

# National Identity: U. S. Midwest College Students' Selection of Reflective Products and Services

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## Abstract

In a preliminary study in the investigation of national identity as expressed by the products and services considered reflective of the nation, college students were asked to complete a welcome basket for visitors to the U.S.. The results of this study can be used to help understand the internal identity of a nation. In addition, the brands specified can benefit from these findings. Additional more refined studies involving both internal and external respondents will follow.

## Introduction

Branding a nation is a complex task due to the multitude of variables to be considered, some of which are continuously evolving. To aid in this cumbersome task an investigation was completed with the results presented here. The opinions of U.S. citizens, specifically college students, were collected as to which products and services they believe best reflect U.S. culture. The goal was to gain insights into what the internal public feels best reflect them and their nation to others.

Place branding includes destination branding for tourism marketing. Nation brands reflect a nation's identity and nation branding is gaining in popularity with tourist boards and governments. A nation's image is an eclectic sum of all the images stakeholders hold about the nation. This image is more complex and fluid than a brand image (Scott, Ashton, Ding and Xu 2011). Differentiation between nations can be difficult yet the tourism market can be very competitive. The key to any type of branding is to identify unique characteristics of what is to be branded.

Branding a nation is a competitive strategy for commercial reasons as well as a tool for self-affirmation of a national identity (Scott, Ashton, Ding and Xu 2011). A nation brand not only influences a decision of destination but also attracts and keeps residents (Kim, Shim and Dinnie 2013). Stakeholders must be engaged in the branding processes as they will, in essence, become 'ambassadors' of the brand. The stakeholders, by necessity, must convey the brand in their actions as international audiences may use the actions of the ambassadors as a source of information about the country (Rawson 2007).

Enthusiasm of the population is critical for an impactful nation brand. The brand should speak with the voice of the people since the people are the voice of the brand (Widler 2007). National pride is necessary for successful nation branding as well as its outcome. Therefore, the citizens' feelings about the nation brand should be present in the early stages of nation branding. Input from stakeholders should be sought by nation branders throughout the nation branding process.

The relationship between a nation's image and the images of the products and services produced by that nation is multidimensional. The perception of the products and services produced by a nation is driven by stereotypes associated with the country of origin's people (Chattalas 2015). In addition, research has discovered that a nation's image is impacted by the perceived characteristics of products made in the country (Ishii and Watanabe 2015). Since a nation can't change their physical attributes they must seek to affect perceptions. Outsiders gain their perceptions of other nations through personal experience, education/knowledge, ownership of products made there, media depictions and stereotypes (Fan 2006).

Research has identified five primary antecedents of nation brand personality. These antecedents are government competence, people/events, natural features, pop culture and arts/history (Song and Sung 2013). Currently, the overall US brand is held somewhat positively abroad based on research findings. U.S. cultural and entertainment products are generally accepted and well-known. Politics and often conflicting bodies with different objectives present a challenge in general U.S. branding (Rawson 2007).

Prevailing stereotypes, both an enemy and a friend of nation branders, can be a starting point for developing national brands. A nation brand should represent the country in a fair and balanced manner. The nation brand needs to be a useful reflection of the competitive advantages of the nation and not be biased or based on outdated clichés (Widler 2007).

To gain insights into citizens' perceptions of U.S. culture a study was designed to relate products and services to national identity. The results of this study are intended to benefit nation branding.

Students were selected as the sample population as research indicates that young people are more similar to their peers worldwide in their wants and needs than other age groups (Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett and Sinha 2008). A content analysis was performed on the results of the qualitative research method of having respondents respond to a written prompt. The study intent was to determine which products and services the sample felt best represented the U.S. culture.

The study was incorporated into three Consumer Behavior classes. The process and the activity were mutually designed to reflect the importance of the understanding

of culture in the effective marketing of products and services. Interactive and dynamic classroom innovations have been advocated to reflect the importance of cultural differences as well as to demonstrate that much of one's own culture is invisible to the individual (Wright and Larsen 2012).

The specific prompt used in this study was as follows:

“The United States chamber of Commerce wants to develop a Welcome Basket for important visitors to the United States. This basket is to contain products and services that reflect the traditions and values of the United States' people and businesses. What ten items would you put in the basket? List these items. (The 'items' do not need to literally fit in a basket. Large items and services can be represented by gift cards or certificates.) Provide an explanation as to why you feel these ten items reflect the U.S. and its people.”

The results and summary conclusions will be insightful and beneficial in future nation branding. It is evident that nation branding, or the marketing of a country's identity to both internal and external audiences is a complicated task. By determining which products and services a nation's members identify as best reflecting their culture marketers will provide deeper insights into the vision of internal audiences as well as authentic characteristics to use in marketing the nation externally.

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**Keywords:** national branding, destination marketing, tourism marketing, internal marketing

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** Marketers involved in international marketing as well as U.S. tourism marketing will benefit from the findings of this preliminary study. Knowing what products and services young adults associate with the U.S. provide a window into the authentic view of the nation.

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