

Mere Association of Product Ad and Travel Destination

ABSTRACT

While some recent studies found that product perceptions could engender an attitude towards the product's origin-country as a travel destination (destination-attitude), none have provided an adequate theoretical explanation of the phenomenon. This study develops theory and provides causal evidence that the phenomenon occurs through mere association effect. Four experiments showed that destination-attitude formation occurred via an implicit (i.e., unconscious) process, and the attitude mediated the influence of product image on visit intention. Causal evidence was provided by visual and cognitive load manipulations. Finally, product-country incongruence was found to be a boundary condition. Hence, exporters, tourism policy makers and businesses should collaborate for mutual gains to enhance the competitiveness of the country's exports and tourism market.

Keywords: Mere association effect, halo effect, dual-process theory, product advertising, travel destination image.

INTRODUCTION

If you like Samsung TV, are you more likely to tour Korea? Would a BMW owner want to visit Germany? Evidence from a nascent research stream appears to support the plausibility that a product may evaluatively cue perceptions of the product's origin-country as a travel destination (Elliot & Papadopoulos, 2016; Lee & Lockshin, 2012; Magnusson, Krishnan, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2014). In particular, a seminar study by Lee and Lockshin (2012) conjectured that a *reverse* country-of-origin effect might have occurred. Traditional country-of-origin effect suggests that people use a global evaluation of a country (e.g., Japan is a high-tech country) to engender their beliefs about specific objects from the country (therefore Japanese TVs' quality must be good). Accordingly, a *reverse* country-of-origin halo, as suggested by Lee and Lockshin (2012; also see Motsi and Park, 2020), would then use specific object evaluations to form an image about the country. Lee and Lockshin (2012) further contended that the generalisation would lead to an image about the country as a travel destination (therefore Japan must be an attractive place to tour), rather than as the product's origin (therefore Japan is a high-tech country).

However, these studies have speculated, but not demonstrated, how the phenomenon arises. Also, as we shall elaborate later, halo effect theory alone cannot adequately explain the affect transfer from a product to the product's origin country as a travel destination. Via four experiments, the purpose of this study is to develop theory and empirically demonstrate the psychological mechanism regarding how product image influences *the attitude toward the origin country as a travel destination* (hereafter, simply destination-attitude), and in turn, the intention to visit the country. Specifically, we draw on the theory of mere association effect (Dimofte & Yalch, 2011; Hussinger & Pellens, 2019; Kim & Jun, 2016; Walther, 2002) to validate that the formation of destination-attitude occurs because a mere association exists between the product and travel destination concept via a common (i.e., mediating) third concept.

Furthermore, through visual imagery and cognitive load manipulations, we offer causal evidence that destination-image is formed via an implicit (i.e., unconscious) rather than explicit process. This contrasts with the majority of tourism research, which mainly focuses on explicit attitudinal evaluation of a travel destination (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Um & Crompton, 1990; Wassler, Nguyen, & Schuckert, 2019). Finally, we test the boundary condition whether the mere association effect of implicit destination-attitude effect occurs only when the product is perceived as congruent with its origin country.

Besides these theoretical contributions, this study's findings have important practical implications. As expansive trade globalisation makes many foreign products readily available in a country, it is likely that consumers have experience with the products, but may know little about the products' origin-country as a travel destination. Understanding how product image influences perceived image of a travel destination will guide tourism businesses, tourism promotion bodies and policy makers to work together with exporters for mutual gains. The findings will help these organisations develop effective marketing communication strategies to enhance their competitiveness for exports and to promote the country as a travel destination.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Mere Association Effect

Considerable evidence supports a country-of-origin halo, where a global evaluation of a country influences beliefs about individual products from that country (Semaan, Gould, Chao, & Grein, 2019). Recently, some studies have demonstrated that a *reverse* effect could occur, where a product image is used to shape the perceptions of the product's origin-country (Elliot & Papadopoulos, 2016; Lee & Lockshin, 2012; Magnusson et al., 2014). A plausible

theorisation of this reverse halo is that memory nodes representing the two concepts of product and origin-country may be interconnected bi-directionally; hence activation can flow in either direction (Lee, Lockshin, & Greenacre, 2016; Raufeisen, Wulf, Köcher, Faupel, & Holzmüller, 2019).

However, the activation and bi-directionality of directly connected nodes is predicated on the nodes being conceptually congruent, thereby enhancing processing fluency (Anderson, 1983; Usunier & Cestre, 2007). This means that a reverse effect would only generalise the evaluations of specific products (Japanese TVs possess high quality) to a (congruent) image about the product's origin-country (therefore Japan is a high-tech country); and *not* to the (incongruent) image about the country as a travel destination (therefore Japan must be an attractive place to tour). Thus, we contend that the phenomenon cannot be adequately explained by country-of-origin effect theory. Instead, we assert that the phenomenon occurs by *mere association* (Dimofte & Yalch, 2011; Hussinger & Pellens, 2019; Walther, 2002).

Mere association effect theory is rooted in classical conditioning (Dimofte & Yalch, 2011; Walther, 2002), where early research had already shown that attitudes could be formed by simply pairing unrelated stimuli (e.g., Staats & Staats, 1958). To be specific, mere association effect rests on the evaluative conditioning paradigm of classical conditioning, the associative transfer of valence to a stimulus that results from merely associating that stimulus with other positive or negative stimulus (see De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, (2001) for a review of evaluative conditioning; Ruszel & Gast, 2020). A prototypical evaluative conditioning procedure would pair a neutral object with a positively or negatively valenced object, such that the former object would acquire the latter's valence. This rationale has led to Mexican authorities strongly contesting to change the name of the 2009 "Mexican flu" because associating the flu with Mexico would damage the country's reputation for tourism and trade (Vigsø, 2010). Likewise, China objected to "Wuhan flu" in the recent Covid-19 pandemic because the name would stigmatise the country and deter foreign visitors (Tan, 2020). In both of these cases, the country name ("Mexico" or "China", in these instances) is the shared conceptual node between the disease and the country's reputation. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that such evaluative conditioning could even occur under complete absence of awareness of the contingency between stimuli (Baeyens, Hermans, & Eelen, 1993; Hammerl, 2000). Figure 1 illustrates this process.

Place Figure 1 here

We contend that mere association effect, through evaluative conditioning, can explain how product-image influences destination-attitude. First, as consumers evaluate a product (in a product ad), they form a valenced image of the product. Next, an affect transfer occurs from the product image to the image of the product's origin country; this is equivalent to the reverse country-of-origin effect purported by Lee and Lockshin (2012). Finally, this origin-country image serves as the mediating node to evaluatively condition destination-attitude. In this sequence (see Figure 1), the origin-country image is *merely associated* with the destination-attitude because of the shared concept of 'country.' Consistent with this postulation, Dimofte and Yalch (2011) assert that mere association effect could explain the illogical transfer of affect between seemingly unrelated concepts because of people's failure or inability to ignore unintended automatic associations.

Implicit Processing of Mere Association Effect

Dual-process theories of cognitive functioning (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Konopka, Wright, Avis, & Feetham, 2019) generally hold that two separate systems of reasoning drive different consumer attitudes. System 1 processes are automatic, and

unconscious, and they shape implicit attitudes. System 2 processes are controlled and conscious, and they rely on effortful cognitive processing to drive explicit attitudes. Evaluative conditioning is often regarded as an automatic process that occurs implicitly without conscious awareness of the pairings between stimuli (Ohme & Boshoff, 2019; Walther, 2002; Walther, Ebert, & Meinerling, 2011). For example, Gibson (2008) showed experimentally that participants with neutral brand-attitudes had few or no connections regarding the brand memory, and hence evaluative conditioning built the memory association and shifted the implicit attitudes for the originally neutral brands. Similarly, evidence from advertising research supports that consumers response unconsciously to stimuli even if they are conscious of the stimuli's presence, as demonstrated by studies in supraliminal primes (Fukawa & Niedrich, 2015; Ohme & Boshoff, 2019). Although mere associations would engender a strong implicit attitude, they may also engender explicit attitude (Dimofte & Yalch, 2011). We therefore hypothesise that:

H1a: The effect of product image is stronger on implicit destination-attitude than on explicit destination-attitude.

Since it is well-established that positive attitude toward a destination increases the propensity to visit the country (Lee, Lockshin, Cohen, & Corsi, 2019; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006), thus:

H1b: Implicit destination-attitude has a greater mediating effect than explicit destination-attitude on the relationship between product image and visit intention.

Mere Association is Malleable and can be Disrupted

Some early studies into cognitive learning advocated that implicit attitudes are highly stable mental representations (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). A supporting notion is that, unlike explicit attitudes that develop from exposure to recent information, implicit attitudes are due to early socialisation that forms robust mental association (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). However, more recent studies have demonstrated that both explicit and implicit attitudes are vulnerable to change, especially when exposed to contextual influences (Mann & Ferguson, 2015; Trendel, Mazodier, & Vohs, 2018). For example, Trendel et al. (2018) showed that exposing participants to counterattitudinal (visual) information could reverse formed implicit attitude towards a fictitious brand for which the participants would have no previously stored associations.

The above findings are consistent with key tenets of mere association effect, which posit that merely-associated implicit attitude generated through evaluative conditioning is sensitive to counterconditioning procedures (Baeyens, Eelen, Van den Bergh, & Crombez, 1989; De Houwer et al., 2001). They are also consistent with the constructionist view of attitude, which holds that implicit attitudes are contextually formed evaluations based on momentarily constructed associations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Hughes, Barnes-Holmes, & De Houwer, 2011). Drawing on these studies, we expected that new counterattitudinal information can weaken the implicit destination-attitude.

H2a: Visual counterattitudinal information will weaken the implicit destination-attitude, so that it no longer mediates the relationship between product image and visit intention.

Also, a visual load task hindered people from processing visual counterattitudinal information, and consequently prevented implicit attitude reversal (Trendel et al., 2018, Experiment 3). Accordingly, we expect that a visual load manipulation would block the

processing of the counterattitudinal information to turn off this reduction effect. Together, these manipulations would provide conclusive evidence that it is implicit destination-attitude, rather than explicit destination-attitude, that has the stronger mediating effect between product image and country image. Therefore:

H2b: A visual load manipulation will block the weakening effect visual counterattitudinal information.

Cognitive processing can be blocked by a cognitive load manipulation, thereby hindering explicit attitude formation (Gibson, 2008; Mierop, Maurage, & Corneille, 2020). A cognitive load task that blocks the formation of product image will subsequently prevent the formation of the implicit destination-attitude since an affect transfer (Step 1 in Figure 1) could not take place (Mierop et al., 2020). Consequently, implicit destination-attitude would be weak if there is little or no affect transfer from product image to the shared country-node. Hence:

H3: A cognitive load manipulation will prevent the formation of implicit destination-attitude, so that implicit destination-attitude does not mediate the relationship between product image and visit intention.

Furthermore, the affect transfer process (Step 1 in Figure 1) is predicated on the product and country nodes being conceptually congruent in order to enhance processing fluency (Anderson, 1983; Usunier & Cestre, 2007). Raufeisen et al. (2019) suggest that a necessary condition for image transfer between two independent and distinct objects is that they are cognitively associated; the two objects must share some common semantic, lexical or even phonetic attributes, such that the closer the association, the stronger the transfer effect. Traditional country-of-origin studies also hold that congruence between a product and origin country would favourably bias consumer product evaluation, and vice versa (Usunier & Cestre, 2007). If a product is deemed as not congruent with a country, then the affect transfer in Step 1 (in Figure 1) would be weak or non-existent, and subsequently prevent Step 2 from occurring. This leads us to present the hypothesis that:

H4: Implicit destination-attitude mediates the relationship between product image and visit intention only when the product is congruent with the country.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual model

Place Figure 2 here

METHOD

To test the hypotheses, we conducted four experiments. Experiment 1 showed that product image engendered a stronger implicit than explicit destination-attitude, and only implicit destination-attitude mediated the influence of product image on visit intention. Subsequently, counterattitudinal information weakened the implicit destination-attitude. Experiment 2 then offered further causal evidence by showing that the implicit destination-attitude was not weakened when a visual load blocked processing of visual counterattitudinal information. Experiment 3 demonstrated that blocking the cognitive evaluation of product image by subjecting the participants to a cognitive load would lead to the implicit destination-attitude being blocked. Finally, Experiment 4 showed that the formation and

mediating effect of the implicit destination-attitude would occur only when product-country congruence existed. Table 1 summarises the design and demographics of the experiments.

Place Table 1 here

All the pretests and experiments used different students from the same cohort of undergraduate Business students in a Pakistani university, who volunteered their participation in exchange for course credits. The students were randomly allocated to one of the four experiments at the time that they signed up for the research. The students were told that the purpose of the experiments was to understand consumers' perceptions of advertised products available in Pakistan. Debriefing took place at the end of experiments. Prior to executing the four experiments, we carried out three pretests to identify suitable experiment stimuli.

Pretest 1

The purpose of Pretest 1 was to identify a suitable country and products for the main experiments. The country had to be one that the participants had little knowledge about and not have visited in order to response bias. The product had to be one the participants would use and was gender neutral. The authors, in consultation with an academic in the Pakistani university, speculated that tea and Kenya would be suitable choices; tea is commonly drunk among Pakistanis and readily available in Pakistani shops and supermarkets, and students are unlikely to have visited or be knowledgeable about Kenya. A list of possible congruent products (major Kenyan exports: nuts, coffee, gemstones, tea) and incongruent products (leather goods, watches, electrical appliances, telephones) was first developed.

Forty-nine students ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.32$ years, $SD = 1.62$, 61% male) responded to an online survey, where they checked the product most associated and the product least associated with Kenya. Then they rated their familiarity with Kenya (1 = *very unfamiliar* to 7 = *very familiar*) and knowledge about Kenya (1 = *not knowledgeable at all* to 7 = *very knowledgeable*). The results confirmed that most participants (32 out of 49 [65%]) associated tea with Kenya, although participants were unfamiliar with Kenya ($M = 2.06$; $SD = 1.31$) and had little knowledge of that country ($M = 1.92$; $SD = 1.10$). Also, electrical appliances were found to be the least congruent product (22 out of 49 [45%]); this product was later used for Experiment 4.

Pretest 2

This pretest aimed to select suitable product ads. First, three static print ads were developed for a fictitious tea brand (*Ladha*) and three ads for a fictitious electric kettle brand (*Dasara*). In an online survey, 62 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.29$, $SD = 1.46$, 72% male) were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Each group saw one tea ad and one kettle ad (randomly selected and counterbalanced). They rated each ad on four single-item measures (all 7-points except the 5-point ad liking scale): ad liking, ad attitude (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), ad professionalism and realism (Yang & Oliver, 2004).

The first tea ad scored the highest mean values for three of the four items, and it had the highest aggregate mean-score for the four items (3.92). This ad was selected for the first three experiments. Similarly, the second kettle ad was selected for the fourth study, as it scored the highest mean values for three of the four items, and had the highest aggregate mean-score (4.76). Appendix 1 shows the ads for tea and kettle selected for this study.

Pretest 3

Finally, Pretest 3 identified a suitable image to serve as visual counterattitudinal information about the country. Five copyright-free photographs of real scenes in Kenya were

first selected through Internet search. Three showed negative images of the country, such as traffic jams and urban rubbish, while two showed typical tour scenes of wildlife and mountains (see Appendix 2 for examples of ads). An online survey asked 59 participants to rate each of the five pictures regarding their overall attitude toward the country via a single item “*How attractive does this country look to you as a tour destination?*” The means for the two positive images were 5.97 and 5.81 (1 = *unattractive* to 7 = *attractive*), whereas the means for the three negative images were 1.75, 1.68 and 2.64. We picked the picture with the lowest mean score to represent the negative image of Kenya.

EXPERIMENT 1

Procedure

The participants ($N = 86$) performed the experiment in a university computer lab, in two steps. The first step exposed participants to an ad for a fictitious Kenyan tea brand (*Ladha*) with the text: “*Now, take a look at this advertisement about a brand of tea. Then answer the following questions.*” They then rated the ad for ad liking and the product image. Next, under the heading: “*Now, consider Kenya as a tourist destination, and answer the following questions,*” they answered a series of questions about Kenya: explicit destination-attitude, visit intention, and familiarity and knowledge regarding Kenya. Appendix 3 contains the questionnaire items for all experiments.

Finally, following the procedure developed by Karpinski and Steinman (2006), step 1 measured participants’ implicit destination-attitude by completing a single-category implicit association test (SC-IAT). The single category was “Kenya” with two attributes (good/bad). Twenty-one “good words” (e.g., beautiful, fascinating), 21 “bad” words (e.g., dreadful, unattractive) and eight pictures of Kenya (e.g., wildlife safari park, congested streets; see Appendix 2) served as stimuli. In order to prevent response bias, the three types of stimuli were presented in a 7:7:10 ratio, with a pause of 250ms between stimuli. Following the improved scoring algorithm described in Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003), error trials were handled by requiring participants to correct their responses, and recorded with a response of mean latency plus a penalty of 400ms. No trials had latencies greater than 10,000ms and no participants had more than 10% of trials with latency less than 300ms. D-scores were based only on the trials from the two test blocks. The range of d-scores are -2 to 2, where a negative (positive) value indicates a negative (positive) implicit attitude towards the target category.

In step 2, participants were shown a negative image of Kenya, before reporting their explicit attitude, implicit attitude and visit intention again. Of the 86 participants, three had previously visited Kenya, seven reported that they were familiar with Kenya (score > 3.5, mid-point of scale for familiarity with the country), three cases were deleted as outliers (answering ‘7’ across all items), and seven cases were deleted for not completing the entire procedure. After deleting these 13 cases, the final sample size was 66.

Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the key variables in this study. Confirmatory factor analyses supported convergent and discriminant validity ($\chi^2(27, N = 66) = 78.1, p < .001$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .08) (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The reliability for all factors (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .8$) were adequate (Peter, 1979). The variance extracted estimates for all factors (minimum AVE = .76) were greater than .5, and greater than the square of the correlations between any two factors (maximum $r^2 = .28$) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Place Table 2 here

Next, we tested for potential common method bias following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), where every variable in the measurement model was loaded onto a common latent factor (CLF), in addition to loading onto its respective factor. The model with a CLF ($\chi^2(28, N = 66) = 83.97, p < .001$) did not result in a significantly better fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.87, \Delta df = 2; p = .053$), thus suggesting that there was no evidence of common method bias.

Manipulation Checks and Controls

The first manipulation check confirmed that the test country was unfamiliar to the participants ($M = 1.71, SD = .66$; vs. mid-point [4], $t(65) = -28.01, p < .001$). Country familiarity was not correlated with all other variables (all $ps > .17$). These results satisfied the underpinning condition of our hypotheses that participants should be unfamiliar with Kenya, so they could not use their familiarity or knowledge about the country to form implicit or explicit destination-attitudes. The second manipulation check confirmed the negativity of the visual counterattitudinal picture ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.52$; vs. mid-point [4], $t(65) = 5.58, p < .001$). Ad liking ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.36$) was significantly correlated with product image ($r = .68, p < .001$), so we included it as a control variable in this experiment as well as in all the subsequent experiments.

Results

Table 3 shows the results of running Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) with product image as the independent variable, visit intention as the dependent variable, implicit destination-attitude and explicit destination-attitude as the two mediators, and ad liking as a covariate. As H1a predicted, the regression paths showed that product image generated a stronger implicit destination-attitude than explicit destination-attitude. Following (Byrne, 2010), comparing a model with unconstrained regression paths, versus another model with these paths constrained to be equal between product image and implicit destination-attitude, and between product image and explicit destination-attitude, found that the two models differed significantly ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.89, \Delta df = 1; p = .026$). These results supported H1a.

As H1b hypothesised, the mediating effect of implicit destination-attitude was significant (see Table 3). The explicit mediating effect was not significantly different from zero, and unlike the implicit mediator, the input and output paths from the explicit mediator (a_2 and b_2) were also not significant. Full mediation was indicated by the insignificant direct effect of product image on visit intention, after controlling for the two mediators. Table 2 shows that co-linearity did not affect these results, as the highest VIF was 2.05.

Place Table 3 here

In step2 of Experiment 1, implicit and explicit destination-attitude were both measured again after exposing the participants to visual counterattitudinal information. As expected, the targeted visual information weakened the valence of implicit destination-attitude ($t(65) = 2.41, p = .019$ [paired t -test]), and implicit destination-attitude was no longer a mediator, thus supporting H2a (means reported in Table 2). Expectedly, explicit destination-attitude was also significantly lower after exposure to the counterattitudinal image ($t(65) = 6.15, p < .001$ [paired t -test]); this was consistent with Trendel et al. (2018), which showed that visual counterattitudinal information could also weaken explicit attitude.

Discussion

Experiment 1's results supported our theorising that the transfer could be explained by mere association effect. Causal evidence for this mediation effect was provided by the

results in step2, where visual counterattitudinal information weakened the implicit destination-attitude formed in step1, and it no longer mediated the influence of product image on visit intention.

Because mediation tests used regression, their evidence is only correlational, rather than causal (Armstrong, 2012). Also, Trendel et al. (2018, Experiment 3) showed that a visual load task could hinder people from processing visual counterattitudinal information. Accordingly, in the next experiment, we used visual load manipulation to block the processing of the counterattitudinal information, and consequently prevented implicit destination-attitude from weakening. This manipulation provided conclusive evidence that the formation of destination-attitude occurred via an implicit process, as theorised by mere association effect.

EXPERIMENT 2

Procedure

Experiment 2 used the same two-step procedure as Experiment 1, with one exception. At the start of step2, participants were asked to hold a visual load (remember a pattern with seven dots) before being shown the visual counterattitudinal image. One of the 81 participants had previously visited Kenya, seven reported that they were familiar with Kenya (score > 3.5), and seven cases were deleted for not completing the entire procedure, leaving a final sample size of 66.

Manipulation Checks and Controls

A manipulation check confirmed that most participants remembered the visual pattern, and rated the visual load task as difficult ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.87$, vs. mid-point [3], $t(66) = 5.43$, $p < .001$). Another check confirmed the negativity of the counterattitudinal image ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.49$), which was not significantly different from Experiment 1 ($t(130) = -1.21$, $p = .23$). Country familiarity was again low ($M = 2.07$, $SD = .71$, vs. mid-point [4], $t(65) = -22.05$, $p < .001$), and did not correlate with any other variables (all $ps > .34$). Table 5 contains the descriptive statistics and the correlations of the key variables in this study. Similar to the previous studies, CFA confirmed the measures' convergent and discriminant validity and the absence of common-method bias.

Place Table 4 here

Results

Comparing step1 and step2 (see Table 4), implicit destination-attitude did not weaken when participants were exposed to the visual counterattitudinal image while holding a visual load in mind ($t(65) = -1.64$, $p = .105$ [paired t-test]). This result differed from Experiment 1 (cf. Table 2), where the implicit attitude was weakened after exposure to the visual counterattitudinal image without the visual load manipulation. Implicit attitude was significantly more favourable in step2 of Experiment 2 versus step2 of Experiment 1 ($t(130) = -2.26$, $p = .026$). Thus, H2b was supported.

Discussion

Collectively, the findings for Experiment 1 and 2 showed that product image had generated an implicit destination-attitude, as we were able to weaken this attitude using visual counterattitudinal information, as well as blocking its reversal by applying a visual load. To provide further support for the causality between product image and implicit destination-attitude, Experiment 3 used a cognitive load manipulation to block the evaluation

of the product (i.e., Step 1 in Figure 1), which should directly hinder the affect transfer, and subsequently turn off implicit destination-attitude's mediating effect between product image and visit intention.

EXPERIMENT 3

Procedure

Experiment 3 used the same procedure as step1 of Experiment 1, with one difference. Participants were asked to hold a cognitive load (remember an 8-digit number) before being shown the ad. Two of the 83 participants had previously visited Kenya, three were familiar with Kenya (score > 3.5), one case was deleted as outlier (answering '7' across all items) and five did not complete the experiment procedure. After deleting these cases, the final sample size was 72.

Manipulation Checks and Controls

A manipulation check confirmed that most participants remembered the number and rated the cognitive-load task as difficult ($M = 3.67$ on a scale of 1 = *easy* to 5 = *difficult*, $SD = 1.74$, vs. mid-point [3], $t(72) = 5.68$, $p < .001$). Country familiarity was again low ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .606$) and not significantly different from Experiment 1 ($t(136) = .94$, $p = .35$ [independent t-test]). It also did not correlate with any other variables (all $ps > .14$). Table 4 contains the descriptive statistics and the correlations of the key variables in this study. Similar tests as Experiment 1 showed that CFA confirmed the measures' convergent and discriminant validity and the absence of common-method bias.

Place Table 5 here

Results

Table 3 (row 3) contains the results of running the same PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) used in Experiment 1. Consistent with H3, implicit destination-attitude no longer mediated between product image and visit intention. Compared to Experiment 1, product image in Experiment 3 was significantly lower ($t(136) = 2.98$, $p = .003$), and so was implicit destination-attitude ($t(136) = 2.98$, $p = .003$). Importantly, implicit destination-attitude was no longer significantly correlated with product image (cf. Tables 2 and 5). Collectively, these findings suggested that the cognitive load manipulation hindered the formation of a favourable product image and in turn, a favourable implicit destination-attitude.

Additionally, although explicit destination-attitude was significantly lowered in Experiment 3 than in Experiment 1 ($t(136) = -5.30$, $p < .001$), it remained significantly correlated with product image in Experiment 3; this was unlike implicit attitude which had turned insignificant. Similar to Experiment 1, explicit destination-attitude did not mediate between product image and visit intention (Table 3). This further confirmed Experiment 1's findings (for H1a) that product image had a stronger influence on implicit destination-attitude than on explicit destination-attitude.

Discussion

Thus far, the results of the three experiments provide strong support for our premise that the formation of destination-attitude is due to an implicit attitude process. They also supported our theorisation that mere association effect theory could explain this phenomenon. However, we had only used a product (tea) that was congruent with the origin country. The next study tested whether the same effects can be found with a product that is deemed incongruent with the country.

EXPERIMENT 4

Procedure

Experiment 4 used the same procedure as step 1 of Experiment 1, except that the ad was for a fictitious brand of electric kettle (*Dasara*) manufactured in Kenya. This product was determined in Pretest 1 to be incongruent with Kenya, according to our sample population. Three of the 86 participants had previously visited Kenya, seven reported that they were familiar with Kenya (score > 3.5), three cases were deleted as outliers (answering '7' across all items), and three cases were deleted for not completing the entire procedure. After deleting these 16 cases, the final sample size was 70.

Manipulation Checks and Controls

Participants rated the electric kettle as significantly incongruent with Kenya ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.89$ vs. mid-point [4], $t(68) = -2.23$, $p = .029$). Compared to Experiment 1's rating for tea ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.45$), the congruence rating for electric kettle was significantly lower ($t(133) = 5.55$, $p < .001$). Country familiarity was low ($M = 1.88$, $SD = .67$) and not significantly different from Experiment 1 ($t(133) = -1.43$, $p = .15$). It also did not correlate with any other variables (all $ps > .16$). Table 6 contains the descriptive statistics and the correlations of the key variables in this study. Again, a CFA confirmed convergent and discriminant validity. However, the common latent-factor model resulted in a better fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.79$, $\Delta df = 1$; $p = .03$), but inspections of the factor loadings found that no loading had turned insignificant. Consistent with other researchers (Lee, Lee, & Li, 2017; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012), this implied the existence of some common method bias, but it was insufficient to account for the observed relationships among the factors in the model.

Place Table 6 here

Results

Unlike Experiment 1, Experiment 4's implicit destination-attitude did not correlate with product image (cf. Tables 2 and 6). Table 3 (row 4) shows that when the product was incongruent, product image had no effects on implicit destination-attitude, and the attitude did not mediate the relationship between product image and visit intention. These results supported H4, which predicted that mediation of implicit destination-attitude was predicated on a condition of congruence between product and country.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

Given the importance of advancing theory in tourism research (Ritchie, Burns, & Palmer, 2005; Stumpf, Sandstrom, & Swanger, 2016), a key theoretical contribution of this study is in showing the psychological underpinning of how product advertising affects tourism outcomes via implicit attitude in ways unaccounted for via explicit attitude. In the absence of any other information, consumers would generate their image of a product from a product ad. In turn, a favourable product image appears to simultaneously and separately generate a favourable implicit destination-attitude (i.e., attitude toward the product's origin country as a travel destination), which in turn increases intention to visit that country. This key finding adds to prior research showing that implicit attitudes predict the majority of behaviour, which is usually associated with low motivation and opportunity to process information (Perugini, Richetin, & Zogmeister, 2010; Trendel et al., 2018). Indeed, the demonstration of turning on and turning off implicit attitude, via visual imagery, offers highly conclusive evidence for an implicit processing of destination-attitude.

Over the four experiments, we obtained convergent evidence that the affect transfer between two seemingly unrelated concepts (product and product's origin-country as a travel destination) is plausible and explainable by mere association effect. The results of the four experiments supported that imagery-based materials (print advertising and photography) formed and later changed implicit destination-attitude, but not explicit destination-attitude, and implicit destination-attitude mediated the effect of product image on visit intention. They also support past studies that mere association effects are not based on deliberative cognitive processing (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Rydell, McConnell, Mackie, & Strain, 2006), and the effects may be more pervasive than many realise. Similarly, Kottler and Gertner (2002) suggest that as a heuristic shortcut for decisions, a mental halo has wide reaching influence across broad areas including exports and tourism, although they did not test this assertion. However, we identified a boundary condition for creating a favourable implicit attitude: the need for product-country congruency.

An interesting characteristic of evaluative conditioning is its resistance to extinction, that is, the strength of acquired affect between paired stimuli diminish little or not at all over time (Aust, Haaf, & Stahl, 2019; De Houwer et al., 2001). This implies that limited exposures to product ads could have long lasting effects of destination-attitude on memory. Furthermore, repeated ad exposures — even better would be the co-presentations of product and travel ads — would nudge the automatic recall and activation of destination-attitude from memory (Hughes et al., 2011).

Several managerial implications may be gleaned from this study. Our study illustrates the effectiveness of promoting a travel destination by using the country's export products. It therefore seems that emphasising a product's country-of-origin may serve two purposes: one is to infer the product quality as in traditional country-of-origin effects, and the second is to favourably bias the perceived image of the country as a travel destination. Favourable product image is likely to influence visiting intention via an implicit (i.e., unconscious) route. Indeed, implicit attitude may even be more influential in choice decisions, especially when consumers are not consciously aware of the source of this influence (Fitzsimons et al., 2002; Lee & Lockshin, 2012; Lee et al., 2016). Exporters, tourism policy makers and businesses should realise that not only are the products from different foreign countries competing with each other for domestic customers, the foreign countries are also potentially competing through these products for a share of the outbound tourism market. Thus, exporters should collaborate with tourism business and policy makers responsible for tourism promotions for mutual gain.

While some products are already capitalising on the traditional country-of-origin effect (e.g., "Made in Japan" tag or slogan), what they fail to realise and capitalise on is the influence of these logos on tourism marketing. For example, the kangaroo image in "Australian Made" logo has clear links to tourism. As consumers are constantly exposed to foreign products, and their advertisements, products are a cost effective (or even free) source of marketing communications for tourism promotions. This is particularly so as packaging (as in the case of tea in this study) may be an effective channel of marketing communication (Khan & Lee, 2019). However, Experiment 4 suggests that it is important to consider country congruence so that the communications are not counter-productive.

The finding that the influence operates below conscious awareness does not detract from the use of products and product advertising for the purpose of shaping travel destination image. As Ohme and Boshoff (2019), among others (Pozharliev, Verbeke, & Bagozzi, 2017), suggest, advertising can be effective at a low level of consciousness because people can still learn implicitly even at this low level. Similarly, mere association effects are underpinned by implicit attitude especially when conditions hinder people's memory for the exposures (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). This means that even mere exposures to products on

supermarket shelves may also induce the formation of implicit attitude toward the product's origin country as a tour destination.

Future Directions

Several areas are ripe for extending this study's findings. Firstly, future research should test consequential choices (i.e., actual tour behaviour) rather than mere visit intentions, as well as replicate this study using samples with a wider demographic range, in different countries, and with different types of products and marketing communications (e.g., social media and packaging). We deliberately chose a favourable product from an unfamiliar country (tea from Kenya, for potential travellers from Pakistan), so that in the absence of any other cues on which to base their visit intention, our participants would draw on their favourable product image to generate a favourable implicit destination-attitude. A question for future work, then, is whether the processes documented here would differ for consumers with considerable knowledge or first-hand familiarity with the country (e.g., India or the U.S. for Pakistani travellers)?

Potentially, country knowledge forms a spectrum, and somewhere along the spectrum the extent of country knowledge overrides the ability of product image to exert evaluative conditioning via mere association. Alternatively, there may be inverse-U effects of product and country knowledge, such that the middle of either spectrum best amplifies the effect. Competing hypotheses based on variations in product and country familiarity could be a rich basis for future investigations. While we used visual images to target and weaken implicit attitude, visual imagery can be created by concrete words, for example, in radio advertising (Bolls & Lang, 2003). Future research could assess whether abstract or concrete words and/or pictures differ in their impacts on implicit attitude creation and change.

While we applied the mere association effect theory within a general tourism context by looking at the overall destination image, other specific tourism contexts (e.g., astro-tourism or green tourism destination) are further areas that future research can extend and generalise our study.

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Appendix 1. Ads for Tea (Congruent Product) and Kettle (Incongruent Product)



Appendix 2. Examples of Positive and Negative Kenyan Scenes



Appendix 3. Questionnaire Items for all Experiments

Variable	Item Description
Ad liking (5-point) (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007)	Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about the ad? (<i>I dislike it very much...I like it very much</i>)
Product Image (7-point) (Taylor & Bearden, 2002)	I believe the quality of this tea/kettle is (<i>low...high</i>)
	I believe the quality of this tea/kettle is (<i>worse than most brands...better than most brands</i>)
	I believe this tea/kettle has (<i>inferior quality...superior quality</i>)
	Overall, I believe the quality of this tea/kettle is (<i>bad...good</i>)
Explicit destination-attitude (7-point) (Lee & Lockshin, 2012)	Kenya offers exciting and interesting places to visit (<i>strongly disagree...strongly agree</i>)
	Kenya has beautiful scenery and natural attractions (<i>strongly disagree...strongly agree</i>)
	Kenya has exciting nightlife and activities (<i>strongly disagree...strongly agree</i>)
	As a tour destination, Kenya offers good value-for-money (<i>strongly disagree...strongly agree</i>)
	Overall, the image of Kenya as a tourist destination is good (<i>strongly disagree...strongly agree</i>)
Country familiarity (7-point) (Baloglu, 2001)	How familiar are you with the country Kenya (<i>very unfamiliar...very familiar</i>)
	How knowledgeable are you about the country Kenya (<i>not knowledgeable...very knowledgeable</i>)
Visit intention (7-point) (Lee & Lockshin, 2012)	Rate your intentions to tour Kenya (<i>very unlikely...very likely</i>)

Figure 1. Mere Association Effect

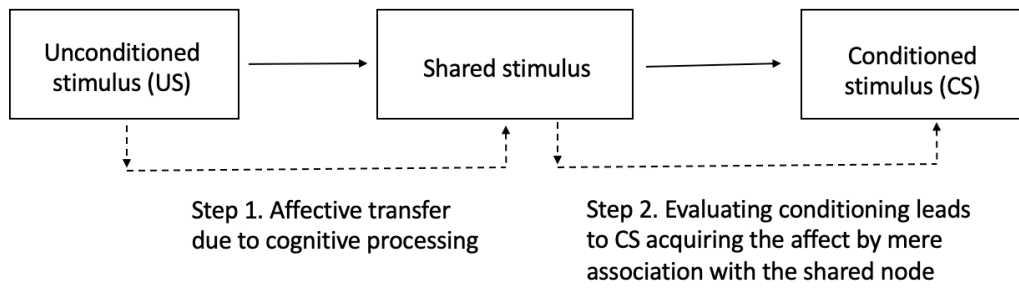


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of this Study

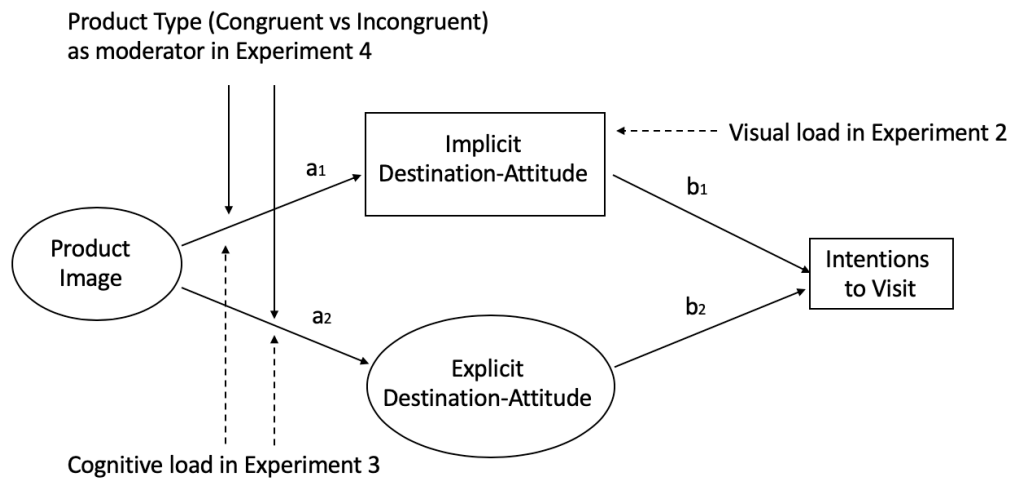


Table 1. Design of Experiments

Experiment	Conditions	Load	Key Measures (step1)#	Counterattitudinal Condition	Load	Key Measures (step2)*	Age Mean (SD, Range) Gender [male/female]
1	Congruent product ad (N=66)*	—	Product Image Explicit DA Implicit DA Visit Intention	Negative image of country	—	Explicit DA Implicit DA Visit Intention	20.98 (1.893, 18-29) [36/30]
2	Congruent product ad (N=66)*	—	Product Image Implicit DA Visit Intention	Negative image of country	Visual load (7-dot pattern)	Implicit DA Visit Intention	22.01 (2.705, 18-29) [34/33]
3	Congruent product ad (N=72)	Cognitive load (8-digit number)	Product Image Implicit DA Visit Intention	—	—	—	22.79 (2.248, 18-29) [54/18]
4	Incongruent product ad (N=70)	—	Product Image Implicit DA Visit Intention	—	—	—	21.49 (2.2, 18-26) [48/22]

Note: Implicit DA means Implicit destination-attitude; Explicit DA means Explicit destination-attitude

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Key Variables in Experiment 1 (N = 66)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	AVE	VIF	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Step 1</i>										
1. Product Image	5.08 (1.30)	.94	.84	1.20	—					
2. Explicit Destination-attitude	5.12 (1.28)	.92	.76	1.53	.47**	—				
3. Implicit Destination-attitude	.15 (.53)	—	—	1.65	.58**	.24	—			
4. Visit Intention	3.89 (1.68)	—	—	1.45	.24	.28*	.34**	—		
<i>Step 2</i>										
5. Explicit Destination-attitude	3.87 (1.57)	.93	.78	1.36	-.002	.35**	-.20	.02	—	
6. Implicit Destination-attitude	-.03 (.41)	—	—	2.05	.36**	.080	.21	-.03	-.15	—
7. Visit Intention	2.89 (1.56)	—	—	1.35	.12	.144	-.12	-.06	.33**	.30*

Note: AVE= average variance extracted; VIF = variance inflation factor; ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 3. Direct and Indirect Effects of Product Image on Visit Intention

	Direct effects coeff (SE)[BCBCI]	Implicit Destination-attitude		Explicit Destination-attitude			
		Indirect Effects coeff (SE)[BCBCI]	a ₁ coeff	b ₁ coeff	Indirect Effects coeff (SE)[BCBCI]	a ₂ coeff	b ₂ coeff
Experiment 1	-.36 (.20)[- .77, .04]	.39 (.13)[.13, .65]	.87**	.45**	.04 (.05)[- .03, .15]	.26	.14
Experiment 2	-.11 (.12)[- .345, .12]	.21 (.07)[.08, .36]	.90**	.31*	.06 (.04)[- .001, .15]	.24	.18*
Experiment 3	-.15 (.12)[- .39, .09]	.06 (.05)[- .02, .18]	.22	.29*	.06 (.06)[- .03, .19]	.28	.21
Experiment 4	.21 (.12)[- .03, .44]	.06 (.05)[- .02, .16]	.28	.20	.04 (.05)[- .02, .17]	.26	.16

Note: The table contains the standardised coefficients of the direct and indirect paths (with boot SE in parenthesis); BCBCI = 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (2,000 bootstrap); significant results are in bold for the indirect effects; coefficients a and b correspond with the model path in Figure 2; mediation path-coefficients are standardised values; ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Key Variables in Experiment 2 ($N = 66$)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	AVE	VIF	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Step 1</i>										
1. Product Image	4.68 (1.09)	.84	.68	2.21	—					
2. Explicit Destination-attitude	4.67 (.95)	.82	.58	1.94	.66**	—				
3. Implicit Destination-attitude	.02 (.43)	—	—	1.29	.31*	.30*	—			
4. Visit Intention	3.62 (1.86)	—	—	1.04	.27*	.35**	.32**	—		
<i>Step 2</i>										
5. Explicit Destination-attitude	3.76 (1.27)	.89	.69	1.40	.18	.14	-.22	.07	—	
6. Implicit Destination-attitude	.12 (.36)	—	—	1.20	-.30*	-.10	.11	-.05	-.11	—
7. Visit Intention	2.89 (1.56)	—	—	1.35	.07	.20	-.09	.12	.45**	-.16

Note: AVE= average variance extracted; VIF = variance inflation factor; ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Key Variables in Experiment 3 (N = 72)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	AVE	VIF	1	2	3
1. Product Image	3.84 (1.01)	.89	.76	1.15	—		
2. Explicit Destination-attitude	3.98 (1.23)	.90	.72	1.10	.30*	—	
3. Implicit Destination-attitude	-.08 (.37)			1.05	.21	.06	—
4. Visit Intention	3.75 (1.73)			1.02	-.02	.20	.27*

Note: AVE= average variance extracted; VIF = variance inflation factor; * $p < .05$

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Key Variables in Experiment 4 (N = 70)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	AVE	VIF	1	2	3
1. Product Image	4.96 (1.47)	.89	.76	1.09	—		
2. Explicit Destination-attitude	4.32 (1.38)	.86	.65	1.14	.24*	—	
3. Implicit Destination-attitude	-.07 (.39)			1.14	.23	.31*	—
4. Visit Intention	3.70 (1.86)			1.02	-.21	.26*	.29*

Note: AVE= average variance extracted; VIF = variance inflation factor; * $p < .05$