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WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NATION? A CROSS-SECTORAL COMPARISON OF NATIONAL IDENTITY ARTICULATION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

Amid Russia's full-scale war, Ukraine's struggle is not only military and political but also symbolic: the country must define and project its national identity on the global stage. This study investigates who speaks for the nation by analysing how different stakeholder groups in Ukraine articulate national identity and how their perspectives shape the nation brand in wartime. The analysis highlights five sectoral viewpoints, which collectively shape a polyphonic identity that reinforces authenticity yet exposes challenges between bottom-up diversity and the pursuit of coherent international

narratives. The study advances debates on nation branding as a multi-actor process, showing that in wartime Ukraine stakeholder diversity enriches the nation brand while also raising critical questions about coherence and strategic direction for the future.

Key words: wartime Ukraine, national identity, nation branding, communications, stakeholder engagement

Introduction

The dynamics of nation branding, national identity, and perceptions play a critical role in shaping a country's image on the global stage. This paper focuses on the case of Ukraine, a post-communist nation, which has undergone significant shifts in its national identity and nation branding strategies in response to Russian aggression. The interplay between these elements takes center stage as Ukraine grapples with the challenges of redefining its identity in the midst of conflict.

Ukraine offers a critical case for examining the dynamics of national identity transformation and nation brand building. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has continuously negotiated its identity while transitioning from a post-Soviet economy toward a European orientation (Kuzio, 2007). Early attempts at branding were fragmented and often ineffective, leaving Ukraine largely absent from the comparative literature of the 1990s and 2000s (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2023). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, even more decisively, the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, transformed this picture. One of the most noteworthy consequences of these events in Ukraine is a dramatic change in Ukrainian national identity and its nation-branding initiatives where brand communication is used as a key part of the nation's response to a military invasion. Through its successive campaigns Ukraine has attracted the world attention and extended the visibility of the war beyond international news coverage media such as social media posts and Vogue. Nation-branding efforts have since moved well beyond official government initiatives, increasingly incorporating the contributions of civil society, cultural actors, and grassroots movements.

While nation-branding efforts provide the external framework through which nations communicate with the world, its foundations lie in national identity — the shared narratives, collective memories, and symbolic meanings through which citizens define their belonging (Smith, 2009; Ermolenko, 2022; Fomenko, 2022). This concept involves the collective understanding of a nation's people, encompassing the beliefs, values, historical narratives, and cultural traits that are considered central and relatively unchanging over time. In fact, Zlobina (2024) state that national identity is a phenomenon established in regards with members unification and understanding of their place globally. To point out, national identity can be created by individuals or groups as wholes, while agreed approach to it can develop strong social equity, increase cooperation with others, provide more efficient information flows, and ensure coordination between state institutes (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2010). Conversely, research suggest the essence of national identity among post-communist countries is a presentation of exotic points of differences and place distinctions in a modern manner (Kaneva, 2021). However, it is essential to acknowledge that even without deliberate

branding efforts, every nation inevitably projects an image to the international community.

Moving further, literature states that there are certain interrelations between national identity, nation-brand identity and country image. Adapting definition of Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2002), nation-brand identity can be considered as a selection of association that are supposed to be created and communicated by means of country brand development. Defining and cultivation of nation-brand identity helps to build a strong motivational system across involved organisations, which relates to the aspects of internal branding and simultaneously important for a comprehensive nation brand strategy formulation (L'hoeste, 2020; Vladoš and Chatzinikolaou, 2021).

Iglesias et al. (2020) suggest the notion of identity is a central element of stakeholders' management, providing a brand platform and direction for future activities and communications. It has also been suggested, that in order to establish nation-brand identity accurately, such aspects, as brand vision and aim, points of differentiations or brand values, field of competence and recognisable signs, have to be clearly defined (Dinnie, 2022).

This understanding of identity as a managerial foundation provides a bridge to broader discussions on nation branding, where state communication becomes a strategic tool for shaping both national reputation and collective identity, while strengthening the country's strategic positioning within the global marketplace of resources and ideas (Dinnie, 2022; Kaneva, 2022; Korostelina et al., 2025). Beyond image-making, nation branding shapes international competitiveness by influencing trade, investment, tourism, and diplomatic recognition. For former communist and transitional countries, applying marketing concepts to national development has never been limited to external campaigns (Kaneva, 2022). Rather, it has meant constructing new images of the nation that are firmly anchored in national identity and its internal interpretation — a resource that can eventually become both an economic and political asset (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2023).

Nation branding translates this internal sense of self into a strategic framework of nation-brand identity, which merges “what the country is” with “what it wants to be seen as” (He et al., 2021). In market-driven global environments, this process often entails converting cultural identity into a commodified product for international audiences. As L'hoeste (2020) argues, within such systems national identity is reinterpreted as a brand, transforming the fluid process of identity formation into a transactional, marketable resource. This commodification is evident in post-socialist transitions, where branding became both a governance tool and a means of self-definition (Kaneva, 2021). Polese and Sheranova (2023) demonstrate through their comparative analysis that branding initiatives intended for external image-building frequently reshape domestic identity discourses, demonstrating how branding and identity formation are mutually constitutive. Their findings reveal that branding operates simultaneously as an instrument of international image projection and as a mechanism for renewing collective self-perception.

Contemporary scholarship on Ukraine provides a clear example of this interdependence. Studies show that after 2014, Ukraine's previously divided identity

evolved into a more unified civic narrative grounded in freedom, sovereignty, and resistance, transforming “Ukrainianness” into a shared national project (Averianova and Voropaieva, 2020). This evolution reflects the constructivist view of identity as socially produced through crisis and interaction (Al Tarawneh, 2024) and provides the cultural foundation for the articulation of Ukraine’s nation-brand identity.

Similarly, Vladoš and Chatzinikolaou (2021) note that large-scale branding campaigns and global events often produce unintended nation-building effects, strengthening citizens’ self-perception and collective narratives. Ultimately, nation branding does not simply communicate identity; it re-frames and performs it. The case of Ukraine’s wartime campaign “Brave Like Ukraine” exemplifies this dynamic, as national characteristics such as bravery are transformed into a form of symbolic capital with political and economic value on the global stage (Kaneva, 2022). Kipnis et al. (2024) further develop this argument by showing that marketing and branding practices in wartime Ukraine operate not only as instruments of communication but as mechanisms of community resilience, enabling collective adaptation and reinforcing the very sense of unity that underpins nation-brand identity.

Moving further, national identity is not produced by governments alone. The reviewed literature collectively demonstrates a paradigmatic shift in understanding place and nation branding, moving away from managerial communication toward a participatory, socially constructed process (Kavaratzis, 2024). Recent studies highlight that nation brand development is most effective when it involves a collaborative and diverse array of actors who engage in the co-creation and negotiation of identity (He et al., 2021; Kaneva, 2022). San Eugenio-Vela et al. (2019) argue that participatory branding enhances the authenticity and legitimacy of place brands by embedding local narratives and fostering shared ownership among stakeholders. Similarly, Helmi et al. (2019) identify several modes of stakeholder engagement—from passive to active and leadership-oriented—demonstrating that brand identity evolves through continuous interaction between public, private, and civic actors. Complementing these findings, Feng, Berndt and Ots (2023) show how residents’ communicative practices and digital storytelling can redefine brand identity in times of crisis, transforming expressions of belonging and solidarity into instruments of collective resilience. In the specific domain of place identity, value is understood to emerge through interactions among stakeholders—emphasising that legitimacy, resonance, and coherence depend not just on state narratives but on multilayered, negotiated meanings (Dinnie, 2022).

While existing literature acknowledges that stakeholders play a key role in place branding, much less attention has been paid to how different sectors articulate national identity and, by extension, influence a nation’s global positioning. For Ukraine, a nation simultaneously engaged in war, recovery, and international repositioning, this gap is particularly significant. The pressing question is how diverse stakeholder groups interpret and project national identity, and how their voices influence the credibility and resilience of Ukraine’s nation brand. By examining the perspectives of academics, business leaders, civil society, cultural diplomacy actors, and communication professionals, this paper investigates the sectoral dynamics that define “who speaks for the nation” at a decisive moment in Ukraine’s contemporary history. In doing so, it

contributes to the literature by highlighting the differentiated role of stakeholder sectors in identity formation, positioning Ukraine as a critical case of nation branding during war and advancing debates on how polyphony can be managed as both a challenge and a strength in national brand strategy.

The aim of this study is to examine how different stakeholder groups in Ukraine interpret and communicate national identity, and to explore how these perspectives collectively shape the resilience and international positioning of the nation brand in a time of war and transformation.

Methodology

The research adopts a functionalist qualitative approach, examining how national identity narratives operate instrumentally within Ukraine's nation-branding and public diplomacy practices (Kaneva, 2021). It employs an exploratory case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), positioned at the intersection of marketing and public diplomacy, and situated within Ukraine's contemporary socio-political context (Yin, 2018). The study also follows a narrative approach, analysing how participants construct meaning through stories that link identity, image, and global perception (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). The research employs an exploratory qualitative case study of Ukraine, a methodological choice particularly suited to analysing contested and shifting dimensions of national identity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) within their current socio-political context (Yin, 2018). Empirical material derives from 25 semi-structured interviews with participants whose roles, whether directly or indirectly, contribute to the articulation of Ukraine's national identity in public, professional, and cultural arenas. The sampling approach proceeded in three steps: first, participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance; second, coverage was extended across academia, business, civil society, cultural diplomacy, and communications; and third, recruitment was supplemented with snowballing techniques to capture additional perspectives (Patton, 2002). The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure, during which themes were created inductively from the material. NVivo 12 software was used to organise codes and facilitate systematic comparison. Since each stakeholder sector (academia, business, civil society, cultural diplomacy, communications) was treated as a separate case, the analysis employed a cross-case comparison design, allowing similarities and differences between stakeholder perspectives to be identified. To strengthen validity, interpretations were triangulated with secondary materials, including policy documents, media reporting, and branding outputs.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews demonstrates that national identity in Ukraine emerges through varied and occasionally conflicting perspectives across stakeholder groups. Rather than a single narrative, the findings point towards a polyphonic landscape of voices, each foregrounding different elements of identity — from historical continuity and cultural heritage to innovation, resilience, and international recognition. This mix of voices reflects the complex and changing nature of national identity, while also raising questions of coherence and credibility in the formation of Ukraine's nation brand. In the following sections, the perspectives of five stakeholder groups —

academia, business, civil society, cultural diplomacy, and communications — are presented and compared.

Academia

Analysis of the academic sector highlights the tendency to frame Ukrainian national identity through reference to history, memory, and language. Identity was frequently linked to discourses of continuity and distinctiveness, emphasising Ukraine's difference from Russia and the importance of preserving cultural and linguistic markers. Within this framing, identity was seen as both a scholarly object of analysis and as a civic resource that shapes Ukraine's legitimacy in the international arena. At the same time, academics pointed to the contested and multiple character of identity, highlighting the reality that it cannot be tied to one definition. Instead, they viewed it as a dynamic construct which is constantly reinterpreted by social experience, collective memory, and political transformation. Academics also reflected on who should be included in shaping Ukraine's nation brand. Their responses stressed that branding cannot be left solely to government or professional marketers; rather, it should involve a broad coalition of actors, including cultural institutions, educators, researchers, and civil society representatives. This emphasis on inclusiveness is also an intellectual issue that a credible and viable brand must draw on the plural voices of society to ensure that identity remains both authentic and representative.

Business

Findings from the business sector emphasise a forward-looking and pragmatic vision of Ukrainian identity. Business representatives frequently associated identity with innovation, entrepreneurship, and global competitiveness, presenting Ukraine not only as a country of resilience but also as a potential economic partner and technology hub. They highlighted the importance of connecting Ukraine's identity to qualities that attract investment and position the country within international markets. At the same time, business voices acknowledged that identity cannot be communicated effectively without credibility and consistency. They stressed that fragmented or contradictory messages risk undermining trust among international partners. For this reason, respondents from the business community pointed to the need for strategic coordination in how Ukraine's story is told, arguing that successful nation branding requires a balance between economic narratives and broader cultural or civic dimensions.

Civil Society

Civil society respondents consistently framed national identity through the lens of resilience, volunteerism, and grassroots mobilisation. They described ordinary citizens as active contributors to the way Ukraine is perceived abroad, portraying them as informal ambassadors whose actions during the war embody national values more persuasively than official campaigns. This bottom-up dimension of branding was linked to traditions of solidarity and self-organisation, presenting it as a defining feature of Ukraine's identity and as a powerful resource for its international image. Importantly, civil society actors acknowledged the fragmented and decentralised character of these contributions. Volunteer initiatives and grassroots projects, while genuine and impactful, can result in multiple parallel narratives with limited

coordination. Participants suggested that greater recognition and support for citizen-driven efforts is necessary, alongside mechanisms of dialogue with government and other sectors. Such integration, they argued, would allow Ukraine's nation brand to benefit fully from the authenticity of grassroots engagement while maintaining coherence in how identity is communicated internationally.

Cultural Diplomacy

Respondents involved in cultural diplomacy described national identity primarily through heritage, artistic expression, and symbolic capital. They described culture as one of Ukraine's most effective tools for communicating resilience and distinctiveness internationally. References to literature, visual arts, music, and language were presented as key elements through which Ukraine differentiates itself and strengthens recognition abroad. For these participants, culture served not just as a source of pride but also as a strategic resource of soft power that can foster empathy and solidarity with international audiences. Cultural diplomacy actors also emphasised the importance of sustained investment and institutional support to ensure that Ukraine's cultural narratives reach diverse global platforms. They noted that cultural initiatives are often fragmented or underfunded, which can limit their long-term impact. At the same time, they highlighted the strength of collaborations between state institutions, independent cultural organisations, and the diaspora, pointing to these networks as crucial for projecting a credible and inclusive image of Ukraine on the world stage.

Branding and Communication Professionals

Branding and communication professionals placed strong emphasis on the need for coherent strategies and consistent branding messages. Their contributions centred on ensuring that Ukraine's external image is aligned across different platforms and audiences, with particular attention to the role of cultural messaging and global perception management. Compared to other groups, they were less engaged with deeper cultural or civic identity markers such as historical memory, volunteering, or grassroots unity. Instead, their value lies in translating diverse inputs into a refined and communicable narrative, transforming areas of consensus into nation-brand assets. In this sense, they act as crucial intermediaries between the multiplicity of internal voices and the international arena, responsible for coherence, alignment, and the transmission of Ukraine's image abroad. At the same time, these professionals cautioned that consistency must not come at the expense of authenticity. They stressed that the credibility of Ukraine's brand rests on reflecting the genuine experiences of society, rather than relying on simplified slogans or top-down directives.

Cross-Sectoral Comparison

Taken together, the five stakeholder groups provide a multi-voiced articulation of Ukrainian national identity. Academics emphasise historical depth and civic values, while business actors stress innovation and competitiveness. Civil society highlights resilience and volunteerism, cultural diplomacy focuses on heritage and symbolic capital, and branding and communication professionals prioritise coherence and alignment in external messaging. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they intersect and complement one another in ways that enrich the nation brand. At the same time, the findings reveal gaps and tensions: bottom-up voices foreground

authenticity and lived experience, whereas top-down actors prioritise message discipline and narrative coherence for international audiences. These dynamic captures both the potential and the challenge of nation branding in wartime Ukraine — a process that relies on managing diversity without erasing it, and on transforming multiple perspectives into a credible and persuasive identity on the international stage.

Discussion

The findings resonate with existing research that conceptualises nation branding as a multi-actor and participatory process, rather than a purely top-down exercise (Kaneva, 2022; Kavaratzis, 2024;). The perspectives identified in Ukraine — spanning historical depth, civic resilience, cultural heritage, innovation, and strategic communication — demonstrate that branding emerges through the interaction of groups with distinct priorities. This reinforces the view that national identity and brand cannot be reduced to a single narrative but must be seen as contested and continually reshaped (Kipnis et al., 2024)).

At the same time, the study engages with debates on the tension between authenticity and coherence in nation branding. Previous scholarship has underlined the risks of highly centralised, state-driven initiatives that overlook citizen perspectives (Kaneva, 2021; Fomenko, 2022; Polese and Sheranova, 2024). The Ukrainian case shows the reverse challenge: strong bottom-up mobilisation produces authenticity and credibility yet can result in fragmentation without strategic coordination. This reflects Bolin and Ståhlberg's (2023) observation that wartime identity-making amplifies multiple voices but also intensifies the problem of coherence. In this respect, the analysis connects with Kaneva's (2022) discussion of the Brave Campaign. While she highlights the state as the central actor in wartime branding, she also notes that the role of non-state actors warrants closer examination. The campaign itself illustrates this point: even when state messaging dominates, wider participation remains crucial for articulating and projecting the nation brand.

The findings further contribute to work on post-communist and transitional branding. Earlier studies note that countries in this category often struggle to reconcile historical legacies with aspirations for European integration (Kaneva, 2021; Fomenko, 2022; Al Tarawneh, 2024). Ukraine reflects this tension sharply: academics emphasise history and civic values, while business representatives promote future-oriented innovation. This duality corresponds with Steenkamp's (2019) argument that economic narratives cannot be disentangled from internal identity debates.

Finally, the study provides further insight into the concept of polyphony in nation branding. While prior literature acknowledges that multiple stakeholders are involved, it has rarely examined how these voices interact across sectors. The Ukrainian case shows that polyphony is not only unavoidable but can also be advantageous, provided there are mechanisms to manage diversity without silencing it. This perspective refines the understanding of stakeholder engagement as not merely inclusion, but as a process of negotiation, alignment, and translation across different arenas of national identity.

Conclusion and Implications

This study addressed the question of who speaks for the nation in Ukraine by analysing how different stakeholder groups articulate national identity and how these

articulations influence the shaping of the nation brand. The findings show that identity is expressed through a polyphony of sectoral voices: academics emphasise history and civic values, business actors stress innovation and competitiveness, civil society highlights resilience and volunteerism, cultural diplomacy draws on heritage and symbolic capital, and branding and communication professionals prioritise coherence in external messaging. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that Ukraine's nation brand cannot be reduced to a single narrative but is formed through the interaction of multiple actors with distinct priorities.

The study contributes to the literature by extending research on nation branding as a multi-actor process. It demonstrates that stakeholder perspectives do not merely coexist but interact in ways that generate both opportunities and tensions, particularly under conditions of war. These findings advance theoretical debates by showing that nation branding should be understood as a polyphonic negotiation, where authenticity, coherence, and strategic direction emerge through the interaction of diverse stakeholder perspectives. In practice, the findings are relevant across domains: for policymakers, by fostering cross-sectoral dialogue and establishing mechanisms to support it; for diplomacy, by ensuring that authentic voices are integrated into Ukraine's international image; and for brand strategists, by highlighting the need for approaches grounded in dialogue rather than imposed from above.

Future research could proceed in three directions: examining how international audiences perceive Ukraine's multi-voiced brand; analysing the long-term effects of stakeholder diversity on post-war reconstruction and branding; and comparing Ukraine with other transitional or war-affected states to see whether polyphony is a distinctive or more widespread feature of nation branding.

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ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ВИРОБНИЧО-ГОСПОДАРСЬКОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ ПРОМИСЛОВИХ ПІДПРИЄМСТВ З УРАХУВАННЯМ ЖИТТЄВОГО ЦИКЛУ

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Підприємство, як юридичний суб'єкт господарювання (комерційна та некомерційна діяльність), використовуючи трудові та матеріальні ресурси, займається виробничо-господарською діяльністю з метою отримання максимального прибутку.

В сучасних умовах господарювання і швидко мінливих умовах зовнішнього середовища в Україні і всьому світі що характеризуються: високим рівнем конкуренції, технічними і технологічними змінами, нестабільною політичною ситуацією, невизначеністю в економіках (зростання рівня інфляції, зміна курсу валют, зниження купівельної спроможності, падіння прибутку підприємств, обмеженості ресурсів тощо), пошук ринків для вигідного вкладення капіталу, процесами глобалізації, стрімкого розвитку діджиталізації, впровадження штучного інтелекту і його повсякденне використання, міграція населення, глобальне потепління, тощо, частіше стало знаходити відображення на нестачі висококваліфікованих кадрів, дефіциту фінансових ресурсів. В таких поточних умовах підприємствам важко протистояти зовнішнім факторам і – все частіше підштовхує підприємства до ретельного планування виробництва для адаптації до зовнішніх змін.

Планування допомагає об'єднати всі структури підприємства спільною метою. Спрямованість і координованість підрозділів вирішує питання ефективного та раціонального розподілу ресурсів підприємства, передбачити різні майбутні ситуації зі своєчасною розробкою планів розвитку підприємства.