

Introduction to the special issue: Nordic perspectives on place branding

In this special issue, we aim at developing research on the practices and processes of mobilising the Nordics in place branding to achieve cultural, commercial and diplomatic ends. The Nordics refer both to a geographical region and cultural narrative. The region consists of five nation-states, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, and the semi-autonomous regions and provinces of the Aaland Islands, Faroe Islands, Greenland including the Inuit land areas, and the cultural region of Sápmi. In total, the region is populated by around 27 million people (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019) who are united by language, history, culture, values and ideals. The cultural narrative, promoted by the international branding strategy of the Nordic Council, give meanings to central concepts in the Nordic imaginary, such as cooperation, consensus, solidarity, democracy, freedom, social cohesion and gender equality. Hence, contemporary place branding processes infuse the Nordics with geospecific imaginaries, cultural values and political ideologies with the aim of maintaining global awareness and relevance. Yet, the knowledge of what is at stake in these processes is limited.

The history and geography of any place shape patterns of thoughts, practices, identities and opportunities. This has been acknowledged by the regionalist school of global marketing scholarships, in which brands are regarded as strategic representations of specific meanings and values endogenous to a confined geographical or cultural context. Regionalist approaches have highlighted distinct communicative tactics characterising global regions, including the Mediterranean (Cova, 2005), Southern thinking (Carù *et al.*, 2014), Middle Easternness (Buschgens *et al.*, 2019) and Japonisme (Minowa and Belk, 2017). These contributions have a keen focus on understanding architectural elements of strategic communication (visual design and advertising rhetoric) as means to distinguish national brands and identities on a multicultural and transnational market. Regionalist studies have identified the domination of auto-exoticising cultural stereotypes, for example, when contrasting “Celtic” vs “Saxonian” entrepreneurial ethos (remarked by creativity and intuition) on the Irish craft market (Fillis, 2014), promoting linguistic idiosyncrasies (Strandberg, 2020) or a unique “taste iconicity” for Indian cuisine (Varman, 2017). So, what does another regional perspective add to the field of place branding?

What is the Nordic perspective?

The Nordic perspective, presented here, goes beyond regionalist schools of global marketing scholarship. Although regionalist perspectives give an insight into fruitful distinction tactics in international contexts, their lens of “radical particularism” diverts attention away from more hybrid and geopolitically attentive branding endeavours. Hence, instead of attempting to simply portray the *essence* of Nordic place branding as a top-down positioning device, the ambition of this special issue is to understand *how* the cultural narrative of the Nordic is mobilised as a result of networked and participatory practices across multiple stakeholders. Equally, we would like to emphasise the institutional and policy context of a developing research approach with fluid contours: *The Nordic Wave* within place branding scholarship (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019).

Determined to explore how the Nordics is assembled in place branding, we walk in the footsteps of extant research on the subject (Ooi and Pedersen, 2017; Pamment, 2016; Browning, 2007). The Nordic perspective in place branding condenses the common features of the Nordic countries as a geographical context but also as a scholarly mindset that affects place branding concepts, strategies and tactics. The *Nordic Wave* perspective adopts a



unique onto-epistemological approach to place branding as a performative (research) practice, acknowledging its social context and political consequences. Accordingly, it represents a relational mindset, connecting not only academics and practitioners but also a wide array of public and business stakeholders within and beyond Nordic communities. Overall, the Nordic type of scholarship, research design, stakeholder interaction and collaboration collectively lend themselves to a distillation of those unique features, which characterise the Nordic place branding.

This special issue brings together scholars from different Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark) with the ambition to display some of the signifying branding practices that constitute the Nordic as place and imaginary. It demonstrates the dependency of Nordic place branding strategies on a political apparatus and consensus across political parties regarding the values and vision of specific places. The kaleidoscopic illustrations serve to push our boundary of knowledge by depicting the evolution, expansion and geographical spread of Nordic place branding as a multi-level structuration and hybrid materialisation of regional identities along the discourses of Nordic sauna, cuisine, indigeneity and welfare. Moreover, the issue highlights an emergent scholarship with local implications and international impact, which collectively synchronise and solidify the extant empirical and conceptual research on the Nordic perspective on place branding.

Contributions

The papers collated for the issue address different aspects of Nordic place branding. They all share the notion of the Nordic as a cultural narrative that should be studied in the making via an engaged type of scholarship driven by therapeutic and diagnostic knowledge objectives, as opposed to technical or emancipatory intents. Thus, taken together, the contributions humbly re-negotiate the hegemony of managerial (Anglo-Saxon) respectively critical (continental) scholarships of place branding and pursue a research approach that is interrogative, compassionate and consultative at the same time ([Cassinger *et al.*, 2019](#)).

The first paper, by Jack Tillotson, Vito Tassiello, Alexandra Rome and Katariina Helaniemi, “The Spirit of Sauna: Legitimizing the Finnish Place Brand”, presents a three-fold analysis of the sauna as a symbolic resource of Finnish nation branding. Drawing on the tenets of institutional theory, they assert that nation branding discourses are legitimised along sauna practices on regulative, normative and cultural levels. Accordingly, discursive resources (such as the sauna) are powerful ordering devices that can be equally regarded as a mode of governance, a token of communal (Nordic) identity and a myth-making material device. This latter can be evident through the geographical spread and scale on which the sauna is being mobilised. Other place marketers (in Scandinavia and Russia) increasingly use saunas as an icon of collectivist, health-focused and nature-based practices, which indicates that what constitutes the Nordic becomes deterritorialised and not fully attached to specific regional, national and state boundaries.

The second paper by Ulla Hakala, “The Voice of Dwellers – Developing a place brand by listening to the residents”, explores key issues within participatory place branding by engaging with the organisational literature on listening. Drawing on an empirical analysis of how residents are listened to by city administrators, she develops a methodological (and onto-epistemological) approach to participation that relies on the transformational role of a researcher as engaged participant in branding processes but also as fully interventionist. The intervention that Hakala performs is characteristic of Nordic scholarship in the sense that it is diagnostic and therapeutic at the same time, as it both analyses and provides solutions to an extant challenge of citizen engagement.

Citizenship and identity performances are increasingly contested in multicultural communities, not only with regards to who represents the voices of “locals” but also to who is a “native”. The third paper by Carina Ren and Kirsten Thisted, “Branding Nordic Indigeneities”, expands and empirically enriches the concept of indigeneity in relation to nation branding in two Nordic contexts. The authors present contemporary practices along which indigenous heritage is appropriated and presented on global markets as a colourful cultural feature of the Nordic. By analysing the commodification of Inuit and Sámi folk music on the Eurovision Song Contest, they argue that commercial media platforms are becoming stages of politicised identity performances and negotiation of multiple geopolitical (national–regional–indigenous) identities.

The performative and existential character of place branding is also central in the fourth paper, “An image worth a thousand words? Expressions of stakeholder identity perspectives in place image descriptions”. Here, Carola Strandberg and Maria Ek Styvén extend the understanding of the relation between place brand identity, image and residents’ social identity. Their study demonstrates the difficulty of inventing and promoting place identity and that the identity of place emerges from the experiences of those who use and inhabit it. Strandberg and Styvén’s perspective asks us to take an interest in humans as embodiments of places and the consequences of such perspective for the identification and sense of community among residents.

The multiscalar alignment of Nordic place brands is addressed by the fifth paper, “Exotic, Welcoming and Fresh: Stereotypes in New Nordic Branding”. Hogne Lerøy Sataøen takes an inside-out analysis of the representation of the Nordic by national tourism marketers. He unpacks the digital brand manifestations of five Nordic countries through a content analysis of DMO web portals (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland), that is also attuned to the politics of place branding. It departs from the Nordic scholarly approach of capturing both the poetics of politics of branding. The author concludes that despite differences across national tourism branding practices, all Nordic countries emphasise sustainability and other social welfare themes as shared ideological orientation.

The sixth paper by Laura Caprioli, Richard Ek, Mia Larson, Mia and Can-Seng Ooi, “The inevitability of essentializing culture in destination branding: the cases of “fika” and “hygge””, take stock of two of the most iconic terms, which are usually associated with the Nordic, “fika” (coffee break) and “hygge” (convivial cosiness). By analysing the process of commodifying the Nordic as a distilled way of living, the authors call for a more balanced view on place and destination branding. The authors thereby adhere to the Nordic approach of place branding, characterised by being problem-driven and dialectic, thus bridging the managerial and critical perspectives. The study dismantles the iconic everyday practices of “fika” and “hygge”, while at the same time acknowledging essentialising as “inevitable” and therefore dancing in the tune of a, possibly better (sic), neoliberal system of commodifying places.

Place branding is not only fuelled by conspicuous, idiosyncratic performances but also deeply seated values and moral positions. The final seventh paper by Lars Pynt Andersen, Frank Lindberg and Jacob Östberg, “Unpacking Nordic branding: The Value Regimes of Nordicness”, demonstrates the usefulness of pragmatic sociology for diagnosing competing value systems pertaining to Nordicness. By observing how Nordic brand actors justify green and communitarian values, they show that Nordicness is performed along tensions and conflicts pertaining to unpretentious Nordic coda. The paper highlights the moral dilemmas underlying authentic modes of Nordic self-restraint and the apparent incompatibility with the conspicuous distinction of fame as a dominant value regime on consumer markets.

Conclusion: Implications of the Nordic perspective

Similar to any regionalist perspective, Nordic place branding manifests symbolic and material boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, highlighting ideological struggles and contestations. The papers in this volume shed light on such practices of demarcation and distinction, which are simultaneously embedded in issues tied to citizen participation, community and democracy. This dialectic is at the heart of the Nordic perspective, and we must therefore problematise how Nordic ideals are elevated to serve as universal humanitarian examples for others to follow, for instance, by claiming world leadership in citizen happiness, gender equality and welfare models. Critical scholarship is needed to follow-up on claims of implicit moral superiority, elitism and leadership and pinpoint new hotbeds of intolerance and exclusion (Cassinger *et al.*, 2020; Gad, 2014). But we must equally empathise with the recent growing resentment of the Nordic value system as an elitist ideology both from abroad and from within the Nordic community itself and question its legacy for future generations. Contestation does not only occur in the Nordic region but have migrated to grassroots movements and digital cultures in a new global media landscape characterised by polarisation and multiple narrative truths. In these spheres, the myth of a peaceful and benevolent Nordic region has been challenged, specifically in regards to violent relationship to former colonies (Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2014), growing problems with alt-right movements (Pamment, 2016) and involvement in international armed conflicts (Browning, 2007). Hence, the Nordic perspective is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it sets out to dismantle the old mythologies, symbols and ideologies, while on the other hand using them in branding efforts to differentiate the region.

It is concerning that Nordic denominators of place branding also serve as a breeding ground of a new type of moralising nationalism and segregation. After decades of globally market-oriented place branding, politics, regional identity and place branding are again entwined, and this relationship takes a strategic position in municipal debates as well as in state-governed projects. Moreover, global mediascapes and digital communications have accelerated and multiplied the spaces where different realities are voiced and where hegemonic, strategic narratives of the Nordic are engaged with – through either appropriation, modification or opposition. Because of the double nature of the Nordic perspective, it is a malleable communicative strategy for unifying as well as dividing communities. As such, place branding scholarship may shed light on socio-spatial inequities and growing imbalances between places. The Nordic perspective can help us to listen to the quiet majority of places that “do not matter”, to attune to problems inherent to competing value systems, parallel societies, violence and populism. In an age of growing disquiet, it can identify feelings of exclusion, disengagement and even resignation from a unifying cultural identity. However, as engaged scholars, we cannot simply stop by diagnosing of democratic crisis. Rather, it is important to work towards re-establishing dismantling social cohesion by taking active part in social debates and community projects. Contestation may constitute a fertile ground for creatively appropriating and remaking the Nordic. The hybridity of the Nordic scholarly approach, as it is presented here, underscores the potential of expanding place branding research and practice to deal with such issues globally.

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Further reading

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