



Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

Where Did This Purchase Come From? Effect of Purchase Type on Preference for Country-Of-Origin Label

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ABSTRACT

Global marketing has seen immense growth in the past few decades with technology driving most of the advancements. This has given consumers many choices and country-of-origin (COO) has become an important criterion in the decisions they make. However, prior work has not examined how the importance of country-of-origin may differ based on the type of purchase (experiential vs. material) that consumers make. To address this gap, this research explores the effect of purchase type on COO decisions. The results of three studies show that when making material purchases compared to experiential purchases, consumers have a higher emphasis on COO, thereby displaying a higher relative preference for stronger COO option. The effect is driven by identity signaling motives. This research has both theoretical and practical implications.

INTRODUCTION

In today's ever-changing global business arena, it is nearly impossible to name a company that does not participate in some sort of international business practice. With this rapid emergence of markets, product origin is beginning to play a more important role in consumer purchasing decisions. For instance, when shopping for perfume (if equally priced), the likelihood for an individual to purchase a bottle crafted in France is higher compared to a bottle made in China. This is simply because France is known for the high quality of perfume produced in their country. The list of similar examples is lengthy and can range anywhere from Swiss watches to Italian fashion items, to German vehicles, etc. This comes in a time where consumers are already needing to make tradeoffs between experiential purchases (e.g., a vacation) and material purchases (e.g., a new backpack) (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Even though country-of-origin and purchase type have gained much attention in both international business and marketing literature (Zhang, 1997; Roth & Romeo, 1992), these two phenomena have not been studied together. In this research, I examine the effect of purchase type (experiential vs. material) on country-of-origin (COO).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchase Type

Experiential purchases have become increasingly popular among consumers (Bronner & De Hoog, 2018). The advantage of spending and consuming experiential purchases over material purchases has been studied academically over the past few decades, the key finding being that experiential purchases have hedonic advantage (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Gilovich and Van Boven (2003) were the first researchers who introduced and differentiated these two types of purchases. The main difference between the two products is the intention behind the purchase. They defined, experiential purchases as those made with the primary intention of gaining a life experience: an event or succession of events that an individual lives through. Material purchases were classified as those made with the primary intention of acquiring a tangible item: a good that is kept in one's ownership.

When asked to think about material purchases, the most common examples participants recalled are electronics, clothing, and jewelry (Gilovich & Van Boven, 2003). As for experiential purchases, the most widespread answers are going on vacation, eating out, or visiting amusement parks.

Even with set definitions, there still are certain hardships when classifying specific purchases (e.g., bottles of wine and cars). However, there are studies that suggest that the distinction between experiential and material purchases do resonate with people in everyday life (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The researchers of this study discovered that there is "very little overlap" between the way respondents describe the two purchase descriptions. Such a distinction is essential to this field and therefore there are other studies that confirm that people can easily recognize and classify their purchases as either material items or experiential products (Guevarra, 2015). At the end of the day, it is for a consumer to decide what his or her purchase is meant to be.

There are some purchases that can be perceived as both experiential and material. Carter and Gilovich (2010) conducted a study focused on the purchase of a 3-D television. Participants were asked to think about the TV for its material elements or its experiential elements. They found that framing the same product as different purchase types can elicit different effects.

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Furthermore, Carter and Gilovich (2012) discuss how an individual might buy a stereo system for two varied reasons. The first, to satisfy a well-honed ear, which would not be considered a material purchase. In contrast, the second purchase intention could be to outdo one's friends, which would fall in the material category.

Most of the literature revolving around experiential and material purchases focuses on happiness gained by these acquisitions. The key finding is experiential purchases provide more happiness than material purchases (Gilovich & Van Boven, 2003). The literature further explores why this pattern holds true. Some of the top reasons are, experiential purchases are closer to self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), when making experiential purchases the comparisons made are less comparative (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), experiential purchases generate less regret of action (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), and provides story utility (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015).

Country-Of-Origin

Globalization is on the rise across many factors of life. The business world is no exception to this trend. With this rapid emergence of markets, there has been an expansion in the research of country-of-origin (COO) in both international business and marketing literature (Zhang, 1997). It is clear that COO does influence consumers' product evaluations and purchase decisions (Peterson et al., 1955). COO is defined as the overall perception consumers form of products from a specific country, based on any prior perceptions of both the nation's production and marketing strengths and weaknesses (Roth & Romeo, 1992).

For many years, studies on COO effects have tried to identify any process that may help to explain how COO influences product evaluation. Some bodies of literature categorize the influence of COO as "either 'home country bias' or 'foreign country bias'" (Chowdhury & Ahmed, 2009). 'Home country bias' is an ethnocentric viewpoint that happens when consumers prefer products to be made in their own country compared to the identical product made elsewhere. In comparison, 'foreign country bias' exists when differential differences are expressed for products made in various foreign countries.

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When consumers are faced with evaluating products, one of largest branding elements to consider is where the product was made (Kumara & Canhua, 2010). These country-of-origin cues on consumer decision making alter marketing decisions (Johnson et al., 2016). Given the high level of connectivity in the business world, it is no surprise that consumers are beginning to focus on where their products come from. As a result, it is common to find that depending on the product, consumers have stronger preferences for certain countries. For instance, since Germany is well recognized for its automobile industry and Belgium is notorious for its splendid chocolates, relative preference for strong COO labels begins to surface. It is because of the country cues that brands have begun to emphasize these strong COO connotations to their advantage.

Regardless of the direction of the influence of COO, there is practical evidence suggesting that COO is an important factor in international marketing strategies. This could not be timelier considering the abundance of companies who need to market their products across the globe. To be successful, those companies should not have a single marketing formula because that will often neglect cultural differences, which could lead to a Public Relations disaster. Utilizing COO in a marketing strategy can be beneficial when nations have a positive perception; however, when products are made in developing nations, they typically suffer from negative COO effect (Bandyopadhyay & Banerjee, 2003). For this reason, companies should use their COO as a strategic tool when marketing their products or services.

There is plenty of evidence indicating that specific variables moderate and alter the effect that COO has with people. For instance, distaste towards foreign products was found to be more likely in individuals that are less educated and more politically conservative (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972). Furthermore, consumer gender (Johansson et al., 1985), consumer age, and occupational group categories (Shimp & Subhash, 1987) had different outlooks on country-of-origin when purchasing foreign goods. It also has been identified that “there are nationality biases in determining the overall product value” (Hung, 1989). This is a notable effect that can be identified from country to country and even different groups of individuals in each country (Poon et al., 2010).

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As a result of the business world being more connected than it has ever been before, the meaning of the “made in” label is increasing in its importance. Different models have been created to measure countries and how they rank against each other. For instance, in 2017, Statista developed the “Made-In-Country-Index” to evaluate 49 countries (Biagi, 2017). Their work encompassed a total of 43,034 consumers worldwide who represented 90 percent of the global population. Their results indicate that regions that are seen as “strong” are Germany, Switzerland, and the European Union. In contrast, they note countries that are projected to have “weak” country-of-origin, Argentina, India, and China. The notion of strong and weak regions plays a crucial role on country-of-origin research.

Further literature explains how it is now widely accepted that COO research needs to be extended to consider how many products are no longer made in one single country (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). This relates to the trend of having goods that are designed in one country and manufactured in another (Han & Terpstra, 1988). A classic example of this are Apple products. Most of their products are designed in California and then assembled in China or other Asian countries. This is a newer phenomenon happening across the globe because of the rise in outsourcing for cheaper labor.

In published literature, there are three types of studies revolving around COO: studies dealing with consumers' perceptions about various countries, studies examining the impact of country image on consumers' product evaluations and purchases, and studies investigating partitioned COO on consumers' product evaluations (Chowdhury & Ahmed, 2009). While marketing literature has acknowledged the importance of country-of-origin on purchasing decisions, the connection between COO and type of purchase has received little attention. To address this research gap, I examine whether there is any effect of purchase type (experiential vs. material) on country-of-origin.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

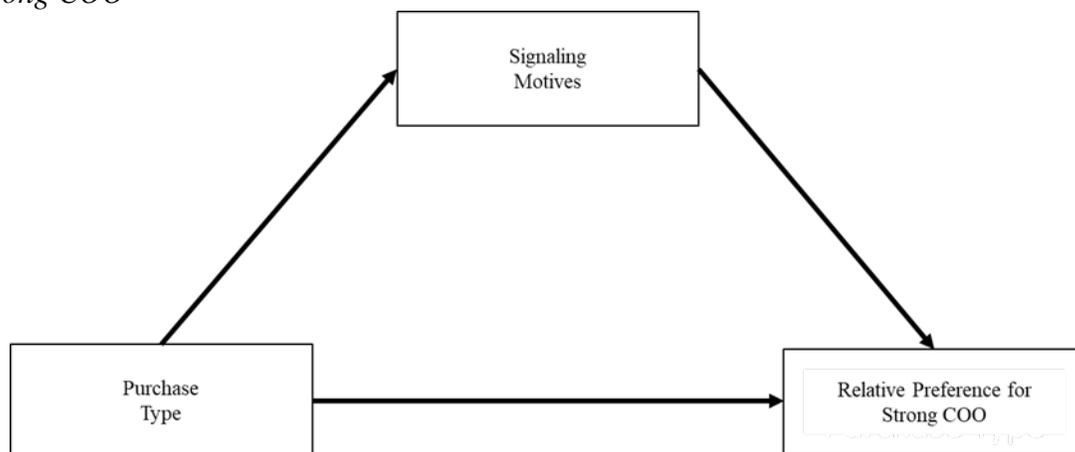
I propose that the two topics: purchase type and country-of-origin are connected by identity signaling. Possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of the identity of an individual (Belk, 1988). Material purchases are those made to obtain a possession, or a tangible item

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compared to experiential purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Such purchases have a better signaling quality due to its uniformity and comparability opposed to the experiential purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). When an individual makes a material purchase, that item then becomes part of themselves and helps them to signal identity. Similarly, products that come from countries that have strong COO cues signal status for the consumer (Huber & McCann 1982). Therefore, I argue that when making material purchases compared to experiential purchases, identity signaling motives come to the forefront (*Figure 1*). Given the capability of the strong COO product fulfilling the same motive, consumers will have higher purchase intentions for strong COO options for material purchases compared to experiential purchases.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Mediating Role of Signaling Motives for Relative Preference for Strong COO



H1: Consumers will display higher relative preference towards strong country-of-origin label for material purchases than for experiential purchases.

H2: The effect between purchase type and relative preference towards strong country-of-origin label is driven by signaling motives.

I conducted three studies testing my hypothesis. In studies 1 and 2, I test Hypothesis 1. Next, in Study 3, I test my Hypothesis 2. In all three studies, I applied the purchase framing technique that is frequently used in experiential and material literature (Carter & Gilovich,

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2010; 2012; Urumutta Hewage & He, 2022). I also incorporated a different product in each study to increase the generalizability.

STUDY 1: BOTTLE OF WINE

Method

In this study, I tested the role of material versus experiential purchases in the trade-offs between country-of-origin purchase decisions (strong vs. weak COO). I applied purchase framing, a technique that was used in prior studies (Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). A bottle of wine was framed as experiential and material (Urumutta Hewage & He, 2022). One hundred and one participants ($M_{age} = 41.37$, females 37.6%) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participated in the study for a nominal fee. Participants in the experiential condition thought about drinking the wine and sniffing the wine, while in the material condition they thought about how wine will fit into their wine collection and the prominent place it will assume in the wine collection.

Next, I assessed the dependent variable. Consumer choice has been captured in numerous ways in the consumer decision making literature (Kamakura et al., 1996). For example, binary choice is one way of measuring where participants are asked to choose from two options (Carson, 1994). Another way to capture choice is asking participants to make tradeoffs. For example, giving two options and asking the participants to make tradeoffs and indicate their relative preference (Tversky et al., 1988). In my research, I used the latter, where I examined tradeoffs which led to relative preference for stronger COO.

Respondents were presented with two options: South African wine (weaker COO option) and French wine (stronger COO option). South Africa and France were chosen as the countries for this study because France is often associated with its large wine industry (Wine Producing Countries, 2022). The same fact applies to South Africa; however, their industry is not as known to the general consumer. I also wanted to keep the two options more comparable. Next, participants were asked which wine they would choose on a 7-point unnumbered scale (1 = Most likely to choose South African wine/7 = Most likely to choose French wine). Then, I asked participants to complete the manipulation check for purchase framing using the

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purchase definition of Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). They were asked “To what extent do you think the wine bottle that you imagined at the beginning of the survey is: (1 = Completely experiential/5 = Completely material)”. Then, I administered the manipulation check for country-of-origin. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with two statements: “South Africa is known for wines” and “France is known for wines” (1 = Strongly disagree/5 = Strongly agree). Lastly, participants indicated their age and gender.

Results and Discussion

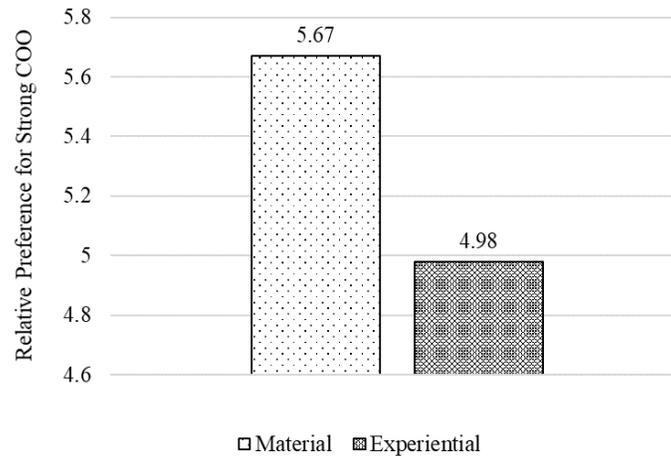
First, I analyzed the manipulation check for purchase type. I found that manipulation was a success, where participants in the material condition perceived the wine to be more material ($M_{\text{material}} = 3.12$) compared to participants in the experiential condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 2.40$, $F(1,99) = 7.88$, $p < .01$). Next, I conducted a manipulation check for country-of-origin using one sample t-test, in which the mid-point was 3 in the scale. I found that France was perceived as a strong COO for wine ($M = 4.69$ $t(101) = 28.56$ $p < .001$). South Africa ($M = 2.14$ $t(101) = -7.97$) $p < .001$) was perceived to be a weak COO for wine.

To test whether purchase type affected relative preference towards the option with strong COO, I conducted an independent samples t-test, which I compared the means of experiential and material groups. I used the purchase type as the independent variable and relative preference for strong COO as the dependent variable. I observed that participants in the material condition had a higher likelihood to choose French wine ($M_{\text{material}} = 5.67$) compared to participants in the experiential condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 4.98$, $F(1,99) = 4.12$, $p < .05$) (Figure 2).

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Figure 2

*Purchase Type and the Relative Preference for Strong COO - Wine
(Study 1)*



This study supports Hypothesis 1 as consumers had higher relative preference for strong country-of-origin when making a material purchase than when making an experiential purchase. In this study, I manipulated the purchase type by framing the same item, a bottle of wine, as either an experiential or material product. To further ensure that the observed effect remains in place for a wide range of stimuli, I conducted Study 2.

STUDY 2: WATCH

Method

To confirm that this effect would be seen with an additional product, I conducted a second study. Identical to Study 1, I again tested Hypothesis 1. One hundred and two MTurkers ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.65$, females 52.9%) participated in this experiment, where a unisex watch was framed for both purchase types. Participants in the experiential condition imagined how they would feel wearing the watch, how they would use it, and how it would go with their daily activities. In the material condition participants imagined the aesthetics of the watch, how reliable and durable it will be, and how it would fit with their other accessories.

Next, participants were presented with two options: English watch (weak COO option) and Swiss watch (strong COO option). England was chosen as the weak COO option because the country is comparable to Switzerland in terms of watch production, general country

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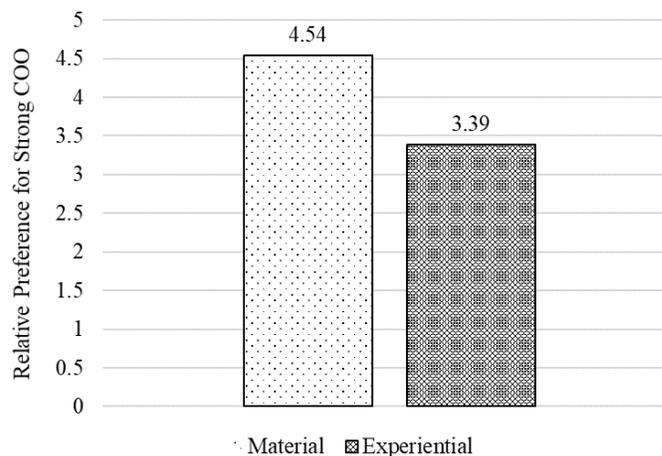
economics, and they are both located in Europe (NationMaster, 2022). From these options, participants were asked to choose which one they would prefer on a 7-point unnumbered scale (1 = Most likely to choose English watch/7 = Most likely to choose Swiss watch). Next, I administered a manipulation check for both purchase type and country-of-origin. For purchase type, they were prompted to answer: “To what extent do you think the watch that you imagined at the beginning of the survey is: (1 = Completely experiential/5 = Completely material)”. For country-of-origin, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following: “England is known for watch products” and “Switzerland is known for watch products” (1 = Strongly disagree/5 = Strongly agree). Again, participants were asked to record their age and gender.

Results and Discussion

This study replicated the results of Study 1—consumers had a higher relative preference towards strong COO for material purchases than experiential purchases. I first inspected the manipulation check for purchase type. The manipulation check was as intended. Participants in the material condition perceived the watch to be more material ($M_{\text{material}} = 4.54$) compared to participants in the experiential condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 3.39$, $F(1,100) = 24.46$, $p < .001$) (Figure 3). Next, I examined the manipulation check for country-of-origin. I found that Switzerland was perceived as strong COO for watches ($M = 4.54$, $t(101) = 24.87$, $p < .001$) opposed to England ($M = 3.39$, $t(101) = -3.57$, $p = .001$) which was the weak COO option.

Figure 3

Purchase Type and the Relative Preference for Strong COO – Watch (Study 2)



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Replicating my previous results and in further support of Hypothesis 1, participants primed with the material frame demonstrated a higher relative preference for strong country-of-origin ($M_{\text{material}} = 6.24$) than those primed with the experiential frame ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 4.98$, $F(1,100) = 10.91$, $p < .001$) (Figure 3). Once again, I found support for the effect. In the next study, I provide further evidence for the effect while testing an underlying mechanism responsible for the outcome.

STUDY 3: TEST MEDIATION – UNISEX LEATHER WALLET

Method

In Study 3, I focused on testing whether the effect between purchase type and relative preference towards strong country-of-origin label is driven by signaling motives (Hypothesis 2). This study follows the same framing method as the previous two studies. I used a unisex leather wallet as the stimuli. I randomly assigned one hundred and thirty-seven undergraduate participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.34$, females 41.5%) to one of the two purchase types. In the experiential condition, participants thought about how they would feel carrying the wallet and how it would go with their other activities, while in the material condition they thought about how the wallet will look and feel.

Next, participants were presented with two options: Canadian leather wallet (weak COO option) and Italian leather wallet (strong COO option). Italy was chosen as the strong country for this stimulus because they are known for their top-of-the-line fashion products and are listed as number seven on the Made-In-Country-Index (Biagi, 2022). Furthermore, Canada is ranked one place ahead at number six. This allows for the countries to be on an even playing field; even though Italy has the slight edge because of their well-known fashion industry. I asked participants to indicate the relative preference between the two options on a 7-point unnumbered scale (1 = Most likely to choose Canadian wallet/7 = Most likely to choose Italian wallet).

To examine the underlying mechanism of signaling motives, two questions were introduced. More specifically participants were asked: to what extent did you make this purchase to express your self-identity and to what extent did you make this purchase to make a statement

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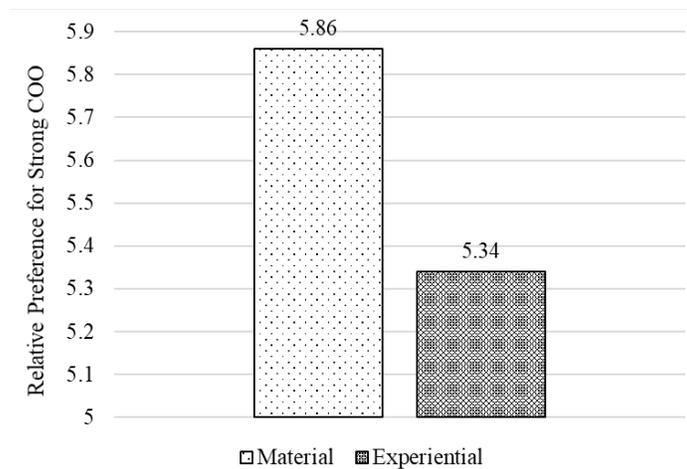
about yourself. The data was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all important/5 = Extremely important) ($r = .69$).

Results and Discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the mean for relative preference for strong COO is higher in the material purchase condition ($M_{\text{material}} = 5.86$) compared to the mean of participants in the experiential condition ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.34$, $F(1,135) = 4.04$, $p < .05$) (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Purchase Type and the Relative Preference for Strong COO – Wallet (Study 2)

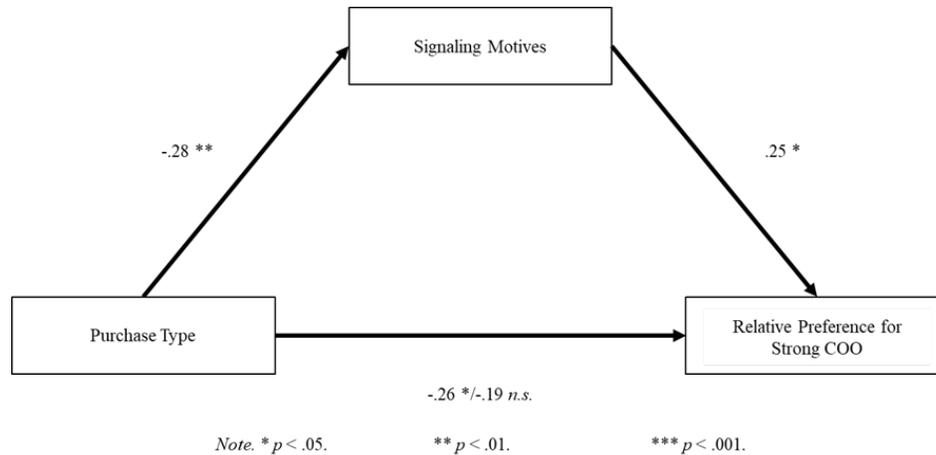


While testing for the driver behind this effect, signaling motives, I conducted a mediation analysis using model 4 (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) (Figure 1). I used purchase type as the independent variable, preference for strong COO as the dependent variable, and signaling as the mediator. In support of Hypothesis 2, results show that when signaling motives were introduced to the model, the effect of purchase type on preference for stronger COO was no longer significant (Figure 5). Thus, proving that signaling is responsible for the effect.

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Figure 5

Mediating Role of Signaling Motives for Relative Preference for Strong COO (Study 3)



GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this research, it was demonstrated that participants had higher relative preference for strong country-of-origin when making material purchases than when making experiential purchases (Study 1 and Study 2). This effect was driven by signaling motives—participants were more interested in making a personal statement for material than experiential purchases. I demonstrated the mediating role of signaling motives through Study 3. To strengthen generalizability, this effect was tested three times on three different stimuli, with six different countries. The outcome was consistent across the samples regardless of the stimuli or countries. By confirming both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, this research supports the notion that purchase type does influence relative preference for strong COO labels. The effect was seen with each study, proving that this is not a lone effect for one product category.

While this research shows a consecutive relationship between purchase type and relative preference for strong country-of-origin option, it does have limitations. For starters, I recruited both undergraduate and MTurk participants for these studies as they were convenient samples. Future exploration should analyze the effect of material versus experiential purchases on the relative preference for strong COO using samples that represent general population. It is also encouraged to assess the effect using larger samples.

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To further strengthen this work, it is key to include participants from different countries. When COO is involved, one's upbringing and culture plays a crucial role in how people act and react. It would be interesting to discover if the results proved through this work are dynamic when testing participants on a global scale. In addition, new countries can be investigated for the products (wine, watch, and wallet) and then new products or services can be introduced into the research. This will continue to increase the generalizability of the outcome. Finally, it will be interesting to examine boundary conditions for the effect such as consuming on private and public.

This work contributes to the current international business and marketing literature by filling a research gap. These studies add to the experiential and material text by examining how purchase type may influence preferences towards COO. Additionally, it enhances the literature on COO by examining purchase type as an important antecedent. The pairing of these two topics is novel to the world of academia.

Lastly, these findings have significant practical implications for marketing practitioners regarding how to use COO to persuade their consumers. Although the application of this research varies depending on the context of the specific product type, there is a core theme. The findings suggest that marketers should use material frames in communication campaigns for products that have strong COO cues. However, if they do not have a strong COO cue, it will be beneficial to use an experiential frame. Such campaigns can enhance consumer outcomes towards the purchases and help to win in the marketplace.

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