

Nation Branding as a Central Component of Foreign Policy: Turkish Nation Branding in Africa - The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examines Turkish foreign policy and nation branding in Ethiopia by analyzing how Türkiye's diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and cultural engagements shape its national image and influence within Ethiopia. Using a qualitative research design, the study integrates data from semi-structured interviews with government officials, diplomats, business leaders, media professionals, civil society representatives, academic experts, and students. These primary data were complemented with document analysis of publicly available reports from the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC), Industrial Parks Development Corporation (IPDC), Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Turkish governmental institutions. The findings reveal that Türkiye's nation branding in Ethiopia is primarily driven by visible economic investments especially in manufacturing, textiles, construction, and industrial parks supported by humanitarian initiatives led by TİKA and other Turkish organizations. Diplomatic respondents emphasized Türkiye's balanced and non-interventionist foreign policy, which enhanced its credibility during periods of Ethiopia's political instability. However, the results also indicate several challenges, including limited public communication strategies, inconsistent media representation, bureaucratic hurdles faced by Turkish investors, and relatively low awareness of Turkish cultural diplomacy among the wider Ethiopian public. Despite these gaps, Türkiye has established a strong and growing presence in Ethiopia, positioning itself as a reliable development partner and rising middle power in Africa. The study concludes that more structured public diplomacy, expanded cultural and educational programs, improved investor facilitation, and strengthened bilateral policy dialogue are essential to maximizing Türkiye's nation-branding potential. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of rising-power diplomacy, soft power, and international branding in African contexts.

Keywords: Africa; Ethiopia; Foreign Policy; Nation Branding; Türkiye.

Received: 11/29/2025

Accepted: 1/29/2026

Published: 2/7/2026

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Nation branding has emerged as a strategic instrument in the conduct of foreign policy and international relations (IR). Traditionally, the image of a state was shaped primarily by its political and military power, yet in the contemporary globalized system, perception, identity, and reputation play equally decisive roles [8; 27]. Nation branding, originally a concept derived from marketing and corporate branding practices, refers to the deliberate management of a country's image abroad through policies, communications, and symbolic actions designed to enhance prestige and influence [22]. In the field of IR, it is increasingly conceptualized as a tool for states to project soft power, build international legitimacy, and attract economic, political, and cultural partnerships Reference [50; 39].

Closely related to nation branding is the concept of soft power, introduced by Nye [43], which emphasizes the ability of states to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or material incentives. Soft power is exercised through culture, values, institutions, and foreign policy conduct that generate credibility and admiration among foreign publics. In practice, nation branding and soft power overlap, with branding serving as the strategic communication of soft power assets [55]. In addition, public diplomacy-defined as the set of activities by which states engage with foreign societies and media to foster mutual understanding-functions as an operational mechanism of nation branding [20]. Similarly, cultural diplomacy, through educational exchanges, arts, religious and linguistic promotion, and other cultural activities, has become an integral part of states' branding strategies [36]. The rise of these practices signals a shift in global politics, where image, perception, and narrative contestations are increasingly important for advancing foreign policy goals.

In this global context, Türkiye's foreign policy since the early 2000s demonstrates a deliberate integration of nation branding with diplomacy. Particularly since the launch of the "Africa Opening Policy" in 2005, Türkiye has actively sought to expand its diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement with the continent [11; 45]. This policy shift has been characterized by increased high-level visits, the establishment of embassies, trade agreements, direct investments, development aid, and humanitarian assistance, largely facilitated through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkish Airlines, and various educational and cultural foundations [6]. Türkiye's branding strategy in Africa has combined entrepreneurial diplomacy-promoting trade, infrastructure, and business ventures-with humanitarian diplomacy-emphasizing aid, religious solidarity, and development cooperation [30]. Such initiatives have positioned Türkiye as a rising non-Western actor that competes with traditional Western powers and other emerging states like China and India in shaping African development narratives [49; 3].

Within this broader African policy, Ethiopia occupies a uniquely strategic position. Geopolitically, Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa, a region of significant global importance due to its proximity to the Red Sea, the Middle East, and major maritime routes [49]. Ethiopia also hosts the headquarters of the African Union (AU), making Addis Ababa a central diplomatic hub where international powers seek influence [1]. Historically, Türkiye and Ethiopia share long-standing ties, with relations dating back to the Ottoman Empire and later reinforced

through modern diplomatic exchanges [56]. In contemporary times, Ethiopia's large population, rapidly growing economy, and political role in regional peace and security make it a valuable partner for Türkiye's Africa strategy Reference [17]. Moreover, Ethiopia's diverse socio-cultural landscape provides a fertile ground for evaluating how Turkey's branding efforts are received across government, civil society, and the general public [1; 34].

Positioning this study within the wider academic and policy debates, Türkiye's nation branding in Ethiopia reflects broader questions about how emerging powers use non-traditional foreign policy tools to enhance their global image. While much of the literature on nation branding focuses on Western countries, there is limited empirical research on how rising states from the Global South, such as Türkiye, implement branding strategies in Africa Reference [47; 17]. Thus, examining the Turkish case in Ethiopia offers an opportunity to assess both the opportunities and limitations of branding as a foreign policy strategy in a developing region, while also contributing to comparative understandings of power, image, and influence in global politics [44; 27; 51].

1.2. Rationale of the Study

Despite the growing importance of nation branding as a tool of international engagement, empirical research examining its application within African contexts remains limited. Much of the existing scholarship on nation branding has focused on Western and developed countries, particularly in Europe and North America, where branding is often linked to tourism promotion, investment attraction, and cultural diplomacy [8; 27]. In contrast, studies exploring how emerging powers operationalize branding strategies through their foreign policy toward Africa are relatively scarce [17]. Specifically, the linkage between foreign policy initiatives and measurable nation branding outcomes in African states has not been systematically studied [51; 22; 47]. This empirical gap creates the need to examine how Türkiye an emerging power with increasing influence in Africa uses nation branding as part of its broader diplomatic and strategic objectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study is also relevant to the fields of international relations (IR), soft power, and public diplomacy. In IR literature, the discourse on soft power emphasizes attraction and legitimacy as central elements of statecraft in a multipolar world [44]. Nation branding provides a practical mechanism through which soft power is communicated and institutionalized [55]. At the same time, public diplomacy literature highlights the growing role of governments in engaging with foreign publics, media, and civil society to shape perceptions and attitudes [20]. By investigating Turkish initiatives in Ethiopia, this study contributes to the integration of nation branding with soft power and public diplomacy theory, offering insights into how non-Western actors mobilize cultural, economic, and humanitarian resources for international image-building.

Türkiye represents a particularly compelling case for such an inquiry due to its dual approach to foreign policy in Africa. On the one hand, Ankara has advanced an entrepreneurial diplomacy, characterized by the promotion of trade, investment, infrastructure projects, and business linkages [45]. Turkish Airlines, construction companies, and commercial ventures have become visible symbols of Türkiye's economic engagement across the continent. On the other hand, Türkiye has simultaneously pursued a humanitarian diplomacy, emphasizing development assistance, humanitarian aid, religious solidarity, and people-to-people connections [6]. Organizations such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and other NGOs have played prominent roles in building

Türkiye's humanitarian profile in Africa [31; 49; 11]. This combination of entrepreneurial and humanitarian diplomacy provides a distinctive model of nation branding that blends material and ideational dimensions of foreign policy.

Therefore, the rationale of this study lies in its potential to fill an empirical and theoretical void. Empirically, it will provide a systematic assessment of how Turkish initiatives in Ethiopia are perceived by different stakeholders, government, business, media, and civil society, and how these perceptions shape Türkiye's broader nation brand image. Theoretically, it will enrich the understanding of nation branding as an extension of foreign policy, especially in contexts where emerging powers, rather than traditional Western states, are the primary actors. Ultimately, this study seeks to generate insights that are academically significant for IR scholarship and practically useful for policymakers engaged in diplomatic and branding strategies in Africa.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

In recent decades, nation branding has become an increasingly important aspect of statecraft, as countries attempt to shape their global image and influence foreign audiences through strategies that extend beyond traditional diplomacy [8; 27]. While a growing body of literature examines nation branding practices in Western and developed states, there remains a significant gap in systematic analyses of how such initiatives are implemented and perceived in African contexts [18; 47]. This gap is particularly evident in the case of Türkiye's engagement with Ethiopia, where a range of economic, humanitarian, and cultural initiatives have been deployed as part of Ankara's Africa Opening Policy, yet their impact on Ethiopia's perception of Türkiye has not been comprehensively studied.

A major problem lies in the lack of systematic analysis of how Türkiye's foreign policy initiatives influence Ethiopian societal perceptions. Although Türkiye has positioned itself as both an entrepreneurial and humanitarian actor in Africa-investing in trade, infrastructure, aid, and education-scholarly works have largely documented these engagements descriptively, without critically evaluating their effectiveness in shaping Ethiopia's image of Türkiye [45; 6]. This absence of empirical evidence obscures our understanding of whether Türkiye's growing presence translates into a stronger nation brand, or whether its efforts are undermined by competing narratives from other global and regional actors such as China, the United States, and the Gulf states [49].

Another critical issue is the complexity of measuring nation branding outcomes in African contexts. Unlike tourism-driven branding campaigns in Europe or Asia that are often assessed through metrics such as visitor numbers or global perception indices, Africa presents unique challenges where branding outcomes are shaped by overlapping historical, political, and cultural dynamics [19]. In Ethiopia, perceptions of Türkiye are influenced not only by direct policy initiatives but also by domestic socio-economic conditions, regional politics, and long-standing relationships with other powers [17; 34; 21]. Capturing these perceptions across diverse stakeholders-government officials, business leaders, media, civil society, and the general public requires a nuanced methodological approach that has rarely been applied in studies of Türkiye's Africa policy.

Finally, there is a pressing need for a nuanced understanding of policy effectiveness and societal perceptions in

order to assess Türkiye's branding success in Ethiopia. While Turkish policymakers often emphasize the success of their "soft power" tools, the actual reception of these initiatives within Ethiopian society remains underexplored. For example, Turkish investment projects may be celebrated by government elites but contested by local communities, or humanitarian efforts may be welcomed by civil society but overlooked in official diplomatic narratives. Without a systematic and multi-layered understanding of these dynamics, it is difficult to evaluate whether Türkiye's initiatives genuinely strengthen its nation brand or whether they merely project symbolic gestures without long-term resonance.

In sum, the problem addressed by this study is the absence of a comprehensive and critical analysis of how Türkiye's foreign policy initiatives affect its nation branding in Ethiopia. The challenges of measuring branding outcomes in African contexts, combined with the underexplored question of how different societal groups perceive Türkiye, underscore the need for a study that systematically links policy actions with perception and branding outcomes. Addressing this problem is not only academically significant for the literature on nation branding, soft power, and public diplomacy, but also practically relevant for policymakers in both Türkiye and Ethiopia who seek to design effective strategies for partnership and cooperation.

1.4. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that merit acknowledgment. First, the research relies predominantly on qualitative document analysis complemented by stakeholder insights. While this approach allows for rich contextual interpretation and alignment with nation-branding theory, it limits the ability to generalize findings or quantify public opinion trends. Future studies could incorporate large-scale perception surveys to empirically measure public attitudes toward Türkiye. Second, access constraints limited engagement with certain stakeholder groups, particularly high-ranking security officials and private-sector investors. Confidentiality concerns and institutional barriers restricted insight into sensitive areas of defense cooperation and commercial negotiations, potentially underrepresenting these dimensions of the relationship.

Third, the study adopts a single-case design focused on Ethiopia. While Ethiopia represents a strategically significant and information-rich case, Türkiye's nation-branding outcomes may differ across African contexts with varying political systems, media environments, and economic structures. Comparative cross-country studies would enhance external validity and theoretical generalization. Finally, media analysis was confined largely to accessible national and international outlets, which may reflect editorial, political, or institutional biases. Regional, vernacular, and grassroots media voices were less systematically captured and may offer alternative interpretations of Türkiye's engagement.

1.5. Research Objectives

In order to address these questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To analyze the relationship between Türkiye's foreign policy and nation branding outcomes.
2. To identify the effectiveness of specific tools of branding, including economic, cultural, and humanitarian initiatives.

3. To provide theoretical insights on nation branding as an extension of foreign policy.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in Ethiopia and it was selected as the study area due to Türkiye's growing strategic presence in the country across investment, education, diplomacy, and humanitarian sectors. As a geopolitically influential state in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia serves as a key arena for foreign policy competition and soft-power engagement by emerging global actors. The country also provides diverse and accessible data sources, including government documents, media reports, and knowledgeable stakeholders from ministries, diplomatic missions, academic institutions, civil society, and the private sector, making it an appropriate context for examining Turkish nation-branding efforts in Africa.

2.2. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to explore how Türkiye constructs and projects its nation brand in Ethiopia. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth investigation of perceptions, narratives, and policy mechanisms that shape bilateral relations. The study adopts a constructivist epistemology, assuming that nation branding is socially constructed through interactions, discourse, and interpretation.

2.3. Data Collection Methods

2.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data were gathered through interviews with key informants involved in Ethiopia–Türkiye relations. Semi-structured interviews were used because they offer flexibility, allow probing, and generate rich, contextual insights. An interview protocol was developed, containing open-ended questions tailored to each stakeholder group. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in person or via online platforms depending on availability.

2.3.2. Document Analysis

Secondary data including diplomatic statements, policy documents, organization's reports, media articles, and business investment data were analyzed to triangulate interview findings and enrich contextual understanding.

2.4. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct involvement or expertise in Ethiopia–Türkiye relations. Snowball sampling was used subsequently to reach additional relevant informants. The sample included government officials, diplomats, business leaders, media practitioners, civil society representatives, academic experts, and university students. A total of 24 participants were interviewed.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, coded manually, and categorized into initial open codes. These were consolidated into axial codes and ultimately refined into major themes reflecting Türkiye's nation-branding strategies, soft-power instruments, diplomatic practices, and local perceptions.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and secure data handling were strictly followed. Participants remained anonymous unless they explicitly consented to attribution. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

3. Results

3.1 Diplomatic Engagement and Foreign Policy Alignment

Interview findings reveal a shared interpretation that the political relationship between Türkiye and Ethiopia has deepened significantly over the last two decades. Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials described the partnership as a "strategic bridge" linking the Horn of Africa with a rising middle-power state. They emphasized that Turkish diplomacy in Ethiopia has been "consistent, proactive, and grounded in principles of mutual respect," aligning with Türkiye's foreign policy emphasis on Africa since the 2005 "Year of Africa" policy shift [41].

Multiple diplomats noted that high-level reciprocal visits serve as symbolic demonstrations of political goodwill and national image projection. Turkish Prime Minister and presidential visits, alongside Ethiopian high-level reciprocal visits to Ankara, were repeatedly referenced as markers of political closeness. These diplomatic visits were also highlighted in official MFA documents, which confirm ongoing political consultations and joint commissions [41]. Interviewees viewed Türkiye's political posture as markedly different from other external actors. The participants frequently contrasted Turkish diplomacy with the more pressured, conditional engagement they associated with Western partners. Turkish diplomacy, by contrast, was perceived as "non-interfering," "respectful of national sovereignty," and "collaborative rather than prescriptive." This perception is consistent with secondary literature that describes Türkiye's Africa policy as rooted in mutual development, equality in partnership, and shared historical narratives [13]. Document analysis corroborates these perceptions: Türkiye classifies Ethiopia as a "key partner in Africa," highlighting Ethiopia's political weight, geographic importance, and symbolic status as host of the African Union [41]. Interviewees regarded this diplomatic affinity as not only a driver of bilateral cooperation but also a central component of Turkish nation branding positioning Türkiye as a dependable, respectful, and culturally connected actor in Africa.

3.2. Economic Cooperation and Investment Relations

Economic engagement emerged as one of the strongest pillars linking Turkish nation branding with its foreign

policy in Ethiopia. All groups of interview participant's government officials, business representatives, and academics identified Türkiye as one of Ethiopia's most active and visible economic partners. Business leaders noted that Turkish investments are "among the most durable and employment-intensive" in the country.

Secondary data confirms these narratives. According to publicly available Ethiopian and Turkish government reports, Türkiye is one of the leading foreign investors in Ethiopia, with more than 260 Turkish companies operating in textiles, leather, chemicals, metal processing, construction, and manufacturing [24; 7]. The Turkish MFA also reports that total bilateral trade reached USD 398.8 million in 2019, followed by sustained economic flows in subsequent years [41].

Interviewees within the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC) described Turkish investors as "long-term stakeholders rather than speculative entrants," noting that they continued operations despite macroeconomic volatility. Turkish business actors seconded this view, explaining that Ethiopia's market size, labor force, and industrial park infrastructure make it a preferred destination. Industrial Parks Development Corporation (IPDC) data shows sizable Turkish investment presence in industrial zones such as Hawassa, Bole Lemi, and Eastern Industrial Park [30].

Participants also linked Türkiye's economic presence with its nation-branding objectives. By building factories, exporting products, and generating employment, Türkiye presents itself as a partner committed to African industrialization. Civil society representatives noted that Turkish investors often engage in community-level actions such as supporting schools or sponsoring social projects which further shape public perception.

Still, challenges were acknowledged. Ethiopian government officials cited foreign exchange shortages, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent policy implementation as constraints affecting Turkish investors. Business sector interviewees noted that while Ethiopia's investment potential is appreciated, there are struggles with logistics costs, customs bottlenecks, and currency repatriation issues. Despite these barriers, the overall sentiment remained positive most interviewees stated that Turkish economic engagement is a cornerstone of bilateral relations and a powerful nation-branding tool.

3.3. Security and Military Cooperation

Security cooperation was identified as an increasingly important domain, particularly since Ethiopia faced internal and regional security pressures. Ethiopian Ministry of Defense interviewees described Türkiye as a "trusted and rapidly responsive security partner." This aligns with publicly available evidence confirming that Türkiye and Ethiopia maintain cooperation in military training, defense technology, and equipment supply [14; 41].

Interviewees emphasized that Türkiye's provision of defense training and technical support reflects its long-term commitment to Ethiopian stability. Some participants highlighted high-profile military agreements signed in the early 2020s, which reportedly expanded collaboration on drones, intelligence support, and officer training. While these developments generated international attention, Ethiopian officials argued that the cooperation fell within the framework of sovereign defense relations. It is revealed that the partnership as consistent with Türkiye's Africa vision, which seeks to support African states' self-reliance in security matters.

Document analysis further shows that defense cooperation is also a powerful branding instrument for Türkiye. Media reports often portray Turkish-made Bayraktar drones and military technologies as symbols of Türkiye's innovation and geopolitical relevance [5]. In the Ethiopian context, interviewees especially students and young observers interpreted Türkiye's security engagement as evidence of its emergence as a technologically advanced global actor. However, civil society respondents raised concerns about transparency, interference, the potential militarization of partnerships, and the need for clear policy oversight. Some critics emphasize military partnership of the two countries.

3.4. Cultural and Educational Diplomacy

Cultural and educational diplomacy appeared as one of the most influential forms of soft power shaping Türkiye's image in Ethiopia. Interviewees consistently referenced the work of the Maarif Foundation, TİKA, and the Turkiye Diyanet Foundation in promoting people-to-people connections. The Maarif Foundation operates several schools in Ethiopia, offering multilingual curricula and Turkish language instruction. Secondary data confirms that Maarif operates across multiple regions and provides scholarships for Ethiopian students [35]. These schools serve as ambassadors of Turkish culture, indirectly strengthening nation branding.

TİKA's development programs likewise reinforce Türkiye's soft power. Government officials, university representatives, and civil society interviewees mentioned TİKA projects including: renovation of historical sites, technical and vocational training programs, agricultural development initiatives, and health support missions. These activities match TİKA's publicly available reports, which highlight Ethiopia as one of its priority African partners [52].

Turkish television dramas, cultural festivals, and language courses were also identified by young interviewees as significant channels shaping their perceptions. Media professionals observed that Turkish cultural products resonate strongly due to shared social values, religious affinity, and storytelling styles. Together, these cultural and educational tools strengthen Türkiye's visibility and legitimacy as a culturally connected actor in Ethiopia.

3.5. Public Perception and Media Narratives

Public perception of Türkiye in Ethiopia is shaped by a blend of direct interaction, media representation, and lived socio-economic experience. Interviews reveal largely positive attitudes among Ethiopian students, business actors, and general citizens. Participants frequently described Türkiye as a modern Muslim-majority nation, a technologically advanced emerging power, an economic partner committed to job creation, culturally familiar compared to Western partners. Media analysis shows similar patterns. Ethiopian News Agency, HornPulse, and other outlets frequently frame Turkish engagements as beneficial and cooperative [24]. Turkish state media, including TRT and Anadolu Agency, also portray the partnership positively, emphasizing mutual development and historic ties [7].

However, interviews also uncovered critical viewpoints. Some academics and civil society participants warned of potential overreliance on security cooperation. Media experts emphasized that while Ethiopia's state media tends to frame relations positively, independent media often calls for greater scrutiny of investment practices and

transparency in military agreements. Despite these reservations, the dominant narrative remains favorable. Türkiye's public image is anchored in its visibility in schools, factories, cultural events, and diplomatic ties reinforcing a brand identity of reliability, modernity, and cultural affinity.

3.6. Humanitarian and Development Assistance

Humanitarian assistance emerged as a powerful but often less-publicized dimension of Turkish engagement. Interviewees from NGOs and government agencies described Turkish humanitarian actors as "efficient," "community-oriented," and "responsive to crises." TİKA's humanitarian activities such as emergency food distribution, health interventions, water projects, and disaster-response partnerships were frequently cited. Document analysis confirms these programs, showing Türkiye's consistent involvement in emergency relief and development support [52].

Ethiopian officials emphasized that Turkish assistance differs from that of traditional donors: it is framed as partnership rather than charity, and delivered with minimal conditionality. Community representatives appreciated TİKA's support for schools, hospitals, and local livelihoods, noting that these interventions build goodwill and trust. Media coverage [24] reinforces this narrative, often portraying Türkiye as a humanitarian friend during crises. As such, humanitarian engagement strengthens Türkiye's soft-power image and contributes significantly to its nation branding in Ethiopia.

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how Türkiye's foreign policy initiatives in Ethiopia function as instruments of nation branding. The findings demonstrate that Türkiye's branding outcomes are not the result of symbolic messaging alone, but rather emerge from sustained, visible, and multidimensional engagement. By integrating diplomacy, investment, security cooperation, cultural outreach, and humanitarian assistance, Türkiye constructs a coherent and credible national image within the Ethiopian context.

Consistent with nation-branding theory, the results confirm that branding is most effective when it is aligned with foreign policy behavior rather than promotional campaigns alone. Scholars argue that credibility is the cornerstone of nation branding, and that reputational gains are derived from observable actions over time rather than short-term communication strategies [9; 23]. The Ethiopian case supports this claim: interviewees consistently evaluated Türkiye's image based on its long-term investments, development projects, and diplomatic consistency rather than slogans or official narratives.

Diplomatic engagement emerged as a foundational pillar of Türkiye's branding strategy. High-level visits, institutionalized consultations, and sustained political dialogue contributed to perceptions of Türkiye as a respectful and non-interventionist partner. This finding aligns with Aydin-Düzgit and Rumelili [11], who argue that Türkiye's foreign policy identity increasingly emphasizes autonomy, partnership, and strategic empathy rather than hierarchy. Ethiopian stakeholders contrasted Türkiye's diplomacy with Western actors' perceived as more conditional, reinforcing Balci's [12] argument that Türkiye seeks to differentiate itself as an emerging non-Western actor in Africa.

Economic cooperation proved to be the most tangible and persuasive branding mechanism. Turkish investments in manufacturing, textiles, and industrial parks were repeatedly cited as evidence of Türkiye's commitment to Ethiopia's development agenda. This supports Cornelissen's [18] assertion that economic engagement functions as a reputational signal, particularly in Global South contexts where employment creation and industrialization carry strong political and social meaning. Unlike extractive investment models, Turkish firms were widely perceived as long-term stakeholders, reinforcing narratives of South–South cooperation and mutual development.

Security and military cooperation enhanced Türkiye's visibility as a technologically capable and geopolitically relevant actor. Media narratives surrounding Turkish defense technology, particularly drones, contributed to perceptions of Türkiye as innovative and influential. However, consistent with existing literature, security cooperation generated ambivalent branding outcomes [29]. While it strengthened Türkiye's strategic image, it also raised concerns among civil society and academics regarding transparency and militarization. This finding highlights that nation branding through security diplomacy carries both reputational opportunities and risks.

Cultural and educational diplomacy emerged as the most positively perceived dimension of Türkiye's engagement. Maarif schools, Turkish scholarships, Turkish language programs, and cultural products such as television dramas fostered strong affective connections, particularly among youth. This confirms Kavoori and Punathambekar's [32] argument that popular culture and education are among the most durable sources of soft power, as they shape identities and perceptions over time rather than through elite-level interactions alone.

Humanitarian assistance further reinforced Türkiye's brand as compassionate and responsive. TİKA's and other organization's development-oriented humanitarian model aligned with Minear's [42] conception of humanitarian diplomacy, where assistance functions both as moral engagement and strategic presence. Ethiopian stakeholders emphasized the partnership-oriented nature of Turkish aid, distinguishing it from donor-recipient hierarchies often associated with Western assistance. This finding strengthens arguments that humanitarian diplomacy can serve as a powerful nation-branding tool when embedded in local ownership and long-term development.

Previous studies on nation branding and soft power have largely focused on Western states, emphasizing tourism promotion, public diplomacy campaigns, and international reputation indices [9; 23]. More recent scholarship has begun examining emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil, highlighting how economic diplomacy and development cooperation serve reputational objectives [18].

Within the Turkish context, scholars such as Akgün and Özkan [3] and Balcı [12] argue that Türkiye's Africa policy reflects a strategic effort to position itself as a non-Western, partnership-oriented actor. However, much of this literature remains policy-centric and descriptive, focusing on institutional expansion rather than societal perception. This study advances existing research by empirically examining how Türkiye's initiatives are interpreted by local stakeholders in Ethiopia. Unlike prior studies that analyze foreign policy intentions, this research foregrounds reception and perception, addressing a critical gap in the nation-branding literature. By integrating interviews, media analysis, and policy documents, the study demonstrates how branding outcomes are co-produced by both the branding state and the host society.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined Türkiye's foreign policy engagement and its nation-branding in Ethiopia through qualitative document analysis supported by stakeholder perspectives drawn from government, diplomacy, business, media, civil society, academia, and students. By triangulating official policy documents, institutional reports, and media sources, the study provides a contextualized assessment of how Türkiye's multidimensional engagement translates into perceptions, reputation, and strategic positioning within Ethiopia. The findings demonstrate that Türkiye's presence in Ethiopia has evolved from primarily diplomatic engagement into a comprehensive partnership encompassing economic cooperation, humanitarian and development assistance, cultural and educational diplomacy, and selective security collaboration. Consistent with the literature on emerging powers and nation branding, Türkiye's approach emphasizes visibility through practice rather than rhetoric, reinforcing its image as a pragmatic and development-oriented actor in Africa. Economic engagement particularly Turkish investment in manufacturing, textiles, construction, and industrial parks emerged as the most tangible and influential pillar of Türkiye's nation brand. Turkish firms have become significant employers and export contributors, thereby embedding Türkiye's image within Ethiopia's industrialization agenda and daily economic life. Humanitarian and development assistance further strengthened Türkiye's soft-power profile. Interventions coordinated through TİKA, the Turkiye Diyanet Foundation, and other NGOs were repeatedly associated with responsiveness, flexibility, and proximity to local needs. These characteristics align with existing scholarship that frames Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy as a key differentiator from more conditional Western aid models. In parallel, educational and cultural initiatives particularly Maarif schools, scholarships, and Turkish media content have contributed to affective connections among Ethiopian youth, reinforcing long-term reputational gains even in the absence of large-scale cultural institutions. Diplomatically, the analysis indicates sustained high-level engagement and policy alignment, with official discourse emphasizing partnership, economic diplomacy, and regional stability. Ethiopia's perception of Türkiye as a "trustworthy" and non-prescriptive partner reflects broader African narratives that situate Türkiye as a non-Western actor seeking to differentiate itself from traditional powers. However, the study also reveals important constraints. Despite strong elite-level recognition, Türkiye's nation-branding efforts remain unevenly visible among the wider public. Limited strategic communication, fragmented cultural outreach, and inconsistent media coverage reduce the full reputational return on Türkiye's substantial material engagement. Overall, the study concludes that Türkiye's nation branding in Ethiopia is credible, positive, and expanding, but not yet fully optimized. Its strength lies in practice-based diplomacy and economic embeddedness; its weakness lies in insufficient coordination of public diplomacy and narrative management. Addressing this imbalance is essential for sustaining long-term influence and deepening societal-level legitimacy.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Strategic Public Diplomacy

Türkiye should develop sustained, audience-specific public diplomacy strategies targeting Ethiopian youth, students, regional communities, and non-elite populations. Digital media campaigns, cultural festivals, documentary programming, and local language outreach would enhance societal-level awareness beyond elite circles.

2. Institutionalize Educational and Cultural Engagement

Expansion of scholarships, joint degree programs, Turkish language centers, academic exchanges, and research partnerships are essential to consolidate long-term people-to-people ties. Such investments cultivate future opinion leaders and anchor Türkiye's nation brand in human capital development.

3. Enhance Visibility of Humanitarian and Development Impact

TİKA and Turkish NGOs should adopt more systematic communication strategies to document and publicize development outcomes, including health, water, education, and livelihood projects. Transparent impact reporting aligns with international best practices and strengthens reputational returns.

4. Improve the Investment Environment through Joint Coordination

Ethiopian authorities should streamline customs procedures, licensing processes, and regulatory frameworks affecting Turkish investors. Establishing joint Ethiopia–Türkiye investment facilitation desks would reduce bureaucratic friction and enhance investor confidence.

5. Institutionalize High-Level Dialogue and Policy Coordination

Regularized forums linking ministries, foreign policy institutions, private-sector actors, and civil society should be institutionalized to address emerging challenges, harmonize expectations, and reinforce political trust. Such mechanisms are critical for sustaining the partnership amid shifting regional and global dynamics.

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