

Nordic Branding

Project Overview

Summary. Since the late 1990s, Nordic states have competed to brand themselves as nations and regions in the global reputational market. In addition, scholars have pointed to Nordic branding efforts dating back to, at least, the late 19th Century with the rise of nationalism and new nation and welfare states. This research programme will explore the idea and images of Nordicity through the lens of nation/regional branding, which offers an alternative to realist and cultural approaches. Contemporarily and historically, the programme analyses the *construction* of Nordic brands and the *politics* of Nordic branding. Given the international prominence of various Nordic *social models* and their salience for self-understanding within Nordic countries, we will examine how they have been used to create the general Nordic brand and emerged as specific brands themselves (especially social welfare, gender and democracy/rights). We will also analyse *cross-cutting* themes of agents and audiences, model selectivity, brand aesthetics and decoupling.

Background

Realist and culturalist perspectives dominate research on Norden. Nordic models and exceptionalism are regularly described and explained by reference to political factors (e.g., social movements, trade unions, proactive bureaucrats, Nordic cooperation) and cultural factors (shared values, traditions, history and even biology). As such research moves into a normative register, these perspectives are often blended into an essentialism that reifies Nordic uniqueness (e.g., Lawler 1997, Pratt 2008, Hirschl 2011). Yet, the idea and image of the Nordics can be studied also as a branding phenomenon. The striking descriptions of the Nordics – ‘moral superpowers’ (Dahl 2006), ‘agents of a world common good’ (Bergman 2007), ‘havens of gender equality’ (UN-CEDAW 2003) or the ‘referent’ for welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) – is indicative of a brand. The promotion and reception of specific Nordic models, from penal humanitarianism to ombudsmen, is equally suggestive of branding. A brand must be (1) stable and specific; (2) have purchase in a marketplace or audience; and (3) created through strategic behaviour (Browning, 2007).

From the late 1990s, Nordic branding has been an explicit phenomenon. As part of the turn to the ‘competition state’, Nordic states and the region joined the global movement of ‘nation branding’ (Byrkjeflot et al. 2013, Angell and Mordhorst 2015, Strang 2016; de Carvalho and Neumann, 2014). Supported by an extensive ‘nation branding industry’ and measured by the ‘Nation Brand Index’, Nordic States have competed to promote and manage their reputation for commercial and political goals.¹ A core feature of these branding efforts has been the foregrounding of social models and the intertwining of cultural, aesthetic and nature-based features. Even though this branding was nation-centric or received as Scandinavian, it often strengthened the Nordic image given the porous nature of Nordicity. This regional dimension has been bolstered by the Nordic Council, which has promoted various brands and broadened its branding strategy order to strengthen the region’s ‘competitiveness and international influence’, identifying the Nordic social model as the first of five branding areas (Press Release, 28. Oct 2014).

Others have argued that Nordic branding is also a historical phenomenon, even if implicit. Drawing on Waeber (1992), Browning (2007) claimed that the mobilisation of Nordic identity and foreign policy during the Cold War was a branding strategy, seeking to demonstrate superiority to a divided and militarised continental Europe. Mordhorst (2015) has identified Danish nation branding as early as the 12th Century with the publication of *Gesta Danorum* (‘The Deeds of the Danes’) and by the 1930s, Nordic states were active in

¹ See, e.g., *Interesser, ansvar og muligheter: Hovedlinjer i norsk utenrikspolitikk*, St. Meld. Nr. 15 2009.

promoting and branding emerging welfare states (Marklund and Petersen, 2013; Petersen, 2011). Participants at our preliminary workshop identified early branding phenomena in the acceleration of the Norwegian universal suffrage decision, creation of consensual democracy narratives in Sweden, and early tourism promotion in Denmark. The workshop also revealed the important role of foreign actors (social movements, political parties and academics) in dynamically shaping the discourse/image of the Nordics – revealing the power of the *xenostereotype* – stereotyping by foreigners (Musial, 2002).

Indirect evidence of Nordic branding also exists. A typical sign of branding is the strategic *selection* of features to be foregrounded (Angell 2010). Illustratively, the unique and restrictive Nordic model on alcohol and drugs has not been widely promoted while narratives of Nordic diplomacy omit mid-20th Century promotion of ethnic assimilation. Selectivity is also apparent in recent contestation surrounding Nordic reputational strategies. The rightward political shift in the region has led to an emphasis on Nordic capitalism and neutral themes (literature, cuisine) and the Swedish Social Democrats have countered with a controversial registration of the Nordic Model as a trademark under intellectual property law, with an emphasis on the social welfare state (Kettunen et. al 2016).

Another indication of branding is *decoupling*. Brands are created for specific audiences or goals and may encounter problems of external coherence. Decoupling was put in sharp relief during the recent refugee crisis: Nordic states engaged in negative branding towards asylum seekers (e.g., the Danish jewellery law, Norway's Facebook advertisements) but sought to maintain their humanitarian image with other audiences. Decoupling may also be evidenced by 'slippage' between the Nordic image and the actual product suggesting strategic processes and an inflated view of Nordic exceptionalism (Makko 2012; Langford and Schaffer 2014; Scharff Smith and Ugelvik 2016; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2016). A final sign of branding is the regular *mobilisation* of image/reputation for secondary goals. For example, the Norwegian foreign ministry drew on the nation's gender reputation to gain access to former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton for general diplomatic purposes (Danielsen, Larsen et al. 2013).

Why research Nordic Branding?

Studying Norden through the lens of branding provides a useful departure point for unpacking the Nordic model, with its paradoxes, challenges, historical conditions and possibilities. First, a branding perspective underscores that Nordicity is a *discursive* phenomenon and therefore a subject of politics and economics. By foregrounding both collective frames and political agency, branding helps us to: understand how the idea and images of the Nordics emerged internally (through cultural diplomacy, nation-building, reputation management) and externally (political strategy, circulation of ideas); test or nuance common essentialist explanations for Nordic exceptionalism; and uncover various paradoxes and challenges as discourses are placed side by side and against practice.

Secondly, the nascent Nordic scholarship on branding is largely focused on individual studies of nation branding (including in Clerc, Glover and Jordan, 2015). In this respect, a focus on Nordic branding would not only contribute to the wider literature on nation branding, it offers the unique perspective of studying the emergence of a highly successful regional brand.

Third, studying the politics of branding can reveal both the positive opportunities and implicit dangers in mobilising Nordic discourses for political/commercial ends. The proposed programme takes no normative stance on the virtues of branding but its empirical methodology can help shed light on its uses and consequences. We can ask under what conditions are branding efforts *emancipatory* (providing 'answers for some of the questions being posed all over the world', as the Nordic Council suggests) or possess a *dark side*, crowding other legitimate models and blinding Nordic states/citizens to decoupling.

Fourth, the study of branding as discursive phenomenon provides a very useful framework for multidisciplinary research and interfaculty collaboration. While the idea of notion of branding has strong roots in sociology, psychology and business studies, understanding its construction and politics requires political science, law, criminology, anthropology and cultural studies. Until now, nation and regional branding has been mostly studied within a few disciplines.

Research Design

This programme will explore the idea/images of Nordicity through the lens of nation/regional branding. It has two-over-arching research questions. The first concerns the *construction* of brands and we ask: ‘why’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how’ and through ‘whom’ have Nordic brand(s) emerged? The second focuses on the *politics* of branding and we ask: how and where are Nordic brands used; what are the dynamics of brand management, decoupling and circulation; and when is branding emancipatory or problematic?

Sharpening our definition, Nordic brands can be understood as both a general brand and a collection of specific sub-brands. A *general brand* seeks ‘the unique multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audience’ (Dinnie 2008: 15). Thus, Nordic social models and other features (e.g., culture, aesthetics, nature) may have been used to create a general Nordic brand. Conversely, *sub-brands* are often created to advance different models or products but often draw on the imprimatur of the general brand. For instance, the recent ‘Nordic prostitution model’ and ‘New Nordic Cuisine’ seem to draw heavily on the legitimacy of the Nordic label. In this project, we will study Nordic branding in its general and specific forms. Beyond this distinction, we view branding as a fluid process. It may involve both Nordic and external actors, draw on only national and Scandinavian models for its content, or may or may not expressly invoke the word branding. The main requirement is that a specific and selective regional idea/image emerges from strategic behaviour.

In order to operationalise the research questions, the programme will focus on selected legalised/institutionalised *social models* as well as *cross-cutting* themes from the late 19th Century onwards. The specific models will be explored in order to understand their role in constructing the general Nordic brand and their function as sub-brands. For conceptual and practical reasons, these pillars are organised under three broad headings: social welfare, gender equality and rights and democracy. For each pillar, the focus will be on the ‘core’ aspects of the model/brand together with an additional domestic and international feature in order to underline the *multi-level* and *multi-spatial* dynamics of Nordic branding. Thus, there are specific projects on Nordic penal exceptionalism, international humanitarianism and development, gender-based corporate board and family policies, prostitution policies, international sexual violence initiatives, consensus democracy, rights regimes and ombudsmen, and migration. The pillars are also complemented by discrete **cross-cutting** projects on branding agents and mechanisms, branding audiences, and brand selection/creation.

The approach is multi-disciplinary and involves participants from law, criminology, sociology, psychology, political science, history, anthropology, economics and business studies and economics. Each pillar will seek to use and partly integrate qualitative/doctrinal, quantitative and archival methods in answering the questions. Interviews, qualitative content analysis and legal methods will form an important part of *qualitative* analysis along with selected *quantitative* methods such as experimental methods on brand content and resilience, new Nordic indexes to test for decoupling, and quantitative content analysis of branding documents and reception. *Historical* methods will help provide an understanding of the *longue durée* but also how brands reinvent/use historical phenomena - ‘myth marketing’. Each pillar contains expertise across disciplines and coordination and meetings will help ensure appropriate development of the methods and peer review.

In order to investigate the complex process of branding and its politics, we have assembled a multi-disciplinary research team comprised of eleven criminologists and lawyers, twelve social scientists and eleven historians. The programme is coordinated by four coordinators from the Faculty of Law, Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and the Centre for Development and Environment. The programme participants come from diverse University of Oslo departments, thirteen different Nordic universities/institutes, and the United Kingdom. The budget for the project is approximately 12 million NOK.

Participants

University of Oslo

	Position	Disciplines	Pillar (Project where only specific)
Department for Public Law			
Malcolm Langford	Associate Professor	Law/Economics	<i>Coordinator, Rights & Democracy</i>
Anne Hellum	Professor	Law	Gender (Prostitution)
Johan Boucht	Professor	Law	Rights & Democracy (Penal)
Cecilia Bailliet	Professor	Law	Social Welfare (Humanitarianism)
Kjersti Lohne	Postdoctoral Fellow	Criminology	Rights & Democracy (Penal)
Department of Psychology			
Inger Skjelsbæk	Associate Professor	Psychology	<i>Cordinator, Gender Equality Pillar</i>
Knut Inger Foster vold	Associate Professor	Psychology	Social Welfare
Espen Røysamb	Professor	Psychology	Cross-Cutting
Centre for Environment and Development			
Sidsel Roalkvam	Associate Professor	Anthropology	<i>Co-Cordinator, Social Welfare Pillar</i>
Department for Archaeology, Conservation and History			
Veronique Pouillard	Associate Professor	History	<i>Co-Cordinator, Cross-Cutting Pillar</i>
Hallvard Notaker	Associate Professor	History	Cross-Cutting (Aesthetics)
Andreas Fellen	Ph.D Candidate	History	Cross-Cutting (Agents & Audiences)
Centre for Gender Research			
Eirinn Larsen	Senior Researcher	History	Gender equality
Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law			
Thomas Ugelvik	Associate Professor	Criminology	Social welfare (Penal)
Peter Scharff Smith,	Associate Professor	Historian	Social welfare (Penal)
May-Len Skilbrei	Professor	Sociology	Gender equality (Prostitution)
Katja Franko	Professor	Law	Rights & Democracy (Migration)
Kristin Sandvik	Associate Professor	Sociology, Law	Social welfare (Humanitarianism)
Norwegian Centre for Human Rights			
Johan K. Schaffer	Researcher (2017) ²	Political Science	Rights & Democracy
Domenico Zipolo	Ph.D Candidate	Law	Rights & Democracy (Ombudsmen)
Kjetil Larsen	Professor	Law	Rights & Democracy

Other Universities/Institutes

Name	Position/University	Discipline	Country	Focus
Christopher Browning	Reader, University of Warwick	History, Politics	UK	Cross-Cutting (Audiences)
Klaus Petersen	Professor, University of South Denmark	History & poli. science	Denmark	Social Welfare
Mads Mordhorst,	Associate Professor, Copenhagen Business School	Business Studies	Denmark	Cross-Cutting (Agents)
Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen	Research Director, Raoul Wallenberg Institute	Law	Sweden/ Denmark	Rights & Democracy (Migration)
Ann Towns	Associate Professor, University of Gothenburg	Political Science	Sweden	Gender equality
Don Kulick	University Professor, Uppsala University	Anthropology	Sweden	Gender Eq. (Prostitution)
Petra Østergren	Ph.D Candidate, Lund University	Anthropology	Sweden	Gender Eq. (Prostitution)
Aryo Makko	University of Stockholm	History	Sweden	Rights and Democracy
Guðmundur Jónsson	Professor, University of Iceland	History	Iceland	Consensus Democracy
Pauli Kettunen	Professor, University of Helsinki Director, Nordic Centre of Excellence	History	Finland	Social Welfare
Torunn Tryggestad,	Director, Center on Gender, Peace and Security, PRIO	Psychology	Norway	Gender Equality (Peacebuilding)
Svein Ivar Angell	Associate Professor, University of Bergen	History	Norway	Agents
Sunniva Engh	Senior Researcher, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS)	History	Norway	Peacebuilding, Audiences
Kjersti Brathagen	Lecturer, Høgskolen i Telemark	History	Norway	Rights & Democracy

² Starting in August 2016, Schaffer also holds a position as Associate Professor, University of Gothenburg.