

Brand Personality: An Application for Singapore as a Brand

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Abstract

This article discusses the potential roles of brand personality on branding Singapore. In marketing literature, the construct of brand personality has been employed to examine the perception of brand image in several contexts in addition to those of typical brands and products. Because a country may also be viewed as a brand, the brand personality construct, when associated with a country, could probably be a promising avenue for the application of this marketing construct. In addition, from a managerial perspective, treating a country as a brand could be an important tool for country positioning and thus draw more tourism, business, and investment to a given country. The present study adopts a qualitative research to gain more insightful findings in this topic as well as exploring the possibility that new country personality dimensions and/or traits will emerge. Data collected from Thai consumers reveal eight dimensions of Singapore's country personality including competence, agreeableness, self-sustainability, peacefulness, rigidity, sophistication, tourism-orientation, and finally negativity. A number of theoretical and practical implications regarding country personality and country branding can be drawn from the study results.

Keywords: brand personality, country personality, marketing, Singapore

Introduction

The brand personality construct employs human personality traits to describe a brand (Aaker, 1997). Although brand personality has long generated interests among marketing scholars, the application of brand personality to non-traditional products or even non-products appears relatively scarce. More recently, however, researchers have started to apply this construct to non-product entities in several contexts including, for example, temples (Polyorat & Miwichian, 2018), political parties (Gorbaniuk et al., 2015; Rutter et al., 2018), cultural festivals (d'Astous et al., 2006), sports teams (Tsiotsou, 2012), tourist destinations (Upadhyaya, 2012), and cities (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2013).

Another nontraditional product that probably deserves more studies in brand personality is the study of a country as a brand. That is, brand personality of a country or country personality may reflect how a country is viewed by using personality trait descriptors. When a country is considered as a brand, brand personality could be useful for describing a country. By putting a country's characteristics together and explaining them as a human being, personality traits can be very important for country branding. For example, tourism, import-export, and foreign investments could be promoted through the careful use of country personality where a country is managed as if it was a brand.

Based on the discussions thus far, the present study, therefore, attempts to explore the personality of a country demonstrate that a country also has personality as do traditional branded products. It is expected that the results from this study can provide insightful guidelines in the development of country marketing campaign and also suggest avenues for more systematic applications of the brand personality concept to non-traditional branded entities.

Singapore is a country selected for the examination of country personality in this study because of several important reasons. First, Singapore is culturally mixed as evidenced by a combination of various ethnicities, languages, and religions (CIA, 2019) observed in this country. That is, Singapore is composed of four major ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others. Furthermore, it has four official languages including English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. In addition, the principal religions practiced in Singapore are Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, and Hinduism. Therefore, it is obvious that Singapore is a truly diverse country and thus may lend itself to a position where the study of country personality could yield several different dimensions of country personality. Moreover, apart from the indigenous Asian cultures, Singapore is relatively more modernized or westernized than other several Asian countries. As a consequence, Singapore could be regarded as a place where East meets West. Second, from the economic and business perspectives, Singapore is a major participant in a global arena. A number of Singaporean multibillion-dollar businesses (Wikipedia, 2019), for example DBS Group, OCBC Bank, Singtel, UOB, and Singapore Airlines, are big players in their industry. On top of that, several worldwide business corporations have a regional office located in Singapore. Therefore, thanks to these important and distinctive

characteristics of Singapore, it is logical to use it as a focal country to study the perception of country personality.

Theoretical Background

Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to a set of human characteristics potentially associated with brands (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is capable of providing symbolic meaning of brands (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). For example, Absolut Vodka could be viewed as a 25-year old person with a cool and modern personality (Balakrishnan et al., 2009). Because brand personality could be more challenging to imitate than tangible product attributes, it can therefore be used as a strategic marketing tool to achieve a more sustainable advantage over competitors (Ang & Lim, 2006).

Literature review in brand personality reveals the relationships between brand personality and several other managerially-important marketing variables including brand loyalty (Farhat & Khan, 2011), human and consumer personality (Balaji & Raghavan, 2011), brand attachment (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012), image of product user (Parker, 2009), acknowledgement of product quality (Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007), and brand persuasion (Guevremont & Grohmann, 2013).

Through a series of survey research, Aaker (1997) uncovers five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date), competence (reliable, intelligent, and successful), sophistication (upper class and charming) and finally ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough). These five dimensions are found to be generalizable across different male vs. female and younger vs. older subgroups, as well as across brands and product categories. In spite of some criticisms (Heine, 2009), several of the brand personality studies conducted after 1997 are based, at least in part, on Aaker's (1997) framework of five dimensions of brand personality (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003; Parker, 2009).

Country personality

Country personality reflects a connection of different perceptual components often related to or representing a particular country with perceptions of human personality traits. The perceptions of country characteristics may derive from several sources including, for example, government, tourism, economy, society, and culture (Sirisoontorn & Polyorat, 2013). Country personality is a feature that can be developed in order to make a particular country standing out from other countries.

As most countries are keen to create uniqueness to distinguish itself from one another, the proper management of country personality may help create uniqueness or

image in the consumers' mind toward a particular country or products from that country. When the brand personality concept is applied to country personality, the definition "human personality traits that are relevant to countries" implies that such human personality traits as aggressive, agreeable, tough, and friendly may be capable of explaining the perceptions of countries. For example, the US may be viewed as aggressive whereas Japan as humble (Sirisoontorn & Polyorat, 2013).

More recently, Sripongpun & Polyorat (2018) suggested that country personality may be composed of three dimensions. First, the dependable dimension includes flexible, honest, neat, orderly, peaceful, pedantic, respectable, secure, and tolerant. Next, the charming dimension covers cheerful, chic, clever, contemporary, cool, creative, developed, and advanced. Finally, the unattractive dimension includes impolite, insincere, unattractive, underdeveloped, uneducated, unfriendly, unhurried, and unstable.

Method

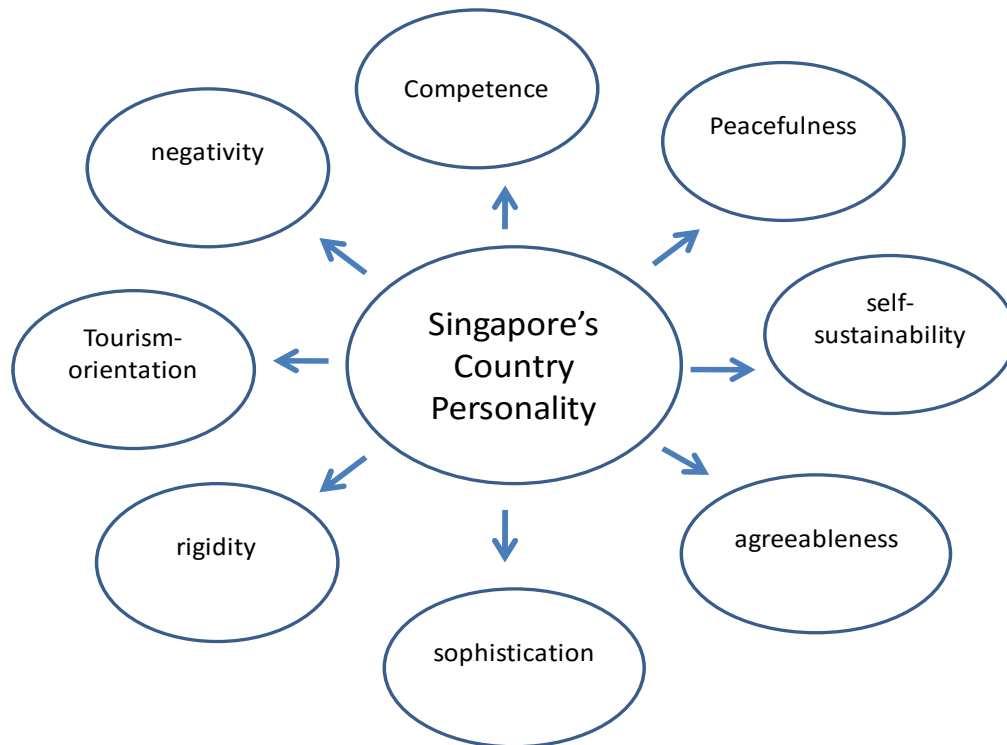
As this research attempts to gain insightful information in the personality of the country of interest as well as eliciting new country personality dimensions and/or traits, a qualitative approach is thus adopted. Sixteen samples of Thai young adults who were undergraduate students were purposively selected and individually interviewed. To encourage the casual inquiry ambience, the research participants were first asked one or two simple questions to warm-up. For instance, "Have you ever been to Singapore?" or "Have you ever seen or ever heard about Singapore from any media?" Then, the researcher told them to imagine Singapore. Next, the researcher asked them "if Singapore were a person, what would be its characteristics?" In this step, each participant was asked to think about and list at least five personality traits that came to their mind when they thought of Singapore.

Results

After the words that are closely synonymous are removed, 39 non-redundant personality traits from the survey are retained. In order to systematically and theoretically uncover the dimensions of country personality of Singapore, two criteria are adopted to group these personality traits: (1) the semantic and thematic relationships among these personality traits and (2) dimensions that are previously identified in the literature.

Based on these two criteria, eight dimensions of Singapore's country personality are identified: competence, peacefulness, self-sustainability, agreeableness, sophistication, rigidity, tourism-orientation, and negativity as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Singapore's country personality



The personality traits belonging to each dimension are as follows:

1. Competence (11 traits): skillful, proficient, high-potential, good-working, investment-conductive, economically-favorable, well-managed, well-educated, strong, prosperous, and well-infrastructure
2. Peacefulness (4 traits): peaceful, solitary, no-hassle and, small
3. Self-sustainability (4 traits): self-sustainable, self-made, surviving, frugal
4. Agreeableness (4 traits): informally, friendly, hospitable, and compromising
5. Sophistication (2 items): fashionable and brand-named-famous
6. Rigidity (3 items): legally-strict, well-disciplined, and tradition-maintaining
7. Tourism-orientation (5 items): good-image, touristic, food-renowned, welcome, and diverse
8. Negativity (6 items): cheating, selfish, extravagant, hectic, hurried, and expensive

Discussions

In summary, the results from this qualitative and exploratory study uncover eight dimensions of Singapore's country personality including competence (e.g., skillful, well-educated, and strong), peacefulness (e.g., peaceful, solitary, and no-hassle), self-sustainability (e.g., self-sustainable, surviving, and frugal), agreeableness (e.g., informally, friendly, and compromising) rigidity (e.g., legally-strict, well-disciplined, and tradition-maintaining), tourism-orientation (e.g., good image, touristic, and welcome), and negativity (e.g., cheating, selfish, and hurried).

The results of the present study provide several contributions to the areas of country personality and brand personality. First, as there have been relatively few studies specifically examining country personality, the current study is therefore a step further to fill in this void.

Second, the results from this study reveal some dimensions similar to those identified in other brand personality and country personality research. For instance, the competence, the peaceful, and the sophistication dimensions uncovered in the present study are quite similar to those identified in research conducted with traditional branded products (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al., 2001), therefore confirming the similarity between brand personality and country personality in this respect.

Third, the emergence of agreeableness dimension seems to be quite perplexing. Although it is not a basic dimension identified in the brand personality literature, it is in fact one of the original Big-5 dimensions of human personality (Thompson 2008). As a consequence, future research may consider examining the differences and similarities among human personality, brand personality, and country personality to better explain this phenomenon.

Fourth, a number of new dimensions are uncovered in the present study. These include self-sustainability, rigidity, tourism orientation, and negative dimensions. The first three dimensions may emerge from the specific characteristics of the focal country, Singapore. That is, Singapore is a small country in terms of land mass. As a result, the self-sustainability could be a big issue; otherwise, it has to excessively rely on other countries for basic resources. Furthermore, Singapore is known for its strictness in laws and regulations. It is widely known that, for example, throwing away garbage in public areas is strictly prohibited and traffic laws must be strictly observed. Next, in terms of tourism, Singapore has many man-made tourism attractions such as Sentosa, Universal Studio, Gardens by the Bay, and Singapore Flyer. These iconic and landmark attractions may have reinforced the perception of this dimension of Singapore's country personality.

Fifth, the emergence of the negativity dimension suggests the difference between brand personality and country personality. This finding from the current study reveals that the personality of a country can be expressed negatively, or in terms of undesirable characteristics. This is obviously different from the brand personality construct proposed by Aaker (1997) in which only positive items were covered. It may be possible that brand personality (in comparison with country personality) is more articulately managed by marketers. Therefore, only positive personality traits were found for brand personality. On

the other hand, country personality is often not specifically managed exclusively by a single or specific marketers. In fact, country personality could be more difficult and more complicated to play with because it could be affected by several more uncontrollable factors. As a consequence, the negative dimension is found for country personality.

Sixth, regarding managerial contributions, findings of the present study revealed personality traits and dimensions that came to Thai people' mind when thinking of Singapore. As its country personality dimensions reflect both positive (i.e., peacefulness, competence, agreeableness, sophistication, and tourism-orientation) and negative (i.e., negativity) sides. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the country to conserve and continuously develop their positive image, while attempting to suppress or eliminate their negative one.

Finally, this study possesses some limitations which suggest avenues for future research. First, it chose only a single country as the focal country. It is thus recommended that more studies should explore a variety of countries. Second, because the data in this study were collected from a sample of undergraduate students, future research may consider non-sample study sample to arrive at more generalized findings. Finally, in addition to the qualitative approach adopted in this study, future studies may employ quantitative methods (e.g., survey and experiment) to complement the present findings to achieve a more comprehensive view of the country personality construct.

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