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Management perspectives on country of origin

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to provide a new perspective by conceptualising country of origin (COO) from a management perspective, identifying the impact different COO constructs have in the context of fashion retailer and manufacturer businesses.

Design/methodology/approach –This qualitative study comprises a series of in-depth interviews with key informants from large-scale fashion retailers and manufacturers in the UK.

Findings - The major findings of this research demonstrate that COO is considered a strategic business imperative but manifests in a variety of ways depending on brand positioning, long-term strategic plans, expertise, and brand values etc.

Research implications - This study contributes to the body of knowledge about the importance of COO. The findings of this research will have practical implications for manufacturers and retailers, informing the debate on the value of the ‘Made in [..]’ epithet.

Research limitations – Findings are limited to the UK fashion clothing industry.

Originality/value – This research presents a new perspective on the COO construct, addressing it from a management rather than consumer perspective. It argues that COO can be considered as a strategic dimension, which is manifested in a variety of ways. COO has been extensively researched from a consumer point of view but this research takes a new approach by presenting findings from a managerial point of view, with fashion manufacturing and retail branding as the context.

Keywords – Country of Origin, Branding, Retail, Fashion, Manufacturing,

Paper Type – Research paper

1.0. Introduction

The country of origin (COO) ‘effect’ on consumer perceptions and purchasing intentions has long been of interest to researchers (e.g. Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Hester and Yuen, 1987; Lee *et al.*, 2013; Lim and O’Cass, 2001; Sharma, 2011; Thakor and Kohli, 1996). In general, COO is epitomised by the ‘Made in [...]’ epithet, referring to the place of manufacture (Parkvithee and Miranda, 2012), and has been regarded as an effective branding tool, as consumers perceive product quality (and other attributes) based on where it was made. Moreover, various authors have suggested that consumers’ perceptions of, and associations with, the country of origin are often influenced by the reputation (with regard to various attributes) of the country in question (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2011; Inch and McBride, 1998; Inch and McBride, 2004; Jiménez and Martin, 2012; Li and Wyer, 1994; Lim and O’Cass, 2001; Michaelis *et al.*, 2008; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999).

Previous studies have identified a range of COO constructs, such as country of brand origin, country of design, country of manufacturing, country of parts etc. In part this is a response to the evolving global economy, where the ‘Made in [...]’ epithet may no longer fully correspond to the product/brand’s home country. Thakor and Kohli (1996) consider country of brand origin and brand image (see also Samiee *et al.*, 2005), suggesting that consumers may have limited knowledge about the origin of the brand. According to Samiee *et al.* (2005), country of brand origin can be associated with the location of the brand owner’s headquarters, regardless of where the *actual* product was manufactured. Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) and Essoussi and Merunka (2007) investigated the effect of country of design and country of manufacturing on consumer perceptions, suggesting that it is the place where the physical product with which the brand is generally associated is actually designed or conceived, that is important. Chao (2001) and Ha-Brookshire (2012) examined the hybrid effect of country of parts (defined as the country where the product’s constituent parts are manufactured) and country of manufacturing on consumers’ behaviour and product evaluation.

Such complexity is symptomatic of the fashion industry, because different aspects of production are frequently located in different countries. Thus, product manufacture (i.e. sewing and finishing) may take place in a country where labour costs are cheap, rather than where it was designed (Parkvithee and Miranda, 2012), and, moreover, the raw materials such as fabric or yarn, and other components (e.g. zips, trims and buttons) used in the product may be sourced from another country entirely. All of this activity may take place in countries, which are not associated by consumers with the origin of the actual brand itself (Samiee *et al.*, 2005; Thakor and Kohli, 1996).

To date, the existing literature on COO constructs has largely focused on consumer/purchasing related issues. An organisational/management perspective is neglected by comparison, especially in the context of the fashion industry, characterised as it is by a blurring of the distinction between retailer and manufacturer brands (see Davies, 1992; McColl and Moore, 2011, 2014). Consequently, the objectives of this paper are: (1) to review the existing COO literature with particular emphasis on evaluating its constituent constructs; and (2) analyse industry experts' perceptions of COO in the context of the UK fashion industry (comprising both retail and manufacturer brand perspectives).

In providing new insights to the perceived relevance and implications of the various COO constructs from representatives of the fashion industry, the paper contributes to the understanding of COO in a specific fashion marketing and branding context. Another contribution of the paper is to consider these issues with reference to the differences between fashion retail brands and manufacturer brands, which have become increasingly blurred in recent years. A final contribution relates to providing evidence relevant to management practitioners in the fashion industry, which will inform the development of branding strategy, to more effectively use country of origin as a branding tool in the global economy.

The paper is divided into six sections, as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of the research, highlighting the research gap it seeks to fill, followed by an articulation of the research objectives. Section 2 reviews existing literature on COO, discussing components and concepts from consumer's perspective. Section 3 provides an overview of the changes that have occurred in the UK fashion industry (encompassing both manufacturing and branding), as well as differences between manufacturer brands and retail brands. Section 4 presents the methodology and section 5 outlines the findings on COO perspectives, using a thematic, template analysis approach, drawing meaning out of the qualitative, in-depth interviews with the key informants. Finally, section 6 provides a commentary with regard to the relevance and implications of the various COO constructs from management perspectives, as well as discusses the theoretical contribution of COO to in relation to retail marketing and branding.

2.0. Literature Review: Country of Origin Constructs

Various authors (e.g. Chao, 1993, Chao 2001; Magnusson *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993; Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999) have examined country of origin in the context of different product categories and international markets. COO is generally

associated with the country where the product is manufactured (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). However, in the evolving global economy, where ‘Made in [...]’ is a more fluid concept, COO has been reconceptualised into different constructs (e.g. country of assembly, country of manufacturing, country of parts, country of design and country of brand origin), defined in Table 1. Consequently, Li *et al* (2000) indicated that, apart from the ‘Made in [...]’ epithet, other facets of COO can influence consumers’ product evaluations (Ahmed and d’Astous, 2003; Chao, 1993; Tse and Lee, 1993): for example, country of manufacturing may be associated with serviceability, workmanship, and economy; country of assembly may affect consumers’ product evaluations on functional aspects (e.g. performance and reliability); whereas, country of design may influence product image, aesthetics, and other aspects.

Table 1: Country of Origin Constructs Definitions

Concept	Definition	Indicative author (s)
Country of Manufacturing	Country of manufacturing (COM) as a place where the actual product is manufactured, which included the final assembling, packaging, product marking and the sewing.	Insch and McBride, 1998; Fetscherin, 2010
Country of Parts	Country of parts (COP) is the country where the majority of the materials used in the product and/or component parts were made or manufactured.	Ha-Brookshire, 2012; Insch and McBride, 2004; Chowdhury and Ahmed, 2009
Country of Design	Country of design (COD) refers to the country where the final product was initially conceptualized, conceived and engineered.	Essoussi and Merunka, 2007; Insch and McBride, 2004; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001
Country of Brand Origin	Country of brand origin is associated with the location of the brand owner’s headquarters, regardless of where the <i>actual</i> product was manufactured, or the country with which consumers associate it with.	Samiee <i>et al.</i> , 2005; Thakor and Kohli, 1996

According to various authors (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Johansson and Nebenzahl, 1986), country of manufacture is an important information cue, which affects quality and brand image perceptions of the product. Ercan (2010) suggested that consumers are often willing to pay more for products manufactured in countries that are economically developed and democratic. Barta *et al* (2000) examined the non-quality related, direct effect of a brand’s country of origin on brand attitude and purchasing intention, finding that Chinese consumers’ animosity towards Japan reduced purchases of brands with Japanese associations, regardless of their intrinsic

quality. Thus, consumers' attitude towards country of brand origin can be influenced by cultural values and perceptual stereotypes.

Chao (2001) found that consumers have greater confidence in information relating to country of design than country of manufacturing, particularly as country of manufacturing has lost much of its informational value due to the increasing prevalence of outsourcing (Ercan, 2010). Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) argued that country of design has no impact on the consumer when assessing product quality, and consequently, country of manufacturing is valued more when assessing product quality (see also, Chowdhury 2010). Ahmed and d'Astous (2008) and Chao (1993) found that both country of parts and country of design affected perceptions of product quality. Indeed, country of parts is often acknowledged as adding value to the brand image (Chowdhury, 2010; Han and Terpstra, 1988), particularly because consumers access and evaluate product quality based on the 'material' used therein. Ha-Brookshire (2012) examined the hybrid effect of country of parts and country of manufacturing on consumer behaviour and product evaluation, and found that U.S. consumers consider cotton production or apparel manufacturing in the United States to be more sustainable than that in China. In addition, the evaluative criteria that consumers use to access the product quality are often impacted by the consumer's 'summary construct', or 'halo' effect associated with the country image (Ahmed *et al.*, 2012; Han and Terpstra, 1988; Niss, 1996; Tigli *et al.*, 2010).

3.0. The UK Fashion Retail Industry

An important theme in the fashion literature highlights how the industry is subject to apparently constant change, arising from quick response, flexible approaches, the constant drive to offer innovative products to consumers (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Hines and Bruce, 2001), and the consumer's appetite for cheap clothing (Donnell *et al.*, 2012). Concomitant developments such as the growth of retail brands, internationalization and the reduction of costs (e.g. Fernie and Perry, 2011; McColl and Moore, 2011, 2014; Mellahi *et al.*, 2002), have forced companies in the fashion industry to source globally. This involves coordinated efforts to secure resources (e.g. technologies, materials, parts, and finished products) on a global scale (Kotabe and Helsen, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2000).

To facilitate this, many fashion retailers have reconfigured organisational boundaries by having their own-branded products, designed in-house by suppliers and/or other third party designers. They also source manufacture of fabric and other components, and actual product assembly, in other countries to achieve competitive locational advantages, such as low labour costs and cheap

transportation costs (Hamzaoui and Merunka, 2006; McCormick *et al.*, 2014). These developments have implications for the COO concept, especially as the retailers themselves are regarded as brands in their own right (Davies, 1992; McColl and Moore, 2011; McColl and Moore, 2014; Mitchell *et al.*, 2012), with implications, for example, for the notion of country of brand origin.

In contrast, manufacturer brands, by definition, are owned by manufacturing organisations (Chimhundu *et al.*, 2010), and are responsible for all aspects of the brand's development, production, transportation, promotion, and support. Dicken (2015) points out that some manufacturer brands were also regarded as actual manufacturers in their own right, as they had ownership on the manufacturing facilities, but due to the high production costs, most manufacturer brands now use offshore sub-contractors, whilst some have moved their facilities overseas, and thus, still regard themselves as manufacturers. According to Ailawadi and Keller (2004), manufacturer brands are stocked by retailers in order to generate customer interest, patronage and store loyalty. In this respect, manufacturer brands arguably operate as an 'ingredient-brand' (Martenson, 2007), which pulls customers into the store. However, as many retailers sell manufacturer brands, they consequently do not necessarily act as a differentiating factor (Martenson, 2007), notwithstanding the fact that consumers generally trust the quality of manufacturer brands, as the leading manufacturer brands have a strong reputation for producing high quality products (Keller, 2003).

However, the emergence and influence of fashion retail branding since the 1990s (see Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Burns, 2012; Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007; Mellahi *et al.*, 2002) has forced manufacturer brands to view fashion retail brands as key competitors to their own products and services. In the UK, this increased competition has been manifest in the emergence of indigenous new retail own-brands, such as Principles, Next and River Island, as well as from foreign fast fashion retailers such as Kookai, H&M, Zara, and Mango, (McColl and Moore, 2011). This has increased demand for global sourcing, as the fashion industry had to respond to market volatility quickly, providing new fashion trends in a shorter timescale (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Thus, faced with the increase in global sourcing (and resulting emphasis on economies of scale), as well as greater levels of market segmentation and differentiation in retailing (Burt and Davies, 2010; Davies, 1992; McColl and Moore, 2014), many manufacturers have increasingly moved towards global manufacturing systems, and developed their brands through their own dedicated retail channels (as well as continued wholesaling through third-party distributors), in order to develop brand identity. Although, these developments have long been an area of interest for many researchers (e.g. Davies, 1992; Davies, 1998; McColl and Moore, 2011; McCormick *et al.*, 2014; Broyles *et al.*, 2011; Glynn *et al.*, 2012; Martenson, 2007), the distinction between retail brands and

manufacturer brands in the UK fashion context remains an under-researched area, especially with regard to managerial perceptions of the importance of country of origin. This study, therefore, aims to analyse the views of industry experts from different fashion retailers, brands and manufacturers in relation to this issue.

4.0 Methodology

An interpretive, qualitative approach (Doherty, 2000) was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of managerial interpretations of the *meaning* of ‘country of origin’ in the context of fashion retail and manufacturer brands. The study used a key informant approach to respondent selection (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006), with respondents chosen, using a judgement sampling approach (Birtwistle *et al.*, 1999), because of their knowledge and influence on branding and manufacturing strategies (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Moore *et al.*, 2010). The study comprised eleven semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with key informants representing ten major UK fashion brands (See Table 2), incorporating both retailers and manufacturers, all of whom had used COO as part of an overall branding strategy. For reasons of commercial confidentiality, participating organisations cannot be identified (Doherty, 2000).

Table 2: Retail Brands and Industry Experts

Company	Organisation Type	Interviewee Position
Company A	Pure own brand - Fast fashion retailer	1) Buyer 2) Buyer
Company B	Pure own brand - Quality led retailer	1) Head of Department
Company C	Premium brand - Performance design led retailer	1) Designer
Company D	Premium brand - Performance design led retailer	1) Buyer
Company E	Premium brand - Manufacturer brand and manufacturer	1) CEO
Company F	Premium fashion - Manufacturer brand	1) Marketing Director
Company G	Multi-channel own brand retailer	1) Buyer
Company H	Component supplier	1) President of Apparel and Footwear

Company I	Clothing manufacturer and suppliers for high street fashion retailer	1) Technical Manager
Company J	Designers and manufacturers for design led brands	1) Senior Fabric Technologist

Interview questions were derived from the existing literature on fashion brand management (e.g. Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2010; Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013), and designed to ascertain respondents' understanding of the term 'country of origin', whether country of origin was considered important, which dimensions of country of origin were considered most relevant to the respondent's specific situation, and any particular issues associated with the use of 'country of origin'. All interviews were held in respondents' offices, and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and data were transcribed. Using an inductive approach, the data were analysed manually, using the template analysis technique (King and Horrocks, 2011), described as a particular way of thematically analysing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; King and Horrocks, 2011; Mark and Yardley, 2004), systematically identifying themes and patterns of meaning, or meaning-making process (King and Horrocks, 2011).

5.0 Findings

The findings are structured according to three key themes: (1) the understanding and importance of country of origin; (2) the perceived importance and use of specific COO constructs; and (3), issues relating to the use of the COO construct.

5.1. *The Meaning of Country of Origin*

Results indicate agreement among respondents on the definition of country of origin, articulating it in somewhat legalistic terms, in terms of place of *manufacture*: "It has a legal definition, which is about the place where the majority of manufacturing takes place in process, such as the last sewing of the product and final packaging" (Head of Department, Company B), or, more succinctly, "...where it is made" (Buyer 2, Company A), and "...where it is manufactured" (Designer, Company C).

All respondents indicated that in a UK context, explicit labelling which indicates country of manufacturing is not necessarily required for fashion clothing products. However, if this information is provided in labelling on the product, the company must provide the correct details:

“...labelling is not a legal requirement for fashion clothing products, but if a company wishes to display [information about country of manufacture], then they must provide the correct detail, as it is illegal to misrepresent the country of manufacturing” (Head of Department, Company B).

However, most respondents from the retail industry do consider the use of labelling as important because it enables customers to make informed purchasing decisions:

“...labelling is appropriate for us, because it gives our customers a choice of whether (or not) they wish to buy the product. So basically our customers don’t care if the product is made in China, but if they wish to make [an assessment of] the quality of the product based on where product is ‘Made in [...]’, we give them the choice to do that” (Head of Department, Company B).

5.2. *Perceived Importance of Country of Origin*

Different aspects of the country of origin construct were considered important, depending upon the retailer’s and manufacturer’s expertise, their long-term strategic plans, and the promise of quality that the organization offers. All respondents viewed country of origin as important, with reference to product quality, labour cost, and technologies used: “I would say country of manufacturing is what I associate with, when thinking about whether the quality of the garment is good or not”, (Designer, Company C).

Another respondent reiterated the importance of this particular construct:

“... the labour cost is still a massively important part of the total production cost, and there is still some fundamental automation required for the assembling of garment, which is relatively cheap in China, Vietnam, and other such countries, because of their wages” (CEO, Company E).

However, to develop British resources, it has been suggested that it is important for the UK industry to develop automation, capacity and capabilities in order to grow garment production opportunities

in the UK. In other words, the fashion industry requires machinery, space and skills to produce and sell ‘Made in Britain’ products. For example:

“...grow the capacity and capability in order to grow the garment production opportunities, because if you are considering producing a ‘Made in Britain’ product, then it’s great to see the majority of that product’s input including yarns and fibres and finished cloth is made in the UK” (CEO, Company E).

Agreement was also evident regarding the association between home country production and proximity, suggesting that country of origin is considered important for retailers that are looking to reduce lead time in order to respond to changing fashion trends, which in turn increases the chances of attracting younger market towards the brand and also facilitates development of a unique brand image by providing something different in the market:

“‘Made in [..]’ heavily influences the business in terms of providing delivery, especially since we have home production, which means we can work real close, having things made in and in the store within weeks” (Buyer 1, Company A).

Proximity also “...provides quick turn over, cost of transporting is nothing, and the stock comes in less bulk” (Buyer 2, Company A).

In addition, country of origin in relation to manufacturing products in the home country (or proximate locations) is also considered important, because the buying teams often encounter language barriers and cultural differences when dealing with Asia-Pacific countries, such as India, and China. For example, one respondent noted:

“We want to relocate our manufacturing system to nearby countries, to prevent the language barriers we face when dealing suppliers overseas. Even though we have our agents who do speak English, however, there is still a struggle, as not everyone can communicate in English, and of course, we don’t speak their language” (Buyer, Company G).

Furthermore, country of origin from a manufacturer perspective was also described as important in terms of consumers forming a perception about a country's image, especially with the influence of the media:

“Country of origin is very important, especially because customers today are aware of where the garments are made, and if the garments are made in a country that is deemed as a third world country, or doesn't have the correct structure in place, working ethics, such as long working hours, wages, and safety standards, then that puts people off” (Buyer 2; Company A).

5.3. *Perceived Importance and Use of Specific Country of Origin Constructs*

As noted above in section 5.1 and 5.2, respondents appeared to primarily associate the notion of COO in terms of country of manufacture, considering its importance with reference to fast fashion and providing a unique selling point. However, the importance and use of other sub-constructs of COO were also mentioned, as discussed below.

5.3.1. Country of Brand Origin

Country of brand origin is considered important for both fashion retailer and manufacturer brands, as it often incorporates an emotional association with many years of brand history and heritage:

“...the origin of the brand is important because the name of the brand represents the heritage, history associated with the name of the two directors, who are currently also the existing owners, of the company, and the brand has an association with a particular sport, because the two owners were the captain of the national team, and then after they started this company start naming after themselves” (Buyer, Company G).

“The brand having British heritage is huge, especially being owned by the [...] family, so it's quite a family business” (Buyer 2, Company A).

Additionally, respondents indicated that retail brands often communicate the origin of the brand through a sub-brand collection:

“...you will probably see it [COO] more on the sub-brand collection, [...] named after the brand’s original name, and this is how the company started, which is still under the umbrella of the brand, and then the same goes for menswear, which is named after the location where the brand store was first established” (Buyer 2, Company A).

For representatives of manufacturer brands, the origin of the brand is important because it is associated with the core brand values, and because it appeals to the international market:

“As an original outdoor British brand, and as the official suppliers to [a particular outdoor national team], we proudly make use of the tag line/Union Jack label, when selling products internationally, because ‘British’ sells as quality. Also, we don’t particularly feel the need to communicate this in the UK as the market here is already aware of the brand heritage and history” (CEO, Company E).

Finally, for manufacturers, the origin of the brand comes to play an important when they are supplying to premium brands that have some sort of connotation to royalty. For example:

“...we supply manufactured products to [a premium brand] that was worn by Princess Kate Middleton, so this is why the British image is important to us” (Senior Fabric Technologist, Company J).

5.3.2. Country of Parts

Respondents’ views were consistent with regard to the importance of the material used in the product, with suggestions that this is due the actual cost of the material which is described as the biggest proportion in garment production: “...with 60% of the cost in the material, and 40% of the cost is then the manufacturing of the actual clothing” (President of Apparel and Footwear, Company H).

Moreover, country of parts is considered as one of the most important constructs for manufacturer brands, because such brands have either pioneered the use of a particular material, or have produced the material:

“...we are known for the [material] used in the jacket, and thus, we continue manufacturing such jackets in the owned factory in the UK” (Marketing Director, Company F).

“...we pioneered the use of [...] components’, which is stitched in [...], laminated in Scotland” (CEO, Company E).

Country of parts is an important construct for the fashion retailers among the respondents, because it is considered as an effective communication tool, especially when associated with a recognized prestige country image:

“The best quality leather is associated with Italian and Brazilian nations, and thus, is considered as a great selling point because consumers immediately associate it with quality leather, and therefore, this often translates to customers through the store” (Buyer 2, Company A).

However, the importance of the country from which the parts are sourced is dependent upon the price, quality and expertise of the country in question. As one respondent noted:

“So we source from various countries based on their expertise, price, and qualities. For example on woven fabric, if we wanted some heavily embroidered products, then that is sourced from India, and for knitwear that comes from China, just because that's where the yarns are sourced from” (Buyer, Company D).

A respondent with a more technical background suggested, that the cost of material is compared between different countries before the final sourcing decision is made:

“If it is cotton it will come from Pakistan, if it's polyester, it's China. So when they are getting priced up for a product, they do the cross-costing, which means that the costing is done from Pakistan, China, India and Bangladesh, from their suppliers, and if the garment is made in China, and the polyester is made in China, then of course the cost of the product will also come cheap” (Technical Manager, Company I).

5.3.3. Country of Design

In the fashion context, the country of design is important because design elements such as the construction of the silhouettes and patterns reflect the style of the garment, which impacts upon the product image, and the brand image:

“We split the design team into several groups, with some designers doing the detail on the research that is felt right for the season, while others do research on the colour and the overall silhouette. The design team then gets together; discusses the idea with garment technology, which then look into this, to make sure that the labels are in the right place, and also help with a pattern and silhouette cutting, if the designers are unsure” (Designer, Company C).

Furthermore, country of design, in particular, is described as an important aspect by the design-led retailer brands and manufacturer brands, because the designers in the company have the opportunity to work close to the head office functions, which enables them to design the appropriate style for the relevant market, as well as have control over functional and aesthetic elements of the product. Likewise, working closely with the brand also provides an opportunity to manipulate the product style and add features as needed, for the market

“As an in-house design team, there are several responsibilities such as doing research on the season, on the detail that is considered important, colour, silhouettes and etc, and putting together those ideas as a mood board. The ideas are then presented to the agents in Germany and Canada. As both countries’ climate and consumers are different, we then have to find a design solution, to ensure that it meets the agent’s feedback. So working in-house gives us the control to take in that feedback and change the design immediately, as per needs” (Designer, Company C).

“...to be honest, I would prefer products designed in the western part of the world, especially in the UK, Europe, North American, because that is the style we have in the Europe. In my previous job, we used to go to the Chinese market hall, in China, and buy ready-made garments to sell basically. Their factories then designs and produces the garment, without actually having any knowledge and understanding about our fashion style, which then results in different fashion from what is worn here in Britain” (Designer, Company C).

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The aims of this paper were: (1) To review the existing literature on country of origin with particular emphasis on evaluating its constituent constructs; and (2) analyse industry experts' perceptions of COO in the context of the UK fashion industry (comprising retail and manufacturer brands). The findings of this research contribute towards the literature of fashion marketing and branding, providing new knowledge on the area of COO from an industry perspective. This will inform an understanding of country of origin and what it means to fashion retail brands and manufacturer brands, how important each component of COO is depending on brands core values, mission and vision and how it is used as a branding tool.

The understanding of country of origin from both retailer and manufacturer perspectives was consistent with Bilkey and Nes (1982) and Han and Terpstra (1988), linking it to the place where the last finishing of the product takes place, thereby equating it with the 'Made in [...]' epithet. Indeed, as noted above, country of manufacture is becoming increasingly important among retailers that are brands in their own right, especially in the fast fashion sector, given the need to respond to market demand quickly, arising from rapidly changing fashion trends (e.g. Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006). As a result, proximity, labour cost, material cost, and fast service are the key considerations and influence the choice of country of manufacture. This corresponds with the existing literature (Li *et al.*, 2000), which established that country of origin is associated with technology, labour costs, cost of materials, quality, delivery performance, and the product cycle time.

Existing literature (Samiee *et al.*, 2005; Thakor and Kohli, 1996) highlights that the country of brand origin is considered to be important from consumer's perspective, concerning the place where the headquarters of the brands are located at, or to the country to which consumers associate a brand with. However, the findings of this study, from both retail and manufacturer brand perspectives have established that the COO of a brand is associated with the place where the brand originated and developed, the location where the founder of the company was from, and to any family/heritage history relating to the brand. Thus, this study indicates that industry perceptions of the importance of COO also relate to emotional values, history and heritage, as communicated in branding strategies. Indeed, the emotional values of brand origin vary in different types of fashion brands, and are dependent upon brand longevity. Nevertheless, the way in which the country origin of the brand is communicated differs depending upon the value, mission and vision of the company concerned. For example, manufacturer brands that are increasingly involved in competing in international markets frequently apply the national image on branded product (e.g. the use of Union Jack, tagline and place marketing) to add value and compete. In contrast, retailers that are brands in

their own right, manifest brand origin in a brand message by establishing sub-brand names and products that have associations with the country, location, and brand history: for instance, in 2011 River Island introduced a sub-brand under the name ‘Chelsea Girl’ (Intel, 2013), targeting the younger market. Another example of a retail brand manifesting brand origin via sub-brand name is ‘Best of British’ collection of M&S. Thus, it can be concluded that retail and manufacturer brands do use country of brand origin as a branding strategy. However, their branding strategies vary depending upon the brand positioning, expertise, history, customer segmentation, and product characteristics (e.g. price and quality). This, therefore, contributes towards the literature of retail marketing, branding, manufacturer brands and country of origin.

Results indicate that the importance of country of parts differs between fashion retail and manufacturer brands. This is because; many manufacturer brands were once manufacturers in their own rights (Dicken, 2015) and have a history of being either innovators of the material and/or a production strategy (e.g. Burberry, Barbour and Henri Lloyd). On the other hand, a retailer, that is a brand in its own right (see Davies, 1992), put weight on the country of parts depending on the reputation of the country the part is sourced from (e.g. River Island and M&S) or depending on whether where country is known for its expertise in producing material or components (e.g. Hobbs London, Phase Eight). The importance of country of parts and components is complicated in the fashion industry, as product components are sourced from a range of countries; therefore the overall country of origin on garment labels is not a representation of the entire product.

Ultimately, for manufacturer brands, the material used in the product is considered to be the most important element, distinctly because brands are often the innovator of the specialist material, fibre or yarn. In addition, the most costly element in the garment production is the price of the material. Therefore, most fashion retailers source their materials from a range of countries in an effort to keep costs low and increase profit.

The study shows that the understanding of country of design is consistent within the existing literature (Ha-Brookshire, 2012) definition as a place where the pattern blocks, silhouettes, creative prints and artwork are designed and conceived. Likewise, corresponding to the existing literature (Ahmed and d’ Astous, 2003; Chao, 1993; Tse and Lee, 1993) the concept of country of design is considered important for both retail and manufacturer brands because it was associated with in-house design, which is deemed to reflect the quality of the company’s ideas and also the image of a country and its brand, enabling the designers to add new innovative ideas. Furthermore, the study also adds to the knowledge of country image impacting on brand image, indicating that design

elements in the garment production impact on the brand image, and thus, in-house design is deemed imperative for both retail brands and manufacturer brands.

In conclusion, from a managerial perspective, the perceived importance of the specific country of origin constructs varies. For example, for a retail brand, country of design is very important, whereas for manufacturer brands, material and manufacturing is important. However, there is no doubt that country of origin has a significant influence in marketing activity and is important for brand image in a fashion industry context.

This qualitative approach contributes to existing literature by developing a deeper understanding of the phenomena in a managerial context and complements a literature based of predominantly quantitative consumer-oriented research (e.g. Inch and McBride, 1998; Chao, 1998; Inch and McBride, 2004). The paper also contributes towards retail marketing and branding literature in terms of how retail and manufacturer brands associate and use country of brand origin and country of parts as a marketing strategy. In the same vein, this paper provides an insight for the industry in terms of how country of origin could be used as branding tool in the global economy, as well as how it contributes to strategic brand identities.

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Concept	Definition	Indicative author (s)	the contrasting roles of
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Country of Manufacturing	Country of manufacturing (COM) as a place where the actual product is manufactured, which included the final assembling, packaging, product marking and the sewing.	Insch and McBride, 1998; Fetscherin, 2010
Country of Parts	Country of parts (COP) is the country where the majority of the materials used in the product and/or component parts were made or manufactured.	Ha-Brookshire, 2012; Insch and McBride, 2004; Chowdhury and Ahmed, 2009
Country of Design	Country of design (COD) refers to the country where the final product was initially conceptualized, conceived and engineered.	Essoussi and Merunka, 2007; Insch and McBride, 2004; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001
Country of Brand Origin	Country of brand origin is associated with the location of the brand owner's headquarters, regardless of where the <i>actual</i> product was manufactured, or the country with which consumers associate it with.	Samiee <i>et al.</i> , 2005; Thakor and Kohli, 1996

Table 1:
Country of Origin
Constructs
Definitions

Table 2: Retail Brands and Industry Experts

Company	Organisation Type	Interviewee Position
Company A	Pure own brand - Fast fashion retailer	1) Buyer 2) Buyer
Company B	Pure own brand - Quality led retailer	1) Head of Department
Company C	Premium brand - Performance design led retailer	1) Designer
Company D	Premium brand - Performance design led retailer	1) Buyer
Company E	Premium brand - Manufacturer brand and manufacturers	1) CEO
Company F	Premium fashion - Manufacturer brand	1) Marketing Director
Company G	Multi-channel own brand retailer	1) Buyer
Company H	Component supplier	1) President of Apparel and Footwear
Company I	Clothing manufacturer and suppliers for high street fashion retailer	1) Technical Manager
Company J	Designers and manufacturers for design led brands	1) Senior Fabric Technologist