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Diversity Appreciated? a Visual Longitudinal Analysis of Ukraine'S Nation Branding Campaigns

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Grounded on visual analysis, this paper discusses Ukraine's nation branding campaigns since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Our study i) highlights the specifics of nation branding for a country with a problematic nation image, and ii) suggests that power dynamics between international tourists and local citizens might be reverted in favor of the former party.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nation branding efforts of Ukraine, a post-communist country, since gaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In detail, our study aims at: i) highlighting the specifics of nation branding campaigns for Ukraine, whose communist past fuels a nation image problematic to promote; and ii) grounding future research that will analyze the power dynamics between Ukrainian citizens and international tourists who are the main audience for these campaigns.

Nation branding falls within the field of place branding (Fan 2009; Gnoth 2002; Hanna and Rowley 2008) that covers an array of studies differing in terms of: i) unit of analysis (city versus nation), ii) stakeholders (local and national governments, citizens, companies, and the media), and iii) objectives of enhancing exports, protecting local/national production, attracting tourists and investors, and facilitating international relations (Papadopoulos 2004). It also shows differences from the country-of-origin research. While the latter holds companies' perspective and leverages the place to improve the attractiveness of other products designed/assembled/produced in that place, place branding literature fosters the perspective of governments and individuals (tourists and local dwellers) and considers the place as the main object of market exchange (Anholt 2004; 2011).

Existing research on place branding can be divided into managerially or conceptually driven studies. Managerial projects explore the application of marketing to improve the economic development of the place (Anholt 2004; 2011; Fan 2009; 2006; Giannopoulos, Piha and Avlonitis 2011; Jaffe and Nebenzhal 2001; Kotler and Gertner 2002). More conceptual projects investigate connections between place, city and nation branding (Hanna and Rowley 2008), the boundary between place branding and country-of-origin (Papadopoulos 2004) or between nation brand and nation branding (Fan 2006) and the differences between corporate and place branding (Kavaratzis 2005).

Our research analyzes longitudinally the nation branding campaigns of Ukraine. With a population of around 45 million, Ukraine has been developing an increasingly tight relationship with the EU (http://eeas.europa.eu/ukraine/index_en.htm). Several reasons justify the choice of our empirical setting: i) the country is transitioning from a central economy to a market economy, thus striving to develop a nation brand far from Soviet associations (Nordbeg and Kuzio 1998), ii) the difference of this nation brand from Western nation brands makes it an intriguing case in studying the specificities of nation branding in transitioning economies, iii) longitudinal analysis of Ukraine's nation branding campaigns is made possible by its twenty years of independence, and iv) more recently the UEFA 2012 Football Championship supports the economic and managerial relevance of this research.

Our data set includes five major nation branding campaigns that Ukraine has conducted over the last 11 years. We collected Ukrainian short promotional videos, logos, press articles and press releases, and other broadcast materials as well as monitored web sites, blogs and forums. Data analysis is consistent with established procedures of interpretive research in general (Spiggle 1994) and of visual analysis in particular (Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994). The research team is

comprised of three researchers, one from the USA, one from Western Europe, and a third from Ukraine, thus facilitating a derived etic approach to data analysis (Berry 1989).

Our findings show two main drivers steadily directing Ukraine's nation branding efforts. Firstly, Ukraine has built its new identity by *stating what it is not*—a communist country—instead of conveying a clear, assertive image of what it is. In an attempt to distance itself from its communist past, its campaigns try to reassure local and international audiences of the “modernization” undertaken by Ukraine. This finding is also supported by other studies focusing on nation branding in post-communist countries (Anholt 2007; Kaneva 2012; Kaneva and Poescu 2011; Kemming and Sandkci 2007). Secondly, Ukraine's nation branding campaigns portray a wide range of visual information that is at times incongruous with each other. Ukrainian nation brand is a collection of folkloristic, architectural, natural, economic, urban, and social elements. The promotional videos illustrate the appeal of clean cities, happy people, a healthy life style, elegant architectural landmarks, and beautiful nature. Catchy slogans such as “Switch on Ukraine” or “High Time to See Ukraine” were created to show the attractiveness of Ukraine, primarily to foreign tourists. However, these all result in a string of campaigns where a lot is shown but nothing is clearly said. These two findings demonstrate that the stigma for Ukraine's past reverted traditional principles guiding nation branding campaigns from an assertive communication approach (what the nation is) to an avoiding approach (what the nation is not), and from a frontal positioning (a few key nation identifiers) to a smokescreen of overlapping elements, which—we argue—are due to the willingness to divert audience's attention from the communist past and an enduring uncertainty about extant national identity. However, despite its multiple nation branding efforts ever since its independence, Ukraine's perceived difference from other Western nations presents a disvalue to both its government and international audiences. In the Brand Index ranking provided by Future Brand, out of 110 nations Ukraine dropped from position 75 in 2009 to position 99 in 2010.

With reference to the second research objective, our analysis indicates that the sense of superiority for the market economy of the Western world has been transferred to a *sense of superiority of international visitors toward local citizens*. The campaign “Ukraine. All about U” may appear as an innocent attempt to attract tourists. However, looking at it from a different perspective, we argue that tourists are given the power to consume, modify, and divert the meanings grounding Ukraine's national identity, thus turning power dynamics to their advantage.

Our work advances nation branding literature by showing that this literature is not culturally neutral and embeds deep post-colonial, Western, capitalistic values and norms, which post-communist countries have problems to elaborate when transitioning toward the market economy. Paradoxically their adherence to capitalism maintains these countries in a state of subjection and helps twist the application of nation branding principles, thus maintaining their gap even further.

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