

From Building to Branding Nation: Overseas Image Management of South Korea

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Historically countries are engaged in national image management. However during the post Cold War period especially with the arrival of globalization has witnessed a surge in the significance of national image building and more and more countries began actively engaged in national image construction and management. The national image building aims to serve two purposes; to create domestic political support and also improvise a country's international influence. The latter function is deemed to be more crucial today since nations desire to integrate with global markets, to participate in global affairs, and to enhance their status on the world stage. How a country is perceived and projected by other countries can result in changes in their mutual relationships and to their strategic responses. The last two decades particularly since the beginning of twenty first century observed a practice of the marketing technique and branding by many countries to improve their national image, hence the reputation of the country.

South Korea is not an exception and has shown a great deal of interest on nation branding in the last few years. Nation branding as a strategy for improving South Korea's national image abroad has been a serious subject of debate not only among politicians and policy makers but has also become a matter of public debate. South Korean government has organized a number of conferences and workshops on nation branding by inviting the world's leading nation branding practitioners and consultancies so as to learn from the experience of other countries and to device various strategies customized for the South Korean context. The Korean media particularly leading national news papers has taken up issue of Korea's national image abroad and the importance of nation branding as a serious matter of public debate and is reflected by the surge in articles related to this topics by leading scholars and practitioners.

Korea's interest in nation branding is largely driven by a desire to reposition the Korea brand away from negative association with North Korean brinkmanship, violent street protest, political corruption scandals, stereotyped dog eating nation and above all lingering images of the Korean War, the government of South Korea has committed significant resources and energy to position the Korea brand as a vibrant dynamic democracy, creative and open to the world.

Nation branding is an emerging concept in the academic disciplines of political, international and area studies and has gained much interest since the concept is closely linked to studies of national identity, which is itself closely linked to the concept of a nation's cultural and political identity. The themes and arguments in the paper is structured as follows. The following section will briefly discuss the historical evolution of nation branding as a concept and practice. Section 2 will conceptualize nation branding by proving definition from diverse

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academic perspectives. Section 3 will discuss the relationship between nation branding and national image hence unravel the practice of nation branding as a tool for national image management. Section 4 will explore the case of South Korea by exploring the context, evolution and the essence of Brand Korea practices. The last section will conclude by summarizing the article with critical comments and suggestions of the author.

From Building to Branding Nations

Since 19th century, when many of today's older nation-states were born, cultural heritage was constructed as an expression of Nationalism, the 'principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent'. Indeed, the projects of nation building were looking backwards, to history, in strategies of 'inventing tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Much of this essence was to be expressed in literature and other art forms, often in popular forms such as music or in landscape painting. Anderson (1991) argued that with the arrival of print capitalism in the post war period, nations were engaged in constructing 'imagined communities' out of more or less heterogeneous groups, ethnicities, classes, etc. The main technologies used were the print media: newspapers and literature, but also art. Later, one can add film and radio (Löfgren 1990). The whole process of nation building through various means by the nationalist forces were inward looking, targeting the domestic audience.

However with the arrival of globalization the primacy of nation state is being questioned and has argued to be transformed the relationship between state, market and society. Major aspect of this transformation is the changing role of the nation-state in international affairs. A central question of the debate focuses on the governing capacity of the nation-state and its government in international transactions, and specifically whether its authority over society has been undermined by global forces. The evolution of nation branding in this context could be regarded as the response of nationalist forces in reestablishing the primacy of nation state, hence a more distinguishable national identity in world where identities are becoming more fluid. Nation branding, then, is the phenomenon by which national governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation-state. 'Brand Estonia' 'Du bist Deutschland', 'Cool Britannia', 'Brand Australia', 'Brand Singapore' and 'Brand India' are few examples.

Nation branding: Conceptual Analysis

Albeit being a relatively new subject, the origin of nation branding study can be traced to four different sources, namely, country of origin (COO) (Papadoplous and Heslop, 2002), place or destination branding (Kotler, et al, 1993; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan, et al, 2002), and more recently, public diplomacy (van Ham, 2001; Melissen, 2005; Fan, 2008a), and national identity (Smith, 1991; Bond, et al, 2001). Lee (2009) offers a good comprehensive review of the literature. Unlike the studies on COO and place branding which have a clear focus on promoting specific economic interests (export, tourism or inward investment), nation branding is concerned with a country's whole image on the international stage covering political, economic and cultural dimensions (Quelch and Jocz, 2004; Fan, 2006).

As an emerging area of interest, nation branding is driven largely by practitioners and is yet to be clearly theorized. The following definition demonstrates nation branding as the mere application of branding strategies and tools for nation states: ‘Nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation’s image’ (Fan, 2006: 6). This definition also highlights that nation branding is concerned with image promotion. Gudjonsson (2005), an Icelandic brand practitioner defines nation branding in a similar way but he identifies the government as the initiator of branding, acknowledging its indirect involvement and influence: ‘Nation branding occurs when a government or a private company uses its power to persuade whoever has the ability to change a nation’s image. Nation branding uses the tools of branding to alter or change the behaviour, attitudes, identity or image of a nation in a positive way’ (Gudjonsson, 285).

For O’Shaughnessy (2000) the notion of the nation as a brand is ‘commonly accepted’ while others are more sceptical about the applicability of branding concepts to nations (O’Shaughnessy 2000). Dinnie (2008) differentiates between a national brand and a nation-brand, which he defines as ‘the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences’. This definition makes reference to a nation’s culture as well as to target audiences in the minds of whom nation brands are ‘situated’.

A close examination of some major definitions of the nation branding concept shows significant differences in the focus and purpose or outcome of branding the nation:

1. To remould national identities (Olins, 1999)
2. To enhance nation’s competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Lee, 2009)
3. To embrace political, cultural, business and sport activities” (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001).
4. To promote economic and political interests at home and abroad (Rendon, 2003; Szondi, 2007)
5. To alter, improve or enhance a nation’s image /reputation (Gudjonsson, 2005; Fan, 2006, 2008b, 2009)

Thus, a nation’s image is what a nation’s people want the world to understand is most central, enduring and distinctive about their nation while reputation is a particular type of feedback received by the nation from the outside world, concerning the credibility of the nation’s identity claims. What nation branding concerns is the image and reputation a nation enjoys in the world. A nation’s image is defined by the people outside the country; their perceptions are influenced by stereotyping, media coverage as well as personal experience. Like commercial brands, a nation’s image can be repackaged, repositioned and communicated in a professional fashion.

Fan (2009) provides a definition of nation branding which encapsulates the relationship between nation branding and national image management;

“Nation branding is 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.”

National image, which reflects the reputation of the country outside the world, has long been recognized for its effect on relations between countries and as a tool of foreign policy. In international politics, the practices of policymakers are girded by their own national self-image and how other nations or cultures perceive their country. Joseph S. Nye (2004) suggests that a positive national image provides the ability to entice and attract other countries; such attraction often leads to acquiescence or imitation. Frank Louis Rusciano argues that world opinion, or the "more or less consensual perception" of a state's reputation, is integral to that country's negotiation of its national identity. Consequently, national image and country reputation are major components of alliance-building and figure prominently in international conflict.

Peter van Ham (2001) argues that the importance of creating a "brand state" through effective image projection and maintenance of a dependable reputation is now the paramount concern of the postmodern political system. J. E. Peterson states, "Branding has emerged as a state asset to rival geopolitics and traditional considerations of power. Assertive branding is necessary for states as well as companies to stand out in the crowd, since they often offer similar products: territory, infrastructure, educated people, and almost identical systems of governance." Simon Anholt (2002, 2007), who coined the term nation brandings decade ago, suggests that brands are gradually becoming "the dominant channel of communication for national identity." State branding is particularly important for reinforcing positive images and blunting or negating unflattering ones. Effective branding depends on the content, resonance, and reception of a country's image abroad

The Case of South Korea

Recently the South Korean government has been paying much attention towards nation branding practices, mainly as response to the low rating of Korea brand the international nation brand indexes. South Korea rated; 33rd on the Anholt-GMI brand Index, 27th in the brand index of International Institute for Management and Development, which reflects the low image of South Korea in the international community even though in real terms Korea represents a better position. The whole effort of nation branding from the South Korean perspective could be read as a strategic initiative to bridge the gap of what is perceived and what actually the country has. For the development of nation brand strategy which is more customized to suit the South Korean context, the Korean government has developed an objective brand index from Samsung Economic Research in 2009 which has focused both on the substance and image following the principle that "no further improvement can be made with out measurement". The SERI index provides a clear picture of the status of Korean brand. The status of Korean brand compared to other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, Korea's national brand in terms of both substance and image was low, lagging behind that of advanced countries such as the United States, France, and Japan. The substance of Korea's national brand approached 97 percent and its national image 89 percent of OECD countries' average (see Figure). Compared with those of G20 countries, Korea's nation brand is competitive enough to build bridges between the G7 and the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). Though Korea's national brand is less competitive than that of the United States, France, and Japan, it is similar to or more competitive than the national brands of the BRICs.

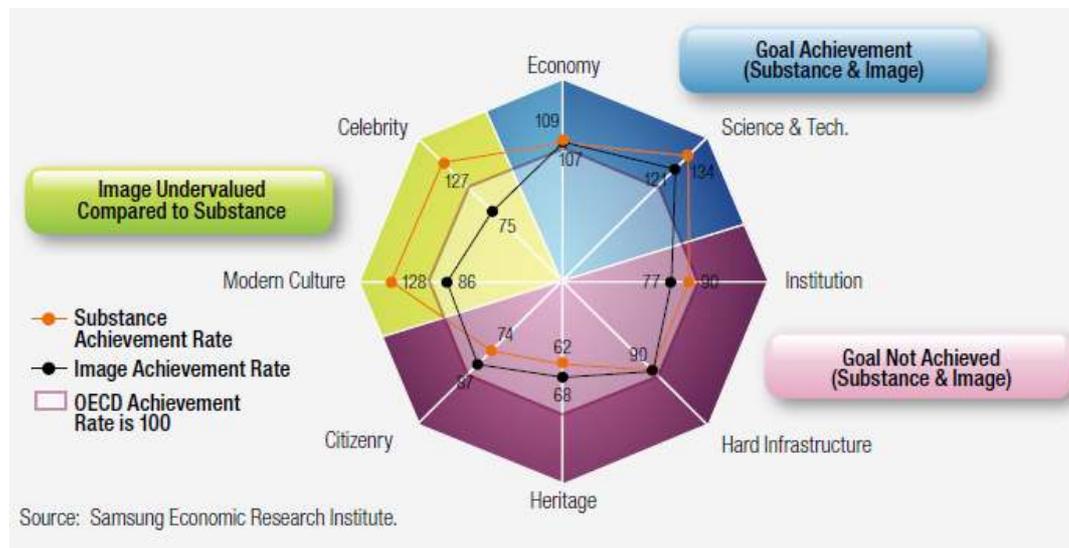


Fig: Status of Korea Brand (Gap between Korea's Substance and Image)

South Korea's Nation Branding Strategy

The South Korean government aims to raise Korea's national brand to the OECD average by 2013 and is undertaking various projects to meet this goal. Towards this line the Lee Myung Bak administration established the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB) under direct control of the Blue House, first of its kind in the world. It sets strategies and directions to coordinate and lead nation branding activities for each department and ministry. The establishment of the Presidential Committee was the culmination of a series of steps towards this line adopted by the Korean President Lee Myung-bak since his inception in 2008. The main role of the Presidential committee is to coordinate government efforts to raise overall standards in Korean society and improve the nation's image in the international community. The committee will also work towards strengthening the cooperation between private sector and the municipal governments to help Korean firms and nationals to get better treatment overseas. The committee comprised of 47 members including ministers, public relation experts, leading academic scholars, business personals etc to play the central role in recognizing Korea's branding activities and creating positive images abroad.

The details of Korea's nation branding strategy have been summarized in the form of a 10-point action plan:

- Promote tae kwon do;
- Dispatch 3,000 volunteers abroad each year;
- Adopt a "Korean wave" program;
- Introduce the Global Korea scholarship;
- Adopt the Campus Asia program;
- Increase external aid;
- Develop state-of-the-art technologies;
- Nurture the culture and tourism industries;

- Treat foreigners and multicultural families better; and
- Help Koreans become “global citizens.”

The plan is ambitious and wide-ranging and is to be commended for its focus on tangible activities and active global citizenship rather than merely on marketing and advertising campaigns. The soft-power component of the strategy is particularly strong through the emphasis on increasing external aid, thus clearly signaling Korea’s transition from aid recipient to aid donor. The social trends within South Korean society that have formed the basis for this increase in overseas development assistance are identified by Lumsdaine and Shopf (2007).

Another facet of Korea’s foreign assistance policy is World Friends Korea, roughly equivalent to the U.S. Peace Corps. The Presidential Council on Nation Branding will play a coordinating role through its oversight of the various volunteer programs that government agencies have traditionally operated. Volunteers will be tasked with promoting Korea’s culture and food around the world as well as working in areas such as information technology, education, and the environment. The spread of Korean culture—the Korean wave—is considered by policymakers to represent an important dimension of the country’s soft power. Although soft power has been considered difficult to measure, the economic benefits can sometimes be directly observable, as in the influx of Japanese tourists to Korea following the screening of Korean soap operas on Japanese television. Korean policymakers, like their counterparts in other nations, need to grapple with the issue of measuring the effectiveness of their nation-branding strategy. This is an area in which most nations are weak and need to quickly learn lessons from the business sector. It is rare to find rigorous strategy evaluation systems in place for nation-branding projects. There can also be a lack of communication of the strategy, whereby nation-branding strategy is formulated domestically but then followed by a failure to communicate that strategy effectively to organizations and individuals on the ground in foreign countries. Governments need to ensure that their countries’ networks of offices for investment attraction, trade promotion, and tourism are all aware of and buy into the strategy that has been formulated. This is a key role that Korea’s Presidential Council on Nation Branding will need to assume if the good intentions of the formulated nation-branding strategy are to become reality.

Nation branding and its Implication for South Korea’s Foreign Policy

The South Korea nation branding has a clear implication on foreign policy. The current foreign policy direction of South Korea is to improve the status to a proactive middle power to play key role in the international affairs. In the previous decades Korean role in the international affairs was constrained because of its lacking soft power and political will despite of its economic and technological prowess. However the current policy direction has paid much attention to improve Korea’s soft power. Culture becomes an important content towards this line.

Korea's rise to G20 summit 2010 chair can be seen as an advancement of its international status and is primarily based on the sustained accumulation of national power, which in turn has been endowed by the nation's people with their hard work. The context of

Korea hosting G20 summit is very significant. As the world economy faced a sweeping financial crisis over the past year, the G7/G8 gave way to a new council, the Group of 20, which includes fast-rising economic powerhouses such as South Korea. At their third summit session, held in Pittsburgh, leaders of the new group officially affirmed that the G20 is now the "premier forum" for coordinating global economic policy and cooperation. The November 2010 G20 meeting will primarily be concerned about the future of global financial architecture which is expected to be a tough one for war between the developed and developing countries. Korea has been chosen as the summit host because of its growing potential of bridging the developed and developing world, reflects its significance in the international affairs. The Korean government sees the occasion of G20 meet as a great opportunity to improve its national image by showcasing its culture and strengths in various fields, hence the uniqueness of Korea.

Conclusion

Nation branding is an emerging subject matter, most of the available literature on this area are policy papers written by practitioners. Theoretical underpinning of nation branding is yet to develop however the examination of the evolution of nation branding as strategy has clearly suggests the phenomenon as a nationalist's response to globalization aimed at reestablishing the primacy of nation state in a context where the national boundaries are becoming more fluid. Towards this line the demand for improving of national image becomes an important criterion for developing distinguish national identity. Nation branding became a political strategy for the elites to air the national images which may some times even backward looking. Nation branding as a phenomenon has overlooked as merely as a commercial strategy however it has wide political ramifications, which are yet to be researched. Korea is an interesting case in point because of the immense government attention to nation branding. The Korean governments approach towards nation branding is broader in its scope and has its resonance more politically than commercially. In the Korean context nation branding is more aimed towards improving Korean soft power hence status in international community however the commercial interest is also quite significant.

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