

The Role of the African as a ‘brand builder’: Contribution to Africa’s Sustainable Development and International Competitiveness

Penelope Muzanenhamoⁱ and Franklyn Liskⁱⁱ

Abstract

This paper contends that African citizens have a twin role in the evolution of the emerging *brand Africa*: They are internal stakeholders whose needs should be addressed by their governments and regional institutions tasked with managing *brand Africa*. Simultaneously, Africans are place brand representatives whose behaviours and competencies are perceived by external global audiences, and coded into associations that ultimately give *brand Africa* its persona. Applying the theoretical premise of internal branding, our paper consequently proposes that internal brand building should be implemented across Africa as it may facilitate ‘ambassadorial’ behaviours for *brand Africa* by Africans on the continent and beyond. Cultural diplomacy is identified as instrumental to continental integration, which is crucial for the competitiveness of *brand Africa* and sustainable continental development.

ⁱ**Penelope Muzanenhamo** is a PhD Candidate at Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK. **Email:** p.muzanenhamo@warwick.ac.uk

ⁱⁱ**Franklyn Lisk** is a Professorial Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation, University of Warwick, UK; Honorary Visiting Professor, School of Social and International Studies, Bradford University, and; Senior Research Associate, Centre for Research on Political Economy (CREPOL), Dakar, Senegal.

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Introduction

Africa is rising (The Economist, 2011). It is experiencing a renaissance (Mbeki, 1998), which is manifested in its robust economic growth and the potential rejuvenation of its image. While these two factors are intertwined, the image of a place is instrumental to the latter’s sustainable development (cf. Maheshwari, Vandewalle and Bamber, 2011). Place images lure or scare off foreign investment and know-how relevant for economic progress. Central to place images are the associations attached to the inhabitants of a place (Fan, 2006). However, perceptions among some members of the global public audience – who may be in ownership of the capital and technology required by Africa for the exploitation of its natural resources and enhancement of sustainable development – tend to portray a significant portion of Africans¹ as failing to sufficiently demonstrate the capacity and self-assurance relevant for exploiting the opportunities coming their way². Combined, these perceptions and Africa’s economic prospects challenge all Africans to be aware of their role in forming Africa’s image as a significant global economic player. Most fundamentally, the perceptions challenge Africans to be in charge of their emerging brand in order to affirm its competitiveness.

A way of guaranteeing more visible responsibility for the brand and its target outcomes can be internal brand building, which is an approach applied within the domain of corporate branding to promote *brand supportive behaviours* among internal

¹About 32% of survey participants on Topix.com believe that ordinary Africans are to blame for the continent’s perceived lack of development, while 33% blame African governments, 18% blame Africa’s colonisers, 5% blame the USA and the EU, 5% blame nature, 3% blame the USA alone, 1% blame EU, and another 1% of the respondents blame China.

²Topix (2012), [Online] Available at: <<http://www.topix.com/forum/afam/T3MO1HUK67UHSJSMS>> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

stakeholders who represent the brand to outsiders (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). The central premise of internal branding argues that the behaviour of employees who act as both internal stakeholders and representatives of the brand, should be aligned with what the brand stands for – the brand values – (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005), in order to ensure consistence between the value that the brand promises its customers and the delivery of that value (Tosti and Stotz, 2000). For example this may mean the promise of a highly skilled labour force for foreign investors that a place brand boasts of on the international market, and the availability of such labour force on the ground.

We equally argue that Africans have a twin role in the evolution of the emerging brand Africa: They are internal stakeholders (e.g., Trueman, Klemm and Giroud, 2004) whose needs should be addressed by their governments and regional institutions tasked with managing *brand Africa*. Simultaneously, Africans are place brand representatives whose behaviours and competencies are viewed by the external global audience, and translated into associations that ultimately give brand Africa its character (e.g., Fan, 2006). Our paper applies the theoretical postulates of internal branding (e.g., Burman and Zeplin, 2006; Burmann, et al., 2009; Tosti and Stotz, 2000; Thomson et al., 1999; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005) to propose internal branding as a potential viable tool for facilitating ‘ambassadorial’ behaviours for *brand Africa* by Africans on the continent and beyond. Applying internal branding to Africa provides the foundation for

accomplishing the objectives of the African Union.³ Our work is deemed relevant in that it potentially informs policies and strategies related to *brand Africa* and sustainable continental development. Arguably, our work is scientifically significant in its application of the internal branding theoretical premise to extend the debate on the former's application and effectiveness on place brands. Our paper starts by discussing the relevance of internal branding for Africa, followed by an overview of the emerging *brand Africa*, and then an analysis of how internal branding can be facilitated across Africa, before presenting a conclusive statement at the end.

The significance of internal brand building across Africa

In May 2000, The Economist branded Africa as “the hopeless continent.” However in December 2011, the same publication redefined Africa as “the hopeful continent” reflecting the world's interest in Africa as the last frontier for growth opportunities and markets.⁴ This attention is significant for brand Africa, given that place branding requires maintaining momentum in order to promote sustainable development

³The African Union's objectives include the: Achievement of greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and the peoples of Africa; Acceleration of the political and socio-economic integration of the continent; Promotion of peace, security, and stability on the continent; Establishment of the necessary conditions which enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global economy and in international negotiations; Promotion of the sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies; Promotion of co-operation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples; Advancements of the development of the continent by promoting research in all fields, in particular in science and technology. See: African Union, (2012), [Online] Available at: <<http://www.au.int/en/about/nutshell>> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

⁴For instance see the following among many more others:

Ernst and Young (2012), [Online] Available at: <http://www.ey.com/GL/en/Industries/Private-Equity/PE-opportunities-in-emerging-markets--Private-Equity-in-Africa> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

The New York Times (2012), [Online] Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/opinion/sunday/africa-on-the-rise.html>> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

Goldman Sachs (2012), [Online] Available at: <<http://www.securitiesglobal.com/2012/06/04/goldman-sachs-equity-research-africas-turn/>> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

Mckinsey report (2010), [Online] Available at:

<http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/mgi/research/productivity_competitiveness_and_growth/lions_on_the_move> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

(Maheshwari et al., 2011). Furthermore, such shifting discourses reveal and locate Africa at a turning point, which is momentous given that turning points represent “ideal opportunities for an internal branding campaign” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 100). Africa’s economic progress should be, arguably, complemented by branding policies and initiatives that invest in African citizens as significant players in influencing the sustainability of such growth.

In his study on the Chinese online perception of Africa, Shen (2009) provides evidence in support of the notion that ‘Africa is its people’. Thus in the eyes of foreign investors, tourists and international institutions, brand Africa is all about African citizens, their perceived behaviours, competencies and contribution to the global system. African political leaders, policy-makers, institutions and ordinary citizens are the ones who embody and communicate the values that are perceived as defining the continental brand Africa. All these groups therefore represent the brand as its ‘ambassadors’. The more interaction they have with the global audience including their appearance on global public platforms, the more they convey and reinforce particular values that translate into the perception that the audience will have of *brand Africa*, irrespective of the ‘true’ situation. In view of this, the need to ensure that these brand ambassadors’ behaviour and performances are consistent with the values, which the continent’s place marketers express as crucial to a favourable continental image and sustainable development cannot be overestimated. When Africans as individuals, country and continental representatives interact with external stakeholders, they are presented with opportunities to build relationships with the world on behalf of the continent and its citizens. The exploitation of such opportunities can be facilitated by the understanding

of and identification with the unique values that not only shape Africa but also appeal to its potential external stakeholders.

However, the complexity of place brands lies in the dual role of inhabitants as brand ambassadors and internal stakeholders at the same time. This implies that, the success of brand Africa also depends on whether continental residents' needs, hopes, dreams and desires are catered for by the place brand (e.g., Trueman, Klemm and Giroud, 2004). The place brand has to make a promise – as formulated by the place marketers – not just to outsiders, but also to the place inhabitants (e.g., poverty reduction). By implication, this challenges place marketers to tell ordinary Africans at least, what the emerging brand can do for them and the opportunities that it can offer them to improve their individual and social lives. Jones and Wilks-Heeg (2004) note that there tends to be gaps and tensions between the constructed images of brands and the “social reality they purport to represent” (p.357). Therefore, there should be substance and evidence to support the claims made by the new *brand Africa*, for instance in the form of popular participation in development and inclusive development (UNDP, 2012)⁵ as reflected in the wider and equal access to employment as well as socio-economic opportunities, implementation of policies that facilitate gender equality, social cohesion and public involvement with the brand.

⁵ The UNDP maintains that all groups of people should be involved in the development of their countries. Regardless of their “gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability or poverty... all groups of people [should be allowed to] contribute to creating opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making.” See: UNDP (2012), [Online] Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_inclusive_development/> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

The emerging brand Africa

An important question that one may have relates to what the emerging brand Africa is and what its values are. In the main, a place brand is complex and multidimensional entity, often carrying multiple images (Anholt, 2005, 2006; Kavartzis, 2005). Analogous with other place brands, the *brand Africa* comprises of the cultural, political, economic and historical dimensions (cf. Fan, 2006). Scanning literature reveals shortcomings in political stability and economic performance as the principal genres defining Africa. In other words, until recently the common image of Africa strongly reflects the political and economic weaknesses of some parts of the continent. However, Africa has a distinctive historical background and rich cultural heritage that if their elements are garnered and harnessed, can provide the brand with a unique selling proposition. Scientists confirm that Africa is the origin of mankind, that in itself is presumably a crucial historical aspect worth of reverence. Art, dance and music are some of the cultural resources that have inspired the world, yet seem to have won little attention as unique and favourable features of Africa.

Research exposes those inimitable cultural and historical dimensions (e.g., Boahen, 1985) in the emerging brand Africa, as represented by “the hidden Africa” or the “Africa they don’t show you.”⁶ The new *brand Africa* is therefore a brand of which values derive not only from the continent’s diversity, scenic beauty, nature, resource endowment and potential, but also from its historical and cultural settings. It is also a brand of which values derive from the humbleness and the warmth of African citizens;

⁶ Sources Available Online (03/07/2012):

<http://www.topix.com/forum/afam/TLTTE2830VL69CEGG/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpcY5XOoLdU>

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL080FF522ADF95148>

<http://richysheart.wordpress.com/2011/08/23/the-africa-they-dont-show-u-2/>

<http://www.gistexpress.com/tag/the-africa-they-dont-show-you/>

their creativity and culture. Arguably, it is the brand that still needs to be communicated and ‘sold’ to Africans and the world at large.

Facilitation of internal brand building across Africa

Researchers identify brand related knowledge and emotions as the key factors that have to be addressed in order to induce brand supportive behaviours by those have the responsibility to deliver its promise to external stakeholders (cf. Burman and Zeplin, 2006; Burmann, et al., 2009; Tosti and Stotz, 2000; Thomson et al., 1999; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). These scholars primarily contend that brand supportive behaviours are contingent upon the *internalisation* of, and *identification* with the brand values (ibid.). They further propound that an inspiring brand vision should be articulated as a prerequisite for orienting and uniting culturally diverse internal stakeholders (ibid.). Translated to the context of brand Africa, this stresses the need to implement policies and initiatives that educate African citizens about the new brand and enables the assimilation of its values into citizens’ identities.

The scholarly views described above also imply that a (new) continental vision has to be created and communicated to all Africans at community, local and national levels. The vision should be meaningful to the diverse African citizens, and it should express the present and the future aspirations of Africa and all its stakeholders. Moreover the vision should contain the power to unite and inspire the integration of all Africans on the continent and beyond, as well as articulate Africa’s link to the world and integration of the continent in the global economy. The lack of integration among African nations represents a threat as well as barrier to the development and attractiveness of Africa to global audiences. A continental vision should consequently serve as the bonding glue

for the socio-economically diverse African citizens, while helping to “to build strong and positive links to other places and people” across the world (cf. Vasudevan, 2008, p. 332).

One way of facilitating the understanding and internalisation of a continental vision, values and brand promise to all stakeholders, involves the investigation of national mind-sets. Exploring and understanding the diverse mind-sets may help place marketers to leverage cognitive dimensions towards a common understanding of what the new brand Africa is and how to bring it to life. Another way entails public debates and grassroots projects that cut across borders and involve ordinary Africans in dialogue: “Internal stakeholders must be given a role and voice in deciding and articulating the brand vision” (Vasudevan, 2008, p. 334), as well as in the processes that impact upon their lives such as those to do with democracy, land and natural resource allocation. Such participation of ordinary Africans’ potentially presents place marketers with chances for developing shared cognitions of the new brand Africa. The core argument holds that, a strategy for the emerging brand Africa should incorporate all Africans, as neglecting any groups may lead to conflicts between their goals and those of the brand as vocalised by place marketers. Cynicism and hostility towards the brand campaign and its claims may be other outcomes of excluding some segments of the African citizens from the redefinition of *brand Africa*. In the least, the majority of Africans have to ‘buy into’ the brand strategy.

Furthermore, involvement may foster a feeling of being valued thereby increasing the African citizens’ sense of accountability for the brand. However, this is not to underestimate the challenge of finding common ground among culturally diverse

African citizens. Misunderstandings and conflicts are bound to arise across the continent. However, these challenges may be neutralised through cultural diplomacy, viewed as the facilitation of the exchange of ideas and values that define and explain African cultures and identity in order to develop common understanding of the socio-cultural and economic diversions across nations. Cultural diplomacy may also enable regional integration and foster a strong sense of identification with the continent among its citizens. The basic tools of cultural diplomacy – facilitate interaction among diverse continental citizens – such as sports, music, literature, drama, theatre and academic exchange programmes among others, may be organized and themed around the values of *brand Africa* and its manifestation.

Evidence abounds that Africans love their continent⁷ in the same way that an English man or woman would love England or a German citizen ‘die Heimat’ (Home). There appears to be an existing strong sense of Africans’ identification with their continent, particularly among those in diaspora, which is based on the meaning that they attach to ‘Mother Africa’. However, identification with Africa needs to be nurtured among citizens on the continent as early as possible. With this noted, an issue that may undermine Africans’ sense of identification with their continent seems to relate to self-belief.

Critical to the nurturing and affirmation of a stronger sense of African identity are project initiatives designed at building an awareness of the unique attributes that define

⁷ Such evidence is available on online platforms such as the following:

Topix (2012), How does Africa make you feel, [Online] Available at: <<http://www.topix.com/forum/afam/TI3K689598E0QFCOR>>
Research blog (2012), *How Africa makes people feel*, [Online] Available at: <<http://research-africa.blogspot.co.uk/p/africa-and-our-feelings.html>> [Accessed on: 10/07/2012].

Africans and their continent. As an online community member summarises, developing knowledge and identification is based on an education that starts in kindergarten, an education that teaches African citizens about their identity, needs and environment. It is an education that is an *“African Centred Education (ACE) model”* of which purpose should be *“the formation of a pedagogy primarily focused and founded upon the use of curricula that result in the accomplishments of African interests... Like any other educational system it must begin from the Kindergarten level and continue all the way toward the University level... Education is a “tool”, it is what prepares future [African] citizens to be able to sustain [their continent] and advance it”* (Super, Topix, 2012). It should also be an education that incorporates the notion of life-long learning among African citizens.

Coupled with that, there ought to be stories and myths that rearticulate Africa’s history and its uniqueness, linking it to the continent’s past achievements and unrealised potential, as well as the past, the present and the future in an optimistic way. Only when Africans believe in and identify with the emerging *brand Africa*, can they feel committed and determined to ‘live’ the brand. Living the brand Africa is a concerted effort among all internal stakeholders, from politicians, administrators and ordinary citizens. To sum it up the African Union’s words, brand Africa is a “collective responsibility” for Africans.

Conclusion

The success of any place brand hinges upon collaboration with inhabitants. Thus the competitiveness and attractiveness of the new brand Africa is dependent on African citizens knowing and identifying with what the brand it is, where it is going, why and

for whom. Internal branding is a potential tool for ensuring the internalisation of and identification with the *brand Africa* values, and it should therefore be “key cornerstone” for developing the new *brand Africa* (cf. Vaseduvan, 2008, p.335). The implementation of internal branding across Africa is also deemed as laying a basis for the realisation of the African Union’s objectives.

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