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**Strategic Use of Symbolic Country of Origin Cues to
Enhance Consumer Acceptance of Foreign Products:
Evidence from Chinese Tea Packaging**

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Abstract

The increasing use of symbolic cultural elements in product packaging has created new opportunities for firms to communicate product authenticity and influence consumer evaluations. While traditional country of origin (COO) effects have been widely studied, limited research has examined how symbolic COO cues, specifically foreign language characters, affect consumer behaviour independently of explicit COO information.

This study investigates the influence of symbolic Chinese language characters displayed on tea packaging on German consumers' purchase intention. Specifically, it examines the direct effect of symbolic COO cues on purchase intention, the mediating role of perceived product quality, and the moderating effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern. A quantitative experimental research design was employed using an online questionnaire administered through Qualtrics. A total of 151 valid responses were collected from tea consumers residing in Germany and analysed using independent-samples *t*-tests, regression, mediation, and moderation analyses in R.

The results indicate that symbolic COO cues significantly increased both perceived product quality and purchase intention. Perceived product quality significantly mediated the relationship between symbolic COO cues and purchase intention, demonstrating that symbolic packaging elements primarily influence purchase intention by enhancing consumers' quality perceptions. Consumer ethnocentrism unexpectedly strengthened, rather than weakened the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention, whereas sustainability concern significantly weakened this relationship.

The study contributes to the literature by introducing the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework, which provides an integrated explanation of how symbolic cultural cues influence consumer decision making process. The findings also offer practical implications for international marketers and policymakers by suggesting that symbolic cultural packaging can enhance consumer acceptance of authentic products, particularly when combined with credible sustainability communication.

Keywords: Symbolic country of origin cues, Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework, perceived product quality, purchase intention, consumer ethnocentrism, sustainability concern, tea packaging.

Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	V
List of Figures	VI
 Chapter 1 : Introduction	 1
1. 1 Introduction of the study.....	1
1.1.1 Chinese Tea as a Product Category	2
1.1.2 Role of Germany in the EU market	3
1.1.3 Tea consumption in German market.....	4
1.1.4 Language Characters.....	6
1.2 Background to the study	7
1.3 Problem statement / research gap	8
1.4 Research Objectives	8
1.5 Research Questions.....	9
1.5.1 Main Research Question	9
1.5.2 Sub-Research Questions	10
1.6 Structure of the thesis	10
Chapter 2 : Literature review.....	11
2. 1 Introduction	11
2.2 Introduction of the Country of Origin Cues	11
2.2.1 Language and script as symbolic COO cues.....	13
2.2.2 Theoretical review of the country of origin cues	15
2.2.2.1 Cue Utilization Theory	15
2.2.2.2 Schema Theory.....	15
2.2.2.3 Associative Network Theory.....	16
2.2.2.4 Country of Origin Effect	17
2.2.2.5 Signalling Theory	17
2.2.2.6 Halo Effect and Summary Construct Theory	18
2.3 Perceptual Process and Product Evaluation.....	18
2.3.1 Consumer Perception	18
2.3.2 Quality of a Product	19
2.3.2.1 Theoretical Review of Perceived Product Quality	20
2.3.2.1.1 Cue Utilization Theory and Perceived Product Quality	20
2.3.2.1.2 Means-End Chain Theory.....	21

2.3.2.1.3 Expectation-Confirmation Theory.....	22
2.3.2.1.4 Dual-Process Theory	22
2.3.3 Purchase intention	22
2.3.3.1 Theoretical Review of Purchase Intention	23
2.3.3.1.1 Theory of Planned Behavior.....	23
2.3.3.1.2 Theory of Reasoned Action.....	24
2.3.3.1.3 Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model	24
2.3.3.1.4 Consumer Decision-Making Model	25
2.4 Consumer Acceptance	25
2.5 Consumer Moderators of Product Evaluation.	26
2.5.1 Consumer Ethnocentrism.....	26
2.5.1.1 Theoretical Review of Consumer Ethnocentrism	27
2.5.1.1.1 Ethnocentrism Theory	27
2.5.1.1.2 Social Identity Theory	27
2.5.1.1.3 In-group Bias Concept.....	28
2.5.1.1.4 Moral Norm Concept.....	28
2.5.2 Sustainability Concern	29
2.5.2.1 Theoretical Review of Sustainability Concern.....	30
2.5.2.1.1 Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory	30
2.5.2.1.2 Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) Theory.....	31
2.5.2.1.3 Norm Activation Theory	31
2.5.2.1.4 New Ecological Paradigm	32
2.6. Introduction to Consumer Cultural Cache Framework (CCC Framework)	32
2.6.1 Concept of the Cache	34
2.6.2 Process of the CCC Framework.....	34
2.6.3 Distinction Between the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework and Existing Theories.....	36
2.7 Summary of the Core Theoretical Foundations of the Study	38
2.8 Hypotheses Development	40
Chapter 3 : Research Methodology	42
3.1 Introduction	42
3.2 Research Approach.....	42
3.3 Conceptual Framework.....	42
3.4 Definitions of Variables.....	43
3.4.1 Manipulation of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue	43
3.4.2 Measurement of Perceived Product Quality	43

3.4.3 Assessment of Purchase Intention	44
3.4.4 Operationalization of Consumer Ethnocentrism.....	44
3.4.5 Operationalization of Sustainability Concern	44
3.5 Population and Sampling.....	44
3.5.1 General Population.....	45
3.5.2 Target Population.....	45
3.6 Sample Size	45
3.7 Selection of Sample	45
3.8 Data Collection	45
3.9 Pilot Study	45
3.10 Ethical Considerations	46
3.11 Instrument.....	46
3.12 Data Analysis Techniques	46
Chapter 4 : Results	47
4.1 Introduction	47
4.2 Demographic Characteristics.....	47
4.3 Experimental Group Distribution	50
4.4 Manipulation Check	50
4.5 Reliability Analysis	51
4.6 Descriptive Statistics	52
4.7 Correlation Analysis	52
4.8 Hypothesis Testing	53
4.8.1 Regression Analysis of Symbolic COO Cue on Purchase Intention	53
4.8.2 Regression Analysis of Symbolic COO Cue on Perceived Product Quality	55
4.8.3 Regression Analysis of Perceived Product Quality and Purchase Intention.....	56
4.8.4 Mediation Analysis of Perceived Product Quality.....	58
4.8.5 Moderation Analysis of Consumer Ethnocentrism.....	60
4.8.6 Moderation Analysis of Sustainability Concern	61
Chapter 5 : Discussion and Contribution	64
5.1 Introduction	64
5.2 Effect of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue on Purchase Intention.....	64
5.3 Effect of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue on Perceived Product Quality	65
5.4 Effect of Perceived product Quality on Purchase Intention	67
5.5 The Mediating Role of Perceived product Quality	68
5.6 The Moderating Role of Consumer Ethnocentrism.....	69

5.7 The Moderating Role of Sustainability Concern	71
5.8 Overall Discussion.....	72
5.9 Contributions	75
5.9.1 Theoretical Contributions	75
5.9.2 Practical Contributions.....	76
5.10 Future Research Recommendations	77
Chapter 6 : Conclusion	79
6.1 Introduction	79
6.2 Summary of the study.....	79
6.3 Limitations of the Study	80
Declaration on the Use of AI.....	82
References List.....	83
Appendix	I
Appendix I. Questionnaire.....	I
Declaration of authorship	IV

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Comparison of the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework with Existing Theories	37
Table 2.2 Overview of the Theoretical Foundations of the Study	38
Table 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 151).....	47
Table 4.2 Tea Consumption Characteristics (N = 151).....	49
Table 4.3 Experimental Condition Distribution	50
Table 4.4 Manipulation Check Results	51
Table 4.5 Reliability Analysis	51
Table 4.6 Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables	52
Table 4.7 Correlation Matrix.....	53
Table 4.8 Regression results and Model Statistics for H1	54
Table 4.9 Regression results and Model Statistics for H2	56
Table 4.10 Regression results and Model Statistics for H3	57
Table 4.11 Mediation results (ACME, ADE, Total Effect, Proportion Mediated)	59
Table 4.12 Moderation analysis results for H5	60
Table 4.13 Moderation analysis results for H6	62

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 List of Major Tea Exporting Countries in 2024	2
Figure 1.2 EU-27 GDP Distribution by Country (%) 2025	3
Figure 1.3 Tea Consumption per Capita in Germany 2020-2024	5
Figure 2.1 Process of the Consumer Cultural Cache Framework (CCC Framework)	35
Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework.....	42
Figure 3.2 Experimental and Control Tea Packaging Stimuli Used in the Study	43
Figure 4.1 Purchase intention by experimental condition.....	55
Figure 4.2 Perceived product quality by experimental condition	56
Figure 4.3 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.....	58
Figure 4.4 Mediation path diagram	58
Figure 4.5 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention at different levels of consumer ethnocentrism.	61
Figure 4.6 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention at different levels of sustainability concern	63

Chapter 1 : Introduction

1. 1 Introduction of the study

Consumers are increasingly exposed to products originating from different countries because of the today's globalized marketplace. As a result, country of origin (COO) has become an important factor influencing consumer perceptions and decision making processes. Mounting evidence suggests that the origin of a product plays a significant role in shaping consumer evaluations, particularly in the context of food products, where perceptions of quality, safety, and authenticity are critical. Because of that lot of countries implements policies to help consumers to identify the origin of the product.

When it comes to the cues, Consumers often rely on both intrinsic and extrinsic cues when evaluating products. However, in many situations, intrinsic attributes cannot be directly assessed prior to purchase. In such cases, consumers depend on external cues, such as brand, price, packaging and country of origin to form judgments about product quality (Szybillo & Jacoby, 1974; Richardson et al., 1994). Among these, symbolic cues embedded in packaging, such as colours, shapes, language and visual elements, have gained increasing importance in influencing consumer perceptions (Hüttl-Maack & Munz, 2025).

This study focuses on symbolic country of origin cues, particularly language characters, as a form of packaging-based communication that can signal cultural origin and authenticity. Unlike explicit COO labels, symbolic cues operate more subtly by activating culturally embedded knowledge and associations in the consumer's mind. Understanding how such cues influence consumer perception is essential for both theory and practice, especially in international marketing contexts.

To examine this phenomenon, this study adopts tea specifically Chinese tea as the research context. Due to its strong cultural heritage and symbolic meaning, Chinese tea provides an ideal setting to investigate how language-based COO cues influence perceived product quality and purchase intention.

Furthermore, this study introduces the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework as an integrative conceptual approach to explain how consumers process symbolic cues. The framework suggests that consumers rely on stored cultural knowledge when interpreting symbolic cues, leading to rapid and intuitive evaluations.

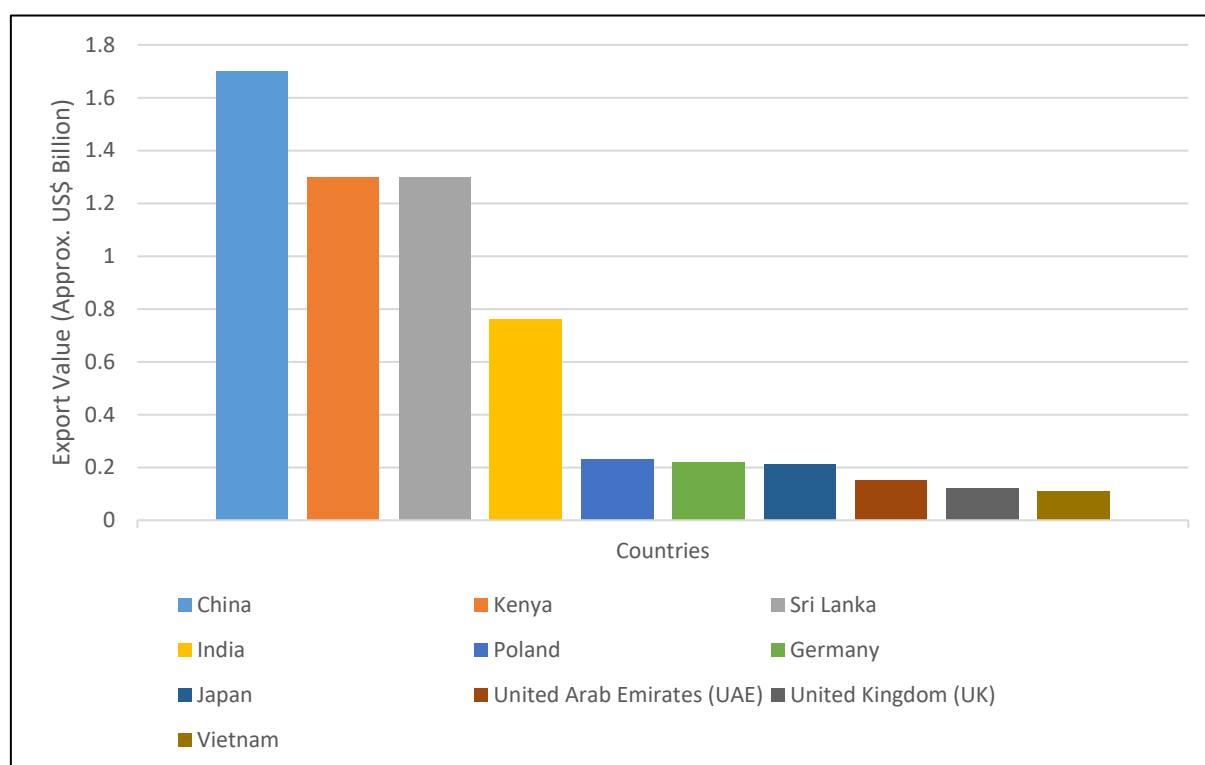
Overall, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of how symbolic COO cues influence consumer perception and behaviour, and

by offering insights into how language character cues can be effectively utilized in international marketing strategies.

1.1.1 Chinese Tea as a Product Category

Tea is one of the most widely consumed beverages worldwide and is closely linked to cultural traditions, especially in countries such as China, where it represents heritage, authenticity, and symbolic meaning (Wang & Song, 2024; Clement et al., 2013). Chinese tea represents one of the most historically and culturally significant beverage categories in the world. It is widely associated with tradition, authenticity, and heritage, making it a meaningful context for examining consumer perception and evaluation processes. These cultural associations make tea is a suitable product category for examining how symbolic country of origin (COO) cues such as language characters influence consumer perceptions and evaluations.

Figure 1.1 List of Major Tea Exporting Countries in 2024



Source: Adapted from the International Tea Committee 2024, World's Top Exports 2024

According to the International Tea Committee (2024) and World's Top Exports (Workman, 2024), the global tea export market was estimated at approximately USD 7.24 billion. This market is largely dominated by producer countries in Asia and Africa, with China leading in export value (approximately USD 1.74 billion), driven by its extensive production of diverse tea varieties. Kenya and Sri Lanka also play significant roles in the global tea trade, each

generating over USD 1.3 billion in export revenue, with Kenya specializing in black tea and Sri Lanka widely recognized for its “Ceylon tea”.

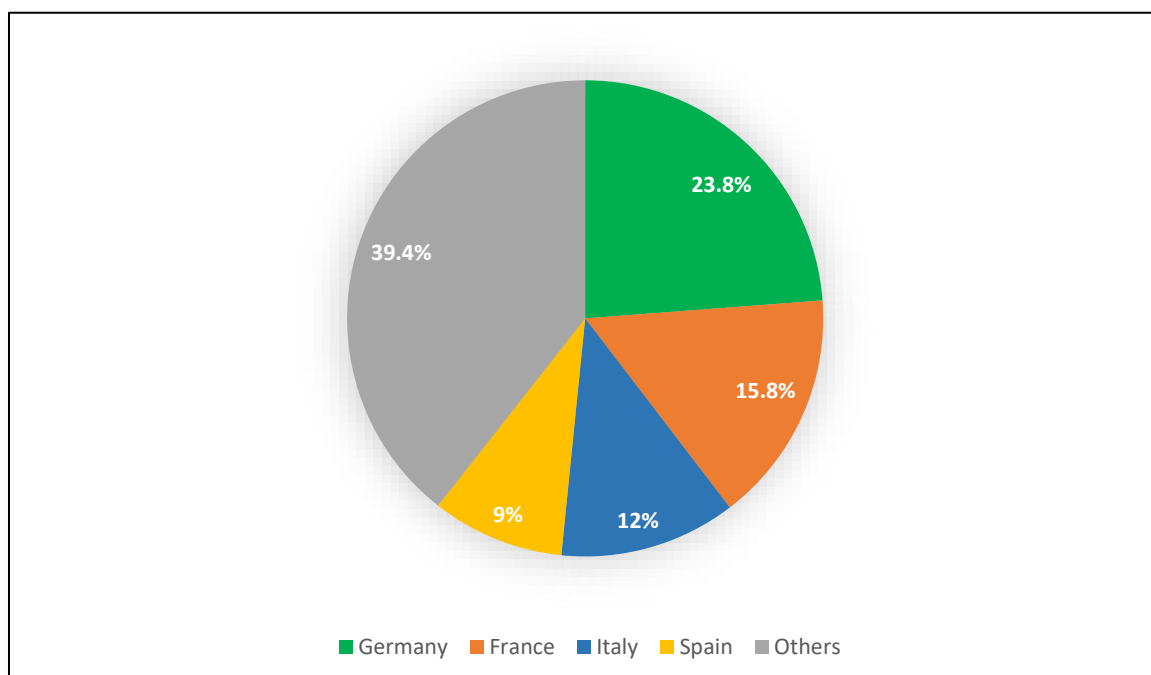
These global market dynamics highlight the prominence of China in the tea industry and reinforce its strong association with tea production and cultural heritage. Historically, China is widely recognized as the birthplace of tea, with tea consumption and cultivation dating back thousands of years (Chen et al., 2012; Wambulwa et al., 2016; Benn, 2015). This long-standing tradition strengthens the symbolic connection between China and tea in consumers’ minds.

Therefore, Chinese tea is selected as the focal product in this study, as it provides a culturally rich and meaningful context for examining how symbolic COO cues influence consumer perception and evaluation.

1.1.2 Role of Germany in the EU market

Germany plays a central role in the European Union (EU) market, both economically and demographically, making it a highly relevant context for consumer research. According to Statistisches Bundesamt 2025, Germany accounts for approximately 23.8% of the total GDP of the European Union, positioning it as the largest economy within the EU. In addition, with a population of around 83.6 million people, Germany represents the largest consumer hub in the region.

Figure 1.2 EU-27 GDP Distribution by Country (%) 2025



Source: Adapted from Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025

This economic and demographic significance makes Germany is a key market for both domestic and international products. German consumers are frequently exposed to a wide range of imported goods and are accustomed to evaluating products from different countries of origin. As a result, country of origin cues play an important role in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions within this market.

Furthermore, Germany is characterized by a high level of consumer awareness and sensitivity toward product quality, sustainability, and ethical considerations. Prior research suggests that European consumers, including those in Germany, often rely on external cues such as origin, labeling, and packaging elements when assessing unfamiliar products (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017; Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008). This makes Germany an appropriate setting for examining how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer evaluation.

In the context of this study, Germany provides a relevant and realistic market environment in which consumers are likely to encounter foreign products, including tea imported from countries such as China. The presence of diverse product offerings and exposure to international brands ensures that consumers have sufficient experience to interpret symbolic cues, such as language characters, in a meaningful way.

Therefore, Germany is selected as the focal market for this study, as it offers an appropriate context for investigating how symbolic COO cues influence perceived product quality and purchase intention within a developed and globally integrated consumer environment..

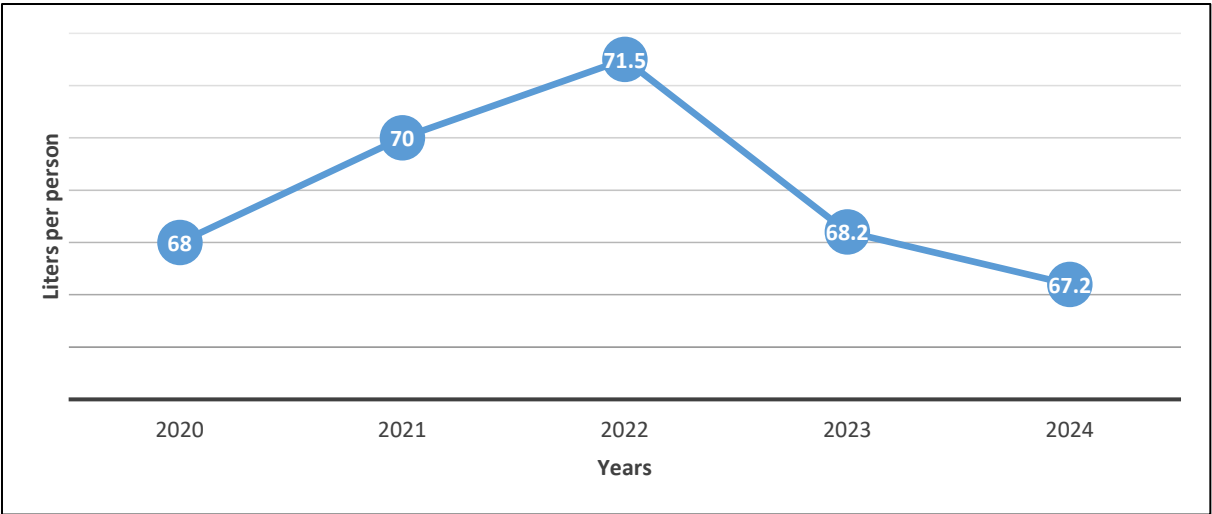
1.1.3 Tea consumption in German market

This study focuses on German consumers as a representative segment of the European market, where tea consumption is both significant and culturally embedded. Tea is widely consumed in Germany, with consistently high per capita consumption levels, indicating its importance as an everyday beverage. This widespread consumption makes tea an appropriate and familiar product category for studying consumer perception and evaluation processes in this market.

According to the German Tea Association (2025), tea consumption in Germany reached approximately 67.2 litres per capita in 2024, consisting of 27.1 litres of black and green tea and 40.1 litres of herbal and fruit infusions. Despite inflationary pressures on consumer spending, overall tea consumption declined by only 1.5% compared to the previous year (2023), demonstrating the stability and resilience of tea consumption in Germany. In total, German

consumers consumed approximately 47 billion cups of tea including herbal, and fruit infusions in 2024, reflecting the beverage’s strong presence in daily consumption habits.

Figure 1.3 Tea Consumption per Capita in Germany 2020-2024



Source: Adapted from the German Tea Association, 2025

Tea consumption is supported by a well-developed retail structure. In 2024, traditional food retailers accounted for over 40% of total tea sales, followed by discounters (17.7%), specialist shops (12.5%), and drugstores (11.1%), while the hospitality sector represented 4.3% of the market (German Tea Association, 2025). This widespread availability further reinforces tea’s role as a common and accessible product within the German market.

Germany also relies heavily on imported tea, highlighting the importance of foreign products in this category. In 2024, India remained the largest supplier of tea to Germany, accounting for approximately 21.8% of imports (around 10,443 tonnes). Sri Lanka ranked second, with over 9,524 tonnes, followed by China, which supplied approximately 8,837 tonnes (German Tea Association, 2025). Notably, China is the leading supplier of green tea to Germany, reinforcing its strong association with tea production and cultural heritage.

At the global level, tea production exceeded 7 million tonnes for the first time in 2024, with China contributing significantly to this growth. China remains the world’s largest tea producer, further strengthening its symbolic association with tea in the minds of consumers.

These consumption and trade patterns demonstrate that tea is deeply embedded in the German market and that consumers are regularly exposed to imported tea products. Therefore, this study focuses on Chinese tea, particularly green tea, as the experimental product, as it represents a realistic and relevant context for examining how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer perception.

To ensure internal validity, this study employs fictional tea packaging stimuli. The use of experimental stimuli is common in consumer research, as it allows researchers to control specific variables while isolating the effect of interest (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008). In this study, explicit COO information (e.g., “Made in China”) is held constant, while the presence or absence of Chinese characters is manipulated as a symbolic cue. This approach enables a precise examination of how language-based COO cues influence perceived product quality and purchase intention.

1.1.4 Language Characters

Language characters are an important element of packaging design and serve as a powerful symbolic cue in communicating product-related information. In international marketing contexts, foreign language characters are frequently used on packaging to convey cultural identity, authenticity, and origin. These linguistic elements go beyond their functional role of communication and act as symbolic signals that influence consumer perception.

Previous research suggests that foreign language displayed on product packaging can function as a heuristic cue, shaping consumers' judgments even when the meaning of the language is not fully understood (Leclerc et al., 1994; Clement et al., 2013). Foreign language elements on packaging can evoke cultural associations, stereotypes, and country images, which subsequently influence how consumers interpret and evaluate products (Leclerc et al., 1994; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). For example, the use of Chinese characters may signal tradition, authenticity, and cultural heritage, particularly for products such as tea, where consumers often associate the product with its historical and cultural origin (Magnusson et al., 2011).

Language characters can therefore be considered a form of symbolic country of origin cue. Unlike explicit COO labels (e.g., “Made in China”), symbolic cues operate more implicitly by triggering culturally stored knowledge and associations in consumers' memory. This process often occurs automatically and without conscious deliberation, especially in low-involvement decision-making contexts.

In the context of this study, Chinese characters on tea packaging are used as the key experimental manipulation to represent symbolic COO cues. By isolating the effect of language characters, this study aims to examine how such symbolic elements influence perceived product quality and purchase intention. Understanding the role of language characters is particularly important for marketers, as it provides insights into how subtle design elements can be strategically used to enhance product positioning and consumer acceptance in international markets.

1.2 Background to the study

The increasing globalization of markets has led to a significant rise in the availability and consumption of foreign products. As consumers are exposed to a wider variety of international goods, the evaluation of unfamiliar products has become more complex. In such contexts, consumers often rely on external cues to reduce uncertainty and facilitate decision-making.

Country of origin (COO) has long been recognized as one of the most influential extrinsic cues affecting consumer perception. Traditionally, research has focused on explicit COO information, such as labels indicating the manufacturing country. However, with the evolution of packaging design and global branding strategies, symbolic representations of origin have become increasingly prominent.

Empirical evidence supports the impact of such symbolic cues on consumer perception. For example, Visbal et al. (2017) conducted an experimental study using fictitious toothpaste products among Swiss and German consumers. Participants exposed to packaging containing Swiss national symbols (the Swiss flag) evaluated the product more positively in terms of perceived product quality and overall liking compared to those who viewed neutral packaging. This finding demonstrates that visual country-related symbols can enhance product evaluation even in the absence of substantive product information.

From a cognitive perspective, consumer decision-making is not always driven by rational and deliberate processes. Instead, individuals frequently rely on intuitive and automatic processing when evaluating products, particularly in low-involvement situations. These rapid evaluations are typically based on previously stored knowledge and associative memory rather than detailed analytical reasoning (Kahneman, 2011).

In this context, symbolic cues such as language characters play a crucial role in shaping consumer perception. These cues can activate culturally embedded knowledge structures, influencing how consumers interpret product attributes and form judgments about quality and authenticity. Despite their increasing use in global markets, the role of such symbolic cues, especially language-based cues remain underexplored in marketing research.

Additionally, individual differences among consumers, such as ethnocentrism and sustainability concern, may further influence how symbolic cues are interpreted. These factors can shape consumer attitudes toward foreign products and affect the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

Therefore, this study is grounded in the need to better understand how symbolic COO cues operate within contemporary consumer decision-making processes. By integrating insights from marketing and cognitive psychology, this research aims to provide a comprehensive

explanation of how consumers evaluate foreign products in the absence of direct product experience.

1.3 Problem statement / research gap

According to the study of Hüttl-Maack and Munz (2025), a lot of studies have investigated various packaging features and their impact on consumers' perception of a product. They also highlighted that, although the use of language on packaging has become increasingly common and consumers are frequently exposed to multilingual packaging, this area has not yet received sufficient attention in research.

Furthermore, existing studies have mainly focused on general packaging elements or multilingual information, while very few studies have specifically examined language as symbolic cues on packaging and their impact on the evaluation of foreign products. This indicates a clear gap in marketing research, particularly in understanding how symbolic country of origin (COO) cues such as language characters embedded in packaging design influence consumer perceptions and behavioural responses.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating how symbolic COO cues, specifically Chinese characters on tea packaging, influence perceived product quality and purchase intention. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a deeper understanding of how packaging-based symbolic cues can be strategically used to enhance consumer acceptance of foreign products and support international marketing strategies.

1.4 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how symbolic country of origin (COO) cues influence consumer evaluations of foreign products. Specifically, this study aims to examine the effect of symbolic COO cues, such as Chinese characters on tea packaging, on consumers' perceived product quality and purchase intention.

In addition, this study seeks to explore the underlying mechanism through which symbolic COO cues affect consumer behavior by analyzing the mediating role of perceived product quality. Understanding this relationship is important, as consumers often rely on symbolic cues when evaluating products, particularly in situations where direct product information is limited.

Furthermore, the study aims to examine the moderating effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase

intention. These factors are expected to influence how consumers interpret symbolic cues and form their purchasing decisions, particularly in the context of foreign products.

Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are:

- To introduce the consumer cultural cache (CCC) framework
- To examine the effect of symbolic COO cues on perceived product quality
- To analyze the impact of perceived product quality on purchase intention
- To investigate the mediating role of perceived product quality in the relationship between symbolic COO cues and purchase intention
- To examine the moderating effect of consumer ethnocentrism on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention
- To examine the moderating effect of sustainability concern on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention

After achieving these objectives, this study will help to fill the gap in marketing research. Theoretically, this study introduces the framework of consumer cultural cache, which explains how the consumer brain processes information when it is exposed to symbolic cues on packaging. On the other hand, this study provides insights for marketing and packaging practitioners on how language characters can be used as packaging cues and highlights their importance in promoting foreign products in the market.

1.5 Research Questions

The present study investigates how symbolic country of origin (COO) cues embedded in product packaging influence consumers' evaluations of foreign products. Specifically, it examines whether the presence of Chinese characters on tea packaging affects consumers' perceived product quality and purchase intention. In addition, the study explores the underlying mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence purchase intention and examines the boundary conditions that may strengthen or weaken this relationship. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1.5.1 Main Research Question

- How do symbolic country of origin (COO) cues in the form of Chinese characters on tea packaging influence consumers' purchase intention, and what roles do perceived product quality, consumer ethnocentrism, and sustainability concern play in this relationship?

1.5.2 Sub-Research Questions

- RQ1: How do symbolic country of origin (COO) cues in the form of Chinese characters on tea packaging influence consumers' perceived product quality?
- RQ2: How does perceived product quality influence consumers' purchase intention?
- RQ3: Does perceived product quality mediate the relationship between symbolic COO cues and consumers' purchase intention?
- RQ4: Does consumer ethnocentrism moderate the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention?
- RQ5: Does sustainability concern moderate the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention?

1.6 Structure of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on COO effects, symbolic packaging cues, consumer psychology, and dual-process theories, and introduces the concept of Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) as a conceptual synthesis that motivates the hypotheses. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, including the experimental design, sample, measures, and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the empirical results. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature, outlines theoretical and managerial implications, and suggests directions for future research. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and highlights main limitations.

Chapter 2 : Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations and empirical research relevant to the present study. It aims to establish a comprehensive understanding of how symbolic country of origin (COO) cues influence consumer perception and behavioural responses.

The chapter begins by explaining country of origin and then examining cue utilization and country of origin theories, which explain how consumers use external signals, such as packaging elements to evaluate products. It then reviews key theories related to perceived product quality and purchase intention, highlighting the cognitive and psychological mechanisms underlying consumer decision-making.

Furthermore, the chapter explores the role of individual level moderating factors, specifically consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern, which may shape how consumers interpret and respond to foreign products.

Finally, the chapter introduces the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework as an integrative conceptual lens that combines insights from existing theories to explain how symbolic cues activate culturally embedded knowledge and influence product evaluations.

Overall, this chapter provides the theoretical basis for the research model and hypotheses developed in the subsequent sections.

2.2 Introduction of the Country of Origin Cues

With the progress of globalization, consumers can purchase products from almost any part of the world and increasingly encounter realities and meanings very different from their own cultures, as digital connectivity breaks down geographical and cultural boundaries. Consequently, the topic of the country of origin (COO) is more relevant than ever (Pegan et al., 2020). At the same time, companies seek to expand their market presence internationally to diversify revenue streams, respond to competitive pressures, and exploit opportunities in larger consumer markets (Kamara, 2024). Thus, companies have adopted various strategies to enter and capture international markets. Historical evidence shows that firms use various international marketing communication strategies like branding, packaging design, and COO to influence consumer perceptions and evaluations of foreign products (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017; Orth & Malkewitz, 2008).

At the beginning, the original concept of the country of origin (COO) reflected only the origin of production (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Merunka, 2006). Basically, there were only explicit COO cues. With the evolution of marketing and increasing competition, companies started to use

attractive designs with indirect COO cues. These kinds of indirect cues are called implicit COOs and companies can use either explicit (direct) or implicit (indirect) or both strategies to benefit from positive country association (Montanari et al., 2023). Explicit COO cues are used to directly communicate the product's origin by using maps, flags of country/city names in "made in" labels, and brand names (Aichner, 2014; Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020). Implicit COO cues can be used to communicate the origin through reference to monuments, landmarks, national characters, colors, and language (Aichner, 2014; Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017; Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020).

The new competitive global context has made the analysis of countries of origin more complex because the spread of production decentralization, outsourcing, and especially the emergence of so-called hybrid products (e.g., with different countries of production and design or brand) has made it more difficult to identify the exact origins of products (Li et al., 2000; Phau & Chao, 2008). The concept known as the deconstruction strategy where the origin of production has been extended to other aspects such as the countries of design, the parts, and assembly (Chao, 2001; Inch & McBride, 1998, 2004; Quester et al., 2000). Because of that, Chen (2004), Thakor and Lavack (2003), and Ulgado (2002) have divided COO as the Country of Brand (COB) and the Country of Manufacturing (COM) while Leila and Merunka (2006) highlighted the importance of the country of production and the country of design (COD).

A study has explained how knowledge of the country in which a product was designed can produce effects only if the product has symbolic value (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011). However, from another perspective, numerous scholars have considered consumers' perception of the product's origin based on associations made with brands (Magnusson et al., 2011; Thakor & Lavack, 2003). The importance of the place where the product is designed or assembled diminishes, while that of customers' perception of the country of association rises. This perspective, which sees the country of the brand as more important than the country of manufacture, has gained widespread use by researchers (Pegan et al., 2020).

Among these COO strategies, country of origin (COO) cues have been studied and used for decades because they help consumers to identify product quality, meaning, and value when objective product information is limited (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008). Previous research on language choice in global advertising reveals that language and symbolic cues related to COO influence consumer attitudes and outcomes, demonstrating the strategic importance of origin signals within international marketing practice (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017; Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008). The long history of COO research confirms that COO cues remain one of the most established and widely applied tools in international marketing for

shaping consumers' acceptance of foreign products and brands (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008).

In summary, prior research shows that COO information has become increasingly complex, with multiple origin dimensions (e.g., country of manufacture, country of design, country of brand) and a distinction between explicit and implicit COO cues. While the physical place of manufacture (COM) still matters in many cases, consumers frequently rely on symbolic brand-related origin signals. This thesis focuses on Chinese language characters on tea packaging as an implicit, language-based symbolic COO cue. This cue (Chinese language character) is used to reinforce Chinese origin associations at the level of perceived brand/country image, while the explicit country of manufacture ("Made in China") is held constant. Thus, the script on the packaging operates primarily as a symbolic signal of brand-related country association (COB) rather than a literal indicator of where the product is physically produced or designed.

2.2.1 Language and script as symbolic COO cues

A study shows that packaging conveys the first impression of product in many purchasing situations and there is a growing body of research illuminating its important role in consumer decision making (Hüttl-Maack & Munz, 2025). Some studies have investigated various packaging features like the shape (e.g., Chen et al., 2020), sensory characteristics (e.g., Krishna et al., 2017), visual design elements (e.g., Togawa et al., 2019), color (e.g., Mead & Richerson, 2018), and the overall appearance of the packaging (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008) and their impact on consumers' perceptions and beliefs about a product. Also, some findings highlighted the importance of packaging design by showing the packaging information has a stronger persuasive effect than the same information in advertising (Fajardo & Townsend, 2016).

Recent research highlights that language on packaging is more than a neutral medium of information. The language on packaging can systematically shape product evaluations. In a series of experiments with multilingual packaging, Hüttl-Maack and Munz (2025) show that the presence of foreign languages with which consumers are only weakly familiar reduces processing fluency, leading to less favorable product evaluations. The study also highlighted that a higher number of translations on packaging increases visual complexity and further impairs the ease of processing, again lowering evaluations. These findings suggest that language choices on packaging can have unintended negative consequences if they overload consumers or confront them with unfamiliar scripts.

While these studies focus on multilingual packaging and the negative consequences of reduced processing fluency, other studies show that foreign languages or scripts can also be used strategically to create desired country associations and symbolic meanings. Research on

foreign-language shows that using a foreign language in marketing communication can function as an implicit country of origin cue because consumers tend to link the language to a specific country and product category (Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017). Hornikx and van Meurs (2017) argue that foreign languages in advertising often operate symbolically rather than informatively, creating associations with cultural values and product origins. Empirical studies demonstrate that foreign-language slogans or text can evoke similar associations and persuasive effects as explicit COO mentions such as "Made in ...", supporting the idea that language use itself can embody COO information (Hornikx et al., 2007; Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017; Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008; Leclerc et al., 1994). Even though more of this work has focused on advertising, this similar mechanism can apply to packaging where foreign languages or scripts on the label can implicitly signal a product's origin and authenticity. In this sense, language and script become part of the broader set of symbolic COO cues, alongside colors, images, and design motifs tied to a particular country.

Beyond the use of multilingual packaging, the visual form of lettering or script can also convey original information. Research on foreign branding and typography suggests that non-Latin scripts, typeface style, and calligraphic elements can signal a product's national or cultural origin independently of the literal meaning of the words (Leclerc et al., 1994; Schmitt & Zhang, 2012). Wagner and Charinsarn (2026) find that packaging with unconventional foreign lettering (e.g., stylised non-native script elements) can lead to more positive brand attitudes than packaging with only the native language, provided that the script is congruent with the product's stereotypical origin. Such lettering works as an implicit COO cue by visually signaling a foreign culture and activating origin-related associations, even when consumers cannot read the text literally. For example, stylized Asian calligraphy on food packaging tends to be associated with "Asian cuisine" and traditional preparation methods, even among consumers who cannot read the characters (Clement et al., 2013; Leclerc et al., 1994).

In many product categories, especially food and beverages, Chinese characters and calligraphic styles are used on packaging to visually communicate "Chinese tea culture" and authenticity (Clement et al., 2013; Wang & Song, 2024). These script elements go beyond mere translation; they function as symbolic markers of Chinese origin, tradition, and cultural heritage in the eyes of consumers (Leclerc et al., 1994; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2026). From a COO perspective, such characters can therefore be interpreted as implicit, language-based origin signals that shape perceptions of authenticity and quality (Hüttl-Maack & Munz, 2025; Hornikx & van Meurs, 2017).

Taken together, prior research indicates that foreign languages and scripts on packaging act as implicit COO cues that can both activate country-related associations and alter the ease of processing, thereby influencing product evaluations (Hüttl-Maack & Munz, 2025; Hornikx et al., 2007; Wagner & Charinsarn, 2026). However, most existing studies have focused either on multilingual information-heavy packaging or on foreign-language slogans in advertising, rather than on a simple, script-based COO cue on otherwise comparable packaging. This thesis mainly focuses this gap by examining how the presence versus absence of Chinese characters on tea packaging, combined with a constant explicit "Made in China" label, affects European consumers' perceived product quality and acceptance.

2.2.2 Theoretical review of the country of origin cues

This part covers theories that relate to the country of origin cues. The main contents of the theory are explained under this part in terms of definition of the theory, main assumptions of the theory, predictions of the theory and its link with this study. Although multiple theoretical approaches exist, this section focuses on the most relevant theories that explain how consumers interpret COO cues in product evaluation contexts.

2.2.2.1 Cue Utilization Theory

Cue Utilization Theory explains how consumers rely on intrinsic and extrinsic cues when evaluating product quality. Intrinsic cues refer to the physical attributes of a product, such as taste, texture, or design, whereas extrinsic cues include attributes such as brand name, price, packaging, and country of origin. The theory further suggests that when intrinsic information is difficult to evaluate before purchase, consumers rely more heavily on extrinsic cues to reduce uncertainty (Szybillo & Jacoby, 1974; Zeithaml, 1988; Richardson et al., 1994). As a result, extrinsic cues play a critical role in shaping perceived product quality and overall evaluation. In the context of this study, country of origin (COO) serves as a key extrinsic cue that consumers use to infer product quality. Specifically, symbolic COO cues, such as language and script on packaging, can influence consumer perceptions even in the absence of detailed product information. Therefore, cue utilization theory provides a fundamental theoretical basis for understanding how COO cues affect perceived product quality and purchase intention.

2.2.2.2 Schema Theory

The famous well known Schema theory explains how individuals organize, store, and retrieve information in the form of cognitive structures known as schemas (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980). These schemas represent accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about specific concepts, such as countries, cultures, brands and product categories (Lee & Schumann,

2004). When consumers encounter new information, they interpret it based on these existing cognitive frameworks.

The theory assumes that information processing is guided by prior knowledge stored in memory, allowing individuals to quickly categorize and evaluate stimuli. In the context of marketing, country of origin cues can activate country-related schemas, including stereotypes, cultural associations, and expectations about product quality.

Once activated, these schemas influence how consumers interpret product-related information and form judgments, often in an automatic and unconscious manner. This process reduces cognitive effort and facilitates quicker decision-making.

In this study, symbolic COO cues, such as Chinese characters on packaging, are expected to activate consumers' existing schemas related to China, including associations with tradition, authenticity, and tea culture. These activated schemas then influence perceived product quality and purchase intention. Therefore, Schema theory also provides a cognitive explanation for how symbolic cues shape consumer evaluations.

2.2.2.3 Associative Network Theory

Associative network theory, originally developed in cognitive psychology, conceptualizes memory as a network of interconnected nodes linked through associative pathways (Collins & Loftus, 1975, cited according to in Brandt et al., 2010). This theory explains how information is stored in memory as a network of interconnected nodes representing concepts, ideas, and experiences. These nodes are linked through associative connections, meaning that the activation of one concept can trigger related concepts within the network.

The theory assumes that memory operates through a process known as spreading activation, whereby exposure to a stimulus activates related associations in a structured network. In the context of consumer behaviour, cues such as brand names, symbols, or country of origin indicators can activate networks of related meanings, including cultural values, stereotypes, and product-related beliefs.

When a country of origin cue is encountered, it activates a network of associations linked to that country, which subsequently influences product evaluation and decision-making processes. This activation often occurs automatically and without conscious deliberation.

In this study, Chinese characters on packaging may activate associative networks related to Chinese culture, traditional tea practices, and perceptions of authenticity. These activated associations can shape consumers' perceived product quality and influence their purchase intention. Therefore, associative network theory explains how symbolic COO cues influence consumer evaluation through memory-based associations.

2.2.2.4 Country of Origin Effect

The country of origin (COO) effect describes how consumers' perceptions of a product are influenced by their associations with the country in which the product is produced. This theory suggests that consumers often rely on country based stereotypes and generalizations when evaluating products, particularly in situations where product information is limited or ambiguous (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008).

The core assumption of this framework is that countries develop specific reputations for certain product categories (e.g., German engineering, French luxury goods), which consumers use as heuristic cues during evaluation. These country-based associations influence perceptions of product quality, reliability, and overall value. As a result, COO information can significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, even in the absence of objective product knowledge.

The use of Chinese characters on tea packaging can activate associations related to Chinese culture, tradition, and authenticity. These associations may influence consumers' perceived product quality and acceptance. Therefore, COO effect theory provides a direct explanation of how symbolic origin cues shape consumer evaluations.

2.2.2.5 Signalling Theory

Signalling theory explains how firms communicate product quality to consumers under conditions of information asymmetry, where consumers cannot directly observe or verify product attributes before purchase. This theory assumes that effective signals must be credible and costly to imitate, ensuring that they reliably reflect underlying product quality (Spence, 1973; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Consumers interpret these signals as indicators of quality, reducing perceived risk and uncertainty in decision-making processes.

In such situations, companies use observable signals such as brand name, price, packaging, and country of origin to convey information about product quality. From this perspective, country of origin cues function as quality signals that communicate information about a product's production standards, technological expertise, and cultural authenticity. Symbolic COO cues, such as foreign language or script on packaging, can signal cultural origin and product authenticity, even when explicit information is limited.

In this study, Chinese characters on tea packaging act as symbolic signals that convey associations with Chinese culture, tradition, and authenticity. Therefore, signaling theory helps explain how such cues influence perceived product quality and subsequently affect consumer purchase intention.

2.2.2.6 Halo Effect and Summary Construct Theory

Halo effect and summary construct theory was proposed by Han (1989). The halo effect is a cognitive bias where one positive trait influences overall perception, while summary construct theory suggests a general impression acts as a summary of specific, known attributes. In consumer behavior, the halo effect often dictates perceptions when familiarity is low, while the summary construct applies when high familiarity allows for detailed evaluations.

Based on theory assumes and combining with COO, the halo effect occurs when consumers have little or no prior knowledge about a product and rely on general country image to form product judgments. In this case, the country image serves as a cognitive shortcut, influencing perceptions of quality and value.

In contrast, the summary construct mechanism occurs when consumers possess prior experience or knowledge about products from a particular country. In such cases, country of origin acts as a summary of accumulated product-related information, allowing consumers to make more informed evaluations based on past experiences.

In summary, the role of COO varies depending on the level of consumer familiarity and knowledge. When familiarity is low, the halo effect dominates or when familiarity is high, the summary construct becomes more influential.

In this study, consumers may or may not possess detailed knowledge of specific tea brands; however, they may still hold general perceptions of Chinese tea. Therefore, symbolic cues such as Chinese script may trigger a halo effect or the summary construct mechanism, shaping perceived product quality through general country associations. This makes the theory highly relevant for explaining how COO cues influence consumer perception in low-information contexts.

2.3 Perceptual Process and Product Evaluation

2.3.1 Consumer Perception

Consumer perception plays a fundamental role in how individuals evaluate products and make purchase decisions. Consumers are constantly exposed to a variety of stimuli in their environment, particularly in the marketplace, where numerous marketing cues compete for attention (Agyekum et al., 2015). These stimuli influence how consumers interpret product-related information and form judgments about quality and value.

One of the most used cues in product evaluation is price. In situations where consumers have limited information, price often serves as an important indicator of product quality (Kotler et al., 2001). However, the relationship between price, value, and quality is not always clear, and consumers may experience uncertainty when making such evaluations (Agyekum et al., 2015).

In addition to price, consumers rely on both intrinsic and extrinsic cues to assess product quality. Intrinsic cues include physical characteristics such as taste, smell, and size, whereas extrinsic cues involve factors such as packaging, brand name, country of origin, and distribution channels (Agyekum et al., 2015).

Perception can be defined as the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret sensory information to create a meaningful understanding of their environment (Gregory et al., 1995; Markin, 1995). This process is essential in consumer behaviour, as individuals must first become aware of a product before they can evaluate or purchase it (Bovee & Thill, 1992). The perceptual process typically begins with exposure to a stimulus, followed by attention and interpretation, ultimately leading to the formation of an overall perception of the product.

Understanding consumer perception is particularly important for marketers, as it determines how product-related cues such as packaging design and symbolic elements are interpreted by consumers. In the context of this study, symbolic country of origin (COO) cues, such as Chinese characters on product packaging, can influence how consumers perceive product quality by activating culturally associated meanings and expectations.

2.3.2 Quality of a Product

Product quality is a fundamental concept in marketing and plays a critical role in shaping consumer evaluations and decision-making processes. It reflects the extent to which a product is able to satisfy consumer needs and deliver value through its features and attributes (Agyekum et al., 2015; Dunk, 2002). In this context, product quality serves as a key link between product characteristics and consumer responses.

From a consumer perspective, product quality is often evaluated subjectively rather than based on objective measures. Consumers rely on their perceptions of product performance when forming judgments about quality, particularly in situations where direct evaluation is not possible (Rao & Raghu Nath, 1997).

It is important to distinguish perceived quality from perceived value, as these are closely related but conceptually distinct constructs. Perceived quality refers to a consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority, based primarily on its attributes and performance (Zeithaml, 1988; Aaker, 1996). In contrast, perceived value represents a broader evaluation that involves a trade-off between perceived benefits and perceived costs, such as price, time, and effort (Zeithaml, 1988). While perceived quality focuses on the assessment of product performance, perceived value incorporates both quality and sacrifice, reflecting whether the product is considered worthwhile from the consumer's perspective. Therefore, perceived

quality is often viewed as an antecedent of perceived value, as higher perceived product quality contributes to greater perceived value.

Although perceived value is an important construct in consumer behavior, this study focuses primarily on perceived quality, as participants evaluate the product based solely on packaging cues without actual product usage or price consideration. In such contexts, consumers are more likely to form judgments about product quality rather than making comprehensive value assessments involving trade-offs between benefits and costs.

This distinction is particularly important in the present study, as symbolic country of origin (COO) cues are expected to exert a direct positive influence on consumers' quality evaluations, which may subsequently shape their purchase intentions. In this study, the term perceived product quality is used to refer specifically to consumers' subjective evaluation of the quality of the tea product presented on the packaging. This terminology is adopted to reflect the product-specific context of the study, although the literature often uses the broader term perceived quality to describe consumers' subjective judgments of the quality of products or services (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Accordingly, perceived product quality is conceptualized as the mediating variable linking symbolic COO cues to purchase intention, which serves as the proxy for consumer acceptance in this study.

2.3.2.1 Theoretical Review of Perceived Product Quality

This section reviews the key theoretical perspectives that explain how consumers form perceptions of product quality. Perceived product quality is a central construct in consumer behaviour, as it reflects consumers' subjective evaluation of a product's overall excellence or superiority. Unlike objective quality, perceived product quality is based on consumers' interpretation of available information and cues. The following theories are particularly relevant for understanding how perceived product quality is formed and influenced in the context of this study.

2.3.2.1.1 Cue Utilization Theory and Perceived Product Quality

Cue Utilization Theory, introduced in Section 2.2.2.1, also provides the primary theoretical foundation for understanding perceived product quality in the present study. While the earlier discussion explained how consumers interpret symbolic country of origin (COO) cues as extrinsic product cues, the present section focuses on how these cues influence consumers' perceptions of product quality. According to the theory, consumers rely on both intrinsic and extrinsic cues when evaluating product quality, particularly in situations where intrinsic product attributes cannot be directly assessed before purchase (Szybillo & Jacoby, 1974).

In the context of the present study, symbolic country of origin cues, represented by Chinese language characters displayed on tea packaging, function as extrinsic cues that consumers use to infer product quality. Because consumers are unable to directly evaluate intrinsic attributes such as taste, smell, or ingredient quality before purchase, they rely on symbolic packaging cues as indicators of authenticity, cultural heritage, and expected product characteristics. These symbolic cues reduce uncertainty and assist consumers in forming subjective evaluations of product quality.

Cue Utilization Theory suggests that consumers' quality perceptions are not determined solely by objective product characteristics but also by the interpretation of external information available at the point of purchase. Consequently, symbolic country of origin cues can positively influence perceived product quality by providing consumers with meaningful information that shapes their expectations of the product. Within the conceptual framework of the present study, Cue Utilization Theory therefore provides the primary theoretical explanation for the proposed relationship between symbolic country of origin cues and perceived product quality.

2.3.2.1.2 Means-End Chain Theory

The Means–End Chain (MEC) Theory was introduced by Gutman (1982) to explain how consumers link concrete product attributes to functional and psychosocial consequences, which ultimately reflect their personal values. Building on Kelly's Personal Construct Theory, the MEC approach was further developed and applied in marketing and consumer research by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). The Means–End Chain approach has subsequently been widely applied in consumer research to explain how consumers connect product attributes with desired consequences and personal values (Grunert & Bech-Larsen, 2005; Ferran & Grunert, 2007; Borgardt, 2020).

This theory explains how consumers connect product attributes to functional and psychological consequences, and ultimately to personal values. The core assumption of this theory is that product attributes serve as means to achieve desired ends, such as satisfaction, status, or emotional fulfillment. As a result, perceived product quality is shaped by how consumers interpret product cues in relation to these higher-level goals and values.

In the context of this study, symbolic COO cues, such as Chinese script, may be interpreted as indicators of authenticity, tradition, or cultural richness. These associations can influence perceived product quality by linking product attributes to desirable outcomes and values. Therefore, means-end chain theory helps explain how symbolic cues contribute to perceived product evaluation beyond functional attributes.

2.3.2.1.3 Expectation-Confirmation Theory

Expectation-confirmation theory explains how consumers form perceptions of quality based on the comparison between prior expectations and perceived product performance (Oliver, 1980, cited according to in AlSokkar et al., 2024). This theory assumes that consumers develop expectations before using a product, which are then compared with actual experiences to form judgments of quality and satisfaction.

If the perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, consumers are likely to evaluate the product positively, resulting in higher perceived product quality. Conversely, if performance falls short of expectations, perceived product quality is negatively affected.

Although this study does not involve actual product consumption, symbolic cues can shape consumers' expectations prior to purchase. For example, Chinese characters on packaging may create expectations of authenticity and traditional quality, which can influence perceived product quality even before product use. Therefore, expectation-confirmation theory helps explain how expectations derived from symbolic cues affect consumer evaluation.

2.3.2.1.4 Dual-Process Theory

Dual-process theory explains that human cognition operates through two distinct systems: a fast, automatic, and intuitive system (System 1) and a slower, more deliberate, and analytical system (System 2) (Kahneman, 2011). The theory helps to assume that many consumer judgments, including perceived quality, are influenced by automatic processes that require minimal cognitive effort.

Symbolic cues, such as language or script on packaging, are often processed through System 1, leading to immediate associations and intuitive judgments. These rapid evaluations can significantly influence perceived product quality without extensive cognitive deliberation.

In this study, the presence of Chinese characters on packaging may trigger automatic associations related to culture, authenticity, and tradition, influencing perceived product quality through intuitive processing. Therefore, dual-process theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how symbolic COO cues affect consumer perception in a fast and automatic manner.

2.3.3 Purchase intention

Purchase intention is a critical concept in consumer behaviour and reflects a consumer's readiness or willingness to buy a product. Consumers invest time, effort, and financial resources in the purchasing process, making purchase intention an important predictor of actual buying behaviour (Saleem et al., 2015). Purchase intention can be defined as a consumer's conscious

plan or decision to make an effort to purchase a product (Kotler et al., 2001). More broadly, it represents the likelihood that a consumer will buy a product or service in the future based on their evaluation and preferences (Agyekum et al., 2015).

Consumer purchase intention is influenced by a variety of factors, including perceived quality, price, personal preferences, and prior experiences (Saleem et al., 2015). Furthermore, before making a purchase decision, consumers typically form perceptions about product attributes such as quality, price, and design, which shape their overall evaluation of the product (Saleem et al., 2015). The study of consumer judgment processes is therefore essential for understanding purchase intention, as it explains how consumers process information and form decisions (Puth et al., 1999; Schiffman & Kanuk, 1991). According to Spears & Singh (2004), perceived product quality has been identified as a key determinant of purchase intention, as higher perceived product quality increases consumers' confidence and willingness to buy.

In the context of this research, purchase intention is considered the dependent variable. The study aims to examine how symbolic COO cues, specifically Chinese characters on tea packaging, affect consumers' perceptions of product quality and, ultimately, their willingness to purchase the product.

2.3.3.1 Theoretical Review of Purchase Intention

This section reviews the key theoretical perspectives that explain how consumers develop purchase intention. Purchase intention is a central construct in consumer behaviour and represents a consumer's likelihood or willingness to buy a product. It is widely used as a predictor of actual purchasing behaviour. The following theories are particularly relevant for understanding how purchase intention is formed and influenced in the context of this study.

2.3.3.1.1 Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) explains that an individual's behavioural intention is determined by three key factors: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Attitude refers to the individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behaviour, subjective norms relate to perceived social pressure, and perceived behavioural control reflects the individual's perceived ability to perform the behaviour.

The theory assumes that individuals make rational decisions based on available information and that intention is the most immediate predictor of actual behaviour. As a result, stronger positive

attitudes, supportive social norms, and higher perceived control lead to stronger purchase intention.

In the context of this study, perceived product quality can influence consumers' attitudes toward the product, while symbolic COO cues may shape these perceptions. Therefore, TPB provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how perceived product quality translates into purchase intention.

2.3.3.1.2 Theory of Reasoned Action

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) proposes that behavioural intention is determined by an individual's attitude towards the behaviour and subjective norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to the theory, individuals are more likely to perform a behaviour when they hold favourable attitudes towards it and perceive social support for engaging in that behaviour.

The theory assumes that individuals engage in systematic and rational evaluation before making decisions, and that intention is a direct antecedent of behaviour. Attitudes are formed based on beliefs about the outcomes of the behaviour, while subjective norms are influenced by social expectations.

In the present study, TRA provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how consumers' attitudes and social influences contribute to the formation of purchase intention. However, because purchase decisions may also be influenced by consumers' perceived ability to perform the behaviour, TPB is adopted as the primary theoretical framework, while TRA serves as a supporting theory that establishes the theoretical basis for behavioural intention.

2.3.3.1.3 Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model explains how environmental stimuli influence internal psychological states, which in turn lead to behavioural responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974, cited according to in Jacoby, 2002). According to this model, external stimuli (S) affect the internal state of the organism (O), which then produces a behavioural response (R).

The theory assumes that consumer behaviour is shaped by both external factors and internal cognitive and emotional processes. In a marketing context, stimuli such as packaging design, brand cues, and country of origin indicators influence consumers' perceptions and emotions, which subsequently affect purchase intention.

In this study, symbolic COO cues (e.g., Chinese characters) represent the stimulus (S), perceived product quality represents the internal cognitive response (O), and purchase intention represents the behavioural outcome/response (R). Therefore, the SOR model provides a clear framework linking symbolic cues to consumer behaviour.

2.3.3.1.4 Consumer Decision-Making Model

Consumer decision-making model explains the stages consumers go through when making purchasing decisions, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase intention (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995, cited according to in Erasmus et al., 2001). The model assumes that consumers engage in a structured decision-making process, although the level of effort may vary depending on the situation.

Perceived product quality plays a critical role during the evaluation stage, as consumers assess the value and desirability of different options. Purchase intention emerges as the outcome of this evaluation process. In this study, symbolic COO cues may influence the evaluation stage by shaping perceived product quality, which in turn affects purchase intention. Therefore, this model provides a process-oriented explanation of how consumers arrive at purchase decisions.

2.4 Consumer Acceptance

Consumer acceptance is closely related to purchase intention in consumer behaviour research. Although this study focuses on purchase intention as the dependent variable, it is employed as a behavioural proxy for consumer acceptance. In marketing and consumer behaviour research, purchase intention is widely recognized as a reliable indicator of consumers' willingness to accept and adopt a product, as it reflects their readiness to engage in actual purchasing behaviour (Dodds et al., 1991; Spears & Singh, 2004; Paul et al., 2016; Ajzen, 1991). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, behavioural intention is the most immediate predictor of actual behaviour which is indicating that individuals are more likely to perform a behaviour when they have a strong intention to do so.

Consequently, purchase intention has been extensively used in prior studies as a valid and measurable outcome variable representing consumer acceptance in various contexts (Paul et al., 2016; Dodds et al., 1991). Furthermore, numerous studies across different product categories confirm that purchase intention effectively captures the acceptance stage in the consumer decision process, making it an appropriate dependent variable for this research (Grewal et al., 1998; Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, in the context of this study, purchase intention is considered

an appropriate and theoretically grounded proxy for consumer acceptance of products influenced by symbolic country of origin cues.

2.5 Consumer Moderators of Product Evaluation.

While consumer perception, perceived product quality, and purchase intention form the core perceptual process underlying consumer decision-making, these relationships are not uniform across all consumers. Individual attitudes and beliefs can moderate how strongly packaging cues influence product judgments. Two key moderators are particularly relevant in the context of foreign products: consumer ethnocentrism, which reflects preferences for domestic goods over foreign alternatives (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), and sustainability concern, which shapes evaluations based on environmental impact perceptions (Gleim et al., 2013). In the context of Chinese tea packaging, these moderators may influence how European consumers respond to Chinese characters as symbolic COO cues, even when explicit origin information (e.g., “Made in China”) remains constant.

2.5.1 Consumer Ethnocentrism

Sumner in 1907 (cited according to Shimp & Sharma, 1987), a sociologist from Yale University initially introduced ethnocentrism concept, which is a purely sociological concept to distinguish between in-group and out-group. However, Levine and Campbell in 1972 (cited according to Shimp & Sharma, 1987) found that ethnocentrism has become a psychosocial construct with relevance to individual-level personality systems as well as to the more general cultural and socialanalytic frameworks. Deeply, this study highlighted that the symbols and values of one's own ethnic or national group become objects of pride and attachment, whereas symbols of other groups may become objects of contempt. This notion was later adopted within consumer behavior, where its fundamental premise aligned with the imported construct (González-Cabrera & Trelles-Arteaga, 2021).

According to Shimp and Sharma (1987) who developed CETSCALE, to measure consumers' ethnocentric tendencies related to purchasing foreign products, defined ethnocentrism as a belief system involving moral judgments about whether or not to purchase foreign-made products. Shankarmahesh (2006) illustrated ethnocentrism as consumers' tendency to avoid foreign-made products, regardless of their quality or price. Thus, consumer ethnocentrism is crucial for this study, as the country of origin determines the decision-making process of a consumer. Therefore, Consumer ethnocentrism variable is considered moderating factors in this study.

2.5.1.1 Theoretical Review of Consumer Ethnocentrism

This section reviews the key theoretical perspectives that explain consumer ethnocentrism and its influence on product evaluation and purchase behaviour. Consumer ethnocentrism reflects consumers' beliefs about the appropriateness and morality of purchasing foreign-made products. It plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward foreign goods and may influence how consumers interpret country of origin (COO) cues. The following theories provide a foundation for understanding this construct.

2.5.1.1.1 Ethnocentrism Theory

Terence A. Shimp and Subhash Sharma (1987) who developed CETSCALE to measure the consumer ethnocentrism and who combine the ethnocentrism theory with American consumer behaviors, explains that consumers may hold normative beliefs regarding the purchase of foreign products. Ethnocentric consumers tend to view buying imported goods as inappropriate or even harmful to the domestic economy, as it may lead to job losses and economic decline.

The theory assumes that consumers' purchasing decisions are not purely based on product attributes but are also influenced by moral and social considerations. Highly ethnocentric consumers are more likely to prefer domestic products regardless of the quality or price of foreign alternatives.

In the context of this study, consumer ethnocentrism may influence how individuals evaluate products with foreign symbolic cues, such as Chinese characters on packaging. Consumers with higher levels of ethnocentrism may perceive foreign-associated products less favourably, thereby weakening the positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

2.5.1.1.2 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, such as nationality or culture (cited as Huddy, 2001). These group affiliations shape individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, as people tend to categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups.

The theory assumes that individuals are motivated to maintain a positive social identity by favouring their in-group over out-groups. This process leads to in-group favouritism and out-group bias, influencing how individuals evaluate products associated with different countries.

In consumer behaviour, this often manifests as a preference for domestic products and a more critical evaluation of foreign goods.

In the context of this study, symbolic country of origin (COO) cues may activate consumers' national identity and trigger group-based evaluations. As a result, consumers with strong identification with their home country may respond less favourably to foreign cues, such as Chinese characters on packaging. Therefore, social identity theory provides a fundamental psychological explanation for ethnocentric consumer behavior.

2.5.1.1.3 In-group Bias Concept

The in-group bias concept, derived from social identity theory, explains the tendency of individuals to favor members, products, or symbols associated with their own group (Brewer, 1999; Molenberghs, 2013). This bias arises from psychological attachment and perceived similarity, leading individuals to evaluate in-group products more positively than out-group alternatives.

From a consumer behaviour perspective, in-group bias functions as a heuristic that simplifies decision-making, particularly in situations where information is limited. Consumers may rely on group membership cues, such as country of origin, to quickly assess product reliability and trustworthiness. As a result, domestic products are often perceived as more favourable compared to foreign products.

In this study, in-group bias may influence how consumers interpret symbolic COO cues. Packaging elements that signal a foreign origin, such as Chinese script, may be evaluated less positively by consumers who exhibit strong in-group preferences. Therefore, the in-group bias concept helps explain how ethnocentrism influences product evaluation processes.

2.5.1.1.4 Moral Norm Concept

The moral norm concept, grounded in Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991), explains how internalized moral beliefs influence individual behaviour. These norms reflect personal judgments about what is considered right or wrong and can shape behavioural intentions beyond purely rational or economic considerations.

The concept assumes that individuals are motivated to act in accordance with their moral values. In the context of consumer behaviour, moral norms may lead individuals to perceive the purchase of foreign products as ethically inappropriate if it is believed to harm the domestic

economy or society. As a result, consumers with strong moral norms may avoid foreign products regardless of their perceived quality.

In this study, moral norms may reinforce ethnocentric tendencies by influencing how consumers respond to symbolic COO cues. Consumers who view the consumption of foreign products negatively may be less likely to translate perceived product quality into purchase intention. Therefore, the moral norm concept provides an additional explanation for the moderating role of ethnocentrism in consumer decision-making.

2.5.2 Sustainability Concern

Sustainability concern has become an increasingly important factor influencing consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of environmentally responsible consumption, because over the last few decades, the consumption of goods and services has increased to unprecedented levels worldwide, leading to the depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and rapid environmental deterioration (Kostadinova, 2016).

Also, Gleim et al. (2013) confirm that sustainability concern refers to the extent to which individuals are aware of environmental issues and incorporate these concerns into their purchasing decisions. Furthermore, research suggests that consumers with higher levels of sustainability concern are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, such as preferring eco-friendly products and avoiding those perceived as harmful to the environment (Paul et al., 2016).

As environmental awareness continues to grow, consumers are increasingly evaluating products not only based on functional attributes but also on their broader environmental impact. Kostadinova (2016) also cited in the study that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2002) has suggested a categorization of sustainable consumer behaviours according to the human's main life functions, such as nutrition (e.g., food waste reduction, sustainable diets), mobility (e.g., use of environmentally friendly transport, fuels and vehicles, car-sharing), housing (e.g., sustainable building, energy and water conservation), health (e.g., healthy and environmentally friendly lifestyles), and leisure (e.g., sustainable tourism and low resource intensity practices).

In the context of foreign products, sustainability concern may also relate to perceptions of environmental impact associated with global supply chains and long-distance transportation. For imported products such as Chinese tea, which is used in this thesis, consumers may associate the product with additional environmental implications due to international

transportation and logistics. Although consumers may not always evaluate these factors explicitly, such associations can still influence how product-related cues are interpreted.

As a result, this thesis hypothesizes that sustainability concern can shape how consumers process information and evaluate perceived product quality. It has also been identified as an important predictor of purchase intention. However, its influence is not always direct; rather, it may interact with other variables, such as perceived product quality and symbolic cues.

In this study, sustainability concern is considered a moderating variable that influences the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. Specifically, it is proposed that consumers with higher sustainability concern may evaluate products differently when exposed to symbolic country of origin cues, such as Chinese characters on packaging. Consequently, sustainability concern may either strengthen or weaken the impact of perceived product quality on consumers' willingness to purchase the product.

2.5.2.1 Theoretical Review of Sustainability Concern

This section reviews the key theoretical perspectives that explain sustainability concern and its influence on consumer behavior. Sustainability concern refers to the extent to which individuals are aware of environmental issues and incorporate these concerns into their consumption decisions. In recent years, sustainability has become an increasingly important factor influencing product evaluation, particularly in the context of global consumption and international trade. The following theories provide a foundation for understanding how sustainability concern shapes consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions.

2.5.2.1.1 Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory

The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, developed by Stern (1999), explains pro-environmental behaviour as a result of a causal chain linking personal values, environmental beliefs, and moral norms. According to this theory, individuals who hold strong environmental values are more likely to develop beliefs about environmental consequences, which in turn activate personal norms that guide behaviour.

The theory assumes that individuals are motivated to act in ways that are consistent with their values and beliefs. As a result, consumers with strong environmental concern are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption behaviours, such as choosing environmentally friendly products or avoiding those perceived as harmful.

In the context of this study, sustainability concern may influence how consumers evaluate foreign products, particularly those associated with global supply chains. Consumers with higher sustainability concern may perceive imported products, such as Chinese tea, as having greater environmental impact due to transportation and production processes. Therefore, VBN theory provides a value-driven explanation for how sustainability concern can influence consumer evaluation and behaviour.

2.5.2.1.2 Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) Theory

The Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) Theory introduced by Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz (1995), posits that “behaviour is an interactive product of contextual factors and attitudinal variables” (Stern, 2000; p. 415). This “ABC theory” formulation implies that for personal behaviours that are not strongly favoured by context (e.g., by being required or tangibly rewarded), the more difficult, time-consuming, or expensive the behaviour, the weaker its dependence on attitudinal factors (Stern, 2000; p. 416). While attitudes reflect personal beliefs and values, contextual factors include situational constraints such as availability, price, and product characteristics.

The theory assumes that even when individuals hold positive attitudes toward sustainability, their behaviour may be constrained or influenced by contextual factors. As a result, there may be a gap between environmental attitudes and actual behaviour.

In the context of this study, sustainability concern represents an attitudinal factor that may influence product evaluation. However, the absence of real purchase conditions (e.g., price or availability) may limit the extent to which sustainability concerns translate into actual behaviour. Therefore, ABC theory helps explain how sustainability concern interacts with other factors in shaping consumer responses.

2.5.2.1.3 Norm Activation Theory

Norm Activation Theory (NAT), introduced by Schwartz (1977), explains how personal norms influence pro-social and pro-environmental behaviour. The theory holds that pro-environmental actions occur in response to personal moral norms about such actions and that these are activated in individuals who believe that environmental conditions pose threats to other people, other species, or the biosphere and that actions they initiate could avert those consequences (Stern, 1999; p. 85).

The theory assumes that behaviour is driven by internalized moral obligations, which are activated when individuals recognize that their actions have environmental consequences. As a

result, consumers with strong sustainability concern may adjust their purchasing decisions to align with their personal norms.

In this study, consumers who are highly concerned about sustainability may interpret product-related cues differently, particularly when evaluating foreign products. Such consumers may be more critical of products perceived as environmentally harmful, which can influence the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. Therefore, norm activation theory provides a moral-based explanation for sustainability-driven consumer behaviour.

2.5.2.1.4 New Ecological Paradigm

The New Ecological Paradigm (NEP), originally developed by Catton and Dunlap (1978), was later revised by Dunlap et al. (2000) to improve the measurement of individuals' pro-environmental worldviews, emphasizing that human activities can have significant and potentially harmful effects on a fragile ecosystem. The NEP reflects a set of beliefs about the relationship between humans and the natural environment, highlighting limits to growth, ecological balance, and the consequences of human actions (Stern, 1999; p. 85).

The NEP scale is widely used to measure individuals' environmental concern and awareness of ecological issues. It captures general beliefs about environmental consequences, which influence more specific attitudes and behaviours related to sustainability (Stern et al., 1995). Individuals with a strong pro-ecological worldview are more likely to exhibit environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviours.

In the context of this study, the NEP provides a theoretical foundation for understanding sustainability concern as an individual difference factor. Consumers with higher environmental concern may evaluate products differently based on their perceived environmental impact, including products associated with foreign production and transportation. Therefore, the NEP helps explain how sustainability concern may moderate the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

2.6. Introduction to Consumer Cultural Cache Framework (CCC Framework)

This study adopts Consumer Cultural Cache Framework (CCC Framework) as an integrative conceptual approach to explain how consumers interpret symbolic cues and form product evaluations. Rather than introducing CCC as a novel theory, it is presented as a framework that synthesizes existing theories in consumer behaviour, cognitive psychology, and marketing to explain how consumers process external cues in decision-making contexts.

The CCC framework is grounded in the idea that consumers rely on external cues when evaluating products, particularly in situations where direct product experience is not available. This aligns with cue utilization theory, which suggests that consumers depend on extrinsic cues such as brand, price, and country of origin when intrinsic attributes are difficult to evaluate (Olson & Jacoby, 1972; Zeithaml, 1988). In such contexts, symbolic cues play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions.

From a cognitive perspective, the CCC framework draws on associative network theory and schema theory, which explain how consumers store and retrieve information in memory. When consumers encounter a cue, such as Chinese characters on packaging, it activates related associations within their cognitive structures, including cultural meanings, stereotypes, and/or prior knowledge. These activated associations influence how the product is interpreted and evaluated.

Furthermore, the CCC framework is consistent with dual-process perspectives of decision-making, particularly the distinction between intuitive and analytical processing as described by Daniel Kahneman (2011). While dual-process theory explains how intuitive judgments are formed through fast and automatic processing, it does not explicitly specify the nature of the knowledge structures that drive these judgments in a marketing context. The CCC framework addresses this gap by proposing that culturally embedded knowledge, stored in a “consumer cultural cache,” serves as the primary content activated during such intuitive processing. In many consumption contexts, especially low-involvement situations, consumers rely on fast, automatic processing (System 1), where symbolic cues are interpreted quickly and with minimal cognitive effort. As a result, visual and linguistic cues can significantly influence perceived product quality without deliberate analysis.

Within this framework, symbolic country of origin (COO) cues are treated as key stimuli that trigger cognitive and associative processes. These cues influence perceived product quality by signalling authenticity, cultural origin, and expected product characteristics. Perceived product quality acts as a central mediating variable that translates cue-based perceptions into behavioural responses, such as purchase intention.

In addition, the CCC framework incorporates individual difference factors that may influence how cues are interpreted. Consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern are considered as moderating variables that shape the strength and direction of cue effects. Ethnocentric consumers may respond negatively to foreign cues due to group-based preferences and moral

considerations, while consumers with high sustainability concern may evaluate products based on perceived environmental impact.

Overall, The CCC framework proposes that symbolic COO cues do not primarily influence consumers through deliberate cognitive evaluation, but through the rapid activation of culturally stored knowledge structures. Consumers respond to such cues by retrieving previously learned associations rather than engaging in extensive analytical processing. It offers a structured approach to understanding how consumers form perceptions and intentions in the absence of direct product experience, making it particularly suitable for the context of this study. By distinguishing between cognitive processing mechanisms and the content of stored knowledge, the CCC framework extends existing dual-process theories and provides a more context-specific explanation of how symbolic cues influence consumer evaluation.

2.6.1 Concept of the Cache

The CCC framework adopts the concept of “cache” as a metaphor to explain how consumers efficiently process symbolic cues. In computer systems, cache memory refers to a mechanism that stores frequently accessed information to enable rapid retrieval without searching the entire memory system (Hennessy & Patterson, 2017). Drawing from this analogy, the CCC framework assumes that consumers develop a form of “cultural cache” in memory, where frequently encountered cultural knowledge is stored in a simplified and readily accessible form. This knowledge is accumulated through past experiences, socialization, media exposure, and cultural learning.

Importantly, the CCC framework distinguishes between the processing mechanism and the content of cognition. While Daniel Kahneman (2011) describes System 1 as a fast, automatic mode of thinking, the CCC framework specifies what is being accessed during this process namely, culturally stored knowledge. Thus, System 1 represents how information is processed, whereas the cultural cache represents the source of information that is retrieved and the fuel for the activation of System 1.

In this sense, the cultural cache functions as a cognitive shortcut that provides the content for intuitive judgments, enabling consumers to rapidly interpret symbolic cues without engaging in deliberate analysis.

2.6.2 Process of the CCC Framework

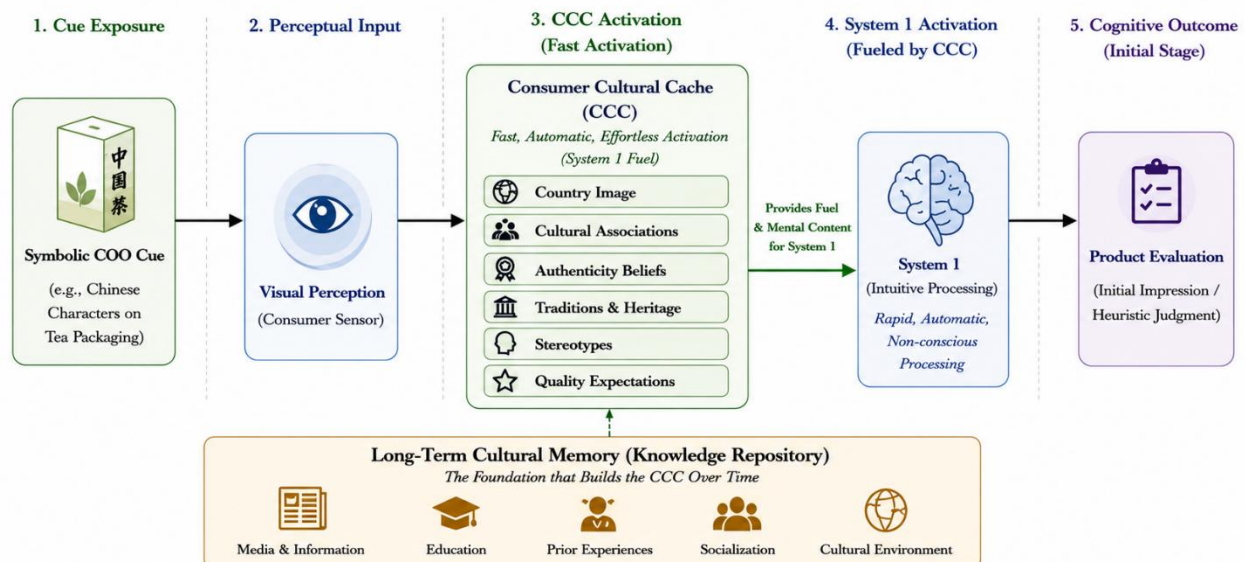
The CCC framework explains consumer responses to symbolic cues as a process of rapid activation of stored cultural knowledge. The consumer cultural cache is continuously shaped

and updated through prior experiences, media exposure, and cultural learning, forming a structured set of associations related to countries, cultures, and products.

This cached knowledge is stored in simplified forms, such as stereotypes, cultural associations, country images, and tradition-based expectations. For example, in the context of Chinese tea, stereotypes may include general beliefs such as “Chinese tea is authentic”. Cultural associations may involve connections to Chinese heritage, ancient tea ceremonies, and holistic lifestyles. Country images may reflect broader perceptions of China as a country known for its long-standing tea culture and expertise in tea production. Tradition-based expectations may include assumptions that Chinese tea is produced using traditional methods and carries historical or medicinal value.

When consumers encounter a symbolic country of origin cue, such as Chinese characters on packaging, these one or more stored associations are automatically activated, influencing how the product is interpreted and evaluated. This activation occurs through intuitive processing, consistent with System 1 thinking (Kahneman, 2011), which operates quickly, automatically, and with minimal cognitive effort. Within this process, System 1 enables initial/heuristic judgment, while the cultural cache supplies the content that shapes those judgments. The figure 2.1 visualised the process of the concept.

Figure 2.1 Process of the Consumer Cultural Cache Framework (CCC Framework)



Source: Developed by the author using AI tools (ChatGPT)

Accordingly, the CCC framework proposes that symbolic COO cues influence consumer evaluation not through deliberate reasoning, but through the rapid retrieval of culturally

embedded knowledge structures. This explains why symbolic cues can strongly influence perceived product quality even in the absence of direct product experience.

However, if consumers lack prior knowledge or associations related to a specific cue, the cultural cache cannot be effectively activated. In such cases, the influence of symbolic cues on perception and evaluation may be significantly reduced.

2.6.3 Distinction Between the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework and Existing Theories

Although the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework builds upon established theories in consumer behaviour and cognitive psychology, it differs from each of them in both scope and explanatory focus. Existing theories explain specific aspects of consumer information processing, whereas the CCC Framework integrates these perspectives into a unified explanation of how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer evaluations.

Cue Utilization Theory explains why consumers rely on extrinsic cues when intrinsic product attributes cannot be evaluated. However, it does not explain the cognitive mechanism through which symbolic cues activate culturally stored knowledge. Similarly, Schema Theory explains how previously acquired knowledge structures are activated when consumers encounter familiar cues. Nevertheless, it does not specify what type of prior knowledge is activated when consumers are exposed to symbolic country of origin cues. In contrast, the CCC Framework proposes that the activated knowledge consists of a consumer's culturally accumulated memories, experiences, beliefs, stereotypes, values, and symbolic associations related to the country of origin. Thus, the CCC Framework provides a more explicit explanation of the content of the cognitive structures activated during symbolic cue processing.

Associative Network Theory explains how activation spreads through interconnected memory structures but does not specifically address how culturally meaningful symbolic cues are translated into product evaluations and behavioural intentions. Likewise, Kahneman's Dual-Process Theory distinguishes between intuitive and analytical cognitive processing, explaining that symbolic cues may be processed automatically through System 1 thinking. However, it does not specify the nature or content of the culturally stored knowledge that guides these intuitive judgments.

In contrast, the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework integrates these complementary theoretical perspectives to explain how symbolic country of origin cues activate consumers'

culturally stored knowledge, comprising accumulated memories, beliefs, experiences, symbolic meanings, and cultural associations, which subsequently influence perceived product quality and purchase intention. Rather than replacing existing theories, the CCC Framework provides a higher-level conceptual explanation that links cue interpretation, culturally specific knowledge activation, intuitive processing, and consumer decision-making within a single theoretical framework. Table 2.1 summarises and compares the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework with the existing theories underpinning this study. It also highlights the framework's theoretical contribution by illustrating how it integrates and extends established theoretical perspectives.

Table 2.1 Comparison of the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework with Existing Theories

Theory	Main Focus	Limitation	Contribution of the CCC Framework
Cue Utilization Theory	Use of intrinsic and extrinsic cues	Does not explain the cognitive mechanism underlying symbolic cue interpretation.	Explains how symbolic cues activate culturally stored knowledge before influencing evaluations.
Schema Theory	Activation of existing knowledge structures	Focuses on schemas rather than culturally specific memory activation.	Explains activation of culturally meaningful knowledge associated with symbolic COO cues.
Associative Network Theory	Spreading activation in memory	Does not specifically address symbolic marketing cues or purchase intention.	Connects cultural memory activation with consumer evaluations and behavioural intentions.
Dual-Process Theory	Automatic and analytical processing	Explains processing style but not the content of activated knowledge.	Specifies that culturally stored knowledge is the content processed automatically during symbolic cue evaluation.

Source: Developed by the author

2.7 Summary of the Core Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Table 2.2 presents the theoretical foundations underpinning the present study. It distinguishes between the primary theories that provide the core theoretical basis for the conceptual framework and the supporting theories that offer complementary explanations for specific constructs and hypothesised relationships. Collectively, these theories establish the theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework and the hypotheses developed in the next section (2.8).

Table 2.2 Overview of the Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Construct	Theory / Framework	Key Reference(s)	Role in the Study	Hypotheses Supported
Symbolic Country of Origin (COO) Cue	Cue Utilization Theory	Zeithaml (1988); Szybillo & Jacoby (1974)	Primary Theory	H1, H2
	Schema Theory	Bartlett (1932); Rumelhart (1980)	Primary Theory	H1, H2
	Associative Network Theory	Collins & Loftus (1975)	Primary Theory	H1–H4
	Country of Origin (COO) Effect	Verlegh & Steenkamp (1999); Balabanis & Diamantopoulos (2008)	Supporting Theory	H1, H2
	Signalling Theory	Spence (1973); Kirmani & Rao (2000)	Supporting Theory	H2
	Halo Effect / Summary Construct Theory	Han (1989)	Supporting Theory	H1, H2
Perceived product Quality	Cue Utilization Theory	Zeithaml (1988); Szybillo & Jacoby (1974)	Primary Theory	H2
	Means–End Chain Theory	Gutman (1982)	Supporting Theory	H2, H3
	Expectation–Confirmation Theory	Oliver (1980); AlSokkar et al. (2024)	Supporting Theory	H2
	Dual-Process Theory	Kahneman (2011)	Supporting Theory	H2
Purchase Intention	Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Ajzen (1991)	Primary Theory	H3, H4

	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)	Fishbein & Ajzen (1975)	Supporting Theory	H3
	Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model	Mehrabian & Russell (1974)	Supporting Theory	H1–H4
	Consumer Decision-Making Model	Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard (1995)	Supporting Theory	H3
Consumer Ethnocentrism	Consumer Ethnocentrism Theory	Shimp & Sharma (1987); Shankarmahesh (2006)	Primary Theory	H5
	Social Identity Theory	Tajfel & Turner (1979)	Supporting Theory	H5
	In-group Bias Concept	Tajfel & Turner (1979)	Supporting Concept	H5
	Moral Norm Concept	Ajzen (1991)	Supporting Concept	H5
Sustainability Concern	Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) Theory	Stern (1999)	Primary Theory	H6
	Attitude–Behavior–Context (ABC) Theory	Guagnano et al. (1995); Stern (2000)	Supporting Theory	H6
	Norm Activation Theory	Schwartz (1977); Stern (1999)	Supporting Theory	H6
	New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)	Catton & Dunlap (1978); Dunlap et al. (2000)	Supporting Theory	H6
Overall Conceptual Framework	Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework	Proposed in this study	Integrative Framework	H1–H6

Source: Developed by the author

Note. Primary theories constitute the core theoretical foundations explaining each construct. Supporting theories & concepts provide complementary explanations for specific relationships within the conceptual framework. The Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) Framework integrates these theoretical perspectives into a unified explanation of how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer evaluations and purchase intentions.

2.8 Hypotheses Development

Based on the theoretical framework and literature reviewed in the previous sections, this study proposes a set of hypotheses to examine the relationships between symbolic country of origin (COO) cues, perceived product quality, purchase intention, and the moderating roles of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern.

According to country of origin effect theory and signalling theory, origin-related cues serve as heuristic signals that influence consumer evaluations and behavioural intentions. Symbolic COO cues, such as foreign language characters, can evoke associations related to authenticity, tradition, and product expertise. These associations may directly influence consumers' willingness to purchase a product, even in the absence of detailed product information. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Exposure to a symbolic COO cue (e.g., Chinese characters) positively influences purchase intention.

The Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework suggests that symbolic COO cues activate culturally stored knowledge structures, which influence consumers' perceptions of product quality. When consumers encounter familiar cultural symbols, such as Chinese characters, they are likely to associate them with authenticity and tradition, leading to more favourable quality evaluations. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Exposure to a symbolic COO cue positively influences perceived product quality compared to a neutral cue.

Perceived product quality plays a central role in translating cue-based perceptions into behavioural responses. According to cue utilization theory and other supporting theories, higher perceived product quality reduces uncertainty and increases consumer confidence, thereby enhancing purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: Perceived product quality positively influences purchase intention.

Perceived product quality is expected to function as a mediating mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence consumer behaviour. Symbolic cues activate culturally embedded associations, which shape perceptions of quality, and these perceptions subsequently drive purchase intention. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived product quality mediates the relationship between symbolic COO cues and purchase intention.

Consumer ethnocentrism reflects individuals' preference for domestic products and their resistance toward foreign goods. Based on social identity theory and in-group bias, highly ethnocentric consumers may evaluate foreign products less favourably, even when perceived product quality is high. As a result, ethnocentrism may weaken the positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Consumer ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention, such that the positive effect of perceived product quality on purchase intention is weaker for highly ethnocentric consumers.

Sustainability concern represents consumers' awareness of environmental issues and their tendency to incorporate environmental considerations into purchasing decisions. Consumers with high sustainability concern may be more critical of products associated with global production and transportation, which may influence how perceived product quality translates into purchase intention. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Sustainability concern moderates the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention, such that the positive effect of perceived product quality on purchase intention is weaker for consumers with high sustainability concern.

Chapter 3 : Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to investigate the effects of symbolic country of origin cues on consumer evaluations of foreign products, specifically Chinese tea packaging in the German market. It provides a comprehensive description of the research design, conceptual model, variable operationalization, hypotheses, population and sampling procedures, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. The quantitative approach adopted in this study ensures systematic testing of the proposed relationships while maintaining methodological rigor and replicability.

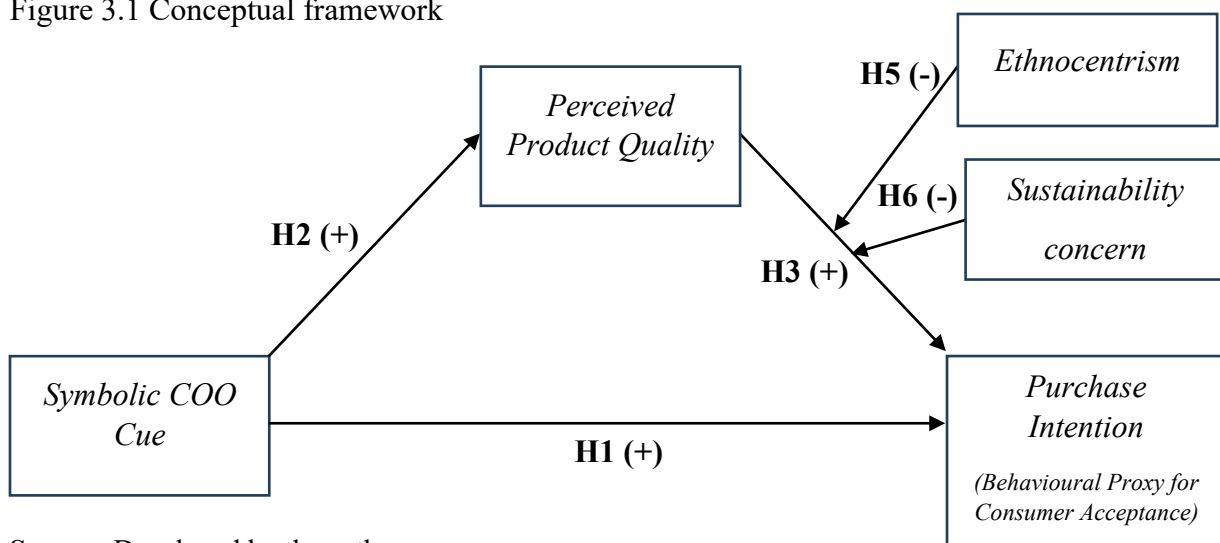
3.2 Research Approach

This study adopted a **quantitative research approach** because this study aims to test predefined hypotheses and measure the relationships between variables using numerical data. The study examines how symbolic country of origin cues, specifically Chinese characters on tea packaging, influence consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions. A quantitative design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to assess the magnitude and direction of relationships among the variables in a structured and objective manner. To analyse these relationships, the study will use statistical techniques such as correlation and regression analysis.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the relationship between symbolic country of origin cues and consumer responses. The framework was represented as follows:

Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework



Source: Developed by the author.

3.4 Definitions of Variables

This section provides precise operational definitions and measurement approaches for each construct in the research model. Each variable is operationalized using established scales from the literature, adapted to the specific context of Chinese tea packaging evaluation.

3.4.1 Manipulation of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue

The symbolic country of origin (COO) cue was operationalized through the presence versus absence of Chinese characters on otherwise identical tea packaging. This represents the key experimental manipulation and serves as the independent variable of the study.

The packaging stimuli consisted of a fictional Chinese green tea brand. To control for explicit origin information, the label “Made in China” is displayed in both conditions. The experimental condition included authentic Chinese characters commonly associated with traditional tea packaging, while the control condition contained only Latin alphabet text.

Figure 3.2 Experimental and Control Tea Packaging Stimuli Used in the Study

(a) Experimental condition (Chinese characters) (b) Control condition (Latin alphabet only)



Source: Designed by the author using photoshop (2026).

This manipulation enabled the researcher to isolate the effect of symbolic linguistic cues and examine whether such cues influence consumer evaluations independently of explicit COO information.

3.4.2 Measurement of Perceived Product Quality

Perceived product quality was operationalized as the consumer's overall assessment of the tea's excellence, authenticity, and expected performance based on packaging exposure. In this study, perceived product quality was treated as a mediating variable, as it was expected to explain the mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence consumer behaviour. The construct

was measured using multiple Likert-scale items adapted from established literature (e.g., Zeithaml, 1988), capturing consumers' judgments of quality and superiority.

3.4.3 Assessment of Purchase Intention

Purchase intention was operationalized as the consumer's likelihood or willingness to purchase the tea product after evaluating the packaging. It served as the dependent variable in this study and represented a widely accepted proxy for consumer acceptance and behavioural intention in marketing research. The construct was measured using multiple Likert-scale items adapted from prior studies (e.g., Spears & Singh, 2004), reflecting the consumer's intention to buy, try, or recommend the product.

3.4.4 Operationalization of Consumer Ethnocentrism

Consumer ethnocentrism was operationalized as the degree to which consumers prefer domestic products over foreign alternatives and believe that purchasing imported goods may be inappropriate or harmful to the domestic economy.

In this study, ethnocentrism was treated as a moderating variable, as it was expected to influence the strength of the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The construct was measured using selected items from the CETSCALE (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), adapted to the context of foreign product evaluation.

3.4.5 Operationalization of Sustainability Concern

Sustainability concern was operationalized as the extent to which consumers are aware of environmental issues and incorporate ecological considerations into their purchasing decisions.

This variable was also treated as a moderator variable, as it might influence whether consumers translate perceived product quality into purchase intention. The construct was measured using Likert-scale items adapted from prior research (e.g., Gleim et al., 2013), capturing environmental awareness and preference for sustainable consumption.

3.5 Population and Sampling

This section describes the population and sampling procedures adopted in this study. It outlines the characteristics of the general and target populations, as well as the sampling technique and sample size used for data collection. Defining the population and sampling strategy is essential to ensure that the selected respondents are appropriate for addressing the research objectives and that the findings can be interpreted with validity and reliability.

3.5.1 General Population

The general population of this study consisted of European consumers who are potential buyers of imported tea products. These consumers are relevant because they are regularly exposed to foreign products and packaging cues in the marketplace.

3.5.2 Target Population

The target population included tea consumers in Germany, as the study aims to examine how symbolic COO cues influence consumers who are not familiar with Chinese language characters. Chinese respondents who are living in Germany were excluded to avoid bias due to linguistic familiarity.

3.6 Sample Size

A sample of respondents was selected for the survey to represent the target population. The study aimed to collect data from approximately 157 respondents. After data cleaning, exclusion of invalid responses and removing 6 Chinese respondents to avoid language bias, the final sample was 151 respondents.

3.7 Selection of Sample

The study used a non-probability convenience sampling technique. Respondents were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. This method was suitable for exploratory and survey-based research where the target respondents are available within a limited time and resource frame.

3.8 Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data was collected for this study. Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire (see Appendix I) administered to respondents after showing them the tea packaging stimulus. Participants were recruited through social media platforms (e. g., Whatsapp, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram).

The questionnaire measured perceived product quality, purchase intention, consumer ethnocentrism, sustainability concern, and basic demographic information. Secondary data were collected from academic journals, books, and credible online sources to support the theoretical background and research framework.

3.9 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with approximately 7 respondents to test the clarity and understanding of the questionnaire. Based on their feedback, necessary modifications were made to improve the quality of the survey instrument.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the research process. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. No personal data were disclosed to third parties, and the information collected were used strictly for academic purposes only. The questionnaire included an information sheet and consent statement to ensure that participants were fully informed before taking part.

3.11 Instrument

The main research instrument was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was consisting of three main parts: demographic questions, Likert-scale statements measuring the main constructs, and screening questions. A 7-point Likert scale have been used for the attitudinal items, ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The instrument is appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect standardized data that can be analysed statistically (see Appendix I).

3.12 Data Analysis Techniques

To test the proposed hypotheses, several statistical techniques were employed using R software.

Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis were conducted to summarize the characteristics of the sample and find the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Then, Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the study variables.

To test Hypotheses 1-3, simple linear regression analyses were conducted. The direct effect of symbolic country of origin (COO) cues on purchase intention (H1), the effect of symbolic COO cues on perceived product quality (H2), and the effect of perceived product quality on purchase intention (H3) were examined using separate regression models.

Hypothesis 4 was tested using mediation analysis with a nonparametric bootstrap procedure (5,000 bootstrap samples). Separate regression models were estimated to examine the moderating effects of consumer ethnocentrism (H5) and sustainability concern (H6) on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

Chapter 4 : Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study based on data collected from 151 respondents. The analysis begins with a profile of the respondents, followed by reliability analysis to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis are then presented to summarize the characteristics of the study variables and examine the relationships among them. Subsequently, the proposed hypotheses are tested using simple linear regression, mediation analysis, and moderation analysis. The results of each statistical analysis are presented and interpreted systematically to determine whether the proposed hypotheses are supported.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics

Table 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 151)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	80	52.98
	Female	69	45.70
	Prefer not to say	2	1.32
<i>Age</i>	18–24	25	16.56
	25–34	42	27.81
	35–44	21	13.91
	45–54	30	19.87
	55+	33	21.85
<i>Nationality</i>	German	44	29.14
	Indian	18	11.92
	Italian	17	11.26
	French	16	10.60
	Spanish	14	9.27
	Turkish	14	9.27

	Sri Lankan	12	7.95
	Polish	9	5.96
	Dutch	6	3.97
	Bulgarian	1	0.66
Current Status	Student	50	33.11
	Employed (full-time)	42	27.81
	Employed (part-time)	26	17.22
	Self-employed	13	8.61
	Unemployed	15	9.93
	Other	5	3.31

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

A total of 151 valid responses were included in the analysis. As shown in Table 4.1, the sample consisted of 80 male respondents (52.98%), 69 female respondents (45.70%), and 2 respondents (1.32%) who preferred not to disclose their gender. Regarding the age distribution, the largest age group was respondents aged 25-34 years (27.81%, n = 42), followed by those aged 55 years and above (21.85%, n = 33), 45-54 years (19.87%, n = 30), 18-24 years (16.56%, n = 25), and 35-44 years (13.91%, n = 21). These results indicate that the sample included respondents from a broad range of age groups, providing representation across both younger and older adult consumers.

The sample was culturally diverse, with respondents representing ten nationalities. German participants constituted the largest group (29.14%), followed by Indian (11.92%), Italian (11.26%), French (10.60%), Spanish (9.27%), and Turkish (9.27%) respondents. Smaller proportions included Sri Lankan, Polish, Dutch, and Bulgarian participants.

When it come to the employment status, students represented the largest group (33.11%), followed by full-time employees (27.81%) and part-time employees (17.22%). Smaller proportions of respondents were self-employed (8.61%), unemployed (9.93%), or selected other employment categories (3.31%).

Table 4.2 Tea Consumption Characteristics (N = 151)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Tea Consumption Frequency</i>	Daily	50	33.11
	Several times a week	37	24.50
	Once a week	33	21.85
	Occasionally	31	20.53
<i>Tea Type</i>	Black tea	51	33.77
	Green tea	34	22.52
	Herbal tea	22	14.57
	Other	17	11.26
	Fruit tea	15	9.93
	Oolong tea	12	7.95
<i>Familiarity with Chinese Tea</i>	Moderately familiar	67	44.37
	Slightly familiar	44	29.14
	Very familiar	17	11.26
	Not familiar at all	17	11.26
	Extremely familiar	6	3.97

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

The sample also demonstrated diverse tea consumption habits. Approximately one-third of respondents reported drinking tea daily (33.11%), Also 24.50% consumed tea several times per week. Black tea was the most commonly consumed tea type (33.77%), then green tea (22.52%) and herbal tea (14.57%). Participants generally demonstrated moderate familiarity with Chinese tea. Among the sample, most respondents reported being moderately familiar (44.37%) or slightly familiar (29.14%) with Chinese tea. Only 3.97% indicated being extremely familiar, suggesting that while respondents generally possessed some knowledge of Chinese tea, expert-level familiarity was relatively uncommon.

Overall, the demographic profile suggests a diverse sample with varying levels of tea consumption and familiarity with Chinese tea, providing an appropriate basis for examining the effects of symbolic country of origin cues on perceived product quality and purchase intention.

4.3 Experimental Group Distribution

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two groups and were almost equally distributed between the two experimental conditions. A total of 76 participants (50.33%) were exposed to the tea package containing Chinese characters, while 75 participants (49.67%) viewed the package without Chinese characters. This balanced allocation indicates successful random assignment and helps ensure that any observed differences between groups are attributable to the experimental manipulation rather than unequal group sizes.

Table 4.3 Experimental Condition Distribution

<i>Experimental Condition</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>With Chinese Characters</i>	76	50.33
<i>Without Chinese Characters</i>	75	49.67
<i>Total</i>	151	100.00

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

4.4 Manipulation Check

To verify that the experimental manipulation was successful, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare respondents' perceptions of the symbolic country-of-origin (COO) cue between the two experimental conditions.

As shown in Table 4.4, respondents who were exposed to the tea package containing Chinese characters reported significantly higher manipulation check scores ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.07$) than those who viewed the package without Chinese characters ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.29$). The difference between the two groups was statistically significant, $t(143.29) = -15.53$, $p < .001$. These findings confirm that participants clearly distinguished between the two packaging conditions, indicating that the symbolic COO cue was successfully manipulated and perceived as intended.

Table 4.4 Manipulation Check Results

<i>Experimental Condition</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Without Chinese Characters</i>	75	2.60	1.29
<i>With Chinese Characters</i>	76	5.61	1.07

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: Independent-samples *t*-test: $t(143.29) = -15.53, p < .001$

4.5 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales employed in this study. Values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability and values above 0.90 indicate excellent reliability. The results are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.5 Reliability Analysis

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Number of Items</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha (α)</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>Perceived Product Quality (PQ)</i>	5	0.96	Excellent
<i>Purchase Intention (PI)</i>	5	0.95	Excellent
<i>Consumer Ethnocentrism (CE)</i>	5	0.92	Excellent
<i>Sustainability Concern (SC)</i>	5	0.89	Good

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha. Values of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ indicate acceptable internal consistency.

The Perceived Product Quality scale showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96. Similarly, the Purchase Intention scale exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.95$). The Consumer Ethnocentrism scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, while the Sustainability Concern scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. All values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability of the measurement instruments. Furthermore, the item-level analysis revealed that the removal of any individual item would not substantially improve the reliability coefficients. Therefore, all items were retained for subsequent analyses. Overall, the findings confirm that the scales used in this study possess excellent internal consistency and are suitable for hypothesis testing.

4.6 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the four main constructs included in the study. Table 4.5 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables.

Table 4.6 Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean (M)</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (SD)</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
<i>Perceived Product Quality (PQ)</i>	3.95	1.96	1.00	6.80
<i>Purchase Intention (PI)</i>	3.95	1.76	1.20	6.60
<i>Consumer Ethnocentrism (CE)</i>	5.40	1.44	1.40	6.80
<i>Sustainability Concern (SC)</i>	3.72	1.59	1.40	7.00

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Perceived Product Quality had a mean score of 3.95 (SD = 1.96), indicating a moderate evaluation of the tea product among respondents. Similarly, Purchase Intention recorded a mean score of 3.95 (SD = 1.76), suggesting a moderate willingness to purchase the tea product.

Consumer Ethnocentrism exhibited the highest mean score among the study variables (M = 5.40, SD = 1.44), indicating that respondents generally expressed favourable attitudes toward purchasing products from their own country. However, sustainability Concern had a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 1.59), reflecting a moderate level of environmental concern among respondents.

Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest substantial variation in respondents' perceptions and behavioural intentions, providing an appropriate basis for subsequent correlation and regression analyses.

4.7 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables. The results are presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.7 Correlation Matrix

<i>Variable</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>1. Perceived Product Quality (PQ)</i>	1.00			
<i>2. Purchase Intention (PI)</i>	0.697*	1.00		
<i>3. Consumer Ethnocentrism (CE)</i>	-0.151	0.343*	1.00	
<i>4. Sustainability Concern (SC)</i>	0.090	-0.158	-0.395*	1.00

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance; $p < .01$ indicates statistical significance at the 1% level.

Perceived Product Quality was strongly and positively correlated with Purchase Intention ($r = .697$, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who perceived the tea product as being of higher quality were more likely to express stronger purchase intentions. This finding provides preliminary support for the proposed positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

Consumer Ethnocentrism showed a moderate positive correlation with Purchase Intention ($r = .343$, $p < .001$), while its relationship with Perceived Product Quality was negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.151$, $p = .065$). Similarly, Sustainability Concern was not significantly associated with either Perceived Product Quality ($r = .090$, $p = .270$) or Purchase Intention ($r = -.158$, $p = .052$).

A significant negative correlation was observed between Consumer Ethnocentrism and Sustainability Concern ($r = -.395$, $p < .001$), suggesting that respondents with stronger ethnocentric tendencies tended to report lower levels of sustainability concern.

4.8 Hypothesis Testing

4.8.1 Regression Analysis of Symbolic COO Cue on Purchase Intention

In this study, hypothesis 1 proposed that exposure to a symbolic country of origin (COO) cue would positively influence purchase intention (PI). To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted with purchase intention as the dependent variable and the symbolic COO cue condition as the independent variable. The regression model is specified as follows:

$$PI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(COO \text{ Condition}_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where PI represents purchase intention, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 represents the regression coefficient for the symbolic COO cue condition, COO Condition denotes the experimental condition (0 = without symbolic COO cue; 1 = with symbolic COO cue), and ε represents the random error term.

The regression results presented in Table 4.7 revealed that the symbolic country of origin (COO) cue had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($B = 2.385$, $SE = 0.210$, $\beta = 0.681$, $t(149) = 11.35$, $p < .001$). The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 149) = 128.80$, $p < .001$, explaining 46.4% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .464$, Adjusted $R^2 = .460$).

Table 4.8 Regression results and Model Statistics for H1

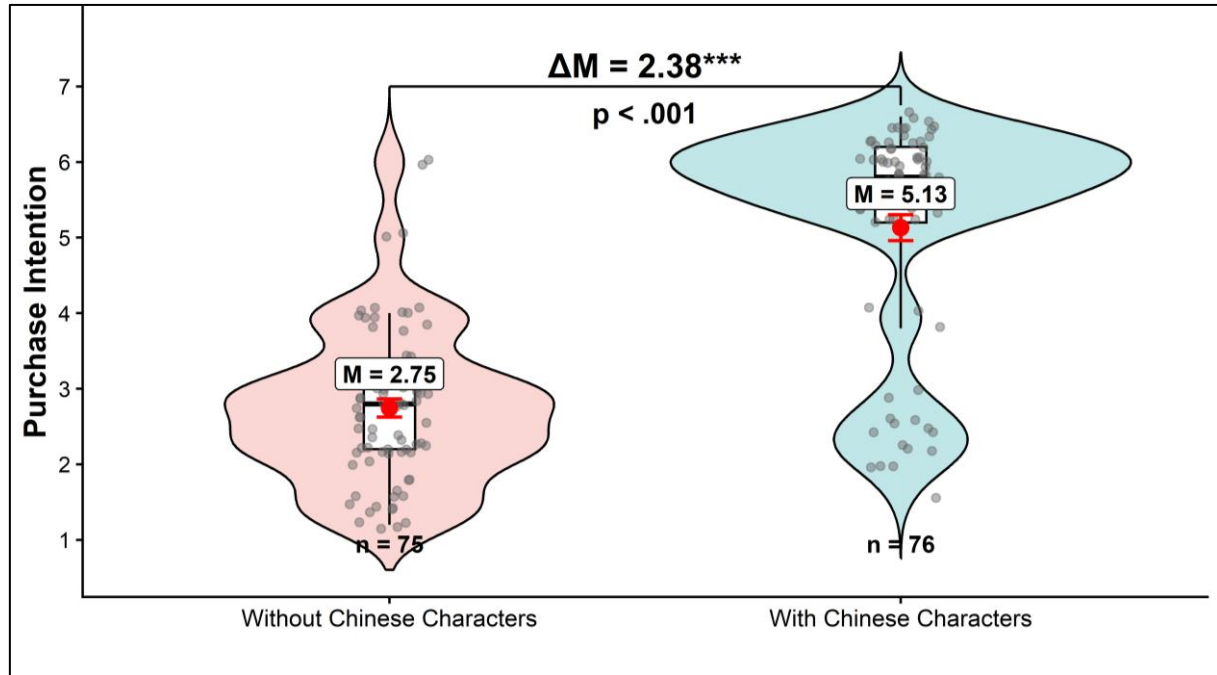
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Constant</i>	2.747	0.149	—	18.42	< .001
<i>COO Condition</i>	2.385	0.210	0.681	11.35	< .001
<i>Model Statistics</i>	$R^2 = .464$ $Adjusted R^2 = .460$ $F(1,149) = 128.80$ $p < .001$				

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance. β = standardized regression coefficient.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the distribution of purchase intention scores across the two experimental conditions. Respondents exposed to the tea package containing Chinese characters reported a substantially higher mean purchase intention ($M = 5.13$, $n = 76$) than those exposed to the package without Chinese characters ($M = 2.75$, $n = 75$), representing a mean difference of 2.38 points ($\Delta M = 2.38$, $p < .001$). The violin plots illustrate the distribution of purchase intention scores for each experimental condition, while the boxplots display the median and interquartile range. The red points represent the group means, and the error bars indicate ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Figure 4.1 Purchase intention by experimental condition



Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

4.8.2 Regression Analysis of Symbolic COO Cue on Perceived Product Quality

Hypothesis 2 proposed that exposure to a symbolic country of origin (COO) cue would positively influence perceived product quality (PQ). To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted with perceived product quality as the dependent variable and the symbolic COO cue condition as the independent variable. The regression model is specified as follows:

$$PQ_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{COO Condition}_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where PQ represents perceived product quality, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 represents the regression coefficient for the symbolic COO cue condition, COO Condition denotes the experimental condition (0 = without symbolic COO cue; 1 = with symbolic COO cue), and ε represents the random error term.

The regression results presented in Table 4.8 revealed that the symbolic country of origin cue had a significant positive effect on perceived product quality ($B = 3.683$, $SE = 0.108$, $\beta = 0.942$, $t(149) = 34.14$, $p < .001$). The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 149) = 1166.00$, $p < .001$, explaining 88.7% of the variance in perceived product quality ($R^2 = .887$, Adjusted $R^2 = .886$).

Table 4.9 Regression results and Model Statistics for H2

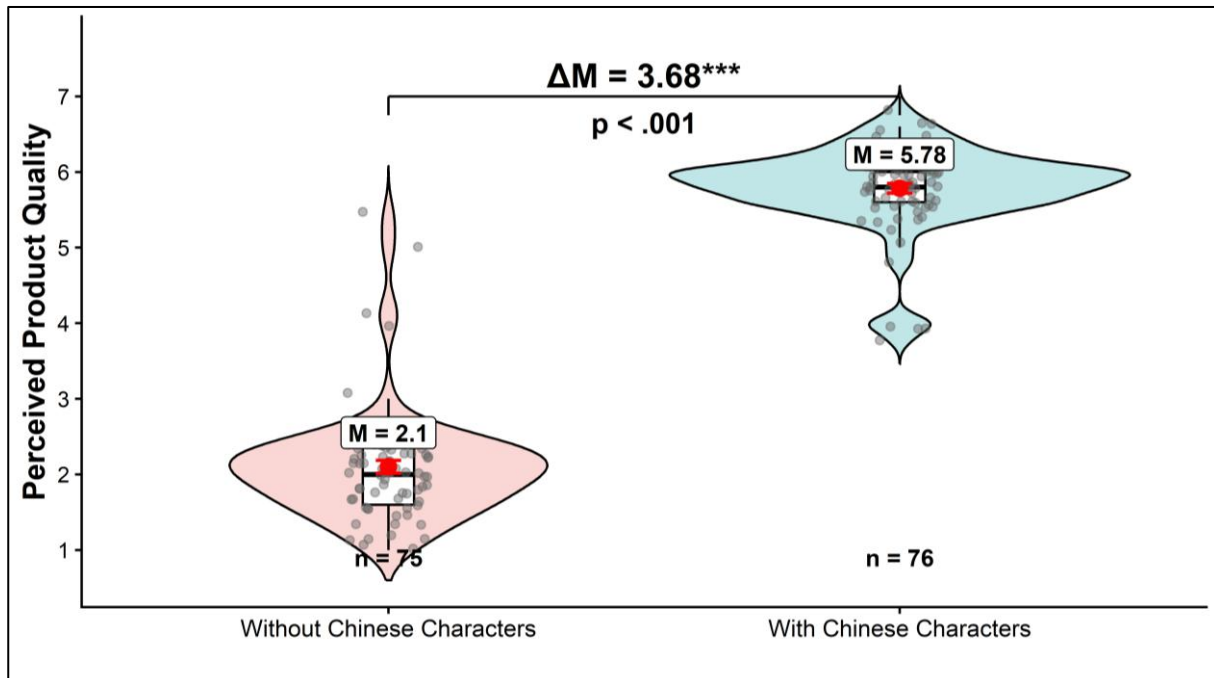
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Constant</i>	2.101	0.077	–	27.46	< .001
<i>COO Condition</i>	3.683	0.108	0.942	34.14	< .001
Model Statistics	$R^2 = .887$ $Adjusted R^2 = .886$ $F(1,149) = 1166.00$ $p < .001$				

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance. β = standardized regression coefficient.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the distribution of perceived product quality scores across the two experimental conditions. Respondents exposed to the tea package containing Chinese characters reported substantially higher perceived product quality ($M = 5.78$, $n = 76$) than those exposed to the package without Chinese characters ($M = 2.10$, $n = 75$), representing a mean difference of 3.68 points ($\Delta M = 3.68$, $p < .001$). The violin plots illustrate the distribution of perceived product quality scores for each experimental condition, while the boxplots display the median and interquartile range. The red points represent the group means, and the error bars indicate ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Figure 4.2 Perceived product quality by experimental condition



Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

4.8.3 Regression Analysis of Perceived Product Quality and Purchase Intention

Hypothesis 3 proposed that perceived product quality would positively influence purchase intention. To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted with

purchase intention as the dependent variable and perceived product quality as the independent variable. The regression model is specified as follows:

$$PI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(PQ_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where PI represents purchase intention, PQ represents perceived product quality, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 represents the regression coefficient for perceived product quality, and ε represents the random error term.

The regression results presented in Table 4.9 revealed that perceived product quality had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($B = 0.625$, $SE = 0.053$, $\beta = 0.697$, $t(149) = 11.88$, $p < .001$). The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 149) = 141.00$, $p < .001$, explaining 48.6% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .486$, Adjusted $R^2 = .483$).

Table 4.10 Regression results and Model Statistics for H3

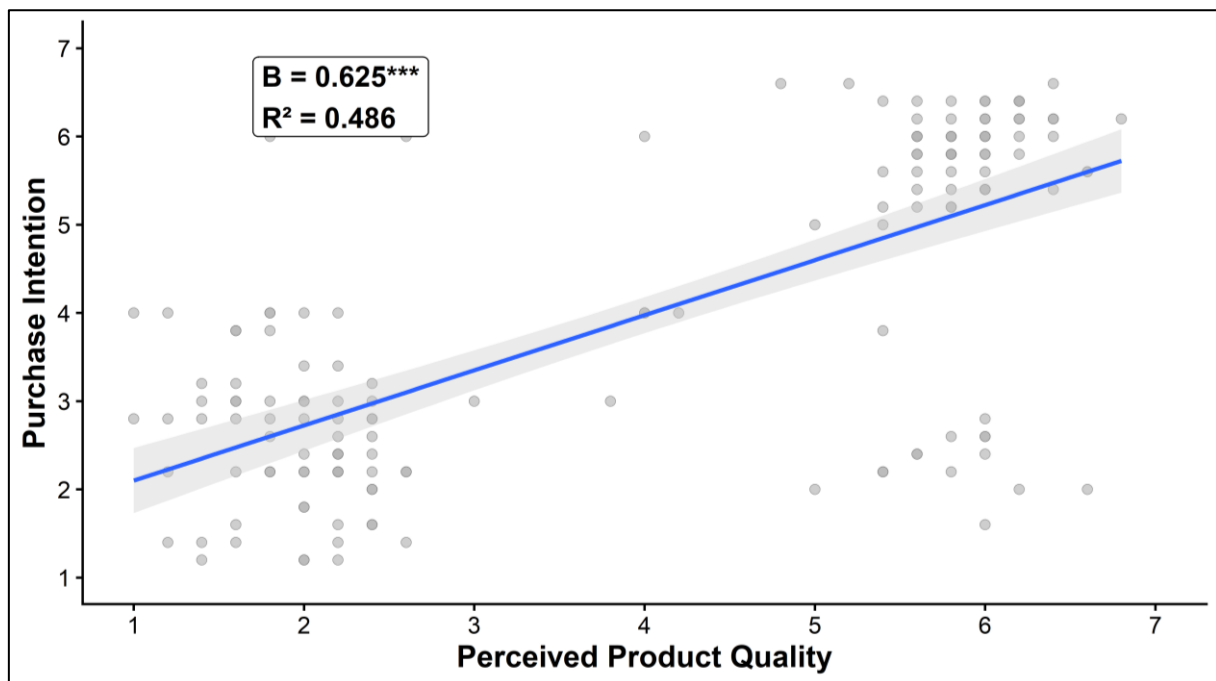
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Constant</i>	1.477	0.232	–	6.37	< .001
<i>Perceived product Quality</i>	0.625	0.053	0.697	11.88	< .001
<i>Model Statistics</i>	$R^2 = .486$ $Adjusted R^2 = .483$ $F(1, 149) = 141.00$ $p < .001$				

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance. β = standardized regression coefficient.

Figure 4.3 visually illustrates the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The scatter plot shows a clear positive linear association between the two variables which indicates that respondents who perceived the tea as being of higher quality generally reported stronger purchase intentions. The fitted regression line further demonstrates this positive trend, while the confidence interval suggests a consistent relationship across the observed range of perceived product quality scores.

Figure 4.3 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

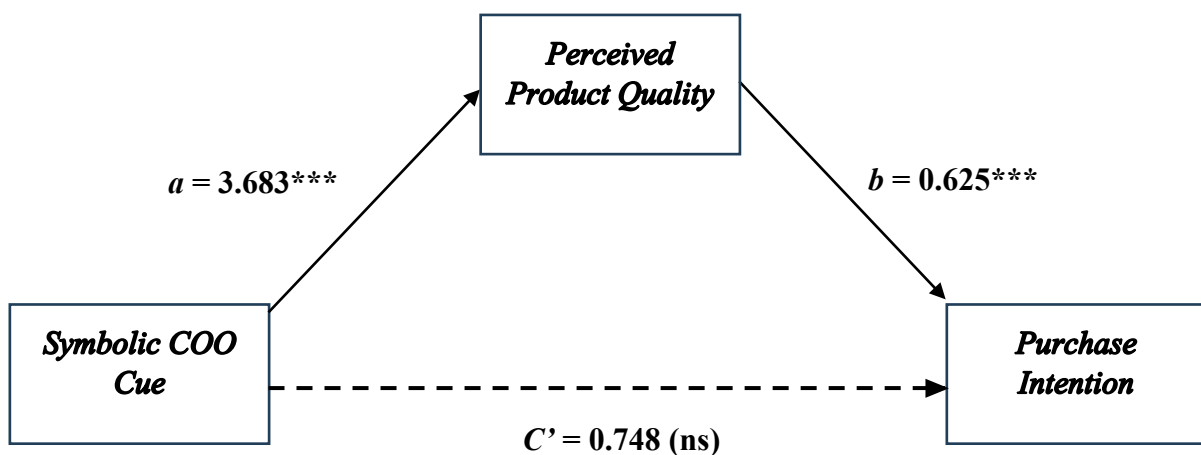


Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

4.8.4 Mediation Analysis of Perceived Product Quality

Hypothesis 4 proposed that perceived product quality mediates the relationship between symbolic country of origin cues and purchase intention. To test this hypothesis, a mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples. The mediation model examined whether perceived product quality transmitted the effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention.

Figure 4.4 Mediation path diagram



Source: Developed by the author.

Figure 4.4 presents the mediation path diagram. The symbolic country of origin (COO) cue had a significant positive effect on perceived product quality ($a = 3.683$, $p < .001$), and perceived

product quality, in turn, had a significant positive effect on purchase intention ($b = 0.625$, $p < .001$). After controlling for perceived product quality, the direct effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention was no longer statistically significant ($c' = 0.748$, $p = .112$), indicating that the influence of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention operated primarily through perceived product quality.

Table 4.11 Mediation results (ACME, ADE, Total Effect, Proportion Mediated)

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>COO → Perceived Product Quality (a)</i>	3.683	—	< .001***
<i>Perceived Product Quality → Purchase Intention (b)</i>	0.625	—	< .001***
<i>Average Direct Effect (c')</i>	0.748	[-0.154, 2.078]	.112
<i>Average Causal Mediation Effect</i>	1.636	[0.410, 2.464]	.016*
<i>Total Effect</i>	2.385	[1.974, 2.780]	< .001***
<i>Proportion Mediated</i>	0.686	[0.167, 1.069]	.016*

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: *** $p < .001$; *ns* = not significant. 95% confidence intervals are bias-corrected bootstrap intervals (5,000 resample)

Table 4.10 presents the mediation analysis results. The indirect effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention through perceived product quality was statistically significant (Average Causal Mediation Effect, ACME = 1.636, 95% CI [0.410, 2.464], $p = .016$). In contrast, the direct effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention was not statistically significant after controlling for perceived product quality (Average Direct Effect, ADE = 0.748, 95% CI [-0.154, 2.078], $p = .112$).

The total effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention remained statistically significant (Total Effect = 2.385, 95% CI [1.974, 2.780], $p < .001$). Furthermore, the mediation analysis indicated that approximately 68.6% of the total effect of the symbolic COO cue on purchase intention was transmitted through perceived product quality (Proportion Mediated = 0.686, 95% CI [0.167, 1.069], $p = .016$).

4.8.5 Moderation Analysis of Consumer Ethnocentrism

In this study, hypothesis 5 proposed that consumer ethnocentrism would weaken the positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. To test this hypothesis, a moderation analysis was conducted using mean-centered variables and an interaction term between perceived product quality and consumer ethnocentrism. The statistical model was specified as follows:

$$PI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(PQ_i) + \beta_2(CE_i) + \beta_3(PQ_i \times CE_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where PI represents purchase intention, PQ represents perceived product quality, CE represents consumer ethnocentrism, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 represents the effect of perceived product quality, β_2 represents the effect of consumer ethnocentrism, β_3 represents the interaction effect between perceived product quality and consumer ethnocentrism, and ε represents the random error term.

The results presented in Table 4.11 indicate that the interaction effect between perceived product quality and consumer ethnocentrism was statistically significant ($B = 0.183$, $SE = 0.026$, $\beta = 0.287$, $t = 6.98$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that consumer ethnocentrism moderated the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 147) = 162.40$, $p < .001$, explaining 76.8% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .768$, Adjusted $R^2 = .764$).

Table 4.12 Moderation analysis results for H5

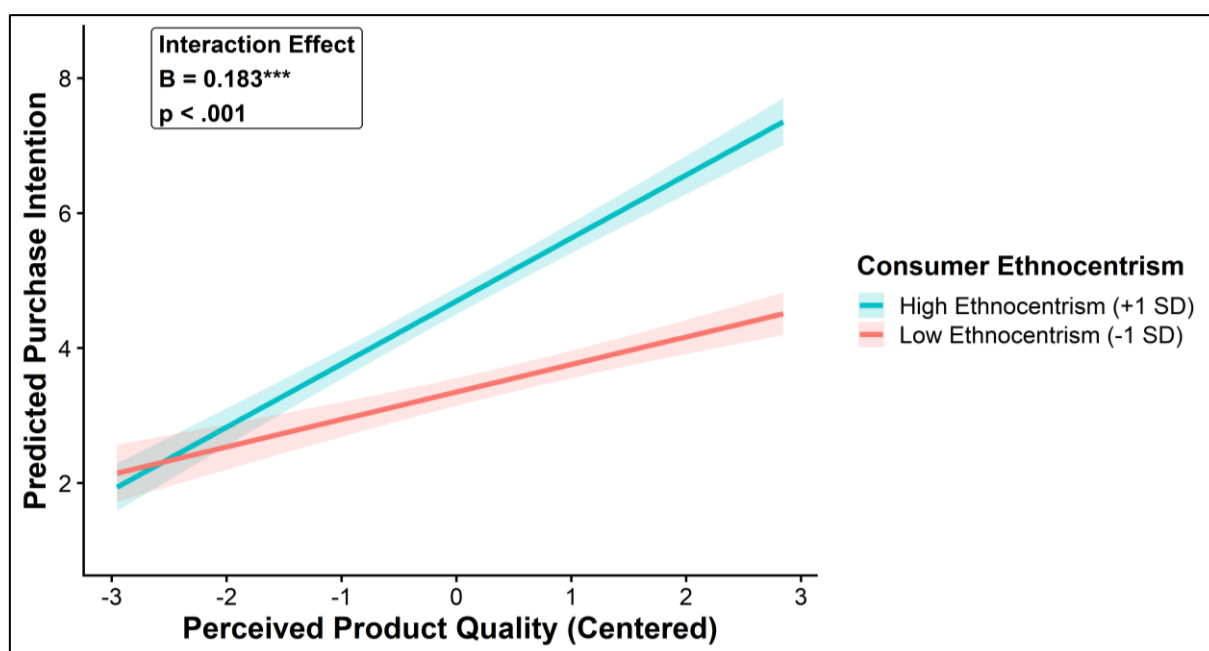
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Product Quality (PQ_c)</i>	0.671	0.036	0.749	18.60	< .001
<i>Consumer Ethnocentrism (CE_c)</i>	0.468	0.051	0.383	9.22	< .001
<i>PQ_c × CE_c</i>	0.183	0.026	0.287	6.98	< .001
<i>Model Statistics</i>	$R^2 = .768$ $Adjusted R^2 = .764$ $F(3,147) = 162.40$ $p < .001$				

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: β = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. The interaction term (Perceived Product Quality × Consumer Ethnocentrism) tests the moderating effect of consumer ethnocentrism on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$.

Figure 4.5 illustrates the interaction effect between perceived product quality and consumer ethnocentrism. Contrary to the hypothesized relationship, the positive association between perceived product quality and purchase intention became stronger rather than weaker at higher levels of consumer ethnocentrism. Specifically, the slope representing highly ethnocentric consumers was steeper than the slope representing consumers with lower levels of ethnocentrism, indicating that the influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention increased as consumer ethnocentrism increased.

Figure 4.5 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention at different levels of consumer ethnocentrism.



Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

4.8.6 Moderation Analysis of Sustainability Concern

Hypothesis 6 proposed that sustainability concern would moderate the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention, such that the positive effect of perceived product quality on purchase intention would be weaker for consumers with high sustainability concern. To test this hypothesis, a moderation analysis was conducted using mean-centered variables and an interaction term between perceived product quality and sustainability concern. The statistical model was specified as follows:

$$PI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(PQ_i) + \beta_2(SC_i) + \beta_3(PQ_i \times SC_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where PI represents purchase intention, PQ represents perceived product quality, SC represents sustainability concern, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 represents the effect of perceived product quality,

β_2 represents the effect of sustainability concern, β_3 represents the interaction effect between perceived product quality and sustainability concern, and ε represents the random error term.

The results presented in Table 4.12 indicate that the interaction effect between perceived product quality and sustainability concern was statistically significant ($B = -0.141$, $SE = 0.030$, $\beta = -0.244$, $t = -4.66$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that sustainability concern significantly moderated the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 147) = 72.09$, $p < .001$, explaining 59.5% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .595$, Adjusted $R^2 = .587$).

Table 4.13 Moderation analysis results for H6

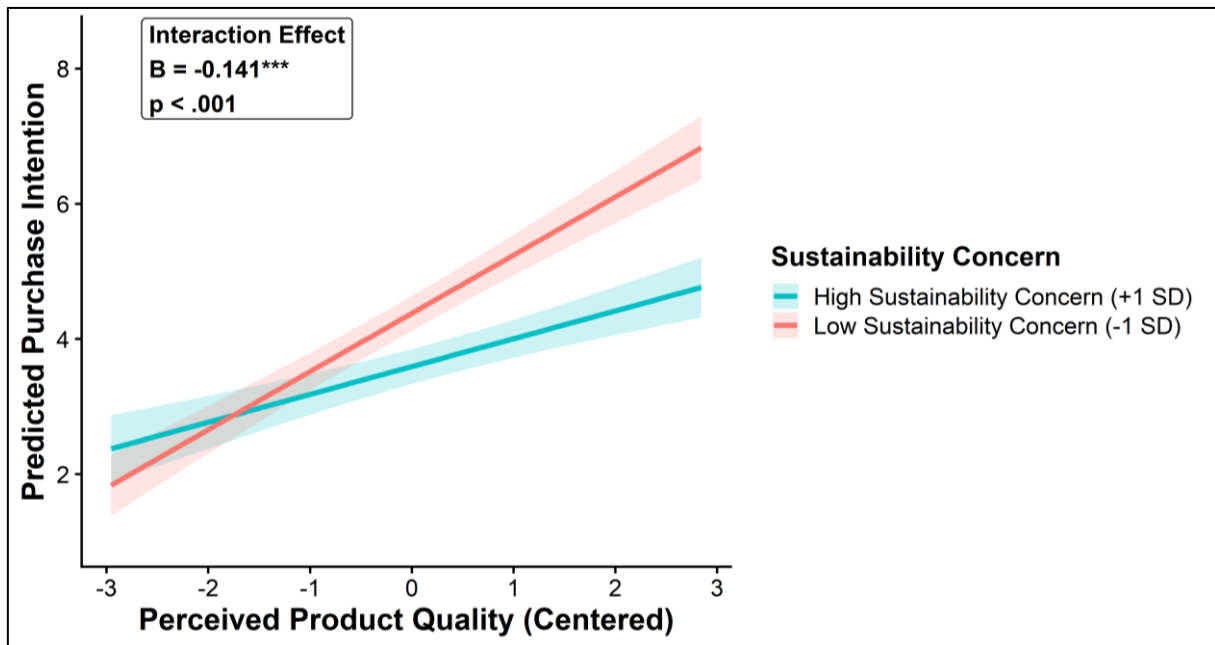
<i>Predictor</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perceived Product Quality (PQ_c)</i>	0.636	0.047	0.710	13.48	< .001
<i>Sustainability Concern (SC_c)</i>	-0.247	0.054	-0.224	-4.25	< .001
<i>PQ_c $\times$ SC_c</i>	-0.141	0.030	-0.244	-4.66	< .001
<i>Model Statistics</i>	<i>R</i> ² = .595 <i>Adjusted R</i> ² = .587 <i>F</i> (3,147) = 72.09 <i>p</i> < .001				

Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Note: β = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. The interaction term (Perceived Product Quality $\times$ Sustainability Concern) tests the moderating effect of sustainability concern on the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. $p < .05$, $\mathbf{p} < .01$, $\mathbf{p} < .001$.

Figure 4.6 illustrates the interaction effect between perceived product quality and sustainability concern. As hypothesized, the positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention became weaker at higher levels of sustainability concern. Specifically, the slope representing consumers with high sustainability concern was flatter than the slope representing consumers with low sustainability concern, indicating that the influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention decreased as sustainability concern increased.

Figure 4.6 Relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention at different levels of sustainability concern



Source: Author's own calculations based on the survey data (2026).

Chapter 5 : Discussion and Contribution

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 by interpreting the results in relation to the research objectives, hypotheses, and existing literature. The discussion focuses on explaining the relationships among symbolic country of origin (COO) cues, perceived product quality, purchase intention, consumer ethnocentrism, and sustainability consciousness. Each hypothesis is examined individually, and the findings are compared with previous empirical studies and relevant theoretical perspectives. The chapter concludes by summarizing the key findings and highlighting their theoretical and practical implications.

5.2 Effect of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue on Purchase Intention

The results of the regression analysis support Hypothesis 1, Respondents exposed to the packaging containing Chinese characters reported substantially higher purchase intention ($M = 5.13$, $n = 76$) than those who viewed the packaging without Chinese characters ($M = 2.75$, $n = 75$). This indicates that the presence of a symbolic language country of origin cue in the form of Chinese characters on tea packaging significantly increased consumers' purchase intention. Hence conclusionly, H1 was supported based on these findings.

Purchase intention is widely regarded as the most immediate predictor of actual purchasing behaviour and reflects consumers' willingness or readiness to purchase and adopt a product (Ajzen, 1991; Paul et al., 2016). As purchase intention was used as a proxy measure of consumer acceptance in this study, these findings suggest that symbolic COO cues positively influence consumer acceptance.

Also, this finding is consistent with previous research showing that foreign language and script can function as symbolic COO cues that influence consumer evaluations beyond their informational value. Some authors in their studies like Hornikx and van Meurs (2017), Wagner and Charinsarn (2026) found that foreign script on product packaging enhances brand evaluations when it is congruent with consumers' expectations regarding the product's origin. Because tea is strongly associated with Chinese culture and tradition, the Chinese characters used in this study likely reinforced perceptions of authenticity, thereby increasing consumers' intention to purchase the product.

On the other hand, the results can also be explained through several theoretical perspectives. From the perspective of Cue Utilization Theory, the Chinese characters acted as an extrinsic cue that consumers used to evaluate the product when intrinsic quality attributes were not

directly observable. Signalling Theory further suggests that the symbolic COO cue served as a signal of authenticity and cultural heritage, reducing uncertainty about the product. Moreover, Country of Origin Effect and Schema Theory indicate that the Chinese characters activated consumers' existing associations with China as the historical origin of tea, leading to more favourable product evaluations. Associative Network Theory also supports this interpretation, as the symbolic cue likely activated memory networks related to Chinese tea culture, tradition, and authenticity, which positively influenced purchase intention.

The findings of H1 also provide preliminary empirical support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework in this study. Even though, the regression analysis demonstrates that the presence of Chinese characters on tea packaging significantly increases consumers' purchase intention, the statistical results alone do not explain the underlying cognitive mechanism through which this effect occurs. The CCC framework offers a theoretical explanation by proposing that symbolic cultural cues activate consumers stored cultural knowledge, referred to as the cultural cache.

In this study, the Chinese characters on the tea packaging likely activated consumers' readily accessible cultural knowledge associated with Chinese tea, authenticity, tradition, and cultural heritage. Rather than engaging in deliberate and analytical evaluation, consumers appeared to rely on these intuitive cultural associations when forming their purchase intentions. Therefore, the findings are consistent with the idea of the CCC framework that symbolic COO cues influence consumer behaviour by activating culturally stored knowledge that guides intuitive judgments.

However, although the CCC framework provides a theoretical explanation for why symbolic COO cues like a language character can increase purchase intention, the direct relationship observed in H1 does not fully explain the process through which this effect occurs. Specifically, it remains unclear whether the activated cultural cache directly influences purchase intention or whether it first shapes consumers' evaluations of the product. To address this question, the following hypothesis examines whether symbolic COO cues enhance perceived product quality, which may represent the first cognitive outcome of cultural cache activation.

5.3 Effect of Symbolic Country of Origin Cue on Perceived Product Quality

The results of the regression analysis support Hypothesis 2, providing that the presence of Chinese characters as a symbolic country of origin (COO) cue significantly increased consumers' perceived product quality. Respondents exposed to the tea packaging containing

Chinese characters evaluated the product as having substantially higher quality ($M = 5.78$, $n = 76$) than those exposed to the packaging without Chinese characters ($M = 2.10$, $n = 75$). This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that consumers rely on packaging cues and country of origin information when evaluating product quality, particularly when direct product experience is unavailable.

The participants in this study evaluated the product mainly based on its packaging, and the Chinese characters functioned as an important extrinsic cue that influenced quality perceptions. This result also supports the findings of Leclerc et al. (1994), who said that foreign language and script can communicate symbolic country of origin information and shape consumers' evaluations even when the language itself is not understood. Also, Wagner and Charinsarn (2026), Hornikx and van Meurs (2017) discussed that foreign script on product packaging generates more favourable brand evaluations when it is congruent with consumers' expectations regarding the product's cultural origin. Since tea is strongly associated with Chinese culture and tradition, the Chinese characters likely enhanced perceptions of authenticity, craftsmanship and quality. Even though some study mainly focused on multilingual packaging and processing fluency (Hüttl-Maack and Munz, 2025), The present study extends their findings by confirming that even a simple script-based symbolic cue can positively influence perceived product quality when it is culturally congruent with the product category.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings are consistent with Cue Utilization Theory, which suggests that consumers rely on extrinsic cues, such as symbolic country of origin elements on packaging, to infer product quality when intrinsic product attributes cannot be directly evaluated. The positive effect of symbolic Chinese language cues on perceived product quality supports the proposition that consumers use available packaging cues as signals to form quality judgments. On the other hand, Means-End Chain Theory further explains that consumers associate product attributes with desirable consequences and personal values. In this study, the Chinese characters likely symbolized authenticity, cultural heritage, and traditional tea production, leading respondents to perceive the product as being of higher quality. Likewise, Dual-Process Theory suggests that these symbolic cues were processed automatically through intuitive (System 1) thinking, enabling rapid quality evaluations without real life experiences.

More importantly, the findings provide stronger support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. While H1 confirmed that symbolic COO cues increase purchase intention, H2 begins to explain the cognitive mechanism underlying that relationship. According to the CCC framework, symbolic cultural cues activate consumers' readily

accessible cultural cache, consisting of culturally acquired knowledge. In this study, the Chinese characters likely activated stored associations related to Chinese tea, authenticity, craftsmanship, and cultural heritage. These activated associations appear to have shaped consumers' perceptions of product quality before influencing their behavioural intentions. Therefore, the findings suggest that the first outcome of cultural cache activation is an enhancement of perceived product quality, providing preliminary empirical support for the psychological mechanism proposed by the CCC framework.

Although H2 demonstrates that symbolic COO cues significantly enhance perceived product quality, it remains necessary to determine whether these improved quality perceptions subsequently translate into higher purchase intention. The following hypothesis therefore examines whether perceived product quality serves as a significant predictor of purchase intention, thereby providing further evidence regarding the mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence consumer acceptance.

5.4 Effect of Perceived product Quality on Purchase Intention

The findings support Hypothesis 3, indicating that perceived product quality has a significant positive effect on consumers' purchase intention. According to the regression coefficient ($B = 0.625$), for every one-unit increase in perceived product quality, purchase intention increases by approximately 0.62 units. This demonstrates that consumers who perceive the tea product as being of higher quality are substantially more likely to express a stronger intention to purchase it. Since purchase intention was employed as a behavioural proxy for consumer acceptance in this study, these findings indicate that improvements in perceived product quality contribute directly to greater consumer acceptance of the product.

Also, this finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that perceived product quality is one of the strongest determinants of consumers' purchase intention. Saleem et al. (2015) argued that consumers form purchase intentions based on their evaluation of product attributes, with perceived product quality serving as a major driver of purchase decisions. Similarly, Spears and Singh (2004) identified perceived product quality as an important antecedent of purchase intention, suggesting that consumers become more confident in purchasing products they perceive to be of superior quality. The present findings therefore reinforce the widely accepted view that consumers' subjective evaluations of product quality substantially influence their behavioural intentions.

The findings also support several theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 2. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that favourable evaluations of a product

contribute to positive attitudes, which subsequently strengthen behavioural intentions. In this study, higher perceived product quality likely generated more favourable attitudes towards the tea product, resulting in stronger purchase intention. Also, the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) proposes that behavioural intention is primarily determined by consumers' attitudes towards the behaviour, further supporting the observed relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

The results are also consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, which proposes that external stimuli influence internal cognitive evaluations that subsequently generate behavioural responses. In the context of this study, the symbolic COO cue represents the stimulus, perceived product quality represents the internal cognitive evaluation, and purchase intention represents the behavioural response. Furthermore, Consumer Decision-Making Model suggests that perceived product quality plays a central role during the evaluation stage of the purchasing process, ultimately influencing consumers' purchase decisions.

The findings also provide further support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. While H2 demonstrated that symbolic COO cues activate consumers' cultural cache and enhance perceived product quality, H3 shows that these enhanced quality perceptions subsequently translate into stronger purchase intention. This finding suggests that the cultural cache does not influence consumer acceptance directly through stored cultural knowledge alone. Rather, the activated cultural knowledge first shapes consumers' perceptions of product quality, which then influences their behavioural intentions. Therefore, H3 represents a critical step in explaining the psychological process proposed by the CCC framework.

Although H2 and H3 show that symbolic COO cues significantly increase perceived product quality and that perceived product quality subsequently increases purchase intention, these findings alone do not establish whether perceived product quality serves as the mechanism linking symbolic COO cues and consumer acceptance. Hence, the following hypothesis therefore examines the mediating role of perceived product quality to determine whether it explains how symbolic COO cues ultimately influence consumers' purchase intention.

5.5 The Mediating Role of Perceived product Quality

The findings support Hypothesis 4 by showing that perceived product quality significantly mediates the relationship between symbolic country of origin (COO) cues and purchase intention. Although symbolic COO cues initially had a significant positive effect on purchase intention, this direct relationship became statistically non significant after perceived product quality was included in the model. This finding indicates that symbolic COO cues do not

directly increase consumers' purchase intention. Instead, they first influence how consumers evaluate the quality of the product, and these quality evaluations subsequently shape purchase intention.

Most importantly, these findings provide the strongest empirical support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. In this study, H1 established that symbolic COO cues increase purchase intention, while H2 demonstrated that these cues significantly enhance perceived product quality. After that, H3 further showed that higher perceived product quality leads to stronger purchase intention. The mediation analysis integrates these individual findings into a single cognitive process.

According to the CCC framework, symbolic cultural cues quickly activate consumers' cultural cache, which contains culturally stored knowledge accumulated through previous experiences, education, media exposure, and social learning. Rather than directly influencing behavioural intentions, the activated cultural cache first shapes consumers' perceptions of product quality. These quality perceptions subsequently translate into stronger purchase intentions. The finding that approximately 68.6% of the total effect was transmitted through perceived product quality provides preliminary empirical support for this proposed mechanism.

Unlike existing theories that explain either the use of symbolic cues or the formation of quality perceptions separately, the CCC framework provides an integrated explanation of the entire decision-making process. It explains why symbolic COO cues alone are insufficient to increase purchase intention directly and proposes that their influence depends on the activation of culturally stored knowledge, which enhances perceived product quality before affecting behavioural intentions.

5.6 The Moderating Role of Consumer Ethnocentrism

Contrary to Hypothesis 5, the findings revealed that consumer ethnocentrism strengthened rather than weakened the positive relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The significant positive interaction effect ($B = 0.183, p < .001$) indicates that as consumer ethnocentrism increased, the positive influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention became stronger. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

This finding contrasts with the traditional view of consumer ethnocentrism proposed by Shimp and Sharma (1987), who argued that highly ethnocentric consumers try to avoid foreign products because they think that the imported goods are inappropriate or potentially harmful to the domestic economy. Similarly, Shankarmahesh (2006) explained that ethnocentric

consumers generally prefer domestic products regardless of the quality or price of foreign alternatives. Based on these theoretical perspectives, the study expected that consumer ethnocentrism would weaken the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention for a product displaying foreign symbolic COO cues. However, the findings of the present study indicate the opposite relationship.

One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that tea is universally recognised as originating from China and has long been associated with Chinese culture, tradition, and authenticity like Swiss chocolate, Italian pasta, Japanese sushi. Consequently, the symbolic COO cue may have reinforced perceptions of product authenticity instead of activating negative evaluations associated with foreign products. Once respondents perceived the product as authentic and of high quality, highly ethnocentric consumers appeared to rely more heavily on those quality perceptions when forming their purchase intentions. Furthermore, the experimental stimulus contained only a symbolic foreign cue in the form of Chinese characters rather than a comprehensive foreign brand identity. As a result, respondents may have interpreted the Chinese characters primarily as indicators of authentic Chinese tea culture instead of viewing them as symbols of economic competition with domestic products.

This unexpected finding can also be interpreted through the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. According to the framework, symbolic cultural cues activate consumers' cultural cache, enabling the rapid retrieval of culturally stored knowledge related to Chinese tea, authenticity, and traditional production. Consequently, instead of rejecting the product solely because of its foreign symbolic cue, highly ethnocentric consumers appeared to rely on these positive cultural associations when evaluating product quality. This interpretation suggests that the activation of culturally congruent knowledge may have strengthened the influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention despite consumers' ethnocentric tendencies.

Additionally, the findings are consistent with the relationship proposed between the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework and Kahneman's (2011) Dual-Process Theory. When consumers encountered the Chinese characters on the tea packaging, the symbolic cue likely activated their cultural cache, providing the culturally learned knowledge that System 1 can use to generate immediate evaluations without analytical thinking. The findings therefore suggest that even highly ethnocentric consumers may have rapidly retrieved positive cultural associations related to authentic Chinese tea, allowing favourable quality perceptions to exert an even stronger influence on their purchase intentions.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the in-group bias concept (Brewer, 1999; Molenberghs, 2013), and the Moral Norm concept (Ajzen, 1991), consumers with strong national identity would generally be expected to evaluate foreign products less favourably and perceive purchasing imported goods as less appropriate. However, the present findings suggest that these theoretical perspectives may not fully explain consumer responses when the symbolic COO cue is highly congruent with the product category. In the case of tea, the strong historical and cultural association between tea and China appears to have outweighed ethnocentric resistance, indicating that perceptions of authenticity can mitigate the negative influence traditionally associated with consumer ethnocentrism.

Overall, the findings suggest that consumer ethnocentrism does not always reduce the effectiveness of symbolic COO cues. Instead, product–country congruence appears to strengthen the influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention among highly ethnocentric consumers. This finding extends the traditional understanding of consumer ethnocentrism by demonstrating that symbolic authenticity can influence consumer responses under certain conditions.

5.7 The Moderating Role of Sustainability Concern

The findings support Hypothesis 6, indicating that sustainability concern significantly moderated the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. The significant negative interaction effect ($B = -0.141, p < .001$) indicates that as sustainability concern increased, the positive influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention became weaker. Therefore, although consumers who perceived the tea product as being of higher quality generally reported stronger purchase intentions, this relationship was less pronounced among consumers with higher levels of sustainability concern.

This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that consumers with higher sustainability concern consider environmental factors alongside traditional product attributes when making purchase decisions (Gleim et al., 2013; Kostadinova, 2016; Paul et al., 2016). Consequently, although respondents perceived the tea product as being of high quality, those with stronger sustainability concerns may have simultaneously considered the potential environmental implications associated with imported products, thereby reducing the influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention.

The findings are also consistent with several theoretical perspectives explaining sustainable consumer behaviour. The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory (Stern, 1999) suggests that consumers' environmental values and beliefs activate personal norms that influence purchasing

decisions, while Norm Activation Theory argues that awareness of the environmental consequences of consumption creates moral obligations that shape behavioural intentions. Similarly, the Attitude-Behaviour-Context (ABC) Theory (Stern, 2000) proposes that purchasing behaviour is influenced not only by personal attitudes but also by contextual factors surrounding the product. Furthermore, the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) suggests that consumers with stronger ecological worldviews are more likely to incorporate environmental considerations into product evaluations. Collectively, these theories explain why highly sustainability-conscious consumers may evaluate imported products using broader environmental criteria rather than relying solely on perceived product quality, thereby weakening the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention.

From the perspective of the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework, the findings suggest that although symbolic COO cues activate culturally stored knowledge associated with authenticity and product quality, the influence of this cultural cache may be moderated by consumers' environmental values. While the cultural cache generates positive quality evaluations through intuitive processing, consumers with stronger sustainability concerns appear to place additional emphasis on environmental considerations during the decision-making process. As a result, the positive influence of perceived product quality on purchase intention becomes weaker among highly sustainability-conscious consumers.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that sustainability concern reduces the extent to which perceived product quality translates into purchase intention. This highlights the importance of considering environmental values when examining consumer responses to symbolic COO cues and suggests that sustainability concern acts as an important boundary condition influencing the effectiveness of quality perceptions in driving consumer acceptance.

5.8 Overall Discussion

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate the cognitive process through which symbolic country of origin (COO) cues influence consumer acceptance. H1 established that the presence of Chinese characters on tea packaging significantly increased consumers' purchase intention, indicating that symbolic COO cues positively influence consumer acceptance. However, this direct relationship alone did not explain why symbolic cues affected consumers' behavioural intentions.

Then, H2 showed that symbolic COO cues significantly enhanced perceived product quality, suggesting that consumers first interpreted the symbolic cue as an indicator of authenticity and product excellence. H3 further demonstrated that higher perceived product quality significantly

increased purchase intention. Finally, H4 confirmed that perceived product quality significantly mediates the relationship between symbolic COO cues and purchase intention. Taken together, these findings indicate that symbolic COO cues influence consumer acceptance indirectly by first enhancing consumers' perceptions of product quality.

This sequence of findings provides preliminary empirical support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. According to the framework, symbolic cultural cues activate consumers' cultural cache, enabling the rapid retrieval of culturally stored knowledge. Rather than directly influencing behavioural intentions, activation of the cultural cache first shapes consumers' perceptions of product quality, which subsequently drives purchase intention. This explanation extends existing country of origin literature by proposing a cognitive mechanism that explains not only whether symbolic COO cues influence consumer behaviour but also how and why these effects occur.

However, while H1-H4 explain the core cognitive mechanism proposed by the CCC framework, H5 and H6 demonstrate that this mechanism is not equally influential across all consumers. Instead, its effectiveness depends on individual characteristics that influence how consumers process symbolic cues. Hence this study use consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern as individual characteristics.

Contrary to expectations, consumer ethnocentrism strengthened rather than weakened the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. This suggests that ethnocentrism continued to operate within the cultural domain activated by the symbolic COO cue. Rather than rejecting the product because of its foreign association, highly ethnocentric consumers appeared to retrieve stronger culturally congruent associations related to authentic Chinese tea, thereby reinforcing the influence of perceived product quality. In contrast, sustainability concern weakened the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention. Unlike ethnocentrism, sustainability concern appears to introduce additional evaluations related to environmental responsibility, transportation, carbon emissions, and global supply chains. These considerations extend beyond the culturally stored knowledge activated by the symbolic COO cue and therefore reduce the extent to which favourable quality perceptions translate into purchase intention.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework primarily operates within the cultural domain of consumer cognition. Symbolic COO cues activate culturally stored knowledge related to authenticity, heritage, and product origin, allowing consumers to make rapid intuitive evaluations through System 1 processing. However,

the influence of the cultural cache appears to be moderated when consumers introduce additional non-cultural evaluation criteria. While ethnocentrism interacts directly with culturally stored associations, sustainability concern represents a separate cognitive domain that incorporates environmental values and ethical considerations. Consequently, the effectiveness of symbolic COO cues depends not only on the activation of consumers' cultural cache but also on whether competing cognitive evaluations become salient during the decision-making process.

Based on all these discussions and findings the study addressed the research gap identified in Chapter 1 regarding the limited understanding of language as a symbolic packaging cue. Previous studies have primarily focused on general packaging elements or multilingual packaging, with relatively little attention given to the role of symbolic language characters in shaping consumer evaluations of foreign products.

The present study demonstrates that Chinese characters on tea packaging function not merely as informational elements but as symbolic country of origin cues that significantly influence consumers' perceptions of product quality and purchase intention. By identifying perceived product quality as the underlying psychological mechanism through which symbolic COO cues affect consumer acceptance, this study extends the existing packaging and country of origin literature beyond the examination of general packaging features.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the research objectives of this study were successfully achieved. First, the study introduced the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework as a theoretical explanation of how consumers process symbolic cultural cues during product evaluation. Second, the results confirmed that symbolic COO cues significantly enhanced perceived product quality and purchase intention. Third, the mediation analysis demonstrated that perceived product quality represents the primary mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence consumer acceptance. Finally, the moderation analyses revealed that consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern influence this cognitive process in different ways, indicating that the effectiveness of symbolic COO cues depends on individual consumer characteristics. Collectively, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how symbolic packaging cues influence consumer behaviour and provide new insights into the strategic use of language-based packaging elements in international marketing.

Overall, this study contributes to marketing and consumer behaviour research by extending existing country of origin literature from identifying whether symbolic COO cues influence consumer behaviour to explaining how and under what conditions these effects occur. The

proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework offers a cognitive explanation for the processing of symbolic cultural cues and provides a foundation for future research examining how culturally stored knowledge influences consumer decision-making across different products, cultures, and symbolic marketing contexts.

5.9 Contributions

The study contributes to the fields of consumer behaviour, country of origin (COO), and international marketing by providing both theoretical and practical insights into the role of symbolic packaging cues in shaping consumer evaluations. The findings address the research gap identified in Chapter 1 and also offer a deeper understanding of how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer decision-making through cognitive processes.

5.9.1 Theoretical Contributions

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the introduction of the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. While previous theories, including Cue Utilization Theory, Schema Theory, Signalling Theory, Associative Network Theory, and Kahneman's Dual-Process Theory, explain how consumers process external cues and make intuitive judgments, this CCC framework addresses by proposing that symbolic cultural cues activate a readily accessible "cultural cache" containing knowledge accumulated through previous experiences, education, media exposure, and social learning. This provides a new cognitive explanation for how symbolic country of origin cues like a language character cue influence consumer evaluation immediately. Although the present study focused on Chinese tea packaging, the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache framework may also be applicable to other culturally authentic product categories in which symbolic country of origin cues play an important role in consumer evaluation

A second theoretical contribution is that this study extends the literature on country of origin and packaging by demonstrating that language characters on product packaging function as symbolic country of origin cues rather than merely decorative or informational elements. The findings show how just one symbolic language character can activate culturally stored associations that significantly influence perceived product quality and purchase intention. Consequently, this research expands current understanding of how packaging design contributes to consumer decision-making.

Also, the study contributes to consumer behaviour literature by identifying perceived product quality as the primary psychological mechanism through which symbolic COO cues influence purchase intention. The mediation analysis demonstrated that symbolic COO cues affect

consumer acceptance indirectly by first enhancing perceived product quality, thereby providing empirical evidence for the proposed cognitive mechanism.

Finally, the contrasting moderation effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern further refine the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework. The findings suggest that the influence of the cultural cache depends on the type of cognitive evaluation involved. Cultural evaluations, such as authenticity and product origin, appear to reinforce the influence of the cultural cache. On the other hand, non-cultural evaluations, such as environmental sustainability, introduce additional considerations that may weaken its influence on purchase intention. These findings provide a foundation for future research examining the boundary conditions of the CCC framework across different cultural contexts and product categories.

5.9.2 Practical Contributions

The findings of this study pitch several practical implications for international marketers, brand managers, packaging designers, and exporters of culturally authentic products.

First, the study demonstrates that symbolic language characters can be strategically incorporated into packaging to enhance consumers' perceptions of product quality and increase purchase intention, which is used as a behavioural proxy for consumer acceptance in this study. For products that possess a strong cultural heritage, such as Chinese tea, symbolic country of origin cues can effectively communicate authenticity without requiring extensive verbal explanations. This provides marketers with a cost effective packaging strategy for strengthening product positioning and entering in international markets.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that packaging should be viewed as a strategic communication tool rather than merely a protective or informational component. By incorporating culturally meaningful visual elements, firms can activate positive cultural associations that enhance consumers' perceptions of product quality and increase consumer acceptance. These findings demonstrate that even a single packaging element can positively or negatively influence consumers' evaluations of a product. Therefore, marketers should carefully consider the design of packaging, particularly in international markets where symbolic cues may significantly shape consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions.

Third, the findings concerning consumer ethnocentrism suggest that symbolic country of origin cues do not necessarily discourage highly ethnocentric consumers. When symbolic cues are strongly congruent with the authentic origin of a product category, authenticity may outweigh

consumers' preference for domestic products. This provides useful guidance for firms exporting culturally authentic products by demonstrating that emphasizing authentic cultural identity may strengthen consumer acceptance even among consumers with stronger ethnocentric tendencies.

The findings regarding sustainability concern indicate that authenticity alone may not be sufficient to influence environmentally conscious consumers. Businesses should therefore complement symbolic country of origin cues with sustainability initiatives such as environmentally friendly packaging, transparent supply-chain information, sustainable sourcing practices, or recognised environmental certifications or labels. Combining cultural authenticity with sustainability communication may improve consumer acceptance among increasingly environmentally conscious markets.

Finally, the findings also provide implications for export promotion agencies, trade organizations, and policymakers responsible for international branding. The results demonstrate that symbolic country of origin cues can positively influence international consumers' perceptions of culturally authentic products. Accordingly, policies and programs that encourage the strategic use of authentic cultural symbols, country of origin communication, and geographical indication (GI) labelling may help strengthen the international competitiveness of export products while preserving cultural heritage. Furthermore, governments can implement initiatives and international promotional campaigns that showcase their country's cultural heritage, traditions, and authentic products to global audiences. Such efforts can strengthen consumers' cultural knowledge and country image over time, thereby increasing the effectiveness of symbolic country of origin cues in international markets, as suggested by the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework.

5.10 Future Research Recommendations

Although this study contributes to the understanding of symbolic country of origin cues and consumer behaviour, several opportunities remain for future research.

First, this study focused exclusively on Chinese tea packaging. Future research should examine the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework across different product categories that possess strong cultural associations, such as Japanese food products, Italian pasta, French wine, Swiss chocolate, or Korean noodles, to determine whether the framework is applicable beyond the tea industry.

Second, the present study examined only one symbolic country of origin cue in the form of a single Chinese language character on product packaging. Future research could investigate the

effects of multiple language characters, different styles of language presentation, or symbolic language cues displayed in various packaging formats. In addition, future studies could examine different foreign languages across diverse product categories to determine whether different symbolic language cues activate consumers' cultural cache in similar ways or produce different consumer responses.

Third, the sample consisted of consumers living in Germany. Future research could compare consumers from different countries and cultural backgrounds to examine whether the effectiveness of symbolic country of origin cues varies across cultures and whether the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache framework demonstrates cross-cultural validity.

Fourth, this study employed purchase intention as a behavioural proxy for consumer acceptance. However, consumers evaluated the product based solely on packaging cues rather than through actual product experience or real purchasing situations. Future research could therefore examine actual purchasing behaviour, willingness to pay, consumer loyalty, or long-term brand preference to further validate the proposed framework under real-world purchasing conditions.

Finally, the contrasting moderating effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern suggest that additional psychological factors may influence the effectiveness of symbolic country of origin cues. Future studies could examine moderators such as product familiarity, consumer cultural intelligence, openness to foreign cultures, perceived authenticity, consumer animosity, or trust to further refine the Consumer Cultural Cache framework and identify additional boundary conditions.

Chapter 6 : Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the overall conclusion of the study by summarizing the key findings in relation to the research objectives and research gap identified in Chapter 1. It reiterates the theoretical and practical significance of the findings, with particular emphasis on the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework and its contribution to understanding the influence of symbolic country of origin cues on consumer behaviour. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the study and outlines the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

6.2 Summary of the study

This study investigated the influence of symbolic country of origin cues on consumer evaluations of foreign products using Chinese characters on tea packaging as the experimental stimulus. Specifically, the study examined the effects of symbolic COO cues on perceived product quality and purchase intention, while also investigating the mediating role of perceived product quality and the moderating effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern. Furthermore, the study introduced the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework to explain the cognitive mechanism through which consumers process symbolic cultural cues during product evaluation.

The findings demonstrated that symbolic COO cues significantly enhanced both perceived product quality and purchase intention. The mediation analysis further revealed that perceived product quality significantly mediates the relationship between symbolic COO cues and purchase intention, indicating that consumers first formed quality evaluations before developing behavioural intentions. The moderation analyses showed contrasting effects of consumer ethnocentrism and sustainability concern. While consumer ethnocentrism strengthened the relationship between perceived product quality and purchase intention, sustainability concern weakened this relationship, suggesting that different consumer characteristics influence how symbolic cues are interpreted during the decision-making process.

The findings also addressed the research gap identified in the literature by demonstrating that language characters on packaging function as symbolic country of origin cues capable of influencing consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions. The study therefore achieved its primary research objectives by demonstrating how symbolic language characters on product packaging influence perceived product quality and purchase intention, while also introducing

and providing preliminary empirical support for the proposed Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework as an explanation of this cognitive process.

In addition, the study contributes to consumer behaviour theory by introducing the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework, which provides a cognitive explanation of how culturally stored knowledge is activated through symbolic cues and subsequently influences consumer evaluations.

Overall, this study demonstrates that symbolic packaging elements are not merely decorative features but strategic communication tools capable of shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. By introducing the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework, the study provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding how symbolic country of origin cues influence consumer behaviour and offers practical guidance for marketers seeking to promote culturally authentic products in international markets.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable theoretical and practical contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study focused exclusively on one product category such as Chinese tea. As tea has a strong historical and cultural association with China, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other product categories or countries of origin. Future studies should examine whether similar relationships exist for products with different levels of country–product congruence.

Second, the study investigated only one symbolic country of origin cue in the form of Chinese language characters. Other symbolic cues, such as national colours, cultural symbols, typography, traditional imagery, or packaging design elements, may produce different consumer responses and should therefore be explored in future research.

Third, the study was conducted among consumers living in Germany. Consumer responses to symbolic country of origin cues may vary across cultural contexts, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other countries and populations.

Fourth, although purchase intention was employed as a behavioural proxy for consumer acceptance, participants evaluated the product solely based on packaging cues without experiencing the actual product or making real purchasing decisions. Consequently, the findings may differ from consumer behaviour in real marketplace settings.

Finally, because the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework was introduced and examined for the first time in this study, its theoretical validity should be considered preliminary. Additional empirical studies using different research designs, consumer populations, and product categories are required to further establish the reliability, generalisability, and theoretical robustness of the proposed framework.

Declaration on the Use of AI

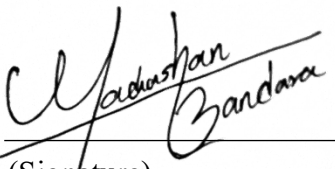
I hereby declare that, in the planning, drafting, and revision of this master's thesis, I made use of the generative AI tool ChatGPT for the following purposes:

- To identify relevant academic sources and literature, including DOIs.
- To assist in planning the structure and overall organization of the thesis.
- To generate and refine R code for statistical data analysis.
- To generate visual illustrations, such as the process diagram of the Consumer Cultural Cache (CCC) framework.
- To improve the language, grammar, and clarity of my own phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

I hereby certify that this declaration is complete to the best of my knowledge. All work has been reviewed by me, and I take full responsibility for it. I understand that the omission or misrepresentation of my reliance on AI will constitute fraud.

Munich, 06.07.2026

(Place, Date)



(Signature)

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Appendix

Appendix I. Questionnaire

Section	Question / Item	Response Format
Participant Information and Consent	You are invited to participate in a research study about tea packaging and consumer opinions conducted as part of a Master's thesis at the Technical University of Munich (TUM). Participation in this survey is voluntary and anonymous. All responses will be treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. The survey will take approximately 5–7 minutes to complete. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Thank you very much for your time and participation.	
Screening Questions	Do you agree to participate in this study? Are you currently living in Germany? Are you at least 18 years old? Do you drink tea at least occasionally?	Yes / No
Packaging Evaluation	This product appears to be from China.	7-point Likert Scale
Perceived Product Quality	This tea seems to be of high quality. This tea seems authentic. This tea appears trustworthy. This tea seems well made. This tea looks premium.	7-point Likert Scale
Purchase Intention	I would consider buying this tea. I would be interested in trying this tea. I would likely purchase this tea if it were available.	7-point Likert Scale

	I have a positive intention to buy this tea.	
	I would recommend this tea to others.	
Consumer Ethnocentrism	I prefer products made in my own country over imported products.	7-point Likert Scale
	People should support products produced in their own country.	
	Buying domestic products helps support the local economy.	
	I generally prefer domestic products to foreign products.	
	Consumers should purchase local products whenever possible.	
Sustainability Concern	I am concerned about the environmental impact of the products I buy.	7-point Likert Scale
	Sustainability is an important factor in my purchase decisions.	
	I prefer products that are produced in an environmentally friendly way.	
	I try to avoid products that harm the environment.	
	I actively look for sustainable product options.	
Tea Consumption	How often do you drink tea?	Daily / Several times a week / Once a week / Less than once a week/ Never
	What type of tea do you usually drink most often?	Tea categories
	How familiar are you with Chinese tea?	Not familiar at all / Slightly familiar / Moderately familiar / Very familiar/ Extremely familiar
	How old are you?	Age categories

Demographic Information	What is your gender?	Male / Female / Third gender / Prefer not to say
	What is your nationality?	Open-ended
	What is your status?	Student / Employed Full-time / Employed Part-time / Self-employed / Unemployed / Other
	In which city do you currently live in Germany?	A list of cities

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