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Nation Branding and its Potential for Differentiation in Regional Politics: The Case of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar

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Abstract. *Simon Anholt, who fathered the concept of nation branding, values the nation brand as the most important resource of a state as it contributes to obtaining a competitive advantage and a consolidated position in the international marketplace. This paper pinpoints how Anholt's paradigm for nation branding applies in the case study of two Middle Eastern countries: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar and its benefits for this regional context. The Middle Eastern countries operate less with the nation branding concepts when compared with the Western world. However, the UAE and Qatar used nation branding techniques quite savvy, Anholt's model internalization being relevant. As of today, the UAE represents Middle East's most powerful brand, while one of its main cities- Dubai- has gained a reputation for its cosmopolitan vibe, whereas Doha of Qatar is consolidating its fame on the international sports circuit. Overall, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) bloc - a region of great wealth positioned between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula- has become acquainted with the advantages of nation branding. Despite the fact that these countries did not target creating a nation brand per se, they took measures for economic development that resulted in nation branding and regional differentiation. In the recent years, Qatar and the UAE have developed strategies for branding attractions that help in distinguishing themselves from their neighbors. The study uses Anholt's conceptual framework for assessing the two countries in their different development stages and from a comparative viewpoint, identifying both communalities and differentiating strategies while developing nation brands. The conclusion is that nation branding can be particularly beneficial to nations from emerging economies and that the GCC specifically can benefit from this process.*

Keywords: *nation branding; Anholt; model; differentiating; GCC; competitive advantage.*

Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regional bloc (its members: the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, Kuwait, and Oman) embodies the world's richest hydrocarbon resources countries. The region stands out for its geostrategic location- between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula- at the crossroads of continents, between Asia (Middle and the Far East) and Africa. Naturally, the cities on the coast of the Persian Gulf (Dubai, Doha, Manama, and Muscat) have been traditional ports of calls for shipments between the Middle East, Africa, India and/or China.

On the other hand, the GCC countries are located in a region of harsh climate (implying a limited natural charm). Thus, they need artificial attractions in order to create attractiveness. This aspect requires building a proper infrastructure and many utilities while enabling a financial coordination plan to manage them (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). It can enable a chain effect contributing to the overall growth of trade and investments. Building attractions with the view to constructing a brand, along with conveying a coherent message for that brand is difficult. Contemporary decision makers face one of the most difficult challenges when they have to communicate coherently (Anholt, 2006). Despite the difficulties to align a consistent message, the GCC countries are developing a vital development strategy that accompanies the nation branding process. Focusing on developing touristic services, aviation, real estate and on international events' hosting (exhibitions/conferences), it resulted in connecting the capitals of these young nations with the world economy (Abu Dhabi-UAE and Doha-Qatar are the capitals considered for this study). As such, the UAE and Qatar managed to differentiate their cities from those of the regional bloc by the means of activities associated with nation branding, in Anholt's (2006) argumentation.

Nation branding has factual effects, hence a practical strategy for nation branding raises a country's ability to attract tourists, investors and talented workforce alike. Findings illustrate that the *key indicators* in a brand's formation encompass *national elements* (names, perception, geostrategic location, inhabitants, traditions, culture etc.) and *infrastructure* (security and safety, economic solidity, technological advance, a market for tourism, advertisement, and promotion). No matter the strategy you enact (after identifying the most striking elements for the respective country), it needs corresponding infrastructure, as Kotler and Gertner (2002) suggested. Only these cumulative factors enhance a brand's visibility and its corresponding benefits (Nicolescu, 2007).

The UAE proved to be the most successful branding product in the GCC region, succeeding the most to englobe the aforementioned elements. The UAE has been pursuing closely the experts' view for accomplishing an ambitious goal, followed closely in the past decade by Qatar. As an important guarantee for success, the UAE also avoided mistakes and other reputational liabilities that generate negative implications and weaken the branding process (Gilmore, 2002).

Research methodology

The structure of the paper reflects a comparison between the UAE and Qatar's nation branding processes, in the light of Anholt's (2006) conceptual framework, analyzing the timeframe associated with the branding processes, the particular methods employed and the distinctive, thus far different results. It is a qualitative assessment, based on the criteria offered by Anholt's (2006) paradigm. We used a thorough literature search in the field of nation branding that helped to generate a comparative analysis of the most significant differences between the UAE and Qatar branding processes via a conceptual appropriation of Simon's Anholt (2006) hexagon model. The multiplicity of perspectives related to branding nations/ countries/ places were investigated through a comparative analysis between the UAE and Qatar, relying heavily on Anholt's (2006) proposed a model for nation brands and on the akin literature. Ultimately, the paper terminates the examination, noting both the successes and limits of nation branding in this particular setting. The study intends to answer the question of why nation branding is beneficial for this specific region and evaluates future prospects of its analysis.

Aim/added-value: Nation branding has received a narrow focus in the Middle East (when compared to studies about the developed economies). This study is a first when it comes to Anholt's (2006) conceptual framework vis-à-vis nation branding in the GCC region. In addition, it provides with an investigation that links the concept of nation branding with the potential it offers for regional affirmation. The study intends to help policy makers, traders, business and communication specialists and any other interested person to understand the benefits of nation branding in a very specific setting, comparing both the UAE and Qatar.

Literature review

Simon Anholt, the author who set milestones in terms of nation branding encircled the meaning of the concept in a six-layer illustration, depicted in *figure 1.* Thus, the nation brand is composed of people's perception towards a country, including six elements managed at national level. Anholt (2006) encourages applying the cumulative effect of each component of the proposed hexagon for rendering the nation brand viable.

Simon Anholt fathered the concept of competitive identity in 1996 (resulting from an accomplished nation branding strategy) and published the first study about it in 1998. He proposed the following channels in order to achieve it: *tourist promotion; exporting brands; government policies (domestic or aimed at the foreign sector); the population's reputation; cultural heritage; the power to attract investment and skilled workforce* (Zeineddine, 2017*)*.

Anholt (2006) equals a successful nation brand with *competitive identity,* summed up as following: *"(...) the synthesis among brand management, public diplomacy, trade, investments, tourism and export"*, while Keith Dinnie (2007) defined the competitive identity of a nation as "*the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide* *the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences".* Simon Anholt (2006) considers a nation brand as "*the most valuable asset: it is national identity made robust, tangible, communicable, and – at its best – made useful*". Anholt (2007) promoted afterwards the seventh element in his structure, more precisely, the performance of state' leaders at international level.

Anholt (2011) ranked competitive identity highly in a globalized economy. He argues that when you reach the competitive identity, your mission in nation branding is accomplished. He also notes that the success is only possible with the collaboration of a wide array of stakeholders, ranging from decision makers, the private sector, investors, assisted by the local population's involvement. A country's international reputation is administered appropriately and positively, once there is cooperation between the various sectors of the state. Dinnie (2009) presented the competitive identity as the conglomeration of the outstanding features of a nation, hereby including the political, economic, social, and cultural assets and capacities.

Nation branding has produced subsidiary concepts, for instance, place branding. Place branding focuses fundamentally on attractions you can find in a destination/a location that has the potential to promote events, allure tourists, investors and skilled workforce (Anholt, 2010). If we talk specifically about tourism, place branding, especially the one oriented towards *cities*, has an important connotation (Zenker, 2009). Place branding meets with the aspiration of marketing tourist destinations, an entrancing instrument for visitors and tourists alike (Balakrishnan, 2009). Therefore, branding places gained increased significance, being a recurrent practice nowadays, due to the growth of globalization instruments that create a symbiosis between markets and culture at the global level (Anholt, 2005a). This is why, [...] *"the reputations of countries (by extension, of cities and regions too) behave rather like the brand images of companies and products, and they are critical to the progress, prosperity, and good management of those places"* (Anholt, 2013).

Nation branding, the umbrella concept, can be correlated with a paramount self-presentation of a country. The domain of nation branding extends beyond touristic promotion/ marketing, including vital economic elements such as investment, exports and matters related to the work force- professionals, students, and qualified foreign residents- meaning it ultimately involves governance. Nation branding strategies should be contemplated in such a manner that ensures checking all the elements included by Anholt (2006) in his six-layer figure.

Figure 1. Nation Brands Hexagon (Anholt, 2000)

What is the stimulus for operating with this rather new concept (the concept in itself it is not new, but it gained visibility with the spread of globalized markets in the past two or three decades)? The nation branding, as Anholt (2006) and Dinnie (2007) promoted it assists with acquiring the much-desired competitive identity. Most of the modern literature has focused on the competitive identity of major countries- i.e. USA, China, Western countries- while there is a shortage of integrated studies on the Middle East. The research can be rendered difficult, without a detailed analysis and exploration (Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen, 2016). The prior experiences (Freire, 2005; Szondi, 2007) pointed up that when analyzing the competitive identity of a nation you need a comprehensive approach combining both the strategies applied and the factors that practically interfere with the nation branding process (Anholt, 2007).

A nation's competitive identity depicts the overarching method in which a country communicates, distinguishes itself and relates to the wide world (Blair, Kung, Shieh, & Kuo-Hsiang, 2015). As Dinnie (2008) argued, the nation brand image relates substantially to the corporate marketing. In an analogy, the competitive identity can be assimilated to a marketing tool in the hands of nations. The main advantage of competitive identity is that it gives a positive edge to the economy and national traits, enhancing the country's global positioning (Anholt, 2009).

People form their perceptions in direct connection with a nation brand. When you think of the Middle East the preconceptions burden the consumer's/ receiver mind, hence a perceptive nation branding process can allow a considerable advantage to whom reflects upon upgrading its international status. For these reasons, the GCC countries -and the UAE and Qatar in particular- mark an appropriate example for the Middle East when delving into nation branding processes.

Anholt's hexagon model internalization in the UAE and Qatar's nation branding processes

Anholt (2005c) explained that you have to stage a nation branding process in a consistent and harmonious manner. The best-expected results are those publicizing the correct assessment of all products, brands, sub-brands and of the activities associated with the purpose. The UAE and Qatar try to work on harmonizing all the elements proposed by Anholt. While being poised by the prejudices linked to the Middle East, the nation branding strategies are even more salient and prove their worthiness in this specific case of the GCC countries- countries of rising affluence, regionally and globally: *"The clichés and stereotypes- positive or negative, true or untrue- (and stereotyping is frequent in the case of the Middle East) fundamentally affect our behavior towards other places and their people and products*" (Anholt, 2007). While they cannot modify the set circumstances of the region, they have to work on improving the standing of their nation brand, accordingly to experts' view.

Branding UAE according to Anholt's model

The UAE has a government that is no different from the majority of the Arabian Peninsula: an absolute monarchy (ruling over the federation founded in 1971, comprising seven emirates). The UAE lies in Western Asia, on the coast of the Persian Gulf, in the southeast point of the Arabian Peninsula. Abu Dhabi and Dubai embody the engines that pump the economy of the federation. In terms of nation brands, the UAE has become the Middle East's most valuable brand. The UAE has become the third strongest brand in the world in 2016 (worth over US$400 billion) (Brandfinance.com, 2016), topping the ranks after modest classifications only one decade ago. When one analyses UAE' s branding process, we come across the flagship project- Dubai-, despite the fact that Abu Dhabi remains the capital city. Dubai has been developed as a nation brand, built in subsequent layers.

An analysis of Dubai's actions from Anholt's perspective on nation brands

- Government: Dubai's leaders have a paramount role in deciding to shape up the former fishers' village to the status of a vibrant international city. Probably Dubai policy makers have reacted quicker than their counterparts, understanding the need for economic diversification, limiting the heavy reliance on oil (Reuvid, 2007). In 1990, the evaluation studies showed that the oil resources are to last for about 30 years. This examination pushed for a coordinated correlation of these resources. Keith Dinnie (2009) has advocated for correlation of resources in the worldwide competition. In order to do that you need excellent branding management techniques that can be refined until the process progresses. Dubai addressed the matter consciously, as it can be observed in the strategies corresponding to the initial plan (firstly focusing on tourism development, generating ulterior projects in all major service sectors). When it comes to governance, we can also observe the seventh element proposed by Anholt (2006), the leaders from Dubai being concerned about having a factual standing in international affairs (involvement in humanitarian cases) and working on cultural diplomacy (Gulfnews.com, 2017). The leaders acknowledged the role of communication in the global context, as well. As a result, in November 2017, Dubai has launched a program called *"International Media Diplomacy"*: "*Effective communication will be particularly important in realizing the UAE's aspiration to be a global leader across sectors"* (Gulfnews.com, 2017), as it is part of the vision of His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid.

-Exports: Dubai is the hub of the UAE and it protrudes as the commercial, transportation and communication center of the region, being a gateway to the Middle East and North Africa. Coming back to the evaluation of oil resources back in 1990, Dubai relies much less on oil than it used to do. With the calculus in mind, the policy makers enabled a plan to diversify its economy using trade, tourism, and real estate development. The oil production was reduced from the peak-high level of "*410,000 barrels/day in 1991 to 50,000 and 70,000 barrels/day in 2017"* (Chamber International, 2017). The current amount of oil production accounts currently for roughly 4% of the total GDP. A Business Year evaluation of 2011 indicated that: "*the wholesale, retail, restaurant and hotel sectors represented 32.8% of Dubai's GDP"* (Dubai FDI, 2017). Dubai, branded as the "*shopping capital of the Middle East"* is the number-one commercial contributor to the wider region. According to MIT data, in 2016 "*the United Arab Emirates exported $98.8B, making it the 29th largest exporter in the world*". The same data reveals that its exports are in the high-end/ luxury department, derived from the luxury/ superlatives branding of Dubai: "*The most recent exports are led by Gold which represents 15.9% of the total exports of the United Arab Emirates, followed by Diamonds, which account for 12.4%"* .

-Tourism: Dubai enabled a *Department of Tourism and Commerce* in the 1980s, as the first step towards economic diversification. With arduous work, Dubai became the fifth most visited city in the world in 2014, having received 11.95 million visitors, the number increased to 12.84 million international overnight tourists in 2015 and 13.34 million in 2016 (Visitdubai.com, 2017). The aim for 2020 is to reach a peak number of 20 million tourists/ year. Most of those (86%) who visit Dubai fall in the category of 20-40 years age group, persons who are internationally exposed (Lee & Jain, 2009), highlighting the potential of Dubai as destination brand. In 2012, tourism was accounting for 31% of Dubai's GDP (Karolak, 2014). The trends are ascendant for what tourism is concerned (Karolak, 2014). Dubai has reached worldwide fame for its extravagant architectural projects, including here *Burj Khalifa,* the tallest building in the world, and other projects that associate with outstanding projects, including the largest shopping mall *Dubai Mall* or the first indoor sky track inside a mall, in the *Emirates Mall*. Its attractions are mostly fabricated, as the climate does not offer the opportunity to promote or structure attractions otherwise.

-Investment and Immigration: As Dubai has increased the number of tourists exponentially; the real estate, transportation, and hospitality sectors have been booming, implying a growing presence of investors, traders and skilled workforce. Dubai being a safe, secure place, the number of foreign residents is very high, making up for roughly 80% of the population, largely an Asian community of expats (Kapadia, 2016). In addition, Dubai strategically focuses on people management. The nationals represent only a minority of the population, but they are affluent. The other important representatives of Dubai's are the traders and investors from the US, Europe and Asia, corporate businesses and other international entities that have chosen Dubai as a headquarters. Dubai enjoys a high level of trust from behalf the investors, as in 2016 it attracted a total of AED 25.5 Billion in FDI capital (equivalent to 6,942,630,000 US Dollars), topping the cities in terms of the amount of FDI capital (Dubai FDI, 2017). Dubai ranks second globally for total projects attracted during the first part of 2017. In sum, Dubai has consolidated its position as a hub in the heart of the GCC, serving the extended region, obtaining a consolidated brand deriving from its numerous glamorous attractions it builds over the past three decades.

- Culture and Heritage: Dubai is the regional domineer in technology, commerce and transportation, enjoying simultaneously a cosmopolitan make-up, grounding ambitions for being crowned the *"Global Arab City*". The worldwide fame is not confined to luxury and flamboyant projects, but also implies being an initiator in becoming "*a smart city"* (Smart Dubai, 2017), while maintaining its Middle Eastern cultural specificity. Dubai managed to link the cozy culture of the desert and its local hospitality, with a modern interpretation of infrastructure and utilities. Dubai projects itself as a modern and secure city (Forbes Middle East, 2017) where Western culture is embraced. Nonetheless, it keeps strict to local dress code, the habits and hospitality of the desert inhabitants.

-People: The number of expats and foreign residents is a sign of the openness of the locals, despite being in a region where norms are strict and conservativeness is still present. Dubai managed to overcome this challenge, welcoming foreigners in the job market and involving them in many other projects that make Dubai specific – *"a modern wealthy city providing luxurious facilities as a sea, sun and sand destination that combines leisure with extensive shopping facilities"* (Coombe & Melki, 2012).

Abu Dhabi's formation as a nation brand according to Anholt's model

-Government and Tourism: The conventions of the Emirates established that the ruler of Abu Dhabi is the President of the UAE (official representation role), while the ruler of Dubai is the Prime Minister of the UAE, (executive role). Therefore, governance aspects are prominent for Abu Dhabi, as they dictate priorities for the entire federation, which is the UAE. Abu Dhabi, the capital city, and concomitantly its second most known emirate, called for its own branding strategy for international recognition (Haider, 2008). The first step in the direction of nation branding was also similar to Dubai's (the difference being of chronological nature, being separated by a gap of 20 years). Abu Dhabi started the branding strategy in the year 2000, marked by the launch *Office of the Brand of Abu Dhabi* (Al Ayedrous Bani Hashim, 2012). The office launched premiere a logo and a catchphrase for Abu Dhabi - *"travelers welcome"* – highly promoted in all sorts of campaigns and activities. Anholt (2009) explained that in the case of less established countries it comes naturally to launch first a signpost logo in the attempt of differentiating themselves. In addition, the consumer's consciousness needs a penetrant element that adheres to his/ her mind. Following the experts' advice, Abu Dhabi has gone beyond a logo, constructing a thorough identity, through different means across areas of national competence: media, web, advertisement campaigns with international reach that promote the manufactured attractions of the Emirate. However, the advertisement is just one element of the overarching strategy, producing maximum a short-term effect, according to Dinnie (2008). Abu Dhabi has started branding with the logo *"travelers welcome*" which turned out to be part of a broader strategy (Formula 1 events or building world-known museums in the recent years), going beyond tourism and having implications on the overall economic construction.

-Exports: The non-oil exports are on ascendant trend, meaning that non-oil related trade raised to Dh 169.11 billion in 2015 (46,041,888,600 US dollars), marking an 11 percent increase, announcing progress in the realization of economic diversification (Issac, 2016).

-Investment, Immigration, and People: According to the statistics yearbook of 2016, *oil contributed an estimated 50.9% of the GDP at current prices in 2014, with the remaining 49.1% representing the share of non-oil activities, which achieved a combined growth rate of 12.0%* (SCAD, 2016). The economic prospects and openness attire a large number of foreign residents. Thus, the economic diversification process is well structured and reaping benefits, ticking the "*investment and immigration"* box of Anholt's (2006) hexagon. When it comes to statistics referring to population, it is difficult to be precise, as 79.6% of the overall population is not actually a resident of Abu Dhabi. The total of the population is measured at approximately 1,214,000 people.

-Culture and Heritage: The rulers together with the other stakeholders decided a different direction for Abu Dhabi, allowing differentiation from Dubai, reflected in the cultural and heritage aspect and the people it can attract, beyond the usual presence of traders and foreign investors. Abu Dhabi has benefitted from a collaboration between different sectors that agreed upon constructing a different image from Dubai (Balakrishnan, 2009), known for its appetence for the Guinness Book of records – a "*city of superlatives"* (Beauregard, 2003). Abu Dhabi's identity strikes through cultural events at the forefront (building an island for culturally established brands, such as The Louvre and The Guggenheim). It stands for a quieter destination in the sun-blessed region of the Gulf, which is fit for events of regional (awards ceremony) or international tenure (Formula 1). The *Yas Marin*a circuit where the Grand Prix takes place is placed on an island, east from Abu Dhabi. The 2009 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix was the first grand event on the circuit. The Grand Prix already numbers eight events (takes place annually at the end of Formula 1 season) and it was the first ever day-night race in the Formula 1 circuit. The Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened its gates to visitors recently, conceived by the French architect Jean Nouvel, combines a modernist style with Arabic patterns. Even though it disposed of the latest building technology, it deployed Arab-style geometric shapes. The museum stems from a 2007 inter-governmental agreement between Paris and Abu Dhabi. Zayed National Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museums' opening will follow soon.

In short, Abu Dhabi has managed a cumulative branding strategy (with emphasis on the cultural/ heritage aspects in the quest for economic diversification), trying to strike all the elements proposed by Anholt (developed previously), coming second to Dubai's international reputation (when you analyze the UAE) (Zeineddine, 2017).

Branding Qatar according to Anholt's model

UAE's prominent status in the field of nation branding has for sure stirred competition in the region. For example, further away from the Emirates, there is Qatar, a small peninsula (separated by the island of Bahrein), in the Persian Gulf, having gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1971.

Qatar shall also be examined from the perspective of the six components of the nation brand proposed by Anholt (2006):

-Government: Qatar - a sheikdom[i] on the coast of the Persian Gulf, ruled in an absolutist manner- has boosted its economic valence, reaching the highest GDP per capita in the world: $129,726 (Business Insider, 2017). Of course, this amount of wealth generates influence that has to be reflected in a brand. Qatar's change of rulers in 1995 accelerated the pace of nation branding. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani took the power of the tiny peninsula in 1995 (deposing his father) and undertook a major economic-social transformation. Sheikh Hamad aimed to gain more influence on the world map, correlated with the abundant gas resources. As such, Qatar became very active in the international and regional organization (GCC and Islamic organizations). Therefore, Qatar has gained worldwide prominence (Peterson, 2006). Currently, Qatar is ruled by one of the youngest monarchs in the world (Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, 37 years old); trying to keep the pace with the constant modernization, while keeping the social norms aligned to the conservative vibe of the region. The achievements under al Thani family's ruling boosted ambitions. As a result, Qatar has presented the National Vision 2030, the master plan for Qatar's makeover in the future years. Doha is meant to be more visible internationally, involved in cultural and sports activities, education. Doha is already in the business and regional policy arena, but it means to emphasize its global assertiveness.

-Exports: The oil and gas sector makes up roughly 50% of Qatar's GDP (www.forbes.com, 2016), compared to less than 5 % in Dubai. Qatar exports are dominated by hydrocarbons (95% of its total exports, with petroleum gas being the main resource exploited). "*In 2016 Qatar exported $55.1B, making it the 39th largest exporter in the world".* The states that benefit most from these exports are Asian: Japan (30% of total exports), South Korea, India, China, Singapore and the regional contender, the United Arab Emirates. The Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) industry is in itself a brand, as Qatar has one of the most modern infrastructures for exporting this commodity. In addition, international level events in sports, culture and international universities campuses located in Qatar helped in broadening Qatar's captivation, but Qatar has yet to demonstrate the profound economic changes (transforming itself from an oil and gas economy) comparable with the UAE's realizations.

-Tourism: Qatar started to invest in tourism as soon as it opened to the world in the late 1990s. For sure, the World Trade Organization negotiation meetings period known as the *"Doha Round"* brought international reputation and channeled efforts to develop hospitality and real estate. During this process, Qatar found its niches in hosting international events: meetings, mediation, conferences or simply sports events. Sports has proven to be a successful niche in differentiation from UAE's plans. Qatar has registered success with hosting sports tournaments, being the organizer of the 2006 Asian Olympics. *"By successfully hosting a major sporting event to showcase shared social norms and sameness, the state can enhance its international prestige and attractiveness in order to boost its agency in international politics."* (Grix & Lee, 2013, p.529). As a distinctive approach from the general idea of destination branding, Qatar wants to associate itself with top services rather than with mass tourism.

-Investment and Immigration: Qatar has achieved international exposure through hosting major international conferences/ meetings and international sports events, through which it promotes investment (both domestic and foreign), presenting the country's vast opportunities. As Qatar still relies heavily on its oil resource, investment opportunities are connected with grand infrastructure projects, transportation development, and Qatar hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022 (being the first Middle Eastern country to win the bid, building up previous success in sports events' organization). Qatar also plans a digital revolution, launching a *Smart nation* project (similarly to Dubai being a *Smart city*), announcing a program (March 2017) that costs the government more than $1.5 billion for rendering Doha a pioneer in digitalization (Export.gov, 2017). In terms of workforce, Qatar relies massively on a foreign workforce. From 1,985,264 active population, Qataris represent only 102,593 (37,214 females) of the workforce (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2017). As in the case of the UAE, the Qatari nationals represent an affluent segment of the population.

-Culture and Heritage: Qatar has started to work on removing the label of a dormant desert city when it embarked on a social transformation that made possible to launch the *Al Jazeera* media network in 1996 (with a broad reception in the wider Middle East). It was unthinkable back at that time to acquire so much regional power through the means of media. Qatar has worked on a strategic plan than rendered Doha as the junction of "*top universities, forums, sports and cultural events*" (Hazime, 2011) in a decade or so. The plans for branding proposed a new image for Qatar as a host of various events, cultural forums, international university campuses and media outlets. Qatar is trying to build impressive art collections that would boost the regional arts' scene in the future. Here one can observe a similar approach to Abu Dhabi, to a certain extent. However, Qatar is not building franchises of the world-known museums, but it is establishing museums concerning regional art (contemporary and Islamic art), blending both the traditional and modern culture.

-People: Just like the UAE (only that it happened later), Qatar initiated a series of programs that render its name more visible, constituting an important destination for foreigners. Estimates, which are based on official Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics (MDPS) data sets, affirm there are approximately 313,000

Qatari nationals, as of mid-2016 (Priya Dsouza Communication, 2017). This means Qatari citizens account for approximately 12% of Qatar's total population of mid-2016. The planning of the grand infrastructure projects require workforce; thus it means Qatar has to consolidate its name as a welcoming destination for foreigners. As well as the UAE, it tries to embrace all nationalities, while keeping strict with the social mores.

Differentiating elements while branding UAE and Qatar and their influence on the regional setting

The countries of the GCC region have an incipient national history (both the UAE and Qatar gained independence in 1971), so they needed to put in place a communication strategy that illustrates a certain identity in the making. Each GCC state needs the tools in order to distinguish itself from its neighbors and from Dubai's already iconic image, while confronting constraints and challenges derived from the newly found wealth. The wide range of challenges they come across can find a response to the strategy of developing the state for growth, consequently consolidating the image of the nation. The colonial past, the physical size, the population (especially since the national population represents the minority in the UAE and Qatar), or the geopolitical situation cannot be modified, but the projection of these nations to the outside world can be. In this sense, nation branding can be one of the most important instruments to be optimized. Nation branding is becoming increasingly important to developing nations (the GCC countries included), as the national identity does not have time to match the pace of the economic growth (Anholt, 2006). Instead, the employment of international marketing techniques can give a boost to identity coagulation. The GCC economies are some of the fastest growing economies and time passing by; they needed a corresponding image for the resources and wealth and consolidation of a certain image. Thus, the UAE and Qatar proceeded in this direction, initiating activities that can be associated with a plan for nation branding. UAE proved more successful so far, its own success even being a stimulus for regional competitiveness.

Differences

While the two countries- the UAE and Qatar- have been through similar processes, including many common aspects related to governance and concerning the vision for expansion (both economically and internationally), one important differentiating factor is *time*. First, Dubai granted longer time (when compared to the other sheikhdoms) for enabling a nation branding strategy, originating in the establishment of a Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing in the 1980s. It is an indicator in the favor of the comprehensive and coherent strategy proposed by Anholt (2006, 2007). Abu Dhabi started the autonomous process of branding in the 2000s, whereas Qatar has started branding in the wake of 1995 political events (almost simultaneous with the initiation and launch of *Al Jazeera* in 1996). Dubai has already gained an international reputation (being visible for already three decades in the global market, while Abu Dubai and Doha were almost invisible to wider audiences) and represents the icon of nation branding in the GCC region (reflected in the number of tourists, events, and investors it attracts annually). In fact, Anholt (2003, 2005b) is a promoter of long-term planning in nation branding (both in terms of planning per se and in terms of resources). He stressed the important role of continuity, simplicity, coherency, and accuracy when laying down the foundations for a nation's labels Dubai's transformation into a destination abundant in high-end estate and record-breaking events has not happened overnight, but it has been staged from the early 1980s. The activities assimilated to nation branding have received a strong impetus in the 2000s, accelerated one more time as a result of drying oil resources and of the lower international price for oil from 2014 onwards. When it comes to reading results, the statistics indicate that tourism accounts for up to 31 % of Dubai's GDP now, while Doha's dependency on oil is still relevant, marking a *striking* difference. In sum, Dubai managed to diversify the sectors of economy best (even compared to Abu Dhabi), limiting the dependency on oil revenues. Qatar's extraordinary economic growth is nourished by its oil and mostly gas resources (the National Vision also invokes Qatar being a hub and an innovator in the LNG industry), seconded by events related to sports and culture. So far, touristic development cannot qualify for UAE's results.

Despite a time lag when compared to the UAE, the National Vision for the future of Qatar largely matches Anholt's (2006) conceptualization of the nation brand, with reference to the areas of national competence, stressing the need for an in-depth overall development.

On the other hand, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the two facets of UAE's nation brand, have risen up to international standards, with the help of a sound, yet perfectible communication strategy. Dubai and Abu Dhabi have embarked on a journey of branding that led them higher in the branding ranks than Qatar so far. This strategy encompasses aspects that adhere to the mind of the consumer- the Gulf's capital of unparalleled records (Dubai) and the buttoned up capital city of an affluent region (Abu Dhabi). In the case of Qatar, possibly the most distinctive pattern for its branding so far is that it strengthened the image of Doha as a host of international sports events. Thus, another differentiating point during the course of nation branding is the *ultimate goals followed by each country examined.* Dubai is pursuing its declared ambition to be a *"Global Arab City*", which it translated to be a consolidated Arab nation whose rulers and population are connected to the international community's pace. Abu Dhabi is emphasizing the image of a culturally vibrant, yet peaceful destination (the *welcoming* sunshine destination) as an alternative to Dubai's flashy appearance, connecting with the cultural resurgence in the region. Furthermore, Doha is earning a place on the circuit of sports events and it is trying to accompany this reputation with building top educational and cultural facilities.

Finally, in the course of its branding process, Qatar had to compete with the UAE's already consolidated success. It has the chances to become a stronger competitor for UAE (notably with regards to events of a certain level that boost economic diversification) if it continues hosting grand events (FIFA World Cup 2022 is a strong bet for the state) and yielding results from the top educational facilities it hosts. This way it can keep up the pace with UAE and reflect the new competitive vibe in the GCC, both countries delineating themselves from the regional background.

Commonalities

Qatar has made noteworthy efforts; however, it is difficult to assemble a strategy that does not "copy" Dubai's upscale patterns of urban planning, events, and record-breaking actions. Dubai, as a trendsetter, has established the *common ground* for the development of the city-states of the GCC. Dubai's fame has managed to generate both a copy- cat effect and a competition for having more high-rise buildings, touristic manufactured venues, hosting high tenure events in the entire region. We note that distinctive niches are difficult to identity when the environment is more or less the same (city-states on the shores of the Persian Gulf, located in the Arabian Peninsula).

Among *common* elements encountered in both cases, we can mention the decision-makers' desire to involve public and private sector in their attempts to advance the economy beyond the oil resources. Both the UAE and Qatar *competitive identity*, in the terms used by Anholt (2006), is a success story for an emerging region, namely the GCC. The two countries feature higher than fellow emirates in an affluent regional grouping- the GCC. Therefore, nation branding meant for both a catalyst for prompting results and visibility internationally and not the least, regionally. We should emphasize the strategies' success, as formulating a nation brand is not only costly but a difficult process. In the quest for nation branding, several sectors were consolidated, notably, tourism, investments and culture/ heritage, benefiting the regional development and ultimately the nation building (an important factor for such young nations as the UAE and Qatar).

Research findings and overall remarks

Research results and findings

The research advanced an inquiry about how nation branding contributes to regional prominence and affirmation. The study has chosen an under-explored theme (nation branding in a very specific setting of the Middle East and its contribution to regional prominence), thus, the qualitative research notes its own limits. The results indicate the level of engagement of the UAE and Qatar into nation branding activities. We note that the scale of activities advanced by the UAE differs from those of Qatar. Nation branding, under the scheme used by Anholt, revealed its benefits for both the UAE and Qatar, highlighting a Middle Eastern contribution to the international understanding of nation branding.

In addition, the region that served as a case study showed that the goal of cementing a distinctive nation brand is associated with both economic and nation building processes. Nation branding campaigns can unite the citizens and forge a sense of pride.

As such, the paper *identified*:
- Even countries from the emergent markets –hereby the UAE and Qatar- can gain international visibility rather quick, as long as decision makers and locals collaborate in elaborating a coherent message about the nation and agree upon methods of promotion (starting with visual signposts or iconic events that are incorporated in broader strategies for nation branding);
- It is possible to enhance the country's international relations and its image abroad through nation branding and differentiate it from the local setting- UAE and Qatar did the best in the entire GCC bloc. Communication tools do matter a lot. Adversely, Anholt's (2006) approach does not offer the means in order to assess the external influence on nation branding, focusing only on what we could do/ make from within. We should note as a practical implication that in the globalization and post-globalization era (fake) news spread quickly and their impact is visible internationally;
- Time is essential when you identify the most salient (and at the same time most accurate) features for ultimately creating a competitive identity (see discussion above on Dubai creating a precedent in the region);
- If a country can manage well the competitive identity advantages, the fellow contenders will be also motivated (see the race between the UAE and Qatar in the aftermath of the 2000s), benefitting the overall economic architecture of the GCC.

The *qualitative* nature of analysis has the potential for generalization; therefore, further study is recommended for overcoming this limitation. In addition, the study was restricted to a general approach to a country nation's brand. Therefore, the private sectors and the communication sector might address it from a different perspective. In addition, the study did not enquire the tourists about their perceptions vis-à-vis the countries investigated and did not assess some specific economic factors (quantity of the revenues from tourism, cost vs. benefits in advertisement and promotions and other marketing tools, etc.).

Conclusions

The decision makers have become more assertive and interested in international visibility. As a result, they become committed to programs that include international marketing techniques, namely nation branding, and place branding. It became recurrent that a strong nation brand is listed as the means that help to empower a country's presence on the world map. The GCC in the wake of acquiring more richness has not neglected this reality. Governments are often behind the nation branding processes, even though they collaborate with other stakeholders. The GCC decision makers have initiated different measures, which can be translated into a nation branding process that resulted in regional differentiation. The existing literature (Nicolescu, Cojanu, Popescu, & Drăghici, 2007) shows that whoever shows resilience in the process of nation branding, manages to yield results. In addition, nation branding is about rendering some important aspects of the nation robust and visible. The concept is met with increasing receptiveness in international circles, as it mingles international marketing, public diplomacy, and international communication strategies. It is also true that a sound nation branding represents a tool that could limit the reputational risks emerging from events exposed negatively and excessively in the media (a feature of the interconnected, globalized world). Many leaders in the Western world (Diaconescu, Nicolescu, & Pânzaru, 2007) are well aware of the importance of branding a country' assets. Marketing practices have pervaded the field of public diplomacy. In addition, nation branding may be extremely profitable for the world of emerging countries, offering them a stimulus in the competitive global marketplace.

The paper evaluates the efforts made in a certain period of time and the strategies used by two emergent nations, namely the UAE and Qatar, making use of Anholt's (2006) model for nation branding in the assessment. It notes that one of the main challenges is to converge the process of nation branding with nation building and public diplomacy. These objectives are occasionally inconsistent; however, a coherent communication strategy is always needed, in terms of images/ messages/ projects (Ham, 2008). The prominent messages circulated by both the UAE and Qatar is that they are available for international trade; they welcome tourists and investors akin, as they operate according to the rules of the global marketplace, offering competitive advantages.

Anholt (2005a) explained that the interest for innovations and freshness makes the difference in nation branding. All the GCC states, including the UAE and Qatar, have scant resources except for hydrocarbon resources (oil and gas); hence, the arduous competition for finding the diversification niches. During the nation branding process, the competitive level can be summarized, as follows: whoever precedes with formulating a distinctive strategy (Dubai is seemingly the winner) becomes a leader that also holds the competitive identity advantage, an important edge over the others. This is why Dubai has become the flagship of branding in the GCC region and the regional initiator of change, giving a stimulus to the overall process, notably to Abu Dhabi and Doha (Qatar's ulterior initiatives having been discussed above).

Further discussions and prospects for examination

Nation branding could be examined in a prospective work from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating both international marketing elements and foreign policy' analysis. The UAE and Qatar provide with a very good pattern in this sense, as their nation building process almost coincides with their own processes of nation branding. In conclusion, this paper delivers a starting point for the evaluation of branding processes in the extended Middle East region. It can ulterior transform into an in-depth examination of the region. In the Middle East, many places remain unknown, or they are infamous (as an aftereffect of the "*war on terror*" that conjoined the Middle East with terrorism). The bias can prejudice the opportunities one can encounter when we examine the plentiful resources in the Arab Gulf region. Averse to what one would expect, the UAE and Qatar illustrate a positive facet of the region and the great potential that can be unlocked through a competent process of nation branding.

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[1] a society ruled by a sheikh, typical to the Arabian Peninsula