (doctors and pharmacists), consumers take into account the COO when making decision, and they are more likely to trust Western brands of drugs to those from emerging markets.

Study method and general characteristics of the surveyed consumers

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, to answer the research questions we applied a qualitative approach. The approach allowed us to gather detailed information from consumers and identify the motives underlying their decisions, thus including perspectives that cannot be achieved through quantitative methods (Touzani *et al.*, 2015; Ebeneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). Moreover, the qualitative approach is justified for the investigation of little-known issues and intricate phenomena (Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir, & Waseem, 2019) such as COO. For this study, we were inspired by an interpretive paradigm aiming at an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon through the eyes of study participants (Rashid *et al.*, 2019), which allows one to explain and understand various reasons and meanings that found their actions (Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

For this study, we selected semistructured in-depth interviews, which are often used in consumer behavior research (Touzani *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, serve in many qualitative research projects as the primary or only source of data, as they allow for gathering information and generating understanding (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 113). Our scenario included open-ended questions and served as a framework for interviews, which is similar to other COO studies (Rashid *et al.*, 2016). Such a scenario allows for informal conversations, which are important when sharing opinions (Anninou & Foxall, 2017). The questions addressed the factors the consumers would consider when deciding to purchase durable goods, with a key focus on household appliances and consumer electronics: Do they consider the COO and its various dimensions or not? Why is it that way? The scenario design (semistructured questions) resulted from the assumption that participants may indicate different COO dimensions, as the questions were inspired both by the literature review and our previous interviews with managers from nine companies from emerging markets selling household appliances in Poland.

The interviewed consumers were purposively selected from participants of a quantitative study conducted previously (January-February 2019) on a random sample of 1012 Polish consumers aged 18–65 using the CAWI method, for which respondents were recruited and surveyed by a research firm. The same firm contacted consumers for interviews and interviewed them, securing their diverse representation by gender, place of residence size, age, income and education, which is a method applied in many qualitative studies (Anninou & Foxall, 2017). Considering the insufficient number of studies on respondents from emerging markets other than Asian markets, we decided to conduct the study in Poland, which represents one of the EU countries. According to the Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) classification that we followed, Poland was classified as an emerging market in 2019 (the year of the study) and still is in 2022 (MSCI, 2022), when we prepared the article.

The final number of interviewees was 25. It allowed us to reach the saturation criterion, beyond which no new data can be acquired (Alam, 2021). Interviews were conducted in March 2019 using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method. Each interview lasted ca. 30–40 minutes and was recorded, thereafter transcriptions were prepared of ca. 5–6 pages of a standard Microsoft Word Processing (MS Word) format document.

The general characteristics of the surveyed consumers are presented in Table 1.

According to Table 1, 25 consumers aged 18–65 took part in the study, with nine people aged 35–44 (36%), followed by five aged 25–34 and 45–54 each (20% each), four aged 55–65 (16%) and three aged 18–24 (8%). There were slightly more men – 13 (52%) – than women, who numbered 12 (48%). Among the respondents, two lived in rural areas (8%), three in cities with up to 19 thousand inhabitants (12%), three in cities with 20–49 thousand inhabitants (12%), four in cities with 50–99 thousand inhabitants (16%), four in cities with 100–199 thousand inhabitants (16%), five in cities with 200–400000 inhabitants (20%) and four in cities with more than 500 thousand inhabitants (16%). Most of the respondents had secondary education (12; 48%) and higher/incomplete higher (10; 40%), and three had primary education (12%). Considering income, the vast majority (nine people; 36%) have a monthly disposable income of 2000–3999 PLN (Polish Zloty), five ranging from 500–999 PLN or from 1000–1999 PLN (20% each), four – above 4000 PLN (16%), and two – below 500 PLN (8%).

Following the preparation of transcriptions, we both read each document several times to get the overall impression of the participants' statements, and then subjected the collected data to thematic content analysis in order to identify, analyze and report patterns (Neuendorf, 2018, pp. 211–223). We coded the contents line-by-line, first identifying themes and then categories. The two of us prepared the coding simultaneously, assigning final pieces to specific categories jointly determined to increase inter-coder reliability (Aykol, Ipek, & Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirc, 2022). As a theoretical background, to identify the reasons for ignoring versus paying attention to the COO, we referred to three categories of mechanisms indicated in the literature as responsible for the COE (Sharma & Sharma, 2011): (1) cognitive – or rational – which conveys knowledge of a country's capabilities/experience in producing certain products; (2) affective, which comprises the symbolic/emotional value of the COO information and (3) normative, which pertains social/personal norms.

Consumer	Gender	Place of residence (size)	Age	Income	Education
K-1	Female	Village	35–44	Under 500PLN	Higher
K-2	Female	200–400 thousands	55–65	2000–3999PLN	Higher
K-3	Female	Up to 19 thousands	35–44	500–999PLN	Higher
K-4	Male	200–400 thousands	25–34	1000–1999PLN	Secondary
K-5	Male	Over 500 thousands	18–24	2000–3999PLN	Incomplete higher
K-6	Female	20–49 thousands	25–34	500–999PLN	Secondary
K-7	Female	100–199 thousands	45–54	2000–3999PLN	Basic
K-8	Male	Up to 19 thousands	45–54	2000–3999PLN	Secondary
K-9	Male	100–199 thousands	55–65	1000–1999PLN	Higher
K-10	Female	50–99 thousands	45–54	2000–3999PLN	Higher
K-11	Male	20–49 thousands	45–54	Over 4000PLN	Secondary
K-12	Male	20–49 thousands	25–34	Under 500PLN	Secondary
K-13	Male	Village	35–44	1000–1999PLN	Basic
K-14	Female	100–199 thousands	35–44	1000–1999PLN	Secondary
K-15	Female	200–400 thousands	18–24	2000–3999PLN	Secondary
K-16	Female	Over 500 thousands	55–65	500–999PLN	Basic
K17	Male	50–99 thousands	45–54	2000–3999PLN	Higher
K-18	Male	100–199 thousands	35–44	2000–3999PLN	Secondary
K-19	Male	Town 200–400 thousand	25–34	500–999PLN	Higher
K-20	Male	City up to 19000	35–44	500–999PLN	Secondary
K-21	Female	miasto pow. 500tyś	25–34	Over 4000PLN	Secondary
K-22	Female	200–400 thousands	35–44	Over 4000PLN	Higher
K-23	Female	50–99 thousands	35–44	1000–1999PLN	Secondary
K-24	Male	50–99 thousands	55–65	2000–3999PLN	Secondary
K-25	Male	Over 500 thousands	35–44	Over 4000PLN	Higher

Source(s): own elaboration

Table 1. General characteristics of consumers surveyed

Findings

The reasons for including or ignoring different dimensions of the COO in Polish customers' purchase decisions of durable goods are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the interviewed poles indicated the following factors as reasons to consider dimensions of the COO: (1) cognitive, (2) affective and (3) normative factors; while among the reasons for ignoring it appeared (1) cognitive and (2) affective factors.

As for considering the COO in purchase decisions regarding durable goods, the interviewees emphasized mainly rational reasons, including predominantly those related to the quality attributed to products/parts/brands from a given country (nine interviewees). Consumers paid attention to the COO also when they are aware of the lower quality of products/brands coming from emerging markets, especially China, and they attribute lower quality and worse technical parameters to products manufactured or assembled there. This approach was supported by their previous (negative) experiences with products from a particular country (six consumers). For example: "These Chinese products are of poor quality . . . as there counts not quality but only quantity. . . . I will not buy it if it is "made in China," because I have got burned on Chinese products" (C-13); "I only check whether the product was made in China . . . if I see the information "made in China," I do not buy it, even if it is Bosch . . . I associate China with bad equipment" (C-7).

Moreover, consumers focused on the COO when they are convinced of the higher quality, greater durability and better technical performance of products/brands originating from certain developed countries, especially Germany or Sweden (three consumers): "We associate these products with some specific features . . . that Swedish is definitely reliable, German – it is reliable because they care a lot about it . . . to have good quality . . . Germany, France – these

Reasons for paying attention to the COO	Reasons for ignoring the COO
Cognitive (Rational) Factors	
• *Quality level attributed by a consumer to products of a certain category originating in a particular country* (C-1; C-7; C-12; C-20; C-21; C-22; C-15; C-18; C-23) • *Negative experience with the quality of products from a particular country* (C-13; C-7; C-14; C-14; C-18; C-14) • *Availability and conditions, including time of repair, awaiting for spare parts or service for products from foreign markets* (C-2; C-10; C-18; C-25) • *Quality level attributed by a consumer to brands associated with a particular country* (C-25; C- 6; C-24) • *Lower prices for products or spare parts from a particular country* (C-1; C-14) • *Quality level attributed by a consumer to components originating from a particular country* (C-14; C-16) • *Knowledge of a companies` experience from particular countries in manufacturing a given category of goods* (C- 8) • *Lack of knowledge about the content of products from a given country* (C-19) • *Perception of a shorter lifespan for products originating in a given country* (C-12) • *Opinion on the aesthetics of products from the particular country* (C-11) • *Warranty service for products from the domestic market as more accessible than for foreign products* (C-1)	• *Knowledge that companies from developed countries are locating production/sourcing of final products/parts to other countries*, e.g. China, due to lower costs (C-2; C-8; C-10; C-17; C-18; C-22; C-23; C-25) • *Owners of well-known brands define quality requirements and control the quality of their products regardless of where they are produced* (C-10; C-11; C-17; C-19; C-24; C-25) • *The main determinants of a consumer`s purchase decision are: price, quality, including product`s functionality* rather than COO (C-2; C-3; C-5; C-15; C-19) • *Unification of components/parts or production technology internationally*, with manufacturers often using components/parts from the same suppliers (C-11; C-17; C-18) • *The conviction that lower quality of products made in China is a stereotype* (C-8; C-11) • *Lack of interest in the origin of a company/brand* (C-1; C-2) • *Absence/difficult availability of information identifying the COO* (e.g. made-in) (C-5; C-6) • *Low product value* (C-22) • *Products of a certain category rarely break down* (C-18) • *Some emerging economies are world leaders in specific branches* (C-8)
Affective Factors	
• *Prestige attributed by the consumer to owning/using foreign brands* (C-20) • *Sentiment towards certain local brands* (C-18) • *Loyalty to long-established domestic brands* (C-18)	• *Reputation, trust in brand and not the COO guarantee product quality* (C-2; C-7; C-8; C-12; C-15; C-17; C-19) • *The consumer is guided solely by the brand when making a decision to buy* socially visible products (C-8)
Normative factors	
• *Consumer ethnocentrism, including:* preference for Polish brands “made-in” Poland (C-1), perception of Polish products as better (C-8; C-20), preference for Polish products over those manufactured abroad (C-1), conviction that buying products “made-in” the home country “gives jobs” to people from that country (C-5; C-6; C-18) and makes companies pay taxes there (C-14; C-18), and supporting local producers (C-21) • *Opinion on CSR, including respect for workers` rights in the country, in this:* perception that salaries in the country concerned are too low (C-1), non-CSR-compliant employment conditions in a given country (under-age employment, humiliation of workers, disrespect for their rights) (C-16; C-18), belief that workers in EU are employed in line with the legal regulations (C-18)	Not identified

Source(s): Own elaboration

Table 2.
Reasons for paying attention to versus ignoring the COO

countries inspire trust because they are close, because they are reliable" (C-1). "It is said that German products are the best, and I have the same opinion. Not only in household appliances ... because German products have always been better, of better quality, longer lasting" (C-21).

Another reason for taking the COO into account by consumers was their better availability and conditions, including repair time, waiting for spare parts or servicing of purchased products (four consumers). The situation was viewed as better for products manufactured in the EU, especially in Poland, compared to overseas markets: "The country matters in terms of possible subsequent repairs or breakdowns .... I will consider buying equipment made entirely even here, in Poland, where the parts are up to date, there is no problem with replacement, with servicing" (C-2).

Only single consumers indicated such cognitive factors as experience with companies from particular countries in manufacturing a particular category of products (C-8), lack of knowledge about the content of products from a particular country (C-19), perception of a shorter lifespan for products originating in a particular country (C-12), opinion about the aesthetics of products from a particular country (C-11) and warranty service for products from the domestic market rated as more accessible than that from foreign countries (C-1).

The study showed that the COO was considered to a lesser extent for affective reasons. The consumer C-20 stated that he treats the purchase of foreign brands as a demonstration of his status, i.e. prestige attributed to owning/using foreign brands: "one has got into luxuries and always wants to have a foreign brand, because the family will see it, the colleagues, the neighbors. Everyone wants to have a better product, but the Polish brand is not worse at all" (C-20).

Another consumer emphasized that he is guided in decisions also by sentiment toward Polish brands and loyalty toward older brands: "Maybe it is my sentiment, but at least because you know this brand for many years, you know what it can do, and if it is a Polish brand, this is the main argument" (C-18).

Among the reasons indicated for considering the COO, there also appeared normative factors, i.e. ethnocentrism and opinion about corporate social responsibility (CSR), e.g. respect for workers' rights in a given country. As for consumer ethnocentrism, we noted that it is important for some to buy products of Polish brands/firms or manufactured in Poland by foreign brand owners as this is to contribute to creating or maintaining jobs and improving the performance of Polish companies as well as increasing tax revenues: "I am more willing to buy products made in our country because it creates jobs" (C-5); "It would be best if the product was manufactured in Poland, because then people have more work ..., we do not give money to someone else" (C-6); "It would be best if it was Polish because then taxes go to Poland" (C-14); "I would rather buy a brand which makes money for someone from Poland ..., gives employment to some people in the country than buy a brand at a similar price that has nothing to do with the Polish market" (C-18).

Moreover, the interviewees declared they take the COO into account when purchasing durable goods brands, as it is important not to purchase products from countries where workers' rights are not respected, where salaries are too low, workers are overworked or children are employed. They contrast Asian countries with the EU, where according to their beliefs; people are employed in accordance with legal regulations: "Workers from the EU must work according to some rules ..., they have rights. In Far Eastern countries, there is no such thing. An employee who works in Far Eastern countries and produces this product may be tired or overworked, and this translates into product quality" (C-18); "If I see on the label that the product was made in China, even if it is beautiful, I will definitely not buy it. ... Because I have bad associations with child labor, with employee humiliation, with exploitation, and that is why it is so cheap. ... only money counts" (C-16).

Among the reasons for ignoring the COO and its dimensions, consumers indicated mainly rational motivations, especially knowledge about the location of production/sourcing in low-cost countries (eight respondents). Moreover, six interviewees pointed out that brand owners define quality requirements and supervise production quality abroad. Slightly fewer (five consumers) indicated that they mostly follow price and quality rather than COO. Only single interviewees indicated such factors as the international unification of components/parts or production technology, the absence/difficult availability of information regarding the COO the lack of interest in the COO, low product value and that products of certain product categories rarely break down: “today, most companies produce in China. Be it Bosch or Sony . . .. When I buy Sony, I do not know what parts are there . . .. It does not matter to me; it is all about cheap labor. Companies . . . manufacture there because of the costs and give their logo . . .. Whether this coffee machine was manufactured in the Czech Republic or in Italy, it does not matter to me. It is just that the company makes the product, they give me a guarantee that it will be a good product, because they don’t want to lose their reputation” (C-2); “there are brands that I will not buy even if they came from the USA, because I have a bad experience with them” (C-8); “there happens a unification of components. If a given brand, be it Polish or Western or Eastern, uses subassemblies with specific parameters in production, manufactured under a similar technological regime, then all these devices are very similar . . .. Today, the market is conquered by quality or novelties, because one must win the customer in some way, either to keep the one who is loyal to the brand or to attract him with some novelty . . .. I would not divide the market into East, West, or Poland” (C-17).

Furthermore, some consumers were convinced that the perception that products made in emerging or developing markets in factories owned or contracted by well-known brand owners are of low quality should be considered a stereotype: “it may already be a stereotype that what comes from China is bad and what comes from other countries is solid and good. And so, all Western companies locate their companies in Asian countries, and everything is manufactured there . . .. Today, everything is so mixed . . .. Most big companies have their production facilities in China . . .. It is only a matter of how something is made, whether the company with own brand and reputation – even though it is produced in China – controls production and cares about quality” (C-11).

Two interviewees noted that among the factors causing them to ignore the COO is the availability – or rather an absence or invisibility – of information identifying the COO: “[the information “made in”] is not always available or it is hard to find” (C-5).

Moreover, consumers ignore may the COO because of affective factors – as they trust brand reputation to guarantee quality – so they solely follow the brand when deciding to buy a socially visible product (seven consumers). Only two consumers indicated affective reasons for ignoring the COO, i.e. that they are solely guided by the brand when making a decision to buy socially visible products: “if the brand is known, one does not consider where something was produced, one looks at the brand to know . . .. The name itself gives trust to the brand” (C-7). “Whether these are branded clothes or shoes, I am interested in the brand, but not necessarily where the product was made” (C-8).

None of the surveyed consumers indicated reasons for ignoring the COO in the normative purchase decision process.

Conclusions, study limitations and future research recommendations

Considering the three categories of mechanisms responsible for the COE indicated by Sharma and Sharma (2011), our study identified several cognitive, affective and normative factors as reasons why poles pay attention to the COO, while only cognitive and affective factors are among the reasons for ignoring the COO. The normative factors were identified only among the reasons for paying attention to the COO and not for ignoring it, which agrees with the results of previous qualitative studies (Tjandra *et al.*, 2013). The overwhelming presence of cognitive factors may suggest that poles tend to be rational. As there appeared more reasons for paying attention to the COO rather than ignoring it, we may state that although poles follow the tendency of the diminishing importance of the COO (Borzooei & Asgani, 2015), the COO still matters for many poles.

Among the factors that motivate consumers to consider the COO when making purchase decisions, the cognitive ones play the key role, particularly the quality issues, attributed to a certain product category or to brands originating from a given country, along with previous negative experiences with them. Moreover, according to previous studies, consumers may identify the expertise of particular countries in manufacturing certain product categories (Rashid *et al.*, 2016). Another rational factor commonly indicated by poles is product availability, repair time, waiting for spare parts or servicing of products from a foreign country.

Interestingly, the affective reasons for paying attention to the COO were indicated by few consumers, including the prestige of foreign brands, sentiment/pride toward certain local brands and loyalty toward domestic brands with a long tradition. This finding finds support in previous research, as the perception of foreign brands is better – especially those from developed countries (Li, Teng, Liao, & Lin, 2021) – and still some consumers, especially older, prefer the older brands they know for a long time (Hat & Smyczek, 2016).

Our study showed that many poles consider normative factors as reasons for paying attention to the COO. The interviewees indicated both factors related to consumer ethnocentrism – which among other things, results in preferences for domestic brands – and opinions on CSR, including respect for workers' rights in the country of origin. The emphasis on these factors is justified in light of consumer trends, i.e. the increasing number of ethnocentric people, sensitive to CSR aspects (Euromonitor, 2020).

Among the cognitive factors that make poles ignore the COO, the one particularly important is that many interviewees are increasingly aware of the fact that brand owners – also those from developed countries – locate production and supply sources in low-cost countries, which is a global trend reflected in the phenomenon of "hybrid products" (Nieroda *et al.*, 2018). This growing awareness makes some poles also mention the international unification of components/parts or production technologies, accompanied by the knowledge that manufacturers often use components/parts from the same suppliers. Moreover, consumers foreground another rational factor, i.e. product quality, as what matters to them more than the COO is knowledge about the product quality, along with the awareness that brand owners define and control quality requirements. This consumer rationality is reflected in the interviewees' conviction that the view about the lower quality of products manufactured in China is a stereotype. Such a conclusion is supported by other studies (Yunus & Rashid, 2016). Product price is an important criterion in consumer decisions and an equally important factor for ignoring the COO.

The study showed that customers ignore the COO to a lesser extent for affective reasons, with trust in the brand and its reputation being by far the most crucial factors. We found out that one may be guided by the fact that if a given product is publicly consumed, the brand can be the most important factor, not the COO. Indeed, many authors (Joe, Tsai, Lin, Ma, & Chiu, 2017) indicate that brand prestige is a factor strongly affecting consumer behavior.

This study contributes to the existing body of international marketing literature by developing a deeper insight into consumer behavior in terms of the COO, particularly with reference to the reasons for paying attention to versus ignoring the COO. Let us underline that due to the qualitative nature of the study, its results generalization would be unjustified (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). This applies also to other product categories due to differences in consumer behavior (Balabanis & Siamagka, 2017) and to other markets due to cultural differences in consumer behavior (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Moreover, according to our best knowledge, this study was the first qualitative one to also identify the factors that refer to CSR among the reasons for paying attention to the COO. The study supports the means-end theory by identifying three mechanisms (cognitive, affective, normative) responsible for shaping the COE. As a rare take from the consumer perspective, our study applied a qualitative approach to investigate the COO phenomenon in a more in-depth manner, which is methodologically enriching.

As for recommendations for managers, this study confirms the conclusions of the quantitative research by Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka (2019) on a representative sample of poles, which found that although the COO and brand are not the key criteria in the decisions of Polish consumers, the COO and its dimensions are sometimes considered secondary criteria. Thus, it is worth creating associations with the COBO – be it genuine or perceived – as consumers mainly associate the COO, including COBO, with the quality of products or brands originating from a country. We should also consider that what matters to consumers is their previous experience with the products or brands from a country, not to mention that a growing number of consumers agree the perception of some countries as originating low-quality products is a stereotype.

Therefore, it may be a good idea to first conduct consumer research including the above aspects, and then decide on whether or how to communicate the COO. Managers should consider the growing consumer awareness about the global supply chains' structure and the location of production of many well-known brands in low-cost countries. Moreover, managers should consider not hiding the stereotypically undesired "made in" information or COBO, instead focusing on the communication of repair time and similar values. What may also prove valuable is highlighting that regardless of the COO, a trusted brand owner defines quality requirements and guarantees quality. Notably, various CSR aspects like respect for workers' rights in a country can matter for consumers, so when shaping corporate strategies – including those related to cooperation with suppliers/manufacturers from emerging markets – managers should take these aspects into account.

A limitation of the study is that it was conducted on Polish citizens only. Therefore, the results should not be generalized to other countries, especially to those significantly different in terms of culture. Conducting a qualitative study on consumers from other countries – be it developed or emerging markets – will allow future scholars to identify a broader scope of reasons for paying attention to versus ignoring the COO. Although we also asked consumers about the context of other product categories, our interviews focused on the example of household appliances and consumer electronics. Thus, future studies should consider other product categories in search of common patterns or differences. Furthermore, other studies should also consider consumer ethnocentrism, for it may be one of the factors that influence the reasons for ignoring versus paying attention to the COO.

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Further reading

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