

REBRANDING NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

SHODIPE OLUWAFUNMILAYO
Department of Mass Communciation
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State
shodipeo@run.edu.ng
+234-8146484062

IFEKRISTI AYO-OBIREMI
Mass Communication Programme
Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State
Ifeyoobi14@gmail.com
+234-8134433425

&
OMOWALE ADELABU (PhD)
Department of Mass Communication
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State
adelabuo@run.edu.ng

Abstract

In today's global world, many countries are embracing nation branding to differentiate themselves, realize the economies of scale, encourage foreign investment and take control of the narrative of their country, away from negative media portrayals or negative national stereotypes. This study examined Nigeria's attempts at rebranding and building a national brand while analysing the challenges that impeded the success of past attempts and charting a course forward to rebranding Nigeria. Evaluation of previous attempts to rebrand Nigeria showed that it failed due to its cosmetic approach to nation branding and lack of continuity. The study was anchored on persuasion theory and it proposed rebranding Nigeria by addressing the fundamental problems of the country, positioning the country as the tech hub of Africa, rebrand through the country's vibrant creative industry, national icons, promotion of national cohesion and patriotism, curbing corruption, creating an enabling environment for businesses to thrive and employing a systematic approach to nation branding. The study concludes that nation (re)branding must stem out of nation-building, which involves addressing the fundamental issues that stand at variance with the reputation the country is trying to portray of itself. The study recommends attitudinal change and mental re-orientation by both the government and the governed to ensure effective rebranding of Nigeria.

Keywords: Nation Rebranding, Rebranding, Nigeria, Perception, Persuasion theory.

Introduction

Nation branding also referred to as place branding or nation rebranding, is a relatively new concept compared to commercial/corporate branding, which has been around for much

longer. The term is said to have been coined by scholar Simon Anholt in 1996 (Aronczyk, 2008; Anholt, 2009). It has been defined as "the strategic self-presentation of a country with the aim of creating reputation capital through economic, political and social interest promotion at home and abroad" (Szondi, 2008). According to Asemah (2010), Nation (re)branding is a planned, systematic, and sustained effort to reposition a nation's image and reputation in the mind of its various stakeholders. Also, Late Professor Dora Akunyili, the former Minister of Information and Communication who launched the rebrand Nigeria campaign in 2009, defined nation branding as:

An attempt as a people to take conscious steps at redefining our nation, re-examining our values and character, and rededicating ourselves to the ideals of our founding fathers (Akinyuli, 2009).

Brymer (2003) suggests that although rebranding principles apply equally to nation brands as they do to commercial/corporate brands, the method may differ. According to him, nation branding requires an integrated policy that represents a country in a coordinated and repetitive way that brings about differentiation. Albert (2009) posits that nation branding differs from commercial/corporate branding because the parameters for the former are far more intricate, and they take considerable time to manifest, stating the parameters to include domestic, social, economic, and political well-being. Therefore, rebranding a nation without proper governance is like putting the cart in front of the "social transformation" horse (Albert, 2009). It is hoped that nation branding might provide a competitive edge in the globalised economy by helping branded nations — 'cool Britannia,' 'incredible India,' 'Malaysia truly Asia' — stand out from the crowd (Browning, 2016).

Browning (2016) argues that nation branding can secure a country various dividends, from promoting economic competitiveness and growth to enhancing national solidarity and self-esteem. According to Amadi (2017), an excellent national brand translates to respect, influence, prestige, and attraction of investors, culminating in that nation's economic, social, and political development. On the other hand, a bad or negative perception of a country's image could translate to a country lacking respect, influence, and prestige in the international community. It could breed poverty, underdevelopment, and negative stereotypes.

The need for nation branding usually stems from a country's desire to take control of its narrative away from negative media portrayals or negative national stereotypes. Nigeria's image is perceived as bad due to corruption, selfishness, carefree attitude, and ignorance of both leaders and citizens (Okoroafor, 2013). As such, there is a need to redeem the image through the concept of rebranding or nation branding. This image laundering approach aims to change the negative narrative and perception held by the international community and instead promote a better narrative based on what a country can offer and favours the government and its citizens. Countries adopt this approach hoping that other nations will change their attitudes and perceptions towards them from negative to positive and consequently invest their money in such countries (Ijewere & Imhanlahimi, 2010).

Given the above, many countries have embraced nation branding to realize the economies of scale that accrue from the production, distribution, and marketing of outputs in the global

market. Ojo & Aghedo (2013) note that this quest for global competitiveness underpins China's Shanghai Expo and its production of promotional films to boost its international image using domestic cultural revitalization as a springboard for soft power (Barr, 2012). Also, through careful nation branding, Spain—isolated and poverty-stricken in the Franco era—has emerged as a modern European democracy and first-choice tourist destination (Gilmore, 2002). Branding has also made Japan famous for technology, Paris for style, Switzerland for wealth, and Rio de Janeiro for carnival (Ojo & Aghedo, 2013).

In the case of South Africa, which, before the end of apartheid in 1994, suffered from an extremely poor international image, it was able to pivot its international perception from negative to positive by actively seeking to revamp its reputation in the post-apartheid era through systematic processes of nation branding (Browning, 2016). Over time, the South African brand has developed from Nelson Mandela's initial emphasis on South Africa as an inclusive 'rainbow nation' embracing diversity (Rose, 2010) to recent articulations of the country leading an African renaissance (Alegi, 2008). However, crucial in systematising the branding process in South Africa was the establishment of the International Marketing Council of South Africa (IMC) in 2000 to act as the custodian of 'Brand South Africa' by working with key stakeholders (government, citizens, organised labour, business, NGOs, educational institutions, the media) in crafting, coordinating and promoting a coherent brand (Youde, 2009; International Marketing Council of South Africa, 2010/2011). Key mechanisms for doing this have included targeted advertising campaigns at key international events such as the World Economic Forum, the production of documentaries explaining South Africa's potential as a political and business partner for foreigners, the development of a Brand South Africa Marketer's Portal, which provides key stakeholders with information, tools, and material to help them promote the country via the consistent application of the brand and, last but not least, through the marketing of South Africa as an attractive destination for major international events (Browning, 2016). Browning (2016) also notes that aside from the opportunities afforded for the active global promotion of South Africa, the IMC also coordinated an extensive programme, designed to enhance pride and patriotism among South Africans and to mobilise them behind the event.

The case of South Africa and Spain proves that nation branding/rebranding can be effective, however in the Nigerian context, previous attempts at rebranding Nigeria from a "country of scammers," one laden with corruption, plagued with poverty, among other negative notions held against the country by the International community to more favorable perceptions have barely been effective. Avraham and Ketter (2013) assert that Nigeria used a cosmetic approach in its last attempt to rebrand itself in 2009 without tackling the fundamental problems and stark realities of governmental corruption and internal tensions, stating that this approach is viewed widely as having failed and even further undermined Nigeria's international image. Hence, this study aims to examine Nigeria's attempts at rebranding and building a national brand while analysing the challenges that impeded their success and charting a course forward to rebranding Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework - Persuasion Theory

This research work is anchored on the Persuasion Theory, which identifies factors that induce change in belief, attitude, and behavior. This theory is a communication and psychology

theory developed in the early 20th century that follows specific steps and processes to reach the target audience. The approach moves from the point of certainty to uncertainty where previously held beliefs in the audiences' minds are creatively challenged. As this is achieved, the walls of resistance are gradually broken as the audience begins to move from an existing point of view to a neutral one, and then a new perception or attitude can be introduced (12Manage, n.d.). These new perceptions and attitudes thus become a part of the audience's mind, and the old is replaced. This theory is, therefore, relevant to this study as the Nigerian brand seeks to persuade the international community to change their attitudes and beliefs towards the country – that Nigeria is not as bad as they think and that there are great things as well as opportunities to be harnessed in the country. Besides from the international community, the persuasion theory in Nigeria's rebranding efforts seeks to persuade the Nigerian citizens to change their behavior, so they too will trust themselves and their government.

Overview of Attempts to Rebrand Nigeria

Scholars (Amadi, 2017; Ojo, Adebola, Talabi & Igbekele, 2012 & Aghedo, 2013) have identified significant efforts to rebrand Nigeria through image laundering as;

1. **Heart of Africa (HOA) Project** was launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration. Initially called the Nigerian image project, it launched in 2004 and later relaunched as the Heart of Africa project in 2005. The project was the government's attempt at positively reinventing the international perception of the country. The HOA project was planned as an information and orientation campaign, and it received an initial government contribution of six hundred million Naira. According to Professor Akunyili (2009a), the Heart of Africa could not fly because the name was contentious, as Malawi was the first to use the Heart of Africa slogan, and many other African countries have laid claims to being the heart of Africa. Secondly, Heart of Africa was first launched overseas, which automatically disconnected ordinary Nigerians from this project. This, no doubt, made the project look elitist and foreign. Despite the enormous amount of money sunk into this image campaign project, its aims were not realized. Adebola et al. (2012) noted that despite all efforts put in place, the Heart of Africa project, however, failed because:
 - The project coordinators did not conduct an image analysis.
 - Stakeholders were not involved in the development of the brand.
 - There was no proper coordination of the Heart of Africa Campaign.
 - Low involvement by public relations, advertising, and media practitioners.
 - Lack of confidence in the economic, political, and social reforms.
2. **Rebrand Nigeria campaign** launched by the late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua administration in 2009. The launch of the rebrand Nigeria campaign received mixed reactions from Nigerians, key stakeholders, and the international community. It received mixed reactions from critics who wondered if the 320 billion Naira the Federal Ministry of Information and Communication earmarked for the project would be used to "rebrand" some private pockets, as had happened in other government programs in the past. Others believed it was a step in the right direction as Nigeria's image was too soiled to the extent that it deprived the country and its citizens of opportunities. At the same time, some Nigerians in the Diaspora received unfair treatment from citizens in host countries. Notwithstanding the negative criticism, the Ministry of Information and Communication,

led by Professor Akunyili, proceeded with executing the campaign to reinvent Nigeria and Nigerians' global and local perception and build a better and more acceptable image for the country. The slogan for the campaign was "Nigeria-Good People, Great Nation." At the Launch, Late President Yar'Adua contended that the campaign was a genuine one to re-orientate Nigerians towards believing in themselves and changing people's perception of the country, both locally and internationally. The late Professor Dora Akunyili (2009b), the then Minister of Information and Communication, noted that an average Nigerian's psychology and attitude towards the nation needed a major facelift. In her view, when Nigerians believe in themselves, they can truly make the needed change in society and be in a position to positively project Nigeria's image to the rest of the world (Akunyili, 2009b). However, Avraham and Ketter (2013) assert that Nigeria's attempt to rebrand itself in 2009 is viewed widely as having failed and even further undermined Nigeria's international image, as the country was unable first to tackle the fundamental problems and stark realities of governmental corruption and internal tensions, stating that this approach to nation branding was merely cosmetic and not fundamental.

Despite attempts to rebrand Nigeria by past administrations, the greater part of the narrative still being portrayed internationally about the country is that it is notorious for corruption, poverty, insecurity, social vices, and weakness of public institutions. Ojo & Aghedo (2013) noted that Nigeria's reputation is at its lowest ebb; this statement still holds true in 2022 as Nigeria is still plagued with various challenges that tarnish our international image, such as insecurity, secessionist agitations, electoral flaws, immigration crimes, corruption, smuggling, arms dealing, a crippled economy, poverty, ill-functional public amenities, structural unemployment, advance fee fraud '419', human trafficking amongst other vices.

Challenges to Rebranding Nigeria

1. Fundamental issues such as high rate of unemployment, economic hardship, food insecurity, poverty, etc. have resulted in increased crime rates such as advance fee fraud known locally as '419', human trafficking, banditry, robbery, amongst others by Nigerians both home and abroad which keeps frustrating the rebranding effort of the country. This agrees with Avraham and Ketter (2013), who assert that Nigeria's attempt to rebrand itself in 2009 is viewed widely as having failed because the country did not tackle first the fundamental problems and stark realities of governmental corruption and internal tensions, stating that this approach to nation branding was merely cosmetic and not fundamental.
2. Public Service and Governmental Corruption are significant factors that frustrate Nigeria's attempt to rebrand itself. Akunyili (2009b) admitted that "right now, the perception of what we have as a brand is a corruption brand, a near-collapse state brand, a dysfunctional people brand, and a brand that is hard to sell." In the past, several key officers of the country have been indicted for corrupt practices, but only a few have been sanctioned. A case in point is the Halliburton scandal. The company subsidiary KBR admitted to bribing key Nigerian government officials to facilitate the award of a US\$6 billion Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas construction contract. About \$150 million in bribes to Nigerians has been traced to an unnamed bank account in Zurich, Switzerland. KBR has since been investigated, convicted, and fined \$589m in the United States (Halliburton: \$150m, 2009).

However, despite the fact that the Nigerians who perpetrated the crime are known, the country has not been able to press charges against them, perhaps because the list indicts three former heads of state and other 'cabals.' Uchem (2009) notes that while other countries have punished their nationals for their involvement in the Siemens, Halliburton and Wilbros corruption scandals, the Nigerian government is dithered on bringing the Nigerian culprits to justice, sending signals that the nation condones corruption. Ojo & Aghedo (2013) argue that Nigeria's culture of impunity makes nonsense of any rebranding or anti-graft stance, stating further that to ensure effective rebranding of Nigeria, a severe political restructuring and attitudinal change must be crafted by both the government and the governed.

3. Lack of systematic approach to nation branding and continuity: One can argue that Nigeria's failure to set up a commission whose sole responsibility is nation branding, with the participation of both public and private consultants/advisors in the commission, as well as annual key performing indices led to the failure of previous attempts to rebrand Nigeria. The Ministry of Information and Communication, led by the Minister, was responsible for Nigeria's rebranding attempts that lacked continuity. Browning's (2016) study shows that an essential step in systemizing the nation branding process is the establishment of a commission that would work with key stakeholders (government, citizens, organised labour, business, NGOs, educational institutions, the media) in crafting, coordinating and promoting a coherent brand, as was the case in South Africa and Ghana. Also, Adebola et al. (2012) assert that one of the factors that led to the failure of the Heart of Africa project, one of Nigeria's attempts to rebrand itself was low involvement by public relations, advertising, and the media practitioners.
4. Lack of National Cohesion and Patriotism: Nigeria is characterized by a history of conflicts that often employ ethnicity, occupation (farmer/herders conflicts), and religion as a smokescreen for personal interests. In 2022, these conflicts are increasing, with secessionist agitations and nepotism plaguing the country. However, national cohesion and patriotism are crucial to the nation's rebranding process, as the lack thereof poses a significant challenge to building a positive national brand for the country. Ojo & Aghedo (2013) state that disorder and violence are present in every part of Nigeria, and though the motives seem to differ, they are often related to politics and economics.
5. Poor rating on the ease of doing business in Nigeria is another challenge to rebranding the country, as this index decreases our international reputation. The 2022 ease of doing business rating ranks Nigeria 131. In recent times, Nigeria has been experiencing capital flight, as investors have been divesting in Nigeria, citing unfavorable business conditions; examples include; Shell Nigeria, whose divestment from Nigeria is reported to cost the country 179 million dollars (Punch, 2022). Also, despite the fact that Nigeria is the world's 6th largest oil producer, it does not have a functional refinery within the country to meet local demand, even though some high net worth Nigerians own refineries in South Africa and other countries to secure their assets and investing their money in more stable economies.

Prospects for Rebranding Nigeria

1. Rebrand Nigeria by addressing the country's fundamental problems and its citizens, such as fixing the leadership deficit, economic reforms, job creation, creating a viable business environment, and fixing the insecurity endemic amongst other vices. Albert (2009) posits that nation branding without proper governance and addressing fundamental issues of a country is like putting the cart in front of the "social transformation" horse. Hence, nation (re)branding must work hand in hand with nation-building.
2. Rebrand Nigeria by positioning the country as the Tech hub of Africa, just like France has been rebranded as the fashion capital of the world, Dubai (UAE) the tourism destination of the world, and the United States of America as the world's superpower and financial hub. Uchem (2009) states that Nigeria is a natural leader in Africa, and hence nation branding should spotlight our leadership on the African continent. According to Adepetun (2021), Nigeria received close to 35% of the 4 billion USD tech investments in Africa in 2021. Idris (2021), a tech news platform, reported that the world's biggest Venture Capitalists are now vying for stakes in Nigeria's tech sector. Hence, Nigeria can capitalise on the country's emerging tech industry and rebrand Nigeria as the tech hub of the world.
3. Rebrand Nigeria through icons who have shown exemplary leadership and excellence across various fields. Several Nigerians, both at home and in the diaspora, are excelling in their various professions, including Wole Soyinka, who became the first black African Nobel laureate for literature in 1986; Ngozi Okonjo –Iwela who in 2021 became the first woman and African to lead the World Trade Organisation (WTO), businessman Adebayo Ogunlesi, who acquired London Gatwick Airport; Aliko Dangote, the CEO of Dangote group, who consecutively for several years has been ranked, Forbes richest man in Africa and who is building the largest petroleum refinery in Africa, to name a few. These achievers show that Nigeria is not entirely an unpleasant picture of leadership deficit, corruption, poverty, etc., but also of creativity, resilience, skills, and enduring legacies of universal acclaim. This narrative should make up our nation's rebranding agenda.
4. Rebrand Nigeria using the Nigerian creative industry, considered the biggest in Africa in music, film & TV, and fashion industries. Nigerian musicians and their music are being embraced internationally. In 2021, Burna Boy emerged as the first Nigerian act to win a Grammy, followed by Wizkid for his collaboration in Beyonce's single Brown Skin Girl. Giant strides are also being recorded in the Nigerian movie industry as Nigerian movies are streamed internationally and enjoying considerable patronage, especially in Africa. The creative industry is Nigeria's big-ticket to reinvent its image as the artists and actors exert significant influence in their art and can positively or negatively influence the country's international reputation.
5. Employing a systematic approach to branding, with an annual budget and key performing indices for nation branding and employing both public and private advisors/consultants in the conception and execution of nation branding. Like Ghana and South Africa adopted a systematic approach to branding by establishing a commission with the sole responsibility of nation branding, Nigeria should also separate this responsibility from the Ministry of Information and Communication (now referred to as the Ministry of

Information, Culture, and Tourism). This is the first step to adopting a systematic approach to nation-building. Also, in their study, Adebola et al. (2012) recommend that there should be high involvement of public relations, advertising, and media experts in rebranding projects.

6. Promoting National Cohesion and patriotism actively and effectively through media, exemplary leadership, and national orientation agency amongst other key stakeholders. Ijewere & Imhanlahimi (2010) note that a successful implementation of the rebranding campaign in Nigeria will promote national pride, which will enable the nation to gain respect in the comity of nations since international relations are a reflection of the domestic policies of a nation.
7. Rebrand Nigeria by curbing the corruption endemic through effective systems and the rule of law. This means that the Nigerian government should place the laws as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution above all and prosecute all corruption cases, as this would show the international community that we no longer condone corruption and, as a consequence, improve our international reputation.
8. Rebrand Nigeria by creating an enabling environment for businesses to thrive through infrastructure and economic policies. A favorable and thriving business environment would encourage foreign investment, create jobs, and improve Nigeria's overall international reputation.

Conclusion

The study traces the historical attempts to rebrand Nigeria, some of the challenges that impeded their success, and outlines prospects to rebranding Nigeria successfully. The study concludes that nation (re)branding must stem from nation-building, which involves addressing the fundamental issues that stand at variance with the reputation the country is trying to portray itself. Hence, for nation branding to be successful, just like in commercial branding, it should involve marketing 'a good product' as Uchem (2009) notes that a good product sells itself.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Rebranding without substantial changes in our attitude and values, ensuring law and order, providing welfare and public infrastructure, and a commitment to democracy and the rule of law amounts to a cosmetic approach to nation branding and an exercise in self-delusion that is doomed to fail; hence, a fundamental approach to nation branding is highly recommended.
2. The Nigerian government should prosecute all corruption cases, especially the Siemens, Halliburton, and Wilbros corruption scandals, as this would indicate to the international community that we no longer condone corruption and, as a consequence, improve our international reputation.

Serious attitudinal change and mental re-orientation by both the government and the governed are recommended to ensure the effective rebranding of Nigeria.

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