

Title: Is the promise of nation branding sustainable?

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Abstract

This paper examines the aims of nation branding and reflects on the extent to which practices in the industry have been able to fulfil these aims. It is an inquiry into the reliability of the applications of branding nations. To fulfil this aim the paper investigates the phenomenon of rating nations through competitive indexes and the effect of this phenomenon on the unification of nation branding promise and practice. It reflects on a country case and changes resulted from branding programmes with reference to data published in nation/country brand and perception indexes. The paper concludes that the ideal promise of helping nations redistribute the world's wealth more fairly by branding the nation is unreliable, and that branding the nation in order to achieve the nation's interest in the long-run proves to be naïve in some cases.

By questioning the unification of nation branding promise and practices, the paper aims to alert practitioners to the importance of aligning national aims and identity with nation-branding programmes. It can also encourage marketing scholars to develop further research into the practices of nation branding in relation to national interests in the long run and the consequences to national identity and nationalism.

Keywords

Nation Branding, Nation Brand Index, Nation-State Brand, Promise of Nation Branding

1. Introduction

The guru branding consultant Simon Anholt, who played explicit role in expanding the market of nation-branding, argued in 2002 that in order to redistribute wealth more fairly around the world, governments need to learn from marketers how to brand their nations. Today the industry is much wider as many branding and marketing practitioners expanded into place and nation branding. Branding is promoted aggressively to the extent that in some cases it appears as if a nation's existence might depend on it, with globalisation positioned as a "threat", as the probability for "unbranded" nations to miss out on potential gains is underscored. Several indexes that rank nations according to their brand, economy, human developments, sustainability or reputation are being widely communicated which is inflaming the competitive atmosphere among nations and creating a sense of urgency for states to employ a branding programme into their national development agenda. Anholt today presents himself as a policy adviser rather than a marketer. This shift emphasises that marketing today plays a role in policymaking. He at the same time starts the Good Country Index offering another way for nations to compete.

This paper examines the aims of nation branding and reflects on the extent to which practices in the industry have been able to fulfil these aims. It is an inquiry into the reliability of the applications of branding nations. As Peirce's philosophy 'fallibilism' suggests, we need to be 'open minded' and accept the tendency to make mistakes, misunderstand or be naïve and inquire our beliefs and previous research results (Main, 2010; Boyd, 2012). Thus, the paper investigates the phenomenon of rating nations through competitive indexes and the effect of this phenomenon, if any, on the unification of nation branding promise and practice. It reflects on a country case and changes resulted from branding programmes with reference to data published in nation/country brand and perception indexes.

2. Ranking Nation Brands

In 2005 Anholt and GfK, a research company, established Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM (NBISM) to measure nations' image around the world, and to track their profiles as they rise or fall. Today there are several nation, country, and city brand indexes such as, Country Brand Index (CBI) by Future Brand, Nation Brand Ranking (NBR) by Brand Finance, Country Brand Ranking (CBR) by Bloom Consulting, and the Good Country Index (GCI) by Simon Anholt. This is in addition to city brand indexes and other subject-specific indexes that rank nations such as, the Global

Competitiveness Ranking, the Human Sustainable Development Index by Our World, Perceived Corruption Index by Transparency International and many others. These indexes regardless of how comprehensive and realistic their ranking is, they put unprecedented pressure on governments to compete.

They are based on perceptions of panels of tens of thousands of respondents from specific number of countries. For example, although the Anholt-GfK NBI ranks 50 countries its respondents are from 20 countries only and they are just over 20,000 respondent. Moreover, not all countries are considered in every ranking and since the majority of these indexes are established in the west and majority of their panels are located in the west there might be biases embedded in the ranking. In 2009 the Middle Eastern countries included in Anholt-GfK Nation Brand Index were only four: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Later on Qatar was added and Iran is not in 2017 ranking. The African continent has only three countries represented in 2017 ranking Nigeria, South Africa and Botswana. Egyptian respondents are considered less experienced in completing online surveys -after a decade of involvement in this survey- as such the survey's length is reduced, resulting in each nation getting approximately 200 ratings from Egypt, 300 less than the ratings received from each other panel. Knowing that Egypt is the only Middle Eastern panel involved in the Anholt-GfK NBI's survey.

Furthermore, ranking nations is problematic due to the complexity of nation identity and its various traits. Some of the indexes' approaches are more comprehensive than others. Future brand's Country Brand Index focuses on the brand as a place to visit rather than a nation by measuring: awareness, familiarity, associations, preference, consideration, and decision/visitation. In terms of associations, five associations are considered in two categories: (1) status, which includes value system, quality of life, business potential; and (2) experience, which includes heritage and culture, tourism, and made-in. Without familiarity with the nation in question completing questions related to the above measures would be problematic. Anholt-GfK NBI on the other hand focuses on the respondents' perceptions of the nations' performance in six categories: culture and heritage, people, exports, tourism, investment and immigration, and governance. Thus, the ranking of these indexes suggests an indication into an international image of a nation that does not make much sense except in comparison with other nations ranked in the same index, based on the same measures, and by the same panel. In 2014 for example, Future Brand ranked Japan number one in their CBI, while Brand Finance ranked the US number one in their NBR, and Germany came first in Anholt-GfK NBI. CBR by Bloom Consulting and NBR by Brand Finance ranked the US number one in 2017 while Germany climbed to number one in Anholt-GfK NBI pushing the US down to the sixth place.

Considering such conflicting results while drawing a national development policy can be confusing, and following any of these indexes may lead to misleading strategic focus, as the results cannot represent the global market or a specific country view due to limitations in methodology, measuring criteria, sampling size and selection criteria. These results also make it difficult to indicate the progress and performance of nations following a long-term nation-branding programme(s).

3. Discussion - The Egyptian Brand in Brand Indexes

According to Anholt-GfK NBISM (2009 Report Highlights), Egypt has been in the lead of Middle Eastern countries since its inclusion in the index, ranked 15 out of 50 countries. Particularly in the culture and heritage criterion, Egypt does well. Although, in governance, Egypt ranked 41 out of 50 this did not spoil its more positive ranking in other criteria such as culture and production. The UAE, on the other hand, despite all its investments and efforts to develop the country as a cultural hub and financial and foreign investment hub of the Middle East, it is consistently ranked much lower, closely matching Saudi Arabia. Remarkably also Iran, occupies the last position out of 50 countries of 2009 Anholt-GfK NBISM in almost every section; Iran also has an impressive cultural heritage, but does not seem to be acknowledged for it by the panels.

Egypt's international image is a result of more than one branding programme (Dinnie, 2008). In addition to Egypt's history, Egypt developed its brand as a producer mainly upon one high quality product: cotton. Egypt has been focused on developing its image as a destination for over a decade. Furthermore, Egypt established a programme to brand the country as a business destination. However, despite these efforts and the long-term brand communications in tourism, culture and lately business and Egypt's rich cultural heritage, in 2009 Anholt-GfK NBISM, the placement of Greece in comparison with Egypt located across the Mediterranean to the north shows the biases operating within the Index.

Although Egypt ranked first in history and third in art and culture, Greece fourth in history and fifth in culture, Egypt's overall ranking was far below Greece, which achieved 9th place as a brand.

Egypt ranking became even more problematic after the uprising in Egypt following Arab Spring in 2011. The political unrest shackled the countries ranking and in 2012, Country Brand Index ranked Egypt 58 out of 112 countries. More dramatically, Syria was described as a state in decline and was ranked 111, while the stable UAE came 23rd. Egypt kept a leading position in heritage and culture in 2014 Future Brand's CBI (6 out of 75 countries) but was identified as an experience country -similar to Greece- rather than a brand where its status in business for example was weak. Oppositely, the UAE was six in the 'good for business' status and overall was ranked 19, the only Arab country that was considered a brand.

In 2017 regardless Egypt's culture and heritage, and branding communication programmes, it is unable to reach Turkey's ranking, which achieves 24th position in Brand Finance NBR. Egypt's political status may be reflected in its ranking since 2011, as it is ranked among the worst performing nations, dropping from 55 to 57 in 2017 Brand Finance NBR ranking and losing USD 10 billion in its brand value. In contrast, the UAE is the third strongest brand in Brand Finance NBR, the only Middle Eastern country on this list. The UK in comparison with its rich culture and heritage although it is among the top 10 strongest brands, it is at the bottom in tenth place.

In practice, nation branding is turning into a nation-state brand aligned closely with public diplomacy. States may often employ nation branding to achieve the state's aim of public diplomacy and make extensive use of marketing tools and techniques. They may aim to divert attention from political and economic policies of the state to an intangible brand identity that is associated with cultural and emotional traits of the nation. Such associations are highly valued and can stimulate more empathy and sympathy with the people of the branded nation and in turn with their state. Nevertheless, when the national people oppose the state policy, the brand may turn into a propaganda, as it does not offer a close representation of the nation's aspirations and lives.

Egypt's branding programmes are unable in recent years to dramatically shift the perceptions of the indexes' panels to achieve higher ranking as its tourism and international trade suffers. Similarly, although indexes continue to rank the US in first position, the US has felt the 'Trump effect' this year (Anholt, 2017) as it is dropped from the first to the sixth place in 2017 Anholt-GfK NBI based on different measures and panel selection criteria. Libya's branding programme in 2007 led by the Monitor Group and its policy changes to turn Libya into a competitive, egalitarian leader in the region by 2019, achieved short lived gains to the state and was unable to stand the political unrest followed the uprising in 2011. Libya has not been ranked regularly since then and recently achieved 163 in 2016 the Good Country Index and 129 in 2017 Bloom's CBR for trade.

4. Conclusion

Consequently, the ideal promise of helping nations redistribute the world's wealth more fairly by branding the nation is unreliable, and that branding the nation in order to achieve the nation's interest in the long-run proves to be naïve in some cases. The phenomenon of branding nations is relatively young, just two decades old, yet it is already proving to be, if not a manipulation of marketing into the gains of elites, a naïve promise of using marketing theory and practice for the 'greater good' with the moral intention of producing a fairer world and happier nations.

Questioning the unification of nation branding promise and practices can alert practitioners to the importance of aligning national aims and identity with nation-branding programmes, and to the integrity of such applications. It can also encourage marketing scholars to develop further research into the practices of nation branding in relation to national interests in the long run and the consequences to national identity and nationalism.

Nation branding effectiveness is based on highlighting uniqueness and points-of-difference such as Brand America and the original idea of freedom and wealth. However, the global market identity and nations competitiveness are employing nation branding to replicate competitive nations' traits and competencies. The UAE with its air-conditioned swimming pools and ice-skating in the middle of a desert, skyscrapers, and English as the business language is an example of the domination of the global market identity. The irony is that the country vision and development projects built a strong nation brand that attracted more foreign investors, talents and workers than the national population leading to dramatic change in identity at incredible speed. Many of the Gulf countries in the Middle East are in similar

position. This pushed the locals to intense measures where nationalisation -or what is called, for example, emiratization and saudisation- is stronger than ever before and many similar policies are changing to drive expatriates out and secure jobs to the native people. One look at the recent events in the US with Mexican migrants (June 2018) can confirm the conflict between nation branding promise and consequences.

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