WORKING PAPER

Assessing the influence of national sports celebrities on tourist perceptions and visit intentions: a cross-cultural comparison

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Abstract

The connection between sports, celebrity culture, and tourism has garnered increasing attention. National sports celebrities often serve as informal ambassadors, presenting an image of their home country to international audiences. However, the extent to which these celebrities shape tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit the countries they represent remains under-explored. A mixed-method approach was employed. An initial qualitative phase involved focus group discussions to identify key sports celebrities and the perceived attributes they impart to their home countries. The subsequent quantitative

phase employed a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 1,879 potential tourists across three European countries (Germany, UK and France). Structural equation modeling was utilized to analyze the relationships among celebrity perceived image, country image perception, trust, and visit intention.

Keywords: Sports Celebrities, Country Image, Tourism Intentions, Consumer Behavior, Destination Marketing.

Introduction

In an age of globalization, countries are vying for the attention of international audiences, not merely for economic investments or political alliances but also to attract tourists (Pike, 2002). Much like brands competing for market share, nations are actively involved in 'place branding,' where they seek to differentiate their territory to present a unique and attractive image to the world (Anholt, 2007). One of the potent tools in this effort is leveraging national sports celebrities, who often command vast global audiences.

National sports celebrities transcend their roles as mere entertainers or athletes; they become symbols of national identity and pride. Their achievements on the global stage not only bolster the morale of domestic constituents but also shape the perceptions of foreign audiences (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009). Their personal attributes, ranging from sportsmanship and dedication to resilience and integrity, often become intertwined with the image of their home nation. For instance, Usain Bolt's lightning speed doesn't just evoke admiration for his personal prowess, but also casts a positive light on Jamaica, his home country, presenting an image of a nation that produces world-class talent (Cornwell & Coote, 2005). Such associations are not confined to the realm of sports. Tourists, exposed to the charisma of these sports celebrities, may develop a favorable image of the respective countries, which in turn influences their travel decisions (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

While the influence of celebrities on brand image and consumer behavior has been documented (McCracken, 1989), the specific role of national sports celebrities in sculpting the image of a country and its impact on tourism remains under-researched. Some studies have dabbled into the broader domain of celebrity endorsement and its ripple effects on destination marketing (Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003), but these provide only a tangential understanding of the phenomenon in question. Their insights, though valuable, are insufficient to grasp the depth and breadth of the influence national sports celebrities wield on country image, especially in the context of global tourism.

Given the above backdrop, this study seeks to fill the gap by empirically investigating the influence of national sports celebrities on the perceived image of their home country among international tourists. Specifically, the research aims to elucidate how admiration for these celebrities translates to a favorable country image, and how such an image, in turn, impacts tourists' intention to visit the respective nation.

Theoretical framework

The role of celebrities in explaining image has been deeply investigated since 1997 (Authors, 2023). A relatively new point that needs further research in the tourism industry is the link between a celebrity and a destination image. Kim, Choe, and Petrick (2018) focused their study on a literary festival and they conclude that celebrity endorsements can strongly influence destination brand and festival community attachment. That's because, as the Image Transfer Theory (Gwinner, 1997) supports, if the tourist/resident has a favorable image towards a brand associated with a tourist destination, the image of that destination will be favored due to the existence of a halo effect that allows the brand image to be transferred to the linked destination.

Following this argument, it is to be expected that the same is true for sports celebrities. A sports celebrity is defined as "a sports celebrity is defined as a player or coach who gained popularity in a specific sport" and a "sports celebrity has the power to direct fans' attention towards the endorsed brand, create a positive brand image" (Dikčius and Ilciukiene, 2021, p. 342). Based on the Symbolic Communication Theory (Kim, Choe, and Petrick, 2018), it's expected that the attributes recognized in a sportsperson competing for a country will be transferred to the country they represent. That is if the attributes recognized in the person are positive and admired, the image of the country he/she belongs to will be favored, increasing its attractiveness as a tourist destination. From this approach, the attributes of a sportsperson competing on behalf of a country could be used to boost the image of the country they represent. Accordingly, we propose:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the perceived image of a national sports celebrity and the perceived image of their home country.

Also, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior postulates that behavioral intentions, which precede actual behavior, are shaped by attitudes toward that behavior. In the context of tourism, attitudes toward visiting a particular destination would be influenced by various antecedents, including the image of notable figures from that place. Drawing from the Theory of Planned Behavior, if potential tourists have a favorable perception of a national sports celebrity, it might positively influence their attitudes and, by extension, their intentions to visit the celebrity's home country:

H2: There is a positive relationship between the perceived image of a national sports celebrity and the intention to visit their home country.

Finally, destination image is a salient factor influencing tourists' travel decisions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). An influential strain of research has shown that there's a robust link between the image of a destination and the intention to visit (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Accordingly:

H3 (replication hypothesis): There is a positive relationship between the perceived image of a country and the intention to visit it.

This hypothesis builds upon prior research, reconfirming the crucial role of destination image in shaping travel intentions.

Country of Origin as a Moderator: A Deeper Exploration

Understanding the perceptions of tourists requires acknowledging the intricacies of their socio-cultural backgrounds. Cultural backgrounds shape the way individuals process information, value attributes, and make decisions (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, the perception and interpretation of celebrity images might vary depending on the cultural context from which the tourist originates. Specifically, differences in socio-cultural values across countries like France, UK, and Germany could lead to distinct interpretations of the same celebrity image. For instance, the cultural dimensions model by Hofstede (2001) suggests that countries can significantly differ in dimensions like uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, and individualism vs. collectivism.

A sports celebrity from Spain exhibiting a passionate and expressive style might be perceived positively in countries where uncertainty avoidance is low (like the UK), as they may appreciate spontaneity. In contrast, tourists from countries with high uncertainty avoidance (like Germany) might perceive the same attributes as unprofessional or reckless (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). Accordingly, we propose the following:

H1a: The relationship between the perceived image of a Spanish sports celebrity, the perceived image of and the intention to visit Spain is moderated by the tourist's country of origin.

Our proposed research model is shown in Appendix 1.

Methodology

Instrument and sample

We used a structured questionnaire to collect the data needed for our study. All measures used were based on well-validated scales used in prior research (see Appendix 2). First,

perceived sport celebrity image was measured with a seven-item scale from Salinas and Pérez (2019). The perceived image of the country as a tourist destination was measured with the nine-item scale from Hahm et al. (2019), while intention to visit was measured with three item-scale from Um and Crompton (1990).

Questionnaires were translated into English, German and French, and an international market research company was hired to assists the data collection. We collect representative data from potential tourist of UK, Germany and France. The sample description is shown in Appendix 3.

Data analysis will be carried out using structural equation modelling with Lisrel 12.0. The invariability of the measurement instrument will be checked before conducting a multigroup analysis for the three country samples.

Expected results and conclusions

We expect to present our results in the Marketing Trends Conference. As our exploration into the interconnected roles of national sports celebrities, country image, and tourist intentions nears its completion, several preliminary conclusions and anticipations can be discerned. Fist, about the multifaceted influence of celebrities, it's becoming increasingly evident that national sports celebrities are not just figureheads of their sport or symbols of athletic prowess. Their influence extends far beyond the stadium, potentially molding perceptions about their home country. This underscores the depth and breadth of the celebrity influence, bridging the gap between sport, culture, and tourism. Second, regarding cultural relativity in perceptions, our hypothesis examinations reiterate the idea that perceptions are not universally shared. Tourists from France, the UK, and Germany, for example, might interpret the image of a Spanish sports celebrity in diverse ways, reflecting their unique socio-cultural lenses. This cultural relativity highlights the complexity of international marketing and the importance of nuanced, culturally sensitive strategies.

For marketing practitioners, understanding these dynamics can inform targeted marketing campaigns. Knowing how a Spanish sports celebrity is perceived in France versus the UK can allow for tailored marketing messages. Tourism boards can collaborate more closely with national sports icons, leveraging their influence to boost tourism. The study's insights can inform training programs for stakeholders in the tourism industry, preparing them to cater to the diverse perceptions and expectations of tourists from different countries.

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Appendix 1

Research model
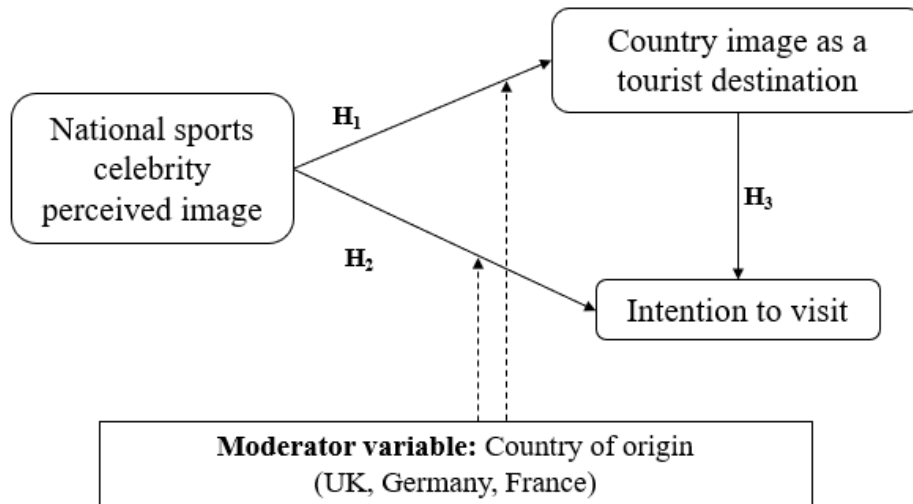
Appendix 2

Scale items[a]

Perceived sport celebrity image (Salinas and Pérez, 2019)

Quality of performance

Skill

Brand image

Brand personality

Meeting expectations

Reputation

Perceived image of the country as a tourist destination (Hahm et al., 2019)

Diversity of cultural makeup

Technological development

Economic development

Educational system

Environmental awareness

Political stability

Identidad cultural

Standard of living

Attention to social well-being

Intention to visit (Um et al., 1990)

I would like to visit Spain

A trip to Spain will be a lot of fun

Spain is one of my first

Spain is one of my favourite tourist destinations

[a] All scales consisted of 5-point Likert questions, ranging from ''1 = strongly disagree'' to ''5 = strongly agree.''

Appendix 3

Sample description

Respondent profile	Total sample	UK	French	Germany	χ^2, F
Gender					
Male	47.7 %	47.6 %	47.1 %	48.7 %	0.34 (ns)
Female	52.3 %	52.4 %	52.9 %	51.3 %	
Education					
Elementary	12.6 %	25.4 %	6.3 %	5.8 %	208, 0*
Professional education.	41.5 %	28.4 %	39.6 %	57.3 %	
Bachelor's degree.	23.8 %	23.5 %	28.2 %	19.5 %	
University degree.	22.0 %	22.6 %	25.9 %	17.3 %	
Age (mean)	44.1	43.4	44.0	45.1	2.17 (ns)
N	1.879	633	646	600	

* $p < 0.05$