

“Exotic, welcoming and fresh”: stereotypes in new Nordic branding

New Nordic
branding

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Abstract

Purpose – Ideas related to “the Nordic” are important in the reconstruction of national identities in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, and these countries’ modern national narratives are structurally highly similar. At the same time, there are clear differences between the Nordic countries regarding their national images. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between ideas of the Nordic and national images through a qualitative study of brand manifestations on Nordic web portals for foreign visitors.

Design/methodology/approach – The two guiding research questions are: How do Nordic branding strategies and national stereotypes impact on nation-branding content toward visitors in the Nordic region? What traces of the Nordic as a supranational concept can be found when the Nordic is translated into concrete national brand manifestations? The analysis focuses on brand manifestations such as brand visions, codes of expression, differentiation, narrative identity and ideologies.

Findings – The analysis shows that clichés about the nations prevail in contemporary brand material and that Nordic branding strategies impact on the portals in diffuse and implicit ways. There are, however, some important common denominators, pointing toward a new Nordic brand related to exotic, untouched yet easily accessible nature, with a focus on pure, fresh and clean food with new tastes, in combination with happy and welcoming people.

Originality/value – The results from the study contribute with insight in how ideas of the Nordic on a supranational level transform when used in concrete and practical branding material. Further, this paper proposes a new Nordic branding focus, which contests traditional Nordic ideas.

Keywords Nation branding, Stereotypes, National images, Nordic branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Ideas of “the Nordic” play an important role in the reconstruction of national identities in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. “The Nordic” is not confined to a region but travels across contexts as an ideological orientation and cultural construct (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). The Nordic Council of Ministers has tried to promote the Nordic countries with reference to democracy, neutrality equality, openness and progressiveness (Nickelsen, 2019). Cassinger *et al.* (2019, p. 4) identify historical stereotypes related to the Nordic, such as cooperation, consensus, solidarity, democracy, freedom, social cohesion and gender equality.



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Although the Nordic model is maybe more of an aspirational ideal than an actual “fact,” the model might still impact on Nordic branding strategies and practices (ibid.).

At the same time, there are differences between the Nordic countries’ national images. For instance, Norway is commonly visualized as a country with a commodity-based economy dominated by shipping, timber, fish and oil (Steen Jacobsen, 1991), where ideals of equality, universalism and anti-elitism are central (e.g. Lien and Lidén, 2001). The image of Sweden gravitates around Sweden as “ultra-modern” (Musial, 2002), the cradle of the welfare state, a “specific egalitarian community” (Stråth and Sørensen, 1997) and characterized by nonalignment (Andehn, 2019). Images of Denmark are related to welfare, democracy and compassion, and the stereotypical Dane is “sexy,” “happy” (Allen, 2016), “unpretentious” and “cozy” (Ooi, 2004). In literary descriptions of Finland, the country tends to be described as an exotic and savage place, inhabited by traditional and mysterious people who lack sophisticated manners (Saukkonen, 2007). Finally, Iceland’s image revolves around its nature and its “pure” and “natural” industries (Gudjonsson, 2005). Iceland is also seen as one of the world’s last frontiers and as part of the “exotic North,” as well as modern and innovative (Loftsdóttir, 2015). Such stereotypes may help explain why the Nordic countries have different views on what composes the Nordic, as well as why developing a common supranational Nordic branding strategy is contested.

It remains an open question how national stereotypes, identities and images of, and within, the Nordic are used for nation branding. Furthermore, the ideas related to “the Nordic” in nation-branding initiatives comprise a topic for deeper empirical research (Andersen *et al.*, 2019a). It has also been noted that the relationship between the Nordic as an idea and “the technocracies of place branding” needs more attention (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Therefore, in this paper, we discuss the following questions:

- RQ1. How do Nordic branding strategies and national stereotypes impact on nation-branding content toward visitors in the Nordic region?
- RQ2. What traces of the Nordic as a supranational concept can be found when the Nordic is translated into concrete national brand manifestations?

To answer the research questions, the paper examines the contents of nation branding on Denmark’s, Finland’s, Iceland’s, Norway’s and Sweden’s web portals for foreign visitors. These portals are prominent cases of nation branding, not only because they present voluminous descriptions of each nation’s identity, culture and history but also because they reconstruct national narratives to attract visitors.

2. Theory and concepts

2.1 Nation branding and the dimension of scale: between strategies of differentiation and similarity

Perspectives and theories related to the marketing, branding and promotion of geographical entities are complex, and there is a great deal of overlap between bordering concepts (e.g. nation branding, place branding and destination branding). Although considerable intellectual efforts have been made to clear out distinctions and variations (Boisen *et al.*, 2018; Hanna and Rowley, 2008), the different perspectives are still embedded in different disciplines and traditions and do not always concur. In the following paper, Nordic branding

is understood and analyzed within a framework of nation branding, in combination with perspectives on brands as scalar phenomenon.

Dinnie (2016) defines a nation brand as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provides the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie, 2016, p. 15). This “multidimensional blend of elements” constituting the country as a brand, comprises history, nature, culture, identity expressions and aspects of the political system. Nation brands derive from “the soul of the nation,” its culture in the widest sense – language, literature, music sports, architecture and so on (ibid., p. 111). Further, Dinne argues that “deep and authentic” nation brands must include several expressions of a nation’s identity and culture; if not, it is perceived as superficial (ibid., p. 112).

In the academic discussion about nation branding, it is commonly assumed that nations are *forced* to compete against each other for resources (tourists, entrepreneurs, events, investors and so on) (Kaneva, 2011). In this process, values, national characteristics and myths are used for branding and differentiation, as a way to “stand out” in a competition among nations, although at the same time very different countries’ branding campaigns tend to use similar values and stereotypes, such as “friendly,” “beautiful,” “adventurous,” “peaceful” and “caring” (Mossberg and Kleppe, 2005). This observation of differentiation strategies in tandem with underscoring similarities taps into recent developments of theories related to reputation building in public organizations. For instance, Wæraas (2014, p. 227) argues that although differentiation strategies are important in branding practices, drawing on shared reputation with other category members is vital, as it affects all members in general and it serves as common resource. In terms of nation branding in the Nordic region, this is compelling: The five Nordic countries might build their brand through focusing on the “soul of the nation” to be perceived as “deep and authentic” (Dinnie, 2016), but at the same time they might rely on communal strategies related to “the Nordic.”

To shed light on this paradoxical situation, the paper proceeds with presenting some theories related to branding beyond the scale of places, cities and nations. Zenker and Jacobsen (2015) identify a growing international “inter-regional competition,” which, in turn, has led to an interest in branding beyond the scale of places, cities and nation states. Inter-regional branding is a complex practice, as regions are intricate relations of geographical abstractions, evolving in cooperation and contrast to other geographical entities. Although inter-regional competition is growing (Zenker and Jacobsen, 2015), it has been identified a neglect of interest in organizational interdependencies and reputational efforts that occur simultaneously at different levels (Wæraas, 2014). As for branding perspectives, Therkelsen and Gram (2010, p. 109) state that “hardly any literature exist on the marketing and branding of places at the supra-national level.”

Empirically, supranational branding in Europe has taken place within what Ashworth and Voogd (1990) label as “nesting hierarchies of places.” Cities, places, nation states and regions are tied together cross-nationally in explicit and implicit hierarchies which spills over on branding efforts. Places are both “an assemblage of products and the product in itself” (Ashworth and Voogd, 1994, p. 7). Different spatial scales stimulate brand claims that are located simultaneously at the local, regional, national and the supranational level. Hence, Ashworth and Howard (1999) use the Russian doll-metaphor when discussing nesting hierarchies. By doing so, they recognize that different organizations at different times might emphasis different levels in a scale hierarchy of places.

In a discussion about scale in branding, Therkelsen and Gram (2010, p. 115) claim that

[...] to achieve a viable place-branding effort, it is essential that the different geographical scales are, indeed, clearly nested within one another and do not stand out as detached geographical units that point in a multitude of directions.

Hence, it can be argued that consistency along the scales is beneficial. Still, achieving consistency is not an easy task, and it demands negotiations and consensus work from multiple actors on different organizational levels. Supranational branding is a complex, and sometimes hard, endeavor as it includes multiple identities, rivalry and conflicting interests.

Supranational branding involves national representatives as key stakeholders. National representatives are also each other's competitors (Therkelsen and Gram, 2010). Hence, national rivalry including national differentiation may hamper interstate cooperation and efforts for building sustainable supranational brands. However, there are several advantages for investing in a supranational brand with a shared and coherent profile. First, a clear message can more "forcefully be communicated" (Therkelsen and Gram, 2010, p. 109). Second, the economies of scale can make it more advantageous to contribute to a mutual purpose. Entities from lower geographical scales might have interests in joining forces with entities that can act as financial locomotives. Potentially, a partnership through a supranational brand will enable larger and more fully fledged campaigns. Third, image attractiveness can function in the same vein, as places with weak images can be benefitted from collaborations with attractive places with stronger images. This ties in with perspectives from the reputation literature, which argues that when a reputation is shared, it affects all category members (cf. Barnett, 2007).

Yet, there might also be risks related to engaging in supranational branding. For instance, the supranational brand might be beneficial for some countries only. A supranational brand might also give disincentives for engaging in branding processes, as "free-riding" can be economically beneficial. Negative spillover effect is another dimension related to supranational branding, as national brands inevitably inherit some of the characteristics associated with the supranational brand. Hence, brand strategists must consciously consider how much they want to invest in and relate its national brand to the supranational level. It might also be questionable whether a consistent brand strategy is "at all feasible in a supranational context" (Therkelsen and Gram, 2010, p. 109) owing to the complexity of levels and nesting hierarchies. Building on the idea of nesting hierarchies, supranational brands are unstable and negotiated constructs. They build on compromises, rivalry, weak decision-making authorities (Andersson, 2007) and multiple ideas of identity (Therkelsen and Gram, 2010). If the different national strategies differentiate too much from the common strategy, its legitimacy as a supranational brand can be at stake.

2.2 Nordic branding: supranational ideas and national clichés

"Nordic place branding" is an emerging field of academic research and practice (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). This is evident in case studies, journal papers and special issues as well as in practical processes and strategies. Cassinger *et al.* (2019, p. 1) understand the Nordic as a broad term and idea, an ideological orientation and myth, as well as a regional space "in which theories, concepts and practices of place branding emerge and develop." Hence, Nordic branding is not only an object of study but also an approach to, and model for, branding practices and policies.

Seen from outside, "the Nordic" might appear as a relatively homogeneous entity (Linde-Laursen and Nilsson, 1991), and the modern national narratives in the Nordic countries are structurally highly similar. Some traits are even seen as part of a genre of *narrating the nation*:

[. . .] the early arrival of the nation, its proto-democratic structure, threats and evil coming from outside, a period of trouble, and then the rise of the good society: democracy, liberal economy, and eventually gender equality (Aronsson, 2008, p. 193).

Pamment (2016, p. 92) sees the Nordic in a nation-branding perspective and argues that despite evident national similarities, Nordic countries “have political, linguistic and cultural differences that significantly impact how they seek to present themselves abroad.”

Within the emerging literature on Nordic branding, there are also some accounts of actual branding processes where the Nordic is made the prime object. By analyzing the 2015–2018 strategy for cooperation on international branding of the Nordic region, Magnus (2016) discusses strategies related to the concept of “Nordic” and “Nordicness.” The Nordic Council of Ministers developed this strategy in close collaboration with national stakeholders and with considerations for the Nordic countries’ own branding programs. The strategy was the first attempt to strategically brand the whole Nordic region and to coordinate a Nordic brand architecture. Eksell and Fjällhed (2019) trace how this strategy came to work after the Nordic Cool Festival in Washington, 2013. In the aftermath of this festival, the Nordic prime ministers “gave the green light to the creation of a common strategy.” One of the ideas was to minimize intrabrand competition and to facilitate cooperation and involvement among important stakeholders. Further, by using the “the Nordic region” as an overarching and unified concept, the aim was that the different countries could refer to characteristics that did not apply specifically to one country only. Magnus (2016) argues that this new strategy established a foundation for how the Nordic countries wanted to be perceived among audiences outside the Nordic region.

Looking more precisely at the strategy document for the supranational Nordic initiative (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015, p. 4), it is a relatively concrete plan for “international profiling and positioning of Norden”, where a core idea is that cooperation and coordinated profiling of activities are important. Hence, the strategy puts together “strategic guidelines.” Importantly, the strategy states that the countries to a greater extent should use the Nordic and Norden as concepts, and the strategy even sees Norden as a stand-alone brand (ibid., pp. 4–5). Further, the strategy illustrates the brand with four background factors: geography, society, history and culture, and five values: openness, trust, innovation, sustainability and humanity/equality. In addition, the strategy also highlights concepts like “Nordic Noir,” “Nordic Design,” “New Nordic Food” and “The Nordic Music Wonder,” however without defining or discussing these in depth.

3. Methods

The empirical investigations focus on the five Nordic countries’ nation-branding manifestations, as these appear on the official promotion portals for visitors: visitdenmark.com, visitfinland.com, visitnorway.com, visitsweden.com and inspiredbyiceland.com (Table 1).

As evident in Table 1 the studied portals have different financial situations, they are set up with different organizational arrangements, and they have slightly different relations to the state. Nevertheless, the portals serve as analytical prisms for studying and understanding brand manifestations in, and of, “the Nordic.” The portals have affinities with destination branding in so far as they emphasize the tourism dimension of a place (Hanna and Rowley, 2008) and differentiate the nations as destinations (Fan, 2014), in addition to conveying a promise of a memorable travel experience (Hanna and Rowley, 2008). Hence, the portals are targeted toward specific groups (visitors) and do not take into account the multiplicity and complexity of stakeholders, which is important in several nation-branding definitions (e.g. Dinnie, 2016). These portals can be considered critical cases

Country	Portal	Organizational arrangement	Annual budget
Denmark	Visitdenmark.com	VisitDenmark is an independent organization. VisitDenmark's board is appointed by the Danish Minister of Business and Growth	€15m (2012) (OECD, 2018)
Finland	Visitfinland.com	VisitFinland is a unit of Finpro Ltd, a state-owned organization consisting of <i>Export</i> Finland, Visit Finland and Invest in Finland	€11.9m (2017) (OECD, 2018)
Iceland	Inspiredbyiceland.com	Inspired-by-Iceland is the official destination brand for marketing Iceland. It was launched by the Ministry of Industry in collaboration with Icelandair, the City of Reykjavik, Iceland Express, the Export Council and the Tourism Association	€5.4m (2011) (Total for Promote Iceland and the Icelandic Tourist Board) (PKF, 2011)
Norway	Visitnorway.com	VisitNorway is hosted by the state-owned company Innovation Norway. The Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries has given IN the responsibility for developing and maintaining the official travel guide to Norway	Approximately €13m (2013) (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015)
Sweden	Visitsweden.com	Visitsweden.com is owned by VisitSweden, a communication company responsible for marketing Sweden as a tourist destination abroad and for the brand and image of Sweden. Visit Sweden is jointly owned by the state and the tourism industry (50/50)	€12.3m (2018) (Visit Sweden, 2018)

Table 1.
Nordic portals,
organizational
arrangement and
budget

(Flyvbjerg, 2004) for studying nation branding, in the sense that if brand manifestations and ideas of the Nordic cannot be found in such destination brand portals, they are not likely to appear in other contexts either.

The material was collected during August 5–23, 2019. The content of web portals tends to change often with regular updates and modifications. Hence, to secure comparability between the countries, it was important to gather the data within a short and limited period of time. The material consists of content excerpts from the web portals, and it had to fulfill three basic inclusion criteria. First, the content had to be placed on the front page and/or be related to headings or sections such as “about the country,” “facts about the country,” “culture,” “people” or “FAQ.” Furthermore, the expressions of nation branding had to be open and accessible on the web portals. This criterion excludes expressions found in promotional materials published elsewhere by the organizations. Finally, only expressions that are fewer than three clicks from the start page are included in the corpus. The analytical approach is interpretive and comparative. This approach enables us to see variations among the Nordic countries as regards brand manifestations and in terms of how “the Nordic” is presented and translated.

In the first stage of the analysis, all portals were read and scrutinized carefully several times. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as a phase of “familiarizing yourself with your data.” In this phase, the portals were read and reread, and initial ideas were noted down.

After this thorough and complete reading, the analysis proceeded with what [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) rubricate as a stage of generating initial codes. In practice, the manifest components of the texts were in focus ([Graneheim and Lundman, 2004](#)). The manifest components are those elements that are physically present and countable ([Berg, 2007](#)). The coding can be characterized as “theory-driven,” in the sense that content from the portals were classified and coded based on brand manifestations as these can be derived from the place- and nation-branding literature ([Dinnie, 2016](#)). The brand manifestations which became relevant for our purposes are as follows:

- brand visions: official strategies agreed upon by various organizations;
- particular codes of expression: evident in types of language, use of icons, visuals and slogans;
- differentiations: uniqueness embedded in culture, history and people;
- narrative identity: national myths and heroes; and
- advocacy of ideologies: highlighting of particular societal ideologies (e.g. human rights, sustainability, equality and openness).

In the second stage of the analysis, the material was explored inductively by focusing on latent components of the portals. This implies an “interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data” ([Berg, 2007](#), p. 242). In particular, this stage of the analysis focused on the role played by ideas of the Nordic. More precisely, the material was analyzed by assigning descriptive codes emerging from the data. In the first stage of the analysis, certain commonalities among the Nordic countries in how they promoted themselves had been revealed. These commonalities were related to four dimensions: nature, history, food and happiness. The commonalities (which were discovered inductively) served as descriptive codes in the analysis. Further, as the study is comparative, this stage focused on contrasting and juxtaposing these codes among the Nordic countries. By doing this, the analysis was able to identify traces of how the Nordic as a supranational concept was translated into different national contexts.

4. Analysis

4.1 Brand manifestations

First, *brand visions* are not explicitly evident in the material. Only the Swedish portal refers to an official nation-branding strategy agreed upon by different organizations. The Swedish vision is also clearly formulated as “we increase interest in Sweden.” However, all the studied portals convey a certain *code of expression*, which evidently incorporates ideas of a brand vision. For instance, all the studied portals use specific types of language, slogans and images to characterize the country: Norway is “powered by nature,” Finland is “Go green – sustainable Finland,” Sweden is “the edible country,” Iceland is “the land of fire and ice” and the Danish portal focuses on “the wonder in the small things in life.” Further, it is important to note that all Nordic countries except Denmark present a code of expression that somehow points toward nature.

The focus on nature is further manifested in relation to *differentiation and uniqueness strategies*, as Norway, Finland and Iceland all explicitly underscore nature as a core dimension of differentiation: Norway is about the “great outdoors”; Finland has “untouched and pristine nature”; and Iceland is a country of “extreme geological contrasts.” These descriptions have all affinities with what [Laven et al. \(2019\)](#) describe as “borealism” in branding, which is a form of exoticism relying on stereotypes attached to the northern regions. It even taps into [Therkelsen and Gram’s \(2010\)](#) descriptions of the Nordic brand

profile, which tend to focus on locations with extreme nature conditions and exotic cultural habits. Sweden sticks out among the Nordic countries, in that its portal does not explicitly differentiate the country as special. Denmark's strategy for differentiation focuses on the fact that "Denmark has been named the world's happiest country" and highlights the notion of "hygge." Although "kos" is extensively mentioned, it is not clearly defined in the portal. As pointed out by Andersen *et al.* (2019b, p. 12), hygge can be seen as a value, a tradition, a social norm, a context, a performance, a mood, an ambience and a design concept. Similarly, Norway also focuses on "kos" – a particular form of being pleased, related to both norms, traditions, designs and moods.

As regards *narrative identity*, four of the Nordic countries encapsulate a distinct narrative about the nation. Denmark, Norway and Finland stress the idea of their people as being happy, open, warm and welcoming. The Danish portal does this by focusing on "hygge," the Norwegian portal by highlighting "kos" and the Finnish portal by contradicting common stereotypes about Finnish culture. Iceland presents a historical narrative about Iceland as founded by the (democratic) Vikings and then becoming a particularly modern society.

Turning to the portals' *advocacy of ideologies*, sustainability is an idea held in common by Norway, Finland and Sweden. Although sustainability is a highly contested and fluid concept, in all three countries it is related to (conserving and respecting) nature, which links to the codes of expression. As discussed, sustainability was also one of the five core values introduced in the supranational Nordic strategy from 2015. Denmark, whose portal is highly consistent with the idea of Denmark as a happy country, advocates values and ideologies related to hygge, informality, talent and freedom. Iceland's overarching ideological discourse taps into a presentation of narrative identity focusing on progressiveness, peacefulness and equality.

The results from this descriptive and comparative analysis of brand manifestations are summarized in Table 2, exemplified with some illustrative excerpts:

It is important to note that none of the portals links to, or mentions, "the Nordic" as a specific asset in its branding. However, there are latent commonalities among the countries, which are interesting to bring into a deeper discussion about the role of the Nordic.

4.2 Role of the Nordic in the portals

4.2.1 *Nordic nature: shaped by national stereotypes.* As is evident in the brand manifestations discussed so far, nature plays an important role in the Nordic portals. At the same time, the different Nordic countries interpret and depict nature in different ways. In Norway, Finland and Iceland, this is highly explicit: Norwegian nature is adventurous and scenic, Finland nature is wild and untouched and in Iceland it is characterized by its extremeness. Nature is also important in Denmark's and Sweden's brand manifestations, though more implicitly illustrated by the choice of pictures: in Denmark nature is presented as accessible, whereas in Sweden cultivated nature is illustrated with pictures of meadows, woodlands and red-painted cabins. This taps into national stereotypes in the studied countries. For instance, in Sweden, forests, lakes and agricultural landscapes in combination with red-painted wooden houses have long been central images signifying the nation (Facos, 1998).

4.2.2 *Viking as a key figure in the reconstruction of Nordic history.* In the presentations of history, the Viking heritage is important. However, the particular *idea* of the Viking history differs in the five countries. The prototypical Norwegian Viking is portrayed as an adventurer exploring the sea:

Brand manifestations	Norway	Finland	Denmark	Sweden	Iceland
Brand visions	Not clearly formulated	Not clearly formulated	Not clearly formulated	Visit Sweden's official vision: we increase interest in Sweden	Not clearly formulated
Codes of expression	The portal's slogan is: "Powered by nature." This is accompanied by the choice of pictures: 34 out of 36 pictures on the first page are from the outdoors.	Centered on the portal's front page is the slogan: "Respect, treasure, enjoy, in the small things in life. Welcome to Denmark! We've put heart and soul, hygge and a little of the wonderful Danish everyday into this website."	Centered on the portal's front page is the slogan: "The wonder of the world is in the small things in life. Welcome to Denmark! We've put heart and soul, hygge and a little of the wonderful Danish everyday into this website."	A central slogan in the country: "Further, the portal's expressions about Sweden are relatively neutral. The language is fact oriented.	"The Land of Fire and Ice" is important in the Icelandic presentation.
Explicit differentiations	Adventurous nature ("The great outdoors") in addition to happiness	Wild and untouched nature ("Finland's untouched and pristine nature is at the core of Finnish life and its sanctity is paramount.")	Hygge/happiness: "Denmark has been named the world's happiest country on numerous occasions, and remains [at] the very top of the UN World Happiness Report."	No explicit differentiation or statements about uniqueness	"A country of extreme geological contrasts"
Narrative identity	A happy nation ("There is a reason why the Norwegians are among the happiest people on earth. Learn the noble art of 'kos', taste some weird and wonderful food . . .")	A country of warm and open people ("Finnish people are warm, open and sincere, even though they would tell you the exact opposite.")	A happy nation ("Welcome to Denmark! We've put heart and soul, hygge and a little of the wonderful Danish everyday into this website, so you can see for yourself how we Danes do life and holidays. Because we are (in case you didn't know) some of the happiest people in the world.")	No direct presentation of a narrative identity or presentation of particular myths or heroes	A modern nation founded by the Vikings ("The Vikings as the fathers of the nation: When the first Viking settlers arrived in Iceland in the late 9th century A.D., they found an uninhabited island. Today Iceland is a thoroughly modern country . . .")
Advocated ideologies	Sustainability	Sustainability	Hygge, informality, design, talent and freedom	Sustainability and gender equality	Progressiveness, peacefulness and equality

Table 2.
Illustrations of brand manifestations

The raids, systematic looting, colonisation, and trade brought the Vikings to many destinations in different directions. In the beginning, only a few seafaring Vikings survived the rough voyages, but the fleets grew and soon enough there were hundreds of so-called longships. They sailed across the Baltic Sea and down Russian rivers as far as the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea to Byzantium and the Caliphate of Baghdad (visitnorway.com).

The Swedish Viking heritage focuses on craftsmanship and trade, a prototype of early industrialization clearly in line with the notion of Sweden as “ultra-modern.” The Danish Vikings portrayed in the portal have similarities with those in the Norwegian interpretation, as they explore and “traverse oceans but also navigate through shallow waters and even land straight on beaches” (visitdenmark.com). In contrast to the Norwegian interpretation, the Danish Viking is further characterized as a farmer, cultivating the land. The Icelandic portal also takes advantage of the Viking era, though presenting it as having given birth to a progressive young nation. Hence, the Viking heritage is important in Nordic nation branding, though it is interpreted differently. This accords with [Aronsson’s \(2009\)](#) analysis of national cultural heritage and memory in Scandinavian culture. He states (p. 74) that “[i]n all of the Nordic countries, the reconstruction of Viking sites is manifold, and this pre-state Scandinavian culture (that of Vikings) negotiates distinct national images of the typical Viking.” The interpretations found in the analyzed material tap neatly into stereotypes and images of the different countries: the Norwegians as adventurous and dependent on the sea; Sweden as ultra-modern; and Iceland as a new but prosperous and innovative country. Accordingly, the past is viewed in the light of contemporary concerns and political visions. As [Kaplan and Orlikowski \(2013\)](#) argue, history will always evoke multiple interpretations, and the chosen interpretation is a way of legitimizing current strategies.

4.2.3 Happiness constructed through kos, hygge, sauna and fika. Happiness is another important common denominator among the Nordic portals, as indicated in [Table 2](#). This is often explicitly discussed in the portals with reference to rankings and comparisons among countries related to standard of living and so-called happiness indexes. This furthermore tends to be related to specific social practices in the different countries, such as “kos” in Norway, “hygge” in Denmark, “fika” in Sweden and “sauna” in Finland. These social practices are used as exotic and illustrative examples of why people in the Nordic countries are happy. There is also reason to underscore that highlighting such practices as main sources of happiness neglects the collective and institutional arrangements in the Nordic countries, such as a generous welfare state, high inclusion of marginalized people in the workforce and trust in political institutions. This is a paradox, as the Nordic welfare model is an important factor in the Nordic countries’ high scores on happiness indexes, as well as traditionally being an important idea related to the Nordic.

4.2.4 Nordic food: fresh, clean and sustainable. Food is another important common denominator among the Nordic portals. Only on the Swedish portal it is presented as a particular brand vision – “the edible country” – but the other portals present and discuss it as well. All the portals tend to present cooking as important in the countries and as related to a particularly Scandinavian and Nordic interest in fresh, clean and pure food, with new, distinct tastes. Hence, food is the most evident example of a supranational Nordic brand component. Nevertheless, there are slightly different translations of the new cuisine: Denmark positions itself in the forefront of the new Scandinavian gourmet cuisine, and Sweden proactively brands itself as oriented toward food using a sustainability discourse. Finland, Norway and Iceland also hint at a new Nordic cuisine by mentioning weird, clean (Norway), wild, natural (Finland), fresh and clean (Iceland) food.

4.2.5 Common denominators. The common denominators described above indicate that *some* ideas related to Nordicism trickle down to the actual branding practices. Hence, some

communal ideas for all the Nordic countries are traceable. This is related to food, nature and happiness. In condensed form, it has to do with presentations of an exotic, untouched, however easily accessible nature, with a focus on pure, fresh and clean food with new tastes, in combination with happy and welcoming people. This also shows how supranational ideas of the Nordic are shaped by, and negotiated against, national backgrounds, narratives and histories. Put differently, Nordicism takes specific national forms. Although the Nordic countries' branding contents are putting weight on slightly different aspects, they are obviously nested together through, for example, highlighting the Viking heritage, a fresh cuisine, happy people and pristine nature.

Finally, it is interesting to note that important dimension commonly related to "the Nordic" are not articulated on the portals. These relate to political issues, such as the Nordic region being the cradle of the welfare state, historical compromises between labor and capital, egalitarianism, gender equality, freedom of speech and tolerance. These issues are historically important in presentations of the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, few traces of such ideas are visible in the studied material. Further, typical values related to the Nordic such as neutrality, equality, democracy, openness and progressiveness (cf. [Nickelsen, 2019](#)) are not prominent in the portals' brand manifestations.

5. Discussion and conclusion

As the analysis has shown, there is a clear tendency toward using national stereotypes in the studied portals. These stereotypes are impacting on nation branding in highly explicit ways. Most often, these stereotypes are related to nature, cultural traits and specific constructions of each country's history. For instance, Norway's portal relies on typical presentations of adventurous nature and an exploratory attitude toward the sea (cf. [Steen Jacobsen, 1991](#)), which also are connected to certain interpretations of the Viking era, namely, the Vikings as adventurous seafarers. The Icelandic portal relies on stereotypes such as purity and naturalness. The country's extreme and exotic nature (cf. [Loftsdóttir, 2015](#)) is used in different ways on the portal, for example, when presenting Icelandic food. On the Finnish portal, stereotypes are used in an ironic way. The clichés about Finland related to stubbornness, darkness and lack of sophistication ([Saukkonen, 2007](#)) are contrasted on the portal with a country of warm and open people: "Finnish people are warm, open and sincere, even though they would tell you the exact opposite." Hence, although clichés are used, they are negotiated and used ironically. The Danish portal underscores happiness in different ways and contexts. This taps into established stereotypes about Danish people as unpretentious, open and friendly (cf. [Ooi, 2004](#)). Finally, although Sweden's portal is the most neutral and descriptive, certain stereotypical ideas prevail here as well. For instance, the Swedish presentation of the Viking era, with its focus on trade and crafts, certainly links to the stereotype of Sweden as "ultra-modern" (cf. [Musial, 2002](#)).

Therefore, the use of national stereotypes in the portal's presentations of culture, history and nature prevails as most important, not explicit ideas related to the Nordic. As was evident in [Table 1](#), different national organizations – often with tight relationships to the state – are the prime responsible for producing the portals. Clearly, national ideas become important frames of reference for such organizations. And, as noted by [Therkelsen and Gram \(2010\)](#), national representatives are potentially competitors in inter-regional and supra-national branding. This illustrates some of the challenges related to the scalar dimensions of branding: It is reason to believe that "the Nordic" is not so easily prioritized in relation to more established national images and content. In any case, the Nordic is not used as a stand-alone brand concept in the portals, and there are few traces of the supranational Nordic strategy described by the [Nordic Council of Ministers \(2015\)](#). For instance, the

concepts highlighted in the strategy document, such as “Nordic Noir,” “Nordic Design” and “The Nordic Music Wonder” are not expressed or discussed in the portals. The analysis shows that Nordic branding strategies impact on the portals in more implicit ways. It is reason to believe that the existing national narratives, histories and traits are impregnating the portal’s brand manifestations, making it hard to introduce supranational Nordic ideas.

These results hardly provide direct solutions for Nordic branding practitioners, but they do contribute with insight in how ideas of the Nordic on a supranational level transform when used in concrete and practical branding material. The Nordic countries are promoted as “exotic, welcoming and fresh,” although the national brands are still impregnated with national stereotypes. Ideas related to the Nordic are translated differently in the different national portals, and the translations are shaped by national stereotypes. Hence, it is evident that further and deeper reflections are needed to integrate ideas of the Nordic into specific national narratives, histories and traits.

As discussed in the theory section, places are nested together in implicit hierarchies. From the analysis, no clear and direct hierarchies among the Nordic countries can be observed. However, it is reasons to claim that it exists a symbolic hierarchy in terms of what aspects and dimensions of the Nordic are prioritized in the brand content. These symbolic hierarchies also tap into previous studies of representations of the Nordic. As in [Therkelsen and Gram’s \(2010\)](#) study, the Nordic countries are described as exotic and with references to both natural scenery and strange cultural habits. In the study reported in this paper, the symbolic hierarchy is also putting other dimensions in the shadow: nature is prioritized over culture, food over other aesthetic experiences and history over contemporary dimensions. The political dimension in the Nordic model is also something that is left uncared for in the presentations.

This study’s results are in line with previous studies which have documented that multiple stakeholder identities, coordination issues and lack of decision-making authority potentially are hampering supra-national place branding efforts (cf. [Therkelsen and Gram, 2010](#); [Andersson, 2007](#)). The study further indicates a potential “reputation commons tragedy” (cf. [Wæraas, 2014](#)) related to the Nordic brand. This tragedy results when “everyone is interested in reaping the benefits of a strong reputation but no one does anything to cultivate it” ([Wæraas, 2014](#), p. 330). Although we know from previous studies that considerably amount of time and resources have been spent on developing an overarching Nordic branding strategy (on the governmental levels), the portals analyzed in this study clearly put more emphasis on national identities. None of the portals indicate a full-hearted commitment to the supranational brand. This might constitute a problem for future developments of the Nordic as a supra-national brand in promotional portals. If the different Nordic countries differentiate too much from the common strategy, the countries’ legitimacy as “Nordic” might be at stake.

One potential way further for Nordic branding practitioners is to develop a strategy “from below,” instead of the more top-down strategy described by [Magnus \(2016\)](#) and [Eksell and Fjällhed \(2019\)](#). To use some of the pinpointed common denominators identified in this study to develop the scalar dimensions from below could be beneficial. At least, the presentations can be more explicitly nested ([Ashworth and Voogd, 1990](#); [Ashworth and Voogd, 1994](#)), for instance, by internal references and allusions to other Nordic countries and their presentations and brands.

According to theory on nested hierarchies and supranational brands it is seen as essential that different geographical scales are “clearly nested within one another and do not stand out as detached geographical units that point in a multitude of directions” ([Therkelsen and Gram, 2010](#), p. 115). Although this seems to be a reasonable recommendation, it might

also be moderated: Coherency should not necessarily be considered as an aim in itself. We know that supra-national brands are built on compromises and weak decision-making authorities (Andersson, 2007). Table 1 also demonstrated the variety of organizations involved in and responsible for the Nordic branding initiatives. These organizations operate on different levels of authority and with different ties to the government. This is indicative of the challenges involved in this type of branding. As discussed throughout the paper, the Nordic countries also have slightly different identities and highlight different images both historically and today. Clearly, this multiplicity should be taken into more serious consideration when efforts are made to build and present supra-national brands. It might even be an argument for adjusting the idea of consistency in supra-national branding. For instance, in a more general reflection on branding, Christensen *et al.* (2005) argue that organizations should encourage variety and indeed nurture the idea of “many voices” to cope with the challenges of the postmodern society.

The results clearly pinpoint some of the dilemmas raised by the perspectives of scalar branding. Dealing with a supranational brand, such as the Nordic, countries can – in theory – choose between two strategies: either a reputational strategy (where the different nation brands focus on differentiation and uniqueness) or a communal strategy (where efforts are made to enhance the reputation of the Nordic as a whole). However, as is evident in this study, these two strategies coexist and striking the right balance between them would arguably be an important managerial task in the future. The membership in a supranational brand strategy is likely to continue being important for the Nordic neighbors, and future studies on Nordic branding should carry on with investigating how translations between supranational and national levels take place, and how different levels are nested within one another. More specifically, other data sources (e.g. interviews, observations) would provide richer material regarding how translation processes materialize. Comparative approach beyond the realm of promotional portals could also refine the approach regarding how these processes play out in different contexts.

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