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From Risk to Reliability: The Interplay of COB and COM in Mitigating Risk and Enhancing Trust in Apparel Purchases

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ABSTRACT

Country of Origin (COO) serves as a critical extrinsic cue that consumers use to assess product quality, build trust, and mitigate perceived risk, particularly in situations where direct product evaluation is limited. In the context of the increasingly globalized apparel industry, products are often designed, branded, and manufactured across different countries, creating complex COO associations. With this landscape, the distinct and interactive roles of *country of manufacture* (COM) and *country of brand origin* (COB) in shaping consumer perceptions remain insufficiently understood. This research gap is particularly relevant in India, a culturally diverse and rapidly expanding apparel market where consumers are exposed to both domestic and international brands. This study investigates how variations in COO cues influence consumers' trust and perceived risk using a 2 × 2 factorial experimental design. Specifically, it compares consumer responses to apparel products associated with Indian versus international COB and COM combinations. The study evaluates how these COO configurations affect perceptions of financial, social, and performance risks, along with overall trust in the product. By isolating and analyzing the individual and combined effects of COB and COM, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how consumers interpret and respond to origin-related information. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to existing literature on consumer behavior and COO effects while offering practical implications for both domestic and global apparel brands. Insights derived from the research can assist marketers and brand strategists in refining

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positioning strategies, strengthening brand credibility, and aligning communication efforts with evolving consumer expectations in emerging markets such as India.

Keywords: Country of Brand Origin (COB); Country of Manufacture (COM); Interaction Effect; Perceived Risk; Trust; Apparel

1. Introduction

Globalization in fashion chains, driven by economic integration and trade bloc desegregation, has significantly expanded free trade. Today's apparel business model is highly complex, involving collaborations with numerous players across multiple countries [1]. As a labour-intensive industry, apparel production frequently shifts across borders to capitalize on lower labour costs, relaxed regulations, or proximity to resources and markets [2]. Consequently, few brands manufacture their products in the country of their origin, with offshoring practices becoming the norm [3, 4].

Consumers often rely on Country of Origin (COO) as an informational cue to evaluate products, as COO can foster trust and mitigate perceived risks in purchase decisions [5]. Mandated COO labelling primarily highlights the Country of Manufacture (COM), a cue that can trigger varied consumer interpretations. Depending on the manufacturing country, consumers may associate the product with superior quality, moderate reliability, or outdated production practices. Products from certain countries are frequently viewed as inferior or counterfeit, leading some consumers to avoid items manufactured in certain nations due to political, social, economic, or environmental concerns [6].

To address this, marketers often emphasize country of brand (COB) to create strong, favourable, and unique brand associations as it distinguishes a brand by leveraging the positive image of its origin country [2, 7]. While Country of Brand Origin (COB) is not a mandatory disclosure, many firms strategically highlight it when it strengthens their brand identity. A favourable COB can improve brand positioning by reducing perceived risks, signalling superior quality, and enhancing brand prestige and value [8–10]. However, in today's global production environment, apparel products often carry multiple COO cues, most commonly COB and COM. When these cues appear simultaneously, consumers may notice discrepancies between the COB emphasized in marketing and the COM displayed on product labels.

Existing literature indicates that consumers interpret COB and COM as distinct informational cues [8, 11–13], which may generate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, associations. Although consumers often attribute high trust and social desirability to products linked with a positive country of origin, it remains unclear how they respond when these cues conflict, for example, when a brand has a strong global image but the product is manufactured in a country with a weaker perception, or vice versa. Whether such incongruent country images diminish trust or elevate perceived financial, social, and performance risk has not been sufficiently examined.

Most COO research has focused on product evaluations and quality perceptions, leaving the role of COO in shaping perceived risk relatively underexplored. Given that COO also functions as a risk indicator, where products from countries with weaker reputations are often viewed with greater suspicion, understanding how consumers interpret incongruent COB and COM cues becomes particularly critical for the apparel sector, which is deeply globalized and highly sensitive to image.

Therefore, this study addresses a significant gap by analysing how inconsistencies between COB and COM influence consumer trust and perceived risk in bi-national apparel products. By examining incongruence across countries with differing economic and developmental profiles, the research highlights an essential yet scarcely studied dimension of the COO effect, offering insights relevant for both domestic and international apparel brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perceived Risk

Perceived risk refers to the uncertainty and potential consequences consumers associate with a purchase decision [6, 14]. It plays a crucial role in shaping consumer purchase intentions, whether the decision is planned or impul-

sive[15]. Consumers tend to prefer products with positive images, as these choices help reduce perceived risks and enhance perceived value[16, 17].

A country with a positive image strengthens a product's positioning, thereby lowering perceived risks associated with its purchase[4, 18]. Brands originating from countries with favourable COO images are viewed more favourably, fostering quality perceptions and reducing perceived risks through their association with wide acceptance and trust in global markets[14, 19].

COO effects vary widely across countries because economic, socio-cultural, and political-legal differences shape how consumers interpret the origin of a product and the risks associated with it. Research shows that consumers often perceive higher levels of risk when purchasing products emerging from certain emerging or developing nations[6, 20]. Brands associated with favourable COO images tend to enjoy stronger positioning in less globalized or developing markets, where COO serves as a powerful signal of credibility and quality[21].

Consumers in many emerging economies frequently hold sceptical views about the quality and reliability of products manufactured within their own regions. This scepticism increases perceived risk, reduces trust, and ultimately lowers purchase intentions[22, 23]. As a result, they often prefer brands from more developed Western countries, associating these products with superior quality, higher social status, and enhanced self-image[24].

In the context of fashion and apparel products, perceived risk tends to be particularly high because consumers place strong emphasis on style, fit, and quality attributes that are often difficult to assess before actual use[25, 26]. This uncertainty makes consumers more sensitive to external cues, especially those related to COO[27]. Given the globalised nature of apparel production, where brands are designed in one country and manufactured in another, the COO becomes an important heuristic, which acts as a mental shortcut that helps consumers evaluate potential risk[28].

When multiple COO cues, such as COB and Country of Manufacture COM, appear simultaneously, consumers may encounter conflicting information[21]. For instance, a well-regarded foreign brand manufactured in a country with a weaker image may trigger doubts about product reliability and elevate perceived financial, social, or performance risk, or vice versa. Such inconsistencies between COO cues can complicate decision-making and impact how much trust consumers place in the product[29–31].

2.2. Performance and Financial Risk

Consumers are wary of purchasing risky products and rely on the extrinsic cues/signals (such as COO, warranty) that can be used to distinguish good products from bad ones[32]. It is expected that consumers would end up spending more time and effort in evaluating the attributes and performance of products that are perceived as high risk, coupled with unfavourable attitudes, and showcase a lower purchase intention for such products[33]. Various studies state that the purchase of apparel is associated with perceptions of higher financial/economic risk, like possible financial loss, and performance risks like the durability of a garment[34, 35].

Perceived risks, including performance and financial risks, are influenced by factors such as the country's manufacturing infrastructure, marketing sophistication, and economic development[6]. Higher levels of country development are associated with better quality perceptions, while lower levels of development lead to lower perceived quality and higher risk[36, 37]. Research has shown that products from developing or emerging economies are perceived as less technologically advanced, less sophisticated, and of lower quality[30]. If the environment has a strong regulatory component, it would lead to enhanced quality of the product, translating to a better standard of product for the consumer[38].

A positive COO indicates a standard of quality for the product and serves as an attribute that helps consumers to distinguish risky or non-risky products. A positive signal through COO creates a positive expectation for the consumers, which translates into an implicit promise that product quality will align with those expectations[32]. The signalling theory[39] posits that information given to the consumer is imperfect and asymmetrical, where the COO acts as the signal for the consumer to mitigate the uncertainties and the risks associated with the product[40, 41]. Using signalling theory as the premise, it is assumed that consumers will use COO as a signal, which is expected to intensify their perceived risk (performance and financial) based on their perception of the competency of the country. The following hypothesis then needs to be ratified based on the perceived risk dimension of COO:

H1. *For favourable COM, associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the performance risk higher than associating with COB India. For COM India, associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the performance risk higher than associating it with COB India.*

H2. *For favourable COM, associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the Financial risk higher than associating with COB India. For COM India, associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the financial risk higher than associating it with COB India.*

2.3. Perceived Social Risk

Social risk is concerned with the adverse consequences associated with the unfavourable opinions of other people on the purchase and its usage. This type of risk implies that the buyer is prompted by thinking about the group that the consumer belongs to, principally either friends or family. Fearing the criticism from family or friends, consumers might stop buying a preferred product, especially those products which are perceived to be controversial or which do not help them to be a part of the social group [42].

To preserve or enhance one's self-image, consumers buy products and services that they believe to be congruent with their self-image and avoid those that are not [15]. Typically, in the emerging markets, consumers seek social status and prestige, thereby attaching themselves to imported products that reveal prestige and make them feel better about their social class [43]. According to research by Guo [44] and Yener and Taşçıoğlu [45], the use of products from a developed economy helps in increasing the self-confidence of the consumer by making them feel more distinguished and rich. It was identified that the female consumers desired foreign apparel brands irrespective of their quality, but for the conspicuous reasons citing show off, impression management, complying with or imitating others, or projecting their social class [24]. When purchasing fashion products, Indian consumers are governed by strong social acceptance [46–48].

Since consumers are more concerned about the style, appearance, and enhancing their social appeal, it's presumed that consumers will perceive smaller social risk for products associated with a favourable COO in comparison to COO being India. Since consumers tend to attach a higher symbolic value to foreign brands, it's assumed that COB will have a stronger effect in mitigating social risk than COM. Based on the theoretical understanding, it's hypothesized:

H3. *For favourable COM associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the social risk higher than associating with COB India. For COM India, associating product with favourable COB will mitigate the social risk higher than associating it with COB India.*

2.4. Conceptualization of Trust

Trust is a subtle concept which can be understood in the individualist framework as a characteristic of confidence in the interpersonal relation or as an attribute of the exchange partner [49]. It is a condition showcasing confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner.

COB can influence a brand's positioning by reducing perceived risks, acting as a guarantee and enhancer for the positioning strategy [18]. Consumers may encounter high levels of risk in situations where they perceive a threat to their self/social identity [50]. So, when a consumer has negative feelings, such as feelings of discomfort or embarrassment while purchasing products originating from a country whose country image is perceived as inferior, he/she may feel discomfort in purchasing because using these products would be incongruent with their personal image or resultant hostility which may make them a target of negative reactions from the people who share the same attitude.

When a consumer is hostile to a specific country, his/her trust will be far less for the firms originating in that country [30, 45]. Therefore, buying a brand from a country with a lower presumed image may result in high levels of risk, thus impacting the trust level. It can be easily comprehended that consumers would attach a high trust to products originating from a positive COO (brand origin) along with a positive COO (manufacturer) image, and vice versa. However, when consumers carry a positive COO (brand origin) image with a negative COO (manufacturer) image or vice versa, whether the consumer exhibits equal trust towards these products is still not answered. Based on the discussion from the literature, it's hypothesized that:

H4. *There exists a significant negative relationship between social risk and trust.*

H5. *There exists a significant negative relationship between*

performance risk and trust.

H6. *There exists a significant negative relationship between Financial risk and trust.*

H7. *For favourable COM (Italy) associating product with favourable COB (France) will lead to higher perceived trust than associating with unfavourable COB (India). For COM with unfavourable country image (India), associating product with favourable COB (France) will lead to higher perceived trust than associating it with COB (India).*

3. Methodology

3.1. Country Identification

Countries with a stronger global brand image and more advanced manufacturing capabilities than India were considered for inclusion in this study. The preliminary pool of countries was identified using data collected from the Indian retail market, where major international brands available in India were examined and their respective countries of manufacture were coded. To further narrow the selection to one country for each category, being Country of Brand Origin (COB) and Country of Manufacture (COM), 100 respondents were contacted via email and asked to rate the identified countries on their perceived brand image and manufacturing capabilities. A total of 40 usable responses were collected from each group. COB was measured using Roth and Romeo's 1992 [51] scale, while COM was assessed using Josiassen et al.'s 2013 [52] scale; both were found to be reliable. The means for COB images were recorded as M_{USA} = 3.814, M_{UK} = 3.825, M_{France} = 4.05, M_{Spain} = 3.589, and M_{India} = 3.52. The mean values of France, the USA & UK were found to be higher than those of India. Since the highest mean value was observed for France, to ensure that significant differences exist in the mean value of France & India, independent samples tests (*t*-tests) were conducted, and significant differences were found between the two mean values (M_{France} = 4.05 vs. M_{India} = 3.52, p = 0.00).

The mean for COM image was recorded as M_{Italy} = 4.025, M_{China} = 3.105, $M_{Bangladesh}$ = 3.42, and M_{India} = 3.65. The mean values of Italy were found to be higher than India, while the mean values of China and Bangladesh were found to be lower. Since the highest mean value was observed for Italy, to ensure that there exist significant differences in the mean value of Italy and India, independent samples tests (*t*-tests) were conducted, and significant differences were observed in the two mean values (M_{Italy} = 4.105 vs. M_{India} = 3.65, p = 0.041). Subsequently, a 2 × 2 factorial design for experimental study was deliberated acting as framework for conducting the manipulation study for COB and COM.

3.2. Data Collection

The study's sample consisted of adult, urban, educated, upper-middle-class Indian female consumers from Delhi NCR. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was used, as these respondents were suited for experimental inferences. Out of 300 approached via email and phone, 296 agreed to participate. After excluding 16 invalid responses, 280 valid responses were analysed.

The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 66 years with 53% aged between 18–30 years, 21% aged 31–40 years, 17% aged 41–50 years and 9% aged 51 years and above, with a mean age of 32 years. Of the total female respondents, 58% of the participants were working females, 23% were students, and the balance were homemakers. All the respondents belonged to the upper and upper-middle income group, where the household's income ranged between ₹7,50,000–₹15,75,000 per annum.

3.3. Stimuli and Procedure

The experiment was conducted in a virtual lab setting due to participants' reluctance to attend physically. A virtual setting was suitable as COO serves as an extrinsic cue, often relied upon when intrinsic cues like touch and feel are unavailable. This setup helped trigger the use of extrinsic cues, aligning with the purpose of examining causal relationships in this experimental study. The experiment was conducted online using Google Forms to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Following Genç and Wang [53], manipulation check questions were included to ensure respondents noticed the COB and COM information while processing the hypothetical product. Only data from participants who answered these questions correctly was considered for analysis.

Participants were informed that the study aimed to gather consumer opinions on a new fashion brand, 'Finualia,' set to launch in the Indian market. The experiment

began with a newspaper article introducing the fictitious brand and product, including product attributes, brand logo (**Figure 1**), and a high-quality product image from the retailer. Participants were then asked about their product evaluation (performance, financial and social risks and trust) based on the provided information. In different versions of the experiment, COB was either India or France, while COM was either India or Italy.

(a) Group I. **(b)** Group II.

(c) Group III. **(d)** Group IV.

Figure 1. Print ads used for the study.

Source: Author's creative ad.

4. Results

The financial risk and performance risk were measured using the scale by Shimp and Bearden, 1982 [54] and social risk with a three-item scale by Stone and Grønhaug, 1993 [55] while trust was measured using a scale by Erdem and Swait (1998) [39]. Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All the scales were found to be reliable, having Cronbach's alpha values of more than 0.7 for all four groups (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Group means and reliability values for all the COO combinations exposed to the four experimental groups.

	COB (France) COM (Italy)	**COB (India) COM (Italy)**	**COB (France) COM (India)**	**COB (India) COM (India)**	
Variables	**Mean Values**	**Mean Values**	**Mean Values**	**Mean Values**	**Cronbach's Alpha**
Financial Risk	3.473	3.66	4.17	5.00	0.873
Performance Risk	5.33	5.03	4.46	4.416	0.739
Social Risk	2.77	4.01	3.49	4.21	0.791
Trust	4.58	4.59	4.31	4.56	0.917

4.1. Effect of COB and COM Effect

4.1.1. Effects of COB and COM on Performance Risk

The results indicate a significant main effect of COB on performance risk ($F(1,276) = 13.032$, $p = 0.00$). Similar results were found for the COM effect on performance risk. Significant difference existed in the mean values such that manufacturing in Italy ($M_{Italy} = 2.464$, $SD = 1.03$) had a lower performance risk than being manufactured in India ($M_{India} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.34$), where $F(1,276) = 37.228$, $p = 0.00$.

In order to test the interaction effect, univariate linear model analysis using SPSS was conducted. The results of the study manifest that an apparel which is manufactured in India, branding it with a favourable country of origin like France, results in no significant difference in performance risk in comparison to when it was branded with COB (India) ($F(1,276) = 3.23$, $p = 0.073$). For apparel that is manufactured in a favourable COM, branding the same with favourable COB reduces the level of perceived performance risk more than associating the same product with COB (India) ($F(1,276) = 10.941$, $p = 0.001$). This leads to partial acceptance of the hypothesis H1.

To test the equal valence of COB and COM, Tukey post hoc test was conducted using SPSS software where results indicate no statistical significant difference in the performance risk ($M_{France–India} = 3.142$ vs. $M_{India–Italy} = 2.79$, $p = 0.294$). Results imply that there is an equal valence COB and COM on performance risk as the negative COB/COM image is offset by the positive COO (refer **Figure 2**).

4.1.2. Effects of COB and COM on Financial Risk

The results of the study show no significant effect of COB on financial risk ($F(1,276) = 0.117$, $p = 0.732$). The main effect of COM on financial risk was also not found to be significant, such that manufacturing in a favourable country (Italy) did not lower the financial risk when manufactured in India ($F(1,276) = 3.465$, $p = 0.064$). Calculating the interaction effect of COB on COM, for Indian manufactured apparels, branding them with COB France did not mitigate the financial risk in comparison to being branded with COB India ($F(1,276) = 1.85$, $p = 0.175$). For apparel with COM Italy, branding the apparel with COB France did not have a significant effect on financial risk compared to COB India ($F(1,276) = 0.768$, $p = 0.382$). The results fail to accept the hypothesis H2. The results of Tukey's post hoc test reveal no significant difference in the mean averages for perceived financial risk in the two combinations ($M_{France–India} = 4.38$ vs. $M_{India–Italy} = 4.00$, $p = 0.404$). Refer **Figure 3**.

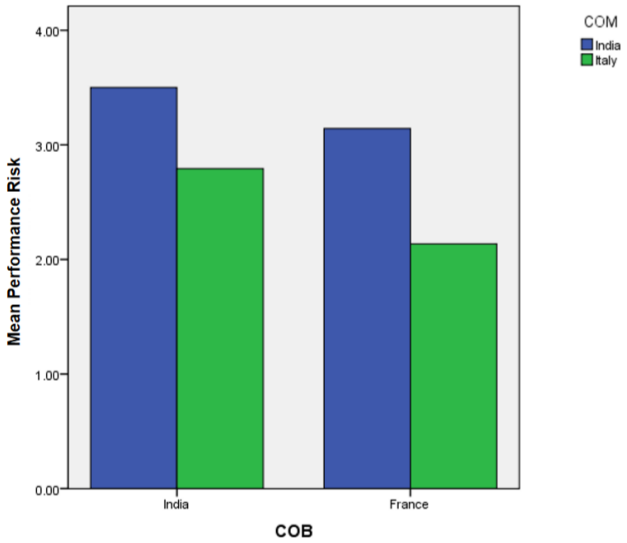

Figure 2. Interaction effect of COB and COM on performance risk for apparel.

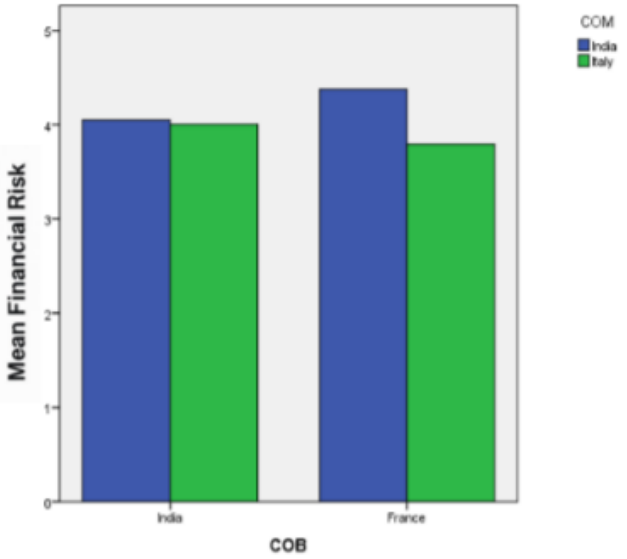

Figure 3. Interaction effect of COB and COM on financial risk.

4.1.3. Effects of COB and COM on Social Risk

The study found significant differences in the mean values of perceived social risk based on the COB information ($F(1,276) = 75.348$, $p = 0.00$). With regards to the main effect of COM on social risk, the effect was found to be significant, such that manufacturing in Italy lowered the social risk compared to being manufactured in India ($F(1,276) = 31.792$, $p =$

0.00). The mean average was found to be significantly lower when COM was a favourable country (M_{Italy} = 3.109, SD = 1.46) than when COM was the home country (M_{India} = 4.03, SD = 1.65).

Calculating the interaction effect of COB on COM for social risk, the results highlight that apparel which is manufactured in India, associating it with COB (France), results in significantly lower social risk compared to being branded with COB (India) ($F(1,276) = 17.748$, $p = 0.00$). For the products that were manufactured in Italy, branding the apparel with COB (France) resulted in a significantly lower level of social risk compared to when branded with COB (India) ($F(1,276) = 65.01$, $p = 0.00$), thus accepting the hypothesis H3. Testing the valence of COB and COM, results reveal that the cross combination of COB (France)–COM (India) in comparison to COM (Italy)–COB (India) on social risk, did not result in any significant difference in the mean values ($M_{France–India}$ = 3.54 vs. $M_{India–Italy}$ = 4.04, $p = 0.14$). Refer **Figure 4**.

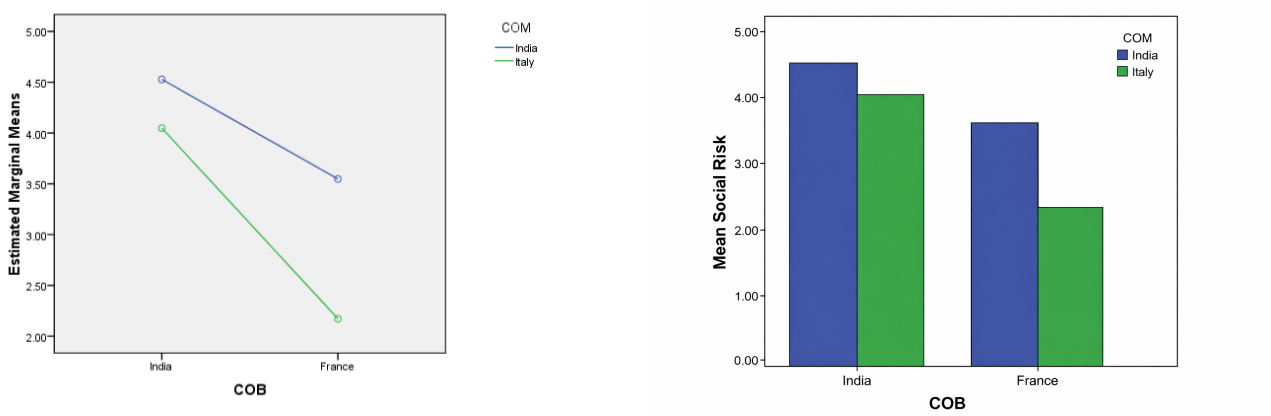

Figure 4. Interaction effect of COB and COM on Social Risk.

4.1.4. Effects of COB and COM on Trust

The results revealed a significant impact of performance risk on trust ($\beta = -0.191$, $t = 2.597$, $p = 0.008$) thus accepting H4. However, the study did not find any significant effect of social risk ($\beta = -0.007$, $t = 0.049$, $p = 0.880$) and financial risk ($\beta = -0.012$, $t = 0.202$, $p = 0.849$) on trust, thus rejecting H5 and H6.

In order to comprehend the main effect of COB and COM variables on trust, univariate linear model analysis was conducted with COB and COM as independent variables and trust as the dependent variable. The results display a significant effect of COB on trust ($F(1,276) = 18.305$, $p = 0.00$), where the participants exhibited a higher trust level for the apparel product based on its COB information. However, the main effect of COM on trust was found to be statistically non-significant, in such a way that manufacturing in a country with a favourable image (M_{Italy} = 5.01, SD = 1.07) did not impact the trust level of the respondent when compared to being manufactured in India (M_{India} = 4.99, SD = 0.88), where $F(1,276) = 0.038$, $p = 0.845$. The results of the study suggest that for Indian female consumers, COB is more important in trust building than the COM information.

It was observed that for apparel items that have COM India, branding them with favourable COB had a higher perceived trust level than when branded with COB India ($F(1,276) = 6.75$, $p = 0.010$). Similar results were obtained when the apparel was associated with COM Italy. Branding the apparel with COB France had a significant effect on the perceived level of trust compared to branding the same with COB India ($F(1,276) = 11.910$, $p = 0.001$), thus accepting the hypothesis H7. The results are indicative of the fact that associating favourable COB specially with an apparel product which is manufactured in a country encompassing an unfavourable image, helps to increase the trust level of the consumers.

5. Discussions

5.1. COB and COM Interaction on Performance Risk

The study shows a direct relationship between COO and performance risk. The study finds the inferences from the signalling theory, which posits that the COO acts as the

signal for the consumer to mitigate the uncertainties and the risks associated with a product [41]. The results find support in the literature and prove that the COO affects the performance risk, which may vary from one country, primarily based on their perceived images due to differences in economic, sociocultural, and political-legal factors [20, 56].

While the extant literature identified that a brand emerging from positive COO signals a stronger brand in the less globalized and developing country markets, the study results establish that COB impacts the perceived performance risk for the apparel product. COB from a favourable country mitigated performance risk compared to when COB was in the home country. However, this study provides insight into the interaction effect of COB on COM. Positive COB information could not mitigate the negative impact of COM (unfavourable country) on performance risk, but could only mitigate the effect when COM information was favourable.

The results support the findings of other researchers and find that Indian consumers show a negative perception towards the quality of products made in developing economies, particularly India, along with a low purchase intention due to higher perceived risk and lower trust in product performance [22]. The important point is that the COM India image as perceived by Indians is highly unfavourable, which makes the consumer question the quality of the product manufactured locally, resulting in higher perceived performance risk. Any positive reinforcement through COB information for apparel manufactured in India does not mitigate the associated performance risk. The particular result suggests that supplementing COB information for mitigating performance-related risk is beneficial only when COB and COM are both from favourable countries.

5.2. COB and COM Interaction on Financial Risk

Contrary to the previous research by Milovan-Ciuta et al. [57] that stated that COO affects the financial dimension of the perceived risk, the findings reveal that there is no substantial interaction effect of COB and COM on financial risk. The results of this study indicate that the consumer found the apparel to be highly financially risky at a premium price, irrespective of the COO association. A possible explanation for the same can be found in the research findings of Dhiman et al. [58], which state that Indian consumers are extremely price-sensitive and use price as a key decision maker in apparel purchase, despite the good brand name, good comfort. As a result, any favourable COO association with the product, either in the form of COB or COM information, could not mitigate the financial risk as perceived by the consumers.

However, the results of the study are contrary to the findings of Josiassen et al. and Al-Aali et al. [52, 59], which stated that the consumers would showcase a willingness to spend higher amounts of money on branded products from favourable COO. In the study, despite favourable COO associations with the product in the form of COB, COM, or both, the consumers found substantial financial risk in purchasing the apparel product. One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon could be a lack of brand familiarity. For this study, a fictitious brand was created, where the consumers had no prior knowledge of the brand. The results suggest that there may be a possibility that Indians may perceive less financial risk for an already established brand compared to a new brand in the market, which is yet to create a value proposition.

From a managerial standpoint, it is suggested that brands and manufacturers should emphasize building brand value for Indian consumers. As per the study by Agarwal S. and Teas K. [60], financial risk can be reduced by influencing consumers' perception of quality and monetary sacrifice. Many times, the brands exercise little control over monetary sacrifice perceptions unless they reduce the price. Although price reductions are possible, it is not necessarily a desired choice, mainly because the higher prices are potential indicators of higher quality.

5.3. COB and COM Interaction on Social Risk

The results find their foundation in the theory of social identity, which states that the attitude and behaviour of an individual are influenced by the group or culture they belong to [61]. The findings of this study support the previous research by Devanathan [47] and confirm that when purchasing fashion apparel products, Indian consumers are governed by strong social acceptance. The results suggest that for Indian consumers, consuming Indian apparel brands can have adverse consequences associated with other people's unfavourable opinions on purchase and its usage.

The results exhibit that Indian consumers found the Indian brands to possess a higher social risk than Western brands. Consuming brands from developed countries, or

countries with favourable images, such as those prominent in fashion, in comparison to Indian brands, may elicit self-confidence by making the consumers feel more distinguished and rich [45]. It was found that Indians associated domestic brands/products to be socially risky as they saw potential disapproval from their family or friends, significantly discouraging them from purchasing.

The results add to the theoretical understanding of the interaction effect between the two facets regarding perceived social risk. It was established that the two COO facets countered the negative effect of each other equally, and an equal valence of the two could be assumed. The positive COB information mitigates the negative effect of COM information and vice versa concerning perceived social risk. While it was assumed that COB would have a stronger effect than COM in the interaction effect, because of more visibility of COB through marketing communication, we found equal valence of both facets. The significant contribution that this study presents regarding the interaction of COB and COM on perceived social risk is that not only do consumers tend to attach a higher symbolic value to foreign brands, but they also associate a higher value with foreign manufacturing.

From a managerial standpoint, it is advisable for all international and domestic brands to showcase their favourable COO, as any positive reinforcements through COB or COM help to mitigate the negative effect. Improvements have to be made by Indian brands that are manufactured locally, as they attract the highest level of social risk. Brands should emphasize social risk reduction strategies by enforcing strong product attributes. As individuals face higher social risk, they will tend to pay special attention to any product information that does or could aid in fulfilling the social risk-related goal. i.e., attributes that would ordinarily be ignored may take a special meaning when consumers are in a state of high social risk.

5.4. COB and COM Interaction on Trust

It was observed that consumers showcased a higher level of trust with products encompassing favourable COO associations (either through COB, COM, or both) compared to those with no or one favourable association. Our findings are in line with the findings of Jiménez and Martín [62], who found that the consumers' trusting beliefs about the product get weakened when there is a negative effect of COO, thus lessening the product evaluations and consumers' purchase intention. The study also found a significant interaction effect of COB on COM, where a positive COB association mitigated the negative effect of COM on trust. A positive reinforcement made to the consumer about the COO, either through favourable COB or COM, helped to increase the consumer's trust levels for apparel products with which the consumers had no prior experience. The findings support the findings of Nijssen and Van Herk [63], where the studies found that the brands or products with favourable country associations had a direct and positive influence on trust.

6. Limitations

Despite efforts to advance understanding of the interplay between Country of Brand (COB) and Country of Manufacture (COM) image effects, this research has several notable limitations. The most significant constraints pertain to the experimental design. Specifically, the study focuses on a relatively narrow scope by examining only two countries as the brand's country of origin (France and India) and two countries as the manufacturing origin (Italy and India). This limited selection may restrict the generalizability of the findings and their applicability to a broader range of contexts.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the set of COB and COM to include a more diverse array of countries, especially those from other emerging economies. Such an extension would enhance the differentiation of findings and provide deeper insights into the dynamics of COB and COM interactions across a wider spectrum of economic, cultural, and industrial settings. Moreover, incorporating additional product categories into the analysis would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of how country images influence consumer perceptions and preferences. This broader approach could help refine and specify the interplay between the brand's country of origin image and the product's manufacturing origin image, yielding more nuanced and robust conclusions.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the nuanced and dimension specific nature of the interaction between Country of Brand Origin (COB) and Country of Manufacture (COM) in shaping Indian consumers' perceptions of apparel

products. The results demonstrate that COO cues exert a significant influence on perceived performance risk where favourable COB associations are unable to compensate for the negative impact of an unfavourable COM, particularly when products are manufactured in India. This underscores the dominant role of manufacturing origin in consumers' performance evaluations. In contrast, the interaction between COB and COM does not significantly influence perceived financial risk, indicating that price sensitivity and monetary sacrifice remain the primary determinants of financial risk perceptions, irrespective of favourable COO cues, especially in the case of unfamiliar brands.

With respect to social risk, the study reveals an equal and counterbalancing effect of COB and COM, wherein positive cues from either facet mitigate negative perceptions associated with the other, reflecting the symbolic value attached to both foreign branding and foreign manufacturing. Finally, trust is found to be strongly influenced by favourable COO associations, with positive COB and/or COM information effectively enhancing consumer trust, even in the absence of prior brand experience. Taken together, these findings contribute to the COO literature by demonstrating that the effectiveness of COB and COM cues varies across risk dimensions, and that while favourable origin cues can enhance trust and reduce social risk, addressing performance and financial risks requires stronger manufacturing credibility and sustained brand value creation in emerging markets such as India.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study utilized data collected solely for academic research purposes, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained; therefore, Institutional Review Board approval was not required.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. For studies involving data analysis, all data were used in accordance with applicable ethical and legal requirements, ensuring that no personally identifiable information was disclosed. This study did not involve any procedures that could cause harm to participants or animals.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements signed by the research participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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