

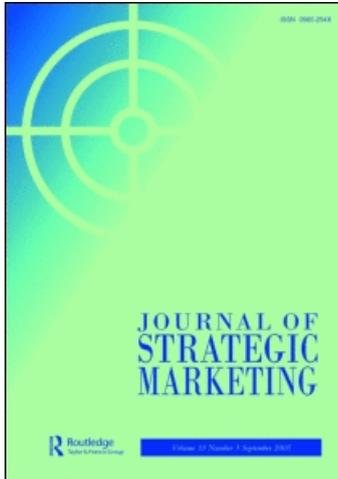
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Building country image through corporate image: exploring the factors that influence the image transfer

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Place branding scholars and practitioners increasingly highlight the influence that corporate image can exert on country image. Yet, there is remarkably little academic research on this image transfer. In this qualitative study, we identify factors that influence the transfer of associations from corporate images to country images through 13 in-depth interviews with place branding experts. Findings reveal six consumer-related (awareness of the corporate brand's country of origin; power of the corporate image; strength of the corporate brand–country association; brand image fit; brand image misfit; strength of industry–country association) and four company-related (extent to which the company plays up or down its country of origin; the company's international and market visibility; number of corporate brands operating in the market) factors that influence this image transfer. Our contribution to the place branding literature is 10 research propositions on the influence that these factors pose in the transfer of associations from corporate brands to countries. We provide country branding managers with guidelines in selecting corporate brands for country branding campaigns and discuss suggestions for future research.

Keywords: country image; corporate image; image transfer; place branding

Introduction

Governments around the globe are taking a proactive approach in country branding, to increase tourism, encourage inward investment and exports and gain political influence (Anholt, 2007; Baker & Ballington, 2001; Dinnie, 2008; Fan, 2006; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2008; van Ham, 2001). While traditionally tourism images have dominated country branding efforts, contemporary campaigns increasingly seek for additional images that can reinforce favourable associations with the country and endorse a distinctive image. Corporate brands can potentially offer such an untapped source of associations. Sweden, for instance, is working with Swedish companies such as IKEA and Volvo to create a common, positive link to Sweden and influence the image of Sweden in the rest of the world (www.brandsofsweden.se).

Commensurate with this growing interest, place branding studies highlight the role that companies can potentially play as brand ambassadors in influencing the image of their country of origin (Anholt, 2003; Cerviño, 2002; Dinnie, 2008; Olins, 1999; van Ham, 2001). Anholt (2003), for instance, argues that corporate brands can boost or even change the image of their countries. Olins (1999) and van Ham (2001) also see a country's

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companies as determinants of the essence of the country brand. Olins (1999, p. 13) even argues that in some cases corporate brands and countries almost define each other: 'Sony is Japan and Japan is Sony.'

Understanding the positive or negative influence that the image of corporate brands can exert on the image of their country of origin and the factors that are likely to affect this image transfer is, therefore, important for tourism boards, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and other organisations that drive country branding efforts (Anholt, 2007). Yet, a review of the literature reveals a shortage of empirical studies that actually explore the influence of corporate image on country image. Against this background, the aim of the present study is to enrich our understanding of this potential image transfer. In particular, we seek to explore the factors that influence the transfer of associations from corporate brands to their country of origin. To do this we combine knowledge from the image transfer literature with insights from an exploratory study with 13 place branding experts. Our contribution to the place branding literature is a series of research propositions on consumer-related and company-related factors that influence the transfer of associations from corporate brands to countries.

We start by clarifying the main constructs that are considered in this article, namely country image, corporate image and the image transfer process, and we develop our research question. Next we explain our methodology. We then merge key insights from the field interviews with conceptualisations in the literature and provide a synthesis that informs a series of research propositions that address our research question and direct future research. We conclude with a discussion that alerts managers to important implications on leveraging the image of corporate brands in country branding efforts.

Literature review

Country image

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of country image, a closer look at the literature reveals multiple conceptualisations of the construct. In line with Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono's (2004), Mossberg and Kleppe's (2005) and Roth and Diamantopoulos's (2009) classifications, three main approaches can be identified in conceptualising country image. First, in the country of origin literature country image has been traditionally conceptualised as consumers' perceptions of products that originate from a country (e.g. Nagashima, 1970; Narayana, 1981; Roth & Romeo, 1992). The second approach conceptualises country image and product image as distinct yet related constructs (e.g. Knight & Calantone, 2000), hence, calling for greater attention to the concept of country image itself (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 1984; Han, 1989). Finally, the third approach considers country image as a generic construct that is shaped by a wide range of factors and not only by the country's products (e.g. Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Within this latter approach, some scholars conceptualise country image as perceptions, mental pictures or impressions of a country located in the individual's mind (e.g. Desborde, 1990), others see country image as a cognitive structure (e.g. Martin & Eroglu, 1993), while some adopt a broader perspective and acknowledge not only a cognitive but also an affective component within the country image construct (Askegaard & Ger, 1997; Verlegh, 2001). Mirroring these latter writings, we adopt Verlegh's (2001, p. 25) definition of country image as 'a mental network of affective and cognitive associations connected to the country'. This definition takes an associative network view, whereby country image consists of nodes linked together in consumers' memory network with regard to a specific country (Anderson, 1983; Collins & Loftus, 1975). These nodes or associations are formed through a country's economic, political and technological conditions, historical events, culture and traditions,

products and companies (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; van Ham, 2001). Corporate brands are increasingly acknowledged as an important, yet underutilised source of associations that can influence country images (Anholt, 2003; Dinnie, 2008).

Corporate image as an influencing factor

The marketing literature conceptualises corporate image mainly from the viewpoint of the receiver (Grünig, 1993), that is, images exist in the minds of individuals and, hence, are not a possession of the company itself (Brown, 1998; Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001). A review of extant definitions of corporate image reveals three groups: (1) definitions that see corporate image as perceptions, mental pictures or impressions of an organisation that reside in the mind of individuals (e.g. Balmer, 1995); (2) definitions of corporate image at the cognitive level (e.g. Dowling, 2004); and (3) definitions that view beliefs and feelings as the components of the corporate image construct (e.g. Dowling, 1986). The corporate image construct is, hence, increasingly conceptualised as a cognitive and affective structure, a mental network of affective and cognitive associations connected to the company (Bernstein, 1984; Dowling, 1986; Keller, 1993; van Riel, 1995). Brown and Dacin (1997, p. 69) elaborate that these associations:

include perceptions, inferences, and beliefs about a company; a person's knowledge of his or her prior behaviours with respect to the company; information about the company's prior actions; moods and emotions experienced by the person with respect to the company; and overall and specific evaluations of the company and its perceived attributes.

Van Riel (1995) argues that over a period of time, these form a mosaic of impressions, which shape the corporate image.

Although practitioners have increasingly acknowledged the influence that corporate brands can exert on the image of their country of origin (Anholt, 2003, 2005), academic writings on this influence are scarce. Dowling (2001) is one of the first branding scholars to conceptualise this influence. In his network of images framework, Dowling (1994) suggests that corporate image is not only influenced by country image; corporate image also influences country image. To illustrate this, Dowling (1994, p. 147) writes: 'On a grand scale, brand names such as Apple, Boeing, Coca-Cola, Disney, Ford, IBM, Kodak, Levis, McDonald's and Xerox have helped shape the image of the USA.' This perspective has been mirrored by recent writings in the place branding literature. Anholt (2005), Dinnie (2008), Dinnie, Hogg and Shaw (2002, 2003, 2006), Olins (1999) and van Ham (2001) all highlight corporate brands as sources of associations that can shape country images. Anholt (2005) identifies commercial brands as key communication tools in the diffusion of a country brand, particularly for developing countries. For instance, he discusses the influence that Samsung and Daewoo have had on enhancing the image of Korea. Dinnie (2008) similarly presents branded exports as communicators of country brands. Corporate brands have been portrayed as the most perceptible country-brand ambassadors (van Ham, 2001) and a key determinant of the essence of the country brand (Dinnie, 2008). Yet, to date, place branding literature reveals little understanding on the influence of corporate image on country image and the factors that may influence the transfer of associations from a corporate brand to its country of origin.

The image transfer

The associative network theory sees memory as a network of concepts (nodes) that are interconnected by links (Anderson, 1983; Collins & Loftus, 1975). Anderson (1983)

explains that one set of nodes (for instance, related to a corporate brand), can induce thinking about other nodes (for instance, related to the firm's country of origin). This process, known as the spreading activation process, predicts that the retrieval of the informational nodes of the interconnected network 'is performed by spreading activation throughout the network' (Anderson, 1983, p. 261). The strength of the association in a consumer's mind between two nodes in the network determines the likelihood of spreading activation, that is, that activation of one node will activate the other and, consequently, the image transfer (de Groot, 1989). Therefore, the stronger the linkage between the two nodes in the minds of individuals, the greater the potential transfer of associations (Fazio, 1995). Moreover, the strength of the connection between the two nodes and, hence, the potential image transfer from one to another is determined by the perceived similarity between the two entities (Fazio, 1989). Schema theory postulates that the level of congruence or fit between new information about an entity and the existing cognitive structure about that entity will influence the transfer of associations (Fiske, 1982). The greater the perceived fit, similarity or congruence between two entities, the greater the potential image transfer (Fiske & Taylor, 1984) and the more likely it is that existing associations will be reinforced (Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997). On the contrary, theories of stereotypic belief change predict that when there is no fit or congruency, a change in existing associations about an entity may be triggered (Weber & Crocker, 1983).

No area has been more concerned with the implications of image transfer than marketing (Martin & Stewart, 2001). Marketing scholars have studied image transfer in areas such as brand extension (e.g. Bhat & Reddy, 2001; Grime, Diamantopoulos, & Smith, 2002; Salinas & Perez, 2009), sponsorship (e.g. Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Smith, 2004) and celebrity endorsement (e.g. Lynch & Schuler, 1994). Within such studies, emphasis has been placed on understanding factors that influence the image transfer between an extension and a parent brand, an event and a brand or an endorser and a brand. For instance, in his review of literature on image transfer in sponsorship, Smith (2004) identifies various consumer-related and company-related factors that influence image transfer. Consumer-related factors include consumers' level of knowledge of the brands involved in the sponsorship and the perceived fit between a sponsor and an event, while other factors relate to the sponsored property itself (e.g. the number of sponsorships, the duration of the sponsorship). In the brand extension literature, perceived similarity between the parent brand and its extension is a factor often described as brand image fit, which is also depicted to influence the image transfer process (Bhat & Reddy, 2001; Grime et al., 2002; Martin & Stewart, 2001). Similarly, in the celebrity endorsement literature congruence in advertisements between spokesperson characteristics and product attributes has been found to influence the image transfer process (Lynch & Schuler, 1994).

Image transfer research provides a theoretical framework to understand the potential transfer of associations from corporate brands to countries in the minds of consumers. Drawing on image transfer literature, we can argue that if a corporate brand becomes linked to its country of origin in the consumer's mind, associations connected to the company may be carried over to the country. Yet extant knowledge on this image transfer is limited. This study fills this void by exploring the factors that influence the potential transfer of associations from corporate brands to their country of origin. We seek to produce a series of research propositions on this image transfer informed by key insights from interviews with place branding experts merged with relevant conceptualisations in the literature. The following section details our methodology.

Research methodology

Given the relatively little prior empirical research in place branding (Dinnie, 2008), an exploratory research design was chosen (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005). A growing body of research applies qualitative, interpretative approaches to marketing-related phenomena for generating depth of understanding when little is known (e.g. de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Quinn, 2009; Tajeddini & Trueman, 2008). This approach was deemed the most appropriate for two reasons. First, our current understanding of factors that may influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin is relatively weak (van Ham, 2001). Therefore, a qualitative method that heavily relies on exploration is more appropriate to study this phenomenon in contrast to approaches that rely on deductive reasoning (Deshpande, 1983). Second, we feel that a better understanding of the complex issues related to the influence of corporate image on country image can be obtained by directly talking to consultants with expertise in place branding.

Given the nature of our study, the most appropriate approach was to conduct semi-structured interviews (Mitchell, 1994). Specifically, in-depth elite interviews (Dexter, 1970) with consultants with expertise in place branding constituted our main data source. Purposive sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) allowed the selection of interviewees based on their extensive knowledge to the research area under investigation. We used the Nexis UK database to identify branding consultancies which have been featured for their place branding projects and which are also based in the UK so that the desired access can be achieved. Our first search, by using the key words place branding generated an initial list of 267 articles. Arising from this, we developed a list of 19 consultancies. The next step aimed at identifying knowledgeable informants. We found the contact details of 24 key informants and requested their participation in our study. Six declined the interview request and five initially expressed an interest but, due to unforeseen changes in their workload, could not be interviewed, resulting in a final sample of 13 place branding experts in 11 consultancies (Table 1 depicts the informants, their positions and selected characteristics of their respective organisations). The 13 informants were founders, chairmen, partners, directors/heads or senior consultants in brand consultancies (average age 48 years; average tenure in the industry 22.6 years).

Drawing on recommendations offered by Thomas (1993), we prepared appropriate emails when contacting the experts, submitted sample questions prior to the interviews, arranged convenient times and type of interview (e.g. face-to-face or telephone interview) and explained the ground rules of the interview in advance. The interviews were discovery-oriented (Deshpande, 1983), aimed at obtaining insights into: (a) the factors that shape the image of a country; (b) moving to more specific questions to uncover informants' interpretations of the influence of corporate image on country image and the factors that may affect the image transfer. Of the 13 interviews, nine were conducted face-to-face at the companies' offices and four were undertaken by phone (two interviews were conducted by phone since these informants were managing consulting projects abroad (Spain and Netherlands) and two preferred this method due to unprecedented work commitments). All interviews were tape recorded and verbatim transcribed. Given our inductive research question, we encouraged informants to wander freely in their responses (asked for examples to illustrate their points) and clarified ambiguities to insure that no interviewer-induced bias crept in (McCracken, 1988). To motivate the informants further to provide accurate data, we promised and ensured confidentiality (Huber & Power, 1985). Theoretical saturation was achieved as the responses did not dispute existing themes or reveal new insights on the matter (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Table 1. Profile of informants.

Key informant's role	Organisation descriptors	Year founded	Number of employees	Number of offices	Fee income	Illustrative projects
(1) Consultant	Place Branding Consultancy	1996	1	1	<i>Not disclosed</i>	Place branding consulting for 39 countries (e.g. China, Sweden, Switzerland)
(2) Founder and Chairman	Branding Consultancy A	1982	250	8	£9,143,000 (2007)	Place branding consulting for the state of Qatar
(3) Founding Partner	Branding Consultancy B	2003	3	2	<i>Not disclosed</i>	Projects for the British Council, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
(4) Founder	Place Branding Consultancy	2003	5	2	<i>Not disclosed</i>	Place branding projects for Malaysia and Toronto
(5) Director	Branding Consultancy C	1986	42	1	£6,000,000 (2008)	Image of Poland in the UK
(6) Director	Branding Consultancy D	1976	77	1	£11,134,251 (2007)	Projects for Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong and China
(7) Senior Partner	Branding Consultancy E	1943	150	6	<i>Not disclosed</i>	Project for New York
(8) Senior Partner	Branding Consultancy F	2001	54	6	£2,469,141 (2008)	Branding projects for Brazil, Vietnam, visit London, Poland
(9) Head of Place Branding	Branding Consultancy G	1973	100	6	£6,400,000 (2008)	A new brand for Belfast
(10) CEO	Branding Consultancy H	1969	1000	4	£45,000,000 (2008)	Place branding projects (UK)
(11) Chairman	Branding Consultancy I	1991	150	1	£17,680,000 (2008)	Project for UK Trade and Investment, the government body for promoting exports

With the fieldwork completed, we established a requisite distance in order to complete the data analysis. Data analysis was aimed at identifying factors that influence the image transfer from corporate brands to their country of origin. Our analysis followed an iterative process moving back and forth between the emerging factors, extant literature and our growing body of data. This analysis fell into two stages. First, we examined all interview transcripts with the aim to identify patterns and variance in descriptions of the factors. Content analysis of the responses to particular questions was carried out by following procedures suggested by Krippendorff (1980). We highlighted these sections in the transcript and assigned codes in the margin of the text. To categorise the raw data further, we applied techniques advocated by van Maanen (1979). Specifically, our conceptual coding entailed using in-vivo codes or a simple, descriptive phrase when an in-vivo code was not available (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This offered general insights into factors that influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin as described by informants. We focused the analysis on factors that were either indicated by the majority of informants (strong evidence) or repeatedly indicated by several informants (moderate evidence).

Applying approaches recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) helped ensure the integrity of our data. We catalogued data and assessed the reliability of the generated codes by involving a second coder with considerable qualitative research experience. Using standardised coding instructions, the second coder examined a random sample of four interviews. Then we compared codings of factors that may influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin. This resulted in an intercoder agreement of $k=0.79$ (Cohen, 1960). Disagreements were resolved through extensive discussions between the authors and the second coder.

Findings

Informants highlighted the link between corporate image and country image as a two-way relationship, mirroring extant studies in the place branding literature (Anholt, 2005; Olins, 1999; van Ham, 2001). The founding partner of branding consultancy B, for instance, noted: 'There is a dual effect; it is the company impacting on the image of the country but also the culture of the country impacts on the way people see the organisation' (Interviewee 3). Focusing on the potential image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin, informants discussed that this can be positive or negative, depending on the associations transferred. As explained by the founder of a place branding consultancy, 'you can see that, in cases like Nokia, for instance in Finland, in a positive sense. In a negative sense, Enron in the US, for instance, had a very negative effect' (Interviewee 4). We now present the consumer-related and company-related factors that influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin as depicted in the interviews.

Consumer-related factors

Informants revealed six consumer-related factors that influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin: (1) awareness of the corporate brand's country of origin; (2) power of the corporate brand image; (3) strength of the corporate brand-country association in the consumer's mind; (4) brand image fit; (5) brand image misfit; and (6) strength of the industry-country association in the consumer's mind. Table 2 provides an overview of the factors, including strength of evidence and illustrative quotes.

Table 2. Consumer-related factors.

Consumer-related factors	Strength of evidence	Illustrative quotes
Awareness of the corporate brand's country of origin	Strong	'Zara has probably had a positive effect on the image of Spain for being overseas when people know where it comes from' (Interviewee 2)
Power of the corporate brand image	Strong	'Obviously the stronger the brand, the stronger the influence' (Interviewee 1)
Strength of the corporate brand-country association in consumer's mind	Moderate	'One factor is the level of association between the corporation and the country in the mind of consumers' (Interviewee 5)
Brand image fit	Moderate	'When there is a resonance between the country image and the corporate image then the effect of one on the other is stronger. If something that the company does, tells us something we may already know about the country, then that amplifies our country image. Company image can have a reinforcing effect on country image more easily than it can have an eroding effect on country image. Let's think of a concrete example, if we know that Camper is a Spanish brand, and we have a perception of Spain as a sort of stylist place, then we see Camper from Spain and it reinforces our idea of Spain as a stylist place' (Interviewee 9)
Brand image misfit	Moderate	'Nokia is positively impacting the image of Finland, making it seem more high-tech because I don't think before the event of the mobile phones, Scandinavia generally was seen as being high-tech at all, it was seen as a place that produced a bit of oil and fish and wood . . . Volvo and Saab have a very positive impact on Sweden, they built safety and reliability into real national brand values . . . I am not sure people thought Swedish cars were safe and reliable before they started to drive Volvos. Before that Sweden was probably ABBA . . . There are some companies that have had a real big impact on the country shifting perceptions, whether it is Nokia in terms of Finland or Swedish cars, Japanese cars, they changed things, people didn't think that those countries can do things like that' (Interviewee 7)
Strength of the industry-country association in the consumer's mind	Moderate	'The transfer of association between the company and the country will be hindered or facilitated by a whole list of things: if the products and services are culturally associated with that country so perfumes from France or whisky from Scotland or even automobiles from Germany so there is a cultural association' (Interviewee 13)

Note: Strong: indicated by the majority of informants; moderate: indicated by several informants.

The majority of informants identified awareness of the corporate brand's country of origin as a key factor for associations to be carried over from the corporate brand to the country. A director of branding explained that unless consumers are aware of the country of origin, the image transfer cannot take place:

Are people aware that the corporation comes from that country? Because unless they are aware of that, then how can they make the transfer of any knowledge or association? If you are in Romania, do you know that Vodafone is a British company? You may have associations with Vodafone but unless you know that Vodafone is a British company, any positive

associations that Vodafone may have the potential to transfer to the UK won't happen unless you know that that is the case. (Interviewee 5)

Across the interviews, informants also stressed that the image transfer will be stronger when the corporate brand has a powerful image in the eyes of the consumer. According to a place branding consultant:

The strong brand will have a strong influence and the weak brand will have a weaker influence. The only twist on that really is that you've got to bear in mind the inferences, if you like, that exist between the corporate brand and the country brand, so the maximum impact will be achieved by a strong brand whose values are 100% coherent with the nation brand. (Interviewee 1)

Several informants also commented on the role that the strength of the corporate brand–country connection in the consumer's mind plays in determining the image transfer. The stronger the linkage, the more likely the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country. A CEO of a branding consultancy provided several examples to illustrate this factor:

If you ask people on the street about German brands, they will talk to you about automobile brands like Mercedes or VW or Audi, they will talk to you about technology brands like Siemens, they will talk to you about energy but they will not talk to you about software, because Germany is about hardware and yet one of the largest software companies is German, SAP; they will not talk to you about fashion, yet Hugo Boss is a German brand; they will not talk to you about financial services, although some of the most important financial service companies in Europe like Deutsche Bank are German. (Interviewee 10)

The place branding experts also discussed the degree of similarity between the corporate image and the country image as a key factor. If these are regarded as similar by the consumer, corporate image is likely to reinforce existing associations with the country of origin. A director of a branding consultancy explained:

The fact that Microsoft and a number of other companies come out of part of America helps strengthen the image as being a leader of innovation and technology . . . All you are doing at that point is reinforcing, and therefore a reinforcement is likely to be easier because it is building on existing perceptions. (Interviewee 5)

However, if the corporate image is considered as inconsistent with the country image, it may trigger a modification of associations with the country of origin, by either enhancing or diluting country beliefs and affect, and/or a creation of new associations. The head of a place branding consultancy provided some interesting examples:

If something that the company does disagrees with what we think we know about the country, then it probably tends to discount it. It takes a while. If we see a lot of that, then we change our image of the country. Whereas we don't think of Spain perhaps as a technological, savvy place, it is a technological and savvy place but it is not one of the primary associations people have with Spain the way it may be with Germany or Japan or California so when we find out that certain companies, like Indra is Spanish and is involved in technology, then we don't really let that affect our image of the country because it doesn't reinforce our preconceptions. After a longer period . . . we will update our country image based on the information provided by the company image. (Interviewee 9)

Similarly, a director of a branding consultancy highlighted this factor using the example of Korea:

Samsung is having a positive effect on Korea. The existing perceptions of Korea particularly in the West were very mixed and very punished by political and historical conflicts in that area, it was also seen as a very under-developed area so having a brand that emerged, that is producing leading technologies, challenges the existing perceptions and makes people reassess that country in a more positive way. (Interviewee 5)

Finally, several place branding experts noted that the image transfer is affected by the strength of the connection in the mind of the consumer between the industry in which the company operates and the country of origin. Experts indicated that the stronger this linkage, the more likely it is for associations to be transferred from the corporate brand to the country of origin:

The product areas and the sort of brands that are associated with the country can also have an effect on perceptions of the country. So Germany and Japan are very largely associated with modernity, technology, competence and so on and so forth, because of the strong association with their technology brands. Italy and France both have soft images, they are not strong in technology; that is partly because the famous brands that come from these countries are soft style brands and it is very difficult to fight against that, it is a sort of cliché. (Interviewee 1)

Company-related factors

Place branding experts also revealed three company-related factors, which influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin. These include: (1) the extent to which the company plays up or down its country of origin; (2) the company's international visibility; (3) the company's market visibility; and (4) the number of corporate brands from the country that operate in the market. Table 3 provides an overview of these factors including strength of evidence and illustrative quotes.

The majority of informants suggested that if the corporate brand plays up its country of origin, it is more likely to trigger a transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin. Experts argued that when this is evident, corporate image will have a stronger influence on country image than in cases where companies place less emphasis on linking their brand to the country of origin. One of the experts illustrated this:

It depends on how closely linked the brands are to each other. The brands that really, actually carry a bit of the national brand with them, of course they have a stronger influence. If we look at UBS, it is very clearly closely linked to Switzerland, and therefore it has an effect. IKEA, is very closely linked to Sweden, it has an effect. Coca Cola is closely linked to the US brand, it has an effect as well. So the closer the brands are linked to their national brands, the more influence they will have... It is really about carrying the values of the place and about demonstrating those either through the actions that you take, the events you organise, the design you make. (Interviewee 4)

Visibility (within a specific market and at the international level) was also highlighted as key in influencing the image transfer from the corporate brand to its country of origin. Informants drew attention to the fact that the more visible the corporate brand, the more it is likely that corporate image will influence country image. We find this in the following comments:

If the brand is not present internationally, it is going to have limited power, so it probably needs to be present in the foreign markets; that it is going to influence and be associated with the country. (Interviewee 7)

I think the more visible the company is, the greater the effect it can have on country image. (Interviewee 9)

Yet, a place branding consultant warned that international visibility could, in some cases, also hinder the transfer of associations. When companies become too global, there might be a danger that their country of origin will become diluted:

That's a double edged sword in a way because if the corporation is highly internationalised, then it has a broader influence and the impact is more target-oriented, but at the same time the more internationalised it is, the more likely it is that its country of origin becomes diluted... This is

Table 3. Company-related factors.

Company-related factors	Strength of evidence	Illustrative quotes
Play up/down the country of origin	Strong	'It depends on how that company has decided to market or position the brand so if they are absolutely linked to the country, then there is going to be a much greater effect than if they de-position themselves from the country and elevate themselves more as a kind of global type . . . There are ways in which you can either play up or play down your relationship. For example, British Airways, there are lots of kinds of clues across the journey process that at the very basic level British is in the name. It is something that BA has chosen to retain . . . British Airways keeps its origin in the name, the union flag on its tail because that is a key part of the corporate identity. At the most elemental level, there is a red, white, blue pallet to what is done, so you cannot take the core DNA of Britishness' (Interviewee 2)
International visibility	Strong	'Scale is an important factor. It is much more likely that a company that is available in 500 countries, can have a chance to have an impact on each of those countries than if the brand is only available in four countries, if you want to shift perceptions of that country globally' (Interviewee 5)
Market visibility	Strong	'If you have a large market share it's better than having a small market share. Market penetration, the presence in the media all that influence. Obviously market visibility helps' (Interviewee 10)
Number of corporate brands	Moderate	'There are some countries for which the image of certain corporations is really of fundamental importance to the image of the country and I suppose the most obvious examples are Japan, Germany, the USA, France, Italy, Switzerland and Sweden. Those countries, it is quite difficult to imagine what their image would be without including the factor of the famous brands. Germany images are composed to a great degree of people's perceptions of these automotive engineering technology brands in almost every sector, and Italy and France, very hard to imagine what their images will be if they won't be their fashionable lifestyle and food brands. For the majority of other countries that don't have so many famous global brands, they have a much weaker influence on the country' (Interviewee 1)

Note: Strong: indicated by the majority of informants; moderate: indicated by several informants.

classic, as the company becomes more global, its country of origin in fact becomes diluted. There are some examples of companies that can become highly internationalised, very global, very successful and still retain a very, very strong country of origin effect like airlines. (Interviewee 1)

Finally, informants argued that when many corporate brands from the same country operate in a market, the influence of corporate image on the image of the country of origin is likely to be stronger. In the words of a senior partner:

If there is a density of corporations in a particular area, that certainly helps. The emergence of a number of Japanese car brands in around the same time at the international level certainly helps perceptions. (Interviewee 7)

Discussion and research propositions

We now merge the aforementioned findings on consumer-related and company-related factors that influence the image transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin

with extant image transfer, branding and country of origin literature to provide a synthesis that informs a series of research propositions vis-a-vis our research question. Starting with consumer-related factors, our findings highlight that awareness and knowledge of the country of origin are a key condition for associations to transfer from a corporate brand to its country of origin. Smith (2004) also identifies this condition in his framework of image transfer in sponsorship. The country of origin literature similarly highlights the importance of this condition for associations to be transferred from the country of origin to products (Paswan & Sharma, 2004; Samiee, 1994). Our first proposition is, therefore, as follows:

P1: If individuals are not aware of the corporate brand's country of origin, no associations are carried over from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Our findings also suggest that the more powerful a consumer perceives the corporate image, the stronger the influence on country image. Studying image transfer in sponsorship, Smith (2004) shows that the power of the sponsored brand image (defined in terms of favourability, strength and uniqueness) influences the potential image transfer. Our second proposition, therefore, is as follows:

P2: The more powerful the corporate brand image, the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

In this study we conceptualised the transfer of associations between a corporate brand and a country adopting an associative network approach (Anderson, 1983; Collins & Loftus, 1975). The strength of the association in the consumer's mind between two nodes in the network determines the likelihood that activation of one node will activate the other (de Groot, 1989). In line with such studies, the findings reveal that the image transfer is affected by the extent to which the two nodes, that is, the corporate brand and the country, are closely linked in the mind of the consumer. The degree of association of a corporate brand with its country of origin is largely determined by the branding strategy of the company (Keller, 1993). Similar to Keller (2008), place branding experts in our exploratory study argued that the stronger this linkage, the greater the transfer of associations. This gives rise to the third proposition:

P3: The strength of the corporate brand-country of origin association in the consumer's mind determines the image transfer. The stronger the linkage, the more likely the image transfer from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Findings also reveal that the strength of the connection in the consumer's mind between a corporate brand and the country of origin and, consequently, the transfer of beliefs and affect from one to the other, are also determined by the perceived similarity between the two entities. This mirrors studies in co-branding, celebrity endorsement, sponsorship and brand extension, which have shown that the greater the perceived fit, match-up, similarity or congruence between two entities, the greater the potential image transfer (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Bhat & Reddy, 2001; Dacin & Smith, 1994; Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Smith, 2004). The level of image fit affects not only the likelihood of image transfer, as indicated earlier, but also the potential degree of change in beliefs and affect towards a country (Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984). The higher the degree of congruence between a corporate image and a country image, the more likely that the country associations will remain essentially unchanged (Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997). We, therefore, propose the following:

P4: The degree of fit between the corporate image and the country image affects the level of transfer of corporate brand associations and the type of effect that corporate image has on country image. If they are consistent with each other, corporate image mainly reinforces existing country associations.

On the contrary, findings highlight that country image may be revised in the presence of corporate associations that are inconsistent with country associations. Theories of stereotypic belief change support this (Crocker, Fiske, & Taylor, 1984). Weber and Crocker (1983), for instance, explain that beliefs and affect can change in response to new incongruent information through a gradual change, a radical change and/or by creating subcategories to accommodate the incongruent information. Crocker et al. (1984) note, however, that associations about familiar brands are often difficult to change. The fifth proposition is, therefore, as follows:

P5: If the corporate image is inconsistent with the country image, it may involve a modification of country associations by either enhancing or diluting country beliefs and/or affect. It may also involve the creation of new country associations.

In addition to the strength of the linkage between the corporate brand and the country, experts also noted that the transfer of associations between a corporate brand and a country is often hindered or facilitated by the strength of the association between the industry that a company operates in and the country in the consumer's mind. Studies within the country of origin literature have also acknowledged that in many cases consumers associate countries with specific products (Hong & Wyer, 1989; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 1984; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). For instance, Germany is associated with cars, and Japan with cameras (Hamzaoui & Merunka, 2006). Shimp, Samiee, and Madden's (1993) empirical study shows that consumers' cognitive structures of products made in specific countries, typically consist of specific products and/or brands linked to the country (for example, France is associated with wines). We, therefore, offer the following proposition:

P6: The stronger the association between the industry of a company and the country of origin in the consumer's mind, the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Turning our attention to company-related factors, our findings highlight that when a corporate brand plays up its country of origin, it is more likely to elicit a transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin. A company can establish a link with its country of origin by conveying its provenance via its corporate visual identity and corporate communication. Corporate visual identity refers to the corporate name, logotype or symbol, typography and colour (Melewar & Bains, 2002). The country of origin of a corporate brand can be communicated directly or indirectly through the corporate brand name, by incorporating symbols of the country of origin (the national flag, landmarks) or can be embedded in the slogan and/or images of corporate advertisements (Papadopoulos, 1993). Proposition 7 is, therefore, as follows:

P7: The more the corporate brand plays up its country of origin, the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Our findings also reveal that the company's visibility (within a specific market and at the international level) influences the image transfer from the corporate brand to its country of origin. According to Keller (1993), brand awareness refers to the strength of the brand node in memory, which is influenced by the frequency of exposure (Anderson, 1983). High frequency of exposure is achieved by highly visible brands. Market share, distribution intensity, advertising expenditure and presence in the media (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008) demonstrate visibility within a specific market. The international visibility of the firm, that is, the number of countries a corporation is operating in, also influences the frequency of exposure to the brand. Considering that the node strength affects 'the amount of activation it can emit into the network' (Anderson, 1983, p. 266), we develop the following propositions:

P8: The more visible the corporate brand is within a specific market the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

P9: The more visible the corporate brand is at the international level the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Lastly, our findings suggest that when many corporate brands from the same country operate in a market, the influence of corporate image on country image is likely to be stronger. Diez Nicolas et al. (2003) offer a similar observation when they conclude that the internationalisation of many Spanish companies has been one of the key factors to improve the country's image. In this context the following hypothesis is suggested:

P10: The higher the number of corporate brands from a country operating in a market, the more likely is the transfer of associations from the corporate brand to the country of origin.

Managerial implications

This research offers important managerial insights for regional offices, embassies, promotional organisations and private associations involved in country branding. Corporate brands are currently underutilised assets in country branding campaigns. Yet, associating countries with corporate brands in country branding campaigns may foster a transfer of favourable associations that can strengthen a country's image. We urge practitioners to leverage associations with corporate brands that: play up their country of origin in their corporate visual identity and corporate communication; have a powerful corporate image; operate in industries which have a strong association with the country of origin; have high national and international visibility; and, have an image that reinforces desired country associations. Practitioners involved in country branding need to consider carefully and monitor these factors in the process of selecting corporate brands that could be used in promoting the image of a country.

Conclusions and further research

This study depicts our effort to build a foundation for place branding scholars that seek to examine empirically the influence of corporate image on country image. Our research provides a fresh insight into consumer-related and company-related factors that may influence the image transfer from corporate brands to their country of origin. These have informed the development of 10 propositions that offer an agenda for future studies. Yet, further research is needed in several areas. Firstly, scholars can focus on developing suitable measures and empirically test our propositions against different countries and corporate brands through large-scale surveys with consumers in different international markets. Longitudinal studies may also trace how the transfer of associations from corporate brands to countries may change over time. Moreover, one limitation of our study is that place branding experts focused on consumers when conceptualising the transfer of associations from corporate image to country image. While country image has been predominantly studied from a consumer perspective (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), we acknowledge that country branding efforts seek to engage multiple stakeholders (Florek, 2005; Pike, 2004). Further in-depth qualitative exploration could therefore aim to understand the influence of corporate image on country image and the factors that influence this image transfer from the perspective of other stakeholders, for example business people who evaluate countries as destinations for business. Quantitative research can then focus on assessing the relative impact of corporate image on country image against other determinants of country image for different stakeholder groups.

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