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# **Country of origin association in retail and wholesale branding**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to consider country of origin in terms of its association with brands heritage and its implications in fashion branding, thus providing a new perspective within the context of retail and wholesale brands. This qualitative study demonstrates how country of origin is used widely as a communicative tool by retail and wholesale brands, associated with brand heritage. However, the way country of origin is manifested and/or associated (e.g. brand name, colour etc.) varies depending on a brand's history, positioning, brand value, and the type of market sector retail and wholesale brands are targeting.

Keywords – Country of origin, Branding, Retail brands, Wholesale brands, Fashion

## **1. Introduction**

Various researchers have shown interest in the concept of brand origin and country of origin (COO) branding (e.g. Johansson et al., 1985; Schooler, 1965; Thakor & Kohli, 1996; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). The recent interest in this field can to some extent be attributed to the fact that products communicate complex country of origin information, which has had a significant impact on the COO effect on product image and brand image in consumers' purchasing evaluation (Lim & O'Cass, 2006; Samiee et al., 2005). In general, country of origin is often associated with its legal definition, which is where the product is manufactured, often characterised as 'Made in [...]'

 (Miranda and Parkvithee, 2013; Rashid et

al., 2016). Furthermore, country of origin is sometimes associated with the home country of a brand.

According to the existing literature, the home country of the brand can be linked to the location of the headquarters of the company that owns and markets the brand, or as a place where the product or the brand was first established (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Dikcius & Stankevicienė, 2010; Jeong et al., 2012; Miranda & Parkvithee, 2013). Hence, the home country of the brand is often linked with a brand's heritage and history (Rashid et al., 2016), regardless of where the product is manufactured (Samiee et al., 2005; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011). In addition, a number of scholars contend that the reputation of the home country (e.g. with regards to social, environmental, political and workmanship etc.) (e.g. Chen et al., 2011; Insch and McBride, 1998, 2004; Jiménez & Martin, 2012; Li & Wyer, 1994; Lim & O' Cass, 2001; Michaelis et al., 2008; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999) has a substantial impact of the consumers' views and reaction to COO or the country of brand origin. This is further influenced by consumer characteristics such as demographic and cultural values (e.g. ethnocentrism and patriotism) (Kaynak & Kara, 2002; Lee et al., 2013; Lin & Chen, 2006; Pecotich & Rosenthal, 2001; Schooler & Sanoo, 1969; Shimp & Sharma, 1987; Wong et al., 2008).

Previous studies have identified a range of marketing techniques to promote country of brand origin; for instance, Thakor & Kohli (1996) and Usunier (2011) considered brand origin with reference to communication, and the way brand name is used as a marketing tool to convey country of origin. Buckley (2011) investigated cultural perspectives to the notion of branding country of origin. Chao et al. (2005) and Usunier (2011) considered foreign branding that can make the origin of the brand fuzzy and complex.

At present, the literature on COO branding primarily deals with purchasing issues from consumers perspective, that particularly deals consumer characteristics such as demographics and cultural values (e.g. ethnocentrism and patriotism) (e.g. Kaynak and Kara, 2002; Lee et al., 2013; Lin and Chen, 2006; Pecotich and Rosenthal, 2001; Schooler and Sanoo, 1969; Wong et al., 2008). Adding to the literature of COO effect on consumers purchasing issue, Samiee et al. (2005) suggested that COO effect has been inflated, and Usunier (2006) agreed to this, suggesting that the concept of COO effect has become irrelevant, particularly in the UK market, as very few customers care about where the product is manufactured (see Rashid et al., 2016). Contradicting these studies, Magnusson et al. (2011) study found that brand origin strongly affects brand attitudes. However, organisational and industry-related issues - particularly from the fashion industry perspectives, where the differences between retail and wholesale brands have blurred are limited in comparison (see Davies, 1992; McColl & Moore, 2011, 2014). Moreover, consumer and purchasing related issues cannot be applied to organizational and industry-related issues, particularly within the fashion industry, because, the fashion industry specialist cannot apply the emotional and culture characteristics when making strategic decisions i.e. re-shore manufacturing back to the UK on the basis that the UK lost the key manufacturing skills with the rise of the living standard (e.g. EY, 2015). In other words, the service sector re-directed the education towards the sector for young people (EY, 2015. P. 05). Consequently, the objectives of this paper are 1) to review the existing COO branding literature with particular emphasis evaluating COO associations from consumer perspective, and 2) analyse industry's perception on the influence COO has on the marketing activates of retail and wholesale brands.

In offering fresh perspectives on the manner in which country of origin is important to a brand, creating emotional values associated with heritage and history, and thus, influences'

marketing activates, which are conveyed in variety of manners from industry perspectives, the paper contributes to the promotional activities of COO in a specific fashion marketing and branding context. However, these findings are not limited to marketing strategies' only as there will also be significant contribution towards management implications as well to how the product is promoted and assorted in different retail settings and market.

The paper is split into the following six sections: Section 1 contains an outline of the study and introduces the gaps in the existing literature. This is followed by an explanation of the objectives of the study. Section 2 analyses the current literature on COO branding. Furthermore, this section offers a detailed discussion of various marketing strategies drawing on both consumer and industry standpoints. Section 3 considers branding with specific reference to retail and wholesale brands. Section 4 outlines the research methodology. Section 5 sets out the research findings on viewpoint of using COO as a branding tool. This is done by means of a thematic, template analysis approach, drawing meaning from the qualitative, in-depth interviews with the key industry informants. Section 6 contains an explanation of COO branding in the retail and wholesale branding context and evaluates the theoretical contribution of COO with reference to retail marketing and branding.

## **2. Literature Review: Country of Origin Branding**

Numerous authors have examined country of origin in different product categories and markets (e.g. Fetscherin & Toncar, 2010; Godey et al., 2012; Magnusson et al., 2011; Rosenbloom & Haefner, 2009; Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Phau et al., 2008).

In general, country of origin is often associated to the place of manufacture. However, due to globalization, significant – and increasing - competition from imported goods and brands, and global sourcing, the notion of country of origin has become unclear, with country of manufacture no longer fully corresponding to the brand's home country. Consequently, various authors have examined the relevance of brand origin in different product categories. For example, Samiee et al. (2005) examined brand origin and suggested that brand origin recognition is largely based on consumers' association with the brand name, as well as with the languages that suggest country of origin regardless of where the brand was manufactured. Essoussi et al. (2011) suggested that brand origin might have the ability to impact the brand image and brand equity. This is partly because brand origin is a strong and stable brand association that exists and remains in consumers' long-term memory (Keller, 1993), especially as consumers frequently recognize brand origin (Lim & O'Cass, 2006). In addition, Samiee et al. (2005) suggested that consumers have limited knowledge about the accuracy of a brand's actual place of origin. In the same vein, Leclerc et al. (1994) examined the use of foreign branding to boost market position and the accentuation of country image to evoke positive association, and the effect it has on perceptions and attitudes, and found that using spellings or pronunciation evoked in a foreign language is a sufficient single cue that affects consumer memory and hedonic perceptions of country of origin.

Based on the literature review above, a proposition has been postulated:

- P1. Country of origin is important based on the perception and association with a country and thus, impacts a brand image.

Following brand origin association theory, various authors have examined the ways through which brand origin is conveyed through a promotional strategy, such as brand name (e.g.

Samiee et al., 2005; Kim & O’Cass, 2006; Leclerc et al., 1994; Magnusson et al., 2011), and also visual cues and celebrity endorsers (Usunier, 2011). For example, Nespresso is “de-Swissified” by George Clooney, L’Ore’al is “un-Frenched” by Claudia Schiffer (p. 488). Moreover, some authors (e.g. Chao et al., 2005; Usunier, 2011) have highlighted how branding techniques are making it difficult to identify the accurate origin of a brand. However, no research to date has examined country of brand origin in the context of fashion retail and wholesale brands, from an industry perspective.

P2. Country of brand origin can be communicated through a brand name

P3. Country of brand origin can be triggered by other promotional activities

### **3. Branding: Retail and wholesale brand context**

In broad terms, branding can be described as a strategy aimed at creating recognition and differentiating a product from its competitors (Aaker, 1991; Doyle & Stern, 2006; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010), using distinctive approaches such as, name, term, sign, symbol, design and other features that reflect the brand’s values, mission and vision. Zatepilina-Monacell (2014) argues that a brand is not only about the logo design, but also about the story of the product told by companies and their consumers. Furthermore, according to Dillon (2011) and Jackson and Shaw (2008), the concept of branding in the fashion industry is especially important as it adds an emotional and symbolic connotation to the brand’s identity, which adds uniqueness and a point of differentiation on what can intrinsically be a fairly generic product, which consumers subsequently associate with in order to fulfil their needs and desires to achieve a particular status or identity (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998; Keller, 1993; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000).

Consequently, fashion retail brands and wholesale brands are compelled to create branding strategies that are designed to communicate individuality to the targeted audience (Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998), increasing customer's trust (Keller, 1993) and loyalty, and thereby ensuring retail success (Birtwistle et al., 1999). For example, a fashion retail brand may portray its principles by means of physical symbols and employment of representative colours, in the manner that Victoria's Secret has done fruitfully with styles, patterns and colours that highlight the allure and sexiness, employing soft pink to enhance a feminine setting (Chang et al., 2004). Also, a retail brand may position itself to exceed the innate functional value of its products by providing innovative style and design, improvements in product quality, or through store ambience, staffing levels and the provision of skilled and knowledgeable staff (Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998). Equally, a wholesale brand may position itself to maximise its social, symbolic and emotional value by offering a set of promises to consumers through a strong brand name and high product quality.

As a result, the general concept of branding in a retail context, and in particular, specifying the differences between wholesale and retail brands, has been extensively researched (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Davies, 1992; Glynn et al., 2012; Martenson, 2007). For instance, Davies (1992) considered the concept of retailers as brands in their own right, suggesting that this includes branding as both a product and a process branding. 'Product' within retail branding is described as a tangible attribute solely manufactured, designed and sold in an exclusive retail store (Davies, 1992). On the other hand, 'process' is about the service that customers experience as they walk into the store e.g. customer service, staff, fixture, warranty and other elements (Davies, 1992).



Moreover, researchers have also shown increasing interest towards the concept of wholesale branding, (Chimhundu et al. 2010; Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015; Keiser & Garner, 2012; Salmon, 2013), related to branded products. The branded products are created with a unique label owned by the manufacturers or suppliers (Chimhundu et al., 2010), and distributed in a series of third party wholesale distribution outlets such as department stores, independent stores, concessions (Kumar, 1997; Salmon, 2013). In addition, Dicken (2015) points out that some wholesale brands once had ownership of the manufacturing facilities (e.g. Hugo Boss, Ralph Lauren, Barbour and etc.), but due to high production costs, the majority now use offshore subcontractors, and are entirely design or marketing focused, running a more overtly retail-oriented business. For example, fashion wholesale brands (e.g. Burberry, Musto and Henri Lloyd) who initially established their brand using a British identity and manufacturing in the UK, have now moved most of their production overseas in order to attain lower labour cost advantages, and thus, have become more retail oriented businesses, by owning dedicated stores as well as distribution through third party stores and channels (Dicken, 2015; Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015; McGoldrick, 2002).

Despite increasing involvement in globalisation and offshoring, the British associations and connotations for brands that were once manufacturers in their own rights continues to play a key part in their brand values and branding strategies. In other words, there are some wholesale brands for whom heritage is an important part of their brand identity and brand message (see also Rashid et al., 2016). Thus, country of origin becomes an important part of the brand heritage story.

P4. Country of origin is important linked to heritage and history, for wholesale brands

Similarly, changes have occurred in branding strategies by retail brands, becoming more like wholesale brands and/or manufacturer brands (Leingpibul et al., 2013; McGoldrick, 2002). For instance, many British retailers (e.g. Topshop, River Island, and Dorothy Perkins), who in the past would have sold merchandise in their own exclusive retail stores, are now also using a wholesale strategy, selling their retail branded products not only through exclusive retail stores, but also through other third party distributors (e.g. department stores, online retailers and concessions).

Based on the literature above, a set of research propositions have been formulated and incorporated within the relevant literature, emerging from the field of country of origin and branding, identifying the gap concerning how country of origin influences the marketing activities of the UK fashion industry, encompassing retail and wholesale brands, considering there is an increase growth in globalisation and UK based fashion brands trying to create global recognition. To fulfil this gap, a set of research questions has been proposed:

1. Would you refer your brand as retail or wholesale brand, or manufacturers?
2. Do you use any of the COO constructs (country of parts, country of design, country of manufacture and/or country of manufacture) in your marketing activities? If so, which one and why?
3. Could you think of other ways through which the branded products or service emphasises on country of origin?
4. What implications do COO have on your brand message, and how does it impact the brand image?

In summary, the section above presents the existing literature on country of origin and branding, emphasising on the gap in the context of retail and wholesale brands, with specific reference to the UK fashion industry. Consequently, this study adds knowledge regarding the

impact of country of origin on marketing activities in the UK fashion industry. Furthermore, the study also contributes the knowledge of how the structure of retail and wholesale brands has become obscured in the UK fashion, influenced by COO integrated (or not) into marketing activities. Thus, the paper has provided an integrated framework by incorporating fashion industry's perception and associations, and how country of origin is used as a branding activity in fashion retail and wholesale brands. The next section focuses underpinning the philosophy and methods that has been employed to conduct this research.

#### **4. Methodology**

This qualitative study employed an interpretive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how country of origin is branded in a fashion retail and wholesale brand setting. Thus, the ontological position, which underpins the design of this study, is subjectivity in nature, seeking to develop an understanding of how COO influences the marketing activities of fashion retail and wholesale brands.

To carry out the research, the study initially intended to interview representatives of fashion retail and wholesale brands, as differentiated by Davies (1992). Consequently, the sampling process started by using a key informants approach to respondent selection (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006), whereby, respondents were chosen using a non-probability, judgement sampling approach, because of their knowledge and influence on branding and manufacturing strategies in the UK. As the actual process of interviewing started with the first few key informants of the UK fashion industry, it became apparent that it was difficult to truly find distinct retail and distinct wholesale brands. Accordingly, an approach was adopted whereby the study looked at a range of fashion brands, from retailers through to wholesale brands, which included different hybrid types of brands in between, such as, design led brands, multi-channel retailers, all of whom (apart from one) were using both retail and wholesale brand strategy.

To strengthen the findings, the researcher then took an approach to look at the industry as a whole, as it was difficult to fit retailers in the category of retail and wholesale brands, and as a consequence, key informants were also selected from fashion businesses including garment suppliers, component suppliers and textile and fashion consultancy companies.

The study comprised 16 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with key informants representing 14 UK fashion brands and organisations (see table 1), all of whom incorporate COO as part of their overall branding strategies, including retailers and manufacturers, as well as other organisations such as textile and fashion consultancy companies. The key informants included executives, managers, assistant buyers, head of department, CEO and more (see table 1). The diversity of key informants provided triangulated perspectives with data on country of origin important and the use in a branding tool, and highlighted divergences and convergences (Dion and Mazzaolovo, 2016; Speziale et al., 2011).

With no existing database on experts within fashion retailers and wholesale brands to provide a sampling frame, a list of respondents was devised using a variety of sources. The key informants from retailers, wholesale brands and other fashion industries were identified via LinkedIn (2017), The Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry (ASBCI) (2014), the fashion networks event (2015), as well as personal contacts. These events were considered beneficial for this study, as the key speakers were representatives on the fashion industry, incorporating retailers and wholesale brands, and were invited to the event to discuss the importance 'Making it in the UK'.

All the key informants from retailers and manufacturers, as well as textile and fashion consultancies were approached via a three-stage process: formal letter, email and phone call. However, where it was possible to identify the name and email of the person responsible for

manufacturing the fashion companies (e.g. CEO and Director of Marketing etc.) via personal contacts, the informants were contacted directly. In order to uphold commercial confidentiality, the participating organisations cannot be identified (Doherty, 2000).

### **Insert Table 1 Here**

The interview questions were drawn from the existing literature focusing on branding and country of origin (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2011; Godey et al., 2012; Magnusson et al., 2011; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Usunier, 2006/2011), considering the importance and use of different promotional strategies to convey country of origin. The interview process started with a very basic question, inquiring about informants' role, the length of employment and about the company's background (Innes, 2013). The next step of the interview process was to investigate whether the companies referred themselves as brands, if so, what type of brand (e.g. retail brand or wholesale brands, manufacturers, business to business brands etc.), as perceived by the respondent. To gain deeper understanding on whether companies operated retail or wholesale brand strategy, ladder technique was adopted by probing the questions on whether companies sold their own brands in their own store or in other stores and channel, advantages and disadvantages, and vice versa, and topics concerning the use of COO in their branding strategies. According to Reynolds and Gutman (1988), laddering involves a series of directed probes, typified by "Why is that important to you?" question, with the express goal of determining the association between the key perceptual elements across the range of attributes, consequences, and values. The purpose of using ladder technique in this qualitative interview process was, because the terminology retail and wholesale brands is no longer frequently used in the UK fashion industry, which helped in determining how retail respondents use both retail and wholesale brand strategy in the UK fashion business. The respondents were then asked what they understood by country of origin? Whether they conveyed country of origin as a

branding element? And if so, which one and how? Finally, the impact country of origin association and promotion had on a brand image.

Most of the interviews were held at respondents' offices in the UK, whilst one was conducted on Skype due to company's refurbishment, and lasted from 30-60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Through an inductive approach (King and Horrocks, 2010; Dion and Mazzalovo, 2016), the data were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis involves analysing data by recognising the patterns and themes systematically in order to understand the meaning (King and Horrocks, 2011).

## **5. Findings**

The findings are structured using two themes, as follows: 1) Place and nation association with COO branding and 2) Colour association with COO branding.

### *5.1 Place and nation association*

All respondents agreed that that country of brand origin is considered important, associated with the heritage, history and emotional values, and that it reflects the brand image, as British image is associated with quality in some specific countries, such as in the Scandinavian region. However, the level of association and the way country of origin is promoted varies depending on a brand's history, value and mission, and positioning. The section below addresses the place and national association in marketing activities influenced by the concept of COO.

It is evident from the retail respondent of company A, representative of an affordable fast fashion retailer, that country of origin of a brand, also referred to as country of brand origin, is manifested through the use of locational association in a sub-brand name. It was further explained that the association with the sub-brand name was because the company has undergone several changes over the year, whereby, the company is trying to target the market that constantly wants new and fresh design. Whilst, associating the sub-brand name with the location where the brand was first established and what the originally was named as, allows the company to associate with brands history and also created opportunities for the target market that company was previously targeting. Meanwhile, a wholesale senior retail respondent from company (G), representative of outdoor clothing revealed that the entire brand has strong connotations to being a British brand, and thus, place association, which is the British image, is conveyed through taglines, Union Jack, but that the company also takes pride in conveying brands history by embedding the location where the company was first established, and that it is one of the most expensive sub brand manufactured by the company, which is because of the heritage history, strong British associations, including manufacturing some products in the UK and finally, use of material in the specific product line that are manufactured specifically by the company. For example:

“The COO of our brand is associated with heritage history, which is promoted through our sub-brand name. For example, our ladies-wear sub-brands are named after the original company name, before the company re-branded with its new name, and our men’s wear sub-brand is named after the location where our store was first established in London” (Buyer, Company A).

In addition to this, senior respondents from company B and G, representative of a retail brand that focuses on selling only its own brands in clothing category and a representative of a British lifestyle, wholesale brand, also operating retail brand strategy in outlets have pointed out how important British values are for the brands that have been established in the market for years, and thus, such companies take pride in conveying this as part of their brand message. However, a senior respondent from company G, representative of a British lifestyle brand also explains that the Royal warrant that was given to them for being leaders in the outdoor clothing also represents the Britishness of the brand. Whilst respondent from company B has highlighted the emphasis of heritage history in the store merchandise, by creating the British, vintage association through the use of big wooden table in a retail store, and the Italian association by the decorative little Vespa motorbike. Thus, it evident that British association is important for both retail and wholesale brands, and has an impact on marketing actives of both retail and wholesale brands. However, the way they promote can vary.

“So have been talking about celebrating 125 years, and that is our heritage and even our brand message. So our brand message, is driven by our 125 years of establishment and customers trust” (Head of Department, Company B).

“[...] And then on the top of that, we’ve got the royal warrants, which were from the Queen, the Duke – strongly associating this with the Britishness” (Marketing Director, Company G).

However, respondent from company K, representative of a new established wholesale brand that were/are originally recognised as component suppliers, have pointed out how important country of origin is to their brand as well, particularly with reference to technical aspects that



are taking place in the UK mills, and thus, the company takes pride in promoting this on their website, creating awareness about the British association particularly on their webpage. Going in hand with company K, respondent from company J, whom are also known component suppliers have pointed out how they are also a brand on the side of being suppliers, selling their haberdashery products in a range of UK department stores, and that the recognition of being a British brand is important to them, as it contains emotional values.

“For us, British association is important because it links to the technical aspects that are taking place in the UK. So, on our website we actually talk about British mills and the technical input” (Non-Executive Director, Company K).

Moreover, a senior representative of a British premium brand company G, leaders of outdoor clothing have highlighted the importance of using foreign brand names for their company, suggesting that in some parts of Europe (e.g. Germany), British image has been associated with being vintage, but also boring, as Britain has been considered to be less active and adventurous. Thus, to make the brand appealing to the European market, the company is using a foreign brand name, thus making associations with the specific country image. Consequently, it is evident that country image association can influence marketing activities, especially when targeting specific market. This was further agreed by senior respondent of company K, representative of a well-known component suppliers, historically known for manufacturing components in the UK and a senior respondent of Company O, representative of a company that conducts research and supports other fashion and textile companies in the UK, that COO in a marketing activity is particularly important for niche brands, that targets a specific market, but also creates an emotional and social associations. However, in terms of

company H, the company uses foreign brand name, but originated in Britain, and therefore, the design functions continue to take place in Britain. For example:

“[...] some European countries still consider Britain as old fashioned, and boring - for old people” (Creative Art Director, Company H).

The senior respondent from company H reiterates that the relevance of communicating country of origin (the brand being British) varies according to the type of product, country image and place associations. Furthermore, similar view were subscribed by company E who pointed out how they emphasised more on the brand being British when selling the brand in Scandinavian countries, because British means quality according to the CEO of company E. However, retail respondent from company A, representative of the affordable fashion retailer had different views, as the respondent pointed out how their company focuses on targeting a wider, international market, and that, if they were to use the direct marketing approach of communicate British association, then it may seem as though the brand is tailored simply for British market, and thus, to create global recognition, the company does not promote country of origin in the marketing activities. These views are a proof that how country of origin influences marketing activities is dependent upon brand positioning, the type of market the company is targeting, which as a result is also effected by the stereotypical perception a market has about a specific country image. For example:

“[...] it depends on where you are standing in the world. So if you are standing in Japan, I would call the brand British because the Japan market thinks British is a really good thing” (Creative Art Director, Company H).

In summary, section 5.1 highlighted how different perception of the same country can occur in fashion branding depending on brand positioning and the type of market and country the brand is focusing to target. The next section will discuss colour associated with COO in fashion retail and wholesale branding.

## *5.2. Colour association*

All respondents from wholesale brands indicated that colour can have strong association with culture and a country, and as a result, a brand can communicate heritage and history through the use of specific colours on logos, prints and patterns, and other marketing tools. For example:

“[...] but this can also be seen through colour we use on our brand name and overall brand theme, associating with the rich history drawn from the country side and the history (Marketing Director, Company F).

Additionally, retail respondents of company C, E, and F, all of whom could traditionally be representatives of wholesale brands, but also now operate a retail brand strategy, have indicated how colour has a strong association to country and culture. They also asserted that, to keep the business ideas fresh and to attract a wider international market, companies can make changes to colour association in a brand message and also merchandise in order to maintain association to a specific country image, or to move away from a country association. For example:

“[...] we are going for a new clear aesthetic style, and moving away from the grey vintage wash, and other vintage elements, which includes anything grungy” (Designer, Company C).

On the other hand, a retail respondent of company A, who are well known on the UK high street for their style and affordable fashion, highlighted how the use of colour in the branding strategies and choice of product merchandise have no connotation to a specific country image, but instead, the colour association is strongly influenced by their target market (e.g. young and chic), and other international fashion destinations. For example:

“As a fashion business, most of our colour choices are inspired prominently from the fashion shows, not just London, but we would look worldwide. We would look at shows in Milan, London, and then because we are a very youth focused brand, we are also very inspired by the street styles from New York to Copenhagen” (Buyer, Company A).

A wholesale respondent from company G, with a foreign-sounding brand name, but with a British brand heritage, added, that their logo uses colours that associates to British flag, but the colour they actually use on their product merchandise vary, as different countries and cultures have different preferences to design and colour. This was said with particular reference to German culture having preferences for two colours, rather than three on the actual product, as German market has preference for simple things, whilst the UK market has preference for more colours. Furthermore, it appeared from the respondent’s view that France, Poland, and even Nordic have similar preferences and view with regards to country perception and colour preferences, although, this controverts wholesale respondents view from company E, who has previously pointed out Scandinavians consider British to associates with quality (see section 5.1). For example:

“In the Nordic, they like to shout out about where the product is designed from or country where the brand comes from, so we have to make sure that to sell well in our chosen market and that we design close to them. In terms of the use of colour, our logo represents the British heritage, but the use of colour on the product merchandise varies. For example: Germany doesn't like three colours in one product. So if you have one colour on the top body, and the different colour on the lower part and then third colour on the zip, they freak out completely (Creative Art Director, Company G).

To sum up, section highlighted how country of origin influences marketing activities of retail and wholesale brand, induced by a range of factors such as country image, target market, brand's history and brand positioning. This section also illustrated a range of manners through which country of origin is promoted, with the key promotional activity being the brand name of sub-brands, to provide traditional customers the choice to associate with heritage history of the brand, and the second is colour association, which reflects emotional values brand has been with its brand history and heritage. The next section (6) will present a discussion and conclude the entire paper, followed by limitation and avenues for further research.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The objectives of this paper were: first, to review the existing COO branding literature that has previously, mainly been documented from consumer perspective; and second, analyse fashion industry's perception on the influence COO has on the marketing activities of retail

and wholesale brand, consequently, how the fashion industry used COO as a branding tool. This paper informs, how country of origin is important for the industry experts because of the emotional values that are attached to the heritage history of the brand, and how the COO influences marketing activities of retail and wholesale brand, in the context where the differences between retail and wholesale brands have blurred extensively over the years.

The findings of this paper make a contribution towards the literature of fashion branding and positioning, and the study reveals that the fashion UK industry perceives country of origin to be important, relating to emotional value, heritage and history, and how COO influences marketing activities of the UK fashion industry, increasingly dependent on the type of market a brand is targeting , the perception of the country image, brand positioning, expertise, strategic business plan and brand's value and mission, and consequently, the study also adds knowledge to how the UK fashion industry uses COO as a branding tool.

Existing literature (e.g. Dinnie, 2015; Samiee et al., 2005; Thakor and Kohli, 1996) highlights how a brand's heritage is bound up with brand origin, and that it is difficult to conceive a heritage without an accompanying image of a particular place. Contributing to this literature stream, this study revealed that there are many ways through which the origin of a brand can be associated with heritage, and subsequently communicated. For example, manifesting country, location and history in a brand name or sub-brand name, logo or website, in order to increase the brand equity, by creating emotional and symbolic connotations to the brands identity in the mind of customers' (see also Dillon, 2011; Jackson and Shaw, 2008). However, the method an organisation applies to communicate any aspect of country of origin depends on the brands target market, brands mission and vision and what the brand aims to be perceived as, for example, Blue Harbour collection at M&S, which focuses on young,

sport oriented men, and the use of Harris Tweed on M&S collection, that creates the emotional association with British values. On the other hand, fashion brands with leading history specially promote their British values on a range of channels, including website. For example, Musto, a leader of performance outdoor clothing. In the same vein, other fashion companies, e.g. suppliers also take pride in communicating their history (e.g. Karpelle is the leading UK clothing manufacturing company, and the origins are based manufacturing within own UK factories), allowing companies to enhance their brand positioning and brand image. This adds knowledge to the literature of country of origin and branding, pointing out how country of origin of a brand is important to all types of brands and companies, and can be communicated variety of manner that creates impacts brands identity, and can also perform as a way of creating brand loyalty, and thus, equity.

The results indicate that country of origin of a brand is important linked to heritage and that country of origin can be communicate through the use of specific colours. For example, Green association with the Scottish heritage and countryside and Blue with Marine, associates to brands value, mission and vision. On the other hand, retail brands that target younger market may use colour that appeals less to brands history, and more to markets choice e.g. Topshop. This resonates with Labrecque and Milne (2011) and Labrecque et al (2013), who explain that the use of colour is an integral aspect of marketing and corporate communication (see Aslam, 2006), which aids in constructing a visual brand identity intended to aim at a specific market and help maintain the brand heritage, and therefore, makes a contribution to the literature of branding, marketing communication and country of origin, illustrating how the association of colour not only reflects brand's history and values, but also reflects brand's identity.

Furthermore, Leclerc et al. (1994) has previously identified how foreign brand name allows companies to boost market position, with an attempt to evoke positive association. Going in hand with this, this study indeed found that some fashion companies are using foreign brand name in their branding strategies, however, in the same vein, the companies are having association with their brand's heritage, through the colour association in a logo, and even by store merchandise / store displays (Union Jack flag displayed in a Superdry store), and thus, this contributes to the literature of branding and marketing, highlighting the relevance of brand's heritage whilst improving brand positioning.

In conclusion, country of origin is important linked with heritage, history and emotional values. However, the importance of promoting country of origin and/or brand origin depends on preferences and perceptives of the receivers in different countries, expertise of the brand, brand positioning, and value and mission. For example, a retailer, that is a brand in its own right (see Davies, 1992), may not consider promoting brand origin to make it appealing to the younger market and international market. On the other, a wholesale brand may promote country of origin and brand origin because of their heritage history and preferences by the other countries they are targeting, thus, the paper contributes towards branding and promotion literature, and also provides an insight for the industry in terms of how country of origin is associated with heritage and used as a promotional tool.

## **6.1. Managerial Implications**



Along with theoretical contribution, this study provides insight regarding how fashion companies associate with COO in their branding strategies, reflected by emotional and symbolic values, and also how COO influences marketing activities of both retail and wholesale brands, which evokes brand positioning and brand identity. For example, place and nation association with the actual brand name or with the sub-brand name, as well as the use of colour association, such as the use of target or green, to associate with Scottish Heritage, or the use of clear aesthetic to attract a wide European market. Finally, it has emerged that the influence COO has on marketing activities largely depends on the brand positioning, which is often influenced by the type of market a brand is targeting, and thus, understanding and knowledge about customers demand is essential.

## **6.2. Limitations**

This study has made contribution towards the literature of branding and COO, regarding the how different fashion companies associate to COO in their marketing activities in the context of retail and wholesale brands, with specific reference to the UK fashion industry. However, the study has identified several challenges and limitation in doing this research, such that the process of identifying the key informants of the UK fashion industry was difficult as fashion companies provide limited database on the internet. Secondly, the actual process was time-consuming, as to reach the key informants, travelling to different cities and town was required in order to gain rich data. Furthermore, although the interview process lasted 30 to 60 minute, however, transcribing the actual interview took longer.

## **6.3. Future research direction**

First of all, based on the findings, it is confirmed that fashion brands cannot be split into the categories of retail and wholesale brands as the differences between the two have become blurred. However, retailers can be categorised into an individual segmentation, affiliated with a brand or company's expertise or identity.

Furthermore, this study has identified how country of origin can impact retail image, product image or country image, depending on brand expertise, brand positioning and strategic long-term plan. This opens up the avenue for future studies; such as, investigating country of origin (different dimensions) with specific reference to online retailing, covering both industry and consumer perspectives, as country of manufacturing cannot be identified in an e-tail strategy and some issues can also be associated with COP, COD and COB (e.g. colour, design and quality). Furthermore, there is also space for further research in considering how luxury brands implement COO in their advertising (heritage, culture, etc.) and this can be examined for different product categories.

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