Research Paper

The nation branding opportunities provided by a sport mega-event: South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade there has been a growing awareness of the significant impact that hosting sport mega-events can have on a nation's brand. This paper discusses the context of nation branding and the role of sport mega-events in generating a nation branding legacy. A nation brand is not owned or controlled by a single organisation, but rather jointly developed and delivered by a network of public and private sector organisations. The examination of both event and brand stakeholder perceptions and experiences post the event was therefore identified as an important research area. The case of South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup was selected as improving the brand image was clearly stated as an aim for the host nation. The paper is based on a qualitative study that featured in-depth interviews conducted with definitive stakeholders from the public and private sectors ($n=8$), within two of the major host cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town that took place two years post the event. The paper details the perceptions, experiences and reflections of these stakeholders relating to the branding opportunities and the legacy from the event and the degree to which these were leveraged. The paper contends that there are significant branding opportunities for nations beyond merely publicity, brand awareness and short-term perception changes. Greater knowledge and understanding of a brand can be developed through the experiences and engagement of visitors, citizens and members of the international business community, leading to the establishment of a more authentic brand image. Furthermore, there is also the opportunity to use these new image perceptions to position the nation brand for competitive advantage in tourism as well as business and investment sectors. Two key influencing factors of the nation branding legacy were identified, namely the media (including traditional and new media) and the role of local citizens. The discourse surrounding leveraging of legacies is furthered and supported, as it is clear that the success and legacy of the mega-event are a result of strategic activities of stakeholders. A nation branding legacy is therefore a combination of the opportunities provided by the sport mega-event and the strategic intention and activities of stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

The first ever FIFA World Cup on African soil took place from 11 June to 11 July 2010. Although South Africa had hosted other sport mega-events, such as the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the 1996 African Nations Cup (football) and the 2003 Cricket World Cup, the 2010 FIFA World Cup represented by far the largest sport event to be hosted. One of the principal issues for all concerned with the organisation of the 2010 event was the issue of legacy, and in particular, the legacy of the event for the South African nation brand. Indeed, the 2010 Organising Committee made it clear that the vision for the event,

and one of its main objectives, was to change the global perceptions of South Africa and the African continent (Jordaan, 2011).

South Africa faces branding challenges similar to most developing nations, given the unfamiliarity of its brand and also having potentially incorrect, out-dated or stereotyped associations. The "Brand Africa"/continent brand effect results in all African nations being associated with the same attributes (Anholt, 2007). For "Brand Africa", these tend to include the negative problems associated with the continent, such as crime, civil war, famine, disease and corruption. A study of nation brand perceptions of South Africa conducted during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Knott, Swart, Turco, & Bob, 2010) confirmed this, showing that there were limited clear perceptions of South Africa's nation brand. In addition, heightened media attention on the nation in the lead up to the mega-event had focused on many negative aspects such as inflation, crime and xenophobic riots, casting

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doubt on the country's ability to successfully and safely host the event (Tomlinson, Bass, & Pillay, 2009).

As the largest sport event to be hosted on the African continent, the 2010 FIFA World Cup provided a platform for the host nation to be showcased to the largest global television audience for any single-sport event ever and created an opportunity to dispel common stereotypes about Africa and dispel Afro-pessimism (Donaldson & Ferreira, 2009; Tomlinson et al., 2009). The case of South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup is therefore an interesting one, as the host nation represents a country that clearly stated its intention to use a sport mega-event to develop its nation brand. The following section reviews the development of the literature related to nation branding and the role of sport mega-events.

2. Nation branding opportunities & challenges

Widler (2007, p. 145) refers to nation branding as a 'discourse', explaining this as 'a body of shared knowledge about a particular thing in the world'. Fan (2010, p. 98) points out that despite the 'huge growth' in publications in this field in the first decade of this century, there has been a 'disappointing lack of progress in conceptual development'. According to Dinnie (2009, p. 15) a nation brand is:

'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences'.

This definition acknowledges the multi-faceted or complex nature of the nation brand. One of these complexities is that there are numerous powerful stakeholders interested in shaping the nation brand (e.g. representatives from government, commerce, not-for-profit organisations, tourism and the media) to appeal to multiple target audiences (Dinnie, 2009). The definition is linked to the "holistic" view of branding, i.e. acknowledging that a brand is more than merely the designed or created aspects, but includes the perceptions and images that reside in the consumer's mind (Blichfeldt, 2003). The core branding objective of providing differentiation is also mentioned. The wording "culturally grounded" implies that Dinnie favours a bottom-up approach to nation branding, ensuring that the brand identity is rooted in the identity, history and culture of its citizens. Fan (2010, p. 101) proposes a slightly different emphasis in his definition:

'Nation branding is a process by which a nation's images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience'.

This definition stresses the process and actions of brand stakeholders and stresses the central activity of nation image management. Similar to Dinnie's definition, it notes that nation brands are constructed and managed by stakeholders and do not simply come into existence on their own, and furthermore, that there is a strategic intentionality to the process, namely that it is expected to result in positive reputation.

The leadership and control of a nation brand are particularly challenging. According to Hankinson (2010), a nation brand is not owned or controlled by a single organisation, but rather jointly developed and delivered by a network of public and private sector organisations. Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2010, p. 3) even note a criticism of place branding being that 'there are too many stakeholders and too little management control'. Dinnie (2011, p. 70) approaches this challenge from an ethical perspective, raising two key issues: firstly, "Who has the legitimacy to act as the place brand manager?" and secondly, 'Who should decide upon the brand values that underpin the brand strategy?'.

Although a generic list of legitimate stakeholders is not defined in the literature, the following typical roles of key nation brand stakeholders are mentioned (Anholt, 2007; Scott, Ashton, Ding, & Xu, 2011): tourist boards; chambers of commerce or investment promotion agencies; cultural institutes; exporters; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; government agencies; and possibly a variety of other bodies, agencies, ministries, special interest groups, NGOs and companies all conducting a form of nation branding. Although a number of stakeholders may be involved in nation branding, Anholt (2007) lays the primary responsibility for this on government.

Increased global competitiveness among nations, be it for trade and investment or for tourism, appears to have led to the development of nation branding. Anholt (2007) explains that in the struggle for competitive advantage, national reputation is becoming more and more significant as countries compete for the attention, respect and trust of investors, tourists, consumers, donors, immigrants, media and governments. Van Ham (2001, p. 2) explains that in 'today's world of information overload, strong brands are important in attracting foreign direct investment, recruiting the best and the brightest, and wielding political influence'. The "unbranded" state has a difficult time attracting economic and political attention. Image and reputation have therefore become essential parts of the state's strategic equity (Van Ham, 2001). A successful nation brand is therefore seen as a key national asset providing strong competitive advantage for a nation (Anholt, 2007; Olins, 2002). To this effect, Anholt (2007, p. 75) prefers to use the term 'competitive identity' to describe the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion.

The challenge appears to be to create an 'authentic' brand image. Govers and Go (2009, p. 17) refer to the 'true identity' of a nation as the full set of unique characteristics or set of meanings that exist in a country and its culture at a given point in time, nevertheless realising that this identity is subject to change and might include various fragmented identities. They urge that this true identity should be the foundation on which to build the nation brand propositions. Similarly, Olins (2002) warns that nation branding can be counter-productive if it is not rooted in fact.

Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011) highlight the importance of managing the nation brand "bottom up"; in other words starting from the people (local citizens). Understanding that brand meanings are socially constructed, culturally dependant and communally "owned" promotes a radical shift in understanding brands and brand ownership (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). Brand meanings are constantly co-created and re-presented by the community, reflecting, as they do, the everyday experience of their constituents. The resulting brand essence is dynamic, authentic and, most importantly, collective. For place brand managers this requires a more inclusive, integrative and comprehensive approach to identifying the meaning-making processes that constitute a brand.

Simonin (2008, p. 23) refers to the 'four pillars', 'critical dimensions' or 'marketing spaces' of nation branding as being: public diplomacy; tourism; exports; and foreign direct investment. He acknowledges that other dimensions have been advanced, such as people, culture and heritage. Fan (2010, p. 98) supports these assessments, although he simplifies it in his assertion that nation branding is concerned with 'a country's whole image on the international stage, covering political, economic and cultural dimensions'. This is similar to an early definition of nation branding by Anholt (2003, p. 11), who likens it to a 'strategic vision', defining the activity of nation branding as:

'determining the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country, and ensuring that this vision is supported, reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between the country and the rest of the world'.

The final aspect of this definition hints at the potential for nation branding that hosting a sport mega-event may hold for a nation. This is the focus of the following section.