

“In 2030 Finland will be the problem-solver of the world”: Reactions to national branding strategies and Finnish education®

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Abstract: Since the birth of Modernity in the 18th century, the concept of Nation State has evolved from a psychological and political phenomenon uniting citizens with each other (against Others) to a global, profit-oriented strategy to “create and communicate a particular version of national identity”. Olins (2000) has proposed to call the latter “nation branding”. A “complicated multi-facet” construct, nation branding has been adopted by many countries in the world. Finland is no exception as it appointed the Finnish Country Brand Delegation in 2008, which produced a document entitled “Mission for Finland – How Finland will solve the world’s most wicked problems” (2010). Typical of nation branding, *Mission for Finland* aims to “better manage and control the image (projected) to the world”. The delegation builds the Finnish brand image upon three key themes: functionality, nature and education. In this paper we examine the presentation of Finnish education through a discursive pragmatic analysis of the reactions of different actors when presented with excerpts from the document. We thus investigate how Finnish education is set in contrast to other nations and their education, and what implications these representations carry concerning global education policies and the export of education. Finally we reflect on ethical constraints of branding Finnish education.

Keywords: Finland, Nation Branding, discursive pragmatics, education export, positioning

Introduction

Education policies and transnational education have developed into “multi-lateral governmental undertakings of heavily funded, professionalized international studies of achievement” during the last three decades (Wiseman & Baker, 2005: 2). This process has accelerated through the dissemination of internationally comparable information provided by organizations such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since the 1960s. Comparative studies undertaken by these organizations have not only displayed differences in education policies, but also initiated an “era of international competition” (Ibid.) which is closely linked to the current growing mobility and migration of students, teachers and researchers. As a result, high-level quality education is regarded as a product, and its high market value has fueled a global “cargo-cult” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004: 201) of education import and export. Commercialized education export is regarded as a lucrative business opportunity: For example Australia’s total income through exported education services rose from about \$5 billion in the academic year 2000-2001 to \$19.1 billion in 2009-2010, thereby becoming the nation’s largest service export (Australian Government, 2010). Similarly, the U.S. Commerce Department announced that the US economy has gained more than \$20 billion through education export during the academic year 2009-2010 (Sánchez, 2011). England leads the world’s top three education exporters with £14.1 billion (~\$21 billion) profit in 2008/09 (British Government, 2011: 9).

Since the publication of the first PISA studies, Finland has been adulated by foreign decision makers, researchers and individuals for her “miraculous results” (Niemi et al., 2011) in terms of education. During the last few years, country officials have decided to invest on

education export to make profit (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). Finland follows thus the trend of commercialized export and its product range currently covers teacher education, teacher trainers, teachers, study visits (or ‘pedagogical tourism’) and the construction and design of schools in foreign countries (Dervin, 2013). This is why we talk about Finland Education® in this article. But (how) can education be turned into a product?

It is important to note at this stage that Finland is actively taking part in Nation Branding. Country and even city branding are now omnipresent phenomenon in our accelerated globalized world. The practice of nation branding is based on the idea that nations compete for resources in an era of increasingly shared markets through globalization (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009: 3). The concept is recent and was invented by business marketing specialists in the 1990s to create “national identity in the service of enhanced competitiveness” (Anholt, 2009).

In Finland, nation branding and education export go hand in hand: the latter concentrates on commercialized strategies which depend on inventing, defining and marketing Finnish education through nation branding campaigns. This interconnection is especially visible in Finland, which identified education as a key theme of Finnish identity in its official Country Brand Report “Mission for Finland” (Mission, 2011). The document explains that there is “an evident demand for Finnish know-how on the international education market” and that, as a consequence, “the proportion of education and knowledge exports will, by 2015, have grown significantly in relation to overall exports” – thus laying an important emphasis on education as a product to export.

In this paper we are interested in the presentation and construction of Finnish education in the document. More precisely we examine how different groups of people perceive the expression and construction of discourses on “Finnish education®” in the document. We aim to

outline the blending of nation branding and education export strategies. Our main interest is in the side effects on interculturality.

1. Nation Branding and Competitive Identity from an Intercultural Perspective

Since the birth of Modernity in the 18th century (Maffesoli, 2012), the concept of Nation State has evolved from a psychological and political phenomenon uniting citizens with each other (against Others) to a global, profit-oriented strategy to “create and communicate a particular version of national identity” (Aronczyk, 2008: 42). As such “the modernist nation might always have been a brand-under-construction” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 125). Olins (2000) has proposed to call the latter “nation branding”. A “complicated multi-facet” construct (Fan, 2010), nation branding has been adopted by many countries in the world for many reasons, amongst which the fact that our globalized worlds are so “fractured” (Moghaddam, 2012) that we need to have the impression that Nation States are still ruling them.

The first book on the topic of nation branding was entitled “Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to Cities, States and Nations” and was published in 1993 by P. Kotler, D.H. Heider and I. Rein. The concept itself, “Nation Branding”, was proposed by independent policy advisor S. Anholt in 1993. Since then, nation branding strategies have been widely applied in many countries. Anholt, known as founder and “leading authority” of nation branding (Dinnie, 2008: xv), has been appointed by more than 20 nations (status 2008) to implement nation branding strategies. He further invented the Anholt Nation Brand Index (<http://www.simonanholt.com/Research/research-introduction.aspx>), an internationally recognized survey which evaluates nations’ brand performance each year. This “ranking” is

currently conducted in over 50 countries and has gained considerable attention (Dinnie, 2008; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009).

Anholt also influenced the Finnish Nation Brand, after first creating a brand strategy for the Baltic Sea region. The project is running between 2011-2013, with an estimated budget of €5 m., financed by the European Union (BDF, 2010:9). Moilanen and Rainisto, place branding specialists who worked with Anholt and were also involved in the Baltic Sea Brand project, have been appointed by the Finland Promotion board to create a development program for nation branding. Their book “How to brand nations, cities and destinations: A planning book for place branding” (2009) offers an “Operational Plan” for nations indulging in place branding, which provides a better insight in the necessary resources. According to the authors, a “reasonable minimum” of place branding investment is €15m over a time period of 5-20 years (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009: 164). This would mean an allocation of €305m to implement the Finnish national brand in 2030. This amount is the same as used by neighboring Norway and Denmark, and does not seem “expensive” given that Australia invested €205m for its brand strategy between 2003 and 2006, and Germany spend €15.2 bn in 2005 (ibid: 162) These numbers, all connected to only one of the current nation branding “guru’s”, illustrate that nation branding is a huge business. However, it seems striking that there have been only few successful implementations of country branding (ibid: 163, Dinnie, 2008). A common problem is that long term branding projects (with a 20-30 year strategy) require continuous funding and combined efforts of constantly changing governments. And since nation branding is such a recent phenomenon, success of the branding techniques is hard (if not impossible) to measure.

Why then is so much money invested in such long term branding projects? It is both the promise of the Oxford Economics Institute of a 75-fold revenue “to every single euro spent” (ibid: 163) and the fear of “losing in the competition”, an idea evoked by branding experts. A

successful national brand promises next to international reputation a head-start in the competitive era of shared markets: an opportunity no government wants to miss.

Remarkably, Anholt has recently revised his concept of “nation branding” (for the reason that “brand” might be associated with the business sector only) into the concept of “competitive identity” (Anholt, 2007; 2008). Nation branding was defined as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie, 2008: 15). This blend can be invented, created and marketed, although it should be based on reality (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009: 174) - nevertheless, operational plans suggests that reality should be altered to fit the brand (ibid: 186). Still, a nation brand is a recognized construction. As branding critic Naomi Klein points out, the role of branding has changed: “rather than serving as a guarantee of value on a product, the brand itself as increasingly become a product, a free standing idea” (Klein, 2010: 25). Klein refers here to brands such as Coca Cola, Adidas, and Microsoft etc.; but her criticism has affected the marketing of place branding as well (Dinnie, 2008: 151). In contrast, with the terminology “competitive identity”, Anholt (ibid.) emphasizes the idea that nations have a unique core identity which differentiates them from any other nation in the world, and that this core identity – once identified – is the only save tool to compete with other nations for investments, tourism, and international recognition.

For us as researchers, the idea of competitive national identities as a product is problematic. It resembles what anthropologists John L. and Jean Comaroff (2009) have called “ethno-preneurialism”: “project(ing) the cultural subject onto the terrains of the market and the law, add(ing) the reduction of culture to (“naturally copyrighted”) intellectual property, mix(ing) it with the displacement of the politics of difference into the domain of jurisprudence (...)” (Comaroff & Comaroff: 59). The Comaroffs talk about “Nationality Inc.” or “country-as-

company” (ibid.: 123), which we consider as appropriate synonyms for nation branding in this paper. Ethno-preneurialism is counterintuitive concept for those who follow a postmodern approach, as identity is a multifaceted and fluid construct (e.g. Bauman, 2004). It equally ignores critical perspectives on the concepts of nation and culture by presuming a nation’s constitutional “essence”. The social categorizations used by “nation branding” specialists also overlook the fact that such categories used to conceptualize groups are “changing” and “historical” (Gillespie et al., 2012: 394).

Amartya Sen (2006: 34-35) reminds us that trying to find national and cultural characteristics that may summarize a nation leads to differentialism and power imbalance. He writes “There are various influences on our reasoning, and we need not lose our ability to consider other ways of reasoning just because we identify with, and have been influenced by membership in, a particular group”. The anthropologist N. P. Pieterse (2004: 33), a specialist of global *mélange*, reminds us that “national identities are *mélange* identities, combinations of people that have been conventionally amalgamated under a political heading (such as Celts, Franks, and others in “France”)”. The attempt to brand a nation thus disregards these *mélanges* and contributes to manipulating politics of difference and to creating reification.

The field of intercultural communication has faced these issues since the beginning of its creation in the 1950s. Relying essentially on the concept of culture (especially national) from its beginning until recently, the field has ignored the fact that images and constructions of such cultures lead to prejudice (someone is deficient while the other is superior) and unequal global politics (Phillips, 2010). In his postmodern critical qualitative approach to the ‘intercultural’, the applied linguist Adrian Holliday (2010: 2) asserts that it is thus important to look at interculturality from the perspective of “ideological imaginations of culture” and at how these “very often lead to the demonization of a particular foreign Other”. As such, in nation branding,

an assertion about the country in question cannot but lead to an (explicit-implicit) comparison to other nations, and in-directly lead to moral judgment about the Other. In the field of interculturality, this has been referred to as both culturalism (Abdallah-Preteille, 1986) or essentialism (Bucholz & Hall, 2005). For Holliday (2010: 4) “essentialism presets people’s individual behavior as entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are”. In nation branding such discourses tend to be disguised under “apparent neutrality of description” (Holliday, *ibid.*) and thus the denial of ideology. According to social psychologist S. Jovchelovitch (2007: 107), in ideological accounts, “systematic asymmetry in the power of the interlocutors is used to dominate, and it is domination that frames and determines the relations between self and other”. As such the ideas of power and (in)justice are central to nation branding and in relation to interculturality.

Comparison – or comparativism – is a common way of defining self and the Other, being implicit or explicit and in the case of nation branding, to sell products and services. For Anne Cheng (2010) comparison only provides us with a snapshot, which ignores “permanent processes of change”. She writes (*ibid.*): “If we need to find difference, it should always be in a situation, because it is only in situation that such things exist. When I speak to a Chinese colleague, I can feel our differences: this does not mean that I represent the West and he the East. Differences do not pull us from behind, towards a cultural identity that determines who we are. Differences are before us, discovered in action, which make us move together. That’s what allows us to continue talking to each other”. It is easy to see how Finland Education® probably uses these strategies to talk to its potential customers (Cai & Kivistö, 2011).

2. A Mission for Finland?

As indicated above, Finland has recently joined the field of ethno-preneurialism, or Global Education Inc. (Ball, 2012). In 2008, Alexander Stubb, the Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs (in office 2008-2011) appointed Finland's Country Brand Delegation "for the purpose of creating a strategy for Finland that addresses the external and internal challenges associated with Finland's image" (Mission: 11). The delegation consists of 23 Finnish citizens who were chosen to represent the Finnish business sector, universities, artists, and "normal" people (e.g. a midwife). With help of branding expert Simon Anholt, the delegation set up working groups in order to create Finland's country brand, to "better manage and control the image (projected) to the world" (Aronczyk, *ibid.*) and to turn this into profit. The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Finnish Tourist Board, the advertising agency SEK & Grey, and Finnfacts are listed as key-sponsors for the project (Mission, 2011: 331).

The result is Finland's official country brand report, entitled "Mission for Finland: How Finland will solve the world's most wicked problems" (365 pages, published 25.11.2011). This document describes Finland's desired national brand in 2030 and provides practical strategies how the country counting 5.4 million inhabitants will become "the problem solver of the world" (Mission: 3). Anholt is said to have helped the country brand delegation identifying "honor", "simplicity" and "madness" as Finland's own, "competitive" identity traces (Mission, 2011: 353).

As such it is easy to see Anholt's concepts reflected in the objectives stated by the Finnish Brand Delegation, which are listed as: 1) Increasing the appreciation of the fruits of Finnish labor, that is, promoting the export of Finnish products and services, 2) Promoting international investments in Finland, 3) Promoting inbound tourism to Finland, 4) Promoting the international status of the Finnish State, 5) Promoting the appeal of Finland among international professionals, 6) Raising the national self-esteem of Finns. (Mission 2011: 23).

Simultaneously to the work of the country brand delegation, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture published a document “Finnish education export strategy: summary of the strategic lines and measures” (MOEC 2010), which clearly puts forward the trend of education export since Finnish education gained international recognition through PISA. The document explains first that there is “an evident demand for Finnish know-how on the international education market” and that, as a consequence, “the proportion of education and knowledge exports will, by 2015, have grown significantly in relation to overall exports” – thus laying an important emphasis on education as a product to export. It is thus not surprising that education is identified as one of the three key investment areas in Finland’s country brand (next to functionality and nature).

We were first interested to see how the “Mission for Finland” document creates the concept of Finnish Education® and how successful the brand actually is. Therefore we analyzed four selected excerpts which play upon the reputation of Finnish education in relation to international rankings (PISA etc.) to sell Finland as a key educational actor in the world. In line with Sjøberg’s comment on PISA (2009) – “The winners also become models and ideals for other countries” – they underline competitive Finnish advantages. If these ideals would become an internationally recognized brand, they might contribute largely to Finnish economy. But, as we have discussed before, there are no winners without losers – constructing a superior image of Finnish Education® necessarily creates an inferior “Other”. Let us consider this example:

“The general belief in education has also been a contributing factor in the high level of education. In Finland, people are expected to have broad knowledge of issues and society. Belief in science is strong in Finland; the majority of Finns believe that climate change is real and caused by humans. (...) Finland is the least superstitious nation in the EU: only

one out of five believe in lucky numbers. For the sake of comparison, it should be stated that on average in the EU two out of five believe in them and in the most superstitious nation, Latvia, three out of five believe in a lucky number.”

We chose this excerpt for this study as it represents a clear intercultural positioning between Finns and the Other, explicitly Latvia. The excerpt contains several extreme case formulations (“people are”, “the majority of”, “the least superstitious”, etc.) which often serve the purpose of legitimizing claims, such as what is right or wrong, better or worse (Pomerantz, 1986). Noteworthy is the reliance of the excerpt on an unknown/unnamed survey – and thus voice – to compare Finland with other countries (“only one out of five believe in lucky numbers”) (Garrigou, 2006).

Considering that the aim of this statement is to create what we call Finnish Education®, a particular, distinguishable image which is recognized in Finland as well as abroad (Mission 2011: 13), we decided not to rely only on our own analysis of the document but to test it on several educational actors. We are thus interested to see how this brand image is perceived by its own target group, i.e. Finnish education decision makers and foreigners who have a stake in Finnish education. For its explicit “international” comparison, this excerpt offered a good opportunity to examine how people concerned with education react to such intercultural phenomena in relation to the nation branding of education.

3. Data Description and Methods

We created an open questionnaire in English which was circulated online (snowball-system) to Finnish headmasters and school teachers, education researchers and foreign degree students in order to collect discourses on Finnish education as part of country branding.

The questionnaire contained four quotes taken from the “Mission for Finland”-document, which provided statements on Finnish education. We chose these quotes in relation to our discussion of interculturality and country branding above, especially as they elevated Finnish education above the “Other”. We wanted to find out how our participants, both in- and outsiders to the Finnish education system, react to the imagined discourses conveyed by the excerpts. The following questions were asked: If you had written yourself this document, would you have written the four items the way they are? Would you have changed anything? Can you tell us what? We invited answers in Finnish, English and Swedish (Finnish and Swedish being the two official languages in Finland).

Due to limited space, we share here explore in depth the reactions to one excerpt which was discussed above. We received 23 responses, out of which 10 were identified as “Finnish” responses, either through the use of Finnish or Swedish language or through the use of personal pronouns (“we”, “our”). All of these 10 were involved in teaching as headmasters or researchers. Our analysis focuses on how the participants present their approval or disapproval of the excerpts contents, what argumentation strategies they follow, if and how the references to the “Other” in the excerpts are commented upon in their responses. The choice of questionnaires as a data collection strategy is questionable. As such we have no possibility to identify the ‘real’ identity of the respondents. For instance, deciding whether a participant is Finnish or not was limited to our own parameters. On the other hand our participants might have been cautious about including strong judgments in their responses because they could not anticipate our own position towards the quotes. Nevertheless we chose the uncertainties of an open questionnaire over other research

methods. By limiting our own impact to the choice of excerpts and the analysis itself, we enabled a wide, diverse range of reactions.

In the answers we identified a continuum of reactions from strong approval of the Mission's statements to disapproval. The used method is that of discursive pragmatics as proposed by Zienkowski, Östman and Verschueren (2011). This method derived from linguistics allows researchers to analyse data by looking for hidden and unexpressed voices, referential strategies (what kind of "authorities" are mentioned, how people are named and referred to, and what group memberships are claimed), and argumentation strategies (what kind of arguments are given, how are perspectives presented). We also paid attention to predicational strategies (what kind of qualities are assigned to persons, animals, objects etc., and how do they manifest in the discourse) and intensifying and mitigation strategies. All these elements can be identified by means of many and varied linguistic elements such as deictics (markers of person, time and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs and verbs), utterance modalities (adverbs, shifters, etc.) but also nouns as they may indicate the attitude of a speaker towards another person, an entity, a phenomenon, etc. All in all, by analyzing what our participants have to say about the excerpts, we examine how they "stage themselves or make themselves manifest in utterances, or on the other hand may decide to distance themselves from it, leaving no explicit signs of their presence or manifesting their attitude in utterances" (Johansson & Suomela-Salmi, 2011: 94). As the chosen excerpts are highly ideological, this method allows us to verify how the respondents react to them.

4. Perceptions of Finnish Education®: Belief in Lucky Numbers or Not?

Our first approach to the responses is quantitative. Out of the 23 study participants, 17 responses are usable in this analysis. The other five have been dismissed because the participants did not answer at all or only with a “N/A” or “ok” and thus could not be analyzed in relation to e.g. the argumentation strategies used. Out of the 17 responses we identified 9 as “Finnish” responses, either through the use of Finnish or Swedish language or through the use of personal pronouns (“we”, “our”). All of these nine participants were involved in teaching as headmasters or researchers. The other eight respondents were international students - although this classification has its limitations as it is based only on the participants’ self-declaration (in the field profession/study field) and the use of language forms.

While reviewing the responses with a discursive pragmatic approach, we identified three categories: those who agree, those who partially agree/partially disagree, and those who fully disagree with the presented statements. Although this categorization might seem superficial, it did help us to recognize a continuum of reactions which is applicable to both the Finnish and the international responses.

4.1. Ambivalent Responses from “Finns”?

This section looks at the data from individuals which we classified as “Finns”. Based on our analysis, only one respondent fully disagreed with the content of the excerpt, three agreed partially (“I agree, but...”) and five participants agreed with the Mission Statement. The shortest answer is formulated as a slogan: (1) “*The strength of being a small nation!*”. This oxymoron (*strength* opposed to *small* for the doxa) seems to reinforce the idea that “belief in science” and “low superstition” are particularly Finnish and related to the size of the country (in terms of population: 5.4 million inhabitants). Displaying these as strengths elevates Finland in comparison

to other countries, which gains emphasis through the oxymoron. The evoked stereotypes about Finland and Latvia, in terms of superstition, are not openly questioned by the respondents and seem to be taken for granted. Of course, as we are working only on questionnaires, we need to bear in mind that the respondents could have potentially written more about this, should they have had more time or motivation.

In one response, the author also does not question the Mission's statement, but supports it by providing an explanation:

(2) "belief in science - or belief in practical experiences through out the history, lucky numbers did not help you to survive over Finnish winters in the past, you had to get food and shelter and know how that is done."

The constructed reasoning with Finnish history and geographical conditions implies that "superstition" or "religiosity" is counterproductive for survival in this context, as it is opposed to "practical experiences". Simultaneously we recognize the idea that Finnish conditions were harder than in any other country, because the fight for survival made people believe in science while it did not necessarily in other countries (as in this case, Latvia). This connects to a national narrative of overcoming hardship and difficulties, which suggests that Finns are stronger than those other countries which still believe in lucky numbers. The argumentation thus seems to create a distinction between Finland and other 'weaker' nations and thus establish an implicit hierarchy.

A very similar argumentative strategy is used in another response:

(3) ”Suomalainen yhteiskunta on sotien jälkeen noussut nimenomaan koulutuksen avulla siihen asemaan, missä se on nyt. Koska meillä ei ole sanottavasti luonnonrikkauksia, ainoastaan ”puita ja päitä” niin tämä kouluun panostaminen ja koulusivistyksen arvostaminen on luontevaa juuri meille.”¹

Just as in the response above, the author provides a “naturalist” explanation supporting the original statements. In a sense what is happening here could be summarized with the idea of “biologization” that Ulf Hannerz (1999) has put forward in his analysis of the use of the concept of culture in our societies. In order to be more convincing, the respondent also constructs a narrative of Finnish history, about the Winter War which opposed Finland and Russia (1939-1940) and adds the arguments about geographical conditions (no natural resources) as an unparalleled hardship which all made it natural (“*luonnettava*”) for Finns to believe in science.

In contrast to these two responses, the following respondent rationalizes the perceived “Finnish belief in science” with the role of religion:

(4) “I believe this is linked to the religion in our society but can’t be totally sure. Religion is based on unproven beliefs, and when religion plays major role in society it increases the misconceptions related to science, and people tend to base the life decision on non-logical and unscientific principles.

The church law allows the church to run its operations without the pressure to perform. Church don’t need to attract more believers, don’t need to entertain, or don’t need to perform miracles. All the church needs to do is fulfill the lawful obligations to receive the

¹ “After the wars, (the) Finnish Society has risen to the position it is in especially with the help of education. Because we do not have a significant amount of natural resources, only “trees and heads”, investing in and valuing school is natural just for us” (our translation)

tax money. It naturally affects to the performance. Nowadays in a Christian country (yes, Christianity is mentioned in our constitution, and yes, we do have "church law", kirkkolaki) we have very secular society due to effects of taxation. For comparison secular country like USA (the constitution of USA is non religious) the church is very strong because it needs to perform well and be efficient to survive.”

The participant argues that the low rate of superstition is connected to a low level of religiosity in Finland, due to the position of the Lutheran Church (the State Church) which has no need to perform well because of its central status in the Finnish constitution. Interestingly the author seems to expect that his/her idea of Finland as a Christian nation might be questioned, and defends him-/herself by entering into dialogue with an imagined interlocutor and answering imaginary questions: “yes, Christianity is mentioned in our constitution, and yes, we do have “church law”, kirkkolaki”. In this comment, the author does not only communicate his/her own position towards religion (as superstition, “based on unproven beliefs”) but also limits Finnishness to Christianity, without taking into account other religious denominations present in Finland, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and New Age movements. Similar to the original “Mission for Finland”-statement, the author provides a comparison, but to the USA. This line of argumentation seems to strengthen the stereotypes of the excerpt through the use of complementary stereotypes.

The next respondent also comments on the status of religion in Finland but, in this case, the argument is however contrary to the analysis above:

(5) “I agree with this. As a teacher in Religious Education I want to remind the reader that this does NOT mean that religion is not an active part of people’s lives. On the contrary,

Finland has been until recently a clearly religiously interested country with a church membership of almost 80%.”

This participant seems to distinguish between superstition and religiosity, but as in the previous comment, “religiosity” applies only to Christianity, excluding the growing religious landscape in Finland (Islam). The contrast between these two responses underlines that there is no consensus about the given quote, even among those who support it. The promoted national narrative varies in each response and appears to be, after all, an individual opinion.

While these first five responses accepted the Mission-statement uncritically, the following four answers added a critical dimension. As an example, one respondent questions the meaning of the concept “belief in science”:

(5) “I agree, though there are big differences between people in this thing too. Generally Finns know about things, because we all adults watch and listen to news, we can read and use internet etc. The new skill to read (media, pictures, social media) is in the future a big question. It means we have to evaluate the information - is it true, is it valid.... and what is really important...

But as I started, education is not about knowing things. It’s about using the information, it’s about talking about it.... it is not so important how quickly we can count alone. More important is to have skills to make a budget together....”

The author challenges the concept of “high level of education” and questions the advantage of literacy in Finland. Although he/she does not comment on the comparison between Finland, other European countries and Latvia, the author problematizes a perceived Finnish unity by stating that

“there are big differences between people” (meaning in the country). This is however followed by a generalization (“generally Finns know about things,”), which is in line with the Mission statement. The argument that the respondent seems to be constructing here is that the role of education should be practical and critical?) rather than knowledge-based. It is not really clear though if this is what Finnish education provides Finns with.

A clearer criticism, in reaction to the excerpt, is found in a participant’s reaction in Swedish:

(6) ”Eftersom finländarna har en bred allmänbildning, är det naturligt att kunskap och fakta baserat på vetenskap och forskning har en viktig roll. Det finns en viss risk i detta, nämligen att man inte ifrågasätter tillräckligt mycket. En stor skillnad kan man märka mellan länderna Finland och Sverige. Som exempel kan nämnas att i svenska medier ifrågasätts allt från EU till enskilda politikere, tjänstemäns, chefers agerande etc. medan en likadan kritisk granskning inte förekommer i Finland förutom ibland när ”mediadrevet” går.”²

This participant seems to be agreeing with the fact that Finns are highly educated and thus the importance of research and competence in Finland. Yet unlike the previous respondents she/he underlines a potential problem with Finnish society, especially through a comparison with a neighboring country, Sweden: Finns are less critical than Swedes in relation to what they read e.g. in the media. He even goes as far as framing this problem through the word “risk”. In a sense what is happening here is a kind of double-bind attitude towards the excerpt: on the one hand,

² “As the Finns have a broad general knowledge, it is natural that knowledge and facts based on science and research play an important role. There is some risk in this, namely, that they are not critical enough. This is one big difference that you will notice between Finland and Sweden. For example, everything from the EU, politicians, civil servants, to managers’ behavior’, are questioned by the Swedish media, while a similar critical analysis does not occur in Finland except sometimes when there is a ‘media madness’ going on”. (our translation)

Finns are 'good' and on the other they lack an essential skill – the same skill as the one described by the previous participant.

Among the responses in the category “partially agree/disagree”, we could identify only one response which challenges the Othering-processes of the Mission-statement:

(7) “I don't like the comparison between the least and the most superstitious nation in the EU. Why on earth to write about a lucky number? I would have written something else instead.

On the other hand, I agree with the beginning of the text. In my opinion, in Finland regular people are expected to follow what takes place in the world today (and that is why newspapers and TV news have always been so popular in this country).”

This participant straightforwardly rejects the comparison between Finland and Latvia and doubts the coherence of arguing with lucky numbers by asking a direct question to the reader (“Why on earth to write about a lucky number?”). But this critical interculturality is only partially applied. The author supports the image evoked in the Mission statement with another generalization expressed through an extreme case formulation (“in Finland regular people are expected”). While the comparison in relation to superstition is rejected, a comparison in terms of being an information society is strengthened by the reference to the participant's own nation (“in Finland, in this country”). While the images about the “Other” are thus rejected, the imagined “Finnish” identity seems to remain unchallenged here.

One response which actually disagreed with both the representation of “the Other and the presentation of the “Finns” was identified. The interesting point about this comment is that it appears coherent and consistent:

(8) “Interesting data. Finland has contributed in Education but we still do something wrong because social class and poverty is often inherited although the educational system should equalize people and opportunities. I guess also the question is that whose values are served in education, who benefit from it and who decides what type of knowledge is important. I believe in lucky numbers.”

By identifying him-/herself as a Finnish person who believes in lucky numbers, the author rejects the Mission’s argumentative strategy (opposing belief in science to lucky numbers) and at the same time the international comparison. Consequently we read irony in the initial statement “interesting data”, which actually lays doubts over the presented “lucky number”-statistics. The author also criticizes the idealization of Finnish education, the idea of Finland as an equality/equity-driven country and questions at the same time the motives behind it.

To summarize the first part of our analysis of how the “Finns” reacted to the excerpt, we note that the variety of reactions examined above shows that the document, Mission for Finland, does not “represent” an imagined, uniform “Finnish” opinion as the nine “Finnish” participants do not all seem to share the same perceptions of Finnish Education®, as it is constructed in the excerpt. It also indicates that the applied nation branding strategies does not seem to have any clear “Finnish” consensus as a basis.

4.2. International Responses: More Criticality?

We now turn to the answers to the questionnaire that we identified as ‘international responses’. Similar to the Finnish responses, the same statement evoked a variety of reactions among our international participants. Out of the eight participants,

- two directly confronted the statement: (9) “I don’t get what lucky numbers have to do with the educational system”, (10) “Superstition and lucky numbers are a silly example, calling Latvia most superstitious nation is bigoted”,
- Four expressed doubts: (11) “to be superstitious is not due to ignorance”, (12) “It is hard to link superstition with education in 21century Europe”, (13) “I do not see the direct relation between superstition and broad knowledge”, (14) “Believe in science: true. Less superstitious: not really”
- Two seem to agree fully with the Mission-quote. These two participants do not challenge the stereotype of Finns who believe in science but not in lucky numbers compared to Latvians who believe in lucky numbers but not in science. But while one participant dismisses the Latvians who believe in lucky numbers ((15) “Latvians are dreamers”), the other one criticizes the Finns who do not ((16) “Finns lack imagination and spirit”). As we can see in both cases, the comparison evoked evaluation and a strong moralistic judgment about the perceived “Other”. However, both responses are so short that they do not allow insights into the reflection processes behind them.
- Also the four responses which agree partially do not challenge the idea that “Finns believe in science”. Neither do they question the statistics about lucky numbers. However they express some doubt about the concept of superstition. For instance, one participant claims that:

(17) “Finland is a rather practical nation and people really think in functional terms. However I do not see the direct relation between superstition and broad knowledge.

Believe in traditional practices may be viewed as superstition, but it does not contract with high level of education.”

In this response, the author first positions him/herself in line with the quote; although “belief in science” has here turned into “practicality” and “thinking in functional terms”, modifying the semantics of the core of the excerpt. Then she/he seems to be casting some doubts on the connection between superstition and broad knowledge. While it seems that the criticism is formulated carefully (use of a modal verb in “it may be viewed as”), the author’s position is underlined implicitly by his/her replacement of the originally used terms “superstition” and “lucky numbers” into “traditional practices”. Many anthropologists such as Eriksen (2001) have demonstrated that the idea of tradition is often attributed to the Other, when one compares across ‘cultures’ and that more rational means of self-explanation and understanding are often associated to self. While the author criticizes the antagonism between “belief in science” and “belief in lucky numbers”, he/she does not react explicitly to the contrast between Finland and Latvia.

A very similar argumentative structure can be seen in another response:

(18) “High level of education certainly accounts in planned and systematic life style. It is really important to be conscious about society and environment. To be rational is definitely the consequence of education but to be superstitious is not always due to ignorance. It is more dependent on the culture, norms and values of the society where one lives. Doesn’t matter how much educated a human is, s/he can’t be as same as a "robot" without feelings.”

In a very similar vein to the previous respondent, this participant first reassures the statements made about Finns in the document, and then criticizes the “science-superstition”-antagonism. He/she offers two explanations: the first is based on the argument that superstition is based on “culture, norms and values of the society where one lives”. Yet this argument does not reveal any explicit value judgment as it seems to serve the purpose of an additional explanation as to why Latvians are more superstitious than Finns. This “culturalist” excuse bears the danger of strengthening stereotypes rather than deconstructing them (Abdallah-Preteuille, 1986). The second argument defended by the respondent however draws a comparison between someone who does not believe in superstition with “a “robot” without feelings”. This image of a cold, heartless machine criticizes the stereotype about “Finns who believe in science” by connecting superstition with emotion and humanity. Nevertheless, as in the answers before, the author does not criticize the given national stereotypes as such.

The following response provides a similar argument, but adds a critical dimension to the image of Finns:

(19) “The Finns believe in science and consider the results of science as their reference.

Anything that does not have a scientific base is not widely accepted by the Finns.

Maybe Finns are expected to have a broad knowledge on issues and society however their perspective is arguably too narrow because Finns are taught to trust the system. For example Finns trust and read the media a lot. Here there is only one major newspaper - one perspective of information.

It is hard to link superstition with education in 21st century Europe.”

In comparison to the other responses which used general vocabulary (“in Finland”, “to be”, “human”), this author addresses “the Finns” five times, which indicates the author’s idea of unity among “the Finns”. As in the earlier responses, “belief in science” is repeated as a reference to the Mission Statement. And similarly the aspect of superstition is doubted, but without reference to the comparison between Finland, Latvia and other European countries. The author further contrasts the Mission’s good connotation of “belief in science” and “broad knowledge” with the idea that the Finns’ perspective is too narrow, which is explained by some kind of typically Finnish “trust” (a typical hetero- and auto-stereotype, see Dervin and Layne, 2013) and the Finnish media landscape. One national stereotype is thus deconstructed by evoking another. This is what Dervin has named a Janusian approach to the intercultural, in reference to Janus, the double-faced ancient God.

This excerpt shares the same characteristics:

(20) “Believe in science: true

Less superstitious: not really, Finns are hooked to gambling (= luck) Lotto, slot machines”

Whereas the author agrees with the first part of the Mission Statement, he/she rejects the second by offering a contrasting generalization (stated as a matter of fact, with an extreme case formulation here too: “Finns are...”). The superstition level of European countries is once again not commented upon.

The final two responses that we have received are categorized as “disagrees” in what follows. As such these participants questioned the Mission’s statement throughout their answers to the questionnaire:

(21) “I don’t get what lucky numbers have to do with the educational system, but ... well! I’m gonna comment on the first part: As already said before I think the belief in education is high as can be seen in long study times and also people often get more than one master-degree. However, this education works on other levels as well. Whereas in other countries students concentrate on studying (at universities) only, in Finland students work and study at the same time. I don’t have the feeling that this is just because of money issues, but more that this is a way to use the university/research knowledge in "real life" all the time. And yes I do think that Finns are rather scientific orientated and do not deal with emotions too much. (Although they do; it’s not as bad as the prejudice about Finns is)”

The beginning of this quote is interesting as the author seems to be interacting directly with us readers us, the researchers. He/she refuses to comment further on the part of the Mission excerpt which deals with superstition, but makes a compromise (again with us, the researchers?) to comment on the first part. It seems that the author is hesitant to criticize the statement further; possibly because we did not express our own position towards the statements when inviting for comments. Once more, the author partially agrees with the other statements. He/she adds that “belief in education” leads to long study times in Finland in comparison to other countries, where “students concentrate on studying (at universities) only”. This is again a generalization to argue for (and against) another one, but her/his perspective is more personal than objective (see the use of modalities in “I think”, (2x) “I don’t have the feeling”). In the last sentence, the author juggles with Finnish national stereotypes. The initial “And yes, I do think...” gives the impression that the sentence is answering the Mission’s statement, but actually it seems to be based on another discourse. Indeed in the brackets the author mentions “the stereotype”, Finns being scientific rather than emotional, which he/she regards as commonly known and accepted. After first

agreeing to this stereotype, the author weakens it by the statement “they do, it is not as bad...”. While on the one hand “not as bad” weakens the stereotype and the prejudice is labeled – recognized – as such, it is not directly contested. All in all the complex game of agreeing-disagreeing, arguing and counter-arguing in (21) seems to summarize quite well the discursive instability that the participants face when commenting on the excerpt.

But a direct confrontation is visible in one single quote:

(22) “Majority of Finns I know do not care less about climate change. Sweden is much more ahead in this, and the success of Finlandization themes in politics and media prove there are enough supporters for Nuclear Energy and Green Party is seen as nothing more than defenders of organic chickens.

Superstition and lucky numbers are a silly example, calling Latvia most superstitious nation is bigoted...also spirituality and superstition should not be confused. It is the sense of spirit that has pushed evolution forward and this shouldn't be confused with superstition either.

That being said, belief and support of universal education is excellent and this should be what Finland should promote and be ambassadors of.”

Similar to (21), this excerpt does not start with an agreement, but with problematizing. The Mission's statement is contested by a reference to the author's own expertise (“Majority of Finns I know”), which questions the causality between belief in science and belief in climate change. The author equally dismisses the “lucky numbers”-statistics and takes a strong stance against the statement about Latvia. However, while s/he labels the comparison between Finland and Latvia as “bigot”, he/she contrasts Finland to Sweden (see above for the Finns' perceptions for a similar

comparison), which is here regarded as “much more advanced”. The idea of comparing nations’ performance is thus present even in the most “critical” piece of data. The response finishes with a very generally formulated suggestion, according to which Finland should promote “universal education”. The use of “universal education” rather than “Finnish education” is, in relation to the Mission’s goals, particularly noteworthy.

Discussion and Conclusions

Considering the answers from the ‘Finns’ and international respondents we note that the national stereotypes evoked in the Missions’ statement are either accepted, not found worthy of discussion or, if rejected, replaced by variations of similar stereotypes. This indicates that thinking of nations and cultures as confined spaces is still more common than we would have wished for, and it does partially promise success to nation branding strategies. However, we could identify a whole continuum of reactions among Finnish as well as international responses, and even those who fully agreed were divided in their opinion (“The strength of being a small nation” versus “Finns lack imagination and spirit”). This questions the main goal of nation branding strategies for education, which were identified earlier as creating and communicating a particular version of national identity (Aronczyk, 2008: 42). Instead, it is especially the “particular” aspects of “Finnish education” which evoked most discussion and criticism by its target audience.

One element that came as a surprise in the questionnaires is the fact that very few participants seem to be critical of the ideological use of ‘national’ and ‘cultural’ characteristics as a way of creating specific ‘salable’ identities and at the same time hierarchizing self and other (Holliday, 2010). As asserting in the first section of this article, nation branding cannot resist othering and imagining as the nation becomes a marketable product. Yet how acceptable is it

when the product is education? When one speaks of Finnish education, who are actually we referring to/'imagining'? What social classes? What sort of institutions (Public and/or private schools; NB: there are around 80 private schools in Finland)? Finns and/or immigrants? Boys and/or girls? Can one thus sell a generic product which pretends to cover a whole nation? By imagining a perfect system of education to export, is this not contributing to ignoring certain actors (e.g. poor, immigrant, boys) who need support?

To conclude let us discuss one of the limitations of this study and open up the floor for future research. The main limitation was related to the use of questionnaires, which provided us with somewhat static discourses from our participants and the inability to question and test the strength of their representations. The next stage will thus consist in opting for more dynamic ways of collecting data. Critical and dialogical-oriented focus groups should allow us to observe how research participants would “collaborate, jointly produce new knowledge and invent ways of thinking in communication” (Markova et al., 2009: 206) in relation to the topics of nation branding, education export and Finnish Education®.

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