

South Korea's country personality in Thai consumer's perception: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Brand personality applies human personality traits to describe a brand. While brand personality has attracted interests from marketing researchers for decades, the application of brand personality to describe a country as a person is still in its infancy. To fill in this void, the present study employs a qualitative research to gain insights in this topic and explore the possibility that new country personality dimensions and/or traits will emerge. Data collected from Thai consumers reveal six dimensions of Korea's country personality including Development (e.g., advanced, developed, highly educated), Agreeableness (e.g., friendly, sincere, sympathetic), Good Appearance (e.g., cute, beautiful, surgical, handsome), Trendiness (e.g., entertaining, fashionable, touristic), Conservatism (e.g., religious, orderly, patriotic), and Negativity (selfish, impolite, chaotic). Several research implications are discussed and avenues for future research are offered.

1. Introduction

Brand personality is a concept which applies human personality traits to describe a brand (Aaker, 1997). While brand personality has attracted interests from marketing researchers for decades, the application of brand personality to non-traditional products or non-products is relatively new. Nevertheless, recently researchers have started to apply the concept of brand personality to non-product entities in such diverse areas as non-profit organizations (Venable et al., 2005), cultural festivals (d'Astous, Colber & d'Astous E., 2006), sports teams (Tsiotsou, 2012), website personality (Chen & Rodgers, 2006), and tourist destinations (Upadhyaya, 2012; Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2006).

Another area that warrants more research in brand personality is the study of country as a brand. In this sense, brand personality of a country or country personality reflects how a country is viewed by using personality trait descriptors. When a country is considered as a brand, brand personality is useful for describing a country. By putting a country's characteristics together and explaining them as human personality traits can be very important for country branding, both for promoting it as a tourist destination and for exporting its product to other countries. How a country is conceptualized with a particular set of personality traits may affect consumer's cognition, attitude, and behavior regarding their decision-making related to that country. As the research in the country personality area is still relatively scant, therefore, this study is a preliminary step toward such direction with an expectation to fill the gap in country personality literature.

South Korea is chosen as a focal country in the present study due to several important reasons. First, South Korea is a country with unique culture. Although South Korea has been relatively more modernized or westernized on the surface than other several Asian countries, South Korean people still maintain their culture, tradition, and customs (Lee 2012). In addition, South Korea is a country that practices the Confucius principle and it heavily plays major roles

even in the present day Korea (Sung & Tinkham 2005). As a result, South Korea is a country with a combination of both traditional, eastern culture and modern, western development. This unique characteristic combination, thus, could lend itself to the reflection of several personality traits of the country. Moreover, in terms of the economic and business perspective, South Korea is a major player in the global economy. Several business conglomerates including, for example, Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and Daewoo are one of the biggest manufacturers for a variety of products especially those in the technology and electronic sectors (Bouhleb, Mzoughi, Hadji, & Slimane, 2011; Yu, 1999; Kim, 2006). For instance, in Thailand, Samsung smart phones are competing forcefully with the US Apple's I-phone and thus has gained considerable market share. In addition, for Thai people, especially teenagers or young adults, South Korean popular culture (K-Pop) has been well and widely received. South Korean movies, music, dance, actors/actress and singers, collectively, may nicely reflect South Korean cultures and thus form some bases for the development of country personality for South Korea in the perception of Thai consumers. Based on this discussion, Korea is, thus, selected as a country of interest to study the perception of country personality in the view point of Thai people.

2. Theoretical Background

Brand Personality

Brand personality reflects human personality traits perceived in a given brand and it explains the personality of that brand (Aaker, 1997). Two sources of brand personality are (1) product-related source including, for example, product category, packaging, and price and (2) non-product-related source such as consumer experience, symbols, marketing communication, and corporate management (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Brand personality is suggested to have impacts on consumer behaviors especially in terms of needs and decision-making (Swaminathan, Stillee & Ahluwalia, 2009). Therefore, brand personality may be used as a strategic marketing tool for creating a relationship between consumers and a brand.

Drawing from psychology and marketing literature, Aaker (1997) developed the brand personality construct and its measure. Through a series of factor analyses, 42 appropriate brand personality traits are identified in five dimensions of brand personality as follows:

- 1) *Sincerity*: down-to-earth, family-oriented, small-town, honest, sincere, real, wholesome, original, cheerful, sentimental, and friendly.
- 2) *Excitement*: daring, trendy, exciting, spirited, cool, young, imaginative, unique, up-to-date, independent, and contemporary.
- 3) *Competence*: reliable, hard-working, secure, intelligent, technical, corporate, successful, leader, and confident.
- 4) *Sophistication*: upper class, glamorous, good looking, charming, feminine, and smooth.
- 5) *Ruggedness*: outdoorsy, masculine, western, tough, and rugged.

Although these five-dimensions emerged from a wide range of product categories including toothpaste, canned soup, retail chain store, automobile, shoe, tire, soft drink, computer, jeans, television set, television station, photo film, candy bar, lotion, credit card, medicine, telephone service, toy, greeting card, perfume, cosmetics, cereal, and fast-food chain, these are typical or traditional products and brands. Therefore, relatively little is known regarding the extent to which the concept of brand personality can be applicable when country is used as a brand. As a result, the present research attempts to fill in this void.

Country personality

The idea of a country as a brand is playing an increasingly important role in people's lives through mass media, product origin and travel experiences. D'Astous and Boujbel (2007)

argued that country personality is a useful instrument for assessing the country image by using the human traits as a guideline. This consumer's perception is very important for global marketers where multinational transactions occur across the globe more frequently. In addition, country personality implies relating a variety of acknowledged characteristics of a country to personality in such dimensions as government policy, economy, society, culture, and tourism. For example, the US may be viewed as possessing an aggressive personality while Japan is of a humble one. Country personality may help identify the meaning of each country in terms of which personality type they belong to, thus providing an insight or a strategic tool for marketing a country.

Using a quantitative approach, d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) developed a scale to measure country personality. Their results revealed six country personality dimensions grouping from 38 personality trait descriptors as follow:

- 1) *Agreeableness*: bon-vivant, amusing, reveler, agreeable, generous, cooperative, accommodating, romantic, and accepting
- 2) *Wickedness*: vulgar, decadent, offender, immoral, fighter, and violent
- 3) *Assiduousness*: organized, rigorous, hard to work, flourishing, serious, and important
- 4) *Snobbism*: snobbish, naughty, mannered, chauvinist, and egocentric
- 5) *Conformity*: religious, spiritual, traditionalist, ceremonious, and mysterious
- 6) *Unobtrusiveness*: cowardly, wimpy, dependent, discrete, and neutral

3. Methodology

In order to gain an insight in the personality of the country of interest and explore the possibility that new country personality dimensions and/or traits will emerge, the present study opts for a qualitative study. Fourteen samples of Thai undergraduate students were interviewed individually. The researchers created the casual ambience by asking the participant one or two introductory questions. For example, "Have you ever been to South Korea?" Or "Have you ever seen or ever heard about South Korea from any media?" Then, the researchers told them to imagine South Korea and asked them "if South Korea 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 South Korea.

4. Results and Discussions

After the interview, 88 personality traits derived from 14 participants were obtained. Subsequently, the redundant words were removed, leaving 45 non-redundant personality traits. Based on the meanings and the relationships among these personality traits, six groups or dimensions of Korea's country personality emerged as below:

- 1) *Development*: technologically leading, thriving, advanced, developed, leader, highly educated, and well-organized
- 2) *Agreeableness*: friendly, sincere, bright, good human relations, sympathetic, united, natural, flexible, peaceful, and cultured
- 3) *Good Appearance*: cute, beautiful, surgical, handsome, distinctive, beauty-loving, and good-looking.
- 4) *Trendiness*: entertaining, fashionable, touristic, tasty, well-dressed, contemporary, stylish, unique, and welcoming
- 5) *Conservatism*: religious, orderly, patriotic, and strict-in-law
- 6) *Negativity*: selfish, temperamental, impolite, insincere, superficial, stingy, war-related, and chaotic

At the dimensional level, in comparison with d'Astous and Boujbel's (2007) country personality dimensions, our agreeableness and wickedness-negativity dimensions are conceptually similar. At the trait level, for each individual country personality trait, our findings reveal six traits that are semantically connected or similar to those of d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) including (1) united-cooperative, (2) war-related-violent, (3) patriotic-chauvinist, (4) selfish-egocentric, (5) cultured-traditionalist, and (6) religious-religious.

After the six dimensions of Korea's country personality dimensions and 45 traits revealed in our study are compared and analyzed with those identified in the literature especially those proposed by d'Astous and Boujbel (2007), some similarities and differences warrant further discussions.

In terms of similarities, first, both sets are composed of both positive and negative personality traits. This finding confirms that the personality of a country can be expressed negatively, or in terms of undesirable characteristics. This is different from the brand personality construct uncovered by Aaker (1997) which include only positive items. It may be possible that brand personality (in comparison with country personality) is more articulately managed by marketers. As a consequence, only positive descriptors were found for brand personality. On the other hand, country personality is often not specifically managed or more difficult and complicated to play with. That is, country personality could be affected by several more uncontrollable factors. As a result, negative dimensions are found for country personality. It should be noted, however, that the degree of negativity in the present study is not as negative as those found in the previous literature, judging from the meaning or connotation of the traits. It is possible that this relatively less negative aspect may reflect the characteristics of either the country of interest (South Korea) or the country of the research subjects (Thailand). Both countries are Asian. Asian culture tends to focus on respect and politeness. Therefore, South Korea, in general, is not viewed as a negative country. In addition, Thailand is high on the femininity aspect (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009). Being soft and gentle people, Thai respondents may not describe South Korea too harshly or too negatively. Next, the sources of the country personality perception appear to be similar. That is, both our set and d'Astous and Boujbel's (2007) set reflect the country image or perception consumers may form from the exposure to various media, product they use, family and friends, direct experience with the country, and the general characteristics of the country.

The results from the present possess some differences from d'Astous and Boujbel's (2007) in some respects. As our study collected data concerning exclusively one country (South Korea), the results, therefore, undoubtedly reflect some unique features of this country which are generally not found from a study that cover several countries at once. These two South-Korea specific dimensions include *Good Appearance* (cute, beautiful, surgical, handsome, distinctive, beauty-loving, and good-looking) and *Trendiness* (entertaining, fashionable, touristic, tasty, well-dressed, contemporary, stylish, unique, and welcoming). These two dimensions obviously reflect the country image influenced by popular culture exported by South Korea. The traits like surgical, entertaining (TV series, singers, actors), and war-related clearly illustrate the distinctive image of South Korea while a scale developed based on several countries in a single study may not naturally lend itself to the discovery of a unique feature. In this sense, the goal of using a qualitative approach to explore the emergence of new personality traits and dimensions is attained.

5. Conclusion

Research Implications

The present study provides several contributions to the areas of country marketing and branding. In terms of theoretical implications, as relatively little research exists in the area of country branding or country personality, this research is a preliminary step toward examining the country personality dimensions and traits, thus, at least partially, filling the void in country personality literature. Moreover, there are a number of personality traits obtained from the interview in this study that are new words which have not been identified in the previous country personality studies. Further investigation of these new country personality traits would provide a fruitful effort in a better understanding of the construct. For example, these new personality traits can be used as a pool to generate scale items to measure the country personality dimensions in a more comprehensive manner.

Regarding managerial contributions, based on the results of the current study, it could be inferred that nowadays people have known about South Korea through various channels. Findings of the present study revealed personality traits that came to Thai customers' mind when thinking of South Korea. With the country personality traits and dimensions being revealed, South Korea will know what characteristics people think of it. Furthermore, the country personality dimensions were shown in both positive and negative sides. Therefore, it would be beneficial for that country to conserve and continuously develop their positive image, while attempting to suppress or eliminate their negative one. Moreover, country personality may be involved in determining the strategies for the tourism and export. For example, this data will be useful for Tourism Organizations in South Korea to adjust the tourism strategies in order to attract Thai tourists. For example, there could be a tour devoted specifically to explore and appreciate South Korea popular culture.

Sirisoontorn and Polyorat (2013) suggested that country personality dimensions are related to consumer purchase intention. As a result, country personality can be used as an instrument to define the appropriate product or service positioning strategy. The marketers and the government sectors can utilize the country personality dimensions to promote the country based on identity in a variety of dimensions, and plan the right position for a particular country. In this sense, the contribution of this research occurs with not only to the country of South Korea but also to Thai entrepreneurs that import Korean products and popular culture to cater to the need of Thai consumers. That is, based on the South Korea's country personality dimensions and traits identified in the present study, proper marketing strategy can be formulated to match or influence the Thai consumers' perception of South Korean products.

6. Research Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the current study provides some insights into the area of country personality, some limitations needed to be mentioned. First, the results are drawn from the personality of a single country, namely South Korea. Therefore, future research may extend this research by studying other countries with different cultural, socio-economical, and technological background. Next, because the data were collected from a sample of undergraduate students, which may not necessarily represent the whole research population, future research may be conducted with a wider coverage of samples for a more generalized understanding of this construct. Finally, other qualitative techniques including focused-group and discourse analysis may be employed to provide additional understanding of the topic.

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