

Nation Brand and Tourism: Familiarity, Perception, and Intention to Visit

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Abstract

Marketing campaigns and products of the cultural industries are an important factor influencing tourists' intention to visit. Both elements can be considered, however, to be integrated into the holistic perception of a destination. The perception of a destination's image has been studied before, but there is no geographically wide-ranging research that assesses the relationship between overall country brand perception and intention to visit. To empirically demonstrate this relationship, an online survey of 2,151 individuals from 21 countries was conducted to assess the level of familiarity with, global perception of, and intention to visit of a sample of 55 countries around the world. From the statistical analysis of the results, it is concluded that there is a positive, significant, and very high correlation between the global perception of a country and the intention to visit it. In addition, through a two-stage cluster analysis, the 55 country brands are grouped into three categories –consolidated, underappreciated, and underconsidered brands– which allows us to propose some strategic recommendations. It is also observed that underdeveloped countries, in general, have a worse perception, which translates into a lower intention to visit, which in turn compromises, in a sort of vicious circle, their possibilities for future development.

Keywords

Tourism Communication, Place Branding, Destination Branding, Brand Image, Awareness.

1. Introduction

Destination image is one of the most important assets that territories have to promote their success in tourism. Destinations invest significant resources into promoting tourists' positive perception and launch marketing initiatives of various kinds (promotional campaigns, events, locations for audiovisual productions, etc.). In return, promoting a positive perception of the destination will result in increased intention to visit (Lin *et al.*, 2023), destination loyalty (Stylidis *et al.*, 2020), and intention to recommend to friends and family (Qu *et al.*, 2011). Thus, knowing potential tourists' perception of a destination is imperative to guide any communication strategy aimed at improving that perception and the economic performance of that place.

At the academic level, the perception of destination image has been studied extensively; the sociopsychological components



that shape this perception (**Khan et al.**, 2017), the role of communication initiatives promoting such perceptions (**McCartney et al.**, 2008), and the description of the perception of image in specific case studies (**Hanna et al.**, 2021) have been some of the main lines of research addressed in this area (**Yilmaz; Yilmaz**, 2020).

However, there is a lack of geographically wide-ranging research that assesses the perception of a diverse sample of countries. Having a global snapshot of the general perception of different countries would be extremely useful for investigating certain tourism phenomena, to facilitate comparative analyses, or to contribute to the interpretation of the results of particular case studies.

Meanwhile, studies on the perception of countries have been conducted mainly from the perspective of tourism (**Hanna et al.**, 2021), which implies a reductionist approach, since there are many points of contact of non-tourist origin that also contribute (and sometimes much more decisively) to the global perception of a territory and that, in turn, influence the intention to visit a destination (**Chaulagain et al.**, 2019), as hypothesized and empirically supported by this study.

Thus, this article takes an in-depth look at the relationship between the general perception of a country and potential tourists' intention to visit by means of an online survey distributed worldwide. The study pursues a twofold objective: (1) to provide a global snapshot of tourists' perception of and intention to travel to different parts of the world, and (2) to empirically demonstrate the relationship between two constructs: the general perception of a country and the intention to visit a country.

Regarding the article's theoretical framework, in the first section we explore the concepts of place branding and country branding, and we define what we effectively mean by perception of a country. Second, we review the academic literature that has linked country branding with intent to visit. Third, we analyze the concepts of perception and awareness, so as to conclude with the hypothesis of our research.

In the Methodology section, we explain that the study is based on an online questionnaire distributed to a total sample of 2,151 individuals from 21 countries, who are asked about 55 countries around the world (in blocks of 5 or 6 countries, with a minimum of 200 responses per block) regarding perceived level of familiarity with the country, general perception of the country, and their intention to visit it in the future.

The Results section presents the data and examines them using different types of statistical analysis, such as comparison of average values, comparison by quartiles, comparison by continents and levels of development, an analysis of the correlation between perception and intention to visit, multiple linear regression analysis, and two-stage cluster analysis.

The discussion and conclusions relate the results to previous literature and highlight the main innovations emerging from the analysis, as well as their scientific and professional implications. The study opens new lines of research on how an improvement in the general perception of a country can exert a positive and measurable change in the intention to visit that country, so as to advance the empirical demonstration of how an improvement in perception can have a subsequent tangible impact on tourism arrivals and revenue.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Place Branding and Country Branding

The concept of place brand (the activity devoted to promoting it being known as "place branding") has seen remarkable development in recent years, from both an academic and a professional point of view (**de Noronha et al.**, 2017; **Boisen et al.**, 2018; **Hanna et al.**, 2021). The image projected by a city or a country is a very important asset that contributes decisively to its success as a magnet for talent or investments (**Maslova; Chiodelli**, 2018; **Vinyals-Mirabent; van Wijngaarden**, 2023), as a production center for goods or services (**Laroche et al.**, 2005), or as a tourist destination (**Fernández-Cavia**, 2011; **Zhang et al.**, 2018). A strong and attractive brand is –both for products and for countries– a competitive advantage that facilitates economic, social, and political interactions (**Fernández-Cavia et al.**, 2018).

Notably, the discipline that specifically deals with nation brand management is commonly known as "nation branding" and also boasts a long list of studies demonstrating its necessity and effectiveness (**Hao et al.**, 2021; **Lee; Lee**, 2021; **Kotler; Gertner**, 2002). "Nation branding" can be defined as "the strategic presentation of a country with the objective of creating reputational capital through the promotion of its economic, political, and social interest both at home and abroad" (**Szondi**, 2008).

In decision-making processes, such as selecting a destination for a vacation trip, the name of a country conjures up a network of associations of tangible and intangible attributes that condition the decision and that can extend beyond its tourist attractions. For this reason, **Dinnie** points out that country branding "has to be seen more as something that exists in the minds of consumers rather than something that can be created in a marketing-controlled way" (2022). Therefore, theoretically, the overall positive or negative perception of a country should exert a decisive influence on tourists' intention to visit (**Qu et al.**, 2011).

Consequently, although there are various ways to understand and approach the image of a country brand, herein we understand it as the aggregate perception –positive or negative– that results from the sum of the mental associations that an individual has of a particular nation.

2.2. Country Brand, Tourism, and Intention to Visit

Brands elicit internal subjective reactions (feelings, sensations, and cognitions) in consumers as well as behavioral reactions, including purchase intention and, in the case of the tourism sector, intention to visit (Lin *et al.*, 2023) and intention to revisit and recommend (Qu *et al.*, 2011). In addition, previous studies have demonstrated the direct impact of certain country brand dimensions on tourists' intention to visit, in particular when there is consistency between the brand personality and the consumer's own personality (Matzler *et al.*, 2016).

Traditionally, however, the literature that has addressed the relationship between a country's image and intention to visit has been confined to the tourism framework (Hanna *et al.*, 2021); that is, the image of a country as a tourist destination has been analyzed rather than the overall image of the country. Although it may be thought that the overall country and the country brand as a tourism destination represent exactly the same thing, these are conceptually distinct (Zenker *et al.*, 2017). In the first case, the brand aims to attract a range of audiences and pursues different types of objectives; however, the destination brand reflects a specific part of it, solely and strategically focused on responding to tourists' interests (Hanna; Rowley, 2008). Thus, the country brand would include the destination brand, but not vice versa.

In this study, we did not analyze the effect of the destination brand but rather of the overall country (nation brand), as we understand that the latter has a more profound impact on potential tourists' decisions (Hahm *et al.*, 2018). Recent research casts doubt on even the potential of destination branding, and tourism promotion efforts, influencing the tourist in isolation from the country brand (Zenker *et al.*, 2017). Certainly, there is a clear interdependence, by which, for example, an attractive tourism destination can be severely impaired by the influence of the country's social, political, or economic context (Alvarez; Campo, 2014; Chaulagain *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the effects of country branding influence different areas of activity, and one of the most important is tourism activity (Chaulagain *et al.*, 2019), so it is necessary to address this gap in the academic literature, investigate this alternative approach, and study the perception of country branding in a complete and holistic way, without limiting it to the tourism dimension.

2.3. Awareness and Perception

Tourism marketing campaigns or the products of the cultural industries would be a further factor contributing to the overall image of a country (Dela Cruz; Lacap, 2023; Fernández-Cavia *et al.*, 2020), as would that country appearing in the media with news about its political, economic, or social situation or the opinions of people who know the place for one reason or another (Gartner, 1994; McCartney *et al.*, 2008).

The professional and academic literature has endeavored to create models for developing a country brand, such as that of Torres (2019), which is organized into three stages, or Steenkamp (2021), which is composed of six steps and also proposes a classification of the areas of significance to which a country brand can be related. However, some authors have drawn attention to the complexity of a country's image, which is much more dynamic—in the sense that it changes more frequently—and complex—in the sense that it is composed of a much larger number of attributes developed over a longer period of time—than the image of a product brand (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; O'Shaughnessy; O'Shaughnessy, 2000). In addition, other researchers have criticized the commercial, short-term temptation involved in using branding in the management of institutional communication in the regions (Kavaratzis; Ashworth, 2006).

To affect tourists' travel intention, a brand must create a country image that accumulates perceptions and cognitive–affective associations that are consistent and build a favorable global perception of the destination (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018). Tourists having a subjective global perception such as this is linked to favorable potential tourist behavior, such as travel intention and intention to recommend (Chi; Qu, 2008).

In this sense, the academic literature on branding points out two concepts that can be applicable to country branding and that are at the root of the research presented in this article. The first is brand awareness, or the “presence of the brand in the consumer's mind” [*presencia de la marca en la mente del consumidor*] (Pappu *et al.*, 2005), which is related to the familiarity that people feel with a brand. Familiarity implies a sense of knowing without the need for specific details, and is very useful for brands in contexts of limited attention (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2011). The influence of familiarity has also been studied specifically in the context of tourism (Tan; Wu, 2016; Chen *et al.*, 2017), converging in highlighting its positive effect on the formation of a strong brand image capable of increasing the intention to visit; it is believed that, the more familiar a brand is to tourists, the more positive their evaluation will be (Chaulagain *et al.*, 2019).

The second concept is brand image, which can be understood as tourists' perceptions of a destination (Gadhoumi *et al.*, 2023). In other words, it is the knowledge of various details about a brand that go beyond familiarity. These perceptions are very diverse and can range from specific product characteristics to related consumer attitudes, or the qualitative evaluations associated with them (Keller, 1993). In this sense, the set of specific perceptions (or, alternatively, associations) leads to the creation of the general perception and positive or negative attitude toward a given brand, the “overall assessment” of the brand (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018; Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2011). As stated by Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015), “creating a positive brand attitude, as well as maintaining it, is what strategic brand management is really all about”. Along the same

lines, researchers in the area of place branding have also identified the importance of a destination's global perception and its impact on tourist behavior (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018).

The proper strategic management of a country brand should have –depending on the context and other exogenous variables– a direct positive impact on that country's performance at the economic, social, and international relations levels. Thus, on the basis of the evidence presented, the central hypothesis of this study is

H1. The overall positive perception of a country determines potential tourists' intention to visit.

3. Methodology

The methodology proposes a study with a broad geographic scope that takes into consideration a sample of individuals of international origin and a sample of countries broad enough to provide a worldwide snapshot that will facilitate comparative studies. The convenience sample is as global and balanced as possible, with respondents by world region being approximately 30% from Europe, 30% from the Asia–Pacific region, 30% from the Americas, and 10% from Africa. Given the use of English as the sole language of the survey, and the worldwide geographic distribution, probability sampling was ruled out.

Specifically, the study was based on an online survey of 2,151 individuals from 21 countries, which was conducted between 28 October and 4 November 2022. The average age of the individuals in the sample was 34.09 years, and 55.65% were men, whereas the remaining 44.35% were women. The geographic distribution of the sample of respondents can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Geographical Distribution of the Sample.

Country	<i>n</i>	%
Argentina	68	3.16
Australia	110	5.11
Brazil	130	6.04
Canada	123	5.72
China	99	4.61
Colombia	3	0.14
Costa Rica	39	1.82
France	113	5.25
Germany	116	5.39
India	190	8.84
Italy	80	3.72
Mexico	123	5.72
The Netherlands	57	2.65
Singapore	118	5.48
South Africa	102	4.74
Spain	68	3.16
Sweden	54	2.51
Turkey	81	3.77
United Arab Emirates	134	6.23
United Kingdom	139	6.46
United States	204	9.48
	2,151	100

The online questionnaire asked respondents about the following issues:

1. Level of familiarity with the country (Likert-type scale): 1 = I know nothing about the country, 2 = I have heard or read news about the country, 3 = I have recently met people or bought a product from the country and/or read information about it, 4 = I have family or close friends from the country and have read information about it, and 5 = I have visited, studied in, worked in, or done business with the country.
2. General perception of the country (Likert-type scale): 0 = extremely negative, 1 = negative, 2 = moderately negative, 3 = moderately positive, 4 = positive, 5 = extremely positive, and NS/NC = missing values.
3. Intention to visit the country (tourism attraction): 0 = no intention to visit and 1 = intention to visit.

Individuals were asked about their familiarity with, perception of, and intention to visit 55 countries around the world. Given the number of countries for which information was to be obtained, and so as not to tire out the respondents and impair the quality of the responses, it was decided to group the countries into 10 blocks so that the respondents had to respond regarding only five or six individual countries, according to the distribution shown in Table 2.

As can be seen, the different blocks were always made up of a heterogeneous group of countries (in terms of size, location, etc.) and composed of equivalent samples of individuals. Given that the study participants were distributed in the aforementioned blocks, the data use strategy was based on the average values achieved by each of the 55 countries for the

three variables used (level of familiarity, general perception, and intention to visit). Therefore, the matrix created ad hoc has 55 rows (the same number as countries) and the same number of columns as variables used. In this instance, in addition to the three items of the questionnaire, a series of identification variables and other crossover variables extracted from secondary information sources were added.

Table 2: Distribution of the Sample by Blocks and Countries for which Answers Were Given.

Block 1 (n = 212): Mexico, South Africa, the UK, Estonia, Myanmar, and United Arab Emirates	Block 6 (n = 206): El Salvador, Italy, Finland, Maldives, and Kyrgyzstan
Block 2 (n = 226): Chile, Jamaica, Sudan, Turkey, and Japan	Block 7 (n = 214): The USA, Nigeria, Poland, Albania, New Zealand, and Saudi Arabia
Block 3 (n = 210): Puerto Rico, Kenya, France, Lithuania, Thailand, and Qatar	Block 8 (n = 210): Canada, Barbados, Mauritius, Austria, Serbia, and Indonesia
Block 4 (n = 214): Costa Rica, Colombia, Belgium, Vietnam, and Azerbaijan	Block 9 (n = 213): Peru, Egypt, Germany, Israel, Australia, Australia, and Armenia
Block 5 (n = 200): Venezuela, Morocco, Sweden, Slovakia, and India	Block 10 (n = 246): Uruguay, Ethiopia, Portugal, China, and Iran

The questionnaire was prepared and distributed in English only, and only individuals who had English as one of their languages were able to respond. It was distributed through a global online platform that issued random invitations. The platform ensured that sampled individuals were invited using a double opt-in system to avoid river sampling, and their unique ID was verified to create the user profile.

The quality of the sample was evaluated at two levels:

1. Machine learning techniques were used to identify and eliminate low-quality responses.
2. Responses were manually eliminated based on these criteria:
 - Response time (in the case of duration so short that it would prevent a quality response).
 - Low quality of open-ended responses.
 - Eliminating inconsistent answers to closed-ended questions.

We also ensured and communicated the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality in the study; that no ambiguous, vague, or unfamiliar terms were included; and that the responses were presented in random order.

The following secondary and crossover research variables were used:

1. **Continent** to which the country belongs: 1 = Africa, 2 = the Americas, 3 = Asia, 4 = Europe, and 5 = Oceania.
2. **Regional division (UNWTO, 2022)**: 1 = Central America and Caribbean, 2 = Central Asia, 3 = East Asia, 4 = Central and Southern Africa, 5 = Middle East, 6 = Northern and Eastern Europe, 7 = North Africa, 8 = North America, 9 = Oceania, 10 = South America, 11 = Southwest Europe, and 12 = West Africa.
3. **Level of development (UNWTO, 2022)**: 1 = poorly developed countries, 2 = landlocked developing countries, 3 = developing small island states, 4 = developing countries, 5 = countries in transition, and 6 = developed countries.
4. **Tourism revenue**: average volume of revenue from tourism between 2014 and 2019 in USD (UNWTO, 2022).
5. **Tourism arrivals**: average number of arrivals to the country related to the practice of tourism for the period 2015–2019 (UNWTO, 2022).
6. **Digital demand**: number of searches in digital environments related to the tourism dimension of countries, between April 2019 and March 2020 (Digital Demand, 2022). Digital Demand is a software tool developed by Bloom Consulting.

4. Results

4.1. Country Familiarity and Perception

Regarding the specific questions in the online questionnaire, the average values achieved by the 55 countries in terms of familiarity, general perception, and intention to visit are presented in Table 3.

In view of the data, it should be noted that the variable “familiarity” ($M_{fam} = 2.63$, standard deviation [SD] = 0.43, range 1.86–3.8) yielded the highest values in relation to the following countries: the United States (3.8), the United Kingdom (3.68), Italy (3.47), Canada (3.43), and France (3.33). The countries (out of the 55 asked about) that were least familiar to respondents were Kyrgyzstan (1.86), Azerbaijan (2.04), and Myanmar (2.12).

In terms of “perception” ($M_{per} = 3.3$, SD = 0.46, range 1.97–4.25), the best-rated countries were Canada (4.25), Japan (4.05), Finland (3.98), Belgium (3.97), and Italy (3.97). The countries (of the 55 asked about) with the worst overall perception were Iran (1.97), Sudan (2.45), and Venezuela (2.63). To provide a comparable overview, perception quartiles ($P_{25} = 2.98$, $P_{50} = 3.26$, and $P_{75} = 3.79$) were calculated to divide the countries into four equivalent groups, which are shown in this map (Figure 1).

With respect to “intention to visit” the respective countries ($M_{int_vis} = 0.67$, SD = 0.16, range 0.27–0.9), those generating the greatest interest among respondents were Canada (0.9), France (0.9), Italy (0.9), the United Kingdom (0.89), and the United States. (0.89). Those with the lowest intention to visit were Iran (0.27), Sudan (0.36), and Kyrgyzstan (0.38). Regarding “perception,” quartiles of intention to visit ($P_{25} = 0.55$, $P_{50} = 0.7$, and $P_{75} = 0.81$) were calculated to divide the countries into four homogeneous groups, with the following result (Figure 2).

Table 3: Average Values of Countries (Ordered Alphabetically) in Terms of Familiarity, Perception, and Intention to Visit.

Country	Familiarity (1–5)	Perception (0–5)	Intention to visit (0–1)	n
Albania	2.28	2.97	0.58	214
Armenia	2.15	3.02	0.52	213
Australia	2.92	3.93	0.81	201
Austria	2.81	3.81	0.81	209
Azerbaijan	2.04	2.91	0.44	214
Barbados	2.18	3.26	0.63	209
Belgium	3.02	3.97	0.86	214
Canada	3.43	4.25	0.9	194
Chile	2.6	3.3	0.72	226
China	2.89	2.7	0.59	233
Colombia	2.84	3.28	0.68	214
Costa Rica	2.54	3.5	0.75	211
Egypt	2.69	3.14	0.71	213
El Salvador	2.34	2.97	0.57	206
Estonia	2.19	3.31	0.59	211
Ethiopia	2.17	2.68	0.44	248
Finland	2.72	3.98	0.81	206
France	3.33	3.84	0.9	199
Germany	3.15	3.93	0.83	200
India	2.8	2.95	0.59	188
Indonesia	2.69	3.36	0.74	209
Iran	2.3	1.97	0.27	248
Israel	2.41	2.79	0.55	213
Italy	3.47	3.97	0.9	199
Jamaica	2.48	3.25	0.7	226
Japan	3.15	4.05	0.88	226
Kenya	2.37	2.98	0.47	210
Kyrgyzstan	1.86	3.03	0.38	206
Lithuania	2.14	3.17	0.51	210
Maldives	2.63	3.84	0.79	206
Mauritius	2.14	3.35	0.65	209
Mexico	2.91	3.23	0.75	201
Morocco	2.52	3.15	0.74	200
Myanmar	2.12	2.79	0.43	211
New Zealand	2.83	3.85	0.82	214
Nigeria	2.28	2.74	0.43	214
Peru	2.37	3.2	0.69	213
Poland	2.75	3.48	0.74	214
Portugal	3.15	3.79	0.87	248
Puerto Rico	2.3	3.23	0.78	210
Qatar	2.61	3.33	0.59	210
Saudi Arabia	2.57	2.88	0.53	214
Serbia	2.33	3.01	0.51	209
Slovakia	2.21	3.28	0.66	200
South Africa	2.72	3.14	0.63	199
Sudan	2.15	2.45	0.36	226
Sweden	2.74	3.87	0.85	194
Thailand	2.84	3.44	0.79	210
Turkey	2.81	3.2	0.71	214
United Arab Emirates	2.99	3.27	0.74	198
United Kingdom	3.68	3.94	0.89	192
United States	3.8	3.65	0.89	194
Uruguay	2.43	3.35	0.75	248
Venezuela	2.44	2.63	0.54	200
Vietnam	2.53	3.18	0.64	214

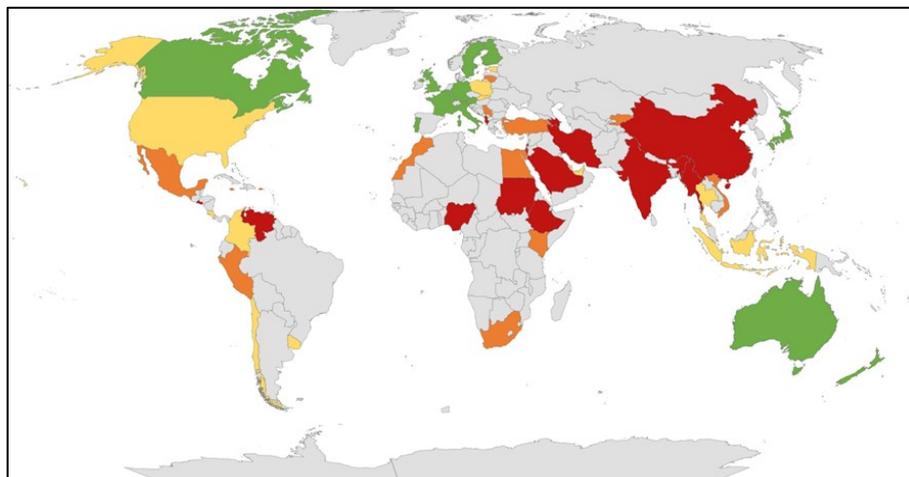


Figure 1: Map of the Perception of Countries Grouped Into Quartiles.
 Note: Green = C1, yellow = C2, orange = C3, red = C4, and gray = not applicable

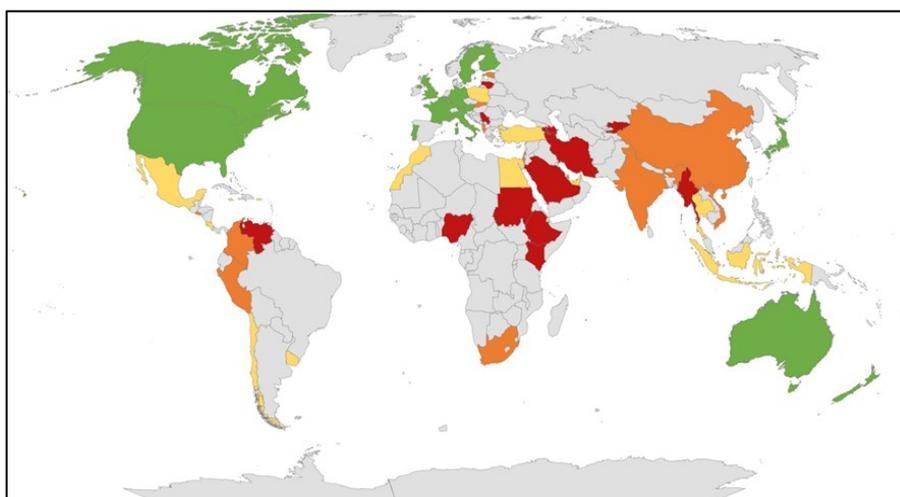


Figure 2: Map of the Intention to Visit Countries Grouped by Quartiles
 Note: Green = C1, yellow = C2, orange = C3, red = C4, and gray = not applicable

Thus, visually, some interesting phenomena can be observed, such as the existence of countries whose general perception is in a quartile above the respondents’ intention to visit (for example, Colombia, Kenya, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Serbia, and El Salvador) and, conversely, countries in which the intention to visit exceeds the general perception (for example, the United States, Mexico, Morocco, China, India, Turkey, and Egypt).

If we analyze these two variables (“perception” and “intention to visit”) by the continent to which the countries belong and by their level of development, useful information can also be obtained. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparisons by Continent and Level of Development in Terms of Perception and Intention to Visit (ANOVA).

Continent	Perception		Intention to Visit		N
	M	DT	M	DT	
Africa	2.95	0.30	0.55	0.15	8
Americas	3.32	0.37	0.72	0.11	13
Asia	3.09	0.48	0.59	0.17	16
Europe	3.59	0.38	0.75	0.14	16
Oceania	3.89	0.06	0.82	0.01	2
Level of Development	Perception		Intention to Visit		N
	M	DT	M	DT	
Underdeveloped countries	2.64	0.17	0.41	0.04	3
Landlocked developing countries	2.99	0.07	0.45	0.07	3
Developing island states	3.38	0.26	0.71	0.07	5
Developing countries	3.07	0.33	0.63	0.12	24
Countries in transition	2.99	0.03	0.55	0.05	2
Developed countries	3.78	0.29	0.81	0.11	18
Total	3.30	0.46	0.67	0.16	55

Note: N = number of countries asked about. ANOVA, analysis of variance; SD, standard deviation

Regarding the analysis by continent, the analysis of variance allows us to affirm that the differences were statistically significant both for the perception variable [$F(4, 50) = 5.89, p < 0.001$] and for the intention to visit variable [$F(4, 50) = 4.86, p = 0.002$]. For both variables, the order of the continents was the same, with Oceania scoring the highest, followed by Europe.

With regard to the analysis by level of development, again the analyses of variance performed showed statistically significant differences in both perception [$F(5, 49) = 16.38, p < 0.001$] and intention to visit [$F(5, 49) = 12.18, p < 0.001$], with those labeled as “developed countries” being the best rated for both variables.

Finally, a two-step cluster analysis, which adjusts for both continuous and categorical variables (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2015), was carried out to observe possible clustering across countries. Thus, the six most identifiable items were introduced: continent, region, and level of development as nominal variables and arrivals, tourism revenue, and digital tourism demand as scalar variables.

The silhouette measure of cohesion and separation amounted to 0.3, a value that is quite acceptable (Norušis, 2012). In terms of the weight of the items, the continent is the most prominent element (with a value of 1), followed by the region (0.74), the level of development (0.43), arrivals (0.11), revenue (0.09), and, lastly, digital demand (0.05).

In contrast, the three clusters derived from the analysis presented a size coefficient (from the largest to the smallest) of 1.25, a figure that indicates the great homogeneity of the groups (Tkaczynski, 2017). Each of these three classes of tourist destination and their corresponding characteristics are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Characterization of the Three Clusters (Two-step Cluster Analysis).

Cluster number	Size		Centers of the characterization variables (% , M)					
	n	%	Continent	Region	Development	Arrivals	Revenue	Demand
1	20	36.4	Europe (80)	Southwest Europe (45)	Developed countries (85)	24,139	32,164	8,385,836
2	16	29.1	Asia (100)	Middle East (37.5)	Developing countries (62.5)	14,406	15,124	5,796,452
3	19	34.5	The Americas	Central America and the Caribbean (31.6)	Developing countries (68.4)	5,691	4,349	4,896,050
Total	55	100						

The largest group of destinations (Cluster 1) is located mainly in Europe and is made up of developed countries with high rates of tourism revenue, arrivals, and tourism demand. The second cluster (Cluster 2) is mainly located in the Middle East, with significantly lower average tourism arrivals and revenue. And the third cluster (Cluster 3) is mostly located in the Americas, with the lowest level of arrivals, revenue, and digital demand. On the basis of the identification of these three types of destinations, it is possible to compare them according to the three main variables of the study, i.e., familiarity, perception, and intention to visit (Figure 3).

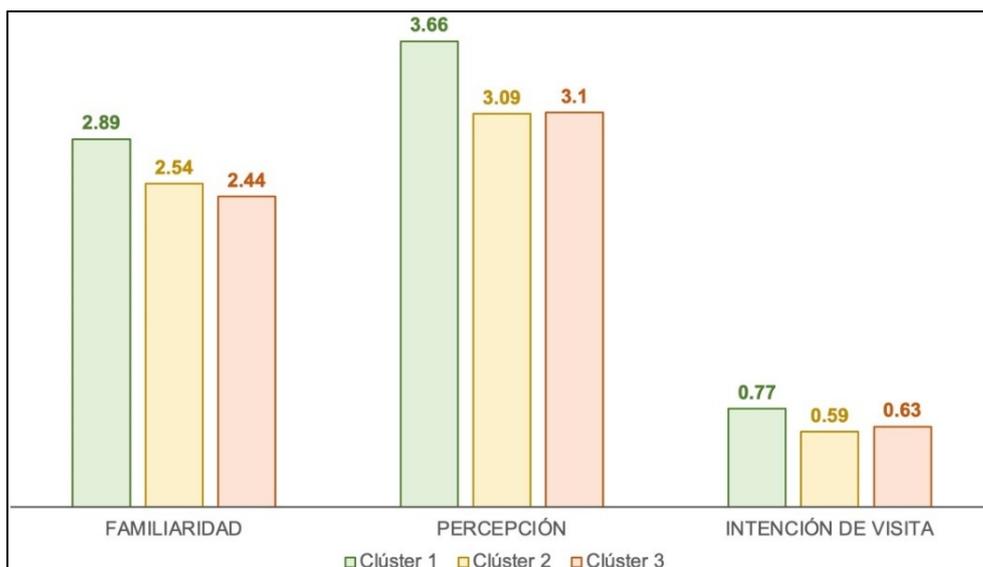


Figure 3: Comparisons of the Three Clusters or Tourist Destinations in Terms of Familiarity, Perception, and Intention to Visit (ANOVA). Note: ANOVA, analysis of variance

The height of the bars in Figure 3 verifies that Cluster 1 generates the highest familiarity ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.49$), best perception ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.37$), and highest intention to visit ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 0.13$) among respondents. Likewise, it is possible to state that statistically significant differences occur between the three groups according to familiarity [$F(2, 52) = 7.18$, $p = 0.002$], perception [$F(2, 52) = 13.93$, $p < 0.001$], and intention to visit [$F(2, 52) = 8.35$, $p < 0.001$].

These data allow us to propose a grouping of country brands into three types according to their characteristics: consolidated brands, underappreciated brands, and underconsidered brands, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Characteristics of the Country Brands Included in Each Cluster.

Country brands	Cluster 1 Consolidated	Cluster 2 Underappreciated	Cluster 3 Underconsidered
Features	Higher familiarity Better perception Higher intention to visit	Worse perception Lower intention to visit	Lower familiarity
Recommendation from a communication point of view	Maintaining the country brand	Improving the quality of perception of the country brand in the first place	Improving first and foremost the visibility and awareness of the country brand
Cluster member countries	Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, the USA	Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Myanmar, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam	Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Sudan, Uruguay, Venezuela

Among the consolidated country brands, as shown in Table 6, were destinations such as France, Italy, New Zealand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Among the brands that we have labeled as underappreciated, whose most direct route toward progress would be improvement not so much in visibility and awareness as in perception, are country brands such as China, India, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. In the third cluster, country brands labeled as underconsidered, in the sense that their level of familiarity among respondents is lower, would be Chile, Costa Rica, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, or Uruguay.

4.2. Relationship between Perception of a Country and Intention to Visit

To address the second objective of the project and respond to the research hypothesis, a bivariate association between the variables “perception” and “intention to visit” was established. The data reveal a positive, significant, and very high correlation (Cohen, 1988; Johnson *et al.*, 2008) between the perception of the country and the intention to visit it [$r_{bp} (53) = 0.90, p < 0.001$], as can be seen in Figure 4.

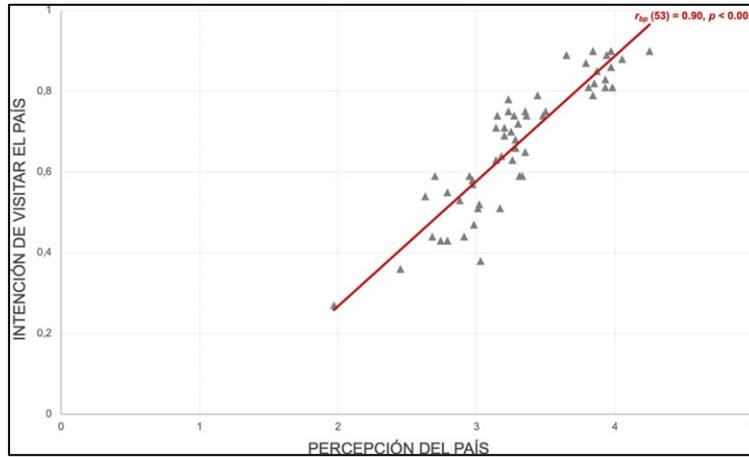


Figure 4: Correlation between Perception and Intention to Visit (r_{bp}).

The graphical distribution of the data shows a clear correlation that demonstrates that, the better an individual’s perception of a country, the higher their intention to visit it.

The variable “perception” is the strongest predictor of intention to visit, as we can see in Table 7, such that this association is revealed to be the most important for a country brand in relation to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. Continuing with the detailed analysis of the data, a multiple linear regression analysis was carried out in which the association between the different predictor variables and the intention to visit the country was calculated. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Predictors of Countries’ Intention to Visit (Regression Analysis).

Predictors	Tolerance	VIF	β
Tourism revenue	0.472	2.118	-0.016
Digital tourism demand	0.504	1.985	0.107
Familiarity with the country	0.233	4.297	0.288**
Perception of the country	0.492	2.033	0.652***

Note: VIF, variance inflation factor. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

The model run in Table 7 was statistically significant [$F (4, 50) = 90.93, p < 0.001$], with the four predictor variables, for the overall sample ($n = 55$), explaining 86.9% of the variance ($R^2_{adjusted} = 0.869$). It was observed that the predictor that most explained the intention to visit a country was the study-inherent variable “perception” ($\beta = 0.652, p < 0.001$), exactly the one that correlated to a greater extent with intention to visit (Figure 4), followed by familiarity with the country ($\beta = 0.288, p < 0.007$).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study pursued a twofold objective: (1) to provide a global snapshot of tourists’ perception of and intention to travel to different parts of the world, and (2) to empirically demonstrate the relationship between two constructs: the general perception of a country and the intention to visit a country.

In addition, the data collected and analyzed shed light on the understanding, on a global scale, of the international perception of countries. Going beyond the descriptive results by country, the data suggest that there are countries that, although not as positively perceived as others, maintain a higher intention to visit. In many of the cases in which the intention to visit exceeds general perception, the tourism industry is historically consolidated, as these are mature destinations (Egypt, Mexico, Turkey, etc.). Conversely, there are also countries that are very well perceived but that did not achieve the same level of intention to visit. This indicates that, although country image and destination image are strongly intertwined and the country brand image as a whole influences tourism decisions, a strong tourism image is able to compensate for aspects of a country perceived as more negative, such as political decisions or adverse social or economic contexts.

More specifically, the cluster analysis identifies three groups of countries with distinct communication challenges. Cluster 1 includes a core group of developed countries, mostly European, that have a better level of perception, high familiarity, and high intention to visit—a group that we recognize as established brands. This finding coincides with previous studies identifying

in this continent a cluster of attractive cultural destinations with its greater heritage of tourist attractions (**Therkelsen; Gram**, 2010). In contrast, Cluster 2 (which we have called “underappreciated country brands”) includes a group of Asian countries that, although they do not lack familiarity, have a poorer global perception and, consequently, a lower intention to visit. For these, the most urgent recommendation –from a strategic point of view– would be to work on improving the perception of the country brand to obtain better results in terms of intention to visit. Finally, Cluster 3 (which we have named “underconsidered country brands”) comprises a group of countries, many of them developing countries, that scored the lowest on familiarity. For them, the first recommendation would be to focus efforts on developing activities, projects, or policies that, while aimed at improving the perception of the country, also contribute significantly to increasing brand awareness and familiarity.

In addition, we also observed that less developed countries have a worse perception when it comes to image than developed countries or countries in transition. This also translates into a lower intention to visit, which hinders, in a vicious circle, its possibilities for expansion, at least in its role as a tourist destination, in line with what other authors have previously suggested (**Martínez; Alvarez**, 2010). Our analysis provides a global snapshot of the international perception of destinations, which is necessary to establish comparisons and place the studies that address the tourism image of specific cases in context.

Finally, this study has been able to statistically prove, using a comprehensive worldwide sample, that the global perception of a country affects potential tourists’ intention to visit, thus validating previous research demonstrating such a relationship in specific case studies (**Chaulagain et al.**, 2019).

6. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

Although one of the main strengths of the study is its scope, due to the large number of countries involved in the research, the sampling strategy opted for was a block distribution, thus avoiding respondent fatigue and improving the quality of the responses but limiting the ability to draw conclusions linked to the origin and cultural context of the respondents.

Thus, there are some specific country brands (such as those of Albania, belonging to the group of consolidated brands, and Japan, within the group of underappreciated brands) that seem to deviate from the observed characteristics. While this could be attributed to the influence of non-brand factors or the limited fit (0.3) of the model, a likely explanation is the variation in international perception, which can vary significantly depending on the specific market.

For this reason, individual countries should assess their overall perception in their various strategic markets to obtain a more complete picture of their case. In addition, the study evaluates the global perception of countries, which, although it is an accepted and tested measure in academic history, does not represent the complexity of the perception of a country well; future research should divide differentiated facets of these countries’ images, and their power to influence the intention to visit them.

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