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Cassinger, Cecilia; Gyimothy, Szilvia ; Lucarelli, Andrea

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20 Years of Nordic Place Branding Research: A Review and Future Research Agenda

Cecilia Cassinger, Lund University, Sweden

Szilvia Gyimóthy, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Andrea Lucarelli, Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract

In the past 20 years, the Nordic region has fostered a distinct place branding scholarship and practice. This paper briefly revisits hallmark contributions that founded and shaped Nordic place branding and argues that by today, the Nordic approach earned widespread international acknowledgement. The Nordic region offers more than a regional context of place branding; its cultural and geo-political idiosyncrasies greatly affect the axiological position of place branding research. By positioning Nordic place branding research on the global scene, the paper outlines the contours of a hybrid scholarly approach (*the Nordic wave*), which bridges across managerial and critical schools of branding and promotes a more extroverted knowledge collaboration with branding practitioners. The paper concludes with discussing the potential the NordicWave for future place branding endeavours.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the Nordic countries have often used the story of citizen well-being as key asset in their place branding narratives. VisitDenmark even engaged with Dreamworks to co-produce the animation film *Trolls* (2016) to paraphrase Denmark as a colourful country in a perpetual state of happiness and recently lobbied at UNESCO to record the convivial concept of *hygge* as immaterial heritage (Andersen, Kjeldgaard, Lindberg & Östberg, 2018). The exaggeration is not fully ungrounded; in March 2020, the Nordic countries have for the eighth consecutive year topped the charts of the annual World Happiness Report (WHR) (Helliwel, Layard, Sachs & De Neve, 2020), this time with Finns coming in on the first place ahead of their Scandinavian compatriots. The report is prepared by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UN), which ranks countries according to how content their citizens are with their lives. The WHR surveys a range of aspects related to well-being, including the liveability of social, urban and natural environments. Considering an adverse climate, peripheral geographic location and sparse populations of the Nordics, it seems that people's assessment of their quality of life may depend on other factors than sunshine and cosmopolitan buzz. Analysts suggest that the consistently high ranking positions are attributable to Nordic exceptionalism (Martela, Greve, Rothstein and Saari, 2020); and the happiness gap between the Nordics and the rest of the world can be explained by a strong social cohesion.

“A happy social environment, whether urban or rural, is one where people feel a sense of belonging, where they trust and enjoy each other and their shared institutions [...] There is also more resilience, because shared trust reduces the burden of hardships, and thereby lessens the inequality of well-being.” (Helliwell, in WHR, 2020)

The importance of citizens trusting institutions is especially relevant in times of societal and health crises, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic. A recent report led by Imperial College’s London’s Institute of Global Health Innovation (IHGI, 2020), found that people who have the most confidence in their health system’s ability to respond to COVID-19 have the highest life satisfaction, while those with no trust came out at the bottom. Across all countries surveyed in July 2020, all Nordic countries performed with scores close to 7 on the Cantril ladder (a 10-point self-rating scale, with 0 representing the worst possible life and 10 being the best). This finding is especially remarkable for Sweden, whose flock immunity (containment) strategy has resulted in far more reported cases and higher mortality rates than the other Nordic countries (John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre, 2020). Irrespective of divergent mitigation strategies pursued by the individual governments in the Nordics, their citizens kept faith in public authorities and remained assured that politicians and public health institutions handled the pandemic in the right way. This is also reflected in a study comparing COVID-19 related deaths across EU member countries (Oksanen et al. 2020), which found a significant relationship between institutional trust and lower mortality rates.

The international rankings (of happy citizens and trusted institutions) seem to confirm the notion that the Nordics are the poster boys of social and environmental responsibility, equity and inclusion. The values associated with these Robin Hood societies; such as cooperation, consensus, solidarity, democracy, freedom, social cohesion, and gender equality (Good Country Index, 2020), are not only mobilised in the external brand communications of each Nordic country but also constitutive elements of a recurring and self-reinforcing normative mantra (e.g. in the Nordic Council’s Nordic Talks, podcasts) and practice (Danbolt, 2016; Nordic Council 2019).

Helliwell’s observation also applies to Nordic place branding and tourism scholarship, spearheaded by stable pan-Nordic institutional platforms such as the NORTHORS-network and symposia (that many Nordic scholars fondly refer to as “the [academic] family gathering”); and, without doubt, the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality & Tourism (SJHT). In the past 20 years, this supportive and convivial environment has played a key role to develop and consolidate Nordic place branding as a field of innovative academic research and practice. Rather than just delving into the geographical frames of best practice case studies, Nordic place branding scholars have embraced Nordicity as an ideological and socio-cultural construct. Conducting research in and about the Nordic region requires a distinct mindset that shapes place branding concepts, strategies and research tactics. This mindset has been defined as a hybrid approach : *the Nordic wave* (Cassinger, Lucarelli & Gyimóthy, 2019), which not only bridges across managerial and critical schools of place branding, but also defines a close engagement with place branding practice and practitioners.

This brief commentary outlines the contours of the Nordic wave, starting by establishing the current state of place branding research in a Nordic context and highlighting seminal contributions curated by SJHT. Second, the paper discusses the scholarly relevance of Nordic place branding research and positions Nordic place branding research on the global scene as a synthesis of managerial and critical schools. By means of conclusions, four specific implication areas are identified along with future directions for research.

Current state of the art of place branding research with distinct Nordic contributions

Place branding as an independent theoretical concept and research subject was first coined in the late 1990s, despite political and intercultural practice has for long engaged in geostrategic communication practices. As Campelo (Campelo 2015; 2017) notes, national propaganda and reputation management activities have existed since the 18th century, and country-of-origin labels were heavily used to promote national products on an increasingly global, post-world-war market. Nevertheless, it was first in 1999 that the conceptual label of *place branding* was introduced with as a value-enhancing strategy on international markets (Roulac, 1999). After the turn of the millennium, planning and tourism scholars widely adopted the notion of branding places as a competitive device, and maintained that places (destinations, cities, and regions) could be promoted and managed in similar ways to commodities and corporations.

The past 20 years saw an explosive growth of descriptive and diagnostic studies on the management of place brands and brand image (growing from mere 36 to over 22.000 published papers between 2000-2020). Two journals have been in the forefront of the field: *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (since 2004) and *Journal of Place Management and Development* (since 2008), both targeting academic-practitioners as well as scholars from diverse disciplines and fields (history, political science, intercultural communication, tourism, media studies, marketing and market communications). The bulk of these contributions can be affiliated with a top-down managerial approach to place branding, which is grounded in the planning and design traditions of strategic management. From this perspective, the politics of place branding is understood as a neoliberal form of governance (e.g. Eshuis & Klijn, 2012), which is fundamentally at odds with the institutional configurations of the Nordic region given its historical emphasis on welfare policies and social democracy (see Lucarelli, 2015). Simply put, the initial (theoretical) map did not fit well the Nordic empirical landscape of branding practices.

In order to settle this ontological controversy, Nordic place branding scholarship has distinguished itself along critical and often provocative pieces and were the first to emphasise the importance of a stakeholder-oriented, networked approach. From the beginning of the 00s, the *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* gave priority to such seminal papers challenging mainstream thinking or offering novel terminologies. Many of these have subsequently become state-of-the-art concepts and approaches, widely used by place branding scholars outside the Nordic region – for instance the distinction between *politics and poetics* of branding campaigns (Ooi, 2004) or the scalar notions of *place brand umbrellas* (Therkelsen & Halkier 2006) and *supranational brands* (Therkelsen & Gram, 2010). Among the early contributions, several deal with the the social complexity and multiplicity of place and destination branding campaigns (Ooi, 2004; Mossberg & Getz, 2006). Instead of streamlined and universal messages, Nordic scholars have been the first to argue for the necessity of a culturally differentiated market communication (Therkelsen, 2003) against the erroneous imperative of a single, one-size-fits-all brand image (Blichfeldt & Ren, 2011). Rather than simply exploring the essential character of geospecific brands or phenomena, Nordic place branding scholars put specific emphasis on the institutional and policy context of place branding. The enduring focus on networked and participatory approaches to place branding (e.g., Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Lucarelli & Broström, 2013; Cassinger & Eksell, 2017), paved the way to inspire scholars and practitioners to engage resident communities as active co-creators of place brands (Kavaratzis et al. 2017).

Apart from pushing the theoretical and conceptual horizons of place branding, Nordic scholars have also devised innovative, participatory methods to engage and work with diverse stakeholders. Prestholdt

and Nordbø (2014) have, for instance employed Visitor-Employed Photography, while Waade et al. (2019) worked with provotyping, which essentially launched architectural design interventions in public spaces to change the atmosphere of a small Danish fishing community. Furthermore, contrasted to a largely apolitical place branding scholarship, Nordic scholars have also touched upon sensitive issues and topical societal challenges in their empirical projects. This may include climate change and the vulnerability of snow-dependent place brands (Hall, 2008; Hall, 2014), silenced indigeneous voices and the cultural appropriation of Sámi heritage in high-latitude destination promotion (Cassel, 2019; Ren et al. this volume) or the intersection between place branding and feminist foreign policy (Cassinger, 2019). Taken together, these unique perspectives have contributed to the opening of a new and distinct approach, *The Nordic Wave* within place branding scholarship (Cassinger, Lucarelli & Gyimóthy, 2019).

The Future of Nordic Place Branding in International Tourism Research: The Nordic Wave

What does it mean to research place branding in a Nordic fashion? To what extent can we talk about a Nordic research approach and mindset? In this section we outline a Nordic approach to place branding and explain what this type of research entails. Contrasting its key tenets and characteristics with those of existing approaches, the Nordic wave is positioned between the management and critical approaches of international place branding research. The Nordic approach charted in Table 1. represents a relational mindset of place branding, connecting not only academics and practitioners, but also a wide array of stakeholders (e.g. visitors, politicians, media, citizens, as well as Nordic and non-Nordic audiences) that are involved in place branding processes in the Nordic region and beyond. Overall, the Nordic type of scholarship, research design, stakeholder interaction, and collaboration, collectively lend themselves to a distillation of those unique features which characterize the Nordic place branding approach. It is transdisciplinary, problem-driven, interventionist, process-oriented, inclusive, participatory and long-term focused at once.

	Management approach	Critical approach	Nordic wave
Conceptualisation	Multi-disciplinary Instrumentalist Essentialist ontology Concept-driven	Interdisciplinary Deconstructionist Determinist ontology Issue-driven	Transdisciplinary Constructionist Relational ontology Problem-driven
Methodological approach	Critical realist Post-positivist	Critical postmodernist	Interventionist (engaged scholarship, participatory)
Scale and scope of research	Mono-dimensional Compartmentalised Colonialist	Two-dimensional Relativist Post-colonialist	Multi-dimensional Process-based De-colonialist
Knowledge objective	Technical Functionalist	Emancipatory Agnostic	Therapeutic Diagnostic
Ideological orientation	Market-driven capitalism Growth	Anti-capitalist Inclusive	Sustainability Social welfare
Place branding metaphor	Heterotopia	Dystopia	Utopia

Table 1. The Nordic wave in place branding research (adopted from Cassinger, Lucarelli, & Gyimóthy, 2019: 238)

Following from the above, the Nordic is here understood in broad terms as an imaginary, idea, ideological orientation, and myth, as well as a regional space in relation to which theories, concepts, and practices of place branding emerge and develop (cf. Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). On the basis of this understanding, we may identify five implications of the Nordic approach, as it has been presented in the commentary thus far, for international place branding research. These distinct features allow the Nordic wave in place branding to travel in different geo-political and scholarly directions, and by manner of cross-pollination, expand place branding research and practices on an international scale.

First, the Nordic approach implies that when analysed in relation to Nordic policies and concepts, place branding should be conceived as *detrterritorialized* by way of being connected to local cultures and imaginaries (e.g. Sapmi, Swedish feminist foreign policy, Danish hygge, etc.), which are not fully attached to specific regional, national, and state boundaries. Second, it follows that the Nordic is a *floating signifier* that are filled with meaning by being circulated in global flows of ideas and practices that set the conditions and boundaries for the construction and diffusion of imaginary communalities, such as, for instance, the Nordic lifestyle, Nordic sustainability, or Nordic Cuisine. The third implication is related to the *ethical imperatives of Nordic scholarship* and how it is, or ought to be, performed to address grand societal challenges. Nordic scholarship is defined by a high awareness of the consequences of research for local communities and being cautious of narratives which present the Nordic as a dominant role model to be imitated in other parts of the world (e.g. equality, egalitarianism, innovation). We may think of this as a particular *translocal responsibility* in terms of how researchers, embedded in Nordic political and societal contexts, attempt to engage with the so-called third mission of academics. This responsibility entails a dialogic and translocal engagement (i.e. consulting, advising, debating, partaking) with practitioners in different spatial settings, encouraging their various and sometimes alternative practices to be brought together and shared, which is not common in other, for example, the Anglo-Saxon context.

Fourth, the translocal responsibility of the Nordic research approach also implies that researchers and practitioners have an increased *geopolitical sensitivity* to the symbolic and cultural significance of place branding when converging with geopolitical interest, at least when it comes to attempts to build grand-narratives about the Nordic reputation and prestige. It is important to underscore that even though the Nordic approach is often considered as a benign utopian geopolitical orientation, it is subject to continuous reconstruction through narration and negotiation. Finally, the fifth implication refers to the general *risk of stereotyping* the Nordic region in terms of its symbolic features and mythical qualities, typically characterised by welfare, social equality and peace. These mythical qualities are used in the international branding strategy of the Nordic region, and can also be traced to promotional activities of individual countries and cities within the region. The Nordic model reminds us of that brands mediate places both as a moral orientations and a markets to invest in (Aronczyk, 2009). At the same time, striving to serve as a humanitarian example for others to follow, promoting equality and welfare models, is not without problems. Such claims may also come with an implicit self-esteem of moral superiority associated with exclusion, struggle, and intolerance.

Future place branding scholarship, in the Nordic context and elsewhere, will have to address and engage with emerging territorial conflicts between places that ‘do not matter’ vs. those shining places that do, whilst simultaneously navigating backdrops of social polarisation, rising populism and other associated reactionary and progressive movements in the political landscape. The hybridity of the Nordic scholarly

approach, as it has been presented in this paper, reveals the potential of expanding place branding research and practice to deal with such issues globally.

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