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ARTICLE



Rational or irrational? Understanding the uptake of ‘made-in-China’ products

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ABSTRACT

African economies are currently characterised by the increasing penetration of made-in-China products, resulting in a resurgence of academic interest in the ‘country of origin’ (COO) studies. The existing literature has described Chinese products as ‘inferior’ and patronised by the poor who cannot afford ‘superior’ brands from elsewhere. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with 65 consumers and 15 suppliers of made-in-China products in Ghana, this paper unpacks the notion of ‘inferiority’ of ‘made-in-China’ and the process of uptake in Ghana. The findings indicate that increasingly, Ghanaians of different socioeconomic statuses patronise made-in-China and employ various approaches including foot-in-the-door technique, the demand for product warranty and reliance on product reviews to guarantee their purchases. The findings, therefore, challenge the constraining effect of COO as a determinant of purchasing behaviour and reiterate the creativity and innovativeness of consumers to safeguard their private interest.

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(POU)

Introduction

The increasing penetration of ‘made-in-China’ products has resulted in a resurgence of academic interest in the ‘country of origin’ (COO) studies – also known as the COO effect. This is because ‘made-in-China’ products are enmeshed in complex, intermingling and conflicting imaginations of other brand images. They are also integral in shaping the discourse around the logic of consumption or avoidance of consumption.¹ The COO effect, which refers to the evaluation of products based on the place of manufacture, is important when examining consumer purchasing behaviour because it has the potential to influence whether a product will be purchased or not.² A number of researchers³ have challenged the utility of the COO effect, insisting that because of multinational production, integrated worldwide supply chains, outsourcing of manufacturing setups and global branding, consumers no longer pay attention to COO in making decisions about products.

Interest in the COO effect has nonetheless surged recently with the rise of China as a major exporter of global commodities. Electronics and household appliances of Chinese origin such as TCL, Hisense and Infinix are now competing favourably not only in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America but also in Europe and North America.⁴ The documented perspective

of Africans (like many in the world) on Chinese products is, however, not quite positive. McNamee et al. report of the introduction of a derogatory term, ‘Fong Kong’, into the South African lexicon which implies that Chinese goods are cheap imitations. In Botswana, clothing merchants who were called ‘China China’ resented the label while other shops were attacked because they traded in cheap and inferior Chinese products.⁵

The attitude towards Chinese products in Ghana is not different from others on the continent. In spite of this, the consumption of Chinese products keeps rising⁶ and this is being reinforced by the setting up of major Chinese retail outlets across the country. The dominant view, however, suggests that ‘made-in-China’ products are patronised because they are cheaper compared to other established brands⁷ and to a large extent procured and utilised by low income earners.⁸ Whereas this perception appears not to have changed significantly over the last decade, recent anecdotal evidence indicates that different classes of Africans procure and utilise various Chinese products including automobiles, machinery, computers, electronic products, clothes and textiles, medicines and foods.⁹ A case in point is the decision of the Parliament of Ghana and other state agencies known for the display of opulence and exotic taste to purchase and furnish their offices, galleries and other facilities with products ‘made-in-China’.¹⁰ The processes by which people adapt and cope with such paradox remain unknown. This paper, therefore, unpacks the notion of ‘inferiority’ of ‘made-in-China’ products and the process of Chinese product uptake among Ghanaian consumers. For this study, made-in-China products are operationalised to refer broadly to Chinese brands and include products manufactured by Chinese multinationals headquartered in China with operations across the globe and those operating strictly in the home country.

China–Africa trade and consumption

The rising volume of trade between Ghana and China is a part of a bigger trading revolution between Africa and China. China is Africa’s biggest trading partner at present, with trade exceeding US\$ 200 billion,¹¹ and projected to reach \$440 billion by 2025.¹² A more comprehensive and systematic data on the economic exchange between Africa and China is managed by the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University with funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom. Below is a 15-year record of trade between Africa and China (Figure 1).



Figure 1. China–Africa trade between 2002 and 2016.

Source: CARI, 2018

On such rising exchanges, it is argued that although China's presence in Africa is felt at both the macro and micro levels, it is in trade and the availability of global consumables that many Africans associate with China's economic power.¹³

Although the Chinese on the continent previously doubted the capacity of Africans to efficiently engage China in the import business,¹⁴ African nationals are currently the main importers of Chinese products to the continent¹⁵ and began importing from China towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. They travel regularly to China, notably to Guangzhou and Yiwu, to cart various wares such as clothing and textiles, food items, jewellery and, more recently, electronics and automobiles.¹⁶

With reference to the impact of China in Africa, the evidence can be summed up in the words of one African activist reported by Gadzala,¹⁷ to the effect that the Chinese phenomenon 'covers a whole range of excitement to panic, disappointment and uncertainty; and not just from Africans but from the whole international community'. This has led to a dichotomous position, subsequently leading to academic and policy briefs being geared towards amassing evidence to support either side of the debate. In this, the pro-China or optimists have emphasised the opportunities presented by China, whilst the sceptics have highlighted the exploitative aspect of the Chinese engagement in Africa.¹⁸

The concerns of the pessimists range from debt sustainability and governance reform to environmental impact.¹⁹ For Tsikata et al., 'the global markets for manufacturers and the manufacturing industries in many African countries have been affected negatively' with Chinese import.²⁰ Consistent with the above position, several African countries, including Nigeria, have banned the import of a range of goods to protect indigenous industries.²¹ Similar case studies exist in different SSA countries. For example, domestically produced clothing and furniture in Ghana and South Africa are being displaced by imports from China leading to closures of many of such indigenous enterprises. Again, in Zambia, the trade unions report that imports from China have undermined the clothing and electrical sector, while in Nigeria, trade unions blame Chinese imports for the loss of 350,000 jobs in 2007.²²

Giese et al. re-echoed some of these challenges and asserted that after two decades of heavy losses in formal employment due to the influence of neoliberal development ideology, the advent of the Chinese at the turn of the millennium produced high expectations among the African populations for (formal) employment creation. However, the Chinese have quickly become the main target of widespread criticism for their perceived general failure to create jobs for local populations.²³

Another issue that is consistently highlighted is the perceived sub-standard nature of Chinese imports, a subject that finds validation in the counter accusation between local and foreign importers of Chinese products. For example, Obeng reports that Ghanaian traders have persistently accused Chinese traders of importing sub-standard products onto the local markets.²⁴ A counter argument is submitted by the Chinese in Africa to the effect that Africans import inferior products from China because they lack the requisite set of skills to competently compete in the treacherous Chinese economy.²⁵ This assessment has also been highlighted by high-profile academic think tanks, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, and leading Western officials such as the United States of America (USA) Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who warned that "...flooding African markets with cheap goods, weakens local manufacturing and undermine[sic] international efforts to promote good governance".²⁶

The optimists on the other hand advocate that at the micro-level, the emerging trade relationship between China and Africa touches the lives of most Africans in a stronger and more positive manner through the large amounts of Chinese consumer goods entering African markets which increase the welfare of Africans. Sustaining this further and to discount the pessimistic account of the collapse of local industry with increasing Chinese imports, Jenkins and Edwards argue that most of the imports from China have only substituted imports from outside sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), except for Ethiopia and Nigeria, suggesting that there is little displacement of domestic production and few negative impacts on employment and local production.²⁷ Such conclusions suggest a synergistic link between SSA and China and help to explain the high sense of optimism which prevails in parts of SSA on the potential opportunities opened for SSA by China's rapid trade expansion.²⁸

More recent works by Giese and Lam have also demystified the challenge of employment.^{29,30} Lam reports that the localisation of the labour force in Chinese projects across Africa has reached an average rate of up to 85%. Additionally, a growing number of Chinese companies have not only recruited unskilled labour but have also started replacing Chinese managers with African experts, on the back of both political pressure for corporate social responsibility as well as the Chinese companies that have realised that having local staff in leading positions, instead of Chinese expatriates, not only contributes to the reduction of input costs but also improves their chances of market penetration and ultimately increasing profitability.

The accusations and counter-accusations aside, how Africans conceptualise products as inferior and the process by which they make sense of 'made-in-China' products remains unknown. Understanding this is critical since there has been a lack of research about African consumers' attitude, behaviour and needs historically.³¹

COO and consumer behaviour

The dichotomy between what people perceive about a product and what they consume is not always straight forward and till date remains a contentious subject worthy of academic discourse. This complexity has been entrenched by COO researchers who have determined that consumers discriminate between same brand made in different countries because of country stereotypes.³² Specifically, COO is considered an essential mediator between purchase-intention and product-patriotism.³³ The influence of the COO effect is not without a challenge. For instance, Johansson et al. argue that contrary to earlier contributions to the literature, cues such as price and quality have a stronger effect on consumer product evaluations than COO.³⁴ Further, Samiee questions the scientific nature of studies that establish a relationship between purchasing and product origin.³⁵ He asserts that there is no compelling empirical evidence that has been offered to support the salience of COO information during actual (non-laboratory) purchase processes. Other critiques of the COO effect such as Peterson and Joliberts subsequently suggested that results that have laid significant emphases on the effect of COO are highly inflated, especially since participants receive verbal descriptions of a brand's COO compared to the ecologically valid situations where supporters search for information at the point of sale or retrieve it spontaneously from memory.³⁶ Shimp et al. conclude, therefore, that by comparison, when consumers encounter brands in the

marketplace, the COO is one of many pieces of information that may or may not be sought, comprehended and factored into the evaluative process of the buyer.³⁷

In a study to test Americans' knowledge on the COO of 84 commonly used brands that are available to most American consumers in departmental stores, mass merchandise outlets, supermarkets and other common retail venues (with 40 coming from the USA and 44 from 8 other countries: England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands and Switzerland), Shimp, Samiee and Sharma discovered that on the average only 35% of the participants got the matching correct.³⁸ Running further analysis with the aid of structural modelling with socioeconomic status, international experience, ethnocentric tendencies, age and gender as predictor variables, the model accounted for only 15% of the variance.

On such findings, Shimp et al. conclude that consumers have limited recall of brand origin and thus find such information relatively unimportant and unworthy of retention in memory.³⁹ It is thus argued that at the point of purchase, cues, such as packaging and in-store displays, and signs provide consumers with external memories that can be acquired on demand.⁴⁰ Research such as this and others with similar findings watered down the utility of the COO effect in analysing purchasing behaviour. Shimp et al. explained that literature that gave positive effect to COO were mostly based on studies that have experimentally manipulated COO cues in controlled laboratory studies.⁴¹ Such manipulations are argued to be heavy-handed because consumers are provided with little differentiating information other than a brand's origin. Under such contrived circumstances, brands tend to be evaluated more favourably when they are aligned with countries that are themselves judged favoured. In other words, the purported studies on COO effect on brands reflect people's evaluation of the country's image. Country image (a concept first introduced by Nagashima in 1970) asserts that consumers hold and picture reputation and stereotypes toward products of specific countries. Martin-Eroglu defines country image as the 'complete set of descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs about that given country'.⁴²

This image is formed by a country's representative product, political and economic background, and historical tradition variables, which represent the country's overall image. The country image does not directly relate to a given product but only provides the basis for some indirect conclusions about the product. Accordingly, the process can be interpreted as an image transfer. People have their attitudes towards countries, and when judging the products of a given country, their origin will largely affect the result of the evaluation. That is, country image influences the COO image of the product, which is practically integrated into its overall image. For example, Germany is known for fine craftsmanship and technical sophistication; therefore, the image most people have of German products is that they are manufactured very carefully, which is then incorporated into the general image of a product of German origin.⁴³

This criticism notwithstanding, the recent growth in globalisation and the wide spread of international trade as many more countries explore opportunities for distributing their products around the world, has brought a resurgence in research on COO effect. This has been explored extensively in marketing literature as consumers are confronted with various choices among many products made in different countries⁴⁴ and it has been proposed that all imported products are subject to COO effect. The emergence of Chinese products and their growing popularity have been key subjects of

academic interest.⁴⁵ In this discourse, two major issues have emerged as central: ethnocentrism and product quality. Sarwar et al. assert that buying a specific country's products sometimes depends on ethnocentrism, which is part of the attitude that some consumers possess.⁴⁶ Consumer ethnocentrism (CET) is a concept introduced by Shimp and Sharma in 1987 to explain the biased preference for domestic products at the expense of foreign alternatives. This attitude, they state, could lead to a situation where citizens of a given country opt for products made in that country even though their quality compares poorly with those imported. For others, CET is the reluctance to buy foreign products⁴⁷ and this has manifested itself in protectionist measures which seek among others to shield local industries from foreign competition. Such idea has little applicability in less industrialised economies like Ghana where almost all technological items are supplied through importation.⁴⁸ With China emerging as the leading origin of Ghanaian imports, studies are required to interrogate the concept of quality. This is because Chinese products have consistently been assessed in relation to other products, and quality and price have become the dominant themes in such discourse.⁴⁹

Made-in-China and the inferiority question

The question of quality is prominent in the discourse surrounding made-in-China products than all other products. Fuelling this is the persistent media representation of Chinese products as cheap and plagiarised industrial products.⁵⁰ This is regardless of China's major strides since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 including aligning its industries with international standards of copyright and intellectual property with some evidence of success. For example, Haier, China's biggest appliance manufacturer, is selling small refrigerators under its own name in the USA, its fiercest critic, and the product is making significant inroads in other advanced economies. Similarly, the Shanghai-based electronic companies, SVA and TCL, sell their branded plasma televisions in US retail chains such as Costco Wholesale and Walmart.⁵¹ Meanwhile, China's biggest computer maker has launched Lenovo as a global brand to position itself for overseas expansion and has gained world class reputation.⁵² Other efforts aimed at building name recognition abroad led Kejian, a mobile-telephone maker, to sponsor Everton Football Club of England in 2003.

The successes of these efforts have culminated in the listing of several Chinese companies on Forbes Global 2000 (e.g. China Shenhua Energy, Baoshan Iron and Steel China Telecom, China Coal Energy, Dongfeng Motor Group, SAIC Motor, Suning Appliance, ZTE, Kweichow, Moutai, Tingyi, Wuliangye Yibin, Want Want China and Jiangsu Yanghe Brewery).⁵³

These efforts were almost neutralised when in 2007, made-in-China products such as toothpaste, children's toys, animal food, paint and dairy products were implicated and subsequently withdrawn from many markets.⁵⁴ This continued for the whole year, and for each month, there was one story or another on made-in-China products that raised public health concerns around the world. In North America and Europe, where most of these reports emanated, the news media quickly seized the chance to underscore the 'dangers' of consuming 'made-in-China' products in a manner that projected those countries as being under the risk of toxic invasion.⁵⁵

This was in sharp contrast to reports on commodities of other origins where specific brand names were the focus of the reportage. This totalising stereotype clearly shows that ‘harmfulness’ or ‘toxicity’ of trade goods relates to their national origin, and it amalgamates trade and culture in a fuzzy representation of China.⁵⁶ Media analysts and anti-China campaigners took the media space with these reports and made it difficult for viewers to realise the strides China was making and the fact that China accounts for more than two-thirds of manufactured goods crossing the globe. These developments have not only reinforced prejudices about certain brand images but have also showed how framed images of Chinese culture spark off an ‘ideological battleground’.⁵⁷ The defects of ‘made in China’ products, objects of polemic analysis in the Western media, have been appraised in the economic and political spheres, resulting in tighter controls, including expanded restrictions on their import.⁵⁸

This antagonism notwithstanding, China accounted for over 40% of all imports into the USA, the largest economy in the world,⁵⁹ and the figures keep soaring. Data from the United States census indicate a persisting trade deficit between the USA and China from a deficit of 234, 101.3 in 2006 to 375,227.5 in 2017 (all figures are reported in millions of US dollars on a nominal basis).⁶⁰ For 2016, Chinese export to US amounted to 462.6 billion and export to China from USA amounted to 115.6 billion leaving a deficit of 347 billion (USTR, 2017).⁶¹

This widening trade deficit between the two largest economies has recently generated a trade war between the two nations. Donald Trump, the President of the USA, declared that America’s trade deficit with China is ‘unacceptable’. In a speech before the United Nations in September 2018, Trump asserted that the world trading system ‘is in dire need of change’, complaining that over the last two decades, the USA has suffered \$13 trillion in trade deficit with China, which has resulted in the loss of over 3 million manufacturing jobs. Prior to this, on 22 January 2018, the USA imposed tariffs and quotas on imported Chinese solar panels and washing machines. The WTO ruled that the USA did not have a case in levying the tariff. On 8 March 2018, Trump announced a 25% tariff on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium also from China. On 6 July, Trump’s tariffs went into effect for \$34 billion of Chinese imports. In return, China levied a 40% tariff on US autos and agricultural exports. On 2 August 2018, the US administration further announced a 25% tariff on \$16 billion worth of Chinese goods. In response, China also announced for a 25% tariff on \$16 billion worth of US goods.

While this banter continues, for most citizens of the world, what China and the consumption of made-in-China products raise is the subject of quality as indicated earlier. Explaining this scepticism among Americans, Upfront Analytics⁶² suggested that as far as marketing goes, Chinese products have been one public relations headache after another. This is because China does not always have the most positive record for quality control. It continues, in the USA, a country that is spoilt by its indigenous companies when it comes to quality; generally, in America if a customer is dissatisfied, often the company or brand will bend over backward to make it right. This is contrary to the Chinese. For the Chinese, the dominant view is that you get what you paid for and if you have a problem, it is too bad. With experiences such as this, whether these prejudices are warranted or not matters very little to most Americans. If they have been burnt by Chinese products in the past, they are less likely to purchase from Chinese manufacturers again. The concept of quality has engaged the minds of theorists and

researchers for decades⁶³ and it remains a subject of enquiry today,⁶⁴ because it is a key variable in purchasing behaviour.⁶⁵ In a competitive environment, compromising on quality is simply unthinkable.

What quality is, nonetheless, differs from one consumer to another. Freling and Forbes assert that the perception of product quality is evident of repeated purchase.⁶⁶ Five dominant approaches have been used to interrogate and define product quality. These approaches are transcendent, manufacturing-based, value-based, user-based and product-based approaches.⁶⁷ The transcendent or judgmental emphasises the metaphysical aspect and views quality as 'something toward which we strive as an ideal, though we may never implement'. For those who believe in this perspective, the understanding is that one needs to experience or be exposed to it to determine what quality is.

The manufacturing perspective focuses on the supply side and is primarily concerned with engineering and manufacturing practices. Quality is thus viewed as conformity to requirements. This aspect of quality is stressed by standards such as ISO 9001, which defines quality as 'the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements'. The product-based perspective reflects the quality of some ingredients or attributes possessed by a product. Quality can be appreciated by measuring the inherent characteristics of the product. By measuring some attributes of the different components composing a product, conclusion can be drawn as to the quality of the end product. Value-based perspective recognises that the different perspectives of quality may have different importance or value to various stakeholders. Quality is thus envisioned in terms of cost and prices. Quality products are those that provide performance at an acceptable cost.⁶⁸

The final perspective on quality which is central to this study is the user-based perspective. The user-based is concerned with the appropriateness of the product for a given context of use. Unlike transcendent view which is ethereal, or the manufacturer which is based on specific components of the whole, the user view is more definite and grounded in the product characteristics that meet users over all needs. This, however, may be subjective because it assumes that individual consumers have different needs and those goods that best satisfy those purposes are those that may be regarded as quality. In operations, however, the user-based approach combines with the value and product perspectives. This is because most consumers rate the utility they derive from consuming a product relative to the price or cost of the said item.

Theoretically, the value/cost-quality debate finds space in the trickle-across model of consumption. This model, contrary to the dominant view that superior status and higher hierarchy determine the flow of consumption pattern from top to down, argues that patterns of consumption flow horizontally and within various strata in society.⁶⁹ This happens because mass manufacturing ensures that goods are produced at different quality levels and price points. Again, media and marketing instruments have increased consumers' level of awareness on products through promotion and advertisement across the landscape. Guided by this model of consumption, it may be postulated that Chinese producers may be targeting a set of consumers whilst other manufacturers could be aiming at members of different strata. How does this theory relate to consumers who have previously been exposed to commodities that were never clouded in such controversy as 'made-in-China' is today? I interrogate this later after discussing the method employed in this study.

Research method

To understand the attitudes of African consumers themselves, this study adopted the qualitative research design. The study area was Accra, the administrative and commercial capital of Ghana. Accra is the first point of call for all major business activities in Ghana and hosts most of the major retail shops that sell imported Chinese products in Ghana. For this study, Accra was zoned into three, namely South Accra, East Accra and West Accra to facilitate representativeness of the population of Accra. The zoning was done to accommodate the two main types of market systems in Ghana. These are the open space traditional markets and the emerging mass retail outlets, which reflect a class-divide. Whereas the lower class are more likely to make purchases from the open market, the middle and upper class members make purchases from the emerging retail markets. Although almost all categories of Chinese products are found on Ghanaian markets, this study focused solely on electronics and household appliances because of their popularity and growing uptake in Ghana.⁷⁰ Additionally, electronics and household appliances are generally in the nature of capital expenditure and it is thus anticipated that a lot of thinking and preparations will go into the decision to buy them or not.

The study involved two sets of participants: consumers and suppliers of Chinese products. The analysis in this paper was, however, dominated by the responses of the consumers, though the responses of the suppliers were key to the general discussions and thus helped to properly situate the perspectives of the consumers. Sampling for the consumers was guided by the type of electronic products procured, age and gender of consumers. On the supply side, the type of products and longevity in the import business guided the sampling procedure. The selection criterion was influenced by the outcome of a pre-test which involved seven participants (five customers and two suppliers). Three non-probability sampling methods, namely accidental, purposive and snowballing, were employed to sample a total of 80 participants. This comprised 65 consumers and 15 suppliers. Forty of the consumers were sampled in the traditional markets and 25 from the modern retail markets. Samples were selected from all the three zones. None of the suppliers was, however, sampled from the modern retail markets. The bulk of the 15 suppliers was sampled from the Makola Market and Kwame Nkrumah Circle business area. These two areas are well known for hosting chains of retail outlets whose owners import and sell electronic and household appliances manufactured in different countries. The distribution of the sample is as presented in [Table 1](#).

In sampling the participants, the researcher positioned himself at the various retail outlets and approached customers who made purchases at the time and solicited for their consent. Those who consented were presented with a list of notable brands of Chinese products available on the Ghanaian markets. The participants were, however,

Table 1. Distribution of participants.

Location	South zone		East zone		West zone		Total
	Achimota mall	Dome-Madina markets	Accra mall	CBD/Nkrumah circle	West hill	Kasoa/Kaneshie market	
Consumers	5	13	7	20	13	7	65
Traders	0	3	0	10	0	2	15
Total	5	16	7	30	13	9	80

not informed of their origin. This strategy was helpful for two main reasons. First, it was in response to some of the challenges encountered during the pre-test. At the pre-test, it emerged that not all participants knew of the COO of products they were using whilst others also assigned wrong countries to certain products. By identifying any of the products as items they had personally been involved in purchasing or used, it helped to eliminate non-users of Chinese products from the sample. Second, the use of the template also helped to minimise motivated response biases and enabled the study of aspects of attitudes that were not open to introspection.⁷¹ Selection was therefore based on people who could identify products they had personally been involved in making a purchase and were also at the time of the interview using any of the products listed or another variant of the identified product(s). The interviews were conducted in three languages (English, Twi and Ga), subject to the language proficiency of the respondent. English is the official language of Ghana whilst Twi is the language spoken by almost 80% of Ghanaians. Ga is the native language of the people of Accra.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with the aid of two sets of interview guides. One was tailored to the supply side and the other to the demand side. This was supplemented with systematic observation at the markets. This included product examination and assessment to draw first hand and personal understanding of the perspectives expressed by participants during the interview sessions. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of Ghana Ethics Committee for the Humanities. All interviews except five were conducted in and around the market areas. Three were conducted in the home of the participants whilst two were conducted on phone. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed as verbatim as possible and themes developed guided by the literature as well as others that emerged alongside. All the names used in the analysis have been made up to grant anonymity to respondents.

Who buys made-in-China?

The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 66 years. The modal age range was between 25 and 35 years. They all had formal education with the majority (57) having a minimum of secondary education. Additionally, all but three of the participants were gainfully employed and thus earned regular income. A third of them were in managerial or supervisory positions and earned almost six times more than the minimum national monthly wage which stood at GH¢ 262 (US\$ 60.5). The participants earned on the average GH¢1500 (US\$350) a month.

Almost all participants (73 out of the 80) were aware of the tag of made-in-china as a symbol of inferiority. This, however, did not prevent them from purchasing and using these products. As rational actors, they had varied motivations for buying their products and employed multiple strategies to guarantee their purchases. The most high-profile endorsement of made-in-China electronics came from Ghana's parliament when they decided to furnish the Parliament house and its galleries with furniture and electronic gadgets from China in 2015 and 2016.⁷²

The participants used electronic and household equipment such as computers, fridges, washing machines, air conditioners, sound systems, television sets, microwave oven and blenders as well as mobile phones. The brands featured included Huawei,

Hisense, Haier, Infinix, Techno, Itel, Xtouch, Lenovo and Motorola. Significantly, these items were either the second, third or fourth known items of Chinese origin purchased by the majority (61) of the participants, an indication of consumer satisfaction.⁷³ The longest duration of ownership was 11 years and the shortest was 1 year. The modal duration of usage was, however, 3 years. A further interrogation of the data reveals a bit more nuances. All participants who had used known Chinese brands more than once included mobile phone on their list of items used. This is expected because mobile phones are the most popular electronics of Chinese origin in Ghana and consistent with the high mobile telephony penetration in Ghana which stood at 134%.⁷⁴

A further analysis reveals a relationship between the type of products owned and income earned. People who earn a monthly income of GH¢ 1500 or less had mobile phones as their major items of Chinese origin, while those earning higher amounts named more expensive and luxurious items such as dish washers, air conditioners, washing machines and refrigerators. The importance of mobile phone ownership in Ghana cannot be overemphasised since its ownership has out-grown its primary functionality of communication to becoming a means to attaining some essential services including banking in the forms of phone-based money transfer and storage.⁷⁵ At the 2007 'Connect Africa' summit, Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda, remarked: 'in ten short years, what was once an object of luxury and privilege, the mobile phone has become a necessity in Africa'.⁷⁶ Africans are also forced to own multiple mobile phones because of the uneven strength of the network service providers. Patrons are, therefore, required to subscribe to more than one service provider to enhance their continued access to mobile services. Significantly, it is observed that several of the participants prior to purchasing these Chinese brands had used other brands and had either purchased the Chinese brand in addition or had replaced the more traditional brands.

Fifty-three consumers knew the origin of their products as at the time of purchase. The 12 who did not know of the origin of their products had these three products: Infinix, Techno and Hisense. Whilst some of the participants reported not to care about the COO of their products, others attributed their products to wrongful COO. For example, some participants thought that their products were made in Korea whilst others thought they were made in Dubai and a few assigned their products to neighbouring Nigeria. Significantly, the brand names of these products do not generally appear as 'typically Chinese'. This is consistent with the finding of Shimp et al.,⁷⁷ who found that only 35% of their study sample correctly matched popular brands to their COO. Such an observation gives credence to the assertion that product cues such as packaging and in-store displays, price and quality provide superior memories to consumers than COO.⁷⁸

Another feature of these products is the distinct ways they are advertised in Ghana. These three products had brand ambassadors who are well renowned media and showbiz personalities in Ghana. For instance, when Hisense was first introduced on the Ghanaian market, the voice-over featured one of the authoritative media personalities and the host of the most popular morning show in Ghana, Mr. Kwami Sefa Kai of Peace FM. When the television commercial was rolled-up later in the year, it featured a renowned female TV presenter and actress (Nana Ama McBrown) and a male comedian (Kwadwo Nkansah), two of the most popular movie personalities in Ghana. Commercials featuring these prominent actors are well presented and the content varied and tailored to coincide

with every major landmark celebration in Ghana and in the world. In both cases, nowhere does the commercial refer to the COO of these products. Instead, the commercials focus entirely on the various product features, its affordability as well as its unprecedented 5 years warranty. It also highlights on-site and free installations for new buyers. With these popular Ghanaians being used as product ambassadors, the companies project the products to their domestic customers as trustworthy, thereby blurring the need for customers to undertake any independent verification including the COO of these products. The ability of celebrities to successfully lead a change in attitude was first conceptualised by Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University.⁷⁹ In this work, Hovland and his colleagues demonstrate how in persuasion, the person doing the act is as important as the message. In this process, they single out factors such as attractiveness as a key component and projected that good looks, familiarity and acceptability may sometimes overshadow poor presentation.

Inferiority and the process of product uptake

Closely linked to who buys made-in-China is the debate surrounding product quality. The participants in this study are classically in the category of users. Their perspective on quality nonetheless combined the various approaches though not in its strictest sense. In considering products to be purchased, the participants singled out product quality as one of four factors they considered before purchases were made. The other dominant factors were price, appearance/packaging and brand name. When prompted about COO, almost a third of them suggested that this was implied when quality and brand name were mentioned. This observation tends to agree with researchers who argue that consumers look out for more than merely COO in their decision-making processes.⁸⁰ For example, Johansson et al. argue that contrary to earlier contributions to the literature, cues such as price and quality may have a stronger effect on consumer product evaluations than COO information.⁸¹

The consumers, however, expressed a composite understanding of quality and did not use quality as a single measurement. In their conceptualisation, different combinations of quality approaches were used. Mildred, for example, views product quality as determined by the category and the purpose of the item. To explain this further, she draws an analogy between two items she was considering buying at the time: a baby car seat for her daughter and a new mobile phone. She explains that although she aims to buy quality things (spend more money), she was unwilling to invest much money into buying a mobile phone which she would replace within a year. She was, however, willing to spend more money in buying the baby car seat to guarantee her daughter's comfort and safety. Whilst this may not be coherently clear on any of the approaches, her perspective combines the value-based and user-based approaches in a seamless fashion. The position of Mildred indicates the subjective and contextual nature of the concept quality contrary to the dominant view that quality is a matter of who can afford. This is because Mildred earns enough to be able to afford other expensive brands of mobile phones she so wishes. Instead of status, her decision is shaped by her personal experiences. The approach further responds to one of the major discourses on made-in-China where inferiority is not determined by user satisfaction but by its supposed cheapness. Mildred's readiness to replace her phone periodically also fits within the

concept of planned obsolescence, a phrase in industrial design and economics in which a product is planned or designed with an artificially limited lifespan, so it will become obsolete after a certain period.⁸² In the case of the mobile phone, the desire for replacement after a short period is due to stylistic obsolescence – a situation where obsolescence occurs when designers change the styling of products, so customers will purchase products more frequently due to the decrease in the perceived desirability of the fashionable item. In other words, a new mobile phone is primarily desired for aesthetic reasons rather than functionality. Buying a relative cheaper product that is functional allows this respondent to keep pace with the fashion cycle. By continuously introducing new aesthetic, and retargeting or discounting older designs, a manufacturer can also ride the fashion cycle, allowing for constant sales despite the original product remaining fully functional.⁸³ This orientation is non-existent for the car seat as it has no such fashion cycle. This is also consistent with the growing sense of materialism that Ghana is immersed in. Kortlowitz describes the tendency to associate success or achievement with the consumption of popular brands as false connection instituted through the power of the media.⁸⁴ Advertisers make consumers believe that what they wear or use defines them. Indeed, in consumer cultures, possessions occupy central positions in the lives of many individuals and are often regarded to be the greatest source of satisfaction.⁸⁵ For the under-privileged, argues Kotlowitz, it is through the purchasing of the talismans of success that they transcend their otherwise miserable situation⁸⁶ (p. 71), an idea that is consistent with the trickle-down model of consumption that has remained a dominant perspective in the sociology of consumption.

A second perspective on the quality of a commodity is evidenced in the words of Onaapo. For her, quality also meant that the item must be reasonably priced relative to others on the market: ‘I won’t buy something that is way above my income, so when I must make a purchase I look out for durability first, followed by price and certainly attractiveness’. Central to this conceptualisation of quality is her understanding that sometimes people spend above ‘acceptable value’ on some products because of their perceived ostentation. She states:

...why should I spend more than my monthly income just on a phone? The Huawei that I spent about half of my salary on can do all the things that an iPhone or Samsung galaxy 7 can do. All the software that an IOS can support, the Huawei can support, and I really think that some of these companies are only playing on our intelligence with this so-called prestigious tag ... if you double my salary today, I will still not spend that much on a phone. My money has better things to do than for me to spend it on a so-called top of the town phone.

Onaapo’s views on quality, particularly in relation to price, fits into a raging subject of theoretical analysis. Imkamp hypothesises that price correlates higher with scale and efficiency of production contrary to the popular assumption that price is a good indicator of quality. This is because mass-produced goods of higher quality may have lower prices than scarce goods of lower quality. He concludes that price should therefore not be an indicator of quality but of scarcity. He demonstrates this further, arguing that if consumers react sensitively to quality variations, then higher quality products should be more marketable and saleable to engender higher quantity production. This will then lead to economies of scale, which, when given enough competitive constraints,

will lead to lower prices.⁸⁷ This theoretical position is accentuated by the optimists who attribute China's competitiveness to their increasing engineering and innovative set up, cheap labour and huge scale of production.⁸⁸ It must be emphasised that consumers who share such positions do not seek to substitute affordability for quality or durability as in the case of Onaapo. Instead, the understanding is that the utility to be derived consuming the expensive known brands could be achieved from buying made-in-China products. They conclude that such ventures are thus wasteful as they add very little to personal satisfaction.

A third perspective on quality is gleaned from the participants' emphasis on specific product features which made-in-China products stood out superior. This feature was notable because it was in response to a deficit identified in previous products. For example, Naadu explained that her decision to buy a Huawei Short X mobile phone was motivated by its picture quality. She states:

I enjoy taking pictures. So, when my other phone got spoilt, I decided that my next phone should have a superior camera quality. Then I was told that Huawei Short X has a perfect camera. So, I went online and did some reviews and was convinced. Went to the shop and requested for that phone and I think it has proven to be a great choice.

Similarly, Kwaku explained that he opted for a Hisense air conditioner because it presented the least kilowatts of electricity consumption. Kwaku had been using his 2-hp air-conditioner for 2 years and believed he was having the worth of his money because the addition of the air conditioner to his household appliances had not affected his electricity bill significantly.

The rate of electricity consumption is a significant determinant in the purchase of electronic products in Ghana because of the high cost of electricity. Ghana has one of the highest electricity costs in Africa and the highest in the West African region. For example, whilst the cost of a megawatt per hour of electricity in Ethiopia is \$24.4, \$81.77 in Nigeria and \$105.95 in Cote d'Ivoire, it cost \$306.34 in Ghana. The few countries that have prices higher than Ghana were war torn countries such as Sierra Leone at \$331.3 and Liberia at \$490.⁸⁹

Alidu and Agbeko, respondents in this study, also shared similar views on their decisions to buy Techno phones. In this case, however, the feature motivating the purchase was the strength of the battery. Alidu puts it more succinctly here:

I had a Samsung phone, but the battery was running down almost every two hours and that kept disturbing my business. I was even forced to buy a power bank as a back-up but to no avail. So, when I heard the advertisement and they talked about how strong and long lasting the battery was, I considered it seriously. So that was the main reason why I went for the Techno phone. ... when I charge the phone fully, sometimes it could take me up to three or four days. One of the special features about this phone is that I can use it to charge other phones. So, it came very handy during the *electricity rationing*...

The words of Alidu dovetail into another factor that attracted many Ghanaians to Chinese products. Ghana experienced its worst electricity supply challenge between 2012 and 2016, when demand significantly exceeded available supply. For close to 4 years, the nation was plunged into power rationing which was later christened *dumsor* ('off and on'). During the crisis, Ghanaians lived without electricity power for between 12 and 48 h every 3 days. The effect of this on the nation was dire. Many

households complained of electronic equipment being avoidably damaged and refrigerated food going bad.⁹⁰ Health and safety were also severely harmed. There were reports of doctors sometimes being forced to carry out emergency surgery under flash lights. The Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research projected that Ghana lost about 1 billion dollars in 2014 alone. During the difficulties, some businesses introduced to the Ghanaian market solar-supported electronic gadgets and other long-lasting power holding equipment ranging from air conditioners, fans, generators, bulbs, torch lights and mobile phones. Out of desperation, several Ghanaians patronised these new entrants to the Ghanaian markets to minimise the harsh effect of the 'dumsor'. Satisfied users of these products were more likely to embrace other Chinese products.

The motivation for the uptake of made-in-China products was guided by some three-prong strategies. Key among these strategies was the resort to reviews from both online and close-knit members, the engagement in the foot-in-a-door technique and demand for product warranty. The use of these approaches is, however, dependent on the tech-savvy consumer, the value of the product and the availability of competent and trusted primary network. The most dominant strategy was the use of online reviews. Sixty-five per cent of the participants reported either first undertaking an online product review/search or doing so after the product has been recommended to them. All people who reported embarking on online review admitted that their decisions were significantly shaped by their online reviews. The potential of online reviews to shape the buying decisions of consumers was, however, dependent on the price of the product, the degree of uncertainty or the risk involved in the purchase and the number of online reviews on the product. The percentage of people who resorted to online review, though small as compared to those in the USA (95%),⁹¹ is an affirmation of the role of online review as a social proof – a psychological phenomenon in which people follow the action of others to reflect what is considered correct behaviour for any given situation.⁹² Data and statistics indicate that people trusted online reviews as much as they trusted family and friends. It is thus not surprising that businesses are beginning to attach more importance to online reviews.⁹³ Additionally, the 65% is quite substantial since ecommerce is now taking-off in Ghana. The percentage also underscores the growing competencies of the Ghanaian in information technology world. Encouraging this technology savvy is the high level of literacy of the participants which expose them to global trends. This also challenges the assertion that Chinese products are patronised by the poor and those not well exposed to other global trends.

The prominence of the cyberspace in shaping consumers' purchasing behaviour does not imply that patrons have abandoned the traditional ways of learning about products – from other past users and traders through word of mouth (WOM). Even where these purchasers were satisfied with the online reviews, they sought for either confirmation or validation from others, including the distributors. This could be explained by the context differences between the originators of the content of online product reviews which are mostly submitted by users from the global North. It is thus not surprising when participants decide to prioritise face-to-face or WOM reviews over online reviews. This action is evident of rationality on the part of the actors because Ghanaians are generally of the view that products that are imported into Ghana are more likely to be compromised than those on the European market,⁹⁴ a situation they

blamed on the poor administration of standards in the country. Under this condition, WOM is used to complement the online reviews. So, customers only proceeded to a face-to-face product review after a positive online review.

Another critical observation is the resort to distributors or sales supporting staff as mediators in their purchasing behaviour, despite the potential for these sellers to exaggerate the utility of a product to enhance sales. The justification for the practice is multifaceted. This is how Nannypo expressed his rationale for seeking sales attendants' opinion on his purchases:

...there are those people (those who will seek to deceive to make sales), but I have also observed that there are some genuine traders on the Ghanaian market. They will openly tell you that these (products) appear the same but this is of a higher quality than this, and sometimes to an extent it is true, sometimes too they will be honest to tell you that there isn't any much difference, except to say that this is from country A and that one is from Country B.

There were other patrons who also resorted to expert reviews only for emotive satisfaction. In this instance, the motivation was to ensure that they exercised the required precaution. Mildred states:

It feels just good when you observe that your intentions; whether poorly informed or otherwise is endorsed by those who know better. It's not like they were going to change your thoughts anyway, but, in those instances, it makes you feel that you were not stupid and that you were meticulous in your decision making. In this instance even when the product does not turn out to be as good as you expected, you will be comforted because you took all the needed measures before you made the purchases.

Closely associated with this cautiousness is the demand for product warranty from sellers. Offering of product warranty, though very common in advanced economies, is quite recent in Ghana. Product warranty has long been established to reduce purchase risk both in perceived and actual forms.⁹⁵ The benefits are mutual for both customers and suppliers involved in the study. Whilst purchasers felt more secure buying lesser known brands, it also boosted sales for the suppliers.⁹⁶ Although the impact of warranty on the purchasing behaviour of Ghanaians follows global trends as indicated above, the implementation of product warranty in Ghana differs in two main ways. First, the warranty does not guarantee a refund or a return of purchased item. Instead, it may offer a replacement or a free repair up to some threshold. Second, no supplier or independent agency sells an extended warranty which is a common practice on a wide range of durable consumer goods, including automobiles, home appliances and electronics.⁹⁷ Significantly, this strategy was exclusive to the high and middle-class buyers and reflected in their preference to make purchases in officially licensed retail outlets, mainly in the emerging modern malls.

Foot-in-the-door technique is another strategy that is employed by Ghanaian consumers to guarantee the quality of their purchases. The foot-in-the-door technique is when one makes a small request that people are more likely to accept than refuse and then make a bigger request later. The idea is that because people agree to the first request, they will be more likely to agree to the second request.⁹⁸ In the case of this study, participants who owned more than one notable Chinese product engaged in this technique (consciously or unconsciously). They had all previously bought lower cost

Chinese products before buying their current most notable ‘made-in-China’. For instance, Kwaku recollects that before he bought his air conditioner, he had used two different versions of Huawei mobile phones and felt he could trust Chinese products and thus opted to buy a Hisense air conditioner 14 times more the amount he spent to buy his last Huawei mobile phone.

Conclusion

This paper interrogates a phenomenon in consumer behaviour where patronage of products keeps rising despite general resentment towards the item. This is one such issue that Chinese products are currently embroiled in Africa. To present consumption of Chinese products (a representation of inferiority) as a rational activity, earlier studies suggested that made-in-China products are consumed by the poor and the underprivileged, who lack the resources to purchase more expensive, durable and known brands. Consumption of ‘cheap’ and ‘affordable’ made-in-China products was, therefore, the only means by which the poor participated in the global economy. This paper, contrary to the overarching explanation (for the increasing consumption of Chinese products), indicates that patrons of Chinese products are of different social statuses though the motivations for doing so vary. The upper and middle-class consumers are motivated less by the desire to feel a part of a supposed ongoing social trend. Instead, they are motivated by the utility to be maximised in using made in China. To the upper and middle-class consumers, the uptake of Chinese products represents prudent use of resources and the purchase of well-defined superior quality product. Furthermore, the study challenges the notion that quality is marked by scarcity and high prices. Consumers of made-in-China deemphasise the significance of price, status and identity in determining product quality as participants devise varied combinations to determine value for their money including specific product functionality, affordability, durability and responsiveness to a stated need. The study, therefore, concludes that the ownership and use of Chinese products do not represent attempts by consumers to strike a false connection with members of a higher social class as suggested by the trickle-down theorists. Instead, they are procured because they facilitate the attainment of the needs (however defined) of their patrons. The study thus supports the emergence of the trickle-across model of consumption, which suggests that consumption culture does not necessarily emanate from the high-end consumers but originate concurrently from different levels of the social structure. This is because of the proliferation of producers and marketers who target members of different social strata.

Irrespective of one’s social status, the study reveals that purchasing made-in-China products is done in a systematic and purposive manner. To make a purchase, the consumers employ a combination of three strategies such as ‘foot-in-the-door’ technique, demand for product warranty and online reviews. In the foot-in-the-door technique, the consumers consciously and unconsciously first purchase less-expensive products and based on satisfactory experiences purchase more expensive and valuable items later. Whereas the use of foot-in-the-door technique and product review (online and word of mouth) are adopted generally by all consumers, the resort for product warranty despite its distinct form of implementation is applied mostly to the upper and

middle-class consumers. This is because the services are limited to the large-scale and licensed distributors from whom the upper- and middle-class consumers purchase.

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