The direct and indirect impact of country personality on behavioral intentions for traveling: the full mediation effect of the affective country image

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Key words
Country personality; affective country image; behavioral intentions; behavioral intentions to visit; Portugal; Brazil

Abstract
The purpose of the current research is to investigate the direct and indirect influence of country personality dimensions on consumer behavioral intentions to visit a specific country, considering affective country image as a mediator. A quota sample of 685 valid respondents from Brazil was analyzed. Portugal was chosen as the stimulus country and the questionnaire was delivered in Portuguese for Brazilians. AMOS 20.0 was employed to examine the proposed model. The predictors of behavioral intentions to visit explain around 67% of its variance. Affective country image is seen a perfect/full mediator between country personality and behavioral intentions to visit. Thus, country personality dimensions have a positive indirect effect on behavioral intentions to visit. Assiduousness and agreeableness show a positive significant influence on affective country image, whereas snobbism shows a significant negative influence. International business marketers should focus on developing marketing strategies emphasizing the distinctive personality of their country destinations. However it is important to keep in mind the higher importance of the emotional components of the country image.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the current research is to investigate the direct and indirect influence of country personality dimensions on consumer behavioral intentions to travel/visit to a specific country, considering affective country image as a mediator. A quota sample of 685 valid respondents from Brazil was analyzed. Portugal was chosen as the stimulus country and the questionnaire was delivered in Portuguese for Brazilians. Knowing that today's international environments are highly substitutable concerning to countries competitiveness we believe that a unique identity can differentiate and positioning countries. Thus, a distinctive country personality appeal may clearly identify a country in the consumers mind and therefore differentiate it from its competitors (Lee & Lijia, 2012).

Europe is ranked as the second most attractive investment region in the world, with a score of 35 percent. It comes immediately after China which scores 38 percent according to the Ernst & Young "Europe Attractiveness Survey Report" (Ernst & Young, 2011). On the other end we can see countries such as Brazil that have increased around 15 percent its expenditures in 2013 and still being one of the major outbound markets in international tourism in 2013 (Kester, 2014). Brazil has around 200 million people (IBGE, 2013) speaking Portuguese, and there are more than 240 million people speaking Portuguese in the world (PLC, 2013). Thus it seems to be a valid issue to utilize Portugal, a European country, and Brazil in developing the empirical research as we propose.

2. Literature revision

Country personality captures the human-like characteristics of a country; affective country image is related to the consumers' emotional connections to a certain country; and the

behavioral intentions to travel/visit to, are associated with the individual's future-oriented desired acts.

2.1. **Country personality**

Personality is most commonly defined as characteristics or qualities within an individual and that may include virtually everything about a person. McCrae and Costa (1996) defined personality as the traits that differentiate individuals, and the Big Five personality model (Goldberg, 1990) is the most widely applied personality theory that is based on trait psychology. The conceptual roots of the country personality construct can be traced back and refers to "*the tendency of people to make attributions of human-like characteristics to animals and nonhuman entities*" (Kiesler, 2006, p. 149). In this context, individuals need to anthropomorphize objects in order to facilitate their interactions with the non-material (inanimate) world (Fournier, 1998). Other research studies in tourism and country of origin have paid attention to a personified approach towards countries (Chao & Rajendran, 1993; Nebenzahl, et al., 2003). That approach leads the authors (d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007) to develop a specific country personality scale. The scale showed that human traits include universal representations that are easily activated due to a previous knowledge and usage on humans in specific or in general contexts or environments to predict people behavior. These authors proposed the personification of countries to qualify them and measure country's image as a symbolic component of a wider construct. In country of origin research, country personality is a concept defined as "*the mental representation of a country on dimensions that typically capture an individual's personality*" (d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007, p. 233).

The concept of image is powerful and influent; it seems that human behavior depends upon perceived image rather than an objective reality as posed by Kenneth Boulding (1956). Accordingly to Boulding (1988; 1956) people' decision "*involves images in the mind of alternative futures with varying degrees of probability, related to certain acts or behaviors…*"(Boulding, 1956, p. 175; Boulding, 1988, p. 20). He defined behavior as acting in a way that the image of the most preferred future is expected to be realized. The author considered image not as a product of a particular stimulus but as a whole image of the world in the mind of the behaving person (Boulding, 1988). Likewise, a typical and attractive country personality can effectively leverage the perceived image of a country and thus influence consumer behavior. Although the country image concept has been analyzed by many, few have focused on personality scales (Nebenzahl, et al., 2003; Chao & Rajendran, 1993; d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007).

2.2. Affective country image

Country image, appear to be not one-dimensional just like any other image-types. Researchers such as Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) argued that country image join up affect and cognition components. Hence, beliefs about another country are captured by the cognitive component while consumers' emotions to another country are captured by the affective component. It is also accepted that emotions and symbolic aspects (Verlegh, et al., 1999) are part of the image construct of a country (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 1993) although these may depend on intangible or non-functional aspects. This approach supports our proposed model.

The affective component of the country image represents consumers' feelings toward a country and becomes operational during the evaluation stage of the selection process (Wang & Hsu, 2010; Gartner, 1993). Even though, according to Brijs (2006), Heslop et al. (Heslop, et al., 2008), and Orbaiz and Papadopoulos (2003) the affective component of a country's image seems to have higher and quicker effects on consumers' purchase intentions when compared to the cognitive elements (Maher & Carter, 2011). Verlegh et al. (Verlegh, et al., 1999) found that affect could be associated to a future act toward hedonic products while cognitions may determine

action tendencies toward functional objects. Thus we may consider emotions directly connected to the outcome we propose.

2.3. behavioral intentions

Intentions may be recognized as connections with future acts and are usually conceived as evaluation-free, and this may be the key difference between intention and attitude. Moreover, the authors (Soderlund & Ohman, 2003) defined intentions as basic units that emerge when individuals appoint in future-oriented cognitive activities such as mental simulation, planning, imagination, and thoughts (like individual's perception of other one' intentions) (p. 54). Moreover, the marketing literature is prolific on propositions about the future, reflected on the explicit usage of intentions labeling to cover several acts in the marketplace. Hence, intentions are usually part of satisfaction models and are treated as dependent variables; generally the researcher assumes that satisfaction affects customer behavior and designs empirical studies focusing on behavioral intentions. That's why intentions are often used as proxies for behavior. Behavioral intentions can be seen as a result of anticipated satisfaction with an object and therefore very useful for marketing purposes. In that vein we can conclude that an act should exists to be evaluated and to predict intentions (Soderlund & Ohman, 2003). Hence, the same researchers introduced the sense of ownership to explore and explain the link between evaluative judgments and intentions (p. 54). We applied it in as a visit intention behavior.

According to consumer behavior and personality literature, an established personality influences consumer preferences (Sirgy, 1982; d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Fournier (1998) referred that the stronger the emotional relationships between consumers and brands the greater the trust and loyalty of them, and we believe it also happen in the context of countries. Thus we purpose to investigate the perceived country personality of a specific country as a whole and to empirically examine its direct and indirect influence on behavioral intentions. Specifically, to determine the extent to which country personality dimensions (agreeableness, assiduousness, conformity, unobtrusiveness, and snobbism) influence behavioral intentions to travel/visit, considering the affective country image as a mediator construct. Country personality, affective country image and behavioral intentions to travel/visit constructs were measured using previous tested scales. To date, we did not see any research like the one we propose - testing the mediation effect of the affective component of country image on the relationship between the country personality dimensions (as country symbolic image) and behavioral intentions to visit. However, we did not consider the cognitive component of country image for this stage on the study.

3. Conceptual model

In line with personality literature, no direct effects of country personality traits on behavioral intentions are postulated for the hypothesized conceptual model - considering the fact that we are using a scale created accordingly the Big Five human personality scale assumptions (d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007), we corroborate with the fact that the personality traits can be seen as highly abstract instances and thus not expected to directly predict specific behavioral patterns (Geuens, et al., 2009). Indeed, in consumer behavior research, personality traits are most commonly linked to behavior via indirect variables.

We proposed the hypothesized research model shown in figure 1 to be the baseline of the empirical research to test the relationship between the independent variables represented by the five country personality dimensions - three of them were hypothesized to have a positive influence on the outcome, and the other two were hypothesized to have a negative impact on the outcome; the mediation variable represented by the affective country image; and the dependent variable represented by behavioral intentions to visit.

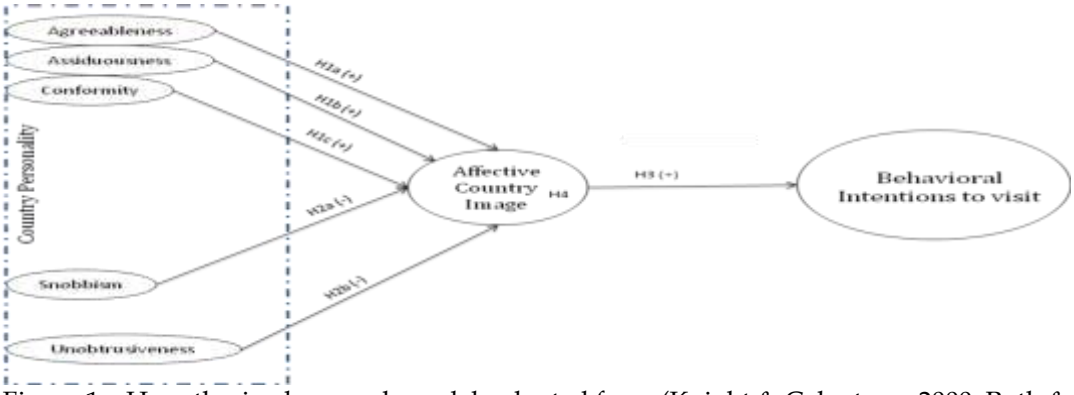

Figure 1 – Hypothesized research model, adapted from (Knight & Calantone, 2000; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Nebenzahl, et al., 2003; Burcio, et al., 2014)

Hypotheses statements:

H1a; H1b; and H1c: (a) Agreeableness; (b) Assiduousness; (c) Conformity has a positive impact on affective country image.

H2a; and H2b: (a) Snobbism; (b) Unobtrusiveness has a negative impact on affective country image.

H3: Affective country image has a positive impact on behavioral intentions to visit.

H4: Affective country image mediates the relationship between country personality dimensions and behavioral intentions to visit.

4. Methodology

The intent of this study was to investigate the mediating role of the affective country image on the relationships between the perceived country personality and behavioral intentions to visit. The study was conducted in two states in Brazil - São Paulo and Bahia. The economic powerhouse and multicultural state of São Paulo, and the state of Bahia with more natives and a powerful historical link to Portugal were chosen. Three criteria guided the choice of the stimulus country: (1) cultural affinity, familiarity and mother language, (2) geographic distance, and (3) economic and demographic diversity.

The questions used in the online questionnaire were mostly close-ended in order to collect the required quantitative data for the study. The questionnaire was designed in Portuguese for Brazilians. To ensure accuracy, the researchers were supported by two native academicians. The researchers and an expert in linguistics ensured the quality and consistency of the final version. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: (a) the consumers' perceived country personality construct, (b) the emotional links to the stimulus country, (c) behavioral intentions to visit, and (d) demographic information of the respondents.

The first section consisted of 24 items (statements / adjectives) assessing country personality symbolic image. The respondents were asked to think of the country as if it were a person and to ascribe human personality traits to it (Davies, et al., 2001). The stimuli country (Portugal) had to be evaluated using 24 personality traits with the help of a 5-point scale, with anchors (1) *does not describe this country at all* and (5) *describe this country perfectly* (d' Astous & Boujbel, 2007, p. 239).

The second section consisted of five questions including 5 affective evaluation items. The respondents had to indicate the extent to which they felt about five specific emotions (items) toward Portugal on the 5-point scale. Affective country image was measured using five items (e.g, "I like [Country] ") adopted from (Knight & Calantone, 2000; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Nebenzahl, et al., 2003) with anchors (1) *totally disagree* and (5) *totally agree*.

The third section captured the behavioral intentions to visit. Behavioral intentions to travel/visit was measured using six items (e.g, "I would recommend going to [country] to others"; "I have plans to visit [Country] in the next two years"), adopted from Um & Crompton (1990), with anchors (1*) totally disagree* and (5) *totally agree*.

The last section of the questionnaire consisted of the socio-demographic questions including gender, age, and level of education, occupation, average monthly individual income, mother language, and residential location. The average response time to complete a questionnaire was around 5 minutes.

4.1. Sample description

The empirical data was taken from a defined quota sample of Brazilian individuals older than 18, having internet access and a registered e-mail, speaking Portuguese, having an income, and having residence at the states where the study was conducted (São Paulo or Bahia).Approximately 59% of the respondents were males and the majority of the sample was between 36 and 55 years old (54.2%). The level of education was high, with 72.2 % having completed college. The level of individual monthly income was also high as 47.9% of the respondents referred to receive more than 10 times the minimum salary (baseline R$ 510.00). Overall, the participants had internet access, had a registered e-mail, lived in the states of São Paulo or Bahia, and have a monthly income. São Paulo state residents were more numerous (65%). Almost all the participants referred to Portuguese as their mother tongue (96.8%). From the sample surveyed, 58.8% of the respondents visited Portugal in the last five years, mainly for tourist purposes (52.6%), and overall the participants demonstrated having affinity with Portugal.

4.2. Analysis of the data

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0) was used to generate descriptive and inferential statistics, and Analysis of Moments Structure (AMOS 20.0) software was used for conducting the structural equation modeling (SEM) procedure to test the hypothesized relationships. Firstly, the data were cleaned up – evaluated by the square distance of Mahalanobis (D^2) using AMOS® 20.0. Observations having D^2/df exceeding 2.5 can be designated possible otliers (Hair, et al., 2005, p. 75). The five scale items proposed to measure the affective components of the country image were subject to an exploratory factor analysis using the principal component analysis (PCA) method. The resulting one-factor structure was consistent with the item-factor expected pattern. A KMO value of 0.847 showed a good adequacy, and the extracted factor explains 73.81% of the total variance. The affective country image statements demonstrated a strong internal consistency, shown by Cronbach's alpha= 0.911.

The six scale items proposed to measure the behavioral intentions, particularly the intention to visit/travel to a specific country were also subject to a PCA with Varimax rotation. The resulting one-factor structure was consistent with the item-factor expected pattern. However, one item had to be eliminated due to communalities below 0.5. After removing the item, the analysis was repeated with just 5 items. The KMO value was 0.738 and Bartlett's test was significant at the 0.001 level. The one-factor solution accounted for 66.58% of the total variance with all communalities ranging from 0.533 to 0.766, and had a relatively high alpha reliability coefficient (0.858).

The proposed hypothesized research model was estimated within the structural equation modeling framework using AMOS® 20.0 and the research hypotheses were tested (figure 2). The proposed hypothesized research model was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood estimation method to ensure construct reliability and validity.

Model data fit adequacy was assessed using various goodness of fit indices and measures, namely the chi-square and corresponding degrees of freedom (X^2/df), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA - and corresponding 90% confidence interval), the goodness of fit index (GFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI), as suggested (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair, et al., 2005; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Bryman & Cramer, 2009). The values of the fit indices should be above the model adaptability standard (X^2/DF between 2 and 5 is acceptable (preferred below 2), CFI > .90, GFI >.90, RMSEA < .08).

Results of preliminary CFA indicated that the measurement fit indices met the cutoff requirements of suggested model fit indices. However, an inspection of the modification indices resulted in an improved fit to the data (X^2 = 701.302, df = 271, p < .001, X^2/DF=2.588, CFI=.959, GFI=.926, RMSEA=.048). An advantage of the CFA/SEM is its ability to quantitatively assess the construct validity (a set of items reflect the theoretical latent construct they are designed to measure) of a proposed measurement theory. CFA helps to empirical estimate validity using a rigorous approach.

Table 1 shows the construct reliability, the average variance extracted (AVE), and correlations of each variable. All items were significantly linked to their corresponding latent factor with factor loadings ranging from .52 to .97 however its majority are above .70, thus not appear to be significantly harming model fit or internal consistency. The AVE is all above .50, and the construct reliability estimates all exceeds .70 except one that is very close (.67). Thus, according to the rule of thumb the values for a construct reliability estimate is that .70 or higher suggests good reliability, and values of reliability between .60 and .70 may be acceptable. In addition the model fits relatively well based on the goodness of fit measures. Therefore, suggesting an adequate convergent validity. All variance extracted (AVE) estimates are greater than the square of correlation of any pair of constructs, thus providing evidence of discriminant validity. According to the rule of thumb all construct AVE estimates should be larger than the corresponding squared interconstruct correlation estimates (SIC). If it is achieved, this indicates the measured variables have more in common with the construct they are associated with than they do with other constructs. Based on these results of the model evaluation process, we can consider both theoretical and statistical grounds that the proposed constructs in the hypothesized estimated model demonstrated good reliability and validity, and that the model fitted the data well.

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Construct Reliability (CR)
1. Agreeableness	1							.625	.82
2. Snobbism	.097	1						.596	.88
3. Assiduousness	.107	.030	1					.538	.67
4. Conformity	.003	..005	.171	1				.597	.75
5. Unobtrusiveness	.033	.234	.081	.010	1			.526	.77
6. Affective country image	.	.	.	.	.	1		.672	.91
7. Behavioral intentions to visit	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	.531	.85

Table 1 – Discriminant validity – Comparing the squared interconstruct correlation (SIC) with average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor of the hypothesized research model

The estimation model included the country personality dimensions estimated on the basis of five-dimension construct measured as following: Agreeableness (items: bon-vivant,

reveler, amusing); Snobbism (items: offender, haughty, snobbish, mannered, chauvinist); Assiduousness (items: organized, rigorous, hard to work); Conformity (items: traditionalist, mysterious); and Unobtrusiveness (items: cowardly, wimpy, dependent). Affective country image include 5 items and behavioral intentions to visit include 5 items. Figure 2 displays the path diagram of the hypothesized research model, with the estimates that were obtained in a standardized solution (with critical ratio (CR) values computed by AMOS in parenthesis).

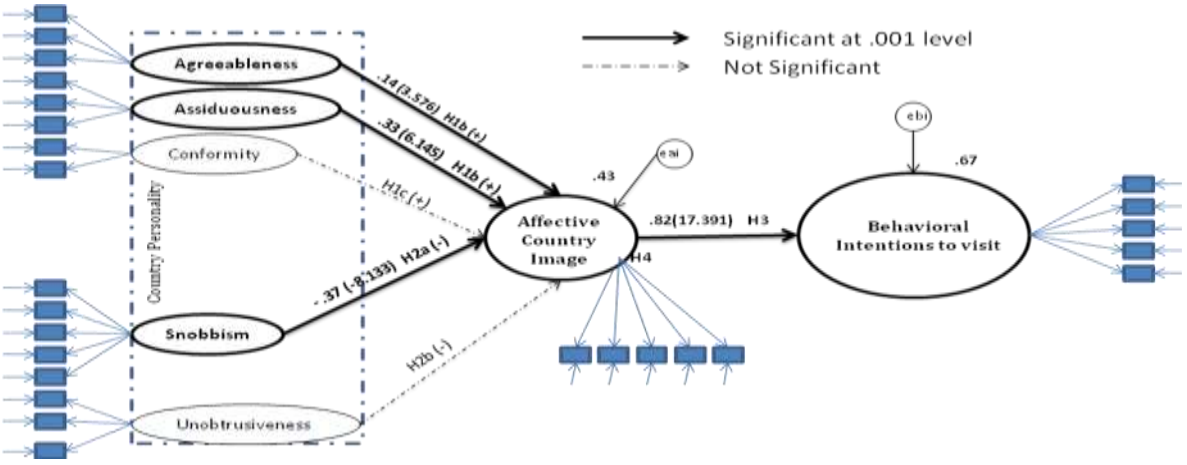

Figure 2 – Hypothesized model, with standardized estimates

The percentage of the variance of the construct behavioral intentions to visit/travel explained by the hypothesized model equals around 67%. Regarding the indirect impacts of the five country personality dimensions on behavioral intentions to travel/visit considering the affective country image as a mediator construct, the percentage of the variance of the mediator explained by the independent variables equals around 43% (see figure 2).

4.3 Hypotheses testing

Path coefficients estimated by SEM and the results of hypotheses 1 to 4 are presented in figure 2. The path coefficient from the assiduousness and agreeableness country personality dimensions to affective country image were significant at the 0.001 level, indicating a positive relationship (*β Assiduousness -> Affective Country Image = .328, p<.001, CR= 6.145;* (*β Agreeableness -> Affective Country Image = .139, p<.001, CR= 3.576)*. The path coefficient from the conformity country personality dimension to affective country image was not significant. The path coefficient from the snobbism country personality dimension to affective country image was negative, yet statistically significant at the 0.001 level, indicating a negative relationship (*β Snobbism -> Affective Country Image = -0.371, p< .001, CR= -8.133*). The path coefficient from the unobtrusiveness country personality dimension to affective country image was not significant. The relationship between affective country image and behavioral intentions to visit showed a positive relationship, significant at the .001 level (*β Affective Country Image -> Behavioral Intentions to Visit = .817, p< .001, CR = 17.391*). Therefore, while hypotheses H1a, H1b, H2a and H3 were supported, hypotheses H1c and H2b were not supported.

For determining the mediation we followed the suggested approach of Baron and Kenny (1986). The mediation is a hypothesized casual chain in which one variable affects a second variable that in turn, affects a third variable. The intervening variable mediates the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable (Usakli, 2009, p. 85). According Hair,

et al. (2005), the evaluation of the mediation, either structural equation modeling or a series of regression analyses can be utilized. We used SEM.

In order to validate the hypothesized research model and the mediating role of affective country image, an alternative model which included direct paths between country personality dimensions constructs and the behavioral intentions to visit was also examined (see figure 3). A set of statistics indicated that the alternative model (figure 3) showed a good fit of the data. However the change in chi-square (ΔX^2 =6.956, df=5, p < .001) indicated that the fit of the alternative model (X^2 =694.346, df = 266, p < .001, X^2/DF=2.610, CFI=.959, GFI=.927, RMSEA=.049) did not perform better than the hypothesized structural research model (figure 2) (X^2 = 701.302, df = 271, p < .001, X^2/DF=2.588, CFI=.959, GFI=.926, RMSEA=.048). Figure 3 displays the path diagram of the alternative model, with the estimates that were obtained in a standardized solution (with critical ratio values computed by AMOS in parenthesis).

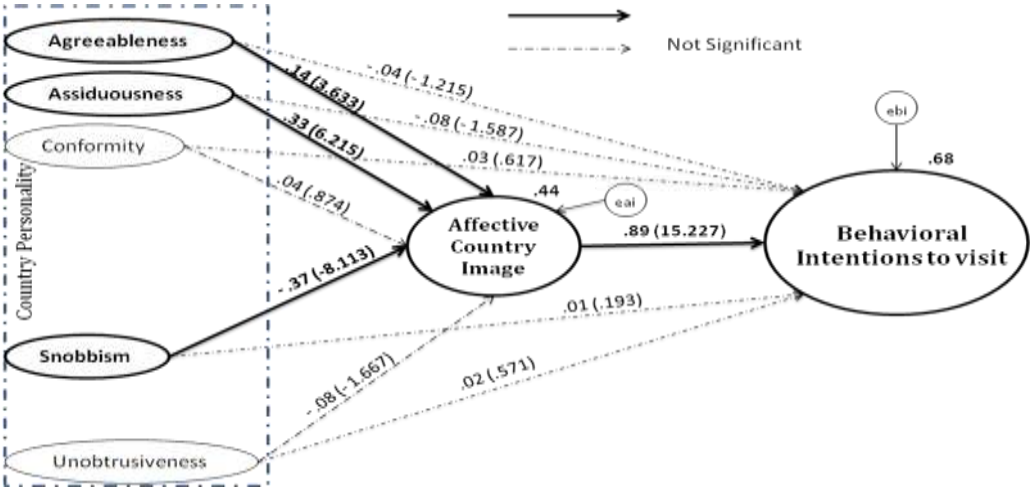

Figure 3 – Alternative model, with standardized estimates

Examination of the individual direct path coefficients indicated that none of the direct paths between the independent variables (country personality dimensions) and the dependent variable (behavioral intentions to travel/visit) were statistically significant. Although, these results technically indicates full mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), given the fact that the hypothesized model fit the data better than the alternative model. Therefore, H4 was full supported.

The assiduousness and agreeableness country personality dimensions showed a positive significant influence on affective country image, whereas snobbism showed a significant negative influence. However, none of the country personality dimensions show any significant direct influence on the dependent variable (behavioral intentions to visit). Thus, country personality dimensions have shown an indirect effect on behavioral intentions to travel, confirming the full mediation effect of the affective country image. The findings suggest differences from comparable earlier studies.

5. Contributions and limitations

This article shows that people could easily think of personality traits and associate them to countries, and communicate a country personality impression. Thus it confirms earlier proposals of d' Astous & Boujbel (2007), (Geuens, et al., 2009), and (Nebenzahl, et al., 2003), and (Davies, et al., 2001). The findings confirmed that consumers attribute personality traits to countries and can set their emotions about a specific country. Thus, the current study may

complement and confirm the conclusions earlier studies had about country personality scale usage. It confirmed its quality as a tool to measure country images perception in a symbolic way, and its importance as a complementary instrument to measure country image.

This study validates the role of affective country image as the bridge linking (mediator of) the situational input of country personality symbolic image to the psychological output of behavioral intentions to visit. Perhaps the most significant finding could therefore be concluded as a theoretically logical and empirically validated link of country personality dimensions, affective country image, and behavioral intentions. The analyses of the hypothesized research model showed important achievements about the study of country personality, emotions, and behavioral intentions relationship. Since all SEM estimated coefficients of country personality dimensions were no longer significant when direct links between country personality dimensions and behavioral intentions to visit were included (alternative model), it was concluded that affective country image worked as a perfect/full mediator between country personality and behavioral intentions to visit.

Our findings provide evidence that the symbolic functions or benefits of a country personality can be crucial in understanding the complex consumer intention to travel/visit behavior. Indeed, the results indicate that country personality dimensions have significant impact on consumer's behavioral intentions. However it is important to keep in mind the higher importance of the emotional components of country image. Affective country image showed a full mediating effect on the relationship between the country personality and behavioral intentions to visit. Thus, international business marketers should focus on developing marketing strategies emphasizing the distinctive personality of their country destinations. However they should consider the country emotions effects. Destination marketers of Portugal could differentiate it based on these personality dimensions, or these dimensions can be utilized in the positioning efforts of Portugal. In particular, focusing on the three of the five personality dimensions (snobbism, assiduousness, and agreeableness) that were found to be significant predictors for consumer' behavioral intentions to visit.

Complementarily, and as suggested by the personality traits frequency analysis, Portugal is seen as a religious and traditionalist country. Thus, marketers can potentially use these characteristics, when designing marketing strategies, to make their communication proposals to attract more Brazilians to Portugal. When applied to this work, emphasis must be placed on the more traditional, positive aspects of Portugal. Like any other study, the present research has some limitations which have to be taken into account when considering a discussion on the findings. First, the findings of this study are specific to one country and cannot be generalized to others. Second, the present study focused on general customers (who have already visited / and who did not visit) perceptions, emotions, and behavioral intentions, therefore the results may not be generalized to cognitive outputs such as purchase attitudes or purchase decision.

Finally, the current sampling approach resulted in a highly educated sample (72.2 percent of the respondents held a graduate degree or higher); and wealthy sample (47.9 percent of the respondents receive more than ten times the minimum salary (R$510)). This might have led to the overestimation of the relationship between country personality, emotional links, and behavioral intentions. Highly educated populations tend to be more receptive to foreign proposals (Canally, 2010), which might arise from their ability to travel abroad and interact with other countries, thus developing an appreciation for its people. Being wealthy may reinforced this fact. Future research should go deep and examine such a possibility.

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