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# **Depoliticizing feminism? The transformation of an ideology-charged concept in a nation branding context**

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# Abstract

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## **Depoliticizing feminism? The transformation of an ideology-charged concept in a nation branding context**

Although feminism is an ideologically-charged concept that allows for various interpretations, Sweden employs a feminist foreign policy with the aim of gender equality. Sweden also seizes the value of feminism in its nation branding efforts. This study problematizes Sweden's use of feminism as nation branding concept. It aims for understanding how feminism is enacted in Sweden's nation branding and what this implies for power relations of the actors. To address the purpose of this study, I conducted qualitative interviews and a document study and adopted a critical perspective. As theoretical framework, systematically distorted communication and discursive closure are used. The analysis has shown that feminism is stripped off its ideological meaning and distorted when enacted in Sweden's nation branding. The concept is depoliticized and commodified to contribute to the target audience of nation branding having a positive image of Sweden. Further, the analysis has shown that the logic of nation branding, where feminism is depoliticized, clashes with the logic of traditional diplomacy, where feminism is politicized. It can be concluded that nation branding increasingly gains momentum over traditional diplomacy.

*Keywords:* nation branding, public diplomacy, diplomacy, feminism, critical perspective, discursive closure, systematically distorted communication, power struggle

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# Introduction

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“Violence, oppression and systematic subordination still mark the daily lives of countless women and girls. Sweden wants this discrimination to end”. This quote from the foreword of the first policy action plan for Sweden’s feminist foreign policy (FFP) sums up the ambition of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA). In October 2014, when the current government was announced, the MFA launched its FFP with the fundamental goal of gender equality (Government Offices of Sweden a). Three years later, in September 2017, Sweden’s current Foreign Minister Margot Wallström was awarded the Agent of Change Award, issued by UN Women for her work on gender equality (e.g. *The Local SE*, 2017, Sept. 21st; United Nations Women, 2017, Sept. 21st.). This shows that in a traditionally diplomatic context, the FFP has left a good impression. However, diplomacy does not occur behind the closed doors of political cabinets anymore but is instead becoming increasingly public. This shift is ‘captured’ by the concepts of (new) public diplomacy (PD) and nation branding, which adhere to a different logic than traditional diplomacy.

In a general sense, both PD and nation branding are concepts that aim to strengthen a country’s image through communication with mainly foreign audiences (e.g. Szondi, 2008, 2010; Pamment, 2013; Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004). However, the conceptualizations of these two concepts and how they relate to each other differ (e.g. Szondi, 2008, 2010). In Sweden, PD “is intrinsically associated with the field of nation branding, and particularly the notion of Brand Sweden” (Pamment, 2013, p. 99). Also, Cassinger, Merkelsen, Eksell, and Kjærgaard Rasmussen (2016, p. 183) integrate Sweden’s nation branding and PD into a framework “which regards nation branding and PD as essentially the same concept”. Hereafter, Sweden’s ‘PD’ efforts and Sweden’s ‘nation branding’ efforts will thus be conceptualized as the same and will be referred to as ‘nation branding’.

The FFP has set gender equality as its aim. Feminism can be understood as some sort of ideology with ambiguous implications; gender equality is more an objec-

tive, the manifestation of feminism. Because the fields of traditional diplomacy and nation branding adhere to different logics, different rules apply. Feminism, as set out by the FFP, means working towards gender equality. When ‘exported’ from diplomacy to and enacted in nation branding, the meaning of feminism is being transformed. It is thus a dynamic concept that is prone to distortion through this process. Sweden was chosen for this study as case to examine how a politically charged concept like feminism is enacted by nation branding.

Feminism is an ambiguous concept: while in Sweden, the notion is often rather positively connotated, this is often not the case in other countries (e.g. BBC, 2017, Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>). The feminist standards set out by the FFP have caused trouble for Sweden in the dialogue with *governments* of countries like Saudi Arabia, where the attitude towards gender equality differs from that in Sweden (e.g. Standish, 2016 July 29<sup>th</sup>; Nordberg, 2015, April 15<sup>th</sup>; Barry, 2017, Nov. 17<sup>th</sup>). Diplomacy is defined as “the established method of influencing the decisions and behavior of foreign governments and peoples” (Freeman & Marks). Therefore, being an openly feminist government might corrupt Sweden’s efforts to convey a positive image of itself to citizens of countries with a different more negative attitude towards feminism. From a nation branding perspective, pursuing a FFP is thus a risky undertaking: dependent on what it is associated with feminism, the image of Sweden ranking high in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum Index, 2017) and being ‘the country with a FFP’ has potential to both strengthen and jeopardize the nation’s position in an international relations context. Influencing the opinion of foreigners is a way to position a country most advantageously internationally, and when communicating Sweden abroad, the concept of feminism is adapted to the target audience in other countries.

This paper focuses on how feminism is enacted in activities of the MFA’s<sup>1</sup> communication department, the Swedish Institute (SI)<sup>2, 3</sup> and Swedish foreign mis-

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<sup>1</sup> “The MFA and Sweden’s missions abroad are responsible for Sweden’s foreign, development cooperation and trade policy” (Government Offices of Sweden b)

<sup>2</sup> The SI is a public agency operating “in the fields of culture, education, science and business in seeking to strengthen ties and promote development” (SI a)

<sup>3</sup> The Government assigns tasks to the SI by the government is “to promote awareness of, interest in and confidence in Sweden abroad, to increase cooperation in Sweden’s vicinity, and to facilitate democratic, equitable and sustainable global development” (SI c)

sions (embassies)<sup>4</sup>. Sweden is used as case for a country that has not only made the ‘unique’ move to employ a FFP. Also, it is a country that brands itself as progressive (e.g. SI; Jezierska & Towns, 2018). Thus, it seems to impose on itself some sort of duty to improve the world by the feminist objectives it sets out in the FFP.

## 1.1 Problematization

From a nation branding view, labelling a nation’s foreign policy and even a government ‘feminist’, is a risky undertaking: using a label that is as ambiguous and ideologically charged as ‘feminism’ presumably causes trouble. But as a matter of fact, feminism is, if not before then now with a FFP, officially part of Sweden’s brand image. Nation branding is a tool of soft power, with the purpose of creating a positive image of Sweden abroad. However, there are some incongruencies between having a strong position in the international playing field, and using an ambiguous, strongly ideological and politicized concept as part of a nation’s brand identity.

From a scholarly point of view, research on nation branding from a gender perspective is rather scarce. Looking at the gender perspective is important, though. Gender is an area that is inseparably intertwined with controversies, ideologies, etc., through which power struggles in nation branding are materialized. Hence, examining the gender perspective could tell us much about the symbolic power and violence of PD and nation branding. In December 2017, when the article of Jezierska and Towns (the first and so far, the only one on Sweden) was revised, still “[l]ess than a handful of scholars have adopted a gender perspective for the study of nation branding, and the scholarship is limited to studies on Japan, Canada, and Iceland” (p. 3). Recently, the notion of soft power and a new PD, adhering to the importance of relationship building and dialogue (e.g. Pamment, 2013; Melissen, 2013) in PD, have tied the concepts of nation branding and PD even further together. It seems that PD and nation branding gain momentum, which, in

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<sup>4</sup> Foreign missions, that is Swedish Embassies and Consulates, are provided with material from the SI via the SI’s publicly accessible online platform “SharingSweden.se”

turn, implies that they gain more power to potentially be harmful in an internal arena; therefore, it is crucial to know more about symbolic power and violence. Moreover, Kaneva (2011) and Jeziarska and Towns (2018) call for more critical research on nation branding and on the gender perspective. Also, a critical perspective can help to understand the mechanisms of how symbolic power is employed in nation branding.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the mechanisms that guide how feminism is enacted in Sweden's communication abroad. Gender equality has a long tradition in Sweden: it constitutes one of the main flagships of Sweden's "achievements". The FFP has pronounced gender equality as its fundamental goal, which is set out to be achieved by ensuring women's and girls' enjoyment of fundamental human rights (Government Offices of Sweden a). This is how Sweden enacts feminism in its diplomacy. However, all strategic communication is about distortion; therefore, when enacted in Sweden's nation branding, the concept of feminism will be distorted. In this study, I will use a critical approach not to criticize these concepts or the work of the MFA, the SI and the embassies.

Compared to other theoretical traditions, a critical perspective allows for revelation of potential power relations, through, for instance, asymmetrical communication. Nation branding serves the purpose to strengthen a country's image, which means it can be understood as PR for the nation. This view implies that shared meaning of feminism is co-created with the audience. This is the base to create positive connotations with Sweden's value of gender equality among the target audience (Szondi, 2010). The image foreigners hold of Sweden should be positive, but also as authentic as possible to help Sweden to a good negotiation position in an international political arena. When enacting feminism in Sweden's communication abroad, it can be expected that it is 'smoothed' to fit into a PR/branding and market logic. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this thesis is based on Habermas' systematically distorted communication (referred to in e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Fuchs, 2016), which suggests that one party in the communicative process configures the discourse, abdicating its responsibility for this disruption. Nation branding can be understood as systematically distorted

communication. Systemically distorted communication manifests in instances of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992). Hence, the theory of discursive closure provides the theoretical framework for *how* communication is systematically distorted. Discursive closure happens when repetitive micro-practices marginalize plausible views of reality in favor of one dominant view to suppress conflict. This is usually of advantage for someone (Deetz, 1992, p. 187ff.)

By examining the case of Sweden, this study strives to shed light on the greater issue of using ideologically charged concepts in soft power to manifest its power position in the world. In a political context, cultural taken-for-granted assumption, established ideologies and different kinds of power relations and institutions “may at least sometimes obstruct or restrict people’s thoughts and freedoms” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 199). Thus, this study contributes not only with some concrete insights about the gender dimensions of Sweden’s nation branding. Assuming that the opinion of foreign audiences is increasingly important, this thesis also contributes by examining what happens when politicized concepts (like feminism) are ‘exported’ to a nation branding context, thus shedding light on what building relationship with other countries’ populations implies.

Therefore, following research questions have been formulated for this thesis:

*RQ1: How is feminism, as set out by the FFP, enacted in the nation branding communication context?*

*RQ2: What instances of discursive closure appear in Sweden’s nation branding communication of FFP?*

*RQ3: What are the implications of discursive closure for the power relations between the actors involved in Sweden’s nation branding work?*

### **1.3 Demarcations**

In this study, the main method of data collection is qualitative interviews (supported by a document study). With the interviews, it is thoughts of the interviewees that will be analyzed, and sense-making interpretations of statements will be done. Due to time limitations, I decided to limit my sample to employees working at the MFA and the SI, as well as four Swedish embassies. These are the ‘official’ and primary institutions that are affiliated with the FFP and the promotion of

Sweden abroad. NGOs, women rights organizations, etc. that presumably also influence foreign audiences in a nation branding manner, are thus excluded. It should also be emphasized that this thesis has not the scope to cover the effects of the FFP or any of Sweden's traditional and public diplomacy or nation branding efforts. This is not only due to limitations in time and extent of this thesis, but also due to the methodology, which does not allow conclusions about effects. Instead, the focus lies on the 'strategy', or what people in charge think and have to say about it. Also, it is within the scope of the critical approach chosen for this study to understand mechanisms.

## **1.4 Disposition**

The study is structured as follows. In the second chapter, I will review the literature to provide definitions and a conceptual background (set the scene), as well as to map where my study can contribute to previous research. In the third chapter, the theory, I will present my theoretical framework of systematically distorted communication and, building up on this theory, the theory of discursive closure. In the fourth chapter, the methodology, I will explain my critical approach and its implications for this study. Further, I will present my research method and how the analysis is pursued. In the fifth chapter, the analysis, I will present my material and findings. In the sixth and last chapter, I will discuss my findings in relation to aim/purpose. Also, I will outline the contributions of this study to previous research and suggestions for future research. The thesis ends with concluding thoughts on the topic.

# Literature Review

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In previous research, the concepts of public diplomacy and nation branding have been scrutinized both in themselves and in relation to each other. Some of the discussions on their relationship will be looked into in the following chapter; not to find a solution to the answer how they relate, but to show how they are intertwined and to ‘aggregate’ the conceptual understandings of both, which are relevant for this study. The second part will focus on the concepts of new public diplomacy, soft power and a PR approach to branding, which are conceptual ‘updates’, emphasizing the relationship building and maintaining character of public diplomacy and nation branding, to fit more to the increasingly complex demands of society. As the studies presented in these two sections do not adopt a very critical perspective on the topic, the purpose section in this chapter will present the few existing critical studies on nation branding and extract the main points relevant for this research.

## **2.1 PD and nation branding: two key concepts**

PD and nation branding are two concepts that both aim at creating positive associations with a country and thus, to position it advantageously in an international context.

### ***2.1.1 Conceptualizations of PD and nation branding***

There have been some differing ideas among scholars about what nation branding is, but Szondi (2008) conceptualizes nation branding independently from branding. He defines it “as the strategic self-presentation of a country with the aim of creating reputational capital through economic, political, and social interest promotion at home and abroad” (2008, p. 5). However, it is possible to apply in nation branding some core ideas of strategic branding in a strictly managerial sense, which aims for building and maintaining an organization's powerful position in

the market by listening to (or creating) consumer demands. In Keller's (2009) so-called customer-based brand equity model, or Simon's (2017, p. 12) idea of relational brand communication, for instance, it is all about increasing the brand's profitability; nation branding is about a country positioning itself advantageously in the international competition for brand export, foreign direct investment and tourism (Olins, 2005, p. 172).

PD, in a traditional sense, is communication activities from a government, aimed at foreign audiences. Or, as Pamment (2013, p. 1) defines it: "the communication of an international actors' policies to citizens of foreign countries". Public diplomacy is not aimed exclusively at only foreign audiences, though, but also at domestic publics, either in an engaging approach by using input from citizens for foreign policy making, or in the approach of explaining the government's foreign policy goals and diplomacy to domestic citizens (Szondi, 2008, p. 6). It can roughly be said that in current conceptualizations of the notion of foreign affairs the focus lies on the influencing of "public opinion to create a receptive environment for foreign policy goals and promote national interests" (p. 7). In other words, public diplomacy is about indirectly facilitating government-to-government relations by involving citizens or publics, whose opinions "may help sway another government's position" (Pamment, 2013, p. 1). It is important to note the relevance of communication in this context, due to a nation's credibility in a diplomatic context being increasingly tied to the nation's way of communicating and influencing discourse, which happens through very complex relationships (Pamment, 2013, p. 39ff.). In Sweden, according to Pamment, the public diplomacy is centered around the country's self-image as being progressive (p. 100). Jezierska and Towns (2018) state the same but call the context in which they place their research "nation branding". According to their study, the core characteristic of the 'Brand Sweden' is progressiveness. The discussion about PD and nation branding has a strong Western bias, which may imply some sort of post-colonial fear of losing power in the world (Szondi, 2008, p. 37).

### ***2.1.2 Nation branding in the Swedish context***

The MFA states that the country's public diplomacy efforts are about "establishing and 'selling' Brand Sweden as an end in itself". It is about employing "values

and culture as medium for prising ‘open’ new public and market spaces” (Pamment, 2013, p. 102). Pamment further states that the national interest in these efforts lies in “competitive, economic terms, with Swedish culture and image employed instrumentally to support these objectives. Promotion therefore acts as the core PD activity for achieving those overall goals defined by the MFA” (2013, p. 102). The ‘Brand Sweden’ can be understood as control over discourse in that it is intended to influence the global public agenda (Pamment, 2013, p. 124), and which is based on values. A “value-based discourse in this sense has the advantage of being malleable to the needs of those expressing them” (p. 124f.). This searches to investigate how and why this malleability appears.

In Sweden, PD “is intrinsically associated with the field of nation branding, and particularly the notion of Brand Sweden” (Pamment, 2013, p. 99). This does not only align with Melissen’s (2005, p. 20f.) opinion that nation branding and PD are, to a large extent, complementary. He may suggest that nation branding is more about “articulation and projection of identity”, while public diplomacy is more about promotion and maintenance of “smooth international relationships”. However, in principle both concepts aim at foreign publics but are also important for domestic publics, and “in contrast to much conventional diplomacy both have foreign rather than one’s own perceptions as their starting point” (Melissen, 2005, p. 20f.). In conclusion, out of the five different models for the relationship of nation branding and PD that Szondi (2008) presents, the fifth model fits the best for this study: it suggests that PD and nation branding are the same concepts. Therefore, as stated in the introduction, in the context of Sweden, all communication examined and referred to will be considered ‘nation branding’.

### ***2.1.3 (Nation) brand identity***

Besides a thorough analysis of the target audience, a ‘strong’ and distinct brand identity is a crucial aspect of successful positioning of the (nation) brand. In the brand communication process, the positioning, the brand identity is ‘translated’ to create a desired brand image in the heads of the target audience. A keyword is sustainability: a brand identity can of course develop through time, but it is the backbone of the brand, so it should work in the long run as good as in the short run. Kaneva & Popescu (2011, p. 192) state that due to the pressure that globali-

zation poses, nation branding can be understood as act with the idea of “producing images that point to a future of new possibilities”. Not only because Sweden scores high in the rankings of gender equality (e.g. World Economic Forum Index, 2017), feminism does make sense to be included in the country’s brand identity. Furthermore, sustainability can be conceptualized not only as actions directed towards protecting the environment, but the social improvement of humans, which includes dealing with poverty, racism, and gender inequality (Ourahmoune, Binninger, & Robert, 2014); thus, showing feminist images that point to a ‘better future’ can be a move to sustain Sweden’s nation brand. Plural brand positioning, as Ourahmoune et al. (2014) suggest, may be Sweden’s key to success: especially when it comes to gender, brands are more ‘successful’ in terms of brand equity the more congruent the brand identity is with the identity of its customers. The ‘customers’ are in the case of nation branding foreign target audiences. Congruence means how well the customer feels their personality “matches” with brand personality (Neale, Robbie, & Martin, 2016; Grohmann, 2009; Sheena, 2012; Geuens, Weijters, & De Wulf, 2009; Kapferer, 2012). What can be concluded from this research for this study is that adapting the wording of feminist message to the respective target audience, e.g. by mentioning ‘gender equality’ instead of ‘feminism’, helps Sweden leverage its nation brand.

#### ***2.1.4 Foreign policy as tool for nation branding***

A study of Grayson (2004) shows how diplomatic initiatives of a nation can be intertwined with, or turn into, PD/nation branding. Having outlined a new Human Security Agenda, Canada’s “diplomatic accomplishment” is more than a reflective self-identification of current directions in Canadian policy; namely, it is, or has become a strong instance of brand development. “Canada is now widely categorized as a human security state that focuses on freedom from fear issues” (Grayson, 2004, p. 42). And not only has Canada with this new policy become *‘the country that’*, but this move has also “broadened and deepened global understandings of what it means to be secure” (Grayson, 2004, p. 42). This case of Canada is reminiscent of Sweden. Grayson’s study raises considerations about how much influence the nation branding logic might have on the logic of traditional diplomacy. To put it bluntly: maybe (new) PD and nation branding has become so im-

portant for nations that they dictate what foreign (or also domestic) policies should look like. Sweden is *the* country with a FFP that communicates feminism abroad as part of its nation branding. Thus, critically examining this case will help understand to better understand the findings from previous research presented above, as well as their implications.

## **2.2 New PD, soft power, and the PR approach to nation branding**

In an increasingly complex world, ‘updated’ understandings of PD have been introduced in research, which includes the concept of soft power. The public relations (PR) approach provides an adequate understanding of nation branding for this study.

### ***2.2.1 The shift towards a new PD and soft power***

New PD has been conceptualized as a shift of focus in international communication, away from foreign ministries being dominant actors in the communication of foreign affairs to the public debating it. This means that mechanisms of ‘traditional’ PD are being adapted to the new communication environment and what counts there, e.g. dialogue on social media (Pamment, 2013, p. 3 and p. 7f.). Primarily, the shift from PD and new public diplomacy, as Pamment (2013, p. 10) states, is the demand for more complex models. Factors that drive this shift are the emergence of new actors in international politics and new communication modes, among others. The role of nation branding in this setting is to help market national values and to find common ground between different actors (Pamment, 2013, p. 25ff.). However, the new PD “has been mainly rearticulated within traditional structures” (Pamment, 2013, p. 128). Pamment (2013, p. 128ff.) identifies relationship management and the management of discourse as characteristics, among others, as the core of new public diplomacy. Influence “is about playing a credible role in multilateral projects” (Pamment, 2013, p. 28f). Pamment also states (p. 136) that instead of “promoting the self-image, PD actors could do more in support of international challenges”.

With PD turning into a more dialogical and relational approach, the notion of soft power gains new importance (Nye, 2004, p. 31f.). While Nye states that culture, political values and foreign policies of a country are the main resources for its soft power (2004, p. 11), Szondi suggests that using soft power basically means nation branding (2008, p. 8). The main asset of soft power is its ability to attract (Nye, 2004, p. 6): it is about “getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your messages and fine-tuning it accordingly. It is crucial to understand the target audience” (2004, p. 11). New PD, then, or nation branding, is about engaging with foreign audiences - not about “peddling information” at them (Melissen, 2005, p. 13).

### ***2.2.2 The PR approach to nation branding***

Soft power and new PD being about relationship building and engagement with target groups links PD and nation branding to the concept of public relations. Melissen states that PD can learn from PR that “the strength of firm relationships largely determines the receipt and success of individual messages and overall attitudes” (Melissen, 2005, p. 21). Further, Szondi (2010) introduces the PR concept to the nation branding concept, arguing for a potential integration of the two. According to Szondi, the co-creational approach to PR, emphasizing creation of shared meaning and relationship building with publics/stakeholders, could contribute a great deal to nation branding. Szondi proposes “relationship building as the central concept and ultimate goal of nation branding instead of image creation and management, which has long dominated the practice and limited its development” (Szondi, 2010, p. 342). The target audience of a nation’s branding efforts are then to be understood not only as means to an end, but as (co-)creators of meaning.

Nation brand values are, according to Szondi, often rooted in national values and reflect exactly these. Though, because “meanings and values are culture-specific and not universal”, nation values can be interpreted in different ways by different cultures. In the case of Sweden, the nation value is feminism. To make sure that the target audience interprets this value in ‘the right way’, namely as something positive and desirable, the step that comes before this value creation is meaning creation, as is done by PR (p. 337).

## **2. 3 A critical perspective on nation branding**

Previous research from a critical perspective maps out nation branding as process that constructs meanings and thus social realities.

### ***2.3.1 Nation branding as process of meaning creation***

According to Mumby (2013, p. 282), who takes a critical perspective on the matter in a corporate communications context, branding is primarily a communicative process with the goal to strategically create complex systems of constructed meaning. This aligns with Szondi's (2010) PR approach to branding. Gender equality in Sweden is a tangible phenomenon: it is fundamental aim of the FFP and an 'achievement' measurable by indices (e.g. World Economic Forum Index, 2017). Feminism, on the contrary, is a concept that leaves much room for interpretation. In the case of nation branding, constructing meaning could thus be understood less as creating a need or desire 'from scratch'. This is how it would be done in a business context where the goal is not to stabilize a nation's position in the world, but a corporation's position on the market. Instead, constructing meaning could be understood as a way to deal with target groups' understanding of feminism that is already there; to find ways to align the target group's understanding of feminism with Sweden's understanding. In this sense, the market metaphor still works well, as in that nation branding is about nothing but about global relations of power (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 192).

That national identities are always constructed implies that there are several imaginations from the target groups' side. However, from the national identity side, there is one imagination, because it is only elites that construct the brand narratives (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 193). That many concepts of branding in a marketing sense can be to some extent transferred and applied to nation branding, often more metaphorically than literally, comes with a paradigmatic problem that mostly remains disregarded. Namely, "much of the scholarly work on nation branding is done within the field of marketing and tends to stay inside a functionalist, apolitical paradigm" (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 192).

Aronczyk, a critical scholar, states that some authors see nation branding as politics collapsing into economics, thus fostering a commodified identity economy (2013, p. 19). In their study, Jezierska and Towns aim to examine the image (the

'brand') of Sweden that the MFA, a political actor, seeks to project. By asking their rather descriptive questions, they "explicitly recognize that nation branding is not a neutral description of an objectively existing nation", rather about selectively constructed narratives (p. 3). Thus, they focus their research on studying what is excluded respectively included and with what effects (p. 3).

### ***2.3.2 The gender dimension in Sweden's nation branding***

According to Jezierska and Towns, the idea of "the 'gender equal state'" emerged out of "pre-existing ideas about Sweden as a modern and progressive model with the duty to encourage imitation" (p. 4). Since 2007, Sweden has actively worked on *progressiveness*, the core concept the country aims to be associated with (Jezierska and Towns, 2018, p. 5). In general, "the contemporary 'Progressive Sweden' brand does not feature the androcentric and objectifying narratives found in other nation branding campaigns" (p. 7). One of the most interesting points of Jezierska and Towns' study is that the term "feminism", though featured in the FFP, is not mentioned at all in strategic documents they analyzed. Their explanation is that feminism is widely associated with antagonism (2018, p. 5 & p. 7). Their critique is that this current brand image created by Sweden abroad could jeopardize Sweden's domestic work on gender equality issues: due to the image Sweden tries to convey abroad, it seems that the country is already 'perfect'; a fallacy, of course (p. 8).

Though the study of Jezierska and Towns (2018) is the first study and thus a good start by bringing the discourse to light, so many questions remain, or come up: why, for instance, are some narratives (or discourses, as the 'manifestation' of narratives) chosen over others? Or why does the discourse on feminism come across as so smooth in Sweden's nation branding communication, when it can be expected to be a difficult topic in the world? Question like these - also in the context of the current Swedish government's FFP - ask for some more and in-depth critical analysis. According to Pamment (2013), power relations are the product of discourses controlled by a nation. Therefore, this study also looks for power relations in the context of Sweden's nation branding.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the concepts of nation branding and PD, both central to this thesis, have been conceptualized and put into relation with each other in several different ways. Previous research on these topics is rather instrumental and apolitical and does not investigate much into mechanisms behind the concepts. Nevertheless, much can be taken away from previous research in these areas, including research on new PD and soft power. At the end of the day, it is about governments building and maintaining some sort of (good) relationship with other countries, these countries' governments and citizens, by communication. Each government or nation involved, hence, each communicator, strives to position itself as advantageous as possible, to be better off afterwards, without risking loss of credibility.

Concretely for the gender aspect of Sweden's nation branding, it has been concluded by previous research that the country 'harms' itself due to painting a utopian picture. This would prevent further domestic development in terms of gender equality, while the situation at home is not at all so close to paradise as communicated to the outside. It lies outside the scope of this thesis to make assumptions about effects. However, it must be emphasized that even if Sweden's nation branding efforts would pose a hindrance for domestic development, this does not have anything to do with the strategy behind the branding efforts, unless the strategy is poor. According to the branding logic, namely, Sweden should try to *not* portray itself as utopia, as this in any way would go against the idea of nation branding to 'improve' the country's situation. These inconsistencies show that understanding of the mechanisms behind nation branding is still some sort of black box. This thesis strives to contribute to previous research by looking into this black box.

# Theory

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As the purpose and aim of this thesis is to take a critical perspective on Sweden's nation branding and public diplomacy, a theory within this tradition has been chosen as framework for the study. Habermas' works inevitably must be taken into account as starting point for any critical theory within the realm of communication (Fuchs, 2016, p. 178).

Habermas' theory of systematically distorted communication (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Fuchs, 2016) will be introduced as basis for the core theory, Deetz' theory of discursive closure. Systematically distorted communication builds the foundation for Deetz' (1992) theory of discursive closure, as it introduces the idea of purposefully 'manipulating' the communication process (without being aware of the manipulation) and thus the final consensus. The theory of discursive closure builds up on Habermas' theory and provides a more empirically applicable theoretical frame for this study. Deetz presents eight practices through which systematically distorted communication happens. This theory builds the framework for examining how one party (Sweden, in this case) in the communicative process discloses some elements and thus 'controls' the discourse and guides it into a certain intended direction.

## **3.1 Systematically distorted communication**

Though heavily criticized for being too abstract and not applicable in empirical research, Habermas' theory of communication, or communicative action (referred to in e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Fuchs, 2016; Prasad, 2018), lays the groundwork for much thinking in the critical tradition. Secondly, it provides the theoretical frame for understanding what nation branding is about. Thirdly, it provides the base and frame for the theory of discursive closure, which guides the analysis of the material.

Habermas' theory is based on the idea of communication being reciprocal as it has to be done by at least two parties (e.g. Fuchs, 2016). In this study, the two parties

could be defined as Sweden, the nation with its communicating actors (SI, foreign missions, MFA), and its target groups abroad and in Sweden. Language offers the opportunity for the participating parties to merge their initial horizons (limited, yet flexible) with each other. However, from Habermas' critical perspective, communication in modern society is not an 'innocent sphere': ideologies as forms of communication instrumentalize language "for justifying exploitation and domination", which, in turn, makes communication an instrument of domination (Fuchs, 2016, p. 188). Fuchs names in this specific context the emergence of strategic communication as specific field that, in his definition, studies "how communication can be used for influencing and persuading specific audiences of particular purposes" (2016, p. 188).

It must principally be suspected that all statements and meanings in communication bear imprints of ideology, "that is, of expressing power and implying socially determined restrictions for the understanding of the social world" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 187). Theoretically, in an ideal speech situation, authentic representation and the rational evaluation of options are ensured (Prasad, 2018, p. 165); the communication between the parties is undistorted (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 187f.). But not only representation, also the way in which is communicated should be authentic. Various imperatives are inquired in regard to their authenticity, and it "what can be recognized as reasonable argument" is demanded (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 188). Practically, this could mean that first and foremost, Sweden must understand what it can 'get away with', what will be perceived as true and adequate arguments and ways of communicating to be able to find some sort of consensus with its foreign audience.

In principle, arguments that claim to be founded on rational connections can be inquired into by the parties partaking in the communication and "discussed until consensus is achieved that a particular view is the right one (or at least acceptable), in the sense of either being true or appropriate in terms of certain well-considered needs and preferences" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 188). That means, for parties involved in the communication to find consensus on something (e.g. a certain view) being acceptable, the base needs to be an argument that both sides accept as being rational. Ideally, communication is about *genuine* consensus (Habermas, 1984, referred to in Fuchs, 2016, p. 186). The author of a statement

should be honest and true, hence, communicate in an undistorted way. If there are any legitimate asymmetries, these should be clarified.

In 'reality', however, most social situations are likely to be characterized by distorted communication (Prasad, 2018, p. 165). "In a general sense, all communication is distorted" because there is always a primary speaker (in this case, Sweden) which per se implies violation of symmetry (Deetz, 1992, p. 173). "This one-sidedness becomes reproduced rather than opened by conflicting representations" (Deetz, 1992, p. 174). For example, if one party is 'expert' on a topic, whereas the other is not, distorted communication is the result, where the 'expert' party is in a more powerful position. Free and equal forms of dialogue and information exchange are thus prevented. Here, "the role of the critical theorist is to question the communicative value of expert knowledge and to replace it (whenever possible) with participative forms of knowledge creation and problem solving" (Prasad, 2018, p. 160). As paraphrased by Gross (2010, p. 336), when systematically distorted, communication cannot be free from the distortion of power imbalances. This leads to also social and political change being impossible.

"Systematically distorted communication operates like strategic manipulation, but without overt awareness" (Deetz, 1992, p. 173); "interlocutors deceive themselves", by thinking they are "in control of exchanges whose purpose is mutual understanding while in fact, they have ceded control" (Gross, 2010, p. 338). Deetz explains this as participants in the communication believing they "are engaging in communication action - pursuing mutual understanding - but are actually engaged in a concealed strategic action, even concealed from themselves" (1992, p. 175). This can happen as result when communicative action (oriented to reaching understanding) and strategic action (oriented to success) are confused (Habermas, 1984, referred to in Fuchs, 2016, p. 185).

According to Allen (2007, p. 645), due to its latent strategic character, systematically distorted communication may not be communicative at all; or it could be, *because* the strategic character is latent and thus, there is no break in the communication. Habermas, though, insists that "even a flawed communication is a communication"; but its systematic character is causing some confusion, as in that "the same validity claims that are being violated (...) at the same time serve to keep up the appearance of consensual action" (Habermas, 2001, referred to in Allen, 2007, p. 645).

Communication is ‘systematically distorted’ if it is dominated by “asymmetrical social relations, mystification, (...) manipulation, rhetoric, distorted descriptions and disinformation” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 189). It is indeed “inscribed in the materiality of social and institutional practice (...) and is always mediated by power relations” (Prasad, 2018, p. 166). For example, in the case of societal social norms that claim legitimacy, it can be asked whether they are “genuinely accepted by those who follow and internalize them”, or whether they do nothing but stabilizing power relations. Critical inquiry searches to answer questions like this one. If the norms do stabilize power relations, then these “illegitimate asymmetrical power relations determine which views are developed and which are blocked” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 189). In this case, it cannot be talked about consensus, hence, it does not resonate with the ideal critical inquiry tries to adhere to. Applying a critical perspective, though, means looking into how values and norms are mediated, to potentially be able to change them and the illegitimately asymmetrical power relations behind them. Instances of systematic distortion “can and should be examined for possible suppressions of alternative voices, not to implement alternative values, but as part of ongoing community development” (Deetz, 1992, p. 177). For this study one of the crucial questions in this regard would be whether Sweden ‘imposes’ its understanding of feminism as set out by the FFP onto other parties in the communication process, disclosed as discourse that might be perceived by these participants as reasonable argument to ‘agree’ with Sweden.

### **3.2 Discursive closure**

Deetz (1992) builds on Habermas and develops the more empirically applicable theory of discursive closure. It exists “whenever potential conflict is suppressed” (Deetz, 1992, p. 187). This theory has been chosen for this research as it allows to look into communicative processes (nation branding) that are expected to entail elements of systematically distorted communication to forward arguments that could favor Sweden’s international position. It can be interpreted in various ways what the concept of feminism per se means; this meaning is created in a nation branding context, based on common understandings of that the target audience and Sweden share. It can thus be expected that Sweden’s understanding of femi-

nism, as 'conceptualized' by the FFP, is 'smoothed' when communicated by Sweden intentionally. Discursive closure promises to provide an adequate theoretical framework to get to the bottom of this 'smoothing' when feminism is enacted in the context of nation branding.

Instances of discursive closure can be found in many communicative processes. For example, by certain groups or participants being disqualified, by privileging certain discourses and marginalizing others, or by moves to determine origins and demonstrate unity. In any case, disclosure means that "the multiple motivations and conflict-filled nature of experience become suppressed by a dominant aspect" (Deetz, 1992, p. 187f.). Thus, the tension of differences is lost, which, in turn, constrains a continued production of experience. In other words, the primary effect of (strategic) disclosure is to prevent insight into the conflictual nature of experience, which leads to understanding being diverted, distorted, or blocked. "When discussion is thwarted, a particular view of reality is maintained at the expense of equally plausible ones, usually to someone's advantage". Thus, dominant systems are protected from scrutinization, and political advantage is protected and extended, which "provides both security and advantage" (Deetz, 1992, p. 188) - which makes theory of discursive closure a fitting theory for researching nation branding and public diplomacy from a critical perspective.

Discursive closure is primarily seen in repetitive micro-practices, "which function to maintain normalized, conflict-free experience and social relations" (Deetz, 1992, p. 188f.). Deetz identifies eight common processes of discursive closure. The first, disqualification, builds on Habermas' assumption about equal opportunities to be a part of communication, as in who has a genuine say. Disqualification is then the process by which participants are excluded from the communication (Deetz, 1992, p. 189). The second, naturalization, means to treat something socially produced as naturally given. Naturalization thus prevents discussion and partakes in the marginalization and privilege of discourses. An example is the presentation of perceived differences as truth, which precludes discussion and development (Deetz, 1992, p. 190f.). The third process, neutralization, means hiding of value-laden positions and activities and treating them as value-free. "A possible world is treated as *the* world" (Deetz, 1992, p. 191). The fourth, topical avoidance, means avoiding certain topics to ensure "order". "All topical avoidance leads to systematically distorted communication" (Deetz, 1992, p. 193), which

shows the heritage of Habermas. The fifth common process, subjectification of experience, means personalizing meaning, which leads to difference in opinion only being resolvable in politics instead of examining the politics of opinion forming. It functions to prevent questioning of normal routines and assures closure of experience (Deetz, 1992, p. 193f.). The sixth, meaning denial and plausible deniability, refers to both placing one possible interpretation (of many) of a statement in the interaction and denying it as meant at the same time. This use of ambiguity is a “very powerful tool of control” (Deetz, 1992, p. 194f.). The seventh, legitimation, means rationalizing decisions and practices by claiming higher order as explanatory device. “Such devices make sense out of difficult-to-interpret activities and conceal contradictions and conflict”. The main interest here lies not only in how the person giving the reason may gain, but also in how this affects the construction of meaning and open choice making (Deetz, 1992, p. 195f.). The eighth and last process is pacification, which describes “the process by which conflictual discussion is diverted or subverted through an apparently reasonable attempt to engage in it”. In other words, to pacify means to play down the significance of an issues, its solvability, or the participants of the communication’s ability to do anything about the issues. This may happen by either presenting an issue as trivial or as futile (Deetz, 1992, p. 195ff.).

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Systematically distorted communication appears when one party in the communication process hinders genuine consensus, and thus development. This party manipulates the discourse and makes the communication asymmetrical to establish or maintain power, without being fully aware of these ‘ethically’ questionable actions. The result of asymmetries in the communication is discursive closure which happens through micro practices and means that discourses are ‘suffocated’ before they can even become a discourse due to systematically distorted communication.

# Methodology

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The method used in this thesis is a discourse analysis with Sweden's nation branding communication practice as the object of study. Data is collected in form of words and texts, thus making this study a multi-methods approach. Words, collected through interviews, promise to provide insight into what happens behind the curtains, e.g. about intentions. Texts, as being publicly accessible online, promise to provide not only background information and insights into the public diplomacy and nation branding strategy, but also how the 'public' is supposed to perceive it. In the data, instances of discursive closure in form of micro-practices are expected to be appear and to 'guide' the discourse on gender equality as initiated by Sweden abroad. This chapter begins with the introduction of the critical perspective, which guides the analysis and thus permeates the data collection method as well. It continues with the presentation of the data collection proceedings and concludes with an outlook onto the proceedings of the (discourse) analysis.

## 4.1 Critical perspective

This study applies a critical perspective following Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018). In their understanding the foundation of the critical perspective is the interpretative approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 179). The task of critical social science is to focus on what "is, or can be made to be, socially changeable", thus, embracing "the idea that social conditions are (...) created and heavily influenced by the asymmetries of power and the special interests". Nation branding can be understood as systematically distorted communication that influences social 'realities'. This implies that by enacting feminism, Sweden's communication fills this concept with meaning and creates associations with gender equality. This assumption opposes the idea of societal conditions and developments being natural, inevitable, and invariant (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 180). Society can be seen as culturally shared forms of consciousness and communication. Meaning,

that which is assumed to be “good, self-evident and neutral” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p. 199), cannot be taken for granted and should be investigated into. Namely, every social movement, even those who themselves try to reject established values can still act repressively. There are always mechanisms that lead to a current situation being the way it is. Taking on a critical perspective means to question the status quo by looking into the mechanisms that shaped it and the reasoning for choices, e.g. why one discourse is (made) more prominent than another.

In the context of this thesis, applying a critical perspective according to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) does not mean to criticize the actions of the agencies: the MFA, the SI and the embassies. Instead, it implies to critically examine the mechanisms behind the work of these institutions. Sweden is used as an example of how ideologically charged concepts, such as feminism as set out by FFP, are enacted in communication and what challenges that poses. Questioning the logic behind and investigating the mechanisms of this enactment is important, because it has the potential to provide interesting insights into the logic of nation branding: it helps to draw conclusions on how and why, in a nation branding context, certain views (on feminism) are suppressed, and what that implies.

## **4.2 Proceedings/Data collection**

The empirical data for this study was collected in a multi-method way. The data collection was more of an ongoing reflective process with snowball-sampling as primary selection method, than to follow a pre-set strategy. As a start, the homepages of the SI and of the Swedish Government (with focus on the entire section FFP) were screened to get background information. At this initial stage, documents of the SI - report on the view on gender equality abroad, and the branding strategy in Swedish and English - as well as the action plans of the Feminist Foreign Policy for the period 2015-2018 provided background information about the social reality. Also, at the very initial stage of data collection an expert interview was set up with a scientist at the Dep. of Political Science at Lund University, who acted as an expert on analyzing foreign affairs. This interview was intended to give some background information on the political dimension of the Feminist

Foreign Policy and its ties to (public) diplomacy and, to some extent, nation branding.

Regarding the sample size it should be mentioned that in the critical tradition, it is less the size of the sample that counts, but about the nuances that occur in a possibly small sample. For this reason, but also because inconsistency and variation are as interesting as consistency (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 233), snowball sampling, leading to interviewees in different institutions (MFA, SI, embassies) and with different job titles and tasks was a better choice than trying to get an as homogenous sample as possible. Also, the document study was included to gain insights on how the MFA presents the FFP, what arguments the government puts forward to position itself as feminist, and what the SI has to say about possibilities to communicate a FFP abroad. These documents were not only intended as background to understand the FFP and what Sweden might mean with ‘feminism’. Also, they were expected to help to later map out inconsistency and clashes between how the ideological charge of feminism is presented in a political/traditional diplomacy context and how it does (not) show up in the communication of Sweden abroad.

#### ***4.2.1 Qualitative interviews***

Thirteen qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted, to find out how actors think that things are by analyzing how they represent them (see table 1). Besides the expert interview with the scientist, staff from the SI, from the MFA, and from Swedish Embassies were interviewed. After research on the web page ‘SharingSweden.se.’, which is part of the SI, there were two campaigns found under the search inquiry for “gender equality” (“Swedish Dads<sup>5</sup>” and “Gender equality - we’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”). One person at the SI that represents both campaigns was contacted and interviewed. He established the contact to representatives at the embassies in Shanghai, Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile who worked with the “Swedish Dads” photo exhibition project, which were inter-

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<sup>5</sup> Swedish Das is a photo exhibition, showing Swedish fathers in everyday-situations with their children. The idea of the exhibition is to raise awareness about and to promote paternity leave (SI d).

viewed as well. Further, the representative of Swedish Dads at the SI facilitated the contact to a communicator at the Institute.

At the SI, two senior managers were interviewed. These two interviewees were contacted via their email addresses, publicly displayed at the webpage of the SI. The aim with interviewing these two was to provide broad insights into the work and strategy of the respective departments, which are working diplomatically with the external audiences of the SI. One of the senior managers facilitated the contact to a representative of SHE Leads<sup>6</sup>, which was then also interviewed.

Simultaneously, initial contact to staff at the communication department of the MFA was established - but didn't lead to any interviews - via a representative at the embassy in Copenhagen, which had been contacted through the embassy's phone number and who was himself interviewed in written form. This contact to the Embassy in Copenhagen was established at a very initial stage of the data collection process to check with Embassies in countries where I myself understand the local language whether they are generally willing to provide interviewees.

However, one interviewee at the MFA, a communication strategist, was successfully recruited via the general contact to the Ministry's communication department, publicly displayed on the Government's website. This communication strategist provided contact to a representative of WikiGap<sup>7</sup> which was for the first time initiated centrally from Stockholm as big-scale event over the globe via Swedish embassies.

Through personal contacts, an interview with a representative of the MFA's Department from European Security Policy was organized. This representative is one of the responsible for "Sweden's National Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security 2016–2020" and has previously worked with public diplomacy at the embassies in Bogotá and Santiago de Chile.

Overall, the sampling for interviewees was snowball sampling, as in the beginning, it was very unclear what or who to look for or how the MFA, the SI, and the

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<sup>6</sup> SHE Leads is a newly launched leadership program by the SI targeting female entrepreneurs and leaders in Saudi Arabia (SI b).

<sup>7</sup> WikiGap is an edit-a-thon, centrally organized by the MFA for the first time in 2018. The aim of the campaign is to increase women's representation on Wikipedia (Government Offices of Sweden c).

embassies work (together), other than the small ‘hints’ given by the webpages of the SI. The big challenge with this approach was, however, the access to and recruiting of interviewees. It is very much a matter of ‘luck’ whether recruiting of interviewees will be a success or a failure. Sometimes, the ‘trail’ of being redirected to colleagues disrupts with people not replying, others do reply after the second or third try to contact them, and other do not reply at all. Especially when establishing an initial contact by myself has proven to be very difficult. Time differences, on the other hand, have not been a problem at all, and also there were no excessive language barriers, even though neither my, nor any of my interviewees mother tongue is English. There were only two cases where the interviews were conducted in Swedish because the interviewees didn’t feel comfortable with English. All the interviewees are anonymized as far as possible.

<b>Position/role</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Referred to in text</b>
Scientist	Lunds University/Dep.of Political Science	Scientist
Representative	Embassy in Buenos Aires	Representative Buenos Aires
Senior representative	Embassy in Shanghai	Senior representative Shanghai
Representative	Embassy in Santiago de Chile	Representative Santiago
Representative	Embassy in Copenhagen	Representative Copenhagen
Communicator	SI	Communicator SI
Senior manager	SI	SI Manager 1
Representative	SI	SI Project manager SD
Senior manager	SI	SI Manager 2
Representative leadership program	SI	SI representative SHE Leads
Communication strategist	MFA	Communication strategist MFA
Representative WikiGap	MFA	MFA representative WikiGap
Representative Department for European Security Policy	MFA (before: Embassy in Bogotá, Embassy in Santiago de Chile)	MFA representative Security Policy

Table 1: overview over interviews

#### ***4.2.2 Document study***

The texts analyzed (see table 2) are all publicly accessible and were retrieved from the Swedish Government's webpage, as well as from the webpage of the SI. The texts can be seen as official texts, which, because they are accessible to the public, can be assumed to be very carefully formulated to convey an intended image. The webpages were chosen because they are the official web pages of the two main actors when it comes to communicating and promoting Sweden abroad, which I focus on in this paper.

The documents on the government's page were found through the Feminist Foreign Policy's subpage, as well as through the search function with the keywords "feminism", "gender equality", and "feminist foreign policy", etc. and by "policy documents", which were then filtered by the categories "feminism" and "released by the MFA". The documents retrieved this way include the MFA's "Swedish Foreign Service action plan for FFP 2015-2018", each including one focus area of 2016, 2017 and 2018. These action plans were chosen because they give an impression on how the MFA presents itself and its policy, and what tone they use - also over the course of the bigger part of the current government's term of office. A fourth document is a short information booklet on "A feminist government ensures that decisions promote gender equality". These documents were chosen as the government's perspective to gain some understanding of how the government, or the MFA itself 'defines' the feminist foreign policy or positions itself as feminist government. Thus, in a branding sense, these documents promised to help understanding the brand identity of Sweden and how public bodies (government, MFA) position themselves 'directly'. Also, these documents are helpful for working in the critical tradition, as the political agenda presented in these documents gives some ideas of the spectrum of possible topics to communicate about the FFP (e.g. violence against women, women's health, etc.).

From the SI's webpage, one document was retrieved. It is the SI report on the attitude towards gender equality abroad with the title "Feministisk utrikespolitik: rött skynke eller vit flagg?". This document is only available in Swedish and is also only visible under the category "Analyzing the image of Sweden" in the drop-down menu under "How we work" on the Swedish version of the webpage. This document was chosen as it is a very relevant document on the analysis of potentially 'difficult' target groups for Sweden's gender dimension of nation branding.

Also, (communication) strategies are based on such analyses, therefore, discourse closure that is found in communication activities could have its point of departure in the SI report, for instance.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Abbreviation in text</b>
Feministisk utrikespolitik: rätt skynke eller vit flagg?	SI (2016)	Report	SI report
A feminist government ensures that decisions promote gender equality	Swedish Government (2017)	Information booklet	booklet
Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy 2015-2018 including focus areas for 2016	MFA	Policy document	Action plan 2016
Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy 2015-2018 including focus areas for 2017	MFA	Policy document	Action plan 2017
Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy 2015-2018 including indicative measures for 2018	MFA	Policy document	Action plan 2018

Table 2: overview over studied documents

### 4.3 Analysis of empirical material and reporting

The empirical material in form of text was analyzed with the premise of detecting and examining instances of discursive closure. The analytical method used is a discourse analysis. The analysis was done by abduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994, paraphrased by Eksell & Thelander, 2014, p. 6) in a hermeneutic interpretation process, moving back and forth between the whole and the parts to get the most out of the material. ‘Facts’, statements, etc. do not exist in a vacuum but in a social context, which is socially constructed, and to question why it is constructed a certain way is the idea of the critical tradition (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, p. 206f.). In this study this means it is not enough to list up the statements of the interviewees, but to extract from the statements what can be interpreted as common

patterns in communication that converge with Deetz' micro practices of discursive closure.

These considerations leave this study with the difficult task of ensuring a reasonable way of analyzing the empirical material and reporting the results. In general, the analysis of material "depends on the researcher's assumptions and premises, which in turn influences how the analysis can be presented" (Eksell & Thelander, 2014, p. 1). Of all the material, elements were selected and deselected. These were then sorted and organized in a way that enable a, for the readers, comprehensible presentation. Although the interpretation of results mainly happens in the discussion, it has to be kept in mind that, as stated above, due to both the inherent nature of critical research, already the analysis of the material is 'constructed' by my interpretation of other people's statements.

# Analysis

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The analysis searches to indicate why Sweden's communication abroad is systematically distorted. It does so by examining how feminism, as set out by the FFP and its goal of gender equality<sup>8</sup>, is enacted in a nation branding context. Also, the analysis lays the ground for discussing what this systematic distortion of Sweden's communication implies about power relations. Being strategic communication, it can be expected that the way feminism is communicated abroad is adapted to the demands of the target audience. Hence, the communication is expected not to send any obviously radical messages. This chapter presents how feminism, when communicated abroad by Sweden, is downplayed, stripped of its ideological content, and reduced to gender equality, a value Sweden would communicate regardless of a FFP.

Following an abductive inspired way of working with the theory and empirical material, the material has been categorized according to Deetz' (1992) micro-practices of discourse closure. Often, the material would fall under several categories. It was decided to categorize the material in these cases under the micropractice that 'fits the best'. The categories are grouped together according to whether they can be interpreted to indicate a branding/PR logic, a marketing logic, or a diplomacy logic (which differs from the other two). What I could see in the material is that the way feminism is enacted in communication clashes with the way it is supposedly intended to be set out by the FFP. It has to be kept in mind that this interpretation of mine is one out of many possible and equally legitimate interpretations. As previously stated, this is an inherent characteristic of interpretative research.

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the MFA's aims for gender equality by "ensuring that women and girls can enjoy their fundamental human rights" (Government Offices of Sweden b).

## **5.1 PR/branding logic: Relativization of Sweden's efforts in gender equality**

Sweden's communication about feminism abroad can be interpreted as adhering to a PR, or branding logic. What can be seen in the material presented in the following is that clearly, Sweden faces the challenge to find a balance between remaining an authentic actor as relatively gender equal country and remaining a credible actor in the world by not showing off as the 'perfect' country. Aiming for a good reputation abroad by mastering this challenge shows that Sweden is very concerned about how others view the country.

The core idea of nation branding communication is to position Sweden as country relevant for its target audience. Sweden is very ambitious when it comes to gender equality (as becomes clear in the statements of the action plans, for instance), and it is "definitely at the forefront in this area" (communication strategist MFA). This shows also in the significance that is attributed to gender mainstreaming. Not only is gender equality a value strongly anchored in Swedish society (e.g. SI Representative SD; SI Manager 2), but also does Sweden have to try as hard as possible to adhere to it, because otherwise it would not be able to make use of this value in their political or diplomatic activities. However, Sweden wants to make itself more relevant for foreign audiences by focusing on the shared "difficulties" and challenges (e.g. SI Manager 1; communicator SI). Systematically distorted communication happens through meaning denial and plausible deniability ('we are really good, but we are not perfect') and neutralization ('we focus on what is there already to minimize confrontation').

### ***5.1.1 Meaning denial and plausible deniability: showing off and being humble***

Discursive closure through meaning denial and plausible deniability is one repetitive micro practice of discourse closure in the communication of Sweden abroad. It happens when on the one hand, it is highlighted that Sweden pursues 'rigid' gender mainstreaming, while on the other hand, it is emphasized that Sweden does *not* see itself as the perfect gender equal country. Thus, feminism becomes a strong red thread throughout Sweden's communication abroad.

One way to emphasize Sweden's political ambition is reflected in the action plan for the FFP, that sets out very high ambitions regarding feminism. The communi-

cation of the MFA is supposed to help sending the signals to support the FFP. Sweden wants to be “the first country in the world to pursue a feminist foreign policy” (action plan 2016). Sweden intends not only to end discrimination against women and girls and become “a leading advocate for gender equality and human rights”. Also, the FFP wants to pursue real progress. Today, Sweden claims to have become this “strongest global voice” (action plan 2018) and that the foreign service will be “standing up for Sweden’s values”. To adhere to these targets, the MFA wants to implement “systematic gender mainstreaming” throughout the foreign policy agenda. Also, it is stated that the FFP requires foreign service to apply gender perspective throughout all its breadth, including their promotion work (action plan 2016). This is nothing new on Sweden’s political agenda. It is more about sending a signal, which “does not cost anything” (scientist). The MFA gets help from its communications department, not to directly implement the policy, but to communicate it and to send that signal.

Not only is feminism set out ambitiously in the FFP. Also, gender equality in general is a strong value in Sweden. It is argued that since the value is so prominent in Sweden, it is unavoidable to communicate it also strongly abroad. Though gender equality is mainstreamed in all activities of the SI, but this does not necessarily have a direct connection to the FFP. Gender equality has namely been something that the SI has been working with “forever” (SI Manager 2). That gender equality has permeated all communication and all the they do and work with is something that all interviewees from the SI and the embassies have unison confirmed. The SI has recently launched SHE Leads, a program targeting women leaders and entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. But even the representative of this project points out that with all their programs in general, the SI wants to promote gender equality, diversity and inclusion. SI Manager 2 also explains that Sweden is a pioneer in gender equality, which is not only a strong Swedish value, but also a political priority and a priority for the communication committees as the SI. He even states that “it is *such* an important part of the Swedish model if you wish, or social model, and it would be very - it is very difficult *not* to address gender equality issues if you want to communicate Sweden”. Therefore, gender equality “has always been part of the story we tell, because it is an important part of this country....and [it is] part of the expectation that others have *on* Sweden”. Even in

the neighboring country Denmark, Sweden is referred to in debates about gender equality (representative Copenhagen).

Feminism can only be allocated a key position in Sweden's communication abroad because Sweden is sufficiently successful in gender equality terms to be one possible role model:

When it comes to our work with promoting Sweden, we want to point to good Swedish examples", but "it is important that we don't... like... say: *you* should do like *we* do in Sweden, this is how it works for *us* in Sweden", but it is more about showing "this is how it works in Sweden, for example". (Representative Buenos Aires)

Though feminism has always been a crucial part of Sweden's story, and this story should be nuanced (SI Manager 1), the "buzz" around FFP might be a convenient mechanism to find international collaborations (SI Representative SD). Sweden prides itself somehow with this, without admitting it. "Having this feminist foreign policy - although it is quite - it is a radical move, it is not the first time that those things have been on the agenda". Having a FFP gets the concept of feminism new attention (cultural adviser Buenos Aires). This current Swedish government placed it "clearly on the agenda" (SI Manager 1) and has thus raised the bar by calling itself feminist. This is not "pragmatism, more symbolism" (scientist). Because of the FFP, this topic has become a higher priority, which is "the big difference" compared to not having a FFP, it is easier now for the SI to work with embassies on gender equality issues; Swedish missions have now higher pressure from the MFA to thematize gender equality (SI Representative SD). The SI Representative SD further explains that Sweden may be more interesting to work with on gender equality issues now, because the FFP is known abroad. Pursuing this policy "is a way to brand Sweden as some kind of different country" (scientist). Although the FFP might help brand Sweden as 'the country with a FFP', and though it might have large impacts in the foreign policy realm, it is important to note that it is the government that and no other institution that in this way pushes the topic of feminism in the world (SI Manager 1).

Mainstreaming gender equality and telling it to the world it is per se not systematically distorted communication. It comes in with the SI and the embassies being influenced by the government yet having to translate feminism, so it fits into the

logic of nation branding communication. Discursive closure is a “tool” in this context to make Sweden more ‘sympathetic’ and relevant to the target audience by pointing out how far the country has *not* come, how much still has to be done.

Firstly, it seems like the SI is in a bit of a tricky with situation communicating feminism (communicator SI), because the FFP is ‘loud’. SI Manager 1 states that “of course, the Swedish government and Sweden as a country are not silent about the fact that we hope that women and girls will enjoy more equal representation than they *have*”. The SI, though, is not supposed to be very much affected by the policy of the current government, although the SI gets yearly instructions from the government and must follow these.

Secondly, the SI plays down Sweden’s ambitions and previous ‘achievements’ regarding feminism. This is done to not make Sweden look as the country that thinks too highly of itself as this would jeopardize how relevant it appears to foreign audiences. In this year’s Facebook initiative on the 8th of March (International Women’s Day), SI did, therefore, not mention Sweden at all. They displayed the Swedish flag, and this still had Sweden as sender of the message but talked only “about the world and a global need for gender equality” (communicator SI). The reason is that they increasingly “realize it is not *that* interesting for someone in other countries to hear ‘oh Sweden, it is so good at this’, and ‘Sweden we are like this’, and so on”. “It is more relevant to try and point out that it is all part of the same context, basically, and we all need to include, for example, gender equality in our countries”. Sweden will be more relevant if they “try to not to say that ‘we are the best’, but that ‘we *also* have challenges’ we need to work on”. To be transparent in this way indicates how Sweden is very concerned about being taken seriously abroad.

Thirdly, the SI tries to relativize the Sweden’s political ambitions by putting the limelight on the fact that Sweden - like every other country - still struggles. The key is to find common ground, to emphasize Sweden is no utopia and shares the ‘same’ problems as the rest of the world. SI Representative SD, for instance, emphasizes that the focus of the Swedish Dads exhibition is to tell the ‘true’ story, “that Sweden is no paradise but that we all face the same problems”, that it has not come “*that far*” either. He complains that the world has a wrong image of Sweden as forefront country which leads to wrong expectations. Therefore, communication about Sweden should focus on telling a nuanced story by saying “we

are not as good as you think, we are pretty poor at gender equality, we have big issues when it comes to all aspects of gender equality”. To avoid backlash reactions, the SI focuses on aspects of feminism where Sweden still has a long road ahead of it. SI Manager 1 states that it is important to

remember to talk about our challenges as well as the fact that in some areas we have come as a country fairly far. If you bring these issues with you, it becomes easier to talk about the question, than if you would just tell a story about Sweden”. “We find that we are more relevant when we talk about the challenges that *we* have in *our* country, when we talk about the experiences and the journey that our country has made, and the fact that in certain areas we still have so much further to go.” However, the story SI tells abroad “cannot be too different from the story that goes on in Sweden. And the discussion we have in Sweden is not - when it comes to gender equality it is not a country that has come all the way. The discussion in Sweden is probably even stronger than people in many countries would believe. Because Sweden is definitely not a country where people are happy with the situation when it comes to gender equality.

SI Manager 1 also puts emphasis on telling a nuanced and balanced story about Sweden:

The nuances are different in different parts of the world, depending on how far these countries have come. Especially when it comes to gender equality, the perception of most people in most countries is already that Sweden *is* - not perfect, yeah, but a country which has come very far. But the interesting thing is not to tell *that*, but the story behind that, to share the experiences of, you know how it came about.

### ***5.1.2 Neutralization: making feminism an icebreaker for dialogue***

Besides downplaying the ‘superior’ image Sweden has of itself, working with a feminist agenda is being framed as something that Sweden has in common with other countries. The work towards gender equality is thus not only downplayed, but also diminished as a shared challenge that can be generalized. SI Manager 1, for instance, explains that Swedish Dads is a tool to “engage in a common discussion”. In general, all the interviewees from the embassies explained that the Swedish Dads exhibition was such a success because it ‘docked onto’ a discussion already existing in the respective country’s society. “We try to do that this in most

of our methods for communication, so that we don't just distribute an image of our country, but also have a dialogue" about all the 'shared' difficulties. The idea is to "try to do it in a way that meets the questions that people actually have where they are". SI Manager 1 states that it is "fairly simple" to communicate gender equality, because at the SI, they "do not only put a message on a channel and push the button". Instead, they "tell a story that is based on sharing ideas rather than showing a perfect image". What is left of feminism after being filtered through these prerequisites is the rather easy to address topic of paternity leave.

## **5.2 Market logic: Commodification of feminism**

A second way to interpret how Sweden encapsulates feminism in its communication abroad is that of adhering to a market logic. Ideological content is removed from the communication and 'business as usual' is done by communicating gender equality like it would be done if there was no FFP. That feminism is enacted as something that 'works for everyone' shows how it is used as tool to create a selling point in favor of Sweden.

Since the FFP and gender equality in general are difficult topics, one way to convey its message is to 'sugarcoat' it according to the logic of nation branding. The campaigns and communication by Sweden is nothing that the target audience is obliged to spend its time and energy on, neither is it experts that want to discuss complicated topics. Thus, the idea is to 'entertain' them while 'slipping in' some gender equality. Systematically distorted communication (to initiate and keep the discourse on gender equality going) with foreign audiences can happen through processes of subjectification of experience ('we make people feel addressed and engaged with'), topical avoidance ('we don't talk about 'heavy' aspects of gender equality'), pacification ('we only say and do what is least risky'), disqualification ('we only communicate with audiences and about topics that are likely to lead to success'), naturalization ('we can help you to get what is good for you'), and legitimation ('we do what is unavoidable and we do it well').

### ***5.2.1 Subjectification of experience: feminism as co-creational experience***

One way to 'sell' Sweden is to focus on topics around feminism that people will not question and that everybody can relate to. MFA representative Security Policy

at the MFA says that paternity leave like thematized in the Swedish Dads exhibition, for instance, “is something that affects everyone, not just women. And I think it is pretty like, *easy* - it is easy messages that we convey”. He also states that in most countries it is something that is easily liked and shared on social media. “I mean it *is* something that people don’t question too much. At least not in the countries where I have been” (MFA representative Security Policy). That is due to that they keep the topics local and that they “pick interesting things that are *easy* to read and easy to shar”. In Chile, they emphasized the economic impact of gender equality (MFA representative Security Policy), which can be interpreted as focusing on an aspect that everybody can identify with because *nobody* can escape the topic of economy in their life.

Discursive closure through subjectification of experience also shows in the work of the MFA’s communication department: communication strategist MFA and her colleagues embed the FFP into other policy areas. She explains they do that because “it is always *easier* if you can have an add-on to some other area” than if you just communicate it by itself. This helps to reach people outside of the “FFP choir”. Also, the FFP is simplified and adjusted so that “the women and the men on the street” sympathize with it.

Not only should themes around feminism be easy and little questionable when chosen for communication. Also, ‘good’ topics are topics that are malleable to fit with different target audiences. This shows in the Swedish Dads exhibition, which from the outset had great potential to catch people’s sympathy due to its democratic character: it was “something that came of of Swedish society itself” (SI Representative SD). The SI didn’t make the content themselves, but they drove the exhibition, selected, and reflected about the representativeness of Swedish society. The exhibition was aligned to the SI’s strategy: they “adopted it a bit to be more representative when it comes to how we are in Sweden right now” (SI Representative SD). The main purpose was to provide material for Swedish missions with the idea that they promote Swedish values. “And by Swedish values I mean values that are shared with most other countries - that we think are important. Such as gender equality” (SI Representative SD). “Swedish Dads has been an *easy* way of working” because the embassies that exhibit can locally pick their own theme. It is a malleable topic, because even if “it is impossible to talk about parental leave in this country, ... we are talking about relationships between fa-

thers and their children”, or about the children’s perspective as in their right to both parents. These are examples of “different ways of *angling* it to make it - to be able to use it in different contexts”.

Another common way to create positive connotations with Sweden through the topic of feminism is to initiate symbolic actions and let the target audience co-create these. For WikiGap, driven by the MFA, the subjectification of experience happened in two stages: first, embassies were invited to join the campaign by creating their own events, and secondly, volunteers were recruited to do the editing. The primary goal of WikiGap “was to increase the representation of women *in* the articles” (MFA representative WikiGap). That goal derives from the FFP’s ‘three Rs’, “women’s representation, resources, and rights”, because “women are underrepresented in all... [sighs] in all societies, and in all areas of society, basically” (MFA representative WikiGap). As communication strategist MFA explains, WikiGap “is one of the very concrete examples of *how* FFP is actually done in practice”. This, again, shows how in a communication context, setting a symbol means taking action: communication is used to “highlight the FFP” (communication strategist MFA). She explains that “knowledge is power” - at second glance, it becomes a bit unclear in how this statement represents the campaign, because WikiGap was not initiated to educate women, but to educate *about* women. Also, MFA representative WikiGap states that because Wikipedia is the largest digital encyclopedia in the world, “the largest information central that we know of”, accessible in many different languages and all round the world, it is a “very powerful tool” to use when pursuing one of the ‘three Rs’. It is interesting that MFA representative WikiGap explains how WikiGap is powerful because the number of articles on women in Wikipedia is remarkably lower the number of articles about men; this reminds of SI Manager 2’s assessment (see section on ‘Disqualification’) of the potential of Sweden’s influence being the biggest where there is the highest ‘demand for support’ in gender equality questions.

If people feel important and involved, they are likely to adopt or intensify a positive connotation with the discourse they contributed to. The success of WikiGap was apparently unexpected: “we have 55, or 65 countries that joined and that’s *far* beyond our expectation, we *never* thought it would be so many”. MFA representative WikiGap explains that this success was due to WikiGap being

a feasible project, a concrete project, a *relevant* project, and something that we had almost had only *good* feedback from, also, from the embassies. Both comes to the actual result, but also when it comes to enlarging their network and finding new platforms” and for profiling Sweden as a country that works for increasing gender equality. (MFA representative WikiGap)

Firstly, if formulated this way it seems as if it was more the embassies that ‘profited’ from the campaign than women in the world. Secondly, it is interesting that the project manager herself, *at* the MFA, was surprised by the success. It seems like this project was designed to just be a small campaign (though explicitly stated as one of the two *main* communication activities in the FFP action plan of 2018); which could lead to the conclusion that WikiGap was pursued primarily to show that the MFA is *doing* something that leaves a good impression. The MFA didn’t seem to expect a big impact which, given the number of articles already existing on Wikipedia, would be unlikely to happen even with the approximately 3,000 new edits that were added to Wikipedia throughout the WikiGap edit-a-thons. However, it was a “bottom-up idea” which might make it appear democratic. Also, the Swedish Dads exhibition is democratic not only in the sense that it was an idea coming out of Swedish society, but also because the co-creational aspect of having local photo exhibitions in each country it was shown made people feel (personally) addressed and included.

Lastly, feminism is packaged as infotainment. A reason for Swedish Dads being more successful than other material on gender equality is that though the alternative exhibition material may be more informative, it is also more “boring”; “it is lacking the cultural part..., it is lacking the beautiful images” (SI Representative SD). representative Santiago in Santiago explains that they didn’t really know how it would go, but it went really well, “people found it soo beautiful”. Representative Buenos Aires explains that Swedish Dads, being a photo exhibition, was

about connecting the cultural with human rights and gender equality”; “if you tie together [the boring part] with art then it gets a whole different dimension. And people take it in much easier”, because they get curious “and then they learn something about how it works in Sweden (...) *and* they enjoy the art. (Representative Buenos Aires)

### 5.2.2 Topical avoidance: on the safe side of feminism

Discursive closure through topical avoidance happens, for instance, in the SI report: only certain questions are asked, covering seven topics: gender equality, feminism, shared responsibility for household, decision making processes, parental leave, organizations that use women's rights in their communication, attitude towards own daughter's career. This is maybe also the reason that though the implications of the notion gender equality differ much between countries, "generally, the attitude towards gender equality is positive".

To avoid misinterpretation, promotional material of Sweden is only shown if it will work for sure in the intended way. SI Representative SD explains that from the outset, The SI has always been aware that Swedish Dads "is something easier", that it "is a material that can be shown in many, many different places". The SI produces "global material", that then is framed by each embassy differently to best engage with the local citizens. In general, this "global material" can be problematic if for example embassies want to present something on a topic that is illegal in the respective country, e.g. homosexuality. They are then not able to collaborate with state organizations. In the case of Swedish Dads, in some countries it was demanded to exchange the word 'partner' with the word 'wife', or it was a problem to show images that contained nude kids. After discussions between the SI and the respective embassy it was decided that no changes will be made and then instead nothing of the material will be used. "If you cannot portray nudity (...) then you have to show these images somewhere else". SI Representative SD explained that in such cases, they "are not going to intervene with that [the local laws etc.], but [they] are not going to take away any images (...) - you have to take the whole package or nothing". Also, when local organizations would put a lot of pressure on how to use the material, the exhibition would be cancelled. Then again, as SI Representative SD explains: "the beauty in it is that (...) it is being (...) debated *on ground*. In the countries, in the cities, in the communities - how to use these images". If there is the possibility of finding common ground between 'Swedish values' and the local perception of these values, it will be discussed whether the communicative activity can be pursued or not, Otherwise, the whole topic will be avoided.

Communication strategies are based on the worldview of the target audience. It is not only crucial to know

the current state of Sweden's reputation before you communicate, because you have to understand your audience... You *have to* know how you are perceived. You don't communicate in a vacuum, of course". "A *bit* of course we don't want people to have the wrong image of Sweden - in *our* eyes, of course, 'wrong' image of Sweden. So of course, we try to do things that would, sort of, not *harm* our country. (communication strategist MFA)

When communicating feminism abroad, it is, therefore, important to adapt the message to the local context:

We *talk* about the issue, we bring the issue of gender equality with us, regardless of where we are in the world. But the communication looks different, depending on where we are in the world. (...) In certain areas we have more open discussions about the feminist foreign policy or gender equality, whereas in other countries the conversation is more inherent in other conversations about other topics. (...) So, it is an adaptation - it is not that we *avoid* issues around gender equality because those are relevant in most parts of the world, I would say, but there is a difference in how *we* and how an *embassy* talks about these issues, dependent on where you are. (SI Manager 1)

One important aspect of adapting the message is to pay attention to the loading in certain notions, e.g. feminism. The tonality and choice of wording, namely, is supposed to be least confrontative and most productive in the respective country. "In some languages, feminism is something – you see, it is a different thing than in Sweden... it *can* be provocative" (MFA representative Security Policy). In a local context, the focus of the communication around feminism and gender equality should lie on shared values rather than the forms where there are differences, to lay the grounds for constructive debate.

Actors should be very alert regarding the local variations that occur. To pursue a line where gender equality according to the Swedish interpretation is emphasized at the expense of local, native culture will probably create worse prerequisites for a long-term conversation. (SI report)

A way to address feminism in Sweden's communication abroad is to intertwine it with topics that already have a prominent position in the discourse in other countries and that are important to people.

One of the things I said if somebody, or if *you* ask us: what is it that decides what you talk about at the SI? One of the first ...answers, to this question is: we talk about the issues that people in other countries *want* to hear about. That's actually one of the things we try to do mostly, we try to listen, and we try to be in contact with our embassies and others in our network around to see: what are people actually interested in hearing about from our country? (SI Manager 1)

Swedish Dads, for instance, is a topic that the target audience has already engaged with: in Argentina, “dads *want* to be with their children” (Representative Buenos Aires), and in Chile, “people really want a change” (representative Santiago). Representative Buenos Aires says one could theoretically also talk about men’s violence against women, which is a more ‘serious’ issue than paternity leave. However, in general it is about communicating feminist values in a way that upsets people the least. Because paternity leave is “not the most controversial part of gender equality” but “kind of the *light* issues when it comes to gender equality”, Swedish Dads has been such a communicative success. What the topic does fight is “the distorted image of men that it is *unmanly* to be with one’s kids” (Representative Buenos Aires), and not, for instance, women’s rights.

### **5.2.3 Pacification: *childproof feminism***

One way to communicate feminism according to the market logic is to somehow conceal Sweden as obvious sender of the message. Examples where systematically distorted communication happens through pacification can be seen in the by the annual Facebook post on the 8th of March (International Women’s Day): “we thought we would use the word feminism, which is not as charged in Sweden as in other countries”. But as the meaning of the word feminism is still unclear, even in the Swedish context, they use simple examples like shared parental leave, equal pay, etc., and they are “trying to take the itch off feminism, somehow”. In the script for a slide show to be posted on Facebook, communicator SI had written:

in Sweden we tend to use the word feminism, or something like that. And then my colleague said that’s maybe a bit too – a bit too – too much of a general statement. A lot of many Swedes obviously don’t use the word all the time. So, that’s why we

ended up, actually, not mentioning Sweden at all. And we discussed that this is a much better way to approach. (communicator SI)

The underlying reflection had apparently been whether using the word ‘feminism’ would only cause unnecessary discussion, which ended in pacifying the discourse by not leaving any room for interpretation as in Sweden being better than other countries in terms of gender equality (thus not being relevant for foreign audiences). The communicator SI further explained that in the context of the Forum on Gender Equality (held in Stockholm in spring 2018),

it has been discussed whether feminism should be used or not in the communication around it. And the MFA said ‘no’, that they did *not* want that word used”. That’s because they “*knew* that they did not want to, like, risk it. (communicator SI)

A second way for Sweden to pacify the discourse on feminism in their communication is to cover it up as something so playful that even children could participate in the discourse. When communicating Sweden in other countries, “it might be almost counterproductive that we talk about gender equality, because it might be provocative for some people and then they just stop listening” (communication strategist MFA). To avoid indifference abroad, communication strategist MFA explains how they at the MFA made feminism ‘childproof’:

we would talk about something else and, sort of, get into FFP in another way - like children books, having Pippi Longstocking as an example of feminism, instead of saying: ‘feminism is great’, we can have sweet Pippi Longstocking and people are impressed by Astrid Lindgren’s books (...) you know, you have to be a bit creative in some areas of the world where you have... uhm... cultural differences. (communication strategist MFA)

Thirdly, the discourse on feminism is pacified is by including the target audience (see also section on ‘Subjectification of experience’). For instance, the local photo competitions were not only added onto the photos of the Swedish dads in the exhibitions in each country to increase local engagement. In Mozambique, for instance, doing so also prevented colonialist associations, which would have happened if only Swedish Dads had been on the wall. Such associations would have put off the foreign audience in this country and jeopardized Sweden’s mission to

communicate abroad: not only because it would have been uninteresting, as SI Representative SD states, but also, because it would have been like imposing something Swedish, European, as ‘the role model’.

#### ***5.2.4 Disqualification: feminism for limited circles only***

To tackle the topic of feminism without taking too many risks is, in the case of Sweden, done by limiting the discourse to an elitist target audience. Disqualification of participants in the nation branding communication can be seen in the SI report. Not only does it solely inquire into the perception of feminism and gender equality in countries that are relevant for Sweden’s export strategy. Also, the sample consists of people between 20 and 40 years from big cities with higher education and employment. Communication adapted to a target group like this one will not reach people outside of the elite.

One example of placing the discourse on feminism in a very safe setting can be seen with the Swedish Dads exhibition. As point of departure, only aspects that are easily thematized are chosen. The exhibition does not seem to be aimed at raising awareness for the respective theme among target groups other than the ones that already are concerned in some way with paternity leave. This promises, of course, success in term of nation branding communication targets. And, as scientist states, “if like 50% of the world likes Sweden, and this adds like 5%. Then maybe it is a good thing”. However, it also means that only a minor aspect of the FFP is enacted.

Another example of how the discourse on feminism is kept on ‘the safe side’ is the SHE Leads program. Saudi Arabia is an example of a country that has very different standards in terms of gender equality than Sweden, hence, Sweden can “make the biggest difference” (SI Manager 2), which helps the country’s positioning efforts. The potential controversy with addressing feminism in Saudi Arabia through the is removed by limiting it to an economic context. SHE Leads aims for an exchange of knowledge and of experiences between the Saudi Arabian female leaders and entrepreneurs and their “counterparts in Swedish companies” (SI representative SHE Leads). Consequently, only women that are in leadership positions already are targeted. Launching SHE Leads in Saudi Arabia only works because the feminist aspect of the project is not only constrained by targeting a very

limited audience. Further, it is ideologically constrained: even when “discussions on gender issues and gender relations and on leadership in general and... on different *norms* in society” (SI representative SHE Leads), these discussions are limited to an economic context. This corresponds with the statement in the SI report (see section on ‘Meaning Denial and Plausible Deniability’) that gender equality is best communicated in an economy context or supported by economy arguments instead of ideology arguments.

### ***5.2.5 Naturalization: Sweden as feminism advisor***

Discursive closure through naturalization happens in the basic assumption that Sweden can profile itself as gender equal and prosper country and thus distinguish itself. Sweden does so by implying that a) other countries have not come so far, and that b) economic growth is something that is generally desirable. These other countries are then ‘made’ in need of ‘help’ by Sweden, the example of great success.

To be able to employ feminism, it has to be ‘made sense of’ for others. Sweden therefore tends to put it in an economy context (see also section on ‘Disqualification’). Increased gender equality may namely be communicated most smoothly in and made relevant for other countries with the argument an economy argument: women’s education and participation in working life leads to increased economic development and security for families. Therefore, when communicating Sweden abroad it is fruitful to focus on ‘hard factors’ such buying power, GDP and other economic parameters. “To emphasize the more ideological reasons for gender equality could be less fruitful in such contexts”. This way, “Sweden can be clear with its feminist agenda but, at the same time meet the target groups within areas that are relevant for them” (SI report).

Not only is feminism put into the economic context. It is also tied to economic growth. The bigger the discrepancy between Sweden and another country, the more Sweden can stand out as good example and as an advocate for improvement. SI Manager 2 points out that it is a general habit to

*tend to believe that the fact that Sweden has a relatively high number of women in the working force makes - well, contributes to making our economy more productive and more competitive. The women’s participation in the workforce, labor mar-*

ket, is an important issue”. “In countries where women have, obviously, less opportunities and where their rights are more limited, there is a special point in addressing these rights and in working *with* countries”. These countries, where “gender equality issues are not as *obviously*... I would say, uhm... addressed as in Sweden”, SI Manager 2 believes they can take the biggest influence, make the biggest change.

To make it appear that linking together feminism with economy is natural, feminism is framed as something from which both Sweden and other countries benefit. SHE Leads, for example, provides opportunities for women in a country that is (far) less progressive in terms of gender equality than Sweden; but it also works “to increase trade relations” (SI representative SHE Leads). The aim is to

build bridges, and we are getting to know people that already *are* in leadership positions, women that are in leadership positions in Saudi Arabia, and to build relationships, and to have an exchange of knowledge and of contacts and also to have more trade in the future.” “it is both to understand where they are at and how to collaborate with Saudi Arabian companies the best possible way. (SI representative SHE Leads)

Sweden does not only create somehow mutually beneficial situation. Further, it positions itself as the country to ‘help’ the other country. For example, at the embassy in Buenos Aires, they had the family economy spokesperson of *Försäkringskassan* as speaker in one of the seminars on Swedish Dads. This ‘teaching situation’ where Sweden shares its experience shows how Sweden positions itself as the country that knows better about family economic matters than Argentina. Interestingly, in this context the FFP seems to have facilitated how the SI positions Sweden as role model that should spread its word:

Of course, having this government, as we *are* a government agency, having the government so clearly speaks abroad about a feminist government and the foreign policy then affects us in that many people around the world are actually interested in hearing about this topic (SI Manager 1)

### ***5.2.6 Legitimation: feminism as crucial part of a bigger plan***

Discursive closure through legitimation happens when feminism is framed in Sweden’s communication as part of political agendas. For example, the govern-

ment's booklet states gender equality to be "part of the solution to creating jobs and growth. It contributes to economic development by making use of both women's and men's potential. It is a matter of course in a modern welfare state".

Making feminism appear as this necessary step, it helps Sweden to portray this step as something that must be done. "Parallely to taking a clear stance in these [gender] matters" (SI report), Sweden needs to understand other cultures better to pursue its active export policy with the goal to increase trade with specific countries. That these countries have been chosen based on different parameters than that they are perceptive for the FFP and its goals shows that the discourse of feminism really seems to be legitimized by a 'bigger' discourse. For example, though SHE Leads, the discourse on gender equality is not only placed within an economic context. This economic context is part of a current bigger political context, namely Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

There has been quite a strong movement when it comes to actually giving women more access the labor market, for instance. And there are now strong political drivers when it comes to... in giving... in giving more rights to women. (SI Manager 2)

This gives Sweden a "window of opportunity" (SI Manager 2): not only can Sweden engage in its trade relation with Saudi Arabia, "one of the 26 prioritized markets that is part of the strategy for the MFA" (SI representative SHE Leads). Also, the SI can legitimately follow its mission to build relationships and to understand other cultures, which gives a convenient frame for communicating feminism (see section on 'Naturalization').

Framing feminism as a necessary step to reach bigger goals is not enough. The discourse on feminism is also disclosed as something that Sweden cannot do without. In the context of improving and strengthening trade relations, SHE Leads program manager SI representative SHE Leads states that

from that nation branding perspective, it is very important for Sweden and for other countries... that people get to know about the culture, and get to know people, and also see that, yeah, ways of reasoning and ways of working and to get to discuss things together, to actually make meaningful relations between people and different countries.

The current Swedish government puts emphasis on being the first and only feminist government in the world (e.g. the action plans), with the FFP being something that Sweden came up with. Also, it is stated in the SI report that “Sweden is internationally known for its work with women’s rights and gender equality”. “Sweden should, of course, be a clear sender of values and ethical standpoints that can be brought into line with a gender equal society” (SI report), Therefore, knowing how to communicate feminism and gender equality abroad does not only help Sweden to improve strategies for reaching international goals, including certain economic or trade goals (SI report). Also, it helps Sweden to be the modern welfare state that it ‘prides’ itself to be.

Legitimation creates the impression that embracing and communicating feminism is a duty of Sweden. Not only does Sweden benefit from it, but also, it cannot do without. According to this interpretation, it like the FFP has set a signal for the communication of Sweden abroad: The communicator SI explains that

...internally here [at the SI], in our discussions, for some of us, using the word feminism feels much less controversial than before. Because, if they *call* – we *call* our foreign policy feminist, we can use the word feminism, without causing too much discussion. (my brackets)

### **5.3 Diplomacy logic: struggle between the MFA and the SI**

A third way to interpret Sweden’s communication of feminism abroad is that there is a struggle between the logic of traditional diplomacy and the logic of nation branding. The discrepancy lies in the degree of politicization of the FFP: while the MFA politicizes feminism with its FFP, the SI depoliticizes feminism in its communication abroad through discourse closure. Though the MFA and the SI have different tasks and adhere to different logics, these tasks and logics overlap and are intertwined, because the SI is, to some extent, tasked by the MFA. The overlap happens when the SI enacts feminism in its communication abroad. The discourse on feminism is closed to an extent that it is only marginally related to the FFP’s ideal of feminism, which shows the clash of interests between the MFA and the SI. This clash occurs in that the MFA sets out feminism as the fight for gender equality in any aspect with its FFP, while the SI sets out feminism as something the target audience of nation branding can identify with. This implies that some

aspects, which can help Sweden with creating a positive image, have to be made prominent in the discourse at the expense of other aspects. Of course, all instances of discursive closure as presented in the previous sections somehow indicate the (power) struggle between MFA and SI. However, in the following, meaning denial and plausible deniability, topical avoidance, disqualification, legitimation, and neutralization are emphasized to structure the findings according to where the clash of diplomacy logic and nation branding logic can be shown.

### ***5.3.1 Meaning denial and plausible deniability: understatement of vs. emphasis on Sweden's efforts for gender equality***

In general, the FFP sets out very ambitious goals in regard to feminism, if which only a few aspects appear in Sweden's communication abroad. The Swedish government aims for gender equality (in Sweden) by working towards six sub-goals: gender-equal division of power and influence, economic gender equality, gender-equal education, gender-equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care, gender-equal health, and stopping men's violence against women (booklet). These objectives contribute to Sweden's 'brand identity', though housework and economic gender equality appear more prominent than the other aspects in Sweden's communication abroad. The government's statement that it is "strengthening the focus of gender equality work on men and boys with respect to violence prevention, health, and increasing men's use of parental insurance". Also, they state that "men's participation and responsibility in gender equality efforts as actors of change is a prerequisite if a gender-equal society is to be realized". From these governmental ambitions, only paternity leave is mirrored in Sweden's communication, e.g. in the Swedish Dads exhibition. Other, more extreme elements of the government's policy, e.g. human trafficking or "the gender equality perspective and criminalization of the purchase of sexual services as a way to decrease demand for sexual services" (booklet) is not to be found in the promotional communication of Sweden examined in this study.

### ***5.3.2 Topical avoidance: exclusion of vs. focus on the ‘unpleasant’ aspects of gender equality***

What can be found of feminism set out by the government in the communication is the aspects that provide material for conflict-poor themes and topics. The MFA, more specifically, made gender equality the “fundamental objective of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy”. As a prerequisite for full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights are emphasized. The government’s action plan “is aimed at strengthening the rights, representation and access to resources of women and girls”. Representation, for instance, is worked with through the WikiGap Campaign, or access to resources is to some extent enabled through leadership programs like SHE Leads. But is the discourse on feminism in these two examples disclosed, as presented in 5.1 and 5.2. Also, on a general level, confrontation and conflict are in any way prevented in a nation branding context. In a political context, however, Sweden strives for more “flexible autonomy”, “this more exclusive Swedish role” (scientist), and does, therefore, presumably not recoil from actions with more ideological potential.

### ***5.3.3 Disqualification: addressing a strategic vs. an undefined target audience***

The MFA seemingly has its ideas on how feminism should be enacted in the communication of Sweden abroad. For instance, in the action plan for 2016, it is stated that

the Foreign Service will use its Sweden promotion activities to advance gender equality and the rights of women and girls, both as a separate agenda and when promoting the image of Sweden abroad. As part of this, the annual work on promotion plans will be used to map gender equality promotion by the missions abroad.

In all the action plans, the MFA presents its ideas of how to communicate the FFP and thus facilitates the discourse on feminism. Of course, these initiatives presented in the action plans are placed within a political or traditional diplomacy realm, in which they are probably logical choices. However, it is questionable whether these initiatives are coherent with a communication logic. E.g. “recurring descriptions that highlight politics in practice” being updated on the website (action plan 2018), or Swedish missions providing skills development in form of training on

gender equality and women's and girls' rights for change agents in leadership positions (action plan 2016) may not hold up to Sweden's ambitions in terms of nation branding.

### ***5.3.2 Legitimation: a bigger plan as benefit vs. an impracticality to communicate***

It seems that the MFA is very secure about its powerful position when communicating Sweden abroad because it provides guidance and 'support' for feminism matters with adopting a FFP. MFA representative Security Policy explains it as follows:

I think it is very good for us, this FFP, because even though we have always been working with gender equality, with this policy it is much *easier*, it is like a *package*, a concept we can lift in different arenas, much easier than we could have done before.

Also, SI Representative SD, although hesitant when asked about the impact of the FFP on promoting Sweden abroad, concludes that the FFP helps their work with gender equality at the SI. The communication strategist MFA explains that she assists "in communicating different aspects of FFP *in practice* to our missions abroad to have them communicate better in the different local, or embassy areas, and also in different other aspects". She calls the embassies the MFA's "extended channels" in the world, which makes the communication activities of her department "like *internal communication* within the MFA". When all Swedish embassies had to go on social media in early 2014, they got guidance *from* the MFA's communications department. However, this does not mean that feminism was enacted in the FFP way. Firstly, the MFA's communication department acts according to strategic communication logic. Secondly, they cooperated with the SI to develop instructions for the embassies. This means that the material was from the outset designed according to the PR/branding and marketing logic, suggesting the assumption that ideological discourses on feminism are disclosed. Given that much conflict potential was already smoothed in the material before it arrived at the embassies, when the new government in 2014 year "decided to introduce the

FFP - I think it was pretty *easy* to communicate, for us to implement the policy” in a communicative manner (MFA representative Security Policy).

Then again, it seems like the MFA itself is a bit unclear on how to deal with the notion of feminism when stepping out of a diplomacy context into a nation branding context. The present MFA made feminism its priority, because “there was room to increase our commitment for gender equality” (MFA representative Security Policy). However, they refused to use the term ‘feminism’ in the context of the Stockholm Forum of Gender Equality. Also, the relationship or ‘hierarchy’ between SI, MFA and the embassies seems a bit unclear in terms of who gets to communicate what and how: on the one hand, embassies apparently had to check with the SI for little details regarding the Swedish Dads exhibition. On the other hand, the MFA and the SI emphasize that the embassies basically “get to do what they want” with the material provided. Also, though SI Representative SD explicitly states they didn’t want companies to “kidnap” the Swedish Dads material, senior representative Shanghai explains how they had sponsors and collaborated extensively with IKEA.

### ***5.3.5 Neutralization: ‘compliance’ vs. ‘non-compliance’ with a target audience***

That the MFA provides guidance does not mean that the SI or the embassies have to accept it. It becomes clear that the SI’s task is not to help the government; hence, they can disclose the discourse on feminism according to their own logic. SI Manager 1 explains that in particular question of gender there is an overlap as in the SI picking up on the FFP. The government does not directly influence the SI - “we don’t *have to* do as *they* say”, as communicator SI explains. Therefore, they did not either let the MFA affect them, when they decided not to mention the term ‘feminism’ in the context of the Forum. Communicator SI explains that this is due to the fact that her department at the SI has a much younger audience where other rules apply. Also, the representative Buenos Aires at the embassy explains that addressing the advantages of paternity is not difficult per se, “the difficult part is to obtain a massive change in culture, but that is, kind of, not our job”. These examples show how discursive closure is legit part of the communication logic: the task of nation branding is not to create change to the degree as the FFP sets out; it is to create change with the goal of promoting Sweden.

It becomes clear that the logic and agenda of the MFA and the FFP clashes with the logic and agenda of the SI. “In no way does the government influence in a *direct* manner our communication in different areas, whether that be gender equality or any other one” (SI Manager 2). It is, therefore, also “not the mission of the SI to explain the government’s policies” (SI Manager 1).

While “*they* [the MFA] focus on telling the story of the Swedish government’s policy, *explaining* the Swedish’ government policy here right now, and providing press releases on what the government is doing, how policy is changing”, “we [the SI] speak *more* in a long-term narrative about Sweden, how Swedish society is developing”. (SI Manager 1, my brackets).

To sum up, it is the institutions that adhere to the logic of strategic communication that have the say in how feminism is enacted in Sweden's communication abroad. The most important of these institutions is the SI, but the communication department of the MFA and to some extent the embassies are also important. The SI does not have to do as the MFA says and they provide material for the embassies that they use in their communication. The MFA has more say over the embassies than the other way around, though they give suggestions and do not impose communicative actions on the embassies. In the end, however, even if the suggestion for a communicative action has its starting points in the MFA’s action plan - as soon as it is being operationalized, it adheres to the logic of communication. In the context of nation branding, creating meaning of feminism is a co-operational process dictated by the target group’s understandings. Accordingly, feminism can only be conceptualized as something that works not only in the view of Sweden and the MFA, but also in the view of the target audience. This ‘common ground’ must be created to ensure the value of gender equality is positively connotated among the target group; the key for Sweden to ‘look good’ as country that fights for gender equality with a FFP.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Sweden’s nation branding works according to the general logic of strategic communication: to convey an intended (brand) image of the nation to foreigners in a way that the target audience can identify itself with. Part of Sweden’s image

abroad is gender equality, but it does not imply the same as gender equality set out by the FFP. Instead, when enacted in nation branding, feminism is discursively closed. The political and ideological dimension of feminism as set out by the FFP is cut out. This limits the 'feminist' part of Sweden's image abroad to the 'easy' aspects of fighting for gender equality.

The analysis of the material has shown that firstly, Sweden's 'forefront position' in terms of gender equality is being relativized, hence, 'downplayed'. Secondly, it can be seen that in Sweden's nation branding efforts, the goal of the FFP, gender equality, is being commodified to help establish a positive image of the country abroad. This happens through marginalization of the more 'unpleasant' aspects of gender inequality that the FFP addresses, in favor of communicating of gender equality in a way that resembles 'infotainment'. Thirdly, the analysis revealed some more far-reaching patterns of discursive closure in the complex relationship of the MFA (and its communication department), the SI, and Swedish embassies. Nation branding does not follow the logic of traditional diplomacy, but instead serves its own purpose and adheres to the market and PR/branding logic: while the FFP sets out feminism as fight for gender equality in all aspects (politically, ideologically charged), Sweden's nation branding reveals most of these aspects in its communication. It thus limits the focus to some few aspects that the target audience will be receptive to, and which are thus suitable for Sweden to employ for relationship building with its target audience.

# Discussion and conclusion

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The aim of this chapter is to discuss the results of the analysis in respect to why the discourse on feminism is disclosed when the FFP is enacted in Sweden's nation branding communication. There is a clash between the politicized concept of feminism employed by the MFA and a depoliticized concept of feminism by the SI: the concepts of ideological and political (politicized) content are reduced in a nation branding logic. If the logic of nation branding 'outperforms' the logic of diplomacy, the FFP cannot accomplish change to the extent it sets out to do. Also, this chapter discusses what systematically distorted communication through discursive closure implies for power relations, who benefits, and what the consequences are.

## **6.1 Depoliticizing of feminism: a small step for the FFP but a big step for Sweden**

The results of this study can be interpreted in many different ways - the beauty and the curse of working in the critical tradition. Of course, as Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018) noted, critical researchers tend to see things to criticize everywhere. For example, in this case, it would mean would be to argue that communication about Sweden has to do with promotion and thus distortion and that *all* the material can be categorized according to the processes of discursive closure put forward by Deetz (1992). This is of course not the case. Nevertheless, it *is* possible to find instances of discursive closure in (all of) Sweden's nation branding communication when looking for cues on how feminism is enacted. The presence of discursive closure is a sign that feminism is a complicated concept which is *not* easy to communicate.

### ***6.1.1 Sweden as profiteer of the created meaning of feminism***

Feminism is a topic that per se allows for many different interpretations. To avoid backlashes due to misinterpretation, negative connotations, ‘colonialist’ imposing tendencies of ‘Swedish’ values, etc., in a nation branding context, Sweden distorts the meaning of feminism to its advantage. That it is possible to create certain desired meaning of this concept shows that it does have the potential to create very powerful discourses *because* it is ambiguous; the ‘challenge’ is to take as little risk as possible in the meaning and value creation process to ensure the desired outcome. This leads to only non-ambiguous aspects of feminism being employed in the communication. Feminism, as set out by the FFP, is thus enacted as feminism as apolitical, non-ideological concept in Sweden’s nation branding context. The concept is ‘filled’ with meaning through a co-creational process with the target audience. The target audience has pre-existing understandings of what feminism is, and Sweden makes use of this to create common ground. Out of this common ground, the value of gender equality is created as something that the target audience will have positive associations with. Consequently, the target audience can relate to a value communicated by Sweden, and the purpose of nation branding is ‘fulfilled’.

### ***6.1.2 Discursive closure of feminism through various instances***

Nation branding has gained momentum in the past years, both in practice and in academia. Sweden as country can only promote the value of gender equality abroad if it adheres to it in domestic politics. In a nation branding context, this is where authenticity comes in. On the one hand, you must practice what you preach, so to say, otherwise you are not credible. On the other hand, Sweden cannot portray itself as feminism-champion. This would namely imply that other countries are not as good. The ambition set out by the MFA in their action plan to make Sweden ‘The country with the FFP’ does, therefore, in a nation branding context cause trouble: if feminism was used as *the* aspect that distinguishes Sweden from the rest of the world, foreign audiences could feel diminished. This would make them avoid feminism, as set out by Sweden, which would obstruct Sweden’s nation branding efforts. This can be explained, for instance, by the theory of cognitive dissonance (e.g. Festinger, 1962): people avoid the information

that makes them feel bad, very shortly summarized. This is what Sweden strategically searches to prevent, which is why it systematically distorts its communication. Nation branding discloses feminism by limiting the discourse to a co-created common ground, free of any gender-equality aspects set out by the FFP that could 'oppose' the target audience's world view. Even of the value of gender equality, which is more an objective than an ideology, only the 'light' aspects of all the aspects set out by the FFP are applied in Sweden's nation branding. As the analysis has shown, discursive closure of feminism happens through all the micro-practices introduced by Deetz (1992): meaning denial and plausible deniability, neutralization, subjectification of experience, topical avoidance, pacification, disqualification, naturalization, and legitimation.

Due to discursive closure, some of the most 'urgent' feminist matters as set out by the FFP, like ending violence against women and women's health, cannot really be found in Sweden's nation branding communication. Nation branding communication has the purpose to build long-lasting relationships with foreign audiences, with the aim of strengthening the image of Sweden abroad. This is done by continuously working on presenting Sweden in the best possible light without losing credibility. Gender equality, the aim of the FFP, is intertwined with the character and identity of Sweden, and the MFA, the SI, and the Swedish missions work closely together. This means that the topic cannot and should not be avoided, eliminated, or left out of Sweden's nation branding communication; but *how* this happens is up to the SI.

### ***6.1.3 'Authority' of nation branding over diplomacy***

Given that nation branding has gained momentum, the MFA must have had this concept in mind when launching a FFP. It seems, though, that at least in a broader communication realm, the main target audience of the ideological message of the FFP cannot be foreign audiences, because to them, the ideological message does not get through due to discursive closure. It seems, as in a nation branding context, all that Sweden gains from having a FFP is to be 'The country with a FFP'. The citizen audience that can be influenced by that is then the domestic Swedish audience, which has a rather positive attitude towards feminism already: because

you must practice what you preach to keep an authentic ‘brand identity’, Sweden might want to engage in increased gender equality within its own borders.

Besides potentially creating real change in political and traditional diplomacy realm, the degree of symbolism in calling the policy and the whole government feminist is striking. This also points to Sweden having strong intentions to influence *someone*. From a political perspective, labelling the MFA’s policy as feminist is a good ‘cost-benefit ratio’: you can use the symbolic power of the term feminism without having to radically change the policy goals. However, there is a twist. The struggle between the logic of traditional diplomacy and nation branding, and the concomitant struggle of power between the MFA and the SI becomes manifest in the areas where the logics and tasks overlap. In this ‘arena’, as the analysis has shown, feminism is object to discursive closure, it is reduced to an apolitical, un-ideological concept. Nation branding is systematically distorted communication, and it strips feminism off its ideological and politicized character so that it fits with target audience’s ‘demands’ with the aim to make Sweden look good. Yet, Sweden’s nation branding cannot be held responsible for doing something ‘wrong’ with this distortion, because it is according to its logic to do so. For the power relations of the actors, systematically distorted communication means that in the overlapping area, the logic of nation branding has the upper hand. Within its ‘own’ context, the diplomacy context, the MFA can set out the FFP to serve a political and ideological agenda. But as soon as it comes to addressing publics, the SI has the word, and their primary aim is to make Sweden look good abroad, not to ‘sell’ the FFP. This means that the MFA can only indirectly make use of nation branding to communicate strong ideological and politicized concepts such as feminism: namely, by being ‘The country with a FFP’, thus encouraging Swedes to meet these (ideological) ambitions by being as feminist as the FFP sets out that the world should be. With diplomacy becoming increasingly public and nation branding gaining importance, this (power) relation is likely to continuously change its shape.

## **6.2 Contributions to the research field(s) of nation branding and (new) PD**

On a very concrete level, this study expands way more on Sweden's nation branding by explaining the fact that Jezierska and Towns' (2018) found in their study: the reason the term "feminism", though featured in the country's foreign policy is not mentioned at all in strategic documents is due to antagonism. In nation branding, minimal risks of misinterpretation or negative connotations of ideological and politicized concepts are taken. However, this study questions the conclusion Jezierska and Towns' (2018) make. My study does not point to any correlation between showing a good image of Sweden abroad and mitigating domestic efforts of gender equality. On the contrary, it seems as if the FFP could be a domestic effort of pushing Swedes to be more feminist.

This study has also contributed to the fields by confirming Pamment's finding that the 'brand Sweden' exerts control over discourse, as in that it is intended to influence the global public agenda (Pamment, 2013, p. 124); this thesis contributes by illustrating how this happens and that it happens according to the logic of nation branding. Also, that a value-based discourse like the one on feminism "has the advantage of being malleable to the needs of those expressing them" (p. 124f.) can with this study be understood better as in how that happens.

On a more general level, this study explains how a nation tries to make the target audience interpret the values of this nation in 'the right way' through systematically distorting the communication of these values. This contributes to Szondi's (2010) PR approach to nation branding: only associations with gender equality that help creating a positive image of Sweden are 'encouraged' among the target audience. This value creation process of making the target audience understand gender equality as something desirable is based on the process of meaning creation. In the case of Sweden, nation branding adapts its conceptualization of feminism to pre-existing 'interests' of the target audience: e.g. fathers in the world would like to spend more time with their children, therefore, feminism is set out as taking paternity leaves, which makes gender equality a desirable value. In the end, this process helps Sweden to build a relationship with the target audience. Thus, this study confirms the significance of knowing the target audience when using soft power, as defined by Nye (2004), p. 11), and it demonstrates that this is

due to the relationship-building character of nation branding. Also, Pamment's (2013) previous finding that instead of "promoting the self-image, PD actors could do more in support of international challenges" can be integrated as in that this study found that *by* supporting international challenges, a nation can promote its self-image. This is not risk-free, though; there is a fine line between being extremely credible and being not credible at all.

This study also contributes as in that it extends Szondi's (2008) finding that in foreign affairs the focus lies on the influencing of "public opinion to create a receptive environment for foreign policy goals". This study shows that it is not necessarily (only) about the creation of such an environment, but more a setting in which Sweden is in an advantageous position through its brand identity. Also, this study aligns with Aronczyk's (2013) claim that nation branding makes politics collapse into economics, fostering a commodified identity economy: in the example of Sweden, the meaning of feminism created by diplomacy is absorbed by the meaning of feminism created by nation branding, at least when it comes to influencing *public* opinion. Sweden commodifies the concept of feminism to strengthen its nation brand identity.

### **6.3 Suggestions for future research**

Given the implications of this study, it would be very interesting to academically expand on mechanisms of (new) PD/ nation branding. Not only does technology develop continuously, but also do multilateral agreements change in the world, accompanied by discourses prone to ideology. Only if knowledge about these phenomena, as well as about the role of a strategic communication logic for the diplomacy realm increases, actors can be made aware and held responsible for their actions. Thus, not only critical studies on the gender perspective, but also critical research on other dimensions and nation branding/PD in general should be done. Is there a paradigm shift? If so, how is it operationalized? How do shifts and (new) mechanisms impact power relations and power struggles? These and many other questions are still open to discuss.

## **6.4 Concluding remarks**

In general, this study shows trends towards nation branding gaining momentum. It is increasingly important what image foreign audiences hold of a nation. This also means that ideologically charged concepts might be increasingly risky to employ for a country, also in its diplomacy efforts; at least, if that nation is concerned about its (good) relationship with other nations in a bi- or multilateral setting.

As has been made clear in the methodology section, the idea of this study was not to criticize the work of the SI, the MFA, or the embassies. Instead, it is aimed towards better understanding how much potential nation branding can have in an international arena. Unfortunately, the world, including Sweden, still has a very long road to go when it comes to gender equality. Having a FFP to send a signal is a great step in the right direction, and so is enacting feminism in Sweden's nation branding. However, that it must be disclosed only shows how little the world is ready for feminism as ideology that sets out to end discrimination against women and girls.

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