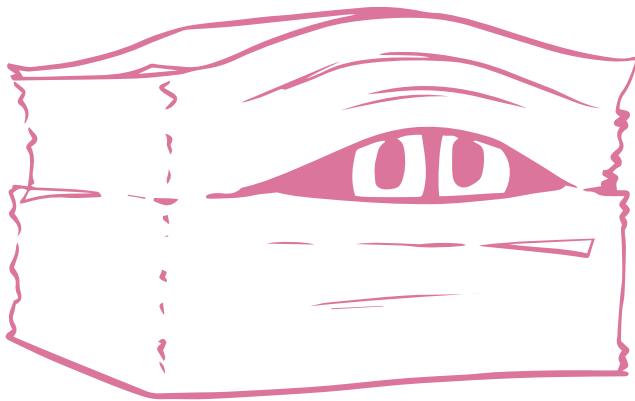# FREAK FACTORY REPORT

#1

The Average is Dead

Hi!

The human brain loves numbers. They seem so clear, unbiased. True. Who am I not to trust that 3 is more than 2? So, we dig into the data, roll around in it, feast on it, until we feel absolutely certain that some things are just the way we see them.

Except, they're most likely not. Because every clean data point measure something. And this something lives in the messy, icky place called the real world. It can be an object, such as a tree or a human being. Or even worse: an opinion, an idea. Captured through flawed measures by a bored researcher trying to get the uninterested object of study to make some sense. What exactly did you have for breakfast on Wednesday two weeks ago? In a world where none of your top two political parties existed, what would you vote for? What brand of chewing gum would you say that you love? I mean really, really love?

In a world were anyone can have anything at any time, and the general public consists of people with fundamentally opposing views on everything from home cooking to climate policy, mainstream has become just another subculture. Trying to do something that will appeal to people on average is destined to fail. So, what can we do if we still want to connect?

First, we need to be true to the data. That reality is messy doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to understand it. It just means that we need to sharpen our tools and our minds. When we do that, we can find amazing nuggets of truth that can help us innovate on new levels. But we also need to be true to ourselves. Being what people say they want is never a good idea. Instead, we need to figure out what we want, and invite anyone interested to participate. That way, we can all find our place in this changing, confusing, freaky world. And a wonderful world it is.

The Freak Factory

Contents
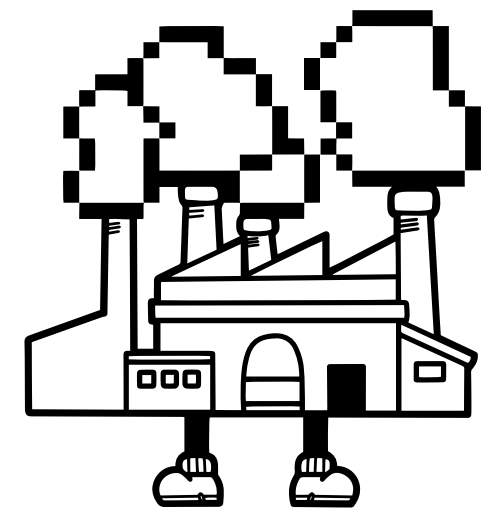
Brand New World

Sweden, like much of Europe, is an immigrant economy. Over the last few decades people have moved here from all over the world, in search of work, freedom, or safety. Around 20 % of the Swedish population now have some foreign background. Being new to a country, its culture and language, makes it much less likely to end up the web panels typically used for consumer research. So how can we know what people in this major consumer group think?

When I started asking consumer research companies about this some months ago, they were willing to acknowledge the problem, but had few solutions. "I guess you would have to get out in the streets and ask people," one specialist suggested, implicating that this was obviously too difficult, or too expensive, to even consider. To me, that sounded like just the reason to do it. So, we did.

During two weeks in October and November 2022, we toured malls, squares and subway stations of Stockholm looking for new Swedes to survey their thoughts and opinions on brands. Simultaneously, we ran a survey with identical questions using a traditional web panel, claiming to represent the general Swedish public. We then compared the results of the two studies; the first ever such analysis conducted in Sweden.

The results were fascinating. Some brands, such as IKEA and YouTube, prove strong in both groups. These brands have little in common in terms of product and brand category, but they are all clear, idea-driven brands that play important roles in people's lives. Others, such as Nordea, Willys and Skoda, rank quite differently in the two groups. While liked among the general public, they are particularly strong with new Swedes. Dagens Nyheter, together with Elgiganten, shows the largest gap. Perhaps this is a result of people with backgrounds from less democratic countries being particularly positive to beacons of free speech?

In the other direction, we see System-bolaget, Triss and Hemnet performing significantly better in the general pop-ulation. Explanations can be found in cultural and socio-economic factors. This is challenging, but also shows major opportunities for these Swedish heritage brands to reconsider their role in a changing Swedish culture.

In times of increasing racism and polarization, I want to make a note on differences and similarities. Is it really warranted to research consumer atti-tudes based on nationality, ethnicity, or race? What are these numbers really saying?

To figure that out, we ran another study, using traditional web panel methodology, targeting only people with foreign background. The results from this study were identical to that of the general Swedish population. This confirms results from studies across several academic fields: it is not your ethnicity, or your race, or were you or your parents were born, that matters. It's how long you've lived somewhere. If you've lived in Sweden long enough to be in a web panel, you are most likely thinking much like someone who's been here for generations.

To anyone worried that Swedish culture is threatened by the influx of people from other parts of the world: Fear not. Everyone's already shopping at IKEA and enjoying their Arla products in front of Netflix. Very soon, they'll pick up a Triss as well.

Nina Åkestam Wikner,
Marketing Ph.D.

Most liked brands in the general Swedish population

(Online survey method)

Brand	Rank
ICA	1
IKEA	2
YouTube	3
Willy:s	4
Arla	5
Netflix	6
SVT	7
Elgiganten	8
Samsung	9
Systembolaget	10
Apple	11
Hemnet	12
Plantagen	13
McDonald's	14
Triss	15
Vattenfall	16
Telenor	17
Nordea	18
Dagens Nyheter	19
Skoda	20

Most liked brands among new Swedes

(Field survey method)

| Brand	Rank
IKEA	1
YouTube	2
Elgiganten	3
Arla	4
ICA	5
Willy:s	6
SVT	7
Apple	8
Netflix	9
Samsung	10
McDonald's	11
Dagens Nyheter	12
Nordea	13
Plantagen	14
Vattenfall	15
Systembolaget	16
Telenor	17
Skoda	18
Triss	19
Hemnet	20

Elgiganten

Top 3 among new Swedes
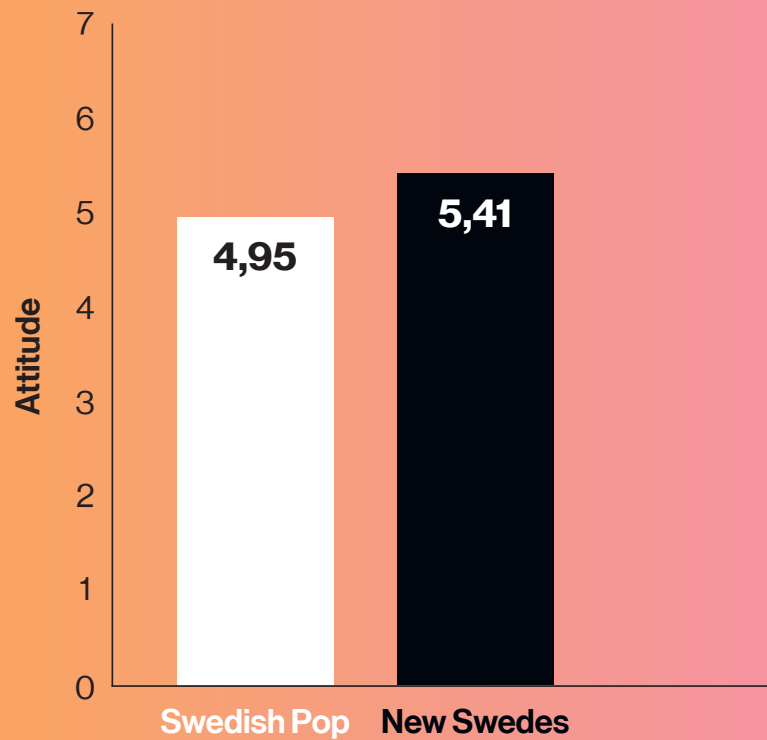
While strong in the population as a whole (#8), new Swedes rate Elgiganten third among all brands surveyed. Only IKEA and YouTube are stronger. This is the biggest difference found in the study.
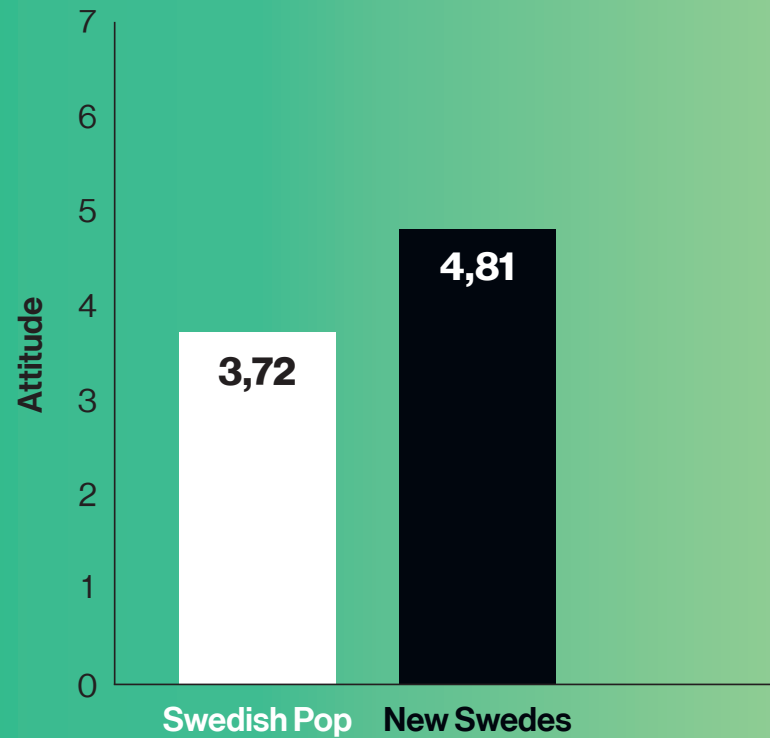
Willys

Liked by everyone. Loved by new Swedes.
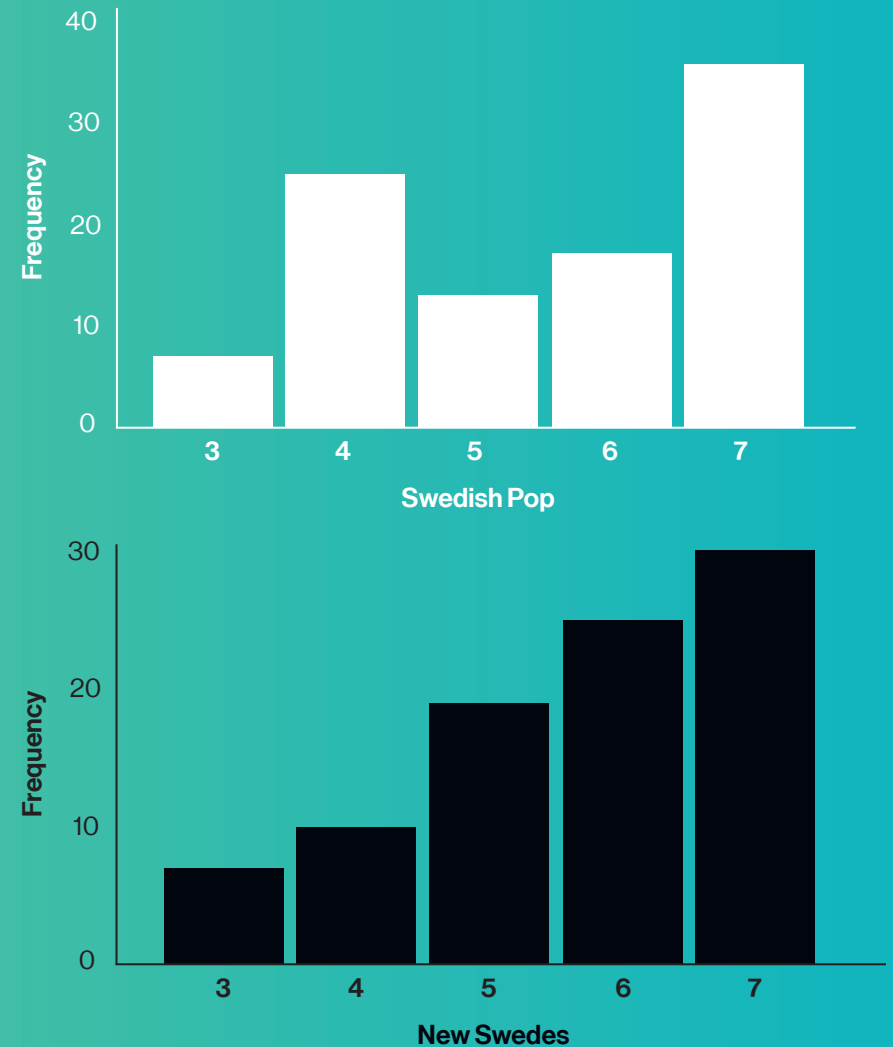
While Willys is well liked in both groups, the gap to market leader ICA shrinks among new Swedes. Willys has a strong fan base in this group, probably as a result of a purposeful and long-term brand strategy.
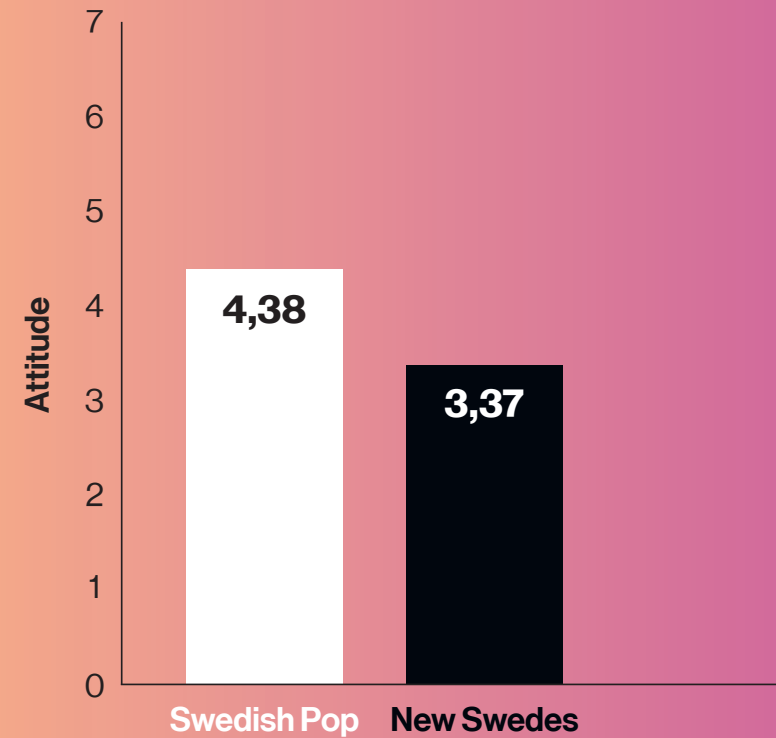
Dagens Nyheter

New Swedes in defense of the free press?

Despite potential barriers of language and tradition, the DN brand is rated higher among new Swedes. Many people in this group have backgrounds from weak democracies, which could influence their positive attitude towards a beacon of the free press.

Hemnet

Housing segregation is evident

Hemnet shows the biggest difference between the two studies, and suffers from low awareness among new Swedes. Based on open answers, this likely reflects the segregation in the Swedish housing market, where fewer new Swedes are home owners.

Systembolaget & Triss

Categories in cultural transition

Systembolaget

	Swedish Pop	New Swedes
	4,73	3,73

Triss

	Swedish Pop	New Swedes
	4,18	3,48
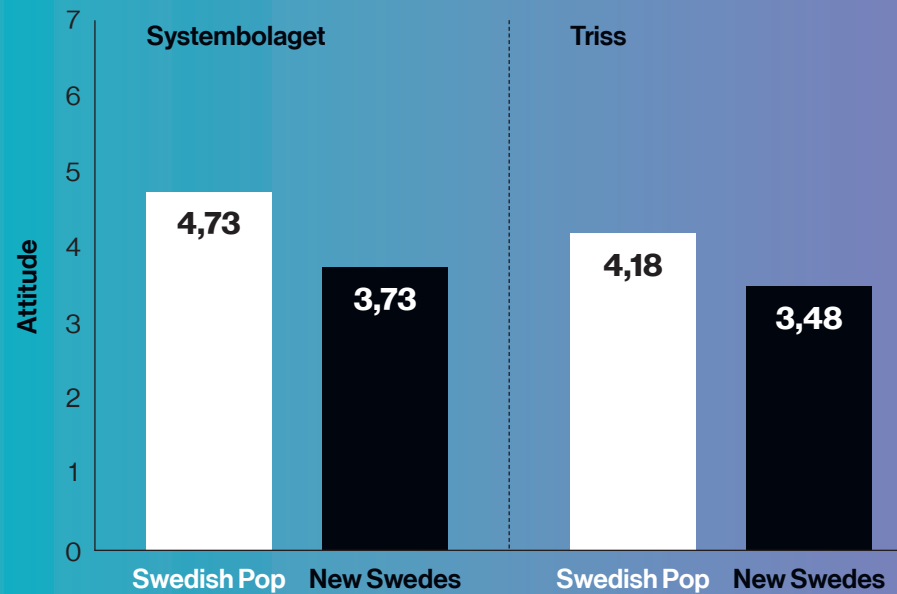
Two strong Swedish heritage brands perform significantly weaker among new Swedes. Both operate in categories that are less relevant in this group for cultural reasons. However, the same pattern shows when comparing younger to older consumers in both groups – indicating a larger cultural shift is on the way.

Skoda & Nordea

Growing fan base among new Swedes

Skoda

	Swedish Pop	New Swedes
	3,19	3,53

Nordea

	Swedish Pop	New Swedes
	3,78	4,17
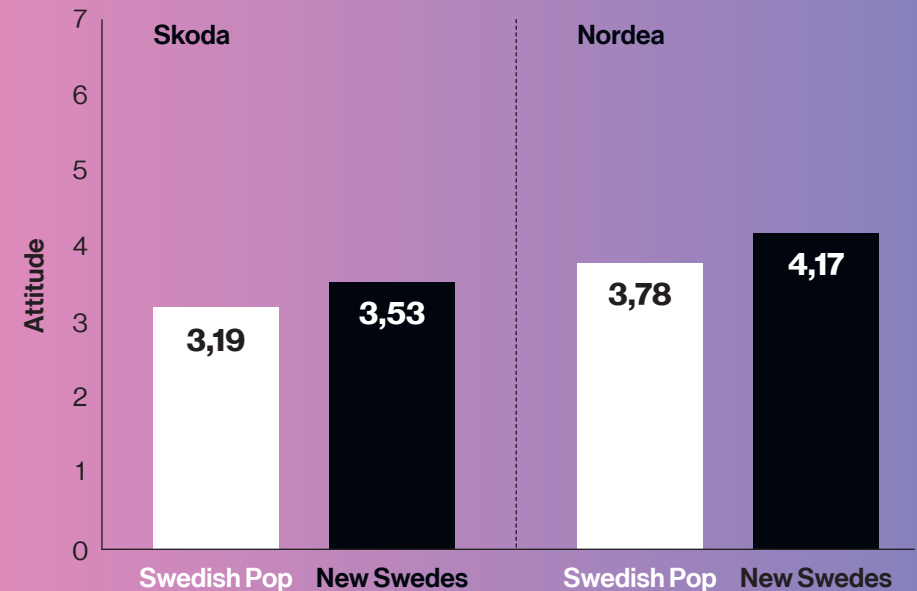
Skoda and Nordea both have significant advantages in the New Swedes group. In terms of rank, Nordea lifts 5 points among new Swedes, on par with Elgiganten.

You Wanna Live Like Common People?

The notion of 'common people' has been around for a while, and as a shapeshifter at will between people, the media, and politics. We gathered four individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives to discuss the existence, relevance, and idea of common people.

Participants:
Daniel Israeli, Construction company owner
Carole Lindmark, Senior Communications Executive
Gunilla Hagström, Illustrator and Art Director
Aynur Isayeva, PR-strategist

Moderator: Olivia Palmqvist, BA Social Anthropology

Is there such a thing as common people?

Daniel It's a complicated term. We try to put people in groups as often as we can, when needed. Through knowledge, areas of expertise, backgrounds, or other attributes. But it's damn difficult, because there's no one thing that could be applied to a group, as a unity.

Carole I don't think anyone wants to define themselves as common people. We perceive common people as the others. It's not how you perceive yourself.

Gunilla The way I see it, there's been a huge shift in what common people is. I grew up in Umeå and there, common people were the ones voting left. And if you voted for "sossarna" (The Social Democrat Pary), you were almost considered a "moderat" (The Moderate Party). Now I live on Ekerö and there, "common people" are moderates, and think that if you vote left – you're a communist.

Is common people a charged expression?

Carole Yeah, I'd say so. If we keep at the idea that "common people" are the others, there could be an assessment in that. And the assessment is not always positive. I remember when the TV-show "Ullared" started and I thought "What is this?!". At the time I worked at Telia, and my husband told me that "Hey, these are your clients. This is common people".

Daniel So really, we're all part of common people?

Aynur To keep it simple, common people are people that sleep eight hours, occasionally go to the cinema and get it on once a week. It's not necessarily a bad thing. You just don't dream about more or less than the common Swedes lifestyle.

Daniel Most people want something that is safe and stable. Our guys, at my company, often talk about it as the only thing their striving for. "I work, I see my daughter, and then I go to bed.". It's the simple life people think is very desirable.

Gunilla It really is desirable. If you have a disability, you might not have that "normal" reality. If you have obstacles getting in the way of that "everyday life", you're not "common people". Because everything is built around "common people".

Daniel People who are the norm, do they exist? I don't know anyone. No one that just falls right into the norm, and doesn't have anything they're struggling with. That's why it's difficult to define what "common people" are. And maybe even more difficult in Sweden, that is a melting pot of the world. What type of common denominator should one have? You have a bunch of common denominators, but for different types of people. I think the norm is in constant motion.

Carole At the end of the day, it's about not having peace. Regular people have some kind of inner peace.

Daniel A lot of people I meet believe that it's about getting up to a certain level. "Now I've got a residence permit, I'm going to be allowed to stay! What a damn thing. I have permanent employment, and it covers my rent and the money to be sent home. My God, I'll be alright". And then you're satisfied. None of my employees could just bounce out, because they have no lifeline.

Gunilla I feel like I meet a lot of "common people" in my everyday life. I have had many conversations with acquaintances that express something that I would describe as an inferiority complex. They worry about being less interesting, depending on

who they would sit beside at a dinner party, for instance, or they diminish their own work titles when they present themselves because they feel like they have "common jobs".

You [to Daniel] talked about one of your guys wanting to be "common people" and be at a level that's "totally common". While you [to Gunilla] mentioned that it's something that sometimes is not necessarily desirable.

Carole But these guys, that we're talking about, I'm thinking that they've worked hard to get there. To get to what we take for granted.

Daniel Yes, I believe you get humbled by the idea of what a regular life is.

Carole Would you agree that common people are other people than yourself? Or do you think that most think "we're just a bunch of common people here."?

Daniel I believe that people can feel like common people depending on the context. If you're in a group where everyone agrees, you're probably common people.

Carole I don't think anyone wants to be common people.

Daniel Around the world, people think that they're common people towards their rulers. In that sense, I think that all people think they're common people.

"That's a government, and we're the common people.".
That's uniting.

Should someone get the responsibility to define the term?

Aynur It's not a tangible term, no one can own it. After all, several politicians wanted to use it as a unifying term in the Swedish election campaign. But the term is abstract. No one can own it or have responsibility for it.

Carole I get a bit triggered by your headline "The Average is Dead". I don't think so, you know. I think there's always a common denominator, but maybe that's not the common belief. That study by Google, where they tried to find common denominators to what creates a strong culture. I believe that study concluded that it's about daring to be fragile, confident and feel that people listen. You can't really depend on age group or perspective for a strong culture.

Daniel I think so too. If you're gonna find a common denominator, you must look much broader than you may think.

Are you common people?

Aynur I'd say I'm everything but common people, based on my definition of common. But someone else might think that I'm common, based on theirs.

AI generated image created by the simple text prompt "photo of common people" at DALL.E, an AI system developed by OpenAI.

Carole It depends on who you ask. I don't think I'm common, I'd rather say I stand out in many ways, and have different perspectives to some. I often hear "Can't you just blend in?".

Gunilla I'm not common. I've changed contexts a lot and I like to switch to a context where I'm not like the others, because it's fun. And I like to keep in touch with everyone, and it happens that I come back, and then I'm not like them anymore. And then, I'm not common.

Daniel Yeah, I think I'm common sometimes, and sometimes I'm not common at all. And sometimes I'm super common.

As the conversation starts, so does the categorizing of the "we and them". As a means of analyzing culture, it echoes the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's approach to how the human mind structures the world. Binary oppositions, as in "we and them", indeed seem to play a role in the sense-making of the world. In order to understand the "them", the human mind must experience the "we". Also, one side is naturally favored more than the other. Carole argues that the general perspective on "common people" is about the other, and not always as the favored other. Contradictory, Daniel's approach to the general lens on "common people" is more flexible, meaning that the common depends on its context. Aynur, argues, that common people get their beauty sleep, and have sexual intercourse once a week. They have dreams about life, no smaller or bigger, than the average Swede. Yet, who is the average Swede? Does the average equal similar habits?

Life satisfaction, from the common thread of the conversation, works as a tool to measure how common one is. Whilst Daniel's hired construction workers have been struggling to get an overall life satisfaction seen as common, Gunilla's friends are ashamed to feel common. Common people, in that sense, may feel mal placé or inferior for a discourse of intellectual character. Here, being common is connected to the sociologist Bourdieu's symbolic capital; the resources available to an individual based on honor, prestige, or recognition. Which serves as values in cultures.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus explains how humans' socialization process, the learning of behaviors, values, norms, and social codes, can create identification. But also, consequently, habitus leads to inclusion and exclusion. Gunilla's friends sometimes feel that the common not is enough, and feel excluded, when they lack symbolic capital above the common.

The conversation falls back into who the common people are, the other or oneself. Daniel argues that the ordinary ones should acknowledge "other common people". Carole argues that people do not think about themselves as common, and that there always will be common denominators, and the ones in the majority will naturally be the common. Nevertheless, the common denominators are not always what one thinks they are.

Their perspectives of themselves, being common or not, look different – yet similar. Aynur does not think she is common, but others might think so. Carole means she is not common, but it depends on who you ask. Gunilla does not see herself as common. Daniel thinks he is common sometimes, sometimes not at all.

Being common or not is highly context-dependent. The context-dependence stems from the less or more of the common denominators, which when it comes to a majority, creates the common. But again, being common people is context-dependent. Sometimes ordinary, sometimes not. Sometimes prefers to be, sometimes not. The circle of common people. Or not.

The conversation of the common held different perceptions of what being common is, implying the subject-iveness in the meaning of common people. As the concept of common people are highly subjective and context-dependent, the existence of common people is too. Concepts without an agreed definition may, sometimes, help individuals to manage their day-to-day life. However, as the concept continues not being forma-lized, common people will remain as subjective imaginations of individuals.

Olivia Palmqvist,
BA Social Anthropology
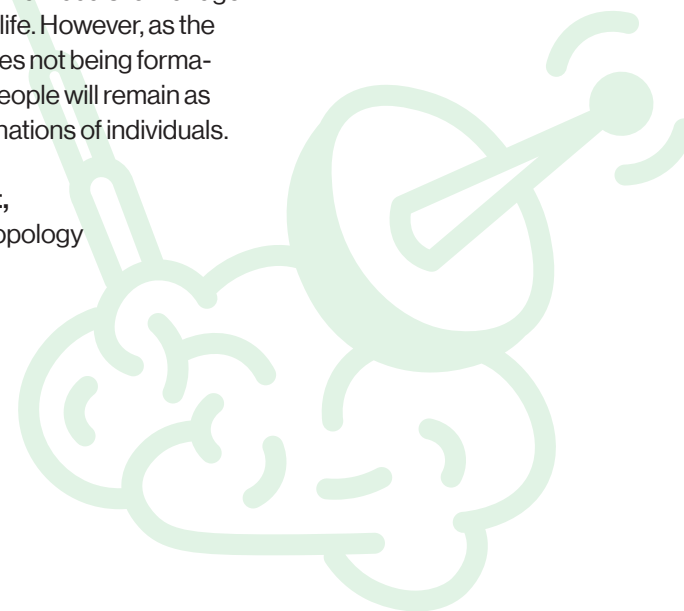
Miniature Man

**Christopher Robin Nordström
/@tokyobuild**

Who are you and what is @tokyobuild?
My name is Christopher Robin Nordström and I am born and still live on Söder in Stockholm, Sweden. I'm an educated furniture designer, and now I study at the Royal Institute of Arts. I have been working as a freelance designer for the past 18 years and have specialized in the design of bags such as backpacks, gymbags etc.

@tokyobuilds is my journal on Instagram, where I publish progress (and failures) of my project of making miniature "portraits" of weathered and mundane buildings from Tokyo.

How was the idea born?
Everything started after my first trip to Tokyo in 2018, a city I had wanted to visit since I was about 12 years old. Of course it was fantastic! I was really struck by how small the city felt, and enormous at the same time. Got intrigued by those small houses that weren't more than 40 square meters of living space. When I came back home I thought that I really needed a hobby other than getting paralyzed in front of Netflix as soon as the kids were asleep. So I decided that I was gonna try and make models of Tokyo houses I had seen on my trip. It's also a suitable hobby to do at the kitchen table.

Tell us a little more about the idea of building model houses.
I wanted to capture, and in a way eternalize, these small houses before they get demolished – something that is happening at rapid pace now. And I think miniatures are a good way to do it. I try to capture and highlight the often overlooked architecture, an architecture that really reflects the life that is going on inside and around them. I grew up in a house with a father that built model airplanes and model trains and a mother that had a huge dolls house, so my connection to miniatures has always been there. All my builds are in the non–commercial scale of 1:20. I choose it just cause it is not commercial which means I can't really cheat and go and buy some details. Everything has to be made from scratch. But it is also a scale that makes

it possible to hold these buildings in you arms and embrace them. There is a scale relation to our bodys that I find interesting.

What does your typical follower look like and how do they find @tokyobuild?
I have two types of followers. The people that are very interested and into model making. Everything from military and car models to dollhouses. People that enjoy and understand and often practice the art of miniatures. Then there is the more pop culture orient-ated followers. People that are into Japanese culture, sci-fi movies and so on. They can also appreciate the art of miniatures but from a more pop culture

oriented perspective. To be honest, I'm not really sure how they find me.Some-times I get reposted on model related sites, or on accounts that are more into pop culture, lifestyle and art. But many times I have no clue how they find me.

What do you think about the future of the project?
The goal is to keep on going, keep on sharing my process, keep on sharing my ups and downs when building. Keep on inspiry and entertaining my audience as best I can. But also challenge myself technically and dig deeper into the meaning of miniatures.

You have over 100.000 followers on Instagram, how has that affected you? Are you a miniature influencer?
I have gotten quite a lot of requests for builds and other miniature related work. But I do work actively to keep on doing what I do, no matter how many followers I get. And I think that is why I have gotten over 100K followers, I have been consistent.

I have some examples of people starting to build miniatures after they have seen my work, so I guess that makes me a miniature influencer.

The Trickster

Eveline Martinsson
/@thedogtrick_singleinreality

Who are you?
My name is Eveline and I've always seen myself as an entrepreneur. For years I worked in different service professions, but I never really wanted a 9-5 job. I've always been a natural matchmaker, pairing friends and people. And I love dogs and have two of my own. So, when I quit my job, I knew I wanted to do something with dating and dogs. Especially since there was no one doing it.

**How was the idea for
The Dog Trick born?**
I've seen how dating has become less serious and more about quick hook-ups and endless online conversations. The ultimate goal of The Dog Trick is for us to get back to the good old-fashioned way of meeting people. At its core it is, much like for dogs, about seeing and experiencing someone new with all the senses. I want the The Dog Trick to be a better, more authentic way for singles to meet. And dogs are just the best ice breakers for interesting conversation.

Who is your typical customer?
The Dog Trick is for people who are serious about meeting someone. Mostly that means people in their 30s and upwards. It shouldn't be just another way to hook up, but a serious dating alternative. And instead of connecting in a muddy dog yard, wouldn't it be nicer to do it in a nice location, with a glass of wine in your hand? I use social media to promote my events and create cute and funny content for my followers. And with my branded cargo bike - The Dog Truck – from which I sell dog treats around the city, I can promote my idea and events.

What do you envision for the future?
I'm just about to launch The Dog Trick dating app, which will have a match feature including extra profiles for the user's dog. It's part of The Dog Trick ecosystem and will get more people to the physical dating events, which is still the core of the offer. Right now, we're only in Stockholm, but in the future, I want to organize events all across Sweden, and maybe later all across Europe. I want The Dog Trick to be really big. So more people can find someone, because everyone deserves love. And there will always be a lot of singles and dogs out there.

How Many Ideas Can You Afford To Lose?

How Virginia Woolf's 100-year-old theory can help shed light on diversity and inclusion in business today.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) has been a hot topic in business for decades, but progress is still slow. Why? Because most Nordic companies fail to link DEI efforts to business value. Could the strong relationship between diversity, innovation, and performance add some additional economic motivation to speed things up?

In her famous essay A Room of One's Own from 1929, Virginia Woolf explores the status of female creativity. In a time when the female intellect was widely undermined and neglected, Woolf argued that the absence of female writers was a result of women's lack of opportunity, rather than lack of talent. Centuries of inhibitory social structures and inequality had restricted women's thinking. Woolf uses the metaphor of a woman in a park to describe women's lack of free expression. The

woman is walking in the park when she starts to think of an idea, but is then interrupted by a male guard and forced to obey by a rule dictating that women aren't allowed to walk on the grass. The interruption causes the woman to lose her idea. How many female equivalents of Shakespeare's genius were lost due to inequality and the lack of opportunity?

DEI In business has conventionally been treated as an HR matter. A way to broaden a company's recruitment pool and prevent discrimination against marginalized groups in the workplace. However, most Nordic companies are still failing to see the full benefits of DEI. Statements from top Nordic companies indicate that many have started to link DEI to business value, but a significant share promote it only because they feel it is the right thing to do. According to

global consultant firm BCG, only 11% of Nordic companies pursue DEI focused efforts with a clear link to business value. The two perspectives are not conflicting, but both are needed to speed up progress and make DEI a top priority for Nordic companies.

When companies put their efforts into making their management teams more diverse, it does pay off. According to Harvard Business Review, more diverse organizations ranked higher in innovation (19%) and financial performance (9%). A study of 1700 companies in eight countries, conducted by HBR and the Technical University of Munich in 2018, found the positive relationship between diversity and innovation to be statistically significant. All six dimensions of diversity (migration, industry, career path, gender, education and age) had significant correlations with innovation, both individually and

collectively, although industry, nation of origin, and gender diversity showed slightly stronger numbers. The effects of different dimensions of diversity were mostly additive (with the exception of educational background/age and career path/industry, which were somewhat correlated). Based on the survey data, HBR calculated that innovation revenues could increase by 1% by enriching the diversity of the management team, 1.5% with respect to national origin, 2% with respect to industry origin, 2.5% with respect to gender, and 3% with respect to managers with different career paths. Based on these findings, a broad approach to diversity that values multiple aspects is therefore most beneficial in terms of innovation outcomes.

But diversity does not automatically lead to an increase in innovation revenue. The power of diversity needs
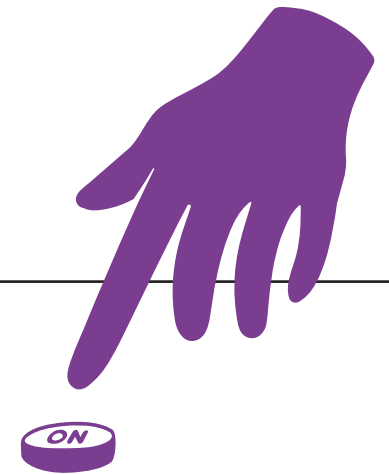
to be unlocked through a shift in power and a company culture, where diverse ideas resulting from a diversity of backgrounds are free to compete – and equally valued.

Woolf's call for equal opportunity was crucial for the early feminist movement, but the 100- year-old hypothesis could also help shed light on the missed

potential of diversity in business today. Inspired by her metaphor, one could ask; if all thinkers aren't allowed to walk on company grass, how many successful ideas are being lost due to the lack of opportunity?

Natalie Pehar N'doye &
Roshanak Fatahian

Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a workforce at a given workplace.

Equity is the act of ensuring that processes and programs are fair and provide equal possible outcomes for every individual.

Inclusion is the practice of making people feel a sense of belonging at work.

4 Not So Average Subcultures

Otherkin

Otherkin is a subculture of people who identify as not entirely human. Each individual comes up with their own reasoning for how and why they are otherkin, and what kind of being they are. Some believe their identity derives from reincarnation, a non-human soul, ancestry, symbolism, or metaphor. Others attribute it to unusual psychology and do not hold spiritual beliefs on the subject. Categories of otherkin include Fictionkin, those who identify as fictional characters; Conceptkin, who identify as abstract concepts; Weatherkin, who identify as weather systems; as well as several other more obscure categories. All otherkin know that they are physically human, in that they look like humans, were born like humans, and live in the way that most humans do. However, some otherkin believe their own bodies are different from most human bodies, such as having genes from supernatural ancestors.

Hardline

Hardline is a deep ecology subculture that has its roots in the vegan straight edge hardcore punk scene. It is seen as a more extreme version of straight edge. Hardline fans put out statements and literature pushing a biocentric view of the world, which advocated for militant veganism, animal rights, anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, and a much more militant version of the straight edge lifestyle, which advocates for a no alcohol, no drugs, no tobacco lifestyle. The Hardline worldview has been described as ecoauthoritarian and ecofascist. Nonetheless, Hardline co-founder Sean Muttaqi has persistently rejected racism, while sending mixed signals about fascism. The heyday of Hardline was in the 1990s when Hardline chapters existed in several cities across the United States as well in the United Kingdom and Germany. However, by end of the 1990s the subculture had mostly faded out.

La Sape

In the Republic of the Congo, sapeurs can be found walking around the capital city of Brazzaville in three-piece suits, silk socks, crocodile shoes, and fedoras. Short for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People), the fashion originated in the early 20th century when the country was subjected to French occupation. Congolese men who worked for the French colonizers, or who spent time in France, began adopting that country's sartorial elegance and aristocratic style. The culture of the sapeurs still lives on, while nearly half of Congolese people live in poverty, as these modern dandies cultivate a vintage aesthetic with great ingenuity and the appearance of wealth in their war-torn country. In recent years there has been a revival of La Sape in Brazzaville. During the early 1980s the government made campaigns to ban La Sape from public spaces, but now they are well respected "darlings of the regime." They have been raised to a higher status of "cultural heritage" by President Denis Sassou Nguesso by allowing them to participate in public cultural events.

"Own work" by Eguanakla is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

You make me feel :)
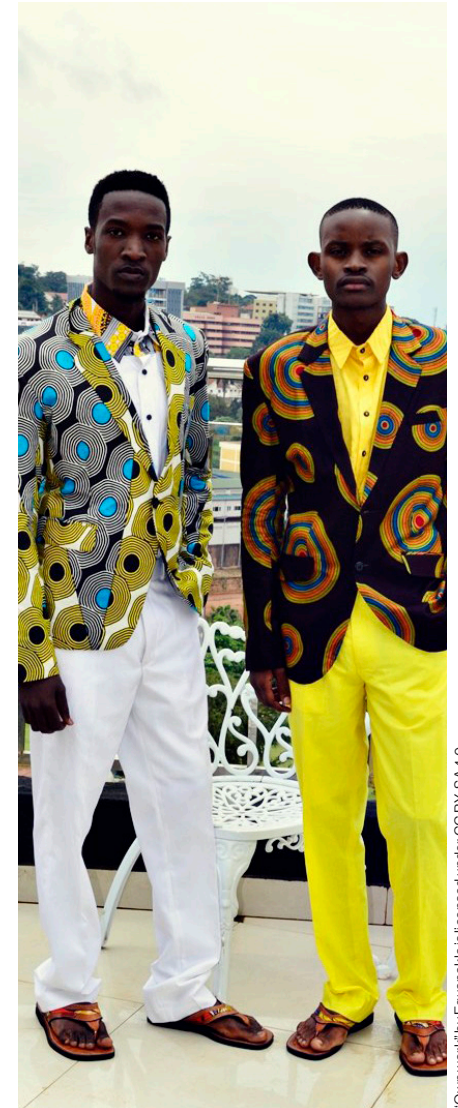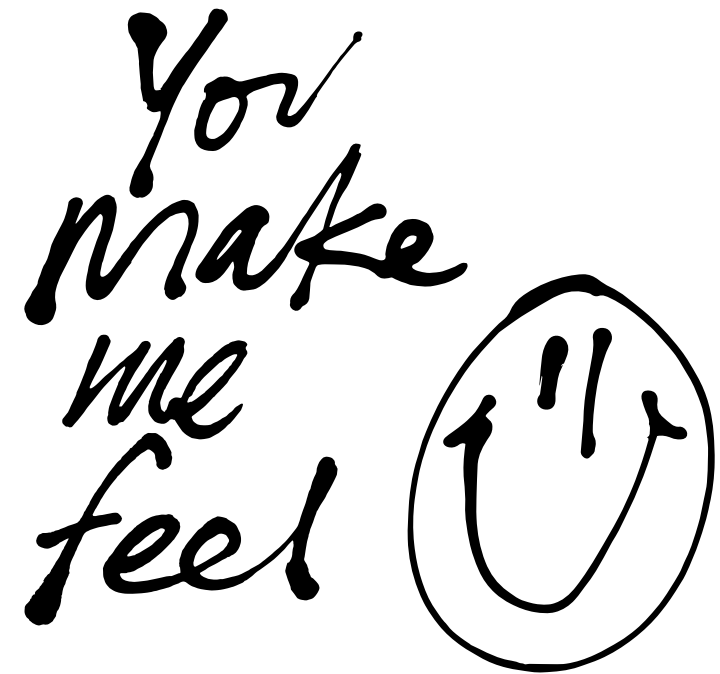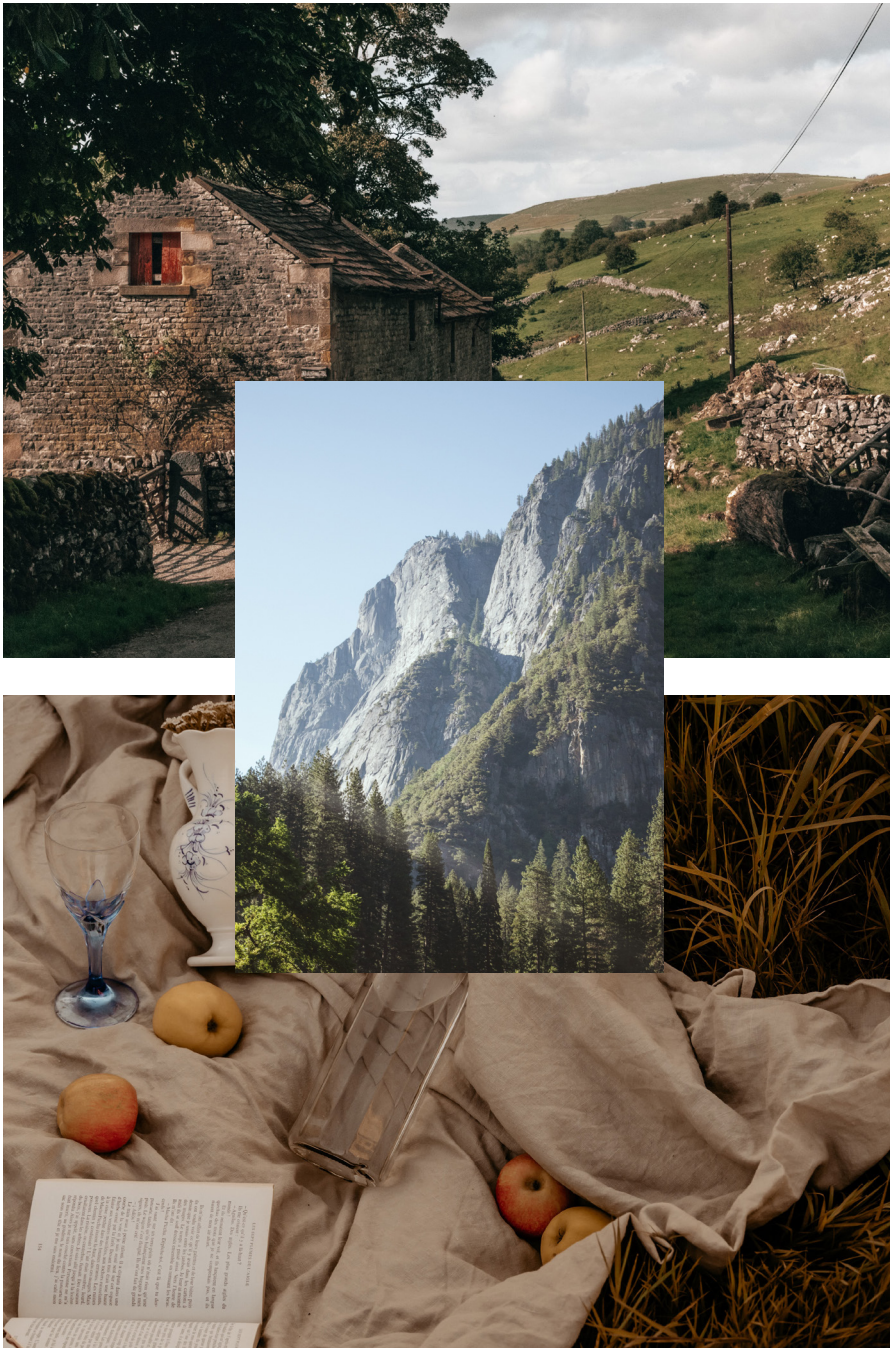
Cottagecore

Cottagecore is an internet aesthetic popularised by teenagers and young adults celebrating an idealized rural life. Based on an idyllic English and European life, it was developed throughout the 2010s and was first named cottagecore on Tumblr in 2018. The subculture centres on traditional rustic clothing, interior design, and crafts such as drawing, baking, and pottery, and is related to similar aesthetic movements such as grandmacore and farmcore. It's described as a subculture of Millennials and Generation Z. Economic turmoil and other challenges facing these young people may be a significant driver of this culture, along with these generations' emphasis on sustainability, and the recent trend to work from home.

Cottagecore highlights simplicity and the soft peacefulness of the rural life as an escape from the stress and trauma of the modern world. The New York Times described it as a reaction to hustle culture and the growth of personal branding. The Guardian called it a "visual and lifestyle movement designed to fetishize the wholesome purity of the outdoors.".

The Oxymoron Of The Effortless Cool Girl
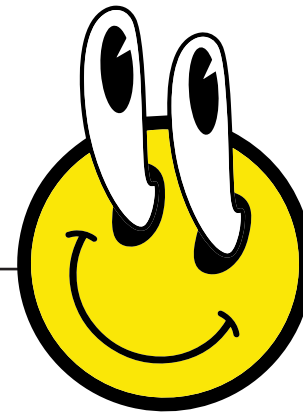
Like many girls born in the '90s, I came of age at a time when the idea of the Perfect Heroine became almost unavoidable as the ultimate role model. The flawless dream woman all girls should aspire to become, and all men based their fantasies on.

It trickled down into the air we breathed and the water we drank like some poisonous stardust. From Hollywood's "girl next door" trope of female characters, and fashion's heroin chicness of the '90s supermodel. Being the Perfect Heroine meant being thin as if we were constantly high on actual heroin, having the mind of a wholesome good girl but the aura of a cheerleader.

Like the rest of my generation, I spent a lot of my girlhood trying to become this idea of woman advertising, fashion, pop culture and the heightened influence of social media spent increasing amounts of money ensuring we'd actually become. The worst sin any of us could commit was to being TOO much. Everyone was telling us to be loud, but not too loud. To be feminine, but not too feminine. To be smart, but not obnoxiously so. To be thin, but not in a way that made people suspect we had an eating disorder (we did). We should still, without hesitation, be able to chow down a McDonalds cheeseburger on a first date to avoid male disappointment. Once, a guy I dated when I was 20 and at my thinnest, told me, "Oh no you're one of those salad girls". Two days later he ghosted me. The same guy had a week previous said he loved that I "was an Acne Studios girl." When I asked him what that meant, he said "skinny, breezy, tall... like Kate Moss."

Kate Moss was in some ways a haunted god in my generation. Her words *"nothing tastes as good as skinny feels"* headlined Tumblr pages, notepads, and sweatshirts of eating disordered female Millennials everywhere. It was a near impossible equation based on a male fantasy of what women should be. Not what we could be. It was the collective dream of an average Cool Girl, and Kate Moss was the ultimate average Cool Girl.

Gillian Flynn described it best in her 2012 novel "Gone Girl":

"Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding."

We were told to play the part, and we desperately tried - and then, eventually unavoidably, failed. Because the idea of the Perfect Heroine, the effortlessly average Cool Girl, is fiction. And for a long time, no one told us that. We had to discover it for ourselves. By living through it, in it.

And we did, whilst acting liberated. Sexually and otherwise. All to keep up the illusion that we weren't just as much victims of the patriarchal impossibility women before us had been. That was also part of the Perfect Heroine starterpack: never let anyone know that you're not enjoying it. Our mothers and teachers were proud. The men we dated were liberated from us, too. From the responsibility that should've come with dating, loving, ghosting us. Or the idea of us. We were free, after all. No man or ad could tell us what to do or be. Yet, that's all they did.

But as my generation of women are approaching 30, a radical shift has transpired. It seems, the Perfect Heroine has turned into the flawed Anti Hero(ine). As a result of a collective, decade spanning brainwash with the aim to turn us into invariably cool girl versions of Kate Moss, Jennifer Aniston clones. In a plot twist, many of us took the poison so long that it turned into a twisted kind of cure.

We are now seeing the rise of female Anti Heroes all around– on screen and in real life.

Lisbeth Salander (Girl with the Dragon Tattoo), Blair Waldorf (Gossip Girl), Amy Dunne (Gone Girl), Rue Benett (Euphoria), Love Quinn (You).

From 2010 and onwards, like a a slow-burning volcano, they have erupted beyond anyone's control.

Taylor Swift, arguably the biggest artist of my generation, has long been the face of this precise struggle to try, try, try in order to become the Perfect Heroine. She has done it for the world to see since the age of 13, and has been ridiculed as a result of inevitably failing. Trying again, and failing, again. Rinse, repeat.

Until now. The single on her album Midnights, called "Anti Hero", was streamed 60 million times in the first week alone. Young women across the globe have been posting innumberable TikToks documenting how they, too, feel like the Anti Heroes of their lives. In it she sings:

"Sometimes I feel like everybody is a sexy baby, and I'm a monster on the hill[...] I stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror, it must be exhausting always rooting for the anti hero."

A sentence that encapsulates the experience we have all lived through in this generation of women.

Just like the student often becomes the master eventually, the Perfect Heroines have ultimately become the Anti Heroines. Too exhausted to live up to the oxymoron of the cool girl. For better or worse, the Perfect Heroine is dying. The Anti Hero has entered the chat. Hi – it's us. We're the problem.

Amanda Brohman
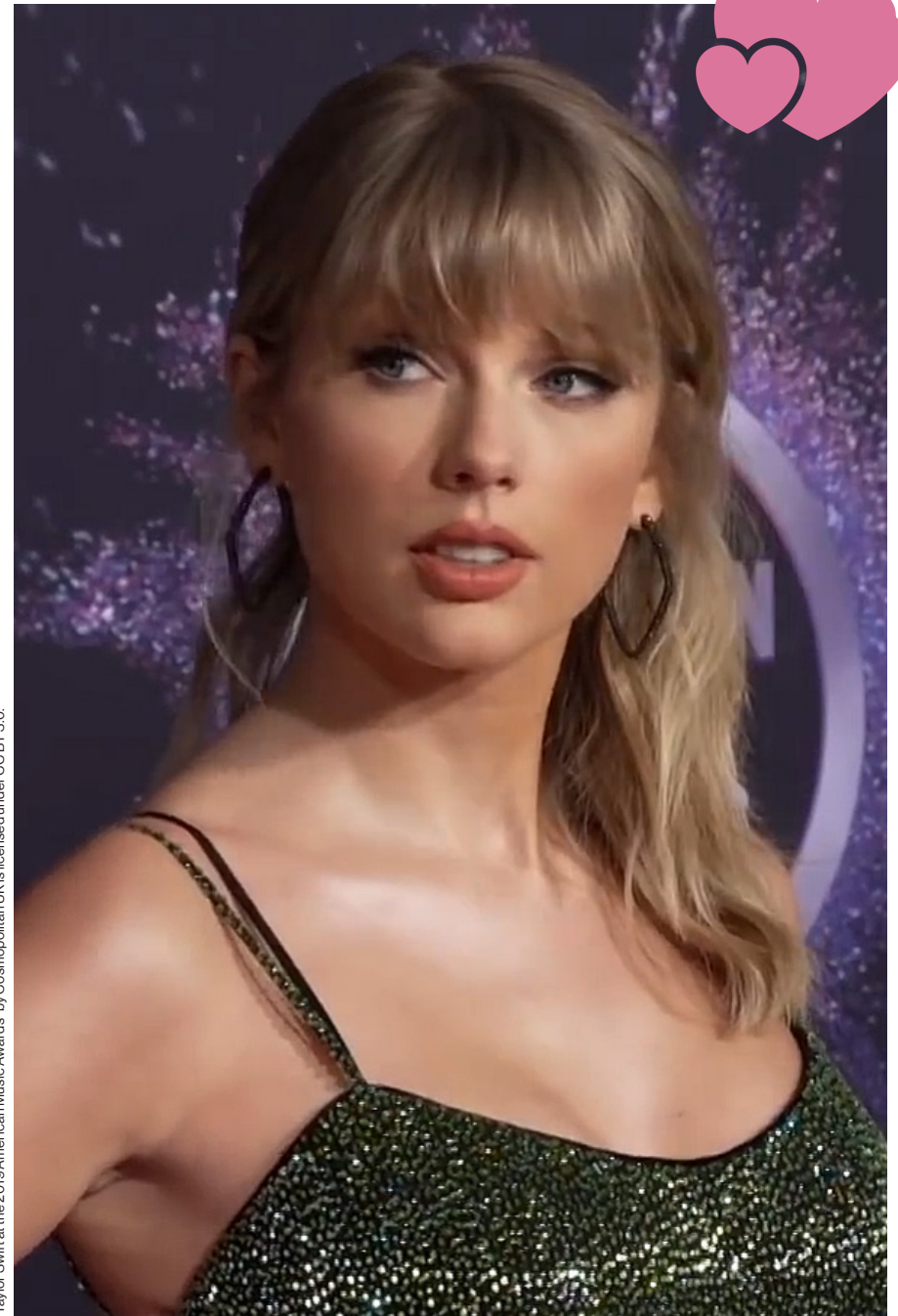
Contributors

Nina Åkestam Wikner Head of Strategy

Jenny Beckman Jr Strategist

Mika Márton Jr Strategist

Olivia Palmqvist Intern Strategist

Carl Henrik Wrethman Cultural Insights Strategist

Oskar Valdre Strategy Director

Natalie Pehar N'doye Client Director

Roshanak Fatahian Client Director
and Diversity & Inclusion Director

Amanda Brohman Community Strategist

Ylva Höckerlind Graphic Designer
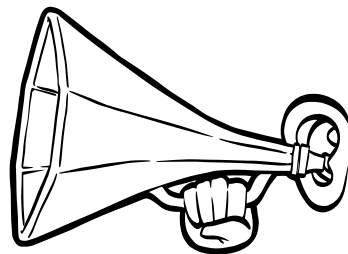
Mika Hyvönen Jr Studio Designer

Anna Lisspers Printbuyer

Maas Punar Office Coordinator

The Freak Factory is NORD DDB's
pan-nordic insight studio,with the
ambition to find the unexpected.

Contact

Carl Henrik Wrethman
carlhenrik.wrethman@se.nordddb.com
+46(0)70 579 09 81

NORD DDB°