Of products and tourism destinations: An integrative, cross-national study of place image

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Despite recognition that places have images, and that images influence consumers (Rojas-Mendez, 2013), place image research has been challenged by a lack of breadth. Studies are generally limited to the perspective of one field of study, mainly Product-Country Image (PCI) or Tourism Destination Image (TDI), measure the images of individual places without reference to a comparative perspective, and rarely consider the influence of a broader gestalt perception of place (Zeugner-Roth & Zabkar, 2015). To explore the multi-dimensional nature of place image and its influence on buyer behavior, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating product, country, and tourism variables simultaneously. An integrated model is empirically tested in two countries using four target countries in each case, resulting in eight model tests. Results reveal how the subcomponents of place image are related: cognitive country image has the greatest influence on product evaluations; affective country image has the greatest influence on destination evaluations; and notably, product beliefs influence tourism receptivity, supporting the hypothesized cross-over effect from PCI to TDI.

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1. Introduction

The power of image as an intangible cue to influence buyer behavior has long been recognized by marketers and market researchers (Dichter, 1985). Its use for geographically defined places, more broadly termed place branding or marketing, is the most macro level application to date. In recent years, the amount of research and practice in the place branding field has intensified (Gertner, 2011). Conceptually, a positive place brand is claimed to create and sustain wealth (Anholt, 2003), and in practice, place cues are commonly used in advertising (Papadopoulos, El Banna, Murphy, and Rojas-Mendez, 2012). The importance of place branding research is reflected in the range of fields that study the phenomenon; most notably, studies are found in marketing (Fetscherin, 2010), tourism (Herstein, 2012), and public diplomacy (Gertner, 2011). For consumers, particularly in developed countries where both the incidence of international travel and the availability of foreign goods continue to grow, the associations that come to mind for any given place are likely to reflect an array of dimensions, from tourism to technology (Rojas-Mendez, 2013). However, most studies are still undertaken within the context of one subject domain, for one place at a time, limiting the contribution of extant research to place image theory and the generalizability of findings. As well, place branding studies are predominantly qualitative, lacking testable models or hypotheses (Gertner, 2011).

More narrowly focused, yet encouragingly substantial and expansive, is the body of empirical theory-based place image research in two related sub-fields: Product-country image (PCI) and tourism destination image (TDI). Both fields focus on relationships between place image and buyer behavior, for product evaluations and purchase in the PCI context and for destination evaluations and choice in TDI. Nevertheless, despite their common interests in place image and buyer behavior, contributions to international marketing and place branding, and private and public audience cross-overs, research empirically connecting the two is very limited.

Images are mental schemata that reflect a complex web of associations of both cognitive and affective components stored in memory (Hawkins, Best, and Coney, 2001). Consistent with this definition, the overall image of a place will influence how its products and destinations are viewed—and its manifestations as a producer and a tourism destination may also interact with each other. The suggestion that place-related behavior is influenced by affective as well as cognitive factors is supported by research both in tourism (e.g., Papadopoulos, Elliot, and De Nisco, 2013) and in product-related research fields such as ethnocentrism (e.g., Shimp and Sharma, 1987) and animosity (e.g., Klein, Ettenson, and Morris, 1998). PCI studies have shown that country image influences evaluations of that country's products, sometimes referred to as a halo effect (Han, 1989), most applicable when consumers are unfamiliar with foreign products. Verlegh and Steenkamp's (1999) meta-analysis of 41 empirical PCI studies found the average effect size

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of country image to be 0.39, considered a medium to large effect on product evaluations. TDI studies, by contrast, do not typically disaggregate a construct for country image, often mixing together country items (e.g. security) and product items (e.g. attractions) as part of a destination image construct. They do show, however, that TDI influences destination selection (Goodrich, 1978) and traveler satisfaction (Bigne, Sanchez, and Sanchez, 2001), as evidence of an image-to-behavior effect.

However, while each of the PCI and TDI fields has been studied extensively, the *interaction* between the product- and destination-related images, and between them and the overall image of a place, remains uncertain. The dearth of research in this area reflects the broad scope of the phenomenon under observation, and represents a fundamental research gap that impedes the cross-pollination of ideas between the two fields and the development of a holistic understanding of the image concept. The present study aims to address this gap through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates country, product, and destination image variables in a single integrative model, enabling the examination of image effects simultaneously within each of the product and tourism domains as well as the interactions between the two. The model examines cross-over effects between the constructs in two ways:

i. Drawing from evidence that suggests country image influences evaluations of that country's products, it postulates whether this influence might extend further from product evaluations to receptivity to that country as a tourism destination; and, vice-versa,

ii. Drawing from evidence that suggests country image influences evaluations of that country as a tourism destination, it postulates whether this influence might extend further from destination evaluations to receptivity to products from that country.

In other words, the model examines whether consumers' positive associations with a country, as in the case of, for example, French quality of life, may engender, first, positive beliefs about French products (e.g., refined wines, high fashion) and tourism destinations (e.g., Paris, Côte d'Azur), as well as, second, cross-over effects between the two, both direct (e.g., wines to rural agri-tourism and vice-versa) and indirect (e.g., upscale tourism to upscale products and vice-versa). Like the halo effect, such influences may not be product- or place-specific but reflect a general extension of positive or negative associations from image to beliefs to behavior.

The focus of the research is on an extensive empirical test of the integrative model, carried out in two countries and for the images of four target countries, resulting in a total of eight tests to assess the model's cross-country applicability. The overall research goal is to contribute to marketing theory an effective approach to examining and identifying place image that encompasses both products associated with the place and the tourism image of the place itself. Through this process, image dimensions can be examined and identified both at the general country level as well as specifically with regards to products and tourism.

The following sections focus on the theoretical background of the study, including an overview of relevant research and description of the model; the study's methodology; presentation and discussion of the main findings; and conclusions, limitations, and implications for research and practice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Overview of past research

From the early work of Boulding (1956), image has been considered a significant predictor of human behavior that influences thoughts, feelings, and actions. In particular, marketing research confirms its strong influence on consumer behavior in a number of contexts, including store image (Thang and Tan, 2003), brand image (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), and corporate image (Stuart, 1999). Concerning specifically *place* image, the phenomenon has been studied most extensively within the sub-fields of TDI, in the tourism literature, and PCI

(also commonly referred to as "country of origin" or "brand origin"), in international marketing. One distinguishing characteristic between research in these two fields has been that TDI considers any level of place, from nations to regions or specific cities or villages, whereas PCI tends to focus predominantly on the country level. Collectively, place image is acknowledged as a significant factor not only in tourism destination selection (Beerli and Martin, 2004) but more broadly in foreign product evaluation (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002).

In the PCI context, country image can be defined as 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" (Roth and Romeo, 1992:480). Though an early PCI study (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1986) found a correlation between travel and product evaluations, this potential relationship has been largely ignored by both the TDI and PCI streams, with only a small handful of exceptions which are themselves limited for various reasons in terms of usefulness and/or relevance. For example, Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) identify substantial overlap between the concepts of country image and destination image, and conceptualize an integrated model, but never test it empirically. Heslop, Nadeau, O'Reilly, and Luk (2005) incorporate country-level constructs from PCI within a TDI model, but do not include product measures. Most recently, Zeugner-Roth and Zabkar (2015) assess the influence of country image and destination image on consumer decisions, but again, omit independent product measures. As a result, there is no extant research combining measures of general country, product, and tourism image except for two studies that are limited in scope (range of relationships and tests) and/or country applications (Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Kim, 2011; Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Szamosi, 2013) and produced inconclusive results for the PCI–TDI cross-over effect. The present research extends existing knowledge by testing more relationships than any previous study, and expanding the empirical test cross-nationally by using two sample and four target countries, all of which makes it possible to assess the PCI–TDI cross-over effects more conclusively. Results tell us more about the influence of a place's product beliefs on its tourism beliefs, and vice-versa, contributing to place image theory and to marketing practice.

2.2. Model development

In order to explore how consumer perceptions of place might influence attitudes about products and destinations simultaneously, an integrated model is proposed to incorporate constructs to measure both tourism and product related consumption behavior patterns. The cornerstone relationships of place image theory that are adopted in this study are three-fold:

(i). Country image affects beliefs. The rationale for this is both intuitive and theory-based: Images are mental schemata, and since schemata are arranged hierarchically in the mind (Nejad and Winsler, 2000), it follows that a country's overall image might influence how consumers view it as a destination and producer, and that the latter two may interact. Additionally, both PCI (Orbaiz and Papadopoulos, 2003) and TDI (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004) distinguish between cognitive, tangible image cues (i.e. quality, wealth, education, technology), and the affective, or emotional components of place image (i.e. pleasant, friendly, trustworthy, safe). Thus, relationships are modeled from two country image constructs—cognitive and affective—to product and destination beliefs.

(ii). Familiarity affects beliefs. From the early study of place image, the influence of familiarity, meaning knowledge of and/or experience with a destination (Gunn, 1972), and foreign products (i.e. use, ease to find) has been considered (Papadopoulos et al., 1988). This relationship has since been confirmed in both the TDI (Baloglu, 2001) and PCI (Orbaiz and Papadopoulos, 2003) fields,