IDENTITY BASED GEO- AND TOURISM BRANDING STRATEGIES DERIVED FROM RURAL MARAMUREŞ LAND (ROMANIA)

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Abstract: Rural Maramures Land is well-established as identity based place brand. It was "naturally" exploited by regional stakeholders, until the new geo-branding fever reached this relatively conservative area. The paper examines the relationship between place branding and tourist branding, and how destination management organisations (DMOs) are substituted by other stakeholders in order to promote identity based strategies. In consequence, communication, concepts and networks will function at the benchmark imposed by the DMO placeholders: NGOs, universities, museums, tourism networks and portals, with substantiated discourse and oriented networks and platforms. Theory is derived from two different perspectives: identity-based cultural events and the local strategy of a LAG (Mara-Gutai, in Maramures, Romania).

Key words: Maramures Land, geobranding, tourism branding, DMO placeholder

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INTRODUCTION

Small tourist destinations, located in peripheral areas have a long-standing image of heritage containers, rich cultural rural areas, a specific vernacular architecture as background for a range of tourist attractions and activities. This is the case of the Romanian "lands": Maramures Land, Oas Land, etc. However, they were affected by an uneven development in respect with other regions, powered by different constraints. The place brand was "naturally" exploited by regional stakeholders, until the new geo-branding fever reached these relatively conservative areas.

This paper examines the relationship between place branding and tourist branding, and how DMOs (Destination Management Organisations) are substituted by other stakeholders in order to promote identity based strategies. Preliminary work on geo-branding issues directed towards the study of an existing, well established identity-based place brand – Maramures Land. Analysis on less controlled development, on local and

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regional strategies, and on tourism activities highlighted some interesting features. The development of tourist infrastructure has an upward trend, and yet the tourist service providers point out a malaise. Interviews with B&B owners specify a lack of assortment regarding the complementary services, weak integration of services, low networking capabilities (Ilies & Hotea, 2010). This was regardless of the general economic crisis, and statements of this kind came in earlier. Tourist satisfaction surveys, carried out by researchers (Stancioiu et al., 2011; Drule et al., 2013) and organizations related to the main DMO (Visit Maramures at www.visitmaramures.ro) showed the main themes needed to asses: assortment, access, information, as well as strong points: traditional food, light cultural activities, local community openness, attractions. Touroperators and main resellers recognize the importance of the present cultural tourism brand. Professional discussions and working partnerships show a slight incoherence at national level, in communicating features, imagery, and frequent changes, hard to manage.

Main research questions are: (1) To what extent the existing place brand, based on regional identity, takes the role of a tourist brand? (2) How to combine geo-branding strategies for tourism and socio-economic objectives in rural Maramures Land? (3) What is the main task of a DMO placeholder?

BACKGROUND

The lower levels of decision in the field of tourism branding are populated with stakeholders that play the DMO placeholder part in the identity-based discourse. Destination management organizations are mainly public bodies having a specific way of functioning. Their projects and funding have a visibly slower lifecycle than the private or NGO project-based activities. In consequence, communication, concepts and networks will function at the benchmark imposed by the DMO placeholders: NGOs, universities, museums, tourism networks, e-tourism portals. All of these DMO placeholders use the regional brand to communicate the tourism brand. The selection of discursive images, sounds, landscapes has a larger variability in this case, biased by the interests of the organization. Main inspiration comes from the rural Maramures Land, with its landmarks (in terms of personality and representations): wood art, vernacular wooden architecture, textiles and landscapes that inspire a spirited, honest, cheerful, reliable, intelligent, charming and open community (Drule et al., 2013). Therefore, the discussions in this paper focus on identity-based events and prioritization of actions in a Local Action Group's development strategy. The actors involved in place branding are DMO placeholders, functioning on networking principles.

Identity-based cultural events

The festival is known as "Marmatia", as part of a larger product "December in Maramures". In 1967 a team of ethnographers started this project in order to preserve immaterial cultural heritage, threatened by the heavy industrialisation process at that time. On the day of the Parade, on December 27th, 40-50 groups of amateur artists from the surrounding villages perform traditional folk music, carols, dances and theatre numbers. After the parade, a smaller conference is gathering all those specialists working on cultural heritage (academics, museum curators, writers etc.). The datasets used in this study refer to the 44th, 45th and 46th edition, in 2012 -2014 period.

All of the previous editions were directed quite organically (with low management capacity); therefore main cultural stakeholders started to lose interest in this festival; that is why they needed new input. A research team from the university has conducted interviews with participants (tourists), locals and artist groups; a fair amount of qualitative data was produced. As the track record of several team members included also practical experience in tourism, the Mayor's office (as the main funding body) decided to

implement the new ideas. This was difficult because the main research interest was in preserving rural heritage, not in innovation or event management; it was a challenge to determine the main intervention points for regional development and raising destination attractiveness. Another constraint was related to the fact that imported ideas, implemented for the first time at certain level, do not equal innovation. Innovation creates "victims" by *changing traditional methods* or at least by threatening certain interests (Decelle, 2004). This approach created the ending of incoherent actions on cultural management at local level, and opened the door for a new stakeholder - the municipal cultural centre.

The mapping of the origin of the spectators is important, tourists from 12 Romanian counties (21.35%), international tourists (4.16%), locals from Maramures Land villages (40.6%), and from Sighetu Marmatiei municipality (33.85%), were present during the studied editions (2012-2014). The average attendance was 20,000 - 25.5% tourists and 74.5% locals. 98% of the tourists were accommodated in B&Bs functioning in Maramures Land, and the rest at the limit of the region (Lapus and Chioar Land, both in Maramures County as well).

It was important to look at the festival from the *services'* point of view. The festival will become *a tourist attraction* or it will remain a *merit good* (subsidised)?

In Romania, this is the first time the university is involved in the concept and in the operations related to a traditional festival. As consequence, the research team contributed to the process of making the festival. It demonstrated that the university could be involved in the development of the festival through specific knowledge management. The features of communication and the "negotiations" during the development of the concept support the conclusions of Florida et al., (2002) that only the university could nurture innovation in a region with such high social capital as Maramures Land.

The LAGs

The main voices that shape small cultural tourism destinations are: local action groups (LAGs, organised groups of communes, animated by same ideas on development), outgoing/returning temporary migration flows, upper-level administration (mostly infrastructure planning and policies). LAGs, organised around the LEADER concept, conceive and apply bottom-up strategies for development, which often include tourism or complementary activities. Two "studies on the zone", for Mara-Gutai LAG: first, on the preservation stage of vernacular wooden architecture, and the second, on the carrying capacity of protected sites, with accent on tourism services, were produced (Ilies et al., 2014). The studies on Gutai Mara LAG's area are territorial analyses arising from the need to substantiate specific local elements, due to the nature and speed of the changes occurring in society. The local development strategy states as its objective: *maintaining, consolidating and promoting the local/regional identity* closely linked to Maramures.

METHODS

The main objective of the study is approached using knowledge and network mapping. This enabled to draw-out the relationships between the various stakeholders, the organisers of the festival, and the LAG's actions. Also, representing the nature of the relationships will allow concluding on the intervention points and the areas where the university could contribute with knowledge to the discourse on the region. Observation and cross-analysis is used to enrich the study, regarding the brand core, the development of the brand as part of a wider national project for the Romanian tourist brand, its dynamic.

Notions such as place branding, geo-branding, tourism branding are often correlated and linked to the notion of regional identity (Hankinson, 2004; Harrison-

Walker, 2012; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). The interaction between the place and the brand has been outlined since 2011, "brands and space mutually shape each other" (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). This concept is important for the present paper, having in mind that the *Maramures* brand is already identity-based, and it does not need a re-construction at this point. The functional symbolism, as part of a hard/soft geo-branding strategy mix, is mentioned in relation to festivals, served by cultural repertoires (Giovanardi, 2011, 2012).

Regarding the multitude of models, stage lists and generalizations, this study focuses on the Albernathy and Clark model (Hjalager, 2002), that accentuates the features of innovation used in the process for the festivals. The relational branding communication model (Harrison-Walker, 2012) was adapted for the Maramures tourist brand and supported the need to link with development strategies in LAGs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary empirical research shows several findings: (1) the tourist brand is overlapping the place brand, and sometimes outgrows it; (2) Place brand takes the place of the tourist brand; (3) Place brand is impacting the tourist brand, both in positive and negative ways.

The place brand as tourist brand

The tourist brand is covering a larger geographical area than the place brand. Maramures Land lays on 3 311km². It is a land type region, with strong cultural, ethnographical and landscape landmarks, recognised on the tourist market as Maramures tourist region. The tourist region has at least two shapes: Maramures and Satu Mare Counties combined (Figure 1), or only Maramures County.
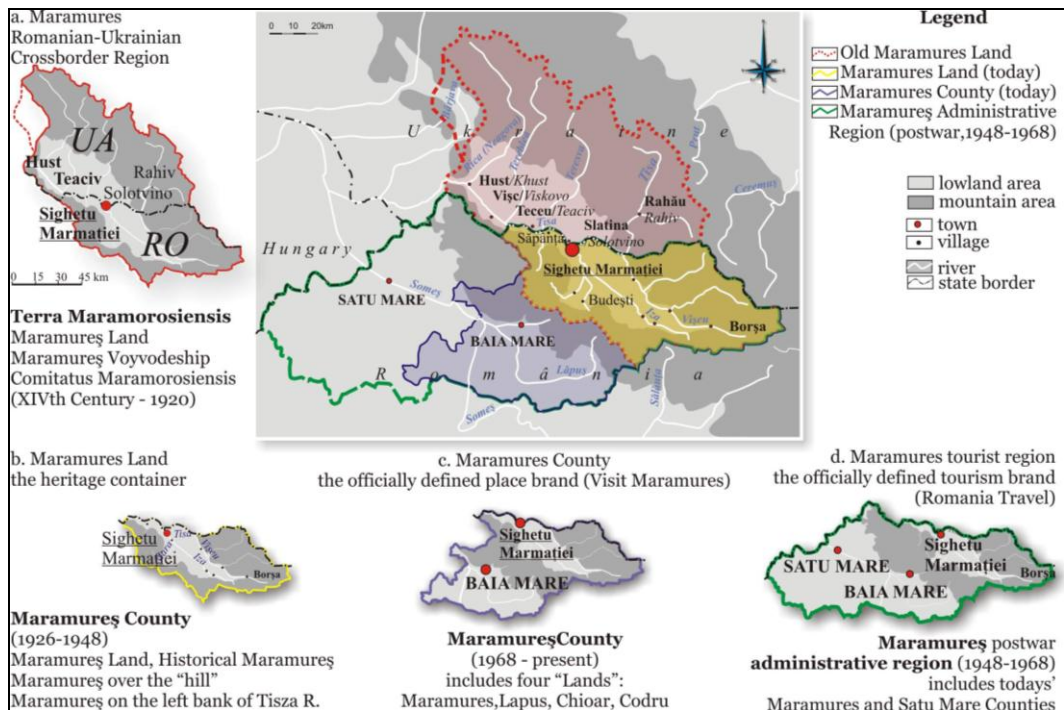

Figure 1. Spatial units named "Maramures" and the relationship with the tourism brand
(Source: Ilies et al., 2014)

First is better marketed by touroperators across Romania, the second is a natural extension to the limits of the NUTS 3 administrative unit with its official bodies, including the main DMO Visit Maramures (www.visitmaramures.ro). National tourist office, Romania Travel (www. romania.travel), maintains the name of the county as synonymous with the tourist region and it does not present a map. Although, the region, the attractions, and activities are highly linked to Maramures Land, the northern part of the county.

Geo-branding strategies for tourism and socio-economic objectives

Branding strategies for Maramures are strongly linked to regional identity. Relational branding (Figure 2) and the features of the core (Hankinson, 2004 in Harrison-Walker, 2012) define the concept for the festivalscape and the main priorities for the Mara-Gutai LAG (Table 1).
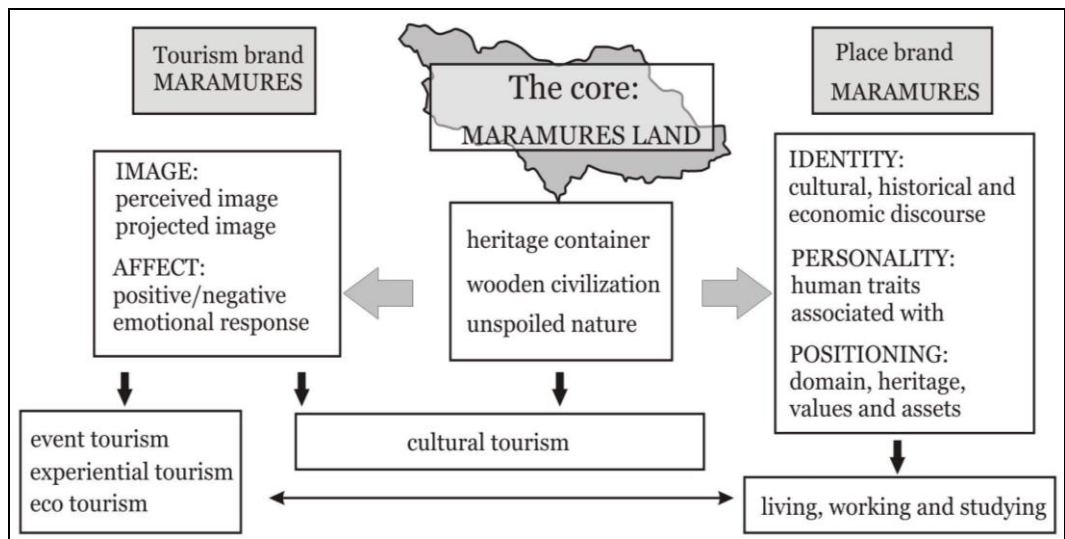
Figure 2. Relational branding based on the features of the core in Maramures Land
(adapted from Hankinson, 2004)

Table 1. Parallel approaches for the Maramures brand's core

Features	The festival	The LAG's objective
A "land", heritage container	Logo derived from the folk costume; Selection of authentic costumes and portfolios for the groups; Craftsmen display their work	Preserving the heritage by specific means (local strategy)
Wooden civilization - a specific vernacular architecture for dwellings and churches	Re-interpretations of wooden elements in the spatial planning;	Creating a simple and clear blueprint for the wooden houses
Nature – protected areas and scenic landscapes	Info-festival centre with tourist info included	Park services and support capacity

The "land" as a heritage container is approached by the festival through the logo, the selection procedures, definition of authentic display etc. The LAG tackles the issue with its own means: strategic planning and actions. Wooden architecture is

reinterpreted in a new innovative manner by the festivalscape planners; on the other hand, LAG creates a simple and clear blueprint to raise awareness on the feature. This will allow stakeholders to build in accordance with the traditional ways: houses, guesthouses, service infrastructures etc.

Main task of a DMO placeholder

Destination management organizations (the DMOs) are public bodies, owned by municipalities, and have the main task to raise awareness of the tourist brand, in order to increase the number of tourists, overnights or other services. In Romania, there are three types of DMOs. Tourist information centers are funded by the municipalities (for local and regional level), and function by the town/commune council. Tourism and County Promotion Office, funded by the county council, outline the marketing strategies and promotion projects for the county. Tourism information centers depending on public funding through projects, managed by NGOs, usually function as long as the project is requesting it.

A DMO placeholder is another type of unit that steps-in at destination level, in order to ensure a proper destination branding, with specific means: NGOs with interests in socio-economic development, universities, museums, e-tourism portals and networks. From this perspective, the LAGs, the local university, the museums, and the local tourism networks are the serrious voices. They have the means to counterbalance the biased discourses regarding the shape, the attractions and the authenticity of the tourist region.

Substantiated discourses are proven concepts, with high degree of peer-reviewed activities, negotiated and implemented at the most accessible level. Theoretical background is set by Jarkko Saarinen (Saarinen, 2004) with its two sided study on *discourse of a region* and *discourse of development*, leading to the identity of a tourist region, further used in branding strategies.

Table 2. Actions and discourses related to the identity-based cultural event

Component	Actions	Discourse
Production of the parade	Participant selection	Groups of amateur artists from the surrounding villages perform *only* traditional, authentic folk music, carols, dances and theatre numbers
	Main spatial deployment	Map with the specific show location, *traditional itinerary* of the parade
Human ressource management	Leveling different teams	Capitalise on the *neutral image* of the university
	Bringing in qualified/trained personnel	New improved event *management* capacity, qualified staff
	Volunteers management	Envolving the *young generation* in the making of the event
Procedures	Tacit knowledge management	*Valorizing* the past editions' strong features, eliminating the weaknesses
	Structured documents	Formal communication, *new media*
Equipment, facilities and work units	Scenery/the festivalscape	*Reinterpretation* of traditional wood carving, textiles, masks
	Work units: stops, main stage, infocenter	*Communicating* the festival, envolving the participants

This involves two types of data: information on the indexing process on the natural and cultural characteristics of a region, and data on economic and institutional

practices of tourism in a given region. Knowledge mapping brings in the information related to the concepts on: spatial planning of an event, external concept of the event, graphic design for operations and communication, event management with visitors and artist groups, policy, etc (Table 2).

Oriented networks and platforms are formed arround coomon interests, the socio-economic development of the region. Geo-branding is applied in order to increase attractiveness of the teritory, in a bottom-up approach. LEADER programme fits well into this concept; LAGs have already taken the role of the DMO. Local development strategy is implemented through projects, including tourism and cooperation measures (413.313, 421, Table 3).

Table 3. Priorities and operational objectives
for the local development strategy of LAG Mara-Gutai
(Data source: LAG Mara-Gutai, 2015)

	Priority	Actions	Discourse
1.	Raising the atractiveness of the teritory	Supporting cultural activities and events	*Authentic* cultural products associated to the rural tourism activities in the area.
		Developing the promotion and communication tools	*Website* design and layout with visual elements derived from traditional woodcarving, textiles and painting.
		Renovation of cultural infrastructure	Authentic folk *costumes*, reinforce the pride of wearing them and relaunch the production.
		Valorisation of natural and cultural heritage	Support authentic features in the *architecture* of the future tourist infrastructure; Respect the tourist carrying capacity of the protected areas.
2.	Increasing competitivity and economic viability	Diversification of local produce offer	Encouraging local groups to form *cooperatives* and to concentrate on local produce.
		Enhancing the storage and selling capacity for local produce	Building *markets* and storages.
		Encouraging small farms to enter the produce market	*Support* small farms with funding and logistics.
3.	Developing the cooperation and management capacity	Partnership development	Common tourist attractions and infrastructure *promotion*.
		Local management abilities	Good project *team*.

CONCLUSIONS

The rural area of Maramures Land is undoubtedly providing supplies for the identity-based geo- and for tourism branding strategies. These elements are mostly from the cultural heritage, the brand's core: the land as heritage container, the wooden civilization and the scenic landscape.

The importance of the core for the geo-branding strategy is derived from the impact on human resources (community resilience, social capital, strong attachment to the land, education, working skills, etc) and also from the economic resources' vantage point (eco-agriculture even with less fertile soils, prevalence of cattle breeding, deforestation and the lumber economy, natural construction rocks, food and textile industry/manufacturers, tourism services, etc).

Tourism branding is rather inconsistent at DMO level, but a series of placeholders take their role in increasing the attractiveness and the tourist frequency. Substantiated discourses and oriented networks form the link between the geo and tourism branding strategies.

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