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An Empirical Study about the Influence of Country Personality and Product Involvement on Consumer's Purchase and Visit Intentions* **

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand the influence of country personality dimensions and product involvement on European consumers purchase and visit intentions, considering the Portuguese context. The increasing economic globalisation has resulted in the reducing of trade barriers between nations and the availability of more foreign products and services across borders. Therefore, the place associations of these products and services might be regarded as a potential competitive differentiator in their respective markets. Despite the proliferation of literature devoted to assessing the effects of country-of-origin, the symbolic dimension of a country's image remains understudied. A questionnaire measuring country personality dimensions, product involvement, and consumer's purchase and visit intention was passed on a sample of 335 European consumers. Country personality indeed matters both positively and negatively. Findings show that while assiduousness positively influences consumer's visit intentions, wickedness has a negative influence on consumer's purchase intentions. Findings also reveal that product involvement has a positive significant influence on consumer's purchase and visit intentions. On developing marketing strategies, international marketers and governmental decision-makers should consider product involvement attributes and specific country personality traits to provide the country's products with a competitive edge, as well as to promote the country as a travelling destination.

Keywords: Country Personality, Country Image, Product Involvement, Consumer Behaviour Intentions, International Marketing.

JEL Classification Code: M30, M31, M39.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, people have become more exposed to products from different countries, the act of visiting has become more accessible and, consequently, country images (CI) are formed in people's minds. According to the 2016 Annual Report of World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) tourism has experienced continued growth and diversification, becoming one of the main drivers of socioeconomic progress and a major player in international trade. In Portugal, tourism has been one of the main sources of income and according to the Banco de Portugal, in 2016, tourism revenue nearly reached 12.7 billion Euros, value that represents about 16.7% of the total Portuguese exports of goods and services, registering a

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significant increase of 10.7% in relation to the previous year (AICEP Portugal Global Portugal¹, 2017). Despite this extensive trade globalisation, consumers might experience foreign products but know little about its origin country (Lee *et al.*, 2016), or being familiar with a particular country but unaware of its most significant products. Song and Sung (2013) suggest that nations who are successfully branded might strengthen their political power and intensify international partnerships, recognising that nations with solid brands promote exports and internal investments as well as the stabilization of their currency. In order to characterise CI, d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) developed a scale to position countries on human traits and applied the concept of brand personality to nations defining it as "the mental representation of a country on dimensions that typically capture an individual's personality" (d'Astous and Boujbel, 2007, p. 233).

The purpose of this paper is to understand the influence of country personality dimensions and product involvement on European consumers purchasing and visiting intentions considering the Portuguese context. To achieve this purpose, a quantitative exploratory study was developed through the application of a questionnaire among 335 European consumers. The targeted consumers were chosen to enhance the managerial contributions of this study because European countries (e.g., Spain, Germany, Italy, and Netherland) are a major export market for several Portuguese products.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Country Personality: State-of-the-Art

The image concept has been a topic of great interest in several disciplines such as consumer behaviour, marketing, and psychology (Barich & Kotler, 1991). The authors describe image has been the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that an individual or a group form on an object. This object can assume different forms such as a product, brand, company, person or a country. It is important to analyse what kind of impressions (true or false, real or imagined) consumers establish with countries and their products (Papadopoulos, 1993). It seems easy for humans to attribute humanlike qualities to nonhuman entities and animals, and this tendency "to imbue the real or imagined behaviour of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions" is known as anthropomorphism (Epley *et al.*, 2007, p. 864). Anthropomorphism have been recognised as a significant marketing tool, applied in the consumer context for long (Triantos *et al.*, 2016). For instance, it can be present in

several elements of a product concept, its packaging and communication.

It is also extensively accepted that consumers establish different types of relationships with brands and one way for a brand to become an authentic partner is to be perceived as having a human character (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998). Literature shows the importance of analysing the association between personal image attributes and products, more specifically the evaluation of self-image/product-image congruity or, for short, the self-image congruity, since it has been used to explain and predict different aspects of consumer behaviour, providing managers with relevant information to support effective marketing decisions (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, consumers are expected to actively choose brands with personalities similar to their own personalities or aspirations.

Research developed on country branding suggests that consumers have the capacity to ascribe specific qualities and traits to countries, just as they do to brands. d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) describe the significance of using the personality perspective to the conceptualization of country beliefs, highlighting that the main reason is that the presentation of countries is often human-like. Among several features that describe this perspective, it is accepted that the "personality perspective fits well with the self-image congruence theory which proposes that people prefer objects whose psychological characteristics are congruent with their own psychological characteristics" (p. 232). Moreover, personality traits exist in people's minds and they make use of them to catalogue the environment in which they are included namely products and/or services. The authors identified agreeableness, wickedness, snobbism, assiduousness, conformity, and unobtrusiveness as the six dimensions of the country brand personality scale. Although some questions have been raised about the assessment of the direct effects of country personality traits on behavioural intentions (Burcio *et al.*, 2014), it is important to stress and in accordance with previous research, personal values have an important influence on consumer behaviour (Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002).

One purpose of this study is to identify which and to what extent the dimensions of country personality influence European consumers' behaviour. This study adopts d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) approach to evaluate the influence of country personality dimensions on consumer's purchasing and visiting intentions in the Portuguese context.

2.2. Behavioural Intentions towards National Products and Travelling

According to Ajzen (1991, p.181) "intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behaviour;

they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior". Extensive research has shown the influence of country image's impact on products/brands preferences and purchase intentions (for review see Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Regarding the attitudes towards the country, these studies assessed the cognitive, affective and conative components of CI, considering each dimension's influence separately or together. However, much less is known about the symbolic component of CI and this study aims to provide further knowledge about the influence of country personality dimensions on consumers purchasing intentions, considering the Portuguese context.

It is also important to notice the considerable amount of literature that has grown up around the theme of destination branding, as an approach to tourism destination promotion (Murphy *et al.*, 2007). Cai (2002) defines destination brand as "perceptions about a place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory" and to build a strong destination image it is important to identify which of these associations are relevant in the consumer's mind. As Sirgy and Su (2000) suggest when evaluating consumer's attitude towards a destination, it is possible to apply the same reasoning that has characterised consumer research about consumers' attitude toward a product, which means to analyse the influence that the matching of the product user image with the consumer's self-concept has on product purchase behaviour. If the self-congruity between the destination visitor image and the self-concept is high, it increases the possibility of the tourist developing a favourable idea of the chosen destination. However, far too little attention has been paid to the symbolic component of CI and this study aims to provide further knowledge about the influence of country personality dimensions on visiting intentions, considering the Portuguese context. Based on the above literature, the hypotheses for this study are inferred as follows:

- H1: Country personality influences consumers' product purchasing intentions towards Portuguese products.
 H1a, H1b, and H1c: (a) Agreeableness; (b) Assiduousness; and (c) Conformity has a significant positive influence on consumers' product purchasing intentions towards Portuguese products.
 H1d, H1e, and H1f: (d) Wickedness; (e) Snobbism; and Unobtrusiveness has a significant negative influence on consumers' product purchasing intentions towards Portuguese products.
- H2: Country personality influences consumers' visiting intentions to Portugal.
 H2a, H2b, and H2c: (a) Agreeableness; (b) Assiduousness; and (c) Conformity has a significant

positive influence on consumers' visiting intentions to Portugal.

H1d, H1e, and H1f: (d) Wickedness; (e) Snobbism; and Unobtrusiveness has a significant negative influence on consumers' visiting intentions to Portugal.

2.3. The Effect of Product Involvement in Consumer Behaviour

The impact of product involvement is a major area of interest within the field of country-of-origin (COO) image-product evaluation relationship. Day (1970, p. 10) defines product involvement as "the general level of interest in the object or the centrality of the object to the person's ego structure". According to Traylor (1981, p. 51), product involvement is defined as a "recognition that certain product classes may be more or less central to an individual's life, his attitudes about himself, his sense of identity, and his relationship to the rest of the world". The author also refers that the terms high-involvement product and low-involvement product are vague since no product is integrally ego involving or uninvolved. Moreover, the concept only applies to the consumers' response to the product not to the product itself (VonRiesen & Herndon, 2011).

Regarding the relationship between country-of-origin image and product involvement Josiassen *et al.* (2008) found that in circumstances where product involvement is considered a salient cue, the argument is that if the consumer is less involved, COO image will be more important since it is a singular salient cue for product evaluation. When product involvement is considered as a supplementary information, the argument is that "the more involved the consumer is with a product, the more motivation there is to seek additional product-related information in order to evaluate the product and, consequently, the more a consumer will make use of COO image as an additional product-related information factor" (Josiassen *et al.*, 2008, p. 435). Findings indicate that consumers are more likely to rely on COO image for their product evaluations in cases of low involvement. These results are extremely important to marketing practitioners, once the COO image might be a useful tool for driving consumers' product evaluations, quality perceptions of products and behavioural intentions to purchase (Josiassen *et al.*, 2008). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H3: Product involvement has a significantly positive influence on consumers' product purchasing and visiting intentions to Portugal.
 H3a: Product involvement has a significant positive influence on consumers' product purchasing intentions towards Portuguese products.

H3b: Product involvement has a significant positive influence on consumers' visiting intentions to Portugal.

3. Research Methodology

To understand how Portugal is perceived in terms of the country personality dimensions and which dimensions are associated with consumer's purchase and visit intentions and how product involvement influences consumers' product purchasing and visiting intentions in the domestic market, a questionnaire was distributed to assess national country image and product involvement. Country Personality was measured in a 24-item (personality traits) scale by d'Astous and Boujbel (2007). This scale has been applied in cross-national research to measure country image as a symbolic component (e.g. d'Astous & Li, 2009; Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar, 2015). Respondents were asked to think about the country as if it was a person and how they would describe him/her based on the attributes (adjectives) offered, through a seven-point scale (1 = "does not describe this country at all" and 7 = "describes this country perfectly"). To assure that respondents understood correctly the attributes, it was possible to hover the mouse over the adjectives to see the meaning.

To measure product involvement, four items from Zaichkowsky (1994) personal involvement inventory were used on a seven-point semantic differential scale, namely exciting or unexciting, means a lot to the respondent or means nothing to the respondent, appealing or unappealing and valuable or worthless. These items have been used in prior research (e.g. Baker *et al.*, 2002; Josiassen *et al.*, 2008; Lin & Chen, 2006). Purchase intentions were measured through three items of product evaluation from Laroche *et al.* (2005), in a three-point semantic differential scale (e.g., willing or not willing to buy Portuguese products). Visit intentions were measured with the three-item adopted from the scale of Um and Crompton (1990), in a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – Strongly disagree, to 7 – Strongly agree (e.g., I would like to visit Portugal or a trip to Portugal will be a lot of fun).

On average, respondents completed the questionnaire in 15 minutes. Data were collected cross-nationally through an online survey. A total of 527 questionnaires were recorded and a sample of 335 was retained after eliminating invalid responses. Regarding the demographic and socio-economic profile of the sample 61% female and the average age was 26 years (range: 18-66). Most representative nationalities were Spanish, German, Italian and Netherland. The most common professions in the sample were employees (23%) and students (74%). Country familiarity and country product

familiarity were evaluated and results show (M = 3.96, SD = 1.64 and M=3.33, SD=1.64, seven-point scale) respectively.

4. Empirical Results and Discussion

4.1. Personality Traits Associated to Portugal

To understand how Portugal is perceived in terms of the country personality traits by European consumers, descriptive statistics were calculated. Results showed that among the enquired European consumers, Portugal is best described by the following traits: "traditionalist" (M= 5.49, SD= 1.08), "bon-vivant" (M = 5.44, SD = 1.04) and "agreeable" (M = 5.41, SD = 1.01). On the other hand, "snobbish" (M = 2.36, SD = 1.39), "vulgar" (M = 2.51, SD = 1.26) and "offender" (M = 2.51, SD = 1.36) were identified as the personality traits that less describe Portugal.

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 23.0) was used to generate descriptive and inferential statistics, and the Analysis of Moments Structure (AMOS 23.0) software for conducting the structural equation modeling (SEM). An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted and the number of constructs and the underlying factor structure of the variables were identified. Concerning the country personality items, results showed that the original six-factor structure did not emerge. Therefore, an underlying five factor for country personality items was found (agreeableness $\alpha = .703$; wickedness/snobbishness $\alpha = .819$; assiduousness $\alpha = .691$; conformity $\alpha = .687$; unobtrusiveness $\alpha = .733$). The "neutral" item has saturated in one single factor and for this reason was excluded. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed acceptable reliability for this scale ($\alpha = .718$). Regarding product involvement, purchase and visit intentions, all the items loaded on the respective factor. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed good reliability for these scales (.908, .856 and .835, respectively).

The structural equation modeling was used to determine whether there is empirical support for the proposed factor structure and the causal relationship between variables of the measured model and the research hypotheses were tested. The proposed research model was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood estimation method to guarantee construct reliability and validity robustness regarding possible violations of normality (Chou & Bentler, 1993). After CFA purification, the initial list of 23 items was reduced to a final list of 18 items. The chi-square for this model was 558,209

(df = 320, p < .001). Given that the chi-square statistic is sensitive to sample size, additional fit indices were also assessed: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Tucker-Lewis Fit Index (TLI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The CFI, GFI, TLI and RMSEA of this model are .943, .894, .932, .047, respectively, resulting in an acceptable adjustment (Bryman & Cramer, 2009; Hair et al., 2010; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Convergent validity was evidenced by the significant standardized loadings (average loading size was .746). The AVE is above .50 except for agreeableness and wickedness/snobbism and the composite reliability estimates all exceeds .70, suggesting an acceptable convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was further investigated analysing if the square root of average variance extracted is greater than the construct correlation between any two

constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This comparison provided evidence for good discriminant validity of the eight constructs (see Table 1).

The results pertaining to the individual hypotheses are detailed below.

Hypothesis 1: results showed that wickedness/snobbism has a significant and negative influence consumers' purchasing intentions ($\beta = -.187$, $p < .05$), supporting hypothesis H1d and H1e.

Hypothesis 2: results showed that assiduousness has a significant and positive influence in consumers' visiting intentions ($\beta = .198$, $p < .01$), supporting H2b.

Hypothesis 3: results showed that product involvement has a significant and positive influence in consumers' purchasing and visiting intentions ($\beta = .503$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .252$, $p < .001$) respectively, supporting H3a and H3b (see Table 2).

Table 1. Composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE), and inter-construct correlations.

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Product	.912	.721	.849							
2. Agreeableness	.725	.470	.286	.686						
3. Wickedness/Snobbism	.847	.481	-.158	-.193	.694					
4. Assiduousness	.742	.497	.175	.154	-.213	.705				
5. Conformity	.754	.508	.159	.126	.060	.061	0.712			
6. Unobtrusiveness	.758	.524	-.101	-.190	.708	-.248	.066	.724		
7. Visit Intentions	.862	.680	.329	.180	-.262	.304	.112	-.278	.824	
8. Purchase Intentions	.860	.673	.567	.259	-.291	.193	.128	-.210	.328	.820

Note: **CR** = Composite reliability; **AVE** = Average Variance Extracted; Correlations are below the diagonal, square root of AVE (bold text).

Table 2. Structure model results

Path		Beta	t
Purch_Int	<--- Agreeableness	.064	1.016
Visit_Int	<--- Agreeableness	.028	.418
Purch_Int	<--- Wickedness/Snobbism	-.187	-2.059*
Visit_Int	<--- Wickedness/Snobbism	-.076	-.795
Purch_Int	<--- Assiduousness	.055	.926
Visit_Int	<--- Assiduousness	.198	2.997**
Purch_Int	<--- Conformity	.051	.871
Visit_Int	<--- Conformity	.073	1.175
Purch_Int	<--- Unobtrusiveness	-.007	-.076
Visit_Int	<--- Unobtrusiveness	-.149	-1.509
Purch_Int	<--- Product Involvement	.503	7.778***
Visit_Int	<--- Product Involvement	.252	4.023***
R ²	Purchase Intentions	.376	
R ²	Visit Intentions	.219	

Note: *p < .05, **p < .010, ***p < .001.

Results provided evidence for the predictive validity of country personality dimensions and product involvement. The R^2 indicates that 37.6% and 21.9% of the total variation of the purchase intentions towards Portuguese products and visit intentions may be explained by the country personality dimensions and product involvement.

The results of this study are in accordance with previous research (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; d'Astous & Li, 2009; Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar, 2015) and have strengthened our conviction that individuals form mental representations of countries and have no difficulty to assign them human personality traits. Even though the results of this study have not replicated the original dimensions of the country personality scale (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007), they are consistent with those of Búrcio *et al.* (2014). The factors agreeableness, assiduousness, conformity, and unobtrusiveness were in agreement with the results of the original scale. It is interesting to analyse these results in terms of cultural orientation, Portugal as a predominantly collectivist country (Hofstede, 2001) represents an interesting contribution to this field of knowledge since most of the findings come from individualistic cultures (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar, 2015).

The results regarding the influence of product involvement on consumers' product purchasing and visiting intentions to Portugal are consistent with previous results (Lin & Chen, 2006). Product involvement has shown to be the most important influence on consumers' product purchasing intentions towards Portuguese products. Results also show product involvement considerable influence over consumers' visiting intentions. Country personality and product involvement are two important concepts that help to explain a significant proportion of consumer purchasing and travelling choices.

5. Conclusions and Implication

The influence of country's image on the prosperity and development of a nation has been widely recognised. However, despite the number of empirical studies in literature devoted to assessing the effects of country-of-origin, the cumulative process and sources that shape a country's image remain understudied (Lopez & Balabanis, 2013). Therefore, the country personality scale contributes to fill this gap acting as a complement to the current CI measuring instruments. The current study makes important theoretical and managerial contributions. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends research on country personality (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; d'Astous & Li, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2013) by simultaneously analysing the influence of country personality dimensions and product involvement

on consumers purchase and visit intentions, considering the Portuguese context.

From a managerial perspective, this study contributes to answer what is the symbolic image of Portugal held by European consumers and which traits are most and less important describing Portugal. An accurate identification of consumers' association between the country personality dimensions and the product categories will support corporate strategic decision-making processes, since it will allow improving congruent conceptual country-product associations (Keller, 1993).

On developing marketing strategies, international marketers and national policymakers should consider product involvement attributes and specific country personality traits to provide the country's products a competitive edge and to promote the country as a travelling destination. Moreover, considering the importance of the assiduousness dimension of country personality on European consumers' visit intentions, destination management organizations should consider incorporating the following traits "organized", "rigorous" and "flourishing" in their destination image campaigns, to promote country's uniqueness.

Endnotes

¹ AICEP Portugal Global Portugal - Trade & Investment Agency is a government business entity, created in 2007, focused in encouraging the best foreign companies to invest in Portugal and contribute to the success of Portuguese companies abroad in their internationalization processes or export activities.

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