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Building the Slow Adventure Brand in the Northern Periphery.

Introduction

The use of tourism as a sustainable regional development strategy, particularly for rural and/or peripheral areas, has been a focus of academic debates and policy discourse for nearly 30 years (e.g., Briedenham & Wickens, 2004; Hall & Boyd, 2005; Lane, 1994; Müller & Jansson, 2006). At the same time, scholars have noted that rural and peripheral areas face specific challenges in tourism brand development, which are important to overcome because rural regions are often dependent on joint branding in order to develop effective place brands (Cai, 2002; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013). In addition, Europe has seen a rise in interregional cross-border place branding, incentivized by the EU cohesion policy and its specialized funds (Braun, 2015; Witte & Braun, 2015). In this context, Nordic peripheries emerge as an interesting example, characterized by both typical challenges (e.g., outmigration, aging population, deindustrialization) and unique opportunities (e.g., high aesthetic, environmental, cultural value, comparatively high quality of life). Nordic peripheries, therefore, comprise ‘the other’ facet of the Nordic place brand, not being part of the ‘slick’ image of the hypermodern, progressive and dynamic urban Nordic spaces. All of the aforementioned makes Nordic peripheries particularly attractive for tourism, which is increasing in popularity in terms of tourist arrivals and media coverage as well as academic research (Brouder, 2013; Berglund, 2017; Hall & Boyd, 2006; Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2009; Lee, Weaver & Prebensen, 2017).

This chapter explores branding in the context of Nordic and northern peripheries through a case study of the Slow Adventure in Northern Territories¹ (SAINT) – a cross-border project funded by the EU Northern Periphery and Arctic Cooperation Program² (NPA), aimed at the geographical area sometimes called the Nordic and Celtic northern Europe (Danson & de Souza, 2012). The main goal of the SAINT project was to help local small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs) overcome the challenges of peripherality in their branding and marketing efforts, and advance the development of an interregional cross-border place brand. Project participants were from four Nordic countries (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland) and three non-Nordic countries (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland), all areas with, according to the NPA, typical features associated with northern peripheries. SAINT draws directly from Varley and Semple’s (2015) concept of *Nordic slow adventure*, in turn rooted in the Nordic philosophy of outdoor recreation and the international slow movements.

¹ <http://saintproject.eu/>

² <http://www.interreg-npa.eu>

Our chapter aligns with the second theme of this book, i.e. *performance* of place branding. We unpack the course of developing and testing a slow adventure brand in the geographical context of the Nordic and northern periphery of Europe, as an emergent and unfinished process. The chapter specifically focuses on the appropriation of the Nordic outdoor recreation tradition, while merging it with the ethics of the slow movements, which is further applied to the cross-border region of the northern periphery of Europe. This chapter starts with a theoretical discussion, where we provide the background of the outdoor recreation tradition in the Nordic countries, the special place of the northern peripheries in the tourist imagery of the Nordics, and the process of negotiating various concepts while creating the slow adventure brand. We proceed with a brief overview of the SAINT project results, followed by a discussion and conclusion, positioning the slow adventure and the interregional place branding initiatives in a bigger picture of regional, international and global trends.

Outdoor recreation in the Nordic countries

Outdoor recreation in the Nordic countries is more than just a leisure pastime. Known in Sweden and Norway as *friluftsliv*, literally translated as ‘life in the open air’, outdoor recreation is a tradition, a belief system, and, a way of life. The term is believed to be coined by the great Henrik Ibsen, himself a passionate wanderer, who captured the spirit of the age in his epic poem ‘On the Heights’ in 1859 (Leirhaug, 2009). Nordic outdoor recreation has been referred to as ‘a philosophical lifestyle based on experiences of the freedom in nature and the spiritual connectedness with the landscape. The reward of this connectedness with the landscape is this strong sensation of a new level of consciousness and a spiritual wholeness’ (Gelter, 2000, p.78). The emphasis on outdoor recreation in the Nordic countries has conventionally been based on fairly simple and straightforward outdoor activities, practiced by the general population, such as walking, hiking, swimming, skiing, camping, mushroom- and berry-picking, in a non-competitive context (Aasetre, & Gundersen, 2012; Sandell & Sörlin, 2000).

Starting from the 19th century, nature has been a key component in the construction and mobilization of national identities in the Nordic countries. Outdoor recreation has shown the capacity to bridge different social classes and distant communities, through circulation of publications, stories, photos, paintings, and other media, resulting in what Sandell and Sörlin (2000) called ‘discovery of recreation landscape’. In addition, several contextual elements contributed to the popularization of outdoor recreation in the Nordic countries. First, there is the Right of Public Access (or ‘freedom to roam’), which offers all citizens nearly unlimited access to nature for recreation purposes. Second, Nordic societies underwent urbanization relatively recently compared to the rest of Europe. The skills of living off the land (e.g., hunting, fishing, bush craft), and links to the countryside have stayed strong among the general population (Hörnsten, 2000). Finally, the Nordic countries are sparsely populated, which leaves vast uninhabited areas, particularly in the peripheries. These and other factors have ensured a unique place for outdoor recreation in the Nordic cultures.

Outdoor recreation, like any other social phenomenon, has undergone substantial transformations throughout the last century. Departing from the traditional modes of engaging with nature, the current trends include increasing commercialization, diversification, sportification, motorization, and a growing emphasis on adventure, performance, and equipment (e.g., Elmahdy, Haukeland

& Fredman, 2017; Fredman, Stenseke & Sandell, 2014; Varley & Semple, 2015). Furthermore, changes in demographics and lifestyle, economic and technological developments have resulted in a growing preference for short and high-quality forms of recreation, capitalizing on infrastructure, comfort and accessibility (Fredman, Wall-Reinius & Grundén, 2012; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011). In conclusion, a review of the outdoor recreation trends indicates that the interest in outdoor recreation in the Nordic countries remains high, while the modes of engagement with nature have exploded in diversity, among which the factors of speed and adventure are important. SAINT aims to tap into this opportunity while offering an alternative *slow* adventure, capitalizing on the Nordic recreation traditions.

Outdoor recreation in the northern peripheries as a Nordic tourist brand

North and northern peripheries have been historically exoticized and romanticized as places of untouched, awe-inspiring wilderness, magic and mystery that invite exploration, discovery and adventure (Gunnarsdóttir, 2011; Margaryan & Zherdev, 2011; Ísleifsson, 2011). These are also the landscapes that offer opportunities to face sublime nature's forces, test one's limits, and celebrate endurance, perseverance and achievement, all of which are rooted in the glory of Arctic explorations of the 19th century. Romantic ideals were especially important in establishing northern peripheries as spaces where one can experience freedom and authenticity, discover what is pure, true and real, as opposed to the supposedly decadent and corrupt centers of civilization in the urban south. For instance, Ísleifsson (2011) has identified the following stereotypes associated with the north, persistent in the 21st century: utopian, creative, authentic, progressive, wealthy but also unemotional, and even immoral. Danson and de Souza (2012, p. 98) state:

North as far away (this also comes with some meanings of remoteness, cold climate and, possibly, sparsely populated which are all 'taken-for-granted'; or even more drastically: 'a vast emptiness'). The characteristics of remoteness and emptiness also appear in the most common definitions of the concept of periphery itself.

Perpetuation of this and a similar repertoire of contradictory stereotypical representations and performances in relation to north and northern peripheries has been conceptualized as *borealism*, an analogy of Said's (1979) famous *orientalism* (Schram, 2011). Consequently, these themes are omnipresent in the tourism marketing media, which is known for its propensity to reproduce stereotypical narratives (Alessio & Jóhannsdóttir, 2011; Gunnarsdóttir, 2011; Rakić & Chambers, 2011; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000).

Idealized northern nature has been one of the most dominating themes when it comes to tourism in the northern peripheries. The north of the Scandinavian Peninsula is frequently described as 'Europe's last wilderness' and 'Europe's Alaska' (Sylvén, 2015); tourists are invited to experience 'the magic of Lapland' (supemenlatu.fi), 'the dream of winter wonderland' in Finland (visitfinland.com), or 'troll hunting' in Iceland (guidetoiceland.is). An analysis of marketing media in Iceland demonstrated that the majority of promotional images represents nature without any visible human impact (Hermans, 2016; Margaryan & Zherdev, 2011). As a recent marketing stunt, Sweden's tourism board has listed the entire country as a 'place to stay' on the Airbnb accommodation-sharing platform, capitalizing on the Right of Public Access. By doing so, the national tourism board states that tourists are welcome to enjoy Sweden's vast nature as an ideal and limitless 'relaxation area', where cliffs are terraces, lakes are infinity pools and rivers are

bathrooms (Visit Sweden, 2017). Overall, the social construction of peripheral nature as hedonic places of tourist enjoyment and relaxation, known in the tourism literature as ‘pleasure peripheries’ (Turner & Ash, 1975), has been well-documented and is still very much present in the tourism media (Brown & Hall, 2000; Hall & Boyd, 2005; Müller & Jansson, 2006).

Merging Nordic and northern in the ‘slow adventure’ brand

In the discussion on place branding, particular attention needs to be paid to the spatial aspect of this process (Boisen et al., 2011). The importance of geographical perspectives in marketing and place branding has been extensively pointed out previously (e.g. Ermann & Hermanik, 2017; Giovanardi & Lucarelli, 2018). Moreover, branding has been recognized as ‘a profoundly geographical type of commodification process’ (Ermann & Hermanik, 2017, p. 2), which tightly braids products, places and nations. In the case of the slow adventure brand and its application in SAINT project, we see the following examples of geographic negotiations. First, the slow adventure brand is semantically embedded in two major areas – the Nordic friluftsliv tradition, and the more recent slow movement. The Nordic friluftsliv is bound to a specific place (i.e., the Nordic region). Varley and Semple (2015, p.74) explicitly point out that slow adventure is ‘a concept particularly suited to the wide, wild expanses of many parts of the world, and specifically to the outdoor living and journeying experience potential in Nordic countries’. They further emphasize (p. 87):

...[S]low adventure fits well with the people, landscapes, cultures and skills of the Nordic countries, and emerges as an opportunity to facilitate high value, unique and memorable experiences. It may also be a concept that makes Nordic tourism distinctive and highly valued for those on the outside – a sustainable, eco-sensible tourism rich in the skills and cultures of the region and its peoples.

The slow movement ideologies, on the other hand, have spread beyond its geographic roots. Originating in Italy in the 1980s, the Slow Food movement was a reaction to the expansion of global fast food chains. This philosophy can now be found in a multitude of production and consumption processes in more than 150 countries, including tourism, agriculture, architecture, fashion, learning, creating, as well as simply being (see e.g., Clancy, 2018; Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Fullagar, Markwell, & Wilson, 2012; Honore, 2004). The spatial extension of this thinking is exemplified by the Slow Cities network (known as Cittàslow, also originating in Italy), striving to revitalize and protect traditional urban life and public spaces. As of 2017, the Cittàslow network has 238 cities in 30 countries (Clancy, 2018). Overall, slow movements symbolize resistance to the ever-accelerating hypermodern society, which propagates a cult of speed in every aspect of human life. Similarly, Varley and Semple (2015) define slow adventure through four key components: *time*, *nature*, *passage* and *comfort*. Attention to nature’s rhythms, bodily experiences of nature’s elements, and mental and physical immersion into a journey through historical, cultural and natural landscapes, are all parts of a tourist adventure when done slowly. In other words, taking time to create insightful, deeply meaningful and transformative experiences in the outdoors, rooted in the local ethics, culture and history is at the heart of the slow adventure.

The SAINT project considers the concepts of slowness and peripherality as complementary. Peripheries, or very loosely, the outermost boundaries of an area, are by definition the spaces of resistance to the fast-paced hypermodern, hypermobile and hyper-globalized ‘core’. Peripheries of the European North are places of vast, relatively unmodified natural areas of high ecological and

aesthetic value, of rich cultural heritage, especially when it comes to the traditional knowledge of nature use and interpretation. Along with the presence of all typical disadvantages of the peripheries, it is important to keep in mind that the countries of the European North, and especially the Nordics, are known for their high levels of social welfare and equality (e.g. high levels of GDP per capita (World Bank, 2018) in combination with low Gini coefficients (OECD, 2018) and high levels of sustainability (SDG, 2017). This indicates that the peripheries in question are comparatively well-supplied in terms of the access to modern infrastructures, technology penetration, facilities and general attributes associated with high quality of life, setting these societies apart from their peripheral counterparts in other parts of the world. As stated by Danson and de Souza (2012, p. 102), '[h]owever measured, whether in terms of income or GDP per head, happiness, quality of life, rates of innovation, political and social freedom and stability, low levels of inequality, or gender balance, the Nordic countries individually and collectively rank at or near the top of any global ranking'. Even though Ireland and the UK perform less well, following an Anglo-Saxon development model, and are not part of the Nordic 'Ark of Prosperity', they are part of the NPA region due to other aforementioned similarities (Danson & de Souza, 2012). Based on this, the NPA even aspires to turn the northern peripheral area into a '1st class region to live, study, work, visit and invest' (NPA, 2016, n.p.). The NPA, in other words, aims to create a transnational region and a place brand, delineating and promoting an image of one dynamic region with certain common properties.

In general, the rise of transnational regions and the development of interregional brands is a primarily European phenomenon, which has specific political goals within the cohesion policy of the EU, namely to 'promote a harmonious economic, social and territorial development of the Union as a whole' (NPA, 2016, n.p.). The typical form of transnational regional cooperation in the EU aims at reducing administrative, cultural-linguistic or infrastructural barriers separating the governments, businesses and residents of border regions, for which specially allocated funding is available (e.g. INTERREG initiative (Braun, 2015; Witte & Braun, 2015)). Slow adventure deals with two interregional brands, Nordic and Northern European peripheral, which, despite significant overlaps, represent different historical and cultural trajectories as well as political goals (for an in-depth discussion on interregional place brands see Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015).

The SAINT project, with its slow adventure brand, works with an amalgamation of all three brand levels discussed by Ermann and Hermanik (2017), namely product (activities related to the ethics of slowness and Nordic friluftsliv), (supra)nation (Nordicity and Northern Europe) and place (peripherality). The project works with the ideology of the slow movements, elevated from its initial geographical context and married with the place-bound concept of the Nordic friluftsliv, and further extends it to the larger geographical area of the peripheries of the European North, propagated by the NPA. This place branding process, however, is not free from inherent tensions and complexities. In this regard, Brown and Hall (2000) discuss the paradoxes of tourism in the peripheries, namely the use of tourism as a way to overcome the characteristics of peripherality that attract tourism in the first place, or the lure of remoteness resulting in overcrowding and touristification, and thus erosion of the 'classic' properties of peripherality. These contradictory developments can already be observed in many North European destinations, especially Iceland and Norway (e.g., Aanesen et al., 2018; Cságoty, Sæþórsdóttir, & Ólafsdóttir, 2017).

Brief overview of the SAINT project results

Based on the three-year-long cooperation among the SAINT project parties, involving tourism SMEs, destination management organizations and research institutions, an interregional slow adventure brand was developed. The development process had the following stages: (a) the elements of the slow adventure experience (based on the criteria by Varley & Semple, 2015) were identified through SME workshops; (b) the criteria were tested and evaluated through an SME survey; (c) core criteria of slow adventure for the SAINT project area were identified; (d) guidelines for the slow adventure brand were developed; (e) marketing efforts were implemented.

In order to understand how the slow adventure tourism product can be defined and operationalized, a transnational survey was conducted, building on the existing baseline of the nature-based tourism studies in the Nordic context (Fredman & Margaryan, 2014; Stensland et al., 2014). In total, 126 SMEs across the SAINT project region participated in the survey. Figure 1 shows the common outdoor activities, typical for the northern periphery region³, that fit the ethos of slow adventure: (i) expeditions into nature, (ii) wildlife viewing and bird watching, (iii) cultural or heritage activities linked to nature, (iv) slow food cooking and outdoor cooking/dining experience, (v) hiking, (vi) recreational kayaking canoeing, rowing, (vii) overnight stays combined with nature experience, (viii) fishing, (ix) outdoor photography, (x) wild foraging, and (xi) nature studies. These activities proved to be almost equally relevant for all partner countries with the exception of Iceland, which had a slightly different pattern (high importance of nature photography, as well as ice cave tours, glacier hiking, caving and ice hiking).

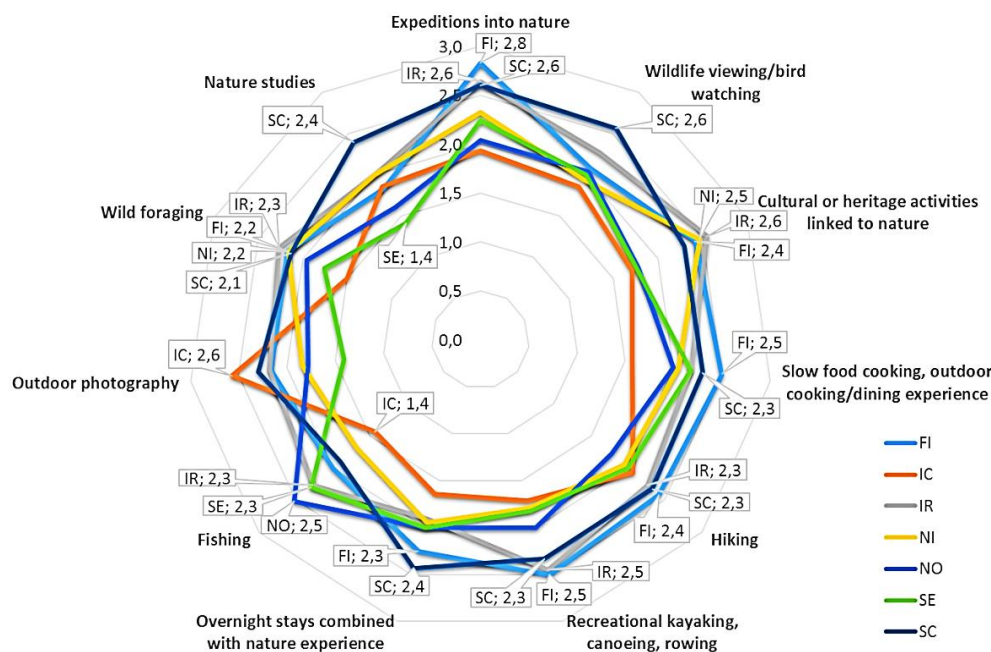


Figure 1 The relevance of core slow adventure activities for generating annual sales in SMEs (1 – Not relevant at all; 2 – Somewhat relevant; 3 – Highly relevant)

³The activities were selected from a pool of Nordic friluftsliv activities previous identified by Fredman and Margaryan (2014) and Stensland et al. (2014).

The project evaluated the relevance of the slow adventure experience criteria, collaboratively developed during partner meetings. The survey revealed the core pillars of slow adventure elements for the SAINT project area, i.e. human- and nature-powered slow journeys, inspiring connectedness with nature, wildlife watching, nature and culture interpretation, slow food, outdoor skills, health and wellness, and storytelling. These pillars were converted into the core criteria for SMEs' eligibility. Based on these, a set of guidelines was eventually developed for use of the slow adventure brand and a trademarked logo. The logo incorporates a stylized image of a snail, which visually ties it to the global network of slow movements (see e.g. the logo of Cittàslow network). The project concluded with extensive marketing activities in all participant countries.

Discussion and conclusion

As stated by Boisen (2015, p.14) 'place branding refers to the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people'. In this chapter, we discussed one example of utilizing Nordicity, and specifically, Nordic outdoor recreation in a tourism marketing-oriented project, aiming at creating an interregional slow adventure brand in the northern peripheral region of Europe. The process demonstrates what Giovanardi and Lucarelli (2018) call 'travelling', which refers to the transformation of marketing constructs of slow, Nordic, northern and peripheral. High levels of flexibility and mobility of these concepts across cultures and geographies qualify them to be what Danson and de Souza (2012) call 'fuzzy concepts', meaning that they appear, are recognized, described and experienced in constant flux. Thus, the Slow Food movement that originated in Italy has transformed into a global phenomenon beyond its initial geographic and cultural context. Similarly, the concept of Nordic outdoor recreation, at a confluence of the ideas of slowness and peripherality, is expanding across the North European region via the interregional slow adventure brand.

Overall, the attention to interregional place brands in the Nordic context and beyond is hardly accidental. Under the EU regionalization policy, transnational projects have been identifying interregional place branding as a key goal (Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015). The fundamental assumption behind this approach is that communicating the assets of a transnational region as a single offer makes the offer more attractive and competitive than the individual parts of the region (Braun, 2015; NPA, 2016). Here two points are especially noteworthy in relation to the SAINT project and the slow adventure brand: first, growing attention to place branding can be tied to an overarching belief that regions are in ongoing competition with each other in ever-expanding global markets, including those of tourism (Boisen, 2015; Lucarelli & Berg, 2012). In this context, slow adventure follows the logic of the slow food movement; regional competition and its undesired consequences, (e.g., loss of local authenticity, weakened social and ecological standards, etc.) can be countered through responsible production and branding principles. Through cross-regional co-operations, northern peripheral regions may be able to enhance their regional production cycles by using their natural, cultural and heritage assets. Thus, by protecting their socio-cultural diversity and plurality from global competition, these regions - perceived as collective projects or enterprises – may be better positioned to generate their unique value propositions (UVP) as communicated through branding efforts like slow adventure. Second, increased responsibilities of European regions, limited financial resources and strong incentives for higher functionality and cooperation to achieve EU funding result in a proliferation of the so-

called nonstandard regionalization phenomenon (i.e., regionalization outside of more standardized spatial divisions) (Deas, 2006; Boisen, 2015). Among possible configurations, one is the ‘nonstandard regionalization of project-based cross-border cooperation’ (Boisen, 2015, p. 30), of which the SAINT project is a direct example. Through its cohesion policy, the EU provides strong incentives to develop cross-border cooperation, accompanied with ongoing efforts to gradually reduce legal, administrative and cultural-linguistic barriers along the internal borders of the EU, as well as continued investments into cross-border infrastructure (Braun, 2015; Witte & Braun, 2015). As a result, multiple new cross-border regions materialize with various life spans and levels of institutionalization. According to Witte and Braun (2015), cross-border place branding then emerges as a way to quickly give substance to cross-border cooperation on economic development. It is therefore not surprising that in case of the SAINT project, branding has become its central output. Moreover, the initially explicit *Nordic* concept (as used by Varley & Semple, 2015) is giving way to a less defined notion of *northern territories*, following the incentive to adapt to a pre-existing nonstandard NPA region, and consequently, contributing to an essentially depoliticized and fuzzy regionalization.

The SAINT project highlights the growing attraction of the northern peripheries as tourism destinations as well as a growing tendency of these regions to consider tourism an important development avenue – a trend observed by tourism researchers over the last two decades (Brouder, 2013; Brown & Hall, 2000; Hall & Boyd, 2005; Kristjánsdóttir et al., 2018; Müller & Jansson, 2006). Tourism has become a go-to strategy for economic development in the peripheries, since it holds promise for generating income under conditions when other sectors fail, while also being characterized by low skill requirements and low barrier to entry (Brouder, 2013; Müller & Jansson, 2006). At the same time, peripheral areas are imagined as places of alternative and exclusive tourism, rooted in the traditions of exotization and romantization of these regions in Europe (Hall & Boyd, 2005; Gunnarsdóttir, 2011; Ísleifsson, 2011). In this sense, the slow adventure brand can be considered a successor of this tradition, since it aligns peripherality with *slowness* (Clancy, 2018; Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Fullagar, Markwell, & Wilson, 2012; Honore, 2004) and *adventure* in recreation (Elmahdy, Haukeland & Fredman, 2017; Fredman, Stenseke & Sandell, 2014), both of which fit well within the classic discourses on tourism in peripheral areas (Brown & Hall, 2000; Danson & de Souza; Hall & Boyd, 2005; Müller & Jansson, 2006). At the same time, the brand capitalizes on notions of Nordic quality, as well as less traditional outdoor recreation activities involving high levels of comfort. This enables a departure from the typical *borealist* image of the north and has potential for attracting high-income, long-haul tourists.

The strong tourist image of Nordic outdoor recreation, along with ‘wild’ and Nordic nature remains the backbone of the slow adventure brand, including the traditional philosophy of *friluftsliv* and environmental ethics (Booth, 2014; Gössling & Hultman, 2006; Partanen, 2017; Sandell & Sörlin, 2000). In addition, the Nordic image has been enriched with the contributions from a larger cultural pool of the European north and adapted specifically to the context of peripherality (Brown & Hall, 2000; Danson and de Souza, 2012; Hall & Boyd, 2005; Müller & Jansson, 2006). The contributions from the non-Nordic countries in terms of the outdoor recreation approaches can also be found, albeit in more implicit and informal ways (expressed, for example, in a stronger prioritization of storytelling, music, arts and crafts, and culinary traditions, as in case of Ireland and the UK). The SAINT project, therefore, presents an example of extrapolating an initially Nordic-specific brand first to a larger region of European northern peripheries, and potentially, further internationally. Through conceptualization and formalization of slow adventure, with the help of official

guidelines and a trademark, the brand itself becomes available for appropriation beyond its initial geographical and cultural context.

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