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# **The National Film Industry as a Component of National Identity and Nation Branding**

International Business

Bachelor's thesis

Turku School of Economics

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Movies are a significant part of popular culture. They can be effective in communicating aspects of a nation through their audiovisual and story-driven nature. This both connects the nation internally and spreads the narrative across borders. From a nation branding perspective, movies can be a valuable asset if used correctly because they are a widespread form of media and easily approachable. The main research questions that this thesis aims to answer is how a national film industry contributes to a country's national brand, and, further, how it can bridge the gap between nation branding and national identity.

The findings of this thesis conclude that nations can use movies to effectively communicate five dimensions of their brand: people, environment, culture, history, and politics. Emotionally charged pieces of media, such as movies, offer viewers relatable characters, engaging stories, and new points of view. As transportation theory suggests, the more immersed a viewer is, the easier it is for the story to alter their attitudes, ideas, and values. Additionally, it has been found that the piece of media does not necessarily need to elicit positive emotions for the acceptance of presented attitudes to take place. This also supports the notion that movies are effective tools of nation branding.

**Key words:** nation branding, national identity, national cinema, popular culture

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Elokuvat ovat keskeinen osa populaarikulttuuria. Niiden audiovisuaalinen ja tarinakeskeinen luonne voi tehdä niistä tehokkaita kansakunnan eri osa-alueiden näyttämiseksi, mikä sekä yhdistää kansaa, että jakaa tietoa muihin maihin. Kansallisen brändäyksen näkökulmasta elokuvat voivat olla oikein käytettynä tehokas työkalu, sillä ne ovat helposti lähestyttäviä ja nykyteknologian ansiosta saatavilla laajoille yleisöille. Tämä tutkielma pyrkii vastaamaan siihen, miten kansallinen elokuvateollisuus osallistuu kansallisen brändin rakentamiseen, ja miten se yhdistää kansallisen brändäyksen ja kansallisidentiteetin.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että elokuvissa välittyy viisi eri kansakunnan osa-alueita: ihmiset, ympäristö, kulttuuri, historia ja politiikka. Tunnepitoiset elokuvat tarjoavat katsojille samaistuttavia hahmoja, mielenkiintoisia tarinoita ja uusia näkökulmia. Transportaatioteorian mukaan tarinassa esitetyt asenteet, ideat ja arvot omaksutaan helpommin, kun tarinan kokija eläytyy siihen vahvasti. Nykyisen tutkimustiedon valossa näyttää myös siltä, että tarinan herättämien tunteiden ei tarvitse olla välttämättä positiivisia haluttujen asenteiden välittymiseksi. Myös tämä tukee elokuvien tehokkuutta kansallisen brändäyksen työkaluina.

**Avainsanat:** kansallinen brändäys, kansallisidentiteetti, kansallinen elokuvateollisuus, populaarikulttuuri

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## 1 Introduction

Much like multinational corporations, countries compete on the global stage for power and resources. This ongoing back-and-forth is built on projecting a positive image to, for example, ease cooperation, establish hierarchies, and attract investment (Jordan, 2009, 43). All entities project an image to the outside world, but it may not always reflect what actors within this entity want or identify with. Branding, be it of a nation, a place, or a company, aims to ensure that this image as a whole stays up to date and accurate (Anholt, 2006, 97). Anholt further suggests that because the brand of a nation ought to be something engaging that members of the nation can stand behind, the creation should not be only in the hands of bureaucrats but done together with representatives of various fields. This can include, for example, economists, historians, public affairs specialists, writers, comedians, and film makers.

National identity is created by the people (Fan, 101, 2010), so when working on the nation's branding, the parties involved need to build on existing features that define the nation. Because nation branding aims to represent an entire nation, it can be assumed that the more it leans on factors that are an integral part of what the people themselves consider to be a part of their nation, the stronger the brand can be. While popular culture, also called mass culture, has been deemed commercial and a pacifier of the masses, its role in bringing people together and communicating values and identities is cannot be denied (Edensor, 2002, 13).

Movies are considered popular culture which has long been deemed less valuable than 'high' culture, such as opera, classical music, and theatre. The validity of popular culture as a representation of a nation has been looked down upon, as it has been considered commercial and simple. National elites and governments would want the country to be associated with manifestations of 'high' culture, such as national galleries, theatres, and opera houses. (Edensor, 2002, 12–15.)

Cinema has been around for approximately 120 years, but in that time, it has cemented itself as one of the most important aspects of popular culture. Over the past century, filmmaking has improved and changed drastically, going from silent, black and white films to highly realistic products that can combine computer graphics seamlessly with live-action footage. Additionally, through the development of technology, especially the

internet, movies are now more widely accessible than ever. Global streaming services, such as Netflix, Disney+ and Hulu, offer their clients a catalogue of thousands of movies to choose from. The global film industry was worth 74 billion USD in 2023 and is projected to grow to 85 billion USD in 2024 (Statista, 2024).

What has stayed unchanged, however, is how movies have the ability to convey feelings, stories, and different points of view to anyone viewing them. Thus, they can be considered powerful tools in shaping the viewers' opinions regarding whatever the subject is. The fact that movies are viewed voluntarily is a feature that can be thought to strengthen the influence of them as marketers of a nation's positive image. As opposed to regular campaigns where different features of a nation, such as the scenery or food culture, are advertised, movies are a more subtle way to promote through product placement. When watching an advertisement, the viewer is aware of that the goal is to inspire certain behaviours, such as buying goods, travelling somewhere, or adopting a particular opinion. This is supported by the findings of Gupta and Lord (1998), who found that various product placement strategies are more effective than advertisements, since viewers are more likely to remember the presented brands when they appear in connection to content that already evokes emotion for other reasons.

In this thesis as examples of film being used as indirect tools for nation branding, two war movies will be inspected closer: *Das Boot* (1981) directed by Wolfgang Petersen, and *Sisu* (2022) directed by Jalmari Helander. The movies contribute to their homelands' nation branding but are not directly part of any branding campaigns. While both showcase Nazis during World War II, the portrayals of war and soldiers differ drastically. Each film was made with international audiences in mind, but where *Sisu* leverages Finnish stereotypes and showy action sequences, *Das Boot* utilizes the reputation of European art-house films and the respected Weimar cinema. From a nation branding point of view, the purpose of these movies is to promote certain aspects of the nation. *Das Boot* aims to rehumanize low-ranking German soldiers and *Sisu's* goal is to show international audiences Lapland's beautiful nature.

## 1.1 Aim of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to explore the way a national film industry contributes to a country's national brand, and, further, how it can bridge the gap between nation branding and national identity. The sub-questions explored in this thesis are:



- What are nation branding and national identity?
- How do nation branding and national identity relate to each other?
- What is the role of the national film industry in nation branding and national identity?

This topic is relevant because of the increasing direct flow of information between citizens of different nations, and the importance of popular culture as a factor in how nations are seen by external and internal actors, such as citizens, companies, and governments. In this thesis, the focus will be on Western nations to keep the scope manageable. The proposed framework and findings can be applied to different nations' film industries and their outputs to determine what aspects of the nation are highlighted in their movie production.

## **1.2 Key concepts and structure of the thesis**

Nation branding has been thoroughly researched, but an agreed upon definition of the term has not been reached. While nation branding and country branding have been studied side-by-side and the concepts have been used interchangeably, in this thesis specifically the term nation branding will be used to make it easier to draw a bridge to national identity. Depending on the end goal and focus, nation branding has been defined in a number of ways. It is rooted in four different areas of study: country-of-origin (COO) effect, place or destination branding, public diplomacy, and national identity. The COO effect and place or destination branding are most concerned with economic interests, such as exports and tourism. (Fan, 2010, 98.) This thesis will focus on cinema as a component of building the brand, and the link between nation branding and national identity, but to further explain the phenomenon, the COO effect, place branding, and public diplomacy will be defined. National identity will be discussed separately in greater detail. Transportation theory suggests that when a piece of media is highly immersive so that the viewer feels "transported" into the story, they are more likely to accept the values or ideas presented (Clark & Green, 2013, 356). For the sake of clarity, the terms cinema, film industry, and movie industry will be used interchangeably.

In chapter two, national identity and nation branding will be discussed separately and in relation to each other. These two larger concepts will be brought together through a

proposed framework presented in Figure 1. In chapter three, two example films, the West-German *Das Boot* (1981) and the Finnish *Sisu* (2022), will be introduced and explored utilizing the theory covered in chapters two and three. National cinema and its relation to nation branding and national identity will also be discussed utilizing the proposed framework. Additionally, transportation theory will be introduced to deepen the understanding of movies' effectiveness in communicating values and attitudes. In chapter four the findings will be summarised and further discussed. Limitations of this thesis and implications for further research will also be presented.

## **2 National identity and nation branding**

### **2.1 National identity**

The concept of national identity is complex and difficult to define without picking apart nation and identity as separate entities. To clarify what national identity consists of, nation and identity will first be explored separately.

#### **2.1.1 Understanding nation and identity**

The construction of a nation has been defined from multiple different angles. The nation can be viewed as a political entity and as a cultural entity, but also a combination of the two. As a political entity, a nation is essentially based on citizenship and is therefore comparable to a country or a state (Skinner & Kubacki, 2007, 306). Ernest Gellner (1983, 6) defines a nation as a cultural entity: “two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating”. Alfred Cobban (1969, 121), in turn views the nation as both a political and cultural identity: “the modern Western European conception of the nation has largely been a product of the fusion of these two tendencies, combining a measure of free individual choice with a consciousness of the inherited traditions and values of communal life”. For the purpose of this thesis, a nation will be defined as a collective of people in a connected geographical area tied together by shared social, cultural, and political attributes, as well as history.

Identity is an ambiguous concept and can be understood in different ways, such as a ground for social or political action, a collective phenomenon, a core aspect of the self, and a product of social or political action (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, 6–8). Mayer and Palmowski, in their article “European Identities and the EU – The Ties that Bind the Peoples of Europe” (2004, 577–589) suggest that individual and group identities are built from interaction with people both inside and outside the ‘we-group’. While aspects of identities can be determined by, for example, geographical and familial origin, the individual meanings are fleshed out through human interaction. They name five categories of identity in connection to European identity: history, culture, constitution, institutions, and law. While these categories have been determined with the European identity in mind, they can also be applied to national identity.

### 2.1.2 Defining national identity

For a nation to exist, there is a requirement of an ‘other’ that tests the unity of the inhabitants (Triandafyllidou, 1998, 598). National identity can be defined as a structure of shared beliefs or opinions, emotional attitudes, behavioural dispositions, and oftentimes linguistic dispositions, as well as solidarity-oriented and distinguishing dispositions in relation to outgroups separate from the national ‘we-group’. This identity manifests as and is shaped by social actors and practices, such as the state, institutions, media, and everyday social interaction (Wodak et al., 2009, 28–29). It may be viewed as an ideology, a social movement or an awareness bringing people together, as well as internal coherence or external distinctiveness (Kowert, 1998, 4–5). National identity has several different dimensions, both internal and external. Internally, it may stem from, for example, common culture, a belief in common descent, and a specific territory over which the nation has sovereign control. External defining elements are ‘significant others’, such as other nations or ethnic groups that contest the ‘we-group’s’ culture or territory. (Triandafyllidou, 1998, 599–601.)

The functions of national identity, as proposed by Francis Fukuyama (2018), are physical security, the quality of government, facilitating economic development, promoting mutual trust, encouraging the maintenance of social safety nets, and making liberal democracy possible. These six are better taken care of when actors are motivated by something they can be proud of, which, in this case, is the nation they feel a sense of belonging. (Fukuyama, 2018, 9–11.)

Based on existing literature Kubacki and Skinner (2006, 287) have compiled determinants of national identity. Presented below in Table 1 are the most relevant findings regarding this thesis. Also presented in the table is how these determinants connect directly to what movies reflect about a nation, as they align with attributes proposed by Gupta et al. (2020). This comparison illustrates the similarities between what cinema presents about a nation and what national identity is thought to be comprised of.

Table 1 Nation's attributes reflected by cinema (Gupta et al. 2020) and determinants of national identity (Kubacki and Skinner, 2006)

Gupta et al. (2020): Nation's attributes reflected by cinema	Kubacki and Skinner (2006): Determinants of national identity
Infrastructure	Residence
Culture	Cultural symbols, culture, language, popular culture, religious beliefs
Politics	Political identity, systems, religious beliefs, passport
Social norms	Values of communal life, religious beliefs
Environment	Residence, clearly defined territory

For the purpose of this thesis, national identity will be defined as the sense of belonging to a nation that stems from and is presented through shared history, culture, language, political culture, social norms, clearly defined territory, and religious beliefs.

## 2.2 Nation branding

Nation branding is rooted in four different areas of study: country-of-origin (COO) effect, place or destination branding, public diplomacy, and national identity (Fan, 2010, 98). The country-of-origin effect place or destination branding, and public diplomacy all link to different areas of nation branding. National identity functions as the starting point for the nation's brand (Fan, 2010, 100–101). The country-of-origin effect has been widely researched starting from the 1960's, which makes it one of the oldest adjacent forms of nation branding research. The country of origin is a product attribute that is comparable to, for example, a brand name, and is usually presented as "Made in (country name)". It has no direct link to product performance but is often viewed as a marker of quality and reliability. (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995, 883–884.) The COO effect stems from the producer country's reputation and thus varies between product groups. For example, Brazilian coffee enjoys high popularity, but complicated production machines made in Brazil are not viewed as reliable even if they are manufactured by a subsidiary of a highly regarded company. The COO effect applies to both industrial and consumer purchasing decisions. Highly manufactured goods are often viewed in a more positive light when the

COO is a more developed country. Less developed countries are more likely to have a better reputation as exporters of raw materials. (Bilkey and Nes, 1982, 89–92.)

Place or destination branding is a widely researched topic that started garnering interest after the turn of the new millennium, but the literature remains scattered and inconsistent. As of 2024, there are 21 theories that have been used to study the phenomenon, but there is no specific set of theories to rely on. (Swain et al., 2024, 535.) Place branding refers to actions taken by local and national governments, as well as non-state actors, to attract investment, drive exports, protect local or domestic business, and advance political, social, and economic interests. It focuses specifically on branding a specific destination with a focus on attributes like architecture, infrastructure, the economy, and political climate. It's also thought to intersect with the COO effect, since the latter is dependent on how the COO is viewed externally. Additionally, both seek to find out in what ways place images can be utilized in marketing. (Papadopoulos, 2004, 36-37.)

Public diplomacy can be thought of as political branding or a political instrument. It's a way for state and non-state actors to advance their interests by, for example, setting public agendas and influencing discourse, but also to gauge the public opinion and evaluate the success rate of their decisions. (Gregory, 2008, 276.) Public diplomacy is a government-to-people form of foreign policy that is most often utilized in times of dispute to influence foreign audiences and, through them, their governments. The nature of a nation's public diplomacy aim is built on history and culture, and ranges from relationship building to persuasion. (Szondi, 2008, 3–9.) An example, the US-American view of public diplomacy differs from the European view. For Americans, it relates to the ideological battle of the Cold war, anti-Americanism post-9/11, and combatting terrorism. The European utilization of public diplomacy centres around communicating identity, boosting the economy, and advancing policy goals. (Gregory, 2008, 275.)

Nation branding can be understood as shaping a nation's overall image in the outside world. While the image is, in the end, formed by external actors, such as other governments and their citizens, nations can attempt to influence these views similar to how commercial brands do. The difficulty lies, however, in the fact that a nation's brand cannot be made up but must be rooted in reality and the identity of the people. (Fan, 2010, 100–101.) This is one of the criticized aspects of the phenomenon; who can speak on behalf of the nation? Branding campaigns can prove especially difficult in turbulent times,

such as political change, and internal or external conflict, as those tend to shape the very foundations of the nation. (Jordan, 2014, 283.) Branding strategists do not have the power to decide the direction in which a nation develops. They can only try and build a convincing package from the different aspects they have to work with. For example, the Brand India initiative proved nationally controversial, since the projected image of India as a rising economic superpower clashed harshly with the widespread poverty that still exists in the country today (Jordan, 2014, 287). In this thesis, nation branding will be understood as various state-backed cultural, political, social, and economic efforts to influence a nation's image in the eyes of foreign audiences, such as other governments, foreign businesses, and citizens, as well as to improve the nation's internal spirit. The focus is on indirect contributions to the branding effort which consist of acts and products that are not directly a part of a nation branding campaign.

### 2.3 National identity as a base for nation branding

For the purpose of this thesis nation branding will be inspected through the proposed framework presented below in Figure 2.

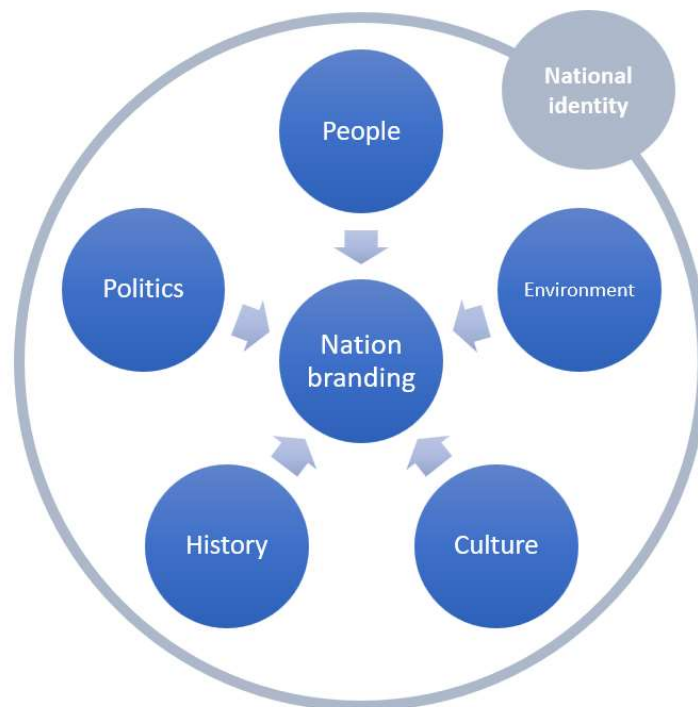


Figure 1 Aspects of nation branding in the bounds of national identity

The five chosen aspects of nation branding have been selected based on the research by Gupta et al. (2020), Fan (2010), and Mayer and Palmowski (2004). Gupta et al. in their article “Nations as brands: Cinema’s place in the branding role” suggest that cinema reflects five attributes of a nation: infrastructure, culture, politics, social norms, and environment. Fan, in his article “Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding” highlights four dimensions of a nation brand: political, economic, social, and cultural. The five aspects chosen for this framework are people, environment, culture, history, and politics. People represents the social dimension, whereas environment, culture and politics represent their respective dimensions. History is presented separately because while it could be discussed as a part of people and culture, it’s a noteworthy aspect of national identity as highlighted by Mayer and Palmowski in “European Identities and the EU – The Ties that Bind the Peoples of Europe” (2004). Additionally, national identity is included in the figure as an all-encompassing factor because national identity acts as the foundation for nation branding (Fan, 2010, 100), and popular culture, cinema included, works within and shapes national identity (Edensor, 2002, 16).

### 2.3.1 People

People can be considered the most valuable asset to nation branding, as majority of the communication happens through them (Gudjonsson, 2005, 288). It is, however, one of the toughest aspects of branding to master. It’s tied closely to national identity, which in turn cannot be defined and accepted by anyone but the people themselves (Fan, 2010, 101). While the people aren’t expected to align with the brand (Vecchi et al., 2019, 76), nation branding still has to stem from national identity in one way or the other (Dinnie, 2007, 127).

Nation branding aims to foster positive emotional ties to a certain nation. Especially when targeting national audiences, building a strong self-image and dignity strengthens this connection. External recognition of the group is also important because it legitimizes the actions and existence of the nation. (Browning, 2015, 199–201.) It can thus be argued that a brand which is both strong and aligns with national identity does not only benefit the nation in its external relations, but also strengthens internal cohesion and the national spirit.



### 2.3.2 Environment

Beautiful scenery and architecture are central pull-factors for tourists. Environment as a part of nation branding is closely linked to destination branding, which focuses on creating a favourable image of a certain place to attract, for example, investments and tourists. (Papadopulos, 2004, 36–37.) Easily recognisable landmarks or aspects of nature are often some of the first things that come to mind about a nation, such as the lakes of Finland or the Berlin wall. Additionally, these environmental details can hold significant historical, political, or cultural meaning, from which their infamy may also stem from.

Territory is also significant for national identity, as nations use, in part, geographical locations to define themselves. A sense of place connected to nationalistic ideas produces recognisable imagery of certain landscapes or places that are accepted as symbols of the nation. Certain places may be important because they are considered the original heartland of the nation, or because they acted as the stage for a significant historical event. (Storey, 2012, 111–112.) The lack of recognition is seen as a threat to the nation, because it entails the possibility that the borders of the territory will not be respected.

### 2.3.3 Culture

Culture is largely leveraged in nation branding, since many instantly recognisable aspects of a nation stem from it. For tourists, experiencing different cultures may be an important part of travelling. A nation's traditional food, special events, and everyday customs are some of what travellers take into consideration when choosing their destination. Culture is also a vital part of national identity, since it encompasses much of what brings people of the same nationality together. A great example of this is music, which has been connecting humans for thousands of years and drawing out strong emotions. Music also plays an important role in the media it is connected to. Its appearance in, for example, a specific film or musical is a significant part of why that piece is listened to (Sanfilippo et al., 2020).

Cultural diplomacy is based on cultural exchanges and is less concerned with policy interests, though creative arts and media have the ability cross political boundaries and build bridges. The Western hegemony of the United States provides continuous proof of the power of cultural exchanges. (Schneider, 2009, 261.) A large part of the US-American

brand is popular culture whose features, such as Marvel superheroes or Disney characters are known worldwide.

### 2.3.4 History

History can be leveraged in a number of ways in nation branding through, for example, long-standing traditions, famous individuals, and national reputation. Japanese martial arts are still practiced and the works of famous Russian authors of the 1800's are still read to this day. Additionally, as an example, it can be argued that the post-War 'New German Cinema' of the 1960's and -70's utilized the historically significant reputation of Weimar cinema of the 1920's and 30's to re-establish West-Germany as a home for respectable and independent Western film (Filmportal.de).

The idea that history is written by victors is controversial, not only because the concept of victor is subjective, but also because the so-called losers of history may also use it to their advantage. Different sides of any given event or conflict have their own narrative of what happened, and it's used to strengthen national identities (Mayer & Palmowski, 2004, 579). It can also be used in nation branding, like Finns have done with the Winter War (1939-1940). Even though the Soviet Union won in the end, Finland's success against the military superpower is kept in high regard and the "spirit of the Winter War" is talked about to this day.

### 2.3.5 Politics

The political brand of a nation showcases it as an actor among other countries, but also the state of internal affairs. The image is built through the actions of government officials, less so through actual campaigns. Governments compete for support on the global stage, and strategies of nation branding can be applied when trying to win over foreign audiences, both governments and people. The political brand connects nation branding to public diplomacy, as it is a government-centred nation branding strategy. It is an important part of the overall nation brand, as it reaches areas not accessible to the other dimensions. (Garbacz Rawson, 2007, 215–220.)

For example, Germany has utilized nation branding to try and leave behind its past legacy of ethnocentrism in favour of a more agreeable and open brand (Jordan, 2014, 287). This rebranding can be considered a successful one, since Germany has established itself as a

respected political and economic actor not only within Europe and the EU, but also globally.

### 3 The national film industry and expressing nationality

National cinema is often characterized by being based on indigenous traditions, discussing domestic problems, and following national concerns (Hake, 2013, 111). It can be a powerful tool in nation branding if used correctly but has not been widely used in democratic countries. For government actors, the challenge lies in, producing a film that elicits positive or compelling feelings in viewers, but not being too involved so that the film comes off as propaganda. Language has also posed a challenge in international distribution for non-English-speaking films, as they have not earned much recognition from significant award committees. (Lee, 2022, 95–96.)

The role of national cinema can be viewed through a protectionist argument as presented by Ian Jarvie in “National Cinema: A Theoretical Assessment” (2000, 71;75–76). The argument presupposes that movies and mass culture are different from traditional forms of high culture, such as music, painting, and theatre. It suggests that, like other infant industries, national cinema should also be protected from international competition, as movies are central in modern communication and technological prowess reads as modern strength. Jarvie further suggests that once movie technology is mastered, the groundwork for adopting more advanced technologies is sturdier. This idea is supported by the quick development and competition of film technology. Set design, cameras, computer graphics, and distribution have all advanced with long strides. Two examples explored in the next section are Wolfgang Petersen’s *Das Boot* (1981) and Jalmari Helander’s *Sisu* (2022) sought to showcase the advanced filmmaking capabilities of West-Germany and Finland, and to compete with US-made movies on the global market. For example, for the distributor of *Das Boot*, Bernd Eichinger, making a successful movie meant following the demands of international audiences and raising the bar for domestic productions so they could compete with what global film industries have to offer (Baer, 2012, 20).

According to the findings of Gupta et al. (2020), cinema showcases five different aspects of a country – infrastructural, cultural, social, political, and environmental – through which foreign audiences build part of their understanding of the country. They concluded that cinema is able to communicate these five attributes in a way that builds and affects the viewers’ expectations of the nation. Movies possess attributes that make them a good medium of nation branding: captivating stories, colorful moving images, strong emotional responses, and clear establishment of location.

### 3.1 The Second World War from two perspectives

Wars are times of extreme distress and test the strength of nations. Their harsh reality comes packaged in patriotic, often even nationalistic, imagery to keep morale high, the nation unified, and to justify violent acts against the opposing side. War-time communications rarely match how the events are covered after, since their purpose is not to inspect the morality of war, but to urge people to hold their own. However, naturally, the opposing side is portrayed in a critical light from the beginning and the inspection of their morality is encouraged.

As shared history is one of the categories of national identity, wars remain powerful unifiers of nations long after peace has returned. Be it national trauma or stories of triumph, the Second World War and the national myths born after have been significant in shaping European identities (Mayer & Palmowski, 2004, 579). Because nation branding is significantly affected by special events and other countries (Fan, 2010, 101), wars can be considered worthy of closer research in relation to the phenomenon.

Two war movies, Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981) and Jalmari Helander's *Sisu* (2022), were chosen to illustrate further how nation branding and national identity can be advanced through film. Though both take place during World War II and depict Nazi German soldiers as central characters, the tone and themes of these movies differ drastically. Where *Das Boot* is a serious, slow-paced, and character-driven anti-war story, *Sisu* depicts gruesome violence in an over-the-top, entertaining, and idealized manner. *Sisu* clearly positions Nazi soldiers as the antagonists of the story, but *Das Boot* seeks to separate the concepts of Nazi and soldier from each other as far as it concerns the U-boat crew.

#### 3.1.1 *Das Boot*: sympathy for the villain

*Das Boot* (1981) is an adaptation of Lothar-Günther Buchheim's novel (1973) of the same name and follows the crew of the U-96 as they set out on patrol in the Battle of the Atlantic. It was produced in the early years of an uptick of neoliberalism in the 1980's in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany). The shift in status-quo could be observed in the country's film industry, as funding and policies pushed the industry toward more a more market-driven model to promote German film as a commodity on the global market. (Baer, 2012, 24–27.) As the cross-border trade and co-operation

increased, West Germany sought to brand itself as a liberal Western nation among West-European countries and the United States. Wolfgang Petersen is one of the most widely known German film directors internationally and has built a successful career in Hollywood after the release of *Das Boot* (Baer, 2012, 21).

*Das Boot* was one of the first clearly export-oriented West German films after the Second World War and the era of 'New German Cinema' of the 1960's and -70's. It successfully combined elements of the high-budget Hollywood action film and European art-house cinema (Baer, 2012, 19). At the time of its release, it was possibly the most expensive production in German cinema history (Variety, 31.12.1980). For domestic audiences, it represented a more conservative image of the German soldier, highlighting the struggles of them as individuals, and for international audiences, it acted as a European "art film" while distancing the regular soldier from the Nazi ideology and country leaders. This promoted the idea of Germans first and foremost as individuals, also in a way victims of the war. The movie is built in such a way that the audience easily forgets that they are, in fact, sympathising with and rooting for the survival of Nazi soldiers.

As an example, the greatest accomplishments in the movie can be considered personal for the crew and has less to do with military success. In one instance, the U-boat manages to sink enemy tankers and must withstand hours of depth charges. After finally resurfacing, the men are at first ecstatic about hitting the enemy, but their joy quickly turns into horror and dread as they notice enemy soldiers still trapped on the burning tanker. The momentary cheer is completely wiped away as the crew have to come face to face with the fact that they are not sinking empty ships. Every other accomplishment in the story is first and foremost personal: surviving enemy attacks, fixing the U-boat in seemingly impossible situations, and making it through a three-week raging storm.

As the central setting is a submarine, the crew is not only physically, but also mentally isolated from the rest of the war and mostly even from the ideology they are fighting for. Only one of the crew members is shown to agree with Nazi ideas, while the rest of the men, especially the captain himself, mock him for his devotion and either criticize or ignore the high command. The submarine also allows for the movie to highlight famous German engineering and efficiency, as the vessel withstands multiple enemy attacks, and the crew manages to keep it operational despite continuous damage from depth charges.

### 3.1.2 *Sisu*: the underdog with the upper hand

Jalmari Helander's *Sisu* (2022) tells the story of a Finnish gold digger who spirals into a one-man war against retreating Nazi troops during the Lapland war. After the cooperation between Finland and Nazi-Germany ceased, the two nations fought as the Nazis retreated through Lapland destroying villages and infrastructure.

Most of the dialogue in the movie is in English, and only towards the end Finnish is heard with increasing frequency. Most, if not all, characters are either of German or Finnish nationality. Curiously, the Nazi soldiers converse in English also amongst themselves, not only with the Finns they encounter. This may be due to two main reasons: the actors are of different nationalities (e.g. British, Finnish, and Norwegian) and, more importantly, it improves the film's accessibility among international audiences. *Sisu* was a hit in the United States garnering over 1,40 million USD in ticket sales on the night of its premiere, 28.4.2023, which made it the fifth most popular movie in the country that day measured by ticket sales. It was screened in 1 006 theatres nationwide. (HS.fi, 29.4.2023.) As Hollywood is recognised as the capital of global, especially Western, film production, *Sisu's* success in the US was an important stepping stone for further international distribution. In 2024, *Sisu* also won Jussi-prizes for best cinematography, set design, makeup, and editing (Yle.fi, 22.3.2024).

The display of Lappish scenery enforces the existing image of Finland and its Northern parts. Lapland is a popular tourist destination for both Finnish and international travellers. According to Statistics Finland (26.1.2023), in December of 2022 alone the total recorded number of overnight stays was 1,80 million, of which 0,73 million were by tourists from outside Finland. By combining admired Finnish landscapes, the myth of Finnish *sisu*, and over the top action, the filmmakers have created a highly functional export product to further promote what is already well-established as a part of Finland's nation branding. The branding here works in both directions; the film benefits from existing ideas of Finland, and the nation's image is spread across the globe via the distribution of the movie. Sony Pictures bought global distribution rights for *Sisu* even before filming had begun. Director Jalmari Helander told Yle that the agreement with Sony helped secure funding for the movie and may also help other Finnish filmmakers. (Yle.fi, 14.6.2021.)

When filming the environment, the cinematography of *Sisu* is comparable to adverts for tourism in Lapland. While the product, beautiful scenery, is essentially the same, the

viewers of *Sisu* are more receptive to the imagery, as they are also immersed in the story itself. This is supported by transportation theory which will be further explained in section 3.3. Additionally, despite *Sisu*'s highly violent content, the movie can be thought of as an effective advocate for the Lappish environment. This is supported by the findings of Yang and Bergh (2017), who concluded that for a movie to have a lasting desired effect on the viewer, it is more important for the content to be immersive rather than elicit positive emotions.

Further, the framing of the Lapland war first highlights the cruel and overpowered nature of the Nazi soldiers, but as the story progresses, the once defeated Finns begin to strike back even if they are outnumbered. This narrative builds on existing stereotypes of both Finns and Nazi soldiers. During the Second World War, Finland was known for successfully fending off the Soviets in the Winter war and managing to hold the line for years during the Continuation war. Finding the strength to best an overpowered enemy is a part of what the world-famous *sisu* builds on. The Nazis, on the other hand, were known for their cruelty and efficiency. Using this frame *Sisu* not only bolsters the idea of Finns as tough fighters, but also justifies the over-the-top violence used by the main character.

### **3.2 Movies as brand ambassadors and a playground for national identity**

Movies can be thought to combine national identity and nation branding, as they are the product of filmmakers of a certain nationality and made to be distributed to audiences both at home and abroad. National identity, like culture, is something that isn't actively considered, but manifests itself continuously through, for example, values, attitudes, customs, and language. Because the nation's brand needs to be rooted in reality (Fan, 2010, 100–101) and branding campaigns may prove difficult especially in times of uncertainty (Jordan, 2014, 283), utilizing the creations of domestic filmmakers can lead to an output that accurately reflects the nation.

Next, the framework presented in Figure 1 will be applied to national cinema to illustrate how aspects of nation branding and national identity are communicated through movies. The findings are summed up below in Table 2.



Table 2 The proposed framework applied to national cinema

	Nation branding and national identity	National cinema
<b>People</b>	Communicators of the national brand, ties to external communities and actors	Portrayals of regular folk, relatable characters across time and nations
<b>Environment</b>	Territory, infrastructure, scenery, architecture, place/destination branding	Promoting recognisable scenery and monuments
<b>Culture</b>	Values, customs, traditions, cultural diplomacy	Expressing culture, keeping traditions alive
<b>History</b>	Famous figures, traditions, important events, national reputation	Revisiting and reframing events, remembering historical figures
<b>Politics</b>	Political climate, policymaking, public diplomacy	Spreading values, advancing agendas, promoting economic and political environment, uniting the nation

In the following sections these five dimensions will be discussed in more detail. *Das Boot* and *Sisu* will be further inspected. Additionally, other examples will be provided.

### 3.2.1 People

Films that portray humans as the protagonists are efficient for shedding light on different individuals and collectives in various situations, places, and times. War, horror, and thriller films, for example, show humans in extreme conditions and may deal with questions such as “What does it mean to be human?”, “When does normally unacceptable behaviour become acceptable?”, or “How do people cope with and survive horrific situations?”. They may offer relatability in its rawest form, as the characters have to set aside their surface-level differences and focus on the deeper ties that bind. Slice-of-life drama films, on the other hand, allow for more space to focus on day-to-day lives of regular folk and a more relatable environment for the viewer to become acquainted with them.

Additionally, famous actors and other celebrities can be cast as central characters or brought in to make a cameo. *Das Boot*, for example, takes advantage of Herbert

Grönemeyer's reputation as a heartthrob pop singer to build his character, war correspondent lieutenant Werner, to be sympathetic, vulnerable, and relatable (Baer, 2012, 31). In *Sisu*, the main character is played by Jorma Tommila, who is known for starring in other Finnish action movies such as *Rare Exports* (2010) and *Big Game* (2014).

### 3.2.2 Environment

Because film is an audiovisual medium, it is common that everything is made to look engaging, from the milieu to the characters. Especially beautiful scenery and architecture are often shown to enhance both the story, but also to highlight the best aspects of the filming location. Through the lens of place branding, this can be especially effective in attracting tourists and investment. Destinations may garner infamy from real-life events, or their reputation can stem solely from a successful movie. A well-known example of this is *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy that was filmed in New Zealand. In a Forbes article written by Carol Pinchefsky, Gregg Anderson, the general manager of Western long-haul markets for Tourism New Zealand, states that the country saw a 50 % rise in arrivals after the first part of the trilogy was released in 2001. He says that the aim of the advertising referencing the trilogy is not to sell the movies themselves, but to evoke similar feelings of grandeur through the familiar scenery and use that as the selling point for tourists. (Pinchefsky, 2012.)

In *Sisu*, the environment is one of the focal points of the entire movie. The visuals are colourful and make the barren, yet beautiful, Lappish scenery look like a call for adventure. *Das Boot*, on the other hand, takes place mostly in the U-96 submarine. This means the movie cannot really be used to promote German scenery. It does, however, highlight German engineering skill, because the set is highly realistic, and the crew use their skills to keep the vessel operational even through very harsh conditions.

### 3.2.3 Culture

Movies can be used in preserving customs and traditions for future generations, as their audiovisual nature allows for lifelike capturing of events. The knowledge can connect the nation internally, and increase awareness of the culture abroad. Movies that depict daily life or enjoyable events, such as a vacation or a celebration, often show viewers an idealized version of what life in the place in question could be like. This may inspire travelers to choose their next destination based on how a nation is presented in film. Music

also plays a significant part in film, as it helps in conveying and enhancing emotion through the screen. Soundtracks are so integrated into films that even epic pieces may go unnoticed in a high-tension scene. Additionally, movies may often enforce and simplify certain characteristics of a culture. An example of this is how US-American culture is perceived by the global young audience based on US-American media: as more violent and sexually liberal than it is in reality (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2003, 103–105). It can be thought, based on this, that while the US has cultural hegemony in the Western world, the diverse and overwhelming output of media fails to contribute to the national brand in a desired and accurate manner.

*Das Boot* and *Sisu* are far from everyday life, but both are still inseparable from their respective national cultures. In *Das Boot*, the men are often shown listening to German music that plays over the speakers throughout the submarine. Additionally, the main characters occasionally crack jokes on the expense of Nazi-German political leaders. This both positions the men as critical of the regime and displays German sense of humour which includes appreciation for political satire. In *Sisu*, on the other hand, one of the central aspects of Finnish culture that is shown is the Finns' relationship with nature. As the main character faces an overpowered enemy, he time and again works together with the environment to stay alive. Even in the beginning, he is shown to live in a small camp in the middle of the tundra with only his dog and horse as company. He seems to be at home in nature without special amenities such as running water or electricity.

### 3.2.4 History

Film allows for the visualisation of historical events, such as the Prague Spring or the Moon landing. Infamous, as well as lesser-known figures are brought to life on the big screen. As is the case with all retellings, the narrative and framing change depending on who is the creator, when is the film produced, and for what purpose.

An interesting example of this is the three different film adaptations of Väinö Linna's war novel *Unknown Soldiers* (*Tuntematon sotilas*, 1954). The story follows a fictional machine gun company through the Continuation war. As of 2024, three filmizations have been produced: in 1955, 1985, and 2017. The first film was directed by Edvin Laine in 1955 and has earned its firm position as an important part of the Finnish identity. It is arguably the lightest of the three with theatrical acting typical for 50's films and a focus on the brotherly antics of the main characters. Rauni Mollberg's 1985 adaptation is a

complete turnaround from its predecessor and focuses on the horrific reality that the young men had to live through. The absence of music, handheld camerawork, and the characters' occasional glances through the screen allow the viewer experience the events as a part of the company. The most recent version, Aku Louhimies's 2017 movie and miniseries highlight Finns' relationship with nature through sophisticated cinematography. They also shed light on the home front by introducing the wives of two prominent characters. The newest adaptation is the most export oriented with its grand visuals and Hollywoodesque style, while the earlier filmizations are oriented primarily for the national audience.

Further, through movies both the majority and minority groups can make their voice heard within the boundaries of the current political climate. Widely accepted points of view may change as the event in question fades further in time. Minority groups also often struggle to establish a firm footing to share their experiences especially if they have been treated poorly by the majority. A recent example is director Katja Gauriloff's *Je'vida* (2023) that is the first full-length feature film spoken entirely in Skolt Sámi. It describes the post-War history of Finland's indigenous peoples as they faced forced assimilation into Finnish culture and were pressured to abandon their own heritage. (HS.fi, 19.10.2023.) In Finland, the oppression of the Sámi people has for long been a hushed topic. Only in recent years the indigenous peoples have been able to talk publicly about their experiences and connect with their heritage.

*Das Boot* and *Sisu* also handle history differently. *Das Boot* offers a more serious view of history because the aim of the film is mainly not to entertain, but to show a different side of the fates that audiences are generally less sympathetic towards. *Sisu*, on the other hand, is clearly positioned as an entertainment film which gives it more freedom. This allows for the movie to be over-the-top and not bound by the laws of reality.

### 3.2.5 Politics

In liberal democratic nations art and entertainment are usually not bound by politics, and filmmakers, for example, enjoy freedom of expression. This, in and of itself, sends a message to tourists and investors that the political climate in the country is democratic and open. Heavy censorship and state intervention often mean that certain groups of people are discriminated against based on, for example, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, as is the case in countries such as the People's Republic of China, the Russian

Federation, and Turkmenistan. Films are, however, effective in spreading political values and agendas. As later discussed, *Das Boot* (1981) was produced at a time when the West-German and European political climate was shifting in a more conservative direction (Edinger, 1978, 27) which is evident in the way the soldiers are portrayed in the film: as victims of the war and separated from the Nazi ideology. This serves the political agenda both at home and abroad, as it recognises the suffering of low-ranking German soldiers and sets them apart from the Nazi ideology as people.

Artists and media innovators can work in tandem with policymakers and business leaders to create impactful products that yield insight into their nation (Schneider, 2009, 276). In Europe, for example, the tradition of government backed film industries dates back to World War II times and is rooted in the need for a united national image (Eidsvik, 1979, 61). To this day, national and supranational film industries are fostered by public support mechanisms, such as public funds, fiscal incentives, and obligations for broadcasters to invest in film and audiovisual content. In 2010-2014, a yearly average of EUR 2,53 billion went to 214 funds in 33 countries, with most of that money, 42,6 %, directed to theatrical production. (Milla et al., 2016, 11–13.) However, state-funded films have to find a balance between getting the desired message across and not falling into propaganda territory. Giving free hands to filmmakers both allows for a more authentic product and helps maintain the nation's political brand as liberal and fair.

### **3.3 Transportation theory**

Narrative transportation theory refers to a framework explaining what kind of effect media experiences can have on viewers. When a piece of media is highly immersive so that the viewer feels “transported” into the story, they are more likely to accept the values or ideas presented. Transportation theory introduces different factors that explain the changes in attitude: reduced counterarguing, liking or relating to characters, mirroring experiences, and emotional response. (Clark & Green, 2013, 356.)

The lack of counterarguing refers to the viewer not stopping to question the ideas or values presented in the story and instead accepting them as they come. This may be due to, for example, unwillingness to disrupt the enjoyment with critique or the persuasion going unnoticed because the viewer does not expect it in entertainment. Likeable characters may also influence viewers to adjust their attitudes, because much like real people, they are often taken after. They may also come off as relatable, which could

strengthen the effect. Additionally, relatable situations are also effective in shaping attitudes and beliefs, since mirroring a direct personal experience establishes a firm connection to the viewer. Lastly, media and characters that evoke strong emotional responses are more likely to be remembered and thus their messages will stick better in viewers' minds. (Clark & Green, 2013, 357.)

Yang and Bergh (2017) connected transportation theory to nation branding. High immersion as an enforcer of positive image is supported by the findings. They found that a movie more violent and shocking, yet highly immersive, left viewers with a more positive image of the country it takes place in, than a less engaging romantic drama. This supports the idea that a movie does not necessarily need to elicit only positive emotions to have a lasting, favourable impact.

As transportation theory suggests, a film that the viewer becomes immersed in is more likely to have an effect on the person's attitudes. *Das Boot* and *Sisu* are both deeply immersive films, the former via high tension and constant uncertainty, and the latter because of its fast-paced and flashy action sequences. This, in part, makes both of them fitting for promoting their respective main messages. *Das Boot* seeks to re-humanize low-ranking German soldiers and position West-Germany as a Western democracy, and *Sisu*'s aim is to promote Lappish nature while establishing Finnish film production as capable of competing on the global stage.

## 4 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis is to inspect how the national film industry works as a component of nation branding and national identity. Understanding how movies can be used in nation branding and how national identity manifests in them is important for both state and non-state actors taking part in the branding effort. As information today is widely accessible to the public, it is increasingly vital for policymakers and branding agents to know how to effectively communicate with the people. Popular culture, movies included, has proved highly influential due to it quickly spreading across the globe and being something that people can experience together. Popular culture is not only entertainment, but also an important window into other nations. The sub-questions explored in this thesis are:

- What are nation branding and national identity?
- How do nation branding and national identity relate to each other?
- What is the role of the national film industry in nation branding and national identity?

Nation branding consists of multiple dimensions, such as the economic, political, cultural, social, and environmental. While branding campaigns are usually in the hands of branding agents and government officials, they can work together with professionals from various fields, such as economists, historians, writers, and filmmakers. It can also prove advantageous to utilize outputs that are not directly part of a branding campaign. For example, popular culture is a valuable asset for a nation due to its widespread and easily digestible nature. In this thesis, nation branding is understood as various state-backed cultural, political, social, and economic efforts to influence a nation's image in the eyes of foreign audiences, such as other governments, foreign businesses, and citizens, as well as to improve the nation's internal spirit.

National identity builds on both internal and external factors, arguably the most important of which is the sense of a 'we-group'. The 'we-group' produces both a sense of belonging to one's own nation and a sense of separation from the people of other nations. These differences manifest in different dimensions, such as culture, social norms, politics, religion, and territorial questions. National identity can be, in part, thought of as the ties that bind a nation together, since, for example, maintaining physical security, ensuring

the quality of government, facilitating economic development, and promoting mutual trust is more efficient when a collective sense of belonging exists. In this thesis, national identity is defined as the sense of belonging to a nation that stems from and is presented through shared history, culture, language, political culture, social norms, clearly defined territory, and religious beliefs.

Nation branding is rooted in national identity, and can be, in part, considered the practice of communicating the identity to foreign audiences. The people of the nation cannot be expected to adapt to the brand, so the brand needs to align with reality. Branding agents cannot speak on behalf of the nation or create the brand out of thin air, but instead they must work with existing features and package them in a favourable and digestible way. As presented in the suggested framework in Figure 1, the aspects of nation branding – people, environment, culture, history, and politics – function within the boundaries of national identity.

National cinema is often characterized by being based on indigenous traditions, discussing domestic problems, and following national concerns. Movies can be a powerful nation branding tool but have to strike a balance between eliciting a favourable image and not venturing into propaganda. The national film industry can be considered an arena where the manifestation of national identity is condensed into an easily distributable product. Because, especially in free democratic states, artistic liberty is celebrated and filmmakers have the ability to produce movies without state intervention, the output can be considered authentic. National identity, like culture, is something that isn't actively considered, but manifests itself continuously through, for example, values, attitudes, customs, and language.

The five dimensions of the suggested framework can also be used to illustrate how nation branding and national identity connect through movies. Films that portray humans as the protagonists are efficient for shedding light on different individuals and collectives in various situations, places, and times. The audiovisual nature of movies allows for the engaging portrayal of the environment. Regarding culture, movies can be used in preserving customs and traditions for future generations, as they can be captured in a lifelike manner. Historical events and figures are also brought to life on the big screen, and new narratives are explored as new information is discovered. Lastly, while



filmmakers may not be directly influenced by the government, politics still affect their work, be it through the overall political climate or larger political questions of the time.

Two examples, *Das Boot* and *Sisu*, illustrate how even movies that cover negative topics, such as war, can be used indirectly in nation branding and to communicate national identity. As transportation theory suggests, a highly immersive movie, even one that elicits negative emotion, can leave a positive impression of the depicted places and people. *Das Boot*, born in a time of a conservative uptick in European politics, brings forward Nazi German soldiers as people separated from their ideology and shows off the engineering proficiency that Germans are known for. *Sisu*, on the other hand, takes advantage of the mythical Finnish *sisu* and combines breathtaking Lappish nature with over-the-top globally competitive action scenes.

Both movies aim to show the technological capabilities of their country-of-origin. At the time of *Das Boot's* release, West-Germany was still trying to rebuild its brand as a respected Western nation. The movie's complicated set design and advanced cinematography spoke in favour of the Germans' previously known technical and engineering capabilities. Similarly, *Sisu* is made in the spirit of high-budget, world-class action films. Finland is not internationally known for its movie production, but technological proficiency has been a component of the Finnish brand especially after Nokia's success in the early 2000's.

The research met its objectives well. The existing literature was comprehensive and sufficient to answer the sub-questions. Combining theory and concepts from different fields of study provided interesting insights into how national identity and nation branding merge in popular culture, in this case movies. A limitation of this thesis is the focus on stable democracies and the positive effects of nation branding through film. The findings of this thesis can be applied to different nations' film industries and their outputs to determine what aspects of the nation are highlighted in their movie production. As audiovisual media has become the dominant channel for the flow of information, it is important to understand how different forms of it can be used in nation branding. Regarding further research, there is a lack of cohesion in nation branding research and related theories.

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