



PLACE MARKETING AND RURAL MUNICIPALITIES IN NORTHERN SWEDEN: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MUNICIPAL HOMEPAGES¹

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Abstract

The place marketing concept is one of the most popular concepts used in the analysis and promotion of countries, regions, cities and towns. The intensification of competition for investment, tourism and human resources among European cities and towns has increased the importance of being unique. Most studies on place marketing focus on unique selling points and thus on brands of already extensively 'marketed' countries, national capitals and other large metropolitan areas, while the rural towns that need more marketing attention, given their need to overcome their lack of material and non-material resources, are often ignored. This is based on the idea of the promotion to target markets of the unique selling points of the town in question.

This paper aims to discuss the extent to which the place marketing concept can be viewed as an essential tool in the effective promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions of Sweden. The paper outlines the reasons why rural towns in Northern Sweden should use place marketing. The article also highlights the basic features of the place marketing concept and its key elements for rural towns as well as describing the target audience for rural towns while identifying their specific needs and wants.

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the 53rd European Congress of Regional Science International, 27-31 August 2013, Palermo, Italy.

JEL classification: M31, R58, Z13

Keywords: place marketing, rural towns, target audience, unique selling point

1. Introduction

The 21st century has seen the active worldwide growth of place marketing and place promotion practice. Every country, city and town is trying to identify and build upon their unique selling point and use it to create a competitive identity thus enabling them to sell themselves better than other places. Today's communities and regions of Europe are engaged in a continuous battle to create more jobs and greater local prosperity. Their citizens and businesses expect this of their communities. To create more opportunities, communities must have the appropriate skills needed to attract investors, new businesses, new residents and visitors (Kotler et al. 1999).

The American Marketing Association (2013) argue that marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large. This modern marketing concept is deeper and more differentiated and related to target markets. Not only products and services, but also places and areas, require positioning, a competitive identity and marketing promotion in order to enhance growth and competitiveness. This has increased the importance of using place marketing among European cities and towns in order to attract investment, tourism and human resources.

Place and city marketing is an established practice within urban management and has attracted the interest of many academic researchers from various disciplines resulting in a substantial and growing body of knowledge (Sicilia et al. 2008). A number of theoretical and practical studies already exist outlining the place marketing process as it is currently used in relation to countries, capital and other large metropolitan cities, focused on different target audiences and using various marketing tools to make place marketing profitable.

The main focus of this paper will be on the Swedish place marketing experience, where relatively little has been written about place marketing practice. Some studies on the practice of place marketing do exist for cities like Stockholm (Rainisto 2003), Gothenburg (Braun 2008), and Umeå (Eriksson 2010) concentrating, primarily, on opportunities to attract tourists. Few studies however exist showing the positive results of place marketing, such as attracting different target markets, especially new residents and employees, in rural Swedish towns (Niedomysl 2007, Eriksson 2010).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the extent to which place marketing can be viewed as an effective tool in the promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions of Sweden. The

paper proposes to answer the following questions: (1) Which of the key elements of place marketing can be applied in the marketing of rural towns? (2) At which target audience should the place marketing of rural towns be aimed? (3) Does a unique selling point emerge in respect of these northern Swedish rural towns?

The towns analysed in the context of this article are located in the regions of Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Västernorrland, Jämtland, Gävleborg, Dalarna and Värmland. Towns with more than 50 000 inhabitants have been excluded from the analysis (see Appendix 1). The empirical data is based upon information available from the homepages of the studied municipalities. By law, all municipalities in Sweden have to have a homepage on which information about the municipality, services provided to residents etc., is given. It is often the case, however, that these homepages are also used for marketing and for municipal branding. As such, they contain a huge amount of prospective information on perceived target groups; unique selling points and how the municipality in question view itself in a place marketing context. The *rationale* for using the homepage for marketing and branding purposes is simple: if you decide to go to, e.g. Stockholm, you will find information on major events and services provided on the homepage as well as links to the tourist information office and tourist activities.

This study begins with a literature review followed by a review and discussion of the key theoretical elements as regards the place marketing concept. The theoretical discussion will outline a theoretical synthesis and generate some hypotheses. With this task accomplished the rural and peripheral areas of northern Sweden will be described. The first part of this section will provide the context in which place marketing should be applied; the second part will describe the marketing activities found on the homepages of the various municipalities analysed here. In the fifth section of the paper an analysis of the data gathered will be made while in the sixth section the results will be discussed and conclusions drawn.

2. Literature review

There has been a significant growth in the number of publications in the field of place and city marketing over the last few years. Important contributions have been made by Kotler et al. (1993, 1999, and 2002), Ashworth and Voogd (1994), Anholt (2007) and Kozma (2006). Kotler with co-authors published three studies on the theory and practice of place marketing using American examples (1993), European experience (1999) and the place marketing of Asian cities (2002), in the context of which a systematic analysis of the positive and negative attempts of the various communities involved to create their own competitive strategies and ‘flesh out’ the role of their

marketing infrastructure in this process is undertaken. Ashworth and Voogd (1994) discussed marketing's role in place promotion, the appearance of new trends in marketing and the difference between product marketing and city marketing. Anholt (2007) has developed the theory and practice of competitive identity for countries and cities, where he described the components of competitive city branding; Anholt's 'brand hexagon' remains the most widely used illustration of place marketing and place branding. Kozma (2006) identifies a general approach to and illustrates the main stages of place marketing with reference to various European examples. The historical aspect of the marketing and promotion of cities within the context of current British and US practice is also highlighted in a book by Ward (2004).

There are also an increasing number of local studies showing the successful results of place marketing. Among the European experiences here we can distinguish between studies of countries' marketing practice: Netherlands (Braun 2008), Malta (Metaxas 2007), Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia (Capik 2007; Fujita, Dinnie 2010), and Hungary (Kozma 2006; Fujita, Dinnie 2010). Among the major place marketing studies of European capitals and cities the study by Rainisto (2003) on Helsinki, Stockholm and Copenhagen should be mentioned, as should the studies by Metaxas (2002, 2010a) on Prague, Lisbon, Glasgow and Barcelona, by Kavaratzis (2008) on Amsterdam, Budapest and Athens; by Braun (2008) on Basel, Birmingham, Gothenburg and Rotterdam; and the study of Hamburg by Zenker et al. (2010). Sicilia et al. (2008) have also produced a study on the content analysis of the websites of European capital cities and identified their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, they have sought to highlight the implications of an attempt to improve these websites.

As is evident from this brief listing of previous studies, most focus on place marketing at the national or large city level. In this context however rural towns are resigned to remain firmly 'in the shadow' of these larger entities. Kotler et al. (1999) discuss how to attract investment, industry, residents and visitors to cities, communities, regions and countries across Europe but also describe the possibility of place marketing in respect of small European towns. In this context the authors deploy examples from Sweden, Norway, and Great Britain. Ward (2004) refers to the historical example of place promotion in respect of the rural town of Wichita, in Kansas, which grew from just 50 inhabitants in 1870 to a claimed 40 000 some eighteen years later (Ward 2004: 25-26). Some publications show the results of marketing campaigns promoting the provinces and rural towns in Europe and around the world, for example, the Dutch province of Groningen (Meester and Pellenbarg 2001). A good example of rural marketing in India is provided by Velayudhan (2007) while Dawson et al. (2011) highlight the possibility of using place marketing in wine tourism for

small wineries in New Zealand and Duxbury and Campbell (2011) present a broad overview of the key themes of cultural development (arts activity) in rural and small communities, based on a review of Canadian and international projects and publications. Common to all of these studies is the notion that place marketing exists only in relation to tourists and tourism – as such, the discourse is dominated by the underlying theme of ‘destination marketing’.

Only a few studies on the marketing practice of municipalities in Northern Sweden have been made (Niedomysl 2007, Eriksson 2010). Niedomysl (2007) used the place marketing concept to attract new residents (families with children from the Stockholm metropolitan area) to Bräcke, municipality in Northern Sweden, distributing brochures showing “attractive images of a good place for children to grow up in...” to 4 000 families. The result of the campaign was that ten families migrated from Stockholm to Bräcke. Nevertheless, this research does show the possibilities associated with marketing promotion as a tool in attracting new residents. Unfortunately, the author included nothing about who these families were what kinds of jobs they filled or, indeed, the quality of life they enjoyed in Bräcke. Eriksson (2010) describes some of the marketing campaigns, primarily to attract the new residents that have taken place in the rural municipalities of Northern Sweden. The author here tries to highlight the differences between the visitors to big cities and rural areas. The main target group for this analysis however remained tourists. The author collected numerous examples of the promotion of rural municipalities in Norrland although it should be noted that these campaigns are generally only short-term promotions without any strategic targets or visible results.

3.1 Place marketing: A theoretical framework

3.1 The place marketing concept and the key elements of place marketing for rural towns

A number of terms are used to describe the marketer’s interest in countries, cities and towns: *place marketing* (Kotler et al. 1993, 1999, 2002; Kozma 2006; Van den Berg and Braun 1999; Metaxas 2002, 2010a, 2010b; Eriksson 2010; Braun et al. 2010; Zenker and Petersen 2010), *city marketing* (Deffner and Liouris 2005; Braun 2008; Kavartzis 2007), *urban marketing* (Kavartzis 2008), *geographical marketing* (Meester and Pellenbarg 2001), *destination marketing* (Baker and Cameron 2008; Buhalis 2000), *village marketing* (Kozma 2006), and *location marketing* (Makombe and Kachwamba 2011).

According to Kotler et al. (2002), the notion of place can include a geopolitically-based physical space; a region or state; a cultural, historical or ethically-bounded location; a central city and its surrounding population; a market with various definable attributes; an industry’s home base and a

clustering of like-industries and their suppliers; or a psychological attribute of relations between people. As such, place marketing entails designing a place to satisfy the needs of its target markets. It succeeds when citizens and businesses are pleased with their community and when the expectations of visitors and investors are met.

The American Marketing Association (2013) identifies place marketing as a marketing tool designed to influence target audiences to behave in some positive manner with respect to the products or services associated with a specific place. Van den Berg and Braun (1999: 993) use the term urban place marketing as a “managerial principle in which thinking in terms of customers and the market is central as well as a toolbox with applicable insights and techniques” while Braun (2008: 43) notes that, place marketing could be defined as, “the coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban offerings that have value for the city’s customers and the city’s community at large”.

Kozma (2006: 13-14) describes place marketing activities as a “spiral process reaching higher and higher levels from time to time”. The 10-C Model of place marketing, the components of which form the skeleton of the marketing-spiral consisting of: consumer-orientation; communication; consensus; coordination; cooperation; creativity; conception; campaign; continuity; and control is used by Kozma to highlight this process.

In addition, a number of authors describe place marketing as a term that aggregates all kinds of territorial formations. Ashworth and Voogd (1994: 43) note that place marketing has been defined as, “[...] the conscious use of [...] marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target audience [...]. It needs to consider aspects of resource production, a set of marketing measures (promotional, spatial/functional, organizational practices) for the market, and many different groups of consumers for different demands”. Kozma (2006) highlights the sub-fields of place marketing as including national marketing, city marketing, regional marketing and village marketing. Braun (2008: 30) holds a similar view “[...] we prefer to say that place marketing is the ‘family name’ for the marketing of neighbourhoods, cities, rural areas, regions, states, countries etc”.

As we can see there are no limits on using different terms to describe marketing concepts in the context of territorial formations. As such, in the context of the research effort undertaken here, it is probably more helpful to use the term *place marketing* as it is more easily associated with the

marketing of rural towns and areas while the differences between the marketing of cities and countries and that associated with rural areas are clearly understood.

Different opinions however exist in respect of identifying the key elements of place marketing. Some authors (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999; Metaxas 2002; Braun 2008) agree that the place marketing concept concerns the adaptation of the traditional marketing mix model “5P” (product, price, place, promotion, people) and its performance in the procedure of place marketing. Undoubtedly however the most important element in the place marketing concept is people. Kavaratzis (2008: 3-4) shows city marketing to be a process that includes a wide range of activities such as an analysis of the city’s current situation through extensive research on its assets, opportunities and audiences; the identification and choice of a vision for the city and the goals that should be achieved; planning specific projects that will collectively achieve the goals set; the active implementation of city marketing measures that can be spatial/functional, financial, organisational and promotional; the process ends with the monitoring and regular evaluation of the results of all these activities.

Kotler et al. (1999: 25) argue that place marketing embraces the following activities: developing a strong and attractive positioning and image for the community; setting attractive incentives for current and potential buyers and users of goods and services; delivering a place’s products and services in an efficient, accessible way; and promoting the place’s attractiveness and benefits so potential users are fully aware of the distinctive advantages of the city. To conduct strategic place marketing successfully, place needs major elements – planning group, marketing factors (infrastructure, attractions, image and quality of life, and people) and target markets (Kotler et al. 1993).

3.2 The target audience for rural towns

Place marketing activities should always be carried out with a focus on the target audience. International experience suggests that place marketing can operate effectively through the promotion of the image of a place as a ‘final provided good’, in order that it becomes attractive and competitive in the potential target markets (Metaxas 2010b).

Kotler et al. (1999) describe the four main target markets for place marketing, which consist of: 1) visitors; 2) residents and employees; 3) business and industry; 4) export markets. Place marketing is successful when workers, residents and businesses are satisfied with their living conditions, and when tourists, new businesses and new investors have their expectations met. Place planning procedures concern the satisfaction of the needs of target markets. It is likely to be successful when

it satisfies two main parameters: a) the enterprises and the residents satisfaction from the purchase of goods and services that the place provides, b) satisfaction of the expectations of the potential target markets (enterprises and visitors), as long as the goods and services that the place provides to them are those that they wish to consume. The same classification in respect of target markets is used by most authors in this field (e.g. Rainisto 2003; Van den Berg and Braun 1999). The common denominator in these broad classifications is that both residents already living in a particular place and potentially new residents, are viewed as target groups for place marketing (Braun et al. 2010).

Van den Berg and Braun (1999: 993) describe the place marketing procedure “as a set of activities intended to optimize the tuning of supply of urban functions to the demand for them from inhabitants, companies, tourists and other visitors”. Kompaniets (2012) highlights two main target audiences for the place marketing and place branding process, the *external target audience*, including the federal or national government, investors, tourists and travellers, business visitors, businesses and entrepreneurs, potential residents and employees such as wealthy individuals, professionals and skilled employees, migrants, national and international mass media, and the *internal target audience*, including regional authorities, citizens, regional mass media and business owners in the area. Moreover, in the context of the place marketing process, these two groups constituting the target audience often act in an interconnected manner.

Place marketing has been practiced in various different contexts including tourism, the domestic and export promotion of agri-food products, country positioning in international relations, the protection of local producers from imports through ‘buy domestic’ campaigns, and marketing targeted at attracting foreign investment, foreign students and skilled workers (Dawson et al. 2011). As such, it is clear that a large percentage of place marketing studies focus on attracting tourists to countries, capitals and cities. Another group of place marketing studies has new businesses and entrepreneurs as its target group. Relatively few place marketing studies however aim directly to attract new residents and employees to specific countries, capitals and/or other cities (Kotler et al. 1999; Bennett and Koudelova 2001; Niedomysl 2007; Zenker et al. 2010; Zenker and Petersen 2010).

According to Bennett and Koudelova (2001) there are two important target groups in place marketing – businesses and residents. Furthermore cities are no longer products that in themselves provide an adequate labour force, land, buildings and infrastructure services to businesses, or homes, services and a social environment for residents. The study by Baker and Cameron (2008) defines the six main goals of city marketing: attracting tourist and business visitors, attracting businesses from other places, retaining and expanding current businesses, providing business

expansion and supporting new business start-ups, expanding exports and outside investments, expanding the population or changing the mix of residents (keeping high profile residents), increasing the life quality of cities. Decision makers, local managers, central government officials, politicians, leading businessman, etc., all try to develop strategies and means of cooperation in order to attain the abovementioned goals.

Zenker et al. (2010) focus on residents and workers as a 'superordinated' target group because of the growing competition between cities and towns in relation to attracting a qualified workforce. Following the studies of Richard Florida, who first coined the term 'creative class' as a signifier for a popular target group of potential citizens, describing their ability to create meaningful new concepts and products and to turn this creativity into economic success as being typical of the members of this creative class who display a 'creative core' developing ideas and 'creative professionals' using them. Zenker et al. (2010) focus attention on the city perception of the creative class and compare it to another important place marketing target group – students or future talents. Braun (2008) also focused on this point.

In relation to place marketing Kozma (2006: 11) distinguished three main target groups which can of course be further subdivided: (1) economic participants: the local authorities must endeavour to promote the further development of the companies already operating in their area, to support small enterprise start-ups and to attract new companies; (2) tourists: the local authorities must endeavour to ensure that the demands of visiting tourists are satisfied and that new tourists and continually attracted; (3) inhabitants: the local authorities must endeavour to intensify the satisfaction level of local inhabitants and to attract those personnel groups that are deemed profitable for the settlement.

3.3 The unique selling points

Kotler et al. (1999) observe that places, like products and services, need to be marketed in a sophisticated way. Each community must define its special features and effectively communicate its competitive advantages to the 'prospective customers' whose support it seeks. Places must also seek to benchmark themselves against the places they compete for resources with and find ways to differentiate and position themselves to stand out in the minds of their target markets (Kotler et al. 1999: ix). Each place is challenged to deliver something truly superior or unique for the marketplace. A place's desire to secure a unique position and positive image in the huge European market is a crucial part of strategic place marketing. Each place must formulate a combination of offerings and benefits that can meet the expectations of a broad range of investors, new businesses

and visitors (Kotler et al. 1999: 25). In other words, every place has to have its' unique selling point in order to differentiate itself from competitors and to retain the attention of its target audience in order to market itself in the best way possible.

Metaxas (2010b) discussed city competitiveness which is derived from the internal characteristics of a city. Each city has some characteristics associated with the its historical background creating something different or special for that city's profile. Each city has its own particularities and distinctive characteristics: its geographical position, size, accessibility to large financial or commercial markets, its accessibility to Universities and technological Institutes, the quality of the infrastructure endowment, the quality of life and the environment, as well as, the city's area of economic specialisation in particular production sectors. All of these factors constitute important characteristics that could function as the foundation for a city's strategy in relation to the exploitation of its competitive advantages. What is most important here however is that each of the city's distinctive characteristics is a 'distinctive good' in itself. City marketing aims to promote and support these characteristics in a strategic manner in order to better set out a competitive city image.

3.4 Theoretical synthesis and hypotheses

The place marketing concept in relation to rural towns is aimed at overcoming the lack of material and non-material resources often associated with such towns; it is based on the idea of the promotion to target markets of the unique selling points of the town. In order to do this effectively a clear target audience has been identified. The term 'unique selling points' (USP) is used to refer to any aspect of an object that differentiates it from similar objects. It means that rural towns, if they want to be competitive and successful, have to have already staked out their own position and differentiated themselves from others rural towns.

Given this theoretical framework we want to test the following hypotheses: (1) Rural towns in northern Sweden have a clear place marketing strategy; (2) The target audience is identified and defined by the rural towns; and (3) the rural towns have a clear notion of what their unique selling points are.

4. The rural town in northern Sweden

4.1 The context

The studied area in this paper covers the regions of Värmland, Dalarna, Gävleborg, Västernorrland, Jämtland, Västerbotten and Norrbotten. The various municipalities included in this study are all

from these seven northernmost regions in Sweden and thus all have many things in common when it comes to their economic structures, population development and other social and political aspects. The studied area is a very sparsely populated area. In terms of land mass the size of the area is larger than that of the U.K. but with a population of only 1.7 million. Kiruna municipality is half of the size of Netherlands (!) and has roughly 23 000 inhabitants. About 18 000 inhabitants live in the 'town' itself while the remaining 5 000 people are scattered between about 50 small settlements in the surrounding area (Statistics Sweden 2013).

The economic structure in Jämtland and Norrbotten is characterised by positive structural change in the economy, but the changes in the regional branch structure are slower than those at the national level. The modern branch structure is thus unable to make up for the negative branch effect, resulting in slower economic growth than the national average. In addition, the regions of Värmland, Dalarna, Gävleborg, Västernorrland and Västerbotten continue to display significant problems as regards their economic structure. These regions suffer from an obsolete (industrial) economic structure where the changes in the branch structure are slower than those at the national level. Consequently the slower regional growth rate - relative to the national level - depends on the structural and the branch effects reinforcing each other. For both groups of regions the growth in productivity is relatively modest (Eðvarðsson et al. 2007). This can in part be explained by an employment increase in labour intensive service production, while employment in the primary and secondary sectors has declined (Rauhut and Kahila 2008).

The unemployment rate in the seven studied regions is much higher than the national average, the share of persons participating in labour market schemes is higher than the national average and the share of early retired and persons on long term sick leave are also higher than the national average (Bjørnsen and Rauhut 2009). In some regions, e.g. Västernorrland, only two out of three persons in the age range 18-64 are actually in work (Rauhut and Kahila 2008). The potential labour supply will develop negatively for the next 10 years (Kangasharju and Dall Schmidt 2009) of which an ageing population accounts for about 9 percent of these changes (Kangasharju et al. 2009).

An ageing population, the out-migration of young adults and population decline characterise the demographic trends in the studied area. With few exceptions (Åre, Krokomsjö and Kiruna) the only municipalities showing a positive population trend and a favourable age structure are those with more than 50 000 inhabitants (Rauhut et al. 2008) and they are excluded from the analysis undertaken here.

4.2 Place marketing awareness

Since small municipalities in rural and peripheral regions are obliged to provide service information to their residents by internet, they will have the opportunity to brand and market themselves in a similar way to that of the big metropolitan municipalities. Seen from this perspective, the information given on the homepages of the 75 studied municipalities constitutes the empirical data which has been analysed in this study. In the case of the municipality of Kiruna the homepage was not fully functional (down for service maintenance) which means that all of the information requested was not accessible.

The information was collected by using a standardised questionnaire in which twelve questions, in five categories, were asked:

- 1 Does the municipality engage in any marketing activity on its homepage?
- 2a Is information easy to find on the homepage?
- 2b Does any information for potential tourists or residents exist in English?
- 2c Is information available in any other languages?
- 3a Is a target audience identified on the homepage?
- 3b Are new residents the target audience?
- 3c Are tourists the target audience?
- 3d Are there any other identified target audiences?
- 4a Are the key selling points of the municipality identified?
- 4b What selling points are identified on the homepage?
- 4c Are any unique selling points mentioned?
- 5 Comments / other valuable information?

A number of points on the information we collected in respect of these questions are worth making. The information we were looking for in respect of the first question was, for example, whether tourist activities were displayed on the homepage and whether there was information on available housing or vacant jobs in the municipality etc. Basically, anything that could market or brand the municipality as an interesting place to visit or move to were included in the answer. Notwithstanding this rather open-ended definition of 'marketing activity', only 29 municipalities displayed such information on their homepage.

In six of the municipalities analysed the homepages were rather rudimentary and thus it was difficult to find information on them. In one case we had to click on icons in Swedish three times before we managed to reach the English version of the homepage. The homepages of the remaining 69 municipalities were however generally well structured and thus it was much easier to find information on them.

Information in English was provided in 37 municipalities while a further 45 municipalities provided a translation of their homepage via *Google* translator; 24 municipalities also provided translations in other languages (e.g. Finnish, Sami, German, Dutch and Thai). Check what languages this information is given in itself provides us with useful knowledge of the target groups. Some municipalities which targeted German and Dutch immigrants with a view to enticing them to relocate to the municipality provided lots of information in German and Dutch; some municipalities provided plenty of tourist information, but only in Swedish.

4.3 Target audience

According to place marketing theory it is possible to conclude that the most important target audience for rural towns is current residents, tourists, prospective residents and employees, and also businesses. For this study we focused on the external target audience, that is to say, on how these municipalities are promoting themselves in attempting to attract tourists and new residents.

The analysis showed that 66 of the 75 municipalities we focused on have identified their target audience on their homepages. Most of these rural towns have tourists as their main target audience (63 homepages), with just 25 municipalities oriented towards attracting new residents. Avesta, Timrå and Pajala are exceptional as they target new residents, tourists and businesses simultaneously. All three try to create the best conditions for entrepreneurs in northern Sweden (Pajala receives EU Structural Funds support).

4.4 Unique selling point(s)

The collected information shows that most of these rural towns believe that their main selling point is their access to *nature* in its various forms. In attempting to describe their unique advantages over other rural towns 80% of them using the following formulation on their homepages: fresh air, beautiful landscape, skiing, skating, sailing, trekking, fishing, hunting, swimming and other kinds of outdoor activities. For example, Årjäng - The most beautiful and wildest place in West Värmland; Filipstad - A small town with charm and opportunities; You're never far away from a wonderful nature and services in Hedemora; Säffle - A simple day, an enjoyable leisure time; Leksand - Visit our wonderful countryside.

Thus, for some municipalities this can be a real USP because of their unique nature-based sights and attractions (Ragunda - "Dead Water Fall" and Thai Pavilion; Berg - Storsjö Monster; Arvidsjaur - The Iglootell (an igloo hotel)) or unique events (Gagnef - World Championship in cross country

skiing 2014; Rättvik - Vasa skiing race; Bollnäs - Jazz-town in Sweden 2013) or if the areas are on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Kramfors, Jokkmokk (Laponia)), or boast unique and famous facilities (Scandinavia's famous ski centres: Malung-Sälen, Åre; Berg - Sweden's biggest go-kart track; Arjeplog - International car testing centre) for others it is simply the appeal of nature without any signs of uniqueness, just a statement of fact. On the other hand some towns, like Leksand, have decided to use infrastructural features such as free wi-fi in the town centre.

Perhaps the most interesting observation here is that a lot of rural towns use the same message to attract both tourists and new residents, which means that according to the municipalities vision for all target audiences access to an outdoor lifestyle and activities and to plentiful 'fresh air' are given as the major reasons to visit or even move there permanently. If these municipalities also aim to attract new companies or entrepreneurs however this is probably not the best approach to take.

To attract new residents rural towns need to create selling points that are meaningful for family lifestyles such as good housing facilities, safety issues - Ovanåker - The safest town in Gävleborg region; child-oriented municipalities (Forshaga, Storuman), there are a few towns with "Sweden's best school" – Kil, Gagnef, Pajala ("world class school"). Some municipalities (Hofors, Nordanstig, Sandviken, Malå, Åsele) use the online contact system to help potential residents. Should they want to move there they can contact the municipality online and they will be contacted back with information. In addition for potential in-movers some towns (Åsele) hold information meetings several times every year.

5. Analysis

5.1 A marketing awareness

The first hypothesis to be tested is that rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden display a clear place marketing awareness in terms of their homepages; the zero hypothesis is that the municipalities analysed here show no clear marketing awareness.

Rural areas in Northern Sweden are associated with population loss, disinvestments and the retreat of the welfare state for instance through reductions in the size of the public sector. In some areas this situation has brought about an economic restructuring towards a focus on the tourism sector. Moreover it is clear that Swedish rural areas, particularly in the mountains of northern Sweden, have for some time now been involved in efforts to market themselves, primarily in relation to tourism but also to attract new residents.

In 29 of the 75 analysed municipalities ‘marketing activity’ was obvious present in relation to the municipal homepage, i.e. the town/municipality itself or activities in the local area were marketed. Unfortunately, six of the homepages were so rudimentary in structure that it was difficult to find any information on them at all. Though this in itself rather indicates a lack of marketing awareness. It is not very likely, for instance, that you will be able to attract foreign tourists to your town/municipality if you have to click on three icons in Swedish to get to the English version of the homepage. We argue that the marketing awareness or, as van den Berg and Braun (1999) put it, the ‘managerial principles and insights for marketing a certain place’ appear marginal in these areas. Braun (2008) and Kozma (2006) also emphasise the importance of marketing awareness for place marketing. Indeed, without it the market, i.e. the target audience, simply cannot be reached.

If roughly only around one in three of the analysed municipalities undertake ‘marketing activities’ on their homepages it is difficult to reject the zero hypothesis, i.e. the municipalities show no clear marketing awareness in relation to their homepages. As such, the tested hypothesis, that the rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden display a clear level of place marketing awareness on their homepages, is proven wrong.

5.2 A defined target audience

The second hypothesis aimed to test the notion of a target audience: the target audience is identified and defined by the rural towns; the zero hypothesis is that the municipalities have neither identified nor defined their target audience.

Identification of the target audience is the first step in any marketing campaign regardless of the product – products, services, companies, brands or places. Most authors highlight the importance of identifying the target audience in place marketing. The American Marketing Association (2013) argue that marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large, differentiating and relating it to target markets. According to Kotler et al. (2002) place marketing entails the designing a place to satisfy the needs of its target markets. It succeeds when citizens and businesses are pleased with their community, and the expectations of visitors and investors are met. This suggests that any place marketing activity focused on rural towns has to start from the identity of its target audience. If it fails to do this it will simply not attract its target audience.

Of the 75 analysed municipalities 66 targeted tourists. A separate version of the homepage was given in English in 37 municipalities and in 24 the information was also provided in other languages (e.g. Finnish, Sami, German, Dutch and Thai). This indicates that these municipalities want to reach specific nationalities of tourists, i.e. it is not just tourists as a target group that are identified and defined – specific nationalities are targeted. In three municipalities only Swedish tourists were targeted: plenty of tourist attractions were described and displayed, but only in Swedish.

In 45 of the 75 analysed municipalities the only translation of the homepage available was via an automatic translation service by *Google Translator*. This kind of automatic translation services is known for its notoriously substandard translations. This is a very passive way of attracting tourists where the most common second language in Europe and a very useful language for tourists internationally – English – is not used. As such, it is difficult to view this as a credible attempt to target international tourists by the municipalities in question. This conclusion is in line with the theoretical reasoning forwarded by Metaxas (2010b) and van der Berg and Braun (1999).

The results of this study show that new residents were a well-defined target audience in 25 of the municipalities analysed. In some municipalities German and Dutch in-migrants in particular were targeted. Kotler et al. (1999) argue that in order to attract new residents you have to give the impression that you can offer them the things they would like to have. In the case of German and Dutch in-migrants in this study, the sparsely populated areas provide them with a form of freedom compared to the overcrowded countries from which they come.

Braun et al. (2010) discuss the residents' role in place branding. The authors argue that there is an urgent need for resident involvement and participation in place branding because residents simultaneously play four roles in the place marketing process: as a target group and therefore the main audience for several marketing actions; as an integral part of a place brand - their characteristics, behaviour and reputation could make a city more attractive to visitors, new residents, investors, and companies; as ambassadors for their place brand, and, finally, they are also citizens and thus vital for the political legitimisation of the whole marketing endeavour. In most places around the world, the attempt to attract new residents constitutes only a small part of the overall place marketing strategy. Existing residents have a more active role to play here. As we have already seen in the context of this study, the level of marketing awareness generally appears to be marginal in northern Sweden and therefore this important aspect – involving current residents – in attracting the target audience may have been overlooked.

Only three municipalities targeted entrepreneurs and business. Bennett and Koudelova (2001), Kozma (2006) and Zenker et al. (2010) stress the importance of attracting business and new residents to a place. Baker and Cameron (2008) also stress how important the business aspect is for city marketing. It therefore follows that if it is important in city marketing, why should it not be important in the marketing of rural towns?

Although 66 municipalities out of the 75 analysed target tourists, only 45 of them can be considered to have a clear notion of what the target groups are that they would like to attract. The provision of appropriate and timely information is an absolute *minimum* requirement if you want to attract tourists. When it comes to the attraction of new residents however only one in three municipalities have identified and defined them as a target audience. Only three municipalities explicitly target entrepreneurs and business which is quite revealing in an area of high unemployment, low employment and numerous social problems. Can it really be the case that the remaining 72 municipalities have simply not thought of entrepreneurs and business as a target group?

As such, we find it difficult not to reject the zero hypothesis, i.e. the municipalities have neither identified nor defined their target audience. Consequently, the tested hypothesis, the target audience is identified and defined by the rural towns, is proven wrong.

5.3 The unique selling point(s)

The third hypothesis to be tested is that rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden have a clear notion of what their unique selling points are; the zero hypothesis is that the municipalities have no clear notion of what their unique selling points are.

Places, like products and services, need to be marketed in a sophisticated way. Each community must define its special features and effectively communicate its competitive advantages to the 'prospects and customers' whose support it seeks. Places must identify those other places with which they compete for resources and find ways to differentiate and position themselves to stand out in the minds of their target markets (Kotler et al, 1999). In other words, every place has to have a unique selling point so that it can differentiate itself from its competitors and retain the attention of its target audience thus marketing itself in the best way possible (Metaxas 2010b).

It appears, however, that about 80 percent of the rural towns in northern Sweden seem not to really understand how to conceptualise the notion of 'unique selling point'. The general approach adopted by many of these municipalities is to try to create their USP's from trivial things like fresh air, skiing and fishing, thus losing the ability to differentiate themselves from their rivals in the minds

of their target audience. In some cases unique natural reference points can function as a USP e.g. the 'Dead' waterfall, the Storsjö Monster, or natural preservation areas on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Unique events also provide good examples of USP's: World Championship in cross country skiing 2014, the Vansbro swimming race, the Vasa skiing race or being the 'Jazz-town' in Sweden 2013. Famous facilities are also good USP's and some municipalities use them: internationally famous skiing centres, Sweden's biggest go-kart track, or an international car testing centre. These USP's are all supported in the theoretical literature (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999, Metaxas 2010b). Leksand has tried something different using an infrastructure USP (free wi-fi in the town centre). This is probably however a poor strategy as many café and food chains etc., now offer free wi-fi for their guests. So why go to Leksand to get free wi-fi when you get that in every *McDonalds* or *Espresso House* anyway?

The 25 municipalities we found that are trying to attract new residents by using USP's which attract families are doing the right thing according to the theoretical literature (Metaxas 2010b, Braun et al. 2010, van den Berg and Braun 1999, Dawson et al. 2011, Kotler et al. 1999, Bennett and Koudelova 2001, Zenker et al. 2010, Kozma 2006, Braun 2008, Nedomysl 2007). According to Kotler et al. (1999) if a certain place can provide the target audience with something they cannot get elsewhere then this is a good selling point. As such, the use of cheap housing or good schools will likely be of interest to families with children. Security can also be, to some extent, considered as a good selling point. On the other hand, an overemphasis on security aspects may be counterproductive as it may indicate that 'security' is viewed as 'a problem'.

None of the 25 municipalities targeting new residents use the availability of jobs or vacancies as a USP. Ultimately, as an in-migrant, if you are unable to get a job in a new town it is unlikely to matter whether or not you will have access to cheap housing and good schools. Municipalities seeking to attract new residents will likely fail – in line with the theoretical reasoning outlined above - if there are no job prospects to entice prospective newcomers (Braun 2008, Kotler et al. 1999, Zenker et al 2010, Kozma 2006, Dawson et al. 2011, Baker and Cameron 2008, Bennett and Koudelova 2001).

The three municipalities targeting entrepreneurs and business (Avesta, Timrå and Pajala) appear to have identified strong USP's: they list all the things they are doing in their desire to become the best municipality for entrepreneurs in northern Sweden. If you want to start up or move a company there it is very clear what you can expect. This also signals something very important: these municipalities do have a vision of the future, where they want to go etc. This definitely makes them unique. Attracting 'the creative class' is highlighted in the theoretical literature as being important

in order to be considered as an attractive place (Zenker et al. 2010, Cf. Kozma 2006, Braun 2008). Niedomysl (2007) however adopts a rather different stance when arguing that fresh air, access to nature and lots of out-door activities attracts all kinds of target groups.

When around 80 percent of the analysed municipalities have no clear notion of what a selling point is regarding tourism and the majority of the 25 municipalities actually targeting new residents use the same selling points as they did for tourists, it is hard to argue that the zero hypothesis is wrong. Consequently, the tested hypothesis, that rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden have a clear notion of what their unique selling points are, is again proven wrong.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss the extent to which place marketing is a necessary condition for the effective promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions of Sweden. The paper set out to answer three questions. The first asked which of the key elements of place marketing can be applied in the marketing of rural towns. The analysis clearly showed that *marketing awareness* is very low. Simply understanding that they can pursue a place marketing strategy through their homepage content would generate something positive.

The second question raised concerned the identification of the target audience for the place marketing of rural towns. Many of the rural municipalities analysed appear to use the same selling points for all target groups: different outdoor activities, fresh air and access to a wonderful nature endowment. Only three municipalities specifically targeted entrepreneurs or business. Furthermore, the 25 municipalities that were actively trying to attract new residents will likely fail because their strategy is clearly sub-optimal. Offering cheap housing and good schools definitely targets families with children, but if there is little or no information on vacancies or even on job prospects in a broader sense, it is unclear what the realistic target audience of these municipalities really is.

It is also worth noting that although 66 municipalities of the 75 analysed municipalities target tourists, some only provide information in Swedish and only 37 have an English translation of the information on their homepage. If you want to reach a particular market it is clear that you need to address that market in a language that it understands. Neither theory nor previous research has paid much attention to this important aspect. One explanation for this may be that it is such a trivial or basic point, as such, it can easily have been simply overlooked. Amplifying this further, the major theoretical works (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999, Zenker et al 2010, Niedomysl 2007, Ashworth and Voogd 1994) do not touch upon this aspect.

The third question focused on uncovering the unique selling points of rural towns in northern Sweden. The conclusion here is that place marketing here is aimed at overcoming the lack of material and non-material resources; it is based on the idea of promoting the unique selling points of these towns to specific target markets. The term ‘unique selling points’ is used to refer to any aspect of an object that differentiates it from other similar objects. This means that, if they want to be competitive and successful, these rural towns have to identify and determine their own unique position and successfully differentiate themselves from other rural towns. Only a few of the municipalities analysed however appear to have a clear notion of what a *unique* selling point is. To use ‘fresh air’, ‘access to nature’ or ‘outdoor activities’ more generally is not really however likely to be a successful strategy when 80 percent of your competitors are using the same selling points. In previous studies by Metaxas (2010b) and Kotler et al. (1999) the importance of having a unique selling point is clearly emphasised. Having a really unique selling point is the basis of all successful marketing strategies and ‘place marketing’ is no exception here.

According to Ashworth and Voogd (1994) three main segmentation strategies are available: the focus strategy (focusing only on one target market), the differentiation strategy (choosing various target markets, but with a different approach strategy for each), and the non-differentiation strategy (where all target markets are approached in the same way). This paper suggests that the analysed northern Swedish municipalities appear, in general, to have adopted the *non-differentiation strategy*. This helps us to explain the meagre results produced in terms of place marketing.

Place marketing is used synonymously with location marketing and implies the use of marketing principles to attract tourists, residents and investors to a particular region. A region in this case is regarded as a product or brand with a bundle of attached attributes although place as a product may exhibit some significant differences from normal commercial products (*Cf.* Hankinson, 2007). In the theoretical world places compete with each other and thus the adoption of strategic marketing techniques to create a competitive advantage is essential. It has been argued that the 3P’s of marketing can profitably be used in relation to destination marketing activities. These 3P’s include (1) the product, i.e. intrinsic advantages and disadvantages of the investment site, (2) the price, i.e. cost to the investor of locating and operating within the investment site, and (3) promotion, i.e. activities related to the dissemination of information in an attempt to create an image of the investment site and provide investment services for the prospective investor (Makombe and Kachwamba 2011).

The empirical evidence found in northern Sweden suggests something else. Firstly, the municipalities appear not to even be attempting to profile themselves in a unique way relative to

other municipalities – about 80 per cent use selling points related to fresh air, nature and outdoor activities. Furthermore, the notion of which target audience to address appears somewhat blurred. Finally, the selling points appear to be of a ‘low investment’ character: fresh air and objects related to nature while in other municipalities old churches or other buildings are highlighted as sight of interest. None of these things require significant investment as they are already in place. Sports facilities require investment and so do improvements in housing and schools, indeed, these things require a clear level of political involvement to be operationalised. The same can be said for the creation of business parks and the other infrastructure facilities required to attract (and keep) business. These findings suggest that local and regional policymakers either do not themselves believe in investing money to make these places more attractive to various target groups, or they are simply obstructing or blocking investments for political or ideological reasons.

Our impression is that at least 25 percent of the studied municipalities could promote themselves successfully if place marketing was implemented in a structured way. The analysed area has a lot to offer. Unfortunately, these municipalities have not yet realised how to benefit from their unique selling points or how best to reach their desired target audience. When they do so, they will be able to attract tourists as well as new residents and businesses. Meanwhile they have to be content with fresh air, nature and outdoor activities.

This paper also finds two theoretical shortcomings in place marketing: (1) the first relates to the language issue. If you want to reach your target audience you simply must address this market in a language that audience speaks. Although this is perhaps a trivial point and belongs to the basics of marketing, no studies previous have been made of its importance. (2) The second knowledge gap identified in this paper relates to the absence of both theoretical and empirical studies on place marketing in rural areas. In methodological terms we used the tools and theories relating to city marketing in this paper and simply transferred them to rural conditions. This is, however, based upon the assumption that such a knowledge transfer is possible. The very limited number of previous empirical studies on this subject however offers little guidance on this point.

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Appendix A: The empirical material

Table A1: The studied 75 municipalities (accessed on 22nd June, 2013)

	Värmland	Populati on	Homepage		Västernorrland	Populati on	Homepage
1	Kil	11782	www.kil.se	1	Ånge	9639	www.ange.se
2	Eda	8496	www.eda.se	2	Timrå	17997	www.timra.se
3	Torsby	12219	www.torsby.se	3	Härnösand	24398	www.harnosand.se
4	Storfors	4150	www.storfors.se	4	Kramfors	18516	www.kramfors.se
5	Hammarö	15061	www.hammaro.se	5	Sollefteå	19736	www.solleftea.se
6	Munkfors	3642	www.munkfors.se	Jämtland			
7	Forshaga	11311	www.forshaga.se	1	Ragunda	5466	www.ragunda.se
8	Grums	8939	www.grums.se	2	Bräcke	6655	www.bracke.se
9	Årjäng	9864	www.arjang.se	3	Krokom	14590	www.krokom.se
10	Sunne	13102	www.sunne.se	4	Strömsund	12138	www.stromsund.se
11	Kristinehamn	23729	www.kristinehamn.se	5	Åre	10406	www.are.se
12	Filipstad	10549	www.filipstad.se	6	Berg	7215	www.berg.se
13	Hagfors	12170	www.hagfors.se	7	Härjedalen	10246	www.harjedalen.se
14	Arvika	25829	www.arvika.se	Västerbotten			
15	Säffle	15308	www.saffle.se	1	Nordmaling	7039	www.nordmaling.se
Dalarna				2	Bjurholm	2421	www.bjurholm.se
1	Vansbro	6779	www.vansbro.se	3	Vindeln	5359	www.vindeln.se
2	Malung-Sälen	10178	www.malung-salen.se	4	Robertsfors	6717	www.robertsfors.se
3	Gagnef	10012	www.gagnef.se	5	Norsjö	4172	www.norsjo.se
4	Leksand	15146	www.leksand.se	6	Malå	3196	www.mala.se
5	Rättvik	10799	www.rattvik.se	7	Storuman	6006	www.storuman.se
6	Orsa	6835	www.orsa.se	8	Sorsele	2673	www.sorsele.se
7	Älvdalen	7139	www.alvdalen.se	9	Dorotea	2794	www.dorotea.se
8	Smedjebacken	10650	www.smedjebacke.se	10	Vännäs	8522	www.vannas.se
9	Mora	20082	www.mora.se	11	Vilhelmina	6941	www.vilhelmina.se
10	Säter	10851	www.sater.se	12	Åsele	2958	www.asele.se
11	Hedemora	15064	www.hedemora.se	13	Lycksele	12351	www.lycksele.se
				Norrbottn			

1						www.arvidsjaur.se
2	Avesta	21467	www.avesta.se	1	Arvidsjaur	6467
1						
3	Ludvika	25639	www.ludvika.se	2	Arjeplog	3054
						www.arjeplog.se
						www.jokkmokk.se
				3	Jokkmokk	5086
						www.overkalix.se
	Gävleborg			4	Överkalix	3497
1	Ockelbo	5850	www.ockelbo.se	5	Kalix	16518
						www.kalix.se
						www.overtornea.se
2	Hofors	9521	www.hofors.se	6	Övertorneå	4772
3	Ovanåker	11392	www.ovanaker.se	7	Pajala	6279
4	Nordanstig	9533	www.nordanstig.se	8	Gällivare	18307
5	Ljusdal	18880	www.ljusdal.se	9	Älvsbyn	8200
6	Sandviken	37089	www.sandviken.se	10	Piteå	41078
7	Söderhamn	25223	www.soderhamn.se	11	Boden	27598
						www.boden.se
						www.haparanda.se
8	Bollnäs	26158	www.bollnas.se	12	Haparanda	9904
9	Hudiksvall	36821	www.hudiksvall.se	13	Kiruna	22972
						www.kiruna.se

Table A2: The excluded municipalities

Region	Municipal	Population
Värmland	Karlstad	86929
Dalarna	Falun	56432
Dalarna	Borlänge	49482
Gävleborg	Gävle	96170
Västernorrland	Sundsvall	96687
Västernorrland	Örnsköldsvik	55008
Jämtland	Östersund	59485
Västerbotten	Umeå	117294
Västerbotten	Skellefteå	71774
Norrbotten	Luleå	74905