

Cognitive as Opposed to Affective Country Image:

The Moderating Effect of Cognition-Affect Intra-valence Nature

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose

Taking the lens of a cue diagnosticity framework and affective primacy theory, this research examines the *relative effects* of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on consumer cognitive judgment, affective evaluation, and behavioural tendency in one integrated model. It also explores how the direct effects may vary with the *intra-valence nature* (ambivalent vs. univalent) of cognition-affect.

Design/methodology/approach

The proposed research model was tested using data from a large Chinese sample and consumer responses to products from four countries—the US, Japan, Brazil and India.

Findings

The results show that the *relative effects* of *cognitive* and *affective country image* are complex and differ by the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect. On a general level, *cognitive* and *affective country image* exert equal influence on affective evaluation and behavioural tendency. In contrast, *cognitive country image* demonstrates a more prominent effect than *affective country image* on cognitive judgment. Compared with univalent, ambivalent cognition-affect strengthens the positive impact of *affective country image* but does not significantly alter the positive impact of *cognitive country image* on consumer reactions.

Originality

This research contributes to the ongoing debate regarding implications of two focal aspects of macro country image by revealing their relative importance in an integrated

framework and enriches country-of-origin research through unveiling the uni/ambivalent cognition-affect as a moderator of the relationship between *cognitive/affective country image* and consumer reactions. The research findings provide implications as to whether and when marketing strategies should focus on leveraging positive (negative) *cognitive* or *affective country image*.

KEYWORDS

Cognitive country image; Affective country image; Uni/ambivalent cognition-affect; Cognitive judgment; Affective evaluation; Behavioural tendency; Country of origin; International marketing; Consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

Country-of-origin (COO) has been one of the most widely researched areas in International Marketing. While early studies focused on the influence of micro country image (i.e., at the product level) on customers' evaluations and/or purchase intentions, research focus has recently shifted to macro country image, that is, the overall beliefs and impressions people hold about a certain country (Garcia-De los Salmones *et al.*, 2022; Pappu and Quester, 2010; Samiee *et al.*, 2024). Scholars have provided abundant evidence of macro country image as a critical antecedent to micro country image and consumer responses (Oduro *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2017). However, of the two key dimensions of macro country image—*cognitive country image* and *affective country image*, there is ambiguity as to which one is more decisive in driving consumer preferences (Kock *et al.*, 2019; Ma *et al.*, 2022). Such ambiguity hampers the managerial relevance of extant findings regarding how to leverage the two country image dimensions to formulate effective international marketing strategies (Lahrech *et al.*, 2023; Rojas-Mendez and Khoshnevis, 2023; Samiee *et al.*, 2024).

Consumers simultaneously hold cognitive beliefs and affective emotions of a country (Li *et al.*, 2014; Serrano-Arcos *et al.*, 2022). These two dimensions of country image, though oftentimes related, do not just cast redundant effects on consumer behaviour, especially when they are of opposite valence (Kock *et al.*, 2019). For example, Japan is widely perceived as a developed country with advanced technology and high living standards (positive *cognitive country image*); but consumers of certain countries, such as in China, hold negative feelings toward Japan because of historical reasons (negative *affective country image*) (Wang *et al.*, 2023). This cognition-affect ambivalence has posed challenges to Japanese brands. As reported, sales of Toyota

and Honda in China dropped because of increased tensions between the two countries (Luo and Zhou, 2020).

For Japanese brands targeting the Chinese market, would it be more effective to emphasize Japan's economic and technological advancement or address Chinese consumers' animosity, rebuilding a friendly country image and fostering positive feelings? Similarly for managers of various countries, the relative influence of *cognitive* and *affective country image* and strategic choice between the two poses a critical issue, since choosing the wrong dimension to leverage could be fruitless or even counterproductive. Particularly, given the accelerating economic animosity, patriotism, and geopolitical tensions in the current world, appealing to consumers' country cognition or affect is vital to international brands' success (Davvetas *et al.*, 2023; Mainolfi, 2022).

Though previous studies have generally confirmed the influence of both *cognitive* and *affective country image* on consumer reactions, it is unclear how their effects compare to each other (Ma *et al.*, 2022; Samiee *et al.*, 2024). Three major research gaps remain in this regard. Firstly, much of the research on *cognitive* and *affective country image* has examined their influence in isolation (e.g., Klein *et al.*, 1998; Nes *et al.*, 2014; Shi *et al.*, 2021; Souiden *et al.*, 2020). Limited studies which examine the two dimensions in one combined model mostly focus on their interaction and consider them as correlated (e.g., Kock *et al.*, 2019; Micevski *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Scarce research has explicitly examined the comparative impact. Whether *cognitive* or *affective country image* typically exerts the predominant influence on consumer responses remains to be established.

Secondly, the intra-valence structure of country image and its potential influence have not been given sufficient attention. While consumers oftentimes have

consistently valenced cognition and affect of a country (i.e., both positive or both negative), it is not rare that country cognition and affect could be ambivalent—one being positive with the other being negative (Kock *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2017). According to psychology literature, the intra-valence nature of cognition and affect could significantly influence their respective predictive power on human behaviour (Lavine *et al.*, 1998). Scholars have called for closer examinations on the role of the valence structure of the two country image dimensions (Wang *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Thirdly, most studies used perceived product quality and purchase intention as indicators of the marketing outcomes leveraging country image (e.g., Kim *et al.*, 2022; Laroche *et al.*, 2005; Maher and Carter, 2011; Witek-Hajduk *et al.*, 2022). However, consumer reaction to foreign products is multi-faceted, including not only cognitive judgments and conative tendencies, but also affective evaluations (Wang *et al.*, 2017; Xie *et al.*, 2015). These consumer dispositions, though mutually related, are distinct constructs and may, occasionally, contradict each other (Verlegh, 2001). Psychological literature has also established that the relative influence of cognitive and affective information would vary for different types of attitudes (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Skowronski and Carlston, 1987). Yet, little research has investigated the impact of country image on consumers' affective responses. Even scarce research has distinguished types of consumer reactions and delineated the respective influence of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on the various marketing outcomes (Oduro *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2017).

To address the identified knowledge gaps, this research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the *relative impact* of *cognitive* versus *affective country image* on consumer reactions. Diverging from extant studies that examined

the two country image dimensions separately or focused on their mutual relations, this research offers a fresh comparative perspective and elucidates which of the country image dimensions (cognitive or affective) plays a more dominant role in driving consumer responses. Additionally, drawing from the cue diagnosticity framework in psychology, this research proposes and empirically tests the varied relative influence of the two dimensions on *distinct marketing outcomes*, namely cognitive judgement, affective evaluation and behavioural tendency, defined in the classic tripartite model of attitude (Ajzen 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

Moreover, this research advances knowledge of the country image effect via exploring how the effects of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on consumers would vary with the *intra-valence nature* of cognition and affect, namely *univalent* versus *ambivalent* country cognition-affect. The findings suggest that *ambivalent* (versus *univalent*) cognition-affect strengthens the influence of affective (compared to cognitive) country image on consumers. These findings provide rich managerial insights into which aspect of macro country image, cognitive or affective, is best to leverage or address to achieve specific marketing outcomes, and the conditions that modify international strategies based on the cognitive-affective country image framework.

2. Literature and conceptualization

2.1. Cognitive and affective country image

The country image construct can be viewed on two levels: micro and macro. Micro country image refers to the overall perception consumers form of products or product categories from a particular country (Costa *et al.*, 2016; Garcia-De los Salmones *et al.*, 2022). Macro country image insinuates consumers' generalized

mental representations of a specific country (Wang *et al.*, 2017; Oduro *et al.*, 2023). This research focuses on the latter.

Scholars have identified two distinct aspects of macro country image: *cognitive* and *affective* (Garcia-De los Salmones *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2012). Adopting the conceptualization of Kock *et al.* (2019), this research defines *cognitive country image* as consumers' *performance-related beliefs* about a country which are mainly cast by the country's level of economic development, standard of living, industrialization and technological advancement. *Affective country image*, on the other hand, pertains to *affect* consumers hold of a specific country, often predominately determined by *performance-unrelated* cues (Kock *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2014). *Affective country image* includes emotions and feelings of identification, trust, attraction and sympathy, or their opposite such as animosity and fear, toward a country, which can stem from consumers' direct and/or indirect experiences with a country's people, culture, politics, as well as historic, military, or economic events between the home country and the target country (Costa *et al.*, 2016; Klein *et al.*, 1998).

Literature has provided abundant evidence of the influence of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on consumer reactions to foreign products, particularly in terms of cognitive judgments and behavioural tendencies (Oduro *et al.*, 2023; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Wang *et al.*, 2017, see Supplementary Table A1). For example, a plethora of research has confirmed cognitive country image as an important external cue for consumer judgments of product quality, reliability, workmanship, and brand competence (e.g., He and Ge, 2023; Orbaiz and Papadopoulos, 2003). Many studies have revealed that *cognitive country image* significantly influences consumers' purchase intention directly and/or indirectly through its effect on cognitive product/brand judgment (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2014; Souiden *et al.*, 2020).

Researchers have also reported a positive relationship between *affective country image* and product-related cognitive judgments as consumers would use their affection for a country, such as its culture, landscape and people, to infer product attributes (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2021; Nes *et al.*, 2014; Shoham *et al.*, 2006). Many studies demonstrate that country affect such as consumer affinity (e.g., Nes *et al.*, 2014; Oberecker and Diamantopoulos, 2011) and animosity (e.g., Harmeling *et al.*, 2015; Klein *et al.*, 1998; Mandler *et al.*, 2023) toward a country significantly influence consumers' intention to choose or reject products from the country.

However, little research has explicitly examined how *cognitive* and *affective country image* would influence consumers' affective evaluation of products, which composes an essential dimension of consumer attitude apart from the cognitive and conative dimensions (Brijs, 2006). Noticeably, scholars generally hold the tacit notion that country affect would influence how consumers feel about products from a foreign country (Klein *et al.*, 1998; Nes *et al.*, 2014). For example, Xie *et al.* (2015) propose that brands associated with the tradition, local communities, and values of an affinity country could likely lead to positive feelings of comfort and nurturance. Nevertheless, empirical findings revealing the effect of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on affective evaluations of products from foreign countries remain scarce (Ma *et al.*, 2022).

Scholars have called for development of a coherent and explicit theoretical framework that delineates the concurrent and distinct impacts of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on diverse consumer outcomes, allowing comparison of effect sizes (Serrano-Arcos *et al.*, 2022; Samiee *et al.*, 2024). This research addresses these calls and examines in one integrated model the comparative effects of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on distinct consumer reactions, namely cognitive product

judgment, affective product evaluation and purchase intention.

2.2. Relative effects of cognitive and affective country image

According to the *cue diagnosticity* framework (Skowronski and Carlston, 1987), in the presence of multiple cues, individuals place greater weight on more diagnostic cues for a given decision, choice, or evaluation (Akdeniz *et al.*, 2013; Feldman and Lynch, 1988). Individual cues contribute to an outcome probabilistically, with some cues implying higher probability than others. The cues that lead to an outcome due to higher probability are considered more diagnostic than others that are less likely to lead to the outcome (Lynch *et al.*, 1988).

The essential position of the *cue diagnosticity* theory is that the relative diagnosticity of multiple cues hinges on specific tasks and goals (Lynch, 2006; Lynch *et al.*, 1988). In other words, the diagnosticity of a cue in comparison to other cues depends on its perceived usefulness and relevance to a specific goal (Linne *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2016). For example, consumers usually face multiple cues and have various goals when buying a product. Functional cues, such as third-party reviews signalling product attributes and unobservable quality, will be more diagnostic for consumer evaluation and preference when reliable performance is pursued (Byun *et al.*, 2021; Moon *et al.*, 2010). Social cues delivering the product's social acceptability and symbolic meanings will be more diagnostic for consumer decision when the product in consideration represents social status, such as luxury goods (Byun *et al.*, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2010).

The central premise of this research is that *cognitive* and *affective country image* could differ in their relative diagnosticity for distinct types of consumer responses. Existing literature suggests that the diagnosticity of cognition- and affect-oriented

cues, such as competence and warmth-related, varies depending on circumstances (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Güntürkün *et al.*, 2020). Competence is more diagnostic for decisions in which capability concerns are salient (Abele and Brack, 2013; Güntürkün *et al.*, 2020; Wojciszke, 2005), whereas warmth is more diagnostic for decisions in which relational concerns are salient (Güntürkün *et al.*, 2020; Wojciszke, 2005; Ybarra *et al.*, 2001).

For examples, Wojciszke *et al.* (1998) report that, in deciding whether to assign a candidate to the task of negotiating a complicated labour dispute (a task that demands high capabilities), people rely more heavily on information about the candidate's competence traits than affect-oriented cues. In a similar vein, "competence rejection" threatens sense of efficacy more than "warmth rejection" (see Chen *et al.*, 2024; Wang and Tu, 2014). In the marketing context, Güntürkün *et al.* (2020) document that customers' perception of a service company's competence (compared with warmth) dominates evaluations of the effectiveness and quality of the company's service provisions, because the substance of these judgments is essentially capability-related.

Cognitive country image, essentially cast by consumer perceptions of a country's level of economic development, standard of living, industrialization and technological advancement, indicates a country's overall competence (Li *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2012). Based on the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence in literature of the diagnosticity of competence-related cues for decisions in which capability is the primary concern, this research argues that *cognitive country image*, as *competence-related* consumer perceptions of a country, is likely to be more diagnostic than affective country image for cognitive judgment of a product wherein capability concerns are salient.

H1 Cognitive (compared with affective) country image would show a stronger effect on consumers' cognitive judgment of products from a foreign country.

By contrast, affect-oriented cues such as felt warmth is more diagnostic than competence for relation-related evaluation and affective responses to a target (Wojciszke, 2005; Ybarra *et al.*, 2001). Research shows that people are more likely to choose willing (as indicated by warmth-related traits) over able (as indicated by competence-related traits) partners when they aim for long-term partnerships (Dhaliwal *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, “warmth rejection” threatens belongingness more than “competence rejection” and thus would result in higher affiliative responses (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Williams, 2007). Compared to the competence perceptions of a company, warmth is more indicative of customer attachment and identification with the company (Güntürkün *et al.*, 2020).

Affective country image refers to consumers' feelings about a country that are often generated from its government, policies, culture and people (Li *et al.* 2014). Extending extant literature, this research predicts that *affective country image*, as an *affect-related* cue, would be more diagnostic than *cognitive country image* for consumer affective responses to products from the country. Therefore, *affective country image* would exert a stronger effect than *cognitive country image* on consumer affective evaluation of products.

H2 Affective (compared with cognitive) country image would show a stronger effect on consumers' affective evaluation of products from a foreign country.

Regarding purchase tendency, existing studies have documented substantial

evidence of the direct effect of both cognitive and affective country image (Li *et al.* 2014; Wang *et al.* 2012). Advancing existing literature, this research tests the relative effects of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on purchase tendency. Purchase tendency, a more downstream outcome, often indicates consumer's overall attitude, for which cognitive and affective evaluations might both be salient, or one might outperform the other, depending on circumstances. This research proposes the intriguing and crucially important research question, that is, would *cognitive* and *affective country image* demonstrate similar effects on purchase intention or one may typically outweigh the other as the more diagnostic cue for this marketing outcome?

RQ Would cognitive or affective country image show a stronger effect than the other on consumers' purchase intention of products from a foreign country?

2.3. Moderating effect of the intra-valence nature of cognition-affect

Consumers may hold consistent cognition and affect for a country, i.e., *univalent cognition-affect* (cognitive and affective country image are either both positive or both negative). There are also times when consumer cognition and affect for a country are inconsistent, i.e., *ambivalent cognition-affect* (positive cognitive but negative affective country image, or vice versa). This research explores whether and how the effects of *cognitive* and *affective country image* would differ as a function of the intra-valence nature of cognition-affect, specifically *ambivalent* versus *univalent* cognition-affect.

The seminal theory of *affective primacy* (Zajonc, 1980), which theorizes the prepotency of affect in determining preferences and subsequent responses (Zajonc, 1980; 1984; Zajonc and Markus, 1982), affords the theoretical foundation to the

arguments of this research. According to the *affective primacy theory*, the predictive power of cognition and affect may vary substantially depending on the evaluative consistency between the affective and cognitive components of an attitude. When affective feelings and cognitive thoughts are consistent in an evaluative way, neither affect nor cognition is likely to exert a consistently stronger influence on global attitude (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Lavine *et al.*, 1998). When affect and cognition are in conflict and have contradictory evaluative implications, individuals are likely to rely, to a greater extent, on affect than cognition in determining their evaluations and evaluation-relevant behaviour (Lavine *et al.*, 1998).

Three rationales are used to endorse the *primacy of affect* principle. First, affect is perceived as more subjectively valid and more closely linked to the self than cognition. Second, affective information is more easily retrieved from memory than cognitive information, in part because of affect's stronger links to the self; hence, the retrieval of relevant information is guided to a greater extent by the evaluative connotations of affective rather than cognitive information (Lavine *et al.*, 1998). Finally, affective responses often chronologically precede cognitive response in attitude formation (Edwards and von Hippel, 1995). When affect and cognition are inconsistent and have conflicting evaluative implications, affective information is likely to be retrieved first, while subsequently retrieved inconsistent cognitive information may then be suppressed or refuted (Chaiken and Yates, 1985), which would compromise the predictive power of cognitive information.

Literature has provided strong support for the primacy of affect principle with evidence from empirical studies (Abele and Wojciszke, 2014; de Lemus *et al.*, 2013; Linne *et al.*, 2022), evolutionary research (Eisenbruch and Krasnow, 2022), as well as

neuroimaging studies with fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) technology (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Attributing to the theory of *affective primacy* and associated empirical findings, consumers with *ambivalent cognition-affect* (compared to consumers with *univalent cognition-affect*), would likely first retrieve and be more attentive to *affective* (affect) than *cognitive country image* (cognition). Increased attention to *affective country image* would enhance its predictive power on consumer responses. In contrast, suppressed or refuted attention to *cognitive country image* would likely reduce its predictive power among consumers with *ambivalent cognition-affect* as opposed to consumers with univalent cognition-affect. Based on this reasoning, this research proposes that the intra-valence nature of cognition-affect moderates the influence of *affective/cognitive country image* on consumer reactions.

H3 Ambivalent cognition-affect (compared with univalent cognition-affect) weakens the relationship between cognitive country image and consumers' (H3a) cognitive judgment, (H3b) affective evaluation, and (H3c) purchase intention of products from a foreign country.

H4 Ambivalent cognition-affect (compared with univalent cognition-affect) strengthens the relationship between affective country image and consumers' (H4a) cognitive judgment, (H4b) affective evaluation, (H4c) purchase intention of products from a foreign country.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this research.

Insert Figure 1 here

3. Methodology

3.1. Choice of countries

Data were collected from Chinese consumers in mainland China. Chinese consumers serve as a valid sample for this research because products from many countries are widely available in China, which is the world's second-largest importer. Chinese consumers, thus, are familiar with products from other COOs, which eliminates random responses (Cohen and Cohen, 1983).

The US, Japan, Brazil, and India are selected as the COOs to be assessed because these countries are among the top ten trade partners with China in terms of total trade value (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Chinese consumers are generally acquainted with these importing countries and their products. Additionally, these countries have contrasting levels of economic development. The US and Japan are more developed countries whereas Brazil and India are less developed with lower level of standard of living, industrialization and technological advancement. Chinese consumers hold diverse affect toward these countries. As the report of Pew Research Center (2016) shows, while Chinese people hold more positive feelings about the US, their feelings about Japan and India are generally more negative. Chinese people also demonstrate favourable affection toward Brazil attributing to its culture and natural scenery.

These four countries exemplify the four distinct *intra-valence structures* of country image defined by the two focal aspects, namely country image dimensions (cognition and affect) and associated valence (positive and negative), which would enable exploration of the proposed conceptual framework.

3.2. Products

Household electrical appliances were tested in this research because: 1) they are familiar to Chinese consumers and are regularly purchased, which reduces response randomness (Cohen and Cohen, 1983); 2) these products, available in the China market, are from a number of countries, which enables country-induced predispositions; the four identified countries all export their own household electrical appliances brands such as Panasonic, Sony and Sharp from Japan, GE, ACA and Holmes from the US, Godrej Appliances, Voltas and IFB from India, and Mallory from Brazil; 3) these products have been tested in previous relevant studies (e.g., Brijs, 2006; Manrai *et al.*, 1998; Roth and Romeo, 1992). Thereby, testing these products in this research would enable comparison of the findings with existing literature.

3.3. Data collection procedure and sample profile

A major marketing research agency specializing in online research was hired to execute data collection. Respondents were recruited from the agency's sample base and awarded points which could be spent online or used to redeem cash or store vouchers. This research adopted a scenario-based survey. Respondents were randomly assigned to respond to one of the four countries and asked if they came across, in an imaginary shopping situation, a household electrical appliance from the assigned country, how they would react to the products. This approach, warranting the ecological validity, allows country image cues to inform product evaluation and decision-making (Koschate-Fischer *et al.*, 2012).

A total of 820 consumers aged 18 and above completed the questionnaire. After data cleaning and screening, such as removing the questionnaires with missing values and obvious mistakes, the final sample size is 812 (see Table I). Generally, the sample,

composed more of relatively younger consumers with higher educational background and decent income from more developed cities, represent major target consumers of imported household electrical appliances.

Insert Table I here

3.4. Measures

Most measures were adopted/adapted from previous studies. *Cognitive country image* was assessed using five items derived from Laroche *et al.* (2005) and Li *et al.* (2014). To capture *affective country image*, both positive and negative feelings toward a country were measured because previous studies have found that *affective country image* embraces both positive and negative aspects which exist simultaneously (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999; Williams and Aaker, 2001) and positive and negative country feelings, e.g., affinity and animosity, are different constructs rather than bipolar opposites of the same construct (Nes *et al.*, 2014). The positive and negative aspects of *affective country image* were evaluated with a ten-item scale respectively adopted from Brijs (2006). Then, as with Lavine *et al.* (1998), a composite *affective country image* score was computed by subtracting an individual's average negative score from the average positive score. Cognitive judgment was assessed using measures adapted from Li *et al.* (2014), whereas affective evaluation was measured adapting the items utilized in Batra and Ahtola (1991). The items measuring *purchase tendency* were adopted from Li *et al.* (2014).

Seven-point scales were used for all measures (1 = negative, 7 = positive) except for *affective country image*. Regarding the response format for measuring *affective country image*, as with Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), respondents were

asked to first report whether they had the specific feeling for the assigned country (absence of a given feeling was scored by 0 = “don’t harbour this feeling”); then, only if this feeling was present, respondents would rate the strength of the feeling on a seven-point scale (1 = slightly, 4 = moderately, 7 = extremely). This procedure was applied to all the 10 items of the measurement. The higher the score, the stronger the positive/negative the feeling was. All measures were translated into Chinese followed by a back-translation procedure (Behling and Law, 2000) to ensure that the meanings of the translated items were consistent with the originals. Table II presents detailed information about the items, their loadings and statistical results.

For the moderator of the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect, this research adopted the method of Lavine *et al.* (1998) to distinguish between *ambivalent* versus *univalent* cognition-affect. For country affect, composite *affective country image* scores less than zero indicated negative overall affect and scores greater than zero suggested positive overall affect. To create positive and negative cognition, respondents with average *cognitive country image* scores below the midpoint of the scale (i.e., < 4) comprised the negative cognition, whereas those with average scores above the midpoint comprised the positive cognition. Respondents were classified as having *ambivalent cognition-affect* if they held negative cognition but positive affect of the assigned country, or vice versa (i.e., when *cognitive country image* < 4 while *affective country image* > 0, or *cognitive country image* > 4 while *affective country image* < 0). Conversely, respondents were classified as having *univalent cognition-affect* if their cognition and affect about the assigned country was either both positive or both negative (i.e., when *cognitive country image* > 4 while *affective country image* > 0, or *cognitive country image* < 4 while *affective country image* < 0).

Insert Table II here

3.5. Reliability, validity tests

Exploratory factor analyses followed by confirmatory factor analyses were run to assess dimensionality and validity of the positive and negative aspects of *affective country image*. Specifically, an iterated χ^2 -difference test was conducted by selecting the item with the lowest item-to-total correlation, stopping when the χ^2 -difference tests showed no difference or the adjusted goodness-of-fit index did not increase (Wieland *et al.*, 2018). Given high inter-item correlations indicate redundancy-respective items, relevant items were deleted. Five items each were elicited for positive and negative aspects of *affective country image* and used in subsequent model estimation (see Table II). The excluded items from the original scale are determined, alert, active, strong, and proud for positive *affective country image*; nervous, afraid, distressed, ashamed, and guilty for negative *affective country image*.

The conceptual framework was tested with structural equation modelling (SEM), using AMOS 24. The measurement model provides a good fit for the data: $\chi^2 = 858.882$, d.f. = 335, $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.564$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .977, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .044, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .031 (Hair *et al.*, 2009; Kline, 2016). All indicators load significantly onto the respective latent constructs ($p < .001$) with values varying from .781 to .923. The composite reliability for each construct exceeds the minimum cut-off value of .70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeds .50 which implies good convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity is established since the AVE for each

construct exceeds the squared correlation between the construct and every other construct in the model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All measures were valid and reliable (see Table III).

3.6. Common method bias tests

Both Harman's single-factor test and the unmeasured latent method factor approach were used to test for the existence of common method bias. Harman's single-factor test was conducted based on an un-rotated exploratory factor analysis on all the manifest variables of the latent constructs. The results show a four-factor structure with the largest factor explaining 43.9% of the variance, which is lower than the threshold of 50% (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Confirmatory factor analysis was also performed to examine the model fit of a single-factor model. The model fit indices indicate a poor overall fit ($\chi^2 = 11722.161$, d.f. = 350, $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 33.492$, $p < .001$, CFI = .505, RMSEA = .200, SRMR = .186).

Following the unmeasured latent method factor approach, a latent common methods variance factor was incorporated into the measurement model, i.e., all items were allowed to load on the latent method factor as well as their theoretical constructs (Bagozzi, 2011; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The model fit of the measurement model with the latent method factor included ($\chi^2 = 858.335$, d.f. = 334, $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.570$, $p < .001$, CFI = .977, RMSEA = .044, SRMR = .032) is comparable to that of the measurement model without the factor. None of the factor loadings of each indicator to its corresponding construct changes substantially. These results indicate common method bias did not appear.

Insert Table III here.

4. Results

4.1. Basic model

Analysis with simultaneous estimation of the measurement and structural models was run. The basic model (as presented using solid lines in Figure 1) provides a good fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 300.961$, d.f. = 139, $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.165$, $p < .001$, CFI = .989, RMSEA = .038, SRMR = .024). The parameter estimates of the basic model are shown in Table IV. The results show significant positive relationships of *cognitive country image* with consumers' cognitive judgments ($\gamma = .790$, $p < .001$), purchase tendency ($\gamma = .445$, $p < .001$) and affective evaluations ($\gamma = .464$, $p < .001$). *Affective country image* also exerts significant positive effects on consumers' cognitive judgments ($\gamma = .110$, $p < .001$), affective evaluations ($\gamma = .421$, $p < .001$) and purchase tendency ($\gamma = .449$, $p < .001$).

Insert Table IV here

4.2. Relative impact of cognitive and affective country image

Regarding the *relative impact* of *cognitive country image* and *affective country image* on consumer responses, the results demonstrate that, for consumers' cognitive judgments, *cognitive country image* has a stronger impact than *affective country image*. *Cognitive country image* also exerts a slightly more prominent impact on consumers' affective evaluations than *affective country image*. For purchase tendency, the effect of *affective country image* is slightly stronger than that of *cognitive country image*.

image. The corresponding differences are .680 (cognitive judgments), .043 (affective evaluations) and .004 (purchase intention), respectively.

To test H1, the *cognitive* ($\gamma = .790$) and *affective country image* ($\gamma = .110$) standardized beta weights were statistically different from each other; their corresponding 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were estimated via bias corrected bootstrap (1000 re-samples). If the CIs overlap by less than 50%, the weights would be considered significantly different ($p < .05$) from each other (Cumming 2009). The results show that *cognitive country image* CI (.752, .829) and *affective country image* CI (.063, .156) do not overlap, which suggests the weights are significantly different ($p < .001$). In support of H1, *cognitive country image* has a statistically stronger effect on consumers' cognitive judgments than *affective country image*.

To test H2, the *cognitive* ($\gamma = .464$) and *affective country image* ($\gamma = .421$) standardized beta weights were statistically different from each other, their corresponding 95% CIs were estimated via bias corrected bootstrap (1000 re-samples). As the *cognitive* and *affective country image* weights have overlapping CIs, to examine if the weight difference is statistically significant, half of the average of the overlapping ICs was calculated (.029) and added to the lower bound estimate of the *cognitive country image* beta weight (.407) which yielded .436. As the *affective country image* upper bound estimate of .474 is higher than the value of .436, the difference between the *cognitive* and *affective country image* standardized beta weights ($\Delta\gamma = .043$) is not statistically significantly larger than the *affective country image* beta weight ($p > .05$). The results suggest that the effects of *affective* and *cognitive country image* on consumers' affective evaluations are not significantly different. H2 is not supported.

For the relative effects on consumers' purchase tendency, the *cognitive* ($\gamma = .445$)

and *affective country image* ($\gamma = .449$) weights also have overlapping CIs. To examine if the weight difference is statistically significant, half of the average of the overlapping CIs was calculated (.029) and added to the lower bound estimate of the *affective country image* beta weight (.390) which yielded .419. As the *cognitive country image* upper bound estimate of .499 is higher than the value of .419, the difference between the *cognitive* and *affective country image* standardized beta weights ($\Delta\gamma = .004$) is not statistically significantly larger than the *cognitive country image* beta weight ($p > .05$). The results suggest that the effects of *affective* and *cognitive country image* on consumers' purchase tendency are not significantly different.

Conceivably, strengthening consumer cognitive judgment and affective evaluation of a product may also strengthen purchase intention (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Although the employed structural equation modelling approach implicitly accounts for potential dependencies between the outcome variables, an additional analysis was conducted to explicitly specify these relationships. This research examined an alternative model that included the relationships of cognitive judgment and affective evaluation with purchase intention. The results (see Supplementary Table A2) show that inclusion of potential dependencies between the outcome variables does not substantially change the results of the hypotheses tests.

4.3. Moderation analysis

To test the moderating effect of *the intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect, this research divided the sample into two subgroups: *ambivalent* versus *univalent* cognition-affect. In total, 392 of the 812 respondents fell in the *univalent* cognition-affect subgroup, with 291 holding both positive cognition (> 4) and affect

(> 0) and 101 expressing both negative cognition (< 4) and affect (< 0). 303 respondents fell into the *ambivalent* cognition-affect subgroup, with 133 having positive cognition (> 4) but negative affect (< 0) and 170 having negative cognition (< 4) but positive affect (> 0). The remaining (117) respondents held either (both) neutral cognition (= 4) or (and) affect (= 0), thus, they were excluded from moderation analysis.

Multiple group structural equation modelling was used to test the moderating role of the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect. The two subgroups, i.e., the *univalent* cognition-affect subgroup and the *ambivalent* cognition-affect subgroup, were included for comparative tests. The multiple group model provides a good fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 684.037$, d.f. = 300, $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.280$, $p < .001$, CFI = .972, RMSEA = .043, SRMR = .050). Table IV presents the parameter estimates for the moderating model.

H3_{a-c} proposes that *ambivalent* cognition-affect (compared with *univalent* cognition-affect) weakens the relationship between *cognitive country image* and consumer reactions to products from a foreign country. As with consumers' cognitive judgment, when cognition-affect is *univalent*, *cognitive country image* has a significant positive effect on consumers' cognitive judgment ($\gamma = .941$, $p < .001$). This effect, although remaining significant, becomes slightly weaker when cognition-affect is *ambivalent* ($\gamma = .932$, $p < .001$). The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent* cognition-affect is insignificant at the .05 level ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.381$, $p > .05$).

Regarding consumers' affective evaluation, *cognitive country image* has a significant positive effect on consumers' affective evaluation when cognition-affect is *univalent* ($\gamma = .590$, $p < .001$). This effect becomes slightly stronger when the cognition-affect is *ambivalent* ($\gamma = .683$, $p < .001$). The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent* cognition-affect is not significant at the .05 level ($\Delta\chi^2$

= .384, $p > .10$).

As with consumers' *purchase tendency*, *cognitive country image* exerts a significant positive effect on consumers' purchase intention when cognition-affect is *univalent* ($\gamma = .683, p < .001$). This relationship becomes weaker when cognition-affect is *ambivalent* ($\gamma = .550, p < .001$). The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent cognitive-affective country image* is not significant at the .05 level ($\Delta x^2 = 3.103, p > .05$). Taken together, H3_{a-c} is not supported. *Ambivalent* cognition-affect does not significantly weaken the effects of *cognitive country image* on consumer responses.

H4_{a-c} proposes that *ambivalent* cognition-affect (compared with *univalent* cognition-affect) strengthens the relationship between *affective country image* and consumer reactions to products from a foreign country. For the consumers' cognitive judgment, when cognition-affect is *univalent*, *affective country image* does not have a significant effect on consumers' cognitive judgment ($\gamma = -.059, p > .05$). This effect becomes significant ($\gamma = .236, p < .05$) when cognition-affect is *ambivalent*. The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent* cognition-affect is significant at the .05 level ($\Delta x^2 = 11.546, p < .01$).

Regarding consumers' affective evaluation, when cognition-affect is *univalent*, *affective country image* has a significantly positive effect on consumers' affective evaluation ($\gamma = .251, p < .001$). This effect evidently becomes stronger when cognition-affect is *ambivalent* ($\gamma = .652, p < .01$). The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent* cognition-affect is significant at the .05 level ($\Delta x^2 = 6.127, p < .05$).

As with consumers' *purchase tendency*, when cognition-affect is *univalent*, *cognitive country image* has a significantly positive effect on consumers' purchase

intention ($\gamma = .198, p < .001$). This effect becomes stronger when cognition-affect is *ambivalent* ($\gamma = .617, p < .01$). The Chi-square difference between the *univalent* and *ambivalent* cognition-affect is significant at the .05 level ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.879, p < .001$). *Affective country image* exerts a stronger effect on consumer responses when cognition-affect is *ambivalent* rather than *univalent*, supporting H4_{a-c}.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The primary focus of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the influence of macro country image through accounting for the *relative effects* of the two focal country image dimensions, namely *cognitive* and *affective country image* on distinct types of consumer reactions, as well as the impact of the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect (ambivalence vs. univalence) in an integrated model. The findings suggest that compared with *affective country image*, *cognitive country image* demonstrates a more prominent effect on cognitive judgment. However, the prominent effect of *cognitive country image* does not manifest in relation to affective evaluation and *behavioural tendency*. In addition, the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect significantly moderates the influence of *affective country image* on consumer responses. Specifically, *ambivalent* cognition-affect substantially strengthens the effect of *affective country image* on consumer responses, including cognitive judgment, affective evaluation and behavioural tendency.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the COO literature by providing a comparative perspective on the country image effect. Diverging from extant research that either focused on only one of the country image dimensions (*cognitive* and *affective country*

image) (e.g., Nes *et al.*, 2014; Souiden *et al.*, 2020) or examined their interrelations (e.g., Kock *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2023), the current research advances knowledge of the *cognitive-affective country image* framework through comparing the *relative* importance of cognitive versus *affective country image* in influencing consumer responses to foreign products. This approach, accounting for the bi-dimensional nature of country-induced predispositions of COO, provides fresh insights on an intriguing and important question, that is, whether consumers follow their heart or mind more when encountering products from other countries (Wang *et al.* 2017).

While most COO research focuses on cognitive judgment and/or behavioural tendency as outcomes of country image effect (Brijs *et al.*, 1999; Oduro *et al.*, 2023), this research explores the relative impact of country beliefs versus feelings on three typical but *distinct consumer responses*, namely cognitive judgment, affective evaluation and behavioural tendency. The findings extend knowledge on how country image influences consumers' *affective reaction* to foreign products, a generally overlooked issue in COO literature (Brijs, 2006; Serrano-Arcos *et al.*, 2022), and answers the call for an integrated theoretical framework that delineates the concurrent and relative impacts of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on diverse consumer outcomes (Serrano-Arcos *et al.*, 2022; Samiee *et al.*, 2024). Allowing for explicit comparison of specific effects in one comprehensive model, this research helps to reconcile the conflicting findings on the magnitude of country image effects in extant studies due to their divergent focuses and partial examination of the country image mechanism (Oduro *et al.*, 2023; Samiee *et al.*, 2024).

The research results affirm the *relatively* dominant role of beliefs (in comparison with feelings) consumers hold towards COOs in determining cognitive judgment and the equally pronounced role played by feelings in influencing their affective and

behavioural responses to products. Such findings reveal that the *relative impacts* of country feelings and beliefs vary depending on the evaluative focus. The current research echoes social psychology literature on the instrumentality of attitude which has established that the relative weights of affect and cognition in evaluative judgments vary as a function of specific features of the situation, the attitude holder, and/or the attitude object (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Güntürkün *et al.*, 2020).

This research provides new insights into the role played by the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect (ambivalence vs. univalence) induced by *consistency/inconsistency* between cognition and affect in dictating the relative influence of beliefs and feelings on consumer responses to products. The findings demonstrate that the relative importance of beliefs versus feelings in driving consumer reactions to foreign products shifts toward feelings as consumers have *ambivalent* (versus *univalent*) cognition-affect. These findings support the notion that COO and consumer research needs a more refined approach that distinguishes different aspects (Maheswaran *et al.*, 2013) and *valence nature* of country image cues (Kock *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

This research contributes to the ongoing debate in psychology literature about the impact of ambivalence on the respective influence of cognition and affect by uncovering a potential boundary condition for the role of ambivalence. Different from the seminal *affective primacy theory* which posits the dominant influence of affect over cognition in driving decision under ambivalent conditions (Zajonc, 1980; 1984; Zajonc and Markus, 1982), several studies counter-argued that, due to the unpleasant nature of ambivalence and thus the motivation to reduce ambivalence, people with inconsistent cognition-affect would engage in more effortful and systematic

processing of information in decision making (Harreveld *et al.*, 2015; Ziegler *et al.*, 2002).

To explain these opposing positions on the role of ambivalence, Linne *et al.* (2022) suggested that elaborate cognitive information processing (i.e., strengthened impact of cognition versus affect) is a coping mechanism to resolve unexpected ambivalence, such as when people find contradictory cognitive and affective product reviews. However, when ambivalence occurs as extant stereotypes (i.e., not surprising/unexpected), individuals do not necessarily employ more cognitive effort, and the affective primacy principle would apply. The findings of this research yield empirical evidence for these nuances of ambivalence. Specifically, ambivalent country cognitive-affect, as extant stereotypes consumers hold of a country, strengthens the impact of affect versus cognition.

5.2. Managerial contributions

This research has important implications for international businesses. First, beyond paying due attention to the importance of country image for international marketing strategies (Cuervo-Cazurra *et al.*, 2018), in choosing *cognitive* and/or *affective country image* as the focal leverage point, brands should match the choice to specific outcomes aimed at. For example, when trying to convince international consumers of the quality and functional excellence of products, companies could spend more efforts on cognitive country image, emphasizing the technological advancement and productive capabilities of the COO. However, if the goal is to build strong customer relations and enhance affective bonding, and/or to facilitate purchase, it would be equally important to appeal to feelings.

Second, brands need to be mindful of the possible impact of the *intra-valence nature* of cognition-affect in relation to a COO on how consumers in a target foreign market might respond to brands/products. When consumers hold *ambivalent* beliefs and feelings of a country, *affective country image* should be especially attended to, given its substantially strengthened influence compared to *cognitive country image*.

For instance, in the opening case, despite Japan's economic and technological strength, Chinese consumers, especially the older generations, do not prefer Japanese car brands due to their animosity toward the country (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Addressing negative *affective country image* and nurturing positive country feelings could be a more effective strategy than investing in *cognitive country image*. As research (Wang *et al.*, 2023) shows, younger Chinese hold improved affect toward Japan thanks to the successful spread of Japanese culture, such as animations, games, food, and music among younger Chinese consumers, and Japan, as a nation brand, is attracting a large number of young Chinese tourists (Wang 2020).

On the other hand, for brands from emerging countries with positive *affective country image*, such as Brazil in this research, managers should try to emphasize the experiential rather than rational aspects of the purchase and, thus, lead consumers to incorporate more feelings than logical thinking in decision making. Strategies integrating and highlighting characteristic country elements, like unique culture, landscape and history, in brand image and product design, would also help to take the advantages of favourable country feelings.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This research has several limitations which could be addressed in future. First, this research was conducted in only one country (China); the findings should be read

and interpreted with caution, particularly when applying the findings to other countries. Due to the impact of culture on consumer responses to foreign products (Kock et al., 2019), relative effects of cognitive versus affective country image and the moderating role of cognition-affect intra-valence nature may vary in different cultural contexts. Further studies could be conducted in other research contexts, such as consumers in both developed and developing countries, to validate the findings.

Second, the findings are generated based on one product type, namely household electrical appliances, which, by nature, are utilitarian oriented. Future research could test if the findings would apply to other types of products, for example hedonic and experiential products. Since utilitarian/hedonic products relate more to functional/affective benefits (Voss et al., 2003), product type could serve as a boundary factor that affects the relative impact of *cognitive* and *affective country image* on consumer reactions. Further research could also capture behavioural data to extend the findings of this research to actual consumer actions.

Third, a major novelty of this research is to draw research attention to the *intra-valence nature* of *cognitive* and *affective country image* and the moderating role of cognition-affect *ambivalence* and *univalence* in the relationship between *cognitive/affective country image* and consumer responses. Future research could examine the influence of the direction of ambivalence (i.e., the specific valence combinations of cognition and affect) and explore the underlying mechanism of the effect of ambivalence (e.g., feeling of being torn) on the influence of *cognitive* and *affective country image*.

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