Do Make me Think - Towards an Integrated Model for Sustainable UX Design.

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the potential to stimulate more socially sustainable practices in the professional field of user experience design. We argue that the endeavour is mandated by political trends towards the regulation of "deceptive patterns", rooted in a more general concern with manipulating algorithms, the user interfaces that mediate them and their consequences on the well-being of citizens and their effects on democratic processes. We argue that the project requires challenge of the status quo – i.e. current design frameworks models to "hook" users, that lack some key concepts to help digital professionals confront their practices to comply with societal demands. We strive to incorporate these concerns in a synthesized model directed at stimulating socially sustainable change, for use in design workshops tailored to industry professionals. We acknowledge the paradox and the inherent contradictions in the project and discuss them in the conclusion.

"All models are wrong, but some are useful" – George E.P. Box (Box, 1976)

Introduction: An emerging political focus on social sustainability

In recent years, the concept of social sustainability has gained traction within policy frameworks in Denmark and internationally. Decision-makers increasingly make the argument that long-term societal well-being depends on more than economic and environmental factors, sometimes called non-financial indicators. This emergent paradigm aspires to combine values like equity, inclusivity, community resilience, and social cohesion into sustainable development policies. In practice this means that we see an increase in legislation promoting equitable access to resources, fostering social justice, and ensuring that community members meet their basic needs and participate fully in society. Social sustainability initiatives may encompass diverse issues such as affordable housing, healthcare, education, fair labour practices, and the protection of vulnerable populations. In the United Nations SDG-framework e.g. social sustainability is expressed in goals for well-being, quality education and sustainable communities (The 17 goals, 2022). The inclusion of these principles within policy agendas marks a shift toward a more holistic approach to sustainability that acknowledges the interdependence of economic, environmental, and social systems.

The business side

Besides being a political concern, social sustainability also plays an important role in the ESG-framework, aimed at assisting investors in identifying companies that "*promote ethical and socially conscious themes including diversity, inclusion, community-focus, social justice, and corporate ethics, in addition to fighting against racial, gender, and sexual discrimination*". (*What Is Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Investing?*, accessed 14.5.2023.). In a sampling we made of 10 of the most visited web shops in Denmark, it is apparent that many companies have adopted socially sustainable values. Our sampling was guided by the "Sustainability Brand Index" (Official Report 2023 Europe's Largest Brand Study on Sustainability, 2023), and we visited the five most sustainable brands (according to the report). We found elements of social responsibility in all companies (Rema, Lego, Thise, Coop and Aarstiderne). Elements included communication dedicated to diversity and inclusion, social responsibilities, typically formulated in CSR and compliance reports. See Figures 4-7 in the appendix.
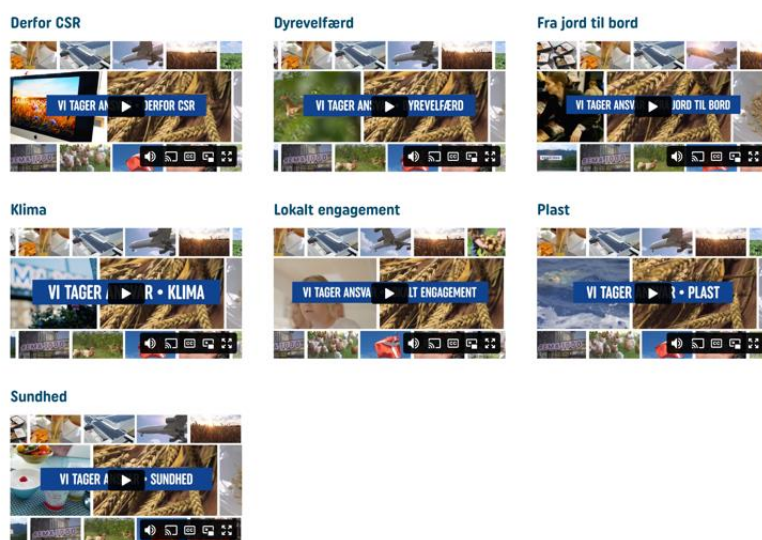
*Figure 1 Screenshot from supermarket chain REMA's website, page informing about CSR initiatives (*CSR-rapport, *accessed 15.2.2024)*

Context: action research and other binds

The research is conducted from the Copenhagen School of Design and Technology. One of the diplomas offered at our institutions is a bachelors' degree in multimedia design. A substantial part of the training consists of acquiring competences in UX-design (we will explain this professional role shortly). Its' research ambitions can be explained using terms from the action research tradition. Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002)

In contrast to other academic approaches, action research strives to

- try out theories with practitioners in real situations and real organizations.
- combine theory and practice in concrete, tangible and mutually recognizable problems and within mutually acceptable ethical frameworks.
- involve researchers and practitioners in iterative processes, aimed at acting together on a particular cycle of activities, including problem diagnosis, action intervention, and reflective learning – often gleaning methods from design thinking (Romme, 2004)
- Modify theory as a result of the feedback.
- Emphasize true and egalitarian collaboration between stakeholders.

A central tenet of action research is that researchers should be explicit about their approach, clarify their research aim, theory, and method at the outset and all the way through its application, as well as at the time of its publication. A prerequisite for the

above, i.e. trying theories with practitioners, combining theory and practice, and involving stakeholders in iterative processes, is to have a guiding model that engages with new questions and new professional demands.

Research question and methodological considerations.

So: the research stems from an action research background, is driven by actors with extensive professional experience, for industry partners and aims at designing processes that intervene in practice. What are the practices that need to be intervened on? In this paper, it is on the field of user experience design. In the following, we will introduce UX design as a profession, argue that some of its practices are under pressure, and take steps in developing a new analytical model, by arguing that the design practices often embedded in action research and design thinking fall short in the light of new demands for social sustainability. In one sense, our project is a theoretical, exploratory, future-oriented, speculative project, aiming at laying the foundations for a new type of practice - by addressing issues that have been underprioritized. Despite its focus on theory, it is directed at grappling with very concrete and practical issues related to behavioural problems caused by dominant rationales in current UX – design, and thus subsumed a general action research agenda.

Research question: How could we develop a model to guide future UX-practice for the support social sustainability – to challenge practices deemed problematic by political organs?

User experience design

"While often at the forefront of expanding material consumption, designers are now increasingly facing the issue of how to achieve the opposite." (Cipolla, 2008)

A User Experience (UX) Designer is a professional who is responsible for creating satisfying or compelling experiences for users of a product. UX designers typically facilitate the design of products that offer a seamless and intuitive user interaction. User Experience (UX) Design is inherently multidisciplinary, merging principles, methods, and knowledge from various fields to create products, systems, and services that provide meaningful and relevant experiences to users. Some of the key disciplines that contribute to the multidisciplinary nature of UX Design are:

- Human-Computer Interaction (HCI): a focus on the design and use of computer technology, particularly the interfaces between people (users) and computers.
- Psychology - understanding human behaviour, perception, cognition, and emotions is essential in UX Design. Psychological principles help designers comprehend how users process information, what motivates them, and how they remember information.
- Design Thinking - a problem-solving approach that involves understanding user needs, challenging assumptions, redefining problems, and creating innovative solutions to prototype and test.
- Information Architecture (IA) - the art and science of organizing and structuring information in products and services to support usability and findability. This involves understanding how user process information and making complex content accessible and navigable.
- Usability Engineering - designing products that are easy to use and match user expectations. Usability engineers focus on quantitative and qualitative methods to measure user satisfaction and performance.
- Visual Design - the use of imagery, color, shapes, typography, and form to enhance usability and improve user experiences, drawing from graphic design principles to create an aesthetically pleasing interface.
- Other responsibilities include include content strategy, anthropology and sociology, computer Science and Software Development, accessibility and inclusion, with an understanding for product management and business strategy.

(Bika, 2017; Soegaard, 2024; *What Are UX Roles? | IxDF*, accessed 13.2.2024.)

The scandal of UX

To outsiders, the profession of UX-designer may seem like an odd mix of disciplines and a somewhat peripheral occupation compared to programmers or more specialised professions like graphic designer or copy writers, but the focus on the effects of UX - design have exploded recently – notably in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018.

"*In March 2018, news of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal made headlines around the world. By inappropriately collecting data from approximately 87 million users' Facebook profiles, the data analytics company, Cambridge Analytica, created psychographically tailored advertisements that allegedly aimed to influence people's voting preferences in the 2016 US presidential election.*" (Hinds et al., 2020)

Suddenly, our relationship with computers – and the role of UX in that relationship came under intense public scrutiny. One direct consequence of the scandal was a series of public confessions from Silicon Valley leaders and innovators who made startling confessions about their role in developing UX techniques that manipulated with users, ultimately to the extent of threatening democracy, and "destroying how society works" (as Chamath Palihapitiya declared , former Vice President for User Growth, (Karppi & Nieborg, 2021))

At the heart of the scandal were the addictive features that created the preconditions for the abuse of user data in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and the behavioural design to make habit forming products that trigger desired outcomes built on principles of variable rewards, unpredictable content, and a (false) sense of autonomy – i.e. the feeling that you as a consumer have a degree of control over your actions. These psychological techniques rapidly became standard on social media and e-commerce websites, and built on insights from behavioural economy (Kahneman, 2012), theories of "nudging" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) and communicated through practical guides in how to hook the user (Eyal, 2014) or designing solutions that prevent the user from having to think (too much) (Krug, 2013).

These techniques, come from a position that focus exclusively on commercially preferred actions and share a reductive view of the user as a target of manipulation. One example, the "Hook Model" (Eyal, 2014) - figure 2 - below, divides the flow into four phases:
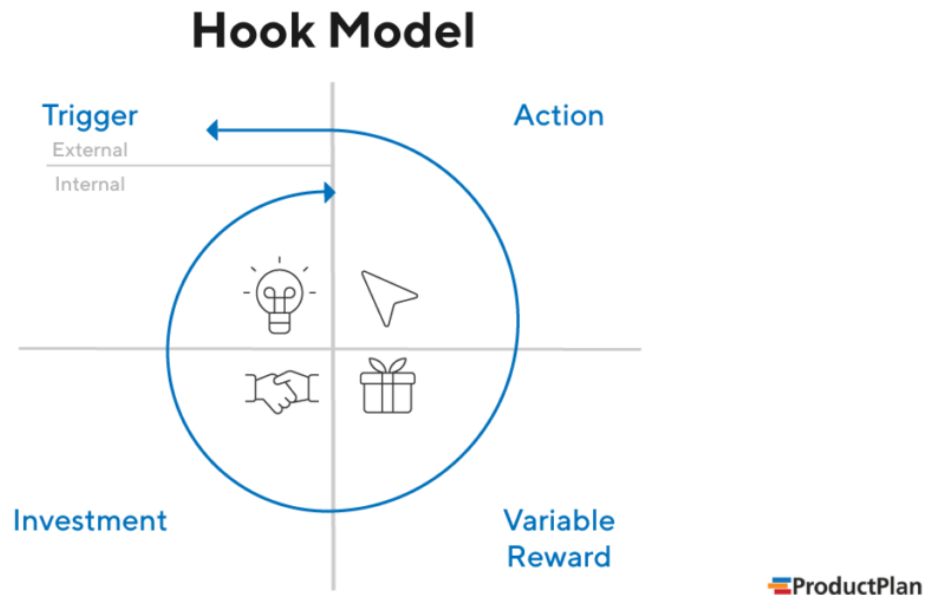
Figure 2 – The hook model from "Hooked" (Eyal, 2014)

Trigger: something intriguing that calls for an action.
Action: the behaviour done in anticipation of a reward.
Variable Reward: the exciting juxtaposition of relevant and irrelevant sets the users' brain "dopamine system aflutter with the promise of reward".
Investment: "An action that improves the service for the next go-around".

Another example of a popular approach to UX-design can be found in Steve Krug's "Don't make me think" (Krug, 2013). Steve Krug himself labels his approach a "common sense" one. Communication online should be "…self-evident. Obvious. Self-explanatory". As a rule, he continues "people don't like to puzzle over how to do things". He then proceeds to demonstrate how the average user is irrational and inattentive.

These two models have been widely adopted, wildly successful and have driven innovation in the field at an impressive pace. But one could also argue that they have been the driving force behind unwanted behavioural changes at a huge scale.

A European political trend – democratic interventions

"Deceptive design patterns aim to influence users' behaviour and can hinder their ability to effectively protect their personal data and make conscious choices." (EDPB, 2022)

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, the confessions of former Facebook CEOs and the public outrage over the manipulation of users, and films like Netflix's "The Social Dilemma" (Orlowski, Jeff, 2020) were probably instrumental in different political initiatives to regulate UX-patterns that risked compromising users' data and undermining their well-being.

In 2022, the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) published guidelines on how to recognise and avoid deceptive dark patterns (in the context of GDPR regulation). EDPB is a legal entity, that has the mandate to ensure "consistent application and enforcement of data protection law across the European Economic Area" (*Tasks and Duties | European Data Protection Board*, 2024)

The guidelines have three target groups:

"...social media providers as controllers of social media, <u>designers</u> and users of social media platforms on how to assess and avoid so-called "deceptive design patterns" in social media interfaces that infringe on GDPR requirements."

EDPB defines considers deceptive design patterns as

"...interfaces and user journeys implemented on social media platforms that attempt to influence users into making unintended, unwilling and potentially harmful decisions, often toward a decision that is against the users' best interests and in favour of the social media platforms interests, regarding the processing of their personal data. Deceptive design patterns aim to influence users' behaviour and can hinder their ability to effectively protect their personal data and make conscious choices."

EDPB categorises deceptive design patterns into six categories:

- Overloading
- Skipping
- Emotional Stirring
- Obstructing
- Fickle
- Left in the dark

In this context, the patterns share the fact that they contribute to breaches in GDPR-principles - put in place to protect citizens' data. The patterns prompt users to share more data than necessary, make it harder to manage data, make people forget about data protection aspects etc.

The report – 73 pages long – ends with an interesting take on "best practices", which could be useful as a guideline for the development of "user-loyal design practices", later. They consist of 19 principles, among them:

- Providing contact information for datacontrollers and supervising authority.
- Coherent wordings.
- Providing definitions.
- Explaining consequences of different choices.

The report is a testament to how seriously this subject is treated, and a strong indication of how current practices are being regulated.

Deceptive design also goes under the name of "dark patterns" According to a mapping by Colin Gray et. al (Gray et al., 2023) dark patterns can be described as "tactics of technology manipulation". They have become pervasive in a range of digital services and "regulators are beginning to act in banning the most aggressive practices under consumer protection and data privacy" (p.1.). The scholarship about dark patterns "started as a small trickle within the HCI-community", to "more than two dozen publications per year starting in 2021". It is not within our scope in this article to conduct a full literature review on the dark patterns-scholarship, but according to Gray et al. it is still subject to scholarly debate, "which types of patterns produce the most harm" and "how regulators and legal professionals should identify (and sanction) the use of dark patterns".

A Danish trend – a whitepaper and expert recommendations

In Denmark, the government has recently published two different reports (in 2022 & 2023), that signal a paradigm shift in political perceptions of IT. Historically, the government, through policy papers, strategies, white papers etc. has made the case that it was important to digitize as many processes as possible – resulting in increased IT-budgets, education, awareness campaigns. Before 2022, staying within the realm of political literature it was practically impossible to discern any negative perspectives on IT.

In 2021, however, that changed, with the governments' publication of "Towards a better society with tech-giants" (our translation (*Mod et Bedre Samfund Med Tech-Giganter*, 2021)). In the preface of the publication, it is stated that big tech, and their pervasive technologies, has become a challenge to our democracy. We are standing in front of challenges in health, law, media, tax and as consumers. The report puts forth 9 principles that should guide our use of technology in the future:

1. The business models of tech-giants should be under democratic control.
2. Children should be able to have a secure childhood in a good balance between the digital and the physical world.

3. Tech giants should support democratic dialogue instead of creating echo chambers and polarization.
4. Tech should giants, should to a higher degree be made accountable for the content on their platforms.
5. Free media should contribute to the democratic dialogue and creatives should be paid for their work.
6. The right of workers should be protected.
7. Tech-giants should contribute to society like all other companies.
8. Competition should be fair and transparent.
9. Democracy should decide on the frame for tech, not the other way around.

In the report, each item on the list is developed, often with reference to phenomena stemming from UX practices that (are considered to) cause addictive use of media, polarizing debates due to algorithmic logics (giving people more of what they want instead of what they need) and so on.

In 2023 the ministry of Business, published "Democratic control with the tech-giants' business models (our translation (Flyverbom, 2023)". Many of the themes from the 2021 report are echoed in this report, in the form of recommendations grouped under 4 headings, and several sub-categories.

- Limitation of data-harvesting and clearer choices
- Limitation of tech giants use of retention mechanisms
- Limitation of tech giants endeavour to predict and influence behaviour.
- the responsibility of tech giants to guard children from inappropriate content

Again, the document is addressing a range of phenomena, that would be unthinkable without a range of UX-practices that manipulate users to act in a way that is deemed counter-productive to collective and democratic ideals.

These three documents are just a few examples of a new sensibility in policy: this concern, especially for how the user and his/her data is extracted or used against the users' will is visible in large, all-encompassing frameworks like GDPR, the digital services act and the digital market act that have had a huge influence on businesses, and of course on the requirements for new UX-solutions – e.g. to ask consent for cookie-practices to name one well-known and ubiquitous feature of websites since GDPR was introduced.

In the light of these institutional developments, the role of the UX-designer is challenged:

"While often at the forefront of expanding material consumption, designers are now increasingly facing the issue of how to achieve the opposite." (Cipolla, 2008)

A sustainable model for UX-designers

The field of UX-design has had a narrow focus of reducing friction for commercial interests, based on a one-dimensional view of who the user is, and what she ultimately wants. This envelope has been pushed to the point where loyalty towards the user has been compromised, in favor of tactics that work against conscious choices. If we accept the notion that deceptive designs aim is to override the users' initial intention (buying a plane ticket, ordering a seat at a restaurant e.g.), we suggest a model for UX-analysis and design, that broadens its perspective, and incorporates dimensions that comply with recent political foci. In this model, considerations about user behaviour, competitive edge and new potentials created by technological development, are infused with legislative, epistemic, and value-driven concerns from non-commercial actors: research institutions, educational institutions, and NGO's (figure 3). The model situates the different dimensions on a spectrum between deceptive and loyal poles. These are not binary states – but acknowledge that working with these issues in practice, is a matter of moving incrementally in one direction or another, rather than permanently switching to one preferred state over another.
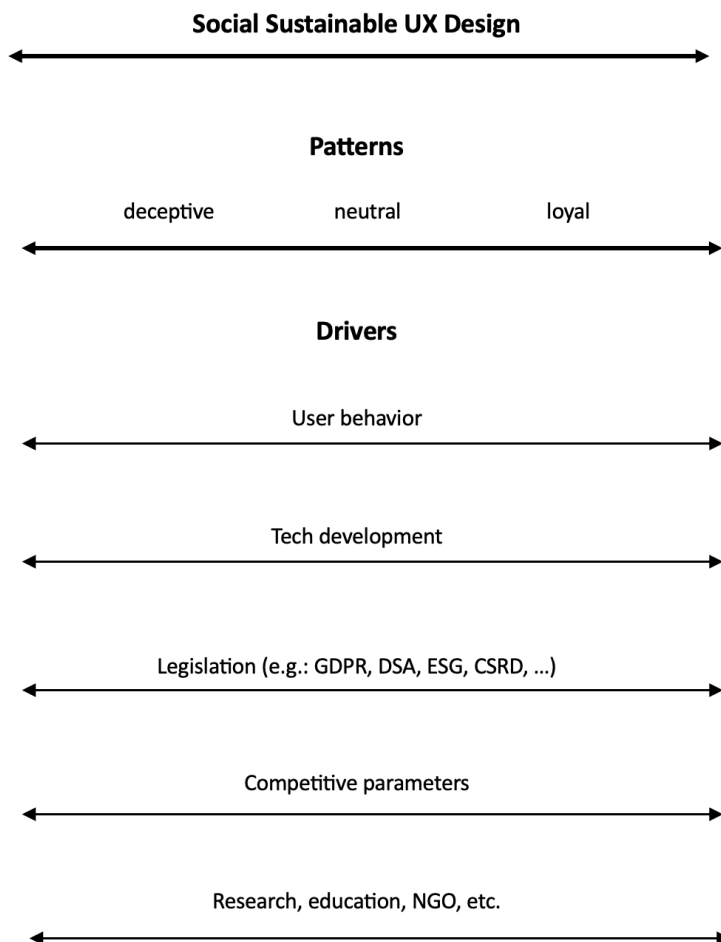
Social Sustainable UX Design

⟵————————————————⟶

Patterns

deceptive   neutral   loyal

⟵————————————————⟶

Drivers

User behavior

⟵————————————————⟶

Tech development

⟵————————————————⟶

Legislation (e.g.: GDPR, DSA, ESG, CSRD, …)

⟵————————————————⟶

Competitive parameters

⟵————————————————⟶

Research, education, NGO, etc.

⟵————————————————⟶

Figure 3 – the SSUX model

The model aims at expanding the parameters for the UX-designer, and at supporting the intentions of the rational and attentive consumer. This is a person who has a desire for products (a) in a sustainable tech environment (b), that complies with policy (c), that has a competitive edge (d) and whose consequences/values are supported by research and knowledge generated by NGO's (f).

A unified model of social sustainability in in UX: planning for future practice

In the section above (context and other binds), we described our commitment to action research. In one sense we did not live up to the principles, by taking steps backwards into modelbuilding. To compensate, we will describe how we could test the insights derived from the work with integrating political demands into a design model, into a concrete practice. The target audience is UX Designers, Product Managers, UI Designers, Interaction Designers, and could include typical design thinking concepts like user persona templates, prototyping materials, workshop handouts and the deployment of Sustainable value Business Model Canvas or similar frameworks.

Content	Purpose	Potential benefits
The communication of case studies where socially sustainable products has improved user experience.	To make the argument that the project has validity	To persuade participants of the realism of the project
Information about the EU data protection boards guide on how to identify deceptive design patterns.	To inform about legal developments	Heightened knowledge
To map instances of deceptive design practice in the stakeholder's own practice	Discover legal vulnerabilities	Self-awareness
Integration of EDPB's best practices (clear contact information, coherent wording, sticky navigation, cross-device consistency, explaining consequences etc (EDPB, 2022)).	Mitigate against legal vulnerabilities	Concrete action
To evaluate the impact of sustainable techniques on user behaviour and business models.	To gauge the realism of the project	Development o sustainable business models

Conclusion, discussion, and perspectives

In this paper we asked how we could support social sustainability in the UX-professions. We made the case that political attention has made the question relevant, and that it is a discursive phenomenon in mainstream company communication. We proposed a unified model for socially sustainable UX design to understand that challenges dominant models by Eyal and Krug, to confront and mitigate the negative effects of current practices. The aim has been to develop a method to stimulate reflection and start innovation-processes that align with emerging political demands. A unified model aims to develop more thoughtful and loyal design patterns. The model needs to be tested, and the next step is to develop methodical research on potential interest for products that are free from data-extraction, deception, and manipulation.

The scope has been narrowly professional and has avoided the larger philosophical and political discussions about the premise for doing business inside capitalist frameworks: as long as financial growth is tied to an increase in sales and revenues, as long as increased sales depends on extracting data from the user (Zuboff, 2019) it seems improbable that UX – practices that work towards creating obstacles for sale, and that reduce the data-economy could have any measurable success.

On the other hand, changes in consumer demands sometimes create the push for commercially sustainable offerings, even when they go against the grain of adopted business logics. Examples can be seen in the tourism industry, e.g. offering holidays for digital detoxing/austere products like silent retreats, functions that ask the user to rethink actions (when Microsoft Outlook gives the user the possibility to cancel the sending of an e-mail)

Another big flaw in this paper, is the lack of empirical knowledge about the prevalence of the models that we claim are at the basis of most UX-practices. We basically don't know whether professionals are integrating legal requirements and ethical consumer demands into their practices.

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Appendix: documentation of top sustainable brands' commitment to social sustainability

We strive to create a responsible place of work for our employees, one in which they can thrive and be their best. We focus on making our workplaces inclusive, safe and motivating, where only the highest standards of ethical business behaviour are maintained. We want all employees to be proud to work for the LEGO Group and help us build a diverse organisation that helps us reach and inspire children, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

Figure 4 – LEGO sustainability page about people (*People - Sustainability - LEGO.com,* accessed 14.5.2024.)

- Klimavenlig emballage. Thise mejeri anvender i videst muligt omfang genanvendeligt materiale i emballagen og laver detaljerede emballageopgørelse. I 2023 traf vi beslutning om at udfase plasticlåg på vores samlede konsummælkssortiment. Med virkning fra Q1 2024 vil plastiklågene være helt udfaset.

- Reduktion af dieselforbruget til mælkeindsamling og køletransport, samt indkøb af virksomhedens første 100% eldrevne kølelastbil.

- Trivsel på arbejdspladsen. Igen i 2023 har Thise Mejeri arbejdet målrettet med at skabe en bedre arbejdsplads for alle, ligesom vi er fokuseret på at inkludere medarbejdere med vanskelige vilkår, herunder ukrainske krigsflygtninge.

Vi er stolte over at vi i 2023 har taget flere store skridt i vores arbejde med Ordentlighed, men anser det også som forpligtet at vi i 2024 sætte yderligere fokus på dette område.

God læselyst med vores 2023 rapport om "Ordentlighed".

Figure 5 – Quote from Thises "Ordentligheds"-rapport (CSR-report) (Ordentlighed - Sådan Tager vi Ansvar, 2023). Translation: "Well-being in the workplace. Once again in 2023, Thise Dairy has worked focused on creating a better workplace for everyone, and we are also focused on including employees with difficult conditions, including Ukrainian war refugees."

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Styr på arbejdsforhold i Sydeuropa

— **2019** —

Arbejdsforholdene er ikke lige gode alle steder i verden. Det kræver ekstra opmærksomhed, og Coop stiller nu krav om, at de sydeuropæiske leverandø-rer af frugt og grønt skal certificeres efter Global Gap Grasp, så de sociale risici forbundet med for eksempel migrantarbejde bliver sat ned.

Figure 6 - (Nielsen, 2020) Translation: "Labour conditions are not equally good everywhere in the world. This requires extra attention, and Coopis now demanding that southern European suppliers of fruit and fruit and vegetable suppliers to be certified according to Global Gap Grasp, so that the social risks associated with, for associated with migrant labour, for example, are reduced."

S4 Social and Employee Conditions
Diversity and Inclusion

In total, we are more than 50 different professional competencies and 12 nationalities in one place, and the talk at the lunch table stretches out in a lot of different directions and is definitely not boring.

All managers in Aarstiderne work with a social, economic and sustainable responsibility, a purpose that is written directly into Aarstiderne's articles of association and has been part of Aarstiderne's business since 1999. It is therefore clear to all managers that Aarstiderne has a significant positive impact on society and the environment as a whole and that as a leader in one's daily work and decisions you must act accordingly. In all job postings, Aarstiderne draws attention to our diversity policy.

Figure 7 – AArstiderne: Diversity and inclusion (Bohé, 2023)