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The Place Marketing Concept of Rural Towns in Northern Sweden: What is the Unique Selling Point?

Olga Kompaniets ^a & Daniel Rauhut ^b

Abstract

The place marketing concept is one of the popular concepts to analyze and promote 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 of studies on place marketing however focus on the unique selling points and brands of countries, the capitals and the big cities, while rural towns need more marketing attention due to overcoming the lack of material and non-material resources in the towns. This is based on the idea of promotion to target markets of unique selling point of the town.

This paper aims to discuss to what extent the place marketing concept as a necessary condition for an effective promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions in Sweden. The paper presents reasons for using the place marketing concept by rural towns in Northern Sweden. Also it contains features of the place marketing concept and its key elements for rural towns, describes the target audience for rural towns with their specific needs and wants.

JEL: M31, R58, Z13

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

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has seen an active worldwide growth in the place marketing and place promotion practice. Every country, city and town is trying to build their unique selling point and to use their competitive identity for to sell themselves better than other places. Today's communities and regions of Europe are engaged in a continuous and significant 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 skills in attracting investors, business, residents, and visitors (Kotler et al. 1999).

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. According to this modern marketing concept becoming deeper and more differentiated and related to target markets, which means the necessity of correction of positioning, competitive identity and marketing promotion not only for products, services or companies, but also for the places and areas - countries, regions, cities and towns due to the growth and intensification of competition for investment, tourism and human resources among European cities and towns which has increased the importance of using the place marketing concept to promote themselves.

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). There are quite a lot of theoretical and practical studies showing the place marketing process according to nations, countries, capitals and big cities, focused at different target audiences and used the various marketing tools to make the place marketing process profitable.

The main focus of this paper will be on Swedish place marketing experience, where relatively little has been written about place marketing practice. Some studies on the practice of place marketing exist for big cities like Stockholm (Rainisto 2003), Gothenburg (Braun 2008), and Umeå (Eriksson 2010) and mostly show the possibility of tourists' attraction. Still there are just a few studies showing the positive results of practice place marketing concept for rural towns in Sweden to attract different target markets, especially new residents and employees (Niedomysl 2007, Eriksson 2010).

The aim of this paper is to discuss to what extent the place marketing concept is a necessary condition for an effective promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions in 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) Which

target audience does the place marketing of the rural towns aim at? (3) Is there any unique selling point in the rural towns in Northern Sweden?

The analysed towns 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 the information available at 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 etc. is given to the residents. It is however common that these homepages are used for marketing and branding of the municipality as well. They contain a huge amount of information on perceived target groups; unique selling points and how the municipality view themselves in the place marketing of their municipality. The rationale for using the homepage for marketing and branding purposes is simple: if you decide to go to, e.g. Stockholm, you will get information on major events and services provided on the homepage as well as links to the tourist information office and tourist activities.

This study will start with a literature review followed by a review and discussion of theoretical key elements in place marketing. The theoretical discussion will line out a theoretical synthesis and generate some hypotheses. When this has been done the rural and peripheral northern Sweden will be described. The first part of the section will provide a context in which the place marketing should be applied; the second part will describe the marketing activities at the homepages of the municipalities. In the fifth section of the paper the analysis will be made and in the sixth section the results will be discussed and conclusions will be drawn.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant growth 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, 2002), Ashworth and Voogd (1994), Anholt (2007), Kozma (2006), etc. Kotler with co-authors published three studies about theory and practice of place marketing with American examples (1993), European experience (1999) and place marketing of Asian cities (2002), where a systematic analysis of positive and negative attempts of communities to create their competitive strategies and the role of marketing infrastructure in this process is done. Ashworth and Voogd (1994) discussed about marketing's role in place promotion, new trends appearing 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 described the components of competitive city' brand; the "Anholt's brand hexagon" is most famous illustration of place marketing and place branding process. Kozma (2006) shows a general approach and stages of place marketing with European examples. The historical aspect of marketing and promotion of cities with Great Britain' and USA' practice is highlights 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 can be distinguished studies of countries' marketing practice: Netherland (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 can be mentioned, and so can the study by Metaxas (2002, 2010a) on Prague, Lisbon, Glasgow and Barcelona, by Kavartzis (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 done the content analysis of the websites of European capital cities and identified it's strengths and weaknesses, also they have presented the implications for improvement of this websites.

As is evident the most studies focus on place marketing for countries and cities, rural towns "stay in the shadow" of cities and countries. Kotler et al. (1999) wrote how to attract investments, industries, residents and visitors to cities, communities, regions and nations in Europe and describe some possibility of place marketing for small European towns; authors display examples of Sweden, Norway, and Great Britain etc. Ward (2004) shows the historical example of place promotion of rural town Wichita, in Kansas, which grew from just 50 inhabitants in 1870 to a claimed 40 000 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: Dutch province of Groningen (Meester and Pellenburg 2001); an example of rural marketing in India is given by Velayudhan (2007); Dawson et al. (2011) show the possibility of using place marketing in wine tourism for small wineries in New Zealand; Duxbury and Campbell (2011) present a broad overview of key themes on cultural development (arts activity) in rural and small communities, based on a review of Canadian and international projects and publications. Common for these studies is that place marketing exists only for tourists' aspect – destination marketing.

Only a few studies on 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 (family with children from Stockholm metropolitan area) to Bräcke, municipality in Northern Sweden, distributing brochures about “attractive images of a good place for children to grow up in...” for 4 000 families; the result of the campaign – ten families migrated from Stockholm to Bräcke. So this research shows the possibilities of marketing promotion for attracting new residents. Unfortunately, the author said nothing about who the migrated families were, what kind of jobs and what quality of life they got in Bräcke. Eriksson (2010) describes some marketing campaigns have taken part in rural municipalities of Northern Sweden to attract the new residents. The author tries to show the difference between the quantity of new residents’ group for big cities and for rural areas. The main target group for this analysis is still tourists; the author has collected examples of promotion of the rural municipalities in “Norrland”, but that campaigns have been just short-term promotion without any strategic targets and visible results.

3. PLACE MARKETING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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

There are a lot of special terms describe the marketer’s interests due to nations, 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; Kavaratzis 2007), *urban marketing* (Kavaratzis 2008), *geographical marketing* (Meester and Pellenberg 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), place is a nation-state, a geopolitical physical space; a region or state; a cultural, historical or ethic bounded location; a central city and its surrounding populations; a market with various definable attributes; an industry’s home base and a clustering of like-industries and their supplier; a psychological attribute of relations between people. So the place marketing means 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.

American Marketing Association (2013) says that place marketing is a marketing 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”. Braun (2008: 43) says 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 the place marketing’ activities as a “spiral process reaching higher and higher levels from time to time”, and shows 10-C Model of place marketing, which components form the skeleton of the marketing-spiral and consists of: consumer-orientation; communication; consensus; coordination; cooperation; creativity; conception; campaign; continuity; control.

There is a group of authors who describes the place marketing as a term that aggregates all kinds of territorial formations. Ashworth and Voogd (1994: 43) say 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) shows the sub-fields of place marketing where include the national marketing, city marketing, regional marketing and village marketing. The same opinion has Braun (2008: 30) “...we prefer to say that place marketing is the ‘family name’ for the marketing of neighborhoods, cities, rural areas, regions, states, countries etc”.

As we can see there are no limits of using different terms for describing marketing concept in the context of territorial formations. So for this research it is more relevant to use the term *place marketing* as it refers more to the marketing of rural towns and areas which consists of differences with marketing of cities and countries.

There is a different opinion about what are the key elements of place marketing. Some authors (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999; Metaxas 2002; Braun 2008) agreed that 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. Furthermore the most important element in place marketing concept is people. Kavaratzis (2008: 3-4) shows the city marketing as a process that includes a wide set of activities such as an analysis of the city’s current situation through extensive research on the city’s assets, opportunities and audiences; identification and choice 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,

organizational and promotional; the process ends with monitoring and regularly evaluating the results of all activities.

Kotler et al. (1999: 25) say that place marketing embraces for 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

Activities within the place marketing concept have to be carried out with a focus on the target audience. The international experience shows 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) describes 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 procedure concerning the satisfaction of the needs of target markets. It could 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) the satisfaction of the expectations of 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 get. The same classification of target markets for places is used by most part of authors (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, as well as potentially new residents, are considered as target groups for place marketing (Braun et al. 2010).

Van den Berg and Braun (1999: 993) described 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 place marketing and place branding process: *external target audience* - federal government, investors, tourists and travelers, business visitors, businesses

and entrepreneurs, potential residents and employees such as wealthy individuals, professionals and skilled employees, migrants, national and international mass media; *internal target audience* - regional authorities, citizens, regional mass media, business owners in the area. Moreover, in place marketing process these two groups of target audience often act interconnected.

Place marketing has been practiced in various different contexts including tourism, 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). So the large part of place marketing’ studies focused on attracting tourists to countries, capitals and cities. Another group of place marketing studies has as a target group new businesses and entrepreneurs. Only few studies in place marketing concept have the aim to attract new residents and employees into countries, capitals and 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 - cities are no longer products that provide labour force, land, buildings and infrastructure services to businesses, and home, services and a social environment to residents. The study by Baker and Cameron (2008) defines 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 life quality of cities. Decision makers, local managers, central government officials, politicians, leading businessman, etc., in cities are trying to develop strategies and means of cooperation to reach the above-mentioned goals.

Zenker et al. (2010) focus on residents and workers as a “superordinated” target group because of the growing competition between cities and towns for qualified workforce. Following the studies of Richard Florida, who first coined the term creative class as a rather popular target group among potential citizens and described the ability to create meaningful new concepts and products and to turn this creativity into economic success to be typical for members of the creative class with a “creative core” developing ideas and “creative professionals” using them, Zenker et al. (2010) gave attention to the city perception of the

creative class and compares it to another important place marketing target group – students or future talents – according to Braun (2008).

Kozma (2006: 11) in relation to place marketing distinguished three large target groups which of course can be further sub-categorised: (1) economic participants: the local authorities must endeavour to promote the further development of the companies already operating on their area, to support the starting of small enterprises and to attract new companies; (2) tourists: the local authorities must endeavour to assure the satisfaction of the demands of visiting tourists and to attract new tourists; (3) inhabitants: the local authorities must endeavour to intensify the satisfaction level of local inhabitants and to attract personal groups which are 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 ‘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: 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 offering and benefits that can meet the expectations of a broad number of investors, new businesses and visitors (Kotler et al. 1999: 25). In other words, every place has to have its’ unique selling point for to differentiate itself among others and to keep attention of its target audience for to market itself with the best way.

Metaxas (2010b) discussed the city competitiveness which derives from the internal characteristics of a city. Each city has some characteristics associated with the city’s historical background creating something different or special for the city’s profile. Each city has its own particularities and distinctive characteristics: the geographical position, the city size, the accessibility to big financial or commercial markets, the accessibility to Universities and technological Institutes, the level of infrastructure, the quality of life and the environment, as well as, the city’s specialization on some particular production sectors - constitutes some very important characteristics that could create city’s competitive advantages. What is most important is that each of the city’s distinctive characteristics is a ‘distinctive good’ in itself.

City marketing is aiming to promote and support these characteristics strategically, in order to set up a competitive city image.

3.4 Theoretical synthesis and hypotheses

Place marketing concept of rural towns is aimed at overcoming the lack of material and non-material resources in towns; it is based on the idea of promotion to target markets of unique selling point of the town. To do so 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 their own position and differentiation among others rural towns.

Given this theoretical framework we want to test the following hypotheses: (1) Rural towns in northern Sweden has 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 TOWNS IN NORTHERN SWEDEN

4.1 The context

The studied area in this paper covers the regions Värmland, Dalarna, Gävleborg, Västernorrland, Jämtland, Västerbotten and Norrbotten. The municipalities in the studied seven northernmost regions in Sweden have many things in common when it comes to the economic structure, population development, social and political aspects. The studied area is a very sparsely populated area: with the size bigger than the U.K. the population only reaches 1.7 millions. Kiruna municipality is half of the size of Netherlands (!) and has roughly 23,000 inhabitants. About 18,000 inhabitants live in the “town” Kiruna and the remaining 5,000 in about 50 “settlements” (Statistics Sweden 2013).

The economic structure in Jämtland and Norrbotten is characterised by a positive structural change in the economy, but the changes in the regional branch structure is slower than the national level. The modern branch structure is thus unable to make up for the negative branch effect, which results in a slower economic growth than the national average. Also the regions Värmland, Dalarna, Gävleborg, Västernorrland and Västerbotten show significant problems regarding the economic structure. These regions suffer from an obsolete (industrial) economic structure where the changes in the branch structure are slower than at the national level. Consequently the slower regional growth relative 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 partly be explained by an employment increase in labour intensive service production, while the employment in 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 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 per cent of the changes (Kangasharju et al. 2009).

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

4.2 Place marketing awareness

Since small municipalities in rural and peripheral regions are obliged to provide service information to the residents by internet, they will have the opportunity to brand and market themselves in a similar way as 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 municipal of Kiruna the homepage did not fully function (down for services maintenance) which means that all information asked for was not accessible.

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

- 1 Is there any marketing activity of the municipal on the homepage?
- 2a Is information easy to find at the homepage?
- 2b Any information for potential tourists or residents in English?
- 2c Information in any other languages?
- 3a Is a target audience identified at the homepage?
- 3b Are new residents the target audience?
- 3c Are tourists the target audience?
- 3d Other identified target audiences?
- 4a Are there any selling points?
- 4b What selling points are identified at the homepage?

- 4c Are there any unique selling points?
- 5 Comments / other valuable information?

Some comments on the information we collected to find answers to the questions are worth giving. The information we looked for regarding the first question was, for example, if tourist activities were displayed on the homepage, if there was information on available housing or vacant jobs in the municipal etc. Basically anything that could market or brand the municipal as an interesting place to visit or move to were included in the answer. Albeit this generous and wide definition of ‘marketing activity’, only 29 municipalities displayed such information on their homepage.

In six municipalities the homepages were much unstructured and it was difficult to find all kinds of 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 very structured and it was easy to find information on them.

Information was given in English in 37 municipalities and 45 municipalities provided a translation service of their homepage by Google translator; 24 municipalities also provided translations in other languages (e.g. Finnish, Sami-language, German, Dutch and Thai). To check what languages the information is given in provides knowledge on target groups. Some municipalities which targeted German and Dutch immigrants to settle down in 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 the place marketing theory it is possible to conclude that the most important target audience for rural towns is residents, tourists, new residents and employees, and also businesses. For this study we are focused on external target audience, how municipalities are promoting themselves to attract tourists and new residents.

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

4.4 The unique selling point(s)

The collected information shows that most of rural towns believe that the main selling point they have is the *nature* in various forms. Describing on the homepages unique advantages over others 80% of the rural towns in Northern Sweden using the following: fresh air, beautiful landscape, skiing, skating, sailing, trekking, fishing, hunting, swimming and others kinds of outdoor activity. 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 unique nature objects (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 areas are on the UNESCO's World Heritage List (Kramfors, Jokkmokk (Laponia)), or unique and famous facilities (Scandinavia's famous ski centres: Malung-Sälen, Åre; Berg - Sweden's biggest go-cart track; Arjeplog - International car testing centre) for others it's just the nature without any signs of uniqueness, just a statement of fact. Some towns decided to use infrastructural features like Leksand - free wi-fi in town centre.

The most interesting is that a lot of rural towns use the same message to attract both tourists and new residents, which means that according to municipalities' vision for all target audience the outdoor activities and fresh air are the major reasons to visit these municipalities or even move there permanently. If these municipalities also aim at attracting new companies or entrepreneurs this way is beyond a veil of mystery.

To attract new residents rural towns create the selling points meaningful for families' life style such as good housing facilities, safety issues - Ovanåker - The safest town in Gävleborg region; children-oriented municipal (Forshaga, Storuman), there are a few towns with "Sweden's best school" – Kil, Gagnef, Pajala ("School of world class"). Some municipalities (Hofors, Nordanstig, Sandviken, Malå, Åsele) are using the online contact system for potential residents if they want to move there they can contact with municipality online and they will contact you back with information, also for potential in-movers some towns (Åsele) are holding information meetings several times every year.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 A marketing awareness

The first hypothesis to be tested is that the rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden have a clear place marketing awareness in the homepages; the zero hypothesis is that the municipals have no clear marketing awareness.

Rural areas in Northern Sweden are associated with population loss, disinvestments and the retreat of the welfare state such as through reductions in the public sector. In some areas this situation has brought about an economic restructuring toward the tourism sector. For a while Swedish rural places, particularly in the mountains of northern Sweden, have made efforts to market themselves, for tourism but also to attract more residents. Arguably, place marketing is also about repositioning a place within a national geographical imagination (Eriksson 2010: 88).

In 29 of the analysed 75 municipals 'marketing activity' was obvious on their homepage, i.e. the town/municipality itself or activities in the local area were marketed. Unfortunately, six of the homepages were so unstructured that it was difficult to find information in them. It rather indicates a lack of marketing awareness. It is not very likely to attract foreign tourists to the town/municipal 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 appears marginal in these areas. Braun (2008) and Kozma (2006) also emphasise the marketing awareness for place marketing, otherwise the market, i.e. the target audience, will not be reached.

If roughly about one out of three studied municipals perform 'marketing activities' on their homepages it is difficult to reject the zero hypothesis, i.e. the municipals have no clear marketing awareness with their homepages. Consequently, the tested hypothesis, that the rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden have a clear place marketing awareness in the 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 municipals have not identified nor defined the target audience.

To identify the target audience is the first step in any marketing' campaign regardless of what could be use as a product – products, services, companies, brands or places. Most of the

authors highlight the important role of identifying the target audience in place marketing concept, e.g. 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. So the modern marketing concept becoming deeper and more differentiated and related to target markets. According to Kotler et al. (2002) the place marketing means 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. So it means that any place marketing activity in rural towns has to be start from the identity of target audience. If not they will not attract the aimed market.

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

In 45 of the analysed 75 municipalities the only translation of the homepage existing was an automatic translation service by Google Translator. This kind of automatic translation services is notoriously known for substandard translations. Now, this is a very passive way of attracting tourists. The most common second language in Europe and a very useful language for tourists internationally – English – are not used. It is difficult to consider this as targeting the town/municipality itself or activities in it to international tourists. This conclusion is in line with the theoretical reasoning by Metaxas (2010b) and van der Berg and Braun (1999).

The results in this study show that new residents were a well defined target audience in 25 municipals. In some municipals especially German and Dutch in-migrants 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 freedom compared to the overcrowded countries they come from.

Braun et al. (2010) discuss the residents' role in place branding. The authors argue about an urgent need for resident involvement and participation in place branding because residents simultaneously play four roles in the place marketing process: as target groups of place marketing itself and therefore the main audience of several marketing actions; as an

integrated 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 they are also citizens and are vital for the political legitimization of the whole marketing endeavour. In most places around the world, attracting new residents will inevitably be only a fraction of the place marketing strategy whereas existing residents have a more active role to play. As we have seen in this study, the marketing awareness appears, generally, marginal in northern Sweden and therefore this important aspect – involving the present residents – in attracting the target audience may have been overlooked.

Only three municipals 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. Also Baker and Cameron (2008) stress how important the business aspect is for city marketing. Now, if it is important in city marketing, why should it not be important in the marketing of rural towns?

Although 66 municipals out of the analysed 75 target tourists, only 45 of them can be considered to have a clear notion of what target groups they would like to attract. To provide information is an absolute minimum if you want to attract tourists. When it comes to new residents as a target audience only one out of three municipals have identified and defined them as a target audience. Only three municipals explicitly target entrepreneurs and business which appears remarkable to us in an area with high unemployment, low employment and lots of social problems. It is more likely that the remaining 72 municipals have not thought of entrepreneurs and business as a target group to attract.

Taken all together we find it difficult not to reject the zero hypothesis, i.e. the municipals have neither identified nor defined the 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 the rural towns/municipalities in northern Sweden have a clear notion of what their unique selling points are; the zero hypothesis is that the municipals 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 its' unique selling point for to differentiate itself among others and to keep attention of its target audience for to market itself with the best way (Metaxas 2010b).

It appears, however, that about 80 per cent of the rural towns seem not to know what a unique selling point actually means. Instead, they try to create the USP from trivial things like fresh air, skiing, fishing, and thereby losing the ability to differentiate themselves among the others to attract the target audience. In some cases unique nature objects can be a USP e.g. as the 'Dead' Water Fall, the Storsjö Monster, natural preservation areas on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Unique events are 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-cart 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 uses an infrastructure USP (free wi-fi in the town centre), which must be considered as a bad example of a USP – many café chains and food chains etc. offer free wi-fi for their guests, so why go to Leksand to get free wi-fi when you get that in e.g. every *McDonalds* or *Espresso House* anyway?

The 25 municipals trying to attract new residents use USP's which attracts 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 be provided with elsewhere you have a good selling point. To use cheap housing or good schools will be of interest for families with children. Security can also, to some extent, be considered as a good selling point. On the other hand, it could also be counterproductive as it may indicate that this town is a place God forgot.

None of the 25 municipals targeting new residents use the availability of jobs or vacancies as a USP. If you cannot get a job in a new town, it does not matter if you can get cheap housing and good schools. The theoretical reasoning on USP would definitely argue that this is a mistake and the place in question will fail in its ambition to attract new residents if there are no job prospects (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 municipals targeting entrepreneurs and business (Avesta, Timrå and Pajala) appear to have identified strong USP's: they list all the things they do in their desire to

become the best municipal for entrepreneurs in northern Sweden. If you want to start up or move a company there it is very clear what you can expect. It also signals a very important thing: these municipals do have a vision of the future, where they want to go etc. This definitely makes them unique. To attract 'the creative class' is high-lightened in the theoretical literature as important to be considered an attractive place (Zenker et al. 2010, Cf. Kozma 2006, Braun 2008). Niedomysl (2007) has a different stance when arguing that fresh air, a wonderful nature and lots of out-door activities attracts all kind of target groups.

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

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to discuss to what extent the place marketing concept is a necessary condition for an effective promotion of 75 rural towns in the seven northernmost regions in Sweden. The paper proposes to answer three questions. The first question asked which of the key elements of place marketing can be applied in the marketing of rural towns. The analysis clearly showed that the *marketing awareness* is very low. Just by being aware of the simple fact that the municipalities actually can perform place marketing through their homepages would generate something positive.

Which target audience does the place marketing of the rural towns aim at was the second question. Many of the rural municipalities appear to use the same selling points for all target groups: different outdoor activities, fresh air and a wonderful nature. Only three municipalities target entrepreneurs or business. Furthermore, the 25 municipals trying to target new residents will fail to be successful. To offer cheap housing and good schools definitely target families with children, but if there is no information on vacancies or even job prospects it is unclear what target audience these municipalities aim at reaching.

It is also worth noting that although 66 municipalities of the 75 analysed target tourists, some of them only provide information in Swedish and only 37 have an English translation of the information on the homepage. If you want to reach a certain market it is obvious that you need to address the market in a language spoken there. Neither theory nor previous research has paid any attention to this aspect. One explanation may be that this is so

trivial or basic; it can also happen that this aspect simply has been overlooked. The major theoretical works (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999, Zenker et al 2010, Niedomysl 2007, Ashworth and Voogd 1994) do however not touch upon this aspect.

The third question aim at finding any unique selling point in the rural towns in Northern Sweden. The conclusion here is that the place marketing concept of rural towns is aimed at overcoming the lack of material and non-material resources in towns; it is based on the idea of promotion to target markets of unique selling point of the town. The term “unique selling points” 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 their own position and differentiation among others rural towns. Only few municipals appear to have a notion of what a *unique* selling point is. To use fresh air, a wonderful nature or outdoor activities is definitely a non-starter when trying being unique when 80 per cent 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 emphasised. A really unique selling point is the basics in all kind of marketing, with no exception for place marketing.

According to Ashworth and Voogd (1994) there are three main strategies of segmentation: focus strategy (focusing only on one target market), differentiation strategy (choosing various target markets, but with a different approach strategy for each one), and non-differentiation strategy (where all target markets are confronted in the same way, offering the same approach for each on). The findings in this paper suggest that the municipalities in northern Sweden appear to have chosen the *non-differentiation strategy*, which can explain the meager results in place marketing.

Place marketing is used synonymously with location marketing and implies use of marketing principles to attract tourists, residents and investors into a particular region. A region in this case is regarded as a product or brand with a bundle of attributes although place as a product may have some differences from commercial products (*Cf.* Hankinson, 2007). In the theoretical world places compete to each other and thus adopt strategic marketing techniques to create competitive advantage is essential. It has been argued that the 3P's of marketing can fit into 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 dissemination of information in 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. First of all, the municipalities appear not to even try to profile them in a unique way relative other municipalities – about 80 per cent use selling points related to fresh air, a wonderful nature and outdoor activities. Furthermore, the notion of which target audience to address appears blurry, to say the least. Finally, the selling points appear to be of ‘low investment’ character: fresh air and objects related to a wonderful nature; in some municipalities old churches or other buildings are high-lighted as beautiful sights to see. None of these things require investments as they are already there. Sports facilities require investments and so do housing and schools. Actually, these things require a political involvement to be operationalised. The same can be said about the creation of business parks and infrastructure needed to attract (and keep) business. These findings suggest that the local and regional policy makers 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 per cent of the studied municipals 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 and how to reach the desired target audience. When they do so, they will be able to attract tourists as well as new residents and business. Meanwhile they have to be content with fresh air, a wonderful nature and outdoor activities.

This paper also finds two theoretical shortcomings: (1) the first relates to the language issue. If you would like to reach the target audience you simply need to address this market in a language spoken by it. Although this is trivial and belongs to the basics of marketing, no studies 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. We have used the tools and theories on city marketing in this paper and just transferred it to rural conditions. This is, however, based upon the assumption that such knowledge transfer is possible. The very limited number of empirical studies offers little guidance.

APPENDIX A: THE EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

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

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

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