intervalla: Vol. 7, 2019 ISSN: 2296-3413

Nørdic-ness: Perception and Positionality of Scandinavian Taste as Good Taste

Milton Fernando Gonzalez-Rodriguez
University of Amsterdam

ABSTRACT
Central to this paper is to shed light on the positionality of Scandinavia as a region along a hierarchy that entwines the notions of *Nordic/Scandinavian* and *good taste*. Based on a qualitative discursive analysis of the promotional material, advertising campaigns and marketability approaches of Nordic-related/Nordic-oriented goods, I suggest that social progress and economic wealth explain why Scandinavia is perceived as fashionable. For decades, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, in particular, have asserted themselves as highly committed countries in the promotion of a better world. Not surprisingly, the region is continuously presented as a cluster of modern, advanced nations. From gender equality to social justice, the northernmost part of Europe is often cited as a model to follow. Use of specific letters from the Danish, Norwegian or Swedish alphabets (e.g. 'Ø'), references to cities or parts of them, or claims about minimalist, simplistic, but distinctively Nordic approaches are ways to convey a sense of *Nørdic-ness*. I suggest that *Nørdic-ness* emerges from a combination of references to stimulate consumers to link a product to the sets of ideas commonly held about the Nordic countries. These notions are mainly linked to the figure of an idealized Nordic citizen (Nordic ethnotype) who carries high prestige and occupies a high position along the arbitrary hierarchy of taste.

KEY WORDS
Taste, Scandinavia, Nordic, Design, Prestige

This paper attempts to shed light on the positionality of Scandinavia along a hierarchy that entwines the notions of *Nordic/Scandinavian* and *good taste*. All along, I use the term taste to refer to the operationalization of attitudes and sensitivities in line with cultural, social and personal preferences informed by trends, and most importantly by perception. I set forth as premise that 'good taste,' despite its illusionary, contestable and intangible nature, is an arbitrary, discursive, deterministic, but highly dissuasive categorization. As an evaluative category, 'good taste' attempts to designate which practices and objects become "signs of distinction" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 483), and which fail to symbolize status and prestige.

As I intend to show, items associated with Nordic lifestyles, values and geographies are marketed according to and in line with notions affixed to Scandinavian high-ranked positionality as a socially and economically advanced region. The underlying idea is that a connection to the Nordic nations prevents specific goods from being allocated in the imagined periphery of items arbitrarily considered to be undesirable, insignificant, ordinary, or worse, tasteless.

Focus lies on promotional material and advertisement campaigns of Nordic and pseudo-Nordic brands. Specifically, the main object of study in this paper are the discursive codes employed by these brands to describe and refer to Scandinavian style on Facebook and Instagram, and the responses of virtual audiences. By pseudo-Nordic, I refer to those brands that claim to be informed, inspired, or encouraged by Nordic values in the creation of their production, even though they are not based in the region. I equally apply the term pseudo-Nordic to the labels, logos, product names and trademarks that playfully, but strategically, allude to Scandinavian linguistic codes in order to evoke a sense of Nordicity.

CONCEPTUALIZING NORDICITY

In varying ways and to varying extents, Scandinavia is implicitly cited as a point of reference within circles of material production that allegedly promote stylish, trendsetting and sophisticated items. Since the early 20th century, "Sweden and Scandinavia's international reputation for design is undisputed, and design has become both a marketable characteristic of Swedishness and an integral part of Sweden's cultural heritage" (Jones, 2016, p. 221).

Attempts to resemble, invoke and evoke a sense of belonging, provenance, ancestry or derivation related to this part of the world mirrors the positive connotations affixed to it. For decades, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, in particular, have asserted themselves as highly committed countries in the promotion of a better world. From gender equality to social justice, the northernmost part of Europe is often cited as a model to follow. From a historical perspective, "values identified as Nordic have ranged from rustic, courageous, heathen and violent to Protestant ethics, secularism, social egalitarianism, individualism, democratic culture and the welfare state" (Aronsson and Gradén, 2013, p. 2). Undisputed reputation and righteousness accredited to the region seems to inform the imaginary of consumers, and their perception of Nordic material culture.

Objects perceived to embody the lifestyle of Nordic citizens become derivatives and manifestations of modern, prominent, and highly praised societies. The figure of a Nordic citizen as the one who has the best quality of life, lives the happiest, acknowledges gender diversity the best, resides in some of the best cities in the world, inarguably informs how these nations are perceived. The emblematic ethnotype (ethnicity-oriented stereotype) of a Dane, Finn, Icelander, Norwegian and Swede is an amalgamation of desirable attributes. From a conceptual viewpoint, "what is specific about ethnotypes is that they single out a nation from the rest of humanity by ascribing a particular character" (Leerssen, 2016, p. 17). As Michael Booth (2015) explains in his book *The Almost Nearly Perfect People*, "coverage of all things Scandinavian" (p. 7) is adulatory, even if it is not necessarily well-founded. The title of the book summarizes some of the sensitivities that the Nordic ethnotype evokes in peoples' imaginary across the globe, and as I proceed to argue, might explain the cachet attributed to Scandinavian-designed products.

A tyranny of qualitative assessments seems to explain why certain pieces of furniture, garments, accessories, or household objects carry higher prestige than others. Almost universally, taste seems to be governed by hierarchical orders (Parkhurst Ferguson, 2004). A valid observation is that Nordic products and design are perceived as a sample of 'good taste' because they allegedly reflect the preferences of *almost perfect* societies. Hierarchies of taste seem to build on status, historicity, longevity, but also a sense of patrimony "loaded with significance" (Belfanti, 2015, p. 56), as is the case of the evolution of the Made in Italy concept. In many ways, Italian and Scandinavian design share commonalities in terms of positionality.

In addition to the evaluative sense of "unanimity and uniformity" (Blumer, 1969, p. 289) that characterizes the world of fashion, prestige is also closely related to trust. Since the 1950s, Italian brands attempting to stand out at a global scale have known that style is "constructed by skilled admen and creative communicators" (Micelli, 2014, p. 86). Perceiving Italian brands as superior to others has also a lot to do with a presumed "heady reverence for craft" (Ross, 2004, p. 216), that renders them immune from scrutiny, suspicion, or disapproval.

Whereas marketing strategies explain the creation of convincing–often discordant–narratives that promote commercial endeavors, they do not conclusively describe the evaluative dimensions attached to the concept of taste. There is nevertheless consensus that "none of us has a wholly singular taste and that, from chefs to sociologists, many of us in fact spend a good deal of time accounting for taste" (Parkhurst Ferguson 2004, p. 19). Probably induced by competition from other markets, Nordic design, for instance, in the case of Sweden has resulted in the "perception of a homogenous stylistic category fueled by an exclusive and homogenous design discourse" (Jones, 2016, p. 221). Consciously or not, the actors behind the production and promotion of Scandinavian design place emphasis on timelessness and functionality, but as I will show, on many other traits as well.

TAXONOMY OF TRAITS

A corpus was built in order to assess the discursive strategies deployed to promote Nordic design. It consists of two sets of data. On one hand, the corpus is made up of ten samples of advertising texts, captions and textual labels produced by 16 Scandinavian brands: Arket, Artek, Bang & Olufsen, Bo Concept, Bolia, COS, Filippa K, Fjällräven, Ganni, Gestuz, H&M, HAY, Iitala, Samsdøe & Samsøe, Selected and Weekday. These are 160 texts that complement visuals posted on Facebook and Instagram during a period of three months (September-November, 2019). The companies were chosen based on the popularity according to search criteria in Google and design-oriented blogs, websites and magazines. On the other hand, the corpus consists of 634 comments posted by online users (i.e. on Facebook and Instagram), as response to the 160 images used as promotional material. Since focus lies on the discursive strategies, the images are not used to make inferences about the series of traits the ads intend to evoke among the viewers. Aesthetic composition and construction of the images are only considered in relation to the reaction of those posting comments online.

Table 1 is an attempt to classify the set of attributes identified in the corpus of advertising texts, captions and textual labels. As marketing strategy, Scandinavian brands underline the importance of creating objects that reflect Nordic traditional values and heritage. Traits have been qualitatively divided according to the references, allusions and associations they make.

Table 1. Qualitative analysis of discursive strategies deployed in promotional and branding material of Scandinavian companies producing clothes, furniture and household objects.

Company / Country	Attributes		
	Design-related	Time/Space-related	Ethos-related
Arket		Durable products Nordic heritage	Democratic quality
Artek	Poetic simplicity		Clear / Functional
Bang & Olufsen	Simplicity Design craftmanship	Rich heritage	
Bo Concept		Excellence rooted in heritage Nordic mood	Elegant
Bolia	Simplicity Craftmanship	Heritage	
COS	Beauty in simplicity	Timeless craftmanship	Functional / Innovative
Filippa K	Minimalism	Timeless style	Ethically-sourced
Fjällräven		Timeless outdoor gear	Responsible Simple / Practical
Ganni			Progress-oriented Environmental Sustainable
Gestuz	Effortless ease	Design tradition	Discreetly innovative
H&M			Affordable Personal
HAY			Sophisticated Functional Accessible
Iitala		Timeless design	Progressive Scandinavian Functional
Samsdøe & Samsøe	Rooted in Scandinavian simplicity	Craftmanship Timeless	Functional Sophisticated
Selected	Minimalistic expression	Timeless	Sophisticated
Weekday			Youth culture-oriented Sustainable

In general terms, Nordic companies stress on the fact that they produce pieces of clothing and furniture that stand the test of time, but most noticeably, items easily recognizable for their simplicity. Promotional material also includes statements about the importance of craftmanship, heritage and functionality.

A closer look at the discursive strategies deployed by the 16 Nordic brands reveal they are committed to produce "timeless", "functional" pieces rooted in the "simplicity" that characterizes the Nordic mindset. "Simple" might make allusion to the lavish aesthetic of minimalist pieces that nevertheless seduce for their intricate, multifaceted elaboration, often complemented with carefully selected finishing features. Alternatively, the term "simplicity" might be a reference to

pieces that only slightly reformulate or adapt older models. In either case, there is nothing *simple* about the innovative fabrics, textures, and fibers used in combination with advanced processes of production, preceded by intense research and product development deployed by Scandinavian companies.

From the producers' perspective, Scandinavian style denotes simplicity, minimalism, timelessness, sophistication, elegance, functionality and craftmanship. Alternatively, at the consumption end of the spectrum, Nordic design objects are praised for their quality, coolness, chicness, but mostly for their beauty. Worthy of further consideration is the set of associations consumers make between the objects being advertised and Nordic citizens (Nordic ethnotype).

Consumers mostly comment on the "gorgeous", "proper blond" models displaying "cool" outfits in "alluring" "Scandi" landscapes, tactically complemented with "scenic" "Nordic weather". The embodiment of the Nordic ethnotype hinges on widespread tropes about ethnic groups, physiognomy, and typifications aligned with historical connotations linked to the tradition of presenting human diversity according to hierarchical taxonomies. Even if there have been associations between blond hair and the "'dumb blond' persona", in fact, "[t]hroughout most of human history, blond hair has been considered attractive and alluring, possibly because this color is associated with gold and light, two things that people consider valuable and desirable" (Sherrow, 2006, p. 149). Not surprisingly, blondness is one the elements easily identifiable in discourse about Nordic-oriented products.

Outside the region, notions about ethnicity (e.g. blondness), and ancestry (e.g. Vikings) seem to strengthen the positionality of Scandinavia as a trendsetting region. Blondness emerges as a component in the creation of advertisement and promotional material that strengthens the connection between geographical spaces and highly-praised societies.

Along with notions about imagined or idealized physical traits that distinguish Nordic citizens, consumers of the brands also comment on the Viking heritage of the northernmost countries of Europe. It does not seem to be merely a matter of taste. After all, "popular culture has taken the Vikings to heart" (Aronsson and Gradémn, 2012, p. 3), nonetheless because Viking ancestry denotes strength, power, adventure, and explorative spirit, which are all good qualities. For many, the "idea that Viking blood and genes are still alive within current generations has a powerful allure" (p. 3). Any connection or association with ancient Nordic heritage seems to grant a certain status, even if it is not based on a contextual, tangible or traceable basis. In many ways, ideas of grandeur have permeated the collective imaginary.

PSEUDO-NORDIC-NESS

Based on the stratified sampling of comments posted by online users, it is possible to make a connection between prestige and 'good taste.' Material culture reflects practices surrounding items that materialize and solidify ideas, but also idealizations about others. The figure of idealized Nordic citizens (Nordic ethnotype) is an example of how "[o]ur way of thinking in terms of 'national characters' boils down to an ethnic-political distribution of role patterns in an imaginated anthropological landscape" (Leerssen, 2007, p. 29). Scandinavian design evokes a sense of sophistication that is entwined with the perception and assumptions linked to the region. Objects labelled as Nordic go through processes that ultimately confirm that status, just as class, "is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 483). A further review of the attributes used by the brands analyzed in this study reveals commonalities and standardizations in the way they describe their products. More importantly, focus is placed on how they are perceived. In other words, it is apparent that association with Scandinavia or any Nordic country situates an object in a favorable position along an imagined continuum that separates good from bad taste. Examples of companies passing for, or pretending to be Nordic are evidence of the presumed advantages Scandinavian identity affords.

Nølson, an Amsterdam-based Dutch brand producing shirts since 2016, or Skøvde, a line of gloves, hats and scarves distributed by the American apparel TKMaxx are valid examples of pseudo-Nordic-ness. In both cases, the Danish-Norwegian vowel [Ø, ø: /øː/] is used to convey the idea that the items are somehow related to Scandinavia. [Ø] operates as a marker of 'borrowed' linguistic ethnicity and identity. It evokes a connection between a product and a geography that consumers associate with ideas particularly useful in the promotion of fashionable goods. A *slashed O* or *O with stroke* as is also called, [Ø] confirms the functionality of Scandinavian-inspired names in terms of prestige, and by proxy, samples of 'good taste.' Even if this vowel is also present in some African languages (i.e. Lendu), it is the awareness of its Nordic usage what renders it desirable.

Attempts to fetishize Nordic languages in order to strengthen a sense of Nordic-ness has also been observed in the taxonomy of product names used by IKEA (Kristoffersson, 2014). Beyond efforts to create a dyslexic-friendly nomenclature, names of Swedish lakes (bathroom articles), Scandinavian boy's names (bookcases), Danish place names (rugs), and Norwegian place names (beds) are examples of how IKEA "uses numerous national markers" (p. 113). Meanings emerge from association, and taste is in many ways an externalization of patterns of consumption, but also of the processes behind those choices. A taste for Scandinavian goods seems to imply that the consumer/user/buyer in question wishes to associate and identify herself/himself with a highly praised ethnotype. Since "consumption is a deeply social act" (Gilady, 2018, p. 2), it is not surprising that "prestige is generated through actors' estimates of the approbative collective assessment of a third party" (p. 10). I suggest the term *Nørdic-ness* to describe the use of references deliberately deployed to stimulate consumers to link a product to the sets of ideas commonly held about the Nordic countries. A sense of prestige attached to the imagined concept of Scandinavian-ness explains why brands proudly frame themselves as brokers of *Nørdic-ness*.

(SELF)-PERCEPTION

Paradoxically, in modern Nordic countries, "showing off" (Nelson and Shavitt 2002, p. 441) is frowned upon, and there is some indication that the Jante Law still today explains some of the behavioral traits seen in these societies. The Jante Law holds the notion that being more important than the others or standing out due to individual qualities means someone else is worth less (Gustavsson, 1995). When Danish-Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose wrote first in 1933 about this unwritten code in his novel *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* (*A Fugitive Crosses His Track*), a set of commandments were listed as the basis of this outlook to life. In his book, ten rules constituted the law that the inhabitants of the fictional town of Jante were expected to follow in order to fit in. Sandemose aimed to describe the Nordic mindset by coining a term to label the set of conventions of the society in which he grew up (Tixier, 1996). Although there are differences in between the conventions of the Jante Law applicable to each country, it has become a marker of the Nordic ethos. Sandemose's novel constitutes a parody on a community that criticizes and discourages individual achievements. Both in academic and colloquial spheres, this term has become synonym of Scandinavian values and attitudes (Kuyper et al., 2011). Although it has gained acceptance as an acknowledged feature of Nordic societies, its connotation is often negative. Many Nordic citizens have expressed their desire to distant themselves from this mentality (Hoefler and Vejlagaard, 2011). At the same time, the strong sense of equality and social parity are seen as the reasons behind the success of the so-called Nordic model (Kvist, 2011).

Yet, a review of the items sold on the websites listed in Table 1 reveals another side of the story. Items invariably considered as samples of 'good taste' are not affordable, neither communal, or democratic in the sense that their production is limited and not accessible to everyone. In fact, besides H&M with its 4414 stores across the globe, and Ikea, most Scandinavian brands are

considered by online consumers as "expensive", "pricy", physically "unavailable" and pricewise "unattainable". In the particular case of Ikea, even if the company "claims to work with the same values, ideals and principles as Swedish welfare policies, with a focus on solidarity, justice and equality" (Kristoffersson, 2014, p. 113), its focus markets are economically advanced countries. Along the same line, whereas brands such as Arket, Bang & Olufsen, Filippa K, Iitala or Samsøe & Samsøe manufacture products that allegedly reflect societies governed by a sense of horizontality and democratic principles of uniformity, they only target specific markets. A valid conclusive observation is that Scandinavian products are not available to everyone, and consequently retain a sense of exclusivity that predictably increase their positionality and status.

CONCLUSION

An assessment of the attributes and associations mentioned by producers and consumers indicate that Scandinavian style is considered a sample of 'good taste,' based on a complex amalgamation of preconceptions, assumptions, idealizations, and expectations. Objects reflect patterns of consumption, but also provide cues about sensitivities, affiliation and identification. In varying ways and to varying extents, Scandinavia is implicitly cited as a point of reference within circles of material production that allegedly promote stylish, trendsetting and sophisticated items (e.g. clothing, furniture, *design* objects). Nordic lifestyles are materialized in products that can be bought, worn, used and displayed by those living outside the highly praised region. As expected, several brands (e.g. Arket, Bang & Olufsen, Iittala, Ikea) have profited and commercialized from the association customers make between Scandinavia and 'good taste.' This is not to say that the physical and aesthetic qualities of goods produced in the region is low, far from it. However, the use of references or connections with a specific region stems from its positionality along a hierarchical and arbitrary order where prestige and perception are the benchmarks.

REFERENCES

Aronsson, P., & Gradén, L. (2013). Introduction: Performing Nordic heritage institutional preservation and popular practices. In P. Aronsson and L. Gradén (Eds.), *Performing Nordic Heritage* (pp. 1-26). London: Routledge.

Belfanti, C. M.(2015). Renaissance and 'Made in Italy': Marketing Italian fashion through history (1949–1952). *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 20(1), 53-66.

Blumer, H. (1969). Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 10(3), 275-291.

Booth, M. (2015). *The almost nearly perfect people.* London: Vintage Books.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilady, L. (2018). *The price of prestige.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Griffiths, D., & Harding, S. (2015). Interdisciplinary approaches to the Scandinavian heritage of north-west England. In S. Harding, D. Griffiths & E. Royles (Eds.), *In search of vikings* (pp. 1-32). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Gustavsson, B. (1995). Human values of Swedish management. *Journal of Human Values,* 1(2),153-172.

Hedling, O. (2014). Notes on Nordic noir as European popular culture. *Frames Cinema Journal* 6, 201-214.

Hoefler, J., & Vejlgaard, T. (2011). Something's ironic in Denmark: An otherwise progressive welfare state lags well behind in care of patients at the end of life. *Health Policy*, 103(2), 297-304.

Jones, M. I. (2016). The visibility of divergence: Vicke Lindstrand – Swedishness,

Scandinavianness and the "Other". *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 85(3), 208-224.

Kuyper, H. et al. (2011). Social comparisons in the classroom: An investigation of the better than average effect among secondary school children. *Journal of School Psychology*, 49(1), 25-53.

Kristoffersson, S. (2014). *Design by IKEA: A cultural history*. (W. Jewson, Trans.). London: Bloomsbury.

Kvist, J., & Greeve, B. (2011). Has the Nordic welfare model been transformed? *Social Policy and Administration*, 45(2), 146-160.

Leerssen, J. (2007). Imagology: History and method. In M. Beller & J. Leerssen (Eds.), *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters* (pp. 17-32). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Leerssen, J. (2016). Imagology: On using ethnicity to make sense of the world. *Iberic@l, 10*, 13-31.

Micelli, S., & Sacchetti, V. (2014). Made in Italy: A decade of change, *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 7(1), 81-88.

Nelson, M., & Shavitt, S. (2002). Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Achievement Values. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33(5), 439-458.

Parkhurst Ferguson, P. (2004). *Accounting for taste: The triumph of French cuisine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ross, A. (2004). Made in Italy: The trouble with craft capitalism. *Antipode*, 36(2), 209-216.

Rusten, G., Bryson, J., & Aarflot, U. (2007). Places through products and products through places: Industrial design and spatial symbols as sources of competitiveness. *Norwegian Journal of Geography* 61 (3), 133–44.

Sherrow, V. (2006). *Encyclopedia of hair: A cultural history*. London: Greenwood Press.

Tixier, M. (1996). Cultural adjustments required by expatriate managers working in the Nordic countries. *International Journal of Manpower*, 17(6), 19-42.

BIOGRAPHY

Milton Fernando Gonzalez Rodriguez is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (University of Amsterdam). His research has mainly focused on the representation of identity in visual and material culture. He has published on indigeneity in Latin American cinema, animated series, television, sociolinguistics and material culture. He is mostly interested in visual and vocative framing, stereotypes in media, digital cultural artefacts and the nexus between visuality, imaginaries and materiality. In 2020 he was awarded the Praemium Erasmianum Research Prize from the Erasmus Prize Foundation for his PhD dissertation *Histrionic Indigeneity: Ethnotypes in Latin American Cinema*. Previous affiliations include University of Iceland and Malmö University. During his doctoral program, he was a visiting researcher at the University of Cambridge and Leiden University.