

The contrast of Hygge

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Introduction

This report is referring to “Hygge Aura Generator Quiz”, a game developed in the context of the “Playable Media” class at ITU University of Copenhagen, during the second semester 2021/2022.

The game has been developed entirely by two people, me (Simone Cibrario Nona), and Francesca Tremulo. Both of us had been living in Copenhagen for little more than half a year when we started brainstorming ideas for the project, and one thing emerged prominently as a shared experience to elaborate further: the idiosyncrasies of life in Denmark as a young expat and the country’s portrayal in media. The most prominent symbol of the cultural shock we experienced is the Danish concept of hygge. What hygge is and isn’t will be discussed further in the following chapter, but the Oxford Languages english dictionary defines it as:

“a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture).”¹

From the mid 2010’s there has been a huge global explosion in the usage of the term, to the point where in 2016 it was shortlisted as a word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary². This spike in media representation of the Danish concept has, as it will be discussed, changed hygge itself and has cemented a perception of it based on wool socks and candle lit rooms. This is the view we had when arriving in Denmark, and what set up our expectations for our lives in Copenhagen. We found out that this depiction is however not truthful to the living conditions of low income expats and to hygge itself.

It’s important to note that the project doesn’t aim to critique hygge directly: our intent with the project has been to highlight the aesthetics of the commercial hygge, while displaying an alternative truth to the one presented in gift shops and in Pinterest boards.

¹ *Oxford languages and google - english*. Oxford Languages. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

² *Updates to the OED*. Oxford English Dictionary. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://public.oed.com/updates/?__prclt=ZQTPPsps

Hygge: a changing term

To tackle a critique of the concept and of its uses we had first to understand and define hygge itself.

Historically the word hygge comes from norwegian, and it only appears in use in the Danish language from the 18th century.³ In this period the word was mainly used as a connotation for a safe habitat, mostly in a familiar context. The word retains this meaning to these days, together with many more. What this definition fails to convey is just how much hygge is also pertinent to the social sphere.

“First, it depends on the complete and positive participation of all present in the encounter.... Second, it requires an evenness of flow, a sustained back-and-forth dance of involvement that encourages and even demands this level of participation. And third, the achievement of these goals is made possible by a range of positive social skills, including teasing (a national pastime), quick repartee, the telling of stories and jokes, patience, sensitivity, and the ability to be an enthusiastic audience as well as performer.”⁴

The sociologist Stephen Borish highlights how hygge it's key to Danish social interaction. It's a ritualistic form of communication that requires the following of non spoken rules and conformity. From these observations it is easy to see how hygge can become imposing to those that deviate from this cultural standard. One of the ways this can manifest is with ‘Hygge-Racism’, a specific kind of racism present in Denmark and rooted in colonialism, Scandinavian exceptionalism and national identity. It is defined as such by Maja Bodekær Black.

“‘Hygge racism’ is when someone says something racist (often based on stereotypes and assumed cultural/ethnic differences) in a social, ‘hyggelig’ context with the purpose to lift the spirits, make people laugh or say something sweet/nice – thus, the racist comment/joke etc. is meant to be received as something positive and not (necessarily) as something serious as both the ‘hyggelige’ situation and intention behind the said is positive. This positive intention is as such regarded as more important than how the ‘hygge racist’ comment/joke etc. is received and perceived which can be both very hurtful and negative. Ways to break with ‘hygge’/the

³ Linnet, J. T. (2011). Money can't buy me hygge: Danish middle-class consumption, egalitarianism, and the sanctity of inner space. *Social Analysis*, 55(2). <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2011.550202>

⁴ Borish, Stephen M. 1991. The Land of the Living: The Danish Folk High Schools and Denmark's Non-violent Path to Modernization. Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing.

good mood e.g. by pointing out the racist nature of the said is met with attempts to defend and legitimize the racism.”⁵

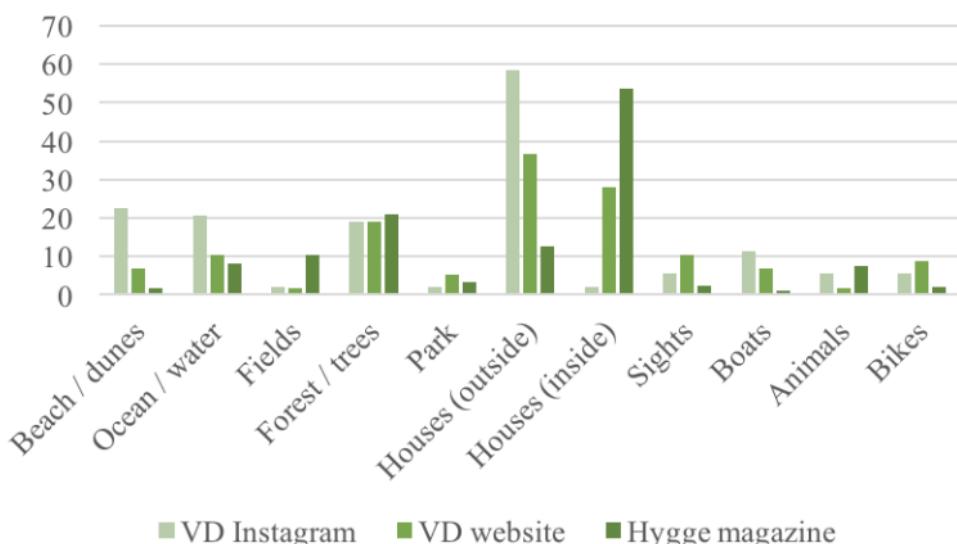
These nuances are however often lost in the usage of the term: by looking at the way hygge is represented and communicated in international press, books and tourist websites what is prominent are things and services. Candles and socks are the most prominent culprit of transformation in the commodification of what is thought by Danes as belonging to the inner self. In the paper “Money can’t buy me Hygge”³ Jeppe Trolle Linnet even argues that some Danes are getting disenfranchised by the term itself as “people perceive the status-oriented, aesthetic, and symbolic side of consumption as detracting from hygge, which they idealize as belonging to the realm of the ‘ordinary’.”.

⁵ Bodekær Black, M. (2018). 'Hygge racism': "noget som man nok bruger mere end man tænker over". A qualitative study of well-intentioned racism. *Department of Sociology, Lund University*.

The mediatization of Hygge

Once it was clear to us how deeply complex the concept of hygge is, our attention was focused on the phenomena that are acting on the concept: why and how are they transforming it? Who are the stakeholders pushing the commodified hygge aesthetics? The framework we decided to use to understand these processes has mediatization, defined by Silverstone as “Mediatization is defined as a process of social change whereby media logic becomes ingrained into cultural and social areas of life”⁶.

Economic agents can therefore appropriate cultural traits and use them for their needs: one example is how the official tourism website of denmark www.visitdenmark.com⁷ uses hygge prominently in their material. The intent is clear: as stated Leonie Greife in their thesis paper “Let’s Get Hyggelig in Denmark”⁸, this is a technique used in place branding to associate positive connotation of a cultural trait to a place and, consequently, their services and products. In the thesis it is also highlighted how different the communication of hygge can differ depending on the commercial intent. The following diagram showcase how the focus of the imagery is much more reliant on nature for the danish tourist website, while for Hygge Magazine, german magazine targeted towards their home market, the focus is indoor.



⁷ occurrences in the imagery present on www.visitdenmark.com and on Hygge Magazine.

⁶ Silverstone, R. (2005). The sociology of mediation and communication. In C. Calhoun, C. Rojek & B. Turner (Eds.), *The sage handbook of sociology* (pp. 188–207). London, UK: Sage Publications.

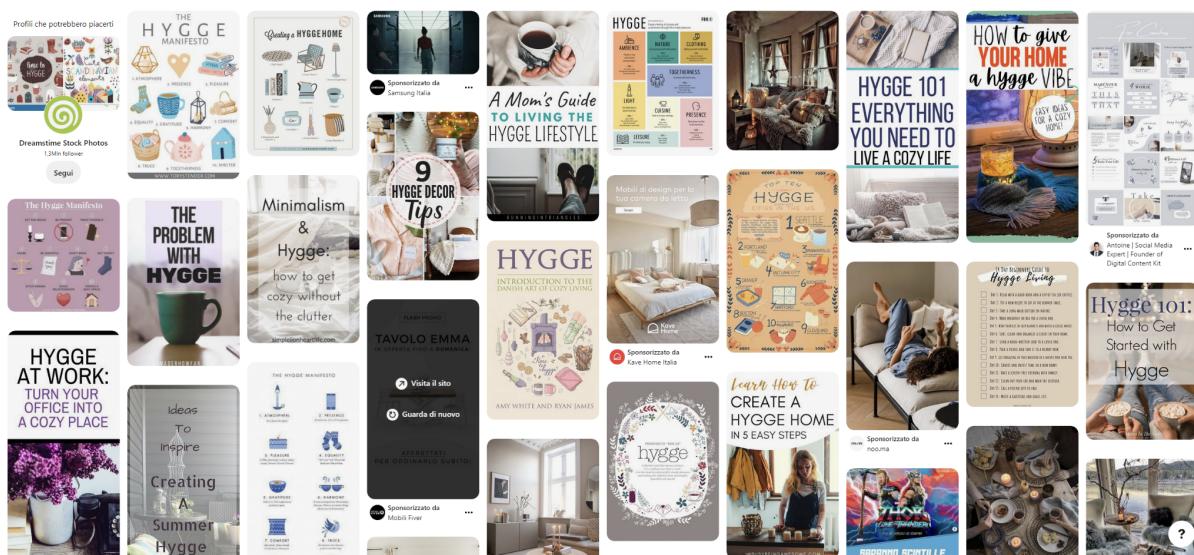
⁷ *What is 'hygge'?* VisitDenmark. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from

<https://www.visitdenmark.com/denmark/highlights/hygge/what-hygge>

⁸ Greife, L. (2018). Let’s Get Hyggelig in Denmark: A Qualitative Case Study About Place Branding in Times of Mediatization. *Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University*.

The implication is clear: the product to sell is different, so hygge takes different shapes. Visit Denmark aims at bringing tourists to the country, so hygge is acted outside, in canals, forests and cozy cafes in Nyhavn. The German magazine doesn't have this need; its customers want to take hygge home. The images displayed and product advertised will then be commodities such as furniture and foods.

During our research we noticed how hygge and its aesthetics have found hold in the image sharing website Pinterest. In a way that mimics the german Hygge Magazine, the mediatization of hygge is directed towards a global audience, but warm blankets and fancy teas are accompanied by quick tips on how to achieve a hygge lifestyle.



A screenshot taken from a search conducted on pinterest using the term "hygge" in 2022⁹

Many of these suggestions are based on the "Hygge Manifesto", written by Meik Wiking in his popular book "The Little Book of Hygge"¹⁰. This principle, completely removed from their social and cultural contexts, are spread through mediatization in a global market, and come to define what hygge is even for the danes. Greife also writes:

"The cultural asset, if it is deployment for place branding and additionally fueled by the media, can be perceived as annoying after a while. Thus, Danes could experience alienation to an emotion that is usually a normal part of their culture...There is the risk that the place brand does not allow locals to narrate their culture, but rather the media create a form of the culture that works for their logic."

⁹ *Pinterest "Hygge" search*. Pinterest. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.pinterest.it/search/pins/?q=hygge&rs=typed&term_meta%5B%5D=hygge%7Ctyped

¹⁰ Wiking, M. (2017). *The little book of hygge: Danish secrets to happy living*. William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

Their statements are confirmed, in the same paper, with a structured interview with a member of the Visit Denmark team, where they admit that a certain degree of bending on the cultural concept is needed to achieve the marketing goals.

The Hygge aura

The Pinterest board sparked the idea to communicate in a playful way our intended message of contrast between the different depictions of hygge.

The core concepts behind the game are:

- The online quiz narrative
- The visualization of the quiz result through pictures, called aura
- The esoteric and cozy aesthetic

Building on the manifesto, we deconstructed its 10 principles into a quiz.

We wrote a simple narrative base scenario for each of them, where we asked the player how they would behave in a particular situation. One of the two answers would imply staying true to the hygge spirit, the other wouldn't. The story in which we decided to embody the player was the one we lived through, and one that challenged the concept intrinsically: moving to another city. This gave us the opportunity to put the player into an uncomfortable situation, where following hygge principle as portrayed in the media might result difficult. Once the 10 questions were answered, we decided to generate a sculpture to let the player visualize a set of objects emblematic of their hygge status.

To decide which object represented the concept the best we went through our reference for hygge mediatization and we calculated the occurrences of some selected stereotypical items. Once we had an idea of which ones were the most prominent we curated the selection, trying to find some “anti-hygge” counterparts and removing the entries that were too impractical to shoot with a camera in a studio setting. This was as result of a decision we made early on to have the aura made of real pictures shot by us, so we could infer a part of our own hygge and not so hygge living into the project as authentically as possible.

Finally to complement the aesthetics of the online quiz with the abstract aura displaying the hygge level of the player, we set our art direction to be based on the world of cartomancy and horoscope, which have an overlapping imagery with these objects.

Before digitizing our game we also built a paper prototype, where the player answered a simple google form and then had the opportunity to create a paper collage with the objects we awarded them depending on their answers. This prototype was instrumental in fine

tuning the questions of the quiz; many of them leaded the player to an obvious choice in the first iteration, as well as creating confusion if the narrative context didn't provide them with enough information to make a decision. The prototype also led us to iterate on the object selection, making them more personal and linked to the narrative beat of the question.



One of the auras created by the player at the end of the prototype.

The final game

The game in its last iteration presents itself as a 3D environment emulating a cozy space with a surreal atmosphere, reminiscent of tarot reading sessions. The questions and narrative are presented to the player in the top section on the screen. When a choice is available it is displayed in the middle of the screen: the player can select it by clicking. Once all ten questions are answered the camera will zoom in the center of the table, where the kinetic sculpture representing the hygge aura of the player will appear. As a last action the game will present the player with a short title, defining of their result in the quiz.

The game has been realized in Unity 3D, using the Ink narrative language to create the quiz. As of the writing of this report, the game is playable directly in the browser at <https://simonecibrario.itch.io/hygge-aura-generator>, but doesn't support mobile play.

After observing several players and being sent their sculptures we observed both the successes and the limitations of the project.

The game manages to convey the wanted aesthetics of coziness and paranormal, creating a coherent setup upon which to infer the wanted meanings. The communication of the

message is however hindered by a lack of internal reference to the concept of hygge; players not familiar with the term couldn't understand what the game was about.

Another issue of the game is that people, despite the improvement after the prototyping phase, still felt like the imagery sometimes didn't convey their own perception of the concept; as an example, drinkers that received the beer image didn't feel represented by the aura. While the intent was to highlight the contrast between different hygge realities, not to create an accurate representation of one's habits, still left some players displeased, and could be improved upon.

The game creates for most player a grounded depiction of hygge as introduced by the game narrative, still a cut feature of the game might have helped better understand the differences between mediated hygge and real behaviors: originally we wanted the player to be able to change the sculpture to the extremes of hygge and anti-hygge, but this had to be ultimately cut due to time constraints. To replace it and give more meaning to the sculpture we added the final comment, dependent not on an individual choice, but on the total of stereotypically hygge answers given by the player. A high hygge score will give the player a final message like "as hygge as cozy socks", while a low one might be something like "hygge-me-not!". These comments help to frame the game as deconstruction of a particular form of hygge, but they may also lead the player to feel judged for things that they feel hygge, but are not through the lenses we used; the player has no way of knowing except a disclaimer citing the intentions of the project in the game's webpage.



The game as presented in its final version, the table is littered with objects highly used in the depiction of hygge.

Conclusion

Ultimately the game, while with some cited shortcomings, manages to create a unique and relatable visual representation of hygge. These representations, just like the concept itself, are moving, changing, and sometimes out of the player control: most players will recognise some of the stereotypes, but will also recognise some foreing, relatable objects.

A dead plant, a smartphone, a surgical mask, none of these things are very hygge, according to its commodified version. However they are part of a reality that both Danes and expats face and, in a way, they can also be hygge.



An example of final hygge aura.

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