
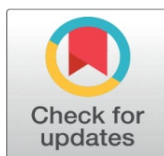


# SINGAPORE: A CITY, A STORY, A BRAND

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## ABSTRACT

Singapore or the little red dot, a small city-state which has positioned itself in such a way that everyone imagines it to be a land of technological innovation, this proves that a country can also be a brand. Building a new identity is the ultimate goal for branding which helps any business or a product to be accepted or sold faster than others this concept can also be applied nations with the concept of "Nation branding". This nation branding is important for every country just like how important it is in the corporate world. Nation branding is relatively a new concept coined by Simon Anholt in 1996, it suggests that the reputation of a country behaves, rather like the brand images of companies and products. As such, a nation's brand can have a significant bearing on its prosperity, welfare, and effective administration. (Murphy, 2022). There is a common conception that a nation projects itself to be a better brand than others to promote tourism but its often more than just tourism sometimes a country would want to gain political and economic attention or to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) or to erase past misconceptions or when a country is transitioning from an age old political or economic stance or to showcase its uniqueness from others. But moreover nation branding increases the Competitive Advantage of a nation, encompassing many sectors, including attracting tourists, investors, entrepreneurs, and foreign consumers of a country's products and services. (Dinnie, 2008).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore or the little red dot, a small city-state which has positioned itself in such a way that everyone imagines it to be a land of technological innovation, this proves that a country can also be a brand. Building a new identity is the ultimate goal for branding which helps any business or a product to be accepted or sold faster than others this concept can also be applied nations with the concept of "Nation branding". This nation branding is important for every country just like how important it is in the corporate world. Nation branding is relatively a new concept coined by Simon Anholt in 1996, it suggests that the reputation of a country behaves, rather like the brand images of companies and products. As such, a nation's brand can have a significant bearing on its prosperity, welfare, and effective

administration. [Murphy \(2022\)](#). There is a common conception that a nation projects itself to be a better brand than others to promote tourism but its often more than just tourism sometimes a country would want to gain political and economic attention or to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) or to erase past misconceptions or when a country is transitioning from an age old political or economic stance or to showcase its uniqueness from others. But moreover nation branding increases the Competitive Advantage of a nation, encompassing many sectors, including attracting tourists, investors, entrepreneurs, and foreign consumers of a country's products and services. [Dinnie \(2008\)](#).

However Nation branding is different from corporate branding in a way that unlike corporates which mostly controlled by a single authority while nations will have multiple stakeholders feeding and working towards the branding process where the general public is also one of the stakeholders contributing to nation branding without their knowledge. [Murphy \(2022\)](#), [Viktorin et al. \(2018\)](#) points out the various examples at different times like during the Cold War how the United States organised various art exhibition to improve its image. They trace United States' branding to the time of civil war like how nation branding should be internal first to build that cohesive society within the country. Singapore is one such nation, which started of by building the brand internally and then moved on to focus more on building the brand for the external audience. [Koh \(2017\)](#) argues that

there would be no Singapore without branding, immediately after its independence Singapore

started the branding process. Initially, it was treated like a commercial brand and through its number of policies and initiatives, Singapore started to shape its brand internally as a cohesive society that is secular in nature. This was not an overnight transformation, Singapore carefully crafted this idea through its various policies, mainly with multiculturalism as its cornerstone.

## 2. AESTHETICS IN NATION BRANDING: ARCHITECTURE

Branding the nation began immediately after attaining self government in 1959 and also when it got separated from Malaysia in 1965. Singapore had to bring something new to the global stage considering that it was transitioning from a colonial background and also from being merged with Malaysia for some years. Initially it started with attracting foreign investment as mentioned above but other than that it had to build its brand from scratch. Since at that time it was known as a cultural dessert because of its lack of indigenous culture. Thanks to internal branding of Singapore in the 1960s this challenge was slowly fading. Now the existing challenge was the external branding for that their solution was to add a touch of Singaporeanness to whatever they did, beginning from tourism.

One of the earliest and most recognisable symbols of this branding strategy was the creation of the Merlion, a national icon that encapsulates Singapore's historical identity and modern aspirations. Even today whenever someone mentions Singapore everyone will relate it to this symbol or as most of the people seen it as a fountain statue near the Marina Bay waterfront. The Merlion is also the national animal of Singapore, the Merlion has its own history as it indicates the historicity of Singapore being a fishing village and its ancient name as "Singapura" which means lion city in Sanskrit, thus half lion and half fish. The statue recently turned 50 years old in 2022, which was installed in 1972 which was officiated by Lee Kuan Yew. But it is not just a symbol or a statue, before it was originally designed as the logo for the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB) in 1964 and was used till 1997. It was

not always famous or well-known like it is now, in 1987 Singapore hosted the Miss Universe Pageant for the first and only time. This show was organised by the STPB and as part of the show all the participants from 68 countries took a picture in front of this statue. This event was televised live and had a viewership of 600 million in 56 countries. [National Heritage Board. \(2022\)](#).

This incident did increase the visibility of Singapore in the following years. Whether it be cultural diplomacy or nation branding is often linked with arts and that kind of becomes the central figure in promoting a brand. It is also very essential to note how they carry themselves in other countries or at any global events. What makes Singapore aesthetic? The answer to the question is that

Singapore's aesthetic comes from its multiculturalism and every single thing they have done till now has showed the beauty of it. And Singapore has implemented a lot of policies and initiative in order to achieve it, the most prominent one was to transform Singapore as the "Global City for the Arts".

Visuals play a very significant role in branding of a nation, for that a country will invest in a lot of ventures namely art and architecture. Art and architecture may not explicitly part of nation branding or a form of cultural diplomacy but no one can deny the fact that these two are like a strong foundation for nation branding like for example, France and Italy, their art and architecture was not developed for their branding but the historicity and aesthetics of them stood apart from everything else, and France and Italy will always be known for their art and architecture which was not an explicit form of branding but an underlying feature that the countries took advantage of it. So it would be valid for any nation to develop their art and architecture and as [Ooi \(2008\)](#) points out there are four main purposes for nation branding the first one would be to shape the public image of the nation, the second one would be to reimage and frame the location selectively and aesthetically.

But the thing for Singapore is that they are trying to reimage its brand, through that it transformed its harsh reality of lack of space for residents and offices alike, this turned their focus toward building marvellous structures or high-rise buildings like skyscrapers. They lacked ground space but they utilised their airspace as much as they can. These buildings were not just aesthetically pleasing but helped them in attracting business and foreign investment and also a residential place for the people. [Yuen \(2005\)](#).

The Cathay building, the first skyscraper of Singapore built during the colonial era in 1941, this Art Deco masterpiece was designed by Frank W. Brewer. It stands stronger till now continuing as a house for a cinema theatre notably this had the first air-conditioned hall in Singapore. [National Heritage Board. \(2022\)](#). Starting from this there have number of buildings that has shaped Singapore's landscape and it has housed both residents and businesses like one of the most notable building would be the Marina Bay Sands, which was inaugurated in the year 2010 and ever since then it has been awarded numerous awards on the lines of architecture, hospitality and sustainability. It's an integrated structure combined with the complex includes a 55-storey hotel with 2600 rooms; a 1.2-hectare garden Skypark capping the towers; an iconic ArtScience Museum on the waterfront promontory; two state-of-the-art theatres; a Casino; a Convention Centre and Exhibition Halls; a wide array of shopping and dining outlets; and an outdoor event plaza. [Safdie Architects. \(2011\)](#).

This noteworthy structure for normal people it may look like it has a huge boat on top of it but the

architectural style has more nuances than one could imagine. Envisioned by eponymous architect Moshe Safdie, Marina Bay Sands was designed and developed to fit harmoniously with Singapore's concept of a contemporary Garden City. Situated along the picturesque waterfront facing the Singapore Strait, the integrated resort comprises a diverse collection of handsome structures and interconnected public spaces that weave together to become the focus of civic life, an approach inspired by the great Roman cities of the past. [Architecture of Marina Bay Sands. \(2022\).](#)

Aside from these structures there has been one major destination that has taken the Internet by storm in the recent years, that is the Changi Airport. Considered one of the best airports in the world, winning the best airport award by Skytrax during the World Airport Awards for 8 consecutive years from 2013-2020, Changi airport has been functioning since the 1950s but it was in 2019 it took the world by storm with the opening of Jewel Changi Airport for its interesting outlook that was designed by Moshe Safdie, this structure began its construction by 2014 and was opened to the crowd in 2019. This has attracted tourists from around the world. Each terminal has its own specialty which is unique from one another [Fazzare \(2019\).](#)

### 3. AESTHETICS IN NATION BRANDING: ART

Apart from architecture one of the other important thing that Singapore started to emphasise from pretty early on is movement towards art. This was one of the main elements that made Singapore more visible in the global arena, as all the policies outlined in the previous chapter. This paper will focus on how those policies were implemented and how it helped in cultural diplomacy and nation branding. As architecture played a very essential role and art played an equally significant role in fulfilling the third aspect of nation branding as [Ooi \(2008\)](#) listed out that is thirdly is to create an image of the location that stands out in the global place-product market. And one of the very first project was the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977. As Mr. Daniel Kok asked a most relevant question during the IPS-SAM roundtable conference on Cultural Diplomacy, In "Singapore, the role of the government is pretty much ubiquitous in everything. But what if artists can be conceived of not just as beneficiaries of the system but also cultural agents and partners whose labour and activities can help the government in achieving what it wants but cannot easily do on its own?" He might have asked this question very recently but this question highlights artists can be cultural agents as it was always a thing beginning from the 1977 arts festival. But it was not with its challenges the first festival in 1977 was critiqued for tilting more towards the western culture and arts.

Thus in the 1990s came the Festival of Asian Performing Arts (FAPA). It was also not a great

success. The actual success came in when these two were merged in 1999 by the National Arts Council. Renamed as Singapore Arts Festival (SAF), the vision was to "set itself apart... as an international event with a strong Asian component". As these lines were made true and fulfilled the third element of nation branding, not to mention it truly played a great role in cultural diplomacy like getting attendees from three different regions, Asia, Europe and America. As Milton Cummings defined cultural diplomacy as exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understandings. [Ang et al. \(2015\).](#)

The renaissance city report 2.0 (2004) presented a suggestion that the arts scene needs to be more vibrant in order to get that global attention, and there were several other suggestions like to integrate arts in education and to develop cultural tourism and one of the major opportunities they figured is that to have a fusion between arts, business and technology.

The fusion can be seen on their future endeavours one such initiative would be the Esplanade- Theatres on the Bay, it was actually opened in the year 2002 though the idea for a national arts centre was conceived during the 1970s. It's a theatre that showcases performances and visual arts for a global audience by collaborating with local, regional and global artists and performers. Ms. Yvonne Tham, the CEO of the esplanade during the IPS-SAM roundtable conference on cultural diplomacy, raised many important points and she also addressed what arts scene really mean for Singapore like for instance she said that she understood the diplomatic notion behind showcasing the culture to the global arena but at the same time she says that one of the main aspect for cultural diplomacy is the people to people connection.

Like what would be art without the artists and all the festivals hosted in the Esplanade starting from the Kalaa Utsavam Festival of Indian Art, Pesta Raya Festival of Malay Arts, Huayi Festival of Chinese Arts all are to celebrate the historical links that Singapore has with the regions but also to provide the artists an arena. [Tarn & Sim \(2020\)](#). This allows them to foster emerging collaborations or relations with the artists from different regions and Singaporean artists which encourages further exchange of culture between the region. Which in fact expands the brand to a different regions. Beyond this, Singapore's branding efforts extend to its tourism sector, using cultural and entertainment events to enhance its global image.

#### 4. THE ROLE OF TOURISM

When it comes to Nation branding or Cultural diplomacy tourism plays a major role. The Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB) initiated the policy roadmap towards a Global City for the Arts, which was monumental and played in its favour. Usually tourism is associated with nation branding

that is tourism attracts the tourists which garners more global attention more global visibility like when a country wants to reimage itself or shape its image, they'll first try to develop their tourism industry and advertise it to a wider audience whether it be in social media or any other forms of marketing tool. When a nation is promoting their tourism industry it can be seen how a nation branding almost similar to commercial branding. As the Renaissance city report 2.0 (2004) highlighted that the National Arts Council (NAC), National Heritage Board (NHB) views Arts for art's sake.

But STPB on contrary views Arts for business sake. Because this is where most of the revenue is generated and puts the nation on a public view. Like any commercial brand nation brands also creates a tagline like for example the famous Athleisure brand 'Nike' has the tagline "Just Do It" or the energy drink company Redbull has the tagline "Redbull Gives You Wings". The same way countries have a tagline for promoting their tourism sector which basically becomes a tagline of their brand. Like India's "Incredible India", Malaysia's "Truly Asia" or El Salvador's "The 45- Minute Country". Every country may phrase their taglines in a creative way but the underlying similarity in them is about highlighting their uniqueness and their specialty that can be found nowhere else. [Herstein \(2012\)](#).



Likewise Singapore has had several taglines through the years, beginning with “Instant Asia” continued with “Surprising Singapore” launched in 1984, Later in 1996 it was replaced by “New Asia—Singapore”. Surprising Singapore” had framed Singapore as a modern city with many traditional Asian characteristics where visitors would be surprised by the Asian-ness of the modern city-state while “New Asia” was different by way of incorporating the ambitions of turning Singapore into a Global City for the Art. Ooi (2018). “New Asia — Singapore” expresses the essence of today’s Singapore: a vibrant, multi-cultural, sophisticated city-state where tradition and modernity, East and West meet in harmony; a place where one can see and feel the energy that makes ‘New Asia — Singapore’ the exemplar of the dynamism of the South-East Asia region. Ooi (2018). STPB also focused on festivals that allowed international visitors to experience “authentic” Singapore. Ooi (2018). At the same time they welcomed international cultural events through the growing influence of pop culture, attracting audience from around the globe. They welcomed a number of cultural events like movies, musicals, pop stars, sporting events and art exhibitions so that they could showcase it to the world as lively Global City for the arts.

Singapore of course did everything from hosting global pop icons from Michael Jackson till Taylor Swift and apart from that hosting mega sporting events like the Formula 1 Grand Prix. Singapore is not a stranger for trying something new, which showcases how meticulously they have crafted their

brand. This type of branding will not always end up being a success since everything is state controlled in Singapore, which in turn has become a major criticism for the brand that is Singapore. Singapore don’t have a historical story like India or France or Italy. But what sets them apart is that they crafted themselves a story that is a innovative city or technologically advanced state or a country that has a stable economy but it was always a brand in the making.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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