NATION BRANDING IN ALBANIAN 2018 PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *In this paper, I discuss some of the 2018 promotional materials produced by the Albanian National Tourism Agency. With the increased number of tourists visiting Albania every year, the promotion of tourism has been given great attention by the Albanian governments during the last decade. In this context, serious attempts have been made to create effective and appealing promotional materials to attract tourists from all over the world. By looking into 2018 promotional materials, mainly information brochures, from the semiotic perspective, I intend to read them as nation branding attempts. For this analysis, I will focus on the linguistic and visual contents of these materials and try to point out how the collection of signs and symbols marking national identity and the discourse accompanying it enable semiotic conditions and create the semiosis of nation branding.*

Keywords: nation branding; promotional materials; semitiocs; semiosphere; semiosis

1. INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Communism in the 1990s, Albania became a reachable destination for many people, who at the beginning visited the country out of a sense of curiosity about its past. Most of them were people who worked for different organizations, diplomatic missions or other similar bodies that had settled in Albania to help its people and governments towards the new path of democracy. Visitors soon discovered that Albania was a beautiful and unexplored country with very intriguing tourist sites to see, with a nice and long coastline and overpowering mountains. This gradually turned the country into a targeted destination for many tourists. So, interest in visiting Albania gradually changed in terms of reasons, opportunities, experiences, preferences and a lot of other things. Obviously, these changes cannot be understood in isolation. In today's world marked by globalization, internationalization, migration and other similar phenomena that enable the movement of people for many various reasons, the need to ostentatiously reveal and promote what one's country has to offer to see is important. What is more, the advancement of technology, especially of information and communication technology, social media, in particular, has empowered public sector communication, thus aiding many enterprises, companies, governmental bodies,

organizations to inform their audiences in real time. In this multidimensional and mobile context, most countries have a nation brand, which they use to single themselves out as a destination to be reached. Albania is no exception in this regard. The increased number of people visiting the country each year has acquired the attention of Albanian governments over the past decade with tourism being prioritized as a major economic sector. In this regard, the promotion of tourism has been particularly emphasized especially in the past couple of years. The Albanian Tourism Agency, originally named the Albanian Tourism Entity in May 2005 and renamed with the current name in 2007, is a unit of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment whose main aim is the promotion of tourism in Albania.

The question then arises what reasons are there for Albania to nation brand. The initial reason for creating a nation brand can be viewed as embedded in the larger post-Communist context and as part of the attempts of all former Communist countries to do away with their past Communist heritage. As Cheregi (2017:28) points out in her examination of the case of nation branding in Romania after 1989, "[…] in transition countries, nation branding is often mentioned because of the constant need to reconfigure national identity by dissociating it from the communist past. If in Western Europe nation branding is an instrument connected to state

power, which uses branding practices to promote the image of a nation in a positive way, in Eastern Europe nation branding is an instrument used to promote the reconfiguration of the political landscape." The attempts of the Albanian governments to brand Albania should also be viewed in the framework of a globalized world, and, as it will be indicated below in the explanation of the winning brand logo and slogan, as an attempt to achieve uniqueness. These attempts should also be read within the integration process. The country is struggling hard to become part of the EU and as such the attempts can as well be viewed within this context. Last but not list, branding, a term initially used in marketing and related to shopping, is made to convince consumers that they are buying a good and unique product that produces long-lasting effects (Kotler et al., 1993, 1997, 1999; Olins, 1999, 2006).

In this context, in 2014 the Albanian government commissioned an international contest "Branding Albania" to invite applications for designing a logo and a slogan that would speak for the country, would mark the country's national identity, would be unique and also make tourists curious to visit Albania. StrawberryFrog APCO won the competition with the following logo and slogan (cf. Figure 1):

Fig.1. The Albanian brand logo and slogan.
(Source: Visit Albania.)

In the idea description provided for this competition, the company pointed out that this logo and slogan were meant for people who "seek experiences, and different, and uniquely their own. […] go their own way, in every sense of the word. And by going their own way, more and more, they will be coming to a new Albania"[1]. The then minister of tourism, in her speech, on the occasion of announcing this competition, pointed out the importance of brand as a powerful and innovative tool for marketing a place and added that the competition "Branding Albania" was meant to change the country's image, to reflect the people's vitality and energy, culture, heritage, and hospitality through a representative slogan (Kurani, 2014). In

Cambridge International AS and A Level Travel and Tourism Coursebook the Albanian logo and slogan was taken as a realistic example of "a brand that is consistent with the destination's positioning" (Stewart, Warburton, Smith, 2017: 124).

Besides this logo, what else do tourists get? How is the country promoted through the official webpage of the Albanian Tourism Agency? In arguing about it, I will adopt the semiotic approach as more appropriate for interpreting nation brands because "it allows the architect to be cognisant of the fact that each sign or symbol has a preordained construct of meaning(s) from the onlooker's own social system" (Nepia, 2013:30). I will draw on cultural semiotics, more precisely, Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, which I will summarily explain below, because I find it relevant since the argument is embedded in the context of cross-cultural communication.

As far as the methodology is concerned, I will conduct some content analysis, more precisely I will examine the contents of the promotional materials published by the Albanian National Tourism Agency in 2018. My intention is to see how and whether the promotional materials manage to keep up with the "branding Albania" attempts so strongly promoted by the Albanian government and so nicely put in the brand logo. I will view these attempts in the context of destination branding rather than the more general context of place branding because as I pointed out, I am particularly interested in investigating the attempts to promote and nation brand Albania from the tourist perspective rather than from the more holistic country perspective. What is more, I am particularly interested in what makes the Albanian brand unique, that is, I will read their contents in terms of identifying those identity markers that distinguish this brand from others. Since destination branding is a way to communicate a destination's identity as unique compared to others (Morrison and Anderson, 2002), emphasizing here two functions of destination branding, namely, identification and differentiation (Qu, Kim, Him 2011:466), I find it pertinent to embed this discussion in the framework of destination branding attempts.

2. THE SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO NATION BRANDING

As I mentioned earlier, for the purposes of this analysis, I will adopt the semiotic approach. That the use of semiotics for analysing tourist or promotional materials and texts is not new has already been

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[1] Albania: Go your own way. http://newalbania.tumblr.com/.

pointed out by scholars as early as the 1990s (Pearce, 1991; Echtner, 1999; Dann, 1996; Mehmetoglu & Dann, 2003; Sternberg, 1997; MacCannell, 1999). When travelling to new and unknown destinations, tourists try to understand or make sense of what they see, what they are told, what they are shown. These are quite commonly representations of that country's or destination's identity. National identity markers that make reference to a country's national symbols, events, cultural heritage and other associations or representations of that country's uniqueness are crucial for branding a nation successfully in order to attract international visitors from all over the world. I should underline here that, in this article, I refer to nation brand and nation branding as two different concepts, with *nation brand* standing for a visual symbol, brand image or a slogan used to market e destination or a country, accompanying all promotional materials about that country and "understood as an advertising sign" (Cheregi, 2017: 29), and *nation branding*, which I have elsewhere defined as "a form of reputation building for a country in order to make itself well-known internationally through the marketing of its own symbols" (Panajoti 2017), and which I discuss here in the context of tourism and in terms of destination branding. Obviously, the two are connected because being an advertising sign, the nation brand "refers to certain meanings and national symbols" (Cheregi, 2017: 29), whereas "nation branding campaigns mobilize a symbolic universe, based on types of national identity discourses and cultural symbols" (Cheregi, 2017: 29), so both engage the semiotic sphere for their discussion. It is important at this stage to distinguish between *national identity*, those features and characteristics that distinguish one nation from another and that collectively identity the people belonging to that nation, *nation branding*, the "process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience" (Fan, 2010: 101)[2], and nation's image, which is a negotiable construct as it regards perceptions and definitions of a nation by people from other countries, but which can be adjusted and readjusted depending on how this image is communicated to them. Fan (2010) summarily puts the relationship between them as follows:

National identity →Nation branding ↔ Nation's image
(*Self perception*) (*Nation brand identity*) (*Perception by others*)

[2] I favour Fan's emerging definition in his 2010 article on nation branding exactly because he sees it as a process.

Fig.2. Fan's distinctions of the three concepts.

Tourism promotion relies on the use of national identity markers to sustain a country's national identity and so build its brand.

Since my reading will be based on the identification of national identity markers, herein briefly defined as those sings corresponding and contributing to singling out a destination from others to tourists worldwide, the reading of promotional materials from the semiotic perspective is more than justifiable. As Saussure remarks, "The relation between a signifier and its signified is not a matter of individual choice; if it were then communication would become impossible. 'The individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in the linguistic community' […]" (qtd. in Chandler, 2007: 27). So, each of these markers or signs enacts two things, signification and communication, which makes the semiotic approach even more appropriate as it integrates both.

Indeed, nation branding has been approached from various semiotic perspectives, spatial, social, modal, as listed by Cheregi (2017:29). For the purposes of this analysis, I will adopt the cultural semiotic perspective, more precisely draw on the concept of semiosphere, which owes much to Lotman and which he sees as the "semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" and "outside [which], there can be neither communication, nor language" (2001) [1990]:123-124). It is "the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist" (Lotman, 2005 [1984]:208).

Although several other forms of defining the semiosphere exist (Kull, 2005; Kotov, 2005; Torop 2005), I will draw on Lotman's definition, which views the semiosphere as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of advertising discourses and as the space of meaning generation" (Cheregi, 2017:31; emphasis in original). I adopt Lotman's perspective because he relies heavily on the concept of translation, which he defines as the process of receiving information. Lotman's thinking draws on bicentrality and emphasizes the presence of external elements, which stay at the periphery. From his perspective, every culture (semiosphere) needs another culture to define its essence and limits. Therefore, the margins are very important.

In this regard, two more concepts are important for this analysis, *semiotic borders*, which function as translating mechanisms and *semiosis*, which is the process of translation (meaning making). The

borders have a double function, they serve as dividing lines and as filters for external elements entering the semiosphere.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will try to look into the signs and symbols that enable semiotic conditions, the advertising discourses as systems of signs, all of which collectively create the semiosphere. The coming together of these systems towards the creation of the semiosphere will be graphically represented in the following manner, which I have adapted from Ndalianis (2014)[3]:
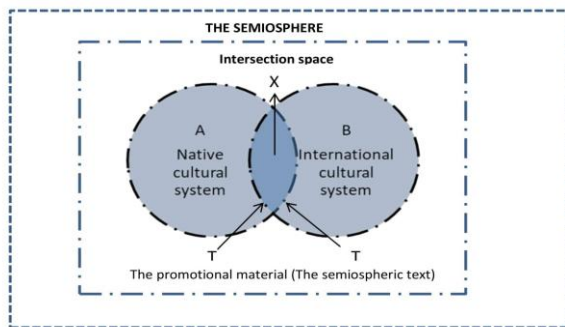

Fig.3. The creation of the semiosphere.

The diagram, which will be used for the interpretation of promotional materials, represents the intersection of two cultural systems, the native and the international, which interact when potential visitors to a destination read or see these materials. I have adapted this diagram because it clearly brings together, from a visual perspective, what happens during the creation of the semiosphere, it draws on cross-cultural communication, which is crucial for cultural semiotics, translation (semiosis), and semiotic borders, which are important to understand Lotman's concept of the semiosphere. To briefly explain the diagram, Ndalianis (2014:12-13), drawing on Clark, sees the intersection space as the translation zone. A and B are areas where no dialogue takes place, whereas T[4], the periphery

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[3] She draws on Lotman's theory of explosion and Clark's adaptation of Lotman's model of explosion (2009) to explain how different cultural systems communicate within the semiophere.

[4] Named T after Lotman's 'triviality', an area of mutual comprehension in an act of communication and where no new information is generated. Clark maintains that these periphery areas suffer from a 'flaw of triviality', which "occurs at the point of meeting between two (or more) systems where signs communicate but no dialogue takes place between them [...]; dialogue instead occurs in the space of intersection (X) which is [...] certain signs from A and begins to translate them

areas or the semiotic borders, which divide the two cultural systems and allow external elements belonging to each of the cultural systems to enter the intersection zone. It is here where semiosis or the process of translation takes place. The more inwards the periphery areas are pushed in, the larger the intersection area and the more successful the translation process or semiosis.

3. THE ANALYSIS

I mentioned earlier, for the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on 2018 promotional materials published by the Albanian National Tourism Agency and made available online to national and international audience (http://albania.al/article/57/albanian_national_touri sm_agency_/). Three promotional materials will be analysed here: *UNESCO world heritage sites*, *Religious monuments*, and *Albanian cuisine*. I should mention here that the website of the Agency contains a lot of information accompanied by very nice pictures but for this analysis I will not discuss the contents of the website. I want to focus only on promotional materials that target international audience.

By conducting content analysis, which I find more adequate for this discussion as it is a technique that studies human behavior indirectly through the analysis of our communications, I want to see how effective these materials are in establishing a dialogue with the international audience, what types of national identity markers and adverting discourses they employ, and how the semiosphere is created. The visual and textual contents of these materials will be closely examined to see how they function as systems of signs inside the semiosphere. I will refer to the model proposed for explaining this analysis.

As it was explained earlier, the semiotic border or the periphery is very important for cross-cultural communication, which takes place in the intersection area and which enacts semiosis, the process of translation, and therefore enables dialogue. Nation branding is viewed here as a cultural space occupying the centre of the semiosphere and the audience occupying the periphery. The semiotic borders functioning as translating mechanisms differentiate between the

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into its own semiotic space, thus generating a process of 'resemiotisation' [...].This dialectic, [...], may be understood as a semiospheric text in that it involves a 'space of two or more communicating cultures'. (Ndalianis, 2014:12-13)

native and the international in the process of translating visual and textual signs entering the semiotic space.

Let us see how this is enacted in the three promotional materials. The first one, *UNESCO world heritage sites*, is a promotional material that describes and provides information about Albanian heritage sites in English and in Albanian, which suggests that the information provided is intended for national and international visitors. The information provided is factual and no scenarios or stories can be found here as you can in promotional videos, for instance. Interestingly, no pictures are included here, thus visual signs or images are missing. In their absence, how is the national image promoted?

In my view, the mentioning of UNESCO serves as a translating mechanism which allows the peripheries to push more inwards and enlarge the overlapping zone thus bringing together the two cultural spaces, the native and the international. Announcing the reader that the sites included in this brochure are protected by UNESCO is a sort of label that brands the listed sites and makes them attractive for national and international audiences alike. All four UNESCO-protected Albanian assets are listed here: Butrinti, Gjirokastra, Berati, and the Albanian iso-polyphony. National identity is marked by using factual discourse that makes reference to UNESCO facts about these sites or historical facts relating the places to antiquity. For the first three, information about when these sites were registered as UNESCO-protected sites is provided followed by some information about their old or ancient roots. In the case of the Albanian iso-polyphony, only information about its becoming part of UNESCO-protected heritage is included and no informative description about the Albanian iso-polyphony itself has been provided. Some information about it would have certainly increased the visitors' interest in the polyphony for the simple fact that it is a unique thing in Albania.

The second promotional material to discuss is *Monuments and places of cult*. This document provides an inventory of major religious places to visit in Albania. It lists them by a certain religious order beginning with the churches from the Orthodox religion, continuing with the cathedrals and monasteries from the Catholic religion, then with the tekkes from the Bektashi religion, to finish with the mosques from the Sunni Islam religion. The document is accompanied by the nation brand image "Albania: Go your own way!". The colours used in the nation brand image are also used to contour the document so as to identify the nation brand logo. The information provided here is in English only and pictures of the sites accompany the factual information about the places. Here, the names of religions and their visual representations, that is, the accompanying pictures, serve as translating mechanisms. Unlike the first example in which pictures were missing, despite the fact that I think they would have branded the sites more effectively, in this case, I think the pictures are needed and serve as translating mechanisms for the audience or reader to identify or associate a religious site with a particular religion. What I also think works as a translating mechanism is the order of appearance of these sites. It is the Orthodox sites that are being listed first, which are indeed many, then the Catholic sites and then the Bektashi and the Sunni Muslim sites. Although the statistics from the 2011 Census claim that a large number of the Albanian population is Muslims, these sites are not listed first in the brochure. Two could be the reasons, in my opinion. The writers of these materials could have listed them by the number of sites to be found in Albania corresponding to each religion or that this ordering could have been intended as a demonstration of religious harmony in the country and also as a strategy to fight stereotypes about the country. Religious harmony is indeed emphasized by the authors in the introduction to the brochure: "Along with their complexity, architectonics, historic, and cultural values those will acknowledge and closely see the faith tradition in Albania and also really feel the religious excellent harmony and coexistence that exists for centuries among Albanians." (Albania.al, 2018). That this could be a strategy to fight stereotypes is again notable in the introduction in the sentence: "We hope your visits in these religious sites will enrich your experience in Albania." (Albania.al, 2018) Although the English language used here is not so correct, one can still note the intent in making the potential visitor discover Albania for themselves.

National identity is marked by images of these sites. The information provided is based on discourses that emphasize history and tradition.

The last brochure is about Albanian cuisine. Because Albania is famous among visitors for its traditional food, a brochure featuring traditional dishes could not be missing. On the cover of the brochure, the reader will spot two logos, the "Go your own way!" logo and slogan and the Agency's logo. Inside, before they get to the table of contents, they will see this picture of a traditional dish, which looks like *fergese* contained in a very plain pan and

served in a rather rustic fashion. This picture is tagged by the nation brand logo and slogan.

Fig.4. Picture image for the *Albanian gastronomy* brochure.

Fig.4. Picture image for the dish called *qifqi* (rice balls) with integrated triangles from the nation brand image.

The discourse in the introduction is more like an appeal to the preservation of traditional food and the importance of geographical and historical embeddedness for the cuisine. Next to it, one can spot a branch of olive tree with some olives in it. The picture on the next page again features three small pots containing three different varieties of olives, as if to tempt the reader. The olives, I think, serve as translators. As signs, they allow readers to translate the following messages, that Albania is an olive-growing country and one can find a lot of varieties here, and also that Albania is a Mediterranean country. As to national identity, the discourse in this introductory part highlights the country's climate, geography, favourable position and location, characteristics, cooking habits, utensils, types of food, sweets and herbs. One can spot here the accompanying pictures of a bunch of parsley and of some peach compost. Wine and other typical drinks with accompanying pictures of a bottle of wine and of some grapes as the typical fruit for producing this drink follow. Some typical dishes are introduced with accompanying pictures under a title "A mixtue from Gods" before one gets to a presentation of typical dishes by region. Dishes from Northern, Middle and Southern Albania are presented with accompanying pictures and thorough explanations. In one case, a recipe has also been provided, that of a dish called *qifqi*. Elements of the nation brand image are nicely introduced in the brochure as in the picture below or on the edges of each page.

As for the national identity discourse, it emphasizes tradition, region, climate, geography and taste. The pictures contained here are better taken than the ones in the previous brochure and serve as translating mechanisms for the reader who can recognize known ingredients from the pictures. The information provided is extensive and informative, sometimes interpretative aiming towards luring the reader to visit the country and enjoy the food, thus particularly branding food in Albania.

Of the three brochures, the last one integrates semiotic elements more successfully, though more traditional dishes could have been introduced in the brochure.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I tried to demonstrate that analyzing promotional materials from a cultural semiotic perspective is important to understand how nation brands can be constructed, what symbols and discourses are used to mark identity, and make out the country as a destination to visit, thus reinforce its brand. For the purposes of this analysis, I focused on three promotional materials published in 2018 by the Albanian National Tourism Agency. The cultural semiotic approach, Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, and an illustrative model of the concept were adopted for the purposes of this analysis. The contents of the three promotional materials were closely analysed, namely the signs and the discourses employed in order to illustrate how the semiosphere was created. From the analysis, it was noted that signs that appeal to prior knowledge of the potential visitor or that can help create immediate associations were used in order to aid cross-cultural communication. To use Lotman's perspective, these signs, visual or textual, namely, the mentioning of UNESCO, the pictures of

religious sites, the olives, the well-known dish ingredients served as translating mechanisms and pushed the borders more inwards to create semiosis and establish cultural dialogue. Nation branding was further sustained by a discourse that was primarily factual but that drew mainly on history, fact-related descriptions, geography, antiquity in order to highlight national identity.

In the end, it can be said that the semiotic approach proved fruitful to analyse the promotional materials introduced here, but it should be added that more research needs to be carried out in this field by analysing not only more promotional materials but also other forms of nation branding attempts. In my view, it would be beneficial for this type of studies to find the way to include the visitors' perspectives for analysis and then compare the different cultural perspectives on the matter.

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