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Nation Branding in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Algorithmic Co-creation of National Image

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Abstract
Nation branding has traditionally been understood as a strategic country-led effort aimed at shaping how countries are perceived internationally through communication, cultural diplomacy and economic positioning. However, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has changed the way national images are created and communicated. This paper develops a conceptual framework that views AI not simply as a supporting tool but as an active intermediary in the nation branding process. Drawing on literature from nation branding, consumer behaviour and AI in marketing, the study proposes a four-layer model consisting of nation-generated inputs, algorithmic mediation, consumer perception and behavioural outcomes. Attention is given to key AI applications including recommendation systems, sentiment analysis, natural language processing and predictive analytics and how these shape global narratives about countries. The paper suggests that AI contributes to a more decentralised and dynamic process of nation branding where influence is shared across state actors, platforms and audiences. In doing so, the study brings together different strands of literature and provides a clearer understanding of how nation branding is evolving in the digital age. It also represents a step towards exploring how AI may reshape nation branding and provides directions for future research in this emerging area.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Mediation, Platformisation, Consumer Perception, Algorithmic Governance

1. Introduction

Nation branding has become a central strategic priority for countries seeking to enhance their global competitiveness. Governments aim to influence how their nation is perceived internationally to attract tourism, foreign investment, talent, and political goodwill (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). Traditionally, nation branding has been as a structured and controlled process in which governments design and disseminate coherent narratives through diplomatic channels, media campaigns, and cultural initiatives. This perspective assumes a relatively stable communication environment, where states act as primary authors of national image and audiences are largely passive recipients.

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

However, the communication environment within which nation branding operates has undergone a profound transformation. The rise of digital platforms has disrupted centralised information flows, allowing multiple actors, including individuals, influencers, and organisations, to participate in shaping national image (Sevin, 2016). This shift has reduced the dominance of state-led narratives and introduced a more fragmented and participatory communication landscape. This weakens the traditional assumption that governments fully control national image formation.

Recently, artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced a deeper structural shift by transforming how information is curated, filtered, and personalised. AI-driven systems, including recommendation algorithms and machine learning models, determine what information individuals encounter and how it is presented (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). In this context, platforms do not simply distribute content; they actively shape perception by prioritizing certain narratives over others. As highlighted by Gillespie (2014), algorithms function as "curators of public discourse," embedding implicit values and logics that influence visibility and interpretation. As a result, audiences no longer receive uniform representations of countries; instead, they are exposed to personalised and often fragmented narratives shaped by algorithmic processes.

This transformation raises a fundamental question: who shapes nation branding in the age of AI, is it the state, the platform, or the algorithm? The answer is increasingly complex, as control becomes distributed across technological systems and user interactions rather than controlled government ways.

This paper argues that nation branding has evolved into a process of algorithmic co-creation, in which national image is not centrally constructed but emerges dynamically through interactions between nation-generated signals, AI systems, and individual cognitive processes. By developing a comprehensive conceptual framework, this study seeks to explain how AI reshapes the mechanisms of perception formation and challenges traditional assumptions about control, consistency, and communication in nation branding.

2. Literature Background

2.1 Nation Branding

Nation branding can be understood as the use of branding principles to shape how a country is perceived internationally (Kotler and Gertner, 2007). It is not limited to one single aspect; rather, it reflects a combination of elements such as tourism, exports, governance, culture, and even the perceived traits of its people (Fan, 2010). In this sense, a nation's image is not built only through marketing campaigns or slogans. It is also shaped by what the country does, including its policies, political decisions, and its role in the global arena (Anholt, 2007). This makes nation branding a complex and evolving process, where communication and real-world actions are closely linked together.

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

Earlier research often treated nation branding as a top-down process, where governments were seen as the main actors responsible for designing and controlling the national image (Aronczyk, 2013). Through structured campaigns and public diplomacy efforts, countries aimed to present a consistent and favourable identity to the outside world. However, this view has become less convincing over time. Today's communication environment is far more dynamic and difficult to control. With the rise of digital media and global information flows, multiple actors now contribute to shaping how a country is perceived. Individuals, online communities, and international audiences all play a role in constructing national image, often in ways that governments cannot fully manage or predict (Govers and Go, 2009; Sevin, 2016).

2.2 Digital Transformation of Nation Branding

The emergence of digital media has significantly altered the landscape of nation branding. Social media platforms have introduced interactivity, immediacy, and decentralization, enabling users to generate and share content that influences perceptions of countries (Sevin, 2016). Which is what is called user-generated content (UCG) which is any content created and shared by users on online platforms (Zhang & Cole, 2016). This shift was the spark that reduced the degree of control that governments have over national narratives.

2.3 Platformisation and Algorithmic Governance

The transformation of nation branding in digital environments is closely linked to platformisation where digital platforms increasingly influence how information is created distributed and consumed. Platformisation reflects the growing role of platforms in organising communication and social interaction where visibility is shaped by computational systems rather than direct human control (Srnicek, 2017; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). In this context platforms are not just communication channels but active organisers of information flows.

One important aspect of this transformation is algorithmic governance. Algorithmic governance refers to the use of automated data-driven systems to organise access to information rank content and influence user behaviour (Just and Latzer, 2017). These systems often prioritise engagement relevance and commercial value which affects not only what users see but also how often and in what order content appears. This reduces the influence of traditional institutional actors and shifts part of communicative power towards digital platforms.

Algorithms also shape how people interpret information. As Bucher (2018) explains algorithms influence the "visibility regimes" through which users make sense of content. Striphas (2015) argues that algorithmic culture changes how meaning is produced in everyday digital environments. Therefore, algorithms do not independently create meaning but instead shape the conditions under which meaning is formed and understood.

In nation branding this means that national image is increasingly shaped within platform-driven environments where visibility depends on algorithmic systems. This challenges traditional state-

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

centred approaches by adding new layers of digital mediation that affect how national narratives are seen and interpreted. This makes it important that nation branding should be understood not only as a strategic communication activity but also as a process influenced by platform and algorithmic infrastructures.

2.4 Artificial Intelligence in Marketing and Communication

Artificial intelligence refers to systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, and decision-making (Russell, 2021). There have been several tools that came and standout in the past few years including and not limited to, ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini, etc. In marketing, AI is widely used to analyse large datasets, predict consumer behaviour, and personalise communication (Huang and Rust, 2021). AI-driven technologies, including recommendation systems and search algorithms, play a critical role in shaping information exposure. These systems rely on machine learning to optimise user engagement, often prioritising content that aligns with individual preferences and behaviours (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In a way AI acts as a gatekeeper that influences what information is visible and how it is framed.

It is important not to treat artificial intelligence as a uniform or single system. Different AI technologies operate through distinct mechanisms and influence communication in different ways. Recommendation systems primarily function through ranking and filtering, determining which content is made visible to users based on predicted relevance and engagement (Ricci,2015). In contrast, natural language processing (NLP) systems focus on interpreting and analysing textual data, enabling applications such as sentiment analysis that assess how nations are perceived across digital platforms (Liu, 2012). More recently, generative AI systems have introduced a new layer by actively producing content, including text, images, and narratives, which can contribute directly to the construction and circulation of national images (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

These differences are analytically important because each type of AI shapes nation branding through a different pathway. Recommendation systems structure visibility, NLP systems shape interpretation, and generative systems contribute to content creation. As a result, AI should be understood as a set of heterogeneous technologies with distinct logics rather than a single, unified mediating force. Recognising this distinction allows for a more precise analysis of how AI influences both the exposure to and the meaning of nation-related information in digital environments.

2.4 Consumer Perception and Personalisation

Consumer perception refers to the cognitive process through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to information (Solomon et al., 2012). In the context of nation branding, this means that people actively construct their understanding of countries based on prior knowledge, experiences, and the information they encounter. As a result, perceptions are subjective and can vary widely across individuals.

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

In digital environments, this process is increasingly shaped by personalisation technologies driven by artificial intelligence. Platforms such as search engines and social media use algorithms to tailor content based on user behaviour, preferences, and engagement patterns (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015). While this improves relevance, it also means that individuals are exposed to different representations of the same country. AI systems determine not only what information is visible but also how it is framed, effectively acting as a filter between the nation and its audience.

A key outcome of this process is the emergence of "filter bubbles," where users are repeatedly exposed to content that aligns with their existing views (Pariser, 2011). This reinforces cognitive biases and limits exposure to diverse perspectives. In the context of nation branding, such algorithmic filtering leads to fragmented national images, where different individuals develop distinct and sometimes conflicting perceptions of the same country. This reflects broader patterns of selective exposure and confirmation bias (Sunstein, 2017), highlighting how AI does not simply distribute information but actively shapes how nations are perceived.

2.5 Conceptualising Algorithmic Mediation and AI Agency

To enhance theoretical precision, it is essential to distinguish between algorithmic mediation and algorithmic agency, as these concepts are often conflated in discussions of artificial intelligence in digital communication. Clarifying this distinction is particularly important in the context of nation branding, where the role of AI risks being overstated without careful conceptual grounding. Algorithmic mediation refers to the process through which digital platforms structure the visibility and accessibility of information using algorithmic systems (Gillespie, 2014). Rather than acting as neutral intermediaries, platforms actively organise, prioritise, and filter content according to embedded logics such as relevance, engagement optimisation, and personalisation (Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017). This process is central to what scholars describe as platformisation, where digital platforms increasingly shape social, economic, and communicative interactions (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). In the context of nation branding, algorithmic mediation influences which representations of a country become visible, how frequently they are encountered, and how they are contextually framed across different user groups. As a result, national image is not simply communicated but is selectively amplified and structured within platform environments.

Algorithmic agency, by contrast, should be understood in a limited and non-anthropomorphic sense. It does not imply intentionality, autonomy, or conscious decision-making comparable to human actors. Instead, algorithmic agency refers to the capacity of AI systems to produce structured and consequential outcomes through automated decision rules and data-driven optimisation processes (Beer, 2017; Kitchin, 2017). These systems operate by identifying patterns in data and adjusting outputs, accordingly, thus shaping exposure and interpretation in probabilistic ways. From the perspective of algorithmic governance, such systems function as regulatory mechanisms that influence behaviour and perception without direct human intervention (Yeung, 2018). However, their operation remains embedded within broader socio-

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

technical systems, shaped by human design, institutional priorities, and platform-specific governance structures.

Distinguishing between mediation and agency is therefore important to avoid overstating the role of AI. Although AI systems play an active role in shaping communication environments, they do not independently create meaning or act with strategic intent. Instead, they influence how meaning is formed by structuring what information is visible, how it circulates, and how it is interpreted by audiences. This perspective is consistent with sociotechnical systems theory, which highlights that technological outcomes emerge from the interaction between human actors, institutional contexts, and technological infrastructures (Bijker et al., 1987).

By making this distinction explicit, AI can be more accurately conceptualised as a socio-technical intermediary in nation branding. It does not replace state actors or audiences but reconfigures the processes through which national image is co-created, shifting influence toward platform-mediated visibility and algorithmically structured interaction.

3. Artificial Intelligence: Definition, Tools, and Applications in Nation Branding

Artificial intelligence encompasses a broad range of technologies that enable machines to process data, identify patterns, and make decisions autonomously (Russell, 2021). In the context of nation branding, AI serves as both an analytical and a mediating force.

3.1 Key AI Technologies

Several AI tools are particularly relevant:

- Recommendation Systems: These systems suggest content based on user behaviour, influencing exposure which can influence nation-related information (Huang and Rust, 2021).
- Natural Language Processing (NLP): Enables machines to understand and generate human language, supporting communication strategies and automated content creation.
- Sentiment Analysis: A subfield of NLP that extracts opinions and emotions from textual data, allowing real-time monitoring of global attitudes toward nations (Liu, 2012).
- Predictive Analytics: Uses historical data to forecast future trends in perception and behaviour (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

3.2 Sentiment Analysis and Nation Image

Sentiment analysis is particularly significant in the context of nation branding. By analysing social media posts, news articles, and online discussions, governments and organisations can assess how their country is perceived globally. This enables real-time feedback and more responsive communication strategies. Especially when trying to brand a country or a destination. However, sentiment analysis is not neutral. The interpretation of sentiment depends on algorithms that may misclassify context, sarcasm, or cultural nuances. In addition, the data used

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

for analysis may be biased, leading to skewed representations of public opinion (Sunstein, 2017). As a result, sentiment analysis both informs and shapes nation branding, reinforcing certain narratives while marginalising others. It can be used which might be advantageous but still among other tools or ways for a better generalisable results.

3.3 AI as a Mediator of Visibility

Beyond analysing data, AI also plays a major role in deciding what people actually see. Recommendation algorithms on platforms like social media and search engines tend to prioritise content that attracts attention and engagement (Huang and Rust, 2021). This often means that emotionally strong or controversial content is shown more frequently than neutral information.
For nation branding, this creates an important challenge. The image of a country is not only shaped by what governments communicate, but also by what algorithms choose to highlight. For example, negative news or trending topics may receive more visibility than official branding efforts, which can influence how people perceive a country. Over time, repeated exposure to certain types of content can shape strong impressions, even if they do not fully represent reality.
As a result, AI is no longer just a tool used to support communication. It actively influences how national image is formed by controlling which narratives are seen and how often they appear. This makes nation branding less predictable and more dependent on digital platforms and their algorithms (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

4. The Shift to Algorithmic Mediation

The evolution of nation branding can be conceptualised as a transition across three stages: in the traditional era, nation branding was characterised by centralised control and uniform messaging. In the digital era, communication became decentralised and interactive. In the AI era, algorithmic systems have become the primary mediators of information.

This transformation represents a shift in power from governments to platforms and algorithms. Nation branding is no longer solely about crafting messages but about navigating algorithmic systems that determine how those messages are distributed and perceived by people, to get the results that the nation want out of its marketing activities.

5. Conceptual Framework: AI-Driven Nation Branding

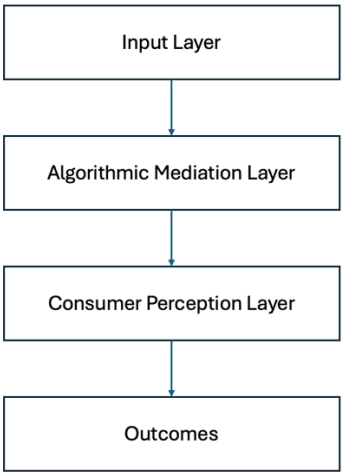
To capture this transformation, this paper proposes a four-layer framework (see Figure 1).

- Input Layer (Nation Signals): This layer includes all signals generated by a nation, such as government communication, cultural exports, economic policies, and international actions
- Algorithmic Mediation Layer: This layer represents AI systems that filter, rank, and personalise content. These systems determine which aspects of a nation are visible to different audiences.
- Consumer Perception Layer: Individuals interpret algorithmically curated information, forming personalised perceptions of a nation. These perceptions are influenced by cognitive biases and prior beliefs (Solomon, 2018).

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

- Outcomes Layer: Perceptions translate into behaviours such as tourism, investment, and political attitudes.



To improve analytical clarity, the framework can be viewed as a directional process linking inputs, mechanisms, and outcomes. Nation-generated signals, such as policy communication, cultural exports, and international actions, enter digital environments where they are processed through algorithmic systems. These systems organise and prioritise information using platform-specific logics, including relevance and engagement, which means that exposure is not uniform but varies across audiences.

At the perception stage, individuals interpret this curated information through their own cognitive frameworks, shaped by prior knowledge, biases, and context. As a result, national image is not experienced in a single, consistent way but emerges as fragmented and personalised across different users. These perceptions, in turn, influence behavioural responses, including decisions related to tourism, investment, and broader attitudes toward a country.

Each layer of the framework can also be linked to observable indicators. For instance, inputs may be assessed through the volume and type of nation-generated content, while mediation can be explored through visibility patterns or engagement metrics. Perception may be captured using sentiment measures or survey-based image evaluations, and outcomes can be reflected in behavioural indicators such as travel intentions or investment interest. Framing the model in this way moves it beyond a purely illustrative concept and provides a basis for empirical investigation.

6. Illustrative Cases

Countries such as Estonia, the United Arab Emirates, and South Korea demonstrate how digital and AI-driven mechanisms influence nation branding. Estonia's digital governance initiatives,

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

particularly its e-government and digital identity systems, have contributed to its image as a highly innovative and technologically advanced nation (e-Estonia, 2020; Kerikmäe and Särav, 2016). Similarly, the United Arab Emirates has actively positioned itself as a leader in artificial intelligence through national strategies and smart government initiatives, reinforcing its forward-looking global image (UAE Government, 2018). In the case of South Korea, the global spread of cultural exports such as K-pop, film, and digital media illustrates how nation branding operates within platform-mediated environments. Content associated with Korean popular culture is widely disseminated through platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, where algorithmic recommendation systems play a central role in amplifying visibility. Rather than being distributed evenly, this content is selectively promoted based on engagement signals, audience interaction, and platform-specific ranking logics (Jin, 2016; Cunningham and Craig, 2019).

From the perspective of the proposed framework, South Korea's cultural outputs represent nation-generated signals that enter algorithmic environments where visibility is structured through recommendation mechanisms. At the perception level, global audiences encounter these curated representations and form impressions of South Korea as technologically advanced, culturally influential, and globally connected. These perceptions, in turn, translate into behavioural outcomes, including increased tourism interest, cultural consumption, and positive national associations.

This example demonstrates how national image is not only communicated through deliberate state strategies but is also shaped by platform dynamics that influence which aspects of a country gain prominence. It therefore provides an illustrative application of the model, highlighting the role of algorithmic mediation in structuring visibility and perception in contemporary nation branding.

7. Implications

While AI plays a significant role in structuring visibility and shaping exposure, it does not replace the influence of state actors or institutional strategies. Governments continue to shape national image through policy decisions, strategic communication, and digital diplomacy, even as platform dynamics introduce new layers of mediation. However, governments must adapt to algorithmic environments by developing platform-oriented strategies rather than relying solely on message control. For marketers' nation branding becomes a data-driven and adaptive process requiring the integration of AI tools. While it is beneficial if used with caution however, there are ethical concerns that must be taken into consideration such as bias, misinformation, and lack of transparency, raising concerns about fairness in global representation.

8. Conclusion

This paper shows that nation branding is no longer a fully controlled, top-down process led only by governments. With the rise of artificial intelligence, national image is increasingly shaped by algorithms that influence what people see and how they interpret it. As a result, perceptions of countries are becoming more personalised and fragmented, rather than unified. The idea of

Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

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algorithmic co-creation reflects this shift, where national image emerges through ongoing interaction between governments, digital platforms, and audiences.

For governments and marketers, this means that managing a country's image now requires engaging with platform dynamics rather than relying solely on traditional communication strategies. At the same time, AI introduces challenges such as bias and uneven representation. Nation branding in the age of AI is therefore less about controlling a single narrative and more about navigating a complex digital environment where perceptions are constantly evolving.

Avenues for Future Research

This paper is only exploring the potential of artificial intelligence in reshaping nation branding; however, further research is needed to better understand and validate the proposed framework. Future studies could focus on empirically testing how AI-driven personalisation influences individual perceptions of countries across different contexts and platforms. Examining how exposure to algorithmically curated content affects attitudes toward nations would provide valuable insights into the behavioural outcomes highlighted in this study. Also, future research could explore the role of specific AI tools, such as sentiment analysis and recommendation systems, in shaping national image over time. Comparative studies across countries or regions may also be interesting and reveal how different digital strategies and platform dynamics influence nation branding outcomes. Finally, there is a need to investigate the ethical implications of AI in this context, particularly in relation to bias, misinformation in addition to unequal representation, to ensure a more balanced and responsible approach to nation branding in the digital age.

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Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

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Vol. 10, No.05; 2026

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