The Application of Brand Personality to Country as a Brand: The Case of the US

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Abstract: *Brand personality reflects the association of human personality traits with a brand. While tremendous marketing studies examine the brand personality of traditional branded products, relatively few studies focus on non-traditional branded entities. The present study applies the brand personality construct to the area of country personality. Through a qualitative approach, the study results reveal that the US possesses eleven country personality dimensions: liberty, leadership, rule-compliance, high development, negativity, independence, friendliness, competence, business-mind, good-appearance, and culture. The study results provide implications for country branding and marketing.*

Key Words: *branding, brand personality, country personality, country branding*

1. Introduction

For years, the construct of brand personality has gained substantial interests from marketing researchers and practitioners. Brand personality reflects the marketing notion that a brand could be viewed as a human being and thus possesses human characteristics, traits, or personality [1]. Brand personality literature (e.g., [2]) reveals that brand personality could be viewed in five dimensions: sincerity (e.g., Hallmark), competence (e.g., The Wall Street Journal), excitement (e.g., MTV), sophistication (e.g., Guess), and ruggedness (e.g. Marlboro). Most of brand personality research, however, appears to focus on branded traditional products (e.g., soft-drink, cars, clothes). The applications of this construct to non-tradition products or non-product entities are relatively scant [3].

From a marketing point of view, a country could be regarded as a brand and therefore different countries are likely to possess different personalities. Country personality reflects a connection of several perceptual components with a country. These perceptions may be based on a number of factors including government, tourism, politics, culture, and economy [4]. When a country is viewed as a brand, brand personality could therefore be used to describe a country. Brand personality of a country or country personality is potentially important for country branding and marketing in many regards such as the promotion of tourism and exported goods. As the research in country personality is relative scant, more studies in this area are therefore warranted.

This country personality study selects the US as the country of interest. The US is one of the leading nations in several aspects. First, in the business world, it is where headquarters of several global corporations including Google, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook, Citibank, Chevron, and Exxon-Mobil are located. Several of these companies are listed on Global Top 100 Brands 2017 [5]. Second, in the educational arena, the US is home to numerous world-class universities such as Harvard, MIT, Yale, and CalTech. Moreover, according to HSBS's global report on The Value of Education: Higher and Higher, the US is considered the most popular choice among parents considering oversea higher education for their children [6]. Third, in terms of tourism, the World

Tourism Organization reported in the UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2017 Edition that the US was the second largest destination based on the arrival of 76 million international tourists. In addition, the US topped the international tourism receipt ranking with $206 billion earned in 2016. Finally, the US is a superpower country in the world. The circumstances in or involved with the US are more likely to result in far-reaching effects throughout the world.

Based on the role of brand personality and the importance of the US in the world, the present study thus attempts to examine the country personality of the US. In the following sections, the literatures in brand personality and country marketing are discussed. Then, the description of the research method is provided, followed by data analysis. Finally, the discussion concludes this study report.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Brand Personality

Brand personality is defined as human personality traits associated with a brand [1]. Two major sources of brand personality include (1) product-related factors such as physical attributes of a product and product benefits and (2) non-product related ones such as consumer experiences, marketing communication, and corporate management [7]; [8]. Brand personality tends to portray symbolic identities of a brand, rather than the tangible product benefits [9]. Therefore, marketers may use brand personality as a strategic tool in product positioning as it is often more difficult of a competitor to imitate than the tangible product attributes or benefits.

A seminal study in the measurement of brand personality by [1] reveals five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity (e.g., down-to-earth, honest, wholesome and cheerful), excitement (e.g., daring, spirited, imaginative and up-to-date), competence (e.g., reliable, intelligent and successful), sophistication (e.g., upper class and charming) and finally ruggedness (e.g., outdoorsy and tough). A series of factor analysis confirm the validity and reliability of these five dimensions across different genders, age groups, brands, and product categories. A great number of the brand personality studies conducted after 1997 employ Aaker's (1997) framework [10].

2.2. Country Marketing

From a marketing perspective, as a country could be viewed as a brand, therefore, a country may modify its image to be more desirable [11]. The practice of this so-called country marketing or country branding is getting more important as competitions among countries become more heightened [12]. Country marketing is, in fact, related to several areas including country-of-origin, destination or place branding, and identity of the nation [11]; [4].

Several studies in country marketing appear to approach this topic from a tourism perspective. For example, [13] studied tourism promotion messages of Mexico and Brazil. The results reveal that these two countries attract their tourists by communicating that their tourist destinations are cheerful, down-to-earth, imaginative, and daring. Moreover, [14], in order to develop a tool for tourism researchers and managers, conducted a study of communication of African countries by collecting data from the official tourism websites of Morocco, Swaziland, Ghana, Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Angola. The results reveals that these 10 African countries could be view differently in terms of sophistication, sincerity, excitement, ruggedness, and competence aspects. Furthermore, [15] country marketing study revealed that attitude toward countries as travel destinations could be affected by the practice of country marketing. Next, [16] investigated British tourists' perception of destination image and destination personality of foreign countries. Their results indicated that the destination image and destination personality are related as the emotional components of destination images explain destination personality. While there are abundant studies in country marketing from the tourism perspective, relatively fewer studies from the marketing viewpoint exist. Therefore, one objective of the present study is to fill in this void.

3. Methodology

There has been relatively few brand personality studies employing an unstructured or qualitative technique [17] Moreover, a quantitative approach is likely to yield only what occurred and insufficiently elicit emotional experience and subjective side of consumers [18]; [19]. As a result, the present study opts for qualitative research. Another benefit of this approach is the potential to uncover new country personality traits and dimensions previously unidentified in the literature and/or traits and dimensions specifically representing the country of interests.

A qualitative study was conducted with sixteen samples of Thai undergraduate students. They were interviewed individually. In order to stimulate the casual ambience which should be better at eliciting responses from the research participants, the researchers asked the participants one or two introductory questions. For example, "Have you ever been to the US?" or "Have you ever seen or heard about the US from any media such as movies, news, or social media?" Then, the researchers told them to imagine the US and asked them "if the US was a person, what would be its characteristics?" In this step, each participant was asked to think about the personality traits for at least 5 words that came to their mind when thinking of the US.

4. Results

After the redundant words were removed, sixty-two non-redundant personality traits are retained. Based on the semantic relationships among these personality traits as well as descriptions of personality dimensions identified in the brand personality literature, 11 groups of the US's country personality are uncovered as below:

- *Liberty*: freedom-focused, rights-focused, and highly democratic
- *Leadership*: leader, superpower, great, powerful, technologically-leading, formidable, and imposing
- *Rule-compliance*: orderly, methodical, disciplined, strict, rigid, rule-compliant, lawful
- *High-development*: highly developed, continuous developing, rich, economically prosperous, grand, good-living, and comfortable
- *Negativity*: intolerant, selfish, discriminatory, disparaging, maladjusting, disagreeable, hectic, and class-oriented
- *Independence*: independent-minded, self-confident, hard-set, solitary, and egocentric
- *Friendliness*: agreeable, friendly, courteous, and nepotistic
- *Competence*: high-quality, punctual, strong, diligent, up-to-date, educated, high-standard, well-recognized, and controllable
- *Business-mind*: cunning, profit-seeking, business-oriented, bargain-seeking
- *Good-Appearance*: fashionable, brand name-oriented, and good-looking
- *Culture:* traditional, ethical, multi-cultural, diversified, and family-oriented

5. Discussions

5.1. Summary

The results from this unstructured, qualitative study reveal eleven dimensions of the US country personality as displayed in Figure 1. These dimensions include liberty (e.g., freedom-focused), leadership (e.g., superpower), rule-compliance (e.g., orderly), high development (e.g., highly developed), negativity (e.g., selfish), independence (e.g., independent-minded), friendliness (e.g., agreeable), competence (e.g., educated), business-mind (bargain-oriented), good-appearance (e.g., fashionable), and culture (e.g. traditional)
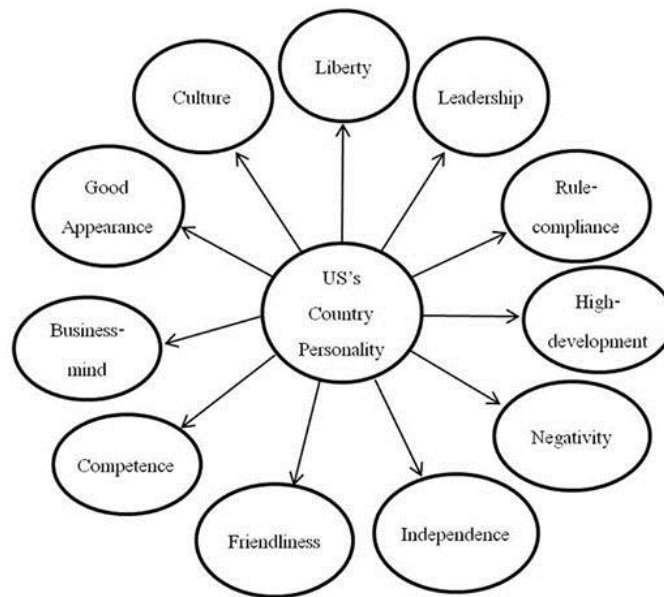
Fig. 1: Dimensions of country personality of the US

5.2. Research Implications

The results of the current study suggest a number of several managerial and theoretical implications to the areas of country marketing and country personality. For the practitioner-focused implications, the perception of liberty or freedom personality could be influenced by the Statue of Liberty which is a well-known icon of the US. This icon is a symbol of freedom. Moreover, American people are perceived to have a high level of freedom in their daily life. This country personality may therefore be instrumental in attracting immigrants who love freedom to live or study in the US.

In terms of the leadership dimension, the superpower US is often portrayed by the fact that the US presidents frequently plays a leader role in a global arena. As the US has the biggest economic size, their economic policy generally impacts the whole world. Therefore, the US may use its power in formulating an economic strategy to support economic partners. The image of world leader is also frequently displayed in movies especially in those from Hollywood. Several movies depict the US as the world leader in managing global disasters or fighting with extraterrestrial invaders.

Rules and regulations are expected to be observed in the US. This is contrary to practices in several other countries where rules or laws are often violated, flexible, or not rigidly enforced. In Hollywood movies or TV series, the scenes where police issue speed tickets for drivers can be found often. In addition, the prestige of law-related careers and the competition to gain entry for law schools also reinforce this perception. The US may communicate this personality dimension to investors to ensure the lawful business practices and rule compliance.

The high development characteristic may reflect the prominent role of major technological companies in the US. For example, Apple is one of the major players in the cell phone market. The launches of new I-Phone models always attract attention from consumers around the world. The US could benefit from this dimension of country personality by providing more support and more conducive environment for development of technologically-advanced products and services.

The selfishness and discrimination characteristics of the negativity personality dimension may reflect that, in the US, people of colors may still be regarded as underprivileged. This perception may be further pronounced with the government's more tightened policy regarding the immigration. For example, the plan to build walls along the US-Mexican border and the introduction of very rigid anti-terrorism policy may result in unfavorable perception of the US and may also negatively impact tourists and investors unintentionally.

In comparison with several other countries, Americans are undoubtedly very friendly and hence comes this dimension. The courtesy and agreeability characteristics may be used to attract tourists and make them feel welcome and relaxed.

The competence dimension represents the quality, standard, and education, for example, of the US. This perception may, at least in part, come from the global reputation of several US universities (HSBC 2017)[6]. Therefore, the US may use its strength in education to attract parents around the world to send their children for education in the US. For example, the diversity of the curriculum, the flexible and modern study program, ample research support, and student internship could be communicated to potential foreign students and their parents.

The business-mind dimension suggesting the cunning and profit-oriented characteristics may be attributed to the US policy towards other countries especially those in Asia. The withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal and the raise of import tax barrier as well as other trade, tax, and foreign policies based on the idea of "America First" may represent some examples of how this dimension is formed.

Good-appearance personality involves fashion and brand name products. This dimension may be attributed to several American brands in the fashion and luxury markets. These brands include, for example, Nike, Coach, and New Balance. The US may promote these brands for both export and domestic consumption by emphasizing the concept of American brands.

In terms of the culture dimension, the US is often referred to a melting pot where diversified cultures and tradition interact. White, Black, Asian, and Native Americans each contribute to this perception. As a result, the US undoubtedly attracts new immigrants because of not only the economic reasons but also the cultural ones.

From the theoretical perspective, as a relatively smaller number of studies focus exclusively on country marketing and country personality, this study therefore contributes to the void in this literature. Furthermore, the present study uncover several new country personality traits and dimensions which are not identified in previous research; including freedom, superpower, imposing, formidable, discriminatory, profit-oriented, and bargain-oriented, for example. Therefore, these new personality traits and dimensions may be used in future research to measure the country personality in a more comprehensive manner.

5.3. Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

There are limitations in the present study that should be mentioned and warrant more scrutiny in future research. First, this study employs only one type of quality approach, future research may consider other types of qualitative approach such as projective technique [19] to study this topic. Word association technique and brand fingerprint technique will provide additional insights to the construct of country personality. Content analysis, as a method to quantify qualitative data, is another interesting approach to examine country personality (cf., [20]. Next, as there is a tremendous growth in internet marketing, future study should consider examine how personality of a country is communicated in the internet-related media such as website [21]; [14] and facebook [13]. Finally, as the present study employs sample from only one country, future research may seek to revalidate our findings buy conducting comparable studies with different groups of research participants.

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