

# Nation branding in times of refugee crisis: Digital media practices of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions

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## Abstract

Although immigration and related policies are among crucial factors building a country's reputation, in-depth studies comparing nation branding strategies of countries facing high influx of refugees are lacking. This holds especially true when it concerns nations with different geopolitical, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics. There is also a growing need to widen our knowledge on digital nation branding and how it can be applied to respond to crisis situations as the refugee dilemma. This empirical study aims to fill these gaps focusing on Belgium and Sweden as an insightful comparative case study. The study's objectives are: (i) comparing similarities and differences between the countries' approach to managing their (digital) nation brand; ii) studying the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis. Data were collected via in-depth interviews with sixteen representatives of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions. Our findings reveal differences between branding strategies of Belgium and Sweden resulting from their different contextual characteristics. What characterizes both nations' strategies is the increased importance of using digital media and the need of adapting to their market logics. Although the mid-2010s refugee crisis has not changed the countries' general digital nation branding strategy, but rather brought sensitive topics into sharp focus, it did lead to communication challenges that the institutions had to face. The Swedish institutions seem to be more active and structured in countering them. We conclude that well-established nation branding strategies are useful tools for governments to base on before, during and after crisis events. The example of Sweden shows that crises can act as an opportunity to reinforce a nation brand.

**Keywords:** nation branding, digital media, migration, refugee, crisis

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## Introduction

During the last decade, European countries have faced an unprecedented inflow of asylum applicants. The refugee movement became an urgent topic on the European agenda, influencing the political, social and cultural public spheres. Due to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (d’Haenens & Joris, 2019) of 2015-2017, many countries found it pivotal to manage their international reputation related to migration and asylum policies. The movement took place alongside rapid digital shifts that increased asylum seekers’ common access to the Internet and mobile services, opening new possibilities for states to reach out to a wider audience, newcomers included, in public communications.

The mid-2010s refugee crisis was highly mediatized and politicized, also in Belgium and Sweden. Although the countries have a relatively similar number of inhabitants (Belgium: 11,2 million inhabitants, Sweden: 9,7 million; Eurostat 2015), Sweden received a much higher number of asylum applications (in 2015, respectively 35,476 versus 162,877). In both countries, the crisis raised strong political and social reactions. Seen from a nation branding and crisis communication perspective, it is insightful to analyze if and how Belgium and Sweden have reacted to the refugee crisis and incorporated the topic in their nation branding tactic.

Comparing precisely Belgium and Sweden is an important case study because of multiple reasons. Firstly, both countries have faced strong immigration since the Second World War, becoming multicultural societies (Puschmann *et al.*, 2019), making migration one of the most dominant topics in their national public debates (De Cock *et al.*, 2018). Since the 1970s, the Swedish state has praised itself for pursuing an ultimate pro-immigration and humanitarian policy. The country has the highest scores on integrating newcomers (MIPEX, 2020), while a majority of Swedish society has a positive attitude towards immigrants (European Commission, 2018). The literature positions Sweden as a good example in migration policy and integrating newcomers for other European countries (De Cock *et al.*, 2018; Puschmann *et al.*, 2019). Belgium, on the other hand, scores worse than Sweden in the MIPEX ranking, while its society shows a less favorable attitude towards immigrants. During the last decades, the Belgian government has pursued a more dissuading policy towards reception of immigrants and refugees (Puschmann *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, despite a similar number of inhabitants, both countries have different geopolitical characteristics. Sweden is a relatively large country with a small population and one official language – Swedish. Belgium is a small country with proportionally seen a dense population and a regional division into French- and German-speaking Wallonia, Flemish-speaking Flanders and both French- and Flemish-speaking Brussels-Capital Region. With three official languages, the country characterizes a distinctive language policy.

Also, contrary to Belgium, Sweden has a long history in managing the country’s image, dating back to 1945 when the Swedish Institute (SI), a public agency with the primary task to promote interest in Sweden around the world, was established. To coordinate the country’s

long-term nation branding activities, the Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad ('Nämnden för Sverigefrämjande i utlandet', NSU) was launched in 1995. The council's aim is to promote a coherent image of Sweden via cooperation of different national institutions, the Swedish Institute and Government Offices of Sweden included. One of the first official documents created on the country's branding, 'Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad' (launched in 2013), presented the Swedish brand to be associated with four main values: innovation, openness, care and authenticity, to be obtained in four fields: sustainability, creativity, innovation and society. Sweden's main objective is described as: "(...) in a world with major challenges, for Sweden's free and open society to function as a hub for innovation and co-creation" (Sharing Sweden, n.d.). The document points also to "connectors" as the strategy's most important target group, defining them as active actors spreading information in large networks, also those on social media. At the same time, Sweden's official visual branding identity system was announced. With time, the country became one of the leaders in nation branding, obtaining high positions in international rankings of nation brands (Bengtsson, 2011). In 2017, the council published its "Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad 2.0". Sweden's core values and communication areas remained the same, but the documents' authors pay attention to new aspects arisen since the previous publication, stating that "(...) Sweden has been affected in recent years by negative rumors and in some cases outright disinformation, particularly in the areas of migration and integration" (Sharing Sweden, 2017a, p. 2). The other noted trend is the digital transformation which has increased cross-border communications and cooperation. Such an established nation branding strategy and history in promoting the country's image seems to be lacking in Belgium. Scholars and practitioners (Cincă & Hîrtie, 2010; ab Iago, 2006) point to Belgium's image deficit and lack of integrated approach to nation branding. Also, the country scores worse than Sweden in international nation brand rankings (see for example Ipsos, 2022).

All these similarities and differences described above make the comparison of Belgium and Sweden an interesting case regarding managing a nation brand, especially in times of refugee crisis. Additionally, the focus on digital nation branding is key. Due to the expanding Internet and mobile use worldwide, online media have become a popular channel among countries to conduct promotional and information campaigns aimed at international audiences. Scholars note, however, that despite the extremely increased importance of the Internet as a strategic platform of communication and branding (Dinnie, 2009; Popa, 2016), the academic research of digital nation branding remains limited (Chung *et al.*, 2020). It is precisely this study's aim to widen the knowledge on digital nation branding and how it can be applied to react to crisis situations.

Upon our knowledge, in-depth studies comparing nation branding strategies of countries facing high influx of refugees are lacking, especially when it concerns nations with different geopolitical, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics. Additionally, to our knowledge, no previous research focused on analyzing specifically digital nation branding practices responding to the refugee crisis. Our study therefore aims at broadening the knowledge at the crossroads of governmental digital media use, nation branding and migration

studies.

This empirical study is based upon a comparative analysis of digital nation branding practices of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions during the mid-2010s refugee crisis. The two main objectives are: (i) comparing similarities and differences in managing the countries' (digital) nation brand, and (ii) studying the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

To obtain the study's objectives, we pose the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** What are the main similarities and differences between approaches of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions to managing their countries' (digital) nation brand?

**RQ2:** What is the Belgian and Swedish governments' strategy towards responding to the mid-2010s refugee crisis in their official digital nation branding communications?

**RQ3:** To what extent has the mid-2010s refugee crisis influenced digital nation branding strategies of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions according to governmental experts?

Methodologically, our study builds upon in-depth interviews conducted with sixteen representatives of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions involved in promoting the countries' image.

In what follows, we illuminate the concept of nation branding in general and digital nation branding in particular, focusing on nation branding as a crisis communication tool. Subsequently, we discuss Belgium's and Sweden's migration and asylum policy. In a next step, based on the in-depth interviews data, we compare Belgium's and Sweden's nation branding practices, and particularly their digital variant, and how these were conducted during the mid-2010s refugee crisis. We end by presenting implications on how a refugee crisis can be incorporated in the digital nation branding tactic of countries with different geopolitical, social, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics.

## **Nation branding and managing a country's image**

Managing a country's image is an important historical concept (Olins, 2002). But while countries have competed for centuries using military and economic forces, nowadays they also do so by using soft power tools such as media and communication to get "others to want the outcomes that [they] want" and "to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

Building and shaping a country's image is highly connected with nation branding and public diplomacy processes. The literature proposes a myriad of definitions and approaches to both terms (for a general overview see e.g. Szondi, 2008). Overall, we see that public

diplomacy derives from policy-related advocacy and cultural relations and aims at gaining related objectives within foreign opinion leaders, cultural and political elites. Nation branding, on the other hand, originates with its managerial focus from corporate branding in order to obtain economic benefits, targeting the general, both internal and external public (Cassinger *et al.*, 2016). What is common in both processes is their aim – gaining competitive advantage over other nations (Kaneva, 2011; Pamment *et al.*, 2017). We position this study's scope within the nation branding paradigm, which we explain in more detail below.

Branding relates to producing complex signs which represent “an immaterial value that identifies a product or a particular organization and that marks it as possessing a differential advantage customarily attached to a symbol, design, or name” (Varga, 2013, p. 827). With the emergence of new countries in the 20th century, trends of globalization, mediatization, migration and transnationalism, governments found it important to build and maintain their nation brands and be competitive on the global market in order to attract tourists, investors, talents, to expand export of local products and brands, to gather attention of foreign audiences, to improve international relations and to create a feeling of pride among the domestic audience (Anholt, 1998; Aronczyk, 2008; Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018; Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

Nation branding, a term coined by Anholt in the mid-1990s, aimed to answer those needs, giving countries possibilities to manage their image using soft power logics while building upon the notions of brand management, public diplomacy, trade, investment, tourism, and export promotion. In line with the modern principles of market economy and liberal democracy, nation branding perceives states as commercial enterprises whose governments, similar to companies' representatives, use specific marketing and selling techniques to influence market capitalization (Aronczyk, 2008; Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010; Kaneva, 2017; Olins, 2002; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011). Nation branding techniques have a broad range: “from ‘cosmetic’ operations, such as the creation of national logos and slogans, to efforts to institutionalize branding within state structures by creating governmental and quasi-governmental bodies that oversee long-term nation branding efforts” (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118).

To increase countries' competitiveness, Anholt (2007; 2010) proposes the concept of competitive identity which combines the notions of nation reputation, identity, politics, and economics. The author indicates six national competences within the nation brand hexagon through which a country builds its reputation on the global market: tourism, exports, governance, society, investment and immigration, culture, and heritage. As Anholt (2007) states, a nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the six indicated areas.

In this work, we refer to nation branding as activities performed by state actors (governments) in cooperation with branding specialists, designed to position a country in a certain way to gain benefits such as attracting tourists, talents, workforce, investors, export opportunities, etcetera. Nevertheless, it is important to note the complexity of the term, reflecting on the difference between a ‘nation’ and a ‘state’, especially when comparing

Sweden and Belgium. Although, as Bolin and Miazhevich (2018) note, both terms are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. ‘State’ refers to a “political-administrative unit with sovereign rule over a geographic territory”, while ‘nation’ “can also have an ethnic meaning and is caught up in commonplace ideologies and political feelings” (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018, p. 531). In the case of our study, where we focus on activities performed by governments, and as we analyze Belgium with its strong regional division and complex state structure, it would be perhaps more applicable to use the term ‘state branding’. However, in order to stay in line with the pioneers within the field of study (Anholt, 2007; Olins, 2002) and the current literature, we keep reference to ‘nation branding’.

## **Digital nation branding**

As branding is a communication practice (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018), governments use different communication channels to reach their institutional goals, to shape and promote their country’s image. Media play an integral role in nation branding processes as technologies, organizations and entities with their own agency and agenda in the creation of meaning as sign systems (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018). Moreover, the technological character of specific media influences a way of forming a message, addressing, and reaching target audiences, as well as reception and interpretation of message content (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015).

During the last decades, the appearance and rise of new technologies has enormously influenced the communication public sphere, nation branding included. It was especially the emergence of Web 2.0, an online domain focused on user-generated content, with social media sites such as Facebook (launched in 2004), YouTube (launched in 2005) and Twitter (launched in 2006) that brought revolutionary changes to the communication world. The introduction of Web 2.0 technologies created new channels for branding countries, such as blogs, social media profiles, viral advertising, brand advocacy programmes, or the first ever embassies in Second Life, created by the Maldives and Sweden in 2007, raising high media attention (Bengtsson, 2011; Dinnie, 2009).

New technologies reshaped the relation between information’s sender and receiver, transforming the traditional one-way top-down communication process into dialogue where the target group acts as a “criticizing court” (Popa, 2016, p. 96) and an active participant responding to a sender’s message in real time (Cull, 2011; Dinnie, 2009). A brand is not a product communicated only by the sender, but rather a result of the public’s perception of it (Kavaratzis, 2004) and thus “[t]aking into account the role which the target audience plays in the branding process, the adaptation to trends and its communication needs is important” (Popa, 2016, p. 96). Digital media, and especially social media, allow governments and branding managers to listen to their audience, to share accessible, relevant information and to promote competitive advantages of their countries faster, cheaper, and to a broader, both internal and external public, taking into consideration their needs and direct role in this interactive process (Cull, 2011; Dinnie, 2009; Popa, 2016). Nation branding and public diplomacy conducted via digital media allow creating closeness with the public by sharing

authentic and credible messages (Popa, 2016) where audiences can reflect their own identity and see the sender as “someone like me” (Cull, 2011, p. 3). In order to successfully promote a country’s competitive advantage in the digital communication sphere, it is necessary for governments to stay consistent, unified and constant in their communications across different governmental departments. Thanks to branding, governments can obtain “an organizational culture of communications consistency and simplicity, through the unified promotion of approved key messages and visuals” (Marland *et al.*, 2017, p. 128).

We understand digital nation branding as positioning a country and promoting its specific image towards both an internal and external public using digital communication technologies in order to gain certain objectives. Similarly to Popa (2016), we believe that promoting a country’s competitive advantages online has nowadays become an integral and much significant part of nation branding strategies. However, it is not exclusive, and promoting a country using also traditional media still applies (marketing mix).

### **Managing a country’s brand in times of (refugee) crisis**

Transnational crises crossing geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries are an inevitable element of today’s reality based on global interconnectedness (Olsson, 2013). As the previous research shows (Olsson, 2013; Pamment *et al.*, 2017), nation branding and public diplomacy play an important role as crisis communication tools to remediate such events. The related literature focuses, however, mainly on analyzing crises caused by war, terror attacks, natural disaster, pandemic, and their impact on reputation of places as tourist destinations (Avraham, 2009; Taecharungroj & Avraham, 2022), with few exceptions such as analyses of the so-called Cartoon Crisis in Denmark, the roundabout incident in Sweden and their impact on the country’s image (Cassinger *et al.*, 2016; Kjaergaard Rasmussen & Merckelsen, 2014; Olsson, 2013).

Parsons (1996) distinguishes three types of crises: (i) immediate crises, with little or no warning; (ii) emerging crises, which develop slowly and can be limited or halted; (iii) sustained crises, which often last for longer time, even years, and are often sustained by rumor and misinformation. We consider the mid-2010s refugee movement as an example of the last type of crisis. In all of them, sustained campaigns based on well-thought strategy (focusing on what will be told and to whom) and open communication play a pivotal role in managing the situation (Parsons, 1996).

Olsson (2013) suggests three core tasks of public diplomacy as a crisis communication tool. The first is (i) sense making – the actors’ ability to recognize and understand the issue and its nature, possible outcomes, as well as to identify relevant stakeholders. The second task asks for (ii) networking – the actors’ engagement in transnational networks in order to facilitate stakeholder communication, focusing on today’s new media landscape and two-way communication. Here, an important part is played by so-called boundary spanners, defined as “persons or units mediating between an organization and its external environment” (Olsson,

2013, p. 226). Finally, Olsson mentions (iii) messaging – the actor’s ability to create and share messages that are relevant for stakeholders and resonate with their norms and values. Vaxevanidou (2017) adds a central message and a central authority coordinating various bodies as key elements of promoting a country’s competitive advantages during times of crisis.

It is important to note that while governments are expected to rapidly and effectively communicate with geographically and culturally distant stakeholders during a crisis (Olsson, 2013), promoting a positive image of a country in such a tense situation is challenging, while its success depends on several factors, not only marketing aspects (Avraham, 2009; Kjaergaard Rasmussen & Merckelsen, 2014). As we discussed, creating a dialogue and the public’s involvement are key in today’s interconnected world in order to effectively promote a country and its brand. However, the task is not easy for governments which often lack an established strategy to communicate with a foreign public at the transnational level (Olsson, 2013). At the same time, to reinforce the message, governments’ communications need to be consistent. All these challenges become even more complex during crisis times “as they require swift and unplanned communication with new sets of stakeholders, many of whom the government had never before needed to deal with” (Olsson, 2013, p. 220). This especially applies to the mid-2010s refugee crisis where asylum seekers, with their access to the Internet and mobile phones, became for governments a new audience to communicate with.

As already noted, in Anholt’s model (2007; 2010), immigration is a crucial factor in building a country’s reputation. However, literature studying this aspect of countries’ competitive identity and the impact of the mid-2010s refugee crisis on countries’ reputation remains scarce. Previously conducted research on the link between migration and place image focused rather on the role of a country’s reputation in the migration decision process for skilled workers and in improving the recruitment of international talents (Nadeau & Olafsen, 2015; Silvanto *et al.*, 2015; Yousaf *et al.*, 2021). Up till now, how countries deal with the influx of asylum seekers during a crisis period regarding their nation brand has not been studied in-depth.

In one of the first and few studies examining countries’ public diplomacy and nation branding responses to the 2010s refugee movement, Pamment *et al.* (2017) show by the cases of Norway and Sweden that public diplomacy and branding, traditionally aimed at attracting tourists, talents, investors etcetera, can be used to dissuade undesired publics. The research conducted by Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017) on Denmark and other Nordic countries confirms that indirect deterrence policies aimed to decrease the number of asylum applications can act as a form of deliberate negative nation branding or national reputation management.

## **Belgium and Sweden during the mid-2010s refugee crisis**

The refugee situation from the mid-2010s onwards has brought implications on political, cultural and social spheres in Europe. In Sweden, the government’s primarily welcoming



attitude towards refugees became more restrictive with time, marked by the introduction in 2015 of the Temporary Asylum and Family Reunification Law launching border controls. The aim of the government's indirect deterrence practices was to show Sweden and its policies as unattractive to asylum seekers, which can be perceived as a form of deliberate negative nation branding (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). Pamment *et al.* (2017, p. 326) note that “the refugee crisis created a communicative challenge for [Sweden] because of contradictions between well-established public diplomacy and nation branding strategies, and the exigencies of the crisis”. In fact, Sweden's nation brand values of openness and care have been highly challenged.

Puschmann *et al.* (2019) write that Belgium's immigration and integration policy during the mid-2010s refugee crisis seemed to be “a one-man show” with Theo Francken, then the Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration, and Administrative Simplification, in the spotlight. Francken, holding the Secretary position between 2014 and 2018, promoted a more negative discourse regarding asylum applicants, criticizing the EU's alleged open border policy. Francken's attitude towards newcomers, often regarded as too restrictive, suggested a shift in Belgium's migration policy from very liberal to very strict. Puschmann *et al.* (2019, p. 27) note, however, that “(...) there seems to be a large discrepancy between Belgium's actual migration and asylum policy and the way Francken and his administration frame and report on it (...)”, as “Belgium has become in fact more liberal toward refugees than under Francken's (liberal) predecessor”. That was confirmed by the increased number of granted asylum permits and reception centers giving shelter to asylum applicants in Belgium.

## **Methodology**

Our study has a dual purpose. Firstly, we aim to analyze and compare Belgium's and Sweden's strategies of managing their (digital) nation brand. The second goal is to study the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

Data to answer our research questions were collected via in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted online between March 2020 and June 2021. In total, sixteen governmental experts took part in the interviews. The sample consisted of a diverse group of interviewees in terms of gender, profile, and years of professional experience. First potential participants were contacted based on the authors' research conducted online (seeking contacts to different governmental institutions involved in promoting the countries' image) and then, once direct contacts started to be established, through snowball sampling. All interviewees were firstly contacted via email to present the aim and scope of the study. From the Belgian side, the sample included (digital) communication specialists, community managers, web content managers, editors, campaign coordinators and heads of relevant units at: the Federal Public Service Chancellery of the Prime Minister (PM), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Service Public de Wallonie (SPW) – Public Service of Wallonia, Wallonia Export and Investment Agency (AWEX), Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI), Vlaanderen

(Flanders), and City of Brussels. The Swedish informants included digital communication strategist, editor and heads of relevant units at the Swedish Institute (SI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

The difference in the number of interviewees on the Belgian (thirteen interviewees) and Swedish (three interviewees) side is supported by the geopolitical and state structural characteristics of the countries. Since the 1993 reform when Belgium became a federal state, the Belgian regions manage not only their domestic affairs, but also foreign policy and sub-state diplomacy, while all governments on the federal and regional level are equal in power (Criekemans, 2010). Such an administrative structure does not apply in Sweden which is a unitary state. Also, as it was confirmed during the interviews, Wallonia, Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region conduct their own promotional and branding campaigns independent of the federal state. Due to this context, it was necessary to conduct more interviews with representatives of the Belgian institutions to give an in-depth insight in the distinctive and more regional assigned competences related to managing reputation in a federal state.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They were run in English, with one exception – one interview was conducted, on a Belgian interviewee's demand, in French. Prior to the interviews, the authors prepared a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions covering the countries' general (digital) nation branding strategy and related production practices, as well as the governmental authorities' digital branding and communication activities since the mid-2010s refugee crisis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, data were coded by using an open coding technique, focusing on primary thematic coding, and comparing techniques to look for similarities and dissimilarities between the different countries and institutions under study. Based on the coding, several recurring themes were identified, as well as similar/different branding and communication patterns between Belgium, Sweden, and their institutions.

## **Results**

### ***Branding Sweden – one council, one strategy***

The interviews confirmed that the Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad (NSU) constitutes the main base of managing Sweden's brand. As the SI informant said, the strategy is their "starting point for any communication initiative", both offline and online. The document was well-known among the interviewed Swedish representatives, and they could point to its objectives and Sweden's values presented there. One of the strategy's main merits is its long-term character, as the SI informant explained: "It is reviewed on a regular basis, but the idea is that it should last over a long time. It gives a broad framework and leaves a lot to each organization's creativity and needs". As confirmed by the Swedish representatives, all the institutions working under the umbrella of NSU have one common and agreed approach to promoting Sweden. However, what was also noted as the strategy's main advantage, is that it presents broad values of the Swedish brand, while each institution involved in the NSU

decides on its own focal points and areas to promote, depending on the institutional scope and objectives.

The SI is the main institution responsible for managing the image of Sweden with the goal to promote interest and trust in Sweden around the world, sharing information about the country and its values, analyzing how Sweden is perceived by foreign targets and promoting international partnerships. The SI runs Sweden's official website – sweden.se, and related social media profiles. As an interviewee explained, the SI's focus is to raise awareness on Sweden especially among younger people abroad, and its digital communications are primarily targeted at three audiences: English, Russian and Arabic speakers.

The presence of the NSU, one overall strategy (including common values and a visual identity system) for all main institutions involved in strengthening Sweden's image, and centralization of promotional tasks at the SI result in having one consistent and coherent communication strategy of the Swedish brand, which has been confirmed by all interviewed Swedish representatives.

### ***Branding Belgium – complex state of fragmentation***

Promoting a coherent country image seems to be more complex and problematic in Belgium. As confirmed during the interviews, managing Belgium's reputation is only a secondary task of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (PM) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), while there is no one, main institution focusing on promoting Belgium. Due to the state's federal character, its division into three regions and language communities, all having their own governments, state competences are spread over different levels and institutions. This leads to strong institutional fragmentation, decentralization, and the lack of one branding and communication strategy. As the PM's representative noted, each Belgian region manages its own image: "The situation is complicated here, as in Belgium the regions have their own branding campaigns. There are not so many national institutions involved [in promoting the image of Belgium]. As an example, there is no Belgian Tourism Agency. That is all regional."

As the interviewees claimed, there is no permanent collaboration between Belgian regions and federal institutions to enhance the country's reputation. This lack of coordination is seen as a main challenge for communicating the Belgian brand, as the PM's representative described:

It's difficult to promote Belgium as a country because it's so divided into regions and communities, whereas other countries, such as Sweden or France, are more centralized. Here, everything is decentralized. It makes it difficult for us to have a coordinated communication strategy because we do not operate as the entire country together. (...) When we have a Belgian project [to promote the country], it's difficult to collaborate because it's very complex and all the regions have to make their contribution (...).

The complex structure of the Belgian state makes it difficult to promote and communicate a clear message not only to the country, but also to its regions. As the WBI representative explained on the example of Wallonia, presenting Belgian regions to foreign audiences, especially those located far away from Europe, takes much time and effort:

When you are a French state institution, it's easy. You have a centralized state, and you communicate about France and French values. Here, it's difficult. We firstly need to explain what Belgium is, it's difficult because it's quite small on the map, and how it works here with six different governments. After that, we explain that we only represent the French speakers of Belgium. (...) And after that we can explain what we [WBI] are doing, what our main competences are. So, it needs time and explanation and it's quite challenging to explain the functioning of the Belgian federal state, because you have different regions and communities working in different competences. In Germany, it's easier because you have lands, and they all have the same competencies. Here, it's more surrealistic.

Each interviewed Belgian institution has its own strategy on communicating their territory, websites, and social media profiles. There is, however, the general, federal website [belgium.be](http://belgium.be), managed by the PM, with information on Belgian administration and services, as well as the federal campaign “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal”, run since 2017 by the PM, aiming to “boost the image of Belgium”, as an interviewee explained. The campaign was launched online and offline on demand of Charles Michel, then prime minister of Belgium, as a reaction to a decrease of tourism caused by the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels.

There are several nations identified as the campaign's primary target audience, the US, the UK, China, Japan, Canada, and France included. In contrast to the SI that targets its promotional activities mainly at younger audiences, the Belgian campaign does not focus on any specific age segmentation. What is more, while the SI's activities are targeted primarily at the audience abroad, the Belgian campaign's goal is to promote the positive image of Belgium also within the country. As one PM interviewee contended: “The aim is to reach also Belgian citizens, so they feel proud of their own country. It would perhaps be weird in other countries, but in Belgium, where there are different language groups, it is necessary to have a campaign directed at the internal public.”

It is thus visible that the country's internal situation influences its nation branding strategy, and that strong regionalism requires promoting the country also internally. The aim of the “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal” campaign is to present “everything that shows Belgium in a positive way” (PM interviewee). The PM interviewees stressed, however, that due to the strong local regionalism, it is difficult to promote “typical Belgian values” and “typical Belgian identity” as “maybe Flemish people do stuff that people from Wallonia would never do. So it's difficult to really say: yes, this is truly Belgian”.

Despite a lack of one general branding strategy and centrally established values to

promote the country, almost all Belgian interviewees on a federal, regional and language community level claimed that they aim to position their territories as a place of multiculturalism, diversity, openness, and tolerance. What is more, it is important to show Belgium and its regions in a multilateral context, as solid partners on the international stage, especially within the EU and UN context. This positioning of Belgium and its territories is logical and results from the local geopolitical characteristics – Belgium is a relatively small country in the center of Europe, neighboring with other important states on the international arena such as France and Germany, and a home to many international institutions. It is thus not surprising that the country focuses on its cosmopolitan flair to benefit from the characteristics of the region and to strengthen its brand. The aim to position the country in a multilateral context has not been highlighted in such an extent in the interviews with the Swedish representatives. The Swedish participants focused more on a goal to present Sweden as a global leader in innovation, branding, and digital diplomacy, without stressing particularly international cooperation in order to achieve this objective.

### ***Digital media as nation branding tools: keeping up with changes***

The interviewed representatives, although more at the Belgian side, pointed to the need of still using traditional media to promote their territory's brand. However, what was indicated by all the interviewees is an increasing importance of conducting online activities. As a representative of the Swedish MFA said: "The aim is to think digital, to start questioning ourselves and our analog projects and to ask: 'Can we take this project and make it digital?'".

All the interviewed organizations run institutional websites and social media profiles, among which Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular social media channel. Facebook is used to engage Internet users and to create community bonds, which is possible thanks to the options of likes, comments and sharing. The aim of using Facebook to form and strengthen community bonding was stressed especially by the Belgian interviewees. To face Belgium's strong regionalism and related challenges, the PM's representatives, responsible for the belgium.be website and social media profiles, decided to have only one Facebook page where they publish posts in all three official languages of Belgium (French, Flemish, German), instead of having one separate profile per language. By this, Internet users can see all comments in different languages under the same post. As the PM interviewee explained:

It's our choice and strategy to have only one page for all languages. (...) We found out that for belgium.be it is better to have all languages together as it creates a kind of community between the Flemish and Walloon people. They see a post only in their language, but comments in all languages.

However, two main drawbacks of using Facebook were pointed out during the interviews. Firstly, as a popular and publicly available communication channel, Facebook brings a broad audience to reach, but also a broad public of Internet users with different opinions and values

to confront. All interviewees noted an increase of hateful comments as a challenge they face on Facebook, which, as the SPW representative claimed, creates serious doubts if the institutions should continue their presence on this channel. Secondly, the average age of Facebook users is increasing, while younger generations prefer other social media such as Instagram, Twitch and TikTok. Consequently, communication specialists need to widen up their spectrum of social media options in order to reach younger audiences.

The other popular social media channels used by both Belgian and Swedish representatives include Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. As the interviewees explained, the popularity of using the latter medium to promote countries and regions has much increased during the last years, mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, LinkedIn has been traditionally used to reach experienced business professionals and to promote economic diplomacy. However, there is a recent distinctive trend of younger people as well as specialists from other fields than business, such as science, education and culture, entering LinkedIn. This shift in LinkedIn users' profile gives the institutions an opportunity to open to a broader audience, especially younger generations. Secondly, LinkedIn is considered as a "professional environment", as the WBI interviewee indicated, where users log in by presenting their professional role and affiliation, aiming to build their personal brand. This specificity decreases a presence of unwanted, hateful comments and debates, which the institutions face on e.g. Facebook.

The interviews confirm that various social media channels, all having their own characteristics, bring different advantages and limitations that are evaluated by both Belgian and Swedish institutions in order to run effective online communication strategies tailored to their objectives. The institutions see changes in social media users' profiles which need to be thoroughly analyzed regarding the impact on reaching their target audiences. Additionally, using social media imposes adaptations in the institutions' way of working and production processes. Both Belgian and Swedish interviewees marked the need of having new profiles and competences within their communication teams – community managers, graphic and video designers. This requirement of new skills brings, however, challenges to employees formerly focused on promoting the countries and regions via traditional journalism. As the SPW representative said:

We have many people in our team who come from traditional paper press, who have prepared traditional brochures, flyers, press notes. (...) And now they need to change their way of working, to write on the web, to write for Twitter. This is upsetting people [translation from French].

The institutions need to adapt to the changing media environment, shifting their way of working in order to reach target audiences – whose online preferences are also changing.

The interviews revealed that to effectively communicate their territory's brand online, the governmental institutions need to face and adapt to digital media's market requirements. The following notions have been pointed by both Belgian and Swedish representatives: adapting the institutions' communication strategy to market-based logics of social media corporations

(e.g. algorithms), use of commercial language and practices, target-audience centricity, and customization, engaging private contractors and creating partnerships with the private sector.

### *Belgium's and Sweden's digital nation branding since the mid-2010s refugee crisis*

According to Anholt (2007; 2010), immigration and related policies play an important role in shaping countries' competitive identity on the global market. The question remains if and how Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions incorporated this topic within their digital activities to manage their nation brand during the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

The Swedish representatives stated that the refugee crisis has not changed their overall nation branding strategy, claiming that their primary aim remained the same before and after the crisis – to present and promote “a correct picture of Sweden” (the Swedish MFA informant). Also, Sweden's “Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad 2.0” explicitly refers to migration and integration topics that need to be dealt with in order to clear the image of the country and to avoid misunderstandings. Interestingly, despite the emergence of a new potential target audience – asylum seekers with their Internet access, the Swedish state has not changed its tactic on whom they wish to target their branding communications at. During the crisis, neither the SI nor the Swedish MFA focused on reaching specifically immigrants or asylum seekers in their online activities – newcomers were not perceived as a particular target group of their communications. Instead, the Swedish institutions' focus remained on targeting connectors and younger people in general.

Nevertheless, during the crisis, the SI did recognize the topic's sensitivity and a higher than usual need of monitoring the public debate to keep their online content up to date and relevant to their target audience. In order to do so, the SI launched a dedicated team focusing explicitly on migration topics. The SI team identified certain communication gaps, especially in presenting Sweden as a country of immigration and emigration. Therefore, the “Sweden and migration” timeline has been published on the sweden.se website in order to present a bigger picture of migration to and from the country, and to explain that migration is not a recent phenomenon, but an integral part of Swedish history. The campaign stresses that while nowadays there are many newcomers migrating to Sweden, the country experienced in its history also periods of big emigration waves. The timeline focuses especially on the period from 1850 up till today, presenting statistics, reasons of migration as well as migrants' personal stories accompanied by their pictures. The article also contains several links redirecting to other websites of the Swedish authorities with more practical information on the topic such as how to obtain a work permit or study in Sweden.

Another symbolic key action taken by the SI team contained launching “Portraits of migration” – an offline and online campaign available on Sweden's website between 2017 and 2019. The campaign was part of the project “Portraits of migration – Sweden beyond the headlines” which aimed to “add new perspectives to the story of Sweden and migration, and to give insights into the current situation in the country” (citation taken from <https://sharing.sweden.se/toolkits/portraits-of-migration/>; accessed on 19 August 2019; webpage inactive

since 2020). In the campaign, the Swedish authorities engaged newcomers of different backgrounds to present their personal stories and experience with immigrating to Sweden. The campaign was created “not specifically for immigrants nor refugees, but for our target audience [younger generations] to show Sweden as open and caring” (dixit the SI informant), which is in line with Swedish brand values.

The allocated unit at the SI focused on migration operated for a few months after which it halted its activities. Quoting the SI informant:

At the time, the topic was on the top of everyone’s agenda, and we had to find out (...) how we could communicate it. We did some communications on this, then it was decided that we had enough content and we had so much else we needed to focus on. Afterall, this is just a part of the story of Sweden so it shouldn’t be lifted as a separate topic.

The Swedish MFA representative also confirmed that migration was back then a priority subject on their agenda, but with time, its importance has faded away, making it “nothing different from other policy areas”.

The topics of migration and asylum have not been in focus of the interviewed Belgian representatives. The institutions have not had any specific communication nor branding strategy on these aspects except for, as it was shared during the interviews, presenting the country and its policies in a correct way. Similarly to Sweden, immigrants and asylum seekers have not constituted a specific target audience of the Belgian institutions’ digital communication actions. As the PM informant said: “we distribute information on the belgium.be website that might be relevant for immigrants too, but it is not our target audience. We provide information to everyone, immigrants included, but they are not in our direct focus”. The federal institutions such as the PM or MFA are not involved, except for only specific competences, in migration-related communication activities which are in fact managed primarily by dedicated governmental migration institutions, such as Fedasil. Additionally, apart from certain topics such as granting work licenses, migration does not belong to original competences of Belgian institutions on a regional nor language community level. As a representative of one regional government stated, they do not communicate neither online nor offline on migration nor to immigrants/asylum seekers.

### ***Digital challenges faced since the crisis***

Although the refugee crisis has not changed the countries’ general digital nation branding strategy, but rather brought, especially in Sweden, certain topics into sharp focus that with time have faded away, it did lead to certain severe communication challenges that the institutions had to face. Both Belgian and Swedish representatives noted that because of the crisis, the topic of migration became highly delicate, making the institutions cover it online only when necessary and relevant to their target audience. According to the Belgian MFA



interviewee, since the mid-2010s, the Ministry has become much more aware of the topic's sensitivity and it currently takes much more time to publish any related content online as it is verified by more internal specialists, legal team included. As the informant stated:

I think not only Belgium, but also many other countries are now more hesitant to communicate about migration because it's so sensitive. I think that there is a lot of hesitation to cover this topic online, which was not up there before the big crisis.

The SI employee explained:

The issue is very sensitive and difficult, and often fails to create any constructive dialogue in our channels. It creates some good debates, but also some extremely angled discussions which are not constructive for anybody. So, we cover the topic only if it is something relevant for our target audience.

Both the Belgian and Swedish interviewees claimed that the mid-2010s inflow of asylum seekers caused an increased presence of unwanted and hateful online comments and discussions on migration and integration matters. As a result, especially the Belgian regional institutions, where migration does not belong to their original competences, decided to avoid the topic: "If we would start writing on migration or targeting migrants, I think all hell would break loose. It's the focal part of our audience, their comments can be really racist. We rather stay away from it" (Flanders informant).

Another aspect noted since the crisis, however mainly at the Swedish side, was an increased circulation of online fake news and misinformation on the country. As the Swedish MFA representative clarified:

You could really read and see during the migration crisis, that Sweden was portrayed as a failed state, as a country almost close to civil war, with no-go zones. You had President Trump saying: 'Look, look what is happening in Sweden'. And international voices from all over the world portraying Sweden as on the total brink of collapse.

The negative narrative shared by the international public towards Sweden and its, at least at the beginning of the crisis, welcoming attitude towards newcomers fits in the general discourse Sweden has been encountering since the 1990s where it "has in some aspects become a negative international projection surface for many countries" (Falkheimer & Raknes, 2022, p. 28). During the refugee crisis, perception of Sweden and its image has become much polarized in the international public debate, which has been pointed by the Swedish MFA:

Sweden is shown either as a paradise or hell. It's crazy. If you're looking at Sweden in the US political debate, you often hear people like Bernie Sanders referring to Sweden as an example to follow, and Donald Trump saying that Sweden is the worst, worst example.

The question remains if and what means were implemented to respond to the increased presence of online misinformation, as well as polarized and hateful discussions. The Flanders' government and its communication team, that suffered from receiving a high number of racist online comments, had to eventually introduce a strict policy allowing their community managers to hide or even remove comments propagating hate, racism, and conspiracy theories. As an interviewee explained: "At the beginning, we tried to convince and warn them [people publishing racist comments], but we gave up on that because they kept coming back. You cannot convince them that it's not OK to post racist comments. So now we delete them". This and the topic's avoidance were the only initiatives mentioned by the Belgian interviewees in response to digital challenges faced since the crisis' start.

The Swedish interviewees presented several major digital initiatives launched to answer the challenges. The first one was the expanded use of social media listening tools in order to conduct instant analyses of what has been said about the country. Secondly, the institutions found it important to map local online fake news with the help of regional representatives and embassies. As it was pointed out, misinformation might differ depending on a country where it is produced, and it is advised to apply local strategies to respond to it. It has also been pivotal for the Swedish representatives to launch proactive initiatives, such as to create and bond communities on social media in advance, instead of only responding to misinformation. As the Swedish MFA explained:

It is difficult to win that war when you want to react with your communication. The best thing is to work proactively. If you work strategically towards one target group, you constantly try to (...) create a bond between you and your target group, you inform them about Sweden and how we think, then they will be the ones in the first line of defense.

The informant pointed at the importance of having dedicated social media followers that can act as "Sweden's ambassadors":

When somebody tries to attack Sweden, you will have all these followers entering the debate and starting to discuss that. And we see this very clearly with our embassies that have managed to build up a strong bond with their followers. If you haven't worked well with your followers and the misinformation hits, you will stand alone.

Another way to fight against misinformation online is to explain trends and related data. The Swedish MFA informant gave an example of an online publication where Sweden's rate

of rape statistics was higher than in certain developing countries. The publication raised much controversy and online criticism of Sweden, presenting its open attitude towards newcomers as an alleged reason for increased crime. Seeing the public reactions, the government's goal was to explain the truth behind the numbers, ensuring that the inflow of asylum seekers has not contributed to the official rape statistics. In order to do so, the government released dedicated, factual digital information packages responding to the controversy in an accessible and clearly formulated language. However, as the Swedish MFA representative explained, social media do not serve well to provide deeper explanation on trends and complex data: "It is not always easy to go deeper and give statistical explanation on social media. It's difficult because on Twitter or other social media you need to communicate in a very simplistic way".

The other solution applied to fight against online misinformation on Sweden is to keep consistency and coherence in all governmental institutions' digital communication actions. It is important that created information packages are branded with Sweden's official visual identity system and shared on websites and social media profiles of different governmental institutions in order to present a consistent message, to increase content's reach and, consequently, to reinforce the country's reputation. The MFA representative emphasized a need of creating such information packages so also the country's foreign missions (e.g. embassies) can publish them on their social media profiles. Not knowing what can be shared externally in response to the refugee crisis was back then a common problem at local embassies. The Swedish MFA, which acts as a coordination center for the embassies, wanted to fill in this communication gap, bringing more consistency and clarity on the topic among their missions spread around the world.

Finally, as already noted above, a dedicated unit was created within the SI to focus on the topic, and several digital campaigns, such as "Portraits of migration" or "Sweden and migration", were launched in response to it. The most important for the Swedish institutions remained to bring digital communications that are relevant to their target audience: connectors and younger people. The Swedish interviewees also claimed that it was essential to treat fake news as an opportunity to share knowledge and correct information on the country, to promote its values and brand e.g. via dedicated digital information packages and campaigns.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

In our study, we posed three research questions in order to analyze Belgium's and Sweden's (digital) nation branding approach, and to study the countries' online nation branding and communication management since the mid-2010s refugee crisis, which took place alongside rapid digital shifts. We aimed to bring innovative contributions to digital nation branding by analyzing the countries with different geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics, governmental structures, as well as varying migration and integration policies while facing the refugee crisis. Upon our knowledge, the choice of countries and scope of analysis bring original results to the literature as no similar comparative research beyond the Nordic context has been performed.

Answering RQ1, there are certain differences between Belgium's and Sweden's approaches to managing their (digital) nation brand. Sweden has one long-term strategy and Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad in which institutions work together to promote a desirable image of the country, both offline and online. Taking from the marketing literature (Aaker, 2004), we consider it as an example of a Branded House. The presence of one coherent strategy seems to be lacking in Belgium where branding activities are held partially on a federal, but also regional and language community level, putting the country forward as a clear example of a House of Brands. The study confirms that the more decentralized a state is, the more complex it becomes to present one coherent and consistent strategy which is required to obtain desired branding goals (Olins, 2002). Having one main institution leading a nation branding strategy in collaboration with other involved entities is essential to present a strong brand on the market.

Belgium's offline and online branding campaign, "Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal", was launched as a response to a drop in tourism, and not as a proactively planned branding project as it was in Sweden. The Belgian representatives target its promotional activities also towards the internal audience, which is due to the country's strong regionalism. It is not surprising as previous research postulates the importance of the internal audience in the process of promoting a nation's image (Anholt, 2007; Aronczyk, 2008). Without citizens' involvement in reinforcing a country's reputation, especially in states with strong geopolitical, language or cultural divisions, nation branding may lack coherence and effectiveness. Sweden, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the external and younger public, without putting so much attention on the internal audience. The countries' geopolitical, state structural, linguistic, and cultural character influences their strategies to manage reputation. Both countries also have different objectives for their branding activities: the Swedish state aims to be a global leader in innovative nation branding and digital diplomacy, while the Belgian representatives pointed more at positioning Belgium in a multilateral context which relates to the country's geopolitical context.

What is common for branding strategies of both states is an increased use of digital technologies, especially social media, which created new ways to communicate with their public. This stays in line with the previous literature that confirms the importance, impact and contribution of online media in promoting countries (Chung *et al.*, 2020). It is important to remember though that social media are corporations which impose certain economic rules. Both Belgium and Sweden, countries with different characteristics, need to adapt to the global market requirements in order to gain the public's attention, to increase communication reach and, consequently, to strengthen their country's image. When communicating their brands, countries need to take into consideration not only their local specificities, but also global market characteristics. Neoliberalism, an "ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition" (Britannica, n.d.), brought broad privatization and marketization of the public space and services, making them a "calculative space" (Jansen, 2008). We also see that the Belgian and Swedish institutions need to face market logic when communicating their countries' image.

According to Anholt's nation brand hexagon (2007; 2010), immigration and related policies are among key factors building a country's competitive identity. Answering RQ2, the results show that in the face of the crisis, the Swedish authorities did not change their digital nation branding strategy nor values to communicate but tried to incorporate the topic into the already existing nation brand platform by clarifying information and emphasizing certain aspects and values. The interviewed Belgian authorities have not taken any digital branding nor communication initiatives in response to the crisis, claiming that they do not have any explicit strategy on this matter. On both sides, however, migration is seen as a subject where the country's image should primarily be correct.

Answering RQ3, although the mid-2010s refugee crisis has not changed general digital nation branding strategies of the Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions, it did bring along certain online communication challenges that the countries had to face – the topic's sensitivity, presence of unwanted online comments at both the Belgian and Swedish side, as well as increased circulation of online misinformation and polarized opinions on Sweden. To mitigate the crisis' impact on the country's reputation, the Swedish authorities took certain measures and communication initiatives to deal with the arisen online challenges. The institutions produced dedicated digital campaigns towards their target audience (connectors and foreign younger people) that would find the content relevant. It was also essential to share coherent information packages on different governmental websites and social media profiles. Also, a special focus was put on proactively creating and bonding transnational communities on social media. The previous literature confirms the importance of proactively fostering civic engagement via social media both during and after crises. Engagement originated from an organization “contributes to relational and behavioral outcomes that increase the likelihood for stakeholders to engage in public advocacy on behalf of organizations” (Yang & Saffer, 2018, p. 427). By engaging with organizations, Internet users are more likely to mention and share these organizations' content, which, in consequence, let messages spread through social networks and reach broader audiences (Yang & Saffer, 2018). Proactively engaging with Internet users and creating a strong community bond on social media can thus be beneficial in terms of influencing public discourse both online and offline, reinforcing a country's image. Sweden's example shows thus that crisis, such as the mid-2010s refugee movement, can be treated as an opportunity to strengthen a country's nation brand by: re-evaluating and improving institutional communication strategies, sharing correct information on the country, promoting its desired image and values. The Belgian governmental institutions decided not to incorporate nor respond to the migration topic in their digital nation branding, letting specific migration institutions and, in some limited cases, regions communicate on it. By this, the country missed perhaps an opportunity to position on the topic and communicate its stand within transnational networks.

Interestingly, neither the Belgian nor Swedish authorities treated asylum seekers as a target audience of their digital nation branding campaigns and have not foreseen related communications at this group. By this, both countries might have missed an opportunity to expand its international online network by a potentially new public. Also, although the

Swedish authorities engaged newcomers in their “Portraits of migration” campaign, we find that both countries could have involved more boundary spanners (Olsson, 2013) and immigrant representatives as a group helping to fight online misinformation and hateful comments.

Our study shows that digital media bring certain challenges, not present in traditional media, that governments active in the Internet sphere need to face. Social media do not always serve best in explaining complex data, trends, and sensitive matters. Also, online media bring a broad public, but also a risk of extended circulation of unwanted comments and misinformation that the governmental institutions need to manage. There are different ways to deal with these challenges, as presented above. As we can see, the mid-2010s crisis’ sensitive character led to different stands and approaches of the countries on how, if at all, communicate online in response to it and how to tackle the related digital challenges. Swedish authorities seem to incorporate the topic within their digital nation branding strategy in a more active and structured way.

We conclude that established nation branding strategies are a useful tool for governments and their institutions to base on during crises challenging the country’s reputation. As the example of Sweden shows, crises can act as an opportunity to reinforce a nation brand by sharing correct information on the country and promoting its values. Digital media help to do so, but also bring communication challenges which can make the already sensitive crisis situation even more difficult to handle by governments, especially in fragmented states. We claim that conducting digital nation branding strategy is essential in today’s world based on interconnectedness in order to gain a competitive advantage over other countries. However, it is pivotal for all governments that their digital nation branding strategy is well-thought off, well-established, long-term oriented, coherent for all involved parties and at the same time adaptable to global shifts, crises, and their specificities. It is also important to consider a specific geopolitical, social, linguistic, and cultural context of countries in order to establish their effective branding strategies.

As we are living in an increasingly internationally interwoven world facing migration challenges, transnationalism, media convergence and digital transformation, we argue that the presented results can be beneficial for future communication strategies of governments and public institutions. At the same time, it is important to conduct further research on how audiences perceive and respond to digital nation branding activities in countries with different cultural backgrounds and governmental structures, also beyond the Western perspective.

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