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► **To cite this version:**

Ibtissam Zejjari, Abla Berrada, Issam Benhayoun. The Country of Origin effects on Moroccan elite consumer's attitudes and purchase intention towards hedonic product. *International Journal of Business and Technology Studies and Research*, 2020, 1, 10.5281/zenodo.3627861 . halshs-02955664

HAL Id: halshs-02955664

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02955664>

Submitted on 2 Oct 2020

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The Country of Origin effects on Moroccan elite consumers' attitudes and purchase intention towards hedonic product

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Abstract: *Even if country of origin effects is one of the most studied topics in marketing literature and consumer behavior, but still attract the attention of researchers due to tremendous critics that need to be addressed. Based on some of those critics, this article presents the results of a qualitative study based on thirty laddering interviews conducted with Moroccan men belonging to the elite of generation Y. Our aim is to understand their attitudes towards hedonic product made in their local country-Morocco- vs foreign countries by integrating the means-end-chain theory which allow us to relate country of origin as a product attribute, consequence and personal value. The findings demonstrate that Moroccan elite consumers prefer foreign brands because they enhance their appearance, self-confidence and the need for uniqueness.*

Key Words: Country of origin effects; hedonic product; elite; generation Y; Morocco; Mean-end chain theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The globalized world we live in has brought opportunities for firms to export different products to different countries. This context of international business emphasizes the importance of Country of origin effects that became the most studied topic in marketing literature during the last three decades. It seems like an ever-ending subject because of tremendous critics addressed to the previous published articles.

Previous studies had proved that consumer considers the COO information to evaluate the product's quality, and that consumers belonging to emerging markets prefer products made in foreign countries (Batra et al., 2000; Hamzaoui and Merunka, 2006; Khan et al., 2012). One of the reasons behind is because foreign brands can enhance the self-esteem and pride of their owners (Khan et al., 2012; Khan and Bamber, 2008) especially for a wealthy target like elite.

However, researches about the attitudes of elite towards foreign products are limited, even if this target is very lucrative for companies because of their capacities to pay high prices to get a foreign product (Khan et al., 2012).

To fill the gap in the COO literature; we choose to study the COO effects on Moroccan elite's attitude towards local versus foreign hedonic product by enlisting the means-end-chain theory and integrating the ethnocentrism as antecedent, this is in line with the findings of Roth and Dimantopoulos (2009) affirming that COO researches need to integrate theoretical frame for a better understanding of COO's antecedents and effects.

The choice of this variable is justified by the potential influence of ethnocentrism on consumer behavior especially in international marketing (Altıntaş and Tokol 2007), in fact foreign companies who are planning to conquer a particular market require a clear understanding of the barriers that their products are likely to face in that market. However, the concept of ethnocentrism is also of importance to domestic marketers, who need to appreciate any potential advantage they might have in marketing their products compared to foreign competition.

By using a qualitative methodology and inspired of the theory mentioned above, we conducted thirty laddering interviews. Thus, the results of this study will enable marketers to obtain a deeper understanding of Moroccan elite consumers when buying foreign products.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Country of origin effects

Over the last three decades, the COO was one of the most studied topics in the literature of international marketing and consumer behavior (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995, p. 883). There are many reasons behind the enormous influx of articles, especially because the results of researches have been the subject of controversies.

In fact, the country of Origin is linked to the overall perception of the consumer based on the country of manufacture image. It can be defined as the place, region or country to which the brand is perceived to belong by its

target consumers (Thakor et al., 2004). Other researchers defined the COO as the country where the product was manufactured or where headquarter is located.

Research has concluded that the COO effects cannot be universal and must be studied in different contexts (Bhaskaran and Sukumaran, 2007). But based on the literature review, most of studies about COO effects had been carried out in developed countries, published research is too US- centric and its generalizability to the rest of the world is questionable. That's why analyzing COO effects in African and Arab countries must be taken into consideration, especially because they present specific characteristics due to the culture, religion and the level of economic development.

In addition, COO effects depend on the purchase situation and the degree of involvement; it can be higher for expensive products and lower for routine ones. These two types of purchase situations had been widely discussed in the literature except for the hedonic product that had been neglected despite its importance.

Nevertheless, despite the vast range of studies into COO effects, studies that investigate the effects of COO on the purchase decisions of elite consumers in emerging markets (those who belong to the upper income stratum) remain scarce (Khan and Bamber, 2008).

2.1 Means-end chain theory

The purchase of foreign product, as a meaningful behaviour, makes the study of the role of values in the context of purchasing behaviour necessary. In fact, many researches confirm that values can explain the choices undertaken by the consumer. The importance given to values led us to retain the means-end chain theory (Gutman, 1982) as a theoretical framework to our study.

The objective of this theory is to understand the consumer motivation behind his choice and to explore the linkages between attributes, their consequences and values related to a product. According to the theory, consumers base their purchase choices not on the products themselves, but on the benefits to be gained from their consumption. They consider the product attributes as a means that allow them to obtain desired goals related to their values (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). In other words, this theory by answering the "why is that important to you?" question reveal the internal process by which the consumer move from concrete (product's attributes) to abstract (values).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Country of origin effects

Since the consumer's socio-demographic characteristics impact the COO effects (Rodrigo, 2013), we choose a specific sample: the elite Moroccan men belonging to the Y generation. The reasons behind this choice are:

- First, elite is a social category and a powerful segment that presents a high purchasing power and that most of companies aim to attract. in the present study we define elite consumer as an informant who occupies a

senior or middle management position or a professional in an area which enjoys high status and who has a high standard of living, this definition is in line with Khan et al. (2012) and Rodrigo (2013);

- Second, male consumers hadn't received as much attention as women and been largely neglected when it concerned consumer behavior towards fashion or clothing, even though male fashion consumption had dramatically increased over the past 20 years. When marketers put a great deal of effort into understanding this market, with the ultimate goal of obtaining first mover advantage, researchers, in contrast, seem to take this emerging market for granted and consider the masculine market similar to the feminine one;

- Finally, we choose the Y generation – being as people born between 1977 and 1994 (e.g., Giovannini et al., 2015; Kim and Jang, 2014; Grotts and Johnson, 2013), because they are more consumption oriented than other generations and regarded as confident, Internet savvy, and brand conscious (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003), and have a tendency to prefer brands possessive and a need of uniqueness (Morton, 2002; Thwaites et al., 2012).

3.2 Product

Previous researches proved that the product category had a significant impact on the COO effects, but while most of the studies are focused on high involvement product the hedonic one received a limited attention, this type of product is purchased and consumed for affective or for sensory gratification purposes (Woods, 1960). In this study, leather shoes will be considered as the focal hedonic product which is in line with previous researches (Khan and Dhar, 2004, Rodrigo 2013). The choice is also coherent with the target, in fact, many studies proved that men pay more attention to their shoes, which are the most expensive item in their outfit.

3.3 Study site

The study of country of origin effects is more focused in developed countries whereas developing and New Industrialized countries have a strong economic potential and participate in export, and are growing at an international level, also the results obtained in a DC context may differ significantly of a NIC for example. In addition, Rodrigo (2013) invite future researches to utilize the MEC approach in other emerging and developed nations to obtain findings that are more generalizable.

Based on those arguments, we decide to choose an emerging country as a study site, which is Morocco. From a research point of view, Morocco is an interesting study site because of its Arabian culture (Alain, Sadrudin 1995), it is also an economically emerging African country and one of the Maghreb countries (along with Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya) and has a strong economic potential in comparison with other African countries. Also, this country lack of attention in researches related to COO with only two articles

3.4 Method

At this point of the discussion, it is necessary to present the key aspects of our methodological choices. Because this study could be considered, to the best of our knowledge, as the first study in Morocco conducted to investigate the COO effects among elite of Morocco, it is appropriate to use a qualitative methodology based on the laddering interview technique so that we can obtain a deeper understanding about those effects. As mentioned before, the MEC theory (Gutman, 1982) confirms that the consumer considers the product as a mean that achieves his desired goals or end, that's why we talk about a means-end-chain. This chain once obtained allows the researcher to understand the underlying causes behind the COO effects towards local versus foreign made hedonic products.

Based on previous researches, interviews conducted with MEC are more informative when they reach at least 30 interviews (Rodrigo 2013). We conducted thirty qualitative laddering interviews, a number that we obtain by approaching 45, the 15 people either didn't answer or declared not having enough time to participate in this research. The interviews were conducted generally at their offices, in Morocco mainly in Fez, Meknes, Rabat, Tangier, between April and September. The respondents for the interviews were recruited following the six steps sampling procedure recommended by Wilson (2006).

3.5 Interview guide

The interview guide is divided into three parts, the first one aims to present the purpose and the context of the study, the second is a discussion based on the "why it is important to you" question (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) to obtain deeper answers and the third part is a conclusion to obtain the socio-demographic information.

PART ONE - INTRODUCTIVE PHASE

- ✓ Introduction to study
- ✓ Purpose of the study
- ✓ Right to confidentiality and anonymity

PART TWO – DISCURSIVE PHASE

Table A

Attribut	Note of importance (1 to 5)
Design	
Quality	
Country of origin	
Brand	
Price	

Table B

Statements	True
I prefer to have shoes that are made in foreign countries rather than in my own country	
I prefer to have shoes that are made in my own country as well as shoes that are made in foreign countries	
I prefer to have shoes that are made in my country rather than shoes made in foreign countries	
I am not interested in the country of origin of shoes	

- ✓ Present table A that contain attribute that serve the consumer to predict the evaluation of product quality so that he can evaluate them based on a 5-point scale.
- ✓ Present table B and ask the respondents to indicate their feelings based on the statements provided.
- ✓ Based on the responses provided for table B, conduct the laddering interviews, asking, “**Why is it important to you**”

PART THREE –CONCLUSIVE PHASE:

- ✓ Ask the respondents to complete socio –demographic questions (Function, income)
- ✓ Conclude with thanking note

Fig -1: Interview guide

The gathered data were analyzed by employing standard MEC laddering data analysis procedure developed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988) to finally obtain the Hierarchical value map (HVM).

Before starting the interview, we used an attitude template towards local and foreign product developed by steenkamp et al. (2010), and another template to fix the most relevant attributes used to evaluate the product. All the responds were asked first to fill those templates before to start the laddering interview.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondents’ profile

Of 30 conducted interviews, 12 are managers, 4 company owners, 5 bankers, one doctor, 3 accountants, 2 engineers, 3 military personnel, with an average income of 21000 MAD per month (approximately 2200 USD). The majority of them are high-school graduated people. No need to mention that the responds are all men between 25 and 40 years old (belonging to generation Y).

4.2 Respondent’s attitudes

Based on the attributes template, the interviewer listed the following: Brand, Country of origin, design and store reputation. Those are the means that lead to “consequences” which are related to psychological identity of the consumer, called values.

Table -1: Findings on consumer preference towards local and foreign made products

Preference	Number of respondents
Preference for Local product	8
Preference for foreign product	17
Preference for both	3
No interest for the country of origin	2

When purchasing leather shoes 17 of respondents prefer to buy foreign ones, due to their high quality with affordable prices, also they mentioned that they even don’t know any Moroccan brand of leather shoes. 8 respondents prefer local leather shoes because of the high known quality of Moroccan leather, these respondents mentioned that in equal quality and prices, they prefer local product to support the national economy. 3 respondents declared that they buy leather shoes from local brand and foreign ones it depends on the design and style that they are looking for. 2 respondents attested that no special attention is given to the origin of the product, but to design and the quality of the shoes.

Based on the respondents’ attitudes four cases can be distinguished:

- *Positive attitude towards foreign products:* those elite consumers affirm that foreign brands have a better quality especially leather shoes made in Italy, they attest that Italy as a brand origin allows them to take the quality for guaranteed and be sure that the design is trendy. A strong need for uniqueness is detected in those Moroccan elites, aiming to look trendy and fashionable but also unique.
- *Positive attitude towards local products:* When it comes to leather, they attest that the one of Morocco is for a high quality and well known, so they prefer to purchase Moroccan brands. Those consumers tend to be more ethnocentric, caring about economic development and creating job opportunities in their own country. This feeling of ethnocentrism is not absolute but conditioned by the quality and the price. According to one of the interviewers: “In case of equal quality and prices between foreign and local brands, I would purchase local brands to support my national economy”.
- *Mixed preference,* in other words positive attitude towards both local and foreign: those consumers purchase both local and foreign leather shoes brands it depends on the one that are trendier, and the offer proposed by the store where they purchase.
- *No attention given to the COO of the product:* those consumers attest that they never ask about the origin of the brand for their shoes, the most important thing is how other perceive them and to which point their quality demonstrate their status. One of the interviewer attest:

“others don’t ask me about the brand or the origin of the brand, but look at my shoes and understand what they have to understand, for me I choose the shoes that are unique and will express myself the most”.

4.3 MEC analysis of the laddering interview:

Consumer that have a positive attitude towards foreign leather shoes develop more tendency for values related to self-esteem, gratification and need for uniqueness, on the other hand those how prefer local leather shoes tend to prefer values related to comfort, security and durability of the product.

Table -2: Chain of attributes, consequences and values.

Most preferred COO	Attributes	Consequences	Values
- Italy - Turkey	- Brand - Design - COO reputation - Store reputation	- Make me feel confident - Enhance appearance Differentiate me from others - Make me feel trendy - Guaranty the quality of the product	- Self-esteem - Self-confidence - Being respected - Need for uniqueness - Security
- Morocco	- Design - Store reputation - Local country	- Feel Comfortable - Durability - Participate in the development of local brands	- Security - Simplicity - Sense of belonging - Nationalism

According to one of the interviewer : “When I am in a meeting, how I look matters so much to me, I pay attention to my shoes for several reasons, first I need to feel comfortable in it so that I can concentrate on my work, second I believe that when we are well dressed we are more respected from the others and that the master piece of my outfit is Shoes, finally a foreign brand especially the Italian have a better quality and design no matter how expensive are, the most important thing is that they make me feel unique”

Expressing a desire to look different, Moroccan elite prefer foreign leather shoes brand. In this context two foreign origins are mentioned in a repetitive way: Italy and Turkey. This is justified by many reasons, in one hand, the global reputation of Italian shoes, which is a strong reason that attracts consumers to put their trust on them because of their high quality. On the other hand, Turkey is a privileged economic partner of Morocco, so many footwear brands are exported to the country, it should be mentioned that Turkey relies on the leather industry at an international level. Morocco corresponds to a less economically developed country compared to the two countries mentioned above but has a rich leather heritage which presents a high potential of exportation.

4.4 Hierarchical value map (HVM)

Because of the high number of consumers how prefer foreign leather shoes, we construct the Hierarchical Value Map based on their answers, the HVM will summarize the most repeated links between attributes, consequences and personal values.

This HVM represent the reasons behind the Moroccan elite attitude towards leather shoes made in foreign countries, which allow us to understand their behaviors.

As presented in the HVM, Moroccan elite consider design, store reputation, brand and country of origin as the most important attributes when they evaluate the product quality, Moroccan elite believe that those attributes (or at least one of them) can enhance their self- esteem, show their status and financial ease but also satisfy their need for uniqueness because foreign brands aren’t affordable to everyone due to their high prices. In fact, elite consumer practices dissimilarity through buying foreign leather shoes.

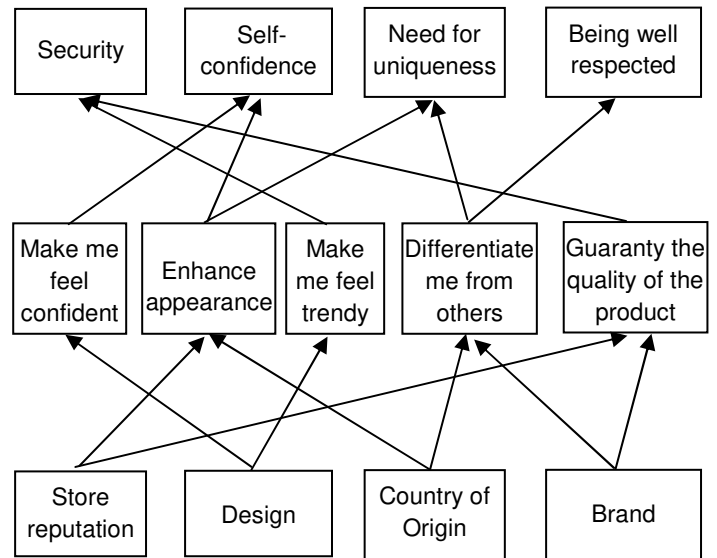


Fig -2: HVM

The most relevant contribution of our study is a conceptual model that we designed from the results of the laddering interviews. The conceptual model that summarizes our major findings can be used in future research to generalize the results of our study. The conceptual model can serve also for marketers because Gutman (1982) suggested utilizing the elements of the chain mainly (attributes, perceived consequences, and values) and operationalize them to guide marketing decision.

Based on Means-end chain theory and the results of our study, the proposed conceptual model connects product attributes, consequences and values as independent variables with the attitude and purchase intention as depended variables, future researches must indicate the product type and the purchase occasion since they could be a contextual moderator variables.

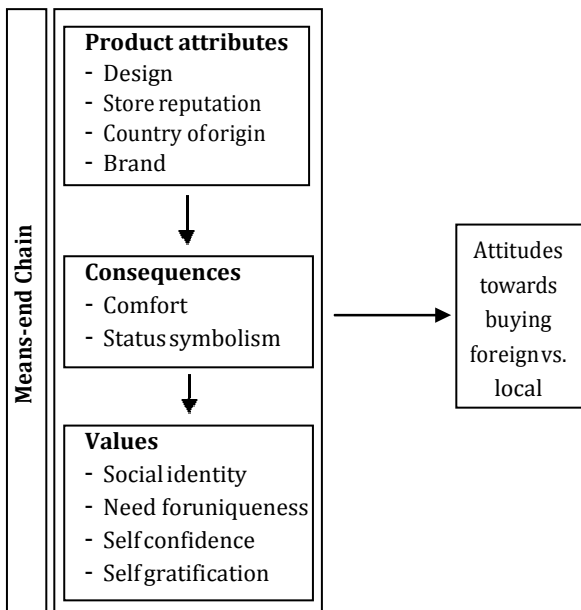


Fig -3: Conceptual model proposition: means end chain model for purchase intention

5. DISCUSSION

Despite the enormous published papers related to COO, the discipline still suffers from many critics related to the methodological, theoretical and contextual issues, one of the most common critics is the small attention given to developing countries, the use of students as a target and the dominance of quantitative methodology.

To overcome those critics, we choose to investigate the COO effects on the attitude and purchase intention of Moroccan elite, especially male belonging to generation Y by using the means-end chain as a theoretical framework and laddering interviews as a method to collect data.

This article seeks to develop a better understanding of COO effects on Moroccan elite male consumers. The results reveal the following: The point on which all the respondents agree is the importance of shoes to enhance their appearance at work, they all confirm that they give a huge importance to the choice of that product because it is a central item in their outfit. When it comes to the origin of leather shoes, most of Moroccan elite prefers foreign brands namely Italian and Turkish ones because they believe that they have a better quality, trendy design and are not affordable to everyone, a point that very matters to Moroccan male elite who looks to be different from the others, in other words they have a very high feeling of need for uniqueness.

On the other hand, the laddering interviews analysis offers strong insights related to COO. In fact, Elite consumers don't entirely rely on COO information; a complex connection between attributes, consequences, and

values comes into play to impact attitudes and purchase intention of the consumer.

This study explores for the first time the COO effects on Moroccan elite especially male gen Y consumers and contributes to knowledge in different levels for academics and practitioners alike:

From the theoretical point of view, this study uses the means-end chain theory as a theoretical framework, which is one of the most recommended theories especially when it comes to compare local and foreign brands (Rodrigo, 2013). For the methodological contributions, the use of laddering interviews is coherent with the theoretical framework, this type of interview allowed us to create the Hierarchical Values Map, very useful to segment, target and position a brand by highlighting the founded values in their communication strategy. From a managerial perspective, our study provides insights into Moroccan elite attitude and purchase intention towards foreign and local product by listing the relevant attributes, their consequences and related personal values, which is very useful for marketers to better promote their brands. Identifying profitable consumer segments is vital for marketers to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage and to develop appropriate marketing mix strategies that target consumer segments effectively (Badri, Davis, & Davis, 1995). Badri et al. (1995) suggest that marketers need to identify these consumer segments through demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and level of income.

This article is not without limitations. First, this study considers a specific target this is also limited to one product and one country, future studies could compare males and females to show significant differences in consumer behaviors among genders (Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1995; Chiger, 2001). Also, this study could be replicated using different type of products belonging to the same category namely hedonic product, to enhance the generalizability of obtained results. Second, the results can also be generalized by a quantitative study by using the proposed conceptual model to investigate elite attitude and purchase intention in other countries. In addition, this study can be also completed by a more in-depth study due to the exploratory nature of our findings.

Finally, the effects of ethnocentrism must be investigated in the Moroccan context as an African country.

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