

Stakeholder Relationship Mapping for Nation Branding: The role of Italian Cultural Institutes

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study aims to investigate the role of cultural institutions as key stakeholders in a nation branding network, proposing a longitudinal study to map the relationships within the cultural network and thus filling a gap in the literature on stakeholder identification and mapping for nation branding.

Methodology - Based on a qualitative multi-study parallel approach, data collection combines case study analysis with archival research and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Thematic coding and the interpretative framework adopted helped to analyse the data in order to map network relationships. Specifically, the selected context refers to the local network of the Italian Cultural Institutes in Sweden (based in Stockholm).

Findings - The Cultural Institutes, in the context examined, emerge as a potential key stakeholder for a nation branding strategy. Given its specific mission and unique position at the crossroads between its country of origin, the host country, and citizens, it acts as a stakeholder selector and relationship enabler: a key role within the national brand relationship network.

Contribution - Although stakeholder engagement has been extensively studied in the context of nation branding, the understanding of how to identify and map stakeholder relationships is relatively limited. This study proposes a relational approach to map stakeholder networks, distinct from the traditional functional approach, with the aim of highlighting the roles of stakeholders in a network to develop nation branding in its cultural dimension.

Implications - The research fills a theoretical gap by exploring the role of cultural institutions in nation branding. Furthermore, it offers practical implications to guide policymakers in designing a nation branding map with an emphasis on relationships linked to the cultural dimension. In addition to central stakeholders and strong ties, it is important for policymakers to consider peripheral stakeholders and weak ties, especially in contexts characterised by high uncertainty.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Stakeholder Mapping, Relationship Marketing, Cultural Institutes, Italy, Sweden.

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INTRODUCTION

Governments invest greatly in creating a positive nation image that can enhance the attractiveness of the stakeholders associated with it (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2025), as nation branding has been linked to various benefits, such as increasing a nation's exports, attracting domestic and foreign direct investments, tourists and immigrants, improving a nation's public image domestically and abroad (Kleber and Juusola, 2021). More specifically, some studies show that nation branding can be an effective strategy to restore trust and credibility in a nation and its institution during a crisis, and others discuss cases of countries who used nation branding to cope with said crisis (Avraham, 2009; Okhrimenko, 2015; Lee and Kim, 2020; Dubinsky, 2023); that explains why, each year, more countries invest in creating their own nation brand strategy, including Italy.

However, despite the relevance of the problems it can solve, nation branding raises controversies and ambiguity. Challenges emerge particularly from the difficulties in selecting stakeholders and defining their role for a nation branding strategy. The lack of clarity regarding stakeholder identification and engagement undermines both the effectiveness of the campaign (technical-economic approach) and its democracy (cultural approach) (Kaneva, 2011). In the Italian context, this problem was particularly evident. The nation branding strategy was developed in 2021-2022 as a response to the Covid-19 crisis, but it has faced the issue of low engagement, as the campaign was conducted primarily online, by pre-selected actors (such as testimonials, celebrities, and ambassadors) with the aim of communicating and celebrating Italy, rather than engaging with it (Minini, 2025). Moreover, despite the efforts, from 2022 to 2023, Italy went from the fourth country with the strongest nation brand to the fifth, according to the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index. The problem becomes even more pronounced when an international perspective is considered, as stakeholders (citizens of foreign countries, foreign institutions, tourists, investors, and cultural and diplomatic partners), variables (cultural, political, and economic), and potential negative consequences multiply.

It is widely acknowledged that culture is a fundamental dimension of nation branding: "perceptions of culture constitute a good indicator or predictor of the overall strength of a country's reputation" (Nobre and Sousa, 2024), and "cultural heritage represents a determinant for the nations' brands [...] competitiveness" (Vegheş, 2022). It is also internationally recognised that Italy is the country that can best demonstrate the importance of culture: according to the U.S Best Countries Report 2022, it ranked 1st in cultural influence; It also ranked second (out of 120) in "Culture and Heritage" according to the Brand Finance's "Global Soft Power Index 2022". The case of Italy is therefore a good starting point for examining nation branding in its unique cultural and relational facets.

LITERATURE GAPS

From a theoretical perspective, there is evidence that effective stakeholder engagement is pivotal for the success of a nation branding campaign: “Stakeholder engagement is absolutely essential to Nation Branding success - to build trust, foster collaboration, and turn citizens, institutions, and even unexpected players into true brand ambassadors”. Especially when a crisis hits, “it’s essential to ensure that all stakeholders receive the same message, avoiding any conflicting information from the destination” (Blooming Consulting Journal, 2025) and, “the secret [of successful nation branding during a crisis] lies in being proactive - building trust with your audience.” (Biller, 2024). However, despite the critical role of stakeholder engagement being studied in greater depth within the literature on place branding (Dinnie, 2015), the existing literature remains vague regarding the roles of various stakeholders (Abdalmajid et al., 2023). More specifically, Long et al. (2024) state that future research should be aimed at “Exploring stakeholder mapping and engagement. Developing comprehensive strategies to identify and engage with diverse stakeholder groups, both domestically and internationally.” In particular, previous literature has focused almost entirely on identifying and mapping stakeholders based on their functional role, with data primarily collected through stakeholder interviews and interpreted using pre-existing frameworks (Xiufang and Feng, 2021; Abdalmajid et al., 2023; Dinnie and Fola, 2009).

The current literature clearly reveals an initial gap: although previous research has examined who the stakeholders of nation branding are, it remains unclear how they should be systematically mapped, compared, and selected, especially in terms of their relationships within a network.

Applying this theoretical doubt to practical evidence, such as the Italian Cultural Institutes, it also becomes clear how little research has been conducted on these institutes in terms of developing nation branding strategies, adapting them to different foreign countries, and thereby creating local networks.

This points to a specific second gap in the literature: the role of cultural institutes abroad has rarely been examined (or even considered) for the international development of nation branding.

Two research questions emerged from the gaps highlighted in the literature: how can stakeholder relationships be effectively mapped for a nation branding strategy? (RQ1), and what is, or could be, the role of cultural institutions in a nation branding network? (RQ2).

METHODOLOGY

Context selection

Given the importance of culture for a nation’s brand and Italy's strength in this dimension, the study focuses on the Italian case. More specifically, it focused on the Italian Cultural Institutes (IICs), given their uniqueness and their consistent activities: they are the only

institutional body that has the specific mission of promoting Italian culture, language and image in 88 different countries. In particular, according to Vaghes (2022), consistent cultural marketing activities have been shown to strengthen a country's brand, which is precisely what IICs aim to achieve as part of their mission. More specifically, in Italy, IICs are bodies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) and are part of the Italian diplomatic network abroad, alongside embassies, consulates, and permanent representations. They are defined as *"places of meeting and dialogue for intellectuals and artists, for Italians abroad, and for anyone who wishes to cultivate a relationship with our country. They organize events in art, music, cinema, literature, theatre, dance, fashion, design, photography, architecture, and more; [...] they promote Italian scientific culture; they create connections between Italian and foreign cultural professionals; and they facilitate dialogue between cultures based on the principles of democracy"* (MAECI website). The nation branding international campaign "Italy is simply extraordinary: beIT", was launched in November 2021 as a response to the Covid-19 crisis and lasted until August 2022; and it was realized by the MAECI in collaboration with the Agency for the Promotion Abroad and the Internationalization of Italian Companies (ICE) and a few other stakeholders (celebrities, ambassadors and unidentified businesses).

This study focuses in particular on the IIC based in Stockholm, due to its special connection with Italian culture and the unique symbolism associated with the Institute. In fact, thanks to its history and the fact that it was conceived from the outset (as early as 1941) as a place representing Italian culture (unlike most IICs), it embodies an "external social fact", to quote Durkheim, which means that the Institute itself has a strategic role and 'possesses knowledge' (Maugeri and Serragiotto, 2014). In other words, this specific IIC has a strong identity and communicative-relational potential, more so than other Italian Cultural Institutes worldwide.

Research Method

To address the two research questions, we employed a qualitative, longitudinal case study research design. Our approach followed an explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2017). Data collection is composed of two parallel phases:

- Archival Research. It was conducted at the IIC in Stockholm. Archival sources were examined to trace the Institute's collaborations and relational dynamics. We mapped two periods of time: from 1998 to 2004 and from 2023 to 2024, with the aim of analyzing the changes in the IIC's relationship maps over a twenty-year span. The broader temporal scope of the first map was necessary as the transition from physical to digital archiving in the early 2000s resulted in the loss of a substantial amount of documentation. Therefore, we extended the analysis back to 1998.
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews – conducted through ongoing meetings and discussions during archival research – with the director and deputy director of the IIC in Stockholm (all the interviews were conducted in person and recorded). We followed and adapted the research protocol of Kallio et al. (2016), basing the interviews on archival research previously conducted to identify the IIC's stakeholders and their relationships with them.

The first interview, conducted with the director of the Institute, consisted of two parts, of which only the first one was relevant for the purposes of this study. It included eight pre-selected questions and a series of other questions that spontaneously emerged. The main questions were broken down by type of stakeholder: Italian and Swedish cultural bodies, universities, other IICs, MAECIs, and the Italian diplomatic network. For each category, the main questions explored both the nature of the relationships (e.g., who proposes initiatives to whom) and the functioning of the relationships. The second interview, held with the deputy director, was conducted to validate the first one. The eight pre-selected questions followed a similar general structure, focusing on relationships with MAECI, other IICs, and the diplomatic network, to verify the consistency of the collected data. Moreover, specific questions were added about four additional stakeholders not explored in depth in the first interview (ITA/ICE, ENIT, EUNIC, and the Lerici Foundation), allowing us to complete the mapping of the main stakeholders of the Stockholm IIC.

Data analysis was then conducted, following thematic coding guidelines for qualitative data analysis (Gibbs, 2018), which combined data-driven and concept-driven approaches, particularly under the theoretical lens of Relationship Marketing (Gummesson, 2011). We then interpreted stakeholder types on the UNESCO FCS, Framework for Cultural Statistics (2009). More evidence about the coding process and data structure are provided at the conference.

To create the map for the years 2023-24, data were collected from the digital archive and supplemented by various informal accounts gathered through direct visits to the Institute. For the mapping of the past, particularly the period 1998-2004, research primarily relied on the paper archive stored on-site, utilizing the official library and warehouse, to identify four relevant types of documents: incoming and outgoing correspondence, communications, press reviews, events, and publications. Documents were coded into successive temporal clusters (1998–1999, 2000–2001, 2002–2004) and then integrated into a single relational map.

FINDINGS

The results of the interviews and archival research are two relationship maps that help understand the role of the Italian Cultural Institute (IIC) in developing Italy's national branding in Sweden/Stockholm. Two maps highlight stakeholder relationships that occurred from 1998 to 2004 (Figure 1) and from 2023 to 2024 (Figure 2). These maps allow us to visualize the evolution of the IIC's local stakeholder network. We present Figures 1 and 2, in Italian, in the appendix (map legend and other details will be explained at the conference). Drawing these relationship maps revealed two distinct types of stakeholders.

Firstly, there are structural stakeholders (MAECI, Dante Alighieri, CM Lerici). They are considered "structural" because the existence and activities of the IIC are grounded in their relationship. Although different IICs have distinct structural stakeholders (CM Lerici, for

example, is specific to the Stockholm case), the relationship with MAECI is common among them all. The interactions with these stakeholders are strong, bidirectional, and continuous in both maps, as the relationship is mandatory and the MAECI one is based on existing law.

Secondly, there are "cultural stakeholders", which can be grouped according to thematic areas following and adapting the 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics. Each IIC has its own cultural stakeholders, and their range is extremely vast. Cultural stakeholders may include universities, churches, galleries, museums, etc. Interactions with them are also bidirectional, but more sporadic, and change over time: many stakeholders from the first map are not found in the second one. These relationships arise in two ways: the Institute proposes a collaboration with the stakeholder, or vice versa. That means that IICs have a crucial role: they act as stakeholder selectors, actively choosing their partners.

The relationship network in both maps is vast and variegated, but it is extremely centralized. That means that the IIC is almost always the enabler of the relationship. In other words, the relationship network is egocentric and not dense. The majority of stakeholders are not connected to each other, only to the IIC, which acts as a "bridge". The second map, however, marks a slight shift in direction: stakeholder relationships are expected to strengthen in 2023–2024.

In summary, the two maps show that IICs act as relationship enablers and stakeholder selectors inside the network, as they:

- are part of the network promoting Italy abroad and have close relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (structural stakeholders);
- are embedded within the unique network of relationships they themselves create in the country in which they operate (cultural stakeholders);
- can collaborate with each other spontaneously or following initiatives by the MAECI, therefore creating a network of IICs;
- can act individually and autonomously.

Note that the potential of IICs is given particularly by their unique position at the intersection of Italian government institutions (especially MAECI), Italian citizens abroad, and the host country (its local communities, public and private entities, associations and organizations, etc.).

In our case and context, the biggest issue revealed by the relationship maps is that they seem to be extremely centralized, even though in 2023-2024 there have been signs of change. However, according to Bravo-Laguna (2024), "decentralized networks might be better equipped for handling complex, dynamic, and extraordinary situations than centralized structures". It means that Cultural Institutes abroad should operate internationally, representing their own countries, while maintaining a specific local perspective. In other words, each Cultural Institute could pursue both the institutional goals of its nation and local goals arising from the specific context in which it operates, thus nurturing decentralized relationship networks, particularly apt for a nation branding strategy.

CONCLUSION

By addressing specific issues and gaps, this research fosters a theoretical and pragmatic understanding of the cultural dimension of nation branding, particularly through the observation and mapping of relationships within local networks of cultural institutes. Drawing on the well-known primary importance of relationships among stakeholders and among dimensions of the nation brand (Rojas-Mendez, 2013), and from the management literature, in which it is commonly accepted that relational capital is an effective anti-crisis measure (Stevenson, 2014; Zafari, 2020; Liu and Yin, 2020; Walecka, 2021 etc.), we propose and use a relationship approach to stakeholder mapping, therefore responding to the first research question. From a more pragmatic perspective, this study is valuable as it provides concrete insights into how stakeholders can be identified and positioned, in response to Long et al. (2024), calling for more empirical research.

For an efficient and resilient nation brand strategy, stakeholders should not be selected solely based on static attributes (functionalist approach), but also based on their network, relations, and interactions (relationship approach; Gummeson, 2011). We suggest considering not only “who the stakeholders are”, but also, foremost, how they are connected to each other. This can be achieved by combining methods such as Social Network Analysis (SNA), relational mapping, archival research, and in-depth interviews to identify hubs, ties, and structural gaps. It is pivotal to identify stakeholders that represent “central nodes” in a country’s nation brand network, which means stakeholders who are highly connected to others and have strategic influence on the network. “Peripheral stakeholders” are also pivotal, as they sometimes possess unique information or connections to important external networks, ensuring transitivity, which “becomes a relevant mechanism in contexts characterized by high uncertainty” and “increases trust across the network” (Bravo-Lasagna, 2024). Peripheral stakeholders have a special role in adapting the national brand to the specific context in which they operate. Moreover, when mapping a relational network, it is essential to consider the types of relationships and interactions among stakeholders, including both strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties represent frequent, trusting, and collaborative relationships. They guarantee continuous and stable engagement. Weak ties are less frequent, but they can bring new information or connections to otherwise isolated parts of the network, which is fundamental as “the existence of effective communication marks the success or failure of crisis responses” and “ensuring that all network actors can be easily reached helps meet a prerequisite for successful action [...] since information flows more quickly” (Bravo-Lasagna, 2024).

Thanks to the relationship approach to stakeholder mapping, it is possible to identify pivotal stakeholders for a nation branding strategy that are often overlooked: the Cultural Institutes. The relationship approach, combined with archival research and interviews, made it possible to answer the second research question, which involved identifying the role of Cultural Institutes within the nation branding network. Considering the selected context, the IICs act as stakeholders' identifiers and relationship enablers, a role crucial for fostering coordinated

nation branding strategies, making them more participatory and less government-centered. The unique way in which IICs make all this possible is thanks to their ability to adapt to the local context in which they operate, while maintaining close ties with Italy.

In conclusion, our study suggests three managerial implications for policymakers and decision-makers. First, identify the project activities and stakeholders involved. Second, map the relationships and classify them as suggested (structural and cultural). Third, define a strategic plan to strengthen existing relationships, both with stakeholders already involved at the local level and to activate positive dialogue between the institutions themselves at the global level. Despite the breadth of insights generated, this research has some limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on the case of the Italian Cultural Institute in Stockholm, which, given its history and the extensive documentation available, represented an optimal mapping exercise but one that is not easily replicable. Secondly, the study is based exclusively on qualitative methods. Future research should therefore broaden the analysis to include different sources of analysis and adopt quantitative approaches to other cases and contexts in order to strengthen and generalise the results.

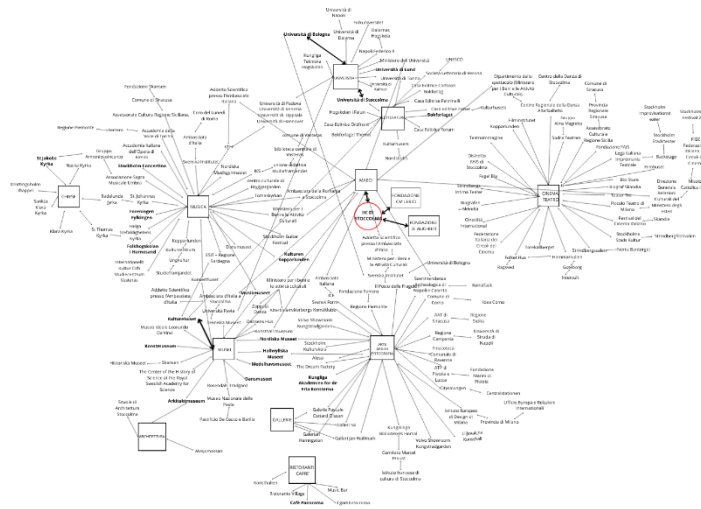
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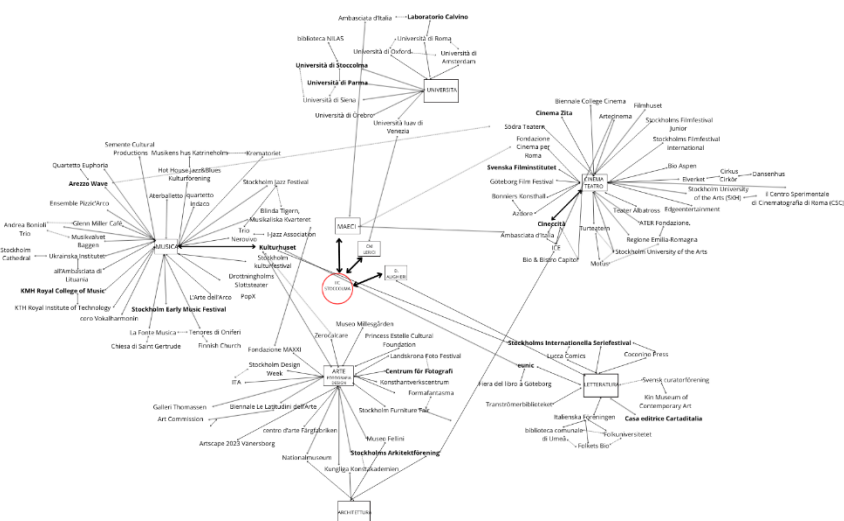
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Figure 1: Italian Cultural Institute of Stockholm's relationships map, 1998-2004*



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 2: Italian Cultural Institute of Stockholm's relationships map, 2023-2024*



Source: Authors' own elaboration

**Notes: Double-headed arrows indicate that the relationship is bidirectional. Thicker arrows indicate the most important relationships (essentially, they highlight structural stakeholders, or other stakeholders with which the collaboration is continuous). Stakeholders listed in bold indicate that there has been more than one interaction with them. Dotted arrows indicate that the relationship is weak (few interactions, interrupted relationship).*

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