



Unpacking Nordic branding

the value regimes of Nordicness

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Unpacking Nordic Branding: The Value Regimes of Nordicism

Introduction

The Nordic region as a brand has received considerable attention over the last few decades. Some argue that the Nordic region constitutes a case of “best practice” within place branding (Pamment, 2016) due to careful facilitation of collaboration and co-creation by many diverse stakeholders (Magnus, 2016; Lucarelli, 2019). Whereas much place branding is based on managing symbolic resources of difference related to nation and territory (Ostberg, 2011; Bolin, 2016; Pamment, 2016), the official place branding strategy of the Nordic region is based on cultivating an image based on “Nordic strengths” or “ways of thinking,” for example, openness, trust, compassion, sustainability, creativity (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015; Magnus, 2016). Research is thus encouraged to discover and cultivate Nordic value resources so that Destination Marketing Organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders may benefit from Nordic brand associations, which is referred to as Nordicism.

Place brands are complex brand concepts (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011) that differ from product brands in terms of the diversity of stakeholders’ claims to legitimacy and ownership of the stories (Hankinson, 2010). The interaction between brands and stakeholders extends beyond conventional relationships where companies communicate with consumers through their brands (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). The literature on place branding has been criticized for the one-dimensional understanding of brand meaning and value (Lucarelli and Brorström, 2013), for example as being non-conflictual, a function of the place or managerial practices that create value and positive associations (e.g., Ashworth, 2009; Govers, 2011). Therefore further research is necessary to conceptualize place branding as a dynamic and ongoing interpretation of symbolic markers (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Gyimóthy, 2017).

We argue for a multi-faceted understanding of place brands where value and meaning are dynamically created through “multilogues” (Berthon *et al.*, 2007), and not dialogues, among stakeholders in culture and the environment (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). To do this, we rely on French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) which allows us to focus on the different rules and values that coordinate social practices. This version of pragmatic sociology opens the way for studying competing rules and values that brand managers and other central

stakeholders invoke during branding practices, for example, when they select symbols, tell stories, thus perpetuating myths in Nordic branding (see Ostberg, 2011).

We use the concept *value regime* as the assembly of adjacent and conflicting values behind branding practices (see Thévenot, 2007). This enables us to focus on what is regarded as important to people, communities, businesses, and societies (Graeber, 2005). Our attention is directed towards the legitimacy and heterogeneity of value regimes in Nordic branding. Using field data from a selection of branding actors from creative industries in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, we seek to answer the following research question: *How is Nordicness appropriated by Nordic branding actors and what value regimes are drawn on in the process?* We contribute to place branding literature with a novel approach by examining value regimes in play when commercial branding actors create Nordicness by mobilizing the place brand. We argue that branding actors rely on varying value regimes that cultivate a specific set of conflictual relations during the creation of Nordic brands. We discuss how the discovery of conflictual relations may contribute to the place branding literature. In extension, we also consider how the reflection on these conflictual relations might be useful for both traditional place branding organizations and SME business actors appropriating Nordicness.

Theory

Value as meaningful difference

While the terms “value” and “value creation” are among the most important and frequently used terms in the marketing literature, they are simultaneously also the most underdefined (Arnould, 2013; Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014; Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Venkatesh and Penaloza, 2013). One of the more fruitful ways in which value has been defined in marketing builds on Graeber’s (2001) work. Graeber suggested that there are three general meanings of value. First, there are “values” that we hold in society or social groups in the sociological or philosophical sense. For example, we can state that a certain society values human rights, gender equality, or that we assign high value to individual freedom, freedom of speech, the environment, or animal rights. Second, there is “value” in the traditional economic sense. Graeber gives an example of the market value of a house, food processor, or ton of pig iron. The majority of the research on value covers the economic or functional benefits of actors, often referred to as exchange value (Bagozzi, 1975; Gallarza and Gil Saura, 2006; Zeithaml, 1988). Finally, there is a notion that “value” can be defined

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as “value as meaningful difference.” This notion stems from the structural linguistics work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argues that the meaning of a concept springs from the contrast it creates to other concepts. Graeber’s (2001) argument is that, essentially, all of the above three views on value are one and the same, because they are all about “meaningful difference.” In other words, the first and second notions of value can be subsumed into the third notion of value as meaningful difference.

In the spirit of “value as meaningful difference,” we can easily draw parallels between successful place branding initiatives and the value that is created as meaningful difference. A societal value such as gender equality is, for example, many times evoked in the official place branding initiatives of the Swedish state (Molander et al., 2019). In such instances the gist of the campaign is that Sweden does things differently than most other countries when it comes to state policies regarding gender equality. The supposed value then stems from the idea that not only does Sweden do things differently but also that this difference is meaningful. Only if the relevant audiences accept the dual propositions of difference and meaningfulness, will such a campaign have the potential to be successful.

Value in place branding

The surge of strategic branding techniques in place marketing in the early 1990s was motivated by the potential for value creation in the consumption of places (Campelo, 2017). Following the increased globalization of markets, where places are progressively competing with each other, they attempt to utilize marketing tools to create differentiation and identification (Ashworth, 2009). Place branding has thus been theorized from a corporate or product brand perspective that presupposes that value is a function of either production, consumption, or co-production (Cassinger et al., 2019). However, place brands differ from product brands in terms of the diversity of stakeholders’ claims to legitimacy and ownership of stories. As an alternative, the appropriation perspective (Lucarelli and Brorström, 2013) views place branding as a dynamic and emergent process (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) where values are created in a dynamic and ongoing interpretation between stakeholders situated in culture and the environment (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). While functional approaches often would consider the creation of meaningful differences in a domain for producers (e.g., DMOs, city planners) (Govers, 2011), the appropriation perspective

opens the way for a multi-faceted understanding of value. What are considered meaningful differences then depend on the spatio-temporal dimension among stakeholders in situ.

A place brand is potentially valuable as a differentiator for stakeholders that draws on its meanings. The process by which industry and business actors create value by mobilizing place brands is scarcely covered in the literature. Recent discussions relevant to the Nordic place brand have pointed at societal values such as equality, welfare-based individual autonomy, trust, egalitarianism, openness and “hygge” (Askegaard and Ostberg, 2019; Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). It is argued that such values can be significant because in other parts of the world “transparency is still imaginary, egalitarianism is still an unfamiliar term, inclusivity is still an illusion [and] gender relations are still troubling” (Kavaratzis, 2019, p. 245). However, it does not follow that “value as difference” is in any way a construct of “essence” or a “fixed” structure. On the contrary: the meaning of any “difference” needs to be continuously negotiated, performed and justified (Puntoni *et al* 2010; Ostberg 2011; Aitken and Campelo 2011).

Regimes of valuation

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) have contributed to pragmatic sociology with the “orders of worth” perspective. The acknowledgement of the existence of “orders of worth,” or what we refer to as value regimes is central, which makes the rules that coordinate Nordicness and branding practices visible. Boltanski and Thévenot’s primary interest is related to how actors “justify their judgments in response to criticism” and how they engage in “bridging disputes to a close,” for example, through compromises (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 19-20). The “orders of worth” perspective enables us to focus on the different value regimes across the Nordic region and, as such, investigate how value regimes would succeed, complement, or compete with one another (see Corvellec and Hultman, 2014). Consequently, the concept of value as meaningful difference depends on the parallel understanding of the underlying, adjacent, and conflicting value regimes for becoming intelligible. For example, a Nordic place brand, say Copenhagen or Lofoten, is only successful if its Nordicness refers to value regimes that are meaningful to relevant stakeholders as “Nordic.” Obviously, selecting and negotiating values to justify a place brand is a political and conflictual process (e.g. Lindberg *et al.*, 2019).

In studying French society, Boltanski and Thévenot accounted for six value regimes (“orders of worth”) that actors may rely on when justifying their practices. These are, with principle values in brackets: (1) inspired regime (nonconformity, creativeness), (2) domestic regime (esteem, tradition), (3) fame regime (renown, reputation), (4) civic regime (collective welfare), (5) market regime (competition, price), and (6) industrial regime (productivity, efficiency) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In addition, several value regimes have been added from other contexts, for example, project regime (flexibility, innovation) (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and green regime (protecting nature and animals) (Thévenot *et al.*, 2000).

Boltanski and Thévenot illustrate how a brand can be justified as a part of the fame regime, where the “state of worthiness” is that of being recognized, successful, distinguished, and able to capture attention (2006, p. 179-180). As for most businesses, invoking the principle values of the market (price) and industrial regimes (productivity and efficiency) might also seem a likely criterion for how a brand is justified. While branding practices for certain businesses, such as restaurants, could be low prices, customer-orientation, and effective cooking under these regimes (e.g., ‘family-restaurants’). For others, focus on local traditions and “terroir” might be central markers within the domestic and fame regime where the principle values are esteem, tradition, and reputation (e.g. ‘fine dining’). Related to Graeber's value as meaningful difference, it is unlikely that price, productivity, and efficiency in restaurants would reflect a meaningful distinction for Nordicness, since it hardly would differ from many other restaurants. From the outset, however, it seems more likely that values such as esteem, tradition, and reputation could be interpreted as significant differences (e.g., if a restaurant has its ideal from the New Nordic Cuisine tradition). However, how well would this offer distinction between French and New Nordic Cuisine? The framework of Boltanski and Thévenot entails analyzing conflicts of inter-regime valuation, where the principles and criteria of one value regime is questioned and negotiated by invoking those of other regimes (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, p. 260ff; Bertilsson and Rennstam 2018, p. 264). It is argued that the “orders of worth” perspective is suitable in “moments of critical questioning in which the worth of particular arrangements needs to be justified” (Patriotta *et al.*, 2011, p. 1805). Thus, unpacking value regimes means more than identifying a set of values or main value regimes; understanding the conflictual inter-regime negotiation is also essential. In comparison, attempts at defining Nordicness as an “essentialism” of a specific set of values or traits (e.g., Anholt, 2007; Pamment, 2016) would

not consider how these dynamic negotiations lead to meaningful distinction in the performances of Nordicness.

Few branding scholars have used pragmatic sociology; however, Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) are an exception who argue that the framework can be used for understanding brand value as a multi-faceted phenomenon, which relies on separate “worlds of worth” for becoming intelligible. They contribute to an understanding of “branding that acknowledges the conflictual relationship between value regimes and enables a balanced analysis of the social consequences of branding” (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018, p. 260). Using this framework, they performed a critical analysis of branding, opening for a more complex understanding of branding as also “destruction of value” and branding as not just a potential for “co-creation” but even for “co-destruction.” In the same vein, Lindberg *et al.* (2019) found that the justification of sustainable tourism of a Nordic destination was based on complex negotiation between regimes of value.

In summary, while previous research has argued that there are multiple meanings and value regimes that are constructed socially and politically (e.g., Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014), Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) contribute to a theoretical foundation of understanding *how* value may differ in Nordic branding. Using pragmatic sociology as a lens, we therefore aim to develop place branding theory in a direction that accommodates a multifaceted understanding of value and value negotiation.

Nordic branding

Cassinger *et al.* (2019) suggest in their Manifesto that the Nordic approach to place branding is transdisciplinary, predicated on being oriented towards sustainability and welfare, and based on constructionist relational ontology. Nordic value regimes should not be considered a “Nordic essence” as such, but rather a specific set of culturally constructed valuations. These valuations constitute Nordicness as a set of meaningful differences of what it means to be “Nordic.”

Consequently, the current study does not address the effectiveness of the branding activities discussed. Rather, the focus is on how the brand actors navigate between different value regimes in forging a sense of Nordicness for their respective (Nordic) brands.

Drawing on Holt (2003), it could be argued that any brand is surrounded by a brand culture constituted by “shared, taken-for-granted brand stories, images, and associations” (p. 3). This brand culture is not merely a result of the firm’s activities. Rather, brand culture is the result of various stories, images, and associations being disseminated by various mediators with more or less explicit agendas of Nordicness. Different audiences might interpret and negotiate Nordicness in ways that lead to multiple brand cultures existing at the same time, which is referred to as polysemy (Puntoni *et al.*, 2010).

This way of understanding how brands are furnished with meaning has particular ramifications for the relationship between Nordic place branding and branding conducted by business actors relating their brand to place. More specifically, these two modes of branding stand in a dialectical relationship to each other, where each one influences the other. In this sense, we consider Nordic place branding a context, resource, and result of the performance of Nordic branding. Thus, we do not focus on *place branding as such*. If we take Sweden as an example, we can see how place branding activities on behalf of the government have systematically disseminated stories, images, and associations portraying Sweden as a modern, progressive, rational, and open-minded country (Molander *et al.*, 2019). Various Swedish companies—IKEA and Volvo being noteworthy examples—have consequently used these notions of Sweden in their brand-building endeavors. These companies have, if one wants to use that terminology, appropriated parts of the official place branding messages in their own brand building activities. Applying Holt’s (2003) terminology, the companies, through their Nordic branding activities, become “authors” of the place brand - Sweden. This is not something that is reserved for those engaging in “place branding proper”.

Another source of inspiration for Nordic branding might be linked to various individuals’ self-expression, for example, how artists have represented the place. Here, the Nordic countries have a rich pool to draw upon, dating back to the Icelandic Viking sagas from the 13th century. Branding actors might also draw on material dimensions, such as climate, landscape, landmarks, and specific experiences. Nordic branding activities are characterized by oscillating between rather vague notions of the respective countries or the Nordics as a cluster, and very specific regional characteristics, for example, terroir.

Empirical contexts and methodological approaches

The selected commercial actors are based on purposeful sampling based on the explicit use of Nordicness in the branding (name, slogan, storytelling, etc.) and the criteria of geographic and sector variation within Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Historically, these three countries represent the heart of the Nordics, and we present these as examples of Nordicness rather than as representing any notion of “Scandinavian essentialism”. Previous research has pointed to similar tendencies of invoking Nordicness in branding in Finland (Pietilä *et al*, 2019), and it would arguably have offered more heterogeneity to include other Nordic contexts, such as Finland or Iceland, which could not be included due to the available resources.

All the commercial actors in the study belong to either design or cuisine sectors that belong to the creative industries. The justification for this is that The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council (www.norden.org) have actively supported the growth of the creative industries. The initiatives to strengthen the competitiveness of commercial actors in these sectors have emphasized the connection between a particular Nordic sentiment and successful business ventures. In the pursuit of examining how Nordicness is appropriated by Nordic branding actors and what value regimes are drawn on in the process, we found these types of industries to be a pertinent choice.

The total sample consists of nine contexts/organizations (some with multiple brands), and interviews with 17 informants, lasting 1-2 h (see Table 1). The objective of the empirical analysis has been to uncover how business actors construct value through Nordicness, and thus perform Nordic branding. This performance of Nordicness takes place at two levels. First, it is performed through various everyday activities that commercial actors are engaged in, such as marketing communication, interior decoration, and design. These activities take place regardless of whether they are the subject of a study or not. Second, the performance of Nordicness takes place during the interview itself, whereby the interviewee constructs a coherent narrative that can be viewed as a specific instance of constructing Nordicness that is contingent on being the subject of this particular study. While the interview deals with activities and strategic considerations regarding the first level, it is also an independent instance of brand performance.

In the pursuit of capturing these two levels of brand performance, we have combined observation, photography, and online research with semi-structured interviews. In each of the nine contexts, we commenced by conducting observations in and around their location, or several locations in cases

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where they had more than one. During these observations, we paid specific attention to both visual elements in the locations, such as written signs, photos, artwork, and interior decoration and to more ephemeral atmospherics such as sounds, music, and scents. These observations were intended to sensitize us to various elements in the locations that could potentially be coded as “Nordic.” In order to document these elements, we photographed them, where appropriate, and subsequently returned to these photographs when conducting the analysis. Unfortunately, limitations of space would not allow photos to be included in this paper. We also wrote fieldnotes after each observation. The online research followed a similar logic where we chartered the online presence of these organizations, both in terms of their official homepages, news articles, and blogs featuring the organizations. The material from the offline and online observations was subsequently used as background material when we prepared for the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the meaning of Nordicism, Nordic values in general, and specifically how they relate to or translate into the Nordic branding initiatives of the respective informants’ organizations, services, and products.

[Insert Table 1 here]

We consider the participants as expert informants as they are professionals reflecting on their roles, practices, and branding strategies, and motivations and personal meaning of these. As most of the informants are entrepreneurs themselves or key personnel (e.g., founders, directors, CEOs, marketing managers), they are effectively performing their brands in the interviews. The informants concurred to publish excerpts from the interview in a podcast series on Nordic branding. Thus, they were aware that the interview was not simply “talking to an academic researcher,” but a performance mediated to a broader audience. All the interviews were conducted in the professional contexts of which the informants themselves had co-constructed and imbued with meanings. We consider these ideal settings because informants were easily reminded of the Nordicism, appropriations, and values during the interviews.

We began by conducting a within-case analysis to identify emerging themes that illustrated how companies furnished their brands with meaning. From this emic level, we moved to a between-case analysis whereby we found commonalities between the cases of such a character that we could move to a more abstract, etic interpretation influenced by our theoretical framework. While we

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4 conducted analyses of all nine organizations, we have chosen to represent four of them—one
5 Norwegian, one Swedish, and two Danish—in our analysis below. As illustrative cases, they enable
6 us to provide a sufficient in-depth understanding of the trials and tribulations that goes into the
7 processes of Nordic branding. Furthermore, if we had chosen to report from all nine cases, we
8 would not have been able to provide sufficient contextual information and empirical richness to
9 account for the competing value regimes at play in their brand-building endeavors. Following, we
10 introduce the four illustrative cases.
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18 The Norwegian Restaurant Nyt is managed and owned by two young entrepreneurs, inspired by the
19 New Nordic Cuisine movement, who reinterpret the Nordicism in the organizational culture, décor,
20 ambience, and gastronomical design. The restaurant's interior has large photos of Nordland nature
21 on the wall, and books and magazines in the lounge areas cover varying topics of Nordic cuisine.
22 The menu is fixed, and customers can choose between four to seven dishes, all based on seasonal
23 ingredients from local resources. The descriptions in the menu are simple, explicating only the main
24 content such as “cod tongue” and “blue mussels,” which is consistent with the restaurant’s ideal of
25 creativity and surprise, but also of down-to-earth pragmatism. The presentation of each dish details
26 the ingredients with an emphasis on the local origin.
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35 The Danish BRØD bakery chain promotes itself as a “Danish bread studio” (in English), which is
36 communicated on the façade and as an integrated part of the brand name and logo on bags and
37 boxes. At the same time, they signal localness and no-nonsense (‘BRØD’ – Danish for ‘bread’),
38 focusing on culinary ambitions with a globalized “lifestyle” concept (‘bread studio’). The design of
39 BRØD should not be confused with the typical urban hipster café. It is devoid of a bohemian
40 ambience or retro design. It is a chain of bakeries with similar (pinewood) décor, placed in
41 provincial towns. The “studio” has the baker perform his craft in plain view of the patrons, and
42 everything in the décor (e.g. benches, lamps, serving boards, tea-lights) is homemade by the people
43 of BRØD or in collaboration with local artisans. The bakers do not start production at four in the
44 morning as usual, but within “normal hours” to allow family life. If a particular type of bread is not
45 ready when patrons enter, they may choose something else.
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56 The Danish company WODEN is marketing shoes as “Scandinavian Sneakers” and the brand name
57 signifies “WOrk of DENmark” and is inspired by the Norse god Odin (aka Woden). The “O” in the
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brand name is designed as a bold circle, referring to the Heliocentric Norse symbol of the sun. The founder explains that his inspiration for invoking the Nordic heritage came to him when he was working with the marketing of Ecco, another Danish footwear brand. During his contact with the export markets of Ecco, it dawned on him that so much of the meaning around the brand Ecco that he took for granted (as Dane) actually carried significant value in these markets as “Nordicness.” He knew then that if he ever started on his own, the brand should be based on “Nordic” values; hence, the Scandinavian Sneakers of WODEN.

The Swedish company Sandqvist has designed bags and other small accessories out of their Stockholm headquarters since 2004. On their webpage, they claim that the inspiration of the brand came from an identified lack of “well-crafted, design-led, functional bags on offer.” They explicitly flaunt their “Scandinavian roots” and state that “the three founders still believe in Swedish values: sustainability and care for the environment, high-quality designs, and uncompromising functionality” (Sandqvist n.d.). The communications of Sandqvist make extensive use of imagery of the Swedish nature, and the slogan “From the Nordic Landscapes” anchors these as symbolic resources of “Nordicness.”

Negotiating Nordicness

In the following, we will unpack how Nordic branding appropriates Nordicness and the value regimes that brand actors draw on to create value as meaningful difference. The findings illustrate how Nordic brand actors advance three regimes (*civic*, *green*, and *inspired*), reject and distance from one regime (*fame*), contest one regime (*market*), and compromise between two regimes (*industry* and *domestic*).

In design and cuisine, the *green regime* assumes an important role in justifying Nordicness. In Restaurant Nyt they have contracts with local organic providers, and they collect Nordic ingredients by foraging (spruce shoots) and diving (seaweed). The slogan of the restaurant is “A taste of Northern Norway,” explicitly claiming “Nordicness.” Such practices indicate that ecology and sustainability are core principles and significant for their positioning, much in line with the New Nordic Cuisine tradition. At WODEN, the green regime resumes a different meaning. Sneakers are usually not designed to last, but WODEN sneakers are claimed to be. In their production of shoes, they use cork in the top sole, recycled rubber in the soles, and Icelandic fish skin instead of leather

(a byproduct of the fishing industry, more durable than leather). It is mainly through commitment to the civic, innovative, and green values that WODEN and Nyt justify the brands as *Nordic*. The passion and enthusiasm that distinguish the design and the cuisine reveal how these actors are motivated by artistic rationales as well as those of sustainability, which signifies the principle values of both the *inspired* and *green* regimes. Consequently, these brand actors do not view their products as a simple commodity that should be sold by adjusting to the desires of a market, but rather as a (green) work of art that should be discovered and valued through surprise and enthusiasm.

The CEO and founder of WODEN uses the notions of “genuine” and “authentic” as important justification of the Nordicness of WODEN:

If you try to be something you are not, then you are not genuine and authentic, then I would also say, you are not really [Nordic] because at the end of the day, this is what matters to us. If we are talking about wind energy or whatever, it is genuine because it has a purpose and foundation.

While this might sound like typical authenticity claims (Beverland, 2006) that are not necessarily unique to Nordic companies, the “genuine” foundation means that green worth should not simply be translated in terms of market (or fame) value, but that it should also have consequences for sociality and how the work place is organized. This connects to the *civic regime*, which covers the principle value of collective welfare, which is often claimed to be a deeply held value on a societal level in the Nordic society (Berggren and Tragårdh, 2010). For example, at Nyt, the traditional organizational hierarchies of the cuisine sector are seemingly replaced by communality and cooperation. A chef at Nyt refers to how they work together and thus have a “team feeling”:

Yes, we have developed a team feeling. When we are about to close in the evenings everyone takes part in cleaning the cutlery and so on, and we can finish and go home. That is how it is, and it is a very good team feeling to work here. Often, in other places it is like the ‘waiters’ team against the chefs’ team.’ That has been my experience.

The chef previously worked in other restaurants (less focused on ‘Nordicness’), which tend to rely on a hierarchical structure of command. At Nyt, everyone participates equally even in the most mundane tasks, such as cleaning, ensuring communal (civic) worth. This is presented as an essential part of the branding of Nyt as “Nordic,” not only as a “backstage” precondition but also as foundation for their relationship towards their guests, as an attempt to defy hierarchies through communal convention (e.g. as ‘kos’, ‘hygge’, Linnet, 2011). The chef and his “Nyt family” all express that the Nordicness they aim for is a “visit into a homely atmosphere,” one that is welcoming, relaxed, inclusive and far from the pretense and pompousness of “fine dining.” Paradoxically, this is why they use comfortable chairs and white tablecloths rather than clean wooden surfaces and minimalist design aesthetics often seen elsewhere as “New Nordic” - as a way to make guests relax and feel welcome. Communality, trust, and a feeling of being safe are what enable employees and founders to live out their inspiration and creativity. In this way, civic and inspired regimes are connected to create Nordicness.

The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) of Sandqvist claims that the basis of their company is related to the Scandinavian roots of Sandqvist, which is related to their upbringing in a social democratic welfare state:

Sweden is quite safe [as a welfare state], and it provides a lot of room for creativity. You can test [innovative] things, and there is pretty much a do-it-yourself feeling in that and I think you can bring that feeling along wherever you go. This level of safety has been attained.

In contrast to Anglo-American citizens, who are often skeptical about state interventions (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010), the CMO celebrates the civic values that the government has provided for him and the company. The brand’s innovative potential (inspired regime) is based on these civic values. Individual freedom in Anglo-American contexts means that the individual citizen should provide for themselves in the field of the market, the citizenship in a Nordic context reflects an affordance to “liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency in civil society” (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010, p. 13).

In a brand video portraying the three founders hiking and skiing in the Nordic landscape, the focus is not on survival or endurance, but on quietly enjoying nature - the intimate experience of Nordic nature while fishing, sleeping under the open skies, cooking together by the fire, and so on. The founder Anton Sandqvist explains how inspiration to the durable, simple design of the bags came directly from these landscapes and “the love of nature.” Thus, the Sandqvist brand is justified as “Nordic” and special by asserting green, civic, and inspired values. In the interview, the Sandqvist CMO claims to base the designs on a “unisex” approach, though without explicitly mentioning “feminism” or gender issues in their general brand communications. However, it is a particular focus in Swedish cases to invoke gender as an important part of civic values (as LGBTQ+ visibility, freedom, equality, etc.). All respondents in the Swedish fashion industry elaborate this extensively. Even though the Swedish respondents are extremely careful not to appear nationalistic in their justification of Nordicness, they emphasize these civic values of gender awareness as “what makes Swedish fashion *Swedish*.”

Nordicness and its tensions

Following Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) perspective, branding actors will always be guided and restricted by rules and convention structures outside of their own realm. Power dynamics and constant shifts of conventions provide varying degrees of freedom to market actors to create the intended message. Consequently, Nordicness and the value regimes that it draws on do not exist in a vacuum during construction of Nordic brands. Instead, branding actors rely on competing value regimes while they attempt to appropriate and justify Nordicness as meaningful difference.

Thus far, our findings point to three main value regimes: *civic*, *green*, and *inspired*, which distinguish Nordicness in several ways depending on the context, that is, primarily the industry type. None of the brand managers, however, have explicated *market regime* as an important rule of Nordicness. On the contrary, several informants denounce this regime as relevant. The CEO of WODEN gives a typical example:

We try to be more than a shoe; that is, without us having to go out and advertise it, brand ourselves on this [...] If there is no good story behind the shoe – well, then you have to spend a lot of money on selling the emperor's new clothes. I have previously seen many brands [doing that]. However, I often take fights because our best

marketing tool, sales tool, that is, the product [...]. So, if we put that value in our product, we can clearly offer a better story.

It is not new that marketing is cast in a dubious light (Torp and Andersen, 2018) or that “downplaying commercial motives” is sometimes a part of forging a sense of authenticity (Beverland, 2006). Still, there is something paradoxical when marketing professionals explicitly denounce “advertising” as such, perhaps even flaunting indifference to profit and market growth (*market regime*). Yet, what we find in this study is that the marketing professionals seem very reluctant to justify their actions openly and the reasoning of these as, in fact, a mode of “branding,” “advertising,” or “marketing.” The CMO and co-founder of Sandqvist see the authentically Nordic values as a restraint balance (as in the concept “lagom”):

CMO: ...we are not so aggressive in our goals for the company. We do have quite high goals, but we can get there. We can get there by our own means in a pace where we do not have to take high risks. We want to sleep well at night. We do not want to feel that we are on the brink.

INT: Brink of...bankruptcy?

CMO: Brink of...well if you want to go fast, you take high risks. We are not prone to doing that. We take only very calculated risks.

INT: Is that Swedish?

CMO: I think that it is...and I think that the further away from the big city you get, the smaller risks you take. Because it is more dangerous to take risks if you...are far from civilization somehow. So, we do take calculated risks, but we do it quite carefully [“ganska lugnt” in Swedish]

Paradoxes can be observed here because brands need competitiveness and efficiency to be profitable. For example, when the CEO of WODEN questions the *fame* and *market* regimes as relevant when arguing that the value of the WODEN brand is *in the product* and not a consequence of promotion efforts ('branding'), which other brands might rely on, or when the Sandqvist idea of Nordicness in business strategy is “lagom” growth.

The principle value of the *fame* regime that several informants deny is not a reputation as such, but the underlying values on which reputation is based. A pre-requisite for obtaining value in the world of fame is to focus on signs in the media to receive popularity and recognition from the audience. However, creating attention around oneself, to desire visibility, distinction, to be viewed as a success or “a star” is not a central value. Seeking and achieving fame means to have “revealed all and no secrets left to be discovered” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, p. 179), which is antithetical to how Nordicness is appropriated at WODEN, BRØD, Nyt, and Sandqvist.

It seems relevant to compare this particular tension between principles of valuation with the moral affordances of self-restraint, which has a special mythical resonance in the Nordic cultures - The Law of Jante. The CMO of Sandqvist refers explicitly to this, when he states “Jante is big in Sweden.” He believes that the Law of Jante is something specific to Sweden, but the “Law” is actually formulated by the Danish/Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1936), which became the label of a moral principle known beyond the Nordic countries (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018). Sandemose intended the “Law” as an exposure of the condescending, destructive pressure of social norms; however, a more positive interpretation also exists - that modesty, humbleness, and trust are cultural values associated with the underlying principles of the Law of Jante (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018).

Interestingly, the most iconic “flagship” of Nordic branding, Noma, could also be regarded as based on a mode of branding that conflicts with the Law of Jante and relies heavily on the justification of worth through “fame.” Noma has skillfully deployed diverse modes of branding in cookbooks, PR, and all kinds of media in their quest for global fame and Michelin stars (Leer, 2016). While Noma claims a certain “informal atmosphere,” it is also a truly exclusive, challenging experience to be able to enjoy, for example, live ants and shrimps (Hermansen, 2012). BRØD is a bakery intent on being anything but “exclusive”, challenging, or authoritative. The CEO (and founder) genuinely wants to create an inclusive space devoid of hierarchy, “snobbery,” or “marketing.” Thus, his idea of Nordic values does not exactly align with what he perceives to be those of Claus Meyer (of Noma):

[Talking about Claus Meyer...] He can go diving and then come back with some seaweed and say ‘this is what we should eat.’ He can go to the Roskilde Festival and

get up on a beer crate and say ‘you need to put more salt in bread;’ he gets 100 people to shout ‘MORE SALT IN BREAD’ [in mock screaming voice]. Well, this is pure Hitler, it is absolutely crazy. And that is what I am saying, this thing with Noma, I think it is super nice if we are going for branding [...] Can you follow me: all this celebrity stuff, all that is called branding. [...] Actually, I do not care about that. I do not even care if it means anything [for my business].

This depiction of cuisine trends as whimsical and authoritative is full of scorn in the lively impersonation of Claus Meyer. The “seaweed and salt” imagery could have been presented as expressions of *green* and *inspired* values, but they are seen as inauthentic, as relating to *fame* regime, hence rejected. The rejection is emphatically performed through his agitated voice, the sarcastic personification metaphor (“pure Hitler”) and the linguistic choices in “...stuff, all that is called...”, signaling a reticence, a distaste of the very words “celebrity” and “branding”. The rejection of *fame* value is extended to any potential *market* value that could be negotiated by the invocation of *fame*: the potential business benefits of (celebrity) branding do not justify it. The CEO further elaborates his rejection of branding by narrating an anecdote of the opening of the Odense branch of BRØD. The local newspaper arrived uninvited and intended to take pictures and publish an article about BRØD; however, he tossed them out after a heated exchange of words. It seems obvious that positive PR in the local newspaper would benefit the business of BRØD in several ways, but this embodied and territorial confrontation is meaningful as a performance of difference.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Figure 1 illustrates how the findings delineate Nordicness through the *civic*, *inspired*, and *green* regimes, and how this only becomes significant when contrasted against the *fame*, *market*, and *domestic* regimes. The regimes of *fame* and *market* (gray) seem to be most directly contested, while the values of the *domestic* and *industrial* regimes (shaded) are partly appropriated when negotiating functional dimensions (Caldwell and Freire, 2004), that is, embracing utilitarian aspects of the region, such as when the heritage and tradition of the Nordland region become important values that are drawn on when Restaurant Nyt appropriates their version of Nordicness. In the same way, BRØD interprets Danish bakery traditions with “lots of real Danish butter” (as grandma should have made it). The *industrial* regime is negotiated, for example, around efficiency when BRØD

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4 arranges the work/life balance for the bakers. It may seem to contest industrial efficiency if the
5 product selection is not ready for the customers in the morning; however, it is efficient to have
6 happy, healthy employees. The representational version of the *domestic* regime, however, such as
7 when Claus Meyer and Noma receive the hierarchical status of representing the New Nordic brand,
8 are examples of how actors use regimes in competition with one another. This means that the
9 potential values of tradition, heritage, and terroir are negotiated through other value structures to
10 become relevant for Nordicness. This continuous process of negotiation of value regimes is how
11 Nordic branding actors appropriate meaning to their brands. Implying that there is no simple
12 standard of “best practice” (Pamment, 2016) or “Nordic strengths” (Nordic Council of Ministers,
13 2015) to offer Nordicness to (place) brands. There are always intersections between the various
14 value regimes at play (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Thus, as our results show, one regime
15 depends on other regimes to become intelligible as Nordicness. Consequently, our findings provide
16 a new understanding of the formation of a Nordic brand.
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28 **Concluding reflections**

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30 Invoking a lens of valuation theory has allowed us to observe how brand actors justify their
31 Nordicness by drawing on value regimes, primarily justified by green, inspired, and civic values. In
32 addition, we illustrate how these Nordic brands are made meaningful as tensions, as propositions of
33 “value as difference.” This premise of identity *as distancing* is one of the most basic human traits.
34 As cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1996) explains, most people do not know what they want
35 but are very clear about what they do not want.
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42 Firstly, our findings indicate how brand actors on one hand appropriate the existing context of the
43 Nordic place brand (a case of elaborate strategic place branding), and on the other hand is doing so
44 in ways that distanced themselves from *branding*. It is a paradox on several levels: brand identity is
45 based on value propositions of difference (Holt, 2003, and so is place branding, Anholt, 2007). In
46 our case, the most important difference is the brand performance of distancing from *branding itself*.
47 The pragmatic sociology of “orders of worth” has been previously employed in studies of
48 marketing and branding (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018). We extend their work by identifying the
49 paradoxical rejection of the fame regime in particular, which would be centrally placed in a
50 marketplace where top-of-mind brand awareness is of essence (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). This
51 finding suggests that the value regimes underlying Nordicness are contingent on a code of moral
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affordances; a mode of Nordic “authenticity” and self-restraint popularized in The Law of Jante and the Swedish concept of “lagom.” In this context, it becomes a positive “value of difference” and a justification of Nordicness. This basis in “self-restraint” is perhaps unsurprising at first glance; however, the fierce distancing of fame and market values in the context of branding is counterintuitive. In addition, while we see this *as part of* the collected, dynamic set of justifications of values that negotiate Nordicness, it neither is the “essence” of, nor is it unique to Nordicness.

Secondly, Cassinger *et al.* (2019) position “The Nordic Approach” in place branding research between two other approaches: Management (capitalism, functionalist) and Critical (anti-capitalist, emancipatory). If we were to offer the findings in light of the Managerial Approach, we might focus on a pragmatic use of the findings to improve the branding by investing more aggressively in marketing the Nordicness (e.g. as “essence” of green values and innovativeness) to maximize the market value of the “Nordic” products and services mentioned above. From a critical perspective, one might focus on the rejection of the fame regime, revealing branding and marketing as simply a mode of “discursive closure” that suppresses the real and potentially negative consequences of Nordic Branding (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018). Alternatively, one might focus on a critical inversion, where one considers the potential negative consequences to society and businesses of not doing any branding at all. It is quite possible that an uncharted potential resides in many Nordic brands that do not come to fruition due to this partial rejection of conventional branding.

Place branding research, such as the present attempt at a Nordic approach, should definitely be aware of the danger of “drinking too much of one’s own cool-aid” in advancing a new form of Nordic moral superiority or “perfect practice” (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). In our attempt to unpack the values of Nordic branding, we align with the “therapeutic” intentions of the Nordic approach outlined by Cassinger *et al.* (2019). Using French pragmatic sociology as a lens, we have presented a “diagnostic” multifaceted understanding of value and value negotiation of Nordicness. An extension of the research presented above could be interventionist in the sense of helping brand actors and stakeholders to acknowledge the conflicts and tensions (and potential moral dilemmas) that are involved when performing Nordicness. Not in a critical sense of exposing capitalist hypocrisy or “functionalist” in the sense of customer-oriented efficiency, but rather as a “therapeutic” reflexivity. Our contribution invites both Nordic brand actors, DMOs, and traditional place branding organizations to reflect on how their negotiations of competing values constitute

performances of *Nordicness as Nordic branding*. In addition, we hope our study could further inspire interdisciplinary, value-based research into the potential contingencies of (product) branding and place branding of other contexts and regions.

Thirdly, while our study and analysis were not designed to reveal specific distinctions within the Nordic place brands or contexts, for example, of “Norwegian values” or differences between sectors, the findings do seem to suggest some systematic differences. Most notable is the tensions around “gender” being a particular strong justification of value in the Swedish context, which aligns with previous research (Molander *et al.*, 2019). Future studies could explore such systematic differences between contexts and sectors to arrive at a more fine-grained understanding of how *Nordicness* is performed as a specific constellation of different value regimes. One approach could be an extension into the life-worlds of consumers, perhaps invoking a lense of ‘field/habitus’ or how value regime tensions are negotiated in welfare states policies through justification of ‘*Nordicness*’.

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Country	Context/Organisation/ SME/Brands	Interviewees	Place of observations/ photos/interviews
Denmark	WODEN – Scandinavian Sneakers	Founder/CEO	Main office, showroom, shops
	RedInk Frejdahl Ragnsborg (Lyngvild)	Owner/branding consultant	Main office
	BRØD	Founder/CEO	Café visits Visit to workshop
	OAK – The Nordic Journal	Founder	Main office
Sweden	Sandqvist Bags	Founder/Head of marketing	Main office, showroom, shops
	Swedish Fashion Council	CEO	Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan
	Association of Swedish Fashion Brands	Secretary General	Main office
	Beckmanns College of Design	Director of external relations Director design communication courses	Visit to College premises
	Aifur		Restaurant, dining. Informal talk with staff and guests.
Norway	Restaurant Nyt, Bodø	Founder/manager Founder/owner/head chef Chef/ apprentices	Restaurant, dining, Visit to kitchen

	Radisson Blu, Bodø	Head chef/manager Chef	Interviews in Restaurant Nyt
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Table 1: Overview of empirical contexts, data and approaches.

