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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Destination Marketing &amp; Management

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm)

## Research Paper

## Discursive contradictions in regional tourism marketing strategies: The case of Fryslân, The Netherlands



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 21 January 2015

Received in revised form

27 May 2015

Accepted 2 June 2015

Available online 13 July 2015

## Keywords:

Destination identities

Intraregional tourism

Tourism marketing

Discursive contradictions

Qualitative analysis

## ABSTRACT

Discourses in tourism destination marketing play an important role in constructing and consuming tourism destinations. However, various discursive contradictions can emerge, potentially limiting or facilitating tourism development. This paper has two objectives. First, it aims to identify discursive contradictions embedded in the positioning statements of regional tourism marketing strategy documents. Second, it intends to highlight how such contradictions simultaneously prioritize and destabilize certain destination identities. Employing the case of the Dutch province of Fryslân, discourse analysis of tourism marketing documents was conducted. Findings revealed contradictions emerging along five themes: place branding, identity claims, target groups, roles and collaboration. Regional Frisian tourism marketing appears to prioritize external orientations and homogenizing identities, with limited consideration of geographically proximate markets and a selective perception of internal stakeholders' roles in tourism. Possible implications of such destination positioning are discussed and suggestions are made to balance various positioning orientations in regional place branding.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism marketing strategies can have significant implications in terms of the social construction of tourist regions and the opportunities and limitations for stakeholders to engage in tourism. Importantly, tourism marketing as a policy tool aims to influence representations of tourism destinations (Cousin, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2012). Destination identities may therefore be politically charged (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003) and attributed meanings may be far from neutral. As such, various interests may underlie the discourse employed in destination positioning statements made in regional tourism marketing.

Regions and tourism destinations alike are socially constructed and derive their meaning and identities from discursive practices (Saarinen, 2004). While discourses do mobilize meanings themselves, they are always incomplete and contested, giving room for the emergence of tensions between attributed meanings (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). Such tension can result from discursive contradictions and paradoxes, reflecting opposing interests or unrealistic aspirations for tourism development. Marketing strategies then can become contradictory or even counterproductive, communicating conflicting signals. An example is when destination marketing is developed for external visitors only, without considering the consequences for the local environment and residents

(Burns, 2004; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; van Rekom & Go, 2006; Ziakas, 2013).

This is particularly relevant for regions in which tourism mainly relies on markets that are geographically proximate or even within the regions that are branded as destinations. In a context where home and away are geographically proximate, binaries of tourist–host, visitor–resident and consumer–producer become increasingly indistinguishable, which makes them vulnerable to contestation and to contradictions between attributed meanings. Contradictions can become problematic in tourism marketing when they are not acknowledged or wrongly used. At the same time, when consciously used they might form a basis for tourism development by positioning destinations through otherness and authenticity on various levels, and by constructing and re-confirming differences between and within destinations (Salazar, 2010).

However, the 'intraregional' perspective of tourism and its societal dynamics has for a long time remained largely overlooked. Mainstream understandings of tourism have become almost equivalent to international travel, crossing territorial borders and the mixing of cultures (Salazar, 2010). It is stated that tourism research suffers from an 'international bias' (Eijgelaar, Peeters, & Piket, 2008). Much tourism research has ignored touristic activities and experiences near to everyday environments, where tourism is produced and consumed by people living within a region (Cavanaugh, 2013) or a city (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenke, 2013). As such, a number of challenges arise when aiming for an improved

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comprehension of tourism at a regional level.

One challenge pertains to the way everyday experience of places, attractions and regions intermingles with tourist experiences and vice versa (Díaz Soria & Llurdés Coit, 2013). Another challenge is to better understand how regional destination identities are produced and reproduced (Pearce, 2014; Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011) and how key stakeholders in this process engage in this through the discourse they use. While top-down understandings of tourism development are countered or complemented by bottom-up processes such as word of mouth (Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2014; Pan, Maclaurin, & Croots, 2007), governments, destination marketers and policy makers maintain essential players in this process. Therefore, we aim to disentangle various contradictions present in the discourse of regional tourism marketing. Employing the case of the Dutch province of Fryslân, a thematic analysis of destination positioning in tourism marketing strategy documents forms the basis of this paper. As such, the paper is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What kind of contradictions emerge in the ways Fryslân is positioned as a tourism destination by regional tourism marketing strategies?

(2) What are the possible implications of destination positioning discourse and the concurrent contradictions for Fryslân as a destination for intraregional tourism?

By focusing on the implications of destination positioning discourse for tourism as an intraregional phenomenon, this paper aligns with a small but growing number of tourism researchers who identify a lacuna of academic knowledge on the social, economic and psychological processes involved in tourism on national and (intra)regional levels (Canavan, 2013; Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2013; Schänzel, 2010; Singh & Krakover, 2015). After further embedding the paper in relevant academic scholarship, we introduce the particular geographical context of the study and outline the methodology and data used. The paper continues with the analysis and findings, followed by a discussion about the implications of discourse in destination marketing, particularly with respect to the various roles of internal stakeholders in relation to tourism and the potential of tourism to (re)create value to everyday life environments.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. The discursive construction of tourism destinations

The branding of tourism destinations is an important way of giving meaning to regions (Cox & Wray, 2011; Lee & Arcodia, 2011; Ploner, 2009). Similar to regions, meanings of tourism destinations are continuously contested through discourse (Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011), with an ongoing interaction between hegemonic, emergent and residual meanings (Harrison, 2013) and several phases of institutionalization (Paasi, 2003, 2009; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013).

Representing regions as tourism destinations is increasingly central to regional policy and tourism marketing. Destination positioning, defined as 'establishing and maintaining a distinctive place in the market for an organization and/or its individual product offerings' (Lovelock, 1991, in Pike, 2012, p. 101) is an important part of competitive marketing strategies. The discourse used in tourism marketing, and the ways destinations are positioned, frames identities (Cousin, 2008; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) and (re)constructs destination imaginaries (Salazar, 2012). Moreover, discourses have multiple functions, as 'language is both a means of attributing authenticating value to the tourist product as well as a means of selling it' (Heller, Pujolar, & Duchêne, 2014, p. 551). Destination positioning is therefore politically charged,

reflecting and affecting various interests and rooted in societal issues extending far beyond the realm of tourism itself (Cousin, 2008). As such, tourism marketing and the branding of regional as tourism destinations are important planning tools for regional governments (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003).

However, despite the popularity of destination branding, successful examples are limited and the results of substantial financial investments in marketing campaigns are difficult to identify or absent altogether. Literature points to considerable problems of extrapolating conventional product and corporate brand positioning tools to destinations (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). For example, marketing campaigns initiated by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) or regional governments tend to have difficulties accounting for perspectives and interests of stakeholders such as residents (Burmans, Hegner, & Riley, 2009; Hall, 2008; Zenker & Petersen, 2014). This results in a lack of bottom-up support, despite the increased acknowledgment that 'living the brand' by local stakeholders is essential (Aronczyk, 2008). Moreover, as pointed out by Braun et al. (2013), residents who do not identify with top-down enforced brand positioning claims might engage in 'counter branding' as a form of protest.

Institutionalizing destination identities is therefore far from being a one-way process. Meanings are circulated (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004) by commodifying both tangible and intangible aspects, for example through the representation of heritage (Ashworth, 2009) or collective identities (Cousin, 2008). In this process, conventional stakeholders such as DMOs increasingly share the arena with other who have obtained a legitimate voice through word of mouth facilitated by travel blogs and customer review websites (Chen et al., 2014; Chu & Kim, 2011; Pan et al., 2007). Place branding thus is a process of co-creation (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015), forcing regional governments, tourism entrepreneurs and DMOs to be even more conscious about their role in destination branding and the ways they attempt to position regions and destinations.

Constructing and transforming tourism destinations is characterized by processes of homogenization and differentiation (Saarinen, 2004). Tourism destinations tend to homogenize both from within and compared to other destinations, aligning with Relph's classic idea of 'placelessness' (Relph, 1985) and Appadurai's 'cultural absorption' (Appadurai, 2011). Differentiation occurs in a rat-race with other destinations, attempting to create a 'competitive identity' (Anholt, 2007). This is done by emphasizing unique features of places, varying from physical assets such as beaches or mountains, to cultural ones such as local food or festivities (Saarinen, 2004). In this vein, regional tourism marketing strategies aim to develop destinations that can compete globally by capitalizing on regional identities, authenticity and local distinctiveness (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003).

Tourism marketing is also strongly spatially structured, often along territorial boundaries on various levels (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003), with possible limitations in the translation to tourism regions and destinations, which tend to be less territorially bound (Messely, Schuermans, Dessein, & Rogge, 2014; Pearce, 2014). This can create contradictions between internal and external orientations of destination marketing, for example when different municipalities, states or countries attempt to develop tourist regions collaboratively (García-Álvarez & Trillo-Santamaría, 2013; Terhorst & Erkuş-Öztürk, 2011; Thomas, Harvey, & Hawkins, 2013), and where histories and identities have to be aligned.

Tourism marketing can thus be a mobilizing force, connecting and unifying stakeholders (Cousin, 2008), but at the same time a basis for tensions and conflicts (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Stepanova & Bruckmeier, 2013) between them. Awareness of how discourses among these stakeholders implicitly and explicitly prioritize some meanings and neglect others, include some stakeholders and

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