

## Nation Branding in the Era of Commercial Nationalism

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This article applies recent critiques of branding and marketing to a case study of the nation branding trend. We argue that critical approaches to brand “co-creation”—a reliance upon consumers to build and disseminate brand identity—help illuminate the ways in which nation branding serves as a technique of governance in the era of global capitalism. The article first considers the recent development of nation branding as a global phenomenon and then explores the details of one such campaign in post-socialist Slovenia. The case study illustrates the ways in which nation branding enjoins the populace to “live” the national brand, and to promulgate it nationally and internationally in the name of taking responsibility for the homeland’s economic development. The article concludes with a consideration of the way in which nation branding’s framing of the state as an “enterprise” fits with the logic of emerging forms of so-called commercial nationalism.

### Introduction: The Nation Branding Bandwagon

As nation states find themselves competing for economic and political capital in the global marketplace, they have embraced the logic of so-called “nation branding,” which has, in the past 15 years or so, gained significant attention in business, policy, and academic circles. According to an article in *The Boston Globe*:

The last few years have seen an explosion of “nation branding,” shorthand for coordinated government efforts to manage a country’s image, whether to improve tourism, investment, or even foreign relations. Firms specializing in nation branding have sprouted up around the world. (Risen, 2005)

Since the inception of the nation state, the state’s promotion of a sense of national identity, both internally and externally, has served as a means of furthering national interests and promoting a sense of loyalty and belonging. The nation branding trend makes the connection between nationalism and

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marketing explicit and concrete, insofar as it is characterized by unprecedented levels of state expenditure on branding consultants, the mobilization of private/public partnerships for promoting national identity, and the convergence of the state's use of commercial strategies for public and international relations with the private sector's use of nationalism to sell products.

This trend is perhaps most visible in the marketing of international tourism, whereby the creation of a national brand image goes hand-in-hand with the development of catchy slogans to portray countries ranging from Kosovo to Uganda as desirable tourist destinations. But the nation branding trend is not limited to tourism, and nation branders work hard to distinguish nation branding from the tourist-oriented focus of so-called place branding (as noted, for example, in Kulcsár & Yum, 2011). Nation branding campaigns are enlisted by the state to address a whole range of issues related to public diplomacy and economic development. As political scientist Peter van Ham puts it, "most states still see branding as a long-term, cumulative effort that will influence foreign investment decisions and the state's market capitalization" (2001, p. 1). In an era of economic globalization, in which international relations remain caught up in networks of interdependence and economic competition, van Ham argues that:

To do their jobs well in the future, politicians will have to train themselves in brand asset management. Their tasks will include finding a brand niche for their state, engaging in competitive marketing, assuring customer satisfaction, and most of all, creating brand loyalty. (2001, p.1)

Framed in these terms, branding and commercial competition become the continuation of warfare by other means in an era of capitalist globalization.

For example, after a survey showed that dominant public associations with Russia included "autocracy," "cold weather," "vodka," and "authoritarianism," the Russian government enlisted a Western public relations firm to manage perceptions of the country and its leadership. As part of the campaign, Russia established an English-language TV channel called "Russia Today" to provide a Russian-oriented interpretation of current events and Russian affairs (Dinnie, 2008). In 2009, the Russian president created a new Kremlin commission to promote a positive image of Russia abroad. According to one press account, Mikhail Margelov, the chairman of the international affairs committee of Russia's Federation Council, said that the nation's branding campaign:

. . . needs to push "*the image of a 'good' rather than a 'strong' Russia*" as part of the "soft-power" approach that is now so popular. And to do that, it must have a coordinated plan, one that will be "*pro-active rather than defensive*" in order to ensure that Moscow gets in the first word in any dispute. (Goble, 2009, p. 1)

Russia is not alone. Nation branding guru Simon Anholt, a British marketer whose 2003 book on nation branding helped to open up new markets for marketing consultants, plies his wares in countries including Croatia and the United Kingdom. Advertising giants such as Saatchi & Saatchi, Interbrand, and Saffron are also selling their talents to nations around the world. The government of Kosovo, for example, paid Saatchi & Saatchi some € 5.7 million (US\$8 million) for their nation branding campaign in 2009

(Lajmpress, 2009). This is a major expenditure for a country whose government budget was €1.4 billion (US\$1.9 billion) in 2009. The campaign was inaugurated with a much-hyped TV ad featuring the slogan “Kosovo: The Youngest Europeans” that was shown on six of the “most influential TV stations: CNN, BBC World News, Euronews, CNN Turk, Bloomberg and Eurosport” (Lajmpress, 2009, p.1).

The emergence of nation branding as a marketing phenomenon has spurred a wave of marketing literature by the likes of Anholt (2003), Olins (1999), and Dinnie (2008), as well as a growing body of academic literature (including, for example, Jansen, 2008; Aronczyk, 2008, 2009; Kaneva, 2007, 2011.). Academic writers have expressed concern over the reductive and undemocratic character of branding as a strategy for public diplomacy in democratic societies. Aronczyk, for example, observes that “branding cannot account for the plurality of voices, legacies and competing visions of the nation-state” (2008, p. 58). Expressing similar concerns, Jansen argues that, “the methodology of nation branding, *qua methodology*, is not democratic . . . Nation branding is a monologic, hierarchical, reductive form of communication” (2011, p. 141). This characterization is one associated with the familiar critique that the broader marketing industry attempts to manage public perception and behaviour in top-down fashion (Jansen, 2011). However, in the wake of the emerging era of interactivity and its attendant critique of industrial-era models of top-down, one-way forms of communication, the marketing industry (and those within it devoted to brand development) has started to reposition itself as more participatory and collaborative.

In this article, we consider the ways in which nation branding partakes of the logic of value “co-creation” (enlisting consumers to participate in the branding process) and, in turn, how this logic fits neatly with the shifting modalities of governance in the neo-liberal era. State-supported nation branding campaigns rely on strategies for value “co-creation” that encourage the populace to identify state and economic imperatives as their own. However, given the long-term character of brand development as a marketing strategy, the effectiveness of nation branding in achieving its stated goals is a question for further and ongoing research. Our objective here is to explore the way in which nation branding seeks to offload the process of national identity-building onto the private sector. Jansen argues that, whether or not nation branding is effective on its own terms, it has pathological effects that are worth taking into consideration, including the lack of transparency and accountability associated with private sector contracting, the authoritarian tendencies of message control that characterize the marketing industry, the “trivialization of public discourse” in branding campaigns, and the transference of “public funds and authority into private hands” (2011, pp. 144–146). Drawing on the case study of nation branding in the young nation-state of Slovenia, we consider the ways in which the strategies and promises of the marketing trend of participatory value “co-creation” seek to legitimate these effects.

### **Branding as a Technique of Governance**

The target audience for branding campaigns is both internal and external, including foreign and domestic markets, tourists, investors, and populations. As Anholt (2003) describes the process of nation branding (although not precisely in these terms), it relies upon both monitoring and mobilizing the populace. Creating and publicizing a national brand means first enlisting citizen participation in the creation of a brand identity, and then using the fact of this participation to enjoin citizens to “live” (and

thus promulgate) the brand (Anholt, 2003, 2007; Aronczyk, 2008; Kaneva, 2007). Such a formulation recapitulates and synthesizes recent marketing literature on the importance of engaging and mobilizing consumers in an increasingly saturated and volatile marketplace. Specifically, it draws upon the notion of a "brand community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) as a means of enhancing consumer engagement, and upon the process of so-called value "co-creation" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) as a strategy for putting consumers to work.

In this regard, nation branding is treated as a crucial aspect of governance in the era of what Cerny describes as "the competition state," which responds to the need to promote, "economic activities at home or abroad" by becoming, "an agent of its own transformation from civil association to enterprise association" (1997, p. 272). In other words, nation branding combines the obligations of citizenship with the responsibilities and risks of the entrepreneur. In this regard, it invokes the logic of neo-liberal governance which relies upon the "multiplication of the 'enterprise' form within the social body . . . . It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 148).

In the attempt to reinvent "the state as a quasi-'enterprise-association'" (Cerny, 1997, p. 260), the metaphors of politics as marketing and "brand community" as polity are, in a sense, realized—at least in theory. As Aronczyk notes, Anholt and other branding consultants advise nations to align their foreign and domestic policies with a well-researched set of national images, much as a successful marketing campaign requires a company to "live the brand": "The need to inspire such allegiance and affiliation in the brand identity reveals a critical dimension of the practice: as a form of communication, the media of the message are effectively the citizens themselves" (2008, p. 54). This formulation echoes the commercial logic of Web 2.0, and of the interactive economy more generally—the use of strategies for mobilizing the population as a means of lateral and participatory, rather than "top-down" and one-way, message transmission. If, in other words, nation branding relies on private "expert" consultants, it does so in order to develop strategies for offloading the work of message circulation onto the populace.

Consider, for example, Israel's 2010 marketing campaign, "Making the Case for Israel," urging Israelis to participate in improving the nation's public image after charges of human rights violations committed during its "one-sided war against Hamas in Gaza" (Martin, 2010). The campaign featured a series of commercials targeted to a domestic audience that invites viewers to serve as "citizen-diplomats" in an effort to improve the country's public image abroad. As the TV ads put it, "Are you fed up with the way we are portrayed around the world? You can change the picture" (ibid.). Israeli citizens traveling abroad were supplied with airline brochures that provided them with, "helpful examples and statistics" to illustrate positive claims about Israel. The country's minister for public diplomacy dubbed these "citizen-diplomats" members of, "the Israeli Public Diplomacy Forces, after the name of the Israel Defense Forces, the country's military" (ibid.). The populace was invited to become the medium for the national brand image.

For the purposes of this article, we focus on state-sponsored branding campaigns, sub-contracted to private consultants and designed to serve multiple purposes including, but not limited to, the attraction of foreign investment, tourism, and the pursuit of public diplomacy. The hallmark of such campaigns, at

least according to their promoters, is that, in an era of economic globalization, they can be repurposed for different audiences in ways that reinforce and build upon one another. The brand identity is treated as a form of capital, the creation of which relies not only on the work of expert advisors and the investment of financial capital, but also on the participation of the populace in building, reinforcing, and reproducing a nation's brand identity. As interactive, participatory campaigns, nation branding efforts enlist the populace as participants in the "co-creation" of a brand identity in the name of both national allegiance and economic self-interest. In so doing, they help enact the double logic of neo-liberal governance characterized, as Gordon puts it, by:

on the one hand, an effort to reduce governmental functions to a set of economically regulated structures and institutions . . . and on the other, an effort to endow existing economic structures and institutions . . . with certain of the functions of a governmental infrastructure. (1991, p. 26)

In this regard, we can describe nation branding as a form of governance *via* market imperatives. As Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody put it, "the co-creation paradigm represents an attempt to establish a specific form of government, in the sense proposed by Foucault (1991), to bring about particular forms of life in which consumers voluntarily provide unwaged and exploited, yet enjoyed labor" (2008, p. 176).

Much has been made of the way in which neo-liberal forms of governance operate by offloading responsibilities associated with the state onto the populace by privatizing them, as, for example, in the case of neo-liberal proposals in the United States to replace state pensions with private investment accounts that require citizens to take on the responsibility of becoming successful investors and speculators. The Foucault-inspired literature on "governmentality" pushes the analysis further. As an "economic" form of governance in the double sense of the term, neo-liberalism works to regulate the conduct of the populace in the very act of offloading responsibilities onto it. The paradox of what Foucault describes as the "epoch of frugal government" (not to be confused with diminished or lessened government) is that "we see both the intensive and extensive development of governmental practice" at a time when government "claims to be and is supposed to be frugal" (2008, p. 28). "Frugal" forms of neo-liberal governance rely, at least in part, on instruments that are "immanent to the field of population" by "acting directly on the population through campaigns, or, indirectly by, for example, techniques that, without people being aware of it, stimulate the birth rate or direct the flows of population to this or that region or activity" (Foucault, 2007, p. 105).

The intensified management of members of the population via economic strategies for guiding conduct seeks to govern, "'at a distance' . . . by shaping the ways they understand and enact their own freedom" (Rose, 2001, p. 6). Nation branding campaigns fit this logic insofar as they invite the populace to identify its own interests with active participation in building and promoting a national brand identity. As Zwick et al. put it, neo-liberal governance, "unlike the more top-down approach . . . works from the bottom up and represents a form of power that, 'acts through practices that "make up subjects" as free persons"' (2008, p. 165). These strategies exist alongside other technologies of governance, including those of the ballot box, the legal system, and the police apparatus. However, the hallmark of neo-liberalism is the ongoing attempt to displace more direct forms of governance into the realm of the private

sphere—to engage in an ongoing process of privatizing functions traditionally associated with the public sector, while simultaneously mobilizing the risks and instability associated with this process as a technique for further management of the populace.

The promise of the brand-as-nation is that it might offer a modicum of control in an uncertain, fast-paced, and competitive global marketplace. Gaining this type of control, however, entails “living the brand.” The injunction to do so relies not on altruism—a sense of “what you can do for your country”—but on self-interest (how you can *consume* for your country). It is a consumerist form of nationalism, or perhaps more precisely, a consumer co-created form of nationalism.

In an attempt to explore the workings of this process, the following sections first map the nation branding phenomenon and then focus on a case study of nation branding in Slovenia. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted in 2009 and early 2010 with different Slovene branding “consultants,” practitioners, and officials who were involved in the nation’s respective branding campaigns either directly or indirectly.<sup>1</sup> Because many international public relations agencies that deal with nation branding are based in New York, four interviews with nation branding experts in New York City were conducted, and websites of the organizations engaged in different countries’ promotion and nation branding were analyzed. The study concludes with a consideration of the relationship between nation branding and what recent research (Ju, 2007; Seo, 2007, 2008; Volcic, 2009; White, 2009) has described as the emergent formation of “commercial nationalism.”

### **Branding the Nation**

In marketing terms, the goal of branding—a term which originally referred to burning an identifying mark on livestock or barrels of goods—was to help build market share and build consumer loyalty, as well as to differentiate formerly generic products and thereby shift the balance of control over pricing toward the producer (rather than the retailer), helping to yield more predictable levels of demand. As the advertising industry developed over the course of the 20th century, shifting its focus from product attributes to associations—selling an image or a lifestyle—brands built up by advertising campaigns were seen to take on an autonomous, quantifiable value. According to van Ham:

Branding acquires its power because the right brand can surpass the actual product as a company’s central asset. Smart firms pour most of their money into improving their brands, focusing more on the values and emotions that customers attach to them than on the quality of the products themselves. (2001, p. 2)

Brand value relies on the stored set of associations that are presumably invoked by the brand identity itself—associations transferred to the product by the brand’s existing reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> The nation-branding proposition appears to appeal greatly to post-socialist nations. Slovenia represents a new nation-state in political and economic transition. Knowledge about its fate can inform a more general understanding of the (national) identity struggles around the world.

It is the notion of brand identity as a distinct and separable asset—a form of image capital, as it were—that makes it possible to conceive of the possibility of branding something that is not bought and sold, such as a place, a nation, or a public persona. If a brand could be seen to signify a predictable and transferable set of potentially valuable associations, then a nation's brand identity would comprise the dominant associations it mobilized in audiences. Retaining the economic imperatives of the marketplace, a desirable "nation brand" is one that invokes profitable associations—associations that help attract tourists and capital investment while driving the sales of national products and boosting a country's international image.

The embrace of nation branding treats issues of international relations and public diplomacy as amenable to strategies for brand management. As van Ham puts, "Creating a brand is not only economically desirable, it has considerable political and strategic implications" (2001, p. 3). When politicians refer to "branding" the United States for Middle Eastern audiences, for example, they are not as concerned with direct forms of consumption (such as encouraging tourism) as with positive public relations. Nation branding consultants mobilize the mystical marketing notion that a brand identity might be separable from actual "product" attributes—that, in other words, successful marketing spin might eclipse the effects of past policies. The language of nation branding translates non-economic or only indirectly economic goals into the logic of the marketplace; diplomacy is seen to be reliant on an appropriate marketing strategy (rather than as an adjustment of the "product" itself). The result is a blurred distinction between political public relations and commercial brand management. According to van Ham, "Why should we assume that the public readily buys into the seductive meanings of consumer capitalism but remains rational and objective when making political decisions?" (2001, p. 5).

The ability to view international relations in this way is a function not just of the development of increasingly mobile forms of consumption and investment in a globalized economy, but also of the reliance by the state-as-enterprise upon market mechanisms of governance. Nation branding is a marketing triumph in itself—the successful recruitment of nation states as clients. By the turn of the millennium, thanks in part to the post-Cold-War emergence of a new set of nations, and also in part to the notion that branding might be one way to manage the economic volatility of a global economy, nation branding had become a successful and lucrative industry (e.g., Anholt, 2003, 2007; Gilmore, 2002; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Olins, 1999; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002).

The promoters of nation branding market it as a powerful equalizer—a way that countries without the economic, military, or political clout of superpowers can compete in the global marketplace. They claim that nation branding can help such nations achieve greater visibility, attract tourists and foreign investors, expand exports, and promote their profile among the member states of various international organizations (such as the EU), all while cultivating patriotism at home (Anholt, 2003, 2007; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Olins, 1999; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002; Szondi, 2007). As one of our New York marketing interviewees puts it:

Branding is *the only* power available to small, unknown, peripheral nations . . . it can help them strengthen their economic position, attract investors, skilled labor, and travelers . . . Do you honestly believe that Kosovo has any other option than to brand itself? Kosovo *has* to market itself . . . this will also strengthen citizens' identity and

increase their self-esteem . . . there is no other way for Kosovo to persuade the rest of the world that they are a young, peaceful, stable, and dynamic country . . . even if they are not [laugh]. (Personal interview, 2009)

It is not hard to cite examples of nations that have what Anholt describes as a successful brand: a public image that leaves tourists and/or investors positively disposed—a country that is well liked by consumers and well-regarded in diplomatic circles. But there is little empirical evidence to indicate whether the success of such countries is due to so-called nation branding strategies, or if it is due to other factors. In her study of Estonia's nation branding campaign, Jansen notes, "Hard evidence is, generally, difficult to come by in the nation branding business, although suggestion, implication, and hype abound" (2011, p. 128). As one of the people who helped to oversee the Brand Estonia campaign put it while discussing Estonia's success (at the time), "Probably we did play a part, but how big a part is really, really hard to measure" (ibid.).

Nation branding reflects a certain way of thinking about the role of a nation—both as a means of selling goods and services, and as an entity that can mobilize the populace in the name of economic development. By the same token, nationalism becomes, at least in part, a form of consumption, while citizenship becomes, in part, a way of "living the brand." In this regard, Arvidsson's description of commercial branding also neatly describes nation branding:

Brand management operates in a kind of social factory where the informational environment (of which the brand itself is a part) functions both as a commonly available means of production and a ubiquitous means of surveillance and governance. (2006, p. 130)

Creating a brand and assessing its uptake and impact—its "return on investment"—requires monitoring the populace, while the effectiveness of the brand depends on popular mobilization. The logic of branding as governance comes full circle, from "governing" consumers to mobilizing citizens.

### **Nation Branding and Nationalism: The Slovene Case**

In part because of their position as relatively new ("start-up") European nations, and in part because of their attempts to develop their local economies and, in some cases, to gain entry to the European Union (EU), all of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have embarked on some kind of publicly financed branding campaign. For example, the branding initiative in Slovenia coincided with Slovenia's presidency of the European Union. In February 2007, just before Slovenia started to preside over the EU, the Ministry of the Economy unveiled a new branding campaign—first internally to the rest of the Slovene government, and then later to the public at large. Before then, Slovenia did not have a coordinated national brand, although national elites had been devoted to creating one for several years (Konecnik, 2006; Volcic, 2008). The slogan "I feel *Slovenia*" (in English—with the internal word "love" emphasized) was, according to one of our consultant interviewees, meant to invoke "those natural senses and feelings that only Slovenes have and share" (personal interview, 2009). The "I feel *Slovenia*" slogan and logo was to be used systematically across the government sector, as well as by non-governmental



and business organizations to promote Slovenia, both to domestic audiences and to foreign visitors, investors, and business partners. The fact that the slogan's word play only works in English suggests the international focus of the campaign.

Like most of the seven former Yugoslav states, Slovenia continues to be involved in the project of identity building. Governmental agencies and private enterprises alike focus on consolidating a sense of distinctive national identity and national brand identity (Volcic, 2008). But nations are complex, political entities, and national identities are created through social practices that are historically and socially conditioned. Nation branding, as Jansen (2008, p. 122) argues, not only introduces new nations (or new national brand identities) to the world but also reinterprets national identity in commercial terms and provides narratives for domestic consumption. This combination is especially important in the former Yugoslav context, where resurgent nationalisms had devastating effects and nation branding is portrayed as a way of avoiding their pathologies by transposing competition into the realm of the marketplace.

Against the background of the Yugoslav wars, commercial campaigns are portrayed by marketers as an alternative to the violent imposition of ideology: manipulation via seduction rather than force. This perspective might be described as the market version of pacification: the hope that economic competition might replace political violence. As van Ham puts it:

The brand state's use of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to construct its own distinct image is a benign campaign that lacks the deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity and uniqueness that can accompany nationalism. By marginalizing nationalist chauvinism, the brand state is contributing greatly to the further pacification of Europe. (2001, p. 2)

This argument is taken even further by Anholt, who outlines the advantages of an allegedly "post-political" marketplace of nations:

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. (Anholt, 2006, p. 2)

The subtext of the promise of nation branding is that historical forms of national identification may come to be seen as anachronistic threats to contemporary economic interest: that, in other words, the market can dissolve archaic forms of collective cultural conflict by disaggregating collectives into self-interested individuals and reassembling them into branded communities. However, it is not clear that nation branding and violent forms of political nationalism are mutually exclusive, nor that the treatment of the state as an enterprise displaces or reduces political violence (Turner, 1994).

What nation branding does do is transpose politics into the register of sales and promotion. Anholt faithfully traces the logic of a worldview in which the responsibility for a nation's economic success in the global marketplace cascades down to the individual choices of consumers, whose investment in themselves (according to the market priorities outlined for them by policy experts) becomes directly tied to the success of the nation. Identifying with the "brand community" of the nation state becomes a means of optimizing one's own chances for economic success.

In keeping with this form of nationalism, the rise of neoliberalism in 1990s Slovenia was marked by the gospel of individualism and a focus on commercialization (Splichal, 2009). By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Slovenia had radically reduced welfare programs and transferred many duties of "the social" from the state to the citizenry and the private sector (Kurnik, 2005, p. 92). There were several attempts during the late 1980s and early 1990s by the Slovene Ministry of Tourism to engage in comprehensive nation branding and to recast Slovenia's international image. During the late 1990s, image management campaigns in Slovenia became more formalized and strategic, resulting in combined public and private sector attempts to develop an effective national brand. When Slovenia entered the EU in 2004, the Slovenia Tourist Board—a state agency—selected the soft-drink-sounding slogan "Slovenia Invigorates" (*Slovenija Pozivlja*) as a means of promoting Slovenia to the rest of Europe. In May 2006, the first international advertising video spot was produced for international TV channels such as CNN. The original slogan, "Slovenia: Your Perfect Getaway" (which in Slovene became: *Slovenija: Popolna za Pobeg od Resnicnosti*—literally, "Slovenia: A perfect escape from reality"), was replaced by "Slovenia: A diversity to discover" (*Slovenija: Raznolikost, vredna raziskovanja*) after criticism from the minister of foreign affairs (Smolej, 2006, p. 37).<sup>2</sup> The Slovenia Tourist Board spent 187 million Slovenian tolar (about US\$1.06 million) on producing the advertisement and buying advertising time on CNN Europe, which led to the cancellation of many other promotional activities abroad.

After 18 years of independence, Slovenes continue to be concerned almost to the point of obsession with their national image (Smolej, 2006, p. 1; Socan, 2004). The results of a 2006 survey that showed the limited extent of their nation's international recognition (especially in Western European countries, such as Germany and France) were hotly debated (Konecnik, 2006). Particularly striking and memorable to Slovenes was finding that Slovenia routinely gets confused with Slovakia by Western Europeans (Smolej, 2006, pp. 25–26). Consequently, most of the Slovene interviewees associated with the nation-branding initiative said that the primary task of the nation's branding campaign should be to spread information about Slovenia, since it is "still a rather unrecognized country" (personal interview, 2010). But they all also framed the ultimate goal of a branding campaign as a means of contributing to the welfare of Slovenes, "to help them to challenge growing global competition . . . in a way, to prepare Slovenes to be more competitive and united in the global market" (personal interview, 2009). Most argued that branding initiatives would help the Slovene government and businesses create a national discussion about the country's future in an era of globalization, migration, and transnationalism. As one interviewee put it,

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<sup>2</sup> The minister insisted the word "getaway" implies "fleeing a crime scene" and this was, therefore, an unacceptable way to promote Slovenia.

branding affects the way Slovenes feel their identity. . . . The brand encourages them to “positively” advertise Slovenia. It encourages them to wear visual symbols, such as T-shirts or caps, with pride. . . . This is especially important for Slovenes abroad so that they continue to be proud of their Slovene roots. . . . In times of globalization, it’s important to feel that Slovenes are united and have a strong national identity that we are all proud of. . . . (Personal interview, 2009)

Despite often inflated and unsubstantiated claims about the importance and power of branding, there has been little public expression of doubts or concerns about the process of nation branding. The celebratory voices of public relations, marketing, and advertising promoters dominate the public discussion in advocating and justifying branding. As one interviewee put it:

To have a national brand is not simply to advertise our touristic spots. . . . To have a brand means that we can identify our own identity and frame a vision and a strategy for ourselves: who we are, what we do, where as a nation we are excellent, where we actually want to go. . . . It’s extremely important that people, ordinary people, identify with this brand, since they are the ones who are crucial in promoting the Slovene brand inside and outside the country. . . . (Personal interview, 2010)

A national brand identity is offered as a rallying point not only for promoting the nation internationally but also for providing individuals with an empowering sense of self-discovery and self-understanding.

#### **“I Feel Slovenia”**

Marketing and PR practitioners in Slovenia tend to emphasize message coherence and unity in the country’s nation-branding campaign. As one of our respondents put it, “Everyone is confused by so many different branding projects going on . . . so many logos, slogans, brochures. . . . It’s complete chaos in this area and we need to pull our act together” (personal interview, 2009). The imperative of creating a unified sense of brand identity adopts the language of citizen empowerment and participation in national self-determination. As another interviewee put it:

Slovenia is so small and insignificant, so, basically, we are cursed. . . . If the country does not take care of its own brand identity . . . if it does not create it, then . . . other countries have the power to craft a stereotypical image for it. (Personal interview, 2010)

For these interviewees, the development of a robust national brand is a kind of national coming-of-age ritual, the sign that a nation has secured its position in the global economy and is ready to join what van Ham calls “the brand bandwagon” (2001, p. 2).

The lack of a visible nation branding initiative in Slovenia means that we are not ready to become a part of the global system of market exchange. We are just not ready yet . . .

. . . if we want to raise our own self-consciousness, our national ego so to speak, we need a systematic and a coordinated image. (Personal interview, 2010)

Finally, borrowing from the language of self-help and personal growth, a successful brand is seen as a marker of self-love, self-respect, and self expression. As one of our respondents put it, bemoaning the delay in the development of a national brand image for Slovenia:

We as a nation are too self-critical, you know. . . . We lack patriotism, we lack this love for our country, we are afraid to express it, so it's good to finally have a channel that says: "It's OK to be proud of Slovenia, we are small, but we are special." (Personal interview, 2009)

In 2006, the Slovene government started to back what became the country's first long-term branding effort, and in July of the same year, it called for proposals. By November 2006, the slogan "I feel *Slovenia*" was selected out of 250 possible alternatives. From the start, the campaign found itself embroiled in rumor, controversy, and charges of corruption. Despite the rhetoric of public participation, it was discovered that the government chose the slogan in advance of the supposedly deliberative work of the committee. This was revealed when a photo surfaced of then-Prime Minister Janez Jansa wearing a cap with the slogan on it two months before the results of the public contest had been decided (Stritar et al., 2007)—revealing the purely promotional character of the promise of national brand "co-creation."

In 2007, the Slovene Ministry of the Economy invited potential marketing agencies to create an overall nation-branding campaign for Slovenia based on the slogan "I feel *Slovenia*." Pristop, a Slovene PR and marketing agency, was announced as the winner responsible for crafting the campaign and Slovenia's "new" image. Pristop promised to develop a market research-study-based campaign that would survey members of the public and include their input and feedback (personal interview, 2010; see also Konecnik et al., 2009). Slovenes were invited to contribute to the creation of "brand Slovenia" on the Internet and through a nationwide mail campaign seeking public feedback. In this respect, according to the marketers, the public was given the opportunity to "take part in the historical project of nation branding" (personal interview, 2010). Pristop consistently emphasized the participatory focus of the brand-building campaign, noting that,

we included participants from three ministries, the state tourist agency, and different experts in order to make the brand connect as much as possible with the Slovene public at large. All Slovene citizens were invited to participate in helping to create the Slovene brand over the Internet thanks to a dedicated website designed by Pristop ([www.znamka-slovenija.si](http://www.znamka-slovenija.si), which translates to [www.brand-slovenia.si](http://www.brand-slovenia.si)). (Personal interview, 2009)

The preparatory market research for the Slovene nation-branding campaign came up with simplistic and tautological findings: "Slovenia is green, it invigorates, it is elemental, and based on organic development and family" (Konecnik et al., 2009, p. 56). The point was not so much to unearth the hidden essence of Slovene identity as it was to enlist the public to do the work of filling out the brand—to take

responsibility for filling these empty findings with meaningful or at least marketable content. According to one of the scholars involved in the project, "You can't show Slovenia simply with an image. . . . You have to *feel* and *experience* Slovenia" (*Priročnik Znamke Slovenije*, 2007, p. 7). These feelings must then be linked by association to the resulting brand identity that, according to the consultants, "can and must forge the very sense of pride that allows the brand to live on" (personal interview, 2010).

As a campaign for national economic promotion and revitalization, nation branding takes on the attributes of a program for governance in the terms outlined by Rose and Miller (1992):

Common modes of perception are formed, in which certain events and entities come to be visualized according to particular rhetorics of image or speech. Relations are established between the nature, character, and causes of problems facing various individuals and groups. (p. 184)

The role of the state and its alliance with various private sector consultancies is to help build these networks and shape these common modes of perception in accordance with so-called national priorities—interpreted through the lens of national competition in a global marketplace. As the *Handbook of Brand Slovenia* puts it, "The power of the brand lies in the consent and motivation of the Slovene citizens to live the brand" (*Priročnik Znamke Slovenije*, 2007, p. 5). Borrowing from the language of brand communities, it goes on to say:

We will all express and communicate the image of Slovenia . . . but the brand will be used differently by different groups. . . . For example, the businessman will adjust the brand to his/her own needs. . . . A sportsman will translate the Slovene story into his/her own sports story. . . . There are as many Slovenes as there are Slovene stories . . . and everyone can use their own interpretation . . . but whoever uses the brand will need to think how to communicate the brand holistically, using all one's senses. (*Priročnik Znamke Slovenije*, 2007, p. 6)

The brand allows for the "translation of the values of others into its own terms, such that they provide norms and standards for their own ambitions, judgments, and conduct," resulting in what Rose and Miller (1992) describe as a "network . . . that enables rule 'at a distance'" (p. 184). The brand at one and the same time promises the freedom of choice associated with consumption and the productive imperatives of the marketplace. Branding guru Anholt (2003) neatly outlines this logic and its post-socialist appeal in celebratory terms:

The opportunity which branding offers new and developing nations is great indeed. It gives them a tool to focus away from the Socialist notion of relative power coming from "tonnage"—tons of steel, barrels of oil, pounds of gold, bushels of wheat, bags of cocoa. . . . The view is still free; the air is for everyone, and Brand Image is shared and built collectively. (p. 147)

Van Ham describes the shift in terms of the transition from modernist industrial production to postmodern consumption: "a move from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence" (2001, p. 3).

### **The Post-Socialist Nation Brand**

As a mode of governance, nation branding has the advantage, in a post-socialist context, of couching itself in terms of the new freedoms—and responsibilities—of the marketplace. As one of our interviewees put it:

Socialism's goal was to create new people . . . a new type of people. So socialism was eager to shape a new man, and the entire social spectrum is connected to this project, to the formation of a socialist, working class people in a completely intentional way. . . . But now, building any kind of identity is playful . . . it's not so serious, it's not, you know, ideological. (Personal interview, 2009)

In the post-socialist and allegedly post-ideological era, the transition is from a top-down assertion of collective identity to the promise of a "bottom up" investment in brand identity. In the discourse of nation branding, the nation comes to stand as one more consumer choice (although for many, of course, the choices are severely limited) rather than a site of collective belonging and action. Collective participation is, in this context, reinterpreted as brand co-creation. Marketing scholars (Fuat & Dholakia, 2006; Fuat & Venkatesh, 1995) describe branding as a liberating means of empowering consumers/citizens. The involvement of ordinary citizens from diverse layers of society in the development of national brand identity is offered as a palliative to those who would criticize the practice's potential for elitism and exclusion.

For the internal audience—the national audience that participates in "building" the brand—the responsibility for "living the brand" becomes a condition for the prosperity of the nation, and thus a form of incentivized work on the self. The connection of nation branding to discourses of freedom, globalization, capitalism, solidarity, participation, and cohesion offers a way to talk about nationhood that is not connected to more "top-down" models for the creation of a sense of national identity. Statements from our respondents such as "Yes, I think the brand reflects our national identity, since this identity has been created with the help of key stakeholders and all Slovenes . . ." are telling. The model of "the national branded-self" fits neatly with the participatory promise of the interactive era and echoes its logic: the invitation to participate not only in the process of marketing to oneself, but also in that of "propagandizing" oneself. As Jansen (2008) writes, "The feel-good illusions of community participation and solidarity that nation branding can cultivate function ideologically to position nation branding as a pro-social force enhancing the public sphere rather than depleting and superseding it" (p. 132).

Since the three most often cited reasons for using nation branding are direct foreign investment, exports, and tourism (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002), it seems fair to say that in many cases the external target audience for nation branding consists of economic elites. The brand identity subordinates the "lived" brand community of internal audience members as consumers/citizens to the exigencies of the global

marketplace and thus to the interests of those who help structure the international flows of capital, labor, and goods. This subordination comes to serve as the basis for an allegedly post-political sense of branded community. Solidarity takes place at the level of production not of goods, but of image, whose creation relies, at least according to the consultants, on the participation of the populace.

Furthermore, such branding strategies rely on the reappropriation of national history by the branding apparatus—that is, the translation of tradition into selling points. As one of our interviewees put it:

We needed a brand . . . so we needed to search for historical, cultural sources of Slovene brand identity. This involved figuring out what Slovenes think about themselves. . . . From our research it came out that it was nature . . . unique villages, lively folk culture, charm . . . The brand allows Slovenes to unite and focus, to emphasize efficiently the country's main characteristics and exploit them. (Personal interview, 2009)

In this regard, Aronczyk (2009) rightly points out that branding does not so much supersede pernicious and divisive forms of nationalism as replicate the claim to transcend and displace the political by transposing it into the register of the market:

. . . if national identity is constituted in this paradigm as prepolitical, the work of nation branding is presented as *post*political—where the nation remains necessary not as a democratic resource for active participation or equal recognition, nor as a geopolitical force to mediate international conflict, but as an ensemble of non-threatening fragments of culture, history, and geography determined by committee. This is the basis of the brand's rising popularity in foreign-policy circles as a vehicle for public diplomacy. (p. 294)

### **Conclusion: Nation Branding and “Commercial Nationalism”**

Nation branding is decidedly not post-political insofar as it opens up new spaces for the commercial exploitation of the political—for the use of nationalism to sell a range of cultural products and to build brand loyalty. In this regard, it fits neatly into the constellation of what recent literature on globalization has described as commercial nationalism—the phenomenon whereby commercial institutions take on an increasingly important role in framing issues of national identity and promulgating branded forms of nationalisms and nationalist brand identities. The literature on commercial nationalism recognizes the historical relationship between commercialism, capitalism, and the nation state, but emphasizes how recent transformations including economic globalization, the decline of public service, state-supported broadcasting in the neoliberal era (especially in the post-socialist nations of Eastern and Central Europe, but also in other regions, including Asia and Western Europe), and the forms of competition associated with the “enterprise state” re-contextualize the relationship between the national and commercial.

In particular, the increasing porosity of borders to the flows of international capitalism endows nation-centric branding with a particular sense of urgency. When a production-oriented sense of national identity is threatened by the dispersed character of manufacturing, outsourcing, and transnational conglomeration, branding works to promote a sense of national distinctiveness in the register of consumption. Similarly, as state-supported forms of broadcasting are challenged and displaced by commercial broadcasters, state agencies find themselves turning to marketing consultants or finding ways of regulating and thus influencing private-sector broadcasters, whose commercialized forms of nationalism do not always neatly align with state priorities.

Seo (2008), for example, has used the notion of commercial nationalism to describe the ways in which burgeoning commercial media outlets in mainland China have promoted a more aggressive brand of nationalism than the state-run media. He argues for more attention to be paid to “the nationalistic discourses . . . massively manufactured and circulated by a fast-growing cultural industry in post-reform China” (p. 1). The resulting “boom of nationalism in the Chinese cultural market” has led to the creation of a new tier of commercially supported public intellectuals, including writers and directors who operate independently of direct state sponsorship while staunchly promoting a nationalist agenda (p. 1). Similarly, Ju (2007) argues that the so-called Korean wave—the popularity of Korean popular culture in other parts of Asia—exemplified the marriage of commercial culture and nationalism, proving that the logic of globalization is not antithetical to the propagation of nationalism. As he puts it,

. . . contemporary forms of local identity can be understood as a product of the global—a means of carving out a particular brand identity that takes shape in response to the process of globalization itself. (p. 9)

Since nationalism is, from its inception, integrally connected to the history of capitalism, it is unsurprising that shifts in the economy associated with neoliberalization and globalization might accompany corresponding developments in nationalism. Even more specifically, and given the central role of the media in the representation of national identity and its corresponding “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983, p. 3), we would emphasize the significance of what Turner (2010) calls “the dramatic decline in public and state broadcasting and the progressive commercialization of television [and other forms of media] worldwide” (p. 8). These developments further reinforce and assist what Murdock (2006) describes as “the decisive shift from nation building to consumerist models of modernity . . . in the early 1990s” (p. 23).

The notion of commercial nationalism outlined by Seo (2007, 2008), Ju (2007), and others (Turner, 2010; Volcic, 2009; White, 2009), refers to the deliberate use of nationalist appeals by commercial entities to differentiate their products in a competitive and increasingly interdependent global marketplace. The selling of nationalism—which has become a common theme in populist commercial outlets globally in a number of countries—represents a reflexive form of national identity building: the choice to consume a particular version of national identification. We see this development as a complementary one to nation branding: On the one hand, commercial entities sell nationalism as a means of winning ratings and profits, while on the other, the state markets itself as a brand. Such is the double logic of commercial nationalism.



In the example of Slovenia, nation branding represented a shift from official, state propaganda to reliance on a commercial campaign (and the private-public partnership that develops it) for building a sense of national identity both at home and abroad. As the private sector embraces the commercial power of nationalism to address anxieties over the fate of the nation in an era of globalization, the state embraces some of the strategies of marketers. To understand the imagined community of the nation through the mechanism of a brand identity is to participate in the reconfiguration of national identity as a strategic asset in the entrepreneurialization of the populace. On the side of the market, commercial nationalism is subordinated to a "higher" end—one that transcends loyalty to particular political formations, political representatives, government policies, and even, paradoxically, loyalty to nation. Brand loyalty comes to represent, above all, allegiance to the logic of the marketplace.



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