The influence of country-of-origin on consumers' purchase intention: a study of the Chinese smartphone market

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Abstract

Purpose – Due to the intense rivalry in the smartphone market, manufacturers of mobile phones are becoming increasingly interested in knowing the factors that influence consumers' purchase intention. This paper aims to examine the effect of country-of-origin image, brand image and attitude towards the brand on the purchase intention of smartphone users.

Design/methodology/approach – An empirical study was performed based on the information gathered from smartphone users. The structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was applied to examine the hypotheses.

Findings – The authors found that brand image and attitude towards the brand significantly influence consumer purchase intention. Additionally, there is an indirect effect even when the nation of origin image does not directly influence the consumer's purchase intention. Indeed, brand image and attitude towards the brand act as a mediator between the country-of-origin image and purchase intention.

Originality/value – This study presents a conceptual model on the impact of country-of-origin image on the propensity of consumers to buy smartphones in a field where little research has been done. The investigation offers a consumer-focused analysis regarding the country-of-origin image. This suggests a significant shift from the current strategy, which is frequently centered on the viewpoint of the companies.

Keywords Country-of-origin, Brand image, Attitude towards the brand, Purchase intention

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Smartphones have developed into a necessary communication tool in people's daily lives. Data from the International Telecommunication Union (2022), the United Nations specialized body in charge of information and communication technology matters, show that the number of mobile phones worldwide reached 8.6 billion in the past year, surpassing the world population. This indicates that several individuals use two or more mobile phones simultaneously. With around 6.6 billion smartphone users worldwide, China represents about 15% of total users (Statista, 2022a).

China has the world's significant smartphone market. Nearly all Chinese smartphone market share is divided between Vivo, OPPO, HONOR, Apple and Xiaomi. Only 16% of the market is taken up by other brands (Samsung, Meizu, Lenovo. . .) (Canalys, 2022). The competition among smartphone brands has gotten fiercer (Liao et al., 2021), and the demand for devices from China is dropping. According to Canalys (2022), Vivo is currently in the lead with 14.1 million units shipped, followed by OPPO with 12.1 million units. HONOR is in third place with 12.0 million units, followed by Apple in the fourth with 9.0 million units. To round out the top five, Xiaomi shipped 9.0 million units. Despite the dominance of Chinese smartphone brands, Apple, a U.S. company, is shipping an increasing number of devices, snatching market share from brands like Vivo and OPPO.

At present, China's 14th Five-Year Plan for Information and Communications Industry Development focuses on developing the digital economy. The overall information and communication sector will have grown to a size that is safe, dependable, green, intelligent and green by 2025. Innovation capability has increased significantly within the new digital infrastructure, which leads to the emergence of new business models and a thorough improvement in the capacity to drive digital transformation and upgrading in the social and economic spheres. These provide a solid foundation for building a robust manufacturing and digital nation.

In recent years, China's mobile phone industry has been highly valued by governments at all levels and supported by national industrial policies. A series of policies, including the Action Plan for the Collaborative Development of Dual-Gigabit Networks (2021–2023), the Action Plan for the Development of Basic Electronic Components Industry (2021–2023) and the Rules on the Scope of Necessary Personal Information for Common Types of Mobile Internet Applications, have been released by the government to promote the growth and innovation of the mobile phone industry. These policies provide a clear and broad market prospect for the development of the mobile phone industry, which also provide a suitable environment for companies' manufacturing and business dealings.

With the rapid growth of new technology and the saturation of the market, the criteria used to assess a nation's level of global competitiveness have also changed significantly (Gupta et al., 2018). Traditionally, the aspects of evaluating international competitiveness were based primarily on utilizing resources, namely natural, material and human. Following the emergence of knowledge and information society, the image of a country, the corporate image, the national image and other symbolic image factors are being adopted as vital criteria to explore international competitiveness (D'Astous and Ahmed, 1999; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2014; Yu et al., 2022). As a result, it is advantageous to create a favorable corporate brand image in the minds of consumers, which influences how they perceive and evaluate the brand by shaping their opinions, perceptions and attitudes (Lee and Lee, 2006).

The concept of origin image was first put forth by Schooler (1965), who claimed that the country-of-origin image directly influenced consumer perception of goods from that place. Reierson (1967), Chasin and Jaffe (1979), Johansson et al. (1985), and Keown and Casey (1995) conducted extensive research on this subject over a long period. It was found that the origin image impacts several variables at various degrees (Al Sulaiti and Baker, 1998; Alonso Dos Santos et al., 2022; Bernard et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2013).

Several authors have previously sought to clarify how the origin image effect is developed. Han (1989) made notable progress among them. He deduced that when consumers know little about the country or region where a product originates, their perception of the locality directly impacts their feelings about the goods. Batra et al. (2000) assert that consumers in developing nations are particularly susceptible to the effects of the country-of-origin construct. Wang (2003) also identified that the average level of consumer cognition is impacted by national, cultural, political, religious, and legal issues and is related to national economic growth. According to Oberecker et al. (2008), a direct link exists between consumer

affinities for a nation and their propensity to purchase goods from that place. Moreover, consumers' acceptance of products from other countries depends on the compatibility of the products with their own values and ideas (Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

Consequently, psychological characteristics like patriotism, loyalty and national honor impact consumers' perception of domestic and international products (Li *et al.*, 2021; Pentz *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, even if goods may not be of the highest quality, consumers are more likely to purchase them if they come from their nation. As a result, the country-of-origin image can influence consumers' purchase intention. Since companies are aware of this, they tend to utilize the country of origin as a marketing tool (Verlegh *et al.*, 2005). Using the phrase "Made in. . . " and placing quality and origin labels on items are two examples of marketing techniques companies use to inform consumers of the nation of origin of their goods subject to legislative restrictions. Other methods not subject to legal restrictions include the country of origin in the brand or the name of the product, such as embedding the national flag or other symbols, or showcasing iconic structures or typical landscapes from the country of origin (Aichner, 2014).

This study examines the effects of country-of-origin, brand image and attitude towards the brand of Chinese smartphone users on their purchase intentions. Additionally, the connections between the factors under consideration, and whether the brand image and the attitude towards the brand act as mediators are investigated.

Literature review and hypotheses
The effect of country-of-origin
The progression of multinational corporations has been inexorably linked to the phenomenon of globalization. A pivotal consequence of this global integration is the intricate national composition of many contemporary products, prompting a substantial redefinition of the conventional notion of "origin." Consequently, the concept now encompasses the location of the product's assembly or manufacture and the geographical source of its constituent components (Thakor and Lavack, 2003). Illustratively, some smartphone enterprises exemplify this paradigm shift. These companies often bifurcate their operations, conducting product design and development in one country while procuring parts from various nations. This practice, especially pervasive within the technology sector, underscores the growing significance of the product or brand's origin as a salient variable within numerous academic research studies (Ciravegna *et al.*, 2014; Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010; Laibach *et al.*, 2019).

The concept of the country-of-origin effect can be traced back to pioneering work by Schooler (1965), whose research illuminated the presence of an emotional bias among consumers when evaluating products contingent upon the product's country-of-origin. Therefore, the image associated with a product's country-of-origin holds the potential to significantly shape consumer perceptions, a phenomenon widely recognized as the "country-of-origin effect".

After Schooler's seminal work, researchers such as Drumwright (1994) and Peterson (1995) further bolstered this concept through their empirical investigations. Concurrently, Zbib *et al.* (2010) articulated a perspective wherein the country-of-origin image contributes to consumer's belief that products from a specific country possess a superior quality compared to those from other nations. For instance, common perceptions may hold that Japanese small household appliances epitomize quality, while French fashion embodies style. Chinese enterprises dominate the international market with competitively priced labor-intensive products, which leaves consumers with numerous adverse connotations that "Made in China" is a subpar and inferior product (Jo *et al.*, 2003; Oumlil, 2020; Veale and Quester, 2009).

Such stereotypes influence consumers' decision-making processes, profoundly impacting their product or service choices.

Consumers adopt a comprehensive perspective, attentively considering product attributes and origin. This phenomenon has been corroborated by research conducted by Frewer *et al.* (2013) and Yang *et al.* (2018), who established that a favorable perception of a product's origin positively influences consumer evaluations, subsequently enhancing their purchase intention. These findings align with the cognitive approach, supported by results from Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka (2022), which positions country-of-origin as one of the extrinsic cues within consumers' information processing, capable of exerting an impact on their purchase intentions.

When consumers possess limited knowledge about a brand's products, they often make inferences about product attributes (such as quality or reliability) based on their understanding of the country-of-origin (Han, 1989). This cognitive bias, known as the "halo effect," was first introduced by Thorndike (1920) and has been extensively examined within the marketing domain by numerous scholars (Burke *et al.*, 2018; Hien *et al.*, 2020; Koubaa, 2008; Leuthesser *et al.*, 1995; Panda and Misra, 2014; Wang, 2003; Woo, 2019). The "halo effect" operates on the premise that the image of origin is essentially a regional reputation, functioning as a reliable external cue for products (Josiassen *et al.*, 2013). The favorable origin image signifies that the region boasts a commendable reputation for producing a specific product type. This reputation acts like an expansive halo, casting a promising light on products manufactured within the entire region (Boatwright *et al.*, 2008; Han, 1989). Products associated with this positive reputation halo effectively bear an identity marker, endowing consumers with a dependable, consistent and trustworthy external reference for assessing product quality (Brodowsky, 1997). Conversely, a negative origin image yields opposite effects.

At the affective level, consumer emotions concerning a country can significantly influence its brand image. This phenomenon implies that consumers extend their emotional sentiments about a particular country to the brands operating within it. These feelings may originate from direct encounters, such as travel experiences or interactions with foreigners, as well as indirect exposures related to art, education and culture (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Specifically, "consumer ethnocentrism" refers to the particular situation in which consumers favor domestic brands over those from other nations regardless of the features of the goods (De Mooij, 2011). It is more prevalent in developed countries. Consequently, a favorable country-of-origin image is anticipated to yield a positive brand image for products from that nation.

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2008), consumers' attitude towards a specific brand encompasses their evaluations, emotional sentiments, and inclinations regarding that brand. Therefore, consumers' attitude towards a brand influences whether they will have a good or adverse reaction to the firm's products. Customers typically develop attitudes due to their experiences with the brand's products. Although the consumers' attitude towards a brand is defined by its permanency through time, this attitude can alter depending on factors including new experiences with its products, advertising and consumer satisfaction (Ghorban, 2012; Solomon, 2020). However, various factors can shape consumers' attitudes towards a brand.

Scholars have worked hard to confirm and establish a connection between consumer attitudes and country-of-origin perceptions (Oduro *et al.*, 2023). Hong and Kang (2006) conducted a study elucidating the substantial impact of the country-of-origin image on the consumers' attitudes. Their findings underscored that a country renowned for producing high-quality products tends to foster a positive attitude among consumers towards products from that country. Conversely, when individuals harbor hostile feelings towards a country, often due to political or social reasons, they resist accepting products from that particular

nation. This interplay between the country-of-origin image and consumer attitudes towards brands has been a subject of investigation across diverse product categories, including beer and personal computers (Chen, 2010), powder milk (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019) and even fictitious goods (Visbal *et al.*, 2017). In all instances, the research consistently concludes that the country-of-origin image positively influences consumer attitudes.

The following hypotheses are suggested in light of the information above:

H1. Country-of-origin image will positively affect purchase intention.

H2. Country-of-origin image will positively affect brand image.

H3. Country-of-origin image will positively affect attitude towards the brand.

The effect of brand image

Currently, buyers can choose from many goods on the market that share similar characteristics. Consumers may rely on their purchase decision on their views of the brands when they have limited information about the products or limited time to choose the one to buy. Kim and Chao (2019) utilized data gathered from young Chinese people to demonstrate that the intention to purchase minimal-involvement products was directly and favorably correlated with the brand image. The researchers' data show that brand image indirectly affected consumers' purchase intention of high-involvement products. According to Khuong and Tran (2018), consumers' intent to purchase the brand increases in proportion to how well-regarded that brand is perceived. Additionally, they emphasized the crucial mediating function of the brand image between several packaging traits and purchase intention.

As was previously mentioned, as customers assess a brand's products, they develop an attitude towards the goods that extends to the brand. Frequently, consumer views of the brand are impacted by that attitude. Therefore, consumers may have various attitudes towards products with comparable characteristics, depending on the brand. As outlined by Kamins and Marks (1991) and Elseidi and El-Baz (2016), they frequently hold more favorable brand attitudes for goods that have solid brand images. Along the same lines, Kim *et al.* (1996) provided evidence for the impact of brand image on customer brand attitudes in marketing communication.

Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4. Brand image will positively affect purchase intention.

H5. Brand image will positively affect attitude towards the brand.

The effect of attitude towards the brand

According to Kokkinaki and Lunt (1999), purchasing decisions frequently entail selecting between various brands within a particular product category. As a result, brand attributes influence consumers' purchasing decisions. When the products to choose from share many comparable qualities, the influence of the brand may be especially significant. In these circumstances, decisions on what to buy can be solely dependent on brand characteristics. As previously mentioned, brand image is one of the attributes that may influence customers' purchase intention.

Similarly, it appears logical to believe that consumers' past opinions about the brand's goods, or their attitude towards the brand, will likewise impact their final purchase decision. In this way, Lee *et al.* (2013) highlighted that satisfaction with previous purchases significantly affects consumers' perception of product features, brand attitude and intention to purchase. Based on several pieces of research, attitudes towards the brand favorably

influence purchase intention; as attitudes towards the brand improve, consumers are more likely to intend to buy the brand's products (Jung and Seock, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Sheeraz *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H6. Attitude towards the brand will positively affect purchase intention.

The relationships in the proposed hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

Methodology
Sample
The empirical research was conducted in China. Chinese smartphone users were the target population for the study. We selected the Chinese market since China is the world's largest smartphone market (Counterpoint, 2022). For data gathering, a volunteer sampling plan was considered. To this end, a web-based survey was carried out, and a link to an anonymous questionnaire was sent to a group of members of the population through various online platforms. Although 403 questionnaires were initially collected, some had to be excluded because they were not correctly filled out, resulting in a sample of 340 valid respondents.

Table 1 illustrates the demographic details of the respondents. The distributions of the sample investigated in this study and the target population are relatively close, using the information supplied by Statista (2022b, c) as a point of comparison. Among all responders, 67.6% were female and 73.8% were between 20 and 29 years old. The regions with the highest percentage of responders were Henan (30.9%), followed by Zhejiang (24.7%) and Beijing (22.6%). Most respondents held bachelor's degrees (54.7%), while roughly 23% had finished their post-graduate studies. Regarding the respondents' jobs, 31.8% were private employees, while 37.4% were students. Almost half of the respondents had no monthly income or earned less than 3,000 yuan (49.4%), even though 27.6% had monthly incomes above 5,000 yuan. A preference existed for Chinese smartphone brands (Huawei, Xiaomi, Vivo or Oppo) from 75.9% of the respondents, while 20.6% of them chose foreign companies like Apple.

Measures
The measurement items were adopted from previously completed investigations. The scales suggested by Parameswaran and Pisharodi (1994) and Rabêlo-Neto *et al.* (2018) were modified to measure the country-of-origin construct. Items adapted from Fan and Chen (2002) and Chen *et al.* (2006) were used to measure brand image. The measures developed by Keller (1993) and Ahn and Back (2018) were employed to determine attitudes towards the brand. Finally, items
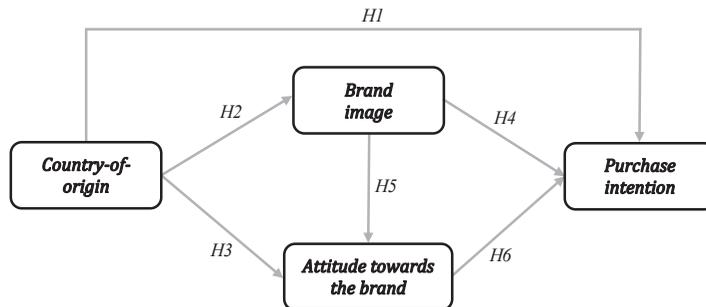

Figure 1.
Conceptual research model

Source(s): Author's own creation

Characteristic	Categories	Frequencies	(%)
Gender	Male	110	32.4
	Female	230	67.6
Age	Less than 20	26	7.6
	20–29	251	73.8
	30–39	41	12.1
	More than 39	22	6.5
Education	Elementary education	23	6.8
	Secondary education	53	15.6
	Bachelor degree	186	54.7
	Master degree	78	22.9
Occupation	Student	127	37.4
	Public employee	27	7.9
	Private employee	108	31.8
	Self-employed	26	7.6
	Unemployed	52	15.3
Monthly income	None	128	37.6
	Under 3,000 yuan	40	11.8
	3,000–5,000 yuan	78	22.9
	5,000–8,000 yuan	50	14.7
	Above 8,000 yuan	44	12.9
Favorite smartphone brand	Huawei	173	50.9
	Apple	70	20.6
	Xiaomi	35	10.3
	Vivo	27	7.9
	Oppo	23	6.8
	Others	12	3.6
Region	Henan	105	30.9
	Zhejiang	84	24.7
	Beijing	77	22.6
	Hebei	53	15.6
	Shandong	16	4.7
	Others	5	1.5

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 1.
Demographic
characteristics of the
respondents

from Kudeshia and Kumar (2017) and Vijaranakorn and Shannon (2017) were utilized to assess
purchase intention. A seven-point Likert-type scale was adopted, ranging from 1 (strongly
disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Table 2 has a complete list of all metrics.

Data analysis
A Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine latent variables' overall
validity and reliability. The reliability of the latent variables, as determined by the average
variance extracted (AVE) and construct reliability, was evaluated using standard estimate
loadings. The structural equation modeling (SEM) method was used with the LISREL
program to test the assumptions. Several indices were applied as indicators to test the
model's goodness of fit.

Results
Analysis of the psychometric properties of the scales
The convergent validity of the constructs was evaluated by analyzing item loadings, AVE,
and internal consistency. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and

Construct	Items	
Country-of-origin (COO)	The technological products of this country are of high quality	COO1
	The technological products of this country are made by highly qualified workmanship	COO2
	The technological products of this country are not imitations	COO3
	The technological products of this country are sold in many countries	COO4
	The technological products of this country are attractive	COO5
	The technological products of this country are reliable	COO6
Brand image (BI)	It is a great company	BI1
	The company has strong research, development and innovation capabilities	BI2
	The company has a good reputation	BI3
	The smartphones from this brand have excellent functions	BI4
	The variety of applications for this brand's smartphones is quite rich	BI5
	The brand's smartphones have a good design	BI6
Attitude towards the brand (ATT)	I find this smartphone brand attractive	ATT1
	I have a good impression of this smartphone brand	ATT2
	The smartphones from this brand can meet my needs	ATT3
	Buying a smartphone from this brand is a good decision	ATT4
	My attitude towards this smartphone brand is positive	ATT5
Purchase intention (PI)	If I were going to purchase a smartphone, I would consider buying it from this brand that originated from this country	PI1
	If I were shopping for a smartphone, the likelihood I would purchase it from this brand that originated from this country is high	PI2
	I intend to purchase smartphones from this brand and country in the future	PI3
	I would buy smartphones from this brand and country rather than any other available	PI4
	I would recommend other people to purchase smartphones from this brand and country	PI5

Table 2.
Questionnaire items

Source(s): Author's own creation

composite reliability (CR) scores. The findings showed that all items had factor loadings higher than 0.70, which indicated a high level of convergent validity. The individual reliability for each indicator (R^2) attained a result higher than the advised 0.50. The constructs' Cronbach's alpha and CR values were higher than the predicted cutoff point of 0.70, providing evidence of internal consistency. The fact that all AVE scores were higher than 0.50 further demonstrated the dataset's remarkable convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Table 3 provides a thorough summary of the findings, representing the convergent validity of the constructs.

Discriminant validity was assessed by contrasting the square root of the AVE for each construct with the correlations between the dimensions in the study model. As illustrated in Table 4, the criterion for discriminant validity put out by Fornell and Larcker (1981) is met because there exist no off-diagonal elements that are higher than the corresponding diagonal element, demonstrating the existence of discriminant validity.

Hypotheses testing
SEM was applied to investigate the relationships in the current research's hypothesized model. The structural equation model was tested employing the maximum-likelihood method in the LISREL software. The overall model fit and the regression paths were estimated to ascertain whether the suggested model adequately characterized the data.

Construct	Indicators	Loadings	R^2	α	CR	AVE
Country-of-origin	COO1	0.86	0.74	0.93	0.94	0.74
	COO2	0.80	0.64			
	COO3	0.86	0.74			
	COO4	0.84	0.70			
	COO5	0.89	0.80			
	COO6	0.90	0.81			
Brand image	BI1	0.81	0.66	0.93	0.94	0.74
	BI2	0.84	0.70			
	BI3	0.91	0.83			
	BI4	0.89	0.79			
	BI5	0.87	0.75			
	BI6	0.84	0.70			
Attitude towards the brand	ATT1	0.93	0.86	0.95	0.97	0.86
	ATT2	0.93	0.87			
	ATT3	0.91	0.83			
	ATT4	0.93	0.86			
	ATT5	0.93	0.86			
Purchase intention	PI1	0.95	0.90	0.96	0.97	0.88
	PI2	0.94	0.89			
	PI3	0.95	0.91			
	PI4	0.92	0.84			
	PI5	0.93	0.85			

Note(s): CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted
Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 3.
Confirmatory factor
analysis results

	COO	BI	ATT	PI
Country-of-origin (COO)	*0.86*			
Brand image (BI)	0.54	*0.86*		
Attitude towards the brand (ATT)	0.63	0.71	*0.93*	
Purchase intention (PI)	0.57	0.65	0.67	*0.94*

Note(s): Diagonal values in italics are square roots of average variances extracted; off-diagonal values are interconstruct correlations
Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 4.
Discriminant validity
results

Table 5 shows that the model fit is satisfactory. The chi-square was considerable at the 1% level. Moreover, the comparative fit index (CFI), the normed fit index (NFI) and the incremental fit index (IFI) all exceed the minimum recommended threshold of 0.90, while root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is less than 0.08. Therefore, all these values indicate adequate fit (Byrne, 1998; Hu and Bentler, 1999).

$\chi2$	df	p-value	CFI	NFI	IFI	RMSEA
322.50	203	0.000	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.042

Note(s): CFI = Comparative Fit Index; NFI = Normed Fit Index; IFI = Incremental Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 5.
Model-fit indices for
structural model

The paths of the proposed structural model are depicted in Figure 2. The model paths produced significant parameter estimates, except for Hypothesis 1, which suggests that the country-of-origin has no direct bearing on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.01$, $p > 0.05$). A significant and positive correlation between the country-of-origin and the brand image ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < 0.01$) is found in favor of Hypotheses 2. The path coefficient of 0.13, significant at a 5% level, also suggests a positive relationship between the country-of-origin and the attitude towards the brand. Consequently, Hypothesis 3 is confirmed. Additionally, Hypothesis 4 is supported by the structural relationship between the brand image and the purchase intention that is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$). The connection suggested in Hypothesis 5 is supported; specifically, brand image predicted the attitude towards the brand ($\beta = 0.82$, $p < 0.01$). The findings overwhelmingly confirm Hypothesis 6 by showing that the attitude towards the brand impacts the purchase intention ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$).

An additional mediation analysis was conducted after hypotheses testing. According to Hong and Wyer (1989) and Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000), the brand's locational origin influences how consumers perceive it, which in turn influences how they feel about the brand and how they decide whether or not to make a purchase. Frewer *et al.* (2013) also found that a favorable perception of the region where a brand was established can enhance the assessment of the goods made by consumers, positively impacting their purchase intention. In the relationship between the country-of-origin image and the purchase intention, the current study assessed the potential mediating role of brand image and customer attitude towards the brand. The statistical significance of the indirect mediating effects was tested using the bootstrap approach to achieve this. The bootstrap protocol developed by Shrout and Bolger (2002) was applied, utilizing 5,000 samples from the original data set. The results obtained are illustrated in Table 6.

It can be deduced that the indirect effects are statistically significant at the 5% level since the 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the estimates of the indirect effects does not include zero. Consequently, brand image and attitude towards the brand mediate the association between country-of-origin and purchase intention.

Finally, Table 7 presents an overview of the tests conducted on the hypotheses.

Conclusions and discussion

The current study offers a consumer-focused analysis regarding the country-of-origin image. This implies a significant shift from the prevailing approach, which is frequently centered on
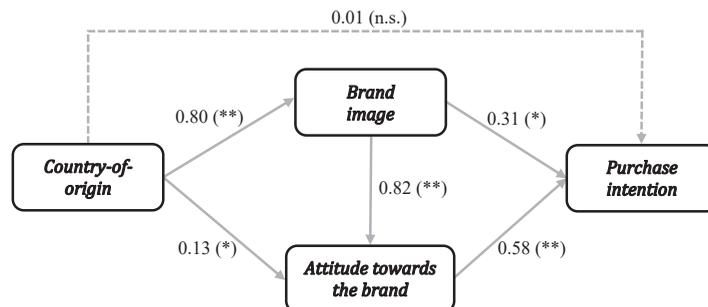

Figure 2.
Results of structural
equation model

Note(s): (*) $p < 0.05$; (**) $p < 0.01$; n.s. = non-significant
Source(s): Author's own creation

the viewpoint of the companies. Researchers examined both the direct and indirect effects of the country-of-origin image on Chinese consumers' intention to purchase smartphones.

The findings show that while the country-of-origin image did not directly influence consumers' purchase intention, an indirect effect was seen. This aligns with previous investigations such as Kim *et al.* (2017), Augusta *et al.* (2019), and Hien *et al.* (2020), which found a positive direct impact of the origin image on the consumer purchase decision of goods, like appliances, fashion collections or cosmetics. Furthermore, the current findings support other investigations emphasizing smartphones, where it was found that the country-of-origin image did have an influence on consumer purchase intention (Sevanandee and Damar-Ladkoo, 2018; Yunus and Rashid, 2016). The findings of this study, in particular, demonstrated that brand image and consumer attitudes towards the brand can mediate the effect of country-of-origin on consumer purchase intention. These results partially corroborate those of Tulipa and Muljani (2015), who identified that brand image acted as a mediating factor between the country-of-origin and the purchase intention for mobile phones. Nevertheless, based on statistical research, the mediator effect of brand attitudes towards the brand was insignificant.

Additionally, it has been found that a positive brand image might influence consumers' attitudes towards the brand favorably. This result supports findings from previous investigations on the beneficial effects of brand image on attitude towards the brand, such as Jalilvand *et al.* (2012), which include destination image, and Ramesh *et al.* (2019), that centered on fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. They found that brand image served as a precursor to the attitude towards the brand, claiming that if the brand performs well, consumers will be delighted, resulting in a favorable mindset.

Implications
In a field where little research has been done, this study proposes a conceptual model for the relationship between customers' inclination to purchase smartphones and the influence of country-of-origin image. Generally, the existing literature primarily examines the impact of

Independent variable	Mediator variable	Dependent variable	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI indirect effect (lower and upper)
Country-of-origin →	Brand image →	Purchase intention	0.266	0.066	0.288, 0.562
Country-of-origin →	Attitude towards the brand →	Purchase intention	0.413	0.069	0.148, 0.405

Note(s): SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval
Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 6.
Bootstrap analyses of the magnitude and statistical significance of indirect effects

Hypothesis	Path	Result
H1	Country-of-origin → Purchase intention	Partially supported
H2	Country-of-origin → Brand image	Supported
H3	Country-of-origin → Attitude towards the brand	Supported
H4	Brand image → Purchase intention	Supported
H5	Brand image → Attitude towards the brand	Supported
H6	Attitude towards the brand → Purchase intention	Supported

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table 7.
Summary of hypotheses testing

country-of-origin or comparable factors on consumers' desire to purchase things. However, this study bases its conceptual model on the idea that various factors shape consumers' intentions to buy smartphones, using country-of-origin image as the independent variable, brand image and attitude towards the brand as mediator variables, and purchase intention as the dependent variable. As a result, this research can serve as a starting point for future studies that examine variables such as country-of-origin image, brand image and attitude towards the brand.

The study's findings indicate that the image of origin indirectly influences consumers' willingness to purchase smartphones through the mediating factors of brand image and attitude. Given the increasing consumer demand for smartphones and the many choices available, brand managers should be vigilant. This is crucial as any harm to the brand image and disapproval from consumers may result in a decline in their willingness to buy.

Foreign brands could cooperate with domestic brands to customize their marketing strategies to the preferences of domestic consumers in order to do thorough optimization and adjustment. The acceptance of products by consumers of goods from other nations is contingent upon how well they align with their values and perceptions, as stated by Zhang et al. (2022). Consequently, it is critical for companies to comprehend consumer expectations and their characteristics, including brand awareness, which will enable them to succeed in the unfamiliar foreign markets (Qu et al., 2021).

Chinese companies can benefit from the government's dual role as the primary shareholder and a crucial reputation source (Fan, 2007). Although the Chinese government has been promoting a favorable country image in recent years (Yu and Liu, 2018), it should continue to enhance the national image while advancing the state of science and technology and fostering a favorable climate to promote the nation's businesses. Consequently, China should boost its foreign promotion of its favorable image by fully showcasing its bounties through the media.

Brand managers should also strive to strengthen the country-of-origin image through advertising and public relations. Marketing professionals can also use this work as a guide, defining and putting into practice specific strategies targeted at improving consumers' image of the brand to encourage more favorable sentiments towards it. Professionals must strive to imply that the products are of high quality, considering the quality of the products is a fundamental component of the brand image. For instance, professionals should emphasize that the goods are produced with suitable resources, by qualified workers and under strictly controlled processes. As a result, any product that enters the market will be regarded as high caliber, which can boost brand image and attitudes towards it and consumers' purchase intention.

From the social perspective, the study's results offer insights into consumer patterns in mobile phone purchases. Additionally, the study reveals that consumers can become cognizant of how country-related stereotypes influence their buying decisions, leading them to modify or prioritize the product's country of origin over other features.

Limitations and future research

This investigation has several limitations that might stimulate future lines of research. One of these limitations is related to the nonprobabilistic nature and limited sample size. Additionally, although the questionnaire was distributed online to consumers through various online platforms from different Chinese provinces, the most reliable responses were from smartphone users residing in a particular area. As an extension of this work, the sample might be expanded to include customer responses from other provinces to make it even more representative.

Another limitation is that, despite analysis of user perceptions of the smartphone brand, various dimensions have not been considered. Therefore, it is not possible to know what factors influence their purchase intention. Consequently, it would be beneficial to distinguish between the user, corporate and product images to understand these elements better. This would present specific cues for companies that market smartphones.

Finally, it would also be compelling to distribute the questionnaire in different nations and examine whether cultural differences affect the findings.

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