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*Nation Branding: A Critical Appraisal of Incredible India*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Kerrigan, Finola, Shivananan, Jyotsna and Hede, Anne-Marie (2012) Nation Branding: A Critical Appraisal of Incredible India. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 32 (3). pp. 319-327. ISSN 0276-1467

The publisher's official version can be found at  
<http://jmk.sagepub.com/content/32/3/319>

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# **Nation Branding: A Critical Appraisal of Incredible India**

**Finola Kerrigan,<sup>1</sup> Ms Jyotsna Shivanandan,<sup>2</sup> and Anne-Marie Hede<sup>3</sup>**

**Published in Journal of Macromarketing, 32 (3). pp. 319-327. ISSN 0276-**

**1467**

## **Abstract**

India is a vast, diverse country, which attracts much attention as a political and economic entity as well as a major tourism destination. This paper explores the Incredible India Campaign, a Nation Branding campaign which has been running in India for approximately ten years. In doing so, we consider nation branding as a mechanism for communicating between a nation and the rest of the world. We draw on a published account of the campaign by one of its architects, a series of images utilized in the campaign as well as a series of interviews with members of the public regarding their reaction to the images used. We argue that national branding campaigns can tell us much about imagined identities of those ‘being branded’. In doing so, we illustrate the difficulty of representing a vast and diverse population within a fast developing economy as well as the benefits of placing the target of the campaign amongst ‘the other’ rather than orienting the citizen at the heart of the nation branding campaign.

## **Keywords**

India, country marketing, destination marketing, tourism marketing

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, King’s College London, London, UK.

<sup>2</sup> Crown Agents, UK

<sup>3</sup>School of International Business, Victoria University, Melbourne, AUS.

**Corresponding author:**

Finola Kerrigan, Department of Management, King's College London, 150 Stamford St, London,  
SE1 9NH, UK.

E-mail: [finola.kerrigan@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:finola.kerrigan@kcl.ac.uk)

## **Introduction**

India's diversity and sheer mass sets the scene for one of the fastest growing economies in the world with a growth rate of around 9.2% in 2007 (Prasad and Rajan 2008). Home to the largest democracy in the world, India is many things to many people. Similar to many other developing countries, India has recognized its potential as a modern tourist destination. In this context, the Indian government launched the Incredible India Campaign (IIC) in 2002. IIC, managed by Amitabh Kant, Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Tourism, was aimed at: 1) extending international business and leisure travellers' length of stay and yield in India; and 2) promoting domestic tourism - all the while positioning India away from a low cost destination to one of luxury (Kant 2009). Since 2002, the IIC has been refined on an iterative basis.

While analyzing the success of the IIC is beyond the scope of this paper, our focus is on the imagery in the IIC and how IIC's target markets construed that imagery in terms of India as a tourist destination and in terms of India as a nation. As such, we examine the relationship between tourism destination marketing and nation branding, of which that latter is a tool of communication "between the country and the rest of the world" (Anholt in Fan 2006, p. 6). Therefore, this paper sets out to answer the following research questions: How is India projected as a nation in the IIC? How did the various images in the IIC influence perceptions of India as a nation? We use a number of resources on the IIC including Kant's (2009) account of the purpose and execution of the IIC, which can be viewed as the 'insider view' of the campaign, images used in the campaign and data from in-depth interviews with members of IICs target markets.

The paper follows with a summary of the key elements of the IIC. Following this section, we provide the details of the methodology adopted for our study. We then present and discuss our

findings, focusing on nation-ness; the voices of the marginalized; the relationship between tourism and nation branding, and the hybridization of cultures as a result of globalization. Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of our study and make recommendations for further research on the topic of the relationship between tourism and nation marketing, with a particular emphasis on the IIC and India.

### **The Incredible India Campaign**

The IIC was a government led, multi-million dollar global endeavor (Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2002). Birthed in 2002, IIC sought to produce a unique and unified brand that would effectively, “pervade all forms of communication and stimulate the travel consumer’s behavior and decision-making process to competitively position India in the global market place” (Kant 2009, p.7). The IIC is deemed responsible for the rise in foreign exchange earnings, which grew from \$3460 million in 2000 to \$11747 million in 2008 (Kant 2009). The campaign is also considered to be largely responsible for the increase in tourists arrivals to India, a figure that rose from 2.65 million in 2000 to 5.38 million in 2008 (Kant 2009). In 2002, India’s position in FutureBrand’s Country Brand Index was 29 out of a total of 45 countries. By 2006, India was India amongst the top 10 country brands (Kant 2009). In 2011, it was ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in the world for tourism with an increase of 32% of visitor arrivals, scoring highly on the ‘Heritage and Culture’ and ‘History’ dimensions.

### **The role of images in destination and country marketing**

Heidegger once said, “the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as a picture” (Heidegger in Rojek and Urry 1997, p. 9) and indeed, visual communication can be seen as ubiquitous and powerful in contemporary society. Schroeder (2002, p. 3) describes our current age as a society that is “organized around attention, in which strategic communication... incorporates visual images designed to capture attention, build brand names, create mindshare, produce attractive

products and services, and persuade citizens, consumers and voters” Visual consumption is facilitated through communications about economic performance, social responsibility and is also used by governments to create positive attitudes for its citizens, consumers, organizations and institutions (Schroeder 2006a).

Marketing through visual images or visual consumption can also be used to facilitate membership to a globalized citizenship—a concept wherein cultural and social distinctiveness, religion, labor, ideas, people, technology, and consumption are increasingly seamless and mobile (Firat and Dholakia 2003; Ong 2006). Utilizing sophisticated and widespread marketing, advertising and branding campaigns, around the world, nations promote the notion of greater global accessibility and fuel a highly interactive consumer in a global village (Clammer 2003; Firat and Dholakia 2003; Kant 2009).

The tourism industry relies heavily on images (Anholt 2002; Gudjonsson 2005; Kant 2009; Kotler and Gartner 2002; Schroder 2006a; 2006b; Tasci and Kozak 2006). Consumers draw on a number of images to develop their attitudes towards a destination. Gartner and Shen (1992) suggested that destination images are formed organically and inorganically. For example, film presents numerous images of destinations in their forefront and backgrounds (Beeton 2004), as do political events (Gartner and Shen 1992) and literature (Butler 1986), which, as consumers, we absorb in a natural manner (Gartner and Shen 1992).

Tourism destination marketing campaigns, on the other hand, present images of destinations that are directed towards target markets through specific marketing channels, and are designed to manufacture attitudes towards the destination (Gartner and Shen 1992). Hence, tourism destination marketing is a deliberate attempt to develop positive attitudes towards a destination and hopefully tourist behavior, but destination marketing is set within the context of a lifetime of imagery that

consumers have naturally, or organically, absorbed about the destination (e.g.: country, state or region). Thus, destination marketers may need to reinforce or counter-balance these organic images. Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott (2003, p.167) state that “limited attention has focused on how the marketing of destinations can reflect socio-political, economic and cultural change.” In this paper, we attempt to explore this facet of destination marketing, which they have pioneered, as we focus on how India has been socio-politically, economically and culturally portrayed within the IIC and perceived by potential tourists.

## **Research approach**

### *Methodological stance*

This study adopted an interpretivist approach. Epistemologically, interpretivism emphasizes meaning and deep understanding and focuses on the meaningful nature of people’s participation in social and cultural life (Searle 1999). One of the interpretivist ontological assumptions is that as individuals observe reality they cannot be separated from that reality itself (Klein and Myers 1999). In other words, the way we perceive the world is intricately bound to our life experiences. This foregrounding of the context within which the image is produced and consumed is in keeping with a social semiotic approach where the responses of the participants in the study are contextualized in relation to their background.

### *Data: types and collection*

We adopted the approach recommended by Lutz and Collins (1993) who advocate that looking at the site of production of the cultural artifacts, the researcher’s reading of the artifacts, as well as that of consumer responses to the artifacts, provides a framework for the comprehensive analysis of a research problem. Therefore, we collected three sets of data for this study: 1) Kant’s (2009) account of the IIC; 2)

a sample of images used in the IIC; and 3) textual data via in-depth interviews with a sample of 16 research participants. See Tables 1 and 2 for an overview of the research participants.

[Insert tables 1 and 2 about here]

The sample of images was chosen by the researchers from a complete set of IIC images available via the web. These images were classified and nine were chosen as representative of the different types of images used in the IIC and deemed to be suitable for the study. The research participants were chosen by means of purposive sampling with participants all having a minimum of a Bachelors' level degree and familiarity with the IIC. Though most of the research participants had either lived in or visited India, in order to further triangulate data, two research participants who had never visited India were also included in the sample. The seven research participants who are of Indian nationality were solicited for interviews outside three different colleges in Mumbai, India in May 2009. Four travelers from a variety of international backgrounds in a café popular with backpackers and travelers were interviewed in May, 2009. The three remaining respondents including an American, Australian, and a Norwegian citizen were interviewed in London during June, 2009.

To commence the interviews, the research participants were asked to confirm their familiarity with India before being presented with the nine images of India from the IIC. The images were presented in chronological order and the participants were asked to reflect on the images in relation to their portrayal of India. They were asked to write down their reactions and thoughts to the selected IIC images. The participants were then asked to talk about the messages that they felt were being conveyed by the images about India as a nation. The semi-structured interview process was discovery-oriented allowing the time to develop additional questions contingent on the interviewee's answers.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were mostly conducted in cafes because of the informal and relaxed setting.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis combined content analysis techniques commonly utilized within visual research (Mittelman and Neilson 2009) with conventional coding techniques used in interpreting the semi-structured interview data. This research employs theoretical pluralism by analyzing the data through a postcolonial lens. Bourdieu (2003, p.618) urges the researcher to consider the structures which influence the interview process and the data produced, the “invisible structures that organize it” In order to achieve the reflexivity called for by Bourdieu, it was important to acknowledge and draw on the internally constructed interpretations of both the researchers and the respondents before stepping away from these interpretations and considering the wider research context and other forms of evidence. In contrast to more rational accounts of the process of analysis, the reflexive research tradition recognizes that analysis begins during the interview itself. We engaged in “an induced and accompanied self-analysis” (Bourdieu 2003, p. 615). In this way, responses were probed and contextualized within our understanding of the field and the respondent’s position within this field. By dividing participants into Indian and non-Indian and adding contextual information such as their educational background and level of familiarity with India, we positioned ourselves to best understand how the respondents constructed their responses.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### *The projected identity*

Kant (2009) provides an in-depth narrative about the conception of the IIC that transformed a country referred to as the “sleeping giant” to one of the most coveted holiday and travel destinations in the world. Through his insights, we can understand more about the intentions underlying the campaign as he sheds light on the vision that the Government of India defined for this campaign. The IIC focused on achieving, “a superior quality of life for India’s people through tourism, which would provide a unique opportunity for physical invigoration, mental rejuvenation, cultural enrichment and spiritual elevation” (Kant 2009, p. 6). Some of the other key strategic objectives as recognized by Kant are outlined in Table 3 below:

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The intentions underlying aims illustrate that IIC was designed as a nation branding campaign rather than merely as a tourism or destination branding campaign. Kant (2009) writes, in detail, about the circumstances under which the campaign was birthed. He noted that prior to the launch of the IIC, India was not a highly popular tourist destination. Kant attributes this lack of attractiveness to a number of reasons and events including the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, the war in Afghanistan, the attacks on the Parliament in New Delhi, the mobilization of Indian troops at the country’s border and the publishing of travel advisories that lead to the withdrawal of airline schedules from India. Kant suggests that there were also several marketing challenges to be addressed in order for IIC to be effective, which are presented in Table 4.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

The IIC was a global campaign and included conventional print and electronic commercials using London and New York’s public transport as its canvas for advertisements. The advertisements attracted the attention of print and electronic media, as the IIC was discussed on almost all TV channels such as

ITV, Sky, BBC, Channel 4, and CNN and on radio stations and in digital media (Kant 2009). Kant (2009) claims that the approximate publicity returns were approximately £5 million as against the £50,000 initial campaign budget.

### **Globalization and Its Impact on Nation-ness**

When asked of their current thoughts about India as a nation, all seven Indian respondents and four non-Indian respondents referred to economic, social, political and cultural changes. Aditya, a 22-year-old student from Mumbai says made the following comment, which exemplifies many of the other comments made about India – today and yesterday:

I associate India with rapid economic growth, IT and one moving towards superpower status...I associate more with a nation that has found a balance between retaining its culture and modernization, emerging as one of the economic powerhouses.

The changes that participants talked about reflect the fluid and ever-changing nature of India, thereby contesting the myth of the hegemonic, unifying and static modern nation-state (Hastings 1997; Hechter 2000). Most of the changes that participants talk of appear to be influenced and motivated by the forces of globalization, including multidirectional movements of capital, ideas, labor, religion, culture and so forth (Ong 2006; Boccock 1993). Thus, one can argue that globalization has exacerbated this current form of the ever-changing nation. But the origins of the idea that nations are products of human invention reside in Anderson's (1983) conception of nation - as "an imagined political community" (p. 6). Anderson argues that all communities that are larger than primordial villages are imagined and that it is the community or national consciousness that invents nations where they do not exist. The implications of such imagined communities question the possibility of homogenous and uniform conceptualizations of the nation and thus the relevance of a concept like nation branding.

Yet, nation branding is increasingly prevalent around the globe. Nation branding seeks to use images to *fix* a particular idea of the nation within the global framework of travelers and other imagined nations (Anholt 2006; 2007a; c; 2008; 2009). The task of representing the changing and heterogeneous realities of India, or any other nation for that matter, seems largely impossible to contain within a consistent and one-dimensional marketing campaign. The idea that the multiple and fluctuating realities of India cannot be captured within the visual images used by the IIC is resonated across the body of interviews. For example, Anushka reacts to the photos and the?

There is more to India than tradition and culture that is dripping in every picture. This India looks like a picturesque country suitable for tourists looking for spiritual enlightenment or any other new age fad India can offer.

Hallvard, a Norwegian traveler who had lived in India also commented on the tensions that some of the images in the IIC present for him. He said:

There are some who will probably stare at those colorful images of foreign and exotic things with wide-eyed amazement. I know India is nothing like this though.

The sterile, stereotypical and in some cases unrealistic scenarios portrayed in the IIC make for scenic and romanticized imaginings of India but they fail to represent the variety of realities that are in a constant state of flux. This unreal depiction of India is most evident in IIC image shown in figure 1 below. This image shows a scantily dressed Indian woman walking on a deserted beach.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In reaction to this image, Maximov said:

[this image] gives the viewer the *mistaken* impression perhaps that Indian beaches are full of beautiful...bikini clad women with perfect warm water lapping at their heels waiting for you to approach them” (emphasis added).

Adrian conveys a similar response when he said:

I suppose a single female might like the idea of strolling on a beautiful beach—but most probably know enough to know that you don’t do it alone, dressed like that in India. I don’t know India that well but I imagine pristine beaches with nobody else around at all are hard to come by, because of the booming population and the tourist industry.

This image of the lone female on the deserted beach plays to the imagined paradise in contrast to the hectic lifestyles from which the targeting tourists seek escape.

### **Voicing marginalized opinions**

The significance of voicing marginalized opinions and views is especially crucial in this paper as the themes of colonialism and stereotyping are important components of the conversation about nation branding through campaigns such as IIC. Feminist historian Joan Scott, poses an important question: “By what process have men’s actions come to be considered a norm, representative of human history, generally, and women’s actions overlooked, or consigned to a less important, particularized arena?” (in Nagar et al. 2002). We raise similar questions in context to forces of globalization that are an important aspect to explore within critical marketing. Nagar et al. (2002) explore the incomplete discussion of globalization by shedding light on several gaps in the literature that only include formal and public spaces within the spheres of economics and politics. The authors (Nagar et al. 2002, p. 260) write,

This emphasis on the formal spaces of globalization is fundamentally masculinist in its exclusion of the economic, cultural, and political spheres (often casual and informal) that operate in households and communities; in daily practices of caring, consumption, and religion; and in networks of alternative politics where women's contributions to globalization are often located.

We extend this discussion further by arguing that women are included in more formal spaces such as the economic spheres of globalization in which world-wide marketing campaigns such as IIC flourish. But when women are included in this realm they are portrayed in a stereotypical and colonial light as sites of cultural preservation and as exotic objects of sexual fantasy and as universal dependents (Kabeer 1994; Mohanty 2003; Narayan 1997). Six of the seven Indian respondents commented on the stereotypical nature of the recurring image of Indian women wearing colorful clothes in the IIC advertisements. Khushnam from Mumbai, in particular, spoke about the "postcolonially problematic" nature of the women in the IIC images as they all were all portrayed as "passive [in] nature" and in "positions of submission." See Figure 2 for an example of one of the relevant images discussed.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Just as Mittelman and Neilson (2009) noted in their study of charity images, we can conclude that the images selected performed a storytelling function, which contributed to the creation of the nation branding strategy within IIC.

### **Hybridization of cultures**

Jack (2008 p. 366). explains postcolonialism/postmodernism as a framework that "deploys diverse theoretical and political resources to interrogate, intervene in and transform the continued power asymmetries and effects of contemporary neocolonialism, and other forms of imperialism" . Said's

*Orientalism* (1978) is considered a seminal text within the field of postcolonial studies. Jack succinctly explains Said's central argument by writing, "Orientalism is a practice of *Othering* where the construction of the *Self* is dialectically achieved through the simultaneous construction of the *Other*." Thus, Said asserts that the Orient was a *cultural production* rather than a reality.

The process of Orientalism has also *created* multiple cultures and objects of cultural significance, which are regulated in such minute ways that they eventually come to be regarded as natural and authentic. One can even argue that postcolonial nations, such as India, are products of the Empire. Indeed, Appadurai (2005) argues that modern nation states with borders, sovereignty and a national consciousness were part of a legacy created by Western colonial powers. One could further argue that the tendency to Orientalize India is an underlying element of the IIC as marketing campaigns often try to relate or reinforce a certain image that the consumer already harbored about a certain product or in this case, a nation (Kotler, Haider and Rein 1993; Kotler, Jatusripitak and Maesincee 1997).

Most of the participants mentioned the unrealistic or "fake" component to many of the pictures presented to them. Jyoti, for example said,

I think these pictures are mainly for foreigners. And though what they [non-Indians] might see in these pictures is true, it is not the whole picture. Yes, there are cows, palaces, poverty, and yes, India is 'vibrant' and 'exotic' but that not all there is to it. There are pubs, libraries, institutions, colleges, civic amenities [and] skyscrapers. There is a whole lot more that people who see my country from a distance would not have guessed it had.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the process of *Othering* is not solely orchestrated by the West. Rather the *Other* (in this case Indians) internalizes stereotypes and, thus, the "fake"

component becomes a lived reality (Said 1978). The example of belly dancing in the Middle East that Said discusses as an example of an internalization can be translated into certain Indian classical dance forms (see Figure 3) that are performed mainly for tourists in India.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

The representations of India have resonance with Lutz and Collins' (1993) analysis of the images of populations from third-world countries within the pages of National Geographic. This tendency to 'idealize and render exotic third-world peoples, with an accompanying tendency to downplay or erase evidence of poverty and violence' (Lutz and Collins 1993, p. 13) is evidence within the IIC images examined in this paper.

Yet, there appears to have been a number of developments within IIC that have moved it away from positioning India in a postcolonialist paradigm. Subsequent reiterations of IIC, such as the "colors" stage and specific initiatives focused on placing familiar images of London and Los Angeles within the context of India. For example, the London campaign saw a series of images invoking iconic London areas within images of India (see Figure 5), while the Los Angeles campaign connected with LA's film industry heritage (see Figure 6).

[Insert Figures 4 and 5 about here]

## **Conclusions**

This paper has contributed to furthering research on nation branding in several ways. The theoretical contribution of this paper was the introduction of postcolonial understandings of issues such as globalization and nation-ness to the study of nation branding. The variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds provided an interesting and unique framework of analysis for a discussion centered on

nation branding, globalization and cultural authenticity. The practical contribution made by this paper is the suggestion to marketers engaged in nation branding to rethink ideas of nation-ness and cultural purity while working on destination branding campaigns that are launched on a global platform. Hybridized realities produced as a result of globalization can present a more accurate depiction of the complex and multiple realities present in the world, which can be used to advantage as a unique selling point.

Rather than reflecting the complexities of India's cultural and spatial identity, IIC focused on presenting an 'imagined' India. Yet, McCannell (1973) noted that tourists are on a quest for the authentic. The daily lives of India were represented by brightly colored silk cloth (Figure 2), elaborate mausoleums (Figures 2,3,5,7 and 9), exotic dancing (Figure 1), and exotic women (Figures 2 and 3). This projection of India existed in the minds of the Indian respondents as an acceptable projection of the India sought by the western tourist, but also as a fantastic regressive image, which fails to incorporate the modern India that embraces technology and progress.

As the aim of IIC was to target both international and domestic markets, presenting an Orientalized image of India may not be effective. Additionally, the global citizen now receives information from a variety of sources such as film, television, social media and literary representations of places and these may contrast with the imagery produced by IIC. The latter phases of the IIC can be seen as shifting the focus from 'how the tourist imagines India' to attempts to connect India to the lives of the target markets. By conjuring up the familiar and placing it in the unfamiliar setting (see images 5 and 6) we can see a movement away from the image as a tool in Orientalizing India, but rather an attempt at intimacy with the *Other*.

We explored the concept of nation branding in order to understand something of how India imagined itself as a tourist destination and the role of nation branding in the commodification of people, culture and space for the affluent tourist market. By contextualizing nation branding within the globalised framework and analyzing the role of the nation and the various manifestations of culture, the process of *Othering* and tourism through a postmodern lens, we are able to reach certain conclusions about nation branding. These conclusions firstly state that, culture is fluid and in a constant state of flux (Hall 2003) and thus cannot be fixed in static visual images without the risk of being unrepresentative and even stereotypical. Second, as Anderson (1983) argues, nations and national cultures are merely imagined communities are constantly being reinvented. For these reasons, providing idealized images of the (desti)nation may be seen as ineffective, or a form of exclusionary stereotyping of the indigenous population.

The paper furthers this argument by contending that forces of globalization, which encourage multidirectional movements of labor, capital, ideas, religion and other cultural artifacts, are responsible for the heightened movement of cultures as well as the creation of new hybrid cultures. Representation of such hybrid cultures is not a simplistic task and takes place within a political, social and cultural reality. As we analyzed this representation, we gained an understanding of the wider possible social, political and cultural impact of such nation branding campaigns. We suggest that macromarketers should look beyond questions of success or otherwise of the campaign to question the role of such campaigns in the wider development agenda of the nations in question.

In addition, this study highlights the internalization of a post-colonial image of Tourist India within Indian respondents. We argue that the IIC shifted from trying to 'show them what we are like' through a series of images of India and Indian life and people, to finding connections between the target

markets and India as a real or imagined place. We propose that nation-branding campaigns can tell us much about imagined identity of those 'being branded', about the focus of this imagination and that there is a need to carefully consider the relationship between the images employed, those being branded and the target for these images of the nation. This can be seen as an acceptance of the *Othering* process which the affluent Western tourist engages in when "imagining India." One could argue that though the images used in the early stages of IIC do not use explicitly colonial or stereotypical images, the visuals **continue** to reinforce a stereotypical, Orientalist and almost primitive snapshot of India.

We acknowledge that this study is not without its limitations. In interpretive research, the outsider can be criticized for viewing social phenomena through their own cultural lens and therefore not understanding the true cultural significance of events or images. Conversely, the cultural insider can be portrayed as too close to events to be able to stand back and provide objective analysis. While, this study does not claim objectivity, it combines etic and emic approaches to the data analysis (both in terms of the researcher and respondent perspectives) and the validity of our analysis is strengthened.

This research is positioned alongside that of Schroder and Borgerson's (2009) analysis of representations of Hawaii through music and its role in reinforcing the sense of Hawaiians as 'other' and a trip to Hawaii as an opportunity to be colonizer. Further research could examine IIC as it evolves into new stages of its development. These new stages may include different strategic objectives for the campaign, different types of images being portrayed, and different markets that might be targeted in the future. In addition, as this is, to the best of our knowledge, the only scholarly analysis of IIC to date, it would be useful to build up a database of research that includes a range of data on the IIC so that a comprehensive analysis can be undertaken of the campaign. Certainly, it appears to be one of the most

ambitious tourism marketing campaigns of this era, and is set within a turbulent period. Hence, longitudinal and multi-dimensional analysis of the IIC and presumably its future iterations will benefit practitioners and academics interested in (desti)nation branding.

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