

## The Impact of Country Personality Dimensions on Country Attractiveness and Word-of-Mouth: A Cambodian Tourism Case

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### Abstract

Conceptualizing a country as a brand, which requires a marketing promotion, can lead to the idea of relating personality to a country. The current study thus focuses on the dimensions of country personality traits on country attractiveness and word-of-mouth in terms of tourism. A survey was conducted with a sample of Thai undergraduate students and Cambodia as the country context. Data were analyzed by a multiple regression in order to explore the relationship among country personality traits, country attractiveness and word-of-mouth. Results reveal that only the competence and sophistication country personality dimensions significantly impact country attractiveness and word-of-mouth. Furthermore, country attractiveness also partially mediates the influence of the sophistication dimension and fully mediates the influence of the competence dimension on word-of-mouth. These findings provide stakeholders in tourism business, both in public and private sectors, a better understanding of country

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personality so that they can create a marketing campaign for a country by positioning an appropriate country personality.

**Keywords:** Country Personality / Country Attractiveness / Word-of-Mouth

### บทคัดย่อ

หากมองว่าประเทศเปรียบเสมือนตราสินค้าหนึ่งและต้องการทำการตลาดให้กับประเทศแล้ว แนวคิดบุคลิกภาพตราสินค้าจะสามารถนำมาใช้ร่วมกับบุคลิกภาพของประเทศได้ การศึกษานี้ศึกษาถึงอิทธิพลของบุคลิกภาพว่ามีต้านใดบ้างที่มีต่อความน่าดึงดูดใจของประเทศและการบอกรสในด้านการท่องเที่ยว โดยใช้การวิเคราะห์การตลาดแบบพหุคุณในการศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ของบุคลิกภาพประเทศ ความน่าดึงดูดใจของประเทศและการบอกรส การศึกษานี้ทำการศึกษาภัยคุกคามที่มีต่อประเทศและใช้ประเทศกับพูชาเป็นบริบทในการศึกษา ผลการศึกษาพบว่า มีบุคลิกภาพ 2 ตัวจาก 5 ตัวนี้ได้แก่ บุคลิกภาพแบบมีความสามารถ และบุคลิกภาพแบบโกรธมีระดับที่มีอิทธิพลต่อความน่าดึงดูดใจของประเทศและการบอกรสในด้านการท่องเที่ยวของกัมพูชาอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่าความน่าดึงดูดใจของประเทศในมิติบุคลิกภาพแบบมีความสามารถจะทำให้เกิดการบอกรสในด้านการท่องเที่ยวของประเทศด้วย ผลการศึกษานี้ทำให้ผู้มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องในธุรกิจการท่องเที่ยวทั้งในภาครัฐและเอกชน เข้าใจถึงมุ่งมองที่ประชาชนนักธุรกิจหรือนักท่องเที่ยวทั้งในประเทศต่างๆ มีต่อประเทศกัมพูชามากยิ่งขึ้น รวมทั้งสามารถทำการตลาดประเทศโดยการกำหนดตำแหน่งทางการตลาดที่เหมาะสมกับบุคลิกภาพของประเทศได้

**คำสำคัญ:** บุคลิกภาพประเทศ / ความน่าดึงดูดใจของประเทศ / การบอกรส

## Introduction

Brand personality has been explored by marketing researchers for decades (Rojas-Mendez et al., 2004). Previous research in brand personality investigated brands in a range of product categories and pointed out that consumers perceive brands in five personality dimensions: sincerity (e.g. Hallmark), competence (e.g. The Wall Street Journal), excitement (e.g. MTV), sophistication (Guess), and ruggedness (e.g. Marlboro) (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). However, this research tends to emphasize brands predominantly characterized by one single dimension of brand personality (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007) whereas a brand may possess multiple dimensions of brand personality. It is noteworthy that the relative impact of each dimension of brand personality remains largely unexplored, and thus presents an interesting point of study for the present research.

One domain of brand personality that deserves more investigation is the study of country as a brand. When a country is regarded as a brand, brand personality could be instrumental for describing, portraying, or positioning a country. As a consequence, by putting a country's characteristics together and communicating them as human personality traits, a country can be branded. (Polyorat & Sripong, 2015). Personality is drawn from the concept of brand personality, which helps consumers distinguish one brand from another. Relating a country to brand personality is likely to explain how that country is perceived in terms of human personality traits, thereby pointing to some guidance to country branding, including attractiveness and word-of-mouth of that country. Therefore, the objective of the current research is to understand the influence of each dimension of country personality on country attractiveness

and word-of-mouth in the context of Cambodia. The results from the present research are expected to provide several theoretical implications to the fields of country personality traits, country attractiveness and word-of-mouth. In terms of managerial contributions, the expected research outcomes will be beneficial for promoting the appropriate country personality traits, leading to a competitive edge in country branding for tourism. As a result, travel agencies, tourist guides, and national tourism promotion organizations may use the study results as a guideline to formulate their marketing efforts.

## Theoretical Background

### Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to human personality traits associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). It is one of the main parts of brand image apart from the product's physical attributes (e.g., quality of food and drink) and the product's benefits (e.g., enhancing one's health and well-being). As brand personality seems to be more difficult to imitate than tangible product attributes, marketing practitioners often make use of brand personality so as to achieve more sustainable advantages (Ang & Lim, 2006) such as creating product differentiation and positioning. For instance, McDonald, in an attempt to create its brand personality to differentiate itself from rival brands, positions its restaurants as "a kid-friendly place" through several marketing strategies (Knutson, 2000, p. 73). Examples of such strategies include the "I'm lovin it" campaign (Mohammad et al., 2005), the provision of McDonald's happy meals, the partnership with kids' movies, the use of Ronald McDonald character, and

the Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC) that supports ill children and their families (Knutson, 2000).

Through a series of studies conducted with American consumers, Aaker (1997) identifies five dimensions of brand personality scale: sincerity (e.g., down-to-earth, honest, wholesome and cheerful); excitement (e.g., daring, spirited, imaginative and up-to-date); competence (e.g., reliable, intelligent and successful); sophistication (e.g., upper class and charming); and ruggedness (e.g., outdoorsy and tough). These five dimensions are found reliable across the male sub-sample, female sub-sample, younger sub-sample and older sub-sample. Moreover, such dimensions originate from a variety of brands and product categories, thereby suggesting the generalizability of personality scale. In spite of some criticisms, brand personality studies conducted after 1997 are often drawn from Aaker's (1997) framework (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

### Country Personality

Country personality means extending a variety of well-known characteristics of a country to personality in such dimensions as government policy, economy, and tourism. For example, the US is often viewed as possessing an aggressive personality while Japan is a humble one. Country image can be beneficial in marketing a country by positioning that country (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). Country personality helps define the meaning of each country in terms of which personality type they belong to through the eyes of evaluating consumer. Additionally, country personality can explain any perception of a country in such aspects as the overall impression and **the effect of country-of-origin, including tourist destinations** (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). In

other words, seeing a country-as-brand (country branding) is significant for country marketing because it can predict the future of a particular country. Like a product brand, the brand of a country is aimed to be remembered by the general public, especially business people, investors and tourists, which can bring about income from trade, investment, and tourism from overseas. For this reason, the concept of product brand can be applicable for the country context. It can be related to country attractiveness and word-of-mouth from the consumer perspective as well.

### **Brand Attractiveness**

The extent to which a brand is attractive, favorable, and distinctive (Kim et al., 2001) primarily determines the success of that brand. As an example, Gonzalez-Benito, Martinez-Ruiz, and Molla-Descals (2008) identify the positive relationship between brand attractiveness and market share. Weigold, Flusser and Ferguson (1992), while indicating the positive relationship between price and brand attractiveness, advocate for the favorable impact of brand attractiveness on attitude toward the ad and purchase intention. In light of the previous studies, it is evident that customers are likely to be attracted to a branded product and are willing to pay more for the performance provided by such a brand.

Based on the interpersonal relationships literature, Hayes, Alford, Silver and York (2006), argue that the perceived brand attractiveness may influence the relationship between consumers and brands in a meaningful and predictable pattern. Their research results pinpoint that consumer attitudes toward a brand affect their opinion of the desirability of that brand as a

relationship partner. At the same time, the relationship quality tends to be dependent, to some extent, on the brand's perceived attractiveness. Likewise, the present study relates a country to a brand while drawing on brand attractiveness in order to explain country attractiveness.

As a result, one purpose of the present study is to extend the reviewed literature by examining whether different dimensions of country personality may exhibit different impacts on country attractiveness or not. From the managerial perspective, the results of this research question will provide insights into how to manage country personality of Cambodia to achieve the desirable level of brand attractiveness.

**RQ1:** What are the influences of different dimensions of country personality on country attractiveness?

#### **Word-of-Mouth**

The success of a brand very much depends on its relationship with consumers who, in turn, take part in multiple social networks where they could influence one another through word-of-mouth in terms of consumption attitudes and behaviors (Allsop et al., 2007). Word-of-mouth signifies an informal communication between consumers and consumers on the products or services, but not communication between consumers and marketing organizations such as complaints or promotions (Mazzarol et al., 2007). Word-of-mouth is less expensive than marketing-originated communication (Villanueva et al., 2008), yet more credible (Allsop et al., 2007). This is because the message is delivered in person and the message sender is unpaid and

often places the best interest of the message recipient as the motive for sharing opinions (Etzel et al., 2007).

In light of the significance of word-of-mouth as discussed above, it is reasonable to extend the current literature by examining whether different dimensions of country personality may exhibit different impacts on word-of-mouth or not. The results of this research question will provide an understanding on how to manage country personality of Cambodia in order to elicit word-of-mouth from tourists.

**RQ2:** What are the influences of different dimensions of country personality on word-of-mouth?

Based on the hierarchy of effect models (e.g., Ray, 1973), cognitive responses come before affective responses. As brand attractiveness is likely to be a kind of cognitive responses tourists originates from a brand exposure while word-of-mouth could be considered as a form of affective responses. This suggests that country attractiveness will influence word-of-mouth. Taking this assumption together with RQ1 and RQ 2, this study attempts to find out if country attractiveness mediates the impact of country personality on word-of-mouth or not, as visually displayed in Figure 1.

**RQ3:** Does country attractiveness mediate the impact of country personality on word-of-mouth?

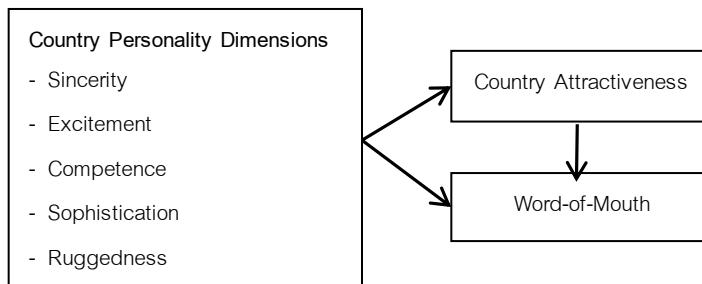


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## Methodology

### Overview

A survey research was conducted to examine the relationships among independent variables (country personality dimensions) and dependent variables (country attractiveness and word-of-mouth). After the reliabilities of the measures used were confirmed, multiple regression analyses were conducted to answer the research questions.

### Samples

Data were collected from 436 Thai undergraduate students (mean age = 20.4 years, female = 76%) attending Surindra Rajabhat University through purposive sampling. The use of student sample has been criticized by many scholars (cf., Sweeny, Soutar & Johnson, 1999) for not being the representative of the population (Wells, 1993). However, there have been a growing number of tourism researchers deliberately choosing students in their work so as to seek a better understanding of the student segment (Gallarza & Saura, 2006). As a result, the use of students as the respondents has become very common for

academics in this context (Witkowski, Ma & Zheng 2003; Knutson 2000; Murase & Bojanic 2004).

In this study, the respondents were asked to complete the survey during regular class hours. They were first informed of the study description, and then asked to complete the country personality measure, country attractiveness measure and word-of-mouth measure. Finally, they provided personal data at the end.

### Measures

All original scales in English were translated to Thai using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). Country personality was measured with Aaker's (1997) 42-item Brand Personality Scale. The psychometric property of this scale with Thai consumers has been validated (Polyorat et al., 2008). The respondents were instructed to think of Cambodia as if it were a person and to rate on a five-point scale (1= not at all descriptive and 5 = extremely descriptive) describing the extent to which each of the 42 personality traits addresses the country. "Sincere", "exciting", "reliable", "glamorous", and "rugged" are examples of items used to assess the country personality dimensions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, respectively.

Country attractiveness was measured with three items adapted from Kim, Han, and Park (2001) also using five-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. "Cambodia is attractive" and "Cambodia is favorable" were examples of this scale.

Word-of-mouth was measured with three items adapted from Kim et al. (2001) also using five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 =

strongly agree. “I recommend Cambodia to other people” and “I talk about my experience with Cambodia” were examples of this scale.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of the variables are displayed in Table 1. All scales exhibit Cronbach's alphas higher than .70, thus suggesting adequate scale reliability (Nunnally, 1970). Further, variation inflation factors were all lower than 3 in all three regression models which were well below the recommended cutoff point of 10 (Neter et al., 1985). This is evidence that there is no multicollinearity problem in interpreting the results from regression parameter estimates.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities

	Mean	SD	$\alpha$
Sincerity	3.36	.53	.81
Excitement	3.15	.59	.85
Competence	3.10	.66	.89
Sophistication	2.82	.74	.88
Ruggedness	3.45	.79	.87
Country Attractiveness	2.91	.87	.86
Word-of-Mouth	2.64	.88	.81

Table 2 Multiple Regression Results

Independent Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Dependent Variable: Country Attractiveness	$\beta$	Dependent Variable: Word-of-Mouth	$\beta$	Dependent Variable: Word-of-Mouth	$\beta$
Sincerity	.04	.67	.06	1.12	.05	.96
Excitement	-.08	-1.20	-.12	-1.76	-.10	-1.47
Competence	.27	3.56**	.16	2.10*	.08	1.11
Sophistication	.27	4.18**	.43	6.76**	.35	5.68**
Ruggedness	-.02	-.47	-.05	-.99	-.04	-.90
Country Attractiveness	---	---	---	---	.28	6.21**

Note: \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .001$  (two-tailed)

(1):  $F(5,430) = 22.98$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .21$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .20$ .

(2):  $F(5,430) = 27.74$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .24$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .24$ .

(3):  $F(6,429) = 31.56$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .31$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .30$ .

Impact of dimensions of country personality on country attractiveness (RQ1). To address this research question, country attractiveness was regressed on sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness dimensions of country personality. The multiple regression results are shown in Table 2. The results reveal that competence and sophistication influenced country attractiveness while sincerity, excitement, and ruggedness did not.

Impact of dimensions of country personality on word-of-mouth (RQ2). To address this research question, word-of-mouth was regressed on sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The multiple regression results are shown in Table 2. The results reveal that competence

and sophistication influenced country attractiveness while sincerity, excitement, and ruggedness did not.

Mediating role of country attractiveness (ATTRACT) on the relationship between country personality dimensions (CP) and word-of-mouth (WOM). To test the mediating role, a series of regression analyses were employed according to Baron and Kenny (1986). First, RQ2 indicates that the competence and sophistication dimension of country personality have a significant impact on word-of-mouth: CP→WOM. Second, in a simple regression analysis, country attractiveness is found to influence word-of-mouth: ATTRACT→WOM. Third, RQ1 indicates that the competence and sophistication dimension of country personality have a significant impact on country attractiveness: CP→ATTRACT. Fourth, to test the mediating role of ATTRACT on CP→WOM relationship (RQ3), word-of-mouth was regressed on both country personality dimensions and country attractiveness. The results point out that the beta coefficient for the sophistication country personality dimension, though still significant, has been reduced, and the beta coefficient for the competence country personality dimension is no longer significant, thus suggesting the partial and full mediating roles of country attractiveness for the sophistication and competence dimensions, respectively.

## Discussions

Results indicate that country personality has an influence on the attractiveness of Cambodia and word-of-mouth of Cambodian tourism. The influential personality dimensions include competence and sophistication. This finding therefore suggests that not all dimensions of country personality are of

equal importance. As a consequence, the marketing efforts must be selective regarding which dimensions to promote or communicate to consumers and marketing budgets should be set accordingly.

In terms of country personality and tourist attractiveness, if Cambodia is perceived as competent and sophisticated, this country will be attractive to consumers or tourists who, in turn, will spread their word of mouth on Cambodian tourist information. Hence, when branding Cambodia, it is important to consider how to properly communicate Cambodia brand to the tourist segment. The finding that country attractiveness is a mediator in this set of relationship further highlights the importance of understanding the mechanism through which country personality influences word-of-mouth in the country tourism context. In this sense, marketers must attempt to make the country more attractive in the target consumer's viewpoint. Otherwise, the consumers may not spread their positive communication regarding the country of interest.

Moreover, the research results reveal that brand personality and brand attractiveness can be well applied to the contexts of country personality and country attractiveness. With this understanding, country marketers or tourism business will be able to promote the two personality dimensions: competence; and sophistication through pictures, verbal language and individuals as follows.

1. Competence: marketers may present this dimension through people, especially charismatic country leaders. Cambodia is one of the countries with outstanding leadership, which could be communicated through the competence in terms of national development and solving crises, including state-of-the art science, technology and innovation. Efficient tourism

management for facilitating tourists (e.g., transport, accommodation, and up-to-date or timely information) could convey the message of competent personality. If Cambodia can position itself as competent, the country will be attractive for tourists who, in turn, will spread their word of mouth about Cambodia.

2. Sophistication: marketer may communicate this personality by promoting luxurious sense of tourist sites and hotels while focusing on services with international standards. Sophistication can be conveyed through formal outfits. In addition to elaborate historic and cultural tourist attractions, presenting shopping centers with world-class brands is another way to convey the sophistication personality of Cambodia to consumers.

In order to gain success in conveying these personality dimensions, marketers need to create regular, continuous and comprehensive campaigns.

### Future Research Directions

The current research collected data with a sample in Thailand only and used a single country (Cambodia) as the country context. It would be interesting to obtain data across different countries for comparison purposes, which will be meaningful for international marketers in creating marketing strategies tailored to each country. Other potential influence factors would be worth studying such as brand loyalty and purchase intention.

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