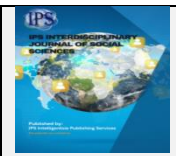




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Beyond Rhetoric: Why Nation (Re)branding Fails in Nigeria

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Abstract	Article History
<p>This study argues that effective nation (re)branding in Nigeria transcends superficial marketing campaigns and political sloganeering. Through documentary research and qualitative content analysis, the paper examined nation branding initiatives implemented by both military and civilian administrations from independence to the Fourth Republic. The findings reveal a consistent pattern across regimes: the failure to address fundamental root causes of Nigeria's negative image and reputation. This persistent shortfall is attributed to a lack of sincerity of purpose among successive leadership and a fundamental misconceptualisation of nation branding as mere rhetorical exercises rather than a comprehensive governance and societal project. The paper reconceptualises nation branding as a strategic, multi-stakeholder process and analyses the complementary roles of government, public institutions, and citizens in rebuilding Nigeria's image and reputation. It concludes that sustainable nation branding requires genuine leadership commitment, institutional reforms, and active citizen participation. Practical recommendations are offered for a more effective, holistic approach to repositioning Nigeria globally.</p> <p>Keywords: Nation branding, Reputation perception indexes and rankings, Rhetoric, Leadership, Rebranding, Nigeria</p>	<p>Received: 11 Apr 2026 Accepted: 26 May 2026 Published: 31 May 2026</p>  <p>Scan QR Code to view¹</p>
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Introduction

The names of countries often evoke a myriad of feelings and perceptions, shaping expectations about their citizens and influencing interactions with foreigners. These perceptions frequently lead to stereotypes that categorise nations and their people as either good or bad, affecting how they are treated domestically and internationally (Bertocchi, Dimico, & Tedeschi, 2022; Romano, Gross, & De Dreu, 2022).

These perceptions are influenced by citizens' behaviors both at home and abroad, as well as by governmental performance, which significantly impacts societal attitudes. Reports and publications from various organizations provide essential indices that measure government efficacy, citizens' behaviors, and perceptions of national leadership, thereby shaping public opinion about countries (Blooming Consulting, 2023; Desai, Duenbier, & MacDonald, 2023). For example, indices like the CEOWORLD Magazine's Global Nations Reputation Index and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index demonstrate correlations that reveal how a country's image and global reputation can influence perceptions positively or negatively (Maiz-Bar, Molaes-Cardoso, & Badenes-Pla, 2025).

While some nations successfully rebrand in response to evolving global dynamics (Kaasinen & Wejke, 2024), others

struggle to alter unfavorable perceptions despite their efforts. Nigeria exemplifies a country that has faced significant challenges in rebranding, as reflected in various reports indicating its negative global standing (Sohn, 2020; Izegwire, 2021). Terms such as "prebendal state," "rentier state," "fragile state," and "hybrid regime" have been used to describe Nigeria, culminating in its classification as a "country of particular concern" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2026; Owonikoko, 2025; Joseph, 1987; Ojo & Aghedo, 2013). This raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the myriad initiatives aimed at rebranding the nation and the reasons for their lack of success.

The thesis of this paper posits that Nigeria has not made genuine efforts at rebranding, focusing instead on marketing campaigns mischaracterized as rebranding. These initiatives often promote a fabricated positive image of the country through slogans disseminated via various media channels, with the misguided hope that such efforts will alter perceptions of Nigeria's reputation. Unfortunately, this approach has shaped the discourse around Nigeria's branding efforts, leading to a predominant focus on attracting investors and tourists rather than addressing the underlying issues (Oluwafunmilayo, Ayo-Obiremi, & Adelabu, 2022; Omotolani, 2025).

Contrasting with existing studies that often prioritise marketing narratives, this research emphasises the necessity to critically engage with the failed nation rebranding initiatives within the broader context of Nigeria's negative image and reputation. It interrogates the superficiality of marketed campaigns, revealing them as mere rhetoric that fails to address the fundamental issues at hand. Nation branding is not a quick fix (Zeina, 2019) due to the complex nature of the challenges involved. This paper argues that effective rebranding must transcend "image management" (Izegwire, 2021) and the expert practices currently dominating the discourse, as exemplified by the Nigeria Reputation Management Group (NRMG) and the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations.

This study contributes to the field by advocating for a clearer understanding of nation branding's meaning and scope, emphasising the need to address the root causes of Nigeria's negative reputation over the long term. The study is organised into eight sections: this introduction is followed by a contextualization of the study, the methodology, a literature review that elucidates key concepts; theoretical underpinning that provides analytical framework, an analysis of Nigeria's failed rebranding efforts, and a discussion of necessary strategies for improving its image. The conclusion reiterates the major arguments presented throughout the paper.

Contextualizing the Study

Nation branding and reputation management have become increasingly measurable through various international indices and rankings published periodically. These tools provide systematic benchmarks for assessing a country's global image, soft power, and overall attractiveness. Scholars have broadly classified these indices into two categories: (a) general nation branding indices, which offer holistic evaluations of a country's reputation, and (b) field-specific indices, which focus on particular dimensions such as tourism, trade, or soft power (Maiz-Bar *et al.*, 2025).

The general nation branding indices include the Anholt Nation Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Index, RepCore Nations, Good Country Index, and Best Countries Ranking. The field-specific indices comprise the Global Soft Power Index, Country Brand Ranking (Tourism and Trade Editions), World Economic Outlook, and Better Life Index.

For this study, four prominent general nation branding indices were purposively selected for their comprehensive coverage and global recognition. These were supplemented with the CEOWORLD Magazine's Global Reputations Index and the Nigeria Reputation Perception Index to ensure relevance to the Nigerian context. The selected indices are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions across Selected Indexes and Rankings

Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index	FutureBrand Country Index	CEOWORLD Magazine's Global Reputations Index	Reputation Lab Rep Nations Ranking	Nigeria Reputation Perception Index	Good Country Index
Export	Made in	Ethics & integrity	Institutional quality	Leadership	Science & Technology
Governance	Tourism	Economic dynamism	Quality of life	Performance	Culture
Culture and Heritage	Heritage & Culture	Innovation and Technology	Level of development	Credibility	International Peace & Security
People	Value System	Quality of life	Human factor	Innovation	World Order
Tourism	Business Potential	Governance and Institutional strength	Ethics and Responsibility	Communication	Planet & Climate
Investment and Immigration	Quality of Life	Global Influence and Diplomacy		Social equity	Prosperity & Equality
		Culture and Heritage		Culture	Health & Wellbeing
		Human Capital and Talent			
		Sustainability and Future Readiness			
		Social Cohesion and Global Citizenship			

Sources: Adapted from Ipsos (2021), The FutureBrand Country Index 2020, Editorial Team (2025), Dimitropoulou (2025), Reputation Perception Services (2026), Editorial Team (2024), and compiled by the authors.

The primary aim of this analysis is to establish correlations among the dimensions, indicators, and relative positions of nations across the selected indices. A review of the 22 dimensions reveals strong interconnections, particularly around governance-related factors. Although the indicators are too numerous to list exhaustively, they consistently emphasise fundamental elements that shape both domestic and international perceptions of a nation. These include

access to basic necessities such as food, employment, and poverty reduction, as well as broader enablers like peace, security, safety, livability, trust, transparency, fairness, justice, and government competence.

The findings indicate a high degree of convergence in country rankings across the indices. As shown in Table 2, Nigeria

consistently occupies low positions, corroborating its poor global image and reputation. This dismal performance is largely attributable to governance failures.

Furthermore, Nigeria’s own Reputation Perception Services (2026) rated the country’s overall reputation perception index at 35.2 out of 100 in 2025. A breakdown across seven dimensions reveals the following scores: Culture (49.4), Leadership (37.6), Social Equity (37.3), Communication (33.7), Innovation (33.1), Performance (32.3), and Credibility (30.7). While Culture was rated “Below Average,” the

remaining six dimensions fell within the “Poor” range. This positions Nigeria in a “low trust reputation band,” characterising it as a “high potential, low trust” nation (Reputation Perception Services, 2026: 24–25). These outcomes reflect deep deficits in governance, credibility, and public trust, stemming from pervasive insecurity, institutional unreliability, corruption, and ineffective leadership.

It is against this backdrop of a persistently battered national image that the study interrogates Nigeria’s nation rebranding initiatives.

Table 2: Nigeria’s Position that Points to Its Image by different Indexes and Rankings

Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (60 Nations)		FutureBrand Country Index (75 Nations)		Reputation Lab Rep Nations Ranking (60 countries)		CEOWORLD Magazine’s Global Reputations Index (197 Nations)	Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (182 countries)	Good Country Index (174 countries)	
2020	2021	2019	2020	2024	2025	2026	2025	2023	2024
50th	59th	68th	61st	52nd	52nd	166th	142nd	140th	121st

Sources: Adapted from Ipsos (2021), The FutureBrand Country Index 2020, Editorial Team (2025), Dimitropoulou (2025), Transparency International (2026), Editorial Team (2024), and compiled by the authors.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design and relies exclusively on secondary sources of data. Data were obtained from relevant academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, government publications, and global reputation and governance indices.

The study employed both content analysis and thematic analysis to interrogate the data. Content analysis was used to examine the recurring themes, narratives, and assumptions underlying Nigeria’s nation branding campaigns and reputation reports, while thematic analysis enabled the identification of broader patterns relating to governance, institutional credibility, leadership, and public trust. The combination of these methods provides a critical framework for understanding the disconnection between Nigeria’s branding rhetoric and the structural realities shaping its global image and reputation.

Literature Review

The concept of branding originated within the fields of marketing and corporate management, where it was primarily associated with products, services, and organisations. Cowking and Hankinson (1996, as cited in Okunola, 2025) define a brand as a product or service distinguishable from its competitors. Beyond identification, however, branding encompasses the perceptions, experiences, values, and emotional associations attached to an entity by consumers and the wider public. Thus, branding is not limited to logos, slogans, or symbols; it also reflects reputation, credibility, identity, and public trust (Anholt, 1998, as cited in Ojo & Aghedo, 2013).

Over time, the concept evolved beyond commercial products to include individuals, organisations, cities, and nations. This expansion reflects the growing recognition that places, like corporations, compete for investment, tourism, influence,

talent, and legitimacy within a globalised environment. Consequently, a nation’s brand increasingly refers to the aggregate perceptions and experiences associated with the country, its institutions, leadership, citizens, culture, and governance system. In this sense, branding contains both tangible and intangible dimensions: tangible elements such as names, symbols, and slogans, and intangible elements such as values, reputation, credibility, and lived experiences (Okunola, 2025).

For nations, branding extends beyond visual identity or state-sponsored narratives. It involves the interaction between how governments present the state, how citizens perceive their country, and how external audiences interpret the nation through direct encounters, media representations, governance outcomes, and international behaviour. The Committee on Rebranding (2009, as cited in Ojo & Aghedo, 2013:84), captures this broader perspective by defining a brand as “the totality of consumers’ experience, perception, benefits and values.” Applied to nationhood, this suggests that national reputation is ultimately shaped less by propaganda than by social realities and institutional performance. Akunyili’s characterisation of Nigeria as associated with corruption, dysfunction, and near-state collapse (Ojo & Aghedo, 2013) underscores how deeply governance outcomes influence national image.

Branding, therefore, may be understood as a strategic process aimed at shaping identity and managing perception. In marketing literature, it is commonly defined as a tool for creating distinctiveness and competitive advantage (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, as cited in Ojo & Aghedo, 2013). This logic has been transferred to nation branding, where states attempt to project favourable images to attract investment, tourism, trade, diplomatic influence, and international legitimacy. Omotolani (2025), for instance, defines nation branding as strategic marketing designed to promote tourism,

culture, and economic opportunities. Similarly, Volcic and Andrejevic (2011) view nation branding as a political and economic instrument through which states compete globally. While these definitions capture important dimensions of nation branding, they remain largely market-oriented and reductionist. They conceptualise nations as commercial entities whose reputations can be managed through communication strategies, advertising campaigns, and image projection. Such approaches often privilege perception management over structural transformation. Consequently, nation branding becomes narrowly framed as an exercise in strategic communication rather than a reflection of governance realities.

More critical perspectives challenge this instrumental understanding. Bisa (2013:62) defines nation branding as the application of corporate branding techniques to manage state reputation, while Maiz-Bar *et al.* (2025) emphasise the strategic management of national image to ensure that external perceptions reflect internal realities. These formulations move closer to a governance-centred understanding by recognising that national image cannot be sustainably detached from political, economic, and social conditions.

Graan's (2016) intervention is particularly significant in exposing the political nature of nation branding. According to him, nation branding serves two broad purposes: cultivating coherent national representations and policing undesirable images. In practice, this transforms nation branding into both a professional industry and a political project dominated by governments, consultants, and communication experts. The implication is that branding initiatives are often shaped more by elite political interests than by genuine national transformation. States seek to control narratives and suppress negative representations without necessarily addressing the structural conditions generating them.

This contradiction becomes even more evident in the discourse on nation rebranding. Rebranding presupposes the existence of an earlier national image that requires modification, reconstruction, or rehabilitation (Okunola, 2025). In theory, rebranding involves substantial transformation aimed at improving identity, reputation, and positioning (Amadi, 2017; Jaeger & Bastos, 2021). However, in practice, many nation rebranding projects — particularly in Africa — amount to cosmetic adjustments involving new slogans, logos, campaigns, and public relations exercises, while the underlying governance crisis remains unresolved.

Existing scholarship reflects this limitation. Much of the literature on nation branding focuses on attracting foreign direct investment, tourism, trade, and international visibility (Oluwafunmilayo, Ayo-Obiremi, & Adelabu, 2022). The dominant emphasis is on communication strategy, media representation, and international competitiveness. Comparatively little attention is paid to the relationship between national reputation and governance quality, institutional credibility, public trust, social justice, and citizens' welfare. Yet these variables constitute the core

indicators used by major global reputation and governance indices (Maiz-Bar *et al.*, 2025).

This disconnect explains why many nation branding projects fail to produce meaningful reputational change. Anholt (2013:6) criticises the distortion of the concept by governments and consulting firms that present nation branding as a quick-fix communication strategy capable of manipulating international perceptions through advertising techniques. Such an approach, he argues, falsely assumes that national images can be transformed independently of political and social realities. The result is what may be described as “image laundering” — the attempt to project positive narratives while structural dysfunction persists.

This critique is particularly relevant to many African states, including Nigeria, where the drivers of reputational decline are fundamentally linked to governance failures: corruption, insecurity, weak institutions, poverty, unemployment, leadership deficits, and declining public trust. Under such conditions, branding campaigns that prioritise slogans and media visibility over governance reforms are unlikely to succeed. Sustainable national reputation cannot emerge from publicity alone; it must be rooted in institutional performance and citizens' lived experiences.

Against this background, this study advances a broader and governance-oriented conceptualisation of nation branding. It defines nation branding as the deliberate and transparent process of identifying and addressing the structural causes of a nation's negative image through reforms capable of transforming governance, institutions, leadership behaviour, and citizens' welfare. From this perspective, marketing, advertising, and public relations are not substitutes for nation branding but merely complementary tools for communicating the outcomes of substantive national transformation. Nation branding, therefore, is not fundamentally about manipulating perceptions; it is about creating governance realities capable of generating credibility, trust, legitimacy, and positive international recognition.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Simon Anholt's Nation Branding Theory (Anholt, 2013), particularly his critique of the reduction of nation branding to public relations and marketing communication. Anholt's framework is relevant to this study because it shifts the discourse on nation branding away from slogans, advertising campaigns, and image laundering toward governance performance, institutional credibility, and substantive national transformation.

At the core of Anholt's argument is the proposition that the image and reputation of nations function much like corporate brands: they significantly influence a country's economic prospects, political legitimacy, diplomatic influence, and global competitiveness (Anholt, 2013). However, unlike commercial products whose images may be shaped through advertising, national reputations are primarily constructed through the lived realities associated with the state — governance quality, institutional effectiveness, public trust, leadership conduct, security, social welfare, and international

behaviour. In other words, countries are judged less by what they say about themselves and more by what they do.

This distinction is fundamental to understanding the failure of many nation branding initiatives, particularly in developing states such as Nigeria. Anholt rejects the notion that national images can be transformed through marketing communication alone. According to him, sustainable reputational change cannot be achieved through media campaigns, slogans, or symbolic rhetoric disconnected from social realities. Rather, nation branding is the outcome of deliberate governance reforms and measurable national progress. This explains why repeated rebranding campaigns in Nigeria have failed to improve the country's global reputation despite extensive publicity efforts.

Anholt therefore conceptualises successful nation branding as a process driven by three interconnected elements: strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. Strategy refers to a nation's recognition of its reputational challenges and its willingness to pursue coherent and long-term solutions. This requires honest self-assessment based on objective indicators such as governance rankings, corruption indices, quality-of-life measures, and global reputation reports. In the Nigerian context, these indicators consistently reveal deficits in institutional credibility, leadership quality, security, accountability, and citizens' welfare. Thus, any meaningful nation branding effort must begin with acknowledging these structural realities rather than denying or masking them through propaganda.

The second element, substance, constitutes the most critical dimension of Anholt's framework. Substance refers to concrete reforms, policies, institutions, investments, and governance practices capable of addressing the root causes of reputational decline. Nation branding, from this perspective, is not fundamentally a communication project but a transformation project. It requires real improvements in governance, economic management, security, infrastructure, education, healthcare, justice delivery, and public accountability. The implication is that reputational change emerges organically from institutional performance and societal progress rather than from orchestrated image campaigns.

The third element, symbolic actions, represents the visible outcomes of strategy and substance. Symbolic actions are not empty gestures; rather, they are credible manifestations of national transformation that reinforce positive perceptions domestically and internationally. Improvements in security, reductions in corruption, stronger institutions, transparent governance, and enhanced quality of life communicate themselves naturally and become more persuasive than any advertising campaign. In this sense, governance outcomes themselves become communicative instruments of nation branding.

Anholt's framework is particularly useful for this study because it provides a critical lens for interrogating the disconnection between Nigeria's branding rhetoric and governance realities. Most rebranding initiatives in Nigeria

have concentrated on perception management while neglecting the structural conditions responsible for the country's damaged reputation. Campaigns promoting patriotism, positive thinking, or national pride were introduced without corresponding improvements in governance, institutional integrity, public service delivery, or citizens' welfare. Consequently, such initiatives lacked credibility and were widely perceived as propaganda rather than genuine transformation efforts.

Anholt's warning against pursuing policies solely for image-management purposes is therefore highly instructive. He argues that governments should not undertake actions merely to improve reputation, since such initiatives often appear insincere and manipulative. Instead, reforms must first address real societal needs and governance challenges; reputational benefits should emerge as secondary outcomes of genuine national progress. This perspective aligns closely with the central argument of this study: that nation branding in Nigeria has failed because it was approached primarily as a communication exercise rather than as a governance-centred project rooted in structural reform.

The application of this framework to the study demonstrates that Nigeria's negative global image is not principally a communication problem but a governance problem. Persistent corruption, insecurity, weak institutions, poor leadership recruitment, policy inconsistency, unemployment, poverty, and declining public trust continue to shape both domestic and international perceptions of the country. As long as these structural issues remain unresolved, branding campaigns alone cannot produce sustainable reputational transformation.

Accordingly, the study adopts Anholt's governance-oriented understanding of nation branding to argue that credible national reputation can only be built through accountable leadership, institutional efficiency, social justice, security, and improved citizens' well-being. From this standpoint, publicity campaigns, slogans, and media visibility are merely complementary instruments for communicating tangible governance outcomes rather than substitutes for them.

Nation (Re)branding as Rhetoric in Nigeria: A Review of Past and Present Efforts

Nigeria's nation branding efforts have historically oscillated between mass mobilisation campaigns, moral reorientation programmes, and public relations exercises (Komolafe, 2016). Although these initiatives differed in language, symbolism, and political context, they shared a common weakness: the tendency to prioritise image management over structural transformation. Most of them sought to reshape citizens' attitudes and external perceptions without fundamentally reforming the governance failures responsible for the country's damaged reputation.

Low Profile Campaign, Operation Feed the Nation, Universal Primary Education and FESTAC '77 (1975–1979)

Nigeria's early nation-building and image-shaping initiatives emerged under the *Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo*

military administration. Programmes such as the Low Profile Campaign, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Universal Primary Education (UPE), and FESTAC '77 combined elements of civic mobilisation, economic nationalism, and cultural projection (Agbaje & Adisa, 1988; Metz & Library of Congress Federal Research Division, 1992).

While these initiatives reflected an awareness of national image concerns, they were largely reformist rather than transformative. The Low Profile Campaign attempted to promote modesty and discipline without addressing the systemic corruption and elite excesses embedded within the state structure. OFN focused on food production but neglected the structural inefficiencies of agricultural policy and rural development. FESTAC '77 successfully projected Nigeria's cultural identity internationally, yet this symbolic achievement was disconnected from domestic governance realities. Overall, the programmes concentrated more on behavioural adjustment and national symbolism than on institutional reform.

Ethical Revolution (1979–1983)

The Ethical Revolution introduced by the Shehu Shagari administration sought to address rising moral decay, corruption, and indiscipline through civic education and public enlightenment campaigns. It promoted values such as patriotism, honesty, accountability, and hard work (Oji, 1982).

The initiative correctly identified unethical behaviour as a major factor undermining Nigeria's image. However, its strategy was fundamentally contradictory. The campaign relied heavily on moral persuasion while the political elite itself remained associated with corruption and patronage politics. Consequently, the programme lacked institutional credibility and failed to confront the structural incentives sustaining unethical conduct. The persistence of corruption after the programme demonstrates the limitations of moral campaigns detached from governance reforms and accountability mechanisms.

War Against Indiscipline (WAI) (1983–1985)

The War Against Indiscipline (WAI), introduced by the Muhammadu Buhari/Tunde Idiagbon regime, represented perhaps the most coercive attempt at behavioural reorientation in Nigeria's history. The programme targeted public disorder, corruption, environmental sanitation, and civic irresponsibility through strict enforcement and punitive measures (Agbaje & Adisa, 1988).

Although WAI temporarily imposed social order and discipline, its approach was authoritarian and superficial. The regime focused primarily on regulating citizens' behaviour rather than reforming the institutions and governance culture producing indiscipline in the first place. Compliance was largely fear-driven and therefore unsustainable. The collapse of the programme following the end of the regime revealed that behavioural change imposed through coercion, without institutional transformation and democratic legitimacy, cannot produce enduring reputational gains.

Mass Mobilisation for Social Justice, Self-Reliance, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) (1987–1993)

The Ibrahim Babangida regime introduced MAMSER in 1987 as a national orientation and mobilization programme aimed at promoting patriotism, self-reliance, public morality, and democratic participation (Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, 1993; Ajaebili *et al.*, 2024).

Despite its ambitious rhetoric, MAMSER largely functioned as a legitimising instrument for the regime's controversial Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Rather than addressing the socio-economic hardships and public discontent generated by SAP policies, the programme sought to manage public perception through propaganda and political mobilisation. Its emphasis on civic responsibility obscured the deeper economic inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and democratic deficits associated with the regime. Consequently, MAMSER became more of a political communication strategy than a genuine nation-rebuilding project.

“Not in Our Character” (1993–1998)

Under the regime of Sani Abacha, nation branding assumed a defensive and reactionary form. The “Not in Our Character” publication emerged in response to growing international criticism of the regime's human rights abuses, political repression, arbitrary detentions, and killings (Komolafe, 2021).

Rather than confronting the governance crisis driving Nigeria's international isolation, the regime attempted to delegitimise external criticism and portray negative reports as distortions of Nigerian identity. This amounted to outright image laundering. The campaign neither addressed the substantive issues damaging Nigeria's reputation nor acknowledged state responsibility for them. Instead, it reflected a politics of denial that deepened the gap between official narratives and lived realities.

Nigeria Image Project and Heart of Africa Project (1999–2007)

The return to civilian rule under Olusegun Obasanjo witnessed renewed efforts to rehabilitate Nigeria's image internationally through the Nigeria Image Project and the Heart of Africa Project (Uche & Olisa, 2021). These initiatives sought to market Nigeria as an attractive destination for investment, tourism, and global partnership.

Unlike earlier moral campaigns, these projects explicitly adopted marketing and public relations strategies. However, they reinforced the problematic assumption that Nigeria's reputational crisis could be solved primarily through image projection and international publicity. While the administration pursued some economic and diplomatic reforms, the branding initiatives themselves remained disconnected from persistent domestic problems such as corruption, insecurity, poverty, and institutional decay. As a result, the campaigns generated visibility without substantially altering global perceptions of Nigeria.

“Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation” (2009–2010)

The Umaru Musa Yar'Adua administration introduced the “Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation” campaign in 2009 to promote patriotism, national pride, and positive citizenship (Edigin, 2011). The initiative relied heavily on slogans, media advertisements, public engagements, and symbolic messaging.

The campaign's central contradiction lay in its attempt to separate citizens from the governance conditions shaping their experiences and behaviour. By projecting Nigerians as inherently “good people,” the initiative downplayed the structural realities — corruption, insecurity, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and institutional failure — undermining national confidence and international trust. Consequently, the programme became another rhetorical exercise in perception management rather than a transformative governance agenda.

Change Begins With Me (2015–2023)

Introduced by the Muhammadu Buhari administration in 2016, the “Change Begins With Me” campaign sought to encourage attitudinal change, civic responsibility, and patriotism. The initiative framed national transformation as a shared responsibility between government and citizens (Onah, Luka, Inobehme & Santas, 2023).

However, the campaign suffered from a credibility deficit. While citizens were urged to embrace ethical conduct and discipline, the administration itself faced criticisms relating to insecurity, economic hardship, selective anti-corruption efforts, and governance inconsistencies. The disconnection between official rhetoric and governance realities weakened the legitimacy of the initiative. Rather than embodying transformative change, the campaign increasingly appeared symbolic and propagandistic.

Destination 2030: Nigeria Everywhere (2024–Present)

The Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration introduced Destination 2030: Nigeria Everywhere as a soft power and creative economy initiative aimed at positioning Nigeria as a global cultural and tourism hub. The project emphasises Nigeria's strengths in music, film, fashion, arts, technology, and diaspora influence (Anyanwu, 2025).

Unlike previous campaigns, this initiative openly prioritises soft power projection and global cultural visibility rather than direct moral reorientation. Nonetheless, it remains constrained by the same structural contradiction affecting earlier branding projects. The campaign celebrates Nigerians' global presence while insufficiently engaging the domestic governance failures — insecurity, unemployment, economic instability, and weak institutions — driving large-scale migration in the first place. The paradox is striking: citizens compelled to leave due to domestic dysfunction are simultaneously reimagined as instruments of national branding abroad. As such, the initiative risks becoming aspirational symbolism detached from socio-political realities at home.

Common Patterns and Structural Limitations

Across military and civilian administrations, Nigeria's nation branding initiatives reveal a consistent pattern. Although each programme emerged within a distinct political context, most shared three defining characteristics: rhetorical idealism, behavioural reorientation, and weak structural engagement. The initiatives concentrated largely on changing perceptions, attitudes, and narratives while neglecting the deeper governance crises responsible for Nigeria's reputational decline.

More significantly, none of the programmes pursued comprehensive reforms capable of transforming leadership recruitment, institutional accountability, public service delivery, or governance culture. Successive governments attempted to market national virtue while remaining entangled in many of the problems — corruption, authoritarianism, policy inconsistency, insecurity, and elite impunity — they claimed to address (Osumah, 2016). Consequently, nation branding in Nigeria evolved largely as a cyclical exercise in rhetoric and image management rather than a sustained project of national transformation.

(Re)branding Nigeria Beyond Rhetoric: What Should Be Done

Effective nation (re)branding in Nigeria must begin with an honest diagnosis of the structural factors responsible for the country's damaged image and declining international reputation. These include corruption, weak leadership, prebendal politics, institutional failure, insecurity, unemployment, poverty, inequality, poor quality of life, injustice, and declining public trust. Others, such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, economic instability, and the growing emigration, further reinforce perceptions of state fragility and governance failure. As long as these conditions persist, branding campaigns and patriotic slogans will remain disconnected from social realities.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond symbolic communication toward substantive governance reforms. This aligns with *Simon Anholt's* framework of strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. Strategy requires a nation to acknowledge honestly where it stands, how it is perceived internally and externally, where it intends to be, and how it plans to get there. In Nigeria's case, this means recognising that the country's reputational crisis is fundamentally rooted in governance deficits rather than communication failures. Consequently, attempts to manage perception without resolving the underlying problems are ultimately unsustainable. As Komolafe (2021) observes, reputation management without structural reform amounts to futility, while rebranding without good governance merely inverts the logic of national transformation.

Substance involves translating strategy into concrete reforms and measurable outcomes. Nation branding cannot be reduced to advertising campaigns, public relations slogans, or media visibility. Rather, it requires deliberate efforts to improve governance, strengthen institutions, combat corruption, guarantee security, create economic opportunities, and improve citizens' welfare. National reputation emerges

primarily from governance outcomes and lived experiences, not from official narratives alone. Thus, the credibility of any branding initiative depends on whether citizens and external audiences can perceive tangible improvements in state performance and social conditions.

Symbolic actions are the visible manifestations of these reforms. Unlike propaganda-driven symbolism, they derive legitimacy from real progress. Improvements in security, electoral transparency, justice delivery, infrastructure, healthcare, and institutional accountability possess intrinsic communicative value because they reshape everyday experiences and external perceptions simultaneously. For example, meaningful reductions in insecurity or corruption would speak more powerfully to Nigeria's reputation than any global media campaign designed to project positivity. Publicity, in this context, becomes complementary rather than foundational.

Achieving this transformation requires coordinated action among government, institutions, and citizens.

Government

The central responsibility for rebuilding Nigeria's image rests with the government because national reputation is fundamentally tied to leadership and governance. The first requirement is the sincere acknowledgment that Nigeria faces a profound credibility and trust crisis. Global indices and domestic perception reports already provide sufficient evidence of the country's governance and reputational deficits. What has largely been absent is the political will to address them transparently and consistently.

Rebuilding trust requires leadership by example. Political leaders must demonstrate commitment to accountability, rule of law, transparency, and ethical conduct. This includes combating corruption without selectivity, strengthening electoral credibility, addressing insecurity impartially, reducing impunity, and ensuring fairness in public administration. Leadership conduct is critical because it shapes institutional culture and societal behaviour. When political elites remain associated with corruption, abuse of power, and policy inconsistency, branding campaigns inevitably lose credibility. Conversely, responsible and transparent governance generates multiplier effects capable of restoring public confidence domestically and internationally.

Institutions

Strong institutions are indispensable to sustainable nation branding because they mediate the relationship between leadership and society. In Nigeria, however, institutional performance is often weakened by political interference, patronage networks, and what is popularly described as "body language" politics — the tendency of institutions to respond more to perceived executive preferences than to constitutional mandates.

To rebuild national credibility, state institutions must function professionally, independently, and predictably. The judiciary, legislature, anti-corruption agencies, security institutions, and electoral bodies must be seen as impartial guardians of public

interest rather than extensions of political power. Institutional independence is essential because credible institutions can moderate governance excesses, strengthen accountability, and build citizens' trust even in periods of political uncertainty.

The private sector and professional bodies also play important roles. Notably, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations and its Nigeria Reputation Management Group, through the Nigeria Reputation Perception Index (NRPI), have demonstrated that national reputation is fundamentally linked to governance performance, leadership credibility, and service delivery rather than publicity campaigns alone. This represents a significant departure from earlier approaches that equated nation branding with advertising and image projection. Consequently, communication experts, media consultants, and branding practitioners must rethink the tendency to market slogans as substitutes for structural reform. Nation branding can only be credible when communication reflects governance realities rather than attempts to conceal them.

Citizens

Citizens constitute both the carriers and beneficiaries of national reputation. Although some Nigerians engage in activities that negatively affect the country's image, reducing the reputational crisis to citizens' behaviour alone obscures the structural conditions shaping social conduct. Many Nigerians continue to demonstrate resilience, entrepreneurial capacity, and commitment to democratic participation despite difficult socio-economic conditions.

The high level of voter registration and participation during the 2023 general elections reflected widespread public desire for accountable governance and national renewal. However, perceived institutional failures and electoral controversies deepened existing trust deficits and public disillusionment. This highlights a critical point: citizens' attitudes and national confidence are strongly influenced by the credibility of governance institutions.

Nevertheless, citizens also possess important responsibilities in the nation-building process. Public trust, civic responsibility, law-abiding behaviour, and social accountability are essential for sustainable national transformation. Nigerians are highly adaptive and responsive to changing realities. When government and institutions demonstrate genuine commitment to justice, transparency, security, and inclusive development, citizens are more likely to reciprocate through constructive engagement and responsible conduct.

Ultimately, nation branding must begin with improving the lived experiences of citizens. As Maiz-Bar *et al.* (2025) argue, enhancing citizens' well-being should precede attempts to attract investment, tourism, or international recognition. A country that works for its people will more easily command respect and credibility abroad. In this sense, sustainable nation branding is not primarily about projecting greatness; it is about creating conditions that make national progress visible, believable, and enduring.

Synergy

The three actors are mutually reinforcing. Government provides strategic direction and political will; institutions translate policies into consistent performance; and citizens provide legitimacy, participation, and feedback. When aligned, they create a virtuous cycle: improved governance produces better outcomes (substance), which generate positive perceptions (symbolic actions), ultimately enhancing Nigeria's reputation more effectively than any communication campaign.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Nigeria's efforts to improve its national image and international reputation over the decades have largely been confined to marketing campaigns, slogans, and public relations exercises rather than genuine nation (re)branding. Successive governments approached the country's reputational crisis primarily as a communication problem requiring image projection, instead of a structural governance challenge demanding substantive reforms. Consequently, most initiatives were designed to attract investment, tourism, and international attention without addressing the underlying conditions responsible for Nigeria's negative global perception.

The study argues that this narrow understanding has significantly shaped both policy and scholarly discourse on nation branding in Nigeria. Marketing campaigns and sloganeering have repeatedly been misconstrued as nation branding itself, whereas they should merely complement substantive national transformation. Genuine nation (re)branding involves deliberate and transparent efforts to confront and resolve the structural drivers of reputational decline in ways that produce measurable improvements in governance, institutional credibility, security, leadership quality, and citizens' welfare. Sustainable national reputation emerges from visible and lived realities, not from rhetorical projections.

Drawing on Simon Anholt's framework of strategy, substance, and symbolic actions, the study found that Nigeria's past and present branding initiatives lacked substantive foundations. The strategies adopted were fundamentally flawed because they prioritised perception management over structural transformation. As a result, the expected symbolic outcomes of successful nation branding never materialised. Instead, Nigeria's global image continued to be shaped by persistent corruption scandals, weak institutions, insecurity, unemployment, poverty, debt burden, electoral controversies, mass emigration, and transnational criminal activities associated with some citizens.

The paper therefore concludes that effective nation branding in Nigeria must begin with governance reform rather than communication campaigns. The government bears the primary responsibility because leadership and institutional performance largely determine national reputation. Addressing corruption, strengthening institutions, improving leadership recruitment processes, guaranteeing security, upholding the rule of law, reducing poverty and

unemployment, and restoring public trust are indispensable prerequisites for rebuilding Nigeria's image sustainably. When pursued genuinely, transparently, and consistently, these reforms will generate positive symbolic outcomes capable of reshaping both domestic and international perceptions of the country. Only at that stage can marketing campaigns and strategic communication serve as credible instruments for projecting national progress.

Conversely, if Nigeria continues the recurring pattern of prioritising slogans, media campaigns, and rhetorical appeals while neglecting the structural causes of its reputational crisis, its global image is unlikely to improve meaningfully. The country's persistently poor performance across major governance and reputation indices already demonstrates the limitations of publicity-driven approaches. Decades of changing slogans and rebranding campaigns have yielded little sustainable impact because they failed to confront the fundamental realities undermining national credibility. Ultimately, nation branding cannot succeed in the absence of genuine national transformation.

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