Reimagining Ireland: the evolution of Ireland's nation branding and the leading role of Irish artists in its ideation and enactment

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

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'If I could just slide from these covers and lie in the tickling grass ...'

Summer Yearn, from the collection *Fox Trousers* by Eithne Hand.

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Abstract

Reimagining Ireland: the evolution of Ireland's nation branding and the leading role of Irish artists in its ideation and enactment

Madeline Boughton

This thesis examines the evolution of Ireland's government-led nation branding between 2015 and 2025 and argues that nation branding can serve as a positive force for societal and global change when grounded in authenticity, culture, and shared values. While nation branding is often criticised for prioritising promotional self-interest, the research revisits Simon Anholt's original conception, which emphasises culture and meaningful actions as the foundation of national reputation and influence.

The study contends that Irish citizens and artists should be recognised as co-authors of Ireland's national identity rather than merely instruments of state promotion. In particular, state-funded artists play a crucial role in navigating the complexities of contemporary Irish national identity, engaging with difficult social and political issues, and presenting nuanced perspectives of contemporary Ireland to international audiences. Through this work, artists function as cultural intermediaries who shape how Ireland is represented and understood abroad.

Drawing on four interconnected journal articles published between 2022 and 2025, the thesis investigates Ireland's nation branding through the perspectives of policymakers, branding professionals, artists, and senior public officials. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with expert participants possessing extensive experience in nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and public policy.

The findings suggest that Ireland has emerged as a successful nation-branding case study, consistently performing strongly in international reputation rankings. However, the thesis also identifies tensions arising from the increasing dominance of nation branding within cultural diplomacy and international relations. Notably, it demonstrates how Irish artists are 'reverse instrumentalising' state-supported nation-brand values such as independence and empathy, using government-backed platforms to critique the actions of other states. This represents a new form of transnational nation branding. Ultimately, the thesis argues for a model of nation branding that empowers artists, prioritises intercultural dialogue and co-creation, and strengthens international understanding rather than serving solely as a promotional tool.

Chapter One: Introduction and context

1.1 Purpose, scope and objectives

Managing a nation's reputation and securing investment, generating influence and demonstrating impact, especially amongst what might be described as the 'dominant elites' of international trading partners and the supranational organisations of the EU and United Nations, are critical components of a nation's foreign policy and public diplomacy. At a time when increasing global tensions and conflicts are putting pressure on nation states to significantly increase investment in the hard power of militarism, the value of soft power is at risk of becoming undermined and diminished. A shift towards internalism, cultural nationalism and economic protectionism are materialising as dominant forces, visible in the growing tensions within increasingly multicultural local communities and in the hardening rhetoric of global political leaders. Now more than ever, responsibility for successfully managing a nation's economic, political and social governance goes hand in hand with a conscientious commitment to do good for others outside a nation's borders, and for the planet.

Globalisation has, paradoxically, rendered a nation's creativity, culture and geographical location of vital importance as intangible assets with the power to unlock significant competitive advantage. The instrumentalisation of a nation's identity and culture to build global reputation and attract tourists and foreign direct investment is not a new phenomenon. Culture and creativity have a unique capacity to articulate the nuances and complexities of national identity and nationhood, both for citizens and international audiences and publics. Exploring the landscape of connection between people and place lies at the heart of a nation's cultural and spiritual identity and sense of belonging, which is encapsulated and assimilated in the shaping of a nation's values. Art and culture are frequently the lens through which a nation challenges, articulates, and performs its nation brand values, rendering it a powerful tool in a government's nation branding armoury.

Ireland's global reputation and nation branding, like all nation states, is constantly evolving. It is part of a dynamic continuum which thrives on the collective and individual imagination and contributions of its citizens, while attempts to coordinate and manage it are the responsibility of the governing institutions of the nation state. This thesis examines the evolution of Ireland's new approach to its nation branding, in the decade 2015 to 2025, and the unique role of Irish artists in embodying and communicating a nation's values and distinctive national identity to domestic and international publics. The term 'role' in this context refers to the function, duty or character an individual takes on in a specific situation

or narrative, and the associated responsibilities and expectations that are conferred on them by virtue of their position. This work also explores the value of two-way symmetrical cultural relations as the foundation of meaningful cultural diplomacy and as a conduit for the articulation of an authentic nation brand. Two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) foregrounds collaboration, trust, and long-term relationship building between individuals, organisations and the social, political and economic institutions of the nation state. When applied to cultural relations policy and practice, this approach aligns with the Council of the European Union's understanding of cultural relations which places 'cooperation of local stakeholders and civil society at all levels (planning, design, implementation) on an equal footing, aiming at a bottom-up and people-to-people approach, local empowerment, participation and co-creation' (Dâmaso, 2025, p. 106). Although mutuality, mutual benefit and shared understanding are recognised as cornerstones of cultural relations best practice (Green cited in Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004), current Irish cultural relations policy is reliant on the traditional Bernay's (1955) propaganda model of one-way broadcast as the primary channel of public influence.

Three government policy documents are central to this thesis: *Global Ireland 2025*, *Culture 2025* and *Culture Ireland 2022-2025*. Each of these policies have been hugely influential in setting out the overarching mission, purpose and objectives of current government funding of the arts in Ireland. They have also informed the strategic direction of the many state and non-state agencies, arts organisations and national cultural institutions who are in receipt of, and dependent upon, state funding. In addition, the research is primarily concerned with two inter-connected whole-of-government programmes, *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland*. The former was instrumental as one of the first whole-of-government programmes with significant cross-sectoral and cross-departmental influence. The latter, *Creative Ireland*, generated significant employment opportunities for Irish artists and, by successfully navigating departmental silos, established cross-departmental initiatives and funding partnerships working with senior officials in health, education, justice, environment and local government.

Four distinct, but interconnected, published journal articles form the basis of this thesis. All were published in double blind peer-reviewed publications. Three of the journals are ranked in the top quartile including the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (Q1), *Cultural Trends* (Q1) and the *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (Q2) with the first article published in *Administration* (Q4), the journal of the Institute of Public Administration in Ireland. The PhD by publication option was chosen as the format that

best suited the project as it enabled the author to receive critical feedback on her work and to gain valuable experience of writing and publishing in an academic context. It also facilitated the dissemination of findings in a timely manner and to contribute to a wider discourse on Ireland's nation branding and cultural diplomacy at a time when three key policies were under review. The PhD by publication offered a clear pathway to progress successfully through each stage of the thesis, working to tight deadlines and delivering each bespoke completed piece of work, before moving on to the next. The doctoral process also allowed for periods of reflection between each publication, which proved invaluable in helping to sharpen the author's critical thinking and reflexivity at each point of progression through the PhD.

The success of Ireland's campaign to win a UN Security Council seat in 2021-2022 was the impetus and focus of the first article '*A new nation brand strategy: Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign'* (Boughton, 2022). This was the first high-profile initiative of the recently formed Global Ireland division and, as the research findings indicate, the campaign was a pivotal moment in determining Ireland's nation branding approach as a values-based strategy. The article traces the origin and rationale for *independence*, *empathy* and *partnership* to be confirmed as Ireland's nation brand values, drawing on interviews with those who were directly involved in the decision-making. These values are at the core of Ireland's foundational nation branding strategy, and they became an important touchpoint and guiding theme throughout this research and the subsequent articles.

In order to understand why the Irish government decided to adopt a new approach to its nation branding, it was essential to examine the specific events which predated and sparked the development of *Global Ireland 2025*. The significance of the largest ever state commemoration to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising was a defining moment for Irish nationalism and a re-evaluation of contemporary Irish national identity in the 21st century. In *This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand* (Boughton, 2023), the study examined the role of the arts and national commemorative events as a pivotal moment where the nation was asked to 'remember, reflect and re-imagine Ireland' (Ireland.ie). The article determined that the unique context of a significant commemoration of an important moment in Irish history, combined with the open source and inclusive approach of the *Ireland 2016* programme, were crucial factors in facilitating a national conversation about Ireland and Irish values. *Ireland 2016* established that there was an appetite to shake off the rhetoric of Ireland's post-colonial past and it instilled a confidence in the political class to build on this momentum, initially through *Creative Ireland* and

subsequently, *Global Ireland 2025*. Most importantly, the research findings validate and reinforce the vital importance of citizens and grassroots movements, alongside the formal institutions of the state, as essential co-creators of an authentic nation brand narrative.

It was clear from the research findings in the first two articles that the arts were central to the success of *Ireland 2016* and that the reputation and influence of Irish artists, nationally and globally, were important factors in the UN Security Council campaign. However, what was missing in the research up to this point, were the artists. What was their perception of their role in building Ireland's reputation abroad and what tensions might exist for artists, who are in receipt of state funding, to act as brand ambassadors? These questions formed the basis of the third article, *Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand* (Boughton, 2024). Drawing exclusively on interviews with Irish artists, all of whom have toured extensively abroad with the support of the state, the third article addressed one of the research sub-questions on the instrumentalisation of the arts as a tool of nation branding. This was the first piece of research which examined the topic of nation branding and cultural diplomacy from the perspective of some of those who are most closely impacted by its application. One of the surprising findings in this research was the level of awareness, and degree of complicity, amongst those interviewed, regarding the expectations of being a 'nation brand ambassador' when funded by the state to tour abroad. Furthermore, there was a clear interest, and a sense of duty and pride, from the majority of those interviewed, to be involved in the development of an authentic nation brand narrative.

The final article in the series is the culmination of the case study, drawing on the full dataset of twenty-seven research interviews, to reveal an important new theoretical concept in the form of transnational nation branding. In *Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding* (Boughton, 2025) a new paradigm of nation branding was identified which makes a genuine contribution to the discourse. This thesis contends that transnational nation branding is the practice whereby an individual or organisation reverse instrumentalises their nation's brand values to call out the actions of another nation state. The concept is observed in the actions of Irish artists who, while supported by the state, use their platform at international festivals and venues to boycott and protest the values or actions of the host nation state. The research findings also point to the weaknesses in Ireland's current policy of cultural promotion as a form of cultural relations and the potential risks to the independence of Irish arts practice as a result of an increasingly dominant nation branding agenda.

1.2 Author's perspective as a practitioner-researcher

The author came to this thesis with the knowledge and experience of over thirty years' working as a senior arts and cultural relations specialist in Ireland and abroad. As the first Irish arts officer appointed to the British Council in Ireland, and subsequently as the first Director of Showcases and Communications appointed to Culture Ireland, she was responsible for the development and implementation of strategic arts and cultural policy initiatives in key international territories. Prior to her move into international cultural relations, she worked as a senior communications professional with a range of national arts and cultural organisations. Throughout her career, she worked closely with both emerging and established Irish and international artists, which gave her a nuanced understanding of their creative practice, and the opportunity to support them in building their national and international profiles and networks.

The author's experience of nation branding and international cultural relations began with her role in the British Council, where she observed how the longest established cultural relations organisation optimised British arts and artists as a means of building the UK's reputation and influence in strategic territories of interest. This experience was the motivation and inspiration for her to undertake a Masters in Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University, which sparked her interest in research and academic study, resulting in a first-class research thesis on representations of Irishness in promoting Irish arts abroad. This first-hand witnessing of the role of the arts in building a nation's reputation, and its capacity as a powerful means to influence hearts and minds, proved immensely valuable in her subsequent role with Culture Ireland.

Appointed as the first Director of Showcases and Communications with Culture Ireland, under her direction and leadership, the government division established a series of annual nation branding showcase events at high profile globally renowned festivals and venues. Highlights included the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, artist showcases at the Edinburgh Festivals, the Great Escape and South by Southwest music festivals and the London and Frankfurt Book Fairs, amongst others. Working alongside the Irish actor Gabriel Byrne, Ireland's first cultural ambassador, she was instrumental in planning and delivering *Imagine Ireland 2011*. The year long programme set out to challenge outdated perceptions of Ireland and Irish arts by presenting some of the best of contemporary arts practice to new and existing audiences, across the United States. She was also responsible for the curation and project management of *Ceiliúradh*, a showcase concert of Irish and British artists, in the Royal Albert Hall, on the 10 April 2014, to mark the first state visit to

the UK by President Michael D. Higgins. Her skills in strategic and government communications were sharpened in her role with Culture Ireland where she was also responsible for the development and rollout of Culture Ireland's first brand identity and strategy (which is still in use today).

The author's knowledge and experience of working in senior management positions across the Irish arts and creative industries, combined with her passion for, and expertise in, international cultural relations and government communications, were key competencies in her recruitment as Director of Communications with both the *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland* whole-of-government programmes. Both initiatives required a capacity for strategic thinking, a track record of working with diverse and complex political, social and economic stakeholder groups, applied practice of working collaboratively to achieve specific outcomes and exceptional networking and inter-personal communication skills. She was part of what Anholt (2008) describes as a 'skunkworks', a small group of 12 senior public officials, special advisers and project managers who are empowered and authorised, at the highest level of government, to develop and implement strategic cross-sectoral initiatives.

A cornerstone of her role with *Ireland 2016* was the coordination of a two-year extensive national public engagement programme to motivate, engage and empower communities, citizens and organisations with the state commemoration programme. This initiative enabled her to facilitate, listen and engage in conversations with citizens and communities, through workshops, seminars and presentations, on issues related to Irish national identity and values. The growth in confidence and maturity in how Ireland was positioning itself on the global stage was crystallised in the narrative of *Ireland 2016* and formed the basis of the government's new perspective on Irish nation branding. As part of the working group which originated and established *Creative Ireland* as the legacy initiative to *Ireland 2016*, she was part of the policy team who developed the mission and purpose of, what was envisaged as, Ireland's first nation branding strategy. Working closely with senior officials, political advisers and brand strategists, the author acquired a unique perspective on how a nation branding strategy moves from envisioning to enactment. While the seed for examining the role and instrumentalisation of the arts in building a nation's reputation abroad was sown in her role with the British Council and Culture Ireland, knowledge and understanding on the topic was deepened by the close proximity to the evolution of *Global Ireland 2025,* and the actuality of how a nation branding strategy comes into being. The quality and range of networks and contacts established over a career that spans three

decades in the arts, international cultural relations and nation branding, has been of critical importance in both inspiring and enabling her to undertake this research.

Practitioner research foregrounds knowledge, expertise and insights in the subject area as a critical factor in the study. It is particularly relevant where the aim is not to simply measure in numerical data but to collate, analyse, interpret and understand a phenomenon by means of qualitative research such as interviews. Heikkinen, de Jong and Vanderlinde's (2016) notion of the practitioner as 'someone who belongs to a community of other practitioners' and seeks to find new knowledge about 'performing, doing' practices (2016, p. 5). In this instance, a process of enquiry was undertaken in cultural relations and nation branding, drawing on a network of experienced and expert informants, including senior government official and advisors, artists, historians and programme managers as a rich research resource.

The principles and assumptions which underpin practitioner-based research are, firstly, the importance of significant professional experience in the field of study which offers a diverse range of perspectives in relevant occupational cultures. Secondly, a degree of intellectual curiosity and motivation to acquire new insights into 'contemporary patterns of knowledge' (Lawrence and Murray, 2020, p. 12) ensures a sense of purpose and focus for the research. Thirdly, practitioner-based researchers are well-informed and sensitive to policy initiatives and strategies relating to the institutions and bodies relevant to their research. Fourthly, the practitioner-researcher is involved in networks with fellow professionals and practitioners which ensures they are both informed and up to date of developments within the field of research. Finally, the astute practitioner-researcher examines the policy implications of their work with reference to 'personal goals and motives, academic and professional interests and the wider socio-economic environment' (Lawrence and Murray, p. 202) within which their research is situated.

While the rationale for conducting practitioner-based research may be clear, due diligence must be given to ensure the research is undertaken with a high degree of methodological and analytical rigour in its planning and delivery. The closeness of the author to the topic combined with any pre-existing professional relationships with the interview subjects requires a heightened sense of awareness and reflexivity, particularly when analysing and interpreting the research data. The practitioner-researcher must keep the purpose of the research in the forefront of their mind throughout the period of the inquiry. It is important to be aware of the deceptive perception of 'prior experience' as a means of determining the topics and issues to be analysed and discussed. Awareness of personal beliefs, bias and

attitudes which might influence or affect the research should also be examined to ensure academic integrity (Lawrence and Murray, 2020). Hence, the principle of reflexivity was a critical factor in this authors' approach to the research, which values a critical understanding of how knowledge is generated and the power dynamics which are inherent in its structures and processes.

In her discussion of the challenges of being an insider-outsider, Le Gallais (2008) recommends writing a brief autobiography which illustrates the researcher's awareness of how past experiences are relevant to, and influence, their research. In conducting this research, a heightened sensitivity to enacting boundary mechanisms was required, such as retaining a clear focus on the research questions throughout the interviews, as a means of retaining 'clear-sightedness' throughout the research process. In recognising her insider-outsider status, the author was cognisant of what Le Gallais (2008) identified as the strengths and weaknesses of this position including: potential for gaining in-depth insights while also risking over-familiarity and researcher bias; an immediate rapport with the research subject and ability to understand sectoral complexities, but with the caveat of 'avoiding presumptions' (ibid., p. 151). Nevertheless, the author's insider-outsider status was ultimately of huge benefit in adding nuance and valuable context to the thesis, while at the same time, maintaining sight of the research purpose and objectives.

1.3. Research approach and structure

While the original impetus for this research was the author's lived experience of working in international cultural relations, Ireland's *Decade of Centenaries*[1] and, specifically, *Ireland 2016*, provided a unique context and rationale for the study of Ireland's nation branding. The strapline for *Ireland 2016* - '*this time will never come again'* – also describes the confluence of events, personnel and political leadership which facilitated and enabled three distinct, but interconnected, whole-of-government strategic initiatives, between 2015 and 2018 – namely *Ireland 2016*, *Creative Ireland* and *Global Ireland 2025*. The catalyst for undertaking the research at this moment in time was determined by three pivotal factors: firstly, the occurrence of a 'threshold' moment provided by *Ireland 2016* which acted as the catalyst for a transformational shift in Ireland's strategic approach to managing its nation branding; secondly, increased government recognition and funding of Irish artists as

[1] The *Decade of Centenaries* was the official state programme which ran between 2012 and 2023 to mark a number of significant centenaries which occurred in the period, the most notable of which was the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/publications/decade-of-centenaries/

instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy; and lastly, access to a diverse range of key informants who were closely involved in the instigation, development and implementation of Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding policies in the period under review (2015 to 2025).

Non-probability purposive sampling was chosen as a means of strategic decision-making regarding why, whom and for what purpose individuals were identified and selected for interview (Palys, 2008). While the use of purposive sampling has become synonymous with qualitative research, it is critical to the integrity of the research that the general principle of selecting individuals who have the most potential to advance understanding and offer unique insights on the research topic is applied. Stakeholder sampling, which is particularly relevant in evaluation and policy analysis, was used to identify the major stakeholders who were involved in 'designing, giving, receiving, or administering' (Palys, 2008, p. 698) the programmes under review. A further criterion ensured that those selected for interview possessed specialist knowledge, experience and efficacy in decision-making within Irish cultural diplomacy and nation branding. The principal disadvantage of purposive sampling is the potential for researcher bias which could potentially affect the validity of the research conclusions (Oliver, 2006).

The author's positionality in terms of her experience and prior professional relationships with some of the interview participants required vigilance and a deliberate reflexivity when conducting the interviews and, in the analysis, and interpretation of interview data. An established credibility and positive reputation in the field of cultural relations and nation branding was an important factor in securing interviews with elite respondents as they are 'selective about interview participation, often assessing the research project's value and quality beforehand' (Niu, 2024, p. 8). While the author's prior experience and access to key informants might also be considered to position her as an 'elite', this was countered by awareness and observance of her role, in this context, as an early career researcher and academic. Securing access to policymaker elites was critical for this research and, as Cairney, Williams and Head (2025) assert, the researcher's 'insider' status in the policy area enables trust and reassurance of a nuanced understanding of what was being discussed. According to Ibrahim and Edgley (2015, p. 1671), reflexivity is 'a self-awareness practice achieved by directing an analytical gaze into the self in an attempt to understand the dynamics between the researcher and the researched'. The practice of reflexivity in a way that is meaningful requires the researcher to be attentive to the power dynamics, pre-existing relationships and for researcher subjectivity to exert undue influence, either deliberately or unintentionally, over the research process. In order to

mitigate against this potential for bias, the researcher paid close attention to the question guide to maintain consistency and focus throughout the interviews, while also taking care to allow a balance between achieving the research objectives and facilitating a comfortable narrative flow. Repeated listening to recordings of the interviews over time, combined with a close study of printed and colour-coded transcripts also enabled the researcher to maintain a degree of objectivity throughout the research process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of twenty-seven participants, seventeen of whom were male and ten were female. Within this group, seven were senior officials working in a range of government departments including the Department of the Taoiseach, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the (then) Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. In addition, the interview group comprised five established brand strategists and senior government policy advisers, two historians, two local government officers, a journalist and commemorations specialist and ten high profile internationally renowned Irish artists. While every effort was made to include ensure a diverse range of perspectives, considering gender, age and geography (national and international, rural and urban), the absence of participants from different ethnic and racial backgrounds other than 'white Irish' is a limitation of the research. This points to the need for further research to counteract what Higgins and Donnellan (2022, p. 171) describe as 'the lack of in-depth engagement with migration and integration' in Ireland's first official cultural policy, *Culture 2025*.

As stated earlier, this study is structured around four published articles in peer-reviewed Irish and international journals, which are included here in chapters 3 to 6:

- *A new nation brand strategy? Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign*. (2022). *Administration*, 70 (3): 85-105. DOI: 10.2478/admin-2022-0020
- *This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand*. (2023). *Place Branding Public Diplomacy*, 19: 535-550. DOI: 10.1057/s41254-023-00296-4
- *Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand.* (2024). *International Journal of Cultural Policy,* 1-20. *DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2024.2409746*
- *Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding.* (2025) *Cultural Trends*, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2025.2595553

Each of the articles are reproduced in the thesis, complete with their respective reference lists, in the format required for each specific journal. A comprehensive reference list, using the DCU preferred referencing style of Harvard, is included at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 1 introduces the context and background to the research. It establishes the rationale for undertaking the study and sets out the research methodology, approach and structure. It also details the authors' expertise, knowledge and experience in the field of study, positioning her as an informed and credible practitioner-researcher. This chapter also gives an overview of nation branding literature as well as a short contextual summary of the historical research on Ireland's approach to managing its nation brand prior to the period of this study.

Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology chosen for the study, including the rationale for the research approach, sampling method, data collection, data analysis and limitations of the research design. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 present each of the articles as they were published. Each one is prefaced by an introduction which situates each article in the context of the overall thesis and sets out their contribution to answering the research questions.

Chapter 7 analyses and synthesises the findings of each of the individual published articles in a discursive chapter which reveals new insights on Ireland's approach to nation branding. It also sets out the study's contribution to new knowledge in response to the research questions which formed the basis of the thesis. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis and points to some areas for future research.

1.4. Nation branding in literature and practice

1.4.1 Origins and evolution of nation branding

Since it first emerged in the late nineties, scholars have been tracking and analysing the evolution of nation branding from multiple perspectives including marketing (Dinnie et al, 2010; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002), public relations (Wang, 2006) and, more recently, public diplomacy and soft power (Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2011; Szondi, 2008). Within marketing and brand management, considerable work has been undertaken on the role and significance of the country-of-origin and reverse country-of-origin effect on consumers perceptions when purchasing goods and services (Andéhn and L'espoir Decosta 2020; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2006;). The latter is particularly relevant to Ireland with proposals advanced for the enactment of the Occupied Territories legislation

which will see a ban on goods and services from Israeli entities based in those areas as a form of protest against their actions in Palestine (Leahy, 2025). Others have analysed nation branding as a function of international relations and political science (Browning, 2023; Christensen, 2013). Browning (2023) distinguishes 'national image', meaning the impressions and preconceptions people have of a nation based on information they have absorbed or personal experience, and the concept of 'nation brand', which requires agency and intent in creating a connection between a nation and its target audiences. Aronczyk (2020, p. 236) conceives of nation branding as 'a form of storytelling conceived primarily to satisfy the needs of the storyteller, and only secondarily (if at all) the needs of the listener.'

While research and debate on the concept and practice of nation branding persists within academic discourse, in some instances, the term 'nation' has been replaced with the more palatable and less contentious 'place branding' or 'country branding'. Despite the change in nomenclature, the objective of both nation and place branding are aligned in their shared purpose around reputation building for influence and impact to a target audience (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). Much of what passes as nation branding is in fact tourism marketing which utilises a country's tangible and intangible assets, its landscape, culture, artefacts, gastronomy, sport etc., as collateral for the promotion of a nation to a target audience. One of the earliest examples of a high-profile tourism campaign, which incorporated some of the reputational aspirations of nation branding, was *Incredible India*. Launched in 2002 and designed by Ogilvy and Mather, the government-led strategy was the centrepiece of India's National Tourism Policy, with the objective of promoting the country as a high-end tourism destination. While the initial campaign was subsequently modified and expanded to promote rural tourism (renamed the '*India Everywhere'* campaign), critics of the campaign point to its superficial and reductive commodification of culture, without context (Edwards and Ramamurthy, 2016). This 'cosmetic' approach contrasts with the evolution of a strategic 'institutional' approach, whereby an overarching nation branding strategy is embedded across all aspects of government policy (Browning, 2023). According to Anholt (2020) effective nation branding aims to authentically reflect a nation's values and demonstrates a commitment to genuine positive societal and global change by all the powerful actors of the nation state.

Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon (2006) and, more recently, Dinnie's ICON model (2016) are both conceptual frameworks designed to guide the development and implementation of a nation branding strategy. A significant difference between the two models is Anholt's emphasis on the different elements which constitute a nation (e.g. culture and tourism,

investment and immigration, governance) which should be 'put to work for the good of the country' (2006, p. 3) while Dinnie is more concerned with what constitutes best practice (e.g. inter-agency collaboration, relevance to stakeholder needs and target audiences). Anholt's Hexagon (2006) is regularly evoked by policy makers and used as a reference point in strategy documents (Browning, 2023). It also forms the basis of much case study research examining the relevance of nation branding in specific country contexts. The diversity and scope of application ranges from individual countries such as Pathak's (2014) study of strategies to rebrand Bangladesh, to Žugić and Konatar's (2017) conversion of the hexagon into a mathematical formula examining its effectiveness on 108 countries.

1.4.2 The academic turn in conceptualising nation branding

Although the term 'nation branding' was not mentioned in Anholt's original article, he has become synonymous with the concept, despite being a staunch critic of what he perceives as primarily marketing-led initiatives aimed at enhancing a nation's global reputation. In response to the visceral antagonism which the term 'nation branding' elicited, Anholt reframed the concept of managing a nation brand as a function of statecraft and the creation of a 'competitive identity' (2010). Anholt hoped this would succeed in 'turning the strategy into an agent of change within the country' (Anholt, 2010, p. 33).

Kaneva (2011) divides the literature on nation branding into three distinct approaches: *technical-economic* which is practitioner based and is marketing-driven, seeing nation branding as an opportunity to seek competitive advantage; the *political* which is "instrumentalist" in its view of public diplomacy and nation branding as tools for gaining advantage in a globalised marketplace; and *cultural* which focuses on the socio-political use of power and knowledge to articulate a collective national identity. Kaneva also proposes a 'conceptual map of nation branding research' which aims to consider existing studies in relation to 'larger theoretical frameworks about social power and national identity' (2011, p. 130). The model uses four quadrants based on a horizontal essentialist/constructivist and vertical consensus/dissensus axis. The essentialist/constructivist axis denotes the formation of national identities as either fixed or constantly evolving whereas the consensus/dissensus axis positions nation branding in relation to marketization, with dissensus-oriented research viewing it as highly problematic.

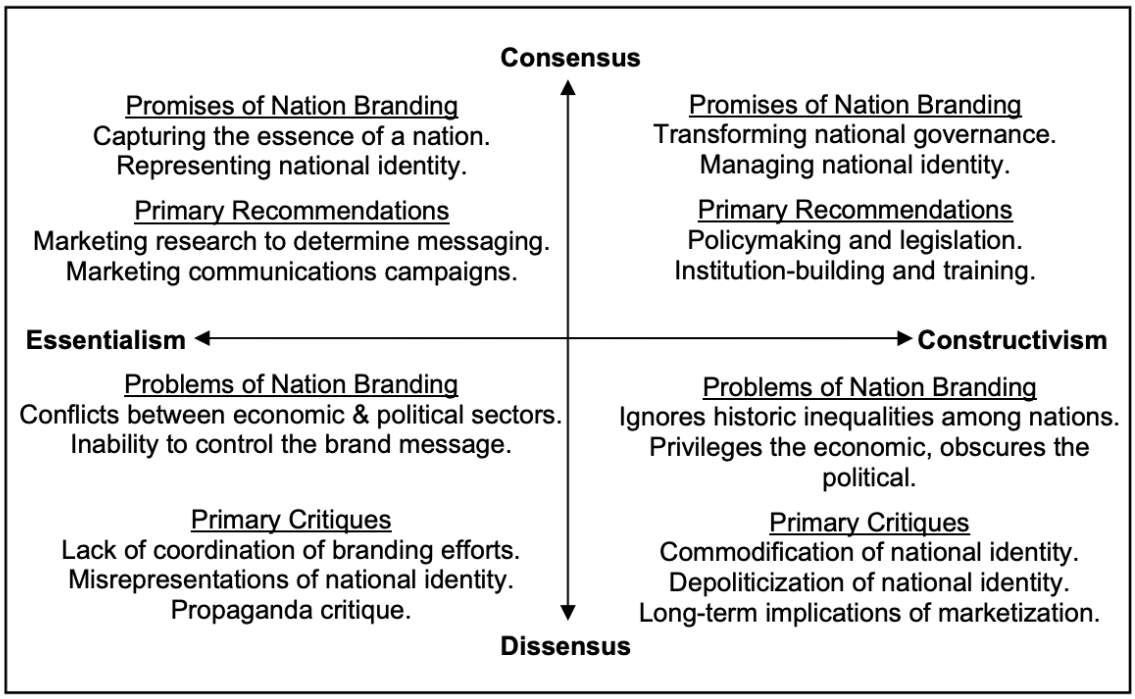


Figure 1: A conceptual map of nation branding research, Kaneva, 2011

According to Kaneva, research in the top left hand quadrant views nation branding 'as a form of persuasion ... with the main purpose of representing national identities to specific audiences' (2011, p. 130). Research with a consensus/constructivist orientation 'views nation branding as a post-political, technocratic function of policymaking, governance, and statecraft' (ibid., p. 131). Studies which fall into the dissensus/essentialist quadrant are concerned with nation branding's attempts to portray the "essence" of a nation while those in the dissensus/constructivist are focused on the commodification of national identities.

In their systematic review of two decades of nation branding research, Hao et al (2019) propose four themes which have emerged within the discourse: the relationship between country image, reputation and nation branding; the role of nation brand personality on internal and external perceptions of a nation; measurement of a nation brand; and the relationship between nation branding and integrated marketing communications. Furthermore, they observed the critical importance of a nation's art and culture in communicating issues of national identity, while also noting a gap in existing research whereby the nation itself is the focus of the study, rather than strategies for promoting specific places.

Recent research continues to track the relevance of nation branding as a tool of soft power in an increasingly unstable global environment. At a critical time where hard military power is gaining momentum, Sevin (2025, p. 8) argues for the critical importance of soft power as a vital component of nation states international relations which acknowledges 'the existence of power resources beyond military and economic ones.' Recognition of the continued importance of soft power is evident in the establishment in 2025 of the UK Soft Power Council, an advisory board to the government which aims to 'coordinate and amplify' the impact of the UK's culture and creative industries (gov.uk). For a small island nation, with historic under-investment in defence and security, Ireland has long relied on its 'ample reserves of soft power' (Todd-Tombiani, 2025, p.2) to generate influence and impact abroad, leveraging its attractiveness as a nation rich in history, heritage and culture. Coakley (2025) also notes the renewed emphasis on culture and the growing importance of the Irish diaspora in the 'slow-boil' of influence which is evident in Ireland's deployment of 'soft-er' power.

In his final article published in Monacle, Nye (cited in Wade, 2025) emphasizes that a nation's actions, at home and abroad, in protecting a free press and supporting the right to protest, alongside its commitment to human rights and multilateralism, will define its influence and reputation on the global stage. For smaller states, Cull (2023) describes the importance of developing a strategy for 'reputational security' to compensate for a lack of military hard power. This requires that nation states strive to make themselves relevant in the international community with the objective that other more powerful nations will protect them in times of crisis. In their critical study of nation branding in the Americas, Sevin, Jimenez-Martinéz and Míno (2025, p. 95) observe the continuing rise and sophistication of 'communicative-centric' government-led strategies aimed at the 'cultivation and dissemination of official versions of national identity.'

In his reflection on the future of place branding and public diplomacy, Dinnie (2024) points to some of the technological innovations which AI and the virtual worlds of the metaverse offer practitioners. He also notes the increasing professionalisation of the sector with a range of post-graduate studies offered by third level institutions and organisations such as the USC Center for Public Diplomacy and the International Place Branding Association for those interested to pursue place branding as a research discipline and industry practice.

1.4.3 The quest for the authentic in contemporary nation branding

At the core of nation branding, in principle and practice, is the importance of identifying and optimising the unique qualities of a nation which distinguish one country from another. Nations are complex, heterogenous entities (Jansen, 2008). For a nation branding strategy to be effective and sustainable, it must be authentic in how it reflects the values, challenges and ambitions of the nation state. This presents both a practical and an ideological challenge for nation branding which, if it is to be effective and credible, must be authentic.

The concept of authenticity, derived from the Greek term 'autos' meaning the particular and specific attributes of an object, has come to suggest an inherent truth, purity and absence of falseness (Fan et al, 2026). Over time scholars in various disciplines have expanded its scope to incorporate elements of anthropology (preserving cultural forms, beliefs and values), psychology (self-awareness and identity formation) and, of particular relevance to this thesis, sociology, whereby authenticity is perceived as a 'socially and culturally constructed phenomenon' (ibid., p. 202). According to Grimm et al (2025, p. 142), authenticity is not a fixed state to be achieved but rather is a 'perpetual process of becoming', a constant endeavour to shape one's identity in response to the world around us. Samuel et al (2018) describe the emergence of 'an authenticity gap', when the image or objective being pursued is disconnected from the actual perception. They note the importance of 'collaboration, unpolished realism and subdued approaches' (ibid, p. 53) as key components of authenticity, with the potential to counteract cynicism and disengagement amongst stakeholders.

Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) identify *distinctiveness* and *social connectedness* as primary determinants of authenticity, both of which are characteristic of Nordic nation branding, often cited as exemplars of best practice (Anholt 2020). Proactive and regular stakeholder engagement, and a genuine commitment to co-creation and collaboration, is essential in determining authenticity (Walter, 2014 cited in Samuel et al, 2018) and vital in terms of both credibility and legitimacy (Lyon and Montgomery, 2013 cited in Samuel et al, 2018). Academic commentary on failed nation branding initiatives, such as the UK's *Cool Brittania* and Kosovo's *Newborn* initiative in the early 2000's, point to their inauthenticity as a fundamental flaw which undermined their legitimacy. If the gap is too great between what is *envisaged* as a nation branding vision, based on the principles of co-creation and collaboration, and that which is *enacted*, meaning the coordinated implementation of that vision, the likelihood of failure is high.

1.5 Ireland and nation branding

1.5.1 Brand Ireland

> *Ireland is a brand. We must connect with that brand now and use it to give us the competitive advantage in a globalised world that is increasingly the same.*[2]

The impetus behind Ireland's nation building and the development of its global reputation can be traced to the foundation of the state as a Republic in 1922 and the new government's aspiration to 'maximise national sovereignty, while cultivating beneficial links of trade and culture between peoples' (Kiberd, 1997, p. 63). In the aftermath of two World Wars, Ireland's neutrality required careful strategic positioning and rebuilding of strained relationships in the new international order (Gibney, 2020). The distinctive role of Irish culture was amongst the first intangible assets of the new state to be optimised as a tool of public diplomacy and influence with the establishment of the Cultural Relations Committee in the Department of (then) External Affairs in the 1940's. The IDA[3] (1949) and Bord Fáilte (1952) quickly followed, with the former tasked with securing inward direct investment and the latter responsible for the promotion of Ireland as a tourism destination. Ireland was amongst the first independent nation states to pioneer nation brand campaigns. Initiatives such as the *Young Europeans* (IDA) and *Ireland of the Welcomes* (Fáilte Ireland) were devised and implemented as a form of strategic nation branding in the 1970's and 80's deploying what Patterson in his article entitled *Brand Ireland* (2009, p. 90) described as 'the 4Ps of Celtic Marketing - *Poets, Priests, Pubs* and *Poverty.'*

The establishment of Culture Ireland in 2005, as the dedicated division for the promotion of Irish arts abroad, coincided with the period of exceptional economic growth known as the Celtic Tiger.[4] A recalibration of Ireland's nation brand began to emerge, emphasising a modern, progressive and multicultural nation, which was less interested in the past and more focused on the need for international acceptance and investment (Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin, 2002). Strategic corporate tax incentives were used to attract significant levels of inward foreign direct investment, abandoning what Fanning (2016, p. 13) described as Ireland's 'post-colonial isolationism' to become one of the world's most successful open

[2] An Taoiseach Brian Cowen speaking at the announcement of Harry Clifton as Ireland Professor of Poetry 2010, July 1 2010 https://www.irishtimes.com/news/poetry-needs-to-be-protected-from-agendas-clifton-1.615889

[3] IDA Ireland is the Irish government's inward investment promotion agency.

[4] The period of economic growth between the late 1990's and mid-2000's which was likened to the East Asian 'tiger' economies (Fanning, 2016).

economies. The Irish government's utilisation of the Section 481 tax credit in the mid 1990's was instrumental in developing Ireland's nascent indigenous film industry, in a move which also aimed to 'to secure a uniquely and robustly Irish brand, which at the same time speaks to evolving identity debates for a fast changing Irish population' (Brereton, 2009, p. 28).

When the 'ship of state' (Bielenberg, 2018) floundered in 2008 before tumbling into a crippling economic crash and a subsequent four-year recession, the Irish government hosted the inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum (2009). Depicted as an urgent call to arms to Ireland's successful and influential diaspora, the gathering of business and cultural leaders were called upon to develop a long-term strategic intervention, which would help secure Ireland's future and repair its damaged international reputation and nation brand. In addition to instituting the term *Brand Ireland* into the political and economic lexicon, the inaugural Forum was a turning point for the instrumentalisation of the arts in the service of the nation state, with widespread agreement that Irish culture 'should be harnessed as a unique brand identifier, a significant employer and selling point for Ireland abroad' (Global Irish Economic Forum Report, 2009. p. 21). The clarion call for the arts to save the Irish economy was exemplified by a week-long discussion on RTE's flagship radio news programme, *Morning Ireland*, where 'the great and the good' of the arts world discussed the economic benefits for tourism and Ireland's reputation abroad, the caveat being that 'creativity must be entrepreneurial and cultural distinctiveness means market advantage' (Meade, 2012, n.p.).

The close correlation between tourism and Irish nation branding can be traced in the co-option of citizens, tourism hosts and artists as nation brand ambassadors in performative acts of national identity construction (Clancy, 2016). In their comparison of the nation branding strategies of Ireland and Greece after the 2008 financial crisis, Koqani, Kyriazi and Wolff (2016) proposed that Ireland prioritise opportunities for engagement with mass media as a vital component of its nation branding. While this article predates *Global Ireland 2025*, the analysis is based on a limited dataset (four interviewees including the marketing manager for Tourism Ireland, a university lecturer based in the UK and two Greek 'brand experts') and exclusively reflects on the success of tourism campaigns such as the *Wild Atlantic Way*. Nevertheless, the role of Irish culture as a signifier of Ireland's nation brand is continually reinforced and amplified through tourism campaigns and also in references to Irish poets, particularly Nobel prize-winner Seamus Heaney, by presidents, politicians and dignitaries. Cultural studies scholars, and many of those interviewed for this thesis, cite the phenomenal success of *Riverdance* as both a pivotal moment for *Brand Ireland* in

the US and Asia Pacific region, and a jarring misstep in reinforcing tropes and outdated stereotypes of Irishness (Ó Conchúir, 2017). While undoubtedly the global dance juggernaut that was *Riverdance* opened the international touring door for many other Irish dance artists, as well as creating employment for thousands of young Irish traditional dancers, it also advanced a version of Irish national identity which displayed 'an enriched whiteness' (Holt, 2023).

With the launch of *Global Ireland 2025* in Dublin in January 2017 by then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, swiftly followed by launches in London and Washington D.C., the latter on St. Patrick's Day, the Irish government initiated a step change in its approach to Ireland's nation branding. Applying Browning's (2023) typology of nation branding, which includes place, corporate and country-of-origin, Ireland's approach would be characterised as 'policy branding'. Nations who adopt this method prioritise global positioning and reputation building, 'and not least, constructing and performing identity' (ibid., p. 26) alongside overtly economic benefits. Overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach and located within the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Global Ireland division was established and tasked with the development and implementation of *Global Ireland 2025*. Former Director of *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland*, John Concannon was appointed Director General of the new division, reporting directly to the Secretary General of the Department. A senior officials' group was established to support the implementation of the strategy and to ensure a coordinated and unified approach in messaging and objectives. This group comprised senior representatives from state agencies and government departments with an international remit to promote Ireland and Irish exports abroad, including Culture Ireland, Department of Agriculture, Department of Education, Enterprise Ireland and Tourism Ireland. A small number of state-funded NGOs such as Concern and Goal, with established networks in key territories abroad, featured in some of the *Global Ireland 2025* campaigns such as annual St Patrick's Day videos, but were not part of the senior officials group. Notably, in addition to delivering the objectives of the strategy which includes the opening of 27 new embassies and missions between 2022 and 2025, the Global Ireland unit has overall responsibility for the Department's communications, information and digital media management and for cultural promotion and diplomacy.

By adopting an 'institutionalised' approach, *Global Ireland 2025* represents a systematic reorientation of Irish government policy, with the aim of achieving a coordinated and coherent approach to enhancing its international reputation, influence and impact abroad.

Designed as a whole-of-government strategy, which Cairney (2026, p. 9) describes as 'the aspiration to achieve horizontally and vertically co-ordinated thinking', the ambition of *Global Ireland 2025* was policy integration, across a diverse stakeholder group, to achieve a unified approach to Ireland's nation branding. Notwithstanding the ambition, one of the main obstacles to successfully implementing a whole-of-government approach is the vague aspirational language and the assumption that policy objectives can be achieved through collaboration (ibid.).

Critics of the Irish policy shift in managing its reputation abroad point to the government's 'mythical' narrative of soft power (Ross, 2025) and the corporatisation of national identity evidenced in the (former) Taoiseach Leo Varadkar's casual description of his leadership role as 'Chairman and CEO of the organisation' (Crawley, 2018). With an estimated €300m investment in *Global Ireland 2025* up to the end of 2025 (unesco.org), the overarching narrative of the strategy is one that presents Ireland as a connected and connecting bridge to Europe, a small island nation 'operating at the heart of an ordered, integrated, and inter-dependent international system' (Coakley, 2024).

1.5.2 Tipping points and thresholds

Commemorate. The word itself has its roots in the joining of the word 'altogether' with 'relate'. Commemoration implies the potential therefore to be itself a form of new knowledge making.[5]

The timeframe of this thesis, the decade between 2015 and 2025, coincided with a period of significant social and political change in Ireland. While the *Decade of Centenaries* focused on commemorating critical moments in one hundred years of nation building, it coincided with a series of unprecedented events which set the tone, context and appetite for a new narrative of Ireland in the 21st century. Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote with the passing of the marriage equality referendum in May 2015. The overwhelming success of the Yes vote was the culmination and affirmation of a growing momentum which was moving away from organised religion and the power of the Catholic church and towards a more progressive and modern society: 'It's not that Ireland has changed today, but that Ireland has confirmed the change that we already knew had happened' (Panti Bliss quoted in McDonald, 2015).

[5] Andrew Clancy, Architect and Arts Council Board Member, Speech to ART2023, Dublin Castle, November 15 2023.

A year later in June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union in a move that tested the long-standing close social, political and economic ties between Ireland and Great Britain, and the tentative security and stability of the Good Friday Agreement. In May 2018, Ireland voted to legalise abortion services in its sixth referendum on the issue, which was further evidence of its transformation to a liberal majority across all social classes, regions and genders in Ireland (Reidy et al, 2021). These events, happening in quick succession, became what Kaufmann (2016) describes as a 'tipping point' in the nation's evolution as a complex system, sparking a national conversation on issues of national identity and Ireland's values as a modern Republic.

The *Decade of Centenaries* initiative offered a unique opportunity for citizens to examine what it meant to be Irish in the 21st century and the implications of that collective reflection on national sovereignty (O'Toole, 2013). An Expert Advisory Group (EAG), chaired by Dr Maurice Manning, and comprising historians, academics and researchers, was appointed by government in 2012. Recognising the potential for the centenaries to become politicised, the EAG established their independence in a formal statement issued in 2013, which prioritised a national and inclusive public consultation programme to guide and inform the development of the state programme. Regular monthly meetings between the EAG and the *Ireland 2016* programme team were instituted in the year leading up to 2016, and throughout the centenary year, where precedence was given to citizen engagement initiatives. In the ritual marking of seminal moments in the foundation of the Republic, such as the Easter Rising, the first Dáil and the War of Independence, the state is given legitimacy in its ambition to speak to, and on behalf of, its citizens. Commemoration is a form of 'alchemy' (Saito, 2010, p. 629) where citizens are primed to examine and reflect on the mythology and images of the nation, transforming personal and historical narratives into a shared collective memory. Mythical images of the nation are often formalised in civic commemoration, the primary aim of which is 'to motivate the whole of society around the idea of a nation' (Cronin, 1999, p. 27). Through large-scale public engagement programmes, *Ireland 2016* and, subsequently *Creative Ireland*, empowered citizens and diasporic communities to engage in a dialogue on Irishness and Irish identity. The 31 local authorities were of vital importance in democratising both the *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland* programmes. Through hosting town hall meetings, facilitating workshops for key stakeholder groups including local schools, community groups and arts and cultural organisations, they facilitated the contribution of ideas and enabled people to voice any concerns, particularly regarding the commemorative programme. Each authority appointed a dedicated *Ireland 2016*, and subsequently *Creative Ireland* Co-ordinator, who was responsible for developing a local programme, in consultation with local organisations and

community groups, with dedicated funding support of €130,000 for each local authority assigned from central government.

In their studies of Ireland's *Decade of Centenaries*, Connolly (2022) and Frawley (2021) investigate the role, and omission, of women in contemporary Irish history. An attempt to address this gap was initiated with Mná 100, as part of *Ireland 2016*, which aimed to 'shine a light on women's participation in political, military, professional and domestic roles' in 1916 and subsequently throughout Irish history (mná100.ie). The programme included a State Ceremonial event on International Women's Day, travelling exhibitions, academic conferences and over 70 local authority initiatives. While Nic Dháibhéid (2023) expanded on the concept of ethical commemoration in her discussion of its importance in the *Decade of Centenaries*, Ferriter (2018, p. 174) concluded that the *Ireland 2016* state commemoration was characterised by 'pride, dignity and considerable depth of research and analysis'.

The appetite for social change, which was evident in the passing of the marriage equality and abortion referenda, combined with a reaffirmation of Ireland's independence and the forging of a new relationship with the UK, appeared to set the tone for a new national narrative. *Global Ireland 2025* was the new iteration of *Brand Ireland*, a vision and nation branding strategy which was forged in the performances, debates, publications, research, state ceremonials, seminars and thousands of workshops, meetings and conversations about Ireland and Irishness which took place in Ireland and abroad over the period 2014 to 2017. The significance of this 'threshold' moment was the context and impetus it provided for the state to articulate and develop a new approach to managing Ireland's reputation and nation brand on the global stage. In adopting a values-based approach to effect impact and influence, the policy platform of *Global Ireland 2025* deployed Ireland's cultural and political capital in the service of a soft power that was 'nimble, selective, connected and respected' (Howlin 2020 cited in Coakley, 2024, p. 192).

While embedded within the project team on *Ireland 2016*, the author witnessed the intense political, social and cultural complexity involved in marking a deeply contentious and pivotal moment in Ireland's recent history. Originating in the messaging, speeches and communications relating to *Ireland 2016*, the term 'complicating the narrative' became the guiding principle in how the *Decade of Centenaries* approached each commemoration. It allowed for nuance and respect for the 'plurality of identities' (Kiberd, 1997, p. 298) which comprise a nation and became a guiding principle which informed all aspects of the *Decade of Centenaries* programme. Sensitivities surrounding contested interpretations of the past

were a further indication of the complexity of remembering violent events. This complexity stems, in part, from the relationship between the remembrance of violent events, in particular the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, and the possibility that such acts of commemoration may inadvertently reinforce or legitimise violence in the contemporary context. Nevertheless, a defining characteristic of contemporary commemorative practices is the widespread emphasis on inclusive and shared remembrance, particularly in relation to contentious historical events, alongside a greater acknowledgement of previously excluded or marginalised narratives. Parity of esteem and respect for the multiplicity of narratives on the island of Ireland became central to the objectives of both official and unofficial commemorative discourse during the lead-up to and throughout the Decade of Centenaries.

Kaufmann's foregrounding of complexity theory as a powerful lens for 'enhancing our understanding of national identity, nationalism and ethnic conflict' (2016, p. 6) is especially pertinent to the study of nation branding. It provides a valuable theoretical framework for this thesis which positions the role of commemoration as means of collective national identity construction, and a critical factor in the evolution of Ireland's nation branding. Prioritising opportunities for feedback from internal and external stakeholders, one of the two defining features of complexity theory, was a cornerstone of the government's *Ireland 2016* programme. In addition to hosting public engagement seminars, workshops, debates and town hall meetings before and throughout the centenary itself, a 'world café' style feedback forum was organised in the autumn of 2016 in Dublin Castle, with all the stakeholder groups. The outcome of these discussions led to the development of *Creative Ireland* and planted the seed for a values-based nation branding strategy, which became *Global Ireland 2025*.

What sets this research apart in the discourse is its twin focus on commemoration and culture, functioning as both the inspiration and provocation, for re-imagining and recalibrating a nation brand. Anholt (2002, p. 235) espouses the importance of a nation's culture as a means of building 'a fuller and more durable understanding of the country and its values.' He makes a passionate argument for culture as the bedrock of an effective nation brand strategy, a vital tool in the armoury of international cultural relations, providing a country with a quality of 'dignity' which is 'uniquely linked to the country itself' (ibid. p. 236). The role of the arts as the primary lens through which so many people, of all ages and backgrounds, engaged with ideas of identity and Irishness throughout *Ireland 2016* was the impetus and inspiration for the development of *Creative Ireland,* which this author perceives as the original nation branding strategy. However, as noted in *Irish arts abroad:*

the future of Irish cultural policy and nation branding (2025), the relegation of the programme to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, combined with the surgical removal of the international component to form *Global Ireland 2025*, completely undermined and cauterised the future potential of *Creative Ireland*.

1.5.3 Role of Irish artists as instruments of nation branding

'*Ireland had a national theatre before it was a nation.'* [6]

Established as part of the Arts Act 1951, the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon was founded with the remit to provide financial assistance to arts organisations, offer scholarships and funding through competitions and prizes and support the 'joint purchase of halls in rural area schemes' (artscouncil.ie). Although they were also responsible for mounting artist exhibitions, in Ireland and abroad, priority of funding was given, not to artists directly, but for 'educational purposes and indirect support such as purchasing art for its collection' (Cooke, 2011, p. 106). It took until 1973 for a shift in policy to take place when, in a letter to the Irish Times, in advance of a Fine Gael-Labour coalition, Ruairi Quinn affirmed the Labour Party commitment 'to place the artist at the heart of policy' (ibid, p. 106). This ambition, and more particularly, the use of language which aimed to place art and creativity at the centre of public policy, was to re-emerge in the vision and rhetoric of *Creative Ireland* when it was launched over forty years later in 2017.

The Arts Act 1951, which was revised in 1973 and again in 2003, updated the definition of what constitutes 'the arts' to reflect the shift in understanding of creative and interpretative expression, both traditional and contemporary. It makes specific mention of theatre, literature, music, dance, film and visual arts, but with the addition of circus, opera and architecture. This definition, and the parameters of what it covers, forms the basis of eligibility for state funding by the government, state agencies including the Arts Council and Culture Ireland, and the national cultural institutions. The location of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland within the UK's Department of Communities, combined with significant funding from the National Lotteries, is reflected in a definition of 'the arts' which prioritises community arts and education, alongside creative industries, drama and dance, literature, visual arts and crafts, amongst others.

[6] Irish actor Stephen Rea in the documentary '*The Fire in Me'*, available at: https://www.rte.ie/player/movie/stephen-rea--the-fire-in-me-now/659359784150

Implicit within the Irish government's state support of the arts, exemplified by the establishment of the Arts Council, and subsequently, the national cultural institutions and Culture Ireland, is a recognition of the value of the arts, for citizens, and Ireland's nation building project (Rafter, 2022). Characterised by Walmsley (2023) as a 'wicked problem', the concept of cultural value in Ireland, as elsewhere in the world, is a contested term, capable of shapeshifting in focus and purpose in response to the objectives of individual stakeholders. While the subject of cultural value has prompted much debate within academic studies (Hadley, McDowell and Walmsley, 2024; Holden, 2004; O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Walmsley 2023), in practice, it is often reduced to statements on 'aesthetics and economics' (Taylor, 2015). For the Arts Council, cultural value is valorised as an economic generator of over €1.5 billion in annual spending in 2025 (artscouncil.ie). Artists, often the strongest critics of the instrumentalisation of the arts, can fall into the trap of doing just that by aligning cultural and economic value. The recent pre-budget submission of the artist-led National Campaign for the Arts trumpeted the results of an IBEC report which noted a 'significant return on investment' of state support in the arts (ncfa.ie). As observed by Hadley, McDowell and Walmsley (2024, p. 1) cultural value is often 'subjective, political and highly contextualised' and their call for a transnational debate, between practitioners, policymakers and academics, to establish agreed parameters is both timely and important.

Hadley (2021, p. 203) defines cultural policy as 'the vehicle through which the state attempts to alter and affect the cultural consumption of both individual citizens and socio-demographic groups'. In post-war Western cultural policy, the concept of the arm's length principle has been institutionalised as a core tenet, designed to safeguard artistic autonomy from government interference (Harding, 2018). Although the importance of autonomy as a core principle of state funding dates back to the 17th century through institutions such as the *Academie Francaise*, the Arts Council of Great Britain was one of the first to embed the arm's length principle as a model of best practice in state funding of the arts, with many other countries following suit including Sweden, Norway and the US. The critical importance of the arm's length principle as a central tenet of the Irish Arts Act is regularly cited by Irish artists and policy makers, including those interviewed for this thesis, as a means of protection against perceived, or actual, political interference. Yet, the term does not actually appear in the original 1951 Arts Act nor in the subsequent revisions in 1973 or 2003. It is explicitly stated in section 24 (2) that 'the (Arts) Council shall be independent in the performance of its functions' (irishstatutebook.ie). However, this relates only to funding decisions. Notably, in section 5 (3) of the Act makes provision for the Minister to direct the Arts Council to comply with specific policies of government and requires the

Council to submit its strategic plans for approval. This confers on the Minister of the day, on behalf of the government, the authority to instruct, and instrumentalise, the arts as a means of achieving government priorities, as and when required.

Despite calls for a statement and definition confirming the importance of the arm's length principle to be included in *Culture 2025* (ria.ie), it is noticeably absent in the final strategy. *Making Great Art Work 2016-2025*, the Arts Council's most recent strategy, notes the 'recalibration' of its relationship to government in the Arts Act (2003) and asserts the 'autonomy' of the Council as the expert body for funding, promoting and developing the arts in Ireland but does not make reference at any point to the concept of the arm's length principle. While this does not, in and of itself, signal an erosion of the principle, there is a noticeable shift in the rhetoric and objectives of cultural policy, evident in *Culture 2025*, towards 'increasing access to the arts and on using them for instrumental goals' (Glinkowski 2011, p. 176). Hilmand-Chartrand and McCaughy's (1989) typology of state funding of the arts proposes four possible models – architect, engineer, patron and facilitator. In this model, the attribution of roles such as 'architect' and 'engineer' reveals how the instrumentalisation of the arts by state agencies is assimilated into practice. The Arts Council's current strategy confirms this shift from the passive patronage and facilitator of arts practice to the deliberate and orchestrated 'development' of the arts in Ireland (artscouncil.ie).

While the importance of the arm's length principle was invoked by many of those interviewed for this thesis as an important boundary between art and state, in the absence of having any specific legislative or policy foundation, it is open to interpretation and can be used to serve the needs and purposes of artists, senior officials, government ministers and funders. For example, when an artist says something negative about Ireland when touring abroad, senior officials will point to the importance of the arm's length principle and artistic freedom when questioned about state funding. For some artists, the arm's length principle offers them the protection to create work without fear of censure or loss of funding and, in some instances, to be a thorn in the side of the political elite.

In reality, Irish artists have long been at the centre of Ireland's civic and public life (Duffy, cited in Graham 1997) with or without the support of the state. The 1916 Rising, the commemoration of which formed the centrepiece of the *Decade of Centenaries*, was described by Kiberd (1997, p.1) as 'a poet's rebellion' because of the number of artists who were centrally involved in its conception and enactment. The arts have always demonstrated their capacity to challenge foundational myths and to reveal buried histories

of the marginalised, the forgotten, those who are silenced or who are at odds with the narrative of a modern progressive Ireland (O'Toole, 2013). Appointed as the inaugural Cultural Ambassador for Ireland, actor Gabriel Byrne asserted the power of the arts to challenge the political establishment at home and perceptions of Irishness abroad. Speaking at the launch of *Imagine Ireland*[7] he believed that 'there has never been a better time to imagine a new Ireland. Our time is now' (Wallace, 2011). Irish writers including Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Brendan Behan and Edna O'Brien, amongst others, are often cited as critical voices who weren't afraid to call out official regimes, the institutions of the state and their 'appointed chroniclers' (Kiberd 1997, p. 646), on issues from political corruption to class inequalities and social justice.

Artist-led campaigns such as #WakingTheFeminists and The Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eight Amendment were critical factors in galvanising communities and organisations, within and outside of the arts sector, to effect legislative change. Linehan (2025) perceives contemporary Irish artists such as Sally Rooney, John Boyne, CMAT and the Mary Wallopers as capturing something of the zeitgeist on pro-Palestine and gender critical issues. Ireland's spirit of rebellion, independence and empathy is empowering Irish artists to speak out on increasing levels of social inequity and marginalisation, while many of them are still emerging from the Troubles and the legacy of the Celtic Tiger (Cafolla, 2025). Their outspoken activism, sometimes even more than their art, has catapulted them onto the global stage, while also significantly increasing their fanbase and income generation through touring and merchandise. Irish artists' activism is not just good for Ireland's nation branding; it is good for business.

The social media concept of parasocial relationships, defined as 'an enduring long-term and usually positive, one-sided intimacy' (Horton and Wohl, 1956 cited in Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen, 2016, p. 24) has become a function of everyday social media interaction (Slattery, 2025). The phenomenon has accelerated the momentum and galvanised widespread support, across communities, sectors and territorial borders, for grassroots movements such as Irish Artists for Palestine and the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eight Amendment. Significant increases in engagement on social media, alongside mainstream news coverage, were recorded when actress Olwen Fouere and film-maker Margo Harkin's turned down honorary doctorates from the University of Galway

[7] *Imagine Ireland: a year of Irish arts in America* was a strategic initiative by Culture Ireland in 2011 to promote contemporary Irish arts in the United States.
https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ambitious-display-of-creative-talent-asks-us-audiences-to-imagine-a-better-ireland-1.1276739

because of its institutional ties with Israel. Indie-bands The Gurriers and The Murder Capital have also gained significant Irish and international media, as well as sell-out concerts, following their pro-Palestine protests. As conduits of a values-based nation branding narrative, artists have the potential to co-opt a wide range of diverse publics who, by their actions and activism, are living the nation brand. Fanning (2004, p. 56) wryly observes: 'When the entire population is galvanized into becoming the mouthpiece of a country's values and qualities, then you have an advertising medium which is actually equal to the enormous task of communicating something so complex to so many.' While the vision, mission and purpose of a nation branding strategy might originate with a small group of think tank public policy makers, senior government officials and brand strategists, the equity is built in the participation, engaging and performativity of a nation's citizens and, as this thesis argues, its artists. People relate to people (Gilmore, 2002) and a nation's artists are often skilled storytellers who embody, communicate and perform a nation's values in a way that moves beyond propaganda into something more powerful, authentic and meaningful.

Instrumentalising artists and the strength and influence of their reputation abroad as a tool of nation branding is not a recent or a particularly Irish phenomenon. The Korean cultural industry has been developed for socioeconomic, cultural and political reasons since the late 1990s, with the creative industries at the forefront of the *Korean Wave*, making culture the country's fourth-largest export sector in 2025 (Lee, 2026). British creatives including singer Katherine Jenkins, OBE actor Hugh Bonneville[8] and singer/fashion designer Victoria Beckham featured in the latest iteration of the GREAT Britain nation branding campaign. Spanish clothes designer Aldolfo Dominguez, film-maker Pedro Almodovar and architect Santiago Calatrava worked closely with the Spanish government on Spain's nation branding (Gilmore, 2002). However, tensions emerge for some artists who can feel compromised by virtue of the funding support they receive from the state. Irish choreographer and dance artist O'Conchuir' (2017, p. 286), in his study of the recent history of state funding for Irish arts abroad, describes the tensions for artists when they are supported 'as a mechanism for burnishing the nation brand, intensifying an instrumentalisation of artistic activity in the service of government economic agendas.' Describing his experience of being selected as an artist to perform at the Irish Pavilion at the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, he comments: 'Although Culture Ireland was responsible for the artistic programme presented at the Irish Pavilion, the Taoiseach's office had ultimate

[8] Great Conversation: Hugh Bonneville and Gareth Neame, https://www.hughbonneville.uk/media/about-hugh/great-conversation-hugh-bonneville-gareth-neame

oversight in that high profile international setting and the tensions between the instrumentalising nation branding agendas of the latter and the curatorial autonomy of the former materialised in our experience at the Expo' (ibid.). The real politick of a nation branding strategy is that it has many fathers and cultural promotion, although vital and valid, is often seen as one component in achieving its purpose and objective.

1.6 Theoretical frameworks

A recurring criticism in the academic scholarship on nation branding is the perceived lack of a solid theoretical foundation for the research (Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis, 2022). The multidisciplinary nature of the practice, which incorporates aspects of international relations and public diplomacy, political and government communications, marketing and brand management, national identity and nation building, has undoubtedly contributed to the inclusion of a diverse range of theoretical models and concepts. Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis (2022) identify 19 theories within nation branding research, most of which appeared in only one paper, with self-congruity theory (Rojas-Méndez et al, 2015) and soft power theory (Bolin and Miazhevich, 2018) being the primary ones. Villaverde (2025) also critiques the absence of what he perceives to be a strong theoretical foundation in nation branding research, while also proposing propaganda and image-making, cultural studies, and post-colonial theory to the already expansive list of relevant theories. According to Villaverde (2025, p. 253): '[P]ublic persuasion efforts are best understood through the analytical lens of propaganda studies rather than by simply following shifts in international relations terminology and practice.'

The utilisation of narrative-based theories has also emerged in recent nation branding discourse, most notably in Arceneaux's (2024) study on the use of strategic storytelling narratives in Ireland's campaign to win the UN Security Council seat, as part of *Global Ireland 2025*. Ricoeur's narrative identity theory was also a useful reference point in this thesis and, in particular, his proposition that 'we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can (or cannot) tell ... we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves in time and place' (Ricoeur, 1992 cited in Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998). This was particularly resonant in the context of Ireland's approach to commemoration, where the principle of inclusivity and respect for the multiplicity of narratives in a form of 'ethical remembrance' (Higgins, 2020) set the tone throughout the *Decade of Centenaries*. Similarly, Halbwach's Durkheimian theory of collective memory and its relationship to commemoration informed the discussion on the significance of ritual acts of national remembrance as a catalyst for authentic nation branding.

Anderson's (2006) seminal concept of nations as 'imagined communities' is regularly referenced in relation to nation branding primarily because it recognises that ideas of nationhood and nationalism are socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of the group. Anderson believed that 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (ibid, p. 9). This sense of shared 'communion', regardless of the size of the nation, has informed much of the narrative and values-based approach to nation branding (Ociepka, 2018). One of the most significant elements of Anderson's idea was the reframing of nation formation as a form of 'cultural imagination' where it had to be formed in the mind before it became enacted in everyday life (Bolin and Ståhlberg, 2020). In their deconstruction of Anderson's concept, Bolin and Ståhlberg propose that the nation becomes 'an imagined commodity' when it is used as a basis to project primarily tourist or economic expectations of value return (ibid, p. 454).

This thesis has drawn on the principles of complexity theory as a framework to analyse, interpret and understand the state actors and processes which contributed to Ireland's new approach to its nation branding. The origins of complexity theory lie in theoretical physics and cybernetics, but it has since been adapted and applied in a range of disciplines from social sciences to global politics and international relations (Hunt, 2020). In essence, the theory is the study of how change occurs in complex systems (Devereux, 2022). Three key features which distinguish the theory include what Hunt (2020, p. 195) describes as 'the intricate interdependency' of key stakeholders, the degree of connectivity between them, and the facilitation of multiple opportunities for positive and negative feedback. Furthermore, complex adaptive systems, which are defined by their 'diverse, non-linear and multiple interacting parts' (Devereux, 2022 p. 251), allow for the possibility and potential of new emergent systems and properties. While the 'trans-disciplinary' nature of complexity theory has contributed to its growing application within international relations (Day and Hunt, 2023: Hunt, 2020), Kaufmann's (2016) article was the first to propose its relevance in the study of nations and nationalism. He asserts its potential to embrace the chaos and complexity of contemporary nations, espousing the importance of horizontal and grassroots systems of influence and 'the wisdom of crowds' to be as important as elite nodes of political, economic and social power, in the construction of national identity.

In line with Cairney, Heikkila and Wood's (2019, p. 4) proposition of policymaking as a function of complex systems, with a 'diversity of actors and interactions that collectively shape policy outcomes', this study proposes that the Irish government's system and process of recalibrating and transforming Ireland's approach to nation branding, in the decade 2015

to 2025, exhibits the core characteristics of a complex adaptive system at work. Firstly, as part of *Ireland 2016* and subsequently *Creative Ireland*, it galvanised support and involvement from multiple and diverse domestic and international stakeholders, from grassroots community groups and local authority networks to government departments, elected and senior officials and advisors, public and private sector bodies, civil society organisations and NGOs, as well as Irish embassy networks and diasporic communities. Secondly, it optimised the intricate and myriad forms of interconnectedness of the various state and non-state actors in numerous ways through partnerships, strategic collaborations and strategic initiatives. Lastly, it offered multiple channels and mechanisms for positive and negative feedback through hundreds of local meetings and workshops, public debates and talks, performances and publications. This gave rise to a new emergent outcome – a new approach to Ireland's nation branding - within the systemic environment that is the Irish government, on behalf of the nation state. This application of the principles of complexity theory corroborates Devereux's (2022) proposition of its usefulness as a lens through which to study and understand the growing phenomenon of nation branding.

1.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this PhD centres on the Ireland's recent re-evaluation and revised approach to managing its international relations and reputation abroad through the development and implementation of a new whole-of-government policy. It traces the evolution of the new strategy and examines the critical role of Irish arts and artists in building Ireland's reputation abroad and their instrumentalisation as part of current Irish cultural relations policy and practice.

The theoretical framework and concepts which underpin the four articles are drawn from existing studies on nation building (complexity theory), nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Particular attention is paid to the contribution of the key informants who were directly involved in the development of the policies and programmes which are core to the research, and to the artists who were directly impacted by their implementation.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Research objectives

This thesis sought to answer the principal question: *How has Ireland's government-led nation branding evolved in the decade 2015-2025 and what role have Irish artists played in its progression?*

The primary research question prompted an in-depth review of literature and theory on the topic of nation branding, tracing its origins, critics and advocates, while also noting its growing centrality within contemporary public and cultural diplomacy discourse. The review incorporated existing scholarly research on the roots of Irish government-led nation branding and the role of Irish artists in Ireland's nation building project. Three sub-questions emerged from the initial review, each of which served to break down the broad scope of the research into smaller, manageable components, ensuring a more comprehensive and deeper analysis in support of the primary research question. The 'research-ability' of the questions ensured that 'sufficient reliable and accessible evidence exists to answer the proposed question' (Goodman et al, 2020, p. 614). Each of the published articles addressed specific elements of the research by addressing these sub-questions:

- In what way did the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme* shape the Irish government's approach to nation branding?
- What effect has the whole-of-government *Global Ireland 2025* strategy had on Ireland's nation branding and cultural diplomacy policy?
- To what extent have Irish artists been instrumentalised in Ireland's nation branding in the period 2015 to 2025?

2.2 Research method and design

2.2.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research was chosen as the basis for this study because of its emphasis on context, experience, perspective, meaning and subjectivity (Lim, 2024). It is particularly appropriate when conducting studies which foreground individual human experiences, knowledge and insights as critical factors in analysing and understanding a particular phenomenon. Typically, sample sizes are small and purposeful (Goodman et al, 2020) with

an emphasis on previously unresearched topics, events or trends. A significant advantage of qualitative research is the opportunity it affords to focus on 'meaning and motivations which cannot be defined by numbers' (Taherdoost, 2022, p. 54). It also allows for the study of a phenomenon with limited accessible information to discover new insights, ideas and theories (ibid).

Particular attention was given to the importance of triangulation in the identification and collection of research data, ensuring the inclusion of different sources with different perspectives on the topic (Goodman et al, 2020). In addition, a mixed-methods research approach was used, combining a media analysis with semi-structured interviews, in the article *This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand* (Boughton, 2023). Media analysis is a form of content analysis which seeks to make 'replicable and valid inferences from data to their context' (Krippendorf, 1989, p. 403). The rationale for including an additional research method was to offer a third-party perspective on the perception of *Ireland 2016*, outside of those who were directly involved in its development and implementation. The search was narrowed to the period following the programme's initial launch (12 November to 30 December 2014) and its completion (1 December 2016 to 9 January 2017). These specific timeframes were selected based on the volume of media coverage generated around these critical moments. Keyword searches were conducted on Lexis Nexis using the terms '*Ireland 2016'* and/or '*Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme'*. While Deacon et al., (2007) identified issues with the use of digital media databases such as Lexis Nexis, from missing and duplicated content to inconsistent results from identical keyword searches, they advocate for its use while taking care to check for false positives or negatives.

Critics of qualitative research point to the potential for bias, a lack of rigour and transparency, and that insights are based on opinion (Goodman et al, 2020). However, Guba and Lincoln (1994 cited in Goodman et al, 2020, p. 618) propose a five-point 'trustworthiness framework' as a means of addressing questions of rigour in qualitative research. The five components are dependability, which ensures the reliability of the data over time; credibility whereby the data is recorded and analysed accurately and truthfully; conformability allows for triangulation of the data to ensure accuracy and relevance; authenticity as a cornerstone of the researcher's use of reflexivity in examining all options; and transferability in terms of how the results might be useful in other contexts. Lim (2024, p. 200) also challenges misconceptions of qualitative research as lacking in rigour, noting that the method demands 'a systematic approach, methodology, reflective practice and trustworthiness criteria' in the study of complex 'context-rich' phenomena. This flexibility

afforded by qualitative research was particularly relevant for this thesis as this method is designed to record and respond to topics and issues in real-time, revealing timely and relevant insights that can be used to inform decision-making (Lim, 2024).

The rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews as the preferred research method was based on the proven capability of this approach to acquire in-depth and nuanced information on a topic, while also allowing a degree of flexibility to pursue a relevant aspect of the discussion to elicit further insights (Ruslin et al, 2022). Semi-structured interviews are also the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is 'to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon' (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2020, p. 1360). Purposive sampling was used in the identification and selection of the research participants. According to Campbell et al (2020, p. 653), 'a relatively small and purposively selected sample may be employed with the aim of increasing the depth (as opposed to breadth) of understanding.' It is best deployed when the research question calls for specific people, with different and important views about the topic in question, need to be included in the sample size (ibid). Stratified sampling (ibid.) was used to determine the specific kinds of information and expertise required for the research and to ensure a diverse range of opinions and views were included in the final dataset. For the purposes of this study, participants were arranged into four groups: artists, brand strategists, policy makers and advisors, and senior officials.

The issue of reliability and validity of the research findings is referenced as a potential weakness of qualitative research. However, according to Kvale (2007, p. 123) validation is mitigated by the researcher's skills in ensuring that they are continually 'checking, questioning and theoretically interpreting the findings' throughout the research process. Charmaz's (2016) constructivist grounded theory foregrounds the importance of continuous critical questioning throughout the research process, from the beginning of data collection through to analysis and conclusion. While the use of qualitative research methods is used to answer 'what' and 'how' questions, the relevance of grounded theory in this instance allowed for deeper analysis by also asking the 'why' questions (ibid.). It is also particularly useful when the research practice involves the simultaneous collection, coding and interpretation of data to reveal new insights.

Lastly, the observance of an ethnographic sensibility throughout the research process facilitated what Davies (1999, cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 385) describes as the ability to 'fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research.'

Researchers using this form of approach optimise their experience and engagement within the field of social research to determine new insights and information. While some measure of personal involvement in the field is valuable in adopting an ethnographic sensibility, Herzog and Zacka (2017, p. 764) propose that 'it is the frame of mind with which the researcher approaches the material, rather than the specific research protocol, that is significant'. While the seed of this research was sown when the author finished her work with Culture Ireland in 2014, she didn't begin this research until she took up her current role in October 2019 as a PhD student and lecturer in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. Her experience over the five years, between 2014 and 2019, working as part of the senior officials' team on *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland* programmes, based in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (renamed in August 2025 as the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport), were instrumental in helping to formulate her thinking around Ireland's nation brand and were the catalyst for her pursuing her doctoral research.

2.2.2 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative research is an iterative process, requiring constant refining, reflection and adjustment. For this thesis, the semi-structured interviews, data collection and initial analysis were conducted concurrently, with a preliminary assessment of the topic area with specific reference to the Irish context, informing data collection and sample size (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2020). An interview guide (sample included in appendix vi) was sent to each participant in advance of their research interview. The guide contained a series of open-ended questions which provided a structure and focus to the conversation, but which also allowed for a degree of adaptability to cater for each individual's specific expertise and experience. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their personal experiences on the subject area, and to share their perceptions and perspectives openly and honestly, through the use of a personal probing technique (Lim, 2024). This approach resulted in a dataset of rich, detailed narratives which provided important context, depth and knowledge on the research topic (ibid).

A total of twenty-seven interviews took place over a three-year period beginning in December 2020, with the final interview taking place in October 2023. Interviews were scheduled, either in-person or online (using Zoom software), depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using a combination of software programmes (Otter.ai and Rev.com). This was followed by a close reading and manual checking of the full dataset of transcripts to check accuracy and to

ensure understanding and analysis of 'the semantic (surface, obvious, overt) as well as the latent (implicit, underlying, hidden)' contained within the interview narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 37). The first publication on Ireland's campaign to win the UN Security Council seat focused specifically on interviews with senior officials and brand strategists who were directly involved in the initiative and in setting out the vision for *Global Ireland 2025*. The second article broadened the lens to include historians, local authority *Ireland 2016* coordinators, senior public officials across the two main Departments responsible for delivering *Ireland 2016*, representatives from the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group and journalists who covered the event. The third article narrowed the focus specifically to Irish artists, across a range of disciplines, but all of whom have toured extensively internationally with the support of the state. The fourth and final article was based on the full dataset of interviews. A complete list of the interviewees, their roles and organisations are included in the appendices (appendix ii) along with a selection of excerpts from interview transcripts (appendix iv and v).

Coding is the process of 'identifying and labelling topics, similarities, and differences in the interview data' (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2020, p. 1364). The principle of inductive coding was applied whereby codes were determined by the participant quotes and responses, rather than by a pre-determined set of codes governed by a specific theoretical framework. The coding process outlined by Lim (2024) was used to code the data, beginning with open coding, where data is closely examined and compared for similarities and differences; followed by a second phase of axial coding which identified the 'central phenomenon, causal conditions, context and consequences' (ibid, p. 220) which emerge in the dataset; the final stage being selective coding which involves integrating and refining the data into coherent themes (ibid).

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was selected to assist with coding, a system which has gained popularity in recent years due to its capacity to streamline and enhance the research process (Limna, 2023). The user-friendly and comprehensive set of tools for coding offered by NVivo facilitated the systematic discovery of meaningful insights and patterns from the range of diverse sources, 'ultimately contributing to the rigor and depth of the research findings (ibid., p. 2). The degree of flexibility offered by the software was especially useful as it facilitated the reshaping and reorganising of codes at each stage of the data collection and analysis, allowing for quick adjustments and alterations to be made as and when needed (ibid). Manual coding was also used to add further rigour to the data analysis, whereby transcripts were printed and marked up with coloured pens to indicate recurring themes and phrases across different datasets. The combination of a traditional

method of coding alongside the use of NVivo is considered by scholars to add a further degree of rigor in the interpretation and analysis of the dataset (ibid). A sample of the researcher's coding system is included for reference in the appendices (appendix vi).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-point system of reflexive thematic analysis was employed as the primary means of interpreting and evaluating the interview datasets. Themes were deliberately generated, created and constructed (Braun and Clarke, 2023), informed by the researcher's positionality and insider knowledge as a practitioner-researcher. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 4), the premise of reflexive thematic analysis is that it is 'infused' with the researcher's subjectivity while engaging in a constant process of shaping and refining their research. The predominant themes occurring in the transcripts were initially identified, coding sections of text, rather than individual words, to create categories and capture the 'essence of the experience' of each participant (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2035). The aim of this first stage was to 'to identify meaningful and potentially relevant passages of text that will be analysed further in subsequent coding cycles' (ibid.,). The next phase involved reviewing, refining and naming themes, based on the patterns, similarities and disconnections which were apparent in the dataset, with extracts from the data used to substantiate each individual article's research findings. An example of the first and second phase of coding is included for reference (see figure 2).

Article	**Primary themes**	**Sub-themes**
Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand	Nation Branding	Nation brand ambassadors Artists included in nation brand narrative Coherent nation brand strategy Nation brand images of Ireland
	Perceptions of Ireland	Contradictions/tensions Distinctiveness/exceptionalism Traditional Ireland versus New Ireland
	Cultural Diplomacy	Coordinated strategy Measurement of impact Means of communicating national identity Concept of mutuality
	Instrumentalisation of the arts	Putting on the Green Jersey Soft power Political purpose Arms-length principle Impact on artists and policy
	Arts funding	Culture Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs Arts Council Tax Exemption Basic Income for the Arts
	Target audiences	Domestic/global Role of Irish diaspora

Figure 2: Primary and sub-themes generated from initial phase of NVivo coding

2.3 Conferences and conversations

As part of the research for this thesis, the author attended two international nation branding and public diplomacy conferences, three Irish government seminars on *Global Ireland* and the *Shared Island* initiatives and a place branding workshop initiative, attended by Simon Anholt, which took place in Sligo (Ireland). Each of these events generated significant new information and knowledge, as well as facilitating introductions to key informants who subsequently agreed to be interviewed for this thesis. Attendance at conferences is a formative part of a doctoral students' induction into their peer group and plays a vital role in 'socialization' as well as helping them to 'develop greater agency and independence as scholars' (Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva, 2018, p. 181). As an early-career researcher and academic, attending conferences on the subject area was of vital importance in helping to 'internalise their new role as a researcher and form a professional identity' (Hauss, 2021, p. 2). It also created 'a transnational network of contacts', through formal and informal contact over a sustained period, generating valuable 'academic network capital' (Urry 2004 cited in Storm et al, 2016, p. 4).

Awarded a grant by DCU School of Communications to attend the 2023 IPBA conference, proved invaluable in terms of building connections with peers, scholars and practitioners, as well as providing opportunities for collaboration and enhanced knowledge of the latest research and trends in nation branding discourse. It proved strategic in providing 'visibility' and gaining recognition for this research within the academic community, a key challenge for early career researchers (Hauss, 2021, p. 5). The conference enabled the author to become part of an established network of nation branding and public diplomacy scholars with different perspectives, knowledge and skills. Most importantly, it facilitated the development of a close professional relationship with Professor Kaneva, who fulfilled the important role for an early career doctoral researcher of both a role model and someone who provided vital career-related support (De Janasz et al, 2004 cited in Ansmann et al, 2014).

Subsequent conversations with Professor Kaneva led to an invitation to participate in a panel on nation branding at the International Communications Conference in June 2025 in Denver, Colorado. As noted by Ansmann et al (2014, p. 6) in their study on the career development for early career academics, 'connecting with other academics who have the skills and resources needed to successfully acquire and complete projects and lectureships, is of increasing importance'. Entitled '*Exploring the Nexus of National Cultures, Identities, and Brands in Transnational Contexts'* at the ICA Conference in Denver, Colorado, the

panel comprised a group of expert scholars in the field of nation branding including Pablo Miño, (Universidad de los Andes, Chile), César Jiménez-Martinez (London School of Economics, UK), Alina Dolea (Bournemouth University, UK), Nadia Kaneva (University of Denver, USA) and Olena Fomenko (University of Alberta, Canada). The opportunity to present new research at the ICA conference, alongside a panel of established scholars, enabled the author to hone her research skills and build her knowledge of the 'conceptual vocabulary and methodological apparatus' informing her research (Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva, 2018, p. 188). It also further developed and established her bona fides and research credentials within and expert peer network. It facilitated conversations and opportunities for collaboration and co-authorship, building a sense of community, connection and support from researchers outside of her home institution (Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva, 2018, p. 189), with increased research visibility following her attendance and participation in the conference panel (Gorodnichenko, Pham and Talavera, 2021).

2.4 Ethical considerations and publisher permissions

A detailed research ethics form was submitted and approved by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCUREC/2020/102) in June 2020. All interviews were voluntary and participants were aware that they could withdraw their consent at any time during the process. Two of the interviewees asked for sight of the quotes that would be used in the research but no changes to the interview segments were requested.

In accordance with good practice, the option of being named or pseudonymised was discussed in advance with those taking part in the research interviews (Parker 2005, cited in Kvale, 2007). With the exception of one participant who wished to be pseudonymised, all other interviewees agreed to be named and signed informed consent forms were obtained and securely filed in accordance with the requirements of the University's research ethics policies. In the context of semi-structured interviews whereby the interviewer becomes 'the instrument of interview research' (Kvale, 2007, p. 32), ethical decisions relating to issues such as bias or prior professional relationships rests largely on the integrity of the interviewer as a person (ibid).

Approval was also sought and provided by the editor / publisher of each of the four journal articles for their inclusion as part of this PhD by publication, with the completed thesis available on the DCU university research repository.

2.5 Limitations of the research

The subjective nature of qualitative research and the small-scale nature of the dataset might be considered a limitation of this study. Although the total number of interviews is small (27 in total), the depth of the insights was valued over the breadth and volume of interviews. Hence, the sample size includes the main protagonists and those who were directly responsible for the creation, development and implementation of government nation branding and cultural diplomacy policies and practice.

Despite repeated efforts and requests to several artists of colour and from different ethnic and racial backgrounds for inclusion in the research group, unfortunately this proved unsuccessful. It is a recommendation for future studies to perhaps utilise an alternative research method such as an online survey which might allow for a wider dissemination of the research questions and a more diverse group of interview participants to respond.

The representative sample of artists interviewed for the thesis work in a range of art forms which are included in the Arts Act 2003 including literature, opera, theatre, dance, film and music. Several visual artists were approached to participate in the research but either declined or didn't respond to repeated requests. Given the critical role of Irish visual artists such as Jack B. Yeats, Paul Henry and, more recently, Dorothy Cross and Clare Langan, in creating images of Ireland and Irish landscape and people which resonate with international audiences, it would have been useful to include the perspective of a visual artist within the broad range of arts practices included in the thesis.

A mixed methods research approach, which combined semi-structured interviews and a media analysis, enabled a degree of triangulation to test the research results in one publication (*This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand*, 2023). It would have been useful to incorporate other triangulation techniques and forms of data collection and analysis to provide alternative perspectives as a means of combatting potential bias.

Chapter Three: Publication One

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the first published article, which appeared in *Administration*, the journal for the Institute of Public Administration, in 2022 as part of the PhD by publication thesis.

This article examines how Ireland has used nation branding as a strategic tool to strengthen its international reputation and influence, particularly through the government initiative *Global Ireland 2025* and the successful campaign to secure a seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2021–22. The article argues that modern nation branding is no longer about tourism promotion or marketing slogans. It has evolved into a purposeful and tactical, often government-led, practice, which aims to align a country's values, diplomacy, culture and policies to build a country's reputation and influence abroad. Through analysis of academic literature and interviews with policymakers, diplomats and branding experts, the article evaluates how Ireland recalibrated its nation branding approach to project itself as an outward-looking, empathetic and influential global actor.

A major theme of the article is the relationship between national identity and nation branding. The study argues that the *Ireland 2016* was the catalyst for a national debate about Irish identity, citizenship and belonging in the 21st century. Government leaders portrayed the commemorations as a moment of collective pride and unity, and the article suggests that the programme unintentionally achieved one of the core goals of nation branding: creating a shared sense of national purpose. This became the foundation for *Global Ireland 2025*, Ireland's first whole-of-government nation branding strategy.

The article outlines the theoretical foundations of nation branding, in particular, the work of Anholt and his concept of 'competitive identity' (2007), which suggests that countries must strategically coordinate their actions, communications and values to maintain relevance in an increasingly globalised world. It also frames the growing dominance of nation branding within modern public diplomacy discourse while also introducing the work of critical scholars who argue that nation branding reduces national identity to a marketable commodity that attempts to 'spin away' political or social problems.

The Irish case study forms the core of the article. Ireland has a long history of promoting itself internationally, from tourism campaigns built around nostalgic imagery to economic

branding strategies such as ‘Brand Ireland’ and ‘Innovation Island’. However, *Global Ireland 2025* represented a more coordinated and ambitious whole-of-government approach. The article identifies several challenges facing this strategy, including the fragmented nature of Ireland’s international promotion, with many agencies competing for influence, funding and visibility. Another issue is authenticity: if branding appears disconnected from the lived experiences of citizens, it risks becoming an empty marketing exercise.

The discussion of Ireland’s UN Security Council campaign is particularly important because it serves as a practical example of nation branding in action. The campaign was positioned as a central component of *Global Ireland 2025* and was based around the values of ‘Partnership, Empathy and Independence’. The author argues that the campaign’s success demonstrated the effectiveness of a values-based branding approach and strengthened confidence in the *Global Ireland* strategy, proving that coordinated reputation management could produce tangible diplomatic results.

Ultimately, the article achieves several things. First, it offers a comprehensive overview of nation branding theory and connects it to debates about public diplomacy and national identity construction. Second, it addresses the primary research question posed in this thesis by providing a detailed case study of Ireland’s evolving nation branding strategy, in the period 2015 to 2018, showing how a whole-of-government approach to nation branding can function as a constructive political and diplomatic tool. Finally, the article argues that authentic nation branding must involve collaboration, citizen participation and genuine reflection of societal values. While *Global Ireland 2025* has achieved notable successes, especially through the UN campaign, its long-term effectiveness depends on creating a more inclusive and participatory national narrative that reflects the diversity and lived realities of contemporary Ireland.

3.2 A new nation brand strategy? Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign

Abstract

This article seeks to add to the growing body of research into government-led nation branding initiatives by examining a specific case study as the driver of a new nation brand strategy for Ireland. Drawing on interviews with senior government officials, policy advisors and brand marketing executives, the author examines the *Global Ireland 2025* initiative and Ireland's campaign to win a UN Security Council seat. The findings indicate that some important building blocks of a new nation brand strategy have been put in place, most notably around government policy, leadership and resources. But in the absence of meaningful citizen and stakeholder engagement, the author questions the authenticity of the new nation brand strategy. This article argues that without meaningful collaboration, *Global Ireland 2025* risks losing the opportunity to be more than just another promotional exercise.

Keywords: Nation branding, Ireland, public diplomacy, soft power, reputation

Introduction

The Irish state's official centenary of the Easter 1916 Rising, entitled 'Ireland 2016', was judged to have delivered an inclusive programme of events that engaged with the wider public. In assessing the centenary programme, one newspaper concluded that '2016 has provided a template for how multiple, often conflicting narratives and interpretations can be embraced in a spirit of learning, rather than the affirmation of previously held beliefs' ('Reinventing the rising', 2016). The then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny (2017) referenced how the centenary programme allowed people to talk about identity, citizenship and community in a meaningful way: 'It was a year of debate without division and argument, without rancour. We all walked a little taller as a consequence. We belonged and we were proud to belong. We told our children; This is Ireland. This is you. Us.'

The opportunity to frame a new nation brand, to reimagine the national narrative 100 years on from Easter 1916, was capitalised upon by *Ireland 2016* and articulated in the legacy initiative as an ambition to 'unify our global reputation' (creativeireland.gov.ie). In this regard, it is fair to conclude that *Ireland 2016* had unwittingly managed to achieve one of

the most difficult objectives of a nation brand strategy, namely, to 'unite a nation in a common sense of purpose and national pride' (Anholt, 2003, cited in Szondi, 2008, p. 12).

Widely credited as the architect of the concept, Anholt has described a nation brand as 'national identity made tangible, robust, communicable and above all, useful' (cited in Aronczyk, 2009, p. 294). In its simplest form, nation branding is about reputation – building, maintaining, reframing, protecting and, potentially, exploiting it as 'a deliberate capture and accumulation of reputational value' (Anholt, 2010, p.52). In the same way that an organisation's or brand's reputation would be considered an important intangible asset, a well-managed nation brand can be of enormous benefit to a country and its citizens (Newburry and Song, 2019).

Building on the momentum of *Ireland 2016*, the Irish government subsequently published a new nation brand strategy in 2018 entitled *Global Ireland 2025*. This article examines the origins of *Global Ireland 2025* as a new all-of-government strategic initiative with a specific focus on Ireland's campaign to win the UN Security Council seat. With Ireland dropping five points in the Global Soft Power Index (2021), and just about holding on to its position in the top thirty (See brandfinance.com), the campaign to win the seat appeared both pressing and challenging.

The first section examines the wider international literature on nation branding, before consideration is given to the Irish case. The evaluation of the Irish campaign to win a UN Security Council seat draws on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. A total of eleven participants, seven male and four female, were selected for one-to-one interviews through purposive sampling. Interviewees were selected based on their direct role or expertise relating to this study. They included senior government officials, civil servants, policy makers and brand consultants. Interview data was coded and analysed drawing on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, where the researcher has foregrounded the contributions of the interview participants to inform the discussion and analysis. The interview material allows for wider consideration of *Global Ireland 2025* as a nation brand strategy, and in exploring how the initiative can enhance Ireland's influence and impact abroad.

What is nation branding?

Nations under the leadership of elected or even unelected governments have long invested in building relationships of influence and creating alliances with other countries for mutual

benefit. In an increasingly globalised world, nations must develop a 'competitive identity' (Anholt, 2007) to promote their brand exports, entice foreign direct investment, attract tourists and demonstrate their influence. Viktorin et al (2020, p. 1) characterise nation branding as the 'deliberate collective effort by multiple constituencies to generate a viable representation of a geographical–political–economic–social entity'.

While nations have for centuries actively advanced their political and economic agendas, the origin of the concept of nation branding is attributed to two British brand specialists, Wally Olins and Simon Anholt. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, both were instrumental in their role as advisers to over fifty presidents, prime ministers and governments on how to develop, manage or recalibrate their nation brand.

In a comprehensive overview of over two decades of research on nation branding, Kaneva (2011) observed the range of disciplines in the literature from marketing and brand management to public relations and, more recently, public diplomacy. For the purposes of this article, the concept of nation branding draws on Anholt's (2008, p. 22) definition as 'the systematic process of aligning the actions, behaviours, investments, innovations and communications of a country around a clear strategy for achieving a strengthened competitive identity'.

It is perhaps understandable why the association of the consumer term 'brand' causes a 'visceral antagonism' (Olins, 2002) when applied to the complexity of national sovereignty, culture and identity that constitutes a nation. While the appropriation of a country's national assets for the purposes of attracting international tourists might be perceived as a form of nation branding (Clancy, 2009), attempts by governments to construct and manage a nation's image (Fan, 2010), in the same way as a breakfast cereal or a car is marketed to consumers, reinforce the perception of the practice as a neo-liberal construct (Jansen, 2008). Nonetheless, for many nation brand initiatives, the ultimate purpose is how to market your nation better than your competitor.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration appointed a Madison Avenue executive to elevate 'Brand USA' overseas. The writer Naomi Klein astutely observed that 'unlike strong brands, which are predictable and disciplined, democracy is messy and fractious, if not outright rebellious' (2002). For Klein, the task of polishing up a nation brand 'is not only futile but dangerous' (2002). In a related-vein, Kaneva (2011, p. 131) also depicts nation branding as 'an ideological project which reinterprets nationhood in relation to neo-liberalism'. A country's ability to differentiate itself and compete for

inward investment, tourists or influence, whether in Europe or the UN, requires them to function effectively in a commodified global marketplace where nation branding is a core competency.

Described in one study as the 'aggregate of stakeholders' images of a country' (Passow et al., 2005, p. 311), measuring a country's reputation and its nation brand remains an elusive science. Newburry and Song (2019), for instance, identify eight global mechanisms to measure a country's reputation on an axis of indicators, from the hard performance indices of exports and foreign direct investment to the more elusive values-based measurement of a country's contribution to the 'global good'. Fombrun's Country RepTrak™ and the AnholtGfK Nation Brand Index are two of the most established frameworks which attempt to rate a country's performance against a set of indices. Brand Finance publishes an annual report listing the top nation brands each year based on a complex matrix of statistical data and brand sentiment indicators. While Anholt's Good Country Index might appear a little less economics-focused, its measurement of 'what each country contributes to the common good of humanity, and what it takes away, relative to its size' (goodcountry.org) is rigorous, and offers a more holistic, less market-driven analysis of each country's brand strength.

The use of branding and marketing techniques has undoubtedly contributed to some of the scepticism around the practice and purpose of nation branding as a PR exercise for 'spinning away the nation's faults' (Dinnie, 2022, p. 246). Nonetheless, carefully monitored and evaluated data-led promotional strategies such as the post-Brexit 'Scotland is Open' campaign, with 25 million completed video views expressing over 90 per cent positive sentiment (Leaver, 2022), or Ireland's 'Origin Green' model, which drove targeted buyer awareness of Irish food from zero to 86 per cent in Asia (Fitzgibbon, 2022) demonstrate the very tangible impact of framing and promoting a nation brand.

While public diplomacy and nation-branding might be described as 'sisters under the skin' (Melissen, 2005, p. 19), there is still considerable tension and debate within the two fields of practice and research as to their pedigree and importance (Anholt, 2003; Kaneva, 2011; Melissen, 2005; Wu and Wang, 2019). Anholt (2010, p. 94) describes public diplomacy as a 'subset of competitive identity', a concept he developed as 'a new model for enhanced national competitiveness' (Anholt, 2007, p. 3) to counteract what he perceived as a superficial interpretation of nation branding. For a country to be successful in its efforts to build its international reputation and influence, it requires 'coordination with the full complement of national stakeholders as well as the main policy makers and all are linked

through effective brand management to a single, long-term national strategy' (Anholt, 2010, p. 99).

When asked to give their opinion on which country has the strongest nation brand, two Irish brand strategists, who were interviewed for this article, were in agreement with Anholt (2020) that the Nordic countries come out top of the list. Nation brand scholars commend the Nordics as a case study in 'best practice' for stakeholder collaboration (Pamment, 2016 cited in Zhang & Golan, 2019), while also noting their emphasis on 'green, inspired and civic values' where 'the most important difference is the brand performance of distancing from *branding itself' (*Anderson et al, 2021, p 362)*).* The strength of the Nordic supranational brand does not impinge on the success of their individual nation brand strategies, as evidenced by the inclusion of four Nordic states - Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland – in the 2021 twenty strongest nation brands, with three of them featuring in the top ten (brandfinance.com).

Melissen (2005, p. 14) makes the point that public diplomacy has evolved from skilled salespeople 'peddling information to foreigners and keeping the foreign press at bay' to creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue and engagement with a community of global citizens. Increasingly, governments also recognise the power of new media to communicate with diverse foreign publics and are operationalising social media channels in a new form of 'digital diplomacy' (Pamment, 2016 cited in Zhang and Golan, 2019, p. 203).

Nation brand strategies are often considered to be more broadcast than dialogue, something that differentiates them from the traditional public diplomacy model, which ostensibly recognises the value of two-way communication and feedback. In his influential writings on the emergence of the 'brand state', van Ham (2001) contrasts the traditional approach to international relations and geopolitics with the new approach to public diplomacy which in turn draws on the tactics and tools of corporate branding and reputation building. In the increasingly crowded global marketplace, diplomats and politicians are adopting the role of brand managers for their country while 'engaging in competitive marketing, assuring customer satisfaction, and most of all, creating brand loyalty' (van Ham, 2001, p. 6).

Ireland and nation branding

The concept of nation branding is not new for Ireland. As Clancy (2011, p. 281) observed 'the [Irish] state has carefully engaged in a sophisticated campaign of branding the country

as a tourism destination.' While nostalgic images of a 'windy, green island full of freckled, red-haired children' (van Ham, 2001, p. 2) appealed to the Irish diaspora (Henry, 2022), strategic campaigns such as the IDA Ireland's 'Young Europeans' in the 70s and 80s and Bord Fáilte's 'Brand Ireland' in the 90s positioned Ireland as one of the first countries to consciously manage its brand image (Fanning, 2006). The idea of a coordinated nation brand emerged at the inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum in 2009, where, in the wake of a deepening recession, the idea of harnessing the strength of Ireland's cultural profile and educated workforce to reposition Ireland as 'the innovation island' gathered momentum. Attendance at high profile global think-tanks and networking events such as the Davos Forum, which inspired the Irish event, formed part of Ireland's reputation rebuilding strategy.

Henry (2022, p. 81) argues that, rather than inhibiting Ireland's success, 'the adoption of sectoral branding approaches have proved fit for purpose in driving standout growth'. With annual marketing budgets of between €40-€60 million, it is no surprise that individual agencies such as Tourism Ireland are reluctant to sign up to the coordinated communications approach proposed by *Global Ireland.* Fanning (2011) advocated a hybrid approach, which retained the expertise and established networks of export agencies, but under the leadership of a senior coordinating group, strategically based in the Department of the Taoiseach or the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). This group would focus on 'internal actions designed to align strategy with substance rather than any external communications campaign' (2011, p. 29).

There are significant challenges for a relatively small country like Ireland to compete in the nation brand stakes when compared with the global 'superbrands' of the US, France and Spain, amongst others. As one interviewee observed: 'The biggest single weakness that a small country has in its brand image or in its competitive identity, is that nobody's ever heard of it, it doesn't get mentioned, it's too small, it's irrelevant' (Interview A, 19 March 2021).

Nonetheless, Ireland's high cultural profile and the strength and recall of Irish arts and culture have enabled it to 'punch above its weight' in terms of brand awareness. In his article 'Beyond the Brand', Anholt (2013, p. 2) described the Irish government's decision to introduce a generous tax exemption scheme for creative artists in the late 60s as an important symbolic act, which 'proved the state's respect for creative talent'. This illustrates the importance of strategic policy change supported by substantive action as being critical in the context of developing nation branding. In 2022, Ireland became the

first country in the world to pilot a basic income for the arts. This represented a deliberate policy shift with significant impact for Irish citizens and the arts but, despite being an objective of *Creative Ireland*, somewhat surprisingly it did not form part of a nation brand strategy and was not referenced in any way by *Global Ireland.*

The role of government is of course central to building a nation brand. As one Dublin-based brand strategist observed: 'The creation of a nation brand image is not about marketing communications. It's about what governments do' (Interview A, 19 March 2021). There are three particular challenges which face governments who choose to pursue a more interventionist approach to nation branding. The first challenge is resistance from agencies already operating in the international arena, to what they perceive as a 'top down' strategy which devalues their expertise, distinctive missions and target audiences. The second challenge is around the notion of aligning behind a 'unified narrative' and imposing a unified image. The final challenge is around authenticity. If a nation brand is to have any relevance beyond being a slick marketing campaign, governments must find a balance between crafting and managing the brand and incorporating what has been described as the 'manifold and uncontrollable contributions of stakeholders such as individual citizens' (Dinnie & Sevin, 2020, p. 137).

In an Irish context, the primary responsibility, including maintaining connections with an extensive Irish diaspora, has traditionally rested with DFA. With a network of over 160 embassies and consulates located in key territories, DFA works alongside statutory agencies, including Bord Bia, Tourism Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Culture Ireland division, all of which are located in different parent departments. One government official observed that 'one of the challenges we have in Ireland at the moment is that you have a whole load of players on the pitch who are to some extent or other promoting Ireland or promoting some concept of Ireland' (Interview B, 22 January 2021).

Interestingly, given these latter comments around the dangers of too many players not cohering effectively enough, Irish governments have recently taken a more hands-on approach to coordinating and overseeing promotional campaigns, in order to identify and deliver coherent overarching strategic objectives. In terms of Ireland's nation branding strategy, the government has adopted *Global Ireland 2025* as its official policy initiative to build and maintain Ireland's influence and impact abroad. Although *Global Ireland 2025* is a whole-of-government initiative, several departments and agencies are involved in the realisation of the overall strategy. As a senior government official confirmed 'the policy is signed off by the political system … but then the executive authority, like Ireland's

governance structure is quite distributed, these different departments and agencies and so on. And so, you need realignment there … it's a lot of work. It's now policy to do that and you say whose job is that? Within that, it's Foreign Affairs' (Interview B, 22 January 2021).

In the context of a strategy such as *Global Ireland 2025*, the tone and messaging of individual agencies and government department campaigns is developed specifically to engage their target audiences. But experience from various countries shows that multiple competing campaigns can result in a fractured and confused narrative which, while achieving short term goals, can also at times help to undermine the longer term strategic reputational work of a nation brand. But this is not the only issue. In the case of Ireland, as a government official pointed out 'it's a contested space' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). A similar point was made by a brand strategist with knowledge of recent Irish campaigns: 'it's not just the target market that's the big bugbear or obstacle. It's the fact that you have four or five different organisations all competing for funds, kudos and basically fame … nobody's prepared to give up their little patch' (Interview A, 11 December 2020).

In response to the challenge around managing the complexity of multi-stakeholder ownership, one approach is to focus on 'a narrative of inclusion, relevance and value' (Interview C, 11 December 2020). This approach speaks to the idea of having a nation brand, which functions as a vessel or framework, providing coherence and structure, but which is open enough to allow each stakeholder to find their place within it. For example, *Creative Ireland*, the legacy initiative of *Ireland 2016,* aims to facilitate, support and enable citizens' participation in creativity as a core driver of national wellbeing. This value-based public policy initiative is broad enough to encompass a diverse range of cross-sectoral partners, from the arts to companies and organisations working in tech, social justice, climate science, sustainable development, architecture and urban living and health. Although Irish creativity features strongly in *Global Ireland*, it was dropped as a value in the UN Security Council campaign, only to re-emerge in Ireland's EXPO 'putting creativity at the centre of human experience' (ireland.ie/expo). This lack of consistency in a values-based nation branding approach serves to undermine its coherence and effectiveness.

This tension also extends beyond tourism to the perception of Ireland within international relations and diplomatic circles, where the excessive familiarity and friendliness of the Irish is sometimes at odds with a track record of not always following through on commitments. This creates a challenge in the construction and promotion of a nation brand between what has been described as 'the envisaged and the enacted' (Interview C, 11 December 2020). There are also reputational issues for Ireland around its perception as a tax haven, which

has gained traction in international media and political circles, not least through criticism from influential academics such as Zucman (2017) who described Ireland's tax regime as 'theft'. While the Irish government has strongly rejected these pejorative labels, a report by the European Union Tax Observatory in September 2021 concluded that Ireland was the 'biggest tax haven in the world' (Paul, 2021).

Background to *Global Ireland 2025*

The *Global Ireland 2025* initiative was launched by the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, in 2018 as a whole-of-government strategy, which aimed to 'double Ireland's influence and impact in the world by 2025'. As Varadkar noted at the time, 'Ireland is emerging from what has been a lost decade for many of our citizens, and it is clear to me that we are emerging with a greater sense of self-confidence and ambition for what we can do as a country. That national self-confidence requires that we always be ambitious, visible and active in promoting the interests of our nation on the international stage' (Government of Ireland, 2018).

The origins of *Global Ireland* can be traced back to *Creative Ireland*, a legacy initiative of *Ireland 2016*. Located within the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, *Creative Ireland* was initially managed by the same project team who delivered *Ireland 2016*. The primary objective was to build on the momentum of the 1916 centenary initiative, with a specific component of the whole-of-government programme focusing on international audience. The first action was the establishment of Ireland.ie, an online 'shop window' modelled on platforms such as Sweden.se and Estonia.ee, including the popular 'invest, study, live and work' strapline.

The Global Ireland Division was established in DFA in 2018 under the directorship of John Concannon, a former director of marketing with Fáilte Ireland and director of both *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland*. Established to oversee the implementation of *Global Ireland 2025*, a whole-of-government structure was adopted as the operating system. It also assimilated the international agenda of *Creative Ireland*. For the first time, the Irish government put in place a unified policy and a single coordinating mechanism, to work with a diverse group of semi-state agencies and line departments in order to advance Ireland's interests abroad. While not directly responsible for individual department and agency strategies, the Global Ireland Division was tasked with establishing cohesion and agreeing shared priorities and objectives. It was also tasked with avoiding duplication and eliminating mixed messages with international audiences. Six regions were identified as

priority territories, including Europe, the Americas, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, alongside adopting eight 'thematic perspectives'. The latter incorporated priorities of existing agencies and departments under broad themes, including 'Bringing our Culture and Heritage to the Wider World' and 'Team Ireland – Supporting Tourism, Trade and Investment' (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Within government, there was a recognition of the challenges – in terms of resources and measurement – with the overall strategy embodied in *Global Ireland 2025*. Most incisively, one government official noted that the objective 'is not about doubling necessarily trade or tourism, although we'd like that to happen, but it's more our overall footprint and impact. We are doubling down on our identity as an outward-looking, engaging, international actor, a good global citizen' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

The shift in tone from overtly promotional to one of mutuality is evident in recent Global Ireland videos where traditional images of Ireland are replaced by personal stories of empathy and impact from Irish doctors, scientists, engineers and peacekeepers across the world. This approach was reinforced by a senior government official in his clarification that 'nation branding and *Global Ireland* isn't just about what we can get from everybody else … it's also about what we can give to the world' (Interview F, 22 January 2021). The notion of being judged by your actions and contribution to the needs of people and the planet, strongly connects with what Anholt (2020) characterises as 'the diplomacy of deeds' – but with his important caveat, 'it doesn't need promoting'.[9]

Much of the *Global Ireland 2025* strategy focused on outputs including increased investment in embassies and consulates, the appointment of cultural officers and the creation of Ireland Houses - specially designed flagship buildings where export agencies will be co-located, alongside exhibition and performance spaces - in key territories of interest and influence. Critically, it also put in place a new structure of cross agency collaboration under the leadership of the Department of the Taoiseach. With so many players on the international pitch, the move to frame the work of multiple agencies and

[9] *Global Ireland 2025* identified culture its first thematic priority and recognised the value in creating a 'compelling and imaginative proposition about Ireland to enhance our international reputation and increase our influence in the world' (Global Ireland, 2020). However, the explicit connection between creativity and wellbeing as a core value proposition, which emerged in *Creative Ireland*, was not explicitly carried forward into the UN Security Council Campaign. It re-emerged in Ireland's EXPO narrative, also coordinated by the Global Ireland division, which seeks 'to frame the issue of human creativity in terms of the future wellbeing of mankind' (Ireland.ie).

departments within the overarching ambition of the *Global Ireland 2025* strategy ensured 'cross-government coherence, taking (into account) the big picture, trying to make sure that the priorities in one Department's area of work are consistent and coherent with priorities in another area' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

The importance of collaboration and joined-up thinking was seen as critical to the modus operandi of the new strategy. As a senior government official noted: 'So a core piece of *Global Ireland* is to bring an integrated approach to how Ireland presents itself internationally' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). The emphasis on inter-agency collaboration was very much in keeping with Dinnie's (2016) ICON framework where he proposed a model of nation branding that is 'integrated, contextualised, organic and new'.

Critically, within the policy objectives of *Global Ireland 2025* was the development of a 'coordinated across departmental multi-agency approach to communicating Ireland internationally' (Interview B. 22 January 2021). However, despite this policy shift, Irish export agencies continue to produce individual campaigns, without any Government of Ireland brand architecture, all of which is an indication of the level of resistance to a coordinated approach. But, unlike *Creative Ireland* and *Ireland 2016*, both of which involved extensive citizen engagement programmes, the new strategy abandoned this grassroots model. Instead, a 'top-down' policy-first communications-led approach was adopted and the opportunity to invite citizens to collaborate on an authentic nation brand narrative for a twenty-first-century Ireland was lost.

The UN Security Council Campaign

The challenges faced by the UN Security Council in delivering a mandate to 'maintain international peace and security' (unitednations.org) are well documented, including the unwieldly veto system of the permanent members (Martin, 2020 cited in Pay & Postolski, 2021). For the ten non-permanent members, elected on a two-year rotation, the ability to demonstrate real impact is equally challenging. Despite these issues, however, the Security Council is still regarded as 'the most powerful body of the international community' (Pay & Postolski, 2021, p. 1). Having a seat at the UN table allows elected members to 'play an important and sometimes even crucial role in the Council's decision-making' (Pay & Postolski, 2021, p. 17). Although considered by some as 'an expensive vanity trip' (Boyd, 2017), for a small island on the edge of Europe, it nonetheless offers a unique opportunity

to influence and shape human rights policy and actions on a global scale and to flex its 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) muscles.

Three weeks after the announcement of *Global Ireland 2025*, Ireland's bid to win the seat on the UN Security Council was officially launched 'as a central element of this strategy' (Government of Ireland, 2020, p. 16). In justifying Ireland's candidature, the then Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney explained that 'we believe in a strong UN and we want to be at the centre of it, advocating for our core values' (Carswell, 2018). The timing of the 2018 campaign was also nationally significant, given the ongoing uncertainty arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU. Although originally announced in 2005, the campaign to win the UN Security Council seat began in earnest at the UN's headquarters in Manhattan in 2018 with the support of former President Mary Robinson and U2's Bono. The campaign lasted for two years - Ireland ultimately achieved the two-thirds majority required and the crucial 128 votes to win the seat (Lynch, 2020). In the words of one senior official, 'we left nothing on the pitch' (Interview F, 6 July 2021), meaning every asset and resource available to them was utilised for the successful campaign.

Ireland had served on the UN Security Council three times, most recently in 2001-02, where the campaign strategy to win the seat became the blueprint for the 2021-22 bid. Ireland's colonial past, its commitment to multilateralism and its unbroken history of peacekeeping were once more central in the messaging. Ireland was positioning itself in the language and messaging of the UN campaign as a country 'prepared to be a bridge, prepared to reach out, to bring leadership' (Irish Foreign Ministry, 2018). As in 2001-02, the tactic of forensic seeking every vote by vote, while a team of diplomats and ministers lobbied key countries, coordinated from the campaign headquarters in Iveagh House, was deployed to persuade influential countries to vote for Ireland.

While Ireland's first two terms on the UN Security Council 'hadn't produced any memorable achievement' (Gillissen, 2006, p. 32), the impact of 9/11 and the subsequent 'War on Terror' overshadowed the 2001-2 term. While its support of Palestine caused some friction within UN diplomatic circles, amidst rising tensions in the Middle East, Ireland leaned on its experience of peacebuilding and dialogue as a constructive approach to addressing conflict resolution. Despite its economic reliance on US investment, Ireland regularly opposed key US policies, including several relating to Palestine. Contrary to speculation that this damaged the brand, Ireland's consistent call for a human rights-based

approach strengthened its position and stance on a 'declared, multilateral world order' (Doyle, 2004, p. 101).

The decision to position the 2021-2 campaign within the framework of *Global Ireland* was significant and meant that, unlike previous bids, the Department of the Taoiseach had direct oversight and input into the campaign strategy and implementation 'to ensure cross-government coherence' (Interview E, 8 June 2021). It also differed from previous campaigns in its use of digital marketing, amplified by an extensive diaspora and activated through a cross-agency 'Team Ireland' approach, to communicate Ireland's brand values of 'Partnership, Empathy and Independence' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2018). One senior brand strategist stressed the importance of taking a values-based approach to building a nation brand: 'I would come at it from the point of view that if you are going to build a nation brand … is that its built on values … and there are three ideas at the heart of branding. Is it credible, is it differentiated and is it motivating to the people you are trying to connect with…' (Interview C, 11 December 2020).

The three core themes of 'Partnership, Independence and Empathy' were considered clear values that separated Ireland from Norway and Canada, the two rival countries for the seat. Among those involved in the brand strategy, there was a view that the narrative presented to voters 'had to be authentic and authenticity is the number one thing in nation branding' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). There was consensus that Ireland had a positive international profile on which to build a campaign, but that the status quo was not going to be sufficient to secure victory. As one official observed: 'You got that reputation. You've got that brand ... that gets you to the starting line, but it doesn't win you the race. There is the next strategic element of our work which is how do we persuade those who are well disposed to us that we're still worth voting for because we bring something to the table…' (Interview F, 6 July 2021).

Whereas the 2001-2 campaign focused on the African and Arab states, the 2021-2 strategy targeted the Small Island Development States, a group of fifty-eight countries, including thirty-eight UN member states. These nations face unique social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, and specific events were organised to engage with them on shared issues of concern. Each country campaign deployed similar tactics including climate change conferences (Norway and Ireland), celebrity concerts (Canada and Ireland) and symbolic visual emblems – pink socks with hearts depicting Norway's theme of Women, Peace and Security. Alternatively, Ireland opted for a reimagined tricolour shamrock with

a dove replacing the white leaf. These types of activities reinforce the view that winning a UN Security Council seat is a high-stakes game of 'elaborate affairs with slick promotional materials and plenty of wining and dining' (Murphy, 2020).

Both Ireland and Norway had indicated their respective intentions to seek a UN seat well in advance of the 2020 vote – Ireland announcing its candidacy in 2005 and Norway in 2007. Canada had lost out to Portugal in 2010, but its declaration to try again in 2018 was perceived as too late to influence the ultimate outcome. Individual national deals – and vote swapping – are commonplace but negative campaigning was ruled out by Ireland early in campaign discussions.

> But we were very clear, we didn't want to disparage the other two because they are our friends. We're not going to get involved in that. We never deviated from that. We always felt that was the best way. But when Canada said 'Canada is back' we simply said, that's great. we never went away. (Interview F, 6 July 2021)

There is always considerable interest from the media regarding the cost of these types of campaigns. In response to a Freedom of Information request, DFA (2020) confirmed the cost as 'approximately €860,000', compared to the £1.2m spent on the 2001-2 bid, and significantly less than competitors 'Norway (estimated €2.8 million) and Canada (estimated €1.5 million)'.

The reputational bounce for a country in winning the seat is apparent in the positive media coverage but, equally, losing out has the potential to be damaging to a national brand image. After the result was confirmed, *Time* magazine observed of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 'It's really the biggest embarrassment he will suffer in his prime ministership in Canada, particularly on international affairs' (Bolangaro, 2020). Whether the winning of the seat impacts public opinion is debatable. A senior public official observed that 'most (Irish) people if asked would say it is a good thing for us to be doing as a global citizen and they would like to see us there at that table and would like us to be using the voice we have there to good effect for the things that matter for Ireland' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

For the government officials who spearheaded the UN campaign, the victory was an important milestone for *Global Ireland* 2025. Losing the seat would not just have been a huge PR setback; it would have cast doubt on the new strategy, given its critics a reason to voice their reservations and very likely halted its momentum. Instead, following a very challenging and competitive campaign, a tangible and 'big, big exercise in ticking the box

around influence' (Interview B, 22 January 2021) had been achieved. Another government official summarised the outcome in these terms: 'Regardless of whether *Global Ireland* is there or not, reputation is going to remain key for Ireland abroad. And there has to be some sort of command and control rather than it drifting' (Interview F, 6 July 2021).

Conclusion

The success of the UN Security Council campaign remains a tangible achievement of *Global Ireland*'s mission to advance Ireland's values and increase influence abroad. But for a nation branding initiative to succeed, it has to move beyond a single campaign, target audience or marketing plan. The strategy must embrace the complexity of a nation and its identity, which is constantly evolving and changing. Rather than aiming at a fixed point of tourism bed nights or an increasing multinational footprint, a starting point is the transition to a narrative which is grounded in a collection of values which speak to the lived reality of a community of people who call themselves Irish, is a starting point.

Nation branding is often viewed by public officials as propaganda or 'spin' which is nothing to do with the serious work of foreign policy or geo-politics. It can also be seen as a political tool of a particular party in power and therefore susceptible to delivering short-term goals in order to be considered effective and worth the investment. *Global Ireland 2025* survived the transition from one administration to another in 2020 – and remains official government policy. Implementation, however, depends not just on leadership in government but also the willingness of key stakeholders to actively support the strategy. A 'top down' strategy which does not take into account key stakeholder objectives and target audiences risks losing momentum and becoming just another promotional campaign in an already densely populated marketplace. While the 'Team Ireland' rhetoric features in *Global Ireland 2025* documentation and stakeholders, such as the IDA and the GAA, appear in promotional videos, there is little evidence of cross-sectoral co-creation in its nation branding, a tactic which the Nordics optimised very effectively in their approach.

There also remains the challenge of the disenfranchised and marginalised voices within civil society who, for whatever reason, remain outside of 'official Ireland', and have not been offered the opportunity to have their voices heard. If the nation brand values of 'Partnership, Empathy and Independence' are to be more than empty declarations, a more nuanced and collaborative approach is needed, involving key non-governmental organisations and civil society. The ambition to include a more diverse range of voices and perspectives in *Global Ireland 2025* was signalled by one senior official who recognised

the ‘value to having a wider conversation and including wider members of the public who mightn’t fall into any of the groups that get consulted by the Departments. I think what we do internationally is very important to Irish people” (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

A truly authentic and effective nation branding strategy must be grounded in the lived experience of all its citizens, and ‘not just civil servants and paid figureheads’ (Anholt 2005, p. 123). If *Global Ireland 2025* is to have a lasting impact which unites a nation in a common sense of purpose and national pride (Anholt, 2003), it must create opportunities for meaningful collaboration and co-creation. The inclusive approach of *Ireland 2016* was proof that, not only is it possible for citizens to create and own a new national narrative, it is essential, if we are to understand and communicate what it means to be Irish today, and to reflect and embody Ireland’s aspirations for the future.

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This article draws on eleven interviews conducted by the author with government officials in the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, as well as a number of policy advisors and nation brand strategists familiar with *Ireland 2016*, *Creative Ireland* and *Global Ireland 2025*. These interviews took place in Dublin between December 2020 and July 2021.

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Chapter Four: Publication Two

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second published article, *'This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand',* which appeared in the *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* in 2023.

The article examines how Ireland's centenary commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising became more than a remembrance of a historical event; it evolved into a new model of nation branding grounded in citizen participation, collective memory, and authentic national identity. The author argues that traditional nation branding often relies on simplified marketing techniques that reduce nations to slogans, stereotypes, and economic campaigns aimed at attracting tourists, investors, and international influence. In contrast, the *Ireland 2016* programme demonstrated how commemoration can function as a participatory and democratic process through which citizens actively shape and redefine the meaning of the nation.

Drawing on Kaufmann's (2016) modelling of complexity theory in relation to nations and nationalism, the article presents nations as 'complex adaptive systems' shaped by interactions between political leaders, institutions, communities, and ordinary citizens. Positioning *Ireland 2016* as, what Kaufmann's describes as a 'tipping point' or 'threshold moment', the author argues that large-scale commemorative events such as centenaries create opportunities for nations to reconsider and reconstruct their identities. Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (2006) is also a point of departure for the article, whereby nations are socially constructed through shared stories, symbols, and rituals.

The article situates this discussion within broader theories of nation branding. Scholars such as Anholt (2002; 2007; 2010) and Dinnie (2022) are referenced to explain how governments increasingly use branding strategies to compete globally for investment, tourism, talent, and diplomatic influence. The article also draws heavily on Halbwachs' theory of collective memory (1952) and Saito's (2010) work on commemoration and memory-making which suggests that people who never directly experienced historical events can still form emotional connections to them through shared acts of remembrance. Unlike earlier commemorations that focused heavily on militarism and heroic nationalism, a central proposition in the article is that *Ireland 2016* adopted a more inclusive approach in its strategic public engagement programme which aimed to include diverse perspectives and previously marginalised voices. The article suggests that this willingness to embrace

multiple narratives strengthened rather than weakened the authenticity of the nation brand and this shift in approach is one of the article's most important achievements: it proposes that successful nation branding must emerge from participation and co-creation rather than top-down state messaging.

Another significant contribution of the article is its emphasis on authenticity. The article repeatedly argues that authenticity, a vital component of effective nation branding, cannot be achieved through public relations exercises or idealised images that ignore social problems and historical contradictions. Instead, authentic nation branding requires openness, inclusivity, and a willingness to confront difficult histories.

The article also contributes to discussions of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy by introducing the concept of the 'intermestic', which blends domestic and international audiences. *Ireland 2016* resonated strongly with the Irish diaspora and attracted international attention as an example of sensitive and inclusive commemoration. In this way, the programme functioned not only as a domestic exercise in national identity formation but also as a form of soft power that projected Ireland internationally as a confident, reflective, and modern democracy.

Ultimately, the article achieves the major objectives. First, it deals specifically with the second sub-question posed in this thesis which asks: '*In what way did the Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme shape the Irish government's approach to nation branding*?' Second, it demonstrates how commemoration can serve as a powerful mechanism for collective identity formation and national renewal. Third, it proposes a new framework for nation branding based on citizen participation, complexity, and authenticity. Rather than simplifying the complexity of a nation into a homogenous entity, the article argues that successful nation branding should embrace diversity, contradiction, and meaningful public engagement. *Ireland 2016* is therefore presented as a model of "citizen nation branding," where ordinary people become co-creators of the nation's national narrative.

4.2. This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand

Abstract

This article argues that, while state-enacted commemoration can give rise to a pre-determined narrative which aligns with political expediency, the active participation and ownership by citizens in the ritual act of commemoration facilitates an 'experiential' process of national identity formation, and a new model of nation branding. It takes inspiration from Kaufmann's conceptualisation of complexity theory and the importance of 'tipping points' and thresholds, which events such as national commemorations represent, as key to our understanding of nations. Ireland's unique method of citizen-led commemoration provided a channel through which 'outsiders', beyond the prominent elite and traditional gatekeepers, are empowered to influence, critique and embody a nation brand that is of their making. Based on interviews with key informants, from historians and brand strategists to community leaders and government officials, and a sample review of news reports, this cross-sectoral study examines the critical role of state-led, citizen-focused commemoration, as a catalyst for a new nation brand.

Keywords: Nation branding; National identity; National commemoration; Collective memory-making; Intermestic; Public diplomacy; Cultural diplomacy

Introduction

Easter Week 1916 remains a pivotal moment in Ireland's modern history, when a small group of insurrectionists rebelled against British rule and declared an Irish Republic. Although the short-lived uprising was quickly crushed by the ruling forces, the Easter Rising and the execution of its sixteen leaders, had a transformational effect on Irish nationalism. It was the spark that lit the flame of a decade of unrest, a War of Independence and Civil War which followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, and ultimately the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The legacies of 1916 and the Irish Civil War were many, including over 2,000 causalities, and a bitter rift between the remaining members of the anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army and the newly established Irish government and its British counterparts. Six counties within Northern Ireland remained under British rule which [more recently] caused the eruption of a violent sectarian conflict, 'the Troubles, until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This brought a tentative peace to a partitioned Ireland, but it also

created the challenge of 'celebrating Ireland's hard-won freedom with the need to not re-ignite the conflicts of the past' (White & Marnane, 2016, p. 30).

Although the Irish Republic was not officially ratified until 1949, the significance of the events of Easter 1916 have been marked annually in a state-led national commemorative event, a cornerstone of Ireland's nation building project. Prior to 2016, the commemoration consisted of a military parade on Dublin's O'Connell Street and official wreath-laying ceremonies, with a series of 'unofficial' events taking place around the country, organised by political or social activists.

This study examines how *Ireland 2016*, a coordinated and unprecedented national and local commemoration programme, empowered citizens to create and embrace a new national narrative of Ireland, one hundred years on from the Easter Rising and the declaration of Ireland as a Republic. By adopting a case study approach, the author examines *why* Ireland's commemoration of the 1916 Rising, a traumatic and divisive moment in its recent history, proposes a new paradigm of nation branding and *how* it might inform and contribute to future practice. Through an in-depth reflection on the state's approach to citizen-led commemoration, and its exploration of national identity and nationhood, the author examines the role of commemoration as a catalyst for the development of an authentic nation brand.

Unlike previous commemorations, *Ireland 2016* was the first ever year-long all-of-government citizen engagement programme, with seven distinct strands, each with an extensive programme of events (Ireland.ie). A budget of €48 million was allocated to *Ireland 2016*, which included €31 million towards seven cultural capital projects. The commemoration provided a unique opportunity for collective and individual acts of reflection and remembrance. It engaged citizens in a national conversation which examined issues around national identity, societal values and what it means to be a Republic in the twenty-first century, creating a new model and mechanism of nation brand construction.

This is the first cross-sectoral study which responds to Devereux's (2022) call for future research to examine nation branding through the lens of complexity theory. In recognising the unique role of commemoration and collective memory-making in the construction of national identity (Saito, 2010), the findings resonate strongly with Kaufmann's (2016) concept of nations as 'complex organisms' and reinforce the value of complicating the

(nation brand) narrative, to borrow from Shakespeare's Hamlet, to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to (the) nation.

A Nation (Brand) Once Again

While globalisation has led to increased collaboration and co-operation within and across nation states, it has also created a climate of intense competition, where countries compete with each other to distinguish themselves from the pack. The challenge of demonstrating influence, attracting foreign direct investment, tourists, international students and an increasingly mobile educated workforce, has contributed to the emergence of nation branding as a 'key strategy for a growing number of governments' (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002, p. 302).

Very often, a shared understanding of what constitutes a nation is implicit, if not assumed, within the practice of nation branding. However, it remains a deeply complex and contested concept, and one which many leading scholars, most notably Hobsbawm (2012), Anderson (2006) and Smith (2010) have written extensively. For the most part, nation brand practitioners have completely bypassed any meaningful interrogation of the concept of the nation, or the constructed identities which form the basis of our modern nation states, preferring instead to assume that the essence and spirit of a nation can be distilled, packaged and sold to an international audience (Kaneva, 2022a, b).

An even more neo-liberal interpretation of the nation state is proposed by van Ham (2001) who argues that countries have often adopted the tactics of corporate marketing and brand awareness, as part of their public diplomacy and export strategies. Halsall (2008, p. 22) goes a step further to suggest that the realpolitick of neo-liberalism, combined with the intense competition of the global marketplace, has positioned the nation state as 'a location manager', whose role is to ensure the most favourable operating conditions for business 'without political interference' (ibid). This rather reductive interpretation of nation branding aligns the practice very strongly with more instrumentalist corporate brand tactics, which advocate that even a complex organism such as a nation 'should be run like a company' (Beck, 2000 cited in Halsall 2008, p. 27).

A leading scholar in the field of nation branding, Dinnie (2022, p. 5) defines the phenomenon of nation branding as 'the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences'. Furthermore, Larsen et al. (2022) emphasise the potential for an effective

nation brand strategy to reinforce existing perceptions of a nation, but also to create new ones. In an attempt to move away from the beauty pageant corporate marketing practice of nation brand-*ing*, Anholt (2007, p. 3) devised the concept of 'competitive identity', a blend of public diplomacy and brand management, as 'a new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world.' Implementing an effective competitive identity strategy requires a combination of inspiring leadership, coordinated multi-stakeholder buy-in and ownership, and a long-term commitment to improving the quality of life of citizens, through words *and* actions.

From this growing literature, one can conclude that a core component of nation branding is, arguably, building and exploiting the distinct features, values and strengths of a country and its people. van Ham (2001, p. 3) pointedly suggests that the optimising of history, culture and geography in the service of a nation brand, is a 'benign campaign that lacks the deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity that can accompany nationalism'. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to underplay a geo-political agenda, not to mention accusations of the commodification of national identity (Kaneva, 2011), and the 'visceral antagonism' (Olins, 2002) which critics and sceptics feel towards the very concept of nation branding.

Nation branding is now a widespread practice with countries allocating significant resources to attract investment, charm tourists and build influence and impact on the world stage. One of the most potent reasons for implementing a nation brand strategy, particularly for countries that have come through a period of turbulent social and civic upheaval, is as a recuperative mechanism for collective identity construction and building social cohesion (Skinner & Kubacki, 2007). When faced with the challenge of inheriting a strong ethnocentric nationalist narrative, juxtaposed with the need to convey a modern pluralist future-facing state, both Estonia and Kosovo for example, employed nation branding consultants to reposition and reframe their national narrative for an international market. Each of these examples demonstrate a pattern in nation branding practice of eschewing traditional representations of national identity in favour of a modern, inclusive, future-focused nation image (Bengtsson, 2011). Is there a risk, therefore, of contemporary nation branding being merely 'a more palatable version of nationalism'? (Jordan, 2014, p. 283).

Nationalism, not unlike the concept of nations, is also a complex and divisive topic, which often manifests as a form of racism 'dressed up as civic nationalism' (Wanga, 2021). Billig (1995) emphasises the importance of what he describes as 'banal nationalism', where citizens routinely express their sense of national identity in small acts of everyday ritual

and symbolism. Every nation brand leans in to symbols of soft nationalism, such as a national flag or popular anthem, which arouses a sense of solidarity and national pride for citizens, and acts as a distinguishing visual competitive identity for nations aimed at an international audience. Anholt (2007, p. 16) also reiterates the significance of 'a benign nationalism amongst the populace' as the most important component of a competitive identity strategy.

Meanwhile, Kaneva (2011, p. 125) recognises such branding as an opportunity to connect 'the discourse of nation branding to constructivist ideas of nationhood'. Contrary to Bolin and Stahlberg's belief that nation branding 'does not engage with community building' (2010, p. 96), this article contends that, if done correctly, it has the enormous potential of empowering citizens to take ownership of a nation brand, thereby 'turning the strategy into an agent of change within the country' (Anholt 2010, p. 33).

It is in the remembrance and re-enactment of the mythology of a shared past, formalised through civic commemoration, that citizens are stimulated and motivated to interrogate ideas of nationhood and national identity (Cronin, 1999; Clancy, 2011). Holt (2004, p. 219) perceives the opportunity presented by a 'cultural disruption' or seismic ideological shift as a key moment to 'reinvent the myth'. Kaufmann (2016, p. 10) also notes the significance of 'threshold effects' or 'tipping points' as features of the 'complex adaptive systems' (ibid) that form the nation. It is reasonable to propose, therefore, that a national state-led citizen-focused commemorative programme of reflection, remembrance and re-imagining of what it means to be a citizen of a nation, in the twenty-first century, represents just such a moment.

Many nation brands are built on the most 'economically efficient stereotypes' (Halsall, 2008, p. 24), which panders to the notion that external publics do not want to spend time understanding the complexity of a nation's identity - 'when you haven't got time to read a book, you judge it by its cover' (Anholt, 2007, p. 1). The assimilation of corporate brand tactics by governments in the creation and implementation of nation branding has resulted in much of the criticism of campaigns such as *Cool Britannia* and Kosovo's *Young Europeans* as inauthentic spin, based on stereotypes and simplified narratives, which are outdated and inaccurate (Skinner and Kubacki, 2007). It is therefore not surprising to learn that citizens are excluded as equal co-creators of a nation brand, which is compiled from 'an ensemble of non-threatening fragments of culture, history and geography determined by committee' (Aronczyk, 2009, p. 294).

In contrast, Kaufmann (2016) recognises and values the contribution of the grassroots and local communities in national identity construction and makes the case for nations to be viewed as 'complex systems', rather than simply elite constructs. This is particularly relevant for nation branding practitioners, where the value and reward in complicating the narrative is to unlock a much more authentic and nuanced nation brand, even if it is to be refined further in its communication. As Anholt (2010, p. 40) observes: 'the true art of branding is distillation: the art of extracting the concentrated essence of something complex, so that its complexity can always be extracted back out of the distillate'. Ireland's campaign to win the 2001-2 UN Security Council seat centred on the communication of three nation brand values - *Partnership, Independence and Empathy* – to distinguish it from Norway and Canada. Although very simple and generic, they were grounded in the complex narrative of Ireland's recent history of conflict resolution and a recognition of the power of the 'multiplicity of narratives' approach, which enabled a broad church of stakeholders and agencies to connect with them as authentic nation brand values.

Commemoration as a catalyst for a new national narrative

Durkheim (1995) coined the term 'collective effervescence' to describe the process whereby, through participating in an act of ritual, the power of the collective transcends that of the individual. This builds on Halbwachs (1952) concept of 'collective memory', which recognises the value and significance of those who have not had direct first-hand experience of an event, participating in ritual acts of remembrance. The polysemic nature of ritual facilitates large-scale national acts of remembrance, reflection and celebration, while also embracing the small, personal and local moments of shared history. The performative and shared acts of public and private commemoration generate a sense of solidarity, both nationally and at local community level, and are instrumental in collective identity formation (Saito, 2010). For the hundreds of thousands of citizens who participate in commemorative events, such as *Ireland 2016*, it offers a unique opportunity to be part of a process which, if carefully managed, empowers communities and individuals to construct 'a new vision for a shared future' (Anholt, 2010, p. 36).

Undoubtedly, the state is the most prominent 'elite node' (Kaufmann 2016, p. 7) in the activation and implementation of national commemorations. Stakeholders, including the media, academics and historians are considered 'central nodes' (ibid.), in that they are a channel of communication for ideas and issues, which flow vertically in only one direction to the masses. Bryan et al. (2013) argue that the very act of commemoration is a political act, a construct which is played out by political actors, entrepreneurs and 'nation builders'. Such one-directional mode of dissemination is aggregated by perceptions of

commemoration as being politicised (Fitzpatrick, 2001; Jordan 2014), where political parties, activists, journalists and historians jockey for advantage in framing the narrative to suit their own agendas.

While state-enacted commemoration can give rise to a pre-determined narrative arising out of political expediency, the active participation and ownership by communities in acts of commemoration enables an experiential process of authentic and meaningful identity construction. It provides a mechanism through which 'outsiders' beyond historians, academics, politicians, nationalists and civil servants, the traditional gatekeepers of commemoration, are empowered to influence, create, and promote a more complex and meaningful narrative that is of their making. This is where commemoration can move beyond the level of re-enactments and memorials, to actively speak to the contemporary (Daly, 2004) and to the future, through the lens of the past. It has the power to radically reclaim a narrative that is not simply claiming 'political legitimacy for a political identity, based upon a particular narrative of the past' (Bryan et al. 2013, p. 74).

However, there is a risk that an open-source approach to commemoration, without some form of coordinating mechanism and shared guiding principles, could descend into incoherence and division. Providing opportunities for citizens, the 'common man and woman' (Larsen et al, 2022, p. 8), to engage in national commemorations was a key focus of the Norwegian Suffrage Jubilee in 2013. In recognition of women who are either written out or perceived as 'outsiders' in historical narratives, a programme of activities, research and special initiatives was developed to redress these omissions. Similarly, as part of *Ireland 2016*, a strand of the programme – *Women of 1916* - was developed specifically to address the underrepresentation of women in the Easter Rising (Casserly and O'Neil, 2017). The Swedish Jubilee, under the brand '*Progressive Sweden: celebrating 100 years of Swedish democracy'* prioritised citizen engagement with a focus on future values (Larsen et al. 2022) but unlike its Nordic counterparts, gender equality was peripheral rather than central to the commemoration programme.

Similar to Sweden, citizen engagement was prioritised as a guiding principle of *Ireland 2016*. For O'Toole (cited in Bryan et al. 2013), Ireland's *Decade of Centenaries* presented a unique opportunity for citizens to reflect and interrogate what it means to be a republic, one hundred years on from the foundation of the state. It also facilitated conversations and dialogue within and across communities on the nature of national sovereignty, post Brexit, and the implications for a partitioned island, within the European Union. Leaning in to Anderson's seminal concept of 'imagined communities' (2006), national commemorative

events can elicit 'feelings of group membership and solidarity among individuals' (Saito, 2010, p. 631), providing both the impetus and the invitation to create a new shared vision of Ireland into the future.

Melissen (2005) notes the increasing importance placed by diplomats and those engaged in public diplomacy in connecting with 'ordinary people', as well as activists and loosely organised groups, who represent and reinforce nation 'brand values', and who can also mobilise previously elusive and often powerful networks. More recently, the concept of the 'intermestic' (Huijgh, 2019, p. 1), which advocates a blend of both the domestic and international in public diplomacy and nation brand practice, is gaining some momentum. This approach recognises the importance of consulting, communicating and empowering citizens as a priority public, without whom, a competitive identity strategy is destined to remain a public relations exercise. This is particularly interesting, when considered in the context of commemoration as a model of authentic nation brand construction, as, in the case of *Ireland 2016*, Irish citizens and the diaspora[10] were the primary stakeholders, upon whom the success or failure of the centenary depended.

In his meditation on commemoration as part of Ireland's *Decade of Centenaries*, President Michael D. Higgins describes the need for 'a hospitality of narratives' (*Machnamh*, Áras an Uachtaráin, 2020). He discusses the unique opportunity posed through the ritual and practice of commemoration for nations and communities to 'reflect, to look deeply at change over time' and for these moments to act as a 'bonding tool for enhanced social capital' (ibid). Building on Kaufman's complexity theory, this approach supports and facilitates the multiplicity of narratives in the construction of an evolving and authentic nation brand, rather than see this alternatively as a challenge or a messy confused narrative in search of an orthodoxy.

Method

The methodology chosen for this research is a case study of *Ireland 2016*, the state programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. According to Yin (2014, p. 16), case study research is a form of 'empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary

[10] 'Ireland takes a broad and inclusive definition of the Irish diaspora. It includes Irish citizens living overseas, both those born in Ireland and those born abroad to Irish families, as well as the heritage diaspora, those many millions of people of Irish descent around the world. It also embraces the reverse diaspora of people who have lived, studied or worked in Ireland before returning to their home countries as well as the affinity diaspora who hold a deep appreciation for our people, places and culture. Together, these groups form the Global Irish.' https://www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/Diaspora-Strategy-2020-English.pdf

phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context'. The primary dataset for the research is derived from a series of semi-structured interviews, supported by a purposive review of a selection of media coverage on two key dates – the initial launch of *Ireland 2016* in November 2014 and the end of the programme year in December 2016. While a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of *Ireland 2016* is recommended in the Conclusion as a possible avenue of further research, the purposive sample in this study reveals valuable insights and strengthens the research findings.

A series of 11 one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, including six male and five female participants, who were selected based on purposeful sampling. This method is specifically useful where the individuals or groups 'are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest' (Palinkas et al. p. 534). Interviewees were identified based on their direct role and/or expertise relating to this study. As a member of the core *Ireland 2016* project team, the author had established a relationship of trust with key informants and was in a position to contact them directly, by phone and email, to solicit their participation in the research. Participants included senior government officials, civil servants, policymakers and local *Ireland 2016* programme coordinators. Confidentiality of the data was guaranteed, where requested, with eight of the interviewees agreeing to be named in the research and three participants availing of the option to be pseudonymised.

Table 1: Interview Participants

	Interviewee	**Role**	**Date**	**Duration**	**Location**
1.	Caitriona Crowe	Former Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland	14.09.2021	01:04:39 mins	Online - Zoom
2.	John Concannon	Director, *Ireland 2016*	22.01.2021	01:03:19 mins	Online - Zoom
3.	Emma Clancy	Cavan County Council, Decade of Centenaries Programme	04.08.2022	35:09 mins	Online - Zoom
4.	Diarmaid Ferriter	Academic and historian, member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group	17.02.2022	50:31 mins	Online - Zoom

5.	Maurice Manning	Chair, Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group	26.07.2021	47:46 mins	Online - Zoom
6.	Ronan McGreevy	Ronan McGreevy, journalist and author	05.08.2021	30:36 mins	Online - Zoom
7.	Deirdriú McQuaid,	Monaghan County Council, Decade of Centenaries Programme	29.07.2022	53:51	Online - Zoom
8.	Ciaran Ó Gaora	Brand Strategy and Design, *Ireland 2016*	11.12.2020	01:25:34	In person – Zero G offices, Capel St, D1
9.	Michael O'Reilly	Government policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*	11.12.2020	53:04 mins	Online - Zoom
10.	Participant A	Senior Government Official, *Ireland 2016*	30.06.2021	50:02 mins	Online - Zoom
11.	Participant B	Senior Official, *Decade of Centenaries*	30.06.2021	50:02 mins	Online - Zoom

Interview data was coded and analysed, drawing on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, where the author has foregrounded the contributions of the interview participants to inform the discussion and analysis. A series of themes were identified for the semi-structured interviews which informed the design of the interview guide, while also allowing the interviewer the option to explore topics of relevance which might surface during the interview. A thematic analysis was used to review the news reports, which were chosen based on purposive random sampling for a specific timeframe directly relevant to the study. Subsequent data analysis consisted of reading, sorting, searching through key articles, comparing within categories, and noting thematic links and patterns (Altheide and Schneider, 2017).

The revisiting of the successes and failures of the *Ireland 2016* centenary programme, through the lens of those who were closely involved in its construction and implementation, while immensely valuable, necessitates treating all informants as unreliable interlocutors. While the author's close involvement with the *Ireland 2016* initiative was a crucial factor in procuring the permission and participation of the key informants, the possibility of any potential bias was mitigated though reflexivity (Ibrahim and Edgley, 2015). This involved the author critically reflecting on her influence, either intentionally or unintentionally, over the research process and applying analytical rigour in her examination of all the information and knowledge received. As noted by Corlett and Mavin (2019, p. 30) 'through positional reflexivity, qualitative researchers can consider the impact of positionality, identity and power in producing knowledge'. As a result, the research material provides an

exceptionally rich dataset from which to examine *Ireland 2016* as a nation brand strategy, and for exploring the influence and contribution of authentic citizen engagement on future nation brand theory and practice.

'*This time will never come again*' - Ireland 2016

The *Decade of Centenaries* is the Irish government's official commemoration programme to mark key events in recent history which led to the formation of the Irish Republic. It commences with the enactment of the Home Rule Bill in 1912 and concludes with the founding of the Free State in 1922 (Whelan, 2017). The commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising, described by Kiberd (1991, p. 191) as 'a brave clean fight against an empire', where a group of men and women staged a bloody uprising against the British and called for the formation of an Irish Republic, was undoubtedly one of the most challenging and potentially divisive events in the *Decade*.

In anticipation of the potential for the commemoration to become a contentious and divisive spectacle, an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) comprising respected academics and historians, from across the island of Ireland, was appointed by the Irish government to oversee the *Decade of Centenaries*. An all-party committee of politicians was also put in place to avoid accusations of a partisan political agenda. The first task of the EAG was to agree a set of guiding principles which would ensure that the commemoration 'will be measured and reflective, and will be informed by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy, of the multiple readings of history, and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience' (Decade of Centenaries.com).

For the organisers, managing a complex and demanding stakeholder group, which included relatives of those who died in 1916, academics, political parties and local community groups, all of whom laid claim to marking this 'pivotal event in the creation of the modern Irish state' (White & Marnane, 2016, p. 30) was a considerable undertaking. There was little public or political appetite to repeat the militaristic bombastic event that marked the 50th anniversary in 1966, or the more subdued and low-key 75th anniversary in 1991.

> *'In 1966, the events had been totally politicised and effectively became part of De Valera's re-election campaign*.' Maurice Manning, Chair, *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

'We didn't use the past as propaganda during this. We really didn't. It was used that way in 1966. Not this time. That sort of signals we are growing up.' Caitriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

However, a disastrous initial launch, featuring an ill-advised promotional video described by a leading academic as 'unhistorical bullshit' (Ferriter, cited in Brophy 2014), was heavily criticised by the media and alienated the public and the relatives of the 1916 rebels, who immediately distanced themselves from the event. The state had made the fatal mistake of using the centenary as an opportunity to promote Ireland as a modern brash tech capital of the world, brushing over any reference to the hundreds who were killed in the uprising, and completely underestimating the sensitivities of those who saw it as the significant event in modern Irish history. It was a deep embarrassment to the government, who immediately lost the trust of key audiences and publics, and the whole event quickly escalated into crisis mode.

'*It wasn't the Provos [Provisional Irish Republican Army] that people were concerned about. It was the fact that the original video was almost like an advertisement for Ireland Inc. It has no link to the Easter Rising, you had companies like Google and LinkedIn in it*.' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist and author

'The public at that point I think was still very uneasy about the whole thing ... by and large they felt really uncomfortable that this thing was going to happen because there was a feeling that nothing good would come of it ... they were worried about what it would make Ireland look like and so many people at the time were talking about just getting the hell out of the country for Easter 1916.' Michael O'Reilly, Policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*

'*There was a fear that it would become another very jolly happy, you know, aren't we all great, isn't Ireland great, moment ... the response to that and the reaction to that initial too quick off the mark, not thought through [launch] ... really put a stop to the gallop*.' Caitriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the organisers re-grouped and immediately undertook an extensive citizen consultation process, involving hundreds of 'town hall' meetings across the length and breadth of the country. This was followed by an in-depth process of building networks of collaboration with government departments, state agencies, relatives'

groups and NGO's, amongst others, and with the support and leadership of the local government network, a re-imagined, inclusive citizen-focused *Ireland 2016*[11] programme was launched on the 31st March 2015. In recognising the appetite for social change articulated in the groundswell success of the same-sex marriage referendum which was to take place on 22nd May 2015, *Ireland 2016* was perfectly poised to articulate a new narrative for Ireland as a proud, inclusive and modern nation state.

> '*I think the public wanted to look at things in a different way so that when the 2016 commemoration came, people were ready*.' Maurice Manning, Chair, *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

> '*I think there's something as well about the open-source idea. So, we had the 44 State Ceremonial events … and then we enabled the communities round the country to get on board with this and encouraged them to [get involved] … so we had over 5,000 events around the country. From something that started as a complete and utter car crash to become this sense of absolute optimism and confidence around the country of who we are …'* John Concannon, Director, *Ireland 2016*

A project team of senior civil servants, communications and brand specialists, policy advisers and members of the Defence Forces, were recruited to design and deliver the *Ireland 2016* programme. It resembled, what Anholt (2010 p. 162) describes in the context of nation brand initiatives, as a "skunkworks" – a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules, often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints.

A cross-sectoral programme was devised, coordinated and implemented by the project team, supported by two policy and communications specialists, working alongside over 150 partners from local and national government departments, semi-state agencies, education institutions, arts and civil society organisations, as well as a range of companies and organisations from across the private and voluntary sector. A two-year strategic

[11] *Ireland 2016* was the state programme to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising. The ten member project team, under the directorship of John Concannon, was based in the National Museum and worked under the auspices of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The programme was overseen by the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group, which comprised academics and historians from across the island of Ireland, who were appointed by Taoiseach Enda Kenny. It was coordinated by a Senior Officials Group with representatives from a wide range of government departments.

communications and marketing campaign began in 2015 which included media partnerships, specially commissioned documentaries and sponsored content across tv, print and radio, as well as the development of an extensive suite of creative content for the new Ireland.ie website and social media (Facebook and Twitter).

Ireland's centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising resonated strongly with the extensive 70 million[12] Irish diaspora, with events taking place in cities and towns across the globe, creating a sense of solidarity with 'other members of the nation in other places' (Saito 2010, p. 631). This supports Halbwach's (1952) proposition around the inclusivity of commemoration and its role in building a sense of connection amongst those who have not had direct experience of the event.

What *Ireland 2016* managed to achieve was to create the context for the first of Anholt's (2010) nation branding imperatives which is to identify a common purpose which is both 'inspiring' and 'feasible' and to which a range of disparate actors with differing agendas, including government departments, state agencies, business leaders, civic society groups, could align and get behind. In addition to participating in live events, from readings to re-enactments, exhibitions, lectures and seminars, millions of people, in Ireland and worldwide, engaged with the ideas and propositions contained within the Programme, through extensive access to digital and online resources.

The unique power of the arts to enable and encourage communities and individuals to reflect upon and create points of connection and understanding when confronted with difficult and disturbing issues is a recurring theme, both in the context of commemoration, but also in the construction and reimagining of a new national narrative. The fact that four of the seven leaders of the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 were artists is an indication of the enduring power of culture and the key role of the arts as both a signifier and source of inspiration in the formation and construction of national identity.

Access to resources such as the Military Pensions Archive, along with major exhibitions by the National Cultural Institutions and network of local county libraries and museums, enabled a new generation of citizen researchers who, for the first time, could explore and

[12] The vast majority of the 70 million who claim Irish heritage are descendants of Irish emigrants, often through several generations starting with those who left Ireland around the time of the Famine. The largest group in this figure is the 36 million people in America who in the last census self-identified as "Irish American" or "Scots Irish". The balance of the 70 million figure was made up of large Irish ancestry populations in Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and smaller Irish ancestry populations in Continental Europe and Latin America.

interrogate their family histories. What began to emerge as a result of the *Ireland 2016* invitation to 'reflect, remember and re-imagine' was a form of what Kaufmann (2016, p. 17) observes in his study of Irish nationalism post-Easter Rising as 'popular political nationalism'. For the first time in the history of the state, the act of remembrance and commemoration moved from being a militaristic politicised event to being an inclusive citizen-led interrogation of Irish identity, past and present. 'Last year we found ways to talk about our identity, the meaning of citizenship, the importance of community. It was a year of debate without division and argument without rancour. We all walked a little taller as a consequence. We belonged and we were proud to belong' (Kenny, 2017).

Complicating the narrative

A guiding principle of *Ireland 2016* was the concept of inclusion and respect for the multiplicity of narratives in undertaking what President Michael D. Higgins (2020) described as an 'ethical remembrance' of the shared history of the island of Ireland. White and Marnane (2016, p. 39) concur with the aspiration that the 1916 centenary commemoration 'should identify with an Irishness that is inclusive and not exclusive'.

The reality of embedding this principle across all aspects of the programme created layers of complexity and necessitated not just time, but sensitivity and care, in how this was managed with key stakeholders and partners. However, it was one aspect of the initiative which confounded Anholt's belief that 'the essence of social justice is diversity, but the essence of good marketing is simplicity, and this tension is seldom fully resolved' (Anholt 2010, p. 90).

> '*We didn't want this to be a replication of old-fashioned heroics. Or any triumphalism of any sort. It's about deepening and complicating the narrative to include more than simply the big heroic actions that went on*.' Caitriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

In fostering and actively facilitating discussion, debate and respect for the multiplicity of narratives and perspectives, across all aspects of the commemoration programme, it enabled a more nuanced and, arguably, richer interrogation of difficult issues and events to surface. A complex part of Irish history has always been the fact that many more Irish men died serving with the British Army at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 then took part in the Rising, something which up until the centenary, was never properly commemorated by the Irish state.

> '*There wasn't any triumphalism or excluding other people, and suddenly I realised that the people were really ahead of the politicians in all of this.'* Maurice Manning, Chair, *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

The default position for nation brand initiatives is to present a positive, optimistic, modern nation, full of potential, set against a backdrop of its most recognisable geographical and cultural assets. It is often why so many campaigns end up looking so similar, even using the same 'live, study, work, invest' strapline. Understandably, no country wants to wash its dirty economic, social or environmental linen in public but if a nation brand is to truly deliver on authenticity as a core competency, it must be courageous in recognising and communicating the need for change. #Waking the Feminists was one such moment for Ireland.

Sparked by the Abbey Theatre's lack of inclusion of women artists in its *Waking the Nation* centenary programme, and its determined refusal to revisit the omission, a national and international activist movement quickly gathered momentum and international media attention soon followed. The movement resulted in a commitment by the Irish government and key arts and culture institutions, with many international organisations following suit, to implement gender equality policies and practice across the creative industries. What began as a disturbing reminder of a deep-rooted misogyny and sexism within the Irish cultural sector, became a catalyst for change in Ireland, and beyond.

> '*A state is the sum of its failures as much as it is the sum of its successes, there is always nuances … I definitely think that the 1916 Rising commemorations in Ireland were an object lesson in how to do it, they weren't bombastic, they didn't push a simplistic narrative, and I think a lot of other countries could learn from that. The important thing is to be inclusive and to move beyond the stereotypes of every nation, to move beyond the great man theory of history, to mark the good points and the bad points*.' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist and author

Despite the perception of *Ireland 2016* as an inclusive state-led initiative, there is evidence of acts of rejection, resentment and resistance surrounding the commemoration. A necrology 'Remembrance Wall' in Glasnevin Cemetery, one of the most historical burial sites in Ireland and the location of the graves of many of the leaders of the Rising, which listed the names of all those who died in the Rising, including British soldiers, caused upset for Irish relatives and incited angry protests and arrests at the state ceremonial event to

launch the wall in April 1916. James Connolly Heron, whose grandfather was one of the leaders of the Rising, maintained that the wall is part of a 'sanitisation of the Rising … it's an aberration' (Heron cited in Russell 2016). In February 2022, Glasnevin Trust confirmed that, as a result of repeated acts of vandalism and protest, the Wall would be discontinued and dismantled.

Organised by Reclaim the Vision of 1916, 'an independent, non-party political citizens' initiative' (facebook.com/reclaim1916), thousands of people took to the streets of Dublin on the afternoon of Sunday 24th April 2016, immediately following the official state commemoration. Parade participants included representatives of Ireland's new communities, travellers, residents of Direct Provision, disability and women's groups, those who are 'forgotten, ignored, marginalised and discriminated against' (facebook.com/reclaim1916). The event was the last of a series of initiatives organised by the ad-hoc group to counteract the state-led programme. Both of these initiatives are indicative of a disconnect between the ambition and rhetoric of an inclusive state-led commemoration programme and the actuality for those who felt excluded and marginalised by a state that had not lived up to the vision of the new Republic, one hundred years after the Easter Rising.

Authenticity and the nation brand

A national commemoration on the scale of *Ireland 2016* presented an invitation to Irish citizens, at home and abroad, to be part of a collective exploration of what it means to be Irish now, through the lens of the past, and to reimagine the Ireland of the future. Every five years, a census captures primarily quantitative, but more recently some qualitative, data on the Irish population (census.ie). In 2016, a Citizens' Assembly of 100 people, deliberately chosen to be representative of Irish society, was established to discuss and consider important legal and policy issues and make recommendations to government (citizensassembly.ie). While both are useful and important research exercises, they do not offer the opportunity for an extensive, cross-generational and cross-sectoral reflection and interrogation of Irish values and identity which was provided by a year-long commemorative programme.

> '*I think countries need to pause, and reflect and take stock from time to time, that's why centenaries are around, that's why big anniversaries are around. In the best way, they are a chance to say where have we been and where are we going.*' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist with the Irish Times and published author

> *'I think it's one of the achievements ... that strong sense of claiming ownership, we're going to do this in our own way. It can be intergenerational and can incorporate the schools and that strong local element.* Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic and historian, member of the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

According to brand strategist and the creator of the *Ireland 2016* brand identity, O'Gaora (2020) makes the point that, while the state may manage the nation brand, its reputation and ownership of the brand lies with the people who engage with it. But what of the views of the citizens whom the nation brand purports to reflect – do they identify with it? Does it reflect what they believe to be a true reflection of their national identity and what role do they play as 'brand ambassadors'?

> *'So, the brand of Ireland is what people say about Ireland and in my view, the first and most important audience, is the citizens. It has to be authentic, and authenticity is the number one thing in nation branding.'* John Concannon, Director *Ireland 2016*

> *'The whole narrative [or Ireland 2016] became pluralistic, non-binary, inter-textual. This is where you get in to pattern recognition rather than dragging dead white men out and saying This is Ireland. I think what we did with the second calibration of [Ireland] 2016 was to give permission to know what it was, which is a moment in time, and leave that vessel open enough that people were asked to fill that with the general plurality of history. It wasn't about the heroic other.'* Ciarán Ó Gaora, Brand strategy and design, Ireland 2016

Jordan's (2014, p. 298) study of the public perception of Brand Estonia revealed that, unlike the political elite who initiated and were very positive about the campaign, 'the majority of the public-level respondents were overwhelmingly negative in their responses' and didn't feel it was an authentic representation of the nation's values or national identity. A clear tension exists in nation branding between accentuating the positive and avoiding a descent into propaganda, where political social or economic challenges are airbrushed out of the narrative.

For a nation brand to be truly effective, it must resonate with its citizens as both authentic and meaningful. As the initial launch of *Ireland 2016* demonstrated, taking a slick marketing approach to something as serious as national identity, which is at the heart of

nation branding, would not be tolerated. A nation brand initiative, built on the shared principles of authenticity and inclusivity, engenders credibility and trust, both of which were critical factors in Ireland's state-led 1916 commemoration programme.

> *'Especially for a nation … because nobody cares if the washing powder that is advertised doesn't get those stains, it won't affect a nation, but that's [the nation] who you are. And that's at the core of your being. And as a citizen, if there's a national brand that actually is underneath it, and it's all smoke screens, it's an embarrassment. It goes against everything as a citizen that you want it to be. And if that means it's less showy, then so be it, it has to be real.'* Senior Official, *Decade of Centenaries*

Ireland, like many other countries, from Sweden to the Philippines to Tasmania, has adopted the strapline of 'live, work, study, invest' as its call to action. Nation brand authenticity requires a trust in the fulfilment of the promised social, economic and cultural benefits which have been presented to the public (Handayani & Korstanje, 2017). In Ireland, it is the network of 31 local government authorities who are responsible for delivering on the day-to-day needs of citizens, from parks and libraries, to planning, water and housing. They played a critical role in motivating and engaging local communities, schools, businesses and organisations to, not just get involved with the commemoration programme, but to own it and make it their own.

> *'I think it has to be [grassroots]. I don't think it's like a 'nice to have'. I think you just have to [involve local communities] particularly if you're pitching abroad, and you want people to move here. They have to live somewhere in a community. They don't live in a strategy. It's our local communities and our local authorities who bring those bigger national policies to real-life on the ground.'* Senior Official, *Decade of Centenaries*

Ultimately, it is local communities, people living in cities, towns and villages, who are the embodiment of a lived everyday national identity. They are effectively nation brand ambassadors and the foundation upon which an authentic nation brand has the potential to thrive and evolve.

Citizen Nation Brand

The decline in the role and power of the church in Ireland, combined with increased globalisation and inward international investment, growing secularisation and membership of the European Union, transformed Ireland from 'a rural backwater in the 1960s to the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s (Anholt 2007 p. 47). The bruising and international humiliation of the banking crisis and economic crash in 2008, resulting in a €67.5 billion bailout, sparked serious social unease and economic uncertainty. In the wake of the crash, the subsequent same-sex marriage and abortion referenda, in 2015 and 2018 respectively, sparked a national conversation about human rights, values and Irish identity.

It was against this backdrop that the *Ireland 2016* centenary programme provided an enhanced opportunity to build on this moment of collection reflection. It sparked a visceral and deeply held connection to the personal stories and family histories of the people's uprising against a colonial oppressor in 1916 and re-ignited the sense of pride in what had been achieved for Ireland in the last hundred years and, more recently, with the passing of the marriage referenda. It demonstrated Ireland's ability to be able to reflect and shed some of the negativity and mythology of its past and visualise a new future. Critically, the mechanism of a citizen-led co-creation of a narrative around Irish nationalism, over the duration of *Ireland 2016*, epitomised what Kaufmann (2016, p. 21) describes as 'crowdsourced nationalism', where civil society rather than 'state elites' become the embodiment of national identity.

> *'I think it was really important in that I think it gave us a confidence as a nation, the way we faced up to old narratives and challenged them in some* way.' Senior Official, *Decade of Centenaries*

> *'I think the process was the really important thing, people were hungry without even realising it … hungry for conversations about who we are, and what is the meaning of our history, where have we come from.'* Michael O'Reilly, Policy advisor, *Ireland 2016*

> *'What good branding does at a national level, at a complex multi-stakeholder level, is it's less concerned about defining what we're not and more about creating a narrative of inclusion and relevance and value. It is not about making the state the hero and its dead pre-anointed heroes the hero. It is about recognising the heroic act of what it is for four and a half million people to identify with each other in all that difference and in all that challenge … the sense of shared endeavour within that of both joy and sadness. How do you create something that has a narrative*

that asks people to join in but is still coherent rather than all things to all people. I think that that is where you start to ground it around the idea of a collection of values that, on their own, are not differentiating but as they conspire to come together, speak to what is the kind of lived reality, and the lived ambition of a collection of people.' Ciarán Ó Gaora, Brand strategy and design, *Ireland 2016*

One of the challenges around collective memory making in the context of commemoration is the conflation of memory and history in what Nora (1989) describes as historiography. The reliance on individual memorabilia and personal stories handed down from generation to generation creates a form of mythology around events which can often create tensions within communities around what is truth and what has been fictionalised to make for more palatable consumption. For the historians and academics who were closely involved with *Ireland 2016*, as well as the local authority *Ireland 2016* coordinators, the importance of preserving and providing access to national archives and local ephemera was vital and acted as a catalyst for debate and discussion around difficult and contentious events and issues.

I think it's interesting looking at how memory can work as well. There are a lot of stories that are passed down through generations. Sometimes people, when they begin to research or do more in-depth research can discover that the stories that have survived or been passed down, or the memories that have been communicated are not necessarily reflective of the reality.' Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic and historian, member of the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

'It has allowed us to build on that and to reach out to harder reach communities, it has given us that platform to reach out to them. And it's definitely has created a really good opportunity to build on that and to discuss and debate the different areas of our recent history.' Deirdriu McQuaid, Monaghan County Council *Decade of Centenaries* Programme

While this article argues for the inclusion of citizens as co-authors and co-creators, one of the primary functions of a nation brand initiative is to optimise domestic assets and deploy them in competing for resources and influence on the world stage (Modhorst, 2018). Several of the sources interviewed for this article were in agreement that Ireland's approach to commemorating 1916 had a positive impact on the perception of Ireland abroad.

'*I think a lot of diplomats were interested as how a small country with a recently very troubled past bedevilled by violence was able to do this in a nuanced and*

sensitive and empathetic way.' Caitriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

'I do think that the [commemoration] programme fed into that confidence, not being afraid to develop a strong brand. It kind of allowed us to do that. That was maybe one of the first times we've seen something that was truly kind of cross-government and cross- department that involved the citizens, that involved local authorities, that it really was a national movement almost. It was like the state in partnership with the citizens' Senior Official A, *Decade of Centenaries*

However, Ferriter (2022) disagrees:

'I don't think it registers much. You know, I think we can delude ourselves into believing that we are a role model in some ways for how to do certain things. I'm not dismissing our achievements. We have to be conscious that we are very unusual in having had a century of unbroken democracy. That's no mean achievement and it's something to herald and it's something to highlight whether or not the rest of the world is interested in that however is another matter altogether.'

A special programme strand devised to engage and empower children and young people to explore and interrogate issues around identity and shared values, inspired them to consider what it means to be Irish and to articulate their ambitions and vision for Ireland's future.

'*Identity is the most motivating thing for all people. We gave people a platform to explore their identity … who are we, what does it mean to be Irish right now? The second thing was the sense of community. Community is so important in a democracy… people being involved, being a part of things. And then the third piece was culture, our culture, the rich culture which enabled this vast tapestry of stories to be told.'* John Concannon, Director *Ireland 2016*

'It became a huge, big conversation about identity and we just caught the moment when people were ready to react and to embrace a more generous open narrative of who we are.' Michael O'Reilly, Policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*

However, in the same way that the handling of Ireland's commemoration required sensitivity and a nuanced understanding and acceptance of the complexity of nations,

questions and suspicions remain about the appropriation of a national act of remembrance and reflection in the service of a new national narrative.

> *'I'm very sceptical of branding ... And of nation branding, you know, because I think it simplifies and distorts and that's a terribly sweeping generalization to make ... there's great gulfs between the rhetoric of revolution and the reality, there are ugly realities that have to be confronted desperate things that are done and it's shot through with contradictions. I think it's very difficult to encapsulate all of that in a branding exercise. I would see nostalgia and romanticism triumphing over that complexity.'* Diarmaid Ferriter, academic, historian and member of the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group

Even in the wake of what was agreed to have been a very successful commemoration of a difficult moment in Ireland's history, *Ireland 2016* was one element of a ten-year initiative, with the highly contentious commemorations of the civil war and partition of Northern Ireland, which were to follow in the period 2018 to 2022.

> *'One of the legacies of this decade is a divided Ireland. That's not something to be celebrated and I'm not making that point in an overtly political way. You know, the reality of the legacy of the revolutionary decade is the border and the division of a small island, because those issues could not be resolved within a unified Ireland. That's a great tragedy. You know, so you have to be conscious of that, you know, for, for all that, you can talk about the achievements and brand things in a particular way, we're still talking today and dealing with the fallout, in often a very toxic way, of the division.'* Diarmaid Ferriter, academic, historian and member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

Media coverage of *Ireland 2016*

While the primary dataset for this study was semi-structured interviews with key informants, the author undertook a review of a purposive sample of Irish media coverage, over two key dates, as a source of secondary data. Two keyword searches were conducted on LexisNexis, using the terms *Ireland 2016* and/or *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, between 12th November 2014 and 30th December 2014 (the programme launch) and between 1st December 2016 and 9th January 2017 (the final month of the Programme).

The first search on the date of the inaugural programme launch generated 24 individual news pieces. Initial news reports referred to the ambition of the commemoration to be '*inclusive, in their spirit and in their activity'* (Humphreys 2014). It emphasised the importance of '*actively engaging*' with citizens (Collins 2014) and the need for '*consultation and participation'* (MacNulty 2014). Furthermore, '*extensive planning and widespread consultation'* (Humphreys 2014) were required to '*get the entire nation involved'* (Murphy 2014) through '*meetings with local communities and organisations*' (Collins 2014), especially in a commemoration that '*belongs to the people of Ireland'* (Anderson 2014).

However, some media criticised the lack of consultation with relatives and key stakeholders, including the Expert Advisory Group who were set up to oversee the commemoration, as '*the empty rhetoric of consultation and inclusion'* (MacNulty 2014). Particular prominence was given to the '*thunderous protests'* (Anderson 2014) and the *'thunderous onslaught of screaming and window banging which plagued the launch'* (Byrne 2014). Accusations that '*the Government had got the tone wrong'* (McGreevy 2014) began to emerge, with the Programme launch described as '*a shambles'* (Murphy 2014), a '*shambolic launch'* (Anderson 2014), or even '*disrespectful*' and '*a joke'* (Flanagan 2014). '*Confusion and controversy*' ("1916 Rising centenary plans set out", *Belfast Telegraph Online*, 2014) was compounded by the '*historically illiterate and vacuous video'* (Ferriter 2014), *which sparked calls for a 'citizen-led and coherent demand for a new and better way of doing things'* (Meade 2014).

A second search using the same keywords of *Ireland 2016* and/or *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, but for the period covering the end of the centenary programme, between 1st December 2016 and 9th January 2017, produced 36 news reports. In stark contrast to the initial news reports, *Ireland 2016* was described as '*a momentous occasion for the country both nationally and locally'* (O'Sullivan 2016), *'an outstanding year … the public really took ownership of the commemoration'* (Ó' Gairbhí 2016). Media coverage described the citizen's response to the centenary as '*not simply a sens*e of *public participation but rather a sense of real public empowerment'* ("Kent is honoured as county stages more than 500 commemorations", *Irish Independent*, 2016), being both '*well planned, dignified'* (Macken 2016) or '*dignified, moving and family friendly'* (Wallace 2016), and '*strong, surprising and mainly brilliant'* (Tipton 2014).

Particular attention was drawn to the high levels of attendance and participation through an '*extraordinary public response'* (Linehan 2016), recalling events where '*the 3,000 strong crowd surged to their feet … a spectacular event that attracted thousands of people'*

(Brouder 2016). Engagement and interest in the centenary surpassed expectations as one reporter noted that '*the level of interest at home and abroad has been truly staggering'* (Sheahan 2016), with '*more than one million people on to the streets of Dublin for the Easter Rising commemorations'* (Downing 2016).

Summary news reports described the centenary as '*a tremendous success'*, or '*an outstanding success thanks to the community groups who played their part'* ("Cork's monumental role in shaping modern Ireland, *Corkman*, 2018). While others talked of how '*the response was extraordinary*' ("Bringing 1916 to life in our classrooms", *Irish Independent*, 2016) and how '*every school took part in some capacity over the year … the numbers attending exceeded what we expected'* ("Bringing 1916 to life in our classrooms", *Irish Independent*, 2016). The high level of interest and participation outside of Ireland was covered in a special feature in the Irish Independent where Irish ambassadors to Britain, Germany, Canada and the United States observed '*the reaction was positive from start to finish'* and '*the commemorations were for everyone, be they Irish* or *not*' (Clifford 2016).

There was a recognition of the distinctiveness of the Irish approach to commemoration where '*2016 provided a template for how multiple, often conflicting narratives and interpretations can be embraced in a spirit of learning rather than the affirmation of previously held beliefs … 2016 was about inclusion, respect, and historical complexity'* (Mulvagh 2016). While the inclusivity of the commemoration was also reflected in a letter to the Drogheda Independent where the writer observed '*the fact that the commemorations were inclusive and respectful clearly suggests* that *the best is yet to come'* ("A lasting memorial to Lady Kate", *Drogheda Independent*, 2016).

Evidence of the prevailing concerns of citizens during 2016 is clear in the top three Twitter trends noted by the Irish Examiner (*"Rio, Rising, and Robbie's goal top Twitter trends*.", 2016) which included #ireland2016 alongside #GE16 and #repealthe8th (the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution allowing for legislation on abortion). However, not all media coverage was positive. The 1916 centenary was included alongside '*Brexit, Trump in the USA, a wet Summer and a change* of *Government*' in its list of '*a year probably best forgotten'* ("Finuge: Countrywide" *Kerryman*, 2016).

Nevertheless, there appeared to be a consensus in the media coverage of the overwhelming success of the centenary and, in particular, the ownership and engagement of citizens in its ideation and implementation: '*I liked the fact that Irish people nowadays largely see history as an ideological melting pot and detective story, not a tribal religion. And I loved the*

collaborative aspects of the celebration – the opportunities for people all over the country to have their say' (Freyne 2016).

Conclusion

This research explores the potential of a new contribution to existing nation brand theory and practice, building on the concepts of competitive identity (Anholt 2010) and complexity theory (Kaufmann 2016). The research draws on Ireland's approach to the *Decade of Centenaries* and, specifically, the citizen-led activation and engagement in 'remembering and reimaging Ireland' (*Ireland 2016*) as a mechanism of co-authoring and co-creating an authentic nation brand. In taking a case study approach, the research findings indicate that Ireland's unique approach to commemoration as a form of 'ethical remembrance' (Higgins 2016), facilitated and enabled citizens to be co-authors of a more nuanced and authentic national narrative. It also supports Saito (2010) in recognising the unique role of commemoration as a lens to examine the construction of national identity and its relationship to nation branding in a globalised world.

Most importantly, in examining Ireland's unique approach to commemoration as an act of participative democracy and citizen engagement, a new framework of nation branding is proposed which not only acknowledges the complexity of the nation, as proposed by Devereux (2022), but embraces it. Complexity theory upholds the importance of diversity and variation in both 'the content and interpretation' of national identity (Kaufmann 2016, p.7), a concept which was central to the principle of inclusivity and the 'multiplicity of narratives' approach of *Ireland 2016*. The power of a national collective recollection of a shared history over a hundred years is a unique opportunity 'to set the received narrative of the events for another' (Bryan et al. 2013 p. 63). There was an unspoken but understood sense of permission-giving or legitimacy to 'remember, reflect and re-imagine' (*Ireland 2016*) and in this remembrance, to forge a new vision of Ireland and its place in the world for the future.

While Anholt's original concept of nation branding may have been co-opted as a tool of government corporate communications, there is something more substantial at stake, for citizens and nations, if the principles of co-creation and authenticity are front and centre in its ideation and efficacy. If, as Anholt (2007, p. 127) believes, 'competitive identity is about making people want to pay attention to a nation's achievements and believe in its qualities', then it is critical for any strategy to be successful that its key stakeholders, which in this case are the citizens, are invested in it.

The impetus to reframe a nation brand is particularly important for countries emerging from a violent conflict or civil war, where 'reality has dramatically changed' (Olins 2002, p. 246). The empowerment of citizens in nation branding is reinforced by Kaneva (2022) in her study of '*Be Brave like Ukraine'* (banda.agency), which optimises the compelling narrative for an international audience of the bravery of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine is the latest in a growing number of conflict zones, which has resulted in mass migrations across continents and the consequent rise in anti-immigration and proto-fascist groups.

Although Aronczyk (2018) questions the role of nation branding in an increasingly hostile global context, she also contends that it is our historians who can help us to understand why the uglier side of nationalism has come to matter again and what its significance might be for a shared future. The latter is particularly relevant in the context of this article and in supporting the hypothesis that commemoration can act as a catalyst for a new nation brand.

Undoubtedly, increased access to new technologies and the rise of the blogosphere and social media has transformed the landscape of media and communications, with peer-to-peer networks creating new spheres of influence, persuasion and power. This represents a new challenge for nation brand practitioners, where the shift away from top-down 'official' campaigns in favour of grassroots channels of influence, means they are no longer in complete control of how the 'brand' is being represented or promoted to a growing networked audience. There are examples where countries have tinkered at the edges of citizen-generated media in the co-authoring of nation brand campaigns such as the @Sweden and @Ireland twitter accounts. While the former is managed by the Sweden.se team 'and a moose @SweInstitute', a different individual is invited to curate the @Ireland feed each week, working to a set of broad guidelines. However, there can be an element of risk to this approach, and it requires careful handling as, has happened on occasion, it can cause unforeseen consequences and 'brand issues' when guest curators post opinions which are perceived to be controversial.[13]

While this research has focused purely on qualitative research drawing on perceptions of key informants, combined with a sample overview of news reports, there is potential for

[13] For example, when it was discovered that one of the guest curators of @Ireland, a young American graphic designer, who was visiting Ireland in the Summer of 2012 as the abortion referendum debate was in full flow, had strong pro-life beliefs, it generated 'an inferno-like debate' (White, 2018) across both traditional and social media.

future studies to examine the effect of Ireland's state commemoration, on citizen and media audiences, using other primary datasets. These might include, for example, a comprehensive study of news reportage which documents resistances against state-led actions and the exclusions inherent within these commemorative acts, analysis of the @Ireland twitter account during key commemorative events, or a content analysis of the Proclamations for a New Generation crafted by children and young people, which have been digitised by the National Library.

The challenges for governments and countries engaged in nation branding are considerable but to not engage in some form of reputation management and control carries a risk of losing out on significant economic and social benefits for citizens, and it allows a nation's brand to be determined without influence, ambition or guidance. The practice and study of nation branding is still a relatively recent phenomenon, but it has grown exponentially in recent years, as evidenced by the volume and range of countries tracked in nation brand rankings, such as the Anholt-Ipsos and Brand Finance indices.

There is much to be learned yet about why and how different countries devise, implement and evaluate their nation brand strategies. Ireland, a small nation which is consistently ranked in the top twenty successful nation brands (brandfinance.com), has much to contribute to the practice and discourse. The *Ireland 2016* centenary programme revealed that, by empowering citizens to reflect and debate issues of national identity and what it means to be Irish in the twenty-first century, it positioned them as co-creators of their own nation brand. More importantly, it provided a framework for a courageous and collaborative approach to nation branding, one which not only champions achievements and shared values, but is bravely articulating the challenges it faces, in being a nation once again.

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Chapter Five: Publication Three

5.1 Introduction

This chapter features the article entitled '*Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand'*, which was published in 2024 in the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*.

This article explores the growing relationship between Irish arts, nation branding, and the role of artists in shaping Ireland's international reputation. It argues that contemporary Ireland has entered a period of renewed cultural confidence, emerging from economic recession with increased investment in the arts and a stronger awareness of culture as a source of influence and identity. At the centre of this transformation are Irish artists, whose work increasingly contributes to how Ireland is understood both domestically and abroad. Through interviews with leading Irish writers, musicians, theatre-makers, and performers, the study examines how artists operate as unofficial ambassadors for the nation while simultaneously resisting attempts to reduce their work to state promotion or propaganda.

The article is grounded in theories of nation branding and cultural diplomacy, and argues that Irish arts and artists are central to Ireland's 'competitive identity', providing symbolic value that strengthens the country's reputation and international standing. The article also draws heavily on Nye's theory of soft power (2004) which describes the ability of nations to influence others through attraction and culture rather than military or economic force. Irish artists contribute significantly to this soft power by presenting Irish identity as dynamic, intellectual, progressive, and emotionally resonant.

One of the paper's central concerns is the tension between artistic freedom and the instrumentalisation of the arts to achieve political or economic goals. The article traces how the Irish government has increasingly recognised the economic and diplomatic value of culture, leading to greater investment in artistic initiatives such as Culture Ireland, Creative Ireland, Aosdána, and the Basic Income for the Arts scheme. While these initiatives have strengthened Ireland's reputation as a cultural nation, they also raise concerns about whether artists are being subtly encouraged to support state narratives.

A recurring theme throughout the thesis and explored further in this article is the importance of authenticity in how Ireland is promoted and represented abroad. One of the achievements of this article is the quality of insights gleaned from interviews with Irish artists on Ireland's nation branding, in response to the third research sub-question which asks: '*To what extent have Irish artists been instrumentalised in Ireland's nation branding*

in the period 2015 to 2025?' The concept of 'meta-soft power' (Nye, 2011), where a nation gains credibility by demonstrating openness to criticism and self-reflection, is an important touchstone in the piece. The findings reveal that artists are highly aware of their symbolic role in representing Ireland abroad, but they also negotiate tensions between national pride, personal identity, artistic integrity, and institutional expectations.

Ultimately, the paper's most significant contribution is its argument that artists should be repositioned as 'critical insiders' in nation branding. Rather than treating artists as outsiders or merely promotional assets, policymakers should recognise them as active co-creators of national identity. The study concludes that authentic nation branding cannot rely on simplistic slogans or carefully managed positivity. Instead, it must embrace complexity, diversity, critique, and the multiplicity of voices that make up a modern nation. Irish artists, through their creativity and willingness to interrogate national identity, are therefore presented not only as cultural ambassadors but as essential participants in shaping Ireland's evolving place in the world.

5.2 'Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand

Abstract

There is a remarkable confidence in Irish culture right now. In the decade to 2024, Ireland successfully emerged from a devastating recession, while overseeing significant investment by the State in the arts. A new generation of artists are shaping Irish identity, forged in the heat of a rapidly growing multicultural population, to construct a new national narrative of Ireland. This paper examines the instrumentalisation of artists in Ireland's nation brand. Based on interviews with renowned Irish artists, the author applies an autoethnographic approach to capture specific insights from these elite expert informants. The study establishes that artists are complicit in their use of the arts as a tool of soft power. It confirms their unique role in building a nation's reputation, and engaging international publics with the multiplicity of narratives, within an evolving Irish identity. It calls for a conceptual repositioning of artists as critical co-authors in effective nation branding.

1. Introduction

The role of a nation's art and culture in national identity construction, nation image and reputation building, and as a driver of economic advantage through tourism and inward investment, has been the focus of much academic and industry research (Ahn and Wu 2015). The discipline and practice of promoting the arts to generate a positive international image of a nation has formed the basis of what has become known as 'cultural diplomacy' (Grincheva 2010). Furthermore, the deployment of Irish culture as a tool of soft power, to promote and rebrand Ireland as a post-colonial Republic in the wake of the Civil War (1922-1923), prompted the newly formed Irish Free State to participate in the 1922 art exhibition in Paris, *Exposition D'Art Irlandais,* (Gibney, Kennedy, and O'Malley 2019). Ireland continued to make its mark on the global stage with Michael Scott's Irish Pavilion scooping the Best Pavilion award at the country's first national representation at the New York World's Fair in 1939.[14]

When Ireland began campaigning to join the European Union in 1967, the hosting of the ROSC international art exhibition, held in Dublin approximately every 4 years between

[14] Ten years later, in 1949, the Cultural Relations Committee, a grant-funding initiative to support the promotion of Irish arts abroad, was established in the Department of Foreign Affairs, three years before the setting up of the first national Arts Council, in 1951.

1967 and 1988, was seen as an opportunity to position Ireland as a 'modern, outward-facing country' (Rafter 2022, 97). As evidenced by successive government attempts to corral the work of artists such as Sean O'Casey and John M. Synge, who were perceived to be presenting a negative image of Ireland abroad, there was increasing recognition of the power of artists as 'unofficial ambassadors' (Gibney, Kennedy, and O'Malley 2019) in building appreciation of Irish culture and values to international audiences. An extensive Irish American diaspora in particular proved to be a valuable source of moral and fiscal support to the nascent new state and were particularly important in terms of maintaining a positive and primarily nostalgic image of the homeland. Ireland of course is not alone in its recognition of the role of arts and culture in promoting a nation brand. Initiatives such as *Cool Japan* and the ill-fated *Cool Britannia* campaign instrumentalised achievements and innovation in arts and culture in order to position their countries as attractive cultural powerhouses (Campbell and Khaleeli 2017).

Artists are cognisant of the deep connection they have to their culture and identity, frequently expressing a strong sense of national pride when presenting their work abroad. From Paul Lynch declaring '*I could not be more proud to be an Irish writer now'* (McLaughlin 2023) in his 2023 Booker Prize speech, to Cillian Murphy's '*I'm a very, very proud Irish man'* (Wilson and Pope 2024) when accepting the Academy Award for Best Actor, artists utilise their soft power in building and reinforcing perceptions of a nation amongst international publics. While Murphy and Lynch, akin to the artists interviewed for this study, have attained a level of international profile and acclaim, their careers and practice retain the imprint of state funding[15]. Barton and Murphy's (2022) study on the ecology of cultural production confirmed that two thirds of prominent Irish creative professionals are reliant on state subsidies for their work. Banks and Hesdmondhalgh (2009) observe the dark side of the creative industries, whereby the high degree of precariousness and volume of unpaid labour, frequently unacknowledged by policymakers, is deemed to be a function of a 'bohemian' lifestyle choice. There can also be considerable additional labour involved for artists to 'live the brand' (Aroncyzk 2008, 54) in their official or unofficial role as nation brand ambassadors. For example, while not formally explicit in contractual arrangements, there can be an expectation that they will undertake certain activities such as attend embassy receptions, participate in panel discussions, media

[15] Murphy's performance in Corcadorca's production of Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* launched his international career, which was sustained by leading roles with the Abbey, Druid and Landmark theatre companies, all of which were funded by the Irish Arts Council and toured internationally with support from Culture Ireland. Lynch credits the vital support of several bursaries and residency awards from the Arts Council as critical to his career and writing practice.

interviews etc., to promote their work and to reflect and engage with the nation brand within the cultural public sphere.

The unique ability of exceptional artists to be both introspective and provocative, to navigate and interpret the complexities of an evolving national identity, enhances a nation's credibility and attractiveness with key domestic and international priority publics (Nye 2002). However, although there is consensus amongst nation brand scholars of the unique role and importance of art and culture in the construction and performance of a nation brand (Anholt 2008, 2020; Dinnie 2022), there is a missing link in the chain whereby artists, by virtue of their 'outsider' status, are rarely considered important co-authors or co-creators in the development of a nation brand strategy. Consequently, a key intangible asset and resource, with the capability to effect meaningful reputational impact and personify an authentic nation brand, remains untapped.

Artists utilise their position of privilege with international publics to act as cultural brand ambassadors for their home country. Many are alert to their embodiment of a nation's image and reputation when engaging with international publics and are attentive to the opportunities for national identity construction and meaning-making, when audiences come into contact with their work. The core hypothesis of this study centres on the proposition that a new paradigm of authentic co-authored nation branding is possible if artists were to be considered, not as outsiders, but rather as 'critical insiders' and co-creators in the construction of a new national narrative. The author deploys an analytic autoethnographic research approach, which forms the basis of this qualitative study, to explore the role of the artist in creating nation brand value. It also examines some of the tensions that arise for artists, who are supported by the state, in confronting or compounding nation brand perceptions amongst international publics. It establishes the potential for a co-authored nation brand, which reflects the growing maturity of a democratic state by embracing the multiplicity of diverse and critical perspectives within the national narrative.

2. Theoretical grounding

2.1 Nation Branding

It is almost four decades since the term nation branding (Anholt 1998) entered the lexicon of public diplomacy, provoking a 'visceral animosity' (Olins 2002) amongst scholars and political analysts who saw it as little more than neo-liberal propaganda (Jansen, 2008,

2011). Kaneva (2021) groups nation branding research into studies of national identity construction and those which are concerned more directly with practice. The former leans into the discourse on nation building and idealised nationalism (Anderson 1983/2006; Billig 1995; Hobsbawm 2012), while the latter uses case studies to examine applied practice, often through the lens of globalisation and neo-liberalism (Aronczyk 2008; Volcic and Andrejevic 2015). The objective of nation branding, similar to that of public diplomacy, is to mobilise a nation's resources to build awareness, understanding and influence for a nation state amongst its target audiences (Aronczyk 2008; Melissen 2005). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power (1984) the 'promise' of nation branding (Kaneva 2009) proposes that, by careful and strategic management of its international reputation, a country optimises its symbolic capital in order to achieve increased social, economic and political capital.

A recurring tension, particularly amongst critics of nation branding, is the requirement to adopt a pro-positivist narrative in campaign messaging, something which can be at odds with an artist's tendency to reflect the critical realities of 'the world as-it-is and the world as-it-should-be' (Dzenovsk 2005, 174). Furthermore, the necessity for an effective nation brand strategy to take the long-term view, doesn't sit well with the short-term political imperative of an average electoral cycle (Melissen 2005). Dzenovska (2005) argues that co-ordination is one of the first challenges in achieving a coherent nation brand, which is best achieved by the appointment of a 'brand steward' to ensure alignment by all participants to a consistent and shared vision.

In her study of early nation branding practices, Aronczyk (2008, 51) quotes a brand specialist who describes the creation of a dedicated unit charged with the responsibility of implementing a nation brand strategy as 'a bit of sand in the oyster to get a better pearl.' The pearl analogy is particularly resonant when considering that every pearl is unique and distinctive, something which is at the heart of nation branding, whose purpose is to provide a 'point of differentiation' (Aroncyzk 2008) for each country, thereby unlocking its 'competitive identity' (Anholt 2006, 2008). This also presents one of the most challenging dilemmas, and enduring criticisms, of nation branding, whereby complex ideas of nationhood and national identity, encompassing contested values and diverse cultures, are reduced to a single 'brand' proposition (Aronczyk 2008). A further tension within nation brand discourse relates to its target audience which Varga (2013, 825) argues is 'inner-oriented', aimed at the citizens of the nation state, whereas the original proposition and subsequent practice has focused primarily on a state's desire to influence foreign publics (Viktorin et al. 2020). While this author has written previously on the role of citizens as

vital co-authors of an authentic 'internal' nation brand (2022; 2023), this article is concerned with artists, as lead protagonists, in a nation branding drama played out for an external audience, for whom a nation's reputation determines their attractiveness as a place to 'live, visit, study and invest' (Ireland.ie).

A nation's arts and culture provide a lens through which perceptions of national identity come into sharp focus, thereby creating that specificity and unique 'top of the mind' brand association which affords one country a competitive edge over another (Aronczyk 2008). Artists are uniquely placed to represent a nation as 'distinctive, singular, accepted, and translatable' (Harrison-Walker, 2011, quoted in Ahn & Wu 2015, 159). There is also a growing body of research which suggests a link between the branding of a country as a cultural state 'and its positive impact on the country's reputation' (Ahn & Wu 2015, 158). Nevertheless, a tension exists between the purpose and motivation for creating an artistic piece of work and the commodification of that work in the service of a nation brand, perhaps because, as Aronczyk (2008, 46) asserts, 'culture – as category, discourse, and reproductive practice – continues to matter for the ways in which value, meaning and self-understanding are made.'

2.2 Diplomacy and nation branding – 'sisters under the skin'

In 1965, Edmund Guillon coined the phrase 'public diplomacy' to describe relationships between governments and their international publics (Zamorano 2016). Tuch (1990, quoted in Melissen 2005) observes the importance of public diplomacy in building mutual awareness and understanding between nations, highlighting their unique values, cultures and policies. Cull (2009) has written extensively on the importance of public diplomacy as a proactive tool for nations to manage the international environment, focusing on key foreign publics and stakeholders. He also notes the increasing infiltration, despite initial scepticism, of nation branding concepts within contemporary public diplomacy.

In more recent times, scholars and practitioners note the importance of citizens as key stakeholders in contemporary public diplomacy practice (Ang, Isar and Mar 2015). There is also a growing recognition of the role of not-for-profits, civil society organisations and high-profile individuals, in official and unofficial, forms of public diplomacy (Zamorano 2016). The emergence of a new public diplomacy (Clarke 2014; Melissen 2005) which utilises new technologies and channels of communication (Clarke 2014) has resulted in what Carter (2015, 3) describes as a 'networked model'. The multi-directional flow of information and influence facilitates the role of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984;

Warren and Dinnie 2018), such as artists, who are co-opted as 'collaborative public diplomacy non-state actors' (Lee and Ayhan, 2015, 65). Although still a relatively new phenomenon, given their complimentary purpose and objectives, and taking the perceptions of the foreign public as a starting point, Melissen (2005, 19) depicts nation branding and public diplomacy as '*sisters under the skin*'.

Cultural diplomacy is concerned with the optimising of cultural assets, including cultural production, as well as co-opting individual artists, for the purpose of connecting with foreign publics. In his examination of the dangers of instrumentalism within cultural diplomacy, Carter (2015, 2) argues that state-sponsored support ensures that foreign publics are 'more knowledgeable about and better disposed towards our nation'. Likewise, Grincheva (2022, 8) observes that cultural diplomacy is 'a strategic instrument to achieve foreign policy objectives.' However, Cull (2008) contends that cultural diplomacy can be severely compromised if it is perceived to be too closely aligned with government.

There is, undoubtedly, a symbiotic relationship between cultural diplomacy and nation branding, where a country's cultural assets are used as a form of soft power (Nye 2004). They are optimised as an expression of national identity, aimed at international publics, to persuade and exert influence in order to achieve foreign policy goals (Carter 2015; Clarke 2020). It is a tactical practice, designed to build reputational awareness, distinctiveness and impact for a nation (Anholt 2006; Villanueva 2007; Zamorano 2016). Most governments and leadership regimes are keenly aware of the value of promoting and claiming their artists as representative of their distinctive culture and national identity which, in turn, bestows a certain amount of international prestige (Isar, 2010). Nye (2010) most notably stresses the importance of authenticity and critical self-reflection in effective soft power and cultural diplomacy. Described as 'meta-soft power', the ability to be introspective, thoughtful and, at times, provocative, not only reflects the maturity of a democratic nation state, it also contributes to a country's attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility, amongst its domestic and foreign publics (Ang, Isar and Mar 2015; Nye 2002).

In his discussion of the power of cultural diplomacy to overcome negative national images, Isar (2010, 33) argues that 'too much is expected of cultural diplomacy today, that it is pressed into service in the name of goods that it cannot deliver.' Furthermore, Cummings (2009) characterises the broadcast nature of cultural diplomacy as similar to nation branding, whereby a nation is purely concerned with self-promotion. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to reconfigure nation branding and cultural diplomacy in a new framework which eschews performative 'cultural nationalism' (Godreau, 2015, quoted in Ang, Isar,

and Mar 2015) alongside the 'cultural policy of display' (Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Williams 1984). This new approach would seek to move away from superficial representations of the life *of* a nation, to interrogating, reflecting and reimagining the complexities and shared values *within* a nation. Such a nuanced but significant shift in perspective might go some way towards the 'cracking open' (Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Isar 2010) of national narratives in order to reflect a more pluralist, diverse and authentic nation brand.

2.3 Instrumentalisation of the arts as a tool of nation branding

'All that he should ask for was liberty and all that he should promise was disloyalty'. [16]

Ahn and Wu's (2015) study of government investment in the arts, based on data drawn from 50 countries, points to the positive influence of cultural promotion on a nation brand's value and reputation. However, the increasing pressure to justify public funding through outputs and outcomes, can result in artists and institutions becoming risk-averse, with the consequent danger of the dumbing down of artistic practice (Holden 2004). Furthermore, increasing competition and pressure on limited resources can sometimes force artists to apply for support, the primary purpose of which is to address a strategic priority of the funding body. Similarly, state agencies and cultural institutions also regularly enter into pragmatic relationships with government and policy makers in order simply to benefit from strategic funding (Clarke 2014; Nisbett 2011). However, the enshrining of the 'arm's length principle' as a cornerstone of Irish cultural policy, whereby the artist has complete autonomy and freedom of expression in their practice (Cooke 2011) maintains a vital *cordon sanitaire* between an artist and state funding.

Conversely, some practitioners are not bothered by the instrumentalist agenda of the funding source if it enables them to pursue their artistic practice. Artists will sometimes respond to funding calls which align with their principles, and which do not require any artistic compromise or tension for them when it is presented in a diplomatic context (Clarke 2014; Nisbett 2011). As Bourdieu (1996, quoted in Clarke 2014, 155) presciently observed: 'the position of the artist in modernity is increasingly characterised both by the development of an identity centred on notions of artistic autonomy and integrity and by the need to function in a cultural marketplace.'

[16] Seán Ó Faoláin on the role and responsibility of the artist in his address to the Institute of Public Administration, Irish Times, October 13, 1965.

Carter (2015, 6) defines the instrumentalisation of the arts as the 'redeployment of culture as an instrument designed to serve other ends', for example, in state or nation branding. Slaby (2011) observes the economic instrumentalisation of the arts which followed in the wake of Ireland's 2008 recession, when major cuts in funding overshadowed the significant shift in cultural policy, whereby Irish arts and culture was optimised as a national resource to drive economic recovery. A neo-propagandist perspective on the instrumentalisation of culture in nation branding asserts the dominance of political and economic elites in its use as a management tool in generating a positive view of a political territory and building external relations with key publics (Zamorano 2016). Furthermore, Hadley and Gray (2017) note the risk of 'hyper instrumentalism' whereby cultural policy is determined by outputs which overstate, without credible empirical evidence, the value of the arts, and are of little interest to political actors. A form of reverse instrumentalisation and national identity 'transference' can occur when a nation state is evoked in interviews and public appearances by artists for whom the deep connection to their homeland and heritage, to their people and culture, is a vital part of their nationhood and national identity construction. While it must be acknowledged that not every artist is motivated or engaged on issues of national identity, the level of critique, ranges of interpretation and public scrutiny on their work and what it represents, is amplified once they are funded by the state.

Nevertheless, national identity construction and nation branding is at its most effective when it is embodied and personalised and not associated with organised political or social movements (Calhoun 1995). Scarpaci, Coupey, and Reed (2018, 320) most usefully describe artists as 'myth carriers', who retain the power of the myth but infuse it with a degree of 'cultural authority'. Rather provocatively, they also suggest that it is an artist's inherent understanding and critical reflexivity, infused with a deep sense of their culture, heritage and values, that enable them to 'transcend mere celebrity status and become revered civil servants' (330). As Melissen (2005, 24) suggests, 'non-official players have turned out to be extremely agile and capable of mobilizing support at a speed that is daunting for rather more unwieldy foreign policy bureaucracies'.

However, there are also challenges in keeping a high-profile outspoken artist on message when they are co-opted by the state in an ambassadorial role (Clarke 2020). For example, Gabriel Byrne, Ireland's first Cultural Ambassador (2010-2011) was heavily criticised for describing *The Gathering*, a tourism initiative to attract the diaspora to Ireland, as 'a shakedown' for American tourists. While special initiatives also offer artists the opportunity to create new work, there can sometimes be a degree of discomfort if the funding compromises their artistic integrity (Clarke 2014).

Ultimately no amount of funding, strategic diplomatic initiatives or high-quality promotional videos can make up for a nation's actions (Anholt 2006). If a country's activities are at odds with the images, messages and cultural representations which it uses to promote itself abroad, it is open to accusations of hypocrisy (Carter 2015). This is the point where artists are cautious of being used as the spin in a country's nation brand-washing.

3. Research context

3.1 Re-imagining Ireland

In 2005, the Cultural Relations Committee at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) was replaced by Culture Ireland, established as a stand-alone agency, but subsumed as a division in 2012, within the Department of Arts, Heritage and Culture. Locating Culture Ireland within the Ministry for the arts, was a deliberate and innovative decision, given the precedent for international cultural agencies, such as the British Council and Goethe-Institut, to be assigned to foreign affairs. Unlike other cultural agencies, where priorities are informed by strategic diplomatic and economic imperatives, Culture Ireland's mission to promote Irish arts abroad is primarily artist-led, building and enabling international opportunities for artist's career sustainability and progression.

The first Global Irish Economic Forum, described by Slaby (2011, 85) as 'the defining moment in the overt economization of cultural policy', was an invitation-only networking event for '300 of the most influential Irish and Irish-connected people abroad' (dfa.ie) which took place in Farmleigh Estate, Dublin, in September 2009. Unlocking the potential of 'Brand Ireland' to increase impact and influence for Ireland abroad formed the basis of discussions, which subsequently became the purpose of the Global Ireland (2025) nation brand strategy almost 10 years later in 2018. In 2010, then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Brian Cowen, consolidated 'Brand Ireland' in the Irish political lexicon in his speech to announce Harry Clifden as Ireland's Professor of Poetry:

> *I believe that being Irish holds a distinct and intrinsic value. Ireland is a brand. People know us. Our country, her landscape and her culture are known the world over. We must connect with that brand now and use it to give us the competitive advantage in a globalised world that is increasingly the same.* (Cowen 2010)

Political recognition of the unique role of Irish arts and culture in building reputation and influence for Ireland abroad was further reinforced by former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny at the launch of *Ireland 100* (a three-week festival of Irish arts in Washington as part of the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*). He reaffirmed that 'we wish them [artists] to represent us, as the essence of who we are as a still-young Republic with an ancient people' (Rafter 2022, 180).

However, several challenges emerged in optimising the potential of 'Brand Ireland', one of which was what Graham (1997, 7) described as the 'symbolic universe of traditional Irish Ireland'. Estimated to be worth in excess of €5.3 billion to Ireland's tourism industry in 2023,[17] recurring images persisted in the promotion of Ireland abroad of a Celtic mythical landscape of rolling hills and crashing waves, populated by traditional musicians and freckled red-haired children (van Ham 2001). More recently, outdated tropes and stereotypes, a 'rural to riches' story of oppressed post-colonial victim to self-made independent Republic, are evolving into a more contemporary narrative which reflects the 'rich tapestry' (Kirby, Gibbons, and Cronin 2002) and diversity of cultures, ethnicities, genders and nationalities who now self-identify as Irish. Ireland has also somehow managed, despite its transformation into one of the world's thriving economic success stories, to retain a sense of connection to its spiritual and cultural roots. As Friedman (2001, quoted in Negra 2006, 9) notes 'people all over the world are looking to Ireland for its reservoir of spirituality, hoping to siphon off what they can to feed their souls, which have become hungry for something other than consumerism and computers.'

Following a high profile campaign for increased support for the arts during Covid, both Arts Council[18] and Culture Ireland funding increased to a historic €134 million and €7.4 million, respectively, in 2024.[19] In addition to a tax exemption for artists introduced in 1969, two other significant and pioneering initiatives have garnered Ireland considerable international respect and enhanced its reputation abroad as a cultural and creative nation. Established in 1981 by former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Charles Haughey, Aosdána (people of the arts) is a 'quasi-academy' (Cooke 2011, 108) of artists who are elected by their peers on the basis of their outstanding contribution to the Irish creative arts. Membership of Aosdána is considered to be highly prestigious, with artists entitled to an annual 'cnuas' (stipend) of just over €20,000 per annum. Furthermore, in 2022, Ireland

[17]https:// itic.ie
[18] A statutory agency, based in the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, with primary responsibility for funding and development of the arts in Ireland.
[19] https://gov.ie

became the first nation in the world to introduce a Basic Income for the Arts scheme (BIA) whereby selected artists are entitled to a weekly income of €325 in order to pursue their practice. The scheme, which costs €33.8 million per year, received widespread national and international acclaim, from artists, the media and policymakers, with the *New York Times* noting that Ireland's initiative 'stands out because it is Government run' (Marshall 2023). Interestingly, Barton, Hadley, and Murphy (2023) observed that such a BIA scheme further instrumentalised the arts by connecting arts practice to issues of value for money and productivity, thereby aligning cultural policy even more closely to the broader political agenda.

One of the most significant shifts in cultural policy in Ireland in recent years has been the development of an all-of-government approach, led by the Department of the Taoiseach, in overseeing the coordination and prioritisation of funding and special initiatives, such as the *Decade of Centenaries* and the *Creative Ireland* programme. This allows for a closer alignment with overall government policy while also ensuring a strategic coordination across multiple departments and state agencies. In a signature move, the Global Ireland division of the Department of Foreign Affairs was established in 2018 and quickly launched *Global Ireland 2025*, a nation brand strategy to increase impact and influence for Ireland abroad. The unit is a merging of the remit of the Department of Foreign Affairs Global Irish division and what was the fifth pillar of the *Creative Ireland* programme, which aimed to 'ensure that Irish culture and creativity is recognised as a vital asset in building Ireland's reputation and influence abroad' (creativeireland.ie). In addition, the all-of-government *Creative Ireland* programme, the legacy initiative of the *Ireland 2016* centenary programme, which aims to place creativity at the centre of public policy, was extended for a further five years to 2027, with an annual budget of over €10 million.[20] An indication of the close alignment of Irish arts as a strategic component of Ireland's nation brand is evidenced in a series of joint initiatives between Culture Ireland and the Global Ireland division, including the recruitment and funding of a team of Cultural Officers in London, New York, Paris and Berlin.

The significance and complexity of funding and policy relationships between divisions, programmes and departments is illustrated in Figure 1, which builds on McQuaid's (2020) framework of state-funded arts organisations, while also taking into account the strategic oversight role of the Department of the Taoiseach. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the all-of-government programmes are led by externally recruited arts (*Creative Ireland*) and

[20] https://oireachtas.ie

tourism (*Ireland 2016* and *Global Ireland*) professionals rather than senior civil servants, and also the influence they exert in the development of Irish cultural and international relations policy and practice.

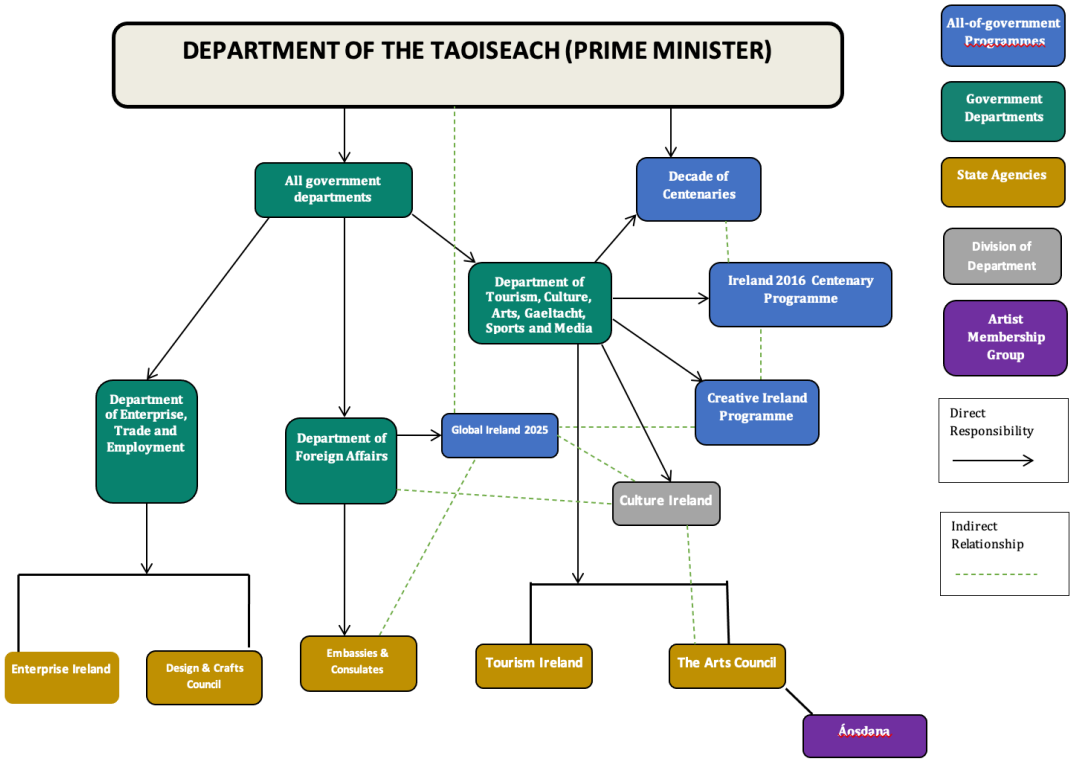


Figure 1. Structure and institutional relationships for the arts in Ireland

4. Methodology

This article takes an analytic autoethnographic approach (Anderson 2006), thereby optimising the researcher's insider knowledge of international cultural relations, combined with practitioner expertise in government-led nation brand initiatives. In her roles with both the British Council Ireland (2001-2005) and Culture Ireland (2007-2014), the researcher designed and implemented international cultural relations policies and strategies for both agencies, before subsequently leading on communications for the all-of-government *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland* programmes.

Autoethnography recognises that 'personal experience cannot be easily or definitively separated from social and relational contexts' (Manning and Adams 2015, 180). In

conducting autoethnographic research, Chang (2008) notes that data can be collected from external sources through interviews, artifacts, and a literature review. The researcher's unique experience, insights and nuanced understanding of Irish international cultural relations pointed towards an analytic autoethnographic approach (Anderson 2006, 378) which recognises the researcher's status as having 'specific knowledge of the research group, analytic reflexivity, discussions with key informants beyond the self and a commitment to theoretical analysis.'

Interviewing artists for research purposes is often used to understand and appreciate their creative process, to gain knowledge about the motives for making work and the particular influences that have impacted on them and their practice (Cotte, Tse, and Inglis 2016). There is also a body of research, drawing on interviews with curators, on their critical and influential role in the visual arts and museums in country branding (Rodner and Kerrigan 2018). The emergence of what Mohlo (2021) describes as transnational 'star curators' are also becoming a feature of place-branding, where cities such as Qatar and Singapore are developing their brand image as 'cultural hubs'.

The technique of purposive sampling was used for this study, whereby respondents were selected based on the researcher's knowledge and judgement that they are 'most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly 2010, 317). A qualitative research method was adopted, which facilitated an in-depth focus using a small sample size, with a group of individuals who 'are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest' (Palinkas et al. 2015, 534). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 'ultra-elites' (Zukerman 1972), specifically artists, who have particular knowledge and hold significant power within an existing group of elites (Harvey 2011).

Having secured approval from the university ethics committee, three female and seven male high profile internationally renowned Irish artists, representing literature, theatre, dance and music, were interviewed for this study (Figure 2). Respondents were chosen on the basis of three criteria: demonstrable international recognition as an Irish artist including significant media coverage and recognised awards; self-identifies as an Irish artist creating work that is informed by and interrogates issues relating to national identity; and whose work, voice or name has been referenced in promotional materials produced by state agencies or government departments as part of strategic promotional initiatives. While attempts to secure interviews with artists of colour or mixed race proved unsuccessful, the researcher ensured that the representative sample of interviewees included a balance of

participants with regard to gender, art form and geographical location (rural/urban and Ireland/outside Ireland).

Name	***Role***	***Date***	***Duration***	***Location***
Anonymous	Acclaimed playwright, performer	February 4, 2023	01:02:53	Zoom
Anne Enright	Booker Prize-winning author	July 10, 2023	56:52	In person
Martin Hayes	Irish traditional musician, founder member of *The Gloaming* trad super-group and Cultural Ambassador	March 29, 2023	53:11 mins	In person
Garry Hynes	Tony Award-winning theatre director and founder of Druid Theatre Company	March 28, 2023	38:08 mins	Zoom
Michael Keegan Dolan	Award-winning choreographer, performer and founder of Teac Damsa (formerly Fabulous Beast Dance Company)	November 26, 2021	48:26 mins	Zoom
Manchán Magan	Bi-lingual author, playwright, performer, broadcaster	July 28, 2023	47:47 mins	Zoom
Philip McMahon	Playwright, founder and producer of ThisIsPopBaby	July 13, 2023	36:12	In person
Fearghus Ó Conchúir	Choreographer, performer	July 18, 2023	01:02:19 mins	Zoom
Camille O'Sullivan	Actress, singer	September 20, 2023	01:13:45 mins	In person
Enda Walsh	Award-winning playwright, screenwriter	June 27, 2023	47:54 mins	Zoom

Figure 2. Interview participants

The researcher's knowledge and personal connections with the artists was a critical factor in persuading them to participate in the study and, most probably, towards gaining their trust to reveal valuable insights and high-quality data. While scholars have raised concerns regarding autoethnography as being 'too inward looking' (Alvesson, cited in Poerwandari 2021, 313), due diligence has been given to the possibility of bias in the interpretation and analysis of the dataset through the use of deliberative reflexivity (Ibrahim and Edgley 2015) which enabled the researcher to be aware of the impact of 'positionality, identity and power in producing knowledge' (Corlett and Mavin 2019, 30). The researcher fully understands and respects the ethical responsibilities with regard to bias in conducting analytic autoethnographic research and has attempted to mitigate any issues by conducting the study 'honestly, authentically and meaningfully' (Poerwandari 2021, 318).

A series of open-ended questions were posed to each artist relating to their perception of how Ireland is promoted abroad, the role of the arts as a tool of cultural diplomacy and nation branding, and their experiences as nation 'brand' ambassadors. Given the limited time available for each interview, a set of guiding questions was sent to each interviewee in advance. Four interviews were conducted in person and six were conducted online over Zoom. All interviews were recorded, with the permission of the artist. The interviews were transcribed using two AI systems (Rev.com and Otter.ai) and checked thoroughly, through repeated listening to the audio recordings and re-reading of the transcripts, for accuracy and nuance. Nine of the artists interviewed agreed to be identified as part of the study, while one interviewee requested pseudonymisation. All interviewees, including three who requested transcripts of their interviews, signed and completed informed consent forms, agreeing for their interviews to be used as part of this study.

The dataset was uploaded to NVivo, a computer system designed to assist researchers in qualitative data analysis through data management, data coding and data analysis (Mortlemans 2019). Scholars have observed the potential for 'conflation of qualitative data analysis with the coding process' (Mortlemans 2019, 441) and the potential for the software to 'distance the researcher from his data'. However, the limited dataset combined with the researcher's in-depth knowledge of the topic and repeated listening to recordings and reading of original transcripts, mitigated against these issues arising in the first place. A six-step thematic analysis was conducted in order to determine 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 17) which were then interpreted and analysed to form the research findings.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. 'Brand Ireland'

'Ireland has long been a figment of the American imagination' [21]

Aronczyk (2008) argues that national governments have adopted the practice and tactics of nation branding in order to manage their image and reputation amongst foreign publics. For small island nations like Ireland, there is an economic imperative to attract investment and exert influence in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. An early adopter

[21] Irish film-maker Bob Quinn quoted in Meaney, 2006, p. 255.

when it came to managing its reputation and image abroad, Ireland is no stranger to nation branding (Clancy 2011; Fanning 2006, 2011). Furthermore, there was strong agreement from those interviewed for this study of a strategic shift in the constructed narrative of how Ireland is promoted abroad. As an engaged and active member of the EU, and a vocal participant on the UN Security Council (1962; 1981-1982; 2001-2002; 2021-2022), Ireland is emerging from the traditional 'Irish Ireland' (Graham1997) of its post-colonial past and is deliberately positioning itself on the global stage as a progressive, innovative and mature independent Republic.

Nevertheless, Ireland faces the challenge of shedding the skin of its post-colonial origin story, while retaining a connection to its cultural past, and crafting a new narrative of a progressive twenty-first century nation. Interviewees observed that Ireland has managed to shrewdly balance its heritage brand as a verdant green and wild landscape, a nation steeped in Celtic mythology, music and a storytelling culture, with the image of a modern, high-powered tech and pharma-based growth economy.

> '*I think we are always navigating the kind of ancientness of culture and its long traditions alongside our absolute contemporary relevance and fit for purpose and, you know, innovative and cutting edge. We're navigating both. But our roots are deep. I think we trade on that'* Fearghus Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023.

Tony Award-winning director and founder of Druid, Garry Hynes is cognisant of the deliberate and strategic self-consciousness which motivated the new Irish Republic to set about building a nation state through the use of images '*that the people living in it (Ireland) knew not to be true but colluded with it in order to distinguish itself'* (Hynes, interview, March 2023). Choreographer and founder of Teac Damsa Michael Keegan Dolan agrees that '*Ireland has been preoccupied with its self-image, its public image, in a kind of disproportionate sort of a way compared to other countries*' (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021). For singer and performer Camille O'Sullivan, the perception of Ireland as both deeply traditional and entirely modern is something to be embraced '*because anything that celebrates who we are as a nation and as artists is important'*. Reflecting on Ireland's enduring reputation as a nation of 'literary giants' she adds the caveat that '*we have to be very careful not to milk it'* (O'Sullivan, interview, September 2023).

Interviewees expressed some discomfort, however, with regard to representations of Irish identity and Irishness as post-colonial victims, a people who are obsessed with religion and land. Author Anne Enright wryly observes that international publishers '*don't want any*

more characters sitting in a confession box because we feel we've had that. We want something different ... enough donkeys already' (Enright, interview, July 2023). Author and broadcaster Manchán Magan expressed reservations about managing the traditional versus modern tensions within the nation brand: '*Are we traditional? Are we progressive? Are we hypocrites? Or are we some sort of new, innovative creative thing*?' (Magan, interview, July 2023).

In spite of a decline of 3.2% in Ireland's GDP in 2023, the economy is forecast to grow by 1.2% in 2024 and 3.6% in 2025, due to improved global trade, falling inflation and a strong labour market (commission.europa.eu). Ireland's economic stability combined with a buoyant job market, has contributed to high levels of immigration, with over 12% of Ireland's population currently identifying as non-Irish (Milcazzi 2023). The increasing diversity of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities prevalent in Irish cities and towns is forging a new paradigm of national identity and a multiplicity of narratives and perspectives which challenge notions of a 'romanticised' Ireland. Theatre producer, director and founder of *ThisIsPopBaby*, Phillip McMahon believes it's important to dispel some of the notions of Ireland which persist with some audiences overseas because *'the Ireland that they imagine, really doesn't exist*' (McMahon, interview, July 2023).

Both Ó Conchúir and Magan reiterate the importance of having a multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the construction of an authentic nation brand, even if it means a degree of tension between modern and traditional Ireland. This resonates with Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) and Isar (2010) who characterise the power of cultural diplomacy as a means to 'crack open' the rhetoric of an outdated nation brand in order to reflect a more pluralist and diverse nation. The term 'meta-power' (Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Nye 2002), which recognises the value of introspection and criticism as key to a nation's credibility, is evoked by Ó Conchúir in his observation of an authentic national narrative that *'reflects Ireland in all its complexities ... in its successes and in its failures, in its darkness and light*' (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023).

Ahn and Wu's (2015) assertion around the positive impact of a nation branding itself as a cultural state resonates strongly in the context of Ireland. The contribution of Irish arts as a cornerstone of Ireland's nation brand was noted by Hynes who reiterated that culture *'is one of the important building blocks of the impression that we want to create'* (Hynes, interview, March 2023). When asked if they would like to be involved in the development of a nation brand initiative as 'collaborative non-state actors' (Lee and Ayhan 2015), McMahon is conscious that '*there would naturally be a tension as the agenda is extreme*

positivity' (McMahon, interview, July 2023). Nevertheless, most of those interviewed believe that artists have a distinctive and important role in nation branding and were interested to be involved in a strategy from the outset: '*There's kind of an energy there of wanting to be part of that conversation and wanting to take your place at the table'* (McMahon, interview July 2023).

All respondents stressed the importance of authenticity and critical self-reflection as a vital component of an effective nation brand, which correlates with Nye's (2010) key principles of 'smart' power. However, Enright notes the inherent challenge in this *'as you can't manufacture authenticity ... that's oxymoronic ... that's doomed to fail already*' (Enright, interview, July 2023). Musician and Cultural Ambassador (appointed in January 2019), Martin Hayes emphasised that '*we must also be able to say what we are messing up ... if we can own that as well, then what you say in the affirmative and in the positive about yourself is much more powerful'* (Hayes, interview, March 2023).

Ó Conchúir eschewed the term 'construction' when asked about how a nation brand is developed: '*I say performance and modelling ... because construction gives me a sense that we're all kind of sitting around with a blank slate and we're sort of imagining, oh, what should we make it be?*' (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023). Hayes believed that the use of the word 'brand' is tarnished but he accepts that '*we don't have an alternative word, so we have to use it ... it's kind of, in a few short bullet points, who we are*' (Hayes, interview, March 2023).

Keegan Dolan expressed some concerns about the ulterior motives behind nation branding: '*If you're selling something, what and why are you selling it? It's usually about money'* (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021). According to Hayes, Ireland's nation brand needs to '*represent the truth of who we are'* (Hayes, interview, March 2023), something which was echoed strongly by another interviewee who remarked that '*it's the job of the artist to reflect Ireland as it is, not what Ireland should be*.' (Anonymous, 2023). The incompatibility between making work which is critical of the state or government policies and the function of a positivist nation brand is, for one artist, an insurmountable challenge.

> '*All artists are effectively troublemakers ... and usually for the powers that be, they should be, that's their role, so the idea of them being co-opted into branding exercises is something that's deeply troubling for me*.' (Anonymous, 2023).

5.2 The art of soft power

All respondents were familiar with the term 'soft power' and its use within the lexicon of cultural diplomacy. They understood the nuances and, at times, tensions which exist between cultural and foreign policy objectives. Hayes appreciated that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) '*have a different remit than any artist is going to have ... they will always be part of what the government wants to do and they can select artists that represent that*' (Hayes, interview, March 2023). Hynes also acknowledged the critical role of DFA in signifying the changes taking place in Ireland: '*I think that Foreign Affairs were the first to recognise that culture wasn't, and I'm speaking metaphorically, necessarily dancing at the crossroads*' (Hynes, interview, March 2023).

Nevertheless, a recurring challenge in nation branding, as discussed by Dzenovska (2005), is the lack of strategic leadership and coordination between the relevant government departments, state agencies and civil society. Ó Conchúir appreciated the importance for state agencies '*that they understand what each one is doing'* while also recognising that, at times, the lack of coordination *'was fun, the diversity was fun, so I'm a little conflicted about that*' (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023).

When it comes to artists accepting and acknowledging state support, Enright observed that '*I'm sometimes surprised by where the funding comes from ... you might sometimes say no to funding, for example, when the British Council invites you as a British writer and you say, well really, really not*' (Enright, personal interview, July 2023). However, Walsh who has been based in London for many years, was less concerned about the optics of accepting support from a British cultural agency:

> '*I don't have a problem with that at all. Years ago, the British Council brought me to Brazil. They presumed I was some English person who works out of the Royal Court. I had links then with a group in Sao Paulo, I gave all my rights to this theatre company. And they went, my God, what can we give you in return? And they built this library in a favela in Sao Paulo, which was nice (laughs). But you know, that wouldn't have arrived if I hadn't taken the ticket and just gone there*.' Enda Walsh, interview, June 2023.

Hynes, however, reiterated the importance of maintaining artistic freedom in the choice of work and of ensuring that state funding doesn't dictate that '*we won't do that particular play because it wouldn't go down well'* (Hynes, interview, March 2023). Magan believed

there is a curatorial agenda at play when accepting state support: '*we're all in favour of curatorial roles when they align with our outlooks ... a liberal sensibility and a pro-minority sensibility. But if we're accepting that idea, we also need to accept the paradigms of that curation*' (Magan, interview, July 2023). McMahon agreed that '*the work that travels is curated, there is a selection ... I think there is a tension there about who gets to travel, what stories get told*' (McMahon, interview, July 2023).

Keegan Dolan recognised the paradox when an artist is programmed by international presenters because they simply have access to state funding rather than because of the quality of the work: *'Is it a good thing that bad Irish work is now travelling around the world*?' (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021). This echoed concerns expressed by Holden (2004) and Isar (2010) regarding the motivation for artists to jump on a funding bandwagon, which can raise questions about the quality of the work that is supported to tour abroad. Critics of the Culture Ireland and Department of Foreign Affairs *Zeitgeist Irland 24*: *a year-long programme of Irish arts in Germany* feared that it would be 'a year of the best Irish talent at cultural funding application writing' (Scally 2024).

Nonetheless, all interviewees acknowledged the value placed by governments, and the political class, on the role of the arts '*as one of our major exports that gives us what you call soft power on the global stage'* (Anonymous, 2023). Hynes perceived that '*it's unreal not to expect it to be used in that way*' (Hynes, interview, March 2023).

5.3 'Putting on the Green Jersey'

This is a phrase that has become common parlance in Ireland for putting the national interest first when called upon to represent or promote Ireland. It is regularly applied to artists and sports people in order to evoke a sense of national pride and responsibility but can also be perceived as a pressure to adopt a resolutely pro-positivist attitude. While those interviewed understood their role as cultural ambassadors and were happy to attend or speak at diplomatic networking or promotional events, they were uncomfortable when their work was instrumentalised in the service of an 'official' message or narrative. This chimes closely with Cull's (2009) belief that cultural diplomacy is ineffective and compromised if it is too closely aligned with official government policy. Hayes concurs that an artist's job is to do the best work that they can and '*it lands where it lands, you couldn't really have another agenda*' (Hayes, interview, March 2023).

The value of artistic freedom as a signifier of a healthy state was reiterated by an interviewee who argued that '*it shows an incredibly grown-up democracy, an incredibly grown-up Republic that can fund art that might be subversive, provocative, that can challenge ...*' (Anonymous, 2023). Schneider (2006 191) emphasises the importance of artists as critical insiders, acting as a 'national conscience' in their reflections, observations and interrogation of societal issues. Ó Conchúir agreed that it is the role of artists to '*tell the truth of their identity'* (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023). For Enright, the idea of somehow coordinating artists to deliver on a coherent nation brand was at odds with the individual, and sometimes solitary, nature of an artist's practice and the necessity of artistic freedom if their voice is to be authentic and uncensored.

> '*What you need is the security to make art that may be unsettling, disruptive, sometimes unpleasant ... to be able to manufacture some interesting version of the truth. And that is just very far away from ideas of national policy ... that sense of being able to disrupt ... top down isn't the way it works*.' Anne Enright, interview, July 2023.

Walsh was particularly attentive to situations '*where you feel like the court jester'* and reiterated the vital importance of not undermining or diminishing the value of genuine cultural exchange: '*You know what the figures are like in terms of the amount of money that Irish culture is bringing in ... and what it's doing for Brand Ireland, so you don't wanna give them the opportunity to make you feel as if, you know, oh, it's all just a laugh, isn't it?* (Walsh, interview, June 2023).

Ó Conchúir was quite nuanced in his perception of artists as cultural ambassadors and articulates the need to be aware of the context behind a particular diplomatic event: '*I can understand how to shape myself and present my work in that context because I am an adult and can make those decisions'* (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023). However, Hynes is unequivocal about the inappropriateness of artists acting as a brand ambassador for their country, regardless of whether or not they are in receipt of state funding:

> *'Once we [artists] become PR or feel ourselves that we're forced into a position to become PR, then that contact that exists in a sometimes, you know, delicate way, will break down and everybody will lose.'* Garry Hynes, interview, March 2023.

Very often, it is their deep sense of connection and love for Ireland that will persuade an artist to get involved in an official state-led nation brand initiative. Reflecting about a

particular campaign which included a short commentary and excerpt from his work *Rian*, Keegan Dolan agreed that '*the reason why I got seduced initially was putting on the Green Jersey. I love Ireland and I want Ireland to do well ... I was proud and flattered that I was gonna be included*.' But a clear tension arises when he sees how the text and images are framed in the context of the overarching narrative '*when it came out, something happened in my brain about the whole equation and its exploitative nature ...'* (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021).

McMahon believed that artists have a role as ambassadors when presenting their work abroad but also recognised a responsibility '*to our communities here in Ireland, our queer community, alternative communities ... that we get to buck the narrative of Ireland or of what Irishness is ...*' (McMahon, interview, July 2023). Keegan Dolan agreed that '*whether you have a responsibility or not, you are an ambassador'* and admits that '*it's profoundly important because I'm so proud of where I come from that I behave and manage myself in a particular way ... and I'll talk honestly but lovingly about Ireland'* (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021).

Enright also recognised the potential to represent '*a sense of complexity ... because of a sense of civic engagement'*. However, she also identified the challenge of coordination when dealing with the arts sector '*because you're looking at a lot of individual artists ... you can't tell them what to do, and that annoys people*' (Enright, interview, July 2023). O'Sullivan echoed this point and clarified that '*I've always had the discussion with them [state officials] ... I've got to do it my way, I think I've got to be me, be respectful to it too if you don't think it's your thing*' (O'Sullivan, interview, September 2023). For an artist who might feel under pressure to adopt a particular 'Brand Ireland' position or role, Enright advised:

> *'If you're shipped in a box, then you get out of the box. And you say, actually, I don't fit there. Thank you very much. Nobody's kind of censoring you.'* Anne Enright, interview, July 2023.

Nonetheless, the pressure for an artist to adapt and mutate to fit the shape of a particular policy priority or to address a negative nation brand image was mentioned by several of the interviewees. Hynes concurs that there can be a level of discomfort when artists are asked, or expected, to participate in diplomatic or official events which have a political component such as national policy launches. In these instances, she was aware that '*there's a certain dance that you're involved in that can be uncomfortable on a personal level,*

there's no doubt about that.' She has witnessed culture being used '*quite consciously to sell ourselves a vision of ourselves that every one of us knows is not true*' (Hynes, interview, March 2023). Keegan Dolan also recognised the contradiction in managing expectations around the artist's role as a brand ambassador: '*Artists keep getting hijacked to be things that they're not. I'm not an ambassador, I'm not a social worker, I'm not a climate changer (sic), I'm a visionary poet who makes dances and ambassadors can't be imperfect and weird, they have to say all the right things to the right people*' (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021).

However, not all respondents felt confident and empowered to push back when they are in a vulnerable position and reliant on state funding to support their practice. Despite the achievement of international recognition and acclaim, there can still be a strong element of uncertainty and fear amongst, particularly, younger artists, to balance the need for support with managing 'Brand Ireland' expectations.

> *'Absolutely artists are bullied. But like, here's the thing. You're bullied by people who have the most to gain from 'Brand Ireland'. You're bullied by people who are in positions usually of power.*' (Anonymous, 2023)

McMahon acknowledged the pressure on artists to '*sing for their supper'*. But he also conceded that, while at times it can be uncomfortable, when in receipt of public funding '*these are things that you have to accept'* (McMahon, interview, July 2023). The competitiveness inherent in public funding can also motivate artists to make work around particular issues of concern for a state or funding body, such as climate change or social justice. '*The mind goes to the money ... if I make this kind of work, I will get support, therefore I'll make this kind of work. Authenticity is gone then; it's like the tail wags the dog*' (Keegan Dolan, interview, November 2021).

The challenge of speaking truth to power for an artist was noted by O'Sullivan who observed that '*artists are usually told to sing your songs, do your acting and stop causing problems, don't get involved in politics*' (O'Sullivan, interview, September 2023). Hayes had mixed feelings about artists expressing political opinions: '*Who are you to say any more than the shopkeeper ... just because you have a platform doesn't mean you know any more ...*' (Hayes, interview, March 2023). The personal and professional risks for artists who challenge the pro-positive narrative of a nation brand can be harshly felt. As one interviewee observed: '*All of these people are part of a system that it needs these things to be, you know, you need to remain positive. So, anybody who speaks out against something*

is torn apart, really' (Anonymous, 2023). Hynes had never felt '*caught in the crosshairs of what is and what isn't acceptable'* but, at the same time, she understands the delicate line that artists walk when their work is co-opted for political or promotional purposes:

> *'Governments will use the power of Irish artists to achieve certain things and Irish artists will benefit from that use ... you have to be very careful because you are constantly negotiating an almost unspoken line and it can be tricky.'* Garry Hynes, interview, March 2023.

But for one artist, the ulterior motive when a head of state gifts, for example, a book of poetry to another world leader, is merely to '*create political capital for themselves and to sell Ireland ... but we are rarely getting paid for it*' (Anonymous, 2023). For others, the uncomfortable nature, such as full-frontal nudity, or disturbing themes within their work has meant that they haven't felt pressure from the political establishment to '*cosy up to me'* (Ó Conchúir, interview, July 2023). Enright keenly observes that '*there's no interest in my affiliations ... there's very few votes in it, I mean, politicians are all about the votes really*' (Enright, interview, July 2023).

6. Conclusion

This article set out to establish the degree to which elite cultural intermediaries, acting as collaborative non-state actors, can play a strategic role in the construction and efficacy of an authentic nation brand. While scholars of nation branding and cultural diplomacy agree on the significant role of cultural actors in building a country's reputation, image and impact, artists are not considered by policy makers, senior officials or brand strategists as valuable co-authors in the construction of a nation brand. The findings of this study would suggest that artists are cognisant of their role as brand ambassadors and are keen to play their part in both holding the state to account when its actions are not aligned with its words, and to use their profile and access to international publics as a platform to enhance their home country's image and reputation.

This study attempts, for the first time, to find points of connection and opportunities for best practice between nation branding and cultural diplomacy scholarship and internationally renowned high-profile artists, as experienced cultural non-state actors. Increased investment in the Arts Council and Culture Ireland, combined with pioneering initiatives such as Aosdána, *Creative Ireland* and the Basic Income for the Arts, have contributed to Ireland's reputation as a cultural nation. These are long term strategic

initiatives which align with Anholt's (2008) principle that *substance* must be coupled with *strategy* and frequent *symbolic actions,* if it is to result in an enhanced reputation. While undoubtedly there are challenges, for both artists and policymakers, in co-authoring the construction and implementation of a nation brand strategy, the potential reward is the creation of a brand that is truly inclusive, authentic and credible. It also enables artists to be reimagined as critical insiders who are respected, valued and empowered in their role as nation brand specialists and engaged citizen artists.

Limitations of the study

Given the particular requirements of the study with regard to participants with a high level of international profile, and an established track record of state funding to tour their work abroad, the sample size is small. Nevertheless, it is representative of a range of Irish artists, across art forms, genders and backgrounds, who have achieved international recognition and have been supported by the state to present their work abroad. Although this is not unusual in the case of qualitative research, particularly where informants have specific expertise and unique knowledge relating to the research topic, future research might expand the sample size to include artists of colour, diversity of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

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Declaration of Interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

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Chapter Six: Publication Four

6.1 Introduction

The final article in the thesis, entitled '*Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding'* was accepted for publication in 2025 in the journal *Cultural Trends*.

The article examines how Irish artists have become central to Ireland's international reputation and nation branding strategy. The article is particularly concerned with the second and third research sub-questions which focus on the effect of Ireland's nation branding on artists and on the future of Irish cultural diplomacy policy. It argues that the Irish government increasingly uses the arts as a tool of soft power, diplomacy, and international influence, particularly through policies such as *Global Ireland 2025* and *Culture 2025*. The article explores the relationship between artists, policymakers, and branding strategists, concluding that Irish cultural policy is becoming increasingly instrumentalised in the service of national reputation-building.

One of the achievements of the article is the scope and expertise of the interview participants including policymakers, government officials, artists, cultural administrators, and branding experts. By combining theoretical discussion with firsthand testimony, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural diplomacy operates in practice in Ireland today. It addresses the primary and second research sub-question in a discussion and analysis of the evolution of Ireland's nation branding in the decade 2025 to 2025 and investigating the effect of the new approach and strategy on Irish cultural diplomacy.

The article re-establishes, and augments, the significance of the primary theoretical frameworks which form the basis of this thesis, namely nation branding and cultural diplomacy, while also introducing the related concepts of instrumentalisation of the arts and the arm's length principle. Ireland's nation brand is portrayed as rooted in ideas such as independence, empathy, creativity, and resilience. Irish artists are considered particularly valuable in terms of Ireland's nation branding and international profile and reputation because they communicate these qualities authentically in their work and their engagement with international publics. While traditionally, cultural diplomacy emphasises mutual exchange and intercultural dialogue, the author argues that Ireland's current approach often resembles one-way cultural promotion rather than genuine cultural exchange.

A major achievement of the article is its identification of contradictions within Ireland's cultural policy. On one hand, the state celebrates artistic freedom and authenticity. On the other hand, it strategically funds artists to tour in regions that align with national economic or diplomatic interests. A further achievement is the origination of the concept of transnational nation branding**,** which emerges when artists independently criticise the policies and values of another nation state, while simultaneously representing their country abroad.

Another important contribution of the article is its critique of Ireland's major policy frameworks. *Culture 2025* is described as Ireland's first comprehensive cultural policy framework, while *Global Ireland 2025* is presented as the country's first whole-of-government nation branding strategy. These policies aim to coordinate culture, diplomacy, trade, and tourism under a unified international strategy. The article ultimately concludes that Ireland's approach to cultural diplomacy has become dominated by nation branding logic. Rather than focusing on mutual cultural understanding, policy increasingly emphasises reputation management and international visibility.

In summary, the article's main achievement lies in demonstrating how Ireland's cultural success and cultural policy framework has become intertwined with the government's nation branding objectives and strategy. The author argues that although Irish artists contribute enormously to Ireland's international reputation abroad, there is a growing risk that Irish artists will become further instrumentalised and institutionalised within Irish government policy to achieve primarily political and economic outcomes

6.2 Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding

Abstract

Irish artists are at the forefront in building Ireland's reputation abroad as a creative and cultural nation. They play a vital role in reinforcing Ireland's nation brand as an independent, empathetic Republic, communicating the challenges and complexities of an evolving contemporary Irish identity. Whether by accident or design, an alignment of Irish government policies, combined with significant investment in the arts, has positioned Irish artists to play a leading role in Ireland's nation branding. Through qualitative research with senior officials in cultural policy, international cultural relations and government communications, this article explores the symbiotic relationship between artists, policymakers and brand strategists which has contributed to the instrumentalisation of Irish artists as articulate and authentic nation brand ambassadors. The author argues that the imposition and dominance of the *Global Ireland 2025* strategy risks institutionalising Ireland's policy of cultural promotion as an instrument of nation branding.

Keywords: Ireland, cultural diplomacy, instrumentalisation of the arts, nation branding

Introduction

The term "punches above its weight" is regularly evoked to describe the "moment" that contemporary Ireland is experiencing in terms of international recognition and acclaim for its writers, actors and musicians. The *New York Times* charted the rise of a "new wave" of artists such as Lisa O'Neill, Lankum and Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin, reinforcing the "creative bounty echoed in other Irish arts resonating abroad" (Hermes, 2023), while the *Guardian* observed that Ireland is currently "the world's literary powerhouse" (McCusker, 2024). By virtue of their practice, independence and access to international publics, artists influence perceptions of a nation's identity and values, rendering them powerful instruments within a government's nation brand armoury (Dinnie, 2022). Former Chair of the Irish Arts Council (2019-2023) and Culture Ireland[22] (2018-2019), Rafter (2022) reaffirms Ireland's use of the arts as a vital component of its nation branding. Irish artists are perceived as unofficial ambassadors by political elites and an important tool of reputation building and

[22] Founded in 2005, Culture Ireland is the division of the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport tasked with the funding of Irish arts abroad.

soft power to promote "appropriate" images of Ireland abroad (Gibney, Kennedy and O'Malley, 2019).

Previous research by the author (Boughton, 2024) established the distinctive role of Irish artists as effective co-authors of Ireland's nation brand narrative. In this article, the author has widened the research lens to investigate the policy implications of Ireland's first nation branding strategy on Irish cultural diplomacy. Qualitative research in the form of interviews with 20 policymakers, senior officials and brand strategists, alongside artists, generated new insights on Ireland's approach to cultural diplomacy and nation branding, foregrounding the interviewees' unique perspective on the topic rather than a generalized understanding of the phenomenon (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021).

With the emergence of *Global Ireland 2025* as the dominant policy lever in Ireland's strategy for international relations, under the guidance and leadership of the Department of the Taoiseach, this article examines the impact of this whole-of-government policy on Ireland's approach to cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, drawing on Anholt's (2020) guiding principle of cultural relations as the most effective mechanism to build reputation and foster shared understanding between nations, the author challenges Ireland's persistence in pursuing a strategy of cultural promotion as a legitimate form of cultural diplomacy and nation branding.

Cultural diplomacy

Nations have long capitalised on their indigenous culture as a means of differentiating themselves from others, with artists considered to be distinctive intangible assets, with the power to unlock significant added "brand" value in terms of reputation, global standing and influence (Bradley and Kennelly, 2008). Justification of state funding of the arts frequently refers to the importance of artists in articulating the distinctive culture and values which characterise a nation, engendering international recognition and prestige, and strengthening national identity (O'Hagan, 2016). Rodner (2022) argues that governments frequently instrumentalise a nation's arts and creative industries to influence and, on occasion, "correct" negative perceptions.

The emergence of instrumentalisation within cultural policy, which links funding of the arts with socio-economic outcomes, is leading to what Hadley and Gray (2017) describe as "hyper instrumentalism", whereby purely cultural values are of little consequence to a dominant political elite. For smaller nations, achieving global recognition through

association with distinctive cultural figures enhances their profile on the global stage (Dinnie, 2022). The role of artists as co-authors of an authentic nation brand also allows for a greater degree of nuance in the communication of complex issues of national identity (Boughton, 2024). State funding of artists to present their work abroad builds connection and engagement with an international diaspora, alongside generating new audiences and opportunities for their work. Additionally, the arm's length principle, enshrined as a cornerstone of contemporary Western cultural policy, facilitates government support for the arts while also freeing artists from interference by the state and from for-profit interests (Harding, 2018).

There can be a tendency within international cultural relations practice to invest in a "show and tell" form of display diplomacy, whereby funds are invested in touring a curated programme of artists to select international audiences. This tactic, which Anholt (2020, p. 102) describes as "rolling the best of their culture into a ball and firing it at foreigners" is designed to appeal to an elite arts audience, international presenters and the global media. Nonetheless, scholars have noted the emergence of a more holistic understanding of arts audiences as collaborators and co-creators, rather than solely consumers of art (Rentschler, 2002). Furthermore, Walmsley (2019, p. 43) proposes we are entering what he describes as the "enrichment period" which foregrounds engagement and experience as the primary motivators for the post-postmodern arts audience, replacing the "reductive and transactional" mode of purely cultural promotion.

Considered by many to be the architect of nation branding, Anholt has remained steadfast in his belief in the importance of cultural relations as "the only demonstrably effective form of nation branding" (2023, p. 225). While cultural relations is viewed as a "two-way, non-coercive model for the practice of soft power" (Singh, 2017, p. 16), there remains a degree of uncertainty within government and in diplomatic circles as to what exactly constitutes cultural diplomacy (Mark, 2009). Although often used interchangeably with cultural relations, cultural diplomacy is perceived as a lesser tool of public diplomacy (ibid.). Ahn and Hu (2015, p. 160) define cultural diplomacy as "the use of the arts and culture in building the image of a country abroad". The establishment of cultural institutes such as the British Council and the Instituto Cervantes combine language teaching with arts and cultural events in their host countries. In the case of Culture Ireland, it operates a one-way "broadcast" style of cultural promotion, a tactic which reinforces the role of the arts as "a powerful manifestation of nation branding" (Hurn, 2016, p. 84). Critics of the instrumentalisation of the arts as a tool of nation branding detect the risk of commodification, where the rationale shifts from promoting understanding between

cultures to the more explicit furtherance of purely economic goals (Browning and de Oliveira, 2017).

The conceptual ambiguity of soft power, often associated with cultural diplomacy, has also proven to be a "contested subject" (Hayden, 2012; Nye, 2011a, p. 5) with little consensus on an agreed definition or approach to its study (Sevin, 2025). Witnessing a return to the dominance of military hard power, Anholt (2010) stressed the importance for governments to invest in the instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Nisbett (2016), however, argues that terms such as "exchange" and "mutuality" are unhelpful as a basis of cultural policymaking, especially where evidence of impact is required. Furthermore, she cogently asserts that soft power has usurped cultural diplomacy as a more "market-friendly" form of merely replicating existing power structures (ibid). More recently, Kaneva and Cassinger (2022, p. 305) argue that the inherently gendered nature of "coercive" hard power, and the putatively "feminine" soft power, positions nation branding and public diplomacy as inferior in the "masculinist" landscape of international relations. Just as the term "brand" has dominated much of the critical discourse and framing of nation branding, the affordances of "power" forms the basis of much scrutiny of the international relations tactics deployed by nation states.

Nation branding

In a globalised world, nations compete for inward investment, geo-political influence and legitimacy amongst increasingly diverse global publics (Aronczyk, 2008). Describing nation branding as "the cautious slow-moving husbandry of existing perceptions" Anholt (2002b, p. 232) proposed that by adopting a "country as brand" strategy, nations can unlock their potential and compete in a modern globalised economy. Sevin and White (2011) describe nation branding as the methods nations use to tell their own stories in order to influence the attitude of international target markets. The unique potential of nation branding to provide "culturally grounded differentiation" (Dinnie, 2022, p. 5) is a recurring theme within nation brand discourse. Anholt (2002a, p. 11) stressed the value of an authentic nation brand as "the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country [which is] reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between the country and the rest of the world." Hart (2020, p. 222) observed the shift taking place in US foreign policy whereby "public diplomacy has the ultimate goal of nation branding." Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis (2023, p. 116) argue that nation branding, unlike public diplomacy, is "underpinned by corporate market logic" and focused on international publics. The rise of a nation branding industry has led to an

unprecedented expansion of practitioners engaged in maintaining a nation's reputation to include those involved in culture, as well as politics (Scaglia, 2020). This chimes with Aronczyk's (2008, p. 54) observations that a nation brand is at its most effective when citizens "live the [nation] brand" through their behavior and actions.

As with public diplomacy, nation branding is concerned with reputation and influence, an instrument of soft power that enables a country to inform and shape the geo-political agenda (Nye, 2010). It is often characterised as a neo-liberal construct which aims to reinterpret and reconstruct national identity and nationhood to serve the ambition of the nation state (Kaneva, 2011). Critics of the instrumental approach to nation branding maintain that it is challenged by any notion of diversification of the nation brand (Yun, 2022). Fan (2006) cautions against misguided attempts at nation branding which depict a homogenous national identity. Scholars also point to its reductionist tactics, using stereotypes and national tropes to reinforce or recalibrate perceptions of a nation state (Kaneva, 2021). Furthermore, the tendency for nation branding to adopt a pro-positivist narrative also risks excluding diverse or marginalised voices in society (Iwabuchi, 2015). The appropriation of nation branding by political elites and the imposition of versions of collective identity, as a means of control of particular social groups, is observed by Sevin, Jiménez-Martínez and Miño (2025). This author has argued that citizen participation in the construction of a new national narrative can contribute positively to an authentic nation brand strategy at what Kaufmann describes as "tipping points", such as national commemorative events (Boughton, 2023). Nonetheless, the importance of engaging and communicating with local citizens and diasporic communities, alongside external publics, is essential if a nation branding strategy is to be effective and authentic (Iwabuchi (2015).

Although it is just over two decades since it first emerged as a concept and practice, there remains some confusion and misunderstanding within nation branding around what constitutes a nation, with perspectives viewing it "either as a political entity, a cultural entity or a fusion of the two" (Skinner and Kubacki, 2007, p. 314). Aronczyk (2020, p. 232) is scathing about what she perceives as twenty-five years of "short-term, elite-led, self-serving projects", which has given rise to the evolution of a nation branding industry. Nevertheless, Anholt (2006) has remained resolute in his central tenet that a nation's reputation is based on its contribution to the good of its citizens, to humanity and to the planet. Furthermore, he has contended from the outset and reiterated in subsequent publications and in his interview with this author, of the primacy of cultural relations which foregrounds intercultural dialogue and mutuality, as a cornerstone of effective nation branding.

Despite predictions of its early demise (Aronczyk, 2008) and claims that "the buzz around nation branding has ended" (Mordhorst, 2020, p. 248), it remains a phenomenon which is "exciting, complex, and controversial "(Dinnie, 2008 cited in Sevin, Jiménez-Martínez and Miño, 2025, p. 87). However, increased awareness of the unique role and value of cultural relations as an effective tool of nation branding risks imposing the latter's dominant agenda onto a weaker cultural policy. This not only reinforces the instrumentalising of the arts as a tool of nation branding, it also further risks shoehorning and institutionalising it within government policy and practice.

Policies in practice: *Culture 2025* and *Global Ireland 2025*

Culture 2025, Ireland's first national cultural policy framework since the foundation of the Irish State in 1922, was published by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in January 2020, following a period of consultation with key stakeholders across the arts and cultural industries. The term "framework" points to its overarching vision which incorporates existing policy initiatives including *Global Ireland 2025* and *Creative Ireland.*[23] A key objective of the framework is to ensure a unified approach by all the state agencies, divisions and departments which have some responsibility for culture. This is the first time that the distinctive role of Irish arts and culture is explicitly identified as a strategic policy instrument, designed to achieve Ireland's cultural, economic and nation brand objectives. Three of the eight values outlined in *Culture 2025* ostensibly instrumentalise culture as an economic driver in building a sustainable future and "presenting Ireland to the world" (*Culture 2025*, 2020, p. 6). Critics of *Culture 2025* point to its lack of "strategic intent" (Hadley, Collins and O'Brien, 2020, p. 154) regarding the creative industries and the risk of it being little more than "an umbrella policy for existing initiatives" (ibid). The absence of meaningful engagement with Ireland's growing migrant cultures is also identified as a significant weakness in the policy, with leadership and implementation of practical initiatives left to local government and state agencies (Higgins and Donnellan, 2023).

Global Ireland was established in 2018, as a division of the Department of Foreign Affairs, to oversee the development and implementation of *Global Ireland 2025*, Ireland's first whole-of-government nation branding strategy. The new policy represented the most

[23] Launched in 2017 as the legacy initiative of the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, *Creative Ireland* is a whole-of-government programme which aims to place creativity at the centre of public policy. www.creativeireland.gov.ie

sustained expansion and investment in Ireland's international presence through a series of strategic initiatives, aimed at strengthening Ireland's international profile, influence and impact abroad. The significance of *Global Ireland 2025* lies in its ambition to align Ireland's diplomatic, cultural, tourism and trade ambitions within a single unified nation brand strategy. Both the Culture Ireland and Global Ireland divisions exploit the unique role of arts and culture in building Ireland's nation brand and reputation abroad. Both are engaged in transactional cultural promotion, whereby artists' artistic capital is exchanged for reputational capital, while also unlocking economic rewards by generating international career opportunities for them.

Established practice within cultural diplomacy is for responsibility to be devolved to specialist agencies, with funding and overall policy objectives determined by ministries of foreign or external affairs. Ireland is unusual in its approach, with funding and promotion of Irish arts abroad, originally the remit of the Cultural Relations Committee based in the Department of Foreign Affairs, reassigned to a new division, Culture Ireland, located within the recently renamed Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. Since its establishment in 2005, the division is primarily a funding body for artists to tour their work abroad and to showcase Irish artists at nation brand showcases such as the Venice Biennale and the Edinburgh Festivals. The *Culture Ireland 2022-2025* strategy, which identifies safeguarding artistic freedom and creating opportunities for artists as core values, is explicitly underpinned by the *Culture 2025* and *Global Ireland 2025* policies. O'Brien (2022) draws attention to the strategy's deference to *Global Ireland 2025* in its policy aims which instrumentalise culture as a means of soft power in building Ireland's reputation abroad.

As the timespan of *Global Ireland 2025*, *Culture 2025* and *Culture Ireland 2022-2025* draws to a close, the "neoliberal econometric mindset" (Hadley, Collins and O'Brien, 2020, p. 155) imprinted in these government policies, risks becoming even more explicit in their replacements. With reviews of these policies underway, the timing of this research is particularly pertinent, prompting the author to ask policymakers and artists their views on Ireland's approach directly, rather than surmising, based on printed reports, policies and statements available in the public domain.

Methodology

This article is based on a series of research interviews with individuals who had the most potential to advance understanding and offer unique insights on the research topic.

Following approval by DCU Research Ethics Committee (DCU/REC/2020/102), ten senior government officials and policy advisors, each with expertise and experience in international cultural relations, government communications and nation branding, were interviewed. A further ten Irish artists from the disciplines of film, literature, dance, theatre and music were interviewed to complete the dataset, each of whom had an established international profile, self-identified as an Irish artist and were regularly supported by Culture Ireland.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative research approach, in the form of semi-structured interviews, was based on the value of this method as a means of gaining a nuanced understanding of a complex issue (Creswell, 2013). Elites are defined as "the influential, the prominent, and the well informed" (Dexter, cited in Littig, 2009, p. 99). For the purposes of this research, participants were considered "expert-elite hybrids" (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p. 6), as their knowledge and expertise was highly relevant and specific to this research. They also exercised a considerable degree of power and influence on Irish government policy. Expert-elites are considered extremely knowledgeable in a particular subject area and deemed to be of high status within their field of interest (Döringer, 2020). The author found this hypothesis to be true in conducting this research. It underpinned the importance of purposive sampling as the preferred research method for securing high-value individuals, each of whom had vital knowledge, influence and impact on Irish cultural policy and nation branding practice.

A critical factor in this research is the author's track record in international cultural relations and her ability in "gaining access, acquiring trust, and establishing rapport" (Mikecz, 2012, p. 482) with the interview participants. The author had the opportunity to meet the participants through her professional roles with the British Council and Culture Ireland, alongside her roles with both *Ireland 2016*[24] and *Creative Ireland.* This enabled the author to build a professional rapport through informal conversations, over an extended period, which helped to establish credibility, thereby creating a balance of status between the interviewer and the interviewees (Welch et al., 2002).

Interviewees were approached directly by email and interviews were conducted both online and in person. An interview guide was sent to the participants in advance of the scheduled interview. Although the questions were exploratory in nature, they were specifically

[24] *Ireland 2016* was the all-of-government official state programme to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising.

worded to elicit "process knowledge" (Döringer, 2020, p. 266) which recognises the value of information and expertise strongly connected to the subject and which is "not easily transferable" (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p. 8). As recommended by Parker (2005, cited in Kvale, 2007), the author discussed consent to be named with the interviewees and, with one exception, all agreed to be named, with signed informed consent forms obtained for each participant.

Interview data was transcribed and coded using the NVivo software system. The author conducted a reflexive thematic analysis which recognises coding as an inherently interpretative practice and values author subjectivity as a resource for research (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Following a thorough examination of the coded datasets, key themes emerged which formed the basis of the article's findings and discussion. Figure 1 lists the interview participants and their roles.

Interviewee	**Role**
Simon Anholt	Policy advisor, nation brand strategist, author
Artist #1	Award winning Irish writer, director, performer
Helen Blake	Assistant Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach
John Concannon	Former Director General, Global Ireland, Former Director, *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme* and *Creative Ireland*
Anne Enright	Booker Prize-winning author
Conor Falvey	Assistant Secretary General, Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
John Fanning	Brand strategist, author
Martin Hayes	Musician, Cultural Ambassador
Garry Hynes	Tony Award-winning theatre director, Artistic Director of Druid Theatre Company
Michael Keegan Dolan	Award-winning choreographer, Artistic Director of Teac Damsa
Manchán Magan	Bi-lingual author, playwright, broadcaster
Phillip McMahon	Playwright, director, founder of ThisisPopBaby
Fearghus Ó Conchúir	Choreographer, performer
Ciarán Ó Gaora	Brand strategist
Michael O'Reilly	Political and policy adviser, author
Camille O'Sullivan	Singer, actress
Brendan Rogers	Deputy Secretary General, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Senior Official A	Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
Christine Sisk	Former Director, Culture Ireland
Enda Walsh	Award-winning playwright, screenwriter, director

Figure 1: Interview Participants

Findings and discussion

Ireland's nation brand

There was consensus amongst interview participants that a nation's art and culture was a critical component and signifier of its nation brand. Brand strategist Ó Gaora (2020) observed that "*culture is the way in which a nation expresses and defines itself*" while senior official Rogers agreed that "*you cannot speak about the reputation of Ireland without culture being one of the key pillars*" (Rogers, 2021). Former Director General of Global Ireland, Concannon (2021) believed that "*culture plays a central role in nation branding, and it should do, it should be very much to the core of it*." Moreover, there was agreement that Ireland's international reputation is grounded in its perception as "*a safe cultured country"* (Concannon, 2021) where the arts are "*very often our USP"* (McMahon, 2023). Fanning (2021) believed that arts and culture were "*quite important as a component of an Irish image"* while political adviser O'Reilly (2020) agreed that they formed "*a very important part of the narrative.*" Those interviewed placed considerable value on the role of a nation's artists in shaping its reputation amongst international publics (Bradley and Kennelly, 2008; Dinnie 2022).

Ireland's nation brand narrative is firmly rooted in its foundation as a Republic with "*independence, empathy and partnership*" (Ó Gaora, 2020) identified as its brand values. The "Good Friday Agreement" and Ireland's unbroken UN peacekeeping record were mentioned as important factors in forging Ireland's reputation as "*a people who have come through difficulty"* (Enright, 2023).

> *I think the country has come through a challenging period in terms of conflict on the island and perhaps has some lessons that it can bring to bear in other contexts.* (Falvey, 2021)

Several of those interviewed referenced the arm's length principle, which creates a "cordon sanitaire" between an artist and their funding body, as a vital component of Ireland's cultural policy and practice. O'Reilly (2020) emphasised that "*you cannot have politicians making decisions ... you need a barrier there"* while senior official Falvey (2021) stressed that "*we don't see ourselves as having a curatorial role in terms of what artists might or might not be saying.*" Former Director of Culture Ireland, Sisk (2021) agreed that "*supporting the artists to do what they do best without any agenda ... nothing sanitised or censored"* is critical to the ethos of Culture Ireland. In his interview for this article, Anholt

(2023) believed strongly that nations benefit from supporting artists who are critical of the nation state, adding that it contributes to building "*an image of creativity and freedom and daring*."

However, theatre director Hynes (2023) was more circumspect regarding the arm's length principle, believing that "*the phrase has become emptier and emptier of meaning ... because both sides have now woken up to the fact that that's a lie, really, that governments will use the power of Irish artists to achieve certain things*." The instrumentalisation of artists' soft power to unlock political capital is apparent when, for example, Cultural Ambassador and renowned Irish actress Ruth Negga joined (former) Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on an LA trade visit: "*It lifts visibility to have somebody at that level involved ... it would have opened doors certainly for a government visit*" (Sisk, 2021). Furthermore, O'Reilly (2020) argued that if you are in receipt of state funding "*you are an ambassador for Ireland ... if you are taking the shilling and you're out there, there is an obligation that comes with that*."

Nevertheless, as Sisk (2021) observed:

> *The challenges from a nation brand [perspective] are that artists don't feel that they are being used for that purpose and that what they are doing has to be authentic and it has to be uncensored ... so that there isn't any weeding out of maybe any undesirable bits.*

While the content of an artist's work, especially when they are examining difficult societal issues, was not perceived to be a factor in garnering state support, the location of where the work will be shown is understood to be very important. Choreographer Keegan Dolan (2021) believed that funding applications to places which are "*considered to be of economic value to our nation"* were likely to be successful, whereas "*if I wanted to go to Ramala or to Uzbekistan, I wouldn't get the money probably."* Falvey (2021) agreed that there have been occasions where artists are supported to tour to territories to achieve strategic "*national objectives*." This reinforces the instrumentalisation of artists in Ireland's nation branding, especially where specific territories of interest have been prioritised. The evidence here confirms that Ireland's nation branding strategy can influence cultural policy priorities in practice.

Choreographer Ó Conchúir (2023) observed how Irish artists navigate Ireland's complex history in ways that are "*connected to other histories around the world ... a kind of small*

place, that can be a microcosm for big global stories to be investigated." According to Anholt, the imprint of Ireland's post-colonial history has positioned Ireland, at a time of global upheaval and uncertainty amongst the major powers, to capitalise on its complex post-colonial history.

> *The old major powers and their colonial debris resonate less and less with younger audiences today; they're much more interested in the victims of colonial ambition than in the perpetrators of it. And Ireland's story is a fascinating story of gallantry under duress and being bullied and being brave and being resilient and being cheerful about it.* (Anholt, 2023)

However, he also perceives a degree of "*anxious self-obsession*" (Anholt, 2023) which, he believes, contributes to a lack of confidence in Ireland's ability to influence geo-political agendas. This observation is not borne out by the research which indicates a high level of awareness of, and support for, Irish artists who choose to engage with global issues in their work and interactions with local and international publics.

Speaking truth with power

It is significant that all of those interviewed agreed that the role of artists is to be their authentic selves, "*to tell the truth, as in the truth of their work*" (Ó Conchúir, 2023). As Falvey (2021) reiterated: "*it's not their job to be cheerleaders, it's their job perhaps to question society."* Considerable value is placed by artists and policymakers on the importance of artistic freedom even if, at times, it can lead to difficult and uncomfortable moments. Irish artist protests against military sponsorship of the South by Southwest (SXSW) music festival in 2024 (Gallagher, 2024) and in support of Gaza at the *Changing States* exhibition in Berlin (Copestake, 2024) were recent examples of the arm's length principle in practice. Both were high-profile nation branding events which were funded and promoted by Culture Ireland as *Global Ireland 2025* initiatives. This suggests the emergence of a form of transnational nation branding, whereby Irish artists are "living" their nation brand values of independence and empathy, in protesting the actions of a host nation state.

For singer O'Sullivan (2023) this facet of Irish artists' character, whereby they are prepared to take risks and take a stand, means that "*when push comes to shove, when we need to shout, we really go for it, we stand up for things.*" Author and broadcaster Magan (2023)

agreed that it was vital for artists, and for society, that they have the artistic freedom and support to confront difficult and challenging issues:

> *Should artists be cutting edge and pushing and making us feel uncomfortable, definitely. They should be able to talk truth to power.* (Magan, 2023)

This supports Anholt's (2023) belief that effective nation branding must be authentic and represent a nation in its true light. Traditional musician and one of Ireland's five government-appointed Cultural Ambassadors, Hayes (2023) agreed that an effective nation brand "*needs to represent the truth of who we are."* However, Sisk (2021) recalled occasions where artists "*have behaved badly, off the stage, in official circumstances, and that doesn't serve anyone well when people go a little off message.*" This suggests an implicit understanding that artists will adhere to "approved" messaging, which contradicts earlier assertions on the importance of freedom of expression, without instruction or censorship.

All of those interviewed were cognisant of the value of high visibility arenas, such as SXSW, as important strategic nation branding events. Senior official Blake (2021) believed that these showcases *"are very very useful"* while Concannon (2021) observed: "*some people think events are just events, the nice things to go to, which they are, but events are strategic.*" Anholt (2023) also reiterated the soft power and influence of artists on global perceptions: "*People believe in culture ... they seem to think that it's always honest, and often it is*."

A noticeable shift in how Ireland is engaging with international publics is apparent in the tone of its government communications. Recent Global Ireland St Patrick's Day campaigns, for example, have focused on the personal stories of Irish people living abroad and their contribution to human rights, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid.[25] Concannon, who initiated the new approach, concurs with Anholt that "*nation branding and Global Ireland [2025] isn't just about what we can get from everybody else ... it's also about what we can give to the world*" (Concannon, 2021). Blake (2021) confirms the new strategy as "*doubling down on our identity as an outward-looking, engaging, international actor, a good global citizen*."

[25] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, (2022) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vRx6CczPGg

Furthermore, Irish artists who "*stand up for the lesser, for the smaller*" (Magan, 2023) are reinforcing Ireland's nation brand values of independence and empathy, identified in *Global Ireland 2025*. When Irish artists choose to make a political point, as playwright McMahon (2023) observed: "*there's a sense of these explosive moments coming out of a tiny island*." Nevertheless, much of what passes as nation branding is still regarded as little more than expensive marketing campaigns. As Anholt (2023) observed: "*It's all based on these very primitive ideas of just bragging about how wonderful you think you are."* This exemplifies the flaw in Ireland's cultural diplomacy, which defaults to cultural propaganda as an instrument of nation branding. This also goes against the core principle of effective cultural relations and authentic nation branding whereby creating opportunities for meaningful understanding, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue are the basis of reputation building for influence and impact.

Nation branding and the implications for Irish cultural policy

The importance of consultation with key stakeholders, in advance of any new policy development, was seen as vital by all those interviewed: "*because if everyone doesn't feed into it and agree on it, it's going to fall apart very quickly"* (Sisk, 2021). Although the senior official tasked with reviewing *Culture 2025* believed that "*you couldn't have an effective policy or brand if you're not going to include the grassroots*" (Senior Official A, 2021), consultations have yet to take place. A further weakness in Ireland's nation branding and cultural diplomacy policies are their devolution to the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Culture, respectively: *"If you are not in the office of the Prime Minister, you are so much at the mercy of ... because the Department of Culture is always low in the pecking order"* (O'Reilly, 2020). The power to develop and implement whole-of-government policies is conditional on access to, and support of, the dominant political coalition. In the case of *Creative Ireland*, its potential as a nation branding initiative was seriously undermined by its location in the Department of Culture: "*it was downgraded, I think, in the department ... it was penned in"* (Concannon, 2021). This was echoed by a senior official who believed that for any policy to be effective, "*it would have to be in Taoiseach's* (Prime Minister's office) *because they have the clout and they have a central view of everything"* (Senior Official, 2021).

Several interviewees referred to the *Great Britain*, *100% New Zealand* and Kosovo's *Newborn* nation branding initiatives. While there was a perception that Ireland's approach was "*quite fractured*" (Sisk, 2021), increased investment by other countries hadn't gone

unnoticed with one senior official commenting that "*Global Ireland is the Irish government positioning itself globally"* (Falvey, 2021). Anholt stressed the importance of creating "*an enabling environment*" whereby those involved in nation branding were empowered at a high enough level to be able to act effectively: "*You want some policymakers in the group who don't have to ask other people's permission before they launch projects"* (Anholt, 2023). However, one interviewee remarked on the suspicions within government departments that *Global Ireland 2025* "*is just smoke and mirrors*" (Rogers, 2021). Even amongst those responsible for crafting and implementing cultural policy, there was evidence of tensions around the competition for power and resources:

> *I'm never quite sure about what Culture Ireland is doing to be honest ... unless it's the export wing of the Arts Council? I could never understand why it didn't follow the British Council or the Goethe Institute ... that's the model for exporting your cultural view of the world and its less contentious.* (Fanning, 2021)

Undoubtedly, years of underinvestment in the arts, combined with the downgrading of Culture Ireland from a statutory body to a division of the Department of Culture, had clearly caused some concern amongst those interviewed regarding its value amongst the political elite. In his interview for this research, Anholt (2023) also observed the power dynamics at play within nation branding whereby "*very often culture gets left out"* in the vital initial stages when the strategy is being formulated. Therefore, recognition in *Global Ireland 2025* of the strategic importance of Irish artists in building Ireland's reputation abroad was welcomed by cultural policymakers: "*Culture Ireland was very pleased that when government announced that they wanted to increase the impact of Ireland abroad, that they saw culture as having such a central role to play in that*" (Sisk, 2021).

The initial welcoming of *Culture 2025* as Ireland's first cultural policy framework quickly gave way to reservations that it was too overarching in its ambition, lacking depth and a clear roadmap for implementation and evaluation, with the devolving of key objectives around diversity and inclusion to local government bodies and state agencies. Similarly, criticisms of *Global Ireland 2025* as a '*smoke and mirrors'* exercise in self-promotion, alongside concerns regarding its dominance of other policy areas (O'Brien, 2022) appear to be borne out by the evidence of this research. For Culture Ireland, the challenge will be, not just to survive a new iteration of *Global Ireland 2025*, but to reimagine itself in a more meaningful form of cultural relations, beyond the instrumentalist agenda of nation branding,

Concluding reflections

The author set out to establish the awareness, amongst both policymakers and artists, of the instrumentalising of Irish arts as a vital component of Ireland's nation branding and the implications of *Global Ireland 2025* on Irish cultural diplomacy policy and practice. The findings confirm the role of the state in supporting artists to tour to territories of strategic importance, as a means of enhancing Ireland's reputation abroad, and as an instrument of nation branding. The research also establishes that current Irish cultural diplomacy policy acts as a form of one-way broadcast, whereby a nation's cultural assets are curated, presented and performed for discrete international audiences, as a means of cultural propaganda. This form of cultural *promotion* disguised as cultural *diplomacy* completely misrepresents Anholt's prime directive which positions cultural *relations* as the essential component of a nation's brand strategy, a super (soft) power with the potential to create shared understanding between nations, citizens and humanity.

While the research reveals a degree of tension when some artists choose to use their profile and privileged access to international publics to speak out on political issues, there is evidence to suggest that Irish artists are gaining confidence in confronting bigger global issues, drawing on their nation brand values. This signals the evolution of a new form of transnational nation branding, which aligns more closely with Anholt's guiding principle that an effective and positive nation brand is built on deeds not words, and merits further research.

Both artists and policymakers advocate strongly for the arm's length principle which safeguards artistic freedom, without fear of censure or loss of funding. However, this precept also facilitates the institutions of the state to capitalise on those opportunities, and the associated media attention, when artists reinforce an "approved" nation brand narrative. As Hynes indicates, it is a somewhat malleable instrument that can be customised for use by both artists and policymakers, when it suits. Furthermore, where artists embody their authentic nation brand values in their work and engagement with international publics, they may inadvertently co-opt a top-down nation brand strategy, devised by civil servants, policy advisers and brand consultants, into one that is lived out in their everyday dealings with the outside world. But then, what if an artist's values and practice are in conflict with "approved" nation brand messages and values? With the emergence of a growing far right presence in Ireland, as with other parts of the world, it's uncertain just how long the arm's length principle will stretch if artists engage in what are perceived to be negative nation brand values of anti-immigration or hate speech in their practice. It also remains to be seen

how the artists' optimising of the arm's length principle, to engage in acts of strategic political protest, will impact on Ireland's reputation abroad, and the consequent implications for Irish cultural diplomacy and nation branding.

This research exposes some of the intricacies and challenges for artists and policymakers on the role of the arts as a tool of nation branding. It raises important questions regarding the implications for Irish cultural diplomacy in the context of artists who choose to instrumentalise their role and international profile to engage in acts of transnational nation branding. Further study is needed on the growing challenges to the principles of cultural diplomacy when artists engage in transnational protests and to examine the shift that is taking place in nation branding whereby artists, when in support of state funding, are effectively acting as state actors, who align with and reinforce the nation brand values of their home state. Ireland's instrumentalisation of the arts *is* a tool of nation branding, but in a form that is outdated and serves to reinforce the criticisms of the practice as a neo-liberal construct, whereby a nation's culture and artists are in the service of the nation state for primarily promotional and economic purposes. Moreover, this article confirms the dominance of *Global Ireland 2025* as the Irish government's strategic instrument of nation branding with significant implications for the future of Irish cultural diplomacy policy and practice.

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Chapter Seven: Findings and Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This thesis is the first primary research study to examine the evolution and impact of Ireland's new strategic approach to nation branding and the consequences for Irish arts and cultural diplomacy. Comprising four distinct, but interconnected published articles, the scope of the thesis encompasses nation branding, public diplomacy and place branding, alongside cultural relations policy and practice.

The publication of four peer reviewed journal articles, focusing on Ireland's nation branding in the decade from 2015 to 2025, affirm the instrumentalisation of Irish artists in building Ireland's reputation abroad. Set against the backdrop of the *Decade of Centenaries 2012-2023*, each article focuses on a particular aspect of Ireland's nation branding and establishes a clear line of direction and connection between *Ireland 2016*, *Creative Ireland* and *Global Ireland 2025*. Collectively, the articles comprise a case study of Ireland's nation branding from the perspective of the stakeholder group who are responsible for its formation and implementation including policymakers, senior officials, brand strategists and artists. The study focused on the discrete group of initiators, creators and producers of Ireland's new nation branding strategy and cultural relations policy, as opposed to the consumers and target publics of the strategy. It offers a unique insight into the rationale and impetus for devising and implementing the strategy from the perspective of those who were closest to its foundation and implementation.

Nation branding has evolved to become a multidisciplinary practice and industry, increasingly dominating public diplomacy, international relations and government communications as the primary means by which nations invest in building reputation and influence on the global stage. Research on nation branding is diverse in approach and discourse, ranging from individual case studies to critical discussions of its conceptual origins and impact on issues of national identity and nationhood. Ireland consistently ranks in the top tiers of measurement indices, including the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index and the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index. This is the first in-depth analysis of the unique factors which contributed to Ireland's recent recalibration of its nation branding. It traces the events which led to the significant step change which has taken place in how the Irish government coordinates, manages and invests in building Ireland's influence, relationships and reputation abroad. It critiques the role of Irish artists, as effective and

authentic ‘nation brand ambassadors’, in creating and reinforcing perceptions of Ireland amongst key target publics.

This thesis builds on Ahn and Wu’s (2015) assertion on the positive influence of the arts in representing a nation’s values and on its global reputation. Moreover, the funding and deployment of Irish artists to present their work in territories of strategic national interest, or in specially curated showcase initiatives such as *Zeitgeist Irland 24* and *Ireland-Canada 180*, aligns with Carter’s (2015) definition of instrumentalisation. Furthermore, the published papers prove that both artists and policy makers are complicit in the strategic use of the arm’s length principle to amplify Ireland’s nation brand values of independence and empathy. However, it also points to emerging tensions within Irish cultural policy whereby it is being weakened and undermined by a dominant and whole-of-government-led nation branding agenda. This also substantiates the claim by Hadley, Collins and O’Brien (2020) of the presence of a neo-liberal mindset, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary nation branding (Aronczyk, 2020; Kaneva, 2011) in current Irish government policy formation.

7.2 Research questions and contribution to knowledge

This research sought to answer the principal question: *How has Ireland’s government-led nation branding evolved in the decade 2015-2025 and what role have Irish artists played in its progression?*

The research expanded on the core question by addressing these sub-questions:

- In what way did the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme* shape the Irish government’s approach to nation branding?
- What effect has the whole-of-government *Global Ireland 2025* strategy had on Ireland’s nation branding and cultural diplomacy policy?
- To what extent have Irish artists been instrumentalised in Ireland’s nation branding in the period 2015 to 2025?

This thesis contributes to scholarship by offering further insight and knowledge into these three gaps in existing research:

Firstly, it situates Ireland as a leading actor in cultural diplomacy and examines the evolution and implementation of its first whole-of-government nation branding strategy.

While there are a small number of studies on Ireland as an 'organized actor in nation branding' (Arceneaux, 2022, p. 442), existing research on 'Brand Ireland' (Fanning, 2006: Patterson, 2011) have focused primarily on tourism (Clancy, 2009, 2011; McManus, 2017) and its role in promoting traditional Irish culture and heritage (Phelan, 2012). This is the first interdisciplinary study to examine the specific and unique role of Irish artists in Ireland's international relations policy and practice, viewed through the lens of nation branding.

Secondly, the thesis is based on original primary research which utilises interviews with a prominent group of key stakeholders, all of whom have played a vital role in developing the policies and implementing practice in building Ireland's reputation abroad. Furthermore, it is informed by, and draws on, the first-hand knowledge and experience of a former cultural relations and nation branding practitioner. This enables the author to adopt an 'insider-outsider' position which facilitates access to vital contacts and contextual knowledge, while deploying a scholarly critical reflexivity in the scrutiny and analysis of the research findings.

Thirdly, at a critical time when key Irish government policies are under review, the research identifies the risk of institutionalising one-way cultural promotion as a form of misguided cultural relations policy. In doing so, it also exposes the danger of subsuming Irish international arts and cultural policy within a dominant nation branding agenda. Irish artists risk being even further instrumentalised and co-opted as state actors, while enabled by state funding and facilitated by the arms' length principle, to enact a top-down nation branding policy, without the opportunity to influence its purpose or objectives.

The timeframe of the thesis is significant in that it covers three key initiatives which inspired and laid the foundation for the new approach: the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, *Creative Ireland* and *Global Ireland 2025*.

- *A new nation brand strategy? Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign* (Boughton, 2022) attributes *Ireland 2016* as both the impetus and inspiration for *Global Ireland 2025*, Ireland's first values-based nation branding strategy. While the article recognises the success of the initiative's first major campaign, it argues that, in the absence of meaningful citizen engagement, the nascent strategy is in danger of reinforcing the negative perception of nation branding as superficial state-supported propaganda.

- The second article, *This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand* (Boughton, 2023) examines the deeper significance of commemoration and national acts of collective remembrance as a means of national identity formation. It reinforces the importance of empowering and facilitating citizen participation in authentic values-based nation branding.

- Confirmation of the vital role of artists in articulating the complexity of national identity and nationhood, a key finding in the second article, is the central theme of this thesis and formed the basis of *Putting on the Green Jersey: Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand* (Boughton, 2023). The article investigated the role and instrumentalisation of artists as a tool of Ireland's soft power and nation branding, from the lived experience and perspective of ten eminent and established Irish artists, across a range of disciplines.

- The fourth and final article synthesised the full range of the research dataset to reflect on the symbiotic relationship between senior government officials, artists, policymakers and brand strategists, in the policy implications of Ireland's new nation branding strategy. *Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding* (Boughton, 2025) challenges Ireland's hyper-instrumentalist approach, which optimises economic imperatives and the singular pursuit of cultural promotion, in place of authentic and meaningful cultural relations and nation branding.

7.3 Embracing complexity as a guiding principle of nation branding

While Anderson's (2006) seminal concept of 'imagined communities' is regularly evoked in nation branding scholarship, Kaufmann's (2016) use of complexity theory as a means of understanding nations and nationalism was considered by this author as a more useful and relevant theoretical framework for this thesis. In foregrounding nations as complex systems, Kaufmann examines the everyday construction of national identity in terms of how it is manifested in the lived realities of individual citizens. He observes four key features which characterise nations as complex systems: a threshold moment or 'tipping point' which can trigger a dramatic outcome; the importance of grassroots self-organising and building connections between interdependent parts to form a complex whole; recognising the power of 'feedback loops' to accelerate events; and recognising the 'wisdom of crowds' as a means of understanding national identity formation. The author

observed each of these components in evidence within *Ireland 2016,* as the first state-led national conversation on the foundation of the Republic.

The two-year long programme examined the continuing relevance of the values which formed the basis of the Irish constitution, utilising the occasion of a national commemoration as a means of empowering citizens and communities to engage in a national conversation on issues relating to Irish national identity. The most ambitious and significant achievement of *Ireland 2016* was its tactical commitment to citizen engagement and providing the mechanisms, support and means to facilitate discussion on issues of Irish national identity and nationhood. *Ireland 2016* was an invitation to everyone who identified as Irish, in Ireland and abroad, to 'remember' and 'reflect' on the first one hundred years of the Irish Republic, and to 'reimagine' the next chapter for Ireland.

While much of the criticism of nation branding revolves around simplifying complex issues of nationhood, *Ireland 2016* embraced the value of complicating the narrative of Irish identity in the 21st century. It recognised that nation states are evolving multifaceted organisms, comprising a multiplicity of identities and, at times, conflicting narratives, which form the basis of its global reputation. The programme's commitment to inclusiveness and not shirking the historical complexity, as noted by Mulvagh (2016), meant that many different stories were told, and many different voices were given the space to tell their stories and be recognised alongside the official state commemorations. Increased investment in, and access to, significant amounts of digitised archival material, fostered a notable expansion of scholarship and public interest, generating a wide range of books, studies, documentaries, and sparking hundreds of local and national arts and cultural events. Collectively, these works reflected the many and diverse interpretations and interrogations of the past as a form of collective memory making (Halbwachs, 1952). This also corresponds with Saito's (2010) view of commemoration as a valuable lens through which citizens examine issues of personal and national identity construction. The successful exploration of the history of ordinary people, notwithstanding the difficulties of navigating potentially difficult issues such as the role of Irish men in the British Army, resonated deeply with Irish audiences (Casserly, 2017). Commemoration in the twenty-first century is increasingly facilitated through television, exhibitions, re-enactments, local history projects, online events, social media groups, and other digital forums. The mixture of complex, multifaceted viewpoints combined with human stories are optimising new and diverse ways in which the past is interpreted and shared.

The salience of *Ireland 2016* was its inspiration and foundation for the development of a government-led values-based nation branding strategy for Ireland. It also provided a framework which defied the notion of nation branding as representing a homogenous, singular national identity, something which Fan (2006) cautions against, and instituted a mechanism for citizens to contribute to the development of an authentic and meaningful nation brand narrative. There is undoubtedly a challenge in adopting what is, in effect, an open-source model of collective determination of nation brand values, necessitating substantial investment of resources, time and energy. The singular opportunity offered by the 'threshold moment' of a significant national commemoration was a huge factor in the Irish nation branding equation. It not only facilitated, but encouraged, the inclusion of marginalised voices (Iwabuchi, 2015) extending beyond the 'elite node' (Kaufmann, 2016) of the official nation state. Devolving ownership of the national commemoration to citizens, through partnerships with the local authority network, educational institutions, national cultural institutions, community groups and non-state agencies, generated hundreds of ideas and sparked enthusiasm and momentum to get involved in the centenary. The entire year prior to 2016 was given over to public engagement, with the Programme team facilitating hundreds of meetings, planning and co-creating events and initiatives, hosting open calls for ideas and funding to support citizen-led events. Flexibility was built in to the structure of the programme specifically to facilitate both planned and unplanned activities, which created a sense of the spontaneous and organic, a key component in Dinnie's ICON model of nation branding (Dinnie, 2022). The latter model foregrounds inter-agency collaboration as a key component of an effective strategy which not only allows for, but specifically, requires co-operation across sectors. It also embraces the opportunity for innovation by building in a degree of flexibility to adopt the strategy to incorporate unexpected moments of inspiration which can come from 'the wisdom of crowds' described in Kaufmann's complexity theory (2016).

A further aspect of Dinnie's ICON model which is particularly relevant to Ireland currently is the notion that a nation branding strategy should be contextualised in relation to the target audience. As part of *Global Ireland 2025*, the Irish government have initiated a small number of bespoke sub-strategies focusing on key territories of interest. For example, the *Global Ireland* Middle East and North Africa strategy aims to 'contribute to and benefit from a peaceful, stable, prosperous and sustainable MENA region' (MENA Strategy, 2024, p. 2). These sub-strategies are informed by and embody the same objectives evident in Ireland's nation branding narrative, while also allowing for a degree of nuance and specificity considering the local context. The Irish government's commitment to the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict is highlighted as a priority in the MENA strategy,

noting that 'Ireland has engaged in intensive diplomatic efforts aims at de-escalation and in preparation for a longer-term political pathway' (ibid., p. 5). The perception of Ireland's hardline stance in support of Palestine, reinforced by the high-profile protests and the recent boycotting of the Eurovision (Savage, 2025) has come under scrutiny by some in the international community, with the withdrawal of the Israeli ambassador to Ireland seen as a serious breakdown in diplomatic relations.

For it to have any impact or value, nation branding requires vision, courage and leadership by governments in aligning strategy with real substance in terms of policy, legislation and social change. Notably, this thesis establishes agreement amongst scholars, strategists and senior government officials on the importance, for both reputation building and nation branding, of actions over words. Established as the whole-of-government legacy initiative of *Ireland 2016*, *Creative Ireland* aimed to place creativity at the centre of public policy. This was the seed of a genuinely innovative nation branding strategy, with a unifying concept that was broad enough to be inclusive of multiple sectors and industries, while capitalising on one of Ireland's most valued and recognisable qualities – Irish creativity.

Creative Ireland achieved some notable successes in its first five years. It was instrumental in transforming arts and education policy through its *Creative Schools* programme and established *Creative Ireland* teams in each of the 31 local authorities to prioritise and embed participation in creativity as a cornerstone of local community development. Ireland is the first country in the world to institute a government-run Basic Income for the Arts scheme, also a *Creative Ireland* initiative, which guarantees artists a weekly minimum wage. This has not only made a meaningful difference in the quality of life and artistic practice of artists, it reinforces Ireland's reputation abroad as a creative and cultural nation.[26] This was the first attempt at a nation branding strategy which aimed to capture the essence of what makes Ireland and Irishness distinctive in terms of a 'competitive identity' (Anholt, 2006). However, the potential of *Creative Ireland* as a nation branding strategy was critically undermined firstly, by not locating it in the Department of the Taoiseach, and secondly by carving out the vital international dimension and reassigning it to Department of Foreign Affairs, where it formed the basis of *Global Ireland 2025*.

[26] Marshall, A. (2023), 'What if artists could ditch their day jobs?' https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/23/arts/ireland-basic-income-artists.html

Established with the objective to 'double Ireland's influence and impact on the global stage'[27] *Global Ireland 2025* is currently the Irish government's official nation branding policy. Remarkably, despite the evidence from *Ireland 2016* of the critical role of artists and Irish creativity as a stimulus for expressing national identity, creativity was absent from the core nation brand values (Boughton, 2022). The rationale for this decision is likely due to the reassignment of the remit for developing the nation branding strategy to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where creativity and culture would be seen as a conduit for diplomacy rather than a core value. Furthermore, Culture Ireland was established in the Department of Culture with the specific remit to promote Irish arts and artists abroad and has defended its territory, and budget, fiercely in the face of any attempts for it to be reclaimed by Foreign Affairs.

A recurring theme across all four articles is the need for strategic leadership, clear authority and power to be invested in the ownership of a nation brand strategy at a senior political level. Ultimately, the decision to delegate responsibility for both *Creative Ireland* and *Global Ireland 2025* outside of the Department of the Taoiseach seriously undermined their authority and capability as effective nation branding initiatives. Furthermore, the state export agencies such as Enterprise Ireland and Tourism Ireland, as well as export divisions within government departments such as Agriculture and Higher Education, have amassed significant resources including staff and budgets, with their own international networks, partners and target audiences. While there is value in cultivating specific international stakeholder groups with targeted initiatives and campaigns, it can also serve to undermine and dilute any attempts at a coordinated joined-up approach. It also counteracts one of the key components of Dinnie's (2022) ICON model whereby a high level of inter-agency collaboration is required to retain overall focus, coherence and alignment in the implementation of a nation branding strategy. With the retention, siloing and funding of various export 'fiefdoms', the challenge of creating alignment across so many diverse stakeholder groups can prove extremely challenging, even with the oversight of the Department of the Taoiseach. Without doubt, undertaking a collaborative form of nation branding which includes public sector and state agencies, alongside the private and not-for profits, while also allowing for some degree of citizen engagement, is challenging to say the least. South Korea attempted a strategic cross-sectoral approach in their nation branding, with the establishment of the Presidential Council for Nation Branding, which had some success (Dinnie, 2012). Arguably, the Great Britain campaign has also attempted

[27] https://www.gov.ie/ga/roinn-an-taoisigh/oraidi/speech-of-an-taoiseach-leo-varadkar-at-the-launch-of-global-ireland-2025/

a collaborative public-private sector approach, but without any grassroots involvement and a focus primarily on promotion. Nevertheless, the absence of any clear systems or processes to facilitate collaboration and co-curation of *Global Ireland 2025* amongst its diverse stakeholder groups, raises questions around its authenticity and efficacy as a meaningful nation branding strategy. This is a serious weakness in the approach, which has the potential, as Walter (2014 cited in Samuel et al, 2018) observes, to create issues of credibility and legitimacy

In its current form, *Global Ireland 2025* reinforces what is characterised as a commodification of national identity (Kaneva, 2011). Arceneaux (2022, p. 442) for instance observed how the use of identity narratives can be deployed in his analysis of Ireland's UN Security Council campaign which aim to 'craft, position and broadcast the cultural, political and aspirational psyche of a state to the rest of the world.' While the tone has changed from promoting Ireland's landscape, heritage and culture to advocating Ireland's contribution to peacekeeping, development aid and making a difference in whatever part of the world Irish people settle, the tactics utilise familiar representations of a version of Irish identity. Ireland's nation branding, however, risks being seen as little more than a form of 'banal' or 'soft' nationalism (Billig, 1995) with images of the Irish flag being raised by Irish peacekeepers in Lebanon, while the Irish diaspora read excerpts from Joyce's *Ulysses* in iconic locations in Berlin, Rome or Sydney.[28] Applying Anholt's first principle of reputation building, *Global Ireland 2025* clearly is a *strategy* with a range of *symbolic actions* but unfortunately lacks *substance* in terms of having the authority or the imprimatur to implement legislative policy change on issues which affect the lives of Irish citizens.

As this thesis indicates, Ireland's nascent nation branding strategy, in its current iteration as *Global Ireland 2025*, is clearly a top-down communications-led initiative, which has abandoned the grassroots, values-based approach that sparked its original development in the first instance. The Irish government is utilising *Global Ireland 2025* as a 'location manager' (van Ham, 2001; Halsall, 2008) for Brand Ireland, optimising and promoting its tangible and intangible assets for the benefit of building influence and attracting inward investment. Furthermore, the vague purpose of the strategy which aims to 'double Ireland's influence and impact on the global stage' makes it impossible to measure its success, particularly in the absence of specific criteria or baseline data from which to benchmark and evaluate key milestones. The most recent evaluation in 2023, conducted internally by

[28] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNU-RnBU0UU&t=5s

the Department of Foreign Affairs, cites the completion of infrastructure priorities, additional consulates and increased FDI investment in Ireland from outside of North America, as key achievements.[29] As yet, there is no evidence of any substantial qualitative or quantitative independent research which measures the outcomes, and not just the outputs of *Global Ireland 2025*. Nevertheless, the survival of *Global Ireland 2025* through three successive administrations is a testament to its perceived success as Ireland's first whole-of-government nation branding strategy. It also features prominently in other departmental strategies as the primary overarching international relations and export policy, which is a strong indication of its importance in terms of the national programme for government.

Undoubtedly, without *Ireland 2016*, there would be no *Creative Ireland* or *Global Ireland 2025*. The success of *Ireland 2016*, as a form of collective citizen engagement in national identity construction, created a unique opportunity to build new alliances and collaborations across the institutions of the state, alongside local, regional and national organisations, groups and members of civic society. It also offered what Anholt (2010) believed to be an imperative for effective nation branding, which is to identify a common purpose where state actors, business leaders and civil society could unite behind, and which is both inspiring and feasible. *Creative Ireland* fulfilled this ambition when it stepped into the vacuum after *Ireland 2016*, with a clear sense of purpose, vision and a mission that was inspiring and authentic in its impact on the lives of citizens.

A key finding of this research is that *Creative Ireland* fulfils many of the criteria for both Dinnie's (2022) ICON model and Anholt's first principles of effective nation branding. It optimises a grassroots and top-down approach, combining planned strategic initiatives with more organic unplanned activities, facilitating and enabling citizens to work in partnership across sectors, industries and disciplines. It further engages citizens and society on the existential issues facing humanity such as climate change, sustainable development and social justice. It is cross-generational in scope and implementation through initiatives such as *Creative Schools* and *Creative Health and Wellbeing*, demonstrating real positive impact on the quality of life of citizens, and contributing more substantially to Ireland's reputation and impact abroad as a creative and cultural nation. It also demonstrated a clear value and role for Irish artists in foregrounding participation in creativity as a guiding principle for societal wellbeing. *Creative Ireland* embodied the *substance* of developing initiatives which have policy and legislative implications, such as the Basic Income for the Arts, informed by a clear *strategy* which utilises the innovation of *symbolic actions,* such as

[29] https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/global-ireland-review-may-2023.pdf

Cruinniú na nÓg, the world's first National Day of Creativity by and for children and young people. It reaffirms Anholt's prime directive that, for a nation to build an enhanced global competitive identity, it requires inspiring leadership, multi-stakeholder buy-in and ownership and a long-term commitment to actions which improve the quality of life of its citizens. In its mission to empower and embed human creativity in public policy as a constant process of collective imagination, idea generation and societal transformation, *Creative Ireland* is closer in its ambition to Grimm et al's (2025) notion of the authentic as a living nation in a constant state of 'becoming'.

7.4 A new paradigm of transnational nation branding

The common thread linking each of these four articles is the role of Irish artists in embodying, challenging and reaffirming aspects of Irish national identity for both national and international publics. For instance, they played a central role in helping citizens and communities to navigate the divisiveness and conflicting narratives which surrounded the 1916 commemoration (Boughton, 2023). The fact that four of the seven leaders of the original Easter Rising[30] were artists added further potency to the role of the arts as the lens through which so many organisations, communities and individuals explored Ireland's turbulent history in the early part of the 21st century. The multidisciplinary nature of the arts also facilitated the sharing of knowledge and the value of intercultural dialogue, creating a bridge between divided communities and diverse backgrounds, in what President Higgins described as 'a hospitality of narratives' (Boughton, 2023, p. 538). While not always successful, as evidenced by the protests and vandalism of the Necrology Wall at Glasnevin Cemetery which took place during 2016,[31] the initiative facilitated a rich and nuanced national conversation around Irish shared values.

As this thesis confirms, a fundamental component of effective nation branding is authenticity. Its primary purpose is to promote understanding and awareness of a nation's distinctive culture and values, while also recognising its challenges and, more importantly, what is being done to address them. Irish artists are aware of their instrumentalisation as a tool of Ireland's nation branding, '*as one of our major exports that gives us what you call soft power on the global stage'* (Hynes, cited in Boughton, 2024, p. 13). The perceived independence and credibility of Irish artists contributes significantly to building trust and

[30] On Easter Monday 1916, Irish nationalists launched an armed revolt against British rule in Ireland. Although quickly suppressed by the British Army, the rising was a seminal moment in modern Irish history, helping pave the way to the nation's independence in 1922.
[31] https://www.thejournal.ie/glasnevin-1916-memorial-callous-vandalism-3331490-Apr2017/

influence for Ireland amongst national and global publics. The arms' length principle affords them the facility to speak and behave freely, without fear of censure or loss of state funding. The use of this 'cordon sanitaire' acts as a buffer which protects their artistic freedom of expression, while senior officials also use it to insulate themselves, and the government, from censure when supporting artists who are critical of the nation state. Nevertheless, while Irish artists, funded by the state, might be perceived as independent brokers, they can also function as critical state actors. (Boughton, 2023). Actors Gabriel Byrne and Brendan Gleeson are outspoken critics of consistent lack of state investment in the arts and the Irish healthcare system, respectively, while also being in receipt of state funding to perform in productions supported by Culture Ireland and the Arts Council. Therefore, although appearing to act as independent agents, artists who are supported and enabled by funders and policymakers, often reinforce an approved government position, in performative acts of nation branding. Furthermore, while the arm's length principle is evoked as a form of protection against interference, there is an implicit understanding that artists will nevertheless be 'on message' (Boughton, 2025). While the exact meaning and purpose of the 'message' is not explicit, there is an expectation from funders that they will not cause embarrassment or digress too far from an 'approved' government position.

Transnational activists often deploy creative tactics to 'install themselves on the media landscape and within public imagination' (Cottle, 2011, p.34) creating a sense of solidarity while also raising the volume and broadcast range in the communication of their demands for change. Prominent Irish bands such as Fontaines DC and author Sally Rooney are at the forefront of a growing artist protest movement in support of Palestine, which is garnering significant media attention, not all of which is positive. McRedmond (2025) argues that Ireland's moral posturing on global issues as the 'self-appointed ethical sherpas of Europe' is tone deaf to the realities of its reliance on its European and UK neighbours. Protests by Irish artists at state-supported nation branding showcases have created a rip tide in the otherwise smooth diplomatic waters, necessitating delicate handling by the backroom team of cultural relations advisers and diplomats. In these instances, artists are optimizing their knowledge and use of diplomatic channels and tactics, rather than bypassing them, to draw maximum attention and focus on their actions and demands. Where non-state actors share political goals which are related to foreign policy, the boundaries between public diplomacy and transnational nation branding become much more liminal (Ahyan, 2018).

The study of transnational activism amongst diasporic publics is gaining momentum within nation branding and public diplomacy discourse, particularly in relation to overseas agents who protest the actions of their homeland nation state, while living in a different

jurisdiction (Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea, 2023). Popkova (2020) describes these non-state actors as 'alt agents' of public diplomacy, whereby they optimise their use of strategic communication to contest the official narrative of their nation state. What distinguishes Irish artists, in what appears to be a new paradigm of transnational nation branding, is the focus of their protest. They are potentially at least serving to reverse engineer the otherwise instrumentalising of Irish national identity and nation brand values, with the tacit support of the Irish government and institutions of the state through the strategic use of the arms' length principle and state funding, to call out the actions of another nation state. For example, when Irish artist Michael Keegan Dolan resigns as an associate artist with Sadlers Wells, a prestigious and important partner and presenting venue for contemporary Irish choreography in London, in protest at their continued sponsorship by Barclays Bank, these actions echo and reinforce perceptions of the Irish state's position on Palestine. By acting as 'collabor-agents', they are assimilating the tactics of transnational activists while also reinforcing their role as effective nation brand ambassadors, channelling their nation brand values of independence and empathy. Moreover, the decision of an artist to withdraw their artistic capital in order to achieve a personal political objective corroborates Carter's (2015) perception of instrumentalism, when culture is used to serve other ends.

Despite the Irish government's official stance that it does not support cultural boycotts, one of the consequences of the artist protests is a much closer scrutiny of Irish cultural diplomacy. Almost a year after the initial artist protests, a recent article in the *Irish Times* (Coyne, 2025) analyses the Irish government's decision to go ahead with the Irish showcases at SXSW in 2024 and 2025. This is indicative of the increasing pressure on politicians and state agencies to justify their decisions, considering the wider global context, and not just based on purely national self-interest. It also aligns closely to what Anholt describes as the 'dual mandate' approach, which he believes is a fundamental principle of nation brand and reputation building. His hypothesis proposes that responsibility for successfully managing a nation's economic, political and social governance goes hand in hand with a conscientious commitment to do good for others outside a nation's borders, and for the planet (Anholt, 2020).

The Irish arts sector is gaining in confidence and are becoming a powerful force in Irish international relations and nation branding through their protest actions in support of Palestine. While motivation of their actions might be traced to the increasing awareness of Irish nation brand values of independence and empathy, which began with *Ireland 2016*, the current crisis in the Middle East appears to have galvanised them into a growing activism movement. The characteristics in what appears to be a new form of transnational

nation branding coalesce around a sense of confidence and empowerment in embodying the nation brand values of a distinctive national identity, access to international platforms to communicate a clear message to multiple and diverse audiences, and a willingness to deploy creative and strategic tactics in calling out the actions of another nation state.

7.5 Cultural relations policy in purpose and practice

The final published article in the series draws together the strands of the research on Ireland's nation branding, which was inspired by *Ireland 2016*, materialising initially as *Creative Ireland*, before re-emerging as *Global Ireland 2025*. It takes a macro view of the impact of Ireland's nation branding on Irish cultural diplomacy policy and practice, at a critical point when three key strategies are under review. The *Culture 2025* and *Culture Ireland 2022-2025* policies, while valorising artists and artistic practice, also reinforce the tendency for arts and culture to 'serve other ends' (Carter (2015, p. 483). They risk diminishing the essence of pure artistic practice, as a vital function of human expression and imagination, subsuming it within a dominant nation branding agenda (Boughton, 2025).

There is no doubt that the funding support and promotion of Irish artists by Culture Ireland has contributed significantly to increasing their international profile and employment opportunities. It further confirms their role as vital and engaged cultural intermediaries (Hadley, 2021) in the interrogation, discussion and performance of Irish national identity to international publics. While artists are keen to present their work to international audiences, and to expand the life of a production through international touring, they also form part of the state architecture to connect new audiences with a contemporary and modern Ireland. Nevertheless, in its current form, Culture Ireland is essentially a funding body which promotes a one-way broadcast form of cultural promotion, without creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue, co-creation of strategies and shared understanding. If the success of *Global Ireland 2025* and Culture Ireland is measured in outputs, the number of Ireland Houses completed, cultural officers appointed, employment opportunities for artists and social media metrics, they are instrumentalising a nation's assets in the service of what Anholt and others critique as 'a more palatable form of nationalism' (Jordan, 2014, p. 283). Furthermore, in the absence of independent curatorial expertise and delegated authority to commission and programme work, initiatives such as *Zeigeist Irland 2024, which are* programmed by government officials, will continue to be regarded with cynicism and scepticism. It is disappointing that *Canada-Ireland 180*, the latest DFA and Culture Ireland strategic initiative in 2027, which aims to 'honour' Irish

Canadian shared history, 'examine' the present, and 'build a creative vision' for the future, is essentially a funding call, without any curatorial vision. The language and rhetoric are also remarkably similar to that of *Ireland 2016*, but without any form of collaborative co-creation or meaningful public engagement.

In its current form, *Global Ireland 2025* is at odds with Anholt's prime directive that reputation is built on the actions of a nation state, rather than self-serving initiatives directed at targeted international publics. It serves to reinforce the criticisms of the practice as being a primarily marketing exercise which attempts to commodify aspects of nationhood and identity to serve the neo-liberalist agenda of the nation state. However, the seeds of a new more radical narrative in Ireland's nation branding are emerging in Irish artists engagement on global issues with other nation states. Almost ten years after *Ireland 2016*, artists continue to be the catalyst for a national conversation about Irish nation brand values and what it means to be a global citizen in the face of increasing use of hard power and militarisation. The Irish artists protesting at SXSW (2024) and in Berlin (2025) are stepping far outside their instrumentalist role of promoting Irish arts abroad and are building national and international coalitions in challenging the actions of another nation state. Artists who work in the performing arts (theatre, dance, music) are more likely to generate international media and audience attention, by virtue of the high-profile nature of festivals and nation branding showcase events such as the SXSW film and music event. However, writers and choreographers are also finding tactical opportunities to draw attention to issues they feel passionately about. Michael Keegan Dolan's recent withdrawal from Sadler's Wells as an associate artist, in protest at the venue's sponsorship by Barclays Bank, and author Naoise Dolan's participation in the Thousand Madleens flotilla to Gaza, are recent examples of Irish artist protests which have garnered significant Irish and international media attention. There is increasing pressure on artists, diplomats and cultural agencies to use cultural boycotts as a form of protest. However, this creates a serious challenge for cultural diplomacy and for the future of cultural relations at a time when a new form of cultural nationalism is on the rise.

Cultural relations originated as a practice of statecraft in the mid 20th century to counteract global division and to help build mutual understanding and respect amongst nations. Its real strength and purpose lie in its proven ability to create meaningful opportunities for shared dialogue and understanding in territories where there is evidence of division and conflict, often in the face of criticism and dissent. While the short-term impact of a cultural boycott can result in increased media attention and even some interim change, it is a blunt force instrument that ignores the complexity of a nation state and the difficulties and

dissenting voices that are sometimes contained within it. It can also operate as a form of cultural censorship which deprives artists, who disagree with the actions of their homeland, the opportunity to complicate the narrative, and allow audiences the chance to see the work and engage in dialogue with its makers. Furthermore, artists who do not want to engage in acts of political protest are often pressurised to discontinue touring to specific festivals, venues and territories which are perceived by certain constituencies to be rogue states.

It's clear that Ireland's current cultural policy of cultural promotion masquerading as cultural relations is fuelling a dominant nation branding agenda. If the true value of a nation's arts and culture has the power to unlock meaningful intercultural dialogue and understanding amongst nations, especially in times of conflict, it must reimagine its purpose, policy and practice to ensure it is more than 'a collection of tokens to be traded and displayed' (Roy, cited in Krastev, 2022).

7.6 Conclusion

Globalisation has not only increased connectivity, trade and mobility amongst nations, it has also institutionalised competitiveness as a driving force for government programmes and the institutions of the state. This thesis also observes evidence of glocalisation whereby Irish artists' enactment of Ireland's localised nation brand values is impacting and influencing wider global issues. While reputation matters in the world of geo-politics, trade and investment, (Nye, 2004), it is the outcome, and not the objective, of an effective and authentic nation brand strategy. Nation branding is supplanting traditional models of public and cultural diplomacy as the means by which governments and ruling leaderships coordinate and deploy the agencies of the state, in using strategic interventions to build global influence and impact.

This thesis affirms the symbiotic and often complex relationships between a nation's art and culture, as signifiers and interrogators of national identity, and their instrumentalisation as tools of public diplomacy and nation branding. It is a dynamic and evolving field of discourse and is the focus of growing studies and academic research, international media attention and scholarly publications. A recent article by Kawashima (2025) argues that artists are active agents of soft power only when they focus on the essential purpose of their creative practice, eschewing co-option as part of a state agenda. However, for artists, many of whom are reliant on state support, this is almost impossible. Artists have a unique role to play in nurturing the collective imagination, interrogating and exploring aspects of national identity and creating a sense of shared values. Rather than nation brand

ambassadors, they are way finders who encompass the ways in which people orient themselves in the world and navigate their way. However, the risk for artists, and for the future of cultural relations, is the overall diminishing of the very essence and unique power of the arts, especially if it is assimilated, instrumentalised and institutionalised as part of an ulterior nation branding agenda.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1: Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings from the four publications and relates them specifically to the questions which prompted the research in the first instance, and which this thesis set out to answer. For clarity, the four publications have been identified in this chapter as:

Publication One: A new nation brand strategy: *Global Ireland 2025* and the UN Security Council Campaign (Boughton, 2022)
Publication Two: This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand (Boughton, 2023)
Publication Three: 'Putting on the Green Jersey': Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of an authentic nation brand (Boughton, 2024)
Publication Four: Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding (Boughton, 2025)

This is followed by a section which outlines the contribution to knowledge and the gap in existing research which this thesis seeks to address. The chapter closes with some concluding remarks on the overall implications of the findings and an indication of possible areas of further research.

8.2 Overall objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was firstly, to document and understand the evolution of Ireland's government-led nation branding in the decade 2015 to 2025. Secondly, the thesis set out to examine the instrumentalization of Irish artists as agents of soft power in Ireland's nation branding. The third and final objective was to understand the role of citizens and artists as co-creators of an authentic and values-based approach to nation branding.

8.2.1 Overall findings in relation to primary question

This research sought to answer the principal question: *How has Ireland's government-led nation branding evolved in the decade 2015-2025 and what role have Irish artists played in its progression?*

All four published articles, and related findings, in some way respond to this essential question. Publications Three and Four are specifically focused on the arts and cultural relations policy and reflect the perspectives of those interviewees who are particularly influential, either in cultural policy, or as respected artists within the Irish creative industries. The findings reaffirm the unique role of Irish arts and artists as a tool of reputation building and one of the important cornerstones of Ireland's identity as a Republic and an independent nation state (Publication Three). The arts were considered by all interviewees to be a vital instrument of soft power and a critical component in building influence and impact for Ireland abroad. Their importance as a means of interrogating issues, from national identity to concerns relating to social justice, was touched upon in Publication Two. This point was further developed in Publication Three, where several of those interviewed spoke about the sense of pride, and in some instances, the responsibility, they felt in representing the complexity of contemporary Irish identity and he diverse racial and gendered communities who identify as Irish, or who call Ireland home.

In Publication One, the introduction of the tax exemption scheme for artists, as a symbolic nation branding action, was cited as an example of the Irish government's recognition of the importance of art and artists to the nation state. Significant increases in Arts Council funding (from €56.7 in 2015 to €140m in 2025), combined with increases to Culture Ireland (from €2.5m in 2015 to €8m in 2025), documented in Publication Two are also indicative of the growing recognition by the state of the value of the arts. However, despite the strong affirmation by all those interviewed of the unique importance of Irish artists and their contribution to Ireland's global reputation, creativity was not included as one of the explicit core values in *Global Ireland 2025* (Publication One).

The role of artists as critical commentators on the nation state forms a strong narrative thread in Publications Three and Four. It's clear from the research findings that, for many artists, speaking truth to power is a vital part of their artistic freedom. While there may be a degree of discomfort for senior officials when artists go 'off message' the authenticity of their activist stance can enhance and amplify positive perceptions of a nation (Publication Four). This aligns with Anholt's (2025) point in Publication Four regarding the positive international perception that is generated for a nation, and the authenticity of its nation branding, when artists use their artistic freedom to be critical of the nation state, 'in its successes and in its failures' (Publication Three). However, whether artists are acting as state or collaborative non-state actors when they use their platform to protest, or call out the actions of the state, remains unresolved (Publication Three).

8.2.2 Overall findings in relation to sub-questions

The research expanded on the core question by addressing these sub-questions:

- In what way did the *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme* shape the Irish government's approach to nation branding?

A key factor which connects *Ireland 2016* and which was instrumental in driving the development of a new nation branding strategy is the continuity in the composition of the senior team of people who were involved in both. The momentum, inspiration and knowledge, which those who were involved in *Ireland 2016* witnessed and absorbed, clearly helped inform the vision and confidence which led to the creation of *Global Ireland 2025*. The decision to adopt a values-based nation branding strategy originated in *Ireland 2016*, as did the framework for establishing a whole-of-government cross-sectoral approach (Publication One). Nevertheless, although the challenge of developing a strategy based on the principles of co-authorship and co-creation was validated in *Ireland 2016* (Publications Two), this was not carried forward in the vision and planning of *Global Ireland 2025* which remains a top-down policy (Publications One and Four).

A recurring theme throughout the research is the value of complicating the (nation brand) narrative, as a means of facilitating inclusivity and demonstrating respect for the diversity of ethnicities, genders and personal histories that contribution to a nation's identity (Publications Two and Three). Kaufmann's (2016) proposition of complexity theory as a lens to study nations and national identity formation has emerged as an important and influential framework for the study's critical analysis (Publications Two and Four). This also links in to the challenges for nation branding initiatives to move beyond the one-way broadcast style of purely promotional propaganda in favour of something that might be complex but is ultimately more authentic (Publications Three and Four).

The research also traced the connection between the artists who were unafraid to take risks and were central to the 'poet's rebellion' (Kiberd, 1997, page 1) of 1916 and the actions of contemporary Irish artists who are using their voices to speak out on issues they feel strongly about (Publication Two and Four).

- What effect has the whole-of-government *Global Ireland 2025* strategy had on Ireland's nation branding and cultural diplomacy policy?

Global Ireland 2025 is Ireland's first attempt at a whole-of-government nation branding strategy. It is a step-change in how the Irish state is approaching the task of managing its reputation and influence internationally and is a gamechanger in terms of its strategic positioning in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Unlike any of the other policies examined in this thesis, it is overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach. It's also clear from the tone and messaging, and from the research conducted for this thesis, that the focus has shifted away from being primarily promotional to being more focused on what Ireland and Irish citizens have contributed to the world (Publications One and Four).

There has been a noticeable shift in the vision behind Ireland's approach to managing its international reputation abroad, particularly in relation to standing up for the 'lesser, for the smaller' (Publication Four). Several interviewees talked about the importance of being a 'good global citizen' (Publication One) and of the importance of giving back to humanity, and to the planet (Publication Four). This reinforces one of Anholt's prime directives that a nation's reputation is based on a 'diplomacy of deeds', not words (Publication One). Best practice, in nation branding terms, is about what governments do (Publication One) and how they can improve the life of their citizens, while also contributing positively to the global community.

One of the key challenges, and potential risks, for Ireland's cultural diplomacy is a deepening of the utilisation of the strength and reputation of its artists as a strategic component of its nation branding. The current tactic and strategy of cultural promotion, as opposed to cultural relations, is already paving the way for the arts to be institutionalised within government policy as a means of achieving the objectives of a dominant nation branding agenda (Publication Four). This supports Hadley and Gray's (2017) point about the increasing threat of hyperinstrumentalism whereby the value of the arts is measured and inextricably linked to other government priorities (Publication Four). It also means that any discussion or interrogation of what constitutes the importance of purely artistic and cultural values is further diminished and disappearing from the national discourse.

- To what extent have Irish artists been instrumentalised in Ireland's nation branding in the period 2015 to 2025?

For artists, walking the funding tightrope is always challenging, even for those who are successful with established international reputations and multiple awards. State funding will always be awarded for specific purposes and sometimes this has worked to the benefit of artists who have been able to access it to produce new work (Publication Three). Several

of those interviewed referred to their awareness of the instrumentalisation of artists to present their work in territories of strategic interest (Publication Three) which is the epitome of Carter's (2015) definition of instrumentalisation which sees culture used to serve other ends. This resonates with Bourdieu's (1996) assertion that artists are always balancing the desire for artistic independence and integrity with the practical requirements of operating in a cultural marketplace (Publication Three). One interviewee was particularly cognisant of the ulterior motive of the institutions of the state, whereby an artist's cultural capital is exchanged for political capital, when performances or artefacts are promoted for political purposes. There was also a strong recognition of the curatorial element involved in state funding in terms of which artists are supported to present work Ireland abroad, with Magan (Publication Three) observing: ''we're all in favour of curatorial roles when they align with our outlooks . . . a liberal sensibility and a pro-minority sensibility. But if we're accepting that idea, we also need to accept the paradigms of that curation.'

There was evidence of some dissention amongst interviewees around the pressure for artists to be nation brand ambassadors, with artists, understandably concerned around the requirement for 'extreme positivity' (Publication Three), despite senior officials emphasising that 'it's not their job to be cheerleaders' (Publication Four). Yet even U2 were co-opted as campaign ambassadors and added their considerable influence and endorsement to Ireland's UN Security Council campaign (Publication One). A key finding of the research is the observance of reverse instrumentalism taking place when artists demonstrate a deep connection to their homeland and its nation brand values at high-profile award ceremonies or in acts of cultural protest and boycotts (Publication Four). It also identifies a transition from being perceived as nation brand ambassadors to performative acts of transnational nation branding.

8.3 Overall contribution to knowledge

A recent review of literature on nation branding in the period 1996 to mid-2021 (Rojas-Méndez and Koshnevis, 2022, p. 110) noted the absence of research on the topic by practitioners who had 'almost no prominent contribution' in academic journals. This research goes some way towards addressing this in its contribution from an experienced practitioner who has witnessed the origin, evolution and implementation of a new nation branding strategy. In addition, the most recent systematic review of nation branding literature notes the prevalence of quantitative research in the form of surveys as the most dominant research method (Hao et al, 2019). They observe the value of qualitative research

as ‘more likely to reveal factors that have not been investigated that influence nation branding research’ (ibid., p. 9). The use of qualitative research, in the form of semi-structured interviews, with a diverse group of informants, each of whom brought relevant expertise but a different perspective to the subject, has yielded new knowledge on the topic.

This is also the first case study to examine the related, but distinct, approaches which Ireland has adopted in its cultural diplomacy and nation branding. It documents a particularly important period in the Irish government’s revision of three important policies, each of which will have a significant impact on the future of Ireland’s approach to cultural diplomacy and its role in building Ireland’s reputation abroad. It charts a significant departure for Ireland in how it is managing its international reputation by adopting a values-based whole-of-government strategy and the effect of artist protests on perceptions of Ireland abroad as an independent empathic republic. It also identifies transnational nation branding as a new concept and emerging trend in the discourse on activism, protest and nation branding.

8.4 Concluding remarks and future research

This thesis set out to understand, interpret and analyse the rationale behind Ireland’s shift in tactics and approach to managing its reputation abroad. It also sought to examine the instrumentalisation of Irish artists as a tool of soft power and a critical component in contributing to Ireland’s global influence and impact, as a small country on the edge of Europe. Debates on national security, Ireland’s history of neutrality and our changing role in Europe, and strategic alliances with the US, Asia and beyond, are important factors which will inform the next iteration of *Global Ireland 2050*. Ireland’s success and optimisation of its soft power as a means of building influence and impact abroad is facing serious challenges as it gains more confidence in taking a stronger position on global issues, such as Palestine. The closure of the Embassy of Israel in Dublin and recent calls to rename a local park, named after an Irish Israeli citizen, has drawn accusations of antisemitism from some international commentators (O’Carroll 2024). While this is strongly and repeatedly denied by the Irish government, it is undoubtedly impacting on perceptions of Ireland abroad. Ireland is gaining confidence as a nation state, particularly in the timeframe of this thesis, which observed the passing of the marriage equality and abortion referenda, as well as a marking of the foundation of Irish republic. The next phase of Ireland’s evolution as a nation state will be critical in terms of how it balances its responsibilities to its people while also delivering on its ambition to be a good global citizen. As this thesis argues, artists have played a central role in embodying a nation’s values at critical moments

in the evolution of the new Irish state. They have the potential, the vision and the courage to do so again. The question is whether the state has the courage to empower, rather than instrumentalise them, as part of a nation brand agenda.

While this thesis reveals some important insights on Ireland's nation branding from the perspective of those who are involved in both its construction and dissemination, there exists a dearth of knowledge regarding the actual perception of Ireland, and Irish artists, amongst international publics. In terms of soft power, Ireland has retained its position in the top 30 (28th place), out of 193 nation brands assessed, according to the latest Global Soft Power Index (Global Soft Power Index, 2026), whereby 160,000 respondents in 102 countries were asked questions based on their familiarity with a particular nation, its reputation and influence. Deployment of hard power by nations claiming to adhere to liberal democratic values creates discord within the nation brand image and negative sentiment amongst global public, as evidenced by Israel's drop to 39th place, the steepest rank decline in the Index (ibid). In *Global Ireland 2025*, the Irish government is attempting to create a strategic alignment between policy, impact and narrative in an approach that is best placed to optimise their soft power. While the foregrounding of Irish arts and artists as a cornerstone of the strategy is indicative of its continued value as a critical mechanism of soft power and influence within an increasingly uncertain geo-political landscape, it would be hugely useful to undertake longitudinal empirical research to support this hypothesis. Current nation branding policies and strategies lack any scientific foundation and are based primarily on anecdotal evidence garnered from Irish diplomatic and consulate networks, diasporic contacts and locally based export offices. For any future policy to be effective, it needs to have clear, achievable objectives with measurable outcomes. This requires the commissioning of longitudinal empirical mixed methods research which would provide a baseline dataset, and a benchmark, upon which a meaningful and measurable nation branding strategy, with key milestones, is based.

Furthermore, the emergence of a new paradigm of transnational nation branding, and the motivations and impact of the reverse instrumentalism by Irish artists who live their nation brand values by protesting the actions of another nation state, merits further research and examination. This could be undertaken through mixed methods research which would involve a quantitative element, such as a survey with a range of artists across disciplines, and a series of focus groups with both artists and presenting partners and Irish cultural officers in key international locations.

Lastly, as the focus of this thesis is on government-led nation branding, only artists who have received state funding to tour their work abroad were eligible, and invited, to participate in the research. However, a gap in existing research, and an important area of future study, might focus on artists who have strong reservations about being instrumentalised in the service of the nation state, or who have refused state funding or opportunities to participate in government-led international art form showcases, on a point of principle. Moreover, given the focus of the thesis on the Irish government's approach to nation branding, participants were selected based on their direct experience, knowledge and expertise related to the topic. The inclusion of artists and perspectives of senior officials and key stakeholders from Northern Ireland, particularly given the emergence of the Shared Island initiative, would add further depth to this study and facilitate the inclusion of alternative expert and informed 'outsider' perspectives on the role of artists in the island of Ireland's dynamic and evolving nation branding.

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Appendix i: Errata

p. 106 Abstract

There is a remarkable confidence in Irish culture right now. In the decade to 2024, Ireland successfully emerged from a devastating recession, while overseeing significant investment by the State in the arts. A new generation of artists are shaping Irish identity, forged in the heat of a rapidly growing multicultural population, to construct a new national narrative of Ireland. This paper examines the instrumentalisation of artists in Ireland's nation brand. Based on interviews with renowned Irish artists, the study establishes that artists are complicit in their use of the arts as a tool of soft power. It confirms their unique role in building a nation's reputation, and engaging international publics with the multiplicity of narratives, within an evolving Irish identity. It calls for a conceptual repositioning of artists as critical co-authors in effective nation branding

p. 108 first paragraph (of this page in Introduction section)

Artists utilise their position of privilege with international publics to act as cultural brand ambassadors for their home country. Many are alert to their embodiment of a nation's image and reputation when engaging with international publics and are attentive to the opportunities for national identity construction and meaning-making, when audiences come into contact with their work. The core hypothesis of this study centres on the proposition that a new paradigm of authentic co-authored nation branding is possible if artists were to be considered, not as outsiders, but rather as 'critical insiders' and co-creators in the construction of a new national narrative. This qualitative study aims to explore the role of the artist in creating nation brand value. It also examines some of the tensions that arise for artists, who are supported by the state, in confronting or compounding nation brand perceptions amongst international publics. It establishes the potential for a co-authored nation brand, which reflects the growing maturity of a democratic state by embracing the multiplicity of diverse and critical perspectives within the national narrative.

p. 117-118 First and second paragraphs of Methodology

The researcher's insider knowledge of international cultural relations, combined with practitioner expertise in government-led nation brand initiatives, enabled her to adopt an ethnographic sensibility, which seeks to observe how people make sense of their world (Simmons and Rush Smith, 2017). In her roles with both the British Council Ireland (2001-2005) and Culture Ireland (2007-2014), the researcher designed and implemented international cultural relations policies and strategies for both agencies, before

subsequently leading on communications for the all-of-government *Ireland 2016* and *Creative Ireland* programmes.

Contrary to prevailing assumptions in the field, an ethnographic sensibility is not confined purely to ethnographers but rather it involves being interested in 'what people do as well as why they do it' (Herzog and Zacka, 2019, p. 764). In conducting any form of ethnographic research, Chang (2008) notes that data can be collected from external sources through interviews, artifacts, and a literature review. The researcher's unique experience, insights and nuanced understanding of Irish international cultural relations pointed towards the value of adopting an ethnographic mindset (Anderson 2006, 378) which recognises the researcher's status as having 'specific knowledge of the research group, analytic reflexivity, discussions with key informants beyond the self and a commitment to theoretical analysis.'

p. 119 first paragraph after Figure 2 interview participants

The researcher's knowledge and personal connections with the artists was a critical factor in persuading them to participate in the study and, most probably, towards gaining their trust to reveal valuable insights and high-quality data. While scholars have raised concerns regarding ethnography as being 'too inward looking' (Alvesson, cited in Poerwandari 2021, 313), due diligence has been given to the possibility of bias in the interpretation and analysis of the dataset through the use of deliberative reflexivity (Ibrahim and Edgley 2015) which enabled the researcher to be aware of the impact of 'positionality, identity and power in producing knowledge' (Corlett and Mavin 2019, 30). The researcher fully understands and respects the ethical responsibilities with regard to bias in conducting research which espouses any form of ethnographic sensibility and has attempted to mitigate any issues by conducting the study 'honestly, authentically and meaningfully' (Poerwandari 2021, 318).

Appendix ii: DCU REC Approval letter

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Ms. Madeline Boughton
School of Communications

Dr. Neil O'Boyle
School of Communications

2nd June 2020

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2020/102**

Proposal Title: **Re-Imagining Ireland: the birth of a nation brand and the leading role of Irish arts and culture in its ideation and enactment**

Applicant(s): **Ms. Madeline Boughton and Dr. Neil O'Boyle**

Dear Colleagues,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Scanlon

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

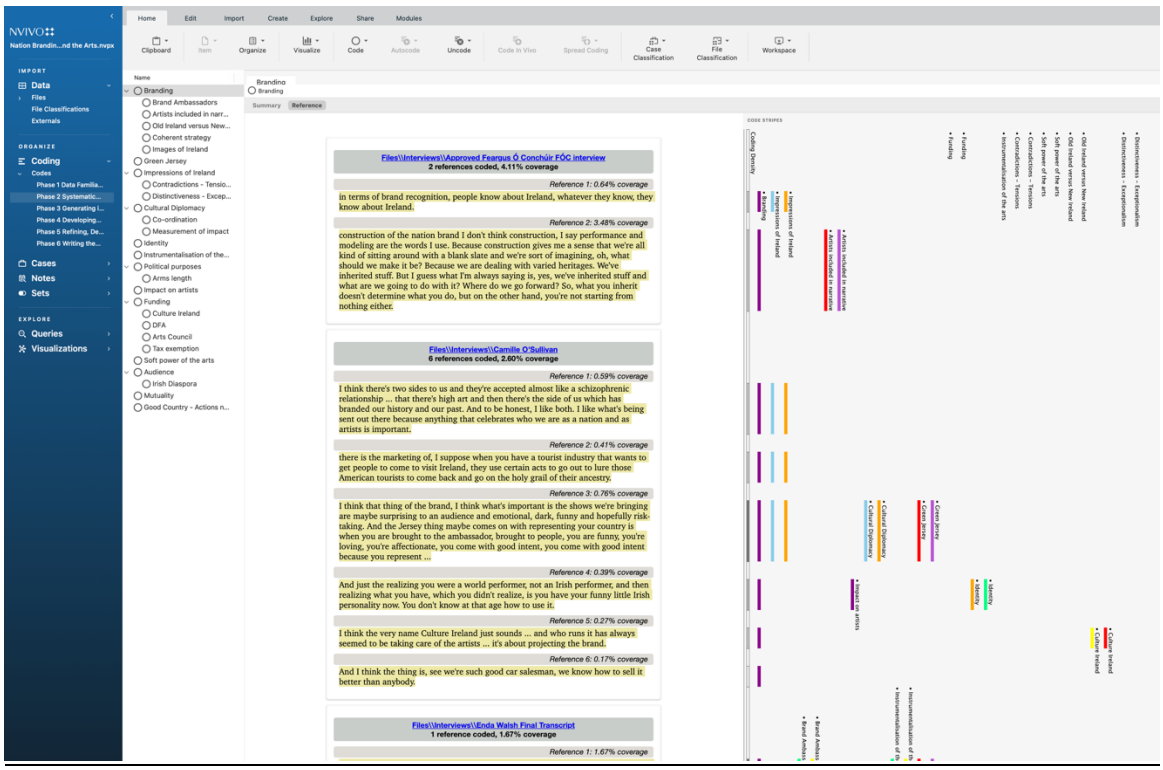
Research & Innovation Support
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9, Ireland

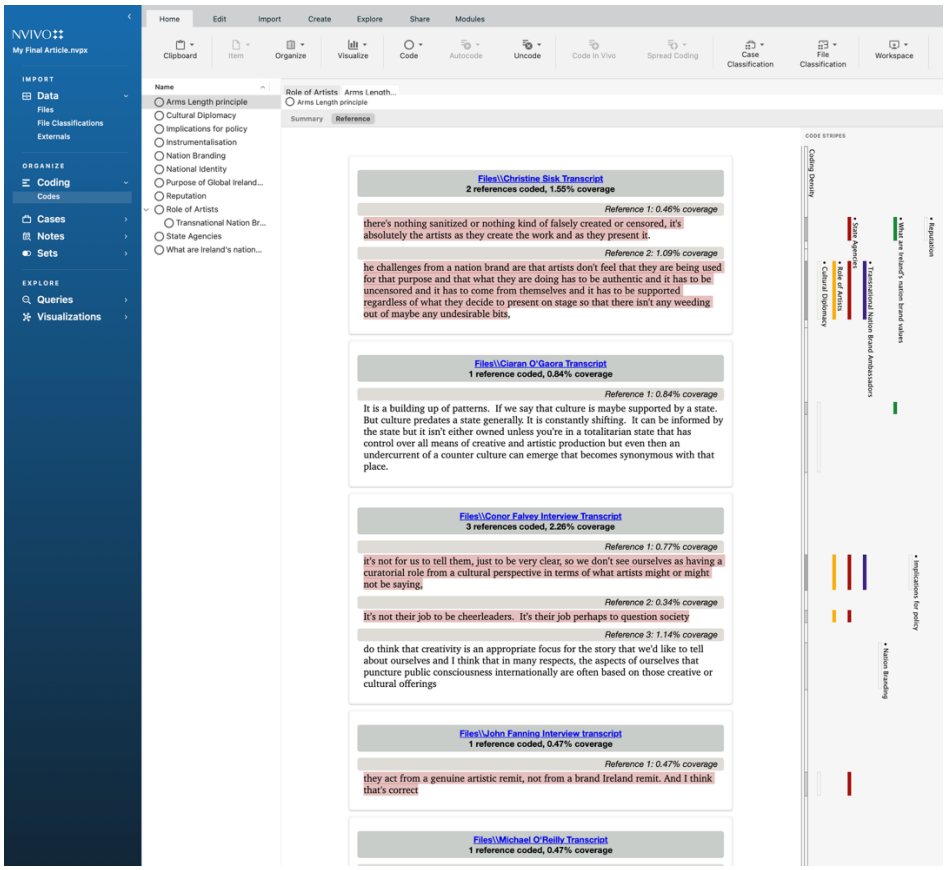
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Appendix iii: Full list of interviewees

Interviewee	Role
Simon Anholt	Policy advisor, nation brand strategist, author
Artist #1	Award winning Irish writer, director, performer
Anonymous #1	*Ireland 2016* Local Authority coordinator
Helen Blake	Assistant Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach
John Concannon	Former Director General, Global Ireland, Former Director, *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme* and *Creative Ireland*
Caitriona Crowe	Former Head of Special Projects, National Archives
Anne Enright	Booker Prize-winning author
Conor Falvey	Assistant Secretary General, Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
John Fanning	Brand strategist, author
Diarmaid Ferriter	Historian and member of the *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group
Martin Hayes	Musician, Cultural Ambassador
Garry Hynes	Tony Award-winning theatre director, Artistic Director of Druid Theatre Company
Michael Keegan Dolan	Award-winning choreographer, Artistic Director of Teac Damsa
Manchán Magan	Bi-lingual author, playwright, broadcaster
Ronan McGreevy	Journalist and author
Phillip McMahon	Playwright, director, founder of ThisisPopBaby
Deirdriú McQuaid	*Ireland 2016* Local Authority coordinator
Maurice Manning	Chairman, *Decade of Centenaries* Expert Advisory Group
Fearghus Ó Conchúir	Choreographer, performer
Ciarán Ó Gaora	Brand strategist
Michael O'Reilly	Political and policy adviser, author
Camille O'Sullivan	Singer, actress
Brendan Rogers	Deputy Secretary General, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Senior Government Official A	*Decade of Centenaries*, Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
Senior Official B	*Ireland 2016*, Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
Christine Sisk	Former Director, Culture Ireland
Enda Walsh	Award-winning playwright, screenwriter, director

Appendix iv: NVivo codebook (excerpts)





Appendix v: Sample interview guide

Research Title:

Re-Imagining Ireland: the birth of a nation brand and the leading role of Irish arts and culture in its ideation and enactment

Primary Investigator:

Madeline Boughton, Assistant Professor, School of Communications,
Dublin City University

Demographic Details:

1. Please provide your name and, if appropriate, your professional title [or role] and organisation which you would like to be used alongside any quotes used in the research.

Irish arts and culture have long been recognised as playing a vital role in building and sustaining Ireland's reputation abroad.

1. In your opinion, what is the current narrative around how Ireland is promoted abroad?
2. What do you think is the role, if any, of Irish artists in how Ireland is perceived and promoted abroad?
3. From the perspective of Irish arts and culture, what do you think differentiates Ireland from other countries in an increasingly competitive global context?
4. Unlike other international cultural agencies, Culture Ireland is based in the Department of Arts and not part of Department of Foreign Affairs. Do you think this is significant or does it impact on the role of artists in cultural diplomacy?
5. Where artists are in receipt of state funding to present their work abroad, do you think they have a responsibility to be ambassadors for Ireland?
6. There can sometimes be a tension between the public diplomacy mission of Foreign Affairs and cultural diplomacy, for example, when an artist is presenting work which might be provocative or challenging in its representation of Ireland or being Irish? How might that impact on the artist and/or on Ireland's reputation abroad?
7. What role, if any, could/should/might artists play in the construction of an authentic nation brand for Ireland?

Summation:

- Are there any other observations you would like to add?

Appendix vi: Sample interview transcript 1 (excerpt)

Interview with Manchán Magan, 10.30am Wednesday 28 July 2023

Madeline Boughton:

What do you think is the current narrative around how Ireland is promoted abroad?

Manchán Magan:

I think, you know, that hasn't been clear. I think the IDA have been really clear. They're the only organization that have had a very clear mission for like more than 20, 30, even 40 years. And they've consistently done that idea. They've sold that idea and they've had success. But as opposed as in terms of like the cultural element or even the Foreign Affairs element, that's not my wheelhouse. The cultural element, it's always been, you know, it's this idea we're soft, we're sort of open to other people, we're sort of creative, but I don't think there's been a clear mission, and particularly in line with how the arts are modernizing and how there's new issues coming in to society that the arts need to deal with, that all of society is dealing with, we don't have a clear ... are we traditional? Are we progressive? Are we hypocrites? Are we still just landing on the shoulders of Beckett and Joyce, or are we some sort of new, innovative, creative thing? So, I would say there's a vacuum there. There's a load of different people pushing different agendas and none of the voices are very strong in terms of theatre, you know, you think The Abbey really hasn't been a strong voice. We can remember in the eighties and nineties they had these big shows. Really, the big, I presume ... has been Druid. And that's why it was great you were talking to Garry, and the tours abroad by Druid are less than they used to be. But they're ... you know, they're more traditional. They're more real reflections on the canon. And that's probably the main message is going out when the Abbey tours also it's not the modern young, innovative young people that they tour. So really we're a cultural country that had great lore in the past, I think is the overall idea.

Madeline Boughton:

From what you're saying, there's mixed messages out there and no coherent narrative around, particularly around the arts side of that messaging. Would that be fair to say?

Manchán Magan:

Yeah, I think there are people trying to make a message. And so we still see the impact of John Concannon in government and in cultural circles. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. We can always pick on the edges of John Concannon and say that there's things that don't sit well, but his influence, and maybe not because John Concannon would actually chime a lot with probably, you know, a lot of the things that Eugene Downes would think , or that the directors of Ireland's organizations, which are basically, let's have a warm, let's be progressive, let's have a warm fuzzy feel to Ireland. Let's try and stand up for the lesser, for the smaller. Which is inspirational, but it's just because, you know, then John steps in to go and then steps out again and then comes in, shows his influence indirectly and then, you know, so, but I suppose he and Eugene would be two key figures. There are loads of other people that we don't know, even like your man, the director of Failte Ireland who's been ...

Manchán Magan:

They're people that we wouldn't see in the public eye but actually have a huge impact. What they're going to put their money behind, what they're going to choose. Just from being on slightly on the inside, the thing that was interesting was seeing the DFA, who we think would be a kind of a conservative group, you know, reach out to Ruan two years in a row and get him to do these really slightly radical films for St. Patrick's Day, what did

the Pro Ukrainian one this year? And the one, two years ago, I can't remember what that was about. Was it the beginning of the Ukraine War or something else?

Manchán Magan:

And it's done in an interesting way that there's all ... it's white glove, there's no name. Ruan isn't allowed to say that he directed one. Ruan is very vague about who tells him to do this. It's last minute he gets sort of a private call, drop everything, do this. And it could just as easily be done with a really dark, bad message. It just as happens that who and who is it, is it Concannon? Is it Eugene? Is it Coveney at the time? But it seems overall that there is this general liberal consensus within the DFA and I see it as well, my niece, Ruan's daughter, she's just gone in as third secretary. And she was absolutely, you know, she's 23 and was radically angry about the injustice in the world. So got jobs at the UN and the EU and in different NGOs and, well obviously 23-year-old Irish girl, would've hated the Irish government, but, you know, would've had no respect for what was happening and decided want to join Médecins Sans Frontiers or something. And she realized actually the people she sees out there in the world is some lone Embassy official, or ambassador or some UN person of Irish, in the background, trying to stand to up for the small person. So in some ways, because we need to pal up with these, you know, often right wing Silicon Valley or at least strong capitalist conservative banks in Silicon Valley and pharmaceutical companies in America. We can't show our liberal leanings too clear on the surface. Maybe that's the idea, but we do both.

Madeline Boughton:

It's something that has come up around the difficulties with Ireland abroad. Diplomats anecdotally would say Ireland has a reputation for speaking out of both sides of its mouth, that we are very hail fellow well met, but when it comes to the hard work, we're not so good. We sign up to everything, but we don't follow through. Do you think that's a valid sort of perception of Ireland from your sort of read on it?

Manchán Magan:

So, like an ambassador would have a better sense of things in that. And so it is true that we don't often commit to the full moral ideas, but I do believe that there's an important role for being able to talk outta two sides of your mouth. The world is very complex. Every one of those, like the Silicon Valley companies are a classic example. They're both highly idealistic and highly exploitative. The world sort of ... all of us individually are that we all like in Mary Robinson, you know, takes her flights and does her damage so that she can talk about other things. There's no clean you know, individually, we are all hypocritical. Governments are going to be hypocritical too. And the beauty is, if we could own up to that and say, yes, in some ways we will espouse liberal causes, but actually there's a line where it damages us and we don't go that far. I dunno, do you need to highlight those or is it understood? And that's why I think it's fine for Ireland to espouse the traditional and also be modern to espouse the conservative and also be hyper liberal as long as we own the fact that there is this multiplicity of ideas.

Appendix vii: Sample interview transcript 2 (excerpt)

Research Interview with Ciaran O'Gaora – Friday 11th December 2020

[Do you think that there is a narrative or a key message about how Ireland is being promoted abroad?]

You used the word promoting several times … what I'm understanding when we talk about commemoration, a date can happen in a calendar and we can ignore it, you are choosing to say, this date or this period is important, we are going to give it significance. You can have a reputation .. if people know you exist, if people don't know you exist, you don't have a brand. The idea of a brand is more of a gut feeling and an association … you don't have any of those things, if you don't know you exist, there is an assumption of an awareness.

When you are using the word promotion, it's suggesting that we are going to go out and make people aware of ourselves, we are going to make people consider us in a certain light and we may be asking people to engage with us or interact with us or exchange … that could be cultural exchange, that could be financial exchange, that could be diplomatic exchange. It doesn't matter. So you are using the word promotion as a way of actively going out and shaping the nature of that interaction and therefore we can only look at this through the lens of an activity.

In terms of mental reputation, I come from the point of view of when we look at the bubble of nation. A nation is a cultural construct; I've spoken about this in the past. A state is a clear empirical thing. Ireland did not exist as a state, as in the country Ireland, as in the state Ireland … the state didn't exist until 1922. The free state. Originally called Eire. Translated into the word Ireland. And in all correspondence up until 1998, referred to by England, Great Britain and the United Kingdom should I say, they referred to this state as Eire.

This whole element around identification, that is a branding exercise, what are we known as … because of our history, we play on an ambiguity that is there, there is the idea of a state, a state is a defined thing and we amble between … the state is the 26 counties but we want people to soft focus that into the island. So that's the state. That definitive thing. And the state can develop its own brand or reputation. Do we trust the Irish state in negotiations? Will they renege on their policies? If they sign up to a Climate Bill, will they spend 60 years getting to it or will they do it in the ten years they said they would.

[The state] it's the apparatus, it is government organisation. Where a nation operates at a cultural level. It is at an intangible level. And when you talk about brand you talk about intangible value. You have two pairs of blue jeans, one has a small little red tab on it 501's, and you paid twice as much, you are paying for the intangible value. You are paying for the narrative association around that.

And the whole idea of Ireland existed as a nation .. you know Roisin Dubh …for hundreds of years and only with the emergence of nationalism, as a political force, and as a cultural force … romanticism … but what it is is … that is the political construction

through cultural mean of a place. You could say, it is not even political, because a lot of people, like members of the ascendency, just like you a kinda Scottish .. a lot of Scottish references that purports to be kind of mountain men, the imagery of tartan and everything like that, that was invented, at the same time as a lot of stuff was invented about Ireland.

The basic idea is that nations are invented or created culturally and they can exist in alignment with a state. Or they, like we can see in Africa or other post-colonial states, those nations or tribes …When we think about the nation, that existed as a cultural construct, and it existed as a cultural construct in the minds of the diaspora in America whose political response to what happened in Ireland in 1916 was different than the domestic response, because it was more emotional, it was more cultural … and more romantic.

I come from the point of view that the idea of a nation is a cultural construct and therefore the arts and culture and narrative and story is what creates that … just like a constitution and agencies and executives and laws create a state. You have words like country and words like territory. There is a territory …. Is Swaziland a country or is it a pretend state? There is a language between those. For me, I am happy to keep with the …

You can have a nation that isn't bounded by geography … on a level and you have state that is … it is bounded by law and geography and structures. For, me they would be the two elements that I think what's interesting … you use the word promoting in the intro … Who is promoting?

When State actors are actually shaping that (promotion). That's slightly different than Glanbia or Guinness. So Guinness, known as black protestant porter, founded by that great anti-home rule industrialist Arthur Guinness who have trade marked the emblem of the State which means that the state needs to use it in an opposite facing direction .. is synonymous with what it is to be Irish. And the core values whether they still articulate that behind Guinness Stout are strength, goodness and communion. When we look at those three values, I would come at it from the point of view that if you are going to build a nation brand … is that its built on values and we deployed that strategy in the United Nations Security Council and that was strategically positioned so that Partnership, Independence and Empathy were very clear values that could be used to credibly and differentiatedly and motivationally separate us from Norway and Canada. And they are three ideas at the heart of branding. Is it credible, is it differentiated and is it motivating to the people you are trying to connect with.

Ireland doesn't speak actually to countries. Individuals and organisations connect with each other and those connections, and those activities form a pattern which over time collectively if you stand back far enough establish certain degrees of expectation on the part of the person receiving it. So, there's Madeline, she's Irish, she'll be a bit of crack, she's easy to talk to, it would be very disconcerting for someone to meet an Irish person who purported themselves in a way that would seem to be arrogant and insensitive. They could be maybe boorish and ignorant, that would fit a stereotype but not necessarily arrogant.

Appendix viii: Publisher permissions

A new nation brand strategy? Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign, Boughton (2022) is published in the journal *Adminstration* and is available as an open-source article at doi: 10.2478/admin-2022-0020.

This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst of a new nation brand, Boughton (2023) is published in the *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* and is available as an open-source article at https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1057/s41254-023-00296-4.

'Putting on the Green Jersey': Irish artists as critical insiders and co-authors of a new nation brand, Boughton (2024) is published in the International Journal of Cultural Policy and is available at 10.1080/10286632.2024.2409746. The copyright agreement with Taylor and Francis, publishers of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* stipulate that: 'The right to include the Article in a thesis or dissertation that is not to be published commercially, provided that acknowledgement to prior publication in the Journal is given.'

Irish arts abroad: future directions for Ireland's cultural diplomacy and nation branding (Boughton, 2025) has been accepted for publication and is in the final stages of production with the *Cultural Trends* journal. The pre-publication link is 10.1080/09548963.2025.2595553. The copyright agreement with Taylor and Francis, publishers of *Cultural Policy* stipulate that: 'The right to include the Article in a thesis or dissertation that is not to be published commercially, provided that acknowledgement to prior publication in the Journal is given.'