



## Original Article

# Selling the state: State branding as a political resource in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** While states have long marketed themselves to promote tourism and economic development, we are now witnessing their use of modern marketing techniques as an explicit political tool. In essence, states are creating and deploying a 'brand' to advance foreign policy goals. I examine how South Africa has attempted to use its Brand South Africa campaign, a public-private programme administered by the quasi-governmental International Marketing Council of South Africa, to achieve specific foreign policy objectives. I discuss why South Africa might use this tool, how it has been successful and what its limitations might be.

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of brands. The logos of companies such as McDonald's, Nike and British Airways are instantly recognisable. Companies use their brands to foster a sense of loyalty among consumers are charging a premium for their products. More than simple marketing, brands create an emotional bond with consumers and set products apart from their competitors.

Seeing the success of branding in the corporate world, an increasing number of cities, regions and states are attempting to brand or re-brand themselves. Governments seek a 'hook' to set themselves apart from their competitors. They want to foster trading relationships with others, encourage corporations to set up factories in them and attract

tourists to spend their holidays (and their money) there. To develop this emotional, positive reaction between their part of the world and citizens, governments attempt to create a brand for themselves with greater frequency today. This is more than a simple tourist slogan or catchy phrase. Governments want to make or re-make their image in the world to gain clout *vis-à-vis* their neighbours to achieve certain political ends.

Although more policymakers see branding as important and consequential for their fortunes in the international community, political scientists have largely shied away from the topic. Most of the existing studies focus on the role of a national brand for tourism and/or economic development. Although these are certainly important, governments rely on developing

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a brand for reasons other than generating revenue. The nascent literature on public diplomacy and 'soft power' tap into elements of state branding, but this focuses more on promoting existing policies rather than branding as a policy itself. Almost no work focuses on states branding themselves specifically for *political* or *foreign policy* reasons.

I argue that states can and do aim to craft unique brands within the international community, and that these brands have important, real-world *political* consequences that go beyond attracting tourism and investment. States craft and deploy particular branded identities to further their foreign policy and international political goals. As with popular culture, media representations and language, branding offers states a means by which they can influence the perceptions and actions of other states through attraction rather than coercion, or at least coercion by other means.<sup>1</sup> Far from providing new advertising jingles, state branding represents an attempt to promote new state identities by using the tools and experience of modern marketing and public relations. Using the case of South Africa and its attempts to foster a post-apartheid, African Renaissance-inspired identity, I demonstrate that states use branding in an attempt to generate favourable political outcomes in the international arena. This phenomenon represents an innovation in how states consciously employ and attempt to craft an identity.

Discussions of state branding share many affinities with existing literature on identity in international relations. Given the similarities between the two, some may dismiss branding as identity production and reproduction under a new guise. This, though, would miss the subtle, yet important, distinctions between the two. Branding is a conscious project by a state. It is overt, as governments actively seek to impress certain associations in peoples' minds. It relies on particular institutions to convey this association, often specifically including private entities working in collaboration with official government agencies. Dunn rightfully notes that the discursive

narratives that construct an actor's identity are often not of its own making (Dunn, 2003, p. 10). State branding represents an attempt by the state to consciously take control of these discursive narratives. Perhaps most importantly, branding is usually a project designed to *consciously* alter or change the images people have already associated with a place. Although international relations scholars have recognised that state identities can have important consequences for world politics, branding represents an overt attempt by governments to harness the process to achieve specific consequences. It explicitly recognises the constructed nature of identity by examining *who* constructs identity and *how*.

## **'BRAND' SOUTH AFRICA**

Few regions in the world may have more reason to want to change their public perception than sub-Saharan Africa. 'Let's face it. Think of Africa, and the first images that come to mind are of war, poverty, famine, and flies' (Gates, 1999). This negative image has essentially become an image that covers the entire continent and negatively impacts the region's ability to attract investment, promote tourism or play a meaningful role in international politics (Wanjiru, 2005). If South Africa wanted to achieve its political, economic and social goals, it would need to present the world with a new image, a new brand, with which it could identify and create an attachment. During the apartheid era, many people around the world had a visceral, negative emotional attachment to South Africa and its image within the international community. The South African government desperately wanted and needed the international community to embrace a positive image of South Africa, and actively sought to do so through a conscious 're-branding' strategy.

Interestingly, apartheid-era South Africa engaged in activities similar to state branding. Between 1972 and 1979, the South African Department of Information spent US\$100 million on efforts to win friends and influence Western states' foreign policies toward South

Africa. These efforts ranged from organising informational sessions for government officials, wooing Black heads of state throughout Africa, making financial contributions to candidates running against apartheid's opponents in the United States Congress, and providing funds for establishing *The Citizen*, a pro-apartheid newspaper in South Africa. The resulting scandal came to be known as Muldergate. Funds for these efforts, led by Eschel Rhoodie under the direction of Connie Mulder, came from a secret account overseen by Cabinet. When the fund's existence and its activities became public knowledge, it ended the political trajectory of Connie Mulder, and eventually forced the resignation of President B.J. Vorster for his role in overseeing the illegal use of funds (see Hull, 1979; Stone, 1979; and Rees, 1980 for more detailed coverage of Muldergate and its reverberations through South African political society). The Muldergate activities certainly sought to shape public opinion and improve South Africa's foreign standing, much as state branding does. A key difference lies, though, in Muldergate's secretive nature. State branding is an overt attempt to deploy a particular state identity, one acknowledged by officials as part of their conscious efforts.

After apartheid's demise in 1994, South Africa found itself in a unique position to completely re-brand itself. Though a South African state had existed in some form since the South African Republic's founding in 1857, a South Africa that celebrated its population's diversity and its connection to the rest of Africa was a new creation. Gone was the Union of South Africa, with its pass laws and enforced segregation. In its place, the Republic of South Africa presented itself as a new entity. South Africa became a 'young' nation, yet it had a long and rich history upon which it could draw. This was an advantageous position for South Africa, as younger nations generally find themselves in a better position to re-brand themselves (Gilmore, 2002, p. 282). Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency, remarked, 'One of the greatest challenges South Africa has faced since we achieved freedom has been

to engage with the international community on terms that promote our national interests' (Pahad, 2005).

South Africa took advantage of this unique opportunity right away, consciously remolding its image away from one of discrimination to one of diversity and acceptance. Government officials realised that South Africa needed to be 'soft sold' to the world in gain a niche and compete with other states for foreign direct investment, tourism and trade (Van der Westhuizen, 2001, p. 69). Attention first focused on cultural exports, those things that would raise South Africa's profile within the international consciousness and encourage tourism. Music, film and athletics took the lead, and their development was fostered by explicit government policies that bolstered these industries and gave them a higher international profile (Van der Westhuizen, 2001, p. 73). The music was not limited to South Africa, as neighbouring countries could often pick up South African radio transmissions.

To assist with re-branding South Africa politically, the International Marketing Council of South Africa (IMC), also known as Brand South Africa, was established. Founded in August 2000, the IMC is a public-private partnership established to raise the country's profile by 2010. Its goals are threefold: to establish a recognisable and useful brand for South Africa, to coordinate branding efforts in the public and private sectors and to build support domestically and internationally for the South African brand (International Marketing Council, N.d. a).

What is the brand that South Africa wants to promote? IMC offers its brand differentiator, the thing that sets South Africa apart, as 'South Africa, a country at the tip of southern Africa, inspires the world to a new way of doing things, because our unique combinations create refreshing possibilities' (International Marketing Council, N.d. a). The brand incorporates South Africa's geographical location (particularly relevant, given the country's position as a regional hegemon), its cultural diversity and its recent historical experiences (as a

'new' country) to convey a politically relevant message. It also represents an attempt to overcome South Africa's previous image as isolated and out-of-step and the African continent's image as war-torn and impoverished (Neale-May, 2003). This new brand presents a South Africa that is a willing and trustworthy partner in the international arena, a country in step with the rest of the world and able to offer unique solutions to international problems. South Africa positions itself as an international peacemaker, thanks to its experience as the only nation to voluntarily give up its active nuclear weapons programme and the stature of former President Nelson Mandela (Singer, 2000, p. 1).

Particularly interesting is the fact that South Africa incorporates its political aims into this state branding exercise. IMC states that establishing a positive brand for South Africa will 'position the country in terms of its investment and credit worthiness, exports, tourism and *international relations objectives*' (International Marketing Council, N.d. a; emphasis added). This public-private partnership between the government and private sector marketing firms to re-brand South Africa is specifically predicated, in part, on assisting the country to meet foreign policy and international goals. The South African government has taken the concept of state branding beyond the realms of tourism and economic development, and entrenched it as a part of its foreign affairs policy.

## IDENTITY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

It attracts little controversy today to assert that states have identities and that these identities can matter. Most agree that states are intentional actors with motivational and behavioural dispositions, and therefore possess interests and identities (Wendt, 1999, p. 224). Less developed, though, are empirical examples of the actual contributions of identity to international relations. Scholars need to move beyond *promise* and show identity's *actual*

contributions to international relations (Goff and Dunn, 2004, p. 1).

A state's identity relates directly to and reflects the social order and ordering principles within that society (Hall, 1999). Because of this, identity is not static, and develops through practices that change in response to these changes in the social order. In this way, one can understand a state's identity as performative. This does not mean that states lack materiality, nor does it assume that identity is simply the reification of prior discourses. Instead, by ascribing a performative element to state identity, we can understand how identities come about through reiterative processes that give meaning to discourses (Webber, 1998, pp. 81–90). In other words, by presenting and representing a particular identity discourse, the state engages in a process that allows others to understand and interpret who that state is and what it wants. A state's identity, therefore, is not 'natural' or 'given', but rather the reflection of cultural and discursive choices made by that state (Webber, 1998, p. 90).

To understand state identity in this way, we must understand how states (and their leaders) come to embrace a given performance. Cornell suggests a three-step process, which he calls narrativisation: selection (choosing the essential points), plotting (relating these events to one another in some causal sequence) and interpretation (making claims about what these events and their relationships mean) (2000, p. 43). 'The problem of collective identity', he writes, 'is the problem of creating an account of who "we" (or "they") are that makes sense of the larger matrix of social relations in which the group finds itself and of its place within that matrix and its experiences of those relations' (Cornell, 2000, p. 44). The process of identity (re)production requires crafting a particular story and promoting it to others.

For this process to occur, there must be at least two parties: a performer and an audience. 'Socially competent actors read labels as signals for what kind of behavior to expect from others and for how to behave toward them' (Frueh, 2004, p. 75). At the same time, though,

the performer cannot always control how the performance is received by the audience, and therefore the audience may decode the performance incorrectly (or at least not as the performer intended) (Dunn, 2001). To try to minimise this possibility, those presenting a given identity discourse will try to use the language, tools and symbols that will resonate meaningfully with the audience. This conflict of interpretation is at the heart of public diplomacy. For example, the United States' efforts to gain favour among moderates and the young in the Middle East rely on television broadcasts, radio stations (which present both popular music and news reporting) and Internet campaigns (Skuba, 2002). The US government employ use these tools specifically out of the hope that they would reach their intended audience and be interpreted 'correctly'. Webber suggests that foreign policy speeches and press conferences also allow states the opportunity to promote their identity/identities to different audiences (1998, pp. 92–93).

Such struggles over identity can also reflect a state's 'growing pains'. A radical change in a state's ordering principles and social order can challenge that state's collective identity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia struggled (and continues to do so) to present a new, democratic face to the community of nations. One can read the 1993 attempted coup by hard-line military leaders in Russia as a conflict between groups over which identity would win. Was Russia a democracy in league with the United States and Western Europe, or was it an ideological bulwark against the evils of capitalism and bourgeois democracy?<sup>2</sup> By the same token, post-1994 South Africa faced the challenge of reorienting itself from being an international pariah that officially sanctioned racism to one that cooperatively worked with the international community.

## THE FUNCTION OF BRANDS

Because these conflicts over understanding and meaning can (and do) arise, it is obviously in the state's interest to do whatever possible to minimise the opportunities for

misinterpretation. Governments have a vested interest in ensuring that audiences interpret their identities 'correctly'. This is where branding enters the picture.

All of us can easily think of brands of various products. In many instances, we have specific thoughts and feelings about that brand – its reliability as a product, its affordability versus its competitors, and its level of quality and sophistication. These associations are not coincidental. A brand, as defined by the American Marketing Association, is a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of the competition' (cited in Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p. 249). Brands are means for distinguishing competing products from one another. We may not be able to tell the difference between two random, anonymous soda pops during a blind taste test. Once we know that the drink in our right hand is Pepsi and the one in the left is Coke, though, we often claim immediately to be able to tell the difference, and have strong feelings about that difference. These distinctions come from branding.

Brands provoke certain responses among consumers, and companies diligently attempt to ensure that their brands evoke the right sorts of reactions. Kotler and Gertner write, 'Brands differentiate products and represent a promise of value. Brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions, and prompt behaviours ... Brands have social and emotional value to users. They have personality and speak for the user. They enhance the perceived utility and desirability of a product' (2002, pp. 249–250). A successful brand evokes an image – an image to which others aspire or deem valuable.

Branding also implies a certain level of control over an identity. Companies take an active role in making sure their products are branded properly so as to reach their target markets with the desired image. They also take active steps to adjust 'incorrect' images within the marketplace. Although a company



cannot completely eliminate competing views of its product, it can take actions designed to counteract those views. Instead of passively sitting back, companies actively try to shape the consumer's views of their products to increase their receptivity within the marketplace. For example, the Phillip Morris Companies re-branded themselves as the Altria Group in 2003. The move was an attempt to shift the public's image of the company as a food and beverage conglomerate rather than a tobacco company, and to better position the company within the marketplace.

The identities that brands provide individuals operate in the same manner as states provide identities to their citizens. They distinguish one group from another. They provide people with a sense of belonging. One's being German or British distinguishes that person from someone who is French or Canadian. States can also manipulate who can lay claim to that identity. I do not mean to argue that states can be bought and sold as such, but the techniques that companies use to establish brands function analogously to those that states use in allocating identity and citizenship.

## BRANDING THE STATE

Combining the insights of public relations and international relations is relatively new, and most of the work appears in business literature. It may seem odd to combine the language of marketing with statecraft, but the two realms are not necessarily so different.

It's clear that countries ... behave, in many ways, just like brands. They are perceived – rightly or wrongly – in certain ways by large groups of people at home and abroad; they are associated with certain qualities and characteristics. Those perceptions can have a significant impact on the way that overseas consumers view their products, and the way they behave toward those countries in sport, politics, trade, and cultural matters; it will affect their propensity to visit or relocate or invest there; their willingness to partner with such countries in international affairs; and whether they are more likely to interpret the actions and

behaviours of those countries in a positive or a negative light. In short, the image of a country determines the way the world sees it and treats it. (Anholt, 2003, p. 109)

A state's image to others may not necessarily be how that state wants to be perceived, but even these unfair perceptions can have a major impact on the state's economic and political fortunes.

Anholt argues that successful branding can unite a country and a people, while also fostering economic development for the state. 'National branding is about making people *want* to pay attention to a country's achievements, and believe in its qualities' (Anholt, 2003, p. 13). He notes, though, that little systematic evidence and few intensive case studies exist on how branding does this (Anholt, 2002, pp. 230–234). Lodge builds on Anholt's argument. She finds that few countries consider the possible benefits of re-branding outside of tourism and economic development. Though not explicitly arguing for the political consequences of branding, she does hint that promoting a 'state brand' can have consequences beyond the economic realm (Lodge, 2002, p. 374).

Wally Olins, the founder of one of the world's most prominent public relations firms, finds little reason not to extend the concept of branding to states. It makes little sense, he argues, to assume that corporations change their brands, but nations are immutable concepts: 'As nations emerge, they create self-sustaining myths to build coherent identities' (Olins, 2002, p. 245). Kotler and Gertner expand upon this point, arguing that country names are like brands in that both allow people to evaluate products and make decisions (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p. 250). Inadvertently, these public relations professionals articulate some of the core principles of the constructivist school of thought in international relations – identities are co-constituted and change over time.

State branding can also give governments the tools with which to control the presentation and consumption of their identity. States cannot

completely control the decoding of their identities by others – but they can try. If a state has a negative image within the international community for whatever reason, it is entirely reasonable to assume that a state will want to take active steps to overcome those images and replace the negative images that exist within the international community. Using the marketing tools of branding provides an active, conscious manner through which states can attempt to represent their identity to the rest of the world.

States have employed lobbying and public relations firms in the past in an attempt to curry favour with foreign governments. Davis (1977) details how both the Nigerian government and the breakaway Biafran Republic employed New York- and Washington-based public relations and lobbying firms to press their cases to members of Congress and influential newspaper columnists. Manheim and Albritton (1984) go further, examining how six different governments employed public relations firms to help to obtain better press in American newspapers. More recently, Silverstein (2007) detailed Turkmenistan's use of a Washington public relations firm to counteract the country's negative human rights record. These efforts address some elements of state branding, but they are largely externally oriented; the affected governments hire firms in foreign capitals to encourage change by that foreign government. State branding, on the other hand, takes a more holistic view of conscious identity creation and deployment. The branding state is crafting an identity within its own borders to share with the rest of the world on a broad scale, not simply tailoring a message for one audience.

In essence, a state attempts to brand (or re-brand) itself to 'sell' a particular image to the international community in order to change power relations. This effort will not necessarily be successful, but it is a conscious attempt by a state to take overt actions to fundamentally alter its say in international affairs. For the branded state, this embrace of market-based thinking applied to a political situation may

represent an attempt to use neo-liberalism to advance its own interest. Many have noted the seeming development of an international consensus in favour of neo-liberal economic policies as advocated by organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Concomitantly, the policy space in which developing states can maneuver has shrunk. Cox argues that the ascent of neo-liberalism has 'weaken[ed] the capacity for resistance by poor countries to the disciplinary market effects generated by forces of global finance and production in an economic system organized and sustained by the rich countries' (1996, p. 499). This may indeed be the case, but branding gives states the opportunity to use the tools and language of neo-liberalism to gain the policy space that the tenets of neo-liberalism deny them. They are turning neo-liberalism on its head – subverting it while staying within its structures. 'Branding, like any other tool, is itself ethically neutral: it is the use to which the tool is put that determines whether it complies with such strictures [of neoliberalism and capitalism] or not', notes one of the leading advocates of place branding who goes on to call place branding 'as much self-defence as proactive behaviour' (Anholt, 2005, p. 2). States can try to brand themselves before they get branded with an unfavourable image.

If states brand themselves with an image to 'sell' in order to achieve certain political goals, what is the role of the 'buyers' in this transaction: the international community? Why would they 'buy' this new brand, especially if it alters international power relationships? Three factors, drawing somewhat from research on consumer behaviour, may be important. First, the international community must consider the brand credible. This may be an almost gut-level, unconscious reaction. North Korea may try to sell itself to the world as a peacemaker, and it may truly believe itself to be just that, but most of the international community will simply not find this believable. Second, the brand has to be distinguishable from others by the international community.

A brand does not mean much if it fails to offer anything new, unique or different. A state cannot simply try to co-opt another country's 'brand'; it must find an identity that realistically draws on its strengths and sets itself apart. Finally, the international community needs some proof of the brand's claims. If a country promises to play the role of impartial negotiator in an international conflict but fails to resolve the crisis (or, even worse, exacerbates tensions among the parties), the international community is unlikely to look to that country as a reliable international partner for peace, regardless of the promises made.

Among political scientists, Peter van Ham and Janis van der Westhuizen have extensively explored the connections between branding efforts and international relations. They have helped to marry the ideas of state branding with traditional views of international relations. Van Ham sees territorial branding as essential for creating some value in the relationship between a territorial entity and its individuals. He argues that this is similar to a corporate brand, which 'gives rise to an "imagined community"' (Van Ham, 2002, p. 255), a concept at the heart of much work on nationalism (see Anderson, 1991). The European Union, for example, is a 'master brand', one that provides the name, style and character to policies that help to place those policies within the marketplace of ideas (Van Ham, 2002, p. 258). Relating this explicitly to theories of international relations, Van Ham argues that integrating public relations with international relations builds on constructivism. Ideas are a form of power, and constructivism recognises the importance of norms, values, identities and ideas as sources of power in the international community. States and structures are mutually constitutive in constructivist theories, just as the meaning of any particular brand relies upon shared inter-subjective meanings (Van Ham, 2002, p. 264). For Van Ham, state branding offers a way to ask critical theoretical questions about how norms transfer between different levels and how power operates among states.

Van der Westhuizen shows that more states are using public diplomacy and re-branding more extensively in their foreign policies. Canada, for example, explicitly includes cultural affairs, while South Africa has relied upon 'Mandelamania' to bolster its popular image. Part of its success, he avers, is that branding necessarily appeals to an intangible social status. Sport, music and film can appeal to people in a unique way and build loyalty. Still, though, few policymakers have investigated how identities or state brands can function as alternative sources of power (Van der Westhuizen, 2000, pp. 1–4).

Although the combination of international relations and public relations offers unique insights into state identity, its creation and its use, little research has gone beyond a basic level. Researchers broadly agree that branding has important links to identity, and could have international consequences, but no work systematically examines *how* state branding affects the international community. Tourism and attracting economic development can certainly be political, but one cannot assume that state branding and re-branding's impacts are solely limited to the economic sphere. Branding involves a conscious shaping of a state's identity and public image. If we understand this, and we accept that branding can have economic consequences for the state, then it logically follows that the branding process will have political consequences. It is important to understand how this process occurs.

## THE RE-BRANDING OF SOUTH AFRICA

Some of the first efforts South Africa made toward re-branding itself focused on cultural factors – promoting music, sport and film. Such cultural images can raise a country's profile and assist in promoting a new brand; however, their usefulness is limited by three factors. First, multiple actors produce and reproduce an identity, making it difficult for a government to control the message being sent. In a free society, a government would be hard-pressed



to ensure that musicians and filmmakers all worked together toward promoting a particular national brand. The lack of unity is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it can help to put the country on the radar screen. People may not have an image of what South Africa is based on music, film or athletics, but at least the name resonates. Although this is important, it offers little for advancing particular political goals. Second, cultural factors are subject to numerous factors outside of anyone's control. Promoting the national rugby or soccer squad can be helpful for attracting tourist dollars, but what happens if the team performs poorly? What if musical tastes shift, making your country's music unfashionable? While these things can heighten awareness, a state needs more than simple awareness if it intends to use its brand strategy to achieve political goals. Finally, the connection between a state's cultural heritage and its political ambitions is tenuous at best. International diplomats may like the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo or cheer for the Springboks, but that does not mean that they will then feel that South Africa is an appropriate mediator of international disputes or a valuable coalition partner. A state needs to go beyond cultural awareness if its brand is to further international political aims.

The South African government, in a unique move, consciously moved its re-branding strategy to encompass political aims. The South African international political brand emphasises its ability to serve as a mediator and negotiator in seemingly intractable political conflicts, thanks to its own history. It promotes itself as having insights and abilities not possessed by other potential mediators, thus distinguishing its 'brand' from competing 'products'. Not only is the South African government consciously attempting to create and deploy a new, unique brand using the tools of modern marketing, but it has also specifically done this to, in part, further its political aims. Brand South Africa goes beyond promoting the country's wine, music and sports; it also promotes the country's political aims. The government is employing its brand to carve out its niche within the

international political arena – and did so by creating a marketing campaign (complete with logo) as would be done for a soft drink, running shoes or automobile.

This move has found its way into South Africa's diplomatic planning. The South African Department of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan for 2003–2005 includes a number of priorities, including public diplomacy. Its objectives for public diplomacy are to communicate the country's foreign policy goals and 'to co-operate with GCIS [Government Communication and Information Services Department] and the International Marketing Council in implementing the marketing strategy for South Africa' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2003, p. 55). In order to achieve these objectives, the department intends to 'seek appropriate global positioning of South Africa and Africa through marketing (imaging and branding) in line with NEPAD, to support the economic development and co-operation objectives, in particular the promotion of investment, trade, and tourism' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2003, p. 55). Subsequent strategic plans have reaffirmed the importance of state branding. Its public diplomacy and protocol programmes centre on the overt marketing of a positive national image to international audiences to further the country's international political and economic goals. This includes coordinating international representations of the country, managing media relations and facilitating increased trips abroad by high government officials (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2005, pp. 94–95). To this day, as part of its public diplomacy objectives, the South African Department of Foreign Affairs aims to 'promote a positive image and branding of the country at home and abroad' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2006, p. 79). The current strategic plan calls for the government to 'co-ordinat[e] efforts across the three tiers of government and other stakeholders, which would result in ... a strategy for a co-ordinate marketing branding of South Africa abroad' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007, p. 5). Thus, the South African government recognises that its branding exercise is part of

its overall strategy to ensure that its foreign policy goals are realised.

The South African government and its IMC have aggressively pursued this initiative. They regularly distribute press releases that not only tout the country's role as an impartial negotiator, but also continually tie this message back to South Africa's brand as a site of new ideas and new approaches to international problems. At the 2004 World Economic Forum in Davos, delegates received copies of *Time* wrapped with advertising from the IMC. This advertisement, geared specifically toward some of the world's most powerful political and economic figures, highlighted South Africa's ability to peacefully resolve international conflicts by drawing on its own experience with ending apartheid. The *Economist* named these ads as one of the 10 most memorable in 2006, ranking the efforts at branding South Africa alongside Renault, Cartier and Lexus (Southafrica.info, 2006).

In 2005, the IMC produced a 90-min documentary for European television audiences, explaining South Africa's promise as a political and business partner (International Marketing Council, 2005). Citing Mbeki and Mandela's efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the press release noted, 'The world's most influential weekly news magazine, *The Economist*, has not been alone in praising what it dubbed this week "the Mbeki doctrine"' (Southafrica.info, 2003, n.p.). The Mbeki doctrine, according to the press release, believes, 'South African cannot impose its will on others, but it can help to deal with instability in African countries by offering its resources and leadership to bring rival groups together, and to keep things calm until an election is safely held' (cited in Southafrica.info, 2003, n.p.). Later, the IMC lauds Mbeki while promoting his abilities and talents. Under the headline, 'Mbeki: visionary pragmatist', the IMC writes, 'When Thabo Mbeki became president, he was seen as one of the few men who could steer South Africa successfully into the global economy. Driven by his vision of an African Renaissance, Mbeki has pushed for a greater

role for SA in the international arena, while championing the cause of the poor at home' (Southafrica.info, 2003, n.p.). The IMC also sponsored a 1-day workshop in August 2006 to bring together newspaper editors from around the world and South African government and business leaders to promote a more positive image of the country, to show how South Africa can contribute to the world, and to promote the country's national and continental interests (International Marketing Council, 2006).

Government officials also look at the upcoming 2010 FIFA World Cup as an important element in the country's political branding. South Africa will be hosting the world's largest sporting event, and the government recognises how the Cup's success could reflect positively on the country and its foreign policy objectives. In 2004, Mbeki remarked, 'We want to ensure that one day historians will reflect upon the 2010 FIFA World Cup as a moment when Africa stood tall and resolutely turned the tide on centuries of poverty and conflict' (cited in Brand South Africa, 2008). Other officials have stressed that a successful World Cup combined with commitments to political stability across the continent could increase South Africa's (and Africa's as a whole) stature within the international community (Brand South Africa, 2008). If observers see that South Africa pulled off the World Cup, they may feel more positively toward South Africa's other international objectives.

South Africa has used this new brand image in numerous places around the world. It has offered its services as an international mediator in places such as Israel, Northern Ireland, the Great Lakes region of central Africa, East Timor, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire, among other places (Van der Westhuizen, 1998, pp. 435–437; Dempster, 2003; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2004). These efforts may not always be successful, but South Africa has branded itself as a credible facilitator in attempts to resolve international crises. Thanks to this brand, competing factions

within a conflict can relate to and respect the efforts of South Africa. When it offers these services, it often trumpets its brand's tagline: that South Africa is able to offer unique solutions to problems that have stymied others. For example, when the South African government announced its brokering of a peace deal in Cote d'Ivoire, it noted that its leadership of the negotiations achieved more in 4 months than the United Nations achieved in 2 years (*Economist*, 2005).

In addition, South Africa took a leading role in transforming the moribund Organization of African Unity into the revitalised African Union. It served as chair of the organisation in 2002, and has chaired the organisation's efforts to bring peace to Darfur (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2004). South Africa has been able to use its brand as an impartial international mediator to avoid charges that it is being motivated by economic interests or that it is acting as a proxy for other major powers (Van der Westhuizen, 1998, p. 448).

South Africa has also played a leading role in formulating and internationally promoting the New Partnership for Africa's Development, or NEPAD. NEPAD is a series of programmes designed to lift Africa out of debt, improve economic development on the continent and promote stability through self-monitoring and peer review. It focuses on promoting 'good governance' and 'self-reliance' within Africa, and 'partnership' with the rest of the world, while avoiding assignations of blame to the West. These images fit easily with Western interests, making it easier to gain acceptance and support (Van der Westhuizen, 2003, pp. 374–377). Further, NEPAD includes the African Peer Review Mechanism. This programme is a means by which African states can monitor each other to ensure fiscal responsibility, respect for human rights and adherence to democratic principles. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) violates the historical norm of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other African states and refraining from criticizing other African states, but is a good faith measure to demonstrate

Africa's commitment to NEPAD (Van der Westhuizen, 2003, pp. 388–389). The challenges of effectively implementing NEPAD are many, and some have criticised the programme for promising much but delivering little. Even if the project fails, many have noted that NEPAD represents a tremendous change in the mindset of both African and Western leaders (Olivier, 2003; Hope, 2005). Expectations of accountability have helped to alter perceptions of the South African government, and have reinforced the country's new branded image.

Nelson Mandela, leader of the anti-apartheid movement and former president of South Africa, has also been of service to South Africa's attempts to re-brand itself. A 2002 survey found that Mandela was the world's second most-recognisable 'brand' after Coca-Cola (Black and van der Westhuizen, 2004, p. 1197). Mandela has taken an active role in increasing South Africa's international visibility through his own personal diplomatic efforts in southern Africa, Iraq and in promoting multilateralism (AFROL News, 2003).

Note how these programmes and objectives fit in with South Africa's new brand. The country has taken a lead in mediating longstanding conflicts, which reinforces the new image as a country that can offer unique solutions and draw on its own multiracial composition to overcome ethnic strife. It also promotes responsibility and accountability, emphasising its integration with the rest of the world. It has taken an active role in conflicts on the African continent, drawing on its position of economic, political and moral dominance on the continent. Its efforts to promote multilateralism contribute to the South African brand as a reliable partner.

Some may object that these public relations moves are little more than a government trumpeting its own success – and it is certainly true that governments promote their achievements to gain prestige. Three key factors make the South African case unique and interesting. First, the South African government explicitly links its foreign policy

achievements to its brand. It is not that Mbeki did a good job diplomatically; it is that Mbeki did a good job diplomatically *because that is what the new South Africa does*. Mbeki's accomplishments are linked to his embrace of the African Renaissance, which promotes the development of African solutions for African problems (Olivier, 2003). The language of the African Renaissance may have become less prominent recently, but its basic ideas of self-sufficiency and African solutions to African problems remain firmly entrenched within South African policy. The so-called Mbeki Doctrine not only emphasises South Africa's ability to assist other nations, but also specifically cites its desire to do so in a cooperative, rather than hegemonic, manner. This again fits with the new identity South Africa is attempting to produce and reproduce in the international arena.

Second, South Africa's branding strategy is primarily oriented toward non-domestic constituencies. This is not a re-election ploy by the African National Congress, nor is it an attempt to shore up domestic support. Instead, the IMC sees domestic constituencies as yet another tool for promoting South Africa internationally. Embarking on the third year of the campaign, IMC CEO Yvonne Johnston emphasised that branding and promoting South Africa was every citizen's responsibility because 'establishing a consistent national brand is at least a 20-year task' (International Marketing Council, 2004). The ads, promotions and diplomatic efforts have focused on changing South Africa's identity abroad, not (necessarily) improving how South Africans feel about their own country.<sup>3</sup> The explicit international focus appears to be garnering some success, as other states recognise South Africa's efforts to re-brand itself and attempt to emulate its success. A Ghanaian news website recently lamented that country's failure to internalise the importance of state branding to further its international political and economic goals. The author specifically singled out South Africa as the country that has demonstrated not just the importance of state branding as a political

tool, but also the resulting successes from a comprehensive state branding project (Opoku, 2005).

Finally, South Africa's branding strategy consistently emphasises that this is a *new* South Africa. Newspaper and magazine articles praise South Africa for its efforts to integrate itself into the international community after years of isolation and an inward focus. The IMC strives to remind people that today's South Africa is a new country with new ideas about its role in the world and new approaches to solving old problems. This emphasis on being new and reintroducing the world to a product and its features resonates with traditional marketing concepts about the re-deployment of a brand (Killian and Company Advertising, N.D.).

South Africa is drawing upon its attempts to re-brand itself in order to achieve its goals in the realms of foreign policy and international relations. It offers unique solutions by drawing on its strengths as a multi-ethnic nation and a regional hegemon. By distinguishing itself as 'a country at the southern tip of Africa [that] can inspire the world to a new way of doing things because our unique combinations create refreshing possibilities', the South African government aims to distinguish itself from other African states while simultaneously offering a wider variety of problem-solving solutions to countries in crisis. Its 'refreshing possibilities' put the country in a stronger position to address international concerns in innovative ways.

## POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS OF STATE BRANDING

While the South African example shows how states use marketing techniques to re-brand themselves for political purposes, this case also shows the limitations of such a project. The South African government, if it is to make this new brand stick, would be wise to remember that any attempt at branding cannot rest solely on public relations. '[A] good brand combines great performance with respect; it combines hard and soft power' (Van Ham,

2005, p. 123). No brand, no matter how heavily advertised, can overcome a failure to deliver.

First, a brand is only believable if it resonates with a state's actions. In South Africa's case, its actions regarding responsibility and diplomacy have sometimes undermines its brand. Despite rhetorical support for NEPAD and APRM, South Africa has shown hesitancy to apply their recommendations fully (Van der Westhuizen, 2003, p. 393). Little peer review actually takes place, and demonstrated policy commitment to the principles of NEPAD has been lacking. If South Africa puts itself forward as a champion of accountability and problem-solving but then fails to follow through, then the brand will be undermined. States will not see South Africa as this source of innovative solutions. Slick marketing campaigns can only get a state so far; its actions must also be consistent with the brand.

Second, South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' in Zimbabwe has widely been interpreted as coddling the Mugabe regime. Mbeki has resisted openly criticising Mugabe, despite his abrogation of basic human rights and allowing a famine to occur. The government has justified its actions, saying Mbeki wants to 'build bridges' (Dempster, 2003). However, many commentators have noted that, 'If he [Mbeki] wants to, he can force ZANU-PF [Mugabe's party] to the negotiating table, the exit package, free and fair elections' (Dempster, 2003). Mbeki's unwillingness to take an active and public role in a political crisis on South Africa's northern border undercuts the country's attempts to project an image of a diplomatically engaged state. If 'refreshing possibilities' look like appeasement, members of the international community are unlikely to believe South Africa's new brand.

Third, states cannot overcome basic limitations that products can. South Africa cannot change its geographic location on the globe, and this may limit its ability to engage the world community. The country's distant location *vis-à-vis* Europe and North America was widely cited as one of the major reasons

Cape Town lost its bid for the 2004 Olympic Games (Swart and Bob, 2004). Further, attempts to reposition the country as an impartial negotiator or active internationalist take time – time that a government in power may not have. Government support may evaporate if results do not appear quickly. Unlike a new consumer product that can be withdrawn from the market and reintroduced, a state is always a part of the international community. It cannot 'hide' while it attempts to re-tool its message or find a more effective branding strategy.

These limitations do not undermine the basic project of state branding. Though a state cannot control every aspect of its identity and image as presented to the outside world, state branding represents an attempt to control the controllable elements of a state's image in order to overshadow any potential negatives. South Africa cannot change its geographical location, but it can 'find a new, post-modern *raison d'être*, which inspires its own populace and appeals to the wider world as well' (Van Ham, 2005, p. 122).

## CONCLUSION

States rely on marketing and public relations to give them an edge when it comes to economic development, attracting new businesses and promoting tourism. These tools can give a state an edge over the competition while simultaneously filling the coffers.

States have started to discover the political uses of branding. They can use their brands to assist them in achieving their goals in the international arena. Just as a brand can convey a certain image to attract investment or tourism, a brand can be a valuable tool for states seeking to assert a particular image or identity to the international community. State branding draws on the ideas of public diplomacy and soft power, but extends them through its explicit use of marketing and public relations to achieve particular political aims.

Perhaps more than any other country, South Africa has explicitly linked its international marketing programme to its foreign affairs



mission. The country has explicitly crafted a political brand that draws on its regional position and its diverse populace. This brand has allowed South Africa to take a more proactive role in international affairs than its power or stature might otherwise allow.

The South African case illuminates the possible uses of state branding as a political tool, but it also illustrates its limits. States can only brand so much, as there are certain unchangeable qualities about a state, such as its location or its population. In addition, a state's brand must comport with its actions in order for that brand to be an effective tool.

Research on state branding is still in its infancy, as is the use of branding for political purposes by states. This plausibility probe strongly suggests, though, that state branding provides a fruitful avenue for future research by international relations scholars. With renewed interest in soft power and the ever-increasing competition among states to obtain economic and political resources, state branding is likely to continue and provide new insights into the use, production and reproduction of both power and identity.

## NOTES

- 1 While many assume that attraction and coercion are fundamentally opposite concepts, Mattern (2005) argues that this merely demonstrates the lack of theorising and consideration of attraction within international relations. Instead of being the opposite of coercion, she posits that attraction is socio-linguistically constructed via representational force. This representational force may be nonphysical, but this does not negate its coercive aspects.
- 2 Of course, it is entirely conceivable that a state may embrace two or more seemingly contradictory identities. My point is not to suggest that an identity is an either/or choice, but rather to highlight the contested nature of these identities. As subsequent events in Russia have demonstrated, the country has attempted to embrace identities that simultaneously embrace the West and reject its central tenets.

- 3 It should be said, though, that this branding effort does not ignore the feelings of South African citizens. By providing the general populace with the tools they need to proactively promote South Africa abroad, it is hoped that this will increase positive feelings among South Africans about their country – which will in turn make citizens more enthusiastic in their own efforts to 'sell' the country.

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