

Country Image: Effects of Hosting a Major Sport Event

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Abstract

When governments and cities host major sports events like the Olympics it is partly because such events are perceived as a means to promote the image of the host. This study presents the effects of the Torino (Turin) 2006 Winter Olympics on the images of Italy in Norway, and provides a theoretical model for the structure and impact of country image on intentions to buy the host country's products and on intentions to visit the country as tourist. The theoretical model receives some support, but contrary to the expectations the event had a negative impact on the image of Italy among those with a high interest in the event.

Key words. Country of origin, marketing, nations, Olympics, image, theoretical model

1. Introduction

During the last decades sport events have assumed an increasingly important role within the globalization process. Cities around the world – backed by governments at the state and country level – compete fiercely to host major international sport events like the Olympic Games. The costs of such events are considerable, and in many cases the local and/or national government has to pick up a major share of the bill.

The economics of hosting an event like the Olympics are complex and a fair amount of research has addressed the topic. In particular, a comprehensive comparison of the economics of staging the Summer Olympics from Munich 1972 to Beijing 2008 has been undertaken by Preuss (2004). Dwyer, Forsyth and Spurr (2006) argue that concerning sport events in general the "economic impacts and net benefits, if rigorously assessed, are much lower than those invariably claimed (p.207). Studies of economic impact typically focus on the short-term effects like the creation of new jobs and the attraction of spectators for the various events. Still, the impact on the destination image and people's awareness of – and intentions to visit – the host city/ country in the future has been acknowledged by several researchers (Mossberg and Hallberg, 2000; Hede, 2005). A few studies have also recognized that hosting a major sport event may influence the image of the country and people's intentions to buy products originating in the country (Nebenzahl and Jaffe, 1991; Gripsrud and Nes, 1996).

In this paper we propose that *country image* may be affected by hosting a major sport event, and that changes in country image in turn may have an effect on intentions to visit the country as well as on intentions to buy products originating in the country. Country image is a multi-dimensional construct which has attracted a lot of interest, and in the first section a short literature review is given. The proposed theoretical model and the related hypotheses are presented in the second section. The empirical study reported relates to the Winter Olympics in Turin in 2006, and data have been collected among undergraduate students in Norway before and after the Olympic Games. The "natural experiment" undertaken and the results

obtained are reported in section 3 and 4, respectively. The study indicates that effects on country image should be taken into account when the costs and benefits of hosting such an arrangement is considered. An important result is that the media exposure gained is no guarantee the image of the country will be improved, it may actually also deteriorate.

2. Country image: A short review

From a marketing point of view, academic interest in *country image* dates back to a study by Schooler (1965). A recent account found more than a thousand contributions (including almost five hundred journal articles) as of mid- 2004 (Papadopoulos and Butt, 2006). Most of this research, especially the early research, explores how information about the country of origin will affect demand for a product. Studies in this research stream have mainly addressed how information about country of origin is used to infer beliefs about the quality of a product. The cue may be considered an external informational cue for product evaluations (Bilkey and Nes 1982). Country of origin may also be considered a symbolic index to other informational cues that have an impact on quality. The informational cue “made in Germany” gives for instance signals regarding a number of internal and external cues like design, reliability, price level etc. While country of origin is an external cue for most products, it should be considered an internal cue when tourism is considered since in this case the country of origin (here destination) cannot be changed without changing the product itself.

Several studies indicate that country of origin is more than an informational cue for the quality of products. As pointed out in a review conducted by Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999), it also relates to emotions, identity, pride and autobiographical memories. They use a framework developed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1989) to classify the processing of the country of origin cue as cognitive, affective or normative. In cognitive information processing

the country of origin cue is used as a signal for overall product quality and specific quality attributes. In affective processing the country of origin cue links the product to symbolic and emotional positive or negative associations including social status and national pride. In normative evaluation consumers rely upon social and personal norms related to the country of origin. They may for instance feel a moral obligation to buy domestic goods to protect jobs, or they may refrain from buying goods from countries they consider pursue immoral policies. The three classes of processing are not mutually exclusive, but are rather constantly interacting.

At least three different approaches to measuring country image are found in the literature. First, the traditional approach has been to focus on products originating in different countries and make inferences about country image as a latent construct. Second, as argued by Martin and Eroglu (1993), country image may be measured independently. If both country images and product images are measured, the linkages between the two constructs may be explored. The third approach, as illustrated by Heslop and Papadopolous (1993), acknowledges the basic distinction between country and product images and the need to measure both. It deviates mainly from the second approach in including the “people” aspect of country image. In a business context, and also when tourism is considered, the image one has of the people in a country may be an important aspect and should somehow be included.

A related approach advanced by Klein, Ettenson and Morris (1998) introduced the concept of *animosity* in predicting buying behaviour of foreign products and tested it on Chinese consumers evaluating Japanese products. Their proposed Animosity Model of Foreign Product Purchase posits that “animosity” and “consumer ethnocentrism” are antecedents of “willingness to buy”. An important point is that animosity is unrelated to product judgments, while the effect of consumer ethnocentrism on willingness to buy is partly mediated by its influence on product judgments. The animosity model has also been applied to study the

willingness of Australian consumers to buy French products during – and after - a period of French nuclear testing in the Pacific (Ettenson and Klein, 2005). The authors argue that “the animosity model does not focus on consumers’ quality judgments, as in the typical country-of-origin paradigm, but on their hostility toward a target nation and their associated willingness to purchase products from that nation” (p.204).

Animosity is defined as “antipathy related to previous or ongoing political, military, economic, or diplomatic events” and has been shown to be unrelated to the image of product quality. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that the animosity dimension may be related to country image in terms of its people and its social system/level of development. In terms of the cognitive-, affective- and normative types of processing discussed above, the animosity dimension is mainly affective and normative. The people and societal dimensions may be both cognitive and affective, but the evaluations of the people dimension are likely to be the most affective. A review of the literature on consumer animosity and how it is measured has recently been published by Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007).

The literature on *destination image* in tourism research and the literature on *country- of - origin* in relation to products in international marketing have developed separately, with limited – if any - cross references between the two streams of research. Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) argue that the two streams of research both are based upon the *country image* construct and would benefit from recognizing the close relationship between the two areas. The importance of media coverage of sport events for destination image and intention to visit has been analyzed extensively in the tourism and sport management literature (Chalip, Green and Hill, 2003; Getz and Fairley, 2004).

3. The model

Building upon the previous literature it is proposed that the image of a country may be studied in three dimensions: A *societal* dimension related to the level of development, a *people* dimension related to cultural factors and personal behavior, and an *animosity* dimension related to politics. Thus, we suggest that consumer animosity may be regarded as a dimension of country image and not as a separate theory. It is suggested that hosting the Olympic Games may cause a change in the *societal* as well as the *people* component of country image among those who watch the extensive TV coverage and other media reports from the Games. Only two previous studies dealing with the impact of Olympic Games on country-product images have been identified in the marketing literature. Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1991) found that the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul improved the image of selected consumer electronic products among Israeli consumers with a high exposure to media reports from the event. A possible explanation is that the media reports from the Games showed South Korea as a more developed country than it was previously perceived. Gripsrud and Nes (1996) found that hosting the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994 had a positive impact on a combined people-country dimension in a sample of Dutch engineers. On the other hand, there was no effect on product evaluations in this case.

When it comes to the effects of hosting major sport events on destination images and/or the intention to visit the country/city, the results are not clear. Ritchie and Smith (1991) analyzed the awareness of Calgary compared to other Canadian cities as a result of its hosting of the Winter Olympics in 1988. They found that Calgary gained substantially relative to other cities, but international awareness levels decreased rather quickly after the event. Mossberg and Hallberg (2000) analyzed the effects of the World Championships in Athletics in Gothenburg in 1995. They conclude that "the results of this study reveal that the foreigners' images of the destination and of Swedish products are the same in both the pre- and post event studies" (p.223). This conclusion is based upon interviews with foreigners travelling to

Gothenburg both before and after the event. The authors suggest that one reason for the result is the media reports were mainly restricted to sport activities, and did not expose Swedish products or tourist attractions. Furthermore, a substantial number of the visitors may have had no interest in athletics and therefore not watched the telecasts from the event. Hede (2005) studied the effects of Australian media telecast of the Athens 2004 Summer Olympic games. The results indicated that 39% of the sample had improved their overall impression of Greece as a tourist destination as a result of their consumption of the telecast, and the increase was most pronounced for those with the most positive attitude towards Greece before the Olympics.

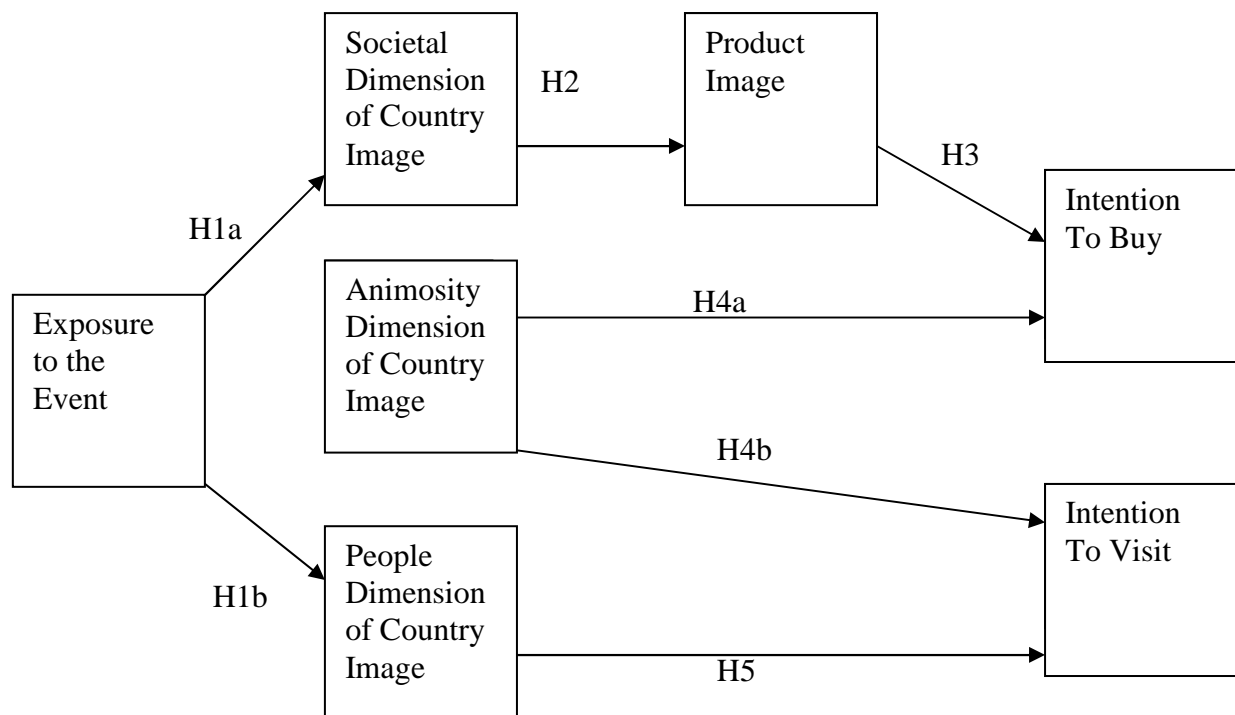
The model we propose is presented in Figure 1. First, country image is conceived as having the three dimensions *societal*, *people* and *animosity* as discussed above. H1 states that exposure to a major event may change the societal (H1a) as well as the people (H1b) dimension of country image. Animosity is a deep-rooted emotional attitude which is unlikely to be influenced by media reports from a major sport event. Hence,

***H1a:** Heavy exposure to a major sport event through media reports will have an impact on the societal dimension of the country image of the country hosting the event.*

***H1b:** Heavy exposure to a major sport event through media reports will have an impact on the people dimension of the country image of the country hosting the event.*

The societal dimension of country image captures the level of economic development, including the technological- and educational level. It seems reasonable that the image a

Figure 1. The model of country image effects



person has regarding this dimension will exert an influence on her/his image of the products originating in the country. Therefore;

H2: *The image of the societal dimension of a country has a positive impact on the image of products coming from the country.*

The image one has of products "made-in" a particular country is likely to influence intentions to buy the products. Hence;

H3: *The image of products coming from a country has a positive impact on the intention to buy products from the country*

According to the literature on animosity there is a direct effect from animosity to willingness to buy products from another country (Klein, Ettenson and Morris, 1998). Animosity does not influence beliefs concerning product attributes – product image – but will all the same have an impact on buying intentions as well as intentions to visit. The latter seems to be a logical extension of the basic theory regarding willingness to buy products. We propose;

***H4a:** The level of animosity towards a country has a negative impact on the intention to buy products from the country*

***H4b:** The level of animosity towards a country has a negative impact on the intention to visit the country*

The intention to visit a country as a tourist is also influenced by the image of the country; in particular the "people dimension" of country image. This dimension concerns to what extent the people are nice, reliable etc. We propose a linkage between the people dimension and the intention to visit the country:

***H5:** The people dimension of country image has a positive impact on the intention to visit the country in the future.*

It may be argued that the effect of country image on intention to visit in reality is mediated by a "destination image". Since this study primarily focused on products and buying intentions, we have not included the "destination image" construct in our model.

4. The empirical study

The Winter Olympics in Torino (Turin), Italy in February 2006 was chosen as the empirical setting to test the proposed model. The Winter Olympics does not attract the same global attention as the Summer Olympics, but in a country like Norway it is considered a major event by a large part of the population. Since the hypotheses relate to changes caused by exposure to a major sport event, data had to be collected both before and after the event.

The aim of the present study was mainly to test theory about changes in country image and related constructs and not to generalize effects to the population at large. In this context it was considered appropriate to focus on undergraduate students. Two random samples of students at a business school in Norway were selected and an electronic questionnaire was sent asking them to participate in a survey concerning attitudes towards foreign countries. The first sample - consisting of 223 students - received the questionnaire before the Olympic Games started and were asked to return it within a few days. The second group – consisting of 312 students - received the questionnaire after the Olympic Games had ended. The response rate was about 37% and 52%, respectively. The questionnaire contained a series of Likert-type statements, and the respondents were asked to state to what extent they agreed on a 7-point scale. 4 items (statements) mapped the “people” dimension of country image, 5 items mapped the “societal” dimension, and 2 items mapped the “animosity” dimension. The items used were based upon previous research, in particular Gripsrud and Nes (1996) and Klein, Ettenson and Morris (1998) and are listed in Appendix 1. The respondents were asked to evaluate Italy as well as England concerning each statement. England was introduced as a control, and we did not expect any changes to take place in the given time period in case of England.

In addition to the statements related to country image, several other questions were asked. One topic of interest was the respondents interest in sports. To measure exposure to the event we have focused on the following statement: “I spend a lot of time watching when major sports events are shown on TV”. This statement was broken down into “winter sports (skiing, skating etc)” and “summer sports (soccer, athletics etc)” and we have utilized the response to the first of these. The respondents were asked to state to what extent they agreed on a 7-point scale. In the data analysis, the original responses have been recoded to a dummy variable: Scores 1, 2 and 3 were classified as “low interest” (0), while scores 5, 6 and 7 were classified as “high interest” (1). The respondents with a medium interest – score 4 – were excluded from the analysis.

Product image was mapped by 7 items, mainly taken from Papadopoulos and Heslop (1993). Buying intentions was operationalized by two statements. The first was “When buying clothes the probability is high I will choose a product from country X” (Italy vs. England). The second statement was similar except shoes were substituted for clothes. Intention to visit was measured with a single statement: “It is a high probability I will visit his country in the next 3 years” (Italy vs. England).

The study was designed as a “natural” experiment with exposure to media reports from the Olympic Games as the treatment. Since it is impossible to randomize who will get the “treatment” and who will not, it is of course not a true experiment. Following Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1991) and Gripsrud and Nes (1996) it was decided to use different samples for “before” and “after” measures to avoid the problem of learning effects. By using two independent random samples we should also control for many other factors which might influence the perceived image in addition to the “treatment”.

5. Results

The testing of the model and the related hypotheses has been conducted in three steps. First, the theoretical measurement models (CFA-models) were analysed by using the LISREL 8.73 software. The estimation of the measurement model is reported in Table 1. The results are based upon the pooled sample (n=535). Both in the case of Italy and England we find support for the underlying theory, i.e. a three-dimensional factor structure consisting of: (1) image of the *people* in the country, (2) image of the *societal system* and (3) the level of *animosity* felt towards the country. All constructs, including the image of *products* originating in a country, have satisfactory reliability. It is interesting to note the similarity between the measurement models for Italy and England, which indicates that the measurement model has validity.

Second, the hypotheses H2- H5 were tested by a structural equation model where “exposure to the event” in the basic model in Figure 1 was excluded. The results of estimating the structural model are reported in Table 2. The model performs well both in case of Italy and England as indicated by Chi-square and RMSEA ($RMSEA_{Italy} = 0.072$ and $RMSEA_{England} = 0.053$). Hypotheses 2-5 are tested by paths in the structural equations models for the two countries. With reference to Figure 1, the structural equations are the following:

$$Pr\ oduct\ Im\ age = \gamma_{12} Societal + \zeta_1$$

$$IntetiontoBuy = \beta_{21} Pr\ oduct\ Im\ age + \gamma_{23} Animosity + \zeta_2$$

$$IntentiontoVisit = \gamma_{31} People + \gamma_{33} Animosity + \zeta_3$$

Table 1: Summary Measurement Model

<i>Factor Loadings</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Composite Reliability</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>Composite Reliability</i>
λ_{11}	0.55		0.69	

λ_{21}	0.67	People	0.62	People
λ_{31}	0.56	0.67	0.56	0.71
λ_{41}	0.55		0.67	
λ_{52}	0.61		0.64	
λ_{62}	0.73	Societal	0.74	Societal
λ_{72}	0.69	0.77	0.68	0.78
λ_{82}	0.71		0.68	
λ_{92}	0.57		0.50	
$\lambda_{10,3}$	0.61	Animosity	0.52	Animosity
$\lambda_{11,3}$	-0.94		-0.95	
$\lambda_{12,4}$	0.49		0.46	
$\lambda_{13,4}$	0.64		0.77	
$\lambda_{14,4}$	0.79	Product Image	0.81	Product Image
$\lambda_{15,4}$	0.81	0.86	0.71	0.86
$\lambda_{16,4}$	0.68		0.73	
$\lambda_{17,4}$	0.70		0.70	
$\lambda_{18,4}$	0.71		0.56	
$\lambda_{19,5}$	0.88	Intention to Buy	0.86	Intention to Buy
$\lambda_{20,5}$	0.90		0.76	
$\lambda_{21,6}$	1.0	Intention to Visit	1.0	Intention to Visit

Table 2 gives the value of the various regression coefficients with the t-values in parentheses. Generally, the values are fairly similar in the structural models for Italy and England. We have a strong and significant positive relationship between the Societal Dimension and Product image for both countries ($t = 9.28$ for Italy; $t = 9.30$ for England). This gives support to H2. We also have a strong and significant positive relationship between Product image and Intention to buy for both countries ($t = 7.67$ for Italy; $t = 6.35$ for England). This gives support to H3. Hypotheses H4a and H4b postulate that animosity exerts a negative influence on buying intentions for products and on intentions to visit the country, respectively. We find support for the negative impact on buying intentions for both countries ($t = -4.17$ for

Italy; $t = -2.32$ for England). These findings corroborate the results found in previous studies on the effects of animosity and gives support to H4a. Results also show that the more animosity felt towards the country the less pronounced was the intention to visit the country. Thus, there was support for H4b. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the people dimension would have a positive impact on the intentions to visit, but no significant relationship was found ($t = 0.24$ for Italy; $t = 0.52$). Hence, H5 was not supported.

Table 2: Summary Structural Model

<i>Regression Coefficients</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>England</i>
γ_{12}	0.71 (9.28)	0.87 (9.30)
β_{21}	0.45 (7.67)	0.43 (6.35)
γ_{23}	-0.20 (-4.17)	-0.13 (-2.32)
γ_{31}	0.02 (0.24)	0.05 (0.52)
γ_{33}	-0.52 (-6.02)	-0.45 (-4.49)
<i>Indicators of Modell Fit</i>		
Chi-square (df)	685.61/182	456.68/182
RMSEA	0.072	0.053

t-values in the parenthesis

When it comes to testing H1, the respondents were divided into groups based upon their response to the statement: “I spend a lot of time watching when major sport events are shown on TV”, specified for “winter sports (skiing, skating etc)”. We distinguish between respondents with “low interest” and “high interest”, while the respondents with medium interest were disregarded in the analysis. H1a and H1b propose that the societal dimension and the people dimension of country image are likely to change for people heavily exposed to the media reports from the sport event. We assume that the group of people who are heavily exposed are the ones who state that they have a high interest in watching major winter sport

events on TV. In the pre-olympic sample this amounts to 99 respondents, while it consists of 166 respondents in the post-olympic sample.

Table 3: Results of two sample t-tests

<i>Italy Diff. in Score</i>	<i>Italy t-value</i>		<i>England Diff. in Score</i>	<i>England t-value</i>
1.008*	2.660	People; High SI	0.219	0.376
-0.137	-0.238	People; Low SI	0.334	0.81
0.374	0.723	Societal, High SI	0.938	1.240
-0.403	-0.595	Societal, Low SI	0.336	0.650

*)Significant at the 0.05 level

Table 3 reports the results of 8 two-sample t-tests in order to test H1a and H1b

$$t = \frac{score_{before} - score_{after}}{pooled\ st.dev}$$
 . A respondent's score on a country image dimension is found by

adding her score on each item used for measuring the construct. We compare scores for respondents with a High and a Low sports interest for two countries and two constructs. As can be seen from Table 3, no significant changes were found for the societal dimension for any of the four groups (high/low interest in Italy/England). This means that H1a did not receive any support.

Turning to the people dimension on the other hand, it is clear that the respondents with a high interest in watching winter sports have a significant *decline* in the case of Italy ($t = 2.66$, $p < .025$). As expected the high interest group show no significant change for England, which was purely used as a control. Also, no changes took place for the low interest group neither in

the case of Italy nor in the case of England. These findings give support to H1b, but unfortunately the effect is negative!

6. Discussion

When governments compete fiercely to host major sports events like the Olympics, and are willing to incur the costs involved, it is partly because such events are perceived as a means to promote the image of the country, the region and/or the city where the event takes place. So far, only limited evidence exists concerning the impact of such events on the image. Such evidence is urgently needed because of the large public resources that are spent, and also because of the high interest from the general public.

The two previous studies in the area (Nebenzahl and Jaffe 1991 and Gripsrud and Nes 1996) both found positive image effects of the Olympics. Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1991) found a positive image effect on South Korean electronic products. They did not test other image dimensions like the image of the Korean people and the image of South Korea as a society. Gripsrud and Nes (1996) did not find any image change for Norwegian industrial products after the Lillehammer Winter Olympics in 1994, but found a significant improvement in a combined people-country image dimension.

In this study we hypothesized that the Torino 2006 Winter Olympics had an impact on the societal dimension and on the people dimension of Italy in Norway. The hypothesis was rejected with regard to the societal dimension, but we find a significant impact on the people dimension. The impact is, however, negative and in the opposite direction of our expectations. No such effect was found in England, the country used as control. Though we have no data to explain the negative image impact, one may speculate that it is due to the mostly negative media exposure from the games. The expectations of Norwegian gold medals before the

games were much higher than what was achieved in the games. We may have a spill over effect from the Norwegian performance to the host of the event. The quality of the arrangement itself was very high from the athlete's point of view. The competitions attracted, however, only small crowds, and the difference between the lacking passion among spectators at the various competitive arenas and the slogan of the arrangement -"passion lives here"- was criticized in the Norwegian press. Also, there were negative comments regarding appearances of the controversial Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. This study indicates that when reports from major sport events are to a large extent negative, they may have a negative impact on the image of the hosting people, even though the reasons for the negativism are outside the responsibility of the host.

This study is the first to demonstrate that image effects of hosting major sports events may be negative as well as positive. China and Canada are future hosts of the Summer and Winter Olympics and South Africa will host the next World Football Championship, and for both it's a major showcase with much international prestige involved. This study demonstrates that a positive image effect does not come automatically, but rather is a very important and complicated task that must be carefully planned and executed by the host.

Our hypotheses 2-5 give the rationale for why it is important for countries to improve their image abroad from a business point of view. It impacts foreign consumer's intention to buy products made in the country as well as their intentions to visit the country as tourist. Thus it also provides a theoretical model for the structure and impact of country image. The model is tested for two countries and is supported by the data, except for the missing impact of the people dimension on intentions to visit. We believe that this may be due to that the measure of people is developed to tap the important content of "people" as it relates to product quality. Perhaps different aspects of "people" should be measured when the focus is intentions to visit the country. A different interpretation is that impression of the people of the country is of less

importance for intentions to visit a country. The impact of animosity on intentions to buy products is well established. This is supported also in our study. Furthermore, our study extends the discussion to the tourism industry by including intentions to visit in the model. The findings suggest that animosity has a large impact on intentions to visit, and it could therefore be an important factor for this industry to follow closely.

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