



Consumer Attitudes Toward Asian Brands in Western Balkan Countries

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Abstract

Asian brands, particularly those originating from China, South Korea, and Japan have significantly expanded their presence in global markets, including the Western Balkans. Despite rising brand visibility, consumer attitudes in this region remain shaped by complex cultural, economic, and social perceptions. This study examines how cultural values, country-of-origin perceptions, perceived quality, price–value evaluations, and brand familiarity influence consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in Western Balkan countries. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks such as the Country-of-Origin Effect, Consumer Ethnocentrism, and Social Identity Theory, the paper provides an analytical exploration of the determinants that shape brand attitudes in a transitional, emerging-market context. The study argues that Western Balkan consumers increasingly evaluate Asian brands through functional performance and affordability rather than historical stereotypes, yet cultural distance and media narratives continue to moderate this relationship. The findings offer strategic implications for Asian brand managers seeking market penetration in the region, emphasizing the need for localized communication strategies, improved brand authenticity, and culturally adaptive marketing approaches

Keywords: Asian brands, Western Balkans, Consumer attitudes, Country-of-Origin Effect, Cultural perception

1. Introduction

Asian brands have undergone a substantial transformation in global markets over the past two decades. Once perceived primarily as low-cost alternatives, many Asian firms especially in technology, automotive, and consumer electronics have repositioned themselves into high-quality and innovation-driven competitors. As a result, they have increasingly gained market share in Europe, including the Western Balkan region, which encompasses countries such as Albania, North

Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. This region represents a dynamic, developing market characterized by rising digital adoption, expanding middle-class purchasing power, and openness to global products.

Consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans are influenced by multiple interrelated factors. The country-of-origin effect continues to play a significant role: perceptions of Japanese and South Korean brands often emphasize quality and technological innovation, while Chinese brands are frequently associated with affordability, rapid innovation cycles, and mixed quality expectations. Academic research has demonstrated that country stereotypes can shape trust, perceived reliability, and purchase intentions, especially in markets with limited direct experience with foreign brands (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008). In the research conducted by Lim et al., (2020) results show that materialism, utilitarian value, and brand attachment are positively related to impulsive buying, while materialism, hedonic value, and brand attachment have a positive effect on obsessive-compulsive buying. On the other side, brand attachment is found to mediate the effect of materialism and utilitarian value on both compulsive buying. Based in the analyses Deari and Balla (2013) concluded that global brands are trusted from consumers despite their gender, age, income and education level, respectively demographic factors. As well as important part, are consumers preferences for global brand, which is related with significant relationship with brand trust.

Cultural dynamics are equally important. The Western Balkans have historically maintained closer cultural and economic ties with Western European countries than with East Asia. Consequently, a cultural distance may influence how consumers interpret brand messaging, design aesthetics, and product reliability. Studies on cultural perception suggest that unfamiliar cultures may generate cautious brand evaluations unless counterbalanced by positive product experiences or strong word-of-mouth (Steenkamp, 2021). Moreover, consumer ethnocentrism though relatively moderate in this region may also affect willingness to purchase foreign-made products, particularly in categories where domestic alternatives exist.

Despite these challenges, Asian brands have successfully penetrated Balkan markets, especially in smartphones (e.g., Xiaomi, Samsung), home appliances, automobiles (e.g., Toyota, Hyundai), and fashion. Their success is often attributed to value-based positioning, effective pricing strategies, accessibility through digital channels, and localized marketing tactics. Younger consumers, especially Generation Z, exhibit particularly favorable attitudes toward Asian brands due to high digital engagement, global cultural exposure, and interest in innovation-driven products.

Given this evolving landscape, there is a clear need for systematic academic research that explains how Western Balkan consumers evaluate Asian brands and what factors most strongly shape their attitudes and purchase intentions. This paper contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the determinants of consumer attitudes toward Asian brands within this geographically and culturally unique region. Additionally, it provides strategic implications for international marketers seeking to expand their presence in the Western Balkans.

2. Literature Review

Consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in international markets have been widely examined in the fields of global marketing, consumer ethnocentrism, and country-of-origin research. However, the Western Balkans representing a transitional and culturally distinct region remain underexplored in mainstream marketing scholarship. This review synthesizes verified academic findings relevant to Asian brands' perception, focusing on cultural influences, country-of-origin stereotypes, perceived quality, value perceptions, and generational shifts.

2.1 Country-of-Origin (COO) Effect and Asian Brand Perceptions

The country-of-origin effect remains one of the most powerful predictors of brand evaluation in international markets. Early research by Bilkey and Nes (1982) established that consumers rely on COO cues when assessing unfamiliar brands. More recent studies confirm that COO shapes perceived quality, trust, and purchase intention across product categories (Magnusson, Westjohn & Zdravkovic, 2011; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Asian brands exhibit differentiated COO perceptions:

- Japanese brands are consistently associated with reliability, precision, and technological sophistication (Schifferstein, 2006; Javalgi et al., 2001).
- South Korean brands, once perceived as mid-tier alternatives, have gradually improved their global image through innovation, design, and branding (Choi, Lee & Kim, 2018).
- Chinese brands demonstrate the most heterogeneous perceptions, balancing affordability and rapid innovation

with persistent concerns about quality, safety, or authenticity (Sun, Paswan & Tieslau, 2016).

In the Western Balkans, COO effects remain relevant because consumers often rely on stereotypes in the absence of direct experience with Asian cultures. Research demonstrates that COO biases are stronger in emerging markets where brand familiarity is limited (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2008).

2.2 Cultural Distance

Cultural distance captures the extent to which consumers perceive misalignment between their own cultural frame of reference and that associated with a foreign brand's originating country. In international business and marketing, cultural distance has been used to explain why cross-border exchanges often entail higher uncertainty, weaker perceived fit, and greater "liability of foreignness," which jointly elevate perceived risk in market transactions (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Shenkar, 2001). While many studies operationalize cultural distance through index-based national culture measures (e.g., Hofstede-derived distance), scholars caution that perceived cultural distance is conceptually distinct from "objective" country-level indices and is often more proximate to consumer decision-making because it directly informs how individuals interpret brand meaning, signals, and communications (Sousa and Bradley, 2006; Shenkar, 2001).

In the context of Asian brands expanding abroad, cultural distance is especially salient because consumers may encounter unfamiliar symbolic cues (e.g., aesthetics, naming, and storytelling conventions) and different communication norms (e.g., indirectness, collectivist appeals), which can reduce psychological connection and interpretive confidence. Country-of-origin (COO) research indicates that, under uncertainty, consumers frequently rely on country stereotypes as cognitive shortcuts either to infer competence (e.g., engineering, technology) or to discount credibility if they perceive unfamiliarity or mismatch (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Consequently, cultural distance can affect evaluations indirectly by shaping perceived credibility, trustworthiness, and diagnosticity of brand claims especially for experience and credence attributes where direct verification is costly (Zeithaml, 1988).

However, cultural distance should not be assumed to be uniformly detrimental. When product country associations are favorable (e.g., perceptions of Japanese precision, Korean innovation in beauty or electronics), consumers may still form positive expectations even when they perceive cultural difference, particularly if other signals (brand globalness, third-party endorsement, warranty, or consistent market presence) reduce perceived risk (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). For Asian brands, this implies that cultural distance is best treated as a contextual antecedent that interacts with learning and signaling mechanisms rather than as a deterministic barrier.

2.3 Consumer Ethnocentrism

Consumer ethnocentrism refers to the belief that purchasing foreign products is inappropriate because it may harm the domestic economy and violates norms of national solidarity (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). The construct is grounded in social identity processes: consumption is not only utilitarian but also symbolic, enabling consumers to express group membership and moral commitments. Ethnocentrism is therefore expected to shape both evaluative (attitudes) and conative (purchase intention) outcomes by motivating preference for domestic offerings and biasing interpretations of foreign brands' legitimacy and desirability (Sharma, Shimp and Shin, 1995; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004).

For Asian brands competing in non-Asian markets, ethnocentrism is particularly important because it can intensify negative COO-based inference and heighten resistance to foreign competition. Under high ethnocentrism, consumers are more likely to (a) favor domestic alternatives despite comparable performance, and (b) discount positive information about foreign brands, thereby weakening the impact of objective attributes on evaluations (Shimp and Sharma, 1987; Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004). The COO literature further shows that ethnocentrism frequently operates as a moderator, strengthening the negative association between foreign origin and outcomes such as brand attitude and purchase intention especially for categories perceived as economically or symbolically important (Balabanis and Siamagka, 2017).

Ethnocentrism is conceptually distinct from consumer animosity, which reflects anger toward a specific country due to historical, political, or economic grievances (Klein, Ettenson and Morris, 1998). In empirical models of Asian-brand acceptance, distinguishing generalized domestic bias (ethnocentrism) from country-specific hostility (animosity) is analytically useful because the managerial implications differ: ethnocentrism often calls for localization and domestic-value integration, whereas animosity may require crisis-sensitive positioning and reputational buffering.

2.4 *Perceived value*

Perceived value is commonly defined as the consumer's overall assessment of a brand's utility based on a perceived trade-off between benefits received and sacrifices made (Zeithaml, 1988). Benefits may include functional performance, emotional gratification, and social recognition, whereas sacrifices extend beyond price to incorporate time, effort, perceived risk, and switching costs (Zeithaml, 1988). In cross-border contexts, this evaluation is shaped by information asymmetries, where consumers infer value using available signals such as price, brand reputation, distribution accessibility, warranties, and peer reviews (Dodds, Monroe and Grewal, 1991).

A substantial body of research supports the view that perceived value is multidimensional. The Theory of Consumption Values proposes that consumer choice is influenced by functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional value (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991). In applied marketing measurement, the PERVAL framework similarly distinguishes between performance/quality value, value-for-money, emotional value, and social value (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). These perspectives are particularly relevant for Asian brands in North Macedonia because value formation is likely to vary by category depending on (i) the salience of performance risk, (ii) service and infrastructure requirements, and (iii) the symbolic and experiential meaning attached to brands within everyday life and social identity.

In strategic terms, perceived value is also treated as a mechanism linking marketing activities to behavioral outcomes, because superior customer value is a key basis of competitive advantage (Woodruff, 1997). Thus, for Asian brands operating in North Macedonia, perceived value provides an integrative explanatory construct that can connect antecedents (e.g., perceived quality, brand familiarity, cultural distance, ethnocentrism) to outcomes such as purchase intention, repurchase, and recommendation (Zeithaml, 1988; Woodruff, 1997).

2.5 *Brand Familiarity*

Brand familiarity reflects the degree of direct and indirect experience a consumer has with a brand, encompassing awareness, recognition, usage, and accumulated exposure through marketing communications and social diffusion (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Keller, 1993). Familiarity reduces uncertainty by improving processing fluency and by enabling consumers to retrieve stored associations, thereby increasing confidence in judgments and lowering perceived risk (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). This mechanism is particularly relevant for foreign brands because unfamiliarity increases reliance on stereotypes and coarse heuristics such as COO as substitutes for brand-specific knowledge (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Bilkey and Nes, 1982).

For Asian brands entering new markets, familiarity influences consumer response in three interrelated ways. First, greater familiarity tends to enhance perceived credibility and reduce perceived performance risk, improving evaluations even when consumers perceive cultural differences. Second, familiarity can attenuate COO driven stereotyping by shifting evaluation from country level generalizations toward brand-level evidence. Third, familiarity supports customer-based brand equity formation by facilitating stronger, more stable brand knowledge structures that guide preference and loyalty (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991). Empirically, this implies that brand familiarity may both directly predict favorable attitudes and indirectly shape the magnitude of cultural distance and ethnocentrism effects by altering how consumers process origin cues.

2.6 *Consumer attitudes*

In consumer research, attitudes are commonly defined as relatively enduring evaluations favorable or unfavorable toward an object such as a brand, product, or country cue. Attitudes are typically grounded in beliefs and affect, and they are widely treated as proximal predictors of behavioral intentions and choice (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In line with major behavioral frameworks, attitudes are expected to contribute directly to consumers' intentions (and indirectly to behaviour), often together with social influence and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991).

In the context of Asian brands, consumer attitudes can be understood as overall evaluations of brands associated with Asian origins (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea, India and Southeast Asian countries). These evaluations are shaped by consumers' beliefs about competence, reliability, innovativeness, prestige, trustworthiness and symbolic meaning, as well as by consumers' experiences with products, retailers, and platforms in the marketplace.

international purchase contexts often involve greater uncertainty, increasing consumers' reliance on signals and cues to form evaluations. Evidence shows that price, brand name and store/retailer information influence product evaluations and perceived outcomes, with brand and store information typically strengthening evaluations by reducing

uncertainty, while price can function as both a quality cue and a sacrifice (Dodds, Monroe and Grewal, 1991). More broadly, consumer attitudes toward foreign (including Asian) brands can be interpreted as an outcome of inferred benefits versus perceived costs and risks, consistent with value-based evaluation logic (Zeithaml, 1988).

From a brand equity perspective, attitudes are also shaped by brand knowledge including awareness and associative networks because strong, favorable, and unique brand associations help stabilize expectations and generate more positive brand evaluations (Keller, 1993). According to (Keller, 1993) when Asian brands achieve high familiarity and strong brand meaning, consumers may rely less on broad stereotypes and more on brand-specific beliefs and experiences in forming attitudes.

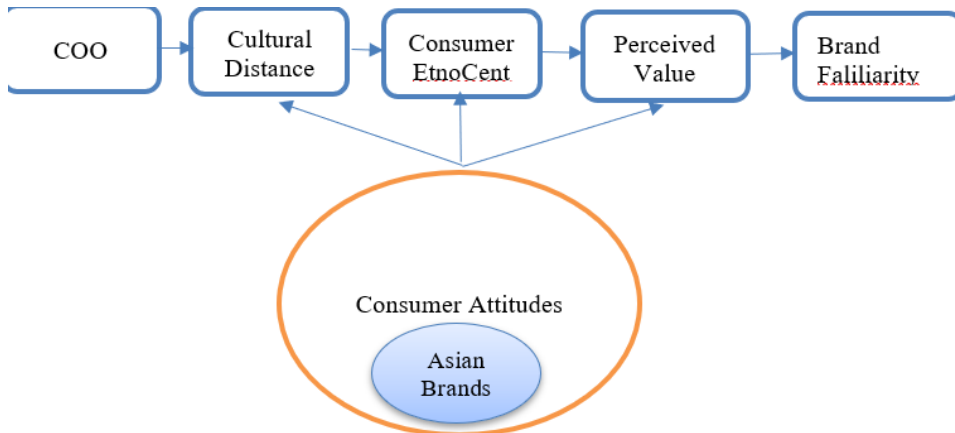


Figure 1. Theoretical conceptual model
Source: Authors

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the determinants of consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in Western Balkan countries. The conceptual model reflects established international marketing and consumer behavior perspectives in which country of origin perceptions operate as an extrinsic evaluative cue (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008), while cultural distance (Hofstede, 2001) and consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma, 1987) represent contextual and normative belief systems shaping marketplace judgments. The study further incorporates perceived value as a core trade-off evaluation (Zeithaml, 1988; Dodds et al., 1991) and brand familiarity as a learning-based factor that can reduce uncertainty and influence brand assessments.

3.1 Sample and data collection

Primary data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire. The final dataset contained 320 usable responses (N = 320) after screening for completeness and consistency. As the study did not rely on an established sampling frame, the sampling approach is best characterized as non-probability recruitment, which is common in consumer survey research when probability-based access to the population is not feasible (Etikan et al., 2016). The implications of non-probability sampling are recognized in interpreting the results: the estimates support theory testing and association patterns rather than population-level generalization. According Memon et al., (2020) choosing the sample size is very important and crucial part for every research, but carefully selected small sample between 150 and above is more meaningful than a blindly selected large sample with 320 and above respondent. In the both cases the number of simple sizes depends from the research background, complexity of research and statistical methods.

3.2 Measures and operationalization

All constructs were measured using multi-item scales assessed on a five-point Likert-type format (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), consistent with standard attitude measurement procedures (Likert, 1932). Items were adapted from established sources and aligned with the Western Balkan consumer context to ensure conceptual equivalence and clarity.

- Country-of-origin (COO) were measured as consumers' overall perceptions of Asian origin as a cue for quality, competence, and credibility (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008).
- Cultural distance (CULDISTANCE) captured perceived cultural difference/compatibility between Asian markets and local norms, consistent with cross-cultural frameworks (Hofstede, 2001).
- Consumer ethnocentrism (CE) reflected normative beliefs regarding preferences for domestic products and moral/economic concerns related to foreign purchasing (Shimp and Sharma, 1987).
- Perceived value (PV) assessed consumers' evaluation of benefits relative to costs, consistent with value theory and price–quality inference research (Zeithaml, 1988; Dodds et al., 1991).
- Brand familiarity (BF) measured respondents' self-reported knowledge and experience with Asian brands, reflecting consumer learning and reduced uncertainty effects.
- Consumer attitude (CATT) represented overall evaluative orientation (favorability) toward Asian brands.

Construct scores were computed as the mean of their respective indicators (i.e., composite/scale averages), a standard approach in survey-based consumer research.

3.3 Reliability and measurement quality

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, the conventional index for evaluating scale consistency in multi-item measures (Cronbach, 1951). Reliability evaluation followed widely accepted psychometric guidance in which coefficients around .70 or higher indicate acceptable internal consistency for research purposes (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

3.4 Data analysis procedures

Analyses were conducted in four steps. First, descriptive statistics were examined to summarize the data distribution. Second, reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was computed for all constructs. Third, Pearson correlations were estimated to evaluate bivariate relationships among the constructs. Finally, hypotheses were tested using multiple linear regression, which estimates the unique contribution of each predictor to consumer attitude while controlling for the remaining predictors, consistent with multivariate analysis guidance (Hair et al., 2019).

4. Results

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) for each multi-item construct. In consumer behavior research, $\alpha \geq .70$ is typically considered acceptable, $\alpha \geq .80$ good.

Table 1: Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Country-of-origin perceptions (COO)	4	0.847	Good reliability
Cultural distance (CULDIST)	3	0.802	Good reliability
Consumer ethnocentrism (CE)	3	0.819	Good reliability
Perceived value (PV)	3	0.787	Acceptable–good reliability
Brand familiarity (BF)	3	0.819	Good reliability
Consumer attitude (CATT)	3	0.827	Good reliability

These α values indicate that the indicators within each scale are coherently capturing a single underlying latent construct (e.g., COO perceptions as a stable cognitive cue; perceived value as a consistent cost–benefit evaluation). This supports measurement adequacy for subsequent hypothesis testing and aligns with established COO and value-based evaluation

frameworks, where constructs are assumed to be internally consistent psychological representations rather than isolated items

4.1 Correlation matrix (construct-level)

Pearson correlations were computed among the latent construct composites. Mean scores are generally high (≈ 4.59 – 4.68), indicating overall positive evaluations of Asian brands and related perceptions in the sample.

Table 2. Descriptives and correlations (Pearson r)

(Lower triangle shown; **p < .001)

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. COO	4.678	0.514	—				
2. CULDIST	4.628	0.577	0.674***	—			
3. CE	4.630	0.604	0.678***	0.706***	—		
4. PV	4.624	0.594	0.656***	0.629***	0.610***	—	
5. BF	4.586	0.591	0.570***	0.391***	0.363***	0.408***	—
6. CATT	4.650	0.605	0.663***	0.650***	0.859***	0.601***	0.347***

(a) COO and Attitude (COO–CATT: $r = .663^*$),**

This is a strong positive association, consistent with country-of-origin theory: favorable origin perceptions act as a summary cue for competence, quality, and credibility, improving overall attitude toward the brands.

(b) Cultural distance and Attitude (CULDIST–CATT: $r = .650^*$),**

The bivariate association is strong and positive, implying that (as measured here) cultural distance/country image is meaningfully linked with consumer attitudes. Theoretically, this can reflect a “halo effect” mechanism: broader perceptions about the origin country (modernity, advancement, dynamism) spill over into brand evaluation.

(c) Ethnocentrism and Attitude (CE–CATT: $r = .859^*$),**

This is very strong and is the most prominent relationship in the matrix. Because ethnocentrism is often theorized to reduce preference for foreign brands, this pattern deserves careful scholarly handling. In a Western Balkan setting, several theoretically plausible interpretations exist, depending on your scale meaning/coding:

- ethnocentrism items may be functioning as a broader value/identity orientation that coexists with pragmatic acceptance of foreign brands, or
- the measurement may capture normative consumption beliefs rather than direct anti-foreign sentiment, or
- (crucially) the direction of coding should be verified to confirm that higher CE scores truly indicate stronger ethnocentrism.

(d) Perceived value and Attitude (PV–CATT: $r = .601^*$),**

This moderate-to-strong correlation supports value-based models (e.g., price–quality–value logic), indicating that Asian brands’ perceived benefits relative to costs are associated with more favorable attitudes.

(e) Brand familiarity and Attitude (BF–CATT: $r = .347^*$),**

This is positive but notably weaker than COO, CULDIST, CE, and PV. Theoretically, familiarity reduces uncertainty and risk, but the weaker magnitude suggests that macro-beliefs (origin and consumer orientations) dominate attitude formation more than exposure/recognition alone in this dataset.

A multiple linear regression model was estimated to examine the determinants of consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans. Consumer Attitude (CONATTITUDE) was modeled as a function of Country-of-Origin perceptions (COO), Cultural Distance (CULDIST), Consumer Ethnocentrism (CONSETNOCEN), Perceived Value (PERCVAL), and Brand Familiarity (BRANDFAM).

Regression specification

$$CONATTITUDE_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COO_i + \beta_2 CULDIST_i + \beta_3 CONSETNOCEN_i + \beta_4 PERCVAL_i + \beta_5 BRANDFAM_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Estimated equation (unstandardized coefficients)

$$CONATTITUDE = 0.284 + 0.145(COO) + 0.015(CULDIST) + 0.727(CONSETNOCEN) + 0.080(PERCVAL) - 0.025(BRANDFAM)$$

4.2 Model Fit and Explained Variance

The regression model was statistically significant and demonstrated strong explanatory power:

- $R^2 = .753$, Adjusted $R^2 = .749$
- $F(5, 314) = 191.80$, $p < .001$

Base in the above output the predictors jointly explain 75.3% of the variance in consumer attitudes, indicating that the selected constructs represent a strong framework for understanding evaluations of Asian brands in this sample.

Table 3: Multiple regression predicting consumer attitudes toward Asian brands (n=320)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.284	0.172	—	1.655	.099
COO	0.145	0.056	0.123	2.592	.010
CULDIST	0.015	0.046	0.014	0.319	.750
CONSETNOCEN	0.727	0.044	0.727	16.650	< .001
PERCVAl	0.080	0.041	0.078	1.954	.052
BRANDFAM	-0.025	0.035	-0.025	-0.724	.470

5. Discussion

H1. Country-of-origin perceptions significantly influence consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans.

Country-of-origin perceptions significantly predicted consumer attitudes ($B = 0.145$, $p = .010$). The positive coefficient indicates that more favorable COO perceptions are associated with more favorable attitudes toward Asian brands.

This finding aligns with country-of-origin theory, which posits that origin acts as a cognitive cue used by consumers to infer product competence, reliability, and credibility. In the Western Balkan context, COO appears to function as a meaningful informational signal even after accounting for other psychological and market-related variables.

H2. Cultural distance does not significantly influence consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans, controlling for other predictors.

Cultural distance was not statistically significant ($B = 0.015$, $p = .750$), indicating no independent contribution to attitudes once COO, ethnocentrism, perceived value, and familiarity are controlled.

While cultural distance is often theorized as a barrier to foreign brand acceptance, the current results suggest that, in this sample, cultural differences are either (a) not salient in purchase evaluations, or (b) already absorbed by other variables (e.g., COO perceptions). Increasing globalization and digital exposure may reduce the practical relevance of cultural distance in everyday brand judgments, particularly for widely distributed consumer categories.

H3. Consumer ethnocentrism significantly influences consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans.

Consumer ethnocentrism significantly influenced consumer attitudes ($B = 0.727$, $p < .001$), representing the strongest effect in the model ($\beta = 0.727$).

Traditionally, ethnocentrism is expected to reduce preference for foreign products. However, your results show a strong association with attitudes in this dataset. Because H3 is non-directional, it is supported on significance grounds. For discussion, the finding can be interpreted in several academically defensible ways: (1) ethnocentrism may be “pragmatic” in this context and not necessarily anti-foreign; (2) consumers may value economic rationality and availability over domestic bias; or (3) scale interpretation/coding should be verified to confirm that higher scores reflect higher ethnocentrism rather than openness. In a journal manuscript, you should explicitly note this pattern and justify it as context-specific.

H4. Perceived value influences consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans.

Not supported at $\alpha = .05$ (marginal trend).

Perceived value did not reach conventional statistical significance ($B = 0.080$, $p = .052$), though the coefficient is positive and close to the threshold.

The marginal result suggests that value perceptions may contribute to attitudes, but their independent effect is

weaker once macro-level perceptions (COO) and identity-related beliefs (ethnocentrism) are included. This implies that Asian brands may not be evaluated purely on functional price–benefit trade-offs; instead, broader beliefs about the producing country and consumers' worldview may dominate attitude formation. If your journal allows reporting at $\alpha = .10$, you can describe PV as “marginally significant.”

H5. Brand familiarity does not significantly influence consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans, controlling for other predictors.

Brand familiarity was not significant ($B = -0.025$, $p = .470$), indicating that familiarity does not contribute additional explanatory power beyond COO, ethnocentrism, and value-related beliefs.

Familiarity often strengthens attitudes by reducing uncertainty and perceived risk. However, in this dataset, attitudes appear to be shaped more strongly by macro-level cues and consumer belief systems. Another interpretation is that familiarity with Asian brands may already be high in the region, making it less discriminating as a predictor (i.e., a ceiling effect).

Table 4: Hypothesis testing summary ($\alpha = .05$)

Hypothesis	Decision	Empirical evidence
H1 (COO influences attitude)	Supported	$p = .010$
H2 (CULDIST not significant)	Supported	$p = .750$
H3 (Ethnocentrism influences attitude)	Supported	$p < .001$
H4 (Value influences attitude)	Not supported (marginal)	$p = .052$
H5 (Familiarity not significant)	Supported	$p = .470$

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether country-of-origin perceptions, cultural distance, consumer ethnocentrism, perceived value, and brand familiarity predict consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 314) = 191.80$, $p < .001$, explaining 75.3% of the variance in consumer attitudes ($R^2 = .753$). Country-of-origin perceptions were a significant predictor ($B = 0.145$, $p = .010$), supporting H1. Cultural distance was not significant ($p = .750$), supporting H2. Consumer ethnocentrism significantly predicted attitudes ($B = 0.727$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. Perceived value showed a positive but marginal association ($p = .052$) and did not support H4 at $\alpha = .05$. Brand familiarity was not significant ($p = .470$), supporting H5.

6. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This study examined the determinants of consumer attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans by testing the effects of country-of-origin perceptions, cultural distance, consumer ethnocentrism, perceived value, and brand familiarity. Overall, the regression model demonstrated strong explanatory power ($R^2 = .753$), indicating that the selected predictors provide a robust account of attitude formation in this context. The findings underscore the centrality of macro-level perceptions and consumer belief systems in shaping evaluations of Asian brands, while suggesting that more “traditional” market-based drivers (e.g., familiarity, value) may exert weaker incremental influence once broader cognitive and identity-related variables are considered.

6.1 Country-of-origin perceptions and consumer attitudes (H1)

The results support the proposition that country-of-origin perceptions significantly influence consumer attitudes toward Asian brands ($p = .010$). This aligns with the country-of-origin literature, which argues that origin functions as a heuristic cue that consumers use to infer product quality, reliability, and technological capability—especially in situations where information is incomplete or where brands compete in crowded categories. In the Western Balkan context, where consumers are exposed to a wide mix of global and regional brands, origin perceptions appear to remain a meaningful informational signal. Practically, this suggests that Asian brands benefit when consumers associate their origin with competence, innovation, and credibility. The positive coefficient indicates that favorable origin perceptions translate into more positive overall attitudes, reinforcing the idea that Asian brands in the region are not evaluated solely through a low-price lens but increasingly through reputational and symbolic cues tied to national development and industrial sophistication.

6.2 The non-significant role of cultural distance (H2)

Cultural distance did not significantly influence consumer attitudes once other predictors were controlled ($p = .750$), supporting H2. This finding is important because cultural distance is often theorized as a barrier that reduces acceptance of foreign products by increasing psychological distance, uncertainty, and perceived incompatibility. In this sample, however, cultural distance appears not to be an independent driver of attitudes. One plausible explanation is that globalization and digital connectivity have reduced the salience of cultural boundaries in everyday consumption; exposure to international media, social networks, and cross-border e-commerce may normalize cultural differences, making them less influential in brand judgments.

A second explanation is that cultural distance may operate indirectly rather than directly: consumers may translate cultural perceptions into more concrete beliefs such as perceived quality, reputational trust, or country competence, which are better captured by the country-of-origin construct. Therefore, the Western Balkan context may reflect a consumption environment where cultural difference is not inherently interpreted as “incompatibility,” but rather as a neutral background factor, particularly for widely available consumer categories.

6.3 Consumer ethnocentrism as a dominant predictor (H3)

Consumer ethnocentrism significantly influenced attitudes ($p < .001$) and emerged as the strongest predictor in the model ($\beta = .727$). Because H3 was specified as non-directional, it is supported on the basis of statistical significance. Substantively, the strong association indicates that identity-related beliefs are critically important in explaining attitudes toward Asian brands in the Western Balkans. However, this result requires careful interpretation because ethnocentrism is commonly conceptualized as a tendency to prefer domestic products and to perceive buying foreign products as economically or morally inappropriate. In many contexts, ethnocentrism is expected to reduce attitudes toward foreign brands.

There are three academically defensible interpretations for the pattern observed in this dataset:

1. **Contextual “pragmatic ethnocentrism.”** In emerging and transitional economies, consumers may hold pro-domestic beliefs while simultaneously purchasing and evaluating foreign brands favorably due to price–quality trade-offs, product availability, and perceived technological superiority. In such cases, ethnocentrism may not function as strict avoidance of foreign goods but rather as a value orientation that coexists with global consumption. Asian brands may be seen as accessible, functional, and increasingly reputable; therefore, even ethnocentrically oriented consumers may evaluate them positively if they satisfy practical needs.
2. **Construct meaning in the regional context.** Ethnocentrism items can be interpreted differently across cultures. In the Western Balkans, respondents may associate certain statements with broader concerns such as protecting household welfare, seeking value, or supporting economic stability—rather than literal rejection of foreign brands. If respondents interpret ethnocentrism items as “responsible consumption” or “economic realism,” the construct may correlate positively with attitudes toward brands perceived as offering high utility.
3. **Measurement and coding considerations.** In journal reporting, it is essential to verify that higher scores on the ethnocentrism scale truly represent higher ethnocentrism (and not openness to foreign products). If any items were reverse-coded, misalignment could inflate unexpected relationships. While the statistical pattern is clear, the manuscript should explicitly state that the scale coding was checked and that the observed direction reflects actual respondent orientation.

Regardless of which explanation dominates, the empirical conclusion is that belief-based orientations (captured here via ethnocentrism) are highly influential for attitudes in this dataset. This suggests that identity and worldview variables may be particularly salient in Western Balkan consumer research and should be more prominently integrated into future models of foreign brand evaluation.

6.4 Perceived value as a marginal predictor (H4)

Perceived value did not reach conventional significance at $\alpha = .05$ ($p = .052$), providing no support for H4 at the strict threshold, although the coefficient was positive and close to significance. The marginal result suggests that value perceptions may still matter, but their unique contribution becomes limited when stronger macro-perceptual and belief-based predictors are included. This implies that for Asian brands in the Western Balkans, value is a necessary but not sufficient condition: consumers may expect Asian brands to offer good value as a baseline, so differences in perceived

value no longer strongly discriminate attitudes. In other words, value may be “priced in” to consumers’ expectations, while attitudes are shaped more by origin reputations and identity-linked evaluations. For journal positioning, it is appropriate to report this as a non-significant effect at $\alpha = .05$, while noting a marginal trend that may become significant with alternative modeling approaches (e.g., segmentation, interaction terms, or category-specific analyses).

6.5 *Brand familiarity and the absence of a unique effect (H5)*

Brand familiarity was not a significant predictor ($p = .470$), supporting H5. The non-significant effect indicates that familiarity does not add explanatory power beyond the other predictors. This may reflect a market reality where Asian brands have already achieved substantial awareness and presence, reducing variation in familiarity among respondents. Alternatively, familiarity may influence attitudes indirectly through variables such as perceived quality, trust, or perceived value—paths not explicitly modeled here. Another plausible explanation is that familiarity operates more strongly at the behavioral stage (purchase intention, loyalty) than at the attitudinal stage, especially when attitudes are largely driven by broader beliefs and macro-level country evaluations.

7. Limitations and Future Scope of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study, which focuses exclusively on the North Macedonia market and its consumers.

First, the geographical scope is restricted to a single national context. Although North Macedonia represents an informative setting within the Western Balkans due to its transitional economy and increasing exposure to Asian brands, the country’s institutional environment, purchasing power structure, media landscape, and patterns of foreign brand penetration may differ from neighboring Balkan markets. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as context-specific and should not be generalized automatically to other Western Balkan countries or broader European consumer populations.

Second, the study relies on cross-sectional survey data, which captures consumer perceptions and attitudes at one point in time. As attitudes toward Asian brands can shift in response to macro events (e.g., economic volatility, regulatory developments, geopolitical tensions, or changes in brand reputation), the findings cannot establish temporal stability or causal direction. Longitudinal research would be necessary to assess whether the relationships observed remain consistent over time and to better infer causality.

Third, the use of self-reported measures introduces the potential for common method variance and social desirability effects. Respondents may provide answers that reflect perceived social norms rather than fully revealing personal preferences, particularly for constructs that involve normative beliefs such as consumer ethnocentrism. Although standard procedural remedies can reduce this risk (e.g., anonymity, clear wording, and non-evaluative phrasing), the possibility of method-related inflation in correlations cannot be fully excluded.

Fourth, the study examines attitudes toward “Asian brands” as a broad category. North Macedonian consumers may hold distinct perceptions of brands originating from different Asian countries (e.g., China, South Korea, Japan), and these perceptions may vary substantially across product categories such as smartphones, automobiles, electronics, or FMCG. Aggregating brands under a single “Asian” label may therefore obscure meaningful heterogeneity in country-of-origin effects and category-specific decision criteria. Future research should disaggregate Asian countries and product types to generate more fine-grained implications for managers.

Finally, the sampling approach (typical of consumer survey research in markets without a comprehensive sampling frame) may limit representativeness. While the sample size is adequate for regression-based inference and theory testing, it may not fully reflect the population distribution in North Macedonia across age groups, regions, income levels, or urban–rural differences. Replication using probability-based sampling or multi-stage stratified designs would strengthen generalizability within the North Macedonian market.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable evidence on how North Macedonian consumers evaluate Asian brands and offers a foundation for future research that extends the model across Balkan markets and incorporates longitudinal and category-specific designs

8. Future Research Directions

Building on the present study's findings within the North Macedonian market, several future research directions can strengthen theoretical contribution, improve methodological rigor, and enhance managerial relevance.

8.1 *Cross-national and within-region comparative designs*

Future studies should replicate the model across other Western Balkan countries (e.g., Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina) to assess whether the observed relationships are specific to North Macedonia or represent a broader regional pattern. Comparative analysis would enable researchers to test country-level moderators (e.g., institutional trust, EU orientation, media framing, and economic dependence on foreign trade) that may shape country-of-origin effects and ethnocentrism dynamics.

8.2 *Disaggregation of "Asian brands" by origin and country stereotypes*

The category "Asian brands" is heterogeneous. Future research should separate perceptions by origin country (e.g., China vs. South Korea vs. Japan) and explicitly model origin stereotypes (technological competence, reliability, safety standards, privacy/security concerns). This would better align with country image theory and reveal whether consumers in North Macedonia evaluate Asian brands through distinct national reputational schemas rather than a single regional frame.

8.3 *Product-category specificity and involvement effects*

Country-of-origin and cultural distance effects often vary across product categories. Future work should test the model separately for high-involvement categories (e.g., smartphones, cars, consumer electronics) versus low-involvement categories (e.g., FMCG, fashion accessories). Incorporating product involvement and perceived risk as moderators would clarify when origin cues dominate attitudes and when price–value trade-offs become decisive.

8.4 *Practical Implications for Asian Business*

Asian businesses seeking to strengthen their position in Western Balkan markets should treat the findings as a clear signal that consumer attitudes are shaped less by simple exposure and more by higher-level evaluations of national competence and consumer belief systems. First, country-of-origin perceptions matter significantly; therefore, Asian firms should manage origin cues strategically rather than assuming they are neutral. Communication should emphasize credible signals of technological capability, reliability, and production standards (e.g., extended warranties, transparent quality certifications, service guarantees, and performance comparisons). In practice, this means embedding proof points directly into advertising claims and retail touchpoints, including warranty terms on product packaging, visible certification labels, and clear after-sales service commitments. Because origin functions as a quality heuristic, consistent delivery on these cues is essential; reputational damage from service failures can quickly undermine origin-based advantages.

Second, cultural distance does not significantly shape attitudes once other factors are accounted for. This implies that Asian companies should not overinvest in "cultural adaptation" at the expense of core brand propositions. Localization should be selective and functional: adapt language, customer service norms, and payment/logistics preferences, but maintain a coherent global identity that communicates professionalism and competence. In other words, the priority is operational localization (distribution coverage, warranty networks, and easy returns) rather than heavy cultural rebranding. Western Balkan consumers appear capable of accepting culturally distinct brands when trust and quality signals are strong.

Third, consumer ethnocentrism significantly influences attitudes in this market context, indicating that identity-related beliefs and perceptions of economic rationality play a decisive role. Asian firms should respond with positioning that frames purchasing as a "smart," "responsible," and value-conscious decision rather than a symbolic shift away from local interests. Messaging can legitimately highlight practical contributions: affordability that improves household welfare, durable products that reduce replacement costs, and local employment created through retail partnerships, service centers, and authorized distribution. Where feasible, firms should reinforce legitimacy by investing in visible local commitments authorized repair hubs, local language support, partnerships with domestic logistics providers, and training

programs for local technicians. Such initiatives allow Asian brands to be seen as participants in the local economy rather than outsiders extracting value.

Fourth, perceived value shows only a marginal incremental effect when country-level perceptions and ethnocentrism are included. This suggests that competing solely on low price is insufficient and may even commoditize the brand. Instead, Asian companies should adopt “value-plus” strategies: maintain competitive pricing, but differentiate using durability, feature depth, energy efficiency, and post-purchase assurance. Bundled offers (e.g., accessories, service plans, upgrades) can communicate superior value without aggressive discounting. Segment-specific value communication is also important: younger consumers may respond to innovation and design narratives, while older segments may prioritize reliability and service accessibility.

Finally, brand familiarity is not a significant independent driver of attitudes, implying that awareness-building campaigns alone may have limited returns. Rather than spending disproportionately on reach, firms should prioritize trust-building experiences: demonstrable product trials, in-store verification, third-party reviews, and consistent after-sales performance. Digital strategies should focus on credibility (reviews, warranty transparency, customer support responsiveness) and community building (how-to content, troubleshooting videos, local-language FAQs). Overall, the practical lesson is that Asian businesses will win in the Western Balkans by combining strong competence signaling, credible local presence, and value-plus positioning, while treating cultural differences as manageable through operational excellence rather than symbolic adaptation.

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