

Corporationalism: subjective creation of national identities and nation-brands

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Abstract

In today's globalisation, countries compete with each other in the same manner as the multinational corporations do. Recently, the term 'nation-brand' has appeared, together with a nation-brand index that tracks how a particular country's reputation responds to activities, promotions and events at home and around the world.ⁱ Countries, like corporations and products have brand values and reputations. These 'branding' factors are analogous to identity formulation on a national and personal level. For example, visual motifs and icons have a dramatic impact on how successful that country is in attracting tourists, foreign investment, capital, talent, cultural relations and political allies. Such manifestations of identity are vital to the marketing of products and services abroad. In order for a country to develop itself as a competitive nation-brand, it needs to have a strong national identity. The paper will argue that in a same manner as the corporate identity, the national identity serves as a foundation on which the 'brand image' is built. The brand's image is a representation of the brand's culture (in this case the nation's culture); therefore, how the image is formed and what kind of form it takes should be of concern to the government, the industry and the local communities. For that reason, strong interdisciplinary partnerships need to be established, as only then the communication of the country's image can bring success in the above-mentioned areas of interest.ⁱⁱ

A historiographic and interpretative methodology will be used to present the analogous case of corporate and national identity formulation. The current political situation in Macedonia will be used to exemplify the argument. This paper will address the subtheme 'Identities/Subjectivities' for the conference and will engage with activities in the boundaries of corporational-ism and nationalism.

Keywords: Nation-brand, national identity, branding, brand image, brand communication, propaganda, symbolism, subjectivity, identity, post-colonial, post-communist, Eastern Europe, Balkans, Macedonia

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Introduction

In many cases the problems of creating a meaningful national identity are almost overwhelming, especially for the new countries whose borders have been carved without any regard for tribalⁱⁱⁱ, cultural or even geographical factors, but merely as a political compromise between two or more major colonial powers. Most of the new leaders of the 'new nations'^{iv} understand that a nation is defined more in psychological and emotional terms, than in tangible terms and characteristics. Moreover, such 'new leaders' have made subjective attempts to develop new, or bring back long forgotten identities that will create a feeling of distinctiveness, pride, and unity because they want to show the outside world that they are independent. The past decade represents a turning point in the methods used by various nations to manage their reputations. In increasing numbers, governments now hire public relations firms and apply brand management theories, which were formerly the domain of corporate communications departments within the business sectors. And as a result 'nation branding' has become an application of corporate branding techniques to countries.^v

Design, branding and identity

Design and brand communication strategies that create specific perceptions of a particular identity within a desired audience are similarly applicable to corporate organizations, small businesses or individuals, as well as for nations, regions or cities and even religious institutions.^{vi} In all cases, the identity serves as a foundation on which a 'brand image' is built. A positive or a favourable brand image can be a valuable asset for any organization, and as a result, corporations and countries are equally concerned with their identities and images and they both try to shape them or improve them if a need arises.^{vii} The reason why similar communication strategies and especially propaganda can be applicable to what it might seem as vastly diverse concepts, could be attributed to the fact that people are primarily guided by their emotions and they will behave or react in the same manner to the same or similar stimuli.^{viii} Therefore, for a brand to be successful, it needs to be able to grasp the complexities of human behaviour and acknowledge the aspirations of

particular groups of people that the brand wishes to address and to convey that knowledge into the brand's identity. The visibility and the symbolic association of the identity are key aspects of the brand's 'success'.^{ix} In any case, the fundamental idea of the identity lies in that everything, which is related to the brand, needs to be consistent in purpose, performance and appearance. Such consistency always derives from the vision or the central idea and is almost always the base from which a successful identity program can be developed.^x

The developments of brand identities embraces a complex network of managing disciplines such as organizational behaviour, marketing, communication and research, and always design in its various relevant forms. However, although design is important, it does not always enjoys the primary or the central position in this process, but it is usually the primary means by which the identity is presented.^{xi} For example, in the context of a nation, the flag, coat-of-arms, coins and bills, postage stamps, and military and police uniforms are only some of the visual (corporate) identity elements that require design expertise. Other obvious and recognisable ways in which national identity is performed is during national ceremonies, when the nation and its symbolic attributes are elevated in public display. In highly choreographed performances during those events, the soldiers, police, marching bands, commanders of horses, government ministers, honorary officials, members of royalty (if applicable) and functionaries, function as a cast of actors that carry out specified and pre-ordered manoeuvres. Such events are a display of legitimacy, power, military might, legal process and the institutional apparatus of the nation-state. Ritualised ceremonies that aim to depict the historical grandeur of the ancient empires re-emerged during the era of nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism (especially between 1870 and 1914), along with the erection of national monuments, the establishment of museums, collections of folklore and canons of national literature, instalment of public holydays, and the 'scientific' classification of cultures and races. With a use of carefully designed and orchestrated 'occasions', specific costumes, a rigid order of events, pseudo-antique carriages and artefacts associated with ancient rituals, such proceedings symbolize timelessness. This action inculcates an aura of grounding the nation in history by implying continuity with the past, symbolising community and legitimising the current state authority. Such 'invented traditions'^{xii} seem to be devised by almost all nations. Today,

celebrations such as an independence day, presidential inaugurations, flag-raising, anthem singing, religious occasions, funerals of important figures, military parades, and 'archaic customs' are common sights across the world, and they tend to follow the same ritual year upon year, inscribing history on space.^{xiii}

World leaders throughout the history whether intuitively or consciously, have understood that an effective visual identity not only makes the nation recognizable, but that it also serves as the first level of communication between the nation and its people.^{xiv} Many historical key figures, from Alexander the Great and Caesar to Napoleon and Hitler understood only too well that national identity is not a static phenomena and consequentially identity could be pre-defined, managed, designed and communicated in such a way as to create a specific image.

Subjectivity of identity

Human beings, both as individuals and as collectives, are identity-seeking animals, and the idea of identity will not wither away. If old identities disappear or recede, new ones will be invented and constructed.^{xv} In line with that national identity represents more than a set of ideas to which individuals and groups can relate and by which one country can distinguish itself from another country. Jaffe and Nebenzahl argue that a nation's image and identity is comprised of the subjective perceptions that the people have about those nations and that the beliefs, ideas and impressions are mental images that may or may not be congruent with the objectively defined attributes of the nation.^{xvi} They also argue that the object does not have to exist in order for a person to form a mental image of it.^{xvii} This is important to note, since national and corporate images are similarly defined as mental pictures that exist in people's minds. In this sense it is the overriding influence of the mind image that motivates human behaviour as opposed to what may be constructed to be the 'real' or 'true' attributes of the object (nation/ corporation/ person) in question. Therefore, the identity design is significantly dependent on knowing what strong mind images exist and how these can be translated into an image that subsequently becomes a brand. And that is what motivates human behaviour, rather than the 'true' attributes of the object in question.

Social scientists in general, also agree that a nation is defined more in psychological and emotional terms, rather than with tangible characteristics. For example, Anthony Smith has listed six basic characteristics that constitute the identity of an ethnic collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity.^{xviii} T. K. Oommen argues that this characterization equally fits the concept of a nation.^{xix} This phenomenon can be observed in the formation of the new post-colonial Asian and African countries, as well as the post-communist Eastern European countries that felt the need to invest in new names, new flags, new rituals, and new traditions. Sometimes looking deep in the past, and sometimes trying to create something completely new, they commemorate their new identities with large-scale stage production representing historical or legendary events, especially local ones, in scenes or representations in which dramatic interests are less important than the spectacle itself. Many countries have invested in erecting national monuments, ranging from large-scale statues to power stations, steel mills and dams, whose symbolic value is infinitely more significant than their economic good. The change of country names like Rhodesia to Zimbabwe and capital cities from Salisbury to Harare is based on symbolism. Robert Mugabe and his colleagues were inventing new traditions in order to create new nation-states and to reinstate the pride of an African past that had been taken by the colonisers. What those leaders had in common with every other leader of every new regime in every new country was the intuitive understanding that people need to belong. People need to know where they stand, they need their loyalties underlined and emphasized, and as Wally Olins says, they need the 'magic of symbolism'.^{xx} Such constructions of identity are also applicable to long established nations, and are still implemented today. Perhaps the strongest example of this in the twentieth century world history is Hitler's creation of Nazi Germany. His extensive use of symbolism was evident in every segment of his governance, which was not at all different from the way in which Lenin and Stalin used symbolism in the Soviet Union, the British Royal family in the United Kingdom and throughout their colonies, Napoleon Bonaparte in his Empire, and further back in history when Caesar used it in the Roman Empire and Alexander in the Macedonian Empire.

Image management: the case of the Republic of Macedonia

During my PhD fieldwork on national identity formation and promotion in Eastern Europe from September 2007 till April 2008, I have established a close communication and collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Macedonia for the purpose of developing a nation-branding case study. In regards to my research I had frequent meetings and interviews with government officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agency for Foreign Investments and the Ministry of Culture, as well as with experts on Political Science and National Security^{xxi} from the state university where we discussed in detail the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and the threats regarding the Macedonian national identity and the Government's efforts to promote the country as a nation-brand to the world. One of the key issues that we addressed was the question of the country's image.

For the majority of people, including many governments, the concept of a nation as a brand is difficult to grasp, and therefore they do not invest in the development of their identity, which is a precondition for a positive image. Regardless of that, most nations, with some exceptions, already have an image in the eyes of the world, whether is it positive, negative or mixed.^{xxii} Furthermore, the image of a less known country may be influenced by the country's category in which the country is classified. For example, a developing African country has a different image to a developed Asian country. In the European context, a Balkan country is considered to have a very different image to a Mediterranean country, or an Eastern European country, although some countries can belong to more than one category – and Macedonia is an example of a country which simultaneously belongs to all three categories of Balkan, Mediterranean and Eastern European.^{xxiii}

When a nation belongs to more than one category, what this country will do to position itself is crucial. If it fails to take a stand then other countries will position it and this may not be in its best interests. For example, when it comes to the image of the Balkans in the European perspective, my careful analysis of the foreign policy of the European Union

towards the Balkans has brought me to the conclusion that the EU clearly has a need to maintain continuous negative perceptions regarding this region in the eyes of their constituency. In the same manner as the Americans were fostering the threat of the Soviet Union in the past, and the threat of global terrorism today in order to unite their people, the EU feels the need to have a threat as well, and preferably a threat that can be easily controlled – such as the Balkan countries today. And this is not an unusual political decision. The literature on propaganda is specific on this matter – an ‘enemy’ must exist, even if one needs to be invented, regardless of whether we are discussing this matter in terms of a nation or a corporation. Also the enemy needs to exemplify an exact opposite of the respected party. This is because the social construction of the enemy fulfils several functions; the main one being that the enemy serves as a reference to which the opposite side can be compared. In the case of the EU, the Balkan region serves as a constant reference for comparison. Unfortunately, this region is usually perceived as the European version of the Middle East and the EU has demonstrated numerous times that it prefers to keep it as such (although their official policy claims differently). To them, this clarifies their values or where they stand, and it gives them a sense of selfhood. Another reason for an enemy is that only by reference to enemies people become united, which means that the greater the internal discord within the societies the more powerful the need for enemies becomes.^{xxiv} Therefore, it is not unusual why some countries decided to promote their ‘Mediterranean’ image rather than their ‘Balkan’ image, like in the case of Greece and Croatia, and recently Slovenia.^{xxv} From this region, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has been unable to identify that the idea of the ‘Balkan country’ could endanger the country’s image, and they continue to promote Macedonia as a Balkan country. However, in several interviews with various Government representatives and in my report to the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I recommended that they should start adopting a ‘Mediterranean’ image, rather than fostering ‘Balkan’ image.^{xxvi} Although Republic of Macedonia is a landlocked country by its borders, from a historical and geographical point of view, as well as the climatic zone, the country does belong to the Mediterranean region, which is more than enough for a sound promotional campaign.

Nation branding involves a much larger number of stakeholders and interests. For example, national, regional and local authorities as well as business organizations,

manufacturers, tourist agencies, economic sectors ranging from high-tech to agriculture, the public at large, and even individuals should be treated as stakeholders. The ultimate goal in such a campaign is to integrate a variety of different interests into a joint branding process. In order for the campaign to be successful, a core message needs to be developed that can be used by different industrial sectors. They all need to actively participate to form a common set of values that will serve as a basis for the brand. Such a type of campaign is called 'umbrella branding'. Therkelsen and Halkier suggest that applying umbrella-nation branding gives a consistently projected, unified national image to the external world, thus being superior to a fragmented and uncoordinated image. However, the danger of this campaign is that if one set of interests is over emphasized to the detriment of another set of interests, an important stakeholder might be alienated. For example, tourist and potential investors have different interests and needs. It is also worth mentioning, that practically all of the emerging economies are trying to position themselves as being modern, innovative and technologically advanced.^{xxvii} Jaffe and Nebenzahl suggest that in today's competitive global village, it takes more than just a slogan about being innovative. Advertising and public relations campaigns can only support 'real' improvements in products and services. By themselves, they are insufficient to bring a significant change in attitudes. Along with the campaigns, a support systems needs to be designed and introduced that will make sure that the promoted improvements are genuine.^{xxviii} Having that in mind, Macedonia will need to continuously invest in the development of the logistics structure necessary for establishing and managing a business.

Conclusion

Think of a country as a highly diversified multinational corporation. This corporation has international trade agreements, seeks international partners to grow its businesses, depends on its reputation for business development, and it knows that in order to develop more it has to attract the best talent necessary for success. As with any other corporation, it strives to secure excellent financial ratings, industry recognition and respect in the marketplace. This corporation offers a very diverse range of products and services, as well as a unique set of opportunities for business development. Its core international agenda is to establish a good reputation in the world, to export its products and services globally, and to attract investments.

In the same manner as multinational corporations, all nations without exception need strong identities. Countries, in the same way as corporations build their image around their identity, and this image can be shaped and improved if needed. Some countries are seen as generous and progressive, others as repressive. Some countries are renowned for their engineering competence (like Germany or Switzerland), while others for design skills (like Italy and France). Whatever these views are, they define the perception of the nation-state as a nation-brand. Positive brand image can be a valuable asset when addressing one's audience or stakeholders and such perceptions can partly determine the 'brand's/country's marketability', whether in the form of export, establishment of subsidiary, tourism, or encouragement of cooperative alliance between business firms. A nation's 'image' is a representation of national culture, and a successful management and communication of that image can determine country's success in every area of interest.^{xxix}

Endnotes

ⁱ See: Anholt Nation Brand Index, <http://www.nationbrandindex.com> (Accessed on July 20, 2007)

ⁱⁱ Nicolas Papadopoulos, Louse A. Heslop, Françoise Graby and George Avlonitis, "Does 'country-of-origin' matter? Some findings from a cross-cultural study of consumer views about foreign products". *Working Paper Series*, No. 87-107, (Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute, 1987)

ⁱⁱⁱ Here I have in mind the conflicts that have arisen between the Shiite's and Sunni's in Iraq or the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Rwanda.

^{iv} Under 'new nations' we can consider the countries that have gained independence and sovereignty in the post-colonial and post-communist era such as: Bangladesh which was formerly West Pakistan and Pakistan itself, which was part of India; the former Yugoslavian countries such as Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Serbian principalities of Montenegro and Kosovo that gained independence as well; Czech Republic and Slovakia which were formerly one country under the name of Czechoslovakia; East Timor, formerly a 16th century Portuguese colony and later a part of Indonesia; Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and other which were a part of the USSR; and basically all of the African and Asian post-colonial states.

^v Lee Hudson Teslik, 'Nation branding explained,' Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/14776/> (accessed on May, 02, 2008)

^{vi} Wally Olins, *The corporate personality: an inquiry into the nature of corporate identity*, (Design Council, 1978). Wally Olins is considered to be one of the most experienced practitioners of corporate identity, branding and brand communication. He has advised many of the world's leading organizations on identity, branding, communication and related matters, as well as a number of cities and countries on national brand image including London, Northern Ireland, Poland, Mauritius, Portugal, Vietnam and others. He has published a number of books on these topics and he has taught at many Business Schools including London Business School, Said Business School at Oxford, Lancaster University, Imperial College Business School and Copenhagen Business School. What in this case makes him different from the many social scientists and philosophers that write on the subject of identity is his extensive experience in the field, especially from the perspective of design - which makes him highly relevant to my thesis.

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- vii Wally Olins, *Corporate identity: making business strategy visible through design*, (Thames and Hudson, 1990)
- viii Dr. Carl G. Jung argues that in the same manner as instincts, the 'collective thought patterns' of the human mind are innate and inherited. According to him, 'they function, in more or less the same way in all of us', and such thought patterns of emotional manifestations are recognizably the same all over the world. See: Carl G. Jung et al., *Man and his symbols* (London: Aldus Books, 1964), 64-65.
- ix James Pilditch, "Design Management and Corporate Policy" in *Design as corporate strategy*, ed. Ritta Aitonurmi, 31-33, (University of Industrial Arts Helsinki, 1990)
- x Wolff Olins, *The new guide to identity*, (London: Design Council, 1995)
- xi Wally Olins, *International corporate identity 1*, (Laurence King Publishing, 1995)
- xii Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The invention of tradition*, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- xiii Tim Edensor, *National identity, popular culture and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 72-73.
- xiv Wally Olins, "Creating an identity programme: the first stage" in *Corporate Identity: making business strategy visible through design*, 147-163, (Thames and Hudson, 1990)
- xv T. K. Oommen, *Citizenship and national identity: from colonialism to globalism* (Sage Publications, 1997), 35.
- xvi Eugene D. Jaffe and Israel D. Nebenzahl, "Introduction: image, images and imagination" in *National image & competitive advantage: the theory and practice of place branding (Second Edition)*, 14, (Copenhagen Business School Press, 2006)
- xvii Eugene D. Jaffe and Israel D. Nebenzahl, "Introduction: image, images and imagination" in *National image & competitive advantage: the theory and practice of place branding (Second Edition)*, 13-25, (Copenhagen Business School Press, 2006)
- xviii Anthony D. Smith, *The ethnic revival in the modern world*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

^{xix} T. K. Oommen, *Citizenship and national identity: from colonialism to globalism* (Sage Publications, 1997), 20.

^{xx} Wally Olins, *Corporate identity: making business strategy visible through design*, (Thames and Hudson, 1990)

^{xxi} As a serious determinant of the human behaviour a strong national identity can produce a continuous mobilizing force, and as such it either strengthens the state, or deeply endangers it if mismanaged. Therefore, the national identity can also be viewed as a central component, which contributes to the national security. See: Lidija Georgieva, "Идеја за државата (Idea of the state; summary in Macedonian)" in *Творење на мирот: мирот, безбедноста и конфликтите по Студената Војна (Creation of peace: peace, security and conflicts after the Cold War; summary in Macedonian)*, 79, (Skopje: Faculty of Philosophy, 2007)

^{xxii} Exceptions are countries for which the majority of the world's population has no, or limited knowledge of - which can hardly be considered as a positive thing - but even in this case, with the help of spin doctors this can be turned into advantage since a country that has no familiar or recognizable image has no negative image as well. In such cases, this can even be a good thing as image can be created. If the image of the country in general is unknown, a well-built propaganda campaign can assist with the creation of positive image and development of a nation-brand. However, that takes substantial amounts of money, time, and significant coordination between various governmental departments and numerous stakeholders.

^{xxiii} Since recently there are attempts to fit these countries in a new category to which they refer to as South-East Europe, as an attempt to minimize the negative associations that the world (in particularly EU) has with the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

^{xxiv} Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and propaganda* (Manchester University Press, 2004), 125.

^{xxv} Slovenia is an exception in this group as it does not have a Balkan image, but it wants to break away from the Eastern European image which is reinforced to the country due to the unfortunate similarity of the country's name with the former Eastern bloc country - Slovakia.

^{xxvi} The recommendation that I have given to the Macedonian Government has been based after my examination of definitions of identity and image, and the necessity for a relatively 'unknown nation-brand' to be associated with a well-known and respected category. Examples say that it is very likely for an unknown brand to be ignored in the marketplace, since it might require more effort on the part of the 'consumers' than brands that appear to be more familiar. This problem can be minimized if the unknown brand is associated with a well-known category. See: Eugene D. Jaffe and Israel D. Nebenzahl, *National image & competitive advantage: the theory and practice of place branding (Second Edition)*, (Copenhagen Business School Press, 2006)

^{xxvii} Anette Therkelsen and Henrik Halkier; *Umbrella place branding: a study of friendly exoticism and exotic friendliness in coordinated national tourism and investment promotion*, (Discussion Paper No. 26; Aalborg University, 2004)

^{xxviii} Eugene D. Jaffe and Israel D. Nebenzahl, *National image & competitive advantage: the theory and practice of place branding (Second Edition)*, (Copenhagen Business School Press, 2006)

^{xxix} Nicolas Papadopoulos, Louse A. Heslop, Françoise Graby and George Avlonitis, "Does 'country-of-origin' matter? Some findings from a cross-cultural study of consumer views about foreign products". *Working Paper Series*, no. 87-107, (Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute, 1987)