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**Internal perceptions as groundings of value for the nation branding.
The case of Lithuania**

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Summary

Nation brand as a cumulative set of related emotions, impressions and associations in the individual's mind emerges and develops irrespectively to the purposive its creators' attempts. It is mostly determined by the personal direct or indirect experience and proclivity to share it. One of the core pillars for successful nation brand is internal nation brand, driven by the citizens' perception of their own country.

The aims of this paper are to define citizens' core perceptions related to Lithuania and to evaluate the potential of these associations to stand as core values for the internal Lithuania's brand.

The research is based on the content analysis of an open on-line inquiry.

The main findings show that the words used most often to express one's feelings about Lithuania could be taken as core or as supporting values while creating internal nation brand and strengthening citizens' engagement to the country.

Keywords: *nation branding, internal branding, citizens, perceptions.*

Theoretical backgrounds

Nation branding, as an object of scientific research, emerged in the end of 20th century, when it was realized, that a country or a nation, as place or organization could be branded. However, a certain level of confusion and several streams of thought are natural when the conception is new and complex. It might be a reason why in the context of perception of a country it is mostly talked about its image, not brand.

Image, as a dynamic, cumulative impression of an object emerges spontaneously, but branding practice provides a possibility to correct and strengthen this impression (O'Shaughnessy, O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Olins, 2003, Anholt, 2002, 2005; De Chernatony, Cottam, 2008; Dinnie, 2008). In other words, brand image relates to how consumers actually see the brand – the total sum of perceptions target audiences have about the brand (Temporal, 2002). Nevertheless many theorists agree, that strong and favourable overall organizational brand needs to have a crucial anchor – internal brand (Aaker, 2004; Burmann, Zeplin, 2005; De Chernatony, Cottam, 2008; Mitchel, 2002;

Olins, 2003, Vallaster, de Chernatony, 2006). Since country is a certain kind of organization and nation brand is similar to corporate brand (Loo, Davies, 2006; Hankinson, 2007; Trueman *et al*, 2007; Skinner, 2008) internal element is also seen as crucial by the nation branding theorists – S. Anholt (2004; 2005; 2009), K. Dinnie (2008), W. Olins (2001; 2003). However, a deeper analysis reveals that, as W. Olins (2001; 2003) states, country's identity is the fundamental idea of the internal branding ideology and its identity building is an important driver of overall brand equity (Burmah, Benz, Riley, 2009), because nations and countries are not empty containers into which random people, practices and objects may be placed (Murdoch, 2006) – individual stakeholders in a business or everyday's life environment discursively or performatively position and align themselves and others with the country using its names and stories, pointing out correct behaviour and desirable ways to conduct. (Ren, Blichfeldt, 2011). Balmer (2008) states that individual's identification with an organization (or in this case country) is influenced by their experience and significantly influences their behaviour. Moreover, according to M. Kavartzis and G. Ashworth (2010), there is often a mismatch between the agenda of branding practitioners and the needs and objectives of local communities, so before initiating nation branding initiatives it is necessary to explore what identity of a country, or in the other words – nation's self understanding is.

Generalizing it could be said, that identity is a beginning point of image creation and reputation management, which, together with performance, consistency and relations forms an overall brand.

Research methodology

The aim of this article prompted the methodology of research. Since citizens' core associations related to Lithuania were aimed to define, a modification of W. Olins' (2003) questionnaire was chosen. Attempting to distinguish authentic and positive identity of a country for successful its branding strategy the author suggested asking its people of what the best about their country was. Since this article does not have the aim to create positive backgrounds for a branding strategy, but to catch the essence of the internal Lithuania's perception, the question was left without the positive aspect and during the research period people were asked to describe with three words what "their" Lithuania was, hoping that they would reveal their personal real emotions, impressions and associations concerning the country as whole. A short and simple question "How would you describe YOUR Lithuania in three words?" aimed to reach individuals' personal feelings, not the image thrust by the public opinion.

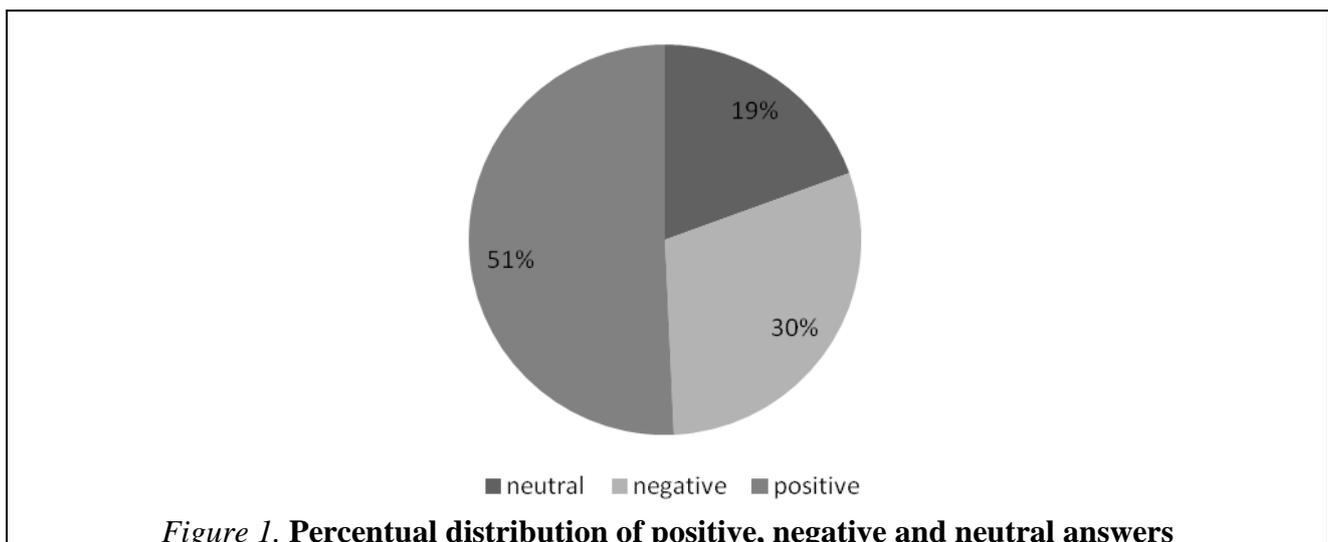
Since reliable amount of answers was expected to collect, no other question was given to raise the attractiveness of the interview. It definitely cut the possibility to distinguish perception

of the country in different audiences, but the aim of this research was to define citizens' core associations related to Lithuania.

The interview was executed in the year 2011, 1007 answers were collected. Primary data was analyzed quantitatively so that the relevant positivity or negativity of a single answer would be revealed; H. Lasswell's (1948) proposed evaluation method of a message was used. Clearly negative attribute in an answer was given a mark "-1", without expressed positiveness or negativeness – mark "0" and an attribute with the clearly expressed positiveness – "1". Frequency of the mentioned attributes was counted to distinguish the most common understanding of the country, all the attributes were distinguished into 20 thematic groups to learn what origins have the mentioned attributes.

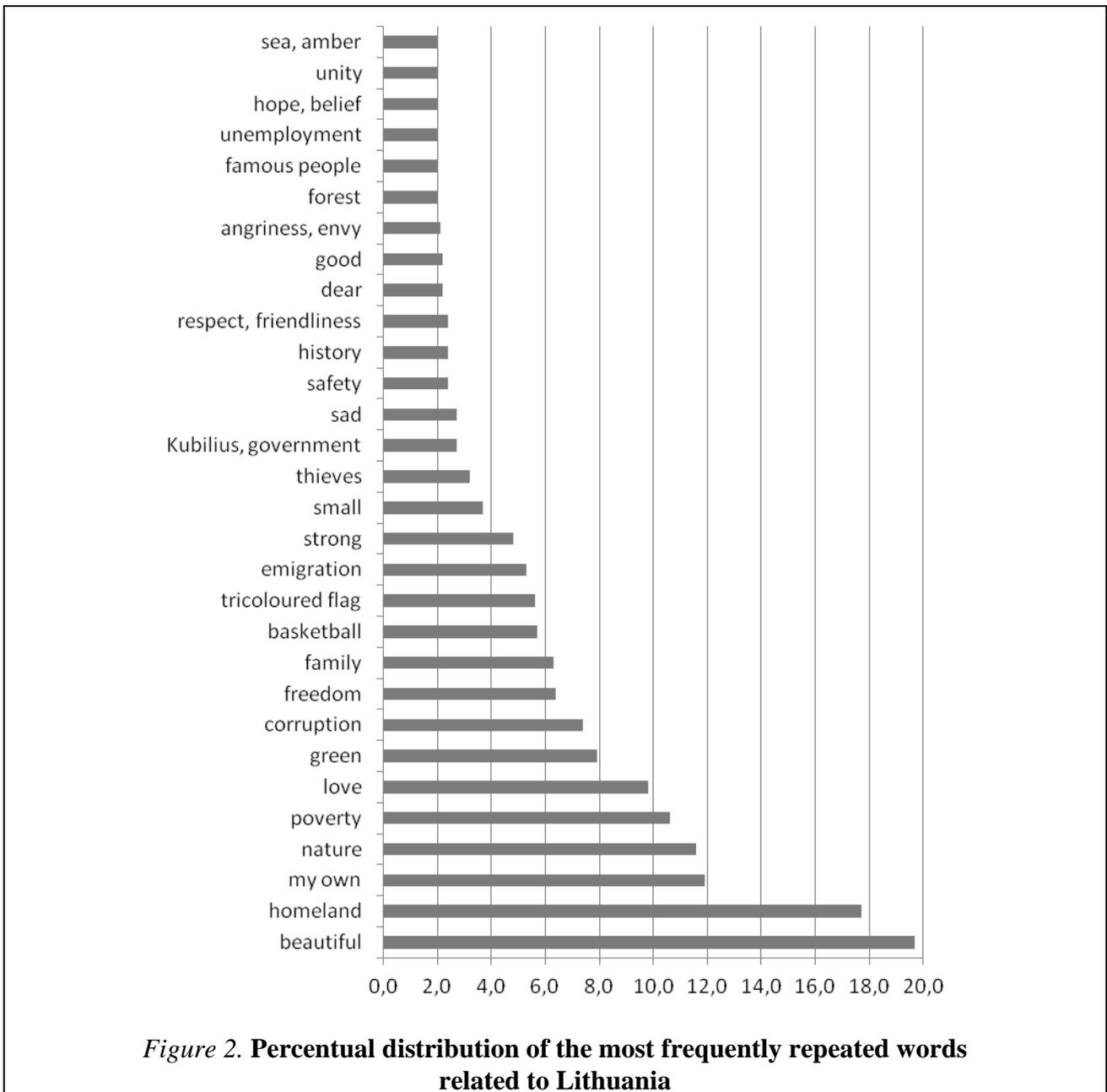
Results

Firstly it was evaluated, what kind of internal perception of the homeland dominates in Lithuania's citizens' minds. It is important to understand whether country's identity is more positive, negative or neutral to have the direction in brand management. Since, as mentioned above, positive aspect of the question was eliminated, negative attributes were freely used. Quantitative analysis of received data showed that more than a half of all answers were mostly positive, one third – mostly negative and the smallest part – neutral. As it is shown in the figure 1, most of the citizens' have strong and clearly expressed positive or negative perception about their country.



To learn about particular associations maintained by the citizens, the most frequent keywords were distinguished. The analysis revealed that most commonly among Lithuanian people is accepted that Lithuania is their beautiful homeland. As it is seen in figure 2, showing 30 most

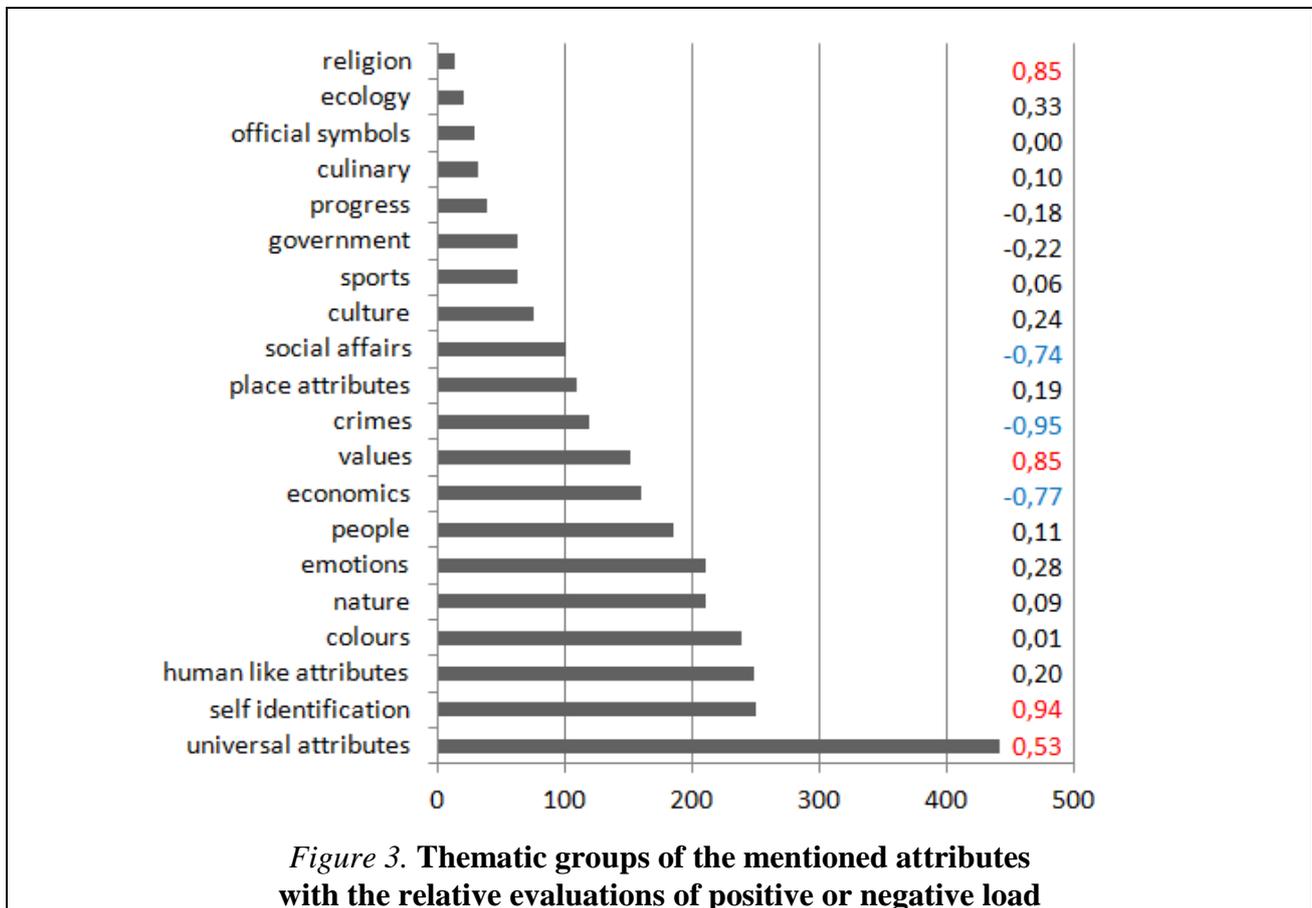
repeated words, other common attributes are nature and greenery, poverty and corruption, love and freedom.



It is noted, that most of the mentioned attributes are expressed more positively than negatively – 22 out of 30 most common associations are relatively positive and only 8 of them relatively negative.

These attributes show the most relevant topics of the Lithuanian people’s life. Interestingly, even though positively expressed attributes dominate in this chart, they are mostly related to meanly on people depending areas. Negative attributes are on the contrary exclusively related to people – poverty, corruption, emigration, thieves, bad government, sadness, angriness, envy, unemployment.

Every of the mentioned attributes was referred to one of 20 thematic groups to get the idea about the most common areas of the citizens' associations about their country. The figure 3 shows these thematic groups in absolute numbers with the score of the overall relative evaluation of expressed positiveness for the attributes in each group (1 – all the attributes evaluated positively, -1 – negatively).



As it is seen from the figure, most of the attributes were universal, like “beautiful”, “good”, “bad” etc, many of them expressed individual’s strong self-identification with the country, these groups were evaluated as relatively positive (0,53 and 0,94). The third biggest group is composed of attributes expressing human like behaviours or characters, evaluated decently positively (0,20). Surprisingly many of the answers were composed of three words – three colours of the Lithuanian flag, however green was mentioned more than twice more often and stressed the importance of the nature in Lithuania’s image in the citizens’ minds. Different (fairly positive – 0,28) emotions were also often expressed, many of the answers were related to different (familiar or famous) people of the country, evaluated more positive than negative (0,11), economic state, evaluated dramatically negative (-0,77) and common values, not surprisingly evaluated very positively (0,95). The smallest groups are composed of the attributes related to religion, ecology, food and progress.

As it was noted analyzing particular attributes, mostly negatively evaluated were to people related thematic groups – economics (-0,77), crimes (-0,95) and social affairs (-0,74).

Image management initiatives in Lithuania

The topic of the nation's image has been very popular in the Lithuanian public space. Several initiatives emerged and failed, because they were pretty narrow, lacked integration to each other and were mostly oriented to the external market and audiences.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union gave start to the new life for many nations, however new important challenges have emerged while integrating into the steady international community. The lack of recognition and identification divulged a crucial issue of the need to present national politics, values, goals, character and ambitions. Between various ways that were being tried, branding has been one of the most popular ones – it was chosen by different countries as a strategic mean to strengthen own position and to facilitate the attainment of the aimed goals.

Looking from the historical perspective Lithuania has been one of the beginners of the nation branding practice. The first recovery of the independence in the 1918 was marked by the first purposive nation branding initiative in the world – a public relations company, led by Edward L. Bernays who was hired to promote Lithuania, its culture, values, language, music, industry etc in the United States and to gain its amiability (Cutlip, 1990).

In the modern world however Lithuanian has not been nation branding leader. At first only the visual elements were important – besides the national flag and blazon several logotypes or just so called trademarks were created.

In the period of new independent country the first attempt to manage country's image in 2001 was accomplished by creating a trademark for Lithuanian tourism and industry (1). It was a symbolic equivalent of a trefoil coloured with Lithuanian national colours – yellow, green and red. This trademark led all the related projects till 2006. In the 2007 a national competition for the new trademark was announced. The winner (2) appeared being too similar to an existing sign (3). After the plagiarism scandal another sing was created (4), even though it was accepted officially, it raises doubts because of the similarity to another existing sing (5). Some private logotypes for the brand Lithuania were created – in 2009 a private initiative started by showing the beauty of the country from above in photography albums “Unseen Lithuania” has spread its margins and became a free chosen, national but unofficial Lithuanian trademark “Lithuania – Heart of the Baltic” (6). For the Millennium of Lithuania in 2009 an occasional logotype was created (7).



Figure 4. Lithuanian trademarks since 2001

Even though these trademarks won national competitions with certain conceptions, they have not been spread any wider than just a visual element, any more universal branding company has not been aligned. Wider separated strategies were created by local and global companies – in 2008 the competition of the strategic national image conception won one called “Lithuania – brave country”, telling that bravery is crucial Lithuanian feature that could present the whole country globally. Activities including modification of the English country’s name “Lithuania”, creation of an epic movie and impressive modern building was planned but has not been accomplished after the governmental changes. New government in 2009 applied to a branding guru W. Olins with the request to create guidelines of overall nation branding for Lithuania. “Selling Lithuania smartly: a guide to the creative-strategic development of an economic image for the country”, advising to show that it is a lively and ‘romantic’, thoughtful and reliable country in Northeast Europe was completed, but not used in any way. Finally under the influence of sensual marketing approach and practice in 2011 “The Scent of Lithuania” was created, but has not had any relations to any branding strategy or image conception.

As V. Tarnovskaya and L. de Chernatony (2011) states, identity management is usually discussed from design and visual experience perspectives while intangible elements, such as brand vision deriving from identity, culture and people’s attitudes are often ignored. The analysis of described activities provides a conclusion that most of them were composed only from certain visual elements and have not been led by any strategic concepts related to country’s identity, both strategic image concepts lacked practical implementation, any of them has not been effective.

Conclusions and discussions

As many theoreticians agree, that branding becomes an emotional bond between organizations and many different groups of stakeholders (Ren, Blichfeldt, 2011), strong brand identity allows a sustainable differentiation of the offering and helps to enhance stakeholders’ identification with the brand (Aaker, 2002; Keller, 1992). M. Kavartzis and G. Ashworth (2010) states, that a major difficulty of the place and nation branding endeavour is that internal and external markets and audiences are both important and nation branding is often called upon to cover the needs of both. What is more, the opportunity to create a sense of belonging – to build a strong

nation-based community – is inherent in the nature of nation branding as is the need to pursue this opportunity. Agreeing to this L. de Chernatony (1999, 2010) stresses the underlying blocks of brand identity, such as brand vision and culture that drives its desired positioning, personality and subsequent relationships, all of which are presented to reflect stakeholders' aspirations and self-images.

The research has shown, that Lithuanian image management initiatives have not been rooted from citizens' self understanding, nor applied effectively. It has been revealed, that according to mostly used attributes as “my”, “me”, “own”, “home”, “family” etc. Lithuanian people see themselves and the country tightly connected, their self-identification with the country is very strong. They freely express their love and stress its beauty and greenery. However negative aspects as “poverty”, “corruption”, “emigration” are also seen but are mostly related to human and governmental factors. These insights might be used as national identity and solidarity drivers, grounding a nation branding strategy.

A strong emotional bond between Lithuanian people and Lithuania is already tight, however negative aspects and dissatisfaction with the actual economic and social state of the country might decrease this citizens' strong self-identification. An obvious lack of trust in governmental bodies should be taken in to account while creating a nation branding strategy, certain actions to decrease corruption should be done and communicated. Common goals and a shared responsibility for them also should be pointed on the grounds of the revealed strong self-identification with the country to augment the solidarity. Clearly expressed accents of the nature, greenery and beauty of the land should be used to strengthen citizens' pride of their country. Other aspects as sports, culture and sources of progress also should be stressed to strengthen citizens' perceptions in these fields.

The research revealed that implemented image management initiatives in Lithuania lacked correlation with actual national identity, were grounded by mostly visual elements and dedicated to external audiences. The meaning of national identity and its recognition is clearly expressed by J. O'Shaughnessy and N. J. O'Shaughnessy (2000): “nations use solidarity appeals constantly when appealing to their own nationals for citizens to have a certain image of themselves or sense of national identity as this helps govern the country. This latter point reminds us that national image is not just for external consumption but is used to infuse a nation with a sense of pride that helps unite it. <...> This is a difficult appeal to orchestrate by any nation while an offer of solidarity, if rejected, is quite blow to the national ego”.

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