

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN IMAGE AND CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR IN NIGERIAN HYPERMARKETS

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0. Abstract

This study aims to examine the importance of country-of-origin image on consumers' buying behaviour in Nigerian hypermarkets. The study considers information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase decisions as factors of consumers' buying behaviour. The study applied structural equation modelling to draw the path analysis for the relationship being investigated. A total of 1272 responses were gathered through online survey. Findings from the study indicate that country of origin image has positive and significant influence on how consumers search for information about a product, evaluate products and decide on alternatives, make purchases and define their post-purchase behaviour. This suggests that Nigerian hypermarkets should be conscious of countries where their products are imported from, as importing from countries with positive image will likely enhance and sustain their performance.

Keywords: Buyer, Behaviour, Consumer, Country of Origin, Image, Product, Purchase

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1. Introduction

Studies focusing on the effect of Country-of-Origin (COO) on product perception have been part of international marketing research for decades, and there is a vast range of evidence that empirically supports COO as having an effect on the perception of consumers. Thus, it is without doubt that COO affects customers' product perception and their buying behavior (Mai, 2011; De Nisco et al., 2016). However, just like other factors that influence consumer buying behavior, the strength and valence of the influence that COO has on consumer buying behavior vary across

different product groups, and it is also dependent on the moderators and antecedents of the COO construct (Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2004). They include consumers' knowledge of the product and country as well as the person's extent of involvement in purchase decisions (Celsi and Olson, 1988; Fauser and Agola, 2021). Ultimately, all these factors determine the extent of positive attitude that consumers exhibit towards a country, and as such, the product's country of origin (Bänsch, 2002). Notwithstanding the popularity of the theory in academia and the large amount of research produced, it must be noted that past studies have predominantly focused on investigating country-of-origin image as a homogenous national construct (Profeta, 2006). However, recent studies have shown that regional differences and tendencies are present in the images of a country, and they can influence how people perceive products from such a country (Orth et al., 2005; Latusi et al., 2018).

Šapić et al. (2021) stated that the concept of "country of origin image" is one of the most famous concepts that researchers have looked into in the social sciences. This is a concept that developed following the decision of manufacturers to internationalize their business activities and offer their products in foreign markets, where it was required that they comply with certain legal requirements and indicate the country in which their products were either manufactured or assembled. For these markets, this information was just a way to identify the origin of a product. In any case, as time passed on, researchers of consumer behavior and marketers realized that country of origin image, which is the image that consumers hold about a country, was vital in their purchase decision-making when buying foreign products (Šapić et al., 2021). This is because consumers' knowledge of the country is a predictor of product quality, superiority, and acceptance. As a result, when forced to choose between various alternative foreign products, the image of the country in which these products are manufactured is likely to influence their perception and cause them to see products differently. In any case, one needs to understand that the way and form in which consumers will make use of the information about the country of origin of the product they want to purchase will significantly depend on numerous factors, like their experience with the product or any other product originating from the country, the type of product in question, and other factors. The influence can also be a product of positive or negative stereotypes about certain countries, which are passed on to the products emanating from such countries (Aichner, 2014).

Changes in the economic environment as brought about by globalization and the development of the internet have fully changed consumers' behavior. The implication is that in today's business world, consumers are faced with a vast supply and a significant increase in the number of brands available for them to choose from. To be precise, they might choose from numerous products that originated in different countries (Usunier, 2011). In the course of these decisions, they develop connotations about images of products, countries, and brands, and this will inevitably influence their perceptions and buying behavior. COO are referred to as the "made-in" image, which represents the country where the product was manufactured or assembled. It can also be explained through the tendencies of consumers to stereotype countries. For instance, products from France can be viewed as luxurious, while those from developing nations are generally perceived negatively (Cordell, 1992).

In cases where consumers hold a positive image of a country and its products, they are ready to purchase such products again because they avert the risk of making wrong choices by purchasing those from untested or untrusted countries. It has been shown in empirical studies

that consumers' attachment to products originating from a country that they have a positive attitude towards is a product of the positive perception they hold about the product feature, as products from certain countries are considered to be of high quality, attractively designed, and technologically advanced (Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008; Coudounaris, 2018; Karimov and El-Murad, 2019).

Business Day Intelligence (2014) conducted one of the earliest studies on the Nigerian retail sector, pointing out that organized retail has rapidly risen in Nigeria over the last two decades. This was supported by National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data, which showed that between 2001 and 2004, the wholesale and retail sectors saw 10 percent growth per annum. As of 2006, this sector contributed 16 percent of the country's GDP. By the first halves of 2011, 2012, and 2013, the contributions to the country's GDP were 15.58 percent, 17.05 percent, and 18.44 percent, respectively (Business Day Intelligence, 2014). Mwamba and Qutieshat (2021) pointed out that the Nigerian market had drawn the interest of multinational hypermarkets with the entrance of prominent players (such as Shoprite, Game Stores, Next, Spar, etc.), and the main attraction for these players is the country's population, which is projected to be 400 million by 2050. This would imply that Nigeria will overtake China and India as the third-most populous country. Thus, being such a significantly growing sector, it is imperative that studies assess its potency in different areas.

Notwithstanding the numerous studies that have been conducted in relation to the effect of country of origin images in the past decades, there are still a number of limitations in these studies. One of the major limitations is that past studies have been conducted mainly in specific geographical areas, with most of them being done in developed nations (Sharma, 2011), with their results normally generalized. Another issue is that they examine the effect of the country of origin image based on different product categories, and this makes it difficult to obtain a generalized view of product categories that are not immediately linked to a country of origin image (Tseng and Balabanis, 2011). In any case, only limited studies have focused on the Nigerian context, and none of the existing studies narrowed their focus to hypermarkets, a rapidly growing sector in Nigeria.

In order to address the above-mentioned gaps, it is deemed necessary to conduct research to understand the importance of country of origin image on consumers' buying behavior, not focused primarily on any special product category but looking at the general purchase of foreign products in Nigerian hypermarkets. In light of the foregoing, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of regional disparities in country image by examining how different components of regional image and their respective economies influence consumer behavior.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Country of Origin (Made-In)

One of the pioneers in the research area of country of origin effect is Nagashima (1970), and this scholar designed the country of origin image as the picture, the reputation, and the stereotype that consumers (both individual and corporate) attach to products from a given country. This image is said to be created by variables like national characteristics, representativeness of the products, history and tradition, and the economic and political

background of the country. It is the set of differential, informational, and descriptive beliefs that consumers hold about a particular country (Martin, 1993), and they influence their purchasing decisions for products from that country. It has also been defined as the influence on a buyer considering products or services from another country because existing stereotypes suggest that the country manufactures high-quality products or services (Suh et al., 2016). In essence, what it implies is that the country of origin image has substantially the same effect on consumers' evaluation of products as other factors (Katsumata and Song, 2015). From a general perspective, country of origin is a multidimensional category that affects consumers and forces them to form a perception of products they know can come from a given country, and this perception is further transferred to other products from the same country. Essentially, the information about the country of origin does offer consumers a summary of the construct of the actual product's features, and it is known to significantly influence the evaluation of products and overall behavior of consumers (Cilingir and Basfirinci, 2014).

By country of origin, what is implied is the place in the world where a product is either manufactured or assembled (Parkvithee and Miranda, 2012). In the global business of today, numerous products feature different parts that are produced in different countries, but these parts are still assembled in a particular country. Thus, manufacturers ensure that the final country where such products are assembled, which is considered the country of origin, is one that consumers across the world perceive as being of high quality, reliable, and technologically advanced. By so doing, these producers are able to take advantage of the effect of the image of the country of origin and the influence that it can have on the perception of customers as well as their decision-making process when buying a foreign product.

Generally, this image is sourced from the direct experience that the consumer has had (or has heard from people who have had the experience) with the country, both through travel or previous purchases and also through word of mouth, studies, readings, and so on (Gripsrud and Nes, 1996). In any case, the effect that country of origin has on consumer behavior does vary from country to country as a result of differences in economic, sociocultural, and other factors.

2.2. Characteristics of Country of Origin Image

In line with the multitude of empirical works that conceptualize country image and the effect of country of origin via varied viewpoints (e.g., Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Bergler, 2013; Buhmann, 2016), as a term, "image" can be fundamentally described as the character of an object (for instance, a country or a region) that individuals perceive, and it is based on an accumulation of organized associations in relation to the cognitive system of the individual perceiving such. Therefore, it features a construct of past and future assumptions about the attributes and characteristics of an object instead of a mere objective description of the object. It is important to state that this construct does not necessarily need to be clearly defined and differentiated, as it can actually feature specific opinions and memories about the said object, which more or less have a strong connection with each other. Therefore, the image can be coherent, although there might be ambiguities and contrasts present (Kelman, 1965). Essentially, the implication is that the focus will be on the cognitive component of an image (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999).

Also, it is important to highlight that images have affective components, which do not feature the evolution of assumed characteristics of an object that are founded on numerous interrelated

assumptions but do make valid emotional appeals about the object in question (Bergler, 2013). In a simpler expression, people are known to associate a country or region with positive or negative emotions, and this shapes how their individual judgments are formed. This is normally born out of the political or social dimensions of a country's image (Maheswaran and Chen, 2006).

On the same note, each individual is actually integrated into a social structure that has permanent members and in which these members maintain mutual contact (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). What this does is that this network of relationships creates a sense of community between these individuals, which ends up manifesting in their common goals, norms, and values (Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983). Considering that these individuals constantly strive to attain their expectations and behavioral norms of their social environment, the implication becomes that the image of the country can be negatively influenced when it conflicts with the values and norms that underlie that of the individual, and this will end up becoming the normative component of a country's image (Klein et al., 2004).

Although the general description of an image is one that features cognitive, affective, and normative elements, Kühn (1993) pointed out that the term "image" needs to be further differentiated between the live-in image and the made-in image. When it comes to the lived-in image, it describes the image of the country in terms of its socio-cultural elements and contains how the country is judged about its history and transactions, economic status, social culture, values, and norms, as well as its political organization (Buhmann, 2016). Thus, it mainly features the effective, normative, and cognitive aspects of the country's image that are not related to the specific product.

On the other hand, the made-in image does not describe the concept of a country in its socio-cultural area; instead, it describes it as the place of origin of economic goods and services, and as such, it sums up the product-related beliefs that people hold about the country of origin. The characteristics of "made-in image" were highlighted by Kühn (1993) to include characteristics of the country's product, characteristics of the country's expertise, image-shaping industries, and image-shaping companies.

2.3. Consumer Buying Behavior

Nowadays, interest in the importance of consumer behavior continues to grow in the field of marketing. In today's business environment, which features continuous and unpredictable changes, marketing has become an important part of any business or organization (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Sangroya and Nayak, 2017; Singh and Islam, 2017). The underlying essence is that it significantly contributes to the success of any organization by promoting business awareness and advancing the level of customer relationships (Verhoef, 2003). Thus, one would expect that companies with scrawny marketing strategies might find it difficult to accomplish their business objectives. Customers will always be central to the development of marketing strategies. The implication is that customers have a very vital role to play in the success of any given firm on the ground that they are the ones generating revenues for corporations through their purchases and utilizing and influencing others to utilize goods and services offered by the company (Khaniwale, 2015). Thus, the essence of understanding consumer buying behavior is to know the buying decisions that consumers make as well as the steps involved in reaching

such decisions. Thus, consumer behavior goes beyond the physical purchase of products to cover a wider range of activities, from the stage of creating awareness for the problem down to post-purchase behavior, and in between also covering idea formulation and other experiences geared towards satisfying the needs and desires of the consumer (Orji et al., 2017). Since it is the starting point of marketing strategy, any decision related to purchasing begins with assessing the available opportunity for any product or service in the market, with the central aim of studying both the market and the consumers (Kotler, 2010). In order to attain this primary objective, numerous scholars and marketers are assessing consumer buying behavior, as it is important to understand and investigate it, especially when one is making reference to third-world nations and developing nations like Nigeria (Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Lai, 2016; Sangroya and Nayak, 2017; Khanfir, 2017).

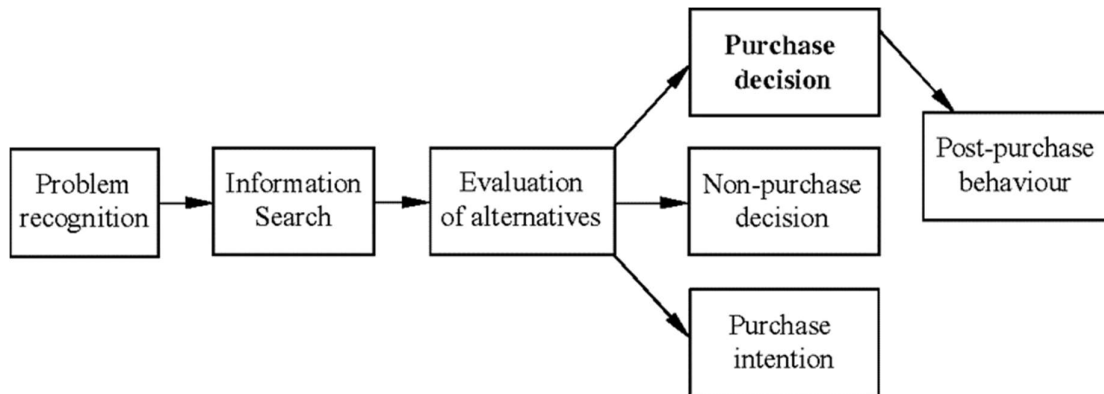
In the marketing context, consumers find it quite difficult to reach a decision because of the numerous options available to them. The term "consumer behavior" refers to the study of people's needs, thoughts, and motivation processes in choosing one product over another, as well as the patterns used in purchasing different products and services (Orji et al., 2017). There are numerous factors that play a crucial role in the process of consumers reaching their final decision. Thus, it is imperative that the marketing team has a clear understanding of these factors that influence consumers' purchasing processes and decisions (Khaniwale, 2015; Noel, 2017; Al-Salamin and Al-Hassan, 2016). The essence of such an approach is that it allows for better integration (following due considerations) of these factors into the marketing strategies and targets the consumers in a more pronounced way.

2.4. Steps in Consumer Buying Behavior

For every marketer, understanding the consumer buying decision process is pivotal. This is because the consumer buying decision process represents the steps in decision making that are initiated by the consumer in the course of purchasing goods or services (exchanging their money for the value tendered by the company), and this can come before, during, or after the said purchase. Its significance stems from the fact that it assists marketers in persuading consumers to purchase the products or services on offer. In the event that the marketer can successfully understand the steps consumers take in reaching a purchase decision, the implication is that they will be successful in selling the goods or services offered to the said consumers. As documented in Figure 1, there are five steps in the consumer's decision-making process: need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. Thus, it illustrates how a consumer initiates thoughts prior to the actual purchase of a given product. However, it is important to highlight the fact that a consumer can actually skip one or two steps in the course of purchase, as this all depends on the mind of the said consumer (Kotler, 2017). People have different mindsets, which is why a consumer purchasing a regular brand of milk when the need arises will likely skip information and evaluation as compared to a consumer purchasing high-involvement products that would want to access information and evaluate alternatives before reaching a purchase decision. Thus, it is all about the human nature of the consumer, because in the course of purchasing a car that has a high price, the consumer will likely not skip any steps in the decision-making process (Kotler, 2017). The decision-making process is known to function more in the case of new purchases or consumer purchases where the demand for involvement is

high. The focus of certain companies has been on understanding the consumer experience in learning, choosing, utilizing, and disposing of a product (Kotler and Keller, 2016), but this study will be narrowed down to the steps taken towards choosing a product or service as discussed below.

Figure 1: Steps in consumer buying behaviour



Source: Kotler and Keller (2016)

2.4.1. Need Recognition

The first step in the consumer buying decision process is need recognition, also known as problem recognition. This can actually be basic needs like shelter, air, water, or food, or it might be an extension of these basic needs (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Kotler, 2017). At this stage, what the marketers should do is understand the needs of the consumers and focus on satisfying them (Shma, 2012). This would be done by identifying the consumers' needs and creating marketing strategies targeted towards satisfying these needs (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Kotler, 2017). When a person is hungry, for example, food is a need, but this may be extended to a good food from a specific cuisine (for example, Nigerian jollof rice). As a result, the emphasis should not be on simply providing food to consumers, but on food that changes their tastes or desires.

2.4.2. Information Search

This is the second stage in consumer decision-making. When the consumer goes to purchase a product or service, the person will start recalling information about the said product or service. In the event that the consumer had a positive experience or had been exposed to someone who had a positive experience about the product or service, the person will likely not push for more information, as the purchase will be based on the trust created through the said experience. However, it is expected that consumers who have negative experiences with a product will likely seek out more information about the said product. This is also the case for new products, as consumers are known to search for information about a product when they want to try new ones (Clow and Baack, 2016). The consumer searches for information about a product through numerous sources. Personal sources (such as family and friends, acquaintances), commercial sources (such as salespersons, advertisements, dealers, social media, peer reviews, and so on), and experimental sources (such as evaluating and using the product) are among them (Kotler,

2017). For instance, when one wants to make the purchase of a smartphone, it is expected that the person will pay attention to advertisements related to smartphones, and the information can also come from friends or family as well as others that might have made use of the smartphone in question.

2.4.3. Evaluation of Alternatives

Once the consumer has accessed different types of information in relation to the product of choice, the person will enter the third stage, which is all about evaluating available alternatives. For instance, a consumer that desires to make the purchase of a car would collect information about a given car brand as well as evaluate other available options in the event that the particular car brand does not meet the consumer's choice, specifications, taste, or purchasing power (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Understanding the evaluation process has been described as difficult because the marketer does not entirely know what the consumer is going through or the factors that would influence their decision to choose one product over another.

2.4.4. Purchase decision

With the alternatives evaluated, the consumer will, at this stage, decide on a particular brand to purchase and actually make a purchase. Thus, it is the stage where the consumer has decided to buy a product, followed by the collection of information from numerous sources, the evaluation of the collected information, and the decision of where to purchase or what to purchase. Normally, the consumer will purchase the brand or product that scores the highest mark in the evaluation stage (Kotler and Keller, 2016), but one also needs to understand that the purchase decision might be influenced by environmental factors.

2.4.5. Post-purchase decision

An average marketer understands that the marketing role does not stop at the point of purchase. This is because it is imperative to understand the behavior or view of the consumer towards the product following use, as the extent of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction would primarily determine their repurchase and recommendation intentions (Kotler, 2017). In the event that the consumer is satisfied with the product, the chances of a repurchase increase, and the marketer can expect to retain such a consumer; additionally, the consumer can influence others to make purchases. On the long run, this increases the chances of the consumer being loyal to the brand, and loyalty would amount to sustainable performance for the company (Kotler, 2017).

2.5. Empirical Review

A number of studies have looked at the importance of country of origin image on consumers' buying behavior. One of the recent works done in relation to the effect of country of origin on consumers' buying behavior was conducted by Fauser and Agola (2021), and it focused on the influence of regional Italian images on consumer behavior in a study of consumers in Germany. The study was based on cross-sectional quantitative data gathered from 388 respondents and analyzed using multiple linear regression and paired t-tests. Findings from the study indicate that there are significant image differences, and they affect purchase probability. On the same note, country knowledge was found to negatively influence the predictive value of measured regional image for purchase probability.

Jumani and Sukhabot (2021) focused their study on identifying the importance of the Islamic brand attitude¹ and its effects on buying behavior among Malaysian Muslims. They began by pointing out that multinational corporations (MNCs) are investing in Malaysia with the central purpose of serving Malay Muslims by carrying the tagline "We are Islamic" for their products. Thus, the study aimed to understand the important aspect of Islamic branding among Malaysian Muslims and to highlight the Islamic branding aspect that motivates Malaysian consumers to buy imported Islamic products. The study was quantitative in nature, with data analyzed using SMART-PLS. Findings indicate that among Malaysian Muslims, the most important attitude is the Islamic brand's origin (country of origin), followed by the Islamic brand's customer segment and the Islamic brand's compliance. Thus, it implies that country of origin has a significant and positive influence on the buying behavior of Malaysian Muslims when it comes to Islamic brands.

Thøgersen and Pedersen (2021) concentrated their own research on the impact of an export country's environmental image on how consumers react to an imported environmentally friendly product. It was an online survey undertaken in Denmark, Germany, and France, with 500 respondents from each of these countries. Findings from the study reveal that consumers differentiate between a country's environmental image and its general and product-related images.

The environmental image of a country is pivotal in consumers' evaluation of an environmentally differentiated product from the said country. To be precise, the researchers found that a country's environmental image has a strong influence on its product-specific images and, through these, influences how consumers evaluate organic food products coming from such a country.

Thøgersen et al. (2021) investigated the influence of country image on consumers' evaluation of imported products based on a test of the hierarchical model in four countries. A quantitative study of consumers from Germany, France, China, and Thailand was conducted, with 1000 responses from each of these countries, and the assessment was on the level of country image regarding Denmark and the attitude of consumers towards buying organic food products from Denmark. The gathered data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Findings from the study indicate that the hierarchical country image model was a good fit for the data in two European countries but not in the two Asian countries. Thus, it appears that hierarchical relationships, as proposed by the model, require a high level of familiarity with and knowledge of the country and the product type.

Akbarov (2021) looked at consumer ethnocentrism and purchasing behavior as moderated by the demographic effect. The study involved 467 questionnaires gathered through convenience and snowball sampling, with the data analyzed using SPSS-24 and AMOS-23 software. Findings from the study indicate that consumer ethnocentrism has an effect on buying behavior, but the effects differ across product categories. Furthermore, marital status, gender, and personal income were found to moderate the relationship between these two variables.

By focusing on the facets of country ecological images, Dekhili et al. (2021) investigated the significance of geographic origin in the sustainability challenge. As a result of the exploratory nature of the study, the researchers adopted two qualitative techniques: semi-structured interviews

and focus groups. Findings indicate that the country's ecological image is composed of eight dimensions: technological, policy, economic, people characteristics, climate, natural, eco-product features, and historical. It was also found that geographical origin is relevant in achieving sustainability challenges.

Mahmoud et al. (2021) investigated consumer xenocentrism and foreign goods purchase intention in an emerging economy, as well as the role of cultural openness in mediating this relationship. 204 responses were gathered through web-based sampling techniques and analyzed using AMOS-21. Findings from this study suggest that aside from country of origin and interpersonal influence, all other constructs positively and significantly influence the intention of customers to purchase. On the same note, country of origin, self-confidence, and self-esteem were also found to have an impact on the intention of consumers to purchase foreign products, though their exposure to other cultures did not endear them to the products of those foreign markets.

Fazli-Salehi et al. (2021) aimed at investigating whether country affinity is applicable to domestic brands and also looking at the role of nation sentiment on the self-brand connection of consumers with domestic vs. foreign brands. It was an online survey conducted in the United States of America, with data analyzed using SEM. The study's findings revealed that for foreign brands, consumers' self-brand connection increased as a result of the effects of country affinity and product quality assessment. In the case of domestic brands, the self-brand connection of consumers was influenced by their ethnocentric (and not country affinity or product quality assessment) features.

Šapić et al. (2021) conducted a study with the goal of determining the impact of country of origin image on customer loyalty towards products from countries with a positive and recognizable image and also to assess whether the effect is attained through product features like quality, design, and attractiveness. It was a cross-sectional quantitative study, and 150 responses were gathered, with the gathered data analyzed using SPSS 20. According to the study's findings, the image of the country of origin is important to consumers and influences their decision to buy foreign products. To be precise, it was found in this study that country of origin images influence consumer behavior when they choose products based on their quality, design, and attractiveness, and they have a pronounced influence on the loyalty of customers towards a given brand.

Alonso Dos Santos et al. (2020) questioned whether a family member should communicate their family identity and country of origin in a cross-cultural study conducted in Chile and Spain. This was also a quantitative online survey, with the gathered data analyzed using SEM. Findings from the study indicate that communicating the identity of a family firm increases brand trust and purchase intention. Additionally, consumers were found to show a higher score on trust and purchase intention in cases where they were exposed to the national country of origin of a product.

Brucaj's (2020) focus was on Albanian consumers' perceptions of domestically produced goods by assessing the impact of country of origin and consumer ethnocentrism. In a cross-sectional quantitative study, the researcher examined 278 responses, and the results show that ethnocentrism is an important factor that affects the way Albanian consumers evaluate products and has an influence on their purchase intention. On the same note, it was also found that

country of origin has a significant impact on the evaluation of foreign products within the context of Albanian markets.

Bernard et al. (2020) focused their study on understanding an increasingly widespread practice consisting of a brand signaling the domestic origin of its products that are aimed at domestic customers. Simply put, the "made in the domestic country" (MIDC) strategy. Thus, the researchers focused on analyzing the MIDC label as a cue that interacts with brand characteristics (brand equity and country of origin of the product). To achieve this goal, they conducted a quantitative survey of 293 French customers on four different pasta brands. The findings of this study revealed that the presence of an MIDC label increased customers' intent to purchase a product, but not their willingness to pay for such a product. The positive effect of country of origin on consumer buying behavior was found to be greater when the product has less brand equity and consumers exhibit high ethnocentrism or are strongly attached to their national identity. Thus, it was validated in this study that adding the MIDC label to products is empirically justified as it has an effect on consumers' purchasing decisions.

Potluri and Johnson (2020) conducted exploratory research on country-of-origin and its impact on UAE consumers' buying decisions. The researchers gathered 370 responses, and their findings indicated that the country of origin of a product influences consumers' buying decisions for both products and services. However, it was also found that demographic factors did not have any influence on the buying behavior of consumers.

The work of Merabet (2020) was focused on the effect of country of origin image on purchase intention through two mediating variables (perceived quality and perceived price). The study gathered 120 responses, and the findings revealed that country of origin image has a positive influence on perceived quality and perceived price. It was also found that perceived price mediates the relationship between country of origin and consumers' purchase intentions.

Yunus and Rashid (2016) focused their study on investigating the determinant factors of country of origin that Malaysian consumers consider when purchasing mobile phone brands originating from China. In a cross-sectional quantitative study, the scholars obtained and analyzed 200 responses, and the analysis shows that all the pre-determined variables were significant and highly correlated in influencing consumer purchase intention towards mobile brands from China.

Essentially, it was found that country of origin had a significant and positive influence on Malaysian consumers' purchase decisions in the mobile sector.

2.6. Hypothesis and Conceptual framework

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

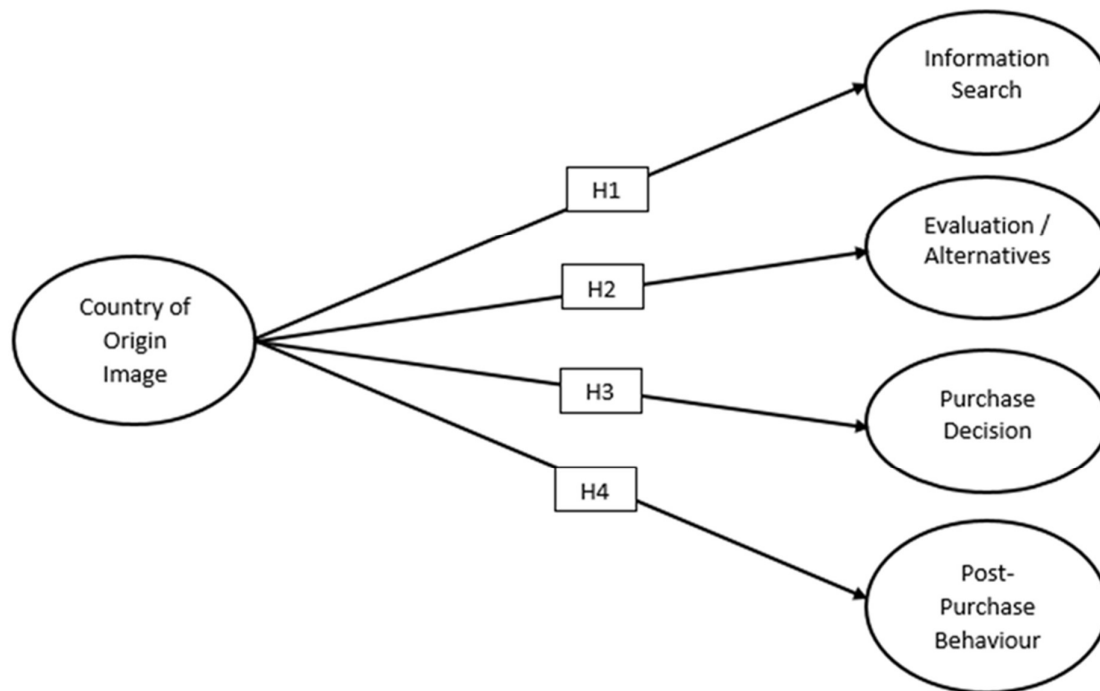


Figure (2) illustrates the conceptual model, where country of origin image is the independent variable and the dependent variables are: information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase decision. Thus, this study mainly aims to assess whether then independent variable influences the dependent variables.

The empirical review showed that numerous studies have been conducted in relation to the relationship between country of origin image and consumers' buying behavior. These studies stretch across different continents of the world, and most of their findings point to the fact that country of origin image has a positive and significant influence on the buying behavior of consumers. The work of Jumani and Sukhabot (2021) in Malaysia showed that country of origin image has a positive and significant influence on Malaysian Muslims' decisions to purchase imported halal brands. Thøgersen and Pedersen (2021) conducted a cross-national study in Germany, Denmark, and France and found that country of origin image has a strong positive influence on product-specific features, and this influence determines consumers' evaluation of organic food products coming from foreign nations. Akbarov (2021) further validated these findings by revealing that consumer ethnocentrism, as determined by a product's country of origin, has a positive and significant influence on the buying behavior of consumers. Other studies (such as Dekhili et al., 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Šapić et al., 2021) also affirm the fact that country of origin yields a positive and significant influence on the buying behavior of consumers toward foreign brands.

However, some have discovered a negative influence. For instance, the study in Germany by Fauser and Agola (2021) showed that country of origin knowledge had a negative influence on the predictive value measured across regional images for the probability of purchasing a product.

Some also found mixed results, as is the case of Thøgersen et al. (2021) in a cross-national study of Germany, China, France, and Thailand. It was found that the country of origin image

(as measured through the hierarchical country image model) has positive and significant influence in the European nations, but no influence was recorded in the Asian nations.

Essentially, country of origin effect is the independent variable, while the dependent variables are: information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (loyalty). In view of the above discussions, the following hypothesis are adopted for this study.

H1: Country of origin image is not significantly important in consumers' search for information when buying from Nigerian hypermarkets.

H2: Country of origin image does not significantly influence consumers' evaluation of alternative brands when buying from Nigerian hypermarkets.

H3: Country of origin image does not significantly influence consumers' purchase decision when buying from Nigerian hypermarkets.

H4: Country of origin image is not significantly important in consumers' post-purchase decision when buying from Nigerian hypermarkets.

3. Research Method

A cross-sectional research design was employed in this study. The study was conducted in Nigeria via an online survey. The researcher targeted responses from all over the country. The survey was hosted on Google Forms, included an IP blocker to ensure that only Nigerian IP addresses can access and participate in the study. The essence of this is to reduce the overall bias that comes with people outside Nigeria participating in the study. Finally, once hosted, the survey was promoted through numerous social media and online platforms to gather more responses. A structured questionnaire was used to gather responses. In consumer research, the questionnaire is one of the main instruments for gathering data, and it comes with different items that are available to the respondents in written form, and it is expected that the individuals respond in writing. Essentially, the respondents were given a list of written items from which they would choose the option that best represented their views. For this study, the questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first section gathered data about variables considered in this study, while the second section gathered data about consumers' demographics. For the second section, the data were mainly dichotomous, while the data from the second section were based on Likert's rating scale, where respondents had to choose between 1 and 5. In this case, 1 represents "Totally Disagree," 2 represents "Disagree," 3 is "Neutrality of view," 4 represents "Agree," and 5 shows that respondents "Totally Agree" with the questions raised. Cochran (1977) emphasized the importance of making references to previous related studies when defining the basis of appropriateness of sample size, stating that it ensures conformity with existing standards and this study applied this approach for content-validity. A total of 1271 responses were gathered and the question was developed based on past related empirical works as documented in Table 1. Gathered data were analyzed using AMOS-SEM software as documented in the results section. The original data can be accessed via Kaggle (<https://doi.org/10.34740/KAGGLE/DSV/4972216>).

Table 1. Battery of measurement items and sources

Latent construct	Number of items	Source(s) of scale
Country of Origin Image	• 8	Fazli-Salehi et al. (2021) and Sapić et al. (2021)
Consumer Behaviour:		
• Information search	• 3	Dekhili et al. (2021) and Mahmoud et al. (2021)
• Evaluation of alternatives	• 3	
• Purchase decision	• 3	
• Loyalty (post-purchase behaviour)	• 3	

4. Results

4.1. Data visualization

A total of 1272 valid responses were gathered in this study (see Table 2). This represents 100% valid responses. The reason for this figure is that the survey was conducted online, and it has a "do not submit" function for any incomplete questionnaire. As a result, before respondents could submit their questionnaire, they had to answer all of the questions. Otherwise, the system will not allow submission. Essentially, only completed questionnaires could be submitted, and there was no incomplete questionnaire. The response rate is similar to the work of Thøgersen et al. (2021), which gathered 4,000 responses from four countries (1,000 responses from each of the countries surveyed).

Table 2. Distribution and Return of Questionnaire

Category of respondents	No of copies of questionnaire distributed	No of usable copies of questionnaires returned	Number of loss and invalid copies d of questionnaires	% returne	% lost
Customer of hypermarkets in Nigeria	Unlimited (Online survey)	1271	0	100	0

Analysis of the demographic variables (as contained in Table 3) shows that the majority of the respondents are males (64.2%), followed by their female counterparts (34.8%). In terms of age, most of them are aged 31–40 years (44%), followed by those aged above 50 years (21.1%), 20–30 years (19.8%), 41–50 years (12.6%), and finally below 20 years (2.5%). According to their ethnicity, the majority of respondents are Igbo (49%), followed by the Middle Belt (22.2%), Yoruba (13.5%), Others (9%), and Hausa/Fulani (6.3%). To be able to offer informed responses, it's imperative that the respondents have had personal experience with a hypermarket. Thus, they were asked whether they had ever shopped in a hypermarket before, and the majority (95.6%) said "yes" while the remaining (4.4%) said "no." Thus, the majority of the respondents have shopped

in a hypermarket before and are a good fit for participation in this study. They were also asked how often they shop in a hypermarket, and the majority answered "at least once per month" (35.2%), followed by "seldom" (27.4%), "at least once per week" (19.2%), "at least once per year" (14.8%), and "never" (3.5%). Finally, they were asked whether they preferred buying products from a certain country, and the majority of the respondents echoed "yes" (62.6%), while the remaining respondents said "no" (37.4%). Essentially, the implication of the analysis is that Nigeria is well represented in the responses gathered, irrespective of ethnicity or geographic sphere, and the findings can be applied across Nigeria.

Table 3. Demographic Variables

		Frequency	Percent %	Cumulative percent %
Gender	Male	816	64.2	64.2
	Female	456	35.8	100
Age	Below 20 years old	32	2.5	2.5
	20-30 years old	252	19.8	22.3
	31-40 years old	560	44.0	66.4
	41-50 years old	160	12.6	78.9
	Above 50 years old	268	21.1	100.0
Ethnicity	Hausa/Fulani	80	.6.3	.6.3
	Igbo	624	49.0	55.3
	Yoruba	172	13.5	68.8
	Middle-Belt	282	22.2	91
	Others	114	9.0	100.0
Have you ever shopped in a hypermarket before?	Yes	1216	95.6	95.6
	No	56	4.4	100.0
How often do you shop in hypermarkets?	Never	44	3.5	3.5
	Seldom	348	27.4	30.8
	At least once per year	188	14.8	45.6
	At least once per month	448	35.2	80.8
	At least once per week	244	19.2	100.0
Do you prefer buying products from a certain country (like Italian Wines), because the country is known for manufacturing such product?	Yes	796	62.6	62.6
	No	476	37.4	100.0

4.2. Assessment of Measurement Model

As stated earlier in the methodology, the researcher assessed both the reliability and validity of the data prior to conducting the structural model assessment. By reliability, what is implied is the scale used to consistently represent the measured construct (Leong et al., 2011). Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, Squared Shared Variance (ASV), factor loadings, Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) tests were used to test the convergent validity for this study. This is documented in Table 4.10, and it can be seen

from the said table that both Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha returned values greater than 0.7, which shows that all the constructs adopted for this study have good reliability (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Furthermore, the AVE value was greater than 0.5, indicating that the gathered data had convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2016; Hulland, 1999). According to Wang and Shah (2023), both the ASV and MSV values should be lower than the AVE in order to be considered valid. From Table 4, it can be seen that all values for the ASV and MSV are below those of the AVE. Thus, the convergent validity is valid.

Table 4: Convergent Validity

	Factor loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE	ASV	MSV
COI8	0.744	0.93	0.91	0.58	0.41	0.50
COI7	0.768					
COI6	0.758					
COI5	0.701					
COI4	0.808					
COI3	0.803					
COI2	0.717					
COI1	0.788					
IS1	0.835	0.92	0.88	0.71	0.66	0.53
IS2	0.817					
IS3	0.884					
EOA1	0.887					
EOA2	0.957	0.91	0.91	0.77	0.73	0.64
EOA3	0.79					
PD1	0.643					
PD2	0.692	0.84	0.756	0.51	0.47	0.46
PD3	0.799					
PP1	0.804	0.81	0.76	0.51	0.50	0.43
PP2	0.675					
PP3	0.675					

Going further, the researcher assessed the discriminant validity with the conventional approach that was proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and cross-loading. It was suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) that the square roots of the AVEs obtained for each of the constructs should be greater than the correlation value established among other constructs for discriminant validity to be established with the data. This is the case as documented in Table 5, as the first value is bigger than the rest of the values in the same column. Hence, discriminant validity is obtained for the loaded data.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity -Fornell and Larcker criterion results

	COI	IS	EOA	PD	PPD
COI	0.761577				
IS	0.745	0.842615			
EOA	0.617	0.551	0.877496		
PD	0.58	0.801	0.552	0.714143	
PPD	0.544	0.868	0.648	0.665	0.714143

The goodness of fit was also tested. For this purpose, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA were used. To be considered a good fit, the standard values for TLI and CFI must be greater than 0.90, and that

is the case for this study. For RMSEA, the standard value should be lower than 0.10, and that is also the case for this study as documented in Table 6. Thus, based on the findings from the table 6, it is concluded that the model is a good fit.

Table 6: Model Goodness of Fit

Selected indices	Result	Acceptable level of fit
TLI	0.903	TLI > 0.90
CFI	0.901	CFI > 0.90
RMSEA	0.003	RMSEA < 0.05 good; 0.05 to 0.10 acceptable

In view of the above discussions, the data gathered in this study can be moved for further analysis. This is based on the fact that it has valid convergent and discriminant validity, and the model is a good fit. Thus, further analysis in relation to the stated hypothesis is presented and discussed below.

4.3. Test of hypothesis

Figure 3 and Table 7 document the path analysis for latent variables. Figure 3 shows that country of origin has a positive relationship with information search (0.83), evaluation of alternatives (0.56), purchase decision (0.66), and post purchase decision (0.81). Going further, the beta and significant values in Table 7 show that this relationship is statistically significant (<0.001). This rejects hypotheses 1–4 in the null forms.

Figure 3: Path analysis

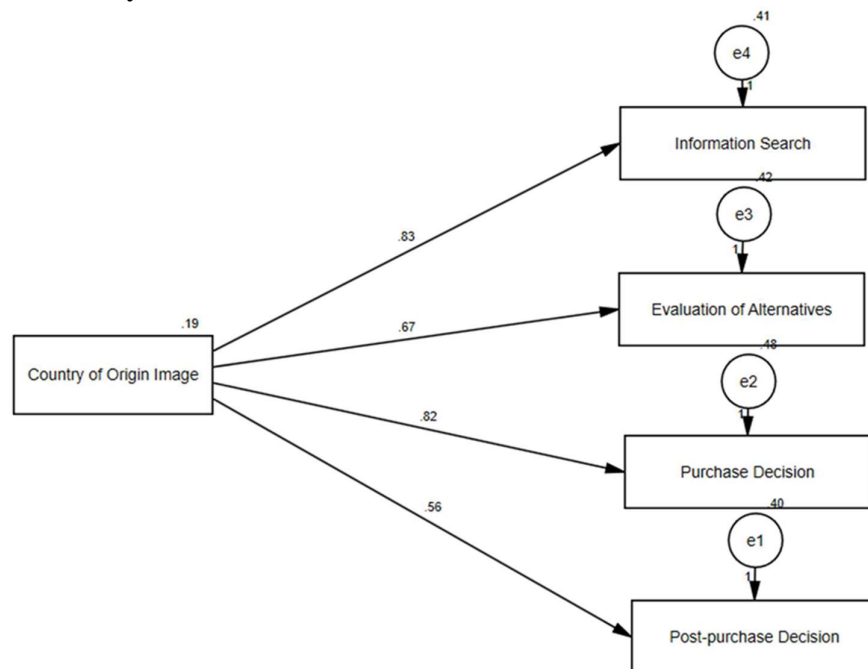


Table 7: Path analysis

Relationships			Estimate	Beta	S.E.	C.R.	P
IS	<---	COI	.831	.495	.041	20.322	0.000
PPD	<---	COI	.564	.366	.040	14.019	0.000
EOA	<---	COI	.668	.412	.041	16.139	0.000
PD	<---	COI	.816	.459	.044	18.425	0.000

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion of Findings

The analysis started with data visualization, and it was shown that the distributed questionnaires returned a 100% response rate. This was possible because the online questionnaire was coded in such a way that respondents could only submit if they had answered all questions. Therefore, all the submitted questionnaires were completed prior to submission, which led to a 100% response rate.

Findings from the demographic analysis show that the majority of the respondents were male (64.2%), aged 31–40 years old (44%), Igbos (49%), had shopped in a Nigerian hypermarket before (95.6%), shop at a Nigerian hypermarket at least once per month (35.2%), and preferred buying products from a specific country (62.6%). Therefore, the demographic analysis revealed that the respondents are a good fit, as they are well positioned to address the questions raised in the study.

Prior to the data analysis, convergent reliability and discriminant validity tests were conducted. The convergent validity revealed Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.7, showing that the adopted constructs are reliable. Going further, the AVE values for all the constructs were found to be above the minimum threshold of 0.50, and both the ASV and MSV values were below the AVE, further indicating convergent validity. For the discriminant validity, it was found that the square root of the AVEs obtained for each of the constructs is greater than the correlation value established among the constructs, and this shows the existence of discriminant validity. Extra effort was put towards assessing the reliability and validity of the data, with the researcher assessing the data's goodness of fit. Findings from the goodness of fit analysis show that the TLI and CFI were both above the 0.90 value, while the RMSEA was below 0.10, further indicating that the model is a good fit for further analysis.

With the reliability, validity, and goodness of fit established, the next step was to test the hypothesis. The first analysis focused on the direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables to test the hypotheses (H1-H4). Findings indicate that country of origin image has a positive influence on information search (0.83), evaluation of alternatives (0.56), purchase decision (0.66), and post-purchase decision (0.81). Thus, rejecting hypotheses 1-4 in their null forms and supporting the view that country of origin image influences consumers' decision-making process while shopping in Nigerian hypermarkets. This is similar to extant

studies (e.g., Fauser and Agola, 2021; Jumaní and Sukhabot, 2021; Thøgersen and Pedersen, 2021; Thøgersen et al., 2021; Akbarov, 2021; Dekhili et al., 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021; Šapić et al., 2021) where it has been reported that country of origin image influences consumers' purchase decisions. Therefore, it is concluded that country of origin image positively and significantly influence consumers' buying behavior in Nigerian hypermarkets.

5.2. Managerial and Policy Implications

The findings of this study are particularly relevant to the management of hypermarkets around the world, and particularly in Nigeria. This is because it has been demonstrated that when searching for information about a product, evaluating their purchase decisions, choosing a product, and repurchasing, consumers consider the image of the country where the product is coming from. Thus, hypermarkets should ensure that they import more from countries with a positive image, as this will likely enhance their competitiveness and performance through increased sales.

The findings can also inform policies in relation to international trade agreements. The Nigerian government should focus more on boosting trade with countries that have a positive image, as this will increase the overall economic performance of the country. This is because higher sales in the hypermarket sector, due to better trade relations with countries that have a positive brand image, will increase tax revenues and other sources of funding for the government.

5.3. Limitations

Notwithstanding certain limitations, the value of this research should not be undermined. The first limitation is that since this study was based on self-report measures for all the key variables, this increases the possibility of common method bias. However, to overcome this drawback, the scales used were previously validated ones. Secondary, while there are numerous factors that influence consumers' buying behavior, this study focused on only the country of origin image, which makes it difficult to compare this factor with other factors. In any case, focusing on one independent variable allowed for a more concise analysis and development of findings that could be applied within a given scope. Finally, hypermarkets feature vast categories of products, and this study was not narrowed to any specific product category. This makes it difficult to specify which product category yielded the most influence or the product category where the findings can be best applied. The absence of focus on a given product category is also important, as it allowed for a general view of the context of the study while laying the foundation for other related studies.

5.4. Direction for Further Related Studies

Based on the limitations, it is recommended that future related studies should consider moderating and mediating factors that might interfere with the relationship between country of origin image and consumer buying behavior as discovered in this study. Other independent factors should also be considered in terms of their influence on consumer purchasing behavior in hypermarkets, allowing for comparative analysis. Finally, it is important to narrow future studies to a particular

product segment, as this would ensure that findings can easily be applied to a particular product segment.

5.5. Conclusion

It is concluded in this study that the image of the country of origin influences consumers' buying behavior in Nigerian hypermarkets. Hypermarket managers are encouraged to always assess the image of the countries they import products from and focus their imputation on countries with a positive image, as this will help them create sustainable performance through increased purchase and repurchase intentions from the consumers.

6. Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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