THEORY AND PRACTICE: NATION BRANDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract. *Nation branding concerns the nation's image as a whole and the manner in which is depicted to other nations. Simon Anholt, one of the leading authors in nation-branding, considers a nation brand as the most valuable asset of a country in order to acquire a competitive advantage and a strategic position in the international arena. The present paper tries to identify how the conceptual framework of nation branding developed by Anholt fits into the concrete actions taken in some countries in the Middle East. Traditionally, the nations of the Middle East have been reluctant to operate with the concepts of nation branding when compared to the Western world. However, an exception can be considered to be the Gulf Cooperation Council bloc (GCC) - a region of great wealth positioned between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Even though initially these countries did not have as a purpose to create a particular nation brand, they took concrete actions for their economic development that resulted in a positive country image for some of them. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar are two Middle Eastern countries that certainly acknowledged their role in the competitive global economy and recently started to apply nation-branding techniques. The cities of the UAE and Qatar were almost unknown to the world until three decades ago. Today UAE has become Middle East's strongest brand, while one of its main cities- Dubai has gained the reputation of one of the most extravagant and cosmopolitan cities in the world. At the same time, Doha is consolidating its reputation on the international sports circuit. Only recently, UAE and Qatar have developed strategies for branding attractions that individualize their image and gives an impetus to internationalization. The analysis uses Anholt's nation branding conceptual framework and will follow two directions: a) a chronological direction that looks in both countries to the different stages of economic development and associated actions that resulted in the present country images and b) a comparative direction that looks at the two countries trying to identify elements of commonality and elements of differences in the ways how their existing images have been built. The paper concludes that the two countries in the Middle East built successful country brands using initially strategies aimed mainly at economic development and later on strategies aimed specifically to country branding.*

Keywords: *nation branding; competitive identity; place branding; the Middle East.*

Introduction

The GCC bloc - (members: UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, Kuwait, and Oman) - a region of abundant resources (the richest region in hydrocarbon reserves) is positioned between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. The region is situated at the crossroad of continents: the Middle East, Africa, and the Far East. The cities on the shores of the Persian Gulf (Dubai, Manama, and Muscat) have been for years ports of call for the boats crossing the Middle East to Africa, India and/or China. This alone represents a geostrategic advantage for a nation branding strategy meant to enhance the nation building process, as well.

On the other hand, GCC countries are positioned in a harsh climate (with the limited natural appeal). Hence, they need to focus on selling synthetic attractions or promote prominent events for steering investment and further economic growth. Such activities must be sustained by a proper infrastructure and utilities; while enabling a financial stimulus plan to make them happen (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). It can be compared to a domino effect that contributes to the overall growth of trade and investments.

However, it is a laborious task to build attractions with the view to constructing a brand, along with conveying a coherent message for the brand. The coherence may be one of the greatest challenges for decision makers of the 21st century (Anholt, 2006). Despite the difficulties to form a unitary branding strategy, the GCC countries are developing an emphatic branding strategy focused on tourism development, aviation, real estate and international events and exhibitions/conferences, meant to place their countries and capitals (Abu Dhabi-UAE and Doha-Qatar being the capitals considered for the study) on the map of the world economy.

The practical implication of nation branding is that an effective strategy for nation branding helps a country to attract tourists, investors, and talented workforce. Findings indicate that the *key indicators* in the formation of a brand comprise *national elements* (country name, the mental perception of it, geostrategic location, people, culture, etc.) and *infrastructure* (security and safety, economic soundness, technology, tourism targets, destination marketing, and promotions). Any strategy you would put in place (after you identified the most striking features of the country) needs corresponding infrastructure, as highlighted by Kotler and Gertner (2002). All the factors together contribute to an effective visibility of a brand and its corresponding benefits.

The most successful product of branding from the Persian Gulf region, namely the UAE, has encompassed the aforementioned elements. In order to strike success to this extent, the UAE has followed closely the specialists' view and tried avoiding mistakes, reputational risks and negative implications that can have a damaging effect on the branding process (Gilmore, 2002). The paper compares UAE and Qatar's nation branding, analyzing the timeframe associated with the processes and the distinctive, yet different results in both cases. Ultimately, the paper draws the conclusions regarding nation branding in the region, noting both its limits and its success. The study stresses the particularity of nation branding in the region and evaluates future prospects of its evolution.

Aim/added-value: Nation branding has received a narrow focus when it comes to emerging markets, notably in the Middle East. This is the first study with a view to understanding Anholt's framework vis-à-vis nation branding in the Gulf region. The findings will likely help policymakers, brand managers, and communication professionals, generally speaking.

Literature review

Simon Anholt, the leading author in matters of nation branding encompassed the whole concept in a six-layer explanation, see Figure 1. Therefore, the nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across six areas of national competence. According to Anholt, the cumulative effect of each element of the six-layer figure creates the nation brand.

Simon Anholt proposed the channels through which you can enhance a country's reputation: tourist promotion; exporting brands; government policies (domestic or aimed at the foreign sector); the population's reputation; cultural heritage; the power to attract investment and skilled workforce. In 2007, he added the importance of the performance the country's leaders' attainment in the international arena (Anholt, 2007). Simon Anholt considers a nation brand as "the most valuable asset: it is national identity made robust, tangible, communicable, and – at its best – made useful" (Anholt, www.superbrands.com). Simon Anholt goes further with describing a successful nation brand as competitive identity, put briefly as: "(...) the synthesis among brand management, public diplomacy, trade, investments, tourism and export" (Anholt, 2006). Simon Anholt fathered the concept of competitive identity in 1996 and published the first paper on the subject in 1998. Keith Dinnie (2007) defined the competitive identity of a nation as "the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences." According to Dinnie (2009), competitive identity represents the mixture of the best features of a nation, encompassing the political, economic, social, and cultural capabilities.

Anholt ranked competitive identity among competitive factors in a globalized economy. Being able to strike competitive identity, means the accomplishment of a successful branding strategy. It shall be made possible with the collaboration decision makers, the private sector, in partnership with the local population. A country's international reputation is managed and changed for the better, as long as there exists cooperation between the various sectors within a country (Anholt, 2011).

Subsequently, branding places gained visibility, a practice that goes hand in hand with the globalization as the products, services; assets merge with the markets and culture in a global community (Anholt, 2005a).

Therefore, [...] "the reputations of countries (by extension, of cities and regions too) behave rather like the brand images of companies and products, and they are critical to the progress, prosperity, and good management of those places" (Anholt, 2013).

Place branding is primarily focused on attractions and the image of a location that might attract events, tourists, investors, skilled workforce (Anholt, 2010). In particular, in the tourism market, there is an emphasis on cities, as place branding (Zenker, 2009). Place branding serves the purpose of marketing tourist destinations, an appealing instrument for visitors and tourists alike (Balakrishnan, 2009).

Nation branding can be compared to a cardinal self-presentation of a country. The domain of nation branding extends beyond touristic promotion/marketing, including crucial sectors as investment, exports and matters related to work force- professionals, students, qualified exported and not the least, governance. In short, nation branding should be constructed in such a way to check all the points enunciated by Anholt in his six-layer figure.

Figure 1. Nation Brands Hexagon (http://nation-brands.gfk.com/)

Although the most modern literature on the competitive identity of a nation presents classical studies- i.e. USA, China, Western countries - there is a shortage of integrated study on the Middle East. Without a systemic study, the research can be rendered difficult (Fouroudi et al, 2016). The past experiences indicated that the examination of the competitive identity of a nation requires a comprehensive approach (Freire, 2005; Szondi, 2007) that stresses both the reality and the process of nation building (Anholt, 2007; Caldwell & Freire, 2004).

The competitive identity of a nation describes the ways in which a whole country differentiates, communicates and relates to the wide world (Blair et al., 2015). As Dinnie (2008) argued, the substance of brand identity and brand image are perfectly transferrable from the context of marketing of products and companies to the national and regional/local level. By that, the competitive identity of a nation can be viewed as a marketing strategy for nations. It could help a nation not just enhance its identity and image, but it also will improve its overall global standing.

A nation's image and reputation are the reflections of the perception of an entity. The Middle East is generally afflicted by prejudice in the consumer's/receiver mind, therefore a complete strategy on nation branding can bring a significant advantage to whom might reap first its results. This is why the GCC is a leading example in the Middle East for considering nation branding.

Nation branding in the case of UAE and Qatar

Why is it relevant in this context?

Anholt (2005) explained that when one works on branding, it should be done consistently and harmoniously. The best result is when you can communicate the value of all the products, brands, sub-brands and the activities, which are designated for the same purpose. The GCC countries needed a communication strategy primarily because its nations' history is incipient, but also since their constraints and problems could be answered with a justified response- a strategy of branding the state for endurance and growth. They are small states and very young nations (independence acquired in 1971) and the physical size, the population (especially as the national population is a minority in the UAE and Qatar), or the geopolitical situation cannot be altered. They met rapid economic development and one can highlight that nation branding is of critical importance to developing nations, which do not have the time to wait for the national image to match the rapid pace of development (Anholt, 2006). The GCC economy is one of the fastest growing in the world and the region needed the corresponding image for its wealth and resources. A competent response was seriously needed, because there appears a predilection in people's behavior when they make choices: "The clichés and stereotypes- positive or negative, true or untrue- (and stereotyping is frequent in the case of the Middle East) fundamentally affect our behavior towards other places and their people and products" (Anholt, 2007).

Economic development and branding UAE

UAE has a government typical to the Arabian Peninsula: absolute monarchy (founded as a federation of seven emirates since 1971). It lies in Western Asia, on the Persian Gulf shores and in the southeast point of the Arabian Peninsula. Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the economic engines of the federation. As a country brand, UAE is known as the Middle East most valuable brand, in one of the world's fastest growing economies. UAE has become the third strongest brand in 2016 (worth over US$400 billion) (www.brandfinance.com, 2016), after years of modest ranking/not in the tops. When one analyses UAE's branding process, we come across the flagship project- Dubai, despite the fact Abu Dhabi is the capital city.

Probably because Dubai policy makers have been quicker than their counterparts to understand the need for diversification and to limit dependency on oil (Reuvid, 2007), the branding strategy has a longer history. Back in 1990, the oil resources were estimated to last 30 years. This evaluation pushed for a coordinated correlation of these resources. Dinnie has advocated for correlation of resources for effective worldwide competition, and in order to do that you need excellent branding management techniques that can be refined until the process progresses (Dinnie, 2009), matters addressed cogently in the case of Dubai.

Dubai started with enabling the Department of Tourism and Commerce in the 1980s. After a few decades of hard work, Dubai became the fifth most visited city in the world in 2014- 11.95 million visitors, 12.84 million international overnight tourists in 2015 and 13.34 million in 2016. (www.visitdubai.com, 2017), while the target for 2020 is 20 million. Most of those (86%) who visit Dubai stand in the 20-40 years age group and are practiced international travelers (Lee and Jain, 2009), an indication for the attractiveness of the destination. The number of expat residents is a sign for the openness and for the allurement of the place. Dubai is known worldwide, for its extravagant architectural projects, including the tallest building in the world, *Burj Khalifa,* and many other superlatives in estate and luxury tourism. The worldwide fame is not confined to tourism but also implies being an initiator in becoming a *smart city*, while maintaining its Middle Eastern cultural specificity. Dubai is a regional domineer in technology, commerce, and transportation links that enjoys a cosmopolitan setting. It displays an incredible potential for investors, travelers, traders, and expats, practically rendering Simon Anholt's six-layer approach possible (plus a factual standing in international relations by virtue of public and cultural diplomacy).

The second most known emirate of the UAE, Abu Dhabi, needed its own branding strategy for international recognition (Haider, 2008). The strategy was initiated in the late 2000s with the creation of the Office of the Brand of Abu Dhabi (Al Ayedrous Bani Hashim, 2012). Its first product was a slogan and a logo for Abu Dhabi -"travelers welcome" – has been vividly enforced in different campaigns and activities (for strategies in the region also see Karolak, 2017). However, advertisement campaigns are just one element of the overall strategy, and at best produce a short-term effect, according to Dinnie (2008). Abu Dhabi branded itself with the logo "travelers welcome" but it turned to be part of a broader strategy (Formula 1 events, building world-known museums in the recent years). Anholt stated that it comes naturally to less well-known countries to start with a signpost logo for differentiating themselves. Moreover, an accomplished strategy means they identify a sharp point in order to penetrate consumer consciousness, to the extent it remains in his/her mind (Anholt, 2009). It is an attempt to tick the boxes of Anholt's hexagon-figure for rendering the nation branding process successful. Thus, Abu Dhabi has constructed more than a logo, rather an identity, with the help of different means: media, website, international advertisement campaigns that promote the manufactured attractions of the Emirate. This is why Abu Dhabi's identity is clearly different from Dubai, with cultural events at the forefront (having an island for cultural entities, such as The Louvre and The Guggenheim), the quiet, sunshine-blessed place and fit for events such as Formula 1 or awards ceremony. It is pertinent when we compare it to Dubai, (Balakrishnan, 2009) which is known for its appetence for the Guinness Book of records – a "city of superlatives" (Beauregard, 2003). Abu Dhabi has managed a cumulative branding strategy, coming second to Dubai's international reputation (when you analyze the UAE) (Zeineddine, 2017).

Economic development and branding Qatar

The achievements of UAE in the field of nation branding have surely augmented the competition level in the GCC bloc. Qatar is located in Western Asia, is a small peninsula (separated by the island of Bahrein), in the Persian Gulf, independent since 1971. Qatar

- the sheikdom[1] of the Persian Gulf developed prosperously in the last ten years, reaching the highest GDP per capita in the world (www.indexmundi.com, 2016) – this wealth had to be reflected in a nation brand. Qatar is very active in the international and regional organization (GCC and Islamic organizations). Therefore, Qatar has gained worldwide prominence (Peterson, 2006). Qatar has achieved international exposure through hosting major international conferences/meetings, as well. For sure, the World Trade Organization ministerial meetings are known as "Doha Round" are included in Qatar's reputation by now.

Just like the UAE (only that appeared later), Qatar designated plans for promoting itself in the wider world, with events, cultural forums, university campuses and media networks. Qatar has started to remove the label of a dormant desert city when it established the Al Jazeera media network in 1996. It was unthinkable back at that time to acquire so much regional influence through it. The realizations fueled further ambitions, thus Qatar, through long-term goals operated mainly through its National Vision 2030, is trying not only to place its capital city Doha in the upper tier, Doha is already in the business and regional policy arena, but also intends to have a global assertiveness. As a distinctive approach, Qatar wants to associate itself with top services rather than with mass tourism (Karolak, 2017).

In the quest to rise up to UAE's reputation, Qatar adopted a nation branding strategy with impact on its capital Doha that transformed from the desert city to the host of top universities, forums, sports and cultural events (Hazime, 2011) in a decade or so. In the process of establishing a branding strategy, Qatar has met with the UAE's already consolidated success. Sporting events, international universities and cultural festivals may broaden Qatar's appeal but Qatar has yet to witness a more radical economic diversification. The oil and gas sector makes up roughly 50% of its GDP (www.forbes.com, 2016), compared to 6% in Dubai. Qatar has the chances to become a stronger competitor for UAE in tourism and economic diversification if it continues improving steadily the grandeur of the events hosted (FIFA World Cup 2022 is an important stake in this sense) and with the top educational facilities.

Differentiating strategies of nation branding

Dubai's approach gives sense to the advance of avoiding negative impacts on the image at all cost. This strategy was possible since it was building a nation brand almost simultaneously with nation building. As an indication of a coherent and comprehensive strategy as suggested by Anholt, Dubai allowed more time (when compared to fellow emirates) for the nation branding strategy to come into place, starting with establishing a Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing in the 1980s. Abu Dhabi realized it is time to differentiate itself from Dubai in the late 2000s, whilst Qatar has started branding post-1996 (coinciding with launching Al Jazeera). Dubai has already an international fame (being visible for already three decades in the market, while Abu Dubai and Doha were almost invisible to wider audiences) and may be the success story of branding in the region (reflected in the number of tourists, new investments and events it attracts annually), whereas Abu Dhabi is attempting to build

[1] a society ruled by a sheikh, typical to the Arabian peninsula

its own way. In order to manage image campaigns effectively, Anholt pleads for long-term nation-brand planning and strategy. Such strategies emphasize the role of continuity, simplicity, coherency, and accuracy- when referring to a country (Anholt, 2003, 2005b). Dubai's image as a destination of superlatives has been constructed from the early 1980s, receiving a strong stimulus in the early 2000s that were accelerated once the economic diversification was enforced (in the perspective of drying resources and a global lower price for oil since 2014). Dubai is targeting a declared ambition to be a "Global Arab City", meaning a consolidated heritage, while connected to the global trends. Abu Dhabi is reinforcing an image (the welcoming sunshine destination) that can be an alternative to Dubai's superlatives. It keeps linking to the accelerated cultural resurgence in the region. Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the two facets of UAE's nation brand, have risen up to international standards, with the help of a communication strategy, comprising accurate elements that are received by the consumer's mind- Gulf's capital of superlatives and the quieter capital city of a sunshine/resource- blessed region.

In the case of Qatar, possibly the most distinctive in its patterns for branding so far is that it strengthened the image as a setting on the international sports circuit. The efforts made by Qatar have been noteworthy; however, it is difficult to compile a strategy that does not "copy" Dubai's fashionable trends in terms of urban planning, events, and record-breaking activities. Its extraordinary economic growth is nourished by its oil and mostly gas resources (the National Vision also invokes Qatar being a hub an innovator in LNG supply), seconded by cultural and sports activities. Touristic plans cannot yet correspond to UAE's results. Nonetheless, when we study the National Vision, we observe an overarching strategy that matches Anholt's vision.

A strong economic image that is desirable for both public and private sector is essential for the UAE and Qatar in their attempts to advance beyond the oil economy. Their competitive identity (in the terms used by Anholt) is a success story for a developing region. We should emphasize the strategies' success, as formulating a nation brand is a costly and strenuous process.

Findings, limits of the study and future research

A qualitative approach was used to investigate the multiplicity of perspectives related to branding nations/countries/places. Given the under-explored nature of this research theme, the qualitative research has its limits.

In the case of the region specifically examined, the ultimate goal is to cement a distinctive nation brand while boosting the nation building process. As such, the paper identified:

- It is possible even when coming from emerging markets to gain international visibility, without forgetting to stress the importance of the country's heritage, as long as decision makers and locals collaborate in elaborating a coherent message about the nation;
- It is possible to enhance the country's international relations and its image abroad through nation branding. Adversely, Anholt's approach does not detail how the international impact plays into the equation of nation branding. We should note that in

the globalization and post-globalization era (fake) news spread quickly and their impact is visible internationally;

- You should allow time to identify the best (and most at the same time accurate) features for ultimately creating a competitive identity;
- If you can manage well the competitive identity advantages, the fellow contenders will be also motivated and it is mostly for the benefit of overall economic growth.

The study acknowledges its limitations. The qualitative nature of analysis has the potential for generalization; therefore, further study is recommended.

In addition, the study was restricted to a general approach of a country nation's brand. Therefore, the private sectors and the communication sector might respond differently to the topic. The research did not consider tourists' perceptions. Furthermore, there is a possibility to investigate and build technical conclusions, based on statistics, reports and other confirmatory techniques.

Conclusions

Each GCC country has to find the means to distinguish itself from its neighbors while confronting challenges to newfound wealth and emerging power and influence derived from the wealth. As the decision makers try to assert their roles, they have demonstrated more interest in international marketing techniques that can augment international visibility. A country's nation brand is increasingly evoked as a means to gain prominence on the world map. Whoever is persistent in nation branding would manage to achieve results (Nicolescu et al., 2007). It makes some features of the country robust and visible. Nation brands are met with increasing receptiveness in international circles, as they represent channels for public diplomacy. It is also true that a sound nation branding represents a tool to limit the reputational risks emerging from events exposed negatively and excessively in the media (a feature of the interconnected, globalized world). Many leaders in the Western world (Diaconescu, Nicolescu & Pînzaru, 2009) have already understood the significance of branding your country' assets. The instrument of nation branding can be particularly beneficial for emerging, newly industrialized nations in the vigorous competition in the global marketplace.

The paper evaluates the efforts made through time and strategies used by two emergent nations- UAE and Qatar. Their challenges to match the goals of nation branding and public diplomacy. These objectives are occasionally inconsistent, but the countries have to form a coherent communication strategy: images/messages (Ham, 2008). The salient message circulated by both UAE and Qatar is that they are open for international business, welcoming tourists and investors alike, adjusted to the global marketplace, offering competitive advantages.

In addition, Anholt (2005a) explained that novelty and the interest to invest in innovations make the difference in nation branding. UAE, Qatar and all the GCC countries have limited resources except for oil (and gas); hence, the arduous competition for finding niches for diversification. In the nation branding process, the competition can be summed up as such: whoever comes first with a distinctive strategy (and Dubai seemed to do so) not only takes the lead but also holds the competitive identity advantage. This is why Dubai became the flagship of branding in the GCC region and the driver for change for the fellow Emirates.

Nation branding should be analyzed in a future study from an interdisciplinary perspective, combing both international marketing and foreign policy. UAE and Qatar offer a perfect pattern in this sense, as their nation building process is almost overlapping the nation branding processes. Therefore, this study can provide with a starting point in the assessment of branding processes in the broader Middle East and offer guidance for the eventual in-depth examination of the region. In the Middle East there are many places still unknown, or known for the wrong reasons (especially given the damaged image generated in the aftermath of the "*war on terror*"). The bias can prejudice the opportunities one can encounter when we examine the plentiful of resources in the Arab Gulf region. Against all odds, the UAE and Qatar illustrate a positive facet of the region and the great potential that can be unlocked through adequate nation branding.

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