Measuring Country Image – Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The concept of **country image** has been under constant attention of academic research in marketing, however the focus has been aimed much more at investigating country of origin image than country image.

Researchers agree that a strong theoretical background to country image would be necessary and proper measurement instruments should be developed, as this field of study is not as well developed as the country of origin image studies.

Recent publications look to a new approach and consider country image related to **country branding** and use the concept of "country value" in a similar way to "brand value".

In this view, globalisation means that countries are competing against each other in the same way as brands do. Therefore, powerful "country brands" have a huge competitive advantage. [Anholt, 2005]

The country brand images are very complex and multidimensional, they consist of more dimensions than classical consumer brands. In the same way as brands are measurable, the country image can be measured as well.

The main aim of our research is to construct a new, alternative measurement for country image, examining the answers to open-ended questions and testing previously developed scales for this purpose and brand image scales simultaneously.

In order to develop our **new multidimensional country image scale** we reviewed relevant literature from both marketing and non-marketing fields, analysed previously developed scales by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As a result of this process we chose three different measurements and carried out field research among 400 Hungarian university students to test these instruments simultaneously.

In this study we present our findings and the results of one of the three measurements. Our aim is to identify the cognitive and affective dimensions of country image, to test the reliability and variability of the applied measurement, and to provide applications for marketing, tourism and public policy strategies.

Keywords: country image, country branding, scale development

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Definition of country image, Country image as brand value

Image as related to countries is less frequently mentioned in literature than more widely-known image types.

Interpreting different authors' definitions, we may recognize that some concepts tend to be mixed up. Basically, we have to differentiate three main concepts: **product image**, **country image** (CI) and **country of origin image** (COO). These three types of image are closely related (especially from our marketing perspective) and somewhat overlapping, influencing each other both directly and indirectly.

The confusion about the concepts partly results from several authors considering *country of origin image* to be the same as *country image*. For example**,** Balabanis et al. (1996, p.1398.) defines country of origin as "a marketing concept that captures consumer's differentiated attitudes towards different nations".

In contrast to that, we consider *country of origin image* to be that part of a product's overall image which is based on where the product comes from. Thus country of origin image is the result of stereotypes linked to a certain product merely because it originates from a given country. Accordingly, in this context country of origin image relates to the product (service), that is: the country of origin image of a certain product.

On the contrary, Roth and Romeo define *country image* to be the same as what we consider country of origin image. In their words, **country image** is "the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular country based on their prior perceptions of the country's production and marketing strengths and weaknesses" (Roth-Romeo, 1992, p.480.).

But **country image** is actually the complete set of descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs about that given country (Martin-Eroglu, 1993, p.193.), the set of people's beliefs, ideas and impressions about a certain country (Kotler et al. 1993, p.141.).

The "*identity prism*" *of the country* (like the concept of *corporate identity*) consists of physical (geography, resources, demographics), cultural (history, culture, arts), personality (name, flag, celebrities), relations (with governments, international organizations), reflection

(controlled image conveyed to foreign customers and others) and internalization (extent to which country expresses foreign publics' psyche) elements (Graby, 1993, p.262.).

Country image does not directly relate to the product but only provides the basis for some indirect conclusions about the product.

In Nagashima's wording, **country of origin image** is "the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to the products of a specific country. This image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history and traditions" (Nagashima, 1970, p.68.). The above partly corresponds to our view as most of the factors mentioned affect the *image of the country* and thus, indirectly, the *image of the product*. Accordingly, the process can be interpreted as an image transfer. People have their attitudes towards countries and when judging the products of a given country, their origin will largely affect the result of the evaluation. That is *country image influences the country of origin image of the product*, which is practically integrated into its overall image (e.g. Germans are precise, therefore German products' image resulting from their origin is that they are manufactured very carefully, which is then incorporated into the general image of a given product).

Of course, image-transfer also acts in the opposite direction, e.g. for Japan: though we do not know anyone from Japan, the positive evaluation of Japanese products may lead to the positive judgment of Japanese people (Baughn-Yaprak, 1993).

Country image, just like any other image, **is not one-dimensional**. Researchers have found / investigated several, often overlapping dimensions, although far less attention was given to measuring attitudes towards countries and their inhabitants than towards country of origin image. Papadopoulos et. al. (1990) found the following *dimensions*: industrial development, affect, industrial orientation, closer ties. Berács and Malota's (2000) results are based on a Hungarian database, the dimensions are: cognitive evaluation, affective evaluation, knowledge about the country (experience), country links (ties).

Consumers beliefs about products and countries may be descriptive, informative or inductive (Fishbein-Ajzen, 1975), these beliefs are formed in different ways. *Descriptive beliefs* are established through experience while *informative beliefs* are shaped by information from external sources (e.g. media, friends). *Inductive beliefs* originate from the perception of a

relationship between some past event and a stimulus in the present. The impact of these direct and indirect experiences; are important factors considering country image as well.

Country image might be considered a special type of image which covers the country's products, brands, companies and much more. Country image is formed on the basis of experience and opinions about the nation or country and on, primarily, information received through the various channels. Possible channels are politics (internal affairs and foreign policy), telecommunication, entertainment (movies) and rumor. Country image comprises many elements: national symbols, colors, clothing, typical buildings, objects, tunes, pieces of literature, specialties of the political system, customs, historical heritage and many more (Jenes, 2005, p. 19.).

The concept of country image has two common interpretations, leading to heavy debates amongst professionals. (Szeles, 1998) The first approach ascribes a so-called "*umbrella function*" to country image, as its elements are made up of the totality of the country's specific products, brands and various organizations. According to the second approach, the country itself is a *complex product*, made up of a large number of elements. (Thus country image is considered a normal product image, yet with more diverse, complex and complicated characteristics.)

Regarding to its direction, the *country image* can be *internal* image (self image) and *external image* (mirror image), similarly to the classification of product image. This kind of interpretation is hardly acceptable bearing on product. Talking of that, the **internal country image** means "what citizens think about their own country", and the **external country image** is "what others/foreigners think about our country". (Jenes, 2007, p.40.)

The expression country marketing has already been present in literature for a couple of years. On the contrary, the **"country as a brand"** approach and **"country branding"** is only mentioned in a couple of works, some of them being rather confusing. Branding, however, is a much wider concept. There is a so-called spontaneous image to each country, which can be turned into a consciously shaped image to be positioned and valued in the marketplace. This latter process is *called country image building, country branding or country rebranding*. According to Anholt (2002), country branding does not only stand for creating a new logo,

slogan or brand name but rather for a comprehensive process including positioning and various communication methods. The objectives of country branding are primarily of economic nature. "Selling" the country basically covers three aspects: fostering tourism, attracting tourists, fostering foreign investments and improving exports.

A classic brand and a country brand have a lot in common, but there are important differences, too. Thus a country brand needs special management. Just like normal product brands, it does have a name, a logo and some further identifiers. Its name, however, has a special origin, and owners are hard to identify, as well. Selling a country brand is not possible, either. Thus valuation becomes questionable, which provides the basis for debates between researchers concerning the scientific background and the validity of country branding theories.

Table 1: The comparison of a classical brand and a country brand

Classical brand	A country as a brand
Clear property relations	There is no one real owner, everybody who lives there is a holder
The management is the owner's competence	The 'management' is chosen by the citizens (in democracies)
Goal: profit for the owner	Goal: the citizenry's welfare
From above leaded, top down control	From beneath, by community values, bottom-up (in democracies
The brand image consists of a few elements	The brand image consists of a vast number of elements
Consistent marketing communications through a few channels	Mostly uncoordinated communications through a large number of channels
The brand name is made-up, it can be changed	The brand name is a geographical area, it cannot be changed
The brand is temporal	The brand wants to live forever

Source: Papp-Váry, 2003, p.7.

1.2. Measuring the value of country brands, quantification and indices of country image

Our present study is centered around how compatible marketing-focused brand value theories are with country image interpretations, that is how they **measure country image** (country brand) **value**.

GMI Nation Brands Index developed by Simon Anholt considers countries' general images from a branding-related aspect. The original survey includes ten countries (recently it's 30-50 countries already), with 1000 respondents from each (not evaluating their home country). There are six groups of questions, the same for all countries. *Country brand value (hexagon)* is determined by: 1. export products 2. views on the government, 3. views on the extent of investments and immigration, 4. the country's cultural heritage, 5. the mentality of inhabitants and 6. the country's tourism. Anholt concludes that tourism is one of the key elements of country image, as, tourism being the most apparent and the clearest aspect, image elements applied in tourism promotion influence the general image of the country, too. Furthermore, the study underlines that – irrespective of any other factor – it is personal experience that has the strongest effect on the formation and the alteration of images.

Figure 1: The Nation Brand Hexagon

Source: Anholt 2002

Recently, researchers have partnered with Brand Finance for a more complex task: calculating the brand value for 32 countries and estimating how the "brand name" and GDP relate to each other as elements of the country's value. They employed the *"royalty relief" approach* which tries to find out how much a country should pay if it was not allowed to use its (brand) name any more but had to „hire" this asset. Brand value was calculated on the basis of publicly available economic performance data and Brand Hexagon image surveys.

The value of a country's name as a brand name has not yet actually been quantified, either. Nation Brands Index is a suitable indicator of country image quality, yet its nature does not allow for quantification, but rather for comparative analyses. In practice, professionals quantify country image using *tourism numbers and indicators*. One of the most important indices is the number of guest nights, expressing the average visit duration per thousand people. Another frequently used indicator is the number of tourists from foreign countries in a given period. Some researchers suggest that other indices might be an appropriate means of expressing country image value, as well. Rankings based on GDP or other economic indices (e.g. export-import ratio) are rather common, for example. They indeed reflect productivity and economic value, but cultural, political and geographical aspects are ignored, thus they must not be interpreted as an expression of country image value.

The picture is clouded by the findings of a 2007 survey by European Brand Institute. The bottom line was that *the success of classic brands goes hand in hand with that of the country*, and vice versa. Researchers suggest that the brand power of a country's brands might lead to valid conclusions about the country's brand power. The first European brand value survey included 3000 brands from 16 industries in 24 countries. Top positions were taken by the largest states: Germany, UK and France. The study also showed that some countries might be characterized by typical (industry or product group) competences, and that the numbers might be further refined by comparing the value of the country's top 10 brands to its GDP. Thus there are indeed efforts for the quantification of country image based on economic indicators.

An interesting topic of literature is the *accounting approach* to measuring country image. The simultaneous application of these two, relatively distant disciplines provides new insights. Nowadays, the value of the world's leading companies significantly exceeds the book value of their assets. The difference comes from hard-to-quantify assets, including the management, market relationships, corporate culture and the brand value of the company (or its products).

For most companies, investments into hard-to-quantify assets tend to yield much higher returns than investments into traditional assets. In order to measure investment efficiency, however, we have to know the value of these assets. Today's valuation practices, nevertheless, only provide a methodology for the valuation of brand names – through measuring additional incomes from the possession of the brand name.

How all this could be interpreted in the context of country images remains, however, unclear. Anholt's model is indeed a step forward as it applies a more complex set of criteria in measuring country image and brand value. The resulting information is interesting, yet the method itself is far from perfect. Countries were evaluated online by 1000 people from each of the ten countries. This limitation, however, is not underlined in the interpretation of findings, even though ten countries' views should not be called a „general image". Still this is the most comprehensive study, indeed. The model yields a single brand image. Multidimensionality, nonetheless, might not only mean that country image has multiple important elements but also that the various groups of respondents (target group segments) have different priorities.

A major advantage of the European Brand Institute model is that it yields a specific quantity for country brand value, yet a drawback is that it only performs brand valuation while the complexity and multidimensionality of country images remain ignored.

2.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our **"internal country image"** survey was conducted among the Hungarian students of Corvinus University of Budapest in March 2008, using self-reported questionnaires, sample size being 399. The structure of the questionnaire was as follows: similar to international studies, the first set of questions dealt with country image in general, employing open-ended questions. Positive and negative views on both the country and its people were collected. The second set of questions tested an internationally well-known and frequently applied scale - Papadopoulos (1993) – which was also employed in a number of Hungarian country image related surveys. The third set of questions was also aimed at country image in general, using a country image scale developed by the Hungarian Gallup Institute. Demographic information was covered in the fourth set of questions. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS suite.

Our **"external country image"** survey was carried out among the foreign students studying in Hungary (for at least one semester), positive and negative views on the country were examined by open ended questions, using self-reported questionnaires. The sample size was 457.

In this study we present our findings on country image regarding to the open-ended questions. We examined the answers of respondents and divided them into categories. Regarding to these categories we developed dimensions that can be suitable for measuring country image.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Open-ended questions about views on the country and its people

The open-ended questions of the first set attempted to survey **people's views on Hungary and Hungarians.** We already tested these questions among foreign students a few years ago (the sample size was 457), therefore we have two databases to make a comparison between the Hungarians' views (internal country image) and the foreign students' views on Hungary and Hungarian people (external country image). At the same time we try to identify the real dimensions of country image (regarding both the *internal* and *external* country images as well).

The first question aimed at exploring respondents' first thoughts on Hungary. (see Table 2a. and 2b.)

The majority of the Hungarians (51%) associates Hungary with concepts like **home** in the first place. Responses related to **natural endowments** were also very popular. **Budapest, gastronomy, Hungaricums and society-related feelings** were also relatively frequent.

In addition, the foreign students associate Hungary with friendly/unfriendly **Hungarian people, gastronomy, history** and **popular sights**. Responses related to the economical development and the beauty of Hungarian women were also relatively frequent.

Table 2.a: Hungarians' views on Hungary (internal country image)

Descriptives	Frequency	(%)
Home	201	51,0
Natural endowments	50	12,7
Budapest	20	5,1
Gastronomy, Hungaricums	17	4,3
Society-related feelings	15	3,8
Ibolya Oláh: Magyarország (song)	15	3,8

Symbols of the country	14	3,6
Sights	12	3,0
Political condition	12	3,0
Economy	6	1,5
Celebrities	4	1,0
Corruption, Crime	2	,5
Public sanitation	2	,5
Sports	2	,5
Science, education	1	,3
Other	21	5,3
Total	**394**	**100,0**

Table 2.b: Foreign students' views on Hungary (external country image)

1 Country	150	Number of references	
Budapest	63	Weather	21
Danube	22	Balaton	14
Hortobágy, the Plain	8	Spas	12
Other	77	Hungaroring	3
2 People	118	Other	3
Hungarian people	90	5 Economy	58
Hungarian women	23	Development	31
Friends	7	EU	12
Family	4	Bureaucracy	5
Other	6	Economy	3
3 Culture	135	Other	18
Gastronomy	73	6 Sg negative	59
History	48	7 'Nothing'	20
Cultural elements	19	8 Beauty	36
Language	18	9 Other	47
Traditions	7	0 No response	111
Other	12		
		Number of respondents	

The second question explored positive thoughts on both the country and its people. (see Table 3a. and 3b.)

The most popular amongst positive *country characteristics* were **natural endowments** by the Hungarian respondents. **Feelings** (social belonging, friendships, kindness) scored high once again, so did **home** and **popular sights** (Hortobágy, Heroes' square etc.). The most frequent positive *traits of people* were related to **emotions** (friendship, feeling of community, togetherness, kindness, helpfulness etc.). Responses from the category **science** and **education** were also frequent (scientific achievements, quality education, scientists, talent etc.).

The most popular amongst positive country characteristics were **friendly Hungarian people, culture** and **gastronomy** by the foreign respondents point of view. The foreign students' responses related to **natural endowments** and **amusement, nightlife** were also frequent.

Table 3.a.1: The Hungarians' positive thoughts on Hungary (internal CI)

Descriptives	1st place mentioned		2nd place mentioned		3rd place mentioned		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Natural endowments	149	39,6	60	33,3	13	18,3	222
Home	56	14,9	16	8,9	4	5,6	76
Society-related feelings	52	13,8	22	12,2	10	14,1	84
Sights	30	8,0	20	11,1	6	8,5	56
Budapest	20	5,3	13	7,2	3	4,2	36
Gastronomy, Hungaricums	15	4,0	14	7,8	12	16,9	41
Sports	8	2,1	0	0	6	8,5	14
Economy	6	1,6	3	1,7	3	4,2	12
Science, education	5	1,3	6	3,3	1	1,4	12
Symbols of the country	2	,5	1	,6	1	1,4	4
Political condition	0	0	1	,6	0	0	1
Other	33	8,8	24	13,3	12	16,9	69
Total	**376**	**100,0**	**180**	**100,0**	**71**	**100,0**	**627**

Table 3.a.2: The Hungarians' positive thoughts on the Hungarians   (internal CI)

Descriptives	1st place mentioned		2nd place mentioned		3rd place mentioned		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Feelings	218	63,4	86	74,8	20	66,7	324
Science, education	41	11,9	9	7,8	3	10,0	53
Other	85	24,7	20	17,4	7	2,3	112
Total	**344**	**100,0**	**115**	**100,0**	**30**	**100,0**	**489**

Table 3.b: The foreign students' positive thoughts on Hungary and the Hungarians   (external CI)

1 Country	97	**3 School**	40
Culture,gastronomy	77	Students	14
Beauty, endowments	36	Teachers	5
Cheapness	20	Quality	4
Transportation	17	System	1
Weather	10	Other	4
Atmosphere	5		
Economic development	2	4 'Nothing'	22
Services	1	5 Other	45
Environment	0	0 No response	130
2 People	173		
Hungarian people	119		
Amusement, nightlife	34		
Friends	26		
The youth (girls,boys)	19		
Language	5	Number of respondents	
Other	1	Number of references	

13

The third question was related to negative views on Hungary and Hungarians. (see Table 4.a and 4.b)

It is apparent that characteristics related to **economic state** (bad economic situation, underdevelopment, deteriorating indices, low wages, poverty etc.) and **political situation** (political battles, conflicts, discredited politicians/parties etc.) were the most often mentioned ones by the Hungarian respondents. The **emotional level** of negative views also became obvious (malaise, social dissension, pessimism, hostility, envy, narrow-mindedness etc.).The majority of negative thoughts about Hungarian people were related to **negative feelings** (e.g. lack of belonging/dividedness, wickedness, narrow-mindedness, envy, lack of culture, pessimism, dissatisfaction etc.).

The majority of negative thoughts about Hungarian people were related to **people** (unfriendly, pessimistic people) by the foreign students as well. The respondents seem to be divided into two different groups regarding to their opinions: some of them like the Hungarians and others dislike. It is apparent that characteristics related to the lack of public safety (**crime, violence**) were often mentioned by the foreigners. In additional, responses from the category '**bureaucracy**' and (the low quality of) **services** were also frequent.

Table 4.a.1: The Hungarians' negative thoughts on Hungary (internal CI)

Descriptives	1st place mentioned		2nd place mentioned		3rd place mentioned		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Economy	109	29,2	29	20,9	12	27,3	150
Political condition	71	19,0	29	20,9	5	11,4	105
Society-related feelings	47	12,6	31	22,3	10	22,7	88
Public sanitation	40	10,7	7	5,0	2	4,5	49
Natural endowments	17	4,6	5	3,6	0	0	22
Corruption, crime	14	3,8	8	5,8	2	4,5	24
Sights	5	1,3	0	0	0	0	5
Budapest	2	,5	1	,7	0	0	3
Celebrities	0	0	1	,7	0	0	1
Other	68	18,2	28	20,1	13	29,5	109
Total	**373**	**100,0**	**139**	**100,0**	**44**	**100,0**	**556**

Table 4.a.2: The Hungarians' negative thoughts on the Hungarians (internal CI)

Descriptives	1st place mentioned		2nd place mentioned		3rd place mentioned		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Feelings	287	74,2	166	84,7	56	77,8	509
Economy	14	3,6	2	1,0	4	5,6	20
Corruption, Crime	14	3,6	11	5,6	6	8,3	31
Political condition	11	2,8	1	,5	1	1,4	13
Other	61	15,8	16	7,2	5	6,9	74
Total	387	100,0	196	100,0	72	100,0	655

Table 4.b: The foreign students' negative thoughts on Hungary and the Hungarians (external CI)

1 Country	68	3 School	22
Services	33	System	10
Economic development	15	Quality	5
Weather	10	Students	4
Environment	9	School	3
Culture, gastronomy	3	Teachers	0
Transportation	3		
		4 Crime, violence	60
Cheapness	2	5 Bureaucracy	50
Beauty	0	6 'Nothing'	27
Atmosphere	0	7 Discrimination	10
2 People	119	8 Other	33
Hungarian people	64	0 No response	145
Language	40		
Amusement, nightlife	1		
The youth (girls, boys)	1		
Friends	0	Number of respondents	
Other	32	Number of references	

Regarding to the results of our examination it is apparent that the above seen types of dimensions of both external and internal country image - considering the responses in isolation from the numerical, real results - are closely related and somewhat overlapping.

4.   SUMMARY

To sum up the above seen types of responses we can state the following. It seems that the aspects that respondents take into account when judging a country's image, can be grouped into four- five dimensions.

The dimensions can be the followings:

-        1st group of dimensions named **'Tourism'**:

         Nature/ natural endowments, atmosphere, sights, services

-        2nd - 3rd group of dimensions named **'Economic/Political situation/Public safety'** :

         Economy, politics, corruption-crimes (it can be divided into 1 or 2 more factors)

-        4th group of dimensions named **'Culture'**:

         Sports, science, education, culture, traditions, history

-        5th group of dimensions named **'People'**:

         People, celebrities, hospitality

In our following study we will develop and test a scale that contains statements about these dimensions.

5.   LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

The first and most important limitation of our study being the very homogenous student sample, these scales must also be tested on a representative sample later on.

Reducing the number of scale questions through the simultaneous application of the scales and through analyzing typical responses to our open-ended questions is an important task, too, as some parts of the scales overlap and findings imply the existence of some potential new variables, as well.

A positive country image having manifold advantages, there are several opportunities for the practical application of these findings by marketing professionals dealing with tourism and country image matters. Amongst direct political and economic benefits are the expansion of tourism, a better position in privatization transactions, foreign investors' increased interest, improved image and competitive position of our entrepreneurs abroad, a more positive external attitude to governmental credit and loan applications, stronger support and international reactions to foreign policy efforts, the strengthening of the national ties and the national consciousness of Hungarians living abroad. In an indirect way, these advantages do actually appear in almost all areas, in citizens' environment, in the way they feel, and in the treatment and the abolition of hungaro-pessimism, as well.

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