



Advancing the country image construct[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized markets a favorable country-of-origin image (CoI) has a considerable impact on consumers' evaluation of products originating from different countries and therefore influences their subsequent buying decisions. The current paper seeks to extend our conceptual understanding of the nature and functioning of the CoI construct. The aim is threefold, namely to provide a succinct state-of-the-art picture of country image research in international marketing, to contribute to a better measurement of the country image construct, and, finally, to develop an agenda for future research.

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1. Introduction

Literature on national stereotypes as well as the perception of nations traces back to the 1930s (e.g., Child and Doob, 1943; Katz and Braly, 1933; Klingberg, 1941) but it was not until the early 1960s that the concept of country-of-origin (CoO) gained the attention of marketing scholars. Ernest Dichter (1962) argues that the successful marketing manager of the future has to pay attention to the basic differences and similarities among consumers in different parts of the world. Schooler's (1965) study is the first to empirically demonstrate that consumers rate products that are identical in every respect except for their CoO differently.

Recent literature reviews estimate the number of publications on topics relating to CoO at well over 1000 with at least 400 of them being published in academic (peer-reviewed) journals (Usunier, 2006). This body of research shows that a product's national origin acts as a signal of product quality (e.g., Han, 1989; Li and Wyer, 1994) and also affects perceived risk and value as well as likelihood of purchase (see Liefeld, 1993 for a review). Numerous articles published in the business press underline the importance of this effect. For example, following the publication of a series of controversial cartoons picturing the Prophet Mohammed, Danish products were yanked off the shelves of many stores in the Middle East, finally costing Denmark's companies millions and raising fears of irreparable damage to trade ties (Fattah, 2006). After a number of recalls and disasters of products made overseas, American consumers are very sensible with respect to the origin of the product and

actively search for products "made in the USA" (Martin, 2007). In this respect, Scott Piergrossi, creative director at Brand Institute Inc. points out that "[c]onsumers are yearning now for reliable, high-quality goods. It need to be once again communicated to the public that quality craftsmanship is associated with the USA" (Vence, 2007, p. 12). These examples show that CoO is an important informational cue that is of interest not only for businesses that need to enhance their competitiveness abroad, but also for public policy makers with similar concerns but at the national or industry level (Papadopoulos et al., 2000).

In conceptual terms, the focus of CoO research has gradually shifted from evaluating differences in product evaluations and preferences based on the mere notion of the national origin of a product (e.g., Italy, Japan, USA) to a more complex construct, namely the *image* of the countries under consideration. While conventional CoO studies allow researchers to analyze *if* consumers prefer products or brands from one country in comparison to another, emphasis on the perceived images of the countries involved enables scholars to analyze *why* this is the case. For example, the technological superiority or economic strength of a particular country could explain the latter. Hence, more and more CoO studies explicitly measure the image of a country as product origin, that is, the so-called country-of-origin image (CoI).

Despite the acknowledged importance of the CoI construct, literature has reached no consensus on how to conceptualize and operationalize CoI (Laroche et al., 2005). Indeed, no systematic analysis of extant conceptualizations and associated measurement scales of the CoI construct exists, leaving researchers with little guidance on how to best operationalize the construct in empirical efforts. The present study addresses this gap by (1) undertaking a state-of-the-art review of current conceptualizations and operationalizations of the CoI construct, (2) identifying critical issues inherent in these, (3) proposing an integrated CoI framework based on attitude theory, and (4) highlighting important areas for future research.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definitional domains

The domain of a construct delineates what is included in its definition and what is excluded (Churchill, 1979). A review of the definitional domains in extant Col research reveals three distinct groups that differ in their focal image object (Table 1), namely (1) definitions of the (general) image of countries (i.e., country image), (2) definitions of the image of countries and their products (also referred to as product-country images), and (3) definitions of the images of products from a country (i.e., product image).

The first group of definitions views country image as a generic construct consisting of generalized images created not only by representative products but also by the degree of economic and political maturity, historical events and relationships, culture and traditions, and the degree of technological virtuosity and industrialization (Allred et al., 1999; Bannister and Saunders, 1978; Desborde, 1990). While all of these factors refer to *cognitive* beliefs about a particular country, Askegaard and Ger (1998) and Verlegh (2001) are among the few researchers who explicitly also mention an *affective* component of country image, the latter capturing emotions and feelings about a particular country. While, already in its origins, image theory assumes that national images have both a cognitive and an affective structure (e.g., Boulding, 1956, 1959), most definitions of Col rather neglect the latter. For example, Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 193, *emphasis added*) define country image as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational *beliefs* one has about a particular

country”, while Kotler et al. (1993, p. 141) refer to it as “the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places”.

The next category of definitions focuses on the image of countries in their role as origins of products. For example, Li et al. (1997, p. 166) define country image as “consumers’ images of different countries and of products made in these countries.” This definition implies that, first, country image and product image are two distinct (but related) concepts, and, second, that country images affect the images of products from that country. Indeed, several studies show that there is a relationship between consumers’ preference for a country’s products and consumers’ image of a country (e.g., Ittersum et al., 2003; Roth and Romeo, 1992). However, although the term product-country image (PCI) is “felt to be broader and represent more accurately [...] the phenomenon under study” (Papadopoulos, 1993, p. 8), it offers a rather restrictive view of the conceptual domain of Col. This is because the image of a country might not only affect the evaluation of that country’s products, but also other important outcomes such as investments, visits and ties with a country (e.g., Heslop et al., 2004). For example, Mattel recently recalled 19 million toys from China due to product safety concerns which will definitely affect its future investment behavior as well as the current ties it has with China (Story and Barboza, 2007).

The last group of definitions focuses exclusively on the images of the products of a country and dates back to Nagashima (1970). However, although using the term *country* to specify the image object, Nagashima’s (1970) definition actually refers to the *products* of a particular country (e.g., Martin and Eroglu, 1993; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2003). Thus, it is *product image* rather than *country image* that

Table 1
Review of key definitions of country image.

<i>Definitions on (overall) country image (Col)</i>	
Bannister and Saunders (1978, p. 562)	“Generalized images, created by variables such as representative products, economic and political maturity, historical events and relationships, traditions, industrialization and the degree of technological virtuosity.”
Desborde (1990, p. 44)	“Country-of-origin image refers to the overall impression of a country present in a consumer’s mind as conveyed by its culture, political system and level of economic and technological development.”
Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 193)	“Accordingly, country image was defined as the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country.”
Kotler et al. (1993, p. 141)	“The sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places. Images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place. They are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place.”
Askegaard and Ger (1998, p. 52)	“Schema, or a network of interrelated elements that define the country, a knowledge structure that synthesises what we know of a country, together with its evaluative significance or schema-triggered affect.”
Allred et al. (1999, p. 36)	“The perception or impression that organizations and consumers have about a country. This impression or perception of a country is based on the country’s economic condition, political structure, culture, conflict with other countries, labor conditions, and stand on environmental issues.”
Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999, p. 525)	“Mental representations of a country’s people, products, culture and national symbols. Product-country images contain widely shared cultural stereotypes.”
Verlegh (2001, p. 25)	“A mental network of affective and cognitive associations connected to the country.”
<i>Definitions on product-country image (PCI)</i>	
Hooley et al. (1988, p. 67)	“Stereotype images of countries and/or their outputs [...] that [...] impact on behaviour.”
Li et al. (1997, p. 116)	“Consumers’ images of different countries and of products made in these countries.”
Knight and Calantone (2000, p. 127)	“Country-of-origin image (COI) reflects a consumer’s perceptions about the quality of products made in a particular country and the nature of people from that country.”
Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2001, p. 13)	“Brand and country images are similarly defined as the mental pictures of brands and countries, respectively.”
Nebenzahl et al. (2003, p. 388)	“Consumers’ perceptions about the attributes of products made in a certain country; emotions toward the country and resulted perceptions about the social desirability of owning products made in the country.”
Papadopoulos and Heslop (2003, p. 404)	“Product-country images (PCIs), or the place-related images with which buyers and/or sellers may associate a product.”
<i>Definitions on (country-related) product image (PI)</i>	
Nagashima (1970, p. 68)	“‘Image’ means ideas, emotional background, and connotation associated with a concept. Thus, the ‘made in’ image is the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country.”
Narayana (1981, p. 32)	“The aggregate image for any particular country’s product refers to the entire connotative field associated with that country’s product offerings, as perceived by consumers.”
Han (1989, p. 222)	“Consumers’ general perceptions of quality for products made in a given country.”
Roth and Romeo (1992, p. 480)	“Country image is the overall perception consumers’ form of products from a particular country, based on their prior perceptions of the country’s production and marketing strengths and weaknesses.”
Bilkey (1993, p. xix)	“Buyers’ opinions regarding the relative qualities of goods and services produced in various countries”
Strutton et al. (1995, p. 79)	“Composite ‘made in’ image consisting of the mental facsimiles, reputations and stereotypes associated with goods originating from each country of interest.”

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