

Country Brand as an Important Phenomenon of Modern Society

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Abstract. *The county brand in terms of valuing consumer well-being is essential to the brand-building process and is especially significant in today's globally interconnected environment. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the national initiatives and country product-origin on consumer-centered country brands. The research strategy was based on a quantitative and qualitative approach. The findings highlight the emergence of place branding, national initiatives, and country product origins in national areas. The study of country brands in the context of communication studies extends to tourism and cultural studies. The study's limitations included the fact that it was limited to countries on the inside. A broader study to represent the circumstances of other emerging countries was proposed. The contributions, both practical and theoretical, address the many-faceted complexity of the evaluated concepts, such as consumer-centered country brand, national identity, country brand, country image, and national reputation. There are several countries, including Eastern Europe, where the country's brand is still in the initial development stages. The practice of Romania might present the required knowledge of other country brands, and this study enables highlighting this aspect.*

Keywords: national identity, citizens' well-being, country brand, country image, sustainable future.

Introduction

The present globalization process implies an increasingly important role in country-brand studies to build a positive identity and image as a competitive advantage in international recognition. The country's brand as an important phenomenon of modern society has only been tangentially analyzed in terms of customer centricity (Fader, 2020) or consumer well-being. Although there are some research studies in the international scientific literature related to national initiatives and the country-of-origin effect or country-product-origin, studies are required to analyze holistically these factors in relation to country-brand. A synergetic evaluation of different variables to create strategic value for the country's sustainable future is required to be developed. Researchers, marketers, and government officials may be considering the sustainable impact while integrating national campaigns or initiatives into country brand strategies as well as the integration of the country-of-origin effect to evaluate consumer behavioral decision-making.

The study proposes to answer a research question, focusing on two elements: how can a country position itself as a brand? How do the complexity of national initiatives and the country of origin effect contribute to brand building, implementation, and dissemination from the perspective of present and potential country consumers well-being? The research aims to assess how a country might position itself as a brand while also understanding the role of the complexity of national initiatives and the country of origin effect in the development process of national branding. The study extensively examined the elements of the consumer-centered county brand of the country of Romania. Therefore, the gap in the study is primarily centered on the lack of awareness about the concepts mentioned and their correlation.

A symbolic connection is established between the country brand, national identity, and a coherent country image (Wu et al., 2022) for a sustainable future (Giddings et al., 2002; McArthur & Rasmussen, 2019). Building and modeling country brand (Kapferer, 1994; Kotler, Gertner,

2002; Neacșu et al., 2016) was examined through the perspectives of country communicators (Dolea et al., 2021). Positive nation branding (Anholt, 1998; Dinnie, 2007) as a holistic construct integrates a complexity of determinants (Anholt, 2008) to attract internal and external stakeholders, investors, and visitors (Zugic, Konatar, 2018). Therefore, this research investigates the complexities of the national brand and highlights its significance in county activities.

Literature Review

From a marketing communication perspective, the literature review identified a marketing communication mix and integrated marketing communication. The marketing communication mix includes promotional communication techniques (advertising, sales promotion, public relations, communication through events, use of the sales force, and direct marketing) and continuous communication techniques (branding and packaging) (Popescu, 2001; Armstrong, Kotler, 2016). Integrated marketing communications enable consistent messaging across channels, resulting in a cohesive brand experience for customers.

Country Marketing in the Internationalization Era

From a brand perspective, the literature review identified destination, territorial, place, country, city, corporation, product, and personal brand. Likewise, there is a conceptual version of supranational identity as the identity of European states (Smith, 1992; Kohli, 2000). Building, developing, and maintaining a positive country brand, identity and image is a complex process.

The country's brand and national reputation are important concepts (Anholt 2008), while modeling the country's identity and image becomes a proactive action of a nation (Vale 2008; Nguyen, Ozcaglar-Toulouse 2021) to support the country's economic sectors (Dinnie, 2007a) and sustainable future. The country has a national identity, while its reputation is valued internationally and represents international perception. Donors, investors, consumers, tourists, and other stockholders respect and trust countries with a positive reputation (Zugic, Konatar 2018). Positive national identities (Anholt, 2007; Anholt, 2008), country reputation (Inversini et al., 2009), nation brand (Kornberger, 2010), country brand image (Moisescu, 2010), country image (Lu et al., 2019), and sustainable effects on the country of origin (Philippe et al., 1982; Verlegh et al., 2005) are all essential in the context of internationalization for a country's sustainable future. These concepts are similar, highly interrelated, yet distinct.

In the globalization process, countries need to achieve place loyalty (Zikiene, Gagiskyte, 2020), valuing consumers' wellbeing. According to Armstrong (2005), a country's valuable assets are considered the concepts of national integrity, transparency, and accountability.

Country Brand Impact as a Proactive Action of a Nation

An important progression toward a sustainable future might be based on country history and present-day modern evolution while analyzing country-future evolution at the national and international levels. Intercultural proficiency, knowledge, expertise, and mindsets are positively associated with individual, marketplace, and societal well-being (Demangeot et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2009). Further, a sustainable future needs to be based on human well-being (Javornik et al., 2022) and human principles (Eletxigerra et al., 2018), including dignity for everyone, recognizing outstanding achievements, addressing current generation requirements while ensuring future generation aspirations, and creating an environment in which people feel comfortable and safe. According to Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993), strategic marketing of places requires an in-

depth knowledge of how consumers determine place decisions, hence indirectly contributing to strong economic development. Consumer-based brand equity is characterized as a multi-dimensional construct that involves perceived quality, brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty (Pappu et al., 2006). According to Gilmore (2002), the essence of a country's brand has to embody the spirit of the country's population, while brand positioning needs to be based on a genuine offer of the country.

In terms of brand-building strategy, the international marketing literature identifies approaches: bottom-up, top-down, hybrid (a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up processes), and design thinking. Design thinking is a valuable approach for countries investigating ways to strengthen national brands by placing the consumer at the center of the process. Design thinking encourages an inclusive place branding process (Källström, Siljeklint 2021), which leads to maintaining and developing brand equity, the synthesis of people-based scenarios (Beverland et al., 2015), addressing a complexity of challenges, from strategy to social change (Cooper et al., 2009). According to Pamfilie and Croitoru (2018), brand management and design thinking, along with innovation, can successfully support its unique actions by delivering the benefits of creativity to attract consumers and their trust. This strategic approach implies optimism, empathy, and experiments in the brand management process.

Romania might benefit from successful brand management that will assure a positive European and international position. While developing a Romanian brand, a complexity of determinants is considered, including harmonization between national tradition and Western principles (White, Kolesnicov, 2015), rich cultural heritage, the dissemination of pride in ancestry heritage (Veghes, Popescu, 2018), the cultural economy (Cetina, Badin, 2019), as well as the country's past, the population with its values, tradition, and culture, as well as the country's civilization and evolution (Plaiaș, Cotirlea, 2013).

Methodology

The complexity of national initiatives and country product origin with an impact on consumer-centered country brands was analyzed.

National Initiatives

The country's aggregate marketing system and key stakeholders operate to benefit the host society and vary by society, reflecting people and culture, the socio-political, geographical, and economic environment, opportunities, constraints, and decision-making. Following an assessment of Korea's national branding achievements and limitations, Choi and Kim (2014) examined policy initiatives and key national branding activities.

National campaigns based on human rights, cultural heritage, ethnic or cultural identification, technologically mediated authenticity, and beliefs and society organization strategies motivate citizens to perceive a country identity that value stockholders' wellbeing. National campaigns based on communication value (Engell, 1988), promoting public participation and awareness of science (Lewis et al., 2023) and knowledge society (Carlaw et al., 2006), have an impact on country education and economic growth (Lin, Nugent, 1995; Ogilvie, Carus, 2014). According to Oliveira (2015), authorities responsible for territorial development and policy-making need to focus more attention on investment-oriented marketing campaigns, tourism-oriented promotion initiatives, and communication strategies exclusively supported by visual components and aesthetic values (e.g., slogans and logos). According to Andrei (2017), nation

branding campaigns cannot have a good impact on country image unless they are part of a long-term strategy that involves all stakeholders.

Based on the discussion above, we can hypothesize the following:

H1: *The higher the national initiatives or campaigns, the greater the value of consumers' well-being in terms of country image and identity.*

The county product-origin

The country of origin effect is defined as the impact of a product's origin or place of manufacture on consumers' attitudes and evaluations, product assessments, and purchasing decisions (Van Ittersum et al., 2003; Andéhn et al., 2016). The importance of county product origin in the purchase decision-making process (Krupka, Arežina, 2017) highlights strategic consumer behavior (Huang et al., 2020) and is a significant categorical characteristic of contextual influences (Dinnie, 2004; Kim, Park, 2017). Lopez, Gotsi, and Andriopoulos (2011) developed a conceptual framework based on the following elements: country of origin, image transfer, corporate branding, and local brand.

During the globalization process (Tausch, 2011), countries became more transparent, presenting both opportunities and challenges due to economic (Dorn et al., 2024) and social inequities (Prasad, Segarra, 2023). The home country image of a product (Roth et al., 2008) is considered one of the defining factors of consumer evaluation. According to White (2012), knowledge of the country of brand origin might promote the country's image of where the brand originated, encouraging the public and private sectors to collaborate to model a country's image.

Based on the discussion above, it can be hypothesized:

H2: *The higher the impact of country product origin, the greater the value of the well-being of consumers (citizens, investors, donors, immigrants, visitors, and tourists) in terms of country image and identity.*

To undertake the research and test the hypotheses, exploratory and confirmatory research as well as empirical research using quantitative data, as well as a case study of a Romanian touristic brand, were chosen in this case. Additionally, in-depth interviews were carried out using a qualitative approach. The developed multi-attribute choice model construct (Martin, Eroglu, 1993) was designed to investigate consumer perceptions and decision-making processes related to a country's brand. The model tested the national campaigns and country product origins on the country brand. Furthermore, the holistic model below illustrates the causal relations between independent and dependent variables (see Figure 1).

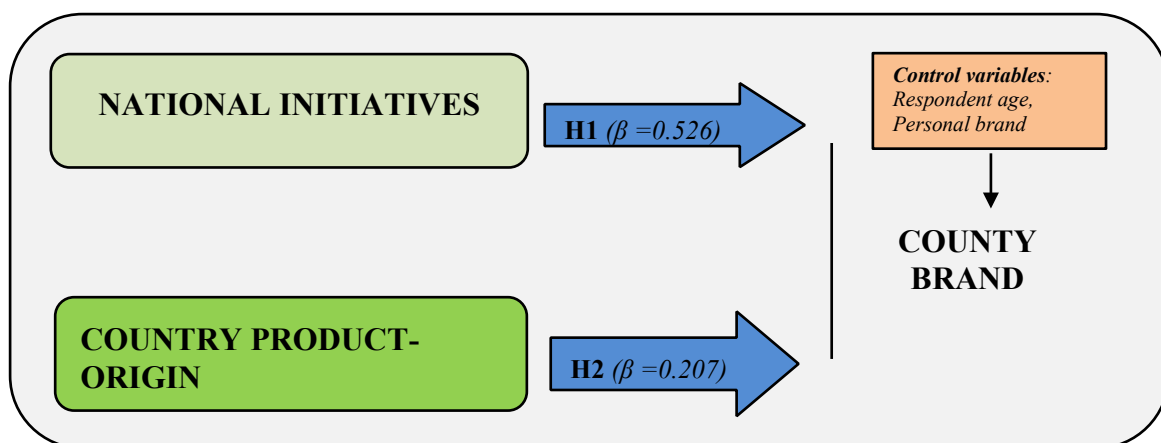




Figure 1. Research Model: Conceptual Framework

Source: Authors' own research.

The empirical research was developed to evaluate and test the conceptual model. By developing the multi-dimensional construct, this research is intended to highlight the importance of internal and external country context determinants in the national brand building processes while developing the country image and identity for a strategic international positioning. The purpose of the study was to explore the respondents' perceptions of national campaigns and country product origin on consumers' perceptions of country brand value for consumers' wellbeing.

The quantitative data was obtained online via a survey initially involving the development of a questionnaire directed at the general population. The empirical testing of theoretical hypotheses has been performed on an online panel of 719 respondents in April–June 2022. After that, the data were encoded and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Independent and Dependent Variables of empirical analyses

Based on the theoretical literature, Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Stevens, 2009) were developed as composite indicators by evaluating variables as follows:

Country brand was measured by the following items: (1) ..citizens, (2) investors, (3) donors, (4) immigrants, (5) tourists, and visitors.

National Initiatives was measured by the following items: (1) information campaigns are required at the national level; (2) culture is an indicator of a country's development; (3) nationally recognized institutions; (4) national architectural heritages; (5) local organizations; and (6) national science and education (Yum, Canary, 2009; Buhmann, Ingenhoff, 2014).

The country product-origin or the country of origin was measured by the following items: (1)the city of origin; and (2) the country of origin (Ahmed and d'Astous, 2008, Lopez, Gotsi, Andriopoulos, 2011; Madan, Rosca, Dumitru, Canda, 2022).

Control Variables:

Respondent's age: was measured by the following items (age ranges): (1) 18-25 years, (2) 26–35 years, (3) 36-45 years, (4) 46-55 years, (5) 56-65 years, and (6) over 66 years.

Personal brand: was measured by the following items: (1) fashion style is important for personal brand; (2) notorious personalities have emphasized personal image over time to make a difference; (3) marketing communication is persuasive; and (4) in the internationalization process, is essential to study differences between countries' business ethics (Shepherd, 2005; David, Bartal 2009; Kucharska, Confente 2017; Zabochnik, 2018; Jacobson, 2020; Madan et al., 2020; Rosca, Madan 2020; Madan, Rosca, Apostol, 2022).

The correlation matrix of independent variables was examined, and no issues of multicollinearity were identified.

In the regression round, after evaluating the summary of the linear regression analysis model, ANOVA analysis, and table with the summarizes of the regression analysis of the independent variables with respect to country brand as the dependent variable (see Technical Appendix), the findings of the regression rounds supported both hypotheses of the literature review.

In the main regression round, *national initiatives and country-product origin* indicate that these determinants have an impact on country brand.

Discussion of Results

Country brand image (Richards, Wilson, 2004; Zavattaro, 2014; Yang et al., 2021), national identity (Latcheva, 2011), and place marketing (Ward, 1998; Ancarani, 2001; Warren et al., 2021) are important topics in the present internationalization era. According to the main regression round, the higher the national initiatives, the greater the value of consumers' well-being in terms of country image and identity, which confirms the Oliveira (2015) study. Likewise, the higher the impact of country product origin, the greater the value of consumers' well-being in terms of country image and identity, which confirms the White (2012) study.

The case study research focuses on the Romanian touristic brand with the slogan "Romania Explores the Carpathian Garden". Several factors influenced the decision to choose the Romanian country brand: it is a consolidated brand, an independent national state and a European Union member state, with the goal of acquiring European and international renown. Analyzing the Romanian tourist brand revealed several main aspects. At first, in the country's tourism slogan, a well-balanced color palette was noticeable. Secondly, the country's tourism brand is present online through several digital media channels. There is an official page on Facebook with new posts. Otherwise, the tourist brand is showcased on the Romanian government's tourism website, which includes various Romanian regions, the county's capital, and national places of significance. But, even so, online posts demonstrate the brand's minimal presence. The Romanian brand highlights a top-down approach, while a design-thinking approach will position the consumer at the center of brand strategy. Likewise, in-depth interviews provide fruitful information for the country's brand building and positioning. Further, cultural events (Gürhan-Canli, Maheswaran, 2000), academic and scientific events (Istudor et al., 2020), art exhibitions, opera performances, museums, poems, literature, sport events, medical tourism, local concerts, and other local events need to be integrated into Romanian country brand management. In Conclusion, brand management is an ongoing activity that requires the participation of all stakeholders in a country, including governments, universities, industry, and consumers.

Conclusions

This research aims to highlight the impact of the country's brand on consumer motivation in choosing a country to strategically position the country in the global marketplace and achieve consumer loyalty. Another goal was to highlight how countries' brands contribute to consumer-centered country brands. The mix between a holistic approach and empirical analyses made it possible to answer the research questions.

The study findings support the consumer-behavioral decision-making hypotheses (Fennimore, 1993), and an ecosystem of country brands was determined, revealing a specific set of stockholders, confirming previous studies. This study comprised a comprehensive evaluation of the place brand for nation positioning, with an emphasis on the Romanian country brand. The research proposal has been completed, allowing for an assessment of how marketing positions a country's identity and image. A country's brand needs to be developed based on the complexity of its relationships, elements, strategic marketing planning, and consistent management. Beyond a mere cohort, to build and maintain trust in a country's brand, national initiatives and campaigns are vital. This is to emphasize that the diverse country community originates from numerous regions

with different cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds. National initiatives need to embody a complex tapestry of trusted narratives, guaranteeing that each stockholder will have a feeling of belonging to the country community.

The study's contributions are multifaceted, highlighting the complexities of the topics under evaluation and emphasizing the importance of a more unambiguous and consistent approach in these fields. Furthermore, important variables in the process of building country brands were identified, including the design thinking approach, the use of a complex of national initiatives and country of origin effect to build the country brand, branding process and managing the country's identity and image.

The study's limitations included the fact that it was constrained to countries on the inside. The broadening of the study to include the realities of other emerging countries is required.

The conclusion validates the implementation of the place brand in connection to tourism, industry, cultural studies, and regional development, all of which are included in these fields of knowledge. This comprehension supports the study's goal, which is to examine the place-brand positioning of a country's image and identity. Concluding, country brand management is essential for the country's sustainable future.

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