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National and Country Image in International Marketing and Brand Management: A Bibliometric and Systematic Review of Conceptualisation and Measurement

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Abstract

National and country image have become important constructs in international marketing and brand management because country-related perceptions can shape consumer evaluations of products and brands, perceived quality, brand credibility, purchase risk, and behavioural responses. However, the literature remains conceptually fragmented, with national image, country image, country-of-origin image, product-country image, country brand image, and related constructs often operationalised through different evaluation objects, dimensions, and measurement traditions. This study integrates bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review to clarify the intellectual structure, conceptualisation, and measurement of national and country image from a marketing and management perspective. The bibliometric analysis uses 1,230 Web of Science records to map publication growth, collaboration, journal sources, keyword networks, thematic clusters, and thematic evolution. The systematic review draws on 43 core studies selected from Web of Science and Scopus to examine construct definitions, dimensional structures, scale prove-

nance, theoretical roles, and empirical relationships. The findings show that the field is anchored in international marketing and consumer research while intersecting with tourism, communication, and public diplomacy. They also show that national-level perceptions, product-country associations, affective evaluations, and behavioural outcomes are related but should not be treated as equivalent. For marketing scholars and managers, the review provides a clearer basis for selecting and adapting national image measures, interpreting country-of-origin effects, managing country associations in brand positioning, and linking national perceptions to consumer-based brand equity. The study concludes that stronger alignment among construct definition, measurement content, and managerial purpose is necessary for cumulative theory development and evidence-based international marketing decisions.

Keywords: brand management; international marketing; consumer behavior; national image; country image; country-of-origin; bibliometric analysis; systematic review

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalised economy, national and country images have become increasingly relevant to international marketing and brand management. Nations seek to manage their international reputation and brand, whereas firms operating across borders must understand how country-related associations enter consumer decision-making. As an element of national soft power, national image shapes how a country is perceived by both domestic and foreign publics [1]. In international markets, consumers may draw on country-related associations when evaluating product quality, brand credibility, purchase risk, environmental responsibility, and their willingness to engage with products, brands, people, or organisations linked to a particular nation [2–4]. Therefore, these associations can operate as market signals that influence brand positioning, consumer-based brand equity, and cross-national marketing outcomes. At a broader level, perceptions of a nation may also shape evaluations of its competence, culture, people, responsibility, and international role [5–7]. Thus, national image occupies a conceptually complex position at the intersection of international marketing, consumer behaviour, brand management, communication, and public diplomacy.

Despite its importance, national image has not developed into a conceptually stable construct. Early work in international relations treated national images as mental representations that helped actors interpret other nations and international systems [8, 9]. Marketing research later narrowed this broader idea into country-of-origin effects, product-country image, and made-in cues, where the country is often studied as an informational cue for product evaluation and purchase intention [10–12]. More recent consumer and brand studies have widened the construct through macro and micro country image, country brand equity, destination image, environmental or green country image, consumer animosity, country emotions, and digitally mediated national image [13–16].

This expansion has resulted in substantial conceptual fragmentation. Labels such as national image, country image, country-of-origin image, product-country image, country brand image, and national branding are often used interchangeably, as if they refer to the same concept. However, the objects being measured differ substantially from each other. Some studies have measured broad national-level beliefs about political system, economic development, technology, culture, people, and international responsibility [17–19]. Others focus primarily on consumption-related evaluations, including product quality, innovation, design, prestige, workmanship, and brand preferences [2, 10, 20]. Others incorporate affective responses such as sympathy, affinity, admiration, animosity, perceived threat, fascination, or warmth [13, 21, 22].

Therefore, the resulting problem is more fundamental than terminological inconsistency. Existing research frequently crosses or conflates different levels of analysis, conceptual domains, and construct roles. Broad beliefs about a nation may be combined with product-specific evaluations, cognitive and affective components may be merged with behavioural intentions, and variables that may theoretically function as antecedents, consequences, or neighbouring constructs are sometimes incorporated directly into national or country image measures. Consequently, conceptually different phenomena may be represented by similar labels, while similarly labelled constructs may be operationalised through substantially different dimensions and measurement scales. As Lu et al. [23] observe, definitions of country image have broadened over time without corresponding convergence regarding the conceptual boundaries of the construct.

This fragmentation creates theoretical, measurement, and managerial problems for marketing and brand research. When national-level evaluations, product-country associations, affective responses, and behavioural intentions are incorporated within the same conceptual space, it becomes difficult to determine precisely what is being measured and how the national image differs from its antecedents, transfer mechanisms, neighbouring constructs, and consequences. For international marketing, this ambiguity complicates the interpretation of country-of-origin effects, consumer responses, brand evaluations, and cross-national comparisons. Measurement scales developed for one domain, such as country-of-origin or destination research, may be transferred to another context without sufficient examination of whether the underlying construct remains conceptually equivalent to the original context. The resulting proliferation of related labels and measures raises concerns regarding construct clarity, comparability across studies, cumulative theory development, and the quality of evidence available for marketing management decisions.

Therefore, a systematic re-examination is needed not merely to catalogue existing definitions and measures, but also to clarify how national and country image research has evolved within marketing and adjacent fields, how the focal constructs have been conceptualised and operationalised, and where their conceptual boundaries have become blurred. This is particularly important for international marketing and brand management, where country-related perceptions may transfer to product and brand evaluations but should not necessarily be treated as equivalent to product-country image, country-of-origin effects, brand equity, or behavioural intentions. Clarifying these distinctions can improve both construct selection in academic research and the managerial interpretation of country associations in international brand strategy.

To address these issues, this study integrates bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review (SLR) method. Bibliometric analysis maps the broader intellectual and thematic structure of national and country image research, including publication development, collaboration patterns, keyword networks, thematic clusters, and thematic evolution. The systematic review complements this field-level mapping by examining the core literature, focusing on construct defini-

tions, dimensional structures, measurement approaches, theoretical roles, and empirical relationships. Combining these approaches enables the study to connect the macro-level development of the research field with the micro-level conceptual and operational decisions through which national and country image have been studied.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the bibliometric landscape and intellectual structure of national and country image research?

RQ2: How have national and country image been conceptualised in international marketing and brand management research?

RQ3: What dimensions and measurement approaches have been used to operationalise national and country image and closely related constructs in international marketing and brand management research?

RQ4: What construct-boundary, measurement, and managerial gaps remain in national and country image research in international marketing and brand management research?

This study makes three principal contributions. First, it organizes a fragmented body of literature by clarifying the boundaries between broad national-level image, domain-specific country-related perceptions, and behavioural outcomes. In doing so, it highlights how differences in the levels of analysis and construct roles have contributed to conceptual ambiguity within the field.

Second, the study synthesises the major measurement traditions through which national and country image have been operationalised. By tracing the provenance and application of measures originating in country-of-origin, product country, macro and micro country image, destination, affective, environmental, and related research traditions, this review identifies both areas of conceptual convergence and sources of measurement inconsistency.

Third, the review sets out criteria for deciding whether future research should clarify an existing construct, adapt an established scale, or develop a new measure of national image. These criteria are tailored to the contexts of international marketing, consumer, and brand management. They guard against reducing the national image to a product-quality cue or combining different levels of evaluation without a clear theoretical rationale. They also provide a basis for managers to select evidence that matches specific decisions concerning country-of-origin positioning, international brand strategy, consumer segmentation, and the management of country associations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study combined bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review (SLR) because the two components address different but complementary questions. Bibliometric analysis was used to describe the field-level structure of national and country image research, including its annual growth, contributors, collaboration structures, keyword relationships, and thematic evolution. The SLR was used to examine evidence from individual articles concerning definitions, construct boundaries, dimensions, measurement approaches, theoretical roles, and empirical relationships.

The two components were analytically linked but not treated as interchangeable. Bibliometric analysis provided a macro-level map of the research field, whereas systematic full-text analysis provided the evidence required for conceptual and measurement synthesis. Accordingly, this study used two analytically distinct corpora: an independent Web of Science corpus for bibliometric analysis, and a broader core corpus derived from Web of Science and Scopus for full-text review.

The identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies were reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework [24]. Figure 1 summarises the study selection process.

Records were identified from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection and Scopus, two major multidisciplinary bibliographic databases widely used in systematic and bibliometric reviews [25]. The search covered publications from January 1973 to December 2025 and was last executed on December 17, 2025. Regarding source type, only peer-reviewed journal articles and review articles were included [26], whereas conference proceedings, book chapters, and other non-journal document types were excluded from the analysis. To ensure scientific rigour, only English-language journal articles were collected.

For the bibliometric component, the WoS dataset was used because its exported metadata were compatible with VOSviewer and RStudio Biblioshiny and provided consistent bibliographic information for analysing authorship, titles, keywords, abstracts, affiliations, publication years, cited references, and other bibliometric indicators. These data were used to describe the development of the field and to identify the main intellectual and thematic structures within the literature.

Database-specific search syntax was used. In Web of Science, the search was conducted with the Topic field: TS=("national image" OR "nation image" OR "country image" OR "country-of-origin image" OR "COO image" OR "nation brand image" OR "country brand image"). In Scopus, the same conceptual terms were searched within the title, abstract, and keyword fields using TITLE-ABS-KEY("national image" OR "nation image" OR "country image" OR "country-of-origin image" OR "COO image" OR "nation brand image" OR "country brand image").

The inclusion of multiple related search terms does not imply that these constructs are conceptually equivalent. Rather, the search strategy was deliberately broad to capture the principal terminology through which national and country-

related image phenomena have been examined across relevant disciplines. The differences among these constructs were subsequently examined through systematic coding and conceptual synthesis.

The study employed two analytically distinct but complementary corpora according to the analytical purpose of the bibliometric analysis and the more selectively constructed systematic review components. For the bibliometric analysis, all 1,230 records retrieved from the WoS were retained without further relevance screening. This corpus was used to map the broad intellectual and thematic structure of the research field by RStudio Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. The purpose of this analysis was to examine how research associated with national image related terminology has developed and clustered across disciplinary and thematic domains. Accordingly, records were not excluded on the basis of their subsequent eligibility for the core systematic review.

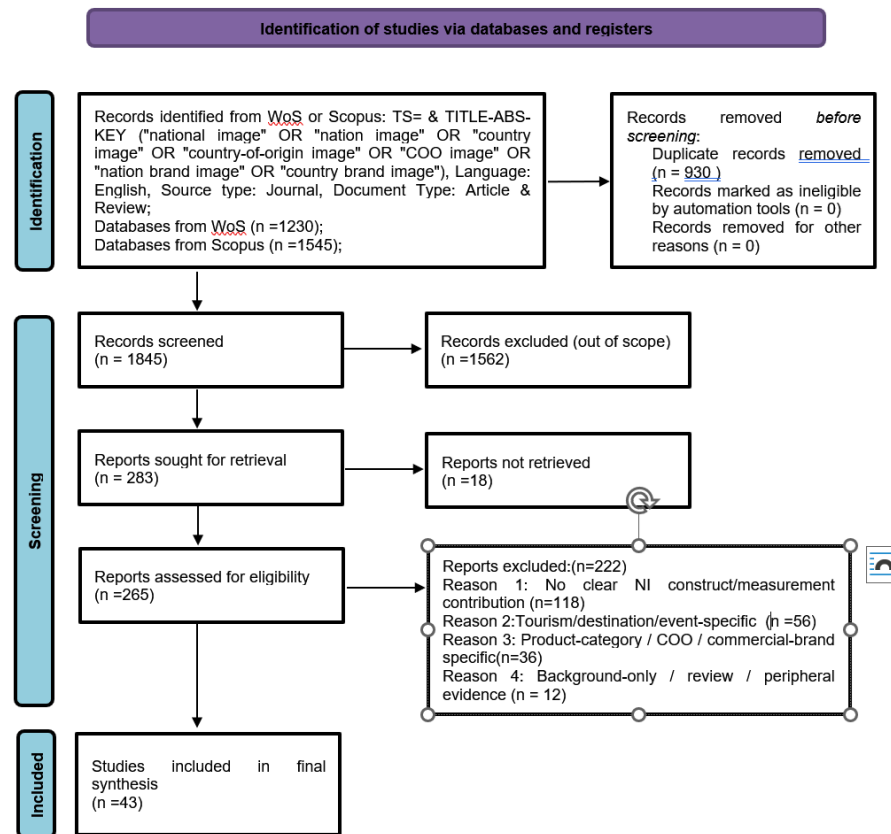


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study selection.

For the systematic literature review, more restrictive substantive criteria were applied to the search results. Studies were considered eligible for the core review when they provided direct and meaningful evidence relevant to at least one of the following areas: first, the definition or conceptualization of national or country image; second, the dimensional structure of the national or country image construct; third, the development, adaptation, or application of a national or country image measurement scale; fourth, the theoretical positioning of national or country image within an empirical model; and fifth, conceptual or empirical evidence relevant to distinguishing national or country image from adjacent constructs in consumer and brand-related research.

Studies were excluded from the core systematic review when the country term functioned only as a geographical descriptor; when no substantive national or country image construct was examined; when the study focused exclusively on a domain-specific construct without contributing to the conceptual or measurement objectives of the review; or when the article did not provide sufficient evidence to support the coding of construct definition, dimensionality, measurement, or theoretical role.

Studies centred exclusively on tourism destinations, event-specific images, narrowly defined product-category or country-of-origin effects, or commercial brand-specific associations were excluded when they did not directly contribute to clarifying national or country image as a broader construct. Similarly, studies in which national or country image appeared only as contextual background or peripheral evidence were excluded from the final core synthesis.

The eligibility criteria were designed not to exclude adjacent research domains automatically, but to distinguish studies that directly informed the conceptualisation and operationalisation of national or country image from those in which country-related perceptions served a substantially different theoretical purpose.

Corpus construction followed the distinct analytical purposes of bibliometric mapping and systematic full-text synthesis.

The bibliometric corpus consisted of all 1,230 records retrieved from the WoS Core Collection. These records were retained without additional relevance screening and were analysed using RStudio Biblioshiny and VOSviewer.

The purpose of the bibliometric analysis was to capture the broad development, intellectual structure, and thematic organisation of research associated with national and country image terminology. Accordingly, the bibliometric corpus was not restricted to studies subsequently included in this systematic review.

For the systematic literature review, database searches initially identified 2,775 records, comprising 1,230 records from WoS and 1,545 records from Scopus. After merging the two datasets, 930 duplicate records were removed, leaving 1,845 unique records for screening.

During title and abstract screening, 1,562 records were excluded because they fell outside the scope of the systematic review, leaving 283 reports for further evaluation. The screening process included an additional assessment of records whose relevance could not be determined conclusively during the initial title or abstract review. Of the 283 reports sought for retrieval, 18 could not be retrieved, resulting in 265 full-text reports assessed for eligibility.

After full-text assessment, 222 reports were excluded. The principal reasons for exclusion were as follows: no clear contribution to national or country image conceptualisation or measurement ($n=118$); tourism, destination image, or event-specific focus ($n=56$); product-category, country-of-origin effect, or commercial-brand-specific focus without sufficient contribution to the focal construct ($n=36$); and background only, review, or otherwise peripheral evidence ($n=12$). Therefore, the final systematic review corpus consisted of 43 core studies.

Accordingly, the 1,230 WoS corpus supported field-level bibliometric mapping, whereas the 43 study corpus supported article-level conceptual and measurement synthesis. The two corpora were connected analytically through the integrative procedure described in Section 2.7, rather than treating their records as interchangeable.

A bibliometric analysis was conducted on the metadata exported from all 1,230 records in the WoS. The analysis examined annual scientific production, leading countries and authors, source distribution, collaboration patterns, keyword co-occurrence, thematic clustering, and thematic evolution. Descriptive indicators, including publication counts, citation patterns, country-level scientific production, and collaboration patterns, were used to characterise field development. Network and thematic analyses were used to identify the main knowledge clusters and their development over time.

The bibliometric results were interpreted as evidence of the field structure rather than direct evidence of construct validity. For example, keyword co-occurrence and thematic maps show how scholars have grouped topics such as country-of-origin effects, country image measurement, nation branding, tourism image, public diplomacy and sustainability. These patterns help locate the systematic review, but they do not resolve the conceptual boundaries of the national and country image.

Thus, the bibliometric findings served as a macro-level foundation for interpreting the development and structural fragmentation of the field, while questions concerning construct definitions, dimensionality, and measurement were addressed through the systematic review of 43 core studies.

The final 43 studies were examined using a structured data-extraction framework. For each study, information was coded concerning the author and publication year, focal construct, construct definition, dimensional structure, scale or measurement source, measurement items where available, response format, sample and research context, theoretical framework, methodology and major findings.

To support systematic comparison across studies, the coding and synthesis applied four principal analytical distinctions. First, the review distinguished national-level image from consumption-level image. National-level image refers to broad beliefs and feelings about a nation, including its people, culture, economy, politics, environment, and international role. Consumption-level image refers to product-country image, made-in image, country-specific product image, and brand-level country associations. Second, the review distinguished image dimensions from behavioural outcomes. Purchase intention, travel intention, willingness to recommend, willingness to invest, and willingness to cooperate were treated as outcomes unless the original study explicitly defined them as part of an attitude structure. Third, the review distinguished general national image from domain-specific image constructs. Green country image, destination image, country personality, affinity, animosity, and digital discursive national image were coded as related domains rather than automatically treated as equivalent to the whole national image construct. Fourth, conceptual articles and empirical studies were used for different purposes. Conceptual articles were used to clarify definitions, taxonomies, and theoretical boundaries, while empirical studies were used to synthesize dimensions, scale families, samples, and tested relationships.

The bibliometric and systematic review findings were integrated to examine whether the structural fragmentation of the field was accompanied by shifts in the meaning and measurement of national and country image. Field-level patterns identified through bibliometric analysis were compared with article-level evidence on construct definitions, levels of analysis, dimensional structures, theoretical roles, and scale provenance.

The synthesis focused on three forms of consistency: whether similar construct labels referred to comparable objects and levels of evaluation; whether the measures used were congruent with the stated construct definitions; and whether

image dimensions were clearly distinguished from antecedents, related constructs, and behavioural outcomes. Recurrent discrepancies in these areas were considered evidence of conceptual drift, measurement transfer, or construct measurement misalignment.

Integrated evidence was used to identify unresolved construct boundary and measurement issues in consumer and brand research. Differences supported by explicit definitions and research purposes were distinguished from cases in which the relationship between construct labels, measurement content, and interpretation remained unclear. These comparisons highlight the research gaps and future directions discussed below.

3. RESULTS

RQ1: What is the bibliometric landscape and intellectual structure of national and country image research?

The bibliometric corpus spans from 1973, when early scholarship examined the relationship between national interest and national image in foreign policy [27], to 2025. As depicted in Figure 2, the evolution of research within this field can be broadly divided into three distinct stages. The stage classification was based on observable changes in annual publication growth patterns, including shifts in publication volume and growth rate over time. The initial phase, spanning from 1973 to 2000, exhibited an annual number of research outputs not exceeding 3 publications per year, with sporadic publications and overall slow growth. The development phase, spanning from around 2001 to 2010, saw annual publications characterised by moderate but sustained growth, with an average annual output of around 12.6 publications per year. A clear shift toward rapid expansion in this field is observed after 2010, marking the onset of the third development stage. The annual publication output exhibited an exponential growth pattern. Specifically, the number of publications increased from 43 in 2011 to 123 in 2025, corresponding to a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 7.8% over the period, indicating a sustained and accelerating expansion of research activity in this field. This growth trajectory suggests progressive consolidation and increasing academic relevance of national image research in recent years.

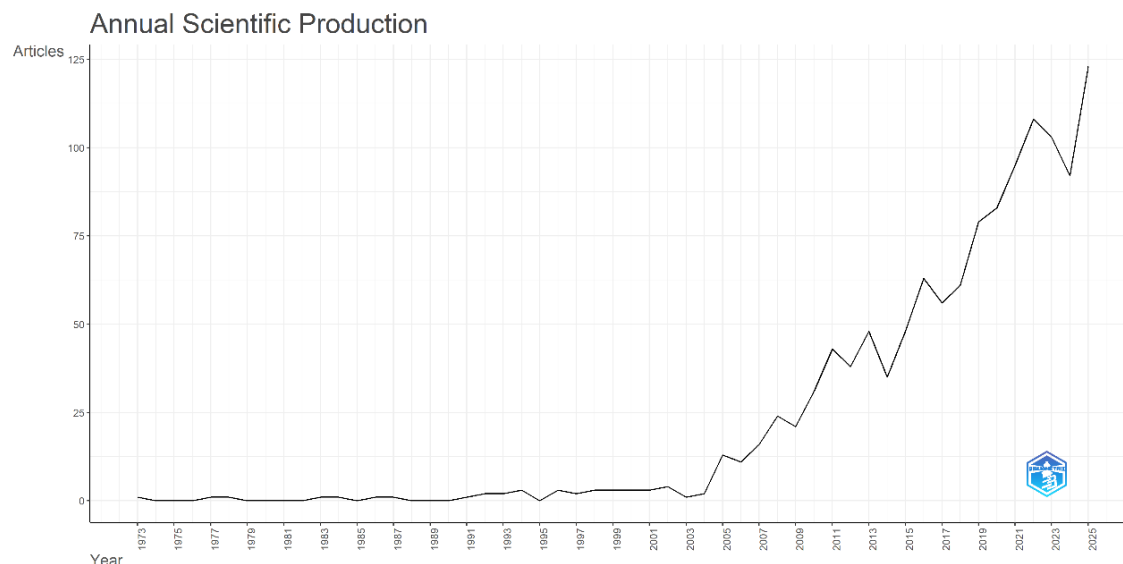


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production

The geographical distribution of scientific production provides insights into the global adoption of this research domain. Following Figure 3, which illustrates the scientific production by country, the USA and China exhibit the highest density of publications, serving as the primary academic hubs. While the United States still occupies a central position as the most prolific contributor, the collaboration network suggests an increasingly internationalised research landscape, with notable participation from both Western countries, like France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and Asian countries, like South Korea, Malaysia, India.

Furthermore, international collaboration is a key indicator of the field's global connectivity. Analysis of the corresponding authors' countries reveals distinct patterns in collaborative behaviours. The ratio of Single Country Publications (SCP) to Multiple Country Publications (MCP) offers a deeper understanding of collaborative behaviours. As shown in Figure 4, China and Korea show a predominance of SCP, suggesting a research ecosystem driven largely by domestic networks and internal collaboration. In contrast, the United Kingdom and Australia demonstrate a significantly higher ratio of MCP relative to their total output. This pattern indicates a stronger tendency towards international partnerships and cross-border knowledge exchange in these regions.

Notably, Turkey and Malaysia exhibit distinct collaborative profiles among emerging contributors. Turkey displays a

remarkable equilibrium, with an almost equal split (50:50) between domestic and international publications. Similarly, Malaysia demonstrates a robust level of international engagement. This balanced composition suggests that scholars in these regions are actively integrating into global research networks, acting as bridges between local contexts and international dialogues.

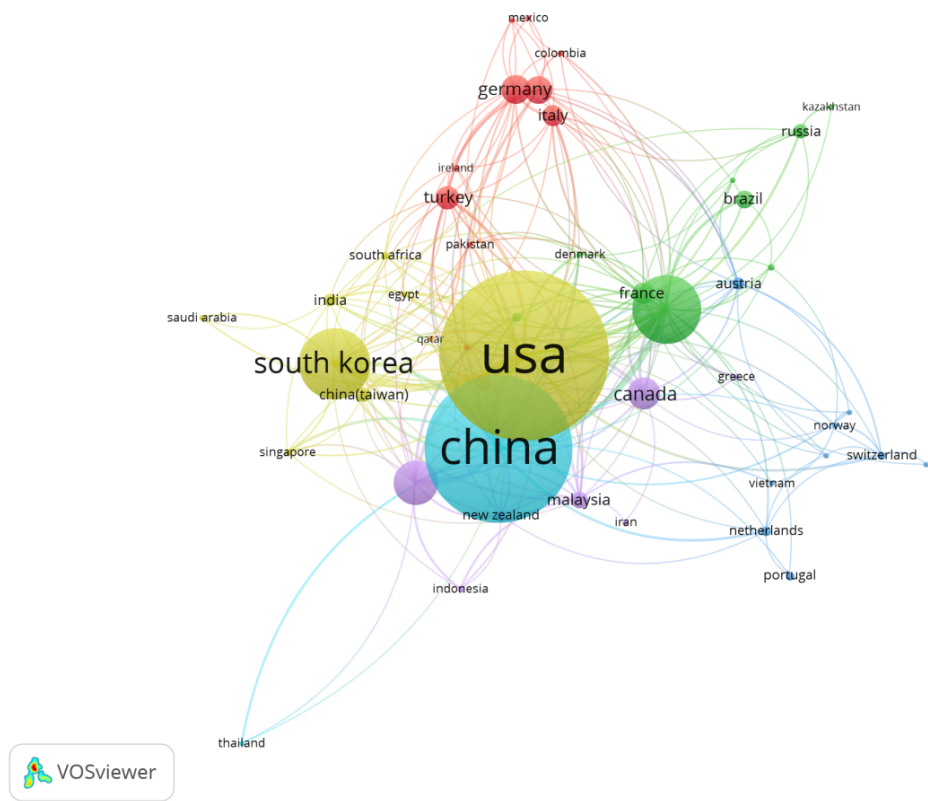


Figure 3. Country Network

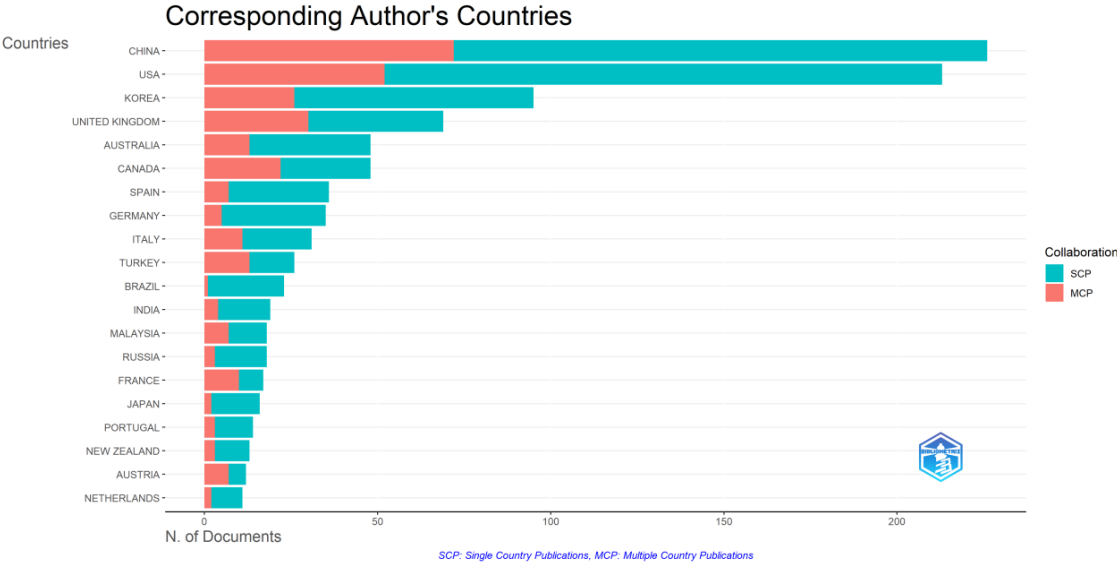


Figure 4. Corresponding Author's Countries

An analysis of publication sources helps identify the core journals and disciplinary foundations of the field. Figure 5 lists the most productive journals. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy stands out as the leading outlet with 51 articles, followed by International Marketing Review with 42 articles and Journal of Business Research with 36 articles. The prominence of these top-tier journals indicates that the research conversation is highly concentrated in high-impact outlets focusing on both niche branding topics and broader marketing theories.

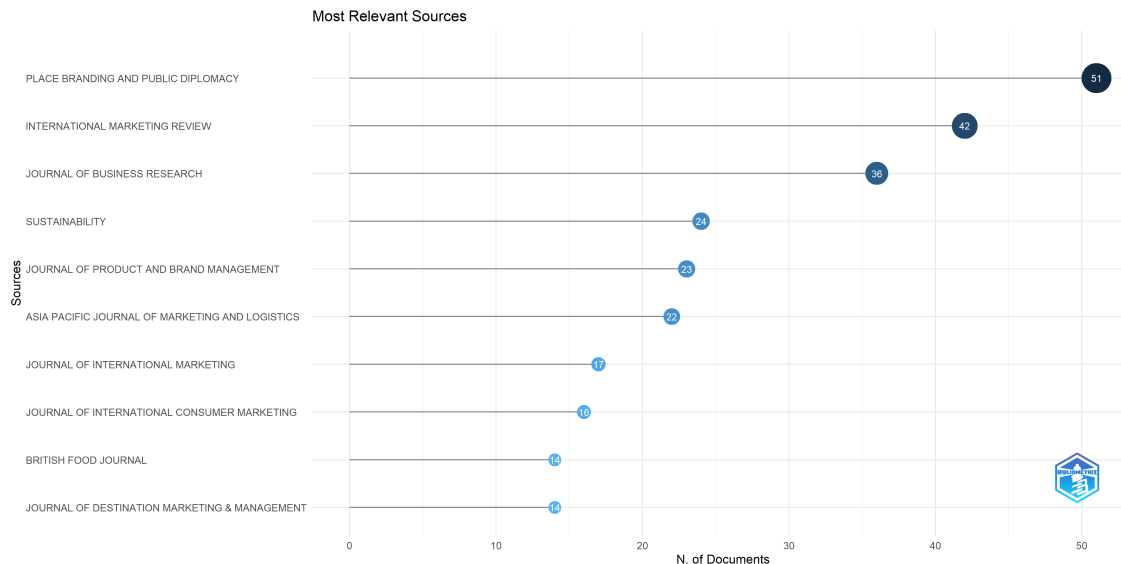


Figure 5. Most Relevant Journal Sources

To further visualise the intellectual structure, a journal co-citation analysis was conducted in Figure 6 using VOSviewer. It is shown that the red cluster, situated on the left, indicates that the national image is mainly explored in the area of business and marketing subjects, reflecting a focus on consumer behaviour, strategic marketing principles, and branding management. This cluster is anchored by journals such as the Journal of Business Research, International Marketing Review, and Journal of International Business Studies. Moreover, the green cluster, which dominates the right side of the network, shows that national image is also examined extensively in tourism and hospitality contexts, including journals such as Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research, and Journal of Travel Research. These sources apply branding theories to destination management, tourist experience and tourist decision-making processes. Acting as a bridge between the business and tourism clusters, the blue group highlights the communicative aspects of the topic, focusing on brand reputation management, national image, soft power, and public diplomacy. This group features specialized journals such as Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, Public Relations Review, and Journal of Brand Management. In summary, Figure 6 demonstrates that the research domain is not isolated, but occupies a significant interdisciplinary intersection among international business, tourism management, and communication studies.

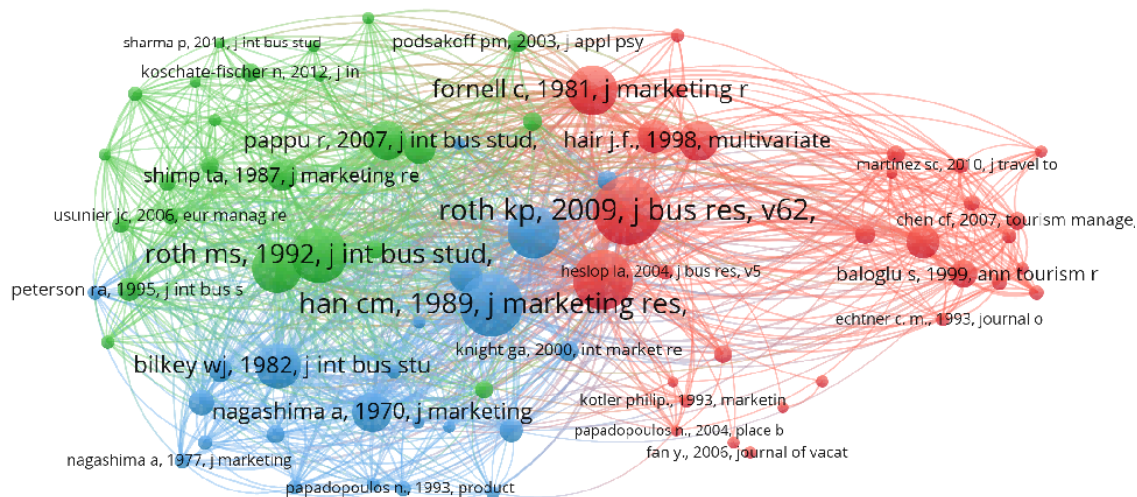


Figure 6. Co-citation analysis of Journal sources

The keyword co-occurrence network is shown in Figure 7, where node size reflects the frequency of a keyword, link thickness indicates the strength of co-occurrence, and colours denote clusters identified by the modularity-based clustering algorithm. The network topology reveals the polycentric intellectual structure of the country-image research domain. At the centre, the node “country image” functions as an umbrella construct connecting three substantive domains—product and country-of-origin research (green), tourism and destination studies (yellow), and national-image and public-diplomacy research (red)—as well as a smaller, cross-cutting cluster of psychological constructs (blue).

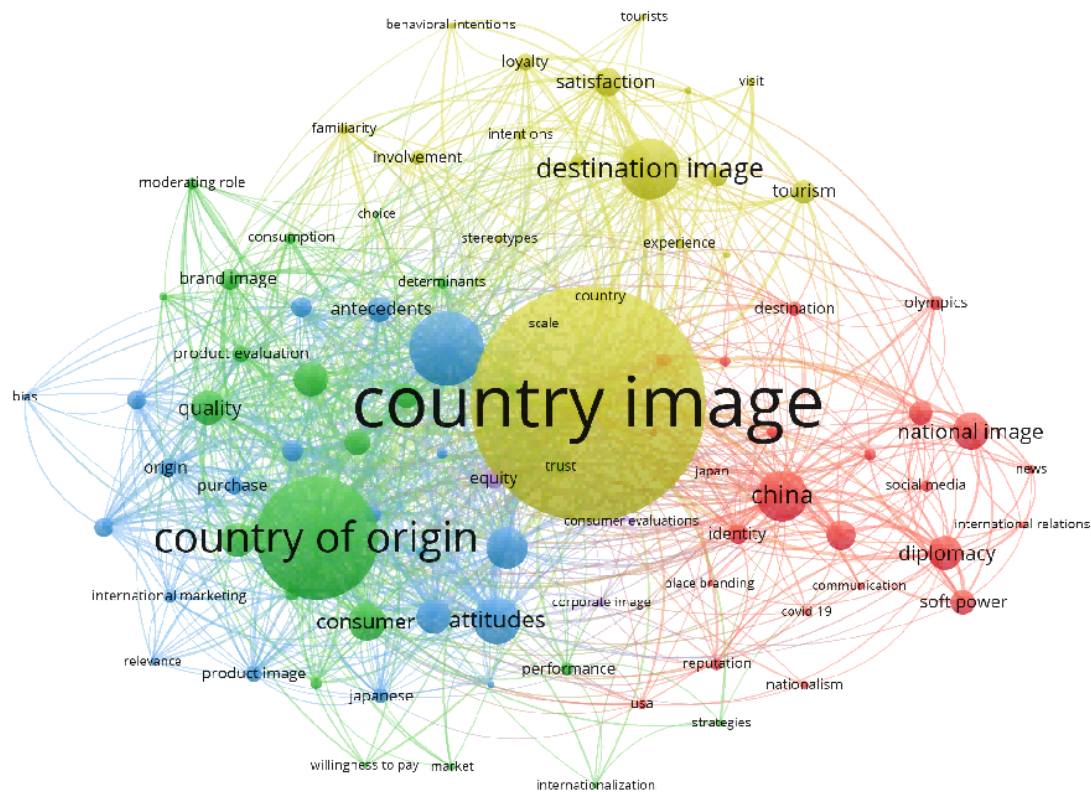


Figure 7. Keywords Co-occurrence Network

Cluster 1 (Green): Product-centric and commercial perspective. The green cluster on the left represents the foundational country-of-origin (COO) Effect. Dominant nodes such as “country of origin”, “brand image”, “quality”, “purchase”, and “willingness to pay” identify this as a market-oriented perspective. In this strand, country image is conceptualised primarily as a concrete product cue that signals quality and reduces perceived risk in consumer decision-making, concerned with the economic utility of a nation’s image. It treats the country as a “brand” that adds or subtracts value to tangible goods in the international marketplace. The proximity of blue nodes such as “attitudes”, “bias”, and “antecedents” underscores the centrality of cognitive psychological mechanisms (e.g., stereotyping, heuristic processing) in explaining how country cues shape product evaluations and consumer choice.

Cluster 2 (Yellow): Experiential and destination-management perspective. The yellow cluster, located in the central and upper part of the map, shifts attention from tangible products to intangible tourism experiences. The central node “country image” is most heavily integrated here, bridging towards “destination image”, “Satisfaction”, “Loyalty”, and “Trust”, indicating the dominance of the tourism and hospitality paradigm. In this research stream, country image is treated less as a transactional signal and more as a holistic experiential construct shaped by visitation, involvement, familiarity, and on-site experiences. The strong co-occurrence among “destination image”, “satisfaction”, and “loyalty” mirrors the destination loyalty models that frame much of this literature.

Cluster 3 (Red): Geopolitical and strategic communication perspective. The red cluster on the right reflects a distinct macro-level strand grounded in international relations and communication studies. Key terms such as “national image”, “soft power”, “diplomacy”, “reputation” and “international relations” highlight a shift from commercial outcomes to questions of political legitimacy and state reputation. The prominence of specific entities (e.g., “China”), together with context-dependent terms like “Olympics”, “news”, and “social media”, suggests that contemporary country image research increasingly examines how mediated communication and major global events influence a nation’s soft power.

Cluster 4 (Purple): Brand-equity bridge. In addition to these three major domains, the map reveals a smaller purple cluster centred on the keyword “equity”. This node co-occurs closely with “consumer evaluations” and “corporate image” and is directly connected to “country image”. This group can be interpreted as a brand-equity-oriented strand of the literature. Research in this stream situates country image within broader models that examine how perceptions of a country contribute to corporate image and overall brand evaluation. Conceptually, this cluster links micro-level consumer responses (e.g., product evaluations or quality) to meso-level constructs such as corporate image and ultimately to macro-level notions of country or nation brand equity. Its intermediate position in the network underscores a bridging role between “Country of origin” focused green cluster and “national image” oriented red cluster.

Cluster 5 (Blue): Cross-cutting psychological mechanisms. Blue nodes such as “attitudes”, “bias”, “antecedents”,

The dynamic evolution of country image research is examined by considering changes in thematic emphasis over time and differences in the structural positioning of research themes. The temporal evolution of key research topics is first analysed using the overlay visualisation in Figure 8, followed by an examination of thematic positioning and emerging topics using the strategic diagram in Figure 9.

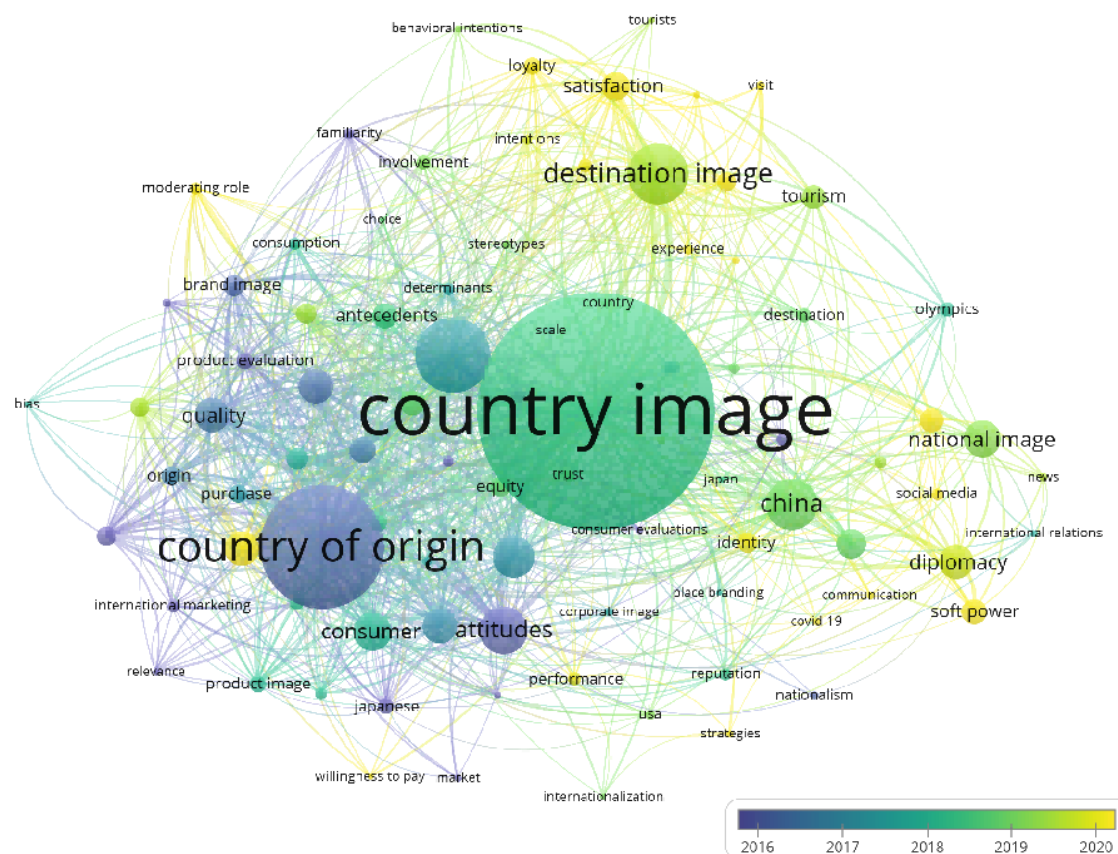


Figure 8. *Overlay visualisation*

Figure 8 presents the temporal distribution of research themes through an overlay visualisation. Node colour represents the average publication year of the documents in which each keyword appears. Dark blue and purple indicate earlier research, while yellow indicates more recent research. Earlier keywords are mainly related to country of origin, consumer attitudes, product quality, and purchase evaluation. This shows that early studies largely examined the country as a product cue in consumer decision-making. Keywords such as country image, destination image, brand equity, and stereotypes appear in the middle of the temporal scale. Their position suggests that the field gradually extended from product evaluation to broader country-related perceptions and experiences. More recent keywords include national image, loyalty, soft power, satisfaction, and mediated communication. These themes show increasing attention to experiential, communicative, and national-level concerns. Overall, the pattern suggests that the meaning and research context of country-image terminology

have broadened over time. At the field level, this change provides initial evidence of potential conceptual drift. However, the overlay visualisation only shows changes in keyword use. It cannot determine whether construct definitions, dimensions, or measurement approaches have also changed. These issues are therefore examined through the SLR.

The thematic map in Figure 9 positions research themes according to their centrality and density, illustrating their relative structural roles within the current literature. Themes related to impact, perceptions, and attitudes are located in the motor-theme quadrant, indicating both high internal cohesion and strong integration with other research themes. This configuration suggests that psychological mechanisms underlying country image have been extensively developed and occupy a central position in the field's current thematic structure.

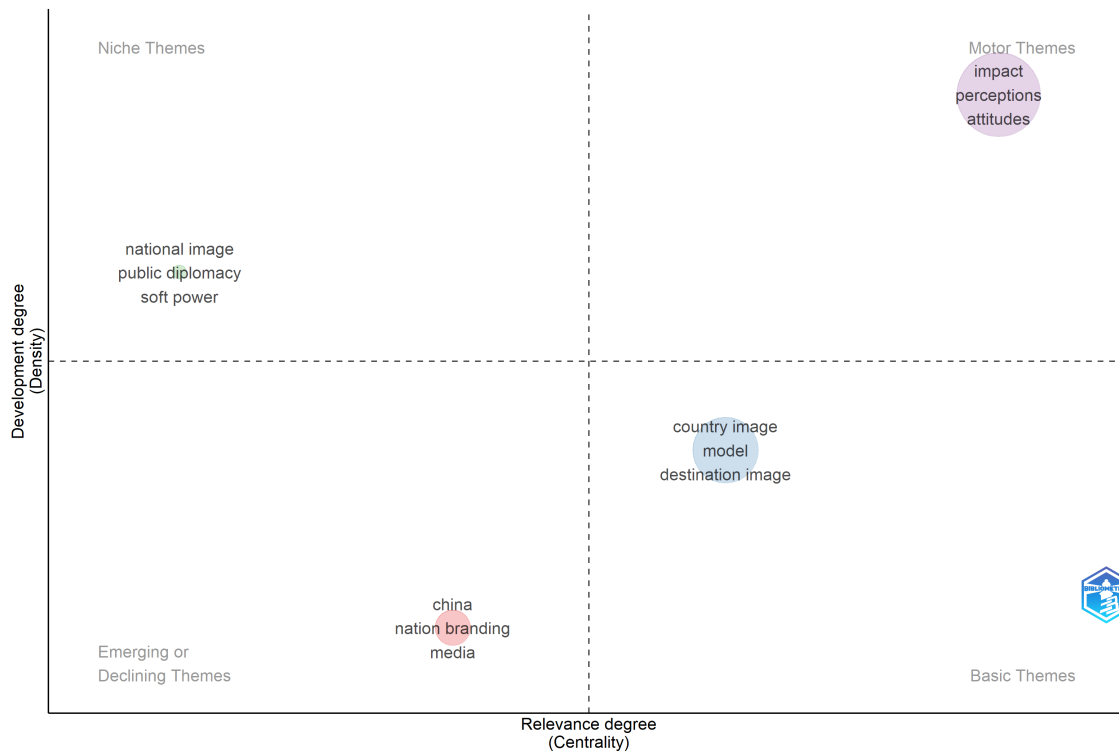


Figure 9. Thematic Map

By contrast, country image, model, and destination image appear in the basic-theme quadrant. Their relatively high centrality, coupled with lower density, implies that these concepts function primarily as widely shared analytical foundations that connect multiple streams of research, rather than as tightly bounded conversations with a highly cohesive internal agenda. Themes including national image, public diplomacy, and soft power are positioned in the niche-theme quadrant, characterised by relatively high density but lower centrality. This suggests that these topics have developed coherent internal research streams while remaining less structurally integrated with the broader literature.

Finally, the cluster comprising China, nation branding, and media is located in the low-density, low-centrality area of the map. This placement indicates limited internal consolidation and weak connectivity to other themes in the current configuration. Interpreted conservatively, it signals that mediated communication and nation-branding topics remain peripheral and fragmented within the thematic structure, rather than establishing a strongly integrated line of inquiry.

In summary, the bibliometric findings reveal three field-level conditions consistent with potential conceptual drift: the overlap between country image and country-of-origin terminology, the separation of the literature into product, tourism, communication, and psychological research traditions, and the temporal expansion of country image discourse from product-related evaluations to broader experiential and national-level concerns. The SLR therefore examines whether these structural and temporal patterns correspond to substantive shifts in construct definitions, evaluation objects, dimensional structures, theoretical roles, and measurement practices.

This systematic review examined the construct-level issues suggested, but not established by the bibliometric analysis. While the bibliometric maps showed overlap among terms and research streams, the full-text analysis assessed whether studies using related labels referred to the same object and defined the construct in comparable ways. Accordingly, the 43 included articles were coded in Table 1 for research method, conceptual focus, dimensional structure, measurements, and reported validation evidence.

The findings indicate that national image has not developed into a single stable construct in consumer and brand research. The comparison shows that national image, country image, country-of-origin image, product-country image,

destination image, country reputation, and country brand equity are connected but not interchangeable. Their coexistence does not, by itself, demonstrate conceptual drift. Some variation reflects legitimate differences in research purpose. Drift is indicated when a shared or similar label is attached to a different referent, dimensional domain, or theoretical role without an explicit redefinition or renewed validation. The original terminology of each study is therefore retained below. No new construct or scale is assumed at the start of the synthesis.

RQ2: How have national and country image been conceptualised in international marketing and brand management research?

The earliest national image literature located the construct at the level of the nation. In international relations and political psychology, national image referred to an organized representation of another country as a political and social entity. Boulding [8] and Holsti [9] associated this representation with beliefs, expectations, and symbolic meanings that guide responses to other nations. Nevertheless, it established a clear focal referent: the image concerned the nation rather than a particular product, destination, or brand.

The country-image literature retained this broad referent in some studies but adopted different focal referents in others. Martin and Eroglu [17] conceptualised country image as perceptions of a country's general characteristics, while Lala et al. [18] similarly treated the country as a broader national environment. In both studies, the focal object was the country rather than a particular product or product category. In contrast, Roth and Romeo [10] examined product-country image in relation to the perceived strengths of products associated with a country. The country was therefore evaluated as a source of product-related associations rather than as a national entity. This distinction does not indicate conceptual drift because the studies used different construct labels. However, it establishes an important boundary between perceptions of a country and perceptions of its products.

This distinction is less consistently maintained in the country-of-origin tradition. Parameswaran and Pisharodi [11] linked general country attributes with general and product-specific evaluations, and related structures were later examined by Knight et al. [28], Hsieh et al. [29], and Pereira et al. [12]. These approaches are appropriate when the research question concerns consumers' evaluations of products associated with a particular origin. However, a conceptual problem arises when the resulting construct is interpreted as an overall national image. In such cases, perceptions of the country and evaluations of its products are placed within the same construct even though they refer to different objects.

Later models attempted to clarify the internal structure of country image, but they used different organising principles. Roth and Diamantopoulos [3] distinguished overall country image, product-country image, and country-specific product image. Brijs et al. [21] drew on semiotics and discourse theory to explain the semantic and pragmatic operation of country image. Their model linked country-specific cognitions with affect and conation in a process that influences product beliefs, evaluations, and purchase intentions. Buhmann and Ingenhoff [6] integrated national identity theory, attitude theory, and reputation management in a four-dimensional model comprising functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional evaluations. These approaches should not be collapsed into one list of dimensions. Some specify what is evaluated, while others specify how beliefs, feelings, and intended responses are related.

The macro-micro distinction addresses the relationship between country-level and product-level images more directly. Pappu et al. [2] treated macro and micro country image as distinct correlates of consumer-based brand equity. Later studies also distinguished general country perceptions from product-, category-, brand-, or domain-specific evaluations [20, 30, 31]. These studies show that nation-level and product-level perceptions are related but not conceptually equivalent. However, they do not specify this relationship in a consistent way. The two levels are variously treated as separate constructs, domain-specific evaluations, or related parts of a broader conceptual framework. The available evidence therefore supports their conceptual separation, but does not justify their automatic integration into a single national image measure.

More recent studies have not extended the national image in a single direction. Some of them developed domain-specific constructs. For instance, Stepchenkova and Shichkova [32] treated country and destination image as distinct but related domains. Thøgersen and Pedersen [31] developed an environmental country image to explain responses to environmentally friendly imported products. In this case, the focal referent is the country's environmental performance rather than the country itself. Other studies have adopted different conceptual lenses. D'Astous and Boujbel [33] represented countries through human personality traits. These studies cannot be treated as equivalent extensions of national image because they either restrict the domain being evaluated or change the conceptual basis through which the country is represented.

Other studies position national image within a causal process rather than adding new content to the construct. Shin et al. [34] examined direct contact as a predictor of national image. Zhang [16] treated social networking site (SNS) reception and expression as communication processes that influence perceptions of Japan and subsequent behavioural intentions. Kock et al. [13] distinguished country-of-origin image from country emotions. These studies assign different theoretical roles to country-related variables. Direct contact and SNS engagement are examined as sources of image formation, whereas country emotions and behavioural intentions are modelled separately from performance-related country images. The next section examines whether national and country image measures include items that represent these related variables.

Table 1. *Conceptualisation and measurement of national and country image and related constructs in the reviewed studies*

Study	Research method	Conceptual focus	Dimensions and measurement
Boulding [8]	Conceptual analysis	Internal representations of one's own and other nations that guide decisions.	Analytical dimensions: territory, hostility–friendliness, and strength–weakness.
Holsti [9]	Historical case; evaluative assertion analysis	National images as parts of a belief system organising perceptions of other nations.	Coding categories: policy, capabilities, success, and general evaluation. Content analysis, not scale factors.
Roth & Romeo [10]	Cross-national survey; factor analysis	Perceived production and marketing strengths of products from a country.	Innovativeness, design, prestige, and workmanship proposed as attributes; empirical analysis supported one factor.
Martin & Eroglu [17]	Scale development; factor and validity tests	Descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a country.	14 items; political, economic, and technological dimensions. Economic content includes product quality.
Parameswaran & Pisharodi [11]	Survey; scale refinement; confirmatory factor analysis	Country-of-origin image spans country, general product, and specific product perceptions.	Three initial facets. Refinement produced two country-attribute factors, three general-product factors, and one car or two blender factors.
Knight et al. [28]	Cross-national surveys; scale refinement and invariance tests	Perceptions of a country as an origin of goods and services.	10-item country-of-origin image scale (COISCALE); seven factors: people, negative offerings, positive offerings, advertising, distribution, price, and political situation.
Hsieh et al. [29]	Automobile survey across 20 markets; multilevel analysis	Country associations attached to automobile brands.	Country-related items joined corporate evaluations in an overall corporate/country attitude factor; product-image factors remained separate.
Pereira et al. [12]	Cross-national survey; factor analysis and scale revision	Country, general-product, and specific-product attributes relevant to origin evaluation.	16 items; five retained factors from three initial facets: two general-country, two general-product, and one specific-product factor.
Pappu et al. [2]	Consumer survey; confirmatory factor and canonical correlation analyses	Macro country beliefs distinguished from micro beliefs about products from that country.	Macro: political, economic, technological. Retained micro structure: innovation, design, prestige.
d'Astous & Boujbel [33]	Interviews; successive scale-development surveys	Countries represented through human personality traits.	Six personality dimensions: agreeableness, wickedness, snobbism, assiduousness, conformity, unobtrusiveness. Full/reduced scales: 37/24 items.
Lala et al. [18]	Scale development; two surveys; factor and validity tests	Country characteristics serving as a halo for product judgments.	21 items; seven dimensions: economic conditions, conflict, political structure, vocational training, work culture, environment, labour.
Roth & Diamantopoulos [3]	Critical literature review	Overall country image distinguished from product-country and country-specific product image.	Cognition, affect, and conation examined within an attitude framework; no new validated scale.
Brijs et al. [21]	Consumer survey; structural equation modelling	Country meanings organised through cognition, affect, and conation.	Country conation includes buying products, doing business, and investing. Product-category purchase intentions measured separately.

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Table 1 – continued

Study	Research method	Conceptual focus	Dimensions and measurement
Giraldi et al. [35]	Executive survey; factor and cluster analyses	Image inferred through perceptions of Chinese appliances and their buyers.	Three personification factors: Underdog, Economic Value Seeker, and Quality and Satisfaction Seeker.
White [7]	Pre/post study of brand-origin information	Country evaluation combining national characteristics and product perceptions.	Five items in one scale: economy, products, beauty, education, global responsibility. Not five validated dimensions.
Hakala et al. [36]	Non-visitor survey; exploratory factor analysis	Country image examined through awareness and perceptions of country attributes.	Five factors: products and politics, people, way of life, sports and nature, security. Factor analysis used know/don't-know coding.
Buhmann & Ingenhoff [5]	Survey; partial least squares path modelling	Specific country beliefs linked to an overall emotional evaluation.	Functional, normative, and aesthetic dimensions measured formatively; emotional dimension measured reflectively.
Buhmann & Ingenhoff [6]	Conceptual model development	Stakeholder beliefs and feelings towards a nation and its state.	Four proposed dimensions: functional, normative, esthetic, sympathetic. No empirical scale validation in this article.
Han & Wang [39]	Framing experiment; factor and regression analyses	National image measured separately from product-country image.	National image: leadership and responsibility, cultural appeal, socio-economic development, hospitality. Product-country image is a separate predictor.
Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar [4]	Consumer survey; structural modelling	Country cognitions, affect, and symbolic meanings linked to distinct behavioural responses.	Country cognition and affect; country personality represents symbolic content. "Hard working" classified as cognition; intentions measured separately.
de Queiroz & Giraldi [40]	Student survey; country-specific exploratory factor analyses	Country image included within broader country brand equity.	Retained factors: car quality, population image, loyalty, technical/economic image, awareness. Item allocations differed by target country.
Carneiro & Faria [41]	Conceptual review and consumer survey; structural modelling	Country characteristics selected for a product-quality research question; product quality measured separately.	Cognitive facets: economic, technological, human/social. Affect deliberately excluded from the selected scope.
Li et al. [19]	Student survey; national-image indices	National image organised around the components of a nation.	Territory, sovereignty, government, corporation, population. A 19-question evaluation system; not an established five-factor latent scale.
Stepchenkova & Shichkova [32]	Association elicitation; content coding and association metrics	Country and destination images as related but distinct domains of place knowledge.	Richness, diversity, strength, favourability, uniqueness, and association types. These are association metrics, not latent dimensions.
Andéhn & De-costa [42]	Conceptual critique	Country-of-origin effects arise through perceived commodity–place relationships.	N/A

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Table 1 – continued

Study	Research method	Conceptual focus	Dimensions and measurement
Suter et al. [43]	Company cases; executive surveys; scale development	Importance of incorporating country-of-origin features into firm strategy.	12 items; textual and visual elements, senses, cultural resources, natural resources. Firm-level instrument, not a consumer national-image scale.
Ayala et al. [44]	Cross-national survey; partial least squares structural equation modelling	Brazil's image as cognitive beliefs, feelings, and conative intentions.	Cognition, affect, conation. Cognitive content: economy, politics, people, culture, innovation, socio-environmental aspects. Conation includes visiting.
Kock et al. [13]	Association elicitation; multiple quantitative studies	Country imagery denotes specific origin associations; country image denotes an overall origin evaluation.	Imagery: formative association strength $\times$ valence indicators. Image: reflective overall evaluation. Country emotions measured separately.
Lu et al. [23]	Definition analysis; network analysis; public survey	Comparison of academic and public understandings of country image.	N/A
Lascu et al. [30]	Consumer survey; psychometric assessment	Macro country perceptions distinguished from micro product perceptions.	Macro: political, economic, technological. Micro: innovation, design, prestige.
Lee [14]	Consumer survey; factor analysis and structural modelling	Environmentally relevant country beliefs and feelings.	Cognitive and affective green country image. Green trust and purchase intention measured separately.
Lopez & Balabanis [45]	Interviews; association/network analysis; attitudinal measures	Country image assessed as recalled associations and as rated beliefs and feelings.	Attitudinal measures: economic/technological beliefs, political beliefs, positive/negative affect. Network properties analysed separately.
Mariutti & Giraldi [15]	Expert interviews; conceptual framework development	Country brand image and reputation as components of broader country brand equity.	Seven proposed equity components: image, reputation, associations, awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, channel relationships. No validated national-image scale.
Martinelli & De Canio [46]	Consumer survey; structural equation modelling	Country and population perceptions used as cues in retail brand evaluation.	Cognitive and affective country image. Affective items include likability, trustworthiness, and "German people are hardworking".
Thøgersen & Pedersen [31]	Two consumer surveys; scale development and invariance tests	Environmental performance evaluated across country and product referents.	One six-item environmental-image measure: two country, two general-product, two food-product items. General, product-country, and category-country images also measured separately.
Garcia-De los Salmones et al. [20]	Consumer survey; structural equation modelling (SEM)	Macro country beliefs and feelings distinguished from category-specific brand perceptions.	Macro: technology, economy, politics, society, culture, nature, affect. Micro: separate three-item clothing and wine measures.
Ma et al. [22]	Consumer survey; structural equation modelling (SEM)	Country beliefs and feelings distinguished from product judgments and evaluations.	Cognitive and affective country image. Product judgments, product evaluations, and purchase intention measured separately.

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Table 1 – continued

Study	Research method	Conceptual focus	Dimensions and measurement
Zhao et al. [47]	International-student survey; retrospective ratings; factor analysis	“Country image” and “national image” operationalised as separate variables.	Country image: government, international, social, affective (20 items). Separate national-image measure: positive/negative evaluations (12 items).
Shin et al. [34]	Survey; group comparisons and contact-image analysis	National evaluations examined in relation to direct contact.	Four summed items: personal image, perceived group image, international role, Korean Peninsula security role. Items, not four validated factors.
Wang [48]	Online-comment analysis; topic extraction and sentiment analysis	National image examined through themes and evaluative tone in communication.	Eight text categories: public attitude, regional development, political, economic, military, social, cultural, others.
Lau et al. [49]	Consumer survey; structural equation modelling (SEM)	National-brand framework spanning country, “Made In”, and product-category images.	Cognitive and emotional evaluations across levels. Country beliefs cover politics, economy, history/culture, technology. Product/category label mapping.
Lee et al. [50]	Qualitative item development; pretests; validation surveys	Green country image as sustainability-related national performance.	23 items; social, economic, environmental, technological, leadership, and people dimensions.
Zhang [16]	Student survey; structural equation modelling (SEM)	Japan’s image examined as a response to social-media reception and expression.	Progressiveness and perceived threat; overall impression also measured. Communication activities and behavioural intentions assessed separately.

RQ3: What dimensions and measurement approaches have been used to operationalise national and country image and closely related constructs in international marketing and brand management research?

The reviewed studies measure national or country image using different dimensions, item sources, and measurement approaches. Some instruments assess general country characteristics, while others evaluate products, people, or specific areas of national performance. These dimensions and measurements provide useful materials for national image, but they cannot be combined directly without clarifying their original domain and construct boundary. These differences become clearer when the comparison moves from scale labels to individual items. The analysis below examines how established measures have been adapted, how items have been assigned to dimensions, and what the reported validation results support.

Early instruments provided foundations for subsequent measurement of national or country image. Martin and Eroglu [17] developed a country image scale with political, economic, and technological dimensions. Lala et al. [18] proposed seven dimensions covering economic conditions, conflict, political structure, vocational training, work culture, environment, and labour. By contrast, Roth and Romeo [10] assessed innovativeness, design, prestige, and workmanship in relation to products from a country. Although these were presented as four image dimensions, their empirical analysis favoured a single-factor solution. Pappu et al. [2] subsequently tested alternative structures and supported a higher-order micro country image comprising innovation, design, and prestige, alongside a separate macro country image measure. These findings distinguish the attributes initially selected to represent national image from the dimensional structure supported by the data.

Later applications show how established country of origin scales have been revised during adaptation. Parameswaran and Yaprak [51] distinguished general country attitudes, general product attitudes, and perceptions of specific product attributes. Their analysis showed that reliability varied across respondent countries, countries of origin, and measurement domains. This finding established an early reason to reassess established measures when applying them in another national setting. Building on this earlier instrument, Knight et al. [28] developed a 10-item country-of-origin image scale named COISCALE. During refinement, they removed items and separated positive and negative product attributes. The final model contained seven factors, including people, negative offering attributes, positive offering attributes, advertising, distribution, price, and political situation attributes [28]. The model showed a common factor structure across samples from Japan, Turkey, and the United States, although some factor loadings differed across countries. Similarly, Pereira et al. [12] retested the instrument developed by Parameswaran and Pisharodi [11], which distinguished general country

attributes, general product attributes, and specific product attributes. Following item deletion and model respecification, the revised instrument contained 16 items across five factors, but its fit varied across samples and target countries. These studies document substantial changes within established measurement traditions. Therefore, citing an original scale does not establish that a later application retains its full content or dimensional structure.

Scale adaptation extended from country reputation to country or national image research. White [7] and Han and Wang [39] both drew on the country-reputation framework developed by Passow et al. [37], but they treated product evaluations differently. White [7] measured country image using five components: economy, products, physical attractiveness, education, and global responsibility. Han and Wang [39] identified four dimensions of national image, including leadership and responsibility, cultural appeal, socioeconomic development, and hospitality. They measured product-country image separately using items adapted from Han and Wang [38]. Thus, product evaluation contributed directly to White's [7] country-image scale, whereas Han and Wang [39] treated product-country image as a separate predictor of national image.

Furthermore, the allocation of cognitive and affective items to dimensions varies across studies. Zeugner-Roth and Žabkar [4] included "hard working" among their country cognition items. Martinelli and De Canio [46], however, placed "German people are hardworking" within affective country image, alongside likability and trustworthiness. Lala et al. [18] included "I like Mexico very much" within the conflict dimension, together with evaluations of governmental cooperation and fair trade. These examples show that dimension labels do not consistently describe the content of their indicators. An effect attributed to affective country image may therefore partly reflect cognitive beliefs about people.

Studies also differ in whether behavioural intentions form part of country image or are measured as outcomes. Brijs et al. [21] included willingness to buy a country's products, do business with it, and invest in it within the conative component of country image. They separately measured purchase intentions for beer and DVD players. In contrast, Ma et al. [22] measured country image through cognitive and affective components, with product judgments, product evaluations, and purchase intention assessed separately. Zhao et al. [47] likewise measured residence intention outside the country image through government, international, social, and affective components.

Green and environmental country image instruments differ in both coverage and structure. Lee [14] assessed cognitive and affective green country image. Lee et al. [50] developed a 23-item green country image scale covering social, economic, environmental, technological, leadership, and people dimensions. The former separates beliefs from feelings, while the latter distinguishes areas of evaluation. Thøgersen and Pedersen [31] measured environmental country image using six items concerning national environmental reputation and policies, products in general, and food products. Their measure combined national and product-related environmental evaluations.

Formative and reflective specifications also informed decisions about item retention. Buhmann and Ingenhoff [6] measured the functional, normative, and aesthetic dimensions formatively and the emotional dimension reflectively. They retained the finalised formative item set despite several non-significant indicator weights to preserve its conceptual coverage. By contrast, they removed one emotional indicator because of its low loading. Kock et al. [13] distinguished country imagery, comprising specific consumer associations with a country as a production origin, from country image, representing an overall evaluation of that origin. They multiplied each association's strength by its perceived valence to construct formative imagery indicators and measured country image reflectively. They removed five imagery indicators with high collinearity after considering whether deletion would result in a loss of meaning.

Not all studies measured image solely through ratings of predetermined attributes. Stepchenkova and Shichkova [32] asked respondents to list associations with the United States as a country and as a destination, then rate each association's favourability. They used the responses to compare the richness, diversity, strength, and favourability of the two image domains. Association elicitation and network analysis were also combined with attitudinal measures to assess Spain's image [45]. Within the network analysis, links between associations were identified through co-occurrence in respondents' descriptions.

The reviewed studies operationalised national and country image through different dimensions, item sets, and measurement approaches. Some differences reflect distinct research purposes, while others concern the assignment of similar items to different dimensions. Product evaluations and behavioural intentions are also included within image in some studies but measured separately in others. Therefore, a shared construct label or scale source does not establish that the resulting measures assess the same content.

4. DISCUSSION

RQ4: What construct-boundary, measurement, and managerial gaps remain in national and country image research in international marketing and brand management research?

This review indicates that conceptual diversity and unclear construct boundaries require different interpretations, particularly when national and country image is used to explain marketing outcomes. The bibliometric findings show connections among national and country image research in marketing, tourism, public diplomacy, and communication. In contrast, the full-text analysis shows that studies using similar national and country image terms differ in what they

evaluate and how they assign items to dimensions. From an international marketing perspective, these differences matter because the same label may be used to explain product evaluation, brand preference, country-of-origin responses, trust, or other consumer outcomes even when the underlying measures are not equivalent. Thus, the central issue is not simply the absence of a common measurement instrument for national image. It is whether studies provide sufficient grounds for treating their findings as evidence about the same phenomenon and whether the measure used is appropriate for the theoretical and managerial decision under examination. Shared terminology can facilitate communication across research traditions, but it cannot establish equivalence among the underlying evaluations.

The first unresolved boundary concerns the scope of the conclusions drawn from an image measure. For instance, Carneiro and Faria [41] argued that country image should be defined according to the research question and theoretical arguments, while recognising limits to generalisability. Therefore, a measure focused on products or a particular area of national performance can be appropriate without representing the country more broadly. This distinction matters when interpreting how brands contribute to national image. Product evaluations formed part of the country image measure in White [7], whereas product-country image was measured separately from national image in Han and Wang [39]. A change in a score containing product evaluations does not, by itself, establish a change in perceptions beyond products. The unresolved question is how far the reported effect extends across the content of the measure. Conclusions about broader national perceptions require evidence that those perceptions, rather than only product-related judgments, account for the finding.

A second problem concerns the distinction between cognition and affect within image measures. For example, Roth and Diamantopoulos [3] identified scales that separated these components conceptually but included cognitive beliefs within affective measurement. The later placement of industriousness within affective country image shows that this problem remains visible in subsequent applications [46]. Its significance lies in the interpretation of reported effects. When an affective measure includes beliefs about people's characteristics, its relationship with consumer responses cannot be attributed solely to feelings towards the country. Thus, discrepancies between reported cognitive and affective effects may reflect differences in item content as well as differences between beliefs and feelings. The review extends the earlier critique by showing that the distinction remains unresolved in some later measures, despite the continued use of separate cognitive and affective labels.

A third issue concerns whether adapted scales retain the content represented by their source instruments. Established measures underwent item deletion and changes to their factor structures in Knight et al. [28] and Pereira et al. [12]. Both studies tested the revised instruments of country image, so these cases should not be treated as examples of borrowing without validation. They instead highlight two questions that need to be distinguished: whether a revised measure is supported in its application; and whether its findings remain comparable with those obtained using the earlier version. Statistical support for the revised structure does not alone establish that omitted or reorganised content leaves the interpretation unchanged. A common scale citation can conceal differences between the measures actually used. For cumulative research, the remaining measurement problem is identifying which conclusions carry across versions and which depend on the particular content retained.

In summary, the review identifies the principal difficulty as determining which findings can reasonably be treated as evidence about the same national or country-image construct and which can legitimately inform marketing management. Studies may reasonably use different measures for different purposes. However, when similar labels conceal differences in evaluation objects or item content, their findings cannot be assumed to confirm or contradict one another, nor should they be transferred uncritically into brand or market decisions. The absence of a single scale is not itself the central gap. The unresolved issue is whether construct definition, measurement content, and research purpose are sufficiently aligned to support valid comparison, theory building, and evidence-based international marketing decisions.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The review distinguishes diversity in research purpose from ambiguity in construct boundaries and positions this distinction as a marketing-theory issue. National, product-related, brand-related, and domain-specific evaluations may be connected without constituting a single construct. Their relationships should be specified explicitly in models of consumer response, country-of-origin effects, international brand equity, and cross-national marketing. This distinction also applies to communication and direct contact, which may explain image formation without becoming dimensions of image itself. The theoretical contribution lies in clarifying the role of country-related perceptions as antecedents, focal constructs, transfer mechanisms, or outcomes rather than combining all country-related variables within a broader definition. This clearer architecture can strengthen cumulative theory development across international marketing, consumer behaviour, and brand management.

Future marketing research on national image should begin by specifying the intended construct, the level of evaluation, and the managerial or consumer outcome that the construct is expected to explain, and then checking whether existing instruments cover that domain. When an instrument is adapted, changes in item wording, content, dimensional assignment,

product category, and market context should be documented against the source measure. Validation should follow the measurement model adopted, including whether indicators form the construct or reflect an underlying evaluation. Cross-national applications should also consider whether a measure supports meaningful comparison across consumer groups and market contexts before managerial conclusions are drawn.

Qualitative elicitation can help assess whether existing items capture relevant perceptions in the target population. The resulting associations require conceptual assessment before they are included as indicators or dimensions. New scale development of national image should be considered when relevant content cannot be adequately represented through an existing or adapted instrument.

For international marketing and country-brand management, the results suggest that national image cannot be managed through a single communication or market cue. Consumers may evaluate a country through competence, responsibility, culture, people, emotion, environmental performance, and product associations at the same time. A country with strong technological competence may still face weak trust if consumers hold negative affective or normative perceptions. Marketing managers should therefore diagnose which dimensions are relevant to a target market and distinguish broad national perceptions from product- or category-specific country associations before designing positioning and communication strategies.

For companies, the review suggests that country associations should be managed at both macro and micro levels. Brands may benefit from positive associations such as design, innovation, reliability, sustainability, cultural appeal, or prestige, while also being affected by wider national perceptions involving politics, people, environment, or bilateral tension. Managers using country-of-origin cues should therefore identify which aspect of national image is relevant to the product category, brand positioning, and consumer segment rather than assuming that a favourable overall country image will transfer uniformly to all brands. Measurement choice should also follow the managerial objective: product-country or country-of-origin measures are more appropriate when the decision concerns product evaluation, whereas broader national image measures are needed when managers seek to understand how general perceptions of a nation transfer to corporate or brand evaluations. This alignment can improve international segmentation, brand communication, market-entry interpretation, and the management of country-based sources of consumer brand equity.

The review also has implications for evidence-based marketing management. Because similarly named country image scales may contain different cognitive, affective, product-related, or behavioural content, managers should avoid comparing country scores or tracking image change without examining what the instrument actually measures. For example, a change in product-related evaluations should not automatically be interpreted as a change in the broader national image. Aligning construct definition, measurement scale, target market, and strategic objective can reduce the risk of translating conceptually mismatched research findings into branding decisions.

6. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This review connects the bibliometric structure of national and country image research with differences in construct definitions and measurement practices and repositions these issues within international marketing and brand management. The evidence shows that related terminology and shared scale sources do not ensure that studies measure the same content. Some differences serve distinct research purposes, while others leave the relationship between definitions, indicators, consumer outcomes, and managerial conclusions unclear. The contribution of the review is therefore to distinguish legitimate variation from unresolved boundary problems and to explain how these problems affect the interpretation and comparison of findings in marketing research. By separating national-level image from product-country associations, domain-specific perceptions, affective responses, and behavioural outcomes, the review provides a clearer conceptual basis for research on country-of-origin effects, consumer behaviour, brand positioning, and consumer-based brand equity. For managers, the central implication is that country-image evidence should be selected and interpreted according to the specific strategic decision rather than treated as a universal indicator of market attractiveness or brand advantage.

Future research can build on this framework by testing how distinct dimensions of national and country image transfer to brands across product categories, consumer segments, and national markets; by examining the conditions under which country associations strengthen or weaken brand equity; and by establishing measurement equivalence before making cross-market comparisons. Such work would connect construct clarification more directly with strategic marketing questions and strengthen the usefulness of national-image research for international brand management.

This review also has several limitations. First, the research covered English-language journal publications indexed in WoS and Scopus. The systematic review further selected studies for their contribution to conceptualisation and measurement, which may give greater visibility to scale development and revision than to routine applications. Its findings identify problems within the reviewed literature rather than establish how frequently those problems occur across the field. The broader bibliometric corpus provides context for the synthesis, but it does not make the selected studies representative of all national and country image research.

Second, this review compared published definitions and measurement items without reanalysing the original respondent

data. It cannot determine whether assigning beliefs about people to an affective dimension changes the estimated relationship between country image and consumer responses. The evidence supports identifying differences in what these measures represent, but their consequences for the reported effects remain untested.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the conception, review design, analysis, interpretation, manuscript preparation, and critical revision of the study. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The bibliometric records, coded review materials, and supporting extraction files are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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