



Evaluation of the impact of Brazil's sustainability on the behavioral intentions of stakeholders toward the country



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of sustainability as a dimension of country image on behavioral intentions (so-called conations) of stakeholders toward Brazil. In addition, sustainable consumption, a moderating variable of the country-of-origin effect (not been identified in other studies), and consumers' gender and familiarity with the country are investigated as moderating variables. The empirical research is of a descriptive nature, and in terms of data collection, a survey method has been used on a sample of undergraduate students from foreign institutions. In total, 427 questionnaires have been considered in the analysis. The results of a multiple regression analyses show that the dimensions of country image (affective, political, technical and sustainability) are reliable factors that have a positive influence on conations toward Brazil, with the affective dimension exerting the strongest influence. Further comparisons show that the sustainability dimension is more important in shaping the conations of female respondents and those with low familiarity with Brazil, whereas the political dimension is more relevant in shaping the conations of male respondents and those with high familiarity with Brazil. Finally, the sustainability dimension has a minor influence on individuals with higher levels of sustainable consumption.

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1. Introduction

For countries to successfully position their products in the international market, it is crucial for them to manage their country image (Brijs, 2006). Indeed, Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Kim (2011) indicate that country image constitutes a central concept within place marketing. The country-of-origin image can thus become a significant strategic tool expressing an emotional and intangible component that affects various decisions related to every country, such as domestic tourism, investments, and product purchasing. Perceptions about a country significantly affect consumer attitudes toward individual brands of products manufactured in that country, phenomenon called “the country-of-origin effect” (Balabanis, Mueller, & Melewar, 2002; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2007).

One understanding of this concept is that country image comprises a set of existing associations that link a given country to other information stored in the memory of a consumer. Among these associations, there may be elements related to a country's sustainability (namely, the extent to which people believe that the country pursues sustainable development practices).

Countries considered “sustainable” can receive global recognition, creating a sense of pride that can enhance their image abroad. The inclusion of this dimension in country image evaluations may enable countries (especially countries from the Global South) to gain a competitive advantage, as governments can determine the influence of this dimension on the behavior of their target audience (such as business partners, consumers and tourists).

In this paper, we evaluate the influence of sustainability as a dimension of country image on behavioral intentions (so-called conations) of stakeholders toward Brazil in comparison with other dimensions of country image (the affective and cognitive dimensions). In addition, we evaluate sustainable consumption and consumers' gender and familiarity with the country as moderating variables.

This evaluation will assist scholars and nonacademic entities (such as governments and representatives of industry associations) to determine the importance and influence of each dimension of country image on the target population, as well as the role of the examined moderating variables. Such information could assist government members and country brand managers in improving their strategic marketing and communications plans by considering the role of a country's sustainability and consumers' sustainable consumption.

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According to Florek (2005), the success of a country brand depends on accurate analysis of the work to be accomplished during the process of developing the brand, engagement in careful strategic planning for the brand, and the establishment of a strategy for eventually communicating the brand. Consequently, effective country brand management for Global South countries, such as Brazil, which have difficulty defining their political, economic and social roles in the global economy, is of paramount importance (Florek & Conejo, 2007). Thus, studies that would provide some guidance in this planning and evaluation process are needed, as it is the case of this paper.

The governments of Global South countries should lead their citizens in jointly building a “concept” that will represent them abroad. One such concept that may differentiate these countries from others and generate a competitive advantage is their image of sustainability. Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos, and Oldenkotte (2012) note that consumers are increasingly concerned about sustainable production, including environmental and ethical issues related to production; thus, the origin of a product may represent a positioning platform that will influence consumers’ willingness to pay more for the product.

2. Theoretical setting and hypothesis development

Despite the considerable amount of research on the topic “country-of-origin effect”, Bloemer, Brijis, and Kasper (2009) note that it remains one of the most controversial areas in the literature on country image. Moreover, despite intense efforts to develop and validate numerous approaches to investigating the country-of-origin effect, literature reviews indicate that conceptual, methodological and theoretical transparency is still lacking and that clarity regarding how and to what extent the country-of-origin effect influences consumer ratings is still largely lacking (Usunier, 2011; Samiee, 2010, 2011).

Notwithstanding the criticisms aimed at this research area, numerous published papers have examined the contemporary relevance of a country’s image and its subsequent effects on consumers’ product evaluations and purchase intentions, among other behavioral outcomes (Elliot et al., 2011; Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos, & Oldenkotte, 2012; Pappu & Quester, 2010).

As noted by Brijis (2006), such relevance can be observed in research on country image and its influence on other behavioral variables in the international business literature related to organizational marketing, foreign direct investment, services marketing, organizational behavior management, communication and promotion, and tourism. The research field of country branding is an example of the application of studies on country image within communication and tourism.

2.1. Country image and country sustainability

In this paper, a complementary perspective on country image evaluation is adopted, namely, the perspective of sustainability. Thus, in an unprecedented approach in the literature on country image, the image of a country is investigated from an environmental perspective. It is important to note that there is no particular measure for assessing country sustainability or country sustainable development (Hanley, Moffat, Faichney, & Wilson, 1999; Moran, Wackernagel, Kitzes, Goldfinger, & Boutaud, 2008; Wilson, Tyedmers, & Pelot, 2007).

Numerous indicators individually capture different aspects of elements that are considered important for sustainable development. Over the years, consistent efforts have been made at the local, regional, national and international levels to identify appropriate sustainability indicators (Singh, Murty, Gupta, & Dikshit, 2012). Each measure provides public policy makers with

a set of suggestions aimed at increasing their country’s level of sustainability (Hanley et al., 1999).

As shown by a review of the country image literature in the leading international academic databases (Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus, Emerald, InderScience, Springer, and Sage), some papers have considered a sustainability perspective in their empirical studies. However, in these papers, the theoretical approach mostly refers to the use of sustainability as a tool for local development and tourism promotion (Kennett-Hensel, Sneath, & Hensel, 2010; Pant, 2005), leaving room for broader research, which is the aim of the study reported on by this paper.

Other studies have investigated the relationship between sustainability issues and country image; however, they use an indirect and tangential approach. Specifically, they examine the influence of ecological appeals in advertising to promote the country-of-origin image associated with products (Manrai, Manrai, Lascu, & Ryans, 1997), the influence of a country’s characteristics on the satisfaction level of organizational buyers (Nguyen, 2009), or the impact of the country-of-origin of a brand on consumers’ willingness to pay for a product (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012).

No study so far has focused primarily on the relationship between country image and sustainability, while examining populations other than tourists. One can assume, however, that there is a relationship between a country’s sustainability and its image because of the growing environmental concerns within various societies. Hence, based on the few studies in the literature investigating the country-of-origin effect as a potential tourist attraction tool from a sustainability perspective, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1. The image of Brazil’s sustainability exerts a positive influence on conations toward the country.

2.2. Country image and the attitude theory

Conations belong to the concept of attitude, which corresponds to a “learned” predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a stimulus from a given object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011). The three categories of attitude are cognitive (perceptual responses and verbal statements of belief), affective (sympathetic nervous responses and verbal expressions of emotion) and behavioral (actions and verbal statements about the behavior). Brijis (2006) and Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) assert that through knowledge of the cognitive, affective and conative components of attitude, one can gauge the image of a given country and its impact on the behavior of the target population.

Herein, a country’s sustainability is considered part of individuals’ cognitions about the country, i.e., their knowledge of or beliefs about the country regarding its sustainable development practices. Along with the affective dimension, the cognitive dimension of attitude influences conations toward a country. In addition to this general effect, studies on country image indicate that this influence may be moderated by a variety of intrinsic information (involving the physical composition of a product) and extrinsic information (i.e., as indicated by Chao and Gupta (1995), not about a product’s physical composition, but how it relates to environmental and cultural factors).

2.3. Moderating variables: gender, familiarity with the country and sustainable consumption

The three moderating variables analyzed in this study are consumers’ gender, familiarity with the country and sustainable consumption. Studies on the role of gender in the country-of-origin effect have reported conflicting results, with some indicating that women have a bias toward foreign products and others indicating

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