

Research series

# Nation and Place Branding Impact on Place Economies

Technical report I:

What constitutes perceptions  
about countries and global cities?

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Bloom Consulting  
[www.bloom-consulting.com](http://www.bloom-consulting.com)  
[contact@bloom-consulting.com](mailto:contact@bloom-consulting.com)

Palma 14, 1 Izq. Ext.  
28004 Madrid, Spain

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# Foreword

Welcome to the first part of the exciting study that challenges the so far unanswered question within the field of Nation Branding and Place Branding — how to measure the proactive effort that goes into managing a nation or place brand?

The study aims to develop a common framework for measuring the impact of Nation and Place Branding on a place's economy.

Nation Branding and Place Branding is the systematic and coherent management of perceptions surrounding a country, nation, or city that is inherent of political and social domains. In other words, Nation Branding and City Branding pursue not only economic goals but also offer governance tools for developing territories through social, cultural, and environmental policies.

While branding as an instrument has become almost a must-have within territory development and governance agendas, conceptual debates about Nation Branding continue to proliferate among academics and place brand professionals.

Although there is no consensus on how to define Nation Branding and Place Brands and measure its impact, the fact is that we live in a world where countries are being urged to find new ways to stand out and distinguish themselves in the global race for talent, investment, and tourism attraction. This new reality undeniably calls for a comprehensive measurement tool to help build resilient Place Brands, and guide policies and actions.

This study will be useful for nation, region, and city managers, governors, and Place Brand professionals, while also contributing to the theoretical debates with its distinctive methodology based on collaboration between academics, consultants, and practitioners in Nation and Place Branding.

## **Collaborations (or partnerships) and Academic Advisory Board**

This research has been carried out by Bloom Consulting with:

- I. The collaboration of **City Nation Place** in the recruiting of the experts in the sample, and
- II. The technical support of Welphi, a research company specializing in the Delphi method and
- III. Under the scientific supervision of an Academic Advisory Board composed by José Fernández-Cavia (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Sara Vinyals-Mirabent (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and Valeriano Piñeiro-Naval (Universidad de Salamanca)
- IV. All Countries, Regions and Cities who participated on this study.

Kind regards,



José Filipe Torres  
CEO, Bloom Consulting  
Global Director for Nation and Place Branding

## About the study

### Perception, Nation Branding and Place Branding

When talking about perceptions of Countries, Cities and Places in general, we refer to the concept of a place as a social construct (Lefebvre, 1991) that is represented through several dimensions: social practices, how people perceive a place through senses, and what mental concept they have of a place or how they conceive it.

At the same time, nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2006) being constructed through national discourses. However, we argue that they may also have physical representations through places (cities, regions etc.), policies, and actions that convey national stories — that is something that a person can experience.

Given those theoretical premises, we apply the perception concept to Nation Branding and Place Branding theory and practice. We understand it as a mental concept being constructed and re-constructed through what people hear and learn about a nation or place (the discourses) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how people experience them, or what they feel through direct interaction with a city, region, or country. Of course, it would be wrong to completely separate these two dimensions, since discourses have a huge impact on social practice and vice versa.

Moreover, we argue that perceptions, even though they can revolve purely around image, result in real actions, like decisions to visit, invest or live in a place, and therefore they have real consequences for countries. That is why it is so important to understand how those national discourses are being constructed, and how they interrelate with people's experiences of a place.

### Challenge

Despite the growing popularity of Nation Branding and Place Branding, there is no consensus on what it actually is and its scope in both practice and academia.

From the academia side, conceptual debates around the definition of Nation Branding and Place Branding continue to proliferate, varying from papers in economics and marketing to urban studies, sustainability, political, cultural, and social sciences. While such an interdisciplinary approach to conceptualization is no doubt necessary, it raises the challenge of how to measure the impact of Nation Branding and Place Branding or City Branding on societies and economies, and what methods and indicators to employ. Approximately twelve thousand academic papers exist on Nation Branding and Place Branding or City Branding, but only 0,1% of them touch upon the topic of measurement.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as an instrument, Nation Branding and Place Branding or City Branding has become an almost must-have on territory development and governance agendas. However, it is still commonly reduced to logos and, in the best-case scenario, promotional activities.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to the dialogue between Nation Branding and Place Branding or City Branding theory and practice, offering a tool for measuring Nation and Place Branding efforts guided by an interdisciplinary approach. The challenge was to deconstruct the good/bad binary approach to how nations are perceived, define what elements build these perceptions, and how they can be managed in a way to facilitate export, tourism, and talent and investment attraction.

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<sup>1</sup>Estimated number based on international academic resources with articles published on the country brand.

## Objectives of the study

First of all, it is important to highlight that this study is a collaborative effort that involved industry professionals from all over the world. This was crucial in overcoming the usual dichotomy between theory that produces knowledge, which is very often detached from how things happen in practice, and practice that omits the theoretical perspective.

The study has three objectives:

- I. **Define what constitutes perceptions.**
- II. Understand how much positive perceptions of a place impact its economic or social performance.
- III. Discover potential correlations between the proactive efforts in managing a nation or place brand and the nation or place's economic performance.

This first report touches upon the **first objective**, which is to define a taxonomy of perceptions.

## Methodology

Firstly, the Bloom Consulting team and researchers from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and Universidad de Salamanca carried out desk research to identify the potential taxonomy of perceptions. This was based on a literature review, as well as Nation Branding, Place Branding, City Branding practices and indexes that measure country and place development, such as OECD and WEF resources.

The literature recap touches upon two interrelated research and theoretic disciplines that correspond with Nation Branding, Place Branding:

- Nation-building: sociological and anthropological perspectives on national discourses, policymaking, and national and international development.
- Place (city, destination, country, region, etc.) Branding: place identity, place narratives, placemaking.

Given the range of Place Branding types (Destination, City, Regional, Country Branding etc.), the current taxonomy is intended mainly for evaluating Nation Brands. The Perception Elements may be applied to regions and cities, however, as the results of the study showed, they may require additional adjustments to address the specifics of these places.

The initial taxonomy served as a base for the Delphi panel — an instrument that meets the objectives of the collaborative approach to the study.

## Delphi process

The aim of this digital Delphi panel was to collect experts' views on the **Perception Elements** — the elements that contribute to changing people's perceptions towards regions, countries, and cities. The Delphi method is regarded as a structured group communication process that allows a group of experts to move forward on a complex problem (Linstone, H. A., Turoff, M., 1975). Briefly, every Delphi process consists of a series of questionnaires deployed in several rounds in which the experts (also referred to as participants, panelists, or respondents) complete the questionnaires. Between each round, the group responses are summarized and fed back to the participants (Hasson, F., Keeney, S., McKenna, H., 2000).

Therefore, the key aspects that characterize the Delphi process are:

- I. Controlled feedback,
- II. Iteration, given that the questionnaire is iterated over a few rounds by allowing respondents to modify their judgements,
- III. Anonymity, since the questionnaires are filled in in private, thus avoiding peer pressure (Rowe, G., Wright, G., 2001).

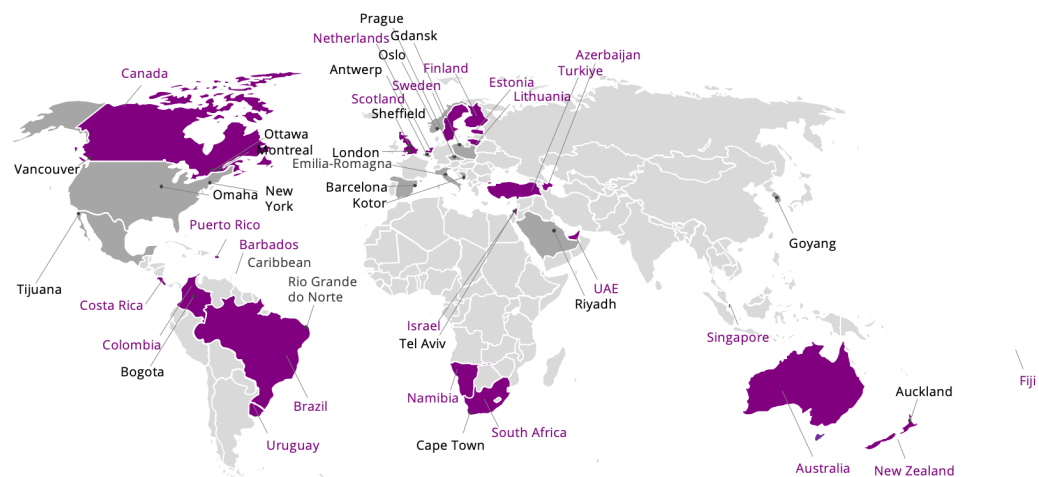
These features enable involving a high number of diverse and geographically dispersed experts (Bana e Costa, C. A. et al. 2023; Landeta, J., 2006, Freitas, Å. et al., 2018) which was deemed appropriate in our context.

## Participants/experts

Given the international scope of this study, we aimed to select participants from a broad range of nationalities while also trying to maintain a balance between different regions.

Additionally, we paid special attention to ensuring that participants' expertise related to the different *Perception Elements* is diverse.

Figure 1 illustrates the complete list of countries, regions, and cities of the study's participants/ experts.



The questions were anonymously answered by 47 experts, all of them Nation, Destination and Place brand managers of countries (23), regions (4) and cities (20) from all over the world.

## Delphi process in detail

We conducted the Delphi questionnaire online using the Welphi platform ([www.welphi.com](http://www.welphi.com)). The questionnaire was designed to be carried out in two rounds to reach a recommended level of agreement of no less than 70%<sup>2</sup>. The goal of the first round was to define a list of *Perception Elements* with which to proceed to the subsequent round that aimed to define a consensual list of *Perception Elements*.

### Outcomes of Round 1

In the first round, we presented participants with the list of 12 *Perception Elements* created by Bloom Consulting and its academic partners. We then asked them to comment, for example, by proposing changes to the *Perception Elements*, and to add any new items they believed were missing from the list. After analyzing the information that the participants provided in the first round, the initial list of *Perception Elements* was updated, leading to a revised list of 13 *Perception Elements*.

### Outcomes of Round 2

This list was then used to structure the second round, in which participants had to indicate whether they agree that the Perception Element “may constitute general perception of a country, nation, region or city” (*How much do you agree or disagree that each of the elements (Perception Elements) may constitute general perception of a country, nation, region or city. Please express your level of agreement for each Perception Element*).

Participants could respond by means of a 5-level Likert scale [8] with answers ranging from *Totally Agree* to *Totally Disagree*. Additionally, they could indicate *Unable to rate*. As in the first round, participants could also add comments whenever they felt the need to.

Here are some examples of the comments received:

**Governance and Internal Policies:** “Applies mostly for countries, and in particular the well-known/important ones. In my opinion, the less well-known the country, the less this influences the perception.” (Representative of a public institution of international relations)

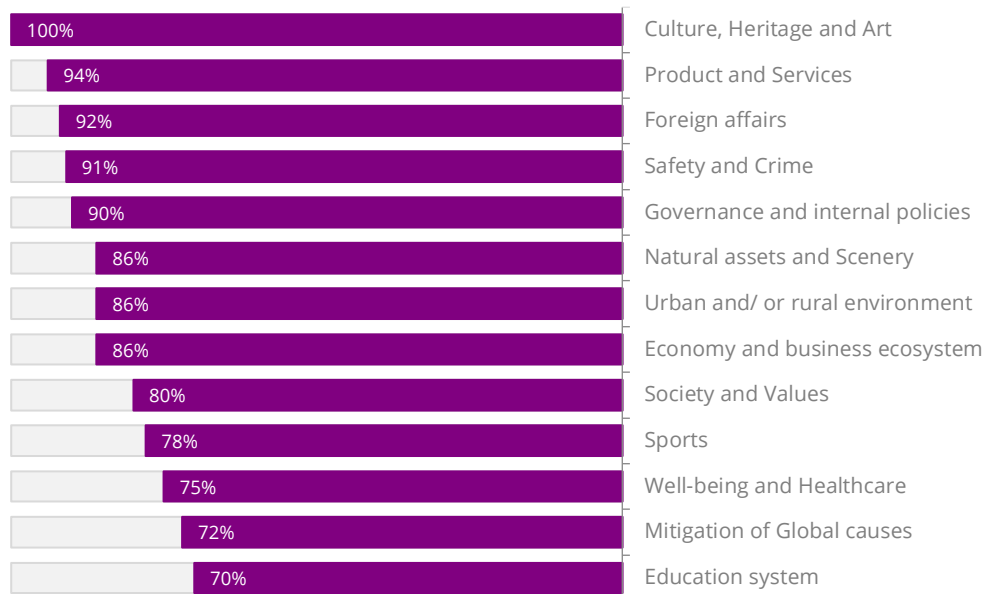
**Well-being and Healthcare:** “The health service and health of people is a good addition; however, I suspect it will be difficult for individuals to be able to know and assess this... Perhaps it is more about access to healthcare and good living conditions and infrastructure such as clean water, quality housing, power, sanitary systems rather than aspects such as mental health.” (Respondent responsible for marketing and insights for a Nation Branding institution)

**Product and Services:** “This is key, with innovations, experience and uniqueness becoming increasingly important as a decision driver” (Representative of a public institution for tourism promotion)

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<sup>2</sup> Based on a review of benchmark studies that also used Delphi method

Figure 2 illustrates the complete list of elements that impact perceptions about a place.



(The percentages indicate the sum of *Totally Agree* and *Agree* responses.)

With 100% agreement, the most agreed-upon element is **Culture** in a broad sense. This includes art, heritage, traditions, gastronomy, history, and relevant characters. It is the only element to achieve absolute assent, receiving 69% *Totally Agree* and 31% *Agree* responses.

**Product and Services** (94% agreement) are the second-most agreed-upon element, and are judged in terms of quality, authenticity, and level of innovation. So, in this case, perception stems from how one rates a place's commercial offering.

The only other three elements that exceed 90% agreement are **Foreign Affairs** (public diplomacy, international presence, political leaders, foreign policies), **Safety and Crime** (taking into account the relevance of conflicts, security, terrorism, police brutality, jurisdiction, political stability, and digital security) and **Governance and Internal Policies** (comprising, as well the level of transparency, the quality of the legal system, political leaders, or public policies).

Some elements received between 80% and 90% agreement, and these are: **Economy and Business Ecosystem** (business culture, labor market, legal system, financial services, etc.) **Urban and/or Rural Environment** (quality of public and living spaces, water availability, pollution rate, quality of public transport and services, city resilience, inclusive public spaces, etc.), **Natural Assets and Scenery** (landscapes, natural reserves, national parks, flora, fauna, aquatic ecosystem, etc.) and **Society and Values** (inclusiveness, solidarity, hospitality).

Other elements are **Sports** (78% agreement), **Well-being and Healthcare** (75%), **Mitigation of Global Causes** (72%), and **Education System** (70%).



# Study results

## Take-aways and study limitations

### **Definition of a framework**

The first objective of the “Nation Branding and Place Branding impact on place economies and societies” study — to define what constitutes perceptions about countries and cities — allowed establishing a framework for further research. The framework allows deconstructing a nation's image, measuring its distinctive elements, and understanding exactly what impacts a country's reputation.

Further reports will address the other objectives — measuring the weight of each *Perception Element*, and how positive perceptions about a place impact its economic or social performance. The Perception Elements themselves serve as a guide to later define the policies required to improve the general perception of a country, region, or city.

### **Different scales and perceptions**

One of the outcomes from the Delphi panel was that, given the specifics of a city, especially when it comes to place governance, the *Perception Elements* cannot be fully applied to the city scale. Although the panel proved the initial hypothesis that certain *Perception Elements* should be adjusted to specific scales, most of the *Perception Elements* are applicable to places of any scale, from city to country. Still, the interpretation for cities might differ, and that is why we launched a distinctive study for global cities.

### **Comprehensive yet flexible tool for measurement**

Although the *Perception Elements* model can be applied to various scales and cases, it is important to consider certain factors when evaluating and interpreting perceptions. As we saw from the different levels of agreement in the Delphi panel, not all Perception Elements have an equal influence on general perception. For example, Mitigation of Global Causes is more volatile and depends on how nations respond to the global events and challenges like pandemics, climate change, poverty and inequality issues.

Thus, it is crucial to measure the type of perception to understand whether a country's real efforts in the field are actually reaching key audiences. Moreover, certain *Perception Elements* may be of high importance to certain countries due to ongoing political or social situations, while others may have different priorities.

### **A step towards reaching industry consensus**

Apart from providing a comprehensive tool for measurement, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical debates around Nation Branding, Place Branding or City Branding. The distinctive methodology developed together with academics is based on a collaborative approach that derives neither purely from expert opinions, nor academic theories, but rather creates a theory together with place stakeholders, drawing from their insights. Thus, the study and its results are validated by academia — researchers from leading universities, as well as practitioners — Country, Region, and City Branding managers from around the world.

## 13 Perception Elements

Here we present the final taxonomy of *Perception Elements – The Bloom Consulting Nation Brand Taxonomy Model* © - that constitute how **countries** are perceived. This model can be used by Nation Branding professionals to measure the impact of their efforts, track how perceptions change over time, and what other factors influence these changes (for example, how certain crises influence certain perceptions).

Figure 3 illustrates the complete list of elements that impact perceptions about a place and approach to measure each of them based on the 5-level scale 1- Extremely negative 2 - Negative 3 - Moderately positive 4 - Positive 5 - Extremely positive.

The Bloom Consulting Nation Brand Taxonomy Model ©



2023 © Bloom Consulting - Any Country, Region, or City is welcome to use this model.

## 13 Perception Elements in detail

**Perception Element 1: Governance and internal policies**

Transparency, Legal system, Political leaders, Public policies

**Perception Element 2: Foreign Affairs**

Public diplomacy, International presence, Political leaders, Foreign policies

**Perception Element 3: Mitigation of Global causes**

Poverty, Inequalities, Peace, Nature conservation, Sustainable development goals etc.

**Perception Element 4: Economy and Business Ecosystem**

Business culture, Labour market, Legal system, Financial services etc.

**Perception Element 5: Product and Services**

Quality, Authenticity, Innovations

**Perception Element 6: Culture, Heritage & Art**

Traditions, Art scene, Gastronomy, Historic events and Personas, Tangible and intangible Heritage

**Perception Element 7: Sports**

Sport teams, Athletes, Celebrities, Sports culture

**Perception Element 8: Urban and/or rural environment**

Quality of public and living spaces, Water availability, Pollution rate, Quality of public transport and services, City resilience, Inclusive public spaces, etc.

**Perception Element 9: Natural assets and Scenery**

Landscapes, Natural reserves, National Parks, Flora, Fauna, Aquatic ecosystem, etc.

**Perception Element 10: Education System**

Accessibility of educational institutions, Public engagement in science, Digital literacy etc.

**Perception Element 11: Society and Values**

Inclusiveness, Solidarity, Hospitality

**Perception Element 12: Well-being and Healthcare**

Public Health infrastructure, Life expectancy, Mental health services, Access to medical assistance

**Perception Element 13: Safety and Crime**

Conflicts, Security, Terrorism, Police brutality, Jurisdiction, Political stability, Digital security etc.

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## Contact

Research performed by:

### Bloom Consulting

Countries Regions and Cities

Operating since 2003

#### Experts in:

- Nation Branding and Place Branding
- Nation and Place Analytics
- Placemaking

[contact@bloom-consulting.com](mailto:contact@bloom-consulting.com)

[www.bloom-consulting.com](http://www.bloom-consulting.com)

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