

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

How (and when) emotions towards countries and their products shape consumer responses to advertising: A Malaysian study

We often judge a product's quality by our overall stereotype of its country of origin (COO) as a high- or low-quality producer. Interestingly, research has also suggested emotions that a COO evokes might sway our evaluations. For instance, in one study Chinese consumers shunned Japanese products because of lingering animosity over Japanese occupation.

A new study** based on research carried out in Malaysia goes beyond simply positive or negative country-based emotions. It explores a subtle but significant way different specific positive emotions can impact purchase decisions: via matches or mismatches between emotions about a country and emotions about a product. This relationship is captured in the idea of "emotion congruence".

Importantly, it is entirely possible to feel positive emotions about a COO we stereotype as a sub-par producer of traded goods: it could still, for example, excite us as a thrilling tourist destination. And given the extent of both trade and tourism today, interactions between them matter.

The researchers used the known fact that consumers rely more on emotional reactions when feeling uncertain about a product. Moreover, an unfavourable quality stereotype of the COO makes would-be consumers hesitant and uncertain, which brings emotional factors into play.

The researchers reasoned that in such cases a match-up between positive emotions about that COO as a tourist destination and emotions about products originating from it would tilt hesitant consumers towards buying the product. Why? Because, the idea of emotion congruence holds that congruence makes it cognitively easier to process advertisements, which inclines people to make more favourable evaluations of the product advertised.

Some 420 students from a Malaysian university participated (about 36% Malay, 20% Chinese and 15% indigenous Kadazan Dusun, among others). Participants first reported their stereotypes of China and Japan respectively as producers. Sub-groups were then shown tourism advertisements for one or other country with emotive taglines conjuring either excitement or peacefulness. Next, they evaluated advertisements

describing a digital camera from that same country with taglines appealing to those two emotions. They also rated how easy the advertisement was to understand.

Japan was stereotyped more favourably than China as a producer. However, a match between excitement/peacefulness emotions about China and the Chinese-made camera helped participants understand the advertisement and lifted intentions to buy it. Whether emotions about Japan as a destination matched emotions about the Japanese camera did not impact purchase intentions.

This confirmed predictions. When – and only when – the COO was viewed unfavourably as a producer in the first place (here, China), thus making hypothetical consumers uncertain and bringing emotions into play in their purchase decision, congruent country-based and product-based emotions swayed them back towards buying the product.

The findings suggest destination marketers and tourism policymakers of poorly stereotyped COOs should collaborate with manufacturers to develop integrated marketing strategies with matching emotional appeals. In particular, low-cost countries entrusted with outsourced manufacturing battle a stereotype of poorer quality yet may have to be disclosed as COOs on labelling.

** The full study results are available in an article authored by Felix Septianto, Tung Moi Chiew and Nguyen T. Thai: "The congruence effect between product emotional appeal and country-based emotion: The moderating role of country-of-origin". *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 52 January 2020. doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.101916

