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The Influence of China's Country-of-Origin on Uzbekistani Consumers' Purchase Intentions: The Mediating Effects of Product Image and Perceived Value

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Abstract

The smartphone market is intensely competitive, with country-of-origin (COO) becoming a key external factor shaping consumer choices in overseas markets. As the world's second-largest economy and a major exporter of smartphones, Chinese brands, despite holding a substantial market share in Central Asian markets such as Uzbekistan, still face challenges related to insufficient brand recognition and limited influence in the high-end market. The study examines how country-of-origin image exerts influences on purchase intention among Uzbekistan smartphone users through a questionnaire distributed to consumers in Tashkent. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was adopted for testing the proposed hypotheses. Based on the results, perceived consumer value exerts a significant impact on purchase intention. Although country-of-origin image and product image do not directly influence purchase intention, an indirect effect still exists. Product image and perceived consumer value jointly mediate the correlation between country-of-origin image and purchase intention. The study focuses on the Central Asian market, analyzing how country-of-origin image shapes consumers' willingness to purchase smartphones—an area that has received limited scholarly attention. It also broadens the multidimensional understanding of country image through a consumer-based perspective, offering insights for Chinese smartphone companies developing market strategies in Uzbekistan.

1. Introduction

Recently, China’s economic and trade exports have expanded considerably. In accordance with the "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2024 National Economic and Social Development" released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBSC, 2025), the total export value reached 25,454.5 billion yuan, increasing by 7.1%, while trade with Belt and Road partner nations rose to 22,068.5 billion yuan, up 6.4% year-on-year. China now features major technology brands such as Huawei, China Mobile, Tencent, Alibaba, and JD.com. This trend can be credited not only to globalization but also to China’s growing capabilities, which have strengthened its national image and fostered positive attitudes among overseas consumers toward Chinese products.

Market research firm Canalys reports that global smartphone shipments increased by 7% in 2024, reaching 1.22 billion units and rebounding after two consecutive years of reduction (Canalys, 2025). Competition among smartphone brands has become even more intense. Recently, China’s mobile phone industry has promoted domestic consumption through subsidy policies while actively expanding its international footprint. Despite strong performance abroad, Chinese mobile brands still face several challenges. Their presence in the global premium segment remains limited, and shifting international trade dynamics, rising tariff tensions, and intensifying global competition create notable uncertainties for overseas expansion. (Xu and Song, 2023). Currently, the smartphone market in Uzbekistan is experiencing steady growth. In accordance with the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, Uzbekistan imported around 1.9 million mobile phones during the first half of 2025, with an import value of $194 million, marking a 3.6% increase from the first half of 2024. China remained the leading source of mobile phone imports, supplying 1.4207 million units and accounting for 75% of total imports (MOFCOM, 2025). In a competitive environment containing numerous international brands, Chinese smartphone manufacturers have gradually gained recognition among Uzbekistani consumers through cost-effective pricing, feature-rich devices, and ongoing technological improvements. However, compared with globally recognized brands such as Apple and Samsung, Chinese smartphones still have room for improvement in terms of brand perception and consumer familiarity. For Chinese smartphone enterprises, understanding Uzbekistani consumers’ intentions to purchase Chinese-origin smartphones—and the factors that shape these intentions—can support the development of more accurate and effective market strategies. Strengthening China’s overall country-of-origin

image will also enhance product competitiveness in Uzbekistan, helping Chinese smartphone companies expand further into global markets and increase their international brand influence (Blanco-Encomienda et al., 2024).

As globalization accelerates, international competition intensifies, and the role of the country-of-origin (COO) factor in consumer purchasing decisions has attracted growing attention. Yao (2019) notes that country-of-origin image arises from consumers' perceptions of a nation or region's broader profile, including economic development, industrialization, politics, history, and culture. This information may not be directly tied to specific products, yet it can shape consumers' evaluations and choices. Country-of-origin image serves as a form of intangible packaging for products, influencing purchasing decisions. Studying this concept can help companies craft marketing strategies while identifying areas of alignment for nations aiming to strengthen their international image. Prior research suggests that consumers in developing countries respond more strongly to country-of-origin information in their decision-making, but most COO studies have concentrated on developed economies (Samiee et al., 2024). Compared with developed nations, consumers in developing economies face greater purchasing risks because of lower average incomes and fewer consumer protection mechanisms or refund policies. Notably, more than two-thirds of the world's countries are developing or emerging economies, and their consumer behavior often demonstrates broader relevance. Consumers in emerging economies like Uzbekistan may engage in more complex, sequential cognitive and affective processing when evaluating products from specific countries, due to factors such as asymmetric product information, evolving brand perceptions, and distinct cultural values. Research on Uzbekistani consumer purchasing habits remains limited, especially within the smartphone market. Uzbekistan has experienced rapid economic growth in recent years, with rising consumer purchasing power and a smartphone market with considerable potential (Statista, 2025). Therefore, research focused on Uzbekistani consumers is necessary to analyze how country-of-origin impacts their smartphone purchase intentions, along with the mediating roles of product image and perceived value, thereby filling an existing research gap.

This study is aimed at investigating how the Chinese country-of-origin effect shapes Uzbekistani consumers' smartphone purchase intentions, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of product image and perceived value. By drawing on the halo effect and cue utilization theories, this study constructs an empirical structural pathway: "country-of-origin image – product image – perceived value – purchase intention". It identifies the positive impact of country-of-origin image on purchase intention and clarifies the mediating mechanisms of product image and perceived value. The study derives marketing strategies for Chinese smartphones in Central Asian markets, represented by Uzbekistan. The current research contributes to the conceptual development of country image as well as offers empirical evidence supporting the application of the country-of-origin effect theory in emerging markets. It provides practical recommendations for Chinese smartphone enterprises operating in Uzbekistan, offering insights that reinforce China's position in international trade and economic development while aligning with the objectives of the Belt and Road initiative.

2. Literature review

The country-of-origin effect remains a vital research topic in international trade and marketing. Growing globalization and cross-border commerce have brought greater attention to a country image and the ways it shapes consumer characteristics. China's expanding national strength and its increasingly positive overseas image have contributed to a shift in many international consumers' attitudes toward "Made in China", giving this research stronger empirical relevance. The concept of country-of-origin has been widely examined in marketing and commerce, producing more than 1,000 publications (Nguyen and Alcantara, 2020, Rodrigo et al., 2023, Samiee and Chabowski, 2021). The idea of the Country-of-Origin Effect (COO) can be traced back to Schooler (1965), who

described it as consumers' cognitive judgments and evaluations of products based on the country associated with them, which in turn influence purchase intentions and behavior. Since then, this topic has continued to receive extensive attention from scholars in both domestic and international settings, especially in international business and marketing. Many researchers have investigated the connections between the Country-of-Origin Effect, perceived value, and purchase intention, producing substantial findings (Srisukwatanachai et al., 2025, Zhou et al., 2024). Their work shows that consumers often hold emotional preferences when evaluating products associated with a particular country-of-origin.

Consumers frequently judge product quality and value based on country-of-origin cues (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995). It is widely recognized that country-of-origin affects consumer purchasing intentions and overall behavior. A product's origin serves as a quality signal, prompting consumers to assign higher value to goods from regions known for strong reputations in certain industries (Kassas et al., 2023). Assessing this relationship helps clarify consumer preferences while supporting countries and brands in shaping their image and enhancing market competitiveness. Still, scholars disagree on how country-of-origin image should be defined. Based on Kock et al. (2019), "Numerous definitions have been proposed for the concept of country-of-origin, yet there is little consensus regarding its scope or measurement criteria". He et al. (2022) reviewed the literature on country-of-origin image, outlining its development across macro-micro viewpoints and cognitive-affective dimensions. A nation's image evolves slowly, influenced by many factors beyond its products and brands, including culture, art, global leadership, and technological progress. This paper begins by examining the drivers of country image and divides it into four components: economic image, political image, people image, and international relations image. This classification follows the work of Bulibuli et al. (2022) and Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka (2023). In order to further understand how country-of-origin image affects consumer purchase intentions, product image is treated separately from national image and examined as a mediating variable.

Consumers typically obtain country-of-origin information through manufacturer labels, although COO perception may also arise independently of explicit labeling (Samiee and Chabowski, 2021). Based on their perception of a country image, consumers form judgments about product value, which subsequently shape their purchasing choices. Researchers have studied how national product image influences brand equity, product image perception, and purchase intention (He et al., 2020). Consumers tend to pay close attention to country-of-origin, and stereotypes formed from it may have long-lasting effects on their purchasing intentions (Cui and Lee, 2017, Frewer et al., 2013). Studies show that a favorable product origin enhances consumer evaluations and increases purchase intention (Yu and Liu, 2016). This Country-of-Origin (COO) effect is supported by Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka (2023), whose research positions country-of-origin as an extrinsic cue in consumer information processing with the potential to influence purchase intention. Oduro et al. (2023) found that country-of-origin image exerts a positive, moderate effect on brand evaluations. Srisukwatanachai et al. (2025) similarly concluded that country-of-origin significantly shapes consumer purchase decisions when studying preferences for Chinese and Thai fragrant rice. Scholars have explored these effects across many sectors, including food (Karagiannis et al., 2022, Gao et al., 2024), apparel (Abalkhail, 2023), and electronics (Chow et al., 2023, Prahiawan et al., 2022). Much of the prior literature focuses on food products, including the effect of origin on wine purchase intentions (Pagan et al., 2025, Zhou and Gao, 2024). Hien *et al.* (2020) and Islam and Hussain (2022) also observed that country-of-origin image strongly affects purchase intentions for complex goods like electronics.

Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Country-of-origin image exerts a significant positive impact on consumers' purchase intention.

Meanwhile, the product itself carries inherent image characteristics, making product image an important influencing factor. Product image reflects consumers' overall perception and impression of a product (Wang et al., 2012), covering aspects such as quality, functionality, design, and brand reputation. Lee and Lockshin (2011) indicated that the overall country-of-origin image shapes perceptions of specific products. Country-of-origin image influences product image (Roth and Romeo, 1992, Wang et al., 2012), and product image strongly affects purchasing decisions, with stronger product image leading to higher purchase intention (Xin and Seo, 2019, Dagger and Raciti, 2011). Xiaojun (2024) found that product image has an economic effect on consumer purchase intention in the context of domestic trend brands. Shi et al. (2023) reported that as Chinese manufacturing gains advantages across multiple product categories, long-standing COO stereotypes in developed markets may weaken or even reverse, creating new opportunities for Chinese brands abroad. This suggests that a favorable product image can mediate the relationship, shifting existing perceptions and positively shaping purchase intention. Consumers often transfer their broader impressions of a country onto its products, forming distinct cognitive links. This country-based cognition shapes how consumers evaluate product image, ultimately influencing purchase intention (Gao et al., 2024). Existing studies confirm that product image mediates the association between country-of-origin and purchase intention. Xin and Seo (2019) indicated that Korean consumers' intentions to purchase Chinese functional foods were mediated by product image, with COO image indirectly shaping purchase intention. Zhang et al. (2020) similarly observed that micro-level product image factors, including design and quality, exert a mediating role in COO effects when examining Chinese consumers' intentions to purchase imported milk.

Thus, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H2a: Country-of-origin image has a significant positive impact on product image.

H2b: Product image has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H2: Product image mediates the association between country-of-origin image and purchase intention.

Consumers' decisions to purchase specific brands arise from perceived value, which is also a crucial factor in brand success (Hien et al., 2020). According to signaling theory, the perceived value related to a country-of-origin image shapes purchasing decisions. These subjective evaluations typically align with consumers' personal impressions; if consumers believe a product offers strong value, their intention to purchase will increase accordingly. Researchers have investigated how country-of-origin image influences consumers' perceived value of products (Gao et al., 2024, Chow et al., 2023).

The product's country-of-origin can shape consumers' cognitive evaluations of its innovation, craftsmanship, reliability, and value through perceptions of that country's production and marketing strengths or weaknesses, thereby influencing decision-making. Many studies show that when consumers learn that a brand originates from a country strongly linked to a particular product category, they tend to form more favorable impressions of its quality and value (Lee et al., 2013, Passagem et al., 2020), which in turn affects how they evaluate the product. For instance, German brands carrying the "Made in Germany" label can positively shape consumer judgments of quality (Alex N and Abraham, 2015). Hien *et al.* (2020) empirically demonstrated that consumers assess the quality and value of household appliances on the basis of the country-of-origin image. Research indicates that country-of-origin influences consumers' perceptions of product quality, with products from countries holding stronger images often considered superior (Pagan et al., 2025). Gao et al. (2024), studying the Chinese beef market, found that consumers' perceived value of beef mediates the link between country-of-origin image and

purchase intention. A favorable country-of-origin image enhances perceived product value, thereby strengthening purchase intention. Chow et al. (2023) observed that for hedonic products, the impact of country-of-origin on perceived value becomes more notable, producing a stronger effect on purchase intention. Therefore, considering individual consumer characteristics and the psychological processes behind perceived value can offer clearer insights into how country-of-origin image shapes purchase intention, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are put forward.

H3a: Country-of-origin image exerts a significant positive effect on perceived value.

H3b: Perceived value has a significant positive influence on purchase intention.

H3: Perceived value mediates the association between country-of-origin image and purchase intention.

Perceived value may also exert influence at the product level, where consumers' judgments of the product itself directly affect their intention to purchase. Consumers in different countries display varying perceptions of countries of origin. For instance, consumers in emerging markets often favor high-quality brands and products manufactured in developed countries (Rodrigo et al., 2023). However, limited research has examined the dual mediating roles of product image and perceived value. Under the halo effect, when consumers are unfamiliar with a product, the image of its country-of-origin serves as a "halo", shaping perceptions of the product's image and indirectly affecting evaluations of other products from the same country (Bloemer et al., 2009). The default heuristic effect is viewed as an intermediate mechanism between the halo effect and the total structure concept effect. Based on this view, during decision-making, consumers process country-of-origin image together with product-related information, influencing their evaluations and ultimately affecting their purchase intentions (Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka, 2023).

Dual Processing Theory (DPT) also helps explain this pathway. This theory divides processing into two systems. System 1 relies on effort-saving shortcuts and involves quick, automatic decision-making. System 2, in contrast, engages cognitive reasoning that is deliberate, slow, and careful, requiring more time (Rodrigo et al., 2023, Balmer et al., 2020). Thus, at the attitudinal level, consumers using System 1 when encountering products from different source countries form initial judgments by relying on country attributes as cognitive shortcuts. Before making a purchase decision, they shift to System 2 processing to assess product-related image, functions, benefits, and overall value. Based on these theories, a structural model of "country-of-origin image – Product Image – Perceived Value – Purchase Intention" can be established. Consequently, extending the earlier hypotheses, we propose Hypothesis 4.

H4: Product image and perceived value exert a chain-mediated effect between country-of-origin image and purchase intention

The model established by the present study's hypotheses is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey by questionnaire

With the purpose of testing these hypotheses, a questionnaire survey was conducted. The survey was conducted in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, by visiting scholars. The actual data collection took place from 1 July to 28

September 2025. We clearly stated the purpose of the survey (exclusively for academic research), explained that the data would be treated anonymously, and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Respondents provided informed consent by completing and submitting the questionnaire after reading the above information. No personally identifiable information was collected, and the study posed no physical or psychological risk to participants. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Since this study involved only anonymous, non-interventional survey-based research with adult consumers and did not involve human experiments, clinical trials, or biological sampling, formal approval from an institutional review board was not required and was formally waived. This determination was made in accordance with the national regulations of Uzbekistan, which do not mandate ethics approval for non-interventional, anonymous survey-based research that poses no more than minimal risk to participants.

The questionnaire items were primarily adapted from the work of Bulibuli et al. (2022) and Cui and Lee (2017), consisting of 16 items on country image (economic image, political image, people image, international relations image), 10 items on product image, 12 items on perceived value (functional value, symbolic value), and 3 items on purchase intention. The detailed sources are referenced in Table 1.

Table 1
Main variable

Variable	Factor	No. of item	content	Type
Country-of-origin image	Economic image	6	China is a country with good economic development	Likert 5
			China has high technology	
			China contributes to the development of science and the innovation of technology	
			China's economic environment remains stable	
			China is a modern country	
			China is a rich country	
	Politic image	3	China is willing to provide assistance to other countries	Likert 5
			China is committed to eradicating poverty	
			China is building a community of human destinies	
	People image	4	Chinese are kind	Likert 5
			Chinese are honest	
			Chinese are friendly to foreigners	
			Chinese are hard working	
	International relationship image	3	China is a globalized nation	Likert 5
			China establishes a friendly relationship with other countries	
			China attempts to keep international peace and stability	
Product image		8	Good quality	Likert 5
			Good level	
			Durable and made of good raw materials	
			Good reputation	
			Good branding	
			Good after-sale service	
			Highly innovative in design	
			Feel content with the made-in China products overall	
Perceived value	function value	5	Good quality	Likert 5

Variable	Factor	No. of item	content	Type
			Cost-effectiveness	
			Work fine	
			A creativity product of design	
			Good after-sale service (A/S).	
	symbolic value	4	Show who I am	Likert 5
			Symbolize high status	
			I am proud when using a smartphone	
			The smartphone will give me comfort in my life.	
Purchase intention		3	I may consider to buy the smartphone	Likert 5
			I probably buy the smartphone	
			I may want the smartphone	

3.2 Measurement method

Specifically, we conducted a quantitative survey examining the influence of China's country-of-origin image on Uzbekistani consumers' purchase intentions. Data were gathered through a 5-point Likert scale to obtain comprehensive and statistically meaningful results. The survey was conducted in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, by visiting scholars, and respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree". Totally 400 responses were gathered, among which 303 were valid, causing a response rate of 76%. Table 2 presents demographic information for the participants.

Table 2
Description of the Distribution of Sample Characteristics

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	197	65
	Female	106	35
	Total	303	100
Marital status	Married	97	32
	Single	206	68
	Total	303	100
nationality	Uzbekistan	290	95.7
	Kazakhstan	1	0.3
	Tajikistan	8	2.6
	Turkmenistan	1	0.3
	Others	3	1
	Total	303	100
Age	Under 20	36	11.9
	20–29	205	67.7
	30–39	30	9.9
	40–49	17	5.6
	Over 50	15	5
	Total	303	100
Occupation	cadre or civil servants	66	21.8
	Enterprise staff	17	5.6
	peasant	8	2.6
	self-employed	13	4.3
	student	189	62.4
	freelance	10	3.3
	Total	303	100
Annual income (Som)	Under 3 million	99	32.7
	3–5 million	57	18.8
	6-10million	51	16.8
	11-20million	45	14.9

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percentage
	21-30million	25	8.3
	Over 30 million	26	8.6
	Total	303	100
Educational level	Below the primary school	10	3.3
	Junior middle school	94	31
	senior school or technical secondary school	180	59.4
	College or University	14	4.6
	Postgraduate	5	1.7
	Total	303	100
The number of times you buy Chinese products every year is probably	Under 2 times	33	10.9
	1–3 times	128	42.2
	4–10 times	95	31.4
	11–20 times	27	8.9
	Over 20 times	20	6.6
	Total	303	100

Males accounted for 65% of the sample, while females represented 35%, indicating a noticeably higher proportion of male respondents. Because the questionnaire focused on purchasing intentions for mobile phones, an area that often draws greater interest from male consumers, this distribution appears reasonable. Ages were largely concentrated between 20–29 years (67.7%), suggesting that the sample reflects a predominantly young demographic. Their purchasing choices are strongly shaped by contemporary trends, social media, and cultural influences, making them a meaningful group for analysis. Students made up the largest share (62.4%), which aligns with the institutional sampling environment. Younger consumers tend to display more progressive consumption behaviors, while state officials and enterprise employees have more stable incomes, often leading them to prioritize quality when purchasing products. These demographic features are advantageous for analyzing the role of country image in shaping consumer behavior. Regarding education, the sample includes a considerable proportion of individuals with higher educational attainment, implying a generally strong cognitive level among respondents. Their purchasing choices are therefore more likely to be shaped by external cues. Additionally, the largest segment of respondents (42.2%) purchased Chinese products 1–3 times per year, indicating relatively frequent purchasing behavior. This may be attributed to close trade ties between Central Asia and China. Such purchasing patterns hold important implications for analyzing consumer sensitivity to country-of-origin cues, acceptance of Chinese products, and long-term market potential in the region.

3.3 Data analysis

SPSS 19.0 and AMOS 28.0 were employed to analyze the survey data. Reliability and validity tests were first conducted, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to assess the validity and reliability of the latent

constructs. Then, structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied for structural modelling and path analysis to test the hypotheses, using several model fit indicators for evaluation. Finally, the Bootstrap method was adopted for assessing the mediating effects of product image and perceived value (functional value and symbolic value).

4. Results

Based on the methodology described earlier, the results are presented as follows.

4.1 Reliability analysis

Since the study measured all major constructs using scales, verifying the measurement reliability is an essential step before conducting further analyses. SPSS 19.0 was employed to calculate internal consistency for each dimension through Cronbach's Alpha reliability test (Table 3).

Table 3
Cronbach's alpha score levels

Cronbach's Alpha	Internal Consistency
$\alpha \geq 0.9$	Excellent
$0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.9$	Good
$0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$	Acceptable
$0.5 \leq \alpha < 0.6$	Poor
$\alpha < 0.5$	Unacceptable

The national image construct was further divided into four sub-dimensions: economic image, political image, people image, and international relations image. As Table 4 shows, all reliability coefficients exceed 0.7, demonstrating good internal consistency.

Table 4
Reliability analysis of variable scales

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Economic image	0.815	6
Political image	0.74	3
People image	0.749	4
International relations image	0.781	3
Country-of-origin image	0.869	16
Product image	0.863	8
Functional value	0.814	5
symbolic value	0.878	4
Perceived value	0.867	9
Purchase intention	0.909	3

4.2 Validity analysis

The scale used in this study is well-established; however, given differences in the research setting and sample, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out to evaluate its applicability. First, dimensionality reduction was performed using SPSS 19.0. AMOS 28.0 was then used to examine model fit based on the resulting parameters.

The national image construct included four dimensions: economic image, political image, people image, and international relations image. AMOS 28.0 was used to test and validate the CFA model, with results shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Model fit validity analysis

Indicators	Measurement Standard	Actual Measurement Results	Fit
CMIN/DF	1–3: Excellent, 3–5: Good	2.181	Excellent
RMSEA	< 0.05: Excellent, < 0.08: Good	0.063	Good
IFI	> 0.9: Excellent, > 0.8: Good	0.923	Excellent
TLI	> 0.9: Excellent, > 0.8: Good	0.911	Excellent
CFI	> 0.9: Excellent, > 0.8: Good	0.922	Excellent

As shown in Table 5, CMIN/DF = 2.181 falls within the 1–3 range, while RMSEA = 0.063 remains below the critical threshold of 0.08. Additionally, the IFI, TLI, and CFI test results all achieved excellent levels above 0.9. All data meet the requirements, thus indicating good model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999, Byrne, 2013).

Given the CFA model's satisfactory fit, we shall further examine the convergent validity (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) of each scale dimension in Table 6.

Table 6
Analysis of model convergent validity and composite reliability

Variables	Factor	AVE	CR
Country-of-origin image		0.435	0.753
Product image		0.444	0.864
Perceived value	function value	0.473	0.816
	Symbolic value	0.648	0.88
Purchase intention		0.773	0.911

CR values all exceed 0.7, and although some AVE values fall slightly below 0.5, they surpass the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.36, satisfying the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). These results suggest that the constructs show acceptable convergent validity and composite reliability.

Then, discriminant validity was assessed through comparing construct correlations with the square roots of AVE. Table 7 shows that no off-diagonal value exceeds its corresponding diagonal value, meeting the criteria of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and confirming discriminant validity.

Table 7
Discrimination validity test

Country-of-origin image	Country-of-origin image	Product image	function value	symbolic value	Purchase intention
	0.66				
Product image	0.248***	**0.666**			
function value	0.273***	0.517***	**0.688**		
symbolic value	0.215***	0.464***	0.467***	**0.805**	
Purchase intention	0.256***	0.432***	0.458***	0.748***	**0.879**
Note(s): (**) $p < 0.05$; (***) $p < 0.01$; n. s. = non-significant					

4.3 Hypothesis testing

Building upon the established reliability and validity, this study develops a structural equation model. It first examines the path relationships among the variables and tests the individual hypotheses, followed by an analysis of mediation effects to clarify how the mediating variables exert influence.

4.3.1 Path coefficient tests

According to Fig. 2, which presents the structural equation model results, all model paths yielded significant parameter estimates except for Hypotheses 1 and 2b. Hypothesis 1 shows a non-significant negative correlation between country-of-origin image and purchase intention ($\beta = -0.312$, $p > 0.05$). Similarly, the correlation between product image and purchase intention is also non-significant and negative ($\beta = -1.195$, $p > 0.05$).

The path coefficient from country-of-origin image to product image is 0.652 and significant at the 1% level, confirming a positive relationship and supporting Hypothesis 2a. Further, Hypothesis 3a is supported, as the correlation between country-of-origin image and perceived value remains positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.295$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 3b is also supported, with perceived value positively influencing purchase intention ($\beta = 2.127$, $p < 0.05$).

4.4 Mediating variable tests

After testing the direct paths, the study further evaluates the mediating roles of the intermediary variables. Prior research by Furukawa and Terasaki (2025) and Karagiannis et al. (2022) shows that country-of-origin image enhances consumers' purchase intention in emerging markets through the product's functional attributes. Product country-of-origin image shapes consumers' judgments of the product and influences their purchase decisions. Frewer et al. (2013) also reported that establishing a positive country-of-origin perception enhances consumers' evaluations of products and improves purchase intentions.

Based on these findings, bootstrap mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediating effects of product image and perceived value on the association between country-of-origin image and purchase intention. This analysis evaluates hypotheses H2, H3, and H4. Table 8 shows the results.

Table 8
Mediating effect tests

Parameter	Effect Size	SE	Lower	Upper	P
National Image → Product Image → Purchase Intention	-0.779	0.809	-3.489	-0.238	0
National Image → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	0.627	0.553	0.192	2.389	0.003
National Image → Product Image → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	-0.549	0.651	-2.68	-0.137	0

As shown in Table 8, none of the confidence intervals include zero, and all p-values are below 0.05. Thus, hypotheses H2, H3, and H4 hold. Finally, Table 9 provides an overall summary of the hypothesis testing.

Table 9
Summary of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Path	Result
H1	Country-of-origin image → Purchase intention	Partially supported
H2a	Country-of-origin image → Country image	Supported
H2b	Country-of-origin image → Purchase intention	Partially supported
H2	Country-of-origin image → Product image → Purchase intention	Supported
H3a	Country-of-origin image → Perceived value	Supported
H3b	Perceived value → Purchase intention	Supported
H3	Country-of-origin image → Perceived value → Purchase intention	Supported
H4	Country-of-origin image → Product image → Perceived value → Purchase intention	Supported

5. Results and discussion

The present study evaluates how country-of-origin image shapes consumers' purchase intentions for electronic products. Given Central Asia's geographical proximity to China, its strong trade connection, and the noticeable impact of country image in the region, Uzbekistani consumers were selected as the research subjects. Results indicate that country-of-origin image influences consumers' purchase intentions. In the conceptual model, country-of-origin image functions as the independent variable, product image and perceived value serve as mediators, and purchase intention acts as the dependent variable. Therefore, this work offers a basis for future research exploring country-of-origin, product-related perceptions, and consumer attitudes. Findings specifically show that country-of-origin image indirectly influences smartphone purchase intention through the mediating effects of product image and perceived value.

The study reveals that in the context of an emerging market like Uzbekistan, COO does not directly translate into purchase intention. Instead, it operates through a dual-path cognitive affective mechanism, where product image acts as a cognitive translator and perceived value serves as an affective evaluator. Although the country-of-origin image does not directly determine purchase intention, an indirect influence is clearly present. The model's initial path results did not confirm a direct positive effect of country image or product image on purchase intention. This outcome aligns with earlier findings by Hien *et al.* (2020) and Blanco-Encomienda et al. (2024). Examining the mechanism reveals that mediating variables reshape the influence pattern. Drawing on the explanations of Wen and Ye (2014) and Jiang (2022) perceived value acts as a strong mediator and creates a masking effect.

Dual-processing theory helps explain this pattern. Under System 1, country-of-origin image quickly elevates purchase intention and simultaneously enhances product image, producing fast and effortless decisions that carry some impulsivity. However, when perceived value enters the model, System 2 processing is activated. This slower, more deliberate evaluation leads to more stable and realistic decisions. The stronger cognitive influence of perceived value increases its mediating force, resulting in masking effects and producing negative correlations in other paths.

This study extends the dimensional understanding of national image by analyzing the impact of country-of-origin perceptions on Central Asian consumers' willingness to purchase electronic products across economic, political, cultural, and international relations dimensions. Findings reveal that both product image and perceived value mediate the influence of country-of-origin on purchase intention. This is in consistence with Dharmadasa and Chanaka (2017), who noted mediation via performance equity and affective equity. However, the present study further integrates multidimensional national factors, deepening the analysis of product image as functional performance and perceived value as affective perception.

In addition, this study identifies a chain-mediated effect: positive country-of-origin image shapes product image, which then improves perceived value—both symbolic and functional. This operates through both objective product attributes and subjective consumer judgments. Importantly, perceived value emerges as a particularly strong mediator, exerting substantial influence on purchase intention. Future studies may examine whether additional variables moderate or further explain this pathway.

5.1 Implications

Considering the rising consumer demand for smartphones and the wide range of available choices, China must remain alert to overcome export barriers. As this study's respondents were consumers from developing regions—particularly within a rapidly evolving and diverse Central Asian context—enterprises should consider consumer nationality when evaluating shifts in attitudes toward foreign-made products. Consumer choices are closely connected to the product's country-of-origin and its associated image. Businesses must recognize this and work simultaneously on product quality and consumer perception. This includes strengthening technical performance and refining marketing communication to shape perceptions of both the product and its origin country. One approach involves using the Belt and Road Initiative to deepen economic, trade, and cultural cooperation, integrating national image promotion with product-level marketing. Another involves leveraging digital media platforms to link product strengths with China's technological capabilities and the positive image of its people, avoiding overly narrow product-focused promotion. This allows consumers to recognize the value of the product while reinforcing positive perceptions of China as the country of origin.

Finally, Chinese smartphone companies should strengthen cooperation with local supply chains. This not only reflects China's international principle of mutual benefit but also helps reduce production costs and shorten logistics cycles. As a result, product pricing becomes more competitive and after-sales service more responsive, forming a positive cycle: "country image empowerment → enhanced product and perceived value → increased market share". Such a strategy can support the long-term sustainable development of Chinese smartphones in the Central Asian market.

5.2 Limitations and future research

However, this study still has several limitations that may guide future studies. At first, issues relate to sample size and coverage. The demographic structure of the sample offers a focused perspective—mainly centered on younger respondents—which may restrict insights into other groups and impose limitations on the survey data. Future research should address these sample-related constraints, examining differences across gender, age, occupation, and income to improve the depth of analysis. Expanding the range of respondents would also strengthen the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Second, although the study analyzed Uzbekistani consumers' purchase intentions toward Chinese smartphones, it did not incorporate all relevant influencing factors. Consumers may adjust how strongly they consider country-of-origin information based on personal traits. Introducing moderating variables tied to individual characteristics may help identify more precise marketing targets. Additionally, the level of attention consumers devote to country-of-origin information can shape their purchasing decisions, and previous research has focused heavily on COO labelling in food products (Kassas et al., 2023), indicating potential for similar extensions in other categories. Finally, using Uzbekistan as a singular representation of the Central Asian region is limiting. Given Central Asia's geographic closeness to China, perceptions of country image carry considerable geopolitical significance. Including multiple countries in future surveys and investigating cultural variability would considerably enhance the study's depth and value.

Declarations

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Author Contribution

Abulizi Bulibuli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. Qi Wu: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis. Xinyue Wang: Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

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Data Availability

Data will be made available on request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

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Figures

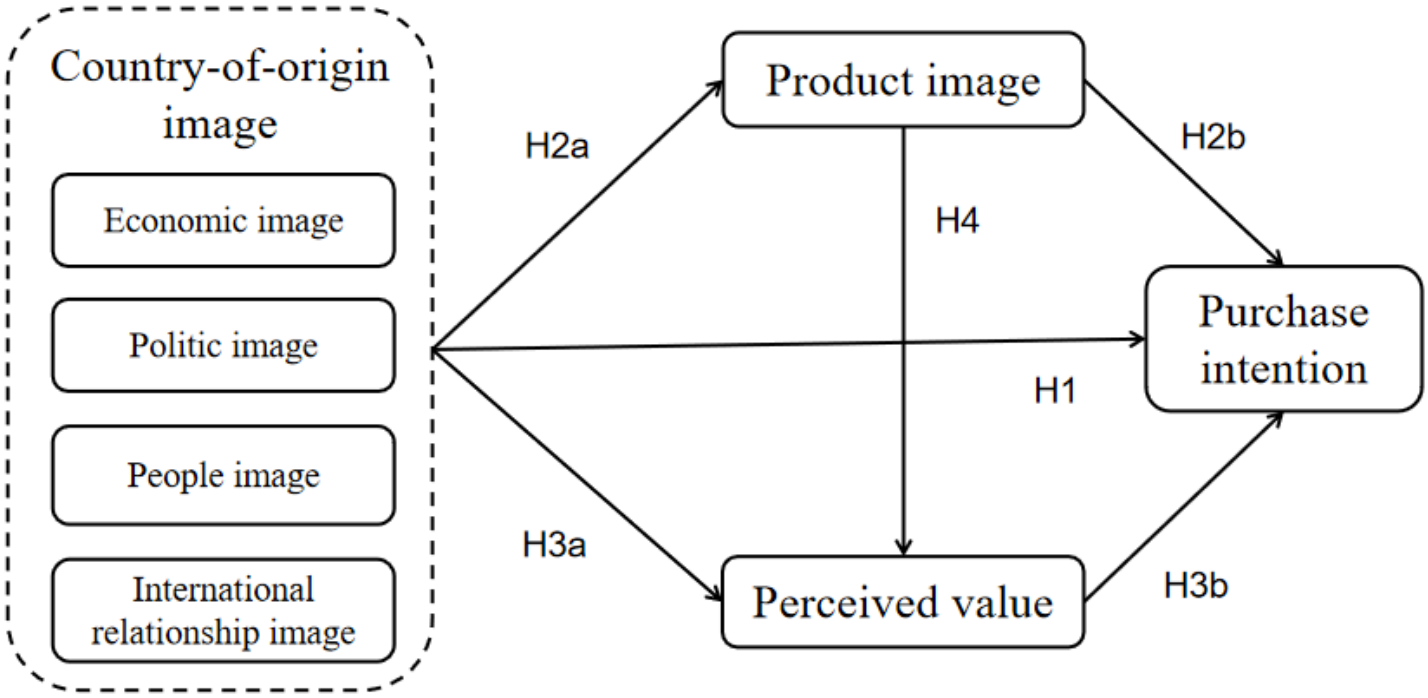
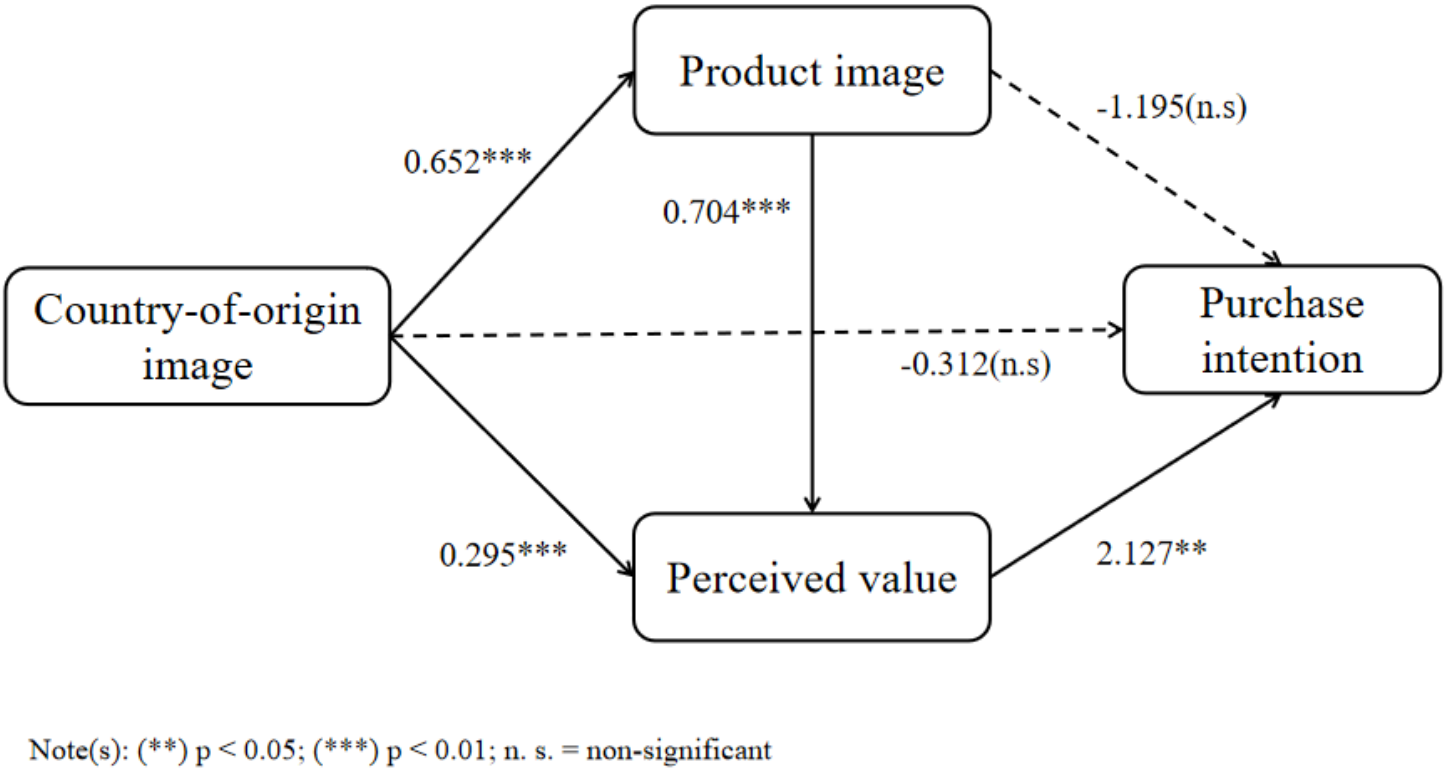


Figure 1

Conceptual research model



Note(s): (**) $p < 0.05$; (***) $p < 0.01$; n. s. = non-significant

Figure 2

Results of structural equation model