What the Hygge?
Britain's Hype for British Hygge

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Abstract
Since late 2016, some middle-class Brits have been wearing Nordic-patterned leg warmers and Hygge-branded headbands while practising yoga in candlelight and sipping 'Hoogly' tea. Publishers in London isolated *hygge* as an appealing topic for a glut of non-fiction books published in time for Christmas 2016. This article elucidates the origins of this British enthusiasm for consuming a particular aspect of ostensibly Danish culture. It is argued that British hype for *hygge* is an extension of the early twenty-first century's Nordic Noir publishing and marketing craze, but additionally that the concept captured the imaginations of journalists, businesses, and consumers as a fitting label for activities and products of which a particular section of the culturally white-British middle-classes were already partaking.

Keywords
Hygge, United Kingdom, white culture, Nordic Noir, publishing, cultural studies

A December 2015 print advertisement in *The Guardian* for Arrow Films' *The Bridge* DVDs reads: 'Gettin' Hygge With It!', undoubtedly a play on the phrase from 1990s pop music hit 'Gettin' Jiggy Wit It' (HMV ad 2015). Arrow Films' Marketing Director Jon Sadler perceived the marketing enthusiasm for hygge[1] that hit Britain a year later with slight envy: 'we've been talking about hygge for several years, it's not a new thing for us [...] it's a surprise it's so big all of a sudden' (Sadler 2017). Arrow Films was a year too early in its attempt to use hygge as a marketing trope. In fact, the advert's pun relies on an erroneous pronunciation of the Danish word hygge to rhyme with 'jiggy', but the glut of books and articles on hygge since late 2016 has made the correct pronunciation better known. Hygge entered the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in mid 2017, classed both as a mass noun and modifier (where 'hygge' in English is used in place of Danish adjectival form *hyggelig*), and defined as 'a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture)' (Oxford English Dictionary 2018). This article looks at how hygge in Britain evolved from a distinctly Danish cult concept to a conspicuously middle-class mainstream cultural phenomenon.

Hygge Happens

According to the *British National Bibliography*, nine books with hygge in the title were published in Britain in 2016. Additional searches on sales database Nielsen BookScan and online retailer Amazon UK reveal five further hygge titles that year (not present in the *British National Bibliography* database owing to their publisher not contributing data). All fourteen hygge books appear to have been released in the last quarter of the year to coincide with marketing for Christmas, the book market's biggest sales period. Most were lifestyle manuals, but the collection included an adult colouring book (James 2016) and some cookbooks (Aurell 2016; Hahnemann 2016). Penguin's *The Little Book of Hygge* by Meik Wiking – the CEO of Copenhagen's Happiness Institute; a Dane writing in English – is perhaps the most well-known. Its back cover blurb gives the gist of how the concept was approached

by all publications: 'Denmark is often said to be the happiest country in the world. That is down to one thing: hygge'. *The Little Book of Hygge* sold a remarkable 150,808 copies in the UK from its publication on 1 September 2016 to 31 December 2016 according to Nielsen BookScan² data, putting it just within the year's Top 25 non-fiction bestsellers. Sales volumes for *The Little Book of Hygge* were trailed by its hygge contemporaries (according to Nielsen BookScan data up to the period ending 31 December 2016): the closest competition, Louisa Thomsen Brits' *The Book of Hygge* (2016), sold 22,468 copies; Marie Tourell Søderberg's *Hygge: The Danish Art of Happiness* (2016) sold 18,791 copies; and Signe Johansen's *How to Hygge* (2016) sold 17,041 copies. These compare with sales figures (up to the same period ending 31 December 2016) of 34,749 copies for Helen Russell's 2015 memoir-travelogue *The Year of Living Danishly*. All pale in comparison with top selling lifestyle books published in 2016 such as Joe Wicks' *Lean in 15* with around 450,000 copies sold, and fiction by JK Rowling or Paula Hawkins, authors of the year's bestsellers with 1.4 million copies sold (Dugdale 2016). Publicity to promote the hygge books prompted commentary articles, spin-off marketing, and inspired lifestyle social media bloggers, hence the resulting buzz for hygge.

From Nordic Noir to Hygge Hype

The early twenty-first-century popularity of Nordic Noir, illustrated, for instance, by Barry Forshaw's articles and books on Scandinavian crime fiction and drama including *Death in a Cold Climate* (2012) and *Nordic Noir* (2013), set the scene for British enthusiasm for hygge. The DVD distributor Arrow Films organised the *Nordicana* festival of Nordic television and fiction in London in 2013, 2014, and 2015 (Nordicana, 2016). *Nordicana*'s purpose was mostly brand-building: Sadler describes *Nordicana* as a 'publicity driver' to sustain interest in the 'genre' of Nordic Noir generally and Arrow Films' DVD brand 'Nordic Noir and Beyond' specifically (Sadler 2017). Since early 2012, Arrow Films had successfully been selling DVDs of Scandinavian television dramas that had been well-received on their broadcast on BBC4 including Denmark's *The Killing* (*Forbrydelsen*) and the Swedish

version of *Wallander*. In addition, *Borgen* was about to be released, Arrow Films was producing *Nordic Noir* magazine bi-annually (edited by Forshaw), and Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy of books and films had recently been huge: 'there was a real palpable sense of there being a movement which was called "Nordic Noir" – or that phrase had [just] been coined – so it occurred to me that we should really try and build a label that could become a brand, that people could associate with anything to do with the genre' (Sadler 2017).

Nordic Noir has indeed now become its own distinct yet broad marketing brand, incorporating both Scandinavian crime fiction and other popular culture exports (cf. Hansen and Waade 2017: 5; Stougaard-Nielsen 2016). Hygge is not strictly an export in the same way as Scandinavian crime fiction: Britain's hygge books were not published in Denmark and translated for the anglophone market, but rather created by and for the British market. Popular ethnography books by British journalists paved the way for the *hygge* trend in the early 2010s, namely Patrick Kingsley's *How to be Danish* (2012) exploring Danish popular culture 'from Lego to [*The Killing*'s Sarah] Lund', Michael Booth (a Brit resident in Denmark) with *The Almost Nearly Perfect People* (2014) featuring chapters on all the Nordic nations, and the aforementioned *The Year of Living Danishly* (Russell 2015). The success of this small cluster of books describing contemporary Danish culture (including hygge) from a British perspective for British audiences attracted interest from publishers keen to exploit an interest in the links between Danishness and happiness (Higgins 2016). An increased interest in Scandinavian culture and lifestyle was also emerging owing to the nations' consistently high rankings in international wellbeing and happiness indexes, and in BBC broadcasts of Danish television series such as *The Killing*, *Borgen,* and *The Bridge*, British audiences got a (stylised) insight into the aesthetics of Danish homes and everyday life. Hygge was then isolated in 2016 by two British editors, Emily Robertson and Fiona Crosby, working separately at Penguin Random House, as a timely, niche concept to be successfully commodified, capitalised on these crescendoing interests (for a fuller account of the publishing journey at Penguin, see Higgins 2016).

A search of *The Guardian*'s website (theguardian.com/uk) – a

newspaper whose readership is by a vast majority Social Grade ABC1 according to NRS social grades (Guardian 2010), that is, upper/middle/lower middle class – returns numerous articles since 2015 featuring the word hygge (Google suggests 536 results, search date: 23 February 2018). In contrast, a search of *The Sun*'s website – whose readership is composed of two-thirds C2DE (low-skilled working class to non-workers) according to NRS social grades (Kirk 2015) – results in only three headlines including the word hygge, and around one tenth of the number mentions on the *Guardian*. Examples exist too in the websites of *The Telegraph* (530 results containing hygge) and *Daily Mail* (198 results containing hygge). While politically hygge is not exclusively consumed by politically left-wing 'Guardianistas', the phenomenon is evidently demarcated as middle class. Articles on hygge in the mainstream British press in late 2016 ranged from the descriptive, derivative, and towards the ridiculous, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 - Hygge Headlines

Title	**Publication**	**Date**
Hunting for Hygge, a New Ingredient in Denmark's Recipe for Happiness	*The Guardian*	4 September 2016
Forget Hygge - Brits Should Be Embracing 'Brygge' [British hygge]	*The Telegraph*	15 September 2016
Hygge – A Soothing Balm For The Traumas Of 2016	*The Guardian*	18 October 2016
Hygge Is A Waste Of London	*Time Out*	18 October 2016
Hygge Is Part Of London	*Time Out*	20 October 2016
The Hygge Of Oasis: Why I Find The Band Strangely Comforting	*New Statesman*	10 November 2016
Battling End-of-year Burnout? Bring Some Hygge To Work	*The Guardian*	16 December 2016

Evidence that hygge had a significant cultural impact at the time is apparent by its ability to be parodied (as humour is generated by common understandings), for instance by *The Guardian*'s Digested Read ('One of the reasons the Danes are so much happier than everyone else is because there is very little to do in Denmark, so we have got used to having low expectations': Crace 2016), *Private Eye* ('We love candles in Denmark. For many years, we used them instead of television': Brown 2016), and popular satire website *The Daily Mash* ('Hygge is byllshytte'), yet the parody book *Say ja to hygge!* by Magnus Olsensen (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016) sold a comparatively small 2641 copies by the end of 2016.

Hygge soon entered other arenas of the British market beyond lifestyle and cookery books, including candlelit hygge yoga retreats (with complimentary hygge legwarmers reminiscent of Sarah Lund's patterned jumper [Yogadoo 2017]), hygge pub meal deals ('2 for £20' at The One Tun, Fitzrovia, London), salads on supermarket shelves (Ginger's Kitchen 'Hygge-Inspired Kale Salad'), monthly subscriptions to 'hygge boxes' by post (from a company based in Derbyshire), Hygge Bands sports headgear, and hygge tea ('Hoogly', a play on the adjective *hyggelig*). Aspirational ranges and marketing campaigns appeared in quality shops including Ocado, Mint Velvet, and John Lewis. A new genre of 'chick lit' has emerged in which hygge is painfully inserted into a light romance storyline (for example, *Hygge and Kisses*: Christensen 2017 and *Hygge Holiday*: Blake 2017). In late 2017, market researchers Ipsos MORI warned of 'The Curse of Cosy' as apparently hygge had been 'mistranslated [...] as a justification for being a bit lazy' (Berliner 2017). Hygge hype will even make a long-standing impact on the urban geography of south-west England when private housing developer Crest Nicholson's Hygge Park opens to residents in Keynsham (Crest Nicholson 2018). Keynsham, a market town located between the cities of Bath and Bristol, lies well below the Danelaw: Hygge Park's Danish-inspired place name is entirely the result of the recent British marketing phenomenon, with the intention that hygge's imagery will appeal to potential purchasers of the development's residential family homes.

Exoticism and Ethnically-Appropriate Cultural Consumption

The accurate pronunciation of the word hygge itself is fixated upon as an opener in most articles and books on the topic. Suggested pronunciations include 'hooga', 'hhyooguh', 'hue-gah', 'heege', and 'heurgh' (Brits 2016: front cover; Maurer 2018; Wiking 2016: 6). The supposed complexity of pronouncing this short foreign word seems to be part of its appeal, likely demonstrating exoticism. Exoticism in this context is when a foreign country or 'strange' culture is appreciated, valorised, and admired by a particular group, perhaps even seen as a preferable alternative to the domestic culture; the opposite of ethnocentrism (Leerssen 2007: 325). This positive form of exoticism is a useful perspective when attempting to analyse the recent British market enthusiasm for hygge.

Occasionally commentary in anglophone markets has noted the 'whiteness' of hygge, for instance an opinion piece titled 'Could Seattle get any whiter than its rating as top hygge city?' (Berger 2018). Illustrative of the contemporary popular enthusiasm for Scandinavian culture in Britain, in 2014, the television broadcaster Channel 4 aired a mini-series called *Scandimania* presented by celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. This one-off series aside, Fearnley-Whittingstall's television output has little to do with Scandinavia, as he typically presents shows about sustainable living and farming on his River Cottage estate in Dorset. Yet, tellingly, *The Little Book of Hygge* has the following to say about the presenter:

> If hygge was a person, I think it would be Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall from River Cottage. With a casual, rustic and slow approach to life, he embodies many of the key elements of hygge – and he also seems to understand the value of good, hearty food in the company of good people.
> (Wiking 2016: 70)

Fearnley-Whittingstall also 'embodies' white, British, upper-middle class attributes, and crucially these aspects of socio-cultural identity speak to the consumers of Nordic cultural exports in the UK, hence his

suitability for presenting *Scandimania*.

In his book *Consuming Race* (2014), London-based sociologist Ben Pitcher proposes that the twenty-first century fandom for Scandinavian cultural exports is an attempt by Britain's white middle classes to assert and perform their individual and group identity in contrast to other sections of society via 'ethnically appropriate' cultural consumption. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen draws on Pitcher's approach and refers to the enthusiasm for Nordic Noir and related cultural exports as a result of the 'allure of accessible difference', where 'all things Nordic have come to represent an imagined desirable elsewhere' (Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen 2016). Hygge is the latest on this list of 'middle-class desirables' representing Scandinavian cool such as H&M, New Nordic cuisine, IKEA, Kånken backpacks, and Scandinavian crime fiction (Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen 2016).

In the mid-to-late twentieth century, it was *en vogue* for middle-class white Brits to display in their homes decorative artefacts obtained from travelling to far-flung, exotic cultures (Pitcher 2014: 55). Now, in a globalised technologically-connected world, these items are more readily available than ever – for example, a consumer can simply buy a Moroccan vase or kaftan online for home delivery – meaning that 'consumption of cultural difference by middle-class white people is no longer necessarily a particularly effective way of accruing cultural capital' (Pitcher 2014: 56). It is also increasingly unfashionable to 'misappropriate' another (generally non-Western) ethnicity or culture; for instance in 2004 media controversy surrounded popular American musician Gwen Stefani whose exoticism of Japanese 'Harajuku' girls, who shadowed her in music videos and public appearances, was interpreted as racist (Dockterman 2014). Finding affinity with an 'exotic' Scandinavian culture has in contrast enabled the white middle classes of the UK to gain cultural capital in an 'ethnically appropriate' way.

In a multicultural society such as Britain where many cosmopolitan groups are able to assert an appropriate racial and cultural identity through explicit cultural consumption (for instance, the British Asian diaspora consuming bhangra and Bollywood), middle-class white consumers, while demonstrating sensitivity and respect to cultural

differences, are for the first time seeking to develop a sense of their own group ethnic distinctiveness (Pitcher 2014: 62). Unlike the example of British Asians, who can look to an idealised 'homeland' for inspiration, Britain's white middle classes are understandably reluctant to reminisce and identify with their imperialist white past. This is where a stereotypical homogeneous image of Scandinavia comes in: 'The material and symbolic consumption of a monocultural Nordic culture is informed by the notion that it somehow represents an "originary" or "ideal" way for white people to live, think and behave' (Pitcher 2014: 71). This particular section of British society is thereby able to assert a group identity via an aspirational form of cultural consumption linked with the imagined homogeneous, exotic ur-culture of Scandinavia.

Explicitly consuming hygge demonstrates membership of a particular ethnically-marked socio-cultural class (consciously or otherwise). 'Whiteness' in this context is about conspicuous cultural consumption enabling a person to embrace being white 'culturally'; it's not necessarily about the physical embodiment of whiteness. Conspicuous consumption of the hygge trend is an assertion of personal and group identity: not 'I'm white therefore I hygge', but 'I hygge therefore I'm white'.

Hygge was Already Happening

Most publications emphasise the 'untranslatability' of hygge as being part of its appeal, yet usually go on to define it as cosy. Hygge is therefore a helpfully broad, vague commercial entity which can be 'safely' attached to many different commercial objects and social experiences. Hygge became a way of naming aspirational cultural consumption that may have been happening anyway but now has a fitting label: jumpers inspired by Sarah Lund in *The Killing;* candles; retro stylish furniture and homewares. Labelling products or experiences that existed already in the British context as hygge made it acceptable to embrace and feel pride in them without risk of being accused of extreme nationalism.

The author is aware of a winter 'hygge hen do' weekend in late 2016 organised by educated (white) English young professionals with

no ancestral or professional connection to Denmark, where hygge was defined as being about friends, family, warmth, conversation, laughter and cosiness. The invitation goes on to describe pub lunches with roaring fires, patterned chunky-knit jumpers, beer-by-candlelight, and granola-and-yoghurt breakfasts, evidencing the adoption of hygge as a fitting cultural appropriation with no hint of self-consciousness about the lack of actual Danish cultural consumption. This anecdote bolsters the argument that hygge has been domesticated to package existing elements of British middle-class consumer culture together: a 'hygge hen do' would almost certainly not have been denoted as such before 2016 (especially by Brits with no connection to Denmark), yet its cultural signifiers may well still have comprised a weekend holiday for these friends. Hygge has therefore been assigned to previously-unlabelled activities, aligning with Pitcher's conclusion that this particular section of British society now finds it necessary to label its cultural consumption in order to assert a personal and group identity, rather than assuming their culture is the norm.

Hygge Back Home

In Denmark, hygge is an everyday mainstream concept and a part of regular speech ('so omnipresent as to be almost invisible': Higgins 2016), and it has never been the subject of a flurry of bestselling books (in fact, Wiking's attempts in Danish sold only a handful: cf. Law 2017). Arguably hygge in Denmark is so quotidian that it has little cultural currency in terms of functioning as distinctive cultural capital. Hygge has however been deployed in Danish tourism campaigns. Hygge was one of the first domestic brand values for Denmark included by state marketers in the early 2010s, but since 2016's anglophone enthusiasm, VisitDenmark has deftly embraced hygge in nearly all its external tourism campaigns. For instance, in May 2018 VisitDenmark (in partnership with Scandinavian Airlines) launched its new website TheDanishAntidote.com with the tagline 'Warning: Are Your Hygge Levels Running Low?' featuring an interactive quiz: 'a test to determine how much hygge you need and provide you with a personalised hygge prescription' (Danish Antidote 2018a). The 'antidote' in the website

title refers to how Danish lifestyle traits can apparently counterbalance the stresses of city life in other nations. Predictably, all roads lead to Copenhagen, with quirky quiz results such as 'You are as hygge as a herring in the North Sea. (That's not very hygge!)', demonstrating the anglophone adjectival usage, as per the OED. The resulting 'Hygge Prescription' is full of stereotypical elements: '250ml coffee, tea OR hot cocoa ONE DOSE TO BE TAKEN DAILY [...] Light a fire OR candles AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK' (Danish Antidote 2018b). A bid to UNESCO in 2018 backed by Wiking's Happiness Research Institute to protect *hygge* as an item of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (VisitDenmark 2018) cemented this marketing phenomenon into an enduring Danish stereotype, illustrating how a positively-received facet of Danish culture abroad has been adopted domestically to shore up aspects of national identity. Uniquely with hygge, Brand Denmark specifically seems to be going from strength to strength, distinguishing it from the rest of Scandinavia.

The Next Hygge - Nothing Compares

In 2017, another Scandinavian lifestyle concept was promoted by publishers as 'the next hygge'. *Lagom*, defined as 'not too much, not too little, just enough', was demarcated as typically Swedish. Books on the concept in Britain sold far less well than the original hygge books: the highest selling *lagom*-themed book, for instance, *Lagom: The Swedish Art of Balanced Living* (Dunne 2017) has sold around 24,000 copies to Wiking's over 270,000 to date (Nielsen BookScan data to the period ending 1 December 2018), despite a similar PR push on its publication in summer 2017. The crucial difference appears to be that *lagom* was promoted as a genuine aspirational Swedish lifestyle tendency, whereas hygge in Britain was already being practised by a particular subset of the British middle classes, as described above, providing a label to existing aspirational cultural consumption. Following the hygge phenomenon, other Nordic concepts including *friluftsliv* ('open-air living'; embracing the great outdoors), *Kalsarikännit/Päntsdrunk* ('getting drunk alone at home in your underwear'; a Finnish pastime), and *umage* ('make a bit more effort', especially with interior design)

have been promoted in the British press and by publishers as the next hygge. Pushes to find the new hygge have not been restricted to Scandinavian culture: a VisitScotland campaign in late 2017 to promote *còsagach* as homegrown hygge backfired when Gaelic speakers publicly criticised the tourism agency for mistranslating the word (Brooks 2017).

Conclusion

This article gives a timely overview of the ongoing enthusiasm for hygge in Britain since 2016, including offering an analysis firmly based in the British context with its entrenched social class system foregrounding aspects of cultural identity. From one perspective, the boundaries of Nordic Noir as a marketing genre have broadened to include the Danish lifestyle export of hygge, illustrated by how the initial focal point for both Scandinavian crime fiction and hygge hype was books. But marketing enthusiasm for hygge soon meant it gained a life of its own, giving a section of Britain's middle-classes a label for various existing aspects of aspirational consumer consumption. Danes in Britain have started lamenting that Brits are doing hygge all wrong – Sofie Hagen, a Danish stand-up comedian living in South London, explains that 'Hygge, to me, has never been something you could buy' in an article by a Danish journalist also living in London, who agrees that 'Hygge, like love though far less elusive, cannot be bought' (Byager 2018). Yet gift websites such as HyggeStyle.co.uk still seem to be going strong, selling, among other things, so-called 'Nordic Snowflake red and white hygge long lounge socks' at £19.99 (HyggeStyle 2018), and Yogadoo still offers its 'Winter Hygge Yoga' retreats in south west England for £65 per half day (Yogadoo 2017). In Britain, hygge *can* be bought.

Endnotes

[1] The word hygge is not italicised or placed in quote marks in most of this article; it has featured in the Oxford English Dictionary as a noun and adjective since June 2017 (Oxford English Dictionary 2018), therefore is treated here as a loan word in English, rather than a Danish word.
[2] Unless otherwise stated, sales figures in this article are for books sold in the United Kingdom from Nielsen BookScan, obtained directly by the author. Thank you to UCL's Centre for Publishing for facilitating access to Nielsen BookScan.

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