

## 2 Variations on shared themes

### Branding the Nordics as gender equal

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Differentiation is at the core of nation-branding. As branding scholar and consultant Keith Dinnie (2008: 139) has argued, ‘governments around the world are turning to branding techniques to differentiate their nations on the global stage and also to give themselves a competitive edge over rival countries with which they must compete in both international and domestic markets’. This urge to differentiate presents a challenge for Nordic states, perhaps particularly when it comes to gender equality. On the one hand, there is now an effort to launch a ‘Nordic’ brand as a single and unified concept that includes all the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers presented a branding strategy for the Nordic region in 2015, the aim being to ‘promote what we have in common – our Nordic perspective, our values, and a culture that has grown out of a common history’ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015: 5). Gender equality is featured as a central pillar in this common branding effort as a set of values, policies and practices that unifies the Nordic region and sets it apart from the rest of the world. On the other hand, each Nordic state still engages in its own nation-branding, and gender equality is a potential feature for each of these states. Nation-branding generally requires that each state presents itself as distinctive and even unique. Rather than a uniform narrative about Nordic gender equality across the individual brands, there is thus an incentive for each state to highlight its own unique traits. The question is what qualities the Nordic countries emphasize in their efforts to brand their respective nations gender equal?

The aim of this chapter is to examine and compare the gender equality components of the branding efforts of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The approach adopted is primarily descriptive, the intention being to provide a comparative examination of the Nordic brands that can provide a wider context for the other chapters in this volume. Do the countries brand themselves in similar ways in terms of gender equality, as the Nordic Council of Ministers has recommended? Or do they attempt to carve their own niches in the international distinction game, as Larsen (see Chapter 1 in this volume) suggests? Do their branding efforts differ in terms of how and to what extent gender equality is emphasized? If so, in what ways does each country claim and feature gender equality as a national

trait? While our theoretical point of departure is critical – the function of our analysis is neither to legitimize branding as a practice nor to help improve Nordic branding – the description of the various countries' branding efforts is merely a first step necessary for a future critical analysis that would unpack the underlying assumptions and power dynamics inherent in these branding practices. The comparison of the brands makes it possible to consider opportunities that may have been missed in particular brands, ways in which gender equality *could have* been incorporated but was not. Identifying missed opportunities, however, does not mean making suggestions about what branding *should have* included. Again, our aim is to highlight differences and similarities rather than to advance particular visions of Nordic brands.

The analysis relies on three kinds of data: (1) secondary sources, to piece together a brief history of the nation-branding efforts of each country; (2) brand platform documents, if they exist and are publicly available, as part of each country's nation-branding history; and (3), most importantly for the analysis of gender equality in each brand, national websites.<sup>1</sup> Nation-branding is obviously much more than the texts and images presented on official websites. Nonetheless, these websites are deliberately and carefully crafted to convey the simple and distinctive messages about national traits that form the core of each national brand. While not comprehensive, we thus approach these sites as a shortcut to the brand each state seeks to promote and project. Since Norway does not use its official country website *Norway.no* as a general branding platform (it serves as a portal to the embassies and missions of the Norwegian Foreign Service), our analysis of Norway is primarily focused on the tourism promotion and travel guide *Visitnorway.no*. The branding of Norway is thus not entirely comparable to the other Nordic countries, but we have opted to include Norway in the analysis nonetheless, bearing this difference in mind.

The methodology used is a standard discourse analysis of the texts of the Nordic country websites. On each website, we began with a general orientation, looking at the organization of the website and the main branding message. Discerning the main branding message is not rocket science – the whole point of these sites is to present clear and obvious narratives about the nation. We then used the search engines provided at these sites to find gender-related articles, using the search terms 'gender', 'women', 'women's rights', 'gay rights', 'LGBTQ' and 'masculinity'. We read all articles containing any of these terms carefully, to discern in what ways gender is presented as part of a particular country's brand. The data collection was carried out in 2018 – the websites may have changed since then.

The concern with the nation's image abroad is not a new one: Nordic states have consciously managed their reputations abroad for at least a century. For instance, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) founded its Press Department in 1909 explicitly to 'remind the world about Sweden',

and it also deployed journalists in Paris, London and Berlin to feed news stories about Sweden to foreign news outlets (Pamment, 2013: 100).

The boom in nation-branding campaigns seems to have occurred in the early to mid-2000s (Teslik, 2007), which is also the period in which the Nordic states first launched 'national brands'. The five states have nonetheless approached nation-branding quite differently, with Finland, Sweden and to some extent Iceland having developed much more coherent, distinctive and institutionalized brands than Denmark and Norway. As we will show below, branding efforts in Denmark and Iceland were triggered and speeded up by sudden events – the 2006 Muhammad cartoon crisis in the case of Denmark, the 2008 economic crises and the 2010 eruptions of volcanic ash in that of Iceland – whereas branding initiatives in the remaining three countries developed as a result of more general and less urgent concerns with the global standing of the respective 'national brands'. As we will demonstrate in the following sections, the roads and approaches to nation-branding vary significantly among the five countries, as does the position of gender equality therein.

In sum, the comparison conducted in this chapter shows that the five Nordic brands rest on similar foundations. They all emphasize egalitarian and progressive values, laws and institutions; and they all highlight the natural environments of their respective countries. In this normative setting, all five brands furthermore include narratives about gender equality and LGBTQ rights. However, they do so to remarkably different degrees. Whereas Sweden centrally features gender equality in virtually all its branding efforts, neither Denmark nor Norway places much emphasis on gender equality at all. Finland and Iceland emphasize gender equality less consistently than Sweden, but when they do emphasize it, they do so forcefully, setting the countries up as gender-equality leaders. Visually and in text, men and women are generally presented in non-stereotypical roles: the nurturing side of men as fathers and caretakers is highlighted, and the innovative and physically forceful side of women is stressed. None of the brands are starkly heteronormative. Other than on the tourism sites, there are few images of heterosexual families and couples, for example, and most images are 'sexuality-neutral'. However, Denmark and Iceland hardly feature LGBTQ rights at all, whereas Finland, Norway and Sweden do so more extensively.

The rest of this chapter is made up of five sections in which we compare the Nordic countries in terms of the extent to which and how gender equality features on their nation-branding websites. We will begin with a discussion of Denmark and Norway, which do the least to incorporate gender equality into the national brand, before moving on to Sweden, the gender-equality branding champion. Once we have looked at these three, Finland and Iceland are discussed. We have labelled each brand in an attempt to synthesize the main message of each national platform, and we use these labels as titles for each individual section. The chapter concludes with a more extensive discussion that summarizes our analysis.

## Trusting Denmark

In 2007, Denmark launched its first explicit 'nation-branding' initiative, entitled the 'Action Plan for the Global Marketing of Denmark', to guide nation-branding until 2012. At this time, Denmark was reeling from the Muhammad cartoon crisis that had erupted in early 2006 and involved global protests and boycotts of Danish products as a result of the 2005 publication of cartoon caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in the major Danish daily paper *Jyllands-Posten*. Facing demands from the Danish business sector that diplomacy and other tools of political dialogue be used to mitigate the crisis, the government established a nation-branding programme to rebuild Denmark's image (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015: 190). The Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs was assigned leadership of the programme, with four additional ministries participating in the taskforce: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation; the Ministry of Education; and the Ministry of Culture. The business sector, however, never became centrally involved in the actual planning and execution of the brand (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015: 191).

Marketing consultants from Red Associates were hired by the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs to develop a brand platform, resulting in the report *Perceptual Analysis and Recommendations for an Aggressive Global Marketing of Denmark* (Red Associates, 2006). The development of this brand platform was subjected to political negotiations (Mordhorst, 2015: 252). As a result, rather than one core message and a single brand vision, Red Associates proposed a platform centred on four themes: 'Responsible and Balanced', 'High Quality', 'Experimental and Proactive' and 'Environmental Awareness, Simplicity and Efficiency'. This was a fragmented and internally contradictory platform that was difficult to implement as a coherent narrative (Mordhorst, 2015: 252). The programme was evaluated in 2010, and it was concluded that, despite major efforts, the international visibility and strength of the Danish brand had not improved to any significant degree (Csaba and Stöber, 2011). The nation-branding initiative was subsequently terminated in 2012 (Merkelsen and Rasmussen, 2015: 192).

There is no contemporary national brand document coordinating the presentation of the country image of Denmark.<sup>2</sup> Branding efforts are coordinated by the Department of Public Diplomacy, Press and Communication of the Danish MFA in collaboration with Danish diplomatic representations worldwide (Merkelsen and Rasmussen, 2015: 192). This department also maintains the official website, *Denmark.dk*, which is designed to 'tell you the story about Denmark'.<sup>3</sup> Denmark's national brand is much less established than those of Sweden or Finland, and international surveys indicate a lack of familiarity with Danish corporate brands and with Denmark more generally (Cremer, 2016) – or, as summarized by two analysts, 'Copenhagen is hot, Denmark is not' (Csaba and Stöber, 2011). Not surprisingly, there have been calls from the Danish business sector for a new, concerted

national branding strategy. As a representative from the Confederation of Danish Industry has argued, ‘we have to treat Denmark as if it were a business: draw up a plan, invest in it, follow up on it, adjust it and measure our results’ (Csaba and Stöber, 2011).

On *Denmark.dk*, the brand message is one that emphasizes the welfare state and social trust in a national community. Trust, community and welfare hang together, we are told, and Danish society functions so well because they are so tightly interwoven within it. In explaining universal healthcare, education and other benefits of the welfare state, the text elaborates that

the idea is that everyone must contribute to the community and in return, the community will help care for all. These values of trust and community are deeply embedded in Danish culture and society and have their roots in Danish history.

(*Denmark.dk*, n.d. a)

Why is Denmark a great place to live? Because of trust, community and the welfare state (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. a). ‘Why are Danish people so happy?’ Because of trust, community and the welfare state (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. b). Why is Denmark such ‘a great place to do business?’ Because of trust, community and the welfare state.

An article entitled ‘Trust: A Cornerstone of Danish Culture’ asks the (perhaps rhetorical) question, ‘Why are the Danes so trusting?’ The reader is provided with a tautological claim: that Danes are trusting because there is a Danish culture of trust – trust is a ‘culturally-determined phenomenon built over time. Trust is learned during childhood from parents, teachers, and coaches, lasts for a lifetime and is passed on from generation to generation’ (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. c). Indeed, the text on *Denmark.dk* is infused both with implicit assumptions and overt claims about the existence and importance of a cohesive and distinctive Danish national community. Not surprisingly, and in stark contrast with Swedish branding efforts, the Danish site makes not one mention of multiculturalism. The monocultural nature of the Danish nation is reinforced visually, with images representing Denmark as a white community with very few people of colour. To be sure, there is one article on religion in Denmark that makes mention of Muslims and Jews and features a photo of three little girls, and the one in the middle is wearing a headscarf (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. d). But this brief discussion follows a much longer one describing Denmark as a Christian country.

So how is gender equality fitted into the Danish national narrative about trust, community and the welfare state? Visually, the Danish site looks similar to the other Nordic ones. There are both men and women depicted throughout, and they are often depicted in non-stereotypical ways. For instance, the majority of the images of a parent and a child feature fathers rather than mothers. However, interestingly, gender equality or the status of women is hardly featured at all textually. In fact, on *Denmark.dk*, there

is only one article – on the broader theme of equality – that devotes a few short paragraphs explicitly to ‘Gender Equality in Denmark’ as well as a few on ‘LGBT Rights in Denmark’ (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. e). There is one additional paragraph describing women’s higher rates of paid employment in Denmark, in an article on work–life balance (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. f), and a few scattered sentences on women here and there. Overall, gender equality has a miniscule presence within the Danish online brand.

In the article on equality, we learn that equality is a central feature of Danish culture, with low income inequality and low poverty rates being characteristic traits of Danish society. Gender equality and LGBTQ rights are discussed as dimensions of this general cultural trait. In contrast with Sweden and Finland, as we will show below, the claims about gender equality in Denmark are furthermore modest, presented as brief, matter-of-fact statements. For instance, the reader is told that ‘Denmark scores well on the World Economic Forum’s gender equality index’ and that ‘women are well represented in Denmark’s government’. Claims about LGBTQ rights are equally downplayed and modest. Statements about equality of same-sex partners before the law and of Copenhagen being one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world are made, but the overall message that ‘being gay in Denmark is no big deal’ is made by hardly featuring LGBTQ issues or gay life at all.

That said, Denmark – like the other Nordic states – is presented in terms of a few gender-equality ‘firsts’: Nina Bang becoming ‘the world’s first female minister in a country with parliamentary democracy’ in 1924 (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. e); Asta Nielsen being Europe’s first female movie star (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. g); and Christine Jorgensen receiving ‘one of the first internationally-discussed gender reassignment surgeries in 1951’ (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. e). Overall, however, it is remarkable how little emphasis is placed on showcasing gender equality and how many opportunities for doing so are overlooked. For instance, in the discussion of Denmark as a Christian country, one brief sentence states that ‘more than 55% of the priests in the state church are women’ (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. d). Given the lack of women priests in most other Christian denominations, this could have been an opportunity to emphasize Danish progressiveness on gender. Likewise, the discussion of Danish foreign policy and aid says virtually nothing about the integration of gender equality into Danish foreign aid (*Denmark.dk*, n.d. h). There is nothing on women or gender in the section on government and politics. Clearly, and in stark contrast with the Swedish brand, as we will show below, gender equality is briefly mentioned but not featured in the branding narrative about Denmark.

### **Natural Norway**

Norway seems to have started working towards a national brand earlier than neighbouring states, and yet these efforts never resulted in a coordinated



brand platform or an institution charged with managing a Norwegian 'brand'. The MFA took a leading role in starting the process, preparing three reports on Norway's image abroad between 1999 and 2006 (Lending, 2000; Omdømmeutvalget, 2006). These reports called for a coherent branding of Norway executed through coordinated national reputation management. Two consecutive bodies were established to meet these expectations: the Norwegian Public Diplomacy Commission (*mdømmeutvalget*) that functioned during 2004–2006 and the Norwegian Public Diplomacy Forum (*mdømmeforumet*) that was in operation from 2007 to 2010. Both were led by the foreign minister and included a broad spectrum of representatives from the private sector, the cultural sector, academia and various NGOs. Angell and Mordhorst (2015: 192) argue that 'national reputation efforts in the Norwegian setting were an integrated part of the foreign policy realm and have not caused significant controversies'.

Ultimately, despite the early initiatives towards a branding platform, Norway did not end up with an explicit and coherent brand that is officially promoted. As the Foreign Ministry explains, 'we are not seeking to convey a fixed message, like a slogan, but rather to stake out a certain direction in our continued efforts to promote Norway'. According to the Foreign Ministry, that general message is that Norway should be seen as an 'attractive, strong and committed partner' and that the world should know more about Norwegian culture and 'our relationship with nature' (*Government.no*, 2013). The official country website of Norway, *Norway.no*, is used as a portal to Norway's diplomatic missions abroad rather than as an information site and country-branding tool. This sets Norway apart from all of its Nordic neighbours. In the absence of a single online focal point, the online management of Norway's reputation abroad is spread over many official websites, including the official government website,<sup>4</sup> diplomatic mission websites,<sup>5</sup> the official tourism website,<sup>6</sup> the official site for studying in Norway<sup>7</sup> and Innovation Norway, a site for promoting business in Norway.<sup>8</sup> The other Nordic states of course also maintain these kinds of websites, and they also engage in some nation-branding in them, too. But they centre their branding efforts on their official country websites in a way that Norway does not. Like the other Nordic states, Norway also has a resource base for public diplomacy developed for 'missions abroad and other relevant actors when they need to tell others about Norway', which allegedly includes images, a story bank and presentations (*Government.no*, 2015). However, the Norwegian resource base is not publicly available. Below, we will focus our analysis primarily on the tourism site *Visitnorway.com*, using the other, less-developed websites at times for additional illustrations.

It is difficult to get a coherent sense from all of these websites of any core messages about Norway. That said, a 2009 report recommended that Norway be branded as 'a resourceful, committed and reliable partner' (Synovate, 2009). This is still the main message that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims to want to use in Norwegian public diplomacy: 'We would like our

contacts to perceive us as: a resourceful, engaged and reliable partner.’ The Norwegian MFA still wants official communication efforts to pivot around two main dimensions: ‘Norwegian culture and our relationship with nature’. Norwegian nature is presented as both ‘magnificent and accessible’ and as a great resource for wealth generation and technological development. Norwegian culture, on the other hand, is coupled with the welfare state, quality of life and egalitarianism (*Government.no*, 2013).

Gender equality is not mentioned explicitly by the MFA as part of the core public diplomacy message. And gender equality does not seem to feature centrally on any of the official sites (other than the government site, of course, which discusses gender-related public policy along with other policy). To be sure, as in Denmark, gender equality is mentioned here and there in more general discussions of Norwegian egalitarianism. For instance, in an article on Norwegian society on the *Study in Norway* site, readers are told that

Openness, equality and equal rights in general – such as economic, social and gender equality – are important values to most Norwegians.... Homosexual relations, for instance, have been legal since 1972, and same sex couples have been able to adopt children and get married since 2009.

As on the other Nordic sites, the caretaking role of fathers is highlighted. Under an image with the title ‘Dad hugging his baby’, we learn that

Systematic efforts are made to ensure that women and men are equal when it comes to education and wages. This has certainly changed the Norwegian male’s role as a father. Norway has a paternity leave quota [... it’s easier] to combine careers and family. Nevertheless, the goal of total equality remains.

*(Study in Norway, n.d.)*

*Visitnorway.com*, Norway’s official travel guide, is clearly tourist-oriented, comprising mostly information about how to get there, where to stay and what to eat. However, there is also some messaging about the country. The slogan ‘Norway powered by nature’ is used in the logo, in line with the core brand message. Throughout, the website is full of beautiful visual representations of nature, which is to be expected from a travel site. There is frequent use of videos narrating personalized stories about Norway through food, nature, etc. (e.g. ‘Find inspiration in our stories from Norway. Meet the locals and get tips from experts and insiders’; see *Visitnorway.com*, n.d. a). Both men and women are featured in these films; however, in videos featuring single individuals, men dominate as protagonists by a ratio of 4:1. Nature and different tourist attractions are presented through the ‘eyes’ of young, heterosexual couples. Avoiding representations of nature as empty



swaths of land seems to directly follow the advice from a 2003 external report on Norwegian public diplomacy:

In portraying peace and nature, Norway should abjure the static landscape, the romanticized anti-modern images of spaces empty but for the occasional troll, and the depictions of an innocuous faraway place. The expression should focus on the dynamic – active people, hardheadedness and modernity.

(Leonard and Small, 2003).

In this way, the land shots avoid the male-explorer gaze. The texts accompanying the videos, however, frequently use words such as ‘explore’, ‘experience’, ‘discover’, all alluding to lust and pleasure.

There are no explicit discussions of gender equality on *Visitnorway.com*. One article entitled ‘Women’s Museum’ presents a museum dedicated to the history of women up to the present time (*Visitnorway.com*, n.d. b). There is no mention of what specific feminist struggles are highlighted or what achievements are celebrated in this museum. If ‘gender’ is mentioned at all on the website, it is simply listed as one of various ascriptive criteria, as an expression of the non-discriminatory character of Norwegian society. For example, we read that among the guests at Park Café there are people of ‘all ages, genders, nationalities, titles and types’, that ‘age and gender set no limits’ for the adventurous trips promoted on the website, or, alternatively that ‘disc golf is a recreational sports for everyone, regardless of age, gender, or ability’.

In contrast, some effort is made to present Norway as an LGBTQ-friendly travel destination, as summarized in the slogan ‘Open landscapes, open minds’. The article ‘LGBTQ+ Travel’ features the story of two couples who came to Oslo for the Pride festival. We learn that

like its Nordic neighbours, most Norwegians have a liberal attitude towards LGBTQ people, and the country was among the first to enact anti-discrimination laws against gays and lesbians. In fact, Norway ranks as third best in the ILGA-Europe 2018 rating of 49 European countries.

(*Visitnorway.com*, n.d. c)

A queer person interviewed in the article assures us that ‘in many ways, we live in a dreamland’, even though there is an admission that ‘parts of Norway are still very far behind’.

There are themes on the website in which one could expect more explicit discussion of gender equality. For instance, an article labelled ‘The Happiest Country on Earth’ boasts about the fact that in 2017 Norway jumped to the first place in the ranking of the world’s happiest countries in the United Nations’ *World Happiness Report* (*Visitnorway.com*, n.d. d). Since the article elaborates on several reasons behind this high result, we might expect

gender equality to be included as an important aspect explaining the ‘happiness’ of Norwegians. However, among the many factors listed, such as a well-functioning welfare and healthcare system or the fact that ‘our society is rather safe and harmonious’, gender equality is not mentioned. It only appears in passing when we learn that in the aftermath of the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway, the daily paper *Aftenposten* invited its readers to list things they appreciate about Norwegian society. Among the most popular contributions, fifth (out of 12) was ‘that everyone has the same opportunity to succeed, get an education and become what they want, without regard to gender, economy and background’ (*Visitnorway.com*, n.d. d). Yet again, gender is presented as one among several other characteristics that showcase Norwegian openness.

It should not be forgotten that while the absence of any other official country website makes *Visitnorway.com* function as the deputy gateway to Norway, it is nevertheless a travel site, and Sweden’s official tourist website, *Visitsweden.com*, also has virtually no references to gender equality. Like its Norwegian counterpart, too, the latter has a specific section entitled ‘LGBT+ Sweden’ (*Visitsweden.com*, n.d. a), though Sweden’s efforts to attract this specific category of tourists go even further than the Norwegian site – the section takes us to a separate website specifically designed as an ‘inspiration for gay and lesbian travellers to Sweden’ (*Visitsweden.com*, n.d. b).

### **Progressive Sweden**

Sweden has one of the most integrated and well-developed national brands of the Nordic countries, and its ongoing platform has a relatively long history (Clerc et al., 2015; Marklund, 2017). In 1995, the Swedish government created a task group – the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (bringing together actors from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, and Business Sweden) – to effectively promote Sweden in a coordinated, long-term manner. The emergence of self-conscious ‘nation-branding’ – in corporate language that draws parallels between the nation and a corporation with a ‘brand’ to manage – can be traced back to a 2003 study called *Sweden’s Image Abroad*, commissioned by the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (NSU). Apart from the Council, the Swedish Institute, a body led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that coordinates public diplomacy promotional resources in trade, investment, export and tourism, has overall responsibility for Swedish public diplomacy. The aim of the Swedish Institute (n.d.) is to ‘promote Sweden and Swedish issues globally’ and to work ‘with Sweden’s image abroad’. A broad consultation process starting in 2005, which involved many stakeholders and promotional bodies, resulted in the 2007 launching of a common brand platform – a simplified and coherent set of concepts that are to serve as the foundation in communication about Sweden. The Council launched the new brand platform with great fanfare, with Swedish public TV broadcasting a

four-hour VIP event over the internet (Pamment, 2013: 100). According to Pamment (2013: 99), 'Brand Sweden represents an ambitious government led consensus that few other democratic states would be able to hold together'. Despite the ambition to forge a broad consensus behind the brand, some dissenting voices were heard from academics and cultural commentators who found the bombastic claims about national distinctiveness and corporate imagery laughable (Pamment, 2013: 101). Since 2007, both the Swedish Institute (2007, 2008) and the NSU (2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2017) have issued a number of reports upgrading and refining Brand Sweden.

The brand platform permeates the country website *Sweden.se*. The core concept to be associated with Sweden, we learn from the Swedish brand platform, is 'progressive' (Swedish Institute, 2007). There are four components of the brand platform: Sweden as an 'innovative', 'open', 'caring' and 'authentic' country (Swedish Institute, 2007). These are clearly streamlined on the site. The brand rests on a seductive mix of progressive values and trendy magazine aesthetics, seamlessly weaving messages about innovation, inclusiveness, equality and the environment into a coherent story about a country at the forefront of the move towards a better future. Multiculturalism and openness to the world are central to the visual presentation. Around a fourth of the people portrayed are people of colour, which roughly corresponds with the national average in Sweden. Of the Nordic visual presentations on the country webpages, this is the most diverse national brand.

Gender equality and, to a lesser degree, LGBTQ rights are central pillars in this progressive story, which resonates with the feminist foreign policy adopted by the Swedish government in 2014. In the work leading up to the present branding strategy, gender equality was identified as one of the themes most closely associated with Sweden in populations around the world (Swedish Institute, 2007). This is clearly reflected on the country website. As a whole, the site imagery by and large tells a story that up-ends gender stereotypes, one of economically active women and caring fathers, with a few non-binary and gender-fluid inserts. The images of sports, science and innovation often feature women, whereas tabs and imagery with small children almost exclusively feature fathers. 'Swedish dads' are depicted as being on parental leave and generally involved in the care of their children, whereas the reality of Swedish men on average only taking 28% of the parental leave that couples are entitled to is not portrayed (Försäkringskassan, 2018). The parental involvement of Swedish men plays an important part in the branding efforts. The focus is dual: on women in the workforce, politics or science, on the one hand, and on men as diaper-changing, vomit-wiping and sometimes stay-at-home caretakers, on the other.

Gender equality is one of the explicit tags on the website, and there are also tags for information about Sweden as a family-friendly country ('Family-Friendly Life the Swedish Way') and 'Children in Sweden'. The article 'Gender Equality in Sweden' highlights important issues crucial for achieving gender equality: power and influence, economic equality, work

and family, and men's violence against women. For the most part, Sweden is presented as highly advanced in relation to these issues. Like Finland, as we will see below, Sweden is also represented as an international role model on gender equality: 'An extensive welfare system that promotes a healthy work-life balance has been an important factor in making Sweden a gender-egalitarian leader,' the reader learns (*Sweden.se*, n.d. a). Although the site in essence presents Sweden as a gender utopia, there is simultaneously some hesitation about being boastful. Indeed, the site contains many disclaimers of the kind that 'Sweden is not perfect, but...'. One typical passage reads, 'Often considered a gender equality role model, Sweden has come a long way. Still, there's room for improvement' (*Sweden.se*, n.d. b). There are a few critical passages that point to problems. For instance, 'Gender Equality in Sweden' also states that 'with a feminist government and a law against gender discrimination, how come Swedish board rooms are still heavily male-dominated?'

Gender is not only discussed in the most obvious ways. For instance, out of four themes dedicated to fashion, one is explicitly labelled 'Fashion and Gender', highlighting norm-breaking brands with unisex design and portraying fashion as 'a starting point to explore new ways of expressing gender through their designs, pushing for a less binary and more fluid way of understanding masculinity, femininity and everything in-between' (*Sweden.se*, n.d. c). Other highlighted features and headlines of the site include depictions of '10 Swedish Superwomen', many of whom are young women entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry. An image of footballer Lotta Schelin, rather than an image of, say, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, is used as the front image of the article 'Swedish Superstars in Sports'.

A systematic gender-mainstreaming effort is visible in many of the themes on the website. Gender equality appears in one out of five themes covered on the site (31 of 159). For example, the theme 'How To Start Up the Swedish Way' features stories from three women and three men, zipper-wise (first a woman, second a man, third a woman, fourth a man, etc.). An article entitled '5 Reasons to Work in Sweden' emphasizes the rights enjoyed by workers, with equality (including anti-discrimination and gender-equality provisions) as a second reason, and family-centred policies as a third. In 'Fashion as an Experiment', which lists brands that stand out, female designers dominate. In the several 'best of' rankings provided on *Sweden.se*, men and women are equally represented. For example, the article '10 Must-Read Swedish Books' includes presentations of four books authored by women and six by men. Swedish film facts highlighting famous Swedish actors, genres and directors feature five females and seven males. This appears to be a systematic effort.

As in Denmark, Finland and Iceland, a number of stories highlight how Sweden was the 'first' to take various steps, underscoring the preferred Nordic image as avant-garde. In various places on the site, one can learn that Sweden was the first country in the world to allow for the legal change of

gender identity (1972), the first to replace maternity leave with parental leave (1974), the first to create a ban on spanking children (1979), the first to pass a law to prohibit the purchase but not sale of sexual services (1999), and so on. As we shall see, the Finnish brand, analysed next, has not integrated gender equality to anything like the same degree as Sweden, even if the role-model claims are just as strong.

## Functional Finland

The national brand of Finland was not fully launched until 2013, even though the process of developing a brand platform began in 2007, when the MFA and the Tourism Board of Finland hired consultants to draft a branding plan. Moilanen (2016) has described this process well. The branding plan emphasized the need to involve broad sectors of society as stakeholders and to ensure commitment to the brand from central political, business, cultural and sports actors. Until 2011, the work to develop the brand was quite ambitious, involving a high-level Country Brand Delegation (made up of 22 prominent Finns with varied backgrounds, including business, academia, culture and the arts, media, politics, public administration and sports), the consultancy of premier brand entrepreneur Simon Anholt, who has also been involved in the development of the Swedish brand, and outreach activities involving society at large (Moilanen, 2016). The delegation submitted its final report in 2010, entitled *Mission for Finland*.

The 2011 elections, which involved a change of government, led to eroded support for the ongoing branding initiative (Moilanen, 2016). Branding efforts were now moved to a new 'Team Finland' network, which was established in 2011 with massive private-sector interest, to develop Finland's external economic relations and financial interests. Team Finland was not a new organization with its own budget and dedicated staff – it was instead a network among existing agencies and organizations. It is steered by the prime minister, with the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Education and Culture at the centre of the network, and it involves Finnish diplomatic and other offices abroad. The board of Team Finland, which is chaired by the prime minister, is almost exclusively made up of private-sector directors, a dramatic break from the earlier attempts to involve broad sectors of society. In 2013, the Unit for Public Diplomacy of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, with the help of US strategic communications agency Kreab Gavin Anderson, published the *Finland Country Image Communications Workbook*, to be used by all Team Finland participants and other interested parties (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland, 2013).

Also in 2013, the Finland Promotion Board was formally brought into Team Finland and tasked with defining, coordinating and implementing the national brand strategy. The Finland Promotion Board is made up of marketing and communications professionals, and the board is chaired by

the prime minister. The Finland Promotion Board maintains Finland's official country brand website at *Finland.fi*, which is called *ThisisFINLAND* (produced by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland). The website was originally established in 1995 and changed its name to *ThisisFINLAND* in 2009. In 2017, the Finland Promotion Board published *Finland's Country Branding Strategy 2017*, a brief document that built on Finland's earlier country brand strategy. Despite its brief five years of existence, the Finnish brand platform – pivoting around the concept of 'functional Finland' – is quite coherent and well established.

Turning to our analysis of *Finland.fi*, the Finnish brand is clear and concise and has consistently centred on Finland as a highly 'functional' society. Three interrelated themes are central to the 2017 brand platform: 'Education and Knowledge', 'Nature' and 'Solution Oriented' (Finland Promotion Board, 2017). The brand message on *Finland.fi* is indeed one of a nation of active, nature-loving and solution-oriented people who are products of one of the world's best education systems. Finns, we learn, value equality and environmentally sustainable technology and solutions. Because of its excellent, egalitarian public education system, this is a nation poised to find innovative and sustainable solutions to virtually any problem. Finland, the site conveys, is a place where things work and people are happy (in fact, the happiest in the world according to the featured European Happiness Equality Index). In short, Finland is branded as a highly functional place.

Before we turn to the issue of gender, we might note that there is not the same explicit emphasis on Finland as a homogeneous national community that we find in relation to Denmark on *Denmark.dk*. The Swedish-speaking and Sami minorities of Finland are present, and there is brief mention of multiculturalism and even racism in Finland.<sup>9</sup> Visually, people of colour appear here and there in the photos on the site, giving the visual impression of an almost but not entirely white society. A discussion of Nasima Razmyar, deputy mayor of Helsinki and former member of parliament for the Social Democrats, begins by describing her as an Afghanistan-born woman 'living as a Finn in Finland'. What does 'living as a Finn' entail? Focus is placed on her work for women's rights, which – along with her successful political career – is attributed to Finland's 'legacy' of gender equality (*Finland.fi*, n.d. b).

The place of gender equality in the Functional Finland brand is paradoxical. On the one hand, *Finland.fi* does not rely extensively on gender equality, at least not textually. Of the hundreds of articles that appear on the Finland site, only around ten are expressly about gender equality (tagged 'gender' or 'equality') and they are not centrally placed. A few more mention equality between the sexes (*Finland.fi*, n.d. c). And yet when gender equality is discussed, the discussion is anything but modest. On *Finland.fi*, Finland is consistently depicted as a gender-equality leader, both in terms of present conditions and in terms of leading the way historically. No less than four articles concern an international gender-equality prize that the government of Finland launched in 2017. The prize serves to set up Finland as a



gender-equality authority, with Finland as a place that knows gender equality and is qualified to promote it elsewhere: ‘Finland has been a leader when it comes to issues relating to gender equality over the past 100 years, and this is the first high-profile prize of its kind in the world,’ declares a quotation from the state secretary at the Prime Minister’s Office. Indeed, the express function of the prize is to ‘cement Finland’s role as leader in gender equality issues’ (*Finland.fi*, n.d. d). A similar prize was established in 2019 to recognize the promotion of LGBTQ inclusivity. The prize is named ‘Hän Honor’ after the new, gender-neutral pronoun ‘hän’ (*Finland.fi*, n.d. e).

Finland’s historically pioneering role on women’s rights is also emphasized. Readers learn that, in 1906, the Finnish parliament was the first in the world to recognize women’s right to run for office and the first in Europe to recognize women’s suffrage (*Finland.fi*, n.d. f). Lively portraits of the accomplishments of historical women’s rights activists in Finland are presented, along with information about how they are celebrated in contemporary Finland. For instance, Finnish flags are flown on 1 October each year to commemorate Miina Sillanpää, an activist and one of the first women elected to the Finnish parliament (*Finland.fi*, n.d. g), and 17 March is Minna Canth Day, to celebrate the nineteenth-century author and women’s rights activist. As in the Swedish brand, there is little if any emphasis on contemporary resistance to gender equality in Finland, such as among supporters of the radical right populist party True Finns.

As in the Danish case, there is a range of obvious opportunities for highlighting gender equality that are not seized. For instance, to express what is unique about Finland and the Nordic region, one article features the reflections of a Finn in the USA on life as a professional in the two countries (*Finland.fi*, n.d. h). Finland’s public funding of daycare, education and healthcare for all is compared with costs in the USA. This comparison could very easily have been presented in gender-equality terms: given existing gender roles with respect to children and the family, public daycare is crucial for enabling women in particular to combine work and parenthood. Instead, the professional in question is a man whose main worry is the bottom line – how much all these things cost. It would indeed have been simple to highlight the gender-equality implications of the differing systems, but this is not done. Another article, with the title ‘Smart People Build Smart Machines in Finland’, emphasizes how people from Turkey and China come to Finland to learn and build things. Women are notably absent from this story, however, as the images and people in the article are only men. The reproduction of the connection between being smart, science and masculinity is quite stark in the article. This could have been an opportunity to break up such a stereotypical connection and instead showcase women in science (*Finland.fi*, n.d. i). There are numerous other instances of stereotypical depictions of men, including an article on the accessibility of Finnish nature entitled ‘Into the Finnish Wild’, which features a muscular man, rather than a woman, riding a mountain bike (*Finland.fi*, n.d. j). The contrast with Swedish efforts

to use every opportunity to present women and men in non-stereotypical gender roles and settings is striking.

### **Inspirational Iceland**

Conscious efforts to manage Iceland's international reputation can be traced to the 'Iceland Naturally' marketing programme that was launched in North America in 1999 by the New York offices of the Icelandic Tourism Board and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Overseas Business Services to serve Icelandic tourism and business interests (Pálsdóttir, 2008). The programme is still running. In 2006, it was expanded to Europe. In the same year, the Icelandic government hired a specialist and commissioned a more systematic report on Iceland's image. The next step in developing the Icelandic national brand took place in 2010, with a new campaign 'Inspired by Iceland'. This was launched after the volcanic eruption that caused massive air-traffic disruptions in Europe (Benediktsson et al., 2011) and relies on extensive collaborations between the government of Iceland, the city of Reykjavík and tourism-related companies. A new website was set up,<sup>10</sup> mainly dedicated to attracting tourists. The Icelandic parliament passed a Promote Iceland Act in 2010, founding an agency specifically dedicated to strengthening Iceland's image and reputation. Promote Iceland is a public–private partnership managed by an executive board consisting of four members from the private sector and three appointed by the government. It runs the official country website, *Iceland.is*, and its most recent country document, simply called 'Iceland Brochure', comes from 2016 and is a slight reformulation of previous versions.

The official gateway to Iceland, *Iceland.is*, conveys a message of Iceland as a progressive, modern society, ranking at the top of measurements for quality of life. The story it tells is of a country characterized by harsh nature and isolation, which produced a resilient people. Probably owing to the country's heavy dependence on the tourism industry, both the website and the country brochure are dominated by beautiful nature shots, and some pages are devoid of any text (Promote Iceland, 2016).

Gender equality is not heavily present on the website, and information about gender relations in Iceland is not easy to find. The term 'gender equality' only gives four hits in the website's search engine. However, the two occasion-specific articles that draw attention to the 'Centenary of Icelandic Independence and Sovereignty' (2018) and 'Anniversaries of Equality' (2015) highlight Iceland as being highly progressive with regard to gender equality, even a 'frontrunner in gender equality'. They describe Icelandic women's path towards gender equality in detail:

Iceland has topped the Gender Gap Index for nine years in a row... recent revolutions [have contributed] such as *Free the Nipple* against

online gender-based violence, the *Reykjavik Slut Walk* where people marched against sexual violence and returned the shame to the perpetrators and the international #metoo movement.

(*Iceland.is*, n.d. a)

These descriptions provide an interesting contrast to the Swedish narrative about gender equality, where the feminist struggle is mostly written out of the story. The Icelandic brand stresses ‘fight’, ‘revolutions’ and ‘marches’, all highly contentious repertoires of the feminist movement (see also Erlingsdóttir, this volume). Gender equality is thus represented as a matter of ongoing competing interests rather than as a cultural trait that is characteristic of the Icelandic population as a whole as a result of developments in a historical past.

While the slogan for the Iceland Brochure and the website is ‘Come and be inspired by Iceland’, gender equality is not something utilized for inspirational purposes. The page in the brochure specifically named ‘Iceland as Inspiration’ lists Icelandic culture – for example, music, narrative poetry, writers and performance art, along with a ‘well educated population with one of the most extensive literacy rates in the world’ – and ‘commitment to sustainability’. Notably, gender equality is not mentioned. This matches the very scarce information on the website dedicated to gender equality, which is buried in occasional notes. Iceland undoubtedly has a lot to boast about when it comes to gender-equality achievements, and yet this is rarely done. When it is, gender-equality ‘firsts’ are emphasized, much as in the other national brands. For instance, we learn that Iceland had the first democratically elected woman president in the world (1980) and the first openly gay prime minister in the world (2009).

This last fact does not lead to LGBTQ rights being prominently featured on the website, however. Yet again, when we do find a relevant article, this time called ‘Rights of the Individual’, there is a lot of substantial information evidencing Iceland’s achievements. The article tells a story of Iceland as ‘the oldest parliamentary democracy in the world’; however, ‘despite old traditions, the Icelandic political mentality is progressive with the country repeatedly receiving top ranking in studies measuring political freedom, gender equality, and human development’ (*Iceland.is*, n.d. b). The evidence of this progressive mentality brought up later in the text is: gender equality, with the country having ‘topped the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report in recent years’; LGBTQ rights; and being ‘the most peaceful nation in the world according to the Global Peace Index’. In sum, the branding website *Iceland.is* does present the country as having many achievements with regard to gender equality, and also specifies that Icelandic society reached this point through feminist struggle. However, the information about these achievements does not figure prominently on the website and is not well integrated in the visual and textual representation of the country.

## Conclusion

Although the brands of the Nordic states are not equally coherent and clear, they all rest on a similar foundation and highlight traits that are in line with the broader national narratives of the individual Nordic countries. All five brands highlight egalitarian and welfare-providing institutions, modern and secular values, nature-loving peoples, and environmentally and hi-tech-oriented economies. None of these branding sites relies on images or narratives that objectify and sexualize women (see Jezierska and Towns, 2018), the kind of branding that has been documented in Canada and Japan, for instance (Miller, 2011; Rankin, 2012). All of the sites utilize images that represent men and women in various roles – as parents, workers, innovators, and so on. This tells us not only that gender equality is key to Nordic national identities, but also that branding, to be regarded as successful, must be in line with the self-images and the policies pursued by the individual countries of the Nordic region. The images of nature include both men and women as active explorers: there is little trace of representations of empty swaths of land subjected to the male gaze, which Loftsdóttir (2015) claims characterized previous Icelandic nation-branding campaigns. None of the brands displays overt gender inequality, and all of them make an effort to include men and women more or less equally in the visual representations. That said, the degree to and way in which gender equality is highlighted varies quite drastically.

Still, it is surprising how different the branding of gender equality is on the country websites. Whereas the Swedish online brand has incorporated gender equality throughout the country's website, neither *Denmark.dk* nor Norway's sites make much effort to brand gender equality or women's rights as part of what is Danish or Norwegian. Finland and Iceland do so to a greater extent, but neither has integrated gender-equality messages into the entirety of the national narrative in the way that Sweden has. Interestingly, wherever Finland and Iceland do address gender equality, they do so forcefully. Both claim to be 'first' on a number of gender-related accomplishments, and both present themselves as international leaders or role models on gender equality. Given the boldness of these claims, it is a bit curious that the gender-equality dimension is not emphasized more prominently in the Finnish and Icelandic brands. In the light of the above, it is evident that the suggestion of the Nordic Council of Ministers that each Nordic country promote gender equality has yet to come to fruition online.

In the competitive field of nation-branding in the international arena, the Nordic countries play a mixed game. On the one hand, they appear as team players. There is surprisingly little comparison or explicit competition between the Nordics in the analysed documents and websites. Even when claiming firstness in various gender-related rankings, this is not done in contrast to other Nordic competitors. Such a move contributes to the fact that, especially from a distance, the Nordics appear as a group of like-minded countries, which all share commitment to gender equality

as a fundamental element of their respective national identities. There is a risk that the nation brands become indistinguishable, however. Thus, on the other hand, a more subtle competition between the Nordics also takes place. As evidenced above, their nation brands feature gender equality to a varying degree, positioning them differently in the international nation-branding game. Here, the simultaneous challenge is not to appear as self-righteous in the quest for moral status, as that would usurp the moral superiority crown. This concern might explain the different choices the countries have made regarding how explicit and vocal they are about their gender-equality achievements.

## Notes

- 1 See <https://denmark.dk>, <https://finland.fi/>, <https://www.iceland.is/> and <https://sweden.se/>. Norway stands out as the only country that does not maintain an official country website. Instead, <https://www.norway.no/> is used as the portal for the embassies and missions of the Norwegian Foreign Service, and multiple other sites serve to brand Norway. Most important of these is the travel guide at <https://www.visitnorway.no/>. Our analysis of Norwegian nation-branding is thus more limited than that of the other states.
- 2 Email correspondence with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 October 2018.
- 3 This text is taken from the details found at the bottom of all pages of the website at [denmark.dk](https://denmark.dk) (accessed December 2018).
- 4 The official website of the Norwegian government is located at [www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no); an English-language version is available at [www.government.no](http://www.government.no).
- 5 See <https://www.norway.no/>.
- 6 See [www.visitnorway.com](http://www.visitnorway.com).
- 7 See [www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no).
- 8 See <https://www.innovasjon norge.no>.
- 9 See, for example, [Finland.fi](https://finland.fi) (n.d. a).
- 10 See <https://www.visiticeland.com/> (accessed December 2018).

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