

The Relevance of the Nation Brand to International Marketing

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Abstract

There have been many studies investigating the extent to which a product's country of origin (COO) or product country image (PCI) exerts an effect that influences consumers' perceptions of imported products based on the stereotype image of the exporting country. However, the nature of the relationship between the way the nation brand is created and communicated, and the way this influences customers when purchasing the outputs of that nation remains under-theorised. The aim of this paper is to explain this relationship in order to clarify the relevance of the nation brand to international marketing. In order to do this, we present the findings of a critical hermeneutic analysis of a range of research artefacts including a previous empirical study into the creation and communication of the brand of a specific nation (in this case, Poland); previously archived data; and a conceptual model of nation branding. Findings offer confirmation of this previously untested conceptual model, and additional clarification of the relative importance of its components. This can offer insights that have implications in practice for tourism, export, and the attraction of foreign investment and economic immigration by examining moderating factors that affect the contact points that reach the nation brand's international target markets. This paper also takes an original approach by considering an holistic conceptualisation of nation branding by placing it in the context of a real nation and its relation with other nations in an international marketing context.

Introduction

Domestic consumers' perceptions of foreign products have been examined in the literature since the late 1960s (Reiersen, 1966; Schooler, 1965). Since that time there have been many studies investigating the extent to which a product's country of origin (COO) or product country image (PCI) exerts an effect that influences consumers' perceptions of imported products based on the stereotype image of the exporting country. However, while the extant literature covers the way a country's exports are perceived in various target markets, there is a gap in the literature considering the way the exporting country's brand is created and communicated in order that it can exert such effects on customers. Globalisation, and the growth of international trade, has led to increased interest into the competitiveness of nations (Al-Sulaiti and Baker,

1998). Although this has led to a recent and growing interest in both the conceptualisation and practice of the branding of nations, as a field of study this remains under-theorised, which could be due to the inherently complex nature of nation branding (Skinner and Kubacki, 2007), the multiplicity of a nation's autonomous stakeholders (Hankinson, 2007; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2002), and the confusion of the terms employed by those researching various aspects of the branding and marketing of places as opposed to the branding of other products and services (Hanna and Rowley, 2008; Kavartzis, 2005; Skinner, 2008; Tasci and Kozak, 2006). This paper therefore aims to address this gap in the literature by clarifying the inter-related nature and relative importance of various aspects of the nation brand, and then to clarify its relevance to international marketing.

Discussion

Whether viewed as political entity, a cultural entity, or a combination of both the political and cultural (Skinner and Kubacki, 2007), a nation is also a geographically bound place, and yet there is a parallel body of literature that considers the branding of places that may or may not be nations. Subsequently, one issue that has yet to gain consensus within the literature is the extent to which scholars should focus on the *national* or the *branding* aspect of the subject area. Moreover, nation branding has yet to be located within the wider domain of the branding construct, rather it co-exists to a large extent in parallel with the branding literature, and also co-exists with the wider literature on place marketing. This issue is similar to the claim that international branding has not yet been clearly positioned within the international marketing domain, instead it co-exists 'with the international marketing literature rather than finding a place within it' (Whitelock and Fastoso 2007:253). An additional complexity for the subject of nation branding is that within the literature places are also considered to either *be* brands (Codato and Franco, 2006) or to *have* brands (Anholt, 2005). Closer examination of these issues seems to suggest that *place marketing* (whether the marketing of an entire nation or the distinct places within it) should be seen to relate to the overall management of that place 'and be managed as akin to a corporation, market getting, from an outside-in approach by its multiple stakeholders, in partnership' (Skinner, 2008:923). *Place branding* can then be located within the wider place marketing literature, but relating specifically to 'a place's promotional activities, contextualised in the domain of marketing communications' operating from the outside-in, in the same way as other brands, 'marking the place with a distinct identity in the minds of the various target groups targeted by the incorporated place' (Skinner, 2008:923). This does not preclude the nation brand identity to be conceptualised as akin to a corporate brand identity, nor does it preclude distinct places within the nation to be marked with their own individual identities. The remainder of this paper will therefore employ the above conceptualisation to 'Brand Poland', and will focus on the national aspects of branding, with reference to the nation brand rather than other types of place brands or wider place marketing issues.

Poland has been ruled by Polish medieval kings, Austrians, Prussians and Russians, was invaded by Nazi Germany during World War II, subsequently falling to Soviet rule, most recently gaining national freedom in 1989 and joining the European Union in May 2004 since which time it has since been attempting to create its own unique brand identity. Reflecting changes that have been evident in the West in recent years, the emphasis in Poland since the collapse of the Iron Curtain has shifted away from heavy industries towards service economies (Grönroos, 2000) with a particular emphasis on tourism (see for example Berg *et al.*, 1995;

Lennon and Seaton, 1998). In 2004 Poland was rated as the world's 15th tourist destination by the World Tourism Organisation, and has been regularly ranked 'among the world's top tourist destinations by such consulting firms as Deloitte Touche' (Lisella, 2003). Poland, a nation of 40 million people, has the largest population of the A8 accession nations of the enlarged EU, and yet has a highly homogeneous culture as immigration to Poland is very low. While some papers have been published that examine individual elements that could be seen to contribute to the creation of Poland's nation brand, many of these concerned Poland before joining the EU, and consider specific aspects of legislative and economic reforms during the transition from Soviet control. Although articles continue to examine the contemporary Poland in light of different aspects of its past, the literature has broadened somewhat since 2004 and now considers: The effects of various legislation on different aspects of business and society; gaps in Poland's economy; papers that compare aspects of Polish business or Polish culture with markets and cultures in other nations; and papers that indicate how specific aspects of international marketing should be undertaken by organisations in other nations seeking to do business in Poland. Hankinson (2004) believes that place marketing is most developed within the tourism marketing literature, however, even the papers relating to tourism in Poland do not tend to take an holistic approach to brand Poland.

Method

We recognise that there are a plethora of case studies that deconstruct the brands of various nations, cases that consider the way that post-communist nations have re-created their identities following the break up of the USSR, and cases examining how other nations have re-fashioned their identities following periods of change. There are fewer papers based upon studies of particular nations that critically examine and seek to inform the way nation brands are created and communicated in a way that advances the discipline. In order to address this gap in the literature in a way that also draws together some of the key findings from case based studies in a way that considers not only the theorisation of nation branding, but also considers whether this theorisation is applicable to real world situations, a critical hermeneutic analysis will be undertaken of a previous empirical study in light of a later conceptual model published by the authors of this paper.

Hermeneutic analysis is qualitative and interpretive, and relies on revisiting data to uncover new understandings (Young, 2004). While hermeneutic analysis can be undertaken on archived data (Mauthner, Parry and Backett-Milburn, 1998) often by a researcher that was not involved in the original analysis, it can also be undertaken by the original researcher(s) returning to their own work 'in a different time and place', reframing the research artefacts, where 'elaborating the different contexts of the various waves of research is likely to be part of the focus of the study' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009:128). Applied in various fields, but rooted in the philosophy of social science (Thompson, Habermas and Ricoer, 1984), critical hermeneutics tends to be textually based, as a means to provide more than reflexivity, in order to offer new critical insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

In this respect, the analysis that follows will be based on our own published work that has utilised data on a specific nation (in this case, Poland) in conjunction with a conceptual model of the nation brand that was published in 2007 but which has yet to be considered in its application to a real nation and its relation with other nations in an international marketing context.

Research artefacts

The nation's brand identity model. Skinner and Kubacki (2007) examined a wide range of literature to create an original conceptual model of the creation and communication of a nation brand identity. This model recognises that nations do not exist in a vacuum. They are each impacted by external macro environmental factors. Each nation comprises various people and places, which are affected by and also in turn affect the nation's political, cultural, economic, and legal systems. Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) brand hexagon elements of tourism, the export brand, foreign and domestic policy, investment and immigration, culture, and heritage and people were incorporated within the model to identify the various marketing issues that both inform and rely on the brand's identity. Although Skinner's (2008) later work informs our current thinking into the conceptualisation of the incorporated nation, marketed from the inside-out, this is consistent with the way Skinner and Kubacki's (2007) model identifies the creation and communication of the nation brand through *contact points* such as public diplomacy, personal experience, formal and informal communications that reach out to the various target audiences outside of the nation about each element of the nation brand hexagon in order to effect successful *international marketing* of that nation's goods and services including tourism, and to attract foreign direct investment and economic immigration. The model also identifies that these contacts are *moderated* by various factors, such as the physical distance between Nation A and its target markets in Nation B, as this is likely to affect what and how much detailed knowledge target markets in Nation B have concerning Nation A. The time that has elapsed between encounters, as this is also likely to act as a moderating factor, as is the target markets' perceptions of the identity markers that carry symbolic importance about Nation A to Nation B, and also the identity rules or 'probabilistic rules of thumb whereby under certain structural conditions and in certain contexts, markers are interpreted, combined or given precedence one over another' (Bechhofer *et al.*, 1999) applied by target markets in Nation B.

Brand Poland, its contact points and moderators. Explorations into the relationship between national brand and national culture in the case of Poland were undertaken by Kubacki and Skinner in 2006. This paper also identified the contact points and moderators of Poland's national brand. The original data that is to be revisited in this study were gathered by three separate methods: Structured questionnaires were administered in Polish, in Poland, by a native Pole. 383 usable questionnaires were returned from Polish people aged between 19 and 24. Responses were gathered on a 7 point Likert scale that ranked the extent to which respondents 'agreed/disagreed that each determinant contributed to their feeling of 'Polishness'' (Kubacki and Skinner, 2006:290). Results were analysed for frequency in SPSS. Also a semiotic analysis was undertaken of 'all 40 articles published in the travel sections of UK broadsheet newspapers over the two-year period between January 2003 to January 2005' (Kubacki and Skinner, 2006:290). Responses were also gathered from two group interviews conducted with groups of 'MBA students from overseas, studying in the UK, who were about to embark on a study trip to Poland. None had ever visited Poland previously' (Kubacki and Skinner, 2006:291).

Archived data. We sought to gain an understanding of the changes in respondents' perceptions of Poland once they had returned from the study trip. However, as the trip took place at the end of the taught part of the respondents' studies the majority of respondents had returned to their countries to gather data for their dissertations. In order to collect the respondent's opinions and impressions from the trip to Poland within two weeks after their return, it was

decided to set up an online focus group. As the moderator's involvement in the group discussion during the first phase of research was minimal and often limited to asking short questions about Poland, the internet appeared to be the best available research tool which would allow researchers to contact all of the geographically widely dispersed participants (see for example O'Connor and Madge 2003; Turney and Pocknee 2005). Turney and Pocknee (2005) believe that online focus groups are theoretically sound, and an in-depth discussion of advantages and disadvantages of online focus groups can be also found in Reid and Reid (2005). Amongst their most important benefits authors mentioned minimal costs and lack of problems with timing and location, which all were the most important limitations during the second phase of that research. The online focus group was design and conducted following the rules described by Sweet (2001). As the participants were MBA students in the final months of their studies, they were already familiar with online communication methods. The discussion was asynchronous and conducted via email (respondents could reply to the messages at a time convenient to them). The respondents were sent email inviting them to join the discussion and were given 7 days to answer all the questions. They were then sent regular daily emails encouraging them to express their opinions and contribute to the discussion. All responses were afterwards prepared for analysis in the same format as the transcripts of focus groups conducted during the phase 1. Each researcher then analysed the transcript separately in order to identify indicative findings. Both researchers' interpretations of each dataset were in agreement. However, the focus of our research had moved on somewhat outside of the domain of tourism and into the wider realm of place marketing and nation branding and so the data from the online focus groups was archived.

Results

In the analysis that follows, re-interpretations of the data from the three research artefacts will be identified as follows: structured questionnaires (*q*); semiotic analysis (*sa*); group interviews (*i*).

The Nazi invasion of Poland in WWII (*q; sa; i*) is still seen to be a major macro-environmental factor that affects Poland's contemporary brand. As this moves further out of living memory, perhaps more recent factors such as the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989 (*q; sa; i*) and the creation of the European Union and its Eastward enlargement in 2004 (*q; sa; i*) may be seen to have more effect. As nations are both political and cultural entities, the issue of politics and culture will be addressed first in this analysis that addresses the way the brand is created.

Political system - From our previous analysis of the data, we can find mention of the changing shape of Poland's geographical boundaries (*sa*), its Soviet past (*sa; i*) and its more recent accession to the European Union (*q; sa; i*). In our initial analysis, Poland's geography was considered in terms of its topography, and also more in terms of the situation of its constituent places in relation to other national borders than the way its geographical borders had shifted over time at various points in its political development as a nation, while these political developments were seen to contribute more to its history from a cultural heritage perspective. Unionisation of the Gdansk Shipyards led by Lech Walesa was also analysed in terms of what it communicated about the nation brand in our previous research, rather than being seen to contribute to the creation of that brand.

Cultural System and Poland's Heritage - Poland's royal past, and the nation's kings and castles (*sa*) found reference within the travel writing. Other issues often seen to contribute to the cultural brand of a nation, such as language (*q; sa; i*), religion - with reference made to both Catholic Poles (*q; sa; i*) and Jewish Poles (*sa*), Polish cultural traditions (*q; sa*), and Polish food and drink (*sa; i*).

Legal System - The only specific reference to Poland's legal system found in our previous research was in the travel writings that noted potential implications of Poland's new Property Laws, introduced upon the nation's accession to the EU (*sa*). However, as has been identified earlier in this paper, legislation has been covered in the extant literature, although not usually related to how this contributes to a nation's brand identity.

Economic System; Foreign and domestic policy; Investment and immigration: Similarly, Poland's economic system was referred to only tangentially in any of our previous findings, in terms of it being a relatively cheap tourism destination (*sa*), and its integration into the European Union (*q; sa; i*). Foreign and domestic policy was also not found to have specific reference within our data, although the current global economic crisis is also having an effect on Poland. While EU accession saw many Polish workers emigrate, many Polish workers have recently left the UK as its economic attraction for economic immigration lessens.

The export brand - Poland's accession to the EU gives the nation access to a 27 member state supra-national market whose population now numbers nearly half a billion. As we have decided to view the marketing aspects of a nation as being related to the nation brand identity model described earlier, our paper takes the stance that if Nation A sells products or services to Nation B, or if Nation A attracts tourists, foreign direct investment or economic immigration from Nation B it is acting inherently *internationally*. Poland is not attracting high levels of economic immigration and its culture therefore remains largely homogeneous. With the largest population of the A8 accession nations joining the EU in May 2004 may be seen to offer more of a target for the export brands of other nations than to be able to activate the 'made in Poland' brand effectively to gain a positive Country of Origin Effect for its own export brand. However, it has also been recognised that, by joining the EU Poland now has the opportunity to capitalise on the positive brand attributes associated with 'made in Europe' when its target markets are located further afield in nations outside of the EU.

People - While this may give some more credence to the argument discussed in Skinner and Kubacki's (2007) paper that a post-national perspective since increasing globalisation leads to national identities becoming of less importance, our empirical data presented in Kubacki and Skinner's (2006) paper suggests that even though such arguments may be useful for the export brand, the identity of the people of Poland as Polish, rather than European it is still of great importance. The characteristics, traits and attributes of the population were described to some extent in all of our previous research (*q; sa; i*). Specific reference was also made to famous Poles. Those most frequently mentioned in all sources were Karol Wojtyla who became Pope John Paul II (*q; sa; i*); Chopin (*q; sa*); Copernicus (*q; sa*); Lech Walesa (*q; sa; i*), and Marie Curie (*q; sa*).

Places - Key places within Poland were also identified by interview respondents, but their knowledge appeared limited to places that were associated with stories that had reached the international media, such as Auschwitz (*sa; i*) and the Gdansk shipyards (*sa; i*), while,

unsurprisingly, large well-known cities such as Krakow and Warsaw were most often referred to in the travel writings (*sa*).

Tourism - Places that may be of interest to tourists for various reasons, such as the Tatra mountains and Carpathian mountains, national parks such as Slowinski and Bialowieza, were mentioned only in the travel writings (*sa*). However, these writings also mentioned the architecture of Poland, and that Krakow is known for having ‘some of the best jazz clubs in Europe’ (*sa*).

Contact Points

Formal and informal communications - Outputs of the cultural production system are filtered through the cultural communications sub-system by cultural gatekeepers (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 1999). Anholt and Hildreth’s (2004) brand hexagon elements of culture and heritage can therefore be seen to have been filtered both formally and informally before they are accessed at contact points by the consumer. These include the travel writings analysed in our previous study, that representations of brand Poland through films such as *Schindler’s List* and Polanski’s *The Pianist*, art and music, and also through the travel writings themselves. Poland’s famous sons and daughters can also be seen to offer contact points with Poland’s international markets, while the general characteristics, traits and attributes of the Polish population were seen to be identity markers.

Personal experience - Data gathered from the group interviews did suggest that personal experience did have an affect on our respondents’ perceptions of brand Poland. However, whether perceptions of the brand were negative or positive did depend on whether that personal experience was gained from meeting Poles outside of Poland, or from experiencing a personal visit to the country. This data presented respondents’ perceptions at a point when they had no previous experience of having visited the country, and generally perceived the brand as negative: with discussion of Poland being cold, populated by people who could not speak English, who had low levels of education and income but were hardworking, friendly but reserved, and who drank vodka. There was a recognition that post-communist Poland was changing, and EU accession was considered to be positive for the nation and its brand identity. All respondents expected Poland to be different from their own countries, *a bit like European culture*, with Russian influences. It was described as *boring place with nothing to do, not much fun, less developed*, the place where *there’s not much interesting things*, and the place that *you don’t hear about*. It was contrasted with Spain, which was perceived as *more famous in terms of tourism and people*. However, revisiting the original transcripts from archived data from the post-visit e-focus group we conducted but which results were not published, we found that once these respondents had come back from their study visit to Poland their perceptions were altered by their personal experience. Some of the comments discussed surprise in how different their perceptions compared, both positively and negatively, to their actual experiences: *‘far better than I expected’*; *‘I probably had a vision of Poland as an ultra-modern country and so was a bit disappointed to find that a lot of the towns and buildings and other landmarks are old but then the age of the towns have a beauty of their own and the Polish people even though most on the street do not speak English are nevertheless friendly people’*; *‘Poland was more developed than I imagine before we went and I found the road infrastructure well developed’*.

Public Diplomacy - No specific reference to public diplomacy was found in any of our previous data, and little exists in the extant literature.

Moderators - Identity markers were identified from a wide literature review. Kubacki and Skinner's (2006) paper therefore included determinants wider than the usual aspects that are seen to contribute to a cultural identity of a populous. These markers included names identifiable with a national culture (*q*); physical characteristics (*q; sa*); the observance of dates of historic importance. Markers that link more to the political aspect of the national brand such as the national anthem and national flag were also seen to contribute to a sense of identity, and therefore to distinguish Nation A from Nation B. While personal experience is seen to provide a contact point between Nation A and Nation B, the extent to which target markets in Nation B will apply various identity rules concerning these markers, and perceive the brand identity of Nation A as either positive, negative, or even unknown was also seen to be moderated by physical distance and time.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to clarify the inter-related nature of the various aspects of nation branding and its relevance to international marketing. By revisiting the data from our previous empirical study published in 2006 along with previously unpublished archived data from that study we would therefore propose some changes in emphasis to certain elements of the conceptual model published in 2007. In the originally published model, we made no distinction in the relative importance of any of its component elements. Communicating a distinctive national brand that accurately reflects the essence of the brand itself proves to be one of the most challenging tasks that marketers now face in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. We have found that *what* is perceived about a nation brand is linked to *how* this perception is formed, and that these perceptions are often made from personal contact with individuals from that nation or through popular media. Even though the nation does not fully control its brand due to the many stakeholders involved in various aspects of the brand creation system, images, beliefs and emotions associated with the nation brand will still exist and be communicated via various contact points. We therefore believe that an understanding of how best to manage these contact points with an understanding of how these contacts are moderated by target markets in other nations moderate can provide valuable insight to the various stakeholders involved with managing and promoting the national brand that could help them understand the importance of their role in the brand creation system.

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