REVIEW OF AWARENESS AND VIEWS ON BRANDING OMAN AS A NATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Previously, brand competition used to be exclusively present in products only. However, nowadays a new form of competition called *Nation Branding, has also been observed all over the world*. Nations are competing as a whole to portray a good image to the outsiders. This, in turn, will have its own positive implications on the nation; such as attracting foreign investment, increasing tourism, and enhancing exports and so on. Therefore, it is important that research is conducted in this field and different aspects of enhancing nation branding are looked at in depth. This research paper looks into Oman's case in branding itself as a nation. It takes into account the locals' (Omanis') views on nation branding in general and branding Oman in particular. It then compares the findings with the 'actual' branding of Oman as a nation through the initiative 'Brand Oman' undertaken by Brand Oman Management Unit (BOMU). The results clearly show that there is a gap between locals' awareness of branding Oman as a nation and Brand Oman's efforts in doing the same. Recommendations are then made to bridge that gap through various actions related to information spread, Oman's cultural tourism development, and publicity enhancement, in order to help promote locals' current understanding of branding Oman and also help brand Oman through a smooth common understanding amongst all concerned.

KEYWORDS
Brand Oman, Nation Branding, Destination Branding, Tourism, Country Image

INTRODUCTION

In twenty-first century the countries have realized that they need a systematic and proactive approach using integrated marketing management to promote themselves in the world (Ruzzier, 2012). *Nation branding* is an initiative to promote a country in an area in which it is better as compared to other nations. Nation branding exists in many forms, the simplest one being a logo or a slogan. Other complex forms include country reputation, peacefulness and the like. There are many reasons why nations are heading towards branding themselves: for instance, to attract foreign investors and tourists, increase local employment, develop a new country image, remove a false image, etc. Therefore, to begin with, it is important that a common image is perceived by locals about their own country, and then this image is transferred to the outsiders in the best manner. Nation Branding's effectiveness can be seen through the image that appears in people's mind when the name of the country being branded is presented to them in context or vice versa. For instance, if you hear the country name 'Italy' and the image of 'fashion or design' is immediately drawn in your mind, then that is a true sign

of a successful nation brand. Similarly, if you hear the word 'fashion or design' and you recall the country 'Italy' in your mind, then definitely the link between branding Italy and fashion has proven to be effective.

In the recent years a number of countries and regions have embarked on branding route including Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dubai, Hong Kong, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, UK, and USA (Daye and VanAuken, 2007). With an ultimate objective to promote itself to rest of the world, the Sultanate of Oman has also initiated a Nation Branding endeavor in 2009. The objective of this research paper is to assess Nation Branding effort undertaken by Oman, from the perspective of Omani people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As competition is rising between nations on various facets such as innovation, technology, tourism etc.nation branding is becoming the talk of the town. Researchers have tackled this interesting topic from different angles and perspectives; ranging from as simple as defining nation branding to the more complex process of investigating existing real examples of nation branding.

What is Nation Branding?

"There is no single definition of nation branding" (Fan, 2006). The definitions vary depending on how a nation would like to brand itself. Nation branding is at times used interchangeably with the country of origin (COO) effect, country image, country identity, and country positioning. Individuals interpret this term differently. To some, "it refers to a consistent and all-embracing national brand strategy which determines the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country, and ensures that this vision is supported, reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between the country and the rest of the world" (Fan, 2006). To others, "a nation brand offers no tangible product or service; instead, it represents and encompasses a wide variety of factors and associations such as geography, history, culture and famous persons, just to name a few" (Fan, 2006). The objectives of nation branding vary according to the objectives set by each country. For instance, a country may intend to present itself as a 'country of peace' while another one might aim to portray itself as 'a country with technological advancement' while still others as 'country of culture and heritage' and so on. Some countries try "to reposition themselves or correct pre-existing/out-of-date notions about the state in order to reflect fundamental political, economic and/or social changes that have emerged in the country" (Tatevossian, 2008). However, in order for a nation to achieve what it's aiming for through nation branding, it must prepare the building blocks for such objectives to be achieved. Another example is seen in countries where they apply nation branding 'in order to define a sort of forward-looking plan'. Thus, the brand is something of a future map for the nation, or a 'promise' (Tatevossian, 2008). In all cases, as Fan (2006) correctly said, 'nation branding …. only serves as the final touch, to add icing on the cake. If economic development in a country is like completing a gigantic jigsaw, nation branding is probably the last piece'.

Approaches and Strategies in Nation Branding

There are various approaches towards nation branding; for instance, place branding or place/destination marketing which promotes a place not just for visits and tourism but also for inward investment, job creation and settlement. Another approach concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image while bearing in mind that 'the purpose of the nation brand, the message it is trying to communicate, and also the target audience are identified before any campaign is launched' (Fan, 2006). 'One of the primary rules of nation branding is that the nation brand must be rooted in the realities of a country and its society' (Tatevossian, 2008). Fiona Gilmore (2002) clarifies this: "the important thing to realize about branding a country is that it must be an *amplification* of what is already there and not a *fabrication*... If a brand is not rooted in reality and credible, the audiences (domestic and international) will sense the dissonance and lose trust in the brand". Thus, different nations have different strategies in nation branding. For instance, "Singapore is being promoted with a new image -- it is to be a funky and creative city where it has embarked on an ambitious program to make the city-state a significant player in the global creative economy" (Ooi, 2008). Switzerland on the other hand, promotes itself by emphasizing "science and technology, higher education, and innovation environment' through the so called *swissnex network*. 'The *swissnex* network is a key component of the Swiss strategic policy on the promotion of education, research, and innovation set by the Federal Council" (Fetscherin and Marmier, 2010).

Destination/Place Branding

"Destination branding is the process of developing a unique identity or personality for a tourist (or investment) destination, and communicating the same to visitors (or prospective investors) using a name, a tagline, a symbol, a design or a combination of these to create a positive image" (Harish, 2010). The benefit of destination branding is not only to attract tourists but also "for inward investment, job creation and settlement" (Fan, 2006). Although "tourism branding has become a powerful mechanism in transmitting brand messages" (Jalilvand and Esfahani, 2010), nevertheless, this leaves the country with a challenging task to brand the place in such a differentiated unique way that tourists select it amongst the numerous choices of destinations present around the globe. "With travellers spoilt by choice of available destinations, never before has it been more important for a destination to develop an effective brand" (Pike, 2005). In fact, as advertising of different places increases and the promotions of various destinations are widely spread, the competition would be purely judged by the hearts and minds of people. Therefore, when a country builds its strategy for destination branding, it is very important that it looks into areas where hearts and minds of people are captured.

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is a component of tourism. It is basically the integration of culture and heritage in tourism in order to offer a unique cultural experience to tourists, since "cultural resources can significantly enhance the image and quality of tourist destination offer" (Urosevic, 2010). This type of tourism enables "good-quality positioning of destinations whose international competition is based on the unique and highly valued cultural resources and preserved natural heritage" (Urosevic, 2010). Therefore, countries with rich cultural resources and heritage would be better off if they develop this type of tourism approach. Cultural resources "not only include the cultural sights, museums and galleries, performances and events, but also the symbolic value of destination cultural identity, the so-called intangible cultural heritage, and the lifestyle of the residents" (Urosevic, 2010). In many countries, the national dress is considered part of the country identity. This enables the tourists to actually sense their presence within the culture of those countries. Moreover, developing tourism within a country through cultural tourism might cause tourists to be more satisfied, spend more, and sometimes extend their stay as well.

Challenges Associated with Nation Branding

Nation branding, like any other newly introduced initiatives, faces challenges. The first challenge is "how to communicate a single image or message to different audiences in different countries" (Fan, 2006). It is extremely challenging to streamline the same image amongst different minds, as different humans have different ways of thinking. Sevin (2011) correctly said that "nation branding indeed takes place in a competitive environment. It is a competition for the hearts and minds of the people as well as for their wallets." Another challenge refers to the fact that "there is usually a multiplicity of organizations engaged in crafting and delivering the brand" (Harish, 2010). Linking this challenge to the previous one, it is important that all parties involved must have a common understanding of what is being branded. Also, though these organizations may work independently, but they need to convey the same message to the audience about the brand image. Finally, the third challenge lies in being distinctive and unique. "The distinctiveness and exclusivity of a nation brand is hard to protect, as the nation has no natural monopoly on the precise qualities it is seeking to promote" (Fan, 2006). For instance, if we take 'place branding' or 'destination marketing' approach as examples, it is extremely challenging to uniquely brand a nation's tourism (in terms of landscape) in a world where there are lots of other countries with rich beautiful natural landscapes. Therefore, a country should truly have something unique and exceptional in order to stand out when compared to other countries.

Branding Oman

Brand Oman Management Unit (BOMU) was launched in Oman by the Public Authority for Investment Promotion and Export Development (PAIPED) at the start of 2009. Since Oman has diverse resources, rich culture, and old heritage such as Arabic calligraphy, marine environment, local textiles, landscape, Oman's historic leadership in trade and pioneering role in exploration, and frankincense, Brand Oman aims to bring about all these jewels when branding Oman as a nation. It celebrates the wonderful diversity that Oman is pleasured with: its unique people, stories, culture, ideas, leadership and vision. "In building and sustaining the brand promise as with products, nations have often made recourse to tailor-fit strategies, appointing brand ambassadors, hosting major sports competitions and crafting catchy taglines" (Ntamu, 2011). In Oman, BOMU was established to provide the government of Oman with timely and cogent strategic communications, media relations, and marketing support. Thus, in particular, it helps Oman build, develop, and communicate a coherent and powerful identity together with establishing and projecting a common and consistent national image. In terms of publicity, BOMU does not aim to follow the straight forward advertising for Oman as a nation. Instead, it plans to encourage a more focused, organic, sustainable, and co-ordinated approach to developing a stronger national brand. Brand Oman therefore, has a brand center which is an online system management tool to

ensure consistency in implementing the various applications of the brand. It is a web-based resource which provides brand knowledge for Brand Oman's local and international partners to ensure appropriate brand delivery. The website consists of a link where all Brand Oman publicity is captured for quick reference. A reference to all recommended websites related to Oman's government authorities, hospitality, media and other services is also included to help locals as well as tourists explore information about Oman. The website contains a link for the tourists in particular which contains information about tourism and services related to it. In addition, BOMU has also taken various initiatives such as Frontline, The Muscat Youth Summit, Inside Stories, etc. These programs proved successful when looking at the intensive attendees and participation. Nevertheless, still most locals believe that those initiatives were not publicized enough and believe that more needs to be done in this aspect.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a quantitative research approach. It employed a questionnaire to measure Omanis' (locals') awareness of nation branding in general and branding Oman in particular. The questionnaire was randomly distributed in hard copy format to a sample of 300 Omanis working in various randomly chosen organizations in Oman. Out of the 300 surveys distributed, 241 were received fully completed representing 80% of the total distributed. The questionnaire was written in both English and Arabic in order to facilitate the understanding of different terms related to nation branding, which otherwise might have not been familiar to respondents. The questionnaire consisted of fifteen (15) questions in total, all of which were closed-ended questions except for one which was a ranking question. Part one consisted of questions related to reveal Omanis' understanding of the fundamentals of nation branding and get their views on what should be Oman's image as a country. The questions were created from the ideas presented in the papers of Fan (2006), Jalilvand and Esfahani (2010), and Urosevic (2010). These papers tackled areas with direct relevance to the subject research and objectives and were tested in the form of questions crated by the authors. Part two consisted of questions related to understanding Omanis' views on the effectiveness and adequacy of Oman's current destination branding efforts in terms of development, promotion, and speed. The questions were created by the authors with the aid of the idea of cultural tourism presented in the paper of Urosevic (2010). Part three was related to Omanis' awareness of BOMU, its objectives, activities and publicity efforts. The questions were created by the authors with the aid of information available on BOMU website and the ideas presented in Urosevic (2010) paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The survey questions were analyzed using descriptive data, especially percentage of frequency of responses. The following sections provide results and discuss implications of findings.

Part 1: Locals' awareness of branding Oman as a nation

The majority (65%) of Omani respondents do not have sufficient background on nation branding. This is not much of a surprise because firstly, nation branding is a recently introduced area upon which countries have just started putting emphasis. Its importance has grown and has proven to be effective in bringing about various objectives set by any country pertaining to the outside world. By the same token, Oman has already started to raise its country image and identity through the creation of BOMU. Although most locals didn't have much background on nation branding nevertheless, mostly (61%) had the right understanding of nation branding's objective as being dependent on the country's political, economic, and social objectives. However, objectives may vary from promoting foreign investment in a country, to promoting a country's local products abroad, to promoting tourism, or even removing any unwanted/bad image about a country or revealing a new image. Therefore, it is essential that all these objectives are clearly explained to the locals through branding Oman campaigns in order for them to be able to distinguish between different countries' nation branding goals.

Furthermore, it was observed that the locals have a specific image in their minds about their own country 'Oman', that is 'a country of rich culture and heritage' as represented by 71% of the responses. This picture is supported by Oman's rich history and culture throughout its existence. When asked about their perceptions of tourists' image of Oman, more than half of them (54%) responded that 'tourists picture Oman as a country with rich culture and heritage'. It was an interesting and positive sign to find that both the locals' personal views on Oman's country image and their perceptions of tourists' views on Oman's country image fall within the same category. Additionally, this is also a good indicator that a majority of the locals believe that the tourists observe Oman's culture and heritage through their visits to Oman's major tourists spots such as Souq's (where silver handicrafts making is common and traditional clothes and jewelry are sold), forts, castles, frankincense areas and more. Moreover, since most Omani males wear the traditional dress in their everyday activities, it is a great cultural image reflecting Oman's culture to tourists throughout their visit.

Similarly, there are some areas within Oman where women still dress up in traditional clothes carrying out their everyday activities, for example in Salalah, Al Dhakhiliyah, and Al Sharqiyah. This again clearly reflects locals' strong connection to their culture, and builds a cultural image of the country in tourists' minds.

In addition, 55% of the locals suggested that Oman should focus on developing its tourism in order to attract more tourists. Tourism consists of many aspects such as Oman's beautiful landscape, mountains, beaches and more. Cultural spot developments also fall under tourism which will indeed attract more and more tourists over the coming years. Hence, since, "any branding effort should be specially designed in accordance with the unique nature of the destination place" (Jalilvand & Esfahani, 2010), therefore, Oman should focus on developing its tourism and integrating its culture and heritage in it. This approach includes the so called '*Cultural tourism*', which is "tourism of special interests, referring to visits of people outside their permanent place of residence, completely or partly motivated by the interest in history, arts, heritage and lifestyle of the location, region, group or institution"(Urosevic, 2010). This tactic is encouraged by various entities such as the *World Tourist Organization*. As stated by experts, "more than 50% of tourist visits in Europe are motivated by cultural heritage, and cultural tourism has the highest growth rate in the entire tourism sector" (Urosevic, 2010). Hence, by applying cultural tourism by developing Oman's tourism, Oman will be in a better position to brand itself as a destination attracting tourists from all over the world. Having said that, other areas such as export of local products, industrial development and technology should be explored as well as they also contribute towards branding Oman and add value to its image as a country. For instance, focusing on exporting quality local products would not only market the product brand but also the country as a whole. For example, when purchasing digital products (cameras or televisions), consumers usually care more about the country of origin of those products (i.e. Japan, Korea) rather than brand names, especially when product brands are new in the market. Oman also exports several quality products, such as Wave (sanitary items) and Amouage (perfumery products). Once consumers begin to trust the quality of such products, then definitely this will positively impact Oman's country image as being a country that produces quality products.

Part 2: Views on the effectiveness and adequacy of Oman's destination branding in terms of development, promotion, and speed

Currently, most locals believe that Oman is not branding itself effectively and adequately (as represented by 64% and 78% of the responses, respectively) as a destination, even though it is rich in both landscape and culture. As a result, through destination branding, Oman should focus on the effectiveness of its promotions which would in turn result in attracting more tourists, and enhancing outsiders' understanding of Oman as a country. Entities concerned with such promotions include Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Oman Air just to name a few. Through them, Oman can expose itself thoroughly. In addition, other sources of destination branding include Oman's presence in other countries' functions, exhibitions and festivals. Also, promotions could be done through the local radio channels or those which are in outside countries.

However, having said that, previously Oman used to be extremely unknown to foreigners and some actually had not even heard of its name. But now, thanks to the improved promotions, Oman has moved to a better position in branding itself as a destination. Nonetheless, efforts need to be increased in order to reach to higher positions in future.

Apart from this, about 33% of the respondents stated that currently Oman is being branded primarily as a destination through word of mouth. This includes foreigners (tourists, students or employees) expressing their positive experience within Oman to others. In addition, this may also include the Omanis living abroad conveying a positive image of their country (Oman) to the people in those countries.

When asked about their views on how the current destination branding method can be improved, 31% suggested that Oman should participate more in festivals abroad rather than holding festivals within the country. A key reason behind this might be that through this transformation, Oman would be exposed to a greater international audience when participating abroad as opposed to the limited foreigners who might come to attend festivals held locally. Therefore, chances of conveying Oman's image effectively and at a larger scope are greater abroad. Oman has already taken this step by participating in worldwide exhibitions such as World Expo held in China in 2010 and in Korea in 2012. Another suggestion given by 29% of the respondents included promoting Oman through social media (Facebook, Twitter…etc). This is a great and fast means of communication used by millions of users today Hence, Oman can easily and quickly convey its messages related to destination branding throughout the world by utilizing such tools.

Part 3: Omanis' awareness of Brand Oman Management Unit, its objectives, activities and publicity efforts

The results show that a very high percentage (81%) of the responding locals do not know anything about BOMU including its reason for existence, while nearly all except a few are also unaware of its website. Most of the respondents expressed that this was mainly the case due to a lack of publicity through media, whereas others linked the lack of awareness to the lack of activities performed by the unit. Therefore, since BOMU is the focal point concerned with branding Oman as a nation, it is vital that locals are aware of it and that its activities are publicized well enough. As for the website, it is considered as an effective informative tool for both locals and foreigners to get to know about Oman in general and Oman brand in particular; hence, it should be well spread across Oman and worldwide in order to achieve its purpose. "Visitors to cultural and historical sites find the needed information *mainly* through the Internet" (Urosevic, 2010). The results also reveal that most locals are not comfortable with the level of publicity done by BOMU through local media or social media. Therefore, BOMU should focus on both of those tools of communication for publicity in order to reach out to as many people as possible. This will help in branding Oman in the most effective manner.

Furthermore, since logos are equally as (or even more) important than words (as it's said, "a picture is worth a thousand words"), it was important to reveal people's views on the logo developed to reflect Oman's image. When expressing their views on brand Oman's logo, 55% of the respondents did not find the logo appealing and thought that it failed to reflect Oman's image correctly. This may be due to the fact that in the logo, the mountains are not outlined in brown for better image reflection, the logo mainly gives a marine view since all colors are in the blue range and it also lacks the signs of Omani culture within it which is an important aspect of branding Oman as a nation. In addition to the logo, it is very important to attach a slogan reflecting a country's message. "A place name by itself is not sufficient differentiation…a slogan is a necessary public articulation of a destination's brand positioning strategy" (Pike, 2005). For instance, India has the slogan '*Incredible India*' which boosted its tourism once it was launched. Also, Malaysia has the slogan '*Malaysia, truly Asia*' which flows very smoothly into anyone's heart and mind. Hence,, brand Oman should develop a similar slogan which appeals to people's hearts and mind and creates an emotional connection with the brand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

After comparing the locals' point of views against the country's efforts in branding Oman, the following conclusions can be made:

- Locals do not have sufficient background knowledge on branding nations.
- Locals (and presumably tourists) view Oman's country image as being a country with rich culture and heritage. Also, the locals suggest that Oman should focus on bringing about this image to the outside world through tourism development and thereafter, destination branding.
- Currently Oman is not branding itself effectively or adequately as a destination.
- Although BOMU is launching different activities to promote Oman's country image and identity and is using the social media to publicize their activities, yet most locals are still not aware of its existence in the first place and also its activities. They believe that it is due to a lack of publicity activities.
- Oman has started to increase its presence abroad through participation in major worldwide exhibitions such as World Expo where millions of visitors come from around the globe. Hence, this is a great opportunity for other countries to promote themselves and their images as well.
- More than half of the local respondents do not find the logo of branding Oman as appealing and attractive or as presenting the true image of Oman Additionally, there is no slogan attached to it, which is considered a crucial part of building an emotional connection to peoples' hearts and minds.

Taking into consideration above conclusions, the following recommendations can be made to strengthen Nation Branding endeavor in Oman:

- Locals should be educated on nation branding as a starting point in order to have a common background and understanding amongst all.
- Objectives of branding Oman should be clearly explained to locals, and different countries' objectives of nation branding should also be explained in order for them to understand the differences.
- Oman should focus on developing its tourism and integrating its culture and heritage in it. Simultaneously, it should also focus on other factors such as export of quality products since this would have a direct effect on country image.
- Oman should participate in festivals abroad more rather than hold festivals within the country as the audience would be at a larger range abroad both in size and variety of nationalities.

- Oman should make use of social media which is considered to be the quickest and most effective tool of communication in today's world. Although BOMU is currently using social media, however, locals are still not aware of it. Therefore, the unit needs to look into why this media is not reaching locals and find ways for improvement. For instance, text messages containing Brand Oman's website can be sent to all mobile users. In addition, activities or events can be sent as notifications too. This way, people would at least know what is happening instantly.
- Brand Oman Management Unit should start by educating people about its existence, its purpose and then follow that with various activities and heavy publicity using both local and social media. One of the most effective tools in publicity in Oman is the radio (fm) where BOMU can advertise its existence in both English and Arabic radio channels, thereby reaching out to a vast number of audience (both locals and foreigners).
- Adding an attractive slogan to differentiate Oman from being just a destination name to being a destination to which tourists are attracted, would certainly add value to Oman's destination branding

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