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The use of Nordic branding by Korean and Nordic companies in the Korean market

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Abstract:

Since around 2010, interest in Nordic design, culture, and lifestyle has increased in South Korea. As part of this trend, a considerable number of both Nordic and Korean companies in the Korean market have started to use Nordic branding to market their products. This means that they evoke association with the Nordic brand, i.e. the sets of associations that individuals have with the Nordic region, in an effort to imbue their products with added value. The utilization of foreign place brands in the marketing practices of private companies is understudied.

In this thesis, I examine and compare the ways in which Korean and Nordic furniture and household product companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand, and the ideas about the Nordic brand that they communicate. The material of the study consists of texts and images collected from the Korean websites of eight Korean and eight Nordic companies that use Nordic branding. I use Serafini and Reid's (2023) Multimodal Content Analysis research methodology to categorize and analyze the material.

My analysis finds that the companies primarily evoke association with the Nordic brand by establishing linguistic, aesthetic, philosophic, historical, and geographical connections between their company and the Nordic brand. The Korean companies are found to associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality, the concepts of *hygge* and "healing" (*hillung*), retro and nostalgia, and trendiness, whereas the Nordic companies associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality, artistry and creativity, sustainability and progressive values, and timelessness.

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1 Introduction

Since around 2010, interest in Nordic design, culture, and lifestyle has increased in South Korea. As part of this trend, a considerable number of companies in the Korean market have started to use Nordic branding to market their products. This means that they evoke association with the Nordic brand, i.e. the sets of associations that individuals have with the Nordic region (Clancy, 2011, p. 285), presumably in an effort to imbue their products with added value. Companies can evoke association with the Nordic brand in a variety of ways, for instance by using Nordic languages in their product or brand naming, or by stating that their brand values are rooted in Nordic culture. The companies in the Korean market that use Nordic branding include both Nordic and Korean companies.

By Nordic companies, I refer to companies like Ikea and Marimekko that were founded in a Nordic country, i.e. either in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, or Sweden. The Nordic companies that have expanded to the Korean market have in many cases outsourced their production and/or grown to international companies of such size that defining them by the country that they were founded in in many circumstances would seem unproductive, but these companies still have an obvious connection to the Nordic region, and as such it is unsurprising that many of them choose to use Nordic branding as part of their marketing strategy in Korea.

On the other hand, many of the Korean companies that use Nordic branding have no concrete real-world connection to the geographical region of the Nordics. The companies have their headquarters in Korea, they have no presence on the Nordic market, and the products they sell are neither manufactured nor designed in the Nordics. The Korean furniture company Kaare Klint is just one example of this. Despite being named after the influential Danish architect and furniture designer Kaare Klint, who is sometimes referred to as the grandfather of the Danish Modern style of furniture design (Mussari, 2016, p. 33), Kaare Klint the company has a website that is only available in Korean, has its headquarters in Seoul, and sells furniture based on original designs – not the designs of Klint, the person.

Given the difference in how these two groups of companies relate to the Nordic region and its brand, it seems likely that they also have differing approaches to utilizing Nordic branding and different conceptions of what attributes make up the

Nordic brand. The goal of this thesis is to examine and compare these differences. My research questions are as follows:

1. How do Korean and Nordic companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand on their Korean websites?
2. What ideas about the Nordic brand do Korean and Nordic companies communicate on their Korean websites?

To answer these questions, I use the Multimodal Content Analysis research methodology detailed by Serafini and Reid (2023). My material is comprised of texts and images collected from the Korean websites of a sample of 16 Korean and Nordic companies that use Nordic branding. My analysis is premised on the understanding of brands as sets of associations that individuals have with the entity being branded (Clancy, 2011, p. 285), the understanding of nations and regions as branded entities (Anholt, 1998), that third parties, through association, can use to imbue their products with added value, and on the social semiotic understanding of communication as always being multimodal, i.e. happening through the interaction of several semiotic resources (Serafini & Reid 2023, pp. 626-627).

As an answer to the first research question, my analysis finds that the companies primarily evoke association with the Nordic brand on their websites by establishing linguistic, aesthetic, philosophic, historical, and geographical connections between their company and the Nordic brand. The Korean companies for the most part only make use of linguistic, aesthetic, and geographical connections, whereas the Nordic companies make use of all five kinds of connections.

As for the second research question, my analysis finds that the ideas that the companies communicate about the Nordic brand center around seven themes. The Korean companies associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality, the concepts of *hygge* and “healing” (*hilling*), retro and nostalgia, and trendiness. The Nordic companies associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality, artistry and creativity, sustainability and progressive values, and timelessness.

Previous research on the utilization of foreign place brands in the marketing practices of private companies is limited and has for the most part approached the topic from a consumer research perspective, with a focus on how product-country associations

affect consumer product evaluations. Very few studies examine the ideas about place brands that private companies communicate. There is no prior research focused on the use of Nordic branding in the context of the Korean market, nor is there any research comparing the use of Nordic branding by Nordic and non-Nordic actors. From the perspective of nations, multi-national regions, and other places with branding strategies, it is highly important to get a better understanding of how private companies utilize foreign place brands, as their doing so inevitably impacts the brand and perceptions of it.¹

This thesis is divided into ten sections. In section 2, I provide a definition of the Nordic region. In section 3, I discuss three international trends related to the Nordic region that have shaped the image of the Nordics since the 2000s: the New Nordic Kitchen movement; Nordic Crime Fiction; and Nordic lifestyle. In section 4, I contextualize the Nordic trend in Korea by examining the scope of the trend and highlighting factors that contributed to its emergence. Following that, in section 5, I briefly review previous literature on place branding and discuss the place branding efforts of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Sections 6 and 7 introduce the material and method of the study, section 8 details my analytical process, and in section 9 I present the findings of the analysis. Finally, section 10 summarizes and concludes the thesis.

¹ The effects that the marketing practices of a private company have on the perception of a foreign place brand can be significant, especially in cases where the place brand is relatively weak and unknown. The positive effect that the Lotte xylitol gum commercials had on the Korean public's perception of Finland in the early 2000s is illustrative of this: The commercials emphasized the Finnish origin of the xylitol in the gum, used Finnish-inspired imagery and repeated the Finnish word *hyvä* (good) as a catchphrase. The commercials were widely popular and as a result, a 2004 survey on the perception of Finland in Korea found that 46.6% of respondents reported to have first learned about Finland through TV commercials (Finncham, n.d., p. 22). As thanks for increasing public awareness of Finland, the Lotte chairman Shin Dong-bin was awarded a state order by the Finnish president Tarja Halonen in 2006 (Pallari, 2006).

2 The Nordic region

The Nordic region, also referred to as Northern Europe or Scandinavia², is comprised of five sovereign states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and three autonomous territories (the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland), each with cultural, linguistic, and political identities that, while similar in many regards, nevertheless are distinct from each other. Politically, this is evident from the facts that Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are monarchies, while Finland and Iceland are republics, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are members of the European Union while Norway and Iceland are not, and that Finland is the only Nordic country to have adopted the Euro as its currency. The region is also far from homogenous linguistically, with most languages belonging to one of three unrelated language families: North Germanic, Finno-Ugric, and Eskimo-Aleut languages (Nordic Co-operation, n.d.).

In spite of this, the Nordic region is often grouped together and treated like a unit by the outside world, especially in areas geographically far away from the Nordics (Magnus, 2016, p. 196). The Nordic countries themselves also perpetuate the international perception of the Nordic region as a cohesive unit by acting together in international forums like the UN and UNESCO (Danbolt, 2016, p. 5) and by actively pursuing a joint Nordic region branding strategy since 2015 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015).

In this thesis, for the purpose of examining the use of Nordic branding by companies in the Korean market, I consider the Nordic countries to be a unit with a shared brand. Any attributes that the companies under examination assign to an individual Nordic country are therefore regarded as attributes assigned to the Nordic brand as a whole.

² As Jalava and Stråth (2017, p. 38) point out, the term Scandinavia is often used as interchangeable with Northern Europe, but is sometimes used to refer only to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

3 Recent international Nordic trends

Since the early 2000s, various aspects of Nordic culture, lifestyle, and languages have become trends in different parts of the world. In this chapter, I will highlight the New Nordic Kitchen movement, Nordic crime fiction, and Nordic lifestyle as significant trends that have been used by Nordic actors in efforts to shape the image and identity of the Nordic region and by companies (both Nordic and non-Nordic) to market and sell products.

3.1 New Nordic Kitchen

In 2004, twelve leading chefs from the five Nordic countries and the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland signed the “Manifesto for the New Nordic Cuisine,” detailing ten principles for Nordic kitchens to adhere to (New Nordic Food, n.d.). The manifesto centers on the purity, localness, and seasonality of ingredients, the revitalization and reinvention of traditional Nordic food products and cooking methods, environmental protection, and the general promotion of Nordic food culture. The Danish chefs René Redzepi and Claus Meyer and their world-renowned restaurant Noma spearheaded the New Nordic Kitchen movement (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013, pp. 45-46), taking the principles of the manifesto to the extreme by foraging obscure ingredients in the vicinity of the restaurant and finding new ways to use old cooking methods like smoking and fermentation. The movement attracted significant attention in the western culinary world. Noma was voted the best restaurant in the world in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2021 (The World’s 50 Best Restaurants, n.d.) and numerous articles have been written about the movement and the restaurants and star chefs associated with it.³ After Noma’s rise to fame, other restaurants in the Nordic region started getting more international recognition and Copenhagen became known as the epicenter of the New Nordic Kitchen movement (Svejenova et al., 2021, p. 232).

Restaurants inspired by the New Nordic Kitchen movement opened beyond the borders of the Nordic region as well. Abend (2015) writes of New Nordic restaurants in Barcelona, New York, Edinburgh, and Long Island City and Kelting (2022, p. 192) of ones in Minneapolis and Berlin. Furthermore, Redzepi and Noma opened pop-up

³ See for instance Forbes (2011), Moskin (2011), Platt (2019), and Morris (2020).

restaurants in London in 2012 (Forbes Travel Guide, 2012), Tokyo in 2015 (Redzepi, 2014), Sydney in 2016 (Hunt, 2016), Tulum, Mexico in 2017 (Dixler Canavan, 2017) New York in 2022 (Leasca, 2022), and most recently in Kyoto in 2023 (Moskin, 2022). In Korea, the New Nordic Kitchen movement seems to have had a very limited impact. The Danish Agriculture and Food Council organized a showcase of New Nordic cuisine for the Korean press in 2012 (Oh, 2012) and the Swedish clothing store and café brand Arket, that currently has four store-café's in Korea, markets its menu as being New Nordic food (Berg, n.d.). There has also been at least one Korean restaurant referring to the New Nordic Kitchen movement as a source of inspiration (B3713, n.d.).

Part of the success of the New Nordic Kitchen movement can be attributed to the support it received from the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCoM), that saw the movement as an opportunity to strengthen a shared Nordic identity and to promote the Nordic region on the global food market (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013, pp. 46-47; Kharkina, 2013, pp. 154-155). In 2005, one year after the manifesto was published, the NCoM declared its support for the New Nordic Kitchen movement by appointing national food ambassadors and starting the New Nordic Food program. (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013, p. 46). The New Nordic Food program ran from 2007-2014 and funded projects that promoted Nordic food abroad, such as a Nordic Food Day for public schools in Washington D.C. in 2011 (Nordic Innovation, 2023).

Following the rise of the New Nordic Kitchen, Danbolt (2016, p. 10) argues that New Nordic has become a brand in and of itself, one that actors in various cultural fields have attempted to adopt to promote their productions. The Denmark-based company Muuto, launched in 2006, was among the first to bring New Nordic to the realm of design (Skou & Munch, 2016), and since then, the term New Nordic has also been used in reference to contemporary Nordic art and architecture, among other things (Danbolt, 2016). However, neither New Nordic Design, New Nordic Architecture, nor any other form of New Nordic has yet gained the same amount of international momentum as New Nordic Food did.

3.2 Nordic Crime Fiction

Nordic crime fiction novels and TV series, also referred to as Nordic Noir, have had wide appeal internationally since the turn of the millennium, especially in Europe

and North America. Leading Nordic crime fiction authors, such as Stieg Larsson, author of the Millennium trilogy, Jo Nesbø, most notably known for his crime novels featuring inspector Harry Hole, and Henning Mankell, author of the Wallander series, have sold tens of millions of copies worldwide and their works have been translated to numerous languages.

According to Stougaard-Nielsen (2016), early Nordic crime fiction authors, such as Maria Lang, Stieg Trenter, Else Fischer, and Gerd Nyquist drew in inspiration from American and British detective stories. Nordic crime fiction first started branching off as its own distinct genre in the 1970s with the writers Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö and their ten-part series of novels starring police officer Martin Beck. Sjöwall and Wahlöö's novels were not only set in Nordic milieus, but also focused on social issues within the Swedish welfare state (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). Social critique has since become one of the defining features of the Nordic crime fiction genre, in addition to realism, protagonists with flawed characters, cold Nordic landscapes, and simple and direct prose without the use of metaphor (Solum, 2016, pp. 137-140).

Stougaard-Nielsen (2021, p. 200) identifies Larsson's Millennium trilogy as the spark that ignited the Nordic crime fiction trend in the English-speaking world in the 21st century. The trilogy was originally published in Swedish between 2005 and 2007, and its English translation was published in 2008. The novels quickly became enormously popular, and as of 2019, 86 million copies had been sold in more than 50 countries (Norstedts Förlagsgrupp, 2019; Swedish Institute, 2012, p. 7).

In addition to novels, TV series and films of the Nordic crime fiction genre have also reached a wide audience and have been exported to many countries. Larsson's first book in the Millennium trilogy, *Män som hatar kvinnor* (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo), has had two internationally successful film adaptations. The 2009 Swedish adaptation, directed by Niels Arden Oplev, won the 2011 BAFTA award for "Best Film not in the English Language" (British Academy Film Awards, n.d.) and had a total worldwide gross of \$104 million, making it the second-highest grossing Swedish production of all time (Pham, 2023). The 2011 English language adaptation directed by David Fincher won the Academy Award for film editing (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2012) and had a total worldwide gross \$233 million (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). *Forbrydelsen* (The Killing, 2007-2012, produced by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation) and *Bron* (The Bridge, 2011-2018, produced jointly by the

Danish Broadcasting Corporation and Sveriges Television), two of the most successful TV series of the genre, were both exported to approximately 100 countries and territories on all continents (Jensen, P., 2016).

Interestingly, successful Nordic crime fiction works have not only been directly exported or adapted to a different language but have also in some instances been remade in different settings for new audiences. A central location in the plot of the aforementioned series *Bron* (2011-2018), is the Øresund Bridge that connects Sweden and Denmark. The series was remade twice. In the American remake (*The Bridge*, 2013-2014), the central bridge of the story is instead the Bridge of the Americas connecting Texas and Mexico, and in the British-French remake (*The Tunnel*, 2013-2018), the bridge is substituted with the Channel Tunnel that connects Great Britain with France (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012) was remade thrice, with the American remake (*The Killing*, 2011-2014) set in Seattle, the Turkish remake (*Cinayet* [murder], 2014) set in Istanbul, and the Egyptian remake (*Mounatef Khater* [take a risk], 2022) set in Cairo (Dohrmann, 2022).

Bergman (2014 p. 83), analyzing international reviews and promotional material of Nordic crime fiction, identifies five core elements behind its international appeal since the 2000s: the “Stieg Larsson effect”; welfare state criticism; gender equality and strong women characters; exotic landscapes and settings; and a strong bond to the Anglo-American crime fiction tradition. Bergman argues that the success of Larsson’s Millennium novels led to a surge in translations of crime fiction written by other Nordic authors, as publishers hoped to find “the next Stieg Larsson.” This, in turn, made the consumption of Nordic crime fiction more accessible to international audiences (Bergman, 2014, pp. 83-84).

Bergman further posits that internationally, the Nordic countries are known and sometimes envied for their welfare systems, and that people living outside of the region are interested in learning more about the Nordic societies. Because of this, Nordic crime fiction is appealing, as it both informs the curious international reader about the inner workings of the Nordic welfare states as well as highlights their flaws and shortcomings (Bergman, 2014, pp. 84-85). Stougaard-Nielsen (2016) similarly suggests that, in the context of the UK in the 2010s, a general interest in the perceived utopian Nordic societies in combination with a “widespread sense of a

domestic dissolution of welfare and social justice” may have contributed to the popularity of Nordic crime fiction.

Many Nordic crime fiction stories feature strong female protagonists, and Bergman (2014, p. 85) considers this another important selling point, seeing as women make up a majority of the readers of most crime fiction sub-genres. Bergman (pp. 85-86) also identifies the exoticness of Nordic landscapes as an appealing element of Nordic crime fiction, pointing out that the covers of translated copies of Nordic crime fiction novels very often feature dark and snowy countryside landscapes, regardless of the actual settings of the novels (Bergman, 2014, p. 82). Finally, Bergman (2014, p. 86) argues that since Nordic crime fiction in large part follows the same genre conventions as British and American crime fiction, the genre has been accessible to international audiences despite certain unfamiliar elements like the Nordic legal systems.

Even though the Nordic crime fiction genre is known for its critique of the Nordic welfare states and arguably portrays the Nordic countries in a negative light, different actors in the Nordic region have embraced the trend as a valuable marketing tool. The Swedish Institute released a booklet in 2012 titled “Sweden beyond the Millennium and Stieg Larsson,” in which it details the international popularity of the Millennium trilogy and Swedish crime fiction in general and discusses the impact that Larsson’s books have had on the image of Sweden abroad. The Swedish Institute (2012, p. 33) finds that the books have given foreign audiences a “darker – but also more realistic and multi-faceted image of Sweden,” and that this has made Sweden more exciting and relatable (2012, pp. 34-35). The booklet also highlights the more favorable aspects of Swedish society that are depicted in trilogy, stating that “the books present Sweden as an innovative, modern and trendy industrialized country” (2012, p.37), that they illustrate the freedom of press in Sweden, and that they promote equality and feminism through the character of Lisbeth Salander. Furthermore, the Swedish Institute emphasizes the potential of Swedish crime fiction to generate value for the Swedish tourism industry (2012, pp. 37-38).

Nordic Noir is also briefly mentioned as a significant Nordic cultural export product in the “Strategy for International Branding of the Nordic Region 2015-2018” published by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2015, suggesting that the NCoM, too, considered Nordic crime fiction to be affecting the international image of the region.

However, the strategy report does not elaborate on the matter further, and no reference to Nordic Noir is made in the updated strategy report for the period 2022-2024 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022).

3.3 Nordic lifestyle and “untranslatable” words

In the mid-2010s, certain aspects of Nordic lifestyle, together with “untranslatable” Nordic language words associated with them, became lifestyle trends in different parts of the world. The most notable examples of this are *hygge*, a Danish and Norwegian word referring to a sense of coziness, communal belonging, and safety that is considered a part of the Danish national spirit, *fika*, a Swedish word denoting the tradition of taking a coffee break together with friends or colleagues, and *lagom*, a Swedish word meaning “just the right amount” (i.e. neither too little nor too much) that encapsulates a general philosophy of moderation and balance. These lifestyle concepts were promoted by both national and regional actors in the Nordics and the trend was leveraged by companies to sell various kinds of associated products and by the Nordic tourism industries to market the Nordic countries as travel destinations.

Of the aforementioned Nordic lifestyle concepts, *hygge* was perhaps the most significant one, and the one to receive the most media attention. In her article in the Guardian in 2016, Higgins calls *hygge* the “most overhyped trend” of the year in the UK, referencing the nine different books on *hygge* that were published in the autumn of 2016, the attachment of the word to almost every media story related to Denmark or the rest of Scandinavia, and the wide range of products marketed using the term (Higgins, 2016). In the New Yorker, Altman (2016) similarly notes that at least six *hygge*-related books were published in the US in 2016.

While the trend seems to have been the strongest in the English-speaking world, particularly in the UK, awareness of specific Nordic language words like *hygge*, *lagom*, and *fika* has increased elsewhere in the world too. Strandberg (2020 pp. 3-5) finds that, in several parts of the world, Nordic language words and unique linguistic features like the graphemes Æ, Ø, and Å have been used in advertising and in the naming of companies and cafes as a way to evoke positive associations with the Nordic countries. Bang (2017), and Bak Seonhui (2017) both note a rise in the use of the word *hygge* in the marketing of products ranging from massage oils and furniture to apartments and hotel vacation packages in Korea.

The reasons behind the sudden emergence of this trend are difficult to determine. Kythor (2018) argues that the *hygge* phenomenon in the UK was a direct continuation of the popularity of Nordic crime fiction media. Another factor contributing to the trend could be the fact that the Nordic countries, alongside the Netherlands and Switzerland, have topped the rankings of every World Happiness Report since the report was first published in 2012 (Martela et al., 2020). This may have sparked an interest in Nordic lifestyle as a possible key to happiness. In an article in *Hankookilbo*, Bak Sangjun (2017), interviewing participants of a Nordic culture club in Seoul, indeed finds that many of the interviewees are drawn to learning about Nordic culture and lifestyle as a form of escapism from Korean societal pressures.

As with the Nordic Kitchen and Nordic crime fiction trends, the Nordic lifestyle trend, too, has been used by different Nordic national actors for image building purposes and to promote tourism. Howell and Sundberg (2015, pp. 104-114) find that Denmark has wielded *hygge* as a tool of geopolitical soft power, using it to attract students and researchers to its universities, and presenting *hygge* as a reason for tourists to travel to Denmark. In 2018, Denmark applied for *hygge* to be recognized as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, claiming it to be one of the reasons for the country's high rankings on the World Happiness Report (Jensen, T., 2018) and the Visit Denmark website (Visit Denmark, n.d.) states that "rumour has it that *hygge* explains why the Danes are some of the happiest people in the world." Sweden similarly promotes *fika* and Norway highlights the concept of *friluftsliv* (outdoor life) on the Visit Sweden and Visit Norway websites (Visit Sweden, 2023; Visit Norway, n.d.), presenting these as important features of Swedish and Norwegian lifestyles and as sources of wellbeing.

4 The Nordic trend in Korea

Around 2010, Nordic design, culture, and lifestyle started becoming trendy in Korea, with the Korean media sometimes referring to the phenomenon as a “Nordic craze” (*bugyureop yeolpung*).⁴ In media coverage of the trend, Nordic design is consistently described using the keywords simplicity, practicality, and eco-friendliness. Both academic and news articles also reference the cold Nordic climate as an important foundational element of Nordic life and design, especially in regard to the design of furniture and home furnishings. The argument is that the long and cold winters force the people of the Nordic region to stay indoors for a large portion of the year and because of this, the people of the region have come to value practical and beautiful design in their homes very highly (Kwon, 2013, p. 114; O, S., 2013, p. 62; I, S., 2012; Han, 2012). Furthermore, O, S. (2013, p. 61) and Park and Yeom (2015, p. 227) note that, in addition to Nordic design, Nordic education, child rearing methods, and welfare also received attention in Korea, with a surge in books related to these topics being published.

In this section I will examine the scope of this Nordic trend in Korea by looking at statistical data on Korean tourism to the Nordic countries, Korean translations of Nordic literature, Korean literature on topics related to the Nordics, and the emergence of Nordic companies and Korean companies utilizing Nordic branding in the Korean market. Furthermore, I will highlight some key contextual factors behind the increased interest in Nordic interior design in Korea.

4.1 Korean tourism to the Nordic region

Korean tourism to the Nordic countries saw great growth from 2009 until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. Finnair’s 2008 launch of the airline’s direct flights between Helsinki and Seoul was presumably a contributing factor to this growth, as it was the first direct flight connecting Korea to the Nordic countries (Yle, 2008).

In Sweden, the number of nights that Koreans spent in hotels and youth hostels increased from 18,622 in 2009 to 41,879 in 2015 and 53,829 in 2019 (The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth & Statistics Sweden, 2022). In Denmark,

⁴ See for instance Jeon, S., (2012), I, H. (2013), Han (2012), Bak (2012), and I, S. (2012).

overnight stays by Koreans in hotels, holiday resorts and youth hostels similarly increased from 9,770 in 2009 to 24,947 in 2015 and 37,198 in 2019 (Statistics Denmark, 2024). In Norway, overnight stays by Koreans in hotels and similar establishments increased from 23,113 in 2009 to 63,374 in 2015 and 96,701 in 2019 (Statistics Norway, 2020). For Iceland, there is no data available on overnight stays by Koreans prior to 2013, but there was nevertheless a clear increase from 3,017 in 2013 to 11,926 in 2015 and 36,419 in 2019 (Statistics Iceland, 2024). There is no available data on overnight stays by Koreans in Finland.

While these numbers clearly show a significant increase in Korean tourism to the Nordic countries, it is important to note that the total number of outbound departures by Koreans also increased rapidly and almost tripled during the same time period (9,494,111 in 2009, 19,310,430 in 2015 and 28,714,247 in 2019) (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2024). This means that although the number of overnight stays by Koreans in the Nordic countries has increased dramatically, this increase has been approximately proportional to the overall growth of Korean international travel.

Even though the Nordic countries have not become some of the top tourist destinations for Koreans, this increase in overnight stays in the Nordics by Koreans still shows that the Korean public's direct exposure to the Nordic countries and their lifestyles and cultures has been growing since 2010.

4.2 Nordic literature in translation

According to data reported by the Finnish Literature Exchange (n.d.), the Danish Arts Foundation (n.d.), and Norwegian Literature Abroad (n.d.), the combined annual number of Korean translations of Finnish, Danish, and Norwegian books has increased since the beginning of the 2000s. Data on Korean translations of Swedish and Icelandic literature is not available.

The data presented in Figure 1 shows that while the annual number of Korean translations of Danish books has remained relatively low since 2000, peaking at six translations in the year 2012, translations of Norwegian and Finnish literature have increased significantly. In 2013 and 2014, there was a notable sudden uptick in the number of translations, and between 2013 and 2023, there was an average of 14.0

Norwegian and 6.7 Finnish books translated to Korean per year. It is important to note that the Danish Arts Foundation's database on translated Danish works is incomplete and that the actual number of translated Danish works therefore may be higher (Danish Arts Foundation, n.d.).

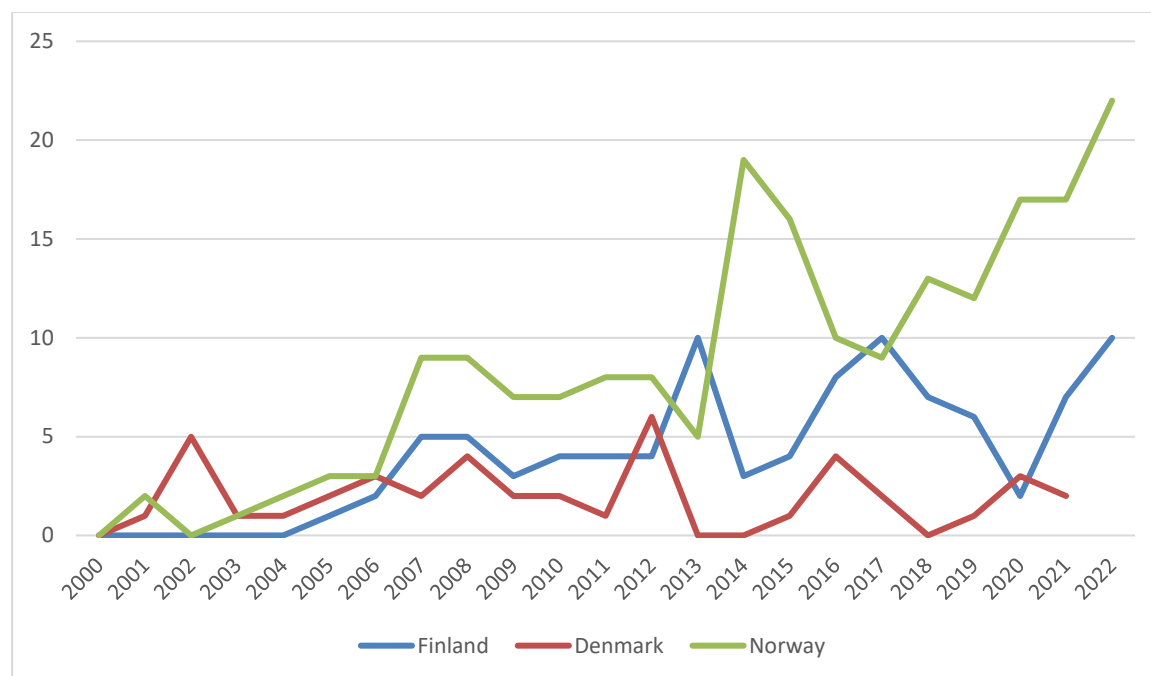


Figure 1. Number of Nordic books translated to Korean per year.

Children's literature makes up a large portion of the translated books. This is presumably in part because books written for children tend to be much shorter than books written for adults, and thus take less time to translate. But another factor contributing to the proportionally large number of children's books being translated from Nordic languages to Korean could be the state of the children's product market in Korea. Korea has an extremely low fertility rate that has been in decline since 2015 and only amounted to 0.81 in 2021, the lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2024). But despite this, the size of the children's product market has grown from 2.4 trillion won in 2015 to over 4 trillion won in 2020 (O, Y., 2023). Koreans are having fewer children but are spending more money on them, creating a demand for a wider variety of products, including literature.

The Nordic crime fiction trend discussed in section 3.3 seems to have had a much lesser impact in Korea than it did in Europe and America. Works of the most prominent Nordic crime fiction authors have nevertheless been translated to Korean, sometimes directly from the source language, and other times from English or

German translations. Larsson's Millennium trilogy, originally published in Swedish between 2005 and 2007 and translated to English in 2008, was first published in Korean between 2008 and 2009. At the time, the series did not receive much attention, and so it was republished in 2011 (Gang, 2011). Barring a few exceptions, most of the Korean translations of books by notable Nordic crime fiction authors like Jussi Adler-Olsen, Henning Mankell, Jo Nesbø, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, and Antti Tuomainen, have been published after 2011. It is noteworthy that Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's ten-part Martin Beck series, published in Swedish between 1965 and 1975, was first published in Korean between 2017 and 2023 (Gim, G., 2017). This suggests that an interest in Nordic crime fiction perhaps was ignited in Korea in the wake of the republished Millennium trilogy in 2011.

4.3 Korean literature on the Nordics

In addition to an increase in literature from the Nordics, the overall number of Korean language books and articles about the Nordics has also increased significantly since the early 2000s. The National Library of Korea's online database (National Library of Korea, n.d.-a) lists 357 Korean language books published between 2000 and 2023 with either "*bugyureop*" (Northern Europe) or "*seukandinabia*" (Scandinavia) in the title.⁵ This list of books includes both works that were originally written in Korean and works translated to Korean from other languages. Of these 357 books, 20 were published between 2000 and 2005, 62 between 2006 and 2011, 186 between 2012 and 2017, and 89 between 2018 and 2023.

Using the same query to search the database for articles gives a result that shows a similar trend. Between 2000 and 2023, a total of 862 Korean language articles with either "*bugyureop*" or "*seukandinabia*" in the title were published (National Library of Korea, n.d.-b). Of these 862 articles, 26 were published between 2000 and 2005, 39 between 2006 and 2011, 423 between 2012 and 2017, and 374 between 2018 and 2023.

Put simply, throughout the mid-2010s, there was a surge in the publication of books and articles covering diverse topics related to the Nordic region. It is noteworthy that

⁵ Books that do not have the keywords *bugyureop* or *seukandinabia* in the title are not accounted for in this query. The list of relevant books is therefore not exhaustive, but I believe it still is good enough for the purpose of highlighting the overall trend.

almost a third of the books published during this period deal with either Nordic interior design or different kinds of crafts.

4.4 Nordic film, art, and exhibitions in Korea

The film industries of the Nordic countries are quite small when measured on a global scale. According to data published by the European Audiovisual Observatory (2015, p. 38), in 2014, there were 56 feature films produced in Sweden, 55 in Denmark, 34 in Finland, 28 in Norway, and 15 in Iceland. By comparison, during the same year, there were 707 films produced in the US, 258 in France, and 248 in South Korea (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015, p. 13). Considering these numbers, it is noteworthy that the Swedish Film Institute in 2015 stated in its annual overview of the Swedish film industry that besides Europe and the USA, Korea was the most important export market for Swedish film. Between 2010 and 2015, 16 Swedish films were screened in Korea (Swedish Film Institute, 2015). Four Swedish films have won awards at the Busan International Film Festival, the earliest in 2010 and the latest in 2013 (The Swedish Film Database, n.d.).

The Korean Box Office Information System's annual statistics on the top 50 foreign films, measured by number of cinema admissions, only lists two (partially) Nordic films during the 2010-2023 time period (Korean Box Office Information System, n.d.). In 2012, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), a co-production of the US, UK, Sweden, and Germany, directed by David Fincher, ranked 40th on the list with 443,855 admissions. The film is based on the first book in Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy. In 2016, *The Angry Birds Movie* (2016), a co-production of the US and Finland, directed by Clay Kaytis and Fergal Reilly, ranked 35th with 680,606 admissions. The film is based on the Angry Birds mobile games created by the Finnish video game developer Rovio. No purely Nordic production made the top 50 list in Korea during 2010-2023.

During the early 2010s, there were several Nordic art-, and design-themed exhibitions in Seoul. In 2012 alone, there were at least three different exhibitions. The Korea Foundation organized an exhibition titled "Nordic Day – Nordic design in Everyday Life," in which the works of 10 Nordic designers and artists were displayed (Yang & Park, 2012). The same year, the Hangaram Design Museum held an exhibition titled "Design Finland," displaying furniture and other products by

prominent Finnish designers. The exhibition also featured recreations of Finnish classrooms and homes that were meant to enable the visitors to experience the environments of Finnish creative education (Seoul Arts Center, 2012). Finally, the Daelim Museum held an exhibition celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Danish designer Finn Juhl, which featured designs by Juhl and several other Nordic designers. In one part of the exhibition, Juhl's designs were displayed alongside Korean antiques (Sung, 2012). Three years later, in 2015, the Daelim Museum held another exhibition displaying the works of a Dane, this time featuring the works of fashion designer and artist Henrik Vibskov (Jeon, H., 2015).

Finnish author Tove Jansson's Moomin characters that have been popular in Japan since the 1970s (Ipatti, 2019, p. 111), have recently grown in popularity in Korea as well. In 2017, BizWatch reported that, during the first half of the year, more than 60 companies were using Moomin licensing to market products ranging from *sikye* (a traditional Korean rice beverage) to clothes and shoes (Bang, 2017). In 2020-2021, an exhibition celebrating the 75th anniversary of Moomin was held in Seoul (Visit Seoul, 2021) and in October of 2020, the Moominland Jeju theme park, featuring exhibitions and a café, was opened on Jeju Island (Moomin, 2022).

4.5 Nordic companies entering the Korean market

The mid-2010s also saw many Nordic companies establishing and expanding their presence in the Korean market. Porcelain manufacturer Royal Copenhagen established its Korean branch as early as 1994, and at the time of writing lists 25 stores in Korea (Royal Copenhagen, n.d.). To strengthen its presence in Korea, the company launched a product line of Korean-style tableware in 2013 (Gim, Y., 2013), sponsored various projects promoting Korean traditional culture, and made new products in collaboration with Korean artisans (Seo, 2013).

Finnish design brand Iittala opened its first Korean stores in 2014 in Seoul and Busan (Fiskars Corporation, 2014), and currently has nine stores in Korea (Iittala, n.d.). Swedish furniture retail giant Ikea opened its first Korean store in 2014 in Gwangmyeong, which at the time was the largest Ikea store in the world. The company then opened three more stores in 2017, 2019, and 2020, and launched its Korean e-commerce platform in 2018 (Ikea, n.d.). The annual sales of Ikea Korea

grew continuously from 2014 to 2022, peaking at 683.6 billion won in the 2021 fiscal year (Lee, 2022).

In 2016, Danish variety store chain Flying Tiger Copenhagen opened its first Korean store and currently has 15 stores in Korea (Flying Tiger Copenhagen, n.d.). Ikea and Flying Tiger Copenhagen were two of the first Nordic companies to sell low-priced Nordic design goods in Korea.

Of course, not all Nordic companies that entered the Korean market achieved the same level of success. The Swedish home furnishings company Granit, for instance, opened its first Asian store in Korea in 2018 (Samsung C&T Global PR Manager, 2018), but the store has since been closed and the company no longer has any presence in the Korean market.

4.6 Korean companies utilizing Nordic branding

At the same time as different aspects of Nordic culture were getting popular and Nordic companies were entering the Korean market, some Korean companies started using Nordic branding to market their products. These companies evoke association with the Nordic brand by using Nordic languages in their product or brand naming, by using imagery of Nordic landscapes in their marketing materials, by referring to Nordic culture, values, lifestyle, or design as a source of inspiration, or by juxtaposing their products with the products of well-known Nordic companies. Most of these Korean companies have no concrete connection to the Nordic region or any of its countries. They have their headquarters in Korea, they usually have no presence on the Nordic market, and the products they sell are neither manufactured nor designed in the Nordics.

I have compiled a sample of 33 Korean companies that use or have used Nordic branding, and noted the year that they started doing so. The sample includes companies that are no longer in business. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all relevant companies as I would not be able to find every single company that uses or has previously used Nordic branding, but this sample still gives some insights into the general timeline of when Nordic branding started to be used by Korean companies. For a list of the companies included in this sample, see Appendix 1.

These companies vary greatly in size, in the type of products they sell, and in the extent to which they use Nordic branding. Some large companies such as Hanssem only use Nordic branding for specific products, without positioning the rest of their company or brand as Nordic in any way. Other companies operate several brands, only one of which is marketed with Nordic branding. An example of this is the company Hansaedreams, that has several childrenswear brands with different themes, one of which, Moimoln, is marketed as a “scandistyle” brand. Finally, there are companies like Scandipapa that use Nordic branding more holistically on every level from product to company identity. These companies use Nordic branding to market a wide variety of products, including beauty products, furniture and household products, fashion, flowers, toothpaste, and NFTs.

The sample was gathered using a few different methods. The majority of companies were found through online searches on Naver and Google, using search queries like “*bugyureopsik/bugyureoppung/seukandinabian beuraendeu*” (Nordic style/Nordic boom/Scandinavian brand) and “*pillandeueo/seuwedeneo/denmakeueo/noreuweieo/aiseullandeueo uimi beuraendeu*” (Finnish/Swedish/Danish/Norwegian/Icelandic meaning brand). These search queries often led to the websites of different companies, brands, and products that were marketed as being Nordic in some way, or to online articles introducing these kinds of companies and products. Other companies in the sample I either stumbled upon by chance during visits to Korea in 2019-2022 or heard about from friends. These sampling methods have some clear drawbacks. Since I gathered most of my material from online sources, it means that there may be a large number of relevant companies that I am unaware of because they have no online presence. It is also possible that I have overlooked companies that evoke association with the Nordic brand through the use of images or design elements but not through language, as my search queries targeted specific keywords.

Information regarding when each of these 33 companies started using Nordic branding was gathered from news articles, social media posts, and posts on company websites announcing the launch of the company or brand. In the few cases when there was no available information about when a company that makes extensive use of Nordic branding was founded, I have assumed that the company’s year of

registration on the Korea Free Trade Commission website is the same year that the company was founded.

The data illustrated in Figure 2 suggests that most Korean companies that use Nordic branding started doing so after 2010. Of the 33 companies in my sample, the earliest one started using Nordic branding in 2005. After that, only one started between 2006 and 2011, 20 between 2012 and 2017, and 10 between 2018 and 2022.

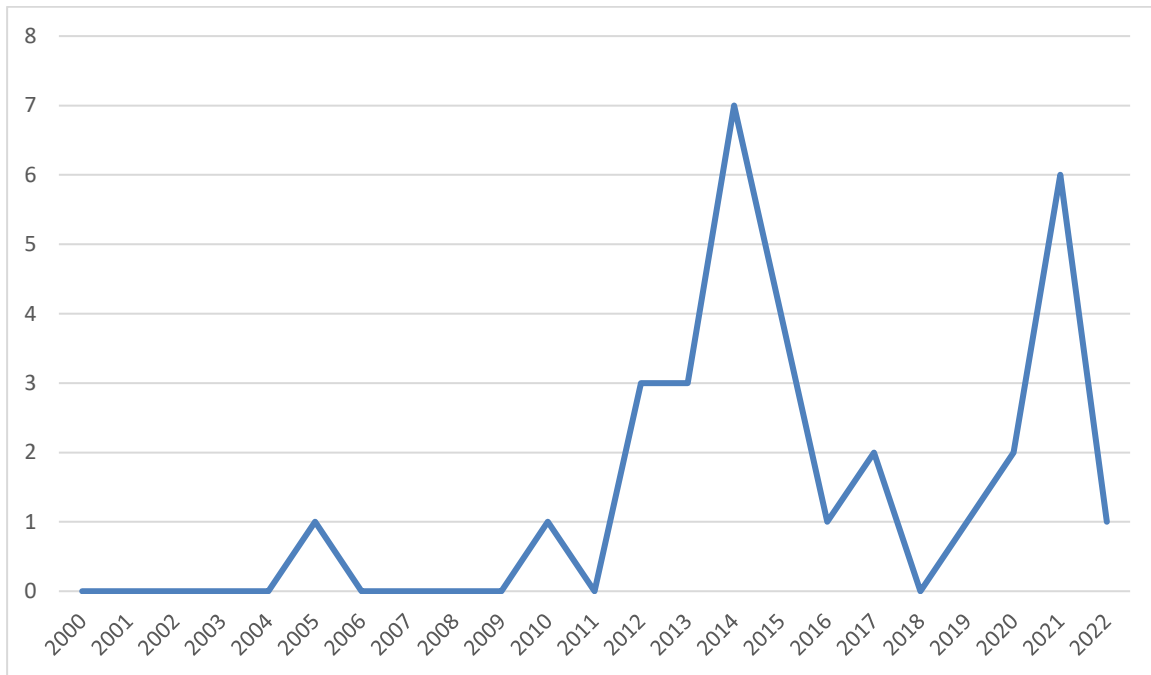


Figure 2. Number of Korean companies starting to use Nordic branding per year.

4.7 Contributing factors to the increased interest in Nordic design in Korea

The data examined in this section thus far suggests that Nordic culture, design, and lifestyle started trending in Korea in the early- to mid-2010s. Next, I highlight important contextual factors behind the increased interest in Nordic interior design.

According to a 2016 article in *The JoongAng* on Nordic design consumption in Korea (I et al., 2016), the general Korean public initially came in contact with Nordic interior design around 2007, through cafes and restaurants in the hip Sinsa-dong Garosu-gil and Hongdae areas in Seoul. At the time, these establishments had very similar interiors, with the furniture usually including a few expensive and well-known Nordic design items, like Arne Jacobsen's egg chair or Eero Aarnio's ball chair, or cheaper knockoffs imitating the designs of these items. The article claims that this

interior design trend later spread to high-end hotels and boutiques and eventually to the homes of regular people and expanded from the realm of furniture to also include tableware and other home furnishing goods.

Park and Yeom (2015, p. 227) see a housing shortage in Seoul and an increased preference for smaller apartments as contributing factors to the popularity of Nordic design in Korea at the time, as smaller living spaces made people put a higher value on practicality and simplicity – qualities commonly associated with Nordic design. O, S. (2013 p. 63) similarly attributes the Nordic design trend to changing lifestyles in Korea, with an increasing number of consumers valuing practical design and choosing to invest in the interiors of their homes.

Hwang (2016), examining the ways in which Japan has influenced Nordic design consumption in Korea, emphasizes the role of Japanese vintage stores specializing in Nordic design in curating the initial understanding of Nordic design and lifestyle in Korea. In Japan, Nordic design had formed a niche on the furniture market before it became trendy in Korea and considering the popularity of Japan as a tourist destination for Koreans, it is likely that many Koreans first came in contact with Nordic design while on a trip to Japan. Japanese vintage enthusiasts had collected and documented information about different types of vintage products, including Nordic design, in books and catalogues, and according to Hwang (2016, pp. 445-446), Korean online stores that sold vintage Nordic design goods referenced the information in these kinds of catalogues when presenting their goods to Korean consumers. In this way, Japanese descriptions of select Nordic design brands and products helped inform both the initial sellers and the consumers of Nordic design in Korea.

Hwang (2016, pp. 450-453) moreover argues that the Japanese slow movie genre, and in particular the 2006 film *Kamome Diner* (Ogigami, 2006), significantly contributed to the rise of the Nordic trend in both Korea and Japan and caused the concepts eco-friendliness, healing, an analog lifestyle, and an appreciation for handmade goods to be associated with the Nordic brand in the minds of Koreans. Slow movies are characterized by stories about escaping the hectic and stressful pace of modern life and adopting a slower and more peaceful lifestyle away from the city. These films tend to have a somewhat uneventful plot without any major conflicts, which serves to instead grant more attention to the set, costume, and sound design.

Kamome Diner depicts the everyday life of a small group of Japanese women running a diner in Helsinki. The interior of the diner, as well as other indoor spaces shown in the movie, are decorated with Nordic (mostly Finnish) design furniture and tableware, and Finnish brands are also prominently featured in the costume design. In addition to showcasing Nordic design products for audiences in both Japan and Korea, the film depicts Finnish life as slow-paced, free of stress, and connected to nature, in effect imbuing the Nordic design products with a specific lifestyle.

Although most slow movie films are not filmed in the Nordics nor feature Nordic design products, Hwang (2016, pp. 451-455) claims that because *Kamome Diner* established the slow-paced lifestyle, appreciation of nature and healthy food often depicted in these films as aspects of Nordic lifestyle, the slow movie genre as a whole has come to be associated with the Nordic brand and has contributed to the Nordic trend in Korea. This means that even the seemingly non-Nordic aspects of these films have influenced the Korean (and Japanese) understandings of what Nordic design and lifestyle are.

5 Places and branding

My study on the use of Nordic branding by companies in the Korean market is premised on the understanding of places as branded entities. In this section, I first briefly discuss the concept of place branding and how it relates to the marketing activities of private companies. Following that, I introduce the Nordic place branding efforts undertaken by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

5.1 Places as branded entities

The concept of nation branding was first introduced by Anholt in 1998, who argues that places have brands, meaning that individuals associate places with various things ranging from certain types of products to cultural values. The city of Milan is for example often associated with fashion and Germany is associated with punctuality and precision. Anholt (1998, pp. 397-398) states that commercial brands can benefit from associating themselves with positive place brands, and that the reverse is true as well – commercial brands can affect the place brands that they are associated with. Crucially, a commercial brand does not need to have a real connection to a place in order to associate itself with the place brand. Because Milan and the rest of Italy are associated with fashion and style, several non-Italian companies selling clothes, cars, and other products actively associate themselves with the Italian place brand by choosing Italian-sounding brand names and shooting commercials in recognizably Italian landscapes. Anholt (1998, pp. 397-398) suggests that part of the reason why the Italian place brand evokes a sense of fashion and style is that commercial actors (both Italian and non-Italian) reinforce these associations in their marketing.

This understanding of places as branded entities has become quite widespread, and today many cities, nations, and multinational regions like the Nordics develop branding strategies in an effort to gain advantages in various fields of international competition. The construction of place brands and the interaction between place brands and commercial brands have been studied from different perspectives.

Scholars in the field of international marketing have studied the impact of place associations on consumer product evaluations since the 1960s, before the concept of

place branding was coined.⁶ This kind of research focuses on how information about a product's or brand's country (or other place) of origin affects consumer product evaluations. This topic has received a lot of scholarly attention, and in general the literature indicates that consumer perceptions of places indeed do affect evaluations of products from said places (Papadopoulos et al., 2018, pp. 736-737; Samiee et al., 2024, p. 287).

Research on how commercial actors utilize place brands is more limited (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 364). One of the only studies that thoroughly examines how commercial actors evoke place brands is Andersen et al.'s (2021) study on how Nordic branding actors from creative industries evoke the Nordic brand in various online and offline activities and in interviews. They find that the actors associate "Nordicness" with green, inspired, and civic values and try to distance themselves from the notion of branding. The analysis shows that these values are communicated in everything from marketing videos and texts to the interior design of storefronts and the opening hours of the businesses. Östberg (2011) somewhat similarly studies how fashion brands reference "mythologies of Swedishness" in different ways depending on their target audience. The study briefly touches upon the fact that non-Swedish actors can utilize the Swedish national brand in their marketing, but the primary focus of the study is on how Swedish fashion brands choose to either emphasize or distance themselves from aspects of the Swedish national brand.

In studies on the utilization of foreign place brands by commercial actors, researchers have in most cases not been interested in closely examining the ideas and values that the actors communicate about the place brand. Haarmann (1989), for instance, examines the motives for the use of foreign languages in Japanese commercials from a sociolinguistic perspective and argues that foreign languages are used to instill a product with a sense of prestige and are usually also intended to evoke specific favorable ethnocultural stereotypes in the mind of the consumer (Haarmann, 1989, pp. 10-15). These stereotypes are, however, not examined in detail. In a more recent study on the use of Nordic words and graphemes in international marketing, Strandberg (2020) finds that several companies across the world that use Nordic orthographic features in marketing seem to do so in an effort to evoke positive

⁶ For a review of country-of-origin research, see Samiee et al. (2024).

associations with Nordic culture, food and lifestyle. Furthermore, the study suggests that these companies seldom meaningfully differentiate between the different Nordic countries and instead treat them as a “single cultural entity with a uniform set of symbolic values” (Strandberg, 2020, p. 12). Although Strandberg does in a few cases examine the ideas and values that the companies present as Nordic in their marketing, the nature of the material of the study (mostly consisting of photographs of signs found on streets) does in most cases not allow for a detailed analysis.

There is no prior research focused on the use of Nordic branding in the context of the Korean market, nor is there any research comparing the use Nordic branding by Nordic and non-Nordic actors.

5.2 Nordic place branding efforts

Since 2015, the Nordic Council of Ministers has directed a joint international branding strategy for the Nordic region with the goal of strengthening its international competitiveness and influence (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015, 2019, 2022). In the documents outlining the strategy, the NCoM acknowledges that each of the Nordic countries have their own individual strengths, interests, and nation branding projects but proposes that a joint Nordic branding strategy could benefit them all, especially in far-away regions of the world where the Nordic countries generally are perceived as a unit. The strategy calls on various Nordic actors, from national embassies and consulates to businesses and entrepreneurs to emphasize a set of “common Nordic values” in their communications and activities. These common values, referred to as the “Nordic perspective,” are identified as trust, equality, sustainability, innovation, and openness (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022, pp. 7-8). The NCoM has implemented this strategy in a few branding initiatives, the most notable of which are the Nordic Talks events and podcasts in which experts from the Nordic countries meet with experts from other parts of the world to discuss global challenges, with an emphasis being put on sustainability issues. Nordic Talks events have been organized around the world, including in Korea, where the Nordic embassies have organized 13 Nordic Talks since 2019 (Nordic Talks Korea, 2024). The extent to which the joint Nordic branding strategy has influenced the activities of other Nordic actors like businesses and entrepreneurs is unclear.

Although the Nordic region did not have a joint branding strategy until 2015, actors within the region have in many instances embraced the international perception of the region as a unit even before the strategy was adopted. An example of this is the promotion of furniture and interior design from the Nordic countries as Scandinavian or Nordic design rather than for example Danish or Swedish design. Mordhorst (2021) and Guldberg (2011) trace the origins of the concept of Scandinavian design to the highly successful traveling “Design in Scandinavia” exhibition held in the US and Canada in 1954-1957. Guldberg (2011, p. 46) states that it was an American magazine editor who first came up with the idea to organize a joint Scandinavian design exhibition. Nordic national actors were initially apprehensive about presenting their design products under a common Scandinavian banner, as they saw fundamental differences between the national design cultures, but they eventually decided to play into the American perception of the region as having a common design style (Mordhorst, 2021, p. 257). The exhibition was highly successful, attracting around 660,000 visitors and breaking attendance records in most of the venues it travelled to (Guldberg, 2011, pp. 42-43). The Nordic Council of Ministers has also promoted the Nordic brand prior to 2015, for instance by funding the New Nordic Food program that promoted the New Nordic Kitchen movement both within the Nordic region and abroad between 2007 and 2014 (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013, pp. 46-47), and by co-organizing the Nordic Cool festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in 2013 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015, p. 7).

6 Material

The material of this study consists of texts and images from the Korean language websites of a sample of eight Korean and eight Nordic companies, and was collected between November 2023 and April 2024. The companies included in the sample all meet the following criteria: they utilize Nordic branding to market their products; they sell furniture and/or household products; they have a Korean language website; and they had an active website during the data collection period.

The sample size was determined by the number of relevant Korean companies I managed to find using the methods described in section 4.6 and by the number of relevant Nordic companies I managed to find through similar online searches and by looking through lists of Nordic companies in Korea on the websites of embassies and chambers of commerce. In order to be able to make relevant analytical comparisons between the companies, only companies that sold similar kinds of products were selected. I chose to examine companies selling furniture and household products, as it was the product category with the highest number of relevant companies. Among the 33 Korean companies using Nordic branding that I found, there are also several companies selling cosmetics and childcare products, but I chose not to examine these product categories because there are so few Nordic companies with Korean websites selling these kinds of products.

Of the eight Nordic companies in the sample, five are Danish, two are Finnish, and one is Swedish. There are no Norwegian or Icelandic companies included in the sample, as I could not find any that met the selection criteria. A possible reason for the absence of Icelandic and Norwegian companies with Korean websites selling furniture and household products is that Iceland, and to a lesser extent also Norway, have historically been underrepresented in international discussion of Nordic and Scandinavian design, with the designers and companies most strongly associated with the terms being from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland.⁷ As the present study is concerned with examining the use of Nordic branding rather than place branding

⁷ Wiśnicka (2023, p. 187) states that Scandinavian Design mostly derives from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Skou and Munch (2016) note that in the 1950s and 1960s, “Scandinavian Design” products that saw international success were mostly from the other Nordic countries than Iceland, and mention that Norway was less famous for design than the other Nordic countries. Fallan (2013, Introduction) states that Iceland is excluded from most understandings of and publications on Scandinavian design.

relating to each of the Nordic countries individually, the lack of Icelandic and Norwegian companies in the sample is not detrimental to the study.

The objective of this study is to examine the use of Nordic branding on the websites of Korean and Nordic companies in the Korean market by answering the questions of how the companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand and what ideas about the Nordic brand they communicate on their websites. In accordance with this objective, I have chosen to limit my material to only the parts of the websites on which the companies most directly communicate their company and brand identity to the consumer. This includes the text and images on homepages, product pages, and various “about us” pages on which the companies explicitly state their values, history, design philosophy, or sources of inspiration. Most companies have at least one such “about us” page and many have several.

I have chosen to exclude every other part of the websites, including customer service pages, privacy policy and other legal pages, news posts, and FAQ pages even though these pages arguably also are used to communicate company identity, albeit not as explicitly.

Company values and core ideas are also communicated through other means than company websites, for instance through advertisement campaigns, social media pages, and the design of physical storefronts. While gathering material from these kinds of sources as well undoubtedly would enrich my analysis, it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The Korean companies included in the sample are Hanssem, Hyggero, Kaare Klint, Maatila, Milema, Odense, Scandi&Home, and Vaahtera. The Nordic companies are &Tradition, Fritz Hansen, Hay, Iittala, Ikea, Louis Poulsen, Marimekko, and Royal Copenhagen. All of these companies meet the aforementioned selection criteria but there are still significant differences between them. Most of the Korean companies were founded during the past decade and are generally quite small companies without any business outside of Korea. The products that they sell are for the most part relatively affordable. On the other hand, most of the Nordic companies are quite old, operate in several countries across the globe, and the products they sell are often much more expensive than the products of the Korean companies.

There are also differences in how the websites of the Korean and Nordic companies are structured. Most of the Nordic companies have several separate “about us” pages on their websites. One page might be dedicated to introducing the design philosophy of the brand while another page deals with the company’s stance on sustainability issues. The information on the product pages of the Nordic companies tends to be limited to technical information about the product and a brief description of its design. By contrast, the websites of the Korean companies usually only have one “about us” page, but the product pages tend to have a lot of information about both the product and the company. Table 1 shows a full list of the companies included in the material and the webpages included from each company website. The URLs of each individual webpage are listed in Appendix 2.

Hanssem is one of the leading companies of the Korean furniture market and is by far the largest Korean company in the sample. Hanssem sells furniture and household goods produced by a plethora of different brands, including its own. Most of Hanssem’s products are not marketed using Nordic branding but searching their website for *bugyureop* (Northern Europe) and *seukandinabia* (Scandinavia) still yields many results. For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to include only the product pages of five of these products that Hanssem sells under its own brand: the Scandi white dish drying rack, the Dono Scandi dining chair, the Nordic fabric sofa, and the Nordic home café and Scandi home office kitchen packages. I have chosen to deal with Ikea in a similar way due to the company’s equally enormous number of products in different styles. Even though Ikea is a Swedish company, it does not market all of its products as Swedish or Nordic design. I have chosen to only include a selection of products that the company explicitly describes as having a Nordic style.

Table 1. Companies included in the material

The titles of the webpages have been translated to English and long product titles have been shortened to save space.

Company	Origin	Types of products	Pages included in material
Hanssem	Korea	Furniture, various household products	Homepage, Scandi white dish drying rack, Dono Scandi dining chair, Nordic fabric sofa, Nordic home café kitchen package, Scandi home office kitchen package
Hyggero	Korea	Furniture, camping equipment	Homepage, Relax chair, Camping wagon, Camping wood shelf
Kaare Klint	Korea	Furniture	Homepage, About, Story, [701 Bookshelf color option review], [Spaces with JC901 series], 201 wave chair, 001 sofa boucle
Maatila	Korea	Home textiles	Homepage, Brand story, Mid-century vintage mansion sheets, Linen look blackout curtain
Milema	Korea	Home appliances, cleaning equipment, cutlery	Homepage, Revol V2 mop, Touch free trash bin, Poland Scrub-wow dishcloth, More Joy Finland cellulose dishcloth, Portugal Ria cutlery
Odense	Korea	Tableware	Homepage, Legodt product line, Nord product line, Nord mug 350 ml, Legodt pasta bowl and ramekin set
Scandi&Home	Korea	Rugs	Homepage, About company, Easy care washable velvet rug, Checkerboard washable rug
Vaahtera	Korea	Furniture	Homepage, About us, POL ash table, LIIKE adjustable height desk, MAC sofa

Company	Origin	Types of products	Pages included in material
&Tradition	Denmark	Furniture, lamps, interior design objects	Homepage, About &Tradition, Flowerpot VP3, InBetween Table SK6, The Home of &Tradition X <i>jamyongseosil</i>
Fritz Hansen	Denmark	Furniture	Homepage, Company information, Anniversary, Fritz Hansen 1872, Extraordinary design, Arne Jacobsen & Fritz Hansen, Poul Kjærholm & Fritz Hansen, Quality and craftsmanship, A shared world, Sustainability, Fritz Hansen Stay x Republic of Korea, Series 7™, PK22™, Swan™, Egg™
Hay	Denmark	Furniture, various household products	Homepage, Hay, front runner of new Danish design, Colour crate, Weekday bench, Crate dining bench
Iittala	Finland	Tableware, glass products	Homepage, Iittala introduction, Sustainability, Expert in glass, Expert in color, Kastehelmi, Kastehelmi plate 31.5 cm, Ultima Thule, Ultima Thule flower vase, Moomin Arabia
Ikea	Sweden	Furniture, various household products	Homepage, Ikea introduction, Ikea vision and core values, A brief introduction to Ikea's history, Sustainable living, Introduction to Life at Home, Nordic style, Fröset,

Company	Origin	Types of products	Pages included in material
			Gurli, Borgeby
Louis Poulsen	Denmark	Lamps	Homepage, Louis Poulsen introduction, Long-lasting design, Company introduction, Our heritage, Sustainability, AJ floor, PH 5
Marimekko	Finland	Textiles, tableware, fashion	Homepage, The art of print, Design philosophy, Our goals and actions, Timeless design, Products of the future, Positive change, Care guide, Unikko mug cup, Pieni tiliskivi table mat, Siirtola petit bowl
Royal Copenhagen	Denmark	Tableware	Homepage, Blue with added passion, Heritage, Craftsmanship, Mark and backstamp, 240-year history, 1775 the mother of Denmark, 1810 bourgeois, 1889 reborn as world-class Royal Copenhagen, 1925 the turbulent 1920s, 1963 the elegance of optimism, 2015 new millennium, Teapot 1200 ml, Plates, Deep oval plate 30 cm

7 Method

My analysis of the use of Nordic branding by Korean and Nordic companies is first and foremost premised on the understanding of brands as sets of associations that individuals have with the entity being branded (Clancy, 2011, p. 285), and the understanding of places, such as nations and regions as branded entities (Anholt, 1998). Analyzing the use of Nordic branding by companies therefore entails examining what kind of attributes the companies associate with the Nordic brand, in other words, what kind of ideas they present as being Nordic.

Furthermore, the social semiotic understanding of communication as always being multimodal, i.e. happening through the interaction of several semiotic resources (Serafini & Reid, 2023, pp. 626-627), serves as a framework for examining how associations with the Nordic brand are communicated. Companies have several different semiotic resources, that is channels of communication, that they can use to communicate ideas on their websites. The most obvious semiotic resources that can be used on websites are written text and visual images, but as van Leeuwen (2005, p. 4) points out, using the example of how different ways of walking can communicate all manners of things from social status to emotional state, almost anything can be used to communicate different ideas and meanings. In the context of websites, one could argue that everything from the visual layout of the website and the pricing of products to the user interface animations and the website domain suffix (e.g. .com or .co.kr) can be used to express something about the company. The types of meanings that can be expressed through any singular semiotic resource vary, and the interpretation of these meanings is always context-bound and partially subjective (van Leeuwen, 2005, pp. 4-6).

In order to analyze my data, I adopt the multimodal content analysis approach described by Serafini and Reid (2023), which is a variation of qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” Drisko and Maschi (2015, pp. 87-88) further highlight the analysis of both manifest (literal) and latent (implied) content as a defining feature of qualitative content analysis. Due to the partially subjective nature of data interpretation – different

researchers may perceive different properties of the same data – it is important for the researcher to provide a transparent explanation of the analytical process.

Serafini and Reid (2023) criticize the tendency of qualitative content analysis research to focus only on written language without acknowledging the multimodal nature of communication. To remedy this in their variation of qualitative content analysis, they incorporate a social semiotic understanding of communication as happening through several different semiotic resources and emphasize the need to also take into consideration how these different modes of communication interact with each other.

The flexibility of the multimodal content analysis method suits my research questions and material well. This method allows me to examine and categorize the material while taking into consideration important contextual factors, latent information, and the interaction between semiotic resources that a more quantitative approach to content analysis, relying on statistical analysis of word frequencies, would fail to account for.

8 Analytical process

In accordance with the multimodal content analysis procedures outlined by Serafini and Reid (2023, pp. 631-645), I first constructed my data corpus consisting of select parts of the webpages of the 16 companies introduced in section 6. After familiarizing myself with the collected data, I defined the object of analysis more clearly by deciding which elements of the data to exclude from the analysis. I chose to limit my analysis of the webpages to the literal and implied meanings of written text, the things depicted in images, the design of products, and the complementarity or dissonance between these elements, as I found the ideas communicated through these elements to be the most relevant for my research questions. I chose to ignore formal elements of the written text, such as the fonts used and the size of the text, as I judged the potential of these elements to clearly convey meaning about the Nordic brand to be insignificant. For the same reason, I also chose to exclude compositional elements of the images and the webpage layout from the analysis.

After defining the object of analysis, I developed categories to use to code the data for further analysis. This was an iterative process in which initial categories were created, tested on the data, and then refined to address issues that surfaced during testing. I took an inductive approach to generating the initial categories, meaning that I carefully read through the data while keeping my research questions in mind and created categories that fit the patterns that emerged from the data.

To examine how the companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand, I eventually settled on six categories that differentiate between the ways in which connections to the Nordic brand are forged on the websites: *Linguistic connection*, referring to instances where Nordic languages are used on the website, for example in the name of the company or its products; *Aesthetic connection*, referring to instances where companies link their product design or its visual presentation to the Nordic brand, for instance by explicitly stating that their products adhere to a “Nordic design language,” or by juxtaposing their products with well-known Nordic design products in their product images; *Philosophic connection*, referring to instances where companies claim a connection to values, lifestyles, or ways of thinking that they present as Nordic; *Historical connection*, referring to instances where the companies reference some aspect of Nordic history;

Geographical connection, referring to instances where companies establish a connection to specific Nordic geographical locations or Nordic natural environments; and *Miscellaneous*, referring to connections to the Nordic brand that do not fit into any of the previous categories. Additionally, I noted which parts of the Nordic region that the companies referenced, and what specific words they used to do so.

After coding the data according to these six categories, I interpreted it to answer the first research question of how the companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand. I found that the categorization used to code the data also was well suited to organize and present the findings.

To examine what ideas about the Nordic brand the companies communicate on their websites, I first created two categories to distinguish between ideas explicitly presented as Nordic, and ideas implicitly presented as Nordic. I regarded ideas as being explicitly presented as Nordic when a word referring to the Nordic region or any part of it was used in the expression of the idea. An example of this is the description of “the free and simple lifestyle of the Finns” (*pillandeuindeurui yeoyuropgo simpeulhan raipseutail*) as a source of inspiration on the website of the Korean company Milema. Here a free and simple lifestyle is explicitly presented as Nordic. I considered every other idea expressed on the websites to be implicitly presented as Nordic, whether intentionally or not, since all of the companies associate themselves with the Nordics through their use of Nordic branding.

To further categorize the different kinds of ideas expressed on the websites, I created four subcategories that were used for both explicit and implicit ideas about the Nordics: *Aesthetics*, referring to aesthetic ideas that the companies present as Nordic; *Values*, referring to values that the companies present as Nordic; *Lifestyle*, referring to activities and traditions that the companies present as Nordic; and *Miscellaneous* for ideas about the Nordics that do not fit into any of the previous categories. There is some overlap between these categories, and in instances where an idea expressed on the website could fit into more than one category, for instance when “Scandinavian minimalism” was presented both as a descriptor of the brands design aesthetic and as a lifestyle, it was noted under each relevant category.

Once these categories were finalized, I examined all the data once more and coded it in accordance with the categories. Finally, to answer the research question, I

interpreted the coded material and created seven themes that highlight the ideas about the Nordic brand that the 16 Korean and Nordic companies communicate on their websites.

9 Findings

My analysis of the Korean language websites of eight Korean and eight Nordic companies that use Nordic branding found that they primarily evoke association with the Nordic brand in five different ways, through establishing linguistic, aesthetic, philosophic, historical, and geographical connections between their company and the Nordic brand. The Korean and Nordic companies utilize these five approaches in slightly different ways. Furthermore, my analysis found seven themes of ideas about the Nordic brand that the companies communicate on their websites. Both the Korean and Nordic companies associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality of design, but other than that, the ideas that they communicate are quite different. The Korean companies associate the Nordic brand with the concepts of *hygge* and “healing” (*hilling*), retro and nostalgia, and trendiness. The Nordic companies, on the other hand, associate the Nordic brand with artistry and creativity, sustainability and progressive values, and timelessness.

My interpretation of the data is inevitably partially subjective as the meanings that I observe in the data might go unnoticed by another observer and vice versa. Another observer might for instance not recognize that the lamp standing on the table in the picture on Vaahtera’s home page is a Flowerpot lamp designed by the Danish designer Verner Panton, and thus might not interpret its inclusion in the picture as Vaahtera demonstrating that its own designs are comparable with and similar to the designs of famous Nordic designers. Because of this subjectivity, I do my best to justify my interpretations by providing plenty of examples from the material.

In the rest of section 9, I go into more detail about the five ways in which the companies evoke association with the Nordic brand and the seven themes of ideas about the Nordic brand that they communicate, and I compare the different approaches taken by the Korean and Nordic companies.

9.1 Ways in which the companies evoke association with the Nordic brand

The 16 companies employ various strategies to evoke association with the Nordic brand. While my sample size is too small for any findings to be generalizable to all Korean and Nordic companies using Nordic branding, my analysis did find some

clear differences in how the Korean and Nordic companies in my sample create a connection to the Nordic brand.

9.1.1 Linguistic connection

Both the Korean and the Nordic companies create association with the Nordic brand by using Nordic languages on their websites. Whether the meanings of the Nordic words used are explained or not varies from company to company. Ikea, Marimekko, Iittala, and Royal Copenhagen all use Nordic languages in the naming of some of their products. In the case of Ikea, Nordic languages are used in the naming of almost all products, while Royal Copenhagen only have a few products with Nordic names, most having English ones. Some of the Nordic companies also include Nordic languages in videos and pictures on their websites. The Fritz Hansen website, for instance, has several videos in which Danish is spoken, usually with Korean subtitles, and the Royal Copenhagen website displays a picture of an old Danish newspaper advertisement.

The Korean companies mostly use Nordic languages in their company and brand names – Maatila, Vaahtera, Milema, and Hyggero are all names derived from Nordic languages. A few companies also have products named using Nordic languages. Interestingly, while some of the Korean companies have chosen actual Nordic language words for their names (*maatila* and *vaahtera* are Finnish for farm and maple), others have opted to instead create portmanteaus of two Nordic language words. Milema states on its website that the company name is derived from the Finnish words *minimaalinen elämä* (minimal life), Hyggero is a combination of the Danish/Norwegian words *hygge* and *ro* (calm), and the name of Odense's Legodt product line is a mashed together version of the Danish words *leg godt* (play well). Strandberg's (2020) study on the use of Nordic language words and graphemes in international marketing found that some companies wanting to associate themselves with the Nordic brand would use Nordic language graphemes like å, ø, and ä in words that should not have them in order to make the words seem more Nordic. As these companies target non-Nordic audiences, the questions of whether or not the meaning of the word is understood and whether or not the word is a real Nordic word at all are less important than whether or not the audience associates the word with a Nordic

language. It is peculiar that none of the Korean companies chose to exaggerate the “Nordicness” of their names in this way.

9.1.2 Aesthetic connection

Both the Korean and the Nordic companies also evoke the Nordic brand by presenting the design aesthetic of their products as Nordic in some way. Many of the Nordic companies explicitly describe their products as being Nordic design products and many of the Korean companies similarly state that their designs are inspired by Nordic design or that they embody a Nordic sensibility. Furthermore, Korean companies often implicitly present their products as having a Nordic design aesthetic by including recognizable Nordic design products or other references to Nordic design in their product pictures.

The Korean companies Maatila, Scandi&Home, Vaahtera, and Hanssem all have product pictures on their websites in which their own products are placed next to well-known Nordic design products. For example, pictures on the product page of one of Maatila’s curtains include a Chair 65, designed by the Finnish designer Alvar Aalto, and a EM77 jug, designed by the Danish designer Erik Magnussen (see Figure 3) and some pictures on the Scandi&Home website feature chairs that very closely resemble Arne Jacobsen’s Ant chair. Additionally, some of the product pictures on the websites of the Korean companies include books and posters that reference Nordic design. On the Kaare Klint homepage, there is a picture of a bookshelf produced by the company, and in the bookshelf, there are two books on Nordic design with clearly legible titles written in a large font. One of the books is titled Alvar Aalto and the other is titled Nordic Interiors & Homes. In other pictures on the Kaare Klint website, posters of Danish modern art museums can be spotted in the background. A few of the Nordic companies also include Nordic design products by other Nordic companies in their own pictures, but this is not done to the same extent as on the websites of the Korean companies.

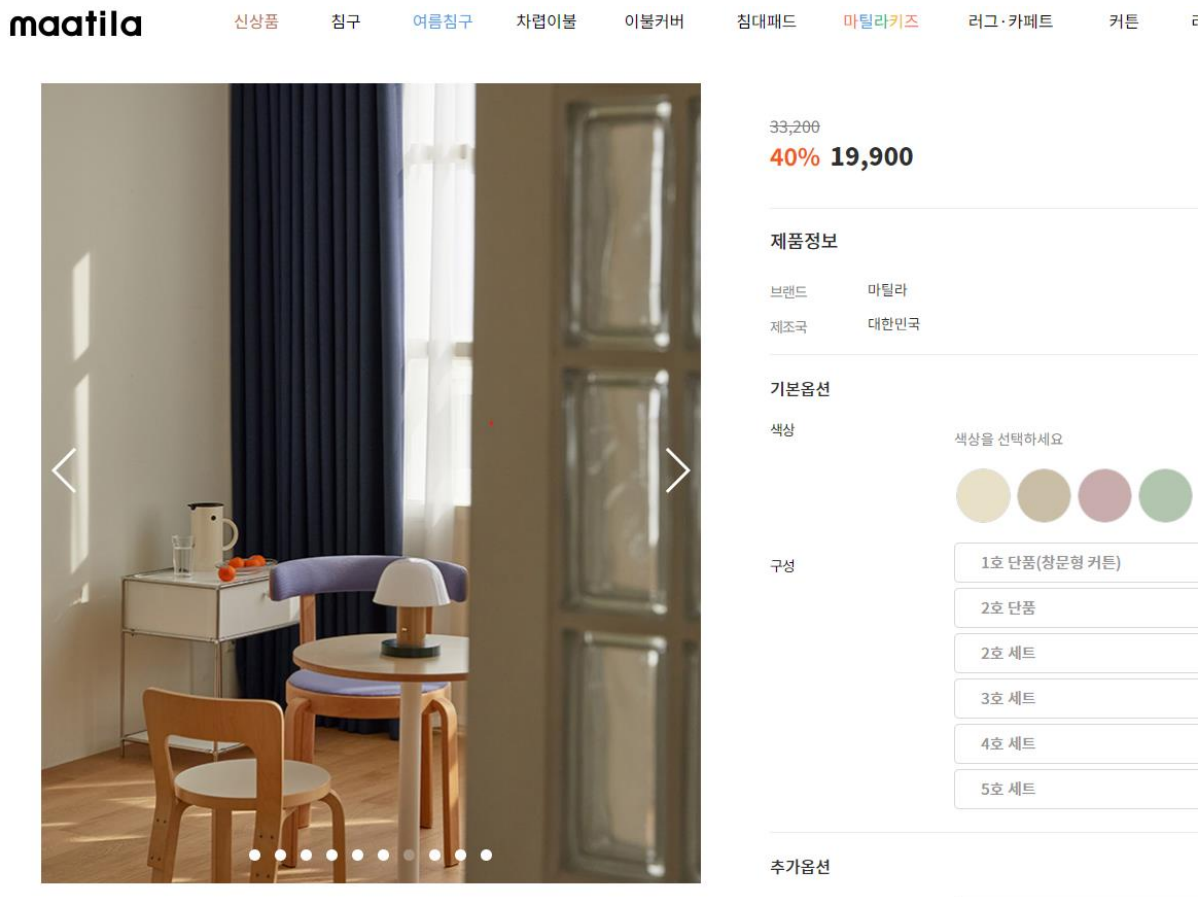


Figure 3. A Chair 65 and an EM77 jug on the product page of a curtain. Maatila (2024).

Several of the Nordic companies explicitly call their designs Nordic. Fritz Hansen claims to be defining Nordic design, Hay describes itself as a pioneer of “new Danish design,” Ikea sells “Nordic style” products, Iittala uses both the terms Nordic design and Finnish design to refer to its products, and Royal Copenhagen says its products are Danish design, and specify that some of them have a Danish modern style. Some of the Korean companies also quite explicitly say that their design aesthetic is Nordic or inspired by Nordic design. Milema, for instance, calls its design “Finnish sensibility design” (*bugyureop gamseong dijain*) and references Scandinavian minimalism and Hanssem says that its Scandi dishrack has a modern Nordic style.

9.1.3 Philosophic connection

It is more common for the Nordic than the Korean companies to associate themselves with the Nordic brand by presenting values and lifestyles that they promote as being essentially Nordic. Iittala and Fritz Hansen both claim that their companies and products embody a Nordic lifestyle, Iittala associating this lifestyle with values of

equality, autonomy, well-being, and life balance, and Fritz Hansen instead emphasizing craftsmanship and responsible manufacturing. Other Nordic companies also emphasize an appreciation of craftsmanship as a Nordic value but sometimes attribute the value to a specific country or region rather than the Nordics as a whole. Ikea for example states that a dedication to one's craft and a prioritization of efficient use of resources are values of the historical Swedish province of Småland.

There are not many Korean companies that explicitly present specific values or lifestyles as Nordic in this way. Hyggero claims the Danish and Norwegian concept of *hygge* as a source of inspiration for the brand and its products and says it promotes a *hygge* lifestyle. Milema similarly associates a Nordic lifestyle with freedom and simplicity by stating that the brand is inspired by the "free and simple lifestyle of the Finns," and, on one of its product pages, also presents eco-friendliness as a Nordic value. The rest of the Korean companies do not explicitly present any values or lifestyles as Nordic.

9.1.4 Historical connection

Many of the older Nordic companies connect themselves to the Nordic brand by introducing the history of their company in a way that shows how it is intermingled with the national history of their country of origin. Unsurprisingly, none of the Korean companies do this, as they neither have as long company histories nor the same kind of connection to the Nordic region. It is interesting and worth noting that none of the companies make references to Vikings, Norse mythology, or other romanticized parts of Nordic history.

On its website, Fritz Hansen emphasizes the role of the company in developing Danish design, mentioning, among other things, that the company was among the first in Denmark to make steel and laminate furniture, and claiming that the company introduced functionalism to the Danish design tradition. Iittala similarly states that it was one of the first companies to start making functional tableware with "progressive Nordic designs" (*jinbojeogin noreudik dijain hyeongtae*) and claims to have played an important role in defining the Nordic way of life. The Royal Copenhagen website details the company's connection to the Danish royal family and Danish national history at great length, describing how the company's products were used in different time periods and how the company responded to societal trends.

Louis Poulsen also has a page dedicated to company history, and while it does not portray the relation between company and national history in as much detail as Royal Copenhagen does, there are some references to specific moments in national history. For example, the company mentions that it designed blackout lamps for the Copenhagen Tivoli Gardens during the second world war. Many of the Nordic companies also show old photographs on their websites that reinforce their connections to Nordic history.

9.1.5 Geographical connection

In text, both the Korean and the Nordic companies refer to the Nordic region both on the regional level, using the terms *bugyureop* (Northern Europe) and *seukandinabia* (Scandinavia), and on the national level, naming individual countries. Iceland and the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland are not mentioned in the material at all, and Hyggero's explanation of *hygge* being a Danish and Norwegian word is the only time that Norway is brought up. Two big reasons for this are that none of the Nordic companies examined in this study are Norwegian or Icelandic, and that the Nordic countries most strongly associated with Nordic or Scandinavian design are Denmark, Sweden, and Finland.

The Korean and Nordic companies differ in that almost all of the Nordic companies, in addition to establishing a connection to a specific Nordic country, also mention the city that they were founded in, and often have pictures from these cities on their websites. By contrast, the Korean companies for the most part keep their references to the Nordic region on the less specific regional and national levels, and in some cases even reference other European countries as well. Odense for example has two product lines that utilize Nordic branding, and three that instead reference Portuguese nature, the Belle Époque, and ballet.

There are remarkably few references to Nordic natural environments. The logo of Royal Copenhagen features three wavy lines that the company explains represent the three major straits of Denmark, but aside from that, none of the Nordic companies explicitly reference Nordic nature on their brand introduction pages, nor do any of them particularly emphasize Nordic natural landscapes in the pictures on their websites. Still, some of the Nordic companies have individual products with designs that are explained to be inspired by Nordic nature. For example, the product pages of

Iittala's Ultima Thule products, designed by Tapio Wirkkala, explicitly cite Nordic nature and melting glaciers as sources of inspiration.

There are several Korean companies that allude to nature in the descriptions of their products, but Milema and Odense are the only ones that explicitly refer to *Nordic* nature. Milema asserts that the brand is inspired, among other things, by the "beautiful and clean natural environment of Northern Europe," and the product page of Milema's cellulose dishcloth has a picture of a summery Finnish forest. The product descriptions on the pages of Odense's Nord product line tableware talk about the "powerful natural environment of Northern Europe's polar regions," snowclad mountains, frozen soil, and the beauty found in such extreme conditions. It is also the only company in this study to use images of snowy and cold winter landscapes. It is interesting that so few companies reference winter and snow, considering that the cold climate of the Nordics often is mentioned as a reason for the development of Nordic furniture and interior design in Korean academic and news articles covering the topic.⁸

9.1.6 Miscellaneous

Analyzing the data, I found only one way in which the companies create a connection to the Nordic brand that does not fit into any of the previous categories – the use of Nordic national symbols. Flags, the most obvious national symbols, were only used by three of the examined companies. On the product page of Milema's cellulose dishcloth, produced by the Finnish company More Joy, the Finnish flag is used in several pictures, usually accompanied by the text "made in Finland" in either English or Korean. The company's logo also uses the same white and blue color scheme as the Finnish flag. Milema is the only Korean company to use a Nordic flag on its website. Ikea's blue and yellow logo similarly shares its colors with the flag of Sweden and, at the time the data was collected, the Swedish flag could also be seen in a picture on the homepage of the Korean Ikea website, in which a miniature flag is stuck into a pile of mashed potatoes on a plate of Swedish meatballs. One of the pages dedicated to the history of the company's oldest product line on the Royal Copenhagen website has a picture of a shelf filled with said products, with a string with small Danish flags

⁸ See for example Kwon (2013, p. 114), O, S. (2013, p. 62), I, S. (2012), and Han (2012).

hanging across the shelf as a decoration. However, these flags are not as clearly visible as the flags in the pictures on the Milema and Ikea websites.

Aside from flags, there are only a few other national symbols that the companies use. Most notably, Royal Copenhagen, displaying its royal warrant of appointment, has the Danish royal crown in its logo, paired with the text “by appointment to the royal Danish court.” Finally, Iittala uses imagery of Tove Jansson’s Moomin character in the designs of some of its products. Due to the cultural significance and widespread appeal of the character, Moomin could arguably be considered an unofficial symbol of Finland.

9.2 Ideas about the Nordic brand that the Korean companies communicate

9.2.1 Simplicity and functionality

Most of the examined Korean companies sell products with simple and functional design without elaborate ornamentation or impractical shapes. Their products and the environments they are shown in often have a neutral and minimal color palette. Many companies present these design choices as being essentially Nordic, either by explicitly stating that their product design is inspired by the Nordics in some way, or by showing their products harmoniously placed alongside famous Nordic design products in the pictures on their website.

The furniture company Vaahtera does both. On the product page of their POL ash table, a rectangular dining table with a dark brown ash top and thin black cylindrical steel legs, Vaahtera asserts that the design of the table was inspired by Nordic furniture, and that the table therefore was made to be functional and to have a simple form that works in any environment. Most of Vaahtera’s products are not explicitly described as Nordic-inspired in this way, but they all share a similar simple and functional design language with a color palette that is mostly limited to different shades of brown wood, white and black.

On the homepage of the Vaahtera website, a large picture of a furnished room is displayed (see Figure 4). All of the furniture in the room are Vaahtera products, but two of the lamps are recognizable designs by renowned Danish designers. A Flowerpot lamp, designed by Verner Panton, stands on a table in the center of the picture, and from the ceiling hangs a lamp that closely resembles Poul Henningsen’s

PH 5 pendant lamp. Both of these lamps are white and harmoniously complement the white Vaahtera furniture in the picture, giving the impression that Vaahtera's furniture and these functional and minimal Scandinavian modern design classics belong to the same realm of design.

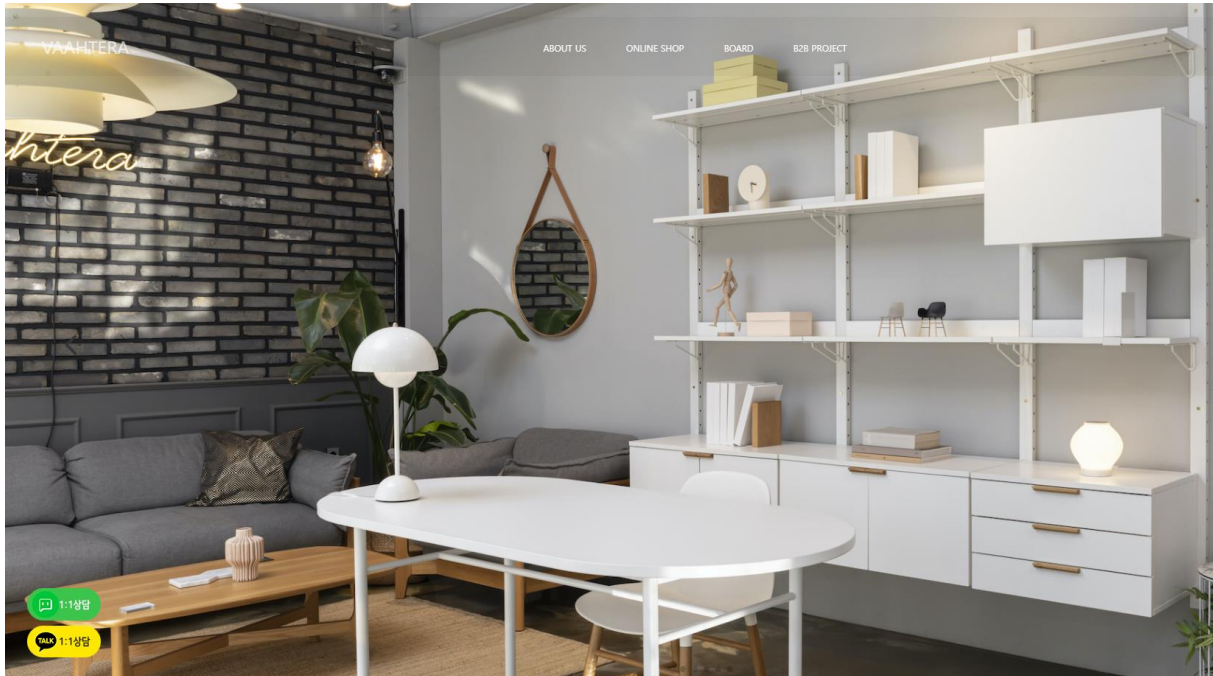


Figure 4. A Flowerpot lamp and a PH 5 pendant lamp on the homepage of Vaahtera. Vaahtera (2024).

Milema, selling kitchenware, small household devices, and cleaning equipment, describes the design of its products as “Finnish sensibility design” (*pillandeu gamseong dijain*) emphasizing “simplicity and superb functionality.” All of its product pages include the slogan “Inspired by Finland / Scandinavian Minimalism” (in English) and an assertion that the brand is inspired by the “free and simple lifestyle of the Finns and the beautiful and clean natural environment of the Nordics.” This emphasis on functionality, simplicity, and minimalism is reflected in the design of Milema’s products, which, barring two exceptions, all have simple, angular shapes with plain surfaces devoid of decoration, and all share a color palette consisting of shades of white, gray, and muted earthy colors. The two products that clash against the general design aesthetic are both vibrantly colored dishcloths with decorative prints and patterns. Both of these products are manufactured by third parties and Milema sells them using both its own and the manufacturer’s branding. Ironically, one of these dishcloths is designed and manufactured in Finland by the Finnish company More Joy, meaning that the only product actually designed in the Nordics

happens to not adhere to Milema's Scandinavian-minimalism-inspired design aesthetic.

Hanssem, Kaare Klint, Maatila, Odense, and Scandi&Home do not explicitly state that they associate the Nordics with simplicity and functionality on their websites, but most of them nevertheless embrace these attributes in one way or another. Hanssem's Scandi and Nordic products, Odense's Legodt and Nord products, most of Kaare Klint's products, and many of Maatila's and Scandi&Home's products have very simple and unadorned functional designs, and the product pictures often include references to well-known Nordic designers and their products or to design movements and styles characterized by simplicity and functionality, such as Bauhaus and mid-century modern.

Maatila, a company selling home textiles, describes its product design as practical and includes recognizable Nordic design furniture in some of its product pictures. The product pictures for one of their curtains, for instance, include a Chair 65, designed by Finnish designer Alvar Aalto, and a product picture for a blanket prominently features a framed poster depicting Danish designer Finn Juhl's 45 Chair. Nordic design furniture and lamps can similarly be found in the product pictures of Hanssem, Scandi&Home and Kaare Klint as well.

Hyggero stands out as the only Korean company in the material that does not portray simplicity and functionality as characteristics of Nordic design. The company does connect simplicity to the Nordic brand by presenting it as an aspect of a *hygge* lifestyle, but simplicity is not discussed in the context of design on the Hyggero website.

9.2.2 *Hygge* and "healing" as Nordic sensibility

Language referring to feelings, moods, and sensibilities is used much more frequently in the descriptions of products and explanations of brand identity on the websites of Korean companies than on the websites of Nordic companies in the material. This is in spite of the fact that the websites of the Nordic companies tend to have much more text than the websites of the Korean companies. I posit that, in general, these Korean companies associate the Nordic brand with comfort, relaxation, freedom, harmony, calmness and closeness to nature, which are feelings and sensibilities related to the

Danish and Norwegian concept of *hygge*, and the Korean concept of “healing” (*hillung*). The association of the Nordic brand with healing in Korea has previously been noted by Hwang (2016, p. 444) and O, S. (2013, p. 62).

The two Korean words used most frequently to bring up emotions and moods on the company websites are *gamseong* (sensibility, vibe, mood) and *gamgak* (sensation). These terms are sometimes used quite vaguely - Hyggero for instance uses the term *gamseong wegeon* (mood wagon) to refer to its foldable camping wagon without explicitly clarifying what this means, what kind of mood it refers to. In most cases, however, the mood is either described in more detail or can be inferred from the context.

In the case of Hyggero, looking at the broader context of the product pages reveals that the creative use of the word *gamseong* in terms such as *gamseong wegeon*, *gamseongcheeo* (mood chair), referring to its foldable chair, and *gamseong kaemping dijain* (mood camping design) referring to the overall product design of the company, relates to the concepts of *hygge* and healing. On each product page, the company explains the origin of its name and defines *hygge* as a word denoting comfort, warmth, coziness, and carefreeness. Additionally, the company claims to promote a *hygge* lifestyle, characterized by spending free time doing simple things with loved ones and enjoying the small things in life. This definition of *hygge* is closely related to the concept of healing, which in the Korean context does not refer to the physical healing of wounds, but rather to self-care, relaxation, and an alleviation of stress.

One of the ways in which healing is practiced is by slowing down and spending time in nature (hence, for example Seoul Grand Park’s [2024] use of the term “healing forest” to promote a recreational program in the park). On the website, Hyggero’s products are photographed in various outdoor environments. This makes sense, seeing as the products are primarily intended to be used while camping, but this also serves to associate the products with healing. This association is made explicit on the product page of the foldable chair, as the chair is called not only a “mood chair” but also a “healing chair.”

Milema directly connects these feelings of freedom, comfort, and closeness to nature to what it calls a “Nordic sensibility.” As previously mentioned, the company labels its

product design “Finnish sensibility design” and cites the “free and simple lifestyle of the Finns and the beautiful and clean natural environment of the Nordics” as sources of inspiration. The themes of comfort and nature are brought up again on the product page of Milema’s cellulose dishcloth, produced by the Finnish company More Joy, where the dishcloth is described as expressing a Nordic sensibility through its “comfortable and natural colors and design.” The majority of the dishcloth designs feature colorful printed drawings of flowers and vegetables, and one of the pictures on the product page is a photograph of a lush and tranquil (presumably) Finnish forest coupled with the text “Made in Finland.”

Hanssem similarly presents its Nordic sofa and Scandi chairs as embodying feelings of comfort and a sense of naturality. The product page of the Nordic sofa implores the reader to “create a sensuous living room with the natural and refined Nordic sofa.” Further down on the page, underneath the word Nordic written in large capital letters, a picture of the beige sofa in a beige interior with soft sunlight filtering through sheer curtains is overlaid with the hashtags #natural, #cozy, #stylish, and #soft. The wooden Scandi chairs are explicitly said to have a “Scandinavian sensibility” (*seukandinabia gamseong*) and are, just like the Nordic sofa, described as being natural. This statement is reinforced by the interior they are shown in – a beige room where the only decorations (aside from a large Bauhaus poster) are potted fir trees, fruits, and flowers (see Figure 5). The comfortability and soft curves of the chairs are emphasized, and their natural wood color is said to bring warmth (*ttaseuham*) to the space they are placed in. Hanssem’s Nordic Home Café kitchen package is also described as having a warm mood (*ttatteutan gamseong*), but interestingly the Scandi Home Office kitchen package is not. It is instead said to have a modern and manly (*maeniswihan*, “mannish”) mood.

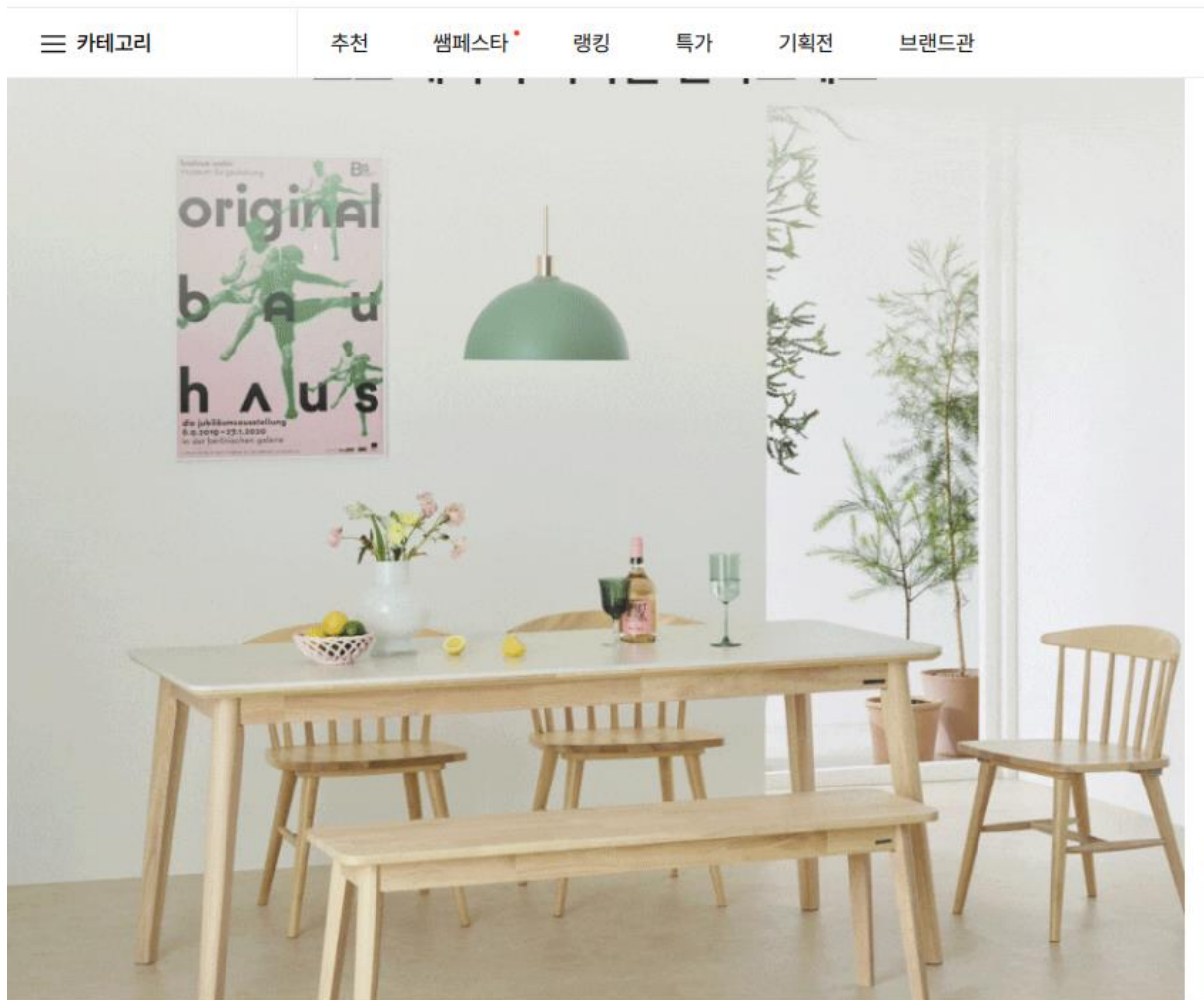


Figure 5. An interior decorated with plants on Hanssem's Dono Scandi dining chair product page. Hanssem (2024).

Maatila calls itself a “mood living design brand” (*gamseongnibing dijainbeuraendeu*) on its homepage, and a video on the page shows how healing can be achieved through changing curtains or bedsheets. The product pictures on the website all evoke a sense of quiet and slow mornings, with soft natural light and breakfast trays on unmade cozy looking beds.

Scandi&Home arguably plays on associations with peace, freedom, and well-being by defining itself as a “Heavenly House with a Nordic sensibility” (*bugyureobui gamseongeul dameun ‘Heavenly House’*). The company also says it strives to create a better life through its “natural and trendy design.” However, a cozy mood and closeness to nature are not clearly communicated through the product pictures. The same can be said for Kaare Klint and Vaahtera. The Kaare Klint website expresses a dedication to making comfortable furniture and Vaahtera calls their design

“emotional,” but although some of Kaare Klint’s product pictures depict people lazily lounging or sleeping on the furniture, most of the product pictures on both Kaare Klint’s and Vaahtera’s websites are shot in bright, sterile environments that seem neither cozy nor close to nature.

Odense is interesting, as the company has two product lines that evoke association with the Nordic brand, but they both have distinctly different moods. The description of the Legodt products conjures up a sense of *hygge* by talking about the joy of spending everyday life with loved ones. The products have warm yellow and orange colors and most of the pictures show the products next to scattered boardgames and toys that signal a happy and nostalgic mood. On the other hand, the Nord product line only evokes a sense of harsh and bitter cold, citing snowclad mountains, frozen soil, and the extreme natural environment of Northern Europe’s polar regions as sources of inspiration. The pictures show the products in a frozen forest covered in thick snow. Through the Nord product line, Odense does directly associate the Nordic brand with nature but does so in a remarkably different way than the rest of the analyzed Korean companies.

9.2.3 Retro and nostalgia

Around half of the Korean companies associate the Nordic brand with retro and nostalgia through incorporating old items and analog technology in their product pictures and using terms like vintage and retro to describe their designs. Wood, as a material, seems to be an important part of the retro aesthetic.

The substantial part of the furniture in Hanssem’s Nordic Home Café kitchen package is made of a dark wood that the company calls “vintage Nordic walnut,” that creates a visual contrast with the rest of the kitchen that is all white. The description of the package says that the kitchen has a mid-century modern style with a retro mood (*reteuro mudeu*), and that its round wooden Scandi drawer handles have a “newtro sensibility” (*nyuteuro gamseong*), newtro being a Korean term referring to the contemporary reinterpretation of old things.

Odense’s Legodt product line draws upon feelings of nostalgia by including a wide array of vintage toys, boardgames, sports equipment, and a bubblegum dispenser in the pictures on the product pages (see Figure 6) while descriptive text talks about

children playing with wooden blocks with their friends. The product line name Legodt being an indirect but quite obvious reference to Lego arguably adds to this nostalgia.

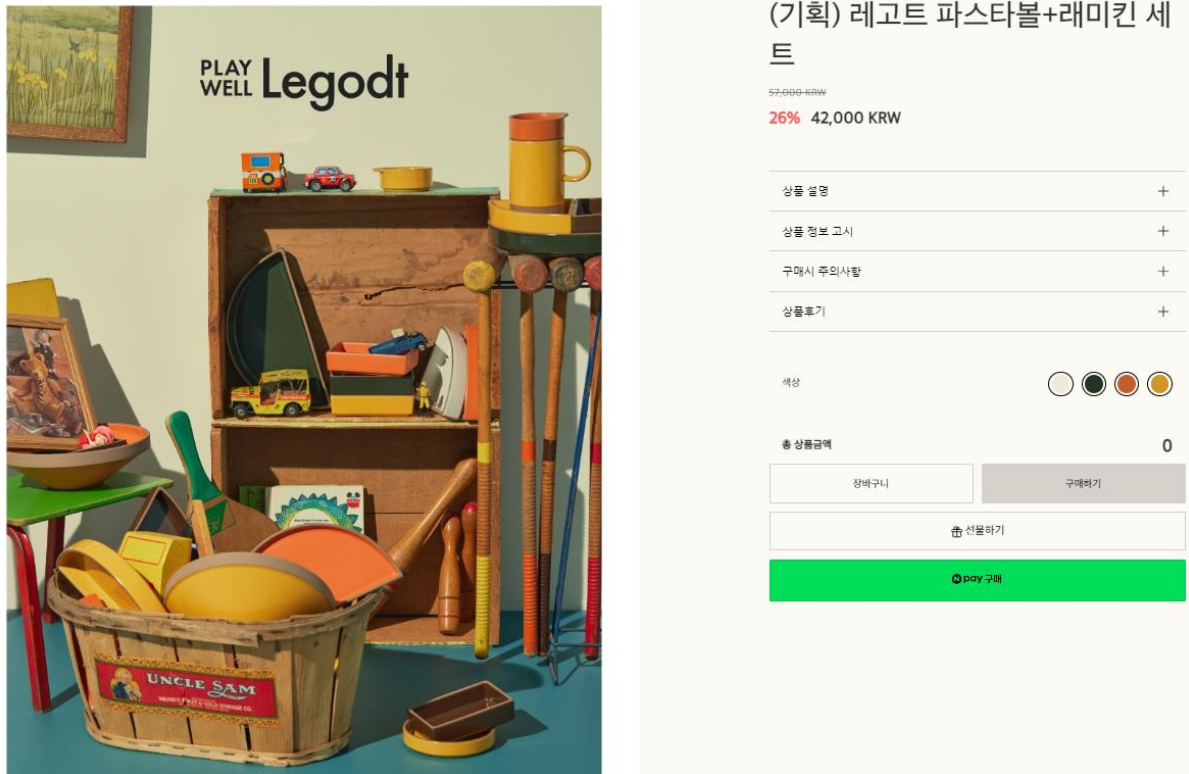


Figure 6. Vintage toys and sports equipment on Odense's Legodt product pages. Odense (2024).

Maatila has several vintage-inspired products, one of which is a striped bedding set called Mid-century Vintage Mansion that comes in a colorway called Nordic Mansion, described as having a “the vintage mood of the Nordics” (*bugyureobui bintiji mudeu*). Somewhat perplexingly, the same product is also said to have the vintage sensibility of 1960s New York. Additionally, many of the product pictures on the website show interiors furnished with teak furniture in the mid-century modern style, and some of the pictures have a vinyl record player in the background. Hyggero uses props in a similar manner to establish a retro or vintage feeling – product pictures feature lace tablecloths, wicker baskets and an analog radio. The visual impression of wood as a material is valued to the extent that the aluminum frames of Hyggero’s camping wagon and foldable chair are painted to look like wood.

9.2.4 Trendiness

Interestingly, around half of the Korean companies describe their products or their design philosophy as trendy, while many of the Nordic companies have chosen to do the opposite and instead consider their products timeless and their designs unaffected by trends. By presenting their products as trendy while simultaneously evoking association with the Nordic brand, these Korean companies communicate the idea that Nordic branded products are trendy.

In their brief self-introductory texts on their brand story and about company pages, both Maatila and Scandi&Home describe their own designs as trendy. Scandi&Home first establishes a connection to the Nordic brand with the phrase “Heavenly House with a Nordic sensibility,” and directly after that declares trendy design, reasonable pricing, and quality to be core values of the company. This phrasing suggests that these values are attributes not only of the company, but also of the Nordic sensibility that the company references. On product pages, Scandi&Home once again calls the design of its products trendy and Maatila claims to be setting “living trends” (*ribing teurendeu*) by researching and developing fabrics and designs.

Hanssem and Milema highlight trendiness only on the pages of select products. Hanssem describes its Nordic Home Café kitchen as having not only a retro mood, but also a “trendy and emotional mood” (*teurendihago gamseongjeogin mude*). Milema, being more specific, asserts that the design of its sensor-equipped touch free trash bin epitomizes minimalism and the “minimal life trend” (*minimeollaipeu teurendeu*). This depiction of minimalism as a trend indirectly suggests that the whole brand of Milema is trendy, seeing as each of its product pages emphasize Scandinavian minimalism as a core part of the brand.

Neither Hyggero, Vaahtera, Odense, nor Kaare Klint mention trendiness on their websites. It is worth noting that Kaare Klint is the only Korean company that seems to take a similar stance on trendiness as most Nordic companies do, rejecting it as an attribute of the brand. Kaare Klint does this by stating that it creates long lasting “slow style” furniture.

9.3 Ideas about the Nordic brand that the Nordic companies communicate

9.3.1 Simplicity and functionality

While the Nordic companies examined in many ways differ from the Korean companies, they are alike in that both groups present simplicity and functionality as attributes associated with the Nordic brand. Many of the Nordic companies do this very directly by asserting that Nordic design, Scandinavian design, or design from a specific Nordic country is simple, minimal, understated and/or functional.

Fritz Hansen, for instance, declaring that the company has defined Nordic design since 1872 and shaped the Danish design tradition, says, in a video on the website celebrating Fritz Hansen's 150-year anniversary, that a "belief in Nordic simplicity" is at the core of the company's designs. The Louis Poulsen website shows that the company considers functionality to be a fundamental aspect of Danish design by stating that Louis Poulsen's designs are based on the principle that form follows function as an homage to the Danish design tradition. On one of the seven pages on its website dedicated to presenting the history of the company, Royal Copenhagen mentions that the company has produced Danish modern style tableware since the 1950s and describes Danish modern design as practical, minimalist, and influenced by Chinese and Japanese culture. Ikea has a page on its website highlighting products that the company deems to have a Nordic style. On this page, Nordic style is associated with minimalism and defined as understated, simple, and practical, with clean lines and an emphasis on the use of natural materials.

Most of the products sold by Fritz Hansen, Louis Poulsen, &Tradition, and Hay, and the Nordic style products sold by Ikea have simple and functional designs, often have a monotone color palette, and rarely have features that seem purely decorative. The product pages of these companies regularly describe the products as having simple and functional design and "clean lines," and the pictures generally show the products in interiors with similarly simple furniture. However, it is worth noting that aside from the furniture, the environments that the products are shown in are often more varied and less minimal than the environments shown in the product pictures of the Korean companies. Ikea's page highlighting Nordic style products is a clear example of this. Despite describing Nordic style as understated and minimalist, the pictures

on the page show a room filled with furniture and artwork in vibrant primary colors and other spaces cluttered with toys and decorative items (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. A cluttered interior on a webpage highlighting Ikea's Nordic style products. Ikea (2024).

Marimekko, and to a lesser extent also Iittala and Royal Copenhagen, sell products that could not be described as minimal. Most of Marimekko's products and many of Iittala's porcelain products have loud prints in bold colors, Iittala's glassware often has intricate decorative textures and patterns, and most of Royal Copenhagen's porcelain have detailed hand-painted decorations and decorative shapes. Marimekko and Iittala nevertheless emphasize functionality and practicality as core design principles on pages dedicated to introducing their brand philosophies.

9.3.2 Artistry and creativity

Almost all the Nordic companies highlight the creative and artistic value of their products and by doing so associate the Nordic brand with artistry and creativity. They go to great lengths to introduce individual designers, architects, and artists they have worked with and explain their creative vision and the role that they have had in the

development of national and Nordic design trends. Some companies further emphasize the artistic value of their products by photographing them in interiors where they are juxtaposed with different artworks.

On a self-introductory page on the Hay website, Hay very directly links creativity to the Nordic brand by maintaining that their creative product designs are rooted in Nordic design. On the same page, Hay goes on to say that the brand collaborates with the best designers in the world. Fritz Hansen, Louis Poulsen, Iittala, and Marimekko also emphasize collaboration with creatives on their websites and Fritz Hansen, Louis Poulsen, and Iittala all have pages on their website dedicated to introducing individual designers that they have worked with. The product pages on these websites also include brief information about the designer of the product.

Louis Poulsen further aligns its products and Danish design in general with creativity and art when discussing Danish architect and furniture designer Arne Jacobsen's inclusion of a specially designed Louis Poulsen lamp in his design of the Royal Hotel in Copenhagen. The Louis Poulsen website refers to the hotel as Jacobsen's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, i.e. total work of art, which suggests that the company considers its products to be works of art. The Royal Copenhagen website similarly notes that Jacobsen chose Royal Copenhagen porcelain to be used in the hotel restaurant, but does not refer to the hotel as a work of art.

Many of the product pages of the most popular products on the Louis Poulsen and Fritz Hansen websites feature pictures in which the products are either surrounded by artworks in carefully curated spaces or themselves displayed as works of art in museum-like settings (see Figures 8 and 9). These images seem to ask the viewer to consider the artistic value of the products.

This approach of the Nordic companies to highlight the creatives behind their designs and to emphasize the artistic value of their products is very different from how the Korean companies present themselves and their products. The massive difference in the price of the products of the Nordic and Korean companies is probably one of the reasons for this. Most of the Nordic companies sell very expensive products and emphasizing their artistic value could be seen as a way of justifying their price tag. Ikea has the most affordable products of the Nordic companies and puts less emphasis on artistic value than the other Nordic companies do. Of the Korean

companies, Kaare Klint has the most expensive products, but the company does not highlight designers or emphasize the artistic value of their products in the same way that the Nordic companies do.



Figure 8. An Egg chair in a room filled with art on the chair's product page. Fritz Hansen (2024a).



Figure 9. The PH 5 pendant product page displays an arrangement of lamps as a work of art. Louis Poulsen (2024).

9.3.3 Sustainability and progressive values

Most of the Nordic companies dedicate a lot of space on their websites to talking about their approaches to sustainability issues. On the websites, efforts to improve sustainability are often framed as ways in which the companies are having a positive impact on the world, and in a similar way, some of the companies also bring up championing progressive values like social equality and inclusivity. This is very much in line with the Nordic Council of Ministers' 2022 "Strategy for International Branding of the Nordic region," which urges Nordic actors to emphasize sustainability and equality in communications and activities (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022, pp. 7-8). Whether or not the strategy played a role in the companies deciding to highlight these values is not known.

Sustainability issues are occasionally brought up on the websites of some of the Korean companies but are never stressed as much as on the websites of the Nordic companies. The Korean company Milema, for example, associates eco-friendliness and sustainability with the Nordic brand by using the term "Nordic naturalism" (*bugyureop jayeonjuui*) to describe their Finnish-produced dishcloth and emphasizing all the ways in which the dishcloth is eco-friendly, but does not bring up issues pertaining to sustainability on any other product page.

Three of the Nordic companies explicitly link sustainability and progressive values to the Nordic brand. Fritz Hansen's corporate profile page states that the company, through its passion for beauty, quality, craftsmanship, and sustainable manufacturing embodies a modern Nordic lifestyle. Iittala also claims its products embody a Nordic lifestyle and identifies equality as a Nordic value and Marimekko declares itself a progressive Finnish brand with core values of inclusivity and equality.

The websites of Marimekko, Iittala, Louis Poulsen, Ikea, and Fritz Hansen all have one or more pages dedicated to sustainability issues. On these pages, the companies generally make claims about how they are working to reduce emissions and waste in their production processes, highlight products that are produced using recycled materials, and showcase examples of actions they have taken so far. Ikea and Marimekko take it a step further and have pages intended to educate their customers on how to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. Ikea suggests buying used furniture, using

renewable energy, eating vegetarian food, and reducing waste. Marimekko gives tips on how to care for their products to make them last longer.

Royal Copenhagen, &Tradition, and Hay stand out as exceptions as they neither have sustainability pages nor promote progressive values on their websites. However, Hay does have products that are made using recycled materials and does emphasize this fact in the descriptions of those products.

9.3.4 Timelessness

Contrary to around half of the Korean companies that associate the Nordic brand with trendiness, most of the Nordic companies strongly emphasize the timeless appeal of their designs and try to distance themselves from the notion of trendiness. The companies do this by explicitly describing their designs as timeless and by showcasing how their products seamlessly fit in both contemporary and historical environments. Many of the companies have long histories and can therefore also point to the lasting interest in their products as evidence of their timelessness.

Ikea's page with Nordic style products declares that the practicality and simplicity of Nordic style design enable the products to remain in style over long periods of time. While Ikea is the only company to explicitly talk about timelessness as an attribute of Nordic design, every Nordic company in the material, except for Hay, describes its products as timeless. Most also claim to be inspired by Nordic or national traditional craftsmanship and design heritage, and as such implicitly associate timelessness with the Nordic brand.

Iittala, Marimekko, and Fritz Hansen directly specify that their products not only transcend time, but also trends. Marimekko goes the furthest in distancing itself from trendiness by stating that the company has an "anti-fashion attitude" (*anti paesyeon taedo*). Furthermore, Iittala, Marimekko, and Louis Poulsen present the timelessness of their products as an aspect of sustainability, arguing that their products never need to be thrown away as they never go out of style, and that they therefore reduce waste and excessive consumption.

Several companies demonstrate the timelessness of their designs by referring to the enduring popularity of their most famous products. Royal Copenhagen dedicates seven pages on its website to detailing the history of the company's first dinner

service, Blue Fluted Plain, and its continued popularity in Denmark since it first was created in 1775. The company underlines the timelessness of Blue Fluted Plain by putting emphasis on the large changes in Danish society, social life, and eating habits that the product has survived and by showing photographs of the product in starkly different historical milieus. Marimekko, Louis Poulsen, and Fritz Hansen use old photographs of some of their products for a similar effect (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Marimekko's website shows the company's products in different time periods. Marimekko (2024).

Interestingly, Fritz Hansen and &Tradition also demonstrate the timelessness of their designs by displaying them in traditional Korean *hanok* houses. Fritz Hansen furnished a *hanok* hotel in Seoul in 2021 and has a page showing pictures and a video from the hotel on their website (see Figure 11). &Tradition similarly has a page with pictures and a video from when the company created a showroom in a *hanok* house in Seoul in 2022.

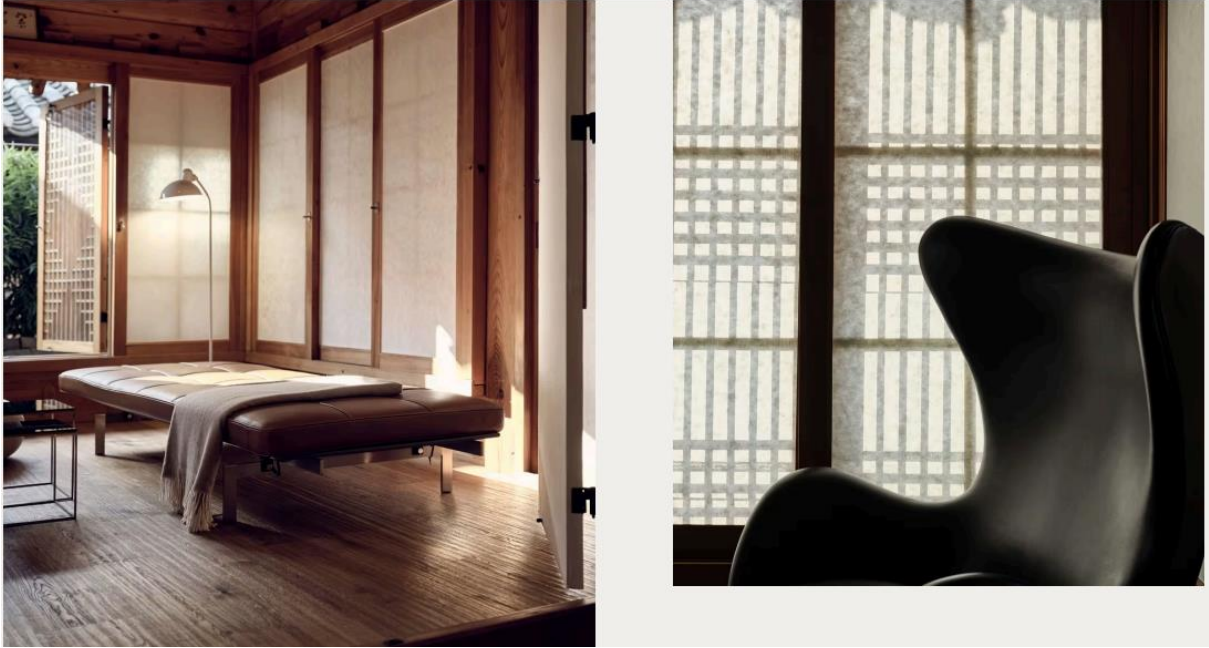


Figure 11. Fritz Hansen furniture in a traditional Korean *hanok* building. Fritz Hansen (2024b).

10 Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to examine and compare the use of Nordic branding by Korean and Nordic companies in the Korean market in light of the increased interest in all things Nordic in Korea since the 2010s. More specifically, my goal was to answer the questions of how the companies use language and images to evoke association with the Nordic brand and what ideas about the Nordic brand they communicate on their websites.

In the first half of the thesis, I contextualized the topic by discussing the New Nordic kitchen movement, Nordic crime fiction, and Nordic lifestyle as recent international trends originating from the Nordic region, by investigating the scope of the Nordic trend in Korea, and by examining the concept of place branding and Nordic place branding efforts. In the second half of the thesis, I introduced the material and methodology of the study, elaborated on my analytical process, and presented the findings.

By conducting a multimodal content analysis on a dataset collected from the Korean language websites of 16 companies selling furniture and household products, I found that the companies primarily evoke association with the Nordic brand in five different ways – through establishing linguistic, aesthetic, philosophic, historical, and geographical connections between the company and the Nordic brand. Both the Korean and the Nordic companies create linguistic connections to the Nordic brand by using Nordic languages on their websites, but the Korean companies primarily use Nordic languages in the naming of their companies, while the Nordic companies more often use Nordic languages in the names of their products and on other parts of their websites. Both Korean and Nordic companies also establish aesthetic connections to the Nordic brand by explicitly describing their product design as being Nordic or having a Nordic style, and additionally many of the Korean companies visually associate their products with Nordic design by including well-known products by Nordic designers and companies in their own product pictures. Philosophic and historical connections are used by several of the Nordic companies to evoke association with the Nordic brand, but these kinds of connections are largely unused by the Korean companies. Finally, both the Korean and the Nordic companies also evoke association with the Nordic brand by making references to Nordic

geographical locations on their websites. The Korean companies tend to be less specific and reference individual Nordic countries, the Nordic region as a whole, and sometimes Europe in general, whereas the Nordic companies, in addition to referencing the Nordic region and its countries, also mention specific Nordic cities.

Furthermore, I found that the ideas that the companies communicate about the Nordic brand center around seven themes. The Korean companies associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality and many of them relate what they call a “Nordic sensibility” with the concepts of *hygge* and healing. Around half of them also associate the Nordic brand with retro and nostalgia, and another half associate it with trendiness. By contrast, the Nordic companies more uniformly associate the Nordic brand with simplicity and functionality, artistry and creativity, sustainability and progressive values, and a sense of timelessness that withstands changing trends.

This study should not be taken as an attempt to conclusively define the attributes that make up the Nordic brand in Korea. As the discussion of recent international trends originating from the Nordic region in section 3 highlighted, place brands like the Nordic brand can carry different meanings in different contexts. In a culinary context, the Nordic brand might be associated with the reinterpretation of tradition and an obsession with locality due to the New Nordic kitchen movement, readers of crime fiction might associate the Nordic brand with flawed welfare systems or perhaps with gender equality, and in other cases the Nordic brand might evoke thoughts of *hygge* and wellbeing. The findings of this study show that even within a very narrow context, in this case the Korean websites of companies selling furniture and household products, different actors employ the Nordic brand in different ways and attribute different meanings to it. Given these findings, it would be interesting to examine the ideas communicated about the Nordic brand by other kinds of Korean and Nordic companies, for instance companies selling cosmetics or childcare products, to see if there is a similar divide in how the Nordic brand is utilized in those contexts as well.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Sample of Korean companies using Nordic branding

Appendix 1.

Company/brand/product name	Type of product	Launch year
Åland	clothing	2005
Kaare Klint	furniture	2010
Vaahtera	furniture	2012
Keittio	kitchen furniture	2012
Fever Green	clothing	2012
Maatila	home textiles	2013
Odense Official	tableware	2013
Skärbarn	children's clothing	2013
Moimoln	children's clothing	2014
Scandipapa	children's clothing, accessories	2014
Moimoi kamppi	children's clothing	2014
Andersson Bell	clothing	2014
Kukka	flowers	2014
Puisto	bags	2014
Puujäpuu	children's clothing	2014
Lagom	skincare	2015
Hyggee	skincare	2015
Little forest	children's clothing	2015
Scandimom	children's clothing	2015
Ilödilo	children's clothing	2016
Laulu	toothpaste	2017
Puuvilla society	NFT	2017
Småland	toothpaste	2019
Scandi&home	rugs	2020
Reissu	skincare	2020
Hanssem Scandi and Nordic products	furniture, household products	2021
Hyggero	furniture, camping equipment	2021
Ledande	skincare	2021
Kaunis	skincare	2021
Kotelo	clothing	2021
Skogen	camping equipment	2021
Hyvaa dent	toothpaste	2022

Company/brand/product name	Type of product	Launch year
Milema	household products	N/A

Appendix 2 URLs of webpages included in material

Appendix 2 a. Hanssem

Accessed on March 20, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://store.hanssem.com/
Scandi white dishrack	https://store.hanssem.com/goods/470604
Dono Scandi dining chair	https://store.hanssem.com/goods/788937
Nordic fabric sofa	https://store.hanssem.com/goods/876536
Nordic home café kitchen package	https://remodeling.hanssem.com/goods/886686
Scandi home office kitchen package	https://remodeling.hanssem.com/goods/886684

Appendix 2 b. Hyggero

Accessed on April 11, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://smartstore.naver.com/hyggero
Relax chair	https://smartstore.naver.com/hyggero/products/6122235431
Camping wagon	https://smartstore.naver.com/hyggero/products/6444343002
Camping wood shelf	https://smartstore.naver.com/hyggero/products/7704120420

Appendix 2 c. Kaare Klint

Accessed on March 17, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://kaareklint.co.kr/
About	https://kaareklint.co.kr/about.html
Story	https://kaareklint.co.kr/story/list.html
[701 Bookshelf color option review]	https://kaareklint.co.kr/story/detail.html?id=7451&p=1
[Spaces with JC901 series]	https://kaareklint.co.kr/story/detail.html?id=7847&p=1
201 wave chair	https://kaareklint.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=4620&cate_no=1238&display_group=1
001 sofa boucle	https://kaareklint.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=4649&cate_no=1238&display_group=1

Appendix 2 d. Maatila

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://maatila.co.kr/
Brand story	https://maatila.co.kr/shop/page.html?id=1
Mid-century vintage mansion sheets	https://maatila.co.kr/shop/shopdetail.html?branduid=1135783
Linen look blackout curtain	https://maatila.co.kr/shop/shopdetail.html?branduid=1135293

Appendix 2 e. Milema

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://shop.29cm.co.kr/brand/6015
Revol V2 mop	https://product.29cm.co.kr/catalog/1098989?source=brand
Touch free trash bin	https://product.29cm.co.kr/catalog/394297?source=brand
Poland scrub-wow dishcloth	https://product.29cm.co.kr/catalog/1116136?source=brand
More Joy Finland cellulose dishcloth	https://product.29cm.co.kr/catalog/1162076?source=brand
Portugal Riga cutlery	https://product.29cm.co.kr/catalog/675362?source=brand

Appendix 2 f. Odense

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://odenseofficial.com/
Legodt product line	https://odenseofficial.com/product/list.html?cate_no=82
Nord product line	https://odenseofficial.com/product/list.html?cate_no=43
Nord mug 350 ml	https://odenseofficial.com/product/%EB%85%B8%EB%93%9C-%EB%A8%B8%EA%B7%B8-350ml/50/category/43/display/1/
Legodt pasta bowl and ramekin set	https://odenseofficial.com/product/%EA%B8%B0%ED%9A%8D-%EB%A0%88%EA%B3%A0%ED%8A%B8-%ED%8C%8C%EC%8A%A4%ED%83%80%EB%B3%BC%EB%9E%98%EB%AF%B8%ED%82%A8-%EC%84%B8%ED%8A%B8/288/category/82/display/1

Appendix 2 g. Scandi&Home

Accessed on April 12, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://scandinhome.co.kr/
About company	https://scandinhome.co.kr/_wg/import/sub/page_01.html
Easy care washable velvet rug	https://scandinhome.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=6254&cate_no=1&display_group=2
Checkerboard washable rug	https://scandinhome.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=6253&cate_no=1&display_group=2

Appendix 2 h. Vaahtera

Accessed on March 17, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://vaahtera.co.kr/
About us	https://vaahtera.co.kr/_apps/kin/about.html
POL ash table	https://vaahtera.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=48&cate_no=25&display_group=1
LIIKE adjustable height desk	https://vaahtera.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=43&cate_no=63&display_group=1
MAC sofa	https://vaahtera.co.kr/product/detail.html?product_no=46&cate_no=24&display_group=1

Appendix 2 i. &Tradition

Accessed on March 19, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://brand.naver.com/andtradition
About &Tradition	https://brand.naver.com/andtradition/shoppingstory/detail?id=2003076111&page=1
Flowerpot VP3	https://brand.naver.com/andtradition/products/8676989503
InBetween table SK6	https://brand.naver.com/andtradition/products/9261644566
The Home of &Tradition X <i>jamyongseosil</i>	https://brand.naver.com/andtradition/shoppingstory/detail?id=2003081226&page=1

Appendix 2 j. Fritz Hansen

Accessed on April 16, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko
Company information	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/corporate-profile
Anniversary	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/anniversary
Fritz Hansen 1872	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/fritzhansen1872
Extraordinary design	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/extraordinarydesign
Arne Jacobsen & Fritz Hansen	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/arnejacobsen
Poul Kjærholm & Fritz Hansen	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/poulkjaerholm
Quality and craftsmanship	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/quality-and-craftmanship
A shared world	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/caring-for-the-world
Sustainability	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/about-us/sustainability
Fritz Hansen Stay x Republic of Korea	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/inspiration/projects/fritz-hansen-stay
Series 7™	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/categories/by-series/series%207/3107?sku=3107-CA135-CST_46-FN-LN
PK22™	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/categories/by-series/pk22/pk22?sku=PK22-ELBLA-SBSS
Swan™	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/categories/by-series/swan/3320?sku=3320-HAL103-SPAL_S48N-SSW-GSN-FS
Egg™	https://www.fritzhansen.com/ko/categories/by-series/egg/3316?sku=3316-MO0005-SPAL_TSW-GSN-FS

Appendix 2 k. Hay

Accessed on March 19, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://brand.naver.com/hay
Hay front runner of new Danish design	https://brand.naver.com/hay/shoppingstory/detail?id=5000531935&page=1
Colour crate	https://brand.naver.com/hay/products/8709643656
Weekday bench	https://brand.naver.com/hay/products/10045872078
Crate dining bench	https://brand.naver.com/hay/products/10061723813

Appendix 2 l. Iittala

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://www.iittala.co.kr/
Iittala introduction	https://www.iittala.co.kr/brand/story
Sustainability	https://www.iittala.co.kr/brand/possibility
Expert in glass	https://www.iittala.co.kr/brand/glass
Expert in color	https://www.iittala.co.kr/brand/color
Kastehelmi	https://www.iittala.co.kr/goods/list/C0120
Kastehelmi plate 31.5 cm	https://www.iittala.co.kr/goods/view/ii_PRD0819
Ultima Thule	https://www.iittala.co.kr/goods/list/C0138
Ultima Thule flower vase	https://www.iittala.co.kr/goods/view/ii_PRD1756
Moomin Arabia	https://www.iittala.co.kr/goods/list/C04

Appendix 2 m. Ikea

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://ikea.com/kr
Ikea introduction	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/this-is-ikea/about-us/
Ikea vision and core values	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/this-is-ikea/about-us/the-ikea-vision-and-values-pub9aa779d0
A brief introduction to Ikea's history	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/this-is-ikea/about-us/ikea-pubad29a981
Sustainable living	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/this-is-ikea/sustainable-everyday/
Introduction to Life at Home	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/life-at-home/
Nordic style	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/ideas/styles/scandinavian/
Fröset	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/p/froeset-easy-chair-black-stained-oak-veneer-60425642/
Gurli	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/p/gurli-cushion-cover-pink-20562886/
Borgeby	https://www.ikea.com/kr/ko/p/borgeby-coffee-table-birch-veneer-70449402/

Appendix 2 n. Louis Poulsen

Accessed on April 28, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/private
Louis Poulsen introduction	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/private/about-us?_gl=1%2a18zr1ge%2a_up%2aMQ..%2a_ga%2aNTQ0NzQwNjA1LjE3MTA5MjY3Nzk.%2a_ga_52LQM2QKCH%2aMTcxMDkyNjc3OS4xLjEuMTcxMDkyNjg4Mi4wLjAuMA
Long-lasting design	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/private/about-us/design-to-last
Company introduction	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/private/about-us/our-compan
Our heritage	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/private/about-us/our-heritage
Sustainability	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/Private/about-us/sustainability
AJ floor	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/catalog/private/floor/aj-floor?v=90328-5744169710-01&_gl=1%2a1ojsx6h%2a_up%2aMQ..%2a_ga%2aNTAzODA2NDA5LjE3MTA5MjczNTY.%2a_ga_52LQM2QKCH%2aMTcxMDkyNzM1NS4xLjEuMTcxMDkyOTE1Ni4wLjAuMA
PH 5	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/catalog/private/pendants/ph-5?v=90293-5741104574-01&t=spareparts

Appendix 2 o. Marimekko

Accessed on April 23, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://marimekko.kr/
The art of print	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/art_of_printmaking.html
Design philosophy	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/philosophy.html
Our goals and actions	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/our-goals-and-development.html
Timeless design	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/timeless-design.html
Products of the future	https://www.louispoulsen.com/ko-kr/Private/about-us/sustainability
Positive change	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/positive-change.html
Care guide	https://marimekko.kr/main/html.php?htmid=_dbook/page/care_guide.html
Unikko mug cup	https://marimekko.kr/goods/goods_view.php?goodsNo=1000004011&mtn=10%5E%7C%5E%EC%A4%91%EA%B0%84+%EC%A7%84%EC%97%B4%EB%B6%80%EB%B6%84%5E%7C%5En
Pieni tiiliskivi table mat	https://marimekko.kr/goods/goods_view.php?goodsNo=1000003822
Siirtola petit bowl	https://marimekko.kr/goods/goods_view.php?goodsNo=1000004063

Appendix 2 p. Royal Copenhagen

Accessed on April 16, 2024.

Webpage	URL
Homepage	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/
Blue with added passion	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/our-passion/blue
Heritage	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/our-passion/heritage
Craftsmanship	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/our-passion/master
Mark and backstamp	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/our-passion/marks
240-year history	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary
1775 the mother of Denmark	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/1775
1810 bourgeois	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/1810
1889 reborn as world-class Royal Copenhagen	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/1889
1925 the turbulent 1920s	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/1925
1963 the elegance of optimism	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/1963
2015 new millennium	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/brand/inspiration/anniversary/2015
Teapot 1200 ml	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/goods/view/rc_PRD0415
Plates	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/goods/list/B0103
Deep oval plate 30 cm	https://www.royalcopenhagen.co.kr/goods/view/rc_PRD0047