

Building a national brand for Vietnamese culture: Leadership as an art inspired by Max Depree

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Abstract: This paper explores how Max DePree's leadership philosophy, emphasizing vision, core values, and servant leadership, relates to Vietnam's national identity, which has been profoundly shaped by the country's historical experiences, including colonialism, war, economic reform, and global integration. A qualitative review of nation-branding literature, analysis of DePree's theory, and case studies of Vietnamese cultural initiatives are combined with an assessment of policy frameworks and financial considerations to evaluate current practices and identify gaps. The study reveals that Vietnam's cultural branding efforts are fragmented due to decentralized leadership, limited community participation, and weak coordination among governmental, private, and cultural stakeholders. These challenges hinder the development of a cohesive national cultural brand capable of supporting sustainable development and soft power objectives. A centralized, participatory leadership model, cross-sectoral collaboration, and strategic investment are essential to integrating Vietnam's heritage and contemporary creativity into a compelling national brand. This research provides a roadmap for policymakers and cultural leaders to position Vietnam's heritage and innovation as drivers of international influence and long-term economic and cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Leadership, Max DePree, National Branding, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Background

Vietnam's cultural identity has long been shaped by the country's historical experiences. Historically, Vietnam's identity has been closely tied to foreign powers as the country endured colonialism, war, and foreign occupation. Perceptions of Vietnam in the 20th century have focused largely on the struggle against French colonialism and then American imperialism, culminating in the Vietnam War of 1955–1975. This protracted conflict has imprinted powerful images of resilience, nationalism, and sacrifice in the global imagination. In 1975, Vietnam was unified, but economic struggles continued, supporting a shared identity of resilience and resilience. The beginning of the economic recovery was marked by the introduction of macroeconomic changes into the economy in 1986 with the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) Initiative, which transformed the country from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. This allowed for increased investment and integration into the global economy by partnering with foreign powers. In the ongoing conflict with the United States, Vietnam began to portray itself as a culturally diverse country with a long history, along with describing itself as modern and technologically advanced. In turn, the government began to recognize the value of cultural diplomacy along with soft power, allowing them to project the country into the international arena.

Today, Vietnam is recognized for its cultural and natural heritage, including eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, more than fifty unique ethnic groups, and a growing contemporary and innovative arts scene. The country is also known for its exquisite cuisine and picturesque landscapes, along with a

growing international presence in tourism. In recent years, Vietnam has sought to reinforce these characteristics through the promotion of cultural festivals, international exhibitions, diplomacy, and digital campaigns. All of these strategies are in line with the international trend of prioritizing culture as a driver of sustainable development, tourism, and national branding.

However, Vietnam still carries out cultural branding activities in a less systematic and underdeveloped manner. Unlike South Korea (with its “Korean Wave” or *Hallyu*) and Thailand (with its “Cool Thailand”), Vietnam does not have a fully developed cohesive story that captures the essence of the country and promotes it abroad. Promotional campaigns are often fragmented across different levels, such as ministries and local governments, lacking a unified, long-term, and sustainable strategic vision. In addition, financial resources are weak, human resource development is still slow, and cultural policies have not been integrated into the national development strategy, greatly limiting the effectiveness of building Vietnam’s cultural brand.

As Vietnam strives to build its image as a dynamic and creative nation with rich traditions, it is important to monitor the development of culture and identity in its historical, economic and policy context. Strategic planning and promotion of culture can enhance Vietnam’s international recognition, while supporting tourism, fostering patriotism and protecting the country’s invaluable cultural heritage in today’s globalized world.

1.2. The Paper's Purpose

This article presents a compelling analysis of Max DePree's leadership philosophy, which emphasizes vision, core values, and servant leadership— principles that can serve as a powerful foundation for a cultural branding strategy in Vietnam. Max DePree, an influential business leader and author of “Leadership is an Art” [1] believes that leadership transcends mere management or decision-making; it involves nurturing and safeguarding the organization’s identity. True leaders, in DePree’s view, are stewards who inspire common goals, foster trust, and actively serve their communities.

In the context of Vietnam, businesses have a unique opportunity to apply these principles in crafting a cultural branding strategy that prioritizes authenticity, inclusiveness, and sustainable development. This strategy not only allows Vietnamese brands to affirm their identity in the international marketplace but also helps promote uplifting cultural values and foster harmonious relationships between businesses and their communities. Through this analysis, we aspire to inspire Vietnamese leaders to appreciate their significant role in steering their organizations toward excellence, all while cultivating a humane and innovative work environment that reflects Max DePree's belief that “Leadership is an art”.

2. Literature Review

Building a national brand for Vietnamese culture involves integrating leadership principles with cultural promotion strategies. Max DePree's "Leadership Is an Art" offers insights into vision, values, and servant leadership, which can be applied to this endeavor. This literature review examines how DePree's philosophy aligns with efforts to promote Vietnamese culture and build a strong national brand.

2.1. National Branding

National branding is a strategic process that aligns a nation's cultural, economic, and political assets to influence international perceptions and enhance its global reputation. This concept is closely tied to the idea of "soft power," which involves leveraging cultural, educational, and diplomatic resources to achieve national goals without coercion. Simon Anholt, a leading expert in this field, emphasizes that soft power is crucial for positioning nations effectively in the global arena [2].

Many countries around the world have successfully built their national brands through various strategies. New Zealand is famous for its "100% Pure New Zealand" campaign, focusing on pristine nature, clean environment and sustainable lifestyle, thereby attracting tourists and investment, while

building a friendly and nature-friendly national image [3]. South Korea has taken advantage of the Hallyu (Korean Wave) cultural wave to promote popular culture such as K-pop, movies and cuisine, thereby enhancing the country's global status. Strong government support in cultural and media programs aims to bring Korean cuisine and cultural images to the global public [4]. Meanwhile, Switzerland builds its national brand based on an image of quality, reliability and neutrality, associated with high-end watch products, banking and Alpine tourism, creating long-term trust and reputation [5]. Poland can get higher levels of exports, foreign direct investments and tourist arrivals at the same time after there is consistent strategy and execution involved with national branding. In conducting the research general scientific and special methods were used such as analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, systematization and grouping, as well as systematic approach [6].

Effective nation branding policies often include clearly defining the core values and national identity, synchronizing related sectors such as tourism, diplomacy, trade, education and culture to create a comprehensive strategy, avoiding fragmentation in initiatives [3, 5]. The application of modern technology and communication, especially social networks and digital communication, is also an important factor to reach the global audience quickly and effectively [7]. Finally, regular measurement and adjustment of strategies helps countries adapt to new trends and feedback from the international community [5].

In Vietnam, progress in national branding has been made through heritage tourism and culinary diplomacy. UNESCO-recognized cultural heritages such as Ha Long Bay, Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex and Hoi An Ancient Town attract millions of tourists each year, while Vietnamese cuisine such as pho and banh mi are increasingly popular globally. However, these efforts still lack cohesion and a unified strategic vision. Initiatives such as The Vietnam Value Programme and the "Vietnam - Timeless Charm" tourism campaign have yet to create a strong impact and have not yet built a comprehensive national brand [8]. Therefore, learning from the experiences of successful countries and applying synchronous policies, focusing on soft power, sustainable development and effective use of modern media will be the key for Vietnam to enhance its national brand position on the world map.

2.2. Key Elements of Max DePree's Leadership Philosophy

2.2.1. Vision

DePree emphasizes that a leader's first responsibility is to define reality, which means articulating a clear and inclusive purpose [1]. For Vietnam, this involves defining a cultural brand that reflects its diverse heritage and creative potential. A clear and specific vision not only helps stakeholders - from government, businesses to local communities - to unify and agree around a common goal but also creates a solid foundation for developing effective branding strategies. Thereby, the Vietnamese cultural brand is not only preserved and promoted in terms of traditional values, but also strongly promoted in the international arena, contributing to enhancing the country's position and influence in the context of increasingly deep globalization.

2.3. Values

Max DePree emphasized the importance of trust and integrity in leadership, considering them the foundation for building lasting and effective relationships

[1]. In the context of building Vietnam's national cultural brand, these values become even more essential to preserve the authenticity of traditional culture while promoting innovation in cultural products. Maintaining a balance between preservation and innovation not only helps Vietnam's cultural brand stay true to its origins and heritage but also makes the brand appealing and relevant to the tastes of modern audiences. By focusing on both authenticity and innovation, Vietnam can build a cultural brand that is both traditional and contemporary, thereby enhancing its position and competitiveness in the international market.

2.4. Servant Leadership

Max DePree advocates a servant leadership style in which the empowerment of local communities and stakeholders is seen as central. This approach is consistent with his concept of “mobile leadership,” in which leaders do not retain absolute control but instead empower others to take ownership and actively contribute to the overall goals of the organization [1]. For Vietnam, empowering local artisans and cultural workers not only enhances the authenticity of cultural products but also increases their appeal to both domestic and international markets. When grassroots stakeholders are deeply involved and involved in the branding process, Vietnam will ensure sustainable brand development while creating a strong and lasting reputation in the global community.

3. Overall Findings

Vietnam’s cultural tourism sector has seen significant growth, with initiatives such as the Heritage Road campaign helping to increase visitor engagement. The number of international visitors over the months is steadily increasing, showing a recovering trend in international visitors. The whole year 2023, the total number of international visitors reaches 12.6 million arrivals, 3.5 times higher than in 2022. International visitors to Vietnam reach 12.6 million arrivals in 2023, increased 3.5 times in comparison to 2022 [9]. However, despite this success, challenges remain, particularly in engaging local communities in decision-making. A lack of community engagement can lead to a disconnect between the cultural experiences on offer and the authentic heritage of the areas. Vietnamese cuisine has achieved significant global recognition, with a 40% increase in international awareness after 2020. The World Food Travel Association (WFTA) estimated that a staggering 81% of international travelers express a desire to explore local cuisine. They are willing to spend an average of 25–35% of their travel budget on food and beverages during their journeys [10]. However, despite this growth, Vietnam’s culinary brand remains fragmented, with many regional specialties and dishes being promoted independently. This fragmentation hinders the creation of a unified national culinary brand that can make the most of Vietnam’s diverse culinary heritage.

Recent developments in Vietnam’s culture and tourism sectors support these findings:

- *World’s Leading Heritage Destination:* Vietnam was named the World’s Leading Heritage Destination for the fourth time in 2023, highlighting the country’s rich cultural heritage and tourism growth potential [11].
- *World Heritage Committee Membership:* Vietnam’s election to the World Heritage Committee for the 2023–2027 term underscores Vietnam’s commitment to global heritage conservation and the potential to leverage this role to enhance its national brand [12].
- Despite notable achievements, the process of building Vietnam’s national cultural brand image still faces many challenges that require a holistic strategy, cross-sector collaboration, and substantial investment to fully realize the distinctive cultural values of the nation.
- *Community Cultural Heritage Challenge:* Initiatives that incorporate cultural heritage into contemporary works have successfully empowered local communities to preserve and promote their cultural heritage, demonstrating the effectiveness of community-led projects.
- *Lack of comprehensive and synchronous strategy:* National branding is still scattered, lacking focus and lacking a specialized strategy, leading to an unclear brand image, failing to create a deep impression and difference in the international arena.
- *Exploitation and conservation of cultural heritage are not effective:* Although Vietnam possesses rich and diverse cultural resources, the conservation and promotion of the value of tangible and intangible cultural heritages are still limited, leading to the risk of fading away, lack of inheritance resources and inadequate investment.
- *Lack of close integration between culture and other fields:* The linkage between culture and tourism, trade, diplomacy and cultural industries has not been fully exploited, reducing the soft power of

culture in enhancing national status.

- *Limited investment and human resources:* Investment in cultural preservation, development and training of human resources for cultural diplomacy has not yet met practical requirements, affecting the effectiveness of national brand building.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation

Max DePree's leadership model provides a theoretical framework that is well suited to address Vietnam's urgent need for an engaging and effective leadership style in the nation branding process. DePree emphasizes the role of servant leadership, in which the leader is not only a director but also a facilitator, creating conditions for members of the organization to maximize their capacity and contribute to the common goal [1]. Applying these principles to the context of nation branding for Vietnamese culture, promoting a shared vision and a values-oriented approach will help create consensus and deep commitment from stakeholders. In particular, empowering important local groups such as artisans, cultural workers and local communities not only helps preserve and promote traditional cultural values but also creates endogenous strength for the national brand.

For example, supporting artisans through grants that are consistent with DePree's servant leadership philosophy will enable them to develop traditional handicraft products that are authentic and have high cultural value. When these products are promoted and protected by the community and widely promoted to the international market, they will contribute to increasing handicraft exports, enhancing the prestige and competitiveness of Vietnam's national brand in the international arena [13].

4.2. Counterargument

Some critics argue that a top-down approach to nation branding is necessary to ensure consistency and tight control over the efforts involved. This view holds that centralized leadership helps to synchronize messages and avoid conflicts in the work of expressing cultural identity [14]. However, Max DePree's leadership philosophy, with its focus on shared ownership and servant leadership, offers a different approach that encourages innovation without sacrificing authenticity [1]. By promoting a servant leadership and empowerment style, DePree's model allows local communities to actively participate in the branding process. This involvement allows them to contribute unique cultural perspectives and values, which are essential in maintaining authenticity to traditional cultural heritage. DePree's model thus balances the need for a cohesive brand identity with the flexibility required to foster creativity and relevance in a rapidly changing global environment.

4.3. Implications

The implications of applying Max DePree's leadership philosophy to the national branding of Vietnamese culture are manifold and have the potential to improve effectiveness in a comprehensive way.

First, the establishment of a National Branding Council based on DePree's principles of servant leadership and shared ownership can help unify stakeholders from various sectors such as tourism, culture and creative industries [1]. This council will play a coordinating role, ensuring that all branding efforts are aligned with the shared vision and core values, thereby promoting a cohesive and consistent national brand [14].

Second, to measure the effectiveness of this approach, studies suggest using indicators such as tourism revenue growth, international brand recognition, and global cultural soft power index [3, 15]. These figures not only help leaders assess the level of recognition of Vietnamese cultural brands in the international arena, but also reflect the brand's positive contribution to sustainable economic development.

Third, another important point is that empowering local communities and artisans according to the servant leadership philosophy will encourage innovation and creativity in cultural products, while maintaining authenticity and traditional values [1, 13]. This balance between innovation and conservation is seen as a key element in building a national brand that is both powerful domestically and attractive in the international market [16].

Ultimately, a values-based and community-led branding strategy not only enhances Vietnam's global competitiveness but also contributes to building sustainable organizations that serve the interests of all stakeholders [1, 15]. Introducing its unique cultural heritage and creative industries will help Vietnam affirm its position on the world cultural and economic map, while creating long-term value for national brands.

Building a national brand for Vietnamese culture through value-driven leadership and strategic finance is a comprehensive approach, inspired by Max DePree's leadership philosophy. In which, the role of finance is considered an essential tool to realize the leadership vision and develop a sustainable cultural brand.

First of all, investment in the cultural industry needs to be prioritized and strongly increased. Vietnam has witnessed rapid development in industries such as film, fashion, handicrafts, literature and tourism, with many large public and private investment projects aimed at exploiting the nation's unique cultural identity. For example, Vingroup has invested hundreds of millions of USD in film projects and cultural tourism areas such as Vinpearl, contributing to promoting the image of Vietnam to the world [17].

In addition, impact investing, especially ESG, is increasingly being used to promote investments that not only generate financial returns but also create positive cultural and social impacts. By integrating cultural values into investment criteria, this approach directs capital to heritage, arts and community projects, thereby contributing to the development of sustainable cultural models. At the same time, this attracts investors who are increasingly interested in social responsibility, long-term value and sustainable development [15].

Then, in addition to financial and leadership strategies, developing businesses with culture as core values plays a key role in building a national brand for Vietnamese culture. Some typical businesses have deeply integrated traditional cultural elements into their products and services, contributing to promoting the image of Vietnam to the world.

- A typical example is Trung Nguyen Coffee, a Vietnamese coffee brand famous for building a unique Vietnamese coffee culture story, from the roasting process to the enjoyment style, creating a national brand with strong influence. Trung Nguyen not only develops products but also organizes coffee culture
- activities, contributing to promoting Vietnamese culture in the international market [18].
- In addition, the Thai Nguyen Green Tea brand is also one of the unique cultural symbols of Vietnam. Thai Nguyen Green Tea is not only famous domestically but also exported to many countries, with the story of the traditional tea growing land and the strictly preserved manual processing process, helping to enhance the value of the national brand [19].
- Another example is the Hoi An Memories live performance art show, held at Hoi An Impression Theme Park, which brings together more than 500 professional actors, vividly recreating the history and culture of Hoi An through 5 performances combining dance, music, light and modern techniques [20]. This show not only attracts millions of domestic and foreign visitors but is also honored as the most beautiful live performance show in the world, contributing to promoting the traditional cultural values of Vietnam in a lively and attractive way.

These examples demonstrate the diversity in how cultural enterprises and projects exploit traditional values to create unique products and experiences, while enhancing the national brand position.

Regarding public-private partnership (PPP), according to a report by the Ministry of Culture, Sports

and Tourism, although legal regulations on PPP in the cultural sector are still being finalized, in reality there has been a trend of close linkage between the public and private sectors in cultural and artistic projects. From 2018 to 2022, PPP projects in the cultural sector attracted more than 1.2 billion USD in investment capital, contributing to improving the quality of cultural products and services, while expanding the ability to promote the national brand to the international market [21]. A typical example is the cooperation between the General Department of Tourism and large enterprises such as Vietravel and Saigontourist in developing unique cultural tours, attracting millions of international visitors each year, contributing to increasing revenue and promoting Vietnamese culture [21]. According to the Strategy for the Development of Cultural Industries by 2030, these industries are expected to contribute about 7% of the national GDP, with the strong development of 12 key cultural industry sectors [22]. However, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh also emphasized the need to increase investment, reform policies and promote public-private partnership to better exploit cultural potential, creating sustainable socio-economic values [23].

5. “Vietnam Cultural Brand Fund (VCBF)” Framework

The government could establish a “Vietnam Cultural Brand Fund (VCBF)” as an important strategic framework, inspired by Max DePree’s leadership vision, with a clear and people-centered mission. This fund would serve as the main financial source, allocating capital appropriately and effectively to initiatives that honor, preserve and share Vietnamese cultural values both domestically and internationally [1, 16]. Focusing investment on sustainable, creative and community-oriented cultural projects would help maximize the soft power of Vietnamese culture, while creating a solid foundation for the development of the national brand [3]. To enhance the effectiveness of communication and branding, efforts need to combine profound storytelling methods, creative design and the application of modern digital platforms such as social networks, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These tools not only help convey Vietnamese cultural identity in a vivid and engaging way but also create deep emotional connections with global audiences, thereby enhancing brand recognition and value [3]. Furthermore, building multi-dimensional, flexible and community-participatory promotional campaigns will contribute to creating a strong and sustainable spread for the national cultural brand. Therefore, the “Vietnam Cultural Brand Fund” is not only a financial tool but also a symbol of value-oriented leadership commitment, promoting synchronous development between heritage conservation and innovation, contributing to raising the position of Vietnamese culture on the world map.

6. Conclusion

Building a national brand for Vietnamese culture based on Max DePree's leadership theory not only provides a new framework for thinking but also addresses the unique challenges in promoting traditional cultural values in the context of globalization. DePree's servant leadership philosophy emphasizes empowerment, shared ownership and the importance of people in all branding activities, thereby creating sustainable connections between stakeholders from the central to local levels. This helps Vietnam not only maintain the authenticity of its products and cultural values but also promote innovation that suits the needs of modern audiences.

In addition, the combination of strategic financial strategies, especially investments focused on cultural industries such as Trung Nguyen coffee with the story of Vietnamese coffee culture, the live art program Hoi An Memories vividly recreates local history and culture or the Thai Nguyen green tea brand preserves and promotes traditional values has proven the effectiveness of this leadership model in practice. Public-private partnership models have also made an important contribution to mobilizing diverse resources, creating conditions for cultural enterprises to develop sustainably, enhancing the soft power of the country. Directive No. 30/CT-TTg dated August 29, 2024 of the Prime Minister emphasized that the development of cultural industries must ensure maximum exploitation of potential, multi-sectoral linkage, meeting the factors: creativity, identity, uniqueness, professionalism,

healthiness, competitiveness and sustainability, gradually building a national brand and participating in the global value chain [24].

Finally, the harmonious combination of value-oriented leadership according to Max DePree and strategic financial strategy not only enhances the effectiveness of national branding for Vietnamese culture but also contributes to highlighting unique cultural identity, creating sustainable competitiveness in the international arena. This is a solid foundation for Vietnam to develop a comprehensive and sustainable cultural brand in the future. This approach will play a key role in addressing the current challenges of fragmented branding strategies and limited resources, ultimately positioning Vietnam as a leading cultural destination in the region.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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