Impacts of Country Personality on Lao People's Purchase Intention and Travel Intention

Sarun Amatyakul[1] and Kawpong Polyorat[2,*]

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Drawing from country personality theory, this research aims to examine Thailand's country personality and its impacts on Lao people's purchase intention and travel intention. This study focuses on Thailand's personality from the view of Lao netizens as they tend to have a leading role in consumption trends in their country by posting information directly or indirectly related to Thailand's country personality. Through purposive sampling, a survey with 384 Lao netizens was conducted. The questionnaire, after being back translated, was in the Lao language. There are five latent variables: 1) travel intention, 2) purchase intention, along with the three dimensions of country personality comprising of 3) dependability, 4) charming, and 5) unattractiveness. Results from confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling indicate that Thailand's most outstanding personality is charming, which is the only personality dimension positively influencing both purchase intention and travel intention. Therefore, this article reflects how important charming personality is for Thailand and thus suggests that Thai public agencies focus on the charming personality when promoting the country.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-border trade between Thailand and the Lao PDR has continued along the 1,810-kilometer border [1]. In this trade, Thailand's export to Laos was worth USD 4,293 million in 2018 and USD 3,929 million in 2019 [2], thus reflecting a 8.48 % decrease. Furthermore, the value comparison for the first seven months of 2020/2019 also reveals a 12.49% drop as Thailand's annual economic growth in 2021 aims at 3.5-4.5% [3]. The downward trend for Thailand's export in this border trade may need to be reverse.

Laos' overall import to Thailand, in contrast, is on the upward trend, totaling USD 5,667.32 million in 2017, USD 6,314.64 in 2018, and USD 6,271.92 in 2019 which was a 10.66% increase [4], [5]. Moreover, per the statistics from 2014 to 2016 by the World Bank, export proportions from other countries to Laos were increasing. For example, Chinese export rose to 57%, Vietnam to 27%, Japan to 48%, and South Korea to 59% [6]. This trend clearly reflects that Thailand is losing its share in the Lao market [7].

Although Thailand's export in border trade with Laos appears to decline, the number of Lao tourists entering Thailand is rapidly growing and reached 1,856,762 in 2019, reflecting an increase of 10.37% from the previous year [8]. When compared to 3.1 million Lao tourists going overseas, this figure suggests that up to 45% of these tourists visited Thailand [9]. In other words, the Thai tourism industry has a promising prospect.

Given this situation, if Thailand can manage its decreasing border trade while maintaining the steady growth in tourism, the overall economic expansion will be more likely to achieve the aim. Therefore, this research proposes the country personality construct, which can make one country stand out from others, as a solution [10]. Country personality can lead consumers to perceive one country differently from others. Country personality can be built by applying such human personality as reliability, charming, and sincerity to the country context [11], [12].

Proper country personality can promote consumption of goods as well as travel and tourism [13], [14]. This is because consumers pay attention to what they perceive as relevant to their actual self and ideal self [15], [16], two important components of their personality. Country personality is thus likely to be a tool appropriate for mitigating a decline in Thailand's border trade with Lao and furthering the growth of tourism industry.

In the marketing context, personality is normally created by symbols such as logos [17] throughout various media. In an era where the internet is taking larger roles, social

[1]*Faculty of Business Administration, Sripatum University, Khon Kaen 40000, Thailand.*

[2]*Faculty of Business Administration and Accountancy, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand.*

*Corresponding author: Kawpong Polyorat; Phone: +66-43-202-401; E-mail: kawpong@kku.ac.th.

media is simultaneously more influential than ever. In 2017, there were 2.4 million internet users, and 2.2 million Facebook users out of the whole Lao population of 6.9 million [18], [19]. Communication through this new medium is convenient and thus seems to rapidly convey country personality across the border.

Hence, this research focuses on Thailand personality from the view of Lao people. Netizens are recognized as a particular group of consumers capable of leading and persuading general consumers to behave in a certain way [20]. Specifically, this study aims to examine (1) Thailand personality and (2) impacts of Thailand personality on Lao people's purchase and travel intentions. The research findings are expected to improve the downward trend in Thailand's border trade as well as to further the growth of the Thai tourism industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Country Personality

Country personality is a construct based on human personality in the country context. Human personality makes humans different from one another because, when in the same situation, different humans show different personalities such as aggression, autonomy, and rejection [21]. Moreover, when they are in different situations, they can display a variety of personalities, depending on the nature of situations. However, humans often show a similar personality when in the same situation again [22], [23]. Therefore, personality is likely to predict human behaviors, at least in part [24].

Although country personality is drawn on the application of human personality, not all human personality traits may appear in the country context [11]. As the concept of country personality sees countries as humans, countries are likely to demonstrate only the personalities that share certain characteristics with humans [25], [26].

Similarly, [27] specifically defined country personality as a group of human traits explaining countries. The emerging personality is a common one that may be found in any country. Personality is indicated by traits, which mean habits displayed in situations. As a result, countries may exhibit a range of personality [24]. According to [11], country personality consists of three dimensions: dependability, charming, and unattractiveness as detailed in Table 1.

The approach used in the research conducted by [11] seems appropriate to study country personality in the context of goods consumption as their scale contains personality traits compiled from a range of studies relevant to country personality not only in the tourism context, but also in other consumption contexts. On the other hand, the scales developed by such other studies as that of [25] may be inapplicable to consumption issues. Further, there has been scant research on country personality with an emphasis of goods consumption. Hence, this research has selected the country personality scale developed by [11] to examine impacts of country personality on purchase intention and travel intention.

Table 1. Country Personality Dimensions and Personality Traits

Dependability	Charming	Unattractiveness
flexible	cheerful	impolite
honest	chic	insincere
neat	clever	unattractive
orderly	contemporary	underdeveloped
peaceful	cool	uneducated
pedantic	creative	unfriendly
respectable	developed	unhurried
secure		unstable
tolerant		

Impacts of Country Personality on Purchase Intention

There exist relatively few studies which indicate that country personality influences purchase intention. This is probably because country personality is a rather new concept. In fact, the country personality scale used in the context of goods consumption has just been recently developed by [11]. Their research has reviewed literature on impacts of brand personality on purchase intention which also suggests the possible impact of country personality as both brand personality and country personality are based on the human personality.

Purchase intention is an interesting topic for marketers in the area of product consumption [28]. Since brand personality is likely to influence purchase intention [27], [29], [30], it can be applied to enhance business competitiveness. However, each personality dimension has a different impact on purchase intention. That is, some personality dimensions do not have impacts on purchase intention whereas others do, yet with difference in directions (negative vs. positive) and levels of impact [13]. Personality dimensions such as sincerity and adorability which positively influence purchase intention often have clearly positive connotations while personality dimensions with a negative impact tend to be those without clear-cut positive meanings such as excitement and ruggedness [31]. Thus, only some of the personality dimensions may be meaningful for brands.

This research aims to investigate impacts of different dimensions of country personality on intention to purchase products relevant to countries. To measure consumers' purchase intention, the scale developed by [32], which contains no leading questions, has been used to better reflect the construct.

Impacts of Country Personality on Travel Intention

Research on impacts of country personality on travel intention primarily draws on brand personality. Considering previous studies as a whole, each personality dimension exhibits a different impact on travel intention in terms of directions and magnitude. That is, clearly positive personality dimensions tend to positively influence travel intention whereas those without clear-cut positive meanings do not [33].

Examples of personality dimensions with this positive impact include responsibility and simplicity as tourists are likely to be interested in countries with these personality dimensions [34]. In addition, if tourist attractions exhibit vibrancy and sincerity, those attractions will be likely to gain attention from tourists [12]. On the other hand, personality dimensions without clear-cut positive meanings such as aggressiveness and activity do not impact travel intention [34].

In other words, each dimension of country personality appears to differently influence travel intention. However, previous research has not used personality scales specifically developed for the country context which may make their results relatively inaccurate. In examining impacts of country personality on travel intention, the current research, therefore, has applied the scale developed by [34] to measure travel intention, which is specifically designed to study impacts of personality on this construct.

3. METHODOLOGY

Population

The population of this research is Lao netizens, defined as Lao citizens who express opinions or share information with others on the internet. Netizens represent an important group as they can lead consumption trends among general consumers [20]. It is noteworthy that there has been no exact number of consumers in this context. The only available data are the numbers of Laos's internet users and Facebook users. Among these figures, the number of netizens is unknown, thus suggesting no exact number of the population for this study.

Data collection with Lao netizens is deemed appropriate. Data collection with the general Lao who are not so familiar with providing information could be difficult. This is different from netizens who are well familiar with voicing opinions and sharing information. Thus, it is easier to collect data with Lao netizens. Moreover, building country personality among them is more probable because it is convenient to communicate country personality via such social media as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter [35]. As a result, Lao netizens are appropriate population of this research.

Sample

Through purposive sampling, the researchers chose Lao consumers in Lao PDR's three key cities: 1) Vientiane, the capital city, 2) Savannakhet city, and 3) Pakse city as these cities have long established their border trade with Thailand. They were also ranked as the top three cities in terms of values of imports from Thailand out of the whole Thai-Lao border trade [36].

Purposive sampling [37] was adopted for this research as it is difficult to obtain a name list of all Lao netizens. The total sample size of this study was 384. According to several researchers [17], [38], the sample size appropriate for confirmatory factor analysis should not be less than ten times of observable variables. As this research had 31 observable variables, the appropriate sample size thus should be at least 310.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a questionnaire in the Lao language with back-translation process to make it culturally compatible [39]. There were four parts in the questionnaire: 1) country personality, 2) purchase intention, 3) travel intention, and 4) demographics. The scale to measure country personality was the one developed by [11], along with another scale to measure purchase intention adapted from the work of [32], and the other to measure travel intention from the research by [34]. For purchase intention, the focal product was Mama (an instant noodle brand) based on a preliminary interview with 30 Lao netizens which revealed Mama as a Thai product that Lao consumers wanted to purchase most and it was the brand they knew best.

Data Collection

1. Submitting the research instrument (questionnaire) to a Lao language expert for Thai to Lao translation. The questionnaire was then sent to another expert for back translation.

2. Selecting a research sample by asking behaviors in exchanging opinions or information with others via social media from netizens found in Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse until the researchers gained access to research participants who were willing to give information.

3. Conducting a questionnaire pretest with 30 research participants.

4. Collecting data with three research assistants and subsequently receiving 384 completed questionnaires.

Data analysis

First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation [40], [41] was conducted for the focal constructs (country personality, purchase intention, and travel intention) to determine if the theoretical model fit the empirical data. Subsequently, reliability and validity of the instrument were assessed. Finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the impacts of country personality dimensions on purchase intention and travel intention.

4. RESULT

The research sample was 384 Lao netizens: 56.8% of them were women and the other 43.2% were men. They were aged between 18 and 54 years, with the average of 23 years.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Thailand's Country Personality

As a preliminary analysis found that the model did not fit the empirical data, thirteen (flexible, honest, peaceful, pedantic, tolerant, cheerful, impolite, insincere, impolite, insincere, unattractive, underdeveloped, and uneducated) out of the 24 personality traits were therefore dropped from the model due to their small factor loadings (<0.5) [38]. The remaining eleven-trait model was assessed for "overall model fit" and the fit index values met or exceeded the critical values for acceptable model fit (x^2/df = 1.865, GFI = 0.956, NFI = 0.912, IFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.946, CFI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.048, and SRMR = 0.045). The model fit was assessed in accordance with the criteria set by [42]-[44]. Next, dependability, charming, and unattractiveness dimensions were evaluated by using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The Cronbach's alphas for the three dimensions were 0.71, 0.82, and 0.70, respectively, all above the recommended 0.70 cut-off point [45]. Additionally, the composite reliability for the dimensions comprised 0.75, 0.86, and 0.75, respectively, all higher than the recommended 0.7 cut-off point [38]. Hence, this model was suitable for an analysis of structural equation modeling.

Thailand's Country Personality

Charming was found to be Thailand's most outstanding personality, with the average of 3.51 (from a five-point scale), followed by dependability at 2.93, and unattractiveness at 2.63.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Purchase Intention

The researchers conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of intention to buy products of Thailand. Findings suggested that the model fit the empirical data (x^2/df = 0.154, GFI = 0.999, NFI = 0.999, IFI = 0.999, TLI = 0.999, CFI = 0.999, RMSEA = 0.001 and SRMR = 0.003). In addition, the purchase intention model was of Cronbach's alpha coefficient at the level of 0.84 as well as composite reliability at the level higher than 0.75, so this purchase intention model was appropriate for the analysis of structural equation modeling.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Travel Intention

The researchers conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of intention to travel to Thailand. Findings revealed that the model fit the empirical data (x^2/df = 0.332, GFI = 0.999, NFI = 0.999, IFI = 0.999, TLI = 0.999, CFI = 0.999, RMSEA = 0.001 and SRMR = 0.004). In addition, the

travel intention model was of Cronbach's alpha coefficient at the level of 0.84 as well as composite reliability at the level higher than 0.75, so this travel intention model was appropriate for the analysis of structural equation modeling.

Analysis of Discriminant Validity

The researchers conducted an analysis of discriminant validity of the three dimensions of country personality: dependability, charming, and unattractiveness, along with purchase intention and travel intention, so there were five latent variables in total. Results revealed that the root mean square of variance of each variable was higher than correlation values of each pair, thus suggesting that each variable could be decently measured in its own content without overlapping with each other [38], as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of Discriminant Validity

	D1	D2	D3	Y1	Y2
D1	**0.57**	0.52	0.25	0.27	0.20
D2		**0.66**	0.16	0.33	0.29
D3			**0.67**	0.11	0.08
Y1				**0.80**	0.29
Y2					**0.80**

Note: D1 = Dependability, D2 = Charming; D3 = Unattractiveness, Y1 = Travel Intention, and Y2 = Purchase Intention

Overall, results of the measurement model demonstrated that the model fit the empirical data, with both reliability and validity. Therefore, this model was appropriate for further structural equation modeling.

Analysis of Impacts of Country Personality Dimensions on Purchase Intention and Travel Intention

Analysis of the Model Fit between Model and Empirical Data

The model contained five latent variables: dependability, charming, unattractiveness, purchase intention, and travel intention. Findings suggested that the model reasonably fit the empirical data (x^2/df = 1.851, IFI = 0.930, NFI = 0.889, IFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.937, CFI = 0.945, RMSEA = 0.047 and SRMR = 0.055).

Analysis of Structural Equation Modeling

A preliminary analysis of structural equation modeling revealed that charming dimension is Thailand's most outstanding personality as well as the only personality influencing both purchase intention and travel intention. The researchers removed some insignificant lines from the model and re-analyzed the structural equation modeling

[46]. Findings indicated that charming dimension remains positively influential for both purchase intention and travel intention with regression standardized coefficient values of 0.469, and 0.451 respectively, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis of Structural Equation Modeling

Impact	β	SE	CR	p-value	Result
D2--> Y1	0.451	0.079	5.691	***	positive impact
D2--> Y2	0.469	0.095	4.951	***	positive impact

*Note: *** Statistical Significance at 0.001*
D2 = Charming, Y1 = Travel Intention, and
Y2 = Purchase Intention

To conclude, the current study on Thailand's country personality and its impacts on purchase intention and travel intention indicate that Thailand is a charming country from the perspective of Lao netizens. In addition, the perception of this country dimension positively leads to higher purchase intention and stronger travel intention.

5. DISCUSSION

The current results point out that Thailand's outstanding personality is charming, the only personality capable of encouraging Lao netizens to buy Thai products and travel to Thailand. These results extend the existing body of knowledge by documenting that country personality is indeed related to travel intention [47] and also confirm previous studies' result that some of the personality dimensions impact travel intention [34].

Previous research indicates that personality dimensions that influence travel intention tend to carry clear positive meanings such as responsibility, sophistication, and cheerfulness [34]. Their finding agrees with the current research result as charming personality also contains a clear positive meaning. In addition, charming is the only personality influencing both intentions to purchase Thai products as well as to travel to Thailand. Such results reiterate how important this personality dimension is to Thailand.

It is noteworthy that previously charming never appeared influential to travel intention. It is probably because charming has just been recently reported by [11], coupled with the fact that previous studies applied country personality scales which were different from the one used in the present study. Moreover, some studies measured country personality with brand personality scales which may cause the results to be relatively inaccurate.

Considering the above limitations, the selection of scales to measure country personality may play a critical role in examining the construct of country personality. As a result, this research has chosen the valid and reliable country personality scale developed by [11] to specifically measure country personality. It is thus reasonable to conclude that charming personality is influential for intentions to buy products of Thailand as well as to travel to Thailand.

The current result that charming personality can influence Lao netizens to purchase products of Thailand is congruent with [20] argument that, in the current era, technology greatly influences consumers. That is, consumers will establish their identity by placing importance on products carrying human traits, rather than products of functional uses. Human interactions with appliances such as smartphones and automation will encourage consumers to look for something with more human traits. The brands that seem as trustworthy as friends will be most likely purchased by consumers. In addition, charming means attractiveness [48], which could make a person attractive and agreeable [49]. Therefore, Lao netizens' consumption of Thai products could be derived from their wishes to fulfill identity and from the fact that Lao netizens may trust and see Thailand as a friend.

Moreover, according to personality theories [15], [50], [16] consumers tend to prefer brands that have personality relevant to their actual self as well as ideal self. For this reason, Lao netizens with charming personality are likely to buy Thai products and travel to Thailand so as to exhibit their charming personality. Similarly, Lao netizens who wish to build this personality for themselves are likely to consume Thai products and go to Thailand to fulfill their ideal self of charming personality.

6. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This research has both academic and managerial contributions as follows:

Academic Contribution

1) The present study contributes to the personality literature by using the scale especially designed to measure country personality. This makes it different from previous research, which mostly measured country personality with brand personality scales even though countries and brands differ from each other [14].

2) Results of this study supports those gained from the work of [11], which indicated that country may consist of personality dimensions with both positive and negative meanings. This is different from the case of brands, which contain positive personality dimensions solely [17]. These results reflect that country personality is not only derived from intended marketing efforts, but also from other external factors, and confirm a difference between the concept of brand personality and that of country personality. Therefore, future research should carefully choose a tool appropriate for their research context.

3) The current study has chosen the country personality scale specially designed for the consumption context. This is different from most previous research, which seemed to

focus on country personality in the tourism context [11]. Further, it shows that country personality is an important construct which may influence other marketing outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, and image [51]-[53] in the same way as brand personality does. Hence, this research could be pioneering work on country personality in the consumption context.

Managerial Contribution

1) These research findings provide insights into creating proper personality for Thailand which is useful for such relevant organizations as Tourism Authority of Thailand and Department of Foreign Trade. Charming personality should be promoted to make it more outstanding while both dependability and unattractiveness should be controlled. For example, Thailand information and identity should be presented on the internet by having interactions especially with Lao netizens. An emphasis on such personality traits as clever, contemporary, cool, creative, and developed/advanced is recommended in order to associate Thailand with charming personality via social media e.g., Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter [35]. Meanwhile, improper personalities should be reduced by not showing personality traits linked with those personality dimensions. In this way, communication with Lao netizens will pass desirable personality traits to consumers [20], [54]. It should also be noted that the current research has focused on Lao netizens, rather than general Lao people who might be more difficult to access.

2) Laos remains in subsistence economy, in which most people do farming for their living. As a result, social acceptance among members in collectivist culture is emphasized [55]-[57]. A Lao person with charming personality is thus well accepted by society. Since Thailand reveals charming personality, which contains agreeableness, it is reasonable for Lao netizens to display charming personality by buying Thai products and traveling to Thailand. This will benefit the Thai border trade, tourism, and economy.

3) These research findings offer useful information to better position Thailand as well as generating benefits for Thailand in product consumption and tourism. Expanding the market share for Thailand through the country personality will differentiate Thailand from others in the view of Laotians. Such a difference will enhance competitiveness [58] as well as country image, which cannot be easily imitated by other countries. These results thus serve as guidelines in encouraging Laotians to feel positive toward Thailand and thereby leading to other benefits in the future.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1) This research utilized purposive sampling, which is limited in generalizability and thereby may decrease external validity. In order to solve this problem, future studies with adequate time and budget may consider probability sampling. [38].

2) While this research is pioneering work on country personality from the view of Lao netizens only, future research may examine this topic with consumers from other countries to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

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