

Branding Norwegian Design in a Globalizing Design World

Factors to be considered when exporting Norwegian product design

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ABSTRACT

Norwegian design is heavily grounded in, and dictated by Scandinavian culture and core values. This phenomenon provides significant challenges for Norwegian design brands, when they decide to embark on new, foreign markets in an even more globalized design world.

This article examines the potential of Norwegian brands to become global brands, based upon typical traits of Norwegian design and how they were influenced by heritage and culture. Furthermore, the article proposes a strategy for Norwegian brands to transition from a local into a global brand by gaining a stronger foothold in international markets.

Results indicate that a branding strategy should be developed around creative equity, design traits, culture and heritage. Being able to draw inspiration from past experiences, events, products and traditions will enhance this creative equity. Furthermore, a culture and content-rich creative equity will improve the chances of Norwegian brands to succeed in global markets, differentiating itself from other brands.

KEYWORDS: Creative Equity, Norwegian design, Brand heritage, Globalized design world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Norwegian design consists of a fairly specific design language, connected to a cultural origin and built around common Norwegian core values. It would be interesting to see how this part of Scandinavian design language can translate to new markets with other cultural backgrounds, and other associations that follow with them.

Factors that will be of high importance in this process are the semantics and semiotics of shapes and signs in products; what may evoke a sensation of comfort in Norwegian culture will perhaps provoke a different reaction in another culture. It will also be important to consider the role of brand heritage and what effect this will

have on the globalisation strategy of a Norwegian design brand.

The author claims that international intervention by global companies may affect the level of branding of Norwegian products positively. However, overemphasising global-branding may negatively influence the existing brand recognition of the typical Norwegian brand as per today, because the tendency to overemphasise global branding may lead to a generalisation and watering down of specific form factors in local Norwegian products. The challenge for design managers here is to develop a balanced branding strategy, which supports a company's globalisation endeavour, but does not undermine its practices in creating meaningful products for

the local context. Prior to this, Norwegian design brands should take a stand and consider both globalization and localization strategic consequences before embarking on new and foreign markets.

The aim of this study is firstly to investigate how Norwegian brands should profile and position themselves within a globalised design world. Secondly, this paper forms a preliminary guide for Norwegian brands that are interested to revise their design philosophy to operate nationally and internationally. Hereby, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the potential of Norwegian brands to become global brands?
2. How much does form influence the brand building of typical Norwegian products?
3. To what extent can the design of Norwegian products be disconnected from its cultural base?
4. What factors are important to consider when Norwegian brands transition from a local into a global brand by embarking on new markets?
5. What type of design and branding strategy should be introduced to gain a stronger foothold in international markets?

2. NORWEGIAN DESIGN

Norwegian design is closely related to the umbrella term “Scandinavian design” that emerged in the 1950s in Scandinavian countries. These countries have engaged in mutual cooperation for hundreds of years, something that has resulted in a closely knitted regional culture, which can be observed in a common Scandinavian design language. All five countries share more or less the same aesthetics and functional philosophy, which is born out of the same societal ideals and values. What is also an important factor for the common design language are the geographical similarities.

Scandinavian life has for centuries been focused around the home, especially with its harsh climate and the long, dark and cold winters. Because of this, Scandinavian homes have always aimed to be a place to escape from the rough outdoors, with comfort, coziness, well-being and warmth as important characteristics. This has been reflected in the product design through the centuries, where simplicity, beauty, functionality works together with natural materials to create a warm and positive glow, often communicating a high level of emotional equity. Even though Scandinavian design embodies similar values across the all five countries, there are certain specific characteristics that distinguish the countries’ design language from each other. [1,2, 3]

With respect to Norwegian design, long tradition of national craft can be traced back to the Vikings and the Lapps. In the 19th and early 20th century, Norway was able to integrate international styles like Art Deco and Art Nouveau more than any other country in Scandinavia, but turned later towards functionalism. After World War II it was difficult for Norwegian designers to re-discover or create a national design identity and style. In the late 1970’s, the discovery of oil and as a consequence, the development of a world-class oil industry distracted the development of the design sector in Norway. However, there have been some exceptions in the past decades. One example is Peter Opsvik who has designed several iconic chairs, directing the Norwegian design philosophy towards functionality, user-friendliness, high-quality manufacturing and modernism. [4]

3. SEMANTICS AND SEMIOTICS

According to the theory of signs by Pierce (1955) and Pierce Edition Project (1998) semantic meaning in products is constructed through a triadic interaction or relationship. The “Representamen” is a perceptible object or a design feature, the “Object” a reference of brand value, and the “Interpretant” an effect of the

sign. In some cases, when a designed object is introduced in another culture, with different references to a similar physical object than the original culture of the design, the links in the triadic relationship will be broken. In an even more globalized world, global brands build strategies to prevent this, in order to still provoke the same associations as first intended.

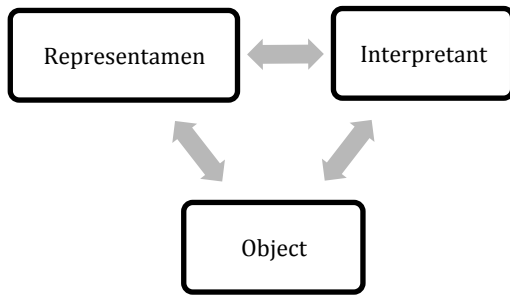


Figure 1: The R-O-I Framework for the Analysis of Brand References in Design

Core values of Scandinavian and Norwegian designs are clearly aligned with Pierce’s theory of signs and ROI framework. However, the challenge is how to semantically transform these core values together with their brand values into tangible design elements and features. Norwegian design brands are usually built upon the following values: friendliness, comfort, functionality and human-centeredness. To exemplify this, we can look to Karjalainen and Snelders (2010) article, who identified Nokia and Volvo as two Scandinavian brands that clearly worked with semantic translation to determine their core values. This can be observed in the earlier phones of Nokia, where the general curves of the phone were to express a friendly smile, which correlates to their brand values such as human centeredness, personalization and user friendliness. In recent years, the “smiling” Nokia curves have more or less disappeared, especially from their lead products. This can partly be attributed to developments in smartphone technology, which de-emphasised the design of product features. However, to retain their core Scandinavian design values, Nokia attempted to use round corners and soft shapes, along with the use of warm material in their new designs.

In Volvo’s case, brand values such as safety, solidity and protectiveness are represented through specific form characteristic. For example, the shoulder line, which is easily recognizable on recent Volvo models, has been inherited from earlier models, especially the Environmental Concept Car of Volvo in 1992.

Both Nokia and Volvo used product design features as a mean to communicate brand values. Nokia had to capitalise more on its user-interface design to distinguish itself from other competitive brands, whereas Volvo was able to pursue a form DNA strategy.

Such a systematic approach towards the development of product form can be a challenge when exporting designs to other cultures and markets, as people may not understand the meaning behind these forms. However, by developing more in-depth cross-cultural understanding of meanings, designers may be more sensitive in designing products for targeted cultures according their contexts, values and beliefs.

4. ACCULTURATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION, LOCALIZATION AND GLOCALISATION

Tomlinson (1991) defines globalization as the “rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world-wide”. When a design from the first culture is introduced to a second culture, reactions from that second culture may not always be predictable. However, knowing of what type of designs may or may not be accepted in certain cultures can be achieved by studying acculturation strategies as outlined by Berry (1997). According to Herskovits (1936), acculturation is a process of intercultural contact where “groups of individuals having different cultures come into first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups”. Acculturation

does not only result in assimilation as the Social Science Research Council (1954) describes it, but also leads to reactive, creative and delayed acculturation. Reactive acculturation is triggered when both groups resist change, whereas creative acculturation is the stimulation of new cultural forms, never before found in either of the cultures. Berry (1997) generated a conceptual framework of how cultures can deal with the issue of acculturation, or rather how to acculturate.

		Is it considered to be of value to maintain cultural identity and characteristics?	
		Yes	No
Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups?	Yes	Integration	Assimilation
	No	Separation	Marginalisation

Figure 2: Berry’s four-fold model of acculturation strategies

In this conceptual framework the following four different strategies are discussed. (1) Integration is a strategy where the interest is to maintain both original cultures when interacting with each other, whereas (2) an assimilation strategy is characterised by fully absorbing the values of the opposing culture, even if it means rejecting the home culture. (3) Separation strategy is defined by valuing their original culture and holding on to it, while at the same time avoiding interaction with other groups. Marginalisation is defined when there is little interest to uphold ones own culture or having a cultural relationship with others.

Companies and designers should be aware of these four acculturation strategies when exporting their own design to foreign markets. As companies engage themselves more actively in international marketing, cultural diversity of contexts may sometimes lead to cross-cultural

misinterpretations of certain brands. Therefore, brands that intend to enter or have already entered global markets may need to re-adjust their design and branding strategies. Reference to a specific host culture, companies have the option to adopt an “Integration”, “Assimilation” or even “Marginalisation” course of action (Berry, 1997).

As an example of “integration”, Maynard and Tian (2004) showed that 58 of 100 global, foreign brands have a Chinese web page to communicate with the Chinese consumers. This strategic move by capitalising on designing signs and graphics rather than physical product elements are typical among established global brands when they want to enhance brand equity.

Furthermore Maynard and Tian’s research (2004) revealed that even though these brands adopted globalization strategies, these strategies were not as homogenous as initially imagined. In fact, they showed a high level of localization by referring to local events, awards and honours given by the Chinese government and local community. Reiterating the “webpages” example, local commitments made these foreign brands appear enthusiastic in embracing the Chinese culture and wanting to be apart of the society. This mix of practicing a global strategy in addition to the integration of China’s political, economic, and cultural characteristics can be defined as a glocalization strategy. Glocalization can be defined as “the process whereby global corporations tailor products and marketing to particular local circumstances to meet variations in consumer demand” (Maynard, 2003). In this way, the brands appear local, but with a global reach.

5. BRANDING AND PRODUCT IDENTITY

5.1 The General Influences on Product Appearance

In a study, involving several design professionals, environmental factors, which had an influence on

product appearance and styling, were evaluated (Person, et al. 2008). The selected environmental factors were (1) the product's stage in the product life cycle, (2) the amount of products the company has in its portfolio, (3) the type of value for consumers that the brand communicates, (4) the resources a firm spends on executing the design. Although there were more factors that affected the styling decisions, as discussed by Karjalainen (2004) and Warell (2001), the earlier mentioned factors were selected because they are most relevant with respect to the scope of this study. These general product appearance factors should also be evaluated by Norwegian design brands in the context of embarking on globalisation strategies.

According to Person and Schoormans (2010), one of the factors for Creative Equity was that the product should have the design trait of quality. It was also stated that Scandinavian design brands have a tradition of using highly skilled craftsmen, which secures production quality. In the same study, one expert aiding the study saw it as crucial to differentiate a product from others using design, as most producers have access to similar manufacturing possibilities in certain mature markets. Another expert stated that her company in the early stages of the product life cycle implemented a distinct styling over their product portfolio, (1) to help consumer recognise the products of her brand, and (2) to strengthen the team spirit within the company.

5.2 Product Category Life Cycle Stage

According to Snelders and Karjalainen (2010) the type of product category has a natural effect on how a company determines its product design strategy. To be more precise, visual identity, product portfolio construction and the overall company philosophy towards design are to a certain degree influenced by the type of product category. It has been observed that companies developing and manufacturing products in new markets were practicing diversified styling and branding strategies for their portfolio of products. These companies manage significantly

different product lines. However, brands operating in mature markets practice product and brand differentiation based on the explicit and consistent use of design features.

5.3 Product's Renewal Cycle

The renewal cycle of single products also have an impact on the design strategies of brands (Snelders and Karjalainen, 2010). In industries where products have a shorter life span, there is a tendency of not relying on a consistent design strategy, but rather building a competence of constantly innovating the design of the product. This is especially visible in industries where the technology is rapidly evolving and brands need new designs to communicate diversity and progress, as well as signalling that preceding designs are outdated. However, in industries where product renewal is characterized by slow and rare design revolutions the focus is on transferring characteristic design features and product generation resemblance.

5.4 Portfolio Width

It has been found that with many models in the product portfolio serving many market segments, a certain level of consistency is difficult to maintain (Snelders and Karjalainen, 2010). In this case, instead of pursuing consistency throughout the whole portfolio, a better option would be to apply a consistent design philosophy within each of the product lines. However, if there is a lead product in one of the many product lines, then this product should be strictly designed with regard to specific design requirements of the product line. Given this situation, designers are freer to experiment visually with products in other product lines that are not crucial for a company's sales numbers. Besides that when companies operate with significant fewer products in their portfolio, each and every product has a much greater impact on the brand identity and brand recognition. This means that the visual impact these products are far greater and needs to be managed in accordance to fit the rest of the portfolio and adhere to the design

philosophy of the brand itself.

5.5 Creative Equity

Person and Schoormans (2010) identified in “The Strategic Relevance of Styling and The Management of Design Styles” that several of the iconic Scandinavian design brands had exchanged ownership during the last decade. These brands were sold to foreign stakeholders with the intention of repositioning the brand and its designs on a global platform. There is no doubt that these brands enjoy strong recognition and a loyal clientele that are envied by other brands and companies, but it has been suggested that there was something else, something stronger that convinced a foreign stakeholder to put his resources and reputation at stake. The brand’s attractiveness that convinced a global intervention was the creative equity associated with these brands. Creative equity is an organizational asset that increases consumer appeal and provides market differentiation. By sustaining the value of their design innovations over time, they are able to turn the footprint of their designs into their prime asset. As visualised in a two-factor creative model, its success hinges on the core design traits of the products and how these traits are forged into an asset in the market (Person and Schoormans, 2010). Product characteristic design traits were expressiveness, quality, authenticity and coherence. The three market properties of creative equity designs were defensibility, extensibility and renewability.



Figure 3: The Two-Factor Creative Model

The model implies that if an acquisition is to take place in order to raise the brand’s chances of going global, the brand should be associated with creative equity as an asset comprising of all its product design characteristics. Person and Schoormans (2010) gave examples of this when shining light on Scandinavian brands such as Marimekko and Orrefors Kosta Boda. Learning from this, it is essential to show a certain level of creative equity when companies aim to brand their products within an international arena. Moreover, creative equity will be even more important once a reputable international stakeholder considers taking over that respective company inclusive of its products and brands.

6. DESIGN HERITAGE

Brand heritage not only embraces “the past”, but also “the present”, and “the future”. This prospective view on branding indicates that being nurtured over decades or even centuries, brands were able to capitalise on their meaningful past and heritage to make themselves relevant to the present future.

6.1 Definition of Brand Heritage

Urde et al. (2007) defined brand heritage as a dimension of a brand’s identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and

particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important. A brand that is infused with heritage stands for authenticity, credibility and trust and can provide leverage for that brand, especially in global markets (Aaker 1996; George 2004). Aaker (2004) also stated that heritage is an important driver for corporate brands as the early roots add authenticity and differentiation to the brands.

6.2 Importance of Brand Heritage

Wuestefeld, Hennigs et al. (2012) identified an increasing awareness of brands' origin and heritage among consumers. This was especially noticeable for luxury brands. In addition, uncertainties in today's business world may massively disorient consumer. Such disorientation may cause consumers to turn to brands with a long and steady history, because they are perceived to be more credible, trustworthier and more reliable than other brands with a shorter history or a not so obvious heritage. Urde et al. (2007) explains that consumers who are of the opinion that heritage is meaningful, may show intensified brand loyalty and even acceptance towards higher prices.

When looking at successful, Norwegian designer brands, one cannot help but noticing that most of them are luxury brands. This is in line with what has been discussed in the previous chapter concerning creative equity. Brands that achieve the greatest success in Scandinavia are the brands that are associated with creative equity, and all the characteristics that go along with it. Person and Schoormans (2010) discovered that creative equity brands have an expressive design that easily differentiate themselves from the competition. They communicate to the consumers, and are built with quality perfected over time by craftsmen. Besides that, these creative equity brands are capable of delivering their promises, in a coherent manner based on, a common design plan or system that connects the products in the portfolio together. Similarly to market related attributes such as defensibility, extensibility and renewability, these traits are

also distinctive for international luxury brands. Comparatively, one can rightfully conclude that creative equity, design and brand heritage of luxury Norwegian and Scandinavian brands are important criteria for international companies in their assessment whether or not to perform a take over.

6.3 Drivers of Brand Heritage and their Values

A research of the different effects of brand heritage on perceived consumer value has been conducted by Wuestefeld et al. (2012). They acknowledged that there is a need for enhancing knowledge among design companies to better understand conditions and drivers of brand heritage as well as their effects on customer's perceived value. Results showed that brand heritage have a strong influence on perceived economic value, the perceived functional value, the perceived affective value and the perceived social value of a brand.

Economic value

The economic dimension of customer value refers to the value of the product expressed in monetary terms, such as price, resale price, investment etc. (e.g., Ahtola 1984; Mazumdar 1986; Monroe and Krishnan 1985). Smith and Colgate (2007) stated that consumers also try to minimize the costs and other sacrifices that may be involved in the purchase, ownership, and use of a product. They saw the overall economic perceived value related to economic costs, psychological-relational costs, the personal investment of customers and the risk perceived by customers in buying, owning and using a product.

Functional value

Sheth et al. (1991) define this value as the basic utilities such as the quality, the uniqueness, the usability, the reliability, and durability of a certain product. Consumers buy a product or service and expect it to perform a particular function or satisfy a specific need it was originally designed for. It is also expected to look good and to last a

long time (e.g., Park et al. 1986) and (e.g., Fennel 1978).

Affective value

The affective dimension of customer value refers to the experiences, feelings, and emotions that a certain product or brand provides to the customer in addition to its functional utility (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Sheth et al. 1991, Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

Social value

The social dimension focuses on the customer's personal orientation towards a brand or product, and addresses personal matters such as consumer's self-concepts, self-worth or self-identity value (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Hirschmann and Holbrook 1982). Consumers may use the product's or the brand's symbolic meaning and support, express and develop their own identity, personality, tastes and values, or simply just associate psychological meaning to a product (Holt 1995; Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Dittmar 1994).

7. DISCUSSION

To some extent technology is seen as a means by which manufacturing companies can strive to adapt to the requirements of a competitive and turbulent (global) environment. The growing complexity and pace of industrial technological change are forcing firms to forge new vertical and horizontal alliances and to seek greater speed, flexibility and efficiency in responding to market changes (Rothwell, 1994). Although underlining the importance of "Technology Push" and "Need Pull" in search of innovation, companies may also opt for more incremental ways of disseminating their products and services through branding and communication strategies.

Since Norwegian culture and values are so much embedded in Norwegian products, it would be risky to internationalise the design of these products without taking reference to their home culture. By exporting Norwegian design, one

inherently exports Norwegian culture. It is about letting consumers from other cultures experience and appreciate some of the Scandinavian and Norwegian values through design and branding. However, it has to be mentioned that the emphasis on the oil and gas sector and other heavy industries, has somehow restricted the design and development activities of consumer products, which inevitable limits the dissemination of a Norwegian design identity.

The research questions, which were outlined earlier in this article, will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

1. What is the potential of Norwegian brands to become global brands

Sharing the same core values and being regionally connected to other Scandinavian countries, Norwegian brands also have the potential to become a key player in building international design brands. These core values, which have a strong global impact are: human-centeredness, simplicity, functionality and beauty. In terms of design they can be characterised by the following keywords: A focus on warmth, comfort, use natural materials and minimalist functionality.

The path for Norwegian design brands to become global players depends on how these brands have used different strategies and design elements to radiate and communicate Scandinavian design values. Both, the Nokia and Volvo case studies exemplifies how different brand strategies were used to achieve competitive advantage, though based on the same Scandinavian design values..

2. How much does form influence the brand building of typical Norwegian products?

As per today, Norwegian design does not emphasise fast moving consumer electronics and communication devices. Being traditionally more industry and craft focussed rather than commercially oriented, Norwegian designers

tend to emphasise significantly on life-long quality in the design of new products. This implies a consistent design strategy where certain design elements are carefully maintained in design renewal processes. The main focus is on how design, can contribute as a differentiator in new product developments , especially when . life cycles is are long.

Hereby, the main design qualities to be aimed for are “Selectivity” and “Timelessness”, as shown in the strategic design of the few Volvo personal car models. Furthermore, timelessness can be achieved by introducing a systematic design approach, which manages generational transfers of valuable and recognisable design characteristics, features and elements over longer periods of time.

An alternative route for Norwegian design brands would be to generate designs for “Fast Moving Consumer” products. However, the risky part is that frequent design replacements may be perceived to be superficial and tarnish the reputation of Norwegian Design, which is presently still being recognised as exclusive

3. To what extent can the design of Norwegian products be disconnected from its cultural base.

Norwegian design incorporates to a certain extent Scandinavian cultures and values. On one hand, Norwegian design can be provoking by presenting elements, which purposely arise feelings. On the other hand, it is also dictated by a functional minimalistic Scandinavian design language. However, is it interesting to observe how the synergy between these two design directions is being appreciated and perceived by users as refreshing and surprising.

Typical classical and modern Norwegian designs, as well as attempts to fusion different design styles, may not always be appreciated in global markets. Besides that foreign cultures may associate these Norwegian design styles differently.

However, the author is of the opinion that Norwegian design brands should not compromise their cultural identity, because from the

viewpoint of exclusivity, and connectivity with “Scandinavian Design” as a whole, it is globally well recognised and highly valued.

4. What factors are important to consider when Norwegian brands transition from a local into a global brand by embarking on new markets.

Scandinavian design brands that have grown into becoming iconic brands with a global success have one thing in common: the creative equity that is associated with these brands. This has been the reason why these brands were attractive for international markets to acquire. Therefore, Norwegian design brands should capitalise on its heritage and earlier successes of “Scandinavian Design” by building their own creative equity. However, there are a number of design traits Norwegian design brands should consider when transitioning form a local to global brand. These design traits are (1) expressiveness, (2) coherency within a system of related products, (3) quality of craftsmanship, (4) authenticity and honesty, and finally (5) timelessness.

Exposure to global markets makes the brand renewable, extendable and defensible, which in return will strengthen the market position of the Norwegian organisation in a new international market environment.

5. What type of design and branding strategy should be introduced to gain a stronger foothold in international markets?

A branding strategy should be developed around creative equity, design traits and heritage. Being able to draw inspiration from past experiences, events, products and traditions will enhance this creative equity. Furthermore, a culture and content-rich creative equity will improve the chances of Norwegian brands to become successful in global markets, differentiating itself from other brands.

9. CONCLUSION

This article has managed to outline a brand strategy for Norwegian design to gain more exposure in global markets. Hereby, the interconnectivity among home culture, heritage selected design traits and a typical creative equity were found to be essential for Norwegian

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companies to enhance their chances to build successful global brands.

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