

From PISA to national branding: exploring Finnish education®

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ABSTRACT

Since the recent global paradigm shift in the governance of higher education toward business and marketing, internationally competitive education is increasingly considered as an asset for governments. Consequently, governments started to invest in education branding and marketing their educational systems. In Finland, national interest in education branding rose especially since the country's success in the programme for international student assessment studies created a positive reputation of its basic education. In this article, the authors investigate how this reputation is transformed into a general Finnish education brand, based upon Finland's official Country Brand Report (2010). The governmental discourse on Finnish education reveals a fusion of education and national branding, which is why the authors suggest to discuss the Finnish education brand as Finnish education®. The article provides an analysis of the elements constituting the brand and opens up a critical discussion on the ethics of branding education through cultural and national characteristics.

KEYWORDS

Education policy and politics; cultural discourses on education; Finnish education; education branding; nation branding; ethics and marketization of education

1. Introduction

Finnish education has gained international attention through exceptional programme for international student assessment (PISA) results in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009, marked by high-level results with very little variation within the student body (MOE, 2009, p. 5, Reini-kainen, 2012). Ever since, Finland has been admired by foreign decision-makers, researchers and individuals for its 'miraculous results' (Dervin, 2013; Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2012). In 2007, for instance, the BBC referred to Finland as a 'superpower of education' (BBC, 2007). Finnish basic education has received much praise in a variety of rankings and publications (e.g. Finland as 'the best country for education' according to Newsweek 2012, 'top performer of education' in OECD 'Better Life Index' (2014), a 'model of excellence' (Sahlberg, 2011a, p. 1)). These rankings have not only made Finnish education popular abroad, but also changed Finland's internal perceptions toward its educational system.

The Finnish government grasped the opportunity to capitalize upon the positive image and reputation of its educational system. In 2009, the Ministry of education and Culture set up a working group in order to investigate Finland's potentials of becoming 'one of the

world's leading education-based economies' (MOEC, 2010, p. 5). Consequently, Finland invested in strengthening the brand of its education. Its strategic importance can be derived from the fact that in 2010 education became a key element of the Finnish nation brand, documented in the official Country Brand Report 'Mission for Finland: How Finland is going to solve the world's most wicked problems' (CBR, 2010).

The national branding campaign resembles what anthropologists John L. Comaroff 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. (p. 59)

The Comaroffs talk about 'Nationality Inc.' or 'country-as-company' (p. 123), which we consider as appropriate synonyms for Finland's nation branding efforts, especially in relation to its education.

The attempts of the Country Brand Delegation to capitalize on a merger between nation branding and education branding led us to the concept of 'Finnish Education[®]' – Finnish education as a brand. The aim of this article is to investigate how this document constructs the brand of Finnish education and what it actually stands for. We are interested in the ways Finnish education branding is established and promoted. Our approach is therefore situated both in the field of marketing and educational research. This article starts by embedding education branding both in educational and economic research traditions. We then proceed with a contextualization of the Finnish case and an in-depth analysis of the construction of Finnish Education[®] in Finland's Country Brand Report. The analysis is followed by a critical discussion and final remarks on implications of the education brand suggestions for future policies and research.

2. The research context of education business and marketing

Before turning to the particular Finnish education branding campaign that we are investigating in this article, one might ask why educational research is concerned with marketing at all. This section reviews the connections between marketing and education in the research literature in order to pave the ground for our analysis.

Education and economics are, for the majority of researchers, distinct academic disciplines which only occasionally collaborate. From the economic perspective, however, conceptualizing education as a market (in its very basic definition of exchanging goods) has a longstanding tradition. About a century ago, economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen noted that 'various universities are competitors for the traffic of merchantable instruction in much the same fashion as rival establishments in the retail trade compete for customs' (Veblen, 1918, in Bok, 2009, p. 1). The actual commodity in the education sector has been conceptualized differently within the marketing literature and especially the identification and roles of customer (students? parents? institutions? governments? employers? societies?) and exchanged products (degrees? educational services? knowledge? students? human capital? research and teaching staff? funding?). These have caused lively debates (cf. Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, 2005; Naidoo, 2003; Umashankar, 2001). The discourses on education as a business are not homogenous because the research contexts are different. Compare, for example, the reality of a tuition fee-based

university in the USA which gains most revenue through college sports with that of a government-funded primary school in Europe. The differences of market representations (Diaz Ruiz, 2013) make it a complex research field, but the entanglement of education and business seems to be taken for granted in the reviewed literature (Ball, 2012; Coate, Barnett, & Williams, 2001; Gibbs, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Tjedvoll, 1998).

In contrast, for many educators the connotation of education as a business is still counter-intuitive (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009, p. 30). Yet, international comparison and accreditation systems introduced a paradigm shift (Bok, 2009; Jongbloed, 2003; Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2007; Murray & Klinger, 2014). Since the 1960s, organizations such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have compiled and published 'comparable' information on education performance. Their data have not only displayed differences in education policies and triggered changes on national policy level (Martens, Knodel, & Windzio, 2014), but also initiated an 'era of international competition' (Wiseman & Baker 2005, p. 2). This international competition is closely linked to the current growing mobility and migration of students, teachers and researchers, but also of skills and knowledge. Consequently, educational research has made a link between competition for assets (respectively students, staff, educational services and funding) and a perceived commodification of education (Bok, 2009; Martens et al., 2014). The perspective is mostly critical and raising questions about whether competition increases or decreases the (often ambiguous) ideal of 'quality' in education (Ahier, Beck, & Moore, 2003; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Carrington, Meek, & Wood, 2007; Naidoo, 2006; van der Wende, 2003, 2007). The discussions predominantly focus on the higher education context (Baker & Wiseman, 2005; Clark, 1998; Jongbloed et al., 2007; Shattock 2009), but some scholars also focus on basic and even pre-school education (cf. Knodel, Windzio, & Martens, 2014; Rinne, Kallo, & Hokka, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004).

The summary above is arguably a rough sketch of a vast field of research, but it introduces the entanglements of education and economics in which Finnish education policies are also increasingly embedded. The Finnish education landscape has come to the spotlight in the early 2000s through 'miraculous' (Niemi et al., 2012) results in the PISA studies. Although these tests were conducted with school children up to the age of 15 years, the world-class ranking has sparked researchers' interests in the Finnish school system in general, from pre-school to adult education. At the same time, curiosity about the Finnish rankings resulted in a flow of 'educational and pedagogical tourists' from abroad, researchers, teachers, headmasters, policy-makers and students alike. This international attention fueled ideas of education being a lucrative asset for Finland, and the government started to promote education export and marketing campaigns (Schatz, 2015). As a result, education has indeed become a potentially 'big business' (Ball, 2012, p. 116) for Finland.

However, research on these developments is scarce. While the PISA results themselves have been widely discussed (Niemi et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2011a, 2011b; Simola, 2005), less attention has been paid to how the Finnish education system is being turned into a national asset. It is important to note, however, that the reactions to this change within the university sector have been investigated (e.g. Ahola & Hoffman, 2012; Kantola & Ketunen, 2012; Rinne et al., 2004), and discussions are currently getting new incentives due to the less outstanding Finnish performances in the 2012 PISA survey. In this article, we are

more interested in what happened before, when education suddenly became an important advantage for Finnish decision-makers. As mentioned earlier, the Finnish government acted upon the positive limelight by making education part of Finland's national brand (CBR, 2010). In the following sections, we outline how this educational brand was constructed.

3. From PISA to nation brand

As has been observed in the field of higher education research, governments increasingly invest in marketing their educational systems and educational institutions (Carrington et al., 2007; Naidoo, 2006; van der Wende, 2003, 2007). In the case of Finland, education branding has a rare status as it is not primarily based on the success of its universities. The PISA studies in the early 2000s created a positive image not only about Finnish basic education, but also about the Finnish education system in general, and the university-based Finnish teacher education in particular.

The Finnish government seized the opportunity to invest in this good reputation in order to join the international education export sector (Schatz, 2015). But while the demand for Finnish higher education rose worldwide (Niemi et al., 2012, p. 19), there was hardly a clear educational product that could feed this demand. As the marketing literature review revealed, defining an educational product is problematic. In Finland, both primary and secondary education offered a wide range of opportunities. The current Finnish legislation prohibits higher education institutions to charge tuition fees both from domestic and international students. The main income is generated through tax distributed by governmental funding bodies such as the Academy of Finland or the Finnish Ministry of Employment, and the Economy Tekes funding agency for technology and innovation, EU funding and private foundations money. Universities, through for example, their Centers for Continuing Education, may charge for educational services, such as teacher visits or specially designed programs. Although these services are based on individual agreements between educational institutions and customers, the government took the lead in promoting Finnish education export and turned it into a national ambition by making education part of Finland's nation brand. A nation brand aims to define and promote what distinguishes one nation from another (Anholt, 2006; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009), and nation branding has become a popular practice worldwide (Anholt, 2008, p. 3; Dinnie, 2008, p. 31).

The Finnish nation brand building initiative started in September 2008, together with a larger project to brand the Baltic Sea Region (BDF Branding Report, 2010). Former Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Stubb (in office 2008–2011, Prime Minister in 2014–2015) appointed a Country Brand Delegation with the aim to define Finland's particular brand. Next to 'functionality' and 'nature', the brand delegation defined 'education' as a 'key element' of Finnish identity and as the main achievement of Finland's society (CBR, 2010). Finnish education is claimed to be 'without doubt among the best in the world' (CBR, 2010, p. 190) and Finland should become 'a major power in learning' (p. 190), both in order to contribute to the development of humanity and to enhance the nation's financial prosperity.

This top-down governmental initiative can be regarded as a performative effort to create a brand both in order to promote a certain national identity and to make education export a profitable business. The outcome is an attempt to construct an official brand of

Finnish Education. In the following section, we outline the elements that constitute this brand and discuss how it is promoted.

4. Finnish education®: what does it stand for? An analysis of representations in the official country brand

4.1. Data

The report we are examining is publicly available online in Finnish, Swedish and English (www.maakuva.fi and www.team.finland.fi). We chose to use the English version in order to avoid possible misunderstandings in the translation. The delegation which crafted the report consisted of 23 Finnish citizens who were chosen to represent the Finnish business sector, universities, artists, and 'normal' people (e.g. a midwife) and worked under supervision of Simon Anholt, an internationally acknowledged branding expert. The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Finnish Tourist Board, the advertising agency SEK & Grey and Finnfacts (an independent media service unit that mediates between international media and Finnish industry and business) are listed as key-sponsors for the project (CBR, 2010, p. 331). The work of the delegation resulted in Finland's official Country Brand Report, entitled 'Mission for Finland: How Finland will solve the world's most wicked problems' (365 pages, published 25 November 2010). Already the wording of the title indicates that this report seeks to catch attention. The report strategically constructs a brand identity for Finland, both for internal purposes (e.g. 'raising the national self-esteem of Finns', CBR, 2010, p. 23) and external investments ('promoting the export of Finnish products and services', 'promoting international investments in Finland', 'promoting inbound tourism to Finland', 'promoting the international status of the Finnish State' and 'promoting the appeal of Finland among international professionals' p. 23). The Country Brand Delegation identified *functionality*, *nature* and *education* as the three key elements of Finnish identity. The report is structured accordingly into three major parts: (1) Finland – It works; (2) Drink Finland and (3) Finland gives you a lesson. Each of these parts is directed at several audiences, a continuous text introduces a potential non-Finnish reader to the achievements of Finnish society in the respective content area, while interrupting textboxes with mission statements (such as 'Mission for employers' (p. 92), 'Mission for schoolyard designers' (p. 130) and 'Mission for Parents of school children' (p. 204)) urge Finnish individuals and institutions to further promote the element. For this article, we were looking at the part presenting education (Finland gives you a lesson, pp. 188–253), including both the text and the mission statements.

4.2. Methodology

Given the length of the document, we decided to conduct a thematic content analysis in order to find out what Finnish education actually is. As a first step, we highlighted all sentences in the text which directly refer to education. After several cross-readings, we decided that the most suitable way to summarize the elements of the brand would be to look at the associations which brand creators tend to invent and communicate. For this we applied Anderson's associative network memory model (Pappu & Quester, 2010). The model suggests that memory presents a system of 'nodes' – collected

information or concepts, which are connected with links in a form of a net, representing the strength of their inter-relation or association. Therefore, a common branding strategy is to repeatedly present attributes which are intended to become nodes or to add to the concept of brand in people's memories. In order to find out which are the associations assigned to Finnish education, we looked at the promotional aspect in each statement. Based on the commonalities among the statements we were able to derive three major content themes: (1) high-quality performance; (2) Finland's success story and (3) global relevance. In the following analysis, we present excerpts which illustrate these themes and discuss them from a marketing perspective. We also apply a critical intercultural perspective, which we find necessary to approach the theme of international education branding.

4.3. Analysis

The first group of attributes we have recognized relates to *high-quality performance*. 'High quality' is attributed to Finnish education several times directly (CBR, 2010, pp. 9, 204, 225, 283) or indirectly (e.g. CBR, 2010, pp. 235, 239, 242). This is not surprising, as brands of any type are established and promoted based on their distinctive characteristics, including quality or other performances, in order to achieve differentiation and positioning on the market. However, some of the attributes from this category we find somewhat problematic. Finnish basic education, for instance, is claimed to be *at the top of the table* (p. 9) and education in general is defined as *better or best* in: 'Finland has to offer to the world *better education* and teachers' (p. 3), 'the Finnish education system, which is *the best* in the world' (p. 229). This type of brand determination and promotion is challenging as first of all it is not clear and precise – we do not know 'at the top' of which 'table' the Finnish education is and what that actually means, nor are we sure of compared to what or which educational system, Finnish education is better and why. Intertextually one could read PISA, but as mentioned earlier, the PISA study does not reveal much about the education system in general. Yet, it is stated repeatedly in the document that 'Finns are the best at teaching and learning', and 'Finnish education is without doubt the best in the world' (p. 191). In the case of a commercial brand, promotion of this kind could be considered *deceptive comparative advertising* as it does not include comparison of essential, relevant, verifiable and representative characteristics and is not legitimate means of informing 'customers' (in this case students and public in general) about the advantages of a brand. It could represent a case of *unfair commercial practice* as well, as it presents information in unclear, incomprehensible and ambiguous manner, which can cause the confusion of 'customers'. Both practices are not only thought to be unfair and unethical, but can also be legally sanctioned (see The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2005, 2006). We emphasize this here, as the 'Mission' is not only the document in which Finnish Education brand is constructed, but via which it is also promoted. This document, which is made highly accessible, serves as means of advertising for Finnish Education Brand. Therefore, rules of fair advertising should apply to it, too.

Second, we found that Finnish education was presented as Finland's *success story*. On the one hand, this refers to the success story of education itself, in which education is regarded as 'the most impressive achievement of the Finnish welfare state' (p. 210). For example, the delegation states that 'the success of Finnish comprehensive schools is the *great success story* of society in the new millennium' (p. 196) and 'Finnish schools

and the Finnish enthusiasm for learning are *success stories*. They are strengths that will not disappear in a flash and their positive impact will continue long into the future' (p. 241). Success remains here undefined, yet the reader might once more assume that it is inter-linked with the PISA results. On the other hand, on a more abstract level, education is presented as perpetuating the success story of Finnish society at large, such as in these excerpts 'A small nation can be big through education' (p. 213), and 'Finland's history has *several success stories* based on popular education' (p. 217). In this societal context, the success story of Finnish education contributes to the success story of the Finnish nation. Education is seen here as an ingredient, or an abstract force, which is described as the factor that 'played a key role in the *success of Finnish society*' (p. 9), or 'the foundation of *Finland's success*' (p. 43). The following excerpt demonstrates how education is used to support a national narrative of progression and prosperity:

Finland's success has been based on an ability to raise millions of people from poverty and illiteracy to create a skilled, affluent middle class. The basis of the country's competitiveness, equality and trust, was created through progress. The key to the miracle was education. (p. 62)

This narrative places education at the pivot of a poor, illiterate Finland to a skilled, progressive and competitive society. This 'miracle'-effect of Finnish education goes beyond identifiable characteristics, but presents it as a force on its own. In a similar fashion, Finnish education is also regarded as the driving force of Finnish children's well-being (which is claimed to be 'one of the most developed in the world' (p. 194), the Finnish economy (e.g. pp. 195, 235) and Finnish leadership (e.g. pp. 49, 229–230)). All these positive achievements are driven by Finnish education, but the CBR does not reveal how. It does tell us though that Finnish education is not the education system itself:

The greatest resource linked to the education of Finnish society is not the comprehensive school system that basks in the spotlight of the PISA success. More important than that is the atmosphere that is strongly positive towards learning and education, which has spread to all of society. (p. 243)

Instead of something concrete, it is 'an atmosphere', or as elsewhere described, 'the Finnish *ethos* of education' (p. 217). From a branding strategy, we might find this abstract magical flair of Finnish education to be a creative way of promoting a brand which can fascinate and attract possible customers. Yet, a market *value* (a product, service, information, etc.) needs to have a specific *benefit* for the customer that is unique to the value – which is in this context questionable. Finland certainly isn't the only country striving for a 'positive atmosphere', and if it indeed is the 'Finnish ethos' which makes Finnish education more special than in other countries, one would wonder how to export it.

Third, we have identified the theme of *global relevance*. This category is based upon statements which set Finnish education in direct comparison to other countries. This theme can already be derived from the section heading 'Finland gives you a lesson' (p. 188), which makes us wonder who is in need of a lesson and in which area of expertise. In fact, according to the report the entire world would benefit from Finnish lessons: 'Finnish teachers have solid proof of their expertise. This expertise should be exported from Finland to the world' (p. 245), it should be exported 'to the rest of the world' (p. 243) and 'used by the rest of the world' (p. 243). The argumentation builds upon the previously outlined miraculous attributes of Finnish Education and relates them to concepts

such as social justice, democracy, equality and human rights. According to the Brand Delegation, ‘the Finnish model is a proven one and it could also function as a means for many current developing countries to go forwards’ (p. 195). From this perspective, Finland as a nation should serve as an example for other countries. Finnish Education is considered to be a means of global social development (p. 239) as, for instance, it offers possibilities for conflict resolution worldwide (p. 64). Therefore, dissemination and commercialized export of the Finnish good practices become an ethical imperative (p. 243).

It is further suggested that, as Finnish education is based on equality principles and has influenced social prosperity, Finland itself became a unique expert to offer help to other countries in need:

High-quality education based on equal opportunity has otherwise played a key role in the success story of Finnish society. Education has created prosperity, safeguarded democracy and evened out differences between regions and social classes. Our expertise in education also offers Finland an excellent opportunity to help emerging countries ravaged by conflict. (p. 9)

The Country Brand Delegation suggests that Finland could become ‘a first aid force in education’, comparable to the international organization *Médecins Sans Frontières* (p. 9).

We as authors find this missionary-approach problematic as it presumes the superiority of the Finnish education system above others. Finnish students might fare very well in the PISA studies but this does not tell us anything about a potential ‘superiority’ of the Finnish education system nor about Finnish teacher education. One might argue that a brand should communicate superiority above other, competing brands. But even in the case of a product or a service, when superiority of the brand over others is communicated, fair practice needs to be respected. Claimed benefits need to be such so they can be proven, and competitive products or services must not be underestimated (see The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2005, 2006). And especially since we are looking at the brand of a society, we would rather remind ourselves of ethical considerations. A seemingly neutral comparison might easily be understood as an insult or a moralistic judgment. Let us consider, for example, the following excerpt of the report:

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. (p. 214)

We chose this excerpt as it represents a clear intercultural positioning between Finns and the ‘Other’, explicitly Latvians. According to our understanding, 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, civilized or primitive (Pomerantz, 1986). Noteworthy is the reliance of the excerpt on an unknown/unnamed survey – and thus external voice – to compare Finland with other countries (‘only one out of five believe in lucky numbers’) (Garrigou, 2006). And while giving the impression of objectivity, evoked by the use of a statistic comparison (without providing a source), the statement contains

a hidden value judgment about science versus superstition which is paralleled to Finland versus Latvia. In terms of branding, it does add to the image that Finnish education is superior to Latvian education but the reason behind this is yet again a vague 'belief' in science and education.

5. Creating a superior brand image? Summary and limitations of Finnish education®

The three dimensions we put forth, (1) high-quality performance, (2) Finland's success story and (3) global relevance, summarize the ways in which the CBR presents Finnish education. What is yet crucially missing is a clarification of what Finnish education actually is, or what is specific about it. The only common trait we have been able to identify is that Finnish education is special because it is 'Finnish' and Finnishness reflected in the learning/teaching atmosphere and specific education ethos, is the reason behind high quality and performance of education.

In marketing terms, this phenomenon is recognized as *brand extension* (Tauber, 1988). In the report, it is argued that 'Finland has a particular opportunity to create other top-level educational products in addition to comprehensive schools and to become a major power in learning' (CBR, 2010, p. 191). Furthermore, 'The pedagogy of higher education must also be brought up to such a level that higher education institutions become part of Finland's world famous education phenomenon' (p. 210) and 'Finnish basic education is the best in the world. The next major objective is to get universities and higher education institutions up to that level – among the best in the world – where basic education already is' (p. 211). These excerpts demonstrate not only that the brand is extended from basic to higher education, but also that the extension is based on an assumed common, fundamental expertise or feature owned by all the 'products' (here levels of education and education in general) within the brand. In the case of Finnish Education®, it is clearly an abstract notion of Finnishness providing a perhaps questionable value for a so-called country-of-origin brand (Saydan, 2013).

From a critical intercultural perspective, this is highly problematic. By presuming and promoting a nation's constitutional 'essence', those who seek to create brands based on nationality overlook the critique of postmodern researchers toward the static concepts of nation, ethnicity and culture. Anthropologist Pieterse (2004) 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')' (p. 33). The attempt to brand a nation disregards these *mélanges* and creates oversimplistic images of nations and cultures, despite the fact these concepts are 'changing' and 'historical' (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012, p. 394). As such, a system of education itself is the result of mixing and borrowing from other contexts. Furthermore, as the applied linguist Holliday (2010) asserts, 'the ideological imaginations of culture very often lead to the demonization of a particular foreign Other' (p. 2). Branding Finnish education within a nation branding approach cannot but lead to an explicit–implicit comparison to other nations.

Promoting or marketing competitive advantages of a nation creates a superior image of that nation, which inevitably creates an inferior 'Other' – such as in the case with Latvian superstition in the previous section or all those nations which are considered to be in need

of Finnish educational expertise. Throughout our analysis (themes 1, 2, 3 above) we came across these elements of superiority. This is alarming from an ethical perspective, although as 'consumers' we might still ask: wouldn't we want to purchase the product which is marketed as the best in the world? And to some extent the Nation Brand certainly benefits from its lack of concreteness. As outlined earlier, the brand is established in the very particular context of a country which just started to invest in education export. It draws on the success of Finnish basic education in PISA, but it also needs to encompass Finnish higher education institutions, vocational education and services that could be exported under the label Finnish Education®. The brand thus needs to be broad in order to be suitable for all future possibilities, some which might not be even on the market yet. Nevertheless, creating the brand based upon the successful PISA results might backfire in light of the more recent rankings, in which Finland's position dropped significantly.

In addition, it needs to be kept in mind that we are unable to measure the actual impacts of the Country Brand Report. That it was disseminated widely does not actually tell much about how it is applied. Educational institutions are encouraged to use the report, but nevertheless they create their own marketing materials. Further studies will have to investigate how this government initiative shaped the national and international perceptions of Finnish education – and (in)directly other systems of education.

6. Final remarks

At the beginning of this article, we outlined the presence of education in economics and vice versa. Although education business is 'here to stay', as Ball put it (2012), much of the research literature is divided into academic camps with differing research traditions and methodologies. Our in-depth take on the Finnish education brand demonstrates how many joint venture points there are which are still waiting for further exploration. We have shown that from the perspective of education and business ethics alike, the branding of education in a national context is problematic. Our presentation of excerpts from Finland's Country Brand Report urges readers to reflect on the implications of branding through unreflective and uncritical comparisons.

As a result of this study, we consider national education branding campaigns as controversial because they can easily overlook the diversities in any classroom and, as in the Finnish example, promote tacit moral value judgments about others. We are aware that this constitutes a dilemma for many nation branding efforts, because comparison – or comparativism – is not only a common way of defining oneself and the other, but it is also a necessity in marketing in order to sell products and services to customers. Yet we argue that it is important for politicians, educators and marketing specialists to recognize the other side of the coin and become sensitive toward the ideologies hidden in education branding strategies. As indicated earlier, there are boundaries between ethical and unethical marketing, which are strictly regulated in the corporate world. While focusing on distinctive characteristics of products – special issues, strengths – is a common differentiation strategy, unfair comparative advertising is unacceptable and regarded as a penal offense. If education is accepted as a commodity, we propose that similar rules should be taken into consideration when branding education as well. Despite being located in different academic disciplines, educational practice and marketing cannot be separated. In economics, Consumer Culture Theories have long admitted the performative aspect of

brands, meaning that constructing a brand changes the way a product/reality is perceived (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010; MacKenzie, 2006). Similarly, acknowledging performativity of representations has been a dominant part of social and educational research since the constructivist turn. If we combine the jigsaw pieces, we must acknowledge that creating and disseminating a national brand of Finnish education inevitably changes the way we perceive and discuss Finnish education. Two years after the release of the Country Brand document, the same discourses we have identified above – high-quality performance of the Finnish education system, Finland’s educational success story and the global relevance of Finnish education practices – dominate the news, university marketing materials and even orientation guides for foreigners in Finland. Further research might investigate these recurring discourses and how the Country Brand initiative has changed the Finnish education landscape. Our article highlights the need for researchers in marketing and education to reflect upon the ethics of education branding in order to contribute to sustainable brands.

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