Research paper

Destination branding: The role of consumer affinity

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ABSTRACT

Changing negative attitudes toward foreign products and brands can be a daunting challenge. Changing such attitudes toward countries/destinations is even more difficult due to their multi-year bases and the fact that, unlike new brands, which can be developed from scratch, destination brands are viewed by consumers as outgrowths of their culture and history. Recently, consumer affinity has emerged in the academic marketing literature as a positive attitude toward a specific focal country. Such affinity is especially important for marketers and policy makers as it can help overcome the effects of negative attitudes such as animosity and ethnocentrism. Accordingly, this paper investigates the role of the drivers of affinity and, by enhancing it, bolstering the performance of foreign products, destination brands and tourism. Following a literature review of recent research on affinity, the paper reports the findings of a qualitative study. Unexpected findings emerge with regard to the inclusion of cultural similarity and collective memory as potential drivers of affinity. The study shows that positive collective memory might be a precondition for the creation of affinity. A case study on re-branding Israel's image serves as a practical demonstration of the importance of affinity to tourism policy makers and marketing managers. As such, the paper demonstrates that affinity can be a proactive tool that can help international marketers and tourism policy makers overcome the effects of negative attitudes.

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1. Introduction

'In today's' globalized world, cities, regions and nations compete ever more intensely in attracting visitors' (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013, p. 31). This type of competition has grown in importance since since'Nations and regions have images, or "brands" that stakeholders often attempt to manage or at least influence' (Clifton, 2014, p. 122). According to Vasudevan (2008), a place's image reflects the *affinity* and *relationship* visitors had/have with the place (see Alanya, Turkey, as a recent example; Tosun, Dedeoğlu, & Fyall, 2015). Oberecker, Diamantopoulos, and Riefler (2008, p. 26) defined consumer affinity as a 'feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer's direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer's decision making associated with products and services originating from the affinity country'. As a result, multiple groups with a stake in destinations' attractiveness (e.g. hotels, attractions operators, municipalities and governments) use brand-management techniques to attract visitors based on visitors'

affinity towards their destinations. For example, Berlin's 'Citizen Brand Ambassador' program aimed to position Berlin as a good location for *business* and as an attractive tourism *destination*. Brand ambassadors (Berlin residents) needed to demonstrate their relationships with Berlin in order to be selected to the program (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013).

Israel has initiated a similar project, building on affinity and relationships between visitors and the country. Ichner (2015) described the Israeli government's recent invitation to 200 German students to visit Israel for several days as surprising. The project is one of the efforts to rebrand Israel's image and turn these students into 'ambassadors of Israel'. According to Israel's ambassador to Germany, while surveys demonstrated a negative perception of Israel among young Germans, each visitor to Israel changed perspective about the country after returning home.

Relationships with and affinity towards destinations can also induce international business. For example, Dinesh C. Paliwal, the CEO of the Herman Corporation (an audio-focused company) noted in the CES conference (Hofman, 2016) that he is proud with the affinity he has for Israel. He further explained that he has visited the country many times for business and pleasure, and has toured it like a native Israeli. As a result, Herman acquired three Israeli startup companies, as 'the Israelis are the best in the cyber security area' (p. 30).

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Place images are also important in light of the availability of and competition between many destinations' 'made-in' brands. Notably, products from a focal origin are strongly linked with that origin's image (Clifton, 2014). Accordingly, can people be segmented based on their level of enthusiasm for purchasing products associated with a certain country's image? From a tourism point of view, Fourie and Santana-Gallego (2013, p. 417) investigated a cultural affinity construct, which they defined as 'the propensity to travel to regions that share some cultural similarities'. They found that it is a determinant in tourists' decisions when choosing travel destinations.

In sum, destination managers face many challenges. These challenges are not easy to overcome, especially when the current destination image is problematic. Tackling these challenges by repositioning and rebranding such destinations requires huge efforts.

While country of origin (COO) is a well-researched global marketing construct, it 'remains a complex construct' (Rosenbloom & Haefner, 2009, p. 270). Its potential impact forces some firms to eliminate or hide any sign of the 'made-in' label to avoid negative perceptions by potential consumers. Thus, it is not surprising that consumers vary in their ability to accurately recognise a brand's true COO (Samiee, Shimp, & Sharma, 2005). Consider a recent intriguing example from Russia. A consumer faces the caviar shelves in a certain retail store in Moscow. Trying to decide which caviar brand to buy from a variety of local Russian and foreign brands, which brand will be purchased? If you think the consumer will prefer a Russian brand because of the quality and/or tradition, you may be right, as Russia is a well-known COO for caviar products. However, while consumers in such situations might think they are chosing a Russian brand, in reality the caviar might have been made in Italy. A recent Bloomberg Business article (Follain & Rotondi, 2015) revealed that the CEO of the Italian firm, Agroittica Lombarda SpA, which operates one of the world's largest caviar farms, admitted that to get their caviar accepted in Russia they decided that it would be better if Russian consumers would be unaware of its Italian origin. The company realized that many people do not recognize that Italian caviar is of excellent quality, thinking instead that only Russian caviar could be high quality. Thus, Agroittica Lombarda reduced the 'Made in Italy' claim on its packaging. This decision appears to have paid off, as the Russian market has become the most important market for his company after only three years of operation.

In general, Russia is well known for its cozy relationship with Italy (Kirchgaessner, 2015). The close personal friendship of Russian President Vladimir Putin with billionaire Silvio Berlusconi has led the former Italian ambassador to Russia to acknowledge the perception that Italy is more sympathetic than other European countries to Russia. The question, then, is whether Russians' feelings of affinity towards Italy would increase their willingness to buy Italian-made products. At its extreme form, would such an effect carry over to Italian caviar?

The phenomenon described above is known in the academic literature as 'consumer affinity'. To the best of the authors' knowledge, it was mentioned for the first time in an international-marketing context in the book *National Image and Competitive Advantage* (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). In general, consumer affinity is considered a positive attitude toward a specific focal country. The role of affinity is especially important given that most research on purchases of goods from foreign countries emphasized negative attitudes such as consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and animosity (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998). Additionally, most international-marketing studies on consumer attitudes focused on *either* negative *or* positive attitudes. The implicit assumption in such cases is that people can hold only one of these opposing attitudes. However, there is evidence from the psychology literature that people can harbor love and hate toward the same object at the same time (Ben-Zeev, 2007).

Two goals underlie the development of this paper. First, given the pioneering nature Oberecker et al.'s (2008) study, the paper aims to replicate it. This will serve to demonstrate geographical generalizability. Second, the paper aims to test affinity as a potential marketing tool in the context of tourism and destination branding.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review is provided of the theory and main findings from recent research on consumer affinity (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Bandyopadhyay, Wongtada, & Rice, 2011; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006; Nes, Yelkur, & Silkoset, 2014; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Oberecker et al., 2008; Rice & Wongtada, 2007; Wongtada, Rice, & Bandyopadhyay, 2012). Second, the paper reports the findings from a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, which serves to test whether the drivers identified by Oberecker et al. (2008) have cross-national generalizability. The paper then shows how building on and strengthening consumer affinity support Israel's rebranding efforts. Finally, the potential is explored for consumer affinity to aid international marketers and policy makers in overcoming animosity and/or ethnocentrism in country/destination branding situations.

2. Literature review

'The idea that countries have a "brand" or "image" is not new' (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, p. 9). Similar to companies that invest in building powerful brands as a means to attract customers, countries are 'beginning to use branding to help them market themselves for investment, tourism and export' (FutureBrand, 2015, p. 4). Marketers and policy makers should be aware of the fact that a 'made-in' label, which once served mainly as a legal statement that denotes an association with products' place of origin, is now an important signal for consumers. Moreover, 'made-in' information conveys emotional associations, which could explain the popularity of strategies such as the iPhone's label that includes a place of production *and* a place of design. Beyond consumer products, consider the label on the back panel of Zoom's professional recording device, which says: 'Designed and engineered by Zoom Corporation, Japan. Manufactured in China'.

Nevertheless, unlike corporate brands, which can be developed from scratch, countries as brands are viewed by foreign consumers as outgrowths of their culture and history, which make them more complex repositioning targets. Hence, understanding the different meanings of COO and its effects offers countries an opportunity to strengthen their country's brand. Against this background, the recent emergence of the consumer affinity concept is welcome and important as it provides a potential tool for policy makers and marketing managers to overcome negative consumer attitudes toward a specific COO and reposition the country image/brand in the desired direction. This is in line with Klein et al.'s (1998, p. 97) notion that 'international marketers will require an expanding repertoire of tools and constructs to enable them to compete and position their goods more effectively'. More importantly, sources of animosity are mostly managerially uncontrollable whereas, as will be demonstrated in this article, international marketers and country policy makers can manage sources of affinity.

Globalization increasingly affects consumption behaviors worldwide and COO is an important driver of consumers' evaluation of products originating from different countries. Following Dichter's seminal paper (1962), which argued that COO could strongly influence acceptance and success of products, more than 1000 academic papers have discussed COO issues (Usuiner, 2006). Schooler (1965) demonstrated for the first time that COO affects