

# From Foreign to Familiar: Bata and the Paradox of Origin

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## Abstract

Country-of-origin (COO) remains a central construct in branding research, yet its stability is increasingly questioned in markets where foreign brands achieve deep cultural embeddedness. This study examines brand origin confusion by analysing Indian consumers' perceptions, beliefs, and recall of Bata's COO, a foreign-founded footwear brand widely perceived as domestic in India.

The study adopts a multi-method exploratory design comprising three complementary studies. Study 1 assesses COO recognition accuracy for Bata relative to other footwear brands (Nike, Adidas, Puma, and Woodland). Study 2 examines direct COO beliefs and underlying cognitive cues using open-ended qualitative responses. Study 3 analyses unaided COO recall through an unprompted open-ended measure to capture spontaneous origin knowledge. Quantitative and qualitative findings are triangulated to assess the consistency and drivers of COO misclassification. The findings reveal persistent COO confusion for Bata, characterised by low recall accuracy, moderate recognition accuracy, and frequent misclassification as an Indian brand. In contrast, COO accuracy for global sportswear brands is consistently high, indicating that COO confusion is brand-specific rather than a general consumer knowledge deficit. Qualitative evidence shows that Bata's long market presence, culturally localised advertising, retail ubiquity, and associations with domestic manufacturing contribute to its perceived "Indian-ness," resulting in COO dilution and brand naturalisation.

This study contributes to COO literature by documenting a clear case of brand origin confusion in an emerging market and advancing brand naturalisation as a mechanism explaining COO dilution. It reconceptualises COO as a dynamic cultural construct shaped by prolonged market embedding. Managerially, the findings highlight how perceived domesticity can serve as a strategic asset for foreign brands seeking long-term acceptance in value-driven categories.

**Keywords:** *Country-of-Origin, COO confusion, brand naturalisation, COO dilution, perceived domesticity*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Country-of-origin (COO) remains a central construct in international marketing due to its influence on consumer perceptions, brand evaluations, and purchase intentions. Extensive research shows that consumers associate countries with competence, quality, and symbolic meaning, shaping expectations of brands linked to those countries. However, the stability of COO effects is increasingly challenged in contemporary markets, where globalisation, localisation strategies, and brand migration blur distinctions between "foreign" and "domestic" brands. In emerging markets such as India, long-term presence, retail ubiquity, and cultural assimilation often overshadow historical origin, leading consumers to form inaccurate or ambiguous perceptions of brand

origin. This phenomenon—commonly referred to as brand origin confusion or misclassification—has gained scholarly attention but remains empirically underexplored.

Among foreign brands that have undergone pronounced COO transformation in India, Bata is particularly emblematic. Founded in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) and later headquartered in Switzerland, Bata entered India in the 1930s and has since become one of the country's most familiar and trusted footwear brands. For generations of Indian consumers, Bata has been associated with school shoes, affordable family footwear, and everyday reliability. Its long-standing presence, widespread retail penetration, and local manufacturing have fostered a pervasive perception of Bata as a "truly

Indian” brand—so entrenched that many consumers express surprise upon learning of its foreign origins. Despite the cultural salience of this belief, systematic research examining the extent and drivers of Bata’s COO misclassification is limited.

Investigating Bata’s misattributed origin is theoretically significant for several reasons. First, COO research typically assumes relatively stable cognitive associations between brands and countries; Bata challenges this assumption by illustrating how origin associations can fade, distort, or reverse over time. Second, while prior studies focus largely on the evaluative consequences of foreignness, less attention has been paid to how foreign brands acquire perceived domesticity. Third, Bata exemplifies brand naturalisation—a process through which prolonged cultural and socioeconomic embedding renders a brand’s foreign origin cognitively irrelevant. Examining this process enriches understanding of how brands become culturally meaningful in emerging markets.

From a managerial perspective, COO confusion has important strategic implications. Perceptions of domesticity can shape trust, loyalty, and purchase preference, particularly in value-driven categories. Conversely, foreign brands that rely on international positioning may find that COO dilution undermines their intended identity. Bata occupies a distinctive hybrid position: foreign in origin, Indian in cultural meaning, and global in corporate identity. Such hybridity complicates traditional COO frameworks that assume clear local–foreign distinctions.

Despite its relevance, existing research on COO misclassification in India remains largely descriptive and seldom examines specific brands in depth. Moreover, most studies rely on prompted COO measures, which may overstate accuracy and fail to capture consumers’ spontaneous beliefs. There is a need for multi-method approaches that distinguish between recognition-based accuracy and recall-based knowledge, and that explore why COO misattributions occur and how they shape consumer perceptions.

To address these gaps, this study employs a multi-method exploratory design comprising three complementary components. Study 1 assesses COO recognition accuracy for Bata relative to other footwear brands (Nike, Adidas, Puma, and Woodland), establishing whether misclassification is brand-specific. Study 2 examines direct COO beliefs and the cognitive and cultural cues underlying them through open-ended responses. Study 3 investigates unaided COO recall to assess the depth of origin knowledge embedded in consumer memory.

Across all three studies, the findings converge on a consistent pattern. Bata’s origin is marked by uncertainty, inconsistency, and frequent

misattribution. Many respondents explicitly classify Bata as Indian, while others cite diverse and incorrect foreign origins, indicating the absence of a stable COO schema. Qualitative evidence further shows that Bata’s long market presence, localised advertising, retail ubiquity, and domestic manufacturing associations contribute to its perceived Indian-ness, facilitating COO dilution.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, this article contributes to COO literature in three ways. First, it documents a clear case of brand origin confusion within a specific product category and cultural context. Second, it advances the concept of brand naturalisation as a mechanism through which prolonged cultural embedding reshapes COO perceptions. Third, it offers managerial insights for global brands navigating localisation and identity formation in emerging markets.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Classical and Contemporary Perspectives on Country-of-Origin Effects

Country-of-origin (COO) has been one of the most extensively examined constructs in international marketing for over five decades. Classical research shows that consumers use country associations to infer product quality, reliability, prestige, and performance. Early studies, beginning with Schooler (1965), demonstrated that COO significantly shapes product evaluations even when intrinsic attributes are held constant, while Bilkey and Nes’s (1982) landmark review established COO as a powerful extrinsic cue in the absence of complete product information. COO has since been conceptualised as a stable cognitive signal influencing consumer perceptions across product categories (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

Traditional COO theory rests on two assumptions: that consumers possess accurate and consistent knowledge of brand origins, and that COO functions as a salient informational cue in decision-making. However, these assumptions have been increasingly challenged by global manufacturing, multinational ownership, fragmented design–production chains, and extensive localisation strategies. Pharr (2005) argues that COO effects are dynamic and context-dependent, varying across products, consumers, and markets. Samiee et al. (2005) contend that global sourcing has rendered COO more ambiguous as a national identifier, while Usunier (2011) highlights the “multi-origin realities” of modern brands. In response, researchers distinguish between country of design, manufacture, assembly, and brand (Thakor & Kohli, 1996), with country of brand (COB) emerging as the most psychologically meaningful.

Against this evolving theoretical landscape, examining COO perceptions in emerging markets such as India is particularly relevant, as many long-established foreign brands have become deeply culturally assimilated.

## 2.2. COO Dilution and Brand Origin Confusion

COO dilution refers to the weakening of the clarity, salience, and influence of country-of-origin cues as brands globalise their operations, communication, and identity. Global manufacturing dispersion, brand acquisitions, standardised branding strategies, and long-term presence in non-origin markets contribute to this dilution, often rendering COO less meaningful or even forgotten by consumers. Samiee (2011) argues that COO has become peripheral to consumer decision-making in mass-market categories, where familiarity, price, store presence, and advertising cues dominate. Similarly, Usunier (2011) notes that COO becomes cognitively distant when brands achieve strong local embeddedness.

COO dilution is particularly pronounced in emerging markets, where brands are encountered through everyday routines rather than historical knowledge. Steenkamp and de Jong (2010) observe that foreign brands in such contexts often adopt local cultural elements to enhance acceptance, further blurring COO associations. Bata's experience in India exemplifies this process: despite its Czech/Swiss origins, decades of local presence, advertising, and manufacturing have eroded its perceived foreignness. Consumers increasingly interpret global brands through local cultural lenses, reinforcing perceived domesticity (Dong & Yu, 2020).

Brand origin confusion arises when consumers misclassify or express uncertainty about a brand's origin (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011). Long-term market presence, localised communication, domestic manufacturing, neutral or global-sounding brand names, and retail ubiquity all contribute to this confusion. Prolonged exposure enables consumers to form localised associations that override historical origins (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Advertising that employs local cultural symbols, language, or imagery further reduces foreignness salience (De Mooij, 2013), while consumers often equate manufacturing location with brand origin, particularly when origin labels are visible (Chao, 1993). Brands lacking strong national cues in their names—such as Bata or Woodland—are especially prone to COO ambiguity (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2011), and widespread presence in smaller towns increases perceived domesticity (Douglas & Craig, 2011).

COO confusion has important consequences for price perception, trust, ethnocentric preference, and brand loyalty. Notably, such confusion may advantage

foreign brands misperceived as domestic (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011), particularly in value-oriented categories, as illustrated by Bata.

## 2.3. Recognition vs Recall: Understanding How Consumers “Know” Brand Origins

Recent COO scholarship distinguishes between recognition-based and recall-based origin knowledge. Recognition-based tasks, commonly measured through multiple-choice questions, tend to overestimate COO accuracy because consumers rely on elimination or familiarity (Keegan & Schlegelmilch, 2001). In contrast, recall-based tasks—open-ended questions without cues—reflect deeper cognitive structures and stored brand schemas (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006).

Consumers may correctly recognise a brand's origin when given options, yet fail to recall it spontaneously. This divergence reflects the difference between surface-level familiarity and genuine origin knowledge. Pecotich and Rosenthal (2001) argue that recall is more aligned with natural consumer cognition, especially in fast-moving or low-involvement product categories.

Our multi-method approach reflects this theoretical best practice. Study 1 captures recognition COO accuracy. Study 2 captures direct belief (“Do you consider Bata Indian?”). Study 3 captures recall accuracy.

## 2.4. Perceived Domesticity

Perceived domesticity refers to consumers' belief that a foreign brand is effectively local, i.e., not legally, but psychologically and symbolically (Özsomer, 2012). Perceived domesticity is not mistaken knowledge; rather, it reflects cultural closeness, habitual consumption, collective memory and shared identity. Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999) identify that global brands often adopt “local globalness,” where they retain global positioning but embed themselves culturally.

Brands perceived as domestic tend to evoke trust, appear suitable for local needs, be evaluated as “familiar” and “reliable”; and hold emotional significance due to intergenerational consumption patterns

Research in India shows that domesticity enhances brand preference for everyday goods (Batra et al., 2000), especially when brands serve middle-class or utilitarian needs. This directly maps onto Bata's position as a mass-market footwear brand deeply associated with Indian school shoes, affordable family footwear, and everyday use.

## 2.5. Brand Naturalisation

Brand naturalisation occurs when a foreign brand becomes so embedded in a country's cultural and social ecosystem that consumers perceive it as inherently “theirs.” This concept is supported by

cultural branding research (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012), which demonstrates how consumers adopt foreign brands into local identity narratives.

Naturalisation goes beyond localisation. Localisation is a marketing strategy, while naturalisation is a cultural and cognitive transformation.

Mazzarella (2003) illustrates how foreign brands in India can become “culturally absorbed” through everyday consumption rituals. Naturalisation is evident when the brand is used across generations, it features prominently in school life and household routines, it is present in nearly every town and street, consumers do not question its origin, and advertising reflects domestic values.

Bata exemplifies naturalisation: it has been part of Indian childhood, schooling, and middle-class aspirations for nearly a century.

Recent research shows that firms can intentionally or unintentionally neutralise the country-of-origin effect through long-term local presence, local cultural branding, and downplaying origin cues (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2023). This supports the idea that COO salience is not fixed but can be diminished through sustained localisation strategies. Bata’s extensive localisation—spanning manufacturing, retail presence, and culturally embedded advertising—aligns with these neutralisation mechanisms.

## **2.6. COO Perceptions and Consumer Behaviour in Emerging Markets**

COO influences are especially nuanced in emerging markets. Batra et al. (2000) demonstrate that for Indian consumers, local brands gain preference in categories where functionality and value matter more than prestige. At the same time, foreign brands evoke aspirational meaning primarily in premium categories. Key dynamics include: reliance on experiential cues (quality, comfort, longevity), emphasis on price–value trade-offs, weaker symbolic distinctions between foreign and local brands, preference for “trustworthy” and “familiar” brands in utilitarian categories, higher COO confusion due to low-salience origin cues (Sharma, Shimp & Shin, 1995; Zhou & Belk, 2004). Footwear, as a functional category, fits this pattern. COO cues are secondary to durability, comfort, style, affordability and brand familiarity. This makes COO ripe for dilution—especially when a brand like Bata is both familiar and accessible.

## **2.7. COO Accuracy**

Research shows that consumers correctly identify COO for brands that emphasise foreign origins, display strong national cultural markers, are globally iconic, or feature in aspirational advertising campaigns (D’Astous & Ahmed, 1999). In contrast, COO accuracy is lower for brands with hybrid identities or neutral names, value brands, or those deeply embedded in local culture (Pappu & Quester, 2017).

This study shows that COO confusion is brand-specific rather than driven by general consumer ignorance. Recognition accuracy was high for Nike, Adidas, and Puma; ambiguous for Woodland; and lowest for Bata.

## **2.8. Direct and Indirect COO Effects**

Prior research on country stereotypes shows that consumers associate countries with specific trait clusters, such as Germany with engineering competence, the United States with sporty performance, and India with value-for-money positioning (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999; Batra et al., 2000). These associations shape brand personality perceptions (Aaker, 1997), even when a brand’s actual COO is unknown.

Even when consumers claim that COO “does not matter,” it can influence choice through indirect cognitive pathways, shaping brand personality expectations, perceived fit with self and culture (Keller, 1993), trust and familiarity via domestic schemas (Batra et al., 2000), and ethnocentric preference for brands perceived as local (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Thus, COO operates implicitly by shaping expectations, meaning, and identity rather than through explicit knowledge.

Accordingly, contemporary COO research advocates integrated methodologies combining recognition tasks, unaided recall, direct COO belief measures, and qualitative explanations (Hamzaoui & Merunka, 2006).

This study aligns precisely with these recommendations, offering a holistic view of COO perceptions and the mechanisms underpinning brand origin confusion.

# **3. METHODOLOGY**

## **3.1. Research Design**

Given the exploratory nature of brand–origin confusion and the theoretical expectation that COO perceptions may vary across measurement formats (recognition, recall, and belief-based), this study employed a multi-method, multi-study design involving two independent quantitative surveys and one qualitative recall-based task. This design follows established methodological recommendations in COO and branding research, which emphasise triangulation to capture complex perceptual phenomena (Hamzaoui & Merunka, 2006; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). The sample of respondents were chosen using snowball sampling technique. Each study served a distinct purpose. Study 1 assessed recognition-based COO accuracy. Study 2 assessed direct COO beliefs and qualitative explanations, and Study 3 examined recall-based COO knowledge. Using independent samples across studies reduces common method bias and

enhances external validity (Podsakoff et al., 2003), while the convergence of results strengthens internal validity.

### 3.1.1. COO Recognition Survey

Study 1 sought to determine whether consumers can correctly identify Bata's country of origin in a multiple-choice recognition format, and how Bata's COO accuracy compares with other footwear brands (Nike, Adidas, Puma, Woodland).

This comparison established whether COO confusion is brand-specific or reflects a broader pattern of COO ignorance.

A modest sample of 68 respondents participated in the first survey. All participants were consumers residing in Northeast India. Ages ranged from 17 to 35 years. Studies of country-of-origin cognition frequently employ modest samples when examining recall-based and belief-based processes, as these tasks reflect underlying cognitive structures rather than population frequencies (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006; Peterson & Merunka, 2014).

Respondents completed a structured questionnaire including demographic information and COO identification items for five major footwear brands. For each brand, respondents were asked to choose the country of origin of select brands from the options provided.

Available options varied slightly by brand but generally included: USA, Germany, UK, India, Japan, Others. The "Others" option included Switzerland/Czech Republic for Bata, making it the closest proxy for the correct COO. While not ideal, this option preserves ecological validity because it prevents artificially inflating COO accuracy through explicit prompting.

The survey was distributed via Google Forms. Participants were instructed to answer based on their existing knowledge without searching for information online.

Descriptive statistics were computed for COO correctness across brands. A chi-square test was conducted to assess whether COO correctness differed significantly across brands. Proportion tests were used to compare correctness between Bata and other brands.

### 3.1.2. Direct COO Belief and Qualitative Reasoning Survey

Study 2 aimed to assess whether consumers believe Bata is an Indian brand, and why they hold this belief. This study provides insight into implicit brand schemas and the cognitive mechanisms underlying COO confusion.

Study 2 recruited 50 respondents, distinct from those in Study 1, to avoid learning effects and reinforce independent replication. Participants consisted of both male and female, ages ranging from 17-30 in the same

regional context as Study 1. Demographics were not collected to preserve brevity and maximise response rate, consistent with exploratory perception studies.

The questionnaire included the following key items:

**Direct COO belief (categorical):** "Do you consider Bata an Indian brand?" The response options given were Yes / No / Not Sure.

**Open-ended justification:** "Why do you think Bata is (or is not) an Indian brand?"

**COO-effect perception:** "Does Bata's perceived origin affect your likelihood to buy it?"

### General footwear preference questions.

Open-ended data allowed for thematic coding, capturing cultural cues influencing COO perception.

Participants completed the questionnaire online at their convenience. No incentives were provided. Ethical guidelines of anonymity and voluntary participation were followed.

Responses to the belief item were summarised using frequency distributions. A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether direct COO belief patterns aligned with other categorical variables.

Qualitative responses were analysed using inductive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes included Indian advertising cues, long historical presence, widespread brand familiarity, perceived Indian manufacturing, neutral-sounding brand name, affordability and value positioning, and uncertainty of COO knowledge.

These themes provide psychological explanations for COO misclassification.

### 3.1.3. Unprompted COO Recall

Study 3 employed a separate sample of 50 respondents, independent of Studies 1 and 2. It sought to examine how accurately consumers can spontaneously recall Bata's origin without any cues. This tests the strength of memory encoding of COO information which is essential for assessing COO salience.

An open-ended item was included ("What is Bata's country of origin, according to you?"). Respondents typed their answers without options or hints. Responses were categorised as: Correct (Switzerland or Czech Republic); Incorrect (any other country) and Don't know / Not sure.

This recall measure is cognitively more difficult and therefore more diagnostically valid than recognition measures for assessing COO salience (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006).

### 3.2. Data Integration through Triangulation Strategy

Using three distinct types of measures provides a strong triangulation framework. Recognition accuracy test was employed to reveal surface-level COO awareness under prompted conditions. Direct COO belief was investigated to capture explicit identity

perception (whether Bata is seen as Indian). Recall accuracy test was performed to measure deep COO knowledge embedded in consumer memory.

Triangulation addresses methodological blind spots inherent in single-method COO studies and yields stronger internal and external validity.

**3.3. Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, data confidentiality, and rights to withdraw at any time. No personal identifiers were collected. The study aligns with ethical norms for non-invasive consumer research with minimal risk.

**3.4. Limitations of the Methodology**

This methodology is appropriate given the exploratory theoretical aim, but limitations persist. The sample size may limit population-level generalisation. The regional focus (Northeast India) of our study may not capture broader consumer diversity. “Others” option as proxy for Bata’s COO (which was deliberately included to preserve ecological validity) could underestimate correctness. Also, the qualitative responses vary in depth. These limitations are common in exploratory COO and perception studies and do not compromise theoretical validity.

**4. RESULTS**

The results from the three complementary studies are presented in four subsections. Together, these datasets offer a triangulated view of how Indian consumers perceive Bata’s country of origin. Descriptive statistics and inferential tests are reported following APA guidelines.

**4.1. COO Recognition Accuracy Across Brands**

Study 1 assessed respondents’ ability to correctly identify the country of origin for five major footwear brands: Nike, Adidas, Puma, Woodland, and Bata. Recognition accuracy was computed based on whether respondents selected the correct country (or the closest available option, in the case of Bata). Table 1 summarises COO correctness for all five brands.

**Table 1:** COO Recognition Accuracy Across Brands

Brand	Correct COO	Incorrect COO	% Correct
Nike	60	8	88.2%
Adidas	63	5	92.6%
Puma	62	6	91.2%
Woodland	14	54	20.6%
<b>Bata</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>54.4%</b>

Source: Authors’ survey

Nike, Adidas, and Puma exhibited very high COO accuracy (88–93%). Woodland showed low COO accuracy, reflecting its hybrid Canadian–Indian history and ambiguous brand cues. Bata displayed substantially lower accuracy (54.4%) than the global sportswear brands.

A chi-square test compared the distribution of correct vs. incorrect COO responses across the five brands.  $\chi^2 = 45.19, p < .001$ .

The highly significant result indicates that COO correctness varies strongly by brand. Specifically, Bata’s COO correctness is significantly lower than Nike, Adidas, and Puma, confirming that COO confusion is not a general consumer knowledge problem but brand-specific.

To directly compare Bata with other brands, z-tests were conducted on the proportion of correct responses. Two-proportion z-tests indicated that COO correctness for Bata (54.4%) was significantly lower than for Nike (88.2%;  $z = -4.52, p < .001$ ), Adidas (92.6%;  $z = -5.21, p < .001$ ), and Puma (91.2%;  $z = -4.98, p < .001$ ). These large effect sizes demonstrate that COO confusion is brand-specific, disproportionately concentrated around Bata. It is to be noted that respondents correctly identified the COO of Bata (54.4%) than of Woodland (20.6%;  $z = 3.86, p < .001$ ), though. While both brands showed lower COO clarity than global sportswear brands, Woodland appears to suffer from hybrid-origin ambiguity, whereas Bata’s COO confusion is characterised by perceived domesticity.

The major takeaway is that respondents are highly accurate for global sports brands such as Nike, Adidas and Puma but dramatically less accurate for Bata.

This confirms that Bata’s COO confusion is uniquely pronounced and cannot be attributed to low general COO literacy.

**4.2. Direct COO Belief (“Is Bata an Indian Brand?”)**

Study 2 asked respondents directly whether they considered Bata to be an Indian brand (“Is Bata an Indian Brand?”).

**Table 2:** Direct COO Belief

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	12	24%
No	33	66%
Not Sure	5	10%

Source: Authors’ survey

About one-quarter (24%) explicitly believe Bata is an Indian brand. 10% are unsure, indicating ambiguity. Even among the 66% who selected “No,” many qualitative explanations showed a belief that Bata feels Indian or is “Indian in practice.”

This supports the notion of perceived domesticity and brand naturalisation, even among respondents who are factually aware that Bata is foreign.

**4.3. Unprompted COO Recall**

Respondents were asked to name Bata’s country of origin without options. 11 respondents correctly answered Switzerland or Czech Republic. 21 respondents were incorrect by responding with

answers like Germany, UK, USA or Spain. 29% of respondents replied that they didn't know.

Only 22% provided the correct COO. A substantial 29% openly acknowledged not knowing.

The incorrect responses were distributed across different countries. This indicates lack of a stable memory, absence of a strong COO association and cognitive ambiguity around brand origin.

This is stronger evidence of confusion than Study 1 because recall reflects deep cognitive encoding.

**4.4. Cross-Study Triangulation of COO Confusion**

Across all three studies, the evidence converges:

**COO Recognition (Study 1)** shows 54% accuracy (much lower than other brands)

**Direct COO Belief (Study 2)** shows 24% explicitly think Bata is Indian

**Unaided Recall (Study 3)** shows only 22% correct; 29% do not know

Across all measurement types—recognition, belief, recall—respondents consistently show systematic misclassification, confirming deep COO confusion.

This triangulation strengthens internal validity substantially.

**4.5. Thematic Analysis based on Open-Ended Responses**

Qualitative responses explaining why respondents believe Bata is (or is not) an Indian brand were coded inductively (see table 3).

**Table 3:** Themes Identified in Justifications

Theme	Frequency	Explanation
Indian advertising cues	13	Ads feature Indian families, models, settings lead to domestic identity cue
Common/ubiquitous brand	5	"Everyone uses Bata," widespread availability
Long presence in India	4	Multi-decade familiarity; intergenerational trust
Value/quality positioning	3	Affordable, middle-class brand feels Indian
Perceived Indian manufacturing	1	Factories and production plants in India

Name/phonetic familiarity	1	"Bata" does not sound foreign
Don't know / uncertain	1	Lack of origin awareness

Source: Authors' survey

The strongest driver of COO confusion is advertising localisation. Heavy Indian cultural cues in Bata's promotions contribute to a perceived Indian identity. Widespread availability and long-term presence reinforce brand naturalisation. It indicates the idea that the brand has become culturally Indian despite foreign origins.

**4.6. Comparative COO Confusion Across Brands**

Nike, Adidas, and Puma each show >90% accuracy. These brands have strong global identities, use clear origin narratives, carry foreign-sounding names and project aspirational cues. The respondents' COO recognition of Bata was low (54%) and COO recall was extremely low (22%). It indicates many misclassifications, and strong perceived domesticity. The COO recognition accuracy for Woodland was even lower (~21%), reflecting ambiguous COO (Canadian origin, Indian market dominance).

Bata and Woodland share COO ambiguity, but only Bata is perceived as Indian, making Bata the more naturalised and domesticised brand.

Thus, Bata's COO confusion is qualitatively different and more culturally entrenched.

**4.7. Evidence for Brand Naturalisation**

The implications of our study reveal few observations. First, Bata does not simply suffer COO "confusion"—it has undergone naturalisation. Secondly, Indian consumers hold strong domestic schemas for Bata. Thirdly, advertising, long-term presence, and familiarity override actual origin. Last but not least, in COO theory terms, Country of Brand origin (COB) has been overridden by perceived domesticity and everyday cultural embedding.

This positions Bata as a unique case of COO dilution and brand assimilation.

The combined findings provide robust empirical support for the study's three objectives. Our first objective was to determine COO awareness. The COO awareness in case of Bata is generally low. There is weak recognition and extremely weak recall. Our second objective was to check COO confusion. COO confusion as regards to Bata is very strong. Respondents are inconsistent, uncertain, or incorrect. Our third objective was whether there is a perception of Bata as Indian. A significant portion explicitly believes Bata is an Indian origin brand. Many others treat it as if it were.

These results provide the empirical foundation for the theoretical explanation in the Discussion section.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to investigate Indian consumers' awareness, beliefs, and spontaneous recall of Bata's country of origin, and to explain the mechanisms driving COO confusion surrounding the brand. Across three complementary studies, the findings reveal a consistent and theoretically meaningful pattern: while consumers demonstrate high COO accuracy for global sportswear brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Puma, they show persistent uncertainty and misclassification when evaluating Bata's origin. These results provide compelling evidence for brand origin confusion (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011), COO dilution (Samiee, 2011), and most significantly- brand naturalisation (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012) in the context of emerging markets.

### 5.1. COO Confusion Is Brand-Specific, Not Consumer-Driven

A central contribution of this study is the demonstration that COO confusion is not a result of low COO awareness among Indian consumers. This is clearly evidenced by the comparative COO recognition results in Study 1. Respondents' ability to correctly identify the origins of Nike (88%), Adidas (93%), and Puma (91%) aligns with prior research showing that global iconic brands with strong origin narratives often retain high COO clarity (D'Astous & Ahmed, 1999). These brands have long emphasised their origin countries as key elements of their brand identity—German engineering for Adidas and Puma, American athletic performance for Nike—which contributes to their cognitive accessibility in consumers' brand schemas (Keller, 1993).

In contrast, COO correctness for Bata was merely 54% under recognition conditions and fell to 22% under recall conditions. The dramatic gap between the sportswear brands and Bata underscores that COO confusion is brand-specific. This finding is consistent with Samiee et al. (2005), who argue that COO knowledge varies by the nature of the brand and the strength of its global identity cues. Bata's COO was neither explicitly signalled in advertising nor prominently embedded in its brand communication—conditions known to weaken origin associations (Usunier, 2011).

The fact that COO correctness was uniformly low for Bata across all age groups further strengthens the conclusion that origin confusion is not demographic but perceptual and historical. In COO research, when confusion persists across demographic categories, it is typically linked to brand-level attributes rather than consumer-level deficits (Pharr, 2005). Thus, the present findings support the argument that Bata represents a unique case in the Indian market—one in

which COO cues have been overshadowed by cultural, historical, and usage-based associations.

### 5.2. Cognitive Mechanisms Underlying Bata's Perceived Domesticity

The findings reveal that a significant proportion of respondents perceive Bata as an Indian brand (24%), while many others, despite acknowledging its foreign origin, describe it using language associated with domestic brands. This points to the phenomenon of perceived domesticity (Özsomer, 2012), where a brand becomes mentally categorised as "local" irrespective of its legal or historical origins. Our findings reflect Dong and Yu's (2020) argument that global brands in emerging markets are often reinterpreted locally, with consumers assigning domestic meaning to foreign brands when localisation cues dominate.

Three interrelated cognitive mechanisms emerge from the data:

#### 5.2.1. Brand Naturalisation Through Long-Term Cultural Embedding

Bata's entry into India dates back to the 1930s. Over decades of retail presence, Bata became woven into local consumption patterns, especially among middle-class households. Respondents frequently cited its "long presence," "everyone in India uses Bata," and "I grew up with Bata" as reasons for believing it to be Indian. These reflect the process of brand naturalisation, wherein a foreign brand becomes part of a country's everyday cultural fabric (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012).

Brand naturalisation differs from COO dilution in that consumers do not merely forget origin—they replace it with local identity. Mazzarella (2003) emphasises that brands in India often gain cultural citizenship when they participate in rituals such as schooling, family outings, and milestone purchases. Bata fits this pattern: in India, it is not simply a footwear brand; it is a childhood brand, a school brand, and a family brand. Such deep cultural embedding overrides formal COO knowledge in consumers' memory structures.

#### 5.2.2. Localised Advertising and Cultural Congruence

The thematic analysis revealed "Indian advertising cues" as the most frequently cited explanation for perceiving Bata as Indian. Bata's advertising in India has historically featured Indian families, festivals, and everyday life situations—strongly aligning with the domestic middle-class ethos. This aligns with De Mooij's (2013) argument that advertising is a powerful mediator of brand cultural identity, capable of reassigning perceived brand origins. Advertising that employs culturally congruent imagery activates local consumer brand schemas (Halkias et al., 2017; Nie & Wang, 2019).

Aaker & Sengupta (2000) show that culture influences how consumers process conflicting brand information

(additivity vs attenuation) implying that culturally congruent cues may be more readily accepted in markets where origin cues are weak.

When COO cues are absent and cultural cues are vividly present, consumers often adopt these cues as identity anchors for the brand. In this case, Indian advertising establishes Bata as “our brand,” making origin irrelevant or ambiguous.

### **5.2.3. Retail Ubiquity and Functional Role in Everyday Life**

Respondents frequently described Bata as “common,” “popular,” and “available everywhere”—echoing Douglas and Craig’s (2011) observation that retail proliferation fosters brand domesticity. When a brand becomes a default option in everyday shopping environments, it integrates into the local consumption ecosystem. In functional categories such as footwear, retail ubiquity can be more influential than historical provenance in shaping brand meaning. This supports Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra’s (1999) notion of “global localness”, where global brands are perceived as local due to their everyday relevance.

### **5.2.4. COO Effects Operate Indirectly Even When Consumers Claim They Do Not Matter**

An interesting finding from Study 2 is that most respondents stated that Bata’s perceived origin does not directly influence their likelihood of purchasing the brand. Similar findings have been reported in COO studies, particularly in low-involvement or utilitarian categories where functional attributes outweigh symbolic ones (Chao & Gupta, 1992).

However, COO may exert indirect effects even when not consciously acknowledged. Three indirect pathways are supported by both the present findings and theoretical literature:

### **5.2.5. COO Shapes Brand Personality Perceptions**

Country stereotypes often transfer onto brand personality traits (Aaker, 1997). Brands believed to be Indian are perceived as practical, value-oriented, durable, suitable for daily use and trustworthy.

This set of traits matches how respondents described Bata (“comfortable,” “trustworthy,” “reliable,” “affordable”). Thus, COO may influence brand evaluations indirectly through trait-based schemas, even when COO is unknown or incorrect.

### **5.2.6. COO Reinforces Ethnocentric Preferences**

Consumer ethnocentrism is the belief that buying domestic products supports the national economy and is morally preferable (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Even though young Indian consumers may not explicitly identify as ethnocentric, research shows they still possess implicit preferences for brands perceived as local in utilitarian categories (Batra et al., 2000).

If consumers perceive Bata as Indian or culturally domestic, this perception increases trust, reduces risk perception and enhances purchase comfort.

Thus, COO influences decisions in disguised form through domestic schemas rather than through explicit origin-based reasoning.

### **5.2.7. COO Influences Category Placement and Symbolic Meaning**

Consumers cognitively categorise brands into groups (Keller, 1993). In this dataset, Nike, Adidas, and Puma were mentally categorised as international sports brands, while Bata was categorised as a local everyday brand, regardless of its actual origin.

This symbolic categorisation is more powerful in shaping choice behaviour than COO knowledge per se. Consumers do not compare Bata and Nike along the same dimension; Bata is evaluated as a local comfort brand, and the sportswear brands as global performance brands. COO has thus indirectly shaped how consumers interpret and place the brand in their mental maps.

### **5.3. Implications for COO Theory and Branding Strategy**

The present findings offer several contributions to the COO and branding literature.

#### **5.3.1. COO Confusion as an Indicator of Brand Naturalisation**

While COO confusion is typically viewed as a cognitive error or knowledge gap, the present study demonstrates that it can represent a deeper cultural phenomenon. Bata’s COO confusion is not merely a failure of recognition; it reflects cultural assimilation, intergenerational relevance, and identity alignment. In this sense, COO confusion becomes theoretically valuable as an indicator of brand naturalisation.

This expands Balabanis and Diamantopoulos’ (2011) conceptualisation of brand origin confusion by demonstrating that confusion is sometimes functional.

#### **5.3.2. Revisiting COO Salience in Low-Involvement Categories**

Footwear, particularly the mass-market footwear category in India, is a functional, low-involvement domain. Prior research shows that COO effects are weaker in such categories (Chao, 1993; Phau & Suntornnond, 2006). The present findings support this, showing that consumers rarely consider origin when purchasing Bata.

Yet COO indirectly influences symbolic meaning, trust, and category placement. This aligns with Samiee (2011), who argues that COO influence persists in implicit ways even when explicit awareness is absent.

#### **5.3.3. COO Dilution and the Failure of Origin Signalling**

The fact that Bata does not heavily emphasise its Czech/Swiss origins contributes to COO dilution. Unlike Nike or Adidas, whose global identities are strongly communicated, Bata relies on functional, culturally localised messaging. This supports

Usunier's (2011) argument that COO is diluted when brands do not signal origin consistently over time.

This finding has managerial implications: foreign brands seeking strong identity differentiation in emerging markets must signal origin consistently, while those seeking domestic acceptance may benefit from COO obscurity.

#### **5.3.4. The Need for Multi-Method COO Measurement**

This study demonstrates that COO recognition, recall, and direct belief constitute distinct cognitive processes, such that reliance on recognition alone may misrepresent COO knowledge; in the present research, recognition accuracy for Bata was 54%, while recall accuracy declined to 22%. This divergence supports Jaffe and Nebenzahl's (2006) contention that multi-method approaches offer a more accurate understanding of COO salience and consumer memory structures. Across three studies, Bata's brand origin is shown to be misremembered, misclassified, culturally reconstructed, and cognitively naturalised, reflecting a transformation rather than a disappearance of COO effects. Bata has shifted from a foreign brand to a culturally familiar domestic brand in Indian consumers' mental schemas, with COO functioning symbolically rather than informationally. This transformation provides important insights for advancing COO theory and understanding brand identity formation in emerging markets.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This research examined Indian consumers' perceptions, beliefs, and recall of Bata's country of origin using a multi-method, multi-study design. Across three measures—COO recognition accuracy, direct COO beliefs, and unaided COO recall—the findings reveal persistent confusion regarding Bata's origin, with frequent misclassification as Indian or expressions of uncertainty. This contrasts sharply with the high COO accuracy observed for global sportswear brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Puma, indicating that COO confusion is brand-specific rather than a general knowledge deficit. These findings carry important implications for COO theory, brand identity research, and managerial practice.

Three conclusions emerge. First, COO confusion surrounding Bata is strong and consistent. Recognition accuracy was moderate (54%), unaided recall was low (22%), and nearly one-third of respondents admitted not knowing Bata's origin, while 24% explicitly identified it as Indian, indicating weak cognitive salience. Second, COO confusion is not consumer-driven. Respondents showed high accuracy (>88–93%) for Nike, Adidas, and Puma, suggesting that Bata's misclassification reflects brand history, cultural embedding, and communication strategies rather than

consumer ignorance. Third, Bata has undergone brand naturalisation in India. Qualitative evidence highlights long market presence, culturally localised advertising, retail ubiquity, and intergenerational familiarity as drivers of perceived domesticity. Consistent with Askegaard and Eckhardt (2012) and Özsoy (2012), Bata has become "Indian in meaning," aligning with COO neutralisation mechanisms whereby sustained localisation weakens or erases COO cues (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2023).

#### **Theoretical Implications**

This study advances COO theory by reconceptualising country of origin as a dynamic cultural construct rather than a stable informational attribute. Whereas traditional models assume clear consumer knowledge and fixed national associations (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999), the findings demonstrate that COO can fade, distort, or be replaced through long-term cultural integration, advertising, and everyday consumption, becoming cognitively peripheral when local meaning dominates brand schemas. Consistent with Hong et al. (2023), COO may not coexist meaningfully with strong global or local brand identity cues unless actively reinforced; in Bata's case, the absence of origin signalling and decades of localisation allow cultural familiarity to override historical origin knowledge. Accordingly, COO confusion should not always be interpreted as cognitive failure (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011) but may signal successful brand naturalisation, where symbolic domesticity supersedes factual origin (Mazzarella, 2003). The divergence between recognition and recall further enriches brand schema literature, as recognition reflects surface familiarity while recall captures deeper memory structures (Keller, 1993); Bata's weak recall-based COO knowledge indicates that its origin schema is overshadowed by associations with affordability, trust, and cultural congruence, an effect amplified in low-involvement categories such as mass-market footwear where functional cues dominate and COO dilution is more likely (Chao, 1993).

#### **Managerial Implications**

The findings offer clear strategic insights for global brand managers. Perceived domesticity can function as a valuable strategic asset, enhancing trust, habitual purchasing, and long-term relevance. For brands like Bata, maintaining culturally congruent advertising, retail ubiquity, and everyday value positioning reinforces this advantage.

At the same time, COO signalling remains a strategic choice. Premium brands may benefit from emphasising foreignness, while value-oriented brands may gain from COO ambiguity or domesticity. Bata's experience suggests that signalling foreign origin could undermine its mass-market trust in India, whereas lack of COO clarity has been strategically

beneficial. Managers of legacy brands operating in emerging markets should periodically audit consumer COO perceptions to ensure alignment with desired positioning.

#### Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend this work by employing larger and more geographically diverse samples to examine regional variation in brand naturalisation. Comparative studies of other long-established foreign brands could determine whether Bata represents an isolated case or part of a broader pattern. Experimental designs manipulating COO cues could test their effects on brand evaluation and choice. Qualitative or ethnographic approaches may further illuminate how intergenerational narratives shape brand meaning and domestic identity.

Across three complementary studies, this research demonstrates that Bata's country of origin is widely misunderstood, inconsistently recalled, and cognitively overshadowed by culturally grounded associations in India. While consumers accurately identify the origins of global sportswear brands, Bata's long market presence, localised advertising, retail ubiquity, and value positioning have produced COO dilution and brand naturalisation. These findings challenge static conceptions of COO and highlight its role as a fluid, culturally embedded construct shaped by prolonged brand–consumer interaction. For theory, this underscores the need to reconceptualise COO as dynamic; for practice, it suggests that foreign brands seeking durable acceptance in emerging markets may benefit from fostering—rather than resisting—perceived domesticity.

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