

## ANALYTICAL ESSAY

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# The Rankings Game: A Relational Approach to Country Performance Indicators

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As the number of international rankings has risen dramatically since the 1990s, a large body of scholarship has emerged to examine and understand them. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of this body of work and to chart out fruitful directions for future research. In short, prior scholarship has been surprisingly quiet on the relations among multiple actors and their economic dimensions at the core of country performance indicator (CPI) activities. To foreground crucial socioeconomic relations, we develop a relational heuristic based upon a sports analogy: the actors involved in the creation and maintenance of CPIs can fruitfully be approached as a complex of players, referees, coaches, and audiences. Such an account helps us better understand how CPIs emerge and are sustained, even when they rely on dodgy data and their effects are perverse. We use nation brand rankings—overlooked in international relations research—as empirical illustration.

A medida que el número de clasificaciones internacionales fue aumentando de forma drástica desde la década de 1990, fue surgiendo un amplio conjunto de estudios para examinarlas y comprenderlas. El objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer una perspectiva general de este corpus de trabajos y trazar direcciones fructíferas para futuras investigaciones. En resumen, los estudios anteriores han sido sorprendentemente discretos en cuanto a las relaciones entre los múltiples actores y sus dimensiones económicas en el centro de las actividades referidas a los indicadores de desempeño de los países (Country Performance Indicators, CPI). Para poner en primer plano las relaciones socioeconómicas fundamentales, desarrollamos una heurística relacional basada en una analogía deportiva: se puede abordar de forma fructífera a los actores implicados en la creación y el mantenimiento de los CPI como un complejo de jugadores, árbitros, entrenadores y público. Esta explicación nos ayuda a entender mejor cómo surgen y se sostienen los CPI, incluso cuando se basan en datos dudosos y sus efectos son perversos. Utilizamos las clasificaciones según marcas nacionales, ignoradas en las investigaciones de RI, como demostración empírica.

Le nombre de classements internationaux a considérablement augmenté depuis les années 90, et cela a donné lieu à un vaste corpus de recherches ayant pour but de les examiner pour mieux les comprendre. Le but de cet article est d'offrir un aperçu de ce corpus de travaux et d'exposer les orien-

tations qui seraient productives pour de futures recherches. Pour résumer, les recherches précédentes ont été étonnamment discrètes sur les relations entre les multiples acteurs et leurs dimensions économiques au cœur des activités liées aux indicateurs nationaux de performance. Nous avons développé une heuristique des relations basée sur une analogie sportive pour mettre au premier plan les relations socio-économiques cruciales : approcher les acteurs impliqués dans la création et le maintien des indicateurs nationaux de performance comme s'ils constituaient tout un ensemble de joueurs, d'arbitres, d'entraîneurs et de publics peut s'avérer productif. Une analyse de ce type nous aide à mieux comprendre la manière dont les indicateurs nationaux de performance émergent et sont maintenus, y compris lorsqu'ils reposent sur des données peu solides et que leurs effets sont pervers. Nous utilisons des classements d'images de marque de pays—qui sont négligés dans les recherches en relations internationales—comme illustration empirique.

**Keywords:** country performance indicators, rankings, nation branding

**Palabras clave:** indicadores de desempeño de los países, clasificaciones, desarrollo de marca nacional

**Mots clés:** indicateurs nationaux de performance, classements, image de marque des pays

## Introduction

The overarching aim of this article is to take stock of the burgeoning scholarship on international rankings and chart out fruitful directions for future research. To do so, we begin by discussing the scholarship on international rankings and then depart from that scholarship to provide a relational heuristic model useful for understanding international rankings; a model that is subsequently used to provide an empirical analysis of nation brand rankings, hitherto understudied in international relations (IR). Since the 1990s, the number of international rankings, ratings, and indicators of state performance—country performance indicators (CPIs)—has risen almost exponentially (Kelley and Simmons 2019, 493). At the last count, Warwick University's Global Benchmarking Project included 304 CPIs in their database (Global Benchmarking Database, v2.0). Advocates claim CPIs provide a scientific means of aiding evidence-based and efficient policymaking. Rankings are also said to help nonexperts compare policy performance among states, thus increasing accountability of public officials. With these rationales, CPIs have quickly become a central tool for a gamut of global governance and domestic policies (see Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012; Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b).

Parallel to the rise of CPIs, a flourishing field of scholarship has emerged to study the CPI phenomenon. With a recent special issue of *International Organization* (Kelley and Simmons 2019), CPI research has certainly become an established research agenda in IR. As we will show below, much CPI scholarship is critical in nature. The methodologies of CPIs have come under fire from statisticians: there is now a small library's worth of work questioning the methodological veracity of CPIs and the datasets that constitute them (e.g., Jerven 2013; Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018). Meanwhile, a growing academic literature documents their perverse effects. For instance, how states “game” rankings while making few real improvements in the activity being measured; how states may prioritize scoring high in a particular indicator while missing important non-quantified goals; and how rankings depoliticize issues and undermine domestic democratic processes (Scott and

Light 2004; Merry and Conley 2011; Van der Vleuten and Verloo 2012; Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b; Freistein 2016).

These recent attempts to grapple with CPIs have tended to focus on traits of the CPIs or the CPI-creating agents themselves, or on the different functions rankings serve for their creators. Virtually all of this research is thus ranker-centric in one way or another. Focusing on CPI creators is an excellent first cut in grappling theoretically and empirically with the proliferation of CPIs. However, it is just a start. Often missing in prior accounts is a broader focus on the wider sets of relationships through which CPIs emerge and remain authoritative. If primary focus remains on the incentives of any single ranking organization, we contend that analyses lose sight of the various actors with stakes in a CPI and how their relations and interactions generate demand for and reproduce the field in which the CPI is situated. We thus propose that attending to the *relations* that sustain these rankings is a fruitful way to study and understand how CPIs emerge and persist. As we elaborate below, central relations are those that have developed between ranking organizations, state agencies, private consultants, media, and national publics in the past few decades (foreign investment actors and national businesses may also play crucial roles). The relations are both moral and material, entailing a mix of economic incentives, desires for organizational maintenance or expansion, national or bureaucratic status aspirations, and more.

In brief, this article takes the existing scholarship on CPIs as a point of departure in order to chart out a path for future research that centers on the broader set of relations—many of them economic—that are at the core of the proliferation and reproduction of rankings. First, in an overview of CPI scholarship, we identify three analytically distinct warrants for problematizing why rankings persist despite often their questionable nature. Regardless of whether one considers (1) the dubiousness of much data, (2) the problematic side effects of rankings, or (3) their corrosive consequences upon democracy to be paramount, each alone points toward investigating the social and economic functions CPIs serve for actors with a stake in their production and persistence. Indeed, put bluntly, if a given CPI suffers the aforementioned shortcomings, we need to ask what other relations keep it in business?

To date, the scholarship has correctly attributed the explosive growth of CPIs to the post-1990s neo-liberal turn toward a global audit culture and the concordant value neoliberal culture places in standardized and numerical measurements for scrutiny and accountability (Merry and Conley 2011; Cooley and Snyder 2015a; Lebaron and Lister 2015). A political economy framework, broadly conceived, is thus already commonplace in CPI scholarship. We agree that the emergence and dominance of neoliberal ideology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is a necessary condition for the rise of CPIs and that a political economy approach to CPIs is fruitful. However, we contend that this account is insufficient and unsatisfactory as an explanation for the emergence and persistence of any individual ranking. After all, even self-identifying neoliberals would not endorse basing policy upon “dodgy data” (Broome and Quirk 2015, 828) nor would they approve of many of the counterproductive effects of several (in)famous CPIs.

We build upon existing CPI research by putting the broader set of CPI relations into sharper focus. In addition to discussing prior CPI scholarship, a second aim of this article is to introduce a relational heuristic for analyzing such rankings. Drawing an analogy between sports and CPI relations, our approach seeks to shed light upon the relationships that CPIs help produce and in which they become embedded; relationships that may help explain their persistence even when their stated utility is dubious. Here, we pick up threads left by prior CPI research that focuses on investigating when, why, and how CPIs affect their targets (Kelley and Simmons 2015, 2019). In particular, we extend and develop the sports metaphor initiated by Kelley (2017) that CPIs constitute “*scorecard* diplomacy” (our emphasis). We find

sports a useful source for our heuristic not only because sports entails sets of relations between different sets of actors (see Cudd 2007), but also because sports always has an economic dimension even as it carries an array of different meanings (e.g., national glory, team elation, individual self-actualization, and so on). Sports cannot be reduced to economics, even if contemporary professional sport is an industry, generating enormous revenue and involving actors that are profit-driven. But all sports participants—even amateurs playing for fun—have to contend with economic realities, including the costs of equipment, organization, and time.

CPIs can be conceptualized in a similar manner. Crucially, when CPIs are established, they simultaneously specify the rules of the game and generate and circulate a “scorecard” of the competition among states (Kelley 2017). In this function, we argue, CPIs establish their creators as *referees*<sup>1</sup> while necessarily also identifying *players*: state agencies willing to play the game and submit to the authority of the referee. In turn, this may generate demand for *coaches*: consultants and other actors who make a living by helping states respond to CPIs and the problems they identify. There is also often a broader *audience* in place, which helps exert performance pressure upon state rankees. This complex of relations, between CPI referees, state players, coaches, and broader audiences should be at the center of an analysis of the growth and persistence of CPIs, we contend. Furthermore, while CPIs can serve a range of different aims, they all carry economic costs and may produce economic gains that have to be taken into account when analyzing what CPIs are and how they reproduce. In sum, we thus contend, when seeking to make sense of the growth and reproduction of CPIs and CPI-related activities, it is essential to treat CPIs relationally and at least partially in economic terms.

Our third aim is to illustrate the empirical utility of conceiving of CPIs in this manner by focusing on a set of CPIs that have received little attention from IR scholars: nation brand rankings. We use Scandinavian and particularly Swedish nation-branding activities to illustrate how the relationship between CPI referees, consultancy coaches, state players, and national media audiences can promote and sustain rankings of questionable merit. Sweden (and Scandinavia more broadly) is often described as having a particularly rational and deliberative policy process, with careful weighing of the consequences of public policy informed by academic reports and the input of various stakeholders (e.g., Petersson 2016). Sweden and Scandinavia could thus be used as a “least likely case” of sorts, allowing us to learn about ranking relations from how these states have become embroiled in ranking activities whose effects do not seem to meet stated goals. Rather than a “test” of our framework, we use nation-branding rankings and the relations and activities they produce and rely on in Scandinavia as an empirical illustration of the potential of our approach to better understand CPIs. Our ambition in the empirical section is thus limited, serving primarily to illuminate our theoretical claims. We leave to future research a fuller empirical examination of the applicability to other rankings. The empirical illustration relies on a combination of a variety of data: secondary academic sources, interviews with three nation brand consultants conducted in 2019, and primary sources from nation brand consultancies (in English) and government documents and print media articles (in Swedish).

The rest of this article proceeds in four sections. The first provides an overview of CPI research and identifies three types of critiques of CPIs therein, each one of which, we contend, points toward further scrutiny of what keeps CPIs in motion. It then moves to discussing the major attempts in IR to make sense of CPIs. We contend that while well-tuned to explain variance in the effects of different types of rankings, they leave in the background and thus undertheorize relations between various actors closely implicated in the political economy of CPIs. The second

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<sup>1</sup>As clarified below, we build upon Cooley's (2015) notion of rankings as judges; however, our framework embeds this role within a broader set of relations.

section picks up the clues left by these works to develop our relational heuristic, bringing into view the economics and relations between “referees,” “coaches,” “players,” and “audiences.” The third section then uses this framework to illuminate the relations sustaining international nation brand rankings in Scandinavia. To conclude, we pull insights from all sections of the article together to articulate a path ahead for future research on CPIs. For those interested in a more critical, encompassing and systemic relational approach, we suggest CPIs may be studied as “indicator industrial complexes.”

### **Prior CPI Research: Three Warrants for Studying CPIs as a Complex of Relations**

Building on work by sociologists (Espeland and Sauder 2007) and anthropologists (Merry and Conley 2011), IR research into the CPI phenomenon has taken off in the last five years, with high profile monographs (e.g., Kelley 2017), edited volumes (e.g., Cooley and Snyder 2015a), and special issues (Broome and Quirk 2015; Kelley and Simmons 2019). It is now beyond doubt that some CPIs are capable of exerting considerable independent influence over states (Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b; Kelley and Simmons 2019). Thus, not surprisingly, questions of when, why, and how CPIs influence state behavior have been central to the more influential IR scholarship on CPIs (e.g., Sharman 2009; Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b; Kelley 2017; Kelley and Simmons 2015, 2019). These works provide the foundation for our article: if CPIs did not have social effects, we would not need to study the political economy of CPIs nor puzzle over what relations and incentives keep them in business.

However, the article is also inspired by a large body of critical CPI research that provides distinct warrants for treating the emergence and persistence of CPIs as a puzzle requiring explanation. The first and most developed branch of scholarship critiquing CPIs has contested their methodological veracity (e.g., Jerven 2013; Bhuta 2015; Firchow and Ginty 2017). While sold as a “scientific” means of gaining data for “evidence-based policy,” a range of scholars have pointed out that even the most established CPIs often suffer from serious conceptual validity issues (e.g., Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b; Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018). Given that many global rankings seek to operationalize concepts academics “routinely describe as essentially contested” (Broome and Quirk 2015, 2)—e.g., democracy, development, freedom, etc.—it is no surprise that even well-established rankings have come under heavy fire for lacking concept validity. The inherent difficulty of ranking complex, global phenomena is only compounded by the tendency to select proxies for expediency rather than rigor (Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009, 173; see also, e.g., Bhuta 2015; Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b). Yet the methodological problems are not limited to measures of contested social concepts. Morten Jerven (2013) demonstrates how even GDP datasets, the bedrock of global development planning, contain validity and reliability problems such that growth rates for many African countries are little more than “guesstimates” (Jerven 2013, 13). Indeed, surveying the literature, Broome and Quirk (2015, 12) remark that “nearly all global benchmarks suffer from a “dodgy data” problem.”

A second branch of CPI scholarship highlights how rankings may also encourage perverse and often pathological effects that run counter to the ostensible goal of the ranking (e.g., Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b; Homolar 2015; Kuzemko 2015). In this vein, Cooley (2015, 5) has pointed out that once a CPI informs resource allocation, it generates incentives to “game” the rankings: striving to manipulate the measure to improve one’s position with minimal changes in behavior. Cooley thus internationalizes Campbell’s Law, long-established in sociology, which asserts that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, [the more] subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Campbell 1976, 35).

At the extreme, an indicator may cease to function as a valid measure of performance *and* waste resources instead of improving the underlying performance. For instance, [Espeland and Sauder \(2007\)](#) have shown how the *U.S. News & World Report* law school rankings have led to a dramatic increase in the marketing budgets of law schools, which has distorted competition and perhaps even undermined the quality of the education. IR scholars have found global governance by numbers can produce similar pernicious effects (e.g., [Cooley and Snyder 2015a,b](#)). For instance, [Schueth \(2011, 449\)](#) suggests Georgia's record-breaking rise by more than eighty places between 2006 and 2008 in the DBI, while remaining stationary on the Global Competitive Index, illustrates a successful "gaming" strategy.

Not all states attempt to "game" rankings, however—many attempt to rise in rank on given terms. Yet, even when states play by the spirit of the game, CPI's may still produce problematic outcomes. States may focus excessively on particular measures established by the CPI, and countries residing near the top of rankings may use their relatively high score to deflect efforts to make improvements ([Towns and Rumelili 2017](#)). Moreover, a great deal rests upon the underlying theorization of the problem that a CPI is established to measure ([Snyder and Cooley 2015a, 187](#)). [Bukovansky \(2015\)](#) shows how Transparency International's emphasis on individual states' level of corruption masks the complicity of western firms in corrupt practices, shielding them from responsibility not to mention occluding effective strategies to combat corruption. As Anna van der [Vleuten and Mieke Verloo \(2012, 73\)](#) summarize, quite besides any states' gaming strategies, CPIs encourage "perverse effects" to the extent that rankings restrict evaluation to the quantifiable and thus miss the "underlying causes or possible remedies" ([Vleuten and Mieke Verloo 2012, 84](#)).

Finally, a third strand of critique poses a more radical challenge to governance by CPI (e.g., [Scott and Light 2004](#); [Oliver 2012](#); [Broome, Homolar, and Matthias Kranke 2018](#)). While indicators are derived from mathematical equations, human interpretation is inescapably involved in deciding what factors to count and how to weigh them. In this sense, indicators always embody a theory of what they claim to measure ([Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012, 9](#); [Bhuta 2015, 94, 101](#)), or as Cathy O'Neil ([2017, 21](#)) puts it pithily, indicators "are opinions embodied in mathematics." In short, these decisions are fundamentally political and power-laden. However, the inherently political character of CPIs is muted by the way in which rankings are presented and circulated in the language of "objective performance measurement" ([Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018, 19](#)). Meanwhile, the development of CPI's often takes place behind closed doors by unaccountable experts insulated from domestic political processes ([Merry and Conley 2011](#); [Cooley and Snyder 2015b](#)). As [Cooley and Snyder \(2015b, 105\)](#) contend, when policymakers and public agencies (such as the USAID) rely on CPIs to formulate policy, they delegate inherently political judgments and political evaluations to ranking organizations (see also [Bhuta 2015, 110–11](#)). [Scott and Light \(2004, 119\)](#) likewise argue that indicators operate as an "anti-politics machine," which sweeps "vast realms of legitimate public debate out of the public sphere," burying "vital politics in a series of conventions, measures, and assumptions that escape public scrutiny and dispute." This democratic deficit becomes acute when CPIs influence or are used as the bases to allocate resources and/or legitimate domestic political reforms ([Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018, 17–20](#)). Moreover, global rankings are almost always produced by western organizations and based upon western norms ([Broome and Quirk 2015, 829](#)). Given the restricted ability of most states—let alone their citizens—to contest the rankings, rankees end up rendered objectives of foreign discourses representing them as inferior.

In sum, existing scholarship has effectively highlighted methodological shortcomings, problematic effects, and the democratic deficit of CPIs. Indeed, each critique generates a distinctive puzzle:

**Table 1.** CPI research: critical aim, analytic, and puzzles

Critical aim	Analytic	Implicit or explicit political-economy puzzles
None	Explanatory	When, how, and why do CPIs exert influence over states?
Reform and improve	Identifying methodological deficiencies	Why is dodgy data used to inform policy?
Mitigate or abolish	Highlighting side effects	Why would state representatives and rankers use CPIs known to produce pernicious effects?
Abolish	Democratic critique	Why would a state outsource political judgments to democratically unaccountable actors?

- (1) Methodological critiques lend themselves to “problem solving” and to improving CPIs. Yet given that their methodological deficiencies are becoming common knowledge within policy circles (Freistein 2016, 378), this mode of critique also begs the question raised by, e.g., Bhuta (2015, 86): why would governments, international organizations (IOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to use dodgy data?
- (2) Research documenting the perverse effects generates questions for state representatives and rankers: why would they use CPIs known to produce pernicious effects?
- (3) Research highlighting the fundamental tension between CPIs and domestic democratic processes poses not only a radical challenge to those who endorse governance by numbers, but also a puzzle: why would sovereign states pay heed to CPIs when it involves outsourcing fundamentally political judgments to others?

We argue that these three modes of critique each provide empirical and theoretical warrants for developing a relational political economy account of CPIs (table 1): one that takes the starting assumption that CPIs are sustained by other functions, relations, and interests than those written on the tin.

#### *Ranker-Centric Examinations of CPIs*

Given the problems with much of the data, it is perhaps not surprising that research has begun to inquire into the functions that indicators play that may not be dependent upon the accuracy of the information CPIs circulate. We will argue below that CPI research would benefit from examining and understanding the broader set of relations of which CPIs and their creators are a part, as the relational context is crucial for the proliferation and endurance of these rankings. That said, while only hinting at relations, existing scholarship does provide several persuasive insights as to why CPIs continue to proliferate. Cooley and Snyder (2015a,b) highlight the spread and intensification of a broader audit culture that renders rankings and benchmarks an increasingly common language available to consumers, policymakers, and other actors. This audit culture helps generate demand for simple comparisons in numerical terms. They also highlight the advances in computing and availability of data. There is no reason to question the claim that these broad developments have set the stage for the explosive growth in CPIs.

Existing research also touch on relations that are central to CPIs. [Bhuta \(2015, 108–9\)](#) as well as [Cooley and Snyder \(2015a,b\)](#) point to the relation between policy-makers and ranking organizations when discussing the fact that policymakers delegate political judgments to CPI-producing actors when relying on such rankings as a basis for policy decisions. [Doshi, Kelley, and Simmons \(2019, 615\)](#) underscore that the social pressure of the Ease of Doing Business (EDB) index “is not a bilateral relationship between the World Bank and a state; our theory stresses that the World Bank alters the informational environment through the EDB ranking which in turn stimulates (often implicit) group pressures on states to reform.” Here, relations between the World Bank, governments, international investors, voters, and domestic business are invoked—but not centered and unpacked. [Cooley \(2015, 21–23\)](#) has in turn contended that CPIs play a “flag-planting” role, helping the creator assert jurisdictional authority over specific issues and thus serving as an advantage in the competitive relations with other organizations. Indeed, in a crowded field, creating a unique CPI can provide a “critical vehicle for external fundraising” ([Cooley 2015, 22](#)). Katja Freistein’s recent investigation into the micro-practices of indicator production within IOs and NGOs provides a close-up account of how indicators play a role in turf wars between IOs and NGOs competing for funding ([Freistein 2017, 11](#)). However, while alluding to relations with other actors, existing approaches are by and large ranker-centric conceptions that stop short of systematically examining the context of relations between ranking creators and other actors. We wish to broaden this view.

Similarly, other theoretically informed attempts to disentangle the CPI phenomenon are also ranker-centric and also only hint at some of the broader set of actors and relations of relevance to rankings. In an important intervention, [Broome and Quirk \(2015, 18\)](#) provide a typology for classifying the confusing array of rankings. However, despite emerging after a sustained and sophisticated analysis, their typology is also ranker-centric, discerning between four types of benchmarking based on the actor that creates and monitors them (state, IO, private sector, NGO). In this regard, the categories may occlude as much as they reveal. For instance, as Terje [Tvedt \(2006\)](#) and many others have long pointed out, the notion that NGOs are independent from states is a myth that overlooks their dependence upon state funding and often symbiotic interests (see also [Sending and Neumann 2006](#)). A relational approach to rankings is needed to see this dependence.

[Kelley and Simmons \(2015, 2019\)](#) and [Kelley \(2017\)](#) in turn develop a dynamic model of how social pressure is exerted through CPIs (see also [Kelley 2017](#) and [Doshi, Kelley, and Simmons 2019](#)). Their model elaborates the causal chain(s)—theorized as a feedback loop—through which CPIs may continuously exert pressure upon their targets. The objective is to parse the mechanisms through which CPIs exert pressure and the conditions under which they affect policy decisions or induce a response from the target. Thus, Kelley and Simmons’ main causal arrow points in a single direction—from CPI-creator intentions and how CPIs exert influence upon target states<sup>2</sup>—leaving unaddressed the issue of how CPIs stay in motion. Nonetheless, the authors provide several clues about important relations that we will pick up in the development of our framework below. For instance, [Kelley \(2017\)](#) underscores that new bureaucratic structures may lead to domestic change. Yet it may also be the case that state bureaucratic self-interest in expanding is involved in keeping an international CPI in play, a dimension Kelley does not investigate. Moreover, [Kelley and Simmons \(2015, 613\)](#) note that the domestic politics mechanism through which social pressure operates relies partly upon a “media hungry for simple headlines.” As this implies, media organizations are not

<sup>2</sup>To be clear, Kelley and Simmons theorize CPI’s exerting influence via feedback loop; however, this feedback loop explains how the ranker X continuously influences rankees a, b, and c. It does not seek to explain how a, b, and c help account for the existence of X.

always the most discerning when it comes to distinguishing between good and bad science. However, to understand why dubious CPIs flourish will require analyzing the media's role in legitimizing a ranking and keeping national publics attentive.

As these two examples illustrate, Kelley and Simmons' various works do bring into view a number of actors implicated in CPI (re)production. However, the actors studied are not understood and addressed relationally. Instead, in their framework(s) the actors are understood as autonomous actors driven to maximize incentives (reputational and economic) in an informational environment that is altered by the CPI. Such an ontologically "substantialist" approach, which takes the actors and their incentives as given, will miss some of the crucial and inherently relational dynamics involved in CPIs emergence and maintenance (on relationalism in IR, see, e.g., [Jackson and Nexon 1999](#)). As we will show below, the form of market vernacular that spread in the 1990s, with conceptions of nations as "brands" that can be packaged and controlled for profit, set the terms for and changed the relations between the actors with stakes in nation brand rankings. In other words, it is not just the information context of given actors with set incentives that has altered, but also the relations and the character of the actors themselves changed.

This is not a semantic issue, but salient to the crucial policy question about whether and how to regulate CPIs. Without taking into account the relations that emerge around CPIs, it severely circumscribes [Doshi, Kelley, and Simmons' \(2019, 641\)](#) ability to answer their own normative question about whether CPIs should be governed "purely by the market place of ideas." If the market place of ideas envisions a power-free discourse whereby the best ideas triumph on merit, the relations that develop around any given CPI may distort any so-called market (see [Ingber 1984](#)). As we will elaborate shortly, our sports heuristic can shed light on this potentiality, and thus, for instance, flesh out and problematize the "quasi monopoly" advantages some CPIs are said to enjoy ([Cooley 2015, 26](#)).

Ultimately, while existing models are fruitful for some purposes, we suggest that a fuller understanding of the economic and social relations that sustain CPIs requires a new approach. Indeed, such an approach would zoom out to take into account the wider field of CPIs: the relationships between the many actors that sustain and stand to gain from the processes CPIs engage and induce. Our discussion of the CPI literature points toward the productivity of combining research into the social effects of rankings with research into the political economy of rankings to address how CPI are sustained by asking who gains from the practice and how. The latter would involve investigating and theorizing the interactive relations that emerge in and through CPIs.

### **A Relational Approach to the CPI Game: Referees, Players, Coaches, and Audiences**

To illuminate the relations of a given CPI, we propose a framework that extends [Kelley's \(2017\)](#) metaphor of CPIs as a "scorecard." Metaphors by their very nature accentuate particular aspects of reality and downplay others. Kelley's "scorecard" metaphor highlights how CPI's render diverse state practices as competitive games. The "scorecard" lens thus brings into view how each CPI not only provides information, but is also the orchestrator of a particular type of competition. Indeed, it illuminates how CPIs are never just measurements separate from the phenomenon they depict but *always* exert social pressure to compete according to the values the CPI embodies. To be sure, the competitors may have been competing in a related manner before, but by establishing rules for measuring good or bad performance, a CPI encourages a particular way of competing.

Given that CPIs always embody theories of what they purport to measure ([Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012](#)), to paraphrase [Cox \(1981, 128\)](#), we can thus assume

that any game that a CPI produces must always be for something and some purpose. Indeed, expanding the scorecard metaphor allows us to ask more critical political economy questions: who gains and how from the particular competition produced, maintained, and encouraged by a given CPI? Through what relations? Here we extend the scorecard metaphor further to foreground four connected actors with stakes in CPIs: what we call the referees, players, coaches, and audiences. Importantly, each of these actors depends on the others—they exist as referees, players, coaches, and audiences only in and through their relations.

Crucially, understanding CPIs as part of a sports game does not imply that all states are “gamers” in the sense of insincerely “gaming the system.” In using the sports game heuristic, we simply suggest that states are *players* in the game a CPI structures. Why and how states play is an empirical question—just as in sports, some may play willingly, others because they feel forced or have no other choice; some may enjoy the game, others not; some may play earnestly, whereas others try to cheat or find ways around the rules of the game. Examining how states play, and with what particular incentives, is very much compatible with the research we envision. For many states, there is a mix of motivations and tactics and these may shift over time (e.g., Cooley and Snyder 2015a). What is more, depending on the CPI, we expect different state institutions or bureaucratic agencies to have a stake (or different stakes) in the game. Unpacking and examining state players more closely, including their incentives for and modes of playing the game, is fruitful if one wants to understand what keeps CPIs in motion. After all, without players, there is no game.

The following section integrates insights from the CPI literature to develop a framework for analyzing the relations that keep a given CPI game in motion. To this end, we first make a clear distinction between the practice of ranking (which, inspired by Cooley’s (2015) discussion of judging, we call refereeing) and the potentially lucrative activities associated with helping a player improve their position in a ranking (we call this coaching). We then bring the relationship of the players (primarily state rankees, often driven by particular state agencies or other state institutions) to the referees and coaches into focus before finally turning to the role(s) of the audiences, their relationship to coaches, players, and referees, and their crucial role in reproducing and legitimating the game embodied by the CPI itself.

#### *Referees: Monitoring the State Players in the Game*

By determining measurement criteria, rankings specify the “rules of the game” and thus determine how to compete. By creating CPIs, ranking actors construct for themselves an authority position in the field of practice, simultaneously clarifying the rules of the game and allocating status (Towns and Rumelili 2017; Kelley and Simmons 2015, 2019). CPI creators typically seek to establish themselves as disinterested arbiters who provide neutral information about the performance of state players. Inspired by Cooley (2015), we suggest this places CPI creators in a *referee* role. This role can be occupied by states, IOs, NGOs, or private market actors, i.e., any actor that creates a CPI. CPI creators may embody authority based upon the legitimacy of the standards they invoke and/or the material and moral punishments or rewards they administer or set in motion (Cooley 2015). In the case of CPIs, the punishments or rewards generally operate through varying degrees of social or economic pressure via elite engagement, domestic politics, or transnational pressure (Kelley and Simmons 2015).

Refereeing is a costly activity. Monitoring countries and generating the data upon which CPIs rest often involves a lot of time, money, and manpower (Jerven 2017, 32). For instance, Jerven (2017) has explored the financial costs of developing credible indicators for the UN’s sustainable development goals, following the UN High Level Panel calling for a “data revolution.” As he points out, “the data revolution

will have a considerable cost—yet the cost of data has so far been overlooked in the development discussion” (Jerven 2017, 32). Jerven contends that virtually all sample-based surveys that try to measure national per capita trends on economic and social indicators require reliable census data as the baseline. According to his estimate, a global population census would cost around 14 billion USD (Jerven 2017, 32). While many CPIs need not require accurate census data, they do all require iterative monitoring activities gathering, interpreting, and circulating data (Kelley and Simmons 2019). To be sure, some CPIs are much more expensive than others. Crucially, however, economic relations are necessarily built into the processes whereby referees “rank the world” and highlighting these is central for a fuller understanding of CPI growth and maintenance.

*Players: Assessed and Ranked by Referees*

The relationship between the referee to the players of the game (the state rankees) needs to be brought into focus in an analysis of CPIs. These state players scored through a CPI have not necessarily volunteered to take part. The CPI scorecard automatically generates the player role for countries ranked, but they are not necessarily inclined to compete for position. Why might a state decide to compete? First, similar to how an enthusiastic golfer plays golf for the intrinsic joy of the game, so might state compete for position in a CPI because they consider the rules of the CPI legitimate and their position in the ranking to be of intrinsic value. However, depending upon the CPI, a state player also faces a set of social and economic sticks and carrots of widely varying strengths (Kelley and Simmons 2015, 2019). Indeed, a second reason for playing the CPI may be social pressure: states may not like the game but nonetheless may wish to acquire the rewards from competing and avoid the potential punishment from a low rank. Here, it is important to be attentive to which institutions or actors within the state that are feeling the pressure. As Doshi, Kelley, and Simmons (2019, 615) point out, rankings may “also reflect on the personal competence of an individual government minister or that of a department of bureaucracy.” This agency or minister would then have a particular stake in playing on behalf of the state rankee.

Third, even if social pressure is lacking, government bureaucracies may have incentives to play a CPI game anyway. For instance, Kelley (2017, 51) notes how the reiterative quality of CPIs stimulates “status maintenance behavior” and “creates an environment of continuous accountability” (Kelley 2017, 51). It is not difficult to understand why a bureaucracy might find the demand for “continuous accountability” appealing. By virtue of their relative nature, rankings continuously produce problems for states to address. If we assume that bureaucracies need to legitimate themselves, perhaps expand their authority and ensure funding, just maintaining position in a ranking requires work that demand bureaucratic solutions. As this discussion indicates, player/referee relations vary considerably: (1) the player may see the referee as a neutral arbiter and enforcer in a game they value; (2) a player may see the referee as a vehicle of coercion, wielding social pressures to force them into competition they would rather avoid; or (3) the player may see the referee and the game as a vehicle to conduct more bureaucratic activity, expand their domain, and raise funds. And although it is the state as a whole that is ranked, it is generally specific state bureaucracies and government actors that do the actual playing. Furthermore, needless to say, some state rankees may be oblivious to both the game and the referee.

These are deliberate simplifications. But where one finds state players that compete for reasons reflecting 2 and 3, we suggest there is a good reason to expect an oversupply of CPIs. Indeed, similar to how sports teams might try to gain advantage by trying to influence the referee, lobby to change the rules in their favor, or even set up a whole new rival league, so low-ranking state players face incentives to

contest a CPI that assesses them unfavorably (Cooley 2015, 5; Towns and Rumelili 2017, 11). One option available to state players may be to create a new CPI with more favorable rules and thus dilute and perhaps usurp the social pressure wielded by the existing CPI (Mäkinen 2018). Here, we have a clear mechanism for why rankings may beget new rankings. If referee/player relation “2” may help explain the creation of new rankings, player/referee relation “3” may help explain the persistence of bad rankings: if a bureaucracy plays a CPI game in order to expand its activities, it may well resist changing its practices, even if the competition produced by the CPI has demonstrable negative effects.

#### *Coaches: Assisting Players*

While all CPIs rely on the role of referee that assesses the competition of state players, in so doing they may also produce demand for coaches. Coaches are parasitic upon the CPI–state relation. They sell their expertise to players on how to perform better to move up in the ranking. In the realm of CPIs, coaches often take the organizational form of consultancies or nonprofits, offering services to assist a state in improving its performance. CPI coaches can thus be seen as an offshoot of the vast global consultancy sector, of which state clients are among the fastest growing group of new customers (Momani 2017, 246). While *ceteris paribus*, state agencies and citizens would be expected to prefer in-house expertise over “alien rule” (Hechter 2009, 300), the explosion of CPIs enables coaches to develop specialist expertise in particular rankings that state bureaucracies (allegedly) cannot match (see Momani 2017 and Seaforth and Sending 2020, 249). In addition, coaches may generate legitimacy from being an outsider and thus beyond partisan interests (see Hechter 2009, 294). Perhaps the clearest example of how a CPI has generated demand for specialist coaching services is the EDB Index (see Cooley 2015, 26; Schueth 2011).

While CPIs often create demand for coaches, prior frameworks only parenthetically incorporate coaching activities. Three of the four “roles” CPIs play according to Cooley (2015) concern the different types of pressure CPIs exert, overlooking how this pressure simultaneously produces demand to deal with that pressure (i.e., through coaching). We suggest that making an analytical distinction between referees and coaches highlights more clearly the financial and bureaucratic interests involved in the production and persistence of particular rankings.

Indeed, studying relationships and overlap between coaches and referees offers a potential explanation for why dubious rankings would emerge and persist. Since coaches profit from helping states play the CPI “game,” they also have economic incentives to promote and encourage the game to help create more demand for coaching services. Moreover, although coaches can be quite independent from the referee, the referee creator of a CPI enjoys clear advantages when it comes to coaching the players. Conversely, coaches may well strive to produce their own CPI to help promote their coaching. Both dynamics—referees becoming coaches in the game they monitor, and coaches seeking to become referees—highlight incentives producing an oversupply of CPIs. Ultimately, should cozy relations develop among coach, player, and referee, we expect questionable outcomes.

#### *Involved Audiences: Cheering or Booing Players*

It should be clear that each CPI at a minimum relies on a relation between a referee and state players, while potentially producing opportunities for coaches offering services to states. However, for CPIs to exert social pressure, it generally also requires an audience interested in the game and its winners and losers (see Towns and Rumelili 2017; Kelley and Simmons 2015, 2019). Audiences can consist of a range of actors, including other states, media outlets, the business sector, members of the public, academia, opposition parties or other political

actors invested in competition embodied in the CPI. This interest might be financial, professional, or emotional, but what matters for our purposes is that audiences can generate attention, funds, and legitimacy for a CPI and operate as a crucial channel through which a CPI may exert social pressure (Kelley and Simmons 2015). Indeed, domestic audiences can take an intense interest in and even be “shocked” by international rankings (e.g., Niemann, Martens, and Teltemann 2017). As we will show below, nation brand indexes have likewise generated a great deal of interest among an audience consisting of media, opposition parties, and general publics.

For the long-term flourishing of a CPI, audiences must be kept interested. Not only do audiences often in some way finance the game, audiences are also often the conduit through which social pressure is exerted to make states play the game in the first place. The referee thus faces strong incentives to produce a competition that will interest their target audience (and divert interest from any rival CPI games). As a result, the quality of a CPI will be subject to the preferences of the audience in question: the degree to which an audience demands methodologically rigorous data, is capable of understanding and interpreting it critically, and cares about or is affected by any counter-productive effects of the competition it inspires—or whether the competition serves merely as a throw-away entertainment. We thus suggest that studying how CPI-sustaining actors compete for the attention of audiences should help us understand how and why referees, players, and coaches may be (in)attentive to methodological flaws and pernicious side-effects.

#### *Toward Analysis*

Our distinction between referees, players, coaches, and audiences is an analytical one. In practice, as we will show below, these roles may become blurred. For instance, as we mentioned above, the creators of rankings may take on both a referee and a coaching function, seeking simultaneously to assess player performance and coach players to improve that performance. Indeed, our heuristic helps us shed light on how actors develop mutually advantageous relations that produce incentives for CPI maintenance far beyond their ostensible “rational” utility. Although we hold that *all* CPIs produce players, instantiate their creators as referees, engage an audience, and provide incentives for coaching, the specifics of these relations and overlaps between these roles will vary. Precisely how these relations work in practice is thus an empirical question. To illustrate how these relations may play out in practice, we next put our framework to work on a set of rankings that have hitherto been overlooked in the IR scholarship on CPIs: nation brand rankings.

#### **Nation Brand Rankings: Symbiotic Relations between CPI Creators, Consultant Coaches, State Players, and Public Audiences**

Emerging in the mid-1990s and escalating in the 2000s, nation branding has become a prevalent practice and language for expressing the contemporary form and value of nationhood (e.g., Kaneva 2011, 118). Nation branding concerns articulating national distinction through branding paradigms that used to be the reserve of the corporate world of marketing and PR firms. Indeed, in addition to tracing the emergence of nation branding to neoliberalism and an audit culture generally, its origins can also be located more specifically in fundamental changes in how the assets of corporate firms were valued in the 1970s and 1980s (Aronczyk 2013, 23–27). With a shift away from valuing tangible assets (e.g., buildings, land, and manufacturing materials) to intangible assets (e.g., reputation and image), corporations turned to brand consultancies specialized in making, assessing, and managing the “social value” of corporations (Aronczyk 2013, 25). The corporate

brand has become central to business activity, as the brand allegedly helps investors and customers identify with the company and thus opt for its products and services.<sup>3</sup>

Since the mid- to late-1990s, the reputation of countries has increasingly been understood and addressed in terms similar to a corporate brand. Although a range of actors drew parallels between nation-states and corporations at the time, marketing and advertising actors were central in offering national governments a corporate template for (re)conceiving the value of nationhood. Developments in Great Britain around the mid-1990s seem to have been pivotal. Simon Anholt, a British national who emerged from advertising to become the most well-known nation brand guru, prolific writer on nation brands, and successful brand policy advisor, claims to have coined the term “nation brand” in 1996 (Anholt 2010, 3). However, a number of other private actors in Britain were engaging in activities akin to nation-branding at roughly the same time.

The vernacular of “nation brands” has since become commonplace. In this vernacular, perceptions of countries are understood as potential assets that can be harnessed in the service of tourism, foreign investment, the attraction of students and workers, the export sector, and thus economic growth and international influence. “Like Coke and Pepsi,” nation brands are something to maneuver and control, to mobilize as a resource in a competitive global economy (Van Ham 2002, 254). Informed by these understandings, at least fifty states, likely many more, have adopted nation brand strategies and sometimes embarked on nation branding campaigns since 2000. “Cool Japan” and “Iceland Naturally” are but two of many (ironically) similar campaigns to repackage and sell national distinctiveness (see Pamment 2012; Aronczyk 2013).

Nation branding has proven especially popular among new states with emerging economies, which are seeking to reposition themselves as “upwardly mobile” and “modern.” In particular, nation-branding activities have diffused rapidly across post-Soviet spaces and across Asia (See Kaneva and Popescu 2011; Aronczyk 2013). Kazakhstan is perhaps the most well-known example: its lavish spending on mega-events and relentless nation-branding has earned it a reputation as a “PR state” (Insebayeva 2015, 1). In addition to attempting to change international minds, nation-branding also serves domestic functions. For instance, Eggeling documents how Qatar and Kazakhstan’s nation branding practices help legitimate these regimes domestically while obscuring their narrow basis of political legitimacy (Eggeling 2020, 34). Indeed, critics contend that nation-branding has proven popular among authoritarian regimes to make these countries’ image problems a matter of PR rather than policy change (Browning 2016).

The rise of nation branding and nation branders is also symptomatic of broader transnational managerial trends toward outsourcing government functions to specialist consultants (Momani 2017, also Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017; Seaforth and Sending 2020). Here, economies of scale, scope, and reputation, supposedly honed by market forces, are claimed to enable consultancies to perform traditional state function with superior effectiveness (Momani 2017, 249). Commonly, such consultants’ perceived value added rests upon claims to expertise with generating and handling “big data,” a “feel good approach to problem solving” and the ability to “simplify ambiguity and complexity into actionable items to empower clients” (Momani 2017, 245). As we will see, nation branders have employed this business model to public diplomacy.

#### *Nation Brand Rankings*

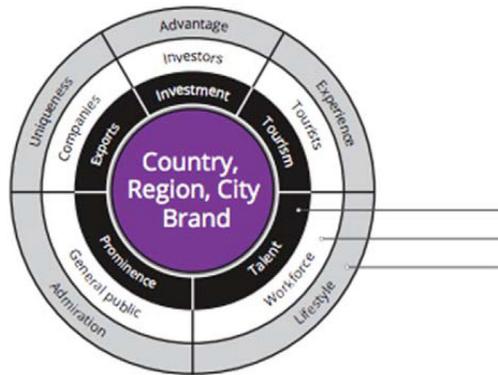
Since 2005, nation brand rankings have become a central component not only in evaluating but also in peddling the very idea of national brands. There is now an

<sup>3</sup> See Jackson (2004) for a discussion about nation-branding and luxury brand-building.

**Table 2.** Nation brand rankings and year launched

Ranking	Year launched
Anholt <i>Nation Brands Index</i>	2005
Futurebrand <i>Country Brand Index</i>	2005
East West Communications <i>Global Index 200</i>	2008(–2011)
Brand Finance <i>Nation Brands Report</i>	2010
Bloom Consulting <i>Country Brand Ranking</i>	2011
Portland Communications <i>The Soft Power 30</i>	2015
Reputation Institute <i>Country Reptraks</i>	2015
US News & World Report, the Wharton School and Bav Group <i>Best Countries Report</i>	2016

Sources: Official webpages of the consultancies, April 2019.



**Figure 1.** Bloom Consulting’s “branding wheel.”

Source: Available from the official page of Bloom Consulting.

array of such rankings (see table 2). Nation brand CPIs have all been created by consultancies—profit-seeking market actors—rather than by IOs, NGOs, or states. The first were launched in 2005, when Simon Anholt introduced the Anholt *Nation Brands Index* (NBI) and the brand consultancy FutureBrand presented the *Country Brand Index* (CBI) (FutureBrand 2019). The NBI has been published annually, in partnership with the German Growth from Knowledge (GfK) market research institute until 2018, when the global market research and consulting firm Ipsos acquired the ranking. Through a combination of first mover advantages and its association with Anholt’s authority in the field,<sup>4</sup> the NBI became the predominant nation branding CPI, whereby “contenders to the field have either adopted his methods or had to articulate highly similar methods in direct opposition to them” (Aronczyk 2013, 32). As we will see, it also helps that NBI reports can be used and purchased by other nation branding firms and thus the NBI helps generate work for other nation-brand coaches. Nonetheless, since 2005, a number of additional rankings have emerged (table 2).

These rankings differ in significant ways, but they all attempt to establish what a nation brand is, operationalize a measure, and then publicize relative nation brand performances. Taking their cues from Anholt’s patented “Hexagon” model, nation brands are usually conceptualized as composing of discrete components (see figures 1 and 2).

These abstract components are then operationalized into various indicators of alleged “strength” in each category. The NBI conducts internet polls of approximately

<sup>4</sup> Anholt’s authority in nation branding was partly generated by a promotional strategy involving developing academic capital via publishing books, peer-reviewed articles, and even establishing an academic journal (see below).



**Figure 2.** NBI’s “Nation Brand Hexagon<sup>®</sup>.”  
 Source: Anholt (2005, 297).

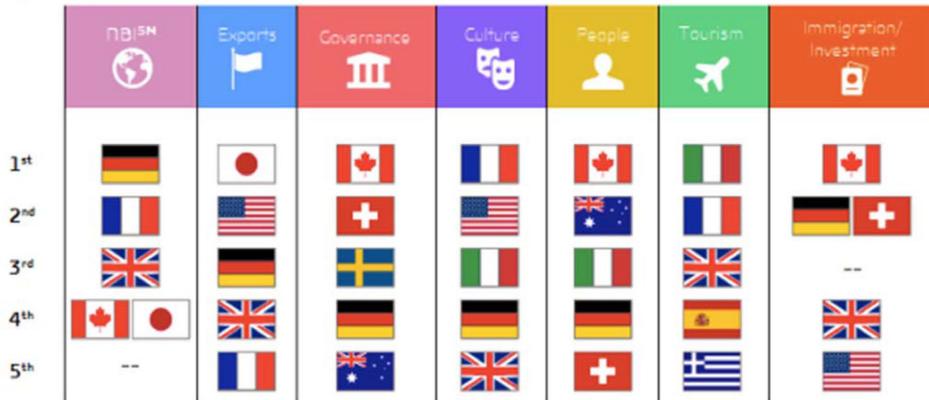
Top 20 Most Valuable Nation Brands					
	<b>1</b>	Rank 2017: 1, 2016: 1 → BV 2017: \$21,059bn BV 2016: \$20,574bn Brand Rating: AAA-		<b>11</b>	Rank 2017: 11, 2016: 10 ↓ BV 2017: \$1,909bn BV 2016: \$1,909bn Brand Rating: AAA-
	<b>2</b>	Rank 2017: 2, 2016: 2 → BV 2017: \$19,209bn BV 2016: \$7,687bn Brand Rating: AA		<b>12</b>	Rank 2017: 12, 2016: 14 ↑ BV 2017: \$1,410bn BV 2016: \$966bn Brand Rating: AA
	<b>3</b>	Rank 2017: 3, 2016: 3 → BV 2017: \$4,021bn BV 2016: \$3,882bn Brand Rating: AAA-		<b>13</b>	Rank 2017: 13, 2016: 15 ↑ BV 2017: \$1,049bn BV 2016: \$915bn Brand Rating: A+
	<b>4</b>	Rank 2017: 4, 2016: 4 → BV 2017: \$3,039bn BV 2016: \$3,002bn Brand Rating: AAA-		<b>14</b>	Rank 2017: 14, 2016: 13 ↓ BV 2017: \$1,014bn BV 2016: \$998bn Brand Rating: AAA
	<b>5</b>	Rank 2017: 5, 2016: 5 → BV 2017: \$3,129bn BV 2016: \$2,942bn Brand Rating: AAA		<b>15</b>	Rank 2017: 15, 2016: 12 ↓ BV 2017: \$1,009bn BV 2016: \$1,121bn Brand Rating: AAA
	<b>6</b>	Rank 2017: 6, 2016: 6 → BV 2017: \$2,969bn BV 2016: \$2,339bn Brand Rating: AA+		<b>16</b>	Rank 2017: 16, 2016: 19 ↑ BV 2017: \$845bn BV 2016: \$630bn Brand Rating: AA-
	<b>7</b>	Rank 2017: 7, 2016: 8 ↑ BV 2017: \$2,066bn BV 2016: \$1,810bn Brand Rating: AAA-		<b>17</b>	Rank 2017: 17, 2016: 18 ↑ BV 2017: \$832bn BV 2016: \$736bn Brand Rating: A+
	<b>8</b>	Rank 2017: 8, 2016: 7 ↓ BV 2017: \$2,066bn BV 2016: \$2,066bn Brand Rating: AA		<b>18</b>	Rank 2017: 18, 2016: 16 ↓ BV 2017: \$798bn BV 2016: \$829bn Brand Rating: A
	<b>9</b>	Rank 2017: 9, 2016: 8 → BV 2017: \$2,034bn BV 2016: \$1,821bn Brand Rating: A+		<b>19</b>	Rank 2017: 19, 2016: 17 ↓ BV 2017: \$703bn BV 2016: \$742bn Brand Rating: AAA
	<b>10</b>	Rank 2017: 10, 2016: 11 ↑ BV 2017: \$1,848bn BV 2016: \$1,289bn Brand Rating: AA		<b>20</b>	Rank 2017: 20, 2016: 28 ↑ BV 2017: \$625bn BV 2016: \$469bn Brand Rating: AA+

**Figure 3.** Brand Finance’s Nation Brands Report Top 20.  
 Source: Brand Finance Nation Brands Annual Report 2017 (2017, 8).

500 adults in twenty countries to generate this data. Some use internet search data (e.g., Bloom’s Country Brand Ranking) or media mentions (East–West Communication’s now defunct Global Index 200), while others do not disclose the precise metrics they use for their measure at all. These inputs are then weighted, rendered numerical, and presented in a relative ranking. Whatever the methodology, all nation brand CPIs result in what resembles an Olympics scoreboard (see figures 3 and 4), ready for global circulation.

The rankings are typically published annually, with great fanfare and elaborate strategies to gain widespread media visibility. The annual reports operate as a teaser; they publicize widely the headline performance of the countries and which nation brands are rising and falling. In the process, the rankings re-produce and promote the idea that modern states should care about and compete to improve their nation brand and that branding efforts may help re-posture states on the “world stage.” This is usually accompanied with a general analysis that treats the rankings with a seriousness devoid of critical circumspection. Individual country data, analysis,

Figure 2: Top 5 Nations across the Indices



**Figure 4.** Top Five Nation Brands across NBI's Seven Indices 2017.

Source: Anholt-GfK National Brand Index Press Release (2017).

and advice are furthermore only available to those countries willing to pay (Nation Brander Interviewee 1, April 23, 2019, Nation Brander Interviewee 3, May 12, 2019). Thus, the ranking operates as a hook designed to generate authority in the field of nation branding and also to attract customers for the coaching services of the ranker (Nation Brander Interviewee 2, March 6, 2019). However, with many nation brand rankings now in circulation, this is a crowded field and not all brand rankings survive. For instance, the Global Index 200 lasted just three iterations. Despite succeeding in drawing in customers from Singapore and Australia, East West Communications deemed this insufficient to warrant its USD 100,000 per year price tag (East West Communications 2019).

Although the CPI literature has not addressed them directly, nation brand rankings are vulnerable to several of the same critiques as other CPIs (see Kaneva 2011; Kaneva and Popescu 2011; Browning 2016). Indeed, scholarship has questioned the methodological veracity of brand rankings and how they encourage a myopic competition that occludes the historical and structural causes of “weak” nation brands (e.g., Browning 2016, 59–60). While the concept of branding extends promises of repackaging the image of states, even advocates have struggled to show that deliberate nation-branding strategies can succeed in improving states’ rank (Kaneva 2011, 121, 123). Finally, several works illuminate the pernicious effects of branding: homogenizing national cultures and depoliticizing fundamentally power-laden issues (e.g., Kaneva and Popescu 2011; Jezierska and Towns 2018). We thus use this as our starting assumption: nation branders and the nation brand rankings, like CPIs more generally, are at least partially sustained by relations, functions, and interests other than those advertised by their creators.

Indeed, as a phenomenon, and like other rankings, nation brand rankings are buttressed by a complex of actors whose relations, roles, and functions can fruitfully be disentangled in terms of our sports heuristic. Our analysis of these rankings below will start with a discussion of the branding consultancies that serve as both referees and coaches, to then turn to an examination of the state players in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries and the audiences that follow and cheer on the competition in the case of Sweden. Although our analysis spans Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, the NBI constitutes a common thread across each country’s branding activities. By focusing on the countries that use the NBI—a first mover and leading nation-branding CPI—we also seek to shed light upon a ranking that sits at the epicenter of the nation-branding industry.

*Referees and Coaches: The Dual Roles of Nation-Branding Consultants*

Since nation brand rankings are all created by for-profit consultancies, the referee and coach roles are blurred. In creating these rankings, brand consultancies try to establish themselves as arbiters in a competitive game among states, providers of neutral information about relative national performance. As Bloom Consulting's official webpage states, "Bloom Consulting created its Country Brand ranking as a means of evaluating the impact of Country Brand strategies." This brief statement contains an additional crucial claim, namely that the ranking evaluates the effects of *strategies*, the intentional management of a country brand. Embodied in the Bloom Annual Nation Brand Report's discussion of their methodology is the assumption that weak brands must imply poor branding strategies.

Even if one accepts that nation brands are important, little evidence exists to support the idea that branding practices affect a nation's brand. As [Browning \(2016, 69\)](#) notes "evidence marshalled by nation-branding consultants is often circumstantial or, at best, premised on establishing correlations." Instead, public perceptions of a country are shaped by a complex set of factors that are often beyond the control of intentional management. Interestingly, even Anholt has been adamant that "there is a big difference between observing that places have brand images (which is simply a useful metaphor) and claiming that places can be branded (which is an excessively ambitious, entirely unproven and ultimately irresponsible claim)" ([Anholt 2008, 2](#)). And yet the claim that rankings help assess nation-branding *strategies* is featured in virtually all these rankings' promotional material and service description.<sup>5</sup> Why?

Part of the answer to that question lies in the consultancy business model—brand consultancies sell services intended to conceptualize, improve, and market nation brands. The claim that public perceptions of a country are amenable to strategic intervention is thus central. If relevant actors did not assert that nation brands could be intentionally shaped and marketed (or if they did not believe that the strength of a nation brand mattered for desired outcomes), there would be no demand for brand consultancies. Identifying nation brands as a measurable and manipulable phenomenon is an important prerequisite to selling brand coaching services. To this end, several branders use nation brand rankings, which rest on seemingly scientific algorithms and data to assess the relative strength of national brands over time. When presented in a ranking, this procedure inevitably produces metric-depicting countries with brands apparently in need of improvement. Thus, consultancies can benefit from taking on both coach and referee roles, using nation brand indexes to "drum up new business from national governments" ([Kaneva 2011, 123](#)).

Yet, nation branders must deal with the difficulty of demonstrating effects of *branding* upon brand rankings. One way of muting questions about nation-branding effects has been to emphasize that nation branding is a long-term enterprise with no quick fixes (e.g., [Anholt 2008](#); Nation Brander 2). However, by leveraging their dual role as coach and referee, nation branding consultants can also generate additional means of justifying their services by presenting the results of the game in a manner that emphasizes tiny changes, accentuates differences, and ultimately encourages seeing the nation brand as a dynamic problem in need of their services.

The NBI country reports illustrate nicely how demand for consultation on nation branding might be generated in this manner. Leaning on the appearance of precision produced by a "Hexagon Model" of brand measurement, the reports routinely emphasize small changes in the ranking as being significant. For instance, the 2014 Norway report celebrates that since 2008, "Norway has increased its overall score by two points, which is slightly more than the average increase among these 43 nations over the past six years (2.0 points vs. 1.8 points)" ([Norway NBI Report 2014, 9](#)). Seemingly knowing their audience, the report goes on to note

<sup>5</sup> Including Anholt-branded NBI reports.

**Table 3: Norway's Rankings by Panel Countries**

	Trial	Argentina	Australia	Brazil	Canada	China	Egypt	France	Germany	India	Italy	Japan	Mexico	Poland	Russia	South Africa	South Korea	Sweden	Turkey	United Kingdom	United States	Denmark	Finland	Netherlands	Spain	
Nation Brands	13	20	14	16	10	20	31	11	5	26	19	13	20	7	14	20	17	4	11	14	17	4	5	10	13	
E-sports	13	23	14	19	11	20	26	14	6	26	11	10	20	3	15	22	11	16	7	10	14	15	7	3	10	11
Governance	8	10	9	11	5	12	15	6	3	22	6	9	12	1	7	11	12	2	4	9	13	1	2	6	2	
Culture	22	29	21	22	10	22	36	19	13	35	22	18	29	15	17	28	24	9	17	20	22	9	11	17	20	
People	14	21	11	10	15	19	11	7	4	28	12	17	10	7	17	21	10	4	11	10	13	2	4	11	16	
Tourism	20	28	15	25	19	20	36	14	13	26	17	13	25	14	20	24	17	15	12	15	19	11	17	9	20	
Immigration/Investment	12	16	12	15	11	15	22	10	5	21	13	11	16	4	12	13	13	2	3	10	16	4	4	9	11	

**Figure 5.** Norway's Nation Brand across the Board 2014. *Source: Norway NBI Report (2014, 10).*

that this was greater than any “increases experienced by many neighboring nations, including Sweden, Denmark, and Finland over this time period (1.5, 1.8, and 1.9, respectively)” (Norway NBI Report 2014, 9). However, the report treats miniscule downward changes with grave concern. The report laments, for instance, that “Norway’s warm, welcoming nature has *backslid* in India; and Turkey holds divided views, believing Norwegians are increasingly welcoming, yet their likelihood of seeing Norwegians as close friends has decreased” (Norway NBI Report 2014, 9—our emphasis). Taking a closer look at the numbers reveals that this “backsliding in India” refers to a fall of 0.1 percent across 6 years. In other words, the average response of the 1000 Indians that took the NBI online survey about Norway decreased by a fraction of a percentage across six years. However, lest anyone question the value of highlighting such small changes, the report also presents the results in a rank-ordered table, whereby the tiny differences in absolute terms can be transformed in a patchwork of rising and falling position demarked by red and green (figure 5):

The Norwegian report nicely highlights how the NBI can be used to give nation branding the appearance of science, precision, and thus legitimacy intimated by statistics. Meanwhile, the report also illustrates how relative positional rankings can be used to present otherwise trivial findings as “problems” in need of branding solutions. The coach and the referee exist in a symbiotic relationship: the referee operates as the generator of the scorecard, which simultaneously highlights a performance problem in need of a coach. Accordingly, it becomes clear that CPIs that depend upon payment for coaching have strong incentives for constructing a fine-grained zero-sum scorecard—for a never ending competition for relative position.

Far from all nation brand consultancies provide rankings, however. Among the many nation brand consultancies that have sprung up like mushrooms, most function primarily as coaches-for-hire. Most furthermore seem to be global, such as Interbrand, Wolff Olins, Kotler Marketing Group, Monitor Deloitte, the Brooklyn Brothers or Red Associates. In the Scandinavian context, the NBI ranking furthermore forms the basis for other coaches’ activities: Norway, Sweden, and Denmark all employed additional private coaches, which incorporated the NBI data as the basis for their nation branding strategies, as we will elaborate below.

Branding firms are not the only actors serving as coaches to state players, however. There is a thriving group of nation brand devotees in academia, almost exclusively in business-based fields such as business management, advertising, and communications. Some of these academics serve as coaches taking on work as paid consultants for government agencies. For instance, Dinnie’s consultancy work includes advising the Korean Presidential Council on Nation Branding (Dinnie 2019). However, many of these nation brand academics are not coaches in the sense of directly advising government agencies. Instead, their publications promote the idea of nation branding and produce how-to instructions that teach an audience of, for example,

business and communications students, PR and marketing agents, and government officials about the merits and strategies of successful nation branding (Kaneva 2011, 122–23). For instance, the aim of Professor Gerzema's and Reibstein's (2016) book *Best Countries* "is to help the world understand the value of nation brands—and how nations are perceived around the world" (Reibstein 2017). Indeed, leading scholars are typically bullish in promoting the necessity of branding (see, e.g., Dinnie 2010, 139). Not surprisingly, when this literature deals with nation-branding failures, such failures are inevitably treated as "lessons to be learned" to improve nation-branding efforts rather than as reasons to question the validity of the nation-branding enterprise as such (e.g., Moilanen and Rainisto 2009).

*Producing Players: Nation Brand Rankings and Bureaucratic Expansion*

The competitive game which nation brand rankings referee also requires willing state players. The concern with a country's image abroad is not a new one—states have deliberately managed their reputation abroad for at least a century. For instance, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) founded its Press Department in 1909 explicitly to "remind the world about Sweden," and the MFA also deployed journalists in Paris, London, and Berlin to feed news stories about Sweden to foreign news outlets (Pamment 2012, 100). States were obviously also already competing in the global economy. But the idea that perceptions of a country could be used and manipulated for economic aims, akin to a corporate brand, was not in repertoire until the late 1990s. It did not take long before an impressive list of states had signed on to the deal, however. Importantly, countries that actively participate in nation branding spend between 1 million and 30 million Euro annually, mostly of public funds.

To analyze the relations that nation brand rankings can produce between coaches and players, we will zoom in on two Scandinavian countries that have embraced nation branding: Sweden and Denmark. As a key part of these endeavors, both Sweden and Denmark paid for tailor-made Nation Brand Index reports. Initiated to redress the fallout from the Muhammed cartoon crisis, Denmark launched a nation branding campaign in 2007—*Action Plan for the Global Marketing of Denmark* (Danish Government 2007)—with the marketing consultants Red Associates developing the brand platform and strategy (Rasmussen and Merkselen 2014). The Danish Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs led the project, which also included participation from other ministries. Denmark allocated US\$120 million to its nation branding "action plan," which was spent on an eclectic range of events, from paying for the world's longest catwalk at Copenhagen Fashion Week in 2010 to hosting the World Championships in BMX. Although the brand platform [www.Denmark.dk](http://www.Denmark.dk) lives on, the centrally coordinated and funded nation-branding activities were terminated in 2012, following a scathing external evaluation (Merkselen and Rasmussen 2016, 192).

Meanwhile, Sweden's nation-branding endeavors are firmly embedded within the MFA. Sweden's nation-branding activities emerged out of a 2003 report entitled *Sweden's Image Abroad*, commissioned by the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (*Nämnden för Sverigefrämjande i utlandet*, NSU), which together with its subsidiary, the Swedish Institute (SI), is responsible for Sweden's public diplomacy efforts. Following a two-year consultation process, Sweden's nation brand platform ([www.sweden.se](http://www.sweden.se)) was launched in 2007 with a live-streamed VIP event (Pamment 2012) and continues to this day. The SI has an annual budget of 92m SEK (around USD 9m), which it spends on cultivating positive coverage in the international press and other promotional activities aimed at promoting "Sweden and Swedish issues globally" (Swedish Institute 2017).

As previously stated, nation-branding consultancies have a public *raison d'être* that presents their work as fulfilling a vital service boosting soft power and

encouraging trade and investment in an increasingly competitive globalized world. Their state clients tend to reproduce such claims (Browning 2016, 56). At least when initiating a new nation-branding campaign, ambitious assertions about the predicted economic gains abound (Pamment 2015). Yet, as Aronczyk (2013, 81) notes, “very few nation-states are deemed to have successfully implemented a coherent and functional brand and recorded measurable results for branding initiatives.” Are state players suckers to the snake oil, or might it be that involved actors gain in other ways?

From the perspective of a state bureaucracy and particularly a foreign ministry, the NBI offers an additional hook upon which to hang their legitimacy, to pursue additional central funding, and even expand existing activities. As we noted above and according to Aronczyk (2013, 69), nation brand indexes are “now regularly used by governments to gain support for policy, spending and trade decisions.” Indeed, looking more closely at nation-branding practices, these bureaucratic incentives become visible. For instance, Merkelsen and Rasmussen (2016) highlight how the Danish Action Plan enabled its leaders to establish three new groups for managing and promoting the Danish brand: the Foundation to the Marketing of Denmark, the Marketing Advisory Board, and the Branding Denmark Taskforce. Meanwhile, several public–private partnerships were established for the same end. The authors compellingly argue that the “Nation Brands Index permits bureaucratic expansion in central government administration as it continuously maintains and reconstructs problems solvable by the initiation of more nation branding initiatives and projects and hence more bureaucratic activity” (Merkelsen and Rasmussen 2015, 181). The Swedish nation-branding activities were similarly expansive. Incorporating 500–600 people (PR consultants, brand strategists, and foreign ministry personnel), Sweden’s preliminary consultation process entailed two years of striving to distill a distinctive Swedish national brand. As journalist Lars Berge noted a decade later: following the “workshops and endless creative meetings, they could finally present one word: Progressive” (Berge 2015).

With this in mind, we can turn to the central paradox of nation brand rankings and branding: little evidence exists to suggest that nation branding strategies affect a state’s standing in the rankings or in the world. Certainly, the Scandinavian countries have struggled to draw a firm connection between branding and brand ranking. The NBI, which is the ranking primarily used by these states, instead functions mainly as legitimation for *new* activities rather than as a mode of showing the effectiveness of past policies. For instance, although Sweden scores high on the NBI index, the *Sverigebild* evaluation reports consistently struggle to show the effects of branding efforts on the NBI indicators (Pamment 2012). Rather than linking changes in the NBI to specific nation-branding activities, “positive changes are put down to general good work and negative changes are the fault of methodology or external factors” (Pamment 2012, 109). However, the *Sverigebild* reports do offer considerable data on measurable activities in terms of attendees to parties, people reached on social media, etc. Skeptics might say that such data provide proof of busyness rather than impact. A similar pattern is found in the Danish case, except that “bad” results in the NBI were usurped into the rationale for persisting with nation branding. As Merkelsen and Rasmussen’s caustic description of how the NBI was used by the government’s nation branding “Task Force,” suggests:

A low ranking would require initiatives in order to make advancements; a high ranking would require initiatives in order to consolidate the position achieved. And the recurring ratings and publication of the results served to maintain the organizational sensitivity towards reputational risk. (Merkelsen and Rasmussen 2016, 191)

Here, if nation branding activities fail to register an impact on the NBI, it paradoxically provides a rationale for more nation branding, which in turn provides a

rationale for continuous central funding for the agency tasked with overseeing the brand strategy. What unites both Sweden and Denmark is their hesitance to reflect critically upon the value of NBI itself and its tenuous relationship to nation-branding activities.

#### *The Involvement of Concerned Audiences*

So far, our Scandinavian vignette has illustrated how a questionable CPI—the Nation Brand Index—has enabled symbiotic relations among players, referees, and coaches. The referee and coaches generated problems for themselves to solve by developing a scorecard that uses relative comparisons and the illusion of scientific precision to exaggerate minor differences in methodologically questionable rankings. Scandinavian state bureaucracies charged with public diplomacy, within the MFAs, are not necessarily suckers to nation-branding quackery: addressing the problem NBI rankings produce provided the opportunity for bureaucratic expansion and branding-related activities. Yet might not the public sphere provide a check upon proceedings? Indeed, in addition to relations between referees, coaches, and state players, nation branding also require domestic audiences to buy into the game, or at least be willing to acquiesce. We will use media attention in Sweden as an illustration of audience involvement in digesting and debating nation brand rankings.

A simple media archive search results in many hundreds of articles in Swedish daily newspapers on “brand Sweden” between the mid-1990s and today.<sup>6</sup> The more common term “the image of Sweden”—*Sverigebilden*—has generated over 3,000 articles, 2,000 of them in 2017 and 2018 alone. It is clear that the idea and value of Sweden as a “brand” is well established in Swedish print media today, serving as a rhetorical commonplace to debate and assess political developments and policy options. In 2018, a dizzying range of issues—including immigration, the royal family, the sexual scandals surrounding the Swedish Academy and its Nobel Prize in literature, the Swedish weapons industry, the feminist foreign policy, and growing rural–urban disparities—were all discussed partly in terms of implications for the strength of the Swedish brand. The message is drummed home time and again: Brand Sweden is good for Swedish industry, and what is good for Swedish industry is good for the Swedish nation and its members. All Swedish nationals have thus better pay attention to the fate of Brand Sweden.

These discussions invoke the global economy as a context of national competition. The circulation of international brand rankings and Sweden’s relative position has proven a key vehicle for generating media attention. Many of the articles celebrate the high ranking of Brand Sweden, with headlines such as “Sweden, in a league of its own” (*Dagens Nyheter* 2005). The rhetoric is virtually identical to that used by branding consultancies and academics, representing nation brands in terms of teams in competition—sometimes as popularity contests—with the rankings serving as the scoreboard. Readers are tempted to read about brand rankings with headlines such as “Here are the world’s most popular countries” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2011), “Germany = the World’s Best Country” (*Aftonbladet* 2014) and “The US Tumbles in Brand Ranking” (*Aftonbladet* 2017). The discussion of the rankings is generally uncritical, instead reporting on how well team Sweden is performing among competitors. Typical depictions often look as follows: “Brand Sweden beats the US, Japan and the neighbors, scoring an eighth place in the international ranking” (*Dagens Industri* 2007).

At the time of the breakthrough of nation branding, national populations were in some sense primed to care about nation brands through pervasive discourses of national identity already in circulation. As much critical scholarship has shown,

<sup>6</sup>We used the media search engine *Mediearkivet*, with the search terms “*varumärket Sverige/brand Sweden*,” “*Sverigebilden/image of Sweden*,” “Simon Anholt,” and “Nation Brand Index.”

nation branding provides a commercial language to grasp and express nationhood, transforming ideas about nations and national identity (e.g., [Volcic and Andrejevic 2011](#)). But while generally primed, interested audiences have also been created through the active efforts of state agencies charged with developing and promoting national brands ([Volcic and Andrejevic 2011](#)).

The SI has indeed actively promoted interest in brand Sweden among Swedish media as well as the general population. Nation brand rankings, and particularly Anholt's NBI, have figured centrally in these efforts. For instance, the SI has arranged annual press conferences to present results from the NBI (e.g., [Swedish Institute 2010a](#)). The institute also regularly arranges seminars and panels on the importance and development of Brand Sweden in relative terms (e.g., [Swedish Institute 2010b, 2015](#) and [2018](#)). Olle Wästberg, former Consul General of Sweden in New York (1999–2004) and Director-General of the SI (2005–2010) has furthermore been a very prolific author of editorials and opinion pieces in Swedish daily press on the value of Brand Sweden, often referring to the NBI. In one piece, on the importance of a strong national brand for Swedish defense, he uses Denmark's fall in the NBI as a result of the Muhammad cartoons controversy as a cautionary tale of what might happen in the absence of a strong brand:

Anholt Nation Brands Index, which measures the reputations of countries, showed that Denmark was ranked 15<sup>th</sup> of 36 countries in Egypt before the Muhammad crisis. After the crisis, place 35. As an export country, Denmark fell from 19 to 31, as a tourist destination from 17 to 34. Denmark was unknown in the Arab world, there were no networks, no knowledge about its social system or about Danish civil society. Denmark had—for budgetary reasons—closed several diplomatic missions. When the crisis came, it was too late to disseminate an alternative image. ([Wästberg 2015](#))

Such representations provide vivid illustration to the general population of what is allegedly at stake in nation branding. [Volcic and Andrejevic \(2011, 601\)](#) have argued that state activities to mobilize national populations to “live the brand” make sense in a neoliberal context to privatize and off-load “the work of message circulation onto the populace.” We would add that engaging national populations as audiences serves additional important functions, such as generating popular support and thus legitimacy for the nation-branding project. Indeed, far from undergoing scrutiny, the NBI enjoys largely uncritical reporting from the Swedish press, which has been only too happy to report upon the annual fluctuations in the ranking as an international popularity contest.

### **An Indicator Industrial Complex? A Research Agenda**

As many have noted before us, the process of ranking the world is inherently political yet oftentimes insulated from democratic political processes. For those interested in transparency and accountability, fuller accounts of how rankings emerge and are sustained are thus warranted. Our sports heuristic provides analytical leverage for scrutinizing the relations that emerge around and out of CPIs. Ours is an analytical but not necessarily a critical approach, however: one could fruitfully use the sports heuristic and reveal influential but ostensibly unproblematic relations between players, coaches, referees, and audiences. Yet, as noted earlier, a wealth of research suggests many indicators often produce effects that run counter to stated public goals, suggesting that CPIs rely upon other functions than those written on the tin. Our analysis has illuminated how even within the relatively rational Scandinavian policy context, a questionable CPI generated symbiotic, self-perpetuating relations between multiple parties with differing stakes in the game. To be sure, nation-branding *strategies* underwent extensive evaluation. However, the NBI largely elided such scrutiny. As the NBI itself was conceived of as the scrutiny, players,

coaches, and audiences rarely questioned the value of the competition as such, reproducing the salience and legitimacy of the nation-branding game in the process.

Such dynamics may contribute to the subversion of public agendas, thwarted democratic processes, and misuse of public funds. In other words, there are often costs associated with CPIs, as prior scholarship has shown. We suggest that an expressly critical research agenda could usefully name and study the relations that sustain CPIs and associated costs as indicator industrial complexes. Such complexes may be more encompassing than any single CPI game, possibly making connections between them. Like its more famous cousin—the military industrial complex (MIC)—indicator industry complexes may involve institutionalized relations between actors with a vested interest in marshaling support for CPIs, relations that have become so embedded that they fade into the machinery of international politics without getting due attention. Just as the MIC works by training our gaze upon military problems that require costly military solutions, an indicator industrial complex produces and accentuates problems that require costly, publicly funded, solutions. Equally, indicator complexes may emerge without conscious design or malign intent but nonetheless generate persistent suboptimal public outcomes. By “naming the beast” and developing a relational framework that helps shed light upon its workings, we hope to inspire further research and public capacity to critically examine CPIs.

The primary and more humble goal of this article has been to develop a framework that foregrounds and conceptualizes the relations between the sets of actors that keep any one CPI in motion. Focusing on nation brand rankings as these have played out in Scandinavia, we illustrated how our sports heuristic, with referees/players/coaches/audiences, can illuminate relations and interests produced and served by engaging in the nation brand ranking game. While nation branding offers a particularly clear example of how symbiotic relations are sustained by a CPI of questionable public merit, we contend our heuristic can shed light upon the political economy of the international rankings phenomenon more generally. For instance, what kinds of coaches have sprung up around other CPIs? With what kinds of relations to CPI referees and state players? How do these relations shape the ability of states to play the game and enable the CPI to remain in business? And what kinds of audiences, with what stakes in the rankings game, cheer or jeer state players, thus encouraging them to continue paying attention to their CPI rank? Mapping these CPI relationships systematically with the help of our heuristic gives rise to a range of important questions about how CPIs emerge, are kept in motion, and how they might be better regulated. Whether and how these relationships add up to an indicator industrial complex, and particularly whether and how the many CPIs are best understood as constituting one or multiple complexes, remain to be addressed. Indeed, we hope to prompt further theoretical, empirical, and normative scholarship on such questions with our intervention.

Another central premise of our discussion has been that CPIs require funding to exist, remain relevant, and exert influence. More systematic attention to this fact would contribute significantly to understanding CPIs. Attempting a more systematic analysis of the role of funding and economic relations would require new data, however. Consider the [Global Benchmarking Database \(2019\)](#), which provides an invaluable resource for CPI scholars. None of the coding categories in the dataset (which includes age, type of producer, coverage, and frequency) pertains to the costs of maintaining a CPI or how it is funded. Thus, one fruitful path ahead would be to map indicator complexes by following the money: how are refereeing costs met? How and by whom is data collection and other monitoring work paid for? In what ways might this influence the form, contents, and influence of CPIs?

There are at least two broad financial models to sustain referee activities, involving the various actors in distinctive ways. First, some CPIs operate on a *pay-to-play* model—e.g., the OECD’s PISA ranking, the Nation Brand Index, and some credit rating agencies—whereby the referee charges fees to the players they judge. Second,

and more commonly, other CPIs operate on a *pressured-to-play* model, whereby states, IOs, NGOs, or for-profit organizations fund a CPI that ranks and thus applies social pressure on states, whether those states asked to play or not. Each model of funding contains economic relationships, relationships that we suggest may also provide insight into how CPIs of questionable technical and social merit persist and flourish. For instance, a referee would ideally remain financially aloof from those involved in the game they oversee. We showed in our examination of nation brand rankings that profit-seeking consultancies often take on the roles of both referee and coach of state players. The nation branding illustration also suggested that particular state bureaucracies may have incentive to pay for rankings of questionable quality if these help legitimize their existence or expansion. It could be that each funding model—or the particular funding relationships each may embody—is vulnerable to varying sorts of pathologies. Further empirical research would be required to both theorize and substantiate whether and to what extent this is the case.

Relatedly, our framework also highlights how particular actors may have vested interests in overlooking the methodological flaws or negative externalities of a CPI. We just mentioned why state bureaucracies may continue to champion CPIs of questionable validity. Our analysis also illuminated the role of nation branding experts who pass through the revolving door between academia and brand consultancy, generating authority from the former and income for the latter, all the while bolstering the credibility of the whole nation branding enterprise. Other CPIs may be sustained by similar dynamics. Our illustration also points to national media and their often uncritical and sensationalized reproduction of nation brand rankings as news. We saw how a state agency may hold press conferences and write debate articles to highlight the importance of a state's participation in a game and place in its ranking, using national media as a platform to drum up support in the general population. There is room for much more research investigating the relationships between the media and various CPI actors. In sum, the CPI research agenda would be advanced in fruitful ways by posing questions about the relations between the referees, coaches, players, and audiences involved in the ranking game.

### Interviews

Interviewee 1. Senior Nation Brander at major US branding consultancy. Phone interview, April 23, 2019.

Interviewee 2. Jose Filip Torres, CEO Bloom Consulting. Phone interview, June 3, 2019.

Interviewee 3. Former pollster at major UK-based polling firm. Written communication, May 12, 2019.

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