



César Jiménez-Martínez

Pablo Miño

Efe Sevin

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## How nations in the Americas define and promote their identities

*In this extract from the introduction to **Nation Branding in the Americas: Contested Politics and Identities**, Efe Sevin, César Jiménez-Martínez and Pablo Miño define nation branding and consider its adoption in the Americas, setting out the book's scope and shifting ideas of national identity since the Cold War.*

***Nation Branding in the Americas. Contested Politics and Identities. Efe Sevin, César Jiménez-Martínez and Pablo Miño. Routledge. 2025.***

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Since its emergence in the 1990s, nation branding – the use of strategic communication to create, communicate and manage specific versions of national identity – has expanded. Nation branding campaigns have become normalised in foreign policy, tourism, and the economy, with governments investing heavily in promotional initiatives to circulate a positive image of the nations they claim to represent. Not even the Covid-19 pandemic or recent conflicts hindered it. Authorities in Iceland portrayed their country as the **perfect destination to visit once travel restrictions were lifted**; China underlined its “vaccine diplomacy” as a means to **boost its reputation in science and international cooperation**; and the Ukrainian government emphasised the **bravery of its people** in the face of the Russian invasion. Theoretical discussions have in turn become more complex, extending to fields such as marketing, international relations, anthropology, cultural studies, and media and communications.

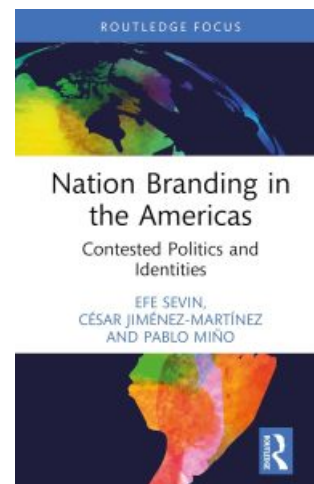
Despite this theoretical and empirical expansion, the Americas have been largely neglected. This is a significant gap considering how enthusiastically national promotion practices have been embraced by governments from the continent(s) over the last two decades, **allured by promises of economic development and greater political influence**. We were therefore approached to fulfil an apparently simple task: to provide a sketch of the history of nation branding in the Americas. However, during our multi-year collaboration, we encountered four challenges that made our undertaking more difficult, but also more nuanced and fulfilling.

# Conceptual boundaries

The first challenge referred to the conceptual boundaries of our study. Nation branding involves, and can also be looked at through, multiple perspectives, from strategic communication to geopolitics. Moreover, there is **little consensus** on how nation branding relates to practices such as city branding, regional branding, public diplomacy, or destination management. We have done our best to embrace this complexity, engaging with different disciplines, our own research and personal experiences.

## Defining the Americas

The second one denoted its empirical boundaries. What did we mean by America or the Americas? A geographical space? An area with a relatively shared history of conquest, colonisation, and revolution(s)? We acknowledge that America or the Americas – depending on whether it is counted as single or several continents – is or are a political and cultural construct in constant evolution, which encompasses the nation-states that gained independence (or were manufactured) after their separation from Britain, Spain, Portugal, and France between the late 18th and early 20th centuries.

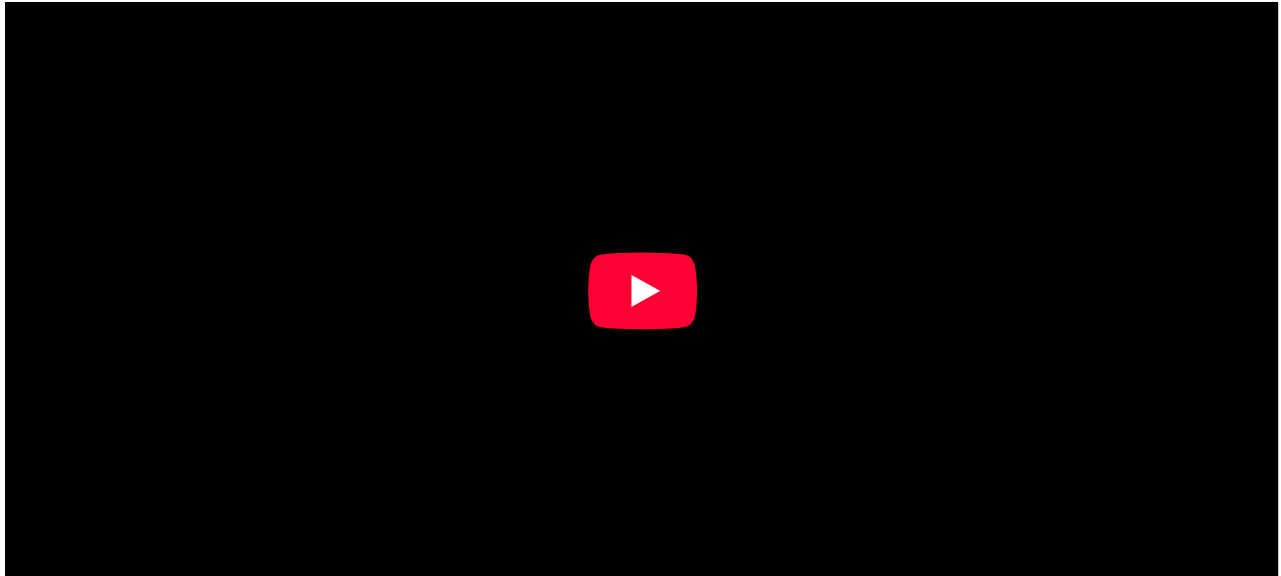


Despite historical commonalities, these nations experienced vastly distinctive processes shaped by local and global economic and political forces, as well as geology, geography, and climate, resulting in **unique sociocultural arrangements**. We decided to focus on societies that represent this diversity, but which could also speak about broader trends, such as branding against invisibility, branding against stereotypes, or branding the past, among others. Our final selection consisted of 12 countries, namely Canada, the United States, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile. This selection allows us to draw a picture, even if incomplete, of nation branding in this continent(s).

## From Neoliberalism to right-wing populism

Third, the environment in which nation branding operates has dramatically changed. Nation branding emerged in a post-Cold War context, characterised by the apparent victory of neoliberalism and the **“end of history”**. Distinguishing features were discourses about globalisation and the supposed decline of nation-states, the early spread of digital technologies, as well as the expansion of promotional logics within the public sector. These transformations prompted warning

tales about the **pervasive ubiquity of branding in all realms of life**, but also fostered the belief that solutions to social problems would emerge from the market. Hence, nation branding was conceived as an answer to challenges posed by neoliberal globalisation. It claimed to facilitate nation-states the securement of foreign investment as well as the enticing of businesses, tourists, and students, while strengthening their so-called “soft power,” that is, the supposed ability to persuade foreign individuals and organisations **through attraction and charm instead of by force or economic sanctions**.



However, nation branding takes place nowadays in a radically different context. Public confidence in globalisation and neoliberalism **has been undermined**, partly because of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, which prompted demands for inward-looking economic measures. Liberal democracies have also been challenged, with illiberal movements making significant electoral gains, as Donald Trump in the United States, Javier Milei in Argentina and until recently, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Many of these politicians have at best an ambivalent relationship with globalisation, equally praising the market and global free trade while arguing that the **nation is under threat from external forces and elites**. The media and communications environment has also been transformed, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok having **billions of users**. Nation branding practitioners can potentially create more content, at a higher speed and across broader territories, yet ordinary individuals can also more **easily reject or subvert versions of national identity carefully crafted by authorities**.

## Who decides a nation's identity?

Fourth, nation branding is controversial. It seeks to **transform the meaning and experience of nationhood**, disseminating the supposed values and characteristics of a human collectivity. Hence, although it is driven by promotional goals, its consequences are far more reaching, including areas such as **national security**. Moreover, although nation branding was originally advised as a means to reach individuals and organisations abroad, it has **increasingly targeted domestic citizens**. This shift

underscores the traditionally marginal role of the latter in these initiatives. Should nation branding be a process guided and managed by governments and consultants, or is there legroom for ordinary people? If so, how to operationalise such participation? How to deal with the inevitable disagreements that emerge when summarising something as contested and shifting as the nation?

Providing definitive answers to these challenges goes beyond the scope of this book, but we nonetheless offer some preliminary demarcations and boundaries to outline our object of study. Moreover, by identifying how elites across the Americas have cultivated and disseminated specific versions of national identity, we sketch a useful map of what national promotion looks like in this area of the world.

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Watch a YouTube video, [How protests shattered Brazil's glossy branding campaign](#) or read an article, [National identity and the limits of soft power: when the nation turns against the state](#) in LSE Research for the World, both based on the book's research.

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## About the author

### César Jiménez-Martínez

César Jiménez-Martínez is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research focuses on the intersection of media, identity and contestation, paying attention to branding and national identities, digital nationalism, and more recently protests and violence.

Pablo Miño, is Assistant Professor at Universidad de Los Andes, Chile. Additionally, he serves as an external faculty affiliate at the Communication Research Center at Boston University's College of Communication. From a critical-cultural perspective, his research focuses on public relations, nation branding and Latin American studies.

#### Efe Sevin

Efe Sevin is Assistant Professor of Public Relations at the Department of Mass Communication at Towson University, in Maryland, US. His research focuses on identifying and measuring the impacts of social networks on place branding and public diplomacy campaigns.

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