Involving events as cocreators of destination brand - Case South-Savo region

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IN Involving Events as Cocreators of Destination Brand: 
The Case of South Savo Region

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Prior studies have recognized the importance of events in destination branding, but the focus has been on the roles of mega-events or sport events, while smaller cultural and free-time events have received far less attention. The stakeholder involvement in destination branding has also been attracting interest lately by many researchers, but there is lack of knowledge on how to utilize events in the branding processes. This study aims to fill the research gap through a case study in the South Savo region, eastern Finland. The purpose of this study is to examine the roles events have in destination branding, and how events are involved in cocreating the destination brand. The empirical data were collected through 13 semistructured interviews of event organizers and local tourism developers. The study identified four different roles and several involvement methods. The findings revealed the importance and potential of organized events in the branding, but it also revealed that they are not yet effectively utilized at the destination. However, there is a consensus about the importance of stakeholder involvement and a common will towards involving events in the branding process. The findings of this study can be utilized by tourism developers and stakeholders to improve destination branding processes.

Keywords: Destination branding; Events; Cocreation; Brand cocreation

Introduction

This study seeks to increase understanding in how organized events help cocreate destination brands, through one particular case. The development of destination brands has become an important strategic tool due to growing competition among destinations, and events are increasingly important components in destination development and branding. Studies show that events can have a positive impact on destination image, brand building, and differentiation from other destinations (Chalip &
However, the role of events has focused on mega-events like the Olympics (e.g., Yu, Wang, & Seo, 2012) or sport events (e.g., Chalip & Costa, 2005; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007); smaller cultural and free-time events have received far less attention. There is also a lack of knowledge on how to leverage events to build the destination brand (Jago et al., 2003) or how to use an event to obtain desired brand effect (Chalip & Costa, 2005). More information is needed on using events in the branding process and ensuring stakeholder participation in brand cocreation.

The importance of involving different stakeholders in the destination branding process has gained attention lately by many researchers (e.g., Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014; Garcia, Gomez, & Molina, 2012; Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2012; Sartori, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2012). The destination branding literature has traditionally focused on the demand-side perspective; that is, how tourists formulate and perceive brand images and messages (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Gil, & Calderon, 2002). Recently, the supply side of the brand has started to receive more attention (e.g., Bregoli, 2013; Koncencik & Go, 2008) and some scholars (e.g., Del Chiappa & Bregoli, 2012) have attempted to integrate them both into a comprehensive model of destination branding.

Branding is increasingly conceptualized as a process that evolves in an interaction with internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Sartori et al., 2012). Sartori et al. (2012) emphasized that successful destination branding strategies require the commitment and mobilization of internal stakeholders and adopting inclusive and participative approach to the branding process help stakeholders’ willingness to share the brand mission.

The focus on the role of stakeholders in destination branding is rather recent and a consequence of a turn towards a participatory branding approach in general (Gregory, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Ind & Bjerke, 2007). Brand cocreation, a concept under the participatory branding approach, refers to brands not formed through traditional communications, rather cocreated by a multitude of people who encounter and appropriate them (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). The core idea of cocreation refers to an interactive process where at least two actors create something in collaboration with or influenced by others (Jaakkola, Helkkula, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2015). Gregory (2007) also called for greater involvement of stakeholders in branding, which posits the need to empower the relevant stakeholders and allow them to participate freely in creating the brand. According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), there are surprisingly few articles on participatory branding and brand cocreation. Hence, additional research is needed to discover how different stakeholder groups, in this case the event organizers, could better be involved in destination branding and how they contribute to the destination brand.

This study aims to fill the above-mentioned research gap through a case study in the South Savo region, eastern Finland. The first aim of the study is to examine the roles events have in destination branding. Secondly, the study seeks to identify which methods of involvement are used, and what the aim of each action is in regard to cocreating the destination brand; that is, how these actions contribute to the branding. The article starts with a literature review focusing on destination branding and the roles of stakeholders in branding and brand cocreation. This review is followed by data collection and methodology. The findings are then presented and discussed, and their implications are considered. Finally, the contribution of this study and future research are discussed. The study contributes to the literature of destination branding and brand cocreation by examining a topic of a less familiar field and deepening the understanding of topic.

**Literature Review**

*Roles of Events in Destination Branding*

Involving stakeholders in destination branding has been attracting interest lately by many researchers (e.g., Beritelli, 2011; Campelo et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2012; Hankinson, 2007; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2012; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003; Sartori et al., 2012) but there is still lack of knowledge of the means by which to utilize events in the branding process. As argued by Getz (2007) and Richards and Palmer (2010), destinations are developing and promoting...
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events of all kinds to achieve certain objectives: to attract tourists (especially during low season), spread a positive image of the destination, to amuse specific areas or attractions, and to diversify the cultural offer. Presenting a rich portfolio of events and its product mix is one of the mechanisms that certainly reinforces destination branding (Jago et al., 2003; Miranda, Gustavo, & Castela, 2015). Considering the impact of organized events for the destination brand, it is important to involve the events and event organizers in the destination branding process from the start.

Events are increasingly being used in destination marketing to enhance the host destination’s brand (e.g., Jago et al., 2003; Lee & Arcodia, 2011). The roles that events and their organizers play in destination branding have been studied by some researchers. Jago et al. (2003) studied the most effective means to utilize events in destination branding from the perspective of leading event and destination marketers. They identified, among others, that community support and a good strategic and cultural fit with the destination are necessary bases for building events into destination branding. Their study laid the foundation for further analysis of events in destination branding. Based on the literature and practical examples, Chalip and Costa (2005) found three roles events can take relative to destination brand: events as cobranding partners with the destination brand, as extensions of the destination brand, or as features of the destination brand. The destination marketer must then decide which role should be emphasized. The events used to help brand destinations should be chosen so that they support the desired brand associations (Brown, Chalip, Jago, & Mules, 2004). Also, Trošt et al. (2012) found that events and destinations are interlinked. Event brand can influence improvement of destination brand or vice versa. According to Lee and Arcodia (2011), regional food festivals can play a decisive role in destination branding. Many festivals contributed to enhancing an existing destination brand, especially if the festival was consistent with the destination brand.

Stakeholders as Cocreators of a Destination Brand

Discussion of cocreation began from a focus on the customer–provider relationship (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), and soon extended to include cocreation in interaction with customers and networks of various actors (e.g., Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). Cocreation is a process in which value is cocreated jointly by firm and consumers through their interactions (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). Hatch and Scultz (2010) were among the first researchers to extend the ideas about cocreation to the study of brands and branding using a full stakeholder perspective and beginning to build a theory of brand cocreation. Many studies conceptualize brand cocreation as a new branding paradigm (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009) that has its roots in the value cocreation discussion. Whereas value cocreation is often studied from the consumer perspective, brand cocreation expands the scope from just the consumers to other stakeholders as well (Gregory, 2007; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Merz et al., 2009).

In the context of tourism and branding destinations, cocreation is a relatively new topic. Although cocreation and customer involvement in the development of tourism services and products has been pointed out by some researchers (e.g., Hjalager & Konu, 2011; Komppula & Konu, 2017; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011), its use for destination branding has so far been studied less. To date, most tourism studies on value cocreation have focused on the company–customer relationship (e.g., Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010), but according to Melis, McGabe, and Del Chiappa (2015), tourism experiences are most frequently produced by firms and organizations collaboratively. Thus, there is a need to further develop knowledge about cocreation issues from the perspective of the network of relationships between individual organizations that all are involved in the development of the tourist supply system.

Recently experience cocreation in tourism has received attention (e.g., Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus, & van Niekerk, 2017; Prebensen & Foss, 2010; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013; Sfandla & Björk, 2013). For example, Seljeseth and Korneliussen (2015) studied cocreation of experience value and found the congruence between tourist’s experiences and self-image and a tourist destination’s brand personality. Tuussyadiah and
Zach (2013) assessed the organizational capacity for cocreation at the level of the DMO and identified social media as an important avenue for tourism organizations to nurture consumer relationships. It was also identified that capacity for cocreation among tourism organizations has a positive impact on their performance. Åkerlund and Müller (2012) explored cocreation in the context of the bidding process for an event by analyzing how the implementation strategies of bidding for a large-scale event is received by tourism stakeholders.

The study revealed the importance of the cooperation between stakeholders from different sectors in the organization of events, the importance of stakeholder engagement on all levels as well as of the official discourse to be consciously elaborated to adapt to counter discourses. Also, Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011) have discussed brand cocreation in a nation brand context highlighting the importance of managing the brand “bottom up,” (i.e., starting with the people). Yet, the involvement of different stakeholders in the context of destination brand cocreation deserves more attention.

Finally, Kavaratzis (2012) highlighted the need to rethink place branding towards a more participation-oriented practice, based on the centrality of stakeholders in the creation, development, and ownership of place brands. Kavaratzis (2012) argued that the involvement of stakeholders is a necessity “brought about by the very nature of place brands, which are cocreated and comanaged by a multitude of place stakeholders who collectively and individually attribute place brands with meaning” (p. 15).

In this study brand cocreation refers to the process where destination stakeholders are involved in the social interactions and form a network where they all contribute to the destination brand creation and with their own actions bring value to the brand. However, the focus of this article is only on how organized events cocreate the brand.

Methodology

Case Study

This study is an intrinsic case study, where the case itself is of primary interest in the exploration (Grandy, 2010). The exploration is driven by a desire to know more about the uniqueness of the case rather than to build theory or to generalize the knowledge (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) case studies are excellent in generating holistic and contextual in-depth knowledge through the use of multiple data sources.

The case study area is South Savo, one of Finland’s administrative regions. It is situated in the Lakeland area in eastern Finland, by Lake Saimaa, Finland’s biggest freshwater lake (Fig. 1). Besides its lakes, the region is known for second homes and a variety of cultural, sporting, and local events. For many years, events and event tourism have been cited as one of the strengths in the tourism of the region. Yet, the events organized in South Savo are little known outside the region (Taloustutkimus Oy, 2011).

The most important destinations in South Savo are Mikkeli and Savonlinna. The towns differ from each other in size and also concerning tourism. Savonlinna is a small town with long traditions in lake and cultural tourism (approximately 34,000 inhabitants). It hosts an internationally recognized opera festival...
last month, during which tourism booms. Mikkeli instead hosts several smaller festivals and as a bigger town (approximately 54,000 inhabitants) it attracts a wider base of tourist markets. The South Savo region hosts mainly domestic visitors but aims to attract more international visitors.

In eastern Finland, tourism developers are creating a new regional brand around Lake Saimaa, the Saimaa brand. The brand development, in its early phases, has started developing content based on the strengths of destinations in the region. The idea is to provide an umbrella brand for a regional entity comprising distinctive areas located by Lake Saimaa (South Savo is one of them). The tourism developers have acknowledged the role of stakeholders as being important to the new brand and the branding process. However, there seems to be a little cooperation and shared strategic thinking between the different stakeholders and with the destination management. The new brand development emphasizes the need for close cooperation between event organizers and the destination management.

**Data and Methods**

As is often in case studies, this study applies a qualitative methodology to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The research started with a background study, which included a website analysis and observations to provide more insight for the phenomenon. The websites of the South Savo Regional Council and two local DMOs (Visit Mikkeli and Visit Savonlinna) were analyzed for an overview of the regional event offering. The researchers also observed the discussion of brand Saimaa in the printed and web media and participated in the meetings related to the study interests organized by the regional DMOs and other tourism developers. The background study constituted important background information and helped understand the whole branding process. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), case studies are usually more accurate, convincing, diverse, and rich if they are based on several sources of empirical data.

The primary data was collected through 13 semi-structured interviews. Semistructured interviews have predefined themes and related issues, but with the possibility to vary the wording and order of questions in each interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Eight interviewees were local event organizers and five of them members of DMOs or other tourism planning authorities (Table 1). The selected interviewees were key players in the destination management and participating in the branding process, and representatives of the key regional events. The interviews and observations supported the decisions about which events should be selected. The Savonlinna Opera Festival, the major regional event, has a dominant role in the whole tourism and brand of the

### Table 1

The Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destination management organization 1</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 1: manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destination management organization 2</td>
<td>Mikkel</td>
<td>Interviewee 2: manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local business services</td>
<td>Mikkel</td>
<td>Interviewee 3: development manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional council</td>
<td>Mikkel/savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 4: development manager</td>
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<td>Municipality</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 5: culture director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Types of events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classical music</td>
<td>Mikkeli</td>
<td>Interviewee 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock festival</td>
<td>Mikkeli</td>
<td>Interviewee 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport event (trotting)</td>
<td>Mikkeli</td>
<td>Interviewee 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pop festival</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classical music and dance festival</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film festival</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport event (rowing)</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opera festival</td>
<td>Savonlinna</td>
<td>Interviewee 13</td>
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The questions were drawn from the previous destination branding and brand cocreation research (e.g., Chalip & Costa, 2005; Jago et al., 2003; Lee & Arcodia, 2011; Trošt et al., 2012), in addition to tourism planning documents of the region. The interviews included questions about the image/brand of destination, the roles of events at a destination, and cocreation of destination brand. The point of view of the questions varied depending on whether the interviewee represented event organizers or the destination management parties. The interviews took from 30 min to 1 hr and 14 min.

The interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This type of analysis focuses on the content of the data with the emphasis on what is said and what is done in the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). One purpose of qualitative content analysis is to produce a holistic and factual description, which provides a big picture of the phenomenon. Another aim is to produce a detailed, rich, and nuanced interpretation of the data’s contextual meanings. This study reports only the part of the interview related to the roles of events and brand cocreation.

The interviews were fully transcribed and uploaded to the Atlas.ti software program for further analysis. After both researchers had read the transcribed data, the primary documents were divided in half to code. Then the data sets were changed to ensure consistent coding and validity. The coding was done using a mixed approach where the classification is based on a combination of an inductive approach and theory. Before coding some of the main coding schemes were predetermined and the rest of the codes were derived inductively from the data. First, as many open codes were given as possible to get an overview of data. Then the coding was standardized by combining and unifying codes. The codes were then classified, and the concepts were grouped into several categories and subcategories.

Findings

The Roles of Organized Events in Destination Branding

The interviewees were asked what kinds of roles they see events in South Savo having in the branding, and how events could be utilized more effectively for future branding. Four roles emerged: events that 1) enhance or change the destination image, 2) support brand features (e.g., nature and local traditions), 3) increase the visibility and familiarity of the destination, and 4) complete each other content-wise (create an event portfolio).

The most often mentioned role was that events enhance or change destination image. For example, a rock event in Mikkeli has made the destination image younger and changed the attitudes towards the event and rock events in general. Generally, events create a positive image of a lively destination where something is happening all the time. Also, small local events were seen as important and they created positive experiences for visitors:

Of course there are these bigger festivals that attract visitors also from a distance but I consider the small local events important as well. . . . They are not necessarily the reasons why people come here but when they have arrived, the events create experiences . . . and also enhance positive images about the destination especially when there are locally organized events with local attendees as well. (Tourism developer, Interviewee 5)

Secondly, events support the destination’s brand features. In the Saimaa brand, those features include nature, and local traditions and ways of life, among others. According to interviewees the events represent and support those same features (e.g., nature film festival). Small, local events especially represent local traditions and work as places to meet locals. Some events had a bigger significance for residents than for tourism purposes but they are great places for tourists to meet local people. A DMO representative also told that they have been seeking content from their key events while building the destination brand. “Events present local traditions and work as places for tourists to meet local people” (Tourism developer, Interviewee 5).

The third role found was that events increase the visibility and familiarity of a destination, via different ways. Traditional events that have been arranged for many years or decades often come first to mind when tourists think about the destination. Also, small local events, or new events, gain media visibility but the impact is local or regional and they support community involvement. Some
Involving Events in Destination Branding

The tourism developers saw stakeholder involvement as important to destination branding. Generally, the focus of stakeholder involvement was on entrepreneurs and on local residents. The methods usually involve several stakeholder groups, but also ways of involving event organizers in particular were mentioned in the interviews.

Interviews highlighted several methods of involvement. The involvement methods fall into three groups: 1) regular meetings and forums for discussion and networking, 2) temporary campaigns and contests, and social media channels, and 3) organizational changes between the Savonlinna Opera Festival and the local DMO.

The basis for event organizer involvement was to attend regular meetings. The most common ways to participate in the branding process and cooperate with other stakeholders were the Tourism and Event Forum, breakfast meetings, and various discussion forums. These sorts of meetings are organized regularly or whenever needed to gather local entrepreneurs, tourism developers, and event organizers to discuss current issues face-to-face, network, share information, and innovate:

The trust and the feeling of making together arises through these kinds of events. It has been surprising how good feelings there have always been at the breakfast meetings. (Tourism developer, Interviewee 3)

These kind of networking meetings are extremely important where not only tourism entrepreneurs meet but also entrepreneurs and actors of all kinds. (Event organizer, Interviewee 13)

Another example of this kind of involvement was the new Saimaa Festivals network that aims to increase cooperation and information sharing between event organizers. The idea of an event network is new, so far only the interest and need towards this kind of activity from the event organizers’ point of view has been mapped. According to the interviews, there certainly is a need for this kind of a network to gather all the regional events under the same umbrella organization and, among other things, carry out some form of comarketing. It would also contribute to the region’s event portfolio and help produce an overall regional picture for tourists.

The Saimaa Moments–photography contest and various social media channels are “methods” that support or strengthen the destination brand. These methods are open to every stakeholder group including event organizers. The idea behind the Saimaa Moments contest is to challenge everyone to capture their vision of “moments on Lake Saimaa” and share their pictures with the hashtag #saimaamoments on social media channels. The best pictures are purchased for destination marketing purposes. Basically, the campaign aims to involve several stakeholders (local people, tourists, event organizers, entrepreneurs) in sharing their ideas and views on the Saimaa brand. Also, it was important to bring events bundled together in marketing gain more visibility for the region and communicate brand messages to many market segments. Finally, the Savonlinna Opera Festival arranges tours abroad every year with its production and likewise hosts foreign opera houses with staff of tens or hundreds of people. According to an event organizer, these concrete actions help branding, not only the event, but the destination as well:

This also has to do with this brand aspect . . . the more we visit abroad the better it is for Savonlinna and Saimaa and Finland. Often these countries or cities we visit, they know basically nothing about our country . . . . But after our visit the knowledge increases.

About 200 people come here during the visit. The majority of them totally falls in love because this is quite exotic for many and they let others know about it as well. (Event organizer, Interviewee 13)

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locals and tourists together as content providers for marketing purposes and get genuine content.

Saimaa Moments—photography contest supports the core idea of the Saimaa brand, the experience of Lake Saimaa. The contest also produces marketing material for DMOs and gives insights into other elements people note when talking about their Lake Saimaa moments, and how they experience life in the area. Some events are seen in the pictures but not many event organizers had taken the chance to take part in the contest in the way some accommodation companies had:

Today if they [visitors] experience something really strong they want to share it. (Tourism developer, Interviewee 1)

The branding has been approached more through visitor experiences, through content marketing and communication because it has been acknowledged that the weakness of this area is specifically the communication. (Tourism developer, Interviewee 3)

Social Media and other electronic ways of involvement were mentioned several times such as great channels for targeting younger audiences. Event organizers also called for better visibility for their events in the regional marketing efforts.

The final method of involvement concerns the cooperation between the Savonlinna Opera Festival, which has a dominant role in destination marketing and branding, and local DMO. For example, some marketing functions will merge. The DMO will cooperate more closely with the event organizers at an organizational level. The festival, already a well-known international brand, would benefit the whole region and other events through joint marketing. This kind of cobranding with the destination aims at gaining synergies in international marketing and branding efforts and gives the regional marketing a boost targeting international markets. The event organizers also mentioned their own international marketing efforts as one way to increase the destination’s visibility and to strengthen the destination brand:

As I have expressed we are willing to take even bigger role also in year-round marketing and branding if the municipality and local enterprises give us the resources to do it . . . and I’m pretty sure that we could do it more effectively than many others.

I call for more cooperation between single actors. If we do together and if the resources were centralized to us we [the festival] could do more for this whole region . . . and I believe that the effect and visibility and strengthening of the brand would be significantly effective. (Event organizer, Interviewee 13)

In most cases, event organizers were involved in the branding with several other stakeholder groups, such as DMOs, enterprises, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The methods targeted specifically to events were the Saimaa Festivals Network and cobrading efforts with opera festival. The Saimaa Moments—photography contest and discussion forums are open for all the other stakeholders as well. The event organizers valued the open discussions and the methods making it the most useful. Still, there are many unused avenues for involving events even more in destination branding and getting the best possible benefit from them. Furthermore, the existing methods of involvement could be used more efficiently.

Discussion and Conclusions

From Cooperation to Cocreation?

This research was the first phase in discovering what roles events play, and how events are involved in destination branding in South Savo. Like many prior studies this study revealed the importance and potential of organized events in the branding, but it also revealed that they are not yet effectively utilized at the destination.

Many findings of this case study are in line with several earlier studies such as similar roles of events (Chalip & Costa, 2005; Jago et al., 2003; Lee & Arcodia, 2011). If a destination wants to change or enhance its image it is important to consider which features the destination wants to change or reinforce. The study proved that some events have a bigger significance for local residents than for tourism purposes but in the branding work the encounters with local people was one point that is and should be emphasized. Local people and their ways of life give genuine content to the brand and create experiences that cannot get anywhere else. Also, Jago et al. (2003) emphasized the importance of committing local people; if residents are interested
in event and see themselves as an integral part of it, their support will have a positive effect on how visitors view the event and the destination. That is one reason why stakeholder cooperation should be reinforced. Houghton and Stevens (2011) argued that a key reason for failure of city branding strategies is the absence/inadequacy of a program for engaging and energizing local people, businesses, and community groups in shaping, articulating, and conveying the brand.

The event offering was frequently mentioned in the interviews. Jago et al. (2003) and Chalip and Costa (2005) have observed that rarely does a single event have a noticeable effect on a destination brand, but instead the whole portfolio of events needs to be considered. The authors remind that all events in the portfolio should enhance or reinforce the destination brand and including only those events suitable to that task. According to this study, event portfolio is evidently thought pretty well in South Savo by organizing many kinds of events that form a continuum and lengthen the tourism season. However, the brand developers should think even more carefully how different events contribute to the brand and which brand features should be more/less emphasized. The most effective means to coordinate the event and destination brands over time need to be identified: how events’ brand and destinations’ brand match in a most appropriate manner (Chalip & Costa, 2005).

The methods relating to events’ involvement in the branding process vary from traditional cooperative meetings to supporting brand cocreation and using social media. The forums and meetings where stakeholders meet each other and discuss common issues, are cooperation at its clearest. The meetings and workshops usually have common goals for the delegates. Palmer (2002) has applied the cooperative concept to marketing stating that “cooperative marketing groups are groups of independent businesses that recognize the advantages of developing markets jointly rather than in isolation” (p. 135). In the same way, events and tourism developers in South Savo have started to recognize the benefits they gain together and organize these kinds of meetings to achieve their targets. However, as one interviewee expressed, events could do even more cooperation with other tourism companies and combine services (e.g., nature activities because nature is one of the brand attributes) with event visit to create more value for customers.

Yet all the interviewees called for more cooperation as the best way to gain more benefits with the same amount of resources. The need for cooperation exists both between event organizers and between event organizers and other stakeholder groups such as entrepreneurs. Event organizers emphasize the need for more cooperation and some kind of a forum for exchanging ideas. The tourism developers emphasize the participatory involvement of stakeholders and the premise for more efficient cooperation is the common will of all the parties involved.

There is a consensus about the importance of stakeholder involvement in destination branding. If a destination brand wants to succeed, it needs to build relationships with key stakeholders and consider branding towards more participation-oriented practice (Hankinson, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2012; Sartori et al., 2012). Hankinson (2004) asserted that place branding is in essence not a managerial process but one of coordination. By developing the brand in partnership, stakeholders can set a shared strategy and coordinate all the messages about the destination (Allan, 2011). In order to reveal authentic brands truthful to local identities, Go, Lee, and Russo (2003) suggested using a bottom-up approach. IT might help connect all stakeholders through forums, e-mails, websites, and discussion boards (Go et al., 2003; Klooster, Go, & Baalen, 2004). South Savo does this, and like one interviewee said, not all media or method suits all; there needs to be several options to participate.

One main involvement method is the use of social media channels and the Saimaa Moments—photography contest. Social media channels support openness and ease of access in discussion, but most often the event organizers use social media mainly for other purposes without thinking that it contributes to branding or affect the experience and destination image that forms in the minds of tourists. The importance of user-generated content in branding has been noticed by many researchers (e.g., Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012; Munar, 2011; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015) but the potential for utilizing social
media in the branding of South Savo has not fully understood or at least executed. Event organizers already use social media in several ways, but they could increase their actions more towards how to involve and engage their users (local people, visitors, volunteers, and staff members) in contributing to the branding.

As the branding process in Saimaa is not yet totally organized and the roles and goals of the different stakeholders are not fully determined, it is difficult to analyze the process purely from a cocreation point of view. Therefore, it would be more certain to say that these actions support the brand cocreation, but the process would need to proceed to the next, more structured level, before reaching an ongoing process of brand cocreation. Many times, the event organizers had difficulties in thinking about the overall concept of cocreation or about actions that somehow affect the branding. Therefore, more detailed targets and roles for each of the stakeholders should be determined, and event organizers should be informed better, so that the brand can be cocreated in the future through the interaction of all the key stakeholders.

The findings suggest that the involvement methods depend at least partly on the destination leadership of the region and the power relations among different stakeholders. Destination branding leaders should first achieve and demonstrate clear understanding of the brand goals and values and then behave in a way that supports this, encouraging other stakeholders to adopt brand-congruent behavior (Cox, Gyrd-Jones, & Gardiner, 2014). The need to gain support and commitment from different stakeholders so that the brand is accepted and adopted by them has been also highlighted for instance by Bregoli (2013) and Konecnik and Go (2008). Ooi (2004) defined the process through which a DMO gains support from stakeholders so that they accept the brand and communicate it through their communication activities and products. Also Sartori et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of participative approach to the branding process. The involvement of local stakeholders during the first phases of identification of the brand values and motivating them to deliver the brand promises through their activities is crucial for the successful destination branding.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution

The present study has limitations inherent to its exploratory nature and the case study methodology. The findings of this study are preliminary in nature and cannot be generalized; however, they contribute to the existing literature by giving an empirical example and discussing the importance of involving organized events in the destination branding that is a less researched theme. The results about the roles of events are in line with several previous studies, but the means of involving events in the branding process revealed new evidence, and showed that events are still an underused element, but potential one. Secondly, cocreation in the context of tourist destinations and destination branding has gained only a little attention, so this research makes a theoretical contribution to the emerging literature and widens the understanding of cocreation to considering other stakeholders than consumers at the destination level. Prior studies have emphasized a consumer-centric approach (e.g., Grissemann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Hoyer et al., 2010). Finally, this study supports the findings of some studies (e.g., Bregoli, 2013; Sartori et al., 2012) indicating the importance of involving and committing stakeholders, in this case events, in successful branding.

This study also has practical implications. Tourism developers and stakeholders participating in brand building can utilize the results to improve branding processes. The first step is to identify the roles organized events have or could have in the branding process, which features the destination wants to emphasize and therefore how events contribute to the brand. This kind of analysis helps both events and destinations to develop, as they better understand, for example, what meanings events of different size have at the destination or in relation to each other. As Chalip and Costa (2005) pointed out, destinations should first identify their own and competing brand association network in the target market. Then they should host events that reinforce, change, or add desirable nodes or associations.

The branding process in Saimaa (including South Savo) is in its early phases and a bit unstructured. Also, the tourism officials admit that there has been a lack of systemacy in the previous branding effort. The study revealed a common will towards
involving several local stakeholders. Also, event organizers want to participate more, and their potential has now been revealed. The process is formed through cooperation among several regions and many stakeholders, but no single party is responsible for leading the process. What’s needed is more strategic thinking and organizing as well as motivating the members in the branding process to obtain the most effective benefits for the brand from the events (and other stakeholders as well).

**Future Research**

The brand cocreation theme in tourism context is still a little researched topic and the need for further research in general has been recognized. This study observed only the views of two stakeholders’ groups, so the roles, views, and involvement of other stakeholder groups in the destination branding might give some new insight; how they all cocreate and add value to branding work. Important stakeholder groups are especially local entrepreneurs, local people, event volunteers, and of course tourists. Because this was a qualitative case study and explorative in nature, future research might consider quantitative research. This topic is important also for industry and it deserves research to continue in case to build competitive destination brands.

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