

Print ISSN: 2288-4637 / Online ISSN 2288-4645  
doi:10.13106/jafeb.2022.vol9.no1.0409

# The Impact of National Stereotypes towards Country-of-Origin Images on Purchase Intention: Empirical Evidence from Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Received: September 30, 2021 Revised: December 05, 2021 Accepted: December 15, 2021

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the country-of-origin image mediates the effect of national stereotypes along two dimensions of perceived competence and warmth, on consumers' consumption behaviors, especially in today's environment, the capricious COVID-19 and the deepening and expanding "The Belt and Road" initiative. Research design, data, and methodology: After collecting 1500 primary data from twelve countries along the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road, this paper conducts ANOVA and SEM in SPSS25.0 and AMOS 24.0 separately to analyze measurements, structural models, and hypotheses via using 1277 final samples. The mediation results illustrate the asymmetric dominance of the two dimensions of national stereotypes, indicating that the country-of-origin image shows the complementary mediation in the effect of perceived competence on purchase intention; whereas, the country-of-origin image holds the indirect-only mediation in the impact of perceived warmth on purchase intention. The results of the moderation show that the effect of country-of-origin image on purchase intention is more significant for consumers who perceive COVID-19 in China to be of lesser severity than those who believe it to be of higher severity. Based on the paper's results, some implications for practice and theory are highlighted.

**Keywords:** The Belt and Road, National Stereotypes, Country-Of-Origin Image, Purchase Intention, COVID-19 Pandemic

**JEL Classification Code:** C83, L81, M31, P46

## 1. Introduction

"The Belt and Road" initiative (B&R), short for "the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road", which has been initiated by Xi Jinping, the president of the People's Republic of China, has attracted the attention of countries all over the world

since 2013 (Yidiyilu.gov.cn, 2021). With the guidance of the five primary goals: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and the bond between people, China has signed 170 inter-governmental cooperation documents with 122 countries as well as 29 international organizations and has established 1023 sister cities with 61 B&R countries (www.cpcnews.cn, 2018). Indeed, the B&R initiative stimulates economic development along its geographic periphery by infrastructure construction and internet interconnection and promotes cultural exchanges among civilizations by multinational corporations (Yidiyilu.gov.cn, 2021).

Especially, prior research has illustrated that culture-general competence is the powerful driving force in shaping consumer perceptions and consumption behaviors (Triandis, 2000; Hidayat et al., 2021; Taherinia et al., 2021). This is also in line with the stereotype content model (SCM) which has been widely conducted in the research on countries of origin (COO). For example, Bennett and Hill (2012) selected eight brands (e.g. McDonalds, B.P.) from the four product categories (e.g., fast food, orange juice)

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to explore how the impact of warmth and competence as the predictors of interpersonal stereotypes on consumption behaviors. Liu et al. (2005) demonstrated that national stereotypes can be easily evoked by the mere COO information, leading to different behavioral consequences via pairing brands with two categories of national stereotype (i.e., Japan and China).

Therefore, the growing international marketing literature has discussed and documented different effects of the B&R initiative corresponding to global trade. For instance, from the environmental standpoint, some researchers indicate the negative impact of B&R on ecosystems (Bo et al., 2016). Conversely, Yu et al. (2020) explored the positive relationships between China's export potential and B&R by adopting difference-in-differences estimation. Particularly, recent research also indicates that the B&R initiative may provide a new path and direction for brands along with "Made in China", especially in the case of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Buckley, 2020; Saud et al., 2020). However, few studies can prove it both theoretically and statistically. Then, to address this theoretical gap, this study uses national stereotypes based on the SCM to explore how the stereotypical associations which are attached by consumers to China along two dimensions of perceived competence and warmth impact the country-of-origin image and finally shape consumers' consumption behaviors. Regarding the experimental gap, although the B&R initiative includes land- and sea-based economic cooperation with Asian and European markets, which are separately named as "the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road", considering the representativeness and validity of the sample, this study only focuses on countries along the 21<sup>st</sup>- Century Maritime Silk Road.

Moreover, this study also highlights the two moderation variables in the above effect. One is COVID-19 which is an external factor that cannot be ignored in 2020. Another is national economic development levels (Li et al., 2020a; Wikipedia, 2020). Because a significant global subject facing today's international business is learning how to coexist with the COVID-19 under the global epidemic's arising and subsiding. However, with rapid Chinese containment of the COVID-19, the advancing B&R initiative may be an opportunity for the country to rebuild their country image according to consumers' perceived high or low severity of the COVID-19 on China and the level of economic development of the country under the effect of national stereotypes, which finally leads to increased consumers' purchase intention (Li et al., 2020b). Hence, under the influence of COVID-19, how the China's country image on consumers' purchase intention in B&R countries? Furtherly, under different economic development levels, what are the diverse influences of China's country image on consumers' purchase intention in B&R countries?

Taken together, it is essential to explore the answer to these questions via establishing the relationships among the SCM, country-of-origin image, and consumers' consumption behaviors. To be more specific, in the paper's model, we will shed light on the mediation effect of the country-of-origin image in the effects of the two dimensions of national stereotypes, perceived competence, and perceived warmth based on the SCM, on consumers' purchase intention. Meanwhile, we also highlight the moderation effects through the environmental-and economical-level variables (i.e., perceived severity of COVID-19 in China and economic development level).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Country-of-Origin Image

Country-of-origin image (CoI), as the key construct in the researches on country-of-origin effect, has been commonly used to explain why consumers hold the different tendency to non-domestic brands which usually are marked as "Made in" and the country name (Maher & Carter, 2011; Sousa et al., 2018). Although a larger of researches have academically illustrated and documented the significant effect of CoI on consumers' evaluation of foreign brands (Chattalas et al., 2008), or intentions to purchase foreign products (Hsieh et al., 2004; Motsi & Park, 2020), the conceptualization of the CoI has not agreed in the empirical research (Carneiro & Faria, 2016). Based on prior research, there are three distinct streams in the CoI research (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Some researchers regard the CoI as the overall mental representation of the country and its citizens. Moreover, these images that consumers build based on their general holistic cognition about the country's economy, politics, and culture (the cognitive component), as well as their feelings and emotions attached to the country (effective component), can permeate various aspects of individuals' lives including their consumption behaviors (Wang et al., 2012). Some researchers define the CoI via integrating the country image and product image simultaneously (Knight & Calantone, 2000). For instance, the CoI has been referred to as the product-country image in Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002). Notably, other streams of the CoI definitions only focus on the images of the country's products (Roth & Romeo, 1992). In the reviews of the prior research and considering the specific explanatory model in this paper, the CoI can be operationalized as the overall mental representation of the country, including both cognitive and affective dimensions in our research because one of the main purposes of this research is exploring the consumers' holistic perceptions of China depending on their knowledge about China's economy, politics, culture, and so on, rather than their only cognitions of China's brands or

products, especially for the consumers from the countries along the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road.

According to the previous pieces of literature, the direct influence of CoI on consumers' product evaluations can be explained by the halo effect or the summary effect. For example, the CoI serves as a halo when consumers have little knowledge of a product or a brand, which finally influences their attitudes toward the product or the brand. However, in familiar cases, consumers tend to summarize their related beliefs and then directly guide their evaluations to the product or the brand. In addition, recent research also documented the halo effect of country image impacted on the consumers' purchase intention (Hsieh et al., 2004). Lined with the theory of reasoned action, purchase intention represents the consumers' attitudes toward the products (Carr & Sequeira, 2007). That is to say, if a consumer has a favorable perception of the products' production country, they are more likely to regard the items favorably, which might lead to a higher intention to buy the products. Therefore, the hypothesis about the effect of CoI on the consumers' purchase intention can be presented as follows:

**H1:** *Country-of-origin image positively affects purchase intention.*

## 2.2. Stereotype Content Model (SCM)

The stereotype content model, as one of the theoretical structures, has been prevalently conducted in various fields to understand and explore the conception of the stereotypes (Chattalas et al., 2008; Guercini & Ranfagni, 2013). For example, marketing researchers tend to adopt SCM to explain how the COO effects give rise to consumers' consumption behaviors (Lee et al., 2020; Motsi & Park, 2020); research on tourism management also develops the SCM via analyzing the different effects of news information on the occupational stigma (Li et al., 2020b). Back to the theoretical source of the SCM, stereotypes referring to the cognitive and emotional associations attached by individuals to other social and cultural groups have a long history in psychology. Furthermore, stereotypes have been identified as an essential role in guiding a consumer's cognition and behavior, mainly when he or she adopts the low peripheral-route decision-making process (Fiske, 2004; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). After summarizing the prior research, SCM, as the new perspective to develop the stereotypes research, has been proposed in the recent business and economics context (Motsi & Park, 2020; Ahn et al., 2018).

In the SCM, social and cultural groups can be organized along the two fundamental and universal dimensions: perceived competence and perceived warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). Concretely speaking, perceived competence represents how individuals evaluate the ability of the target group to

pursue their goals or complete their tasks successfully and effectively. And perceived warmth indicates what kind of the target group's intentions, positive or negative (Fiske et al., 2002). This means, following the two dimensions of competence and warmth, there are four quadrants in the SCM, including high competence-high warmth (HC-HW), high competence-low warmth (HC-LW), low competence-high warmth (LC-HW) as well as low competence-low warmth (LC-LW). Applied to the international marketing context, it is usual for consumers to feel competent but not warm when the foreign brands from the developed countries, whereas to feel warm but not competent when the foreign brands made in the developing countries (Chattalas et al., 2008; Motsi & Park, 2020). More recently, Fiske et al. have developed SCM via indicating that individuals stereotypes in the HC-HW quadrants are more likely to evoke admiration, envy is more likely to be inducted from the HC-LW quadrants, LC-HW quadrants are prone to arouse pity, and contempt is more easily to be activated in the LC-LW quadrants (Fiske, 2012; Fiske & Durante, 2016).

Taken together, the SCM can not only validly describe the whole image of consumers' hold to the target groups but also effectively explain consumers' downstream consequences, including consumption behaviors (Chen et al., 2014; Kirmani et al., 2017; Liu & Lin, 2018). Thus, this paper decided to build the two-dimensional model stemming from the SCM, perceived competence and perceived warmth to explain the relationships among national stereotypes, CoI, and purchase intention.

## 2.3. The Relationships among CoI, SCM, and Purchase Intention

As we discussed before, perceived competence corresponds to the characteristics of intelligence, efficiency, and skillfulness, which result from interpersonal or intergroup interactions (Fiske et al., 2002; Maher & Carter, 2011). That is to say, in the interpersonal domain, when a consumer meets a professional salesperson in the shop, the consumer is more likely to choose the product which is suggested by the salesperson when they believe in the professional salesperson's competence. Similarly, applied to the intergroup domain, perceived competence about China will also be transferred to the positive beliefs about the made-in-china image. This is also in line with the international marketing research indicating the critical role of national stereotypes in consumers' evaluations of foreign products (Chattalas et al., 2008). Specifically, foreign consumers who perceive competence dimensions of the national stereotype are more likely to evaluate the products associated with the perceived country.

What's more, the direct impact of perceived competence of national stereotypes on consumers' product quality

evaluations has been well documented within the international marketing literature (Motsi & Park, 2020). These direct influences of perceived competence on consumption behaviors also serve as the theoretical foundation of the other two streams of definitions of CoI (i.e., product-country image and only product image) (Roth & Romeo, 1992). This can be used to explain why some marketers tend to establish close associations between the specific products and the countries, such as Germany and cars, Japan, and electronics (Usunier & Cestre, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2:** *Perceived competence is positively associated with the country-of-origin image.*

**H3:** *Perceived competence positively affects purchase intention.*

Although perceived warmth is not positively predicted by the competence dimensions in the SCM, international marketing studies also illustrate the significant effects of perceived warmth on the country's image (Chattalas et al., 2008; Motsi & Park, 2020). Singapore Airlines is a typical case of successfully using the warmth dimensions of national stereotypes in rebuilding the country's perceptions (Chattalas et al., 2008). Related to SCM, warmth refers to the perceptions of the positive or negative intentions of the other individuals or other groups, who are usually labeled to the features of friendship and sincerity (Fiske et al., 2002). This means, the perceived warmth dimensions of national stereotypes also have a positive impact on the CoI.

Furthermore, the effect of perceived warmth of national stereotypes on consumers' consumption behaviors is not directly or immediately (Halkias et al., 2016; Magnusson et al., 2019). This means the perceived warmth dimension may influence consumers' purchase intention through the CoI. These findings also have been revealed in the interpersonal interactions researches (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Specifically, different from the competence dimension that can effectively grasp consumers' attractions and increase the current operating performance, the dimension of perceived warmth can shape the solid and long-term relationships between consumers and markers (Güntürkün et al., 2020). Taken together, warmth is not dominant in consumers' consumption behaviors but can influence behaviors through relationships in terms of interpersonal domain or through the CoI in an intergroup domain. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H4:** *Perceived warmth is positively associated with the country-of-origin image.*

**H5:** *Country-of-origin image mediates the effect of perceived warmth on purchase intention.*

## 2.4. Moderating Effects of Environment- and Nation- Level Variables

### 2.4.1. Environment-Level: Perceived Severity of COVID-19 in China

On April 20, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the total of COVID-19 cases was 2,314,621 and the high rate of COVID-19's infection in European countries. Specifically, although COVID-19 is originated within Wuhan, China, in late 2019 but has been expanded to an increasing number of countries and has been labeled as a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020 (Kumar et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020a). This means, COVID-19 has engulfed all over the world in a very short time and led to different levels of COVID-19 in many countries.

Given the massive impact of the COVID-19 hitting on global traits, psychographic behaviors, and even global interconnectedness, exploring how the consumers' buying patterns can be shaped or analyzing the factors predicting the differences in various countries' future development remain a strong practical and theoretical significance in the marketing context (Zwanka & Buff, 2021). For instance, based on the regulatory focus theory, Kumar et al. (2020) indicate how the prevention-and promotion-focused efforts give rise to the diffusion of the COVID-19 in the countries with different degrees of the COVID-19 (Kumar et al., 2020). Expanded to this research, we propose that the effect of CoI on purchase intention varies with the consumers' perceptions of the degree of severity of COVID-19 in China. This may be because whether the COVID-19 epidemic can be contained under a country's control has become a symbol of the country's comprehensive competence and also reflect the country's attitude towards international affairs (Li et al., 2020b). That is to say, compared to consumers who perceive the high severity of COVID-19 in China, consumers who perceive the low severity of COVID-19 in China are more likely to label China as high competence and warmth, and then form a positive image about China, which finally result in increasing intentions to choose China's products. Then, we can hypothesize that:

**H6:** *The effect of country-of-origin image on purchase intention is greater for consumers who perceive the low severity of COVID-19 in China versus those who perceive the high severity of COVID-19 in China.*

### 2.4.2. Nation-Level: Economic Development Level of Different Countries

It is common to divide countries into developed countries and developing countries according to the

relevant indications of economic development, such as gross domestic product (GDP) and gross national product (GNP) (Wikipedia, 2020). And it is easy to connect the developing countries with high population growth, poverty, and high unemployment rate, whereas to associate the developed countries with high population quality, affluence, and advanced tertiary industry (Sabir et al., 2019). In international marketing, consumers’ attitudes and behaviors towards foreign and domestic brands can be influenced by the national characteristics, especially the development of its economy (Clark, 1990). To be more specific, consumers who come from a developing country (or medium-industrialized country) tend to choose foreign products as status symbols, especially the country of origin from developed countries (Batra et al., 2000). Therefore, consumers in developing countries may show a preference for products whose country-of-origin are developed countries rather than developing countries to gain more symbolic values to guide their tastes (Goodyear, 2020). However, consumers who live in developed countries (or industrialized countries) are more likely to be attracted to the product features than the product’s origin. Then, due to these differences between consumers in developed and developing countries, the hypotheses in this study can be proposed as follows:

**H7:** *The effect of country-of-origin image on purchase intention is greater for consumers who live in developed countries versus life in developing countries.*

### 2.5. Control Variables

To examine the effectiveness of the research model, the study also includes several control variables that the

literature indicates effects of purchase intention. Although the products made in China have a wide range of consumers abroad, they have different purchase intentions in gender, age, and education level (Cappelli et al., 2017). Income and occupation could also have an impact on the purchase intention of consumers. For example, the price of Chinese products is more attractive, compared with other countries. (Ahmed & D’Astous, 2004). Therefore, the study controls these factors, including gender, age, education, average monthly income, and occupation in the model.

Thus, the conceptual framework of the undertaken study is shown in Figure 1.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of national stereotypes, the CoI on consumers’ purchase intention along the “21st - Century Maritime Silk Road”. A structured questionnaire has tested the model established in this study. The primary survey is conducted in the twelve countries of Australia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Myanmar, Netherlands, Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam, which involve three continents of the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road (Asia, Europe, and Oceania). The main reason for selecting twelve

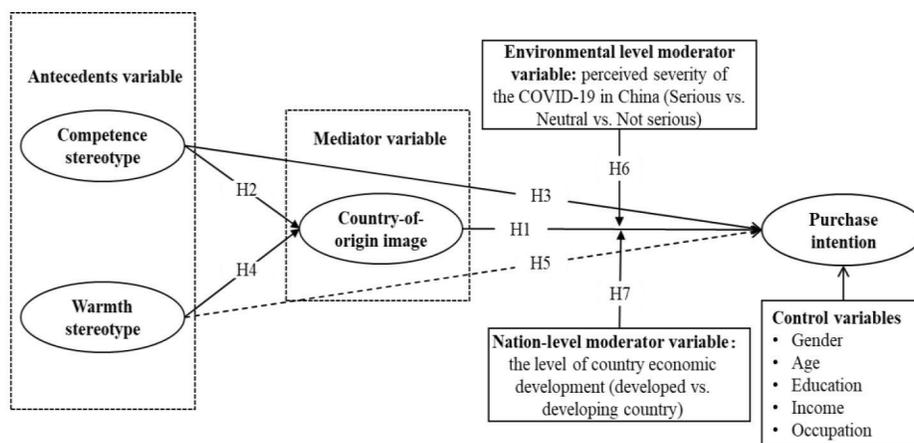


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

countries of the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road was to ensure the sample represented the key 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road countries with different national levels of economic development and different perceptions of the COVID-19 in China, guaranteeing the generalizability of the research outcome (Gobo, 2018).

Participants were 12 countries' consumers recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for monetary compensation. MTurk provides a practical way to utilize a large number of subjects for online surveys. Our survey was conducted from February 2021 to March 2021. Previous research shows that workers on MTurk are more demographically diverse than the traditional college subject pools (Michael et al., 2011). Given heterogeneity within a country, the data set covers only metropolitan areas. To ensure safety for adequate conclusions, we selected at least 100 samples in each country. The final survey was administered to 1500 respondents through in-person and Amazon Mechanical Turk. Before inputting the data, the questionnaires are checked for any missing data. This initial screening revealed that out of 1500 surveys, 1277 were filled in. Hence, the response rate was 85 percent.

### 3.2. Measurement Scaling for Constructs and Items

The items that were used to measure whether the study constructs are adapted from previous studies. A few procedures were undertaken to minimize common method bias. First, the items and questions are carefully worded to avoid ambiguity and keep simple and concise, without unfamiliar terms and complex syntax; Second, the physical distance between measures of the same construct is also taken into consideration, that is, not to have all items of the same construct right next to each other.

The items used to measure competence stereotype by five items were adapted from Aaker et al. (2010). Warmth stereotype was measured by four items adapted from Aaker et al. (2010). The CoI was measured by six items adapted from Park et al. (1986) and Hsieh et al. (2004). Purchase intention was measured by four items adapting the scale developed in Ajzen (1991).

Sociodemographic measures include marital gender, age, education level, average monthly income, and occupation. Gender was measured dichotomously. The age range was measured using an ordinal scale. Education level and occupation were also measured using an ordinal scale, and average monthly income was measured in the local currency and subsequently converted into U.S. dollars. A pre-test of the survey instrument was conducted to conceptually validate the instrument. The final survey questionnaire is presented in the appendix. All items were measured on a

7-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (not agree at all) to 7 (absolutely agree).

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Sample Characteristics

The survey forms were distributed to 1500 respondents from twelve countries of Australia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Myanmar, Netherlands, Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam, which involve three continents of the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road (Asia, Europe, and Oceania). The main demographic variables included in this study are gender, age, education level, average monthly income, and occupation. A total of 1277 participants were recruited from twelve countries along the "the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road". Table 1 exhibits the frequencies and corresponding percentages of each demographic variable.

### 4.2. Reliability and Validity

AMOS 24.0 was used to estimate both the measurement and structural models. Both principal components factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed to assess the reliability and validity of the scales. Scale reliability is measured by Cronbach's alpha (or  $\alpha$ ). According to Nunnally (1994), a scale whose Cronbach's alpha is 0.7 or above is considered to be reliable. In this research, the lowest and highest Cronbach's alphas are 0.874 (warmth stereotype) and 0.904 (CoI), respectively. Thus, scale reliability does not appear.

Convergent validity is supported if standardized factor loadings are 0.5 or above (preferably 0.7 or above), and average variances expected (AVE) are 0.5 or above. The measures satisfy the recommended thresholds as shown in Table 2, and therefore convergent validity can be claimed.

Discriminant validity tests whether concepts or measurements that are not supposed to be related are actually unrelated. Hair et al. (1998) suggest that a model meets discriminant validity, provided that the minimum of average variance extracted (AVE's) is larger than the squares of between-construct correlation coefficients (Hair et al., 1998). The smallest AVE, 0.614, is for CoI, and its square root is 0.784. Meanwhile, the maximum between-construct correlation coefficient is 0.103, the correlation between warmth stereotype and purchase intention as shown in Table 3. Therefore, it is confirmed that the square root of AVE obtained for each construct is larger than the correlation of the construct with each of the remaining constructs, confirming discriminant validity. Based on the results of these three validity tests, the validity of the research constructs used in our study was acceptable.

**Table 1:** Demographics of the Survey Respondents (N = 1277)

Item	Characteristic	Number of Samples	Percentage
Gender	Male	631	49.4
	Female	646	50.6
Age	Below 20	20	1.6
	21–30	341	26.7
	31–40	407	31.9
	41–50	273	21.4
	51–60	151	11.8
	61 or above	85	6.7
Education level	High school level	312	24.4
	Bachelor's degree	606	47.5
	Doctoral degree	243	19.0
	Others	116	9.1
Average monthly income	500USD or below	59	4.6
	500–1000USD	304	23.8
	1000–1500USD	377	29.5
	1500–2000USD	330	25.8
	2000USD or above	207	16.2
Occupation	Office boy/ office lady	296	23.2
	Civil servant	220	17.2
	Technician	313	24.5
	Specialist (Professor, Doctor, Lawyer, etc.)	180	14.1
	Homemaker	180	14.1
	Student	20	1.6
	Others	68	5.3

### 4.3. Hypotheses Testing

After examining the measurement validity and reliability, the proposed hypotheses were tested by SEM (structural equation modeling). The fit indices of the model were better than the recommended thresholds, demonstrating a good fit between the model and data ( $\chi^2/df = 3.201$ , CFI = 0.976, TLI = 0.972, RMSEA = 0.042, SRMR = 0.023).

As indicated in Table 4, we evaluated the structural model regarding the size and significance of the path coefficients are evaluated and performed them to test H1 to H4. Results from the quantitative findings indicate that CoI has a positive influence on purchase intention, H1 is supported ( $= 0.084, p < 0.01$ ). The findings from the quantitative data analysis reveal that competence stereotypes have a positive influence on CoI, H2 is supported ( $= 0.075, p < 0.01$ ),

and competence stereotypes have a positive influence on purchase intention, H3 is supported ( $= 0.074, p < 0.01$ ). The findings reveal that warmth stereotypes have a positive influence on CoI, which supported H4 ( $= 0.058, p < 0.05$ ). In addition, warmth stereotype has no direct influence on purchase intention4 ( $= 0.048, p > 0.05$ ). Hence, to improve the CoI, we can start by improving the national competence and warmth stereotype.

### 4.4. Mediation Analyses

H5 posits that CoI mediates the effect of the national stereotype on consumers' purchase intention, and the bootstrapping approach was used to test the mediating effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The use and test of mediating effect is the main trend in management studies. The analysis of SEM-based on bootstrap can

**Table 2:** Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct	Indicator	Standard Loading 1	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
Competence stereotype	CS1	0.729	0.893	0.894	0.628
	CS2	0.831			
	CS3	0.761			
	CS4	0.826			
	CS5	0.811			
Warmth stereotype	WS1	0.737	0.874	0.875	0.637
	WS2	0.819			
	WS3	0.786			
	WS4	0.847			
Country-of-origin image	Col1	0.719	0.904	0.905	0.614
	Col2	0.756			
	Col3	0.865			
	Col4	0.787			
	Col5	0.785			
	Col6	0.781			
Purchase intention	PI1	0.775	0.882	0.883	0.654
	PI2	0.843			
	PI3	0.847			
	PI4	0.767			

Note: <sup>1</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.001$  level, C.R.: construct reliability, AVE: average variance extracted.

**Table 3:** Correlation Matrix.

Variables						
	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
Competence stereotype	4.638	1.522	0.792			
Warmth stereotype	4.785	1.412	0.078	0.798		
Country-of-origin image	3.972	1.516	0.089	0.071	0.784	
Purchase intention	4.773	1.414	0.102	0.071	0.103	0.809

Note: Diagonal bold italics entries are the square root of AVE; all others are correlations coefficients. M: Mean, SD: Standard deviation.

**Table 4:** Results of Hypotheses

H	Structural Path	Estimates	S.E.	T-value	<i>p</i>	Results
H1	Country-of-origin image → Purchase intention	0.084	0.029	2.904	0.004**	Yes
H2	Competence stereotype → Country-of-origin image	0.075	0.028	2.708	0.007**	Yes
H3	Competence stereotype → Purchase intention	0.074	0.026	2.840	0.005**	Yes
H4	Warmth stereotype → Country-of-origin image	0.058	0.028	2.060	0.039*	Yes

overcome the shortcomings of traditional testing methods such as the Sobel test in dealing with different sample sizes and mediating effect values (Cheung & Lau, 2008). According to the findings that the indirect effect of CoI on the relationship between national stereotype and consumer’s purchase intention is significant with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval, excluding zero (competence, indirect effect = 0.006, 95% CIs = [0.002, 0.015]; warmth, indirect effect = 0.005, 95% CIs = [0.001, 0.013]), a consumer’s CoI mediates the effect of national stereotypes on a consumer’s purchase intention. Therefore, H5 is supported.

#### 4.5. Moderation Analyses

##### 4.5.1. The Moderating Role of the Perceived Severity of the COVID-19 in China

The study design was a 2 (CoI: high vs. low) \* 3 (the perceived severity of the COVID-19 in China: serious vs. neutral vs. not serious) between-subjects design. The country-of-origin is divided into two groups based on the median of the data. The high perception group is 1, and the low perception group is 2. Participants viewed an image of the National Health Commission of China on China’s COVID-19 data for the past year. Participants need to answer the perception of the severity of the COVID-19 in China based on the data.

A 2\*3 ANCOVA on purchase intention revealed a significant interaction between CoI and the perceived severity of the COVID-19 in China,  $F(1, 1271) = 7.253, p < 0.01$ . It can be seen that the perceived severity of the COVID-19 in China has a moderating effect on the relationship between CoI and consumers’ purchase intention. Participants were high intention to purchase when perceived as not serious COVID-19 in China than serious and neutral perception level of China’s COVID-19 ( $M_{not\ serious} = 5.125$  vs  $M_{neutral} = 4.785$  vs.  $M_{serious} = 4.147$ ), as shown in Figure 2-1, H6 is supported.

##### 4.5.2. The Moderating Role of the Level of Country Economic Development

The study design was a 2 (CoI: high vs. low) \* 2 (the level of country economic development: developed country vs. developing country) between-subjects design. The processing of the country-of-origin data is the same as the previous part. We have divided participants into developed countries and developing countries according to the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) classification standards.

A 2 \* 2 ANCOVA on purchase intention revealed a significant interaction between CoI and the level of country economic development,  $F(1, 1273) = 6.391, p < 0.05$ . It can be seen that the level of country economic development has

a moderating effect on the relationship between CoI and consumer’s purchase intention. The effect of CoI on purchase intention is greater for consumers who live in developed countries ( $M_{developed} = 4.841$ ) versus living in developing countries ( $M_{developing} = 4.514$ ), as shown in Figure 2-2.

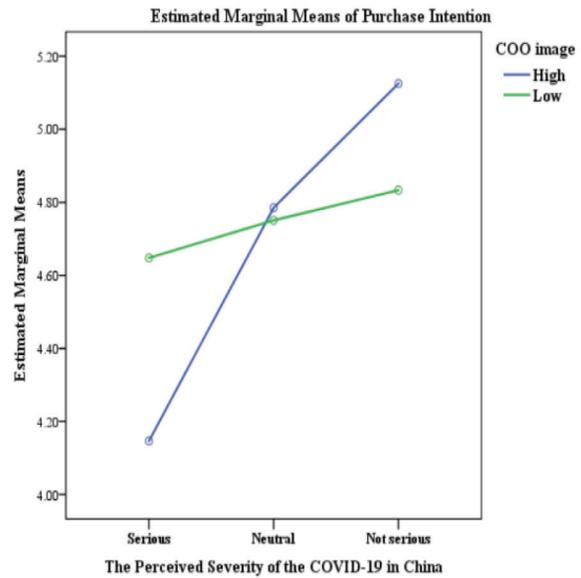


Figure 2-1: Results of Moderation Effect of the Perceived Severity of the COVID-19 in China

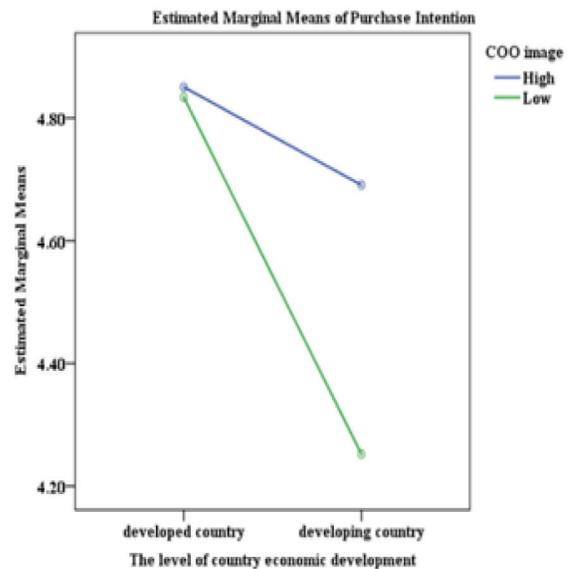


Figure 2-2: Results of Moderation Effect of the Level of Country Economic Development

#### 4.6. Control Variable Results

Finally, to provide a more robust test of the results of this study, control variables (gender, age, education level, average monthly income, and occupation) were included as direct antecedents of purchase intention.

According to the research results, gender, age, education level, average monthly income, and occupation have no significant effect on latent variables. It shows that gender, age, average monthly income, and occupation have no difference in CoI and purchase intention. Therefore, this study minimized the impact of demographic characteristics on potential variables.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

We have tested our hypotheses across 12 countries and used large samples of consumers, which allow for a strong test of the empirical generalizability of our findings. As the globalization process quickens and several less-developed countries join the global market, there is a need to investigate emerging markets. Thus, this research makes it possible to extend the findings in the literature on the influence of national stereotypes on purchase intention through CoI, and test moderator variables providing a more sophisticated explanation for how this influence occurs.

#### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

Despite the surge in academic and practical interest in the topic of stereotype content model and CoI, opportunities for further academic advancement of this construct have been facilitated by economic globalization and One Belt and One Road. To this end, this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, based on the stereotype content model in social psychology, this study divides the national stereotype into competence stereotype and warmth stereotype, contributing to the theoretical development of the national stereotype. Existing studies usually define the national stereotype as consumers' stereotype of their country's products, with durable goods and cultural products as the main research objects (Hsieh et al., 2004). In this study, the national stereotype is defined as consumers' general perception of the people of a country based on political, economic, cultural, and other factors, excluding specific product categories. Therefore, our research breaks the limitations of the original literature on the product category and improves the external validity of the research results.

In addition, existing studies mainly focus on the direct impact of information from the national stereotype on product evaluation and the role of consumers' cognitive, emotional, and normative responses at the level of consciousness. This study emphasizes how the national stereotype influences the

CoI and has examined its influence on consumers' purchase intention under the moderating effect of environmental and national levels. This provides a new perspective for studying the influence path and mechanism of the country-of-origin effect.

Our third contribution was that we integrate national stereotype literature with CoI and consumer behavior theory to develop and test a moderation model of the relationship between CoI and consumer purchase intention. We examine the moderating variables at the environmental and national levels, taking into account the current COVID-19 situation and global economic development into consideration. According to the research results, the effect of CoI on purchase intention is greater for consumers who perceive the low severity of COVID-19 in China versus those who perceive the high severity of COVID-19 in China. The effect of CoI on purchase intention is greater for consumers who live in developed countries versus life in developing countries. This provides new empirical support for the applicability and application value of the CoI and purchase intention in marketing research, thus, promoting the further applications and development of this literature in the field of marketing.

#### 5.2. Practical Implications

Certain important practical implications can be derived from our research. First, in this study, competence and warmth stereotypes have a positive effect on the CoI. Aaker et al. (2010) found that the two dimensions of warmth and competence have a positive impact on brand attitude and purchase intention. When a brand has both warmth and competence, the brand attitude and purchase willingness of consumers are the most positive factors. However, due to the limitation of resources and the need for a differentiation strategy, enterprises can only focus their resources on one stereotype dimension- the warmth or competence of brand building. In this case, enterprises need to consider the stereotype of consumers in the target export market on the stereotype of the brand and adopt the brand strategy matching the stereotypes of the origin country to build the brand image, to promote consumers for having a positive brand attitude and purchase intention. Combined with the research conclusion of this paper, Chinese enterprises should strengthen their warmth stereotype, improve their competence stereotype, and finally improve the purchase intention of consumers in the process of brand globalization.

Second, China is now accelerating the One Belt and One Road national strategy and moving towards brand globalization. "Made in China" is not only a strong guarantee for Chinese brands to go on a global scale but also a huge obstacle for stereotypes from customers in some developed countries around the world. Different country images bring unique influences on their representative industries and

brands (Interbrand, 2016). In this study, under the influence of COVID-19, the CoI has enhanced the influence on consumers' purchase intention regardless of the competence or warmth stereotype. Therefore, for Chinese products, an important task is to improve product quality and form famous brand products with independent intellectual property rights to enhance the brand value. Chinese enterprises should improve their influence in developed and developing countries, improve their global awareness and enhance consumers' purchase intention. In the new situation, we can improve the CoI by promoting cultural identity among countries and showing the responsibility of China, and then influencing consumers' purchase behavior.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Research

As an empirical study, this research has several limitations that present issues for further research. First, this study is a consumer-based extension of Roth (1995), only the moderating effects on CoI dimensions that have been examined. However, potential moderating variables in the relationship between CoI and purchase intention might exist. For instance, consumer ethnocentrism and cultural identity have different influences on purchase intention. Future research can explore such possibilities.

Second, referring to the scope of this study, other variables are not added to the model. Future studies could extend our model to include different consumer psychological variables as antecedents and indicators, including consumers' goals as well as needs, achievement motivation, and product involvement.

Finally, measurement improvements are possible and may be important for further research. The sample we used in this study is drawn from 12 countries along the 21<sup>st</sup> - Century Maritime Silk Road and the potential measurement problem arising from questionnaire design and international survey implementation is beyond our control. Although the measurement model has proved acceptably at a pool level, the result of our national-level analysis, which seeks invariant factor patterns across countries in a more rigorous way, is unsatisfactory. Regarding the use of self-reporting to measure key concepts, the variance explained may be biased upwardly because of the self-reported nature of the individual behavior response. To address this validity issue, future research might use multiple methods to eliminate the rivals' opposition to the explanation of shared methods.

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**Appendix: Questionnaire Items**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Measurement Item</b>
<b>National Stereotypes</b>	
Competence stereotype (C.S.)	1. I think China is competent.
	2. I think China is confident.
	3. I think China is independent.
	4. I think China is competitive.
	5. I think China is intelligent.
Warmth stereotype (W.S.)	1. I think China is tolerant.
	2. I think China is very friendly.
	3. I think China is gentle.
	4. I think China is sincere.
<b>Country-of-origin Image</b>	
Country of origin image (Col)	1. I think the price of Chinese products is attractive.
	2. I think Chinese products are of high quality.
	3. I think Chinese products have high technology.
	4. China actively cooperates with us.
	5. China's cultural heritage is well preserved.
	6. Chinese culture has great attraction.
<b>Consumer Purchase Intention</b>	
Purchase intention (P.I.)	1. I believe this brand is my first choice for relevant products.
	2. I will choose this brand next time when I buy this product category.
	3. I am willing to try new products for this brand.
	4. I will speak positively about this brand to others.

Note: Arrangement by researchers.