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External construed country image : the essence and the possibilities related to measurement of its conformity with internal country image

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External construed country image – the essence and the possibilities related to measurement of its conformity with internal country image

Summary. The paper aims to determine the essence of construed external country image and the possibilities related to measurement of its conformity with internal country image. The basis for the performance of this purpose is literature studies and a qualitative online survey. The issue of construed external image, although present in the literature in relation to organizations, was not touched upon in the case of country image research. The author analyses the possibilities related to measurement of external construed country image, focusing on the conformity of this image with the internal country image. Research on determining the causes of partial or total unconformity of these dimensions of country image is of cognitive importance and indicates the direction of communication activities aimed at improving country image, as well as sense of national identity.

Introduction

„Country image research examines how a country's image influences consumer's perception and attitude towards the country, its people, and their marketplace of-ferings" (Lu, Heslop, Thomas, Kwan, 2016, pp. 825–850). Country image exerts impact on decisions such as selection of the destination of a journey, place of residence, place of studying, location of a project or entertainment, cultural or

political events. Due to their significance, the issues related to forming country image constitute an important and interesting research area.

This paper aims to determine the essence of construed external country image and the possibilities related to the measurement of its conformity with internal country image. The basis for the performance of this purpose is literature studies and a qualitative online survey. The issue of construed external image, although present in the literature in relation to organizations, was not touched upon in the case of country image research.

Based on literature studies the author emphasises the multi-dimensional nature of the country image, describes its basic dimensions and discusses the issues related to the essence of construed external country image. The author analyses the possibilities related to measurement of construed external country image, focusing on the conformity of this image with the internal country image. Research on determining the causes of partial or total unconformity of these dimensions of country image is of cognitive importance and indicates the direction of communication activities aimed at improving country image as well as sense of national identity.

The country image concept and the essence of external country image

Country image has been for many years associated with country of origin image, which has considerably narrowed down its definition and scope of the conducted research. Many definitions referring to this aspect have been formulated. One of them is the definition by Roth and Romeo (1992, p. 480), according to which country image is „the overall perception of the products from a given country based on the previous perception of the country's production and its strengths and weaknesses in marketing". Yet certain definitions approach this notion from a broader perspective. The most commonly quoted definitions include the one proposed by Martin and Eroglu (1993, pp. 191–210), who defines country image as „the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country."

It is a simplification to speak of a general image when it is known that various recipients may have diverse images of the same country. The basic differentiation is made when recipients are divided into insiders and outsiders, „us" (residents) and „others" (tourists, customers, investors etc.). Hence, it is possible to determine internal image expressing what residents think about their country and external image reflecting how this country is perceived in its complex environment. Both these images may be subject to further specifications, since neither insiders nor outsiders constitute a uniform group.

The notion of internal country image identity is closely related to identity. With reference to the definition of identity proposed by Albert and Wheeton

(1985, pp. 263–295), it can be stated that in the case of a country, identity expresses the country's features perceived by its residents as central, distinctive and enduring, when its past, present and future are taken into account.

The distinction of the external and internal country image does not exhaust the list of its dimensions. In the scientific literature in the field of psychology and management we can meet the notion of „construed external image" (Ashforth, Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994; Fuller, Marler, Hester, Frey, Relyea, 2006; Jardim da Palma, Pereira Lopes, Escórcio Soares, 2012). The concept refers to the beliefs of a member about outsiders' perception of their organization and, by extension, about themselves as members of the organization (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994). Simply stated, this dimension of image expresses a perception of what members believe outsiders think about the organization (Dutton, Dukerich, 1991). It often happens that insiders have a distorted impression of the external image of their organization, either believing their organization is perceived in a more positive or a more negative light than outsiders see it (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994).

Previous studies indicate that construed external image is positively related to organizational identification (Vardi, Wiener, Popper, 1989; Smidts, Pruyn, van Riel, 2001; Dukerich, Golden, Shortell, 2002; Fuller et al., 2006). The results of these studies also supported the need for esteem as a moderator of the relationship between construed external image and organizational identification.

The construed external image provides more than just information about the probable social evaluation of the organization, it „acts as a potentially powerful mirror, reflecting back to the members how the organization and the behaviour of its members are likely being seen by outsiders" (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994, p. 249). Therefore, members' identification is sensitive to how they think outsiders view the organization. „When the construed external image of an organization is assessed as attractive (i.e., members believe the image contains attributes that distinguish the organization in positive, socially valued terms), the construed external image strengthens members' organizational identification" (Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994, p. 250).

It seems logical to apply the concept also in the case of a country. Construed external country image expresses convictions of insiders about how outsiders see their country. As in the case of organizational research, definition of this image dimension is of cognitive importance and may indicate the direction of communication activities aimed at improving country image as well as sense of national identity.

Country image research – the measurement complexity

As it was mentioned, for many years the attention of marketing scholars has focused on the relation between a product and its origin (Usunier, 2006). The first

researcher that empirically demonstrated the impact of the country image on the product image was Schooler (1965). Over time the framework of the research on country image became much broader (Pasquier, 2008, p. 81).

In 2016 Lu, Heslop, Thomas and Kwan published the paper „An examination of the status and evolution of country image research" that is a broad review of publications, and research procedure trends of the field. The authors reviewed 554 articles published in academic journals over 35 years to present how country image research practices have changed across time. They divided country image studies into groups focussed on four aspects: COO – country of origin effects; CI – general image of a country; product-CI – image of a country in terms of its product origin; and country-specific product image – image of a product or service of a specific country. The authors identified 9 major CI research themes identified:

1. Ethnocentrism, animosity, and culture.
2. Destination image, tourism, and brand country/destination.
3. Brand image, brand management, and consumer loyalty.
4. Business buying behaviour, and business management.
5. Decomposed COO effect, and globalization.
6. COO effect, consumer behaviour, and international business-marketing management.
7. Consumer attitude, buying intention, product attributes, and product management.
8. Emerging country and stereotype.
9. Country image and product image.

While the theme „ethnocentrism, animosity, and culture" and „destination image, tourism, and brand country/destination" were of increasing popularity, the „consumer attitude, buying intention, product attributes, and product management" was steadily becoming less popular.

Most of the analysed articles (455 from 554) presented the results of the empirical research. Within quantitative research, survey was the most prevalent (59%), followed by experiments (36%) and secondary data analysis (4%). The most common data collection methods in qualitative research were in-depth interviews (47%), focus groups (28%), content analysis (10%) and open-ended questionnaires (11%) (Lu, Heslop, Thomas, Kwan, 2016).

It's worth noting that country image may differ in individual opinion groups. Hence, image research could concern country image in the eyes of diverse recipients (various groups of tourists, investors and business people, consumers, employees, students, residents etc.). Depending on the nature of the group, different place images and evaluation criteria might be involved. In order to specify country image more adequately, research can be conducted in various recipient groups, and its results may be subject to comparisons (Prentice, Andersen, 2000).

Image can be also measured in the same group before and after direct experiences with a country (Baloglu, McCleary, 1999).

The country image situation can be determined based on research carried out at various measurement levels. The research may lead to determining the following: the level of country recognition, general impressions of the country, image constituents and their impact on country evaluation, perception of major characteristics (identity components), country image in relation to competitive environment, strengths and weaknesses of country image. Country image can be measured in cognitive and affective dimension (Pike, 2002). Research on country image can be conducted based on functional characteristics and psychological characteristics (Crouch, Ritchie, 2003). The performed measurements may regard holistic image and characteristic attributes. The research process may lead to capturing unique attributes and „common" features (Echtner, Ritchie, 2003).

The complexity of country image measurement processes results in the necessity to realize the possibilities and limitations arising from the application of various methods and to approach generalizations of the results of the research with caution. The image research may also lead to determining fragment image that is narrowing down country image to a particular aspect.

The construed external image and insiders own perception of a country – the results of the qualitative survey

The issue of construed external image, although present in the literature in relation to organizations, was not touched upon so far in the case of country image research. According to Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler (1992), people search for consistency between identity and image, in order to reduce or to avoid cognitive dissonance and to maintain perceptions of predictability and control. In the case of a country, it seems interesting to examine the construed country image and to determine whether it is consistent with insiders' own perception of the country.

To illustrate the possibilities arising from the use of open-ended questions in measurement of external construed country image (CECI) and the conformity of this image with the internal country image (ICI), the author of this paper conducted pilot survey on image of Poland. Respondents (insiders) were interviewed about outsiders images and associations related to Poland. The survey was limited to opinions on the image of Poland, among people who have never visited our country, whose perception is not based on their own experience but only on various communication messages. The respondents were asked: „What do people, who have never visited Poland, think about our country? What associations do they have with Poland?" The given answers were confronted with the perceived conformity (or differences) of their own image of Poland with CECI. The infor-

mation obtained in the simple close-ended question („Are their opinions consistent with the reality?") was made more in-depth by explaining the provided answer. In case of perceived non-conformity with reality (partial or total), the respondents were asked: „Why do you think others have inappropriate opinions about Poland? How can they be changed?".

The online survey was conducted in April 2017 on the sample of 104 students and participants of postgraduate courses of the Wrocław University of Economics. The study sample consisted of 77 women and 27 men.

Table 1 presents baseline descriptive statistics of age. The surveyed respondents were in the age range from 19 to 62. The average age of the respondents was 37,6 years. The median equalled 38, so 50% of respondents were 38 years old or less, and 50% were 38 years old or more. The non-random selection of the sample makes the research unrepresentative for the indicated population.

Table 1

Baseline descriptive statistics of the study sample by age

Mean	Min	Max	Median
37.6	19	62	38

Source: own elaboration.

The qualitative material from the survey was subjected to content analysis and categorized. It needs to be noticed, however, that the employed free association method involved some problems at the stage of categorisation, analysis and interpretation. The lack of limitations to the number of the listed associations resulted in significant differences as to the scope and nature of the descriptions. The problems occurring at the categorisation stage are mainly related to determining the level of generalisation or specification of the categories. Because of the qualitative nature of the data, statistical analyses of the results are limited.

The answers to questions about external construed country images (expressed by perceived opinions of outsiders and their associations with Poland) include:

a) lack of knowledge or little knowledge about our country, lack of associations or confusion with other countries (30%);
b) negative associations (64%);
c) positive associations (26%).

Part of the answers includes content indicating both positive and negative associations of outsiders and associations that are neutral in expression or difficult to classify as positive or negative.

It should be noted that a large group of respondents (60%) think that outsiders, who never visited Poland, have negative opinions and associations with our country. Among the negative things that according to the respondents foreigners associate with Poland 35% of all respondents (59% of those who pointed negative

associations) mentioned associations with poor development of the country (poverty, underdevelopment, poor living conditions, little civilized country). Another group of negative associations (17% of all respondents) were those related to negative characteristics of residents (lazy people, alcoholics, thieves). 10 respondents claimed that foreigners associate our country with cold and severe weather. The most commonly mentioned positive associations of foreigners were those related to positive character traits (such as friendliness, diligence, resourcefulness), the beauty of nature (nature, landscapes) and the beauty of Polish women. In responses of 25% of respondents, we can read that for foreigners Poland is a country associated with history (II World War, Solidarity, Communism) and well-known historical figures (John Paul II, Lech Walesa).

The construed external country image was confronted with the perceived conformity with the perception of Poland by respondents (tab. 2).

Table 2

Perception of conformity of construed external country image (CECI) with internal country image (ICI)

CECI and ICI – perception of conformity	Respondents (%)
Total conformity	22
Partial conformity	51
Unconformity	27

Source: own elaboration.

According to 22% of respondents the image among outsiders is defined as consistent with reality. 27% of respondents declare the total non-conformity of this image with reality (this applies to respondents who previously pointed to the lack of external knowledge about Poland or claimed that foreigners have negative associations with Poland). The remaining 51% of respondents claim that external opinions on Poland are partially consistent with reality (partial unconformity of CECI with ICI).

Table 3 presents the main reasons of unconformity of CECI and ICI. Among the reasons of inappropriate opinions about Poland the respondents reported: lack of knowledge and proper education, lack of experiences and contacts related to Poland („because they have never visited Poland"), behaviour of Poles living or travelling abroad, negative stereotypes, low self-esteem of Poles and their critical opinions about Poland poor visibility of Poles and Polish companies abroad, negative or residual information from international media sources.

Some respondents believe that the low opinion of Poland is influenced by low self-esteem of Poles and their critical opinions about Poland („Unfortunately Poles have low self-esteem, instead of saying good about their country – they criticize it", „We must start ourselves to like and respect each other", „We must better perceive our country", "Less hang-ups, we have reasons for pride").

Table 3

The main reasons of unconformity of CECI and ICI in the insiders' opinion

CECI and ICI – reasons of inconformity	Respondents (%)
Lack of knowledge and education	19
Lack of experiences and contacts related to Poland	14
Behaviour of Poles living or travelling abroad	14
Negative stereotypes	13
Low self-esteem of Poles and their critical opinions about Poland	8

Source: own elaboration.

Respondents proposed many ways to improve Polish image among foreigners. According to them, it is important to invite foreigners to our country so that they can confront their image with the reality. Creating opportunities to visit our country (i.e. cultural and sport events, study visits) may serve this purpose. Promotional campaigns should take into account its attractions and the achievements of Poles in various spheres of life (business, science, art, sports etc.). According to respondents, educational and promotional activities should be addressed both to foreigners and Poles. It is also important to make Poles aware that their behaviour may impact to a large extent the image of Poland.

Conclusions

Construed external country image expresses convictions of insiders about how outsiders see their country. The paper confirms the purposefulness of conducting its measurements. The use for this purpose of free association methods, despite the terms concerned with the qualitative nature of results, have a range of practical applications. Definition of this image dimension is of cognitive importance and the research on the causes of partial or total unconformity with country internal image may indicate the direction of communication activities aimed at improving country image as well as sense of national identity. Asking open-ended questions does not limit the respondents' associations to attributes and direct answers that are suggested, that's why using free association methods can be a source of ideas for improving the country image.

The conducted pilot survey does not give grounds for generalisations about construed external country image of Poland (it is related, among others, to the sample size and lack of representativeness, which does not permit generalisation of findings). The research could inspire further, representative research on this image dimension. Comparisons of the internal and constructed external image with the real external image seem to be an interesting research issue.

The research challenge is combining construed external country image measurements with the behavioural aspect. Such attempts are more common with

research related to the country of origin of products and research on tourist destinations. What is an important problem is seeking such connections in relation to identified coherence or differences between different dimensions of country image.

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Zinterpretowany zewnętrzny wizerunek kraju – istota i możliwości związane z pomiarem zgodności z wewnętrznym wizerunkiem kraju

Słowa kluczowe: wizerunek kraju, zinterpretowany zewnętrzy wizerunek, wewnętrzny wizerunek kraju, pomiar wizerunku kraju

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest określenie istoty zinterpretowanego zewnętrznego wizerunku kraju i możliwości związanych z pomiarem jego spójności z wizerunkiem wewnętrznym. Podstawą realizacji celu są badania literaturowe i pilotażowe badanie o charakterze jakościowym. Problematyka zinterpretowanego zewnętrznego wizerunku, mimo że obecna w literaturze dotyczącej organizacji, nie była dotychczas podejmowana w odniesieniu do krajów. Autor analizuje możliwości związane z pomiarem zinterpretowanego zewnętrznego wizerunku kraju, skupiając się na problemie spójności z wizerunkiem wewnętrznym. Badania prowadzące do określenia przyczyn całkowitej lub częściowej niespójności tych wymiarów wizerunku kraju mają znaczenie poznawcze i wskazują na kierunki działań komunikacyjnych mających na celu zarówno poprawę wizerunku kraju, jak i poczucie tożsamości narodowej.

Translated by Magdalena Daszkiewicz

Cytowanie