Research paper

Destination branding: The role of consumer affinity

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Changing negative attitudes toward foreign products and brands can be a daunting challenge. Changing such attitudes toward countries/destinations is even more difficult due to their multi-year bases and the fact that, unlike new brands, which can be developed from scratch, destination brands are viewed by consumers as outgrowths of their culture and history. Recently, consumer affinity has emerged in the academic marketing literature as a positive attitude toward a specific focal country. Such affinity is especially important for marketers and policy makers as it can help overcome the effects of negative attitudes such as animosity and ethnocentrism. Accordingly, this paper investigates the role of the drivers of affinity and, by enhancing it, bolstering the performance of foreign products, destination brands and tourism. Following a literature review of recent research on affinity, the paper reports the findings of a qualitative study. Unexpected findings emerge with regard to the inclusion of cultural similarity and collective memory as potential drivers of affinity. The study shows that positive collective memory might be a precondition for the creation of affinity. A case study on re-branding Israel's image serves as a practical demonstration of the importance of affinity to tourism policy makers and marketing managers. As such, the paper demonstrates that affinity can be a proactive tool that can help international marketers and tourism policy makers overcome the effects of negative attitudes.

1. Introduction

'In today's' globalized world, cities, regions and nations compete ever more intensely in attracting visitors' (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013, p. 31). This type of competition has grown in importance since since'Nations and regions have images, or "brands" that stakeholders often attempt to manage or at least influence' (Clifton, 2014, p. 122). According to Vasudevan (2008), a place's image reflects the *affinity* and *relationship* visitors had/have with the place (see Alanya, Turkey, as a recent example; Tosun, Dedeoğlu, & Fyall, 2015). Oberecker, Diamantopoulos, and Riefler (2008, p. 26) defined consumer affinity as a 'feeling of liking, sympathy, and even attachment toward a specific foreign country that has become an in-group as a result of the consumer's direct personal experience and/or normative exposure and that positively affects the consumer's decision making associated with products and services originating from the affinity country'. As a result, multiple groups with a stake in destinations' attractiveness (e.g. hotels, attractions operators, municipalities and governments) use brand-management techniques to attract visitors based on visitors'

affinity towards their destinations. For example, Berlin's 'Citizen Brand Ambassador' program aimed to position Berlin as a good location for *business* and as an attractive tourism *destination*. Brand ambassadors (Berlin residents) needed to demonstrate their relationships with Berlin in order to be selected to the program (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013).

Israel has initiated a similar project, building on affinity and relationships between visitors and the country. Ichner (2015) described the Israeli government's recent invitation to 200 German students to visit Israel for several days as surprising. The project is one of the efforts to rebrand Israel's image and turn these students into 'ambassadors of Israel'. According to Israel's ambassador to Germany, while surveys demonstrated a negative perception of Israel among young Germans, each visitor to Israel changed perspective about the country after returning home.

Relationships with and affinity towards destinations can also induce international business. For example, Dinesh C. Paliwal, the CEO of the Herman Corporation (an audio-focused company) noted in the CES conference (Hofman, 2016) that he is proud with the affinity he has for Israel. He further explained that he has visited the country many times for business and pleasure, and has toured it like a native Israeli. As a result, Herman acquired three Israeli startup companies, as 'the Israelis are the best in the cyber security area' (p. 30).

Place images are also important in light of the availability of and competition between many destinations' 'made-in' brands. Notably, products from a focal origin are strongly linked with that origin's image (Clifton, 2014). Accordingly, can people be segmented based on their level of enthusiasm for purchasing products associated with a certain country's image? From a tourism point of view, Fourie and Santana-Gallego (2013, p. 417) investigated a cultural affinity construct, which they defined as 'the propensity to travel to regions that share some cultural similarities'. They found that it is a determinant in tourists' decisions when choosing travel destinations.

In sum, destination managers face many challenges. These challenges are not easy to overcome, especially when the current destination image is problematic. Tackling these challenges by repositioning and rebranding such destinations requires huge efforts.

While country of origin (COO) is a well-researched global marketing construct, it 'remains a complex construct' (Rosenbloom & Haefner, 2009, p. 270). Its potential impact forces some firms to eliminate or hide any sign of the 'made-in' label to avoid negative perceptions by potential consumers. Thus, it is not surprising that consumers vary in their ability to accurately recognise a brand's true COO (Samiee, Shimp, & Sharma, 2005). Consider a recent intriguing example from Russia. A consumer faces the caviar shelves in a certain retail store in Moscow. Trying to decide which caviar brand to buy from a variety of local Russian and foreign brands, which brand will be purchased? If you think the consumer will prefer a Russian brand because of the quality and/or tradition, you may be right, as Russia is a well-known COO for caviar products. However, while consumers in such situations might think they are chosing a Russian brand, in reality the caviar might have been made in Italy. A recent Bloomberg Business article (Follain & Rotondi, 2015) revealed that the CEO of the Italian firm, Agroittica Lombarda SpA, which operates one of the world's largest caviar farms, admitted that to get their caviar accepted in Russia they decided that it would be better if Russian consumers would be unaware of its Italian origin. The company realized that many people do not recognize that Italian caviar is of excellent quality, thinking instead that only Russian caviar could be high quality. Thus, Agroittica Lombarda reduced the 'Made in Italy' claim on its packaging. This decision appears to have paid off, as the Russian market has become the most important market for his company after only three years of operation.

In general, Russia is well known for its cozy relationship with Italy (Kirchgaessner, 2015). The close personal friendship of Russian President Vladimir Putin with billionaire Silvio Berlusconi has led the former Italian ambassador to Russia to acknowledge the perception that Italy is more sympathetic than other European countries to Russia. The question, then, is whether Russians' feelings of affinity towards Italy would increase their willingness to buy Italian-made products. At its extreme form, would such an effect carry over to Italian caviar?

The phenomenon described above is known in the academic literature as 'consumer affinity'. To the best of the authors' knowledge, it was mentioned for the first time in an international-marketing context in the book *National Image and Competitive Advantage* (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006). In general, consumer affinity is considered a positive attitude toward a specific focal country. The role of affinity is especially important given that most research on purchases of goods from foreign countries emphasized negative attitudes such as consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and animosity (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998). Additionally, most international-marketing studies on consumer attitudes focused on *either* negative *or* positive attitudes. The implicit assumption in such cases is that people can hold only one of these opposing attitudes. However, there is evidence from the psychology literature that people can harbor love and hate toward the same object at the same time (Ben-Zeev, 2007).

Two goals underlie the development of this paper. First, given the pioneering nature Oberecker et al.'s (2008) study, the paper aims to replicate it. This will serve to demonstrate geographical generalizability. Second, the paper aims to test affinity as a potential marketing tool in the context of tourism and destination branding.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review is provided of the theory and main findings from recent research on consumer affinity (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016; Bandyopadhyay, Wongtada, & Rice, 2011; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006; Nes, Yelkur, & Silkoset, 2014; Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011; Oberecker et al., 2008; Rice & Wongtada, 2007; Wongtada, Rice, & Bandyopadhyay, 2012). Second, the paper reports the findings from a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, which serves to test whether the drivers identified by Oberecker et al. (2008) have cross-national generalizability. The paper then shows how building on and strengthening consumer affinity support Israel's re-branding efforts. Finally, the potential is explored for consumer affinity to aid international marketers and policy makers in overcoming animosity and/or ethnocentrism in country/destination branding situations.

2. Literature review

'The idea that countries have a "brand" or "image" is not new' (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, p. 9). Similar to companies that invest in building powerful brands as a means to attract customers, countries are 'beginning to use branding to help them market themselves for investment, tourism and export' (FutureBrand, 2015, p. 4). Marketers and policy makers should be aware of the fact that a 'made-in' label, which once served mainly as a legal statement that denotes an association with products' place of origin, is now an important signal for consumers. Moreover, 'made-in' information conveys emotional associations, which could explain the popularity of strategies such as the iPhone's label that includes a place of production *and* a place of design. Beyond consumer products, consider the label on the back panel of Zoom's professional recording device, which says: 'Designed and engineered by Zoom Corporation, Japan. Manufactured in China'.

Nevertheless, unlike corporate brands, which can be developed from scratch, countries as brands are viewed by foreign consumers as outgrowths of their culture and history, which make them more complex repositioning targets. Hence, understanding the different meanings of COO and its effects offers countries an opportunity to strengthen their country's brand. Against this background, the recent emergence of the consumer affinity concept is welcome and important as it provides a potential tool for policy makers and marketing managers to overcome negative consumer attitudes toward a specific COO and reposition the country image/brand in the desired direction. This is in line with Klein et al.'s (1998, p. 97) notion that 'international marketers will require an expanding repertoire of tools and constructs to enable them to compete and position their goods more effectively'. More importantly, sources of animosity are mostly managerially uncontrollable whereas, as will be demonstrated in this article, international marketers and country policy makers can manage sources of affinity.

Globalization increasingly affects consumption behaviors worldwide and COO is an important driver of consumers' evaluation of products originating from different countries. Following Dichter's seminal paper (1962), which argued that COO could strongly influence acceptance and success of products, more than 1000 academic papers have discussed COO issues (Usuiner, 2006). Schooler (1965) demonstrated for the first time that COO affects

consumers' product ratings. In line with such early research, COO's impact can be positive or negative depending on the product category and the specific country. Consequently, several consumer attitudes towards COO have been recognized. For example, ethnocentrism refers to a general consumer belief about the appropriateness of purchasing foreign-made products (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and country-specific consumer animosity reflects remnants of antipathy related to historical tensions between two countries (Klein et al., 1998). Numerous studies have confirmed the negative effects of ethnocentrism and animosity on purchases of foreign products. Hence, although globalization made it possible to find foreign brands everywhere, international marketers have been struggling with negative forces that influence consumer attitudes toward foreign brands.

Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) suggested that consumers can be segmented by their attitudes toward their country versus other countries and identified four segments. *Patriots* are ethnocentrics, who feel that their duty is to buy local products only; *cosmopolitans* have no bias toward imported goods; *traitors* have clear preferences for imported goods; and *hostiles* do not buy goods from certain countries they dislike or feel animosity toward them. Intriguingly, Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006, p. 95) argued: 'in some situations, a made-in or associated country level label may trigger an affective, rather than a cognitive response'. Moreover, they noted that consumers might be more willing to consume products and brands from a country they feel affinity towards and gave an example of 'Jews residing in Western countries and purchase Israeli government bonds, even when alternatives bonds have a higher yield, as a token of support of the country' (p. 95). Furthermore, Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) argued that ethnocentric consumers might exhibit *conflicting* attitudes affecting purchase decisions, as they are reluctant to buy foreign goods but, at the same time, harbor positive attitudes toward a specific foreign country. Following Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006), Klein et al. (1998) proposed to consider animosity *and* affinity as polar opposites. This led them to recognize conflicting emotions/attitudes, such as consumers who prefer imported products but feel animosity toward a certain country or consumers who are ethnocentric but feel affinity for another country. Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) did not define affinity conceptually nor test its role empirically. Rather, they called for future research to address 'the question of how consumers with conflicting emotions behave' (p. 100). Asseraf and Shoham (2016) provided a recent example of such a study. They tested an integrative model, examined four attitudes toward foreign products simultaneously, and documented empirically that animosity and affinity can coexist.

Oberecker et al. (2008) focused on consumer affinity in a series of qualitative studies. Recall their definition, which referred to consumer affinity as affect-based feelings of liking for a specific foreign country. Such liking develops from personal experience with a given country, as well as product originating from it. Their qualitative studies included interviews and focus group in several European countries explored seven bases for consumer affinity which they classified into macro (lifestyle, scenery, culture, politics and economics) and micro-drivers/sources of affinity (contact, stay abroad and travel). Their main findings were:

1. **Lifestyle** is reflected by mentality, food, language and personality traits. It was found as the most important source of affinity.
2. **Culture** is reflected in history, values and traditions. Paradoxically, cultural similarity and dissimilarity can induce affinity.
3. **Scenery** (the second most important source of affinity) is related to location, landscape and climate.
4. **Politics and economics** were theoretically assumed as critical drivers of consumer animosity but were unrelated empirically with consumer affinity.
5. **Staying abroad** for longer periods contributes to the development of affinity.
6. **Short travel** such as in holiday trips also contributed to creation of affinity.
7. **Personal contacts** with friends or family abroad was an essential source of affinity.

In sum, Oberecker et al. (2008, p. 49) established that 'consumers do have affinities for certain countries'. Lifestyle, scenery and staying abroad were key drivers for affinity and could be used to direct marketers' efforts in search for affinity for their countries.

Later, Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011, p. 63) abandoned the cognitive approach since 'it might be difficult to fully account for consumer affinity by examining only cognitively based antecedents'. They conceptualized consumer affinity as a high-order, two-dimensional construct capturing sympathy with and attachment toward a foreign country. In support of Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006), they demonstrated that consumer affinity and consumer ethnocentrism are distinct, that they can coexist, and that affinity outweighed ethnocentric tendencies in affecting willingness to buy products from a focal country.

This supported Oberecker et al.'s (2008, p. 51) argument that 'active management of consumer affinities could be an attractive option for overcoming ethnocentric barriers'. It led Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011, p. 62) to conclude that 'a focus on consumer affinity might be promising for counteracting ethnocentric barriers, which are still a major obstacle for buying nonlocal products'. This finding is crucial for marketers as it implies that even if negative attitudes toward the COO of a certain firm exist, they can be overcome.

However, how can international marketing managers create or develop affinity feelings? On which dimensions would they need to concentrate? In general, the authors of this paper agree with Oberecker et al.'s (2008) cognitive approach, which revealed several potential bases for affinity. The paper thus attempts to replicate their qualitative study. Interestingly, Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011) excluded consumer animosity from their model because they believed that consumers rarely experience simultaneous feelings of affinity and animosity for a specific country. In contrast, Asseraf and Shoham (2016); Nes et al. (2014) tested and confirmed the coexistence of animosity and affinity.

Parallel to Oberecker and colleagues, Rice and Wongtada (2007) investigated the conflict in consumers' attitudinal response to foreign brands and concentrated on the animosity-affinity conflict. Their framework, which was based on Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006), envisioned a continuum of attitudes towards an individual country that ranges from animosity to affinity. Their research model included an interaction of general attitudes (ethnocentrism and anti-globalization) and country-specific attitudes (animosity and affinity) toward foreign products. Rice and Wongtada (2007) propositions were not tested empirically. However, they stressed that managers can focus on minimizing the negative consequences of animosity through lobbying activities in the microenvironment.

Wongtada et al. (2012) studied Thai consumers and their affinity and animosity feelings toward the US and Singapore. They focused only on the tensions between animosity and affinity and did not address possible conflicting general (positive or negative) with country-specific attitudes. Their scale differs from Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), which was based on sympathy and attachment. Wongtada et al.'s (2012, p. 161) findings also supported the notion that 'affinity is a unique and independent construct'. Specifically, they demonstrated that while animosity is triggered by political and economic conflicts, affinity is derived

from a focal nation's people and business and education achievements. In addition, they found that affinity outweighs animosity with respect to its impact on product quality judgments (but not on willingness to buy). Thus, they concluded that affinity and animosity affect different stages of the foreign purchase decision.

Nes et al. (2014) contributed to the growing stream of research on affinity. Unlike Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), they argued that consumer affinity is derived from 'appraisal of events concerning the culture and landscape, the people, the music and entertainment and/or politics of the affinity target country' (p. 782). They found that consumer affinity is related to actual product ownership thus demonstrating the managerial relevance of affinity. Contrary to Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), they found an indirect effect of affinity on buying intentions through micro country image, explained by the role of the different affinity dimensions. Nes et al. (2014, p. 783) also appear to have neglected the potential tensions between general and country-specific attitudes but stressed the need for future research to examine 'if there is a potential relationship between product type and the magnitude of the affinity construct'.

Finally, in summarizing and integrating previous findings, Asseraf and Shoham (2016) tested an integrative model, which they termed as the 'tug-of-war' model of foreign product purchases. They combined two general attitudes, namely positive cosmopolitanism (Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009) and negative consumer ethnocentrism, with two country-specific attitudes, namely positive consumer affinity and negative consumer animosity. In addition, they tested the simultaneous effects of these attitudes on product judgment and product ownership in intra- and inter-national contexts. Asseraf and Shoham (2016) based their consumer affinity scale on Oberecker et al.'s (2008) conceptualization and incorporated those macro and micro dimensions that are relevant for intra- and inter-national research. Inter-country, they tested the attitudes of Israeli Jews toward Italian products, as Israelis are known for their high affinity for Italy. Intra-country, they tested the attitudes of Israeli Jews toward Israeli Arabs' products as previous studies demonstrated relatively high animosity towards them (Shoham, Davidow, Klein, & Ruvio, 2006). Contrary to previous research, Asseraf and Shoham (2016) found that consumer affinity affected product-quality judgments and ownership positively. In addition, affinity outweighed animosity with respect to affecting product quality judgments and ownership. Regarding the coexistence of simultaneous positive and negative attitudes toward the same country, their findings documented the existence of a small group of consumers with these contradicting attitudes. This supports Oberecker et al.'s (2008) proposition that the relationship between animosity and affinity is negative but not perfect.

In sum, place branding has become important and policy makers strive to create and improve it. However, history of conflicts and tensions between countries or cultures cannot be changed, so 'changing a country image is a slow long-term process that take decades rather than years' (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, p. 176). For example, while consumer animosity due to historical tensions between China and Japan is well-documented (Klein et al., 1998), shifts in consumer attitudes could occur. A recent Financial Times article (2015) described a sudden rise in Chinese tourists' demand for Japanese products. This led Okamoto's CEO to declare that 'few companies have benefited so spectacularly … from having "Made in Japan" stamped on products' (Lewis, 2015). This attitudinal and behavioral change is strong enough to make the company rethink its plan to move manufacturing operations to China. The company recognized that a 'Made in China' stamp on condoms might kill the appeal of these new customers.

Marketers cannot, however, always wait for decades for such

winds of change. Hopefully, as was shown in the review above, consumers' affinity might be a perfect antidote for negative COO effects. This is why '…industry groups such as chambers of commerce, councils, tourist boards and government agencies are partners in the effort to maintain or improve a country's image' (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, p. 137). Moreover, these partners should pay attention to consumer affinity and especially to its drivers as they might be the keys for a enhancing their country's image.

3. Methodology: the qualitative study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to replicate and test the findings reported by Oberecker et al. (2008) on the basis of their original qualitative studies (Studies 1 and 3) and to try and re-validate their underlying sources of consumer affinity. After 12 in-depth interviews with Israeli consumers, lasting 25–35 min, data saturation was achieved. Eight of the interviewees were male, age ranged from 36 to 52 years and educational level ranged from high school to university degrees.

A semi-structured guideline was utilized based on the seven sets of affinity drivers identified by Oberecker et al. (2008): macro (lifestyle, scenery, culture, politics and economics); micro (stay abroad, travel and contact). All interviews were audio-taped. Full transcripts were prepared and a 'scissor-and-sort' approach was used. All the reasons discussed by the participants as underlying their feelings of affinity were content-analyzed.

In contrast to Oberecker et al. (2008), not all respondents were able to name an affinity country spontaneously. In some cases, respondents felt more open only well into the interview process and several countries were named as affinity countries. USA and Italy were the most frequently mentioned countries towards which respondents felt positive attitudes. For instance, one participants operates an online jewelry shop and caters to a worldwide audience. While most of his merchandise comes from China, during the interview he emphasized that when he has stocks of Italian jewelries he always emphasizes it in his advertisements. Similarly, when targeting American consumers he tries to sell mostly USA-made products as he views COO as a powerful cue for them.

Conversely, Turkey and China were mentioned negatively, which reflects animosity. However, while animosity toward Turkey seems to have risen due to the recent political conflict between Israel and Turkey, particularly following the aftermath of the Marmara Gaza Flotilla, animosity toward China seems to stem from economic concerns.

While drivers' classification mostly followed the categories presented by Oberecker et al. (2008), the study supported the existence and importance of cultural similarity (part of the culture driver) and collective memory (part of the political and economics driver) as drivers for affinity among Jewish Israelis. These surprising findings will be discussed later.

4. Findings

The affinity-related themes that could be replicate from the original study are discussed first. Thepaper then elaborates the differences between the present study and that of Oberecker et al. (2008).

4.1. Lifestyle

Consistent with the original study of Oberecker et al. (2008), the lifestyle of a country was found to be a key underlying base of

consumer affinity. Lifestyle was the most important driver for liking a country; it was mentioned by eight participants. For example, many respondents mentioned food and beverages as important lifestyle facets; 'I am attracted to Italian food' [E1]; 'enjoy drinking wine, eating well…' [G1]. In addition, respondents described citizens of the country for which they have affinity in a favorable way; 'they know how to live' [I1], 'it's a happy nation' [H1]. Language was also mentioned as reason for the existence of affinity; for example 'the Italian language makes me smile' [E11].

4.2. Culture and cultural similarity

A country's history, values and traditions were triggers for creating feelings of affinity in previous research (Bokszanski, 2002; Peng-Er, 2004). Cultural similarity as a driver stems from commonalities, such as a language, values, religion or heroes. Bokszanski (2002) showed that cultural similarity has a positive effect on people's beliefs about other countries. In contrast, Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007) found that cultural similarity does not guarantee affinity feelings and concluded that both cultural similarity and dissimilarity may be equally valid reasons for affinity.

The interviews substantiated the role of culture as an affinity driver, as exemplified by statements such as 'it's nice that they have been able to preserve and respect their tradition' [I3], 'they have a very aesthetic culture' [G3], 'you are standing in front of the Coliseum and you see things' [F3]. These findings are in line with Oberecker et al. (2008).

However, there was surprisingly strong evidence in the present study for cultural similarity as a more important driver for affinity than cultural dissimilarity. Seven participants mentioned cultural similarity as a positive trigger for affinity; only one mentioned cultural dissimilarity as a reason for positive feelings. Examples for the former include 'they have a very close mentality to the Israeli mentality' [F4], 'they are like us, a high temperament nation, what we call open people' [B4], 'you learn to appreciate similarity' [K4], and 'they are cheeky, like the Israelis, in a positive way' [D4]. One participant also mentioned a general similarity in the type of landscape as a positive trigger (e.g. 'Italy, Greece, they have so many things that are similar to ours, so it gives you a feeling of home' [G4].

4.3. Scenery

Not surprisingly, climate and landscape emerged as key drivers for affinity. Similar to Oberecker et al. (2008), our interviewees demonstrated the importance of the landscape, scenery, and climate in creating feelings of affinity. For example, 'beautiful country, their landscape, nature and cities' [B2], 'it's so nice to be in Toscana and to see all these things' [F2] and 'comfortable climate, not too hot and not too cold, everything is green' [E2].

4.4. Politics and economics

Following previous literature (Balabanis, Mueller, & Melewar, 2002; Bokszanski, 2002; Crawford & Lamb, 1981; Mittelstaedt, Hopkins, Raymond, & Duke, 2004; Razov, 2004; Rozman, 2002), Oberecker et al. (2008) expected politics and economics to serve as affinity drivers and recognized two subtypes. The first assumed that 'affinity might be induced by positive perceptions of a country's political, legal, and economic system' (Oberecker et al., 2008, p. 33). The second, termed 'collective memory' can be described as relationships between two countries, which share a history, a border, or economic ties. Whereas Oberecker et al.'s (2008) research did not support the role of politics and economics, our study provides evidence that collective memory plays an important role our context. Collective memory was mentioned by six

participants. For example, one respondent felt affinity for the USA, because of the support it gives to Israel: 'I like the USA; I will always support the team whose country has a good relationship with Israel' [A5]. Another explained: 'for me as an Israeli, it's important that this nation does not hate us, it's very important' [B5]. Other statements in this vein were 'they are a friendly country to us' [C5] and 'Germany is the best friend of Israel today' [A51] and 'the history balance toward Israel is positive' [K5].

4.5. Stay abroad

Only one participant referred to staying in a country for a longer period as a trigger for affinity (for the USA). He stated: 'I lived for several years in the USA, so for me it feels like home' [G6]. We call for future research to re-assess the role played by politics and economics as drivers of affinity to resolve these conflicting findings.

4.6. Travel

In line with previous studies, three participants mentioned short vacations in foreign countries as a base for affinity. Typical statements included 'I love Spain, I just returned from Barcelona' [D7], 'it is a combination of several things, I was there and I will be happy to get back there again' [C7] and 'Italy, I really enjoyed being there' [I7].

4.7. Contact

Only two participants indicated that contact with people from a foreign country was the reason for their affinity. One case was based on a working relationship: 'Of all the agents I worked with, the ones I liked the most were the Italians' [F8]. The second case was based on family ties, 'I love England because I have family there' [K8].

5. Discussion

The insights provided by this study include some surprising findings regarding culture similarity and collective memory that did not emerge in the original study. Hence, further research is needed to establish the relative importance of affinity drivers qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition, this study was conducted in Israel, while the studies of Oberecker et al. (2008) were conducted in Austria and Belgium. Further testing to establish the existence and impact of affinity in other countries is needed for generalization purposes. The surprising role of collective memory as a base for affinity requires further investigations. In addition, the controversial role of culture similarity suggests that future research should examine the degree to which it can affect affinity.

Oberecker et al. (2008) and the present study support the existence of consumer affinity attitudes in different country contexts. Several affinity bases emerged in both studies, namely lifestyle, scenery, culture, stay aboard and travel. Additionally, in both studies, lifestyle and scenery were key bases of consumer affinity. Other key bases of consumer affinity in the Israeli context are in line with Oberecker et al.'s (2008, p. 43) suggestion that 'more specific bases (e.g. a cultural similarity) may be more important for some countries than for others'.

In contrast to Oberecker et al. (2008), the findings of this study suggest that cultural similarity plays a major role in the creation of affinity. Several explanations for the difference exist. First, according to Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011, p. 62), '[i]n all three of our studies, 60% of the respondents named a European Union country as their affinity country, which might be the

consequence of an evolving European identity'. This finding supports our findings that cultural similarity might serve as an important driver for creation of consumer affinity. Second, our findings are in line with previous research in which similarity was important in the context of similarity-attraction and dissimilarity-repulsion models. These models suggest that similarity promotes group attraction and dissimilarity promotes group repulsion (Chen & Kenrick, 2002). Josiassen (2011) illustrated how consumer affinity and animosity focus on consumers' attraction to or repulsion from a foreign country. The finding of this paper regarding similarity might be explained by the fact that Israel is surrounded by Arab countries with whom the relationships are poor at best, possibly creating an 'isolated' feeling among Jewish Israelis that lead them to seek more cultural similarity in foreign cultures.

In search of inter-related themes, this paper found that the participants who mentioned cultural similarity were also identified lifestyle as a base for affinity. Such consumers might be representative of a segment that bases decision-making on 'softer' attributes as opposed to a segment that values functional attributed as a decision-making basis. Indeed, the only two participants who did not view lifestyle as a base for affinity stated at the beginning of their interviews that they were very functional. Examples include 'I am looking for attributes that suit my needs, good ingredients' [F9] and 'functionality, I am defining what I need and then go and look for it' [H9]. While somewhat speculative, the importance of cultural similarity might be higher in countries with warmer, open attitudes and of lesser importance in countries where functional attitudes are the norm. Following Hofstede's cultural dimensions, its importance should be magnified in cultures that tend to femininity (e.g. Scandinavian countries; Hofstede, 2001).

The importance of collective memory as a basis for affinity was also surprising. Collective memory might serve as a *precondition* for affinity's creation, as some participants mentioned that the first question they asked themselves when they evaluate a foreign country is whether they support Israel or not. If this is the case, Israeli consumers' decision-making is not compensatory; rather, it follows an elimination-by-aspects process rule (Tversky, 1972). Elimination-by-aspects establishes minimal cutoff values for the most important attribute. All alternatives are first considered on the most important criterion and alternatives with values below that cutoff are eliminated before the next important attribute is evaluated.

While Oberecker et al. (2008, p. 34) obtained no support for the roles of politics and economy as affinity drivers, they noted that 'at this early stage of research, the lack of empirical evidence should not be interpreted as invalidating this theoretically based category, because this finding might be attributable to the specific research setting involved. In other words, collective memories might play a potentially important role in other country contexts'. The emergence of politics and economy in the present study might be unique to Israel, which has been independent country only since 1948 years. The complicated relationships with its Arab neighbors may have made these drivers more salient than in other countries.

This study belongs to the COO stream of research and it is therefore not surprising that in addition to the affinity drivers on which the study focused, other themes emerged. China as a COO was central in this study and was mentioned by nine participants, mostly in a negative way. For example, 'In the end everything is produced in China … It is harder for me to buy a product that is made in China' [H10]. While some negative attitudes were based on the perceived poor quality of China's products, others exhibited ethnocentric tendencies when discussing China. 'Israel's textile industry was ruined because of China... they produce the Israeli army uniform in China, why? ' [K10] and 'in the past we had Israeli electrical products but today everything is produced in China; if I can still find an Israeli-made product I will prefer it … because I want to support our local economy' [K10]. Another statement reflecting a negative attitude toward Chinese products was 'I will always prefer not to buy made in China' [E10] and 'they are infringing on intellectual property, they are imitators and do not respect human rights' [D10]. It seems that Israeli consumers' decision-making reflects a combination of attribute- and attitude-based choice where China is concerned.

A product ethnicity theme, mentioned by seven participants, was also dominant. This theme was especially prominent when the discussion turned to Arab-Israeli products. Although most participants expressed general negative attitudes toward buying Arab-Israeli goods because of animosity, most qualified these negative expressions with a disclaimer that for certain cases, they preferred Arab-Israeli products. For example, a participant said: 'I will always prefer Jewish-Israeli products' and later added: 'Hummus, I will prefer to eat in an Arab restaurant because it is better' [E9]. Another example of ambivalence was demonstrated by another participant, who said: 'they are our enemies, I don't want to support them, and so I will not enter their shops' but later he added: 'there is no substitute for Arabic food, I will be happy to enter and eat in their restaurants' [C9]. One participant revealed consumer racism attitudes toward Arab-Israelis, saying 'I don't buy products from them, I don't go to their shops but I do buy their traditional Arab products, only their traditional products, nothing more than that' [B9]. Products whose image was strongly associated with a certain country was also observed by Oberecker et al. (2008, p. 41), for instance, Canadian maple syrup, French cheese and German cars, leading them to conclude: 'feelings toward a country do not seem to upwardly bias product perception consistently'.

6. Case study: Israel's re-branding efforts

David Sable, the CEO of Young and Rubicam, declared proudly 'I have an Israeli passport and I visit Israel almost every year' and recalled his service in the Israeli Defense Force (Alexander, 2015, p. 30). He noted that Israel as a brand needs to stop talking about the holocaust/wars and how much moral and ethical Israel is. Rather, Israel should focus on values such as creativity of the start-up nation. This is in line with his view that a country like any product is a matter of branding. In fact, since 2003, a new branding strategy based on the ideas of David Sable was developed in a project called 'Brand Israel Group'. It aims to position Israel as an advanced, democratic, creative, and breakthrough country. This project involved different marketing/strategy consulting agencies, became more known as the 'Brand Israel Project', and was active as such from 2007 to 2010.

The main findings from several surveys and focus groups were a 'growing irrelevance of Israel' (see David Sable on Marketing Israel – YouTube) and a country image identified with war and violence (Alexander, 2015). In addition, findings showed that while Americans can support Israel from a rational point of view, some still did not want to visit or do business with Israeli firms. Sable concluded that strategists and marketers could not change or effect the Israel's policies or the stories about wars and conflict. Instead, Sable argued for an emphasis on changeable attitudes. Using the terminology of this paper, Sable recommended abandoning all efforts to change conflict and war stories to combat negative country connotations and concentrate on developing positive country connotations. In the words of Ido Aharoni, a manager in the 'Brand Israel Group' and an Israeli Consul General, 'we did not want to deny the conflicts or to ignore the geo-politics reality, however, I never met a brand that is successful only by emphasizing its problems and disadvantages' (Alexander, 2015), p.

32. The last notion is line with Asseraf and Shoham (2016) call to invest in creating affinity in order to overcome negative attitudes effects such as animosity and ethnocentrism.

Accordingly, Israel started to invest in a series of marketing efforts in digital channels such as Facebook and Twitter. It also created joint ventures in an effort to rebrand its image and make it more attractive to young Americans under the age of 35. For example, these efforts included the organization of visits to Israel by celebrity writers, chefs, designers and actors in an attempt to develop relationships with key opinion leaders in creative domains. Another activity was a joint venture with the male magazine, 'Maxim'. A special edition of the magazine was developed for this project featuring famous Israeli models such as Gal Gadot and Bar Refaeli. All print ads in this special edition showed Israeli models with swimsuits under the headline 'Israeli Defense Forces' aiming to present the armed forces from a more human point of view.

With these efforts not as successful as hoped for, a branding company named 'Open'— which usually deals with branding projects for consumer goods, retail and start-ups— was hired in 2011. 'Open' created a brand manual for Israel and a new slogan 'Israel – The Land of Creativity'. Brand manuals are tools usually used by multinationals that market brands all over the world. It is an integrative document for all brand materials and guidelines and serves as a means to maintain the same brand identity world-over. Open uncovered that Israel was presented differently across Israeli embassies using different colors, logos, presentation and story-lines. Hence, a new brand language was created and documented in the brand manual used to provide instructions about how tangible elements of the Israel brand should be used in all Israel-as-brand communications.

The new branding of Israel was presented in January 2013 by the Ministry of Foreign affairs under a strategy titled 'creative energy'. According to the CEO of Open, Saar Fridman, they hoped that the new interactive brand language they created in lieu of classical Israeli values (i.e. the holy places and Jewish traditions) would center future positioning efforts on the positive attributes of Israel. An interactive website offers 72 videos for touring itineraries in Israel is an example for the use of scenery and lifestyle as new and major drivers for consumer affinity. Importantly, Fridman noted that as the case with product brands, the new branding effort's success depends on the implementation process.

Notably, Sabel's solution for Israel's image problem requires an effort to change the 'Generation World', a target segment of young cosmopolitans who see themselves as citizen of the world. This idea is in the spirit of Asseraf and Shoham (2016) 'segmentation matrix'. They suggested that international marketers should initially target the cosmopolitan consumers, who are characterized as with consumer affinity for a focal country. Additionally, since lifestyle is a major driver for the creation of consumer affinity (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016), Sabel's advocated biggest selling point of the brand 'State of Israel' is rooted in the fact that Israelis are warm and embracing country. This is reflected in his words 'I've got a Hindu friend and a Catholic friend who had the most amazing experience of their lives when they visited Israel – the embracing, the openness, and the total warmth' (Alexander, 2015, p. 34). Accordingly, Israel launched an exhibit titled 'Open a Door to Israel' (December 2015; see Exhibit 1). The exhibit is meant to provide people 'with a glimpse of Israel and its people, letting them create connections by experiencing, interacting and getting a sense of the values that make up the unique spirit that is Israel' (MFA, 2015). The international launch of this exhibit commenced in January 2016 in Rome with planned stops in prestigious locations around the globe including Germany, France, Russia, South Korea, Japan, China and the US.

While the above-mentioned series of projects for branding

Exhibit 1. Israel's re-branding efforts in Italy.

Israel did not aim to provide overnight results, there is some evidence that change has begun with Israel's image tied to domains in creative industries such as High Tech and TV. In addition, there is an increase in the number of tourists. According to Ido Aharoni 'the most important number, of course is in the field of tourism. Tourism tell you a lot about the strength of the brand' (Knowledge Wharton, 2015, p. 5). According to a statistical report of the ministry of tourism (Sultan, 2015), the number of visitors to Israel was less than 2 million in 2005 but this increased steadily to 3.3 million visitors in 2014. Other signs for the positive results of Israel's re-branding efforts can be found in the Country Brand Index report. Israel's overall rank was 41 in 2009 but this improved to 26 in 2014; (FutureBrand, 2015). Moreover, according to this report, Israel is among the top five countries most likely to see an improvement over the next three years. Additionally, the 2015 Global Creativity Index (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2015) ranks Israel as 30th overall (out of 137) and third in the Global Technology Index.

In an interview with Wharton professor David Reibstein, Ido Aharoni stated: 'it is crucial for nations to be proactive in building their brand identity' (Knowledge Wharton, 2015, p. 1). Aharoni stressed the need to manage a problematic country image with tools from psychology and marketing rather than political science. To exemplify how long such a process can be, Aharoni presented the project's actual timeline from its launch in 2003 to its early success by 2009–2010, when there was evidence of 'wide recognition Israel is gaining as a bastion of creativity, whether it's in the field of High tech or even Hollywood. Israel is the third provider to content to Hollywood today' (Knowledge Wharton, 2015, p. 3). However, Aharoni believed that Israel's brand image was even more important. Specifically, he noted that an improved country brand image could strengthen national security due to a strong and vibrant tourism industry. 'Tourism is a huge agent of change. Every person who has a positive experience in Israel becomes a brand ambassador' (Knowledge Wharton, 2015, p. 4). An outstanding example is a recent activity by the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs, which invited delegation of Arab journalists who live in Europe to visit Israel (Ichner, 2016). According to one of these journalists, 'The visit in Israel change the way we treat you… this visit allow us to deeply understand the state of Israel... it will definitely will allow us to present a different image of Israel'.

Finally, Similarly to Sabel, Aharoni stressed that it is very hard to change a problematic country image and noted that 'if you in the field of nation branding do not take a proactive approach and define your own brand identity to the world, your competition will do it for you' (p. 3).

7. Conclusions

7.1. Theoretical implications

This paper found that cultural similarity and collective memory are important triggers of affinity creation. Hence, scholars should consider revising the affinity construct and include these drivers. An updated operationalization should improve predictions for consumers' willingness to buy from a given COO. Moreover, it is suggested that positive collective memory might be a precondition for affinity creation. The proposed Affinity-Animosity-Collective Memory matrix presented below (Fig. 1) represents a possible model of the relationship among these attitudes. For example, accordingly to this matrix, pure affinity can develop only if there is a positive collective memory between the nations/cultures and other affinity drivers are present (Quadrant 2). Conversely, pure animosity will develop if there is a negative collective memory between the nations/cultures as well as other animosity drivers (Quadrant 3). Quadrant 1 and Quadrant 4 present cases where mixed emotions can develop. For instance, a consumer can have affinity feelings for a country as result of admiration for the culture, lifestyle and scenery of a certain country; but, at the same time, the same consumer could exhibit animosity toward the same country because of a negative collective memory between the two nations. From a practical standpoint, the model presented in Fig. 1 can guide managers.

7.2. Managerial implications

Policy makers need to manage destination brands on an on-going basis. For example, Turkey recently launched a new campaign using the slogan 'Turkey, Discover the Potential' and utilized new branding identity and visuals aligned with this slogan. Nihat Zeybekci, Turkey's Minister of Economy noted: 'we realized that a common brand which would contribute to conducting the world's perception of Turkey like an orchestra, was necessary' (Turkey-discoverthepotential.com, 2015). This process involved many Turkish export decision-makers and was dedicated to create a brand of Turkey to represent Turkish products in global markets. As part of this country branding effort, Turkey strives to present a coherent image, rather than have each corporation and institution use different logos, mottos, and promotional approaches.

Likewise, decision-makers in Berlin have become aware of the need for re-positioning of Berlin as a touristic destination. Thus, when Berlin hosted a congress for international association representatives (April 2016) its policy makers used the opportunity

Fig. 1. The 'Affinity/Animosity – Collective Memory' matrix.

to launch a new branding for the city under the slogan 'Charge up! Berlin 365/24′. It aims to position Berlin as a city that is full of life with a wide range of day and night cultural activities. As part of these marketing efforts, a new website was launched under the domain 'visitberlin″ and a new app was developed to help tourist navigate the locations and events the city offers.

Notable, while some have maintained that globalization has made COO information less relevant to buying decisions when foreign products are considered, the authors of this paper believe otherwise. A recent example is Motorola's launch of the Moto X smartphone in 2013. Its advertising campaign underlined one message: 'the only smartphone assembled in the U.S.A.' (Zeman, 2015). This move, which failed eventually in 2015, apparently attempted to build on American consumers ethnocentric tendencies and pull them away from Asian smartphones including the iPhone, which is designed in California but *assembled* in China.

More recently, the Economist published an article titled 'Why Guinness is less Irish then you think' (C. R., 2015). Although Arthur Guinness founded the brewery in Dublin, this unofficial Irish national brand is actually managed from the company's London headquarters since 1932 under the name Diageo. The company even considered to disassociate itself from its Irish roots in the 1980s and re-launch the brand when IRA's terrorism flourished. The article noted that the case of Guinness is but one example of an attempt to disguise COO in an effort to boost sales and concluded that national identity matters as much as ever.

Recent strategic moves in the car industry also support the importance of COO. For instance, in 2005, MG, once a British brand, was bought by China's oldest carmaker NAC and production was moved to China. The company launched the new MG in several countries including Israel in 2012. The company choose a marketing strategy, which emphasized the British heritage of the brand, rather than using a 'Made in China' COO cue. The TV commercial included British visuals, symbols end the accompanying music was by the famous British music band, 'Madness'. The Israeli launch was a total failure most probably because potential buyers could realize from the media that what looked like and was promoted as British was actually a car made in China.

The competition between Portugal- and China-made shoes described in a Bloomberg Business recent article provides another example (Leiber, 2015). According to it, Portugal's 1500 shoe factories have increased the value of their exports by 50% since 2009 by using a branded differentiation strategy rather than competing on prices. This article quoted a Portuguese director in one of the shoemaker firms saying 'Made in Portugal is selling' (p. 3).

In sum, these recent examples provide ample evidence that COO is still important and hence policy makers and practitioners should pay attention to COO-related issues. Taken together, the following managerial recommendations can be made:

(1) **COO is alive and important**. Managers and policy makers should consider the pros and cons of using COO cues based on target markets and desired positioning.
(2) **Market research is important**. Marketing managers should always conduct market research in target countries but should pay special attention to the set of attitudes towards a brand or company's COO. Managers can segment consumers based on their level on cosmopolitanism, ethnocentrism, animosity, and affinity. They need to recognize the 'tug of war' in consumers' minds among these attitudes and additional influences exerted by attitudes such as national identity and consumer racism (Asseraf, 2011). This kind of research might help design different strategies for different consumer segments and 'companies entering or already operating in foreign markets could benefit from targeting consumers who are emotionally bound to the importing country and thus are especially
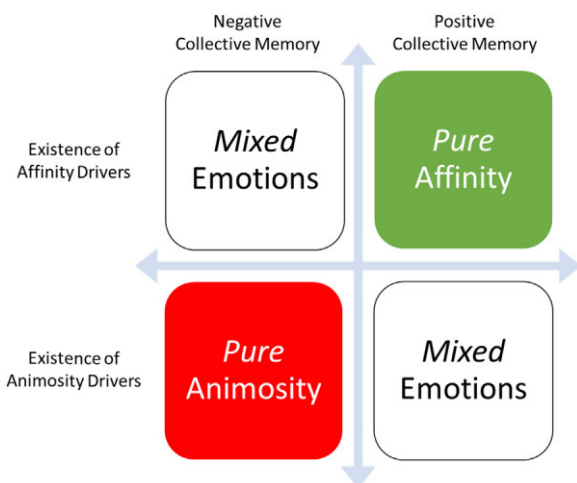
receptive to its products' (Oberecker et al., 2008).

(3) **Consumer affinity is important**. Policy makers and marketing managers should familiarize themselves with the consumer affinity concept because affinity for a country enhances demand for products from that country. It can overcome some of the negative effects of animosity and ethnocentrism as noted by Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011, p. 62): 'a focus on consumer affinity might be promising for counteracting ethnocentric barriers, which are still a major obstacle for buying nonlocal products'.

(4) **Consumer affinity is driven by several sources**. Affinity's drivers can be useful in enhancing affinity and, through it, bolster acceptance of foreign products (see Appendix for illustrations and suggestions). 'In the long run, such efforts might be of considerable value for a country's companies and brands by paving the way for sales in foreign markets' (Oberecker et al., 2008, p. 50).

Changing negative attitudes toward countries/destinations is difficult due to its multi-year basis. This paper recommends an effort to tackle this herculean task by focusing on the development of consumer affinity via its different drivers. In parallel, it should be noted that this is a long process. It is to be hoped that marketers will recognize and use the positive force of consumer affinity as an antidote for common negative attitudes and gain increase in their countries' economic factors and tourism.

Appendix

Drivers of Affinity – Suggestions/Examples for Practitioners.

Drivers of Affinity	Suggestions and Examples for Practitioners
Lifestyle	'A company might launch advertisements for the imported brands that focus on the emotional aspects of the producing country rather than on product attributes' (Oberecker et al., 2008, p. 50). These advertisements might emphasize issues such as 'the great taste of the X food', 'the great warm mentality of X nation' or 'the famous cuisine'.
Culture	Companies can tie products to national themes seeking to enhance consumer affinity. For example, the American car brand, Cadillac, aimed to compete with known luxury German brands, Mercedes-Benz and BMW, used a marketing campaign in Israel that underlined the superiority of the US over Germany in a campaign that stressed that '[i]t's not a coincidence that you never heard of a German space program. Also in the luxury car segment the most powerful player is American – Cadillac'. In addition, 'Companies might draw on testimonials to emotionally appeal to foreign consumers. For example, the United States might evoke positive feelings among Austrians by featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger, an Austrian-American politician and Hollywood 'star'' (Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, 2011, p. 62).
Scenery	Firms could build up on the scenery image of the host country. For example, an Israeli furniture retail recently used a print campaign under the slogan 'Italian summer in Natuchi net' and the visual on the double spread is a beautiful Italian beach with no furniture. Alternatively, market Israel could be marketed as a tourist destination by positioning the country as the 'land of tracks'. Many companies offer guided tracks from the north to the south to audiences outside of Israel (see, for example, Israel-extreme.com).
Collective Memory	Based on the finding of the in-depth interviews, international marketing managers can take advantage of the importance of collective memory. They can emphasize COO when positive collective memory exists or deemphasize COO when collective memory is negative.
Cultural Similarity	Given that cultural similarity drives affinity, it behooves international marketing managers to consider the impact of cultural similarity as a key decision for new market entry. For instance, it could be advisable to first expand or launch products in countries that are culturally similar to currently successful markets. For example, after a successful launch in the US, it might be easier to launch a product in Canada before launching in culturally dissimilar countries, such as Brazil. As Canada and the US are culturally close, strategies that worked in the US might also work well in Canada.
Stay Abroad	Countries should strive to attract people from different professions to spend significant periods visiting them. For example, a co-author of this article spend several months doing post-doctoral research in Lisbon, Portugal. This led his family to visit Portugal and enjoy its culture, cuisine and scenery. This stay abroad developed affinity for Portugal, which might translate later to a preference for Portuguese products.
Travel	Even short travel-based experiences can be useful. For example, a co-author of this article worked in the past as a CEO of a pharmaceutical company. He encouraged key stakeholders from USA, India and Korea to travel to Israel. These stakeholders visited Israel holy places such as Jerusalem and the dead sea and experienced its lifestyle, scenery and culture. Most of them returned home with affinity towards Israel. A second example might involve countries that are tourist attractions. For example, the Italian brand, Fiat, could take advantage of the fact that Israelis visit Italy on vacations, tour its sites, and enjoy its known scenery. Fiat could identify these consumers and direct its campaigns to them. By doing so, they will gain from Israelis' affinity to Italy (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016).
Contact	Family or friends contacts can also be used by marketers. For example, American companies operating in India can take advantage of the fact that many Indians have relatives in US. Policy makers can support indirect approaches for creating affinity. For example, the Israeli blog called 'Bubble Perspective' was launched by Veronika Nocky, a young Swedish woman. She started her blog to show a personal side of things in Israel and to reflect on life of ordinary people in Tel Aviv, 'that has so many wonderful sides to it apart from politics and such'. Such unofficial blogs and other social networks can develop affinity for Israel.

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