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From Design Nations to Fashion Nations? Unpacking Contemporary Scandinavian Fashion Dreams[1]

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Abstract

To many people, the link between Scandinavia and design is still a familiar story of functionalism and the social democratic welfare states of the twentieth century. But until recently the Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—had not sought to connect themselves with fashion design. This, however, has changed since the turn of the millennium. Present-day government institutions, industry organizations, fashion media, and industry form partnerships that not only give the fashion industry a prominent status in deindustrialized economies, but also potentially change the image of the nations. In this article

I unfold what I term the fashion dreams of the Scandinavian countries in order to examine what their experiences tell us—on one hand, the role of fashion for the nation, and on the other hand, the contribution of national governments to the polycentrism of the fashion world.

KEYWORDS: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, fashion design, identity, industry policy

From design nations to fashion nations? This is the trajectory that lies at heart of this article, and when looking at the Scandinavian countries in the course of recent history, it is a striking development. The dominant design movement of the Scandinavian countries arose in the 1950s and 1960s and still holds significance. But the new focus on fashion in Scandinavia raises the possibility of a great shift currently taking place within the Scandinavian countries, not only in terms of their culture and economy, but also with respect to the image they project to the world.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the social democratic welfare states of the Scandinavian countries have combined industrial production with high living standards and a high degree of social equality. Simultaneously, they have also earned international recognition for their socially embedded functionalist design, primarily of furniture but also of lamps, kitchenware, and textiles (Dickson 2006; Halén and Wickman 2003). "Scandinavian design," defined first and foremost in relation to British and US export markets, came to mean genuine design solutions for everyday life, designs that do not follow the prosaic flux of fashion, but rather pursue the good life as a nearly utopian ideal (Davies 2003). This image styled the Scandinavian countries as design nations, and continues to characterize Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, both locally and internationally. By design nation I mean when design not only stands for the act of innovation and giving form to material objects, but when it is also made subject to government strategies in order to pursue better solutions for the future of the nation. In the aftermath of the Second World War the Scandinavian countries can be regarded as design nations as their governments not only supported the boom of design consumption locally and internationally, but also believed in the egalitarian vision of the ability to design through modernist architecture and home interior design, the good life for all, which was the credo of the young social democratic welfare states.

However, after deindustrialization and the increasing political dismantling of the welfare states at the end of the twentieth century (Højrup 2003) fashion has emerged as the new national imagery. In the transformation to knowledge-based societies, the Scandinavian notion of design, of giving form and making things, increasingly seems outdated; it is often referred to in the public discourse as "an old chair." New design policy initiatives stress the importance of new perceptions of design—for example, as a strategic approach to innovation through particular ways of thinking and structuring work processes. At the same time, "outdated" seems to be the watchword of the ideological vision that grew out of the social democratic welfare state, based on equality and democracy for all. Under conditions of globalization, international competitiveness appears to be more important than social ideals, at least in current government rhetoric, as will be later shown.

Even the term "Scandinavia" has lost some of the symbolic significance it carried in the 1950s and 1960s, when it was used in the international promotion of design from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. At the time, it linked a particular style of design with the political sphere of the social democratic welfare state, although the Scandinavian countries could not be accurately characterized by political unity either then or now (Østergaard 1997). The preferred term today is the Nordic region, which in geographical terms includes Finland, Iceland, and Greenland as well as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. However, I use the term Scandinavian here to describe the group of countries that are part of the Scandinavian Peninsula, the geographical area just above Northern Europe. When it comes to fashion, Scandinavia is not considered a collective label suitable for international promotion, as it was in the heyday of Scandinavian design. Denmark, Sweden, and Norway act independently, have their own fashion policies, and think mostly of each other as competitors not only in the region, but also internationally.

The idea of design nation, the starting point of the present analysis, is relatively well-defined. This is not the case for the idea of fashion nation, the model into which the Scandinavian countries may be developing, as my research studies. By stressing "fashion nation," I wish to emphasize how each of the three Scandinavian governments are currently, and for the first time in recent history, taking a sincere interest in fashion design and fashion clothing industries, and formulating policies for them. For each, the fashion industry is seen as critical for success in the new knowledge-based global economy. Fashion is viewed as cosmopolitan and capable of anticipating future trends, as a successful intermediary in globalized production networks, bringing economic gain on the basis of mostly immaterial processes such as branding, marketing, and trade. Unlike the paternalistic appearance of design nations, fashion nations focus not particularly on what is considered good for society and the individual, but on what makes the nation state appear attractive, modern, and forward-looking.

In this article, I unpack what I term the fashion dreams of the Scandinavian countries in order to examine what their experiences tell us—on the one hand, the role of fashion for the nation and, on the other hand, the contribution of national governments to the polycentrism of the fashion world. In the respective cases of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, I explore the processes by which fashion is inscribed in industry policy, showing in each case how the different outcomes are produced by each country's particular industry conditions and constellations of private and public actor involvement. My overall argument is that the inscription of fashion in national discourse for the construction of a country's image should not only be read as an industry policy measure, whose efficiency can be evaluated in reaching a stated goal. It should equally be seen as an attempt to formulate models for small peripheral countries in Europe in the era of globalization, as a way to bring them into the cosmopolitan consciousness. For a small country the image of fashion is important in getting the attention of fashion consumers, international fashion media, and tourists, but even more so in attracting the investment and participation of knowledge workers and international companies. I use the term "fashion dreams" to designate the complex nature of the Scandinavian governments' engagement in fashion, including uncertain but ambitious hopes and desires for reenergizing national visions.

Before turning to the case studies, I offer a perspective on the complex relationship between fashion and nation that is unique to each case study, and draw attention to the challenges met by governments aiming to mobilize fashion for the nation as a globalization strategy.

Fashion Nation

Following the globalization of fashion, there has been an increasing interest in the study of fashion in relation to nation, as the dominance of Western fashion has been exchanged for an increasingly "multicultural fashion regime," as Lise Skov has pointed out (2003: 239). However, the research perspectives are numerous and diverse. The interest among some researchers has been in rewriting the history of fashion in order to both recover local histories and replace previous notions of authoritative fashion centers (e.g. Maynard 2001; O'Byrne 2000; Steele 1998; White 2000). Subsequently, these studies contribute to the production of myths and images of distinctiveness. Other studies consciously challenge such myth production (e.g. Breward *et al.* 2002) or try to explain the complexity of the link and its continuous reproduction in practice (e.g. Brand and Teunissen 2005; Craik 2009; Goodrum 2005; Palmer 2004; Skov 2003). In the diverse cases of Hong Kong fashion and British fashion, both Lise Skov (2003) and Alison Goodrum (2005) show how cultural distinctiveness is a complex design intent that functions as a kind of legitimization strategy to gain market position. As further stressed by Brand and Teunissen (2005), local sartorial traditions gain importance as part of these strategic moves for creating difference. Local dress traditions are deconstructed and reinvented to fit contemporary global fashions with touches of cultural specificity.

Where the situation in Scandinavia is concerned, the complexity of the relationship between fashion and nation similarly includes the design issue of creating cultural distinctiveness. However, here there are particular challenges, as the relationship between fashion and nation was inconceivable until recently. After the nineteenth-century National Romantic movement and the nation-state building of independent democracies in Scandinavia,[2] fashion was perceived and practiced as something that came from abroad and formed a part of the cosmopolitan orientation of the elites. Fashion, with its changing styles of dress, was seen to represent the antithesis of the nation-building process, in contrast to particular local peasant festive wear, which was perceived as constant and viewed as a metaphor for the ideas of freedom and equality desired by the young nations (Sørensen and Stråth 1997). As a consequence, festive peasant dress was elevated to national folk dress as part of the nationalist movement (Lorenzen 1987; Stoklund 2003). Romantic genre paintings depicted men and women dressed in folk dresses, popularizing the understanding of national identity in dress as static and resistant to the influence of fashion. Today, using modernist nationalism research, dress historians explain how such clothes were also subject to changing fashions (e.g. Eldvik 2010; Haugen 2006; Lorenzen 1987), but nevertheless they remain popular as a sign of the nation in Sweden and Norway, though less so in Denmark. The use of folk dress at private and public celebrations is particularly common in Norway. This practice also occurs in Sweden, where a specific national costume ("Allmänna Svenska Nationaldräkten") was introduced in 1903 and worn on the National Day, June 6, since its introduction in 1983. In Denmark, the use of folk dress is uncommon, limited to the minor folk dance movement, and as a result the knowledge of this kind of dress, of its manufacture and materials, is limited to folk dancers and dress curators working mainly at cultural historic museums.

In this respect, the Scandinavian countries developed a notion that they had two different kinds of dress. One was folk dress, historically oriented backwards, growing out of preindustrial peasant society and used to signify the nation in a more or less formal and ceremonial way. The other was fashion, seen as future-oriented, connecting citizens with the rest of the world, and viewed as neutral in terms of national significance. However, the relation between the two types of dress is perceived in different ways—in Denmark they are mutually exclusive and folk dress has little place in contemporary life, whereas in Norway they are seen as complementary; national folk dress still has a place in ordinary people's wardrobes and are brought out for festive occasions. Sweden, one could argue, is placed somewhere in between the two extremes.

Therefore, sartorial traditions do not tend to form a strong part of a design strategy in Denmark, but they are more common inspirations in Norway, where traditional knitting patterns are reinterpreted in contemporary fashion design (for example, the brand Arne and Carlos). Jennifer Craik suggests that national fashion "is the expressive encapsulation of the cultural psyche or zeitgeist of a place through its people that occurs when three realms are synchronized: aesthetics, cultural practice and cultural articulation" (Craik 2009: 413); in Denmark, aesthetic distinctiveness or the recognizability of clothing style is the least significant. One could argue the situation is different in Sweden and Norway due to the common use of outdoor wear; although similar dress traditions can be localized in Iceland as well as North America, which makes it hard to argue that outdoor wear is particular Swedish or Norwegian. Further, neither Danish consumers nor Danish fashion designers seem concerned with the representation of the nation through their dress or design practices. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the relationship of fashion and nation mainly addressed the representation of the nation as modern. The design aim was to make something new, appealing to local as well as international consumers and at the same time unique in the sense of the signature design of the individual fashion designer (Melchior 2008). The link between fashion and nation was at times presented by the media as a reflection of the trendy modern Danish, Swedish, or Norwegian lifestyles, but did not result in a clear perception of the cultural distinctiveness of Scandinavian fashion, as was the case for Scandinavian design. Fashion design from Scandinavia could just as easily belong to any country whose fashion designers were informed by the latest Western fashion trends.

Today's new emphasis on the relationship of fashion and nation in the Scandinavian countries seems in keeping with the historical relationship of fashion and nation. Not surprisingly, it is driven neither by particular Scandinavian dress practices nor by self-exoticization of local sartorial tradition, as in the examples by Brand and Teunissen (2005) or Skov (2003). Instead the relationship is government-driven and must be understood in connection to the new conditions of nation-states under globalization. In these conditions, as the ethnologist Søren Christensen has pointed out, national identity and culture are increasingly seen as competitive components for economic development and benefit (Christensen 2006: 81–2). Despite the historical perception that Scandinavian countries are on the receiving end of international fashions, the local fashion industries are now also important producers of national imagery. Fashion is perceived as a suitable means of making the nation stand out internationally by producing fashionable eye-catching clothes and images. It invites and receives attention, which is highly valued by contemporary society on both personal and institutional levels. In the current perspective, fashion can make sense of place, and place branding is a key mission for the nation in a globalized age, in which cities, regions, and countries increasingly compete with one another to attract investors, employees, residents, and tourists (e.g. Anholt 2009; Kavaratzis 2005). The ethnologist Orvar Löfgren has described the longing for the new as a pervasive characteristic of our society. What he terms the "catwalk economy," based on the economic model of launching new ideas twice a year (if not more), is currently being adopted by other industries, from computer to car manufacture, in order to generate more positive awareness and business (Löfgren 2005). My argument is that the Scandinavian governments have joined the catwalk economy. There is a longing for new images today. Through fashion, the Scandinavian countries expect to build their images as outward-looking, internationally influential knowledge societies, which they find necessary in a time of globalization.

Based on existing fashion research literature and on the considerations of the fashion focus in the Scandinavian countries, I think a potential two-way link between fashion and nation should be highlighted. On one hand, fashion companies and the various local fashion industry organizations emphasize cultural distinctiveness and national identity in the design of fashionable clothing, as a commercial strategy to create specificity in the highly competitive international fashion market. On the other hand, governments find it attractive in associating fashion with the image of the nation. Sometimes the two-way link is present at the same time, at other times this is not the case and causes challenges, as the following case studies show.

If the local fashion industry in the nineteenth century was a medium to construct and define the nation state through contemporary folk dresses, among other things; today this industry is considered by local governments to be a suitable partner in a symbolic strategy of redefining and branding the nation as contemporary and part of the new global agenda.

Great Danes

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the Danish government was the first among the Scandinavian countries to introduce a fashion policy, characterized by ambition and self-confidence. Since 2005, government fashion policy has stated the future potential of the Danish fashion industry to make Denmark/Copenhagen the fifth global fashion center in the world, after Paris, Milan, New York, and London. In its first five years the policy has attracted the local attention of the industry and further government initiatives, rather than realizing the ultimate dream through an international breakthrough.

The Danish Fashion Industry

In order to understand the Danish case, I shall introduce the Danish fashion industry. The industry is estimated to consist of about 1,200 companies, of which approximately 620 companies are registered by Statistics Denmark as "whole sellers of clothing" (Deloitte 2008; FORA 2005). The majority of these are small companies, owner-managed, with four to nine full-time employees. In total, the industry employed approximately 11,328 people in Denmark as of 2008. In the same year, the industry had an annual turnover of 23.6 billion DKK (3.17 billion euros), of which about 90 percent was gained on export (21.4 billion DKK/2.87 billion euros). However, as in many Western European countries, most of the fashion export can be accounted for by the re-export of clothing produced abroad, and therefore has a low impact on local employment numbers. The main export markets for the Danish fashion industry are the immediate neighboring countries: Germany, Sweden, and Norway (DTB 2008: 2–3).

Yet, the numerous small companies do not drive the economy of the Danish fashion industry. The three largest companies, Bestseller A/S,[3] BTX Group A/S,[4] and IC Companys A/S,[5] are jointly estimated to generate 75 percent of the annual export turnover. These companies are built as concept houses or multi-brand companies and have their own retail distribution network. In particular, Bestseller and BTX can be characterized as primarily price-focused, consisting of market-driven brands with an impersonal design profile. By contrast, IC Companys has a brand portfolio divided into designer-profiled fashion brands—among them the fashion brands By Malene Birger,[6] Designers Remix,[7] and InWear[8]—and fashion brands without a specific designer profile, such as Jackpot, Part Two, Matinique, and Cottonfield.

By combining the export figures of the clothing industry with the Danish textile and leather goods industries, local media and industry trade organizations often call the Danish fashion industry the fourth largest Danish export industry among the country's manufacturing industries.[9] For the last ten years, this has been the continuing success story of the industry. However, business reports show that during the same period fewer than half of the industry's companies has generated profits (Deloitte 2008, 2009).

Despite this mixture of success and failure, the political awareness of the Danish fashion industry has developed over the last decade. Before this, the government did not pay any specific attention to the fashion industry. It was considered a sunset industry that would quietly disappear when left to its own devices, especially in the late 1980s with lay-offs of local seamstresses, pattern cutters, knitters, and other skilled workers, forcing companies to close or outsource their production. But instead of disappearing, the Danish fashion industry was, in a European context, an early adaptor to globalization. Since the 1970s, production has gradually been outsourced to low-cost countries in Europe and Asia, and the industry has locally been transformed and given a new focus on design, branding, marketing, and retail.

Today most Danish fashion companies show their collections biannually at the fashion week in Copenhagen. Copenhagen Fashion Week has existed since the late 1950s and, in the last ten to fifteen years, has developed into a major fashion week in the Scandinavian region with predominantly Danish and Northern European visitors. At fashion week it is possible to see some of the best known Danish designer fashion brands, including Bruuns Bazaar, By Malene Birger, Day Birger et Mikkelsen, Munthe + Simonsen, Baum und Pferdgarten, Samsøe & Samsøe, Designers Remix, InWear, Mads Nørgaard Copenhagen, Rützou, Noir, Henrik Vibskov, and Stine Goya. It is difficult to discern a common identity among these brands, an observation also made in the 2004 exhibition *Unik Danish Fashion* at the Danish Center for Design (Malling and Most 2004). Danish fashion brands vary from a cosmopolitan classic look (e.g. Bruuns Bazaar; Figure 1) and bohemian and ethnic-inspired styles (e.g. Munthe plus Simonsen and Day Birger et Mikkelsen) to avant-garde street styles (e.g. Henrik Vibskov and Stine Goya). Despite the different looks, there is a consensus on Danish fashion as wearable, affordable, and in tune with international trends, in that respect representing what is proudly termed democratic fashion or simply described as "good value for money" (Rasmussen 2006).

Denmark/Copenhagen—The Fifth Global Fashion Center

Why did the fashion industry catch the attention of the Danish government, then liberal-conservative, at the beginning of the twenty-first

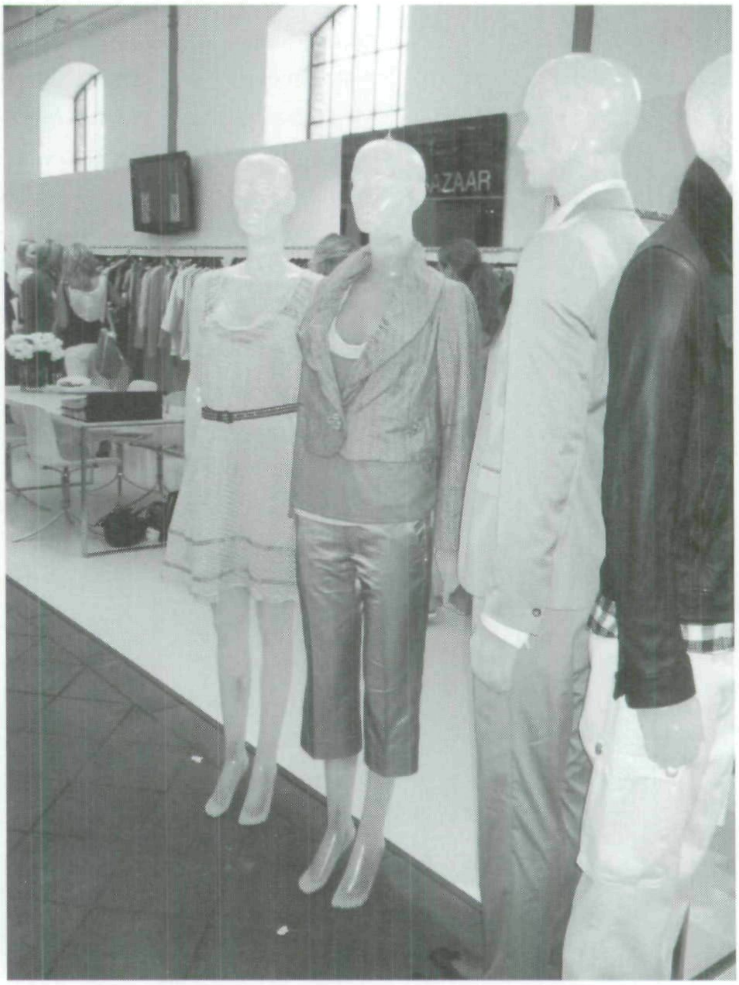

Figure 1
The Danish fashion brand Bruuns Bazaar presenting its Spring/Summer 2007 collection at Copenhagen Fashion Week. Bruuns Bazaar is known for its modern classic style for the urban man and woman. The brand was among the first in the early 1990s to mark the transition of the Danish fashion industry from production based to design based. Image courtesy of Marie Riegels Melchior (photographer).

century, giving life to the dream of Denmark/Copenhagen becoming the fifth global fashion center?

I think the answers to this question lie in the developments of the industry as previously described: it is considered a successful industry, which has continued to grow after deindustrialization. However, it is possible to see more specifically why the government formulated its fashion policy by reading its self-initiated report from 2005, entitled "User-driven innovation in Danish fashion—the fifth global fashion center?" ("Brugerdreven innovation i dansk mode—den 5. globale modeklynge?"; see also FORA 2003).

The report argued for the importance of user-driven innovation in the fashion industry, demonstrating the fashion industry's involvement in the overall Danish industry policy. In 2005, user-driven innovation was introduced as a key asset at which the Danes excel, and for some years Denmark's stated goal was to become "the most innovative country in the world"—particularly with regard to user-driven innovation (Innovationsrådet 2005: 5). User-driven innovation was, in other words, seen as a key Danish characteristic and as a potential for future development referencing research findings that foreigners associated user-friendliness, good design, and simplicity with Denmark and the Danes. This concept was introduced not only as an innovation method but also as a cultural characteristic and a political buzzword, believed to strengthen the competitiveness of local industries on global markets. But it was not clear what user-driven innovation could actually do for the Danish fashion industry, besides calling for more focus on its specificity to differentiate it from its competitors and project a stronger and more independent image of Denmark.

Based on structural studies of the leading international fashion centers of Paris, New York, London, and Milan, as classified in the report, it was declared that the implementation of the Danish fashion policy required the industry to secure its critical mass, achieve stronger coherence among industry companies, and operate as a center. The industry needed to strengthen the education of fashion designers, develop the business knowledge of the industry, provide a "knowledge center" for the industry (like Future Concept Labs in Milan or the Cultural Access Group in New York), and build a network organization. Finally, the report stated the importance of differentiating Denmark's fashion industry from those of other countries by emphasizing its strengths and characteristics (FORA 2005: 60–2).

In subsequent years, the recommendations of the government's fashion policy were followed by the establishment of the network organization *Danish Fashion Institute* in late 2005 by joint government and industry support. From the beginning, the aim of the organization has been to coordinate and promote the exciting biannual fashion week in Copenhagen under the new brand name *Copenhagen Fashion Week* (Figure 2), as well as to promote and strengthen the perception of a

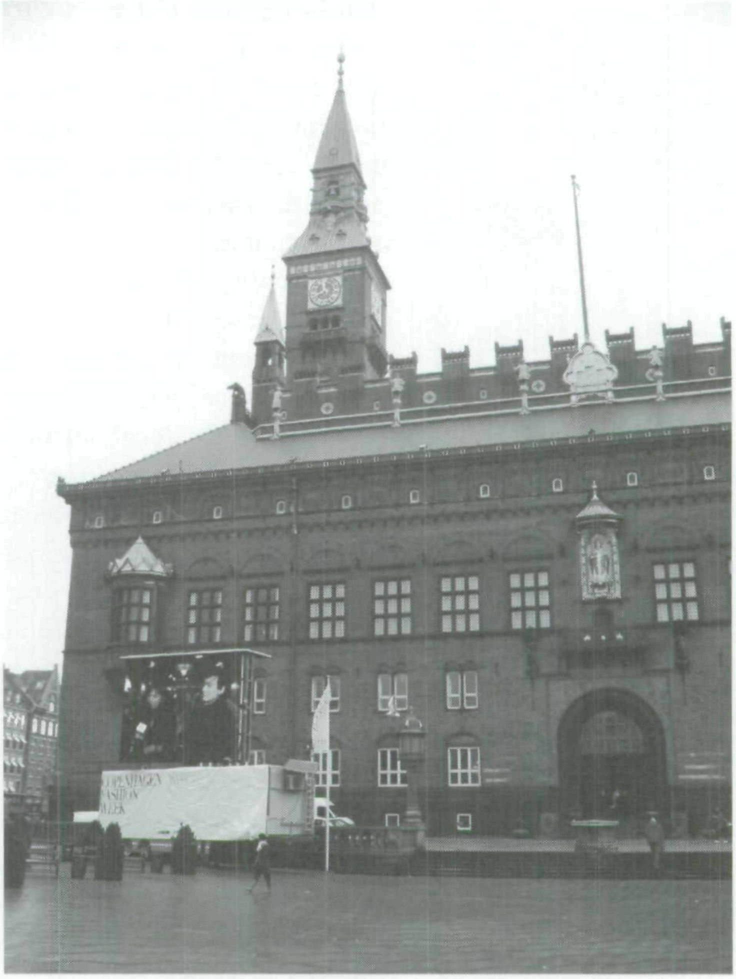

Figure 2
Copenhagen Fashion Week, February 2007. During the event the City Hall of Copenhagen was transformed into the center stage for fashion shows presenting the Fall/Winter 2007/8 collections. Once the initiative of the Danish Fashion Institute, the previously exclusive industry fashion shows have, since 2006, become public events as wide screens are placed at different locations in the city center to attract ordinary people's interest in fashion. Image courtesy of Marie Riegels Melchior (photographer).

specific Danish fashion through industry seminars, assistance for start-ups, support of exhibitions, fashion awards, fashion design talent scouting, etc. Some of this work was already handled by the major trade organization, *Dansk Fashion & Textile*, and the emergence of a new organization has led to some tension between the organizations. While the government favors Danish Fashion Institute for promotional work for the industry, the trade organization feels it has the mandate of the industry, though without a history of direct government collaboration.

Since 2005, the government fashion policy has been further developed and supported by initiatives. For example, in 2008 the director of Danish Fashion Institute was appointed as board member of the newly established *Foundation for the Promotion of Denmark* (in Danish, "Fonden til Markedsføringen af Danmark"); later that same year, Danish Fashion Institute was again appointed by the ministry to coordinate the initiative of "The Fashion Zone," with the aim of strengthening the Danish fashion industry through stronger cohesion. So far, the outcome of the initiative has been the establishment of a website publishing news and information about the Danish fashion industry and organizing knowledge-sharing events.[10]

Challenges for the Government's Fashion Policy

Until now, the government's fashion policy has led to a stronger public awareness of the industry, mainly driven by the network organization and its strong skills in communications. But the effort has primarily been local and international recognition is still waiting to be pursued. Attempts to identify the Danishness of Danish fashion have also been made, but no clear answer has been found besides the democratic quality of Danish fashion given its price point and wearability (Rasmussen 2006). As I see it, this is due to the historical lack of a national perception of dress in Denmark. Consumers are not demanding national specificity, and Danish fashion designers are neither trained in what are the local sartorial traditions nor trying to represent the nation through the making of clothes. Their enterprise is transnational and in reality fashion designers and other stakeholders have not been very interested.

The fashion policy faces further challenges in attempting to unite the whole industry around it in order to work to reach its goal. Recurring disagreements between the trade organization (representing the industry) and the Danish Fashion Institute (mainly representing the government) have been reported in the Danish media. For example, the trade organization announced that the policy was misdirecting the focus of the industry, when it was actually necessary to earn money on the core business of making clothes through trading. As they stated, it must be accepted that Denmark is a "trade nation," not a "couture nation."[11]

Great Dreams

As a fashion industry policy, the idea of the fifth global fashion center has been highly ambivalent. On one hand, it is based on a glaring misreading of Denmark's potential in global fashion. As David Gilbert pointed out in his introduction to *Fashion's World Cities* (2006), Tokyo is already considered the fifth global fashion center, and Shanghai aspires to be the sixth global fashion center. There is a whole row of large competitive fashion nations. Therefore, in terms of international recognition, it has been embarrassing for a small country to push this slogan. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the policy has been productive on the domestic scene in creating visibility for the fashion industry and mobilizing networks of consultants, media people, researchers, and educators. Of course, it has also caused confusion in the industry; ultimately, the policy is connected to great dreams rather than reality.

Perhaps the policy makers and involved organizations were wise to avoid defining specific success criteria for the first Danish fashion policy. This has spared them the unpleasant moment of awakening to reality. Instead, it seems possible that Denmark or Copenhagen can be a self-proclaimed fashion center if it wants to be. This shows the distance between the policy rhetoric and the industry whose interests it supposedly advances. In reality, many Danish fashion companies are struggling to simply stay in business, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. While they do not believe that the fashion policy was formulated to serve their interests, as I see it, they have been willing to give voice to the importance of Danish fashion as long as it is a political priority.

Strong Swedes

The biggest difference between the Danish and Swedish fashion industries is the fact that Sweden is home to one of the world's major and most successful fashion companies, Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M). H&M operates in thirty-four countries, employs about 73,000 people, and in 2008 had a turnover of 104 billion SEK (72.2 billion DKK/9.62 billion euros).[12] H&M alone is three times bigger than the entire Danish industry. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that fashion features prominently in the official "face" of Sweden. In the portrait gallery welcoming fliers to Arlanda Airport near Stockholm, among famous Swedes such as Alfred Nobel, Ingmar Bergman, Ingrid Bergman, tennis player Björn Borg and the royal family, one can also find fashion designers, CEOs, and founders of major Swedish fashion companies (Figure 3).[13] Fashion also has come into focus for Swedish museums, such as Stockholm's Nordiska Museet, which in 2010 opened the permanent exhibition *The Power of Fashion: 300 years of Clothing*, and at Stockholm University even an independent program since 2006 has developed under the heading "Centre for Fashion Studies." Although the Swedish fashion policy also contains

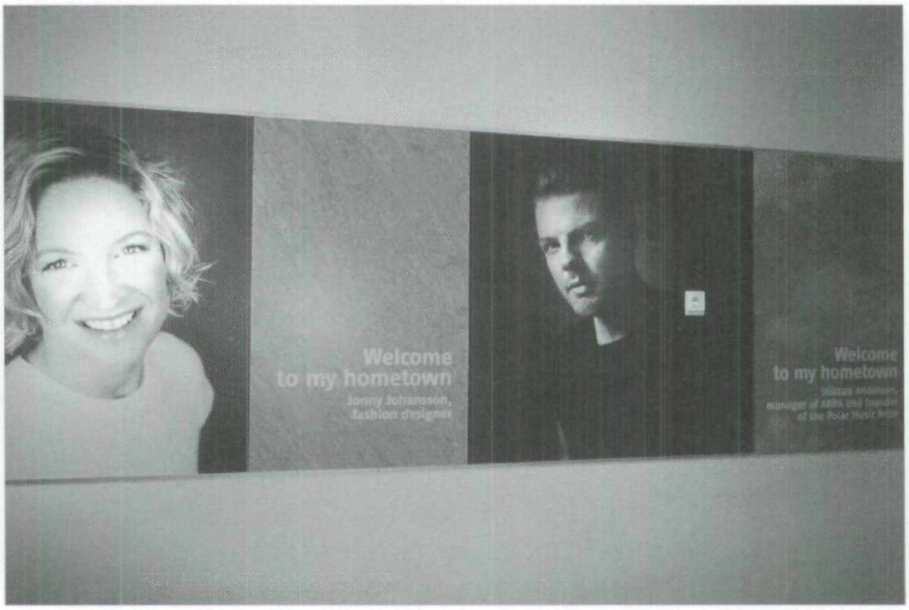

Figure 3
As one arrives at Arlanda Airport outside the Swedish capital of Stockholm from abroad, the "Stockholm hall of fame" portrait wall welcomes you. From pictures of the present royal family members, successful sportsmen, and business people, to significant historic individuals, the people who built Sweden are evident. This includes fashion designers, such as, to the right, Jonny Johansson, founder and creative director of the international acclaimed jeans brand Acne A/B. Image courtesy of Marie Riegels Melchior (photographer).

aspirational elements, it is grounded in both industry interests and cultural interests, and has more realistic goals than its Danish counterpart. Sweden's current fashion dream is to take part in the design of a new progressive Sweden.

The Swedish Fashion Industry

According to economist Atle Hauge, the industry is dominated by retail chains, with H&M as the largest (Hauge 2007: 29); but it also has a few smaller wholesale fashion companies with current international recognition, including the fashion brands of Acne, Filippa K, J. Lindeberg, Whyred, Hope, and Nudie Jeans. In total, the Swedish fashion industry consisted in 2003 of about 1,500 companies. Like the Danish case, the Swedish fashion industry is an export industry, with the other Nordic countries ranking as its main markets; the industry export is estimated at about 6 billion SEK (650 million euros) and the local turnover at 64.4 billion SEK (6.98 billion euros), of which H&M is responsible for 5.3 billion SEK (570 million euros) and Lindex AB (though less branded than H&M), for 3.3 billion SEK (360 million euros).[14] In the latter half of the twentieth century, local manufacturing was outsourced to low-wage countries in Europe and Asia; what remains in Sweden is, as in Denmark, a knowledge-based industry of design, branding, marketing, and retail. With this transition, the Swedish government has taken interest in the industry, but not as strongly as in Denmark. Specifically, the awareness of the fashion industry is due to the success of H&M, but also acknowledges the economic potential of fashion in general. Fashion designs are believed to hold unique potential for the branding of Sweden abroad, as stated in the government initiative report "Fashion Sweden: A Survey of Swedish Fashion Design" ("Mode Svea: En genomlysning av svensk modedesign") (Sundberg 2006: 9).

Swedish fashion is generally characterized by functional clothes based on sober design, as stated by trend forecaster Cay Bond (2006). This perception of Swedish fashion has its roots in the 1960s development of the Swedish fashion industry, but in recent years it has been questioned by the exposure of new Swedish fashion companies representing a wide variety of style. In 2005, Dunkers Kulturhus in Helsingborg (in southern Sweden), the fashion exhibition *In Fashion: New Swedish Clothing Design* emphasized, among other things, "how [...] multifaced Swedish fashion currently is [...]" (Carelli and Wilhelmsson 2005: 5). For fashion designers and fashion people it is somehow challenging to look for a common identity of Swedish fashion. Even so, in contrast to the situation in Denmark, fashion companies are far more likely to label their clothes as "Designed in Sweden." The fashion industry appears to be responding to globalization's demand for marks of local originality. Labeling Swedish fashionable clothing as "Designed in Sweden" does not conflict with any particular style. It is believed to be a technical statement, not a symbolic statement linked to cultural distinctiveness.

Fashion as Image of a New Progressive Sweden

Although the Swedish industry has not yet experienced the same level of government involvement as its Danish counterpart, in the last five years there has been a growing government interest in the industry, including the publication of the earlier mentioned report. The report makes several points, the most salient being that the domination of the industry by retail chains has made it difficult for new fashion brands to enter the market. As a consequence, new fashion companies often have a short life span. Another point in the report is the lack of a collective strategy for the industry. There are many different institutions and organizations concerned with the Swedish fashion industry, from educational institutions, industry and trade organizations, to export councils and trend forecasting agencies. Yet, according to the report, the problem is that they operate individually, and as a consequence the industry does not have the coordinated strategy that is necessary for securing further growth and realizing the potential to represent the nation as desired. The report examined one possible solution to this problem by asking a selection of Swedish fashion companies if they wanted more collective promotion of "Swedish fashion" based on government support. The majority of the fashion companies' answers were skeptical. Small companies saw such an initiative as shortsighted; for them, it is not enough to receive financial support to exhibit at a foreign fashion fair. As expected, they expressed a need for long-term investment and support regarding strategic planning to help them enter new markets and establish serious contacts with foreign buyers as well as press. Other companies, of different sizes, found mutual promotion initiatives under the heading "Swedish fashion" to be problematic, as for them Swedishness is not a common denominator; it is more important for them to communicate their individual identities in order to consolidate brand and business platforms (Sundberg 2006: 50). The companies' reaction highlights the common problem of co-branding—in this case, fashion companies promoted as "Swedish fashion" are dependent on the positive brand value of Sweden, which they are not empowered to control (Aaker 1995).

A few years later, *The Swedish Institute*, a government-funded agency working to promote Swedish interests abroad, and *Visit Sweden*, a public organization targeting tourism in Sweden, took further interest in the Swedish fashion industry. The Swedish Institute declared one of its focus areas to be "new creativity," in the sense of pioneering contemporary culture and creative industries, seen as the manifestation of "the new progressive Sweden."[15] The exhibition *Swedish Fashion—Exploring a New Identity*, shown at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London in Spring 2009, was part of this initiative. Its aim was to expose the new progressive Sweden by showing fashion designers that have particularly challenged the stereotypical notion of Swedish fashion as functional clothes. In other words, contemporary fashion design was an attempt to show a new Swedish image and communicate distance from the traditional Swedish aesthetic corresponding to the values of the twentieth-century Swedish welfare state.

Visit Sweden's further engagement with the Swedish fashion industry was officially initiated in late 2009 with the launch of *Association of Swedish Fashion Brands*, which since has received a donation of 1 million SEK (110,000 euros) from the government to promote Swedish fashion. The association was founded through a collaboration of Swedish fashion brands—Filippa K, Tiger of Sweden, Cheap Monday, Whyred, and Hope—with the newspaper *Bon*, the PR agency Patriksson Communication, and *Visit Sweden*. The aim of the association is to strengthen the Swedish fashion industry and increase its visibility in order to promote Sweden and its capital Stockholm, primarily through the coordination of the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week held in the capital biannually.[16]

Compared to the Danish case, it is clear that Swedish government involvement is less aggressive. The government has explored what characterizes fashion in Sweden, leading to their current investment in the fashion industry through industry collaborations regarding the branding of Sweden. The fashion industry is perceived as an image-maker of Sweden, transforming the image of the nation towards the new rather than projecting a specific national style through the sum of the country's fashion design. The Swedish government is not aiming to turn the country or its capital into a global fashion center, as is the ambition of the Danish government, but more modestly to develop through fashion a new image of the nation, which makes its fashion dream strong in realistic terms.

This focus on image-making ties nicely into the cultural developments concerning fashion at museums and at Stockholm University and make it more realistic to believe in the Swedish fashion dream coming true. Even though the university program of Fashion Studies is made possible by a significant donation from the founder of H&M, Erling Persson Family Foundation, it facilitates research and educational programs that are less oriented towards industry knowledge, but more on fashion as a cultural and artistic form of expression, the same way that fashion is recognized by the government agenda. It is most likely that the initiative will affect both the general level of understanding of fashion as a cultural phenomenon and, with candidates obtaining jobs in the fashion industry's marketing departments, the potential to strengthen company profiles for further international recognition.

Brave Norwegians

The case of Norway it is very different from both Denmark and Sweden. The Norwegian fashion industry is small, and international recognition of Norwegian fashion brands is even more limited than that of its Scandinavian counterparts. Some people might know of the Norwegian fashion designer Per Spook (b. 1939), who had an international fashion designer career in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s as chief designer of the fashion house Louis Féraud, and ran his own *haute couture* fashion house from 1977 to 1995, or recognize the country's knitwear tradition and sports- and outdoor wear, with international brands such as Helly Hansen (established 1877) or Swix Sport (established 1943).

Nevertheless, Norway has most recently formulated its fashion policy with clear influence from the government fashion focus in both Denmark and Sweden (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 16). In 2008 Norsk Form (The Foundation for Design and Architecture in Norway), a government-initiated institution, published the report "Fashion Pilot: An Investigation of the Norwegian Field of Fashion Design" ("Motepilot: En undersøkelse av det norske motedesignfeltet"), which did not merely describe the industry but also explored it and its future potential for the first time (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 13).

The Norwegian Fashion Industry

The 2008 report characterized the Norwegian fashion industry as a minor industry, with little coherence, which has yet to be discovered and understood (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 13, 70–1). Based on 2005 statistics, the Norwegian fashion industry is comprised of 1,140 whole sellers of textile, clothing, and footwear (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 34).[17] These companies collectively employ about 4,213 people, and had an annual turnover of 14.5 billion NOK (1.79 billion euros) in 2005. Many are one-man or one-woman companies, and most are directed at the domestic market. New Norwegian fashion brands that caught attention locally are, among others, Fam Irvoll, Arne & Carlos, Batlak og Selvig, and Cecilie Melli.

The annual export of Norwegian fashion is therefore very limited in comparison to its Scandinavian neighbors. In 2006 it reached 590 million NOK (72.9 million euros). In the same year, the import of fashionable clothing was more than twenty times the size of the export, reaching 12.8 billion NOK (1.5 billion euros). The commercial capability of the Norwegian fashion industry seems to be in fashion retail, dominated by the company Varner Gruppen AS (established in 1962).[18] In summary, the Norwegian fashion industry is regarded as a small industry but believed to have growth potential, specifically in the export market (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 70).

Norwegian Fashion Design—A Well-Known Brand

The 2008 report claims the existence of a Norwegian fashion focus, despite the small size of the industry. At the same time, the report calls for stronger recognition of the industry by the government for its growth potential. Additionally, the report concludes that further coherence and a more robust network must be implemented by government initiative in order to establish a self-conscious Norwegian fashion industry (Nordgård *et al.* 2008: 68–9). The report advised the establishment of a *Norwegian Fashion Institute*, following the Danish example. This suggestion was realized in February 2009 with financial support from the government and initiated by "Innovasjon Norge."

Through the Norwegian Fashion Institute, a Norwegian fashion policy was formulated. One of its first initiatives was the promotion of Norwegian fashion during Expo 2010 in Shanghai, as part of the contemporary image of Norway. The initiative, aligned with the stated fashion policy of making Norwegian fashion a well-known fashion brand, will specifically focus on the promotion of a Norwegian fashion identity. This approach differs significantly from those taken by both Denmark and Sweden and takes advantage of Norway's unique dress history. National folk dress is still in use by many Norwegians, and this perhaps constitutes a stronger common ground for Norwegian fashion designers to address the Norwegian fashion identity. Still, the government-initiated report did not go into detail in describing the content of a Norwegian fashion identity, other than references to knitting and the country's popular tradition of wearing clothing perceived as national folk dress ("bunad"; Figure 4). The national sartorial traditions dating

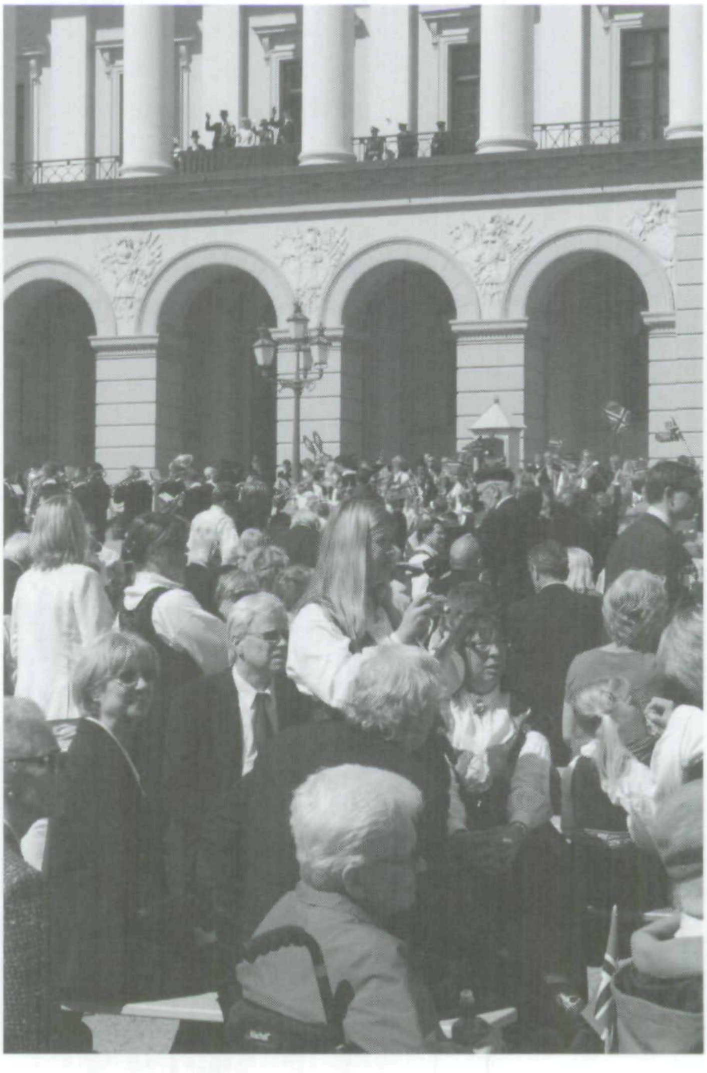

Figure 4
Dressing for the nation at Norway's National Day, May 17. For the parade in front of the Royal Castle in Oslo, Norwegians gather to celebrate the nation, some dressed up in so-called "bunad," some new and some old, inherited from family members. Image courtesy of Bjørn Sverre Hol Haugen (photographer).

back to the nineteenth century are, in other words, still considered to be foundational for a contemporary Norwegian fashion brand.

The Norwegian Fashion Institute has also gone in another direction by taking the lead of the Nordic project *NICE* (Nordic Initiative Clean and Ethical),[19] which aims at promoting ethical and sustainable business practices in the region. This indicates a strong value-driven vision, and unlike the Danish and Swedish initiatives there is no attempt at claiming leadership of the region. One of the highly successful projects under the NICE initiative concerns the use of Norwegian wool for fashion production. With wool as a key material of Norwegian knitwear and folk dress, the project shows how in various ways cultural distinctiveness and ethics is tied into the Norwegian fashion discourse in contrast to both the other cases.

But still the Norwegian fashion policy faces the challenge of getting recognition, particularly internationally without any front-running companies. As in the Danish case, the initiated fashion policy may have better odds locally than internationally. The Norwegian fashion dream is more modest than those of Denmark or Sweden: Norway does not proclaim itself to be a leading regional center, but simply aims to improve the recognition of Norwegian fashion domestically and overseas. In terms of the cultural claim to being a fashion nation, Norway is also more reluctant to claim a role as producer of cosmopolitan fashion. Instead, it draws on some of its complementary traditions of national folk dresses and outdoor activities. These in turn can be used as sources of cultural distinctiveness, as in other countries responding to increased competition caused by the globalization of fashion production and consumption. As such Norwegian fashion is likewise believed to boost the imagery of the nation, but due to the premises it is a brave ambition.

Conclusion: Scandinavian Fashion Nations?

With the terms "great Danes," "strong Swedes," and "brave Norwegians," I try to paraphrase the specificity of the fashion policies of the Scandinavian countries. As I have already stated, "great Danes" refers to the recognition of the Danish fashion industry as a significant export industry, and the highly self-confident ambition of the Danish government to make Denmark/Copenhagen the fifth global fashion center. But it also refers to the great distance from dream to reality, as it entails a failure to understand the challenges of becoming a leading global fashion center, stemming from Danish provinciality. In reality, this improbable dream has so far only been productive for the local mobilization of the Danish fashion industry, attracting local attention and perhaps boosting the self-confidence and self-consciousness of the industry with the possible outcome of greater sales and export. "Strong Swedes" refers to the already strong market position of the Swedish fashion industry in international fashion, as well as the achievability of the Swedish government's ambition to support the fashion industry in order to associate itself with the new image of a progressive, modern, cosmopolitan, and up-to-date Sweden. Finally, "brave Norwegians" refers to a minor fashion industry that, despite its size, lack of coherence, and, until recently, government recognition, is sufficiently daring and courageous to want to enter international markets and become a well-known fashion brand.

In all three cases, it is clear that the fashion dreams are highly government-driven. The Scandinavian countries share a common belief in fashion as a strategy to support the image of the nation, particularly an imagery that differs from the previous idea of Scandinavian design nations. In both Denmark and Sweden, the images delivered by the fashion industry and the designs of its companies are not nationally focused. It is in tune with international fashion and, at best, represents an independent brand identity that falls in between classic European dressing styles and avant-garde-invoked street style. The case of Norway is a little different, as the image of the nation through fashion still makes reference to national identity through self-exoticizing design strategies.

But with the emphasis on fashion, the focus is more about what is trendy and attention-grabbing, and less about stronger ideological visions. The Scandinavian countries demand international attention through fashion—it is the attention they are after, not the communication of a particular message, as far as I see it. At least, as the case studies have demonstrated, neither the fashion industries nor the fashion design they deliver have something particular to say apart from being fashionable.

At the beginning of this article, I asked whether the Scandinavian countries are transforming their cultural significance from design nations to fashion nations. I think I dare answer the question with a yes. The countries have not dismissed the role of design endeavors apart from fashion, but their contribution is not intended to communicate or materialize certain political visions of defining the good life for all. Governments form partnerships with the fashion industry, according to the case studies discussed, in the hopes of being perceived as trendy, modern, and hip nation states. However, this strategy could also be a dangerous trajectory to follow. It seems a peculiar decision for a government to associate itself with an industry that adjusts oversupply by supplying novelty to an uncontrollably consumerist audience, and further that outsources irresponsible use of national resources and extremely poor labor conditions (child labor, unpaid overwork, poor safety, etc.). Further if the dream is too unrealistic, detached from practice, and therefore unachievable, as at least in the Danish case, it easily undermines the original idea. Among the industry players, it perhaps creates more confusion than confidence. But despite that it also has the potential to enable a local fashion industry to become more reflective on the relationship of fashion and nation in which they play a part, and to find answers for new ways of structuring the industry and new ways that fashion nation can become a creative potential for the design of clothing. The three case studies are just not there yet.

But the case studies have shown how fashion is believed to be a model for small nations to enter the global arena. It feeds into the idea of a polycentric fashion world and throws light on how it is reproduced not only through commerce and consumption, but also through government policies and nation-states searching for new ways for being and being seen on the global stage of the current globalized world.

Notes

1. This article is founded in my PhD dissertation on Danish fashion (Melchior 2008). The article is characteristic of a Scandinavian comparative perspective basis made possible by the study of government initiative reports, websites, and secondary literature on contemporary Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian fashion industries. Due to my more in-depth knowledge of the Danish case, I have decided to let the case study begin the article and form the basis of the comparison with the Swedish and Norwegian cases.
2. In 1849 the absolutist monarchy was abolished in Denmark, in 1866 in Sweden, and in 1905 Norway declared its independence after centuries belonging to the Danish Kingdom and, since 1814, to the Kingdom of Sweden.
3. Bestseller A/S (est. 1979) had in 2007 an annual turnover of 10.4 billion DKK (1.38 billion euros) and employed 2,654 people in Denmark. The company represents ten different fashion brands for children, women, and menswear, including the brands Vero Moda and Jack & Jones. In 2007 the company ran 1,740 own-concept stores (www.bestseller.com).
4. BTX Group A/S (est. 2005 when the capital fund EQT bought the company Brandtex A/S, est. 1935) had in 2008 an annual turnover of 3.194 billion DKK (430 million euros) and employs 1,593 people. The company represents nineteen different fashion brands for teenagers, women, and menswear, including the brands b.young and Blend (www.btx-group.dk).
5. IC Companys A/S (est. 2001 by the merger of InWear A/S (est. 1969) and Carli Gry International A/S (est. 1973)) represents eleven different fashion brands for women and menswear. In 2006 the company's annual turnover was 3.023 billion DKK (410 million euros), it employed 2,200 people, and ran 259 concept stores. The company is publicly listed on the Copenhagen Stock Exchange (www.iccompanies.dk).
6. The head of design of By Malene Birger is Malene Birger, who founded the company in 2003. Until 2010 the company was partly owned by Malene Birger, but is now owned solely by IC Companys.

7. Designer and Creative Director of Designers Remix is Charlotte Eskildsen.
8. InWear's current Design Manager is Lene Borggaard. The brand was established in 1969 as a fashion design brand with Kirsten Teisner as head designer. During the early 1980s, Teisner left the brand and for more than two decades its designer profile was anonymous until Borggaard was introduced as the brand's designer profile in 2007.
9. Based on 2003 figures, the export profit of the fashion industry (i.e. the export of clothing, textile, and leather goods) was 30 billion DKK (4.02 billion euros), making it the fourth largest manufacturing export industry, next to the medical industry as the third largest (export profit of 32.1 billion DKK/4.31 billion euros), the agricultural industry as the second largest (export profit of 67.9 billion DKK/9.11 billion euros), and the electronic and machine industry as the largest (export profit of 92.1 billion DKK/12.35 billion euros; FORA 2005: 14).
10. See www.fashionforum.dk.
11. See the newspaper article in *Børsen* (February 10, 2010: 6).
12. H&M Annual Report 2008.
13. Among the portraits are of Jonny Johansson (founder of Acne AB), Mikael Shiller (CEO of Acne AB), Erling Persson (founder of Hennes & Mauritz AB), and Filippa Knutsson (founder of Filippa K AB). Observation made November 5, 2009.
14. These numbers are based on 2005 statistics (Sundberg 2006: 13).
15. www.si.se/English/Navigation/About-SI/Focus-areas-2007-2010/ (accessed December 16, 2009).
16. www.modeakrivet.se (accessed December 16, 2009).
17. It has not been possible to find the exclusive number of fashion companies focusing solely on clothing to compare with the Danish and Swedish cases.
18. Varner Gruppen AS has since 1967 been known for its retail concept under the brand name of Dressmann. Since 1980 the company developed as a conglomerate, owning and running a bicycle factory, an insurance agency, real estate, as well as manufacturing of workwear (www.varner.no).
19. www.nicefashion.org (accessed November 30, 2010).

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