

Chapter 3

Place Branding in Systems of Place – on the Interrelation of Nations and Supranational Places

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Abstract The pervasive managerial logic of branding has established a stable foothold in the context of place management. Yet the question of whether places, such as cities, regions and nations, can be effectively managed using marketing techniques remains elusive, as place brands and company brands have been observed to differ in various ways. A key characteristic of this difference is the possibility of a company brand of being created from scratch and having its associations and characteristics carefully tailored to suit the needs of its authors. While the control of a company brand can easily be lost and its meaning relies on a reading of the brand by anyone receiving its message, the control that can be exerted over which meaning is attributed to a company brand appears almost absolute when compared to a place brand. A place is a brand often long before it is formally branded. A place brand – like a city, region or nation brand – is per definition attached to a system of geographical abstractions in quasi-cartographic form in which each city, region or nation is understood in relation and contrast to other geographical entities. For those who seek to alter perceptions about a place, this presents a challenge, since the role of a place in this system of geographical abstractions constitutes a piece of information more vital than any other in defining the place. Our understanding of places cannot be separated from their scale, and any effort at managing the reputation and meaning of a certain place will be interpreted in an unintended way due to interrelations between these abstract representations. For instance, a particular region is likely to be seen as part of a bigger context – for instance, the nation. Most of the time, the nation is in turn also part of a higher-order place (e.g. the European Union or Africa). Using the example of nation branding for Sudan and Slovenia, one can identify supranational places such as “sub-Saharan Africa” or “Eastern Europe”, carrying their own highly salient and

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often negative meaning in much of the Western world. We explore how association to a *system of place* is thought to influence the prospects of branding campaigns and introduce and discuss how reassociation can serve as means of mitigation of negative supranational belongingness. In doing so, we discuss also the challenges of interregional branding in this regard, where perceptions of two (or more) different nations interfere.

Keywords Meta-brands • Nation branding • Brand perception • Perception management • Developing countries

Introduction

The pervasive logic of branding has established a stable foothold in the realm of place management to the point that it can even be said to have become ubiquitous. For the people and institutions charged with the management of places, the potential of branding gleams appealing at the horizon, but branding places comes with its own unique challenges. Nation branding is, perhaps besides destination branding, the most recognized form of place branding (Balakrishnan 2009; Fan 2006; Kotler et al. 1993; Olins 2002). Even though place branding in general is a relatively new research field, it has seen a dramatic increase in the number of articles published annually in academic journals since the turn of the millennia (Gertner 2011; Lucarelli and Brorström 2013). While the attention has shifted somewhat to the branding of cities in the last couple of years (Anholt 2010; Braun 2011), nation and regional branding remains one of the areas of place branding which has garnered the most attention from academics to date (Hospers 2004).

In practice, the rise of nation branding – and its politically minded twin, public diplomacy (see Tusch (1990) for a more nuanced explication of the concept) – can be seen as due to a discourse which puts great emphasis on how nations compete with each other (Porter 1990) and adopt marketing techniques in order to attract investments, companies, tourists and new residents (Kotler and Gertner 2002). As the images of nations are increasingly viewed as commercially relevant in a more and more varied array of settings, such as tourism (Nadeau et al. 2008), exports (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Pappu and Quester 2010) and attracting foreign direct investment (Kalamova and Konrad 2010), the cultivation of this image has become all the more pertinent.

Adopting the techniques and language of managerial practice and applying them on places is also often done as an attempt to control how structural changes are understood and how the narrative around them develops. One could, for instance, argue the way in which China's recent industrialization is brought into understanding as a repositioning (Deng and Dart 1995) is reflective of an increasing propensity to view place management as a process that, in part, entails what is typically understood as marketing. Nations can, for instance, be thought of as products in their capacity of attracting tourists and be made subject of marketing

campaigns with the goal of strengthening their competitiveness and attractiveness as destinations, a practice which is becoming increasingly prevalent (Gilmore 2002; Morgan et al. 2002; Pike et al. 2010).

Places such as nations or regions are rarely thought of in a single function but are marketed, indeed branded (Kavaratzis 2008; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2008), with multiple goals in mind (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000). Increased tourism, investment, residency and visibility are all ultimately seen as the means to the end of the financial success, longevity and relevance of the place. Naturally, the governments of “troubled” nations or regions (e.g. the “developing world”) are no exception to this will of securing a future for nations or regions they represent. If anything the situation is perhaps more extreme in the developing world due to the fact that governments in these parts of the world often find themselves in situations that are volatile – either from crisis or opportunity. As most of the developing world suffer from a rather poor reputation (Osei and Gbadamosi 2011), a reputation that may stymie the return on investment on improving infrastructure or creating attractive conditions for potential tourists, in such situations, the allure of branding may be particularly pronounced.

But the promise of branding and the reality of branding are two often very different things. For places such as nations or regions, challenges abound. In this text, two issues will be held up as central challenges to nation branding as it applies to the developing world. The first is a well-known issue in place branding; that place brands are not created from nothing as a company or a product brand may be. Rather nations and regions exist, they may arguably already function as brands in many ways long before they are subject to reputations management in the strict sense. The second issue is a problem that is, arguably, richer in complexity. A place is not only often known long before it is “formally” branded, but the nature of places can also be drawn from their capacity of drawing meaning very closely from their position in a system made up by multiple places. These meta-national (and interregional) places not only often have their own meaning attributed to them but are also often far more salient than the regions they are made up of. In the following sections, we will search for the crux of this problem and explore the problem of how nations and regions can actually alter the perception of themselves in the face of more salient meta-national places.

Branding Nations and Regions

The concept of a nation generally refers to a large group of individuals of the same race and language, while the concept of a country mostly describes a particular area. In the literature, both terms are used interchangeably (for a more profound analysis, see Fan 2006). Nation branding applies branding and marketing techniques to promote a nation’s image to its relevant target audiences (van Ham 2001; Fan 2006; Wang 2008), while the term nation branding is typically evoked in the context of commercial relevance which entails a number of widely different areas such as

tourism, the image of products being produced in the country and the attractiveness of the country as a target of investment (Nadeau et al. 2008). The importance of the cultivation of a nation's image has been emphasized as a crucial endeavour of national governments for some time (Manheim 1994); it is also often argued that this task has become increasingly challenging in recent years (Wang 2008) as technology and cultural shifts have made the landscape of communication all the more nebulous. Regional branding – as another place level of place branding – is dealing with politically, economically or socially defined regions that can be within one nation or between one (or more) nation (i.e. interregional branding like the Øresund region (Hornskov 2007; Hospers 2004)).

Place marketing and branding in general aims “to maximize the efficient social and economic functioning of the area concerned, in accordance with whatever wider goals have been established” (Ashworth and Voogd 1990, p. 41). It therefore constitutes an attempt to “promote a place's values and image so that potential users are fully aware of its distinctive advantages” (Kotler et al. 1993, p. 18). For a place brand, no shared definition yet exists in the place branding literature (Anholt 2010; Gertner 2011; Kavartzis and Ashworth 2005; Zenker 2011), and some have proposed that the essence of a place brand in general is “nothing more and nothing less than the good name of something that's on offer to the public” (Anholt and Hildreth 2005, p. 164). This “good name” – or reputation of a place – could also be described as the nation's image or brand. In line with this argumentation, Zenker and Braun (2010, p. 3) focus on a place brand as “a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design”. This definition, arguably analogue to Keller's (1993) conceptualization of consumer-based brand equity of firm brands, essentially asserts that a brand is not the communicated expression or “place physics,” but the perception of those expressions in the mind of the target audience. Those perceptions can vary strongly between target groups (Zenker and Beckmann 2013), as do the needs and wants of different target groups regarding a place (Zenker 2009).

Systems of Places

No place exist in a vacuum; to fully understand what this statement entails, we require some qualification of what constitutes a place on a basic level. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) identifies place as emerging from the void of space through the virtue of meaning attribution to some identifiable feature in a landscape. According to Tuan's (1977) seminal work on the nature of place, this first step of “placing” units of space through the attribution of meaning to them allows, in turn, the scaling of places into more abstract aggregates of place. Any levels of these scalable places are understandable by virtue of their contrast or likeness to other units in the same system (cf. Tuan 1977, p. 171). While the understanding of place is, according to

Tuan (1977), born from direct experience, this experience and the understanding of place it creates in turn enable an understanding of place in a more abstract form. Through contrast and likeness to directly experienced places, abstractions can be drawn. These abstractions can even venture beyond any semblance of having a “real” territorial correlate in space in the absolute sense, yet the influence of strictly symbolic places like Heaven, Hell, Shangri-La, Valhalla or Atlantis can often be felt in the real world (Deacon 1997, p. 453). Places, “real” or symbolic, are created through the attribution of meaning towards them. The thread of this argument, if followed far enough, leads to a notion of place as ultimately contingent on meaning, as put quite strikingly by Edward Casey (1993, p. 330): “Stripping away cultural and linguistic accretions, we shall never find a pure place underneath . . .”.

In the absence of a truly objective nature of any place, the understanding of the means and conditions of the meaning attribution which come to define place becomes a clear priority on the path to enlightenment in the understanding of how places are defined. A crucial element of this understanding can arguably be found in the interrelation of places; Tuan’s (1977) demonstration of the scalability of place suggests that places are contingent on not only meaning derived from contrast and likeness in a horizontal sense, in the sense that, for instance, nations are understandable by virtue of comparison to one another. Rather, scalability and the great potential for abstraction it enables also support the importance of vertical interrelation between places, that is, cities, regions, nations, continents and virtually any other abstraction of place enjoy an inter-contingency of meaning. In many ways, the human understanding of places demonstrates qualities that make it a quintessential example of a Baudrillardian system in which the position in a system of symbolic interrelation becomes the key determinant of essence (cf. Baudrillard 1968). Put differently, places are made sense of, given significance, primarily as a consequence of their relation to other places. If a new place is encountered, it is automatically integrated into a system of quasi-geographical representation – in Deacons’ (1997) example of mythical places, this integration may lack a territorial component; nevertheless, the mythical place is defined as a consequence of its likeness and contrast to other places known to the person encountering the mythical place.

This characteristic of places as contingent on interrelation to derive their meaning in their very nature makes obvious certain particularities related to the industrialized cultivation of them – that is, place branding. A region, for instance, may be subject to a certain interference of meaning drawn from its association to the nation it is located in when a given person formulates their attitude towards it. This general principle may be more or less pronounced depending on how much is known about the place; if very little is known, it may be more natural to assume that needed information is inferred from other sources like in what nation or greater region it is located. A place may also be subject to co-definition from places that from a perspective of scale can be said to operate on a “lower” level, for instance, cities and specific landmarks may become synecdoches for a region. Examples of this can be found in the case of Copenhagen which can be thought of as functioning as a synecdoche for the Øresund region or, for instance, how the Øresund bridge can be said to fulfil the same role for the entire region.

“Vertical” and “horizontal” interrelation can both be conceptualized as contributing to defining any one place; regions and nations are not particular in this regard. Although one could argue that the nation state as a category of places that often has a distend amount of meaning attributed to them in contemporary society, due to the historical primacy of nations in legal and governmental contexts. While the importance of the nation state as a unit of organization in both political and economic terms has been argued to be on the decline (Miyoshi 1993; Ohmae 1993), its symbolic relevance arguably remains largely intact. Asking a given person to make sense of the world is still likely in the 2010s to yield a reference to the concept of nations. Nations are, like all places, also subject to having images, narratives and ideology attributed to them through an increasingly mass-mediated system that results in a collective notion of things or a social imaginary (Appadurai 1996). Mass media is often a means of homogenization of narratives towards places, a process that can often be observed to follow the colonial patterns of west–east and north–south (Hardt and Negri 2000), but it also serves as a means of creating a reference from which alternative accounts can be drawn and what Appadurai (1996, p. 8) calls “communities of sentiment” can form in opposition, or in reference, to these mass-mediated images.

Salient Meta-place Brands

To illustrate the power of salient meta-place brands and the influence of these meta-brands in place branding, let us take the example of Sudan: Sadiq al-Mahdi – Prime Minister of Sudan from 1967 to 1968 – illustrates the plight of those taxed with managing the reputation of Sudan during a talk given at the Center for Cultural Diplomacy (2011):

There is an Arab image problem which sought to make the Arabs the embodiment of oriental despotism, the prevalence of despotic regimes in the Arab world tended to extend this view of Arab particularity . . . The most important image problem in the world today especially in the west is that of Islam that has an image [of being] an irrational, violent religion . . .

Al-Mahdi, musing about the potential of Sudan to escape turmoil and poverty through developing its reputation, attracting tourists and foreign direct investment, observes that marketing Sudan as an attractive place for things such as investment and vacation is inherently challenging. Granted, Sudan has a great deal of home-grown problems, but it is also perceived as belonging to several supranational places or regions which carry associations with negative events. “Sub-Saharan Africa”, “the Arab world”, “the Muslim world”, “the horn of Africa” or just “Africa” are all regions attached to widely disseminated, highly salient and often very negative narratives (Osei and Gbadamosi 2011).

The importance of nation and regional image in the context of FDI has been demonstrated to be rather robust (Kalamova and Konrad 2010). However, hypothetically speaking, if a potential investor would evaluate Sudan without knowing much

about the nation, a highly likely means of first approach for the problem of whether Sudan is a viable option for investment would be to reference one's attitude towards one of the "meta-national" places that Sudan belongs to. In this particular context, the attitudinal outcome of referencing these meta-national places is likely to become highly negative. Sudan is not unique in this sense; many transitional, pre-transitional or problem-stricken nations are perceived to belong to supranational units of place that not always provide the most fertile ground for developing a positive reputation to put it mildly.

Statistics on FDI appears to support this rather depressing conclusion. In the 1990s, during which time, FDI in developing countries generally increased dramatically, sub-Saharan Africa (not counting South Africa) enjoyed only approximately an 8th of the increase compared to Central America and only about a 16th compared to East Asia and the Pacific (Asiedu 2002), and while the situation has improved (Darley 2012), sub-Saharan Africa still lags behind in attracting FDI to this day.

Tourism is another commercial activity in which the perceptions held by about the nation, outside the nation, are the principal determinants of success. The importance of tourism as a driver of economic growth, particularly in the context of transitional economies or pre-transitional economies, has been the emphasis of a large body of research over the last decade (Dieke 2003; Dritsakis 2004; Oh 2005; Mishra et al. 2011; Kaplan and Celik 2008). This importance coupled with the fact that potential tourists are highly sensitive to risk perception and that negative news about a destination is known to have a highly detrimental effect on consumer attitudes (Santana 2004) provides the fodder for the elevation of both the importance of tourism and the severity of the obstacles facing nations, such as Sudan, in attracting tourists.

Sudan is not just a victim of association to a negative meta-image, it too has as a symbolic component of the meta-image also contributed to it; the stories associated to the genocide in Darfur and the Janjaweed militia have helped create the image of turmoil that characterizes the region (Campbell 2007). In the case of the image of "the horn of Africa" region, another of its component places, Somalia, has become a sort of "dominant source" of narratives that have come to characterize the media discourse of the entire region in recent times. Narratives of modern piracy and the idea of Somalia as the epitome of a "failed state" (Murphy 2011) and seem to have been subtly integrated into the image of the entire region, and as a result exert an effect beyond the border of the nation it affects directly (Nevin 2009).

While the horn of Africa is, perhaps, the quintessential example of a supranational (interregional) place having a highly negative reputation, other regions exert the same suppressive effect on individual nation's attempt to brand themselves. Places such as "Eastern Europe", "Central America", "Central Asia" and "the Middle East" all carry their own narratives and images, many of them often negative from a Western perspective that typically takes precedence over the image of any one region or nation when a potential investor, tourist or any other "consumer of place image" makes causal reference to these places. The problems this may cause are made even more pertinent by the fact that studies on the nature of human judgement and decision making over the last several decades put great emphasis on

the importance of unconscious processes that lie beyond direct conscious control (Bargh et al. 1996; Fitzsimons et al. 2002; Dijksterhuis et al. 2006). This research suggest that we automatically make use of information which is made pertinent by association; if, for instance, a person (erroneously) believes that Bhutan is located in Central Asia rather than Southeast Asia, this will lead to the activation of a completely different set of associations which may have implications for behaviour of any kind.

For many regions and nations in the developing world, large-scale changes are occurring in a rapid pace; these changes may come in the form of both opportunity and crisis as they both destabilize the nation and risk sending it into regression but also provide the chance to shed the “third world” status and allow the nation to travel through the state of a “transitional economy” towards the elusive horizon of being perceived as a modern industrialized society. Changes that pertain to the image of supranational (interregional) places are no exception; in the next segment, some implications of these changes for place branding will be explored in further detail.

Altered Image

There is a great multitude of ways in which places attempt to change their reputation; infrastructural projects, re-urbanization and reorganization of poorly functioning institutions are all well tested and earnest attempts to improving conditions that are relevant to the interests of tourists, investors, residents and other actors that may have an interest in the nation (Anholt 2006; Fan 2006). But these initiatives do not come bundled with positive publicity by default. Material changes is one thing, changes in perception another. For many countries that are undergoing real change, effective communication of these changes appears to emerge as the true challenge on the path to large-scale improvement (Brown et al. 2006; Fetscherin 2010). Given these circumstances, the allure of place branding campaigns is not difficult to imagine, but what do these campaigns ultimately result in? The products of place branding are often TV-spot advertisements, new logos, billboards and events of different kinds aimed at promoting the place being orchestrated (Dinnie 2008).

These initiatives, aimed at improving the reputation of and to draw visibility to the place in question, risk becoming part of the support for the structures that keep the regions or nations of the third world in their subordinate role towards the rest of the world. Nation branding as iterated on, for instance, the National Geographic channel has been argued to maintain the “first world/third world” divide (Roy 2007). As the persistence of how these TV-spots insist on the modernity, authenticity and enlightened culture of the place they advertise may seem more like meaningless boasting than a window into the soul of the experience a tourist or investor would have, should they choose to allocate their respective commercial activity to the

nation being advertised. But promises of “modern infrastructure”¹ may do more to enforce the notion that nation is somehow behind or part of a world in which modern infrastructure is not taken for granted. The relative uniformity displayed in these campaigns also serves to group the places involved in place branding together into a category of places that “have to advertise”.

The reference to the greater region in which a nation is situated may seem innocent; indeed, it is arguably the most pertinent information about a nation, but a problem lies in wait. There are a large number of nations on planet Earth, perhaps too many for most human beings to comfortably make sense of individually. Instead we categorize, aggregate and summate individual regions and nations into greater regions based on some “iconicity of similarity” (cf. Deacon 1997, p. 75). These supranational (interregional) places have a tendency of becoming dominant in the formulation of our understanding of individual nations that do not have a salient image by themselves.

But for some nations, this can be a boon waiting to be leveraged upon, for instance, in the eyes of many onlookers; European Union membership can mean that a nation gives up its status as an “Eastern European nation” and instead somehow becomes an extended part of “Western Europe”. Examples of this tendency include Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, to name some. EU membership is a means by which nations can truly redefine themselves through an alteration of supranational belongingness; this may not necessarily mean much in terms of actual changes in the affected nations, but an alteration of perception is highly likely and arguably becomes more likely among audiences further removed from these nations.

It may seem self-evident that change in perception on a supranational scale requires perceivable changes that extend beyond the level of a single nation. Yet it is hard to argue that influence from supranational regions does not affect the perception of nations belonging to the region and that nation branding is not exclusively concerned with improving the reputation of single nations. Taken together, these two tendencies appear to create conditions that create a significant risk of resources being wasted on ineffective communication programmes within the frame of nation branding campaigns. Due to the simple fact that other more meaning-potent place entities than the individual nations in question, constitute the main source of meaning for the majority of consumers are targeted by nation branding campaigns.

Conclusion

Regional and nation branding, defined as the organized communication aimed at influencing a region’s or nation’s reputation, appears to be a promising potential counter to the torrent of negative press typically characterizing the pre-transitional

¹Invest in Georgia, “Summer in Georgia”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Cez4PFSyvA>, retrieved 27-11-2013.

economies in the so-called third world. The tendency of these communication initiatives to fail to live up their lofty promises raises an interesting question – why the lack of return on reputational investment? In the present text the argument that potential consumers of a place often make sense of a nation as a part of a larger system and that this system of places in its aggregated form carries its own meaning. This principle, illustrated through the case of Sudan, illustrates a fundamental property of place; place is not by some default defined in perception as it is organized in a legal and political system, such as a nation or region. In some cases, the meaning attributed to individual nations is drowned out by more salient imagery attributed to places that lack institutional representation concerned directly with advancing its reputation. This lesson from nation branding in the developing world, a context in which this phenomenon is highly prevalent, is also applicable to place branding in general as a place on any level can be highly salient in meaning while completely lacking in, or having a highly ambiguous, institutional representation.

There should be little doubt that the stakes of place branding are high; apart from the direct commercial relevance of image, which transects many different venues (cf. Nadeau et al. 2008), there is a bigger picture. While a nation or regional brand can be an asset in a vast variety of arenas of commercial interest, it extends far beyond commercial. It can, for instance, come to pertain even to contexts such as the formulation of national or regional identity (Bond et al. 2003). Nation branding can also be seen as highly relevant to issues of public diplomacy and so-called soft power (Nye 2004). Soft power, a concept signifying the dimension of power that extends a nation's influence beyond the venues of direct military, economic and diplomatic means of influence, is increasingly relevant as it is often far less costly to leverage upon to assert influence (van Ham 2001).

It appears clear that a place brand can serve a very important role, yet the concept itself is nebulous; it has been noted that a place image, or brand, is not a single monolithic construct but rather highly multifaceted depending on the context in which it is invoked (cf. Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009; Diamantopoulos et al. 2011; Andéhn 2013). It is, for instance, highly possible for a nation to succeed as a brand in one respect while failing in another as demonstrated by Martínez and Alvarez's (2010) example of how Turkey has become a highly regarded tourist destination while the perception of the country in general remains relatively negative.

The present paper has explored how the place is formulated and found that the disjuncture between institutional representation and places as they appear to their "consumers" provides a challenge even if one, generously, concedes that places can be effectively branded. In terms of branding, this disjuncture can be likened to having narratives linked to one's brand over which one can exercise a very limited amount of control. If, for instance, one would attempt to alter the perception of the nation of Slovenia, one would first somehow have to address the fact that Slovenia itself may not be a salient construct to many consumers and may be understood primarily by virtue of its role as belonging to the supranational places "former Yugoslavia" or "Eastern Europe". It may be exceptionally difficult for many nations

to rid themselves of their association to supranational places, but membership may shift over time; in the case of Slovenia, European Union membership may help de-place Slovenia as a part of Eastern Europe and move it into a new belongingness.

This process is arguably a far more powerful means to truly alter how people perceive Slovenia that what could be achieved by any conceivable strategy that can be likened to a place branding campaign. This understanding of the region or nation as having a place in a system of places that constitute the spatial understanding of the relevant groups of consumers of the regional or nation brand emerges as a crucial aspect of reputations management. Ultimately this issue can be thought of as a problem of understanding how and by whom the place in question is consumed. It may seem like a classical adage of marketing, but success in reputations management is arguably contingent upon understanding from what point one departs from; in the context of place branding, the problem of salient supranational places represents a factor that has a strong influence on the feasibility of a regional or nation branding initiative.

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