
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nation Branding through Tourism in Qatar: An Exploratory Review and Future Research Agenda

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| ABSTRACT

As countries compete for tourism, investment, and global recognition, nation branding has become an important topic for researchers and decision-makers. Tourism is a visible and significant part of nation branding, shaping how international audiences view a country. This study explores how tourism fits into Qatar's nation-branding strategy, with a focus on institutional collaboration and ongoing tourism projects rather than short-term events such as mega sporting events. This study uses a review-based exploratory method, drawing on academic research, policy papers, official tourism websites, and user-generated travel content. It describes and maps the main tourism initiatives and organisations involved in branding Qatar as a destination. The analysis looks at the roles of Qatar Tourism, Visit Qatar, Discover Qatar, and Qatar Airways, and how they promote tourism and shape experiences for international audiences. The study also reviews independent travel vlogs from 2025 to show how international visitors experience and present Qatar. This study does not aim to measure branding effectiveness or test theories. Instead, it provides an initial overview of tourism-led nation branding in Qatar and identifies areas that require further research. By explaining current practices and examples, the paper sets the stage for future research on tourism-driven nation branding in Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council region.

| KEYWORDS

Nation Branding, Tourism Governance, Tourism Promotion, Qatar, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

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Introduction

As global competition increases, countries seek ways to stand out and attract tourists, investment, talent, and international attention. Nation branding has become an important strategy for shaping and managing a country's image, reputation, and identity (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). It involves more than just logos and slogans, covering the coordinated communication of a country's cultural, economic, political, and social qualities, which together shape how both outsiders and citizens see the country (Fan, 2010).

Tourism is a key part of nation branding and is one of the six areas measured by the Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI), which assesses how people view countries across different dimensions, including tourism (Anholt, 2007). Because tourism is visible and grounded in real experiences, it has a special impact on how countries are perceived internationally. It serves as soft power, allowing countries to shape their image through attraction and persuasion rather than force (Nye, 2013). Tourism connects countries with global audiences, helping them share stories about their culture, heritage, lifestyle, safety, modernity, and openness (Morgan et al.

2011). By promoting destinations and creating visitor experiences, tourism enables countries to highlight aspects of their national identity and supports economic development and soft-power goals (Kotler et al., 1993).

In this international context, the State of Qatar offers a particularly relevant case for exploratory research. Over the past few years, the country has achieved considerable worldwide attention and visibility, notably as the first Arab nation to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, an event widely associated with positive shifts in global perceptions, and in Qatar's case, it has across multiple reputational dimensions, such as people, culture, and governance (Ibrahim and Aleksanyan, 2026). Beyond mega-events, Qatar has pursued a more sustained approach to boosting its international image through long-term investments in tourism development, cultural infrastructure, and destination-promotion initiatives via organisations such as Visit Qatar and Discover Qatar.

Most research on Qatar has focused on nation branding through major sporting events and global media coverage, but less attention has been given to tourism-led nation branding as a coordinated, ongoing strategy. This study uses an exploratory, review-based approach to explore how tourism initiatives fit into Qatar's broader nation-branding strategy, drawing on academic literature and policy sources. By mapping key tourism initiatives and institutions, the paper contributes to the nation branding and tourism literature and identifies areas for future research in Qatar.

Conceptual Foundations

Destination branding is among the earliest applications of branding principles to geographic locations, originating primarily within tourism and destination marketing. In contrast to conventional products, destinations are not produced or managed by a single entity; instead, they consist of complex social, cultural, and experiential systems formed by diverse stakeholders (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). From a marketing perspective, branding addresses how viewers interpret, organise, and recall information about an offering. Seminal studies by Kotler et al. (1993) extended branding logic beyond products to cities, regions, and nations, asserting that places compete for visitors, investment, and attention in ways similar to commercial offerings. Expanding upon this foundation, brands are understood as perceptual constructs that reduce uncertainty and guide judgment by shaping expectations through symbolic value, emotional meaning, and experiential consistency (Kotler and Keller, 2016). This is particularly relevant in tourism, where potential visitors rely on mediated images and reputational signals rather than direct experience. Within this context, destination branding can be understood as a strategic process that integrates visual identifiers, experiential promises, and emotional associations to differentiate destinations, lessen perceived risk, and shape visitor expectations (Blain et al., 2005).

As branding ideas were applied to places, the concept of place branding expanded beyond tourism. Place branding includes cities, regions, and local areas as complex entities shaped by tourism, economic development, governance, culture, and social life (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). This view sees places as branded through a mix of policies, stories, and real conditions, not just marketing. Nation branding then became the broadest framework, focusing on the international image and reputation of whole countries. Closely tied to Simon Anholt's work, nation branding views a country's image as composed of governance, culture, people, tourism, exports, and investment (Anholt, 2007). Later research has stressed that nation branding is more than promotion; it is closely linked to national identity, policy consistency, and managing how the world sees the country (Dinnie, 2008).

Bringing these perspectives together, destination branding functions as a central operational component of nation branding; it is one of the dimensions of Anholt's Nation Brand Index, translating abstract national accounts into tangible, observable experiences for visitors. Tourism plays a central role in nation branding by supporting direct engagement with a country's culture, people, and environment. As a result, destination branding is one of the most visible and influential channels through which a nation's image is formed and revised internationally (Morgan et al. 2011).

Nation Branding through Tourism in the GCC Region

Tourism has become a more important part of nation branding in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in recent years. This is due to efforts to diversify oil-reliant economies, increase international visibility, and build soft power. In this setting, tourism is a main way to show modernity, openness, and a unique culture to the world (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the earliest and most developed example of tourism-led nation branding in the GCC. Since the early 2000s, Dubai has pursued a coordinated branding strategy focused on major infrastructure projects, famous attractions, global events, and strong international connections. This ongoing effort has made Dubai a well-known tourism and lifestyle destination and a key example of destination branding in the Middle East (Stephens Balakrishnan, 2008). Dubai's brand is often more recognised than the UAE's (the country that it is in), highlighting how city branding can sometimes overshadow the national brand.

Saudi Arabia has recently become a major player in tourism-led nation branding. Through Vision 2030, the country has started a big transformation plan that puts tourism at the centre of efforts to diversify the economy and change its international image (Vision 2030, 2026). Steps like opening to international tourists, building large projects such as NEOM and the Red Sea Project,

hosting global sports events, bringing in famous football players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar, and expanding cultural and entertainment options all show a clear effort to move beyond its traditional oil and religious identity. These changes show that tourism is becoming more important for nation branding in the GCC.

Qatar has also increased its focus on tourism-led nation branding, especially in the last decade. While it was less focused on tourism than the UAE in the past, Qatar now uses tourism as a key way to boost its international profile and diversify its economy. This shift is supported by investments in cultural infrastructure, global events, and destination-promotion efforts, especially around the FIFA World Cup 2022. Qatar National Tourism Strategy 2030 aim to attract 6 million visitors by 2030 (Government Communication Office, 2026a). This is just evidence of the country's direction to capitalise on tourism as a major area of focus.

Tourism Governance and Institutional Branding in Qatar

Tourism governance plays a key role in how destinations are developed, managed, and presented to the world. For place and nation branding, governance provides the structure needed to coordinate and maintain branding goals over time (Kavaratzis, 2012). In Qatar, tourism development and branding are managed through a central system that supports the country's wider objectives.

Qatar's approach to tourism governance has followed a clear timeline. In 1990, Qatar established the Supreme Commission for Tourism by Emiri resolution, demonstrating early commitment to organising and promoting tourism. In 2000, the creation of the Qatar Tourism Authority marked a move toward a more formal and strategic approach to tourism planning and international promotion (Almeezan, 2000). Now, Qatar Tourism leads tourism governance as the national authority, with Visit Qatar serving as its destination branding and promotional arm. This setup shifts from an authority-focused model to one centred on visitors and experiences, aiming to boost international engagement and visibility.

Visit Qatar was established in 2021 by Amiri Decree No. 15 to oversee national tourism development. It functions as the principal platform for destination branding and international promotion. This effort is integral to a wider approach aimed at repositioning Qatar from an event-centric or stopover destination to one recognised for unique, experience-based tourism offerings. The official website (www.visitqatar.com) offers a user-oriented digital interface that targets a wide range of international and regional audiences. The platform is available in nine languages: Arabic, English, Russian, Chinese, French, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, and German. This demonstrates a broad-based strategy that targets a global audience. The website presents curated destination narratives, cultural highlights, lifestyle experiences, and practical travel information, allowing visitors to engage with Qatar above and beyond standard promotional content. In addition, it features the Qatar Calendar, which has information on national events, festivals, exhibitions, and sporting activities to facilitate trip planning for visitors. By showcasing heritage, contemporary culture, and hospitality, Visit Qatar effectively communicates its national tourism objectives via consistent, comprehensible narratives for international audiences.

Tourism branding in Qatar is consistent with Qatar National Vision 2030, which guides the nation's comprehensive development. The Vision is structured around four primary pillars: human, social, economic, and environmental development. Tourism is positioned under the economic pillar and listed as one of the goals under the third strategy 2024-2030 to establish Qatar as a worldwide tourist destination (Government Communications Office, 2026b).

Alongside government-led tourism institutions, Discover Qatar (www.discoverqatar.qa), a destination management company owned by Qatar Airways, plays a major role in shaping visitor experiences. Qatar Airways, as a member of the Star Alliance, operates through Hamad International Airport, a leading, award-winning global aviation hub (Unis, 2025). This purposeful aviation infrastructure advances Qatar's tourism objectives by enhancing international accessibility, promoting transit tourism, and promoting extended visitor stays.

Discover Qatar offers a range of tourism products, including stopover packages for travellers staying in Qatar for a few hours or days, guided tours, cruise experiences, and pre-planned itineraries. While it is part of the national airline, Discover Qatar acts as a platform that delivers experiences and supports official destination branding. Its work goes beyond promotion by turning destination ideas into real experiences. Discover Qatar works closely with Visit Qatar, demonstrating an integrated branding approach. This connection is clear on digital and operational platforms. For example, on Hamad International Airport's website, in the top navigation bar, when you click Experience Qatar, it shows Discover Qatar and Visit Qatar, which is just proof of how these platforms work together to support destination promotion, experience booking, and brand communication.

Tourism governance in Qatar demonstrates that destination branding is a well-organised, established process. Strong leadership and clear planning help shape how people around the world view the country.

Tourism Promotion and International Visibility

Tourism promotion is a key way that destination branding increases international visibility and shapes how the world sees a country's identity. According to Giannopoulos et al. (2011), tourism is one of the most concrete and manageable parts of a nation's brand. They argue that destination branding can help strengthen nation-branding efforts by making national identity more visible and real.

As part of the state's official tourism authority, Visit Qatar continuously launches seasonal campaigns to increase international awareness and attract visitors. A campaign came out in 2024 to promote stopovers in Qatar, "What a Difference a Day Makes", encouraging passengers to transform short layovers into meaningful experiences by highlighting Qatar's compact and varied attractions, including beaches, cultural sites, dining, and leisure options accessible within 24 hours (Khatu, 2024; Qatar Tourism, 2024). The campaign employs classical music, curated itineraries, and digital tools such as booking widgets to ensure message consistency and improve visitor conversion.

Other campaigns include Visit Qatar's "Surprise Yourself," which aims to attract a broader international audience by highlighting unique, memorable experiences that go beyond typical expectations. This campaign, launched in several markets and media platforms, focuses on the emotional impact of "Moments That Stay With You," encouraging families, couples, and adventure seekers to explore Qatar's attractions, such as cultural centres, natural landscapes, and luxury hotels (MultiVu, 2024). The latest campaign, launched in September 2025, invites GCC travellers to experience winter in Qatar, further boosting seasonal and regional tourism (Qatar Tourism, 2025).

In addition to large-scale destination marketing campaigns, Visit Qatar strategically collaborates with international social media influencers throughout diverse influence tiers (nano, micro, macro, and mega), sponsoring visits to the country to improve international visibility and stimulate international awareness through experiential, shareable content via multiple platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok). These cooperative efforts amplify destination visibility and support peer-to-peer destination narratives, as the existing tourism literature shows that social media and influencer-driven storytelling are key mechanisms for constructing and communicating destination image and brand meaning (Tran and Rudolf, 2022). Visit Qatar also engages with local content creators and digital channels operating within the tourism domain, who play a key function in supporting authentic, place-based accounts and sustaining ongoing digital engagement with both residents and visitors. This combined influencer strategy indicates an integrated approach to destination branding that combines international reach with locally grounded representation (Visit Qatar, 2025).

Illustrative Evidence from User-Generated Travel Content

The following analysis draws on publicly available YouTube travel videos from vloggers and content creators from around the world who visited Qatar in 2025. These are non-sponsored videos by Qatar. Therefore, reflect personal travel experiences rather than institutionally commissioned promotional content. The only exception is a video featuring David Beckham, released in August 2022 on the Visit Qatar YouTube channel, several months before the FIFA World Cup, which was included to provide contextual contrast. From a wider pool of over thirty travel vlogger videos featuring Qatar in 2025, we selected a small sample for illustrative purposes, as shown in the screenshots below.

A common theme in these videos is that Qatar is seen as a short-stay or stopover destination. Many creators talked about visiting for 24 or 48 hours, or during a layover. This matches the stopover packages offered by Visit Qatar and Discover Qatar. Several creators described Qatar as safe, modern, and clean, while also highlighting its mix of traditional and cultural elements. As The Lovers Passport vloggers said, "from the futuristic skyline of Doha to the sunlit dunes of the desert, Qatar is a destination that effortlessly merges upscale modernity with a richly diverse cultural heritage."

Food and local experiences were frequently emphasised. Mark Wiens, an American food vlogger, shared a video that attracted approximately 1.4 million views, in which he explored street food and local cuisine in Qatar alongside residents and some locals, describing the food as "delicious." Several creators also highlighted cultural encounters. Ken Abroad, a travel vlogger from Germany, expressed strong first impressions of Qatar during a short visit of approximately two days, describing public infrastructure such as train stations as "absolutely spotless, modern, and clean," and remarking, "I wish train stations in my country, Germany, looked like this." He further described being invited by an elderly local for "coffee and dates" in Souq Waqif, which he described as a meaningful and unexpected cultural interaction.

Many videos and their descriptions mentioned Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022. Chris Kermis, an English travel vlogger, called Qatar "the country that hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup" in his video description. This shows that the event still helps raise international awareness and recognition for Qatar. In his video, he was surprised by aspects of Qatari culture, especially heritage experiences, saying, "It's a completely different side; I've never seen anything like this in my life" after seeing traditional practices such as falcon markets and veterinary facilities for falcons (Facons Hospital) in central Doha.

Several creators also addressed traditional customs and expectations. The Lovers Passport vloggers discussed the significance of observing local customs, advising female visitors to “dress modestly” and “cover shoulders,” framing these practices as part of respectful engagement with the host culture. Visual recurring themes within the videos were highly consistent, with creators frequently using Doha’s skyline in the video itself and particularly in video thumbnails, showing how Qatar’s modern architecture is actively leveraged as a visual branding asset to project a contemporary national image, alongside heritage locations such as Souq Waqif, which most creators also visited. Most of the videos reviewed attracted more than 100,000 views. They received largely positive audience comments about Qatar, with only a few outliers, indicating ongoing worldwide interest in Qatar as a destination. While not representative of all visitor perceptions, these independently produced narratives offer illustrative insight into how Qatar is currently experienced and communicated by international visitors.

Research Gaps and Future Research Agenda

Most recent research on Qatar’s nation’s brand focuses on mega-sporting events, especially the FIFA World Cup 2022, and how the country is portrayed in international media. Tourism is typically seen as a short-term outcome of these events, rather than a long-term, coordinated nation-branding strategy. Because of this, the ongoing role of tourism in Qatar’s nation branding remains understudied.

While earlier studies have looked at official branding campaigns, policy stories, and government communication, there has been little focus on how tourism-led nation branding is experienced and shared through user-generated content. Independent travel vlogs and social media stories are increasingly important in shaping how destinations are perceived, yet they remain underused in nation-branding research, especially in exploratory research.

The way tourism governance, destination branding organisations, and aviation groups work together has not been studied much. In Qatar, the combined roles of Qatar Tourism, Visit Qatar, Discover Qatar, and Qatar Airways form a unique setup that has not yet been fully explored as a model for integrated tourism-led nation branding. To fill these gaps, future studies should compare tourism-led nation branding across GCC countries, examining differences in governance, storytelling, and branding outcomes. Research using surveys, interviews, or digital analytics could help show how international audiences see Qatar’s tourism efforts and how these views affect the nation’s brand. Long-term studies would also help track how Qatar’s national brand evolves after the World Cup and test the sustainability of tourism-led branding beyond significant events.

Conclusion

This study presents tourism as a continuous and experience-driven element of Qatar’s nation-branding efforts. By drawing on a range of institutional sources and illustrative visitor content, it reflects how national narratives are communicated and encountered through tourism-related experiences. Rather than positioning tourism as a temporary or event-focused activity, the study frames it as an ongoing process through which Qatar’s image is shaped and shared. This research offers a contextual foundation for future work on tourism-led nation branding in Qatar and the wider GCC region.

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