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Unveiling the power of supplier-country image on B2B customers' perceptions: Beyond the product's beauty

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in business-to-business (B2B) sectors often assume that findings regarding country-of-origin (COO) effects on end consumers can be directly applied to the industrial marketing context. This tendency to generalize can result in an inaccurate understanding of how buyers perceive COO information in B2B scenarios. This study investigates the effect of supplier-country image on international customers' perceptions of both perceived product quality and relationship quality in a B2B market environment. We further examine the consequences of perceived product quality and relationship quality on supplier awareness and customer loyalty. Data collected from 182 international B2B buyers in the Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products and furniture industries were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicate that supplier-country image influences the relationship quality dimensions (trust, commitment, and satisfaction) and perceived product quality. Moreover, trust and commitment enhance customer loyalty, while trust and satisfaction leverage supplier awareness. In contrast, perceived product quality only influences customer loyalty, albeit to a weaker extent. Thus, relationship quality plays a more significant role than perceived product quality in influencing supplier awareness and customer loyalty in B2B environments. These results challenge the notion that the impact of COO on end consumers can be equally applied in B2B contexts, and they expand our understanding of how supplier-country image affects relationship quality in the industrial setting. Furthermore, they draw managers' attention to the importance of mitigating a potentially negative COO image through measures aimed at improving relationships.

1. Introduction

Country-of-origin (COO) studies help international managers comprehend how customers perceive and respond to products from a particular foreign country (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020; Jiménez & San-Martin, 2016; Dichter, 1962). The vast majority of studies in this field have focused on COO as a cue to synthesize information on products and brands from different countries (Hamzaoui & Merunka, 2006; Jiménez & San-Martin, 2016). Previous studies have found that COO has the potential to perform an important role in buyers' evaluations of products (Barbarossa & Mandler, 2021; Johansson et al., 1985), serving as a signal of a product perceived quality (Han, 1989; Ahmed & D'Assous, 1995; Dzever & Quester, 1999) and affecting customers' purchase intention (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995; Bradley, 2001). However, as

emphasized by Wang et al. (2014), COO research becomes disconnected from reality without a solid theoretical background, unable to provide strategic operational guidance to international firms. For this reason, some researchers have been calling for more robust theoretical support to improve COO's operationalization (e.g., Samiee, 2011; Dobrucali, 2019).

One of the areas for which the effects of COO have remained relatively unexplored is in the specific setting of industrial or business-to-business (B2B) marketing (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020; Kaynak & Kucukmiroglu, 1992; Quester et al., 2000). The scarcity of research on how industrial buyers' perceptions and decisions are affected by COO image has been reported for decades (Andersen & Chao, 2003). More recently, several studies continue to claim there is a need for more studies investigating its effects in B2B contexts (e.g., Leonidou & Hultman,

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2019; Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). One explanation for the current research gap in the study of COO effects in industrial settings is the recognition that empirical studies in industrial contexts are substantially more complex and challenging than in consumer products contexts. This is due to the greater difficulty in collecting data from industrial managers (Andersen & Chao, 2003).

The effects of COO in industrial contexts were reported as early as the 1970s (Håkansson & Wootz, 1975; Nagashima, 1970; White, 1979). Håkansson and Wootz (1975) analyzed the relative importance of supplier characteristics, such as location in different countries and size, concluding that location was the most important supplier characteristic. Nagashima (1970) and White (1979) investigated the influence of the “made in” concept on the perceptions of industrial buyers, emphasizing its relevant role in the perceptions formation process of industrial managers. When investigated in the industrial context, COO was found to influence purchase decisions (Knight, Holdsworth, & Mather, 2007), quality perceptions (Ahmed & D’Astous, 1995; Insch, 2003), and product perceptions (Cattin, Jolibert, & Lohnes, 1982; Dzever & Quester, 1999). Liang and Parkhe (1997) argue that international industrial buyers’ decisions are complex since they involve an information-processing load associated with the international products’ choice process, which is likely to surpass the bounds of human rationality. Currently, in the industrial marketing context, the COO image holds greater relevance than ever before because every intermediated good in the production process is strongly exposed to the COO effect due to the increasing globalization of the production process (Dobrucali, 2019). Consequently, understanding supplier-country of origin becomes of capital importance. However, due to the cognitive overwhelming and excessively expensive process of collecting information, international industrial buyers often rely on information that is readily accessible and easily recalled, such as the supplier’s country-of-origin reputation (Insch, 2003).

Industrial marketing has long been recognized as a distinct area of studies within the marketing field, and research on the COO effects on industrial buyers’ perceptions have called attention to the need for caution in generalizing the findings obtained in the consumer products context to the industrial setting (Dzever & Quester, 1999). Even though researchers working in the field of industrial marketing frequently seem to assume that the findings relevant to the COO effects on final consumers can be translated to the industrial marketing area, these generalizations can mislead an accurate assessment of the perceptions of buyers in terms of information from the COO (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). Several areas of divergence, including the nature of the buyer-supplier relationship, imply that empirical findings from consumer products contexts may not be readily applicable to industrial settings (Meshreki, Ennew, & Mourad, 2018). Compared to consumer products, which usually involve individual decision making, decision making on B2B sourcing is considerably more complex, involving multiple players within the decision-making process (Andersen & Chao, 2003; Dzever & Quester, 1999). Furthermore, the evaluation criteria used in the industrial context may significantly diverge from consumer product evaluations, incorporating aspects such as evaluation of service capabilities and compliance with product safety standards (Andersen & Chao, 2003). Most importantly, as reported by Håkansson and Wootz (1975), industrial buyers do not restrict their evaluation criteria only to product quality but assess also the quality of the supplier. The more structured evaluation process in the industrial context, the technical nature of industrial products, the divergence in terms of perceived risks and information requirements generate substantial differences between the behavior of consumers and industrial buyers (Andersen & Chao, 2003; Meshreki, Ennew, & Mourad, 2018). Consequently, due to the intrinsic divergences that exist between consumer and industrial purchasing contexts, Quester et al. (2000) emphasize that it is inappropriate to apply what we know about COO effects on the consumer markets to the B2B environment arbitrarily.

In addition to being considered an under-investigated research

theme, the importance of the COO image in B2B markets has not attained a consensus (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). One line of thought raises doubts about the relevance of the COO image in industrial markets (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Edwards, Gut, & Mavondo, 2007). According to this line of reasoning, industrial buyers may be less susceptible to and less influenced by country information (Ahmed, D’Astous, 1995). However, another line of thought argues that the relevance of the COO image in industrial markets is prominent, since the globalization of the production process has made buying and selling across borders the rule rather than the exception (Dobrucali, 2019; Ghauri, & Cateora, 2014). When comparing the magnitude of COO effects in the industrial and the consumer contexts, Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) concluded that, for industrial goods, the COO effects are not less relevant than for consumer goods. According to this second line of reasoning, as the production process becomes an increasingly global activity, it becomes progressively more important to understand industrial buyers’ attitudes towards global products. Consequently, the comprehension of the effects of the COO image on the industrial setting becomes a vital issue (Dobrucali, 2019). Thus, these contradictory views concerning the relevance and influence of the COO image in the industrial market context constitute a meaningful knowledge gap (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020).

Although COO image research implemented in B2B environments has mostly placed the focus on the product as the object of evaluation, similar to business-to-consumer research (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Wang et al., 2014), B2B customers’ interest transcends the mere characteristics of the product (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). Industrial customers value the development of solid cooperation with suppliers that facilitates not only delivery of the product but also acts as a source of knowledge and value creation (Fredriksson, & Gadde, 2003). Consequently, when investigating COO image effects in B2B markets, it is fundamental to focus not only on products but also on the entire supplier-customer relationship (Morgan et al. 2007).

The present study seeks to investigate whether suppliers’ COO image influences the buyers’ perceptions of perceived product quality and what role the relationship quality plays in the process. Relationship quality is a central construct in relationship marketing theory (Lewin & Johnston, 1997; Antwi, 2021), which has contributed greatly to understanding the different theoretical dimensions of the customer relationship as a core tenet in building strong and solid customer relationships (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the B2B markets, it is fundamentally important to overcome the mere optics of COO effects on the product and to address the relationship domain by evaluating a fundamental construct in the field of industrial marketing: the relationship quality. This is assumed to be one of the most relevant variables influencing firm’s satisfaction within partnering firms (Silva et al., 2012). Relationship quality is a central theme in B2B relationships (Jiang et al., 2016), and it is becoming increasingly important from both a theoretical and a managerial perspective to comprehend and monitor this relationship (Naudé & Buttle, 2000; Silva et al., 2012). Hence, it is crucial to understand the role of the COO in influencing buyers’ perceptions regarding the quality of the products bought, which transcends the sphere of the mere product and enters the relationship domain. Interest in the creation and reinforcement of collaborative relationships between firms has increased in recent decades (Antwi, 2021; Jap, 2001; Alejandro et al., 2011), with a specific lens being directed to an evaluation of the perceived relationship quality of these collaborations (Langfield-Smith and Greenwood, 1998; Robson et al., 2008). This can be viewed as an assessment of the general strength and cohesion of the relationship between the buyer and the supplier (Silva et al., 2012). The perceived relationship quality is a particularly important source of differentiation when the product characteristics and price are insufficient to guarantee customer acquisition and maintenance (Alejandro et al., 2011). In B2B markets, durable relationships with suppliers allow customers to be more efficient in procurement and reduce transaction costs (Walter et al., 2003). Therefore, industrial customers increasingly

reward qualified suppliers who foster cooperative and long-term relationships (Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998; Walter et al., 2003). Relationship quality has the potential to affect customers' willingness to remain in a business relationship and to condition their behavior (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). It is also proven to improve performance (Hoppner et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2012). Consequently, in the industrial setting, enhancing the relationship quality is fundamental to the competitiveness of supplier firms (Mohan et al., 2021).

Building on these observations, the main objective of this study is to investigate the role of suppliers' COO image on both the perceived product quality and the relationship quality between the buyer and the supplier in a B2B international context. This study provides two contributions to the literature. First, our research enlarges current knowledge on the effects of the COO image in B2B markets, which remain considerably unexplored (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). This has led to an inappropriate generalization of the findings about COO effects from consumers to the industrial marketing area (Quester et al., 2000). In addition to being a scarcely investigated theme, previous studies have taken contradictory positions regarding the effective power of the COO image in B2B markets, creating a significant gap in the knowledge (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). Moreover, our study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the role of supplier's COO image in relationship quality. In the industrial market context, it is crucial to extend the analysis of the COO effects beyond the scope of products (Maheswaran & Chen, 2006) into the relationship domain, which has become a main strategic priority in B2B markets (Hilman, & Hanaysha, 2015; Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). However, research addressing the role of the COO image on relationship quality is noticeably limited (Hilman & Hanaysha, 2015).

Second, building on relationship marketing theory, our study provides an examination of the effects of both perceived product quality and relationship quality on supplier awareness and customer loyalty. As emphasized by Mangus et al. (2022), previous research focused on relationship quality has most frequently addressed its impact on financial outcomes, such as account profitability (Mullins et al., 2014), sales (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990; Palmatier, 2008) and price premium (Palmatier et al., 2007). Consequently, the current research extends current knowledge by investigating and comparing the effects of product and relationship quality on industrial customers' perceptions and behavior.

The current investigation is focused on the Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products and furniture industries. Portugal presents a compelling case for research on internationalization-related studies because of its unique economic landscape within the European Union (EU). Despite having a small domestic market, Portugal's export activities have been growing over the last few years, representing around 49.6 % of GDP in 2022. This is a significant increase compared to 38.2 % in 2012, demonstrating the growing dynamism of Portuguese industry in international markets. Notably, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for 99.5 % of all enterprises in Portugal (Pordata, 2014). Portugal ranks as the fourth country in the EU with the highest number of SMEs per capita, fourth member state with the highest share of employment by SMEs in non-financial business sectors, and the fifth in value added by SMEs (European Commission, 2024). Due to these characteristics, several studies about IB were conducted in Portugal, for example about the determinants of propensity to export or international performance (e.g., Serra, Pointon & Abdou, 2012; Prange & Pinho, 2017), knowledge flows between headquarters and subsidiaries (e.g., Crespo, Griffith & Lages, 2014; Crespo, Crespo & Curado, 2022), the interconnections between innovation and international performance (e.g., Costa, Lages & Hortinha, 2015; Silva, Styles & Lages, 2017), international joint ventures or international alliances (e.g., Silva, Bradley & Sousa, 2012; Mata & Portugal, 2015), economic slowdowns and foreign ownership (e.g., Varum & Rocha, 2011; Varum, Rocha & Silva, 2014) or the use of pro-internationalization incentives (e.g., Torres, Clegg and Varum, 2016).

Several motivations support the decision to select the Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products and furniture industries as the focus of this analysis. First, these industries are traditional sectors with a long history in Portugal. They were identified in Porter's 1994 report, "Building the Competitive Advantages of Portugal," as local clusters that could enhance the country's long-term competitiveness (Gonçalves et al., 2015). Second, despite the traditional nature of these industries, they differ in their R&D intensity: the molds industry is classified as a medium R&D intensity sector, while the furniture and footwear industries are classified as medium-low R&D intensity sectors (Galindo-Rueda & Verger, 2016).

Third, most companies in these industries have, over recent decades, shifted from a price-based strategy to one emphasizing quality, design, and innovation differentiation (Fratocchi & Silva, 2018; APICCAPS, 2023; Cefamol, 2023; AIMMP, 2024). These sectors are now recognized as excellent examples of innovation, quality differentiation, and modernization, having successfully moved into higher value-added segments (APICCAPS, 2023; Cefamol, 2023; AIMMP, 2024). Currently, they are among the most internationalized Portuguese industries, with export shares of 77 %, 85 %, and 90 % for wood products and furniture, molds, and footwear, respectively (GEE, 2023; APICCAPS, 2023; Cefamol, 2023; AIMMP, 2024). Interestingly, despite their international success, these traditional industries have received only marginal FDI inflows, remaining predominantly Portuguese-owned (OECD, 2023), which may serve to facilitate stronger links between the country and the supplier (Cedrola & Battaglia, 2013).

The paper is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, a review of the literature is presented, and the hypotheses developed. The research method is then explained, followed by an analysis of the structural equation modeling results. Finally, the main conclusions and implications are discussed, complemented with the study's limitations and future lines of research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Relationship quality

Relationship quality, generally perceived as representing the strength and cohesion of the relationship between business partners (Alejandro et al., 2011; Antwi, 2021), has seen its importance increasingly recognized over the years (Naudé & Buttle, 2000). Relationship quality is a construct embedded in relationship marketing that incorporates the closeness of a supplier and its customers (Antwi, 2021).

Relationship marketing theory has developed mainly in the B2B context (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and has identified relationship quality as a fundamental construct in both industrial and business-to-consumer environments due to its ability to influence the relationships' value and performance (Hani et al., 2022). Relationship marketing theory helps to investigate the effects of inter-firm relationship dimensions on performance in B2B environments (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The main purpose of relationship marketing is to foster trust and a respectful relationship between parties to generate sustainable and lasting relationships (Hani et al., 2022). Relationship quality is a key construct in relationship marketing research because high-quality relationships can be an important antecedent of stability, effectiveness, and long-term orientation in these relationships (Jiang et al., 2016).

In the extant literature, relationship quality has been identified as a multi-dimensional construct (Alejandro et al., 2011; Hani et al., 2022). Dwyer and Oh (1987) have considered satisfaction, trust, and opportunism as dimensions of relationship quality, while Crosby et al. (1990) have included only satisfaction and trust as components of relationship quality. De Wulf et al. (2001) later conceptualized relationship quality as a global construct encompassing trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Antwi (2021) emphasized that these three dimensions have become the most cited components of relationship quality. Consequently, following the operationalization of the relationship quality construct most

commonly implemented by previous studies (e.g., Alejandro et al., 2011; Antwi, 2021; Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020; Walter et al., 2003), this study conceptualizes relationship quality as a multi-dimensional construct that includes elements of trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

Trust can be defined as the confidence and willingness of a trading partner to rely on the other party (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). Trust encompasses the belief or expectation of one party regarding the honesty and integrity of the other party in the relationship (Crosby et al., 1990; Walter et al., 2003). Therefore, trust incorporates one party's beliefs that the other party's behavior will meet expectations (Antwi, 2021). According to several authors (e.g., Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Berry, 1995; Silva et al., 2012), trust is usually a key factor in a successful relationship. Trust defines how both relationship partners will relate to each other and take care of the relationship (Lui & Ngo, 2004; Day et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2012).

Commitment can be defined as one party's enduring desire to maintain a relationship with the other business partner (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined commitment as one party's belief that an ongoing relationship with the other party is so important as to expend maximum effort to maintain it. Therefore, commitment entails the purpose of building and maintaining a long-term relationship with the other party (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Walter et al., 2003). Commitment is, as with trust, one of the most extensively examined constructs in relationship marketing research (Crosby et al., 1990; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment are two interrelated elements in B2B markets (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A B2B customer attends to relationship quality with its supplier by developing trust and commitment (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Silva et al., 2012).

Customer satisfaction is defined by Anderson and Narus (1984, p. 66) as a "positive affective state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of a firm's working relationship with another firm". Consequently, customer satisfaction comprises an overall emotional assessment of the performance of the service or product, normally occurring in the post-consumption phase (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020).

The impact of country of origin on relationship quality and perceived product quality

The literature on the COO image applies two main conceptualizations (Dobrucali, 2019). The first one, macro-country image, incorporates associations at the country level, involving the dimensions of economics, politics, and technology (Pegan, Reardon, & Vianelli, 2022). The macro-country image can be defined as "the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country" (Martin & Eroglu, 1993, p. 193). This conceptualization is more appropriate when exploring a country's public image (Pegan et al., 2022). The second conceptualization, micro-country image, concerns the image of a particular product category from a country (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Therefore, micro-country image can be defined as "the total of beliefs one has about the products of a given country" (Nagashima, 1970, p. 68).

The macro-country image can be different from one's attitude towards products from that particular country (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2007). Since COO effects can diverge across product categories, previous studies recommend the investigation of the COO phenomenon across different product types (Ahmed & D'Astous, 1995). In the industrial marketing context, the measure of COO image effects using micro-country image constructs assessed at the product level is the typical focus (Dobrucali, 2019; Pegan et al., 2022). Therefore, this research focuses on micro-country image effects rather than on the more generalized macro-country image effects.

COO incorporates a buyer's evaluative reaction regarding the country where the product is manufactured (Han & Terpstra, 1988; Ferguson et al., 2008), being considered an extrinsic product cue that differs from an intrinsic attribute or physical product characteristic (Han

& Terpstra, 1988; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). Although the concept of a product image may be suitable for COO research in a business-to-consumer environment, in the B2B field, buying and selling is more about relationships than product exchanges (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). Consequently, B2B firms are increasingly willing to relinquish short-term financial gains to maintain long-term customer relationships (Mohan et al., 2021). Fostering strong and solid relationships with their business partners may generate substantial long-term benefits that surpass the short-term financial losses necessary to achieve the desired outcome (Arli, Bauer, & Palmatier, 2018). This premise is a core foundation of relationship marketing theory, where relationship quality constitutes a central tenet (Mohan et al., 2021) and where long-term orientation is crucial (Jiang et al., 2016; Ashnai et al., 2009).

Therefore, in a B2B market context, the conceptualization and measurement of the COO image should be associated more with the supplier-firm level rather than being centered solely on the product (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). Although most research pertaining to the COO in the B2B context places the focus of evaluation on products, similar to the business-to-consumer environment (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Insch, 2003), industrial buyers' interest goes beyond the product level. Industrial buyers value the creation of solid cooperation with the supplier to establish a relationship that acts as a source of knowledge. Thus, when investigating COO effects in industrial market contexts, it is crucial to assess not only the products but also the entire supplier firm (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). However, the conceptualization of the COO image from the perspective of a supplier firm in B2B markets has been almost entirely neglected in previous research (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020).

Industrial buyers typically follow a holistic approach where the supplier's overall assessment is a fundamental part of the procurement process (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). B2B customers frequently interact with suppliers not just to acquire products or services for their operations but mainly to obtain access to critical supplier competencies that they perceive as fundamental and do not themselves possess (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). This suggests that the supplier organization assumes vital importance, and the characteristics of the products that are bought matter to a lesser extent (Qualls & Rosa, 1995).

Consequently, the present research investigates the effects of micro-country image measured at the supplier-firm level. By shifting from products to suppliers as objects of evaluation, we intend to assess the effects of industrial buyers' stereotypical evaluation of the supplier-country image on the supplier-buyer relationship. In line with Jacob and Schätzle (2020, p. 198), we use the term supplier-country image defined as "the image of countries in their role as origins of suppliers for business customers."

One of the main premises of relationship marketing theory is to enhance trust between the parties to foster a sustainable and lasting relationship (Hani et al., 2022). Trust is a fundamental component of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A positive supplier-country image can enhance trust in the supplier. When the supplier-country image evokes competence stereotypical beliefs, buyers tend to perceive the firm as being more trustworthy (Barbarossa & Mandler, 2021). Consequently, we propose that:

H1. Supplier-country image is positively associated with buyers' trust.

The COO image can be crucial in determining international buyers' behavior (Chen et al., 2011). Foreign customers' attitudes and behaviors can result from judgement of a product's legitimacy (Wang et al., 2014). Therefore, the COO image can be more than a cognitive cue for customers to judge product quality (Edwards et al., 2007). The COO image can incorporate both a symbolic and emotional meaning that activates customers' imagery and affective connotations about a specific country (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Previous studies have recommended that COO research in B2B markets should place the focus of analysis on the entire supplier organization instead of only the product level (Bradley, 2001; Jacob & Schätzle, 2020).

In relationship marketing theory, the focus is on building and

maintaining long-term relationships rather than just achieving individual transactions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Commitment is perceived as a crucial dimension for long-term business relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A favorable supplier-country image can lead to greater customer commitment. The reputation and stereotypes inherent in a supplier-country image affect the perceived reliability of a supplier because it is expected that the suppliers' obligations and promises will be fulfilled (Hilman, & Hanaysha, 2015). Consequently, the supplier-country image can act as a relevant evaluation criterion influencing international buyers' commitment (Kim, 1995). Therefore, we propose that:

H2. Supplier-country image is positively associated with buyers' commitment.

Satisfaction can be defined as one facet of the global effect of evaluation of the performance of a service or product (Johnson & Fornell, 1991; Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). When the performance of the product or service matches or exceeds the customer's expectations, higher levels of satisfaction are obtained (Antwi, 2021; Berman, 2005).

Customer satisfaction is a core aspect of relationship marketing (Alejandro et al., 2011). The supplier-country image can influence customer perceptions and expectations, enhancing or decreasing customer satisfaction levels. The reputation intrinsic to a supplier-country image can be transferred across different products and brands originating from that particular country, thereby reinforcing the reliability of the suppliers (Chisik, 2003) and enhancing the levels of customer satisfaction (Hilman & Hanaysha, 2015). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3. Supplier-country image is positively associated with buyers' satisfaction.

The stereotypes inherent in a COO image can shape customer behavior (Barbarossa & Mandler, 2021). Buyers frequently use COO images as an attribute of the product and a cue to infer product quality (Ferguson et al., 2008). Consequently, products or services from countries with a favorable image tend to be perceived as having a positive quality (Han & Terpstra, 1988; Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). The relationship marketing theory emphasizes the importance of delivering superior perceived value to customers to foster stable and long-term relationships (Hani et al., 2022). The COO image can influence the perceived value of the supplier's products (Ferguson et al., 2008). Therefore, buyers frequently use the supplier-country image as an extrinsic product cue to infer the quality of foreign products (Edwards et al., 2007). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4. Supplier-country image is positively associated with perceived product quality.

The impact of relationship quality and perceived product quality on awareness and loyalty

Relationship quality encompasses the strength and intensity of a relationship performing a fundamental role in determining customers' behavioral outcomes (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). The main purpose of relationship marketing is the formation of strong and long relationships to promote value creation for both customers and suppliers (Boulding et al., 2005). Customers maintain a relationship when they expect to obtain positive value from it. Consequently, relationship quality is fundamental in determining customers' involvement and behavior (Nadeem et al., 2020). In B2B markets, obtaining competitive advantages based on product characteristics or price is increasingly difficult (Chen et al., 2011). Therefore, industrial firms try to differentiate themselves from their competitors by enhancing relationship quality (Mohan et al., 2021).

Product or supplier awareness refers to the customer's ability to recall or recognize the product or supplier from comparable products/suppliers in a specific industry (Aaker, 1991). In B2B markets, many suppliers can offer similar products to industrial customers (Chen et al., 2011). Consequently, providing a product or service that embodies

unique and differentiated values that allow industrial buyers to recognize and recall both the product and the supplier has gained paramount importance in the industrial setting (Davis et al., 2008).

Trust can act as a source of brand awareness (Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022). Every brand in the market is established on a foundation of trust (Ganesan, 1994). The key for the survival of a brand or supplier in the marketplace is to create trust (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Previous research has shown that trust is an important predictor of brand equity and of its dimensions, including brand awareness and brand associations (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Fatma, Rahman, & Khan, 2015). Trust fosters deeper engagement with customers, which enhances brand awareness. Since trust incorporates the confidence that one party has in the exchange partner's integrity and reliability (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Silva et al., 2012), higher levels of buyer-seller trust enhance the customer's ability to recall and recognize the supplier from other comparable offers. More formally:

H5a. Trust is positively associated with supplier awareness.

Loyalty refers to a buyer's decision to repeatedly maintain a relationship and to continue to purchase the service or product (Alejandro et al., 2011). Loyalty incorporates a behavioral component, manifested through a repurchase intention and an attitudinal component encompassing the customer's preferences, attitudes, and impressions regarding the product or service (Sheth & Mittal, 2003). Customer loyalty generates substantial marketing advantages including profitability, cost reduction, and positive word-of-mouth (Chen et al., 2011).

Constructing customer loyalty in a B2B context is about nurturing the quality of the supplier-buyer relationship (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Trust, perceived as one party's confidence in the other exchange party (Antwi, 2021), is a fundamental component in the development of relationship quality in B2B markets and for the achievement of buyer loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Relationship marketing theory is constructed on the foundation of trust (Berry, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A fundamental premise of relationship marketing theory is that, by fostering trust, suppliers can enhance relationship quality and build deeper and more meaningful relationships with their customers, leading to long-term relationships (Hani et al., 2022). Therefore, since trust encompasses the belief that the exchange partner's behavior will be aligned with one's expectations, a customer's trust is considered a crucial antecedent of repurchase intentions (Qureshi et al., 2009). Thus, trust enhances the quality of the relationship and fosters both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Chiou & Droge, 2006). Therefore, we propose that:

H5b. Trust is positively associated with customer loyalty.

Commitment refers to one party's belief that the ongoing relationship with the exchange partner is so important that it deserves efforts to ensure its maintenance (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, the customer is willing to continue to invest resources to sustain a long-term relationship with the business supplier (Hilman, & Hanaysha, 2015). Higher levels of customer commitment involve stronger levels of customer engagement and interactions with the brand or supplier, leading to a stronger brand awareness (Hutter et al., 2013; Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022). Consequently, commitment has been shown to play a significant role in enhancing brand awareness (Hutter et al., 2013). Therefore, a customer's commitment to a relationship leverages the customer's ability to recall and recognize the supplier from comparable suppliers in a specific industry. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H6a. Commitment is positively associated with supplier awareness.

Commitment encompasses an emotional sense and the creation of a strong bond with the exchange partner and is, therefore, able to significantly influence a customer's behavioral intention (Antwi, 2021). Customer commitment is paramount in maintaining a long and solid relationship (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). Consequently, commitment is recognized as a central construct in relationship marketing theory (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Commitment

incorporates a customer's willingness to build and maintain a long-term relationship with the supplier, and this long-term orientation leads to sustained loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Walter et al., 2003). Commitment can foster favorable word-of-mouth – a manifestation of attitudinal loyalty – and stimulate future purchase intentions, demonstrating behavioral loyalty (Alejandro et al., 2011). Therefore, customer commitment is an essential determinant of customer loyalty (Amoako et al., 2019). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H6b. Commitment is positively associated with customer loyalty.

Satisfaction involves the global emotional evaluation associated with the performance of the product or service provider (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). Consequently, high levels of satisfaction can promote favorable attitudes towards the product or service and enhance the development of long-term relationships (Hsu et al., 2010). Satisfied customers tend to develop favorable associations with the supplier, which contribute to leveraging the supplier's awareness (Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022; Pappu & Quester, 2006). Consequently, the level of satisfaction has been considered a relevant factor in explaining variations in brand awareness (Pappu & Quester, 2006). The overall awareness of a supplier is strongly associated with a favorable predisposition toward this supplier (Paswan & Ganesh, 2003). Therefore, satisfaction is considered a crucial factor in building brand awareness (Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Marell, 2015). Since satisfaction plays a crucial role in encouraging behaviors and judging attributes (Mangus et al., 2022), higher levels of customer satisfaction can enhance the buyer's ability to recall and recognize the supplier from industry competitors. Therefore, we propose that:

H7a. Satisfaction is positively associated with supplier awareness.

Relationship marketing theory emphasizes the importance of building long-term relationships, pointing to customer satisfaction as a critical element in nurturing these long-term relationships (Hani et al., 2022; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Satisfaction is recognized as a critical antecedent of customer retention (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Satisfaction increases the customer's perception of value (Alejandro et al., 2011), fostering the customer's desire to maintain a stable and durable relationship with the business partner (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020). Thus, satisfaction tends to influence a customer's overall attitude and repurchase intentions (Antwi, 2021) because it is seen as a driver of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Chiou & Droge, 2006). Therefore, we propose that:

H7b. Satisfaction is positively associated with customer loyalty.

Perceived product quality incorporates intangible judgments, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the quality of a product or service (Foroudi et al., 2018). Therefore, perceived product quality involves the customer's evaluation of a service or product compared to other alternatives (Sürücü et al., 2019). Perceived product quality has been considered an important source of brand equity in both consumer and industrial contexts (Chen & Su, 2011). When customers evaluate a product compared to other products in the competitive set, they are more able to recognize the differences between them (Nguyen, Barrett & Miller, 2011). Therefore, we contend that perceived quality facilitates the customer's ability to recall and recognize the supplier from industry competitors. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H8a. Perceived product quality is positively associated with supplier awareness.

Relationship marketing theory focuses on the creation of long-term customer relationships (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Perceived quality is crucial in this context because it significantly enhances customer loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Perceived quality is an important driver of favorable attitudes towards the product or service (Fatima, Jahanzeb, & Mohsin, 2013), resulting from the judgement of customers on the product or service attributes that are meaningful to them (Nguyen, Barrett, & Miller, 2011). Customers tend to select products or services that make them feel secure. Consequently, the higher the perceived quality, the more likely the intention to repurchase (Foroudi et al., 2018). Therefore, perceived quality can drive customer loyalty (Madadi,

Torres & Zúñiga, 2021; Nguyen, Barrett, & Miller, 2011). Thus, we propose that:

H8b. Perceived product quality is positively associated with customer loyalty.

Fig. 1 presents an overview of our conceptual model.

3. Method

Sample and data collection

This study uses data from international industrial customers of the Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products, and furniture industries. Although targeting a larger number of sectors would have had the benefit of increasing generalizability, this was not possible due to the research design. Unlike typical studies using online surveys, the research team did not directly send invitations to industrial customers. Instead, initial contacts were established with sectoral business associations and specific companies in the targeted industries. After a request for collaboration from these business associations, the companies distributed survey invitations to their industrial customers. Data were collected by implementing an international survey, launched in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. The questionnaire was developed after an extensive review of the previous literature to detect measures with the potential to capture the constructs of interest. The questionnaire was prepared in English and then translated into Portuguese, Spanish, and French. It was checked for accuracy following the conventional back-translation process. The questionnaire was pre-tested to evaluate its clarity using eight semi-structured in-depth field interviews directed to Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products, and furniture suppliers. Some interviews incorporated suggestions into the final version of the questionnaire to improve readability and understanding.

The final questionnaires (in those four languages) were made available online. The links were e-mailed to Portuguese footwear, molds, and wood products, and furniture industries producers requesting that they send these to their international customers. In the end, the online survey was sent by trade associations representative of these sectors to associates that forwarded the request, respectively to 679 international customers from footwear, 434 international customers from molds, and 188 international customers from wood products and furniture. Given that the survey was launched through third parties, it was not possible to send reminders after the first invitation. The final sample consisted of 182 usable questionnaires, resulting in an effective response rate of 14.0 %. This is comparable to similar studies, where a survey is sent to companies to be answered by their customers (e.g., Theron et al., 2008; Müller et al., 2018). To determine the minimum required sample size, we utilized the G*Power software version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009), applying parameters appropriate to this study as recommended by Hair et al. (2017a). Specifically, we employed an F-test with linear multiple regression, a fixed model, and R² deviation from zero, with a test power of 95 %, an error probability of 0.05, and an effect size (f²) of 0.15. This analysis indicated a required minimum sample size of 159 (Hair et al., 2017a). Based on these guidelines, the sample size of this research, comprising 182 responses, was deemed adequate to conduct statistical analysis.

The sample characteristics are organized in Table 1. A total of 79 respondents were from the footwear industry, 68 were from the molds industry, and 35 from the furniture and wood products industry. We collected responses from industrial customers (importers and distributors) originating from 28 different countries. Most respondents (61.0 %) were companies with less than 50 employees, and approximately 74.7 % show a global turnover below 10 million euros. Most respondents were buying footwear or molds from Portuguese suppliers for seven or more years (54.9 %), 29.7 % of the respondents for 4–6 years, and 15.4 % for less than three years.

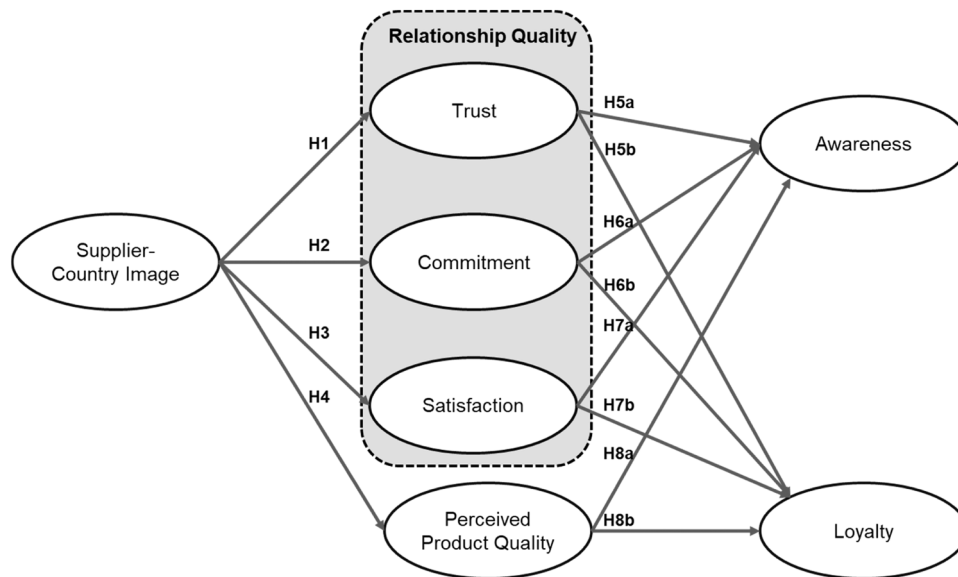


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of country-of-origin effects on relationship quality.

Table 1
Sample Profile.

Characteristics	N	%	Characteristics	N	%
Industry			Experience as an importer of Portuguese Industry		
Footwear	98	53.9	0–3 years	28	15.4
Molds	49	26.9	4–6 years	54	29.7
Furniture and wood products	35	19.2	7–10 years	44	24.1
			11–20 years	28	15.4
			> 20 years	28	15.4
Turnover			Country		
< 500.000€	23	12.6	France	40	22.0
500.001€ – 2.000.000€	56	30.8	Spain	28	15.4
2.000.001€ – 10.000.000€	57	31.3	Germany	24	13.2
10.00.001€ – 35.000.000€	22	12.1	Belgium	13	7.1
35.000.001€ – 50.000.000€	10	5.5	Netherlands	13	7.1
> 50.000.000€	14	7.7	UK	12	6.6
Number of Employees			Greece	4	2.2
< 10 employees	45	24.7	Switzerland	4	2.2
11–50 employees	66	36.3	Poland	4	2.2
51–100 employees	18	9.9	Denmark	4	2.2
101–250 employees	15	8.2	Other Countries	36	19.8
> 250 employees	38	20.9			

Measures

We relied on the existing literature to identify multi-item scales that were adapted to the context of the present study. Respondents were asked to assess their level of agreement with each statement using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”), with 4 representing “Neither agree nor disagree”. A summary of the operationalization of the endogenous and exogenous variables, as well as the validity and reliability indices, is presented in Table 2.

The *supplier-country image* measure is a 5-item scale adapted from Chen et al. (2011) and initially developed by Pisharodi and Parameswaran (1992). The measure of *customer trust* was adapted from Walter et al. (2003), and is a 6-item scale that was previously developed by Kumar et al. (1995) and Ganesan (1994). These items were related to welfare, competence, discretion, and honesty. *Customer commitment* was

measured using a 6-item scale adapted from Walter et al. (2003). In line with the previous definition that emphasizes the intention to build and maintain a long-term relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Walter et al., 2003), the items explore the attachment, care, and investment that industrial customers put in the relationships with Portuguese suppliers. *Customer satisfaction* was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Lam et al. (2004), and the items considered the overall degree of satisfaction with Portuguese suppliers. The measure of *perceived product quality* was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Van Riel et al. (2005) and was already used in the context of international B2B research (e.g., Chen et al., 2011). The measure of *customer loyalty* was adapted from Lam et al. (2004); it is a scale with four items originally developed for a B2B context. On the other hand, *supplier awareness* was measured using a 3-item scale, adapted from Davis et al. (2008).

To minimize the spuriousness of results, other factors that may influence customer loyalty and product awareness were included as control variables – namely, nationality (*European country*), industry, and firm size (*firm size (sales)*, *firm size (employees)*). First, we account for the nationality of the B2B customers using a dummy variable: respondents from European countries were classified as “1” and respondents from non-European countries as “0”. This variable was designated by *European country*. There is some research supporting the view that customers’ country may lead to differences in the loyalty of B2B customers (e.g., Paparoidamis et al., 2019) and supplier awareness (e.g., Schätzle & Jacob, 2019).

The industry type and its usual practices can also impact customer loyalty and supplier awareness. Evidence shows that the sector may influence customer loyalty (e.g., Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Stock & Zacharias, 2013). Since our sample included B2B customers from three industries, we included *industry* as a dummy variable, where footwear industry buyers were classified as “1” and both mold and wood products and furniture industries buyers as “0”.

Moreover, we consider the firm size of the buyers as a variable that can affect supplier awareness and customer loyalty. Firm size can be understood as a proxy for buyer power and, therefore, the buyer’s disposition to switch suppliers can reduce customer loyalty and supplier awareness (Barry et al., 2008; Wathne et al., 2001). Redondo and Fierro (2007) found that larger B2B customers show less long-term orientation with their suppliers than smaller customers. On the contrary, there is evidence showing that the firm size can have a positive relationship with customer loyalty in B2B markets (e.g., Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Stock & Zacharias, 2013; Wu et al., 2015) and to supplier awareness (Xie &

Table 2
Measurement scales.

CONSTRUCT	Standardized Factor Loading
SUPPLIER-COUNTRY IMAGE ($\alpha=0.876/CR=0.879/AVE=0.708$)	
Portuguese suppliers are well educated.*	-
Portuguese suppliers are hard working.	0.874
Portuguese suppliers achieve high standards.	0.893
Portuguese suppliers raised standard of living.*	-
Portuguese suppliers have technical skills.	0.750
CUSTOMER TRUST ($\alpha=0.925/CR=0.927/AVE=0.718$)	
When making important decisions, the Portuguese suppliers are concerned about our welfare.	0.731
We can rely on the Portuguese suppliers handling critical information on our company confidentially.	0.890
When we have an important requirement, we can depend on the Portuguese supplier's support.	0.878
We are convinced that this customer performs its tasks professionally.	0.883
The Portuguese suppliers are not always honest with us (Reverse scored).*	-
We can count on the supplier's promises made to our firm.	0.845
CUSTOMER COMMITMENT ($\alpha=0.892/CR=0.902/AVE=0.700$)	
We feel good when we buy Portuguese molds/ footwear/ furniture.	-
We feel emotionally attached to Portuguese molds/ footwear/furniture.	-
We care about the long-term success of this professional relationship.	0.823
We are loyal buyer of Portuguese molds/footwear/ furniture.	0.773
We focus on long-term goals in the relationship with Portuguese suppliers.	0.842
We are willing to invest time and other resources in the relationship with Portuguese suppliers.	0.813
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ($\alpha=0.907/CR=0.905/AVE=0.706$)	
Overall, my company is very satisfied with its relationship with Portuguese suppliers.	0.873
Overall, Portuguese suppliers are good companies to do business with.	0.802
Overall, Portuguese suppliers treat my company fairly.	0.797
Overall, the service of Portuguese suppliers comes up to my expectations.	0.885
PERCEIVED PRODUCT QUALITY ($\alpha=0.867/CR=0.877/AVE=0.704$)	
The shoes/molds/furniture manufactured in Portugal are very high quality.	0.911
The products manufactured in Portugal have excellent development lead time.	0.862
The shoes/molds/furniture manufactured in Portugal are innovative.	0.909
CUSTOMER LOYALTY ($\alpha=0.895/CR=0.894/AVE=0.679$)	
I've said positive things about Portuguese footwear/molds to other professional colleagues.	0.816
I've recommended Portuguese footwear/molds to other professional colleagues who seek my advice.	0.806
My company considers Portuguese footwear/molds as its first choice for footwear/molds production.	0.899
My company will do more business with Portuguese suppliers in next few years.	0.770
SUPPLIER AWARENESS ($\alpha=0.891/CR=0.903/AVE=0.756$)	
Portuguese footwear/molds/furniture is well known in the footwear/molds industry.	0.855
Portuguese footwear/molds/furniture suppliers are recognized as strong trading partners.	0.924
Portuguese footwear/molds/furniture suppliers make the purchase process easier.	0.826
Overall structural model fit: $\chi^2_{(276)} = 674,17$; $\chi^2/df = 2.44$; PCFI = 0.77; CFI = 0.91; IFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.08.	

Notes:

* -This item was deleted during the scale purification process; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

Zheng, 2020). We control firm size by including two categorical variables: *firm size (sales)* and *firm size (employees)*.

Details of the measurement items and their validity assessment are presented in Table 2.

Non-response and common method bias

Non-response bias was assessed by wave analysis, which compares the first wave of respondents (early 117 respondents – 64.3 %) with the second wave of respondents (late 65 respondents – 35.7 %). The *t-tests* on the latent variables and demographics revealed no significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between these two groups of respondents, suggesting that non-response bias is not a problem in our sample (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

Since we measured all the latent variables using the same self-reported survey instrument, common method bias (CMB) must be considered. Following the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Podsakoff et al. (2012), several procedural precautions were employed when designing the questionnaire. To reduce the social desirability bias, the questions were sorted differently from the conceptual framework organization: some of the questions related to the dependent variables were asked before those related to the independent variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Kock, 2015). Additionally, we used different scale anchors for the dependent and independent variables. Moreover, we did not reveal the specific purpose of our study, and we assured full anonymity of the responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, all the scales described the extreme values (1 and 7) and the central value (4).

In addition to these preventive procedures, we conducted the marker variable test, according to the recommendations of Lindell and Whitney (2001). The survey included a question about the respondents' experience of importing (measured using a categorical variable with years), which is unrelated to the variables used in this research. The CMB would justify the amount of correlation between this variable and the other variables included in the model. The average correlation between the marker variable and the focus variables in the model is 0.09, ranging from 0.055 and 0.133, and these correlations are not significant. Following the procedures suggested by Lindell and Whitney (2001), we used the second lowest correlation ($rM=0.03$) and calculated a correlation matrix adjusted for CMB. The results of the marker variable test indicate that the significance of the correlations of the focus variables remained highly consistent and that the differences between the original and the adjusted correlation matrix is minimal ($\Delta r = 0.034$) (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2006). Based on this outcome, we conclude that CMB does not bias the results of this research.

4. Analysis and results

Measurement model

The data were analyzed with SPSS AMOS 29.0, and the two-stage approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was followed. First, the reliability and validity of the scales were analyzed through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using the maximum likelihood estimate as suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999). The choice to employ this covariance-based method was primarily driven by its suitability for theory testing (Hair et al., 2017a), which is why we decided to exclude all the items that showed loadings below 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; 2012). Table 2 exhibits the standardized factor loadings for all the items, along with the validity and reliability indicators for all the latent variables.

The reliability and validity of the multi-item latent variables in the model were assessed in several phases. First, the reliability of the latent variables was examined using composite reliability (Bagozzi, 1980). As presented in Table 2, the composite reliability (CR) values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 for all the latent variables (Nunnally,

1978; Bagozzi, 1980; Hair et al., 2018; Bagozzi & Yi, 2012), suggesting that all the latent variables are reliable.

Second, the convergent validity of the latent variables was confirmed using two criteria suggested by Hulland (1999) and Churchill (1979): all the item loadings should be significant and higher than 0.70, and the AVE by each latent variable should be above 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; 2012; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). By following an iterative process, the standardized factor loadings that did not achieve the 0.70 threshold were excluded (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; 2012). As presented in Table 2, five items were dropped because they showed loadings below this rule of thumb. The AVE, which represents the extent to which the group of item variances is explained by the latent variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), exceeds the recommended value of 0.5 for all variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Third, we assessed discriminant validity by comparing the correlation between all pairs of latent variables with the square root of the AVE for each latent variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Besides presenting the descriptive statistics of each variable, Table 3 indicates that the condition is fulfilled for all the latent variables because the numbers in the main diagonal (square root of AVE) are higher than the correlations between the latent variables (values below the main diagonal). Overall, the results indicate that our measures have good reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

To assess the overall CFA model fit for the baseline model, we analyzed several well-known fit indicators (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2018; Kline, 2005). Although the chi-square (χ^2) statistic produced a value of 674.17 with $df=276$ and a p-value of 0.000, the normed chi-square (χ^2/df) indicates a good fit ($\chi^2/df=2.44$), since it is well below the threshold of 3.0 (Iacobucci, 2010; Kline, 2005). Moreover, the other fit indicators yield values above 0.90 (Hair et al., 2018), which is the threshold for good fit: comparative fit index (CFI = 0.91) and incremental fit index (IFI = 0.91). In addition, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) has a value of 0.08, which falls within the acceptable range to consider that the model presents a good fit (Hair et al., 2018).

Structural model

To test the hypotheses of the conceptual framework, we developed two competing models. In Model 1, we only considered perceived product quality as a mediating variable between supplier-country image and both supplier awareness and customer loyalty. In Model 2, we included the three dimensions of relationship quality as additional mediators. The standardized estimates for the parameters, as well as the p-values, the explained variance of dependent variables (R^2), and the fit indices for both models are presented in Table 4.

The assessment of the structural models also shows a good fit for both

Model 1 ($\chi^2_{(100)} = 278,27$; $\chi^2/df = 2.78$; PCFI = 0.67; CFI = 0.92; IFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.09) and Model 2 ($\chi^2_{(320)} = 718,26$; $\chi^2/df = 2.24$; PCFI = 0.62; CFI = 0.90; IFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.08.).

As for the hypotheses, in Model 2 (with all the variables), the analysis of the impact of the supplier-country image on the relationship quality dimensions reveals support for the three dimensions – namely, buyers' trust ($\beta=0.747$, $p < 0.001$), buyers' commitment ($\beta=0.663$, $p < 0.001$), and buyers' satisfaction ($\beta=0.889$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Moreover, the supplier-country image exhibits a positive and significant relationship with perceived product quality ($\beta=0.835$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4.

As for the links between the relationship quality dimensions and supplier awareness, the results differ: while customer trust and satisfaction are positively related ($\beta=0.330$, $p < 0.001$ and $\beta=0.495$, $p < 0.001$, respectively), customer commitment does not show a significant relationship ($\beta=-0.033$, $p = 0.574$). Hence, H5a and H7a are supported, and H6a is not. Similarly, regarding the connections between the relationship quality dimensions and customer loyalty, the results are also divergent: both customer trust ($\beta=0.267$, $p < 0.001$) and customer commitment ($\beta=0.342$, $p < 0.001$) are significant, whereas customer satisfaction does not show significance ($\beta=0.058$, $p = 0.468$). Therefore, H5b and H6b are supported, and H7b is not supported.

The hypothesized relationships between perceived product quality, supplier awareness, and customer loyalty display an interesting pattern. If we exclude the effect of the relationship quality dimensions (Model 1), these relationships are positive and strongly significant (supplier awareness: $\beta=0.682$, $p < 0.001$; customer loyalty: $\beta=0.620$, $p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, when we simultaneously include the dimensions of relationship quality as determinants of supplier awareness and customer loyalty, both of these relationships lose strength and one of them becomes non-significant: supplier awareness ($\beta=0.114$, $p = 0.156$). However, customer loyalty remains positive and significant ($\beta=0.190$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the results do not support H8a but support H8b.

Concerning the control variables, only three of the relationships achieve significant values. First, the industry dummy shows negative relationship with both supplier awareness ($\beta=-0.129$, $p < 0.01$) and customer loyalty ($\beta=-0.136$, $p < 0.01$), meaning that the effects on supplier awareness and customer loyalty are not independent of the industry. This result seems to support the idea that the international customers of the footwear industry are less aware of Portuguese suppliers than those from the molds and wood products and furniture industries. Similarly, we may advance to the conclusion that loyalty in the footwear industry is lower than in the other industries. Second, there is a positive relationship between the dummy for customers from European countries and supplier awareness ($\beta=0.174$, $p < 0.001$). This can be interpreted as European customers being more aware of Portuguese suppliers than non-European customers.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Supplier-country image	0.841										
2. Commitment	0.666**	0.837									
3. Satisfaction	0.686**	0.673**	0.840								
4. Trust	0.562**	0.617**	0.666**	0.847							
5. Perceived Product Quality	0.679**	0.639**	0.642**	0.589**	0.839						
6. Customer Loyalty	0.663**	0.710**	0.651**	0.678**	0.618**	0.824					
7. Supplier Awareness	0.686**	0.652**	0.718**	0.707**	0.590**	0.646**	0.869				
8. Firm size (employees)	0.127 ^{ns}	0.232*	0.187*	0.260**	0.124 ^{ns}	0.161*	0.217**	-			
9. Firm size (sales)	0.155*	0.271**	0.164*	0.216**	0.142 ^{ns}	0.148*	0.230**	0.669**	-		
10. Industry	-0.248**	-0.325**	-0.281**	-0.318**	-0.215**	-0.318**	-0.392**	-0.414**	-0.222**	-	
11. European Country	-0.028 ^{ns}	-0.017 ^{ns}	-0.096 ^{ns}	-0.027 ^{ns}	-0.069 ^{ns}	-0.001 ^{ns}	0.077 ^{ns}	-0.081 ^{ns}	-0.179*	-0.107 ^{ns}	-
Mean	5.34	5.60	5.30	5.21	4.92	5.32	5.00	-	-	-	-
Standard Deviation	1.00	1.08	1.11	1.12	1.17	1.40	1.29	-	-	-	-

Note: The boldface scores on the diagonal are the square root of AVE.

* $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$; ns= not significant.

Table 4
Hypotheses testing results.

	Hyp.	Model 1			Model 2		
		Standardized Estimate	p-value	R ²	Standardized Estimate	p-value	R ²
Supplier-country image → Trust	H1				0.747***	0.000	0.558
Supplier-country image → Commitment	H2				0.663***	0.000	0.440
Supplier-country image → Satisfaction	H3				0.889***	0.000	0.790
Supplier-country image → Perceived Product Quality	H4	0.819***	0.000	0.670	0.835***	0.000	0.696
Trust → Supplier Awareness	H5a				0.330**	0.000	
Commitment → Supplier Awareness	H6a				-0.033	0.574	
Satisfaction → Supplier Awareness	H7a				0.495***	0.000	
Perceived Product Quality → Supplier Awareness	H8a	0.682***	0.000	0.646	0.114	0.156	0.786
Trust → Customer Loyalty	H5b				0.267***	0.000	
Commitment → Customer Loyalty	H6b				0.342***	0.000	
Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty	H7b				0.058	0.468	
Perceived Product Quality → Customer Loyalty	H8b	0.620***	0.000	0.533	0.190*	0.012	0.575
<i>Control Variables</i>							
Size (employees) → Supplier Awareness	-	-0.010	0.894		-0.065	0.295	
Size (employees) → Customer Loyalty	-	0.054	0.443		-0.017	0.770	
Size (sales) → Supplier Awareness	-	0.103	0.152		0.092	0.117	
Size (sales) → Customer Loyalty	-	0.004	0.947		-0.024	0.664	
Industry → Supplier Awareness	-	-0.229***	0.000		-0.129**	0.010	
Industry → Customer Loyalty	-	-0.235**	0.000		-0.136**	0.004	
European Country → Supplier Awareness	-	0.144**	0.008		0.174***	0.000	
European Country → Customer Loyalty	-	0.004	0.937		0.018	0.667	
Overall structural model fit:	-	$\chi^2_{(100)} = 278,27; \chi^2/df = 2.78;$			$\chi^2_{(320)} = 718,26; \chi^2/df = 2.24;$		
		PCFI = 0.67; CFI = 0.92; IFI = 0.92;			PCFI = 0.62; CFI = 0.90; IFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.08.		
		RMSEA = 0.09.					

Note: t-values are significant at
 * $p < 0.05$,
 ** $p < 0.01$,
 *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

Robustness checks

One of the major distinctions between the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) that we used and an alternative method, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), is that CB-SEM is more suitable for theory confirmation, whereas PLS-SEM is primarily used for prediction and theory development (Henseler et al., 2014; Sarstedt et al., 2016; Dash & Paul, 2021). Since one of the arguments of this study is that some of the relationships have not been hypothesized before in the B2B context, this makes PLS-SEM an appropriate methodological choice (Hair et al., 2017a) in order to explore the complementarity of these approaches (Joreskog, & Wold, 1982; Hair et al., 2017b).

To test the robustness of our results, the data were analyzed using the PLS-SEM approach, by applying the SmartPLS 4.0 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2022) to estimate both the measurement and structural models. As regards the measurement model, we followed all the procedures to guarantee that the latent variables meet all the requirements related to the reliability and validity of the multi-item latent variables (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2012).

To test the model fit (Hair et al., 2012), three criteria were used: i) the explained variance of the endogenous variables (R^2), ii) the predictive validity, and iii) the effect size (f^2). The non-parametric bootstrapping technique was used to test the significance of the PLS parameter estimates (Hair et al., 2012). In line with the recommendations of Chin (1998), we used 5000 bootstrap re-samples of the same size (number of observations) to estimate t-values and standard errors.

As regards the explained variance, all the endogenous latent variables reveal values above the threshold of 0.10 defined by Falk and Miller (1992): $R^2_{\text{trust}} = 0.317$; $R^2_{\text{commitment}} = 0.450$; $R^2_{\text{satisfaction}} = 0.474$; $R^2_{\text{perceived product quality}} = 0.461$; $R^2_{\text{supplier awareness}} = 0.675$; and $R^2_{\text{customer loyalty}} = 0.625$. If we consider the classification of Hair et al. (2011, p. 145), which argues that “ R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, or 0.25 for endogenous variables in the structural model can be described as substantial, moderate, or weak, respectively,” all the variables

demonstrate a weak level of explained variance, except for supplier awareness and customer loyalty, which show a moderate level.

As for the predictive validity, the Stone-Geisser test (Q^2) was analyzed for all the endogenous variables by performing the PLS predict procedure (Vinzi et al., 2010). Since all the Q^2 values were higher than 0.0 (ranging from 0.307 for trust to 0.468 for satisfaction), the inner model demonstrates high predictive relevance (Chin, 1998).

Finally, the effect sizes (f^2) of the independent variables on each endogenous variable were also computed. By following the standards suggested by Cohen (1988), if the f^2 values are above 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, the effects are small, medium, and large. We found that supplier-country image has large effect sizes on customer commitment ($f^2 = 0.819$), customer trust ($f^2 = 0.465$), customer satisfaction ($f^2 = 0.901$), and perceived product quality ($f^2 = 0.856$). As regards the dimensions of relationship quality, customer trust has small effect sizes on both supplier awareness ($f^2 = 0.130$) and customer loyalty ($f^2 = 0.104$); customer commitment also has small effect sizes on both customer loyalty ($f^2 = 0.133$) and supplier awareness ($f^2 = 0.019$); customer satisfaction also has a small effect size on customer loyalty ($f^2 = 0.017$) and a medium effect on supplier awareness ($f^2 = 0.158$). The effect sizes of perceived product quality are small or marginal for customer loyalty ($f^2 = 0.025$) and supplier awareness ($f^2 = 0.010$), respectively.

To replicate the hypothesis testing already conducted using CB-SEM, we also computed two alternative models (Table 5), where Model 1 only includes perceived product quality as a mediating variable between supplier-country image and both outcome variables, and Model 2 also considers all the dimensions of relationship quality as additional mediators.

The results were very similar to those already achieved using CB-SEM. For instance, in Model 2, the supplier-country image is positively associated with both perceived product quality ($\beta = 0.679$, $p < 0.001$) and the set of relationship quality dimensions: buyers’ trust ($\beta = 0.563$, $p < 0.001$), buyers’ commitment ($\beta = 0.671$, $p < 0.001$), and buyers’ satisfaction ($\beta = 0.688$, $p < 0.001$).

Moreover, all the relationship quality dimensions are positively related to customer loyalty, namely customer trust ($\beta = 0.291$,

Table 5
Hypotheses testing results using SmartPLS.

	Hyp.	Standardized Estimate	Model 1		Model 2	
			p-value	R ²	Standardized Estimate	p-value
<i>Direct Effects</i>						
Supplier-country image → Trust	H1				0.563***	0.000 0.317
Supplier-country image → Commitment	H2				0.671***	0.000 0.450
Supplier-country image → Satisfaction	H3				0.688***	0.000 0.474
Supplier-country image → Perceived Product Quality	H4	0.680***	0.000	0.462	0.679***	0.000 0.461
Trust → Supplier Awareness	H5a				0.303**	0.000
Commitment → Supplier Awareness	H6a				0.122	0.098
Satisfaction → Supplier Awareness	H7a				0.358***	0.000
Perceived Product Quality → Supplier Awareness	H8a	0.540***	0.000	0.459	0.083	0.225 0.675
Trust → Customer Loyalty	H5b				0.291***	0.000
Commitment → Customer Loyalty	H6b				0.348***	0.000
Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty	H7b				0.125*	0.049
Perceived Product Quality → Customer Loyalty	H8b	0.585***	0.000	0.437	0.141	0.051 0.625
<i>Mediation Effects</i>						
Supplier-country image → Trust → Supplier Awareness					0.171***	0.000
Supplier-country image → Commitment → Supplier Awareness					0.082	0.107
Supplier-country image → Satisfaction → Supplier Awareness					0.246***	0.000
Supplier-country image → Perceived Product Quality → Supplier Awareness		0.367***	0.000		0.056	0.238
Supplier-country image → Trust → Customer Loyalty					0.164***	0.000
Supplier-country image → Commitment → Customer Loyalty					0.234***	0.000
Supplier-country image → Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty					0.086	0.053
Supplier-country image → Perceived Product Quality → Customer Loyalty		0.397***	0.000		0.096	0.065
<i>Control Variables</i>						
Size (employees) → Supplier Awareness	-	-0.033	0.679		-0.084	0.151
Size (employees) → Customer Loyalty	-	0.017	0.833		-0.029	0.628
Size (sales) → Supplier Awareness	-	0.140	0.065		0.106	0.056
Size (sales) → Customer Loyalty	-	0.026	0.709		-0.041	0.480
Industry → Supplier Awareness	-	-0.504***	0.000		-0.273**	0.010
Industry → Customer Loyalty	-	-0.380**	0.002		-0.129	0.199
European Country → Supplier Awareness	-	0.332**	0.010		0.376***	0.000
European Country → Customer Loyalty	-	0.040	0.806		0.038	0.775

Note: t-values are significant at

- * ρ < 0.05,
- ** ρ < 0.01,
- *** ρ < 0.001 (two-tailed test).

p < 0.001), customer commitment (β = 0.348, p < 0.001), and customer satisfaction (β = 0.125, p = 0.049). On the other hand, when we analyze the association with supplier awareness, the results differ: both customer trust and customer satisfaction are positively related (β = 0.303, p < 0.001 and β = 0.358, p < 0.001, respectively), while customer commitment does not exhibit a significant relationship (β = 0.122, p = 0.098).

The most relevant difference compared to the results of the CB-SEM approach concerns the hypothesized relationships between perceived product quality and the two outcome variables: supplier awareness and customer loyalty. In the absence of the relationship quality dimensions (Model 1), these relationships are positive and highly significant (supplier awareness: β = 0.540, p < 0.001; customer loyalty: β = 0.585, p < 0.001). However, when the relationship quality dimensions are included as co-determinants of supplier awareness and customer loyalty, the strength of these relationships decreases substantially and becomes non-significant (supplier awareness: β = 0.083, p = 0.225; customer loyalty: β = 0.141, p = 0.051), which represents an even more profound change than the one we identified using the CB-SEM approach.

5. Conclusions, implications and future research

Discussion and implications

In this study, we investigated the effect of supplier-country image on international customers' perceptions of both perceived product quality and relationship quality, in a B2B market environment. In the current landscape of industrial marketing, the significance of the COO image is

at an all-time high because every intermediated good involved in the production process is highly susceptible to the COO effect, driven by the growing globalization of production (Dobrucali, 2019). However, previous research has neglected to examine the effects of the COO image in the specific setting of the B2B environment (Leonidou & Hultman, 2019; Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). Besides being considered an under-explored research theme, findings of COO effects in B2B markets are often contradictory (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020). In the previous literature, one line of thought questions the importance of the COO image in industrial markets (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Edwards et al., 2007), suggesting that industrial buyers might be less affected by and responsive to country-related information (Ahmed & D'Astous, 1995). However, another perspective argues that the COO image is highly significant in industrial markets because, as production processes become more globally integrated, understanding industrial buyers' attitudes to global products becomes increasingly important (Dobrucali, 2019; Ghauri, & Cateora, 2014). In the current investigation, we have argued and found empirical evidence that supplier-country image is relevant for international management activities in B2B markets. This finding contradicts the line of thought in previous studies that raises doubts on the importance of the COO image in industrial markets (Ahmed & D'Astous, 1995; Edwards et al., 2007), and it provides support for the perspective that defends the prominence of the COO image effect in the B2B context (Dobrucali, 2019; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

This study intends to contribute to expanding current knowledge on the impact of supplier-country image and to improve understanding of the COO image's ability to shape B2B customers' perceptions of both perceived product quality and relationship quality. We were also able to

realize that more and more, in today's highly competitive environment, relationship quality has become a main strategic priority in the industrial context (Nadeem & Al-Imamy, 2020), sometimes even going beyond the traditional requirements as for perceived product quality, which even though remains a traditional building block of COO. Consequently, it is essential to extend the investigation of the COO effects beyond the product scope and assess the relationship domain. In the industrial setting, the COO is not just having repercussions over products assessment but also over the capacity to develop good relationships with the suppliers of that country. The image of a country reflects not only on the quality of the goods it produces but also on the quality of the relationships that can be established with its businesspeople, a finding that aligns with Suter et al. (2021) and Diamantopoulos et al. (2017).

While the conventional concept of product image may be appropriate for COO research in a business-to-consumer setting, in the B2B market, as the process of buying and selling is more focused on relationships than on the exchange of products (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020), the overall idea of relationship quality gains relevance. Previous research of the COO image in B2B markets has mainly been focused on the product as the object of evaluation, similarly to business-to-consumer research (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Wang et al., 2014). Although most research on COO in the B2B context focuses on product evaluation, similar to the business-to-consumer environment (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011; Insch, 2003), industrial buyers' interests should extend beyond the product level. Consequently, in the industrial market context, the measurement of the COO image should be more closely linked to the supplier firm level rather than solely focused on the product (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). However, previous research has almost entirely overlooked the conceptualization of the COO image from a supplier-firm level perspective in B2B markets (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020).

As such, the current study explores the effects of the micro-country image measured at the supplier-firm level. By focusing on suppliers rather than products as objects of evaluation, we aim to evaluate how industrial buyers' stereotypical perceptions of the supplier-country image impact the supplier-buyer relationship. The novelty of our findings lies in suggesting that, in an industrial context, supplier-country image affects not only the perceived product quality but also the relationship quality dimensions of trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Therefore, in addition to being used as an extrinsic product cue to make inferences about the products' quality, industrial buyers' perceptions regarding the supplier-country image have an influence on how they evaluate the relationship with their suppliers. Hence, our study's findings demonstrate that, when assessing COO image effects in B2B markets, it is fundamental to transcend the mere product's sphere and extend the focus to the entire supplier-customer relationship.

The investigation of the influence of the supplier-country image on industrial buyers' perceptions is important for partner firms to be aware of their own biases against their peers. Equally, it is fundamental for companies from countries typically associated with a low or neutral COO image to develop strategies to cope and deal with consequences that may result from this eventual negative impact on the quality of their relationships.

The present study provides evidence that international industrial buyers' behavioral responses that are reflected in the trust and commitment they place in their partner firms and the satisfaction they display with that relationship can effectively be impacted by COO bias. This means that the general image of the COO of suppliers influences perceptions of relationship quality. Buyers using the COO as a decision factor have a signal that will help them form trust, commitment, and satisfaction perceptions. If the image is not favorable, the perception is that the relationship is not as good as it could otherwise be if the COO image was better. Hence, a solid relationship with buyers gives the supplier a strong competitive advantage in today's business world that may mitigate eventual non-positive perceptions on the product. The

buyer-supplier relationship quality is a crucial factor because it conditions the probability of continued interchange in the future. The crucial role of effective international marketing strategies in achieving success is becoming increasingly recognized by firms (Leonidou & Hultman, 2019). In particular, B2B marketing is gaining organizational importance (LaPlaca, 2013), with B2B marketers defending the relevance of building strong brand management capabilities (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), and with an alignment between international and relational marketing as postulated by Nijssen and Van Herk (2009). From this, we can conclude that companies should be attentive to all the biases that may interfere in the regular course of an international relationship.

The present study demonstrates that improving the legitimacy associated with the supplier-country image is critical for foreign products to get support from buyers. A favorable supplier-country image can achieve buyer support for relationship quality, a crucial dimension for B2B marketers. If that positive image does not exist, a multifaceted mechanism would have to be put in place to overcome the effect that, we now know, goes beyond the perception of product quality and threatens the very relationship that confers considerable benefits.

Furthermore, this research adds to relationship marketing theory by demonstrating that, in a B2B environment, relationship quality is more prominent than perceived product quality in determining supplier awareness and customer loyalty. This result suggests that industrial firms need to foster trust, commitment, and satisfaction to remain competitive, evidencing that B2B customers' interest surpasses the mere characteristics of the product. This finding supports Fredriksson and Gadde (2003), who argued that industrial customers privilege the development of cohesive cooperation with suppliers. In addition to delivery of the product, this can act as a source of knowledge and value creation. Consequently, drawing on relationship marketing theory, our results underscore the importance of strengthening dimensions such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction to enhance the competitiveness of supplier firms. Relationship quality is perceived as a crucial theme in B2B relationships due to its potential to influence customers' willingness to remain in a business relationship and to affect their behavior (Jiang et al., 2016). This way, in the B2B field, becoming a member of a network and/or creating and fostering a solid relationship with business partners can be more influential than focusing purely on product exchange to enhance supplier awareness and leverage customer loyalty, thus facilitating the accrual of substantial long-term benefits.

Regarding the implications for international industrial marketers, COO image information should be carefully managed given its strong influence on the relationship quality's three determinants and intangible elements. The existence of stereotyped perceptions of buyers from foreign countries may favor or hinder the efforts of marketers when entering a new market. Consequently, international industrial marketers should continuously manage their buyers' COO perceptions, which can change over time and may not be uniform inside a particular country. When the COO associations are recognized to be negative, industrial managers need to expend extra effort to work on the buyer's attitudes towards the product and the suppliers' attributes, stepping away to a negative overall image that may hinder their interests. Briefing their salespeople and the gatekeepers of the contracts is crucial to circumvent any negative effects. Investing in extra-business activities should be carefully considered. Having a global approach to communicating the know-how of Portuguese manufacturers – in the case – is key, in which high technology, the time-honored traditions of production, and the use of modern communications, both online and offline, is emphasized (Silva & Saraiva, 2016), which, in any case, takes time to develop. An unfavorable COO can obstruct internationalization success, as the international business literature has testified (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). However, firms must be aware of this bias and extend their reach beyond the firm's products and engage in the relationship between buyers and suppliers. Managing an international partnership towards relational capital may payoff if well done (Silva et al., 2012)

Furthermore, due to the strong influence of relationship quality

dimensions on generating supplier awareness and customer loyalty, industrial managers need to train salespeople in gratitude-eliciting behaviors when interacting with customers, which can trigger trust, commitment, and satisfaction. When recruiting and training sales personnel, industrial marketing managers should encourage social abilities that promote the creation of solid interpersonal relationships. These attributes should be strongly rooted in technical and functional sales arguments, which demand a profound knowledge of the product at hands. Additionally, being transparent and supported by a well-defined contract can further enhance the trust-building process (Silva et al., 2012). Sales personnel should be sensitized through training management programs to the nature of the social process inherent in developing a supplier-customer relationship. Enhancing relational selling behaviors, emphasizing cooperative intention and quality communication, can be crucial in fostering customer trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Consequently, it can strengthen the supplier-customer bonds and the relationship quality. Ultimately, this may mitigate the potential negative effects of the COO. Preventing from stereotyping can also assist this goal.

Limitations and directions for future research

We acknowledge that our study presents certain limitations, some of which may affect the generalizability of results. First, this study focuses on three industrial markets: footwear, molds, and wood products and furniture industries. The main reason for this limitation is related to the research design. Contrary to what usually happens in studies that use online surveys, it was not the research team that sent the invitation to participate in the survey directly to industrial customers. Instead, initial contact was made with sectoral business associations and specific companies in these sectors. Following a request for collaboration from their respective business associations, companies sent the invitations to their industrial customers. This procedure assisted in inquiring the suppliers' clients, which despite being rich in the information collected, falls somehow out of the control of conventional. Future research could expand the subject under investigation to different industries to appraise their possible differences. The dynamics of each industry could be different and, thus, the supplier-country image could present varying impacts. Additionally, extending the research to include other industries, particularly less traditional ones with high R&D intensity, could provide further insights. From another perspective, a comparative analysis could be conducted – for example, through a multi-group analysis – to compare the supplier-country image of various focus countries.

Second, this research investigates the effects of the Portuguese supplier-country image on international buyers' attitudes and behaviors. Given that the Portuguese image in these specific traditional industries is associated with a positive or neutral perception, future studies should assess the magnitude of the effects arising from negative image associations.

Third, data were collected from a single respondent at each international industrial customer, and their individual perceptions were considered as indicative of the organization they represented. Future studies could benefit from gathering responses from multiple respondents in each industrial customer organization to reduce the risk of common-method variance further.

Fourth, as demonstrated earlier, the sample size is appropriate for analyzing the conceptual model using SEM. Comparable or smaller sample sizes have been observed in business-to-business studies related to COO (e.g., Jacob & Schätzle, 2020; Pegan et al., 2022). To enhance the generalizability of the study's findings, future research designs should focus on improving response rates.

Finally, the combined effects of other variables such as relational risk and experience with other suppliers from the same country could be used as independent variables and tested in a longitudinal study.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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