The Construction of Country Images and Stereotypes:
From Public Views to Google Searches

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This study explores the role of stereotypes in the construction of country images. Using social and psychological assumptions about stereotypes and news values theory, we hypothesize that country images are formed primarily based on stereotypes and that countries in close proximity display more diverse images of each other. Following the newly developed 5-dimensional model, we analyzed survey questions about Switzerland in seven countries and compared the answers with Google searches in the same countries. Survey questions displayed more stereotypes than Google searches did. Stereotypes were indeed found to be predominant when forming country images. Countries in closer proximity displayed more diverse images, but also more stereotypes, about Switzerland than did distant countries.

Keywords: public diplomacy, country images, Google search analysis, mixed-method design, news factors, country stereotypes

Country image is an essential construct in international communication. It serves not only capitalist goals (like trade or tourism relationships), but also peace building and social cohesion (Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017). Governments and public diplomacy actors measure the country image abroad to adapt their communication strategies accordingly. "The best public diplomacy begins with listening: systematically collecting and analyzing the opinion of foreign publics" (Cull, 2010, p. 12). However, the concept of country images has been challenged in recent years. Some scholars argue that the concept of nation-states, and thus country images, has lost significance in times of globalization and migration (Somerville, Hargie, Taylor, & Toledano, 2017). People do not think of themselves and others as citizens of states, but rather as "global citizens." However, the rise of nationalism in recent times shows again segregation tendencies between countries, and people often use national prejudices and stereotypes to define foreigners (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015).

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Indeed, research suggests that attitudes toward a country are based predominantly on stereotypes and prejudices (Cuddy et al., 2009; Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). The formation of stereotypes depends on acquired knowledge about a country, which is related to the proximity between the source and target countries. For instance, Segev (2016) and Tanikawa (2019) have shown that geographical proximity matters when studying the amount and valence of news about foreign countries. However, recent digital developments have changed information processes about countries and thus might impact country image and stereotype formation.

One aspect in which digital communication processes have altered the concept of country image is information search. People from one country increasingly search online for information and products relating to other countries, often using Google as their prime source (Segev, 2018). While online searches about countries reveal people's intentions to buy goods, travel, study abroad, or obtain media products and entertainment, they offer only a partial picture of the formation of country images without considering people's motives, beliefs, and actual experiences of foreign countries. We therefore combine and integrate two kinds of coordinated analysis, which are based on the same model and operationalization: We analyze search queries related to a country using Google Trends data, and we analyze survey data to find out more about the topics that people associate with a country.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based mainly on social psychology approaches regarding *stereotypes* (Cuddy et al., 2009) and the *news values theory* (Eilders, 2006; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Haynes, 1984; Staab, 1990), the latter explains, among others, the attention given to countries in the news and its implications. Our broad research questions are:

RQ1:   *What makes up the image of a country?*

RQ2:   *What role do stereotypes play in the construction of a country image?*

Finally, because of the availability of online information in the digital era,

RQ3:   *What are the differences between online searches and views held about foreign countries?*

Our findings shed light on (digital) public diplomacy and how to listen to international audiences and understand content creation through (online) communication processes (Arsenault, 2009; Cull, 2009). Country image, the way a country and its people are perceived by others, can then be seen as both one outcome of (digital) public diplomacy (Sevin & Ingenhoff, 2018) and its starting point for developing communication management programs.

Literature Review

The Process of Country Image Formation

The concept of nations is relatively new to human history, but has recently become crucial to our understanding of global phenomena. In *Nationalism and Social Communication*, Karl Deutsch (1953) describes the various facets comprising national identity, including language, culture, and the shared social, economic, and political values in people's lives. Gellner and Breuilly (1983) further emphasize the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism as the driving forces behind the strengthening of nationalism, due to the needs of people—sharing a common language and culture—to work together on a global scale and compete with others. Although in the last three decades, practices of global communication have been intensified with the rise of the Internet, recent studies show that nationalism online is thriving (Lim, 2017) because of the emergence of filter bubbles enforced by customization algorithms, which increasingly expose people to like-minded views in vernacular languages.

However, rather than national identities, the focus of the current article is on country images, that is, the way people perceive other countries and nations. The study of country images has always been as important as that of national identity. In fact, Walter Lippmann (1922) famously argued that our views of others are the reflections of our own identity. Indeed, people define national and social identities by their relations and attitudes toward other groups (Bouchat & Rimé, 2018).

The formation of country image attitudes depends on various factors. People gain knowledge about a country in many ways, including directly, based on their own experiences (e.g., through exhibitions, fairs, travel, literature, and schoolbooks; see Chen, Lai, Petrick, & Lin, 2016; Cuddy et al., 2009; Dovidio et al., 2010), through peer group reporting, and indirectly via news media. As far back as 1965, Galtung and Ruge stated that news media were highly influential international image-formers in the way that they provide us with relevant information about what is going on in the world.

The basic model to analyze both survey and online search data sets is the 5-dimensional model of country images, developed recently by Ingenhoff (2017). Based on the tripartite attitude theory of reasoned action by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we understand the country image as an attitudinal construct comprising a *cognitive* set of beliefs (including the functional, normative, cultural, and natural dimensions of the country image) and an *affective* component (the emotional dimension of the country image). The 5-dimensional model is a slightly updated version of the 4-dimensional model, developed by Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015), which did not differentiate between cultural and natural assets of a country, but incorporated both under an aesthetical dimension.

Whereas the cognitive components include people's knowledge about different attributes concerning, for example, a country's government, its market, its social well-being, its values, its landscape, and its culture, the affective component refers to the general feeling of how much people like the country and how much they are fascinated by it. The cognitive and affective components lead, finally, to a formation of intentions, called the "conative" component (e.g., whether people would like to visit the country, invest in the country or work in the country).

Conceptualized as an attitudinal construct and based on Smith's (1987) representation of national identity, the country image includes five different dimensions: the *cultural* dimension, referring to cultural assets made by humankind; the *natural* dimension, reflecting the natural beauty of a country; the *functional* dimension, referring to competences and competitiveness—the country's political and economic effectiveness and performance; the *normative* dimension, regarding the integrity of a country and its norms and values; and, finally, the *emotional* dimension, describing general feelings of fascination for a country. This conceptual framework, also used by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs in Switzerland (FDFA, Presence Switzerland) to measure the nation's image, allows us to investigate to what extent people's views and online searches about a country refer to these five attributes.

We chose to study Switzerland for several reasons. Although Switzerland generally has little news value and is rarely mentioned in the news worldwide (Segev, 2016), it still generates rather strong stereotypical views around the world. Switzerland is well known for its democratic system, neutrality, and peace negotiations, as well as its long cultural tradition. In addition, many consider Switzerland as the origin of renowned quality products and industries and innovative science sectors. It is highly valued as a tourism destination and has four linguistic and cultural regions, and many of Switzerland's perceived strengths and weaknesses (such as beautiful landscape or neutrality) are mirrored in various stereotypes. Therefore, it allows us to grasp all dimensions of the country image among closer and more distant countries.

Stereotypes in Country Images

Social psychology approaches can help us to explain that attitudes and beliefs are formed primarily based on stereotypes (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Indeed, international stereotypes have a direct effect on cognitive and affective images (Chen et al., 2016). To define the concept, Walter Lippman (1922) was the first to use the term as categorizing "pictures in our head." Dovidio et al. (2010) define stereotypes as "associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members that shape how people think about and respond to that group" (p. 8) to help reduce complexity. The need to simplify information may be especially relevant in today's information society. Further, it has been found that stereotypical representations are very stable and difficult to modify (Alexander, Brewer, & Hermann, 1999).

However, stereotypes should not be considered only as the result of a social-cognitive process, but rather analyzed in a sociocultural context (Ibroscheva & Ramaprasad, 2008). In his integrative model of stereotype formation, Bar-Tal (1997) defines different mediating variables, such as culture, ethnocentrism, proximity, and media. Fiske (2017) found that the attributes show "cultural variation in their stereotype content" (p. 791), thought to be responses to different cultural contexts. Moreover, various studies indicate that stereotypes vary across cultures (Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2017).

According to mirroring theory, people evaluate stereotypes of other countries depending on their own nation's identity, culture, and stereotypes (Hřebíčková & Graf, 2018). Looking at Switzerland, Bender, Gidlow, and Fisher (2013) highlight that every country attributes stereotypes to Switzerland according to its "home" culture. Herz and Diamantopoulos (2013) mention that some countries' publics attribute more functional stereotypes, and others more emotional stereotypes. For example, Italians might emphasize Switzerland as a workplace, while Indians might talk about its beautiful landscape. Switzerland is mostly

associated with positive stereotypes, such as beautiful landscapes, chocolate, cheese, and watches (Bender et al., 2013; Kym, 2010; Rindisbacher, 2010). These stereotypes have been confirmed by Feige, Annen, Matt, and Reinecke (2016), who identified nearly the same topics mostly associated with Switzerland. Clearly, these presuppositions may have developed during socialization processes, such as education or media exposure (Burgers & Beukeboom, 2016; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999).

News media are shown to nourish stereotypes. Mass media can only depict a very brief view of the world and tend to frame news by the use of stereotypes, which, through priming effects, might activate or consolidate prejudices about social entities such as nations (Arendt, 2013). For instance, Grix and Lacroix (2006) showed that in different kinds of news reports (e.g., sports, politics, culture), print media resort strongly to stereotypes when talking about Germany. In addition, Tzogopoulos (2016) discusses the role that stereotypes played in the media coverage of the Greek economic crisis.

We therefore assume:

H1:   The five dimensions of the Swiss country image (functional, normative, cultural, natural, and emotional) are formed predominantly based on stereotypes.

Country Proximity and News Values Theory

As mentioned, stereotypes may vary depending on various cultures. Hřebíčková and Graf (2018) have shown that countries in cultural and geographical proximity evaluate a country's image similarly, whereas distant countries highlight other country clichés. Further, if the evaluated country is close, people tend to have a more critical attitude toward it (Hřebíčková & Graf, 2018). It is thus important to look at proximity between countries as one of the factors in the construction of country image.

News values theory looks at differences in the perception of information and news from countries that are close, compared with countries that are more distant. The news value of proximity explains why we receive much more information about, and therefore have a more detailed knowledge of, neighboring countries than distant ones. However, proximity refers not only to geographical distance; as Yann and Bissel (2018) indicate, countries that are close geographically may also share a common history and culture, economic relationships, or political conflicts. Therefore, they are likely to be interested in each other's news because they are directly affected by potential consequences (Segev, 2016). For geographically, culturally, and politically distant countries, we often receive a limited news portrayal (with the exception of powerful economies or ex-colonial ties). This can have a great impact on the country image of these countries, because people lack direct experiences and therefore rely mainly on the media (Perry, 1985; Wanta, Golan, & Cheolhan, 2004). Although social media may provide alternative sources for information about countries (Golan & Himelboim, 2016), traditional news organizations increasingly dominate social media channels (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016).

Apart from the importance of geographic proximity, Sheafer, Shenhav, Takens, and Van Atteveldt (2014) showed how political proximity between countries can be reflected in favorable or critical news coverage toward a country. Following the homophily thesis, they operationalized the political and value

proximity of several countries from Israel and then demonstrated how countries that are more similar to Israel and different from Palestine in terms of values, politics, and religion tend to cover the conflict in favor of Israel. Straubhaar (1991) further stressed the importance of cultural proximity. His results indicate that Latin American media tend to produce regional content because people prefer national or culturally proximate media products, be they entertainment or news. In short, together with geographical proximity, political and cultural proximities between countries are also reflected in mutual news coverage and frames.

Given that Switzerland is relatively less prominent in international news compared with the larger economies (ranked 26th in the study of Segev, 2016), it is expected that images and stereotypes of Switzerland will be based mostly on other sources, such as popular culture and tourism, producing the well-established stereotypes of Switzerland (such as chocolate and mountains). Still, following the news value theory, bordering countries such as Germany and France are close to Switzerland not only geographically, but also culturally and politically. Because of their proximity, they are potentially exposed to more news about Switzerland and might be expected to display a greater variety of topics associated with it.

D'Hooghe (2007) differentiated between assets and liabilities in the study of China's image around the world. She found that some countries tend to hold negative views on China ("liabilities"), such as human rights or climate change issues, whereas others hold positive views ("assets"), such as its economic and cultural achievements. These topics, in which country images are constructed, correspond well with Ingenhoff's (2017) 5-dimensional model presented earlier. Whereas liabilities are often equivalent to the normative dimension, assets are part of the functional, natural, and cultural dimensions. Considering the importance of proximity in public diplomacy (Sheafer et al., 2014) and news value theory, we propose that a greater diversity of perceptions, but also more negative ones (including tax fraud and bank scandals), toward Switzerland will be predominant in neighboring countries:

H2:   *Neighboring countries display a greater variety of topics related to Switzerland than distant countries do.*

H3:   *Neighboring countries display more news-related topics about Switzerland than distant countries do.*

International Searches on Countries

Google Trends data are widely employed to study what people search for around the world. For example, the analysis of search queries has been used to study and predict the attractiveness of tourist destinations (Artola, Pinto, & de Pedraza Garcia, 2015; Matsumoto, Matsumura, & Shiraki, 2013), the consumption of some products and services (Vosen & Schmidt, 2011), and possible destinations for immigration (Vicéns-Feliberty & Ricketts, 2016). Yet studies rarely focus on comparative international searches. Segev (2018) studied the network of international searches, in other words, which countries are being searched for around the world and by whom. He found very significant regional patterns; people from one country often search for information about countries in their own region. Still, larger and economically more powerful countries, such as the United States, China, and Russia, attracted more global searches.

In terms of search topics, Segev (2018) identified three main types of flow: that of people (tourist destinations, visas, work, and immigration), of products (shopping), and of information (news, media products, and entertainment). Country images, which are partly based on knowledge, practices, and experiences, therefore could be found in some of the popular searches for foreign countries in Google. In accordance with the 5-dimension model, online searches focused on the natural dimension (the country's landscapes and weather), the functional dimension (the country's products and services, political system, and recent news), and the cultural dimension (the country's food, entertainment, and arts).

In this sense, Switzerland is a great example for studying the development of stereotypes. Being a relatively small country in Europe, Switzerland is not among the most searched-for countries in the world—it ranks 28th in Segev's (2018) study—yet users worldwide have different degrees of knowledge about it based on their geographic proximity and tourism habits. It is therefore expected, in line with the survey results and with H2 and H3, that neighboring countries would display a much greater variety of searches—for example, related to work opportunities or news and media in Switzerland—while more distant countries would display narrower search topics related to Swiss stereotypes, such as the landscape and typical Swiss products. Unlike surveys, which include opinions and views, searches reflect more the practices and information needs related to foreign countries, such as tourism, news, and sporting events. Survey items are designed to measure latent constructs (e.g., country image) and therefore rely on implicit knowledge gained from stereotypes. Searches, however, reflect the explicit information needs. We can therefore expect to find more stereotypical views in survey answers than in searches.

H4:   *Surveys feature more stereotypical results than online searches in both neighboring and distant countries.*

Methods

Data Collection

Survey Data

For the first part of the analysis, we analyzed data gathered via representative surveys by the FDFA, Presence Switzerland, on the Swiss country image in seven foreign countries (France, Germany, India, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States) between September 13, 2016, and October 6, 2016. The total sample consisted of 3,556 persons (1,728 women and 1,828 men) between the ages of 18 and 69 years ($M = 40.1$; $SD = 13.5$). The survey asked respondents about (1) what comes into their mind when they think spontaneously about Switzerland, and (2) what topics related to Switzerland they can recall spontaneously from the news and media. For all open questions, the respondents could give a maximum of five answers.

We focused on the mentioned associations with Switzerland of selected close countries, namely Germany ($N = 1,784$ mentions), France ($N = 1,634$), Italy ($N = 1,869$), and the UK ($N = 1,727$), and distant countries such as the U.S. ($N = 1,645$), India ($N = 1,973$), and the UAE ($N = 1,833$). For the survey question

related to the news, we coded whether the participants could remember any news at all, and to which image dimension the news belonged.

Google Searches

In a second step, we compared the survey data with online searches from each country. To analyze what people searched for, we employed Google Trends data on the most popular Google searches related to Switzerland in the seven countries surveyed. We looked at both the top and rising searches in each individual year from 2004 to 2017. In total, this procedure provided a total of $N = 3,839$ search queries from the close countries: Germany ($n = 603$ searches), France ($n = 576$), Italy ($n = 602$), and the UK ($n = 620$), and the distant countries: the U.S. ($n = 631$), India ($n = 517$), and the UAE ($n = 290$).

Measurement Instrument: Codebook

For our content analysis of the open survey questions and Google searches, we developed a codebook based on the 5-dimensional model of country images. The codebook defines formal codes (coder, coding unit, etc.) and content codes, operationalizing the five dimensions with their specifying subdimensions as codes. For example, the functional dimension includes codes for economic actors (pharma industry, insurance, health, tourism industry, etc.); for the workplace (size of job market, quality of work, pay rates, costs of living); for government and politics (political actors, votes, regulations, alliances, etc.), for infrastructure, and for many others. We coded Swiss products, such as knives and watches, and economic features, such as banks or wealth, as stereotypical functional aspects. The normative dimension comprised codes such as ethical actions and issues related to characteristics of the country in question. In the case of Switzerland, both respondents and online users referenced issues such as banking and tax scandals, the FIFA scandal, protection of the environment (nuclear power, recycling, climate support), solidarity, freedom and human rights, and tolerance and openness (acceptance of minorities, xenophobia, openness/cosmopolitanism). Based on the literature, the acclaimed neutrality of Switzerland was also coded as a normative Swiss stereotype and as well as part of the functional dimension. The cultural dimension coded sports (soccer, tennis, skiing, etc.), cultural offerings (music, film and television, architecture, etc.), and famous personalities related to Switzerland. Here, typical stereotypes can be found in food (chocolate, cheese), multilingualism, and traditional Swiss customs and folklore (e.g., yodeling). In addition, some characteristics, such as being "slow," hardworking, or punctual, are considered Swiss clichés. Within the natural dimension, natural features of Switzerland were coded. Here, a lot of stereotypical codes, such as those related to mountains and the beauty and properties of the landscape, can be found.

In the recalled news coding process, we only coded news that dealt with actual issues and events that could indeed be found in the news about Switzerland. We did not code general or stereotypical mentions about Switzerland—such as "mountains," "tourism advertising," or cities such as "Geneva"—that do not link specifically to news about Switzerland. All missing answers or answers not connected to news were coded as "do not know."

Both the open questions of the survey data and the Google search queries were studied and classified by three coders. An intercoder reliability test was then calculated with a high satisfactory agreement (κ = .82, p < .001 for the dimension, and κ = .78, p < .001 for the subcategories).

Results

The Five Dimensions Are Formed Predominantly Based on Stereotypes

To address H1 concerning the prevalence of stereotypes in the country image, the general perception of Switzerland was analyzed in all seven countries. The results of the survey show that in each country image dimension, national stereotypes were prominent. Most survey answers mentioned the functional, cultural, and natural dimensions. Functional mentions referred mostly to Swiss neutrality, the banking sector, or typical Swiss products such as watches or Swiss army knives. Nature-related mentions addressed mainly the beauty of the landscape and Swiss mountains. The cultural dimension featured stereotypical mentions such as chocolate or cheese, or typical traits of Swiss citizens. In total, at least 30% of the mentions in distant countries (India: 30.8%; UAE: 34.5%; U.S.: 47.4%) and around 50% of the mentions in close countries were related to Swiss stereotypes (France: 59.6%; Italy: 51.7%; Germany: 52.2%; UK: 49.1%). The higher proportion of stereotypes in neighboring countries was due to more diversified mentions of clichés. For instance, European countries highlighted cultural stereotypes, such as Switzerland being "precise, punctual, and reliable" or "hardworking" or "slow and friendly," which were less present in the distant countries.

Neighboring Countries Display a Greater Variety of Topics

In line with H2, neighboring countries showed a greater variety of knowledge regarding Switzerland than distant countries. This can be seen in the prominence of the different country dimensions. In distant countries, associations with Switzerland were mainly confined to a few aspects of three dimensions (Figure 1). The natural dimension played a major and consistent role (India: 34.6% of 1,973 mentions; UAE: 32.1% of 1,833 mentions; U.S.: 33.6% of 1645 mentions) and was mainly characterized by the aforementioned natural clichés (mountains, cold climate, and the beauty of the Swiss landscape). Likewise, Indian, American, and Emirati respondents often mentioned topics related to the cultural dimension (India: 29.4%; UAE: 25.9%; U.S.: 35.5%), namely typical Swiss food, especially chocolate, or tourism aspects. The functional dimension, which encompasses more hard information about a country, took third place (India: 25.0%; UAE: 30.7%; U.S.: 23.0%) and was represented mostly by the clichés of Swiss banks or watches. Banking scandals were also one of the few normative aspects highlighted besides the stereotype of neutrality by distant countries (India: 3.9%; UAE: 6.4%; U.S.: 9.3%).
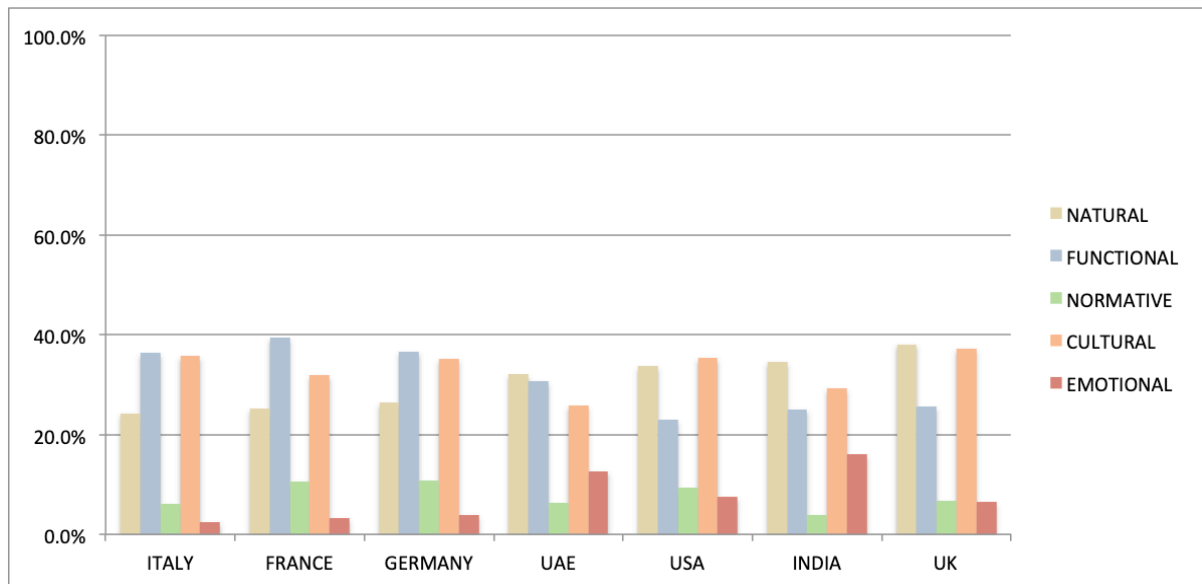
Figure 1. Dimensions of survey cited topics (n = 3,556) for Switzerland around the world.

Regarding the emotional dimension, American, Indian, and Emirati people expressed positive sentiments about their liking for Swiss people or their fascination with Switzerland's beauty (India: 16%; UAE: 12.7%; U.S.: 7.5%).

In contrast, neighboring countries highlighted more diverse aspects in different dimensions. They highlighted functional aspects of Switzerland the most (France: 39.6% of 1,634 mentions; Italy: 36.3% of 1,869 mentions; Germany: 36.6% of 1,784 mentions; UK: 25.6% of 1,727 mentions). Besides the typical entries, such as banks or wealth, high cost of living, watches, and army knives, people also highlighted different aspects of Switzerland's politics and economy: Germans associated Switzerland with direct democracy, neutrality, and restrictive immigration policies. Italians mentioned the Swiss currency, the bureaucratic system, and the job market in the canton of Ticino, for example. French people focused on the economic features of the country by emphasizing Switzerland's tax system. All neighboring countries, including the UK, highlighted the political alliances and independence of Switzerland regarding the European Union and, in contrast to distant countries, discussed living and working conditions in Switzerland.

The cultural dimension was the second important dimension in the survey data (France: 31.9%; Italy: 35.7%; Germany: 34.9%; UK: 37.2%) and included many mentions of the Swiss population, but also cities or Switzerland's sports offerings, such as skiing, soccer, and tennis. The natural dimension was dominated by various stereotypes, including mentions of Swiss mountains, the beautiful landscape, and the cleanliness of the country (France: 25.2%; Italy: 24.3%; Germany: 26.4%; UK: 38.1%).

Mentions related to normative aspects other than Swiss neutrality were not very present (France: 10.6%; Italy: 6.1%; Germany: 10.7%; UK: 6.8%), but still showed that neighboring countries were aware of issues such as Switzerland's isolated role in relation to the EU, its lack of openness, and some xenophobic attitudes. The emotional dimension was almost absent in neighboring countries. To sum up, when asked about what comes to mind about Switzerland, people from distant countries first highlighted natural aspects, whereas close countries highlighted functional aspects.

As with the survey data, the variety of search topics related to Switzerland was higher among neighboring countries than distant countries (Figure 2). Neighboring countries displayed more searches related to the functional dimension (France: 44.4%; Italy: 50.2%; Germany: 45.3%; UK: 31.9%). In particular, searches related to the economy, government and politics, and the workplace were the three top categories among the neighboring countries.
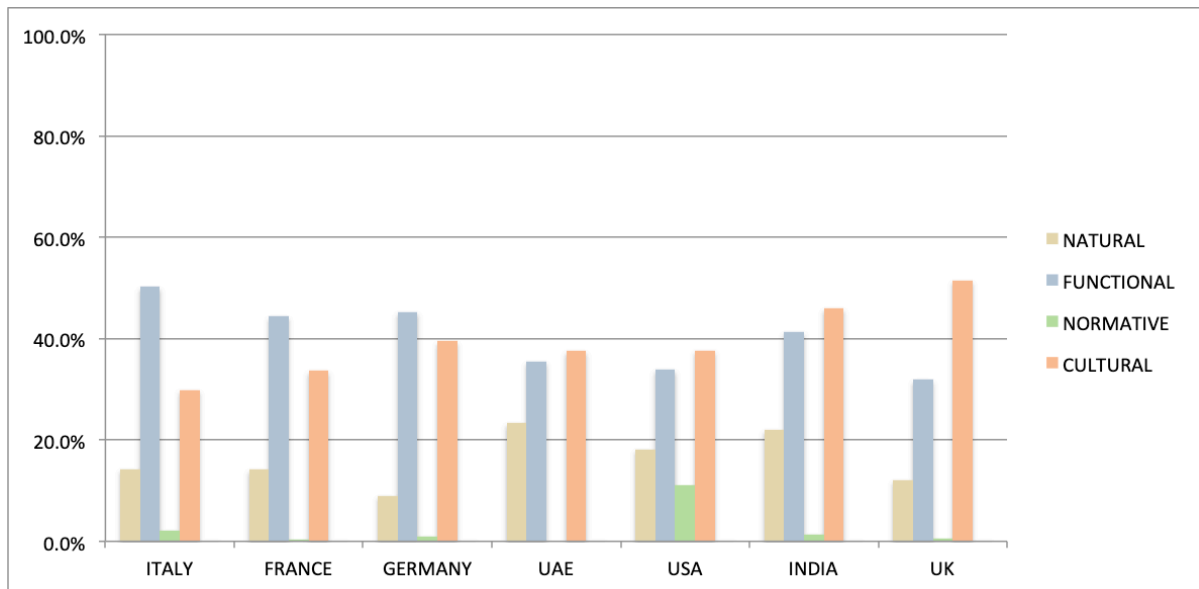

Figure 2. Dimensions of searches (n = 3,839) for Switzerland around the world.

Similarly, the cultural dimension was the second most prominent among Google searches on Switzerland (France: 33.9%; Italy: 30.1%; Germany: 39.5%; UK: 51.75%). There were, however, several differences between the survey and search data. Whereas people from neighboring countries mentioned food, such as chocolate and cheese, in their survey responses, online searches focused on sports, cities and places, and general information, including phone numbers and directories.

Still, in line with the survey data, online searches related to the natural (India: 14.9%; UAE: 23.4%; U.S.: 18.2%) and cultural (India: 30.1%; UAE: 37.7%; U.S.: 38.3%) dimensions appeared relatively more frequently in distant countries. Apart from searches for time and weather, landscape searches were also prominent, including the Alps and lakes in Switzerland.

Neighboring Countries Display More News-Related Topics

To address the H3, assuming that people in close countries have more functional, hard information about Switzerland than those in distant countries, respondents were asked to recall news information about Switzerland. Confirming our assumption, in the neighboring countries, at least 40% of all respondents remembered a variety of news related to Switzerland (Germany: 50.9%; France: 42.2%; Italy: 42.2%). This included tax fraud, Swiss bank accounts, and political votes or decisions regarding immigration. In the UK, which is a close but not direct neighboring country, 26.8% of the respondents could remember news topics. Respondents from distant countries such as the U.S., India, and the UAE showed an even lower recall of news about Switzerland (U.S.: 18.6%; India: 25.2%; UAE: 15.7%). This was in line with our expectations that the farther countries are from Switzerland, the less people remember any news about it. Among news that was recalled by distant countries, information related to sports, such as the Olympic Games and tennis, was most prominent. In addition, news information about banking scandals, accidents in the Alps, or crimes were mentioned even if specific knowledge about the events was missing (e.g., a train attack in Switzerland was falsely mentioned as a terrorist attack). Therefore, people from distant countries recalled mostly sports information, scandals, and sensationalist news.

Although news-related online searches are relatively rare with respect to Switzerland, neighboring countries, particularly Italy (6%) and France (5.6%), displayed a greater diversity of news-related searches, including online news sources in Switzerland, searches related to recent referendum or election results, and other local events. However, news-related searches were the highest in India (7.9%). From 2009 to 2017, searches related to Indian black money in Switzerland appeared in both the top and rising searches from India.

Surveys Feature More Stereotypical Results Than Online Searches

To address the fourth hypothesis, Figure 3 displays the percentage of stereotypical survey answers and Google searches about Switzerland in distant and neighboring countries. In support of our assumptions, it shows that the percentage of Swiss stereotypes appearing in survey answers is far higher than that appearing in Google searches. While 40% of the survey answers in distant countries contain Swiss stereotypes, only 7.1% of the online searches in distant countries do so (z test = 38.13, $p < .01$). Similarly, while 54.3% of the survey answers in neighboring countries contain Swiss stereotypes, only 1.7% of the online searches in neighboring countries do so (z test = 57.57, $p < .01$).
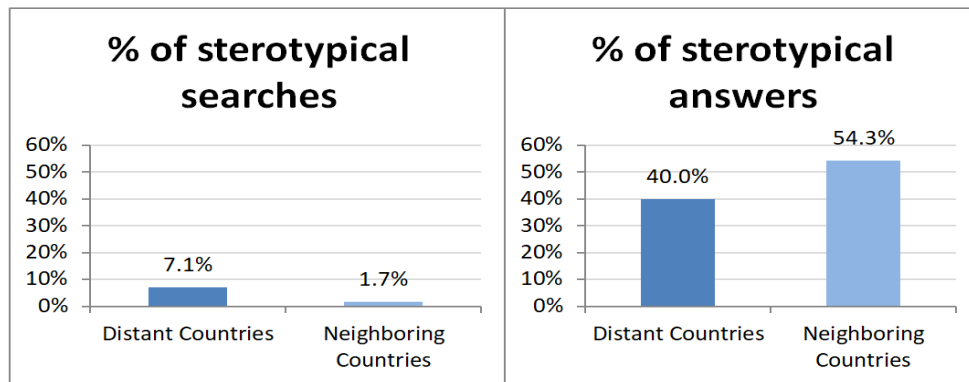
Figure 3. Percentage of stereotypical Google searches (n = 3,839) and survey answers (n = 12,465) related to Switzerland around the world.

Figure 3 reveals another interesting pattern. The percentage of Swiss stereotypes appearing in the online searches of distant countries is higher than that appearing in neighboring countries. However, when it comes to survey answers, the percentage of stereotypes is higher in the neighboring countries. These findings reinforce the practical aspect of online searches compared with survey data. It shows that national stereotypes exist in neighboring countries even more than in distant countries, but rarely appear in their searches.

Discussion

In this article, we focused on the role of stereotypes in the construction of a country image as they appear in online searches and survey data. There is a general correlation between what people associate with a country and what they search for about that country.

We first hypothesized that stereotypes are very prominent in the Swiss country image. In line with the proposed theory of stereotypes and the findings of Chen et al. (2016), we found that the country image formation processes rely primarily on stereotypes. The most recalled stereotypes for Switzerland, in both the survey and online searches, were similar to those found by the studies of Bender et al. (2013), Kym (2010), and Rindisbacher (2010) in being rather positive and related to "mountains," "chocolate," "banks," or "watches." The high prominence of stereotypes is a very interesting result because it shows that even with the diversity of information available in the digital era, people still rely on, and perhaps need, heuristics, shortcuts, and stereotypes, mainly acquired during socialization processes (Burgers & Beukeboom, 2016). Further, it goes along with the definition of Alexander et al. (1999) that stereotypes are long-lasting and not easily changed or eradicated.

Referring to our second hypothesis, neighboring countries showed a greater number and variety of Swiss stereotypes. This indicates that people in neighboring countries are more in touch with the Swiss population and have closer ties to Switzerland than people from distant countries, who mention merely the Swiss landscape. This strengthens the argument for the impact of proximity on country image and

stereotype formation. Not only do neighboring countries show a greater number and variety of Swiss stereotypes, but they also name more diverse topics related to Switzerland than distant countries.

This is an interesting result because it counteracts the assumption that stereotype formation is negatively correlated with knowledge about an entity, but strengthens the idea of stereotypes as complexity-reduction phenomena. Indeed, the greater (stereotype) knowledge might be explained by the fact that neighboring countries have more information and knowledge available—for example, due to school education (history, geography, languages)—which also often nourish national stereotypes. In addition, neighboring countries are exposed to more country image campaigns (which often use stereotypes) because they are the main target groups with respect to tourism. Interestingly, when looking at the differences in Google searches between close and distant countries, it is noticeable that searches from distant countries were more stereotypical than searches from neighboring countries. Therefore, it can be argued that the absence of knowledge about a country indirectly leads to a more stereotypical behavior (searches) toward that country.

As mentioned, it is important to study stereotypes and country images taking a sociocultural approach. Thanks to the 5-dimensional model, we could confirm Herz and Diamantopoulos's (2013) assumptions that different countries name diverse stereotypes and topics relating to various dimensions. In line with the findings of Hřebíčková and Graf (2018), results show that within each group (close and distant countries), the same country image dimensions are highlighted. Close countries rely mostly on cultural stereotypes, whereas distant countries express nature-related clichés. Besides the various stereotypes found in the different countries, we can see different aspects highlighted in their country image of Switzerland. In both the survey data and Google searches, functional aspects are the most prominent in close countries, whereas distant countries highlight the natural aspects of Switzerland.

When looking more deeply, our results prove the theoretical assumptions that country images are a social-cultural construct: We can explain many of the mentioned aspects through mirroring theory and the influence of ethnocentrism. Indeed, people from many countries remember topics that are linked or relevant to their own country. Even though the UK is not a direct neighbor of Switzerland, British people know about Switzerland's independence from the EU. This might be explained by the discussions around Brexit, which often used Switzerland as a possible model for the UK. The mentions from distant countries, which are not related to stereotypes, also have a self-centered background: Americans may name universal healthcare, because the health system is a perennial topic in the U.S. India's many affective comments about the landscape and Switzerland as a tourism destination may be due to the presence of Switzerland in many Bollywood movies, and their mentioning of Nestlé might lead back to the "Maggi" scandal in 2015, often discussed in the news.

Regarding news, we confirm our third hypothesis: that neighboring countries recall more news-related information than distant countries do. When looking at France, Germany, and Italy, we can see that many respondents recall news information related to politics or the economy. This corresponds to Segev's (2016) assumption that neighboring countries are interested in each other's news because it might have greater relevance for them. For instance, Italian respondents frequently remember the Swiss vote about

foreign workers in the canton of Ticino, by which they might have been directly affected. In the distant countries, however, there are very few recollections of Swiss news.

In short, considering that Switzerland has a relatively low news prominence worldwide, news has some influence on its regional image, but rather limited influence on its global image. In farther countries, stereotypical views are rather narrow, focusing on Swiss landscape, products, and services. Because news tends to focus on negative events, the appearance of a country—in this case, Switzerland—in the news often increases the normative dimension of its image. Indeed, the results show that the normative dimension is more present in the neighboring countries and that positive emotional comments, based largely on clichés, are mostly made in distant countries. To link this with the findings of d'Hooghe (2007), the liabilities of the Swiss country image formed by news are surpassed by its assets based on stereotypes.

To extend our news collection findings to the digital realm, we analyzed Google searches and found, in line with H4, that these give less stereotypical insights than survey data do. This is mainly because online searches are more action oriented (traveling, purchasing products, or looking for entertainment). We did observe, for example, that searches from most countries are related to sports, particularly soccer games. This is in line with other findings on country searches, suggesting that popular searches for European countries are mostly related to international soccer competitions (Segev, 2018).

Also, we found that the normative dimension could be barely observed in searches and is more prominent among survey answers in neighboring countries. While searches reflect actual information needs, surveys enable researchers to explore views and opinions too. Referring to the news value theory (Eilders, 2006; Galtung & Ruge, 1965), we can explain the presence of the normative dimension among neighboring countries as a result of the higher news value of Switzerland to them. In both searches and survey data, the emotional dimension is barely present. This can be explained by the framework of the investigation. In the survey data, people were asked to name features of a country image (general associations or recalled news) and not to express their overall emotions about the country. Google searches feature concrete information about a country and are not used to express emotions—unlike social media, for instance. These characteristics show the specificity of each research unit and highlight the importance of analyzing country images through different methodologies.

Based on these findings, Table 1 offers an integrative model to explain the role of stereotypes in the construction of country images. Country images are constructed through information and physical interactions (such as international news and travel). They are inevitably reduced to stereotypical views (Dovidio et al., 2010). News is one of the important heuristic mechanisms through which the variety of information about a country is reduced to narrow views and stereotypes. Both surveys and online searches reveal similar trends, in which people from closer countries mention more diverse dimensions of country image such as functional, natural, and cultural. Yet when attempting to study stereotypes, open questions are more instrumental than online searches because they include the normative and affective dimensions too. In short, the different cognitive dimensions of country image as shaped by people from distant and close countries can be similarly observed in surveys and online searches, yet surveys reveal also the normative and affective dimensions of country image and are better in highlighting countries' stereotypes.

Table 1. A Summary of the Main Findings in Their Theoretical Context.

Country proximity	Country image dimensions	Stereotypes observed
Closer: More news, more travel for leisure and business purposes	Survey: More news recall, diversity of cognitive dimensions, more opinions and normative views, more ambivalent positive and negative affective views	Survey: A greater diversity of stereotypes from all dimensions
	Searches: Diverse searches from all dimensions, cognitive rather than affective dimension	Searches: No stereotypes observed
Farther: Less news, less travel	Survey: Specific views (natural, functional), more specific affective (positive in the case of Switzerland)	Survey: A lower diversity of stereotypes from specific dimensions; in the case of Switzerland, mostly from the natural dimension
	Searches: Specific views (natural, functional), cognitive rather than affective dimension	Searches: Stereotypes from the cognitive dimensions (mountains, watches)

Limitations

In terms of methods and research units, Google Trends offers valuable data on searches related to countries, providing insights that do not always appear in survey data. This method allows us to overcome some of the survey limitations, such as the self-reporting bias. However, global search data bring their own limitations. For example, the data provided in Google Trends for each query are limited to the 50 most popular and rising searches and therefore do not capture the overall richness of searches. To obtain more search information, queries from different periods should be combined. In our case, we did this to generate enough searches about Switzerland. Although the sample offers a great variety of topics from the various country image dimensions and a very different combination of topics in each country, it is still possible that less popular searches might provide a more complementary picture that would better fit the survey data. Still, combined with survey data, online searches provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship among country images, online practices, and stereotypes. Finally, the current study explored how stereotypes appear in country images, yet the role of national stereotypes in social media, with its greater scope for emotional expression, remains an important field for future investigation.

In addition, future studies should explore the different types of proximity, such as cultural, historical, and political, as well as how power differences between countries can influence country images. Furthermore, because country images are dynamically constructed, future studies should explore how changes in the news about a country could alter its image.

Conclusions

Stereotypes are the building blocks of country images. The more information and interaction two countries have in common, the more diverse stereotypes they develop for each other. The similarities observed between online searches and public views about Switzerland provide a clear indication of this process, but also highlight the strength and usefulness of a mixed-method approach in public diplomacy research. Although public views and online searches revolved around similar topics, the former included many more opinions, views, and stereotypes than the latter. Online searches, however, can give more direct and precise knowledge beyond the stereotypes, revealing the actual information retrieved about a country, and thus are part of its country image formation. For example, a person who hears about a friend's trip to Switzerland may look for more details on Google, expand her or his knowledge about Switzerland, and shape her or his image of it.

In the same way that marketers employ Google Trends to understand in what context their brand is searched for, scholars and practitioners may use it to better understand the respective information needs and intentions of people from other countries, including trade and shopping interests, tourism intentions, media and information needs, and even how their country is perceived normatively around the world. Combined with open-question survey data, news, and social media content, public diplomacy can put together a much more complete picture and develop communication activities and campaigns to strengthen the country image.

In addition, we see that many of the stereotypical responses may result from country branding promotion campaigns, given that the Swiss tourism agency uses common stereotypes quite often to promote Switzerland abroad. Here, we might find strong evidence that public diplomacy could cooperate more closely with the tourism agency in aiming to alter the country image and move away from stereotypical associations and toward a more modern and innovative view of Switzerland.

In particular, when studying national branding campaigns, scholars should take into account the differences between neighboring and distant audiences and their different information environments. Whereas the neighboring countries show much more interest in, and hold much more information about, the branded country, distant countries are often less aware of or interested in that country and therefore may hold less diverse views on it. The challenge is therefore to cater to the information needs of each particular country group based on its "home" culture and on its specific associations and ties with the branded country.

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