

# **Exploring Antecedents of Familiarity and Attitudes toward Nation Brand**

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## **Introduction**

Since international stages have rapidly changed many countries have focused their efforts on finding a new paradigm to achieve sustainable development and to secure global peace. During this transitional period, many countries which heavily relied on hard power became on the process of decay, soft power has arisen to be the core competitive value in international competitions (Nye 2005). Particularly, the effects of well-managed national image received more attentions. Now more countries notice national brand management to effectively manage their national images, which were developed on the basis of branding theories and knowledge. Today, many countries face global competitions to attract more foreign capital, tourists, and talented human resources, and to expand export markets of their own products (Kotler and Gertner 2002). This led global attention and efforts toward branding activities to systematically manage their own national images.

Despite the global trends and importance of national branding, many scholars raised concerns about the vulnerability of theoretical foundation. According to Gertner's review of 212 articles related to issues of place marketing and place branding (2011), most of the articles were subjective and anecdotal neglecting theoretical backgrounds and model or hypothesis which can be verified. Therefore, this research discusses the process of building a brand image and construal level theory as an effort to develop a theoretical structure of nation branding management.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **(1) National Image & Nation Brand**

A national image carries a country's attractiveness and credibility serving as a crucial part of soft power as well as global competitiveness. Therefore, an issue of how to increase the value of a country through effective national image management has weighed more within the international relations.

As endorser brand a nation serves as influencers of all nation-related factors. It can greatly

affect evaluation of a product made in a country and attitude towards the country when it comes to international politics, diplomacy, cultural exchanges, trades, tourists and investment planning (Anholt 2003). A country has an image like a brand, and whether it is positive or negative, it is critical to pay attentions to national images. Whether it is created naturally by media, travel, business experience, or product purchase experience, these national images encompasses overall evaluation, and knowledge of differences in evaluation depending on the route can enable us to build strategic plan.

Consumers achieve corporate activities and other information to learn, access, and purchase branding products. Brand experience is distinguished based on intervention of a vehicle. Customers might perceive different attributes of experience strongly depending on the degree of brand experience or direct and indirect experience. It is also possible to apply this distinction of brand experience to national brand.

## **(2) Route to Establish National Image**

A national brand image is a type of prejudice and it can be irrelevant to the present condition of the nation. This national brand image can be built upon misunderstanding, prejudice, cultural difference, and untimely events that are no more operative and influential. However, people still build up an image of a nation based on biased experience, because it takes so many times or it is not often likely to have enough to build the right national image (Anholt 2003). Therefore, a national brand image establishes through a few routes, and identifying the route that influences national brand image will possibly suggest directions for effective management for a national brand image.

Despite the lack of discussion in types of nation brand experience, Moffitt (1994) suggested three levels of route for the process of forming a global brand image, which are relational routes such as systematic, societal, and personal relationship, and the text route indicating mass media contents, and personal experience. Considering limitations of access to information of a foreign brand, this result can be applicable as a theoretical perspective on the route to form a national brand image. If the three types are used to distinguish routes of forming national image, the textual route can be regarded as indirect experience and the personal route can be regarded as direct experience. Relational route can be counted as combinations of direct and indirect components. Smith (1973) found out that most people build up an image of a foreign country without direct exposure or experience, and mass media mainly contributes to the image formation. Wilterdink (1994) insisted that national image is built upon information which is gained through direct as well as indirect experience. The indirect information can be obtained from print, record, and video forms, interpersonal communication, mass media message such as newspaper and magazine. However, indirect experience through media has a wide range of influence, but the leverage can be relatively weak. On the contrary, direct experience such as

visiting and purchase has strong influence on small number of people.

In conclusion, a national brand image is formed based on diverse experience related to certain country. Among the various influencers, direct route will be the most effective and a certain way to learn the actual aspects of the country. Routes for direct experience can be tourism, personal exchange, residential experience, studying abroad, but these are not appropriate when it comes to target a number of foreign citizens, requiring enormous budget. Therefore, many countries are dependent on indirect routes to form and convey national brand image such as news report, image advertisements, prints, and publications, cultural contents like drama and movies, and events. Indirect image communication can be exposed to diverse foreign publics, but it has a high potential to misinform or carry distorted image. The purpose of this study is to examine the overall differences in evaluation of nation brand based on the types of nation brand experience.

### **(3) Psychological Distance: Construal Level Theory**

According to Construal Level Theory in the realm of customer behavior and marketing, people generally tend to use abstract information processing when they feel more distant, whereas they utilize concrete information processing (Trope and Liberman 2003, 2010). In other words, people have different thinking or information process depending on social-psychological distance such as temporal, social, and spatial distance. Therefore, they can end up with different interpretations about the same subject or events (Trope and Liberman 2003, 2010; Smith and Trope 2006; Liviatan Trope and Liberman 2008).

Construal Level Theory says that when we evaluate a thing or an event that is psychologically far from us, high level construal will be used, which puts more importance on central characteristics, high-rank information of categorization, purpose, and desirability. On the other hand, for a case with close psychological distance, low-level construal will be used, which is oriented to concretion, peripheral properties, low-rank information of categorization, and feasibility (Trope and Liberman 2003). According to a research that investigated the effects of social distance between individual and evaluation subject on evaluation on others depending on similarity (Liviatan, Trope and Liberman 2008) when people feel more similarity to others, they feel closer social distance, and evaluate them through heuristic features of the subject, which is low construal level. Research results of inference level depending on spatial distance (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope and Liberman 2006), people tend to describe an incident which happened close space in detail, whereas they give an abstract description for an incident which happened from spatial distant. When Construal Level Theory is applied, there will be different level of nation brand experience regarding the preferred country in the same continent (which has high similarity and geographical proximity – psychologically close country), the preferred country from other continents (which is distant and hardly similar – psychologically distant

country), and the least favorite country. Based on these theoretical foundations and previous literature, we suggested three research questions:

RQ 1: Are there differences in types of experience (routes to get information) of a foreign country depending on regional category of a respondent and country of evaluation?

RQ 2: How types of experience (routes to get information) of a foreign country and regional category of country of evaluation affect nation brand familiarity?

RQ 3: How types of experience (routes to get information) of a foreign country and regional category of country of evaluation affect nation brand attitudes?

## **2. Research Methodology**

This study is to verify the effects of the relationship between different experience types of nation and psychological distance on perception and attitudes toward the nation. To examine this study, a survey was conducted for 7000 participants from 14 countries. The 14 countries were categorized into six groups depending on the similarity of geographical and historical backgrounds. To test the effects of psychological distance participants were asked to answer a set of questions about three countries—the preferred country within the same category, the preferred country from other category, and the least favorite country.

We adopted Moffitt's route of forming global brand image (1994) as conceptual frame, direct and indirect experience, and individual activeness to get information of a foreign country. Based on the comprehensive previous literature and opinions of experts we developed a primary route to form perception and attitude toward a country. We used the same survey items to 14 countries, which consist of 5 categories. Collected data was tested through statistical methods like cross analysis and two-way ANOVA.

## **3. Results**

### **(1) Research Question 1**

Table 1 show the result of cross analysis which proved that there were significant differences among types of experience of the preferred country from the same region, the preferred country from other regions, and the least favorite country. Direct experience was more frequently observed for the preferred country in the same regional category than counterpart from other regional category. The results also presented the differences between two preferred countries from the same and other continents. For a country with short psychological distance (from the same continent) participants showed difference in direct experience where more detailed and non-central information is exchanged. If indirect experience through the media is dominant to learn about a country it is likely to dislike the country.

**Table 1 Cross-tabulation Analysis about Regional Categories of Nation (The Least Favorite Nation)**

Group	Have Seen or Heard from Public Media	Frequent Exposure to the Nation by Public Media	Consumption of Culture Contents	Direct Experience of Searching About The Nation	Visiting or Housing Experience / The Presence Of Intimate
Preferred Nation In Homogeneous Sphere	1795(25.6%)	1875(26.8%)	1166(16.7%)	745(10.6%)	1419(20.3%)
Preferred Nation In Heterogenous Sphere	2469(35.3%)	2171(31.0%)	1055(15.1%)	722(10.3%)	583(8.3%)
Nonpreferred Nation	3645(52.1%)	2035(29.1%)	663(9.5%)	301(4.3%)	356(5.1%)
Total	7909(37.7%)	6081(29.0%)	2884(13.7%)	1768(8.4%)	2358(11.2%)

$$\chi^2=1841.479, df=8, p=.000$$

## (2) Research Question 2

Two-way ANOVA test was conducted to examine differences in types of experience between different regional categories, and the results revealed significant statistical differences. There was a significant main effect of types of experience and regional category on evaluation of familiarity. Participants had different level of familiarity to a country depending on types of experience, and direct experience led to familiar feelings. The least favorite country had the lowest level of familiarity depending on regional category.

When familiarity was considered as a subjective cognitive structure based on diverse experience of certain object (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), it can be interpreted as subjective attitude built upon accumulative experience of a foreign country through various routes. Familiarity in the cognitive level is important for preference. In general the preferred country from the same continent had greater level of familiarity.

A significant two-way interaction effect between types of experience and regional category existed on evaluation of familiarity. More specifically, under direct experience condition, the preferred country from other continent had greater level of familiarity than the preferred country from the same regional category. Types of experience did not make difference

**Table 2 The Influence of Types of Experience and Regional Category of Nation on the Degree of Familiarity**

Continent		Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Square	F-value	Level of Significance
Main Effect	Type of Nation Experience	9005.634	4	2251.409	1063.643	.000
	Type of Nation	517.351	2	258.676	122.207	.000
Interaction Effect	Type of Nation Experience X Type of Nation	1456.642	8	182.080	86.021	.000

in familiarity level for the preferred country from the same continent. On the contrary, respondents with direct and active experience had significantly higher level of familiarity for the preferred country from other continent.

### (3) Research Question 3

Two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the main effect and interaction effect of types of experience of the preferred country from the same regional category, the preferred country from other regional category, and the least favorite country. As a result, types of experience of a country significantly influenced the overall attitude toward the country. The more direct and active experience respondents had the more favorable attitude will be created among them. The least favorite country had the lowest evaluation on attitude, and the preferred country in other region had higher evaluations than the counterpart in the same region.

A significant two-way interaction effect between level of experience of a country and regional category of the country existed on evaluation of attitude. According to the result, the preferred country from other regional categories rather than the same category received more favorable evaluations through direct experience.

**Table 3 Mean Difference of Types of Experience and Regional Category of Nation on the Attitude towards Nation**

Type of Experience \ Type of Nation	Preferred nation in homogeneous sphere	Preferred nation in heterogeneous sphere	Nonpreferred Nation	Sum
Have seen or heard from public media	4.51(1.57)	4.58(1.34)	3.50(1.44)	4.06(1.53)
Frequent exposure to the nation by public media	4.89(1.48)	4.95(1.38)	3.66(1.60)	4.50(1.60)
Consumption of Culture Contents	4.96(1.54)	5.27(1.38)	4.07(1.60)	4.87(1.57)
Direct experience of searching about the nation	5.06(1.56)	5.58(1.30)	4.47(1.67)	5.17(1.53)
Visiting or Housing experience / The presence of intimate	5.03(1.55)	5.65(1.25)	4.31(1.76)	5.08(1.57)
Sum	4.85(1.55)	4.99(1.40)	3.68(1.56)	4.51(1.61)

### Conclusion and Discussion

In the twenty-first century, national image, which represents likability and reliability, is valued as the core factor of soft power and national competitiveness over hard power like military power. Therefore, the importance of effective management in a national image to increase the nation value has gathered more attentions. Responding to the increasing importance of national image, this study is designed to expand theoretical system for strategic and systematic management of national image based on brand experience and Construal Level Theory. By examining the influence of types of experience of a nation and psychological distance on familiarity and the overall attitude toward the nation, the goal of study is to provide concrete

guidance for national image management.

In result, the types of experience of a nation were affected by psychological distance toward the nation. When psychological distance is close to the nation direct experience is preferred to obtain concrete information. On the contrary, when people felt psychologically distant from the nation they prefer indirect experience getting abstract information. The results indicated applicability of construal level differences related to psychological distances from a subject to the realm of experiences of the nation.

In the analysis of the effect of experience and evaluation type of country on familiarity and overall attitude significantly, main effect and interaction effects exist. Especially, evaluations on familiarity and attitude of countries from other regional categories were compared to countries in the same region in terms of interaction effect. For countries in the same region, types of experience caused little difference in overall evaluation, whereas types of experience generated significant difference in evaluations of the preferred country in other region. This can be construed in diverse levels, and sharing the same culture and history can play a negative role in evaluation of countries of the same region. It is possible that a new and unfamiliar country would get favorable evaluation compared to a familiar country with geographic proximity and a long history of exchanges. In addition, countries from the same regional category can be perceived as competitors. In other words, a country which is physically distant is less regarded as a competitor, while a close country is more likely considered as actual rival. Due to the perception, it is highly possible for closer a country to get overall low evaluation. Future research should include this interpretation by examining the causes.

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