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“VISIT RWANDA” : A WELL PRIMED PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN OR A GENUINE ATTEMPT AT IMPROVING THE COUNTRY’S IMAGE ABROAD?

Abstract

This article examines why Rwanda, a poor African country that is generally known for the horrific genocide that took place there in 1994, has decided to sponsor Arsenal, one of the richest football clubs in the world, using “Visit Rwanda” messaging. It therefore analyses the contextual circumstances, which explain the Rwandan government's choice for profiling itself using this manner of nation branding. As such, the article outlines how the commercial deal is seen as part of a state-led strategy for the long-term development of the country. By presenting Rwanda as a place to go to, the negative image of the genocide will be replaced by the image of a more stable country which is attractive to visitors and investments. However, other reports cast doubt on the sincerity of this strategy, as they purport that this effort in nation branding is being used to persuade the international community to overlook alleged human right violations in the country. Consequently, the article concludes that the Rwandan government's choice for branding the country in this manner appears ambiguous and seemingly limits itself to marketing, in order to achieve benefits for the country that are probably too good to be true.

Keywords Rwanda, Visit Rwanda, Nation branding, Public relations, Diplomacy, Sports

Introduction

On 22 May 2018, a commercial deal was concluded that stunned the world. Arsenal, a wealthy English football club, announced that it was going to be sponsored by Rwanda, a poor African country that is generally known for the horrific genocide that took place there in 1994. In exchange, Arsenal agreed to feature the “Visit Rwanda” logo on the left sleeve of all the football team’s kits for the following three football seasons (Arsenal FC 2018).

As expected, when a low-income country like Rwanda sponsors one of the richest football clubs in the world, this raised questions (Reyntjens 2018a). Critics say the money should have been spent alleviating the chronic poverty in the country (Britton and Cullen 2018). Rwanda is the nineteenth poorest country in the world, whilst Arsenal is one of the richest football clubs in the world (Reyntjens 2018a). However, for the Rwandan government, the deal is part of a broader strategy to develop tourism in the country (Reyntjens 2018a). Hence, taking the country’s poverty into account, this article aims to substantiate why the Rwandan government is using branding to raise the country's profile.

To do this, the article firstly examines the theoretical foundations of the concepts relevant to this study. Secondly, a contextual background is outlined in which a short historical overview of Rwanda is provided, followed by a closer examination of the “Visit Rwanda” nation branding campaign. Thirdly, an analysis is made of the underlying motives and purposes of Rwanda’s nation branding campaign to enable a critical assessment as well as an interpretation of its effects.

Literature review

A useful starting point for the conceptual context is the conceptualisation of Rwanda as a brand, in the sense that it has a distinctive individual identity which is unique to itself. This follows the American Marketing Association's traditional definition of a brand (Bennett 1988), as well as Anholt's (2005) view that countries have always been brands, in the truest sense of the word. Moreover, Temporal's (2015, p. 12) definition of a brand as "an idea, which lives in the imagination of the audience and encompasses feelings, perceptions, and mental associations", provides the necessary clarification for the ensuing analysis.

Building on these conceptualisations, Hankinson's (2004) identification of four streams of thought about brands - brands as communicators; brands as perceptual entities; brands as value enhancers; and brands as relationships - is useful. In the current study, Rwanda's brand can be seen as a perceptual entity which appeals to the consumer's senses, reason and emotions.

Indeed, as highlighted by Peterson (2006) and Avery and Keinan (2015), branding can then be understood as a process by which practices and tools are used to create a distinctive positive perceptual frame, which can be at the same time perceived differently by different people but is also part of collective discourse. Imperative for this study, furthermore, is De Chernatony and McDonald's (2003) clarification regarding the role of branding - as they highlight that while marketeers instigate the branding process (branding as an input), it is the consumer who forms a mental vision of the brand (branding as an output), which may be different from the intended marketing aim. This is particularly relevant as pre-existing perceptions of Rwanda may be entrenched in the target audience's minds and therefore difficult to change through the process of branding.

The denotation of "a nation" should also be considered. Smith's (2002, p. 15) definition goes as follows: "a named community possessing a historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs". Whilst useful, it is important to note that, before the genocide, the Rwandan population was divided on contentious ethnic lines of Tutsis and Hutus, which were artificially considered unequal. After the genocide however, in an effort to construct a collective identity that promotes national unity and de-ethnicization, all ethnic references have been eradicated in the public discourse (Buckley-Zistel 2006).

Adding then, the findings of Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993), Anholt (2005, 2007, 2010), Aronczyk (2013) and Dinnie (2008), an understanding of nation branding as "a conscious and planned process of certain stakeholders - in this study, the government of Rwanda - which aims to produce and transmit certain desired favourable images of a country to external and internal stakeholders using a variety of methods" can be reached. Noteworthy for this study, is that Rwanda's nation branding functions as a tool for national image management and image promotion (Szondi 2010); and that the process itself is being outsourced to branding agencies and consultants who give advice, develop the core ideas and elements, design visuals, and produce a national "brand book" (Szondi 2008).

Deserving of discussion also, are branding strategies to change negative images (see e.g. Avraham 2004, Gertner and Kotler 2004, Herstein and Jaffe 2008, and Jørgensen 2019). In particular, Avraham's (2014) conceptualisation of various approaches of turning the liability of places into assets is worth a look. In the Rwandan case, the aspect of spinning a violent political conflict - the 1994 genocide - into an asset comes to mind. As a result, the genocide memorials in Rwanda have evolved into so-called "dark" (i.e. involving sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre; Stone 2006) or "genocide" (Alluri 2009, Beech 2009, Friedrich and Johnston 2013, Hohenhaus 2013) tourism attractions (Sharpley and Gahigana 2014). Nevertheless, although these "attractions" undoubtedly

remain symbolic in contemporary Rwanda, they stand in stark contrast to the vision of the country that is nowadays being purported through nation branding.

Lastly, given that this study also focuses on the aspect of Public Relations (PR) in Rwanda's nation branding, this also deserves delineation. A useful definition in this regard is Hazleton and Long's (1988) description of PR as an adaptive organizational process where communication is used to achieve goals. Adding the insights of Avraham (2006) and Avraham and Ketter (2008), two major goals can be deduced that apply in the Rwandan case: generating publicity for Rwanda's marketing campaigns and crisis communication to deal with reputational damage. Particularly relevant, moreover, is the role played by various PR agencies in engaging the media in Rwanda's nation branding initiative, by building strategic relationships with media outlets, journalists and relevant organisations (Szondi 2010).

In sum, all these insights serve as the necessary theoretical foundation that will allow a critical examination of the "Visit Rwanda" nation branding campaign.

Contextual background

A history of conflict

For a better understanding of the context in which Rwanda felt the need to rebrand itself, it is imperative to understand its history of deeply rooted class divisions - which were often expressed and manipulated through constructed identities of the local Hutu and Tutsi populations (Alluri 2009).

Starting with administrative reforms, introduced during Rwanda's rule of Tutsi monarchs in the mid-eighteenth century and further institutionalized by German and Belgian colonizers, Rwandan society became divided along perceptions of ethnicity. As such, these reforms ensured that Tutsis had higher access to employment opportunities, power, land and resources - whilst Hutus were mostly confined to physical labour and agricultural cultivation (Des Forges 1999, p. 31-34).

The monopolization of power within a small ruling class caused a rift between the Hutus and Tutsis, which culminated in the 1959 Rwandan Revolution. Hutu activists began killing Tutsis and destroying their houses, (Linden and Linden 1977, p. 267) forcing over 100,000 people to seek refuge in neighbouring countries (Gourevitch 2000, p. 58-59; Prunier 1995, p. 51). This eventually caused the abolition of the Tutsi monarchy.

Following the decolonization of Rwanda, Juvénal Habyarimana (a Hutu) took power in a military coup. Even though there was greater economic prosperity and a reduced amount of violence against Tutsis, he pursued policies (e.g. an ethnicity-based quota system for government jobs) that were perceived by the Tutsi as discriminatory (Prunier 1995, p. 74-76).

In 1990, a group of high ranking Tutsi officers formed the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) from their base in Uganda and invaded Rwanda initiating the Rwandan Civil War (Prunier 1995, p. 93). Neither side was able to gain a decisive advantage in the war, (Prunier 1995, p. 135-136) but by 1992 it had weakened Habyarimana's authority. Ensuing mass demonstrations forced him into a coalition with the domestic opposition and eventually to sign the 1993 Arusha Accords with the RPF (Prunier 1995, p. 190-191) leading to a cease fire.

On 6 April 1994, ethnic strife between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority peaked as the cease-fire ended when Habyarimana was killed as his plane was shot down near Kigali Airport (BBC 2010). This event served as the catalyst for the Rwandan genocide. Over the course of approximately 100 days,

between 500,000 and 1,000,000 (Henley 2007) Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus were killed in well-planned attacks at the orders of the interim government (Dallaire 2005, p. 386).

The RPF restarted their offensive and methodically took control of the whole country by mid-July 1994 (Dallaire 2005, p. 299). Within Rwanda a period of reconciliation and justice began thereafter, led in part by the swift establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, as well as the reintroduction of the Gacaca - a traditional village court system. Nevertheless, there have since been frequent charges of revisionism; mainly focusing on the fact that the RPF committed human rights violations themselves (Rever 2018; Reyntjens 2019).

The Civil war and the genocide left Rwanda's economy and social fabric in shambles. Subsequently, the country has since struggled heavily with its legacy of ethnic tension associated with the traditionally unequal and contentious relationship between the Tutsi minority and the majority Hutus.

Post conflict perceptions

During the early stages of the transition out of conflict, the RPF government ensured that official narratives about the genocide and civil war were proclaimed within Rwanda. Nevertheless, once the international community officially recognized that a genocide had occurred in Rwanda, the international media produced racist narratives which portrayed Rwandans in two categories: perpetrators, who were hypermasculine, barbaric and uncivilized Hutu men; and victims, typically identified as Tutsi women and children (Holmes 2013; Cieplak 2017).

Rwanda, as a country, was from that moment on no longer considered as the beautiful "land of a thousand hills", but as a bloody land of horror, littered with rotting bodies and full of poverty-stricken, helpless women, men and children. On the borders of Rwanda, the refugee crises in Zaire and Tanzania also appeared to confirm Rwanda's failed state status and highlighted the moral imperative of the international community to step in and rebuild the country (Holmes and Buscaglia 2019, p. 111).

The strategy for economic transformation and "Vision 2020"

The strategy for economic transformation of Rwanda was introduced in 2000, when the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning released its "Vision 2020" (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2000). Designed to transform the country into a middle-income, service-based economy, this document outlined a government development framework, in which six priority pillars (good governance; an efficient state; skilled human capital; a vibrant private sector; a world-class physical infrastructure; and a modern agriculture and livestock) were identified. These development pillars were deemed to be crucial for ensuring that the necessary long-term transformations in Rwandan society happened (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2000, p. 3). It was considered a very ambitious plan, especially given Rwanda's historical reliance on subsistence farming and foreign aid.

As tourism was considered a development priority in "Vision 2020", the tourism Working Group was established in late 2001. This working group, which included private and public stakeholders of the tourism industry, was established to make consultations possible and as such help with the implementation of Vision 2020 (Nielsen and Spenceley 2011, p. 233).

In 2002, following the first round of consultations, the government developed the Rwanda Tourism Strategy, of which a revised version ("Sustaining the Momentum") was released in 2007. In addition, in 2006, a complementary National Tourism Policy was outlined, of which a revision was released in 2009 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Nielsen and Spenceley 2011, p. 234).

In 2009 also, the government approved the Sustainable Tourism Master Plan for Rwanda, which was developed by the UN World Tourism Organisation in conjunction with them. This “Master Plan” consolidated the previous strategies and policies, gave clear and detailed recommendations, and set ambitious targets. Tourist arrivals were projected to increase from about 980,000 in 2008 to more than 2 million in 2020, with an expected increase in foreign exchange earnings from about \$200 million to more than \$600 million (Nielsen and Spenceley 2011, p. 234).

Rwanda’s nation branding efforts

Following the passing of formal tourism plans, a national campaign was launched to improve the image of tourism in the country. The reason being that the word for tourism in Kinyarwanda, the local language, means “wandering around aimlessly” and consequently has a negative connotation. A media campaign was launched to sensitise the population and convey the benefits tourism could bring to Rwanda (Nielsen and Spenceley 2011, p. 234).

Strategic PR efforts to transform the negative perceptions abroad; and to improve Rwanda’s international image began in 2010, when the RPF had stabilized its political power and was better positioned to focus on developing its external “brand image” (Holmes and Buscaglia 2019, p. 111).

Just before the 2010 presidential elections, the Guardian reported that president Kagame had appointed London PR firm Racepoint to develop Rwanda’s nation brand to attract inward investment. At the time, Racepoint’s managing director, Cathy Pittman, was quoted as saying:

“You used to Google Rwanda and the first thing you would see would be about genocide. Now we are feeding content and stories to journalists about the economy and culture. A lot of it is about images” (Booth 2010).

A year later, Rwanda’s National Export Strategy (Government of Rwanda 2011) was released. The strategy considered nation branding as integral to its implementation and observed that:

“nation branding consists of developing and communicating an image - both internally and externally - based on a country’s positive values and perceptions relevant to export development” (Government of Rwanda 2011, p. 25).

The strategy also highlighted the requirement to engage in niche-building:

“small developing countries such as Rwanda face budgetary and operational challenges while forging their national brands abroad. As such, Rwanda will explore creative and cost-efficient ways to create, position and communicate Brand Rwanda” (Government of Rwanda 2011, p. 25).

That “Rwanda’s brand is not well established internationally and suffers from unwanted associations” is a priority concern for the RPF. The strategic plan continued:

“Rwanda often receives unfair press through questionable sources. In a competitive global market, this association can hinder product positioning in key exports [sic] markets. A positive brand must be established for Rwandan products internationally in order to convey the true spirit of Rwanda” (Government of Rwanda 2011, p. 25).

In response, the strategy proposed that “Rwanda’s global brand image” should be managed:

“impressions about a country’s brand are formed in different ways including international media, events, academic literature, arts and culture, etc. Rwanda will develop a strategy for identifying the different channels through which these impressions are formed as well as a strategy for aggressively managing its brand position in these channels” (Government of Rwanda 2011, p. 25–26).

Leading up to the twentieth commemoration of the genocide, the RPF government appointed another London-based PR agency, Portland Communications, to assist with placing positive stories about

Rwanda and to cover the commemorations in the international media. Portland Communications held briefing sessions with several British-based academics to discuss coverage of Rwanda. However, they had limited connections with journalists on the ground and struggled to source personal-interest stories about Rwandans. Portland Communications was later dropped on the grounds that they did not understand Rwanda's complex politics and history (Holmes and Buscaglia 2019, p. 111).

In December 2014, the Ministry of Trade announced plans to embark on a "made in Rwanda" brand to help address the trade deficit and develop Rwanda's manufacturing sector. At home, the government launched a "Buy Local – Twigire" campaign (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2014).

More recently, in 2017, the government appointed The PC Agency to "build its brand in the United Kingdom (UK)" as RwandAir launched its first direct flight from London to Kigali. The emphasis here was on developing Rwanda's destination brand. Paul Charles, founder of The PC Agency, commented in a press release announcing the deal, stating that: "Rwanda now has the leadership team, the product and the infrastructure to attract premium travellers" (Smith 2017).

The Rwanda Development Board (RDB)

The main actor involved in Rwanda's nation branding efforts is the RDB. This government department was officially established in 2008, to coordinate, spur and promote national economic development by promoting investment, export, and job creation (RDB 2020a).

Inspired by the Singaporean model for development, the RDB was drawn up to the likeness of The Singapore Economic Development Board (Verhaegen 2011, p. 17); and conceived following the dispatchment of government officials to Singapore, where they studied the various aspects that encompass the Singaporean development policies (GRIPS Development Forum 2014, p. 8).

Considered a "one stop shop" for all investors, it integrated all government agencies responsible for the attraction, retention and facilitation of investments in the Rwandan national economy (RDB 2020b). The Executive Director's position, currently filled by Clare Akamanzi, is a cabinet-level position that is appointed by and reports directly to president Kagame (iGuide 2017).

Rwanda's latest rebranding: "Visit Rwanda"

Rwanda's latest rebranding - Visit Rwanda - was developed by the earlier mentioned The PC Agency. This PR firm was appointed by the RDB in May 2017, and was tasked to challenge perceptions of Rwanda in the UK media, to increase visitor numbers from the UK and to increase the average length of stay in Rwanda. (The PC Agency 2018).

As a consultant for The PC Agency, Annabel Illingworth was appointed to help with rebranding the country, shifting the global perception away from the genocide and towards responsible tourism, alongside promoting Rwanda's role as a tech hub and incubator within Africa. Her main aim was to increase the average length of stay in Rwanda, by demonstrating everything the country has to offer. The reason being that visitors tended to come for a short period to see the gorillas and then moved on to another country. Furthermore, she was also to focus on the premium demographic (i.e. the high-end tourism), to tie in with the increased cost and restricted allocation of permits to see the gorillas (Illingworth 2019).

Illingworth and her team consequently created the new "Visit Rwanda" brand for the tourism board; an accompanying new website (www.visitrwanda.com) to cover Tourism, Trade & Investment; and promotion films to be aired on African TV, online, at events and on social media (Illingworth 2019).

The official reveal of Rwanda's new rebranding and accompanying logo took place on May 23, 2018. As highlighted by Illingworth, the logo was inspired by Rwanda's beautiful landscape, its volcanoes, its flora and fauna as well as its famous, renowned traditional art form, the Imigongo, which is characterized by bold, geometric designs (Illingworth 2019).

Partnerships with Arsenal and Paris Saint Germain (PSG)

The more visible efforts at branding came in the form of football sponsorships. Starting with the English club Arsenal and more recently with the French club PSG.

Arsenal's sponsorship deal was made public on 23 May 2018, when the football club announced that the RDB had become the first official sleeve partner, as part of the country's drive to become a leading tourist destination, using "Visit Rwanda" messaging (Arsenal FC 2018).

As highlighted above, Rwanda's sponsorship promptly raised questions (Reyntjens 2018a). Politicians from countries that were sending a lot of development aid started questioning the rationale for sending more (De Ryck 2018). For example, Andrew Bridgen, a British member of parliament, stated:

"British taxpayers will be rightly shocked to learn that a country supported by huge handouts from the UK is in turn pumping millions into a fabulously rich football club in London. If this isn't a perfect own goal for foreign aid, I don't know what is" (Little 2018).

Nevertheless, Akamanzi defended the agreement stating that tourism is Rwanda's number one foreign currency earner, and that the more the country earns from tourism, the more it can invest in its people (Britton and Cullen 2018).

Rwanda signed its second sponsorship deal with PSG on 4 December 2019. Under the deal, the Visit Rwanda logo will be displayed on the first team's training and warm-up kit, the women's team kit, on the stadium installations and on backdrop banners (France 24 2019). The deal also includes that PSG fans will be able to drink Rwandan coffee and tea in the stadium of PSG, the Parc des Princes. It is estimated that the deal costs Rwanda approximately ten million euros per year (De Ryck 2019).

Rwanda was again in the media, because the country had previously invested a lot in a similar deal. Consequently, more people questioned whether Rwanda was actually achieving what it claimed to be in terms of tourism and investment (De Ryck 2019). Nevertheless, Akamanzi once more defended Rwanda's rationale by stating:

"We invest part of our tourism revenues in strategic collaborations such as the one with PSG because we understand the positive effect they have on the overall perception of the country globally" (Reuters 2019).

Discussion

Having provided a contextual background, a critical assessment can now be made based on Kaneva's (2011) literature review on political approaches towards nation branding. Here, she highlights how political approaches see nation branding, at worst, as an augmented form of propaganda and, at best, as a "post-ideological" form of reputation management for nations (Kaneva 2011, p. 126). Applied to this case, Rwanda's nation branding approach could be seen either as "a well primed PR campaign", or "a genuine attempt at improving the country's image abroad".

A well primed PR campaign?

Prior to active nation branding, Rwanda was usually negatively portrayed in the media. This generally was because of NGO's denouncing abuses (i.a. human rights violations, a lack of press freedom and

the boycott of political opposition) under the rule of Kagame; or because of the country's extreme poverty. Hence, it can be reasonably assumed that Rwanda's latest nation branding effort entails to a well primed PR campaign aimed at deflecting the media's attention from the "real" situation in the country.

"Rebranding" despite war crimes and repression

Central to this assumption is a report entitled "Spin doctors to the autocrats: how European PR firms whitewash repressive regimes", released in 2015 by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) - a research group working to expose corporate lobbying on EU policy. In this report, a separate chapter is devoted to Rwanda entitled "Rwanda: rebranding - despite war crimes and repression" (CEO 2015, p. 17).

In this chapter, CEO outlines how the Rwandan government has hired several PR firms to work on deflecting criticism, and rebranding the country. They claim that these PR efforts, in addition to historical guilt over the genocide, have attributed to the uncritical Western support for Kagame (CEO 2015, p. 17).

The main piece of evidence referred to is a report published by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in August 2009, which noted that Rwanda has "excellent PR machinery", and that this has been key in "persuading key members of the international community in believing that it has an exemplary constitution which it fully respects ... the truth is, however, the opposite" (Booth 2010).

A first company mentioned in the report, as playing a significant role in facilitating this "PR machinery", is Portland Communications. (CEO 2015, p. 18).

As noted by the British Sunday Times, the contract between the Rwandan government and Portland dated from early 2013 and was said to be worth more than 1,25 million euros (Leppard 2013). Noteworthy is that, when the contract was closed, one of the most controversial spin doctors of Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell, was working for the company (CEO 2015, p. 18).

Another British firm mentioned is BTP Advisers. Reference is made to a secret recording of BTP's chief executive, Mark Pursey, who used to be the international media relations adviser for the Rwandan Government. On the record, he describes building an "attack site" - a webpage targeted at people who "over-criticised" about "who did what in the genocide". He moreover mentioned:

"The government of Rwanda is itself enormously controversial, it is very uncertain what their role was in the deaths that occurred around the time of the genocide" (Newman and Wright 2011).

Pursey also describes undermining the credibility of the 2010 UN report into Rwandan war crimes in DR Congo, saying:

"in order to try and address it, we did not address the accusations that were made. We addressed and focused on the reasonableness of the accusers" (Newman and Wright 2011).

A third firm mentioned in the report is the British Racepoint Group, which in 2010 and 2011 worked to "re-position" Rwanda with key audiences in Europe and the US (CEO 2015, p. 18). Reference is made to a report by The Guardian on an event at Rwanda's embassy in London organised by Racepoint, which involved a fake Rwandan village hut for journalists to sit in, while smart-suited British PR executives poured Rwandan coffee and burred about presenting "a different image" focusing on "mountains, gorillas, crops" - all part of the country's efforts to reinvent itself after it was torn apart by genocide (Booth 2010).

Reference is also made to a case study published by PR journal "PRovoke" entitled "The New Rwanda" about the work Racepoint did for the Rwandan government. In addition to organising stakeholder

input sessions with external groups (e.g. the Blair Foundation and Clinton Global Initiative), and placing articles on key issues such as human rights and democracy in Rwanda, or interviews with Kagame and cabinet ministers in influential international media, Racepoint also embarked on an “aggressive issues response programme”. In other words, counteracting negative and critical press, that “focused on human rights, cultural redevelopment, independence and democratic misperceptions in Rwanda” (PRovoke 2011).

Also crucial to their effort were the “media familiarisation” tours Racepoint organised for journalists. As a result, media discussions about Rwanda increased by 4400% during the time, and - key for a country eager to rebrand - discussions about the genocide decreased by 11% (CEO 2015, p. 18).

One of the more worrying aspects of Racepoint’s objectives was to “educate and correct the ill-informed and factually incorrect information perpetuated by certain groups of expatriates and NGO’s,” including, presumably, the critiques of the crackdown on dissent among political opponents overseas (PRovoke 2011). This should be seen in the context of an investigation by the Globe and Mail that claimed that the RPF allegedly had plotted to kill dissidents abroad in South Africa, Britain, Sweden, Belgium, Uganda, Kenya and Mozambique” (York and Rever 2014).

In sum, considering the controversial use of PR agencies in the past, there is valid reason to believe that the Rwandan government’s latest nation branding effort is just more of the same.

Rwanda’s £30 million sleeve

In line with CEO’s report, several academics have also claimed that Rwanda’s latest nation branding efforts entail to the same controversial PR scheme as outlined by CEO.

As such, Filip Reyntjens - a specialist on Rwanda and emeritus professor at the University of Antwerp - has claimed in an article entitled “When the poor sponsor the rich: Rwanda and Arsenal FC” published on The Conversation news website that Arsenal might have (unwillingly) overlooked the risks that are involved when dealing with Rwanda, considering the signal that is given in light of Kagame’s human rights and democracy records (Reyntjens 2018b).

Reyntjens thereby refers to the existence of widespread analysis and commentary (i.a. by investigative journalist Judi Rever and Human Rights Watch), claiming that the RPF has engaged in human rights abuses and de-facto eroded the state of democracy in Rwanda (Reyntjens 2018b). Furthermore, he highlights that the RPF - due to realising that battles have to be fought in the media, rather than on the ground - has developed a formidable information and communication strategy stretching back to the Rwandan civil war. He explicitly refers to a quote by Kagame, from an interview with Nik Gowing - published in his report “Dispatches from Disaster Zones” on challenges for information management in complex emergencies:

“We used communication and information warfare better than anyone. We have found a new way of doing things” (Gowing 1998, p. 4).

Taking this into account, Reyntjens concludes that the information and communication strategy of the Rwandan government involves paying those who can help promote the right image of the country. For a long time, this only implied PR firms. But, as highlighted by the sponsorship deals, this now includes football clubs as well (Reyntjens 2018b).

Likewise, Susan Thomson - an associate professor at Colgate University, who was a program officer for the UN Development Programme and present in Rwanda during the crisis - published a blogpost on the “Africa is a Country” blog titled “Rwanda’s £30 million sleeve” (Thomson 2019).

In her blogpost, Thomson claims that the RPF, as part of its priorities upon taking power, dispatched both the military intelligence and PR machinery to craft a singular victor's narrative of Tutsi victims and Hutu killers (Thomson 2019). She thereby noted that the RPF were able to quickly craft a narrative that framed itself as the hero who saved Rwanda by working with expatriate journalists, aid workers and diplomats - all of whom were rightfully shocked at the suffering the country experienced (Thomson 2019).

As this narrative is widely accepted in the West, Thomson claims it has provided the government with the moral authority to remake Rwanda in its vision of benevolent leaders governing the largely uneducated and rural masses. Hence, they promote an official PR line proclaiming that, thanks to government-led initiatives to promote ethnic unity, Rwandans now live in harmony (Thomson 2019).

Thomson furthermore highlights how the subtext is also plain: Rwanda is a good place to do business, and welcomes tourists and investment as part of the government's plans to grow the economy. The Arsenal deal is the most recent iteration of this policy, offering a convergence of Kagame's love of football and his desire to transform Rwanda, whatever the costs to the average citizen (Thomson 2019).

Considering the above, she concludes that the "Visit Rwanda" campaign is yet another example of Kagame's grandiose vision for Rwanda, seductively disseminated as good economic stewardship. Moreover, according to her, the sponsorships are better seen as another example of a dictator who is out-of-touch with local realities, bent on pursuing vanity projects rather than actual development; and without any avenue for recourse for the citizens, given the RPF's political grip on the country (Thomson 2019).

In sum, both Reyntjens and Thomson provide valid reasons to believe that Rwanda's latest nation branding efforts account to a similar well-primed PR scheme, as outlined by CEO's report.

A genuine attempt at improving the country's image abroad?

Whilst there are certainly multiple reasons to believe the aforementioned, it would be unfair to reflect only one side and leave out other interpretations. As such, certain elements can be derived from Rwanda's nation branding approach that substantiate it as being part of the country's diplomatic "toolbox".

But, before going into these, reference should be made to an important concept in this regard: "soft power". This is a term coined by Nye (1990) to describe co-optive power in contrast to hard power (e.g. military actions). It refers to a country's ability to influence other countries' behaviour or "the ability to shape what others want", without using hard or coercive power - which is "the ability to change what others do" (Nye 2004, p. 5-11). Nation branding, as done by Rwanda, can be an important tool in the development of a nation's soft power. A successful nation branding campaign will, after all, help create a more favourable image among the international audience thus further enhancing a country's soft power (Fan 2008).

Commercial diplomacy to help spur tourists and foreign investors

As outlined above, the Rwandan government has an ambitious project related to economic development, in which the sponsorships appear to play an important role. Accordingly, the way the government has positioned the country in relation to the international community has changed over the last couple of years.

Whereas Rwandan diplomacy used to be more focused on traditional and security diplomacy - for example, by contributing peacekeeping troops, thereby altering the country's image as a peace kept state into that of a proactive peacekeeper (Holmes and Buscaglia 2019, p. 104) - the government appears to have changed this focus. As such, they seem to prefer more commercial diplomacy (i.e. diplomatic activity conducted by state representatives with diplomatic status in view of business development - through a series of business promotion and facilitation activities - between a home and a host country; Naray 2008); with the RDB in the foreground, as the central diplomatic actor.

A clear example of this is the appointment of the current High Commissioner for Rwanda to the UK, Yamina Karitanyi. Prior to her posting, Karitanyi was the director of the Tourism and Conservation portfolios at the RDB (Rwandan High Commission UK 2018). Hence, her appointment shows the importance given to the role of the RDB - as main diplomatic actor - for the development of the country.

Furthermore, several efforts undertaken by the government show how they have attempted to reposition Rwanda as more tourist and business friendly. For example, there is the government acquisition of the Rwandan subsidiary of the Ugandan-based SA Alliance Air. This airline was re-branded to RwandAir, and began to operate as the new national carrier on 1 December 2002 (Karuhanga 2014). Despite being lossmaking (Himbara 2018a), it has since been held as part of the government's long-term plan to connect Rwanda to the rest of the world (RwandAir 2019).

Another example is the construction of the Kigali Convention Centre. This building was unveiled in July 2016, having cost reportedly \$300 million, thereby making it the most expensive building in Africa (Himbara 2018b). With its construction, the RDB believes the country can position itself as the leading destination for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions in East Africa; thereby making it part of the country's tourism sector, as they look at events as one way to diversify and develop the economy. Karitanyi, who was RDB's chief tourism officer at the time, was quoted as saying:

"meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions are not only a very powerful marketing tool for the country but also a big revenue generator" (The East African 2015).

More recently, of course, are the deals with Arsenal and PSG. As stated earlier, the rationale behind these partnerships is that they will improve the overall perception of Rwanda. This will then allow the country to earn more foreign currency from tourism, which can then be invested to the benefit of the citizens (Britton and Cullen 2018; De Ryck 2019). Similarly, given its pivotal role, it was once again the RDB (and not the foreign ministry) who announced both deals.

In sum, these efforts give an idea of the rationale embedded in the commercial diplomacy strategy, adopted by the government in order to develop the economy and reduce the reliance on foreign aid.

Sports diplomacy by means of strategic sponsorships

Sports is widely recognised as a universal language that can break down cultural barriers. As such, sports diplomacy has increasingly become an important aspect of diplomatic practice. It can be defined as the "use of sports people and sporting events to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign publics and organizations, to shape their perceptions in a way that is (more) conducive to the sending government's foreign policy goals" (Murray and Pigman 2014, p. 1101-1102).

Following the assumption that nation branding is part of Rwanda's diplomatic toolbox, another argument that could be made is that the strategic sponsorships are part of a larger sports diplomacy play for Rwanda as the country looks to rebrand itself on the world stage. Indeed, by aligning itself

with two of the most well-known football clubs in the English and Francophone worlds, one could say that Rwanda has positioned itself as an actor in the “global sports scene” (Leff 2019).

It could furthermore be argued that the strategy applied in converting the government’s image-building efforts to diplomatic outcomes, is the strategy of Vast Media Coverage. This strategy emphasizes that the conversion of sports diplomacy into favourable outcomes will be more effective when the endeavours are communicated globally. According to Cull (2009), a core approach to do this is through international media outlets. Raney and Bryant (2006) furthermore point out that, through vast media coverage, sports stars have become household names and the excitement of sports has been brought to virtually everyone. Hence, this strategy seems to have great potential for image-building efforts by nations (Abdi et.al. 2018, p. 369).

Given also that PSG’s president, Nasser Al-Khelaifi, has served as chairman of Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) since 2011 (the same year QSI obtained ownership of PSG; Sayare 2012) and is well known for holding various leadership roles in Qatar, the sponsorship deal with PSG could be seen as including traditional sports diplomacy (i.e. international sport consciously being employed as an instrument of diplomacy) by the Rwandan government, aiming to form a strategic alliance with Qatar.

Noteworthy in this regard is that Qatar Airways, a Qatar-state owned airlines, purchased a 60% stake in Rwanda’s Bugesera International Airport on 9 December 2019 (5 days after the Visit Rwanda deal was officially announced) and two months thereafter obtained a 49% stake in RwandAir (Al Jazeera 2020). As such, it is not inconceivable to believe that there is an element of reciprocity present in these deals.

Celebrities as ambassador for “brand Rwanda”

Non-state actors, like celebrities, have increased their involvement in diplomatic relations and as such altered the landscape of the traditional diplomatic realm (Young 2018). Particularly relevant in this regard is their ability to - unlike traditional, official diplomats - use colloquial language and focus on a single issue of concern important to them (Cooper 2008). Moreover, when considering the notion of nation branding as an aspect of diplomacy, even simple praise broadcasted to millions of followers can easily be considered a diplomatic act (Jones 2017, p. 326). Inevitably then, the visits of high-profile celebrities functions as an integral part of building “brand Rwanda”.

For example, in 2018, the Australian-American actress Portia de Rossi gave her wife, Ellen DeGeneres, an on-camera 60th birthday gift: a trip to Africa culminating in a visit to a new campus named after DeGeneres to be built at The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund in Kinigi, Rwanda. The fund continues the work of Dian Fossey, the murdered naturalist who made Rwanda’s gorillas her cause (Mzezewa 2019).

Since that gift was given on live television, de Rossi has been to Kinigi to break ground for the campus (and shared videos and photos of the trip), and DeGeneres has visited Rwanda (and shared videos and photos from the trip). The couple has a combined 80 million followers on Instagram (Mzezewa 2019).

Whilst in Rwanda, the couple met Kagame and also took pictures with Akamanzi, holding a “Visit Rwanda” campaign placard (The East African 2018).

For Rwanda, associating with a global “brand” as big as Ellen DeGeneres, who has 78 million followers on Twitter, is likely to give the country more visibility in its marketing efforts as a high-end tourism destination, as well as towards its gorilla conservation agenda (The East African 2018).

DeGeneres is, however, not the only celebrity to make a highly publicized visit. Several Arsenal club footballers (e.g. Brazilian footballer David Luiz) have also visited Rwanda (accompanied by a media team) as part of the "Visit Rwanda" partnership with Arsenal (The New Times 2019).

In sum, with the rise of market hegemony and less state-centric governance, celebrities as commodified, branded personalities become not simply part of a political culture (Daley 2013) or "unorthodox diplomatic community" (Louis 2012), but totemic in attaching value to the events, places, or people they endorse - however tacitly (Jones 2017, p. 326). As such, visits as those by Ellen DeGeneres and David Luiz; and statements such as:

"I came to Rwanda with the curiosity to learn about the country, considering what it went through 25 years ago. I have to say I was inspired by how fast it has bounced back" (Mutanganshuro 2019).

can be considered a triumph for a government attempting to change the perception of the country to the outside world.

Conclusion

Based on what was discussed above, it can perhaps best be said that Rwanda's latest nation branding effort is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the government's history of using PR firms to work on deflecting the media's attention and criticism from the "actual" situation in the country, has been well documented. Hence, it is not unreasonable to expect that the current nation branding effort reflects the same.

On the other hand, nation branding could also be seen as a logical outcome of globalisation and neoliberal policies, which have made it easier for people, capital and goods to flow across borders. In response, nation-states, such as Rwanda, are expected to make themselves more attractive to foreigners and foreign capital; and nation branding is one of the tools available that states seem to deem handy to serve this goal.

All things considered, Rwanda's approach to nation branding seemingly limits itself to marketing campaigns, in the hope that these can manufacture a good image and attain objectives - such as attracting a lot of foreign visitors and investors to the country - which are perhaps too good to be true.

There seem to be two reasons for this.

Firstly, there is the Rwandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, which has a diplomatic corps that is unable to wield the country's soft power to its fullest extent. As a consequence there is a decentralization noticeable, in the sense that specific areas in foreign affairs are being delegated to the ministries - such as the RDB - that deal with the subject.

Secondly, there is the fact that the identity of Rwanda is personified by Kagame, who is globally seen as the ambassador of (brand) Rwanda. His dubious reputation reflects on the image that exists of the country abroad.

As a result, Rwanda's nation branding resembles more a business plan with a set of actions and resources devoted to them; rather than an all-encompassing national strategy. This has - as highlighted by RDB's (2020c) annual report for 2019 - certainly provided a lot of visibility (over 546 million people reached through global media exposure), a growing number of tourists (1,531,286 recorded international visitors in 2019), an increased influx of foreign currency (US\$ 498 million in recorded tourism revenues in 2019) and perhaps even diplomatic clout; but these outcomes still fall short of the projected outcomes set out in the 2009 Sustainable Tourism Master Plan for Rwanda.

Hence, one may wonder if these outcomes herald a legitimate argument for spending taxpayer's money on branding campaigns, by PR firms who aim to create an identity for the country and its "ambassadorial" leader. Perhaps, a better and more credible strategy would be to invest more in developing the country, whilst using nation branding campaigns rather as an add on (e.g. when announcing projects, initiatives and events) to an active foreign policy strategy.

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