Branding a nation: Framework for Building Favorable Country-Image

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Abstract

There exists an intensified competition among different countries to attract investments, tourists and exports. The purpose of this paper is to build a new framework for creating better images for countries through image makeover so that they can have a strong global presence. It also critically examines whether brands have the capability of making or marring the image of their country of origin and vice versa.

To an extent country image translates into the image of its products and vice versa. But this is not necessarily true under all circumstances. The proposed framework augments the literature on nation branding and fills the identified gap in the same. Brands can stand out on their own.
The study is conceptual and based on theoretical avenues available in this area.

Images of Brands and their countries are interlinked. They can either make or mar each others' reputation. The paper proposes a framework for creating better images for countries through image makeover. Descriptive research approach has been used. The framework for this study is grounded in interactions and review of the literature. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were held.

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Introduction

In marketing parlance, not only goods and services can be offered to the customers but a whole range of products can be offered including events, ideas, persons, places and even nations. In today's era there exists an intensified competition not just among corporate and consumer brands, industries and markets but also among countries. Hence the need for building the right image for a country. For this a country has to sail through crests and troughs to create, identify and bank upon the most favorable image for itself. It has to build upon the same and also update it with the passage of time to enhance its marketability and keep itself afloat amidst the ever expanding frontiers of national greatness. In the international arena, a nation gets its image based on the image of the products it markets. It is a widely held belief that the global community forms a favorable image about a nation if the corporate and consumer brands of that nation are perceived to be of great value and held in high esteem by consumers across the globe. The reverse also holds true i.e. if a particular country has a favorable and successful image, then the brands marketed by it get an upper edge over competing products manufactured by some, say, not so successful, nations.

Consumer/corporate brands can make or mar the image of their country of origin. These brands may or may not be the best in performance, quality and such other parameters, but the customers' perception towards them can make a huge difference and is decisive of their success or failure. Customer perception, images and beliefs have acquired much relevance and are emerging as the new reality. Consumers associate different attributes, which may or may not be factual, with various countries as well as with different consumer/corporate brands, which in turn lead to the formation and shaping up of their perceptions about those countries and brands. The quality and effectiveness of marketers' offer is thus determined not so much by its actual performance as by the customer's perception about it. Irrespective of various other facets of the product, if the customer has a positive and favorable perception towards it, he is satisfied with it, and is dissatisfied under circumstances where he has developed a negative perception for the given product. Same is true for nations.

This paper examines customers' perceptions towards brands based on their country of origin and also critically analyzes whether brands have the capability of making or marring the image of their country of origin. It even attempts to check if favorable country image helps in improving the image of its corporate and consumer brands. The paper also focuses on designing a framework for creating better images for countries through image makeover so that they can acquire a strong global presence.

This paper is divided into seven sections. The first section highlights the review of literature dealing with customer perceptions towards brands originating from different countries and critically examines various studies carried out on nation branding in the past to see if there are any findings available to show that corporate and consumer brands impact the image of their countries of origin and vice versa. The second section explicitly states the purpose of the study undertaken. The third section deals with the methodology and the research design. The fourth section comprises of the discussion of the results. The fifth section focuses on a framework in designing a strategy for effectively building favorable country-image for a nation. The sixth section mentions the managerial implications and conclusions of the study. Finally, the paper ends with the limitations and directions for future research in the related field.

Literature Review and Research Gaps

Majority of the research on nation branding have been conducted with an emphasis on understanding the importance of applying the concept of branding to nations to increase their market value. The literature related to this reveals varied opinions on nation branding. Some authors say it is inevitable in the present times while others debate upon its usefulness. Other studies connected to this have been done in the domain of country-specific branding activities and their implications on the domestic and the international spectrum. Noted author Keith Dinnie of Temple University, Tokyo, Japan in his study titled 'Nation branding and country image: Opportunities and limitations of a media-centric approach' mentioned that a nation needs to brand itself and create the right kind of image in the global arena to attract foreign investments, to promote exports and tourism. He also opined that many governments are not accustomed to the brand management techniques and spend public money on extensive advertising campaigns without evaluating the effectiveness of the same. He propagates that a media-centric approach to nation branding would yield the desired result. He also suggested a qualitative research technique 'Brand Personification' where in the question asked to the audience would be on the lines of: "If brand X were a person, what kind of person would it be?"

But, according to Af Simon Anholt (2009), nation branding is just a myth; it does not exist in reality. He pointed out that between 2005 when the Anholt Nation Brands Index1 was launched, and the latest study in October 2008, there had been no detectable correlation between changes in national brand value and expenditure on 'nation branding campaigns'. He is of the opinion that efforts in branding a nation hardly pays off and that a nations brand value may remain stable or even decline in spite of running various advertising and PR campaigns. He further stated that places do have their brand images and that these images are critical to the success of their products, services, talent, finance, investment, culture, respect and profile in the global contest

Thomas Cromwell & Savas Kyriacou, 2009, in their article 'The concept and benefits of branding' emphasized on the fact that branding has always been associated with corporations and their products and services both in consumer Business-to-business markets. But today branding is also used to shape a country's image and there is a widespread realization of the idea of a global village in which competition among nations have reached a new level of sophistication They further note that markets and foreign policies compete in the international arena and hence economic and political development of a country cannot take place in isolation of the international community. Political, economic, legal and cultural environment of a nation contribute to its identity and image. So every nation, according to them, is already a brand in the sense that it is already registered in the minds of others as an entity with either positive or negative attributes. These perceptions will drive the behavior of other nations and also individuals which in turn will contribute to its progress or failure. They also discussed the benefits of branding and re-branding.

'The rise of the brand state: The postmodern politics of image and reputation' by Peter Van Ham throws light on the shift from straightforward advertising to branding where products and services are given an emotional dimension so that people can identify with them. According to him, Singapore and Ireland are not just counties, but brand states that have an emotional resonance with the increasing global audience of consumers. He has used the term brand state to denote the outside world's idea about a particular country.

He observed that everything related to America or having a tag of 'Made in the U.S.A stand for prosperity and individual freedom. Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs are associated with the efficiency and reliability of Germany. In the global consumers' minds brands and their countries often get merged. He has cited the example of Nokia being perceived as Finland's envoy to the world.

Peter Van Ham pointed out that yesteryear's traditional diplomacy is becoming obsolete. Politicians will now have to find a niche brand for their country and train themselves in brand asset management. Their task would include ensuring customer satisfaction, engaging in competitive marketing and creating brand loyalty. Brand nations will compete not only among themselves but also with super brands like Microsoft, CNN etc

The world today is overloaded with information and hence it becomes pertinent to have strong brands to attract foreign direct investments. The unbranded nation has a difficult time in attracting political and economic attention in this given this scenario. Image and reputation are key factors for the strategic development of a nation.

The author of the article ‘Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation branding- Brand Estonia’ critically examines the emergence of nation branding as a commercial practice for nations to redefine and reposition themselves within the master narrative of globalization. He puts forth the argument that nation branding is an engine of neo-liberalism embracing a reductive logic which privileges market fundamentalism. He opines that nation branding is anti-democratic and is also a risky business that can backfire.

However, after reviewing the related literature on image building it was felt that most of them focussed on some specific country, city or place. There is a lack of a holistic approach. There is a gap in the sense that no such simplistic model in the form of a framework available to create the desired and relevant image for a country that would be appealing to the audience across the globe is lacking in the literature. The need for a framework that could be applicable across all places, cities and countries is felt. Moreover, there is also no concrete acknowledgement of whether consumer/corporate brands impact the image of their country and vice versa. Also, a study to acknowledge that the image of a country needs to undergo effective makeover to be in tune with the changing times is missing.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective of the study was to suggest a framework for building ‘country image’ with the help of brands. For this it was deemed necessary to get a thorough understanding of, and an insight into, customers' perceptions towards brands based on their country of origin. The importance of the concept of branding for nations has already been established in the marketing literature. However there is a lack of a simplistic model in the form of a framework that would help to create the desired and relevant image for a country and make it more appealing to the global customers. No extensive study has been done on understanding and acknowledging the dynamic nature of customer perception towards different corporate or consumer brands based on the change of image of their country of origin of those brands and hence the need for a study to acknowledge that the image of a country needs to undergo effective makeover to be in tune with the changing times

This study would enable marketers and governments to generate thoughtful strategies for branding and creating as well as managing the right perceptions and images for their nations, among the global fraternity to attract and gain investments, exports and tourists for their projects, goods/ services and places. This study also aims to augment and enhance the theory on customer perceptions towards country of origin of different brands by providing meaningful inputs in an organized sequence. Although nation branding and positioning have been considered to be one of the key elements of the modern marketing management, it is surprising to learn that there exists a lack of research and theories relating to creating, managing and updating country-images for obtaining sustainable competitive advantage in the international schema of affairs. Another gap identified in the marketing literature reviewed on country image and nation branding is that there is no general acknowledgement of the fact that customer perception is dynamic in nature. They vary over a given period of time and hence it is not sufficient to be just aware of the understanding of the concept, but also strategies should be suggested to evolve the image of a country from time to time as and when deemed necessary so as to keep pace with the contemporary customers'[2] tastes and demands. The objectives can be summarized as:

- To build a framework for creating better images for countries through image makeover so that they can have a strong global presence.
- To understand customers' perceptions towards brands based on their country of origin and to critically analyze whether brands have the capability of making or marring the image of their country of origin.
- To check if favorable image of country of origin helps in improving the image of its corporate and consumer brands.

Research Approach and Design

Descriptive research approach has been used to conduct this study. Descriptive Research is used to provide an accurate snapshot of some aspects of the marketing environment or marketing activities. The hypotheses often exist in case of descriptive research but they may be either tentative or speculative. Researches concerning the understanding of customer evaluation of the attributes of a company's brand versus its competing brands take refuge in this kind of research. The frame work for this study is also grounded in interactions wherein the aim of the investigator was to attempt to determine the views of the respondents.

As the aim of the study was to get insights into customers' perception towards different brands based on their country of origin and to find out whether strong brands help in creating positive image about their countries and vice versa, it was thought suitable to have focus group discussions and in-depth interviews for gauging customer perception and beliefs and proposing a framework for marketers/governments to effectively create and update their country images. Collection of data by means of a structured questionnaire for this purpose seemed irrelevant. Customer awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of customer perceptions, attitudes and beliefs is inadequate to facilitate the conduction of a quantitative study. It also becomes difficult if not impossible to start with a set of hypotheses as in the case of deductive research approaches due to the lack of availability of standard and popular marketing approaches. For getting insights into the problem in this study, qualitative research provided the required flexibility. Some of the major factors showing that customers' perceptions towards consumer/corporate brands and countries are dynamic in nature were identified in the exploratory phase. For focus group discussions three groups were formed with 7 participants in each of them. The participants, who belonged to various courses of a business school, were asked to give their insights, views and opinions etc about different brands belonging to different countries based on their perspectives. People of diverse demographic and professional profiles comprised each focus group of the sample set. To ensure that each focus group discussion could generate diverse ideas, customer experiences, attitudes and perceptions towards various brands, they had participants from different courses like MBA 1st and 2nd year participants, colleagues from Marketing, Finance, Operations Management, Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Development. The focus group Discussions were mostly unstructured and the process of data collection included observing, listening, moderating and noting/jotting down the vital points of the ongoing discussions. Focus group discussion benefited the study by providing insights into the shared understanding of the concepts by the people and the ways in which they were influenced by and reacted to the marketing mix elements to form images about different products (including countries). The duration of the focus group discussion ranged from 30 to 40 minutes.

In-depth interviews were conducted in the next phase shifting the approach from an exploratory inductive one to a direct and confirmatory one. 462 participants comprised the sample for this phase although the size of the sample was not pre-determined. The approach was such that the process of interviewing was stopped when it was realized that theoretical saturation was achieved in the sense that no relevant additional data can be had to help in the concerned study. This is different from statistical sampling where the sample size is pre decided. In the in-depth interview phase of the undertaken study, the goal was to search for information rich interviewees and stop integrating with the respondents as soon as the theoretical saturation was reached /obtained. The respondents were asked to rank certain parameters on a 5 point Likert scale.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two types of data have been gathered for this study: (1) on the basic understanding of customer perception about the image of a country and the dynamic nature of this perception (2) a thorough depiction of the relationship between customer perception about corporate and consumer brands and their country of origin and also the impact of country image on its consumer or corporate brands. For the focus group discussion the participants were contacted through the selected business school's intra-mail. The participants, i.e. the insiders of the selected business school were also encouraged to bring in interested friends and colleagues for the study. This kind of sampling helped in bringing together an ample number of participants. By avoiding adoption of volunteer sampling, the self selection biasness was minimized to a large extent which is a big concern in studies of this type. This was done by ensuring that in each of the focus groups the maximum number of participants with similar educational backgrounds and courses was restricted to three.

The interview phase consisted of asking question that tried to probe and explore the customers' perception about a brand and its country of origin, what factors led to the formation of such perceptions, whether their perceptions changed over time towards the same brand and country, if yes then what according to them could have helped in changing their previous perception. Informal interview was conducted to get a first hand information about the way customers feel towards different brands and reasons for their perceiving two or more brands of similar nature very differently. Follow up questions attempted to address issues on the different attributes, benefits, and other marketing mix elements that led to customers' liking, disliking, acceptance or rejection of brands. Analysis of the information obtained involved review of the notes made during the focus group discussions. Ideas and views expressed during the focus group discussions and the interviews held were seen for convergence. Words and sentences which seemed to capture the essence of customers' perception and beliefs were sorted out. Apart from this, the respondents were asked to rank five important parameters on a 5-pont Likert's scale as given in the table below. To avoid subjectivity in data analysis, and also to cross check and verify the emerging themes and constructs derived from the discussions held in this study, some of the respondents of the focus group discussions and interviews were again contacted for corroborating and confirming the analysis. Precision of the results obtained from analyzing the data was confirmed by the feed- back. Scrutiny of data collected in the study helped in proposing a conceptual framework managing customer perception towards a nation brand.

Data collected from the interview stage:
Total sample size 462

Table 1: Sample Profile

Number of respondents	Occupation	Age	Gender		Socio-economic Class
			Male	Female	
355	Students	20-24	262	93	B
62	Teachers, Professors	27-45	24	38	B
41	Staff members in academic institutes	21-28	23	18	B

Table 2: Factors Influencing Choice of Brands

Factors influencing choice of brands	Highly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Country of origin	297	84	56	23	2
The success of some brands has lead to the development of the country's image as a successful nation	302	104	29	20	7

Corporate and consumer brands drive their home countries to acquire leadership of the global economy	285	73	84	8	1
Habit of repeatedly buying a company's brand irrespective of rationality of decision based on price, quality, performance etc.	89	72	34	147	120
Favorable country image leads to upper edge to brands launched by it	293	88	53	22	9

Customer insights obtained from Focus Group Discussions

Total sample size for FGD was 21. These 21 respondents were also part of the personal interviews

The following major points emerged in the 3 FGDs held with 7 participants in each of them

- Corporate image was vital and played a significant role in influencing their choices for different product brands
- The success of a brand helped in improving the corporate image
- The success of a brand also reflected in the country's image

- The image of a country contributed significantly in influencing brand choices among the international consumers
- Coca Cola soft drinks, McDonald's hamburgers and Microsoft software are successful brands originating from America. The success of these brands, among others, has lead to the development of the image of America as a successful nation.

- Japan stands out from the rest of the Asian countries because of its global brands like Sony, Toyota and Nikon are well known because of their quality of products. These brands have delivered economic power to their owner by the mere strength of their corporate/consumer brands.
- Maybelline NY' is suffixed by the initial letters of America's most famous city, New York. It appeals to the world's young women who aspire to be like the trendy young women of New York.

The Proposed Framework for Creating Better Image for a Country

The image of most countries, either favorable or unfavorable, already exists in the minds of the global audience. For developed nations these images are quite vivid and clear but for the lesser known countries they might be vague. Moreover, if customers are unaware of a lesser known country, they might even tend to be indifferent to its products or services, howsoever good they might be.

In order to achieve an image makeover, a country has to organize its branding efforts under three stages:

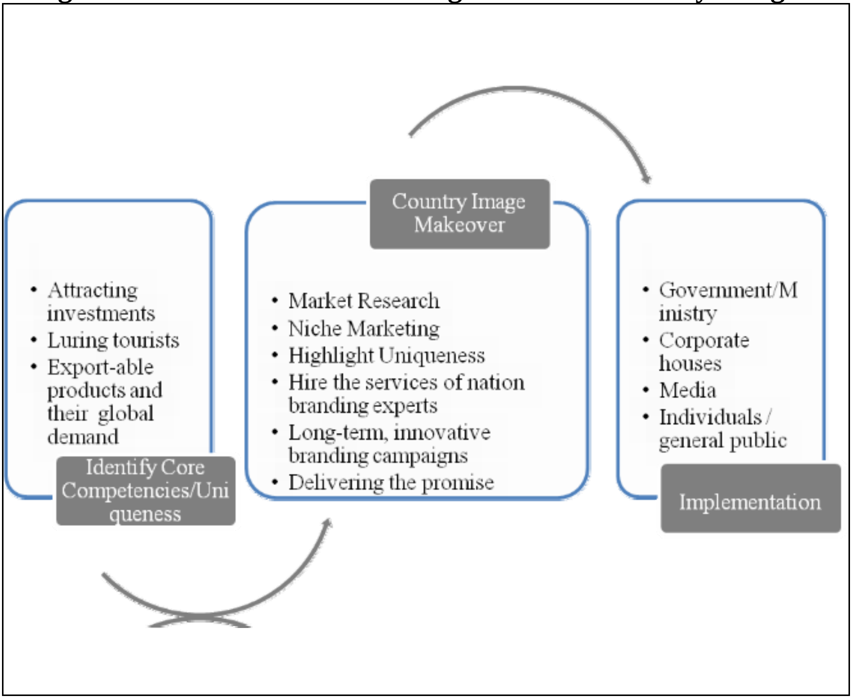
Stage I: The first stage would necessarily involve the identification of its core competencies and uniqueness and also analyze where it stands and how it compares to the competition in terms of its capability to attract foreign investments, lure tourists and export products that are in great demand globally.

Stage II: Once the uniqueness is identified, it can move on to the second stage where extensive market research is required to gauge the demand for that unique aspect of it. Niche marketing should be emphasized to cater to the needs of particular segments of audience who find the identified uniqueness appealing enough. The uniqueness has to be highlighted in a massive way by running long-term, innovative branding and promotional advertisement campaigns by hiring the services of experts who are adept at strategically and systematically branding a country. Such kinds of campaigns raise the expectations of the global customers, hence it is not just sufficient to promise big, but rather delivering the said promise is of immense importance.

Stage III: the third stage of image makeover of a country involves the implementation of the plans made at stages I and II by the Government and the concerned ministry of that country, big corporate houses and other private players of that country can help in branding their country too. Even some strong consumer brands can actively propagate their country's name to create the desired impression in the minds of the international audiences. Media is a very important tool and can play a major role in communicating and projecting the desired image of the country to the world at large. It can also project the country's globally successful consumer brands. Even the individual countrymen comprising the general public of the particular country can consciously make efforts to imprint their country's new image to their global contacts or during their foreign trips given the slightest opportunity.

When all the three stages mentioned above are carried out, a proper evaluation plan to measure or check the effectiveness of the branding and image makeover activities have to be put in place to provide a check and appropriate feedback on the success or futility of the processes adopted. The feedback or evaluation of the effectiveness of the major activities undertaken for image makeover can be obtained after a specific and stipulated time period by finding out whether there has been an increase a.) in foreign investments b.) number of tourists visiting the country c.) demand for its products in the global market. Again, the degree/extent to which these have increased and an estimate of how much remains to be achieved given the potential of the said country is to be established and action plans need to be taken accordingly.

Figure 1: Framework for Building Favorable Country-Image



Discussions of the Results

Discussions and interviews held with the participants show that when a customer decides to purchase a certain brand of product, he is not necessarily seeking the benefits offered by it. The brand means something more to him than the benefits that it provides, and thus he is connected to it in a way that makes him feel good about himself by satisfying certain needs like need for status, acceptance among peer groups etc. For example, a customer buying a certain brand of garment or car may not be merely satisfying his need for clothing, conveyance-the basic benefits that can be derived from these two product categories; he may in fact be buying indirectly through this, a statement of his lifestyle, his status etc through his brand choices for he perceives the brand personalities of these chosen products to be in sync with his personality or the image that he wishes to project about himself to others by flaunting these products.

Majority of the respondents felt that the corporate image was vital and played a significant role in influencing their choices for different product brands. They also opined that if a brand carves out a success for itself it gets reflected in the manufacturer's image or in other words, it helped in improving the corporate image. But surprisingly, the respondents seemed to ignore the country of origin as a major criterion for choosing a particular brand. They felt that a country may have a good image but that does not necessarily mean that all products sold by it would be exceptionally good. For example brands like Kellogg's didn't take off well here. A loyal customer would develop a habit of repeatedly buying a company's brand over its competitor's offerings irrespective of rationality of his decision based on price, quality, performance etc.

However foreign brands, particularly those from the US have greater acceptability and appeal among the masses and they are perceived to be of superior quality by the masses in a developing country like this (India)

In the international arena, a nation gets its image based on the image of the products it markets. For example, Coca Cola soft drinks, McDonald's hamburgers and Microsoft software are successful brands originating from America. The success of these brands, among others, has lead to the development of the image of America as a successful nation. The international community forms a favorable image about a nation if the corporate and consumer brands of that nation are perceived to be of great value and held in high esteem by consumers across the globe. If we look at the Asian countries, Japan stands out from the rest. Global brands like Sony, Toyota and Nikon are well known because of their quality of products. These brands have delivered economic power to their owner by the mere strength of their corporate/consumer brands. Economic power thus vested by corporate and consumer brands drive their home countries to acquire leadership of the global economy.

The reverse also holds true. If a particular country has a favorable and successful image, then the brands launched by it get an upper edge over competing products manufactured by some, not so successful, nations. Maybelline NY and Revlon are few examples that prove beyond doubt that the above statement holds ground. It is to be noted that the brand name 'Maybelline NY' is suffixed by the initial letters of America's most famous city, New York to cash upon its popularity quotient. The whole idea behind this was to appeal to the world's young women by projecting itself as the most preferred cosmetic brand among the trendy young women of New York which indeed is an aspiration group for the young women belonging to the other parts of the world.

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

Consumer and corporate brands play an important role in forming a country's image. If these brands are liked by the consumers and are popular, then there is every possibility that the image of the country will get a major boost in the international map. Brands manufactured and marketed by economically developed nations find more acceptances among the global masses. The power of brands in making or marring the image of their country of origin is inevitable. With the shrinking of the world into a global village there is an increased ease with which brands are crossing national and cultural barriers. The favorable image of a country definitely adds on to the appeal of its brands be they consumer brands or corporate brands.

Every country is unique in some way or the other. All it has to do is to identify this uniqueness and make it appealing to the global customers through proper branding and promotional tools to create a distinct image for itself that would be far removed from the clutter of other countries of similar league. The framework proposed in this paper can be applied to design a specific plan and implement the same so as to optimize efforts towards building the right image for a country. Creating the right country image is a challenge both for the ministry and the private players. Some of the major factors that should be emphasized are highlighting uniqueness, market research, niche marketing, long-term branding campaigns, hiring experts for brand building activities for the concerned country and also delivering the promise to build trust among the international stake holders.

The image has to be built, propagated, reinforced through proper campaigns and later updated as well. A country has to create and then re-create images for itself to take leverage of the shifting tastes and attitudes of people the world over.

Building a country's image is not a one-time activity; it is a continuous process and has to evolve with the changing needs, preferences and attitudes of the international markets. Hence an image uplift and makeover is required after the elapse of a certain period of time to maintain the effectiveness and competitive stand/position of the country.

Managerial implication of these in a nut shell is that brand image and country image should be in sync with each other and they should also complement and supplement each others' strengths and weakness to achieve a strong global presence and gain an edge over the competing brands and countries.

Limitations of the study

The study is conceptual. It is a qualitative research on the understanding of the phenomenon of customer perceptions towards brands based on their country of origin. The measures suggested for understanding whether strong brands help in creating favorable image for their countries as also whether positive country image translates into the products sold by it needs to be validated through some objective and appropriate scale to make it more factual. The approach suggested here is a generalized one; marketers/governments need to develop and employ a more case sensitive or rather country-specific and targeted methodology to manage perceptions about their countries. Although an attempt has been made to identify the major factors contributing to the formation of positive customer perception for a nation, there is a lack of validating their impact in depth. Also the list of variables mentioned and the framework provided for creating the desired perceptions while branding a nation cannot be claimed to be all exhaustive as there can always be some other important factors and steps to create or build images and perceptions, not identified in this study. The sample size is too meager consisting of respondents who were either pursuing or serving for the various streams of management education of a selected Business school for convenience of data collection. This sample, hence, might not be a true representative of the whole population.

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