

Positioning countries on personality dimensions: Scale development and implications for country marketing

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Abstract

The main objective of the research presented in this article was to develop a scale to position countries on human traits. The scale development procedure followed the admitted sequence for the construction of psychometrically good measuring instruments. A list of human-relevant adjectives was generated from previous personality scales and individual interviews with a sample of French-speaking Canadian adults. Two empirical studies were conducted to reduce the list of adjectives and estimate the underlying personality factor structure. This resulted in the identification of six country personality dimensions which were labeled as follows: *agreeableness*, *wickedness*, *snobbism*, *assiduousness*, *conformity*, and *unobtrusiveness*. A survey was conducted among a sample of 170 French-speaking Canadians to refine the scale, assess its stability and psychometric properties, and test the adequateness of a reduced scale. Both the full (37 items) and reduced (24 items) scales were shown to have a stable structure and good psychometric properties. The article concludes with some marketing applications of the scale for positioning countries and estimating the relative impact of the personality dimensions on attitudes toward countries in general, product–country attitudes, and attitudes toward countries as travel destinations.

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People know much more about countries than they did several years ago. With the increasing development of worldwide communications, events of public interest that happen in some remote country are being diffused almost instantaneously across the world ([Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004](#)). The higher standards of living of some societies coupled with the affordability of worldwide transportation have encouraged people to travel around the world, such that more than ever people have had some direct experience with different countries, their customs, and their citizens ([World Tourism Organization, 2003](#)). With the globalization of markets, people also come to know countries by being exposed to and buying products of various national origins ([Roth and Romeo, 1992](#)). In sum, people everywhere are more likely than ever to have formed relatively organized mental representations of countries.

Learning about these mental representations is fundamental. As people's perceptions of countries are taken into account by governments when they make international policy decisions,

these perceptions may therefore impact the lives of millions of individuals. For some countries, tourism represents a major economic industry. Because people's preferences for travel destinations depend in good part on country perceptions, it is important to know and manage these perceptions. The economic health of many countries is contingent upon their ability to produce and export products in different parts of the world. In addition, in order to reduce their costs, firms are increasingly transferring their manufacturing operations in countries where they can find a low-wage workforce. Because consumer evaluations of products are influenced by their knowledge of where products are made ([Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2003](#)), how countries are perceived by consumers is a significant determinant of economic performance.

Recent image research in marketing has adopted the position that commercial objects, such as brands and stores, can be positioned on human traits ([Batra et al., 1993](#)). [Aaker \(1997\)](#) has proposed that brands, like human beings, are represented in consumers' minds in terms of personality traits. In a retailing context, [d'Astous and Lévesque \(2003\)](#) have proposed that the personality of stores can be assessed on the basis of five traits. Because forming personality impressions of people is something

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that is spontaneous and recurrent (e.g., Asch, 1946), researchers working in this area speculate that this process is general and that it extends quite naturally to inanimate objects. The personality traits of objects must be inferred from different sources. In the case of brands, advertising is presumably a major source of inference whereas store personality inferences may depend more on direct experiences within the store (e.g., atmosphere, clients, service personnel).

With increased exposure to international information, the opportunities to form organized mental representations of countries are frequent. Assuming that these representations naturally revolve around human traits, people may spontaneously position countries on personality dimensions. This possibility is examined in the research reported in this article. More precisely, the objective of this research was to develop a measuring instrument aimed at capturing the basic personality dimensions of countries. In the next section, the relevant literature which deals with country images is briefly reviewed. This is followed by a description of the methodological procedures that were used to develop the country personality instrument and to assess its psychometric properties.

1. Country images

Early studies on country images were conducted in the 1960s and the 1970s. For instance, Robinson and Hefner (1967) studied the perceptions that two groups of individuals (people from Detroit and students at the University of Michigan) had of 17 countries. Using multidimensional scaling, they found that these perceptions were organized around four dimensions and that three of these dimensions were shared by the two groups: communism, level of development, and Hispanic influence. However, the relative importance of each dimension in differentiating countries varied across the two groups. Whereas the level of development was the most important dimension for students, in the case of Detroit residents it was the political regime (i.e., communism or not).

Jones and Ashmore (1973) examined the country stereotypes and characteristics associated with nations and ethnic groups. In their study, an amalgam of 50 countries and ethnic groups had to be evaluated using 49 adjectives. Using hierarchical and multidimensional analyses, they identified eight distinct groups of countries that could be positioned on two main dimensions: modern–backward and cooperative–competitive. For instance, German people were found to be stereotypically associated with traits consistent with a competitive character whereas the traits of Italians reflected a cooperative character.

The concept of country image has been studied quite extensively in marketing. This stream of research has emphasized the effect of country images on specific consumer behaviors, such as product evaluations and purchase intentions. Consequently, in many marketing studies the concept of country image has been closely related to elements of direct relevance to consumer products. Thus, Nagashima (1970) has associated a country's image with such product characteristics as price, reliability, technology, reputation, style, and design. For Narayana (1981), a country image is formed on the basis of

all perceptions linked to a country's products. According to Roth and Romeo (1992), country image is a global perception based on a country's products as well as the strengths and weaknesses of its marketing.

In some rarer instances, marketing researchers have used broader definitions. Thus, Martin and Eroglu (1993) defined country image as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (p. 193). They proposed that country image was composed of a political (e.g., capitalist *versus* communist system), an economic (e.g., level of standard of living), and a technological dimension (e.g., mass-produced *versus* handcrafted products). Another broad perspective was adopted by Allred et al. (1999) who said that country image is made of people's impressions based on the country's economic conditions, political structure, culture, conflicts with other countries, and position in relation to environmental issues.

Marketing practitioners have also been interested in country images. The Global Market Insite company has recently developed the so-called Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index whose main purpose is to produce a ranking of 25 nations with respect to the power and appeal of their brand image. The index is based on six dimensions: tourism (i.e., the nation's appeal as a tourist destination), exports (i.e., the image of the nation as a producer of consumer goods), governance (i.e., the perceived competence of the nation's government), investment and immigration (i.e., the nation's appeal as a place for working and investing), culture and heritage (i.e., the perception of the nation's cultural strengths), and people (i.e., the nation's human capital) (The Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index, 2005).

With such a variety of definitions and approaches associated with country image research, it is relevant to ask why a personality perspective is useful or even necessary. A first reason is that the presentation of countries is often human-like. For instance, we hear that such country “has a seat” at the United Nations. Or, an editorial in some newspaper describes such country as “aggressive, morally decadent, and racist” (*sic*). The use of human traits to qualify the decisions and actions of countries is likely to encourage their personification and this is one justification for their utilization to measure a country's image. Secondly, human traits provide some rich meanings. These meanings permit to predict different types of consistent actions. In addition, human traits are associated with universal mental representations that are easily activated because they have been used previously to characterize people in our environment and predict their behavior. They correspond to easily accessed, abstract cognitions that provide an efficient mechanism for making different types of inferences about objects, including countries. Finally, the personality perspective fits well with the self-image congruence theory which proposes that people prefer objects whose psychological characteristics are congruent with their own psychological characteristics (see e.g., Graeff, 1996; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Applying this theory to countries, this implies that people are likely to prefer countries that they perceive as being psychologically similar to them. Obviously, this theoretical prediction is testable to the extent that the characteristics that are used to assess the level of self-image congruency can be applied to both countries and humans.

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