



## Halo effects of tourists' destination image on domestic product perceptions

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 24 March 2010  
Revised 10 November 2010  
Accepted 19 November 2010  
Available online 14 December 2010

#### Keywords:

Country-of-origin  
Destination image  
Halo effects  
Tourist behaviour  
Familiarity

### ABSTRACT

Country-of-origin (COO) image may imbue product beliefs, just as beliefs about a travel destination can form from destination image. As COO and destination image both concern belief formations from images, we meld these research streams to investigate the influence of destination image on beliefs of and preference for the destination's local products. We posit that consumers may non-consciously form a COO image from destination image, which in turn influences product preference. Consumers in China ( $n = 226$ ) and Chinese tourists in Australia ( $n = 235$ ) self-reported their perceptions of Australia as a tour destination and of Australian wine. The results show that destination image positively influences product beliefs with both samples, but the influence is stronger with Chinese consumers who are unfamiliar with Australia. Destination image influences product preference indirectly via product beliefs. A key managerial implication is that exporters and tourism authorities should cooperate to harness a country's destination image for exports.

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### 1. Introduction

Country-of-origin research and travel destination research have developed separately through different streams even though they seem to be measuring similar constructs – country images that are reflected by cognitive beliefs. Although these two research streams appear to share common ground in relating a country's image to products, as we elaborate below, no empirical studies have attempted to meld them into a more coherent whole.

Country-of-origin (COO) effects concern how consumers use images of a product's origin country to form product perceptions and preferences (Demirbag et al., 2010; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Especially when they are unfamiliar with the products, consumers may use this image as a halo to infer product attributes such as quality (Bilkey and Nes, 1982) or even social status (Batra et al., 2000). Since Schooler's (1965) seminal work, COO studies have traditionally focused on how consumers derive product beliefs from mere "made in country" cues (e.g., Han, 1989), or from their overall perceptions of a country, such as its state of development or the technology skills of its workforce (e.g., Demirbag et al., 2010; Pappu et al., 2010). None have attempted to relate product beliefs to images specifically from a tourism perspective. Also, COO research mostly concerns consumers' perceptions of products available in their own countries (Srinivisan and Jain, 2003; Verlegh

and Steenkamp, 1999) with little regard to consumer visits to other countries.

In contrast to COO image, destination image research centres on tourism as the product category and countries as tourism brands (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002). Studies in this area show that favourable destination images increase intentions or behaviour to visit/revisit the destinations. Although some destination image studies have investigated destinations as shopping havens (Moscardo, 2004) or tourists' propensity to buy souvenirs (Tosun et al., 2007), little is known about the relationship between tourists' image of a destination and their beliefs about the destination's domestic products (e.g., see Pike's, 2002, review of 142 destination image papers).

In this study, we meld COO image and destination image concepts, and seek answers to the following questions:

- Rather a traditional COO image, would an image of a country specifically as a tour destination (e.g., whether it has beautiful and interesting places to visit) influence perceptions of the country's products?
- If so, does the relationship between destination image and product perceptions differ between those who are familiar and those who are unfamiliar with the country as a tour destination?
- How does destination image influence preference for the country's products?

In order to be clear in our language, we use the word 'domestic' to delineate products of a focal country, the one visited by the tourists. These products (e.g., Australian wine) may be sold in the

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country visited (Australia), but may also be exported to the tourists' home country (e.g., China).

Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002, p. 295) lament that acceptance of the country-image concept is still low, and that "marketing a country or place is often a little-understood panacea [used by governments out of] necessity rather than choice because their countries or cities were on the economic sick list and in dire need of exports, tourism and foreign investment". This study provides a test of our contention that COO and travel destination research can be blended to better understand the effects of a nation's image on tourism and consumer behaviour in a globalising world. As we elaborate later, a successful validation of our research model would also have applied implications, particularly the links between tourism and product exports.

## 2. Conceptual development

Before providing support for our arguments that product beliefs may form from destination image, we briefly review literature on the two distinct research streams.

### 2.1. Country-of-origin Image

COO effects on product evaluations and preferences are well known (see reviews by Srinivisan and Jain, 2003; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Research concurs that when consumers do not know or are unable to detect a product's true characteristics, they often use their perceptions of the product's country-of-origin to form stereotypical perceptions of the product. Consequently, consumers favour products from countries with positive images to those with negative images.

Researchers liken COO image to an extrinsic and intangible cue that is distinct from the physical product (Chattalas and Takada, 2008; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Like retailer reputation or price, COO image can signal and be used to manipulate perceived product quality without material changes to a product. For example, an early study found that when they were told of the country-of-origin, Japanese consumers associated the US with complex industrial products, such as cars, that were more expensive and less reliable than German or UK products (Nagashima, 1970). Likewise, US consumers associated made-in-Japan labels with mass-produced and technologically advanced electronic products, and preferred Japanese cameras and radios to those from other countries. Similarly, Liu and Johnson (2005) found that when experimental participants were exposed to a product's country-of-origin, they automatically formed country-specific beliefs about the product. The participants had sufficient information about the product's attributes to evaluate the product without bias and were told that COO information was irrelevant, but they still formed stereotypical beliefs that influenced their evaluations.

While positive COO images may lead to favourable product evaluations, negative COO images can be formidable barriers to marketers, even if the perceptions are misguided or erroneous (Johansson et al., 1994). Indeed, COO image may give rise to idiosyncratic product beliefs. For instance, Leclerc et al. (1994) demonstrated that French-sounding brand names improved the evaluation of hedonic products such as perfume, but lowered the evaluation of utilitarian ones such as computers. Moreover, the evaluations persisted after consumers had actually experienced the products. We also comment here that the COO literature has not used travel destination images as part of the measurement of the country of origin image.

### 2.2. Destination image

In contrast to COO image, destination image in tourism research is an overall representation of beliefs, ideas, and impressions of a

travel destination (Pike, 2002; Stepchenkova and Morrison, 2008). Similar to the relationship between COO image and product preference, favourable destination images may result in visits or revisits to the destinations (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Gallarza et al., 2002).

Many researchers credit Hunt's (1975) seminal work on how interstate US residents viewed other states as travel destinations how they viewed the residents from those other states with spurring research interest in destination image (e.g., see Beerli and Martin, 2004; Gallarza et al., 2002). Hunt (1975) surveyed people from different US regions about their views of the Rocky Mountain states of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming and after finding similar positive responses, suggested that states should capitalise on their images as destinations through promotion.

In his review of 142 destination image studies conducted between 1973 and 2000, Pike (2002) showed that tourists' image perceptions of a destination may influence a wide range of matters including top of mind awareness, length of stay, frequency of visits, and even perceived value of the destination. Supporting Pike's findings, Stepchenkova and Morrison (2008) found that when potential US travellers lacked objective information about Russian tourism attractions, those with more (less) negative image of Russia as a tour destination were less (more) willing to tour Russia. The authors stressed the importance of marketing efforts to correct the negative perceptions in order to help spur Russian tourism. In summary, there is substantial evidence to support the positive influence of favourable destination image on tourist behaviour and tourism business.

### 2.3. The non-conscious influence of destination image on product beliefs

As the above review shows, a country's image may stem from characteristics such as its history, people, or even its military and political involvement in the world stage. By contrast, destination image focuses narrowly on what interests temporary visitors to a country, such as the standards of its hotels and its places of interests. Some researchers postulate that the two concepts – COO image and destination image – overlap, but they are unsure to what degree or have not tested the relationship empirically (Gnoth, 2002; Stepchenkova and Morrison, 2008).

In this study, we attempt to show that destination image may influence product beliefs, much like COO image does. A confirmation of our hypothesis would mean that tourists may form product beliefs from their perceptions of a tour destination. It also provides support to researchers' postulation that country image and destination image overlap. As we further elaborate, consumers may unconsciously overlap COO image and destination image, resulting in them using destination image to colour beliefs about the country's products.

COO images are likened to halos that extend their influence to perceptions about the country's products (Boatwright et al., 2008; Han, 1989). Early research suggests that the effectiveness of halos stems from people having "a fundamental inability to resist the affective influence of global evaluation on evaluation of specific attributes", especially when they are unaware of the halos' existence (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977, p. 255). Furthermore, when consumers are unconscious of the stimulus that biases their perceptions, the stimulus may be triggered by the mere presence of a related mental concept (Bargh, 2002; Fitzsimons et al., 2002).

For example, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) provide evidence that people unconsciously base their judgments of an object on their overall impression or halo about the object. In their experiment, participants rated a college teacher's appearance, mannerism and accent after being shown one of two videos of the teacher. One video showed the teacher as likeable and approachable, while the

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