

Nation branding and international media coverage of domestic conflict: An agenda-setting study

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Abstract

Agenda-setting theory of the media describes the relationships between how news media present issues and how important those issues are to news consumers. Applying agenda setting theory, we ask, does media coverage of international political events relate to a nation's brand? We leverage a domestic conflict index variable from the Cross National Time-Series (CNTS) dataset of New York Times articles, which are considered influencers of global news content. Our dependent variable is Anholt's NBI index from consumer surveys from 2005 through 2007, whose data include an aggregate nation brand index score as well as a disaggregated score for different categories such as tourism and exports. To investigate these relationships, we employ general additive models (GAM), which account for non-linearity using cubic splines, finding generally a negative relationship between media coverage of conflict and consumer sentiment of a country. To confirm our findings, we compare the results with both the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) dataset of political events and the Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) measure of reported conflict fatalities in a country.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Agenda-Setting Theory

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The concept of nation branding emerged in the early 21st century, partly due to the aftermath of 9/11 and the U.S. State Department's efforts to improve America's image. Simon Anholt introduced the idea of place branding in 2002, applying commercial brand management strategies to countries. However, he later realized a country's image is more closely tied to its identity, politics, and competitiveness, and began using the term Competitive Identity instead (Anholt, 2011, p. 21). In distinguishing between nation branding and country reputation, Passow and colleagues (2005) noted that reputation is a strategic concept centered on long-term impressions that are constructed by images and actions of an organization, or in this case, a country. Some of the images, messages and actions are functions of nation branding, and the impressions people hold about countries are, in fact, the nation's brand (Anholt, 2020). Studies of country reputation have found it to be a multi-dimensional construct, including aspects of leadership, affection, and culture that is quite stable (Yang et al., 2008; Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005; Fullerton & Holtzhausen, 2012).

When Anholt originally put forth the idea of nation branding, he developed the "Place Branding Hexagon", dividing it into Tourism, Brand Exports, People, Culture, Governance and Investment/Immigration (Anholt & Hildreth, 2004). He also launched the Nation Brand Index (NBI) survey in 2005, which measures a nation's brand through the lens of consumer sentiment, using a series of questions about the respondents' attitudes toward and awareness about other countries. To the extent that product brand perceptions and attitudes result from consumer processing of brand information, through either mediated messages or word-of-mouth communication, as well as personal brand experience (Aaker, 1996), the resulting brand concept or image consists of multiple attributes and beliefs, including valence. Likewise, the formation of citizen attitudes toward nation brands has been described as a stable, yet heterodox phenomenon that is affected by various integrants, including but not limited to country exports, tourism, advertising, media reports, governance, natural and man-made disasters, and cultural exports such as movies and music (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2017).

The media can have a significant impact on a country's brand, as studies suggest that increased news coverage leads to a higher perceived importance by the public (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). This influence on public perception is known as agenda-setting, where the way news is presented affects the importance assigned to the issues by those exposed to it. Classic agenda-setting studies found a strong correlation between newspaper reporting and which topics the public subsequently perceived as being important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), a phenomenon later referred to as first level agenda-setting. Later, in studies of second-level agenda-setting, media messaging was found to influence not only topic salience but also attribute salience for a particular topic. For example, exclusive reporting by the New York Times (NYT) about animal abuse in horse racing led to high salience not only for the topic but also for specific story attributes like equine drug use (Denham, 2014). This phenomenon is known as second-level agenda-setting.

One medium's coverage can also influence another medium's coverage, referred to as 'intermedia agenda-setting theory'. Studies have found that depending on the topic, major

outlets, such as the NYT tend to act as the agenda setters (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018; Stern, Livan, & Smith, 2020). In other examples, Van Belle (2003) reported that NYT coverage of foreign politics tracked with subsequent US foreign aid decisions, Chomsky (2000) concluded that NYT coverage of the Greek civil war acted as an “advance agent of the Truman Doctrine” (p. 415), and Lin et. al (2018) showed evidence that NYT international business reportage affected world gold markets. Lihua (2012) argued that stories about China in the NYT manipulated opinion about that country, and Golan (2006) found that the NYT strongly influences the agenda of UK network television news programs.

Given the potentially high impact news can have on perceptions, according to agenda-setting theories, we seek to add to the research literature by asking: does media coverage of international political events and domestic conflict relate to a nation’s brand?

Data

To study our question specifically regarding the NYT, we examine whether NYT coverage of inter national domestic conflict is related to NBI, by leveraging the CNTS dataset that was generated through systematic coding of NYT articles (Banks & Wilson, 2022). We use the domestic conflict index (DCI) from the CNTS data, which is a weighted index of eight measures, including assassinations, general strikes, guerrilla warfare, major government crises, purges, riots, revolutions, and anti-government demonstrations. While this dataset tracks NYT reporting exclusively, it is this limited, but arguably powerful, coverage by an iconic media outlet used to build the index that we seek to explore.

The New York Times has limitations in terms of its audience and coverage (mostly US based) and thus its global agenda-setting influence. Further, the DCI variable is a hand-coded database, which can introduce bias. Therefore, to cross-validate our findings, we also test the agenda-setting influence of media on a nation’s brand by correlating NBI with two other media databases, known as GDELT (Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone) and the Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)’s geo-referenced event dataset, version 22.1 (Leetaru & Schrod, 2013; Sundberg & Melander, 2013).

GDELT is a dataset of political events built by daily computer-assisted scraping and machine coding of thousands of worldwide news outlets from more than 100 languages (Leetaru & Schrod, 2013). We use GDELT’s Goldstein score (1992), which is an index for how negative or positive a story is from -10 to 10, in this analysis. GDELT has been used in other agenda-setting studies, including those on intermedia agenda setting and fake news (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018) and how news media in different countries influence how other countries cover international news (Guo & Vargo, 2017). UCDP’s geo-referenced dataset includes records information about individuals killed or injured around the world from organized violence. Because violence may have an especially negative impact on perceptions of other countries, the UCDP database provides an additional check on the relationship between media coverage and perceptions of other countries. While the UCDP database has

not been widely used in other agenda-setting studies, it is commonly found in conflict literature about the influence of violence and death on the United Nations Security Council's agenda (Binder & Golub, 2020).

By analyzing three data sources to understand whether a nation's brand is influenced by media coverage, this study can provide cross-checks and increased validity, with each dataset intended to address a shortcoming of other datasets. All datasets include measurements of political events as reported in the media and score them on how they relate to domestic stability, making them readily comparable. The CNTS dataset potentially has a coverage bias both in terms of only covering negative events and not recording more minor, locally covered events. Since the GDELT data set has a much more comprehensive scope, it allows us to compare NYT's relationship with a nation brand when compared to all media coverage, which could also proxy as a measure of true number of events since it is likely to include all political events instead of just those deemed newsworthy by the NYT. It also accounts for the fact that local and regional news have an audience that is more interested in smaller events. However, GDELT is machine-coded and could suffer from algorithmic bias. UCDP fills in this gap by using human-coding and many media sources including Global Newswire, BBC monitoring, and local and specialized news outlets. This allows us to further explore the criterion-related validity with another media-collected dataset focused on conflict and adds to the research on intermedia agenda-setting.

Research Design

Our dependent variable is Anholt's NBI index and our time sample was determined by availability of these data, which cover 2005 through 2007 and were provided directly by Simon Anholt.¹⁾ Measurements are made quarterly and include an aggregate nation brand index score as well as a disaggregated score following Anholt's hexagon categories. Scores are based on rank-ordered responses from about 40 countries, mostly developed or rapidly developing, from online consumer surveys administered to stratified random samples within each country. Samples are stratified by age, gender, and where applicable, geographical region, race and ethnicity. Sample sizes ranged from 200 to 1000, with a mean of 740 and median of 1000. Respondents do not rank their home country.

To interpret the relationship between NBI and media coverage, we use general additive models (GAM), which account for non-linearity using cubic splines. We visualize these models for overall NBI and each of its six categories with all three media-sourced variables of CNTS, GDELT, and UCDP. As a check of media-source inter-relationships, we also compare all three media source variables using plots of GAMs.

We make a number of transformations in the data for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, the NBI data were reported quarterly and had different scales of scores when

1) We considered adding measures of our dependent variable, such as the country rankings provided by US News & World Report, but to our knowledge other options only publish ordinal rankings, which would not have been compatible with our design.

administered.

Therefore, quarterly survey scores were normalized between one and zero. Second, to match the data with the CNTS and UCDP data, NBI scores for all quarters during which a country was included and GDELT Goldstein scores, which are reported daily, were averaged for each year. Third, for comparability, DCI scores and Goldstein scores were normalized to scores between zero and one as well. Fourth, Goldstein scores usually run from negative to positive, which is the theoretical opposite direction of DCI, as higher scores indicate more violence, and so the GDELT Goldstein scores were inverted for easier comparison. Fifth, given the high level of dispersion and expected diminishing effect, fatality counts from UCDP were logged. Lastly, we lag the media related variables by one year, which is the minimum amount possible, so that these events have time to impact consumer sentiment, if at all.

Findings

We found, depicted in Figure 1, a quadratic relationship between media conflict events and the overall NBI score. Initially, increased conflict corresponded with lower scores, but for the highest scores, the relationship became positive. Spain maintained a strong brand despite domestic conflict, indicating that negative coverage can lower a country's brand score, but not if the brand already well-established. When contrasted with GDELT, countries with neutral events have the highest branding, but highly positive or negative events lead to lower branding scores. This indicates that negative events like military attacks hurt a country's brand and seemingly positive events like foreign aid can be perceived negatively by some consumers, likely due to conflicting interests or perceptions of unnecessary intervention. UCDP fatalities with no observations vary greatly, but the negative linear relationship for non-zero values indicates that fatalities impact the perception of a country more than media events.

When examining brand indexes for NBI, DCI, GDELT, and Goldstein, shown in Figure 2, 3, and 4, certain aspects have a stronger impact on the overall relationship. DCI and GDELT scores for Exports, Culture, and Tourism are mostly neutral. Government, People, and Investment show a positive quadratic relationship. Goldstein scores are consistent, with only Export branding showing no correlation. UCDP scores are all negative, but not always linear. Exports level off at higher values, while People show the most consistent negative correlation.

Broadly, we find that NYT coverage of conflict events around the world was negatively related to consumer sentiment, but this relationship appears to be limited to government and investment branding, indicating that consumers realize that political events covered in the NYT do not represent a country's culture or people. Also, the DCI relationship with overall NBI is much flatter than we see for the other two variables. Compared to the nearly linear relationship between UCDP recorded fatalities, the contrast suggests consumers can differentiate between types of negative political events, with deaths being perceived most negatively. At the top-line level, these findings support the long-standing agenda-setting theory of the press, as well as second-level and intermedia agenda-setting theories. The mixed

effects on various aspects of the nation brand are consistent with Anholt’s (2020) premise that some active branding functions, such as tourism advertising and the marketing of exports, can impact certain dimensions of a nation’s brand, while not necessarily its image overall. The results of this study also confirm that a nation’s brand is relatively stable and does not move quickly with each reported news story.

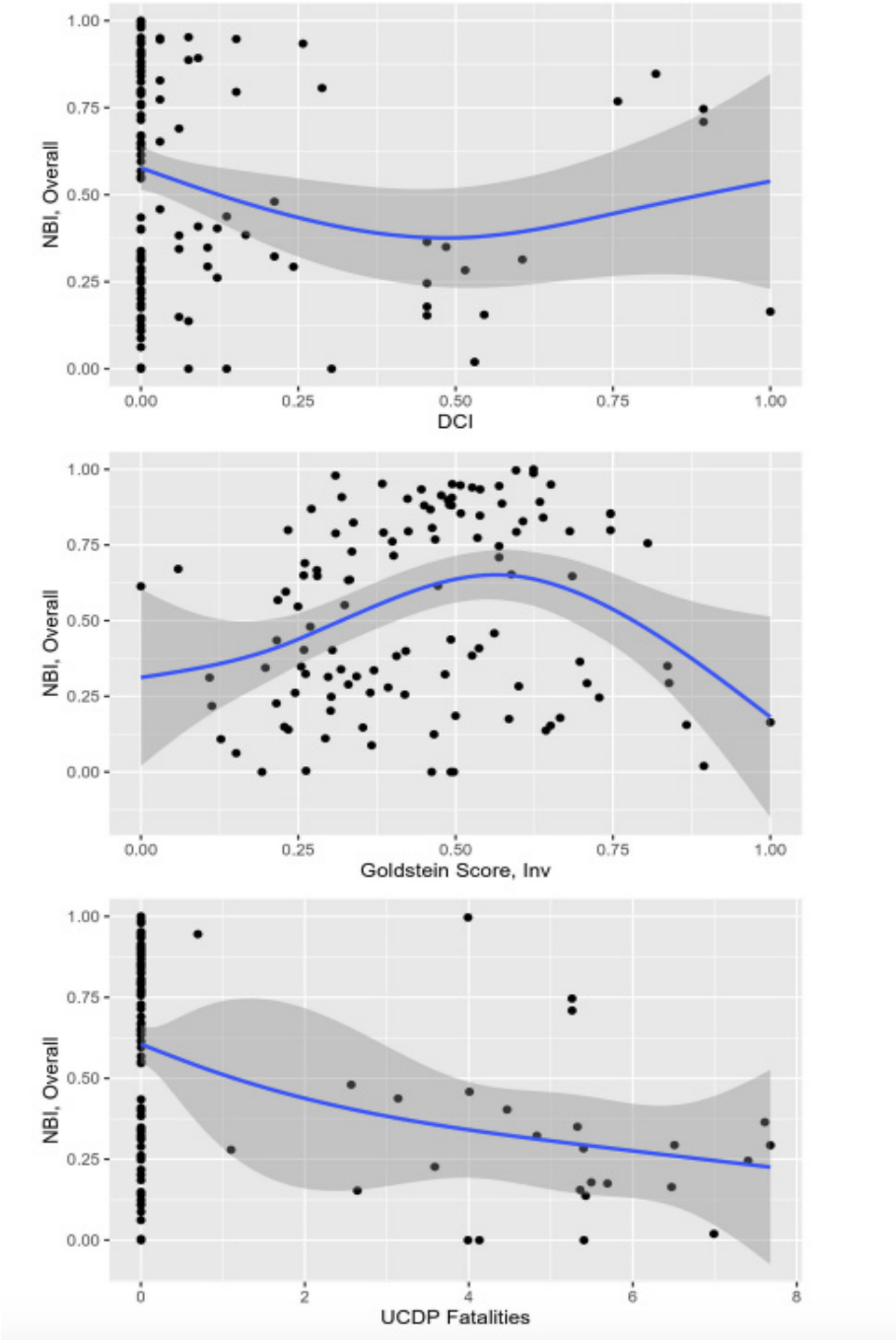


Figure 1. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and CNTS’s Domestic Conflict Index. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI and the Goldstein score are lagged by one year and scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

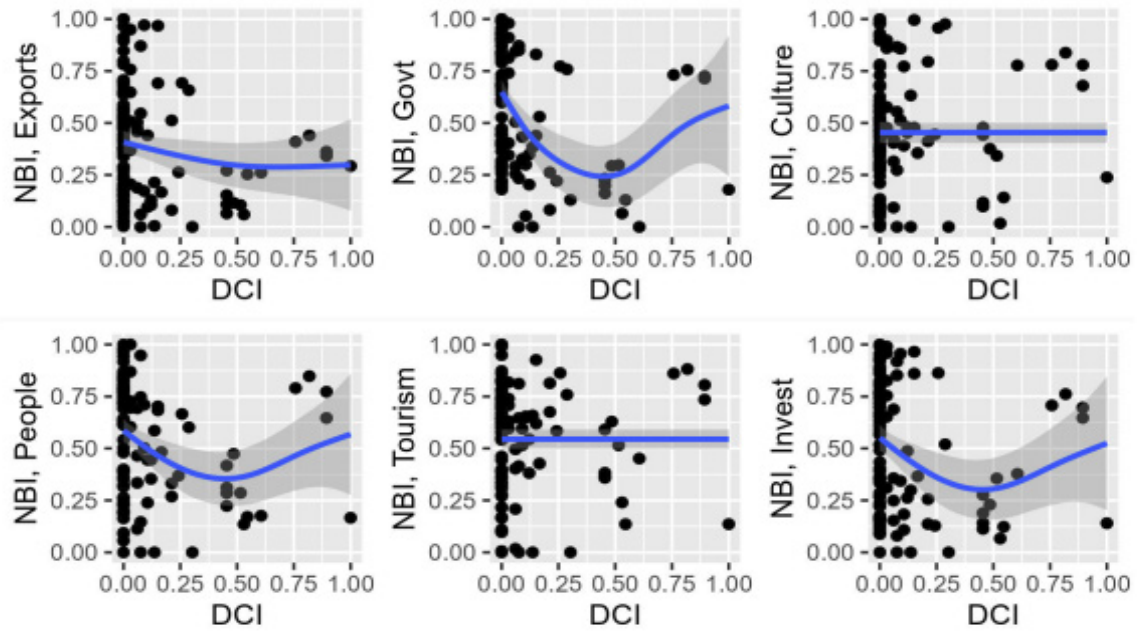


Figure 2. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and CNTS’s Domestic Conflict Index. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI is lagged by one year and all variables are scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

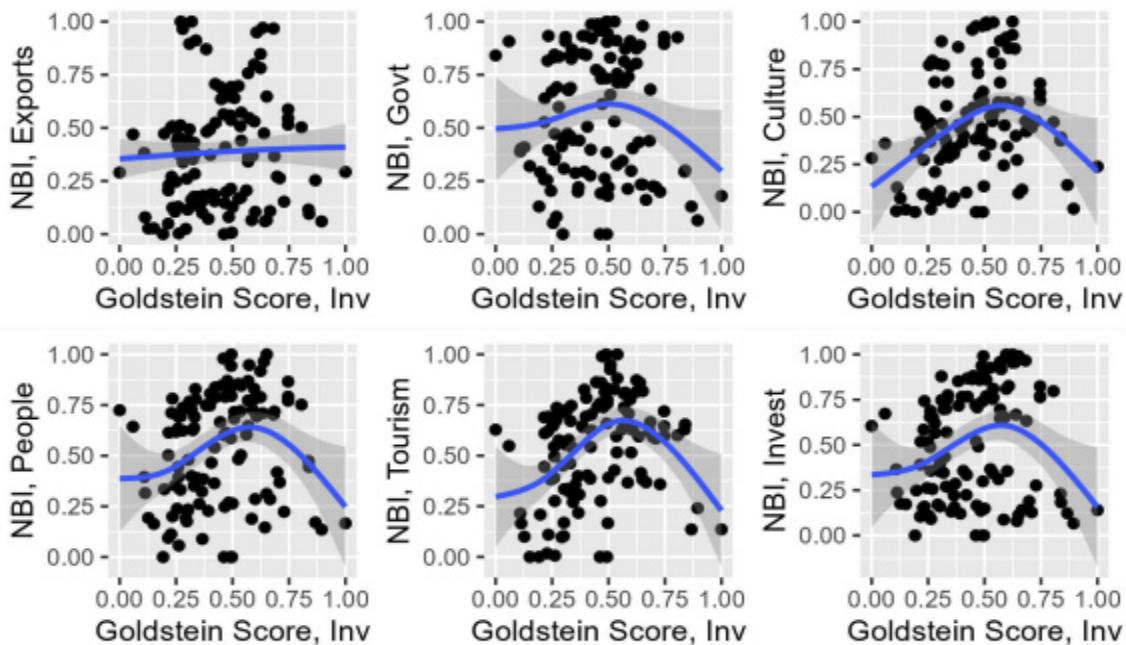


Figure 3. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and inverted Goldstein score from GDELT. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI is lagged by one year and all variables are scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

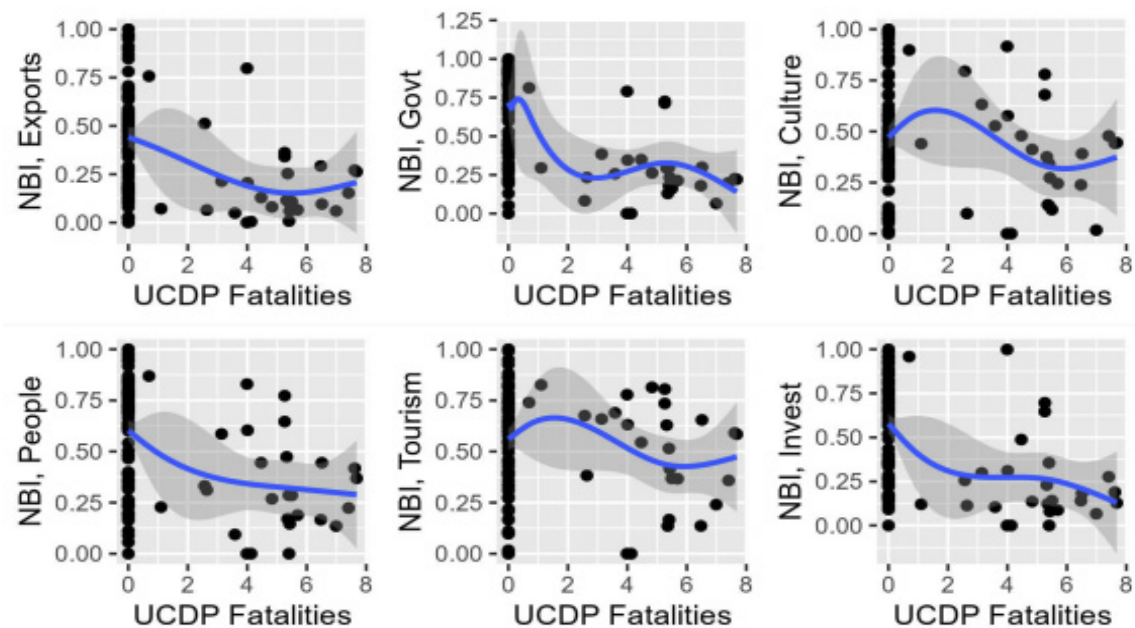


Figure 4. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and UCDP recorded fatalities. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. Logged fatalities are lagged by one year and NBI is scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

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