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Conceptualizing nation branding in the field of higher education: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on a qualitative systematic literature review of 40 peer-reviewed articles across multiple disciplines to examine how higher education (HE) is framed within nation branding discourse. Using Kaneva's, N. (2011). Nation branding: Toward an agenda for critical research. *International Journal of Communication*, 5(25), 117–141. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/704/514>) tripartite model of nation branding approaches as an analytical lens, we analyze how different perspectives assign roles to HE and reveal the close entanglement between nation branding and the internationalization of HE. We find that the economic-technical approach predominates, often portraying HE as an instrument of national competitiveness. The study identifies key conceptual and geographical gaps and suggests alternative perspectives that could enrich future scholarship and practice. It highlights the need for more inclusive and critically engaged approaches, particularly as global educational alliances, international student flows, and geopolitical landscapes continue to evolve.

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1. Introduction

Nations are constantly engaged in efforts to promote favorable identities and images. More recently, these activities have been reframed as 'nation branding' and have become a growing focus of governments worldwide (Jordan, 2014; Varga, 2013). Various cross-national indices, such as the Nation Brands Index, Country Brand Ranking, and Future Brand Country Index, have emerged to rank nations based on the perceived image and value of their brands. These rankings reflect an increasingly competitive global system, where countries leverage 'country of origin' associations to stimulate economic activity (Fetscherin, 2010). Nation branding is also gaining political significance, as states seek to assert soft power and shape global perception amid rising geopolitical tensions (Gilboa, 2008).

Although the term 'nation branding' was coined by Simon Anholt in 1996, its roots run much deeper. Kaneva (2011) argues that while the term may be relatively new, disciplines

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such as Communication, Cultural Studies, Political Science, and International Relations have long addressed the construction of national myths, identities, histories, and propaganda as core concerns. This indicates diverse definitions of, approaches to, and intellectual histories of the issues of nation states (i.e. internal to a specific state/region) and the construction and projection of desired images or 'promotion'. The ambiguity of the term nation branding (e.g. Hao et al., 2021) has sparked debate over its purpose (Jiménez-Martínez, 2017), intended audiences (Jordan, 2014; Marat, 2009), how or whether it should be pursued (Avraham, 2020), and its broader implications (Ishii & Watanabe, 2015). What is clear, however, is that unlike more overtly political terms such as 'propaganda', which is often linked to authoritarianism, nation branding reflects a more neoliberal, market-oriented mode of statecraft, involving market-driven strategies to exert national and international influence.

Nation branding practices span a range of sectors, including tourism, nature, sports, industry, culture, technology, and education (Schatz et al., 2017). Higher education (HE), as a sector increasingly shaped by market forces and commodification, has become a particularly prominent focus of these efforts. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, Finland, China, Thailand, India, Israel, and Greece have developed distinctive HE brands aimed at both international and domestic audiences. Similarly, Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have made significant investments to position their HE systems as regional and global hubs, often aligning with economic diversification and soft power strategies. These initiatives include the establishment of education cities, international branch campuses, and scholarship schemes to attract international students (Healey, 2015).

Elsewhere, governments have launched coordinated national-level campaigns to promote their HE systems abroad. Examples include Australia's 'Study in Australia' campaign (Favaloro, 2015), Canada's 'EduCanada' initiative (Stein, 2018), the UK's 'Education is GREAT' campaign (Lomer et al., 2018), and China's Belt and Road-focused scholarships (Hong & Hardy, 2022). These state-led efforts typically combine marketing, diplomacy, and funding to enhance international student recruitment and national visibility through HE. They involve inter-ministerial coordination, targeted promotion abroad, and support for institutional participation in global education fairs and rankings (Bamberger & Kim, 2023). As international HE hubs emerge and student mobility patterns are reconfigured, such nation-led branding strategies are likely to intensify (Bamberger et al., 2025).

Despite growing scholarly and practitioner interest in nation branding, there has not yet been a concerted effort to understand how 'nation branding' is conceptualized and operationalized in the context of HE. This gap is consequential as HE is increasingly mobilized as a strategic resource in nation branding efforts, whether through the promotion of international student recruitment, the export of education services, or the cultivation of soft power. Yet, there remains a lack of clarity about how HE is framed within nation branding discourses and what roles it is assigned in the broader nation branding literature.

This study addresses that gap by systematically reviewing how HE is conceptualized in nation branding scholarship across disciplines. Our aim is not only to map the field but to interrogate the assumptions behind different approaches and highlight underexplored dimensions. This analysis is especially timely, as global competition, nationalism, and shifting geopolitical dynamics continue to reshape both HE and national identity projects.

Thus, the study offers insights for scholars and practical value for policymakers and practitioners involved in HE marketing and strategy. It encourages more reflective engagement with the use of the ‘nation’ as a branding device, prompting critical reflection on how it is invoked, whose values it promotes, and what implications these choices carry across diverse geopolitical and institutional contexts.

While several literature reviews have examined nation branding more broadly (e.g. Hao et al., 2021; Kaneva, 2011; Lee, 2009), including a recent systematic review by Rojas-Méndez and Khoshnevis (2023), these studies take a more expansive view of the field and do not focus specifically on the role of HE. Building on this body of work, and particularly on Kaneva’s (2011) typology of nation branding approaches, we conduct a systematic review to examine how HE is conceptualized within nation branding scholarship across disciplines.

We adopt Kaneva’s (2011) tripartite model – technical-economic, political, and cultural – as a guiding framework, our goal is not to validate or reinforce her typology as a fixed or exhaustive classification. Rather, we use it as a tool to explore how different understandings of nation branding shape the roles assigned to HE in the literature. This typology enables us to map recurring patterns, while also identifying points of tension, overlap, and emergence such as the pluralistic and hybrid approaches found in a significant portion of the corpus. In this sense, the model serves as a useful starting point that helps illuminate both dominant framings and conceptual gaps.

In the sections that follow, we first review the current debates and definitions surrounding nation branding, including different conceptual lineages and approaches. We then detail our systematic review methodology. The findings are presented according to Kaneva’s three core approaches, followed by a discussion of studies that adopt pluralistic or hybrid perspectives. We conclude by identifying limitations in the current literature and proposing directions for future research and practice.

2. Nation branding: definition and approaches

Once seen primarily as tools for product differentiation, brands now play a pivotal role in identity formation in postmodern society, helping individuals derive meaning and form social connections through brand associations (Sihvonen, 2019; Varga, 2013). Originally linked to corporations – first products, then services – branding techniques have since expanded into fields such as tourism, religion, public diplomacy, and cultural studies (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Merkelsen & Rasmussen, 2016). A notable development is the branding of physical spaces, which has led to concepts like place branding, destination branding, and nation branding (Andéhn & Zenker, 2015). This shift suggests that places can be treated as products, applying corporate branding methods to physical and symbolic spaces. In this framing, nations are positioned as marketable entities competing globally for tourism, investment and prestige.

While this approach has been influential, particularly in marketing and management scholarship, critics argue that reducing nations to products oversimplifies their complex historical, political, and cultural identities, and may promote homogenized or sanitized images that exclude minority narratives or internal diversity (e.g. Gudjonsson, 2005; Varga, 2013). Furthermore, viewing the nation as a brand can mask power asymmetries, raising questions about who defines the brand and whose interests it serves (Volcic &

Andrejevic, 2011). These critiques highlight the need to carefully consider the political and ethical implications of applying corporate branding logic to nation-states.

Our focus is on the concept of 'nation branding', a phenomenon that has seen a proliferation of scholarly attention across various academic disciplines, particularly in Political Science and International Relations, Marketing and Management, and Communication and Cultural Studies over the recent decades. A common point of departure is the view that a nation's branding is linked to the rise of globalization in the 1990s, and the perceived necessity for nations to compete and redefine themselves in order to attract and boost export, tourism, and foreign direct investments, as well as enhance their soft power (Dinnie, 2008). Anholt (2006, p. 296), for example, defines a nation's brand as 'the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the six areas of national competence', consisting of tourism, exports, people, governance, cultural and heritage, as well as investment and immigration. Every nation, in one way or another, engages in these distinct aspects of nation branding, employing a variety of branding and marketing techniques to enhance its image to the outer world (Fan, 2006).

While nation branding is arguably a fairly recent concept, its main areas of interest, namely the creation and projection of a national identity and image, have deep roots in many disciplines, representing diverse meanings, approaches and key concerns. Fan (2010) identifies four distinct origins of nation branding: (i) country of origin (economic-driven, export branding); (ii) place (destination) branding; (iii) public diplomacy (political branding); and (iv) national identity (cultural branding). These origins suggest different orientations, ranging from critical to functionalist, based in diverse ontologies and epistemologies. Such a multiplicity, therefore, has escalated debates on: the nature of nation branding (e.g. functional, essentializing and homogenizing activity; constructive process); its main targets (e.g. national citizens or international audiences); primary actors (e.g. national administrators, consultants, the public) (Fetscherin & Marmier, 2010; Wilder, 2007); its key foci, aims and (desired) outcomes (e.g. to enhance a nation's competitiveness; improve a nation's image and reputation; reshape national identities; promotion of economic or political activities); and its implications (for democracy and the 'culturalization' of politics, Varga, 2013). This has prompted more critical perspectives on nation branding, which question the overly optimistic or instrumental assumptions often embedded in its discourse – particularly the idea that branding will automatically enhance a nation's image. Anholt (2011), for example, critiques the superficial use of branding strategies as public relation tools disconnected from substantive policy reform. Similarly, Fan (2010) and Kaneva (2011) point to the tokenistic use of branding language and its potential to obscure deeper structural and political issues.

These diverse views and approaches to nation branding are the basis of Kaneva's (2011, p. 120) typology of nation branding research, which inductively reveals three distinct approaches: (i) technical-economic approaches; (ii) political approaches; and (iii) cultural approaches. Technical-economic approaches are often found in place branding, marketing and management disciplines, advocating a functionalist perspective that resonates the narratives that could be found in the works of product or corporate branding (Anholt, 2008; Olins, 2002). Such approaches tend to reify nations, viewing them as static, homogenous entities, and are often aimed at measurement (e.g. Fetscherin, 2010) and promoting best practices (Silvanto & Ryan, 2018). These approaches elicit opposition from schools of thought uncomfortable with the corporatist ideology that views the

nation as a marketable product, thereby undermining the nation's dignity, as well as from those uneasy about limiting the scope of nation branding to economic motivations alone, which downplays (geo)political aspects (see Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017; Gudjonsson, 2005).

Political approaches share the instrumentalist view of nation branding as a means to strengthen the nation's position and competitive advantage in the global system (Gilboa, 2008; Kaneva, 2011; van Ham, 2001). Their conceptualization of nation branding is often aligned with the ideas of public diplomacy and 'soft power' (Nye, 1990), upon the shared recognition of 'a shift in political paradigms, a move from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence' (van Ham, 2001, p. 4). Nation branding hence becomes a tool through which nations reconstruct the image and perception outsiders hold about the nation, and in so doing, exert a desired influence in the global arena (Fan, 2006). Studies in this political strand have examined how nations overcome reputational deficits through nation branding initiatives (for Israel, see Avraham, 2009; for Greece, see Bisa, 2013; for Sweden and Norway, see Pamment et al., 2017). While many examine the communication management strategies these nations employ to cope with their falling reputation against immediate crisis such as earthquake and tsunami (Harris, 2013), as well as against sustained crisis like Israel's ongoing conflict with Palestine (Avraham, 2009), Lee and Kim (2021) argue that nation branding can also be used to overturn socially disruptive situations and global-scale crises into situational opportunities, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cultural approaches are largely driven by cultural and media studies (Kaneva, 2011) and broadly take a more critical approach towards the discourse and practice of nation branding. Volcic and Andrejevic (2011) view nation branding as a tool of 'commercial nationalism' in which citizens are extolled to propagate a prescribed national image both domestically and internationally. The implications of nation branding on nationalism and national identities are also widely discussed by scholars in this stream. Jordan (2014), for example, argues that nation branding is a 'highly politicized activity', as 'the context in which nation branding operates affects the way in which national identity is communicated, understood and contested' (p. 286). This is particularly the case when a country employs nationalist and exceptionalist narratives and cross-national comparisons to brand itself. The image produced through this branding process generates and reinforces the othering effects of those who do not belong to this self-made subjecthood or lack what Thobani (2007, p. 6) describes as the 'exalted qualities'. Overall, these three approaches, belay different perspectives on what nation branding is, how it can be studied and its implications for society.

Given this diversity and complexity, and the growing use of nation branding for HE systems, it is worthwhile to understand how nation branding is studied and employed in HE research. Despite the growing number of articles that examine the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) and their programs in nation branding, such as promoting soft power and geopolitical nation-building projects (Adoui, 2023; Hong & Hardy, 2022), and attracting promising international students (Lomer et al., 2018), there has been an absence of a comprehensive review that maps out (i) how nation branding is understood in the HE literature and (ii) the role HE plays in such nation branding processes. This is where our review plays a pivotal role.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (QSLR), which combines the systematic, transparent procedures of traditional systematic reviews with the interpretive depth of qualitative analysis (Snyder, 2019; Suri, 2020). QSLRs are particularly suited to fields with contested definitions and high theoretical diversity – such as nation branding – as they allow researchers to trace patterns, interrogate conceptual framings, and critically synthesize perspectives across disciplines. Unlike narrative or integrative reviews, QSLRs use explicit search criteria, inclusion/exclusion protocols, and detailed documentation of the review process (Bearman et al., 2012). This approach was appropriate for exploring how HE is framed within nation branding discourse, where studies span marketing, political science, international education, and cultural studies. It enabled us to move beyond descriptive mapping to examine how concepts are defined, how theoretical lineages are constructed, and what roles are assigned to HE across different national and disciplinary contexts.

We used the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to guide the identification and reporting of studies (Moher et al., 2009). PRISMA supported transparency and rigor throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process, as shown in Figure 1. Although originally developed for quantitative reviews, PRISMA has been applied to qualitative syntheses to enhance methodological clarity and rigor (Tricco et al., 2018). After identifying eligible studies, we conducted a thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016), combining deductive coding based on the literature and Kaneva's (2011) typology with inductively generated themes concerning definitions, rationales, and implications of nation branding.

3.1. Identifying the research questions

In light of the research problems outlined above, the following research questions were developed to guide our review methodology and analysis:

- (1) To what extent does the current research in higher education on nation branding align with Kaneva's three primary approaches to 'nation branding'?
- (2) How does each approach to nation branding in the higher education literature characterize the role of higher education?

3.2. Search strategy and eligibility criteria

Eligible studies were identified from two electronic databases: Web of Science and SCOPUS. A search strategy was developed using Boolean searching, built upon three arms: (nation* OR countr*) AND brand* AND (higher education OR universit*). Any eligible studies were required to employ these keywords in their title, abstract, or author/publication keyword. As we were interested in how the concept of 'nation branding' evolved over time across the eligible studies, we did not restrict the search dates. Additionally, we specified our search to peer-reviewed articles in the English language, hence any non-English publications, along with books (including chapters and reviews), review papers (such as systematic or scoping reviews), conference slides, and conference proceedings were excluded.

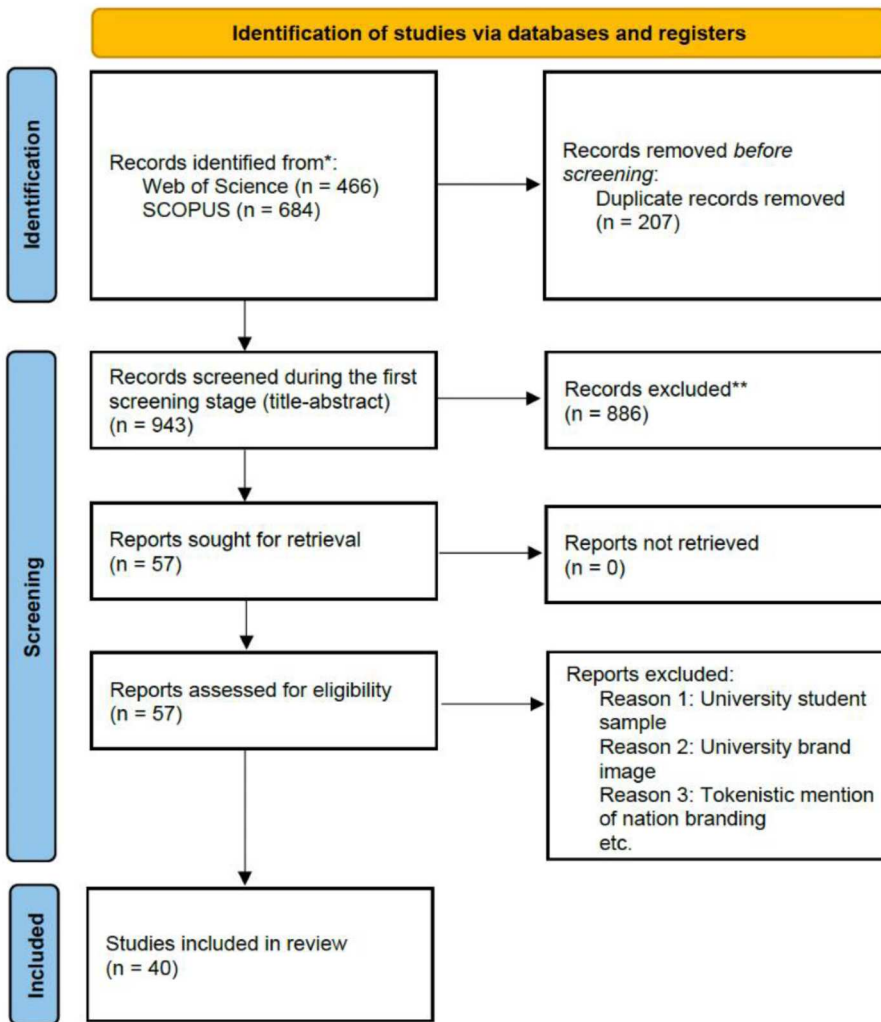


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram.

3.3. Study selection

After excluding 207 duplicates, 943 unique sources underwent title-abstract screening process. Two reviewers independently screened 20% of these using the inclusion and exclusion criteria, resolving any conflicts through discussion and consensus. One reviewer screened the remaining 80%. A total of 57 peer-reviewed publications proceeded to full-text screening. Both reviewers independently assessed all full texts to ensure that no eligible publications were missed, resolving any disagreements through discussion. During these two screening stages, the following exclusion criteria were established:

- i Non-English language
- ii Inappropriate study type (e.g. books, including chapters and reviews; review papers; conference proceedings and slides)
- iii Papers with preliminary results
- iv Focuses on nation branding, but does not address HE
- v Focuses on branding or HE, but not at the national level (e.g. universities' role in city and regional branding)

Many articles appeared in the search because the samples were university students, for example, studies on students' perceptions or preferences regarding luxury brands or specific countries, and were therefore excluded. Other articles were excluded because, although they used the word 'nation' or 'country', their focus was primarily on university brand image; many often employed a tokenistic use of the terms 'national development' and 'nation-building', only briefly mentioning the potential spill-over effects of HE branding on the economy. We suggest that this signals that the term 'branding' has been perceived as a buzzword, with little discussion about what nation branding is or how it works in the context of HE. Unless these articles specifically addressed the potential impact HE and university branding would have upon nation branding, they were excluded. After the exclusion, we were left with the selection of 40 papers as the final corpus.

3.4. Data extraction and analysis

Both reviewers coded each article for further analysis: type (empirical or theoretical), purpose, country context (if applicable), sample population, (if applicable), research focus (e.g. policy; students; scholars), theoretical/conceptual framework(s), methods (if applicable), and key findings. The articles were coded by additional categories based on the literature review and the guiding purposes of this study including nation branding definition/view; precedents of and purposes for nation branding; intended outcomes of nation branding; nation branding theories/literature; policy/practice recommendations; the view/role of HE in these studies. Extensive notes were taken at this time and were consulted throughout the analysis.

3.5. Methodological limitations

Focusing specifically on 'nation branding' may have excluded studies using related concepts, such as the role of universities in advancing national soft power. Additionally, limiting the review to peer-reviewed articles published in English likely excluded perspectives from diverse national and political contexts that shape how nation branding is conceived and promoted in HE. This includes, for example, countries with strong state intervention in HE compared to those with a high proportion of private HE institutions.

The included papers also varied in the depth of their engagement with nation branding. In many cases, the concept was mentioned only briefly as a general conceptual lens to contextualize HE's role within broader political economy and internationalization frameworks. These instances required subjective judgement by both reviewers, as their treatment of nation branding was less explicit than in papers with a more direct

conceptual focus. While the quality of publications also varied – with some appearing in unranked journals – we included all sources that met the peer-review criterion.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis revealed that the understandings of ‘nation branding’ in the HE literature broadly align with the three approaches outlined by Kaneva (2011): (i) technical-economic approaches; (ii) political approaches; and (iii) cultural approaches. However, we likewise identified a subset of articles which used a plurality of approaches. This section first outlines how nation branding is conceptualized in the context of HE, then presents findings according to Kaneva’s three categories, followed by an exploration of studies that adopt a pluralistic perspective.

4.1. Understandings of nation branding in HE literature

Table 1 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the number of articles, examples of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and the geographical focus for each nation branding approach. Of the three archetypal approaches, the dominant single approach was the technical and economic. A total of 18 studies out of 40 studies (45%) adopted this approach to nation branding in HE, with eight additional

Table 1. Four approaches to nation branding in the HE literature.

Approach to nation branding	Number of articles	Examples of theoretical and conceptual frameworks	Geographical focus
Technical and economic	18 (26 if included pluralistic)	Competitive Identity; Competitive and entrepreneurial state; Bourdieu’s Theory of Capitals; Country brand equity; International student recruitment; Corporate identity management; Place Image and branding; Corporate Image; Triple helix model; Marketing in higher education; Push and pull factors; Internationalization; Marketization	Asia (e.g. China, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, Thailand) Middle East (e.g. Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates) Europe (e.g. Finland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom) Transcontinental countries (e.g. Turkey)
Political	8 (18 if included pluralistic)	Soft power; Banal nationalism; Science diplomacy; National symbols and nation building; Brand equity; Organizational reputation in the public sector; International students; Higher education regionalism; International branch campuses; Legitimacy of the welfare state	Asia (e.g. Armenia, China, South Korea, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) Europe (e.g. Ukraine, United Kingdom) North America (e.g. Canada, United States) Oceania (Australia) Transcontinental countries (e.g. Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan)
Cultural	2 (10 if included pluralistic)	Iconography; Heritage; Nationhood; Disembodiment; Indigenous, critical race, and post-colonial critiques; Nation building	Africa (Zimbabwe) North America (Canada)
Pluralistic	12	Soft power; Place branding; Sub-sector branding; Social media; International student marketing; Internationalization	Africa (e.g. Botswana, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda) Asia (e.g. China, Israel, Thailand) Europe (e.g. Norway, Sweden) Transcontinental country (the de facto state Turkish Republic of North Cyprus)

studies incorporating it as part of a pluralistic approach. A total of eight studies out of 40 studies (20%) of the corpus adopted a political approach, with 10 additional studies incorporating it as part of a pluralistic approach. Among the three approaches, the fewest studies focused on the role of HE in promoting cultural aspects of national identity, with only two out of 40 studies (4%) adopting a cultural approach, while six additional studies included aspects of it as part of a pluralistic approach.

Over 30% ($n = 12$) of the final corpus employed more than one approach to nation branding: the pluralistic approach. Four studies employed both the technical-economic and political approaches (10%), three studies employed both the political and cultural approaches (7.5%), respectively, and two studies (5%) employed both the technical-economic and cultural approaches. Three studies (7.5%) incorporated elements of all three approaches, suggesting a more multi-dimensional understanding of nation branding.

The corpus also revealed clear distinctions in the disciplinary origins of single-approach studies. Political approaches often stemmed from public diplomacy, while economic approaches more common in education, business and marketing. In contrast, studies using pluralistic approaches showed fewer clear disciplinary patterns. This may be because such studies tend to focus on national and HE branding as 'marketized' practices aligned with broader 'internationalization' goals (Koldas et al., 2018; Kraus & Burford, 2020). Although we deliberately excluded internationalization-related keywords to avoid narrowing the scope, many included studies still emphasized internationalization, especially in relation to recruiting international students. This suggests that nation branding in HE is largely directed at external audiences, rather than international nation identity-building.

We also observed that the role of HE varied according to the different approaches to nation branding discussed. Each study sheds light on how HEIs contribute to nation branding, with most offering recommendations for policy and practice. The following section will detail the role of HE and HEI within each identified approach.

4.2. The role of HE in technical and economic approach

As shown above, nearly half of the studies in our corpus adopt a technical and economic lens, reflecting the continued influence of neoliberalism and global market competition in HE. This framing presents HEIs as drivers of economic value, with nation branding positioned primarily as a strategy to attract international students and boost institutional prestige. Table 2 reveals that the theoretical frameworks employed in the 18 studies that drew on this approach align with those commonly used in marketing, economic development, and innovation studies. These include frameworks such as the entrepreneurial and 'competitive state' (Lomer et al., 2018), 'competitive identity' (Barnawi, 2022), brand equity (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016), the Triple Helix model (Beecher et al., 2020), and corporate identity management (van der Rijt, 2023).

One common understanding across all studies was the underscoring of the important role that HE and HEIs play in constructing and communicating nation brands to mitigate challenges posed by the wider political economy. The rationales behind this varied, including overcoming reduced government funding for HE, which threatens the financial health of HEIs (Lomer et al., 2018), addressing the rise of regional competition in international student recruitment (Mourad & El Karanshaw, 2013), and preparing

Table 2. Studies employing ‘technical and economic approach’.

Approach	Reference	Theoretical/conceptual framework	Geographical focus
Technical and economic approach (n = 18)	Aziz et al. (2016)	Theory of Planned Behavior; place branding	Eurasia (Turkey)
	Beecher et al. (2020)	Triple Helix model	East Asia (Hong Kong, South Korea)
	Barnawi (2022)	Competitive Identity	Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and UAE)
	Fetscherin and Marmier (2010)	Nation branding	Europe (Switzerland)
	Foroudi et al. (2017)	Integrated Marketing Communication; brand identity	Europe (UK)
	Ghazarian and Keller (2016)	Push/pull model	East Asia (South Korea)
	Herrero et al. (2015)	Place branding; corporate image	Europe (Spain)
	Herrero-Crespo et al. (2016)	Brand equity	Europe (Spain)
	Kamal Basha et al. (2020)	University and country branding, country of design, delivery mode	Asia-Pacific (Australia, Singapore), Europe (UK), North America (USA)
	Knight (2011)	Educational hubs; internationalization of higher education	Middle East (Qatar, Bahrain, UAE), Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia), East Asia (Hong Kong)
	Lomer et al. (2018)	Bourdieu’s capital theory; nation branding; entrepreneurial and competitive state	Europe (UK)
	McLeay et al. (2020)	Country-of-origin	Europe (UK)
	Mourad and El Karanshaw (2013)	Brand dimensions; marketing in higher education	Middle East (Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, Bahrain)
	Papadopoulos and Hamzaoui-Essoussi (2015)	Place image, nation branding	Africa
	Qawasmeh et al. (2021)	Destination brand quality	Middle East (Jordan)
	Samokhvalova (2017)	Nation branding, higher education branding	Southeast Asia (Malaysia)
	van der Rijt (2023)	International student mobility; corporate identity management	Asia-Pacific (Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore), Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, UK)
	Wang (2022)	Scholarship; Internationalization; Brand perception	East Asia (China)

domestic students for the global job market (Barnawi, 2022). Despite these varying ratios, the common goal of attracting international students across the studies highlights the portrayal of HEIs as critical players in understanding and influencing the factors that shape students’ decisions about where to study abroad (Qawasmeh et al., 2021). This includes communicating the most relevant positive values and images of the nation brand to prospective international students (McLeay et al., 2020; Samokhvalova, 2017) and, consequently, influencing students’ intentions and satisfaction through distinctive marketing communication strategies (Foroudi et al., 2017; Herrero et al., 2015; Mourad & El Karanshaw, 2013). For example, McLeay et al. (2020) argued HEIs as important stakeholders in designing and communicating ‘nation brands’ outward, wherein the perception and image of a ‘nation’ can be crafted, deconstructed, and manipulated. However, Ghazarian and Keller (2016), based on their survey of 620 adults in South Korea, revealed that a positive country image played little role in influencing their ideal study abroad destination.

Several studies also highlighted the potential for HEIs to expand their role in nation branding efforts beyond merely communicating established brand images (Aziz et al., 2016; Fetscherin & Marmier, 2010). Papadopoulos and Hamzaoui-Essoussi (2015) suggested that expanding educational offerings and fostering transnational partnerships could enhance intra-African nation branding by attracting more inbound student mobility. Studies focusing on regional educational hubs highlight the significant relationship between HEIs and the government. In this view, HEIs could contribute to nation branding efforts by establishing a collective interest between the government and HEIs to ensure the success of the hubs and aligning their branch campuses with the mission of the education hub to serve the needs of the local HE marketplace (Beecher et al., 2020), and coordinate initiatives aimed at generating revenue or developing a skilled workforce by attracting foreign students, partners, or institutions (Knight, 2011).

While these studies offer detailed accounts of branding mechanisms and rationales, the focus remains largely on outcomes and best practices, with limited attention to critical voices or power dynamics embedded in branding decisions.

4.3. The role of HE in political approach

A smaller group of studies adopts a political framework, positioning HE not only as an economic driver but also a strategic instrument of statecraft. Here, HEIs are portrayed as contributing to soft power, public diplomacy, and national geopolitical ambitions, projecting national values, and reinforcing and communicating national identity on the global stage. This reflects the ways in which states strategically deploy HE as part of broader nation branding agendas.

Similar to Kaneva's (2011) typology, the eight studies categorized under this approach draw on conceptual frameworks from public diplomacy and international relations (Table 3). These include soft power, regionalism, the state-university relations, science diplomacy, and cosmopolitanism. Of note, there were frameworks that were, in essence,

Table 3. Studies employing 'political approach'.

Approach	Reference	Theoretical/conceptual framework	Geographical focus
Political approach (n = 8)	Abbasov (2024)	higher education regionalism; international branch campuses	Eurasia (Russia)
	Gao and Liu (2020)	Bourdieu's theories of capital and field	East Asia (China)
	Hong and Hardy (2022)	Brand equity, nation branding	East Asia (China)
	Lundin and Geschwind (2023)	Soft power, governance of internationalization in welfare states	Europe (Sweden)
	Park et al. (2016)	Nation Branding	East Asia (South Korea)
	Qi and Ma (2023)	The state-HEI relationship	East Asia (China)
	Sataøen and Wæraas (2016)	Organizational reputation; higher education branding	Asia-Pacific (China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Singapore), Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK), North America (USA, Canada), Africa (South Africa)
	Schlegel et al. (2011)	Science Diplomacy; nation branding	Europe (Switzerland), East Asia (China)

pluralistic, such as brand equity (Hong & Hardy, 2022), Bourdieu's capital theory (Gao & Liu, 2020), and organizational reputation (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2016), but in these cases, they are deployed in ways that foreground state-led nation branding goals.

Studies within this category emphasized the role of HE in enhancing a nation's standing in the global system and strengthening diplomatic ties. Particularly notable across these studies is the active role of government actors. As Sataøen and Wæraas (2016) argued:

Globalization, standardization, and marketization of public sector services not only put the reputations of central and local government agencies at stake, but also those of the entire public sector and the nation, for which central governments have a particular responsibility of promoting and protecting. (p. 165)

These studies posit HE as a crucial element of nation branding (Hong & Hardy, 2022). Governments have increasingly viewed the internationalization of HE and the attraction of international students as strategic tools for nation branding and public diplomacy, leveraging them as forms of international development policy to project soft power (Gao & Liu, 2020; Park et al., 2016). This approach not only enhances a nation's global image but also fosters broader geopolitical nation-building initiatives (e.g. China's Belt and Road initiative; Hong & Hardy, 2022), which can yield long-term diplomatic and economic benefits (Gao & Liu, 2020). Also underlying the broader projection of soft power as a 'knowledge nation' that offers high-quality education or positions itself as an international education hub are latent goals: protecting domestic students while generating additional revenue (Lundin & Geschwind, 2023), and managing crises through reinforced state control during the COVID-19 pandemic (Qi & Ma, 2023).

In more authoritarian contexts, such as China and Russia, the strategic use of HE as a tool for soft power is notably more pronounced, reflecting the dominant rationales for internationalization in HE (Mulvey, 2020) and resulting in a higher degree of state control, which potentially limits the autonomy of HEIs in challenging or resisting state-driven narratives. Abbasov's (2024) study on Lomonosov Moscow State University's branch campuses in post-Soviet countries illustrates how these campuses act as a vehicle for promoting the Russian HE models and fostering regionalism. This initiative reinforces political and cultural ties across these regions, highlighting how soft power strategies in HE can extend political influence and enhance cultural integration.

Thus, within the political approach, HE is often framed as an extension of the state's nation branding machinery, serving diplomatic, ideological, and strategic functions within national projects aimed at global influence. While this approach deepens our understanding of HE's strategic role, the literature tends to emphasize state-driven narratives, paying less attention to how institutions and individuals shape these branding processes.

4.4. The role of HE in cultural approach

Though limited in number ($n = 2$), studies within the cultural approach reveal how HE contributes to symbolic nation-making – often through promotional materials, campaigns, and institutional storytelling (Table 4). These studies focus on the role of culture and heritage in shaping national identity, employing frameworks such as iconography,

Table 4. Studies employing ‘cultural approach’.

Approach	Reference	Theoretical/conceptual framework	Geographical focus
Cultural approach (n = 2)	Thondhlana et al. (2021)	Iconography, heritage, nationhood, and branding	Africa (Zimbabwe)
	Stein (2018)	Marketization of internationalization, nationalism, anti-colonial critiques	North America (Canada)

nationhood, and nationalism, all examined through a critical, anti-colonial lens (Stein, 2018; Thondhlana et al., 2021).

Each study warns of the dangers posed by the values embedded in nation brands, particularly those shaped by (ethno)nationalist and exceptionalist narratives. In the case of Zimbabwe, Thondhlana et al. (2021) argue that prioritizing the cultural heritage of dominant ethnic groups (e.g. archaeological artifacts, diverse histories, past cultural achievements) as symbols of nation branding fosters a sense of cultural superiority over marginalized groups. They examine how HEIs reinforced this through visual identities, including corporate naming, logos, and brand slogans.

As noted by several studies employing a technical and economic or political approach, constructing and communicating a positive national image with values that attract international students has been central to the role of HEIs in nation branding (see Lundin & Geschwind, 2023; McLeay et al., 2020; Qawasmeh et al., 2021; Samokhvalova, 2017). Stein (2018), in contrast, provides a critical lens through an analysis of Canada’s ‘EduCanada’ brand and the exceptionalist narratives embodied in it, arguing that its uniformly positive messaging silences historical legacies of colonization, racial violence, and the negative experiences of international students.

Hence, a common thread in the two cultural approach studies is how HEIs, through their visual and discursive branding, promote selective values and historical narratives to foster national exceptionalism. This branding, as Stein (2018, p. 473), notes, can also ‘absolve educational institutions of their ethical and pedagogical responsibility to disrupt colonial patterns and social relations.’ The limited presence of cultural analyses in the literature points to a significant gap, particularly in postcolonial, contested, or authoritarian contexts where branding is tightly controlled and often aligned with dominant ideologies.

4.5. The role of HE in the pluralistic approach

Nearly a third of the corpus (n = 12) employed two or three approaches, drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks such as cosmopolitanism, internationalization, marketization, nation building, brand identity (Table 5). This indicates the emergence of a ‘pluralistic’ approach – identified by Kaneva (2011, p. 120) as underdeveloped – where economic, political, and cultural strategies often intersect. This approach reflects the complex, multi-scalar roles HEIs play in national projects and allows for a more nuanced understanding of HE’s role in nation branding.

Four studies employing technical-economic and political approaches examined the role of HE as a sector that supports multiple nation branding objectives. Two studies on China, for example, showed how the internationalization of higher education serves both as a technical means of attracting talent to advance the country’s economic

Table 5. Studies employing ‘pluralistic approach’.

Technical and economic + Political approach (n = 4)	Koldas et al. (2018)	Internationalization; higher education branding	Eastern Mediterranean (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus)
	Lefifi and Kiala (2021)	Soft power	East Asia (China) & Africa (Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda)
	Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012)	Cosmopolitanism in international education marketing, disembodiment	Asia-Pacific (Australia), Europe (UK), North America (USA)
Technical and economic + Cultural approach (n = 2)	Yousaf et al. (2020)	CAGE distance framework, nation branding theory, brand equity theory	East Asia (China)
	Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011)	Nation branding; place branding; brand identity	Europe (Finland)
	Schatz et al. (2017)	Education business and marketing	Europe (Finland)
Political + Cultural approach (n = 3)	Fauve (2015)	Actor-Network Theory; international political sociology; banal nationalism	Central Asia (Kazakhstan)
	Makgala (2018)	National symbols and nation building; corporatization, managerialism and commercialization	Africa (Botswana)
	Sataøen (2019)	Branding; nation branding; sub-sector branding	Asia-Pacific (China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Singapore), Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK), North America (USA, Canada), Africa (South Africa)
All three approaches (n = 3)	Bamberger et al. (2020)	Social media marketing	Middle East (Israel)
	Kraus and Burford (2020)	Internationalization; marketization	Southeast Asia (Thailand)
	Sataøen (2015)	Corporate branding in higher education; nation branding	Europe (Norway & Sweden)

agenda and as a political tool of ‘education diplomacy’ to enhance its international standing. This is exemplified through the concept of international students acting as ‘goodwill ambassadors’ (Yousaf et al., 2020) or ‘de facto brand ambassadors’ (Lefifi & Kiala, 2021, p. 193). Others examined how, in the HE sector, specific values and elements are selectively woven into nation brands, enabling countries to advance particular national identities that can support their broader economic and geopolitical agendas, thereby gaining political recognition in the international system in the absence of state support (Koldas et al., 2018) or diluting negative stereotypes such as histories of imperialism (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2012). This underscores the perceived instrumental role of HE in advancing national political and economic agendas, while sidelining the autonomy and agency of HEIs.

Three studies combined political and cultural approaches. These papers conceptualized the role of HE in different ways, ranging from government agencies leading the sub-sector branding of HE (Sataøen, 2019), to portraying HEIs as national symbols serving the public (Makgala, 2018), to using universities to attract international scholars as a nation branding strategy (Fauve, 2015). Sataøen (2019) describes nation branding as the creation of an imagined community aimed at differentiation through distinctive national characteristics. His analysis of national HE web portals from 23 countries – mostly managed by government and public diplomacy agencies – shows that these

platforms often rely on national clichés and stereotypes (e.g. landscapes, innovative mind-sets), resulting in a conformist presentation across countries. He also raises democratic concerns about outsourcing HE branding to external experts, who tend to portray national identity as singular and static, reinforcing stereotypes through clichéd representations.

Two studies integrating technical and economic approaches with cultural approaches both focused on the case of Finnish education brand (Hakala & Lemmetyinen, 2011; Schatz et al., 2017). Both studies identified nation branding as a profitable business but they portrayed mixed views towards the role of HE. Schatz et al. (2017, p. 175) critically examined the exceptionalist narratives embedded in the Finnish education branding to marketize its education as an exportable product and promote education as ‘a “key element” of Finnish identity’, revealing the problematic nature of its ‘missionary-approach’ upholding its superiority over other education systems. Thus, in this case, HE or HEIs plays rather passive role; Finnish HE – deemed unsuccessful by the government in satisfying the growing global demand – becomes commodified to support Finnish education success stories, which mainly involve primary and secondary education rather than HE. Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011), on the other hand, suggest that for Finland, as a culturally homogeneous country, to overcome stereotypical images and achieve international competitiveness, the HE sector must actively contribute to improving the experience of international students in Finland, thereby transforming their stereotypical images into positive ones.

Three studies adopted a holistic approach that incorporated all three perspectives on nation branding (Bamberger et al., 2020; Kraus & Burford, 2020; Sataøen, 2015). Across these studies, a common theme is the complex and strategic role HEIs play in shaping and interpreting nation branding – rather than passively receiving it – by selectively tailoring portrayals of their nations to align with institutional goals and market positions. For example, Bamberger et al. (2020) examined the social media posts by HEIs aimed at attracting international students. Their study revealed variations in how nations and students are portrayed, shaped by institutions’ positions within global and local competitive markets, their missions, and their interpretations of the state’s cultural character, whether defined as ethnic or civic. Thus, HEIs were viewed as selectively engaging with and interpreting different portrayals of the nation, strategically deploying them as part of their international student recruitment campaigns.

Both Kraus and Burford (2020) and Sataøen (2015) explored the underlying power relations in nation branding. Placed within a critique of uneven power relations between the Global North and South international student destinations, and embedded in branding as a broadly commercial enterprise, Kraus and Burford (2020) analyzed promotional videos for international programs in Thailand to understand how they place themselves in the global international HE markets. Highlighting how international HE branding draws on various portrayals of the nation to draw in mainly domestic students, they argue that the promotion of ‘international’ HE programs to domestic audiences in Thailand reflects the global power imbalance in HE, where Global South universities face challenges in gaining international recognition as a study destination compared to those in the Global North. On the other hand, through a comparison of national and institutional-level branding in the HE systems of Norway and Sweden, Sataøen (2015) reveals a disconnect between national representations and institutional practices, raising critical

questions about who holds the power in shaping branding decisions within HE systems. Together, these studies highlight the complexity and agency involved in nation branding within the context of HE. This is a significant yet underexamined issue, highlighting the lack of research on who determines the values promoted through nation branding and how those decisions are made.

In other words, in line with Bamberger et al. (2020), these pluralistic studies argue that there is no fixed or singular nation brand or identity, suggesting instead that it may function as a floating signifier. We endorse this argument, as our analysis of these studies similarly exposed a fragmented interpretation of the term ‘nation branding’ within the included literature. We identified that this fragmentation predominantly arises from diverse conceptualizations of ‘nation’ evident in each article, ranging from a primordial and unchanging entity to an ‘imagined’ construct necessitating active creation and reconstruction through branding and marketing methodologies, as well as variations in the rationale for nation branding, such as enhancing global competitiveness, fostering diplomatic relations, or addressing domestic political agendas.

5. Implications and future research

Drawing on Kaneva’s (2011) typology of nation branding approaches, we examined how these are applied in HE literature and how they shape portrayals of HE’s role in nation branding. The dominant technical and economic framing positions HEs as tools for advancing national economic agendas, particularly through attracting international students and academic talent. Most studies in this category emphasize the state’s role in shaping institutional branding and positioning HEs within global education markets. This emphasis is unsurprising, given the prevailing neoliberal and competitive global state logics that have dominated internationalization discourse in HE Bamberger & Huang (Bamberger et al., 2019). However, we argue that reducing HE to economic functions is both limited and short-sighted, as it neglects the broader political, cultural, and social contributions that HE makes to society.

We also anticipate a shift as political and postcolonial perspectives gain traction, potentially influencing both nation branding practices and the broader role of HE. With rising nationalism, populism, discourses of de-globalization, and shifts towards multipolarity, HE scholars are increasingly examining HE’s role in state projects and shifting global geopolitics (Bamberger & Huang, 2024; Brøgger & Moscovitz, 2022; Brooks & Rensimer, 2024) – areas previously overshadowed by the discourse of neoliberal globalization (e.g. ‘open borders’, ‘flows’) spurred by a period of relatively subdued geopolitical tensions since the end of the Cold War. This shift is evident in studies using political approaches to nation branding, where HEs are portrayed as part of the state’s political machinery, contributing to national identity and public diplomacy. Particularly notable is the growing portrayal of international students as ambassadors (Lefifi & Kiala, 2021; Yousaf et al., 2020). This is significant in the current global climate of rising geopolitical tensions, where international student hubs are emerging worldwide, destinations are becoming more multi-polar, and the competition for ‘hearts and minds’ is intensifying amid shifting global dynamics (see Bamberger & Huang, 2024; Glass & Cruz, 2023). The strategic use of HE in public diplomacy and soft power underscores the increasing importance of political considerations in nation branding strategies.

Although the cultural approach was the least commonly adopted as the sole framework in studies of nation branding, those that did emphasize its significant role for HEIs in shaping and disseminating often selective values and historical narratives through promotional campaigns, primarily for commercial and economic purposes. Notably absent from these analyses are the possible selective storytelling for other purposes, such as upholding state narratives, or the power relations embedded in such relations: i.e. could HEIs in authoritarian contexts contest 'official' nation brands and narratives? These may be important areas of future development.

Finally, the rise of pluralistic approaches to nation branding in HE suggests a more comprehensive understanding of how economic, political, and cultural strategies intersect and converge in nation branding. This synthesis indicates a shift towards more integrated analyses of nation branding practices, where HEIs engage in complex interactions to fulfill diverse objectives simultaneously. It recognizes the varied roles that HE plays in society and its multiple levels of embeddedness: global, national, and local.

With few exceptions (e.g. Sataøen, 2015; Stein, 2018), the current literature categorized in the first three categories (technical-economic, political, and cultural) predominantly focuses on the benefits and strategic applications of nation branding within HE, often overlooking its negative implications, power relations in decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and contextual variations. Encouraging pluralistic approaches is, therefore, essential, as dominant discourses can limit understanding within a given field. Emerging literature on nation branding and HE should engage more deeply, broadly, and critically with political dynamics – moving beyond narrow concepts like 'soft power' – and prioritize the inclusion of diverse stakeholder voices. Involving perspectives from those both within and beyond the policy sphere, such as students and local communities, can offer a more comprehensive view of nation branding practices. This requires going beyond representational analyses (e.g. videos, photos, policies, websites) to include direct engagement with stakeholders through methods such as interviews. We therefore call for critical exploration of how students, faculty, policymakers, and communities perceive, shape, resist, and participate in nation branding initiatives. Future research should also examine the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of these efforts, particularly how they are shaped by geopolitical developments and international tensions, including their impact on student mobility and educational collaborations.

These future research directions also carry important implications for HE marketers and national agencies involved in education branding. As scholarship adopts more critical and pluralistic understandings on nation branding, marketing strategies should also move beyond surface-level promotion. Instead of relying on polished representations such as slogans or global rankings, which often oversimplify national complexity, branding efforts should be co-constructed to reflect lived realities and include the voices of students, faculty, and local communities. A more inclusive approach can foster authentic, differentiated brand identities that resonate more meaningfully in a competitive global landscape.

In this way, this study advances our understanding of the strategic roles assigned to HE in nation branding, highlighting its multifaceted contributions across economic, political, and cultural spheres, and underscoring its close connection with internationalization. Beyond mapping current perspectives in the literature, it also offers an analytical lens

that surfaces more nuanced and critical interpretations of nation branding, encouraging reflection on dynamics that have often been overlooked.

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