

Amidst a global pandemic, how will brand Singapore renew itself?

Reputation is precious. Top talent and hot money gravitate to the most attractive, respected countries. For a nation as small and as young as Singapore, its brand is its most valuable asset, enabling its stunning ascent from Third World to First World in just 30 years.

Today, in the face of deep global displacements exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, how might Singapore refresh its brand once more? This third edition of Koh Buck Song's classic study of brand Singapore delves into the challenges and opportunities of a new world order, and analyses developments at home including the 2020 General Election and the "Passion Made Possible" country brand.

"A must-read for all policy-makers and business leaders. The secret of Singapore's success is precisely uncovered by Koh Buck Song."
— YASU OTA, Nikkei Asian Review, Japan

"Koh is a writer of style and substance on country branding. His book is a must-read for anyone interested in place branding on a national scale."
— PROF RUTH RENTSCHLER, University of South Australia Business School, Australia

KOH BUCK SONG has worked on the nation branding of Singapore in various capacities, from promoting foreign investment to enhancing liveability and projecting soft power. As a country brand adviser, he has spoken extensively on brand Singapore internationally, including in Cambridge (Massachusetts), Boston, Chicago, London, Oxford, Tokyo, Tahiti, Phuentsholing (Bhutan), Shanghai and Melbourne.

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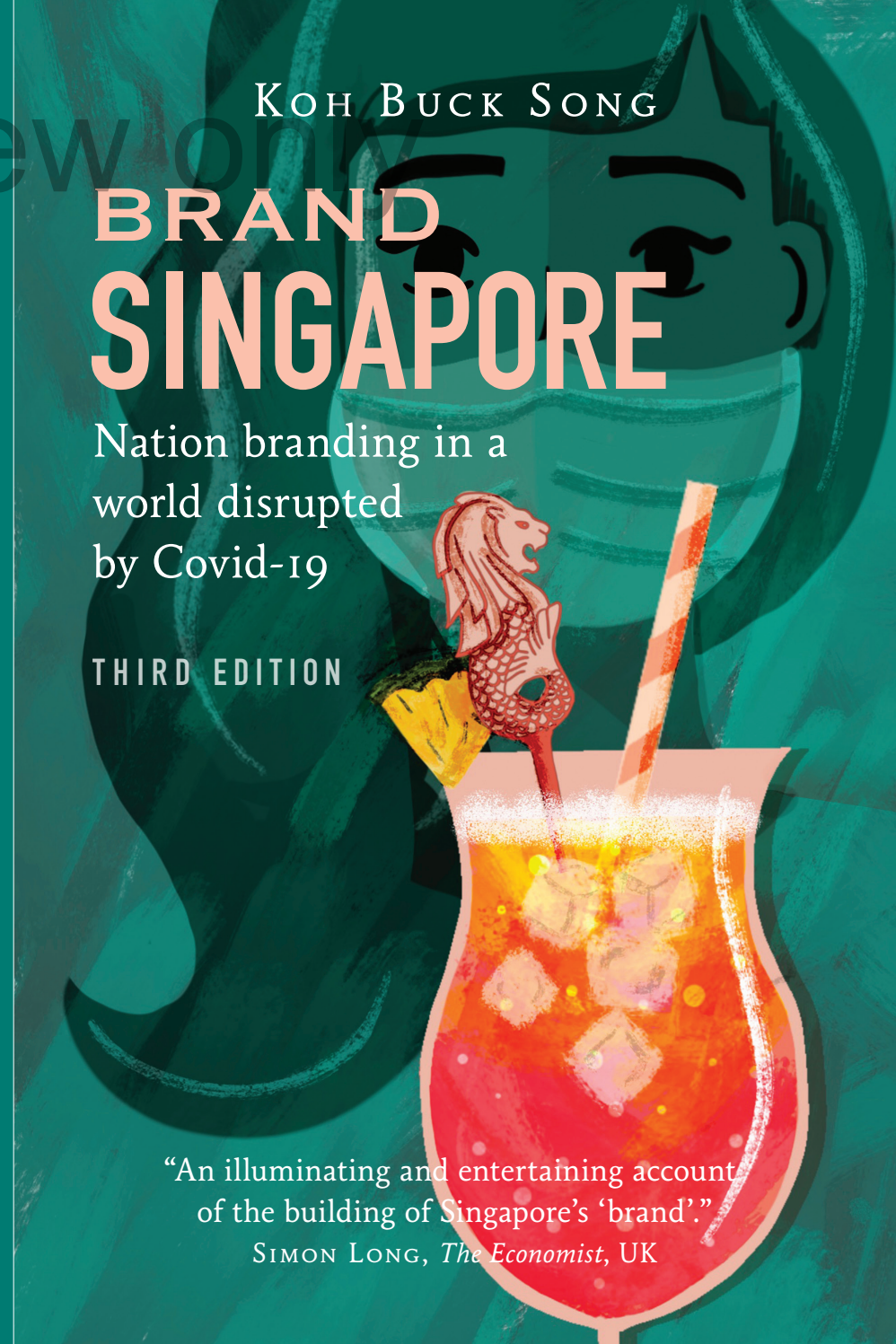
BRAND SINGAPORE

Nation branding in a world disrupted by Covid-19

THIRD EDITION

"An illuminating and entertaining account of the building of Singapore's 'brand'."

SIMON LONG, *The Economist*, UK



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Praise for *Brand Singapore*

“Few governments have moulded their country’s image as consciously and diligently as Singapore’s. Koh Buck Song has written an illuminating and entertaining account of the building of Singapore’s ‘brand’, an effort so successful that its politicians sometimes seem to confuse their country with a Fortune 500 company.”

SIMON LONG

The Economist, United Kingdom

“Koh is a writer of style and substance on country branding. His book is a must-read for anyone interested in place branding on a national scale, especially in the Asian region.”

PROFESSOR RUTH RENTSCHLER

University of South Australia Business School, Australia

“A must-read for all policy-makers and business leaders, who are struggling to survive in the ever-intensifying global competition. Building the brand of a nation is not magic. There are fine-tuned mechanisms and strong volition behind the front stage. The secret of Singapore’s success is precisely uncovered by Koh Buck Song.”

YASU OTA

Nikkei Asian Review, Japan

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“Koh’s well-documented story (on Singapore) offers inspiring ideas... it is almost a declaration of love to place branding by a prominent practitioner in the field.”

GRUPO TASO
Place branding consultants, Spain

“Koh provides a highly illuminating account of Singapore’s nation branding. The acknowledgement of the political environment within which nation branding occurs is a particularly welcome contribution to the place branding literature.”

DR KEITH DINNIE
Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice (Routledge), UK

“A wonderful way to describe how to create excitement for a country, define its spirit, and sell its promises.”

DR RAFARAVAVITAFIKA RASATA
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Madagascar

“Beyond telling Singapore’s brand story in such a clear and easy-to-read book, Koh has managed to take readers into a journey that conciliates core concepts from the academic shores of place making, place branding and place marketing strategies, with the practitioner’s trails.”

DANIEL VALVERDE BAGNARELLO
Nation Brand Director, Costa Rica

“An important contribution to the discipline and research field of nation branding. Koh’s book illustrates the central role nation branding can play in long-term economic development, and outlines how Singapore’s clear nation branding strategy has been core to the city-state’s transformation over the last 50 years.”

JONATHAN MCCLORY
The Soft Power 30 index, UK

“Comprehensive and well-researched, giving readers insight into the mechanisms and multifaceted nature of Singapore’s nation branding... Koh’s enlightening account truly expands notions of Singapore beyond the strict regulations, stable environment and economic prowess that it is most known for.”

RACHEL CHAN
Center on Public Diplomacy,
University of Southern California, USA

“A fascinating account of brand Singapore’s imaginative campaigns and visionary concepts shaping the country’s identity and image.”

FLORIAN KAEFER
The Place Brand Observer, Switzerland

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Brand Singapore

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**BRAND
SINGAPORE**

THIRD EDITION

**Nation Branding in a World
Disrupted by Covid-19**

KOH BUCK SONG

For review only

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For Dora,
whose brand of zest for life
enriches Singapore,
even as it extends far beyond

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INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC that surfaced in late 2019 has turned the world upside-down. By the end of August 2020, this coronavirus strand had already claimed more than 24 million known cases, and more than 820,000 deaths worldwide. The global economy, totally upturned, will take years to recover. But the fundamentals of place branding have maintained their centre of gravity. When human wellbeing is being washed aside by relentless tsunamis of asymptomatic infections, and foreign aid, international collaboration and most travel are being kept ashore by waves of protectionism and currents of deglobalisation, anyone venturing out must tread water more carefully, and try to swim towards the dry land of safe, welcoming and trustworthy country brands.

Reputation is precious, now more than ever. Of all earthly possessions, your brand is the most valuable thing you could have for moving up in the world – whether as a person, company or country. Without a good CV, you would not be entrusted with a high-level job. For businesses, success rests on corporate standing and customer support, both of which start with having a good name. As for countries, only the most attractive and respected places have the power to draw top talent and hot money. With country brands, larger nations have some room for manoeuvre – they could even take a few knocks and still proceed unscathed. But for small states, a nation brand is all the more valuable because, in some cases, a good reputation is the main asset – perhaps the only one that can be built up with human effort – to attract tourism and other inflows of people, goods and services.¹

All these realities of country branding and brand-building are being challenged even more today, in the light of global developments since the start of the 2010s, and now, all the more in a world totally disrupted by Covid-19, with the lifeblood of place brand-building – the movement of people and goods, cultural events, enjoyment of food, entertainment and other cultural products – all but halted. Even before the pandemic, the global village was already fragmenting. Countries that used to lead in global rankings of country brands have seen their nation brands damaged, as their politics and societies have become more divided and divisive. The two prime examples of this were both seen to emerge in the same

year of 2016, in Britain after the Brexit vote in the June 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, and in the United States after the controversial election of President Donald Trump in November 2016, leading to the whole country being referred to by *Time* magazine as the “divided states of America”.² Under the administration of President George W. Bush from 2000 to 2008, the USA’s divisive effect was external, leaving the world more fractured, mainly because of its hardline Middle East foreign policy. Now, internal forces from within threaten to tear the country itself apart. The first term of the Trump administration saw the USA stumbling to the brink of civil war, exacerbated by the politicisation of public health and the fallout from the rash of Covid-19 cases and deaths, and the Black Lives Matter protests.

Across the world, the socio-political forces of extremism and populism have come to the fore in individual countries in an unprecedented way. At the same time, the accompanying developments of withdrawal from some key aspects of globalisation, including greater protectionism and curbs on trade and immigration – leading to an inevitable drag on individual mobility, tourism and investment – have transformed the global context in which nation brands can assert themselves and compete. Singapore is an open trading nation, with its trade more than three times the size of its gross domestic product, one of the world’s highest ratios. A rules-based global trading system, based on respect for the rule of law and international norms, is essential to its growth. Having

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a strong brand is vital to its relations with trading partners.

In the field of nation branding and brand-building, Singapore continues to be a fascinating case study. By consciously creating and cultivating a country brand, the island – geographically small at just over 720 sq km, but internationally influential beyond its physical size – pulled itself up from next to nothing to become Asia’s forerunner in the league of leading nations. For example, in the 2019 ranking of the Country Brand Index, a global survey of 75 countries’ reputations by the brand agency FutureBrand, Singapore held its own as a representative of Asia, being ranked 18th overall, second in Asia after Japan (ranked number 1 globally). In the sub-category of most influential cities, Singapore kept its position at 12th place. The republic’s relatively high placings are due, in large part, to a unique Singapore-style brand guardianship – unusual in the way the country’s brand is shaped for its own people as well as in the way it is displayed to the world. This book assesses this remarkable brand journey, as well as the challenges for the future in a new world order.

Chapter 1 explains the concept of nation branding, and positions Singapore’s global standing in this space. Terms like “brand equity” and “brand ambassadors” are described. Following that, the nation branding of Singapore is examined through the three main spheres of society: the public, private and people sectors.

Chapter 2, on the government’s “visible hand” in nation branding, considers how the state plays the biggest role, as it

does in most other spheres of life in Singapore. This chapter reveals a measure of the extent of central coordination in terms of social, economic and political policy, thereby indirectly building and sustaining Singapore’s strongest brand attributes. Of the four sub-brands, the tourism brand journey is the best-known, culminating in the “Passion Made Possible” brand launched in 2017, the most effective concept thus far. Today, these forces are being adjusted, with the passing away in 2015 of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first prime minister, marking a shift into a new era of country brand-building without Mr Lee’s direct influence. The introduction of the reserved Presidency, a bold political move, positioned Singapore significantly in terms of global brand awareness of the multiculturalism that the city-state is admired for. The carefully curated Singapore Bicentennial year of 2019 marked another new phase, reaffirming key fundamentals of Singapore’s relationship with its colonial past, and opening up a whole new way of looking at the island’s 700 years of ancient heritage.

Chapter 3 looks at Singapore’s corporate sector, including some key characteristics of how business people and organisations behave in relation to the country brand, as well as how the private sector has produced some global winners, and asks: Can business players do more, and how?

Chapter 4 takes stock of contributions made by individual Singaporeans to the country brand in all forms of creativity, including playing with Singlish, from arts and

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entertainment to sports and diplomacy, as well as the activities and achievements that have attracted the attention of significant foreign audiences, sometimes without directly meaning to. The game-changing impact of the “SG50” year is examined – a whole year in 2015 of citizen engagement to celebrate Singapore’s golden jubilee of independence. For external audiences, the Hollywood movie *Crazy Rich Asians* brought global brand affinity for Singapore to a whole new level, even as it sparked some soul-searching at home about minority representation.

Chapter 5 offers an analysis of the deeper meaning behind Singapore’s chief national icons, such as the Merlion, and argues for a more holistic and comprehensive way of thinking about the symbols that influence the country brand.

Chapter 6 follows with a critique of troublesome international perceptions that have stuck, and whether these “brand keloids” – enduring scars on the reputation – pose obstacles to brand-building. The extent of the “stickiness” of these negative perceptions is evaluated, especially the “nanny state” tag. On the socio-political aspect of brand Singapore, the general elections of 2011, 2015 and 2020 are discussed in relation to what they reveal about the nature of governance and of the agency of the electorate, which flesh out realities beyond most external preconceptions.

Chapter 7 assesses the case of the official nation branding project “The Spirit of Singapore” from the 2000s, and contemplates the future of Singapore as a country brand

against the backdrop of a world of deglobalisation that is becoming less open and welcoming in terms of trade, tourism, immigration and investment. Singapore’s fondness for maritime national metaphors and analogies is also discussed. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is explored, including the damage it has already caused, and the direct and indirect effects on the future of Singapore’s country branding.

Singapore’s traditional plus points of its brand attributes – clustered around efficiency and effectiveness – are well-known to those who admire them. Among this group are many people, whether from developing countries or the most advanced states, who have seen worse in their own backyards and look up to the Lion City. To what extent has nation branding accounted for the republic’s dramatic rise in more than five decades, over and above its many other “secrets of success”? And if a good name requires constant, conscious and coordinated cultivation, what are Singapore’s chances of continuing to do this, and moving up even higher in the world? Can it succeed in its ambition to be a leading global city? Has the very idea of a global city changed, with new questions being asked about globalisation itself, and now, with all the displacements brought by Covid-19? In the pursuit of progress, development and quality of life, could the method and manner of Singapore’s nation branding, in fact, be the most important secret of all?

FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

Once upon a country brand...

YOU KNOW THE TYPE: ask them to choose between two restaurants for dinner, and they hem and haw, and hem and haw. Their protestations range from the robustly courteous (“I really don’t mind; you choose...”) to the blatantly false (“I eat everything!”). Finally, you ask: “Okay, what if I were to put a gun to your head for a reply on the count of three, which one would you pick? Don’t hesitate, just say the first name that comes to mind.” If you’re lucky, you finally get an answer. That answer is due to branding.

That final selection draws on what is called, in the vocabulary of branding, “top-of-mind recall”. When a subject is mentioned, the first name that comes to mind is the one that has managed to connect and register most readily with the person making a decision. In the corporate branding industry, people are routinely gathered in focus groups and asked questions to test, for example, which brands they mention on the spur of the moment, and also to reveal what they instinctively think and feel about these brands. The brands most often cited without hesitation are those that have secured top place in the short-term memory of their target audiences. This process is called “brand recall” – and the even more valuable type of this data is “unaided brand recall”, when respondents are not prompted which option to select (for example, asking “Which restaurant do you think is best for steak?” with no options given). For any brand, attaining a high level of unaided brand recall gives a significant competitive advantage in that particular brand space. If you can get many people to think of your brand first before others, it means that the chances of your brand being picked in a buying decision are that much greater.

The value of branding

Branding, then, is the sum total of actions taken to shape the perception of something, someone or some location, so as to achieve and maintain top-of-mind awareness. It refers

to conscious and deliberate efforts to create and cultivate an image for a product, party, person or place. Advertising and public relations are the usual communications approaches employed, through platforms including the mainstream media, online social media and third-party endorsement.

In the branding process, assets and advantages are highlighted, and sometimes grossly exaggerated. At the same time, flaws and faults are set aside or even covered up. Branding can be very loud or very soft. It includes the most public and expensive proclamations, such as billboard ads for luxury consumer products – from limousines to lingerie – across the globe. Or, it can entail zero extra dollar cost, because branding also includes taking basic measures of self-improvement, such as a company getting its customer relations staff to do better based on user feedback and then informing customers about it using existing channels of communication.

A key difference between marketing and branding is that marketing deals with things that are more concrete, whereas branding is more abstract. Marketing usually involves applying hard power facets such as pricing and product quality, or offering discounts or freebies, trying to entice customers with material sweeteners. By contrast, branding is more concerned with promoting brand attributes – characteristics that other people can recognise and appreciate. Branding is about intangibles – for example, the very idea of Singapore – with a soft power approach to win attention and affection for brand awareness and affinity, so that other people know

your brand and like it, even if they may never pay any money to buy anything from you. Marketing highlights more superficial qualities, while branding seeks to grasp quintessential character. One way to tell whether an action is more marketing or branding is to see whether it has an easily measured quantitative key performance indicator (KPI) – if it does, it's probably more marketing than branding. Overall, branding is more holistic and comprehensive, and marketing is, in fact, a subset of branding.

And branding is not all about profit and sales. Branding can also be done – indeed, needs to be done – just as much by non-profit organisations. Often, the lack of impact in general of non-profit organisations in advancing their causes can be put down to lack of branding. The more people know of, and think well of, a group – for-profit or non-profit – the more likely they will support the cause it promotes. Some of this branding can be free advertising (at least with no immediate dollar cost) – increasingly an option through “viral marketing” via online social media. Some of it is good public relations, through doing things right and influencing others to recognise it and compliment you for doing it or refer others to you.

Most of the time, branding is an expensive business. Advertising space is costed on perceived value. The process goes like this: Talent is vital to create branding concepts to begin with; man-hours are then essential to execute those plans and make the branding come to life; and, hopefully, the returns should be more than worthwhile. Good branding is

worth paying for, if you consider that a reputation is the ultimate intangible asset, whether for one man or woman, or a huge global corporation, or a country or even a whole region. Multinational companies spend millions of dollars to construct and protect their corporate standing. Revenue, profit, growth, their very survival – all depend on this.

A brand is valuable because it takes a lot of effort to create, and also to preserve. Once damaged, a brand is very difficult to repair. As a corporate example, Enron is a brand-name that became impossible to use after the exposure of extensive accounting fraud brought down the energy company in 2001.¹ The collapse was all the more spectacular because Enron had built up a strong (but false) brand identity, for instance winning *Fortune* magazine's award for "most innovative company in America" for six years running until 2000. The earlier branding helped the company to become, in its heyday, the darling of the stock market and the international business media. But after its dramatic downfall, there was no hope of brand recovery.

Countries are not like companies

By contrast, countries are different from companies in more ways than one. First, "brand-building" is a closely related term to "branding" that applies more to a country brand than a commercial one. Brand-building can refer to actions to enhance a country brand that are less overt, broader in

scale and longer-term in perspective, and more often without, or with much less, upfront dollar cost. Sometimes, the effect can be subconscious, or even unconscious. For example, if a government buys an advertisement in a magazine to promote tourism, that is nation branding. If, at the same time, the government organises activities to engage citizens in events such as national celebrations of independence, that would be nation brand-building, if only indirectly. As flags are waved amidst the celebrations, some national values would be highlighted, and these are invariably the country's "brand attributes" displayed for the world to see.

Fostering national identity is key to enhancing the capacity of ordinary citizens to act as brand ambassadors for their countries, if only indirectly. Just as capitalism works through individuals being motivated in the first instance by the profit motive for personal gain, citizens who aspire to make a mark in the world (as a YouTube musician, for example) always add to the brand value of the countries they represent, whether they intend to do so or not, and in however small a way. Indeed, in the longer term, a place that seeks to be a global city would be much better-placed to achieve this goal if more people in that place understand what a nation brand is, have thought about the concept of nation branding, and have considered the possibility of their own contribution to the country brand. Such nation brand-building efforts led by the state also have an external dimension that involves public diplomacy – essentially winning friends

and influencing people in the international arena. A cocktail party for foreign diplomats is not what most people would call “branding”, but it is almost certainly part of “brand-building”. For convenience, in this book, the term “branding” will be used for short, most of the time, even when it sometimes is actually mostly “brand-building”.

Next, a country is much more multifaceted than any company, so that it is much more difficult for a country to have its brand completely destroyed. Even the most unattractive place has some redeeming feature. War-torn Afghanistan might currently rank near, or at the bottom of, all possible holiday destinations, but give it time and anything could happen, just as tourism and investment have returned to places previously ravaged by natural disaster, from hurricane-swept New Orleans to tsunami-hit Phuket. For nation branding, time can heal almost all wounds. In the Asian region, Japan offers one of the best examples of brand recovery, from the nadir of its World War II expansionism to the popularity today, across affluent Asia and elsewhere, of all things Japanese, from Tokyo’s Tsukiji market (before it relocated in 2018) to winter wonderland vacations in Hokkaido. Brand Japan regularly tops global rankings such as the Country Brand Index.

Conversely, for cities or countries, unlike corporations, it is more difficult to change names and start all over again. This is not to say that changing names is not attempted from time to time. Examples include a city like Bombay renaming itself Mumbai, or a country like Myanmar relocating its entire

capital from the heritage-rich Yangon to the remote Naypyidaw, a move that accentuated its negative branding of secrecy under a military junta government in the eyes of international observers.² But starting over is not as daunting as it might seem, at first. The many Eastern European nations that used to be part of the former Soviet Union were given a new lease of life with the demise of communism in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. For these new nations, the task of brand-building had to begin with working at dissociating themselves from any negative branding left over from the Soviet era.

Indeed, in the branding game, Russia, the nation most closely associated with the former Soviet mindset, is ironically the most successful among the former members of the Soviet Union in distancing itself from that past. First, it already had top-of-mind recall. Partly, Russia has more resources and the advantage of size. Also, it has a good springboard, building on its status as a BRICS country (part of the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa as the world’s five most promising up-and-coming economies³). In December 2010, Russia clinched another most valuable prize in nation branding platforms by winning the bid to host the soccer World Cup 2018. It drew in help from internationally well-known bid ambassadors such as national soccer team captain Andrey Arshavin, who at that time played for Arsenal Football Club in the English Premier League. At the same time, developments like Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and reports

of Russian interference in the 2016 US election have also moved Russia down a few notches in international estimation. Overall, however, Russia's success shows that countries are more resilient than corporations in branding.

Over a shorter time-span, the United States is a prominent recent example of the ups and downs that a country brand can go through. The USA's country branding was damaged during the Bush administration from 2000 to 2008, mainly due to actions taken for the "war on terror" in the Middle East, after the 9/11 attacks in the US in 2001. Brand America – the world's most powerful nation brand – was then rebuilt under President Barack Obama from 2008 to 2016, with a greater openness to the world, including a "pivot to Asia". But under Donald Trump, with all the missteps of the first term of his administration, with new signs every day of damaging brand attributes including withdrawal from global multilateralism, disregard of the rule of law, divisiveness, protectionism, racism and xenophobia, global perceptions of brand America have nose-dived further. By mid-2020, with the US leading the world in Covid-19 deaths and reeling from record job losses, brand America had sunk to a new low. In a much-quoted line, Fintan O'Toole of *The Irish Times* wrote: "The world has loved, hated and envied the US. Now, for the first time, we pity it."⁴

Brand recovery depends, to a large extent, on target audiences forgetting any negative branding in some measure. In the days before the Internet, there was at least amnesia to

fall back on. Except for the most heinous of crooks, one could be forgiven one's misdeeds if enough time had passed; branding could rebuild all but the most devastated reputations. Today, on the one hand, it is a lot harder to hope that people will forget, because stuff that is online stays there for much, much longer and, worst of all, anyone can just "Google it".

That said, on the other hand, this effect is tempered to a large degree by another phenomenon in the way that public opinion is formed in the world today. The information may be all out there, but most people are too lazy or too busy to do their own homework. People will look something up only if they are prompted to. Instead, what happens is that they come to depend – almost entirely in some cases – on habitual sources of information. This leads to the infamous "bubbles" in which more and more people live today. These "echo chambers", in which anything they might disagree with is blocked out, is where people get their sense of the outside world. Hearsay from friends, family, Facebook feeds and even fake news crowds out facts, in what has been called a new "post-truth" universe. Hence, people can stay generally ignorant of both good and bad developments. They can remain ignorant of new successes just as much as they can stay oblivious to fresh scandals.

Nonetheless, this qualification aside, online citations remain crucial for any brand, including nation brands. The things that are cited about any brand on the first few pages of a Google search get an unimaginable amount of "multiplier

effect” dissemination and reinforcement. Hence, getting good stuff about yourself onto the first page of a Google search has become paramount. The trick is how to get it there.

The Google trick

This Google trick – of influencing what is said about your brand on a Google search, or what comes up top in such searches – is even harder to pull off when it comes to nation branding. When anyone Googles your country, they can see whatever is relevant online, which adds up to what is sometimes called “digital identity”. For a country seeking to do better in the world, of the three basic economic factors of production, land can usually be increased only with land reclamation, ever since imperialism went out of fashion, in a manner of speaking. The other two factors – labour and capital – will come your way only if you not only do the right things, but also do the right branding.

Nation branding is the lifeblood of any nation; it helps to attract physical and financial investments, business, trade, tourism and other economic inputs, as much as it boosts talented human resources, permanent residents and new citizens. In the global “war” for talent, resources and financing, the nations that succeed are those that can best maximise their aspects of *competitive* advantage on top of *comparative* advantage.⁵ Comparative advantage – the economic concept that shows that every nation can benefit from free trade, if it

can produce goods and services at a lower opportunity cost than that of its trade partners – allows small economies like Singapore to make up for the disadvantages of being small. Singapore has leveraged this well, even without producing many goods and services itself, but mostly through effective management of transshipment. It has honed this advantage further over more than 200 years as an important international trading post since the arrival in 1819 of Sir Stamford Raffles and the East India Company from Britain. Singapore is among the nations with the most extensive networks of free trade agreements – 25 by August 2020: 14 bilateral pacts and 11 regional ones. As former Foreign Minister George Yeo famously said: “Our best strategy, both for Singapore and for Asean, is to be ‘completely promiscuous’ in our relationships.”⁶ But to stay perennially ahead of the global competition, something else is needed to go one step further and add yet another extra edge, for distinctive brand differentiation. Other things being equal, the nations that can do nation branding better will gain this added *competitive* advantage.

Singapore bought into this idea with gusto. Since becoming independent in 1965, the republic has done better than many other countries in this brand space, in terms of conscious and concerted branding – albeit mainly at the sub-brand level rather than one all-encompassing, centrally directed brand. This book examines Singapore’s track record in branding both internally and externally: who has tried to do what, to what effect, and where does the nation stand now

in its ambitions to be Asia's leading global city. Throughout, the focus will be on how successful the state's efforts have been in influencing brand reception by Singapore's main target audiences, which include the country's own people as well as people all over the world in key areas including trade, investment, tourism, immigration, cultural exchange and international relations.

As a country, you can be paradise on Earth, but it's no good at all if no one knows. The brand messages have to be conceptualised, put together and delivered well, and get through to the target audience. This is where a brand is different from an identity. Identity is character, a set of characterisations that flesh out someone or something. This becomes a brand only when effort is put in to communicate it to target audiences, and to sustain this messaging over time. The next level would be when audiences recognise and remember the brand. And the highest level would be universal top-of-mind brand awareness. Getting the brand messaging through to the audience is where most of the attention is focused in nation branding, as with all branding. And this is no simple task.

Brand affinity: How sweet is your brand?

After brand awareness comes brand affinity, the extent to which audiences not only know about a brand, but feel positively towards it. A man who is wooing a woman must first

make sure she knows his name, and then he must make her like him. Human minds are highly susceptible to influence, and yet, frustratingly hard to change. The brain works in strange ways, and often, the subconscious is thought of as being more powerful than the conscious mind. In most cultures, the sight of a snake immediately strikes fear in the beholder even when it is generally a harmless species, whereas a teddy bear evokes affection, even though real-life bears are more dangerous than cuddly. Mental models are what frame how people see and interpret reality.

This is why something like, say, wearing a turban is a symbol of social status in some cultures – as in large parts of Asia and the Middle East – but may be seen as strange and even suspicious outside that region, especially in a post-9/11 world.⁷ It would take a rebranding effort to alter perceptions of snakes and turbans. For turbans, a recent game-changing example is the very diverse 2015 Cabinet of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which was hailed as “the world's most Sikh Cabinet” with four Sikh members, when even India had only two Sikh Ministers.⁸

Conversely, brand-building messages are more effective when delivered by people with appearances that are considered attractive. Messages conveyed by physically attractive people – like a blonde bombshell or a handsome, tanned hunk or a salt-and-pepper-haired gentleman in a handsome suit – are perceived better by target audiences, even though the messages could be false or the messengers completely fake.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KOH BUCK SONG (family name: Koh) has been closely involved in the nation branding of Singapore for three decades, in various capacities. Most recently, he was a member of the Singapore Tourism Board's Marketing Advisory Panel for the "Passion Made Possible" brand concept launched in 2017.

As socio-political commentator, editor and journalist with *The Straits Times* (1988–99), he articulated and critiqued the Singapore brand for global and domestic audiences.

In strategic public communications since 1999, he has advised the Singapore government on nation branding, quality of life, economic strategy, foreign investment promotion, entrepreneurship, urban planning, leadership culture, national security, environmental stewardship, international media relations, market competition and policies on media, heritage, arts and culture. He served on many citizen panels such as the Singapore Arts Festival steering committee and as Deputy Chairman of the Censorship Review Committee 2010, after also serving on the committees of 1992 and 2003.

As head of global media relations and strategic planning for the Economic Development Board – a lead agency spearheading brand Singapore since 1961 – he led a team to create the "global entrepolis" brand concept for Singapore.



As head of public affairs (Southeast Asia) at communications consultancy Hill & Knowlton, his public-sector accounts included the global branding of Gardens by the Bay, Fusionopolis, National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Garden Festival.

Koh has also advised foreign governments on country brand-building, soft power and bilateral relations, and has spoken on Singapore's global image at international conferences at Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Chicago University in the USA; as well as at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government; Fudan University in Shanghai; and Melbourne and Deakin Universities in Melbourne. He was the keynote speaker at the City Nation Place Global Forum in London, and has also spoken at

the Japan Foundation in Tokyo on a visit as a cultural leader of Singapore; at a dialogue on nation building and branding at the Royal Institute for Governance & Strategic Studies in Phuentsholing, Bhutan; and at a Pacific Economic Cooperation Council seminar on sustainable tourism in Tahiti, French Polynesia.

As Adjunct Editor at the Centre for Liveable Cities of Singapore's Ministry of National Development, he authored numerous reports, including for the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum and the Young Leaders Symposium in Singapore and New York, as well as edited books including *A Chance of a Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore* (2016). He has also been an editorial consultant for organisations including the FutureChina Global Forum, Urban Redevelopment Authority, National Environment Agency, Lien Foundation and Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

Koh holds a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he was a Mason Fellow, as well as degrees in English from Cambridge University and in education from London University. He has lectured on leadership as Adjunct Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore; and on media policy at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.

This is his 36th book as author and editor. The first edition of *Brand Singapore* was translated into Chinese and

published in China in 2012. His other books include *Heart Work* (2002) and *Heart Work 2* (2011), on Singapore's global branding for foreign investment promotion; *Perpetual Spring: Singapore's Gardens By The Bay* (2012), the official coffee table book of Singapore's futuristic public gardens; and *Learning For Life: Singapore's Investment in Lifelong Learning Since the 1950s* (2014), about a key brand attribute of Singapore's manpower resource.