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RIDING THE NORDIC WAVE

The role of the Nordic brand in
branding the region's capital cities

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ABSTRACT

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In recent decades, the Nordic region has become increasingly interesting in the eyes of the world. It has gained recognition for embodying a set of progressive values and lifestyles that are currently in high demand globally. Nordic cities have become strong representatives of the Nordic brand on the global stage as the megatrend of urbanization has made cities important drivers of economic development and moral thought-leadership. To maintain the high standard of Nordic welfare states, it is essential for the Nordic region, its nations, and cities to be competitive and attractive in the eyes of investors, relocating talent and visitors alike. The purpose of this study is to understand what kind of role(s) the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. To find answers to the research question, the branding practices of the Nordic brand and the city branding strategies and practices of Nordic capital cities are explored.

In the theory section of this study, the relevant literature on the relatively young academic field of city branding is reviewed. Furthermore, to understand the ways in which the Nordic brand is actively or passively made use of in the branding of the Nordic capital cities, literature around brand architecture and spillover effects between connected brands is explored. The resulting theoretical framework combines theoretical thinking around place branding, umbrella branding and spillover effects. The study was conducted using abduction as an approach for knowledge creation and thus the theoretical framework was reviewed and iterated throughout the research process.

As existing literature around city branding has been deemed insufficient and lacks theoretical and conceptual frameworks, qualitative research that is more exploring in nature suited the needs of this study well. 12 experts and practitioners from two Nordic capital cities were interviewed to gain an understanding on the phenomenon. The empirical evidence gained from the interviews was coded and analyzed using the Gioia method. During the analytical process, 69 first order codes, six second order themes and two overall dimensions were recognized from the research data.

The analysis revealed six different roles that the Nordic brand either actively or passively plays in the branding of Nordic capital cities. The roles are: *the Connector*, *the Curator*, *the Quality Label*, *the Homogenizer*, *the Satisficer* and *the Excluder*. Some of these roles are already actively played out in Nordic capital city branding, some are underutilized according to the empirical evidence of the study. The findings suggest that certain roles identified in the relationship between the Nordic brand and the branding efforts of the Nordic capital cities may be perceived as beneficial and could be leveraged for the benefit of the cities, while others may be viewed as detrimental to their city branding efforts.

The conclusion of the study summarizes the key findings of the research and the implications it could have in managing the Nordic brand and the Nordic capital city brands. Based on the empirical evidence, the Nordic brand is clearly an asset in the branding of the Nordic capital cities and suggestions on how to maximize the benefits it brings forth and how to mitigate its more harmful spillover effects are presented.

Keywords: city branding, place branding, spillover effects, Nordic brand, Nordic capital cities

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
1.1 Nordic cities on the rise.....	4
1.1.1 What is the Nordic brand?.....	5
1.1.2 Nordic city branding.....	8
1.2 The purpose of the study.....	10
1.3 Definitions and assumptions of the study.....	11
2 PLACE BRANDING AND SPILLOVER EFFECTS.....	13
2.1 Defining city branding.....	13
2.2 City branding paradoxes.....	17
2.3 Umbrella brands, sub-brands, and spillover effects.....	19
2.3.1 Umbrella brands and sub-brands.....	19
2.3.2 Spillover effects.....	20
2.4 Theoretical framework of the study.....	23
3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH.....	25
3.1 Philosophical approach of the study.....	25
3.2 Qualitative research	27
3.3 Generating the empirical data.....	29
3.3.1 The selection of interviews.....	29
3.3.2 Interviewing experts.....	32
3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews.....	33
3.4 Analysis of the data	34
4 NORDIC CAPITAL CITY BRANDING UNDER THE NORDIC BRAND.....	39
4.1 Identifying the active roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities.....	41
4.1.1 The Connector.....	41
4.1.2 The Curator.....	48
4.2 Identifying the passive roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities.....	53
4.2.1 The Quality Label.....	53
4.2.2 The Homogenizer.....	56
4.2.3 The Satisficer.....	60
4.2.4 The Excluder.....	63
4.3 Conclusion of the results.....	65
5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION.....	68
5.1 Summary of the study.....	68
5.2 Theoretical contribution.....	71
5.3 Managerial implications.....	73
5.4 Evaluating the quality and limitations of the study.....	76
5.5 Potential for future research.....	78
6 REFERENCES	80
7 APPENDICES.....	90

APPENDIX 1. Modifiable structure of the interview	90
APPENDIX 2: The roles of the Nordic brand and their managerial implications.....	95

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Organizations driving Nordic collaboration.....	7
Table 2. The capital cities of the nation-states in the Nordic region.....	9
Table 3. Potentially counterproductive city branding practices.....	18
Table 4. Detailed information on the interviews.....	31
Table 5. The roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities.....	40

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The threefold scheme of brand management shaping the aggregate city brand (Adapted from Kavaratzis 2004)	16
Figure 2. Region brand’s spillover effects on city brands in competitive collaboration.....	24
Figure 3. Analyzing the interview data with the Gioia method.....	37
Figure 4. The process for analyzing the data.....	38
Figure 5. The active and passive roles that the Nordic region brand takes in relation to the Nordic capital city brands.....	66
Figure 6. The contribution of this study.....	71

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Nordic cities on the rise

“You know my predecessor who sat in this seat, President Obama, used to say it would be alright if we left everything to the Nordic countries.”

– President of the United States Joe Biden, 4.3.2022

“Look to cities, not nation-states, to solve our biggest challenges.”

– World Economic Forum, 23.1.2020

In recent decades, the Nordic region has gained recognition for embodying a set of progressive values and lifestyles that are in high demand around the world. Gender equality, stable governance, relative social cohesion, a strong design heritage, a sensible work-life balance, general safety, a respectful relationship with nature, and the political will to fight climate change are among the traits that are attached to the brand image of the Nordics. But it's not only the Nordic nations that are benefiting from the increased interest in the region. Partly because of the megatrend of urbanization, cities are now often seen as important drivers of economic development and moral thought leadership. Nordic cities have thus become strong representatives of the Nordic brand on the global stage.

The topic of marketing and branding of the Nordic region, its nation-states, and cities has gained prominence on the political and media agenda, owing to the ongoing global crises and the anticipated demographic and labor market shifts within the region. One example of this is the demographic trend of an aging population in the Nordics (Sánchez Gassen & Heleniak 2019), which necessitates the identification of alternative means to sustain the welfare societies for which the region is renowned. In 2022, there has been a significant level of discourse in Finnish media regarding the need for foreign expertise in the workforce (HS.fi 12.11.2022) and the decreased interest from foreign talent and foreign investors toward Finland due to the perceived risk of Russia's war against Ukraine expanding to its other neighboring countries (Mannonen 2022). Contrary to the need for foreign talent and other remedies to face future crises, the politics in the Nordics have

substantially toughened against immigration in the past decade. Recent criticisms have been directed towards the Finnish Immigration Service for denying residence permits to highly qualified individuals (HS.fi 10.12.2022), while Denmark has also been observed to implement strict immigration policies in recent years (Foreign Policy 2021; The Economist 2021).

For various reasons, capital cities in the Nordics would benefit from increasing their global reputations and attractiveness. To maintain the high standard of Nordic welfare states, it is essential for the Nordic region, its nations, and cities to be competitive on the international stage. To achieve this, systematic efforts must be made to enhance their appeal to foreign talent, investments, and visitors in the future. Given the current level of interest in the Nordic region, it is essential for cities to capitalize on this opportunity. As the Nordic capital cities compete on the global stage, but also against one another, an important question arises: Will the winner take it all or can collaboration between the Nordic capital cities create a win-win-win-win-win situation?

1.1.1 What is the Nordic brand?

“What could a bunch of tiny, cold, insignificant countries where everybody looks the same, acts the same, and thinks a good time is a plate of pickled herring have to offer the diverse and dynamic United States?” – Anu Partanen (The Nordic Theory of Everything; 2016, 7)

The Nordic region consists of five nation-states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and three autonomous regions (Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland Islands) that together inhabit approximately 28 million people (Norden.org 2023). The sum of their GDP comprises the 12th largest economy in the world (World Bank 2019; Magnus 2016). The vast amount of global attention in media and academia the Nordic region has received in recent years can be contributed among other things to its prosperity (Fellman 2019), its nations’ similarly progressive social welfare models (de la Porte et al. 2022), handlings of the recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Irfan et al. 2022) and the war on Ukraine its neighboring country Russia initiated (Mitchell A.W. 2022), high

rankings in the quality of life and happiness studies (Martela et al. 2020, 130), and the curiosity toward the art and culture spawning from the region (Mitchell W. 2022).

“The world around us essentially defines the Nordic region as a single unit. The image is overwhelmingly positive, largely because we in the Nordic region seem to have found solutions to economic and political challenges that both we and others are grappling with.” (Nordic Council of Ministers 2022)

However, it is important to note that the Nordic nation-states do have their own set of challenges and are not universally lauded. They face similar issues as other regions and countries in the developed world, such as the polarization of well-being and prosperity and the rapid aging of the population, which will likely pose challenges for the Nordic model in the coming years. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that the primary sources of economic prosperity in these countries are unsustainable in the long term. These include Norway's dependence on fossil fuels, Sweden's reliance on its mining industry, and Finland's on its forestry (i.e., Fellman 2019; Moore 2014; Frelle-Petersen 2020).

The successes in the arenas of public diplomacy and nation branding of its individual nation-states have been crucial for the Nordic region as it is located on the Northern periphery of Europe and has always had the need to raise its profile and remind the rest of the world of its existence (Pamment 2016). Arguably Nordic place branding and public diplomacy are gaining results: the outside world has shown increasing curiosity toward the Nordic countries and the underlying factors of their long-reigning success in various global surveys for a decade now (The Economist 2013).

In the 2010s, government officials in the Nordics came to terms with the fact that the region already has a place brand of its own and subsequently began its systematic management via a cross-governmental collaborative institution called the Nordic Council of Ministers (Magnus 2016). Magnus (2016) states that the practice of strategic brand management for the Nordic region brand came about from the realization of foreign actors (politicians, citizens, companies) already bundling the individual Nordic nation-states together as a group – especially the further they geographically locate from the Nordics themselves.

Nordic cooperation takes place on many levels. The Nordic Council of Ministers, acting on behalf of the governments of the Nordic nation-states, endeavors to enhance collaboration among the Nordic countries and to raise awareness and interest in the region as a whole. Their set vision is for the Nordic region to become “*the most sustainable and integrated region in the world in 2030*” (Nordic Council of Ministers 2020). On top of the Nordic Council of Ministers, there are various other institutions that drive collaboration between Nordic actors, such as nations, regions, cities, and companies. Table 1 lists some of the most relevant organizations to this study.

Organization	Organization’s role in Nordic collaboration
The Nordic Council of Ministers	The Nordic Council of Ministers is the official body for intergovernmental cooperation in the Nordic Region. (Norden.org B 2023)
Nordic Innovation	Promoting cross-border trade and innovation within the Nordics and from outside the Nordics. Sub-section of the Nordic Council of Ministers. (Nordic Innovation 2023)
Nordic Investment Bank	The Nordic Investment Bank is the international financial institution of the Nordic and Baltic countries with its headquarters in Helsinki, Finland. (Nordic Investment Bank 2023)
Nordic Smart City Network	The Nordic Smart City Network is a collaboration initiative joining five Nordic countries, and currently 20 Nordic cities with a common goal: to explore the Nordic way to create livable and sustainable cities. All capital cities are represented in the network. (Nordic Smart City Network 2023)

Table 1. Organizations driving Nordic collaboration.

Recently, the field of marketing, and more specifically branding, has garnered attention in global politics and other academic disciplines, such as history, through the examination and study of the concept of place branding. For instance, Eirinn Larsen, a Norwegian

historian, recently co-edited a book titled “Gender Equality and Nation Branding in the Nordic Region” (2021) which examines the political and gender-related dimensions of Nordic branding to gain a deeper understanding of how nation branding is employed and for whose benefit in the global context.

Place branding has also become a prominent issue on the political agenda, as exemplified by the frequent references to the Nordic brand in public speeches by individuals such as the current president of Finland, Sauli Niinistö. Considering the evolving security landscape in Europe, and specifically, the efforts of Finland and Sweden to join NATO, Niinistö (2022) recently remarked that joining the intergovernmental military alliance would make the Nordic brand even stronger and referred to the US president Joe Biden saying that if the world would be in Nordic hands it wouldn’t have any problems. Niinistö concluded by stating: *“That’s the Nordic brand and we should make use of it.”*

This study is interested in how the Nordic region’s strong global image (the Nordic brand) is made use of in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. To date, academic literature has primarily examined the relationship between the region brand and nation or corporate-level branding within the Nordics, but only limited attention has been placed on studying the interaction between region and city branding.

1.1.2 Nordic city branding

What is a city brand and why do cities need to be aware of and deliberately manage their brands in the first place? City branding and the study of cities and urban development are increasingly important academic and political topics going into the future. Robert Muggah (2020) stated in his article for The World Economic Forum 2020 that he believes cities might be even more important than nation-states in solving our future’s biggest challenges:

“In contrast to nation-states, cities and mayors are stepping up to the global challenges of the twenty-first century. Growing numbers of city leaders are taking action to reduce their carbon footprints, scale-up renewable energy solutions, harness the digital economy, absorb and protect migrants, and reduce inequality. Cities concentrate the

majority of foreign direct investment and are the drivers of innovation and productivity. As a result, cities are rivalling nation-states – in terms of their economic clout, diplomatic influence and international connectivity.”

The process of globalization has greatly altered the functions of urban areas worldwide, as they are increasingly competing for resources on a global scale. As a result, the positioning and attractiveness of a city have become significant factors in inter-city competition, which is where the concept of city branding becomes relevant (Anttiroiko 2014, 1). Studies often look at this phenomenon “*through ‘first-world lenses’ and thus from the perspective of challenges faced by cities in the developed world*” (Anttiroiko 2014, 2). This applies to the capital cities of the Nordic countries, which are all notably prosperous in comparison to most cities globally.

Although most of the studies and academic literature on city branding focus on major world cities (New York, London, Paris, Shanghai, Tokyo, etc.) it is in the interest of this study to look at the phenomenon from a Nordic perspective and better understand how the Nordic brand is an asset for the Nordic capital cities (Table 2). This provides a compelling context for the study: While the Nordic cities would appear to gain advantages from being part of the Nordic region, they concurrently compete with one another for limited global resources.

Nordic capital city (NCC)	Nation-state	Population (Norden.org C 2023)
Stockholm	Sweden	2,2 million
Copenhagen	Denmark	1,3 million
Oslo	Norway	1,2 million
Helsinki	Finland	1,1 million
Reykjavik	Iceland	0,2 million

Table 2. The capital cities of the nation-states in the Nordic region.

The Nordic capital cities are similar in many ways to one another but vary in population size with Stockholm clearly being the most populated and Reykjavik the least. The size of a city can naturally affect its brand awareness and attractiveness among global target groups.

1.2 The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand how the Nordic brand is shaping the branding of the Nordic capital cities. While being closely connected through a shared region brand, the Nordic capital cities still compete against one another for the flows of resources such as investments, talent, tourism, and relocating corporate facilities. This study will investigate how sub-brands that are collaborative yet in competition against each other make use of the spillover effects from a strong umbrella brand. The sub-brands might face a risk of excessive homogenization if they align themselves too close to the umbrella brand without finding ways to differentiate underneath it.

This study aims to be relevant for practitioners and academics in the field of place branding, but also more generally contribute to the academic study of branding. The findings of the study may have implications beyond the specific case of branding the Nordic capital cities as it can inform how brand managers can strategically leverage a powerful umbrella brand while avoiding homogenization with their peers. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research question:

What role(s) does the Nordic brand play in the branding of the Nordic capital cities?

The study aims to contribute to the field of city branding by exploring the relations between a powerful umbrella brand (of the Nordic region) and its sub-brands (of the Nordic capital cities). The research phenomenon revolves around city branding and more specifically around how Nordic capital city brands derive value from a strong region brand (the Nordic brand). The theoretical framework will be based on the academic research of place branding and the spillover effects of connected brands. The managerial impacts of the study can also be manifold as the cities studied compete against one another

and other peers around the world for investments, tourism income, and talents for the cities' business ecosystems.

To answer the research question, the city branding strategies and practices of two Nordic capital cities, Copenhagen and Helsinki, and the Nordic region brand were investigated. All Nordic capital cities are at a critical junction, facing major challenges such as shifting population trends, the devastating impacts of climate change, and a newly volatile global order, to name just a few. In this new era of uncertainty, it is more important than ever to understand how to make these cities more attractive in the eyes of foreign talent, investors, businesses, and visitors. The Nordic brand has never been more fascinating, and it would be a missed opportunity for the cities not to tap into its potential.

1.3 Definitions and assumptions of the study

Some assumptions were made to keep the scope of the study manageable and its language and tone coherent. To understand the role(s) of the Nordic brand in the branding of the Nordic capital cities, this study will investigate the practices of branding the Nordic region and two of its capital cities, Copenhagen and Helsinki. These cities were chosen not only because they were accessible and familiar to the researcher but also because they represent two different levels of maturity in city branding: Copenhagen has a long history of systematically branding its city to its target groups whereas Helsinki has a more limited experience in branding itself.

Copenhagen and Helsinki have a similar population size as indicated in Table 2, and thus create an interesting case study for investigating their respective branding efforts. Although the focus of this study will be on these two cities, the roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities are likely similar in the case of the remaining three Nordic capital cities that were not studied.

Even though the Nordic capital cities have a wide range of stakeholders that they need to keep in mind while conducting city branding, this study will focus on the external stakeholder groups (i.e., investors, global companies, talent, and visitors) of a city instead of its internal ones (i.e., citizens, local companies).

In this study, the Nordic capital city brands will be considered as sub-brands of the Nordic region brand (this assumption will be discussed further in chapter 2.4). For simplicity's sake and to be able to declare generally applicable findings this study will focus on the Nordic capital city (NCC) brands, specifically the city brands of Copenhagen and Helsinki as singular entities and leave their sub-brands out of scope.

Regarding the potential meaning and/or affect transfer from the Nordic brand to the Nordic capital city brands, the focus of this study will be on investigating the one-way spillover effects from the region brand to the city brands and the potential horizontal spillover effects between Nordic capital city brands.

2 PLACE BRANDING AND SPILLOVER EFFECTS

2.1 Defining city branding

A brand represents the things that a product, service, employer, organization, person, or place means to consumers (Kotler et al. 2016). It can be defined as a set of attributes (tangible or intangible) designed to create identity and awareness, and to build the reputation of the branded asset (Sammut-Bonnici 2015). The objective of branding is to create brands that differentiate from the competition and to make the product, service, person, organization, or in this study's case, the place more attractive in the eye of the beholder.

Place marketing was first introduced in academic texts around 30 years ago (Kotler et al. 1993), but it can still be seen as a young field of academic research (Zenker & Braun 2017). In the past years, the focus of place marketing has shifted toward place branding as places try to garner positive associations in their stakeholders' minds (Zenker & Braun 2017). Place branding has only recently captured the attention of scholars and the definitions of a *place brand* and *place branding* still vary a lot.

The practice of place differentiation has been dubbed as place branding. It is still regarded as a relatively young academic field and is yet to develop a set of clear and widely accepted theoretical foundations (Kavaratzis & Charles 2018). Place branding is now understood as the deliberate actions taken to uphold, fortify, and manage a place brand.

Simon Anholt (2006, 2), who is regarded as a world-leading expert in place branding, legitimizes the need for the branding of nations, cities, and regions by stating that because of the rapid advance of globalization “*all responsible governments, on behalf of their people and their companies, need to discover what the world's perception of their country is, and to develop a strategy for managing it*”. This is important because every place (country, city, and region) needs to compete against each other “*for its share of the world's consumers, tourists, investors, students, entrepreneurs, international sporting*

and cultural events, and for the attention and respect of the international media, of other governments, and the people of other countries” (Anholt 2006, 1).

To compete on the global stage, places, more precisely cities, towns, nations, and tourist destinations need to brand themselves to differentiate from their peers and other places that are competing for the same tourists, residents, investments, and corporate relocations (Anttiroiko 2014, 1 & 26; Moilanen & Rainisto 2009, 3). This is nothing new, as Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005, 506) state: *“Places have long felt a need to differentiate themselves from each other, to assert their individuality in pursuit of various economic, political or socio-psychological objectives”*.

According to Kaefer (2021) the term *place brand* refers to the defined DNA of a place and its distinctive and unique character that is based on its personality and identity. Kaefer continues by stating that a place brand represents the identity of a place (i.e., the architecture and city surroundings) and its image (how people perceive the place).

Applying Dinnie’s (2008) definition of a nation brand, Anttiroiko (2016, 102) offers a definition for the term *city brand*:

“The unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provides the city with locally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences. Branding is thus about conveying a brand or symbolic essence of a city to target audiences for strategic gain.”

As stated before, the theoretical literature on place branding is still scarce and the precise nature of place branding, that city branding is a branch of, is yet to be agreed upon (Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015). However, the practical need for differentiation between places is justified and place branding is assumed necessary due to the ever-intensifying competition between places (Hanna & Rowley 2011).

According to many scholars, the most important aspect setting place branding apart from private sector branding is the sheer number of stakeholders and their vested interests to take into consideration while managing a place brand (Frost 2004; Iversen & Hem 2008, 604). Nobody really owns a place or its brand even though many places (cities, nations,

regions) have designated branding organizations to manage their place brands. Place brands have internal (i.e., residents and companies from the city) stakeholders and external ones (i.e., potential residents, tourists, investors, and companies looking to relocate) and because of this multitude of stakeholders brand managers have less control over place brands compared to product brands (Iversen & Hem 2008, 604). This study will focus on the external and moreover international stakeholders of a place brand.

Not surprisingly, in recent years there has been a stronger focus on stakeholders, their significance, their role, and their further engagement in the academic literature on place branding (Kavaratzis & Charles 2018). Furthermore, it can be stated that there is an ongoing paradigm shift from static to dynamic place brands that are built and managed in participation with their stakeholders (Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015). Zenker and Braun (2017) argue that stakeholder management is the most important task in the brand management of places because it must orchestrate a network of sub-brands (city districts, iconic places within a place, company-led place brands, etc.) for a powerful joint place brand. In the past decade, some researchers have put their focus on citizens as stakeholders, and on their participation in place branding (Zenker & Braun 2017).

In his doctoral dissertation, Rainisto (2003) showcases the multicuity of stakeholders, events, and causes that become success factors for a place brand. Not only is the success of a place brand, or a city brand in this study's case, dependent on managing the existing stakeholder portfolio well (such as fostering public-private partnerships), but also among other things adjusting to macroeconomic events, managing a planning group capable of visionary thinking and strategic analysis, measuring and following up on learnings and in essence developing leadership, which Moilanen and Rainisto (2009, 34) call the greatest challenge for a place brand. Also achieving political unity in a democratic system that chooses its political leaders anew every few years causes friction in long-term branding efforts. Place brands (and thus city brands) "*must acknowledge the long-term, systematic, consistent and united action, as an investment to reach the agreed targets*" (Moilanen & Rainisto 2009, 23).

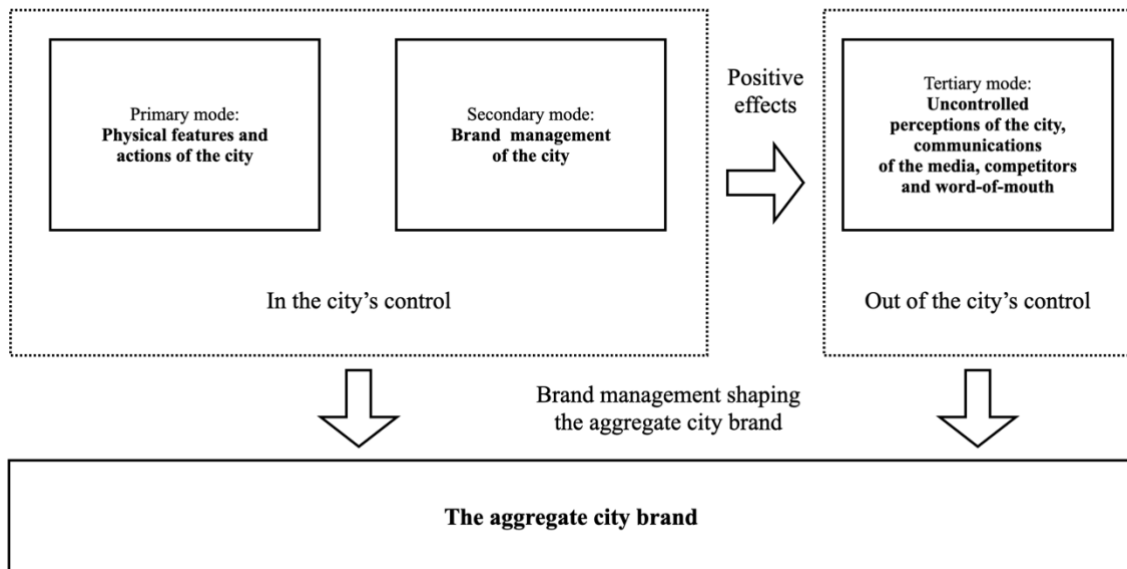


Figure 1. Three-fold scheme of brand management shaping the aggregate city brand (Adapted from Kavaratzis 2004)

The complexity of city branding has by now become obvious. There are conditions one can try to affect by deliberate and strategic city branding and then there are conditions that are out of the practitioners' hands. According to Kavaratzis (2004), this challenge can be conceptualized in a three-fold scheme (see Figure 1 above) with three distinct modes: primary (physical features and actions of the city), secondary (brand management of the city; originally "brand communications" in Kavaratzis's model) and tertiary (uncontrolled communications of media, competitors, and word-of-mouth). What Kavaratzis (2004) sees as essential in this conceptualization is that the synthesis of the city brands' controllable modes of brand management (the primary and secondary modes) should evoke and reinforce a positive image and word-of-mouth (the tertiary mode) which then feeds back as a stronger city brand to its internal and external target groups.

Moreover, Kavaratzis (2015) has in the past decade been finetuning his approach to how place branding and concludes that there is still no full agreement or even understanding as to how place brands are formed. Place branding literature sees that the root of the problem lies in the lack of clear conceptualization of brands within marketing studies (Braun 2011). Brands are described as anything from mere managerial devices controlled by companies (Aaker 1996) to strategic tools that drive the entire existence of corporations (Hatch & Schultz 2008). The paradigm shift towards a service-dominant

logic for marketing (Vargo & Lusch 2008) turned the focus largely toward stakeholders, which stems from how value is created (Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015). In this new line of thinking, value is seen to be of experiential nature (Vargo & Lusch 2008), meaning that it is created in experiences more than images or emotions. Moreover, value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the person experiencing or benefiting from it (Vargo & Lusch 2008). Namely, the ways in which people create and understand value are unique and might be disconnected from objective reality (Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015). This becomes an important notion going further in this study as place brands, be they region or city brands in the case of this study, can never be fully controlled or managed in the traditional sense often referred to in marketing literature.

2.2 City branding paradoxes

In its pursuit of differentiation, the practice of place branding can paradoxically result in a homogenization of place brands, rather than promoting their unique qualities. Ambord (2020) draws attention to the inherent contradiction in place branding stating that as cities set out to brand themselves to differentiate from their competition, the actual means of city branding (i.e., branding campaigns) resort to statements and practices that often do the opposite.

Valaskivi (2016) has studied the nation branding of Finland and Sweden and points out the risks of benchmarking the other nation's branding strategies and success cases as well as the common practice of using the same external consultants in devising nation branding management practices. One interviewee in Valaskivi's study even stated that *"We acknowledge each other as competitors but nevertheless share information openly, because it benefits everybody"* (Valaskivi 2016, 145). These risks driving nation brand homogenization can be extended to city branding as in place branding literature they are often interchangeable terms (Anholt 2007).

Cities (like the nations they belong to) constantly benchmark each other's branding practices (Anttiroiko 2014, 17). One way for cities to measure the success of their city branding efforts is to compare their standings to their peers in various global rankings that evaluate and rank cities based on economic, geographical, and social characteristics.

Table 3 presents the practices that are identified in the academic literature on place branding as contributing to the homogenization of city brands, making city branding efforts potentially even counterproductive.

Practice	The potentially counterproductive effect
Bench- marking peer practices	When cities compare and benchmark their city branding techniques, success cases, and strategies to those of their peers, they might end up making the cities sound, look, and feel too similar to their stakeholders in order to meaningfully set them apart from their competition. Valaskivi (2016) has studied this in the context of nation branding and has noted it as a risk for homogenization.
Bench- marking city rankings	Cities can resort to actions that they believe will help them climb in city rankings. If this was common practice everywhere, it would mean that cities would become more and more similar in the eyes of their target groups and stakeholders. This contradicts the very idea of city branding. Anttiroiko (2014, 17) states that “ <i>rankings are tools for cities to learn from one another and justify their policies</i> ”. As a result, this creates a risk of homogenization which Anttiroiko (2014) sees as one of the paradoxes of international city branding: while branding is supposed to make the city more distinct in the eyes of the target groups, global benchmarking tends to counterproductively homogenize the cities as there may be a temptation to design policies and direct actions according to the criteria applied in rankings.
Bench- marking branding trends	The current visual, tone-of-voice, and conceptual branding trends make it harder for brands to stand out from one another as the people (from in-house teams or creative and/or communications agencies) designing them tend to lean on cultural zeitgeist for their inspiration. Valaskivi (2016) has noted that the use of the same branding consultants creates a risk of homogenization in the context of nation branding between Sweden and Finland.

Table 3. Potentially counterproductive city branding practices.

These are some of the city branding practices that this study aims to dig deeper into with the empirical evidence gathered from the Nordic region and Nordic capital city branding experts and practitioners.

2.3 Umbrella brands, sub-brands, and spillover effects

2.3.1 Umbrella brands and sub-brands

Traditionally umbrella brands in marketing literature are seen to serve as providers of additional brand equity to connected brands (Aaker 2004) to reduce perceived risk when launching new products to the marketplace and to improve positive perceptions of brand partners (Laforet & Saunders 1994; Rao et al. 1999). An umbrella-branding strategy enables firms to make use of the reputation attached to a brand, something that could generate savings in marketing costs and brand development over time (Aaker 2004). Moreover, umbrella branding reduces the risk and cost of introducing new products to the market by indicating that the new product has the same (or similar) quality to existing products if the parent brand is strong (Montgomery & Wernerfelt 1992).

Despite Anholt's (1998; 2004) assertion that a place brand can function similarly to a manufacturer's brand by offering a sense of trust and quality assurance, there is limited literature and practical examples of region brands acting as umbrella brands for city brands in academic research and practice. The brand architecture of city brands may not be as intentionally or systematically developed as compared to a company's approach to brand architecture planning and management.

In the case under study, the Nordic brand's spillover effects on the Nordic capital cities, the nature of umbrella branding becomes even more complex. While the Nordic Council of Ministers oversees the Nordic brand, it does not possess ownership of the brand in the traditional sense. As Iversen & Hem (2008, 604) note, place brand managers have limited control over their brands when compared to product brand managers. The Nordic Council of Ministers can play an active role in shaping the image of the Nordic brand that benefits all Nordic actors, but due to the nature of place branding, where ownership of the product is not possible, it is impossible to have complete control over the brand. For instance, the

Nordic capital cities maintain autonomy over their individual branding strategies and practices, while simultaneously reaping the benefits of the perceived association with the Nordic brand. They leverage the Nordic brand where it aligns with their goals and can also mitigate any potential downsides that may arise from the association.

2.3.2 Spillover effects

There seem to be little or no academic studies on how meanings or attitudes towards nation (such as Finland or Denmark) or region brands (such as the Nordics) transfer to city brands with inevitable connections to them through geography and governance. Some studies have investigated the spillover effects of place umbrella brands on their associated entities, but they have mostly focused on how the place umbrella brands attribute or affect spillover to associated product brands (Iversen & Hem 2008). There are also studies on how affinity towards the Nordic region affects the perception of Nordic consumer brands (Ekstrand 2018).

This study will refer to the academic study of spillover effects which will aid in understanding how city brands can make use of the possible attribute, meaning, affect, and/or attitude transfers between a region brand and associated city brands. Raufeisen et al. (2019, 251) define the spillover effect in their summary article on the topic as an effect on *“how the assessment of one entity (object or individual) influences the assessment of a different entity”*. They continue to define the spillover effect as *“the transfer of affect, attributes, or both, between associated entities that are independent of each other in their evaluation”*. This definition serves the purposes of the potential transfers of meaning and/or attitudes from the Nordic region brands to the Nordic capital city brands well.

It is important to note that the concepts of spillover effect and halo effect should not be considered synonymous, even though authors in the field of marketing literature have used them interchangeably in the past (cf. Iversen & Hem 2008, 608). A halo effect is a common bias that we use to assess situations or individuals. For example, if one likes a president’s politics, they also probably like his appearance and voice (Kahneman 2011, 82). In marketing literature, the halo effect is defined to describe situations where one attribute of an object or individual influences the evaluation of another attribute of the

same object or individual (Raufeisen et al. 2019, 250). A spillover effect, however, differs from a halo effect in the sense that it occurs between associated, but independent entities (Raufeisen et al. 2019, 251).

Because Keller (2013) describes i.e., countries or geographic areas as potential sources of brand equity enhancement, it is possible to extend the idea of meanings and/or attitudes towards region brands such as the Nordic brand spilling over to its sub-brands such as the Nordic capital city brands of Copenhagen and Helsinki.

These spillover effects include, but do not limit to country-of-origin effects that traditionally within marketing literature refer to product brands adopting meaning or affect from the country of the brand's origin. Classic examples of these include Italian sports cars being connected with the qualities of style and speed, French perfume associated with classiness, and Japanese consumer technology with affordable quality (Clifton 2014). On top of linking products or brands with positive country-of-origin connotations, strong brands can also shield and protect the brand from harmful country-of-origin associations (Clifton 2014). These COO effects can be activated in the consumer's mind automatically when making the connection between the brand and the country or region (Liu & Johnson 2005). As Keller (2013) states that brand equity can flow to brands as knowledge transfer from various sources, in this study the country-of-origin effects are extended to the broader idea of region-of-origin to the city brands under its umbrella.

In their essence, spillover effects exist because the mind aims for cognitive efficiency, making it a heuristic process of the human brain. Raufeisen et al. (2019, 254) state that *“people store knowledge in the form of associative networks and these networks enable the transfer of attributes between mentally connected objects (e.g., brands, celebrities, sponsored events, etc.)”*. If this kind of association exists *“an aim for cognitive efficiency, a need for causal explanations, and a preference for a harmonious state drive the process of either aligning attitudes on two entities or using one as an information surrogate for the other; both of which result in spillover effects”* (Raufeisen et al. 2019, 254). According to Raufeisen et al. (2019), these underlying principles were found to apply in i.e., brand extensions, different forms of co-branding, and COO (country-of-origin) effects.

Spillover effects are essentially heuristic processes of the mind that exist to create cognitive efficiency in the state of bounded rationality (Loock & Hinnen 2015). The main driver to simplify cognitive processing in these ways is the tremendous amount of information that an individual confronts in their everyday life. Within the context of this study, the spillover effects from the Nordic brand can be seen as roles that either benefit or harm the branding of the Nordic capital cities. Simply put, as long as an individual makes the connection between a Nordic city and its belonging to the Nordic region, the attitudes, meanings, and/or affinities connected to the region spill over to the city brand.

Raufeisen et al. (2019) also remind us that spillover effects do not only function in a one-way manner, but also from the sub-brand or brand extension to the parent or umbrella brand. In the context of co-branding and COO (country-of-origin) labeling, attitudes transfer to the brand from the COO connection or the co-brand. Regarding brand extensions, attitudes toward the parent brand spill over to the brand extension. Raufeisen et al. (2019, 251) call it a reciprocal spillover effect when meaning or attitudes also transfer back to the country (COO), co-brand, or parent brand. In this study, as mentioned in chapter 1.3, the focus will be on investigating the one-way spillover effects from the region brand to the city brands and the potential horizontal spillover effects between the city brands.

Relating to place branding, spillover effects are usually studied to unearth the ways commercial brands benefit or handicap from their countries of origin and some studies even show that the meaning transfer works the other way around, too, from product image to country image (Lopez et al. 2011, 1620). This study extends the study of spillover effects within place branding to city branding to better understand how Nordic capital city brands can extract value from a strong Nordic umbrella brand while protecting themselves from its potentially harming spillover effects.

Spillover effects from the Nordic brand fall under the tertiary mode of what creates an aggregate city brand (see Figure 1): they are not in the city's control, but nevertheless, affect the way the city's brand is perceived. With the secondary mode, that is brand management (or "brand communications" in Kavartzis's original model from 2004), the city can either make use of the spillover effects from the tertiary mode or mitigate their harmful effects on the aggregate city brand. The primary mode of city branding, that is

the physical place, and its actions are not considered to be within the realm of city brand management as they refer to the historical build of the city and its ongoing political decision-making.

2.4 The Nordic capital brands as the sub-brands of the Nordic region's umbrella brand

It can be argued that the Nordic region brand should not be treated as an umbrella brand that extends its meaning and affect to sub-brands, as a place brand cannot be managed to the same extent as a traditional corporate brand. However, there is a shared understanding in the place branding literature that place brands possess many of the same characteristics and exhibit similar behaviors as corporate brands. For the purpose of this study, the Nordic region and all the associated perceptions, meanings, and affective responses will be referred to as the Nordic brand.

Anholt (1998; 2004) states that a place brand can behave just like a corporate brand, providing its sub-brands an umbrella of trust and a guarantee of quality. City brands can thus be considered sub-brands of a regional umbrella brand (Anttiroiko 2014, 75). In this study, the Nordic capital city brands are considered sub-brands of the Nordic region's umbrella brand. This study aims to broaden the understanding of how the studied sub-brands make use of the strong Nordic umbrella brand while still competing as peers against each other for resources such as investments, talent, visitor flows, and relocations of companies.

Recently there has been some criticism of the over-simplifying way academic texts have regarded city branding. Zenker and Braun (2017) question whether singular "one size fits all" city brands are even relevant anymore because place brands are by definition complex. On top of catering to a multitude of stakeholders and different target groups, they also withhold diverse place offerings. Zenker and Braun (2017) go on to propose that target group-specific sub-brands and a clear brand architecture not unlike a corporate "house of brands" for city brands are needed. Also, Anttiroiko (2014, 76) states in his book on the political economy of city branding that "*cities should explicitly design*

strategies for extensions of their umbrella brands or master brands” and provides strategies and examples to do so.

Figure 2 aims to bring together the major theoretical components of the research. In the figure, the umbrella brand (in the case of this study, later referred to as the Nordic brand, the Nordic region brand, or the umbrella Nordic brand) spills over meaning and affect to its sub-brands (in the case of this study referred to as the Nordic capital city brands, or NCCs for short). The figure also recognizes the inherent tension between the cities as they would benefit from collaborating to further strengthen the region brand but find it difficult to do so while competing against each other for global resources.

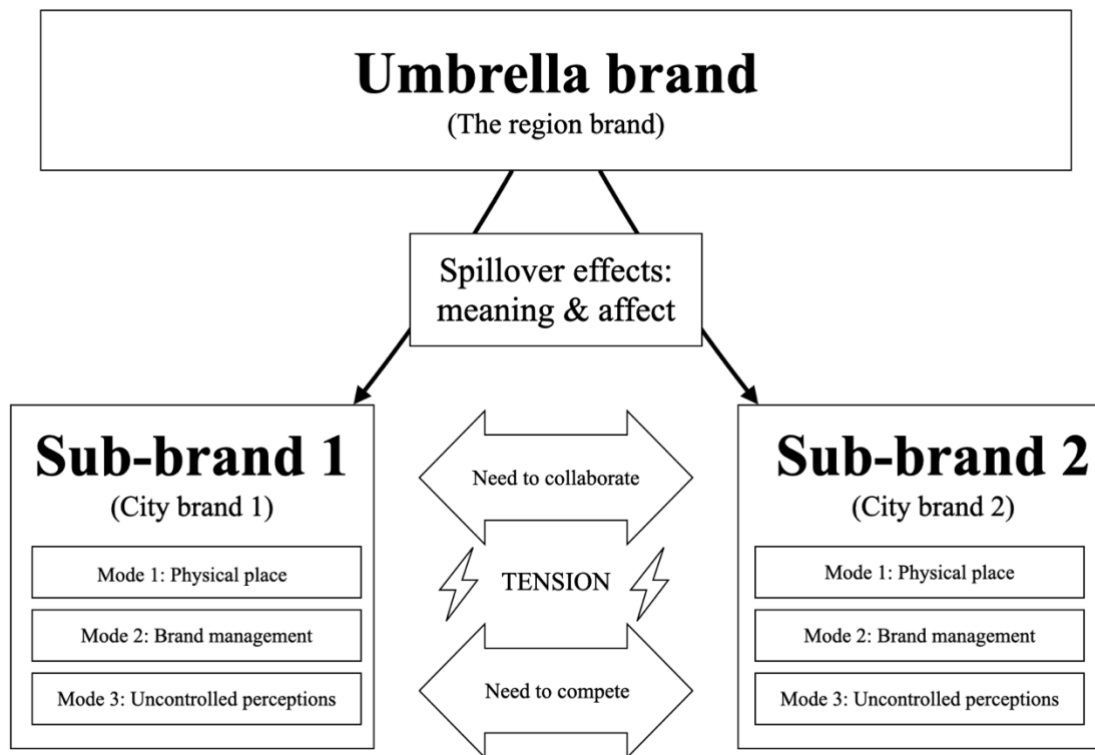


Figure 2. Region brand’s spillover effects on city brands in competitive collaboration.

The Nordic capital cities can either strengthen and make use of these spillover effects or mitigate their potentially harmful consequences through their deliberate city brand management. The theoretical framework depicted in Figure 2 will be used in analyzing the empirical evidence of the study and revisited as a fine-tuned and expanded version at the end of chapter 4.

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Philosophical approach of the study

For a study's methodology to be consistent and sound, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of the underlying philosophical principles that guide it. As all scientific research has a philosophical foundation (Hunt & Hansen 2011, 111), these concepts will help define the research design, strategy, and methods of this study (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Moreover, the ontological, epistemological, and methodological concepts of the study's philosophical approach must be understood.

Ontology focuses on ideas about the existence of, and the relationship between, people, society, and the world in general (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 13). Epistemology provides an understanding of what can be known, and how knowledge is created and asks whether we can even try to pursue an objective truth with scientific research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The methodological approaches of a study are based on the ontological and epistemological ground that the research stands on and try to explain how we can understand and gather knowledge in practical ways (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

This study adopts moderate constructionism as its philosophical approach, recognizing that knowledge surrounding the subject of city branding, as perceived by experts and practitioners, is inherently subjective, with multiple perspectives on what constitutes truth within the field (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). The moderate constructionist approach posits that truth is established through dialogue, critique, and consensus within various communities and that usable knowledge and empirical evidence play a vital role in its formation (Lincoln & Guba 2000).

In line with the moderate constructionist philosophy, this study aims to generate new, usable knowledge by incorporating multiple perspectives on truth (Lincoln & Guba 2000). The moderate constructionist ontology holds that while there may exist an objective reality that is independent of human perception, it can only be accessed and understood through specific cultural and social lenses: *“a truth claim is epistemically*

acceptable in a community if it is based on evidence that is acceptable to the community and if the community is open to investigating the claim and its evidence in an openly critical manner” (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010, 101). “Community” here refers to the different experts and practitioners of city branding around the world (the research subjects), and even the researcher himself. The researcher can play an instrumental role in creating new knowledge through the chosen methodological approaches (more on this in chapter 3.2).

Compared to a critical realist view, moderate constructionism is not concerned about moving closer toward one universal truth but acknowledging the possibility of multiple community-formed bases of knowledge (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). However, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) also argue that critical realism and moderate constructionism are fairly close to one another, especially epistemologically and methodologically. In line with the critical realist tradition, moderate constructionism acknowledges that knowledge is constructed within a social context and therefore, the researcher must be aware that complex phenomena cannot be fully explained in their entirety (Easton 2002; 2010). However, unlike critical realists, moderate constructionists are less concerned with ontological questions (Nightingale & Cromby 2002).

The methodology of abduction is deemed an appropriate and suitable approach for this study, in alignment with the philosophical stance of moderate constructionism, as outlined by Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010), and will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3.4. Abduction is an approach to knowledge production in the middle ground between induction and deduction (i.e., Coffey & Atkinson 1996). In practice, the researcher iterates between inductive and deductive reasoning while conducting the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). In abductive reasoning, the researcher makes a series of observations and proceeds to deduce their most likely explanation thus allowing to “logically leapfrog” into more innovative conclusions than with purely deductive or inductive reasoning (Leskelä 2020, 227).

Researchers who subscribe to the moderate constructionist approach often adopt a research logic based on abduction (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). Abduction allows data-driven theory generation, whereas deduction is more theory-driven. However, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) argue that it is not enough to say that a research process takes an

abductive approach, as in some phases of the study the logic might follow pure abductive reasoning while in other stages the reasoning might lean more toward induction or deduction. Even though it must be specified in what way the research is abductive, the process can be identified as having abduction as the guiding approach to knowledge creation (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010).

The main reason for basing the reasoning of this study on abduction is the scattered nature of the existing knowledge on city branding. There are theoretical concepts and frameworks within and around city branding, but none match the intention of this study fully. Therefore, the study intends to expand the theoretical thinking on city branding with empirical evidence from the conducted interviews. As this study explores a powerful umbrella brand (the Nordic region brand) in relation to its sub-brands (the Nordic capital city brands), an abductive approach is seen as a good fit. Moreover, abduction is deemed as an appropriate approach to knowledge creation because this study focuses on theory development instead of theory generation. As an intended result, the study aims to create a more cohesive framework based on existing literature, theoretical insights, and empirical evidence (Dubois & Gadde 2002).

3.2 Qualitative research

Through qualitative research, it is possible to understand, describe and make interpretations of a phenomenon at hand (Eskola & Suoranta 1998). To gain a deep and detailed understanding of a complex and intangible phenomenon (Belk et al. 2013) such as city branding, this study was conducted using qualitative methods. Even after 30 years of research into place marketing and branding, the field is relatively new in academic studies and coherent theories are still being evolved (Zenker & Braun 2017). This study aims to contribute to the theory of city branding through empirical evidence.

The study takes a managerial approach to understand how city branding is conducted in Nordic capital cities such as Copenhagen and Helsinki. Qualitative methods strive to understand the world as it is *experienced*, and not how the world actually *is* – it is in the interest of this study to understand how the experts and practitioners of city and region branding understand the phenomenon, not how the phenomenon objectively *is*. The

phenomenon of city branding cannot be measured easily and is always contextual. Therefore, qualitative methods fit well in gaining more knowledge on it: they allow a deep dive into relevant concepts and a more holistic view of the phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

Existing literature on city branding is insufficient and although there are increasing amounts of academic contributions around the phenomenon, there is also a lack of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the field (Zenker & Braun 2017). Qualitative research is more explorative in nature (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) and thus suits the needs of the study better than quantitative research methods that benefit more from clear theoretical frameworks that can be empirically tested. Qualitative research methods are suitable when aiming to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that is lesser known (Carson et al. 2001). Qualitative research also allows comparing the empirical evidence with existing theory and assessing what differences and commonalities there are (Gummesson 2005). From an interplay between the generated data and theoretical frameworks, this study generates new findings while attempting to enhance existing theories.

In qualitative studies, the researcher can be seen as an instrument of the study. This poses an important role for the researcher and demands self-awareness. As a researcher, it is imperative to consider one's role, purpose, and underlying assumptions in the research process, as these decisions may shape the interpretation and findings of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). As acknowledged by Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006), the researcher can't achieve complete objectivity in qualitative research due to the inherent subjectivity that arises from the researcher's cognitive and physical presence, as well as their pre-existing knowledge of the topic. It is sufficient that the researcher aims to actively become aware of their attitudes and beliefs related to the phenomenon and tries their best so that they don't affect the research too much (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006).

However, the active and participatory role of the researcher can be seen as an opportunity as well: Leskelä (2020) points out that during the qualitative research process, the researcher should trust their intuition and whether a surprising insight or a seemingly contradictory insight awakens their curiosity, it might be a valuable lead for them to

follow. In this study, the researcher recognizes the potential influence of their prior knowledge and experience in the field of city branding on the research process but aims to leverage this as an asset in achieving a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, while maintaining the integrity of the study.

3.3 Generating the empirical data

3.3.1 The selection of interviewees

In this study, experts in the field of city branding, practitioners with hands-on experience in city branding, and experts and practitioners in the field of the Nordic brand have been interviewed to gather empirical data that have been subsequently analyzed to address the established research questions. The selection of interviewees in this study was strategically chosen from various organizations and sectors within the city branding and Nordic branding fields. This includes representatives from city branding organizations in Helsinki and Copenhagen (Helsinki Partners and Copenhagen Capacity), from the city government communications department responsible for city branding in Helsinki, experts and former practitioners of city branding, academic researchers in the field, and practitioners of Nordic branding at the Nordic Council of Ministers.

This diverse range of perspectives and experiences was essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and to inform the analysis of the collected empirical data. It was deemed necessary to interview both experts and practitioners to gain a holistic understanding of the practices and strategies surrounding city branding in the Nordic capital cities. By gathering perspectives from both experts, who may offer a more objective viewpoint, and practitioners, who can provide insight into the practical implementation of city branding initiatives, the study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

All the interviews (see Table 2) took place between November 2022 and January 2023 online via Zoom or in person in Copenhagen. In adherence to ethical research standards (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), the researcher ensured anonymity and confidentiality for all participants and obtained informed consent before the interviews, which were

conducted voluntarily. Despite the challenges that often arise in gaining access to institutions in qualitative business research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), minimal difficulties in identifying and scheduling interviews with relevant participants were encountered. The interviewees were willing to share their perspectives on the research phenomenon and made time for hour-long interviews.

The selection of participants for the interviews was based on a combination of factors, including the quality of the informants (most of whom had a significant role in leading the city branding efforts of Helsinki or Copenhagen), the researcher's prior professional connections (referred to as "backyard research"; Glesne 1999, 2628), chain-sampling (where interviewees suggested potential new participants and facilitated introductions), and purposeful sampling (to ensure representation from various backgrounds and perspectives). These methods are all considered legitimate alternatives for participant selection in a business research context (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

In this study, a comprehensive effort was made to carefully select interviewees to ensure that a wide range of perspectives and insights on the topic of Nordic capital city branding was represented in the empirical evidence. Ultimately, a total of 12 individuals were chosen from various organizations involved in city and Nordic branding in Helsinki and Copenhagen. These individuals were chosen based on their expertise and knowledge of the subject matter and were deemed to be sufficient in number to provide high-quality data. Detailed information on the interviewees, including their roles and the specifics of the interview process, can be found in Table 4. Following ethical research practices, all interviewees were anonymized by being assigned pseudonyms.

Interviewee's pseudonym	Interviewee's relationship to city branding	Date	Interview location	Language	Length (minutes and no. of transcribed pages)
Antti	Expert	2.11.22	Zoom	FI	42 min, 12p.
Salla-Maija	Expert	22.11.22	Zoom	FI	54 min, 21p.
Leena	Expert	1.12.22	Zoom	FI	48 min, 16p.
Sigrid	Expert	1.12.22	Copenhagen	EN	57 min, 21p.
Anna	Practitioner	2.12.22	Zoom	FI	53 min, 14p.
Jaakko	Expert	8.12.22	Copenhagen	FI	42 min, 14p.
Pär	Expert	16.12.22	Zoom	FI	48 min, 9p.
Neea	Practitioner	16.12.22	Copenhagen	FI	73 min, 15p.
Salla	Practitioner	20.12.22	Zoom	FI	46 min, 15p.
Nicholas	Practitioner	20.12.22	Copenhagen	EN	42 min, 11p.
Ingrid	Practitioner	22.12.22	Zoom	EN	55 min, 15p.
Charlotte	Practitioner	10.1.23	Zoom	FI	30 min, 8p.

Table 4. Detailed information on the interviews.

The informants had extensive expertise in Nordic region branding or Nordic capital city branding based on their experiences working with city or region branding strategies and practices (e.g., as CEOs, CMOs, directors of communications, or heads of development), in the city government (e.g., as mayors, CMOs, or heads of strategy), or as consultants on place branding in the Nordics. Some of the interviewees were currently employed by a city or the region branding organization (labeled as practitioners in Table 4) and some had prior experience from working directly in one of the organizations or working for one of them as a consultant (labeled as experts in Table 4).

3.3.2 Interviewing experts

This study employed an expert interview approach as the primary method of data collection. The interviewees were chosen based on their institutional positions, involvement in the phenomenon being studied (Nordic capital city branding and Nordic branding), and extensive knowledge and expertise on the topic (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010). Emphasis was placed on selecting high-quality informants for this study, to obtain a nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon through a tailored interview structure that aimed to elicit responses relevant to the study's research question from each interviewee. As this study took a managerial perspective, it was of utmost importance that the interviewees had managerial or expert experience in the research phenomenon. In expert interviews, truth is constructed in cooperation with the interviewee (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010), and this also conforms to the research approach of moderate constructionism. This means that the researcher might already have some interpretation of the subject which is then tested, corrected, and modified based on the interviews.

During the interview process, it is important to consider the potential for bias in the responses given by experts and practitioners. To mitigate this, the researcher must strive to establish a sense of trust with the interviewee and create an environment that encourages objective responses. This can be achieved using language and terminology that aligns with the professional ethos of the interviewee (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010). This was achieved through the researcher's prior collaboration around the research phenomenon with some of the interviewees and shared understanding of the topic with the ones the researcher didn't have a former acquaintance.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured question set, which the researcher tailored to each interviewee before the interview. Additionally, the researcher exercised flexibility in deviating from the semi-structured question set by posing relevant follow-up questions that arose during the interview, to elicit responses that would provide answers to the research questions. The researcher's prior knowledge of the topic facilitated this process, allowing for the identification of applicable follow-up questions, and ensuring that the focus of the interview remained on the relevant issues (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010).

The chosen method of expert interviews was found suitable for the study as the goal of the interviews was to gain specific knowledge on a niche topic. The method is not interested in the interviewees themselves, but in the distinct knowledge they have because of their past or present institutional or another expert status (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010). By selecting interviewees who had relevant knowledge and experience related to the research phenomenon, the data collected during the interviews were deemed usable in the analysis phase of the study. Semi-structured interviews are seen as an optimal way of conducting expert interviews.

3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

The interview is a social situation where the researcher and the interviewee co-create knowledge about the research phenomenon. In the moderate constructionist approach, the interview is seen as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed together by the interviewer and the informant (Holstein & Gubrium 1995).

For this study, the researcher chose the method of semi-structured interviews to find answers to the set research question. This meant that all the interviewees were posed with the same or nearly the same set of questions (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). The chosen method is deemed appropriate in settings, such as in this study, where the researcher has decided he wants to gain information on a specific topic and the participants are not given the freedom to associate freely in the interview situation (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). In this study, it meant that the question set was built in a modifiable manner. Because of this the researcher and the interviewees could further expand on topics they found meaningful. In this style of interviewing, both of the parties are active, and knowledge is created jointly (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). The set structure also prevented the interview from getting out of the researcher's hands as there was always an appropriate theme or a next question to resort to.

This relatively common set of questions and shared themes tied all the interviews together even though none of them were exactly alike by design or by expected results (Eskola & Suoranta 1998). The somewhat loose structure of the interviews also puts pressure on the researcher to conduct the interview effectively and comparably. In semi-structured interviews, the questions that were planned before the interview and the ones that the

researcher came up with on the spot were all based on prior knowledge and the theoretical framework that was followed (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018).

The interviews mostly followed the same thematic structure with each one having a specific focus that led to unique questions and discussions. For example, with general experts on Nordic city branding the researcher didn't dive into specifics of how city branding efforts are led but aimed to gain a broader understanding of the topic. Also, with the practitioners at the Nordic Council of Ministers, the interviews focused more on how the Nordic region brand is being led and how it's connected to its sub-brands, which are in this case the Nordic capital city brands. To distill the best possible empirical evidence from all 12 interviews, a lot of preparative work was conducted, and the process leaned heavily on the researcher's existing topical knowledge.

The interviews were conducted either in Finnish or in English depending on the nationality of the interviewee: The Finns were all interviewed in Finnish and the Danes, Norwegians, and Estonians in English. The variability of the interview languages poses a challenge in the analysis phase as the data must be comparable. Comparability will be achieved by a meticulous translating process after transcribing each interview.

3.4 Analysis of the data

The researcher began the analysis of the data already during the interview process by making observations, taking notes, and conducting preliminary sorting. These were considered in the analysis phase of the study. After each interview, the researcher listened to the recordings and transcribed the discussions by writing everything down (Eskola & Vastamäki 2015, 42). This process was probably the most time-consuming part of the study (two to three hours transcribing each interview) but is regarded as mandatory for the qualitative analysis of the empirical evidence (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 222). In making the data accessible and more approachable, transcribing was an important part of the analytical process. Because the researcher spent a lot of time with the empirical evidence from the expert interviews, he started to see common themes within the data and started to understand how they fit or didn't fit the chosen theoretical framework. Thus, when the

analytical process began, the researcher already had a lot of ideas on how to make use of the findings in the study.

As the expert interviews were all conducted with participants holding different roles in different organizations and even in different countries, the data collected is not immediately comparable with one another. To gain insights and reach results, some coding needed to be done. However, as Glaser and Strauss (1967, 8) note, “*the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa (that she or he) must have a perspective to see relevant data and abstract significant categories from it.*” In this study, this meant that the researcher needed to recognize common themes in the data gathered in the expert interviews and code them based on the theoretical framework applied.

Empirical indicators from the data, such as events, actions, or activities that have been observed in the expert interviews among city and region branding experts and practitioners and written into the transcribed interviews, are compared with one another to search for commonalities and differences between them (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Coding of the empirical evidence helped the researcher find information from the expert interviews that fit the classes and theoretical elements within them.

This study thus adopts an evidence-based method for analyzing its results. It is based on an analytical method known as the Gioia method. It suggests that certain specific tasks should be done when developing theory from empirical evidence because of the complexity of the social phenomena studied (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), such as city branding in this study’s case.

In the Gioia method, the researcher approaches their data with a clean slate without clear existing ideas of the key concepts or categories that could be derived from it. The researcher goes through the interview transcripts (or other qualitative data) and finds ways to code them. First, the researcher codes the data into first-order categories and then starts to combine them into more abstract categories that then build the data structure of the study. These abstract categories can be abstracted even further into overarching dimensions that then can be utilized to create new theories or develop existing ones (Nag et al. 2007).

Figure 3 illustrates the data structure of this study that was created by analyzing the interview data with the Gioia method. All the first-order codes, the second-order themes, and the overall dimensions are listed in the figure. The researcher typified the spillover effects from the Nordic brand to the NCC brands into six roles (labeled as second-order themes in Figure 3) that the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. The results derived from the research data are discussed further in Chapter 4. The transparency of the results was increased by including direct quotes from the interviews (the interviewees' names have been pseudonymized) that supported the analysis. By including direct quotes, the researcher creates a connection between what has been found and analyzed from the data set and based on which interviews these analyses have been made (Gioia et al. 2013, 23).

While the chosen theoretical framework originally proposed in the study worked relatively well, it was iteratively developed and fine-tuned during the analytical process. This iterative process means that the analytical approach of this study is abductive in its nature (Dubois & Gadde 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) and fits well with the philosophical foundation of this study. The empirical evidence found from the expert interviews was analyzed in contrast to the existing theoretical concepts, but in a way that left room for empirical findings that did not fit those concepts. This is typical for an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde 2002). The Gioia method gives structure for deriving new conceptual thinking from empirical evidence.

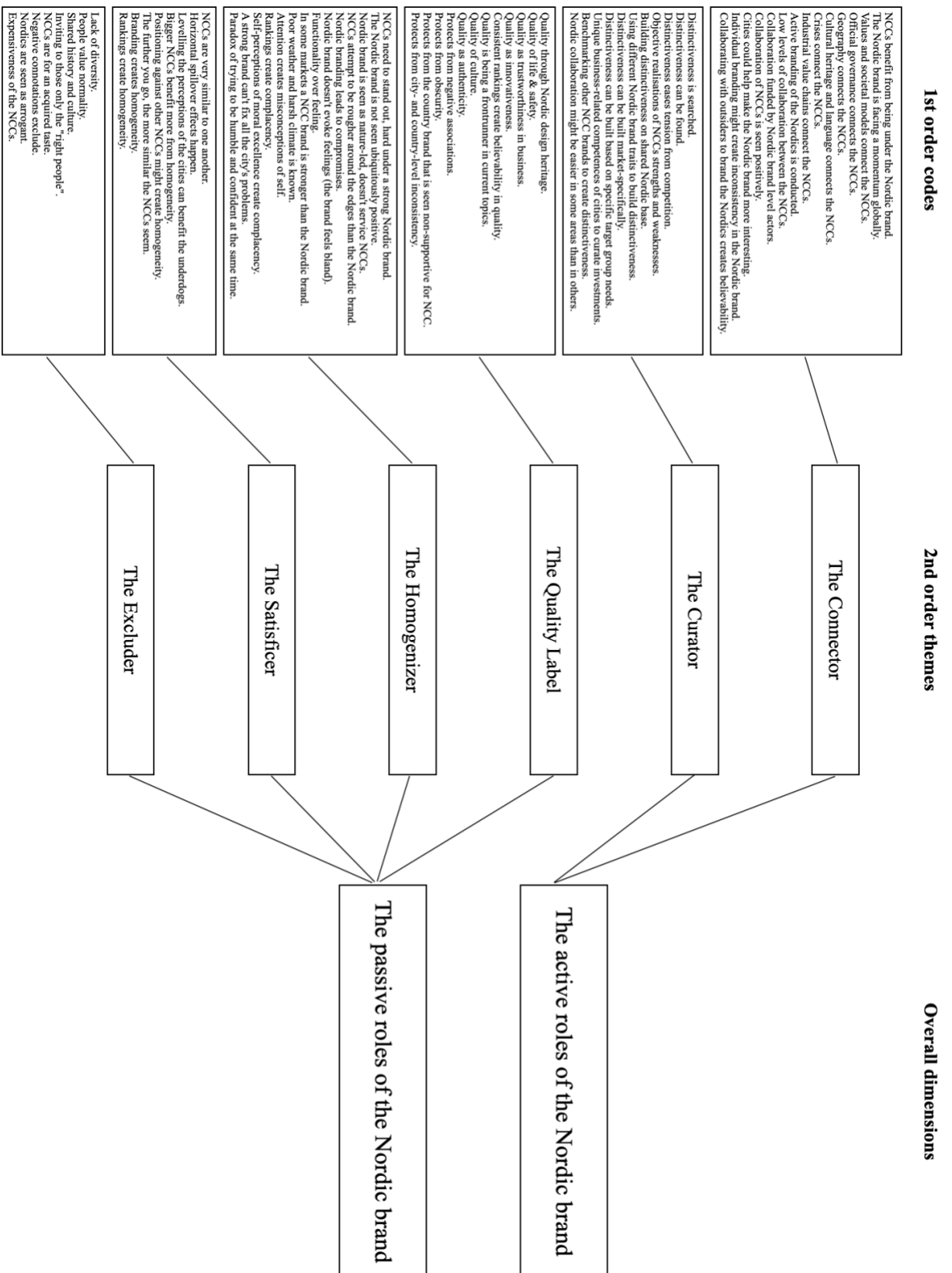


Figure 3. Coding the interview data with the Gioia method.

Figure 4 depicts the analytical process in this study that began already during the interview phase and concluded with finding the results of the study based on the empirical evidence.

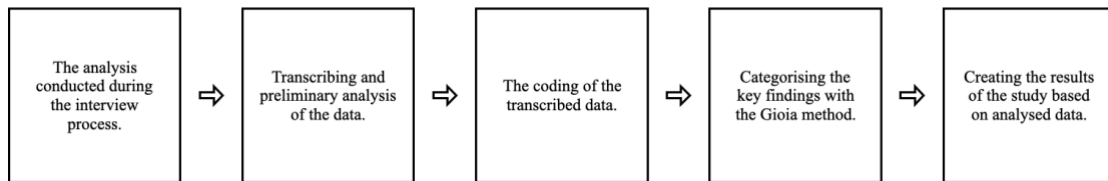


Figure 4. The process for analyzing the data.

Even though the researcher’s prior knowledge and possible presumptions on the topic brought some potential challenges to the study, they turned out to be beneficial in the analysis phase. The classification and categorizing of the empirical evidence came to the researcher quite naturally during the process. This same prior knowledge of the phenomenon of city branding also helped in formulating the interview questions and in the selection and recruitment of suitable participants for the interviews.

An abductive approach turned out to be a good fit for the study. As this study focuses on theory development, existing theories on spillover effects and city branding were developed based on academic literature, theoretical insights and the analysis of the empirical evidence.

In the process of writing this thesis, advanced language-processing tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly were utilized to ensure grammatical precision and fluency in the language used throughout the study.

4 NORDIC CAPITAL CITY BRANDING UNDER THE NORDIC BRAND

This chapter of the study will address the set research question. The spillover effects from the Nordic region brand on the Nordic capital city (NCC) brands will come into focus. Based on the conducted 12 interviews, spillover effects from the Nordic brand that are positive and beneficial for the Nordic capital city brands, and effects that can be either neutral or even harmful to the city brands in question were found. In the context of this study, these spillover effects will be analyzed as active or passive roles that the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities.

This study focuses on the one-way spillover effects that the Nordic region brand, or more specifically the recognition of a Nordic capital city belonging to the Nordic region, has on the assessment of the city brand itself. It is assumed that the person who assesses the city brand is knowledgeable of the Nordic capital city in question to belong to the Nordic region and thus transfer meaning and/or affect (spillover effects) from the region brand to the NCC brands.

Because the Nordic capital cities all have power over their individual branding strategies and practices, they make use of the Nordic brand where they see fit. Based on the empirical evidence presented in this chapter, the benefits of the Nordic brand can be actively sought out in the branding of the Nordic capital cities, or they can be actively brought upon by the deliberate branding activities of the Nordic brand (managed by the Nordic Council of Ministers). However, the spillover effects can also passively affect the Nordic capital cities merely caused by the perceived linkage to the Nordic region. The cities try to make use of the Nordic brand where it is in their interest and conversely attempt to mitigate the potential disadvantages the linkage brings forth.

The Nordic brand's spillover effects were typified into six roles that the Nordic brand plays in branding the Nordic capital cities. These roles will be briefly introduced in below Table 5 and further expanded upon in the following sub-chapters.

The Role	A/P	Description
<i>The Connector</i>	Active	The Connector role of the Nordic brand brings the NCCs together through shared values, geography, and governance. The potential for collaboration under the shared umbrella brand for mutual benefit is great but underutilized.
<i>The Curator</i>	Active	The Curator role helps the NCCs to become more distinct from one another and eases the tension of competition. The Nordic-level actors could work together with the NCCs in curating the city brands for the global stakeholders, especially within segments where the competition is not as intense.
<i>The Quality Label</i>	Passive	The Quality Label role enables the positive quality-related associations of the Nordic brand to spill over on the NCC brands and protects them from harmful associations that might arise in the minds of the global stakeholders.
<i>The Homogenizer</i>	Passive	The Homogenizer role creates difficulties for NCC branding when the cities are perceived as too similar to one another. This might benefit the stronger city brands. However, it also creates opportunities for the weaker ones through horizontal spillover effects between the NCC brands.
<i>The Satisficer</i>	Passive	The Satisficer role can create complacency among the NCC brands. The recent city ranking successes, the global interest, and the strong Nordic brand may foster a misperception of recognition and appeal among city governments and branding organizations, potentially causing the NCC brands to satisfice for less innovative and safer city branding.
<i>The Excluder</i>	Passive	The Excluder role can alienate potential investors, visitors, and especially talent from considering the NCCs. The role stems from the perceived (and sometimes actual) lack of diversity and unwelcoming cultures of the Nordic region.

Table 5. The Roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities.

Based on the interviews and the following analysis of the data, six different roles that the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities either actively or passively have been recognized. The roles were typified following the Gioia method.

4.1 Identifying the active roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities

The Nordic brand can be active in connecting the Nordic capital city brands to collaborate and maximize their potential, curating the individual and distinct strengths of the NCC brands, while at the same time diminishing the competitive tension within the region. The two active roles that the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities are named *the Connector* and *the Curator*.

4.1.1 The Connector

The Connector role of the Nordic brand refers to the activities that bring the Nordic capital cities (NCCs) together through shared values, geography, and governance. The empirical evidence shows that the potential for collaboration under the shared umbrella brand for mutual benefit is great but underutilized.

The Nordic Council of Ministers, who in 2016 took upon branding the Nordic region, sees the role of the Nordic brand as a connector between Nordic actors such as Nordic countries, cities, companies, organizations, and people (Nordic Council of Ministers 2022):

“One of the main aims of branding The Nordics is to promote increased Nordic collaboration on branding activities. The branding project must therefore work strategically to act as a connector between different Nordic actors.”

This idea of the Nordic brand functioning as a connector between the Nordic capital cities (NCCs) is supported by the empirical evidence derived from the conducted interviews. The increased global interest toward the Nordic brand was recognized widely in the

interviews. The Nordics are seen to be more interesting than 10 years ago partly because the topics and values that the Nordic brand is connected to have become more widely shared in the global west, such as the discussion around sustainability (i.e., the green transition) and equality (i.e., the #metoo movement).

“Being Nordic is nowadays so much more interesting than it was just 10 years ago.” (Salla-Maija)

However, the connection must be made between the umbrella brand and the sub-brand, in this case, the Nordic and the NCC brand for the positive spillover effect to take place: the spillover effects are essentially transfers of attributes, meaning, or affect between mentally connected objects (Raufeisen et al. 2019). This means that to reap the benefits of being part of the Nordics, the NCCs need to make sure they are regarded as part of the Nordic region. The interview data suggest that some Nordic capital cities might be better known in connection to the Nordic brand than others and hence benefit more from the strong Nordic brand.

“We have recognized that the global awareness of Helsinki is very weak whereas the global awareness and the brand images of, say, Stockholm and Copenhagen are stronger. This makes one think whether the Nordic context even benefits us.” (Salla)

“In general, I can say that if someone is interested in the Nordics and if they recognize Finland as a part of the Nordic region and Helsinki as a Nordic capital city, then it is most likely only a good thing for us.” (Salla-Maija)

Being part of the Nordic region is widely recognized as an advantage for the Nordic capital cities (NCCs). As relatively small entities compared to many global cities and nations, the NCCs and Nordic national states are less well-known brands. Therefore, linking with a stronger, more well-known brand, such as the Nordic region brand, has numerous benefits. Despite a total population of around 28 million (Nordic Statistics 1.1.2022), the Nordic region is less populous than Tokyo's greater region, which has a population of over 37 million (Yle.fi 2023). Nonetheless, the Nordic region is globally seen as an economic and cultural powerhouse, and its brand is well-known.

“Considering our (Helsinki’s) level of global recognition, or lack thereof, I definitely see being part of the Nordic region as a positive thing.” (Anna)

The increased attention and interest towards the Nordic region are seen as advantageous on the global stage. It has been observed that the Nordic region holds a disproportionate amount of soft power relative to its population size. This is also stated in the strategy for international branding of the Nordic Region as follows: *“Competition for a place on the international arena is tough, and small countries like ours can work together to generate greater visibility and influence. By coordinating branding activities in a joint initiative, we can generate synergies in the public and/or private sectors in each country.”* (Nordic Council of Ministers 2022). Also, the empirical evidence supports this claim:

“In my opinion, the strongest argument for Nordic cooperation is that ‘it just makes sense.’ We are the 11th largest economy in the world (if we were a country). — If you think about how few people we are, we are incredibly rich in relation to the population.” (Neea)

“We (The Nordics) are almost like superpowers in many things, especially when together, and even though there are only around 25 million of us, we are more powerful and influential when we come together.” (Antti)

“Maybe that’s where we make the Nordic branding even more positive, because we have to brand a unified region, and we’re 27 million or something, that’s a huge country if you think about it like that. — We, for example, like to say that if we were one country, we would win the most gold medals.” (Ingrid)

The ability to come together under a stronger and more widely known Nordic brand that is also very positively viewed throughout the world is thus seen as an immense opportunity. The interviews suggest that the NCCs aim to make active use of the strong Nordic brand and try to connect the positive spillover effects to their city brands.

“I think being part of the Nordic region brings more benefits to Helsinki than being solely Finnish. We should be more closely tied to the societal system that represents the Nordic region. I think that good and clever branding always

borrowed from somewhere and associates itself with images connected to a larger entity, and the Nordic region is a much larger entity on the world stage than just Finland.” (Leena)

A multitude of aspects connects the Nordic capital cities under the Nordic brand. Collaboration towards creating and maintaining a strong Nordic brand is regarded as easier because of the shared geography, values, official governmental institutions, societal models, history, culture, and language among other things. On the investment front shared value chains connect the Nordic capital cities and make it easier for them to collaborate with the business world.

The value base that the Nordic countries and their capital cities are built on connects and makes collaborative efforts easier. It can be even seen as a responsibility to act upon these values at a time when they seemed to be threatened around the world.

“All of it (Nordic branding) is associated with Nordic values and a strong emphasis on a value base where the value of the individual is very important and equality and all those basic principles on which our welfare states are built.” (Neea)

“The emphasis on values (in Nordic cooperation) is very strong. Everyone (the NCCs) is building a more sustainable world, and humanity and compassion are so present in everything, that it is a huge asset.” (Salla)

“Actually, I think we need to be more (attached to the Nordic brand), because it is, first of all, it's a big world, and we share values, we do have a similar core, like governments, democracies, and all these things, so I do think that that identity needs to be very strong.” (Sigrid)

The geographical proximity of the Nordic capital cities in Northern Europe serves as a natural point of connection, and as the distance from the region increases, the perception of the Nordic cities as a unified entity also increases. This is reflected in the interviews, with many of the interviewees noting that the association with the Nordic brand is leveraged more prominently in certain regions as opposed to others. This is typical in

markets that are located farther away from the Nordic region. However, the perceived value of the Nordic brand is subject to variations in different markets and should be leveraged more extensively in those markets where it is held in higher regard than the individual Nordic capital cities or nations.

“From an outsider's perspective, we are seen as a cohesive group of nations.”
(Antti)

“The further you go, the weaker our (the Nordics’) awareness is. But it's not always that simple, we know that for example in Japan, Finland has the strongest recognition and image of the Nordics.” **(Anna)**

“But in general, when it comes to markets further away, it's better to identify with a larger region, like in America or Asia, the Nordic region as a whole has more significance than just Finland alone.” **(Leena)**

“The further away we went, the more deliberately we made use of the Nordic brand in branding the city of Helsinki.” **(Jaakko)**

Although the Nordic Council of Ministers has been deliberately branding the Nordic only since 2016, the fact that it is doing so is widely recognized among the interviewees. The initiative taken by the Nordic Council of Ministers, which operates under the direction of the prime ministers of the Nordic nations, to actively engage in Nordic region branding is seen as a positive development by the interviewees. This is because it allows the cities to redirect their limited resources towards more focused efforts in individual city branding. Again, because of the relative smallness of the whole region, it makes sense to bundle the cities and countries together to brand the Nordics as a whole.

“You could think that the Nordics are seen as cities in the eyes of others because they are so small. — If the whole of the Nordics has about 28 million people, then some big city in Europe can be about that size. So in some way, it feels natural that the Nordics is the entity that is being branded.” **(Neea)**

“A pragmatic point-of-view is that as the resources are anyway limited, then let’s leave the branding of the Nordic region to the Nordic nation-states.” (Jaakko)

Campaigns run by the Nordic Council of Ministers such as “The Traces of North” and content platforms such as the “Nordic Talks” are examples of branding initiatives that aim to brand the Nordics as a whole. Something that is hoped to benefit all actors (including the Nordic capital cities) in the Nordics.

“The campaign showed what kind of effects the Nordics have had in the world. What they have done. Not in the way ‘look at us how great we are, how friendly and how innovative’, nobody is interested in that kind of thing.” (Pär)

However, the Nordic unity is seen as institutionally quite weak compared to the EU which has more power over the legislation and other structural matters in the Nordic capital cities. The interest toward Nordic region and country branding is also seen as volatile depending on the political climate in the Nordic countries.

“The Nordic region is institutionally quite weak when compared to the European Union.” (Antti)

“I mean you can definitely see which political parties are in power at a given time from the way that country and Nordic branding is being led.” (Salla)

It is even seen that the Nordic capital cities could be given a bigger role in the overall branding of the Nordic region. Some frustration from the cities was to be sensed in the interviews: they wish that the Nordic states or the Nordic Council of Ministers in charge of the Nordic brand would involve the Nordic capital cities more in the branding of the region. Opportunities are sensed in creating collaborative platforms for Nordic capital cities coming together to brand the Nordics as a whole.

“We could have exploited it (a common Nordic marketing initiative) much more, but we got completely detached from it, we were not a part of it, and if they had engaged operatively, actually inviting us, and just shared little funds for us to do

something, then I think we could have exploited that much more. Now it became something they did, themselves and a bureau.” (Nicholas)

“We haven’t been discussing the Nordic brand recently. Let’s say that Helsinki wishes to have more conversations on the Nordic level. — I often find myself wondering about how Nordic branding could be more beneficial for the city branding that we are doing.” (Salla)

“The branding of the Nordic region should be enforced on the global stage, and as the region brand can be a bit fuzzy, distinctiveness could be built on top of the Nordic capital city brands.” (Leena)

The potential for collaboration among the Nordic capital cities to enhance the overall perception of the Nordic region as a brand is widely acknowledged among the interviewees, as they recognize the benefits that the cities can derive from being associated with a strong and unified Nordic brand. Despite this recognition, it is acknowledged that limited budgets, their internal competition for resources such as talents, investments, and tourism, and a lack of initiative, have resulted in Nordic capital cities not collaborating on branding the region as a whole. This job then naturally falls to the Nordic nations and the Nordic Council of Ministers. Leaders on the highest national levels, such as Sauli Niinistö see the collaborative opportunities under the strong Nordic brand: *“Our shared Nordic model is a good and strong brand that has a lot of underutilized potentials. We can do way more things together and grow to become an even stronger union”* (Niinistö 2017).

“We could be each other’s brand ambassadors – how could we make our own unique personas strengthen the shared image in some way?” (Salla)

“We should collaborate with the other Nordic capital cities more, but the real gem of an idea on how to do that is yet to be found.” (Anna)

“Everybody’s talking about collaboration between the Nordic capital cities, but in practice, the question arises about how to do that as competitors. Because at the end that company or talent will choose one city and not all five of them.” (Pär)

“All of them who should be in charge of the collaboration talk a heck of a lot about it, but I haven’t seen anything concrete happening like ever. — We should be on a mature enough level in building the Nordic capital city brands to understand that it is not a zero-sum game.” (Leena)

The Nordic capital cities can be seen as important stakeholders to one another because of their strong and varied connections, and because working together to strengthen the shared Nordic umbrella brand would benefit them all greatly. Zenker and Braun (2017) argue that stakeholder management is the most important task for modern place brand management and in dismissing the opportunity of collaborating with their peers, the NCCs are also failing in this task of making the most out of these stakeholder relations.

Based on the interviews, the Connector role of the Nordic brand is seen as an asset to all the Nordic capital city brands. Being a Nordic capital city truly connects the cities and enables them to come together under a strong umbrella region brand that can lend visibility, meaning and affect to its sub-city brands. The interviewees value the active brand management by the Nordic Council of Ministers but seem to hope for more opportunities to become involved in co-creating the Nordic brand. The interviewees understand the benefits of city brands collaborating to strengthen the Nordic brand even more, but efforts towards initiating any concrete actions seem to be scarce.

4.1.2 The Curator

The Curator role of the Nordic brand refers to the activities that help the NCCs to become more distinct from one another and ease the tension of competition. The Nordic-level actors could work more together with the NCCs in curating the city brands for the global stakeholders, especially within segments where the competition is not as intense.

On top of sharing the benefits of belonging under a strong Nordic umbrella brand, the capital cities also share a need to stand out from one another in the face of opportunities to win over investments, talent relocations, or tourists from the global market. However,

the interview findings posit opportunities for collaboration even in this competitive landscape.

Despite the shared benefits of a strong Nordic brand, the Nordic capital cities still face competition against one another as global investors, tourists or talent make their choices between the cities. The Nordic capital cities, therefore, find themselves in a dynamic state of collaborative competition, where they would all benefit from working together to enhance the Nordic umbrella brand. However, once the attention is directed towards the Nordics, they may then need to fiercely compete against each other for valuable resources, such as tourists, talent, or investment opportunities. This competition may take shape in various forms, such as a couple deciding on a weekend destination, a professional deciding on a new place to live, or a business looking to establish a new location in the Nordics.

“It might be a destructive form of competition if we don't see how important it is to first get attention directed towards the Nordics. And then it's a different story on how we share all the good things here. — I think in the end, everyone benefits, although some might benefit more than others.” (Antti)

Even though the means and stakes of the competition can vary greatly between the cases, all the interviewees agreed that the Nordic capital cities are in competition for many kinds of global resources and need to seek distinctiveness from their peers.

“The interest of Helsinki was to promote the Nordic brand because it automatically benefits us, but at the same time, we also needed to stand out.” (Jaakko)

“In terms of cooperation among the Nordics, there are more opportunities than obstacles, but it is clear that there is a real competitive aspect to it.” (Anna)

“It would make sense to compete for resources like the ones from the Bay Area by promoting all the Nordic capital cities and letting people decide where they want to go. But in reality, it doesn't work that way. The Nordic capital cities are too jealous of each other. If we were trying to get a Google Innovation Lab in one of

the Nordic cities, it would be difficult to see all the cities working together. Each city would be pushing its own agenda.” (Salla-Maija)

The competition for the establishment of regional headquarters for global corporations is considered to be particularly intense, as the economic and employment impacts of such investments are substantial. Additionally, corporate relocation cases are often unique and happen rarely, whereas individuals make relocation decisions to one of the Nordic capital cities daily. Within the tourism segment, competition is less intense as travel decisions are not singular, one-time choices.

“(Within the tourism sector) there would be joint initiatives just because it makes sense. In China, the Nordics were seen as a shared identity, a brand, and a destination. — It's also an advantage (for the visitor) to be able to say, ‘we did four countries’ and that almost becomes like a brand in itself.” (Sigrid)

“There was a lot of competition between the capital cities, but least for the tourists. When tourists come from far away, they will usually visit all the Nordic countries.” (Jaakko)

The very purpose of city branding is to be able to stand out from the competition with one’s unique assets and image. To compete on the global stage, cities brand themselves in order to differentiate from their peers and other places that are competing for the same tourists, residents, investments, and corporate relocations (Anttiroiko 2014, 1 & 26; Moilanen & Rainisto 2009, 3). Kaefer (2021) states that the place brand needs to be unique and distinctive in character. In competition against their peers, it became clear from the empirical evidence that the NCCs try to find ways to become distinct from one another and manage the brand accordingly.

“There are unique areas for which the cities want to become known, and of course, the need for distinctiveness and specialization arises to be able to make the most out of the common good (the Nordic brand).” (Antti)

“...But when you start looking at these cities more closely, there are even a surprisingly lot of differences.” (Jaakko)

“We (Helsinki) don’t want to be Stockholm’s little sister but want to stand on our own two feet... and that’s why we want to foster this distinctiveness.” (Salla)

Achieving this distinction can be challenging for the Nordic capital cities. One approach to differentiate the brand is through benchmarking and monitoring the branding efforts of other NCCs. By keeping an eye on the actions of peer cities, it is possible to identify opportunities for differentiation and avoid the use of similar strategies or messaging when targeting the same global markets.

“We investigate what Stockholm is doing in its international branding so that we are aware. It doesn’t make sense to fight against each other in certain things.” (Salla)

Despite the competitiveness, opportunities were sensed in coming together as NCCs to recognize each other’s distinct assets and to create an understanding between the cities of when and how to push for the Nordic brand collectively and when and how to focus on the unique and distinct assets of each city that makes them stand out from the lot.

Ideally, the strengths and unique assets of the Nordic capital cities could be curated for prospective investors, talents, and tourists. Here, the Nordic brand can take an active role through Nordic-level actors such as the Nordic Council of Ministers or Nordic Innovation. All the cities would still benefit from the shared Nordic umbrella brand but would collaborate in making sure each one would become distinct enough from the others to live up to its full potential.

“Like, what are the common themes that would create the base, on top of which we could build our own unique and distinct attributes as cities?” (Anna)

When collaboration is scarce, the homogenizing effect (expanded in chapter 4.2.3) of the Nordic brand can cause asymmetrical competition where the stronger and better-known city brands reap the benefits from the cities’ perceived similarity.

“If we did not have a thorough chat or an agreement of what areas are strong where, then we would be in an unequal competition, and we (Copenhagen) would lose that.” (Nicholas)

Curating experiences for the tourist segment already takes place and is seen as a natural way to collaborate between cities as many tourists (especially ones coming from farther away) visit many Nordic capital cities within the same trip. Moreover, if a tourist enjoys their visit to one of the NCCs, they are probably more likely to visit another at some later stage. The interviewees see opportunities in collaborating within tourism in which the Nordic brand could take a curative role in portraying what kind of experiences are offered in each city and country.

“If someone visits Stockholm and likes it, they could next come and visit Copenhagen.” (Jaakko)

“We could present different kinds of interesting things under the same umbrella; I think that could be a concrete way to cooperate.” (Anna)

Moreover, the curator role doesn't limit to the tourism industry. Different actors in the Nordic region see collaborative opportunities in sharing investment opportunities that come from outside the Nordic countries.

“It is done quite a lot within the travel industry, and actually within investments, too. I myself have done a lot of it with export promotion and investments, I think that was a form of curation.” (Neea)

In conclusion, based on the empirical evidence the tension from the competition is acknowledged among the Nordic capital cities. However, the interviewees do not necessarily see this as a zero-sum game that would prevent any kind of collaboration. On the contrary, a lot of opportunities are sensed in curating the cities' unique and distinct attributes under the Nordic umbrella brand to ease the tension created by the competition for global resources.

4.2 Identifying the passive roles of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities

Based on the empirical evidence, the Nordic brand can passively (without the active participation of, for instance, the Nordic Council of Ministers) benefit the branding of the Nordic capital cities through its positive spillover effects or harm them through its more negative spillover effects. The four passive roles of the Nordic brand are named *the Quality Label*, *the Homogenizer*, *the Satisficer*, and *the Excluder*.

4.2.1 The Quality Label

The Quality Label role of the Nordic brand refers to the positive quality-related associations connected to the Nordic brand that spill over on the NCC brands and protects them from harmful associations that might arise in the minds of the global stakeholders.

The Nordic brand is widely recognized for its association with quality across a variety of fields, including politics, society, consumer products, industrial innovation, and popular culture. This reputation is exemplified for example by the numerous strong global consumer brands that have emerged from the Nordics in recent decades, such as Lego from Denmark, Nokia from Finland, and IKEA from Sweden. Furthermore, the Nordic region's rich design heritage in areas such as architecture, furniture design, glassware, and household appliances further reinforces the perception of high quality that spills over to the Nordic city brands.

The empirical evidence features various examples of these country-of-origin, or more specifically within this study, region-of-origin effects spilling over from the Nordic brand to the Nordic capital city brands. These COO (or ROO) effects are typically activated in the mind of consumers, possibly without them even noticing, because of the mere presence of country-of-origin (COO) information (Liu & Johnson 2005). Meaning that if the connection between the Nordic brand and the Nordic capital city brand is made, the spillover effect takes place. Among other things, the interviewees saw the Nordic brand spilling over to the cities as a sense of quality in life (i.e., work-life balance, success in happiness studies), in safety (i.e., relatively low levels of crime, all countries likely soon

belonging to NATO), and in innovativeness (i.e., green technology, visionary design, and fashion). Moreover, the consistent successes of the Nordic countries and cities in various rankings make the quality associations believable.

“No group of countries is as successful in as many criteria as the Nordics, so in that way, we have an objectively strong image.” (Antti)

“The Nordic brand elevates you, it’s not just a quality label, that ‘now you qualify’, but it lifts you up to become a part of a greater brand that is known around the world in every field as a strong brand. It helps, no question about it.” (Pär)

“And we do have credibility and a real experience to provide within the fields of design, architecture and creative business.” (Leena)

The Nordic brand can serve as a protective shield for capital city brands, mitigating harmful associations related to geographical location and other factors, as well as guarding against incompatible country branding and inconsistencies resulting from changes in city leadership.

According to Jo et al. (2003), a strong brand with familiarity and high-quality reputation can shield the brand product from harmful country-of-origin effects. Some of the Nordic capital cities have strong enough city brands themselves that can shield them from the harmful country-of-origin effects, but others seem to benefit substantially from the protection the Nordic brand can provide. Based on the interviews the harmful COO connotations are meaningful for example regarding the proximity of Russia.

“In this global security situation Helsinki truly has been put on the world map, and as Finland, we are the ‘first nation after Russia’. And in that context the Nordic layer becomes more important.” (Salla)

“We (Helsinki) are still perceived as Eastern European by many. So being able to attach ourselves to a modern and functional societal image, where the quality of life and wellbeing is high, I think that we should try to attach to that.” (Anna)

“Helsinki’s problem is that we are like a small Stockholm and it’s hard to find uniqueness in that because we’re so similar to Copenhagen and Stockholm. But I do still think that it’s a more positive association than the Eastern Bloc or Russia would be.” (Salla-Maija)

The Nordic brand was also seen as a label of distinctiveness next to better known neighbors in the global West. Being part of the Nordic region and enjoying the associations people attach to it was seen as an asset in competition with major European cities.

“(Being part of the Nordics is an asset for Copenhagen) because otherwise we would be (perceived as) part of Germany, and I don't think that would be an advantage. No, I do think the Nordic brand is quite strong, and I think its identity is also quite strong. — And there is a clear distinction between being from Germany and being from the Nordics.” (Sigrid)

By aligning with the Nordic brand, the city brand is shielded from harmful associations that may arise from its geographical location, as well as from a country brand that may be associated with attributes or imagery that do not align with the desired brand image of the Nordic capital city. Some interviewees gave examples of Finland’s country brand being marketed to tourists mostly through imagery depicting its nature and landscapes, whereas the city brand of Helsinki would benefit from more urban connotations. The connections to the Nordic brand and other Nordic capital cities can be beneficial in creating associations that are more in line with the set target brand image:

“We are still perceived as somewhat rural; I mean Finland is.” (Anna)

“Finland’s country brand seems to be a lot about the reindeer and the lingonberries, about the snowy winter wonderland, and we (practitioners of the Helsinki city brand) need to make sure that the culture and urbaneness would also be connected to the Finland brand.” (Salla)

City branding is recognized as a long-term endeavor that benefits from a systematic commitment to the chosen strategy (Moilanen & Rainisto 2009, 23). However, based on

the research data, the branding of the Nordic capital cities is subject to fluctuations due to the democratic election of political leaders every few years. This often results in new city leadership wanting to realign the brand to meet their own visions and perceptions of the city's image and future aspirations. In this case, a strong Nordic brand can protect from inconsistencies happening on the city and country levels.

“The changes in political leadership create inconsistencies that pose a major risk to city brand building.” (Leena)

“A delicate brand can't cope with such inconsistency. Let's imagine that Berlin would disappear from international arenas for two years, it wouldn't affect the city brand in any way. But our (Helsinki's) brand is still so young and has been built with such care, that it might not survive such inconsistencies in who we are and what we stand for.” (Salla-Maija)

4.2.2 The Homogenizer

The Homogenizer role of the Nordic brand refers to the difficulties that NCC branding faces when the cities are perceived as too similar to one another. This might benefit the stronger city brands at the expense of the weaker ones. However, it also creates opportunities for the weaker ones through horizontal spillover effects between the NCC brands.

Based on the interviews the Nordic brand creates perceived homogeneity in the Nordic capital city brands. This is regarded as both a blessing and a curse. The Nordic capital city brands must constantly balance between collaborating for their greater good and competing against one another for limited resources. The perceived homogeneity of the cities makes it harder to become distinct in their own rights. This sub-chapter will investigate in more detail the effects that the perceived homogeneity has on the Nordic capital city brands and when and for whom it is harmful or beneficial. Based on the empirical evidence, the Nordic brand passively creates perceived homogeneity that the cities then deal with in different ways.

The homogeneity of the Nordic capital cities is widely recognized in the data set. The similarity is among other things perceived to stem from the shared history, a homogeneous cultural landscape, and a physical location by the sea. However, the similarities do not stop there, they are visible and perceived by the international target groups as comparable in regulation, taxation, and other bureaucratic systems. The interviewees saw some threats to Nordic capital city branding in leaning too heavily on the Nordic brand and losing the city brand's distinctiveness.

“All those cities are pretty much the same. Like taxes, regulation, and systems, there's not much difference, like if you look from a bird's eye view, the cities are pretty much the same. So, that's the challenge, how do you stand out, how do you create systems that really tip the scales in your favor.” (Salla-Maija)

“Yeah, all the cities feel very similar, they are by the water, have interesting urban planning, and from an American perspective, are old cities.” (Leena)

On top of collaboration, the inherent homogeneity of the Nordic capital cities strengthened by the Nordic brand creates tension among the cities when they need to become distinct and compete against each other for limited resources.

“A good brand can spark people's curiosity, but if all of our Nordic capital cities are built on the same model or concept, then no one stands out. That kind of uniformity is a big risk in creating a good city brand that is formed by uniqueness, surprise, and recognizability.” (Leena)

“We ended up dealing with the same challenge again: we (Helsinki) had work-life balance as an overarching brand theme at Slush, but then we realized that Sweden and Denmark had the same, too.” (Jaakko)

“We list our distinct attributes, and then we go check for example Stockholm's website and notice that they use many of the same attributes themselves.” (Anna)

According to some interviewees, the city rankings might end up hurting the Nordic capital cities' pursuit of becoming more distinct through city branding. This is in line with what Anttiroiko states in his book "The Political Economy of City Branding" (2014).

"I think they (city rankings) create a stereotype of what is good, I mean we do a lot of things (because of them), I do think that they have a tendency to do that (create homogeneity)." **(Sigrid)**

Political structures and the Nordic model create unity between the Nordic capital cities. All five nations apart from Norway belong to the EU and this sets Oslo apart slightly in ways that could affect the flow of investments, talent, and tourism.

"The EU framework is one aspect that contributes to the homogeneity among the Nordic capital cities, although Norway does have a unique position in this. In general, it creates uniformity and similar structures." **(Antti)**

According to the empirical evidence, spillover effects happen not only from the region brand to the city brands but also horizontally between the Nordic capital city brands. The brand-enhancing successes or deteriorating failures of one Nordic capital city brand might change how people view the other Nordic capital cities as a consequence. This is due to one of the drivers behind spillover effects: people transfer attributes from one entity to another because of their preference for mental harmony (Heider 1958). Based on the interviews, the strength of a Nordic capital city brand might also stem from the systematic and long-term branding efforts of the city, and that other NCCs can benefit from this work because of horizontal spillover effects.

"We should take advantage of the fact that our friends (the NCC peers) have been doing this work (city branding) for much longer. And especially the Swedes, who are world champions in marketing." **(Charlotte)**

The perceived homogeneity might work in the favor of a Nordic capital city that finds itself in an underdog position (not as well-known or with a weaker brand) as positive perceptions of the other Nordic cities horizontally spill over. This might favor the lesser-known cities as the Nordic brand levels the perceptions of the brands in the minds of

people. Based on the interviews people around the world often confuse the Nordic countries with one another and do not remember which capital city belongs to which country. This suggests that any city ranking success or positive PR for one Nordic capital city could benefit all of them by making the overall Nordic brand stronger.

“Whether it’s Finland, or Sweden, or Denmark on top, it isn’t necessarily so meaningful.” (Antti)

“People often get confused between the Scandinavian countries; they might ask if Stockholm is the capital of Denmark. But it's good because if they ask, you can say yeah, it's almost the same thing, another city, but besides the point. That's maybe why that common thing, the Nordics, works as a good brand.” (Pär)

“It's beneficial when someone else is successful, as it makes others interesting as well.” (Neea)

However, the inherent similarity of the Nordic capital cities is seen as a challenge by almost all the interviewees. The homogenous nature of the cities makes it difficult to become distinct from one another. It is only natural that the existing power dynamics of the Nordic capital cities come into play when the cities are perceived as homogeneous.

“It is definitely so that the two main centers in the Nordics are Copenhagen and Stockholm, and that the gravitation does pull in that direction.” (Antti)

“I often came across the fact that Helsinki's brand is quite strong, we have many good features, but Stockholm and Copenhagen have practically the same ones, and in addition, they are much larger, more international, and historical, more traditional and stronger.” (Jaakko)

“There is a danger in that similarity, and perhaps particularly for us as Helsinki, since we are less known. When Stockholm has such a long reputation, and Copenhagen as well — we have a tough job to stand out.” (Charlotte)

The bigger and better-known cities (the strongest Nordic capital city brands) might reap the benefits for instance in investment decisions when the cities are perceived as nearly identical to one another. This seems to be beneficial to the Nordic capital cities that already have the strongest brands and hurt the city brands that are lesser known and valued.

“The challenge for us in Helsinki is that we are less well-known compared to Stockholm and Copenhagen, which have strong, established reputations. If someone perceives Helsinki and Stockholm to be the same, they'll likely choose Stockholm due to its stronger brand. I believe that the Nordic brand can be beneficial for us, but we need to have our own unique elements to stand out when the competition becomes too close.” (Salla-Maija)

“(Within life sciences) you would see a lot of people and a lot of companies for instance moving to Stockholm, because they cannot see the difference between what is it that the capabilities here (Copenhagen) towards Stockholm, if you stay on that more overall level, I think then we'll end up in this smaller and bigger brother situation, and who's bigger than whom. And then the perceptions of differences would actually be a downside to Copenhagen.” (Nicholas)

The Homogenizer role seems to paradoxically both create opportunities for Nordic capital city brands and harm their efforts to be perceived as distinct from one another in competition for global resources. The Nordic brand is seen to level competition among the NCCs but also blur the unique qualities of each city in the minds of the target groups.

4.2.3 The Satisficer

The Satisficer role of the Nordic brand refers to the potential complacency among the NCC brands. The recent city ranking successes of Nordic capital cities, the heightened global interest, and benefiting from the strong Nordic brand may foster a misperception of recognition and appeal among city governments and branding organizations, potentially causing the NCC brands to satisfice for less innovative and safer city branding.

The interest toward the Nordic brand is well-known, and the perceptions and associations linked to it are overwhelmingly positive, as also demonstrated by the interview data. However, some of the interviewees have sensed weak signals of potential fatigue and annoyance growing towards the ever-successful Nordics. Based on the empirical evidence, the constant successes could also enforce the Nordic capital city brands' perceptions of themselves as ever-successful cities that can do nothing wrong. This kind of oversized self-confidence could consequently hurt the Nordic capital city branding efforts by satisficing the city branding practitioners and making them complacent and even lazy in coming up with new and innovative ways of branding the city.

Branding is successful only if it's relevant to those who are its target group. According to Dinnie (2008), city branding needs to be relevant for all its target audiences and it would achieve strategic gain only when succeeding in this primary goal. The findings of the interviews indicate that the perceptions of the Nordic brand among target audiences vary, and it is not universally regarded as positive. Furthermore, the Nordic brand appears to have varying levels of effectiveness across different markets. In addition to being relevant to target audiences, a city brand should possess unique and distinctive characteristics that reflect the place's identity and personality (Kaefer 2021). However, according to the interviewees, the Nordic brand is sometimes perceived as lacking in distinctiveness and being overly polished and uninteresting.

“When it comes to what I personally think about the Nordic brand, I see Helsinki as having the opportunity to stand out a bit as an underdog and being a little more exciting, rugged, or diverse than maybe being seen as a utopia of equality and blond hair. — The Nordic brand is a bit too round around the edges, too smooth and calm.” (Anna)

“Not everyone in the world likes the Nordic countries. Taxes, it can be boring in the Nordic countries, their politics are boring, and the whole idea that if someone has a preconceived notion that the Nordic countries are bad in some way, it also extends to the cities. — If you see something negative about the Nordics, it's that they're boring, that everything is perfect, that everything works.” (Pär)

“The Nordic brand is a bit of a moral guardian.” (Neea)

The active branding of the Nordics must consider an abundance of stakeholders that all have their own strategic agendas and goals that they would want the Nordic branding to support. Kavaratzis & Charles (2018) and Zenker & Braun (2017) point out that the role of stakeholder relations has become more and more important in modern place branding, but they don't touch upon the topic that came up in the interviews: co-creating a brand with stakeholders and considering the needs and wants of all related parties inevitably leads to compromises in the branding.

The interviewees in charge of the active branding of the Nordic brand recognized that within Nordic capital city branding the managers can take more risks and follow singular visions whereas Nordic branding must face stricter boundaries because of its task to clarify the common positive sides of the region.

“That's maybe what makes the Nordic branding different, because city brands can be a bit more real, maybe? Just because our point of view is that we have to brand the values that we have in common, because we need to find these things that we do have in common, and the things I think that we have in common are mostly positive which is why our system works so well.” (Ingrid)

Based on the interviews, being constantly lauded as the best in the world, succeeding in various city rankings, and being protected by a strong Nordic brand can cause a lack of urgency, inactivity, and even laziness in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. This can create shortsightedness that can be seen in the lack of collaborative initiatives and in resorting to conservative marketing efforts. The increased interest toward the Nordic brand can create a risk of coming across as arrogant, too. The Nordic region brand has been increasingly talked about for more than a decade now and it is only natural that this interest might fade over time. A Finnish saying encapsulates it well: “There is only one direction from the top and it is downwards.”

“Yeah, it's always a risk when things are going too well, you become too content with yourself.” (Pär)

“We are getting messages from our international partners that ‘you are very welcome to come and talk about the Nordics, but do not mention the word Nordic,

because you might come across as arrogant. Because you're always like The Nordic Way, Nordic this and that, Swedish, Danish, Finnish. You should approach the situation as a dialogue, not through country brands or the Nordic brand.' Those are still very singular comments, but they are getting louder by the day.”
(Neea)

“We climb too high of a ladder and then try to tell everybody that that's how you should live your life, we have found the model. Then the Nordic brand becomes a bit of a hindrance.” **(Nicholas)**

The cities, and the region as a whole, might become complacent and pleased with their success in different kinds of city and country rankings – this might mean losing the motivating underdog position consequently.

“For me, the whole competition of those rankings makes no sense, and they make cities complacent.” **(Sigrid)**

Based on the interviews, relying too much on the increased global interest toward the region and the successes in the different kinds of rankings might satisfy the cities and thus make the Satisficer role of the Nordic brand harmful in the branding of the Nordic capital cities.

4.2.4 The Excluder

The Excluder role of the Nordic brand refers to the potentially alienating factors that might prevent global investors, visitors, and especially talent from considering the NCCs. The role stems from the perceived (and sometimes actual) lack of diversity and unwelcoming cultures of the Nordic region.

When you create unity, you also create exclusion. Based on the conducted interviews, the Nordics are seen as very homogeneous from the outside and these perceptions can be supported by the lack of diversity in the wider populations. The region is sometimes perceived as an exclusive club that is impossible to get properly into if you're not born in

one of the five countries. Even though the Nordic capital cities are seen as the melting pots and most diverse places in the region, the current political climates in the Nordic countries are perceived as cautious or even hostile towards immigrants throughout the region.

“The Nordic countries combined, what we share and have in common are really great things, but also there’s a danger put yourself forth as this fortress of greatness that people can’t really come inside. — Because we need to specify who we are, from who we are not in the Nordics. We have these shared things in common and you can’t be a part of it, it’s like an exclusive club almost.” (Ingrid)

“In Estonia, there’s a belief that Estonia is a Nordic country and, of course, everyone understands that there are many Eastern European problems here, cultures are a bit different, but if you don’t look at history, but the future, it would be practical that our position would be in the Nordic countries. So, if we could choose between Eastern Europe or Northern Europe, it would be much better if we were in Northern Europe because it helps.” (Pär)

“We would need to break away from this image of a social democratic utopia (folkhemmet). I think that if Helsinki were to break away from the Nordic capital city brands, it should be more international and have a melting pot vibe like Berlin for example.” (Salla-Maija)

“The lack of diversity. Like our friend’s child who lives in the US, when they came here, they said this is the country where everyone looks exactly the same, and it’s clear that this lack of diversity is visible on our streets.” (Charlotte)

Some of the interviewees recognized that their city isn’t a perfect match for everyone because of its unique geographical location, the sometimes-harsh climate, and the considerably liberal values that the city stands for. The interviews reveal that the goal of the Nordic capital cities’ talent and visitor attraction programs can be to find the right people who would find the city to their liking. This rings true on the investor front as well: like all regions and like all cities, the economic profile in the Nordics and the Nordic capital cities has evolved into specializing in certain industrial fields more than in others.

For example, Stockholm is among other things known for their life sciences scene, Helsinki for their gaming industry, and Copenhagen for their green technology and logistics know-how.

“We have recognized that Helsinki isn’t for everyone. It isn’t the most obvious choice and those who have it in their consideration sets (as travel destinations), are likely people who have already seen many kinds of places and want to experience something new. Or then they deliberately seek out alternatives or experiences that their peer group hasn’t experienced yet.” (Anna)

Based on the empirical evidence the Excluder role of the Nordic brand in branding the Nordic capital cities can be harmful to the NCCs especially among the talent and business target groups. However, this is a downside that has been recognized and active measures are taken to delineate its negative consequences to the city brands.

4.3 Conclusion of the results

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the role(s) the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. The spillover effects that transfer meaning and/or affect from the Nordic brand to the Nordic capital city brands were categorized into the six different roles presented in this chapter.

The revealed six different roles that the Nordic brand either actively (led by Nordic actors) or passively plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities are *the Connector*, *the Curator*, *the Quality Label*, *the Homogenizer*, *the Satisficer*, and *the Excluder*. Some of these roles are already actively played out in the Nordic capital city branding, some are clearly underutilized according to the interviewees. The findings of this study suggest that certain roles identified in the relationship between the Nordic brand and the branding efforts of the Nordic capital cities may be perceived as beneficial and could be leveraged for the benefit of the cities, while others may be viewed as detrimental or obstructive to the city branding efforts.

To showcase how the empirical evidence augment the used theoretical framework, below Figure 5 was created with an abductive approach to knowledge creation. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 has been finetuned and the spillover effects from the umbrella Nordic brand have taken the form of roles that the umbrella brand (the Nordic brand) plays in relation to its sub-brands (the Nordic capital city brands).

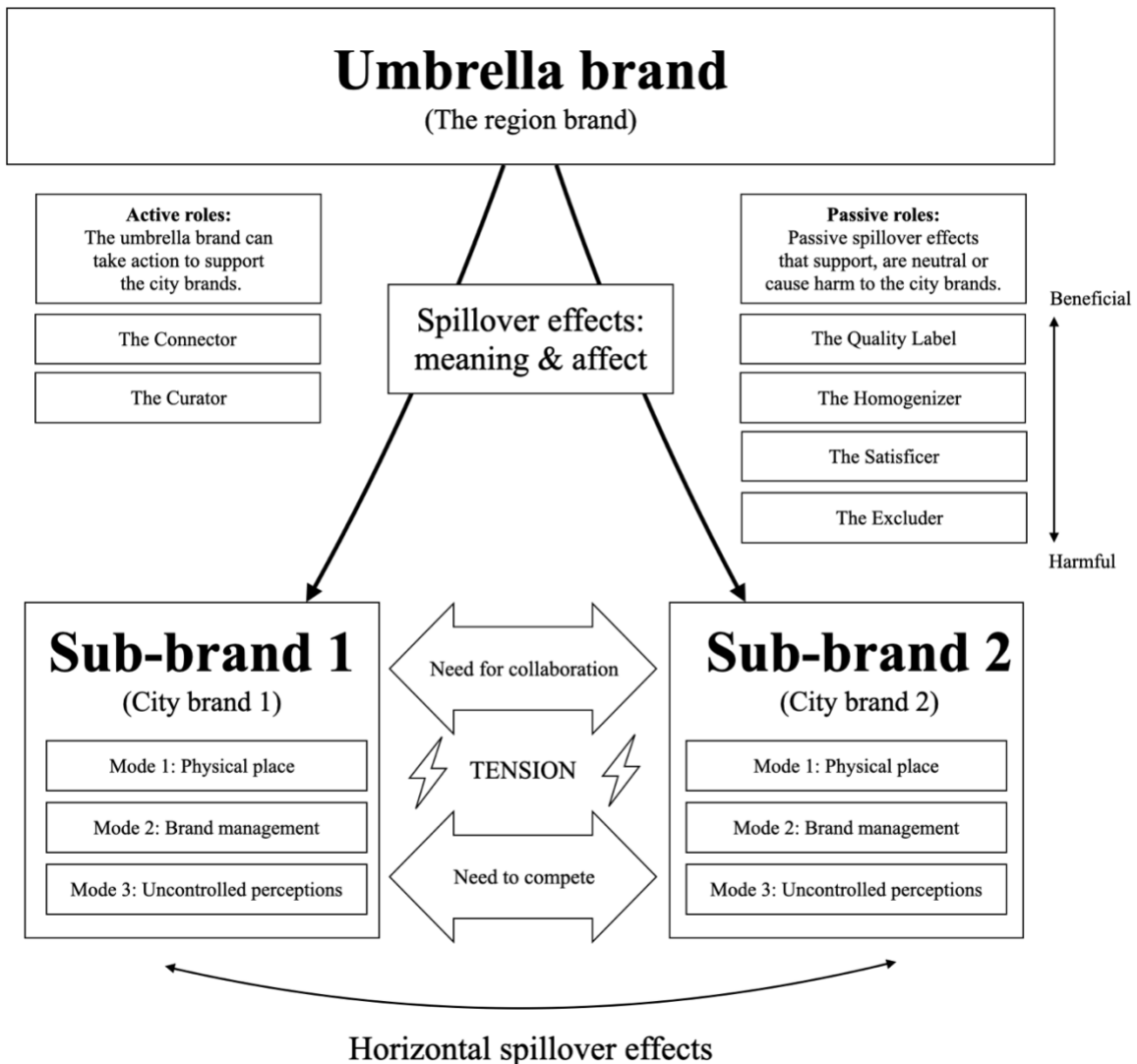


Figure 5. The active and passive roles that the Nordic region brand takes in relation to the Nordic capital city brands.

The Nordic capital cities compete against one another for global resources, and this creates tension between their respective city governments and the city branding organizations. However, according to the empirical evidence it is evident that all the cities benefit from being a part of the Nordic region and that the stronger the Nordic brand is

the better it is for the branding efforts of all the Nordic capital cities. A need to collaborate between all Nordic actors (including the NCCs) is recognized to further strengthen the Nordic brand but according to the interviews collaboration efforts are deemed insufficient.

On top of recognizing the six roles that the Nordic brand can play in branding the Nordic capital cities and the tension that NCCs face from the collaborative yet competitive nature of their relationships with one another, the framework now recognizes that meaning and/or affect can also spill over horizontally from one Nordic capital city to another. The spillover effects of the Nordic brand can take active or passive roles in the branding of the Nordic capital cities and some roles of the Nordic brand are already actively played out by Nordic actors such as the Nordic Council of Ministers. Based on the empirical evidence, all the roles were recognized to have consequences on the branding of the Nordic capital cities and measures to maximize the beneficial roles and mitigate the harmful ones are taken at varying degrees.

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of the study

Cities have become significant economic drivers within their respective regions and even serve as beacons of moral leadership on a global scale. They are rising as the new frontiers of progress and innovation. Because of their size, unique structure, and governance, cities are more agile than nation-states in tackling the wicked problems facing the world in the 21st century. As an example, in 2017, 30 major cities across the United States committed to the United Nations to reach the country's greenhouse gas emission targets outlined in the Paris climate accord, despite the national government's decision to withdraw from the agreement (New York Times 2017).

Collaboration at the Nordic level has primarily been delegated to national governments. While the Nordic capital cities understand the advantages of cooperation, they have yet to take systematic action on it. The Nordic countries have a long-standing tradition of institutionalized collaboration among their national governments, with the Nordic Council of Ministers serving as the primary facilitator of such efforts. The vision of the Nordic Council of Ministers is to establish the Nordic region as the most sustainable and integrated region in the world in 2030 (Norden.org B 2023). Based on the empirical evidence, integration efforts have overlooked the great potential for collaboration that the Nordic capital cities could have in further strengthening the Nordic brand.

The Nordic Council of Ministers plays a key role in managing the Nordic brand, but it does not have complete control over it. This is consistent with the literature on place branding, which suggests that place brand managers have less control over their brands compared to product brand managers, due to the large number of stakeholders involved (Iversen & Hem 2008, 604). The way the world perceives the Nordic brand is shaped by both historical events and current occurrences, both within and outside of the Nordics. Rather than solely being managed and controlled by the cross-governmental organization, the successes and shortcomings of the Nordic brand are largely influenced by the actions

and decisions of the Nordic people, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and increasingly, cities.

This study was conducted to find out what kind of roles the strong region brand of the Nordics plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. More precisely, the study aimed to find answers to the following research question:

What role(s) does the Nordic brand play in the branding of the Nordic capital cities?

The scope of this study was narrowed down to the Nordic capital cities and to understand what kind of spillover effects an increasingly strong region brand such as the Nordic brand transfer to its sub-brands. The results of the study are based on 12 interviews that were conducted among city branding experts and practitioners between November 2022 and January 2023.

Based on this study, the Nordic brand transfers meaning and affect to the branding of the Nordic capital city brands in many ways if the connection is made between the two. The person assessing the Nordic capital city brand needs to know that the city in question belongs to the Nordic region for the spillover effect to happen.

The Nordic brand plays different kinds of roles either actively or passively in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. First, the shared umbrella brand connects the city brands and creates opportunities for collaborating for shared goals for their own and the greater good of the Nordic brand. They all benefit from the strong Nordic brand and the rising global interest toward it, but at the same time try to craft and communicate their own unique and distinct brands within the region. The Nordic brand unites them through shared values, geography, history, and language, it protects them from unwanted connotations and provides them with a head start in many fields because the Nordic brand is often connected with quality.

Conversely, the cities should see how attaching themselves to the Nordic brand comes with its downsides, too. Because the Nordic brand is often better known than the individual Nordic capital city brands, connecting to it can create a false sense of

homogeneity. The cities' distinctiveness is suppressed by the strong associations people already have about the Nordic brand. The Nordic brand can also be a party pooper of sorts: the constant successes of different Nordic actors (nation-states, cities, companies, etc.) in global rankings have crafted an idea that the Nordics succeed in anything they set out to do. The more the Nordics succeed, the less interesting and newsworthy it becomes in the eyes of the global audience – and the fewer people are interested, the less the Nordics get visibility in the media. A perfect and pristine aura of the Nordic brand can make it harder for the capital cities to be seen as avant-garde, innovative, and surprising in the eyes of their desired audiences.

On top of this, the constant interest toward the Nordic brand can create complacency and even apathy in city branding efforts. The urgent need to outperform oneself and continuously come up with innovative ideas to develop city branding is often the modus operandi of cities on the fringes of public awareness. Combining this with the paradox of the Nordic countries needing more and more skilled workers in the future while at the same time making public efforts to complicate the integration of immigrants will likely hamper the Nordic brand and the Nordic capital cities in the long run.

This study found that the Nordic capital cities tend to have limited cooperation with one another, with any collaboration that does occur appearing to be ad-hoc and often reliant on personal connections. The conducted interviews revealed a shared sense of frustration regarding the lack of concrete action toward collaboration and cooperation despite frequent discourse on the topic. The reasons for this lack of action may be varied. One potential explanation is the competitive nature of the relationship between the Nordic capital cities, as they compete for global talent, investment, and tourists. However, the interviews suggest that there is a shared understanding among the cities that city branding in the Nordics is not a zero-sum game, and that collaboration towards a stronger Nordic umbrella brand would be mutually beneficial.

Based on the findings of this study, opportunities for collaboration among the Nordic capital cities to enhance the Nordic brand may lie in highlighting the unique characteristics of each city – dubbed as *The Curator* role in chapter 4. To address issues of homogeneity and competition for scarce global resources, the Nordic capital cities could benefit from working together and transparently identifying the strengths and

weaknesses of each city. By creating a plan to distribute resources more equitably, these cities may be able to better collaborate in strengthening the Nordic brand, ultimately benefiting all of them.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the research of city branding in different ways. Ladik & Stewart (2008) present the three elements of contribution to a scientific study: context, theories, and methods. This study has contextual and theoretical contributions to the academic field of place branding, and more specifically, of city branding. This sub-chapter will first discuss the study's contextual contributions followed by its theoretical ones (visualized in Figure 6).

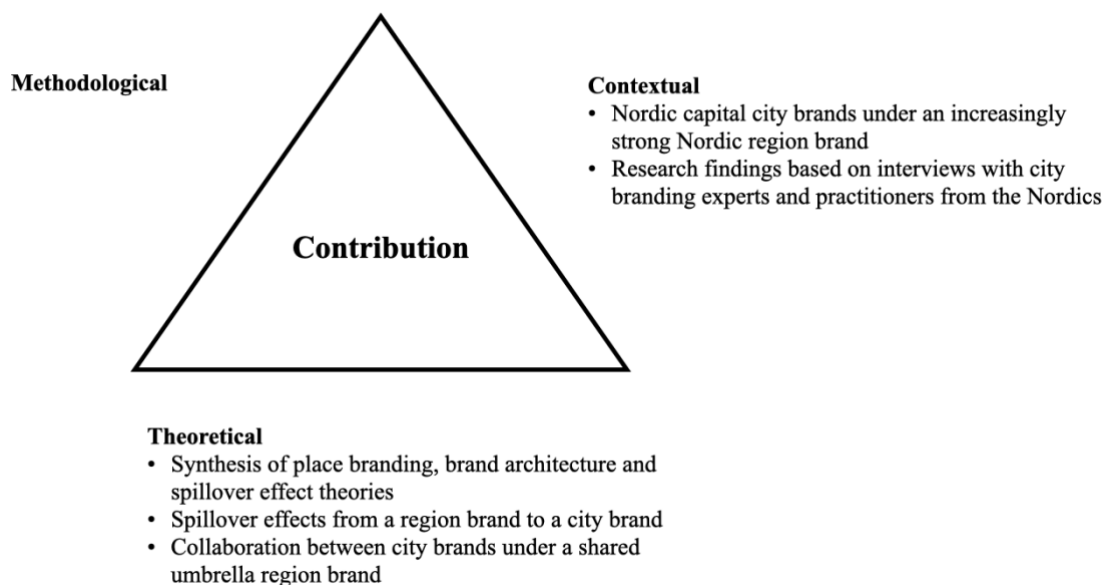


Figure 6. The contribution of this study (Model adopted from Ladik & Stewart 2008).

The clearest contribution of this study is the results derived from its unique contextual setting in which the increasingly strong Nordic region brand was studied in its relation to the region's national capital cities. The roles that the region brand of the Nordics plays in the branding of Nordic capital cities have not been studied before this. Prior research has investigated the impact of the Nordic brand on corporate brands from the region (Ekstrand 2018) and the risks of homogenization in Nordic country branding practices through

excessive benchmarking (Valaskivi 2016). However, there is a lack of examination of the specific spillover effects of the Nordic brand on the sub-branding of its capital cities. While the lack of literature on a subject does not necessarily indicate its importance as a research topic (Ladik & Stewart 2008), it can be argued that due to the relatively limited research conducted in the field of city branding, it is expected that there are still research gaps to be explored.

The existing literature and theoretical frameworks on place branding are limited (Kavaratzis & Charles 2018). This study contributes to the field's growing body of literature by providing insights from a unique contextual setting, synthesizing theories on spillover effects to place branding and further developing existing theories. While this study does not aim to generate new theories, it highlights how existing literature and areas of research can be expanded upon. As this study subscribes to the moderate constructionist approach, it adopts a research logic based on abduction (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010) that enables data-driven theory generation and allowing for a less theory-driven research process than deduction.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by synthesizing the literature on place branding and spillover effects, as first illustrated in Figure 2. The framework is further enriched in Figure 5, considering the specific context of the Nordic capital cities and the roles of the umbrella brand in relation to its sub-brands, as well as the potential horizontal spillover effects between the sub-brands and the tension that arises from collaboration in a competitive setting.

To conclude, the results reveal that combining the theory from the study of spillover effects with the theory on place branding is meaningful when studying the phenomenon of city branding in relation to the umbrella brand that transfers meaning and/or affect. The study offers both theoretical and contextual contributions to the field of place branding. Specifically, it synthesizes the literature on place branding and spillover effects to create an enriched framework for understanding the relationship between umbrella brands and sub-brands, and how this relationship can be affected by competition and collaboration. Methodologically the contribution isn't substantial: The study utilizes a common approach of conducting semi-structured interviews with experts to gather results.

5.3 Managerial implications

In addition to theoretical contributions, this study has implications for managers, especially in city, country, and region branding organizations in the Nordics. Nordic capital cities compete for resources like investments, talents, and tourists globally, but also with one another. To be able to create a strong brand that would attract target audiences first to the Nordics and then to individual cities in the region, city branding must not only be systematic and built on the objective strengths of the city but also utilize the spillover effects from the nation and region brand it belongs to.

The results of this study might be useful for brand managers of other places around the world, too. All cities belong to countries and regions that might transfer beneficial or harmful spillover effects to the city brands. The six roles presented in this study that the Nordic brand plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities might not be universally applicable but the underlying idea of meaning and/or affect transfer between connected places is.

This study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners in the field of city and region branding in the Nordic region. The resulting empirical evidence is current and relevant, making the findings of this study relevant for a broad audience within the field of place branding. The section discussing the theoretical contributions of this study provides insight into the roles the Nordic brand takes in relation to the capital city brands from the region and how they could better collaborate in a way that would benefit them all. The various managerial implications of these findings will be examined in more detail in this sub-chapter.

The study's empirical evidence highlights the ways in which the Nordic brand can benefit the branding efforts of the Nordic capital cities, by enhancing the attractiveness of the cities in the eyes of their target audiences. However, there seem to be also some downsides in attaching too closely to the Nordic brand as a Nordic capital city brand. Consequently, the managers in charge of these brands should aim to maximize the benefits of the Nordic brand's positive roles and try to mitigate the harms of the more negative ones. Some of the roles the Nordic brand takes in relation to the NCC brands can

be dealt with more actively and as the effects of some roles are more passive, it might be less straightforward to address their either beneficial or harmful consequences to the city brands.

How to make use of the active roles the Nordic brand can play in branding the Nordic capital cities:

- 1) *The Connector*: The city brands should celebrate the positive effects the Nordic brand has on the Nordic capital city brand and nurture the relationships with the other NCCs. To increase the city brand's awareness and strengthen its positive connotations, they should make use of the Nordic brand in markets where it is stronger than the city brand itself or the country brand it is connected to. Coming together as Nordic capital cities together with the Nordic Council of Ministers who actively manages the Nordic brand to assess opportunities for collaboration could be productive.
- 2) *The Curator*: Collaborating with other NCCs where possible to strengthen the shared Nordic brand is advised. Due to the interconnected value chains within many fields related to investments, talent acquisition, and tourism, a stronger Nordic brand that attracts resources to the region can benefit all Nordic actors. The Nordic capital city brand managers should aim to objectively analyze their own and their peer cities' strengths to create a distinct brand that doesn't overlap too much with the other NCC brands. For example, based on the empirical evidence, collaboration within the tourism sector is especially fruitful as many visitors tend to visit more than one Nordic capital city at a time.

How to make use of the positive effects and mitigate the potentially harmful effects of the passive roles the Nordic brand can play in branding the Nordic capital cities:

- 3) *The Quality label*: The Nordic brand should be utilized wherever it can enhance the evaluation of quality in relation to Nordic city branding efforts. Areas, where the Nordic brand is perceived to be particularly strong in terms of quality, include livability, work-life balance, relevant sections of the design industry, societal infrastructure, trust in government, and technological innovation, to name a few.

Being connected to the Nordic brand protects the Nordic capital cities not only from obscurity due to their relatively small sizes as urban areas, but also from harmful connotations such as the proximity to Russia, something that has become especially valuable since the war on Ukraine was started in early 2022. For example, to mitigate the potential worries from investors or relocating talent related to the geographical location of the Nordic capital cities (especially related to Helsinki which is the closest one to the Russian border), managers should emphasize the Nordic region's unity, general safety and strong ties to the Western world.

- 4) *The Homogenizer*: To tackle the risk of being perceived as too similar to one another, the Nordic capital cities should take it upon themselves to discover their distinctiveness as discussed earlier in relation to *the Curator* role. According to the empirical evidence, the perceived homogeneity can especially hamper the branding efforts of the lesser-known Nordic capital cities with weaker brands, meaning their efforts to search for distinctiveness within the Nordic brand can be seen as even more urgent.

- 5) *The Satisficer*: Efforts to mitigate the somewhat detrimental effects of the Nordic brand towards the Nordic capital city brands should be encouraged as branding the NCC in new and innovative ways without compromising on quality not only make the Nordic capital city brand seem more interesting but can also have positive reverse spillover effects to the umbrella Nordic brand. Although the Nordic brand is overall seen as a true asset to the branding of the Nordic capital cities, the potential downsides should be taken seriously: Based on the interviews, experts, and practitioners perceive indications of “Nordic fatigue” among important target audiences regarding the constant emphasis on the achievements and successes of the Nordic region and its countries and cities. These effects can be mitigated by attempting out-of-the-box and creative branding efforts that go against the grain of what is expected from a Nordic capital city, but that still abide by its values and objective strengths.

Constantly topping rankings measuring various aspects of livability and society can create a false sense of accomplishment in the city branding practitioners in the

Nordics. The empirical evidence suggests that cities may become complacent in their branding efforts and produce less innovative branding, due to the assumption of wide awareness and positive perceptions among their target audiences. Becoming too comfortable with one's efforts and achievements is known to hinder creativity and ambition. To prevent this, managers should constantly keep updating their practices, following global trends and changes in target audience behaviors. Becoming aware of and acting against one's own biases can be achieved for example by employing external professionals to help in branding efforts.

- 6) *The Excluder*: The empirical evidence suggests that the Nordic brand may present a risk of alienation for potential investors, talents, or tourists due to a perceived lack of diversity or difficulty in integrating into the region. To address these risks, city brand managers should collaborate closely with their respective city's immigration, tourism, and investment bureaus, and actively gather feedback from target audiences to identify and address any issues in the system. In addition to improving the city's customer experience among these important target groups, the brand should also focus on addressing any potentially harmful or misunderstood connotations related to the Nordic brand in its branding efforts.

The Nordic brand is clearly an asset in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. It is up to the city brand managers in the region to show whether they can surf the Nordic wave or drown underneath it.

5.4 Evaluating the quality and limitations of the study

For a researcher, it can be challenging to assess the scientific quality and trustworthiness of a study within qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The researcher has a substantive impact on the research through the choices made during the research process and the analysis of the results. The choices throughout the process have been cumulatively built on one another and have beyond doubt taken the research into directions that another researcher wouldn't reproduce in exactly the same way.

The results of the study are based on expert interviews and the researcher has no way to be certain of the truthfulness of the interviewees' answers. The limitations of this study include the potential for bias in the responses of the interviewees, as they may have only discussed matters they deemed important, rather than providing a completely objective perspective. Additionally, as a qualitative study, the analysis of the empirical evidence is subjective, and the interpretation of the interviews may differ among researchers. This is in line with the study's moderate constructionist approach where the interview is seen as a social encounter where knowledge is created together by the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium 1995; 1997).

It should be noted that the views expressed in the interviews are subjective in nature and may have been influenced by the current global situation at the time of the study. The interviews took place in November and December of 2022 and January of 2023. During this time the media was, for instance, extensively covering the ongoing war in Ukraine and the urgent need for foreign talent in Finland.

Despite the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research, the researcher took steps to ensure the quality of the study by implementing a constant evaluation process throughout the research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This was achieved using theoretical triangulation, which involves drawing from multiple sources of literature and theories to gain a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Also, a lot of emphasis was placed on the interviews and their individual quality. The semi-structured interview structure was modified to suit each of the individual interviews (see basic structure in Appendix 1). It was determined that a sample of 12 experts and practitioners in the relevant field was sufficient to generate a rich and comprehensive data set, with a focus on quality over quantity of the interviews.

Even though this study followed the good practices of qualitative research, it has some limitations that need to be addressed. The scope of this study was narrowed down to the Nordic capital cities and their relation to the umbrella brand of the Nordic region. The study left out the obvious interrelationships between the Nordic nation-states and their capital cities to focus more broadly on what kind of roles the Nordic region as an entity plays in the branding of the Nordic capital cities. Jumping over the nation brand level was

a deliberate choice because it is interesting to understand how a powerful and well-known region brand spills over to the branding of the Nordic capital cities.

The study was conducted by interviewing 12 people who fell into the categories of general experts on Nordic place branding, Nordic branding practitioners, and practitioners of city branding in Helsinki and Copenhagen. This added to the subjective nature of the study as brands are eventually created in the minds of the perceiver (i.e., a person belonging to the target group of a city brand), the results can be biased because they were found through interviewing people whose task it is to manage the brands in question. The results of the study could have also been different if city branding practitioners from the remaining Nordic capital cities of Stockholm, Oslo, and Reykjavik would have been interviewed in addition to the city branding practitioners and experts from Copenhagen and Helsinki and the region branding practitioners in charge of the Nordic brand.

5.5 Potential for future research

The phenomenon of city branding is vast and relevant to all urban areas throughout the world. It is still considered to be understudied as an academic field (Zenker and Braun 2017) and thus posits various opportunities for future research. This study covers but a fraction of the phenomenon and leaves many stones unturned. Three ideas for future research are presented in this final sub-chapter of the study.

The study was conducted from the perspectives of experts and practitioners within the Nordic capital cities and the Nordic brand and thus the results reflect views that are subjective, biased, and knowledgeable of the topic. In future research around the phenomenon of place branding in the Nordics, it could be interesting to study Nordic capital city branding from the perspective of the target audiences, that is to say, global relocating talent, investors, companies looking for new market entries or even visitors who have not visited the Nordics yet. Because in the end, brands are created in the minds of the people and not on the drawing boards of brand managers.

The results of the study also pose interesting potential for future research. It could be useful to further research how the now recognized roles that the Nordic brand plays in the

branding of the Nordic capital cities are made use of in the day-to-day practice. A case study focusing on a single Nordic capital city and its relation to the Nordic brand might uncover insights that could be useful in the branding of any of the Nordic capital cities, or moreover, in the branding of any global city connected to a strong region brand.

Regarding the role of *the Excluder* that the empirical evidence suggested, it will be interesting to see whether the concept of the Nordics will be fluid enough in the future by potentially welcoming Baltic countries such as Estonia as part of the region or whether it will stay as a tight-knit union of the five sovereign states of Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland and the three autonomous territories of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: The introduction, statement of the study's ethical integrity and the modifiable interview question structure

As part of my research, I'm interviewing city branding experts and practitioners from Copenhagen and Helsinki. I'm also interviewing people from the Nordic Council of Ministers about the Nordic brand and how it's linked to the city brands. There will be all together 10-14 interviews.

The research will be public, I'll share it with you when it's published next spring, but this interview will be made anonymous so your name will not be public for others than me and possibly my seminar group at the university.

Is it ok if I record this interview?

I would like to keep this interview semi-structured: I have a set of questions, but I might divert from them as we go forward to deep dive on a point I find interesting.

If you feel you're not the right person to answer a question or another, or you don't want to answer a question, we can move forward.

Now, when I talk about city branding, I use the term in its broad meaning: what makes a city special, how it's seen and experienced, what kind of ideas are linked to it.

I will go through questions about:

- City branding in general
- City branding especially about Copenhagen and/or Helsinki
- Nordic capital city branding in connection to the Nordic brand
- The relationship between the Nordic capital cities to each other
- The potential risks or counterproductive measures of Nordic city branding

Any questions before we start?

THE MODIFIABLE INTERVIEW QUESTION STRUCTURE:

Generally, about city branding:

- What constitutes a good city brand? What can be achieved by a good city brand?
- Mikä tekee hyvän kaupunkibrändin? Mitä hyvällä kaupunkibrändillä voidaan saavuttaa?
- Can you name examples of cities that have strong city brands?
- Tuleeko mieleen esimerkkejä erityisen vahvoista kaupunkibrändeistä?

Specifically, about branding city X:

- Does Copenhagen conduct deliberate city branding? How?
- Harjoittaako Helsinki tarkoituksenmukaista kaupunkibrändäystä? Miten?
- City branding's most important job in CPH? Must-win-battles?
- Mikä on kaupunkibrändäyksen tärkein tehtävä Helsingille? MWB?
- Who is the target group(s) for CPH's branding? Are there priorities between them?
- Kuka tai ketkä ovat Helsingin kaupunkibrändin kohderyhmiä? Onko prioriteetteja?
- How is the brand image of CPH seen now by its target groups?
- Miten Helsingin kaupunkibrändi koetaan tai nähdään nyt kohderyhmiensä toimesta?
- How should the brand image of CPH develop in the future for the city branding efforts CPH to be successful?
- Miten Helsingin kaupunkibrändin pitäisi kehittyä jatkossa, jotta oltaisiin onnistuttu?

- Who is branding CPH around the world? Who does it because it's their job and who does it even though it isn't?
- Kuka tai ketkä brändäävät Helsinkiä maailmalla? Kuka tekee, koska se on heidän tehtävänsä? Kuka tekee sitä vaikkei se ole?
- How is the success of city branding in CPH measured?
- Mitataanko Helsingin kaupunkibränditoimien onnistumista? Miten?
- What kind of effects does the change of the political leaders have on Copenhagen's city branding?
- Millaisia vaikutuksia poliittisen johdon vaihtumisella voi olla Helsingin kaupunkibrändäykseen? Onko sama haaste kaikissa pohjoismaisissa pääkaupungeissa?
- Are city rankings important? How do they affect branding of CPH?
- Ovatko kaupunkirankingit tärkeitä? Miten ne vaikuttavat Helsingin brändäykseen mielestäsi?

About branding city X as part of the Nordic region:

- Is the Nordic brand an asset for CPH's brand?
- Onko Pohjoismaihin kuulumisesta (Nordic-brändistä) hyötyä Helsingille?
- How is the Nordic brand made use of in branding CPH?
- Miten Nordic-brändiä hyödynnetään Helsingin brändäyksessä?
- What attributes/values connected to the Nordic brand are most useful in branding CPH? Are there attributes/values that are not?
- Mitkä attribuutit tai arvot, jotka kytkeytyvät Nordic-brändiin ovat erityisen hyödyllisiä Helsinki-brändille? Mitkä ei?
- Does CPH rely more on the Nordic region brand in some markets than others?

- Tukeutuuko Helsinki jollain alueilla/markkinoilla vahvemmin Nordic-brändiin kuin toisilla?
- Does CPH co-operate with other cities or stakeholders to brand the Nordics together?
- Tehdäänkö pohjoismaisella kaupunkitasolla yhteistyötä pohjoismaiden brändäämiseksi tai tunnetuksi tekemiseksi?

About branding city X alongside its Nordic capital peers:

- What sets CPH apart from other Nordic capitals? Positively / negatively?
- Mikä erottaa Helsingin muista pohjoismaisista pääkaupungeista? Positiivisesti/negatiivisesti?
- Do Nordic capital city brands compete against one another? How?
- Kilpailevatko pohjoismaiset pääkaupungit keskenään? Miksi ja miten?
- Does CPH benchmark or position its city branding against its peers in the Nordics (other capitals)?
- Vertaileeko tai positioiko Helsinki itseään kaupunkibrändäyksessä pohjoismaisiin pääkaupunkiverrokkeihinsa?
- Does CPH collaborate in city branding with Nordic capital peers?
- Tekeekö Helsinki yhteistyötä kaupunkibrändäyksessä muiden pohjoismaisten pääkaupunkien kanssa?

The risks of Nordic capital city branding:

- In your opinion, are Nordic capital city brands distinctive enough (compared to one another)?
- Erottuvatko pohjoismaiset pääkaupungit mielestäsi tarpeeksi toisistaan?
- In your opinion, what are practices that might be counter-productive in Nordic city branding (that is, make them too similar to each other)?

- Mitä tekijöitä tai käytänteitä pohjoismaisessa kaupunkibrändäyksessä tulee mieleen, jotka saattavat olla haitallisia kyseisten kaupunkien kaupunkibrändäyksen kannalta?
- Does CPH use external partners in city branding? Do current visual and/or conceptual branding trends affect planning and executing the city branding?
- Käyttääkö Helsinki ulkopuolisia kumppaneita kaupunkibrändäyksessään? Vaikuttavatko brändäystrendit (visuaaliset tai muut) Helsingin kaupunkibrändäykseen?
- What if the Nordic region brand's momentum doesn't run forever, is this a recognised risk?
- Mitä käy, kun Pohjoismaisen brändin momentum hidastuu, onko tällaista riskiä tunnistettu?
- Do you see other potential risks or downsides in Nordic city branding?
- Näetkö muita riskejä tai haittapuolia pohjoismaisessa kaupunkibrändäyksessä?

In conclusion:

- Any questions I didn't ask that you deem relevant to the discussed topic?
- Tuleeko mieleen muita kysymyksiä aiheeseen liittyen, joita en osannut kysyä, mutta haluaisit nostaa esiin?

APPENDIX 2: The roles of the Nordic brand and their managerial implications

The Role	Active / Passive	Description	Managerial implications
The Connector	Active	The Connector role of the Nordic brand brings the Nordic capital cities (NCCs) together through shared values, geography, and governance. The potential for collaboration under the shared umbrella brand for mutual benefit is great but underutilized.	The city brands should celebrate the positive effects the Nordic brand has on the Nordic capital city brand and nurture the relationships to the other NCCs. To increase the city brand's awareness and strengthen its positive connotations, they should make use of the Nordic brand in markets where it is stronger than the city brand itself or the country brand it is connected to. Coming together as Nordic capital cities together with the Nordic Council of Ministers who actively manages the Nordic brand to assess opportunities for collaboration could be productive.
The Curator	Active	The Curator role helps the NCCs to become more distinct from one another and eases the tension of competition. The Nordic-level actors could work together with the NCCs in curating the city brands for the global stakeholders, especially within segments where the competition is not as intense.	Collaborating with other NCCs where possible to strengthen the shared Nordic brand is advised. Due to the interconnected value chains within many fields related to investments, talent acquisition and tourism, a stronger Nordic brand that attracts resources to the region can benefit all Nordic actors. The Nordic capital city brand managers should aim to objectively analyze their own and their peer cities' strengths in order to create a distinct brand that doesn't overlap too much with the other NCC brands. For example, based on the empirical evidence, collaboration within the tourism sector is especially fruitful as many visitors tend to visit more than one Nordic capital city at a time.
The Quality Label	Passive	The Quality Label role enables the positive quality-related associations of the Nordic brand to spill over on the NCC brands and protects them from harmful associations that might arise in the minds of the global stakeholders.	The Nordic brand should be utilized wherever it can enhance the evaluation of quality in relation to Nordic city branding efforts. Areas where the Nordic brand is perceived to be particularly strong in terms of quality include livability, work-life balance, relevant sections of the design industry, societal infrastructure, trust in government, and technological innovation, to name a few. Being connected to the Nordic brand protects the Nordic capital cities not only from obscurity due to their relatively small sizes as urban areas, but also from harmful connotations such as the proximity to Russia, something that has become especially valuable since the war on Ukraine was started in early 2022. For example, to mitigate the potential worries from investors or relocating talent related to the geographical location of the Nordic capital cities (especially related to Helsinki that is the closest one to the Russian border), managers should emphasize the Nordic region's unity, general safety and strong ties to the Western world.
The Homogenizer	Passive	The Homogenizer role creates difficulties for NCC branding when the cities are perceived as too similar to one another. This might benefit the stronger city brands at the expense of the weaker ones. However, it also creates opportunities for the weaker ones through horizontal spillover effects between the NCC brands.	To tackle the risk of being perceived as too similar to one another, the Nordic capital cities should take upon themselves to discover their distinctiveness as discussed earlier in relation to the Curator role. According to the empirical evidence, the perceived homogeneity can especially hamper the branding efforts of the lesser-known Nordic capital cities with weaker brands, meaning their efforts to search for distinctiveness within the Nordic brand can be seen as even more urgent.
The Satisfier	Passive	The Satisfier role can create complacency among the NCC brands. The recent city ranking successes of Nordic capital cities, the heightened global interest, and benefiting from the strong Nordic brand may foster a misperception of recognition and appeal among city governments and branding organizations, potentially causing the NCC brands to satisfy for less innovative and safer city branding.	Efforts to mitigate the somewhat detrimental effects of the Nordic brand towards the Nordic capital city brands should be encouraged as branding the NCC in new and innovative ways without compromising on quality not only make the Nordic capital city brand seem more interesting but can also have positive reverse spillover effects to the umbrella Nordic brand. Although the Nordic brand is overall seen as a true asset to the branding of the Nordic capital cities, the potential downsides should be taken seriously: Based on the interviews, experts and practitioners perceive indications of "Nordic fatigue" among important target audiences regarding the constant emphasis on the achievements and successes of the Nordic region and its countries and cities. These effects can be mitigated by attempting out of the box and creative branding efforts that go against the grain of what is expected from a Nordic capital city, but that still abide by its values and objective strengths.
The Excluder	Passive	The Excluder role can alienate potential investors, visitors and especially talent from considering the NCCs. The role stems from the perceived (and sometimes actual) lack of diversity and unwelcoming cultures of the Nordic region.	The empirical evidence suggests that the Nordic brand may present a risk of alienation for potential investors, talents, or tourists due to a perceived lack of diversity or difficulty of integrating to the region. To address these risks, city brand managers should collaborate closely with their respective city's immigration, tourism, and investment bureaus, and actively gather feedback from target audiences to identify and address any issues in the system. In addition to improving the city's customer experience among these important target groups, the brand should also focus on addressing any potentially harmful or misunderstood connotations related to the Nordic brand in its branding efforts.