



From branded exports to traveler imports: Building destination image on the factory floor in South Korea



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The summative meaning from association to a country co-defines a country's image.
- Destination achieves an extended commercial relevance by transcending commerciality of goods.
- PCI affects tourists' decision to ultimately impact their visiting intentions to the country.
- Proposes a path model that evaluates theoretical constructs of PCI with those of TDI, in reverse.
- Past product purchasing is a significant indicator of visit intention to a country.

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ABSTRACT

In international marketing, it is believed that a positive image of an exporting country positively influences consumer behavior toward products from that country. An emerging notion is that a reverse effect may exist in which positive evaluations of products lead to equally positive image of the origin country. Based on a sample of 500 American purchasers of South Korean products the relationship between product purchasing and intention to visit is explored using SEM in a model that links product evaluation with an intention to visit. The study confirmed that consumers' willingness to interact with South Korea based on past product purchasing was a significant indicator of their intentions to visit the country.

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1. Introduction

Country image constitutes a crucial factor in international marketing, as notions, stereotypes and ideas about countries and their products are a pervasive factor in consumer judgment and decision making (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). The implicit underlying assumption that the country-of-origin effect is a relevant marketing phenomenon only in the direction of

country-to-good has recently been called into question (White, 2012). Indeed, country image not only affects the evaluation of goods from a country. Goods, brands and services that are marketed as having a particular origin in turn have an effect on the image of the country with which they are associated (White, 2012).

The implication is that an oscillatory influence exists between brands, products and services that goes beyond mere co-dependence between brands. It therefore follows that the image of products, services and brands associated with a particular country is defined in part by the country's image (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Keller, 1993; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Similarly, a country's image can be influenced by the aggregate image of the

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products, services and brands associated with the country (White, 2012). The nature of place, in the phenomenological sense, is therefore generally understood to be contingent upon the meaning attributed to it (Tuan, 1977). The oscillatory mechanism involved is derived from the notion that consumers arrive at a summative value judgment, or attitude, through a subjective weighting of the aggregate sum of associations relating to the object they are evaluating (Keller, 1993). This summative value judgment, or attitude (Ajzen, 2001; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), is never static; it remains in flux such that the dynamics of meaning do not follow a linear transfer path but rather move as a pendulum. In other words, the meaning derived from an association to a country does not rest statically with, for instance, a product, service or brand, but instead meshes with a pre-existing meaning attributed to the object. This new summative meaning then transfers back to become a co-defining element of the country image.

At a superficial level, the oscillatory nature of meaning through association sheds light on a co-dependence between image and commerciality. Specialization and the formation of clusters are a particularly relevant area in which an individual firm and its image can have a significant impact on a country's long-term economic development. This can often also be true at the sub-national level, such as in provinces, states, cities and regions. In the case of countries, it is perhaps more reasonable to assume that the firms, products and brands perceived as being from a particular country play a role in the formation of attitudes toward the country as a whole, as well as in connection with various aspects of its culture. In other words, place assumes enhanced relevance by transcending commerciality of goods to extend into service-related venues, one of which is tourism.

This paper is consistent with White (2012) in questioning the assumption that the country-of-origin effect in marketing is pertinent only in the direction of country-to-good. Regardless of the nature of the commercial activity involved, such as goods, services, places, or persons, brand marketing connected with a particular origin also exerts an influence on the image perception of the country with which it is associated (ibid), which is also referred to as Product-Country Image (PCI). In other words, the evaluation of commercial relevance based on the particular country of origin also affects the country image and in turn consumer behavior (cf. Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Keller, 1993). As such, image provides information and knowledge cues to facilitate the decision making processes (Gertner & Kotler, 2002). This paper postulates that in the case of tourists' decision making and behavior, country image as expressed in PCI ultimately impacts their intention to visit a destination. Succinctly, this study proposes that any attempt to relate PCI with the image of a destination as perceived by tourists (Tourism Destination Image, or TDI) requires the testing of a model that explicitly incorporates attitudinal theoretical constructs for country images based on its products to shed light on tourists' intentions to visit a place. In that sense, through a survey that encompasses product evaluation, the perception of country image and plans to visit South Korea among Americans, this study bridges the gap revealed in the literature to draw together the fields of PCI and TDI (see Hankinson, 2004; Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005). It previews the integrative models of Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, and Luk (2008) and of Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Kim (2010) with a path model that engages the evaluation of theoretical constructs of PCI pertaining to origin effects with those of TDI, *in reverse*. That is, it

ultimately integrates the various instances of the commercial relevance of origin to place image.

2. Country image: expressing the commercial relevance of place image

In marketing literature, country image has been operationalized differently depending upon the context and scope of research. From a general perspective, country image refers to consumers' overall mental maps and opinions about a country based on the information and associations attached to the country (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). These country-specific knowledge structures and associations include “representative products, economic and political maturity, historical events and relationships, traditions, industrialization and the degree of technological virtuosity” (Bannister & Saunders, 1978, p. 562).

Naturally, when country image is considered in conjunction with consumer products, the term reflects the relationship between a country and products from (or made in) that country (Hooley, Shipley, & Krieger, 1988; Li, Fu, & Murray, 1998; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002), or more accurately, a perceived relationship between a product and a country (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011). Consumers often evaluate the quality of a product based on these country–product associations (Knight & Calantone, 2000; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005) and prefer products from a country that they perceive favorably (van Ittersum, Candel, & Meulenbergh, 2003). Certainly, perceptions and generalizations made about a country by relating products to the country serve to reinforce PCI. According to Nebenzahl, Jaffe, and Lampert (1997), PCI not only provides people with images to support their evaluation of the country's brands and products but also ultimately influences their decisions on whether to purchase products from that country. In order to embrace the multidimensionality and distinctiveness of the country-image construct (Laroche et al., 2005; Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), this reasoning should by extrapolation also apply to the purchase of tourism products and offerings from that country.

According to Nadeau et al. (2008), an explanation of the possible effect of both product and country images on consumer attitudes toward a country and its products is in fact embedded within PCI theory. Read and dissected in reverse, the implication is that product image influences country image. This can be observed, for example, in the practice of fashion firms to connect their brands to fashion-centered countries such as France and Italy. Fashion firms use these countries' images as the epicenter of style makers and trendsetters (Amine, 2008; Hauge, Malmberg, & Power, 2009), reinforcing the notion of a reciprocal relationship between country image and product image (Jansson & Power, 2010). This underscores the premise of this paper: while consumers judge products and brands based on the name of their country of origin, their perception of a country is also affected by the image its products convey (White, 2012). For example, just as “being South Korean” conveys a certain meaning to the Samsung brand in the minds of consumers, the idea that Samsung is South Korean also contributes to an understanding of the country of South Korea.

A country image effect on consumer behavior has been a common topic in marketing, but the term has not been consistently defined (Zeugner-Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Nonetheless, “place” is a conceptual construct of exploration that is common to both PCI and TDI. Place is broadly defined here to

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