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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILL COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHANGE COO IMPACT ON EVALUATION STAGE OF MATURE EGYPTIANS BUYERS FOR A NEW CAR (EXPLORATORY STUDY)

^{1,*}Adel M. Torieh, ²Nevine A. Youssef, ³Omneya M. Moharam and ⁴Yara M. Ibrahim

¹Professor Dr. of Marketing, Ain Shams University- Cairo, Egypt

²Director at Influence Public Affaires, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt

³Lecturer of Marketing, Pharos University in Alexandria, Egypt

⁴Lecturer of Finance and Investment, Pharos University in Alexandria, Egypt

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ABSTRACT

Country of Origin (COO) can be defined as the total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs buyers shape about a country versus others. In the marketing literature, the COO effect is known to determine the activation of associations (positive or negative) in the consumer's mind, which then affect the consumer's propensity to buy (or not buy) products from that specific COO. The COO effect is exercised primarily through the country's image. Accordingly, this research will examine the COOI impact on the evaluation stage of mature Egyptian buyers for a new car, and how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect this relationship. The research will apply qualitative research through a focus group of 61 Egyptians in Cairo and Alexandria. The results show that there is a strong relationship between the quality of passenger cars and (Stability Economy as well as Governmental Management); moreover, there is a weak relationship with (Social Discipline as well as Political Response).

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INTRODUCTION

By 1Q 2020 huge global crisis facing the world for the first time in history, locking down people everywhere, and freezing the business life. Reminding you of an American movie named "2012", that was about decimating humankind, or the end of days as they call it. The film features a series of destructive natural disasters that were causing massive deaths and driving the world to an end. During which, we discovered there was that secret ship or arks, as they call it in the movie, which was being built in the Himalayas to be used as shelter to ensure humanity's survival in case of any fatal disaster. Certain people were allowed to buy tickets to secure places on the arks. When the world was coming to an end, those were the only survivors who started rebuilding the whole new world, each working on their ark, self-dependent on their capabilities and resources, and making the best use of them to be prepared for the rebirth of mother earth. Taking that movie and applying it to our world now, our paper found that there is so much resemblance between the 2 cases. Each ship or ark resembles each country, in which people should now start working extremely hard

deploying and adopting the concept of self-dependent, utilizing its capabilities and resources and start thinking. In our opinion, the world is living the same mode, which calls it the Preparation mode, each country is trying to survive, while at the same time preparing themselves for the coming era, the rebirth of the new world after the pandemic, whatever time it takes. (Torieh et al., 2020). During that period "preparation mode" as we called it. Each country should be working extremely hard preparing and equipping itself with all the necessary tools to hit hard when life returns. The preparation mode entails working on each country's resources, de-globalizing themselves. (both human and natural). We are in a crisis, that should be managed carefully to ensure public health, avoid financial losses, however, the contradiction arises from the fact that the crisis has dramatically hit the economy globally and to regain the economy, we have to sacrifice public health. COVID-19 dictates social distance and separation, while economic prosperity requires interconnection. Every country needs to act immediately to prepare, respond, and recover. We are facing an unprecedented global crisis that needs an unprecedented management plan. Will COVID-19 Pandemic country's response change - shortly- COO "made in" image impact on buyer awareness of product quality? our paper focusing on mature" age 40 and above" Egyptian buyers, more

*Corresponding author: Adel M. Torieh,

Professor Dr. of Marketing, Ain Shams University- Cairo, Egypt.

than buyers from Egypt from sophisticated manufacturing countries like Japan, for the sophisticated product (Passenger New Private Car). But by economics meltdown during COVID-19 pandemic the question is: what will keep "Elephant Companies" still dance, and are marketing mindsets in manufacturing cars companies able to prevent dinosaur to be a part of the past? it is an essential question? The question(s) here is During and post COVID-19 Pandemic, the image of the country of origin will change in the mindsets of the customers around the world?, Shall the same impact still prevail shortly?, shall we still respect products from giant countries which have pandemic/ still have the same prestige to their brands from cartoon giant manufacturing countries? Will COVID-19 pandemic country's response change - shortly- COO "made in" image impact on buyer awareness of product quality? our paper focuses on mature".

It is established in literature from a long time (Bilkey and Nes 1982), till these days (Due 2020),(Dich2019) that the brand's country of origin highly affects consumer perceptions of quality, country image, perception of value and risk; there are typical countries that are leading specific industries and has a reputable impact on consumers. Where the country of origin (COO) is defined as the corporation where the marketing activities for the brand is located. Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, (2012), Audhesh and Sharma (2004), and Adamantious and Blabanis (2004) stated that consumers would pay more for some brands that are favorable than others and coming from a better-perceived country of origin. Many types of research proved the importance on the country of origin for consumer decision making, however, the most recent country of origin (COO) researches indicated that consumers commonly link the brands they buy to the wrong country of origin Xiaouhn (2020), Erdogan (2017), Kashaf (2016), Israel *et al.* (1997), and Johanson *et al.*,(1985,1989,1994). The dilemma is that buyers often do not know that they have misclassified the brand's Country of origin, and they only assume that their perceptions of the country of origins right, also manufacturing car companies think that buyers will keep the same image in their mindsets during a pandemic? also hardly know the real country of origin like Toyota cars, from Australia for some models. But those companies are assuming wrong, because of the globalization and the emergence of international brands and its availability worldwide, also the internet, the strong buyer awareness about COO and the fact that sometimes can easily know the true origin. But the idea is not about buyer's awareness of the real country of origin but it's in their cognitive dissonance when they know, the change they will experience if any on their perception of quality because of pandemic, value, and risk for this brand after they are aware of the country of origin image., Moreover, shall companies intentionally try to mislead after the pandemic, the buyer to a more favorable country of origin, thinking this might enhance their brand image? Our paper tries to discuss will COVID-19 Pandemic change the image manufacturing car countries.

The impact of country of origin awareness on perceived quality, risk and value caused by buyer's cognitive dissonance will be measured in the passenger car market because it's proven that among private passenger car, the country of origin image (COOI) plays an important role or driver for buyer's choice of goods. Liu and Chau (2001), Shukla (2011), Hashmi and Muhammad (2017), Gahye and Kim (2017), Namhoo and Eunha (2017), Thakor *et al.*, (2017), Suter *et al.*, (2018), and Nguyen *et al.*, (2020)

Literature Review

Overall, (COO) can be defined as "The total of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs buyers shape about a country versus others" and has been always been treated as a construct that includes many facets explained by political, economic, technological or social environments of a country.

Another definition, which is "the latest and seems very accurate to nowadays buyer perception is a definition", by Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006), define (COO) here as "The country which a consumer associates with a certain product or brand as being its source, regardless of where the product is produced." Where the brand may originate from a different country and this is the main reason for this research, "the buyer might place a lot of importance on a brand's COO but associate the brand with an incorrect origin" Torieh (2005). Many examples apply to buyer's perception of (COO) that's not true about a brand like (Nike) which is not an American produced brand, yet it's perceived as so from most of the consumers. Moreover, consumers might sometimes experience no classification in the sense that they fail to associate the brand with any specific country which is a shame as well "both COO misclassification and non classification have mostly undesirable consequences" Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011).

It is well established in the literature that buyer's attitudes toward the country-of-origin (COO) of a brand influence brands and the consumer perception about them. The definition of the Perceived (COO) is the country in which the corporate headquarters of the company marketing the brand is located, no matter where it is manufactured, and that will significantly influence the consumer decision-making process. Balabanis and Diamantopoulos (2011) argue that (COO) directly affects the inferences consumers make about a brand's attributes and influence their behavioral intentions. Koschate and Fischer *et al.*, (2012) argue that consumers will spend more on a branded product from a more favorable(COO). Companies use subtle and direct (COO)associations through their brand values, store design, and styling of products Shukla (2011).Although (COO) effect is not absolute for all product categories, and a country might rank high in consumer's minds for one product category but rank low in another different category. This is what Johnson *et al.*, (2016) called a balance between country images and products. Their findings showed that a positive product-country match would exist when a country image is perceived as being very strong in an area that is also an important feature for a product category like fashion products for example and Italian shoes which are perceived as one of the highest quality shoes just because its Italian. And another example is highly perceived by consumers. the Japanese passenger car just because it is made in Japan. Buyers evaluate brands differently when they know their country of origin, although they might like a brand and have tried it before, they get highly affected by the country of origin because it's a part of their evaluation criteria. Torieh (2005) added that the country of origin is the first signal for buyers, the first sight, due to the limited information and knowledge of the product.Buyers assess countries such as the USA, Japan, and Germany as producing products of high quality for passenger cars; on the other hand, all developing countries are associated with low-quality products being produced. There are many examples of countries, not just a few buyers who boycott brands "made in specific countries" due to these countries negative perception or even political actions, so knowing the country of origin of brands that buyers purchase can highly affect its purchase

intention where the purchase decision is also influenced by the personality, including the terms of the age of work, the economic level as well as his/her lifestyle. Another major factor that affects the purchase decision is the mental or cognitive aspect. It consists of motivation, learning perception, reliance, and attitude. The relation of the first factors and the sub-factors has influenced the buyers' getting hold of the product. During the past years, and till 2020, COO has been defined only by being "The country of manufacture or assembly" Torieh (2005). Nevertheless, globalization brought high attention to the COO effect as one of a vital variable that highly affects international competitiveness. Additionally, the increased rate of multinational companies opening in addition to the profound foreign direct investments in (less developed and developing) countries helped in trying to reduce all costs possible.

A bi-national/hybrid product – like a car- means that a brand shouldn't only be designed, produced, and sold in one country. COO no longer can be treated as a single aspect; but rather should be treated as a multi-dimensional aspect, especially with the current technological boom, which made consumers able to associate many countries with one brand. As a consequence, products started being sorted against four COO sub-dimensions that are vital for evaluating the process quality: Country-of-Parts (COP), Country-of-Assembly (COA), Country-of-Design (COD), and Country-of-Manufacture (COM), Country-of-Know-How (COK), Country-of-Personnel (COP), and Country-of-Tangibles (COT) Chao, P. (1993), Chao and Gupta (1995), and Chao(2001). In the Marketing literature, the (COO) impact is known to determine the activation of associations (positive or negative) in the buyer's mind, which then affect the buyer's propensity to buy (or not buy) products from that specific COO. The COO impact is exercised primarily through the country's image. The country image (CI), as well as the brand image, identifies a set of associations with the COO, organized into groups in a significant.

Proposed Variables from Literature Review for (COOI) Study

Independent Variables

- Brand Name
- Brand Image
- Brand Awareness
- Brand Evaluations
- Brand Perception
- Brand Familiarity
- Country of Origin Image
- Country of Design
- Country of Assembly
- Culture and Ethnocentrism
- Made in Image
- Product Quality Price
- Perceived Quality
- Price

Moderators and Mediators Variables

- Consumers' Demographics (Moderator)
- Consumers Familiarity (Familiarity with Foreign Country/ Product) (Moderator)

- Consumers Psychographics Characteristics (Consumers' Involvement/ Ethnocentrism) (Moderator)
- Consumers' Attitude (Mediator)
- Country Image (Moderator)
- Nation Equity (Moderator)

Dependent Variable:

- Purchasing New Passenger Private Car

Decision Making: It is important in COVID-19 pandemic era consider four main groups of variables, that may be related with COOI Impact to buy a new private car from giant manufacturing car countries such as China, Japan, France, Italy, Germany, USA, and South Korea, variables which determine consumer buying behaviour:

Individual (e.g. personal values and beliefs),

Social (e.g. Social Discipline; following rules during COVID-19 pandemic), Political (e.g. country policies / political skills), and

Economics (e.g. /Stability /meltdown economy during COVID-19 pandemic).It is worth mentioning that the Individual variable, which includes personal and interpersonal determinants holds an important place for investigating the role of COOI impact on new car purchase decision-making as personal learning process and beliefs regarding a country and/or a product may influence buying centre's decision in line with members' tasks and roles within the group. Aby and Patro(2014)

Research limitations: Like most researches, Our COOI impact study has its limitations, which are very imported to be mentioned,

- **First:** The focus here is on purchasing a new private car, not for Business Purposes.
- **Second:** The focus here is on first time purchasing, not on Repeat Purchasing.
- **Third:** The focus here is on mature "40 years and above" buyers from one country **Egypt**, not Cross-National Comparison.
- **Fourth:** The focus here is only on (COOI) / Made in Image Impact
- **Fifth:** The responses of Egyptians Potential buyers are only during the period from March- July 2020
- **Finally:** The research focuses only on cars from top-ranking manufacturing car countries' reputations for Egyptians according to past literature: Japan, China, Italy, Germany, France, South Korea, and the USA.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The research methodology is critical for researchers to hold up the questions they effort to answer in their studies. The research aims to study the relevance between the country of origin image impact and new car buyers' decision making in Egypt during COVID-19 Pandemic Our research paper is considered a descriptive study, in which much social research is descriptive and uses a variety of data-gathering techniques.

Table (1) shows the answers:**Table1.The Sample Responses to The Study Statements**

Statement	Totally Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally Disagree
Social Discipline I feel surprised by citizens in countries as Italy, France, and Spain for their uncommitment during the first stage of COVID-19 pandemic, as staying at home and maintaining social distancing, which might prevent me from purchasing products from these countries.	3.5%	16%	29%	16%	35.5%
Stability Economy . What happened in countries as Germany from commitment and economic stability during COVID-19 pandemic might encourage me to purchase purchasing products from these countries	29%	29%	10%	-	32%
Governmental Management . The good management of countries as Japan and South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic might make me continue purchasing products from these countries.	32%	26%	8%	8%	26%
Political Response I blame countries like China and the United States for the unclarity and mismanagement towards the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic which might prevent me from purchasing products from these countries	13%	6.5%	35.5%	19.5%	25.5%

Source: Focus Group online data

Table 2. Dimensions to Evaluate Mature Attitudes of Purchasing a New Car

Dimensions	Totally Agree	Agree	Natural	Disagree	Totally Disagree
Technological Dimension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level of industrialization (based on the manufacturing of goods instead of agriculture. measured by technological development, quality of HR, availability of finance, machine usage,). Level of technological research Level of literacy 					
Social Dimension Social Discipline					
Economic Dimensions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level of the standard of living(measured byGDP, consumer price sensitivity,) Stability of economic environment (measured by the change in GDP over time, consumer prices, unemployment rate,) Quality of products Existence of a welfare system(measured by equal opportunities for everyone and funded through taxation) Level of labour costs 					
Political Dimensions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democratic versus dictatorial system Capitalist versus communist system (measured by private vs public control over FOP,freedom of the market, degree of freedom of competition,). Civilian versus military system 					

Define descriptive research as "a process of recording and reporting phenomena; not primarily concerned with causes". A major purpose of many social scientific studies is to describe situations and events. The researcher observes and then describes what was observed. In descriptive studies, one might find a relationship between two variables, but still not be able to say why this relationship exists because no explanation has yet been given.

Data Collection: Our paper applies a qualitative research design, the research is based on meeting qualitative data that is neither assessable nor quantifiable. An interview with a sample of new passenger car buyers was conducted to examine how the country of origin image may affect their decision during COVID-19 Pandemic.

Population and Sampling: Our research is concerned with studying the relationship between country of origin image it and Car buyers' decision making in Egypt in the city of Cairo(Capital of Egypt) and Alexandria(North of Egypt)). The sampling technique used in convenience sampling, which involves selecting haphazardly those cases that are easiest to obtain for the study sample.

Focus Group Interviewing: By using focus group online as a research instrument, according to COVID-19 circumstances "Stay home- Work from home", the researchers conducted the questions through Zoom meeting application for 61 Egyptians (divided into 4 groups), in which a group of statements related to our paper' title was asked, the focus group were all 40 years and above, from Cairo - Alexandria, 50% Female-50% Male, All of them well educated, 25% are Housewives, the remaining are Businessmen, Employers, and Academics.

(Will COVID -19 Pandemic Change COOI Impact on Evaluation Stage of Mature Egyptians Buyers for a New Car)

- **Social Discipline Impact:** most of the respondents agreed that there is a **weak** relationship between the quality of passenger cars and a country's Social Discipline for COVID-19 Pandemic crises. (Totally Agree +Agree= **19.5%**)
- **Stability Economy Impact:** most of the respondents agreed that there is a **strong** relationship between the quality of passenger cars and a country's Stability

Economy for COVID-19 Pandemic crises. (Totally Agree +Agree =58%)

- **Governmental Management Impact:** most of the respondents agreed that there is a **strong** relationship between the quality of passenger cars and a country's Governmental Management for COVID-19 Pandemic crises. (Totally Agree +Agree = **58%**)
- **Political Response Impact:** most of the respondents agreed that there is a weak relationship between the quality of passenger cars and a country's Political Response for COVID-19 Pandemic crises. (Totally Agree +Agree = **19.5%**).
- However, some of the respondents doubted that the standards of the after-sales services, as well as the maintenance service, will not be as efficient as before the pandemic, and consequently, they might switch to another manufacturing car country that has better and more efficiently managed the COVID-19 pandemic crises

A Proposed Future Study: The researchers suggest a proposed study after COVID-19 pandemic- in the near future, - with more depth interview- the study entitled:

COVID-19 Pandemic Country's Management Impact on Country- of - Origin Image (COOI): Mature Attitudes of Purchasing a New Car

(Comparative Study): To compare between potential mature buyers in two countries or more, according to demographic variables (Income, Level of Education, Gender) The researcher suggests four dimensions to evaluate Mature Attitudes of Purchasing a New Car, it shows in the table (2) :

Conclusion

The world has never witnessed a crisis that affected the whole aspects of a country just as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. It did not just negatively affect the economic or financial markets of a given country/ies. However, its negative uncontrolled effect has expanded to include all aspects of life in the whole world. The response of countries varied significantly, there is nothing constant, developed countries that were expected to act in an A response, some of which have dramatically failed to contain the pandemic, while other countries including some developing countries have managed the crisis in an extraordinary unexpected way.

Accordingly, it was very important to start to explore the perception of consumers towards these changes when making a purchase decision as buyers evaluate brands differently when they know their COO. When applying an exploratory study on the sample, we found out that the economic, as well as the government management aspects, are the only two factors that may influence Egyptian buying decision when deciding to buy a new passenger car. This is because these two dimensions can influence the after-sales services as well as the maintenance service of the car. However, the other 2 dimensions that were examined, the social as well as the political response have a weak relation to that decision. Accordingly, that opens the floor for more investigations and researches to be carried out to compare between countries concerning buyers' buying perception on COO after the COVID-19 pandemic crises.

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