Thailand 4.0 and the Internal Focus of Nation Branding

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Abstract

This conference paper is based on an ongoing doctoral research that addresses the phenomenon of nation branding in Thailand. The research critically examines what nation branding is, what it does and whom it is aimed at. It challenges the conventional view that nation branding is an externally-oriented, apolitical, business-derived practice aimed at increasing a country’s competitive advantage in the global marketplace. The research offers an alternative interpretation of nation branding as a highly-politicised practice that is primarily aimed at changing the social attitudes and behaviours of the nation’s own citizens. In order to demonstrate the political nature and internal focus of nation branding, the present paper examines one of Thailand’s recent branding initiatives – the ‘Thailand 4.0’ project – that sets out to promote sustainable economic growth in a digital age. The paper firstly discusses nation branding from a theoretical perspective drawing on studies in the fields of business, international relations, culture and the media. Secondly, it contextualises the Thailand 4.0 project within the broader economic and political developments in Thailand since the 2014 coup d’état. Thirdly, it analyses the project’s contents and the surrounding discourse drawing on primary source data and promotional materials gathered during the author’s 2016 field research in Thailand. The paper argues that ‘Thailand 4.0’ is an exercise in internal nation branding aimed at enhancing the current military junta’s legitimacy by creating an image of a country moving towards economic prosperity.

Key words: nation branding, Thailand, Thailand 4.0, military

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On 22 May 2014, a group of high-ranking army generals led by army chief General Prayut Chan-o-cha overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra following months of political turmoil. Operating under the name of National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the military junta abrogated the country’s existing constitution and cracked down on political dissent. The NCPO did not tolerate even the smallest signs of opposition and the country soon made international news for increasingly bizarre arrests. Flashing a three-finger ‘Hunger Game’ salute, reading Orwell’s 1984 book in public, eating a sandwich, ‘liking’ or sharing anti-junta memes on Facebook had all become arrestable offences in post-coup Thailand.¹ The NCPO was the most hard-line junta in the twenty first century Thailand and unlike previous recent juntas (including those responsible for the 1991 and 2006 coups) the NCPO leadership was in no particular rush to restore civilian rule. The country was without a prime minister for three months following the coup until General Prayut was appointed as the country’s prime minister in August 2014. Since then, the NCPO kept postponing their election timeline with the most recent indications suggesting that the election could be held in early 2018.² This would make the current junta the longest military-led government since the 1980s.

The coup, Prayut’s often ham-fisted leadership style and the increasingly protracted military rule have been subject of fierce international criticism. Dwindling economic performance, mega-projects riddled with corruption scandals and constant suppression of political and civil rights have also threatened to weaken the junta’s support base at home. External and internal reputation-management has thus played an important role in the junta’s post-coup activities. This conference paper is based on an ongoing doctoral research that studies the junta’s post-coup nation branding efforts in Thailand. The research critically examines what nation branding is, what it does and whom it is aimed at. It challenges the conventional view that nation branding is an externally-oriented, apolitical, business-derived practice aimed at increasing a country’s competitive advantage in the global marketplace. The research offers an alternative interpretation of nation branding as a highly-politicised practice that is primarily aimed at changing the social attitudes and behaviours of the nation’s own citizens. In order to demonstrate the political nature and internal focus of nation branding, the present paper examines one of Thailand’s recent branding initiatives – the ‘Thailand 4.0’ project – that sets out to promote sustainable economic growth in a digital age. The paper firstly discusses nation branding from a theoretical perspective drawing on studies in the fields of business, international relations, culture and the media. Secondly, it contextualises the Thailand 4.0 project within the broader economic and political developments in Thailand since the 2014 coup d’état. Thirdly, it analyses the project’s contents and the surrounding discourse drawing
on primary source data and promotional materials gathered during the author’s 2016 field research in Thailand. The paper argues that Thailand 4.0 is an exercise in internal nation branding aimed at enhancing the current military junta’s legitimacy by creating an image of a country moving towards economic prosperity.

**Conceptualising Nation Branding**

Nation branding evolved as an extension of place branding – a practice of branding locations such as villages, towns, cities or regions to attract tourism, investment and human capital – rooted in marketing, management and tourism studies. These disciplines are concerned with economic growth and capital accumulation and they see nation branding as a profit maximising, national reputation management strategy. Since the term nation branding was first coined in the 1990s, many countries have jumped on the nation branding bandwagon of fancy-looking logos and catchy slogans fuelling the conventional belief that nation branding is an externally-oriented, business-derived, apolitical strategy aimed at increasing a country’s competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

However, countries have used nation branding for other than economic purposes. For example, the Chinese government has invested in nation branding since the early 2000s to improve China’s political image and standing abroad. International relations and communication studies thus conceptualise nation branding as means of ascending the global hierarchy of nations and discuss it in relation to propaganda and public diplomacy. Although there is no consensus on the nature of the relationships between the three concepts, many studies coincide in claiming that nation branding is a soft power tool – an intangible and co-optive state power that a country employs to make other countries “want what it wants” – that works on the principle of attracting public opinion through positive influence and techniques of persuasion. van Ham even suggests that nation branding signifies a shift from a modern to a postmodern (and peaceful) world characterised by the politics of image and influence instead of power and geopolitics. This overly optimistic worldview indicates a growing preoccupation with the soft power of persuasion and influence as opposed to the hard power of coercion and military might within the field of international relations.

Although customarily overlooked, practical effects of nation branding have significant socio-political implication for the national (and local) realm. Cultural and media studies offer by far the most critical accounts of nation branding as they examine the impact of nation branding on national and cultural identities. These studies address the implications nation branding has on what Kaneva calls “the politics of identity” and how it projects certain
representations of the socio-political world veiled in the concept of national identity. As Aronczyk sums up, the merit of nation branding is its ability to create discussions about the importance of the nation in the modern world which in turn helps to secure its continuity. Nation branding is thus often discussed in relation to nation building and nationalism. Here, nation branding is more of an updated form of nationalism. Volcic and Andrejevic refer to this as commercial nationalism, where commercial interests increasingly shape the nature of loyalties between the state and the people in promoting a branded national identity. The conceptualisation of nation branding as an economic nationalism is characteristic of a number of cultural studies.

For this reason, academics from left/liberal perspectives often disdain all talk of branding and marketing which they see as reflecting a neo-liberal agenda. For instance, Varga argues that nation branding is “an implicit cultural policy” devised by private corporations to encroach on the public and private sphere and to turn the nation’s citizens into self-governing entrepreneurs – or “playmakers” – who would then form a market-driven society. Because of this, Varga argues, nation branding should not be conceptualised as nation building. In the process of nation branding, a small group of branding professionals reduces national identity to a short slogan and a logo that is uprooted from the country’s historical and cultural context in order to create a flexible and commercially-viable set of values that can appeal to a diverse audience of external consumers. This process makes it difficult for the nation’s citizens to identify with a national identity that has been stripped of its historical and cultural value, and it may also have adverse effects on the country’s public sphere as sympathisers of the branded identity may try to repress its critics. For Varga, nation branding is thus an undemocratic and self-defeating process which, unlike nationalism, is unable to create national solidarity and cohesion among its citizens.

There are at least two problems with Varga’s argument. Firstly, his understanding of nation branding is largely limited to branded logos and slogans. Although the process of nation branding can de-historicise and de-politicise national identity in favour of creating a flexible and widely-appealing national brand, the reality is that logos and slogans will never fully replace national identity, shared histories and ethnic filiations. As Govers points out, logos or slogans have limited effects on nation branding as nations already have their names, national symbolism and landmarks. What matters are the associations, that is images and attributes, nations invoke in their audiences. Secondly, Varga overemphasises the power global markets wield over politics and society. He sees the state as a mere instrument of global markets that use it to advance capitalist growth. In this context, nation branding
becomes a mere economic imperative – a position pertinent to marketing, management and tourism studies. However, economic benefits may not be the only reason – or even the main reason – why states start branding themselves. The countries’ elites, not the global market forces, make the decision whether to brand their country or not – hence the decision is, first and foremost, political as opposed to economic, and even if the government justifies nation branding on economic grounds there might be some ulterior motives behind it. This is especially the case of non-democratic and transitory regimes where the government’s legitimacy depends on its image – external as well as internal – just as much as on the success of its policies. Therefore, this study argues that it is the country’s political elites, not global markets or private corporations, who seek to manage social behaviours and values of the nation’s citizens through nation branding.

Although many business-derived studies tend to offer highly positivist and normative approach to branding, it is possible to draw analogies between nation branding and corporate branding. In their complexities, nations are arguably closest to corporations even though this does not mean that nations should be treated as such. The number of stakeholders involved in nation branding and the almost infinite number of ways in which one can engage with a nation makes nation branding far more complicated than branding a corporation. Complex multi-level governance, constant negotiations of different political ideologies and interests, and contestable right to power are only few of many other factors that distinguish nations from corporations. Nevertheless, studies in corporate branding can help to improve our understanding of what nation branding is and how it works. Hatch and Schultz offer a useful model for conceptualising corporate branding as a strategy for aligning a company’s vision, organisational culture and its corporate image. As a result, corporate branding is relational and each of the three aspects – vision, culture and image – constitute and influence one another. When applied to nation branding, this model helps to overcome the conventional belief of externally-oriented and apolitical nation branding. Hatch and Schultz’s organisational culture defined as internal beliefs and value systems is reflective of a nation’s own identity and day-to-day practice. This firmly places national identity into the nation branding matrix. Although national identity (how the nation perceives itself) and national image (how the nation is perceived by others) are conceptually different, they are both rooted in historical and cultural interpretations of the nation and its people, and are mutually constitutive. The same can be said about corporate identity and image. The third aspect of Hatch and Shultz’s model – the vision – relates to the CEOs’ view of their organisation and their future expectations. In practice, nation branding is confined to a limited number of actors – at least in its initial stages.
– who define and design the features of the new national brand. Since these actors involve government officials, and in some instances branding/marketing consultants, their ‘brand vision’ is shaped, consciously or not, by the government’s own political agendas. This means that nation branding is first and foremost a political act regardless of what objectives it professes to have. Consequently, the power relations between the vision, culture and image are not equal. Vision is the driving force behind branding – whether in corporate or national setting – as it seeks to manage, and align, the culture and image with its brand notions. Nation branding is then aimed at managing people’s attitudes and behaviours; and since external perceptions (image) are unlikely to change unless met with reality (culture), this paper argues that the primary target of nation branding is its domestic audiences, that is the nation’s citizens.

**Branding Post-coup Thailand**

Following the 22 May 2014 coup, the NCPO scrapped nation branding strategy of the ousted government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Initiated in 2012, Yingluck’s government hired branding consultant Tyler Brûlé, owner of international marketing agency Winkreative, to devise a new branding strategy that would restore investors’ confidence in Thailand after the severe 2011 floods. Brûlé audited existing communication strategies of various ministries and governmental agencies, and proposed a unified branding strategy under a new slogan – Modern Thailand – and a simple set of monochrome logos. The Modern Thailand branding strategy presented little known facts about Thailand’s manufacturing and infrastructure, and the country’s hospitality, which – according to the promotional materials – would make Thailand a perfect place for doing business. Based on Winkreative’s website, the Modern Thailand campaign consisted of a short film series, biannual Modern Thailand magazine, TV advertisements, global print campaign and an international retail concept. The campaign was also advertised in Brûlé’s magazine Monocle – a popular global affairs magazine with international circulation. The Yingluck administration presented the Modern Thailand brand to the Swiss government during its 2013 European tour. Despite the obvious economic focus, Yingluck’s branding initiative was not only about increasing foreign investors’ confidence but it was also about repairing the government’s badly damaged reputation by their mismanagement of the 2011 floods.

The 2014 coup put an abrupt end to the Modern Thailand brand which disappeared almost completely from the public domain. The NCPO’s approach to nation branding was markedly different to that of Yingluck and her administration. As a successful businesswoman, Yingluck approached nation branding from a purely marketing perspective.
Hence, the Modern Thailand campaign did not go beyond the newly established façade of the Modern Thailand slogan and logos. This might partly explain why the campaign disappeared so quickly after the fall of Yingluck’s government as it had not gained substantial momentum and sufficient public awareness. The NCPO, on the other hand, did not seem particularly concerned about the visual aspects of nation branding - the junta did not hire an international branding consultant, nor created a new slogan or a logo for the post-coup Thailand. The junta’s understanding of and approach to nation branding was rooted in the military concept of information operations (IO). As Yin and Taylor explained, Thailand’s IO activities differed from the classic western definitions of IO as coordinated use of psychological operations, military deception, electronic warfare, computer network operations and operational security since Thailand lacked advanced military technology capabilities and human resources necessary to conduct such IO. Instead, Thailand’s IO consisted of activities conducted by the government and/or military that sought to influence domestic populations as well as foreign audiences. Traditionally, these activities included royal propaganda, media control and censorship, psychological operations and, more recently, nation branding. Nation branding in the post-coup Thailand thus sought to influence – or to manage and align – people’s attitudes and behaviours with the junta’s own vision of Thailand as a creatively modernising, yet culturally unique and socially traditional country.

The junta’s nation branding vision for post-coup Thailand needed to be understood in a broader political context of the last decade characterised by an ongoing political turmoil. Despite various street protests that frequently plagued Thailand for over a decade, the ongoing political turmoil was essentially an intra-elite conflict between the traditional elites – military, monarchy and bureaucracy – and the Shinawatras – Thaksin Shinawatra was the country’s prime minister between 2001 and 2006; his sister Yingluck was prime minister between 2011 and 2013; both were deposed in military coups – and their political allies. In many respects, the 2014 coup was a re-take on the 2006 coup that had failed to remove Thaksin’s influence over Thai politics; all elections that took place in between the two coups (in 2007, 2011 and 2013) were won by pro-Thaksin parties. Rebranding Thailand away from the Shinawatras and strengthening the position of the traditional elites were the two main objectives behind the junta’s post-2014 nation branding efforts. Following the coup, the NCPO first launched a ‘happiness’ campaign to soften domestic and international opposition towards the coup and strengthen the well-known association of Thailand as ‘the Land of Smiles.’ Bizarre military-organised happiness festivals flooded streets of Bangkok in an apparent move to show to the world and Thais themselves that the life under the NCPO – and the traditional
establishment it represented – was happy, peaceful and orderly unlike the ‘messy’ years under the Shinawatras. In another move, Prayut launched a weekly TV and radio programme titled ‘Returning Happiness to the People’ where he would discuss his visions, policy plans and success stories. The format of these programmes was conspicuously similar to Thaksin’s weekly radio programme during his 2001-06 premiership.\(^{31}\)

When Prayut became the country’s prime minister in August 2014, he complained about the lack of Thainess – the vague concept of what makes Thai people Thai – around him.\(^{32}\) To counter the perceived deficiency, Prayut formulated twelve values of Thainess and made it compulsory for schoolchildren to recite them on daily basis. These values were a peculiar mix of nationalism, political conservatism and religious moralism conducive to authoritarian rule. For example, they promoted loyalty to the nation-religion-king triad, deference to one’s elders and/or superiors, honesty, generosity, pursuit of greater social good over individual’s interests, frugality, upholding of the philosophy of sufficiency economy of HM King Bhumibol, and learning the true meaning of the democracy with the king as head of state (a phrase officially used since 1980 denoting an autocratic, usually military-led, form of governance).\(^{33}\) After Prayut included his twelve values of Thainess into the government’s eleven-point policy agenda for the post-coup Thailand, Thainess became one of the core themes of the junta’s nation branding. Prayut even declared 2015 the ‘Discover Thainess’ year with a matching tourism campaign and many ministries included promotion of Thainess and Thai manners into their agendas for the year.\(^{34}\) The junta’s Thainess campaign was a highly-politicised branding exercise to strengthen socio-political position of the traditional elites by promoting social values conducive to authoritarian rule.

When the junta seized power in 2014, they promised to heal Thailand’s dwindling economic performance. Thailand’s economy had suffered badly as a result of political crisis that preceded the coup. Although the coup put a stop to political protests and restored superficial notions of peace in the country, it sent further shockwaves through many sectors of Thailand’s already fragile economy. Compared to 2013, international tourist arrivals were down by 8.7 per cent while foreign investment contracted by 10 per cent in the first ten months of 2014.\(^{35}\) Despite fierce criticism of Yingluck’s fiscal policies – especially the controversial and costly rice-pledging scheme where the government bought rice from farmers at rates 50 per cent higher than average market prices and then struggled to re-sell it\(^{36}\) – the junta adopted many of Yingluck’s economic policies from the 2014 budget in addition to their own public spending stimulus packages and infrastructure projects.\(^{37}\) These measures, however, proved insufficient to recover the country’s falling economic performance and
economic forecast remained bleak throughout 2015. Increasing household debt, falling exports, low consumer and foreign investor confidence were at risk of undermining the junta’s support among those who had originally endorsed the 2014 coup.

In September 2015, the NCPO reshuffled the cabinet and brought in Somkid Jatusripitak as the new Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, and Suvit Maesincee as the Deputy Commerce Minister. Somkid and Suvit were Thaksin’s former intellectual aides, they both hold marketing doctorates from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and were mentees of American marketing guru Philip Kotler. Together with Kotler, Somkid and Suvit co-authored a book on nation branding called ‘The Marketing of Nations: a strategic approach to building national wealth.’ Bringing in Somkid and Suvit was a tactical move on the junta’s side as Somkid was behind many popular economic policies of Thaksin’s government that came to be known as ‘Thaksinomics.’ Once in office, Somkid launched more stimulus packages aimed at Thailand’s rural populations, increased incentives for foreign investors, endorsed junta’s infrastructure projects and prepared strategies for strengthening domestic private sector through a creation of specialist manufacturing hubs and new tourist destinations; while Suvit came up with the junta’s flagship branding project: Thailand 4.0.

**Thailand 4.0**

Launched in April 2016, Thailand 4.0 project resonated with Klaus Schwab’s idea of fourth industrial revolution – a rapid development of digital technologies across all industries that had changed modes of production, consumption, service provision but also the way people live, work and relate to each other. Thailand 4.0 essentially promised an economic upgrade that would align the country with the new digital age. An infographic video produced by the Ministry of Commerce (MoC) explained that Thailand’s economic development started in the 1.0 age of agriculture, followed by the 2.0 age of light industry and the current 3.0 age of heavy industry. Having reached the 3.0 age two decades ago, Thailand had not been able to move on and was now trapped at the middle-income level with an annual economic growth of only 3-4 per cent. How can Thailand escape the middle-income trap? According to the video, Thailand needed to enter the digital 4.0 age to become a high-income country. To transition from 3.0 to 4.0, Thailand needed to have an innovation-driven value-based economy in the spirit of ‘work less, get more’. The video then outlined five key areas of focus – food, agriculture and biotechnologies; public health and medical technologies; robotics and smart technologies; digital technologies; and culture, creative industries and high-value services – and illustrated how life in the 4.0 age will look like. At the end, the video asked: “We have already started – will
On the surface, Thailand 4.0 offered an attractive vision of the country moving towards economic prosperity. Suvit described Thailand 4.0 project as part of Thailand’s nation branding that focused on the country’s economic position. The idea behind the project was to help differentiate Thailand from its neighbours when competing for foreign investment and to overcome the middle-income trap. Value creation, distributed capitalism and sustainable development were the project’s three main buzzwords. Despite the apparent focus on the country’s economic positioning, foreign investors were not the primary target audience of the Thailand 4.0 project nor was the upgrading the country’s industrial and service sectors the project’s top priority. As Suvit explained, this branding project was aimed at Thai people since to get to Thailand 4.0, the country needed to first have Thai people 4.0. And how would Thai people 4.0 look like? According to Suvit, they would be global, digital, capable, and socially responsible. To achieve this, a society-wide education reform was needed to make Thai people purposeful, innovative, resourceful and mindful – the four key skills that would characterise Thai people in the 4.0 age. Suvit concluded that it was not the economy that would differentiate Thailand from its neighbours – and the world – but Thai people. Thailand 4.0 was a *prima facie* example of internally-focused nation branding.

At its core, the Thailand 4.0 project was effectively ‘selling’ an appealing vision of their future selves to the Thai people in exchange for their support, trust and loyalty to the military government. A series of infographics titled “Thailand 4.0 Policy for Easy Comprehension” that were posted on Suvit’s official Facebook page, made this core message even more explicit: a Thai man – who conspicuously looks like Prayut - was visited by his future self who came from the Thailand 4.0 age and told him that the country’s future depended on him. The future self then described Thailand 4.0 as an age of security, wealth and sustainability showing the man images of Thai farmers with iPads, old people aided by robots and a society of smart-looking entrepreneurs and neatly-dressed high-skilled workers. If progress, innovation and improved quality of life were the true objectives behind the Thailand 4.0 project, it would be difficult to fault the project except that it was initiated by an unelected government. However, under the surface the Thailand 4.0 branding project was nothing more than an empty branding exercise of the ruling junta aimed at enhancing their legitimacy by showing Thai people, and the world, that the NCPO had a long-term economic strategy. As a skilled marketer, Suvit was employed to deliver and promote the junta’s economic vision and that was exactly what he did. However, when asked about examples of actual policies that would underpin the Thailand 4.0 project, Suvit did not have concrete answers as policy creation
was a responsibility of individual ministries. However, many governmental officials across different ministries were themselves confused about what Thailand 4.0 was and how to achieve it.\textsuperscript{45} And despite all the talk of digital Thailand 4.0, faxing was still a popular way of communication at different ministries and various governmental agencies in 2016.\textsuperscript{46} Yet, by presenting this vision of a creatively modernising Thailand the NCPO wanted to show Thai people the benefits of military over civilian rule. Under an elected government, Thailand 4.0 project would be at risk every time a new government came to power. However, long-term prosperity could be guaranteed under the junta. The NCPO even made Thailand 4.0 project part of its 20-year National Reform Strategy; a strategy enshrined in the country’s draft constitution that made it binding for elected governments to follow.\textsuperscript{47}

Essentially, Thailand 4.0 was a political facelift for post-coup Thailand and the junta. The project sought to strengthen the position of traditional elites by placing them at the heart of economic development. Under Thailand 4.0, the country would follow HM King Bhumibol’s philosophy of sufficient economy as one of the drivers of economic development.\textsuperscript{48}
Formulated in the 1970s, Bhumibol’s sufficiency was based on values of personal moderation, prudence and social immunity.\textsuperscript{49} It was an inherently conservative, inward-looking and anti-capitalist approach to economy and economic development and, arguably, a stark contrast to the digital capitalism proposed by Thailand 4.0. Bhumibol’s sufficient economy was a response to the unbridled capitalism of the 1970s and 1980s during which Thailand was achieving double-digit growth on annual basis. As a result, the king’s idea did not gain in popularity until the 1997 Asian crisis, when the country was struck by unprecedented economic meltdown. Due to the strict lese majeste laws, there was little open criticism of Bhumibol’s philosophy in Thailand but those who dared to speak out argue that sufficiency economy was yet another political tool of the traditional elites aimed at maintaining the country’s rigid social hierarchy system.\textsuperscript{50} Personal moderation, prudence and social immunity are hardly aspirational values when it comes to economic development, especially in the digital 4.0 age. Furthermore, Bhumibol’s philosophy shifted responsibility for economic development from the government to individual citizens; a failure of development conveniently became an individual’s failure. Located within context of Buddhist belief of merit-derived social hierarchy system, Bhumibol’s sufficient economy thesis justified and normalised economic and social inequality. Bhumibol’s call for moderation was rather paradoxical seeing that he was ranked as the world’s richest monarch with an estimated wealth of 30 billion US dollars in 2011.\textsuperscript{51} The junta’s decision to promote economic development in tandem with sufficiency economy thus sought to contain people’s economic – and relatedly socio-political – aspirations that could threaten
the power and position of the traditional elites. Interestingly, the junta did not expect foreign investors to follow the sufficiency path, which made the alleged benefits of this philosophy and junta’s commitment to it at best questionable.

What did Thai people make of Thailand 4.0? Most participants of the six focus groups conducted by the author between September and November 2016 had not heard of Thailand 4.0 before. Those who had heard about the project were still unsure what it was about. All focus group participants were shown the MoC video about Thailand 4.0 (discussed earlier in this section) and then asked to discuss it in relation to what the video was about, why the government made such a video, who the target audiences were, and how the video made them feel. Most focus group participants were university students, one group consisted of university lecturers, and one of villagers fond of the Shinawatras. At least one focus group was conducted in each of the four main regions: the north (Chiang Mai), northeast (Ubon Ratchathani), central (Bangkok), and the south (Hat Yai; upper south). As a result of the decade long political conflict, the author expected the fiercest opposition to the project in the north and northeast – the Shinawatras’ strongholds – and strongest support in the upper south – anti-Thaksin and pro-establishment. However, this was not always the case. Although participants in the upper south were most inclined to view the project in a positive light, they expressed some doubts about the project’s feasibility. Their doubts were mostly related to the length of time necessary for this project to succeed and the limited time the junta had on their hands. One participant did not like the project as they believed the digital age was not in line with Thailand’s aptitude – Thailand needed to follow the sufficiency path of HM King Bhumibol instead. This was despite the video making explicit references to sufficiency. The participants in the upper south were also most inclined to express hope in the video and the government with one participant suggesting that Thai people needed to help the government achieve Thailand 4.0 by starting from themselves. The video’s final call for action clearly resonated with this participant.

Yet, participants in the upper south were not the only ones inspired by the video. Rather surprisingly, a group of pro-Shinawatra villagers in the northeast were also inspired by the video and expressed similar attitudes to the participants in the upper south: they too felt that they should start with self-development and were keen to spread the video’s message to their common villagers. Thailand 4.0 had similar appeal to the Shinawatras’ populist policies that were widely supported by Thailand’s rural populace. However, unlike the participants in the upper south, the villagers in the northeast did not express hope in the military government. Their motivation to take up action was based on their mistrust of the military government and its commitment to the next general elections. One participant aptly captured the general mood
by saying: “We can do this ourselves, we don’t need to wait for the [civilian] government or election. If we wait, when will we get it?” There was definitely a sense of frustration among the villagers about the course of Thai politics even though the video struck all the right cords. Ultimately, who was behind the video mattered more than its content.

The most negative feelings towards the video were expressed by participating students in Bangkok and the northeast, and lecturers in the northeast who described Thailand 4.0 as mere propaganda and political necessity for the junta to stay in power. Participating students and lecturers in the northeast also expressed feelings of alienation as they believed the project would benefit mainly urban Thais. There was a sense of disenchantment among the northeastern participants in that the government had never asked people in the provinces what they actually needed; some thought that the junta was pursuing the Thailand 4.0 project because of an international development trend. Although the participants from these three groups were not strictly against the ideas presented in the video, they were sceptical about the junta and their altruism. Participants in the north were less sceptical about the junta’s intentions. They were, however, largely pessimistic about the junta’s abilities to carry out a project premised on modern digital technologies. As one of the participants noted, the junta government consisted of a largely old military entourage who was not that up to date with modern technologies themselves. Nevertheless, some participants still expressed hope in the project and its feasibility. Despite the different feelings and opinions, all participants agreed that the video – and the related project – was aimed at Thai population at large. Most participants believed that video targeted mainly young generations, such as students and young adults, as these sections of Thai society could potentially benefit from the project. As one participating student in Bangkok noted, the junta’s focus on young people was also very pragmatic – they were the next generations of voters and potential critics of the junta. Following the coup, Thai students were among the most vocal critics of Prayut and the ruling junta. The junta’s obsession with promoting Thainess and Thailand 4.0’s focus on re-education clearly placed young people at the centre of their post-coup nation branding activities. Overall, most participants criticised the video for being too vague on how Thailand 4.0 could be achieved. The vision of a creatively modernising Thailand was not strong enough to diffuse concerns most participants had over the project’s feasibility under the military regime.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to challenge the conventional belief of nation branding as an externally-oriented, business-derived, apolitical practice and to offer an alternative
interpretation of a highly-politicised nation branding primarily aimed at the nation’s own citizens. The article argued that nations did not brand themselves for purely economic reasons and that nation branding was an inherently political practice because the new nation brand was initiated and designed by the country’s political elites. Therefore, nation branding was always prone to succumb to political agendas of those who created it. This was illustrated by the case of the pre-coup and post-coup branding efforts in Thailand. Whereas Yingluck’s marketing-oriented Modern Thailand nation branding campaign was focused on re-building foreign investor confidence and the government’s damaged reputation following the 2011 floods, the junta’s post-coup branding was aimed at re-branding Thailand away from the Shinwaras and strengthening the socio-political position of traditional elites – the monarchy, military and bureaucracy. The junta’s post-coup use of nation branding was informed by the military concept of information operations and aimed at managing people’s attitudes and behaviours in line with the junta’s own vision of Thailand. The junta scrapped Yingluck’s Modern Thailand project and substituted it with its own nation branding campaigns: first, the happiness campaign to soften the opposition towards the coup, and then the Thainess campaign to strengthen values conducive to authoritarian rule in Thai society.

Since the junta’s ability to stay in power was also threatened by the country’s meagre economic performance, the NCPO brought in two marketing experts – Somkid and Suvit – to ostensibly improve the country’s economic performance. The junta’s flagship nation branding project – Thailand 4.0 – about sustainable economic growth in the digital age, however, sought to demonstrate the benefits of military over civilian rule and to show that the NCPO had a long-term economic plan. The Thailand 4.0 project was merely selling an appealing vision of their future selves to the Thai people in exchange for their loyalty and support of the military government. As the project did not provide much substance beyond the vision of a creatively modernising Thailand, Thailand 4.0 was essentially a post-coup facelift for the junta and the traditional elites it represented. Despite Suvit’s efforts to promote Thailand 4.0, Thai officials and the participants interviewed for the purpose of the doctoral research were still largely unaware or unsure of the project in the last few months of 2016. Nevertheless, the project did manage to invoke feelings of hope in some participants but these were not always coupled with equal feelings of hope for the military government. The most interesting effect the project generated was its ability to inspire pro-Shinawatra villagers in the largely anti-junta northeast to take up action and spread the project’s messages to their fellow villagers. However, the villagers’ enthusiasm for the project did not translate to their enthusiasm for the military
Overall, the project’s content seemed to have mattered less to the participants than those who initiated it.

NOTES

21 Aronczyk, “Living the Brand”, 43-5.
23 Author’s interview with an informant from the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), 18 November 2016.
25 NESDB interview, op.cit.
27 Author’s interview with an informant from the Government Public Relations Department, 21 November 2016.
31 For further information, see Duncan McCargo and Utkrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2005), 168-72.
32 Author’s interview with an informant from the Ministry of Interior, 17 September 2016.
34 For example, the Bangkok Metropolitan Culture Council that falls under the Ministry of Culture organised competitions in Thai manners at schools across Bangkok. Author’s interview with an official from the Bangkok Metropolitan Culture Council, 20 September 2016.
38 “Thailand’s Military Junta”, op.cit.
40 The Thailand 4.0 video is available in Thai at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEfY3rQZpNo>
41 The original Thai caption reads เราเริ่มแล้ว คุณเริ่มหรือยัง
Author’s interview with Dr Suvit Maesincee, 25 July 2016.

Interview with Suvit, op.cit.

See infographics (in Thai) at https://www.facebook.com/infographic.thailand/photos/ms.eIxnKvOw1AIA29UYXbuf7GqkEB-;rcGel4DTECwEY6fgDzpAWqIdUjZwTSvVegKmbMLpJuqHwBLvpsVH-;AJQLkF9lYGEn3iticypa8YM-;WsbgfHBDiiT7cI6FmKv9IR3wBjuq9lizCzvLGHUd0W8O2QJnRWUmnC7Ev79J4vo0y6nPh1xpmfUO83tAR8C-;z0WRE-;bps.a.1285171828192786.1073741898.451864701523507/1285172301526072/?type=3&theater

Author’s interviews with officials at the Ministry of Interior, 28 September 2016; Ministry of Culture, 6 October 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 November 2016.

Author’s field notes, 2016.

NESDB interview, op.cit.

See the Thailand 4.0 video, op.cit.


Author’s interview with a Bangkok businessman, 25 October 2016.


Author’s interview with an informant from the Board of Investment Thailand, 16 November 2016.

No focus groups were conducted in the three Malay-border provinces – known as ‘Deep South’ – due to security concerns.

Focus group with university students in Hat Yai, 11 November 2016.

Focus group with Red-Shirt villagers in Ubon Ratchathani, 14 October 2016.

Focus group with villages in Ubon, op.cit.

Focus group with university students in Ubon Ratchathani, 13 October 2016; Focus group with university lecturers in Ubon Ratchathani, 13 October 2016.

Focus group with university students in Chiang Mai, 19 October 2016.

Focus group with university students in Bangkok, 28 October 2016.