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STATE BRANDING AS A TOOL OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL STUDY

This article investigates state branding as a complex, multidisciplinary form of strategic communication shaped and redefined by the digital transformation of the global information space. It argues that branding now encompasses not only political identity, cultural values, economic positioning, and institutional legitimacy but also the symbolic capital of a nation in the eyes of international stakeholders. The study examines and compares key theoretical models by Anholt, Dinnie, Manor & Pamment, and Szondi, emphasizing their continued relevance and applicability in the fields of international relations, soft power, and public diplomacy. Branding is conceptualized as a dynamic, evolving digital ecosystem involving states, media, digital platforms, and diverse global audiences. A comparative review of major indices and analytical tools highlights persistent challenges in measuring brand performance under conditions of algorithmic control, fragmented visibility, and shifting online influence dynamics.

Keywords: international relations, branding, digital branding, theoretical models, indices, state branding, information and communication campaigns, public diplomacy.

JEL classification: F59, H89, Z18, D83.

БРЕНДИНГ ДЕРЖАВИ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ПУБЛІЧНОЇ ДИПЛОМАТІЇ: ТЕОРЕТИКО-МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

У статті досліджено сучасні тенденції розвитку цифрового брендингу держави, який перетворився на важливий інструмент самопрезентації, міжнародного позиціонування та стратегічного впливу. Особливої актуальності набуває дослідження брендингу в умовах глобального середовища, де інформаційно-комунікаційні

компанії стають ключовим інструментом конкуренції за міжнародну увагу, довіру та вплив. Авторами проведено огляд літературних джерел щодо наукового та теоретико-методологічного підґрунтя та розуміння ролі бренду в системі міжнародних відносин і формування міжнародного іміджу, досліджена об'єктивна потреба в теоретичному моделюванні цього феномену, а саме, концепція «шестикутника національного бренду», її переваги і недоліки, модель Дінні засвідчує, що бренд держави є багаторівневою системою і має архітектурну структуру, адаптивно-інституціональна модель цифрового брендингу розглядається як синтез інституціонального підходу до публічної дипломатії та адаптивного управління цифровими медіа, «бренд держави» це насамперед сутність держави, що вбудовується в національну ідентичність і забезпечує впізнаваність і цілісність бренду; визначенні ключові чинники ефективності цифрового брендингу держави, методи та інструменти вимірювання бренду країни в цифровому середовищі, серед яких, щорічний глобальний індекс (NBI), індекс Soft Power 30, Global Soft Power Index та як вони взаємодоповнюють один одного в аналітичному вимірі; наведено багаторівневу екосистему цифрового вимірювання бренду держави, в межах якої взаємодіють три ключові компоненти: глобальні інституційні індекси, аналітичні платформи і глобальна аудиторія.

Зроблено висновок, що державний брендинг не обмежується рекламними практиками чи іміджевими кампаніями, а є комплексним міждисциплінарним процесом, який охоплює політичну ідентичність, публічну дипломатію, економічну привабливість і стратегічні комунікації. Він формує цілісну модель сприйняття держави на міжнародній арені, впливає на довіру до її інституцій, визначає характер зовнішньополітичної взаємодії та підсилює позиції країни у глобальних мережах впливу. У контексті цифрової трансформації брендинг держави також стає інструментом "м'якої сили", що здатен ефективно конкурувати за увагу аудиторій у віртуальному просторі, забезпечуючи присутність і видимість країни у глобальних інформаційних потоках.

Ключові слова: міжнародні відносини, брендинг, цифровий брендинг, теоретичні моделі, індекси, брендинг держави, інформаційно-комунікаційні кампанії, публічна дипломатія.

Problem Statement. In the 21st century, communication has become one of the key arenas of geopolitical rivalry, while reputation has emerged as a strategic resource for states. Consequently, state branding has evolved into an important tool for self-presentation, international positioning, and strategic influence. Against the backdrop of growing information saturation, intensified symbolic competition among states, and the digitalization of the public sphere, the formation of a positive, recognizable, and stable image of a country has become a priority of national policy. This process extends far beyond advertising campaigns or image management—it encompasses issues of politics, identity, economy, communication, and international engagement. In particular, the study of branding in the context of a global digital environment is gaining special relevance, as information and communication campaigns become key instruments in the competition for international attention, trust, and influence.

State branding has become the subject of research across numerous academic disciplines and requires an interdisciplinary approach. In scholarly discourse, interdisciplinarity is defined as the integration of knowledge, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies from multiple fields to achieve a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon. Such an approach is essential in the case of state branding, as this phenomenon combines elements of political representation, cultural diplomacy, economic rationale, and communication strategy [1].

Among the academic fields that form the theoretical foundation of state branding, international relations occupies a particularly important place. It is within this discipline that the concepts of soft power, reputational capital, strategic communication, and global positioning are developed. Branding in the context of international relations is

understood as a tool of public diplomacy, enabling a state to exert influence not through force or economic pressure, but through attractiveness, trust, and consistency in its external actions. This enhances the state's agency in the international arena, strengthens its legitimacy within the system of international institutions, and expands the possibilities for diplomatic dialogue.

Analysis of Recent Studies and Publications. The concept of *soft power*, proposed by Joseph Nye, is fundamental to understanding the role of branding within the system of international relations. It suggests that a country can achieve its goals if other actors voluntarily perceive it as authoritative, culturally attractive, and morally legitimate [2]. In this context, the state brand emerges as a form of strategic reputation shaped at the intersection of foreign policy, cultural representation, and public diplomacy. Thus, branding is not merely a means of presentation but a strategic tool for shaping a state's international identity.

Despite the significant role of international relations, state branding is also studied within other academic domains, each of which offers a unique analytical perspective and makes a substantial contribution to the interdisciplinary framework of its examination.

The leading discipline among them is marketing, particularly strategic branding, which provides the conceptual foundations for understanding the national brand as an integrated system of perceptions, symbols, promises, and reputations. It is within the marketing paradigm that key concepts such as positioning, target audience, differentiation, and reputation management are developed. Simon Anholt, in his work *Competitive Identity*, argues that states, like companies, compete for attention, trust, and respect in the global arena, and therefore must operate within the framework of branding [3]. According to the *Nation*

Brands Index (2023) survey, 72% of respondents agreed that a positive image of a country influences their willingness to purchase its products or travel there [4].

Political scientist M. Clarke, in turn, emphasizes in his research that state brands can convey ideologically marked messages—ranging from democratic to nationalist or "ecologically neutral"—thereby influencing the legitimacy of ruling regimes and the formation of the political agenda [5]. For example, according to data from the Pew Research Center, over 60% of citizens in G7 countries have changed their perception of the United States depending on the administration in the White House, which indicates a strong connection between leadership branding and the country's image [6].

Sociology focuses on studying the mechanisms through which social perceptions of the state are formed, both domestically and internationally. Its methodology includes discourse analysis, reputation indices, measurements of social capital, and public opinion research. For instance, the Soft Power 30 ranking takes into account not only states' media activity but also such parameters as trust in government, the presence of an active civil society, and cultural diplomacy [7]. All of this enables sociologists to empirically assess the effectiveness of national branding strategies.

Cultural studies interpret state branding as a form of symbolic representation of collective identity. N. Kaneva, in her foundational article «*Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research*», argues that branding is not merely marketing but a tool of power that shapes and transmits conceptions of the nation through control over narratives, symbols, and visual imagery [8]. As shown in the study by M. Aronczyk, states that actively employ cultural tools in their branding efforts tend to have, on average, 34% higher tourism appeal [9].

The *Edelman Trust Barometer* (2023) report notes that 78% of respondents across 28 countries consider transparent digital communication an important factor in building trust in the state. This underscores the growing role of digital platforms as a primary channel for shaping and maintaining the national brand, especially during times of crisis [10].

Economics approaches state branding through the lens of the national brand as an intangible asset that directly influences competitiveness, investment attraction, tourism development, and exports. According to estimates by Brand Finance in the *Global Soft Power Index* (2023), the economic value of a national brand can account for up to 10% of a country's GDP, depending on its level of recognition, political stability, and overall image [11].

Despite the active exploration of nation branding as an interdisciplinary phenomenon at the intersection of international relations, marketing, sociology, political science, cultural studies, communications, and economics, the issue of developing an effective model of nation branding under current global challenges remains unresolved. In particular, the impact of digitalization, global communication shifts, and the evolving geopolitical landscape on the

construction of national brands remains insufficiently studied. This reveals a research gap that requires further comprehensive analysis to develop relevant theoretical approaches and practical recommendations.

Research Aim. The primary aim of this study is to establish the theoretical and methodological foundations for defining state branding in the digital environment within an interdisciplinary framework. The theoretical significance and relevance of the topic are driven by the need for a systematic analysis of the role of digital information and communication campaigns in the structure of contemporary state branding.

Presentation of the Main Research Findings. In the process of the development of state branding as a distinct field within the system of strategic communications, international relations, and public diplomacy, an objective need has emerged for the theoretical modeling of this phenomenon.

Brand models gain particular relevance in the era of digital transformations, when a national image is shaped not only through diplomatic or cultural channels but also via social networks, media platforms, recommendation algorithms, and digital narratives. Under such conditions, theoretical models must respond to new challenges—ensuring flexibility and interactivity, accounting for the behavioral patterns of online audiences, and adapting to the dynamics of information cycles.

One of the most influential and well-known models in the field of state branding is the *Nation Brand Hexagon* concept, proposed by British international marketing expert Simon Anholt in the early 2000s. This model was the first structured attempt to systematize the key factors shaping a state's reputation on the international stage, and at the same time, it serves as a universal analytical tool for assessing a national brand within a dynamic global environment.

Anholt proceeded from the assumption that states, like corporations, are compelled to compete for limited resources—not only material ones (such as investment, tourism, and trade), but also symbolic ones (such as attention, trust, and loyalty). However, unlike business brands, countries cannot simply change their "product line," as their identity is largely shaped by history, culture, geography, and political structure. For this reason, according to Anholt, state branding should not be based on constructing an artificial image, but rather on the consistent management of reputation through real actions and policies that reflect the country's authentic values [3].

However, under current conditions, Anholt's model requires critical re-evaluation. It was developed prior to the era of digital media dominance and therefore does not account for the specific nature of interactive communication, the influence of social platforms, the role of digital identity, or the rapid pace of information cycles. Moreover, the model is predominantly descriptive—it does not provide ready-made strategic solutions but merely highlights areas that should be developed. According to critics, particularly N. Kaneva, such a model risks becoming "a tool for

legitimizing neoliberal rhetoric” without taking into account the actual political or cultural dynamics [8].

The development of state branding practices in the global arena necessitated further theoretical reflection that would account for the internal differentiation of a state's brand components, their interactions, and the connection between local, regional, and national elements of identity. One response to this need was the national brand architecture model proposed by Keith Dinnie—a researcher and practitioner in the field of brand management for states and regions.

In his work *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice* (2016), Dinnie emphasizes that a state brand is not a monolithic construct—it is a multi-level system in which national, regional, and city brands interact with brands of cultural institutions, export lines, tourism campaigns, public diplomacy, and civil society. This model enables us to view the brand not as a single «showcase», but as an architectural structure with a clear hierarchy, sub-brands, and points of contact with the global audience [12].

In the digital environment, Dinnie's model proves particularly effective, as branding becomes multi-platform under conditions of informational fragmentation. The actors of communication include not only official state bodies but also regional governments, cultural institutions, civic leaders, and digital ambassadors. In such a context, the architectural structure of the brand ensures logical consistency in communications, helps to avoid message conflicts, and maintains the coherence of the country's image amid constant presence in the digital sphere.

The conditions of information saturation, algorithmic content filtering, crisis-driven challenges, and reputational risks compel states not only to coordinate their communication efforts but also to build a coherent, rapidly adaptable institutional system that ensures the stable representation of the national brand in the digital space. The response to these challenges is the adaptive-institutional model of digital branding, which combines the strategic coordination of institutions with the dynamics of digital media and data.

This model can be viewed as a synthesis of the institutional approach to public diplomacy and adaptive digital media governance, drawing on the research of scholars such as Ilan Manor [13] and James Pamment [14]. In his work *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, Manor argues that in the digital age, the state must operate as a flexible communication organization capable of responding to challenges in real time, coordinating multi-platform campaigns, and ensuring the consistency of the digital brand across all levels. Within this framework, state branding is understood not as a fixed strategy but as an ongoing process of adaptation to an evolving digital environment.

The concept of institutional coordination is central to the work of James Pamment, who emphasizes that successful state branding in the digital dimension requires integration among foreign policy institutions, national media,

cultural organizations, and civil society. Such coordination enables the creation of a coherent informational message and reduces the risk of image fragmentation, which may arise under conditions of digital oversaturation and uncontrolled content flows.

Against the backdrop of the state branding models discussed—those focusing on information dissemination channels, organizational structures, or brand management processes—the national narrative model stands out for its emphasis on the substantive and emotional-value content of state communication. In today's digital environment, where international audiences form impressions of a state through fragments of information, symbols, images, and stories, not only the format but also the meaning conveyed becomes crucial. Therefore, a state's ability to construct a coherent and compelling narrative about itself comes to the forefront.

In this context, the national narrative model holds key importance for analyzing state branding in the digital age. At its core is the idea that a national brand is not a fixed image or a set of visual symbols, but rather a dynamic narrative composed of stories, values, archetypes, and cultural codes. As József Szondi notes, «a state brand is not merely communication; it is, above all, a narrative about who the state is in the world and why its presence matters» [15].

A central element of this model is the concept of the state's «mission» in the global arena. A successful brand is one that embeds national identity within a broader narrative—about innovation, democracy, sustainable development, peace, or other universal values. A state that consciously constructs its narrative assumes one of several roles—hero, victim, guide, or partner—and builds its communication strategy accordingly. This approach ensures the recognizability and coherence of the brand across all expressions—from political statements to the aesthetics of social media pages.

In the digital environment, this model is particularly relevant, as it is through stories that a state engages with the emotions of its audience. Traditional campaigns are being replaced by microformats: short videos, storytelling on TikTok, flash mobs, memes, and infographics. According to the study *Digital Storytelling and State Branding in the Age of Algorithms*, over 63% of respondents consider a state's story more important than political information when deciding whether to trust it as a partner or to travel there. The narrative structure allows these fragments to be integrated into a coherent communicative logic, in which each message is part of a larger semantic framework [16].

To systematize the main characteristics of the models and to visually compare their relevance in the context of the digital environment, it is appropriate to present a comparative table. This table summarizes the key parameters of each concept—from its underlying idea to practical effectiveness—and also highlights their common features and differences (Table 1).

Table 1

Comparative Characteristics of Theoretical Models of State Branding

Model's Name	Key Idea	Strenght	Limitations	Relevance for Digital Environment
Nation Brand Hexagon (Anholt)	A state's reputation is shaped across six interconnected domains: exports, governance, culture, people, investment, and tourism	A universal, structured model suitable for analysis and comparison	Does not account for digital platforms and new media	Low (developed prior to the digital age)
Brand Architecture (Dinnie)	A country's brand is a multi-level system of interaction between national, regional, and local levels	Accounts for regional specificity and enables the alignment of multiple sub-brands	Requires a high level of institutional coordination	Medium (adapted to the digital context)
Adaptive-Institutional Model (Manor, Pamment)	The state as a digital communication organization: strategic integration and adaptability in the digital space	Suitable for crises, information attacks, and a dynamic media landscape	High demands for digital competence and resources	High (specialized for digital strategies)
National Narrative Model (Szondi)	Branding as a coherent narrative: constructing a meaningful story that resonates with a global audience	Provides conceptual depth; engages with values, storytelling, and trust	Vulnerable to manipulation; dependent on the quality of messaging	High (focused on communication in digital media)

Source: compiled by the authors

Thus, branding models serve not only as theoretical tools for analysis but also as a practical foundation for the development of information and communication campaigns aimed at strengthening a state's international reputation, increasing its recognizability, and creating a sustainable positive image. These efforts take into account the relevant factors that ensure the success of state branding in the global digital environment.

Understanding these factors is critically important both for the development of communication strategies and for evaluating their effectiveness in a dynamic, fragmented information space. Considering such elements as trust, value consistency, emotional engagement, visual identity, and technological adaptability enables a state not only to remain visible but also to become an influential symbolic actor in international relations (Figure 1).

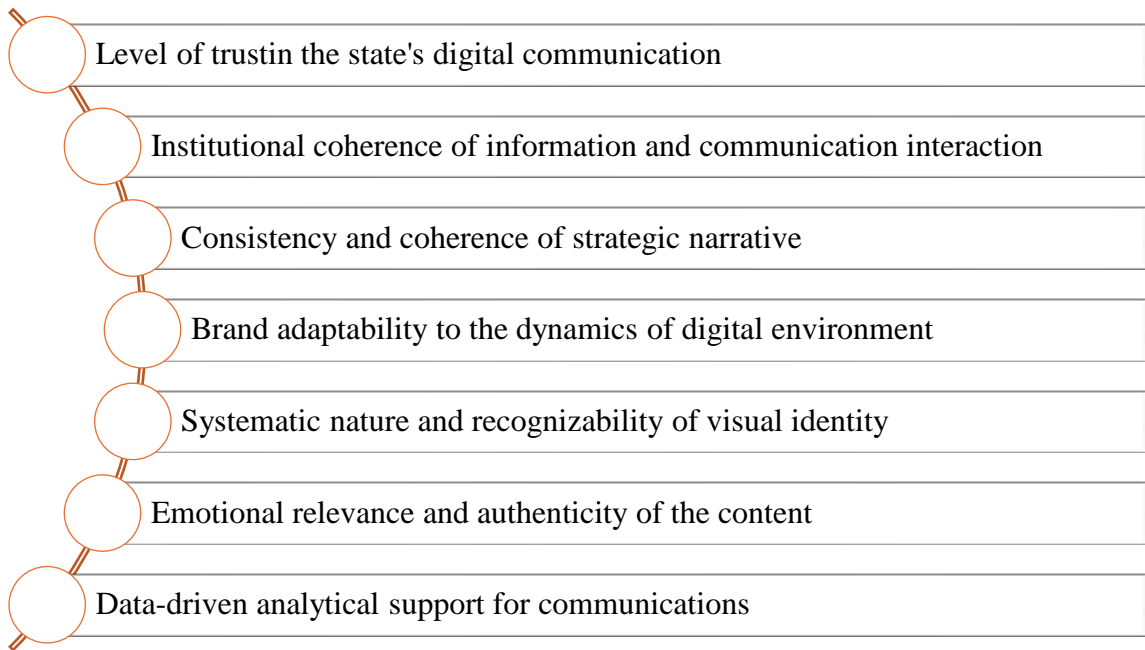


Figure 1. Key Factors of Effective Digital State Branding
Source: developed by the authors

The practical implementation of these principles demonstrates high effectiveness on a global scale. For instance, countries such as South Korea strategically combine emotionally oriented content, engagement with opinion leaders, and digital analytics in their campaigns to build a brand of an innovative, open, and culturally rich nation. This approach confirms that it is the balanced integration and understanding of key factors that enables states not only to compete for attention but also to foster lasting trust in the global digital environment.

The conditions of the global digital environment have significantly transformed not only the approaches to building a state's brand but also complicated the mechanisms for its evaluation. In contrast to traditional notions of image as something abstract or immeasurable, contemporary branding practices increasingly rely on both quantitative and qualitative indicators that allow for an objective assessment of recognizability, emotional impact, trust, and value alignment with international audiences.

Among the leading methods for assessing the reputational appeal of states in the international arena, the Anholt–GfK Nation Brands Index (NBI) plays a key role. It measures how countries are perceived by international audiences across six strategic dimensions, which fully correspond to the so-called “Anholt Hexagon”: governance, exports, culture, people, tourism, and investment & immigration [4].

In the context of the digital environment, where state branding is a continuously evolving process shaped by technology, new media, and the behavioral patterns of online audiences, there emerges a need for more flexible and integrated approaches to measuring soft power.

In this regard, the *Soft Power 30* index has gained significant traction, encompassing six core dimensions of soft power: governance, culture, global engagement, education, digital technologies, and enterprise. Its methodology combines open statistical data, analysis of a country's digital footprint on the internet, and surveys of international respondents and experts. The “Digital” dimension is particularly relevant in the context of state branding in the digital environment: it includes online presence, social media activity, the effectiveness of digital diplomacy, and the state's capacity to communicate within the rapidly shifting global information flow.

According to the latest *Soft Power 30* report, leading positions are held by countries that successfully combine

cultural potential, value-based appeal, and advanced digital communication. The United Kingdom, France, and Canada consistently demonstrate strong performance not only due to their prominent cultural institutions and educational programs but also as a result of strategically developed digital platforms and communication campaigns [7].

While the *Soft Power 30* index is undoubtedly an important milestone in the development of soft power measurement practices, its limited geographical scope and relatively static methodology leave room for further improvement of the analytical toolkit. In response to the growing demand for more global, quantitatively oriented, and digitally adapted models for evaluating state branding, Brand Finance has developed the *Global Soft Power Index*—currently one of the most comprehensive and influential tools in this field.

Special attention within the index structure is given to the digital dimension of branding, particularly a state's capacity for effective presence in the global online environment. Indicators such as the level of digital diplomacy, social media activity, effectiveness of crisis communication, and trust in information from official digital channels are taken into account. This approach enables the identification of links between a state's reputation and its communication strategies within the digital ecosystem, which is especially crucial amid information threats and the competition for international attention.

According to the results of the *Global Soft Power Index 2023*, the leading countries in terms of digital potential include the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and France. All of these states demonstrate digital communication strategies that are integrated with cultural diplomacy, economic openness, and international cooperation. In turn, countries that invest in digital platforms, online branding, and transparency generally receive higher reputation scores among international audiences [11].

To systematize the key characteristics of the main indices used to measure state branding, it is appropriate to compare them across several parameters—including methodology, scope, focus areas, and institutional affiliation. This comparison reveals the evolution of approaches to assessing soft power and international reputation, and helps to understand how these indices complement one another in analytical terms. The comparative table below summarizes the main features of the three leading indices in the field of state branding (Table 2).

Table 2

Comparative Characteristics of Key State Branding Indices

Index Name	Developer	Number of Countries	Research Methods	Main Categories	Key Feature
Anholt–GfK Nation Brands Index	Simon Anholt / GfK	50+	Consumer surveys in 20 countries	Exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, immigration	The first model for assessing state reputation
Soft Power 30	Portland Communications	30	Surveys + open data	Digital technology, governance, culture, global engagement	Focus on soft power and digital diplomacy
Global Soft Power Index	Brand Finance	120+	Surveys (100 000+) + expert assessment	8 categories: reputation, government, business, culture, education, media, values, sustainable development	The most comprehensive in terms of country coverage and digital dimension

Source: compiled by the authors based on: [4; 7; 11]

In today's conditions of algorithmically managed informational visibility and the rapid pace of digital cycles, it is the combination of global rankings and digital analytics that establishes a new level of methodological rigor in state branding strategies. This approach not only enables the tracking of a country's reputational capital but also facilitates its active management through adaptive, multi-platform communication. As a result, the system for measuring a state's brand increasingly takes the form of a multi-level digital ecosystem, within which three key components interact: global institutional indices (which provide strategic benchmarks and allow for comparative assessment), real-time analytical platforms (which enable continuous monitoring), and the active participation of the global audience (which generates reputational feedback and amplifies or diminishes the state's image messaging).

For this system to be effective, states must understand

each level of interaction: how international perception is shaped within index frameworks, which narratives dominate the digital space, and how audiences respond to specific informational stimuli. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries—such as New Zealand and South Korea—significantly improved their positions in international rankings not only due to medical successes but also thanks to effective digital communication: government transparency, rapid response, and clarity of messaging on social media. This demonstrates the importance of an integrated approach to brand measurement—one that combines quantitative assessment (through indices), qualitative analysis (through digital tools), and continuous engagement with the public.

The diagram below illustrates the multi-level ecosystem of digital state brand measurement (Figure 2).

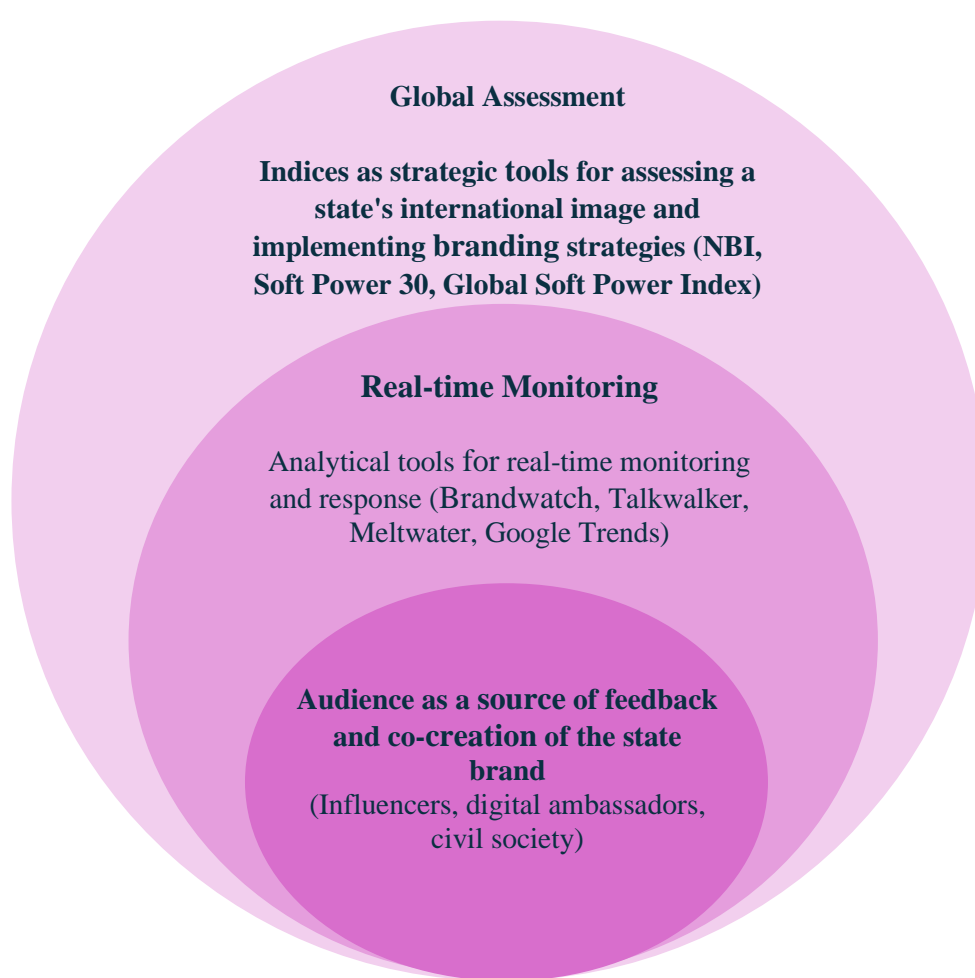


Figure 2. Ecosystem of Digital State Brand Measurement: Structure of Interaction Between Indices, Analytics, and Audience

Source: compiled by the authors

In conclusion, the methods and tools for measuring a state's brand in the digital environment serve not only a diagnostic but also a strategic function. They enable states to adapt information and communication campaigns to the conditions of a highly competitive global media landscape, respond in a timely manner to the challenges of the digital age, and enhance the effectiveness of their foreign policy presence. It is the integration of index-based analysis,

digital analytics, and audience engagement that ensures the sustainability, relevance, and competitiveness of a state's brand in the global digital environment.

Conclusions. The article presents a theoretical and methodological analysis of the phenomenon of state branding in the context of the digital transformation of the global environment. It has been established that state branding is not limited to advertising practices or image campaigns but

is a complex interdisciplinary process encompassing political identity, cultural diplomacy, economic attractiveness, and strategic communications. In this context, the discipline of international relations plays a particularly important role, as it enables the assessment of the relationship between a state's image and its foreign policy influence.

The article analyzes key theoretical models of national brand formation, including Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon, Keith Dinnie's brand architecture model, the adaptive-institutional approach of Manor and Pamment, and the national narrative model. It is revealed that the effectiveness of these models depends on a state's ability to adapt to the digital logic of the global communication space. In this context, country branding is understood not as a static structure, but as a flexible communication ecosystem that is continuously updated in response to reputational challenges and shifts in audience behavior.

The main factors of effective digital state branding have been identified—namely, trust, narrative consistency,

emotional engagement, message coherence, visual identity, analytical adaptability, and the integration of feedback. These factors determine how deeply and effectively a state is embedded within global digital communication.

Finally, the article systematizes contemporary tools for measuring state branding—from soft power indices such as the Anholt–GfK Nation Brands Index, Soft Power 30, and the Global Soft Power Index, to digital analytics platforms such as Talkwalker, Brandwatch, and Meltwater. The concept of a digital state brand measurement ecosystem is proposed, in which institutional indicators, real-time analytical platforms, and active participation of the global audience interact.

Thus, the article not only outlines the scientific and theoretical foundations of the topic but also establishes a methodological basis for further analysis of practical cases, public diplomacy tools, and the effectiveness of communication campaigns in the global digital environment, which will form the focus of the next stage of the research.

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