

BOOK REVIEW

Brand Singapore: Nation Branding in a World Disrupted by Covid-19 (3rd Edition)

Koh Buck Song

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Brand Singapore: Nation Branding in a World Disrupted by Covid-19 is a success story written by Koh Buck Song that describes how the small city-state has been using nation branding strategies to develop itself into a world-renowned Lion City. As a follow-up on the first two volumes on the same topic, *Brand Singapore: How Nation Branding Built Asia's Leading Global City* (Koh, 2011) and *Brand Singapore: Nation Branding after Lee Kuan Yew, in a Divisive World* (Koh, 2017), it presses on with the classic brand story by offering novel perspectives on how the nation can brand itself in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and amid the rise of social media. The author is a Singaporean brand advisor, author, and editor who has been involved with Singapore's nation branding for many years. He recently served as a member of the Singapore Tourism Board's Marketing Advisory Panel for Singapore's "Passion Made Possible" brand concept launched in 2017 (Kaefer, 2021; Koh, 2021).

The book first provides context to the upcoming discussion by going over the pandemic phenomenon, the recent socio-political challenges across the world, and Singapore's strong global brand presence despite being geographically tiny. The seven chapters that follow this factual introduction offer an in-depth analysis of the various aspects of the city-state brand-building strategy.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the remaining chapters. It discusses the related concepts of nation branding, brand recall, digital identity, brand affinity, brand ambassadors, third-party endorsement, and brand equity through the lens of Singapore's branding in the public, private, and people spheres.

Chapter 2 highlights the key role of the state in building the brand in the public sphere. The emphasis is on how the nation can be the "visible hand" successfully driving its branding efforts. Because of its averred success creating new business opportunities for the world, Singapore's brand is sometimes referred to as a "GDP city" or a "global entrepolis". One of the examples given to show the role played by the government is "The "Passion Made Possible" tourism campaign. Another successful effort listed is the state-led Singapore Bicentennial series of nationwide activities launched in 2019 to portray the city state's rich history to its people.

Chapter 3 explains the importance of Singaporean companies as another key driving force behind the country's branding in the private sector. The discussion hinges upon the concept of "Singapore Inc." and its metaphorical meaning and potential to instill pride amongst Singaporean organizations. Readers will relate to many of the iconic brands cited as examples in this chapter. One such corporation, is Singapore Airlines, which, with its brand essence centering around the "Singapore Girl," is cited as a clear exemplar of how a Singapore Inc. can bring the nation brand to the world. Other iconic brands mentioned include homegrown Singaporean brands such as Raffles Hotel and Tiger Beer, as well as foreign global brands based in Singapore, the like of Caltex, Dyson, and Lucasfilm Ltd. The author also explores the

idea of promoting Peranakan cuisine as a way of highlighting a distinctive Singaporean cultural experience. It could become an additional attribute to the Singapore brand. It is worthwhile noting, though, that Peranakan food may not be perceived as truly unique as it has a shared origin with Malaysia and its limited popularity around the world is still a key challenge.

Chapter 4 focuses on the people sphere. The government and business sector are not the only contributors to Singapore branding – Singaporeans do play their part as well. One compelling example is their significant contribution to “SG50”, a reference to Singapore’s 2015 golden independence jubilee and the celebrations that took place. They firmly put the spotlight on people. Seen as a common motivating force within the country’s diverse population, the celebrations enjoyed a very high level of participation among Singaporeans who were actively engaged in pursuing this national agenda. This chapter also discusses the concept of “soft power” in light of cultural material such as Singlish (the conversational form of English casually used in the country), Singaporean films, or the famous novel and Hollywood movie *Crazy Rich Asians*, and how it applies to Singapore, and can help portray the uniqueness of Singaporean people and society. As a result, the Singapore brand has been moving from being a “cultural desert” where there were few significant cultural events in town to being a “cultural dessert” where cultural events are frequently organized throughout the year.

Chapter 5 turns to the core meaning of the name *Singapura* (or “Lion City”) and its national icons. Also tackled in this chapter is the mythical origin of the Merlion, the iconic symbol of the nation, which, we are told, fills the gap left by the absence of a “physical” national animal truly representative of Singapore. The author suggests that Singapore should try to associate its country brand with the Merlion and lion-related attributes as part of ascribing a regal dimension to it and enhancing the nation’s brand image.

Chapter 6 considers the negative perceptions that have been associated with “brand keloids” and the scars inflicted on the country’s reputation. Chief among these is the stereotypical brand image of “the nanny state,” a reference to the significant number of previous government regulations or restrictions on its people’s lives. Interestingly enough, recently, many countries around the world increased their own levels of social control after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to align more closely with the direction set by the Singapore government. At the same time, the ruling People’s Action Party of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong began to use social media to make Singaporeans feel more empowered, suggesting that the future direction might be to become increasingly more inclusive in order to win support.

Chapter 7 assesses the post-Covid 19 challenges which Singapore branding faces. The latest government-led rebranding initiative to date, known as “The Spirit of Singapore,” provides a starting point for the assessment. Readers are first reminded of the four key brand attributes of Singapore as defined then (Nurturing, Transforming, Collaborating, and Daring to Dream) and how “the Singapore way” gives an edge to the city-state as compared to competitor cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Sydney in terms of liveability. The author’s view is that the impact of Covid-19 on the Singapore brand image as well as on its sub-brands of trade, investment, tourism, and immigration have been quite positive thanks to its well-resourced response to the outbreak and excellence of its healthcare system. With the pandemic behind, the country now needs to focus on its post-pandemic digital economy, US-China geopolitics, and an active participation in multilateral frameworks. Social cohesion forms a unique selling proposition that enhances the attractiveness of the country. Since the city-state’s multicultural society is a blend of Chinese, Malay, Indian and other ethnic groups, the X factor of Singapore’s branding would be its social cohesion and harmony.

The strength of this book lies in its insightful analysis of Singapore's nation branding from past to present. Its content is also enriched by the author's compelling account of the nation's history and the contribution of government-led and corporate initiatives as well as Singaporeans' unique socio-cultural blend to the country's admirable brand success. Another merit of the book is the variety and relevance of real-world case studies discussed in relation to nation brand-building key elements and strategies. As to the author's suggestions as to how Singapore could tackle lingering negative perceptions and post-Covid 19 nation-branding challenges, while they seem cogent, it is too early to tell. Until they are implemented in the future, their true pertinence and real effectiveness remain somewhat unclear.

Overall, *Brand Singapore: Nation Branding in a World Disrupted by Covid-19* is a valuable resource for anyone in either the corporate or public sector interested in branding, marketing, and international relations. To begin with, the insights provided in the book are not limited to Singaporeans. Readers from all over the world can learn from the comprehensive analysis of the brand strategies and tactics adopted by the city-state to build its own brand and attract external audiences, e.g., investors, tourists, and top-notch talent. University students could also benefit from engaging in critical discussions on how to take a new look at Singapore's post-Covid 19 brand positioning based on its history, culture, society, and future economic pursuits. Another promising avenue for fertile academic debates is how best the key learnings from Singapore's major brand initiatives could be applied to developing nations given their own particular contexts.

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