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**Sustainability as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy:  
Danish Soft Power in the Case of Copenhagen Fashion Week**

MA Thesis

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### **Authorship declaration**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited. Artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited capacity for bibliography formatting and grammatical assistance.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines Copenhagen Fashion Week (CPHFW) as an instrument of Danish cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. Drawing on constructivist theory and Joseph Nye's soft power framework, grounded within small state theory, the study advances the argument that structured cultural platforms can function as institutionalised sites of identity performance, contributing to the international construction and diffusion of desired state identities. Through a qualitative single case study design, the research analyses CPHFW's mandatory sustainability requirements alongside a corpus of international media coverage from 2020 to 2026. The findings assess whether CPHFW's sustainability agenda, embedded as a binding structural condition of participation, achieves the intersubjective recognition in international discourse to generate reputational benefits for Denmark. The study contributes to the undertheorised intersection of cultural diplomacy, creative industry, and soft power, while offering an empirically grounded analysis of how small states mobilise cultural platforms to exercise normative influence beyond their limited material capabilities.

**Keywords:** Denmark, sustainability, soft power, cultural diplomacy, Copenhagen Fashion Week.

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## **Introduction**

In contemporary international relations culture has become an increasingly strategic arena through which states choose to project values, construct their identity, and pursue foreign policy objectives. Beyond traditional diplomacy and classic material capabilities, states operate in an environment where reputation, credibility, and normative alignment also shape international standing. Cultural diplomacy, understood as the use of cultural expression to advance foreign policy goals and foster international understanding, has emerged as an important instrument of statecraft. While once dominated by state institutions, cultural diplomacy today also frequently involves non-state actors and creative industries that function as intermediaries in the international projection of national identity. Within this transformation, fashion events have developed into a visible yet under-theorised site of soft power. Fashion weeks are no longer solely commercial trade events, they increasingly serve as platforms for communicating political and normative commitments, particularly in relation to sustainability, inclusivity, and social responsibility. As such, they may contribute to shaping how states are perceived internationally. This thesis examines Copenhagen Fashion Week (from here on CPHFW) as a case study of how fashion industry can function as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power projection in a small state context.

Although soft power theory, most prominently articulated by Joseph Nye (2004), has generated extensive scholarship, empirical analysis of how specific cultural platforms operationalise soft power remain rather limited. The existing literature acknowledges that culture contributes to national attraction and reputation, yet the mechanisms through which structured cultural events translate domestic identity narratives into international recognition are insufficiently explored. The research puzzle of this thesis lies in the tension between theory and practice: if soft power rests on attraction derived from culture and values, how exactly do these institutionalised cultural platforms contribute to constructing and projecting that attraction. More specifically, the research questions, whether a non-state cultural event such as CPHFW can function as a structured instrument of Denmark's soft power strategy, and if so, through which mechanisms.

Grounded in constructivist theory and soft power theory - two distinct theoretical paradigms that are deliberately brought into dialogue in this research - this thesis advances the central argument that structured cultural platforms can function as institutionalised sites of identity performance that contribute to soft power projection. Constructivism emphasises that state identities and interests are socially constructed and thus provides the ontological foundation

for understanding how cultural platforms shape international meaning and recognition. Soft power theory, by contrast, operates at the level of international strategy, explaining how states exercise influence through attraction rather than coercion. The analytical contribution of this thesis lies in the synthesis of these two frameworks - constructivism explains the mechanism through which identity is constructed and performed, while soft power theory explains why that construction matters politically. As mentioned, constructivism emphasises that state identity and interests are socially constructed through discourse and practice (Wendt, 1999: 170-178). In so, cultural events represent arenas in which identity is performed and communicated. Drawing on Nye's (2004: 5-11) concept of soft power, the thesis suggests that when cultural platforms consistently embed nationally desirable values - such as sustainability and equality - into visible and internationally recognised practices, they may generate reputational benefits and reinforce perceptions of state credibility and attractiveness. The theoretical relationship between these two frameworks is further synthesised in the literature overview chapter, where constructivism and soft power theory are shown to be mutually reinforcing rather than competing approaches. The theoretically expected outcome is that CPHFW's sustainability strategy contributes to constructing Denmark as a credible and normatively attractive actor in the field of sustainable innovation. Rather than replacing traditional diplomacy, such cultural platforms are expected to complement broader foreign policy strategies by reinforcing desired reputation and legitimacy. In addition, the Danish case is analytically significant within the framework of small state theory. As a small state, Denmark cannot rely exclusively on coercive or economic power to shape possible international outcomes. Small states often depend on multilateral engagement, alliances, and normative positioning to enhance their visibility and legitimacy in the international system (Thorhalsson, 2019). Therefore, cultural diplomacy and nation branding represent strategic outlets through which small states may "punch above their weight", and reinforce reputation and credibility beyond their limited material capabilities. From this perspective, CPHFW provides an empirically rich ground for analysing how a small state mobilises cultural platforms to strengthen its international image.

Therefore, the primary research question guiding this study is: **How does CPHFW's strategic focus on sustainability function as a tool of cultural diplomacy, and in what ways does it contribute to diffusing the constructed sustainable identity externally in ways that may enhance Denmark's soft power?**

The thesis adopts a qualitative single case study design. CPHFW has been selected as a critical case due to its institutionalised sustainability requirements and explicit strategic positioning. The timeframe of analysis spans from 2020 to 2026, beginning with the introduction of the first Sustainability Action Plan and further covering subsequent developments. The empirical analysis relies on systematic qualitative content analysis of three categories of sources: 1) official institutional and policy documents, 2) organisational communications, and 3) international digital media coverage. The analysis shall focus on identifying recurring themes, value articulations, and framing strategies in order to assess, how sustainability is embedded into identity narratives and how these narratives are externally recognised. The study does not attempt to measure direct diplomatic outcomes or behavioural change, rather it analyses discursive recognition and media tone as indicators of perceived credibility and attractiveness. Furthermore, the thesis does not evaluate the environmental performance of the fashion industry itself, rather, it examines how sustainability is framed and mobilised as a diplomatic resource. These scope conditions position the research within an interpretive tradition. The justification for studying a fashion event as a serious object of IR inquiry is addressed directly in the methodology chapter, where the case selection is discussed in full.

The thesis is structured in the following way: chapter one presents the theoretical framework and literature review, discussing constructivism, small state theory, soft power, cultural diplomacy and nation branding. Chapter two outlines the research design and methodology. Chapter three provides an empirical analysis and framing of the case study - the CPHFW's sustainability strategy, examination of its policies, partnerships, and institutional positioning. Chapter four analyses international media discourse and assesses whether Denmark's projected sustainable identity is successfully recognised externally. The conclusion summarises the findings, reflects on their theoretical and empirical implications, and the possibilities of future studies.

## **1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Overview**

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis of this thesis. It proceeds in the four following stages. First, constructivism is introduced as the ontological foundation of this research, with particular attention to three concepts - identity, norms, and intersubjectivity - that are directly applied in the analysis of how CPHFW constructs and projects a sustainable Danish identity. The limitations of the constructivist framework are then acknowledged and addressed specifically in relation to this study. Second, small state theory is introduced to establish the structural context that makes soft power and cultural diplomacy strategically central for Denmark. This contextual framing explains why these concepts matter for a state of Denmark's limited size and material capacity. Third, soft power, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding are introduced as the operational concepts through which the constructivist foundation is applied to the empirical case at hand. The last section of this chapter shall outline the central theoretical argument of the research, synthesising all of the above into a coherent analytical proposition that guides the following empirical chapters.

### **1.1. Constructivism in International Relations**

As outlined in the introduction, the central question of this study concerns how CPHFW may function as a site of identity construction and soft power projection. Addressing this puzzle requires a theoretical approach capable of explaining how identities, norms, and meanings shape state behaviour and international perception, rather than solely focusing on the distribution of material capabilities. Constructivism provides precisely this explanatory foundation, as it addresses the analytical questions that the research puzzle demands.

Constructivism emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as a significant critique of the dominant rationalist paradigm in international relations theory, particularly neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Neorealism, as was stated by Kenneth Waltz (1979), conceptualises the international system as structurally determined by the anarchic distribution of material capabilities, treating state interests as externally fixed by their position in the system. Against this view, constructivism argues that neither anarchy nor state interests are given facts of the international system. Rather, their meaning is socially constructed through interaction, discourse, and shared practice. The foundational text of systemic constructivism is Alexander Wendt's "Social Theory of International Politics" from 1999. Wendt's earlier statement that "*Anarchy is what states make of it*" (Wendt, 1992: 395) captures the core claim of

constructivism that the structure of the international system is not a brutal material fact but more so a social one, constituted by the shared ideas, expectations, and intersubjective understandings that states develop through their interactions over time. This seemingly simple proposition has important analytical implications. It means that how states understand themselves and each other - their identities - is not externally determined but actively constructed through practice and discourse.

Wendt's (1992: 394-395) central contribution is the principle of mutual constitution, meaning that social structures and agents are not independent variables but rather reciprocally related. States act within a social environment shaped by norms and shared meanings, yet through their practices they simultaneously reproduce or transform that same environment (Wendt, 1992: 395). Therefore, identities are not fixed attributes that states possess prior to their interaction - instead, they are relational and dynamic, emerging from and sustained through consistent social engagement. Due to the fact that interests are understood to stem from identities, a change in how a state understands itself - and, critically, how it is understood by others - can alter its foreign policy behaviour and its standing in the international system. Such perspective shifts analytical attention away from the distribution of solely material power toward the ongoing processes of meaning-making that constitute the international arena. It is this particular shift that makes constructivism the appropriate framework for a study concerned with how a fashion event contributes to the construction of national identity and the generation of soft power.

Rather than utilising constructivism as a broad school of thought with competing internal strands, what matters analytically for the study at hand is identifying the specific concepts it provides that are necessary to address the research puzzle. Three such interrelated concepts - identity, norms, and intersubjectivity - form the conceptual foundation of this thesis. Each is defined below in direct relation to the analytical work it performs in this research, drawing on the contributions of Wendt (1999), Finnemore (1996), and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). The concepts are not treated as abstract theoretical constructs but as analytical tools that allow the interpretation of how CPHFW constructs and projects a sustainable Danish identity, and in what way that identity achieves recognition in the international discourse.

## **Identity**

Identity is the foundational concept for this research. For Wendt (1999: 231), state identities are the basis of their interests, meaning that a state's self-understanding, whether as a

revisionist power, a neutral mediator, or a normative leader, shapes how it defines its goals and conducts its foreign policy. It is crucial to note that identity is relational, which means that it is not simply self-assigned in isolation but develops through interactions with others and, importantly, depends on external recognition (Wendt, 1999: 235-237). This emphasis on external recognition is analytically central for the present study. A state may project a particular identity through its cultural practices and institutional commitments, but that identity only becomes socially effective when it is acknowledged and validated by external audiences (be that other states, international institutions, international media outlets etc). Therefore, the gap between identity projection and external recognition is therefore not incidental but a detrimental part of how soft power operates. Applied to the case of CPHFW, the analytical question is twofold: first, how does CPHFW's institutional commitment to sustainability project a coherent and credible Danish identity, and second, does that projection achieve meaningful recognition in international discourse? The first question is addressed in chapter three through the analysis of CPHFW's own institutional documents, the second is addressed in chapter four through the analysis of international media coverage.

## **Norms**

Norms refer to shared expectations about appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891). Norms as a concept do not solely constrain behaviour, in fact, they also compose identities by specifying what conduct is considered appropriate for a particular kind of actor (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 891). For instance, a state that consistently adheres to democratic governance norms is constituted as a democratic state, and one that consistently prioritises environmental leadership is constituted as an environmental leader. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998: 892) highly influential model of the "norm life cycle" identifies three stages through which new norms diffuse across the international system: norm emergence, where norm entrepreneurs advocate for a new standard of appropriate behaviour; norm cascade, where states begin to adopt the norm widely, often driven by processes of socialisation; and internalisation, where the norm becomes taken for granted and embedded in institutional practice. In the context of research at hand, sustainability functions as precisely such a normative frame – one that signals responsibility, innovation, and ethical commitment in international discourse. The adoption of sustainability as a binding structural requirement by CPHFW, rather than a voluntary aspiration or purely rhetorical commitment, represents a form of norm institutionalisation, or in other words, the embedding of a normative commitment into

the operational logic of an internationally recognised platform. How this institutionalisation positions Denmark as a norm leader and in what ways it may generate soft power through normative attraction is one of the central empirical questions of the study.

### **Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity refers to the collectively held meanings and understandings that constitute social reality (Wendt, 1999: 160-165). From a constructivist point of view, phenomena such as reputation, legitimacy, attractiveness, and credibility are not objective properties of states that can be measured independently of the perceptions of other actors. Instead they are considered as intersubjective constructs - this means that they exist in the shared interpretive space between actors, produced and sustained through discourse, recognition, and collective meaning-making (Wendt, 1999: 163). This has direct and important methodological implications for the present study. Because reputation is intersubjective, it cannot be assessed solely by examining what a state or its associated institutions say about themselves. The attractiveness or credibility of Denmark's sustainable identity must be traced through the responses and representations of external audiences. This is why the analysis of international media discourse in chapter four is a theoretically necessary component of the research. Without it, the study would assess only what CPHFW and Danish institutions project – this would only reflect the projection side, without examining whether that projection achieves the intersubjective recognition on which the generated soft power depends.

The three concepts of identity, norms, and intersubjectivity are not only individually significant but also mutually constitutive in the constructivist framework. Identity shapes what norms a state finds credible and worth adopting. Norms in turn shape and reinforce identity by specifying what conduct is considered appropriate for a state of any specific “kind”. However, both identity and norms are sustained through intersubjective recognition - the ongoing affirmation by other actors that a state is what it claims to be. This internal coherence of the three concepts makes them suitable analytical tools for studying a case of CPHFW. The event institutionalises a sustainability norm, performs a Danish identity centred on environmental leadership, and seeks intersubjective validation through international media visibility and recognition. The three concepts are not applied in isolation but as an integrated analytical framework, in which each dimension is legible through the others. Understanding how CPHFW projects identity requires understanding which norms it mobilises. In turn, understanding

whether that identity achieves recognition requires attending to the intersubjective processes through which meaning is collectively validated or contested in international discourse.

### **1.1.1. Acknowledgement of Criticism**

Having established the three constructivist concepts central to this study, it is important to acknowledge the specific limitations of the constructivist framework they bear on the particular research design. This is not a general critique of constructivism as a theoretical school, rather it is a targeted acknowledgement of the analytical tensions that arise in applying constructivism to the specific research puzzle of this thesis.

The most significant limitation, and one directly relevant here, concerns causal precision. Checkel (1998) has argued that constructivist accounts often lack the analytical specificity to establish clear causal chains between norms, identities, and observable outcomes, tending to identify associations between social processes without fully specifying the mechanisms through which one produces the other. Applied to this study, this limitation manifests in the following way: demonstrating that CPHFW institutionalises sustainability as a norm does not automatically establish that this produces soft power gains for Denmark as a state. The causal step from identity performance to intersubjective recognition, and from recognition to reputational benefit, is not guaranteed by the theoretical framework alone. This thesis acknowledges that limitation explicitly. The analysis can demonstrate how CPHFW's sustainability narrative is recognised externally, how it is framed in international discourse, and whether that framing is consistent with the identity Denmark seeks to project, yet it cannot claim to have established a direct causal pathway from institutional practice to diplomatic outcome. This is a constraint of the interpretive research design that is adopted for this particular study.

Another limitation concerns the relationship between discourse and material practice. Constructivism has been criticised, including once again by Checkel (1998), for unintentionally treating the construction of meaning as analytically self-sufficient, without adequately accounting for the structural and economic conditions that shape and constrain identity claims. In the context of this thesis, this is another meaningful concern. CPHFW's sustainability narrative exists alongside the material realities of the fashion industry, including genuine environmental impacts, commercial incentives, and the persistent risk of greenwashing. Therefore, the analytical framework does not treat CPHFW's sustainability discourse as

inherently credible or strategically effective - rather, it examines how that discourse is received in international media, including through critical and sceptical framings. The deliberate inclusion of contested and critical media coverage in the data corpus is not incidental but intentional. It is the constructivist attention to intersubjective recognition, rather than just self-projection, that requires examination on how identity claims are not only accepted but also challenged in the external discourse.

Rationalist scholars, represented most prominently by Fearon and Wendt (2002), have further challenged constructivism's explanatory scope by asserting that the rational assumption of material interest maximisation does a better job at providing empirically testable account of state behaviour than the constructivist sophistication of identity, norms and intersubjectivity. This challenge is acknowledged, but the research puzzle of this thesis is not one that rationalist frameworks are well-positioned to address. The question of how a fashion week constructs and projects a national sustainable identity, and whether that identity achieves intersubjective recognition in international discourse, is fundamentally a question about meaning, perception, and social recognition - not about strategic material calculation. Constructivism is the appropriate framework not because rationalist alternatives are without merit, but because the research question at hand requires a framework that fundamentally considers the role of ideas, norms, and shared understandings in shaping international outcomes.

It is worth noting that the constructivist framework adopted here also shapes the methodological design of this study in a way that is worth making explicit. Because constructivism holds that identities, norms, and reputations are intersubjective, produced through shared meanings rather than objective facts, the research cannot rely solely on self-reported data from CPHFW or Danish institutional sources. A study that examined only what CPHFW says about itself would be analytically incomplete from a constructivist perspective. It would capture the projection side of the identity equation but would miss the recognition side entirely. This is why the research design integrates two complementary empirical chapters: chapter three analyses how CPHFW and Danish institutions construct and project a sustainable identity through their own documents and communications, while chapter four analyses how that projected identity is received, framed, and evaluated in international media discourse.

Beyond these internal limitations, it is also worth acknowledging a broader point about the scope of constructivist claims. Constructivism is a framework for understanding how meaning is socially constructed and how identities and norms shape behaviour, it is not a framework for

predicting specific outcomes or establishing universal causal laws. The analysis in this thesis is therefore interpretive rather than explanatory in the positivist sense. It seeks to provide a theoretically grounded and empirically detailed interpretation of how CPHFW constructs a sustainable Danish identity and how that identity is received in international discourse. The methodology chapter elaborates more on the possible implications of this stance for the research design.

## **1.2. Small State Theory**

Before introducing the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy, it is necessary to establish the structural context that makes these frameworks analytically central for Denmark specifically. Without this foundation, the deployment of soft power and cultural diplomacy might appear as strategic choices from among a range of equally available options. Small state theory reveals them instead as structural necessities, as the primary instruments through which a state of Denmark's size and material capacity can pursue meaningful international influence.

Small states are conventionally defined by their limited material capabilities and reduced structural weight in the international system. They lack the military and economic scale to coerce other states or to exercise decisive influence through hard power alone. As Thorhalsson (2019) has argued, small states compensate for these inherent limitations by seeking shelter through multilateral institutions, alliances, and normative positioning. Rather than attempting to match larger states in terms of material capacity, small states leverage reputation, legitimacy, and normative alignment to enhance their visibility and influence in international forums (Thorhalsson, 2019: 14). Soft power and cultural diplomacy are therefore not peripheral or optional strategies for small states, they are actually the central ones. For a state without significant military leverage or economic dominance, the ability to shape how it is perceived internationally becomes one of the primary instruments of their foreign policy.

Denmark is a paradigmatic example of this dynamic. With a population of fewer than six million people, a limited territory, and no significant military or economic dominance, Denmark's international standing relies substantially on its normative reputation and its capacity for multilateral engagement and values-based diplomacy. As the former Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt has observed, soft power is what makes it possible for a small nation to "punch above its weight" or in other words, to exercise the influence in international settings that its material capabilities alone would not justify (Brand Finance, 2022: 108-109). The strategic deployment of cultural platforms such as CPHFW to reinforce Denmark's

normative reputation is therefore not incidental to Danish foreign policy but structurally coherent with the imperatives that small state theory identifies. It is the kind of move that small state theory would predict, and its effectiveness is precisely what this thesis seeks to examine.

Small state theory also illuminates why sustainability is such a strategically significant normative agenda for Denmark specifically. Sustainability has emerged as one of the most consequential normative frameworks in contemporary international politics, shaping multilateral environmental negotiations, corporate governance standards, consumer behaviour, and foreign policy priorities across the world. For a small state, normative leadership in a globally prominent agenda such as sustainability offers a mechanism to exercise influence that is disproportionate to its material size. By embedding sustainability into its cultural identity – for instance, through institutions such as CPHFW, through domestic policy, and through diplomatic engagement - Denmark can claim credibility and leadership on an issue that is simultaneously domestically important and internationally recognised. Small state theory thus establishes not only why Denmark relies on soft power, but also why sustainability is the particular normative resource through which it pursues that strategy. This understanding of Danish foreign policy provides the context within which CPHFW's sustainability strategy must be understood.

It is worth noting that small state theory has itself evolved considerably as a field. Early formulations tended to treat small states primarily as objects of great power competition rather than as strategic actors in their own right. More recent scholarship, including Thorhalsson's (2019: 20-21) shelter theory, has moved toward understanding small states as active agents that navigate the international system through institutional membership, normative positioning, and identity management. This more operative conceptualisation of small statehood is directly relevant for this research. Denmark is not a passive recipient of international norms but an active participant in their construction and diffusion, including through cultural platforms that embed normative commitments into internationally visible practices. The analysis of CPHFW is therefore also, implicitly, a contribution to the literature on small state agency, as it examines how a small state uses cultural resources to exercise normative leadership in an area where it has developed a genuine institutional advantage. Whether that exercise of normative leadership achieves the needed intersubjective recognition that would translate it into soft power is the empirical question this thesis seeks to answer.

### **1.3. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

Having established constructivism as the ontological foundation and small state theory as the structural context, this section introduces the additional frameworks applied to the empirical case: soft power, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding. Together, these concepts explain how states pursue international influence through non-coercive means, why cultural platforms such as CPHFW are analytically significant as instruments of foreign policy, and how the specific content of national identity is managed and projected internationally.

#### **1.3.1. Soft Power**

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” in 1990, and subsequently developed in “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” in 2004. Nye (2004: 7) has defined soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or material payment. Where hard power relies on military force or economic incentives to compel certain behaviour, soft power operates through appeal and attractiveness. A state with attractive values, a compelling culture, and credible policies can achieve its foreign policy objectives because others choose to follow, admire, or reproduce it (Nye, 2004). Nye (2004: 11) identifies three principal sources of soft power: 1) a country’s culture when it is attractive to others, 2) its political values when it lives up to them both at home and abroad, and 3) its foreign policies when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.

All three of these sources are contingent as they generate soft power only when they are perceived positively by external audiences, not only by virtue of their existing. This conditionality is analytically significant for the present study. Denmark’s sustainability-oriented cultural practice does not generate soft power simply by virtue of existing as institutional policy. It does so only insofar as it is recognised and positively received internationally. Nye (2004: 97-101) emphasises that soft power is not merely what a state says about itself but how it is perceived by others. This aligns directly with the constructivist framework established in the first section of this theoretical chapter, which highlights that soft power is an intersubjective phenomenon, dependent on external recognition and reception rather than solely on the state’s own projection. A state may invest heavily in projecting a desirable identity, but if that image does not resonate with external audiences, no soft power is generated or distributed. The gap between identity projection and external reception is therefore one of the central tensions that the later empirical chapters seek to examine.

The measurement of soft power has attracted growing institutional interest. For instance, Brand Finance, a world-leading valuation consultancy, has produced annual Global Soft Power Indices since 2020, assessing countries across dimensions including business and trade, governance, international relations, culture and heritage, media and communication, and education and science (Brand Finance, 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025; 2026). Denmark has consistently ranked among the upper tier of small states in these indices, reflecting international recognition of its governance model, welfare values, and cultural output. These rankings provide important empirical context for the core argument of the thesis that Denmark's reputation for sustainability and progressive values is not merely a domestic self-presentation but one that is recognised internationally. The reports will be analysed in further depth in the empirical chapters of this research.

The Brand Finance rankings also raise an important methodological point. These indices measure soft power through a combination of survey data, such as tracking public perceptions of countries across multiple dimensions, and media analysis. Denmark's consistent strong performance suggests that its international image is not merely a domestic self-construction but one that resonates with international publics and institutions. For the purposes of this study, that is significant in two ways. Firstly, it establishes that Denmark's investment in normative positioning has already achieved a degree of intersubjective recognition at the general level of national reputation. Secondly, it raises the more specific question that this thesis addresses: how does CPHFW's sustainability strategy contribute distinctively to this broader recognition, and whether the mechanisms through which it does so are consistent with the constructivist expectations articulated in the theoretical framework. In so, the Brand Finance indicators provide the broad macro-level context - the media analysis in chapter four, however, provides the micro-level evidence about the specific mechanisms through which CPHFW contributes to (or maybe falls short of) sustainable identity recognition.

Soft power has also attracted substantive criticism that is important to acknowledge. For instance, Wilson (2008) has argued that Nye's framework remains conceptually underspecified, mistaking attraction for influence without adequately explaining the mechanisms through which one produces the other. Vuving (2009), however, has offered a clarification, which identifies the three currencies of soft power: beauty, brilliance, and benignity, which in turn produce admiration, respect, and sympathy respectively. A further critique, advanced by Mattern (2005), suggests that soft power is never truly voluntary – it just it just hides its power relations more effectively than hard power does, using representational

force to shape how others understand their own preferences. While these critiques need to be duly noted, they do not undermine the utility of soft power as a reasonable and suitable conceptualisation for this study. The study does not seek to establish whether Denmark's soft power causally alters the behaviour of other states - although if that is one of the findings, then it will be further analysed. The goal is to examine whether CPHFW's sustainability strategy contributes to constructing the reputational resources that soft power requires.

### **1.3.2. Cultural Diplomacy**

Cultural diplomacy is one of the principal mechanisms through which soft power is operationalised in practice. Milton Cummings (2003: 1) offers a central definition, stating that cultural diplomacy is the “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding”. This definition states the communicative and relational dimensions of cultural exchange, situating it within a broader project of international understanding rather than simply unilateral promotion or portrayal. In practice, however, the boundary between genuine cultural exchange and strategic self-presentation is frequently rather blurred. States and their associated institutions consistently use cultural assets such as art, music, cuisine, fashion, movies, in order to advance their foreign policy objectives, build reputational capital, and shape how they are perceived internationally.

The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (2011), alongside Edward Knudsen in “The External Cultural Policy Monitor” (2024) has identified Denmark as a country with a well-developed cultural diplomacy infrastructure, highlighting the active role of the Danish Cultural Institute in projecting Danish values internationally. Cultural diplomacy in Denmark is not incidental but coordinated, reflecting a deliberate strategy of international cultural engagement that complements the traditional formal implementation of foreign policy. The Danish Cultural Institute's most recent strategy (2025-2028) makes this explicit, positioning Danish culture as a vehicle for global dialogue and normative influence (Danish Cultural Institute, 2025). CPHFW operates within this broader system, and its sustainability agenda can therefore be understood as an extension of Denmark's institutionalised cultural diplomacy rather than a simple standalone commercial initiative. The relationship between fashion and diplomacy has received some, yet still rather limited, scholarly and institutional attention. The Meridian International Center (2018) convened a dedicated forum exploring how fashion functions as a site where cultural values and diplomatic messaging intertwine, noting that fashion weeks in particular serve as internationally visible stages for the projection of national identity. Culasso

et al. (2012) have examined the Italian fashion system as a case of national identity construction through the creative industries. This demonstrated how a structured fashion sector can reinforce international perceptions of a country's cultural distinctiveness and economic prestige. A comparable logic applies to the Danish case, though with a different normative emphasis - if Italian cultural diplomacy centres on craftsmanship and luxury heritage, Denmark's focuses on sustainability and ethical innovation.

A significant development in the cultural diplomacy literature concerns the expanding role of non-state actors. Traditionally, cultural diplomacy has been understood as an activity conducted by state institutions such as embassies, cultural institutes, and government-funded arts programmes. This state-centric model has given way to an understanding of a network in which private organisations, civil society actors, creative industries, and even individuals contribute to the international projection of national identity, often first without explicit government coordination (Bound et al., 2007: 24-25). Joseph Nye (2004) himself has acknowledged this shift, noting that in the age of information, the credibility of soft power sources actually increasingly depends on their perceived independence from direct state control. In so, a direct government-sponsored cultural programme may be viewed with scepticism, whereas an internationally recognised independent event may generate more genuine attraction precisely because it appears more natural and organic. This understanding is directly relevant to the case of CPHFW. The event is not a state-run programme but an industry-led organisation that has received partial public funding – for instance, the grant from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2025 (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2025). Such hybrid positioning, between state sponsorship and market autonomy, may in reality even enhance its soft power potential. As an institution that appears to be driven by commitment to sustainability as a sectoral leader, rather than by vertical state diplomatic instruction, CPHFW may generate more credible and genuine international recognition than a state-led campaign would.

The constructivist framework established earlier in this chapter allows for a more precise understanding of what cultural diplomacy achieves analytically. Cultural diplomacy is not just a communication strategy, it is a practice through which identities are performed and intersubjective meanings are constructed and sustained. When Denmark invests in cultural diplomacy through the Danish Cultural Institute, or when CPHFW includes sustainability into its mandatory participation requirements – these are acts of identity performance in the exact constructivist sense. They contribute to constituting Denmark as a particular kind of

international actor. An actor that is credible, normatively attractive, and committed to sustainable innovation. The effectiveness of these performances, however, is contingent on their reception. Cultural diplomacy that is not recognised or validated by external audiences does not generate the intersubjective recognition on which soft power depends. This is precisely why the present study is not limited to an analysis of what Danish cultural institutions and CPHFW say about themselves.

### **1.3.3. Nation Branding**

Nation branding is closely related to cultural diplomacy and provides a complementary conceptual layer for understanding the specific content and management of Denmark's international self-presentation. Simon Anholt (2007), who introduced the term of nation branding, defines it as the process through which nations seek to build and maintain a competitive identity. The goal is a coherent, attractive, and credible international image that enhances the state's standing across domains ranging from tourism and trade to foreign policy and cultural influence (Anholt, 2007). Anholt's concept of "competitive identity" captures the degree to which states actively compete for international attention, trust, and appeal, and the degree to which their cultural outputs contribute to success in that competition (Anholt, 2007: 2).

However, it is important to note that Anholt (2007) himself is also notably sceptical of deliberate branding campaigns. He argues that a country's image is shaped primarily by what it does, for instance, its policies and conduct in international affairs, rather than by what it says about itself (Anholt, 2007: 37-38). This means that communication campaigns without substantive practice behind them rarely succeed in shifting international perceptions long-term. This idea importantly translates in the particular case study of this research. Since CPHFW's sustainability strategy involves genuine structural commitments rather than superficial rhetorical positioning or voicing of support, it aligns with Anholt's argument that credible identity construction requires real world practice. It also reinforces the constructivist argument about norm institutionalisation - a sustainability identity that is embedded in the structure of an internationally visible event is more likely to achieve intersubjective recognition than one that exists only at the level of state intentions. Nation branding is treated in this thesis as a contextual concept that specifies what kind of identity Denmark projects through cultural platforms such as CPHFW. The specific empirical content of Denmark's national and Nordic branding context is examined further in the third chapter.

#### **1.4. Central Theoretical Argument**

Having introduced the full theoretical framework - constructivism, small state theory, soft power, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding - it is now possible to articulate the central theoretical argument that synthesises these concepts into a coherent analytical proposition. This argument is presented as the conclusion of the theoretical chapter.

The central goal of this thesis is to advance the following theoretical expectation - cultural platforms that institutionalise and consistently perform nationally salient norms contribute to the construction and international diffusion of desired state identity. When such identity performances are externally recognised and positively received, they reinforce the reputational resources, on which soft power depends. When they are contested or rejected, they reveal the limits of identity projection and the structural conditions under which soft power claims fail to translate into genuine international influence. In both cases, the fundamental constructivist framework provides the analytical basis to meaningfully interpret the empirical findings.

Applied to the particular case of CPHFW, the central argument is that the event functions as an institutionalised site of identity construction that embeds sustainability into Denmark's international self-presentation, through binding participation requirements, structured action plans, and a publicly visible commitment to industry transformation. By institutionalising sustainability as a structural condition for participation, CPHFW moves beyond symbolic gesture toward what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) would recognise as norm institutionalisation, in other words the inclusion of a normative commitment into the operational logic of a recognised international platform. This institutional embedding, combined with the event's international visibility and the Danish state's broader cultural diplomacy infrastructure, creates the conditions under which a coherent and credible sustainable Danish identity may be projected internationally.

However, the constructivist framework insists that identity projection is only the first half of the analytical consideration. Due to the fact that identity and reputation are intersubjective concepts, the question of how CPHFW's sustainability strategy contributes to Denmark's soft power cannot be resolved by examining CPHFW's and Denmark's own documents and communications alone. It must be traced through the responses of external audiences. More specifically, how international media discourse frames, attributes, and evaluates CPHFW's sustainability claims. If international media consistently attributes CPHFW's sustainability agenda to Denmark as a deliberate state actor, frames it as structurally significant rather than

merely aesthetic or commercial, and receives it positively, this would support the constructivist expectation that sustained identity performance generates soft power through intersubjective recognition. If such recognition is absent, inconsistent, or contested - which may be the case in light of the growing prominence of greenwashing criticism directed at the fashion industry - the analysis will illuminate the conditions under which the gap between identity projection and recognition remains unresolved, and what this means for the limits of Denmark's cultural diplomacy strategy.

The central theoretical argument also implies a specific understanding of what would count as evidence for and against the thesis' core claim. The constructivist framework generates two possible empirical outcomes, both of which are analytically productive and theoretically informative. If the media analysis reveals consistent positive attribution of CPHFW's sustainability agenda to Denmark as a deliberate state actor, and if coverage frames this sustainability as structurally significant and credible rather than only aesthetic or commercial, the findings would support the constructivist expectation that sustained identity performance generates soft power through intersubjective recognition. If, by contrast, the analysis reveals inconsistent attribution, sceptical framing, or the dominance of greenwashing criticism that challenge the credibility of CPHFW's sustainability claims, the findings could bring out the specific conditions under which the gap between identity projection and intersubjective recognition still remains unresolved. This would suggest that Denmark is investing in soft power resources that have not yet achieved the external validation necessary to translate into genuine international influence. The constructivist framework is necessary precisely because it enables to interpret both outcomes in theoretically meaningful ways, and because it connects the empirical findings back to the broader theoretical debate about the mechanisms and limits of soft power projection through cultural platforms.

Such theoretical synthesis also clarifies the relationship between constructivism and soft power theory in this research. These are two distinct analytical traditions, brought into dialogue because together they address different dimensions of the same research puzzle. Constructivism explains the exact mechanism - how identity is constructed, performed, and recognised through social interaction and shared meaning-making. Soft power theory explains why such recognition matters politically, and how it translates into the kind of international influence that is particularly valuable for a small state such as Denmark. Small state theory in turn explains why soft power is not simply "one of" strategy for Denmark but a structural

necessity. Nation branding provides the specific clarification of what kind of identity Denmark projects and how. Cultural diplomacy is therefore the actual practical instrument - the institutional mechanism through which that identity is projected internationally. The synthesis of these frameworks supports the research design that is attentive to the discursive processes through which CPHFW constructs a sustainable Danish identity, to the political significance of whether that identity achieves external recognition, and to the structural conditions that shape the relationship between identity performance and soft power generation. The following chapter will outline the research design and methodology through which this theoretical framework is operationalised in the upcoming empirical analysis.

## **2. Research Design and Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological choices that guide the upcoming empirical analysis of this study. The first section establishes the interpretive nature of the study and its coherence with the constructivist theoretical framework. The following section introduces and justifies the qualitative single case study design and the selection of CPHFW as a critical case. Then the primary analytical method is presented – qualitative content analysis. It introduces the coding framework that is applied to the corpus of international media sources. The three categories of empirical data collected are described and the search and selection procedure for the media corpus is explained. Finally, this chapter also addresses the principal limitations of the chosen research design.

### **2.1. Interpretive Research**

The epistemological positioning of this research, or in other words the underlying assumptions about how knowledge is produced and what can be known, is interpretive. Constructivism, as the ontological foundation of this thesis, holds that social phenomena such as identity, reputation, credibility, and attractiveness are not objective properties of states that exist independently of the meanings actors attach to them. They are intersubjective constructs, produced and sustained through discourse, practice, and collective recognition (Wendt, 1999). An interpretive approach is therefore logical for a study grounded in constructivism: if the phenomena under investigation are socially constructed and meaning-dependent, they must be studied through methods that are sensitive to meaning, context, and interpretation rather than through methods designed to measure objective properties.

Interpretive research stems from the assumption that social phenomena do not exist independently of the meanings that actors attach to them (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The question of whether CPHFW's sustainability strategy contributes to Denmark's soft power cannot be answered by counting the frequency with which sustainability-related terms appear in media coverage, or by simply collecting survey data on Denmark's international reputation. It requires interpretive analysis of how sustainability is framed, attributed, and evaluated in the specific discursive contexts of institutional documents and international media. This is precisely what qualitative content analysis, which is the selected analytical method for this thesis, is designed to do. The research therefore does not seek to establish causal laws or produce findings that are statistically generalisable. Instead, it seeks to produce a theoretically grounded interpretive account of how sustainability is institutionalised as a normative

commitment by CPHFW, how it is projected as a component of Danish identity, and whether that projection achieves intersubjective recognition in international discourse. The validity of the findings rests not on their quantitative representativeness across cases but on the coherence and analytical nature with which the interpretive framework is applied to the upcoming empirical material.

## **2.2. Qualitative Single Case Study**

The research puzzle at the centre of this study, how CPHFW's sustainability strategy functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy for a small state seeking soft power, requires a design capable of capturing institutional practice, discursive identity construction, and international reception. These are not phenomena that can be reduced to variables in a comparative statistical design. They are deeply contextualised, regionally and historically situated, and dependent on the specific characteristics of the case. Due to all the abovementioned factors, this research uses a qualitative single case study design, with CPHFW as the primary focus of its analysis.

The choice of a case study design in this instance is research puzzle specific. The research question asks how a particular kind of cultural platform, one that has institutionalised sustainability as a binding structural requirement, contributes to soft power projection for a small state. This question requires in-depth examination of CPHFW's specific institutional architecture, its relationship to Danish state cultural diplomacy, and the reception of its sustainability claims in international media. For example, a comparative design across multiple fashion weeks would lack the necessary depth of analysis required to answer the question. Another alternative, such as a large-N survey design, would be unable to capture the qualitative dimensions of how sustainability is framed and attributed in discourse. The single case study design is therefore the most appropriate methodological choice for this research puzzle at hand.

CPHFW itself has been selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) rather than a typical or a representative one. A critical case can be characterised as one that due to its particular features, provides especially informative evidence about a theoretical proposition. In simpler words, it is a case where, if the argument holds, it is most likely to hold here, and if it does not hold here, it is unlikely to hold elsewhere (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). CPHFW qualifies as a critical case because it is one of the very few fashion weeks globally to have institutionalised sustainability as a binding structural requirement for all participating brands, rather than treating sustainability as an optional theme. Its mandatory Sustainability Action Plans, its explicit governmental support from Danish cultural and foreign policy institutions, and its established

international visibility make it a theoretically relevant empirical example for examining how a cultural platform can function as an instrument of state soft power. As previously stated, the research findings are therefore not intended to be statistically generalisable across all fashion weeks or cultural diplomacy contexts. They are analytically generalisable as they highlight broader theoretical propositions about identity construction and norm diffusion through cultural diplomacy.

In addition, it is important to briefly acknowledge a broader disciplinary concern that affects the legitimacy of this study as a work of International Relations (IR). The choice to study a fashion week as a case of possible diplomatic practice and soft power projection may, in some contexts, invite scepticism. Feminist IR scholars have long observed that the discipline has historically prioritised domains associated with masculinity – more so military strategy, security, trade, and statecraft in its most formal and robust expressions (Enloe, 2014). And although this research does not position itself as a feminist IR contribution, and its theoretical framework is fundamentally grounded in constructivism, it is important to recognise that the industry of fashion as a research site deserves the same analytical seriousness that IR allows to other cultural platforms, and that resistance to this is most likely reflecting disciplinary bias rather than genuine analytical objections. To conclude, CPHFW is not researched because it is fashionable or aesthetically interesting, but because it is an institutionalised, internationally visible cultural platform that embeds normative commitments into its structured practice, which is precisely the kind of site that constructivist and soft power scholarships identify as analytically significant.

### **2.3. Qualitative Content Analysis and Coding Framework**

The primary analytical method employed in this study is qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is defined by Krippendorff (2004: 18) as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. As a method, this approach enables systematic and transparent examination of textual data while remaining sensitive to meaning, context, and interpretation. This particular study uses the qualitative variant of content analysis, as presented by Mayring (2000), which moves beyond word-frequency counting toward the interpretive identification of themes, framings, and patterns of meaning within texts. This an important distinction of the present research, as the analytical interest lies not in how often particular terms appear in the data, but in how sustainability is framed, attributed, and contextualised across different types of documents and media sources.

The analysis is deductive in its nature, meaning that the coding categories have been derived from the theoretical framework established in the previous chapter, rather than emerging inductively from the data itself during the research process. All coding categories and their respective codes are therefore researcher-assigned, developed directly from the constructivist concepts of identity, norms, and intersubjectivity, and from the soft power and cultural diplomacy literature as previously reviewed. In the analytical process, the deductive framework itself is applied with interpretive sensitivity, which means that while the categories are pre-assigned, the researcher remains attentive to patterns in the data that complicate or enrich the theoretical expectations, and these shall be reported and discussed in the following analytical chapters.

For the first part of the empirical analysis the focus is on how sustainability is defined, framed, and institutionalised within CPHFW's own communications, and how has the relationship between CPHFW and Danish state been articulated in the lense of possible cultural diplomacy objectives. The coding framework is particularly applied to the second stream of the empirical data, that will be analysed in the second part of empirical analysis (chapter four), which includes the international media corpus. For media sources, the focus shifts to how external audiences frame, attribute, and evaluate CPHFW's sustainability claims. The five coding categories for the media analysis are presented in Table 1 below.

*Table 1. Coding framework for international media analysis (chapter four).*

Category	Name	Codes	Analytical purpose
1	<b>Attribution of Sustainability</b>	A - CPHFW as organisation; B - Denmark as state/national culture; C - Nordic region broadly; D - no clear attribution	Assesses whether media connects sustainability to Denmark as deliberate state actor.
2	<b>Tone</b>	A - celebratory; B - neutral/descriptive; C - critical	Assesses credibility of soft power claim in external reception.
3	<b>Framing of Sustainability</b>	A - structural/institutional; B - symbolic/aesthetic; C - political/diplomatic	Captures how sustainability is conceptualised.
4	<b>Temporal Framing</b>	A - single season or event; B - sustained/long-term employmeny	Indicates whether CPHFW's sustainability is seen as consistent strategy or merelu an isolated event.

5	Source Type	A - CPHFW; B - Danish government/institutions; C - journalists/critics; D - sustainability experts/NGOs	Reveals whose perspective dominates on the sustainability narrative.
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Each article in the international media corpus is coded against all five categories. Where a category could permit multiple applicable codes, the dominant code will be highlighted alongside any secondary codes. Category 1, attribution of sustainability, carries the greatest analytical weight for the purpose of this research, as it directly addresses the core question of whether international media connects CPHFW’s sustainability agenda to Denmark as a deliberate state actor, or attributes it instead to the organisation alone or to the Nordic region broadly. In so, the patterns that will emerge across the corpus, such as changes in attribution, tone, and framing across the 2020 to 2026 timeframe, are considered the primary empirical findings of this thesis and shall be analysed in chapter four.

#### 2.4. Data Collection

This research draws upon a combination of primary and secondary qualitative sources that collectively capture the institutional, discursive, and perceptual dimensions of CPHFW’s role in Danish cultural diplomacy. The triangulation of these data streams ensures validity and analytical credibility, also allowing for a multi-level understanding of how sustainability is constructed, projected, and received as a soft power resource.

The first set of data consists of official institutional and policy documents and reports (CPHFW’s Sustainability Action Plan 2020-2022 & 2023-2025; CPHFW’s Sustainability Requirements; The Danish Cultural Institute’s “Strategy 2025-2028”; Nordic Council of Ministers’ “Sustainability in Cultural Policy in the Nordic Countries” 2024) that articulate Denmark’s, as well as Nordic, cultural and diplomatic objectives. Key sources will show how sustainability is operationalized as a binding standard for participating brands, and Denmark’s broader international cultural engagement priorities. Supplementary materials from the Nordic cooperation will provide regional context by framing sustainability and equality as central to Nordic values and identity. The second data category includes official organizational and partner communications (CPHFW Press Releases (2020-2026); Statements from Partner Organizations; CPHFW’s annual “Impact Reports” or “Summit Summaries”) from CPHFW and its partners, such as press releases, mission statements, and event summaries. These materials will be analysed to identify how institutional narratives of sustainability (including

sustainable innovation) are constructed, and how they align with Denmark's cultural diplomacy agenda. In addition, statements related to ethical oversight, such as those concerning the „greenwashing“ allegations, will be examined to assess the credibility and legitimacy of Denmark's sustainability claims. However, it is important to note that the research focuses on the projection and reception of Denmark's sustainable identity and does not conduct a systematic audit of the fashion industry's environmental impact. Both sets of data will be analysed and thoroughly presented in the third chapter of this study. All the data has been collected from the official representative websites of the CPHFW, the Danish Cultural Institute, the Nordic Council of Ministers and other partners, as well as all the materials are included in the bibliography.

The third data stream is the international digital media corpus, which forms the empirical basis of chapter four. The corpus consists of 25 articles, published between 2020 and 2026, drawn from a range of international outlets that shape global perceptions of fashion, sustainability, and state image. The articles were identified through targeted keyword searches using the terms “Copenhagen Fashion Week (CPHFW)”, “Denmark”, and “sustainability” across digital databases and outlet archives. Inclusion criteria required that articles substantively address CPHFW's sustainability agenda, its international reputation, or its relationship to Danish or Nordic identity. Articles focused exclusively on commercial or aesthetic coverage of specific collections, without any engagement with sustainability framing, were excluded.

The corpus spans a various range of outlet types. It includes international fashion trade press such as Business of Fashion, Vogue UK, Vogue Australia, and Harper's Bazaar - which represent the dominant voices in global fashion discourse and whose framing of CPHFW's sustainability carries significant weight for the event's international reputation. It also includes mainstream international business and general interest media such as Forbes and Fast Company, which provide coverage that connects fashion to broader political economy and sustainability governance contexts. Critical and sustainability-focused outlets like Green Economy and Polimoda, provide the sceptical and greenwashing-critical perspectives that are essential for a balanced analysis of how CPHFW's claims are received. Finally, institutional and industry sources as Creative Denmark, Smiley Movement, Vocast, provide the more promotional framings that allow for comparison with independent journalistic coverage. Individual articles range from approximately 600 to 2000 words in length, reflecting the range from brief news items to substantive analytical features. The articles will be coded for each

category as a whole, since the length of the articles is not overbearing. The full list of media sources is provided in the bibliography.

## **2.5. Important Research Considerations**

The important considerations that may limit this analysis shall be acknowledged as well. Firstly, as a qualitative single-case study, the findings are context-specific and are not necessarily intended for generalization. The findings illuminate how CPHFW functions as a cultural diplomacy instrument for Denmark in the 2020 to 2026 period. They are analytically generalisable in the sense that they advance theoretical propositions about how cultural platforms contribute to soft power generation, but they cannot be directly transferred to other national or institutional contexts without further comparative research. As well as the research confronts the inherent difficulty in measuring soft power outcomes. Indicators such as media tone and public perception are employed as proxies for attractiveness and credibility, yet they remain indicators of perception rather than conclusive evidence of tangible diplomatic influence or behavioral change. This aspect is a part of interpretive studies. Another key task for this research is to engage with possible critiques, for instance “greenwashing”, and analyze how such challenges test the resilience and credibility of the very soft power it seeks to generate.

### **3. Case Study: CPHFW as a Cultural Diplomacy Instrument**

This chapter presents the first stage of the empirical analysis. Its purpose is to examine how Copenhagen Fashion Week constructs and projects a sustainable Danish identity through its own institutional practice, and how that practice is embedded within the broader infrastructure of Danish state cultural diplomacy. The chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section establishes the main contextual foundation - the Danish and Nordic identity landscape within which CPHFW operates, and which gives the event's sustainability agenda its national and regional resonance. The second section analyses CPHFW's institutional architecture, tracing how sustainability was transformed from a voluntary aspiration into a binding structural condition through the two Sustainability Action Plans for the years 2020 and 2023. The third section examines the relationship between CPHFW and the Danish state, demonstrating that the event operates not simply as an autonomous commercial platform but as an imminent component of a larger cultural diplomacy system. The final section provides the conclusive discussion that highlights the most important points that became evident during the analysis. These sections build the case that CPHFW functions as an institutionalised site of identity construction - one in which sustainability is embedded as a normative commitment that serves Denmark's international self-presentation and soft power strategy.

#### **3.1. Denmark, Nordic Identity, and the Strategic Value of Sustainability**

To understand why CPHFW's sustainability strategy carries any diplomatic weight, it is first necessary to situate it within the broader identity context from which it draws its credibility. Denmark does not approach sustainability as a peripheral policy concern or a recent simple rebranding exercise. It approaches it as a constitutive element of national identity. An element that has been cultivated over decades through domestic policy, institutional design, and coordinated international engagement. This contextual foundation is rather significant, because it means that when CPHFW institutionalises sustainability as a structural requirement, it is not constructing a new identity from scratch. It is actually drawing on and reinforcing an already internationally recognised national narrative that has been built by Denmark at large. What CPHFW helps with is granting the narrative a greater specificity, visibility, and normative precision.

Denmark's international reputation is, at large, intertwined with a Nordic reputation. The five Nordic countries - Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland - have collectively cultivated a distinctive international identity centred on characteristics such as social

democracy, gender equality, environmental responsibility, transparency, and high quality of life. This Nordic identity is not simply a natural cultural formation, rather a politically and institutionally constructed one. The Nordic Council of Ministers has played a central role in its consolidation, most visibly through its Vision 2030 agenda, which frames the Nordic region's collective ambition to become the world's most sustainable and integrated region (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021). In this framing, sustainability is not merely a policy objective but a definitional element of what it means to be Nordic. That in itself is a claim to regional distinctiveness in the international arena that carries its own soft power potential. Individual Nordic states, including Denmark, benefit from this regional identity as a form of collective credibility. When CPHFW presents itself as a sustainability leader, it draws on the internationally recognised Nordic brand as a pre-existing reputational resource, situating its institutional commitments within a narrative of regional normative leadership that external audiences are already prepared to find credible.

Within the Nordic framework, Denmark has developed a particularly coherent and visible international brand around sustainability, design, and social innovation. This brand is reinforced across multiple domains – for example architecture, urban planning, food, and increasingly fashion. This produces a cumulative impression of a society whose progressive values translate into visible and, importantly, exportable practices. The consistency of this brand across domains is significant because it suggests a degree of deliberate coordination rather than just incidental coincidence. Denmark's leading governing party, Socialdemokratiet, has explicitly acknowledged the strategic value of this reputation, framing soft power as a tool that enables a small state to shape international norms and exercise influence in multilateral settings in ways that serve Danish interests (Socialdemokratiet). This explicit political acknowledgement is important, due to the fact that it directly confirms that the Danish state understands its normative reputation not merely as some pleasant by-product of domestic policy but as an important strategic foreign policy resource. A resource that requires active cultivation and deployment.

The institutional infrastructure through which Denmark manages and projects this brand is well-established. The Danish Cultural Institute, founded in 1940 and operating across a network of international offices, functions as the primary vehicle through which Danish cultural values are communicated and promoted internationally (Danish Cultural Institute, 2025). Its most recent strategic framework, covering the period 2025 to 2028, explicitly

positions Danish cultural engagement as a means of fostering global dialogue and normative influence (Danish Cultural Institute, 2025). Culture, in the Institute's framing, is not merely an area of artistic expression but a tool for advancing Denmark's international standing and shaping the normative environment in which it operates. This institutional articulation of culture as diplomacy is the framework within which CPHFW's sustainability agenda must be understood. The event does not exist in isolation from Denmark's broader cultural diplomacy infrastructure. Instead, it operates within such infrastructure, and its sustainability strategy draws legitimacy from the institutional system that surrounds it.

Denmark also benefits from a consistent and favourable international reputation in global soft power assessments. As has been previously mentioned, Brand Finance's annual Global Soft Power Index, which has tracked national reputation across multiple dimensions since 2020, has placed Denmark consistently among the upper tier of small states across categories including governance, culture and heritage, and international relations (Brand Finance, 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025; 2026). This performance reflects the international resonance of Denmark's normative identity - the degree to which external audiences perceive Denmark as a credible, trustworthy, and normatively attractive actor. The former Prime Minister of Denmark, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, has described soft power as the mechanism through which a small nation can leverage reputation and values to exercise influence disproportionate to its material capacity (Brand Finance, 2022: 108-109). This framing, offered by a former head of government, also captures the strategic logic that makes CPHFW analytically significant, as it is one of the cultural platforms through which Denmark constructs, performs, and sustains the normative reputation that its soft power strategy depends upon.

The relationship between sustainability and Danish national identity is, however, not without tension. The constructivist framework established in chapter one anticipates that identity claims are not simply projected but must be recognised and validated by external audiences to generate soft power. It also anticipates that those claims are subject to contestation, especially when the substance behind the claim is perceived as insufficient to justify the claimed identity. Denmark's sustainability brand, for all its international recognition, operates in a context of growing scrutiny of green claims across all sectors, and the fashion/textile industry is among the most exposed to credibility challenges in that particular regard. The deeper analytical significance of this tension is addressed in the following sections and developed fully in chapter four. For now, it is sufficient to note that the contextual foundation of CPHFW's sustainability

strategy is simultaneously both an asset and a source of vulnerability. The very credibility that Denmark's national identity lends to CPHFW's sustainability commitments also raises the expectations against which those commitments are measured by critical external audiences.

The main point that shall be highlighted is that CPHFW's sustainability agenda does not emerge in a vacuum. And it is embedded in a rather layered identity context - Nordic collective identity, Danish national identity, and a coordinated state cultural diplomacy infrastructure. This gives the agenda both its international resonance and its strategic logic. CPHFW's sustainability identity derives its credibility from the national and regional narratives it draws upon. In so, sustainability identity's contribution to Denmark's soft power depends on the degree to which international audiences recognise those narratives as authentic, substantive, and worth emulating. The following section continues on the basis of this contextual overview to the analysis of CPHFW's own institutional architecture, examining how sustainability has been transformed from a simple stated aspiration, into a binding structural condition of participation.

### **3.2. CPHFW's Institutional Structure**

The previous section established the contextual landscape within which CPHFW operates – a Danish national identity built around progressive values, a coordinated state cultural diplomacy infrastructure, and a Nordic collective brand that carries its own internationally recognised “brand” and credibility. This section shall focus on the event itself, examining how CPHFW translated that contextual identity resource into a concrete institutional structure. The central claim of this section is that between 2020 and 2026, CPHFW underwent a transformation. The sustainability moved from being a stated organisational aspiration to a binding structural condition of participation. This transformation constitutes what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) would recognise as norm institutionalisation or the inclusion of a normative commitment into the operational logic of a recognised international platform. Understanding this transformation in its precise foundational terms is necessary for evaluating the soft power argument, because it is exactly the structural depth that gives CPHFW's sustainability identity its credibility in international discourse.

Firstly, a more contextual background of CPHFW is of importance. Copenhagen Fashion Week was established in 2006 as the consolidation of Denmark's existing fashion trade events, and is organised by the Danish Fashion Institute as a non-profit foundation (Copenhagen Fashion Week). It is funded through a combination of commercial partnerships and public sources, with

the Danish Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs contributing as a primary public funder, alongside individual strategic commercial partners (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2022). This hybrid public-private funding structure is itself also significant, due to the fact that it positions CPHFW as neither a purely state instrument nor a purely market actor, but as the kind of networked cultural platform that Bound et al. (2007) and Nye (2004) identify as most efficient in generating genuine soft power, precisely because its sustainability credentials appear organic and independently motivated rather than state-dictated. The event is held biannually, in January and August, attracting international press, buyers, and various industry representatives. In the recent years it has consolidated its position, as noted in multiple international coverage pieces, as the fifth major global fashion week after New York, London, Milan, and Paris (Copenhagen Fashion Week).

The sustainability strategy was not a founding feature of CPHFW but a deliberate transformation that began taking institutional form in 2019, when the organisation began developing what would eventually become the Sustainability Action Plan 2020-2022. Unveiled in 2020, the mentioned plan announced an ambitious three-year roadmap structured around three main pillars: reduce, educate, and accelerate (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2020). These three pillars are already instructive in themselves. “Reduce” addressed CPHFW’s own operational footprint, meaning carbon emissions, single-use materials and waste generation. The “educate” positioned CPHFW as a knowledge platform, committing to provide participating brands with tools, seminars, and guidance on material sourcing, carbon accounting, and consumer communication. The “accelerate” point was explicitly outward-facing - it framed CPHFW’s ambition not merely as self-improvement but as a larger industry transformation, signalling from the very beginning that the event understood its own sustainability agenda as a normative project directed at the broader fashion ecosystem rather than only a compliance exercise for its own benefit. This language of acceleration and agenda-setting reoccurs consistently across CPHFW’s communications throughout the period and is one of the clearest indicators that sustainability was being framed from the beginning as a form of normative leadership, not just environmental management.

Importantly, the 2020-2022 Action Plan did not immediately impose mandatory requirements on the participating brands. Instead, it firstly functioned as a preparatory phase. This may be understood as the first stage in Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) norm life cycle, where norm entrepreneurs actively work to persuade actors to adopt the new standards of appropriate

behaviour. During this preparatory period, CPHFW offered brands online seminars on materials sourcing and carbon accounting toolkits specifically designed to prepare them for the requirements that would become mandatory already in 2023 (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2020). The organisation also introduced a self-assessment survey, which piloted with twelve representative brands before wider rollout (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2022). This preparatory architecture is important because it reveals a strategic chain throughout which CPHFW did not simply impose a normative standard from above, but invested three years in building the institutional capacity and knowledge infrastructure that would allow brands to comply. This “infrastructure-first” approach reflects a more sophisticated understanding of how norm adoption actually works – not simply through sudden imposition but through gradual and thorough socialisation and capacity-building, which falls under the understanding of constructivism of how norms become embedded in practice.

By the end of the 2020-2022 Action Plan period, CPHFW reported successfully meeting 35 of its 37 self-set targets (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2022). The annual Sustainability Report functions as a significant transparency mechanism, which is ought to publicly demonstrate accountability against the stated goals and reinforce the credibility of the sustainability identity. Anholt’s (2007) argument that credible nation branding requires substantive practice rather than rhetorical self-promotion is directly applicable here, as CPHFW’s willingness to publish progress reports signals a commitment to transparency that distinguishes its sustainability strategy from the kind of superficial green branding that the critics often identify. The reports have also been recognised externally. For example, the government-funded programme “Grønt Genstart” selected CPHFW’s Sustainability Requirements as the framework to train fifty small and medium enterprises in the Danish fashion and textiles industry, incorporating the CPHFW standard into Danish industrial policy (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2022).

The transition to the Sustainability Action Plan 2023-2025 marked the decisive institutional shift for the CPHFW. In 2023, sustainability requirements became mandatory admission criteria for all brands seeking a place on the official show schedule. The 18 action points in six focus areas: strategic direction, design, smart material choices, working conditions, consumer engagement, and show production, were no longer simply aspirational but binding as conditions of participation. Brands that could not demonstrate compliance were excluded from the official calendar - 1 out of 29 applicants (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2023). The rejection demonstrates that the requirements were genuinely enforced rather than just symbolically

announced, which further established the credibility of the mechanism and distinguished CPHFW's approach.

The six focus areas of the mandatory requirements need closer attention, because the way they are structured and framed reveals how sustainability is being operationalised as an identity commitment. The strategic direction requirement asks brands to demonstrate that sustainability is embedded in their business model and guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals - the framing that situates CPHFW's requirements within a global normative framework and connects individual brand behaviour to internationally recognised standards (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2023). The design requirement demands circular design principles and a commitment not to destroy unsold inventory from previous collections, which is a structural intervention in production logic rather than merely a communication standard. The smart material choices requirement specifies that at least 50 percent of a collection must be made from certified, preferred, or new-generation sustainable materials, or from deadstock fabric. This presents a measurable, verifiable threshold that has a clear quantitative dimension within what remains a qualitative governance framework. Working conditions requirements include supply chain due diligence, fair pay standards, and alignment with the Danish Fashion Ethical Charter, which obliges signatories to promote inclusive and diverse body ideals. Consumer engagement requirements mandate that brands actively educate their customers about their sustainability practices. Show production requirements include zero-waste set design and a ban on all single-use materials in event production (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2023).

The breadth of these requirements across environmental, social, and communicative dimensions is significant. A purely environmental framing of sustainability would restrict requirements to materials and emissions. By encompassing working conditions, consumer education, and show production, CPHFW's framework positions sustainability as a kind of holistic identity commitment, as a way of operating that reflects values rather than merely metrics. This connects directly to the constructivist concept of norms as constitutive rather than merely regulative because the sustainability requirements do not simply constrain what brands can do - they specify what kind of actor a brand has to be in order to be able to participate. Participation in CPHFW thus functions as a form of identity certification, a public signal that a brand belongs to the normative community that CPHFW has defined and institutionalised as sustainable.

The 2023-2025 Action Plan also introduced a further evolution in CPHFW's relationship to the external regulatory environment. In March 2024, CPHFW announced revisions to the Sustainability Requirements in explicit response to the EU policy landscape, particularly the emerging EU Green Claims Directive and the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2024). The materials threshold was raised from 50 to 60 percent certified or preferred materials, with full implementation required from 2025. This responsive evolution is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that CPHFW's sustainability framework is not static but actively adjusted in accordance with the broader regulatory environment. That is a characteristic of norm entrepreneurs who understand that maintaining normative leadership requires continuous adaptation. Second, it positions CPHFW's requirements as anticipating rather than merely reflecting EU policy, suggesting some degree of normative ambition that goes beyond simple compliance and more so moves toward standard setting. The timing of this advancement, however, proved to be conflicting due to the fact that the revisions were announced in the same period in which the official greenwashing complaint was being prepared against CPHFW, creating an awkward positioning between institutional evolution and contestation that chapter four will analyse in more detail.

What emerges from this institutional analysis is a picture of deliberate, sequenced, and deepening norm institutionalisation. Between 2020 and 2026, CPHFW moved through recognisable stages of normative development: the articulation of a sustainability vision in 2020, the building of institutional capacity and knowledge infrastructure during the 2020-2022 preparatory phase, the statement of binding requirements in 2023, the public demonstration of accountability through annual reporting, and the continuous adjustment of standards in response to regulatory developments. Each stage reinforced the credibility of the sustainability identity by adding institutional layering, which has made it progressively harder for external audiences to dismiss CPHFW's claims as rhetorical rather than truly structural. This institutional depth is the foundation of CPHFW's soft power potential – without it, the sustainability identity would be, as according to Anholt (2007), ineffective as a reputational resource. With it, CPHFW has constructed the kind of practice-based, institutionally grounded normative commitment that constructivist theory identifies as the necessary prerequisite for genuine identity recognition. The following section examines how this institutional architecture is embedded within the Danish state's cultural diplomacy infrastructure, and through what mechanisms the normative capital generated by CPHFW translates into a resource for Danish soft power.

### 3.3. CPHFW and the Danish State

The previous section established that CPHFW has developed a sophisticated and deepening institutional architecture around sustainability, one that has moved from aspiration to structural condition and from domestic capacity-building to international standard-setting. This section shall address the question that the previous institutional reflection alone cannot answer - in what ways does CPHFW's sustainability strategy function as a component of Danish state cultural diplomacy, rather than simply as the autonomous initiative of a fashion organisation? The argument that is developed here proceeds through three interconnected claims. First, the Danish state has explicitly identified CPHFW's sustainability framework as a foreign policy resource and has invested in its international diffusion through state diplomatic funding. Second, CPHFW operates within a coordinated cultural diplomacy ecosystem: a network of state and semi-state institutions whose shared mission is the international projection of Danish values. Third, the international adoption of CPHFW's sustainability framework by other fashion weeks constitutes the most evident and concrete evidence of normative soft power effect, which is the diffusion of a Danish-origin standard across the global fashion governance landscape. Collectively, these three claims build the case that the relationship between CPHFW and the Danish state is not merely incidental but structural and purposive.

The most direct evidence of the state-CPHFW link is the 2025 joint grant from the Danish Ministry of Culture and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The grant was awarded from a shared grant pool specifically designed to fund internationally oriented cultural projects with strategic diplomatic value. The official grant announcement describes the funding as being allocated in recognition of CPHFW's ambitious work within the global fashion sector and particularly the Sustainability Requirements framework (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2025). In so, the Danish state is not funding CPHFW as a commercial trade event or as a cultural prestige project in the conventional sense. It is funding it specifically for its sustainability framework and specifically for the profound international rollout of that framework. The project supported by the grant includes five activations over two years - two in Denmark and three abroad, in London, Paris, and New York – very international in its nature (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2025). The choice of cities is also telling, since London, Paris, and New York are the three capitals of the vast global fashion system, and the cities whose fashion weeks have historically defined the long-standing normative standards of the industry. Sending Danish sustainability standards to those, under a joint cultural and foreign affairs funding, is a recognisable act of diplomatic ambition.

What distinguishes this grant from the regular arts funding is the explicit involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs alongside the Ministry of Culture. Classically in Danish institutional practice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees the country's international diplomatic and strategic engagements. Its co-sponsorship of the CPHFW grant signals that the state understands the international diffusion of CPHFW's sustainability framework as a matter of foreign policy relevance, not merely cultural promotion. This directly connects to the part of theoretical framework that was established in chapter one. Cultural diplomacy, according to Cummings (2003) and Bound et al. (2007), is precisely the use of cultural exchange and cultural assets to advance foreign policy objectives. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' involvement confirms that the Danish state is not just a passive beneficiary of whatever soft power CPHFW happens to generate, but an active participant in developing its international deployment. The grant also reveals the state's understanding of the CPHFW-Denmark link that this thesis identifies central - the sustainability framework is treated as a Danish asset with international normative value, not merely as an industry initiative that just happens to originate in Copenhagen.

The grant must be understood in the context of the broader cultural diplomacy infrastructure within which CPHFW operates. The Danish Cultural Institute's strategy for 2025 to 2028 positions the Institute's work explicitly at the intersection of cultural exchange and foreign policy advocacy, stating a commitment to "highlight the significance of culture in foreign policy" and to demonstrate "culture's capacity to drive lasting societal change" (Danish Cultural Institute, 2025). The strategy identifies sustainability as one of the main priority themes alongside equality, education, science, and democratic dialogue. This list reflects not merely the Institute's interests but Denmark's larger articulation of the values it seeks to project internationally. This institutional alignment between the Danish Cultural Institute's sustainability agenda and CPHFW's sustainability framework shall not be treated as coincidental. Both institutions operate within the same normative ecosystem, drawing on the same national identity resources and serving the same broad diplomatic purpose – the international positioning of Denmark as a credible, progressive, and normatively attractive state.

The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (2011) has specifically identified Denmark as a country with a well-developed cultural diplomacy infrastructure, noting the active coordinating role of the Danish Cultural Institute in connecting Danish cultural output to international audiences.

What this highlights is that CPHFW does not operate as a lone actor generating soft power independently from state ambition. It operates within a broader system, connected to state ministries through funding relationships, aligned with the Danish Cultural Institute through shared normative priorities, and embedded in the Danish Fashion Institute's mandate to make Scandinavian design internationally competitive. The sustainability framework that CPHFW has developed and institutionalised is, from this systemic perspective, a collective product of the Danish cultural diplomacy ecosystem rather than a purely private initiative. As previously brought out, Nye (2004) and Bound et al. (2007) have both argued that in the contemporary environment (and especially now amidst the inevitable social media presence in all spheres of life), soft power is most effectively generated not through state-controlled cultural programmes, but more so through networked, hybrid actors whose credibility derives in part from their own perceived independence. CPHFW is a great example of such an actor - it is neither a government department nor a purely commercial event, but a cultural institution whose sustainability commitments appear industry-driven while simultaneously being part of a state cultural and normative interest and network.

The third and analytically most significant dimension of the CPHFW-state relationship is the evidence of normative export. More specifically, the adoption of CPHFW's sustainability framework by fashion weeks and fashion councils across Europe. This is where the soft power argument finds its most certain empirical grounding. By 2025, CPHFW's Sustainability Requirements had been adopted as a framework by the Norwegian Fashion Hub and Oslo Runway, Berlin Fashion Week executed by the Fashion Council Germany, and Amsterdam Fashion Week (CPHFW press release, April 2025). Most significantly, in January 2025 the British Fashion Council - which organises London Fashion Week, the most globally prominent of the fashion weeks outside the Big Four - announced a formal collaboration with CPHFW to implement the Sustainability Requirements across its NEWGEN emerging designer programme, with full implementation planned for 2026 (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2025).

This norm export example is rather decisive for the soft power argument. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) norm life cycle model identifies the aforementioned norm cascade, which is the stage at which a norm spreads rapidly while other actors adopt it (driven by processes of socialisation and legitimation), as the clearest evidence that a norm has achieved genuine international attention. The sequential adoption of CPHFW's framework by Oslo, Berlin, Amsterdam, and London between 2020 and 2026 maps onto this understanding. Denmark did

not compel these fashion weeks to adopt its standards. It persuaded them, through the credibility of its own institutional practice, the international visibility of its sustainability identity, and the practical utility of having a ready-made framework developed by the event that had pioneered the approach. That is an example of soft power operating according to Nye (2004) - the ability to shape others' behaviour through attraction and emulation rather than coercion or inducement. The fact that the framework being adopted is explicitly Danish in origin, developed by Copenhagen Fashion Week, in collaboration with Danish knowledge partners In Futurum and Dansk Fashion and Textile, means that Denmark's normative model is being reproduced across the international fashion landscape. At this point, Copenhagen becomes the reference and Danish sustainability standards become the baseline for the industry.

This chapter has demonstrated that CPHFW functions as an institutionalised site of identity construction embedded within a coordinated Danish cultural diplomacy ecosystem. The contextual analysis established that Denmark's sustainability identity is a long cultivated national narrative that CPHFW draws upon and reinforces. The institutional analysis traced a deliberate process of norm institutionalisation - from aspirational framework in 2020 to binding structural condition in 2023 - demonstrating that CPHFW's sustainability credentials rest on substantive practice rather than mere symbolic self-promotion. The state relationship analysis showed that CPHFW operates not as an autonomous actor but as a component of a state-endorsed diplomatic network, co-funded by the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and whose normative framework has been adopted by Oslo, Berlin, Amsterdam, and London. In summary, these three layers establish the conditions necessary for soft power generation. Whether the projected identity achieves the external recognition, will be analysed and addressed in the next chapter.

## **4. International Media Analysis**

This chapter presents the second stage of the analysis. The goal of the previous chapter was to examine how CPHFW constructs and projects a sustainable Danish identity through its own institutional practice and state partnerships. This chapter examines how that projected identity is received, framed, and evaluated by external audiences in international media discourse. The main question is whether CPHFW's sustainability identity achieves the intersubjective recognition that the constructivist framework identifies as necessary for soft power generation, and if so, then in what ways, through what framings, and with which limitations.

The chapter draws on a corpus of 25 international media sources published between 2020 and 2026, coded using the five-category framework presented in the methodology chapter. The analysis proceeds thematically rather than source by source. The first section examines the attribution patterns across the corpus, meaning who or what media sources identify as the agent of sustainability, and whether that attribution connects to Denmark as a state. The second section analyses tone and framing across the corpus, with particular attention to the temporal shift from predominantly celebratory coverage before 2025 to a contested reception during and after the greenwashing complaint of that year. The third section focuses on norm diffusion evidence as the most concrete available media-side evidence of soft power effect. The final section provides the analytical discussion, directly answering the research question on the basis of the coded findings and connecting those findings to the established theoretical framework.

### **4.1. Attribution and Recognition**

The most analytically significant coding category in this study is attribution of sustainability (Category 1), as it directly addresses the central tension identified in chapter three - whether CPHFW's sustainability identity translates into a resource for Denmark as a state, or whether it is received internationally as the property of CPHFW as an autonomous organisation. The coded corpus reveals a clear and interpretively rich pattern. Attribution to CPHFW as an organisation (Code A) is present in 24 of the 25 sources, making it the dominant attribution across the entire corpus. Attribution to Denmark as a state or national culture (Code B) is present in 7 sources. Attribution to the Nordic region broadly (Code C) is present in 8 sources. However, it is important to note that these patterns are not mutually exclusive - multiple codes apply where sources make more than one attribution, and several sources that code primarily as A also contain secondary B or C attributions.

The dominance of Code A is not surprising, as it reflects a structural feature of how cultural diplomacy operates in practice. As Nye (2004) and Bound et al. (2007) have both argued, the most effective soft power is generated not through state-controlled cultural programmes but through credible, and most importantly, seemingly independent cultural actors whose normative commitments appear “organic” rather than engineered. CPHFW’s sustainability identity is most powerful precisely because it appears to be driven by sectoral conviction and institutional commitment rather than by government instruction. When international media attributes sustainability to CPHFW as an organisation, which is the source of its credibility. A media corpus in which every source attributed sustainability directly to the Danish state would actually suggest that CPHFW’s cultural diplomacy was too transparent, too obviously state-directed, and therefore less effective as a soft power instrument. The dominance of Code A is analytically consistent with the hybrid cultural diplomacy model that chapter three identified as the structural basis of CPHFW’s influence.

The seven sources that do attribute sustainability to Denmark as a state or national culture are analytically more significant than their number suggests, precisely because they are independent and unprompted. The most explicit is Pair of Trends (2020) in an article titled “How Denmark Is Leading Sustainable Fashion”, which frames the entire discussion at the level of the Danish nation: “*Denmark has a long-standing record of being environmentally conscious*” and its fashion industry is understood as an expression of national character rather than corporate strategy. This source codes as the only purely B-attributed source in the corpus - the Denmark-as-state framing is its primary and dominant register. Family Style (2025) makes the attribution almost as explicitly, connecting CPHFW’s sustainability agenda to “*the value system integrated in Danish culture*”, referencing government funding through the Danish Arts Fund, and describing the event’s success as inseparable from the broader Danish national context.

The Portail source (2025), reporting on the British Fashion Council’s (BFC) adoption of CPHFW’s sustainability requirements, provides a different kind of Code B evidence. Writing from Tallinn for an Estonian audience, the article frames the BFC collaboration as a story about Danish normative leadership – basically, Copenhagen setting a standard that London has chosen to follow. The geographic positioning of this source is itself quite noteworthy - an Estonian outlet reporting on a Danish-British institutional relationship in terms of Danish influence is evidence of the international reach of the Denmark’s sustainability association. It

is not a Scandinavian outlet writing about its neighbour, nor a Danish outlet promoting its own country. It is a Baltic publication independently registering the normative authority of a Danish-origin framework.

The Creative Denmark source (2024) and the CPHFW press release (2025) on the BFC adoption both code as A and B simultaneously, reflecting their institutional positioning. Creative Denmark is a Danish state cultural promotion body, and its framing of CPHFW naturally integrates the national and organisational levels. The Business of Fashion piece by Shayeza Walid (2026), which covers CPHFW's twentieth anniversary, makes the Denmark connection in the context of discussing the event's survival of the greenwashing crisis, noting that the event's resilience is mainly connected to its deep roots in Danish cultural infrastructure. This secondary reflects that even in a post-crisis context, the Denmark-CPHFW link is recognised by an authoritative international fashion trade publication.

As previously stated, Nordic regional attribution (Code C) appears in 8 sources. The Nordic attribution is not identical to the Danish attribution, and the distinction matters for the soft power argument. When the South China Morning Post (2024) covers CPHFW's sustainability highlights, and frames them as expressions of Nordic environmental values, or when NSS Magazine (2025) describes Copenhagen's "*dual identity - Nordic roots, international projection*", or when Polimoda (2025) situates CPHFW within a broader Nordic fashion ethics tradition, they are attributing sustainability to a regional identity that Denmark shares with the other Nordic states of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland. As established in the previous chapter, Denmark benefits from the Nordic collective brand as a pre-existing reputational resource. Being associated with Nordic normative leadership is not the same as being identified as the sole agent of that leadership, but it is consistent with small state theory's argument that Denmark uses regional alignment as a platform for international influence. Denmark is the dominant actor in CPHFW's institutional identity, and Nordic attribution therefore piles, perhaps disproportionately, to the state that hosts and runs the event.

In so, it can be summarized that CPHFW's sustainability identity is predominantly received internationally as the property of the organisation rather than the state, which is structurally consistent with how effective cultural diplomacy works. Where the Denmark connection is made explicitly, it is made by independent international sources, which constitutes genuine intersubjective recognition rather than just self-attribution. And where the Nordic attribution dominates, Denmark benefits as the primary national actor within that regional identity. As

such, the attribution patterns are consistent with the theoretical expectation that soft power operates through indirect, culturally mediated mechanisms rather than through direct state-to-state attribution. The following section examines how the tone and framing of coverage shifted across the 2020 to 2026 period.

#### **4.2. Tone and Framing**

The most analytically compelling pattern in the corpus has turned out to be temporal, rather than thematic. When the 25 sources are arranged chronologically and their tone codes are read as a sequence, they tell a coherent story. Between 2020 and 2024, thirteen sources code as celebratory (Code 1) and three as neutral (Code 2). Between 2025 and 2026, however, nine sources code as sceptical (Code 3) or critical (Code 4), with only two remaining celebratory. This does not reflect a gradual drift toward scepticism, but a rather sharp inflection point concentrated in the first quarter of 2025, triggered by the filing of a formal greenwashing complaint against CPHFW and seven participating brands with the Danish Consumer Ombudsman (Green Economy, 2025). The framing patterns across the corpus reinforce this temporal reading, as structural and institutional framing (Category 3, Code A) dominated the earlier sources, while environmental and measurable framing (Code C) and political and diplomatic framing (Code E) emerge more so later in the critical cluster, as journalists and analysts begin questioning the substance behind the identity claim. The two phases of this arc, the construction of credibility and its contestation, are essential for evaluating the soft power argument.

The celebratory phase spans between the years 2020 to 2024 and includes some of the most authoritative voices in international fashion media. Harper's Bazaar (2023), Vogue UK (2023), Vogue Australia (2022), Fast Company (2024), and the Smiley Movement (2023) all code as tone 1, celebratory, and all frame CPHFW's sustainability primarily through Code A and Code B: structural and institutional framing that emphasises the mandatory requirements, the binding nature of participation conditions, and CPHFW's role as an industry leader and pioneer. The language across these sources is significantly consistent: "world's most sustainable fashion week", "setting the standard", "pioneering", "leading the way". This consistency is important - when multiple independent outlets across different countries and different publication types converge on the same evaluative language, they are collectively producing what constructivist theory would recognise as intersubjective meaning or, in other words, a shared understanding of what CPHFW is and what it represents. The celebratory coverage of this period is not simply

promotional, it is the process through which CPHFW's sustainability identity becomes socially real in international discourse.

Fast Company's 2024 article "Copenhagen Wants to Cement Itself as a Sustainable Fashion Mecca", is particularly instructive as a representative of the celebratory phase at its most developed. The framing here moves beyond simply describing CPHFW's requirements to positioning the event as an aspiring global capital of sustainable fashion, using spatial and architectural metaphors that suggest permanence and institutional solidity. The word "cement" in the headline already implies that the sustainability identity is still in the process of becoming fixed, that it is a project under construction rather than an established fact, but that its trajectory is toward consolidation. This framing recognizes both the ambition and the yet not secure quality of CPHFW's soft power claim. Vogue Australia's coverage similarly recognises CPHFW's sustainability as a cultural achievement rather than merely a regulatory compliance story, framing it as an expression of "the Scandi drive for sustainability" that positions Copenhagen within a distinctive regional aesthetic and ethical identity. Both sources code as C (Nordic attribution) alongside their primary A coding, reinforcing the claim that the celebratory phase consistently situates CPHFW within a broader Nordic and Scandinavian identity frame.

The Hypebae source (2024) adds an important dimension to the celebratory phase by focusing on the material innovation side of CPHFW's sustainability agenda rather than its institutional architecture. Covering the Spring/Summer25 season, it highlights specific sustainable material choices by participating brands - recycled fibres, deadstock fabrics, low-impact dyes - and frames these as evidence that CPHFW's requirements are producing tangible creative responses rather than merely formal compliance. This Code C framing (environmental and measurable) is notable in the celebratory cluster because it shows that at least some of the positive coverage was engaging with the substance of CPHFW's sustainability claims rather than simply its institutional reputation. This matters for the soft power argument, since it indicates that the credibility of CPHFW's sustainability identity in the period 2020 to 2024 rested not only on its normative architecture but also on actual visible practice, which gave independent fashion journalists something concrete and verifiable to point to.

The inflection point arrived in early 2025. In March of that year, sustainability activist and consultant Tanja Gotthardsen filed a formal complaint with the Danish Consumer Ombudsman alleging that CPHFW and seven participating brands had made misleading sustainability

claims in their marketing communications (Green Economy, 2025). The complaint focused specifically on the use of comparative wording, such as claims that CPHFW was “the world’s most sustainable fashion week”. The formal complaint argued that these claims were unverifiable and constituted greenwashing under Danish consumer protection law. The filing of the complaint itself, before any regulatory determination, immediately reframed CPHFW’s sustainability identity in international media coverage. Where the celebratory sources had largely accepted CPHFW’s self-description, the post-complaint sources began interrogating the evidentiary basis of those claims with a critical rigour that was entirely absent from the earlier coverage.

The Glossy piece by Zofia Zwięglinska (2025) is the most analytically valuable source in the critical cluster. Published in March 2025 within days of the complaint being filed, it combines reporting on the allegations with direct quotes from CPHFW CEO Cecilie Thorsmark, from participating brands Baum und Pferdgarten and Berner Kühl who admitted to marketing missteps, and from independent sustainability experts assessing the systemic implications. Zwięglinska’s framing codes as critical (Tone 4) and political and diplomatic framing (Category 3, Code E) - the piece explicitly considers what the greenwashing allegations mean not just for CPHFW but for the broader international adoption of its framework, raising the question of whether London, Berlin, Oslo, and Amsterdam have unknowingly imported a flawed normative model. This Code E framing - treating CPHFW’s credibility problem as having diplomatic and governance implications - is the critical cluster’s most rich contribution, since it confirms the soft power argument by showing the serious international significance of CPHFW’s normative authority.

The Green Economy source (2025), the Sustainable Fashion Forum Substack (2025), and The Danish Dream (2025) all code as tone 4 and cluster around the same March 2025 period. Their framing is primarily environmental and measurable (Code C), meaning they assess CPHFW’s sustainability claims against specific material and verification standards. The Sustainable Fashion Forum piece is particularly significant because it reports the outcome of the Ombudsman process. The case was eventually dropped, but CPHFW was issued a formal warning about the use of unverifiable comparative sustainability claims in future communications. This resolution - no finding of breach but still receiving an institutional warning - depicts that although CPHFW’s claims survived legal scrutiny, they did not do so without institutional cost.

The Forbes piece by Stephan Rabimov (2025) sits at the intersection of the critical and the systemic. Titled “Copenhagen Fashion Week Faces Systemic Threats From Greenwashing to Designers Exiting”, it codes as tone 4 and uniquely combines the greenwashing narrative with a separate concern that several high-profile designers are leaving CPHFW for Paris and Milan, attracted by larger commercial audiences and greater international exposure. The framing here is simultaneously commercial and market focused, alongside political and diplomatic (Code D and E), producing a source that treats CPHFW’s sustainability identity as a competitive strategy under pressure from multiple directions. This is the most pessimistic source in the corpus in terms of its assessment of CPHFW’s long-term prospects, and it codes as the clearest example of the critical cluster’s tendency to treat the greenwashing complaint as symbolic of deeper structural vulnerabilities rather than as an isolated incident.

The Lampoon Magazine piece (2025) occupies an unusual position in the corpus. It codes as sceptical rather than critical (Tone 3) and its framing is primarily structural and institutional (Code A) and political and diplomatic (Code E), making it one of the most complex sources in terms of the relationship between tone and framing. Lampoon does not accept CPHFW’s self-presentation uncritically, but neither does it adopt the adversarial stance of the complaint-driven coverage. Instead, it positions CPHFW within a comparative analysis of fashion week sustainability governance across Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Lisbon, treating Copenhagen as the benchmark against which others are measured while simultaneously questioning whether that benchmark is sufficiently rigorous. The article’s central argument that fashion weeks need binding external regulation rather than self-regulation, is more structurally critical of CPHFW’s model than the greenwashing complaint, but its framing is analytical rather than accusatory. Code E applies because Lampoon treats the entire question of fashion week sustainability as a matter of international governance rather than industry practice, implicitly recognising CPHFW’s role as a normative leader whose choices have consequences beyond mere Denmark borders.

What the tone and framing analysis collectively reveal is a pattern of identity construction, recognition, and contestation that maps with precision into the constructivist understanding of how soft power claims operate in international discourse. The celebratory phase produced genuine intersubjective recognition - a shared understanding across independent international media that CPHFW represented a credible and consequential normative model. The critical phase subjected that recognition to scrutiny and found it partially faulty, not because the

normative model was false but because the evidentiary standards required to sustain it in a heightened regulatory and journalistic environment had not kept pace with the reputational claims being made. The aforementioned arc from celebration to contestation shows a story of soft power “maturation”, as it showcases how a normative claim grew significant enough to attract a serious international challenge. The following section shall examine the norm diffusion evidence in the corpus.

### **4.3. Norm Diffusion**

While the previous attribution and tone analyses provide evidence about how CPHFW’s sustainability identity is received and evaluated in international discourse, the norm diffusion evidence in the corpus provides something more concrete - documentation that CPHFW’s normative framework has spread beyond Denmark and is being actively adopted and reproduced by institutions in other countries. This is the media-side evidence to the institutional norm export evidence presented in chapter three. Soft power, as Nye (2004) defines it, is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction. The corpus contains multiple sources that document precisely the dynamic of international institutions choosing to adopt a Danish-origin normative standard not because they were compelled to but because they found it credible, useful, and worth implementing.

The most significant norm diffusion source in the corpus is the Portail article (2025), which reports on the British Fashion Council’s formal adoption of CPHFW’s Sustainability Requirements in January 2025. Writing for an Estonian audience, the article positions the BFC collaboration as a story about the international reach of a Danish normative model. She notes that the BFC has chosen to implement CPHFW’s requirements framework across its NEWGEN emerging designer programme, with full implementation planned for 2026. The framing codes as structural and institutional (Category 3 Code A) and political and diplomatic (Code E), treating the adoption not as a commercial partnership but as an institutional alignment with a normative standard that Copenhagen has established. The geographic layering in this case showcases the evidence of the international reach of CPHFW’s normative authority.

The Dazed piece from December 2023, captures the norm diffusion at an earlier and in some ways more organic moment, before the formal BFC announcement and before the greenwashing controversy. Titled “What 2023 Meant for Sustainable Fashion”, it situates CPHFW’s mandatory requirements within a broader retrospective on sustainable fashion governance and notes that Copenhagen “started a trend” that London, Oslo, and Iceland have

already begun to follow. This framing is valuable because it is offered by an independent international youth and fashion media outlet with no institutional stake in CPHFW's reputation. Dazed is not reporting a press release or covering an event it attended, instead it is offering an independent assessment of the year's most significant developments in sustainable fashion and identifies CPHFW's normative influence as one of them. The temporal framing codes as developmental over time (Code B), which places CPHFW's norm diffusion within a trajectory rather than treating it as one isolated event. This kind of independent and temporally aware external recognition can be claimed by constructivist theory as intersubjective meaning - reflecting a shared understanding that CPHFW has achieved the status of a norm-setter in its field.

The Polimoda source (2025), offers a distinctive form of norm diffusion evidence. Its framing codes as A and C (structural framing with Nordic attribution) and its tone is celebratory, but what makes it significant is its institutional origin. Polimoda is a prestigious Italian fashion school whose students attended CPHFW specifically to study its sustainability model. The choice to send students to Copenhagen rather than to one of the biggest fashion week organizers in Paris, Milan, or New York, as a case study in sustainable fashion governance is itself evidence of the normative authority CPHFW has achieved. Academic and educational institutions do not send students to observe events they consider marginal or irrelevant. Polimoda's institutional decision to position CPHFW as a learning model for the next generation of fashion industry professionals registers a durable and long-term form of normative recognition, as it signals that CPHFW's framework is being embedded in professional education and therefore in future industry practice.

The South China Morning Post source (2024) adds the geographic dimension that the corpus would otherwise lack. The majority of sources in the corpus are from European or North American outlets, which creates a potential regional bias in the evidence of international recognition. The SCMP, which is one of the most widely read English-language newspapers in East and Southeast Asia, highlights that the CPHFW's normative reputation has reached beyond the Northern European and Anglophone media environment within which it was primarily constructed. The source codes as celebratory (Tone 1) and presented through symbolic and environmental framing (Category 3, Code B and C), and its attribution is primarily to CPHFW as an organisation with secondary Nordic framing. Although it does not make an explicit political or diplomatic argument about Denmark's soft power, a major East

Asian outlet independently choosing to cover CPHFW's sustainability agenda as a newsworthy story is evidence of international recognition that extends the corpus beyond its main regional concentration.

The NSS Magazine source (2025), an Italian fashion publication covering the Spring/Summer26 brand lineup, contributes to the norm diffusion analysis through its framing of CPHFW's international positioning. NSS describes the event's lineup as reflecting its "dual identity of Nordic roots and international projection" and characterises CPHFW as having secured its place as a key figure in the global fashion industry. This framing codes as sustained development over time (Category 4, Code B), and structural and symbolic framing (Category 3, Code A and B). The "dual identity" formulation is precise and maps closely onto the theoretical argument of this research - CPHFW operates simultaneously as a Nordic cultural institution and as an international platform, and it is precisely this duality that makes it an effective cultural diplomacy instrument/platform for Denmark. The Nordic identity provides the normative content: the values, the aesthetic, the sustainability commitment. The international projection converts that content into soft power.

Thus, it can be said that the norm diffusion sources in the corpus provide media-side evidence for three of the soft power mechanisms identified in chapter three. First, international adoption: the sources document independent recognition of the institutional evidence that CPHFW's framework has been adopted by London, Oslo, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Second, educational and professional embedding: the Polimoda source documents that CPHFW's model is being studied and reproduced in professional fashion education, suggesting that the normative diffusion extends beyond institutional governance into the formation of future industry practitioners. Third, geographic reach: the South China Morning Post source documents recognition beyond the mere European and North American media environment, extending the evidence of international reception to East Asia. While it is true that none of these sources prove that CPHFW's norm diffusion translates directly into diplomatic benefit for Denmark, they collectively demonstrate that the conditions for soft power generation - such as genuine international recognition, independent emulation, and geographic spread - are present in the media record, and that they are present in forms that are consistent with and reinforce the institutional evidence assembled in chapter three. The following section brings together the findings from all three analytical sections to answer the research question directly.

#### 4.4. Discussion

The three analytical sections of this chapter have examined the international media reception of CPHFW's sustainability identity from three distinct but interconnected angles - who owns it in external discourse, how it has been evaluated over time, and whether the normative model it represents has spread beyond Denmark. This section draws those three angles together to answer the research question directly. The question driving this research is: how does CPHFW's strategic focus on sustainability function as a tool of cultural diplomacy, and in what ways does it contribute to constructing and diffusing a sustainable identity that may enhance Denmark's soft power?

The corpus points toward three findings that together constitute the whole answer. The first is that CPHFW's sustainability identity has achieved genuine and durable international recognition in the period covered by the study (2020-2026). This recognition is evidenced not by what CPHFW says about itself, but by what independent international media says about it: thirteen celebratory sources across multiple countries and outlet types, consistent language of normative leadership, and the repeated framing of CPHFW as a standard-setter rather than merely a participant in global sustainability discourse. However, it shall be noted that the recognition is not universal - it is partial, geographically concentrated in European and Anglophone media, and heavily contested from 2025 onwards. When authoritative international outlets including Harper's Bazaar, Vogue Australia, Fast Company, and Dazed independently converge on the same evaluative framing of CPHFW as a global sustainability leader, they are collectively producing the intersubjective recognition that the constructivist framework identifies as the necessary condition for soft power generation. The celebratory phase of the corpus is not merely promotion but is the social process through which CPHFW's sustainability identity becomes internationally real and noticeable.

The second finding concerns the attribution gap and what it means analytically. The corpus shows that most international media attributes sustainability directly to CPHFW as an organisation rather than to Denmark as a state. Although this is the direct finding, it does not mean that Denmark's soft power claim is unfounded. It means that the mechanism through which CPHFW's sustainability identity translates into Danish soft power is indirect, operating through the three pathways identified in chapter three: state investment with explicit diplomatic purpose, cultural diplomacy ecosystem integration, and international norm export. The seven sources that do make the Denmark connection independently and unprompted are significant

because they represent genuine external recognition rather than the echo of institutional self-promotion. And the eight sources that attribute sustainability to the Nordic region rather than Denmark specifically are not losses for the soft power argument, as they are consistent with the small state theory prediction that Denmark benefits from regional normative alignment as a force multiplier for its own limited capacity. Attribution, in the analysed media corpus, is partial, indirect, and cumulative. Yet that aligns with how constructivist theory predicts soft power attribution operates when a non-state cultural actor is the proximate instrument of a state's normative strategy.

The third finding is connected to the 2025 contestation period, revealing the structural vulnerability of self-regulatory soft power claims. CPHFW's sustainability identity was built on a framework of mandatory requirements whose enforcement mechanism was, at its core, self-reporting by participating brands rather than independent third-party audit. When Tanja Gotthardsen's complaint to the Consumer Ombudsman subjected those claims to formal legal scrutiny, the gap between the institutional architecture and its evidentiary basis became publicly visible. The critical sources of 2025 did not argue that CPHFW's sustainability agenda was worthless or fraudulent, however, they argued that the claims made on the basis of that agenda were stronger than the actual verification mechanisms behind them. And the outcome of the case being dropped but a formal warning issued, is the key point for evaluating the net effect of the contestation on CPHFW's soft power claim. The dropping of the case means that CPHFW's sustainability claims were not found to constitute a legal breach of Danish consumer protection law. The warning means that the evidentiary basis for comparative claims was considered insufficient to sustain those claims in the future without stronger substantiation. Most importantly, the outcome suggests that CPHFW's normative authority survived the most serious challenge it has faced, but at the cost of constraining the rhetorical scope in which it can project its authority. It can no longer claim global normative supremacy without independent verification. It can, however, continue to claim normative leadership, and the institutional record, including the BFC adoption and the ongoing international uptake of its framework, provides substantive grounds for that claim.

Connecting these three findings back to the theoretical framework creates a coherent answer to the main research question. CPHFW functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy through the construction and projection of a sustainability identity that is embedded in its institutional practice, aligned with Danish state cultural diplomacy objectives, and recognised in

international media discourse as a credible normative model worth emulating. It contributes to constructing a sustainable Danish identity by drawing on and reinforcing a pre-existing national and Nordic reputational resource, deepening its credibility through structural commitment rather than rhetorical claim, and achieving independent external validation in both celebratory and, paradoxically, in critical coverage. It contributes to diffusing that identity through the documented adoption of its framework across European fashion governance institutions, the educational embedding, and the geographic reach evidenced by East Asian media coverage. And it enhances Denmark's soft power in the precise way that Nye (2004) identifies as the mechanism of soft power effect - by making Denmark's normative model attractive enough to emulate, by associating Denmark with a globally salient sustainability agenda, and by establishing Copenhagen as the reference point for the global fashion industry's most consequential governance experiment. What the corpus has showed is that the conditions are present, the mechanisms are active, and the recognition, even if partial and contested, is clearly present.

## Conclusion

The main root driving the thesis at hand was the research question of how does CPHFW's strategic focus on sustainability function as a tool of cultural diplomacy, and how is the constructed sustainable identity recognised externally in ways that may enhance Denmark's soft power. The empirical analysis this research offers is affirmative, but contested at the same time - the conditions and mechanisms for soft power generation are present and active, yet the path from identity projection to genuine international influence is neither automatic nor unchallenged.

The theoretical framework provided the analytical vocabulary for reading both the institutional and media evidence. Constructivism, with its emphasis on identity as relationally constituted and norm institutionalisation as a social process, offered the main mechanism. It explained how CPHFW's sustainability commitments are not simply policy choices but acts of identity performance that contribute to positioning Denmark as a particular kind of international actor - credible, normatively ambitious, and committed to sustainable innovation. Soft power theory, in turn, explained why such performances matter politically, and why the recognition of that identity by external audiences is not merely reputational flattery but a form of international influence. Small state theory provided the structural context that made this analysis necessary in the first place - for a state of Denmark's size and material capacity, normative leadership is not an optional diplomatic register but a structural imperative. The synthesis of these three frameworks produced the central theoretical argument that structured cultural platforms, when they implement nationally salient norms into binding institutional practice and achieve genuine intersubjective recognition, can function as instruments of soft power projection for small states.

The empirical analysis confirmed that CPHFW meets the conditions the theoretical argument requires. Between 2020 and 2026, the event underwent a deliberate and sequenced process of norm institutionalisation, moving from an aspirational sustainability vision, through a preparatory capacity-building phase, to a set of mandatory participation requirements whose credibility was publicly demonstrated through annual reporting, third-party recognition, and calibration against EU regulatory developments. The parallel analysis of CPHFW's relationship to the Danish state revealed that this institutional process did not unfold in isolation, as the event operates within a coordinated cultural diplomacy ecosystem, co-funded by the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and its sustainability framework

has been explicitly identified as a foreign policy resource. The most concrete evidence of soft power effect emerged from the international adoption of that framework by the British Fashion Council, Berlin Fashion Week, Oslo Runway, and Amsterdam Fashion Week - a Danish-origin standard spreading across international fashion governance through attraction.

The media analysis completed the analytical process by examining whether this projected identity achieves the intersubjective recognition that constructivism identifies as the necessary condition for soft power to operate. The coded corpus of 25 international sources spanning 2020 to 2026 revealed a contested pattern: although the analysis showed that the attribution is predominantly to CPHFW as an organisation rather than to Denmark as a state, it is important to highlight that this is structurally consistent with how hybrid cultural diplomacy operates. In addition, the seven sources that make the Denmark connection independently and the eight sources that trace it back to Nordic values are significant because they are external and unprompted. Another finding is the consistent and independent celebratory framing between 2020 and 2024, in which outlets across multiple countries converged on the language of normative leadership, followed by a sharp inflection point in 2025 triggered by the formal greenwashing complaint. This contestation was analytically significant in two main ways. It confirmed the seriousness of CPHFW's normative authority, as soft power claims that do not matter are not challenged. Simultaneously, it exposed the structural vulnerability of self-regulatory credibility in an environment of increasing external scrutiny. The Consumer Ombudsman's resolution, dropping the case but issuing a formal warning, allowed for CPHFW's authority to survive, yet within newly constrained rhetorical boundaries.

Therefore, it can be stated that CPHFW functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy through three cumulative mechanisms: the institutionalisation of sustainability as a structural norm that constitutes a practice-based national identity commitment, the embedding of that practice within a Danish state cultural diplomacy infrastructure deployed for explicitly diplomatic purposes, and the international diffusion of the normative framework through adoption by other fashion governance institutions. The constructed sustainable identity is recognised externally through consistent positive international media coverage, independent attribution of normative leadership to Copenhagen and Danish and Nordic identity, and the documented spread of the framework across European fashion governance. The research demonstrates that the conditions and mechanisms for soft power generation are present and active. It needs to be addressed that the study cannot prove measurable diplomatic outcomes for Denmark, nor would an

interpretive constructivist study claim to do so. What the evidence shows is that CPHFW has made Denmark's normative model internationally attractive enough to replicate, and that is the mechanism through which soft power operates.

This research makes three important contributions to the existing literature. It contributes to a small but growing body of IR scholarship examining the creative industries as sites of cultural diplomacy and soft power projection, offering an analysis of a fashion week as a deliberate instrument of small state normative strategy. It applies constructivist norm institutionalisation theory to a non-state cultural actor, extending the theoretical framework beyond its conventional state-centric applications. And it showcases that the contestation of a soft power claim can simultaneously damage and confirm the authority of the entity, through the comprehensive analytical account of the CPHFW greenwashing crisis of 2025.

The study's principal limitation is inherent to its research design. The interpretive single case study approach enables analytical depth but cannot demonstrate statistical generalisability or prove causal outcomes. Future comparative research examining how Oslo Runway, Amsterdam Fashion Week, or Berlin Fashion Week have adopted and adapted CPHFW's model would allow the theoretical propositions developed here to be tested across cases. A longitudinal study tracking CPHFW's soft power trajectory beyond the 2025 contestation period would also be valuable. Fashion as a diplomacy tool remains significantly undertheorized in IR, and the analytical framework developed in this thesis - combining constructivist theory, small state theory, and soft power analysis around a non-state cultural actor - is available for application to other domains where culture, commerce, and normative governance intersect in the international arena.

This research has demonstrated that the institutions through which states construct and project their international identities are not limited to embassies, military alliances, or trade negotiations. They also include cultural platforms through which values are performed, norms are institutionalised, and the world is invited to recognise a particular vision of what a state stands for. Copenhagen Fashion Week is one such platform. Denmark, as a small state that cannot rely on material power alone to exercise international influence, is a particularly illustrative case. Most notably, this study demonstrates that in modern days, the instruments of normative influence may be of least traditional or expected origin, nevertheless they carry significant weight in diplomatic state identity depiction.

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## Annex 1

*Table 2. Coded media corpus for international media analysis (chapter four).*

	Source	Year	Category 1: Attribution	Category 2: Tone	Category 3: Framing	Category 4: Temporal	Category 5: Source Type
1	Bird & Bird	2025	A, C	3	A, E	C	D, E
2	Business of Fashion	2026	A, B	2	A, B	B	C
3	CPHFW Press Release	2025	A	1	A, E	B	A, B
4	Creative Denmark	2024	A, B	1	A, B	A	A, B
5	Dazed	2023	A, C	2	A, B	B	C
6	Family Style	2025	A, B	1	A, B	B	C
7	Fast Company	2024	A	1	A, C	B	C
8	Forbes	2025	A	4	D, E	B	C, D
9	Glossy	2025	A	4	C, E	B	C, D
10	Green Economy	2025	A	4	C, E	B	C, D
11	Harper's Bazaar	2023	A	1	A, B	A	C
12	Hypebae	2024	A, D	1	B, C	A	C
13	Lampoon Magazine	2025	A, C	3	A, E	C	C
14	Last Week in Denmark	2025	A, B	3	C, D	B	C
15	NSS Magazine	2025	A, C	2	B, A	B	C
16	Pair of Trends	2020	B	1	B, A	B	C
17	Polimoda	2025	A, C	1	A, B	B	C, E
18	Portail	2025	A, B	1	A, E	B	C
19	Smiley Movement	2023	A	1	B, A	A	C
20	South China Morning Post	2024	A, C	1	B, C	A	C
21	Sustainable Fashion Forum	2025	A	3	C, E	B	D
22	The Danish Dream	2025	A	4	C, E	B	C, D
23	Texfash	2025	A	4	C, E	C	C, D
24	Vogue Australia	2022	A, C	1	B	B	C
25	Vogue UK	2023	A	1	B, A	B	C

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