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## National Branding and its Key Components: Sample of Azerbaijan

### Abstract

This article explores national branding concepts while identifying its key components. This article reviews the existing literature on national branding by analyzing the literature on country branding, which incorporates branding concepts such as brand identity, brand image, and brand value. Based on the example of Azerbaijan this article examines governance, cultural heritage, economic prospects, tourism, international relations, and other factors that shape a country brand image. Most literature on national branding argues that having a unified and well-articulated brand allows a country to enhance its global reputation, attract foreign investment, and strengthen its identity. This article adds to the literature on branding nations by describing the components and aspects of the Azerbaijani brand.

**Keywords:** national branding, country branding, brand identity, brand value, Azerbaijan

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## Milli brendinq və onun əsas komponentləri: Azərbaycan nümunəsi

### Xülasə

Məqalədə milli brendinq anlayışları araşdırılmış və onun əsas komponentləri müəyyənləşdirilmişdir. Bu sahədə mövcud olan ədəbiyyat təhlil olunaraq, ölkə brendinqinə dair elmi yanaşmalar – o cümlədən brend identikliyi, brend imici və brend dəyəri kimi anlayışlar nəzərdən keçirilmişdir. Tədqiqat çərçivəsində Azərbaycan nümunəsi əsasında bir ölkənin brend imicinin formalaşmasında rol oynayan amillər – idarəetmə, mədəni irs, iqtisadi potensial, turizm, beynəlxalq münasibətlər və digər təsiredici faktorlar təhlil edilmişdir. Əksər elmi mənbələrdə vurğulandığı kimi, sistemli şəkildə qurulmuş və vahid strategiya ilə ifadə olunan ölkə brendi dövlətin beynəlxalq nüfuzunun gücləndirilməsində, xarici investisiyaların cəlb edilməsində və milli kimliyin möhkəmləndirilməsində mühüm rol oynayır. Məqalədə Azərbaycanın milli brend komponentləri və bu brendin formalaşmasında rol oynayan əsas cəhətlər elmi əsaslarla təqdim olunur və mövcud ədəbiyyata töhfə verilir.

**Açar sözlər:** milli brendinq, ölkə brendinqi, brend identikliyi, brend dəyəri, Azərbaycan

### Introduction

A country brand and country image are crucial in shaping its international reputation and influencing perceptions. In an era of globalization, where nations compete for economic opportunities, a well-managed nation brand can be a strategic asset. Nation branding has gained increasing attention as governments seek to position their countries favorably on the world stage (Anholt, 2007).

All countries, regardless of their regulation, have an image, which is the cornerstone of a country brand. Improving a nation's image is a long and complex process. Nation brands are important because they inspire people to visit, work, explore, and contribute. Governments must not voluntarily decide how their image will be continuously presented to the world.

The main message of country branding is that if a country is to improve its global image, it should focus on improving and promoting its country brand rather than dreaming of unrealistic results. Credible, concise, practical, tangible (Fournier, 1998), high-level, or more important ideas, materials, and actions can gradually raise the position of the country that presents them. Country branding is a process that consists of a country's branding strategy, substance, and symbolic activities.

When a country brand positions the country's authenticity, it will increase its fame and recognition. The joint work of civil society, the public sector, and the private sector leads to the main goal – a favorable profile. Recognizing the qualities and limitations of a nation, either to strengthen its foundation, processes, and policies or to resolve uncertainty, will allow countries to realize their potential and access opportunities. Economy, politics, history, society, environment, architecture, science, and geography are the primary sources of a country image. The image is also influenced by its past, its position in world history, and its place in the global community. The country image is based on synthesizing these sources and its traditions. The nation's image combines all these publications taken from different newspapers. Country branding helps to create an impression of authority and policy in global markets. It helps to gain foreign cooperation to gain legal standing.

Initially, business branding consultancies constituted most of the corporations that advise on country branding issues today. Public relations, advocacy, and advertising have become the primary branding sources in the postmodern branding era. In the global market, the label of a country is a logical and important measure of the government's exchange authorization. It tests whether it is worthy of everything left from its family, housing, society, deals, goods, and institutions. Its inhabitants can benefit from the influence of the impression made by its residents and the opportunities others provide.

## **Research**

Azerbaijan provides a unique example for analyzing nation branding at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Azerbaijan emerged as an independent state seeking to enhance its international prestige, historically shaped by Russian, Persian, and Ottoman influences. This paper explores the key components that contribute to Azerbaijan's branding and image, focusing on governance, economic development, cultural heritage, tourism, and international relations.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the key components of a strong nation brand? (2) How do these components apply to Azerbaijan? (3) What challenges and opportunities exist in shaping Azerbaijan's national image?

This study has employed a case study approach to answering the identified research questions that examine the effectiveness of Azerbaijan's country brand and brand identity in terms of the main components of nation branding.

### Literature Review

#### *1.1 Nation Branding: Concept and Theoretical Framework*

Despite the extensive theoretical literature on destination, place, and nation branding, there is no consensus on their definitions and applications. The multiple dimensions included in the concept of nation branding involve a variety of disciplines, including economics, marketing, social sciences, political sciences, and environmental sciences.

Simon Anholt (Anholt, 1998) observed that a country's reputation acts as a brand image for companies. He explained that, like brands, a company's reputation is essential to its success, and a country's reputation is essential to its progress and prosperity.

Place branding and destination branding are closely related concepts and are often used interchangeably despite their differences in scale. This comprehension aids in creating more accurate and efficient methods of branding (Bosworth, 2023). ResearchFDI outlines four primary divergences concerning place branding and destination branding (Table 1):

- Scope and Scale of Promotion
- Audience and Objectives
- Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

- Industry and Sector Emphasis

**Table 1. Key Distinctions: Place Branding vs. Destination Branding**

Area of Distinction	Place Branding	Destination Branding
Scope and Focus	Overall identity: culture, history, economy, sustainability.	Specific attractions and narrative to differentiate the location.
Audience and Objectives	Broad audience: businesses, residents, tourists. Focus on development, tourism, and identity.	Primarily tourists. Focus on engaging activities.
Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement	Wide stakeholder involvement: businesses, government, residents.	Tourism-focused stakeholders: tourism boards, local businesses.
Industry and Sector Emphasis	Attracts diverse industries, positioning the area as a hub for multiple sectors.	Focus on tourism and hospitality sectors, ideal for vacations and conferences.

*Source: ResearchFDI (2023)*

Destination branding focuses on analyzing a place's most attractive and competitive features from the perspective of potential visitors. It involves developing unique narratives that differentiate the destination from its competitors and communicating them consistently across marketing activities (TPBO, 2015).

BrandTrust offers the following definition of place branding: a brand-centric strategy applied to a specific geographical area, such as a tourist destination (Glossar - Das Nachschlagewerk Für Markeninteressierte, n.d.). Often, place branding is not organized or developed in a unified manner. Different groups, such as business, investment, technology, and even tourism, work autonomously to promote the image and brand of a place from their perspective. However, moving from a disjointed approach to a more coordinated approach can significantly improve the competitive advantage of a given place. A well-branded place improves the conditions for export business, increases revenues and tourism, creates a skilled workforce, and increases investment opportunities.

Furthermore, it also strengthens the background and foundation of public diplomacy, as it easily shapes the image of a place and can convey how safe and secure this environment is, what kind of environment it is located in, the tax regime, the quality of the workforce, the existing political stability and education system, as well as the culture of the society (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009).

According to Anholt (2007), place branding manages a place's image through strategic innovation and the relationship between the economy, trade, society, culture, and government. He came up with the term "competitive identity," which combines brand management, public diplomacy and trade, investment, tourism, and export promotion.

Govers and Go (2009) explain place branding as a process of thinking about ideas to reconstruct the identity, distinctive mark, and "places of genius." It involves the construction of place through hardware (infrastructure, buildings), software (events, stories), orgware (joint organizational frameworks), and virtual devices (symbols, performance gestures, websites) (TPBO, 2024).

Destination branding seeks to create an attractive, credible, and unique position in the tourism industry with a carefully crafted brand identity (Glossar – Das Nachschlagewerk Für Markeninteressierte, n.d.-b). The challenge of destination branding is defined by its integrated complexity: how to integrate a wide range of services offered by multiple stakeholders into a single, unified brand identity.

As Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) have pointed out, place branding involves business and investment, tourism, export markets, public diplomacy, and identity, enabling citizens to enhance their self-esteem. Although the academic literature does not always make a strict distinction between place branding and national branding, a subtle attempt at differentiation is possible. Olins

and Hildreth (Olins, Hildreth, 2011) have noted that national branding is associated with political or cultural criticism, nationalism, and inward-looking nation-building (Kaneva, 2011).

Nation branding is defined as a means of political expression, especially for small and peripheral countries that seek to strengthen their competitiveness with superpowers' economic and military power (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011). Much of the literature on nation branding views it primarily as a way to achieve a country's competitive advantage (Kaneva, 2011). Although the concepts of place branding and nation branding are conflated when marketing a region, they differ somewhat in emphasis and approach.

Anholt (2007) noted the difficulties in defining people's perceptions of countries and how they compete for exports, governance, tourism, investment, immigration, culture, heritage, and even peoples. Like place brands, nation brands are intangible and socially constructed (Fournier, 1998).

In this regard, discourse is fundamental, and perhaps in conjunction with "understandings and experiences of places are mediated through a range of everyday texts in which landscapes are seen" (Gibson & Davidson, 2004).

#### Components of Nation Branding

Branding was initially used for differentiation in business management but has now expanded to include nations, cities, and regions (Dinnie, 2008). The American Marketing Association (2006) defines a brand as "a name, symbol, term, or combination of them that is intended to distinguish the goods or services of one seller from those of another." The brand has been the focus of nation branding, which aims to create a desirable image of a nation in the global marketplace (American Marketing Association).

Anholt (Anholt, 2005) suggests the Nation Brand Hexagon, a model consisting of six components: governance, investment, exports, tourism, culture, and people. Taken together, these determine how competitive and influential a country is on a global scale. They are the main pillars that influence the perception of a nation both within its borders and internationally.

Based on this hypothesis, Dinnie (2008) proposes that nation branding encompasses external perceptions and the internal foundations of a nation's identity. As defined by Dinnie, the interrelated components of a nation brand are brand identity, brand image, brand equity, and strategic brand management. They are only effective when aligned with the country's economy, politics, and culture, as they are relevant to the national context.

Country branding requires careful consideration of the key areas of focus: Brand Identity, Brand Image, and Brand Equity. These areas provide the basis for how a country brand will be perceived and evaluated internally and externally.

Brand Identity refers to a nation's core values (Aaker, 1996). These include cultural markers, historical narratives, vision, and self-image. Brand Identity supports all efforts towards external branding to strengthen unity among citizens while presenting an attractive descriptive discourse about the country to the outside world (Dinnie, 2008).

In contrast to Brand Identity, brand image refers to the perception of a nation by external audiences and other countries (Keller, 2003). This perception is shaped by various issues such as media coverage, diplomacy, tourism, international trade, and many others (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001). A positive Brand Image is excellent for attracting investors, tourists, and even skilled workers and adds significant value to the country's competitiveness.

Brand Equity refers to the value placed on a place's brand and brand image. This field has added to the brand's impact on the world, the economy's infrastructure, and the citizens' soft power (Anholt, 2007). Improved brand equity strengthens external relationships, improves economic development, and supports positive public opinion, enhancing international competitiveness (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

These three components, brand identity, brand image, and brand equity, work together. All three aspects must be addressed systematically to create and sustain a competitive nation brand. They shape the brand's image and reputation and add value or equity.

Nation branding is assessed and measured on various dimensions, including brand identity, image, and equity. The Nation Brand Index (NBI) and Country Brand Index (CBI) are monitored to

measure the effectiveness of these components. Developed by Simon Anholt, the NBI assesses a country brand image and equity by assessing its governance, tourism, exports, and other aspects vital to its global reputation. The CBI, developed by Bloom Consulting, monitors a nation's brand identity and global presence, offering analysis for branding purposes in investment promotion and public diplomacy.

Anholt's NBI is one of the well-known benchmarks for assessing foreigners' perceptions of a country. Like any other index, the NBI measures how positive or negative a country is regarding tourism, business, aid, governance, culture, and people. The NBI is based on public surveys filled by citizens of other countries with some knowledge or experience of the country. The NBI helps identify areas where countries are performing poorly, allowing marketers and government officials to implement appropriate strategies to improve the country brand globally.

Anholt's NBI assesses country brands based on six dimensions (Figure 1):

*Figure 1. Nation Brand Hexagon*



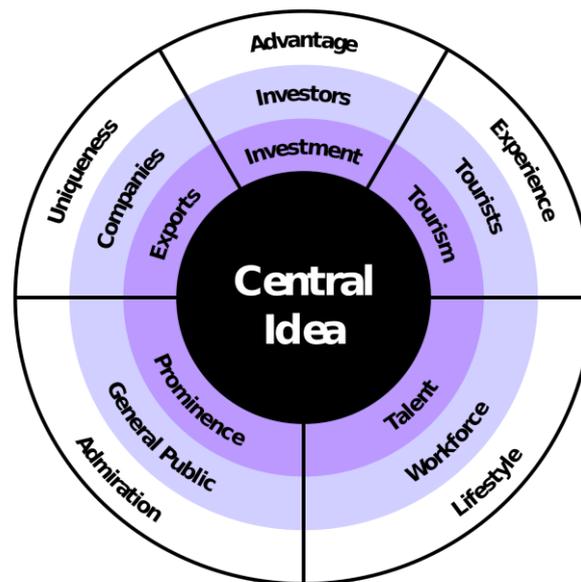
*Source: Anholt & Ipsos, 2021*

- Tourism – Marketing a country's image as a desirable travel destination.
- Exports – The value a country generates by selling its goods and services.
- Governance – How a country's leadership is perceived in terms of the openness and effectiveness of its system.
- Culture and Heritage – The impact of a country's achievements on global culture, sports, and the arts.
- People – Perceptions of a country image, such as its citizens' hospitality, friendliness, and social values.
- Investment and Immigration – The level of investment opportunities a country has and how welcoming it is to foreign skilled and unskilled workers and immigrants.

Analyzing these metrics over time shows how competitive a company is and its strengths and weaknesses in the global marketplace, helping countries understand their brands (Azerbaijan will expand agricultural cooperation with Poland and North Macedonia).

Bloom Consulting's Country Brand Index (CBI) is another comprehensive tool for managing the brand image of a country, region, or city. It views these entities as important assets that require individual approaches to achieve their goals. Bloom Consulting outlines five key dimensions of branding in its Branding Wheel, which are (Figure 2):

Figure 2. Nation Brand Wheel



Source: Bloom Consulting, 2025

Each dimension targets specific groups with specific needs. For example, the tourism dimension focuses on tourists seeking exclusive holiday packages. With this in mind, Bloom Consulting's methodology allows for comprehensive approaches that cover all five dimensions and more concentrated approaches for each dimension. This tailored approach ensures that broad strategies respond to the complex nuances of each target audience (Bloom Consulting, 2025).

Bloom Consulting has created Tourism and Investment (Trade) rankings focusing on the tourism dimension. This approach illuminates a country's position in these important areas and provides guidance on how to improve its overall brand.

Both internal and external factors influence a nation's brand identity. These aspects include:

- Governance and Political Stability: Effective governance enhances international credibility and investor confidence (Anholt, 2007).
- Economic Development and Investment Environment: A strong economy with business-friendly policies increases a country's international brand equity, attracting foreign investors.
- Cultural Heritage and National Identity: A successful nation brand requires a unique identity, and a country's history, culture, and traditions provide such a differentiating factor (Dinnie, 2008).
- Tourism and destination marketing: International events and tourism campaigns play an important role in advertising a country's cultural and natural assets, thus strengthening its brand image (Morgan, 2004).
- Foreign Policy and Global Engagement: International relations and participation in global organizations affect how a country is viewed and its brand image (Nye, 2004).

#### Azerbaijani Country Brand

Azerbaijan is rich in cultural, historical, and natural resources, and its geographical location is optimal for the intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. In recent years, the Azerbaijani government has paid great attention to improving its brand image through tourism.

Azerbaijan's brand identity as a country includes the interdependent elements of brand identity and brand image. Along with these concepts, brand identity is also influenced by international relations, economic power, tourism, culture, and governance. Understanding these factors allows us to identify key components and strategic schemes that still require more attention to improve the global perception of Azerbaijan.

#### 1. Governance and Political Stability

Azerbaijan's brand is largely defined by its governance, which undoubtedly contributes to its formation. The country has a presidential republican system of government, which has led to a stable political system and is a good selling point for foreign investors and international stakeholders (European Committee of the Regions - Azerbaijan, n.d.). Political stability in the country also serves as a bulwark for developing other areas, such as tourism, trade, and cultural diplomacy.

## 2. Economic Development

Azerbaijan's economy primarily depends on its abundant energy resources, particularly oil and gas. However, the Azerbaijani government is trying to expand its economic opportunities. Azerbaijan has standing partnership programs in the field of agriculture with several European and Non-European Countries, as Poland, Macedonia and United Arab Emirates (Agricultural Research Center, n.d.). To strengthen its oil-dependent economy, withstand international competition, and become less sensitive to fluctuations in oil prices, it needs to strengthen the economy through agriculture, technology, and tourism.

## 3. Cultural Heritage and Identity

Cultural heritage is an important aspect of nation branding, and Azerbaijan's cultural heritage is influenced by Persian, Ottoman, and Russian architecture, literature, music, and cuisine. It is depicted in its architecture, literature, music, and cuisine. Important heritage sites: the Historic Center of Sheki and the Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape significantly impact Azerbaijan's brand identity (UNESCO in Azerbaijan, n.d.). These sites and many others that carry the UNESCO logo significantly promote Azerbaijan's brand value. Azerbaijan is internationally known for its mugham music and national festivals that reflect Azerbaijan's soft power culture.

## 4. Tourism and Destination Branding

Tourism is a key aspect of Azerbaijan's branding strategy. The recent "Take Another Look" initiative promoted its cuisine, hospitality, and culture worldwide (Our Brand, n.d.). The campaign aims to change people's perceptions of Azerbaijan by presenting it as a country with rich opportunities for travellers. Azerbaijan is trying to market itself as a source of growth and a soft power for diplomacy. The country has many attractions, including the historic cities of Baku and Sheki, the Caspian Sea coast, and the Caucasus Mountains.

## 5. Regional and International Partnerships

Azerbaijan is part of many international organizations such as Turksoy, EU, and UN, and they use this to brand the country internationally. Sponsoring diplomacy efforts such as mediation in the Ukraine-Russia conflict has allowed the country to present itself as a neutral country focused on diplomacy Kucera (2024). Through regional and international diplomacy, Azerbaijan can promote its culture and politics globally while strengthening itself as a strategic ally for cooperation.

### "Take Another Look"

The "Take Another Look" campaign, created by the Azerbaijan Tourism Bureau (ATB), is a cornerstone in the branding of Azerbaijani tourism. The campaign aims to project Azerbaijan internationally as a destination for exploration and holistic leisure benefits, highlighting its historical significance and modern achievements.

The most innovative part of the "Take Another Look" campaign is the brand story built around it, which encourages travellers to take part in exploratory journeys. The "Take Another Look" slogan encourages people to change their perspective on Azerbaijan, dig deeper, and find what they could not see before. The campaign promotes seeing Azerbaijan as a "land of discoveries" – a place where there is always something new to discover, whether it is historical sites, natural wonders, or vibrant culture.

The visual identity of the "Take Another Look" campaign features a prominent lens icon consisting of an overlapping circle and semicircle, resembling a camera lens. The symbol is a stylized representation of Azerbaijan and acts as a lens. As a visual device, the lens acts as a window that invites the public into the contrasting serene mountain ranges, cityscapes, colourful, rich cultural traditions, and several other notable elements that shape Azerbaijan's identity. This approach visually depicts Azerbaijani identity through a narrative where space is constantly discovered and experienced about contradictory co-existing elements.

The main target of the "Take Another Look" campaign is international travellers who are less familiar with Azerbaijan. They see it as a destination dominated by oil and energy. From a branding perspective, the country is strategically positioned as an exploration destination that meets the needs of the majority of tourists seeking adventure, culture, wellness, or luxury experiences.

The campaign also targets travellers seeking alternative countries with captivating, rich histories, stunning cultural experiences, and breathtaking nature. The Azerbaijan brand positioning as a destination of "discoveries" and "limited discoveries" caters to those seeking new and original experiences in uncharted territory.

The campaign utilizes various marketing channels to reach global viewers, such as the Internet, social media, traditional advertising, and public advertisements. The ATB website serves as the Main advertisement booth for Azerbaijani tourism by offering prospective tourists' up-to-date information, relevant videos, blogs, and travel guidebooks.

The website contains several supporting materials, such as brochures, maps, and thematic booklets on Baku's multicultural identity, including regions such as Khinalig, Beshmarmag, and Shusha, as well as the Polish and Jewish communities. These documents are translated into several languages to reach a broad international audience.

Colourful graphics, attractive stories, and contacts with international travel agencies and media bring Azerbaijan to the center of attention of world tourism. In addition, the campaign's active digital presence on social networks allows it to reach young travellers with digital devices constantly looking for new places to see in Azerbaijan.

The "Take Another Look" Campaign has raised global awareness of Azerbaijan as a tourist destination. Due to this increasing awareness, the country is attracting an increasing number of tourists from the EU region and the Middle East. Azerbaijan has also hosted international events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix and Eurovision 2012, putting it on the world tourism map.

## Conclusion

This study focuses on the main aspects of Azerbaijan's nation branding strategy, governance, economic development, cultural heritage, tourism, international relations, and other areas within the theoretical literature on nation branding and how they influence the country image worldwide.

Azerbaijan is actively working to present itself as a unique and diverse destination, mainly through the award-winning "Take Another Look" initiative. The branding has indeed been successful, as efforts to showcase the country's culture, natural resources, and modern achievements are increasing, and Azerbaijan is presented as a country worth discovering.

This paper suggests that a clear distinction between destination branding and nation branding would improve Azerbaijan's country brand.

This study contributes to the nation branding literature by addressing the components of Azerbaijan's nation branding. Currently, Azerbaijan is focused on promoting itself as a tourism brand. However, given the country's tangible and intangible resources, comprehensive nation branding could enhance its international reputation.

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