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DESTINATION BRANDING: CENTRAL FINLAND AS THE SAUNA REGION OF THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

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With boundaries for travelling disappearing, tourist destinations compete more than ever for their market share. In order for a destination to attract tourists, it has to position itself successfully among others by building a strong brand. On the way of understanding processes around branding, this study attempted at answering what constituted the core of a destination brand.

In the first chapter of the study, a thorough analysis of the previous research in the field of tourism identified image as the core concept of the destination brand. Further investigation of the image formation and management processes presented an image-based framework for destination branding.

The second section of the thesis examined a case of the Sauna Region brand. By describing the major decision making bodies and operations, this chapter offered an outline of the regional development project in all its complexity. The analysis also questioned whether induced by marketing operations and activities sauna images resonated with the organic images prevailing among representatives of two target audiences, namely tourist agents from Germany and Japan.

The findings of the qualitative research among German and Japanese tourist operators comprised a set of practical implications around the image-based brand formation process of the Sauna Region.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Emerging from corporate definition, branding has become a much discussed concept in tourism studies (Hall 1999; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Morgan et al. 2002; Morgan et al. 2003; Morgan et al. 2011; Framke 2002). Yet characteristic of tourism features, such as continuous dynamics within the practices and fast pace of scholarly development, have created a number of different interpretations around the concept of destination branding.

Among the variety of interpretations, there is a large pool of scholarly work (Blain et al. 2005; Stern et al 2001; Gutierrez 2005; Kapferer 2012) which defines consolidated associations, or images, as the most prominent constituents of destination brand framework. Such understanding of the concept manages to reflect well multiple stakeholder angles: tourists (demand-side) and tourist organisations or destinations (supply-side); and thus, seems to be the most appropriate framework for the destination brand analysis.

Having established the core of destination brand in the first chapter of this work, the study continues with in-depth analysis of how image is formed and managed, and how destination brand relies on a set of favourable images. Supported with several models, the image formation and management processes give the basis for further testing of the framework on the practical level.

The second chapter introduces a practical case for this study – a regional tourist development project from Central Finland and its operations towards creating Sauna Region destination brand. To present the complexity of regional tourism development in Finland, a thorough description of decision making bodies and structures (e.g. Stopover Central Finland project) is given in the chapter.

Despite the fact that the currently running Stopover Central Finland project has initiated a large number of marketing operations on the way of creating the Sauna Region brand, it remains unclear whether projected by those efforts images resonate with the target audiences. To fill this gap, the present research conducts a number of interviews among tourist operators selected by the project to see how

the core notion of the Sauna Region brand – sauna – is interpreted by German and Japanese tour operators, which favourable images are retrieved from discussions around sauna and how these images can be incorporated into the process of building Sauna Region as the regional destination brand.

1.1 Aim of the Thesis

To give the basis for all the above described steps of the research, it is important to anchor the study to the main research question and objectives of this work. On the way of understanding the conceptual scope of brand within the field of tourism, this study attempts at answering the following research question: what constitutes the core of destination brand.

In line with this, the empirical section of the study aims at defining how image-based destination branding framework specified through theoretical analysis can be applied to the case of Central Finland regional development and its Sauna Region brand.

By defining on a more detailed level the importance of the favourable images related to a product/ notion, the empirical research continues with establishing a set of favourable sauna images, which both differ and recur among the representatives of the selected target countries.

As the final step, this study approaches an issue of branding from a more holistic perspective and introduces a model of destination branding which evolves around the concept of image. Each step of the model is described in more detail with instances of how certain steps of the branding process can be adjusted to resonate with the target audiences.

2   DESTINATION BRANDING AS A CONCEPT

Being a comparatively new area in tourism research, destination branding is in the process of its evolution from generic product and company branding to a more complex conceptual framework including multiple image-related notions and processes, such as image formation, image management, projection of the image and publicity management (Saraniemi 2009, 17).

The ongoing dynamics of the tourism as an industry emphasize the fact that whichever tourism concept is taken into consideration it has a fast pace of development, both in research and in practical execution (Saarinen 2004). In addition to this specific nature of tourism, for the past decade there has been a more concise work done analysing tourist destinations and concepts around them, such as branding (Morgan et al. 2003; Morgan et al. 2011; Framke 2002).

Despite the prior scholarly work on destination branding (Hall 1999; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Morgan et al. 2002), understanding the image influence on the perceived value of a destination has been much overlooked. The research of destination branding has primarily concentrated on branding through visitors' experience (Ryan 2002; Blain et al 2005; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), and quite a few definitions of destination branding encompassed symbolic representations of a destination, which would identify and differentiate the place.

The classic definition of a brand, however, brings into focus value adding associations created in the mind of product/ service consumers (Kapferer 2012, 11), which are very much affected by images both produced and organically received. Following this definition, there is a need to trace how much images constitute branding as a concept within the scope of tourism.

2.1   Definition of Destination Branding

Brand of a destination is as important as a brand of a product. The importance of destination branding, however, has been much more rapidly growing due to technological changes and globalisation, which have forced tourist destinations to

compete more actively for customers (Saarinen 2004) than generic product branding, which has simply shifted towards a more holistic view incorporating values, unique promise and a sense of community (Kapferer 2012).

Despite the fact that destination branding is much related to, or based on, the ideas within corporate branding, the subject matter of a tourist destination adds own specific elements into the conceptual framework of a brand. Depending on the perspective, destination branding has been approached as either 1) marketing activities creating a name, symbol, logo or any other graphic element of a destination, 2) travel experiences which are associated with a particular destination, or 3) consolidated associations and images related to a specific destination (Blain et al. 2005).

Although all the perspectives have research support (Ritchie and Ritchie 1998; Ritchie and Crouch 2003; Saraniemi 2009), the latter approach to destination branding can be analysed as the final outcome of the first two perspectives. This means that destination branding can be understood as a set of associations and images related to a specific destination which are enhanced by marketing activities and travel experiences.

This definition reflects the fact that the choice of a travel destination has much more than a convenience and leisure aspect, but rather a symbolic association representing own preferences (Saraniemi 2009). In other words, while selecting a destination to travel to, one is guided by the image a traveller wants to reinforce in own mind and be associated with.

Having defined destination branding, it is important to trace how different scales of spaces, such as regions, influence understanding of this concept. The following sub-chapter defines in more detail region as a tourist destination and looks into its specific characteristics.

2.2 Tourist Destination: The Perspective on a Single Region in Finland

Similarly to the concept of branding, the concept of a tourist destination has been defined in different ways ranging from a place that receives visitors (Gåslason 2012), any place of interest to tourists (Howie 2003), a well-defined area which offers various services to tourists (Vanhove 2012) to a geographical space with a cluster of tourist resources (attractions, infrastructure, services) (Pike 2008, 24) and even a unit of action where interaction between a large group of different stakeholders and visitors and creation of experiences take place (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

Differences in definitions show that the term tourist destination can be approached on multiple levels: as geographically defined areas, as interaction based units, and as cultural spaces. Saraniemi (2009) argues, however, that in respect to tourist destinations the basis should be set not on the scales of spaces (whether it is one hotel or a country) but rather on the uniformity of created experiences and images.

On the other hand, while looking at tourism development in Finland, regions have been traditionally promoted as geographically restricted areas with Visit Lapland being the most prominent example (Visit Finland 2017). An explanation for this lies in the fact that regional tourism development is often a matter of financing structures provided by regional councils or regional development organisations (Suomen matkailustrategia 2020) and consequent limitations of the geographical area.

Following these two points, the most optimal identification of a region as a tourist destination in Finland should include notions of geographically restricted area and unity of operations and images created by regional companies, organisations, resorts and other stakeholders within that area.

Whereas the geographical aspect of the definition is clear cut, the notion of image has rather complex interpretations, regardless of the fact that this issue has been researched in tourism for the past four decades (Rajesh 2013). It is also a quintes-

sential point of the destination branding, and shall be discussed in more detail in the following sub-chapter.

2.3   Image-related Conceptual Framework of the Destination Branding

Based on the earlier provided definition of the brand as a composition of associations and images related to a specific tourist destination this sub-chapter analyses in more detail the conceptual framework of the destination branding with regard to image and image building processes.

Depending on which aspect of image is analysed, it has been affiliated with multiple notions. In tourism research, image has been often related purely to destination marketing operations (Nedelea et al. 2016) as both perceived and projected representations of a destination (Stern et al 2001; Gutiérrez 2005).

In traditional sense, image has been defined as some static component of a mental representation (Baloglu and McCleary 1999), which is analysed either from the recipient's perspective or from the producer's angle.   In some of the earliest research, the definition concludes that image, as a sum of beliefs and perceptions about a destination, is created over the time from various sources, and that it can either reflect reality or imagination (Barich and Kotler 1991).

Despite the variety of definitions there are several underlying notions, which coincide in the scholarly literature about destination image – impressions and perceptions (Jenkins 1999; Tapachai and Waryszak 2001; Pike 2002; Kim and Richardson 2003). These notions reflect the nature of a destination image which, as Rajesh (2013) explains referring to the work by Gunn (1972), is a composition of two elements – organic and induced.

Whereas organic images are created in the minds of visitors through previous experiences and through application of own value system, induced images are projected onto visitors through advertising campaigns. The overall image is then created based on all the processed information and prior knowledge.

Another image creation model proposed by Tasci and Gartner (2007) elaborates the elements of the destination image by looking at the sources of image creation: from the destination itself (supply-side), from independent or autonomous sources (e.g. news agencies) and from image receivers (demand-side). This model suggests that organic element is created in two different ways with the autonomous sources having a considerable power at the initial stage of image formation prior to the trip (Saraniemi 2009, 29).

This model sets the foundation for identifying which processes are crucial in the destination image building framework: image projection (supply-side) and image reception (demand-side). In addition to that, as Balmer and Greyser (2003) state, images as concepts require managing even if it is challenging due to the fact that destination images may vary depending on which stakeholder perspective is taken into account.

Having touched upon the image building framework, it is necessary to distinguish which processes take place within this framework. Adopted from Saraniemi (2009) model incorporates earlier conducted research in this field and can serve as a good basis for analysing image-related destination branding processes. According to this model, destination image, or destination brand, undergoes image formation activities, image management, projection operations and publicity management. Each of these practices is described in more detail below.

2.3.1 Image Building vs Image Formation

Similarly to the concept of image, image building has received a number of different interpretations. In a traditional sense, image studies have concentrated on the relationship between image and behaviour and the effect of stimulus factors on tourists' perceptions (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). Only recently have researchers approached the process of image building from the perspective of decision making organisations (e.g. government, tourist boards, agents), or DMOs, and their activities on the way of enhancing positive images of tourist destinations (Tasci and Gartner 2007).

By approaching tourist destination images from the perspective of DMOs, a number of studies (Tasci and Gartner 2007; Li and Petrick 2008) have established a largely accepted framework which divides the process of image creation into activities performed by supply-side (destinations) and demand-side (tourists or other stakeholders).

While both sides have to interact actively in order for a destination image to be created, Saraniemi (2009) argues that supply-side activities shall be labelled as 'image building' and demand-side activities as 'image formation'.

Whereas the image building process belongs to the field of psychology, the notion of image formation is rather well-established in the tourism studies. As early as in 1970's Gunn (1972) suggested that the formation of images is based on the outputs of the organic images and induced images which, as Lopes (2011) points out, are created in people's minds even without travelling to the destination.

As it is described in Gunn's (1972) work, induced images are formed by promotional materials, campaigns and other external to the tourist variables and the organic images are created by a range of very personal variables, in particular prior experiences.

By incorporating destinations and tourists into one process, Gunn's research angle overruns earlier described supply- vs demand-side ideas, and becomes a focal one in this study. At the same time the term of *image formation* suggested in his research became an essential one in understanding destination image creation.

2.3.2 Image Formation Variables

Having set image formation as a core concept in the image creation framework, it is important to see in more detail what comprises destination image. Following the discussion in the previous sub-chapter, destination image is formed when induced images and organic images are intertwined. Whereas induced images – images produced by campaigns, promotional materials, events – are a considerably simple to understand composition, organic images are of a more complex nature.

While Gunn's (1972) research sets the core understanding of organic images – prior experience, Lopes (2011) emphasizes that individual value systems have the major influence on which image is created about a specific destination by every single person. This makes the process of organic image formation a rather individual matter, which is reflected through personal value systems.

In addition to this, Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that age, race and previous experiences affect the image formation process to a large extent. Govers, Go and Kumar (2007) continue by suggesting that tourist's personality traits influence not only tourist destination choices but also image formation.

As these variables do not contradict each other but rather complement each other, the image formation model needs to include all of them to give a full representation of the variables. A visual mapping of the major image formation variables can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Major image formation variables.
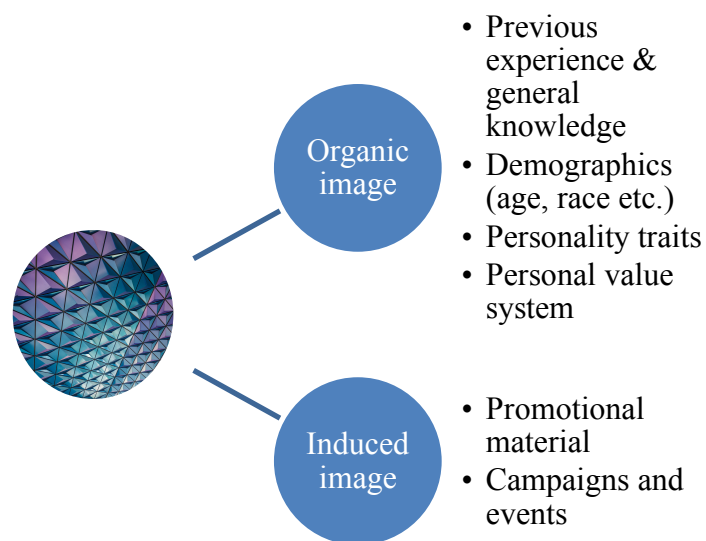
Such a representation of a destination image variables shows that image formation is a continuously evolving process between tourist bodies and potential tourists, or between supply- and demand-side. Once this interaction is taken into consideration, image as a notion becomes more transparent, and thus, it becomes more evident which specific elements of its composition can be managed.

2.3.3 Image Management

Having established comprising elements of a destination image, this work goes onto analysing how destination image can be managed by organisations responsible for tourism development. The major question with this crucial destination branding process is how activities aiming at creation of induced images can be performed in the way that would result in projection of a favourable image.

Despite the fact that destination image management has been approached both in literature and in practical application (Howard 1998; Day, Skidmore and Koller 2002; Croy 2010), the process itself has been largely vague depending on the stakeholders' perspective. Moreover, Balmer and Greyser (2003) argue that destination image cannot be controlled or managed because its comprising elements lie beyond the scope of strategic planning and decision making.

Regardless of these arguments in research, destination image management in practice has been seen as an important part of the destination branding. While certain elements of the image are indeed rather complex to be managed (e.g. organic images), the other ones, i.e. induced images, are very much dependent on the work done by DMOs.

Having specified that, in this work it is essential to account with the fact that images are not static and are rather susceptible to messages from different external to destinations sources. This idea once again indicates that destination images have to be continuously managed.

With regard to these specifications, Barich and Kotler (1991) developed a four-stage management process. All the steps of the process are interdependent and constitute a continuous flow rather than a one-time management operation. The process is illustrated in Figure 2.
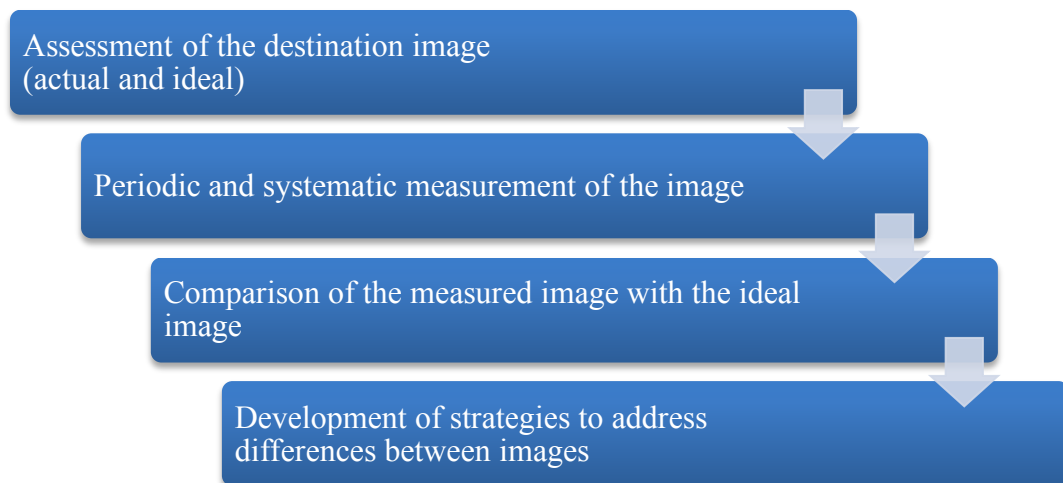
Figure 2. Four-stage image management process by Barich and Kotler (1991).

In this model, assessment of the destination image is the starting point. It entails two parts: assessment of the actual image, which can be performed through analysis of the results of surveys among tourists/ potential tourists and other stakeholders; and assessment of the ideal to the target market image. Once the assessment is done, the image has to be systematically measured over the period of time as the second step of the model.

The third step of the process includes comparison between the measured image and the ideal image and finding the discrepancies between the two. Strategic planning of operations, which would address the differences, follows as the fourth step of the image management process.

The outcome of this model is a set of strategic operations which would lead towards an ideal destination image. According to Saraniemi (2009), these strategic operations can be grouped into activities focusing on the projection of the image (promotional materials and campaigns) and publicity management through cooperation with the mass media. These destination image processes will be described in the following sub-chapters.

2.3.4 Projection of the Image

Projection of a destination image is yet another important element of the destination branding process. Similarly to other concepts, projection of the image has varied from a merely photographic representation of a destination (Garlick 2002) to narratives aiming at reshaping destination images (Moilanen and Rainisto 2008). All the interpretations have, however, the same juxtaposing elements – authentic representation vs fantasy (Holbrook 2000).

While projecting an image, DMOs have to seek the balance between representations which emphasize authentic experiences, widely addressed in tourism discourse, and representations which correspond with tourists' expectations or fantasies towards a destination (e.g. Northern Lights in Lapland appearing all year round).

In destination image projection, 'authenticity' has been among the predominant issues (Govers and Go 2005). Being quite a controversial notion on itself, authenticity in tourism has created a certain tension between the desire of projecting authentic images of a place and the need of accommodating experiences for consumption by tourists. Thus, tourist products have to both serve as commodities, which are easily sold to international consumers, and as national/ local identity projections, which would emphasize differentiation and uniqueness (Holbrook 2000).

Another sensitive issue appears in the process of image projection not corresponding to the tourists' expectations. While resulting in negative experiences, this clash of projection and expectations has to be carefully analysed by DMOs in order to assess which specific elements of the image do not correspond and whether they can be altered or whether image projecting messages can be restructured to accommodate these differences.

To summarise these ideas, a modified from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) model of the image projection and its major issues can be seen in Figure 3.
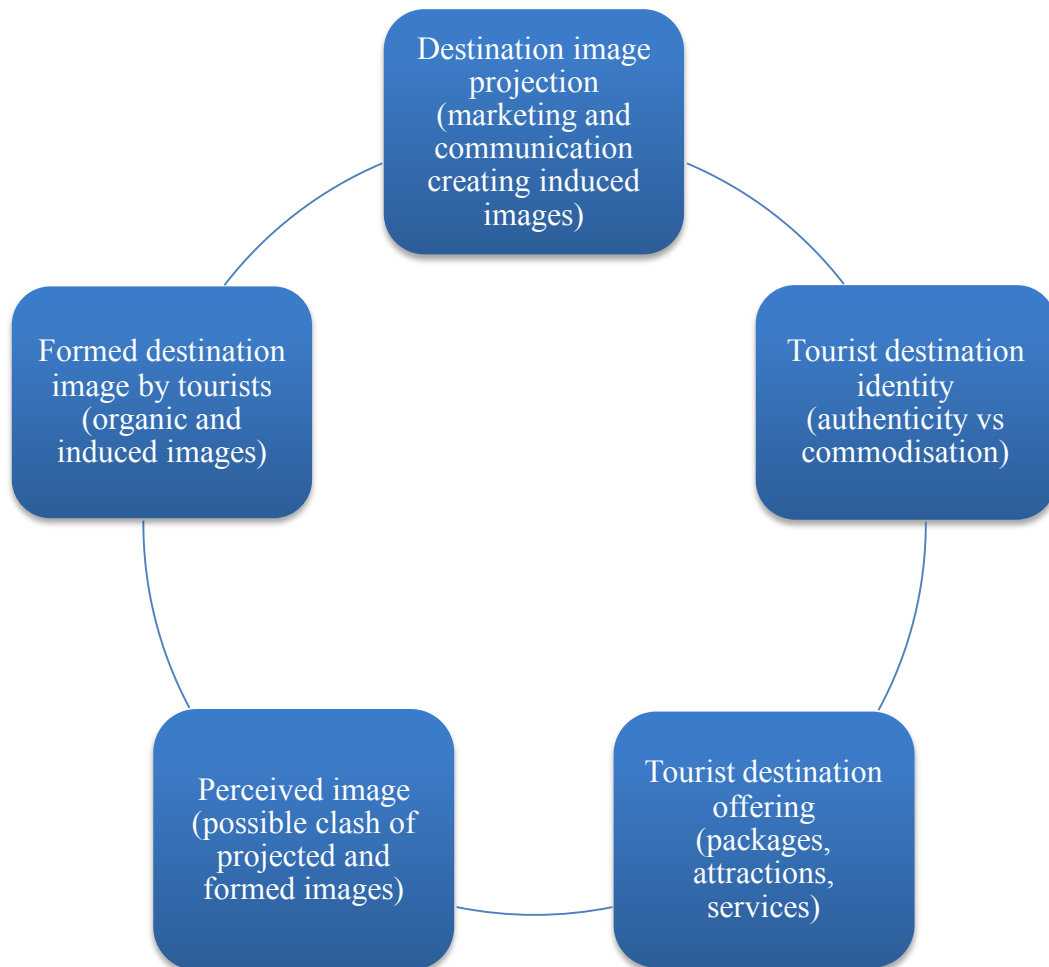
Figure 3. Image projection process (modified from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985).

Whereas destination image projection is solely managed by DMOs, management of images formed by the mass media sources is a much more intricate process, which needs separate attention. This is also the final process of the suggested destination branding framework.

2.3.5   Publicity Management

Publicity, as a part of the larger communication and marketing concept of Public Relations, can be identified as the way of conveying information to public through mass media (Lancaster and Witney 2007, 188-189). Its primary function, as Deuschl (2007) states, is to influence public opinion in a favourable way.

Although largely researched and applied in other business sectors, publicity in tourism has been a relatively new notion, and publicity management – a fairly new process in destination branding (Saraniemi 2009). It is, however, a very powerful method of forming organic images and has a large potential in the way destination images can be managed (Dore and Crouch 2003). While much of publicity is often unplanned, a number of programmes have been undertaken by various DMOs with great success and results overcoming in ROI (return-on-investment) other methods of destination marketing.

One of the best examples of the successful work over the time in publicity management is the popularity of Finnish Lapland as a tourist destination specifically among tourists from Asia (Saraniemi 2009). Over the past decade, having arranged a number of press tours, blog tours and media appearances, Lapland has received a 92% increase in the number of nights spent in the region by Chinese travellers within January-November 2016 (MaRa 2016). With the Asian tourist boom, Tourist Board of Finland in cooperation with DMOs in Lapland continues an extensive media work (Visit Finland 2017).

Among the most commonly used types of publicity management used in the presented above case are press releases, press tours, blog tours, video news releases, social media releases, radio features and press conferences (Visit Finland 2017). These methods are largely employed in the process of creating induced destination images, which along with organic ones, constitute the basis of the perceived destination image – a powerful source of knowledge for DMOs willing to build a favourable image and a strong brand.

3 SAUNA REGION OF THE WORLD AS A BRAND

In 2015, following the regional tourism strategy 2020 (Keski-Suomen matkailustrategia 2020) the Tourism Board of Central Finland decided to create a brand for the region. Among suggestions based on certain aspects of the regional tourism proposition, the Board accepted the idea of sauna as the focal point of the brand. In September 2015, Central Finland proclaimed itself the Sauna Region of the World (maailman saunamaakunta) (Visit Central Finland 2017).

The choice of the title and the direction in brand building were supported with a number of facts. Firstly, the world's largest smoke sauna is located in Central Finland (Tupaswilla 2017). Secondly, the region has a well-developed sauna industry with Harvia, Savotta, Saunasydän and other companies producing sauna-related items known worldwide. Thirdly, the only Sauna Village, which is an open-air museum with a large collection of saunas from different areas of Finland, is also located in this region. Finally, regional sauna and sauna-related tourist products are among the leading regional well-being products, as stated by Sauna from Finland (2017) and Visit Finland FinRelax programme (2017).

Even though sauna as a notion is often associated with Finland as such (Smith and Puczkó 2012), Central Finland has very valid reasons and facts which can differentiate the region from other regions in the country with the help of sauna. Yet to be able to position and differentiate itself as the Sauna Region, Central Finland requires not only time and finances but also unified operations to enhance desired image formation in the minds of potential visitors.

On the way of achieving this, the Tourism Board of Central Finland under the Central Finland Chamber of Commerce has initiated a two-year project (2016-2018), which through a number of defined operations will create a regional brand for Central Finland as the Sauna Region of the World (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

The principles behind the work and some of the major tourist activities performed by the Stopover Central Finland project in charge of boosting the Sauna Region brand are described in more detail in the following sub-chapters.

3.1   Regional Tourism Development Practices in Central Finland

To understand the complexity of regional tourism development in Central Finland, it is important to see which practices take place, under whose initiation and on which scale decisions are made.

In the development of the regional tourism two major bodies are involved: the Central Finland Regional Council (Keski-Suomen liitto) and the Tourism Board (Matkailuhallitus), which operates under the Central Finland Chamber of Commerce (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari). Whereas the Regional Council performs mainly the role of the financial body, the Tourism Board is responsible for strategic development and control of unified operations executed within development projects (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

The Tourism Board is composed of executive managers of regional tourist companies. Currently the Chairman of the Board is Mrs Tiina Mäntyharju, the Managing Director of Himoslomat Oy. In addition to the Chairman, there are eight members of the board and three specialists. The members of the Board all represent large tourist companies in Central Finland (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

The development of regional tourism is based on the long-term strategy, currently set until 2020, defined by tourist companies in cooperation with the Regional Council. Within the strategy there are several major goals, which have to be reached by 2020 (Keski-Suomen matkailustrategia 2020). In order to achieve these goals, the Board and the Regional Council have decided on the practical solutions, one of which is uniting own marketing efforts under development projects. Together with the Regional Council, the Board then decides on the financial structure of the projects.

In addition to the large-scale decisions, the strategy offers a framework for common operations in terms of rules and principles of work, responsibilities and the scope of work of each body. In this way, the Regional Council is responsible for overseeing all general development in the region, the Tourism Board is responsible for outlining main directions of the development and controlling the work of the development projects, and, finally, the development projects are responsible for decisions on a more practical level and execution of operations to reach the objectives set in the strategy.

Within the history of regional development, Central Finland has had two projects, namely one in 2014-2015 aiming at promoting the region to tourists from Russia, and the other one aiming at promoting the region to tourists coming from such Western European countries, as Germany, France, Austria, Belgium and the Netherland and Asia (Japan, China) under the brand of the Sauna Region of the World (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

The current Stopover Central Finland project has a set two-year marketing plan and specific numeric goals for marketing operations both online and offline. At the moment of planning this thesis, the project employed two persons: Mrs Päivi Heikkala, as the Project Manager, and I, Ms Anna Zaborna, as the Marketing Manager (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

Among the tasks of the Stopover Central Finland project, brand development of the region is of crucial importance. By continuously developing and strengthening this brand, the region can position itself and differentiate among other regions of Finland. This area of the project operations will be discussed in the next sub-chapter.

3.2 Sauna Region of the World: Setting Central Finland on the Map of Tourist Destinations

Sauna is one of the well-known Finnish innovations, which nonetheless has not been much promoted by Finnish tourist destinations towards foreign tourists (Smith and Puczkó 2012, 57). With over 2 million saunas in the country (This is

Finland 2017), sauna is a rather common place in Finland, and has, therefore, been overlooked as a unique tourist proposition.

In the beginning of 2000s this problem was acknowledged and a new organisation – Sauna from Finland ry – was established in 2010 in Jyväskylä, Central Finland (Smith and Puczkó 2012). With the main idea of popularising sauna around the world and developing sauna experiences among Finnish companies, Sauna from Finland has grown into a nation-wide association with over 100 members (Sauna from Finland 2017). Currently the main office of the association is located in Helsinki.

While establishment of Sauna from Finland did take place in the region of Central Finland, the actual work of the association has aimed at including companies from different business sectors (tourism, industry, technology) around Finland without building a specific sauna-related brand for one region. That is why, there was a need to emphasize the importance of sauna as a highly important tourist product and a basis for a new brand for Central Finland.

As described earlier, the current development project (2016-2018) has been in charge of developing sauna theme into a consistent regional image – regional brand. To achieve this, Stopover Central Finland together with a specially formed Sauna Work Group has been planning marketing activities, which would help to set Central Finland on the map of tourist destinations as the region with the best and most diverse sauna experiences.

Sauna Work Group consists of the Stopover Central Finland Project Manager, Tourist Coordinator from the Regional Council, several company executive and marketing managers and the Chairmen of Sauna from Finland. On a monthly basis, the group has meetings where major promotional activities are discussed and planned. This is also a platform for networking, since companies from different sectors may be invited to the meeting at any point when region-wide events are planned.

Alongside these meetings Stopover Central Finland arranges monthly meetings with the Marketing Group, which is comprised of marketing managers of the companies belonging to the project, and quarterly meetings with the Tourist Board of Central Finland. Whereas Sauna Group meetings focus on building the network of companies within sauna-related sectors, Tourist Board meetings focus on main directions in the project operations, and Marketing Group meetings contribute to the planning of specific marketing tasks and activities. The overall presentation of the structure and functions can be found in Figure 4.
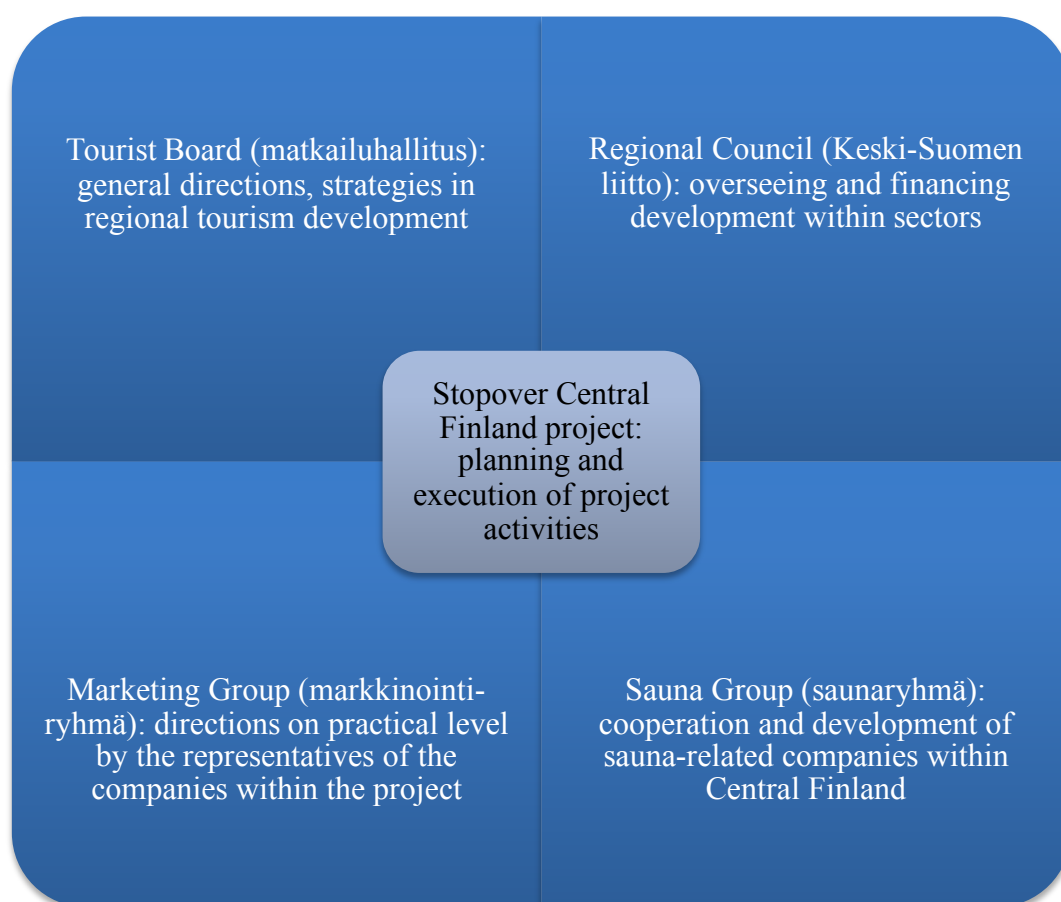

Figure 4. Central Finland regional tourism development: major bodies and responsibilities.

Having described the governing bodies, the structure and the responsibilities, it is important to present the main practices and activities performed by the Stopover Central Finland project in relation to the Sauna Region of the World brand. The

following sub-chapters give an overall presentation of operations and sauna specific initiatives which have been executed and planned within 2016-2018.

3.3 Sauna Region of the World: Overview of the Main Practices and Activities

All the practices of the current development project can be divided into three large categories: development of tourist products which would be appealing to both domestic and international tourists, development of marketing channels and establishment of a strong Sauna Region brand with the help of events and supporting tourist packages (Keski-Suomen kauppakamari 2017).

Development of the products is done through continuous work with the members of the project, at workshops arranged together with Visit Finland and other specialists in the field, and through initiatives which strengthen regional cooperation. This part of the operations includes also various sale runs and familiarity tours.

The second section of the project work aims at creating solid online presence for the region and regional companies. Within this part of the work websites www.visitcentralfinland.com and www.saunaregion.com were created in several languages. In addition to that, the project has established social media channels in Facebook, VKontakte, Instagram and YouTube.

Finally, the third part of the operations focuses on strengthening the Sauna Region brand by creating a unique week of events known as the Sauna Region Week (saunamaakuntaviikko). The pilot event took place in 2016 and received positive feedback. In July 2017, the second Sauna Region Week was arranged attracting a large audience of sauna enthusiasts.

3.3.1 Sauna Region Week

After the first event in 2016, Sauna Region Week 2017 was held in Central Finland on 1-9 July (Sauna Region 2017). The primary idea of the event is to give an opportunity for locals and guests alike to try different types of saunas, learn about locations and resorts in Central Finland which provide sauna services and sauna packages.

Besides the events, the Sauna Region Week arranged several challenges for everyone who enjoyed this essential to the Finnish culture place. Similarly to the previous year, Sauna Region Week 2017 began at the Iskelmä Music Festival at Himos and ended with the Sauna Heating World Championship, which took place at the Spa Hotel Peurunka.

While Finland has been known for various sauna competitions, the Sauna Heating World Championship is a totally new and unique event concept during which teams of 3-5 people compete for the title of the champion by heating up Savotta tent-sauna up to 80 C, and in finals – by assembling the tent-sauna and heating it up to 80 C within the fastest possible time.

Unlike the pilot year, Sauna Region Week 2017 had a larger scale with more companies participating and more events taking place during the week. By having enabled participation of various tourist operators and service providers, the project has created an event which not only strengthens the network of sauna-related companies but also showcases the variety of services and products to tourists. The detailed programme of the Sauna Region Week 2017 can be found on the website https://saunaregion.fi/programme/.

3.3.2   Tourist Packages

In addition to the Sauna Region Week, the project has been working on creation of tourist products, which would attract domestic and foreign tourists to Central Finland. Throughout a number of workshops in cooperation with Visit Finland and other industry experts, regional companies have developed diverse sauna packages, which combine multisensory experiences with Finnish sauna traditions and well-being trends.

This is an ongoing process, and the products can be refined through feedback and cooperation. Yet the first results of the work are visible at Visit Finland's portal MyStay, which features over 20 different well-being/ sauna packages from Central Finland (Visit Finland 2017). These packages range from a specific sauna

treatment to programmes which last several days and include accommodation, food and activities.

Four of the well-being packages have received a prestigious WinRelax award stating that the products correspond to the high level of requirements and offer authentic Finnish experiences through programmes, cuisine, use of natural products in treatments or even textiles (Jyväskylän kaupunki 2017).

Promotion of the packages is another important area of the work. This is primarily done through participation at sale runs in Europe and Asia, as well as organisation of familiarity tours for agents and tour operators from specific target markets. In addition to that, the packages are promoted through online channels and at various travel industry events.

Examples of the sauna packages provided by Central Finland resorts and hotels can be found on the website https://saunaregion.fi/experience/sauna-packages/. All the packages can be purchased by individual travellers/ groups of travellers as well as tour operators. In addition to the described services, each product can be adjusted to the customers' needs and requirements upon separate negotiations.

3.3.3   Online Marketing Operations

Partially described in the previous sub-chapters, online activities constitute an important part of the Stopover Central Finland project operations. Along with the newly created Central Finland tourist portal www.visitcentralfinland.com, which offers information in three languages (English, Finnish and Russian) about regional attractions, accommodation options, events and activities; one more sauna-related site www.saunaregion.com has been created. The later offers information about sauna traditions, terminology, etiquette and rules, as well as information about tourist packages and programmes which include sauna.

All the websites are managed by the project. This gives an opportunity to update and create content efficiently without outsourcing it to the third parties. In addition to the pages, there is a social media presence in Facebook in English and Russian, in Instagram in English, and in VKontakte in Russian. All these social

media channels are closely connected to the websites and serve as both traffic converting sources and communication channels with the target audiences.

Besides these operations, the project runs various social media, PPC (pay-per-click) campaigns in Google and Yandex. The results of the work are analysed and compared with the yearly targets. Additional smaller-scale action steps are taken in case if the targets differ from the set goals. Together with the offline operations, online activities present a large scope of actions which support each other on the way of establishing Sauna Region as the brand.

While all the operations and initiatives contribute to the brand creation, it is important to understand whether induced by marketing operations images resonate with tourists' organic images about sauna, or the Sauna Region for that matter.

In order to create a coherent image or a brand, it is crucial for Sauna Region to work closely with associations organically created in the minds of the tourists and focus on maximising favourable images identified in the pool of the imagery perceptions related to sauna.

To gain knowledge about sauna-related organic images, this work conducts a qualitative research among representatives of tourist operators from two countries selected by the Stopover Central Finland project. The data collection methods and a thorough analysis of the results are described in the following chapter.

4   DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As identified in the previous chapter of this work, tourist destination branding has its basis in the favourable image formation. This means that associations, which have a positive connotation around a specific place have to be reinforced and nurtured through diverse marketing practices. To understand whether any activities around a brand will resonate with the target markets, it is important to distinguish which specific associations exist around tourist concepts.

To gather information on the images related to the concepts of "sauna" in the context of tourism in Finland, a qualitative method in the form of interviews is selected as the data collection method. A more detailed description of the data collection process follows in the sub-chapter 4.2.

All the results of the interviews are systematically analysed and grouped based on whether they have positive, neutral or negative connotation. In addition to that, all the images are analysed in the context of cultural differentiation, i.e. whether or not they are common to all the tour operator representatives or significantly different for the agents based in two different countries.

A set of positive associations is selected as the final stage of the empirical study. This set of images will give the basis for the practical implications of the study which serve as a recommendation to the Stopover Central Finland project.

4.1   Data Collection

A total set of eight (8) conversational interviews was conducted with the representatives of six (6) German and two (2) Japanese tour operators (Appendix 2.). The contact details of the operators were provided by the Stopover Central Finland project based on previously agreed scope of this research. Fifteen minute interviews were standardised and required open-ended responses. The interviews were conducted through Skype or on the phone. Prior to the interviews all the interviewees had been contacted by email and provided the structure of the inter-

view. In addition to that, the interviewees were asked to briefly answer the questions in written.

Altogether there were twelve (12) questions (Appendix 1.) which were divided into three groups: basic information questions, such as whether or not respondents had previously travelled to Finland, whether or not the agency offered any tourist packages to Finland at the moment of the interview taking place. The second group of questions related to the country-level images. The purpose of these questions was to see how strong the notion of sauna was tied to Finland and whether it appeared in the TOP 3 answers on the country-level.

The third and the final group of questions explored images connected to sauna. These questions focused on associations (positive, neutral or negative) and whether these associations would be appealing to the agents' target customers.

4.2   Methods of Analysis

All the interviews were systematically analysed with the focus on images related to sauna. The analysis was divided into two phases. At the first phase the images/ associations were grouped into positive, neutral and negative based on responses given by the interviewees to a specific question.

The second phase focused on recurring and new types of images. In other words, the images were analysed on the frequency of them being used in the responses. Finally, all the images given by the German agency respondents were compared with the answers given by the Japanese agency respondents to trace whether or not there were any differences in the recurring images. Although the data collected might not be sufficient enough to give strong recurring messages, it was still relevant to see whether or not responses differed based on the country the agents represented.

At the final stage of the analysis a set of positive recurring images was selected to provide the basis for the destination branding of the Sauna Region. A number of practical applications are later suggested in the last chapter of this work.

4.3 Reliability and Validity of the Research

As the research is based on the qualitative method, the major indicators of reliability and validity are trustworthiness and quality (Golafshani 2003, 604). From the perspective of trustworthiness, it is important to see whether the data can be revisited at any point of the research. In order to achieve this, data collection process included several stages: contact with the agencies via e-mail with a list of the interview questions and oral interviews via Skype or phone. During the initial contact via email all the interviewees were asked to give brief written answers to the questions.

Having answered the questions, the interviewees had a clear idea of the overall structure of the interview. In addition to that, this method of data collection eliminated any possible accent-based ambiguity of the answers during the phone/ Skype interviews. Due to the fact that all the interviewees provided answers in written, actual interviews were not recorded for any further transcriptions.

Written answers also provided validity of the data collection, since they served as respondents' validation of the data. In addition to this, to achieve objectivity of the research, all the steps of the research were discussed with the Project Manager of the Stopover Central Finland project, who agreed on overseeing the process of data collection and approved the list of questions.

5 RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

This section of the study focuses on the results of the interviews and gives analytical framework to the images related to the sauna. Prior to the specific categorisation of the images, which is described in more detail in the following sub-chapter, it is important to note several observations related to the respondents and interview answers.

Firstly, all the eight respondents had previously visited Finland several times. This means that none of the respondents based their answers purely on external information and not personal experiences. Among the most common places of visit were Helsinki and different towns in Lapland (Saariselkä and Rovaniemi).

Secondly, all the respondents named sauna among the TOP 3 country-level images. There are, however, certain cultural discrepancies in descriptions around the sauna, which will be explained in sub-chapter 5.2.

Finally, all the respondents emphasized that the given images would attract their target groups, which included elderly people, young couples and families with kids. This final point is an essentially interesting one due to the fact that sauna as a concept is associated with very different groups in terms of demographical variables. In the case of tourist destinations this is seen as a very positive matter indicating broad spectrum of target audiences.

5.1 Sauna-related Images

Associations retrieved from the interviews and related to sauna have a variety of notions. A summarised list of associations together with the distinction between positive, neutral and negative connotations is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Complete list of sauna images.

	Association	Positive	Neutral	Negative
1	Snow	+		
2	Lake/ sea	+		
3	Mild wind	+		
4	Silence	+		
5	Detox	+		
6	Hot springs site in Japan	+		
7	Health	+		
8	Relaxation	+		
9	Relaxed	+		
10	Refreshing	+		
11	Slow	+		
12	Mindfulness	+		
13	Healthy	+		
14	Good for city people	+		

As the the results show, all the images were perceived by the respondents as the positive ones. During the process of interviewing not a single association was given in a negative light. This offers an interesting insight into the fact that sauna as a concept bears only positive connotations, and thus, it can be a strong marketing point for tourist destinations.

Among the recurring images there are three notions which were used by several respondents: relaxation (three respondents), silence (four respondents) and health (two respondents). This implicates that sauna is perceived strongly as a place to restore own body and soul and that has a healing power.

In response to the question of whether any specific season is connected to the sauna, the respondents separated into three groups. The prevailing majority of the respondents associated sauna with summer (and lakes). The second group of the interviewees related sauna to winter only, and the third group of the respondents had no seasonal preferences in the associations. This shows that unlike certain tourist products that have a tight correlation with a season (e.g. winter sports, husky rides), sauna can be marketed as an all-year round product.

These implications retrieved from the images in the analysis will be explained further in chapter 6, which explains how the results of the study can be applied practically in the Sauna Region destination branding.

5.2   Unifying Themes and Cultural Discrepancies

While conducting interviews with representatives from two rather distant nations – Japanese and German – it was important to see if sauna would be associated with different images based on cultural differences. Despite the fact that a comparative study would require a much broader scope of responses, it is still possible to trace some cultural discrepancies and some unifying themes.

Prior to describing cultural discrepancies, this sub-chapter explains several commonly noted points or unifying themes. First of all, all the respondents referred to sauna in the TOP 3 country-level images question. This shows that this is a notion which has a very strong tie to the image of the country as a tourist destination. Secondly, all the respondents claimed that the images had a positive connotation and would be strong enough to attract agencies' target groups.

Finally, among the recurring images the notion of silence was used by both German and Japanese respondents, unlike relaxation or health. This unifying image is rather important in the marketing of sauna products since it appeals to both target groups of the Sauna Region.

In addition to the unifying themes, there are a number of discrepancies in the answers of the Japanese and German respondents. The first difference is noted in the

fact that both Japanese respondents associated sauna with summer, unlike the German travel agents who related sauna to winter or no specific season.

The second discrepancy shows that images suggested by the Japanese respondents were associated rather with the environment (e.g. snow, lake, wind, hot springs) than health benefits, which, on the other hand, became a strong set of correlations for the German respondents. This gives a basis for finding the frame for marketing material and messaging – whether it should focus on the benefits or on the actual environment surrounding sauna.

Based on all the results this study continues with a more practical approach to the question of Sauna Region branding in the form of which messages should be used in the marketing materials to resonate with the positive images around the notion of sauna.

6   PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Following the discussion on image as the most essential constituent element of the destination brand in the theoretical section of the study and the analysis of the interviews, this chapter suggests a number of steps to be taken by the Stopover Central Finland project and other bodies involved in the regional tourism development on the way of building Sauna Region brand.

Prior to the practical steps of the Sauna Region destination branding, there is an explanation of how favourable images around the notion of sauna can be transferred to the higher level of the Sauna Region destination images. This chapter continues with an explicit model adapted from Saraniemi (2009, 71) and examples of how the images can be incorporated into every step of the brand creation process.

6.1   Projection of the Sauna Images onto the Destination Image of the Sauna Region

Previous discussion around the image as the foundation of the destination branding in chapter 1 focuses on the concept from the perspective of a complex set of attributes around a destination. The practical analysis, on the other hand, establishes images around the notion of sauna existent in the minds of the target audiences.

To fill the gap between the destination image and sauna images it is important to turn to summary of the destination branding research by Hanlan and Kelly (2005), who suggest that a strong destination brand can be built once certain destination product is experienced and labelled with an image attribute. In other words, once a positive image around sauna (product, experience) is created it is possible to transfer this image onto a higher level – the level of the destination image.

In their article Hanlan and Kelly (2005) continue by presenting the idea that once a small number of positive and meaningful images is identified, the DMOs have to incorporate them into marketing operations in order to position the destination.

This summary supports an earlier described model of image projection by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985).

In the context of this research, once positive images around the notion of sauna are identified, they can be transferred onto the level of the Sauna Region, as it is shown in Figure 5, and help the destination find its own positioning within the scope of other destinations on the county-level and on the international tourism arena.
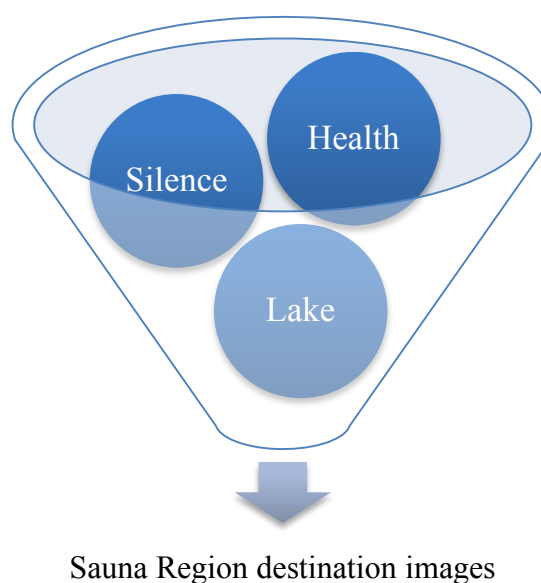
Sauna Region destination images

Figure 5. Projection of the sauna images onto the Sauna Region as a destination.

Thus, when working on the Sauna Region brand these positive images have to be nurtured and reinforced throughout marketing communication. A more holistic view on the Sauna Region destination branding process is described in the following sub-chapter.

6.2   Sauna Region Destination Branding Process

Even though image, or brand formation and management processes described in chapter 1 serve as a good basis for DMOs to understand the complexity of a destination brand, they do not give a holistic view on destination branding. To understand destination branding – its strategic and tactical levels – a merged model of

destination branding (Figure 6) comprised of models by Saraniemi (2009, 71) and by Barich and Kotler (1991) is taken for further discussion around the distinguished sauna images and Sauna Region branding.
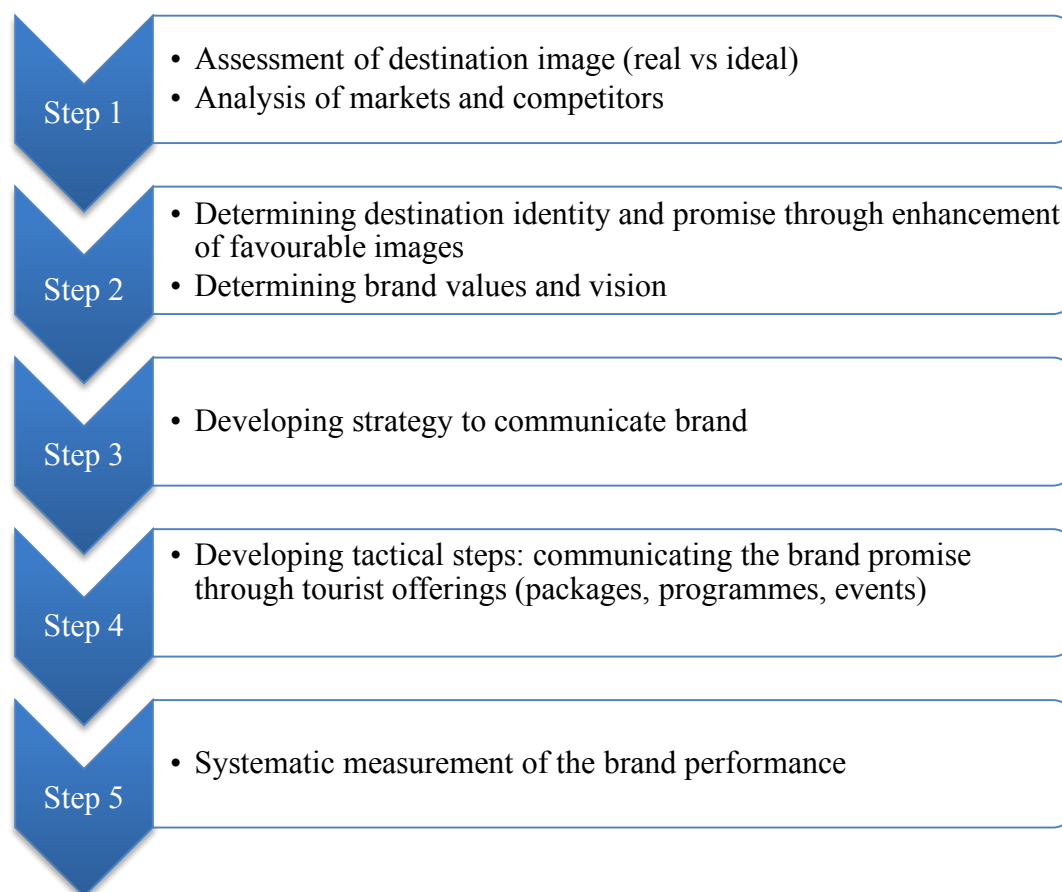
Step 1
- Assessment of destination image (real vs ideal)
- Analysis of markets and competitors

Step 2
- Determining destination identity and promise through enhancement of favourable images
- Determining brand values and vision

Step 3
- Developing strategy to communicate brand

Step 4
- Developing tactical steps: communicating the brand promise through tourist offerings (packages, programmes, events)

Step 5
- Systematic measurement of the brand performance

Figure 6. Destination branding process.

Within this model the very first step of analysis of destination image has been accomplished through the research. This study has identified a set of favourable images among two target audiences i.e. Japanese and German tourist operators. This set of images, as it is discussed in the previous sub-chapter, can be transposed onto the Sauna Region destination image. This means that images such as relaxing, detox, silence, lake, slow or mindfulness can be adopted by the Sauna Region in creating own destination image. The second part of the first step – analysis of markets and competitors – remains to be done by the DMO with regard to how

identified images can differentiate the Sauna Region among other places which are associated with recreation and health.

Within the second and third steps, which focus on destination identity and strategic decisions, the emphasis lies on the fact that earlier created favourable images have to be nurtured and reinforced. This can be done by the means of strategic marketing communication, which for Japanese would rather focus on nature surrounding the sauna and for German tourists on health and relaxation.

The fourth step, which is concerned with the tourist offerings (e.g. packages, programmes and events), has to be also looked through the angle of the favourable images. It is, therefore, recommendable to build programmes or sauna packages with the emphasis of health benefits for the German tourists – sauna for a detox followed by a refreshing swimming in the lake and a healthy dinner with the dishes which stimulate metabolism; whereas programmes for Japanese tourists have to include a set of slow and relaxing activities in the nature (e.g. walking, berry picking, meditation), which would include a sauna session.

While going through the steps of the brand creation process, it is important to emphasize that practically each step has to incorporate favourable sauna images – they should guide both the strategic and tactical decision making processes in order to create a unified brand.

7   CONCLUSIONS

Over the past several decades, destination branding has been among the much researched areas of tourism studies. Evolving from the field of business and economics, branding has received a number of definitions depending on which perspective is taken into account: demand-side (tourists) or supply-side (tourist companies, destinations). On the way of understanding the concept of destination brand this research questioned what precisely constituted the core of a destination brand.

With this research question as a guidance, theoretical analysis indicated that despite differences in stakeholders' angles, a recurring notion of image emerged as the core constituent of a destination brand. Such an ambiguous concept as image, however, had to be clarified. By presenting several models of image formation and management this study established an image-based conceptual framework, which would help to understand how tourist destinations could affect favourably different stages of these processes and consolidate positive images into one brand on a practical level.

Following the theoretical analysis, a practical case for this study was selected – Central Finland regional development practices on the way of establishing the Sauna Region brand. The case was described in depth to show the major decision making bodies and the complexity of operations within the scope of regional tourism development.

Although Stopover Central Finland had been promoting the region of Central Finland as the Sauna Region through various initiatives and activities (e.g. Sauna Region Week, online promotion, sale runs), it was important to see if images surrounding the notion of sauna had positive connotations and were strong enough to be used as destination images, or destination brand constituents, for a single region of Finland. In addition to that, it was crucial to trace how sauna-related images were perceived by two target countries audiences, i.e. tour operators from Germany and Japan.

These questions gave the basis for the empirical research which was conducted with the help of the qualitative method. By interviewing eight (8) tourist operators defined by the Stopover Central Finland project, the study collected a set of images around the notion of sauna, specified favourable images and transferred them onto the scope of the destination image.

Since the interviews were organized with the representatives of two culturally very distant countries, it was important to find whether there were any unifying themes or discrepancies in the answers of German and Japanese tourist agents. Despite a rather small sample of Japanese representatives, several recurring and differentiating points were selected. These findings provided a background for marketing focus in the practical recommendations.

Finally, evolving from the image management process described in the theoretical section of the study an image-based Sauna Region destination branding process took form. Whereas strategy level steps, such as defining vision and brand promise, remain to be looked at from DMOs perspective, tactical level operations (e.g. tourist offerings) were described with the emphasis of how sauna images should be incorporated into the programmes or communication addressed towards potential German and Japanese customers.

While this study focused on a singular case of Sauna Region brand within the scope of regional development, the processes defined in the research can help any region in Finland or any other destination around the world understand what should constitute the core of their own brand, how to align ideas around own unique tourist proposition with the images surrounding a specific destination.

As boundaries for travelling disappear, competition among tourist destinations becomes stornger. Fast development of tourism as a field requires further research of destination brands, particularly on a smaller scale of regions or cities. Furthermore, a set of studies should address destinations which have neither specific world-known historic attractions nor long history of tourist practices, similarly to the ones described in this study case.

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Interview structure

Basic information

1. Have you travelled to Finland? If yes, how many times and to which places?

2. When did you begin your cooperation with the Finnish tourist companies?

3. Do you currently offer packages to Finland?

4. Who are your target groups to promote these packages to (e.g. families, elderly tourists, pairs)?

Country-level images

5. Can you tell about your TOP 3 associations with Finland?

6. When thinking of Finland as a tourist destination what do you expect to experience and see?

7. Is there a specific area in Finland you think of in connection with those experiences?

Sauna images

8. When you hear the word "sauna" what associations come to your mind?

9. Are these positive/ negative/ neutral associations?

10. Are these associations related to any specific season?

11. Would these associations be attractive to your target customers?

12. Are these associations you would sell sauna packages with to your target customers?

Table 2. Conducted interviews

	Interviewee	Position	Type of contact	Date
1.	Tour operator 1	Sales Planner (Tokyo, Japan)	Email, Skype call	6.11.2017
2.	Tour operator 2	Sales Manager (Tokyo, Japan)	Email, Skype call	6.11.2017
3.	Tour operator 3	Managing Partner (Potsdam, Germany)	Email, phone call	14.11.2017
4.	Tour operator 4	Product and Sales Manager (Cologne, Germany)	Email, phone call	15.11.2017
5.	Tour operator 5	Product Manager (Medelbach, Germany)	Email, phone call	16.11.2017
6.	Tour operator 6	Product Manager (Giessen, Germany)	Email, phone call	16.11.2017
7.	Tour operator 7	Sales Manager (Dormage, Germany)	Email, phone call	16.11.2017
8.	Tour operator 8	Sales Manager (Cologne, Germany)	Email, phone call	17.11.2017

Due to the non-disclosure agreement with Stopover Central Finland all the contact details and names have been substituted with generic words for the online version of the thesis.