

BRINGING THE NATION TO THE NATION BRANDING DEBATE: EVIDENCE FROM UKRAINE

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INTRODUCTION

The emergent stream of research on branding nations, places and destinations has been growing along with a plethora of definitions, terminology and conceptualizations (Gnoth 2002; Papadopoulos 2004; Kavaratzis 2005; Hanna and Rowley 2008; Fan 2009). By place branding we refer to an articulated set of marketing actions that present the following traits: They are i) different in terms of unit of analysis, ranging from the city to a whole country; ii) may involve multiple stakeholders including local and national governments, citizens, companies, and the media; and, iii) cover a large array of objectives, such as enhancing exports, protecting local/national production, attracting tourists and foreign investors, facilitating international relations, and more (Papadopoulos 2004). While established contributions on “country-of-origin” mostly hold companies’ perspective and deploy the place to improve the attractiveness of other products designed, assembled and/or produced in these places, place branding literature fosters the perspective of governments and individuals (both tourists and local dwellers) and considers the place as the main object of market exchange (Anholt 2004, 2011). Therefore, place branding constitutes an excellent theoretical context by which to improve understanding of the arenas in which markets consume others’ identity, here represented by the identity of a place.

In this paper, we discuss the nation branding in emerging markets with a specific focus on Ukraine, a post-communist nation that has been engaged in nation branding efforts since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. We have undertaken a two-phase project in which the first phase focused on thoroughly collecting, reviewing and analyzing visual data in the form of marketing promotion campaigns pertaining to Ukrainian place branding. We believe that our findings from the first phase have implications to the nation branding literature in that they contribute by i) bringing evidence from the Ukrainian place branding efforts, and ii) raising pertinent questions to further advance the field of study.

BACKGROUND

Nation branding literature has undergone two major transformations. First, it shifted from destination branding, which envisioned initiatives mainly meant to target tourists, toward city and nation branding (Hanna and Rowley 2008). This shift called to action more articulated types of audiences (companies, foreign governments and organizations, the media, etc.). Second, it pushed past the simple idea of place promotion in favor of a more comprehensive idea of incorporating an increasing number of marketing perspectives and tools (Kavaratzis 2005). As a consequence, this stream of research has now opened the way to works addressing the stakeholders so far left untended, the local citizens in particular.

In contrast to prior literature, this work aims at raising new conceptual questions while focusing its attention on a missing category of stakeholders: the citizens of the place engaged in nation branding initiatives. We argue that nation branding leverages upon the history, traditions, culture, productivity, and reception skills of place dwellers who act as citizens, service suppliers, employees, endorsers, and even ‘characters’ in the commercialization and theatrical representation of the place in favor of tourists, foreign investors and organizations, and foreign employers. In a way, the collective identity of these groups is crafted by nation branding actions and later marketed to a varied array of prospect targets with whom these people have to interact, exchange, and negotiate. In detail, we aim at:

- i) Unpacking the processes of construction of nation branding (How and by whom are the constituents of nation branding selected?),
- ii) Interpreting the processes of place consumption by the intended targets (How do tourists or other targets appropriate place elements conveyed to them by place branding actions?),
- iii) Observing the role of and the affect on local citizens of nation branding activities (Which role do they play? How does the selling out of their collective identity to foreigners activate their individual identity?).

The majority of existing place branding research is either managerial or concept-driven. Managerial projects are likely to explore the application of marketing logics to improve the economic development of the place they promote (Anholt 2004; 2011; Aronczyk 2008; Fan 2009, 2006; Giannopoulos et al. 2011; Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2001; Kotler and Gertner 2002). Consequently, these studies primarily deal with governments, companies, and tour operators. Projects that are conceptual in nature explore the connections between place branding, city branding and nation branding (Hanna and Rowley 2008); the boundary between place branding and country-of-origin (Papadopoulos 2004); the separation between nation brand and nation branding (Fan 2006); or the difference between corporate and place branding (Kavaratzis 2005). As such, they mostly benefit scholars and consultants in the field.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

As discussed by Kaneva (2012:5), post-communist countries offer a proper perspective to study “the changes in the structure and relations of power, identification, and mediation that were enabled by the end of the communism”. From an empirical point of view, this paper analyzes an emergent, post-communist economy, that of Ukraine. With a population of around 45 million, Ukraine maintains an increasingly close relationship with the European Union (EEAS 2012).

While consistent with the AMS’ call for papers on the new world economy, Ukraine has been selected for many additional reasons. After achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has been transitioning from communism to capitalism and from a central economy to a market economy. Almost seven decades of Soviet hegemony and influence are slowly being replaced in an attempt to construct a Ukrainian national identity (Nordberg and Kuzio 1998). This extended time-horizon allows a longitudinal exploration of Ukrainian nation branding campaigns. These campaigns include multiple stakeholders (some were started by local governments, others originated from the people living in the country) and have various focuses (political, touristic, sports, etc.). Lastly, the upcoming UEFA Euro 2012 European Football Championship will direct attention of numerous and distinct stakeholders to Ukrainian nation branding efforts, thus stimulating stakeholders’ reflexivity on the topic and making our empirical field particularly promising in terms of insights.

The process of data collection for this research includes both secondary and primary data collection techniques. We have analyzed Ukrainian nation branding materials, including short promotional videos from Youtube and Ukraine’s official EURO 2012 site (Ukraine2012.gov.ua), logos, press articles and press releases from the official EURO 2012 web site (uefa.com). We also monitored various European web sites, blogs, forums and fan sites such as poland2012.net, eurocup.org, euro2012.nu, and euro-2012-blog.com. In the second phase of the data collection we plan to supplement our analysis of the mentioned materials by means of semi-structured, in-depth and phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al. 1989) and ethnographic techniques (Kozinets 2010) complemented by relevant field observation where possible. Informants will be selected according to principles of variety and contrast (Miles and Huberman 1984) among Ukrainian citizens and UEFA EURO 2012 visitors. Data analysis will follow established procedures of interpretive research (Spiggle 1994). In particular, secondary data has already been analyzed according to the principles of visual analysis (Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994). This involved starting with a description of the visual elements in terms of subject matter, form and style and interpreting them in relation to our research questions. We specifically focused on the discourses and ideologies portrayed in the promotional materials.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings from our visual data analysis suggest several key outcomes. First, Ukraine has conveyed to its audiences a plethora of visual information that is rather diverse in nature. Its nation brand appears to be a collection of folkloristic, architectural, natural, economic, urban, and social elements. The promo-videos are focused on the visual appeal of clean cities, happy people, a healthy life style, elegant architectural landmarks, and beautiful nature accompanied by contemporary music themes with themes from Ukrainian folklore. They have created catchy slogans such as “Switch on Ukraine” or “High Time to See Ukraine,” which were created to show the attractiveness of Ukraine, primarily to foreign tourists.

A clinical analysis of Ukrainian overwhelming nation branding strategy shows that it contrasts with established principles of communication and branding. Both branding and communication literatures have long recommended to reduce the number of information conveyed to the target audience(s) in order to increase the returns of the marketing efforts. In branding, clear positioning justifies such an information pruning (Keller 1998), while in communication audience’s limited cognitive capabilities inform the choice of communicating less to communicate better (Aaker et al. 1992). However, Ukrainian decision to include multiple visual and informative stimuli can also be read in light of the experience marketing literature, which would suggest stimulating all the consumer’s senses (Schmitt 1999) and thus multiplying the levels of experience

performance. Moving from this consideration, the question that this preliminary finding brings forth is whether nation branding actions should comply with guidelines applied in communication and branding theories or with those indicated by theories of 'experience marketing'. In different words, our research has led us to ask: Are nation brands closer to corporate brands and persuasive commercials or are they more like consumer experiences? This question should provide the underpinning of the second phase of our research.

The second finding indicates that Ukraine has been building its new identity by stating what it is not - a communist country – instead of conveying a clear, assertive, and distinctive image of what it is. In this regard, we aim to explore how tourists and citizens make sense of an identity that is constructed by means of rejection and which does not impart key, distinctive traits. Looking closely to its nation branding actions, it becomes evident how these campaigns desperately try to reassure both local and international stakeholders. This finding is supported by other recent studies on nation branding in post-communist countries. For example, Kaneva and Popescu (2011) show that nation branding has been used also to attenuate the turmoil in Romania and Bulgaria after the collapse of communism. Kemming and Sandikci (2007) notice that also Turkey has been relentlessly trying to reassure European leaders to facilitate its process of EU application. Ostapenko (2010) states that Russia is using nation branding to re-position the country's negative image globally through the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games. Another former USSR country, Moldova has also directed its nation branding efforts to increase tourism and attract foreign investors (Tonu 2011). Anholt (2007) offers an interesting explanation for post-communist nations' need for distancing themselves from their political past. He argues that communism constituted the end of national identity, since it interrupted the export of these countries' national products while impeding the free circulation of people. However, if these contributions confirm that for post-communist nations reassurance is apparently more relevant than assertiveness and also provide explanations for that, they do not help us understand the implications both for tourists and local citizens of such a distancing approach to nation branding. How do tourists and citizens make sense and emotionally elaborate an identity that is constructed by means of rejections and which does not hold key, distinctive, positive traits?

Finally, Ukraine seems to elaborate part of its nation branding campaign around the foundational notion of 'customer orientation.' A current campaign has the slogan "Ukraine. All about U". This statement could constitute an innocent, welcoming approach to attract tourists. However, if we combine the customer/tourist-centric evidence with our second finding, the implication could be that tourists are given additional power to manipulate Ukrainian identity. How do local citizens interpret the power attributed by incoming visitors in providing meanings to their nation? Can we detect forms of resistance or strategies of negotiation?

This research aims to provide a more specific contribution to the literature on place branding and nation branding than what is available currently. First, by highlighting the role of citizens, it focuses on an element that has almost remained at the margins of the literature. Second, the preliminary findings offer some emergent and unexpected answers to our research objectives while indicating innovative venues for the next steps of data collection and analysis.

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