

Experiential Nature of Product-Place Images: Image as a Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes an interpretative approach to imagery related to country of origin and proposes a conceptual framework based on stereotyping and experientially constructed meaning. Countries and nations engender mythological narratives in other countries as they become part of the signification process concerning "foreign-domestic" and "country X-country Y". This depth in meaning is best captured through an experiential approach. We suggest that the dimensions of place, product, market context and usage context are central to understanding contextualized product-place images (CPPIs). Furthermore, we suggest interpretive methodologies to assess CPPIs. Demonstration of the strength of this approach rests on ongoing empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

Country of origin (COO) or product-country-image (PCI) has been a widely-researched topic (Özsomer and Çavuşgil 1991; Papadopoulos 1993). Yet, mixed findings abound regarding the effects of this still not-so-well-understood concept. There is a widespread agreement that to address the limitations of the COO or PCI concepts and research, a theoretical framework is needed. We take an interpretative approach to imagery and propose a conceptual framework based on experientially constructed meaning, to reflect the interface between the individual and society.

Stereotypes, which are mental representations (Oakes, Haslam and Turner 1994; Mackie and Hamilton 1993), provide a base and a point of departure for our approach. Stereotype effects include bias in selectivity of perception, accentuation of both differences between, and similarity within categories (in- and out-groups), tendency of stereotypic expectations to confirm themselves, and evaluative and behavioral discrimination favoring the in-group. Stereotypes embody symbolic values and beliefs that are related to an out-group's position relative to the in-group and are sensitive to comparative context. This literature implies that similarity versus difference comparisons, multiple contexts, and the interconnectedness of mental structures, including cognitive, affective, motivational, and sensory aspects, need to be considered in conceptualization and measurement of PCI. Although several researchers note the role of the competitive market setting (e.g., Ger 1991, Morello 1993) or consider stereotypes and schemas (e.g., Maheswaran 1994, Shimp, Samiee, and Madden 1993), current conceptualizations and measurements of COO or PCI do not capture the contextual and comparative nature of meaning.

Although stereotyping literature is valuable in pointing to the contextual and comparative nature of meaning, one stereotyping bias, the favorability of the in-group, is challenged by the empirical consumer interest in non-familiar products. Favoring the in-group is consistent with the assumption in much COO literature that the more familiar (or similar the country of origin) the better. But, with globalizing economies and societies, consumption of the exotic or the foreign is also highly desirable. We suggest that the desirability of the foreign relates to how consumers negotiate their identity in the self-other relationship. This identity negotiation reflects itself in the experiential meaning of products from other countries. Meaning is inscribed in a potentially rich connotative and mythological universe, which is experienced by a consumer in a particular context. Image takes on its meaning from the subjective experi-

ences in a subjectively meaningful universe whose meanings are for the most part socially articulated and shared. A country and a nation engender mythological narratives in other countries as they become part of the signification process concerning "foreign-domestic" and "country X-country Y". Consequently, PCI's are signs whose meaning must be determined through the analysis of the connotations they evoke, and, hence, the myths they are inscribed in. This depth in meaning can best be captured through an experiential approach to PCIs.

The experiential PCI tells us a story. Basically a story about the place of origin of something. But the product itself also tells its own story according to its classification in the specific market context, including such dimensions as perceived competing products and brands, distribution, etc. And what does the advertising say? How does this differ from competitors' and substitutes' adverts and pre-existing product images? And finally, it also provides meanings for the consumer pertaining to the effects of the usage. We suggest that the dimensions of place, product, market context, and usage context are central to understanding the contextualized product-place images (CPPIs): products are categorized in relation to a *product* category, a (set of) *place(s)*, a *market context* (position vis-à-vis a set of competitors and within the distribution system), and a *usage context* where the usage context also captures the relationship of the particular product to "self". These dimensions account for the following questions pertaining to any object: what is it? what is its relation to other objects? where did it come from? where (in my consumption pattern) will it go? what will it do? and where will it take me? (cf. Askegaard & Ger, 1998).

Place refers to the meanings pertaining to all sorts of spatial relationships. This may be place of brand, place of production, place of design, place of innovation, place of origin of the raw materials etc. The "country-of-origin", as well as a region within a country or a wider region such as Europe belong in this sphere. Thus, we prefer to speak about product-*place*-images (PPI). But *place* also refers to meanings pertaining to the local and the global, the domestic and the foreign, and similar dichotomies.

The notion of product is here translated to *phenomenon*, in that we wish to distance ourselves from a narrow understanding of the things in question. Phenomenon refers to "product" in that very general sense it has come to be understood within the marketing literature, i.e. any "marketable", tangible or non-tangible phenomenon.

The *market context* refers to the relative or positional meaning of the phenomenon compared to its surroundings, competitors, etc. Relevant questions in this connection are such questions as: What kind of similarities and differences exist compared with phenomena (products) on the local market scene? And what kinds of distinctive features are used to demarcate and position goods in the market in question? This dimension points to the importance of positioning in the creation of a PCI.

Finally, the *usage context* refers to meanings pertaining to the consumption situation or to general and specific rituals concerning the consumption or usage of a given product. This, then, refers to the consumption context in general and the impact of origin spaces on the applicability of the phenomenon, and its compatibility with local usage patterns.

We argue that to understand the notion of PCI, as any other image, we must use a richer set of connotations than used in standard approaches, and that such images are context-dependent. Furthermore, the embedded nature of CPPIs suggests that operationalizing country-of-origin in advance, with relatively short and closed types of questionnaires, is very difficult, if not impossible. Hence, we use interpretive methodologies to assess/understand CPPIs and explore the strength and richness of such an approach. We examine the desirability and consumption of the foreign (versus local) in Turkey and if and how identity negotiation reflects itself in the experiential meaning of products from other countries.

THE STUDY

We conducted a qualitative study to investigate the experiences with, preferences for, and views about Turkish and foreign goods across a variety of product categories: cars, clothes, shoes, electronics/appliances, foods and drinks. We encouraged participants to talk about their own and their friends' consumption experiences, preferences, and opinions. The topics we inquired referred to and drew from the four components of our model: products, market contexts, places of origin, and usage contexts. These topics included: which goods are consumed, preferred or desired, perceived places of origin of these goods, what various (competitive) domestic and foreign products/brands signify and how these products/brands are compared, when and how these products are used, what people think and feel about and associate with the countries from which foreign products originate, and what are the experiential meanings (images, thoughts, feelings, associations conjured up) of the "West", "Westerners", "Turkey" and "Turks".

Our data consist of 25 depth interviews and observations in homes, cafes, and public spaces in Ankara. The respondents were visited in their homes or dormitory rooms. Interviews were conducted with Bilkent University students and a broad cross-section of Turks with various social class, age, and education backgrounds and degrees of religiousness/Islamic identity. The homes visited ranged from upscale to downscale households, including two homes in squatter neighborhoods. The third author conducted the depth interviews during a three months' stay in Ankara. The interviews were conducted either in English or Turkish (with the help of a translator) and translated to and transcribed in English, to facilitate discussions between the authors. Our interpretations reflect an integration and/or negotiation of Turkish and Danish, that is, insider's and outsider's, perspectives.

FINDINGS

Many respondents' views on foreign and Turkish products are illustrated and encapsulated by the following expression:

"Our hearts say 'stay here, you are members of the East,' but our mind is always, our direction is always facing West." (Hasan, male, 18).

This ambiguity and dilemma is expressive of the identity conflict experienced in relation to consumption patterns in transitional societies. But behind the overarching dilemma of identity negotiation is concealed a lot of variance, both in terms of product category (and, hence, market context) and in terms of various imagery cues used to infer assessments of product quality. Consider the following two quotations, both referring to the clothing sector:

"If the name is English it is good, what comes from abroad is good." (Onur, male, 26).

"Five years ago Levi's was a thing, not anymore. Now Turkish jeans have wonderful quality. They are even better. Turkish youth realizes that." (Elçin, female, 25)

The first informant is representative of a tendency found among certain informants to reject domestic products and any reference to the local generally, to such an extent that just a brand name in English is enough to create the necessary distance. This, in spite of the fact that many Western brands, e.g. Polo, actually do have production in Turkey. On the other hand, several other informants were referring to the changing nature of specifically the Turkish clothing products, as exemplified by the second quotation above.

Beyond the clothing sector, however, the general tendency is that foreign is associated with upscale and domestic with downscale consumption. Not necessarily, however in an absolute sense, that domestic consumption *per se* is always downgrading, but rather in the way that foreign consumption possibilities represent an enlarged code of consumption, a sign of both more (economic) power of consumption and a more elaborated taste; a creation of a new "consumption community" of those who know and appreciate the blessings of international consumer culture.

Workers, people living in villages, they will eat *pide*. Students, who know the Western culture, who are educated, they know pizza and they prefer pizza. They also eat *pide*. But people from lower classes always eat *pide*." (Ekin, female, 18).

Such comments taken from our interviews and our observations in general indicate that the Contextualized Product-Place Image model applies across the numerous product categories that we investigated. Two more interesting findings emerge from our data. One notable finding is that the notion of "place" is multifaceted and the place-of-sale is seen to be as important as place-of-origin. The second is that the most significant discrimination emerges to be between the foreign and the local origins of products: the broader place of origin, that is, foreign or "Western," is much more significant than specific countries-of-origin such as Germany, America, Japan. Furthermore, place-of-production in many contexts were seen as subordinate to place of brand origin or place of design. This divide is interrelated with the meanings of these broad places of origin and the underlying identity issues, constructions of "us-them". There is a general fascination with foreign/Western goods. However, purchasing power imposes a limit to the importance and consideration of place(s)-of-origin. That is, a foreign-local differentiation is made only when things-beyond-the-cheapest are accessible and affordable. We discuss the relevance of the Contextualized Product-Place Image model and the multiplicity of the notion of "place" in section I and the meanings of foreign versus local products as related to identity issues in section II below.

CONTEXTUALIZED PRODUCT-PLACE IMAGES FOR AN ILLUSTRATIVE PRODUCT CATEGORY

We find the CPPI model to be pertinent in all the product categories we investigated. Not only the more high-tech products (cars, appliances) but also clothes, shoes, and even the more daily and mundane products, such as food and drinks, are experienced and evaluated contextually and comparatively. Many respondents differentiate such products based on their places-of-origin and also compare them based on usage and market contexts. Here, we elaborate on just one of these categories to illustrate how the four dimensions of the CPPI model are basic to dialogues and views about foreign products. We discuss hot drinks, which, as part of a food culture, has some interesting implications for studying imag-

ery of stability and change in a consumer culture. On the one hand, it could be expected to be more resistant to homogenizing change due to Westernization and globalization, since, as Warde (1997, p. 58) points out, "most sociologists of food suggest that it is extremely difficult to change eating habits fundamentally or rapidly". Immigrant studies underline how food remains a very important link to the "old country" and expatriates often refer to various food consumption experiences when they express their longings for their native surroundings. On the other hand, Warde also argues for the profound intertwining of novelty and tradition, and Fischler (1990), demonstrating the perpetual evolution of our food cultures especially in the 20th century, discusses how the pizza in the United States went from virtually unknown to becoming an "All-American Food" over a range of a couple of decades. In our particular context, it can be noted that if the pizza underwent this change in America from the 1950's to 1970's, it may be asserted that from the 1970's to the 1990's it has gone from an "All American" to an "All Global" food.

Coffee is simultaneously a profoundly traditional Turkish consumption icon and a product category undergoing considerable change in terms of new product types and consumption situations. Consider the following comments regarding the image of "Nescafe":

"I compare American coffee with tea, not with Turkish coffee". (Inci, female 35).

"Nescafe is very easy compared to Turkish coffee. And you can drink it like tea, but the Turkish coffee, you cannot drink it anytime because it is very strong. ... I like instant coffee because it keeps me awake. ... But I am really a tea person. ... I never liked tea bags". (Handan, female, 25)

For most respondents, "Nescafe" refers to all instant coffees. It is seen within the market context of first and foremost tea, then cappuccino and espresso coffee and to a lesser degree Turkish coffee. Its biggest competitor is tea. Its place-of-origin, the "West," signifies modernity and the good life. On the other hand, despite the imported coffee beans, Turkish coffee is seen very Turkish. It has had a key historical role in social life with traditional coffee houses, wedding rituals, and fortune-telling. Usage contexts for instant coffee and its competitors are different. "Nescafe" is perceived to be practical, and modern. For middle class informants it is an easy, any time and anywhere (at home or at work) beverage; for downscale informants it is more of a treat or a luxury.

I have Nescafe all the time, all day, when I am studying. Nescafe is more practical, you can easily make it, but it takes time to prepare Turkish coffee. Turkish coffee is usually consumed after the meals. Turkish coffee reminds me of being with friends and chatting together. When you go to a neighbor or a friend, she prepares Turkish coffee and you chat while you drink. I almost always drink it with my mother or my friend. I never drink it alone (Zehra, female, 18).

Particular brands of instant coffee are less prominent in the popular imagery than types of coffees, with the exception of Nescafe Gold, which signifies distinction and good taste (for lower middle/middle class). Tea, made in the traditional way in a teapot, signifies normalcy—breakfast, all day, everywhere. Turkish coffee is preferred after meals, as a treat, and connotes sociality and homey relaxation. Cappuccino or espresso are seen to be more special and modern, and preferred at a café.

Turkish coffee I drink when I am at home. I don't ask for Turkish coffee when I am out. ... Turkish coffee does not fit

cafés, I'd order instant coffee or cappuccino when I am out (Barish, male, 23).

Thus, although all four dimensions of CPPI are observed for types of hot beverages, the most crucial and differentiating dimension seems to be usage contexts.

Instant coffee is but one small example of the application of our model for understanding experiential product-place imagery. Compared to coffee, there is less contextualization of other goods, for example appliances, by usage. Foreign brands of appliances are more broadly seen to be desirable across all usage contexts. Hot beverage usage seems to have been compartmentalized to accommodate "traditional" and "modern" drinks. However, electronics, not a traditional good, accompany a modern image which is more aligned with the foreign. On the other hand, compared to hot beverages, the differentiation in imagery and evaluation for appliances rests more on the places (of origin), constructed in more complicated ways than for hot beverages (cf. Askegaard and Ger, forthcoming). Hence, the different components of the CPPI model are pertinent and influential to varying degrees for different product categories.

"FOREIGN" VERSUS "LOCAL" AND ISSUES OF IDENTITY: LOCAL-FOREIGN PRODUCTS AND US-THEM

In all the product categories we investigated, the most important discrimination, in terms of the place of origin, is "foreign" versus "domestic." Foreign is generally taken to be Western, and the experiential meanings of "foreign product" and "local product" are associated and co-produced along with the imagery of the "West" and "Turkey." The experiential meaning of "foreign" is expensive, for rich people, high quality (e.g., "If the name is English it is good, what comes from abroad is good"), durable, well-made, state-of-the-art, reliable, more variety/choice, original (authentic), being part of the world or international, and different—clean, bright, shiny, nice appearance. Many informants justify their choice by saying "foreign goods are better," or "Turkish firms don't do much R&D, their goods are not always state of the art." However, there is a recently increasing trust in Turkish brands reflected in comments such as "We also have good brands, Turkish products are improving" or "Vestel [a Turkish electronics firm] does R&D, they make good products."

Despite this emerging trust, "local" connotes lesser quality, nationalism—which in Turkey has very specific political connotations and as applied by some of our informants must be understood as a negative qualification, cheap (but sometimes still too expensive for its quality), economic (spare parts, servicing), and common/ordinary. Framing and shaping the meaning of "foreign," the "West" connotes modernity, advancement, technology, science, and innovation—all more technological references. Other images refer to Western economic superiority: abundance, wealth (a majority can afford wanted things), individualism, career orientation and opportunities, hard working people, and competition. A third set of meanings pertain to the political environment such as: democracy and freedom, being yourself and acting the way you are, and finally, certain references are made to what is seen as the specific features of Western sociality: people, and societies in general, are being well-organized, disciplined, clean, calm, comfortable, and a nice place to live with no or fewer problems.

Understood as a broader social context, "Turkey" connotes a set of oppositions to the imagery carried by references to the "West". "Turkey" is underdevelopment and hassles of everyday life. "Turkey" is more chaotic in macro-social relations (dislike and disregard for rules) and less rational but more emotional and

sentimental. In contrast, important organizational structures are located on the level of personal relationships, where references to family orientation (strong ties, seeking help, solving problems together, respecting elders) and more friendly, hospitable, and warm people abound. In terms of male-female relationships, this evokes imagery of both honor and restrictions. The strength and role of all of these meanings imply that the conceptualization of the place(s) (of origin) of a product must be broad. The question of "where does it come from?" yields richly layered and powerful connotations that impinge on consumption choices.

As the informants' comments indicate, many regard foreign goods to be superior and prefer to buy foreign products to the extent they can afford it. This fascination with and a trust in the novel and the foreign, desire for global goods, and inability to respect domestic products has also been found in previous studies on other transitional societies (e.g., Croll 1994; Ger 1997; Sklair 1991; Weismantel 1989). Such a tendency creates and reinforces a cultural dependency on foreign things and images, a negative social identity, and low self-respect/confidence. For example, in Zumbagua, Ecuador, white bread symbolizes the dominant culture whereas Indian ethnic identity is associated with barley gruel, now considered inferior by the dominant culture and children (Weismantel 1989). Eating bread threatens indigenous identity and strength of family. Barley gruel being a symbol of home, hospitality, and female productivity, women react very emotionally to their children's request of bread. Such processes strip people's identity and reduce self-respect and self-determination. The interplay between the desirability of the foreign and the downgrading of the local rests on particular cultural histories (of encounters with the "Other") and current encounters with globalization. Wishing to be developed, marketized, and modernized, and comparing themselves to the "Other," who is regarded to be more advanced and living a better life than "Us," people in transitional societies want to break away from the past and move towards the future and move away from "Us" towards "Them."

In the process of negotiating their identity, an Orientalist imagery of Turkey has been adopted by Turks. With Occidentalism (see Carrier 1995), Turks attribute a whole range of positive characteristics (reason, productive, hardworking, orderly, democratic, free, clean, systematic) to the West. The positive and aspirational identity is that of the modern Westerner. They want to be like, to follow the model of, to become that Other. There is a historical background to this current situation. Turks historically faced many disruptions in identity as they transformed from Central Asian nomads, to Muslim soldiers, to multicultural Ottomans, and finally to modern Turks. A historical mobility and disrespect for the local Anatolian civilizations accompanied an admiration for the "civilized" Others – first Persia and Arabia, later Europe, and now America.

Hence, in societies where social identity is not always positive and desirable, where historical and current encounters with the foreign have involved peripheral relations with global centers, foreign goods may reign over the local.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We find support for our argument that Product-Place-Images are experiential, contextual, and narrative/cultural biography-like. Our findings reveal the complexity and multiplicity of "place(s)- (of-origin)" and that, in the current study, place-of-sale is as important as, e.g., place-of-manufacture in defining "place." This unexpected finding suggests that references to the distribution system possibly should be considered part of the "place" dimension rather than the "market context", since the spatial references to the

life path of the product tend to include its origin in the distribution system, saving the market contextuality to imagery pertaining to competitors. Future studies of country-of-origin or country image have to take into account this and many more aspects of spatial references, such as place-of-raw materials, place-of-design, etc. too. We observe that the experience of CPPI is embedded in identity negotiation, that the issues of identity and the Other set the stage for and frame the experiential Contextualized Product-Place-Image. We demonstrate that an in-group bias, or consumer ethnocentrism, contended to occur in pursuit of a positive social identity, does not exist in transitional societies where social identity, at least partially, clashes with aspirational identity. Consumer ethnocentrism might not exist for those consumers who want to become the Other. Nor for some consumers who desire and want to discover and explore the exotic Other.

These findings, which are not so surprising if we consider the global consumption literature, are very informative for and have critical implications for the country-of-origin literature regarding (re)conceptualization, research approaches, and measurement. Future studies of country-of-origin have to consider the experience with products from other countries in a broader context and the multiple experiential meanings of a "place" as well as issues of social identity. Rating scales and ratings of quality, conventional in country-of-origin studies, cannot "measure" the layers and depth of connotations associated with "made/designed/assembled/sold-in" images. Other methods, capable of capturing the richness inherent in relevant imagery, must be employed if we want to understand the narratives of the object world that surrounds us.

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