

Approaching the concept of country branding through systematic review

Aproximación al concepto de marca-país a través de la revisión sistemática

Hongquan Long¹ | [ORCID ID](#)
leolong@uma.es

Luxury Tourism Magazine, Spain

Isabel Ruiz-Mora² | [ORCID ID](#)
isabelruiz@uma.es

University of Malaga, Spain

Carmen Cristófol-Rodríguez³ | [ORCID ID](#)
carmen.cristofol@uma.es
University of Malaga, Spain

Recepción: 17/06/2024 Revisión: 25/06/2024 Aceptación: 25/06/2024 Publicación: 29/06/2024
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5783/revrrpp.v14i27.862>

Abstract

In today's global landscape, a well-managed nation brand stands as a crucial intangible asset, significantly enhancing a country's ability to attract investment, talent, and tourism while distinguishing itself in international competition. This study systematically reviews nation branding research from the past decade, spanning from 2014 to April 2024, by analyzing 578 peer-reviewed articles from prominent databases like Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). Utilizing bibliometric analysis techniques, including performance analysis, citation analysis, co-citation analysis, and author analysis, the study identifies key contributions, influential publications, and leading authors within the field. The findings reveal a predominant influence of Western countries in nation branding research, with emerging contributions from BRICS nations. This comprehensive review highlights significant research trends, such as the growing importance of digital media in shaping nation brands and the increasing focus on sustainability and cultural diplomacy. The study also uncovers existing knowledge gaps, particularly in the areas of measurement methodologies and the impact of geopolitical changes on nation branding. By employing VOSviewer software, the research visualizes co-citation and co-occurrence networks, providing deeper insights into the collaborative and thematic landscape of nation branding research. These visualizations reveal key clusters of research activity and

¹ Hongquan Long is a researcher, Spain. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7969-0408>

² Isabel Ruiz-Mora is associate professor at the University of Malaga, Spain. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0723-9850>

³ Carmen Cristófol-Rodríguez is associate professor at the University of Malaga, Spain. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9766-6500>. Main contact for editorial correspondence.

thematic concentrations, offering a roadmap for future investigations. The study aims to serve as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners, fostering a more nuanced understanding of nation branding and guiding future research directions in this vital area. By identifying the most influential works and authors, this review not only acknowledges the contributions made to date but also sets the stage for advancing the field through targeted research addressing identified gaps and leveraging emerging trends in global nation branding strategies.

Keywords: National branding, nation image, systematic review, bibliometric analysis, country image.

Resumen

En el panorama global actual, una marca nacional bien gestionada se erige como un activo intangible crucial, mejorando significativamente la capacidad de un país para atraer inversiones, talento y turismo, al tiempo que se distingue en la competencia internacional. Este estudio revisa sistemáticamente la investigación sobre la marca país de la última década, que abarca desde 2014 hasta abril de 2024, analizando 578 artículos revisados por pares de bases de datos prominentes como Scopus y Web of Science (WoS). Utilizando técnicas de análisis bibliométrico, que incluyen análisis de rendimiento, análisis de citas, análisis de co-citación y análisis de autores, el estudio identifica contribuciones clave, publicaciones influyentes y autores destacados dentro del campo. Los hallazgos revelan una influencia predominante de los países occidentales en la investigación sobre el branding nacional, con contribuciones emergentes de las naciones BRICS. Esta revisión integral destaca tendencias significativas de investigación, como la creciente importancia de los medios digitales en la configuración de las marcas nacionales y el creciente enfoque en la sostenibilidad y la diplomacia cultural. El estudio también descubre lagunas de conocimiento existentes, particularmente en las áreas de metodologías de medición y el impacto de los cambios geopolíticos en el branding nacional. Al emplear el software VOSviewer, la investigación visualiza redes de co-citación y co-ocurrencia, proporcionando una comprensión más profunda del panorama colaborativo y temático de la investigación sobre el branding nacional. Estas visualizaciones revelan grupos clave de actividad investigadora y concentraciones temáticas, ofreciendo una hoja de ruta para futuras investigaciones. El estudio pretende ser un recurso valioso para académicos y profesionales, fomentando una comprensión más matizada del branding nacional y guiando futuras direcciones de investigación en esta área vital. Al identificar los trabajos y autores más influyentes, esta revisión no solo reconoce las contribuciones realizadas hasta la fecha, sino que también establece las bases para avanzar en el campo mediante investigaciones dirigidas a abordar las lagunas identificadas y aprovechar las tendencias emergentes en las estrategias de branding nacional global.

Palabras clave: Marca país, branding nacional, revisión sistemática, análisis bibliométrico, imagen del país.

Summary

1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Discussion and conclusions. 6. References.

Sumario

1. Introducción. 2. Marco teórico. 3. Metodología. 4. Resultados. 5. Discusión y conclusiones. 6. Referencias.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of nation branding involves strategically constructing and promoting a nation's soft power to enhance its recognition both internationally and domestically. A strong nation brand is crucial for cultivating a positive global image, which in turn can promote trade, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), draw in talented individuals, and boost international tourism, among other advantages.

From ancient Egypt (Batey, 2016) to society nowadays, governments, public sectors, private sectors, and citizens contribute to form brands (Szondi, 2007). Nation branding is the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences (Dinnie, 2022). As a formal discipline, nation branding is still relatively new (Koh, 2020) and it is studied from different areas, such as public relations, marketing, sociology, and political science (Fan, 2006), since it is a public relations and marketing tool (Anholt, 2007), especially studied by the states through the different rankings (Anholt, 2007).

According to Xifra (2010), "at all stages of economic, social and political development, nations rely on nation building to achieve their specific national objectives. Nation building is therefore a strategic process involving several resources and policies, communication being one of the most important" (p. 118). The relationship between country branding and public relations is evident but not extensively explored in literature. For instance, Demir et al. (2015) examine how events like the Olympic Games influence country branding and visitor perceptions. Searson and Johnson (2010) analyze how transparency laws impact the visibility of national brand symbols on Latin American government websites. Jeong et al. (2013) propose digital public relations strategies to enhance a country's image. Additionally, Van Zummeren-Moreno and Haro (2019) explore nation branding during the Franco era through the lens of NODO music (van Zummeren-Moreno & Haro, 2019). Ortiz (2016) discusses cultural barriers to communication and the creation of a new narrative for Brazil's country brand, while Xifra (2010) provides an approach to national construction from a public relations perspective.

This paper collects data from peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical journals from the databases Scopus and WoS which are popular and widely used in social science research (Osiński, 2018), for the last ten years from 2014 to April of 2024. Following the systematic literature review methodology, we comprehended and concluded the concept of nation branding, and explored the importance of nation branding for countries. Furthermore, through bibliometric methodology, we identified and analyzed the existing contributions. We found the key publications, key authors, co-citation network, and co-occurrence network, among other results, with the help of the software of VOSviewer.

Even so, a well-managed nation brand is commonly considered as a valuable intangible asset for every nation in today's world. It is one of the most important aspects of international

competitiveness too. A good nation brand can influence people's choices - where to invest, where to study, where to live, and where to travel. Nations that invest in nation branding are showing a positive impression to the public in trade, investment, and tourism (Dinnie, 2022, p.6). A country with a positive image gains advantages in global competition.

Miño (2022) examines nation branding efforts in Chile, Colombia, and Peru as modern expressions of colonialism in Latin America. Through interviews with 21 professionals involved in these campaigns, the study explores how nation branding reflects economic dependency on developed nations and adherence to neoliberal ideals. The success of these efforts often depends on capturing moments of national pride, typically tied to economic growth. The article argues that nation branding embodies the "coloniality of power" concept, where countries define themselves through imposed neoliberal perspectives. It highlights Peru's particularly successful campaign, which coincided with economic growth and renewed cultural pride. His study contributes to the cultural approach to nation branding, recognizing how these efforts can reinforce power imbalances. Recent social protests and political changes in these countries challenge the neoliberal narratives underpinning previous nation branding efforts, suggesting that success in this field is more about capturing national sentiment than creating logos or campaigns.

Nation branding can play a pivotal role in helping a country reestablish its unique identity, setting it apart from competitors and making it an appealing destination for foreign tourists (Kladou et al., 2016). Transitional countries, in particular, strive to reinvent their nation brands to distance themselves from former systems and perceptions (Szondi, 2007).

The research was guided by the following objectives (O):

O1. To find out the volume of quality international scientific production that has been published on "National Branding" in the last 10 years.

O2. To identify the gaps in research on national branding research and public relations.

O3. To visually represent the most outstanding topics, authors, entities, geographical areas, and scientific publications in terms of the number of works disseminated, as well as their interrelation in collaboration networks.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The origins of the brand and its concept

The brand's origin can be traced back to ancient Egypt, where people put symbols on their bricks to recognize them. In the Middle Ages in Europe, guilds used trademarks as a brand on their products to prevent imitation and guarantee the quality of their products (Batey, 2016). Traceback the recent time, the American Marketing Association in 1960 defined a brand as a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them, which is applied to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors (Muñiz Jr., 2015). Researchers commonly agree that a brand can be tangible and intangible. A brand encloses a name, moreover, different forms in our brain's images, meanings, associations, and experiences. An intangible brand has a more profound influence

on the public. It is a conditional, intangible, and legal asset representing perceived values to all stakeholders (Fan, 2010; Kuchibharla, 2012).

Branding includes different techniques, purposes, attributes, dimensions and audiences depending on the type of implementation, which can be product, corporate, person, place, nation, etc. For a product, the brand strategies are expanded around a product or service with a clear purpose to sell products or develop relationships, using logos, packaging, stationery, marketing collateral, apparel design, signage, messages, and actions to stand out from others (Mindrut et al., 2015). For countries, brand strategies help them to position their unique identity and stand out from the competition without always needing to provide tangible attributes to their audience.

Other differences between a product brand and a national brand are the dimensions and audiences with which they work. The first one targets a specific segment and works mainly on the economic dimension; conversely, the national brand involves multiple and large audiences and is composed of political, economic, social and cultural dimensions (Fan, 2010). For example, with the brand portfolio complexity, Mexico can compete with advantages in different segments, such as culture and gastronomy, other than its Sun & Beach brand in Cancun (Puente-Díaz, 2018). From 1972 to 2002, Singapore highlighted its legal system, efficiency, and strategic location to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) (Feridun & Sissoko, 2011).

In general, brands exist to help publics choose from a bewildering array, show the product's intrinsic quality and confirm the choice of the customers. Customers identify a brand with its distinctive image, language, and association (Wheeler, 2013). On the other hand, a brand is related to an organization's reputation. Organizations recognise a brand's importance in achieving its goals and maintaining competence (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). A good reputation for an organization can attract top talents, suitable suppliers, and investment. A strong brand of an organization helps to showcase that its offerings are relevant and uniquely fulfill the expectation of customers (Ettenson & Jonathan, 2008).

2.2. Concept of nation branding

The earliest and most familiar practices of nation branding in history can be dated back to ancient China, during the Datang Heyday (A.D. 626 to A.D. 755) of the Tang Dynasty. The state implemented enlightened despotism, and ideological emancipation via the Silk Road and promoted its products, technology, arts, and cultures abroad. The state was thriving. Therefore, it had a profitable national brand and attracted thousands of foreigners from Japan, the Middle East, Europe and different parts of the world to study or do business in China. Even nowadays, Chinatown is called "Tang Ren Jie" in Chinese, where the "Tang" comes from Datang Heyday, "Ren" means people, and "Jie" means street (大唐盛世 [Datang Heyday], n.d.)

A nation's brand is an intangible asset and is influenced by culture and trends in our society (Roll, 2006). Intangible assets are increasingly important for both private businesses and countries. A brand is the most important intangible asset. Nation brands have much richer and deeper cultural resources than any other types of tangible brands like product brands (Dinnie, 2022). So far scholars and industrial practitioners do not have a consensus on the definition

of nation branding. However, in Table 1, we collect four widely-used definitions. In this article, we define nation branding as the strategic application of constructing and promoting a nation's soft power to enhance its recognition and reputation both internationally and domestically.

Table 1. Comparison of the definitions of nation branding

Author (year)	Name of publication	Definition
Dinnie (2022)	Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice	The unique, multidimensional blend of elements provides the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences.
Mittilä & Laurén (2014)	Country Branding	A country's whole image covers political, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions. The concept is at the national level, multidimensional, and context-dependent.
Ahn & Wu (2015)	The Art of Nation Branding	Nation Branding refers to the application of "marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image." Past literature has recognized the arts and culture sector as an effective way to improve a country's image.
Wiseman & Kerr (2013)	Diplomacy in Globalizing World: Theories and Practices	The application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries, in the interests of enhancing their reputation in international relations.

Source: Own elaboration.

A nation's brand derives gradually from its unique culture, people, history, natural landscape, and others. Thus, it is not easy to build in a short time. It is different from the brand of a product. Nation branding requires certain ethics such as honesty, and respect. A nation's brand should form from its culture instead of merely using marketing tricks. A nation's brand belongs to its entire citizenry not to any marketer or organization (Dinnie, 2022). Marca España (Brand Spain) project was a success in pedagogic and promotional activities that portray Spanish identity in a positive light internationally (Ulldemolins & Zamoranoa, 2014). On the other side, Nigeria attempted to develop a comprehensive national brand in the 2000s but was deemed unsuccessful due to its failure in the development phase (Papadopoulos &

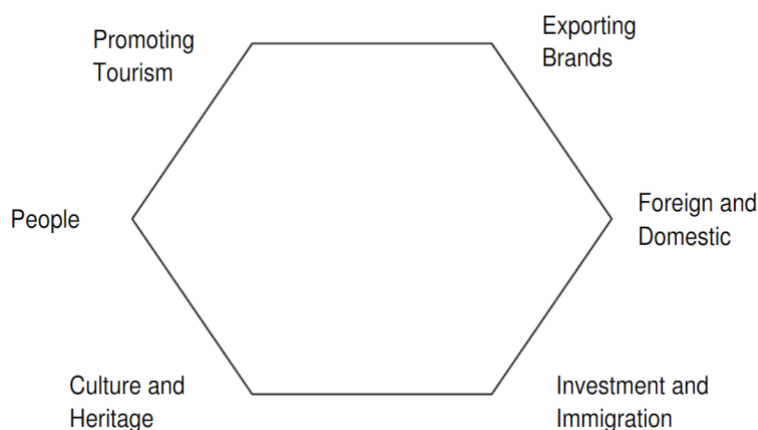
Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2015).

2.3. Benefits of Nation Branding

According to Anholt (2005), every country has a brand. Whether we admit it or not, we have impressions of some countries regardless of positive, negative, or a mix of both. These impressions have a sort of impact on people's choices - where to invest, where to study, and even where to travel. Nations that invest in nation branding are trying to give a positive impression to the public to fulfill their objectives in terms of trade, investment, and tourism (Dinnie, 2022, 6). The Maltese government applied communication practices to develop the nation brand in 2010. A coherent approach to public relations and a corporate communication rationale offer a strategic framework that helps competitiveness and sustains overall value. It is a success in developing and sustaining Brand Malta (Belete, 2017). Besides these, nations compete to attract talents which include international students (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016) and skilled workers. Nations also compete to attract customers to buy their goods (Giannopoulos, n.d.). A country with a positive image gains advantages in the global competition.

Anholt (2005) also introduced the nation brand hexagon (Figure 1) for the assessment of the nation brand with six aspects: tourism, exports, people, culture and heritage, inward investments and immigration, and foreign and domestic policy. The six aspects reflect a nation's brand and give people information about the characteristics of the nation (Mugobo & Ukpere, 2011).

Figure 1. The nation brand hexagon



Source: Anholt (2005).

Many countries consider attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) as the most important benefit among all in nation branding investment. Two Korean scholars Richard Lee and You-il Lee have comprehensive research on how nation branding helps the country to attract FDI using South Korea for the case study. Its FDI increased 7 times compared to USD 7 billion in the year 1997 with USD 15.2 billion in the year 2010 thanks to its nation brand strategies (Lee & Lee, 2019). Nation branding played an important role in helping countries like South Korea, Singapore, etc. with the FDI.

In terms of tourism, nation branding helps a country to rebuild its unique identity to stand out from the competition as an attractive destination for foreign tourists (Kladou et al., 2016). Working together with Emirates - one of the largest airlines in the world persistently for decades, Dubai has successfully branded itself with its unique desert culture but also as a safe and modern shopping destination in the Middle East (Saed et al., 2020). Expo 2020 (held from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022) further promoted the brand of Dubai and as well as the country Emirates to the world.

Transitional countries such as Central and Eastern Europe try to rebuild their national brands to distinguish them from the old system (Szondi, 2007). Estonia has rebuilt its national image from the former Soviet Union via the e-government program (Kimmo et al., 2018) to a modern high-tech state. Misconceptions about a country are dismissed by a good nation branding with specific target audiences especially in the case that there are stereotypes (Dinnie, 2022, 6). The intensive use of public media, an example of soft power, is partly responsible for the success of making the idea of being Catalan attractive among a majority of Catalans (Garcia-Muñoz, 2018).

Nation branding is essential for any nation to have a positive international image to promote trade and attract FDI, talent, and international tourists among other benefits.

2.4. PR approach to National Branding

Olins (1999) identified the parallels between nation image management and corporate communication in terms of coherence, uniqueness and identification. Largely thanks to the work of these two researchers, the discipline made the leap to the field of marketing, but it was not Fan (2010, p. 101) who went a step further by creating the concept of nation image management as an evolution of the initial concept of nation branding, whose main challenge is to communicate a unified image to audiences and potential audiences in different countries. In this way, the audiences are not only the external ones, but also the country's own inhabitants, being able to apply the situational theory of the audiences of Grunig and Hunt (1984).

Nation branding is a long-term and sophisticated communication strategy that requires the involvement of multiple publics in both planning and implementation (Donner & Fort, 2018). These publics or stakeholders are individuals or groups who can affect or be affected by the achievement of organizational objectives (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). As we work from a PR approach, we will work with the public concept from Grunig and Hunt (1984). Effective nation branding necessitates their active participation. Government and public institutions should take the lead in nation branding initiatives. As Szondi (2010) emphasizes, these entities need to invest in and spearhead nation branding efforts. The government's unique position enables it to mandate and coordinate the behavior of all stakeholders, ensuring a cohesive strategy (Tatevossian, 2008).

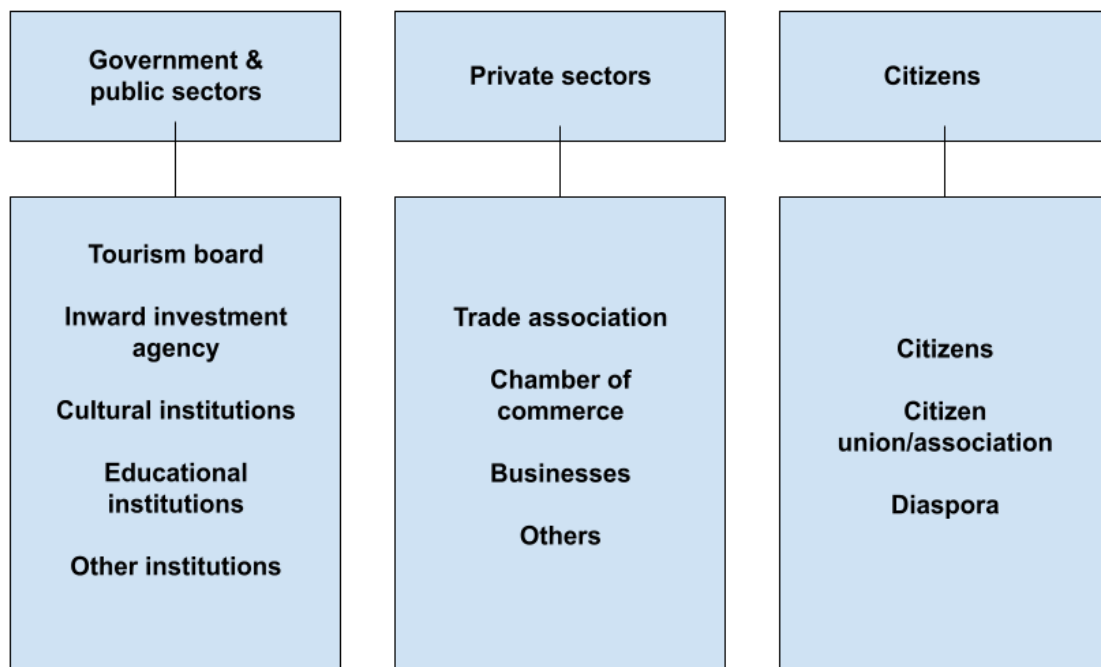
Capriotti (2010) outlines the strategic process for managing corporate branding through effective communication and he emphasizes three main stages: strategic analysis, identity profile definition, and identity profile communication. These steps are crucial for organizations to create, influence, and maintain a positive public image. Nation branding, like corporate

branding, aims to create, communicate, and maintain a positive image, but on a national scale. The principles discussed by Capriotti in managing corporate identity can be directly applied to nation branding.

Strauck Franco (2013) examines how Paraguay is portrayed in major online media outlets in Latin America and Europe, conducting a content analysis of articles published about Paraguay in 2010. It identifies certain contexts and situations that influence media coverage and information processing about Paraguay, and recognizes qualities associated with the country that could serve as elements for strategic image management. The paper underscores the importance of media in shaping public opinion and the country's image and suggests that while Paraguay's international image is not distinctly positive or negative, there are opportunities to leverage neutral coverage and positive aspects, such as the country's football achievements and cultural identity, for potential strategic nation branding.

The private sector also plays a crucial role in nation branding, businesses support goals such as export promotion, inward investment, and tourism (Dinnie et al., 2010). The synergy between public and private sectors is essential for achieving comprehensive nation branding objectives. Moreover, citizens themselves are integral to the nation's brand. As Tatevossian (2008) points out, they act as diplomats in public diplomacy. Their behavior and interactions reflect the national identity and significantly influence the perception of the nation globally. By integrating PR theories and practices, nation branding can effectively harness the collective efforts of various stakeholders to enhance the nation's international and domestic reputation. Figure 2 shows the three pillars of the stakeholders of nation branding.

Figure 2. Stakeholders of nation branding



Source: Szondi (2007).

Some countries fall into the scenario that different institutions work in their fields without a centralized coordinating party. As a result, a consistent nation brand is hardly built. A good nation brand takes time to build but the term of each government in a democratic society is shorter and shorter than what a branding campaign necessitates (Dinnie, 2008, pp.170-172). Therefore, the government is not only a pillar but also should work in the role of coordination and consider nation branding as a long-term plan instead of a short-term marketing campaign.

3. METODOLOGY

Branding is a very studied topic, especially in the 21st century. Based on a search of the Web of Science database, we can find more than 140,000 studies regarding “Branding” in May 2024. This subject has been researched since the 20th century and raised attention at the beginning of the 21st century. As we can observe from this search result, the sum of the research during the first six years of the 21st century (total of 13027 works) overcomes all the research done during the 20th century (12143 results). However, we found that studies regarding “Nation branding” do not have the weight; there are only 5138 from all the databases.

Nation branding is an interdisciplinary topic studied in economics, tourism, communication, marketing, and international relations has been done simultaneously. We can find numerous studies related to this issue. For this reason, we choose systematic review and bibliometric analysis as methodological approaches since both of them are rigorous and widely used in scientific research to determine the core research or relationship between the author and the research. With the help of these techniques, we can better understand the main interests of the given topic from the large volume of data (Sepulcri et al., 2020; Donthu et al., 2021).

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of nation branding research in the last ten years, we conducted a preliminary systematic literature review to collect data on the relevant keywords of “nation branding”, “nation brand”, and “country brand” on Scopus, WoS, and Google Scholar. This step helps us prove if there is a sufficient publication on our research subject. The results are in a significant volume of more than 15,000 in different disciplines. Considering the data obtained, systematic analysis is an appropriate method to execute such research, according to Naveen et al. (2021). In addition to answering the research objects, we selected several variable analyses as follows:

- Citation analysis: to detect the most influential publications.
- Co-citation analysis: to discover the relationships among cited publications and foundment possible future studying topics.
- Author analysis: to detect most relative authors in this theme.
- The authors’ analysis and keyword co-occurrences provide additional insight into the topic and potential areas for further research.

Table 2. Metrics for analysis in this paper

Variables	Requiring data	Usage
Publications from academic	Journals	Total publication of research constituent from academic
Number of contributing authors (NCA)	Author	Total number of authors contributing to publications of research constituent
Country of origin	Country	The country of origin of the organization of the authors.
Citation análisis	Author, citations title, journals, DOI, references	To analyze the relationships among publications by identifying the most influential publications in a research field.
Discipline	Discipline	Discipline of the journals and publication.
Methodology análisis	Title, abstract, journal papers	To find out the methodologies that are used in the papers.

Source: Adapted from Donthu et al. (2021).

In addition to realizing bibliometric analysis, it is necessary to clarify the topic or issue under investigation, select researching objects, decide on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and clean data. In this paper, we obtained data from peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical journals from WOS and Scopus in social science for a period of ten years from 2014 to April 2024, which covers almost the whole period of scientific production in nation branding. We collected the data from reputed databases Scopus and WoS. Scopus is Elsevier's abstract and citation database launched in 2004 and it covers approximately 11,678 publishers. It uniquely combines a comprehensive, expertly curated abstract and citation database with enriched data and linked scholarly literature across a wide variety of disciplines. (Elsevier. n.d.) and WoS has a significant advantage as a tool to evaluate the research impact on the social sciences (Norris & Oppenheim, 2007). The Web of Science is also the world's most trusted publisher-independent global citation database. It is the most powerful research engine, delivering best-in-class publication and citation data for confident discovery, access, and assessment. (Clarivate. n.d.).

Table 3. Details of the dataset

Sources	Period	Query	Date of download
Scopus and Web of Science	2014 to April 2024	Edit TITLE-ABS-KEY ("nation branding" OR "country branding" OR "nation brand" OR "country brand") AND PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "soci") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "busi") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "arts") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "econ")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "english") OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "spanish") OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "chinese"))	10th of April, 2024

Source: own elaboration.

Researchers used different keywords to research the same concept - nation branding. These keywords are “nation branding, country branding, nation brand, and country brand”. Thus, when we do the query, we do not limit it only to the keyword “nation branding” to find out more related articles. The period of this query is from April 2014 to the 10th of April 2024. According to Urbizagastegui (2016), English, Spanish, and Chinese are the languages most used in academic publications. Also, the related articles in the three languages occupy 96% of the total results. Therefore, in this article, our analysis and report are based on the articles in these three languages.

From our preliminary research, we found that only papers from certain disciplines are related to nation branding. To increase the accuracy of the results, we set them within the disciplines of social sciences, business, management and accounting, arts and humanities, economics, econometrics, and finance. And exclude irrelevant disciplines such as engineering, computer science, etc in which researchers only mention nation branding briefly but the scopes do not have much to do with nation branding according to our preliminary research by reading those papers.

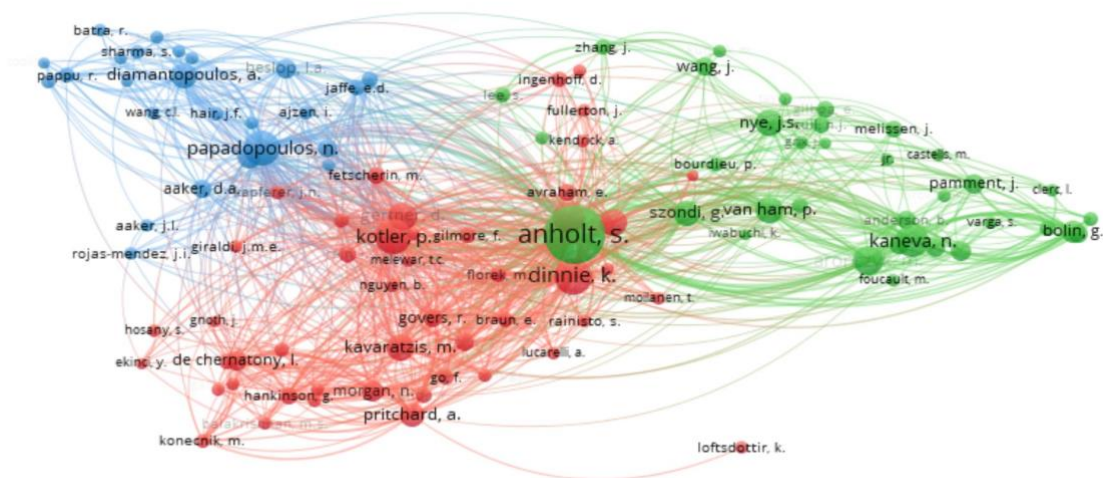
After the data was collected, we applied the bibliometric analysis to further examine the articles by using VOSviewer software to analyze the authors, institutions, and regions of the journal articles. The intellectual structure was discovered by using a citation network, co-citation network, or bibliographic coupling network. A keyword co-occurrence network was applied to find out the key concepts that have been explored in nation branding, and then we will select most-cited articles to do further analysis to find out their key concepts and methodologies. Lastly, we will read the top 50 most-cited articles to find out potential research gaps in nation branding. Finally, the results will be analyzed and synthesized, and descriptive statistics can be used, such as frequency tables or network mappings.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Citation analysis and keyword co-occurrence analysis

The analysis of citation networks and co-citation networks can help identify the most influential publications and authors in a research field. Figure 3 shows the interaction of authors by citations generated in nation branding research over the last ten years (2014–2024). Anholt S, Kaneva N, and Papadopoulos N are the authors that have received the highest number of citations among the articles analyzed.

Figure 3. Interaction of the authors by citations generated in nation branding over the last ten years (2014–2024)



Source: own elaboration.

To explore the key concepts and themes explored in nation branding research, we conducted a keyword co-occurrence analysis. Figure 4 presents the results, showing distinct clusters of co-occurring keywords. The size of the circle represents the total strength of the keyword links with other keywords. We can observe that public diplomacy, soft power, country image, tourism and national identity are the most relevant keywords in relation to this topic apart from nation branding itself. The two biggest clusters are in red and green. The red cluster is led by tourism and includes keywords such as brand equity, branding, competitiveness, country brand, country of origin, destination branding, foreign direct investment, image, nation, place branding, reputation, and others. The green cluster is led by public diplomacy and includes keywords such as Estonia, identity, international relations, media, migration, nation brands, national identity, nationalism, politics, and soft power.

Andy W. Hao, Justin Paul, Sangeeta Trott, Chiquan Guo, Heng-Hui Wu	2019	Two decades of research on nation branding: a review and future research agenda	67	Measurement of nation branding	Systematic review
Browning Christopher S.	2015	Nation branding, national self-esteem, and the constitution of subjectivity in late modernity	66	Nation brand personality	Qualitative analysis - phenomenology
Foroudi Pantea et al.	2016	A framework of place branding, place image, and place reputation: Antecedents and moderators	62	Brand, image and reputation	Qualitative analysis - face-to-face in-depth interviews
Iwabuchi Koichi	2015	Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: Soft power, nation branding and the question of 'international cultural exchange'	59	Brand, image and reputation	Qualitative analysis - historical study
Rojas-Méndez José et al.	2013	The U.S. brand personality: A Sino perspective	56	Nation brand personality	Qualitative analysis - grounded theory
Bmann Alexander, IngenHoff Diana	2015	The 4D Model of the country image: An Integrative approach from the perspective of communication management	54	Measures of a Country Brand	Qualitative analysis - Thematic analysis

Source: own elaboration.

4.3. Identification of research gaps

To identify potential research gaps in nation branding, we closely examined the 50 most cited articles in our dataset. One gap that emerged is the lack of comprehensive measurement methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of nation branding strategies. While some studies have proposed frameworks or models (e.g., Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015), there is a need for more robust and widely accepted measurement approaches.

Another gap relates to the impact of geopolitical changes and global events on nation branding strategies. As the geopolitical landscape shifts, nations may need to adapt their branding approaches to align with new realities and perceptions. However, this aspect has not been extensively explored in the literature.

From a public relations perspective, there is an opportunity to further investigate the role of strategic communication and stakeholder engagement in nation branding initiatives. While some studies have touched upon the importance of public diplomacy and citizen involvement

(e.g., Szondi, 2010; Tatevossian, 2008), more research is needed to understand how PR principles and practices can contribute to effective nation branding. As Xifra (2010, 118)- aptly noted, "at all stages of economic, social and political development, nations rely on nation building to achieve their specific national objectives. Nation building is therefore a strategic process involving several resources and policies, communication being one of the most important". This underscores the critical role that public relations can play in nation branding efforts.

Future research should focus on how PR strategies can be integrated into nation branding campaigns to enhance their effectiveness. This includes exploring areas:

- Stakeholder mapping and engagement. Developing comprehensive strategies to identify and engage with diverse stakeholder groups, both domestically and internationally.
- Reputation management. Investigating how PR techniques can be applied to build and maintain a positive national reputation in the face of challenges or crises.
- Crisis communication. Examining how nations can effectively manage their brand during times of political, economic, or social upheaval.
- Digital and social media strategies. Analyzing how digital PR tools and social media platforms can be leveraged to reach global audiences and shape perceptions of national brands. Measurement and evaluation:
 - Developing PR-focused metrics and methodologies to assess the impact and effectiveness of nation branding initiatives.
 - Cultural diplomacy. Exploring how PR can facilitate cultural exchange and promote understanding between nations as part of broader nation branding efforts.

Our research highlights the potential for public relations to play a more prominent role in nation branding initiatives, an aspect that has not been extensively explored in previous studies. By integrating PR concepts and practices, such as stakeholder engagement, strategic communication, and reputation management, nations can enhance the effectiveness of their branding efforts.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of nation branding research through a systematic review and bibliometric analysis of peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and April 2024. By addressing the first research objective (O1), we found a significant volume of international scientific production on nation branding, with 578 articles identified from prominent databases like Scopus and Web of Science. This highlights the growing interest and importance of nation branding as a research topic across various disciplines, including social sciences, business, management, arts, and economics.

Regarding the second research objective (O2), our analysis revealed several gaps and potential areas for future research in nation branding. One of the key gaps identified is the lack of comprehensive and widely accepted measurement methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of nation branding strategies. While some studies have proposed frameworks or models, there is a need for more robust and standardized approaches to quantify the success of nation branding initiatives. This gap presents an opportunity for researchers to develop and validate new measurement tools or adapt existing methodologies from related fields.

Another gap relates to the impact of geopolitical changes and global events on nation branding strategies. As the geopolitical landscape shifts, nations may need to adapt their branding approaches to align with new realities and perceptions. However, this aspect has not been extensively explored in the literature. Future research could investigate how nations can proactively manage their brands in response to geopolitical shifts, conflicts, or global crises, and how these events reshape national identities and public perceptions.

From a public relations perspective, our study identified an opportunity to further explore the role of strategic communication and stakeholder engagement in nation branding initiatives. While some studies have recognized the importance of public diplomacy and citizen involvement, more research is needed to understand how PR principles and practices can contribute to effective nation branding. This includes areas such as stakeholder mapping, reputation management, crisis communication, and the integration of digital and social media strategies into nation branding campaigns.

Through the co-occurrence analysis of keywords (addressing O3), we identified public diplomacy, tourism, country image, soft power, and national identity as prominent themes and concepts in nation branding research. This aligns with the multidimensional nature of nation branding, encompassing political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. However, it also highlights the need for a more balanced approach, as some areas, such as sustainability and cultural diplomacy, appear to be underrepresented in the current literature.

In our personal interpretation as researchers, the field of nation branding presents exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge exchange. By integrating insights from various disciplines, such as public relations, marketing, political science, and cultural studies, researchers can develop a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved in shaping and managing a nation's brand. Moreover, the increasing relevance of digital platforms and social media in nation branding campaigns calls for innovative approaches that leverage these channels effectively while addressing potential challenges such as misinformation and reputational risks.

This systematic review and bibliometric analysis have contributed to a deeper understanding of nation branding research by identifying key publications, authors, and thematic clusters, as well as highlighting existing gaps and potential areas for future investigation. The findings underscore the multidimensional nature of nation branding and the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach that considers various stakeholders and communication channels. As nations continue to navigate an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, effective nation branding strategies will play a crucial role in shaping perceptions, attracting investment

and talent, and promoting cultural exchange and understanding.

Our research has certain limitations which can also be opportunities for future research. Firstly, we only used the databases of Scopus and WoS. The articles that are not in the two big databases were not studied. Some aspects of the paper, for example: less-cited due to the publication date, were not able to be obtained or further analyzed during our research. Secondly, we only selected the articles from academic journals while other types of publications were excluded such as conference proceedings, books, etc. In this line, Dinnie (2022, 2015, 2008) has published three textbooks on nation branding which are important references. Thirdly, due to the sample size, some articles were not analyzed. High-quality papers outside the timeframe were not further analyzed either. Last but not least, we limited our research to three languages (English, Chinese, and Spanish). We suggest new scholars read the latest nation branding textbook by Dinnie, and the top articles in Table 6 to further understand nation branding. Nevertheless, our research can still be a good reference for researchers who are interested in nation branding.

6. REFERENCES

- Ahn, M. J., & Wu, H.C. (2015). The art of nation branding: National branding value and the role of government and the arts and culture sector. *Public Organization Review*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-013-0255-6>.
- Anholt, S. (2005). Anholt Nation Brands Index: How does the world see America? *Journal of Advertising Research*, 45 (3), 296-304. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021849905050336>
- Anholt, S. (2008). Las marcas país. *Estudios Internacionales*, 41(161), 193-197. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-3769.2008.14290>
- Argenti, P. A., & Druckemiller, B. (2004). Reputation and the corporate brand. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 6, 368–374. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540005>
- Batey, M. (2016). *Brand Meaning: Meaning, Myth and Mystique in Today's Brands (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Belete, M. (2017). The brand image of Malta as a tourism destination: A case study in public relations and corporate communication practice. *VISTAS: Education, Economy and Community*, 44-61. <https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/3147>
- Belloso, J. C. (2010). Country brand: A differentiation mechanism and source of intangibles. *Paradigmes, economía productiva i coneixement*, 5, 42-51. <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Paradigmes/article/view/218443/297603>
- Boulding, K. E. (1959). National images and international systems. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3(2), 120-131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002759003002>
- Capriotti, P. (2010). Branding corporativo: Gestión estratégica de la identidad corporativa. *Revista Comunicación*, 27, 15-22

Chaves, E., Botelho, D., & Giraldo, J. (2019). Análisis del valor de la marca país y de la percepción de cultura. *Estudios y perspectivas en turismo*, 28(3), 570-588.

Clarivate. (n.d.) Web of Science Group. <https://clarivate.com/webofsciencelgroup/solutions/web-%20of-%20science>

de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., Rando-Cueto, D., & Iglesias-Sánchez, P. (2022). Articles in health communication: A science mapping analysis in Web of Science. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031705>

Demir, A. Z., Eliaz, M., Cebi, M., Cekin, R., & Yamak, B. (2015). A strategic approach for export: Improving country image through the Olympics. *The Anthropologist*, 20(3), 457-461. <https://doi.org/10.31784/zvr.11.1.13>

Dinnie, K. (2008). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Butterworth-Heinemann.

Dinnie, K. (2015). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Routledge.

Dinnie, K. (2022). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Routledge.

Dinnie, K., Melewar, T. C., Seidenfuss, K.-U., & Musa, G. (2010). Nation branding and integrated marketing communications: An ASEAN perspective. *International Marketing Review*, 27(4), 388-403. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02651331011058572>

Donner, M., & Fort, F. (2018). Stakeholder value-based place brand building. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 27 (7), 807-818. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-10-2017-1652>

Donthu, N., Kumar, S., Mukherjee, D., Pandey, N., & Lim, W. M. (2021). How to conduct a bibliometric analysis: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 133, 285-296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.070>

Elsevier. (n.d.). Scopus. <https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus>

Ettenson, R., & Jonathan, A. (2008). Don't confuse reputation with brand. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 49(2), 19-21.

Fan, Y. (2010). Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6, 97-103 <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.16>

Feridun, M., & Sissoko, Y. (2011). Impact of FDI on economic development: A causality analysis for Singapore (1976-2002). *International Journal of Economic Sciences and Applied Research*, 1, 7-17.

Giannopoulos, A. A. (n.d.). "Desti-Nation Branding": What for? From the notions of tourism and nation branding to an integrated framework. In Berlin International Economics Congress (2011).

García-Muñoz, C. (2018). Achievements and limits of strategic communication for nation-building: The case of Spain's Catalan region (1979-2017). *Revista Internacional de Relaciones Públicas*, 15(8), 129-152. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5783/RIRP-15-2018-08-129-152>

Grunig, J.E. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. Holt, Rinehart and Wilson.

Hao, A. A., Paul, J., Trott, S., Guo, C., & Wu, H.-H. (2021). Two decades of research on nation branding: A review and future research agenda. *International Marketing Review*, 38(1), 46-69. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-01-2019-0028>

Herrero-Crespo, Á., Gutiérrez, H. S. M., & Garcia-Salmones, M. d. M. (2016). Influence of country image on country brand equity: Application to higher education services. *International Marketing Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-02-2015-0028>

Hosseini, S. (2021). Memorable tourism experience research: A systematic review of the literature. *Tourism Recreation Research*. 48 (3), 465–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1922206>

Johnson, H., & Gentles-Peart, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Brand Jamaica: Reimagining a National Image and Identity*. Nebraska University.

Kladou, S., Kavaratzis, M., Rigopoulou, I., & Salonika, E. (2016). The role of brand elements in destination branding. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 6 (4), 426-435 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.06.011>

Koh, B. S. (2020). *Brand Singapore: Nation Branding in a World Disrupted by Covid-19*. Marshall Cavendish International (Asia).

Maurya, U. K., & Mishra, P. (2012). What is a brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 4(3), 122-133. <https://www.iiste.org/journals/index.php/EJBM/article/view/1322>

Kuhzady, S. (2020). Peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation in the sharing economy: A review. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 25 (19), 3115–3130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1786505>

Lee, R., & Lee, Y. (2019). The role of nation brand in attracting foreign direct investments: A case study of Korea. *International Marketing Review*, 38 (1), 124-140. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-01-2019-0024>

Meng, X. (2020). *National Image: China's Communication of Cultural Symbols*. Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3147-7_5

Mindrut, S., Manolica, A., & Roman, C. T. (2015). Building brands identity. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 20, 393-403. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(15\)00088-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(15)00088-X)

Miño, P. (2022). Nation Branding as a Modern Expression of Colonialism in Latin America: A Focus on Chile, Colombia, and Peru. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 2762–2780.

Mittilä, T. S., & Laurén, H. L. M. (2014). Country branding. In 2014 *International Conference on Global Economy, Commerce and Service Science (GECSS-14)* (pp. 370-373). Atlantis Press.

Mugobo, V. V., & Ukpere, W. I. (2011). Is country branding a panacea or poison? *African Journal of Business Management*, 5(20), 8248-8255. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJBM11.951>

Muñiz Jr., A. M. (2015). *Brands and branding*. In The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosb047>

Norris, M., & Oppenheim, C. (2007). Comparing alternatives to the Web of Science for coverage of the social sciences' literature. *Journal of Informetrics*, 1(2), 161-169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2006.12.001>

Olins, W. (1999). *Trading Identities: Why countries and companies are taking on each others' role* in Dinnie, K. (2004) Place Branding: Overview of an emerging literature, *Place Branding*, 1, 1, 106-110.

Ortiz, F. C. (2016). The view to another: cultural barriers to communication, new narrative and Brazil country brand. *Revista Científica Hermes*, 15, 242-262.

Osiński, Z. (2018). The usefulness of data from Web of Science and Scopus databases for analyzing the state of a scientific discipline: The case of library and information science. *Zagadnienia Informacji Naukowej-Studia Informacyjne*, 57, 45-93. <https://doi.org/10.36702/zin.469>

Papadopoulos, N., & Hamzaoui-Essoussi, L. (2015). Place images and nation branding in the African context: Challenges, opportunities, and questions for policy and research. *Africa Journal of Management*, 1, 54-77 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322373.2015.994423>

Puente-Díaz, R. (2018). Using international sport events as part of a brand construction strategy: The case of the destination brand Mexico. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 19 (2), 147-159 <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-08-2017-0088>

Roll, M. (2006). *Asian Brand Strategy: How Asia Builds Strong Brands*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Saed, R. A., Upadhya, A., & Saleh, M. A. (2020). Role of airline promotion activities in destination branding: Case of Dubai vis-à-vis Emirates Airline. *European Research on Management and Business Economics*, 26 (3), 121-126 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iemeen.2020.07.001>

Sánchez-Nuñez, P., Cobo, M., De Las Heras-Pedrosa, C., Peláez, J., & Herrera-Viedma, E. (2020). Opinion mining, sentiment analysis and emotion understanding in advertising: A bibliometric analysis, en *IEEE Access*, 8, 134563-134576 <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2020.3009482>

Searson, E. M., & Johnson, M. A. (2010). Transparency laws and interactive public relations: An analysis of Latin American government Web sites. *Public Relations Review*, 36(2), 120-126. <https://doi.org/10.21013/jems.v15.n2.p1>

Strauck Franco, M. A. (2013). La información publicada en la prensa internacional como elemento configurador de la imagen de los países: el caso de Paraguay. *Revista Internacional de Relaciones Públicas*, 3(5), 69-94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5783/RIRP-5-2013-05-69-94>

Smith, R. D. (2013). *Public Relations: The Basics*. Routledge.

Szondi, G. (2007). The role and challenges of country branding in transition countries: The Central and Eastern European experience. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(1), 8-20. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000044>

Szondi, G. (2010). From image management to relationship building: A public relations approach to nation branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6, 333-343. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.32>

Tatevossian, A. R. (2008). Domestic society's (often-neglected) role in nation branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 4, 182-190. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2008.8>

Ulldemolins, J. R., & Zamorano, M. M. (2014). Spain's nation branding project Marca España and its cultural policy: The economic and political instrumentalization of a homogeneous and simplified cultural image. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21 (1), 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2013.877456>

Van Zummeren-Moreno, G., & Haro, R. (2019). NoDo en la construcción de imagen marca país en el primer franquismo (1943-1951). *Revista Internacional de Relaciones Públicas*, 9(18), 29-52. <https://doi.org/10.5783/revrrpp.v9i18.610>

Wheeler, A. (2013). *Designing Brand Identity: An Essential Guide for the Whole Branding Team*. Wiley.

Wiseman, G., & Kerr, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practices*. OUP USA.

Xifra i Triadú, J. (2010). Relaciones públicas y nacionalismo: una aproximación a la construcción nacional desde la perspectiva de las relaciones públicas. *Trípodos*, 26, 117-132. <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Tripodos/article/view/187680>

Xiao, Y., & Watson, M. (2019). Guidance on conducting a systematic literature. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 39(1), 93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17723>