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Nation Branding of the Philippines in the Post-Pandemic Era: Insights and Perspectives

John Xavier S. Chavez*

DBA, School of Media Studies, Mapua University, Makati, Philippines

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Abstract:

Nation branding is used by a country's government to promote its identity and image abroad. A strong nation brand influences the choice that people make to live, study, invest in, or visit a country. However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges in the development of a strong country brand. Arguably, the pandemic brought significant disruption, adversely affecting skillfully and carefully choreographed images of countries, including socio-economic and political gains they made before the pandemic. The Philippines were not spared. In this study, Anholt's nation brand index was used as the main framework to analyze how the Philippines were impacted by the pandemic and can better brand itself post-pandemic across six dimensions of national competence: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and immigration and investment. While studies have been conducted on branding the Philippines, this research is novel as it was conducted during a pandemic and examines the prospect of branding the country in the post-pandemic era. The study tried to identify other dimensions that can be considered by the Philippines as it grappled with the pandemic and showed how the Philippine brand was severely dented across Anholt's six dimensions. Interestingly, two new dimensions emerged, brought about by the pandemic: health and technology. This study is of great significance in branding the country post-pandemic, especially in developing a national branding campaign through the concerted efforts of the public and private sectors. This approach could help the Philippines and other countries manage their images locally and internationally despite challenging times. A descriptive case study was used to draw responses from ten key informants across the archipelago using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. This study provides recommendations and strategies for the Philippines to develop a strong country brand in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: country branding, nation brand index, COVID-19 pandemic

Corresponding Author: John Xavier S. Chavez, DBA, School of Media Studies, Mapua University, Makati, Philippines; email: jxschavez@mapua.edu.ph



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后疫情时代的菲律宾国家品牌：洞察与观点

摘要：

国家品牌是政府在国外宣传其身份和形象的手段。强大的国家品牌会影响人们选择居住、学习、投资或访问某个国家。然而，新冠疫情给打造强大的国家品牌带来了挑战。可以说，疫情带来了重大破坏，对各国精心打造的形象产生了不利影响，包括疫情前取得的社会经济和政治成果。菲律宾也未能幸免。在本研究中，安霍尔特的国家品牌指数被用作主要框架，分析菲律宾如何受到疫情的影响，以及如何在疫情后更好地打造自己的品牌，包括国家能力的六个维度：出口、治理、文化、人民、旅游、移民和投资。虽然已经有关于菲律宾品牌的研究，但这项研究是新颖的，因为它是在疫情期间进行的，并探讨了疫情后打造国家品牌的前景。本研究试图找出菲律宾在应对疫情时可以考虑的其他维度，并展示了菲律宾品牌在安霍尔特的六个维度上受到的严重打击。有趣的是，疫情带来了两个新维度：健康和技术。这项研究对于后疫情时代的国家品牌建设具有重要意义，特别是在通过公共和私营部门的共同努力开展国家品牌建设运动方面。这种方法可以帮助菲律宾和其他国家在困难时期管理其在本地和国际上的形象。采用描述性案例研究，通过深入访谈和主题分析，从整个群岛的十位关键受访者那里获得回复。本研究为菲律宾在后疫情时代打造强大的国家品牌提供了建议和策略。

关键词：国家品牌、国家品牌指数、新冠肺炎疫情。

1. Introduction

Nation branding is done by the government with the help of public relations personnel and corporate businesses to establish an image that portrays the country's current state (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015). A country needs to maintain a positive image to build and boost its reputation on a global scale as it is important for a business to maintain a strong corporate image. In nation branding, a country is considered a product that needs to be promoted in the market to raise awareness of the brand and attract consumers' attention. Therefore, having a strong country brand can provide an immense competitive advantage (Anholt, 2005).

Nations possess distinct methods of asserting territorial ownership. In Korea, they are known as K-Pop or K-Drama. In Japan, anime and Japanese animations are performed. In Taiwan, they have bubble tea. This allows each country to have its own unique branding identity across the globe. However, country branding is a more complex task of nation branding and public diplomacy that goes beyond mere icons and slogans (Dinnie, 2014).

The emergence of COVID-19 represents a significant global disruption, potentially unparalleled in its impact on modern society. According to Lee and Kim (2020), unlike previous pandemics in recent memory, COVID-19 was striking in its global scope, spreading to every continent, disrupting communities and dramatically changing everyday life across the globe. In the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic, public diplomacy may present certain nations with an opportunity to enhance their soft power influence on the international stage.

In a world reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, skillfully choreographed images of countries and carefully crafted reputations were disrupted. There was a shifting of mindsets not only of local consumers but also international consumers, which had a profound

impact on country brands. The Philippines were not spared. Notwithstanding its limitations, the Philippines engages in substantial efforts to establish its national brand, particularly in the domain of tourism, which represents the most prominent sector. However, these endeavors were significantly impeded in 2020, underscoring the necessity to reevaluate the nation's marketing and branding strategies.

This study contributes valuable insights to researchers and scholars seeking to conduct further investigations into nation branding. It will also aid policymakers, government officials, and executives in crafting strategies and policies for branding the Philippines after the pandemic. Moreover, it will help brand managers and designers in the public and private sectors conceptualize and design nation branding campaigns for the Philippines during the post-pandemic era, particularly for commercial and investment-generation purposes. Lastly, the study helps the country's tourism industry by improving its destination brand in the post-pandemic era. Other countries may do the same, focusing on economic development, trade, tourism welfare, and human development, among others.

This study was conducted during a time when the country and the world were battered by the coronavirus pandemic. According to Derderian (2020), COVID-19 was not only a significant sanitary and health crisis but also provoked an unprecedented downturn in the global economy, affecting many entrepreneurs and their businesses. Saadat et al. (2020) observed that the outbreak of COVID-19 caused global concerns: lockdowns and health protocols caused changes in the people's lifestyle, extensive job losses; the sustenance of millions of people was threatened, flights were canceled, transport systems were closed, economic activities were stopped, and stock markets experienced a decline concurrent with the reduction in carbon emissions and pollution levels.

The pandemic tested the country's resilience and demonstrated its vulnerability. As Lee and Kim (2020) stated, in a global pandemic, public health outcomes are not the only variables at stake but also countries' national brands and influence, which depend on how a country responds to the crisis. As the new normal comes about, branding must be done for the Philippines to claim a distinct image in the minds of its citizens, foreign stakeholders, and global customers.

Anholt (2005) launched the nation brand index (NBI) as a means of measuring a country's global perception using six variables (tourism, exports, governance, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, and people). Combining these six elements quantifies the firmness and quality of a country's "brand image" as shown below:

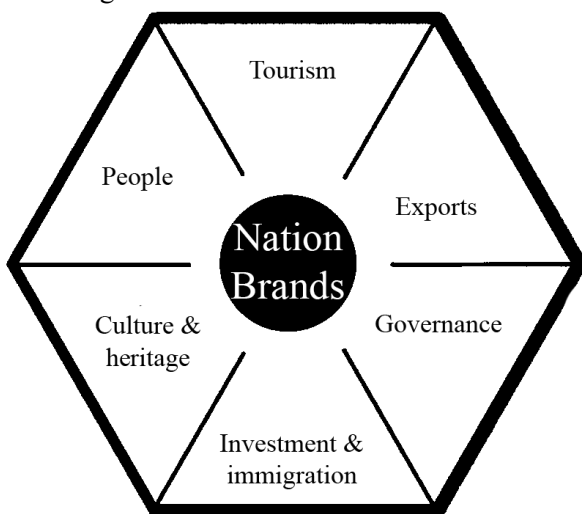


Figure 1. Anholt's nation brand hexagon (Anholt Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI), n.d.)

Anchoring on Anholt's framework, the study analyzed the current situation of the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis its efforts to brand itself. The country's performance was assessed across the six dimensions using primary and secondary data. However, as the world ages and complexities arise, especially in the unprecedented global crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored whether other dimensions can be considered in the nation's branding based on the primary data gathered. The aim was to create and promote a distinct self-image and international reputation for the Philippines that would most effectively serve the nation's interests in the post-pandemic era.

In the country's effort to carve out a particular niche for itself in the international stage and as global markets continue to expand and international competition for trade, investment, and tourism intensifies, the study recognized the need for the country's brand to be evaluated using Anholt's nation brand hexagon so that associations can be made with Philippine's generalized qualities and its perceived character and standing in the world.

Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the

brand of the Philippines?

2. How did the country fare in its branding during the pandemic based on Anholt's nation brand hexagon across the following six dimensions: governance, tourism, exports, investment and immigration, culture, and heritage and people?

3. What other dimensions can be considered when branding the Philippines post-pandemic?

4. What branding strategies can be developed for the Philippines in the post-pandemic era?

2. Literature Review

Anholt's framework as a proven and tested model in a country has been used in various studies, for example, in branding Kenya as an attractive investment destination (Mary & Misiani, 2017), formulation of a conceptual framework for branding initiatives for Zimbabwe (Masango & Naidoo, 2019), a case study of Singapore as a nation brand (Yee, 2009), branding China as a destination for higher education (Yousaf et al., 2020), and branding Estonia as an advanced digital society (Papp-Váry, 2018).

Zeineddine (2018) conducted a study concerning the rebranding of Central and Eastern European countries that used to be in a communist state and are currently in a transitional economy.

A study by Cheregi (2018) regarding the branding campaigns of Romania and Moldova was similar to Zeineddine's except that it concentrated only on these two countries. Romania and Moldova experienced challenges with their branding initiatives due to their status as transition economies. Romania has been the subject of multiple national branding studies. Andrei (2017) discussed the importance of the involvement of citizens in a country's nation branding campaign. In this study, it was discovered that five branding campaigns failed due to corruption, resulting in Romanian citizens' loss of cooperation with governmental initiatives aimed at promoting Romania's image. Political scandals and failed domestic policies can heavily affect a country's reputation.

Kobierecka and Kobierecki (2019) examined the adverse consequences of a public relations crisis. Scandals and controversies significantly affect a country's image and reputation. The study showed a correlation between the doping scandal in Russia and its brand. The controversy not only affected the international image of Russia but also raised concerns and doubts about the integrity of sports worldwide.

Global events can be used as promotional tools for a country brand. Andrei (2017) discussed the importance of likeability. Congenialness is more important than competitiveness. The study showed the importance of a nation or country presenting a warm aura and its effect on its image. Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa (2018) analyzed the effects of leveraging major sports events to promote the country's tourism. Leveraging sports events offers various short- and long-term strategic benefits for the nation's developing brand.

Place or destination branding has become a trend in

countries with abundant tourist spots. Chigora and Hoque (2018) emphasized the significance of tourism and its role in establishing a country brand. The study examined the importance of enhancing a country's tourism promotion in conjunction with increased stakeholder engagement and favorable media coverage to achieve an effective destination brand. The study concludes that hospitable people, tourist attractions, and the accessibility of a place are major contributors to place branding.

Other than tourism, culture is another variable that supplements branding strategies. Ioanid et al. (2014) argued that brand managers should consider cultural characteristics and the values and customs of potential local customers when entering international markets. Ana and Andrei (2018) reviewed the significant contributions of famous corporate brands to a country and its image. For less developed countries, getting associated with a well-known brand could bring advantages in terms of diplomacy, national reputation, and country image.

Nation branding influences trade, primarily through its impact on investment and export. In a study in Africa, a continent that suffers from negative image and stereotypes, it was found that this adverse reputation bears a negative causal effect on foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into African economies, thus highlighting the need to enhance nation branding strategies to make significant contributions to the image-building aspect of investment promotion (Matiza & Oni, 2014). The study zeroing in on Zimbabwe, a country in Africa, showed that the negative image that the country has negatively affected its ability to attract FDI's (Matiza & Oni, 2013). Similarly, it was revealed by Lahrech et al. (2020) covering the ten best-NBI countries between 2008 and 2014 that the brand image of a country has a strong positive correlation with FDI inflows. The study concluded that countries that exhibit high nation branding tend to experience a significant increase in the country's economic growth. Papadopoulos et al. (2016) established the need for more studies on the multi-faceted topic of nation branding and FDI's and suggested a more comprehensive agenda for research in the future.

The relationship between country branding and export was examined by Kilduff and Tabales (2017) in their analysis of the impact of country branding on consumer behavior in the global marketplace. This study identified country-of-origin (COO) and consumer studies as influential factors in the evolution of country branding. Bekasova et al. (2017) discussed the significance of export promotion. A lack of country branding or identity can affect a country's export performance.

Other elements or factors can also be considered in the conceptualization of a national brand. Popovska and Darcq (2019) studied the possibility of using humanitarian and developmental initiatives focusing on the European Union (EU) aid volunteers and their contributions to nation branding. Hess and Najbor

(2020) examined the possibility of internationally promoting Poland's culture through films.

Anholt's (2005) NBI has been popularly used as a formula to devise an effective nation branding campaign. Žugić and Konatar (2018) discussed the significance of Anholt's NBI as a format for efficient nation branding. Merckelsen and Rasmussen (2015) also used Anholt's NBI for constructing Denmark's brand.

Lee and Kim (2020) observed that the pandemic has ushered in a new chapter in public diplomacy as border closures, lockdowns, and social distancing have become the norm across the globe. However, some countries like South Korea view the crisis as a strategic opportunity to elevate their nation's brand in the eyes of the world. During the pandemic era, the task of establishing a stable nation became increasingly complex. Lee and Kim (2020) conducted a study on South Korea's pandemic public diplomacy. This study analyzed Korea's COVID-19 response, public diplomacy, and nation branding campaign. Lee and Kim discussed the possible effects of sharing its effective action plans with other countries so that the country could exert a positive influence.

Rookwood and Adeosun's (2021) study in Japan examined the perception of two sport mega-events—the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the 2020(21) Summer Olympic Games—with regard to their economic and political challenges in the context of a global economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic. The research analyzed these events through the lens of public diplomacy and nation branding. The study explored the perspectives of several relevant stakeholder demographics, including those working for various bodies related to the staging and analysis of events as platforms to showcase nation branding, public diplomacy, economic development, and sports tourism.

Similar studies using Anholt's framework were conducted, noting how the same six dimensions were applied in branding other countries. Studies by Mary and Misiani (2017) on Kenya, Masango and Naidoo (2019) on Zimbabwe, Yee (2009) on Singapore, Yousaf et al. (2020) on China, Papp-Váry (2018) on Estonia, and Merckelsen and Rasmussen (2015) on Denmark, among others, bank on Anholt's nation brand model. In this study, however, the six dimensions were applied to the Philippine context during an extraordinary pandemic. Previous studies were conducted before the pandemic.

A portion of the extant international literature examined the process of nation branding, analyzing the various dimensions considered significant in this field and their influence on countries' branding initiatives. For example, Yee (2009) highlighted China as a destination for higher education. On the other hand, Papp-Váry (2018) emphasized Estonia as an advanced digital society. Bekasova et al. (2017) explored the idea of branding Latvia as a green country. This study was similar to the extent that it also considered how the Philippines could strengthen its competitive edge by capitalizing on Anholt's dimensions. This study drew

parallelism with other studies in terms of coming up with a strategic framework, as exemplified by Andrei (2017) and Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa (2018), but their studies focused on country branding through sponsorships of global or sports events, while Ana and Andrei (2018) and Kilduff and Tabales (2017) highlighted the COO strategy in country branding.

3. Methods

The researcher employed a case study methodology to investigate the current issue of the Philippines' branding in the post-pandemic era and elucidate the characteristics and behaviors of the sampled population during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was acknowledged in some past studies that nation branding is a highly qualitative subject that deals with matters of image and reputation (Same & Solarte-Vasquez, 2014; Kilduff & Tabales, 2017; Hao et al., 2019).

In qualitative research, the sample size is not predetermined but rather depends upon the number required to fully inform all important elements of the phenomenon being studied, which means that sample size is sufficient when additional interviews do not result in the identification of new concepts signifying an end point called data saturation is reached (Klonova, 2012), although a large number of articles, books, and studies suggest from 5 to 50 participants anywhere as adequate (Harris, 2013). In this regard, the researcher initially started with five key informants until it reached ten, at which point the researcher reasonably observed that saturation was achieved. The 10 key informants were selected from across the Philippines: 4 from Luzon, 3 from the Visayas, and 3 from Mindanao to ensure adequate representation of the population's geographical distribution. The sample comprised adult Filipino individuals, with equal representation of male and female genders: five males and five females. The informants represented diverse sectors of society: policymaking, business, tourism, academia, non-governmental organizations, government services, media, and civic organizations. Each informant was considered an expert in the group or sector they represented. The ages of the informants ranged from twenty-two to sixty-five years old. The study targeted informants older than 18 years, given the complexity of the subject matter under study. The study consciously considered informants who could offer valuable opinions and insights about branding the Philippines from a political, economic, or sociocultural perspective. In other words, the selection of the participants was based on competence, perspective, and experience.

In this study, the means of measurement were not numbers but rather the experiences, thoughts, and opinions of the participants that were gathered through an online semi-structured interview composed of mixed questions. The researcher conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview, which was conducted online (Appendix A). The interview questions were divided into three parts. The first part, a set of preliminary and demographic questions, was to determine the profile of

the informants, while the second and last parts were comprised of mixed questions to assess how the informants perceived the pandemic's impact not only on their work and organizations but also on the country's nation-branding efforts. For the first part, the variables considered were age, gender, occupation, and type of industry that the respondent was affiliated with. The second part determined the level of impact of the pandemic on the informant and the organization that he/she was affiliated with and also probed whether the actions taken by the government and/or private sector were satisfactory for the informant. The third section of the questionnaire determined the impact of the pandemic on country branding. In addition to the interviews, which served as the main sources of primary data, a review of the related literature was conducted to gather secondary data on the problem.

The researcher used Google Forms to create and disseminate the interview questionnaire. After creating the form, a link was sent to the informants that directed them to the questions. An online interview was conducted via Zoom and/or telephone. Lockdowns and strict social distancing were still in force during the study.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed by gathering transcripts of the interviews. Despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic because the interviews were conducted online, the researcher was mindful of the nonverbal responses of the informants, such as gestures, tone of voice, and emphasis. To identify patterns across these observations, the interviewer read through the transcripts and identified codes. Inductive or open coding was employed, commencing with a thorough review and familiarization of the interviews, followed by the generation of codes based on the interview data (Medelyan, 2024). By identifying codes in qualitative research, quality analysis and findings can be achieved (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The generated codes helped the researcher identify emerging themes. Common topics, ideas, and meaning patterns that emerged repeatedly in the interviews were identified. Thematic analysis was conducted through the examination of interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, including topics, ideas, and patterns that emerged consistently (Caulfield, 2023). By identifying the themes relevant to the focus of the research and theoretical framework, reading and re-reading transcripts until theme saturation is achieved, an accurate description of analysis and data integrity can be ensured (Roberts et al., 2019).

4. Results

To provide appropriate context, the presentation of results and analysis was organized in accordance with the specific research problems addressed in the study.

Problem 1: How Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect the Brand of the Philippines?

The study began by analyzing the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic on the participants' personal and professional lives. All informants were deeply affected by the pandemic. Their personal lives were changed by it, and most replied "worse." A significant proportion of respondents reported having a family member who contracted COVID-19 and/or succumbed to the disease. Several informants and their families experienced the disease, resulting in the loss of an immediate family member due to the virus. The words "sick" and "lost" emerged from the informants several times.

The ramifications of the pandemic manifested not only in physical consequences but also in psychological impacts for certain individuals. Most were anxious about their own health and that of their family members. Several participants exhibited visible emotional distress when recounting their experiences during the pandemic, particularly those who endured losses in terms of life, health, and employment. "The pandemic has personal significance," stated a participant who experienced the loss of a family member due to the virus. The psychological impact of the pandemic was obvious as some informants admitted to having suffered from psychological issues. "Anxiety," "incessant worrying," "sleeplessness," and "depression" were the most common complaints expressed by the informants.

Everyone felt the pinch of the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Common problems were "rising healthcare costs," "skyrocketing prices of goods and services," and "economic uncertainties in employment." A key informant lost his job, and another worked for a much shorter time, which severely affected her income. A key informant, who was an entrepreneur, expressed significant concern regarding the impact of the lockdown on business revenues, which necessitated the termination of several employees. He said, "I worry a lot not just for my family but also for my employees."

All the informant-employees reported that their respective organizations were significantly impacted by the pandemic, with some indicating that their employers implemented workforce reductions and stringent cost-containment measures. In addition, they had to adapt to new and shifting work arrangements. The participants' emotional responses of sadness and anxiety were evident during the interview. This sentiment is exemplified by the statement of one informant: "I feel sad, I lost my job." The pandemic not only posed a significant threat to human lives and well-being but also jeopardized livelihoods, inflicting substantial damage to businesses, proprietors, and employees.

When the informants were asked if they were satisfied with the government's efforts, most expressed dissatisfaction. They anticipated assistance from the national government and their local government unit (LGU); however, they did not receive any support beyond the canned goods and rice distributed during the stringent lockdown in April and May 2020. Critics expressed concern regarding the perceived inequitable distribution of government financial assistance, which was disproportionately allocated to lower-income

groups, with minimal or no support provided to the middle class, who constituted a significant portion of the nation's tax-contributing population. An informant claimed, "The lack and unfair distribution of relief during this pandemic is unfortunate."

Some informants criticized the manner in which the government appointed military personnel in positions that were supposed to be filled by people with scientific and medical backgrounds. "I disagree with the seeming militarization during the pandemic," said one informant referring to both the military appointees and the heavy-handed approach by the government in handling the pandemic.

The respondents agreed that the pandemic adversely affected the image of the Philippines. They all believed that COVID-19 eroded the gains that the country made before the pandemic in terms of branding. Common areas of concern pointed out by the informants that severely dented the country's brand ranged from "weak healthcare system," "slow vaccination against COVID-19," "ineffective and uncoordinated government response to the pandemic," "recession," "unemployment," "inflation" to "business closures" and "unfavorable business climate". There were also few who highlighted "human rights abuses" and "media repression" during the pandemic.

A dominant theme that emerged was the negative overall impact of the pandemic on informants. The perception of the informants regarding the government's handling of the pandemic was also negative, characterized by dissatisfaction.

Problem 2: How Did the Country Fare in Country Branding amid the Pandemic Based on Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon across the Following Six Dimensions: Governance, Tourism, Exports, Investment and Immigration, Culture, and Heritage and People?

Based on the respondents' responses, the pandemic adversely affected the country's brand. This was encapsulated in an informant's statement: "COVID-19 made grave consequences on the socio-economic and political landscape of the country, thus its impact on the country's brand was bad."

Governance, people, and investment were the dimensions perceived to be severely affected by the pandemic. Aside from "economic hardships," a few informants raised these issues in governance amidst the pandemic: "extra-judicial killings," "human rights," "media freedom," and "graft and corruption." According to an informant, "overall, the government's handling of the pandemic is bad and disagreeable not to mention that we are already mired in problems like extra-judicial killings, graft and corruption, suppression of media freedom and human rights violations among others."

One dimension that the informants zeroed in on was people. Some highlighted the importance that Filipinos play in marketing their own country. They pointed out that prior to foreigners' developing a positive perception

of the nation, it is imperative that Filipinos cultivate a sense of pride in their own country.

Several key informants highlighted their sad experiences during the pandemic and the lack of government support, which affected their confidence in the country. The area of people's health also appeared in the interviews. For some informants, the issue of health is equally important to economic recovery. Healthy and strong citizenry was an integral component of the country's brand. As expressed by an informant, "the issue of health and well-being becomes more pronounced more than ever during this pandemic."

Another dimension that emerged in the interview was investment. The observed negative effects of the pandemic on business and the economy seemingly caught the attention of the informants. A number of informants underscored the country's fragile economy and the closure of some business establishments brought about by the pandemic, which they claimed could affect the country's investment promotion aimed at attracting FDIs. The persistent issue of health, particularly concerning the workforce, with specific emphasis on the delayed implementation of immunization programs for workers, was reiterated by the respondents. Noticeably, the businessmen informants were very impassioned in discussing this aspect. A businessman-informant said, "Businesses are among the hardest hit by the pandemic, both local and foreign, making a serious impact on investment."

Problem 3: What Other Dimensions Can Be Considered When Branding the Philippines Post-Pandemic?

The emergence of the issue of "health and well-being" in the study was rather interesting. "Health is indeed wealth these days more than ever," highlighted a key informant. Although it can be argued that health and wellness are variables that could be placed under the people dimension, their emergence highlights their importance during the pandemic. The need for a robust healthcare system was very pronounced for the informants. The informants themselves and their families who were afflicted with COVID-19 expressed intense feelings when discussing the matter. For them, a strong healthcare system was reflective of how the government values its people. All of them underscored the need for vaccinating the population. Moreover, for them, branding the country in the post-pandemic era involved the prioritization of health issues and the inoculation of the population is a step toward the right direction. Human capital constitutes a nation's most significant resource. The informants associated individuals' health and well-being with the country's brand, considering these factors as important as the population's traits and characteristics of competence, openness, tolerance, and amiability in shaping national identity.

Another interesting dimension that emerged from the study is the respondents' clamor for investing in technological innovation in the post-pandemic era. An

informant captured this in the following statement: "Technological innovation is an important variable to consider so people can remember the Philippines' competitiveness. As we have seen during this pandemic, technology can never be overemphasized."

Another informant noted, "If one already has a great product, and the audience will love it and it is ready to be shared with more people around the world, selling it with the help of technology could be the key."

"The technological transformation was already happening before the pandemic, but the pandemic hastened it," noted another.

Interestingly, tourism emerged as one of the principal dimensions that the key informants identified as crucial for consideration in branding the Philippines in the post-pandemic era, alongside governance, people, and investment. Notably, tourism took a backseat during the pandemic, as indicated by their responses, except for an informant from the tourism sector, for whom the impact of the pandemic was very palpable. In his words, "the tourism industry crumbled down because of the pandemic."

A predominant theme that emerged was the critical importance of the country's health and technology sectors during the pandemic. Although governance, people, and investment were heavily impacted by the pandemic, there was no other time when the recognition of "health and wellness" and "technological innovations" became more pronounced than during the pandemic. Arguably, health may well fall within Anholt's people dimension and technology subsumed already under investment. However, the point was the cognizance of the informants of these dimensions as independent dimensions from the others considering the challenging times.

The dimensions greatly affected by the pandemic were people, governance, and investment, although interestingly, tourism was added when respondents were asked about the dimensions the government should focus on in the post-pandemic era. This could indicate that the perception of the country's brand was personal for the informants and because tourism did not directly impact most of them during the pandemic, it was not a priority.

Problem 4: What Branding Strategies Can Be Developed for the Philippines in the Post-Pandemic Era?

The majority of respondents emphasized the necessity for technological advancements, innovative solutions, infrastructural development, and healthcare improvements in the post-pandemic era. A number of them used the internet speed in the country to illustrate how the country lags behind other countries in terms of technology. The nation's competitiveness in the field of information communication and technology (ICT) was the primary focus of many advocates. As elaborated by an informant, "if we want to be competitive like the advanced economies and some of our Asian neighbors like Singapore, we have to excel in ICT in this modern

world.”

Some expressed frustration with how the country fared in terms of education. Although they stated that the Philippines were blessed with talented and skilled workers, they indicated the need for education and training to sustain this edge: “Though we Filipinos are among the best talents and skilled workers in the world, we must sustain this edge through education and training.”

Furthermore, respondents were also quick to point out the need for the country to invest in roads, bridges, harbors, airports, etc. to improve transportation and communication. Lastly, the persistent issue of public health within the context of this pandemic was reiterated, with respondents advocating increased governmental investment in healthcare infrastructure. In the words of an informant, “healthy people make up a healthy nation and this is vital if we want a strong country brand especially in these trying times.”

Corollary to the above, the theme that emerged was the country’s need to underscore its post-pandemic business readiness. Considered important variables in the area of investment by informants were health, information and technology, education, and infrastructure. As mentioned many times, health was a primordial consideration for informants. Education was also valued by the respondents to sustain the competitiveness of the country’s workforce. The necessity for robust infrastructure and ICT should not be underestimated.

The informants mentioned that the government and private sector must do something about nation branding. They believed that nation branding is not just the sole responsibility of the government but must be a concerted effort by the public and private sectors. They asserted unequivocally in their response that nation branding should not be solely a unilateral governmental action as it inherently involves and impacts all stakeholders. Some were even quick to point out that everyone would benefit from the country’s good image and suffer from its tattered image. In the words of a key informant, “we are all in this together.”

The participants identified potential for collaboration between the public and private sectors in nation branding. They emphasized the capability of large domestic corporations to align their product and service branding strategies with the broader objectives of national branding initiatives. As summarized by an informant, “country branding must be a product of collaboration between business and government through creative and innovative co-branding strategies.”

The informants also proposed the necessity for the government to reevaluate and refine its public diplomacy strategy, emphasizing the importance of more effectively communicating its desired image to the international community. Some suggested that the government modify its approach to governance, particularly regarding human rights and media treatment, if it seeks to garner favorable support from foreign publics. As mentioned by an informant, “the

government should communicate more effectively to its citizens and the outside world most especially since we have a negative image in areas like human rights and media freedom.”

The urgent need for the government to re-strategize its public diplomacy emerged as a theme. Collaboration between the public and private sectors and a more effective way for the government to communicate with the outside world were favored approaches by the informants. Collaboration can be achieved in a myriad of ways, especially between the government and businesses and between the government and its citizens. Of particular significance was the predominant recommendation by respondents that the government should reevaluate and refine its public diplomacy strategy. They observed the predominantly negative information about the Philippines, disseminated to the international community, and regarding this matter, they indicated that the government must meet the requisite standards. As stated by an informant, “there must an effective communication from the government to the local and foreign public especially if we want to emphasize the positive image of the country instead of being clobbered by the negative image that people get from the local and foreign media.”

5. Discussion

The pandemic indeed exerted a deep impact on the country’s brand, not only based on the perceptions of the informants but also on the literature. The informants’ bad experiences during the pandemic and their dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the pandemic were translated into an unfavorable view of the country’s brand.

Despite the high approval ratings of the Duterte administration, a survey conducted by the ASEAN Studies Center revealed that Filipinos expressed the highest level of disapproval regarding their government’s response to the pandemic among Southeast Asian populations, with 35.8% of respondents indicating disapproval (Ranada, 2021). A commentary observed that the Philippine government’s overall response to the pandemic was characterized by ineffective governance and excessive use of force, manifesting in militaristic curfews and checkpoints, severe penalties for violating stay-at-home orders, and widespread food insecurity among the impoverished population (Beltran, 2020).

This observation may indicate that branding originates from internal factors. True enough, the best brand ambassadors of a country are its citizens. Del Mundo (2008) supplemented this argument by asserting that the country should cultivate a profound sense of national pride among Filipinos rather than allocating substantial resources to advertising campaigns.

The study deemed it important to establish the impact of the pandemic on informants and probe their perceptions and experiences since branding is considered a perception game. Studies have revealed that the emotions and perceptions of a country’s citizens

affect its branding (Che-Ha et al., 2015; Luong, 2016). Despite the divergent and fragmented conceptualizations of nation branding, Hao et al. (2019) observed the importance of citizens' perceptions of their own country in peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical journal articles published from 1998 to 2018. Mariutti et al. (2019) acknowledged that residents' perceptions about Brazil had an impact on foreign perceptions about the country. Luong's (2016) similar study in Vietnam, involving its citizens, both residents and non-residents, found that their attitudes impacted Anholt's dimensions to varying degrees. In Che-Ha et al.'s (2015) study in Malaysia, the citizens' emotions and perceptions were explored to conceptualize and test a framework of its branding elements.

Filipino citizens serve as representatives of their nation and cannot be expected to demonstrate loyalty and positive behavior if they are dissatisfied with the governance of their country. Perceptions of locals about how their country is governed may influence the international community, whose perception of a country influences their decision to invest, visit, study, live, or retire.

It may be true that nation branding is heavily dependent on perceptions and the informant's negative emotions and perceptions brought about by the pandemic could have been translated into a negative image of the country's brand during its onslaught. Nation branding could come from within. Filipinos are their country's best brand ambassadors, but they must first have a positive image of their government.

Using Anholt's Nation Brand Model as the framework of the study, all the six dimensions were adversely affected by the pandemic. The ones considered to have been most severely affected were people, governance, and investment. Tourism was added to the three as another important dimension to be considered in country branding after the pandemic. This could show that the importance of a dimension is relative to an informant's experience during the pandemic and may change in its relative significance to the informant in the post-pandemic world. This aligns with the underlying notion that nation branding is a function of perception.

Governance, as reflected in the actions taken by the government in handling the pandemic, may reveal weaknesses in the country's efforts in managing and mitigating the global health crisis. The manner in which the nation addressed these critical issues influenced its reputation both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, all of these occurred during the socio-economic and political ills that the country already faced, which the pandemic intensified.

The findings are supported by secondary data that indicated that the Philippines were significantly affected across Anholt's six dimensions. The GDP of the Philippines, according to the Mapa (2021b), contracted by 9.5% in 2020, accompanied by significantly high unemployment and inflation rates. In 2020, despite the Philippines' improved ranking in the Human

Development Index, the country remained at the lower end of the average score for nations categorized within the high human development tier (Rosales, 2020). FDIs contracted by 24.6% to \$6.5 billion in 2020 from \$8.7 billion net inflows in 2019 chiefly due to the economic impact of the pandemic (Rivas, 2021). Although the World Economic Forum (WEF) temporarily suspended the ranking of countries in the 2020 Global Competitiveness Report due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines ranked 64th out of 141 countries in the 2019 Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), declining by eight positions from the previous report (Crismundo, 2020). In the context of exports, amidst a global economic recession and international border closures at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines experienced a significant decline in external trade of goods. The total trade value decreased by 18.2% to \$149.37 billion in 2020, as evidenced by data indicating a reduction from \$182.52 billion in 2019. This decline was characterized by substantial double-digit reductions in both merchandise exports and imports (Mapa, 2021a). This was complemented by figures from the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Based on data from the UNCTAD, Philippine export performance remained below that of East Asian economies leading global trade recovery (Ibanez, 2021). According to the Department of Tourism-Philippines (2020b), foreign arrivals and tourism declined by 83% in 2020 as the country closed its borders due to the pandemic; the number of foreign tourists in the Philippines was 1.32 million, an 83.97% decline from 8.26 million in 2019 (Rey, 2021). The year 2020 witnessed the closure of numerous heritage sites in the Philippines due to health protocols and travel restrictions, and numerous cultural events in the country were canceled or significantly reduced in scale (BusinessWorld, 2021).

The significance of health and technology, as indicated by the respondents, was notably intriguing. Although it can be posited that health is encompassed within the category of people and technology is already subsumed under investment, their identification as distinct dimensions warranting consideration in the context of the pandemic may be indicative of shifting citizen priorities in country branding during periods of adversity. It is plausible that one of the most substantial transformations precipitated by the pandemic was the proliferation of digital technology. The pandemic provided an opportunity for firms to restructure their business models by adapting automated solutions with the aid of digital technologies. This observation is analogous to the global phenomenon observed during the pandemic, specifically, the significance of technological innovations.

In a survey by OCTA Research, staying healthy was the highest concern of Filipinos across all socioeconomic classes, with 77% of those from the ABC class considering it as their top concern, 65% from Class D and 62% from Class E (Cepeda, 2021). In a survey conducted by the Department of Tourism-

Philippines (2020a), in collaboration with some entities, it was revealed that domestic leisure travel was a significant driver of the recovery of the Philippine travel industry, with 77% of the respondents expressing their willingness to travel to local destinations once restrictions were lifted in 2021. AlphaBeta (2021) highlighted the growth of the use of computers, the internet, mobile phones, social media, and e-commerce in the Philippines during the pandemic.

Given these findings, Anholt's framework may be modified as follows, given the circumstances of the pandemic and the Philippines' unique branding needs, from the original hexagon to an octagon with two new dimensions highlighted in red:

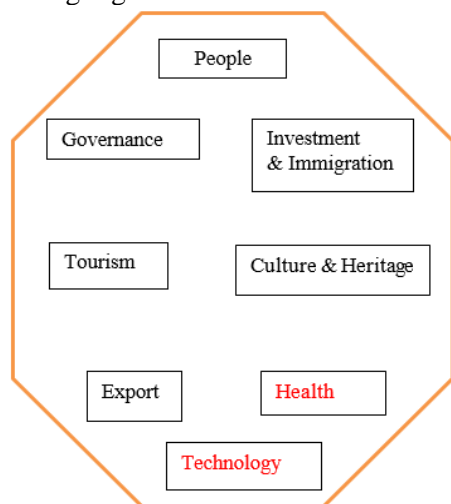


Figure 2. Anholt's nation brand octagon (Modified by the author)

The need for the country to underscore its business readiness was captured by the apparent importance of the investment dimension for informants both during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic era. Investment was identified as both a dimension negatively impacted by the pandemic and a factor warranting consideration in the branding of the Philippines during the post-pandemic period. Key areas perceived crucial by informants in attracting investments were technology and innovation, education, infrastructure, and health. These findings could manifest areas of competitiveness that the government should focus on when branding the Philippines in the post-pandemic era. Furthermore, this may demonstrate how important it is to highlight the country's efforts to attract investments as part of its branding strategy in the post-pandemic world.

The observations made by the informants are corroborated by secondary data, which indicated that investment in the country experienced a significant decline due to the pandemic, particularly in the FDI sector. As mentioned, the Philippines ranked 64th out of 141 countries in the 2019 Global Competitiveness Report. An analysis of the country's ranking in 2019 indicated that the declines were primarily attributable to ICT adoption, macroeconomic stability, and health, while improvements were predominantly observed in market size and labor market (Makati Business Club, 2019).

Retooling the country's public diplomacy strategy

was supported by the informants' suggestion for more effective government communication with its people and the outside world. While public diplomacy is primarily a governmental function, the informants emphasized the necessity for collaboration between the government and private sector in this domain. This strategy draws some parallels with previous studies that have emphasized the importance of public diplomacy in nation branding (Szondi, 2008; Potter, 2018; Rasmussen & Merckelsen, 2012). The observations of certain respondents indicating areas of concern in the nation's governance are corroborated by secondary data sources. Diplomacy is a function of good governance (Petrovsky, 1998). Several international rankings related to governance indicated the country's deterioration in that area. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) (2020), which analyzes and evaluates whether and how developing countries and countries in transition steer social change toward democracy and a market economy, ranked the Philippines 69 out of 137, garnering a score of 4.89 on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). In 2020, the Philippines fell one spot in the Global Democracy Index, landing at 55th out of 167 countries and being classified under the "flawed democracy" category of the report due to alleged human rights violations (Yumol, 2021); in the domain of media freedom, the Philippines descended two positions to 138 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, citing the persistent government-supported attacks against the media (Elemia, 2021); the Philippines also slipped to 115th out of 180 countries based on the Corruption Perceptions Index, signifying two slots down from being 113th in 2019 (Yumol, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The following are the key findings of this study:

1. The study revealed that the pandemic had a significant negative impact on the country's brand. The informants had a bad experience with the pandemic. This implies that their adverse experience, coupled with their perception of governmental actions, which was characterized by dissatisfaction, negatively influenced their perception of the country's brand.

2. All the six dimensions of Anholt's nation brand model were negatively impacted by the pandemic. However, these three dimensions were strongly affected by the pandemic as perceived by informants: governance, people, and investment. These three dimensions also remained significant in the post-pandemic era, with tourism emerging as a substantial dimension to be considered as well. This demonstrates the significance of these dimensions in branding the Philippines post-pandemic. Most strategies formulated for branding the Philippines in the post-pandemic era, as derived from suggestions from key informants, tended to gravitate toward these dimensions.

3. The matter of health has become a fundamental consideration in nation branding, given the pandemic

and concurrent technological advancements. This implies the indispensability of these dimensions as perceived by informants during challenging times like a pandemic. This highlights the need for the government to prioritize these areas not only for the benefit of its people but also to uplift its image.

4. There was a need to underscore the country's business readiness in the post-pandemic era. This is important considering the extent of damage caused by the pandemic on the country's image locally and abroad. Investment was identified as both a dimension negatively impacted by the pandemic and a factor meriting consideration in the branding of the Philippines during the post-pandemic period. Key areas perceived as crucial by informants in attracting investments were technology and innovation, education, infrastructure, and health. These findings could indicate areas of competitiveness that the government should prioritize post-pandemic. In these areas, the government must demonstrate proficiency if it aims to enhance its country's brand in a highly competitive global environment.

Finally, there was a need for the government to retool its public diplomacy strategy. Missteps made by past administrations can be corrected by that administration or the one replacing. Valuable insights can be derived, particularly from the alleged infringements on media freedom and human rights attributed to the Duterte administration. The media are a strong force to reckon with as their stories influence how the local and foreign publics perceive a country's image.

Nation branding is a multifaceted concept. To further advance research in this field, the study proposes the following recommendations:

1. There is a need to gather and classify literature on country branding, for example, based on emerging themes or issues as this will make further research on the subject more logical and organized. This may entail much hard work because there is a dearth of published materials in the country about nation branding, but this will give an impetus on future research agendas on the matter.

2. It would be interesting to conduct empirical studies to determine the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the different dimensions in Anholt's framework and to determine the relationship of these dimensions to one another. The use of quantitative approaches can further validate the inductive qualitative findings of this study.

3. Relative to the aforementioned recommendation, a mixed method is suggested to further improve this study. The qualitative aspect will retain the scope of this study. The quantitative component would examine two variables: the pandemic and Ansoff's dimensions. The intent is to measure the extent of the impact of the pandemic on Ansoff's six dimensions using a particular statistical measurement tool.

4. Research on design, particularly in the domain of visual branding such as logos and taglines, focusing on

the authentic Filipino identity, would be valuable in the fields of arts and design. This could gain traction, especially if studied in conjunction with the tourism dimension of nation branding.

5. The development of strategic models or frameworks in nation branding, following the tradition of grounded theory, is another avenue that can be explored in future studies on the subject matter, especially in the area of policymaking, taking into account sustainability and competitiveness.

6. Conducting research on place branding not only at the national level but also at the regional or local level is another interesting facet of study to be considered. The country's different regions, cities, and municipalities can be used as subjects in the study benefiting LGUs. Furthermore, it is suggested that place branding studies could be conducted at a higher level through collaborative research with regional counterparts in the ASEAN or Asian region, of which the Philippines are a member.

7. Limitations and Further Study

The study focused on assessing how the Philippines' brand was impacted by the pandemic, primarily anchoring on Anholt's nation brand model. The research was initiated and completed at the time of the pandemic, resulting in constraints on data collection and gathering as the interviews were conducted online. This occurred when the country was still under prolonged quarantine due to the pandemic. The findings and recommendations of this investigation are predicated on data collected from 10 key informants who participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and secondary data derived from extant literature. The descriptive case study method was used.

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Ethical Declaration

The researcher took the responsibility of keeping the informants' data private in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 in the Philippines. All participants signed an informed consent form.

The researcher refrained from coercing any unwilling participants to respond to the interview questions. The researcher ensured that participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, while also elucidating the potential implications of their participation. Of paramount importance, the participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives by furnishing the requisite information pertaining to the subject matter.

No inducement was offered to the informants. Their participation was voluntary. The interview was made

objective as much as possible by removing biases and prejudices that the researcher might have. The researcher observed and recorded the behaviors and activities and did not attempt to change them to suit the study and its purposes.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide and Questions

By answering the questions in this written interview, you agree that your answers and comments will be used for academic research purposes only. Your private information will be kept confidential in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Please be assured that the information you share is secured and will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

Demographic Information:

- Full Name
- Age
- Birthday
- Address
- Marital Status
- Occupation
- Type of Industry/Sector

This section determines the impact of the pandemic on you and your organization. Further explanation of your answers would be very helpful.

1. Did the pandemic affect you personally? If yes, then how?

2. Did the pandemic affect your employment? If yes, then how?

3. Did the pandemic affect your organization? If so, how?

4. Are you satisfied with the actions taken by the government to control the pandemic? Why or why not?

5. What are your suggestions or recommendations to the government regarding handling COVID-19?

6. What should the government focus in this crisis be?

This section considers your views on country branding. Further explanation of your answers would be very helpful.

7. Are you aware of “country branding”? If yes, how did you hear about it? If no, let me share with you what country branding means. It refers to the application of marketing strategies by a country to achieve a distinct image and international reputation by considering various factors such as its political dimension, culture, and character traits of its population.

8. Do you think the pandemic has affected the branding of the Philippines? If so, then how?

9. Have you heard about Anholt’s nation brand index (NBI)? If yes, how did you learn about it?

10. In case you have not heard about Anholt’s NBI, it is an analytical tool that assesses the international reputation of nations across six dimensions: governance, people, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, tourism and exports.

Among these different dimensions in country branding based on Anholt’s NBI, which would you consider to have been severely affected in the country by the pandemic and why?

- ___ Culture and Heritage
- ___ Exports
- ___ Governance
- ___ Immigration and Investment
- ___ People
- ___ Tourism

Pls. feel free to explain why you consider such dimension(s) to have been severely impacted by the pandemic.

11. Besides these six dimensions, are there any other dimensions or variables that you think should be considered in country branding, especially considering the pandemic? Why?

12. Based on how the Philippine government dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, did your perception of the country’s brand change? If so, was it better or worse? Why?

13. The country has been impacted by the pandemic in many ways. Going back to Anholt’s six dimensions, which of these different dimensions in country branding based on Anholt’s NBI would you consider important in the post-pandemic era and why?

- ___ Culture
- ___ Exports
- ___ Governance
- ___ Immigration and Investment
- ___ People
- ___ Tourism

Pls. feel free to explain why you consider this dimension important during the post-pandemic.

14. Do you think the government is doing enough in terms of country branding? Why or why not?

15. In the area of investment, where should the government focus and why?

- ___ Institutions
- ___ Infrastructure
- ___ Macroeconomic development
- ___ Health and primary education
- ___ Higher education and training
- ___ Goods and market efficiency
- ___ Labor market efficiency
- ___ Financial market development
- ___ Technological readiness
- ___ Market size
- ___ Business sophistication
- ___ Innovation
- ___ Others (Please specify)

Pls. feel free to explain why you consider it important.

16. Do you think country branding is a government responsibility? Why or why not?

17. What suggestions or strategies can you give to the government (and to the private sector if you think it should be involved) in the area of country branding?