Measuring Country Image and Country Brand
– Theory and Practice
– Abstract for the Doctoral Seminar of the 1st EMAC Regional Conference–

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of country image has been under constant attention of academic research in marketing, however the focus has been aimed much more at investigating country of origin image than country image.

Researchers agree that a strong theoretical background to country image would be necessary and proper measurement instruments should be developed, as this field of study is not as well developed as the country of origin image studies.

Recent publications look to a new approach and consider country image related to country branding and use the concept of “country value” in a similar way to “brand value”.

The country brand images are very complex and multidimensional, they consist of more dimensions than classical consumer brands. In the same way as brands are measurable, the country image can be measured as well.

The main aim of our research is to construct a new, alternative measurement for country image, examining the answers to open-ended questions and testing previously developed scales for this purpose and brand image scales simultaneously. Our aim is to identify the cognitive and affective dimensions of country image, to test the reliability and variability of the applied measurement, and to provide applications for marketing, tourism and public policy strategies.

In order to develop our new multidimensional country image scale we reviewed relevant literature from both marketing and non-marketing fields, analysed previously developed scales by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As a result of this process we chose three different measurements and carried out field researches among university students to test these instruments simultaneously. After the analysis of the results we tested an explanatory model of country image and its dimensions by using PLS Structural Equation Modelling.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. DEFINITION OF COUNTRY IMAGE

Image as related to countries is less frequently mentioned in literature than more widely-known image types. According to Martin and Eroglu (1993, p. 193.) country image is „the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country.” Kotler et.al. (1993, p. 141.) suggest that country image is „the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places.”

According to the literature, the domain of the country image construct can differ in its focal image object: country image can be i) general country image; ii) product-country image (country-of-origin image), or iii) product image, which is related to a country (in some cases country-of-origin image again). (for more details see Roth and Diamantopoulos’s (2009) recent review)

According to the most widely known interpretation in the literature, country image is what people think about a certain country. This “thinking” – according to the definitional domains of country image in the literature – can be: i) impressions; ii) ideas, iii) stereotypes; iv) schemas; v) associations; vi) perceptions; vii) attitudes; viii) beliefs. The inconsistency in the definitional domains of the country image construct results confusion its conceptual specification. Moreover, the term of country image is very often overlapped with other terms, such as ‘national identity’, ‘national stereotypes’.

On the other hand, according to traditional image interpretations, country image is analogous to corporate image, which, has two typical approaches: i) there is a so-called spontaneous image, formed in consumers’ minds, and ii) another part which can be heavily influenced by conscious communication. Thus people’s spontaneous evaluation of any given country might be shaped and controlled through an established country image concept accompanied by well-designed, targeted communication efforts.

Regarding to its direction, the country image can be internal image (self image) and external image (mirror image), similarly to the classification of product image. This kind of interpretation is hardly acceptable bearing on product. Talking of that, the internal country image means ’what citizens think about their own country’, and the external country image is ’what others/foreigners think about another country’. (Jenes, 2007, p.40.)
2.2. DIMENSIONS OF COUNTRY IMAGE

Country image, just like any other image, is not one-dimensional. Researchers have found/investigated several, often overlapping dimensions, although far less attention was given to measuring factors towards countries and their inhabitants than towards country of origin image.

With regards to the varying dimensional interpretations and findings of the literature, a content analysis was carried out among 41 research studies dealing with dimensions of country image in order to explore the most relevant influencing factors of the construct. The explored factors and sub-elements are the followings: (see Figure 1)

i) economy (sub-factor: labor market); ii) politics (sub-factor: international relations); iii) geography (sub-factor: environment); iv) history; v) people; vi) culture; vii) similarity; viii) feelings.

![Figure 1: The Dimensions of County Image](source: compiled by author, 2009)

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An “internal country image” survey was conducted among the Hungarian students of Corvinus University of Budapest in March 2008, using self-reported questionnaires, sample size being 399. The structure of the questionnaire was as follows: similar to international studies, the first set of questions dealt with country image in general, employing open-ended questions. Positive and negative views on both the country and its people were collected. The second set of questions tested an internationally well-known and frequently applied scale – Papadopoulos et.al. (1990) – which was also employed in a number of Hungarian country image related surveys. The third set of questions was also aimed at country image in general, using a country image scale developed by the Hungarian Gallup Institute. Demographic information was covered in the fourth set of questions. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS suite and PLS Structural Equation Modeling.

3.1. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this paper the analysis of Gallup scale results are described only. The scale measures 24 statements about a country on a 4-point scale (not at all typical, not typical, typical, very typical). Factor analysis was completed using principal components analysis and VARIMAX rotation, while the correlation of variables was confirmed by calculating KMO values. The number of factors was determined on the basis of the „eigenvalue greater than 1“ criterion. Following the first factor analysis at a KMO value of 0.801, the software produced seven factors which explained 56 percent of total variance (24 variables). Finally, having excluded 4 variables, at the KMO value of 0.799 five factors...
explained 52.6 percent of total variance (20 variables). The five factors altogether explain 52.6 percent of total variance, and the elements correspond to the country image dimensions already known from literature. Sample data yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.791 as an indicator of the scale’s reliability.

After the analysis we got the following factors:
i) „description of human relationships and feelings” (21% of variance); ii) „description of success (11% of variance); iii) „description of democracy” (9% of variance); iv) „description of culture” (6% of variance); v) „description of performance” (5% of variance).

3.2. THE MODEL OF COUNTRY IMAGE DIMENSIONS

The resulting five factors were further analysed using the SmartPLS software. Country image, as a latent variable, and its dimensions and the indicators thereof make up a so-called formative model, that is the direction of the relationship points from the indicators towards the latent variable (Diamantopolous-Winklhofer, 2001). The dimensions’ contribution to the score of country image is measured by the path coefficients, the majority of which can be considered rather strong (evaluation of path coefficients: >0.33: strong effect, ~0.2: moderate effect; also see: Wilson et. al., 2007).

Model evaluation was further refined by analyzing the relationships’ significance level (bootstrapping method). Four of the indicators (see the model: development, „democraticness”, suffering, nice landscapes) demonstrated a less than significant impact.

Figure 2: The Model of the Hungarian Country Image Dimensions

Thus the dimension „People’s characteristics” is affected by the perceived righteousness and diligence of people, social cohesion, the degree of solidarity and how cheerful people appear to be, while the dimension’s effect on the latent variable is 0.273.

The dimension „Country’s success” is influenced by the degree of success, economic performance and the country’s degree of development. The measure of the dimension’s impact on the latent variable is 0.339.

Source: compiled by author, 2009
The elements of the dimension „Country’s democraticness” are related to social justice, human freedom and the rule of law; the dimension has an effect on the latent variable of 0.309. The dimension „Country’s performance” is related to sport and scientific achievements; the measure of its influence on the latent variable is 0.206. The dimension „Culture” is affected by the talent and the literacy of people, historical background and people’s perceptions of the country’s culture. The dimension’s effect on the latent variable is 0.360.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

4.1. GENERAL EVALUATION OF THE MODEL

Concerning its reliability and validity, the model proved out to be appropriate, and its contents demonstrate close similarities to the approaches already known from literature. Significance was measured using the bootstrapping procedure, while the multicollinearity of manifest variables was tested by the VIF-method. A typical characteristic of so-called formative models is that non-significant elements must not be removed from the model, not even after having tested the significance of the indicators. The reason is that their abandonment might threaten the balance of the entire model (Diamantopolous-Winklhofer, 2001). Thus it can be only noted that even though the aforementioned indicators seemed to fit the model during the primary analysis, they turned out to be inappropriate during the final, general testing of the model.

4.2. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH

The model – besides its limited appropriateness – also demonstrated a number of weaknesses. The first and most important weakness originates in the characteristics of the scale employed in data collection. The so-called „Gallup-scale” (Country image scale developed by Gallup Institute), has primarily been used in internal country image surveys before, and as a consequence it lacks several items and topics which might be of importance to general country image surveys (and especially external country image surveys). Such an item or dimension might be e.g. „tourism”, considered to be a determining factor of country image in literature. Similarly, factors related to investments and political atmosphere might be important. The need for the inclusion of these factors in the analysis and for the development of a scale appropriate for general image measurement might provide a solid foundation for future research lines.

Furthermore, another important limitation was that the scales were tested on a highly homogenous sample of students; tests should be carried out on a representative sample, as well, with some further refinements. Several demographic characteristics demonstrated significant differences even in this student sample – the analysis of a representative national sample might yield clear evidence for these relationships. Another limitation was that the sample was a Hungarian sample, as the special nature of the topic would otherwise call for international comparison and for the development of an internationally validated measurement model and scale. This might also be the subject of future research projects.
REFERENCES


