SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Exploring the Use of Nordicness in Sustainability Messages: The Case of Nordic Fashion Brands

By

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Abstract

Being on everyone's lips for years, the concept of sustainability has become an almost unavoidable phenomenon within contemporary business discourses and practice. In particular, has the Nordic fashion industry increasingly been infused by sustainability with a continuous growing public interest in buying sustainable products from companies that have embarked on a sustainable path. Despite a broad interest in sustainability within academia, as well as business management, no extant academic work has yet been done to investigate how national identity or country-of-origin is interrelated with how brands communicate sustainability. This study aims to analyze the various aspects of Nordicness in sustainability messages in the Nordic fashion industry by answering the following question: *How is the concept of Nordicness incorporated into Nordic fashion brands' sustainability messages?* Using empirical data from a selection of fashion brand actors in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland, a qualitative content analysis is used to examine how ideological and socio-cultural considerations of sustainability are embedded in the concept of Nordicness and shown through the brands' sustainability messages. Based on our analysis, we have discovered five key themes that intricately relate to the concept of Nordicness. These themes are characterized by numerous distinctive Nordic identity cues, incorporating both implicit and explicit references. Our findings highlight how fashion brands effectively integrate Nordicness into their sustainability messaging, thereby further enhancing and capitalizing on the already prominent global recognition of Nordic sustainability identity.

Keywords: Sustainability, Nordicness, Fashion, Nordic Branding, Sustainability Marketing, Nordic Identity, Case Study

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Sustainability is more a journey than a destination, but it still pays to know where you are on the path. -Daniel Esty (2009, p. 179)

Introduction

‘So, you’re writing about sustainability? Has this not been dwelt on by so many others already?’ This comment is possibly something you would like to avoid hearing when you mention your area of research. Still, that has not stopped a lot of people from responding with such initial comments (and others similar to them) whenever we have made conversation about our thesis project. And even if these are perhaps uninformed comments, they do immediately raise a problem with the subject of sustainability in business and management research: there are so many aspects of sustainability that some people cannot even believe exists!

The concept of sustainability has arguably been a hot topic in academia for years now, as well as in politics, organizations, mass media and in the mind of consumers. It has emerged as a critical concern for businesses in today’s global landscape, in an era marked by environmental degradation, social inequality, and resource depletion. Integrating sustainable practices has become imperative for addressing climate change, and especially the fashion and textile industry holds an important role in taking steps towards sustainable transformation (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). While it is challenging to definitively label one specific industry as the ‘most’ polluting, the fashion industry is often cited as being one of them, and is undoubtedly associated with significant environmental impacts throughout its supply chain (McKinsey, 2020). Sustainability has grown as a prominent concept within the industry, with many progressive entities striving to move beyond rhetoric and take concrete steps to meet the growing consumer demand for sustainable products and practices. With consumers being increasingly willing to pay more for sustainable fashion products (McKinsey, 2020), brands are responding by incorporating sustainability messaging into their advertising and communication materials, highlighting eco-friendly fabrics, fair labor practices, and ‘green’ initiatives to reduce carbon emissions.

Of particular interest is the Nordic region, where studies have revealed that the annual consumption of textiles per capita in the Nordic countries is higher than the global average (Norden, 2023). This proposes a paradox with the otherwise positive attention the countries have gained for its incorporation of sustainability into various cultural values and expressions, leading to the construction of a distinct concept of ‘Nordicness’ that is reflected in socially constructed commercial signs or brands. Among these brands, Nordic fashion brands frequently leverage the country-of-origin (COO) or regional identity of Nordicness to establish connections with the values it embodies. The ethos of Nordicness is primarily grounded in its distinctive ‘Nordic strengths’ or ‘way of thinking’ as identified by Andersen, Lindberg and Östberg (2019), which encompass a range of characteristics such as openness, trust, compassion, sustainability, and creativity. These strengths are emblematic of the Nordic region’s ideology, progressive socio-cultural and political landscape, which has gained popularity worldwide and influenced various industries, including fashion. ‘Nordic fashion’ has emerged as a unique style that

emphasizes simplicity, quality, functionality, and nature, reflecting the values and characteristics associated with the concept of Nordicness. These strengths epitomize the Nordic region's ideology and progressive socio-cultural and political landscape, which have garnered global recognition and become subjects of extensive study. The region's almost utopian nature has captivated worldwide attention. Notably, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have secured top rankings in the UN Sustainable Development Goals index, solidifying their position as the most sustainable countries in the world (Sachs et al., 2022). The Nordic region, with its remarkable achievements in pioneering technology and strategic sustainability efforts, has served as a model for other developing nations.

Consequently, the region has cultivated a distinctive 'Nordic Sustainability Identity,' further enhancing the value of the Nordic place brand. This identity resonates across various industries, with Nordic brands inherently prioritizing sustainability and excelling in communicating their sustainability endeavors. Collaborative initiatives involving all stakeholders play a significant role in generating awareness and driving action. The Nordic fashion industry, renowned globally for its minimalist style, quality craftsmanship, and functional designs, embraces sustainability as a fundamental principle. Nordic fashion brands consistently emphasize their commitment to sustainability, aligning themselves with the region's overarching "green values." Despite their commendable commitment to sustainability, many Nordic fashion brands are intertwined within the global fashion value chain, where the pursuit of cost efficiency leads to the outsourcing of production and sourcing of materials from developing countries across the globe. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between the Nordic region's sustainability image and the realities of its engagement with the global fashion industry.

This study aims to explore the interplay between the concept of 'Nordicness' and the brand values associated with the Nordic place brand, specifically in relation to how sustainability is communicated by Nordic fashion brands. While extensive research exists on Nordic place branding, there is a noticeable absence of studies specifically focused on the intersection of the Nordic identity and the formation of sustainability communications. This highlights a significant knowledge gap that necessitates further investigation and exploration. Further, our intention is for the findings of this study to make a significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of Nordic branding and sustainability marketing. In addition, we aspire to raise awareness and foster a greater sense of mindfulness regarding the influence of cultural and national heritage on sustainability perspectives and practices within a given society, acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects. While this aim may be idealistic in nature, it remains central to the initial inspiration that ignited our thesis project.

1.1 Research Question

To gain a more adequate understanding of the phenomenon of Nordicness in sustainability messages, the following research questions have been developed:

RQ: *How is the concept of Nordicness incorporated into Nordic fashion brands' sustainability messages?*

At this point, we would like to outline our understanding of 'incorporated' in the given research question. In the thesis at hand, incorporated is not necessarily meant as an active action or branding tool, consciously implemented by the brands. Instead, we see the word as referring to how the identified concept of Nordicness can be seen in the fashion brands' messages, either directly or indirectly, and as being implemented due to the implicit social norms and cultural heritage, which is deeply integrated as an internal and invisible part of the brands' identity. In addition, by 'sustainability messages' we mean the communication material on sustainability that the brands' have published on their respective websites, and in their sustainability/CSR reports.

Having briefly introduced the background for the thesis project as well as the overall aim of this study, we will now proceed to frame the study further through a delimitation of our inquiry. Hereafter, the following chapter is intended to shed light on the pre-existing literature involving the subject at hand, before analyzing the sustainability messages deployed by Nordic fashion brands.

1.2 Delimitations

This study sheds light upon how the concept of Nordicness is incorporated by fashion brands in their sustainability messages from a corporate perspective by investigating sources of communication published by the selected case brands. Therefore, the study delimits any external material featuring the brands from mass media outputs and is narrowed down by e.g., not taking newspaper articles about the brands, magazines and blogs into account. Furthermore, it does not examine employees, suppliers and investors' understanding of the brands' sustainability messaging and, thus, data material from these actors. Another delimitation is how we have not investigated the problematization from a consumer perspective. Although the brands' communication is targeted at various stakeholders, and especially consumers, we decided to place our focus on the brands' posture within the scope of the project.

Literature Review

2.1 The Origins of *'Norden'*

The following paragraphs intend to present how a common national identity was formed in the Nordic Region over a long period of time. The final aim is to explore how the identity, embedded in historical experiences, has developed in our modern world into unique characteristics relevant to the Nordic fashion industry. In particular, the focus will be on Nordic brands' sustainability marketing, which has contributed to the creation of a new Nordic sustainability-focused identity.

Throughout history, individuals, nations or regions have organized themselves into groups with the purpose of optimizing the realization of their common interests (Tägil, 1995). Here, the emphasis has been on the importance of shared experiences and a sense of solidarity, which over the course of time will be placed on a presumed common heritage. In the Nordic region, many historical experiences have been shared and thus certain lifestyles, political systems, mannerisms and customs have shaped a common identity. Tägil (1995) describes that such identity is often anchored in specific geographical areas, where people have had a sense of common origin and perceived themselves and others as comprising some kind of culturally distinct community. The concept of Nordic countries emerged from the ideological construction of 'Norden' often with allusions to Old Norse literature and mythology. However, the idea of what makes *Norden* Nordic and regional identities of Scandinavia can be understood as tools for political and socio-cultural demarcation of the regions shared identity. For instance, the terms 'Nordic' and 'Scandinavian' are commonly employed to describe shared attributes such as race, openness, values, and secularity. These terms have played a critical role in defining the identity or brand of the region. Conversely, they are often disputed due to inconsistencies stemming from factors such as geographical location and political ideology. Despite this, the various uses of the term 'Nordic' have remained crucial in negotiating the region's identity and have increasingly become a resource for commercial and cultural branding purposes (Strang et al., 2021).

Hansen and Waever (2003) describes the origins of 'Norden' as a constructed community on the basis of two significant factors. First, their geopolitical location where all individual nation-states share distinctive characteristics with exceptions, namely; their location in Northern Europe, and all individual states being smaller in size with the partial exception of Sweden. According to the authors (Hansen and Waever, 2003), these nations also share similar political culture as social welfare states with significant ethnic homogeneity in congruence to language, culture, and ancestry. Second, The Nordic Countries are part of a discourse that highlights the cultural, political, and ethical uniqueness of the Nordic region. This discourse traces to a tradition of framing Norden as a community that prioritizes values beyond the narrow rational and strategic considerations typically associated with states' foreign policy pursuits (Hansen &

Waever, 2003).

Parker (2002) describes Norden from a historic point of view, as a loose, decentralized organization consisting of smallholding farmers, fishermen, foresters, merchants, soldiers, priests, and officials, which survived into the modern period unlike other European nations in the South. He emphasizes the reason being the Nordic region's unique geopolitical position which afforded itself a form of relative independence from the European other, allowing Nordic societies to negotiate various versions of distinctiveness resulting in cultural and political variation from patterns influenced by the Southern counterparts. An independence emerged from the Northern nations entering into European interstate conflicts, which then strategically moved them towards a conscious common defensive parallelism across Scandinavia. This was a part of producing a 'Nordic identity' grounded in mutual restraint, sympathy, and commitment, not only between the different countries but also between people (Parker, 2002). The regions' distinctiveness thus takes advantage of its partial dependence from the more dominant European nations located to the south, allowing them to define themselves in ways that let them to be both 'in' and 'out' of Europe, benefiting from their unique position (Parker, 2002). Starting from the 1930s, and particularly following 1945, Norden was frequently portrayed in opposition to a German or European conservative other, or as a distinctive region that presented a third alternative to Western capitalism and Eastern communism (Hansen, 2003). In addition, Parker (2002) emphasizes that the Nordic position may not be a disadvantage, but a limitation by being positioned in a marginal situation of neither being different nor detached from the rest of Europe. Furthermore, he mentions how Nordic countries have typically leveraged their partial independence and differences to their advantage without actually separating themselves from the Europe they heavily depend on.

2.2 The Early Formation of Nordic Identity

In the 1930s, the term 'Nordic' was politically used by the German National Socialists, as well as by the far right in the Nordic region with examples such as the Swedish National Socialists' 'Nordic Youth.' Simultaneously, there was a growing rhetoric of 'Nordic democracy' used by Social Democrats and others to depict the region as a democratic refuge amidst the rising totalitarianism in Europe (Strang et al., 2021). As such, tensions to achieve a sense of partial independence from the European other led to the Nordic countries' reluctance to integrate with the European Union, and was faced by years of referendums and public debate, particularly in Sweden towards the mid nineties. Thus, the diverse levels of integration with the EU, ranging from resistance towards the Euro to Norway's limited membership in the European Economic Area, and Sweden's strong political autonomy, can be seen as a result of a collective interest-driven response, rather than idealism concerning the Nordic region. The use of Nordic rhetoric has been instrumental in aligning the Nordic countries and bringing them to a similar level of development (Jordheim, 2017). Hence, it could be argued that Norden conceived the

Nordic position as a potential intermediary between the national and European levels (Hansen & Waever, 2003) referring to a more progressive and advanced region giving birth to systems of governance such as the 'Nordic Model.'

2.3 Characterizing the Nordic Imaginary

In the thesis project at hand, the concept of Nordicness is used to encompass a wide range of beliefs or identity cues that have distinguished the Nordic countries from other regions and countries in Europe. These cues and beliefs are rooted in ideological, socio-cultural and political factors that have contributed to the emergence of an ideological place brand actively preserved and promoted by the countries for a number of reasons. The definition of the 'Nordic' is often defined by geography, language, culture, or politics, however, it cannot be fully captured by any one of these factors alone. In fact, attempts to define the Nordic region tend to offer multiple characteristics that create distinct descriptions of the region, rather than attempting to be all-encompassing. These varying definitions of Nordicism represent different viewpoints on what the region is or should be, resulting in competing visions of its identity. The five nation states of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland together with the three autonomous regions of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland encompasses not just a set of shared values, but contradictions and paradoxes with such shared values that the notion of Nordicness is built upon. Exactly what aspects constitutes 'Nordicness' has naturally been in constant development over a long period of time and often been a matter of dispute and variation. There is no exact definition of what it entails and thus it is open for various interpretations depending on which angle we as authors decide to view it from, whether that would be from a strategic/military, socio-economic, or cultural/political perspective. Despite the lack of a precise definition, institutionalization of factors that define Nordicness has been historically present and significant.

Strang et al., (2021) provides a description of what characterizes the Nordicness through a broad range of characteristics, which include notions of sparsely populated societies living in close relationship with nature, comparatively peaceful and consensus-driven political cultures, or the dominant role of the state and a relatively weak position of the family in societal affairs. Additionally, the authors highlight some of the paradoxes of Nordicness, such as the strong yet secularized position of religion in society, the political traditions of equality versus the competitiveness of the Nordic economies, or the peripherality of relatively poor peasant societies surviving in harsh conditions versus rich and modern societies blessed with abundant natural resources. These distinctive features may draw upon geography, language, culture, or politics, but cannot be exhaustively defined. Askegaard and Östberg (2019) present their perspective of the Nordic Imaginary as the source of institutionalizing social meanings, therefore being essential for comprehending both individual and societal perspectives. The imaginary is not limited to what is doable or representable, but rather encompasses their orientations and conditions. It does not focus on institutions in their functional and symbolic manifestations, but

rather on their framing. The fundamental issue of the imaginary is the relationship between the individual and society, which is a significant phenomenological aspect of Nordicness. This relationship has nurtured societal values such as equality, egalitarianism, openness, transparency, and sustainability, among other discussed aspects within the rhetoric of Nordicness (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019). In addition, Kavaratzis (2019) argues that half of the world's political systems and conditions makes the Nordic system appear distant and utopian, owing to its significant aforementioned values. For instance, by how 'egalitarianism' is still as an unfamiliar term in other parts of the world, inclusivity being viewed as an illusion, gender relations being troubling, and social justice is still a cause for revolutions. Despite the emphasis on the geopolitical location, which attempts to define the Nordic identity through shared values and meaning more than spatial, the 'Nordic' is conceptual; in other words it is important to see the 'Nordics' not as merely a set of countries and their practices, but 'Nordicity' or 'Nordicness' as a set of ideas and propositions (Kavaratzis, 2019).

2.4 Unpacking Nordicness; *Language, Values, Culture and Discourse*

When examining the origins, circumstances, and discourses surrounding the notion of Nordicness, various concepts such as *The Nordic Model, Nordic Egalitarianism, Nordic Feminism and Openness, Nordic Noir, Nordic Design, Nordic Sustainability,* and *New Nordic Cuisine* emerge as cultural phenomena, societal values and discourse. While the conceptualization of such phenomena is pertinent to it's discursive and historical discourses of Norden, we attempt to explore some of these phenomena relative to constructing Nordicness or the Nordic identity, which would allow us to explore how such identity cues translate towards sustainability considerations within the Nordic fashion industry. However, Andersen et al., (2019) argues that when examining Nordicness, it is crucial to avoid essentialism by attempting to uncover a genuine identity based on geographical labels, culinary heritage, and traditions. Instead, the term 'Nordic' functions as a brand whose meaning is constantly being translated by a variety of institutions, businesses, communities, and is negotiated through consumption, media, popular culture, and politics. Thus, it is difficult and even misleading to draw a clear distinction between 'value' or 'tradition' when referring to concepts like 'Nordic egalitarianism,' 'trust,' or 'hygge' when trying to define Nordicness. For instance, while *hygge* is included in the official Danish Canon of Values as one of ten 'Danish values,' its centrality in everyday notion of and ubiquitousness in Nordic societies have resulted in its continuously negotiated rich meaning, and may as result be constructed discursively as a value, tradition, social norm, context, performance, mood, ambience, or design concept (Andersen et al., 2019).

When exploring the collective identity of Swedes, the particular concept of *Lagom* can be found extensively. Lagom *(not too much, not too little; just right!)* is the concept of the delicate balance of individuality and collective responsibility, and often emerges in almost every aspect of life in Sweden (Barinaga, 1999). This distinct norm can be understood in various ways in

everyday situations, as it embodies the tension between individual liberty and societal obligations, the balance between informal interactions and formal displays of respect for others, and the challenge of expressing one's feelings while seeking to avoid direct conflict through compromise and mutual agreement (Barinaga, 1999). In Sweden, the term is considered a blanket reference across all aspects of life and in identifying the extremes and defining the moderate path or course, which in its origins was constructed as a notion of equality and a just society practicing common sense and appropriate behavior (Brones, 2017). Although lagom has garnered global attention through other aspects involved with Swedish business and design, other Nordic countries have similar concepts that are built upon similar notions of collectivism, simplicity and balance in everyday life. These ideas share similarities with the Danish-Norwegian concept of *Janteloven* and the Norwegian tradition of *Måtehold,* which refers to moderation and balance in all aspects of life, from a consumer cultural context to personal attitude and behaviors (Beltagui & Schmidt, 2015). Likewise, *Velbehag* in Danish refers to finding comfort in the simple joys of life, and the contentment one gathers by focusing on simplicity and balance similar to that of lagom.

2.4.1 Emblematic Features of Nordicness; *Between The State and the Individual*

At the core of the Nordic identity is the idiosyncrasy and social philosophy of *Nordic egalitarianism.* Askegaard and Östberg (2019) finds that the deep-seeded notion of egalitarianism was founded in the modernist era to ensure inclusive economic and social development that may have been influenced by values of the ancient Nordic economy of happiness. Grounded in equality for all, the egalitarian philosophy ensures equal opportunity, social welfare and modernist views of income redistribution to support a comprehensive system of access to healthcare, education, and other social services inducing greater social mobility. The Nordic welfare state is widely regarded as emblematic of Nordicness, deeply ingrained in all levels of society across the Nordic states. The model is celebrated for its rejection of powerful and influential social elites, evidenced by its skepticism and criticism of elitism. It is therefore plausible to argue that Nordic egalitarianism, championed by diverse actors in the region, converged to create an ideological framework for designing and implementing *The Nordic Model*. The model is often applauded by global leaders, intellectuals, and scholars for its remarkable ability to build societies that achieve both economic prosperity and social inclusivity in a harmonious manner. Paradoxically, whilst upholding its equality and progressive discourses, Sweden, Denmark and Norway continue to remain as monarchies with a so far continuous strong public acceptance and popularity across generations. This particular position conforms with Nordic culture and its various expressions of taste. Weijo (2019) attempts to provide an explanation for this unique position in his explorations of Nordic sociology of consumption in discovering aspects distinctly Nordic. In his analysis, he describes the basis of Nordic cultural tendencies of social conformity and muted displays of distinction, which act in accordance with the *Law of Jante (Janteloven)*; a Danish/Norwegian concept familiar across the Nordics. It refers

to a set of cultural norms or unwritten rules often presented in the Nordic social contract promoting humility, equality and social conformity while discouraging overt display of ambition or social distinction. The interpretations of Janteloven vary, but it is frequently seen as a set of intrinsic values that provides the basis for the Nordic societies' strong belief in equality.

The Nordic states' ability in maintaining low levels of inequality in multiple spheres have created a sense of solidarity with its citizens. Although state intervention to maintain social inequality has been the social policy for years, a set of cultural values guide the resilience of the Nordic welfare model. Dente (2020) describes how the Danish concept of *Samfundssind* is interpreted in a sense of 'collective responsibility' and 'community spirit,' to the sense of sustainability existing in one's conscience, dignity, integrity and respect for one another. Also, collaboration and reasonable competition are some of the few interpretations of the vastness allowed by the term in context of coming together as a community. Correspondingly, *Dugnad* in Norway represents the tradition of voluntary communal work for the benefit of the community, which fosters a sense of social cohesion, trust, and shared responsibility that are crucial for the functioning of welfare states (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020). Similar concepts exist across other Nordic countries which characterizes its sense of solidarity and encourages active citizen participation, cooperation, and support for public initiatives.

2.4.2 Nordics: *The Global Good Samaritans*

The Nordic countries, with their political roots embedded in social democracy, have prioritized human rights as an integral part of their identity, consistently earning them high rankings for human rights protection and continued prioritization of this issue in their domestic and international policies (WHR, 2020). Thus, the Nordic states are often characterized in different ways such as "moral superpowers," "agents of a world common good," "norm entrepreneurs," "global good Samaritans," or simply "good states," in a foreign policy and international relations context (Langford & Schaffer, 2015). The foreign policy approach advocated by social democrats in the Nordics or early Scandinavia is rooted in the expansion of civil, political, social, and economic citizenship rights during the 20th century. Social democracy's struggle for emancipation since the 19th century continues as many citizens still lack protection of their human rights and participation in decision-making, making the worldwide implementation of human rights a logical continuation of this fight for social democrats, who believe that everyone deserves to enjoy the fruits of liberty (Brandal et al., 2013). The Nordic model shaped by social democracy is distinctive for its ability to balance seemingly opposing polarities, as it blends a dynamic and flexible form of capitalism with a robust welfare system and effective market regulation. It reconciles individualism and collectivism, not just in the economic realm, but also in the civic sphere by fostering a strong domestic community through its social welfare programs and promoting universal human rights globally (Midttun et al., 2011). Brandal et al., (2013) cites the sentiments of German political scientist Thomas Meyer, where he conceptualizes social

democracy as a specific way of organizing society in a liberal democracy; as such, social democracy not only maintains state responsibility in the sense of ensuring civil rights and liberties, e.g. the right to vote and freedom of speech, but also social rights such as access to education, work, and a minimum material wealth. The Nordic model is often used as a point of reference or benchmark in both academic and political discourse across the rest of the world, and its human rights policies have seemingly provided a high-level of human rights to its citizens, creating an identity that only a few other states can match (Langford & Schaffer, 2015).

2.4.3 Trust, Transparency and Openness

Nordic political culture is highly respected for its promotion of transparency in governance within the European Union, with Nordic societies being deeply influenced by the ideal of openness and commonly adhering to the principle of *Nordic Openness*. The term is often referred to as *öppenhet* in Sweden, *åbenhed* in Denmark, *åpenhet* in Norwegian and *avoimuus* in Finnish, which showcases the affinity for the concept across the states (Götz & Marklund, 2015). The idea of openness is firstly based on the principle of public access to information or the availability of official records dating back to the Swedish Freedom of Information Act (Tryckfrihetsförordningen) of 1766, and secondly the political process of commissions of inquiry that formulate public policy through engagement of all stakeholders. The combination of consensus and openness has contributed to the firm democratic principles and adherence to rule of law in the Nordic countries (Götz & Marklund, 2015). Through a comparative analysis of social origins of civil society, Rainio-Niemi (2015) reveals how the Nordic states are remarkably well adapted to incorporate demands of various civil organizations into public policy by allowing wide participation based on the concept of openness. Hence, openness is also characterized by aspects that include transparency, accountability, and accessibility in public decision-making (Rainio-Niemi, 2015). In contrast to its political discussion of the concepts, the increasing importance of access to government information, where global markets rely on information about countries as potential investment environments, has led to a paradigm shift from a democratic understanding of openness and transparency to an economic one. In terms of institutional openness, the new economic concepts of transparency focus mainly on the efficiency of administrative output and the stability of the market environment (Erkkilä, 2015).

2.4.4 Nordic Gender Equality. *A Nordic Brand?*

Many argue that the Swedish state's individualistic rationale was guided by the objective of liberating the individual from all forms of dependency and control from civil society, which separated ideological boundaries between the poor and the charity, workers from employers, wives from their husbands and parents from their children (Molander et al., 2019). As a result, the Swedish gender ideology is constructed through state intervention and incentivised by institutionalizing it by providing incentives and acting as a mediary behind its egalitarian

backdrop. For this reason, the existence of stereotypical gender roles in not only parenting but the workplace and society, exist at a minimum and other gender based inequalities are addressed with equal rigor by Nordic states. However, it was not until 2019 that programs specifically aimed at ensuring the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals were recognized by the Nordic gender equality program, indicating that the region was slow to acknowledge and promote equal opportunities for these communities.

Progress has since been profound and significant with the Nordic Council of Ministers aiming to make the region the most gender friendly region in the world (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020). Markkola (2021) suggests that the progress achieved in addressing equal opportunity issues since then have been remarkable, albeit slow predominantly due to the heightened focus on the Nordic tradition of gender mainstreaming. Further, the extensive efforts of the Nordic Cooperation and Nordic Council of Ministers and their gender equality agenda is conceptualized and built reinforcing Nordicness and its placebrand. Since the early 1990s, there was a noticeable shift in the Nordic approach to promoting gender equality, where it transitioned from attempting to persuade other governments to adopt "the Nordic way" of *Nordic gender equality* to consciously constructing a model of gender equality for export, utilizing the marketing rhetoric of Nordicness, and appointing the Nordic Equality Ombudsman as new ambassadors (Markkola, 2021). Therefore, the interventions of the welfare states in promoting gender equality can be considered to be fashioned by progressive and modern ideologies and the Nordic societies dynamic and adherence to the state and legislator, which are markedly distinct from those of other Western democracies such as the United States.

2.4.5 Socialism, Secularity and Design towards Nordic Modernity

The Nordic Welfare States' notable position did not develop independently but rather emerged alongside its acceptance and encouragement to the submission into modernity with the goal of building a model and humanized society. To embrace modernity, the Nordic countries have shown a fast willingness to accept diverse religious beliefs and ideas, while also quickly distancing themselves from those ideas and beliefs to achieve modernity. Thus, a key aspect of Nordicness is its *secularity*, where society has learned to negotiate the relationship between religion, science, and the workplace through methods such as segregation, estrangement, and incorporation which reflects an institutionalized form of secularism and scientific rationality that has played a significant role in shaping the Nordics' path towards modernization (Tiaynen-Qadir et al., 2021). Another modernist example of the emergence of *Nordic design* can be found in the Swedish political movement in the early 1930's. Sweden's quest for achieving modernity was reinforced by the influence of social democracy, which distinguished the social welfare state in the 1940's. The Social Democratic Party published and distributed the *Acceptera manifesto* written by a number of architects and creatives, marking the origins of Swedish functionalism in design through the lens of *'funktionssocialism'* or *functional socialism* (Asplund et al. 1931).

This new style of architecture and design was founded on the principle of function over excessive ornamentation, a significant departure from traditional design principles where the proponents of this manifesto emphasized extreme functionality, rejecting other capitalist approaches as deceptive (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019). The *Acceptera manifesto* represents a development designed to move in a predetermined direction, built upon a modernist view of time, progress, and linear causality, where the proposed direction is rooted in industrial technologies and design with a singular focus on a specific societal future. Also, the political vision outlined in *Acceptera* was clear and unambiguous and had a long-lasting impact on the ideological and socio-material formation of the Swedish welfare state. Simultaneously, examples of Norwegian architects designing several buildings for public affairs reflecting similar ideas on public welfare emerged, and discourses on design responding to social requests in the welfare state were asserted by prominent architects such as Lars Backer (Ramia, 2019). Similar movements emerged from other Nordic countries such as in Denmark and Finland, whereas the primary considerations for social welfare-based architecture focused on public housing created a comparable, aesthetically, and functionally complementary design rhetoric inspiring Nordic design.

2.5 Environmentalism and the (Nordic) Sustainability Identity

One of the key drivers of the Nordic countries' focus on sustainability is their strong sense of social responsibility shaped by the Nordic model of governance. The Nordic model has evolved into a social welfare based system with significant advances through investment in education, healthcare, and other public services (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019), thus providing its citizens with a high standard of living. In addition, the Nordic citizens have historically forged a special relationship with nature by reason of its vast wilderness, vegetation, lakes, extensive coastlines, mountains, and magnificent aurora borealis lighting the sky on cold winter nights. As such, Nordic peoples' relationship with nature has been characterized by the concept of *friluftsliv*, which roughly translates to free-air life and interpreted in many Nordic languages as "living a simple life in harmony with nature and spending time outdoors" (Beery, 2012), therefore by and large both a philosophy and a lifestyle. Salminen (2019) provides a perspective of its possible origins by pointing to the unique boundaries that exist in the lives of the Nordic societies, and on the one hand the extensive regulatory regimes set by the welfare state and the freedom provided by the concept of *everyman's rights*. The strict state regulations and everyman's rights (which is a paradox in itself) thus allows everyone to be one with nature and access natural areas freely with the acceptance of responsibility to avoid disturbance to nature or other's (Salminen, 2019).

The Nordics' are frequently regarded as leaders when it comes to taking responsibility for the environment (Carlström, 2016) and this sense of responsibility towards the environment could have contributed to the deep-rooted environmental ideals of contemporary Nordic society. Through their analysis of green economic policies of three Nordic countries, Khan et al., (2021)

reports that the established tradition of ecological concern and reputation for placing progressive environmental policies at the heart of national politics is evident in their policy texts, where the importance of protecting the environment is taken as a given, without directly raising the idea of nature as a valuable resource subject to exploitation and in need of protection. The policy documents studied present two complementary perspectives on their green economy; (i) advocating for the economy to operate within ecological limits and; (ii) promoting growth in environmentally-focused technology sectors such as clear technologies (Khan et al., 2021).

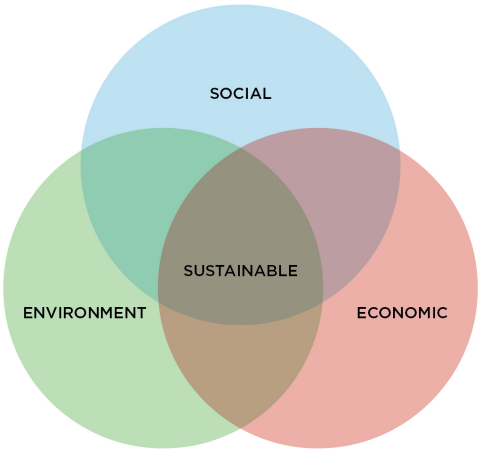
2.6 Origins of Sustainability and the Three Pillar Framework

The origin of *Sustainability* as a concept is subject to much debate and remains an area of ongoing inquiry. In their book on business ethics, Crane, Matten, Glozer and Spence define sustainability as "the long-term maintenance of systems according to environmental, economic, and social considerations (2019, p. 32). On the contrary, Markley (2012) positions sustainability as a conception of time, explored through the use of various disciplinary lenses including religion, philosophy, and history, and conceptualizes sustainability as an ethical tool that enables the achievement of political and ecological goals. Last, Spindler (2013) explores the European conceptualization of sustainability during the 18th century, where it emerged as a principle guiding deforestation practices and forest management. Building on these historical antecedents, he defines sustainability as a survival strategy aimed at responsible use of vital resources. Further, he argues that sustainability has undergone a transformative evolution since its inception, and has evolved into an embraced management tool by politics and society. Probably the more common usage of sustainability, however, is in relation to sustainable development, often defined as a "strategy of social development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Crane et al., 2019). On the contrary, the considerable advances that sustainability has brought about in certain industry sectors, and its association with the neoliberal economic system, has also been critiqued. According to Markley, the more sustainability approaches "a set of statistical inferences… the more it tends to remain complicit in exploitative ideologies of resource extraction and the political and administrative hierarchies..." (Markley, 2012, p. 59), thus emphasizing the need to acknowledge the concerns surrounding the role of sustainability in today's economic paradigm.

With its roots in environmental management, sustainability is for some predominantly synonymous with environmental sustainability. Though, the concept is now more commonly thought of in broader terms with e.g., the employment of the 'Three Pillar' framework, which includes not only environmental considerations, but also economic and social considerations. In addition, more recent sustainability literature has been focused on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which covers 17 areas that also many companies have realigned their sustainability commitments to (Crane et al., 2019). Though, it is worth noting that the Three Pillar framework has been incorporated into its conceptualization. In the following, we will

briefly outline the set of seminal definitions on the Three Pillars of Sustainability depicted by Leminen, Rajahonka, Westerlund and Hossain (2021).

Figure 2.1: The Three Pillars of Sustainability (Leminen et al., 2021)



Environmental sustainability refers to safeguarding the sources of raw materials necessary for human needs and ensuring that the sinks for human wastes are not exceeded, in order to promote human welfare. This definition emphasizes the preservation of natural capital as means to maintain the quality of the environment over the long term (Leminen et al., 2021).

Social sustainbility points to a positive state within communities and the process that can lead to achieving that state. The concept prioritizes the well-being of individuals and their entitlement to be valued members of their communities, including striving to improve living conditions by means of human capital development, job creation, health, and safety (Leminen et al., 2021).

Economic sustainability can be examined from at least two perspectives: the financial performance of companies, as well as that of external stakeholders such as improving workers well-being in a certain community (Leminen et al., 2021).

It is essential to acknowledge and understand these components of sustainability in order to formulate effective strategies for promoting and operating sustainable development.

2.7 The Paradoxical Quest towards *'Fashion Sustainability'*

The fashion industry stands out as one of the most environmentally unsustainable sectors worldwide, primarily driven by its relentless pursuit of constant consumption. The industry's continuous demand for new and captivating styles is fueled by the desire to cater to the ever-evolving and dynamic nature of fashion, fueled by the high frequency of consumption

serving as a pivotal catalyst for the industry's growth, compelling manufacturers and designers to churn out an incessant stream of novel and enticing products (Han et al., 2017). The advent of fast fashion in the mid-1990s, coupled with a growing awareness of climate change and social justice concerns, has brought to the forefront a host of pressing issues which include the escalating environmental repercussions and broader societal impacts caused by the fashion industry. The democratization of the fashion industry, amplified by the power of social media, has given rise to a proliferation of mass-market brands. This phenomenon has contributed to a prevailing "throw-away" culture, which has garnered significant scholarly scrutiny and media attention on the industry's accountability, where this attention extends beyond fast fashion to encompass the fashion industry as a whole (Yang et al., 2017). In addition, is the textile production responsible for approximately 45% of microfiber pollution in waterways, 10% of total CO2 emissions, and significant fresh water pollution due to pesticide and chemical usage, representing just a fraction of the detrimental impacts attributed to the fashion industry (Sahimaa et al., 2023). Consequently, scholars advocate for ending fast fashion and the promotion of slow fashion as the sole means of managing the escalating ecological and social repercussions.

In response to the mounting research and heightened demands for accountability within the fashion industry, the majority of global fashion companies have embraced 'sustainability' as an integral component of their corporate strategies. However, Brewer (2019) raises a crucial inquiry regarding why certain companies genuinely champion sustainability, while others merely make superficial and intangible adjustments to their value chain and suggests that this distinction may stem from the interplay of factors such as low prices, consumer demands for both ecological and social sustainability, and the diverse corporate models and personalities adopted by these companies. The extensive analysis by economists and law scholars of shareholders' rights and responsibilities in determining the purpose of corporations has revealed a prevailing Anglo-Saxon perspective of prioritizing "shareholder value" and emphasizing its primacy over other considerations, leading to a pursuit of short-term profits that has had detrimental effects on other stakeholders, including the exacerbation of global warming and neglect of social and human capital concerns (Brewer, 2019). The Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, which resulted in over 1000 deaths of garment factory workers, highlighted the various social issues within global supply chains, with particular attention given to labor governance, prompting a debate on whether the responsibility for change should fall on governments to enforce labor governance or companies to alter their business practices as a whole, as discussed by Bair et al. (2020).

Over the course of time, sustainability in the fashion industry now includes social and ethical issues like working conditions, fair trade, and social responsibility, as well as production organization and responsible consumption practices such as swapping, sharing, mending, reusing, and limiting fashion purchases with ecological approaches to clothing maintenance and laundering (Murzyn-Kupisz & Hołuj, 2021). Akrout & Guercini (2022) posits that sustainability

is no longer a trend but a core requirement in business where more brands are attempting to "endogenize" the different dimensions of sustainability through *sustainability marketing* which believes in creating economic value by encouraging sustainable behavior, influencing stakeholders, and aligning the brands identity with that of a holistic sustainability identity. This shift also presents an opportunity for the fashion industry to proactively promote environmentally friendly behavior, sustainable consumption, and address the concerns of all stakeholders, thereby gaining the trust of active, demanding, and socially connected consumers, and offering new possibilities for managers and researchers (Akrout & Guercini, 2022). The authors emphasize the importance of sustainable marketing as a practice that can lead to competitive advantage and differentiation. However, this raises the question of whether 'sustainability marketing' is a double-edged sword, acting as a paradox that can both enhance consumption and undermine sustainability efforts, ultimately becoming counterproductive. Despite the efforts of brands and conglomerates at various scales, the challenges of achieving 'true' sustainability persists. While some consider the complex ecological aspects and their socio-economic repercussions, others focus solely on the environmental consequences, resulting in a one-dimensional approach. The challenge inherently lies within the broad definition of sustainability, where the encompassing nature of the definition allows for the concept to be maneuvered and molded by corporations, and policymakers who act in the name of sustainability on their own terms. Sustainability had to go through its evolutionary paces to arrive at its current place where it is widely recognised and increasingly acted on by all stakeholders, but the question continues to remain; *are we all speaking the same language when it comes to the concept of sustainability?* (Farley & Smith, 2020).

2.7.1 Sustainable Fashion in the Contemporary World

A substantial body of scholarly research has emerged on sustainability and the fashion industry over the course of the past decade, which delves into diverse aspects of the fashion value chain, exploring sustainability concepts, innovative business models and principles, in the aims of navigating the intricate interplay among the three pillars of sustainability. These endeavors seek to address the complexities inherent in achieving sustainability goals within the industry. The *"cradle-to-cradle"* (C2C) design framework is one such concept, which offers an alternative to the traditional linear *"cradle-to-grave"* (C2D) model that generates significant waste by converting resources into products sold to consumers who ultimately dispose of them, generating large amounts of waste (Braungart & McDonough, 2009). The C2C concept alongside others such as *upcycling*, in conjunction with the concept of the circular economy introduced by Stahel and Reday-Mulvey (1976), have played a significant role in shaping the notion of circularity and giving rise to the concept of '*circular fashion'* in the modern era. The emergence of the *'slow fashion'* or *'lowsumerism'* movement provides a contemporary response to the growth-oriented approach of multinational fast fashion conglomerates. It emphasizes small-scale production,

high-quality resources, craftsmanship, longer product life cycles, and fosters closer relationships between consumers and their products (Brewer, 2019). As the transition towards a circular and closed-loop model gains momentum, numerous companies and brands are actively seeking innovative approaches to transform their business models. Examples of circularity measures and circular economic policies as the new sustainability paradigm can be seen not just in corporate strategy but in national and regional policy as well. In fact, the Nordic region has already incorporated circular economic policies into its Nordic Council of Ministers action plan for Vision 2030 for the Nordic Co-operation. Furthermore, the Nordic region prioritizes sustainable development through programs aimed at aggressively promoting circular business models by establishing a common baseline for all companies and with the participation of green entrepreneurs, aimed at positioning the Nordic region as a leading and agile frontrunner in the circular economy (Nordic Co-operation, 2020).

The circular economy appears as a concept that prioritizes economic systems with primary considerations for the environment and implicit value placed on the social pillar of sustainability, however, Geissdoerfer et al., (2016) claims that it is plausible to design policies and interventions with more environmental emphasis in developed countries and more social emphasis in developing countries. Among various sustainable business models, circularity is recognized as one archetype that aims to improve the sustainability of the system, alongside other beneficial options that can be combined to maximize gains and achieve synergistic outcomes (Geissdoerfer et al., 2016). It is important to note that the circular economy is an evolutionary iteration of sustainability as a blanket concept implemented in China in the 1990s (Winans et al., 2016) and later, across the world. Geissdoerfer et al., (2016) describes the key differences between sustainability as a broader concept and the circular economy as illustrated in table 2.1 with the intentions of understanding how the concept was institutionalized and put into practice. In their comparisons of the differences between the two concepts, it is clear that sustainability prioritizes the triple bottom line (TBL) while the circular economy is focused on the 'economic system' as the key difference of outcomes.

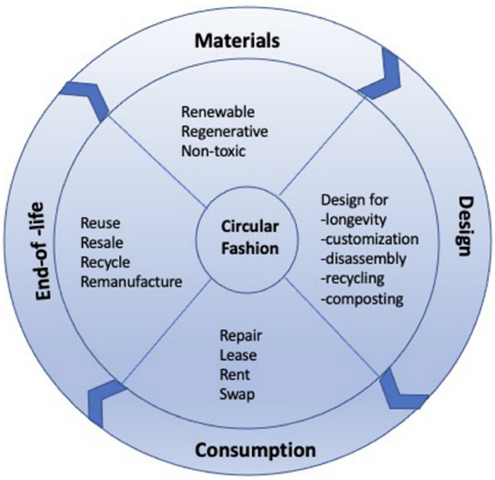
Table 2.1: Selected Differences between Sustainability and the Circular Economy (Geissdoerfer et al., 2016)

	Sustainability	Circular Economy
Origins of the term	Environmental movements, NGOs, non-profit and intergovernmental agencies, principles in silviculture and cooperative systems	Different schools of thought like cradle-to-cradle, regulatory implementation by governments, lobbying by NGOs like the EMF, inclusion in political agendas, e.g. European Horizon 2020
Goals	Open-ended, multitude of goals depending on the considered agent and her interests	Closed loop, ideally eliminating all resource input into and leakage out of the system
Main motivation	Diffused and diverse reflexivity and adaptive→ past trajectories	Better use of resources, waste, leakage (from linear to circular)
What system is prioritised?	Triple bottom line (horizontal)	The economic system (hierarchical)
To whose benefit?	The environment, the economy, and society at large.	Economic actors are at the core, benefitting the economy and the environment. Society benefits from environmental improvements and certain add-ons and assumptions, like more manual labour or fairer taxation
How did they institutionalise (wide diffusion)?	Providing vague framing that can be adapted to different contexts and aspirations.	Emphasising economic and environmental benefits
Agency (Who influences? Who should influence?)	Diffused (priorities should be defined by all stakeholders)	Governments, companies, NGOs
Timeframe of changes	Open-ended, sustain current status "indefinitely"	Theoretical limits to optimisation and practical ones to implementation could set input and leakage thresholds for the successful conclusion of the implementation of a Circular Economy
Perceptions of responsibilities	Responsibilities are shared, but not clearly defined	Private business and regulators/policymakers
Commitments, goals, and interests behind the use of the term	Interest alignment between stakeholders, e.g. less waste is good for the environment, organisational profits, and consumer prices	Economic/financial advantages for companies, and less resource consumption and pollution for the environment

Later on, with the emergence of circular fashion as a concept adapted from the circular economy, the model has gained wider attention and popularity among scholars as well as corporates and policy makers. The concept is believed to be of Swedish origin and first coined by Dr. Anna Brismar who later introduced its first theoretical interpretation in 2014 (Rathinamoorthy, 2018). In order to transition towards a circular model, companies are required to fulfill a set of requirements. In the case of circular fashion, the following steps outlined by Rathinamoorthy (2018) would be the prerequisites in the transitioning towards a more sustainable, circular value chain:

1. ***Product design*** must enable users to easily disassemble and repair individual components, as well as recycle them at the end of its life either through technical recycling or biological degradation as nutrients.
2. ***Production*** process should be safe, free from harmful chemicals or processes, ensuring the safety of humans, animals, and ecosystems during the manufacturing stages and throughout the recycling process.
3. ***Recycling*** through a well defined mechanism and technology, which should be established to collect, sort, and recycle end-of-life clothing and fashion products based on their quality. The customer involvement during this process would significantly reduce the future environmental impact through awareness and education.
4. ***Product repair and reuse mechanisms*** should be well defined and established in society to facilitate product repair or repurposing, thereby extending its lifespan.

Figure 2.2: Circular Fashion System (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021)



Fashion sustainability and sustainability as a whole are intricately connected to the concept of the circular economy, as extensively explored in scholarly research. As proposed by Dissanayake and Weerasinghe (2021), there are four distinct components within the circular fashion system, each with its unique sustainability considerations that are anchored in synergy in

a circular fashion model. However, other concepts such as *Rental Economy Models* (Gyde & McNeill, 2021), *re-use* and *resale models*, or *recycle* and *upcycle models* are introduced as circular fashion models within fashion, where brands can be seen to adapt various models to not only become more sustainable but to carve a competitive edge and successfully market and position their businesses (Todeschini et al., 2017).

Sustainability communications is also a prominent aspect of contemporary fashion marketing, which has evolved in the fashion sustainability dialogue. Milanesi et al. (2022) suggest that in devising communication and marketing strategies, brands must recognize that sustainability not only affects environmental values, but also social, economic and political values. Akrout and Guercin's (2019) investigation critically scrutinizes the current state of sustainability practices within the fashion and luxury sectors, where the authors aim to unravel the paradoxes and potentialities. These suggests that sustainability should not be viewed as a mere fashion trend for the future, as propagated by the industry. Instead, it should be considered an integral aspect that is intrinsically linked to the outcomes, objectives, and metrics of fashion brands and their stance on these subjects. Concepts such as *greenwashing* through communication have created significant attention towards how sustainability communications must be followed through by brands, and extensive scholarly research has evidenced against ripple effects and broader, macro and micro economic consequences of greenwashing. According to Milanesi et al. (2022), it is argued that fashion brands should not solely focus on communicating their sustainability efforts related to nature, but instead ensure transparency and cover all aspects of their sustainable processes. By doing so, they can avoid the perception of engaging in greenwashing. This highlights the importance of incorporating these considerations into managerial discussions and marketing decision strategies. Hence, sustainability managers in most global fashion companies follow guidelines pre-defined by policy makers as well as internally vetted best practices to avoid communications related concerns, both in educating the consumer and marketing the sustainability competencies and achievement of the brand(s).

2.7.2 The Role of Fashion Brands in Shaping Consumer Attitudes towards Consumption

Over the past decade, consumers' knowledge and self-concept of sustainability in fashion have experienced significant growth. The advent of social media and online communications has fostered conversations on the social and environmental impacts of the fashion industry, contributing to a wider awareness of these issues and creating a continued demand for greater accountability and transparency within the industry. This trend is reflective of a shift in consumer values and attitudes towards sustainability, as more individuals recognize the significance of making ethical and environmentally responsible choices in fashion. Despite the increasing focus on implementing and marketing sustainable practices within the fashion industry, most consumers have limited knowledge and experience of fashion sustainability efforts. According to

Blazquez, Henninger, Alexander and Franquesa (2019), there is a clear disjuncture between companies' sustainable communication and consumer perception. The author's findings suggest that retailers should communicate the meaning of sustainability and their proactive response to achieve it in a clear and accessible manner, without resorting to traditional sustainability communications. This would help bridge the knowledge-gap and shape consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion products, leading to actual purchase intentions. Along those lines, Kong, Ko, Chae and Mattila (2016) argues that knowledge can act as a catalyst in changing attitudes, and prior research has shown that environmental knowledge has a positive relationship with environmental behavior. The authors suggest that different sources of knowledge can help individuals understand the various concepts of sustainability in fashion, thus bridging the gap between attitudes and behavior. By addressing the knowledge-gap and enhancing consumer understanding of sustainable fashion, companies can foster positive attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability, ultimately contributing to the growth of the sustainable fashion industry. For this reason, consumers need to have a frame of reference or an understanding of the parameters used to measure sustainability to make sense of the term. In their article, Aman, Harun, and Hussein (2012) describes how consumer awareness and attitudes towards sustainable products can improve with greater knowledge of sustainability and environmental issues. Kong et al. (2016) argue that sustainable knowledge, or environmental knowledge, requires consumers to possess two key components. First, they need to comprehend the environmental and social impact of products or services, such as the staggering 79 trillion liters of water consumed, 4 gigatonnes of carbon emissions, and 92 million tonnes of waste generated annually by the fashion industry (BCG, 2019; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Second, consumers need to understand how products are produced and which ones are manufactured in eco-friendly and ethical ways.

Although sustainability research points towards heightened consumer attention towards sustainability considerations, a question mark remains on how consumers put such interests into action. Jeong and Ko (2021) states that modern consumers prefer companies that prioritize honesty, environmental preservation, and corporate social responsibility over profit. This shift has led to a transition from a producer-centric market to a consumer-centric market where production activities follow consumer demands for sustainable and ethical products. However, the disparity between attitudes and actions is a common occurrence in international consumer research. The Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) and Globescan released a report titled "Empowering Consumers Through Transparency - Report on Global Consumer Research" in May 2019, in which consumers from China, Germany, the UK, and the USA were interviewed about their behavior and attitudes towards sustainability and consumption in the fashion and textile sector. The report revealed that consumers expressed a desire to be more sustainable but lacked the necessary tools to take action and confidence in the sustainability efforts of companies. According to the findings, half of the respondents did not trust companies to act in the best interests of society and only 1 in 10 had a high level of confidence in companies regarding sustainability efforts (Sustainable Apparel Coalition, 2019).

Methodology

This chapter is concerned with presenting an overview of our reflections on research philosophy, and the key methodological considerations and decisions made to answer the research question, thus providing the reader with an understanding of the research process to guarantee transparency and scientific soundness (Crotty, 1998; Bryman & Bell, 2015). The chapter will start by presenting our epistemological and ontological considerations, and hereafter outline the research methods, sampling of data, data analysis, and the quality of the research.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy is discerned with our assumptions as researchers about the nature of reality, and what we know about it, which in turn always shapes the theoretical and methodological choices, albeit often implicitly (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). On these matters, this thesis project is guided through a set of assumptions that leans towards a critical realist approach. Developed by Roy Bhaskar, CR is an all-inclusive philosophy that provides an alternative to the constructivist and positivist approaches to provide an account of ontology and epistemology (Bhasker, 1989). The method recognizes the reality of the natural order, and seeks to identify the underlying and hardly visible mechanisms of the social world, to then be able to address potential issues and suggest recommendations for change (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

We found that the fashion brands are a part of an external reality within social, cultural and historical structures that are not directly observable or identified without our practical and theoretical work. For example, when Swedish consumers go to a brand's sustainability page and read about 'Swedish wool' as a sustainable material, then we would point out that he or she has only seen or experienced a small part of everything there is. To fully understand how Nordicness is incorporated into Nordic fashion brands' sustainability messages, we will have to first identify the 'Nordic identity' that has given rise to the above phenomenon that we are trying to understand (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Hence, our aim has been to provide a brief historical presentation of the Nordic region, and to explain the observable phenomenon by looking for the underlying causes and mechanism through which deep structures in the Nordic region have shaped Nordic fashion brands' sustainability messages. However, CR also recognizes the role of subjective information of social actors in a given context, which implies that we follow the recognition that our knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning and experiences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Therefore, we have been seeking to minimize such biases by awareness of such, and to be as objective as possible.

3.2 Methods

Because our purpose is theory generation, we used inductive reasoning by looking for patterns in the data material to induce an underlying theory (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Further, a qualitative approach was adopted as we found the nature of the topic required an approach that went beyond a quantification in the data collection and analysis. Instead, the qualitative approach would allow us to capture meaning and underlying themes from the messages during the interpretative process from which the final data is created (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Besides, as we were interested in a phenomenon in which it appears that no prior research exists, a purely quantitative strategy would have been difficult to employ due to the lack of extant literature from which we could have drawn leads to formulate hypotheses (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, it is important to mention in this regard that there exists a rich body of research and literature in isolation within 'Nordic identity', sustainability marketing, and the Nordic/Scandinavian fashion industry, just not in interrelation.

The thesis project is a multiple case study, built around the data material from eight Nordic fashion brands, and the content analysis method. Adopting a case study strategy would allow us to broadly approach the phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence by obtaining an empirical based introduction to a research area, which is still indeed at its infancy stage (Yin, 2003; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). More specifically, a multiple case study strategy was found appropriate in allowing for verification of similar findings across the cases to enhance transferability. One could argue that a single case study approach could have led to an acquisition of a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Though, for the aim of shedding light on an industry in an entire region consisting of several countries, the choice of multiple cases was deemed insightful as a way to produce more representative knowledge for the industry as a whole, with the help of observation of consistencies across cases.

While these consistencies might overlap as well as differ, we do not intend to conduct a comparative study. Rather, we wish to synchronize the findings and lay out the different themes and patterns to explicitly show the similarities. Though, to completely distance ourselves from comparative study was not feasible either, since using data material from several brands will bring about moments of comparison. Additionally, we did not intend to evaluate nor judge the brands sustainability performance. The objective was to examine the final codes to gain a more comprehensive understanding in how these can be scattered into themes. Lastly, the application of qualitative content analysis was considered an ideal method to analyze the empirical data as it allows for the researchers to engage in the data collection using interpretation of either explicit or inferred communication. The application of this method will further be presented in Paragraph 3.4, explaining the data analysis process.

3.3 Data Sources

Our initial research of the concept of Nordicness in sustainability messages began in March 2023. At this time, we began to informally build a knowledge base around the subject by downloading and reading company annual sustainability/CSR reports, looking through company websites, and studying literature on 'Nordic identity' and sustainability in the Nordic fashion industry. The preliminary research on literature around the subject was essential, since it helped us to identify a knowledge gap yet to be explored, and form the data collection process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We then started to intensify our research with two weeks of gathering empirical data from the selected brands. The following two paragraphs will elaborate on the sampling of empirical data material obtained from the cases, which function as the main source of data to examine the research question guiding the thesis at hand.

3.3.1 Sampling of Case Brands

Within the given time frame and scope of the thesis, the data collection of all the Nordic fashion brands presenting some type of Nordicness cues in their sustainability messages were not viable, thus we had to select a sample for the research. The sample consists of eight Nordic fashion brands based on purposive sampling. Since we aim to examine the concept of Nordicness in Nordic fashion brands' sustainability messages, the sampling criteria had to be based on brands that are either built on, or inspired by the factors that characterize the Nordic region, and the criteria of geographic variation within Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland. Third, the case brands had to have a strong presence in the market by having expanded internationally, as well as a strong consumer base and online presence. This immediately delimited any boutique brands as these do not have a significant sustainable impact, or impact through their messaging. Although purposeful sampling does not necessarily intend to offer a representative sample (Robinson, 2014), we found it imperative for this study to show variation by selecting brands across the entire Nordic region. Further, we found during our research that the majority of the fashion brands cohering to the criteria were Swedish and, thus, there is an overrepresentation of Swedish brands. Yet, we found this to show a true representation of the region since Sweden is the largest and most populous of all the Nordic countries.

Additionally, we found the following criteria as being essential in order to collect the most suitable data for our content analysis: Sustainability; the companies would need to prioritize (not necessarily fulfill) either individual or collective sustainability goals and initiatives in their operations and communication. Nordic identity; fashion brands that have a significant connection to the Nordic region and the Nordicness cues identified from extant literature. It was paramount that the brands were founded in a Nordic country, and had close ties to the region by having headquarters in that respective country. The 'Nordic identity' had to be visible from searching their websites, which could be elements of design, simplicity, functionality, or drawing

inspiration from the Nordic nature and landscapes. Diversity; brands that represent a diversity of products, price points, and target audience. Also, brands that represent different segments of the market, such as luxury, fast fashion, outdoor wear, and circular business models. These criteria were central in order to explore the phenomenon of Nordicness in the fashion brands' sustainability messages by encompassing a wide representation of brands in the region and these different actors' sustainability messages. Using multiple cases to draw different perspectives would allow us to gather insights that complement each other, as well as to increase validity of the research and improve credibility. In addition, this would strengthen the academic contribution and managerial insights, as the drawn conclusion intends to be applied over a broader spectrum of contexts. The above selection process led to the sampling of eight brands whose brief description can be found in the below Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Case Brands

Brand	**Description**
Filippa K	Swedish brand founded in 1993 and known by many as the brand pioneering the now iconic look of Scandinavian minimalism. Its main focus is on well-made luxury pieces with classic shapes, clean lines, and timeless colors, guided by a brand philosophy of emphasizing longevity with high-quality materials (Filippa K, 2023a; Filippa K, 2023b).
Norrøna	Norwegian family-owned outdoor brand founded in 1929 near Oslo, creating high-performance products with innovative technical advancements, while focusing on traditional craftsmanship traditions. The company is known for introducing many new product technologies to the market e.g., the prototype of Europe's first Gore-Tex jacket in 1977 (Norrøna, 2023).
66˚North	Icelandic outdoor brand, founded in 1926 as a matter of survival for Icelandic fishermen and soon thereafter search and rescue teams. The company specializes in high-quality performance apparel, which has gained international recognition for its functional and durability (66˚North, 2023a).
ARKET	Contemporary fast fashion brand within the Swedish H&M Group. It was founded in 2017 with a mission to democratize quality by making sustainable design accessible to more people. Their collections feature minimalistic designs, while promoting the concept of long-lasting, well-made garments that transcend trends (ARKET, 2023a; H&M Group, 2019).
Organic Basics	Danish underwear and active-wear brand founded in Copenhagen in 2015 and well-known for its body-positivity, diversity, and certified product materials. With an all-European production and no seasonal collections, the brand places sustainability and ethical production at the forefront of its business (Organic Basics, 2023a; Organic Basics, 2023b).
Marimekko	Finnish brand founded in 1951 and famous for its iconic prints and bright color fabrics, which has earned the company a strong and unique identity around the world. Its design philosophy is based on timeless, functional and durable products (Marimekko, 2023a; Marimekko, 2023b).

Nudie Jeans	Swedish denim brand Nudie Jeans founded in 2001 and publicly recognized for their work with sustainability. Their brand and design philosophy is based on long-lasting, sustainable materials, and a circular business model (Nudie Jeans, 2023a; Nudie Jeans, 2023b).
Sandqvist	Swedish bag and accessories brand founded in 2004, with a clear focus on sustainable and environmental-friendly materials. By combining useful features with a minimalistic design, the idea is to make items that can be used both in the city and in the forest (Sandqvist, 2023).

3.3.2 Sampling of Documents

Our empirical data sources consist of documentary data from the eight case brands. The data materials include the brands' website communication (incl. figures and videos) on sustainability, and CSR/Sustainability reports published on their websites. Consequently, the used sampling method does not essentially require an ethical review, since the materials used were collected from unrestricted platforms and public documents, and does not treat sensitive or personal data. In addition, it does not involve human 'subjects' as with interviews or ethnographic studies, however, as we did make use of direct quotes from the videos, we made sure to be mindful of portraying the quotes in alignment with what is said. The retrieved data materials were hereafter condensed through the purposive sampling approach, in which we purposely selected the documents that exemplified the Nordicness cues previously classified according to the created category schema. An overview of the retrieved data is given in Table 6.1 (Appendix). Importantly, this made it possible to get a comprehensive overview of the data and detect similarities and patterns, which allowed us to plan the data analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Our content analysis resembles the steps proposed by Mayring (2000). The objective of the empirical analysis has been to explore how Nordicness is incorporated into sustainability messages, whereas these are visible through regular business activities that the actors are engaged in, regardless of whether those are the subject of a study or not. We have attended to the latent content, in which we have coded the underlying meaning of the messages (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Further, although the research project follows an overall inductive approach, moments of deduction arose in the initial coding of the data. First, we began by compiling literature while simultaneously researching online data material from Nordic fashion brands to develop a general understanding of the content. The literature and online data material was subsequently used as a foundation for identifying the key themes and concepts, and for the final case sampling. We then created the cues, categories and coding system to analyze the data as summarized in Table 6.2 (Appendix). The categories and codes are thus both theoretical-based as well as data-based, combining inductive and deductive category development (Mayring, 2000). The documents were then collected from the case brands, applying the coding system and cues to

the material by systematically analyzing each content and assigning it to the appropriate theme as illustrated in Table 6.1 (Appendix). At this point, our initial interpretations had begun to emerge, and this preliminary analysis led to the identification of themes to arrange the data around, also functioning as the main themes in the written analysis. While we conducted analyses of all eight brands, we chose to present the quotes under each theme most relevant to the analysis. The next stage involved the exploration between our themes and extant literature by juxtaposing commonalities and relationships in the data from the cases with the literature, moving to a more abstract and latent interpretation influenced by the Nordic cues previously identified, hence prompting the analysis to the clarification of the cognitive map.

A particular objective was to ensure that our research and interpretations were sound, proposed as the last step by Mayring (2000). When evaluating the validity of content analysis, researchers have primarily relied on the qualitative criteria and standards developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which aim to achieve 'trustworthiness.' We used four of these procedures for ensuring the trustworthiness of our research: we repeatedly triangulated our data sources, collecting additional material for confirmatory purposes, and cross-referencing journal articles and books; we intended on mutual agreement among all three researchers to enhance conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); the sampling criteria has been thoroughly described, and we have utilized a clear categorization and coding table to aid in the transparency of the study; the data analysis process has been presented to ensure that the reader has a comprehensive understanding of how our analysis was conducted; a clear connection between the data and the findings have been established through the created cognitive map (Figure 5.1) and tables (Appendix). Lastly, we have used a representative sample size of brands to enhance the transferability of the present research.

Empirical Findings

If there were only one truth, you couldn't paint a hundred canvases on the same theme.
-Pablo Picasso, 1966

In the study at hand, we adopt an approach that involves unpacking and analyzing the corporate sustainability messaging of our eight selected case brands, focusing on five key themes that we have identified. These themes were derived from the re-categorization and coding of our empirical data, and they both explicitly and implicitly shed light on different aspects of Nordicness that are uncovered throughout our collective analysis. These cues provide insights into the varying degrees of the brands' Nordic identity and their influence on sustainability considerations. However, it should be noted that not all case brands necessarily align with the narratives of the emerging themes, and their levels of involvement may vary.

4.1 Fabric and Textile Sustainability as a Priority

It became apparent during our analysis of the case brands that the product materials were presented as a sustainable initiative, in which the brands could strategically communicate how integrating more sustainable fabric and textiles into their production would lead to a reduced environmental impact, as well as locally sourced fibers. While research points towards heightened consumer attention towards sustainable products (Sustainable Apparel Coalition, 2019), it is not an implausible assertion to make that the average consumer finds it challenging to know what to look for when searching for more sustainable alternatives when buying the usual t-shirt or pair of jeans. However, the materials used tends to be one of the more obvious signs for the consumers to lookout for in their search for more sustainable fashion products, with many being accustomed to checking the product material on the garment label before a purchase.

In their attempt to draw sustainability-conscious consumers in, many Nordic fashion brands thus focus on communicating their sustainability activities around product materials. If the materials are communicated as being eco-friendly or sustainable, and the company has described clearly how this was achieved in an accessible manner, it may lead to a positive consumer perception (Blazquez et al, 2019). Although there were slight variations in the product materials presented online by the case brands, there were many overlaps throughout their websites and published reports, with a clear theme involving specific materials. We have divided the following analysis into two sub-sections, each representing the most emphasized fabric and textile themes depicting Nordicness cues in the brands' sustainability messages.

Wool as a Sustainable Nordic Material

When you ask people around the world about the Nordic countries, one thing will likely come to mind: Vikings. The famous and infamous Nordic ancestors were not only expert sailors but also expert textile producers. Their constant travels required high-quality sails made of wool, in which it would have taken 8000 h to spin and weave one single sail (Jørgensen, 2014). Not only did the Vikings consider wool as a material of quality and longevity, it was also considered a beautiful and luxurious textile, with rich Viking graves filled with clothes made of wool (Klepp, Tobiasson, & Laitala, 2016). But perhaps more importantly is how the Vikings mastered advanced techniques for exploiting the raw beauty and performance of the wool fibers (Klepp, Tobiasson, & Laitala, 2016), a valued tradition and craftsmanship still present in the Nordic countries today. In sustainability messages, this depiction of wool as a sustainable and quality material assumes an important role in justifying Nordicness. Filippa K has partnered with a local sheep farm, using the discarded wool byproduct from the meat production to reduce supply chain length and carbon impact. The wool is then used to produce "the Swedish Wool sweater," explicitly claiming 'Nordicness.'

On their website, Filippa K uses the notions of "local," "Swedish" and "valuable organic resource" as important justification of the Nordicness of Filippa K:

> Each year at Filippa K, we produce a new edition of the Swedish Wool sweater: a signature style for the house that was born from our ongoing initiative which aims to ensure no local wool goes to waste. In 2018 we discovered that wool byproduct from the Swedish meat industry was being discarded. We then partnered with a local sheep farm, connecting them with our existing supplier network [. . .] – turning this valuable organic resource into the first Filippa K Swedish Wool sweater [. . .] By sourcing wool locally from Sweden, we were able to reduce our supply chain length and carbon impact by roughly 75%.*

The message indicates how the collaboration with local communities and wool as a sustainable and highly regarded resource are underlying principles and significant for the brand's positioning, much in line with the old traditions of the vikings who understood how to maximize the production of wool (Klepp, Tobiasson, & Laitala, 2016). While wool and wool production are not necessarily unique to Nordic fashion brands (or Vikings), the emphasis on the "local" and the "Swedishness" aspects means that the worth of the sustainability message should not simply be considered as a general market value, but something that is tied to how Nordic countries perceive themselves as comprising some kind of culturally distinct community (Tägil, 1995). For example, in the case of ARKET the traditional ideas of the newest trends associated with the fast fashion industry are seemingly replaced by the support of communality, Nordic farming and traditional craftsmanship. A message on their website refers to how they support the local sheep farmers in the community of Gotland and thus also emphasizing the conception of wool as a sustainable Nordic material:

> [. . .] The Gotland sheep is a domestic breed named for the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Their wool is coarse but silky and naturally curly, producing a beautifully light fluffy yarn that is known to be

> exceptionally warm and lustrous. Keeping sheep has a long tradition on Gotland. The animals do well on rough pastures, grazing on bushes, leaves and wild herbs, and contribute to improving biodiversity and conserving the island's rugged terrain. There are still a few workshops and craftsmen who keep the local tradition alive but most of the wool is destroyed due to low demand. To support small family-owned farms and save this premium-quality material from going to waste, we are introducing a limited collection of timeless knits made from 100% Gotland wool.

The value of collaborating with small family-owned farms connects to the importance of solidarity and the principle of universal welfare in the region, which is often mentioned as a deeply embedded value in the Nordic societies (Andersen et al., 2019). This can be linked to the egalitarian philosophy and the Nordic Model, where inclusive economic and social development are deeply embedded in all levels of society across the Nordic welfare states (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019), and often celebrated for its ability to achieve economic prosperity in a harmonious manner. ARKET's support of small local communities is grounded in the equality for all, ensuring a modernist view of income redistribution, and thus contributing to the traditional local sheep farms' continued survival despite a low demand. Further, it relates to the region from a historic point of view, as countries consisting of smallholding farmers etc., who have managed to survive in today's modern period unlike many other Southern European nations (Parker, 2002). The brands are therefore taking part of a discourse that highlights the uniqueness of the Nordic region as a community that prioritizes the above-mentioned values.

Figure 4.1: Swedish Wool (Filippa K, 2023c)

In addition, the employment of the terms "Swedish wool" and "Gotland wool" instantly reveal how these actors are motivated by Nordic rationales as it attaches certain connotations to the branded material. While both Filippa K and ARKET predominantly use other types of wool in their production, and from other countries, they specifically highlight the locally sourced wool, although only used for a limited collection or the yearly edition of a sweater. According to Strang et al., (2021), terms like these are commonly employed for commercial and cultural

branding purposes to describe shared Nordic attributes, thus highlighting its importance in the Nordic brands' sustainability messages.

The concept of *hygge* is also an essential part of ARKET's message, with the care of the well-being of smaller farms and animals. Hygge is a part of the Danish vocabulary that addresses "our basic human need to belong" (Brits, 2016, p. 10) and the stability of contentment, however, its value is also common to the other Nordic countries. By being content, the idea is that people become aware of and responsible for other people's well-being, thus capturing a way of keeping people attuned to their surroundings and open to empathy (Brits, 2016; Breunig & Kallestrup, 2020). This "value of hygge" is further reflected in the wording of Gotland wool being *"…silky and naturally curly… known to be exceptionally warm and lustrous."* Hygge is often manifested as a certain feeling rooted in small everyday experiences like wrapping oneself in something that feels comfortable and cozy. For instance, this could be wearing a warm woolen sweater while tucking up in front of a fireplace. These undertakings of caring for small local communities and the feeling of a material, draws its meaning from 'hygge' as the fabric of ordinary living, and its way of giving something rather ordinary "a special context, spirit and warmth" (Brits, 2016, p. 13), essentially making it extraordinary. It resonates with what several authors say about the term, namely, that it implies "ideas of beauty, warmth, emotional closeness, feelings of solidarity, and relaxation from work…" (Gullestad, 1989, p. 80).

When describing the scenery of the sheep doing well on *"rough pastures, grazing on bushes, leaves and wild herbs…conserving the island's rugged terrain,"* ARKET is portraying the beauty and pleasure of "the simple things in life," such as taking in the present moment of a picturesque scene, which is an important tradition of 'hygge' at a time where people have become distanced from each other and the environment (Brits, 2016). Similarly, is the care for animals' well-being describing a way of being that introduces humanity and warmth into one's life. Norrøna see this value of animal welfare as an obligation in its use of sheep wool:

> The wool we use comes from sheep that are non-mulesed and traceable. All of our wool is either 3rd party verified & traceable or Responsible Wool Standard (RWS) certified [. . .] As animals have no voice in terms of their well-being, we see it as our obligation to ensure that all of our animal products originate from animals that are treated well [. . .] Norrøna is genuinely concerned with the welfare of the animals in our value chain and we work to make sure that they are treated humanely.

Next to the above message is a brand picture portraying a sheep, standing in high bushes while looking over the scenic mountains in the Norwegian landscape, the focus is not on clothes, but on quietly enjoying and appreciating nature – similarly to ARKET's scenery and the pictures on Filippa K's website. In this way, the brands are inspired by bringing nature into their consumers' lives, creating a harmonious atmosphere and a feeling of warmly hygge that celebrates a quiet stability and the joy of finding peace in the little things. For 66˚North, wool resumes a different meaning in their sustainability message. It is mainly described as a durable

and a *"natural long-lasting and breathable insulator that keeps you dry…and feels comfortable even when wet or sweaty and cold…and it is an environmentally friendly fiber that can easily be composted."* Similar messages can be found across many of the case brands using wool in their production, praising the fiber for its qualities such as functionality, longevity, comfortable feeling, and sustainable qualities – all tied to the Nordic notions of combining smart designs with function and durability. The general enthusiasm around wool, signifies the high value of the material in the Nordic region as not just being a regular fiber, but something that holds a special meaning. It used to be crucial for the Vikings' everyday lives, but whereas it is still valued as a premium material, it is now also celebrated for its sustainable qualities.

Organic, Bio-Based, or Natural Materials: A Nordic Love Story

It's official – organic products are here to stay. Whether it is organic foods, organic skincare, or organic clothing, these products have moved into the minds of consumers. In terms of food production, many reviews have identified an organic 'health halo' with consumers having the perception that organic products are healthier and a more 'natural' alternative for your body than conventional products (Tobi, Harris, Rana, Brown, Ouaife, & Green, 2019). This is particularly the case in the Nordic region, with an increased consumer focus on a healthy lifestyle, and the countries being the most developed markets in the world for organic food production and sales (Pekala, 2020). While many consumers arguably do not think of organic food production when they think of organic fashion, the two industries are essentially part of an interconnected agricultural system, with organic fashion products stemming from materials produced of organic fibres crops. With a rich agricultural history and heritage, the Nordic countries are deeply involved in its farming industry, and its vital importance for society, and thus also in its environmental impact (Prestvik, Kvakkestad & Skutevik, 2013). However, in terms of the fashion industry, most Nordic brands have today out-sourced their production to cheaper production countries with little legislation (Klepp et al., 2014) in regards to e.g., artificial fertilizers and pesticides, with the result that it is legal to import goods that would otherwise be illegal to produce in the Nordic region. Consequently, many of these Nordic brand actors do not view their use of organic materials as merely a commercial adjustment to the desires of a market, but rather as something that is integrated as a "Nordic way of thinking." Norrøna uses notions of organic food and cotton, implicitly drawing parallels to the Nordics' focus on 'organicness':

> Today Norrøna uses 100% organic cotton in all of our cotton products! [. . .] Even though the idea of organic cotton might seem confusing, the movement is based on the same principles as the ones for organic food. Just as food, organic cotton is grown using methods that have a low impact on mother earth. There's no use of toxic chemicals and it promotes and enhances biodiversity and biological cycles. Currently 100% of our cotton is organic or recycled.

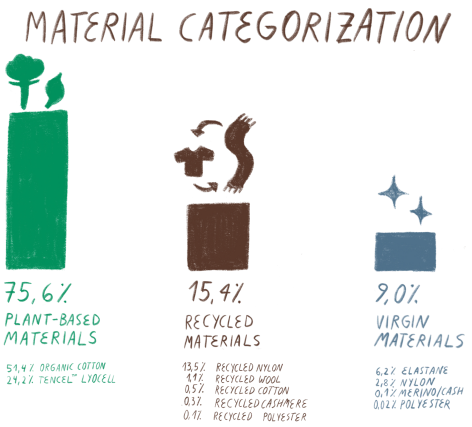
While this might sound like a typical sustainability message that can be found on many company websites, the drawn parallel to an organic "movement" based on the ones for food, connects it to the Nordic countries "organic food movement," having the most developed organic

markets in the world, in particular Denmark and Sweden. For example, was Denmark the first country in the world to develop national organic standards and launch an organic label by setting rules for organic production (Pekala, 2020). This awareness and focus on organic products in the Nordic region are not only tied to food though, as consumers are being increasingly concerned on the environmental sustainability of the clothing they consume, leading them to attach the two with an increasing knowledge and awareness around sourcing methods. This "movement" is thus strongly present in all of the case brands' messages, with a strong emphasis on especially bio-based, recycled, upcycled, and organic materials that plays a role in protecting biodiversity. On their website, the CEO of Nudie jeans, Joakim Levin, describes the choice of materials as *"a no-brainer. It's really about common sense,"* referring to how the brand partners with organic cotton farmers to protect the environment:

> Since clean dry denim fabric is one of the cornerstones of Nudie Jeans, why would we use anything but clean cotton to produce it? In fact, all our cotton garments originate from certified organic farming. [. . .] Organic cotton is grown without any artificial fertilizers, pesticides or genetically modified seeds. The methods eliminate the risks associated with hazardous chemicals used in conventional cotton farming. This is not only important for the people working on the fields but also for the soil as it is not contaminated by toxic pesticides.

This mentioning of "clean" in relation to a material, connects with the general consumer perception that everything organic is perceived as something clean and more preferable than conventional products (Tobi et al., 2019). The importance of protecting the soil from contamination and the workers in the fields, is also a common theme in the brands' messages. At Marimekko, the attention is also on organic materials, a more sustainable agriculture and protection of farmers with their *"mission of Better Cotton to help cotton [farming] communities to survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment,"* while Sandqvist portrays a similar message, stating how *"all cotton used is produced on a small scale by marginalized farmers…By choosing this [organic] cotton, we support both the farmers and cause less harm to the environment."* It is mainly through commitment to the green and civic values that justify the Nordicness in the brands' messages, thus tying the brands to the Nordic concepts of *dugnad*, *samfundssind*, *forkröelse* and *talkoot*, all characterized by its notions of collective social action and care for the common good – which holds a central position in the creation of the Nordic welfare societies (Simon & Mobekk, 2019; Andersen et al., 2019). Further, it connects to the Nordics' historical heritage as nations that previously consisted of small-scale farming, together with work in fishing and forestry. For example, Swedish society was formerly characterized as 'agrarian', with a whooping two thirds of Swedes working in agriculture in 1870, responsible for supplying the needs of local communities (Morell & Myrdal, 2011).

Figure 4.2: Our Products (Organic Basics, 2023b)



The positive attitudes to organic agriculture as a sustainable solution (also outside of the Nordic region) arguably ties to a general public interest and the Nordics' strong identification with nature (Morell & Myrdal, 2011). A sustainability message from Organic Basics refer to this "love of nature" in its usage of dyes from food waste:

> Conventional dyes are typically made from fossil fuel-based raw materials. So, we introduced a selection of new colors inspired by nature and colored by natural dyes made from natural, non-edible agricultural and herbal industrial waste that would otherwise go to landfill. Our new dyes are based on waste from rosemary, palmetto fruit, saw palmetto and beetroot production.

In a figure of Organic Basics' material categorization (Figure 4.2), the high percentages of plant-based materials used are portrayed from a green pillar, connecting fashion with nature and thus asserting the 'Nordic' by its green values. All case brands elaborate this 'green' awareness extensively through their sustainability messages, with Sandqvist explicitly mentioning that *"by staying true to our Scandinavian roots, we believe in the value of sustainability and care for the environment…,* therefore directly claiming the green values connected to the Nordic region. At ARKET, this green value is also reflected in its use of retrieved waste materials from the *"the North Sea to South Asia"* to protect the oceans:

> ECONYL® is designed exclusively from waste materials such as discarded fishnets and textile scraps. The regenerated nylon has a much lower impact on the environment than virgin nylon and helps divert waste from landfills and oceans. [. . .] The fishnets are retrieved from all parts of the world – from the North Sea to South Asia – and include so-called ghost nets which have been lost and left at sea and pose a serious threat to marine life.

The emphasis on the protection of aquatic environmental protection implicitly connects to the Nordic regions' long maritime history and strong ties to the sea e.g., through coastal fishing as a labor-intensive production (Hultman et al., 2018). The sea arguably holds great value for

many Nordics', both in terms of cultural heritage, but also due to the mere fact of the countries' extensive mainland and island coastlines, thus often being exposed to water in many areas of the region. The close relationship with the sea ties to the concept of 'friluftsliv', in which many Nordics' value the free-air life and spending time in nature or by the sea by being in harmony with their outdoor surroundings (Beery, 2012). ARKET further showcase this notion of the maritime with its usage of a material named *"Rise by BLOOM algae foam"* that is *"made from repurposed algae biomass and bio-based additives, [which] reduces the use of petroleum-based EVA and helps maintain healthy marine ecosystems."* While the other case brands do not employ materials made of algae biomass, nylon yarn (Figure 4.3) or similar, several of them showcase their "love for the sea" on their websites with numerous photos of water, fishermen, and the Stockholm archipelago, hence emphasizing an embedded (Nordic) appreciation for the ocean. This notion is also depicted in many of the brands' collaborative sustainability endeavors and partnerships, but that we will elaborate on further in section 4.2.

Figure 4.3: Materials: What We Are Made Of (ARKET, 2023b)

Following the above analysis, we have recognized that all case brands present product materials as a sustainable initiative, albeit there was a slight variation in the showcased materials due to the nature of the distinctive products sold by the brand actors. Nevertheless, certain materials were often in the spotlight throughout the websites and reports, whereas these tended to justify cues previously identified as 'Nordic', in comparison to other types of materials. Specifically, locally-sourced wool and organic-based materials seemed to be a common thread in many of the brands' sustainability messages, where we found these to illustrate 'Nordicness' in various ways, for example by its links to Nordic history and nature, hygge, principles of universal welfare, the 'Nordic organic movement', and finally organic agriculture.

4.2 Collaborative Innovation as Collective Responsibility

Nordic innovations are arguably a hot topic around the world, especially when it comes to developing green sustainable solutions and implementing technology for renewable energy, where the Nordic region has a well-established position as a world leader (Weber & Smith, 2016). The key for this success have previously been identified as stemming from favorable framework conditions and a well-functioning regional innovation system (Mikkola, Randall & Hagberg, 2016). During the sampling process of this study, it became apparent that collaborative innovation was a common theme among all case brands, where a few brands in particular had incorporated innovative collaboration into their sustainable operations. However, we found that most of the messages involving innovation could be applicable for the analysis in some manner. As a result, a comprehensive analysis on collaborative innovation went beyond the scope of this chapter, instead leading to a small selection of initiatives and collaborations that demonstrate the incorporation of 'Nordicness'. The following two sub-section will outline those cases.

Let's Partner Up! Spreading the Message 'The Nordic Way'

The global attention on climate change and the continuing challenge of implementing sustainable solutions, has placed energy at the forefront of the political agenda, including organic agriculture as presented in the previous section. Here, the Nordic region has emerged at the global center stage of attention, combining ambitious climate and energy policies with steady economic growth (Weber & Smith, 2016). Since the breakthrough of industrial and modern times, the Nordics' have shown themselves to be capable of steady development and renewal in many areas (Andersen & Crehan, 2009), where co-operation tied with innovation in this sense is a natural ingredient of a Nordic approach, thus leading to an intrinsic 'Nordic Way' when facing issues. So, how does this relate to the fashion industry? As mentioned above, the Nordic countries have historically been successful in adapting to the application of innovative solutions, and this seems to have influenced the case brands' initiatives. During our analysis, we uncovered how some of the brands were teaming up with suppliers or partners to implement sustainable solutions to their supply chain, whereas these were directly influenced by 'green' Nordic innovation policies, in particular organic agriculture and renewable energy. In an interview published on their website journal, Nudie Jeans sat down with their Indian supplier, Armstrong Knitting Mills, to elaborate on their collaboration towards reducing CO2 emission as a collective responsibility:

> Since the overall temperatures are going in the same direction, all players in the textile industry — big and small — need to start acting. Because every one of us shares the responsibility to decrease our CO2 emissions. So, what can Nudie Jeans do? We can start by choosing suppliers who take their role in the global shift toward renewable energy and reducing CO2 emissions seriously.

Nudie Jeans' sense of shared responsibility for the environment is presented as an essential part of their strategy in collaborating with suppliers who share their mission. This emphasis ties to Nordic countries' focus on sustainability as a social responsibility, shaped by the so-called

Nordic Model (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019). The importance of taking *action* towards sustainable solutions is related to the Nordic established tradition of ecological concern and progressive environmental policies (Khan et al., 2021), where it is taken as a given that everyone *"big and small – need to start acting"*, ensuring communal growth and worth. Further, the focus on renewable energy is often seen elsewhere as 'Nordic' – due to the regions' leading position within these technologies and the adoption of them. For instance, it was estimated in 2014 that 38% of the total primary energy supply in the Nordic region came from renewable sources (Mikkola, Randall & Hagberg, 2016). The published interview also sheds lights on the supplier's view, explaining their investment in renewable energy systems:

> We are constantly looking to increase our renewable energy production, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Moving forward, we plan to invest more in renewable energy production. Our first step was the windmills — with a current capacity of 18.50 megawatts per year — and we recently invested in solar panels. [. . .] Working with brands like Nudie Jeans attract other brands with a sustainable mindset, so it definitely gives Armstrong a competitive edge. And hopefully, the competitors will follow, which ultimately means reduced emissions on a bigger scale.

Cooperation between industries and societies has been a defining characteristic of the Nordic countries' development in sustainable development, giving them a competitive advantage. However, as argued by Andersen & Crehan (2009) then the Nordic region will have to sustain this position by assuming a leadership role and not simply follow trends. Nudie Jeans show signs that they are taking on this leadership role. For example, by collaborating with a supplier who invests in windmills and solar panels, they are not only leading the way for competitors to take similar action, but also contributing to developing solutions in foreign countries with the ultimate outcome of *"reduced emissions on a bigger scale."*

Figure 4.4: The Journal: Sustainability (Nudie Jeans, 2023c)

Similarly, have cooperation between industries and academia been defining in the Nordic countries sustainable development (Andersen & Crehan, 2009), whereas Filippa K are collaborating with the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in transitioning to renewable energy in their supply chain aimed *"to examine what actions Filippa K could perform to lower their emissions originating from their wool acquisition process."* At Organic Basics, their innovative quests resume something different. The brands' innovative endeavor involves cooperation with WWF, to develop Turkey's first regenerative organic cotton supply chain:

> In order to help reverse climate change and make a positive impact, we are co-creating with WWF to develop the first regenerative organic cotton farm in Turkey. The project is a long-term one that will take place over at least the next three years. It will help to change the way cotton is grown in the region, and hopefully inspire more farmers to change to regenerative organic cotton farming practices. [. . .] Switching modern agricultural practices to regenerative practices will be instrumental in helping to reverse climate change.

The observed advocacy among the Nordic actors towards innovative solutions promoting green growth, plays a significant role in the concept of 'Nordicness,' where not only NGOs but brands like Nudie Jeans and Organic Basics align with national government policies (Andersen et al., 2019). Although the above-mentioned projects take place outside of the Nordic region, the same Nordic governmental and societal values can be observed in the brand's innovative operations and collaborations. In the same way, we have observed various smaller-scale collaborations much closer to "home." For example, at Sandqvist, the civic and green values of the Nordic fashion brands are shown through the protection of bees/biodiversity in Sweden:

> We are introducing our first Gardening Bag, in support of Naturskyddsföreningens campaign operation Save The Bees. This is a project close to our hearts, growing up in a small village in Sweden, the meadows and forests were always teaming with life, insects and flowers. Nowadays, just the sight of a bee feels like a rare thing. This needs to change. We need biodiversity, we need sustainable farming and foresting and we need bees. We can all do something to help. - Daniel Sandqvist, Co-founder Sandqvist

Save the Bees project is just one out of many collaborative projects and innovations spotted across all brand actors. A few notable ones are Filippa K's RISE-project to develop a branded *"bio-based Scandinavian Vegan "Leather"* material from *"Swedish waste streams from the apple cider and forestry industries,"* and Organic Basics' and Norrøna's ocean clean-up collabs in their pursuits to remove plastics from beaches and oceans around Copenhagen and the Norwegian coastline, respectively. Also, a common theme is the inclusion of employees, inspired by the Nordic value of collective social action (Simon & Mobekk, 2019; Andersen et al., 2019). At 66°North, this is shown through the brand's plan to build a forest in Iceland:

> 66°North officially signed a contract with the Icelandic Forestry Association (IFA) for the next forty years to build a forest in the name of 66°North [. . .] The partnership involves planting around 11,000 trees over the next five years [. . .] The first step towards the 66°North forest was taken May 29, 2021 where the staff of 66°North and their families planted 100 trees.

Figure 4.5: 66˚North and the Forestry of Iceland (66˚North, n.d.)

Consequently, these brand actors align with the Nordic model, which demonstrates Nordicness through their commitment to collective responsibility through actionable efforts. The movement of coming together for a social cause, and the acceptance towards innovation in all aspects are what enable the case brands to live out their sustainable mission. In this way, the messages capture notions of Nordic *modernity* and *samfundssind* as the brands are inspired by their Nordic roots, as well as the political agenda in the Nordic region.

4.3 Circular Fashion as the New (Nordic) Sustainability Paradigm

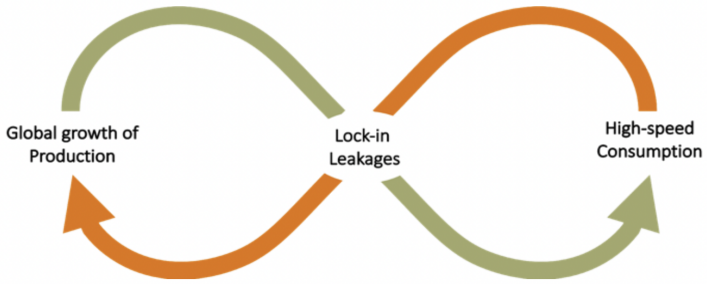
While we conducted analysis on all eight case brands to understand emerging themes of how they furnished their sustainability strategy and communicated it, it was evident that Circular Economy as a concept was emerging as a solution in the form of *Circular Fashion.* Although all actors did not refer to the concept and 'circular fashion', the underlying strategy was clear. We utilized the prerequisites of *circular product design, production, recycling, product repair and reuse mechanism* identified by Rathinamoorthy (2018) to identify the emerging theme of circularity guided by the four key component of a Circular Fashion System: *materials, design, consumption and end-of-life* and their corresponding considerations presented by Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, (2021). However, it is worth noting that not all brands with the exception of 'Nudie Jeans' have a holistic circular fashion approach to its entire value chain, but fulfills multiple considerations within all four phases of fashion circularity mentioned above. Additionally, our aim is to unveil the distinctive Nordic qualities that define the sustainability communications of these brands and identify commonalities in such portrayals among the selected case brands.

4.3.1 From Passion to Circular Action: The Purposeful Transformation of Sustainability Strategy

The achievement of a sustainable and circular fashion and textiles system relies on collaborative efforts encompassing society as a whole, involving various industries, policymakers, and the

millions of individuals who are consumers and enthusiasts of fashion. The body of academic research revolving around circular economy and its iterative concepts demonstrates the potential of applying circular economy principles in facilitating the transformation from an extractive, wasteful, and risk-amplifying value chain to a circular business ecosystem within the fashion and textiles industry (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021). This shift is vital for transforming a sector that can adapt resiliently to the pressing environmental challenges we face today. The transition towards circularity necessitates addressing challenging self-reinforcing dynamics. As Figure 4.6 by Cornell et al., (2021) illustrates, the global increase in production and rapid consumption has led to an unsustainable systemic lock-in, resulting in value chains characterized by material leakages instead of a restorative and regenerative design.

Figure 4.6: Systemic Lock-in of the Global Fashion Value Chain (Cornell, Häyhä & Palm, 2021)



Circular economy in principle aims to dissociate economic growth and development from the depletion of finite resources by differentiating between technical and biological materials, emphasizing efficient material design and utilization to optimize resource flow, and ensure the preservation or enhancement of both technical and natural resource stocks (Todeschini et al., 2017). Upon analyzing the case brands, a seemingly prevalent theme is to primarily prioritize environmental responsibility with implicit gain towards the social aspects of sustainability. However, Geissdoerfer et al., (2016) states that it is plausible to design sustainability policy around specific industries with emphasis on the environment in developed nations such as Nordic countries and more social emphasis in developing countries in Africa or South East Asia. Hence, the following analysis attempts to discover why the Nordic brands may be actively transforming their sustainability focus towards a more circular approach in sight of the impending challenge of not only transforming sustainability strategy but the entire business models and how this may be influenced by values and norms which characterize Nordicness. However, it is worth noting that all the case companies place substantial importance on social aspects of sustainability which is through their commitment to value chain transparency and ethical trade, both in conjunction with and separate from their communication efforts regarding circular fashion, as revealed through the conducted analysis below.

Figure 4.7: The Art of Building a New Brand (Nudie Jeans, 2019)

"At the time, we were almost the only company building a brand based tangibly on values. When we started Nudie Jeans in 2001, we decided that environmental awareness and human rights would permeate everything we did" as the founder of Nudie Jeans, Maria Erixon, explains in her book *"Start your own f*cking brand,"* presenting the backstory of Nudie Jeans. While one approach to sustainability involves building a brand and aligning its trajectory with sustainable practices, establishing a brand with circularity as its fundamental purpose necessitates a genuine passion for accountability as a driving force. As the industry has largely been caught up with the idea of *Circular Fashion,* Nordic brands such as Nudie Jeans, Filippa K, and Pure Waste are in the forefront of the Circular Economy for Fashion concept.

Nudie Jeans and its Swedish cultural values are ingrained throughout every aspect of the brand. Its inception as a circular brand runs deep within the personal convictions of the founders on protecting the environment and respecting people. In the chapter "From Sweden with love", Maria Erixon states how *"...we were determined that environmental consciousness and human rights would inform everything we did. Nothing was to be produced where the environment and or the people could be harmed. We wanted to sleep well at night,"* which justifies the purposeful, passionate conceptions for the environment within many Nordic citizens' lives. Hence, Nudie Jeans has not only embraced but leads the industry based on values *"driven by conviction and determination"* in the face of many hurdles. These messages can be consistently found across their sustainability claims and boldly in statements such as *"we made the choice to manufacture our product in a fair and ethical way. An opportunity every company is given, but too few take."*

Norrønas' CEO, Jørgen Jørgensen, mirrors similar sentiments that are ecologically aligned with less emphasis on the social aspect of sustainability. The brand's communications are fundamentally based on the businesses values of quality and the love of nature with reference to the Nordic concept of *Friluftsliv*: *"...to be able to make products that don't hurt the environment is important for me also, so I can sleep well at night…we as an outdoor company have more responsibility, we have to change."* In their six part (video) mini series published to promote the sustainability roadmap, Jørgen describes the concept from a collective social responsibility standpoint with reflection to its founder's (his grandfather) love for nature. Their tagline 'Welcome to Nature' echoes its purpose as an outdoor clothing brand and also the deep seeded connection between Norwegian people and nature. The concept of friluftsliv, deeply rooted in the cultural values of each Nordic country, showcases unique interpretations while upholding the shared ideals of fostering a profound connection and harmonious coexistence with nature. Zoglowek et al., (2018) describes the concept of friluftsliv from the popular Norwegian idol; professor Fridtjof Nansen, whose perspective was to foster the ability to see simple and fundamental things, embark on untrodden trails, accept challenges and risks and dare to do the unknown, while his version of friluftsliv was characterized by simplicity, accountability, inquisitiveness, hand-on experience and direct and authentic experiences with nature (Zoglowek et al., 2018). Alternatively, among its many interpretations of the Nordic phenomenon, the concept is also understood as one's attitude towards nature, ecological thinking and accountability towards the environment and commitment to society (Repp, 2007). Norrønas commitment towards ecological thinking is further exemplified by its commitment to circular fashion models of resource optimisation and increasing consumer awareness by overconsumption, and its direct impact on the very nature that Nordics' love and cherish:

> For us it's important that we don't make fast clothing, that's not a super sustainable way of being. We still want to make really high-quality products. We want them to last a long time, we want people to use them, but we want to make sure that we have a plan to get them back in. –Brad Boren, Director of Innovation & Sustainability

The brand's strong connection with the environment is effectively demonstrated through their communications, highlighting their unwavering commitment to "responsibility to change." This is evident in their continuous exploration and implementation of innovative circular models aimed at optimizing resources and closing the loop towards becoming a circular model. Norrøna is aiming at becoming *"the most responsible outdoor company,"* and the leader in environmental and social responsibility by pushing the industry forward, hence the brand introduced its Responsibility Roadmap 2029, which aims to achieve ten sustainability goals by the year 2029. Although Norrøna's sustainability roadmap showcases ambitious goals inspired by circular economy principles, the brand's direct focus on the second cycle of post-consumer recycling and repurposing of their products, which is a crucial element of circular fashion, appears to be lacking. We delve deeper into this potential gap within the roadmap in our analysis.

Figure 4.8: Responsibility Roadmap 2029 (Norrøna, 2015)

At Marimekko, fashion and accessories contribute to 53% of its revenue. The value of "fairness to everyone and everything" not only emphasizes their dedication to sustainability but also embodies the essence of Finnish values that radiate throughout their actions. The concept of *friluftsliv* is very much part and parcel of Finnish society, with over 80% of its land covered in trees and lakes. Finland's profound bond with nature has also positioned it as a leader in forest management. Today, Finland boasts over 50% more trees than it did 50 years ago, a testament to the strong commitment of Finns to preserve and responsibly harness the benefits of the environment (Finland Toolbox, 2021). The brand's values reflect similarities to the Finnish cultural construct of *Sisu* which are also reflected in their ambitious but sensible achievement of sustainability and circularity goals. Sisu embodies the notion of conquering obstacles through unwavering determination and resilience, requiring not only practical wisdom but also the ability to assimilate environmental cues and respond to challenges in a positive and adaptive manner (Lahti, 2019). Marimekko's values of *"Getting things done – together"* and *"Courage, even at the risk of failure"* is mirrored by efforts which included carrying out:

> Uninterrupted third-party audits of factories in high-risk countries during the coronavirus pandemic, subjecting 100% of purchases from non-EU countries to social audits, recycling cutting waste of their products into fibers and incorporating regenerated fibers to launch their first closed-loop collaboration in 2023, and co-developing wood-based SPINNOVA® fiber as an alternative sustainable material.

These endeavors exemplify the Finnish textile industry's pursuit of becoming a global frontrunner in circular textile production. Through collaborative cross-industry efforts, the industry focuses on developing state-of-the-art technologies and achieving a closed-loop system, highlighting their commitment to completing the circularity circle (UNDP, 2021). The brand's commitment to circularity is encapsulated within their "timeless design" and "design from Finland" philosophy, aligning with the four essential principles of the circular economy in fashion identified by Rathinamoorthy (2018). It can be understood that Marimekko's sustainability strategy is built on three guiding principles that are based on the triple bottom line

framework with cautious but effective integration of circular economy principles across all its verticals. Marimekko identifies the principles below as:

1. Timeliness design brings joy for generations to come
2. The product of tomorrow leave no trace
3. Positive change through fairness and equality

> Marimekko Innovation Works – a cross functional, in-house innovation function – together with our partners is responsible for the development, promotion, and piloting of innovative, more sustainable materials, dyes, and technologies, as well as new business models and services related to sustainability and the circular economy.

Marimekko is determined to contribute to the circular economy through new processes and services, which are developed by 'Marimekko Innovation Works' and illustrated in the figure below, depicting its ambitions to create a closed loop model as well as achieving long-term business success. According to Brydges et al., (2022) the effectiveness of sustainability efforts lies in their ability to be actionable and engage consumers, as it is crucial for consumers to take responsibility and actively contribute to making a difference. Given the complexity of sustainability as a phenomenon, it becomes imperative to involve customers, not just in raising their interest in relevant issues, but also in actively participating and being part of the solution. Figure 4.9 provides a visual representation of what Marimekko intends to achieve through its strategy which captures its design values, recycled and reused products and upcycled material, cleaner and transparent supply chain in a circular pattern.

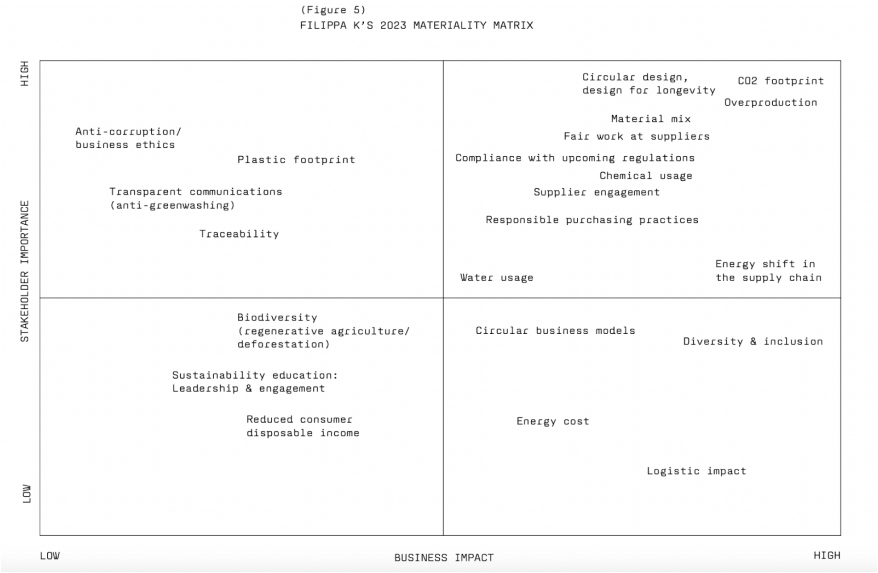
Figure 4.9: Marimekko Sustainability Strategy (Marimekko, 2023c)

Swedish Filippa K has been a forerunner in sustainable fashion and has actively campaigned towards circular economy transformation within the industry. The brand is another example of a purpose business inspired by its Nordic values. It states that the brand established a circular business model as far as 2014, which has since evolved into a three pillar sustainability model of which *1. Circularity* aims to design the full cycle of a garment with the "*intention of reducing, repairing, reusing and recycling,"* whereas the *2. Traceability* and *3. Impact*

Reduction pillars show their attempt to ensure supply chain transparency and quantified impact measurement from all organizational activities. Filippa K's sustainability team annually updates a comprehensive material topics matrix (Figure 4.10), incorporating inputs from various stakeholders, including the customer care team, suppliers, and production teams, ensuring a holistic perspective on sustainability considerations. Following the creation of the material topics matrix, Filippa K validates the identified topics using Global Reporting Index (GRI) standards disclosures. This matrix offers transparency into the brand's circular economy considerations in relation to stakeholders, with a notable emphasis on the materiality and design aspects of their value chain. Additionally, Filippa K demonstrates significant interest in the second cycle usage of their products through initiatives such as their K Pre Owned program:

> In 2022 we increased our use of organic and recycled cotton in our collections (35%), and the majority of our garments were made using mono fibres (62%). We held four circularity workshops for our Fabric, Design, Pattern and Buying teams. We started new circularity initiatives such as the Circulose® Loop, and continued with the ongoing initiatives of Swedish Wool and Filippa K Preowned. We worked with our long term partner, the fabric mill Manteco, to develop a selection of garments using wool made from previous Filippa K production scraps.

Figure 4.10: Filippa K Materiality Matrix (Filippa K, 2023)



Rooted in its Swedish origins, Filippa K has been seeking to reshape the fashion industry by *"driving a movement of mindful consumption by creating pieces with long-lasting style and quality"* since its inception in 1993. This messaging appears consistently in their sustainability communications. Strähle & Schnaidt (2016) highlight Filippa K's commitment to understanding and enhancing its closed-loop supply chain, and the brand actively engages consumers in completing the cycle through initiatives such as their pre-owned program and product rental

programs, which incentivize material recycling. By prioritizing functional and timeless design that reduces overconsumption, the brand embodies the principles of *Nordic minimalist design* and aligns with the guiding principles of the *acceptera manifesto*. Further, it is important to note that Filippa K has established short and medium term targets to drive their circularity initiatives from 2021 to 2040, aiming to "*ensure strategic relevance in terms of financial performance and mitigate business risks associated with environmental challenges."* We expect to delve further into this in our subsequent analysis.

While ARKET is part of the Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) Group, which often faces criticism for its role in advancing and at times spearheading the fast fashion industry, ARKET positions itself as a sustainable offering within the group's portfolio, leveraging the well-established, extensive, and strong supply chain of the H&M Group:

> Fashion is one of the world's most resource-intensive industries with a large climate footprint. But for many of us at ARKET, the opportunity to be part of a positive development and contribute to a circular economy is what motivates us in our daily work.

The sustainability messaging of ARKET appears to draw inspiration from other Swedish brands like Filippa K, which could be a result of both diversification and a test platform for H&Ms ongoing efforts to adapt circular economy practices. According to the H&M Group (2023), *"ARKET's mission is to democratize quality through widely accessible, well-made, durable products designed to be used and loved for a long time"* aligning with the design ethos of many Nordic brands in their pursuit of implementing circular economy policies. ARKET would not have been able to "democratize" quality and become widely accessible if not for H&M's complex but well established global supply chain. Such claims can be evaluated in light of criticism from the Australian ethical brand ratings agency 'Good On You.' The agency describes how ARKET's use of medium-level eco-friendly materials, and fast fashion traits such as offering on-trend styles and engaging in rapid stock replenishment, may be contradictory to its claims of creating durable long-lasting products (Good On You, 2022). Nevertheless, ARKET prioritizes textile recycling as an element of its closed-loop model, although it lacks a repair and reuse program unlike its other competitors. An interesting and unexpected aspect of their recycling program is its acceptance of any fashion product, regardless of its condition or brand:

> Bring clothes, shoes and home textiles to your nearest ARKET store - from any brand, in any condition. No product is too small or too insignificant to be recycled. Even a single sock can be left behind and given a new purpose.

Incorporating recycling into a business model requires changes in the cost structure, key activities, and key partners parameters, as fashion brands often opt to procure recycled materials instead of processing them internally (Todeschini et al., 2017). Therefore, the brand's recycling

efforts can be viewed as a commendable circular initiative, at least in the short term, aimed at preventing fashion industry products from ending up in landfills. This involves carrying out complex transformations within its sourcing and production processes and collaborating with partners. However, ARKET's efforts towards circularity in its affairs can arguably be an outcome of its Swedish origins and Scandinavian design ethos, which reflects the autonomy it enjoys despite its affiliations with H&M Group.

Located at the far reaches of the Nordic region, another brand that deeply values its heritage and embodies a strong sense of purpose is Icelandic 66˚North. Throughout its 97-year existence, the brand has provided protection to the people, fishermen, and rescue teams of Iceland against the unforgiving and challenging climate of the North:

> 66˚North combines the longstanding Icelandic virtues of resilience, making things that last, never wasting anything, and harmony with nature, alongside modern best practices in design, production, and supply chain management to create a brand that is carbon neutral, circular – the more it grows the more good it does – and an example of a new (yet also very old) kind of sustainable company.

As it appears, the brand has a dedicated focus on circularity by showcasing its less than comprehensive sustainability initiatives on their website. Despite not fully capitalizing on its smaller scale and remote geographical location for the purpose of a truly circular business suggested by *"it's as a small nation, our customers have always been our friends, family, and neighbors."* 66˚North has achieved remarkable growth throughout the Nordic region, Europe, and even the Americas during its nine-decade history. As 66˚North experiences growth, it faces its share of challenges, which the brand endeavors to address through its adherence to circular principles. Below are notable efforts outlined by 66˚North from the foundation of their approach:

> **Functional, Multi-Purpose Design:** *"We don't want you to have a closet filled with single-purpose shells, insulation layers, or jackets."* The brand focuses on producing multi-purpose products designed for a variety of uses, reducing overall consumption.
>
> **Materials That Last:** *"We would rather make a garment that lasts for a decade rather than one which is slightly more "sustainable" in the short term but has material which will break down and lead to waste after two or three years."* 66˚North reflects on the general sentiment across case brands in producing long-lasting garments over sub-par products at the cost of marginal gains in sustainability.
>
> **Shrinking Product Assortment:** *"To reduce waste and live up to our standards of multi-purpose, versatile design, we are always looking for opportunities to shrink the product assortment."* 66˚North claims that it has reduced its product assortment by 52% since 2018 to achieve efficient growth.
>
> **Product Repairs:** *"We want your clothing to live a long and healthy life as possible. We run our own repair service at our 66°North headquarters in Iceland."* Repairs are encouraged despite limited accessibility.

Carbon Offsetting

"*While 66˚North is a carbon offsetting business, it is only through our holistic approach to circularity that we can minimize harm."* 66˚North acknowledges that carbon offsetting is not a perfect solution and emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach.

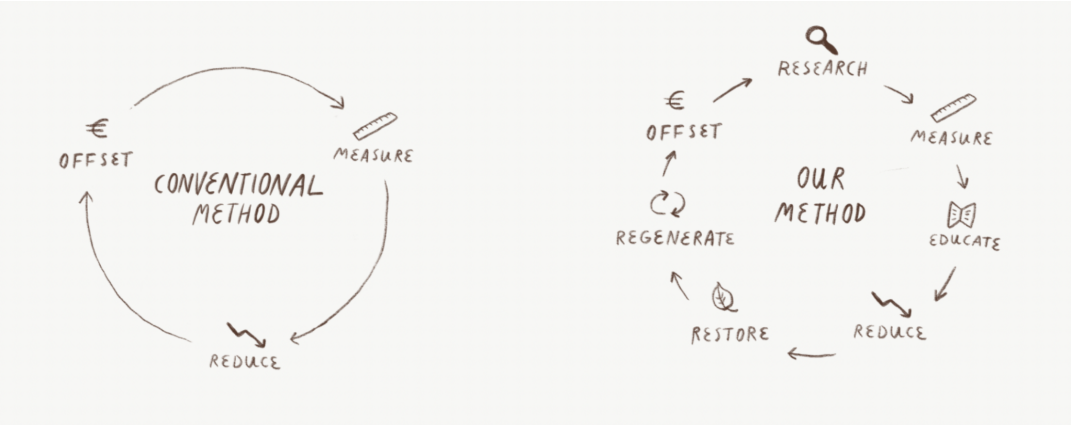
Although the brand demonstrates a commitment to the principles of a circular economy, as reflected in its sustainability messaging, carbon offsetting has been a topic of intense critique within the scientific community. According to Watt (2021), carbon offsetting virtues can create an illusion of a beneficial system based on virtual representations, leading to a focus on the symbolic value of carbon credits, hiding the actual environmental and social impacts of their production. The activity continues to contribute to the decline of the UN Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) offsetting system, and continues to haunt international climate governance at the UN in the wake of the 2015 Paris Agreement (Watt, 2021). The criticism directed towards the carbon offset market has resulted in intermittent challenges to its legitimacy (Paterson, 2012). Nevertheless, 66˚North, like other Nordic fashion brands, proudly draws inspiration from its Icelandic heritage and values rooted in a harmonious relationship with nature, hence the messaging uncovers an inherent sense of responsibility.

Organic Basics is also actively engaged in carbon offsetting by striving to minimize CO2 emissions throughout its supply chain, making it a key sustainability metric for the company. *"There is no such thing as a sustainable fashion brand. But we can make clothes in a better way. Let's share the progress we've made and the challenges we face."* The brands' detailed sustainability messaging appears to be focused around two aspects: *1. Reducing its carbon emissions impact* and 2. *CO2 emissions transparency across its supply chain.* A specific target for the company is to become changemakers and openly disclose their impact with aims of reducing *"our emissions intensity by 50%. But what does that actually mean? We'll reduce our emissions by 50%, relative to our revenue growth."* Additionally, the brand admits to setting an unrealistic net zero carbon emissions commitment back in 2019:

> We now realize this is not feasible. We're a fast-growing startup, and because we plan to continue growing and expanding our product offering – whether it's in sizes, colors or categories – we realized that our net zero commitment is completely unrealistic. That's why we're setting a new carbon intensity target.

Through acknowledging its penchant to grow as a result of setting an unrealistic target, Organic Basics openly admits to the possibility of setting unrealistic growth targets, thus raising concerns about the sincerity of their efforts. The brand is an unique example by not explicitly referring to circular economy policies throughout their corporate sustainability messaging, although many of their initiatives such as the take-back program, material choices, and product care communications, demonstrate elements of a closed-loop approach in their strategy.

Figure 4.11: Organic Basics' Holistic CO2 Offsetting Framework (Organic Basics, 2023)



Swedish brand Sandqvist has created a unique place in the market for their modern, minimalist Scandinavian designs and responsible practices, thus they are another example of placing circular economy policies at the core of their sustainability strategy:

> Sandqvist has set ambitious sustainability goals for 2025 and 2030 [. . .] such as reducing our total climate footprint by 50% and achieving a fully circular business. The latter require a high degree of cooperation with customers and suppliers throughout the value chain, which we constantly strive to achieve.

It is clear from their messaging that Sandqvist is aware of the challenges in a total transformation, both socially and economically. According to Tan, Tan and Ramakrishna (2022), it is important that business leaders educate and create strategic public education by providing facts, clarifying its shortcoming and performance benefits, and justifying its market position and premium to bridge the intention action-gap. Sandqvist appears to be focused on educating its customers as part of a lifestyle, a specialty of which is inspired by 'Nordicness':

> Take the chance to experience something new! We are inspired by our Nordic landscapes and want to encourage everyone to experience its beauty in different ways, whether it's cycling to work or taking a break in nature. By appreciating nature, we can take a joint responsibility for taking care of it in the best way.

The brand's 'Circularity' page focuses on collective responsibility, both as producers of fashion products and as consumers, and attempts to use self-awareness on their sustainable impact, coupled with individual responsibility by urging consumers to *"minimize, use, care, circulate,"* and *"experience"* their products, and the Swedish nature they are inspired by. Many businesses view waste as a burden rather than a valuable resource, impeding their efforts to close the resource loop, and the cost factor often discourage brands of material recycling compared to acquiring new, unused materials (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021). Sandqvists' sustainability

messaging claims that the brand is aware of its impact on the environment, continuously improving the circularity of their products by focusing on their waste hierarchy guide:

> We therefore let the waste hierarchy guide our design process and have during the years taken several innovative steps to reduce and refine our business towards increased circularity.

Their efforts to close the loop is inspired by their waste hierarchy guide, which considers individual (material) climate impact, water scarcity, and impact on biodiversity. They state that the total recycled material has increased by 10% between 2021 and 2022, to a total of 53% recycled materials used in their products. Their consumer education measures and reuse, recycle and repair schemes are discussed in their messages, which is in line with the 4R framework.

Figure 4.12: Sandqvist's efforts to close the loop (Sandqvist, 2022)

MINIMIZE	We have set goals to minimize the use of virgin materials. We have established long-term planning in product development (beyond seasons) to avoid deadstock material and increase resource efficiency
PROLONG	We sell care products, well-suited for our product range, and educate our customers in how to make the bags last for a long time. Sandqvist offers all customers services to repair and extend the life of their products if they should break. We also offer spare parts.
RE-USE	We design our bags to endure seasonal trends and to fit into every moment of life. With high-quality fabrics and lasting design we wish them to be worn, and passed on to the next user when there is a need for that. We actively communicate this to our customers.
REMAKE	We offer customers that do not wish to repair a worn-out bag the possibility to hand them in to us and get a 20% voucher in return. The materials from the bags beyond salvation are used for various purposes such as spare parts for our repair service, to art-projects or for scientific projects through multiple collaborations.
RECYCLE	We are designing the bags to be easily separated and in mono-materials, to prepare them for recycling. We are supporting scientific research projects aiming to establish efficient recycling processes for synthetic materials.

4.3.2 Designing with Purpose: *Circular by Design*

At the core of circular design is the concept of products and materials being utilized in closed loops, which effectively allows for their repeated use. As designers by definition are involved throughout the product development lifecycle, from conceptualization to prototyping and production, they are responsible for playing a key role in fashion sustainbility (Murzyn-Kupisz & Hołuj, 2021). Research shows that more than 80% of the environmental impact of a product can be determined during the design phase (European Commission, 2012) thus, the design department is required to make a number of assumptions on how the product will be used by different actors during its lifetime (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021). For example, while assuming that consumers may repair and reuse the product, careful consideration must be given to effective mechanisms which allows for disassembly and recycling by careful selection of a design which enables for extended use of the product (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021).

With regards to Nordic design in general, a set of *'green values'* often assumes the important role in characterizing the Nordic identity. Scandinavian or Nordic design, despite originating from diverse schools of thought, converges around the shared principles of minimalism and sustainability, emphasizing the reduction of resource consumption and environmental impact (Mordhorst, 2021). The design identity is also known to be shaped by the functionalist and socialist roots captured in written manifestos such as the *Acceptera* which calls for an ideological and social material formation and design responding to social requests and welfare (Ramia, 2019). Sandqvist claims to gather their design inspiration from the Nordic landscape, showcasing its Scandinavian heritage, and reinforces its sustainability messaging through the abundant use of Swedish landscape and nature imagery, evoking a symbolic connection to the Nordic region. Sustainability messages such as *"we believe that our bags can be part of a sustainable lifestyle and we want to inspire our customers to contribute to that,"* encourage consumers to embrace nature and incorporate it into their everyday lives. Further, Sandqvist's aspiration to establish a complete circular model begins with a focus on circular design, and their dedication to this goal is evident in their messaging by emphasizing their commitment to an iterative design process that discourages overconsumption and prioritizes high-quality products to prolong their lifespan:

> Long Lasting products and circularity. We aim to create functional products that could be used for every moment of life and at the core of product development lies an ambition to design for longevity. To ensure this we place high quality requirements on every material and continuously improve the quality by assessing feedback and claims.

Another Swedish brand, Nudie Jeans, is a true trailblazer in circular fashion and continues to spearhead its movement in becoming unapologetically truthful in their messaging on sustainability. Although the brand does not explicitly discuss its Scandinavian design heritage or

inspiration, it is abundantly clear that the Nordic sense of civic obligation towards sustainability is powerfully captured within the brand's spirit and reflected through their messaging:

> Nudie Jeans' environmental philosophy was present even before the first collection was designed. [. . .] Long before circularity became a buzzword, we focused on longevity and knew that garments you love – you keep. [. . .] Exploring new sustainable fabrics and fibers is also part of the design process at Nudie Jeans – working closely with our fabric suppliers, adapting new developments, and keeping track of new technologies.

The iconic Scandinavian minimalism embedded in the love for quality over quantity, has inspired a number of brands, including the founder of Filippa K, who saw *"a need for simple, well-made garments that answer to the real experiences of daily life while balancing style and comfort in equal measure."* According to the brand, the founder's vision of creating an uncomplicated, desirable and sustainable wardrobe is carried forward in their design ethos: *"We design for the full cycle of a garment with the intention of reducing, repairing, reusing and recycling."* Filippa K claims to use 62% mono fibers in their garments, and 35% of recycled cotton as part of choosing materials in their design process. In addition, the brand continues to train and hold workshops for their fabric, design, pattern and buying teams to enhance their knowledge on designing for circularity and has gone further to Circulose® Loop, Swedish Wool and Filippa K Pre-owned initiatives to support its circular model ambitions. The brand showcases Nordic modernity and innovation both in terms of design as well as processes, which are often characteristics found in the Nordic design philosophy.

In its essence, ARKET tries to enact the embodiment of new Nordic everyday design through its *"modern day market and lifestyle destination"* concept, by describing how their products reflect *"clean lines, a neutral color palette and solid materials inspired by nature and the northern climate",* thus drawing inspiration from New Nordic design. The brand further emphasizes on concepts of *"functionality and durability"* as the basis of good Nordic design, in which the brand has conceptualized through its fashion products, restaurants, and homeware collections. Also, the notion of archiving is a central theme carried throughout ARKET's brand story and mirrors the *"long-lasting nature of our collections, an extensive library of design history and vintage samples, and our ideal of transparency."* Their messaging further indicates their timeless nature and continues to iterate on the importance of quality and longevity of their products. Although ARKET may not have an explicit circular design framework, their sustainability messaging displays strong concern for the environment as a primary theme, followed by its New Nordic design-influenced store concept, and by loudly and frequently stating throughout their environment page how *"the possibility to be part of the progress and make contributions towards a more circular economy [is] what motivates us to do what we do."*

Based on the above findings, we have recognised that all case brands are determined to create 'timeless' products that stand the test of time. Timelessness is an important feature in a circular fashion system to extend product life and reduce consumption (Urbinati et al., 2017).

Research shows that if the average time of clothing worn can be doubled, greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced by 44% percent (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In addition, brands like Organic Basics and Marimekko share the importance of unisex clothing, not only from a design standpoint but from an environmental standpoint by reducing overall consumption. The civic values of gender awareness are an important Nordic cue, which the brands attempt to assert without explicitly mentioning "genders." It appears that producing trans-seasonal products have lately come into focus in terms of fashion design and many of the case brands display messages with reference to 'all-season fashion' as another alternative to reduce fashion waste (Koszewska, 2019). Further, they are determined in incorporating more mono-fabrics in their products to achieve better circularity by reducing the complexity of fibers, thereby allowing for a more efficient recycling process (Sandvik & Stubbs, 2019). Lastly, we have observed a clear influence of the collective concept of 'Nordicness' on Nordic fashion brands, where Nordic design plays a significant role, leading to a convergence towards circular design philosophies. This influence has shaped the design philosophy of Nordic fashion brands, emphasizing the importance of circularity.

4.3.3 Transparency in the Transformation: Rethinking Supply Chain Transparency for Accountability

Nordic Exceptionalism in Fashion: Progressive Policies, Transparency and Openness

The increasing focus on circular economy research in the fashion industry is driven by the profound and immediate socio-economic impacts of the industry itself. Numerous researchers and scholars are actively examining and evaluating current models of circular fashion systems, offering theoretical insights, and advocating for a transformative overhaul of the textile and fashion sector. Their work aims to minimize the consumption of natural resources and waste generation while maximizing the longevity of materials and products. Sahimaa et al. (2023) argue how achieving a fundamental shift towards a circular economy in the fashion industry cannot be solely reliant on fashion brands, producers, and consumers. They emphasize the need for swift policy interventions and regulations by governments. In response, Nordic countries and their governments have proposed progressive circular economy policies to facilitate this transition (Norden, 2021).

The Nordic Model, characterized by strong social governance, plays a significant role in shaping the concept of 'Nordicness,' where not only civic society but also corporate entities (brands) align with government policies, distinguishing it from other markets where state intervention is seen as a hindrance to freedom (Andersen et al., 2019). Although we will not delve into specific state policies in this study, it is worth mentioning how the Nordic Council of Ministers aim to identify and remove barriers to circular business models while facilitating knowledge sharing on circular best practices across the Nordic Region and throughout the textile value chain (Norden, 2022). The sustainability messaging of all the case brands reflects the

values of civic and corporate responsibility, aligning with the Nordic model and demonstrating their commitment to accountability through actionable efforts. Additionally, the messaging captures a sense of Nordic modernity as the brands strive to explore new and innovative processes for optimizing material utilization, re-use, recycling, and waste management practices:

> The roadmap has really been helpful for our suppliers to understand, and it's helped us push them [. . .] at the beginning they said that you know what, this doesn't really matter [. . .] So, we told them you can either be part of the solution or of the problem. –Brad Boren, Director of Innovation & Sustainability (Norrøna)

It can be observed that the deep rooted commitment towards sustainability of Nordic brand actors goes beyond what Akrout & Guercini (2022) explains as creating economic value by not only changing as a brand but encouraging all stakeholders to align with and value sustainable behavior. Norrøna explains the challenges they were met with when transforming their supply chain as "*they know that if they want to work with us, they need to get serious about this…"* Amidst significant push back from suppliers, they have managed to continue to support and convince their partners, noting how *"our suppliers wanted to do the right thing, but they didn't know how. So, then we tell them what to do in order to get there."*

Norrønas responsibility mandate has expanded beyond the transactional supplier relationships to provide for more than technical but financial assistance to suppliers in times of need, which are complementary factors for suppliers alignment towards transparent and circular practices across the supply chain. Geographical complexities in global fashion supply chains pose sustainability risks and expose companies to social and environmental pressures which include chemical-intensive textile production, labor mistreatment, carbon emissions, and textile waste accumulation (Rafi-Ul-Shan et al., 2018). While compliance and cooperation across the value chain and partners are important, a proactive approach is needed for complete sustainability (Markman & Krause, 2016). As extensively discussed throughout the literature review on the intricacies across the global supply chain, Nordic brands are particularly cautious about sustainability compliance in their source markers, which mainly consists of developing countries:

> We are proud of our supplier partners and wish to share as much background information on our products as possible. We will also extend our audits to fabric suppliers in so-called risk countries. (Marimekko)

Marimekko's commitment for transparency is vital to achieve its circular economy goals, which the brand identifies as falling in line with its values of producing timeless products *"made in balance with the environment.",* believing that this *"can only be achieved through new technological, material, and business-model innovations, which we are committed to continuously developing together with our partners."* The brand continues to work with external partners such as the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), Responsible Sourcing Network (RSN), and many more organizations to ensure its transparent and dynamic supply chain, and by

its commitment to publishing detailed information about the transparency of their value chain, which is a core value of the brand and falls closely in line with Finnish values of transparency and truthfulness (Götz & Marklund, 2015).

> An important part of being a sustainable brand is having increased transparency internally and for customers and the wider public. Our focus has been on the social aspects of production, which refers to the transparency of how and where production takes place. Being transparent about our production locations enables us to address any non-compliances and to take responsibility in our supply chain. (Nudie Jeans)

The above message is an example of the notions of Nordic transparency and openness, which are commonly understood as principles that prioritize transparency, accessibility, and accountability in public decision-making, as noted by Rainio-Niemi (2015). These characteristics are often associated with Nordic exceptionalism, and have evolved over time to encompass economic transparency in the context of business practices (Erkkilä, 2015). Nudie Jeans and Sandqvist continue to comply with the notion of transparency with a particular focus on the source markets as well as their shortcoming in the process of achieving circularity. Sandquivst notes that their transparency pledge is in place as a promise to customers and stakeholders, about how their products are made *"to the best of their knowledge, from raw material to store,"* acknowledging that there is plenty of work to be done, in order to become fully transparent. It is worth noting that all case companies have published their list of certified suppliers across multiple tiers within the supply chain, and seeks to work with independent certifications and transparency indexes such as the Fear Wear Foundation (FWF), Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Material Change Index, Leather Working Group (LWG), and other credible local organizations to ensure compliance and transparency in reporting.

4.3.4 Waste Management: *Commitment towards Post Consumption Waste Management*

Nordic countries, similar to other high-income nations, face the issue of high per capita waste generation. However, they have gained significant expertise in employing diverse waste treatment technologies, including waste-to-energy systems by successfully implementing technical measures for solid waste management and establishing effective policies to devise waste management plans that have been in place in Nordic countries for decades (Behzad et al., 2020). Paradoxically, the consumption of textiles per capita in the Nordic region is between 13.5 kg to 16 kg, which corresponds to 26 and 48 garments per capita annually and greater than the global average (Norden, 2023). This phenomenon is typical in high income countries such as the Nordic countries, where their waste generation per capita is slightly above that of the EU with the exception of Norway, which is attributed to the high disposable income in the Nordic region (Kaza et al., 2018). Hence, while their waste reduction and management practices have been remarkable through state and community initiatives, Kant Hvass & Pedersen (2019) calls for brands to take accountability for their textile waste issue by exploring proactive alternatives for

their post-consumer waste, as they contribute to the issue by designing, sourcing and market fashion products that leads to over consumption.

> Our jeans are not designed to be used a few times and then thrown away. We cherish the well-worn and mended Jeans that become a part of ourselves when worn a long time – a second skin. (Nudie Jeans)

Nudie Jeans has been spearheading the circular consumption dialogue by not only actioning it but also educating customers of the vital importance of repairing and reusing their clothes. In fact, the brand has carved out a unique market position through leveraging circularity as a strategic mechanism, as identified by Todeschini et al. (2017), to gain a competitive edge and effectively market and position their business. The brand demonstrates the commitment to its cause through its 'Repairs for life' program, which they actively strive to make more accessible to customers worldwide. Nudie Jeans claims to have repaired over 65,386 pairs of jeans for their customers and sold over 3984 pairs of used denims upon repair through their re-use program:

> One of the biggest challenges of circularity is scalability. In 2017, we set a goal to open 50 new Repair Spots globally by 2030, and one of the steps to - ward reaching that goal is partnering with selected wholesale accounts and establishing Nudie Jeans Repair Stations in their local shops. This enables a wider reach for our repair services and allows us to spread our curricular activities while creating opportunities to impact consumers' adoption of more circular behaviors.

Figure 4.13: Create Tomorrow's Vintage Campaign (Nudie Jeans, 2023)

Along with their repair stores and partnership expansion, Nudie Jeans showcases its accountability in minimizing its impact by offering a 20% discount for customers who hand in old fashion items, which they will repair and resell through their sales channels. Just as important, is the brand consistently emphasizing its Swedish heritage and the concept of 'lagom'

to promote a balanced and responsible approach to fashion consumption for greater sustainability, a value that has been integral to the company since its inception:

> Lagom is a Swedish word for "just the right amount." It's our version of Yin and Yang. The fire and the water in every Swede's life. Nudie Jeans is based on an idea. This idea is in turn composed of several concepts, beliefs, and a good portion of old fashioned fighting spirit.

The Nordic case brands also continue to embrace and test new circular initiatives to increase their post consumer waste management practices. Product-service systems (PSS) such as repairing, leasing, and rental models provide a new way of extending product life focusing on utilization (Dissanayake & Weerasinghe, 2021), which ARKET appears to be communicating effectively. They have partnered with 'Circoos', an online shop for renting childrens and maternity clothes, believing the childrens clothing rental model will contribute significantly towards their circularity efforts. ARKET states that a *"typical child grows through eight sizes in the first two years of its life, and on average, their parents buy around 280 pieces of clothing during this time – most of which are only used for a few months, or even less."* An article published by Shiffman (2021) in Vogue Scandinavia, reports how Scandinavian brands are leading the way in the clothing rental market for adults, albeit calling for more brands to get on board with the rental model. While the Nordic region has been extremely successful in many waste management programs, they have encountered several challenges in meeting their recycling targets, specifically in the textile segment (Kant Hvass & Pedersen, 2019). ARKET is leading a recycling campaign in the fashion industry by not limiting its recycling program to its own product:

> Bring clothing, shoes and home textiles to your nearest ARKET store – from any brand, in any condition. Nothing is too small or too insignificant to be recycled; even the lonely sock in your drawer can be dropped off and given a new purpose.

Hence, the brand is leading the way for the industry in gathering and sorting fashion items for recycling to allow for consistent supply and sorting of textile waste. Their messaging implies a continuous improvement of the recycling campaign that falls in line with the Swedish Government and Delegationen för cirkulär ekonomi advisory group, which supports state efforts circular economy policy (Swedish Institute, 2023). In addition, ARKET incentivizes customers with discounts for handing in their fashion products for recycling.

Both Norrøna and 66˚North actively promote product repairs and reuse through their global repair programs, although unlike Nudie Jeans, these programs are not complementary. Norrøna proudly states that they have repaired over 11,000 clothing items for their customers in 2022 and are committed to expanding their repair program to achieve their sustainability goals by 2029. Meanwhile, 66˚North draws inspiration from its Icelandic values of *"making things*

that last, never wasting anything, and harmony with nature" as the driving force behind their mission to become a carbon-neutral and circular brand. Filippa K operates its Pre-owned program to encourage reuse to reduce overconsumption. All the case brands with the exception of Organic Basics provide a repair and reuse program, and each brand emphasizes the importance of responsible consumptions across their messaging. Thus, upon closer examination of the case brands, it becomes clear that although Nordic countries have made significant strides in waste management, further measures are needed to align textile waste management policies with target levels. While the Nordic values of responsibility and sustainability are evident in the messaging regarding alternative practices for post-consumer waste in these brands, it has also become clear that the Nordic fashion industry has been slower in adopting the successful and progressive waste management practices already established in other regions.

4.4 Aligning towards Collective Action

The environmental, human rights, and gender conversations sparked by the Woodstock music festival in 1969 had significant implications for the economy, environment, and Western society in the 20th century. According to Spindler (2013), its cultural impact provided the opportunity to adopt a holistic sustainability perspective in the development of the industries, including fashion. Still to this day, many rights and opportunities of LGBTI people are under pressure around the world, however, the Nordics region is eager on taking the lead in promoting equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone of its citizens, and have been working for over 40-years to make the Nordic region one of the most gender equal regions in the world (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020).

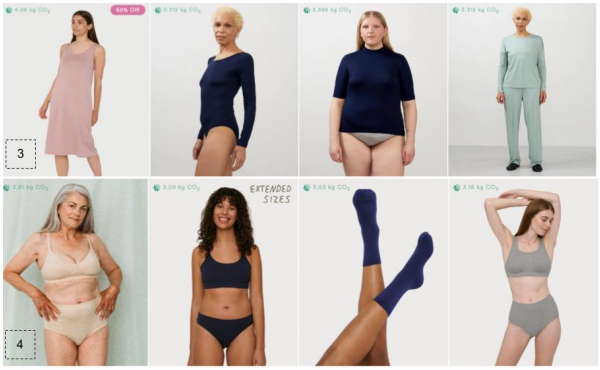
During the sampling process, it became apparent that notions of equality, diversity and inclusivity was a common theme among many of the case brands, both explicitly and implicitly showcasing messages with the above-mentioned values. In the following analysis, we will examine a small selection of messages, demonstrating how these illustrate various notions of Nordicness by aligning with the Nordic political agenda surrounding gender-equality, and international policies such as e.g., the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to move towards collective action in the Nordic fashion scene.

Vibing like Janis Joplin

In her song "Women is Losers", the legendary icon Janis Joplin expressed the societal disadvantages faced by women: *"Say honey women is losers. Well, I know you must have heard it all, And everywhere Men always seem to end up on top."* This reference to gender inequity was taken into account in the conception of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which among other development areas, aim to reduce the significant economic, social, and disparities between men and women worldwide (Leach et al, 2018). The Nordic fashion industry has

followed suit, with our findings reflecting how many of the brands' commit to bridge the gender gap through its messaging. This approach ties to the concept of *Nordic Egalitarianism* through the analyzed brands' commitment to reducing these disparities, including a clear dedication to expanding women's participation. For instance, ARKET shares hiring figures for women through its sustainability messaging, stating that in its *"Headquarters, 78% of its employees are women, with 72% occupying managerial positions,"* which aligns with the overall Nordic regional vision of gender inclusion (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020).

Figure 4.14: Women's Collection (Organic Basics, 2023) **Figure 4.15:** Unisex Collection (Organic Basics, 2023)



The emphasis on equality is further illustrated through notions of diversity, as shown by Organic Basics' imagery in Figure 4.14 and 4.15. Organic Basics portray these notions of inclusion throughout their product catalog by its usage of diverse models varying in age, gender, ethnicity, size, and by avoiding any gender stereotypes to the degree possible. It points to the Nordic societal values such as equality and egalitarianism, where it is argued that such values can justify Nordicness because in other parts of the world "egalitarianism is still an unfamiliar term, inclusivity is still an illusion (and) gender relations are still troubling" (Kavaratzis, 2019, p. 245), which also points to the distancing from the "emblematic Nordic ethnotype" in terms of physiognomy, ethnic groups, and heritage (Gonzalez-Rodiguez, 2019).

At Marimekko, messages on equality align with the values prevalent during the 1960s, reflected on its website by numerous images from this period, illustrating female factory workers, flower-power prints, connected by the brand's inclusive vision:

> Since the 1950s, our dream has been to empower people to be happy just as they are. And this strong belief in inclusivity and equal rights shines through in our actions as well as our designs. [. . .] It's deeply rooted in our company DNA to promote fairness and equality in the world around us.

The company DNA to promote fairness and equality is often mentioned throughout Marimekko's website as stemming from its founder, Annika Rimala. For example, in the late sixties, Annika set out to *"create a design that would suit everyone regardless of age, size, or*

gender." The result was illustrated through its "Tasaraita (Even Stripe) Pattern" as shown in Figure 4.16, created from the brand's philosophy of *"There can be no joy without fairness and equality,"* and has since 1968 been a Marimekko mainstay. The branded pattern has since boasted nearly a hundred different colorways over the years, whereas one of them is the "Rainbow equality Tasaraita print, directly connecting Marimekko's values with the Nordic political agenda surrounding gender-equality.

Figure 4.16: Tasaraita (Even Stripe) Pattern and Rainbow equality Tasaraita Print (Marimekko, 2023b)

From Norden with Love

As mentioned in the above, we have found that the sustainability values similar to the ones depicted by the Nordic Council of Ministers and UN SDGs are reflected in many of the case brands' messaging. This pursuit of aligning operations with those of national and international policies, is shown by Norrøna's CEO Jørgen Jørgensen who, in a published interview on their website who, reflect on the brand's future ten-year sustainability plan:

> It's much more impactful to have ten-year plans than three-year plans, because in ten-year plans, we can actually start to make directions in where we can go. What's fun for me is trying to make the impossible possible and I totally believe we can. [. . .] Looking at 2029, which is our 100-year anniversary, we look at several things. The first thing we look at is the UN has 17 sustainable development goals. This is making sure that life on earth is livable. It was part of the forefront of the Paris agreement as well. We need to implement that throughout our company.

The message demonstrates the brand's commitment not only to environmental protection policies but also to the Nordic values of transparency and openness, which Jørgen Jørgensen further in the interview calls a necessary *"environmental tax."* Norrøna is also working to promote decent working conditions and human rights in their supply chain, stating how the brand adheres to the Norwegian Transparency Act (Åbenhetsloven) that *"aims to promote enterprises' respect for fundamental human rights and working conditions…,"* directly emphasizing how national legislation influences their operations and thus messaging.

At Marimekko, their sustainability projects are also centered around the 17 UN SDGs, with a specific focus on the ones most relevant to the brand. The brand described how the commitments serve *"as the foundation for Marimekko's engagement in Positive Change,"* and how they are *"committed to the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) to further reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with the UN Paris Climate Agreement,"* which implicitly connects to the Nordic green value of sustainability. This is further shown through Filippa K's messaging, where the brand has been focused on improving its worker's conditions by teaming up with the Fair Wear organization, who measures Filippa K's performance in these areas to *"ensure good labor standards in our supply chains, and to continue maintaining high compliance with the Filippa K Code of Conduct and international regulations."* Along those lines, Nudie Jeans' Code of Conduct is based on international regulations set by the International Labor Organization (ILO*)* and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Includes the Code of Labor Practice used by the Fair Wear Foundation. Thus, the brand actors' actions and commitments extend not only to regional Nordic civic values and policies but also to those of the European Union, as well as global initiatives, given their connection to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

4.5 Design as the Enabler of Good

When examining the origins surrounding the notion of Nordicness, it seems almost impossible to avoid concepts such as Nordic Design, which has emerged as cultural phenomena, and a societal value held dear by many Nordics'. Its distinct design features are often characterized by those of simplicity, minimalism, and functionality, which are said to stem from the Swedish political movement in the early 1930's in the quest for achieving modernity, and reinforced by the influence of social democracy. Subsequently, this movement flourished in the 1950's throughout the five Nordic countries, and a new style of architecture and design was founded on the principle of function over excessive ornamentation (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019), quickly spreading to other areas of Nordic society, industries, and everyday life. Today, concepts like Scandinavian fashion or Scandinavian minimalism have gained much attention worldwide, known for its clean lines, high-quality, and neutral colors. Similarly, we found that many of the case brands utilized the positive image of Nordic design in their messaging, presenting its features as sustainable, and thus as an "enabler of good." We have divided the following analysis into two sub-sections, each representing the most emphasized themes found from the analysis.

In Minimalism We Trust

In the Nordic fashion scene, minimalism has been a fundamental concept for decades, and is often associated with the notion of "Less is More," while still regarded as appealing and sophisticated. Norrøna subscribe to the principles of minimalism through its philosophy of "Loaded Minimalism":

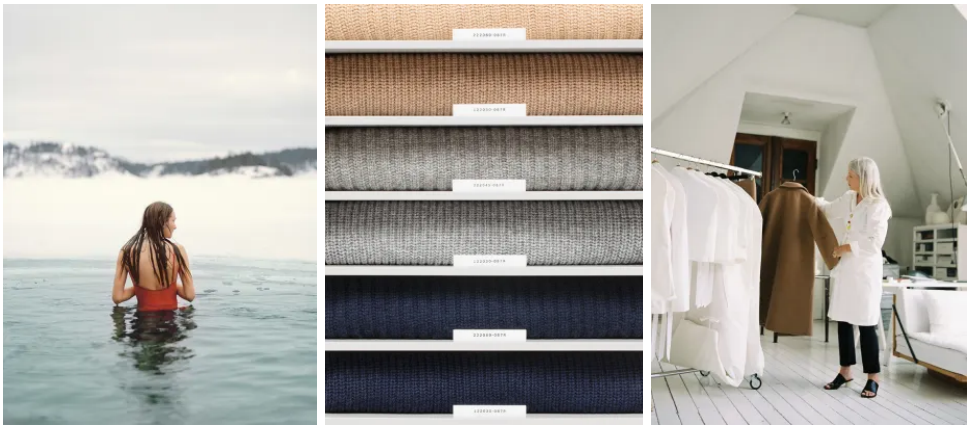
> We build [Norrøna] touchstone products, establish construction techniques, and redefine the meaning of fit, fabric, function, and finish, based on our design principle of Loaded Minimalism™: Great products made as clean as possible with all critical details.

The philosophy serves as a means for the brand to communicate its sustainable commitment, by emphasizing ethos of cleanliness, quality finish, and function, which are common minimalistic ideals. It is important to note that the concept of minimalism is not consistently interpreted the same way across all case brands. Filippa K, for instance, utilizes minimalism to position themselves as a luxury brand, adhering to the narratives of Nordic good taste (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2019), but the brand also emphasizes the parallel between minimalism and a "sustainable wardrobe:"

> Filippa K was founded in 1993 [. . .] pioneering the now-iconic look of Scandinavian minimalism. [We] saw a need for simple, well-made garments that answer to the real experiences of daily life while balancing style and comfort in equal measure...uncomplicated, desirable and sustainable wardrobe is as relevant today.

While this might sound like a typical brand description, the drawn parallel between Scandinavian minimalism and sustainability means that green worth should not simply be explained in terms of sourcing methods, circularity etc. Instead, this connects to the significance of Nordic design, which embraces minimalism as a sustainable alternative to other capitalist approaches that are deemed deceptive (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019), and assumes an important role in justifying Nordicness. At Sandqvist, their slogan of "a company that challenges the role of combining high functionality with minimalist design," explicitly claims its Nordic roots by combining the Nordic values of functionality and minimalism as a key significance in their positioning. It is a particular focus in the Nordic cases to invoke minimalism as an important part of a good sustainable choice, which connects to the concept of Lagom, where balance and moderation are seen as common sense (Brones, 2017).

Figure 4.17: People: Ideas for Modern and Mindful Living (ARKET, 2023c)



Timelessness, Durability and Functionalism: The Holy Trinity of Design

The concepts of timelessness, durability, and functionalism were emphasized by most of the brand actors in their sustainability messages. As elucidated by Gonzalez-Rodriguez (2019), these values hold significant prominence within Nordic design, regardless of industry. Through our sampling of data, it became clear that the brands establish a connection between the above-mentioned concepts and those of sustainability. Typically, these terms refer to garments that are not bound by any particular trend or style to possess a visual appeal, rather it is seen as products that can survive through decades and different fashion eras. At ARKET, they do not explicitly use the term "timeless" to describe their products, however, albeit still capturing a similar meaning in their messaging:

> Our garments and products are made to be used and appreciated for a long time, with the intention of making less of an impact on the environment and building a lasting wardrobe that is independent of temporary trends.

The mentioned appreciation for products that can stand the test of time *"for a long time,"* emphasizes how the brand is positioned as a sustainable alternative to its parent company, H&M, by being focused on a stable, lasting wardrobe, instead of fleeting trends. Similar messages can be found across cases. For example, Filippa K encourages an *"approach to fewer, better pieces that stand the test of time"* as *"long-lasting pieces represent our commitment to mindful consumption,"* and thus directly connecting its long-lasting design with sustainable purchase behavior and business practices within the fashion industry. In a 'Nordic Brand' context, the notion of 'timelessness' is often connected to something avant-garde, or with the integration of ethical considerations into product development, which in some cases idealizes the Nordic identity (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2019). For instance, Organic Basics pairs its usage of "long-lasting" products with considerations to sustainability:

> Designing durable and long-lasting products, partnering with European factories and choosing responsibly, ethically sourced and certified materials are how we minimize our environmental impact as much as possible.

Figure 4.18: Designed and Proven in Iceland since 1929 (66°North, 2023b)

Conversely, there are other actors who incorporate durability and timelessness explicitly to their messaging. At Sandqvist, timelessness is illustrated as an enthusiastic idea, where the brand *"design products for you to love and use for a long time. All bags and accessories are made with durability, quality, and timelessness in focus."* Marimekko also connects the concepts with people, highlighting how *"timeless design brings joy for generations to come,"* and thus emphasizing how long-lasting design is embedded as a value in Nordic society, and in particular one that brings joy. In addition to timelessness, many of the brands incorporate the notions of functionality and durability into their messages, albeit often implicitly, and often in relation to their company history. For example, 66˚North uses the notion of its products standing the test of time in the Icelandic outdoors' as an important justification of their durable and timeless design:

> For nearly 100 years 66˚North's products have been Designed and Proven in Iceland, worn by everyday people and outdoor professionals in some of the world's most challenging conditions. Nothing makes us prouder than when we see someone in a 20 year-old-plus 66˚North jacket, whether that's in the Icelandic highlands, around town in Reykjavik, or in our offices. We mean it when we say our products are "Made for Life!"

This often used interconnection of timelessness, durability, and functionalism in the brands' messaging suggest an almost holy trinity, whereas the three terms combined represent a sacred trinity of Nordic design as the architect behind high-quality design. It is mainly through the holistic idea surrounding the three design concepts that justify the Nordicness in the brands' messaging, where the design is able to influence one's emotional state, inspired by Nordic landscapes, community, responsible consumption, and considerations to the environment.

Further, the enthusiasm and passion communicated through the messages reveal how these actors are not only motivated by Nordic aesthetic rationales in their design principles, but also those of sustainability, which signifies the Nordic values of combining design with responsibility and durability, without compromising its chic appeal and simplistic beauty associated with Nordic design (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2019). Consequently, the fashion brands selected for this analysis do not view their functional and timeless products as "practical", but rather as small pieces of green art that people should discover (or re-discover) and value through joy and consideration to the environment.

Discussion

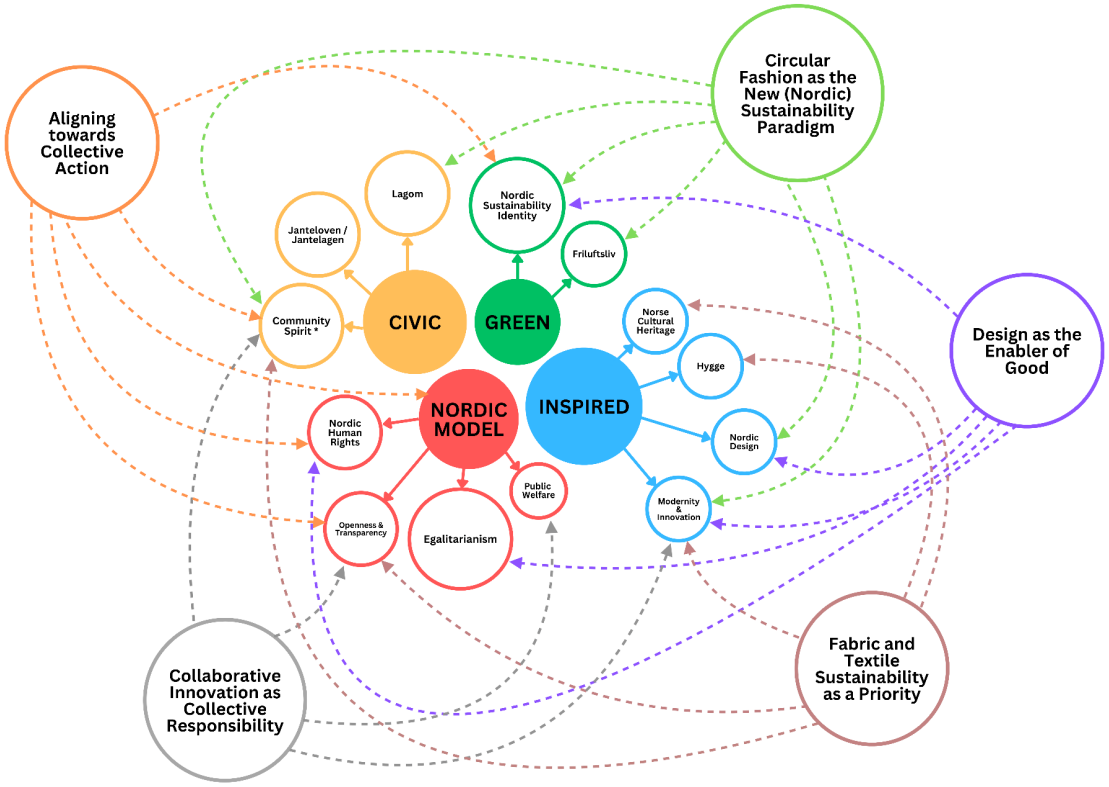
5.1 Sustainability Messages and its Reflection of Nordic Cues

To visually represent the interplay between the type of sustainability messaging conveyed by Nordic fashion brands and the corresponding Nordic cues that inspire them, we have created a cognitive map, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. It is essential to emphasize that this map exclusively presents Nordic cues –both explicitly and implicitly –emerging from thorough analysis of the brands' communications.

First, we have categorized relevant Nordic cues into 'Green,' 'Civic,' and 'Inspired' clusters drawing inspiration from Andersen et al.'s (2019) concept of value regimes associated with Nordicness. It should be noted that our interpretation may not fully align with the original authors' intentions. Within the 'Civic' cluster, we have included values, norms, cultural customs, and implicit rules that reflect the Nordic social contract and its societal conditions. The 'Inspired' cluster captures values and cues influenced by the notions of non-conformity and creativity, stemming from Nordic socio-political ideals. The 'Green' value regime represents the intrinsic bond between the Nordic region and its breathtaking landscapes, diverse ecosystems, and reverence for nature. Within this regime, we highlight the 'Nordic Sustainability Identity' that permeates various aspects of Nordicness.

In addition, we have introduced a fourth category representing values and ideals derived from the Nordic Model –a characterization of Nordic exceptionalism and the superior values upheld in the Nordic region (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge that the Nordic Model itself can serve as a Nordic cue, and there may exist intricate synergies among the mapped Nordic cues. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this map, our focus is primarily on the most prominent connections directly linked to the relevant sustainability messaging.

Figure 5.1: Cognitive Map of Sustainability Messages and their Corresponding Nordic Cues



The Nordic region has meticulously cultivated a distinctive reputation, capturing the attention of international discussions over the years. This has been achieved through a combination of unique value systems and geopolitical factors, ultimately establishing a strong and unparalleled brand presence on a global scale. This position has attracted numerous scholars who delve into the diverse phenomena surrounding the five Nordic countries and their values. Despite their differences, these values exhibit intriguing similarities while standing out distinctively from the rest of Europe and the world.

Some scholars examine these phenomena as the 'Nordic Imaginary' (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019) and some through the lens of the relationship between the people and the state (Andersen et al., 2007), while others explore it from a geographical and historical perspective. Nonetheless, scholars agree on and argue over the distinctive values, cultural heritage, and norms that the region possesses in defining its sense of 'Nordicness.'

This commitment towards protecting and respecting nature has contributed to the creation of what we believe to be globally esteemed 'Nordic sustainability identity.' The Nordic identity has played a crucial role in shaping the sustainability identity that numerous fashion brands worldwide aspire to emulate, and Nordic brands have effectively capitalized on this advantage. While sustainability is often viewed as a functional aspect by many fashion brands globally, Nordic brands position themselves as inherently sustainable entities, establishing their brand foundations on the principles of sustainability from within.

Therefore, *this study aims to explore the incorporation of the concept of Nordicness into the sustainability messages of Nordic fashion brands.* It will closely analyze the corporate sustainability communication to uncover and examine the various characteristics associated with 'Nordicness' that are embedded within these messages. In doing so, we have also uncovered a set of themes which emerged through the research that echoes the values of Nordicness which we have identified through previous academic literature. The Nordic region has fostered a novel and distinctive approach to addressing sustainability challenges, giving rise to a group of Nordic brands that serve as thought leaders in their respective industries' sustainability efforts. Notably, Nordic fashion brands have successfully integrated sustainability into the core of their brands, rather than merely treating it as an afterthought.

Our analysis and review of sustainability literature revealed a clear indication of numerous challenges related to material sustainability. These challenges serve as significant obstacles for governments, policymakers and brands aiming to promote sustainable consumption within the fashion industry. Key factors in addressing these challenges include the search for alternative sustainable fibers, the development of effective recycling methods for existing fibers, and the exploration of innovative models for reuse and recycling in fashion. It became apparent during the analysis of the data that all case brands to varying degrees present ***the development of alternative and sustainable fibers and materials as a sustainability priority.*** Nordic countries are leaders in material sustainability by pioneering cleaner and circular alternatives ranging from alternate fuels to substitutes for wood and other material required by various industries (Norden, 2019; Business Sweden, 2021). The messaging of all case brands reflects their sustainable modernity as accountable fashion brands, prominently featuring locally developed fibers like Spinnova, Infinna, Norratex, Renewcell, and other internationally developed alternatives (Fisher, 2023). The Nordic Council of Ministers and The Nordic Textile Collaboration has identified the following as initiatives to support sustainable textile economy choices concerning materials for the Nordic region; *a. using locally available materials b. using surplus or residual materials and c. using recycled materials* (Norden, 2023). All case brands have consistently communicated initiatives that encompass all three aspects to varying degrees. A significant finding was the ***notable shift towards organic materials***, as evidenced by the majority of the case brands exclusively utilizing organic cotton or recycled cotton in their garments. As conventional cotton cultivation poses a major sustainability challenge due to high water consumption, excessive

pesticide and chemical use (Radhakrishnan, 2017), Nordic brands appear to be proactively shifting away from non-organic cotton substituting with sustainable alternatives and recycled cotton blends.

The sustainability messages often referred to organic, natural, eco-friendly, and bio-based materials, reflecting characteristics associated with Nordicness in terms of consumer demand and social values regarding consumption. These were closely linked to the organic food movement in the Nordic region and its organic agriculture, with the Nordic region being the most developed markets in the world for organic food production and sales (Pekala, 2020). Thus, several case brands appear to have portrayed ***wool as a sustainable and organic Nordic material by strategically utilizing the Nordic place brand to associate Nordicness with a material.*** Emphasis was placed on several Nordic cues with implicit links to its Viking heritage and more explicit references to its value for traditional craftsmanship, "localness", farming traditions, and the survival of small local communities reflecting the deep-rooted Nordic agricultural heritage embedded in the Nordic DNA. The choice of organic materials does not appear to be merely a commercial adjustment but is deeply integrated into the brands' ethos as a "Nordic way of thinking" which is made apparent through the tonality of their sustainability messaging which resonates with ***a sense of collective social action and care for the common good*** (Simon & Mobekk, 2019; Andersen et al., 2019) that are characterized by Nordic concepts *dugnad, samfundssind, forkröelse* and *talkoot* etc.

Responsibility is a cornerstone of Nordic society which has led to the socio-politically strong welfare state system in all Nordic countries. Hence, the sense of civic responsibility is also reflected through the sustainability efforts of corporate actors, especially through collective action with the rest of society. Thus, a majority of the case brands can be witnessed to participate in the ***protection of the closest surrounding environment in their respective home countries*** through local conservation and national level initiatives with the participation of civic action groups. Additionally, the case brands exhibit the same level of innovation which is applied towards designing and transforming their products, services and business models towards their sustainability efforts. The *Nordic region's reputation as one of the most developed regions in the world is closely tied to its strong emphasis on modernity and innovation*. This commitment to progress and innovation contributes to maintaining the region's almost utopian image, which is widely recognized globally as 'the Nordic way.'

Through our analysis, we have witnessed a majority of case brands calling for the ***synergy of responsibility and innovation as a collective effort in overcoming sustainability challenges in the region.*** The sustainability messaging of the case brands emphasizes the collaborative endeavors between industry partners, start-ups, and activist groups to continuously explore innovative approaches in product manufacturing. This collaboration spans various stages with multiple actors, including the responsible sourcing of raw materials, the selection of sustainable

fibers, and the diligent monitoring of ecological footprints, worker conditions, and fair wages etc. Examples include *Norrøna's collaboration with 'Goodwings' to measure carbon emissions of business trips, Filippa K's partnership with the Swedish meat industry to source Swedish wool, and 66°North's collaboration with UN Women to provide grants to refugee women in Turkey.* These proactive steps reflect a holistic approach to sustainability through collaborative efforts. As Andersen & Crehan (2009) has recognized, the region has always relied on cross industry cooperation even with competing brands as a defining characteristic of the region, which has allowed the region to rapidly validate and accelerate their initiatives to remain thought leaders in sustainability.

As part of their responsibility as global citizens with Nordic accountability, many of the case brands discuss ***innovative partnerships towards creating a sustainable and transparent value chain across the globe***. Further, the case brands appear to prioritize enhancing or reimagining current business practices that directly contribute to social or environmental sustainability, as well as other causes they are dedicated to. However, while these brands demonstrate a commitment to transparency, there is limited emphasis on their sustainability efforts within their source countries. Although these efforts are assessed and verified through individual assessments and eco labels, their messaging fails to adequately convey the social and economic impact. Currently, the focus is predominantly on consumer markets and tailored to meet ecological priorities and provide general assurances of social sustainability.

Green growth encompasses fostering economic growth and development (Mikkola, Randall & Hagberg, 2016), and it is crucial to avoid applying a uniform strategy across all markets in which the brands operate. Instead, the brands' sustainable initiatives should align with the national priorities and contexts of the countries where raw materials are sourced and suppliers operate. Thus, it is essential for green growth and circularity efforts to consider the social aspect alongside environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development. Yet, our analysis reveals a recurring pattern where the social pillar receives less emphasis compared to the environmental and economic aspects in the case studies.

Within the process of sustainable transformation, a significant finding is the ***emergence of circular economy policies in the fashion industry***, with a primary focus on ecological and economic considerations. This can be attributed to a number of Nordic values such as ***Nordic sustainability ideals, progressive modernity and concepts such as friluftsliv influenced by its 'green' value regimes of protecting nature and accountability stemming from its 'civic' responsibility.*** The integration of circular economy policy into the fashion industry appears to be an inevitability due to the alarming rate of the textile industry and its impact in accelerating climate change. Nordic brands, however, appear to take progressive steps in transitioning towards a circular economy. Novel approaches to measure and encourage behavioral change in customers "*Using a custom-built app (RISE Project), we asked selected consumers to track what*

they wore over a 100-day period. The aim is to increase awareness among both companies and consumers around circular thinking in the fashion industry and explore strategies to inspire individuals to value their garments more" by Filippa K, is commendable as experimental strategies are vital in the path to circularity as recommended by the Nordic Council of Ministers under ***"support the innovation of new technologies for circular initiatives"*** (Norden, 2023). Despite being a subsidiary of H&M group, ARKET's recycling program, which allows consumers to hand in any type of textile product and clothing for recycling, proves that Nordic brands are proactively experimenting with circular strategies. With a global recycling rate for used clothing below 1%, there is a substantial annual loss of around USD 100 billion worth of raw materials (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), and the environmental impact is even greater, highlighting the brands' prioritization of long-term ecological and cost savings. These efforts also complement the Council of Ministers' request to solve the impending textile recycling capacity and challenges due to its unsustainable fashion consumption (Norden, 2021).

Additionally, a set of sub-themes emerges in uncovering circularity as the new sustainability paradigm, which are also linked to Nordic characteristics. These included ***"Nordic design and its inherent qualities which support circulatory"***, ***"alignment towards collective action for circular initiatives" and "emergence of post consumer waste management programs which align with circular principles***." These themes have emerged through initiatives that support the 4 aims of The Nordic Textile Collaboration (Miljøministeriet Miljøstyrelsen, 2023), and highlights the ***Eco-modernity as a Nordic concept*** (Midttun & Olsson, 2018), ***extremely functional and non deceptive Nordic design ethos*** (Askegaard & Östberg, 2019), which supports product longevity and reduces consumption, and ***social cooperation and collaboration towards a common goal which characteristic of Nordicness*** (Wilson & Hessen, 2018) in the transitioning towards a circular economy.

The circular fashion system, by its very nature, demands increased transparency exposing the true cost of fashion across the complex, global fashion value chain. This has called for the need for all stakeholders to take steps in order to fundamentally transform their practices. Consequently, attention is drawn to the ***transparency into the social impact across the fashion value chain***, highlighting how Nordic brands actively collaborate with stakeholders to minimize negative social consequences and uphold the principles of sustainability. While the social impact within the value chain is not a primary focus of the circular economy, Nordic case brands address it separately, but their messaging primarily revolves around addressing the ecological impact.

With the exception of Nudie Jeans, brands generally do not explicitly address circular fashion in their sustainability messaging, or fully integrate circular economy policies into their sustainability mandate. While some brands have taken steps towards the transition, many have yet to fully embrace actionable circular fashion strategies or explore resale, rental, and repair models. *The messaging of most brands treads a delicate balance between encouraging*

consumption of their products under the guise of sustainability and promoting conscious fashion consumption. Despite its slow transition towards circularity, all brands have undertaken at least one significant sustainability initiative which leads the way towards achieving circularity and clear indication of the sense of civic responsibility of collective social action inspired by different Nordic concepts (Andersen et al., 2019).

The European Union, Nordic Council of Ministers, and the United Nations have established comprehensive programs to ensure sustainable development through policy and legislative compliance among all stakeholders involved in commercial activities. The Nordic region has made remarkable progress in achieving specific UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and EU textile strategy for sustainability considerations by strict adherence to their policies and regulations. Conformity towards policy, particularly that of the state, is deeply embedded in the Nordic model of social governance. Both individuals and corporate entities in the region demonstrate a stronger commitment to achieving policy objectives and complying with regulations compared to other markets. Our findings indicate that the ***UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) significantly influence the sustainability priorities of all the case brands.*** The comprehensive and holistic approach of the UN SDGs allows actors in the textile sector to align with and action different sustainability considerations across the textile value chain. The Nordic Council of Ministers has endorsed an action plan aimed at realizing their vision for the 2030 agenda, actively promoting sustainability to transform the region into a green, competitive, and socially sustainable area (Norden, 2021). However, the council acknowledges that despite the Nordic region's leading position in sustainability, there are persistent challenges in ecological sustainability stemming from unsustainable production and consumption practices. These challenges contribute to the pressing issues of climate change and biodiversity crisis.

Furthermore, our findings indicate a ***higher emphasis on ecological action through collaboration with local and international organizations and sustainability indexes to measure impact***. These organizations could vary from activist groups to non-governmental organizations involved with ecological and biodiversity conservation to research programs conducted by universities. The many indexes are mostly standardized self-assessments such as the *Higg Index* by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, Global *Organic Textile Standard* (GOTS), *FairTrade* and the *Fair Wear Foundation* etc. among many others, which allows brands to measure and communicate their individual impact across all sustainability pillars. On the contrary, brands effectively demonstrate their sustainability accomplishments through consumer-oriented communications, employing the two forms identified by Turunen & Halme (2021): third-party eco-label verification and free-form sustainability communication. Still, the majority of communications predominantly rely on extensive third-party independent eco-label verification, which not only highlights Nordic transparency in relation to globally aligned accountability, aiding consumers in making informed consumption choices (Rainio-Niemi, 2015), but also

provides brands with a strategic advantage to promote their products as sustainable alternatives, despite the potential counterproductivity of such messaging.

We have also observed numerous references in the sustainability messaging of the case brands, all emphasizing the importance of collective action in achieving sustainability goals. Majority of the case brands have also placed significant emphasis on social sustainability, however, significantly lower prominence was placed to social aspects over ecological sustainability. We identified certain brands that exhibit a ***strong commitment and active engagement in promoting gender equality and inclusivity, both within the workforce as well as representation in promotional messaging*** (fashion models and unisex clothing) highlighting the significance of these social considerations. The Nordic region's commitment to human rights and gender equality is particularly evident in these contexts, ***reflecting the brands' inherent egalitarian values derived from their Nordic origins***. Further, a standout feature across all sustainability messaging is the ***ethical manufacturing considering fair wages and decent working conditions for workers.*** Majority of the case brands have aligned with the UN SDGs towards monitoring the relevant social sustainability goals by annual, in-person audits of factories and facilities located in different parts of the world ensuring accountability. The messaging of our case brands further reflects the influence of green value regimes and civic responsibility towards collective action (Andersen et al., 2021; Simon & Mobekk, 2019), as evidenced by references made to individual sustainability initiatives, which align with the four goals outlined by the Nordic Textile Collaboration. These goals, published by Miljøministeriet (2023), promote a circular approach to textile waste management, digitization and traceability strategies, and the strengthening of collection, sorting, reuse, and recycling of post-consumer textiles. Despite individual efforts such as repair and reuse programs, care guides to prolong product lifetime, and explicit calls for responsible consumption, most brands, with the exception of Nudie Jeans and Filippa K, have yet to actively align themselves with the circular economy recommendations of the Nordic cooperation.

In addition to their commitment to sustainability, Nordic fashion brands embody the distinctive Nordic design aesthetics that are valued components of the Nordic place brand. The point of origin itself offers fashion brands a competitive advantage in the market, as there is a greater appeal for minimalist, timeless, and functional clothing, which generates global demand. The analysis finds an interesting trend of ***Nordic design and its many intrinsic values which closely resembles the values of sustainable development and circular economic definitions***. We found that fashion brands use the many aspects which characterizes Nordic design for its contribution towards achieving their sustainability considerations. This may be in the way of producing high quality 'timeless' clothing which denies the need for over consumption and design that incorporates sustainable material or design concepts, which allows for effective recycling. The use of Nordic design ethos in marketing sustainability is a noteworthy phenomenon, as it promotes simplicity, functionality, and quality through the incorporation of

words such as “timeless” and “minimalist,” emphasizing the longevity of the products. The common theme here indicates that ***fashion brands leverage various aspects of Nordic design to contribute to their sustainability objectives***. The report “Mapping Sustainable Textile Initiatives in the Nordic Countries” has identified 148 Nordic fashion brands. Among these, the findings under the category of ‘Materials and Design’ reveal the use of locally available, surplus or residual, and recycled materials, which are considered key factors influencing the product design of the case brands. Our analysis reaffirms the consistent presence of these results in the sustainability messaging of all eight case brands. The terms ‘timelessness,’ ‘functionalism,’ ‘durability,’ and ‘high quality’ are repeatedly emphasized by all brands, establishing a conceptual foundation for their minimalist design approach. Marimekko, however, diverges by incorporating Finnish design and employing alternative definitions that share many similarities with the other brands. Still, as per Gonzalez-Rodriguez’s (2019) observations, Nordic brands consistently construct a narrative that places Nordic design at the forefront, emphasizing concepts such as timelessness, durability, functionalism, and minimalism. This tendency can be linked to Blumer’s concept of “Unanimity and Uniformity,” which serves to establish the prestige and trustworthiness of the Nordic place brand in the fashion industry. However, it also creates a perception of stylistic homogeneity, particularly regarding Nordic design. In relation to our findings, this homogeneity in sustainable brand communications, influencing design and subsequently shaping societal perceptions, may lead to a sociological uniformity in national identity. This phenomenon, as proposed by Hobsbawm (1992), restricts alternative forms of communication and other styles that could simultaneously convey a sense of nationalism through the expression of Nordic design and its place in sustainability communications.

5.2 Concluding Reflections

Exploring the many elements which constitutes Nordicness and its manifestation in the sustainability messaging of Nordic fashion brands proved to be a significant challenge, given the extensive scope of both subjects. We delved in depth into the place brand of the Nordics and the roots of where the Nordic myth making took place to understand its many cues and where they originate from. Subsequently, we immersed ourselves in the complex field of textile and fashion sustainability, and its place in the Nordic region as some of the top consumers of fashion on the globe. Navigating through the vast body of literature on these topics, we realized that our study would serve as an interconnected scholarly endeavor, forging a crucial link between these two domains. Our primary aim was to address the fundamental question of how Nordicness seamlessly intertwines with the concept of sustainability, particularly within an industry that inherently is unsustainable by nature. It is important to note that our study does not intend to offer a critique of the multitude of ideals, values, cultures, and norms that shape the ‘place brand’ of the Nordics or the romanticization of Nordicness. Nor does it intend to critique or analyze the many sustainability initiatives of sampled case brands. Nonetheless, we have encountered and

observed numerous paradoxes, realities, and exceptionalities associated with it. Also, our study was not designed to underscore, critique, or analyze the sustainability efforts undertaken by Nordic actors or the selected brands. Instead, we embarked on a delicate exploration, aiming to comprehend and extract the intentional or unintentional utilization of Nordicness in the communication of sustainability by Nordic fashion brands.

In addition to identifying five key themes in the sustainability communications of our case brands, which are communicated in conjunction with a set of Nordic cues which we have illustrated, our findings confirm the following key points: *a. Nordic fashion brands employ Nordicness both explicitly and implicitly in their messaging. b. Brands tend to reinforce a set of design, sustainability, and collective responsibility values, resulting in a homogenized approach to sustainability communication across most brands. c. Fashion brands communicate their sustainability positions in a distinctively Nordic manner, characterized by a desire to blend in rather than stand out, maintaining a position of subtlety and relevance.* Additionally, we observe that these *brands are more inclined to directly attribute their climate or socio-economic impact to specific metrics* (such as GhG emissions or material types), *thereby empowering consumers to make informed choices regarding their consumption habits.* On the contrary, the Nordic attributes of moderation in all aspects of life, specially in fashion consumption, are not frequently reflected in the messaging of all brands, which can be attributed to purely economic and commercial considerations.

We also believe that in order to gain deeper insights into the distinctions between markets and products from different origins, and how the point of origin shapes their sustainability messaging, a comparative analysis becomes necessary. But, contrasting the Nordic region against other counterparts proves challenging due to its distinctive position. Nevertheless, it may be possible to draw parallels and contrasts by examining a country like Japan, which shares certain similarities in values and ideals. Given the Nordic region's renowned reputation as a frontrunner and global leader in sustainability initiatives and innovations, the inclusion of Nordicness in sustainability messages, whether implicit or explicit, may contribute to a more favorable consumer perception. Still, additional research is required to delve deeper into this aspect.

Finally, it may be important to be cognizant of the "savior complex" associated with the Nordics as presumed champions of sustainability worldwide. However, when it comes to fashion products, there exists a sustainable paradox as Nordic countries have a less-than-ideal track record, being among the highest consumers of fashion products globally. This paradox highlights the need for greater awareness among managers regarding this discrepancy between perception and reality in the context of sustainability. This could serve as an opportunity for future research which comparatively analyzes the impact of Nordic branding and sustainability communications in driving fashion and textile consumption.

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