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When satire is serious: how political cartoons impact a country's brand

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This article examines the case of Italy's Mr. Berlusconi's indiscretions and the effect his scandals have played in the decline of the Italian national brand. National brands are the perceived added value that international consumers place on that country and its products and services. An analysis of recent political cartoons will provide insight into international attitudes regarding Mr. Berlusconi's political and social actions. From this investigation, the authors conclude that a country's political leader's negative image and reputation can have a large negative impact on national brand equity abroad. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

From 'Sparkling Korea', 'Timeless Tunisia', 'Incredible India', and 'Amazing Thailand' to 'your very own Ireland', and Greece's 'the true experience', national brands have become key motivators for tourists, investors, migrants, and worldwide consumers of national exports seeking something a bit different. Nations have become much more than the mere colorful drawings in an elementary school atlas (van Ham, 2001). Every country possesses a national brand, which encompasses the political, cultural, historical, geographical, metrological, and financial aspects of that nation's people and land. The rewards of this branding, as with other forms of branding, are immense in attracting 'consumers' of that brand (van Ham, 2001; Anholt, 2002; Buer, 2002).

However, there are risks associated with creating a brand, as there is an unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand will be respected. This leaves the owner of brand exposed to considerable reputational risk (van Ham, 2001; Buer, 2002). A specific brand value or brand equity is being constantly affected by its respective firm's

actions. This is due to a better-educated and informed pool of consumers demanding a higher level of corporate social responsibility and ethics (cf. Egri and Ralston, 2008). Nations must be vigilant to be good stewards of their international reputation and must remember, 'brand promises are not made in isolation' (Buer, 2002). It has become increasingly difficult for countries that have poor reputations or no reputation to remain competitive in today's globalized world (van Ham, 2001).

This article first discusses national branding and caricature theories then contributes to the literature by applying these theories to the case of the infamous Italian premier, Mr. Berlusconi. It does this by first linking a nation's brand with its politics then by applying that link to the Berlusconi controversy. From there, the authors examine how cartoons can affect public sentiment and effect political action. Finally, the authors discuss some implications for both managers of nation brands and private brands.

NATION BRANDING

What is in a nation brand?

Nation brand refers to the identity of a particular country as perceived by an international audience

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(Anholt, 2005). Throughout this paper, we also refer to it as a country brand and a national brand. Brands are considered a marketers' main tool to differentiate products and services. The American Marketing Association's definition of a brand is a name, a term, a sign, a symbol, a design, or a combination of these intended to identify the goods and services of one seller from the competition. Successful brands are often extended to include new offerings in the hopes that the brand association will speed up consumers' information processing and learning (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Brands also have emotional and social values to consumers (cf. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Brands create value for consumers and investors in the form of brand equity, which includes intangible assets such as customer preference, performance, social image, and trustworthiness, as well as more tangible assets such as financial gains appraised from increases in firm value (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Shimp *et al.* (1993) coin the term country equity in reference to the emotional value consumers attach to a product or a service from a particular country. These brands assist consumers to evaluate purchases according to their own intrinsic values. Therefore, a nation brand may either add or subtract perceived value from a purchase.

A country's image can affect the internal political, social, and economic stability. If properly managed, this image can benefit the country in all sectors by becoming a lasting vehicle for goodwill and by encouraging forgiveness in difficult times. Well-branded countries can reduce the impact of negative political and economic events, and stakeholders can be more willing to forgive or forget negative events or news. This is valid both in the institutional relations with other countries and in the business environment. Moreover, countries that are branded well recover faster in the eyes of stakeholders than badly branded one (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Garbacz Rawson, 2007). When a product, a service, or a corporation is identified with a positive country brand, it has a better chance of receiving a price premium for its offerings, preference over other brands, and longevity (Garbacz Rawson, 2007). Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) find that 'national images are powerful stereotypes that influence behavior in all types of target markets' (p. 298).

Like a frail product brand, a weak nation brand leads to reduced differentiation, unclear meaning, and low brand recall in the minds of travelers, investors, and business people. Country brands create strong and positive impressions that generate desire and demand. All of this affects a nation's ability to stand out and take advantage of growth opportunities. A strong country brand is more than the sum of its parts as it makes people's lives better

through creating a strong emotional connection with potential tourists, investors, international students, and business people (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Despite crisis, economic downturn, political upheaval, and public relations problems, countries with a clear identity, consistent values, and a lasting heritage continue to perform at the highest level (Bojan, 2008).

Nation brands are long-lasting reminders of past deeds both good and bad. The Olympic games had a tremendous positive economic, political, and social impact on the national brand of Korea (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 1993). The 1989 events that took place in Tiananmen Square also had profound negative influence on China's national brand (Brunner *et al.*, 1993). Samsung's place as the leading manufacturer for many electronics and Nokia's position as the leading telecommunications firm can both build nationalism within Korean and Finnish citizens, respectively, and also improve their national image. Country brands can assist large national firms expand into international markets, which citizens derive a sense of national pride (Dinne, 2004). Nation branding is even important with the delicate situation between China and Japan, as China currently has an active public diplomacy campaign to increase its brand status within Japan, albeit with limited results (Dinne and Lio, 2010). A strong, positive nation brand can bring value to the country's citizens, investors, tourists, students, business people, and government.

Looking deeper into nation branding

The existing literature on nation branding tends to be more sector or country specific, as well as more empirical than theoretical (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Place or country branding is receiving more consideration with a growing number of researchers trying to ground it in theory (Anholt, 2002), with Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) model of nation branding leading the way. Their model identifies that a country's brand is influenced by tourism, people, culture and heritage, investment, immigration, foreign and domestic policy, and export brands. The perception of the identity outlined by the model forms a nation's brand for the international audience (Figure 1).

After observing international political events, Anholt (2007) asserts that politics is the key influencer of nation branding. Positive change will happen only if a government has a clear vision of the country's image and can successfully manage that vision. A national political brand is a part of the more complex nation brand and consists of the perceptions of a country's political decisions and values and is most often issued and communicated by the political leaders of the country. Within the model, the political aspect appears to carry more weight than the other influences. Just

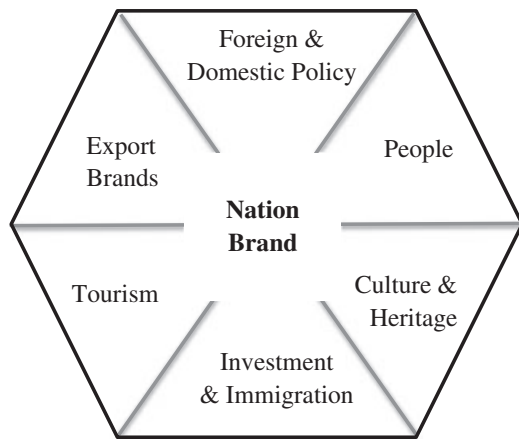


Figure 1 Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) nation-branding hexagon. Adapted from Anholt and Hildreth (2004)

as governments communicate with their citizens, governments communicate to foreign audiences, aiming to accomplish an international positive and productive image. A policy-oriented competitive identity strategy differs from a nation-branding strategy in that it is more focused on promotional techniques, as usually seen in tourism campaigns. An effective nation-branding strategy is not centered on promotional techniques because these are useful only after the political strategy has been implemented (Anholt, 2007).

A vital part of both planning the national brand vision and implementing the branding strategy is involving stakeholders, including government and citizen institutions, to insure consistency across all facets of exposure (Anholt, 2007). Moreover, brand ambassadors, such as political leaders, are the main source of information about a country for international audiences. Thus, their actions and behaviors have immense implications for national image (Olins, 2003; Anholt and Hildreth, 2004).

Political leaders attract more media attention than business, export brands, or tourism, because of the immediate implications of what they say or do (van Ham, 2001; Garbacz Rawson, 2007). The frequency of messages and impressions across the mass media keeps political leaders in the minds of people around the world. Therefore, political leaders expose their countries to global audiences and promote travel or investment in their respective nation (Garbacz Rawson, 2007).

MR. BERLUSCONI'S EFFECT ON THE ITALIAN BRAND

The exploits of Silvio Berlusconi

Silvio Berlusconi is a successful Italian entrepreneur and the current Prime Minister of Italy. He is worth over US\$11 billion and is the 37th richest man in the

world (Kroll and Miller, 2010). Mr. Berlusconi is currently Italy's second longest-serving Prime Minister, having held this position on three separate occasions from 1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006, and currently since 2008. He leads the *Popolo della libertà* political movement, which is a center-right party he co-founded in 2009. He has some control over the media, as he directly owns three of the most influential private television channels, the biggest group of Italian newspapers, as well as indirectly controlling two out of three public television channels (Kroll and Miller, 2010). Moreover, his family owns one of the top European publishing houses, Mondadori.

Mr. Berlusconi has had a long history of criminal allegations and conflicts with the Italian Justice system (see Table 1 for a complete list). He has been accused of crimes, including mafia collusion, tax fraud, false accounting, corruption, and bribery of police officers and judges. Berlusconi is currently facing several cases in Italian courts (Kroll and Miller, 2010). The judiciary was forced into staying a few cases due to changes in laws enforced directly by Berlusconi's parliamentary majority (Castelnuovo, 2009; Agnew, 2011). There are several cases pending that he is trying to quell by again creating a law that suspends the legal processes for political figures (Stewart, 2008), which contravenes the principles of the rule of law and the *magna carta*. He has tried three times in 7 years to create this immunity law, but so far, it has yet to pass the constitutional court (Agnew, 2011).

In his defense, Mr. Berlusconi claims that this situation amounts to

...judicial persecution, against which I am proud to resist, and the fact that my resistance and sacrifice will give the Italians a more fair and efficient judicial system makes me even more proud (Brown, 2008).

He also claims that he had to endure '...577 visits by police, 2,500 court hearings, and 174 million Euros in lawyers' bills paid by me' (Brown, 2008). Moreover, the Italian premier attests that many in the judicial system have taken an interest in defaming him '...with the aim of subverting the votes of the Italian people' (Brown, 2008). Mr. Berlusconi's image problems do not stop with his public life. There have been a number of private scandals regarding divorce, extra-marital and underage affairs (Pisa, 2009). Evidence shows that Mr. Berlusconi has attempted time and time again to subvert justice through his legislative majority and the power afforded to him through this office.

This political influence on a country brand is evident in Italy with Mr. Berlusconi's premiership and misdeeds. The authors used the 2010 edition of the FutureBrand Country Brand Index (CBI) to evaluate the Italian national brand. This annual study examines and ranks country brands based on

Table 1 A history of the legal troubles of Mr. Berlusconi

Status of trial	Allegation
Acquittals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lodo Mondadori: bribery of judges (acquitted due to SoL) •All Iberian 1: 23-billion-lira bribe to Bettino Craxi via an offshore bank account code-named All Iberian (first court sentence: 2 years 4 months jail; appeal: acquitted due to SoL) •Bribery of the Guardia di Finanza (1st sentence: prison 2 years 9 months; appeal: acquitted due to SoL for three charges and the 4th charge was unsubstantiated) •Massonic lodge trial: false testimony (guilty—offered amnesty) •Lentini affair: accounting fraud (not guilty—change in Accounting Fraud Law) •Macherio Estates 1: accounting fraud (amnesty offered following the 1992 Fiscal Remission Law) •Macherio Estates 2: embezzlement, tax evasion, accounting fraud (acquitted due to SoL in all charges) •All Iberian 2: accounting fraud (acquitted—new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government) •SME-Ariosto 2: accounting fraud (acquitted—new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government) •Medusa Cinema: accounting fraud (acquitted—minor amount compared with wealth) •SME-Ariosto 1: bribes to the judge Renato Squillante (acquitted) •Television rights: accounting fraud, tax evasion, embezzlement (acquitted)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Statute of Limitations (SoL) •Amnesty •Legislative acquittal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Other acquittals
Stayed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Fininvest 1: accounting fraud and embezzlement (archived—new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government) •Fininvest 2: accounting fraud (archived—new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government) •Anti-competition behavior: division of publicity between RAI and Fininvest television giants •Drug trafficking •Tax bribery on the pay TV •Conspiracy concerning the 1992–1993 slaughters •Collusion to money launder with mafia, together with Mr. Dell’Utri
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Stayed for legislative reasons •Other stayed trials
Ongoing trials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Corruption of justice: bribe to the lawyer David Mills •Corruption of senators of the Romano Prodi government camp (trial transferred from Naples to Rome)

Source: www.ricercagiuridica.com/cassazione/.

FutureBrand’s proprietary research, which is similar to Anholt and Hildreth’s (2004) model. It incorporates elements of tourism, heritage, and culture, which are good for business, quality of life, and value system. The sixth edition of CBI incorporates a global quantitative study with 3400 international business and leisure travelers from 13 countries on all five continents. These data are then qualified by in-depth expert focus groups that took place in 14 major metropolitan areas around the world. The overall country brand score is calculated using FutureBrand’s hierarchical decision model, which measures the overall country brand performance in the following areas: awareness, familiarity, associations, preference, consideration, decision/visitation, and advocacy. Additionally, this ranking reflects the extent to which a nation exports its values through its iconic brands.

As the 2010 CBI reveals (see Table 2 for the top 25 country brand ranking), economic performance is also vital to brand strength. For example, Greece’s

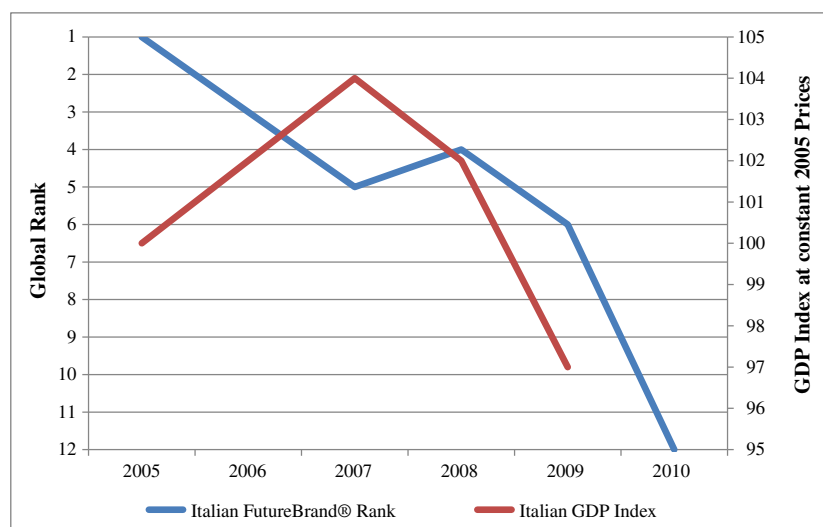
2010 22nd rank has fallen eight positions since 2009 and 16 positions since 2005. This can be seen as largely due to recent economic strife and liquidity concerns and ineffective leadership (Byron, 2010). Italy has also faced economic troubles in the global recession, which may have influenced the Italian position; however, the authors argue that economics cannot explain Italy’s lapse, as most, if not all, ranked countries suffered severe economic strife. The inaugural report in 2005 listed Italy as the first nation brand globally. Things are very different now, as the 2010 report listed Italy as 12, 11 places down in 5 years (Figure 2).

Italy fared much better in terms of heritage and culture, which it placed first (Table 3). But even in terms of tourism, Italy ranks 15th only despite increased efforts to boost tourism over the last few years with high-profile domestic and foreign advertising initiatives, even featuring Silvio Berlusconi himself. However, this is set against a backdrop of sustained criticism of Mr. Berlusconi’s premiership (Poggioli, 2009). The FutureBrand 2010 CBI finds

Table 2 2010 FutureBrand overall top 25 country brand ranking

2010 rank	2009 change	Country	2010 rank	2009 change	Country
1	+1	Canada	14	-4	Spain
2	+2	Australia	15	-2	Singapore
3	0	New Zealand	16	+3	Maldives
4	-3	USA	17	-5	Ireland
5	+6	Switzerland	18	-3	Bermuda
6	+1	Japan	19	+4	Denmark
7	-2	France	20	+8	Austria
8	+8	Finland	21	+5	Mauritius
9	-1	UK	22	-8	Greece
10	+11	Sweden	23	-5	India
11	-2	Germany	24	+1	Iceland
12	-6	Italy	25	+6	the Netherlands
13	+9	Norway			

Source: FutureBrand (www.futurebrand.com).



Source: FutureBrand (www.futurebrand.com) and UN Data (data.un.org)

Figure 2 Italian performance in overall FutureBrand Rank & GDP Index (2005–2010).

Table 3 Examining Italy's FutureBrand 2010 country brand ranking performance

Top 25 country brand index categories	Italy's rank	Included attributes
Tourism	15th	Attractions, resort and lodging options, food, and value for money
Heritage and culture	1st	Authenticity, history, art and culture, and natural beauty
Good for business	Not reported*	Investment climate, skilled workforce, advanced technology, and regulatory environment
Quality of life	Not reported*	Education, healthcare, standard of living, job opportunity, safety, and livability
Value system	Not reported*	Political freedom, environmental friendliness, stable legal environment, tolerance, and freedom of speech

*Only the top 25 countries reported.

Source: FutureBrand (www.futurebrand.com).

negative feelings toward Italy and its political leader, which are increasingly strong and suggest that they may be starting to affect other parts of the country's image.

POLITICS OF CARTOONS

Like urban graffiti, jokes, and other genres of popular culture, cartoons challenge the ways we

accept official images as real and true. Cartoons are static form of caricature, which in turn is a form of satire (Bal *et al.*, 2009). A cartoon is a drawing, representational or symbolic, that makes a satirical, witty, or humorous point. A cartoon exposes viewers to a point of view for or against its subject, either by presenting it as a figure worthy of sympathy or by distorting it into a figure of ridicule (Streicher, 1965, 1967; Alba, 1967; Coupe, 1967). Condensing history, culture, and social relationships within a single frame, a cartoon can re-contextualize events and evoke reference points in ways that a photograph or even a film cannot (Gombrich, 1963). Cartoons are often a humorous commentary on recent events, which allows the spectator to easily elaborate on the image and develop an opinion on the subject (Bal *et al.*, 2009). Political cartoons are often an outlet of opposition or criticism, which are used to propel social issues to the general public's attention.

Newspaper and magazine editors use cartoons to portray a specific issue because of their simplicity in reader comprehension. Readers can understand their message faster than any political commentaries or editorials. Clever cartoons are often the motivator for a consumer to actually read editorial viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs. Editorial cartoons have an increased chance of becoming viral and therefore usually have wider circulation, a longer life, and a greater influence than written editorials among the public (Duus, 2001). The purpose of political cartoons is not necessarily just to inform but also to make people reflect on current events and issues about politics, government, and society. Artists aim to attack an idea, a person, or a party in the hopes that the image will inspire a laugh or a smile at the expense of the subject (Duus, 2001).

Bal *et al.* (2009) develop an integrated theory, grounded in literature, to explain how cartoons work. Effective cartoons must process exaggerated elements of sympathy, a gap between the image and reality, and either material or ideological differentiation. The authors use this framework to analyze the following Berlusconi cartoons.

CARTOONING ITALY'S BERLUSCONI

The two cartoons discussed in the following section represent a summary of the relevant facts and aspects of the recent affairs of Mr. Berlusconi. The authors decided to examine two British cartoons for several reasons: First, we were looking for cartoons that were available and seen by a large number of people; and second, they had to discuss the same subject. Having two British cartoons satisfy both requirements. British newspapers have a tradition of satire cartoons that is appreciated by the readers. The decision to have cartoons from the same country strengthens the message. We found several cartoons about Mr. Berlusconi and the sex scandal he is facing, and we chose the two with the higher visibility based on readership of the publications where they were printed. Both images appeared in well-regarded international newspapers in December 2010; thus, the authors assume that they are representative and provide a glimpse of how international audiences view Mr. Berlusconi's recent actions.

The Times' cartoonist, Mr. Morten Morland, captioned the first cartoon 'onwards with confidence' (Figure 3). It was published the day after Mr. Berlusconi won a confidence vote in the Italian Parliament. In the image, Mr. Berlusconi is riding a



Figure 3 Onwards with confidence! Source: Morland, 2010

thin raft, shaped like Italy, and painted with the colors of the Italian flag, which is sailing through fast brown colored waters. He is sporting a helmet made from a pink bra and is not wearing any trousers while hugging two barely covered young ladies. His raft is attached to slightly submerged boat further upstream, which bears a sword and the scales of justice.

This cartoon has several elements that give the viewer an indication of how British people perceive Italy and its leader. It seems that Italy is in deep trouble from this scene because the outline of the country and its justice system are nearly submerged in the brown, fast-moving river. The future looks bleak as Italy struggles to survive the economic crisis with its Mr. Berlusconi steering the country and its justice institutions blindly into the rapids of uncertainty. The cartoon's depiction of Mr. Berlusconi with two young women and wearing their undergarments shows that his scandals and affairs that rocked Italian politics are well-known to the international audience. Moreover, Mr. Berlusconi's Italy will not float long as the impending conclusion of his story seems near.

The second cartoon is from *The Independent* by Dave Brown and was published the day before the confidence vote. It is titled 'Silvio Berlusconi: the leader who has eroded Italian democracy', which may be even more caustic than the image. In this cartoon, a battered, trouser-less Mr. Berlusconi seems to be tripping on a mess of sexy women's lace undergarments. He is balanced precariously on a broken leg in a cast the shape of Italy, and it seems he will fall down the stairs of either the Italian Parliament or perhaps a courthouse. It seems that the Italian Prime Minister's private and public life are finally bringing his story to an inglorious end (Figure 4).

Despite increased efforts to boost Italy's international profile and tourism by using prominent domestic and foreign advertising initiatives, fairs, and exhibitions, Italy continues to see its national brand decline in global rank in 2010. This effort by the Italian government features advertisements in which Mr. Berlusconi is displayed in an attempt to improve his stained image. This national brand decline is set against a backdrop of sustained criticism of Silvio Berlusconi's premiership and the financial difficulties the country has faced in the global economic crisis, such as a drop in purchasing power, fierce student strikes, and domestic social tensions. However, the misguided values of the Italian leader seem to be internationally perceived as carrying into vital elements of Italian politics, business, tourism, and culture as reflected in the decline of the Italian national brand since Mr. Berlusconi took power in 2008, regardless of his past successes.

CONCLUSIONS

Loyal consumers often forgive a brand's indiscretions but only to a point (Hart *et al.*, 1990). A strong national brand can provide a country additional leeway to weather short-term difficulties that hamper both domestic and foreign public perceptions. However, the degree to which consumers look the other way seems to have its limits as well, as previously illustrated in the Italian example.

The national brand spirit will depend as much on citizens as ambassadors of values and culture as it does on specific locations or destinations. In order to increase national brand value, a nation's leaders must not only manage the country's government but also become ambassadors and promoters of the nation or be taunted, as Berlusconi is, by the



Figure 4 Silvio Berlusconi: the leader who has eroded Italian democracy. Source: Brown, 2010

cartoonists of the political press for their misdeeds. A strong national brand will earn rewards both in the public and private sectors by increasing gross domestic product, through higher sales, exports goods, tourism, and taxes, as well as an improved sense of national pride.

A national-branding strategy is grounded in the vision of political leaders, especially the head of government or state. This vision needs to provide an environment that supports improvement of the six points outlined by Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) hexagon. As the Italian case has shown, the political and even social actions of government leaders can have significant effects on the perceived national brand equity.

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