

**NATIONS ON DISPLAY.  
NATION BRANDING STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPLE-  
MENTATION IN NATIONAL PAVILIONS: THE CASES OF  
FINLAND AND THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA**

Annika Rissanen  
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Political Sciences  
Department of Social  
Sciences and Philosophy

# UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Faculty Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Department Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy
Author Annika Rissanen	
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This thesis aims to explore the policies and approaches to nation branding that states develop to promote their international image. This goal is achieved through analytical focus on two cases: Finland and Saudi Arabia. The thesis seeks to explore how Finland and Saudi Arabia define, frame, and develop the tasks of establishing a favorable international image of themselves as strategic activity. The analysis draws on theoretical and conceptual discussion of nation branding and public diplomacy and employs the methods of contents analysis and aesthetic and narrative analysis while taking as its research material the official publications of Finland: 'Finland's Country Branding Strategy' (2017) and 'Handbook for Country Image Work' (2024), and of Saudi Arabia: 'Vision 2030', and the national pavilions of the two. Based on the findings of its analysis, the thesis argues that there is no 'one' successful model of nation branding strategy - no one-size-fits-all approach to nation branding. Rather, the thesis concludes that successful nation branding requires cooperation between the government and relevant stakeholder groups, the recognition of the nation's position in relation to its regional neighbours, and multi-channel communication. I conclude that states identify their strengths, weaknesses and target groups in order to create a distinctive nation brand.</p>	
<p>Keywords</p> <p>nation branding, public diplomacy, World Expos, Bureau International des Expositions, Expo 2020 Dubai</p>	
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## TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on tutkia eri käytäntöjä ja lähestymistapoja, joita valtiot hyödyntävät edistääkseen maakuvaansa kansainvälisesti. Tutkimuksessa analysoin, miten Suomi ja Saudi-Arabia lähestyvät maakuvatyötä strategisena toimintana. Tutkielman kaksi keskeisintä käsitettä ovat maakuva ja julkisuusdiplomatia. Analyysi tarkastelee maakuvan ja maakuvatyön käsitteitä teoreettis-käsitteellisen sekä esteettis-narratiivisen tutkimusotteen avulla. Tutkimusaineistona toimii analysoitavien valtioiden viralliset julkaisut sekä niiden paviljongit vuoden 2020 maailmannäyttelyssä. Suomen osalta hyödynnän Suomen maakuvatyön strategiaa vuodelta 2017 sekä maakuvatyön käsikirjaa, joka on julkaistu vuonna 2024. Saudi-Arabian osalta materiaalina hyödynnän Vision 2030 -tulevaisuudensuunnitelmaa. Analyysi osoittaa, että maakuvatyölle ei ole olemassa yhtä toteutustapaa, joka sopisi kaikkien valtioiden sovellettavaksi. Pikemminkin tulokset osoittavat, että menestyksenkäs maakuvatyö edellyttää valtion ja tärkeimpien sidosryhmien välistä yhteistyötä, valtion vahvuuksien tunnistamista sekä monikanavaista viestintää. Väitän, että valtion tulee tunnistaa sen vahvuudet, heikkoudet sekä kohderyhmänsä, jotta se onnistuu luomaan selkeän ja omia tavoitteitaan tukevan maakuvan.

Avainsanat: maakuva, julkisuusdiplomatia, maailmannäyttelyt, Bureau International des Expositions, Expo 2020 Dubai

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Je veux vous remercier pour la chance de faire connaissance avec la diplomatie finlandaise. Particulièrement, je vous remercie aussi pour toutes les occasions auxquelles vous m'avez donné la possibilité de participer en tant que membre de la délégation de la Finlande. Grâce à vous, j'ai pu participer à l'Assemblée Générale du Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), ce qui m'a permis de trouver ce sujet fascinant pour ma thèse de master.*

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Annika Rissanen  
November 2024  
Espoo Finland

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

BIE	BUREAU INTERNATIONAL DES EXPOSITIONS
FPB	FINLAND PROMOTION BOARD
OECD	THE ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT
PISA	PROGRAMME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESS- MENT
UAE	THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
UN	THE UNITED NATIONS

## REFERENCES OF IMAGES USED IN CHAPTER 5

- Image 1. The Finnish pavilion from outside. IHC Integrated Holistic Communications. (n.d.-a). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from [https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion\\_round\\_forreview/?pid=6067914698&id=0&h=MTkxMzI0MTI3](https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion_round_forreview/?pid=6067914698&id=0&h=MTkxMzI0MTI3)
- Image 2. The central Gorge. IHC Integrated Holistic Communications. (n.d.-b). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from [https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion\\_round\\_forreview/?pid=6067929026&id=6&h=MjUxNTU2ODk3](https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion_round_forreview/?pid=6067929026&id=6&h=MjUxNTU2ODk3)
- Image 3. Inside of the Finnish pavilion. IHC Integrated Holistic Communications. (n.d.-c). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from [https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion\\_round\\_forreview/?pid=6068024159&id=36&h=NDkyNTc1MDc1](https://integratedholisticcommunicationsdmcc.pixieset.com/pavilion_round_forreview/?pid=6068024159&id=36&h=NDkyNTc1MDc1)
- Image 4. View of Saudi Arabian pavilion from outside. Boris Micka Associates. (n.d.-a). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from <https://www.borismicka.com/projects/pavilion-of-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>
- Image 5. A view of the Saudi pavilion upon entry. Boris Micka Associates. (n.d.-b). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from <https://www.borismicka.com/projects/pavilion-of-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>
- Image 6. The interactive water installation at the Saudi pavilion. Ghesa Water & Art. (n.d). Retrieved 15 November 2024 from <https://ghesawaterart.com/projects/ksa-pavilion/>

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The term 'branding' is often associated with marketing and advertising as a tool that is used to create an identifiable and in most cases a positive image for products or services. The recognition of a brand can be strengthened by slogans, logos and names. A well-established brand offers competitive advantage over the other brands in the same segment. Importantly, in recent years and decades, 'branding' has not been limited to private and commercial actors and companies, but has become a project undertaken by nation states. Today, it is a well-known fact that nations also strive to create distinctive images of themselves and communicate them to international audiences. In addition to commercial advantages, such as export of national products or the impact on the tourism sector, nation brands also promote political interests of nations. This thesis sets to investigate nation branding work as a strategic activity of states and to examine how nations communicate their nation brands to international audiences through world exhibitions.

## 1.1 Background and motivation of the research

I became fascinated about World Expos during my internship at the Embassy of Finland in Paris in fall 2023, which created for me the opportunity to participate in the 173<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) as part of the Finnish delegation. During the internship I also had the opportunity to take part in the lobbying events of candidates for the host of Expo 2030. This experience made me realize the complex and political nature of nation branding in international arenas. Forming the research questions and choosing which countries to research was a straightforward process. In the course of the internship, I learned how Finland promotes its country image in various ways, which motivated me to examine Finland in this thesis. In turn, I made the decision to examine Saudi Arabia after witnessing the final vote that declared Saudi Arabia as the host country of Expo 2030. The fact that at the time it had remained rather unknown for me inspired me to do more research on

it. Writing this thesis has confirmed for me the wish to use the knowledge I have gained while exploring these cases also in my professional career in the future.

The aim of this thesis is not to compare the strengths of Finnish and Saudi Arabian nation brands, nor to describe the cultural characteristics of these nations. Rather, it is to explore the different ways in which they have approached nation branding as a strategic action that can be transmitted to design and immersive experiences for the international audience to encounter.

## **1.2 Research questions and the objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to find answers to the following research questions.

1. How do Finland and the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia approach nation branding as a strategic action in regard to their goals, key actors, and thematic contents of country images?
2. How were the nation branding strategies by Finland and by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia implemented at Expo 2020 through their pavilion design?

The first research question addresses how nation branding can be approached from different perspectives and will require the analysis of official publications of Finland and Saudi Arabia. The question is based on the recognition (evidenced in theoretical literature on this topic) that nation branding has a strategic nature. The second question seeks to establish to how the priorities for nation branding, identified as a result of the analysis of the official publications, have been made 'visible' and 'translated' into an audience experience through the construction of national pavilions by Finland and Saudi Arabia. My focus on world fair pavilions is based on the assumption that they are examples of a unique and tangible way of communicating nation brands and of developing international image for an international audience.

## **1.3 Research material and methods**

In regard to the research material of the thesis, in order to answer my research questions, I will use the official publications of Finland: 'Finland's Country Branding Strategy' (2017) and 'Handbook for Country Image Work' (2024), and of Saudi Arabia: 'Vision 2030'. There has been a fairly recent change in the term used to communicate about nation branding. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland now uses the term 'country image' instead of 'nation branding'. However, I have decided to use the term

'nation branding' in order to create a coherent analysis. Finland and Saudi-Arabia have both published official publications that discuss strategies used in nation branding. The reason for this selection is that these discourses are part of carefully thought-out long-term plan hence well-curated.

### **1.3.1 Finland's Country Branding Strategy**

The nation branding of Finland is supported by the Finland's Country Branding Strategy published in 2017. The strategy is a document consisting of the core messages and strengths of Finland. These are based on the Country Branding Report prepared by the Country Brand Delegation appointed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Stubb in 2008. The delegation consisted of Finnish business and government representatives, leading communication consultants, notable cultural actors, professors and other public figures. The delegation's work on the Country Branding Report took two years. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2010, p. 19.)

Shared values form the foundation of Finland's nation branding strategy. It identifies reliability, equality, inclusiveness, a role of problem solver and quirkiness as the building blocks of Finland's identity as well as values. These are not just characterizations set from above but are elements that many Finns consider to be important to them as well. The strategy identifies Finland's key strengths as functionality and well-being, nature and sustainable development, education and know-how. The Country Branding Report recognized that Finland benefits from focusing on the messages what they are already known for instead of adapting something completely new as Finland's target image. In competing against other nation brands, Finland should merely target its real strengths and attributes that differentiate it from its competitors. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2017.)

The last page of the strategy summarizes Finland's core messages that can be presented in international arenas. The statement "Finland believes in equality, democracy and taking care of each other" reflects Finland's values. Finland message map aims to emphasize the three main messages of Finland as a country: its highly valued education system, well-preserved nature and its smoothly functioning society. These messages are based on Finland's acknowledged strengths mentioned above. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2017.)

### **1.3.2 Handbook for Country Image Work**

Another important document to examine in more detail is the Handbook for Country Image Work published in 2024 by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. This guidebook is targeted mainly for all stakeholder groups that communicate about Finland in international contexts. The objective of the handbook is to facilitate and har-

monize Finland's country image work among the actors involved. The handbook provides background on why country image work is important for Finland, what Finland's core messages and target groups are, and practical tools for country image communication. It digs deeper into Finland's Country Branding Strategy (2017) and creates a comprehensive framework for the participation of different stakeholders in country branding work, which is a cross-sectoral cooperation between the government, business and the cultural sectors. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2024.)

### **1.3.3 Vision 2030**

In 2016, Saudi Arabia introduced a society-wide reform plan called Vision 2030 which aims to reduce the nation's dependence on oil production and diversify its economy. It is a government led programme which goal is to transform the nation a global investment powerhouse that drives for sustainable and versatile economy that creates prosperity for all. The vision consists of three main themes: i) a vibrant society, ii) a thriving economy and iii) an ambition nation. Each of these themes include detailed objectives and target groups. However, in terms of this thesis, I have limited the scope of the analysis to focus on those aspects that deal with the priorities of nation branding. (Vision 2030, 2016.)

### **1.3.4 Methods**

In order to analyze both the official publications as well as the national pavilions, I have divided the analysis into two parts. The first part employs the method of contents analysis and the second part is an aesthetic and narrative analysis. For the analysis of the pavilions, I have examined images, videos, symbols, slogans of the pavilions that have been used to thematize the nation branding strategies. This method has also made it possible to approach an important aspect of the national pavilions: the immersive experiences afforded to visitors. In this respect, a slight limitation is that I have not had the opportunity to explore the pavilions on site. Instead, I have relied on the material available online.

## **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis will proceed in the following steps. The first chapter of the thesis aims to provide the context of the institution of World Expos, its history and the main organization, Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), which is in charge of overseeing and regulating the expos. It also presents in more detail the event of Expo 2020 Dubai, which is where the national pavilions analyzed later in the thesis were showcased.

Chapter 2 defines the key concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy and outlines their particular relation. I have divided the actual analysis of this thesis into two chapters. The analysis of nation branding material, consisting of the official publications of Finland and Saudi Arabia will be presented in chapter 4, and it will delve into the issues of strategic priorities, identified target groups and it will pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the Finnish and Saudi Arabian nation brands. The second part of the analysis in chapter 5 focuses on the design and organization of the two national pavilions that communicate the nation branding priorities of Finland and Saudi Arabia. Finally, in chapter 6, I discuss the key findings and elaborate further their implications, as well as offer conclusions.

## **2 THE CONTEXT OF WORLD EXPOS**

What do the Seattle Space Needle, the Atomium Brussels and Eiffel Tower have in common, other than the fact that all of them are widely recognizable landmarks and famous tourist attractions? The answer is simple: these landmarks have been built as centerpieces of World Fairs to attract interest and visitors. The motive for building these remarkable monuments was to demonstrate the progressiveness of industry in the World Fairs host country. These buildings have become well known over the years and today they are mainly used as tourist attractions.

This chapter introduces World Expositions, and the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), one of the key institutions discussed in this thesis and explores its history and development starting from its creation in the early 20th century until the current times. This chapter will also touch upon the process of becoming a host country, using an example of the 2020 Dubai Expo. The aim is to provide institutional and historical context to the thesis inquiry.

### **2.1 The creation of BIE**

The concept of World Fairs became a reality in 1851 as the first World Fair took place in London, United Kingdom. In the early days, World Fairs focused mainly on showcasing industrial innovations and scientific discoveries as the Industrial Revolution influenced this period. World Fairs were not systematically organized from the first World Fair up to the year 1928. Instead, each organizing country made its own decisions concerning the organizing of the fairs without consulting or cooperating with the other participating countries or stakeholder groups. This volatile situation caused challenges and undermined the nature and profile of the World Fairs, namely jeopardizing the image and quality of Fairs. One of the main challenges related to the increasing number and frequency of World Fairs, which then resulted as higher costs

for both the host and participating countries. At the same time, the variety of the fairs broadened. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-a.)

In an effort to bring an end to the fragmented nature of World Fairs' organization, thirty-one member countries gathered in Paris in 1928 to create a shared administrative body. The outcome of this convention was the creation of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE). This intergovernmental organization became the main body for managing and regulating international exhibitions. The 1928 Paris Convention also mandated that all exhibitions that lasted more than three weeks, were non-commercial and organized by a BIE member country, were to be identified as 'international exhibitions', and therefore had to follow the rules set in the Convention. (de Matos et al., 2022.) The terminology used to refer to international exhibitions, has changed over the history of BIE. The Convention of 1928 was expanded by the 1972 Protocol, which recognized World Expos and Specialized Expos under the same classification of World Expositions. It was later developed by the 1988 amendment, which changed the terminology to its current form "International Registered Exhibition". (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-a.)

Currently, there are 183 BIE member states. Each member state is represented by a delegation that consists of maximum of three representatives. These delegations participate in developing the Expo policies and engage in dialogue between Expo host country and their national governments concerning their participation in the Expo. The delegations cast the vote in the BIE General Assembly which is held at the headquarters of BIE in Paris. The BIE General Assembly is the main decision-making body of BIE, and it is organized twice a year. The management of BIE is divided between the Secretariat and the Secretary General who is selected in the BIE General Assembly. The Secretary General works as an official and legal representative of BIE, whereas the Secretariat is responsible for the overall management of BIE and different Expos. Their work is complemented by four committees: (i) Executive, (ii) Rules, (iii) Administration and Budget, (iiii) Information and Communication Committee. Each committee consists of BIE member countries that cooperate on specific issues related to BIE's functions. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-b.)

Today, there are four types of Expos recognized by BIE: Triennale di Milano, Horticultural Expos, Specialized Expos and World Expos. These four types differ from each other in size, objectives and target groups. Triennale di Milano showcases decorative arts, design and ties links between current societal issues with arts. It is unique in that is always hosted by the same city (Milan). In turn, Horticultural Expos represent the collaboration among agriculture industry, nations and international organizations who are motivated to tackle the questions of sustainability in agriculture. As per their name, Specialized Expos concentrate on a particular issue that the international community shares interest in. For example, in 1938, the city of Helsinki hosted a Specialized Expo that focused on Aerospace which attracted 25 participating countries. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-c.) In terms of this thesis, the scope

has been limited to cover the World Expos because those international events illustrate the concept of nation branding well and comprehensively.

## **2.2 A brief overview of organizing a World Expo**

Since the creation of BIE, the significance of World Expos has increased as the scale of these events has grown. Simultaneously the public attention and number of visitors has expanded. For instance, over 24 million guests visited the most recent World Expo in Dubai, 2020. One could argue that this instance drew special attention because it was the first Expo held in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA) region. This region covers the African continent, Middle East and Southern Asia. There are a set of policy guidelines that lead the process of organizing a World Expo, which will be addressed below. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-d.)

The process of becoming the host of an Expo takes several years of preparations. BIE has divided the process into seven stages: candidature, project examination, project campaign, registration, implementation, the actual Expo period and lastly post-Expo. The procedure starts with the submission of application by the governments that seek to become the host country. Once one government has submitted their candidature, BIE starts a period of six months during which other governments interested in hosting the next World Expo must submit application of their candidature. The application presents each countries' ideas on the theme, exact dates, duration and the host city. According to BIE, this stage takes place six to nine years before the actual Expo. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-e.)

Each candidature country names an Enquiry Mission which evaluates the impacts of the arguments presented in the application. After all criteria has been assessed, a report of findings is submitted to the BIE General Assembly. Following a successful application submission, candidature countries can launch promotional campaigns to reach the attention of BIE member country delegations. The project campaign stage ends with the election. The election takes place in the BIE General Assembly, in which each BIE member country has one vote. The vote is conducted by a simple majority. If there are more than two candidate countries, one must obtain two-thirds of the votes to be selected in the first round. If no country receives the two-thirds, the candidate with the least votes is excluded. The vote continues until there are two candidates left and the one who obtains a majority of votes is elected. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-e.) One particularly interesting point is that there is not a universal rule on whether countries should disclose publicly their voting decisions and what they are based on.



After the election, the elected host country continues to work closely with BIE on preparations as the registration stage continues. This includes providing a comprehensive implementation plan, called the Registration Dossier which must be delivered to BIE at minimum of five years before the opening of the Expo. Following the registration, the implementation can begin. In this phase, the host country sends the official participation invitations and starts building the actual Expo site. In collaboration with international organizations and countries that have confirmed their participation, contracts concerning the pavilions are signed. These contracts specify the size of the pavilions as well as their theme and location. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-e.)

Lasting for up to six months, the Expo consists of different types of events that include discussion forums and themed events, and that showcase the participating countries' culture and unique characteristics. The Expo ends with a closing ceremony, which is followed by the post-Expo period. The post-Expo is implemented according to the plans outlined in the Registration Dossier. The host country is obliged by BIE to find further use for the Expo site. (Bureau International des Exhibitions, n.d.-e.)

### **2.3 Expo 2020 Dubai, UAE**

The city of Dubai in United Arab Emirates hosted the Expo 2020 as the first World Expo organized in the MEASA region. Originally the Expo 2020 was scheduled to take place in the fall of 2020 but due to the global Covid-19 pandemic the opening was postponed by one year. In total, it lasted for 182 days from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022. It gathered 24 million physical visitors and 251.2 million virtual ones. Visitors could explore 192 national pavilions and a number of special pavilions organized by partner organizations.

The Expo carried a theme 'Connecting Minds, Creating the Future'. The theme aimed to create opportunities for innovation, interconnectivity and provide sustainable solutions to worldwide challenges. The theme was divided into three subthemes: mobility, opportunity and sustainability. The Expo 2020 site itself covered 4.38 square kilometers which included six districts: Al Wasl, Al Forsan, Jubilee and mobility district, sustainability district and opportunity district. According to Hopkins Architects, the architectural company responsible for the Expo thematic sites, the idea was to create areas that resemble petals and are connected to the main hub, Al Wasl Plaza. (Pintos, 2021.) The national pavilions were placed throughout each district.

### 3 NATION BRANDING AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

This chapter defines the key terms and concepts of this thesis. The chapter will present the concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy, distinguish between them and outline their unique relation. This will be subsequently utilized in the following analysis chapter. Over the years a conceptual debate on the overlap of the two terms has taken place in the study of public policy. However, while nation branding is a relatively new term as it has started to appear in academic research since the 1980s and 1990s, public diplomacy is a far more established term. Despite the West-centric nature of public diplomacy, this chapter focuses on providing a comprehensive understanding of the development of public diplomacy as well as the most relevant aspects in terms of the analysis<sup>1</sup>.

#### 3.1 The creation of nation branding

The origin of the term 'nation branding' is associated with Simon Anholt, a British public relations consultant whose publications have influenced the distribution and popularization of the term. Such publications include *Nation-Brands of the twenty-first century* (1998) and *Brand New Justice* (2006). Along with Anholt, Keith Dinnie, another British scholar, has affected establishing nation branding as an independent research area. Both of the early researchers saw nation branding as founded on a set of traditional branding manners that are applied to marketing in unconventional contexts, such as governmental operations. (Kaneva, 2011.)

Both Dinnie and Anholt have a background in marketing, but they approach it within different contexts. Dinnie has an academic record in marketing studies and

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<sup>1</sup> Szondi argues that after the Cold War, Western and American values were spread across Eastern Europe leading to the assumption that Western traditions should work anywhere else. (Szondi, 2008, p. 37)

early in his career Anholt worked in marketing consulting. They began to formulate their ideas on nation branding in the early 20th century. Dinnie published a groundbreaking book entitled *Nation branding: Concepts, Issues and Practice* in 2007 that introduced this completely new field of study. This pioneer book made connections between traditional marketing practices and the wider social sciences such as national identity, global political climate and environmental awareness. (Dinnie, 2008.) The key concepts of marketing used in the book mainly focus on branding activities, for instance that of managing brands.

Anholt's approach to the field of nation branding began when he identified similarities in the way nations depend on their reputation to how corporations rely on their brands. The success of both actors is affected by how they manage these processes aiming to ensure the desired level of reputation. (Anholt, 2008, p. 22.) Anholt argues that the fundamental motivations for nations to invest resources into nation branding are to differentiate themselves from the other nations on the world scene and to reinforce their economic position on investments, export promotion and tourism (Anholt, 2008, p. 23). Anholt's input into the creation of nation branding as a field of study is further demonstrated by the fact that he formalized nation branding by developing the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (see [Ipsos 2023](#)). This widely used survey-based index will be utilized later in the analytical chapters of the thesis.

Forming a nation-state into a recognizable brand is a complex process that demands extensive use of different methods, resources and tools. In practise, nation branding related activities include a wide range of actions and execution methods that vary in terms of scale and reach. As with marketing, nation branding has predetermined audience, objectives and targets. These are discussed in more detail in chapter four. Firstly, it is essential to define what a brand means in this context. In the field of marketing, brands are mixtures of identified logos, symbols, names of products or services that are distinguishable from their competitors (Armstrong et al., 2017). A wider approach to branding views brands as related to three concepts: identity, image, and personality. Identity, image and personality are key elements that have an important part in brand management. (Johansson et al., 2015, p. 3–10.) With 'identity' Johansson (2015) refers to how Armstrong and his collaborators (2017), define brands, as mentioned above. Brand identity consists of its name and visuals. In turn, image illustrates if a brand has either a positive or negative connotation. In some cases, brands deliberately or accidentally develop personalities that are transmitted to their customers and consumers. A brand that has a well-known personality usually seeks to reach a specific customer profile. An example of this are the products designed and manufactured by Apple. With its cutting-edge technology and sleek design, the company wants to appeal to trend-conscious customers who share an appreciation for innovative gadgets despite the heavy price tag.

The old conception of marketing viewed the field of branding as a one-way activity of advertising and selling (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 33). The concept of new

marketing differs from the old conception as it engages with customers by involving them in building the brand through experiences and impressions (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 46). At the core of the new conception is the importance of two-way engagement, meeting customer needs and establishing long-term customer relationships (Armstrong et al., 2016, p. 33). The acknowledgement of the customers' active role is also seen in the way customers value the responsibility aspect of corporations. Corporate social responsibility is one of the growing trends in international business.

Dinnie (2008) argues that although all brands are influenced by societies and therefore current trends, nation-brands are in a far more favorable position due to their cultural resources and in some cases well-established national identity (Dinnie, 2008, p. 14). He underlines that national identity involves understanding of the national culture as well as knowing which enterprises have origins there. The aspect of the country of origin will be discussed below.

### **3.2 The motives and actors in nation branding**

Throughout times, nations have had different motives to refine and manage their perception by the international public. Based on the reflections about the early publications about nation branding, Olins (2002) notes that in the early days of nation branding, branding activities included new naming policies, and building unique traditions that aimed to create a general sense of loyalty to the nation. Many of these reforms date back to the end of colonialism and the rise of new and independent nation-states in the 20th century (Olins, 2002, p. 241–248). However today, competition between nations have strengthened. In the international business environment, competition and the urge to differentiate oneself from the competitors has intensified among nations in response to societal changes such as climate change, globalisation and digitalisation.

According to de Chernatony (2008), there are three main reasons why nations are motivated to invest resources in nation branding. These are: (i) objectives of attracting new investments, (ii) increasing export promotion and (iii) gaining the attention of tourism industry. All of these are motivated by profitability, and the success can be measured based on a possible revenue as in a business environment. More broadly, nations might be targeting specific groups such as skilled vocational workforce to attract more people to work in the care sector, which many Western societies sorely need as their populations age. Another goal might be to appeal to new tourism customer groups as the tourism sector recovers in post-pandemic period. This specific targeting shows the strategic aspect that aims for a stable and long-term effect on so-

cities. As a result of successful efforts, nation branding can improve the nation's position in world politics, expand its export relations and reinforce economic stability (de Chernatory, 2008, p. 17–18).

De Chernatory (2008) claims that multiple stakeholder groups have public and private interest in being involved in shaping the nation brand in a way that is beneficial to them as a collective. The most relevant stakeholders include government officials, the business sector, and representatives of tourism boards and media outlets. The vision, goals and the future of the brand are common concerns for these actors. The stakeholders share predefined main policies and guidelines on the nation's brand, and they cooperate to manage that brand. (de Chernatory, 2008, p. 16–19.) To illustrate the role of these stakeholders, an example case will be introduced in the section 3.2.1.

### **3.2.1 The case of Finland Promotion Board**

The Finland Promotion Board (FPB) is a prime example of how representatives of different stakeholders cooperate to manage and guide Finland's nation branding projects. The members of FPB are appointed by the Prime Minister and their term is approximately three and a half years. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the work of FPB is guided by a management group that oversees identifying the principal themes for Finland's nation brand each year and declaring general guidelines. It is also responsible for providing guidance on the planning of tools that are used in everyday country image communications. This group consists of executive level civil servants who represent the ministries involved, two examples of which are the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Prime Minister's Office. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.-a.)

While the terms in office change, the core composition of FPB has remained unchangeable over the terms. The changes have concerned mainly the individuals, not the entities they represent. One reason for this is that a number of major Finnish companies have not experienced changes in the short term. The companies that are members of FPB are listed companies such as Fiskars, Finnair and Marimekko. In addition to the business sector, advocates of cultural sector are also key figures. These actors include the Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes and the Central Organization for Finnish Culture and Arts Association. Moreover, it should be noted that the cities of Helsinki and Tampere are active members of FPB. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.-b.)

Along with FPB, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland promotes Finland's nation branding by producing commonly used branding tools such as ThisisFINLAND (official country image media), Finland ToolBox (visual and audiovisual material bank), theme calendars that include key themes and events of Finland's nation brand yearly, and FINFO brochures and annually published This is FINLAND magazine. The last two are printed materials which cover specific themes of Finnish society,

business environment and culture. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.-b.) All these tools are published in multiple languages to ensure their wide coverage and use. For example, the printed materials are often distributed both at events organized by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Representations of Finland to foreign government officials, other stakeholder groups and the general public. These publications cover a broad range of topics and are therefore targeted at anyone interested in Finland and Finnish society.

### **3.3 Nation branding and national stereotypes**

Many cities and countries have specific associations with characteristics, historical events, and figures whether intended or not, which tend to rely on and fuel stereotypes. The problem of stereotyping is related to the study of nation branding because they can benefit nations or turn against them. The Oxford English Dictionary (2024) defines the term 'stereotype' as an understanding that is associated with a prejudiced and simplified notion that categorizes characteristics of an individual, place and the like. In short, stereotypes provide a generalized view of an object and can lead to oversimplification. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024.) Stereotypes can be both positive and negative. In forming the key pillars for nation branding, governments, with the help of PR and marketing consultants, examine if certain products or services are widely recognized outside its actual borders and can be used as a basis for the desired image. For instance, there are several cases where this approach has been used.

Think 'France' and you are thinking of the French cuisine, high fashion brands and historical figures such as Joan of Arc and Édith Piaf. Think 'Mexico' and what comes to mind are sombreros, white-sand beach resorts and foods seasoned with spicy chili peppers. These examples show that the repositioning of a country's international perception requires the nation to recognize its fundamental roots and realities to evolve its nation brand (Gilmore, 2002, p. 284). However, general associations and commercializing of already existing brands can be used as a foundation for developing a distinctive nation brand. If a certain actor, for instance a company that has succeeded in building a successful product and is commonly associated with the company's country of origin, the origin country can benefit from this general association. This is even more beneficial if the association has positive connotations since it creates a solid basis for further enhancement of the affiliation. Examples include Korean pop culture industry, German highly developed engineering and Japanese expertise in electronics. I consider the former below in section 3.3.1.

### **3.3.1 The case of the Korean Wave**

The Korean word “hallyu” meaning Korean Wave started to appear in 1990s when South Korean TV series were first exported to China. Soon these K-dramas received enormous popularity in other East Asian countries such as Thailand, Japan and Vietnam. As a result of increased shared interest in South Korean cultural products, hallyu spread to cover other popular culture subjects like pop music, clothing, cosmetics and the language itself. In short, the term Korean Wave is used to highlight the massive global success and international reach of South Korean popular culture. (Samosir et al., 2024.) However, the success has not taken place by chance or merely as a result of efforts by the artistic sector. The government of South Korea has played an important role in facilitating the success story.

The unique relationship between the government and the entertainment industry is an outcome of shared understanding of the potential of exporting cultural products. Samosir et al. (2024) have argued that Korean Wave has been a way for the government to use soft power methods to strategically shape the perceptions of other international actors. I argue that it is a mix of soft power and the practice of cultural diplomacy because it combines the cultural phenomenon with the global reach. As a term cultural diplomacy refers to efforts of nations to build relations through cultural exchange, art and heritage (Lane & Fabius, 2013). I suggest that Korean Wave channels the cultural elements into a recognizable brand through its popularity, spreads awareness and knowledge of Korea worldwide.

### **3.3.2 The opportunities and risks of nation branding**

Although positive associations can create opportunities for nations, they might generate challenges as well. Possible challenges can arise if there is a crisis within a company whose country of origin is well recognized, and which has established international recognition on the association between the country and the given economic sector. This was the case with a German car manufacturer Volkswagen in 2015 when it faced a PR scandal due to violations of regulations concerning emissions tests. The scandal not only had deleterious financial impact on the company, but also affected negatively consumers’ trust and tarnished the public image of German automobile industry. One stereotype associated with Germany is their respect for the rule of law. As the emission scandal was exposed, it undermined these positive beliefs.

One of the most recent scandals is occurring in the world of IT, and it concerns the image and reputation of China. The member states of EU and the U.S. are discussing on possible restrictions for the use of Chinese-owned online platform called TikTok. The European Commission has started formal procedures in 2024 to evaluate if the company has neglected the Digital Service Act regarding safety, data protection

and age-inappropriate content. (European Commission, 2024.) Similar discussion is underway in the U.S. as a new bill concerning the future of the app was passed in March 2024. According to the bill, the use of TikTok will be banned in the U.S. or the ownership of the company must be transferred to actor other than China. (Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act, 2024.) These concerns have led to a situation where China's image as one of the world's leading countries in the technological development is at risk of being damaged especially in Western societies.

The case of TikTok shows that a country known for its advanced technology, which is inherently a strength of its nation brand, can become self-defeating if common concerns arise as in this example. If serious concerns such as national security issues are brought into debate, the negative perception of the technology producer can extend to its country of origin.

### **3.4 The future of nation branding**

While nations are increasingly aware of the importance of a unique nation brand, there are different trends that nations could adopt in the future. As we live in a digitalized world, many of the nation branding tools have also been digitalized. Media and especially social media play an important part in online nation branding. Online nation branding goes beyond the official websites managed by governments. It includes branding activities that take place in a coordinated way in a web-based environment. The central issue is to coordinate the online image of a nation with the conventional nation brand. In an ideal scenario, both approaches support each other and create a legitimate nation brand that translate to both online and face to face audiences.

The use of online media has helped nations to reach international audiences more easily and consequently alter the perceptions the virtual community may have of a nation. The growth of the internet and social media use boomed in 2008, Macrae argued that online nation branding would equalize economic superpowers and less-developed countries in terms of financial resources spent on nation branding. Through online media, nations can benefit from exposure and indirectly shape their image in the eyes of key stakeholders more quickly than through print media. (Macrae, 2008, p. 246-247.) For instance, tourism boards cooperate with social media trendsetters who are focused on sharing travel-related content to market and attract new consumers. This type of exposure often targets different users than the tourism board's own following, which is an effective way to broaden the customer base.

Although the significance of online nation branding rises and the emergence of new technologies such as artificial intelligence continues, the status of nation branding



as a diplomatic activity remains vital. He et al. claim that nation branding is particularly important for those nations which do not otherwise benefit from the country-of-origin image (He et al., 2021, p. 29). In several instances, this applies to nations that gained their independence after the fall of communism in 1989 and are consequently still defining their national characteristics. In addition to this, nation branding is equally important for those nations that already have an established nation brand. The intensified global competition of inward investment and skilled workforce has created the need for nations to use resources as a way to differentiate themselves from competitors. There is no evidence to indicate that the development will change in the near future. Nevertheless, scholars suggest that nation branding will take new forms such as how well countries participate in and manage common global crises. For instance, in the aftermath of Covid-19 crises, the success of countries' resilience and preparedness strategies were measured by the number of casualties.

### **3.5 The concept of public diplomacy**

The concept of public diplomacy was popularised by American political scientist and a former U.S. diplomat Edmund Gullion in 1965. Gullion stated that public diplomacy as a term was needed to replace the term 'propaganda' which had similar meanings at the time but carried a negative tone. He conceptualized public diplomacy as a set of instruments which capitalize on broader dimensions of diplomatic practice to advance national concern and advocate its interests in a foreign nation. This traditional conceptualization was based on a set of actions that shape the public opinions and attitudes on a nation's foreign policy. The nation-centric work aimed to influence how it was perceived by the general public in an international context. (Cull, 2006.)

During the Cold War public diplomacy gained recognition due to dramatic changes in international politics. During the Cold War and during the post-war era, particularly the two superpowers the U.S. and the Soviet Union were motivated to promote their superiority in countless ways. This included the use of propaganda, public diplomacy and cultivation of their external perception. (Melissen, 2005.)

Both in academia and in practice, public diplomacy is treated as a diplomatic activity. However, Melissen (2005) highlights an important distinction concerning the active parties. The practice of diplomacy evolves around representatives of nations and established organizations in an official international context while public diplomacy involves the general publics of foreign nations, unofficial organizations and the contribution of individuals (Melissen, 2005, p. 3–7).

### **3.5.1 New public diplomacy**

Some scholars propose that the roots of public diplomacy have existed since the creation of independent nation-states. As the historical dimension of diplomacy has progressed, it has evolved to cover new areas of interest. For instance, Melissen (2005) argues that the most recent wave of public diplomacy is a new public diplomacy. (Melissen 2005.)

Melissen (2005) claims that the discourse of public diplomacy shifted to 'new public diplomacy' after the 9/11 terrorist attack. The term public diplomacy has developed as a result of collective understanding that there is a need for nations to communicate with non-governmental actors to achieve favorable perception of themselves. During the Cold War and shortly after, their efforts focused on communication between nations and foreign officials. The new public diplomacy differs from the traditional public diplomacy in its approach to the role of nationals. The new public diplomacy emphasizes the active role of individuals not only as objects of communication controlled by the nation, but rather as participants in a two-way dialogue. In this sense, individuals include representatives of various non-governmental actors and multinational organizations. The dialogue is intensified due to the rise of digital communication tools such as social media outlets and other informal methods. Participants of the new public diplomacy are motivated by a shared understanding that they are committed to communicate on issues beyond the nation's official agenda. (Snow & Taylor, 2008, p. 3–10.)

### **3.6 Soft power and public diplomacy**

'Soft power' is a widely used term in the field of international relations, and is closely linked with public diplomacy. The term was popularized by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in the early 2000s. According to Nye soft power is the use of attraction to achieve the desired outcomes, rather than by payment or coercion. Nations form soft power resources out of the values reflected in their culture, which they integrate in how they manage their relations with other nations. Public diplomacy is a tool which allows these values to be communicated to the international public. (Samosir et al., 2024.)

Nye summarizes the resources of soft power in regard to three attributes: culture, political values and foreign policies. In practice, a nation has succeeded in creating soft power if it is perceived as attractive by others. For this purpose, nations are motivated to communicate a certain image by harnessing these three attributes. A nation must comply with its values in both internal and external politics. They must also be

seen as a legitimate actor in internal community in order to promote a credible, positive image of themselves. If a nation has a strong adherence to its values, its credibility is high. (Samosir et al., 2024.)

As this thesis addresses how nations are managing their image and perceptions associated with them, it incorporates the concept of soft power in its methodological and analytical framework. Nations aim to be associated with positive elements and to have a stable reputation. One way to achieve success is to use soft power to organize sports tournaments, cultural fairs or other mega-events. It seems that in the context of World Expos the host country showcases their ability to bring the international community together, but at the same time there are additional and hidden agendas motivating its actions. These events create possibilities for the host country to promote their desired image in an allegedly 'non-political' manner. In this thesis I argue that the World Expos are an example of such multifaced working of power.

### **3.7 The complementary relation between nation branding and public diplomacy**

This chapter has outlined the concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy. Although they are independently developed concepts, with distinct contexts and histories, in the thesis I view their relation as complementary. Many scholars have mainly focused on defining the concepts, rather than on exploring their relation. A portion of nation branding heavily relies on branding materials such as symbols and campaigns that are visible for their audiences, whereas public diplomacy is based on more discreet actions that might have a covert political nature. Both aim at creating a favorable image and at building trust between actors, but they differ in regard to the practice and implementation.

Perhaps the most extensive distinction between nation branding and public diplomacy has been made by György Szondi, a senior lecturer in public relations at Leeds Metropolitan University (Szondi, 2008; see also Hart, 2018 p. 222). In his essay, Szondi has identified five possible relations between the two concepts:

1. Nation branding and public diplomacy are unrelated concepts.
2. Public diplomacy is an element of nation branding.
3. Nation branding is an element of public diplomacy.
4. Nation branding and public diplomacy are coexisting but overlapping concepts.
5. Nation branding and public diplomacy are synonymous.

Szondi does not take a clear stance on which definition is the correct one. He points out that Simon Anholt, whom I mentioned earlier, viewed public diplomacy as an element of nation branding early in his career but has subsequently come to understand them as two overlapping concepts (Szondi, 2008). My own position adopted in this thesis is that nation branding and public diplomacy coincide and can be found simultaneously regardless of the context in question. I will explain this further below.

My position draws on a more recent characterization is offered by Kelechi (2024), who suggests that instead of focusing on the dissimilarity of nation branding and public diplomacy, one should focus on their interconnectedness. Nation branding and public diplomacy can benefit from one another by creating synergy that optimizes and enhances them. (Kelechi, 2024.) One example of this is how nation branding strategies can be implemented into the field of public diplomacy through the network of embassies. Embassies function as places that can produce both nation branding and public diplomacy successfully because their actions are aimed to heterogeneous audiences. This implies that the activities embassies produce are targeted at multiple levels of the society. The nation branding produced by embassies can be tailored according to the country of the mission and its special characteristics. In turn, nation branding helps a country to 'market' itself and make itself known before promoting a politicized agenda in an international setting.

## **4 ANALYSIS OF NATION BRANDING STRATEGIES: THE CASES OF FINLAND AND THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA**

In this chapter, I will present the strategic nature of Finland's and Saudi Arabia's nation branding work based on the primary material in the form of selected official publications, which I have presented earlier. These consists of: Finland's Country Branding Strategy (2017), Handbook for Country Image Work (2024) and Vision 2030 (2016). I will analyze how the two nations justify their nation branding by addressing the strategic priorities, target groups and strengths and weaknesses. This first chapter of the analysis gives insights into the branding and key priorities that can be discovered by looking at the two national pavilions of the two at Expo 2020, which I will follow up in chapter 5.

In terms of the analysis of nation branding strategies, it is beneficial that the countries examined differ widely from each other since it will potentially give a greater diversity of outcomes. By choosing comparative cases, the comparative approach produces common features and dissimilarities that can generate generalizations, patterns and predictions (Landman et al., 2003, p. 4-10). While it can be argued that one of the main objectives of nation branding is the goal of improving positive perception, the tools and methods of implementation are as diverse as the number of countries undertaking nation branding activities in the world.

### **4.1 The case of Finland's nation branding**

According to Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2021, which is the ranking system considered as one of the most widely used nation branding indices globally, Finland was ranked 15<sup>th</sup> out of 60 independent nations (Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, 2022). As mentioned previously in the thesis, created by Simon Anholt, one of the

'founding fathers' of the nation branding concept, the index follows how the nation brands evolve and rank in comparisons yearly. In the following sub-sections, I will analyze how Finland approaches nation branding work as a strategic international activity.

#### **4.1.1 Finland's strategic priorities**

Global nation branding surveys play an important role in forming strategic priorities of Finland's nation branding. Finland monitors closely global nation branding surveys and research that prove the basis for strategic actions. The actors want to be sure that they focus their resources on the researched topics to ensure that the resources are used to the maximum. Finland's objective is not to develop entirely new strengths but rather to focus on the assets it is already known for and the reputation it has already established, and to strengthen them with an active and long-term approach. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2024.) It is cost-efficient to focus on the elements of what Finland is known for worldwide rather than try to implement new messages that can appear as unknown or artificial and 'fake' to the audience. It is also important for Finland's strategy that the objectives and goals set by the government are taken into account in the process of planning and implementation of Finland's nation brand.

The Handbook for Country Image Work (2024) acknowledges that the countries similar in size receive a limited amount of international attention, but it aims to be bigger player than its population size in sectors that are its strengths, including quality of life, well-functioning social institutions such as the Finnish education system and its closeness to nature. This fact has an impact on the careful selection of key themes and the repetition of messages to ensure that Finland's key messages and characteristics are successfully communicated to the audience. Different indices included in the official branding strategy documentation are a great tool for this as they provide data and information that can be used for monitoring trends and evaluating the direction of actions.

Alongside the focus on actual strengths, it is essential that the key messages of Finland's nation branding are perceived as true, realistic and do not require prior knowledge about the theme by the audience. Finland's nation branding communication aims to recognize the audience's position in advance to avoid misunderstandings and wrong interpretations. One of the characteristics of Finland's international perception, for example is its trustworthiness. To maintain this profile, the messages communicated need to be correct and, also, perceived as 'authentic'. 'Reliability' also stands out as one of the characteristics that Finland would like to impress on international actors targeted by its branding strategy. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland,

2024, p. 16–17.) ‘Honesty’ is also mentioned in the Finland’s Country Branding Strategy (2017), as expressed in the slogan that the ‘Finnish handshake is the most reliable in the world’ (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2017, p. 4).

#### **4.1.2 The key target groups of Finland’s nation branding**

In addition to focusing on the truthfulness of the messages, a successful nation branding strategy requires that the target group is well-defined in order to reach key actors and audiences. Finland’s nation branding work acknowledges the importance of the target groups and the most suitable communication style for its key messages. Finland has defined its target group to be people who are internationally oriented, higher than average education and income levels who have the resources to travel to Finland, invest in Finland or buy products that are made in Finland. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2024, p. 13–15.)

This target group choice indicates that nation branding work primarily intends to affect the choices of individuals considering whether to buy Finnish products or whether to visit Finland as tourists, for instance, rather than global companies or institutions. The choice also shows that Finland seeks to increase its visibility through ‘authentic experiences’ of actual individuals. On the other hand, this may reflect the acknowledgement of one of Finland’s nation branding weaknesses: Finland is known for ‘issues’ that do not lend themselves easily into capitalizable and marketable experiences or products, such as good governance or a functional society (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2024).

Different factors are visible in the selection of the target group, for instance the awareness of high standard of living in Finland. It is not enough to provide information about Finland to as many people as possible, the nation branding communication must generate interest that subsequently needs to translate into action by the target group, resulting, for example, in the decision to visit Finland. To succeed in this, the target group must have the financial resources to experience a country with high living cost, which may differ from what the individual is used to. This means that the target audiences are relatively affluent groups, able to afford the prices of Finnish products or to cover the costs of travel and tourism in Finland.

While the target group is well-defined, it goes without saying that it is composed by many different sub-groups. The common thing is that the individuals in this target group must be interested in aspects that Finland has successfully managed to promote, which then has resulted in an individual’s choice to get to know Finland in more detail. A great example of this are tourists that seek to visit Finland.

According to Visit Finland, the target group visiting Finland consists of people whose values align with what Finland has to offer from the tourism perspective. This group consists of people who value localness, proximity to nature and want to avoid

mass tourism. (Business Finland, n.d.-a.) The choice of the target group has been also strategic. By offering alternatives for consumers who value environmental values, it is a way to raise awareness of Finland's environmental consciousness. It sends a message that environmental values are aligned with Finland's values, which aims to profile Finland as a responsible international actor that recognizes and promotes global sustainability issues and sees opportunities in being involved to solving them.

Finally, the selection of the target group can be also seen as a strategic choice from a demographic point of view. Finland is one of many countries facing an ageing population and therefore Finland wants to appeal to well-educated foreign professionals who are at a stage in their life where they might look for options where they want to settle down. By targeting this group, Finland aims to present itself as an attractive country for high-qualification and educated migrants, highlighting its character as a high-tech country with a reputation for good social support networks which are factors the target group might consider important. This consideration shows that nation branding can intersect with and be utilized in relation to such key policy sectors as immigration.

#### **4.1.3 The strengths and weaknesses of Finland's nation brand**

Finland's high ranking in the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index shows that the already existing perceptions of Finland are mainly positive, and that Finland's nation brand is strong due to its reliance on key themes such as functional society, untouched nature and advanced know-how that remain a constant regardless of what government has been in power. The strengths of Finland's nation brand can be summarized twofold as (i) the emphasis on the positive themes such as functionality of the Finnish society that provides wellbeing and security to all and (ii) its social role as an active actor in issues as sustainable development and equality. Finland has profiled itself as a country that values education, the use of digital solution and of which government bases its decisions on researched information. I elaborate this issue more in section 4.1.3.1.

According to my reading of the material, these are the elements constituting the the depiction Finland wants to create about itself: (i) functionality and well-being, (ii) nature and sustainable development, and (iii) education and know-how, which form a coherent image of the cornerstones of the Finnish brand. All these elements mentioned in the strategy (2017) reflect Finland's real identified assets. The statement in Finland's strategy (2017) that the everyday life is the best in Finland, is a demonstration of the functionality of life and strong social security, through which Finland aims to appeal to the needs and wants of the target group. At the same time as Finland seeks to attract the attention of the target group, it also aims to increase its visibility globally by raising its profile through highlighting sustainability and equality issues high on its agenda as one of its foreign policy priorities. These issues have raised their



international relevance in recent decades, hence being associated with these particular issues internationally has been a strategic choice in the efforts to assume a leading role in these areas.

I argue that Finland's nation brand would not be this highly ranked without a well-organized and inclusive nation branding work. At the core of Finland's nation branding work is the policy of collaborating with all the parties involved in the nation branding activities. The work itself is oriented long-term and the policies have lasted unchanged across governments. As there is a consensus about the key themes, it is relatively unproblematic for all parties involved to communicate them. I have addressed this multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral cooperation in section 3.2.1. For instance, the strong involvement of the Finnish business sector in building of the Finnish nation brand is the evidence of understanding the scalability of the benefits of nation branding work: it is not only the nation branding that helps to make Finnish products to be known abroad, but also Finnish companies contribute to this deal through foreign trade. Especially Finnish companies manufacturing consumer products like Fiskars and Marimekko contribute to making Finland known for their customers by implementing promotion as 'Finland's brands' through their products. In practice, this might happen by introducing the customer to the origin of the products or company by adding information about the companies' roots in Finland on the product packaging, for example.

The central weakness of Finland's nation brand is that Finland is still not well-known internationally, especially in comparison to other Nordic states, and Finnish culture remains relatively unknown abroad. This concern is also raised in the Handbook for Country Image Work (2024). While Finland's brand is positive and strong among those who are already aware of Finland, the recognition of Finland and its brand is relatively low broadly across the world, compared to other Nordic countries.

The Handbook for Country Image Work (2024) states that successful nation branding work results in positive emotions and creates links between the target group and Finland. One obvious way to create these links and experiences is through visiting the country. Visiting a country is a way of immersing oneself in a new environment, encountering cultures, experiencing something new and creating memories. In addition, experiencing elements of national culture enables the creation of a bond or interest. In my view the fact that Finnish culture is not well known is due to prevailing assumption that all Nordic countries are similar, and the cultural differences are therefore ignored and, historically, international attention to countries of the region has been dominated by others, like Sweden or Denmark. It is evident that they share some similarities in cultural characteristics, but every Nordic country has their own special cultural aspects that differentiate them from one another (Lindskog & Stougaard-Nielsen, 2020). For example, Finnish food culture differs largely from the food cultures of

other Nordic countries because of the use of lake water fish and the culinary and cultural influence of its eastern neighbor, Russia, throughout history (Bergflødt et al., 2012).

Also, I consider that one of the weaknesses of the Finnish brand, besides the lack of awareness of the specifics of Finnish culture, lies in the fact that Finland and Finnishness have not received the same attention in the mainstream international perceptions as its counterparts, Sweden and Denmark. Denmark has successfully promoted the idea of *hygge* to international audiences, while Sweden has done the same with the art of *fika*. There has, however, been some attempt of Visit Finland launching a campaign called *Find your Inner Finn*, which included a masterclass to Finnish happiness, but so far this has been limited in its effects compared to either the Danish or the Swedish brand promotions.

In addition to the lack of international recognition of any distinguishing characteristics Finnish culture, the limited number of famous Finnish people also impacts the low brand awareness. Finnish conductors, composers, heavy metal bands and athletes are famous outside of Finland, but they represent fields with very narrow target groups. In my view to increase Finland's global visibility in the mainstream, Finland must have global celebrities. On the other hand, in recent years, certain state figures such as President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin have gained greater visibility as a consequence of the historic event of Finland's decision to join the North Atlantic military alliance NATO in spring of 2022, the global news coverage of which was extensive. The visibility of these high-profile government leaders and of the historic decision also had a positive impact of Finland's visibility more broadly. It should be noted that the Finnish nation brand has not faced any major setbacks or scandals. Rather, Finland's global visibility has been boosted by the change in international power dynamics following its decision to join NATO in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It might be that because Finland's application was ratified more rapidly than that of another applicant, Sweden, Finland has been placed in a better light and underlined Finland's international relations with the NATO member states. The interest towards the new NATO member state has contributed to Finland's visibility in the international political arena.

#### **4.1.3.1 Media coverage during covid-19**

Finland received a lot of positive international media coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic (see e.g. Rose, 2023). As the new global health crisis reached every corner of the world, the strategies of countries to prevent the spread of the pandemic and protect themselves were put under a close microscope. At the same time, the women-led government of Finland at the time received a lot of foreign media attention and cast Finnish gender equality, education and political systems into a wider discussion.

The women-led government was present in the media through regular press conferences that talked about Finland's measures against the pandemic.

Because the whole world faced a new health threat, the media coverage of covid was so extensive that those countries that succeeded in their covid-19 measures and those who failed received much media attention. Finland's well-measured protection policies, the obedience of its citizens to comply with the guidelines and the reasonable infection rates compared to their Nordic counterparts attracted positive interest in Finland.

Initially, the news about Finland's covid strategy focused on government actions during normal times to maintain the country's security of supply. This approach was different from the other European countries that had ended maintaining their security of supplies gradually. The resilience of the Finnish society was highlighted as the society remained functional despite the pandemic: crisis legislation allowed for strict restrictions on gatherings, which helped to contain the spread of the pandemic, state financial support to businesses prevented the economy from collapsing, and children's schooling continued almost as normal with a rapid transition to distance learning. The transition to distance learning for school children and the shift to working remotely were made possible by an already existing digital society. Finland's strategy was stricter than the strategy followed in Sweden for example, which caused concerns about the capacity of Swedish health care system to sustain its functions during a prolonged pandemic.

The success of Finland's covid actions helped Finland to appear as a stable and secure nation that is able to adapt to rapidly changing global realities. The low infection and mortality rates demonstrated the public trust in the government and the policies set by the health care professionals and researchers. Also, there was very little activity in the form of protests or acts of public disobedience against covid restrictions.

While global news coverage focused on the pandemic as a threat, individual phenomena related to the pandemic also attracted coverage. An example was the Finnish dogs used to detect covid positive passengers at the Helsinki Airport. The news of these sniffer dogs spread worldwide as people needed positive news in the times of crises that communicated about Finland's innovativeness and know-how.

## **4.2 The case of Saudi Arabia's nation branding**

In the second part of this chapter, I shift attention to nation branding of Saudi Arabia, which has been outlined in the government program Vision 2030, launched in 2016 by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and aimed at depicting strategies of economic, social and cultural diversification of the country. Through Vision 2030, Saudi

Arabia approaches its nation branding as an activity that covers all aspects of social life in a comprehensive matter. Whereas Finland focuses its core messages and strengths on a narrow set of issues, Saudi Arabia aims to *rebrand* itself in a more holistic manner by trying to diversify its international image and to counter some of its negative perceptions. In 2021, Saudi Arabia placed 55<sup>th</sup> place in the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, 2022). The government has recognized that the international perception plays a significant role in determining whether a country is appealing as an investment opportunity or as a tourist destination. In this effort, the implementation of the new vision requires a diversified and multi-channel approach.

#### **4.2.1 Saudi Arabia's strategic priorities**

In contrast to Finland, which uses specifically identified themes and knowledge of what it is already known for abroad as its guidelines for nation branding, Saudi Arabia is building its rebranding efforts around the broadly defined 'power of change' and the notion of a new era, as articulated in its Vision 2030. The economic diversification is the driving force of the rebranding efforts, which is also the engine for social reforms. Saudi Arabia acknowledges that in order to transform its nation brand in the eyes of desired target groups, it must also include and implement social reforms. Given the wide range of the new reforms that have been proposed in Vision 2030, I have limited my scope to cover its most essential aspects for rebranding Saudi Arabia.

Before the launch of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's nation brand and international perception had been affected by the bad reputation of its autocratic government, low ranking in human rights monitoring, and the limitations of women's rights (among other things). The oil rich nation was seen as religiously conservative and closed to foreigners due to its conservative nature. In 2016, as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched Vision 2030, which delivered a masterplan to shift away from the oil production as the main source of income for the country, it also raised questions about the importance of reshaping its international image as a top priority.

With Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's objective is to change its international image as a nation closed to foreigners and appear to the international audience as a modern nation by implementing new societal reforms in the hope of attracting interest and enhancing its profile in international arenas. One of the key elements Saudi Arabia is using to rebrand itself as a modern nation is through diversifying its economic structure by establishing new economic sectors such as sustainable energy, defense, mining, tourism industry, entertainment and sports sectors. (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 44–49.)

Saudi Arabia, aiming to combine in its international image both traditional and modern elements, is using its advantage the media attention that has been created by historical social reforms. It wants to appeal to what modernity is according to what

the majority of Western nations defines as 'being modern': a highly digitalized, sustainable and gender-equal actor. The transition from the reliance of oil production and fossil fuels toward sustainable energy solutions indicates that Saudi Arabia has absorbed the fact that its fossil fuel reserves will eventually run out and therefore it is not sustainable for its economy to rely on a single source of revenue, even though it has been extremely profitable the past decades.

One of the biggest reforms that can also be viewed as a tool for enhancing the Saudi brand, is the opening of its borders to international tourism. From the perspective of tourism, Saudi Arabia has established itself in the field of so-called 'religious tourism' for Muslim populations globally because two holiest cities in Islam, Medina and Mecca, are located in Saudi Arabia and are most visited by pilgrims. In 2019, Saudi Arabia started to grant tourist visas for foreign nationals on the basis of non-religious purposes of travel. Saudi Arabia takes advantage of its unique geographic location that connects the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe to attract tourism streams (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 6). Allowing international non-religious tourists to visit Saudi Arabia also benefits other business sectors and boosts the nation's service sector, being beneficial for its own citizens by increasing domestic tourism. It also decreases the amount of money spent by Saudi citizens on travel abroad as there are new alternative destinations in the domestic market. This lucrative cycle has also helped with the objective of implementing new business sectors, and the development of the entertainment and cultural industry, for instance, can be considered as tool for reshaping Saudi Arabia's international image (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 27).

In 2022, the Ministry for Tourism of Saudi Arabia appointed the world-famous professional football player Lionel Messi as their tourism ambassador. This collaboration with Messi can be treated as a strategic choice in the effort to attract maximal attention and interest from international consumers. The fact that the selected figure is a representative of the sport football, one of the most popular sports in the world, shows that Saudi Arabia is seeking to optimize its reach of targeted audience. This objective is accomplished through Messi's massive fan base. Messi has over 500 million of followers on Instagram which ensures Saudi Arabian tourism's exposure to an enormous international audience. I argue that a significant percentage of Messi's fans get their first encounter with Saudi Arabia precisely through a stream of curated pictures on Instagram, which is fruitful for Saudi Arabia's efforts to establish its international tourism sector and tangibly communicate the most desired image of itself via social media platforms.

The choice of Messi as the official tourism ambassador resonates with the fact that Saudi Arabia has invested in hosting different sporting events in recent years, which has increased its international recognition both among people who follow sports and in the eyes of possible investors. In this sense sports can be thought of as a tool to attract interest and branding as a global hub for sports. Similar branding at-

tempts have taken place in other sports as well. One of the most recent cases is happening in the world of golf. In the wake of the LIV Golf tournament, sponsored by the Public Investment Fund, the Saudi Arabian wealth fund has received a lot of attention from the media as it has attracted many famous professional golf players to join this completely new golf tournament.<sup>2</sup> These cases show that the attention of the sports world is increasingly drawn to Saudi Arabia which improves its international recognition.

Another key element that Saudi Arabia is using for its rebranding efforts concerns women's empowerment and equal rights among men and women. This reform of Vision 2030 has attracted much international media attention as the country had followed religious laws and policies for a long time, which had been interpreted by the Western countries as limiting of the rights of certain groups of people in the society. For instance, women had been prohibited by the law to make decisions concerning their social and bodily self-determination without the permission their male-guardian until 2019, when some mitigations to these laws were introduced. Examples of less strict regulations include: allowing women to use public services such as healthcare, to receive education and to obtain official documents like ID cards and passports without the permission of the male-guardian. (The Saudi Human Rights Commission, 2024.)

In addition to the changes introduced to guardianship policies, Vision 2030 highlights women empowerment by allowing women to join the Saudi work force. Whereas many European nations encounter aging demographics, the Saudi population is relatively young: over 50 % of the Saudis are under 25 years old according to Vision 2030. Also, majority of the university graduates are women, which gives the government a supply of educated workforce. (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 37.) One of its objectives of empowering women is to increase the current amount 22% of women's participation in the workforce up to 30 % (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 39). Vision 2030 emphasizes that through changes it aims to provide equal job opportunities regardless of one's gender. Women's inclusion in the workforce, and the greater international public visibility of Saudi women, is also demonstrated by the fact that Saudi Arabia appointed its first female ambassador to U.S. in 2019 (The Embassy of Saudi Arabia in the U.S. n.d.-a). This appointment is way of highlighting its progressiveness and development in women's empowerment also in prestigious fields as diplomacy. All these efforts at increasing social equality and inclusion, and at greater openness to foreign visitors and investors, have had significant impact on the strategies of nation branding.

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<sup>2</sup> This led to a split in professional golf, as prior to LIV tournament, professional golf was only played in one tournament, PGA tour which has been the highest level and most distinguished golf tournament in the world. Critics argue that LIV tour has caused the fracture of the sport by offering players unprecedented prize money in return for quitting PGA tour and joining LIV tour.

While implementing these societal reforms, in its international presentation Saudi Arabia has simultaneously acknowledged its historical roots and traditions, as well as the significance of Islamic religion by including both themes in its brand. This message is demonstrated in Vision 2030, as it characterizes its objective of being ‘a vibrant society with strong roots’ (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 21). In this sense, ‘roots’ refer to the strong religious heritage and the fact that Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Islamic religion. The nation that Saudi Arabia aspires to become, does not aim to get rid of its origins, but, rather, includes and integrates them in the modern version. According to Vision 2030, the society-wide transformation project is made possible by ‘adhering to the Islamic principles, Arabic values and national traditions’ (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 72). This communicates that religion also has an important role in modern Saudi Arabia, despite the many implemented reforms that were not aligned with religious principles, for instance the aforementioned modifications to the male guardianship. A concrete example of the appreciation of Saudi heritage is the goal of doubling the number of its UNESCO heritage sites (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 19). Having multiple UNESCO listed sites contributes to establishing the country as an interesting tourist destination and can be considered as part of its re-branding.

I would suggest that highlighting the role of Saudi cultural heritage is a message targeted primarily to Saudi citizens and to citizens of other countries with majority Muslim populations. Although the government is modernizing the Saudi society, its message is that the fundamental characteristics of the society stay rather unchanged, and that Saudi-style modernization is not a threat to tradition or religion. Also, it can be considered a way to increase national pride. Finally, putting emphasis on Saudi Arabia’s distinctive and rich culture, can be viewed as a signal to the international audience, that seeks to publicize that Saudi culture had existed long before Vision 2030. The message underwriting this emphasis on culture is that Saudi Arabia is more profound and complex than merely the current transformations that take place there.

#### **4.2.2 The key target groups of Saudi Arabian nation branding**

Since Vision 2030 is a society-wide development project that I interpret here from the perspective of nation branding, it does not specify the target groups in the same way that Finland does. However, based on the priorities I have presented earlier, three possible target groups of these key nation branding messages can be identified.

The primary target group are the governments of Western countries and their political leaders who have potentially the most influence on amplifying Saudi Arabia’s new image. In order to enhance its international profile and to gain trustworthiness globally, the knowledge of its efforts to transform its society and rebrand itself must increase among people who hold the most political power. Also, Saudi Arabia

focuses on building new bilateral trade relations under the influence of its new improved image since it lacks the know-how of new industries (for instance mining and circular energy that many other nations already have).

Secondly, Saudi Arabia targets its nation branding communication at foreign investors. Even though Saudi Arabia is a very wealthy country due to its fossil fuel resources, it still needs foreign capital to carry out all its projects highlighted in Vision 2030. According to Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia aims to expand the assets of the Public Investment Fund from 600 billion to over 7 trillion (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 47) and to raise inward investments from 3.8% to international levels of 5.7% of GDP (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 53).

The third possible target group consists of foreigners who are skilled professionals in various fields of expertise. Attracting that group to Saudi Arabia is a crucial element in the success of Vision 2030. Carrying out all projects requires attracting the interest of experts to work there. Thus, Saudi Arabia must make itself attractive in the eyes of foreign skilled workforce. This is also recognized in the vision: 'Our goal is to attract and retain the finest Saudi and foreign minds, and provide them with all they need. Their presence in the Kingdom will contribute to economic development and attract additional foreign investment.' (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 37). In practice, there are many elements that determine whether skilled professionals want to move to Saudi Arabia for work, which are integrally linked to its rebranding strategies. One of the key aspects has been that Saudi Arabia adopts societal changes to make itself more favorable place to live for expats.

#### **4.2.3 The strengths and weaknesses of Saudi Arabia's nation branding**

Saudi Arabia's low ranking in the Ipsos-Anholt index in 2021 shows that the rebranding initiatives require more time and effort before the improvements begin to materialize and Saudi Arabia's ranking improves. For this reason, it is therefore essential to consider possible advantages as well as the disadvantages of the document shaping its branding strategy, Vision 2030. After examining Vision 2030 from the perspective of nation branding, I have identified the following strengths: (i) Saudi Arabia's ability to capitalize on the novelty value and (ii) their strategy to integrate nation branding work with the renewal of the economy. From the nation branding perspective, Saudi Arabia puts to use the perceptions of the 'mysteriousness' of its kingdom, which has been its core characteristic for decades. The country has remained rather unknown globally for non-Muslims. I argue that besides the efforts to diversify its economy and to transform its society, Saudi Arabia aims to diversify its international representation included in Vision 2030. This is because it could be based on a single message: that 'Saudi Arabia is the largest oil exporter in the world.' As the value of fossil fuels declines, countries with massive oil reserves cannot depend on it for their future. In addition, it should be mentioned that the governmental system, the absolute monarch,



is an advantage that enables streamlined communication of the desired image. When the decision power is controlled by one entity, the house of Saud which is the royal family of Saudi Arabia, enables a coherent implementation of the planned image also in unconventional fields such as the economic reform demonstrates. Also, the vast resources allow the government to have close cooperation with the top public relations consultants who have the know-how of delivering the desired image for the identified key target groups.

However, there are some weaknesses that the Saudi brand struggles with. First, there are issues in terms of the already existing connotation that might be difficult to overcome from the perspective of international branding. As Saudi Arabia has mainly welcomed religious visitors in the past, the connotation of being 'religiously conservative' might be difficult to overcome by the mainstream. The is where the challenge lies: how to assure the international audience that also people with different religious beliefs or non-religious individuals are truly accepted and welcomed.

Secondly, the use of multiple means to create an image of 'a modern country' can weaken the effectiveness of the nation branding communication. Because the target groups consist of many sub-groups that have different interest, some of the methods are efficient for others, while others are not. For instance, women's empowerment and green energy initiatives are high on the agendas of Nordic countries, while the branding angle targeted at Saudi Arabia's neighboring countries that follow religious policies could be the potential prosperity generator for the Gulf region that Vision 2030, if carried out successfully will offer.

Lastly, there are similar reform plans being implemented by other Gulf region nations that might generate competition. Examples include Kuwait Vision 2035, Qatar National Vision 2030 and Dubai Vision 2030. Because Saudi Arabia relies firmly its nation branding work to the reforms of Vision 2030, it might form a challenge as there are other nations developing similar visions. Although, the visions differ in terms of their priorities and implementation methods, it is obvious that all these development projects will also create synergy and benefit the Gulf region which will face the need to move away from their fossil fuels dependency eventually.

## **5 ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL PAVILIONS AT EXPO 2020**

In this chapter, I will analyze which key themes of Finnish and Saudi Arabian nation branding are identifiable and showcased in the national pavilions of the two, and analyze the techniques used to deliver those messages. It seems to me that one of the greatest ways for nations to boost their nation brand in the manner that suits them than by investing in participation in Expos in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For that reason, I include analysis of the national pavilions of Finland and Saudi Arabia as part of this thesis' investigation of national branding because these pavilions offer a unique insight into how key branding motifs, representations and objectives are 'put into practice' and 'implement' at the level of visitors' experiences.

### **5.1 Analysis of Finland's pavilion**

Finland participated in the 2020 Expo with a pavilion called Snow Cape, in Finnish 'Lumi', which is the Finnish word for snow (see image 1). The pavilion was designed by JKMM Architects, which has received also international recognition by winning several architectural awards. The Finnish pavilion at Expo 2020 is not their first work, as the company designed the Finnish pavilion "Giant's kettle" for the Shanghai Expo 2010. (Business Finland, 2020, p. 5–6.)

The theme of Finland's exposition pavilion was "Sharing Future Happiness" which was divided into three subthemes: circular economy, sustainability and innovations. The Finnish business sector had a strong presence in spreading these themes, contributing to the promotion of Finnish know-how. The pavilion presented the key pillars on which Finnish happiness is based, namely: 'the symbiosis of the people, nature and technology' (Business Finland, 2020, p. 9). Next, I will examine how some of

the main pillars for Finland's nation branding is communicated to expo audience through the design and organization of the Finnish pavilion.

### **5.1.1 The concept of Finnish happiness**

The fact that Finland had chosen to build its pavilion around the theme of happiness was a strong choice. Connotations around societal happiness are unambiguously positive and as a theme 'happiness' is easily approachable and a universal goal for many governments. At the time of Expo 2020, Finland had been identified as the happiest country in the world for the third time in a row according to the UN World Happiness Report. This recognition is notable, and the ranking receives a lot of global media attention annually. Being declared 'the happiest country in the world' several times in a row, not only brings attention to Finland, but also sparks a wider debate about the 'secret' of Finnish happiness.

With this success, Finland relied on the lasting impact of the media attention it had received from the title of 'the happiest country in the world' by choosing happiness as the theme of the pavilion. While the experience of happiness itself and the factors that lead to happiness are subjective and debatable, through the design of the pavilion Finland worked to identify and bring the elements of Finnish happiness to be seen and experienced by the audience. Importantly, these elements are consistent with some of the themes already named in the previously discussed branding strategy. As soon as one entered the pavilion, one could hardly miss the blue LED text 'Shaping Future Happiness' on the wall, written in English as well as in Arabic as a respect for the host country. In addition, this gesture can be seen as a concrete attempt to build bridges between the cultures of Finland and United Arab Emirates and a sign that in designing the pavilion the Finnish actors have understood their opportunity to stand out from the other pavilions by not only highlighting Finland's own profile by also by paying attention to the presence of the host country.

The pavilion's design communicates clearly that the Finnish 'happiness' is linked to a secure and stable society, a simple way of life alongside nature and a public trust in authorities and institutions. However, these are issues that are difficult to incorporate within a material design and for the audiences to experience, and around which it is hard to create strong emotions, which I have mentioned earlier in this thesis, as some of the shortcomings of Finland's nation branding. Nevertheless, the Finnish pavilion has managed to incorporate aspects of Finnish happiness in a subtle way at the level of aesthetics of the design and the visitor's immersive experience, such as showcasing what life in Finland is like through a long screen that circles around the inside of the pavilion (see image 3). The recording is clearly meant to appear as an 'authentic representation' of the Finnish daily life by incorporating glimpses of Finnish landscape, everyday life, showing pavilion visitors what Finnish schools, workplaces and

other public spaces look like. From the branding perspective, this representation aims to offer to the audience an immersive experience of some elements of Finnish happiness and to spark interest in a 'real life' experience of Finland, thus boosting Finnish tourism.



Image 1. The Finnish pavilion from outside.  
(IHC Integrated Holistic Communications, n.d.-a).

### 5.1.2 The emphasis on Finnish nature

The façade of the pavilion is pure white as a symbol of snow that covers the building representing an Arabic tent (see image 1). We could speculate whether combination of the two disparate elements, snow and desert (that Arabic tents tend to be associated with), was a choice meaning to intrigue and encourage a closer visit. There is also a water element right next to the entrance in a distinct reference to Finland being a land of thousands of lakes (see image 1). Viewed from the outside, the pavilion represents a minimalist design, but an observant visitor might notice additions referencing Finnish design and architecture in the form the material choices of the pavilion (granite floors, wood structure).

When looking at the design of the pavilion, typical elements of Finnish nature can be noticed, such as forests, lakes and snow. The first space a visitor enters into is called 'the central Gorge', which reminds the visitors of Finnish forests, and especially the rugged gorge landscapes of rural Finland (see image 2). The Gorge is paneled with wooden surface which forms a distinctive curved shape. This place provides the visitors with a serene moment to pause and immerse themselves in the peacefulness of the Finnish forest, smelling the freshness of the wood and listening to the recording of bird songs playing in the background. The Gorge uses Finnish technology to keep

the temperature of the space cool, creating a relaxing moment in the middle of the desert. (Business Finland, 2020, p. 5–6.) I argue that the idea behind the Gorge is to afford the audience a pleasant moment of relaxation and immersion into visual, olfactory and auditory sensations by way of branding it the ‘Finnish forest experience’.



Image 2. The central Gorge.  
(IHC Integrated Holistic Communications, n.d.-b).

Inside the actual pavilion, the use of Finnish nature-themed elements continues (see image 3). The inner ceiling creates reference to the Northern Lights, which is accentuated by the dim lighting used inside the pavilion. For many foreigners, the Northern Lights are a unique experience, and their inclusion in the interior of the pavilion has enhanced the sensual aspects of the pavilion and helped identify Finland as a place of remarkable experiences and striking natural phenomena.

Also, the use of color-changing lighting can be seen as an aesthetic tool that communicates the specificity of four seasons as something that will be undoubtedly impact the experiences of Finland’s visitors (see image 3). Presenting and harnessing Finland’s unique natural appeal as a branding tool has been a deliberate decision and an attempt to differentiate itself from the other national pavilions through emphasis on these distinctive features. I argue that this has been a favorable choice for the Finnish brand, as the contrast between Finnish nature elements and the Expo site and the nature of the host country, the United Arab Emirates, is significant given the vast differences in their geographic location and therefore their landscapes.



Image 3. Inside of the Finnish pavilion.  
(IHC Integrated Holistic Communications, n.d.-c).

### 5.1.3 Finland's emphasis on circular economy

Another individual theme that is emphasized in the Finnish pavilion is the circular economy, which is shown in the presence of Finnish businesses and key sectors offering their solutions in the main exhibition space. Over 100 Finnish companies are present at the Finnish pavilion ranging from industries such as manufacturing, ICT, to forestry and sustainable energy (Business Finland, 2020, p. 1). Expo visitors have the opportunity to explore what each of the companies have to offer as they go around the pavilion.

Innovative and sustainable solutions are needed to minimize the impact of climate change and keep the globe habitable. According to the Finland's vision for the future presented in the Finland's Country Branding Strategy (2017), 'global challenges will be solved with high level of expertise, open-minded thinking and innovative approach. In this context, the sustainable development is a self-evident fact.' (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2017, p. 2).

Here, Finland's high expertise is identified as an opportunity to contribute to the delivery of sustainable solutions. The strategy also mentions that the motivation that inspires Finland to act is based on appreciation of the Nordic nature and its resources. In the context of circular economy, the megatrend of the future, through its pavilion design, Finland identifies itself as a solution-oriented participant. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2017, p. 4.)

The exhibition space includes individual slots that present how Finnish companies respond to the demand for circular economy solutions. One example of this is the

vertical farming system called Grow 360 by Evergreen Farm Oy. Their invention offers ways to grow vegetables cost-efficiently with minimal farming-land needed. (Business Finland, 2020, p. 67.) This invention responds to the recognized fact that food production needs to happen more locally in order to cut unnecessary logistics that cause a significant number of emissions globally. The inclusion of this theme is probably also due to identification of what industrial solution might be of greatest interest for the host country and its neighbors. I believe that the host country, United Arab Emirates, and the Middle Eastern countries in general, might potentially be hugely interested in this, because conventional farming is not possible due to their hot climate and, in this way, the desire to increase domestic food production.

Incorporating the Finnish business sector into the center of the pavilion itself, has benefited their internationalization and has enabled the scalability of the Finnish know-how. Through the innovative solutions of the Finnish companies, Finland aims to profile as a modern nation that is a proactive participant in global issues. The objective of the pavilion is to introduce and raise awareness of Finland and also provide a platform for Finnish companies to attract global attention.

## **5.2 Analysis of Saudi Arabian's pavilion**

The Saudi Arabia Pavilion was built to reflect the country's past, present and shared future. It was designed by Boris Micka Associates and was measured the second largest pavilion at Expo 2020 after the pavilion of the host country UAE. The pavilion carries a theme: 'The sky is the limit' which aims to create opportunities for the world to build relationships and connections with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi pavilion acts as a window opening to the rest of the world which invites the audience to explore the country's strong heritage, extensive business opportunities and societal progress. The concept of the pavilion is 'Relatability: creating opportunities for the world to relate to and connect with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'. (Ministry of Culture of Saudi Arabia, 2024). This statement can indicate about Saudi Arabia's greater goal of creating new international relations and also strengthen the already existing trade relations.

### **5.2.1 The significance of long history and traditions**

The foundation of the Saudi Arabian pavilion is based on the discourse of its long history and distinctive traditions. Although the exterior of the pavilion is modern and almost futuristic with a large number of digital screens on the outside, references to the past are strongly present inside the pavilion (see image 5). Given its vast size, the pavilion contains many large showrooms where messages are communicated mainly

through audiovisual elements that enable the visitors to immerse themselves in the videos that tell the story of the kingdom and its development process from the past to the present day (see image 4).

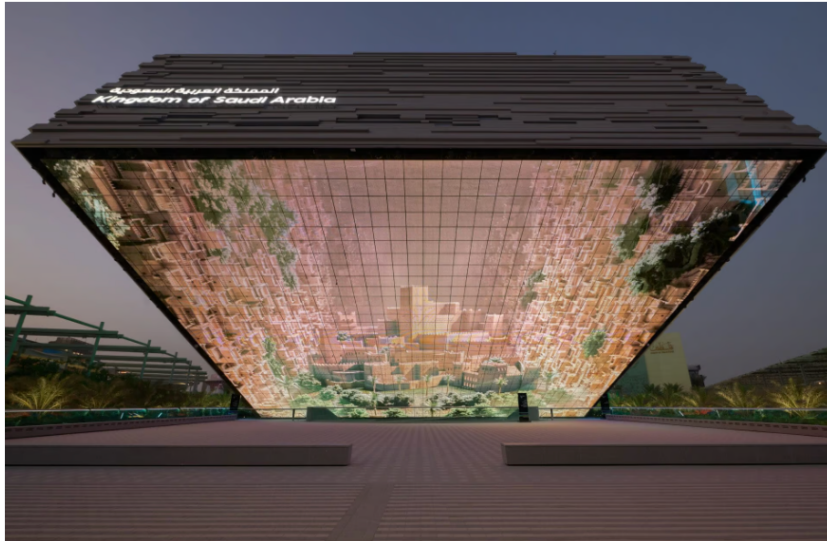


Image 4. View of Saudi Arabian pavilion from outside.  
(Boris Micka Associates, n.d.-a).

The references to Saudi Arabia's past appear as one enters into the pavilion. During the escalator ride at the entry, the design of the pavilion interior highlights the country's heritage sites such as the Al-Aan Palace, a historical landmark (see image 5). Along the way, there are images of the nomadic tribes who herd their camels, which introduces the traditional way of Saudi life and offers the visitors representation of Saudi Arabia's roots. The actual exposition spaces communicate this message as they showcase the desert landscapes where some Bedouin tribes still live. In terms of narrative structure, by starting the visit with the historical origins of Saudi Arabia that transition into its representation of a modern country, the pavilion design communicates a synergy of the two. It clearly merges approval of socio-economic 'progress' with values of distinctive cultural roots.

The small number of references to the role of Islamic religion present at the pavilion is noticeable. They are present mainly in the vision screens that depict the cultural landmarks but they do not have a big role. I see this as a result of deliberate consideration of what key messages Saudi Arabia wants to promote further in regard to its nation branding internationally. In contrast to the Finnish pavilion's reliance on the things that Finland is already recognized for abroad, the Saudi pavilion tries to reduce the emphasis of its Islamic religion (with which its image is broadly associated) and is also highlighted in Vision 2030. (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 5–6.) Through the abundance of other (non-religious) messages and images, the pavilion suggests that Saudi Arabia is 'more than' the historical hub of Islam.





Image 5. A view of the Saudi pavilion upon entry.  
(Boris Micka Associates, n.d.-b).

In addition to the emphasis on historical origins, other cultural aspects are also presented in the exhibition showrooms. There is an interactive water art installation that showcases patterns typical for the different regions of Saudi Arabia (see image 6). This over 32 meters long water curtain enables the visitors to explore the country's typical cultural symbols through a captivating tapestry installation. This installation piece was awarded with the Guinness World Record title of 'the longest interactive water feature' (Ghesa Water & Art, 2021). I suggest that the inclusion of water is meant to disrupt the image that Saudi Arabia predominantly desert but also highlight the fact that Saudi Arabia has several thousands of kilometers of coastline on both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and therefore is located along major shipping routes (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 6).

Representing its distinctive food culture is another way of attracting interest and differentiating oneself from others. Saudi Arabia presents its food culture by offering expo visitors an opportunity to get acquainted with Saudi cuisine in a restaurant called 'Sard' located separately from the Saudi pavilion. The menu includes typical Saudi food products and ingredients such as Saudi coffee 'Qahwa', dates, saffron, and rose water. What is interesting that besides the menu introducing each dish with their original Arabic name, the different drink options available are named after regions and cities in Saudi Arabia. This shows the extent of branding efforts that aim to make the country of origin known. ([menu](#))

I argue that it is not coincidence that these cultural aspects are included in the pavilion because according to Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia aims to double the number of UNESCO heritage sites and position itself as an intriguing new tourist destination.

This shows that even much seemingly minor details need to be seen as practices integral to the broader national branding strategy.



Image 6. The interactive water installation at the Saudi pavilion. (Ghesa Water & Art, n.d.)

## 5.2.2 Open doors to the world

I have mentioned earlier in the thesis that Saudi Arabia's nation branding objective is to rebrand itself through diversifying their economy and implementing some social reforms that support the longevity of the overall transformation plan. Besides the cultural aspects, the Saudi pavilion communicates this key message of transforming the Saudi society into a *modern* nation by incorporating elements that signify to the visitor present-day issues. The discourse of *modern* Saudi Arabia is constructed by incorporating green solutions with technological innovations. Its features include the use of solar panels, energy-saving screens and efficient use of water to reduce the carbon footprint of the pavilion. A concrete example of this is the use of LED-screens both inside the pavilion and on the pavilion's mirror-like façade, which also presents a modern image of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi pavilion even won the Guinness World Record of having the largest interactive lighting display (see image 4) (Ghesa Water & Art, 2021). The pavilion's awareness on climate issues is reflected by the fact that the sustainability of the pavilion is awarded with the highest sustainability rating (U.S. Green Building Council, 2021). These underline the country's dedication of environmental issues, and create impression of innovativeness, technical capabilities and 'global consciousness'. The Saudi pavilion, a large-scale architectural project demonstrates the Saudi government's capacity, means and ambition to show its advanced profile in environmental issues to the international audience. What is also interesting is that there are no references to the fact that Saudi Arabia is still the world's biggest oil exporter: at the same time that Saudi Arabia is highlighting its commitment to act

against climate change, it does not mention its important role in exporting fossil fuels. This is another example that the contents and design of the pavilions expresses key points of national branding, in this case by trying to counter the country's negative reputation as a major contributor to climate crisis.

Another way the pavilion signifies Saudi Arabia as modern and globalized and having 'open doors' to the world is done by presenting the vast opportunities for tourists for worthwhile experiences. Different destinations are showcased on a curved screen, which allows the expo visitors to discover them through the screen. Videos include tourist destinations in the desert such as Al Ula, as well as the beach resorts located on the Red Sea coast such as Amaala, a luxury tourist destination. However, there is a challenge in trying to attract the attention of expo visitors from tourism point of view. As Expo 2020 is hosted by the United Arab Emirates, one of the neighboring countries of Saudi Arabia, the landscapes are similar due to their geological location. That is why the Saudi pavilion emphasizes its cultural heritage sites (see image 5) rather than the modern destinations. This is a sign that the Saudi pavilion acknowledges its position at the Expo 2020: the host-country UAE is mostly known for the emirate of Dubai which can be described as ultra-modern. From the tourism perspective, it is beneficial for the Saudi pavilion to include some elements of its cultural assets in order to differentiate itself from the host country and other national pavilions. This further suggests that the success of national branding depends, partly, on a depiction of the country as 'unique' in relation to its neighbours in the international perception.

The Saudi pavilion gives the visitors a broad and informative view of what modern Saudi Arabia is. Its primary objective is to make the desired image of itself known and enable experiences for the visitors as they explore the pavilion.

## **6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This thesis has addressed the question what policies and approaches to nation branding states develop to promote their international images, while focusing on Finland and Saudi Arabia. The previous two chapters have analyzed the core elements of Finnish and Saudi Arabian nation branding work and examined how they have been implemented in the national pavilions and hence communicated to an international audience. In this chapter, I return to the research questions introduced earlier and reflect the larger implications of the theoretical chapter, as well as offer conclusions.

### **6.1 The key findings of the analysis of nation branding strategies**

After analyzing both the official materials outlining the goals and directions of national branding policies and the national pavilions at Expo 2020, I have demonstrated that there are substantial differences in Finland's and Saudi Arabia's approaches to nation branding. National branding strategy is clearly not a one-size-fits-all project, but, rather, there are enormous differences in how states define, frame, and develop the task of establishing a favorable international image of themselves. I have identified the advantages and challenges resulting from their adopted strategies in regard to delivering their intended image. The analysis demonstrates that Finland has adopted a narrow approach that isolates its nation branding goals from other international and domestic policy objectives, whereas Saudi Arabia integrates its goals within a larger social reform.

In the course of my analysis of the relevant material, I have established that both countries seek to achieve the typical objectives of nation branding outlined in the theoretical chapter of the thesis: to boost investments, export promotion and tourism, the methods used are rather different. Finland's narrow approach aims to attract the in-

ternational interest through carefully selected key themes that all have a positive connotation: (i) functionality and wellbeing, (ii) nature and sustainable development, and (iii) education and know-how as showcased in the Finland's Country Branding Strategy (2017). These elements emerge from monitoring different nation branding surveys, for instance the widely used Ipsos-Anholt Index. I have argued that Finland's strategy has been to invest in and strategically reinforce the reputation it has already established. The repetition of the key messages ensures that Finland's nation branding priorities and characteristics are successfully communicated to the audience. Building a nation brand on the basis of already established strengths also enables a long-term strategic work among all the key actors involved in nation branding work. I have suggested that the advantage of the narrow approach is that Finland has managed to achieve a well-organized and inclusive nation branding work that includes a strong collaboration of different actors. A measure of Finland's success in this regard is that its nation brand has been highly ranked by Ipsos-Anholt Index. The cooperation between the different actors and spheres of activity (business, cultural and governmental sectors) permits the continuum and repetition of key strengths across consecutive governments. Also, the emphasis on the key strengths creates a set of core themes that are then implementable through projects showcasing Finland and 'Finnishness' at international events, such as the World Expos. In section 6.2 I discuss this specifically in regard to the Finnish pavilion at Expo 2020.

The Finnish approach has potential drawbacks, however. One potential disadvantage is the fragility of the brand given how closely connected and interdependent its core elements are. For instance, if an individual key element of the Finnish brand is threatened by a sudden change, it might have negative impact on the brand as a whole. One recent example is Finland's declining performance in the OECD's PISA survey, which measures 15-year-olds' skills in different subjects and evaluates the success of participating countries' education systems. Yet, this development is recent, and according to my analysis, has not contributed to a lesser emphasis on Finnish expertise or know-how. It does, however, entail a potential risk in the future.

Another potential disadvantage Finland has faced is the challenge of making its core elements identifiable internationally by differentiating itself from the general positive image of the Nordics. As I have mentioned earlier, there is a prevailing assumption that all Nordic countries are similar, and their characteristics are consequently overlooked. This false assumption causes an additional challenge for Finland's strategy to gain visibility and recognition against the backdrop of Denmark, Sweden and Norway states that have been very successful at establishing, and reaping the rewards of, their 'Nordic' brands. This is something Saudi Arabia, in comparison, does not struggle with in relation to its regional neighbours.

In turn, in contrast to the case of Finland, my analysis has shown that Saudi Arabia seeks to establish an improved international image through rebranding efforts. The term 'rebranding' implies that an already existing image needs to be reinvented

in order to either remain relevant and current or to correct perceptions that might negatively impact a country's brand. In contrast to the Finnish focused and narrow approach to nation branding strategy, the Saudi approach has integrated strategies and goals of nation branding within its society-wide reform plan, Vision 2030. The document emphasizes the kingdom's needs to diversify its economy and shift away from its dependence on oil and other fossil fuels, and my analysis has shown that its nation branding strategy is harnessed into this larger goal. This holistic manner in which nation branding is understood and practiced also aims to diversify its international image and counter some of its negative perceptions, such as social conservatism, that connect to its traditionalism and an image of a country ruled by strict religious rules that remains closed to non-Muslims.

Following from this, the main difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi Arabia as regards nation branding is the decentralization of the key messages. Communicating endless opportunities for all, can lead to the lack of focus on key messages and it weakens the credibility of the communicating party. Another difficulty Saudi Arabia is facing concerns its already existing international image of being 'religiously conservative'. However, this issue has been explicitly addressed in Vision 2030, and has made attempts to overcome this problem by implementing relevant social reforms.

The advantage of the Saudi approach is the wide range of methods to communicate the notion of the kingdom's 'new era' under the umbrella of economic diversification and the social reforms that support it. By having the economic diversification as the driving force and a key objective of the rebranding, the strategy has enabled Saudi Arabia to reach a wide audience that consists of political leaders as well as foreign investors and business representatives motivated to expand operations in a country that ambitiously seeks to reshape its economic landscape making it favorable for foreign operators, investors and visitors. Also, the implementation of the approach has been quite efficient, partly because it is made possible by absolute monarch who is the only source of political power and who has promoted the Vision 2030. While this thesis has not examined the relationship between nation branding policies and democracy, these findings have indirectly raised questions about efficiency of policy implementation. The relationship between national branding and democracy is in need of study by future research. There are differences also in motives and actors involved. While Finland has limited resources set for nation branding work, Saudi Arabia's image benefits from the almost infinite economic resources to shape its international image.

## **6.2 The key findings of the analysis of the national pavilions at Expo 2020**

I have based the second part of my analysis of nation branding in Finland and Saudi Arabia on the assumption that national pavilions at World Expos can offer countries a rare opportunity to promote and strengthen the key messages of the nation brand through design and organization of the national pavilions. Also, via pavilions, countries can reach new audiences. As my analysis has convincingly shown, pavilions offer the possibility to 'translate' and 'substantiate' specific political narratives and strategies into concrete, material and multisensory experiences. I have shown that both in the case of Finland and Saudi Arabia the pavilions articulated clearly their core messages. Presenting nation branding themes by using material signs and symbols is easier for the audience to comprehend. For instance, through the design of the Finnish pavilion, the 'secret' of Finnish happiness is made more tangible for the visitors as it is linked to the ideas and images of well-functioning society and Finnish people's closeness to nature. The Saudi pavilion shows how the image of 'a modern nation' has been addressed through the futuristic design of the pavilion and incorporating the use of technological solution into the exposition spaces. The specifics of the design substantiate and materialize the goals of re-branding.

The national pavilions enabled the engagement between the governmental officials who worked at the pavilion and the visiting public. These governmental officials acted as advocates of the national brand at the grass-root level, for example by introducing the issues presented inside the pavilions and providing additional information for the pavilion visitors. This engagement is crucial in communicating the 'authentic' messages and avoid misinterpretations. Through national pavilions countries seek to attract the attention of expo visitors and increase the public's understanding of the brand. By incorporating immersive experiences, visitors have the possibility to create memories that have a role in 'embodying' the nation brand. Organized every five years, I have concluded that World Expos provide a unique opportunity for the countries to gather and present their innovations to global issues.

## **6.3 Final conclusions and recommendations**

This thesis has explored the context of World Expos, the creation of the overseeing organization BIE and shed light on the current process of becoming a host country of an expo. In chapter 3, I have discussed the complementary relation between the two yet, independent key concepts: nation branding and public diplomacy. These concepts have had a central role in framing this thesis. Although the concepts have originated from different disciplines (nation branding has its roots in the discipline of marketing

and public diplomacy in international politics from the Cold War), in recent debates they have been brought more closely together. While they are independent concepts, academics such as Szondi (2008) suggest that they are overlapping. The analysis of the thesis was divided into two parts: in chapter 4 I explored the strategic nature of nation branding, priorities as well as strengths and weaknesses. In the second part in chapter 5 I discussed the implementation of nation branding elements in the national pavilion and how nation brands are communicated via national pavilions at Expo 2020 Dubai. The analysis has demonstrated that Finland and Saudi Arabia differ in terms of the approaches used in nation branding, as well as in organizing their nation branding work. Finally, in chapter 6 I have discussed the wider implications of the findings.

This thesis has demonstrated that in order to create a successful nation brand, a country must acknowledge its strengths and weaknesses as well as specify the main target groups and strategic priorities. In a world where there is high competition to attract both skilled workforce and foreign investments, building a distinctive nation brand requires dedication of resources and planning. Monitoring relevant surveys and engaging with different stakeholder groups gives insights into which direction and how the brand is evolving, and provides an opportunity to pivot and redefine the strategy if necessary.

This thesis shows that there are three principal motives for nations to invest resources in nation branding: (i) boost export promotions (ii) the goal of attracting new investments and (iii) the objective of attracting the interest of the tourism sector. Countries need to approach nation branding as a strategic activity in order to reach their target audience through communicating their nation branding priorities. After analyzing both the official publications of Finland and Saudi Arabia, it can be said that Finland emphasizes the elements it is already recognized internationally such as education and know-how, stable and secure society for all, sustainability and innovativeness, while Saudi Arabia has engaged in 'rebranding', while integrating nation branding into a broad society-wide development plan, which introduces a plan for economic diversification and social reforms supporting it. This is also seen by analyzing the national pavilions where Finland has communicated messages about the 'building blocks of Finnish happiness' and Saudi Arabia has aimed to create an image of 'a modern nation' with the emphasis on its cultural heritage and presenting its commitment to tradition as harmoniously linked to, rather than in conflict with, its engagement in modernization, innovation and globalization.

In conclusion, I suggest that an effective nation branding strategy consists of inclusive cooperation between the government and relevant stakeholder groups, the recognition of the nation's position vis-à-vis its counterparts and multi-channel communication, as well as capacity to generate distinctive, easily identifiable and relatable contents. In addition, when globally popular and recognizable products or services emerge that can be linked to and identified by referencing its country-of-origin, that



could be harnessed by the country to a broader advantage, as the examples of Korean Wave or Finland's ranking as 'the happiest country' indicate.

While my research has demonstrated diversity of nation branding strategies and how they become 'embedded' in and articulated through the design of national pavilions at world fairs, there is a need for more research on how international megatrends related to geopolitical changes and global crises shape nation brands on a broader level. Ultimately the success of a nation brand is dependent on the brand awareness. Attracting the interest of the target groups successfully has a huge impact whether a nation brand can be communicated efficiently. It will be fascinating to observe whether, in a world where costly promotional and global sport events are being criticized and where a new trend of 'scaling down' is developing, the participation in World Expos will continue to constitute an important arena for nation branding work or whether new arenas will emerge.

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