

**KEY PERSPECTIVES IN NATION IMAGE:  
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR NATION BRANDING**

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**Abstract**

As an emerging area of research, nation branding is in urgent need for conceptual and theoretical development, and can benefit from the literature of organisation identity and organisation reputation. The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual framework for the analysis of nation image. Built upon the original framework by Brown et al (2006), the framework includes two models: six key perspectives in nation image and gap analysis of their relationships.

**Key words:** nation image, nation identity, organisation identity, stereotype, gap analysis

## **KEY PERSPECTIVES IN NATION IMAGE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR NATION BRANDING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Of all forms of organisations in the world, a nation is the largest and most complicated one. Many nations suffer from image problems but have no clear idea of how to address them. Nation branding could provide solution to these problems. Nation branding is about the management of a nation's image and reputation. As an emerging area of interest, nation branding is driven more by practitioners than by academic researchers. There is an urgent need for conceptual and theoretical development of the subject. In this regard, nation branding can benefit from the literature of organisation identity and organisation reputation. The purpose of this paper is to apply organisation identity theory to the context of nation image and present a conceptual framework for the analysis of nation image formation. Built upon the original framework by Brown et al (2006), the framework includes two models: in the first model, six key perspectives in nation image are identified; and in the second, gap analysis at four levels is adopted.

### **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

Country, nation, and state, these three terms are commonly used interchangeably but have different meanings. A country means an area of land occupied by a nation, while nation generally refers to a large group of people of the same race and language. State, on the other hand, considers a country as a political organisation, i.e. the form of government: parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy or one party dictatorship. In this paper, nation will be used to represent country, its people and the government. Among many different definitions of the nation concept, one of the most influential definitions is provided by Joseph Stalin (1913) "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people,

formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”

### **Identity, image, reputation,**

Nation identity, to paraphrase Albert and Whetten’s definition of organisational identity (1985), is the collective understanding by a nation’s people of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, and that distinguish the nation from other nations. National identity embodies the characteristics of a nation that its people perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring (CED) in a nation when past, present and future is taken into account. It refers to the essentially irrational psychological bond that binds fellow nationals together and which is supposed to constitute the essence of national identity. This psychological bond is usually termed “a sense of belonging” and such expressions point to the close link established between each individual and the collective self, namely the nation (Triandafyllidou, 1998). More specially, national identity has the following key elements: an historic territory, or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; and a common economy with territorial mobility for all members (Smith, 1991:14).

Image and reputation are a pair of interrelated constructs, i.e. image is what is projected to other while reputation is the feedback received from other (Whetten and Mackey, 2002:400). Image and reputation, which is the reciprocal of image, both are components of a symmetrical communications process between the organisation (self) and relevant stakeholders (other) (ibid.). Thus, a nation’s image is what a nation’s people want the world to understand is most central, enduring and distinctive about their nation while reputation is a particular type of feedback received by the nation from the outside world, concerning the credibility of the

nation's identity claims. Identity, image and reputation are all mental associations generated by knowledge and past experience.

Although national identity is a popular area for research, there is still no agreement about what the concept actually is. Some would even argue that it is such an elusive concept, it may never exist (Anonymous, 2007). Contrary to commonly held assumptions, the concept of national identity based on widely agreed associations about the nation may never exist –this is because the nation is not a unitary entity in which all members think, feel, and act in the same way. Instead, each individual engages in many different ways in making sense of the nation and national identities (Thompson, 2001)

### **Perception, stereotype**

Perception is a kind view, belief and opinion about oneself and the external world. There are self perception and other perception. Stereotyping is a term coined by Lippman (1922) to describe “pictures in our heads”. To Wilson and Rosenfeld (1990), stereotypes are clusters of preconceived notions. Stereotyping means assuming that all the objects in some category are similar in ways other than the one used to categorise them. Though some stereotypes are positive, most of them are not. Stereotyping produces prejudice, an unreasonable prejudgement of people who are different from one's own group. Perceptions about a nation and its people are often no more a set of stereotypes that are either inaccurate or outdated.

### **A nation as an organisation**

A nation is a complex organisation, and many nations are multicultural and multi-ethnic. Like a conglomerate, a nation is diversified in many different “businesses” and has many different stakeholders. Although parallels can be drawn between nation and organisation, there are

important differences. For example, to what extent, can a country's citizen be treated like employees in an organisation?

### **A nation as a brand**

Nation branding refers to the application of branding and marketing communications technique to promote and manage a nation's image. A nation brand can be defined as the total sum of all mental associations about a nation in the mind of international stakeholders (Fan, 2006). A nation brand can take the form of one of three sub-brands: political brand, economic/ commercial brand, and cultural brand. A nation brand exists with or without any conscious efforts in nation branding, as every country has a current image to its international audience, be it strong or weak, clear or vague. Nation brands can be treated as corporate brands (Balmer and Grey, 2003; Riel and Balmer, 1997), but there are significant differences between the two. The change of a nation brand is far more complicated than the change of a corporate brand.

### **KEY PERSPECTIVES IN NATION IMAGE**

Nation image is a nebulous concept that has various meanings and interpretations. The formation of nation image is a complex process in which different perspectives interact with each other, while self perception, i.e. how a nation sees or believes itself, takes a dominant role. In their original framework of organisation image, Brown et al (2006) studied four central "viewpoints" of organisation. In this paper, two new viewpoints are added. In total, six viewpoints or key perspectives in nation image are identified.

(Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 here)

Each of the perspective is expressed in forms of a single or pair of questions.

1. How does Nation A see itself?

(Who are we as a nation?)

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), the self concept is comprised of a personal identity component that includes idiosyncratic characteristics and a social identity component that includes salient group classifications. In the case of nation identity it has a distinctively unique national component, i.e. the national character or so called “nationalishness”, such as Britishness, and a range of group identifications, European, EU, developed country, English speaking, etc. A nation can classify itself and other nations into various categories or groups.

National identity, like organisation identity, is not constant. Identity is neither fixed, unalterable, nor wholly fluid and amenable unlimited reconstruction (Parekh, 2000). For those nations experiencing or having experienced fundamental changes, it is high time to re-examine their national identity. If people believe that their nation’s identity needs to be altered either in content or in its evaluation, people are likely to modify their behaviour (Dutton, et al, 1994:256). The degree of self identification and classification determines the behaviour of the nation both of its government and people. Subsequently this change in national identity needs to be communicated to the outside worlds.

The relationship between identity and image can be summarised simply as below:

(Self) Identity → Positioning /Nation branding → Image (held by other)

A nation has multiple identities and has to decide what core or prime image it want to project to the outside world. Should a nation present a single consistent image or different images to

different audiences? As a nation's image is context and situation based, it is impossible for a single image to work under all different circumstances.

2. How does Nation A see Nation B?

(How do we see the outside world?)

This new perspective is an important addition to the understanding of nation image. National identity and nation image are relative constructs in which other nations (or more precisely, how a nation sees other nations) play an important part. The quest for uniqueness of identity is inseparable from the conception of others. National identity becomes meaningful only through the contrast and comparison with other nations (Gellner, 1964: 167-171; Kedourie, 1992:44-55; Trandafyllidou, 1998:596-599). National identity is shaped not only by the nation's people themselves, but also by the environment surrounding them. Among the environment influences, there are "significant others", a term coined by Trandafyllidou (1998:599) to refer to another nation or ethnic group that is territorially close to, or indeed within, the national community and threatens, or rather is perceived to threaten, its ethnic and /or cultural purity and /or its independence. A nation's identity at a specific time is influenced by its world view, especially by how it sees other nations. This perception and knowledge of others provide the nation a context or *reference point* in defining its own identity. The whole argument of nationalists seems to be reduced to the fundamental question of defining the "we" and the "they" (ibid, 596). As a nation may have several different significant others at any time, and each of them needs to be treated separately: this is shown in Figure 1 as Nation B; there could also be Nation C, Nation D, and so on.

3. What does Nation A believe Nation B thinks of it?

(What do we believe our image in the world?)

This perspective refers to what a nation's people believe about how their nation is perceived by others. This construed image is subjective, together with a nation's views of others, has a crucial influence on a nation's self perception. It can be argued that a nation's identity is shaped by the twin factors: how it sees others and how it believes being seen by others.

4. How is Nation A actually being perceived by Nation B?

A real image of a nation held by another nation is the nation's reputation that captures the set of associations that people outside believe are CED to the nation (Brown, et al, 2006). In an ideal situation, subjective construed image should be the same as objective actual image. But in reality, the two images would never be the same. There will always be a gap between the two. The problem is that it is very difficult to find out accurate actual image,

5. How is Nation A promoting itself to Nation B?

6. How does Nation A want to be perceived by Nation B?

In the framework by Brown, et al (2006), there is only one viewpoint termed as "intended image". However, it is important to distinguish the image being projected now from the image planned in the future. Perspective 5 is *currently* projected image while Perspective 6 desired *future* image. Both perspectives are concerned with the positioning of a nation in the minds of target international audience in order to create an intended image; but they differ in terms of time dimension. For a nation has yet to embark on nation branding, there is perhaps no current projected image except actual image held by the outside world which often is no more than outdated stereotypes. To improve a nation's image, it may be easier to create new positive associations than try to refute old ones (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).



## **Gap analysis**

The relationships between six key perspectives are illustrated in Figure 2.

(Insert Figure 2 here)

Among these relationships, three are especially important: self perception and perception of other, self perception and actual image, and self perception and desired image. Gap analysis is a formal study in identifying discrepancy by comparing the current status with intended future status. Four potential gaps need to be examined in these relationships:

Gap 1: Self perception v External perception/Actual image

Gap 2: Construed image v Actual image

Gap 3: Projected image v Actual image

Gap 4: Current image v Future image

This model provides researchers and practitioners with a useful tool to understand the complex relationships between different perspectives in the formation of nation image. It is the task of nation branding to identify and analyse the gaps, and hopefully to reduce these gaps through new communications.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual framework that helps to achieve a better understanding of the formation of nation image. The framework identifies six key perspectives in nation image, and more specially, the relationship between a nation's self perception (identity) and other perspectives. The introduction of "significant other" as a reference point to the formation of nation image is a contribution to the literature. The gap analysis model provides a useful tool in repositioning nation brands. Future research is needed to test the framework empirically. It is hoped that this paper will facilitate further theoretical development in nation branding field.

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**Table 1 Key perspectives in nation image**

	<b>Key perspective</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Typical question</b>
1	Self perception <b>Identity</b>	Mental associations about the nation held by its people	Who we are as a nation?
2	Perception of significant other(s)	Perceptions that a nation has of other nations, Reference point, world view	How do we see the outside world?
3	Construed image	Perceptions that a nation's people believe that other nations hold about their nation	What do we believe our image in the world? "Mirror on the wall"
4	Actual image <b>Reputation, stereotype</b>	Real perceptions about a nation held by other nations	How is our nation <i>actually</i> being perceived by others?
5	Currently projected image	Image currently being created and communicated to the world that might not reflect reality of the nation	How is our nation currently promoting itself to the outside world?
6	Desired future image (Gioia, et al, 2000) <b>Positioning</b>	Visionary perception that a nation would like other nations to hold about it in the future	What do we want to be perceived by the outside world?

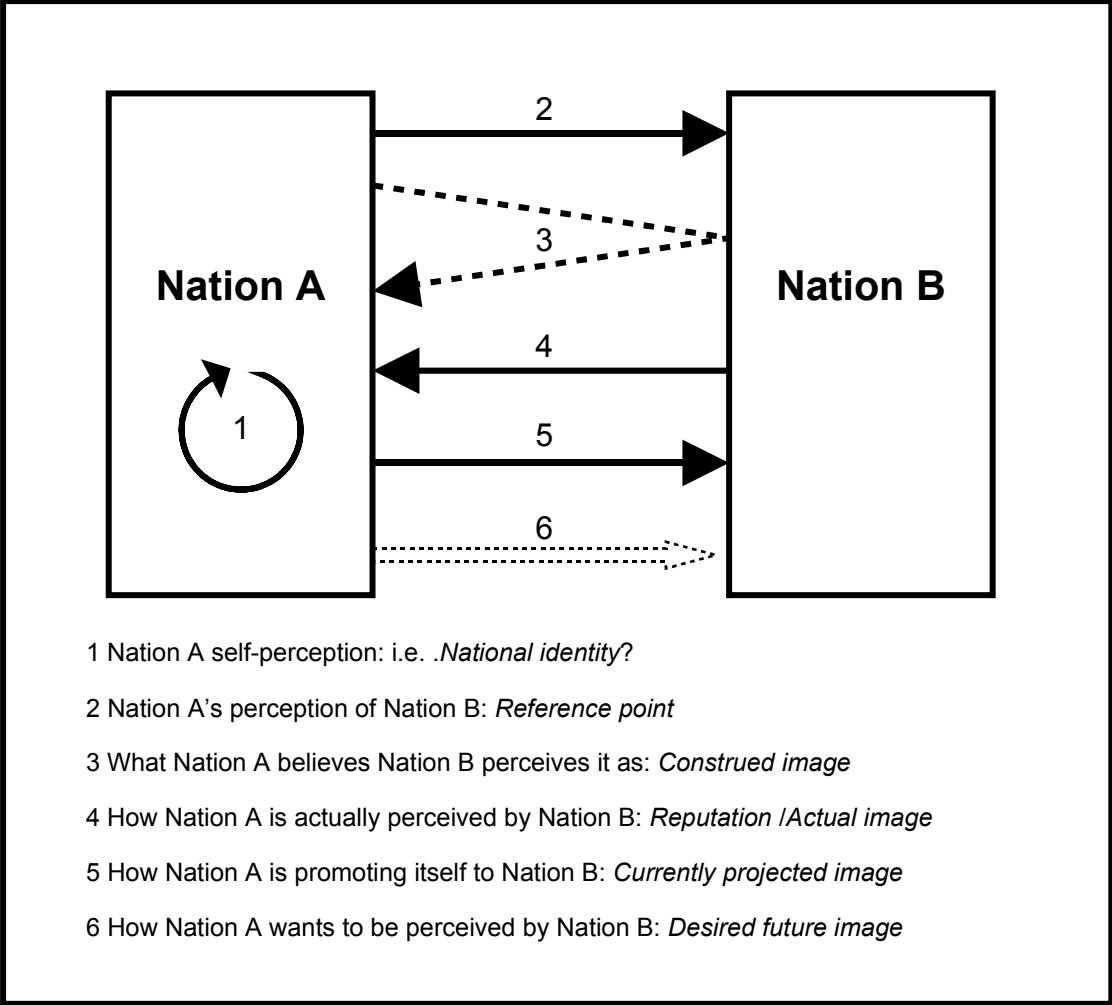


Figure 1 The Six Key Perspectives of A Nation's Image

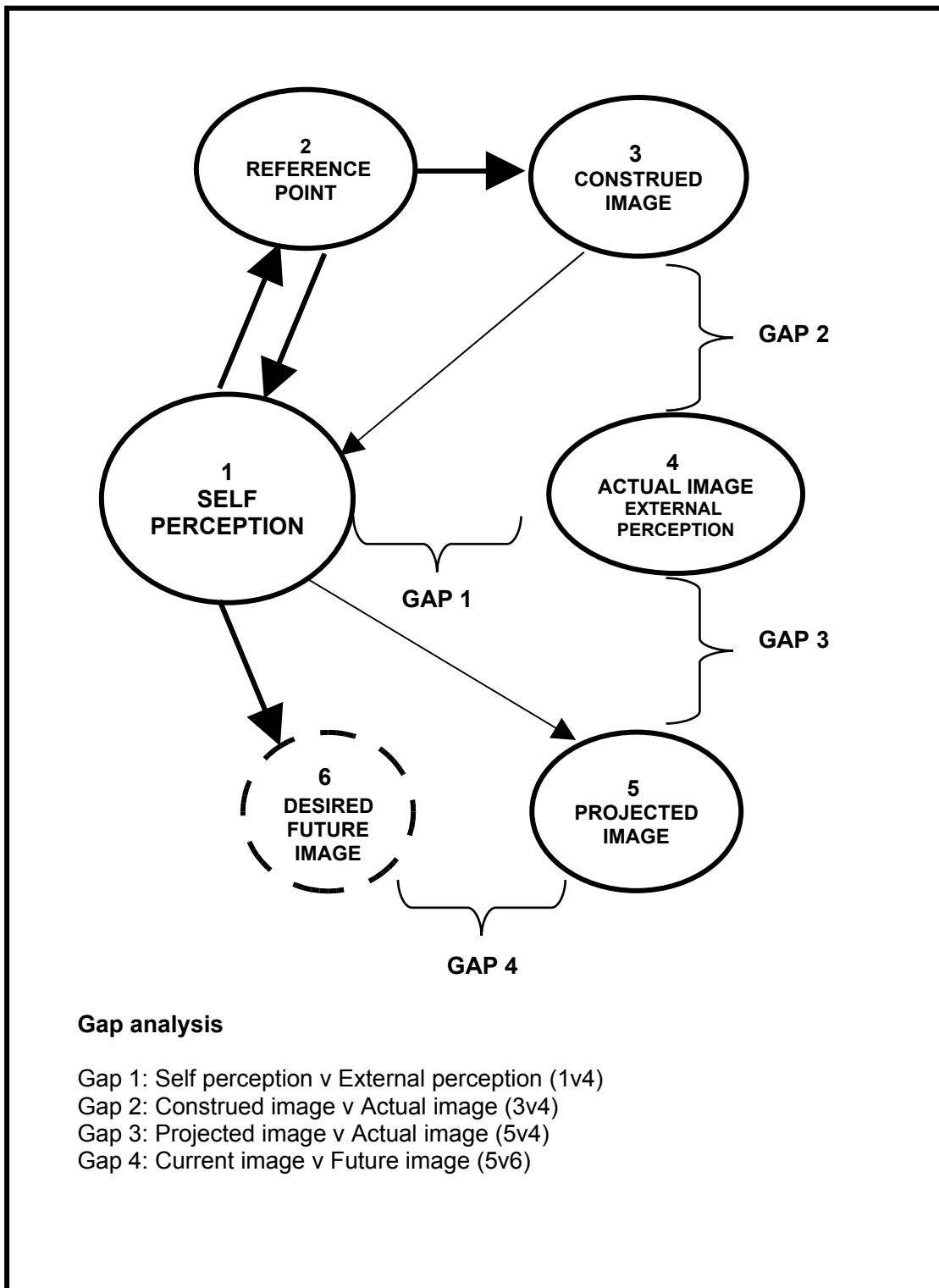


Figure 2 The Relationships between Key Perspectives in Nation Image