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## **Unpacking Nordic branding**

*the value regimes of Nordicness*

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## Unpacking Nordic Branding: The Value Regimes of Nordicness

### 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 Nordicness.

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

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4 stakeholders invoke during branding practices, for example, when they select symbols, tell stories,  
5 thus perpetuating myths in Nordic branding (see Ostberg, 2011).  
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9 We use the concept *value regime* as the assembly of adjacent and conflicting values behind  
10 branding practices (see Thévenot, 2007). This enables us to focus on what is regarded as important  
11 to people, communities, businesses, and societies (Graeber, 2005). Our attention is directed towards  
12 the legitimacy and heterogeneity of value regimes in Nordic branding. Using field data from a  
13 selection of branding actors from creative industries in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, we seek to  
14 answer the following research question: *How is Nordicness appropriated by Nordic branding*  
15 *actors and what value regimes are drawn on in the process?* We contribute to place branding  
16 literature with a novel approach by examining value regimes in play when commercial branding  
17 actors create Nordicness by mobilizing the place brand. We argue that branding actors rely on  
18 varying value regimes that cultivate a specific set of conflictual relations during the creation of  
19 Nordic brands. We discuss how the discovery of conflictual relations may contribute to the place  
20 branding literature. In extension, we also consider how the reflection on these conflictual relations  
21 might be useful for both traditional place branding organizations and SME business actors  
22 appropriating Nordicness.  
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## 34 35 **Theory**

### 36 *Value as meaningful difference*

37 While the terms “value” and “value creation” are among the most important and frequently used  
38 terms in the marketing literature, they are simultaneously also the most underdefined (Arnould,  
39 2013; Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014; Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Venkatesh  
40 and Penaloza, 2013). One of the more fruitful ways in which value has been defined in marketing  
41 builds on Graeber’s (2001) work. Graeber suggested that there are three general meanings of value.  
42 First, there are “values” that we hold in society or social groups in the sociological or philosophical  
43 sense. For example, we can state that a certain society values human rights, gender equality, or that  
44 we assign high value to individual freedom, freedom of speech, the environment, or animal rights.  
45 Second, there is “value” in the traditional economic sense. Graeber gives an example of the market  
46 value of a house, food processor, or ton of pig iron. The majority of the research on value covers the  
47 economic or functional benefits of actors, often referred to as exchange value (Bagozzi, 1975;  
48 Gallarza and Gil Saura, 2006; Zeithaml, 1988). Finally, there is a notion that “value” can be defined  
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4 as “value as meaningful difference.” This notion stems from the structural linguistics work of  
5 Ferdinand de Saussure, who argues that the meaning of a concept springs from the contrast it  
6 creates to other concepts. Graeber’s (2001) argument is that, essentially, all of the above three  
7 views on value are one and the same, because they are all about “meaningful difference.” In other  
8 words, the first and second notions of value can be subsumed into the third notion of value as  
9 meaningful difference.  
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16 In the spirit of “value as meaningful difference,” we can easily draw parallels between successful  
17 place branding initiatives and the value that is created as meaningful difference. A societal value  
18 such as gender equality is, for example, many times evoked in the official place branding initiatives  
19 of the Swedish state (Molander et al., 2019). In such instances the gist of the campaign is that  
20 Sweden does things differently than most other countries when it comes to state policies regarding  
21 gender equality. The supposed value then stems from the idea that not only does Sweden do things  
22 differently but also that this difference is meaningful. Only if the relevant audiences accept the dual  
23 propositions of difference and meaningfulness, will such a campaign have the potential to be  
24 successful.  
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### 33 *Value in place branding*

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35 The surge of strategic branding techniques in place marketing in the early 1990s was motivated by  
36 the potential for value creation in the consumption of places (Campelo, 2017). Following the  
37 increased globalization of markets, where places are progressively competing with each other, they  
38 attempt to utilize marketing tools to create differentiation and identification (Ashworth, 2009).  
39 Place branding has thus been theorized from a corporate or product brand perspective that  
40 presupposes that value is a function of either production, consumption, or co-production (Cassinger  
41 et al., 2019). However, place brands differ from product brands in terms of the diversity of  
42 stakeholders’ claims to legitimacy and ownership of stories. As an alternative, the appropriation  
43 perspective (Lucarelli and Brorström, 2013) views place branding as a dynamic and emergent  
44 process (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) where values are created in a dynamic and ongoing  
45 interpretation between stakeholders situated in culture and the environment (Aitken and Campelo,  
46 2011). While functional approaches often would consider the creation of meaningful differences in  
47 a domain for producers (e.g., DMOs, city planners) (Govers, 2011), the appropriation perspective  
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4 opens the way for a multi-faceted understanding of value. What are considered meaningful  
5 differences then depend on the spatio-temporal dimension among stakeholders in situ.  
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10 A place brand is potentially valuable as a differentiator for stakeholders that draws on its meanings.  
11 The process by which industry and business actors create value by mobilizing place brands is  
12 scarcely covered in the literature. Recent discussions relevant to the Nordic place brand have  
13 pointed at societal values such as equality, welfare-based individual autonomy, trust, egalitarianism,  
14 openness and “hygge” (Askegaard and Ostberg, 2019; Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). It is argued that such  
15 values can be significant because in other parts of the world “transparency is still imaginary,  
16 egalitarianism is still an unfamiliar term, inclusivity is still an illusion [and] gender relations are still  
17 troubling” (Kavaratzis, 2019, p. 245). However, it does not follow that “value as difference” is in  
18 any way a construct of “essence” or a “fixed” structure. On the contrary: the meaning of any  
19 “difference” needs to be continuously negotiated, performed and justified (Puntoni *et al* 2010;  
20 Ostberg 2011; Aitken and Campelo 2011).  
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### 30 *Regimes of valuation*

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32 Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) have contributed to pragmatic sociology with the “orders of worth”  
33 perspective. The acknowledgement of the existence of “orders of worth,” or what we refer to as  
34 value regimes is central, which makes the rules that coordinate Nordicness and branding practices  
35 visible. Boltanski and Thévenot’s primary interest is related to how actors “justify their judgments  
36 in response to criticism” and how they engage in “bridging disputes to a close,” for example,  
37 through compromises (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006, p. 19-20). The “orders of worth” perspective  
38 enables us to focus on the different value regimes across the Nordic region and, as such, investigate  
39 how value regimes would succeed, complement, or compete with one another (see Corvellec and  
40 Hultman, 2014). Consequently, the concept of value as meaningful difference depends on the  
41 parallel understanding of the underlying, adjacent, and conflicting value regimes for becoming  
42 intelligible. For example, a Nordic place brand, say Copenhagen or Lofoten, is only successful if its  
43 Nordicness refers to value regimes that are meaningful to relevant stakeholders as “Nordic.”  
44 Obviously, selecting and negotiating values to justify a place brand is a political and conflictual  
45 process (e.g. Lindberg *et al.*, 2019).  
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4 In studying French society, Boltanski and Thévenot accounted for six value regimes (“orders of  
5 worth”) that actors may rely on when justifying their practices. These are, with principle values in  
6 brackets: (1) inspired regime (nonconformity, creativeness), (2) domestic regime (esteem,  
7 tradition), (3) fame regime (renown, reputation), (4) civic regime (collective welfare), (5) market  
8 regime (competition, price), and (6) industrial regime (productivity, efficiency) (Boltanski and  
9 Thévenot, 2006). In addition, several value regimes have been added from other contexts, for  
10 example, project regime (flexibility, innovation) (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and green regime  
11 (protecting nature and animals) (Thévenot *et al.*, 2000).  
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20 Boltanski and Thévenot illustrate how a brand can be justified as a part of the fame regime, where  
21 the “state of worthiness” is that of being recognized, successful, distinguished, and able to capture  
22 attention (2006, p. 179-180). As for most businesses, invoking the principle values of the market  
23 (price) and industrial regimes (productivity and efficiency) might also seem a likely criterion for  
24 how a brand is justified. While branding practices for certain businesses, such as restaurants, could  
25 be low prices, customer-orientation, and effective cooking under these regimes (e.g., ‘family-  
26 restaurants’). For others, focus on local traditions and “terroir” might be central markers within the  
27 domestic and fame regime where the principle values are esteem, tradition, and reputation (e.g.  
28 ‘fine dining’). Related to Graeber's value as meaningful difference, it is unlikely that price,  
29 productivity, and efficiency in restaurants would reflect a meaningful distinction for Nordicism,  
30 since it hardly would differ from many other restaurants. From the outset, however, it seems more  
31 likely that values such as esteem, tradition, and reputation could be interpreted as significant  
32 differences (e.g., if a restaurant has its ideal from the New Nordic Cuisine tradition). However, how  
33 well would this offer distinction between French and New Nordic Cuisine? The framework of  
34 Boltanski and Thévenot entails analyzing conflicts of inter-regime valuation, where the principles  
35 and criteria of one value regime is questioned and negotiated by invoking those of other regimes  
36 (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, p. 260ff; Bertilsson and Rennstam 2018, p. 264). It is argued that the  
37 “orders of worth” perspective is suitable in “moments of critical questioning in which the worth of  
38 particular arrangements needs to be justified” (Patriotta *et al.*, 2011, p. 1805). Thus, unpacking  
39 value regimes means more than identifying a set of values or main value regimes; understanding the  
40 conflictual inter-regime negotiation is also essential. In comparison, attempts at defining Nordicism  
41 as an “essentialism” of a specific set of values or traits (e.g., Anholt, 2007; Pamment, 2016) would  
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4 not consider how these dynamic negotiations lead to meaningful distinction in the performances of  
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6 Nordicism.

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9 Few branding scholars have used pragmatic sociology; however, Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018)  
10 are an exception who argue that the framework can be used for understanding brand value as a  
11 multi-faceted phenomenon, which relies on separate “worlds of worth” for becoming intelligible.  
12 They contribute to an understanding of “branding that acknowledges the conflictual relationship  
13 between value regimes and enables a balanced analysis of the social consequences of branding”  
14 (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018, p. 260). Using this framework, they performed a critical analysis  
15 of branding, opening for a more complex understanding of branding as also “destruction of value”  
16 and branding as not just a potential for “co-creation” but even for “co-destruction.” In the same  
17 vein, Lindberg *et al.* (2019) found that the justification of sustainable tourism of a Nordic  
18 destination was based on complex negotiation between regimes of value.  
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28 In summary, while previous research has argued that there are multiple meanings and value regimes  
29 that are constructed socially and politically (e.g., Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014), Boltanski and  
30 Thévenot (2006) contribute to a theoretical foundation of understanding *how* value may differ in  
31 Nordic branding. Using pragmatic sociology as a lens, we therefore aim to develop place branding  
32 theory in a direction that accommodates a multifaceted understanding of value and value  
33 negotiation.  
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#### 40 **Nordic branding**

41 Cassinger *et al.* (2019) suggest in their Manifesto that the Nordic approach to place branding is  
42 transdisciplinary, predicated on being oriented towards sustainability and welfare, and based on  
43 constructionist relational ontology. Nordic value regimes should not be considered a “Nordic  
44 essence” as such, but rather a specific set of culturally constructed valuations. These valuations  
45 constitute Nordicism as a set of meaningful differences of what it means to be “Nordic.”  
46 Consequently, the current study does not address the effectiveness of the branding activities  
47 discussed. Rather, the focus is on how the brand actors navigate between different value regimes in  
48 forging a sense of Nordicism for their respective (Nordic) brands.  
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4 Drawing on Holt (2003), it could be argued that any brand is surrounded by a brand culture  
5 constituted by “shared, taken-for-granted brand stories, images, and associations” (p. 3). This brand  
6 culture is not merely a result of the firm’s activities. Rather, brand culture is the result of various  
7 stories, images, and associations being disseminated by various mediators with more or less explicit  
8 agendas of Nordicness. Different audiences might interpret and negotiate Nordicness in ways that  
9 lead to multiple brand cultures existing at the same time, which is referred to as polysemy (Puntoni  
10 *et al.*, 2010).  
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18 This way of understanding how brands are furnished with meaning has particular ramifications for  
19 the relationship between Nordic place branding and branding conducted by business actors relating  
20 their brand to place. More specifically, these two modes of branding stand in a dialectical  
21 relationship to each other, where each one influences the other. In this sense, we consider Nordic  
22 place branding a context, resource, and result of the performance of Nordic branding. Thus, we do  
23 not focus on *place branding as such*. If we take Sweden as an example, we can see how place  
24 branding activities on behalf of the government have systematically disseminated stories, images,  
25 and associations portraying Sweden as a modern, progressive, rational, and open-minded country  
26 (Molander *et al.*, 2019). Various Swedish companies—IKEA and Volvo being noteworthy  
27 examples—have consequently used these notions of Sweden in their brand-building endeavors.  
28 These companies have, if one wants to use that terminology, appropriated parts of the official place  
29 branding messages in their own brand building activities. Applying Holt’s (2003) terminology, the  
30 companies, through their Nordic branding activities, become “authors” of the place brand - Sweden.  
31 This is not something that is reserved for those engaging in “place branding proper”.  
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44 Another source of inspiration for Nordic branding might be linked to various individuals’ self-  
45 expression, for example, how artists have represented the place. Here, the Nordic countries have a  
46 rich pool to draw upon, dating back to the Icelandic Viking sagas from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Branding  
47 actors might also draw on material dimensions, such as climate, landscape, landmarks, and specific  
48 experiences. Nordic branding activities are characterized by oscillating between rather vague  
49 notions of the respective countries or the Nordics as a cluster, and very specific regional  
50 characteristics, for example, terroir.  
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## 58 **Empirical contexts and methodological approaches**

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4 The selected commercial actors are based on purposeful sampling based on the explicit use of  
5 Nordicness in the branding (name, slogan, storytelling, etc.) and the criteria of geographic and  
6 sector variation within Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Historically, these three countries represent  
7 the heart of the Nordics, and we present these as examples of Nordicness rather than as representing  
8 any notion of “Scandinavian essentialism”. Previous research has pointed to similar tendencies of  
9 invoking Nordicness in branding in Finland (Pietilä *et al*, 2019), and it would arguably have offered  
10 more heterogeneity to include other Nordic contexts, such as Finland or Iceland, which could not be  
11 included due to the available resources.  
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20 All the commercial actors in the study belong to either design or cuisine sectors that belong to the  
21 creative industries. The justification for this is that The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic  
22 Council ([www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org)) have actively supported the growth of the creative industries. The  
23 initiatives to strengthen the competitiveness of commercial actors in these sectors have emphasized  
24 the connection between a particular Nordic sentiment and successful business ventures. In the  
25 pursuit of examining how Nordicness is appropriated by Nordic branding actors and what value  
26 regimes are drawn on in the process, we found these types of industries to be a pertinent choice.  
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34 The total sample consists of nine contexts/organizations (some with multiple brands), and  
35 interviews with 17 informants, lasting 1-2 h (see Table 1). The objective of the empirical analysis  
36 has been to uncover how business actors construct value through Nordicness, and thus perform  
37 Nordic branding. This performance of Nordicness takes place at two levels. First, it is performed  
38 through various everyday activities that commercial actors are engaged in, such as marketing  
39 communication, interior decoration, and design. These activities take place regardless of whether  
40 they are the subject of a study or not. Second, the performance of Nordicness takes place during the  
41 interview itself, whereby the interviewee constructs a coherent narrative that can be viewed as a  
42 specific instance of constructing Nordicness that is contingent on being the subject of this particular  
43 study. While the interview deals with activities and strategic considerations regarding the first level,  
44 it is also an independent instance of brand performance.  
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54 In the pursuit of capturing these two levels of brand performance, we have combined observation,  
55 photography, and online research with semi-structured interviews. In each of the nine contexts, we  
56 commenced by conducting observations in and around their location, or several locations in cases  
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4 where they had more than one. During these observations, we paid specific attention to both visual  
5 elements in the locations, such as written signs, photos, artwork, and interior decoration and to more  
6 ephemeral atmospherics such as sounds, music, and scents. These observations were intended to  
7 sensitize us to various elements in the locations that could potentially be coded as “Nordic.” In  
8 order to document these elements, we photographed them, where appropriate, and subsequently  
9 returned to these photographs when conducting the analysis. Unfortunately, limitations of space  
10 would not allow photos to be included in this paper. We also wrote fieldnotes after each  
11 observation. The online research followed a similar logic where we chartered the online presence of  
12 these organizations, both in terms of their official homepages, news articles, and blogs featuring the  
13 organizations. The material from the offline and online observations was subsequently used as  
14 background material when we prepared for the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured,  
15 focusing on the meaning of Nordicism, Nordic values in general, and specifically how they relate  
16 to or translate into the Nordic branding initiatives of the respective informants’ organizations,  
17 services, and products.  
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34 We consider the participants as expert informants as they are professionals reflecting on their roles,  
35 practices, and branding strategies, and motivations and personal meaning of these. As most of the  
36 informants are entrepreneurs themselves or key personnel (e.g., founders, directors, CEOs,  
37 marketing managers), they are effectively performing their brands in the interviews. The informants  
38 concurred to publish excerpts from the interview in a podcast series on Nordic branding. Thus, they  
39 were aware that the interview was not simply “talking to an academic researcher,” but a  
40 performance mediated to a broader audience. All the interviews were conducted in the professional  
41 contexts of which the informants themselves had co-constructed and imbued with meanings. We  
42 consider these ideal settings because informants were easily reminded of the Nordicism,  
43 appropriations, and values during the interviews.  
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53 We began by conducting a within-case analysis to identify emerging themes that illustrated how  
54 companies furnished their brands with meaning. From this emic level, we moved to a between-case  
55 analysis whereby we found commonalities between the cases of such a character that we could  
56 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 Nytt 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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4 brand name is designed as a bold circle, referring to the Heliocentric Norse symbol of the sun. The  
5 founder explains that his inspiration for invoking the Nordic heritage came to him when he was  
6 working with the marketing of Ecco, another Danish footwear brand. During his contact with the  
7 export markets of Ecco, it dawned on him that so much of the meaning around the brand Ecco that  
8 he took for granted (as Dane) actually carried significant value in these markets as “Nordicness.”  
9 He knew then that if he ever started on his own, the brand should be based on “Nordic” values;  
10 hence, the Scandinavian Sneakers of WODEN.  
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18 The Swedish company Sandqvist has designed bags and other small accessories out of their  
19 Stockholm headquarters since 2004. On their webpage, they claim that the inspiration of the brand  
20 came from an identified lack of “well-crafted, design-led, functional bags on offer.” They explicitly  
21 flaunt their “Scandinavian roots” and state that “the three founders still believe in Swedish values:  
22 sustainability and care for the environment, high-quality designs, and uncompromising  
23 functionality” (Sandqvist n.d.). The communications of Sandqvist make extensive use of imagery of  
24 the Swedish nature, and the slogan “From the Nordic Landscapes” anchors these as symbolic  
25 resources of “Nordicness.”  
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### 33 **Negotiating Nordicness**

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35 In the following, we will unpack how Nordic branding appropriates Nordicness and the value  
36 regimes that brand actors draw on to create value as meaningful difference. The findings illustrate  
37 how Nordic brand actors advance three regimes (*civic*, *green*, and *inspired*), reject and distance  
38 from one regime (*fame*), contest one regime (*market*), and compromise between two regimes  
39 (*industry* and *domestic*).  
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45 In design and cuisine, the *green regime* assumes an important role in justifying Nordicness. In  
46 Restaurant Nyt they have contracts with local organic providers, and they collect Nordic ingredients  
47 by foraging (spruce shoots) and diving (seaweed). The slogan of the restaurant is “A taste of  
48 Northern Norway,” explicitly claiming “Nordicness.” Such practices indicate that ecology and  
49 sustainability are core principles and significant for their positioning, much in line with the New  
50 Nordic Cuisine tradition. At WODEN, the green regime resumes a different meaning. Sneakers are  
51 usually not designed to last, but WODEN sneakers are claimed to be. In their production of shoes,  
52 they use cork in the top sole, recycled rubber in the soles, and Icelandic fish skin instead of leather  
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4 (a byproduct of the fishing industry, more durable than leather). It is mainly through commitment to  
5 the civic, innovative, and green values that WODEN and Nyt justify the brands as *Nordic*. The  
6 passion and enthusiasm that distinguish the design and the cuisine reveal how these actors are  
7 motivated by artistic rationales as well as those of sustainability, which signifies the principle  
8 values of both the *inspired* and *green* regimes. Consequently, these brand actors do not view their  
9 products as a simple commodity that should be sold by adjusting to the desires of a market, but  
10 rather as a (green) work of art that should be discovered and valued through surprise and  
11 enthusiasm.  
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20 The CEO and founder of WODEN uses the notions of “genuine” and “authentic” as important  
21 justification of the Nordicness of WODEN:  
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25 If you try to be something you are not, then you are not genuine and authentic, then I  
26 would also say, you are not really [Nordic] because at the end of the day, this is what  
27 matters to us. If we are talking about wind energy or whatever, it is genuine because it  
28 has a purpose and foundation.  
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34 While this might sound like typical authenticity claims (Beverland, 2006) that are not necessarily  
35 unique to Nordic companies, the “genuine” foundation means that green worth should not simply be  
36 translated in terms of market (or fame) value, but that it should also have consequences for sociality  
37 and how the work place is organized. This connects to the *civic regime*, which covers the principle  
38 value of collective welfare, which is often claimed to be a deeply held value on a societal level in  
39 the Nordic society (Berggren and Tragårdh, 2010). For example, at Nyt, the traditional  
40 organizational hierarchies of the cuisine sector are seemingly replaced by communality and  
41 cooperation. A chef at Nyt refers to how they work together and thus have a “team feeling”:  
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49 Yes, we have developed a team feeling. When we are about to close in the evenings  
50 everyone takes part in cleaning the cutlery and so on, and we can finish and go home.  
51 That is how it is, and it is a very good team feeling to work here. Often, in other  
52 places it is like the ‘waiters’ team against the chefs’ team.’ That has been my  
53 experience.  
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4 The chef previously worked in other restaurants (less focused on ‘Nordicness’), which tend to rely  
5 on a hierarchical structure of command. At Nyt, everyone participates equally even in the most  
6 mundane tasks, such as cleaning, ensuring communal (civic) worth. This is presented as an essential  
7 part of the branding of Nyt as “Nordic,” not only as a “backstage” precondition but also as  
8 foundation for their relationship towards their guests, as an attempt to defy hierarchies through  
9 communal convention (e.g. as ‘kos’, ‘hygge’, Linnet, 2011). The chef and his “Nyt family” all  
10 express that the Nordicness they aim for is a “visit into a homely atmosphere,” one that is  
11 welcoming, relaxed, inclusive and far from the pretense and pompousness of “fine dining.”  
12 Paradoxically, this is why they use comfortable chairs and white tablecloths rather than clean  
13 wooden surfaces and minimalist design aesthetics often seen elsewhere as “New Nordic” - as a way  
14 to make guests relax and feel welcome. Community, trust, and a feeling of being safe are what  
15 enable employees and founders to live out their inspiration and creativity. In this way, civic and  
16 inspired regimes are connected to create Nordicness.  
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28 The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) of Sandqvist claims that the basis of their company is related  
29 to the Scandinavian roots of Sandqvist, which is related to their upbringing in a social democratic  
30 welfare state:  
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35 Sweden is quite safe [as a welfare state], and it provides a lot of room for creativity.  
36 You can test [innovative] things, and there is pretty much a do-it-yourself feeling in  
37 that and I think you can bring that feeling along wherever you go. This level of safety  
38 has been attained.  
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44 In contrast to Anglo-American citizens, who are often skeptical about state interventions (Berggren  
45 and Trägårdh, 2010), the CMO celebrates the civic values that the government has provided for him  
46 and the company. The brand’s innovative potential (inspired regime) is based on these civic values.  
47 Individual freedom in Anglo-American contexts means that the individual citizen should provide  
48 for themselves in the field of the market, the citizenship in a Nordic context reflects an affordance  
49 to “liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency in civil society”  
50 (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010, p. 13).  
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4 In a brand video portraying the three founders hiking and skiing in the Nordic landscape, the focus  
5 is not on survival or endurance, but on quietly enjoying nature - the intimate experience of Nordic  
6 nature while fishing, sleeping under the open skies, cooking together by the fire, and so on. The  
7 founder Anton Sandqvist explains how inspiration to the durable, simple design of the bags came  
8 directly from these landscapes and “the love of nature.” Thus, the Sandqvist brand is justified as  
9 “Nordic” and special by asserting green, civic, and inspired values. In the interview, the Sandqvist  
10 CMO claims to base the designs on a “unisex” approach, though without explicitly mentioning  
11 “feminism” or gender issues in their general brand communications. However, it is a particular  
12 focus in Swedish cases to invoke gender as an important part of civic values (as LGBTQ+ visibility,  
13 freedom, equality, etc.). All respondents in the Swedish fashion industry elaborate this extensively.  
14 Even though the Swedish respondents are extremely careful not to appear nationalistic in their  
15 justification of Nordicness, they emphasize these civic values of gender awareness as “what makes  
16 Swedish fashion *Swedish*.”  
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### 29 *Nordicness and its tensions*

30 Following Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) perspective, branding actors will always be guided and  
31 restricted by rules and convention structures outside of their own realm. Power dynamics and  
32 constant shifts of conventions provide varying degrees of freedom to market actors to create the  
33 intended message. Consequently, Nordicness and the value regimes that it draws on do not exist in  
34 a vacuum during construction of Nordic brands. Instead, branding actors rely on competing value  
35 regimes while they attempt to appropriate and justify Nordicness as meaningful difference.  
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42 Thus far, our findings point to three main value regimes: *civic*, *green*, and *inspired*, which  
43 distinguish Nordicness in several ways depending on the context, that is, primarily the industry  
44 type. None of the brand managers, however, have explicated *market regime* as an important rule of  
45 Nordicness. On the contrary, several informants denounce this regime as relevant. The CEO of  
46 WODEN gives a typical example:  
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52 We try to be more than a shoe; that is, without us having to go out and advertise it,  
53 brand ourselves on this [...] If there is no good story behind the shoe – well, then you  
54 have to spend a lot of money on selling the emperor's new clothes. I have previously  
55 seen many brands [doing that]. However, I often take fights because our best  
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4 marketing tool, sales tool, that is, the product [...]. So, if we put that value in our  
5 product, we can clearly offer a better story.  
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9 It is not new that marketing is cast in a dubious light (Torp and Andersen, 2018) or that  
10 “downplaying commercial motives” is sometimes a part of forging a sense of authenticity  
11 (Beverland, 2006). Still, there is something paradoxical when marketing professionals explicitly  
12 denounce “advertising” as such, perhaps even flaunting indifference to profit and market growth  
13 (*market regime*). Yet, what we find in this study is that the marketing professionals seem very  
14 reluctant to justify their actions openly and the reasoning of these as, in fact, a mode of “branding,”  
15 “advertising,” or “marketing.” The CMO and co-founder of Sandqvist see the authentically Nordic  
16 values as a restraint balance (as in the concept “lagom”):  
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25 CMO: ...we are not so aggressive in our goals for the company. We do have quite  
26 high goals, but we can get there. We can get there by our own means in a pace where  
27 we do not have to take high risks. We want to sleep well at night. We do not want to  
28 feel that we are on the brink.  
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30 INT: Brink of...bankruptcy?

31 CMO: Brink of...well if you want to go fast, you take high risks. We are not prone to  
32 doing that. We take only very calculated risks.  
33

34 INT: Is that Swedish?

35 CMO: I think that it is...and I think that the further away from the big city you get, the  
36 smaller risks you take. Because it is more dangerous to take risks if you...are far from  
37 civilization somehow. So, we do take calculated risks, but we do it quite carefully  
38 [“ganska lugnt” in Swedish]  
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47 Paradoxes can be observed here because brands need competitiveness and efficiency to be  
48 profitable. For example, when the CEO of WODEN questions the *fame* and *market* regimes as  
49 relevant when arguing that the value of the WODEN brand is *in the product* and not a consequence  
50 of promotion efforts ('branding'), which other brands might rely on, or when the Sandqvist idea of  
51 Nordicness in business strategy is “lagom” growth.  
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4 The principle value of the *fame* regime that several informants deny is not a reputation as such, but  
5 the underlying values on which reputation is based. A pre-requisite for obtaining value in the world  
6 of fame is to focus on signs in the media to receive popularity and recognition from the audience.  
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8 However, creating attention around oneself, to desire visibility, distinction, to be viewed as a  
9 success or “a star” is not a central value. Seeking and achieving fame means to have “revealed all  
10 and no secrets left to be discovered” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, p. 179), which is antithetical to  
11 how Nordicness is appropriated at WODEN, BRØD, Nyt, and Sandqvist.  
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18 It seems relevant to compare this particular tension between principles of valuation with the moral  
19 affordances of self-restraint, which has a special mythical resonance in the Nordic cultures - The  
20 Law of Jante. The CMO of Sandqvist refers explicitly to this, when he states “Jante is big in  
21 Sweden.” He believes that the Law of Jante is something specific to Sweden, but the “Law” is  
22 actually formulated by the Danish/Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1936), which became the  
23 label of a moral principle known beyond the Nordic countries (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018).  
24 Sandemose intended the “Law” as an exposure of the condescending, destructive pressure of social  
25 norms; however, a more positive interpretation also exists - that modesty, humbleness, and trust are  
26 cultural values associated with the underlying principles of the Law of Jante (Cappelen and  
27 Dahlberg, 2018).  
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37 Interestingly, the most iconic “flagship” of Nordic branding, Noma, could also be regarded as based  
38 on a mode of branding that conflicts with the Law of Jante and relies heavily on the justification of  
39 worth through “fame.” Noma has skillfully deployed diverse modes of branding in cookbooks, PR,  
40 and all kinds of media in their quest for global fame and Michelin stars (Leer, 2016). While Noma  
41 claims a certain “informal atmosphere,” it is also a truly exclusive, challenging experience to be  
42 able to enjoy, for example, live ants and shrimps (Hermansen, 2012). BRØD is a bakery intent on  
43 being anything but “exclusive”, challenging, or authoritative. The CEO (and founder) genuinely  
44 wants to create an inclusive space devoid of hierarchy, “snobbery,” or “marketing.” Thus, his idea  
45 of Nordic values does not exactly align with what he perceives to be those of Claus Meyer (of  
46 Noma):  
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56 [Talking about Claus Meyer...] He can go diving and then come back with some  
57 seaweed and say ‘this is what we should eat.’ He can go to the Roskilde Festival and  
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4 get up on a beer crate and say ‘you need to put more salt in bread;’ he gets 100 people  
5 to shout ‘MORE SALT IN BREAD’ [in mock screaming voice]. Well, this is pure  
6 Hitler, it is absolutely crazy. And that is what I am saying, this thing with Noma, I  
7 think it is super nice if we are going for branding [...] Can you follow me: all this  
8 celebrity stuff, all that is called branding. [...] Actually, I do not care about that. I do  
9 not even care if it means anything [for my business].  
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16 This depiction of cuisine trends as whimsical and authoritative is full of scorn in the lively  
17 impersonation of Claus Meyer. The “seaweed and salt” imagery could have been presented as  
18 expressions of *green* and *inspired* values, but they are seen as inauthentic, as relating to *fame*  
19 regime, hence rejected. The rejection is emphatically performed through his agitated voice, the  
20 sarcastic personification metaphor (“pure Hitler”) and the linguistic choices in “...stuff, all that is  
21 called...”, signaling a reticence, a distaste of the very words “celebrity” and “branding”. The  
22 rejection of *fame* value is extended to any potential *market* value that could be negotiated by the  
23 invocation of *fame*: the potential business benefits of (celebrity) branding do not justify it.  
24 The CEO further elaborates his rejection of branding by narrating an anecdote of the opening of the  
25 Odense branch of BRØD. The local newspaper arrived uninvited and intended to take pictures and  
26 publish an article about BRØD; however, he tossed them out after a heated exchange of words. It  
27 seems obvious that positive PR in the local newspaper would benefit the business of BRØD in  
28 several ways, but this embodied and territorial confrontation is meaningful as a performance of  
29 difference.  
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42 [Insert figure 1 here]  
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45 Figure 1 illustrates how the findings delineate Nordicness through the *civic*, *inspired*, and *green*  
46 regimes, and how this only becomes significant when contrasted against the *fame*, *market*, and  
47 *domestic* regimes. The regimes of *fame* and *market* (gray) seem to be most directly contested, while  
48 the values of the *domestic* and *industrial* regimes (shaded) are partly appropriated when negotiating  
49 functional dimensions (Caldwell and Freire, 2004), that is, embracing utilitarian aspects of the  
50 region, such as when the heritage and tradition of the Nordland region become important values that  
51 are drawn on when Restaurant Nyt appropriates their version of Nordicness. In the same way,  
52 BRØD interprets Danish bakery traditions with “lots of real Danish butter” (as grandma should  
53 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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4 affordances; a mode of Nordic “authenticity” and self-restraint popularized in The Law of Jante and  
5 the Swedish concept of “lagom.” In this context, it becomes a positive “value of difference” and a  
6 justification of Nordicness. This basis in “self-restraint” is perhaps unsurprising at first glance;  
7  
8 however, the fierce distancing of fame and market values in the context of branding is  
9  
10 counterintuitive. In addition, while we see this *as part of* the collected, dynamic set of justifications  
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12 of values that negotiate Nordicness, it neither is the “essence” of, nor is it unique to Nordicness.  
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16 Secondly, Cassinger *et al.* (2019) position “The Nordic Approach” in place branding research  
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18 between two other approaches: Management (capitalism, functionalist) and Critical (anti-capitalist,  
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20 emancipatory). If we were to offer the findings in light of the Managerial Approach, we might focus  
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22 on a pragmatic use of the findings to improve the branding by investing more aggressively in  
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24 marketing the Nordicness (e.g. as “essence” of green values and innovativeness) to maximize the  
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26 market value of the “Nordic” products and services mentioned above. From a critical perspective,  
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28 one might focus on the rejection of the fame regime, revealing branding and marketing as simply a  
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30 mode of “discursive closure” that suppresses the real and potentially negative consequences of  
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32 Nordic Branding (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018). Alternatively, one might focus on a critical  
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34 inversion, where one considers the potential negative consequences to society and businesses of not  
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36 doing any branding at all. It is quite possible that an uncharted potential resides in many Nordic  
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38 brands that do not come to fruition due to this partial rejection of conventional branding.

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



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4 *performances of Nordicness as Nordic branding*. In addition, we hope our study could further  
5 inspire interdisciplinary, value-based research into the potential contingencies of (product) branding  
6 and place branding of other contexts and regions.  
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11 Thirdly, while our study and analysis were not designed to reveal specific distinctions within the  
12 Nordic place brands or contexts, for example, of “Norwegian values” or differences between  
13 sectors, the findings do seem to suggest some systematic differences. Most notable is the tensions  
14 around “gender” being a particular strong justification of value in the Swedish context, which aligns  
15 with previous research (Molander *et al.*, 2019). Future studies could explore such systematic  
16 differences between contexts and sectors to arrive at a more fine-grained understanding of how  
17 Nordicness is performed as a specific constellation of different value regimes. One approach could  
18 be an extension into the life-worlds of consumers, perhaps invoking a lense of ‘field/habitus’ or  
19 how value regime tensions are negotiated in welfare states policies through justification of  
20 ‘Nordicness’.  
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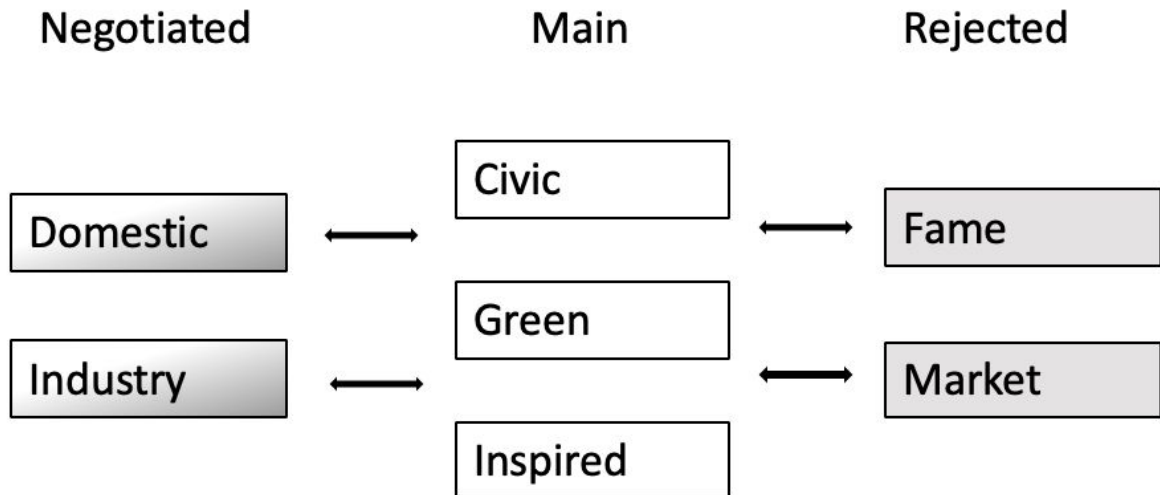
Country	Context/Organisation/ SME/Brands	Interviewees	Place of observations/ photos/interviews
Denmark	WODEN – Scandinavian Sneakers	Founder/CEO	Main office, showroom, shops
	RedInk Frejdahl Ragnsborg (Lyngvild)	Owner/branding consultant	Main office
	BRØD	Founder/CEO	Café visits Visit to workshop
	OAK – 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.

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Management and Development