

The place branding of Qatar

Maaïke de Jong

European Tourism Futures Institute, Stenden University, the Netherlands
e-mail: maaïke.de.jong2@stenden.com

Destination branding has become popular. Countries brand themselves to draw visitors and competent expatriates and to create economic diversification. The brand emphasises the uniqueness of the place; it frames the culture and sells its way of life. In the perspective of tourism, this research examines the branding strategies of Qatar. To the Qatari, the brand message and the place reality are designed by creating a new brand reality which reflects the line of flight the country has taken into an envisioned society. This research examines the strategic approaches in the local social, cultural and political context. Place branding is outwardly directed, but it is the domestic politics and mechanisms of local control that shape how the country can brand itself.

Keywords: branding strategies, destination, place branding, Qatar, tourism

De place branding van Qatar

'Destination branding' is populair geworden. Landen creëren een 'brand' of 'merk' om zo bezoekers en competente expats (tijdelijke bewoners in het buitenland) te trekken, en daarnaast economische diversificatie (verscheidenheid) te creëren. De brand benadrukt de uniciteit van de plek, het is een weergave van de cultuur en verkoopt haar 'way of life'. In het perspectief van toerisme, gaat dit onderzoek in op de branding strategieën van Qatar. De boodschap achter de brand en de 'place reality' t.a.v. Qatar is ontworpen door middel van het creëren van een nieuwe 'brand reality' die het land weerspiegelt in een beoogde samenleving. Dit onderzoek bestudeert de strategische aanpak in de lokale sociale, culturele en politieke context. Place branding is naar buiten gericht, maar het is de binnenlandse politiek en de lokale overheid die bepalen hoe het land zich een brand kan toekennen.

Trefwoorden: bestemming, branding strategieën, place branding, Qatar, toerisme

卡塔尔品牌创建中的地位 摘要

旅游目的地品牌已经成为流行。国家自身品牌吸引了大量本地游客和外籍人士，从而创造经济多样化。该品牌强调地方独特性，它囊括文化和其生活方式。从旅游业的角度来看，本研究考察了卡塔尔的品牌战略。就卡塔尔当前的品牌信息和品牌地位，来创造实现一个新的品牌，进一步反映了该国的飞行航线已经成为社会的设计构想。本研究探讨在当地的社会背景中文化和政治的战略方针。表面上是针对地方品牌，实际上它是地方性政治和体制，进而说明该国如何形成自身品牌。

关键词: 地方品牌，品牌战略，卡塔尔，旅游业，目的地

Introduction

Ooi (2006) states that a place brand 'accentuates the positive characteristics of the place; it packages the society and sells its cultures (e.g. way of life, the arts, museums, and even the creativity of the people)'. Ooi (2006) clarifies this statement by saying, '[i]n other words, the branding process is part of the commodification of culture and society'. He argues (2006) that the branding of countries is inherently different to the branding of products for four distinct reasons. Firstly, branding authorities have no formal power over citizens or local agencies. Secondly, local politicians and residents may not be supportive of the country's branding

efforts. Thirdly, a place is geographically immobile; this means that the consumption of place needs to take place in the country. Fourthly, in the branding of countries, state-supported authorities and their plans are connected to the local social, cultural and political agenda.

Study Design

There are two reasons for the choice to study the destination branding of Qatar. The first is that Qatar is actively engaged in the process of branding itself and in promoting tourism.

Secondly, as (inter)national faculty living in Qatar, we are taking advantage of our own local knowledge of this country and attempt to present the case of this country through broad description and understanding.

This study focuses on the role of the national tourism promotion authority of Qatar, the Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA). The QTA mediates between local residents and foreign tourists. It also arbitrates between keeping the integrity of local cultures and commercialising local cultures for tourism consumption. In this context, the questions are 'How does the QTA brand Qatar?' and 'How does the QTA implement its branding strategy?'. These questions form the basis for us to describe the branding strategies and the various factors that influencing them.

Data were collected through interviews with various stakeholders in the tourism industry, such as representatives of the QTA, local museums and Qatar Airways, and research by fourth-year tourism management students. These students came from various countries including Sudan, Tunisia and Serbia. Moreover, documents, newspaper clipping and promotional materials were also gathered, mainly from local sources. The research was performed during the 2009 to 2010 academic year.

According to Ooi (2006), there are four functions of place branding, which are politically and socially situated. The first function is to shape public perception of the place. The second is to package the place selectively and aesthetically. The third function focuses on the competitiveness of a place compared to neighbouring destinations, and the fourth function is to create unique experiences.

Dwyer, Livaic and Mellor (2003) developed a model of destination competitiveness that seeks to capture the main elements of competitiveness highlighted in the general literature, while appreciating the special issues involved in exploring the notion of destination competitiveness as emphasised by tourism researchers. The model was developed in a collaborative effort by researchers in Korea and Australia. The determinants of destination competitiveness are classified under six main headings, such as 'inherited resources, created resources', 'supporting factors and resources', 'destination management' and 'situational conditions and demand conditions'.

In the model of destination competitiveness (Dwyer et al., 2003), inherited, created and supporting resources are grouped together with the shared characteristic of making the destination attractive to visit. Inherited resources can be classified as either natural or cultural. Natural resources include physiography, climate, flora and fauna, and so on and cultural resources describe the culture and heritage or the destination, such as the destination's history, customs, architectural features, and traditions which enhance the attractiveness of a tourist destination. Created resources include tourism infrastructure, special events, entertainment, shopping and any available activities. The category 'supporting factors and resources' provides the foundation for a successful tourism industry, including general infrastructure, quality of services, hospitality, and accessibility of destination.

Destination management in Qatar is executed by the Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA) which was introduced above. Destination management includes factors that enhance the attractiveness of the inherited and created resources and strengthen the quality of the supporting factors.

Qatar also invests in created resources. Beyond functionality and destination competitiveness, there is another way of framing which is loosely associated with the concept of 'Dreamlands'. 'Dreamlands' was the title of an exhibition in Centre Pompidou (5 May to 9 August 2010) which refers to 'Dreamland, opened at Coney Island, New York, in 1904' (Centre Pompidou, 2010). A description of the New York Dreamland from the Centre Pompidou (2010) brochure is:

Among its attractions, the park included a boat trip on Venetian canals flanked by facades of painted canvas, and a climb in the Swiss mountains. Destroyed by fire in 1911, Dreamlands was the pioneer of an architecture of sensation, dream and entertainment that spread throughout the world over the twentieth century.

The concept of a dreamland is interesting for the way in which it has influenced thinking about the leisure society and the ways in which it 'has shaped the imagination, nourishing both utopian thinking and artistic creation, but they have also become realities: pastiche copy and artifice now provide the environment in which real life takes place, their normality dissolving the boundary between dream and reality' (Centre Pompidou, 2010). These four functions of place branding are necessary to the multidimensional dreamscape of a country. In this paper, the dreamland concept forms a framework for reflecting on the place branding of Qatar.

Branding Qatar

Qatar is located halfway along the western coast of the Persian Gulf. It has a population of 1.9 million (QSA, 2009), with a total area of 11 437 km². The climate is hot and humid during the summer, from June to September, with daytime temperatures reaching as high as 50 °C. The average spring and autumn day temperatures are about 30 °C, while during the winter the average day temperature is moderate at about 19 °C (State of Qatar, 2002).

Qatar's culture and heritage have formed the bedrock of its modern society. Its social warmth provides the foundation for the country's endless hospitality and its music and handicrafts are an inspiration to modern artists and artisans. The government, encouraged by HH the Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani and HH Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, has embarked on a multifaceted approach to preserving the culture and heritage of the country (QTA, n.d.). Qatar has a strong economy, benefitting greatly from its petroleum sector and small population. The investment increase in tourism infrastructure of US\$17 billion over the next five years is making Qatar even more attractive to visitors. This investment includes the construction of luxury hotels, resorts and other leisure facilities, totalling a 400 per cent increase in hotel capacity up to 29 000 luxury rooms by 2012 (QTA, n.d.). The Trade, Restaurants and Hotels sector contributed QR3 750 million to Qatar's overall GDP in 2003, representing 5.3 per cent of total GDP. According to QTA (n.d.), this sector will be one of the most promising in the coming years, as business, cultural, sports, education and tourism events aimed at promoting Qatar, gather even more momentum.

Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA) is the official representative of the Ministry of Tourism in Qatar. QTA's role is to organise, enable, and supervise the tourism industry development in Qatar, as well as to represent and promote Qatar as

a quality tourism destination for leisure, business, education, and sport. Qatar Tourism Authority gets actively involved in organising events and promotions which positively reflect on the general image of Qatar as an evolving tourism destination. Increasing the number of travellers coming to Qatar is the basis of Qatar Tourism Authority's new strategy: to grow the tourism industry in Qatar by 20 per cent in the next five years. QTA intends to reach this goal through a variety of methods, including attracting travellers flying through Doha, thanks to the key location of Qatar between Europe, Africa and Asia. Qatar Tourism Authority also aims to develop Qatar into a leading world-class event destination for the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) sector. Qatar already boasts existing exhibition space of 15 000 m²; two new convention and exhibition centres, totalling more than 95 000 m², will be added in the near future. QTA in its role as industry leader is responsible for managing the temporary Doha Exhibitions Centre, the Doha Convention Centre and Tower to open in 2012 and the Qatar National Convention Centre, scheduled to open in 2011 (QTA, n.d.).

Industry

The Tourism Master Plan of Qatar (State of Qatar, 2002) states that the hospitality and tourism industry in Qatar is still in development. The Tourism Master Plan of Qatar (State of Qatar, 2002) indicates that work in the hospitality and tourism industry is not considered prestigious for of the following reasons: Qatar has only a very limited number of national inhabitants as a resource of working power; tourism as a service industry does not have a strong enough standing to be of great interest for Qatari workers, especially in the executive job level; the tourism industry depends on a qualified foreign workforce from western and Asian countries to fill staff vacancies; and there is only one private education and training facility in Qatar to prepare future tourism staff and no comparable efforts are detected from the public sector. No coordinating institution for human resources development exists to date in Qatar. Visitors to Qatar cannot experience a uniqueness of service quality in tourism. Although meeting international standards with regards to hotels and airlines, no sense of place is created as a consequence of the multicultural backgrounds of staff and the largely external educational conditions. The overall awareness in tourism-related industries is very low and quality standards outside the core business (customers and immigration, taxi, retail) lack dedication and form when it comes to contact with tourists, especially from western and Asian countries. As far as historical attractions go, Qatar's offerings are limited. However, unlike most of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the nation's capital,

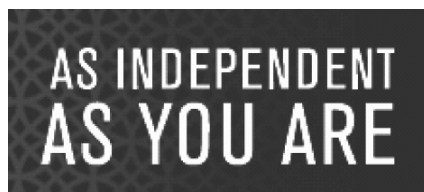
Doha, offers a renovated souk, Souk Waqif, a recently build Islamic Museum of Art and a well maintained, family-friendly Corniche. There are several shopping malls offering attractions such as indoor amusement parks and boat trips on staged Venetian canals and a designated luxurious shopping, marina and leisure destination, 'the Pearl'.

Hospitality Industry

Part of the created resources (Dwyer et al., 2003) are the built hotel rooms. The Qatari government has allocated about \$17 billion to finance and develop tourism facilities and infrastructure in line with its plans to diversify the country's economy. According to the QTA (n.d.), the country aims to produce considerable growth in hotel buildings through the year, due to several major spurring projects such as The Pearl, Barwa Al Khor, and Lusail which will soon bring an increase in the number of available premium rooms. Up to 14 000 new hotel rooms are under construction amounting to 30 000 rooms on stream by the end of 2012. The Authority plans to boost the number of tourists to 1.5 million visitors per year, as well as to encourage them to lengthen their average stay from one-and-a-half to four days. According to Al-Sharq Newspaper (2009), Mr. Ahmed Al-Nuaimi (chairman of QTA) declared that QTA has already started to fulfil its first Qatar promotion campaign. Internationally, QTA launched 50 taxis in London designed with the new slogan of QTA and some of the main tourist attractions in Qatar. Locally, the same promotion will be done in Qatar's taxis. In addition, QTA cooperated with Al-Jazeera Network in order to produce various tourism promotion movies about Qatar and broadcast them in different international channels.

QTA developed a new slogan 'As independent as you are' which aims to reflect Qatar's tourism situation, its economy, promotions, and tourism facilities provided to tourists (see Figure 1). According to QTA's chairman Ahmed Al-Nuaimi, 'Qatar is world renowned for both our tradition of independence and our progressive orientation. Qatar Tourism Authority's new slogan, Independent Spirit ["As independent as you are"], represents the core of our new identity'. He states that '[t]his fundamental Qatari spirit is revealed in Qatar Tourism Authority's new logo. We have created a seal that represents Qatar's role in bringing worlds together: business combined with leisure, authenticity joined with advancing technology, globalisation meeting with independence' and refers to the values of Qatari history, culture, warmth and hospitality, its embracing of modern technology and being one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Chairman's message, n.d.).

In Al-Riyadh Newspaper (2008), Qatar is ranked as one of



قطر Qatar

Figure 1: QTA slogan (on the left) and logo (on the right) (after Qatar Tourism Authority (n.d.))

the most developed destinations in the Middle-East, in its provision of both modern and traditional shopping facilities. In addition, Souk Waqif is an added positive feature to Qatar's tourism as it reflects the modernity and tradition of Qatar.

Specific education in the field of tourism in Qatar is very limited and has only recently seen a significant upgrade when the Dutch CHN University (presently Stenden University Qatar) opened the Doha campus in September 2000. This shows some effort being made towards the proper training and education of tourism staff. Apart from the above-mentioned institutions, Qatar relies almost exclusively on external sources to deliver qualifications (State of Qatar, 2002). The actual position of Qatar as a tourism destination has to be determined with regard to its competitive neighbours. Therefore, different complementary and competing countries in the Middle East were analysed to assess the impact of their tourism performance on Qatar (State of Qatar, 2002). In order to determine Qatar's current competitive position, several aspects of its tourism product are assessed and contrasted with its external profile in the international marketplace (State of Qatar, 2002), namely: nature, culture and heritage, themed man-made attractions, and events.

Conclusion and recommendations

QTA Branding Goals (n.d.) aims at 'extending the stay of businessmen in Qatar for an extra 48 hours to explore the country and get acquainted with its several progress features especially in business and tourism areas'. Their brand-management style consisted of an 'aggressive' marketing campaign, promoting Qatar both locally and internationally (Chacko, n.d.). When interpreting the brand 'Qatar' the 'Independent Spirit' seal shows the role of Qatar as a society that brings different worlds together. It is a narrative about how Qatar should develop and offers a view on Qatari society. There are several social and political views underlying the branding of this country, which explain its branding strategy (Chacko, n.d.). Moreover, the 'As independent as you are' brand offers a vision of Qatar as a highly developed society which is rooted in an Arabic heritage while at the same time offering advanced technological, economic and educational developments. It is the story of how Qatar has risen and how it should become a continuous line of flight, which is a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari (cited in Lorraine, 2005: 145) that can be described as 'a path of mutation precipitated through the actualisation of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit (or "virtual") that release new power in the capacities of those bodies to act and respond'. There are social, cultural and political views which explain this strategy.

What competitive advantage does Qatar offer as a tourist destination? In order for a destination to compete successfully, it must have various factors, as mentioned in the secondary sources of this research. The QTA's main aim is to reflect the culture of Qatar but at the same time show others that Qatar is open to receiving people from different cultures and backgrounds. Moreover, Qatar is different to its neighbouring countries. In addition, there are two projects under construction in the Lusail area which will promote Qatar's tourism. One of them is the cultural village and the other is the entertainment city. There are also a booming number of hotels in Qatar

which give the country unique characteristics in addition to an atmosphere of high quality service and hospitality. On the other hand, QTA does not focus on leisure tourism at the moment the way it focuses on MICE tourism. Therefore, there is no intention at the moment to build a high number of entertainment parks and the like.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn on the competitiveness of Qatar as a tourist destination. The study found that QTA is taking advantage of the culture and heritage of Qatar to compete with other countries. Like these countries, Qatar sought to transform its cities into multinational cities without losing its own culture which is by far the most important aspect to be done. Moreover, Qatar's competitiveness is dependent on attracting business tourists and that is why QTA, in cooperation with Qatar National Hotels Company (QNHC), is trying to increase the number of hotels and business facilities. There are several issues related to the image-building activities of the QTA to which the tourism stakeholders can pay attention. Marketing and promotion are the basis for reflecting the image of a destination. QTA plays an important role in reflecting a positive image of Qatar both locally and internationally. Its new logo and slogan are enough to show people that Qatar is uniquely different as their main aim is to combine the uniqueness of Qatar's culture and Qatar's openness to welcome others' cultures. In addition, the marketing section and the promotion and exhibition sections are responsible for promoting Qatar and making others aware of Qatar as a business destination at present and then as a tourist destination in the future.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn regarding the image-building activities of the QTA. The study shows that QTA wants to reflect that Qatar is preserving its Arabic roots as well as its culture and heritage. Therefore, culture is a part of the image-building process and embedded into the advertising message. QTA is working hard to enhance an image which reflects Qatar as an Arab country which welcomes people from different countries and cultures. According to QTA (n.d.), the image that tourists should have about Qatar is very important because this image will help to attract them to the destination and consequently encourage them to visit the state. According to the Qatar Statistics Authority (n.d.), the demand for Qatar is increasing which means that the image of Qatar has been changing from year to year. Regarding the strategies that the QTA follows to brand Qatar as a tourist destination, one can deduce that Qatar is branded as a business destination. QTA organises various local events by sponsors, advertises in different media, and distributes promotional materials and gift items. Marketing internationally takes place by participating in international events and exhibitions, such as the promotional campaign through Asia and Europe to promote Qatar to respective markets.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the QTA strategy in branding Qatar depends mostly on marketing and promotion. This has a considerable influence on tourists, including both business travellers and tourists visiting friends and family, and their choices. There are some other stakeholders which have a big role in building the image of Qatar and so indirectly help to establish the brand of Qatar. The first such stakeholder is Qatar Airways. This high-quality airline, which carries passengers from different nationalities, helps to promote Qatar's tourism by showing on-board videos on Qatar and distributing

its magazines, which includes a great deal of information about Qatar. In addition to Qatar Airways, tour operators and hotel representatives also help to promote Qatar's image at international events and exhibitions. The newly established Museum of Islamic Art is a major player in attracting cultural tourists. Moreover, it serves as one of the attractions which business tourists can visit as an added activity. The new QTA logo reflects how Qatar's society is attached to its culture, heritage and its Arabic roots. These factors are sufficient to show that Qatar is unique and different. Qatar is developing fast and steadily. This means that even in a changing environment, Qatar attempts to preserve its unique culture and, at the same time, respects other cultures in a way that allows it to maintain its heritage while still following modernity.

Currently, QTA depends mostly on marketing and promotions to establish the brand of Qatar locally and internationally. The brand Qatar is currently a business destination and QTA wants to attract business travellers who come to do their business and simultaneously explore the cultural aspects of Qatar. QTA expects that these tourists will then inform others and encourage them to visit. Local marketing is mainly inspired by sponsoring and organising various events, advertising in different media, and distributing promotional materials and gift items. International marketing is organised by participating in events and exhibitions taking place abroad. This study is useful for tourism students, researchers in tourism studies, or other stakeholders who are interested in branding or marketing.

The following recommendations are useful for reflections on the place branding of Qatar. These recommendations are as follows: there should be cooperation between QTA and embassies of Qatar abroad as they can help to introduce Qatar to other nationalities, especially during special occasions such as Independence Day. There should also be cooperation between QTA and the Supreme Education Council of Qatar to grant scholarships for students to study tourism and hospitality. In the future, there will be opportunities for further development of the cooperation between QTA and tour operators, travel agencies, local museums and airlines, especially Qatar Airways. The reason behind this is that such cooperation can reach a large number of tourists as these organisations have direct contact with customers and the distribution of such promotional materials will be quick and easy.

In 'As independent as you are' QTA envisioned one gigantic project after another, based on an economy of abundance. Qatar is not and does not want to be 'another Dubai' and in this development and branding, QTA focuses on a balance between heritage, tradition and development. Still, one could argue that it would be justified to follow the Centre Pompidou's framing of 'Dreamland Dubai' which states that the developments are 'expressions of a post-functional urbanisation based on luxury and excess'. Qatar offers variety from a reinvented souk, an elaborate Museum of Islamic Art, to a shopping mall staging Venetian canals among the shopping visitors. It is a created oasis. Like Dubai, Qatar 'sells' dreams. Visitors are carried away on a stream of images in which real and virtual are skilfully and knowingly combined' (Centre Pompidou, 2010). The line of flight chosen by Qatar reflects the dreams of an ultra reality of a contemporary world.

References

- Al-Riyadh Newspaper. 2008, January 18. p. 12.
- Al-Sharq Newspaper. 2009, September 30. p. 9.
- Centre Pompidou. 2010. Dreamlands [Brochure]. Paris.
- Chacko KT. n.d.. Master plan to make Qatar a major tourist destination. Qatar Tourism Authority. Available at <http://www.qatartourism.gov.qa/press/index/1/24> [accessed 19 September 2010].
- Chairman's message. n.d. Qatar Tourism Authority. Available at <http://www.qatartourism.gov.qa/about/index/1> [accessed 19 September 2010].
- Dwyer L, Livaic Z, Mellor R. 2003. Competitiveness of Australia as a tourism destination. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 10: 60–78.
- Lorraine T. 2005. Lines of flight. In: Parr A (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp 144–146.
- Ooi C. 2006. Tales from two countries: the place branding of Denmark and Singapore. Available at <http://openarchive.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10398/7393/cdp%202006-009.pdf?sequence=1> [accessed April 2009].
- QTA (Qatar Tourism Authority). n.d. Available at <http://www.qatartourism.gov.qa/> [accessed 20 July 2010].
- QSA (Qatar Statistics Authority). n.d. Available at <http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm> [accessed 20 July 2010].
- State of Qatar (2002) Tourism Master Plan. Final Report.

