

Cultural aspects of nation branding and the example of Greenland

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Abstract

This article is an analysis of narrative representation presented on the official web platform Greenland.com, established and managed by the Greenlandic nation branding company – Visit Greenland. The project is supposed to present Greenlandic cultural and national identity to the world in a simplified way, and therefore only focuses on its three main aspects – pioneering nature, culture of nature, and tradition in a modern sense.

Key words

Greenland, nation branding, national identity, cultural identity, representation

Introduction

After a long period of colonisation and establishing a self-government in 2009, Greenland began to redefine its identity and reveal it on the international arena. A branding campaign has been implemented to communicate a newly defined image of Greenland. This campaign has been carried out mainly using Internet tools such as a webpage (Greenland.com), as well as social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

In 2013, this project was implemented by establishing a national tourist board of Greenland and governmental agency – Visit Greenland. In 2005, the company, formerly known as Greenland Tourism, was transformed into the Greenland Tourism and Business Council, before finally changing into Visit Greenland. The main aim of the agency is to promote and develop the tourism industry in Greenland. In the past, it also provided consultancy services to entrepreneurial self-starters.

The purpose of nation branding is not exclusively boosting tourists' flow or attracting foreign investors to a country, although it is unquestionably a significant and direct benefit. I wish *inter alia* to highlight the cultural aspects of branding a nation. In doing so, I will indicate that two narrative tendencies are outlined using the example of Greenland

In this paper I explore the concept of nation branding from the narrative perspective by analysing the content of the webpage Greenland.com administrated by the agency Visit Greenland. I would like to present possible definitions of nation branding and the notion I adopt in this article, and then consider how Greenland constructs a narrative about itself through means of nation branding.

Nation branding

There are various conceptualisations of the term nation brand. The notion has been applied by practitioners and academics in various contexts and has many implications, and generally definitions found in the literature can be classified into three main categories (Fan 2006: 2):

- country of origin effect (COO)
- nation brand
- national identity

The country of origin implies close correlation between a country and the products that originate from it. Relations between products and countries they come from can sometimes be emphasised in marketing campaigns or even by the product itself. The second term refers to a country's intangible assets that are not connected with any products sold. It may entail such associations as a country's image, its positioning among other countries, and equity both economic and cultural. Eventually nation brand is classified as a reflection and embodiment of national identity. It focuses on the cultural aspects of a country, its national characteristics, and stereotypes.

The same problems are encountered while trying to conceptualise what the purpose of nation branding is. Some researchers equate it with place marketing (Kotler 2002: 250), while to others it is a broad, more complex notion. Nation branding is primarily defined by most researchers as all-embracing actions taken to communicate to the rest of the world the

specific vision of a country (Anholt 1998: 397). Nation branding aims at creating an idea of a country that is transparent, clear, and distinctive, based on emotional qualities. It should be possible for the concept to be symbolised verbally and visually. Its effectiveness relies on centralised activity and cooperation of cultural, political, and sport entities (Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2001: 9).

Depending on the adopted definition of nation branding, there emerge two main effects of the process of nation branding. The first being purely economic, as an incentive for boosting exports and sales of the products produced in a given country. Another possibility would be to promote country as a travel destination and prospective target for investors by means of nation branding, mainly its image and utter marketing tools. (Fan 2006). The main aim of launching a branding project in Greenland was, above all, promotion abroad.

However, nation branding and product branding are substantially distinct from each other. The most crucial difference lies in the effect of these two phenomena. Nation branding creates an emotional benefit, while product branding is functional. Although some researchers claim the opposite, countries are not products in any way and although there are significant differences between nation branding and product branding, the former can benefit from tools developed by the latter.

The definition of nation branding referred to later on in this paper reads as follows:

Branding is the process of designing, planning, and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage reputation (Anholt 2007: 37).

The cultural aspect of branding Greenland

Branding as such is purely a marketing domain; and therefore its cultural roots and sociological background is only explored in some research (Dinnie 2008: 45). Cultural aspects are embedded in the process of promoting Greenland abroad, which becomes clearly visible while visiting Greenland.com.

Images and representations can convey powerful messages. They are outcomes of decades of historical events, political decisions, established laws, economic conditions, cultural experiences, and much more. Briefly, images of countries are established in a long-term process and it is a challenging task to forecast its results, let alone to have an impact and control over it (Fan 2006: 8). More and more countries are promoting their national

image or even rebranding. Greenland, for instance, decided to rebrand its image, which was expressed even in slogans. From “Greenland – the Greatest Experience” and “Greenland – you will never forget”, they went to “Greenland – be a pioneer”, and finally “The big Arctic five”. These are only logos and slogans but they tie all the marketing actions that go with the process together.

In the following chapter, I will explore how the narrative of the national identity of Greenland as a brand is constructed. I argue that the narrative of the nation’s identity plays a key role in nation branding. This narrative is always based on certain distinctive features. These distinctive features of a country are representations of its history, common experiences, times of glory, and oppression.

An awareness and understanding of the core features of a certain nation is a prerequisite for developing nation-branding campaigns, as the essence of any nation brand derives not only from the country’s companies and brands but also from its culture in the widest sense – language, literature, music, sport, architecture and so on all embody the soul of nation. (Dinnie 2008: 11).

National identity, to paraphrase Ketler’s definition of organisational identity, is the collective understanding of a nation’s people of these elements that are supposed to be central and relatively permanent and that distinguish one nation from other nations (Ketler 1993: 3). National identity embodies the character of a nation by its people perceived as the central, distinctive, and enduring traits in a nation, where the past, present, and future are taken into account. It refers to the essential psychological ties that bind the country together and that are supposed to form the core of national identity. This psychological bond is usually called a sense of belonging, and such expressions underline close the relationship between each individual and the collective imagination, namely the nation.

Some experts, such as Simon Anholt, nation branding’s leading scholar, go far as equating national identity with nation brand. In his view, nation brand is merely a tangible, robust, communicable, and above all useful version of national identity (Anholt 2007: 217).

A country just like being well known for a variety of nation brands can also have many different nation brand identities simultaneously. Nation branding is not about building or transforming national identity, which Olins initially proposed (Olins 2002: 2). A nation’s identity is defined by the nation’s people and not due to a branding strategist. Any change in

a country's identity is primarily either carried out or accompanied by fundamental changes in the political, economic, and social systems.

Nation branding's task is mainly to align its national identity with reality. This is especially important for countries such as Greenland that have implemented dramatic changes in their political, economic, and social systems. It is the task of nation branding to narrow the gap between the above-mentioned images and reality. One of the aspects of Greenland's nation branding narrative is the constant emphasis on the country's origin, role of tradition in modern society, and timelessness.

Culturally, Greenland is characterised by the extreme conditions the population has lived under and the fantastic environment for human existence provided by nature. Life as sealers and hunters in small isolated communities is reflected in the language, music, myths, clothing, food, homes – everything has been developed from the materials available and with a frugality, ingenuity and impressive sense of strength, quality and simplicity. Much is history, but the cultural roots are strong and alive. A vibrant and dynamic culture is developing in line with and with respect for traditions and beliefs, leaving clear traces in the culture of today in all areas

National identity is generally presented as primordial and present in almost every domain of life in Greenland. The essentials of the national character have not changed with the course of history, but only adjusted to contemporary society.

One of the key representations of Greenlandic identity articulates the culture as original, authentic, and pioneering. It is the element of culture associated with what is called the Inuit culture, which the website described as primeval and rich.

Throughout the ages, people who have been attracted to Greenland are those with pioneering spirits, who are not afraid of making ways to new places to discover new opportunities. They are indeed pioneers in their own ways: from the Inuit, who emigrated to a huge and unknown country thousands of years ago, to the Vikings in South Greenland and to many explorers, traders, missionaries and workers who have visited the country.

This *pioneering spirit* is a representation of the following realia:

- The hunting industry is still present to a limited extent, but people still hunt seals, birds, narwhals, polar bears, and walruses.

- Traditional fishing equipment and harpoons, kayaks, and dog sledges are still in use.
- Greenland has not been affected by Western culture to a large extent.
- The country is almost unspoiled by foreign influence.
- The culture kept by people is almost unchanged since ancient times.

In Greenland the ancient traditions and cultural heritage has been preserved in an unchanged and untouched condition from foreign influence. This pioneering nature seems to have roots in the identity of its ancestors. This is an example of the narrative of national identity being a foundational myth, a story which traces the origin of the nation, the citizens and their national identity back so early that they are lost in the history of mythic times.

Another representation of Greenlandic identity that completes the pioneering spirit and which was formulated by Visit Greenland in the official branding campaign was the *culture of nature* as inherent in Inuit identity, their culture and soul. This feature of identity could be said to fall within the pioneering nature, as it suggests something that is essentially and profoundly rooted in nature. The culture of nature means, in particular, respect for nature and dependence on nature. The images of nature present it as harsh, dangerous, and tough. But there is also another description of nature that falls slightly outside the first. This is the description of nature as a pristine and virgin power. Nature, kind to those who know how treat it. It seems as if these two images of nature exist simultaneously.

Greenlandic nature is described on the website as powerful, something that you cannot have control over and which has a great impact on everyday life. Up to 80% of the country is permanently covered by ice and therefore life largely exists on the coasts and from the sea. Greenland's nature, with its enormous surface, has always influenced how Greenlandic society was built and customised. Its overwhelming dominance has been caused by the fact that nature has never been only a beautiful background, but has always challenged people living in Greenland:

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Because most of the country is covered by ice, towns and villages are isolated and are often located far away from each other. In other words, national identity is also symbolically grounded on the idea of a nature as a primordial force that the individual has always had to take into consideration. It is also timeless and powerful, and thus makes people feel humble and small. Inuit know that the forces of nature are both unpredictable and beyond their control. They seem to accept this. Therefore, they have a valuable opportunity to find peace and quiet in themselves. Spirituality in nature is interpreted as the inner peace they feel when they accept that Mother Nature and life itself fundamentally cannot be controlled.

The Arctic environment's enormous power and vastness have played a decisive role in the way we have built and developed our society. Nature has not just been the beautiful scenery, but has also been a constant challenge to the people. Most of Greenland is covered by ice, making each city and settlement physically isolated. The cold and unpredictable weather tests people's limits. Therefore people have always had to look for ways to adjust to what Mother Nature lays out for them. After all, the primal forces of nature have always been what people have had to contend with, and this is just as true today as it has been since the beginning of the history.

The last essential element in this analysis is the discourse, which is called tradition in a modern sense. Here, Greenlandic culture is articulated as one that is also modern and in line with the contemporary. On Greenland.com, emphasis is put on new businesses and entertainment opportunities, new training places, technology, fiberglass dinghies, and other modern goods, anything that could be a tangible product. Although the original hunting culture can still be found in the settlements, one can also find satellite TV and young people who surf the Internet at home. One can visit the indigenous people when traveling to Greenland. They are naturally those who retain their language and a large part of their cultural heritage. Society therefore binds the present and past.

The circumstances dictated by the market compel nation brand creators to consciously highlight particular meanings and myths and ignore the others, while justifying it as a mean of promoting national identity (Arończyk 2007: 5).

The nation branding campaign in Greenland focuses on some of the traditions that Hobsbawm and Ranger call the *invention of tradition*:

Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 34).

The invented tradition is what Hobsbawm defines as set of practices that are of either of a ritual or symbolic nature, which aim to ingrain certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, automatically implying a certain continuity with a suitable historical past (Ibidem: 44). One such evoked custom is, for example, Mitaartut:

Greenland has its own version of Halloween, called Mitaartut, on January 6. It is a Greenlandic tradition, not a holiday, but schools close early. Children in costumes and ghost like make-ups visit houses in the evening to sing and dance in front of them, and receive candies. People guess who the children are under the costume.

In addition, other cultural components of national identity are presented on the branding webpage. According to Anthony Smith's analysis, they could be categorised as: values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits, languages, and practices. In real life, all of these components are transmitted to the new members who receive the culture of a particular nation. The process of identification with a specific culture implies a strong emotional investment able to foster solidarity bonds among the members of a given community who come to recognise one another as fellow nationals (Gellner 1983: 178). Furthermore, they imagine and feel their community as separate and distinct from others (Anderson 1983: 26). This cultural distinctiveness is constantly emphasised in the branding project.

Greenland, as a nation presented on Greenland.com, is not a political entity but a phenomenon that goes beyond that, constituting a system of cultural representation. Greenlanders are not only legal citizens of the nation but also make up the idea of the nation as presented in its national culture. A nation is a symbolic community and it is this which accounts for its "power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance" (Schwarz 1986: 106).

Summary

The idea of nation branding is not a new one and many countries have been making use of it for decades now. Greenland has joined this group with its professionally designed campaign concentrated on reaching an audience mainly via the Internet web site and social media. To be effective, it should have a clear and purposeful message, and it seems that the content and message of Greenland.com is very straightforward and clear. It is also due to the fact that nation branding campaigns are designed for specifically defined target groups.

The identity of the Greenland brand is based on three main representations of national identity: pioneering nation, culture of nature, and tradition in the modern scene. According to specialists from Visit Greenland, they all represent common values of Inuit from Greenland. These values are expressed in symbols and slogans.

Greenlandic nation branding and nation brand are two different but connected notions. Greenland has always had a brand, although it was not defined using this word. Many factors have impact on the image of a country and how it is perceived by the citizens of other countries. Nation branding can potentially improve the image of places, but only when the campaign is coherent with a genuine identity of a country, and simply endeavours to highlight distinctive features of a country. Brand images of countries, either positive or negative, are rarely an entirely accurate reflection of the identity of a country.

Nation branding has earned its reputation as one of the most controversial diplomatic tools in use. Critics argue that it is both misleading and demeaning to treat the character and identity of a nation as a brand; a commercial product to be manipulated and sold to consumers.

The tendency to underestimating nation branding campaigns is high, which can potentially cause huge costs for a given nation. Professor Nicolas Papadopoulos of the School of Business at Carleton University in Ottawa believes in the potential of nation branding but points out a number of significant barriers that encounter those who would like to perform branding techniques really effectively. Papadopoulos especially notes that the main challenges currently faced by branding is a lack of units responsible, difficulties with establishing actionable and measurable objectives, lack of authority over the input and control over output, limited flexibility, and the relative lack of marketing know-how. He also believes that truly effective branding requires cohesion and expertise that most countries have not yet developed (Anholt 2003: 89).

In defence of this whole concept, branding analysts and researchers argue that the greatest opposition to nation-state branding stems from where the most significant misunderstanding of the idea of branding occurs (Ibidem:120). Legitimate branding is quite simply not product advertising; it is the presentation of a country's most impressive advantages to the world, for the benefit of the citizens of the country that is being branded.

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