

Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research

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This article discusses the growing body of research on nation branding, arguing for an expanded critical research agenda on this topic. It begins with an extensive overview of scholarly writing on nation branding, based on 186 sources across disciplines. The discussion organizes the sources in three categories, teasing out key themes within and across them. Second, the article proposes a reflexive conceptual map which identifies four types of research orientations across disciplines. Finally, some directions for future critical research on nation branding and its implications are outlined. The ultimate goal of this mapping exercise is to stimulate more work informed by critical theories on the global phenomenon of nation branding.

Why Care About Nation Branding?

In its 2005 "Year in Ideas" issue, *The New York Times Magazine* listed nation branding among the year's most notable ideas. The article featured British brand consultant Simon Anholt and summed up his position in this way: "Just as companies have learned to 'live the brand,' countries should consider their reputations carefully—because . . . in the interconnected world, that's what statecraft is all about" (Risen, 2005).¹ At first glance, this claim seems hardly revolutionary. Nation-states have historically used various forms of persuasion to advance their political, economic, and cultural agendas. Indeed, one could argue that the American field of mass communication research has its roots in the study of propaganda

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¹ Anholt claims that he coined the term "nation branding" in 1996 (earthspeak.com, n.d.). He is undoubtedly the most prolific author on the subject (e.g., Anholt, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2007, 2008), and he has played a key role in establishing nation branding through consulting practice, speaking engagements, and efforts to institutionalize it as an academic field with scientific legitimacy. Another "founding father" of nation branding is Wally Olins, also a British brand consultant, whose work for governments, speaking engagements, and publications (e.g., Olins, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2005) are commonly referenced.

and its imputed effects (e.g., Lasswell, 1927, 1936), as evident in early work on development communication (e.g., Lerner, 1951, 1958), public relations (e.g., Bernays, 1923, 1955), and public opinion (e.g., Lippmann, 1922, 1925; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

Nation branding, however, is not a mere synonym for propaganda, nor are its suggested applications limited to influencing public opinion through advertising or public relations. Despite nation branding's growing popularity, there is much disagreement about its meaning and scope (see, for example, Dinnie, 2008; Fan, 2009). Conceptual debates are discussed in more detail later in the paper, but at the outset, I offer a working definition of nation branding as *a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms*. In terms of practical manifestations, nation branding includes a wide variety of activities, ranging from "cosmetic" operations, such as the creation of national logos and slogans, to efforts to institutionalize branding within state structures by creating governmental and quasi-governmental bodies that oversee long-term nation branding efforts.² The most ambitious architects of nation branding envision it as "a *component of national policy*, never as a 'campaign' that is separate from planning, governance or economic development" (Anholt, 2008, p. 23, emphasis in original). In addition, nation branding programs can be directed at both domestic and international audiences, and they are often funded with public money. In short, nation branding seeks to reconstitute nations both at the levels of *ideology*, and of *praxis*, whereby the meaning and experiential reality of nationhood itself is transformed in ways that are yet to be fully understood.

In light of this, communication scholars should be particularly interested in developing a critique of nation branding because efforts to rethink nations as brands relate to theoretical debates central to critical scholarship of culture and communication. These debates include the problems of cultural imperialism and commodification (e.g., Mosco, 1996; Schiller, 1976, 1989), the perils of capitalist (neoliberal) globalization (e.g., Beck, 2000; Sassen, 1998), the state of public spheres and civil society in a globalizing world (e.g., Calabrese, 1999; Habermas, 2001), and the centrality of identities in contemporary experience (e.g., Castells, 1997; Hall & du Gay, 1996; Laclau, 1994). Critical theorizations of the transformation of space and place in post-modernity (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Harvey, 1990, 2001, 2006; Lefebvre 1991) are also relevant and should be brought to bear in discussing the implications of nation branding. Finally, a growing body of recent critical work investigates brands and branding as distinctive phenomena of late capitalism that transcend the economic realm (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Einstein, 2007; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007), but it mentions nation branding only in passing.

Research on nation branding has been the focus of a number of literature reviews from marketing (e.g., Kavaratzis, 2005; Papadopoulos, 2004) or public relations perspectives (e.g., Wang, 2006b). Some scholars have also conducted partial cross-disciplinary reviews with the goal of clarifying the relationship between nation branding and public diplomacy (e.g., Gilboa, 2008; Szondi, 2008). While these sources

² Examples of such bodies include the following: UK's Public Diplomacy Board, established in 2002, and of which Simon Anholt is a member; the International Marketing Council of South Africa, also established in 2002; and South Korea's Presidential Council on Nation Branding, founded in 2009.

offer helpful insights into the growing literature on nation branding, the intended contributions of this paper are different. First, the present review offers a synthetic reading across disciplines as a way to illustrate the relative weight of different disciplinary approaches on nation branding research as a whole. Second, it teases out themes and assumptions that cut across disciplines, and it does so from a critical vantage point. Finally, this review is intended to stimulate interest in nation branding among media and communication scholars, and it hopes to encourage a new wave of research on this topic that is informed by critical theories. The paper's interest in critical theoretical approaches is, admittedly, in line with the author's own critical research agenda. It is also motivated by the fact that critical scholarship is currently a minority voice in debates about nation branding.

For the purposes of this review, 186 sources on nation branding were examined. These sources were all published between 1997 and August 2009, and they range from scholarly articles to book-length studies. The sample comprises 140 articles published in academic journals (including theoretical and empirical studies), 17 books or chapters in edited volumes, 8 graduate theses, 15 reports or essays published by think tanks and private branding agencies, and 6 academic papers presented at conferences or available on academic websites. Brief opinion pieces and commentary, even if appearing in academic publications, were excluded from the count of sources, although they were examined by the author. Also excluded were publications in trade journals (such as *Advertising Age*) or general interest media (such as *The Economist*), although the topic of nation branding is often discussed by such sources.³ Although the sample includes an extensive collection of sources, it likely does not contain every publication on the topic, due to the limitations of electronic search methods and the author's lack of access to some materials.⁴

The discussion organizes the sources into three categories which, borrowing from Bell (1976), are labeled: *technical-economic*, *political*, and *cultural* approaches.⁵ *Technical-economic* approaches include

³ While not included in this review, several online blogs compile information on nation branding and present commentary by practitioners. See, for example, <http://nation-branding.info> and <http://www.brandchannel.com>.

⁴ Studies were located through searches in academic databases, online searches, and by following the topic in academic publications, conference presentations, and media reports. When mining electronic sources, the following search terms were used: nation(al) brand(ing), country brand(ing), public diplomacy, place brand(ing), destination brand(ing), and reputation management. Not all of the identified sources are cited in this article, but all have informed its claims. The selection of sources was also limited by the fact that only English-language publications were considered. However, because the biggest proponents of nation branding are based in the UK and the United States, and as English is considered the universal business language, this selection is likely to be fairly comprehensive.

⁵ Bell (1976) outlines a tri-partite "ideal type" structural model of the capitalist social order and proposes that capitalism's contradictions can be understood by recognizing the "antagonistic principles that underlie the technical-economic, political, and cultural structures of the society" (p. xvi). The technical-economic realm is based on principles of efficiency, specialization, and hierarchy where the ultimate goal is to maximize profit (pp. xvi-xvii). The political realm is governed by the principle of equality, where the ultimate goal is to ensure equal representation and participation (p. xvii). The cultural realm is one of

studies from disciplines that concern themselves with conditions for economic growth, efficiency, and capital accumulation. These include marketing, management, and tourism studies. *Political* approaches include studies primarily interested in the impact of national images on nation-states' participation in a global system of international relations. These studies come from the fields of international relations, public relations, and international communication. *Cultural* approaches include studies from the fields of media and cultural studies, which tend to focus on the implications of nation branding for national and cultural identities. A limitation of this categorization derives from the fact that some sources raise questions pertinent to more than one of the three categories.⁶ Overall, most studies demonstrated a clear predisposition toward one conceptual approach. Nevertheless, the three categories proposed in this review should be viewed as a heuristic, rather than as a strict classification.

The discussion that follows unfolds in three steps. First, it offers an extensive overview of the current terrain of scholarly writing on nation branding and teases out key themes within and across the three approaches outlined above.⁷ Second, it suggests a reflexive conceptual map which identifies four existing orientations that relate to the ontological assumptions of research and cut across disciplines. Finally, the paper outlines the beginnings of an agenda for further critical cultural scholarship on nation branding. By engaging in this mapping exercise, the paper's ultimate purpose is to show that critically informed research from media and communication scholars can contribute significantly to the understanding of nation branding and its multiple implications for nationhood.

Technical-Economic Approaches

Of the 186 reviewed publications, 106 (57%) were classified as belonging to the technical-economic category, illustrating that the discourse of nation branding finds its strongest representation in the field of marketing. The main academic journal that provides a forum for publications with a technical-economic approach is *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (established as *Place Branding* in 2004, but renamed in 2006). The journal's founder and managing editor is Simon Anholt, who, as mentioned earlier, has been instrumental in establishing nation branding as a discourse and a field of practice. This journal published 36 of the 85 journal articles reviewed in this category. Another significant journal is the *Journal of Brand Management* (16 articles), which devoted a special issue to nation branding in April 2002.

Technical-economic studies are written by nation branding practitioners, or by marketing scholars. Overall, they adopt a functionalist perspective that sees nation branding as a strategic tool for enhancing a nation's competitive advantage in a global marketplace. A common central argument is that

"self-expression and self-gratification" (p. xvii). Because branding is a uniquely capitalist tool for producing value through rationalizing meaning, Bell's conceptual framework seems particularly fitting.

⁶ This is especially true for studies from the technical-economic and political approaches. In such cases, studies were categorized based on the reviewer's subjective assessment of a study's main argument and its orientation.

⁷ Although some comments are made on common methodologies within each approach, a systematic discussion of methods is beyond the scope of the present review.

the production of national images is not very different from branding products or corporations. As one frequently cited practitioner states,

All of us who work with corporations and their brands understand that fizzy drinks, trainers, mobile phones and other apparently insignificant and entirely unmemorable trivia give real emotional and spiritual value to some lives. Many brands help to create a sense of identity, of belonging, just like the nation. (Olins, 2002, pp. 247–248)

While acknowledging that nations are more complex than products, Olins argues that, when it comes to national identity, people can be “motivated and inspired and manipulated” with the use of the same techniques that companies use to brand products (*ibid.*). This instrumentalist approach unapologetically espouses a form of “social engineering” that allows elites to manipulate national identities. It ignores relations of power and neglects the implications of nation branding for democracy.

Authors in this group argue that the benefits of nation branding are best appreciated by marketers, and that they are ill-understood by public sector representatives (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). This has prompted practitioners to defend their trade in polemical essays that typically assert the inevitability of global competition—and consequently, of nation branding (e.g., Anholt, 2006a; Gertner, 2007; Olins, 2002; Yan, 2003). Still, they typically present limited empirical evidence of branding’s effectiveness beyond anecdotal “success stories.” Most studies from this approach that involve an empirical component are descriptive, written in the form of business-style case studies of particular nations’ campaign efforts.

Although they share a common marketing paradigm, technical-economic studies use different terms to refer to nation branding, and they are often engaged in definitional debates.⁸ Even authors who adopt the term “nation branding” offer a number of competing definitions of what nation branding is and is not (Fan, 2009). For example, Fan identifies three types of definitions: “product related,” “national level,” and “cultural focus” (2005, pp. 5–6). Product related definitions refer to the image conferred on products by their country of origin (e.g., German cars, French wine) and the reverse conferral of image on a

⁸ For instance, “place marketing” and “place branding” are two umbrella terms preferred by the marketing discipline (e.g., Gould & Skinner, 2007; Hanna & Rowley, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2005; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2004; Rainisto, 2003). Within place branding, some studies focus on “city branding” (e.g., Hospers, 2003; Stigel & Frimann, 2006), “region branding” (e.g., Andersson, 2007; Hall, 1999; Hornskov, 2007; Szondi, 2007), and “country/nation branding” (e.g., Dinnie, 2008; Endzina & Luneva, 2004; Gilmore, 2002; Wetzels, 2006). Tourism studies and vacation marketing tend to use the term “destination branding” (e.g., Morgan et al., 2004; Therkelsen, 2003). The most recent coinage is the term “competitive identity” (CI) (Anholt, 2007), intended to circumvent negative associations with the word “branding.”

country by its products.⁹ National level definitions refer to a country's overall image and positioning, or to its brand equity (e.g., Japan as a "technological powerhouse"; the United States as a "beacon of democracy"). Finally, definitions with a cultural focus refer to a country's culture and national identity—and in Fan's view, these have little relevance to marketing proper (ibid., p. 6). In a later paper, Fan offers a more general formulation of nation branding as "a process by which a nation's images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience" (2009, p. 6).

Despite variations, all definitions from this approach retain an instrumentalist frame which conceives of national identity as an asset or liability to be managed and deployed by experts in tactical or strategic ways. This approach puts forth various models of the components of national brands and factors that influence them. These models are presented as tools for measuring the value of national brands and are also intended to inform recommendations for branding activities. Among the most frequently cited models is Anholt's "national brand hexagon" (Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index 2005), which includes six dimensions of the national brand: tourism, exports, governance, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, and people. Based on this model, Anholt has developed a survey instrument which he uses to generate a proprietary quarterly ranking of national brands. Similar rankings, using different models, have been created by other consultancies as well (e.g., FutureBrand's Country Brand Index). These are used to legitimize consultants' expertise and drum up new business from national governments.

Some authors have attempted to develop models that specifically account for culture's place in the construction of national brands (e.g., O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Skinner & Kubacki, 2007). Others focus on national image more broadly, attempting to illustrate a process for managing changes in image (e.g., Fan, 2008). Regardless of their particular focus, the models are meant to advance an applied research agenda that is intended to inform, but not to question, the practice of brand management for nations. These instrumental approaches obscure the political dimensions of national governance and identity construction in order to render them suitable for co-optation by the logic of marketing.

Notwithstanding a multiplicity of definitions and models, authors in this category share three main assumptions about the current state of nationhood, all of which are firmly rooted in a marketing and management orientation. First, they assume the hegemony of global markets and global competition among nations. Second, within this context, national wellbeing is defined primarily in terms of securing an economic competitive advantage, and nation branding is expected to contribute to this by attracting investments, tourists, human capital, or trade. Third, based on the previous two assumptions, this approach asserts that a parallel between nations and brands is warranted and necessary.

⁹ This area, designated as Country of Origin (COO) or Product Country Image (PCI) marketing, predates academic discourse on nation branding and considers the image of nations as a variable in the marketing matrix of product promotion. I exclude COO/PCI studies from this discussion, focusing instead on materials that take the nation itself as the object of "augmentation" through branding. For more on COO/PCI and place/nation branding, see Papadopoulos (2004) and Dinnie (2004).

The axiomatic acceptance of global market competition and nations' need for competitive advantage is exemplified in the following passage: "The place competition is global, and all places whether located in Europe, Asia, Latin America or the USA, need to develop new capabilities to survive in the competition" (Rainisto, 2003, p. 12). The competition imperative is also expressed in relation to internal (national) and external (extra-national) "consumers":

As people, capital and companies have become more footloose, it is vital for places, in all scales, to provide in all these areas an environment capable not only to attract new activity and place-users but also, and perhaps more importantly, to keep existing ones satisfied with their place. (Kavaratzis, 2005, p. 329)

A critical reading of this quotation might note a disciplinary (in the Foucauldian sense) function of branding that aims to control people's satisfaction with their place, or (to turn the phrase) to keep them in their place.

The claim that "any nation can be viewed as a brand" (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 56) is also commonly asserted, although different authors offer various qualifications. Some argue that nations have always managed their images, although they may not have called this "branding," and hence, the current turn to branding is a logical continuation of a long-standing process (e.g., Anholt & Hildreth, 2004; Olins, 2002). A simplistic expression of this idea merely states that:

Every nation is a brand and most nations have had their brands made for them. The nation brand could have been developed deliberately or by default, formed from a myriad of different sources, such as word of mouth, education, mass media, travel, product purchases and dealings with its people. (Loo & Davies, 2006, p. 198)

Here, the equivalence of nations with brands is presented as an "organic" process that occurs with or without a nation's awareness. More sophisticated articulations argue that "the tasks in general consumer branding and national image management share much in common, but the manifestations in practice are quite different" (Wang, 2008, p. 18). Overall, technical-economic studies give little attention to historicizing national identities, except to make broad statements about the need for national brands to be "rooted in the nation's history, culture and policy" (ibid., p. 17).

Some questioning of the empirical evidence for the success of nation branding has begun, even from this camp. For instance, Fan points out that "the correlation between countries that have produced strong brands and those that are strong brands themselves is undeniable, yet the direction of causation is unclear" (2005, p. 9). Countering such concerns, Anholt (2008) emphasizes that nation branding should be seen as a long-term project that does not yield immediate results. He argues that there are two "schools" of nation branding—"communication-based" and "policy-based"—and that, while communication-based branding is more common, only policy-based branding produces real results (Anholt, personal interview October 13, 2005). As Anholt (2008) puts it, "if brand management is put into a silo of 'communications' or 'public affairs,' there is little it can do. But when it informs policymaking and

becomes implicit in the way the country is run, it can dramatically accelerate change" (p. 23). These expansionist policy aspirations are also important to the next category of studies to be discussed.

Political Approaches

A total of 66 publications were reviewed in this category (35% of all sources), which included: (a) academic studies from the fields of international relations (e.g., van Ham, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003, 2008), public relations (e.g., Kunczik, 1997; Wang, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Zhang, 2007), and international communication (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2006; El-Nawawy, 2006; Gilboa, 1998, 2001, 2008; Nisbet et al., 2004, Zaharna, 2004, 2008); and (b) writings by authors based in political think-tanks and research institutes (e.g., Hughes, 2007; Leonard, 1997, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Melissen, 2005). Studies were published in a variety of outlets, including books, policy reports, and journals, with no single outlet serving as a main forum in this category.

Writings in this category focus primarily on "public diplomacy"—a concept which precedes the notion of "nation branding," and which has been in circulation since at least the 1960s. Wang (2006b, p. 93) identifies four areas in the general literature on public diplomacy that concern: "(1) mass media and public diplomacy, (2) public diplomacy and its intersection with adjacent disciplines, (3) historical perspectives on public diplomacy, and (4) public diplomacy strategy and management." In an effort to categorize practices of mediated diplomacy, Gilboa (2001, p. 4) proposes three distinct models: public diplomacy, media diplomacy, and media-broker diplomacy. The purpose of this paper is not to review the evolution of thinking about public diplomacy as a whole.¹⁰ Rather, sources were selected based on whether they addressed the particular relationship between public diplomacy and nation branding.

The similarities and differences between conceptualizations of public diplomacy and nation branding, as well as their potential convergence or divergence in *praxis*, have drawn significant attention from scholars in this category (e.g., Anholt, 2006b; Szondi, 2008; Zaharna, 2008). There are two broad positions on the matter: one sees them as distinct but related to each other (e.g., Gilboa, 2008; Szondi, 2008); the second, more controversial position views them as essentially the same, suggesting a spill-over of the technical-economic approach into the political approach (e.g., Anholt, 2007; van Ham, 2001b). The first view is discussed in most detail by Szondi (2008), who comes up with four models of the way nation branding and public diplomacy intersect. He acknowledges, but ultimately rejects, a fifth model that views the two as equivalent.

The equivalence argument is made most directly by Anholt, who stated in an interview that the two terms refer to the same set of practices: "We [in the UK] call it public diplomacy because we want it to sound posh and we don't want anybody to think that this is more of the spin-obsessed Blair government trying to PR the country into prosperity" (personal interview, October 13, 2005). This position parallels Anholt's ideas of "policy-based" nation branding as an all-encompassing strategy of

¹⁰ For examples of comprehensive discussions on public diplomacy, see Gilboa (2008) or Snow and Taylor (2008).

national image management. Nevertheless, even Anholt's views have been qualified over time to allow for distinctions between public diplomacy and nation branding (e.g., Anholt, 2006b).

Similar shifts in opinion can be seen in the writings of other authors (e.g., Zaharna, 2004, 2008), suggesting that, as yet, there is no clear consensus on the relationship between public diplomacy and nation branding. However, it is clear from the overall reading of the literature that certain assumptions held by the technical-economic approach are also shared by authors in the political category. These include the claim that nation-states operate in a global competitive context (Wang, 2008), and that, by managing their reputations strategically, nations can advance their interests in the international arena (e.g., van Ham, 2001a, 2001b; Wang 2006b). In other words, both approaches share an instrumentalist orientation and see public diplomacy or nation branding as tools for gaining a competitive advantage, regardless of whether the processes are defined in economic or political terms.

There appears to be some distinction between U.S. and European perspectives, as well. U.S. authors often focus more closely on American public diplomacy, seeing it as a descendant of propaganda efforts during the two World Wars and the Cold War (e.g., Gilboa, 2001; Snow & Taylor, 2006; Wang, 2006b).¹¹ They commonly discuss the need for a "new paradigm" in U.S. public diplomacy that recognizes the new geopolitical realities after the end of the Cold War. Some authors identify U.S. involvement in the Middle East as a new challenge, so they discuss public diplomacy in relation to 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terrorism" (e.g., Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005; Maluf, 2005; Sheaffer & Shenhav, 2009). Many publications in this group present case studies of public diplomacy efforts (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2006; El-Nawawy, 2006; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2006; Kendrick & Fullerton, 2004; Plaisance, 2005; Zaharna, 2001; Zhang, 2007), offering critiques of their successes or failures. In terms of theoretical influences, these studies often refer to Nye's concept of "soft power" (Nye, 1990, 2004) and the idea of *noopolitik* (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1999), both of which emphasize the importance of a nation's reputation in international relations. As Gilboa (2001, p. 2) summarizes, "it is a nation or leader's image and control of information flows, and not just their military and economic power, that help determine their status in the international community."

In contrast to the U.S. view, European authors tend to describe public diplomacy as part of an overall strategy of national image or reputation management (e.g., Leonard, 2002a, 2002b; van Ham, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). This approach relies on theoretical arguments about the alleged decline of the nation-state in a globalizing world, and it is often articulated in relation to the historical realities of European integration (van Ham, 2001a, 2001b). For example, Leonard (2002b) sees public diplomacy as a strategic tool in influencing strategic decisions about national policies with respect to both domestic and international relations involving economic, political, and cultural affairs. This breadth of ambitions makes public diplomacy appear virtually equivalent to nation branding, as defined by Anholt (2003, 2008).

¹¹ A number of studies discuss public diplomacy during the Cold War (e.g., Alexandre, 1987; Critchlow, 1995; Dizard, 2004; Nelson, 1997), but my focus is on the period after the Cold War, because I want to compare nation branding and public diplomacy, and the term "nation branding" emerges only in the 1990s.

Peter van Ham (2001a, 2001b) draws on theories of post-modernity to argue that international relations are witnessing the rise of "brand-states." For him, nation branding signifies "a shift in political paradigms, a move from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence" (2001b, p. 4). He compares the power of "the brand" to a "surrogate religion" and argues that concerns over image and reputation are "increasingly shaping Europe's political landscape, affecting even NATO and the European Union" (2001b, p. 3). Van Ham's most provocative claim is that nation branding presents an alternative discourse of collective identity construction that is less dangerous than modern nationalism (2001b, p. 3). Using post-communist nations as his example, he claims that branding can channel national sentiments into an outward-oriented mode of collective identity, "gradually supplanting nationalism" (2001b, p. 3). This thesis seems questionable in the face of recent ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, for example.¹²

Van Ham's argument is pushed even further by Anholt, who claims that a worldview which sees places (and nations) as brands is superior to previous ideas about international relations:

The market-based view of the world, on which the theory of place branding is largely predicated, is an inherently peaceful and humanistic model for the relationships between nations. It is based on competition, consumer choice and consumer power; and these concepts are intimately linked to the freedom and power of the individual. For this reason, it seems far more likely to result in lasting world peace than a statecraft based on territory, economic power, ideologies, politics or religion. (2006a, p. 2)

In Anholt's formulation, nation branding offers a form of "post-political" politics (to borrow a term from Žižek), complete with its own moral imperative. Of course, a critically informed view of markets would point out that their existence and functioning is very much linked to such issues as "territory, economic power, ideologies, politics or religion"—a position that begins to emerge in studies from the cultural approach.

In sum, political approaches see nation branding, at worst, as an augmented form of propaganda, and at best, as a "post-ideological" form of reputation management for nations. The literature also reveals an increasing tendency for technical-economic perspectives to be integrated into discussions of international relations and the political actions of nation-states. Thus, the political implications of incorporating marketing and branding principles into national governance and international relations deserve greater scrutiny in future research.

¹² Several former Yugoslav nations, including Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia, have employed nation branding, but its ability to pacify nationalism in that region remains dubious.

Cultural Approaches

This is the smallest and most recent group of studies, and it includes a total of 14 sources (8% of the total). Thirteen of them situate themselves in the field of media and cultural studies (Aronczyk, 2007, 2008, 2009; Baker, 2008; Iordanova, 2007; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Kaneva & Popescu, 2008; Roy, 2007; Volcic, 2008; Widler, 2007), along with one in anthropology (Dzenovska, 2005).¹³ The majority of these studies appear in communication journals focusing on critical cultural research. Commonly employed methods in this category include critical textual and discourse analyses, ethnographic interviews and observations, and historical and political economic analyses.

What distinguishes these studies from technical-economic and political approaches is their grounding in critical theories of culture, communication, and society. They are not concerned with advancing a theory of nation branding that could inform its applied practice. Rather, they focus on elaborating a critique of nation branding's discourses and practices as they relate to national identity, culture, and governance. They see national identity as a dynamic struggle and negotiation, shaped by various local and extra-local agents, over collective and individual meanings. Put differently, they are interested in examining the implications of nation branding for the *politics of identity* and the ways in which "nation branding promotes a particular organization of power, knowledge and exchange in the articulation of collective identity" (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 46).¹⁴

A focus on historicity is central to cultural approaches to nation branding, and two key historical referents are the end of the Cold War and the subsequent rise of global neoliberalism. Jansen connects nation branding to a neoliberal agenda of global "market fundamentalism" and argues that, "if globalization brands the world and explains the new cosmological order, then nation branding mythologizes the component parts of the new order" (2008, p. 122). Aronczyk presents a theoretical discussion of the nation branding discourse and argues that it is "a logical extension of a particular way that national ... identity has long been construed and communicated in time and space" (2007, p. 107). She connects this discourse to constructivist ideas about nationhood, as elaborated by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, and of culture and communication, as theorized by James Carey. Aronczyk (2008) further explores the discourse of nation branding by studying British-based brand consultants and the ways they talk about their field of practice.

Continuing the focus on discourse, Widler (2007) draws on Foucault to discuss how nation branding limits broad participation by citizens and is contrary to the principles of diversity and plurality. Analyzing branding materials from five countries—Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, Liechtenstein, and South Africa—she concludes that "instead of fighting stereotypes [nation branding] reproduces and enhances

¹³ Other critical cultural studies on nation branding exist. However, at the time of writing, full texts were accessible only for the studies discussed here. This review only focuses on nation branding and does not include critical studies of other types of "place branding," such as city branding (e.g., Donald & Gammack, 2007; Donald, Kofman, & Kevin, 2009).

¹⁴ In that regard, designating this category as "cultural approaches" is somewhat of a misnomer, as this label obscures the fact that these studies understand the cultural as political.

them" (Widler, 2007, p. 148). Kaneva (2007b) proposes a similar thesis by examining a government-sponsored nation branding campaign in post-communist Bulgaria. Drawing on Barthes' semiotics and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, she excavates implicit myths within branding texts and illustrates how they serve as "the new propaganda vehicles of post-communist political elites."

An important theme that emerges from this set of studies relates to the ways in which nation branding limits the range of possible national identity narratives and shapes them for the benefit of external (Western) audiences. Roy (2007) describes nation branding as a neocolonial discourse that positions American culture as superior to others. Iordanova (2007) suggests that the long-term impact of externally oriented performances of national identity contribute to a sense of "split identity" among the members of a national community. Looking at the online branding efforts of former Yugoslav countries, Volcic (2008) finds a tendency to reproduce stereotypical representations for the purpose of selling them back to Western audiences. In a comparative study of Romania and Bulgaria, Kaneva and Popescu (2008) discover similar discursive conventions at play in tourism-oriented branding texts. Considering the reasons for these similarities, they argue that nation branding constrains post-communist national imaginaries within a logic of commodification that seeks to satisfy the desires of an external "tourist gaze." Baker (2009) focuses on Eurovision as a site for the performance of national identities and examines the types of brand narratives created by countries of the former Soviet Bloc. She also argues that these narratives veer between the reproduction of familiar stereotypes and self-exotization.

Most of the studies in this group insist on the importance of examining the political implications of nation branding. Dzenovska (2005) applies an anthropological approach to study the practices of public and private sector actors involved in the branding of Latvia. Kaneva (2007a) uses Bourdieu's field theory to analyze the practices of domestic and international stakeholders in the re-branding of Bulgaria. Jansen (2008) discusses individuals and institutions active in the production of "Brand Estonia." Iordanova (2007) describes the interested actions of various parties involved in the building of a Dracula theme park in Romania. All of these examples represent efforts to historicize and contextualize the study of nation branding, move beyond analyses of branding texts alone, and look at the practices of particular agents situated in historical place and time.

In short, cultural approaches attempt to formulate a counter-argument to the perspectives discussed in the previous two sections. They do so by questioning the imputed equivalence of global marketization and democratization, by connecting the discourse of nation branding to constructivist ideas of nationhood, and by historicizing the texts and practices of nation branding and exposing their linkage to relations of social power.

However, the existing critical work demonstrates several important limitations. First, many of the critical studies focus on single countries—an approach which is justified to the extent that the studies examine historical and cultural factors within concrete contexts. However, given similar geographic interests, collaborative research may allow researchers to combine data from multiple sites and produce richer insights. Second, the present body of critical studies tends to place greater emphasis on analyzing nation branding as a *discourse*. While some studies have examined its constituent practices as well, more work should be done in this area, bringing to bear materialist theories of social change and reproduction.

A Conceptual Map of Nation Branding Research

So far, I have outlined several key themes in nation branding research within three categories that remain somewhat tied to disciplinary boundaries. In this section, I propose a conceptual map that cuts across disciplines and organizes research approaches along two conceptual continua related to ontological assumptions (Figure 1). The vertical continuum refers to the underlying position of the research toward processes of marketization. I have labeled this continuum "consensus/dissensus," borrowing from Deetz, who argues that situating research along a consensus/dissensus dimension "draws attention to the relation of research to existing social orders" (1996, p. 197). This bears some similarity to the distinction between "administrative" and "critical" research described by Gitlin (1978), but Deetz's nomenclature refers to the positioning of research in relation to social power more broadly. For Deetz, consensus-oriented research naturalizes the present and works within a hegemonic frame, while dissensus-oriented research politicizes and historicizes the present and focuses on conflict. Thus, in my mapping, consensus-oriented research on nation branding naturalizes marketization, while dissensus-oriented research views it as problematic.

The horizontal continuum refers to the premises of the research about the nature of national identities. This continuum is labeled "essentialism/constructivism," and it refers to a study's theoretical assumptions about the nature of nationhood. Essentialist-oriented research sees national identities as more or less fixed objects to be discovered and represented, while constructivist-oriented research assumes that national identities are actively and continuously produced by various agents. It is important to reiterate that both vectors on the map should be viewed as dimensions that imply degrees of proximity to an ideal type. Thus, studies may be more or less invested in affirming the hegemony of markets, or in the (in)stability of national identities; in some cases, they may adopt contradictory assumptions.¹⁵

¹⁵ In light of this, I avoid giving specific studies as examples. My goal is to provide a tool for practicing self-reflexive research, rather than to "label" existing work.

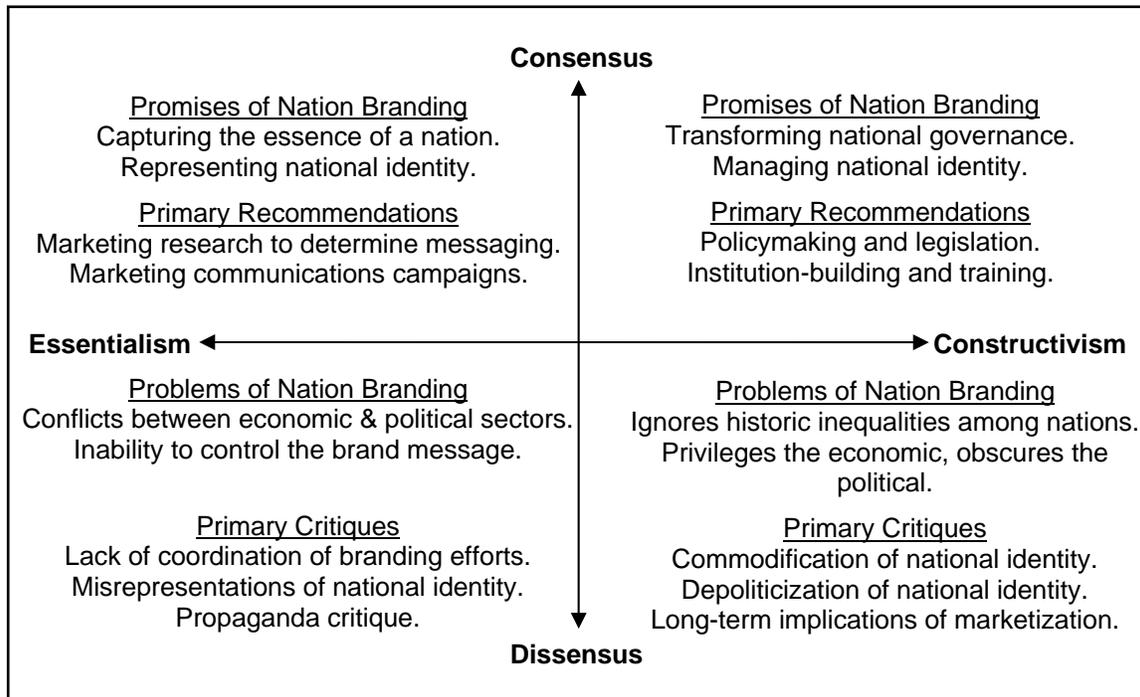


Figure 1. A Conceptual Map of Nation Branding Research.

The proposed map is intended as a reflexive exercise that could inform the practice of *research* on nation branding, not the practice of nation branding itself. It is an exploratory effort to demystify implicit assumptions within research orientations, and to relate them to larger theoretical frameworks about social power and national identity. The map can be used to evaluate the position of a study in relation to the “promises” and “problems” of nation branding. Research in the consensus-leaning upper half focuses on explaining and affirming the promises of nation branding, and its primary objective is to arrive at recommendations for the deployment of nation branding. By contrast, research in the dissensus-leaning lower half pays greater attention to implicit or explicit problems with the ideas, uses, and consequences of nation branding. This research is interested in critiquing the ideas and practices of nation branding, although there is wide variation in the scope and nature of critiques.

Research with a consensus/essentialist orientation views nation branding as a form of persuasion that employs the tools of marketing communication with the main purpose of “representing” national identities to specific audiences, or of disseminating the “best” information about a nation’s policies. Here, we would find studies from the so-called “communication” school of nation branding within the technical-economic and political approaches.

Research with a consensus/constructivist orientation views nation branding as a post-political, technocratic function of policymaking, governance, and statecraft. For these studies, the nation-state has been effectively transformed into a “brand-state,” and national identity must be “managed” in concerted

ways. This approach has been referred to as the "policy" school of nation branding, and it includes studies from the technical-economic or political camps.

Studies with a dissensus/essentialist orientation would include a somewhat paradoxical mix. More moderate technical-economic and political approaches recognize that market mechanisms do not function perfectly, and that they may even have anti-democratic tendencies. These studies tend to propose private-public partnerships as a way to both ameliorate these imperfections and minimize conflict between the economic and political sectors. They are also concerned with nation branding's ability to correctly portray the "essence" of a nation; they point out the difficulty of controlling a nation's brand message, contrasting it with the task of message control in product branding. On the other hand, this quadrant would also include crude propaganda critiques that view marketing and branding as tools of manipulation and distortion, useful for creating "false consciousness."

Finally, studies with dissensus/constructivist orientations are concerned with how nation branding is implicated in relations of social power, and they seek to examine the strategies and practices of historically-situated agents associated with nation branding. These studies problematize the tendency of nation branding to depoliticize and obscure the struggles and negotiations through which national identities are produced. They are also concerned with the commodification of national identities that nation branding implies. We find current research from critical media and cultural studies in this category, which remains the smallest in the body of nation branding research.

Toward An Agenda for Future Critical Inquiry

This review has illustrated that the landscape of research on nation branding is uneven, and that it leaves a number of significant gaps. Importantly, critical cultural voices in the debate on nation branding remain in the minority. Thus, critical scholarship from a media and cultural studies perspective stands to make meaningful contributions, and to move the debate on nation branding beyond applications, into a discussion of implications. Critical scholarship should seek to explain the reasons why nation branding has been so appealing to national and transnational elites around the world, and it should analyze the alliances between economic and political elites. It should document and theorize the ways in which nation branding discourses and practices enter and alter the construction of nationhood and governance. Finally, it should consider the cultural and political implications of treating nations as brands. In this final section of the paper, I propose three lines for future critique that build on existing studies from the cultural approach category and expand on their critical agenda. The proposed agenda is, no doubt, limited in scope, as it is openly committed to promoting critical theoretical approaches. It is not concerned with avenues for expanding research from the technical-economic or political approaches.

First, some critical studies examine nation branding's attempts to commodify the physical and symbolic dimensions of place and space, as well as the ideas of collective identity and solidarity associated with nationhood. In this respect, nation branding can also be analyzed as an *ideological project* which reinterprets nationhood in relation to neoliberalism and, in the process, invents a form of "commercial nationalism" (Volcic, 2009). As Jansen (2008, p. 122) points out: "Branding not only explains nations to the world but also reinterprets national identity in market terms and provides new narratives for domestic

consumption.” There are important political and cultural consequences to this reinterpretation which remain understudied at this point.

Second, future critiques should extend beyond the ideological claims of nation branding to examine the *political economy of its practices*. Here, research would look at the particular agents, at both the national and transnational levels (e.g., branding consultancies, national agencies, local government elites, and global institutions), that are involved in perpetuating nation branding projects and the specific benefits they stand to gain. This is an important direction for analysis, because nation branding has now moved beyond the realm of ideas, into the realm of influencing national policies. It is “supported by public policy and funding, and encouraged by international development and trade organizations including the United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization and others” (ibid., p. 121).

In analyzing the practices of nation branding, studies should focus on the types of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic) that are being produced and exchanged within the local and global fields of nation branding. In this task, the work of Pierre Bourdieu can be particularly relevant, as it offers a theory of the “political economy of practices and symbolic power that includes a theory of symbolic interests, a theory of capital, and a theory of symbolic violence and symbolic capital” (Swartz, 1997, p. 8). Bourdieu’s theory would allow for a dynamic examination of nation branding as a field of practice.

Finally, existing critical studies of nation branding have generally ignored the intersections of national identities with other modes of collectivity and identification. The narratives of nation branding certainly constrain national identities within a commercial logic, but they do so in gendered and racialized ways, as well. In other words, critical scholarship cannot forget that national communities are hardly homogeneous, and hence, their representations in branding narratives have consequences for sub-national and transnational identities as well. This line of critique is currently in the blind spot of critical work on nation branding. In sum, the present conceptual review is intended to stimulate greater interest toward nation branding among critical communication scholars, and to encourage further theoretical and empirical engagements with this phenomenon.

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