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Exploring Culture, History and Nature as Tourist Destination Branding

Constructs:

The Case of a Peripheral Region in Sweden

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Abstract

Indigenous tourism has recently been acknowledged as a potential and fast growing segment of the tourism industry. In line with this process, the local culture, history, and nature are often seen as popular and, indeed, well-sold products. Examples from tourism industry suggest the complex constructs of culture, history, and nature can be effectively incorporated in tourist destination branding process and help to create and market the unique image of a destination on the marketplace. In its turn, a strong and distinctive destination brand positively affects an inflow of tourists, contributing to the overall wealth of the region. The present study attempts to explore how the constructs of culture, history, and nature can be incorporated in the process of branding a tourist destination. The study uses the case of peripheral region Eastern Norrbotten situated in the north of Sweden. Eastern Norrbotten has a range of unique assets, which generate from its location near the Finnish-speaking part of Sweden (Tornedalen) and the influence of indigenous Sami culture. The northernmost location of the Swedish Eastern Norrbotten, its historical heritage, multilingual and multicultural environment yearly attracts thousands of tourists from different countries, who come here to experience Midnight Sun, salmon fishing, reindeer race, Sami culture and Finnish sauna. A proposed three-dimensional model of tourist destination branding incorporates regional culture, history and nature as branding constructs. The results of the focus group discussion suggest regional culture, history and nature can provide with possible branding dimensions, which can be clearly associated with the tourist destination and upon which a tourist destination brand can be built. Regions with peripheral location can be seen as almost ideal cases to build brands on the basis of culture, history, and nature due to their remoteness and relatively untouched and well-preserved assets associated with the named constructs. Recognition and effective communication of these assets to potential tourists are, however, seen as essential prerequisites for creating a distinctive tourist destination brand. The Internet and Web technology due to their global penetration and accessibility can be a vital aid in brand communication process. One of the main implications for tourism practitioners, therefore, would be a recommendation to accent on the unique features of the region, associated with its culture, history and nature, when building the website content. The nature of the following study is explorative, which leaves an open room for future research.

Keywords: tourist destination, brand, culture, history, nature

1. Introduction

Indigenous tourism has gained recognition as a branch with a great potential and currently represents a growing segment within the tourism industry (Müller & Pettersson, 2001). Local culture, history, and nature became popular, well-sold products (Saarinen, 1997; Poimiroo, 2000). Successful cases from tourism industry show that the complicated constructs of culture, history, and nature can be effectively used to create and market a unique image of a tourist destination (Saarinen, 1997; Ooi, 2001), i.e., for destination branding. Branding is a powerful tool that can significantly improve the appeal of a tourist destination on the consumer market, which in turn positively affects an inflow of inbound tourists, contributing to the overall wealth of the region. Another important positive aspect of the destination branding based on the regional assets is the ability to create expectations of potential visitors that are likely to be confirmed, when they will visit the region.

The present is a pilot-study, which explores how the constructs of culture, history, and nature can be incorporated in the process of branding a peripheral tourist destination. The research purpose here is *to explore regional culture, history, and nature as tourist destination branding constructs*. For this purpose, the author looks how the named constructs are described in the marketing and tourism-related literature, and proposes a three-dimensional model of tourist destination branding, which depicts a tourist destination as a structure comprised by the branding constructs. The proposed model is tested using the case of a peripheral region in Sweden, Eastern Norrbotten¹. The explorative nature of the present study does not imply a thorough examination of the named constructs, rather than imposes to elucidate their role and possible use in destination branding.

2. Theory

2.1 Tourist Destination Branding: Some Aspects

¹ The region of Eastern (Östra) Norrbotten is comprised by four municipalities of Kalix, Överkalix, Övertorneå, and Haparanda, situated in Norrbotten county of Sweden, which is the northernmost Swedish county.

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) sees local tourist destinations as central contributors to the process of development and delivery of tourism products. Therefore, tourist (or tourism) destination is identified as a fundamental unit of analysis. According to WTO, “a local tourism destination is a physical space in which a visitor spends at least overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions, and tourism resources within one day's return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, and images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness. Local destinations incorporate various stakeholders often including a host community, and can nest and network to form larger destinations” (WTO, Working Group on Destination Management).

Destinations are often regarded as specific geographical area: a country, an island, or a town (Hall, 2000). Buhalis (2000) addresses the destination concept from the strategic perspectives of destination marketing and management. He argues that “...traditionally, marketing (literature) concentrates on increasing visitation and treats tourism like any other commodity. This approach fails to recognise the unique needs and limitations of each destination as well as their particular geographical, environmental and socio-cultural characteristics” (Ibid., p.98). However, “...it is increasingly recognised that a destination can also be a perceptual concept, which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, educational level, and past experience... Often, destinations are artificially divided by geographical and political barriers, which fail to take into consideration consumer preferences or tourism industry functions (e.g. Alps shared by France, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy)” (Ibid). Destination branding approach allows to work with consumer perceptions and preferences, creating and controlling the image of a tourist destination. Buhalis (2000) suggests the “destinations are amalgams of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to the consumers”, and this *amalgam* of tourism products and services offered by a destination is consumed by tourists under the *brand name* of the destination during their period of stay. So, in other words, “a destination can be regarded as a combination (or even as a brand) of all products, services, and ultimately experiences provided locally” (Ibid., p. 97-98).

Ritchie & Ritchie (1998) discuss the importance of tourist destination branding arguing that although the substantial amount of literature was dedicated to the generic field of branding, the field of destination branding has been on the backyard of research for quite a long time.

Recently, destination branding has gained much attention in tourism research for its role in tourism marketing and destination management. Ritchie & Ritchie adopt the Aaker's definition of brand² and, based on it, propose the following *destination "brand" definition*: "A Destination Brand is a name, symbol, logo, word, mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience" (Goeldner et al., 2000, p. 653).

Destination brands can be developed using the unique regional features that provide with the distinct attractors and touristic assets, which form the basis for building a brand "identity". The *brand identity*³ as defined by Upshaw (1995) is the total perception of a brand in the marketplace (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). Building a destination brand identity or, in other words, creating a distinct image of the destination on the consumer market can, thus, be seen as one of the central tasks of a destination branding process. *Destination branding* is seen here as a broader marketing concept, which includes but is not limited to creating destination brand (as defined by Ritchie & Ritchie), and is defined *as a set of marketing activities aimed at creating, maintaining and promoting a distinct image of a tourist destination on the market*. In the present paper, only one aspect of destination branding (as defined above) will be regarded – the process of creating a distinct tourist destination image, using the branding constructs of culture, history and nature.

2.2 Tourist Destination Branding Constructs

Regional cultural, historical and/or natural assets are important touristic attractors and can, therefore, form the platform for destination branding. Next sections give some insights into culture, history and nature as branding constructs.

² **Brand** is "a distinguishing name and/or a symbol (such as logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or service from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical" (Aaker, 1991, p. 7)

³ The **brand "identity"** is also the part of the **brand's overall "equity"**, which is defined as "a set of brand assets or liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991, p. 15).

Culture

Culture – “the set of basic values, perceptions, wants, and behaviours learned by a member of society from family and other important institution” (Kotler & Armstrong, 1991, p. 669) – is one of the factors that determine the overall attractiveness of a tourism region. A broad definition of culture suggests that it is the human-made part of the environment. It is a very diverse and rich factor, comprising the societal norms and traditions, language, dressing styles, architecture, handicrafts, art, music, gastronomy, etc. (Triandis, 2002). Goeldner et al. (2000) suggest: “...successful tourism is not simply a matter of having better transportation and hotels but of adding a particular national flavour in keeping with traditional ways of life and projecting a favourable image of the benefits to tourists of such goods and services...” (Ibid., p. 278). In tourism, the most affective power has the exposed or material culture of a tourist destination. It is a culture that we see when we come to a place: buildings, behavioural manners, traditional dresses, food, etc. As it is exposed, it is easier to manage for marketing purposes: to make an impression, to make remembering, surprise, make wondering (Ibid.). Material culture can differentiate the tourist destination from other regions and help creating its unique image or brand.

History

Goeldner et al. (2000) suggest that history may be one of the most interesting dimensions of a tourist destination, and is a rich instrument which allows creating a unique tourist experience. Local historic sites, stories, and legends – all create a romantic and lasting experience for region’s visitors (Ibid.). History is also what differentiates and unites nations, and is one of the important motives to visit one or another region. Historic travels become much more popular, and there are successful examples of how to use history to create a brand image of a region. Examples of popular historical attractions are Mount Vernon in the USA (plantation home of President George Washington, Virginia), Bastille square and Louvre in Paris (Ibid.), in Sweden – Vasa Ship in central Stockholm.

Nature

Nature, natural resources and environment is the most fundamental dimension of the tourist destination. Goeldner et al. (2000) differentiate between three unique components of natural environment and suggest any destination is *primary and unchangeably* characterised by its physiography (nature and appearance of its landscape), climate (the kind of weather it has over a period of years; i.e. the conditions of heat and cold, moisture and dryness, and wind),

and, finally, people, who belong to the destination (residents) and are its current or potential visitors (tourists).

3. Destination Branding Model

Incorporating the described constructs of culture, history, and nature into a tourist destination branding process, the following model of destination branding can be proposed as in Figure 1.

The branding dimensions are the following:

- ❖ *Culture*: e.g., regional culture, language, identity, traditions – general and region-specific;
- ❖ *History*: e.g., history of the region, historical development and influences; and
- ❖ *Nature*: e.g., geographic location, climate, landscape.

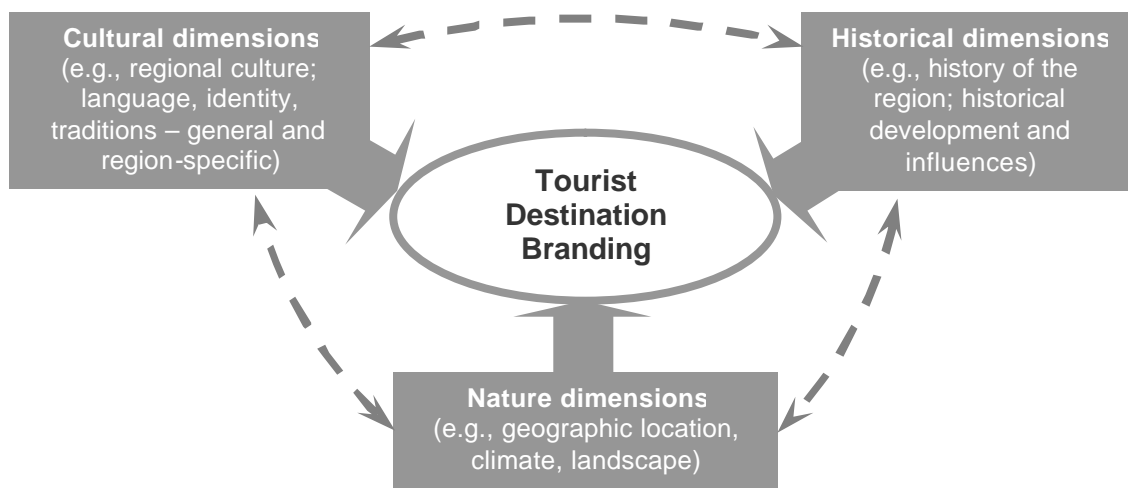


Figure 1. Tourist Destination Branding Model

The proposed tourist destination model incorporates regional culture, history, and nature dimensions, which should work synergistically to create a unique image, i.e., the brand name of a region. Here, 'tourist destination' is seen as a structure comprised by cultural, historical, and nature branding dimensions. These dimensions are formations of local traditions, geographic location, landscape features, etc., and represent the unique traits characterising and differentiating a tourist destination. These dimensions can, therefore, be used all together as well as separately, as a basis for creating and maintaining a tourist destination brand. For a brand name to be a successful differentiator of the destination on the tourist market, it should

focus on the attractive and easily connectable to the destination characteristics inherent in regional culture, history, and/or nature. The next section presents the case of Eastern Norrbotten region in Sweden as an example of how these destination characteristics could be identified.

4. Applying the Model: The Case of Eastern Norrbotten, Sweden

Eastern Norrbotten is a small peripheral region situated in Northern Sweden. It has a range of unique features, which generate from its location near the Finnish-speaking part of Sweden (Tornedalen) and the influence of indigenous Sami culture. The northernmost location of this region, its historical heritage and multicultural environment yearly attracts thousands of tourists from different countries. The region has more than 200 small and medium-sized tourism service providers, hotels and camping places, as well as high standard traditional Swedish food restaurants. A good variety of seasonal tourist attractions offered by Eastern Norrbotten can range from reindeer and scooter racing to salmon fishing and forest safaris. On the whole, Eastern Norrbotten can be regarded as a popular tourist destination, yet, it does not have a well-developed brand name.

Focus group discussion design & results

The proposed model of tourist destination branding was tested on the case of Eastern Norrbotten using the method of focus group discussion. The participants of the small focus group were the people who live in the region full- or part-time and, therefore, are believed to have some deeper experience and knowledge of the region. The participants were asked to discuss the list of regional characteristics categorised within the constructs of culture, history and nature. The list was compiled after the screening of the local press and literature related to the region of Eastern Norrbotten. During the discussion, the participants were also asked about what things come into their minds in the first place when they think of culture, history and nature of Eastern Norrbotten, and which of these things they believe have a clear and may be unique association with the region. Using this method, the following dimensions of each of the three constructs were identified: see Table 1.

Table 1. Emerged Branding Dimensions of Eastern Norrbotten

Branding Construct	Identified Possible Branding Dimensions
CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tornedalen's tongue and identity -Laestadianism – Tornedalen's religion -Sami -Finnish-Swedish border -Traditional Swedish food: knäkebröd (flat dry bread popular in Sweden), surströmming (sour herring prepared accordingly to the traditional recipe used in the north of Sweden and Norway), löjrom (salted whitefish roe), salmon, renkött (sliced fresh reindeer meet eaten as a traditional warm dish, dried fresh reindeer meet eaten as a snack), hjortkött (deer meet eaten in warm dishes) -Norrbottdensdräkt (traditional dress of Norrbotten's region)
HISTORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Fishermen & Sami people -Norrbottden's gård (traditional Norrbotten's yard) & kyrka (church) -Close to Finland and Russia
NATURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Climate: coldness, ice, snow -Polar Circle -Silence -Emptiness -Remoteness -Polar Night, darkness -Midnight Sun -Northern Light -Reindeers, salmon -Landscape: skärgården (Norrbotten's archipelago), fjällen (mountains), untouched forest, stones from Ice Age

The results, i.e., the possible model of branding of tourist destination Eastern Norrbotten is presented by Figure 3. It should be noted that the proposed branding dimensions, presented in the model, should only be seen as an example of what regional characteristics can be used, when developing a tourist destination brand.

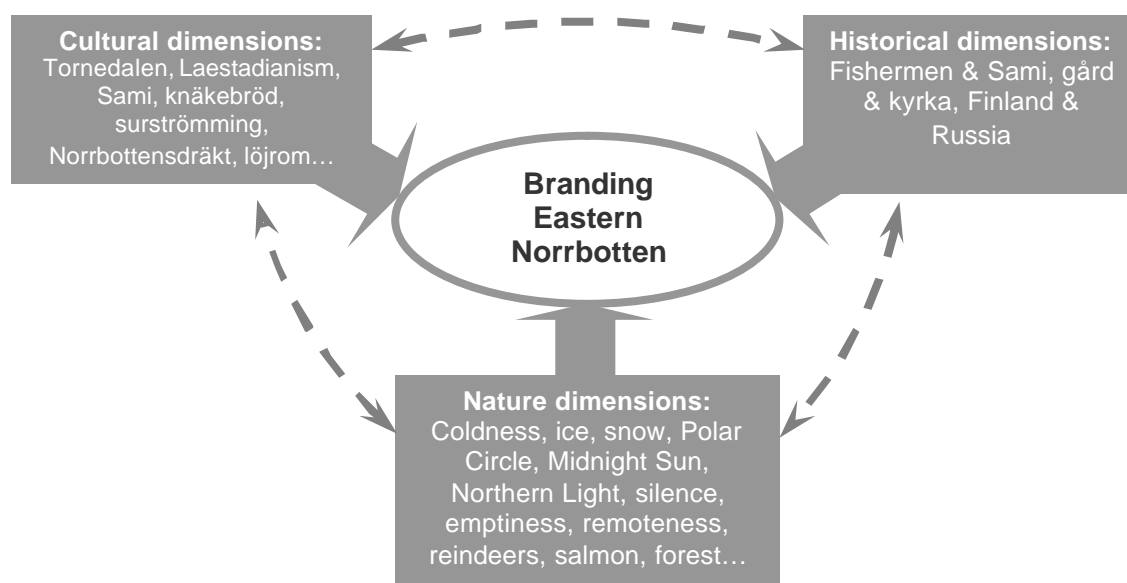


Figure 1. Branding Tourist Destination Eastern Norrbotten

It is seen, that the constructs of culture and nature are richer representatives of unique dimensions of Eastern Norrbotten region. It is, therefore, could be suggested that in branding of tourist destination Eastern Norrbotten, the accents should be made on its culture and nature as these are easier associated with the region and are more likely to create a distinct image of Eastern Norrbotten.

5. Discussion and Implications

Destination branding is a powerful tool for tourism providers to improve their appeal to consumer markets. Branding a tourist destination, based on regional assets, is likely to create controllable expectations of potential inbound tourists, because then the touristic offer is based on something that the region can offer. Confirmation of expectations, in turn, creates overall positive experience of inbound tourists, which encourages repeated visits and word-of-mouth. Literature and examples from the tourism industry suggest that regional history, culture and nature can be successfully used as tourist destination branding constructs. The present paper with the research purpose *to explore regional culture, history, and nature as tourist destination branding constructs* proposes a three-dimensional model of tourist destination branding, which is tested on the case of Eastern Norrbotten, a peripheral region located in the northernmost part of Sweden. The results of the focus group discussion suggest regional culture, history and nature can provide with possible branding dimensions, which can be clearly associated with the tourist destination and upon which a tourist destination brand can be built. Regions with peripheral location can be seen as almost ideal cases to build the brands on the basis of culture, history, and nature due to their remoteness and relatively untouched and well-preserved assets associated with the named constructs. E.g., Eastern Norrbotten can be expected to build a stronger and more recognisable brand if based on branding dimensions of regional culture and nature as these have appeared to better represent the regional assets. Recognition and effective communication of these unique features to potential tourists are seen, however, as essential prerequisites for creating a distinctive tourist destination brand. The Internet and the Web technology due to their global penetration and accessibility can be a vital aid in brand communication process. One of the main implications for tourism practitioners, therefore, would be a recommendation to accent on the unique features of the region, associated with its culture, history and/or nature, when building the

website content. The following steps are advised to follow, when determining the possible destination branding dimensions :

1. Search for and identify the critical assets and unique characteristics of a tourist destination within each of the proposed branding constructs of culture, history and nature;
2. Review the emerged list of branding dimensions and pick the most critical ones in terms of marketing and promotional activities (i.e., those with a greater potential to attract tourists, or very unusual ones and thus having greater possibilities to be clearly connected to the destination);
3. Incorporate the selected dimensions into a proposed model to check whether they depict the destination in a way that can create a clear and attractive picture in a mind of a potential tourist;
4. Look what can be improved (what characteristics of the branding constructs can be added/removed) to achieve a synergy-effect;
5. Concentrate on the regional branding dimensions, when defining the destination brand and/or designing marketing/promotion strategy.

Concluding, it should be stressed again that the nature of the following study is explorative, which leaves an open room for future research. The present study is a pilot, which did not have a purpose to provide with an in-depth discussion of the role of the destination branding constructs of culture, history and nature, rather than to elucidate how these can be used in destination branding. Therefore, it could be suggested to further research these branding constructs, as well as their role in destination branding.

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