

Experience Marketing in Country Branding: Theoretical Developments and an Estonian Case Study

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Abstract

Country branding activities are driven by the need for differentiation and for this purpose experience marketing could become an efficient tool to sustain competitiveness in tourism, particularly in the case of small countries. This article advances the theoretical understanding in the field by proposing a conceptual model explaining the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences, and image. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with foreigners and branding experts closely acquainted with Estonia. The methodological approach included qualitative content analysis and the use of secondary data. A categorization system of country-based experiences was created and then compared with the current official marketing strategies. In addition, the findings show the Estonian experiences that are perceived as most authentic, and recommend the use of experience marketing based on research from the cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. This research could assist countries in brand management by emphasizing the need for comprehensive analysis of experience marketing in country branding.

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1. Introduction

Tourism represents one of the most significant sectors in the economy of many small countries. Competition is tough and differentiation is crucial. In light of this, successful place marketing and effective country branding are key to a positive country image. Tourism contributes to economic growth and increases a country's revenue; it also has a considerable impact on areas affecting quality of life such as health and wellness services. Consumer behaviour determines regional and global trends, influencing products and services, commerce and industries. Specific fields such as trade and marketing struggle to understand and influence consumer behaviour. The satisfaction of customer needs and the growing use of experience marketing play a fundamental role in what Pine and Gilmore (1998) have described as the experience economy. They also state that people look for originality and genuine, real value in everything they do (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). The demand for specialized products and services would increase if a commitment was made to add value to existing offers or to the creation of new experiences.

Traditional marketing is rooted in the rational economic view according to which costs and benefits constitute the most important variables (Schmitt, 1999). In contrast, the researchers of experience marketing stress the relevance of emotional aspects. McCole (2004) defined experience marketing as a new way of thinking about the discipline, and argued that going back to the traditional practice would mean only attending to customer satisfaction. As he also noted, emotional attachment is central to the experiential paradigm. This article goes further and highlights the need for a holistic view of experience marketing, analysing experiences from all perspectives; in other words, combining customer beliefs, emotions, intentions, and motivation.

Customer experiences form the cornerstone not only of contemporary marketing and tourism but also of country branding. Experiences affect attitudes, judgments, and other aspects of consumer behaviour. On the other hand, new experiences may result from changes in attitude or behaviour. Attitudes shape social orientations, or the inclination to respond to something either favourably or unfavourably. The components of attitudes are cognitive (our thoughts and beliefs), affective (feelings and emotions), and conative or behavioural. Myers and Alpert (1968) explain that they are evaluative reactions that manifest in one's beliefs, feelings or intended behaviours. Attitudes about a place (country, city, specific location, etc.) can be simply based on neutral data or as complex as the memories and emotions that they evoke. Places may feel peaceful, inspiring, reminiscent of old times, or possess attributes that are appealing or attractive. Therefore, people develop attitudes about places in the same way as they do about products, companies, other individuals, or behaviours – that is, on the basis of their beliefs, emotions, and impressions (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

Country branding strategies can be adjusted based on insights obtained about the experiences that customers report. These may relate, among others, to discovery, safety, romance, individuality, or the modern application of traditions. A significant insight emerging over the past few years concerns the role of authenticity; recent studies indicate the increased appreciation of authenticity, as it has become a rare quality in the commercial world (Peterson, 2005; Pine and Gilmore, 2008). Consumers make consumption decisions based on their own perceptions of authenticity or how real they perceive an offering to be. According to Napoli et al. (2014, p. 1096), by being able to “measure and assess authenticity, marketers may be empowered to identify new opportunities for brand positioning and value creation that may

contribute to greater consumer loyalty and attachment” to the brand. For a small country, it is very important to understand which experiences to promote in country branding, and whether a greater investment in research on experience marketing should be made.

The priority for small countries should be differentiating themselves from other countries, while at the same time appealing to their customers’ minds and emotions. There is little research to date on country branding that makes use of experience marketing or that seeks to identify authentic experiences. No theoretical framework has been proposed that could illustrate the interconnections between the most important notions that converge towards specific branding activities. This reveals conceptual and empirical gaps in the way experience marketing is understood and the need for specific analysis. Research conducted on behalf of Enterprise Estonia, the country’s Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), about the Estonian brand has been mostly quantitative to date. Consequently, a qualitative assessment is required to balance these results. Furthermore, in the research phase prior to this study, a mismatch was discovered between the key symbols selection used in the Estonian marketing strategies for tourism and the perceptions of the target audience (Same and Solarte-Vasquez, 2014). For successful competition, countries and more specifically DMOs have to monitor the brand to promote experiences and attributes that will suit the brand identity and their consumers. To achieve this, feedback must be collected and utilized.

Academic research needs to identify how experience marketing can more effectively support the branding of a small country on the international market and how travellers perceive and describe their experiences. The aim of this article is to advance our understanding of experience marketing in country branding (by establishing interconnections between the concepts, classifying country-based experiences, and comparing them with the existing marketing strategies). The main research questions guiding this article are: How are the existing theoretical concepts related? How to classify experiences for country branding and which experiences can better support Estonian marketing strategies?

The specific research objectives are: 1) to propose a theoretical model of the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences and positive country image based on a review and systematization of academic literature; 2) to classify experiences, identify which of these are authentic, and to propose categories for future research; and 3) to compare the experiences of the interviewees with those recommended in the official Estonian marketing strategies for tourism. A set of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with branding experts and foreigners familiar with Estonia. The study was carried out over a period of two years, during which the current branding status, image, and reported country experiences were explored. A comparative assessment was then performed using this primary (interviews) and secondary data consisting of the existing strategies. The theoretical contribution of this article is integrative: it models the conceptual interactions on the fundamental terms and activities required in experience marketing when branding a country.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical background and literature on concepts related to experience marketing and country branding. Section 3 explains the methodology of this study and Section 4 describes the findings. Section 5 discusses key issues and Section 6 presents conclusions, including comments on the potential for practical applications of this research.

2. Conceptual Framework

Experience marketing and country branding are both related to consumer behaviour theory and branding theory. Experience marketing is still in the emerging stages; this is why a single definition is not available, and authors such as Tynan and McKechnie (2009) specifically comment on the lack of consensus in the field. This article fills this gap by developing a conceptual model that begins with experience marketing. Scholars as well as practitioners take experience marketing often as a synonym for experiential marketing or customer experience management (CEM), illustrating confusion about what should be the core terminology of the discipline. Baron, Harris and Hilton (2009, p. 346) consider experience marketing to involve “the creation of a memorable episode based on a customer’s direct personal participation or observation”, whereas Lee, Hsiao and Yang (2010, p. 356) claim that it requires “marketing staff to emphasize the overall experience quality for consumers passed by brands, including rational decision-making and sentimental consumption experience.” In the present article, experience marketing is defined as the “strategic marketing of experiences that take into account the affective, cognitive and conative perspectives of the consumption experience” (Leppiman and Same, 2011, p. 249). On this basis, it can be assumed that the main question posed by experience marketing is “What do customers know, feel and want?” about an offering (Same, 2012, p. 291). According to Schmitt (2010), the key concepts of experience marketing are experiential value, different types of experience, experience touch points, and the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences; but this is not an all-inclusive list. Experience marketing is based on strategic marketing management and deals with customer interaction and value co-creation. In studies of place or country branding, some researchers (Blain et al., 2005; Hankinson, 2009; Hudson and Ritchie, 2009; Nikolova and Hassan, 2013) have already noted the importance of experience marketing and the analysis of perceptions and experiences in understanding consumer behaviour.

Experience marketing covers three interrelated perspectives: cognitive, affective, and conative (Gartner, 1996). Cognition is the sum of what is known about a country; it is either organic or induced. This consists of awareness, knowledge, and/or beliefs, which may or may not have been derived from a previous visit (Fishbein, 1967; Pike and Ryan, 2004). Cognitive studies are dominant in the marketing literature, while discussion of the affective perspective has been more limited (Kim and Yoon, 2003). Affection refers to an individual’s feelings towards a country, which could be favourable, neutral, or unfavourable (Fishbein, 1967). It has been suggested that affect usually becomes operational at the evaluation stage of the destination selection process (Gartner, 1993). A person “might have a number of positive beliefs but still have negative feelings towards the destination” (Bigné et al., 2001). Studies have shown that affection influences visitors’ evaluations, destination choice, and future decisions (ibid.). The conative perspective is analogous with behaviour, being the intent or action component; intent refers also to the likelihood of brand choice and purchase. For example, conation could express the possibility of an individual visiting a country in a certain time period. Strong associations between emotions and the desire to travel are also evident in research (Yüksel and Akgül, 2007).

For creating a model to systematise the related theoretical concepts, the interconnections of additional relevant notions in the field should elaborate on place marketing, country branding, meaningful country-based experiences, authentic experiences, country brand

authenticity, and positive country image. The purpose of place marketing is to create awareness and a positive image of the place to potential and existing customers. In the context of tourism, place marketing literature often refers to countries as destinations (Hankinson, 2009; Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009; Morrison, 2013). According to Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005, p. 337), destination branding consists of marketing activities such as the creation of a logo or other graphic that “identifies and differentiates a destination”; such activities “consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; [...] serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and [...] reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk.” They argue that this definition addresses Aaker’s core branding concepts, while deriving from the concept of experience marketing (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; 2010).

Country branding is an umbrella term, covering the branding of tourism as well as exports, foreign direct investments (FDI), and immigration (the present article takes destination branding as a subset of country branding). Some authors refer to it as nation branding (e.g. Olins, 2002). The focus on tourism does not exclude other fields, especially when tourism branding interrelates and overlaps with these, as a result of them using the same country brand attributes and policies. For instance, official visitors, export partners, new residents, and people on business trips might also engage in tourism. Consequently, country branding is equally important for them. This is supported by research indicating that the image of a country is investigated more often than that of any other type of place.

In country branding, research into visitors’ perceptions and attitudes towards their overall experience is essential. Anholt (2007) defines a country brand as the perception of the place (brand) that exists in the minds of the audience, while Dinnie (2008) defines it as “the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the place with culturally-grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (p. 15). Country branding includes activities that attempt to reduce the gap between the desired identity (on country and DMO side) and the actual image held in the minds of consumers (receiver’s side). The country branding strategy is necessary to introduce a vision and framework for effective branding activities.

Meaningful country-based experiences are used to appeal to both the rational and emotional purchase decisions of the target audience. Brand-relevant experiences are characterized as being memorable (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), meaningful, and relevant to the customer (Carù and Cova, 2003). Customer experiences originate from the interaction between a customer and a brand or product, in this case a country. This experience is personal and implies the customer’s involvement at different levels: cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical (Verhoef et al., 2009). According to Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012), tourism literature has provided a limited explanation of the factors characterizing memorable tourism experiences. Research into the construction of tourist experiences has “shifted from the objects provided by tourism businesses to tourists’ subjective interpretation of the meanings of those objects” (Ibid, p. 13). According to their research results, “seven constructs or memorable tourism experiential components (i.e., hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty) are important components of the tourism experience that are likely to affect a person’s memory.”

A successful brand communicates to consumers the offer of a bonus of a recognizable

differentiated value based on authentic experiences. These are defined as experiences which are not only unique; they also seem genuine and real. People remember them when they think of a country. By offering them to consumers, countries enhance their competitiveness and differentiation. Daye (2010, p. 5) believes that symbolic brand images may be “associated with destinations that have strong value-added appeal that goes beyond functional, physical attributes to more symbolic, experiential features.” Furthermore, he is convinced that it is “unlikely that distinctive brand images will be achieved by mainly listing the physical attributes of destinations, or by only reinforcing stereotypical sun, sand, sea, and fun images [...] while taking a predominantly functional approach to branding” (2010, p. 12).

Discontent with excessive commercialization and a distrust of marketing has led people to believe that many things in their lives are fake or inauthentic, making them more open to alternative consumption behaviour. Consumers demand products that reflect their desire for authenticity. This changes overall consumption and marketing trends, driving marketers to reassess their strategies. It is crucial that authenticity claims capture the experiences, expectations and desires of the target group, and reflect their values and beliefs (Molleda, 2010). Napoli et al. (2014, p. 1096) found that sincerity, quality commitment, and heritage are “the drivers that are reflective of a brand’s ability to create enduring mental associations between the brand and things that matter to an individual, which is the core of authenticity.” Positioning a brand based only on quality, great service, and product superiority is too common to be an effective strategy; emphasizing authenticity, on the other hand, allows a brand to be “true without being perfect” (Beverland et al., 2008). Nevertheless, authenticity claims alone do not guarantee success in terms of positioning; authenticity must also be demonstrated (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). For example, consumers look for added value in brands in characteristics such as a story, spirituality or a sense of community.

Country brand authenticity is experienced at a subjective level, and it thus differs from person to person. Napoli et al. (2014, p. 1091) describe brand authenticity as “a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers.” In their view, the concept is complex and forms on the basis of different perceptions such as sincerity, nostalgia, heritage, cultural symbolism, craftsmanship, quality commitment, and design consistency. A country’s authenticity is defined by visitors’ overall experience of its offerings, engagement, and setting. The concept is also related to visitors’ evaluations of the degree to which their country-related impressions and expectations remain true during a visit. Scholars claim that authenticity is central to brand status, equity and corporate reputation (Chhabra et al., 2003; Beverland et al., 2008) with some even suggesting it as one of the foundations of contemporary marketing.

Marketers need to measure and assess the authenticity of their brand. A consumer-based brand authenticity scale builds on calls for an objective measure of brand authenticity that includes “the voice of the consumer” (Napoli et al., 2014, p. 1090). Only this sort of dynamic tracking of brand authenticity allows managers to determine strengths and weaknesses with regard to competing brands, and the drivers needed to achieve an authentic brand positioning. Such knowledge can suggest directions for marketing strategies that will either change or reinforce consumer brand perceptions.

A positive country image is one of the key challenges in tourism. Place image is defined as the “sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place” (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 141). Image fulfils a fundamental function in the choice process, as tourists generally have a limited knowledge of destinations that they have not previously visited. According to

Yüksel and Akgül (2007, p. 715), countries with “a strong, positive, discriminatory, and recognizable image have more probability of being chosen” by visitors. Images affect visitors’ behaviour, influencing their mental constructions about a destination’s attributes, and consequently the decision-making process (Bigné et al., 2001). Individuals develop their own mental constructions, which are influenced by their perceptions, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and impressions. Nicoletta and Servidio (2012) confirm that a great body of literature considers the country image as a multidimensional construct consisting of a combination of two factors: the emotional and the rational.

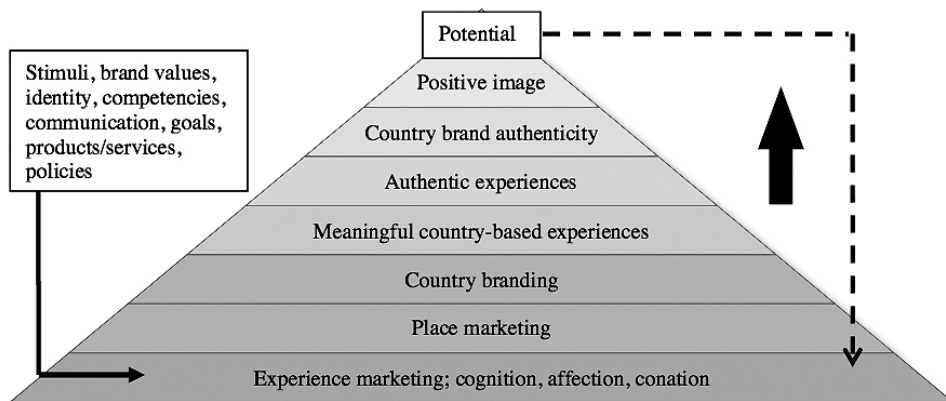
There is an on-going debate around the country image construct, regarding both its nature (uni-personal or collective) and its content (mode of interaction and type of components) (Gallarza et al., 2002). When determining the components that form this impression, some differences appear: for some authors, country image is only derived from a cognitive element; for others, both cognitive and evaluative components are involved; and for a third group (e.g. Dann, 1996; Gartner, 1996), destination images are formed by three interrelated elements – cognitive, evaluative, and conative (Gallarza et al., 2002). The evaluative component has been neglected in tourism research. According to Pike and Page (2014), the majority of destination studies have focused on cognitive attributes, and only recently have cognition and affect towards destinations been studied together (e.g. Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Kim and Yoon, 2003; Konecnik, 2005; Hosany et al., 2006; San Martin and Del Bosque, 2008). An unreasonable emphasis is placed upon the cognitive component while neglecting the opportunities that others can offer. Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011, p. 1259) found that “country-specific cognitions influence affect, which in turn influences conation. Country-related conations also represent the predominant influence on a subject’s beliefs, evaluation, and purchase intentions.” In the country image, different components trigger sub-effects simultaneously (Ibid.).

Nicoletta and Servidio (2012) investigated affective and conative factors in terms of tourist motivations, and explored whether two sets of images representing the same tourist destination can affect people’s behaviour from motivational, affective, and decision-making points of view. They used four items based on the affective image scale developed by Russell and Pratt (1980), the aim of which was to examine whether destination images have a role in affective evaluation. This scale includes four bipolar adjectives: unpleasant–pleasant, sleepy–arousing, distressing–relaxing, and gloomy–exciting. The scale has been used to study the role of images as affective factors (e.g. by Yüksel and Akgül, 2007). Finally, Pearce and Lee (2005) studied the relationship between travel motivation and travel experience, and their results show that the core considerations determining travel motivation are novelty, escape and relaxation, relationship enhancement, and self-development. They indicate that host-site interaction and nature-related motivations are essential factors influencing experienced visitors, whereas personal development, stimulation, security, self-actualization, nostalgia, romance, and recognition are priorities for less-experienced visitors (Pearce and Lee, 2005). Inter alia, these subcategories are used in the findings section in an attempt to link theoretical considerations with the experiences (and image) of the Estonian case.

On the basis of the previously analysed theoretical considerations, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was drawn, illustrating the interconnections between the marketing concepts. Experience marketing corresponds to the largest baseline because it can be applied to different fields of marketing. One of these – the focus of this article – is place marketing, which in turn is an umbrella term for places (countries, cities, regions, etc.). Country

branding includes destination branding because it can be applied to tourism as well as to business (export, FDI), immigration, and education promotion. Meaningful country-based experiences are uniquely associated with the country. Among these memorable experiences only some are authentic: assisting in differentiation, and leading to country brand authenticity and a positive country image. According to Blain et al. (2005), these activities serve to create a country image that positively influences consumer destination choice.

Figure 1. Model Indicating the Interconnections between Experience Marketing, Country Branding, Authentic Experiences, and Positive Image



Source: Author's illustration

This research broadens our understanding of experience marketing and country branding as multidimensional constructs in which authenticity plays an important role. The figure attempts to provide a visual account of the interconnectedness of all notions and shows that branding processes do not end with the potential. The outcome is a feedback loop that provides input to experience marketing activities, in which cognition, affection, and conation are equally important, and could be applied to all levels of the model.

3. Methodology

This study was designed with the intention of mapping perceptions in a similar way to Hankinson's (2009) experience survey. Marketing customer-based research is better evaluated using qualitative methods. Conversely, quantitative approaches are limited for evaluating and drawing conclusions about the meaning of human perceptions and experiences (Botterill and Platenkamp, 2012). A qualitative study was conducted through 31 semi-structured interviews, which took place between April 2012 and March 2014. These aimed to explore and understand how foreign visitors perceive Estonia, what their experiences have been, and what their opinion of the present country brand is. Individuals from priority markets for Estonian tourism such as Finland, Sweden, Germany, the UK, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Norway, and Spain, were the first to be considered for this research.

To ensure a wider perspective, interviews with people from America, Asia, and Oceania were also included. At this stage, people who had visited Estonia several times, or had been living in the country for more than five years were selected. The purpose was to obtain knowledgeable information. Twenty-four interviews were conducted with foreigners living abroad, four with foreigners living in Estonia, and three with Enterprise Estonia (DMO) representatives. Nine of them were branding experts: scholars or experienced marketing professionals. The interviewees came from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Denmark, the UK, Hungary, the USA, Australia, Japan, Colombia, Uruguay, Scotland, Canada, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Germany.

The interviews lasted from one hour to ninety minutes, and were personally carried out by the author. When interviewees volunteered information that seemed relevant, they were not interrupted but were asked additional questions. The sample reached saturation when the answers became repetitive (Patton, 2002). The sessions were recorded and transcribed. An interview guide was designed for this study and consisted of 26 questions covering Estonian experiences, authenticity, customer's perceptions of the brand concept and its elements, recommendations for country branding, and so on. Questions included "How do you describe your experiences in Estonia?", "What kinds of experiences do you expect to have in Estonia?", "What could be an authentic Estonian experience?", and "What is more convincing when promoting a country: rational (facts), emotional, or motivating arguments?" Each interviewee was asked to tell a short personal story detailing an experience in Estonia, and to give additional recommendations on how to promote the country abroad. Although the information collected includes more material, responses to the above-mentioned questions formed the basis of this analysis.

In addition, secondary data sources were used: the six official marketing strategies developed by Enterprise Estonia (DMO) in the field of tourism were analysed in terms of their substance. The strategies are used to promote Estonia to visitors from all over the world. These include: 1) the overall concept "Introduce Estonia" for all areas of communication (including tourism), 2) the marketing strategy for tourism entitled "An old country in a shiny package", and 3) four sub-strategies focusing on tourism (city, culture, wellness, and nature holidays). The experiences suggested in the strategies were compared and contrasted with all experiences and perceptions reported by the interviewees. The categorization system from Table 1 was the frame of reference for the comparison to test the practicability of the system. For that reason, the content of the existing strategies was coded in the same way as the interviews. This method of comparative analysis was concerned with the systematic matching and contrasting of country-based experiences in order to find similarities and differences in documents and interviews. The inclusion of additional documents diversified and completed the research.

A qualitative content analysis was applied to the collected data (Mayring, 2000): first a directed and then a conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In the directed content analysis, three categories and twenty-five subcategories were drawn from the theoretical considerations; when answers did not fit into the existing subcategories, or when it seemed necessary to facilitate the systematization process, seven new subcategories were formulated based on the data from the analysis of the interviews. The analysis started with concept-driven coding, and continued with data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007). Conventional content analysis was used in the second phase of the research, to find the most authentic Estonian experiences and to compare them with those presented in the documents.

4. Findings

4.1. Cognitive, Affective, and Conative Perspectives in Experience Marketing

The systematization and clarification stage of the study addressed the second research question by employing the three perspectives or categories described in the conceptual framework – cognitive, affective, and conative – which form the baseline of the model. They have been drawn from the literature review conducted for this study and the established definition of experience marketing. The categorization and coding that resulted from systematizing the country-based experiences, and examples of Estonian experiences drawn from the interviews are shown in Table 1. The table is divided into three categories, grouping 25 theoretically based subcategories selected from existing research by the authors referred to in the second column of the table. Furthermore, 7 new subcategories that emerged during the analysis of the interviews are integrated into the table because they were needed or useful; these are marked in italics, and constitute original contribution of this research.

Table 1. Perspectives Influencing Experience Marketing in the Context of Country Branding, Subcategories, and Examples of Estonian Experiences

Category, perspective	Prior sub-categories	Subcategories (applicable to future research) and examples of Estonian experiences
Cognitive (what is known about a country; brand awareness, knowledge, beliefs) What do visitors know about Estonia?	Cultural identity, political climate, language, history, landscape, climate, economy, religion, and people (Brijs, Bloemer, and Kasper, 2011)	<p>Cultural identity: beautiful Old Town of Tallinn, the Song Festival, architecture, cultural events, art, language (Finno-Ugric, similar to Finnish)</p> <p>Economy: EU member, euro, economic success story, fast changes, e-solutions, Skype, IT savvy, Nordic/Scandinavian ties, Baltic, cheaper prices, poorer than Scandinavian countries, international business community</p> <p>People: friendly, bi-/multilingual, entrepreneurial, well educated, reserved, helpful, too serious, energetic, compliant with agreements and time limits</p> <p>Services: good quality services (hairdresser, beautician, etc.), abundant and cosy restaurants, good accommodation/hotels, bad flight connections, free Wi-Fi</p> <p><i>Overall impressions:</i> small, unknown, good value for money, more Western than other Baltic countries, not easily accessible, innovative, clean, compact</p> <p>History: long national history, the Soviet past, Hanseatic town</p> <p>Climate: four seasons, snow, cold winter</p> <p>Landscape: flat, no big mountains, close to sea</p> <p>Political climate: politically stable, no government debt, famous president</p> <p><i>Basic knowledge that visitors might be assumed to have:</i> location, capital, places to visit, symbols, short distances, belonging, proximity to Finland, north-eastern, attractions</p> <p>Knowledge before and after visiting: surprising factor</p>

<p>Affective (feelings and emotions linked to a country)</p> <p>What kind of feelings/emotions do visitors describe?</p>	<p>Pleasant/unpleasant; relaxing/distressing; arousing/sleepy; exciting/gloomy (Russell and Pratt, 1980)</p>	<p>Pleasant: good food, gourmet meals, atmosphere, local produce, musical experience, handicrafts, folklore, countryside, good hosts, theatre, cultural similarities</p> <p>Relaxing: peaceful, sea, quiet, cosy winter experience, new art, privacy, perfect location for anything slow (slow food, pace of life)</p> <p>Exciting: illuminated Christmas market, discovery time, the Soviet era feeling, like an onion, feeling of freedom, nice culture of equestrian show-jumping, medieval experience</p> <p>Arousing: things happening all the time, energy, vibrant, changes in environment over time, sitting around bonfire, singing together</p> <p><i>Country-based memories:</i> related to history, events, friends, the Soviet period</p> <p>Distressing: prices have gone up, closeness of Russia, too focused on Tallinn (equivalent to Estonia)</p> <p>Unpleasant: ferry tourism, criminals come through Estonia to Scandinavia</p> <p>Gloomy: shadow of the Soviet past, Soviet architecture</p>
<p>Conative (intentions, motivation related to a country)</p> <p>What can visitors do in Estonia?</p>	<p>Novelty, escape and relax, relationship, autonomy, nature, host-site interaction, stimulation, personal development, safety, self-actualize, isolation, nostalgia, romance, recognition (Pearce and Lee, 2005)</p>	<p>Novelty: going to a sauna, experiencing something different (e.g. places that have the aura of the Soviet era: Paldiski, Sillamäe), visiting cultural places (e.g. Kadriorg palace)</p> <p>Escape and relax: relaxation, nice big spas, cross-country skiing and ice skating, walking in old wooden districts (e.g. Kalamaja), Tallinn zoo, wild berry picking</p> <p>Nature: being close to unspoiled, beautiful and untouched nature (forests, clean air), beaches with white sand and pine trees, visiting Lahemaa and Soomaa national parks, Jägala waterfall</p> <p><i>Wishes and desires:</i> people want to eat well, come to live in Estonia</p> <p>Host-site interaction: attending local parties, visiting Estonian homes, discovering other towns than Tallinn, events (e.g. Viljandi Folk)</p> <p><i>Incentives:</i> health tourism, inexpensive shopping (e.g. Rocca al Mare centre), chance to win a trip, spending quality time, travel packages, plans to visit neighbouring countries during the trip</p> <p>Stimulation: St. John's Day celebrations, driving on ice, hunting, outdoor experience (camping, canoeing, hiking)</p> <p>Security: feeling personally safe, meeting respectful people and good scientists, plans to re-visit Estonia</p> <p>Relationship: visiting friends or family, working and living in Estonia, summer farm work programme, recommending a visit</p> <p>Isolation: walks in the swamps, going to beaches that are not crowded, visiting rural areas and islands (Saaremaa, Kihnu)</p> <p>Personal development: learning, conferences, studying in Estonia</p> <p>Romance: visiting cosy cafes in Tallinn's Old Town or manor houses (e.g. Vihula), long summer nights</p> <p>Autonomy: you are free to do and be what you are; people are independent and free, nobody wants to depend on others or anything</p>

Notes: The 32 subcategories are placed in order of importance as pertaining to this study.
Source: Author's compilation

This categorization system can be used as systematized guideline and it comprises a potential resource that can be used by other countries in mapping or categorizing their country-related experiences in country branding.

4.1.1. The Cognitive Perspective

The cognitive perspective includes the facts about the country: its *cultural identity, economy, people, services, overall impressions, history, climate*, etc. The country seems tidy and organized, it is home to an international business community, and good quality hotel *services* and travelling can be expected. The interviewees talked about the picturesque Old Town of Tallinn, where they want to walk around and this was the most commonly known fact about Estonia.

In *overall impression*, Estonia is seen as a stable, westernised, and creative country, with a “dynamic, can do attitude” among its “young, educated, and motivated population” (INT 20); on the other hand, the interviewees reported experiencing shortcomings in infrastructure and its closeness to Russia as not so positive. When comparing *knowledge before and after visiting*, it appears that over the years the country continues to surprise visitors. Most feel that the reality of the place exceeds their expectations: they consider products to be of good quality and find that improvements in infrastructure and services development are happening surprisingly rapidly; also, it is much cleaner and safer than they imagined it would be. Many are surprised by “the know-how in digital infrastructure” (INT 31), repeatedly referring to the Internet and Skype; one branding expert summed it up perfectly: “seems like [everybody is] Internet addicted, Wi-Fi is everywhere – even on the sea” (INT 29).

One branding expert pointed out how in the on-board magazine on the airline airBaltic mushroom picking was claimed to be a very Latvian activity, and stressed the fact that many countries could make exactly the same claim (also Estonia), copying one another and competing for the same customers. In this light, it was recommended that advertisers not try to sell the sauna as an Estonian experience: “That is the wrong concept anyway. And don’t try to say that Estonia does the best saunas, it is a no-win situation” (INT 6). Another expert gave an example of promotional material using heritage as a hook: “this building has been here since 1340.” He argued that “that is a long time and that is a fact with emotions about it” but marketers need to provide information that people can relate to something meaningful, not give “facts just for the sake of it” (INT 11).

On the subject of how to present the offerings to customers, the interviewees recommended being concrete – sticking to place, experience, and a minimum of facts. They expressed the view that “less is more” and stressed the dangers of overloading people with information they cannot relate to, especially if they are not familiar with the place. Some thought it would be helpful to invite opinion leaders who could share in the positive experiences being promoted; this is, moreover, a more eye-catching and less expensive promotional tactic than paid advertisements. One branding expert suggested focusing tourism and trade promotion on how it is “fun to be in Estonia”, on “nature and [the] unspoiled environment” (INT 20), and recommended emphasizing the country’s young, well educated, and creative people. In addition, the interviewees encouraged those visiting Estonia during the Song Festival to go and see these musical performances, involving thousands of singers, which they described as stunning, engaging, and extraordinary. When commenting on how to promote Estonia, the interviewees recommended referring to its location, belonging, attractions, and proximity to Finland. Data of this type can be grouped under the *knowledge that visitors might be assumed to have*.

When comparing experiences under the cognitive perspective, the marketing strategies do not include any that could be placed under subcategories such as *services, political climate*, and *economy*. The reason services are not represented could be that the interviewees only

talked about those that are relevant, where they see special added value, or that are less expensive than in their own country; in addition, for example inconvenient flight connections are not positive promotion. The latter two are not in the list of tourism promotion presumably because they are in the official marketing strategy for the business environment.

In summary, because the country is not well known, information about Estonia is insufficient, although four new subcategories emerged during this study.

4.1.2. The Affective Perspective

The interviewees made references to affective or emotional connections that can be categorized as *pleasant*, *relaxing*, *exciting*, *arousing*, *distressing*, *unpleasant*, or *gloomy experiences*, or *country-based memories*. They had expectations based on personal experiences and their links to Estonia. These expectations included, for example, that Estonia would be the perfect location for anything slow – “slow food, slow life, and slow sea, slow everything” (INT 15). An interviewee recommended taking it slow, relaxing, enjoying the place peacefully and meaningfully; another said: “Relax and rest, and learn. Sit down and appreciate what it is, do not run around like a fool. It is not Paris or London” (INT 6). From one branding expert’s point of view, a realistic potential exists in capturing the Estonian brand by positioning it as a romantic destination: “No one out there is claiming we are the romantic capital of Nordic Europe. That would work particularly well in the Asian market that will be hitting your shores in the next five to ten years” (INT 13). The interviewees praise Tallinn’s illuminated Christmas market, which they recommend that everyone see because of the medieval surroundings and the unique emotional experience that this atmosphere generates. Visitors like to walk around and “feel the narrow passages between the buildings” (INT 9) and the smell of the city. To discover the cultural and historical sides of Estonia, another expert stated: “It is north-eastern Hansa. Sell it as north, as long as facts support the emotions” (INT 6).

When commenting on their Estonian experiences, many interviewees referred to the quality of the food, recommending for example “a daytrip stopover to have lunch at a gourmet restaurant and do some shopping in the Old Tallinn” (INT 5). The interviewees described good food in terms of being fresh and organic, tasty and delicious-looking. One interviewee explained that what he loves about Estonia is the energy, as it is “a new country and people are making things happen, and there are new developments all the time” (INT 18). Every time he comes to Tallinn, something new is happening that makes it a different experience. An expert expressed a similar feeling and explained that “Estonia and its culture is a bit like an onion. Every time you peel off a layer there is more to learn, so it is very nice to spend the time with friends over there and learn about Estonian culture; and get a bit more Estonian perspective on the rest of the world” (INT 13). In addition, the interviewees clearly felt that Estonians are exceptional hosts.

The interviewees explained that if the purpose is not to attract a crowd of ferry tourists, promoting the more intimate, one-to-one experience could be a good option rather than appealing to mass tourism; as one expert put it: “I would focus on personal stuff – farms, forest, sea, all sort of things personal like local person-to-guest experiences because you cannot have mass tourism here. You would have special interest travellers and they want to have personal experiences” (INT 6).

From the affective perspective, experiences that fall under the subcategories *distressing*, *unpleasant* and *gloomy*, and *country-based memories* are not mentioned in the marketing strategies. It is obvious that the promotion of the country does not describe experiences that

are not positive or could discourage visitors. Conversely, the interviewees also described negative and less favourable experiences in relation to Estonia. However, the strategies could stress the previously mentioned favourable *country-based memories* that could affect the visitor's consumption choices in a positive direction.

In short, the interviewees acknowledged the effectiveness of affective promotion. Prior subcategories were sufficient for the analysis, and only one new subcategory emerged.

4.1.3. The Conative Perspective

On the conative dimension, the interviewees recommended showing what the country offers: what to do on the weekend, where to go and which attractions to see. The intentions behind their recommendations for activities can be grouped under subcategories including *novelty, escape and relax, nature, wishes and desires, host-site interaction, incentives*, etc.

Surprisingly, many interviewees recommended exploiting the opportunities that the Soviet past presents, and appealing to people's interest in re-living the history of places. They thought that these could turn out to be even more popular than the obvious offerings such as Tallinn or the islands. A town like Sillamäe, hidden away and forgotten, could be a nice product imprinted with the Soviet heritage. *Nature* was also of great interest, as Estonia is not crowded and offers good and varied opportunities.

The interviewees made further suggestions, such as indoor programmes (like sea life); *incentives* to bring in international slow cuisine chefs and foodies to make Estonian versions of their own style; the development of innovative products around the Old Town; emphasis on the ease of access to regional areas because "anything within a 2-hour radius of Tallinn has good potential" (INT 13); promotion of Estonia to seniors; more active advertising of spas, gastronomy, cultural experiences, events, history, and discovery/adventure travel. One branding expert suggested using content marketing and social media to disseminate more information and tell stories about the place (INT 31), another proposed to "invite all Estonians to become brand ambassadors" (INT 29).

Many more Estonian experiences seemed meaningful to the interviewees, like inexpensive shopping (for people from Nordic countries); walking in the wooden districts; visiting Estonian homes and attending local parties; the snow and the cold, if visitors had not experienced it before; the sense of safety and neatness, and local efficiency (practical online transactions, ease of managing one's own affairs). "Small is beautiful" type references, historical experiences, visiting smaller towns, islands, and friends were listed. With regard to *wishes and desires*, visitors may want to see beautiful manor houses; they want to eat well and find that restaurant prices are cheaper. Scandinavians would like to visit spas.

From the conative perspective, experiences that belong to subcategories such as *stimulation, security, personal development, wishes and desires and autonomy* were absent from the marketing strategies because experiences related to these subcategories were not described in the documents. These are related to personal well-being, but the strategies are aimed at being a practical tool to aid everyone interested in promoting Estonia to foreign visitors, without considering very individual and specific interests.

To sum up, even though two new subcategories came out, the interviewees talked the least about this perspective.

4.2. Authentic Estonian Experiences

Following the proposed model, the second phase of the analysis proceeded with conventional content analysis. Two interview questions, “What could be an authentic Estonian experience?” and “What kinds of experiences do you expect to have in Estonia?” were aimed at uncovering testimonials on authentic Estonian experiences. Not all of the experiences conveyed could be considered authentic; among the answers, a careful selection was made according to the following criteria: the uniqueness of the experience; being available only in that place and/or it having originally been established in that country; a consensus on its authenticity; its traditional character; being frequently spoken of; deep roots in the culture; and/or a kind of permanence (over time it has become associated with the country).

A truly authentic Estonian experience is the Song Festival, according to the majority of responses analysed. One expert said that it is heart-warming to see how “40,000 singers come together and hold hands with strangers” (INT 24) and that Estonia should market it much more. This person said that she knows people living on another continent who would travel to Estonia to see that; but has never seen any tourist information promoting it as it deserves: “Come share the incredible experience of the Song Festival in Estonia!”

Most of the interviewees see the Old Town of Tallinn, described as “a jewel” (INT 28), as very authentic, and recommended promoting it more actively. Authentic experiences were also said to be obtainable by visiting saunas, the coast and the seaside, trying tasty local *food*, using e-solutions, driving on ice, or cross-country skiing. Many mentioned that going to the swamps, being close to nature, and the islands and manor houses seem very authentic. The beach is attractive because while many people might think that the Latin-American countries “have nice beaches with palm trees – which are actually too warm and salty... – ...here you get the real thing that has the sun and it is not extremely hot, the sand that does not attach to your body, the sea that is not salty, it is perfect” (INT 25); and “Here you have the shade of pine trees, the beaches are very empty, and this is great, and they do not have people just selling you stuff. I believe that the experience of a beach would be great” (INT 11). Many spoke enthusiastically of *close-to-nature* type situations, like hiking in the forest and having “the experience of being dependent on nature and nature being kind to you” (INT 3). Some referred to wild berries, the smell of different flowers, hay and animals, fruits, recommending showing “every kind of season with its smells, with its characteristics, and colours because the changes are very interesting” (INT 19).

Other authentic experiences were described, such as the St. John’s Day celebrations with its pagan/spiritual ritual feeling, visiting Soomaa National Park to experience nature and the Woolf summer farm work programme for foreign youth – university-age travellers. This last option would be interesting in that they would perceive Estonia as an “off the beaten path destination” (INT 24), offering experiences of a different culture. One interviewee pointed out that people in Estonia are highly patriotic, very attached to their land, as if grown out from it; and affected by everything that is happening in their surroundings, meaning that people are truly authentic (INT 25).

The Christmas market tradition and its atmosphere seemed a pleasant experience to most of the visitors. For example, for Finnish people the old-world atmosphere is unusual, because their capital, Helsinki, was bombed during the Second World War and could not preserve its medieval architecture: “the winter market in the Old Town you have is something that we really would like to see” (INT 9). For some interviewees snow is exotic, to others peacefulness is enjoyable.

After filtering out the authentic Estonian experiences, these were sought in the official marketing strategies as the grounds for comparison. In addition, when comparing the codes (experiences, promotion symbols) involved in the official strategies with the codes of the actual perceptions and experiences of the interviewees, a mismatch becomes evident. The interviewees spoke about many experiences, attributes, and possible symbols that are not in the strategies. For example, one sub-strategy refers to food, and many interviewees talked about food, but the symbols selected by the DMO are products that do not seem popular: black bread, Baltic herring, and *kama* (a traditional Estonian mixture of four flours); of these only the last was recalled by just one of the interviewees. The experiences and symbols (objects, phenomena, events, or landmarks) for promoting Estonia, such as rehabilitation, limestone, islets, wild animals, strongholds, the folk calendar, medical establishments, and eco-tourism, all belonging to the strategies, did not appear at all during the interviews. Furthermore, the interviewees did not talk about famous Estonians, film festivals, juniper, Estonian National Opera, museums and churches of Estonia, sports events, golf, or blacksmith shops, but these are recommended in the strategies.

Whereas the Song Festival, the Old Town of Tallinn, food, and nature (according to this study key authentic experiences) were elaborated in the official documents, the Christmas market, was not. In addition, driving on ice, recent e-solutions (e.g. parking, online transactions), wild berries, hiking in the forest, and snow were pointed out as authentic by the interviewees, but were not suggested for promotion in the marketing strategies.

5. Discussion

The proposed model shows the interconnectedness of the marketing concepts described in the conceptual framework while advancing the understanding of experience marketing in country branding. This interpretation contextualised the empirical research. The analysis of experiences started at the base of the conceptual model, and then progressed to the upper level of meaningful country-based experiences assessing the examples provided by the interviewees and selecting the few that qualify as authentic. The comparison brought out the similarities and differences between the interviews and the documents. The relationships between these concepts could determine specific managerial actions for designing an effective country brand strategy seeking to attract travellers and businesses to the country. The upper levels of the model, once identified, present fundamental components of country branding that really influence tourists destination choices, and affect their consumption decisions. Following this model would optimize the identification of authentic experiences that small countries need in country branding and differentiation.

Country brand management activities need to consider the cutting-edge marketing trends that suggest that effective brands communicate more than physical attributes. As Daye 2010 (p.12) states, successful brands also “convey meanings, emotions, and aspirations that are symbolically aligned to the consumer’s search for value-added benefits in their consumptive practices.” Moreover, for a person with no prior experience in a given country, “a cognitive elaboration of such an affective message will be required” (Pike and Ryan, 2004, p. 340). Understanding the perceptions of foreigners about the country will help to make marketing activities more meaningful and influential. For example, Estonia is not clearly

perceived as Nordic (recommended in the strategies) but according to the interviewees rather as Baltic or Eastern European. This is a notion that affects brand management options and tactics. If the country wants to identify with Nordic countries, then it is necessary to increase the promotion of these kinds of experiences. In any event, the identity choice depends on the creator of the brand and its owner; therefore, it is needful to decide how brand managers want visitors to experience the country and strategize accordingly. This supports the belief that tourists who have positive country-based experiences will develop images about the identity that managers have promoted and favoured, and spread the effect by speaking about them, and inspiring others. The interviewees recommended an increased promotion of human capital and the Estonian people, also their fun and warm side, and their welcoming nature, to contrast with the shadow of the Soviet times, and the not entirely inaccurate notion that Estonians are too serious and introverted. Tourists that travel from afar are more attracted to fun and openness.

Myers and Alpert (1968) emphasize that attitudes toward “features which are most closely related to preference or to actual purchase decisions are said to be determinant; the remaining features or attitudes – no matter how favourable – are not determinant” (p. 13). Thus, country DMOs need to identify determinant attributes in each target market whereby the country is perceived positively. This article has proposed a guideline, as summarized in the table, to manage the process of identifying and monitoring country experiences from 1) the cognitive perspective: *cultural identity, economy, people, services, and overall impressions*; 2) the affective perspective: *pleasant, relaxing, exciting, and arousing* experiences; and 3) the conative perspective: *novelty, escape and relax, nature, wishes and desires, and host-site interaction*. The 14 key subcategories following from these three main categories could be taken up in future research on mapping country-related experiences. In addition to the 25 subcategories from previous studies, 7 new subcategories emerged to supplement the list of codes during the analysis, as new ideas of categorizing were identified from the data. An additional category, *stimuli*, was considered to comprise a valid and, indeed, necessary fourth perspective, suggesting an interesting focus for further research. Stimulus is one of the basic notions in experience marketing and must be studied in addition to cognition, affection, and conation in order to produce a holistic view of consumer behaviour, and could provide valuable insights for marketers in their activities.

Contrasting with the result of Brijs et al. (2011), this study does not recommend the subcategory *religion* but rather adds *services, overall impressions, and assumptions about basic knowledge*. The interviewees talked about quality services, which many of them use, knowing that these are cheaper than in other countries and the quality standards are high. They also conveyed overall impressions that could not be placed in other subcategories, as they were broader than the rest. The proposed subcategory *assumptions* is based on what travellers might know beforehand when visiting any country. *Knowledge before and after visiting* could be elaborated further and provide valuable information, as many interviewees expressed surprise in that their expectations were exceeded, and comparing the previous and current experience of the country would also result in a valuable insight for country brand managers. Besides, the subcategories *language* and *cultural identity* previously proposed by Brijs et al. could be merged, as language is a manifestation of culture.

In parallel with Russell and Pratt's (1980) work, the four types of affective experiences mentioned above could contribute to a positive country image; the experiences relating to the possible subcategory *sleepy* were not mentioned; the methodological tool that is being

suggested adds *country-related memories*, as the interviewees had visited the country before and had good memories of it expressed in an emotional way.

Pearce and Lee (2005) suggest *nostalgia*, *recognition* and *self-actualization*, but this study found no instances of these subcategories; on the other hand, *incentives*, and *wishes and desires* arose as new subcategories. Incentives did not qualify under other subcategories. Wishes and desires are directly related to the conative perspective for experience marketing, and therefore, must be separated from the other subcategories.

Effective country branding should provide visitors with “an assurance of quality experiences, reduce visitor search costs, and offer a way for destinations to establish a unique selling proposition” (Blain et al., 2005, p. 330). The interviewees recommended the use of the facts: “come to the country that invented the Christmas tree, country that invented the sauna” (INT 11), etc. Some of them recommend updating the facts about Estonia. The country seems to be safe and clean; small and efficient; many things done online. The factual promotion is working, at least in Scandinavia, even if with a delay. For example, some Finnish interviewees were surprised at what a convenient travel destination Estonia is for them, finding it hard to believe that Tallinn is just 80 kilometres away from Helsinki. Information has always been available, but needed an affective impact such as stressing that these people living very close to Finland share the same cultural heritage. It is obvious from instances of this type, which repeat from country to country, that to sell the promise of a good emotional experience is as important as distributing information. Anyway, to disseminate more information is necessary because Estonia is not well known, while at the same time creating and inducing positive feelings and emotions, and presenting good incentives for a visit.

Customer research for the Estonian brand has been insufficient and the available methods and tools for involving customers as co-creators of the brand have not been exploited to their full potential: the public is not well understood, the selection of brand symbols is inadequate and the symbolism is not communicated properly. All of these reasons contribute to the problem to a varying extent. Therefore, the fact that the real potential of the country to attract travellers from any of the intended target groups is not realised is an uncomfortable but important outcome of this study. A country can hope to have a competitive identity and brand when an effective and realistic differentiation of its potential has been achieved and further transmitted to the intended audience, using the correct symbols and experiences. Country brands should therefore communicate the brand experience in a way that the consumer will easily appropriate and understand these meanings and incorporate them into their travel experiences.

As established earlier, that every country is remembered by the experiences people associate with it, another category to use in any assessment or mapping of experiences would be authenticity. This is a crucial component of many activities contributing to a country brand, but in order to find authentic experiences, research must be conducted. According to one branding expert, the phenomenal success of Tallinn’s Christmas market globally has been one of the most outstanding examples of tourism marketing in Europe in the last five years: “That along with what Finland is doing – capturing Santa Claus – is an excellent strategy” (INT 6). However, it is surprising that while they were considered highly authentic experiences by the interviewees in this study, neither winter nor the Christmas market is mentioned in the Estonian strategies for tourism.

The official marketing strategies show a marked disconnection with the results of this study. Many attributes and experiences that were mentioned in the interviews had not taken

into account, while some of those included in the documents do not capture the interests of customers. Another significant flaw in the marketing strategies that was intuitively tackled by many interviewees is that the brand in general seems to be the result of guessing what foreigners like about Estonia instead of actually knowing or being aware of how to better communicate and promote the positive side of the country and develop good offerings. Brand strategies have to become iterative, reflexive processes. Although the interviews expressed subjective opinions, they displayed a surprising level of congruity. It can be deduced that the methodology chosen was suitable for the topic and its main instrument was successful in obtaining large amounts of substantial data. Therefore, this approach can be seen as possessing the potential to discover the real essence and the most convenient identity of the country, compared to how this essence and identity are framed by current documents. Considering the abundance of literature and theory available, countries should not set strategies that fall short of what is possible by not consulting the target audience, in cooperation with all stakeholders, and ignoring fundamental principles of marketing. This is supported by the results of the analysis performed on the data from this study.

In the case of Estonia, the most noticeable problems in the current marketing concepts have to do with identity choices. It has been established that place marketers have “less control over the brand experience than marketers of mainstream brands” (Hankinson, 2009, p. 98); therefore, it is even more critical to produce thoughtful, manageable, and simple but adequate strategies. This can be facilitated by continuous observation and assessment of visitors experiences and by verifying the consistency between the brand experience and its identity, values, and goals, which are set by the brand managers. Extreme conceptualization can be detrimental to the process because it develops detached strategies.

Strategies have more chances of succeeding when they rely more on on-going feedback and are responsively adjusted in accordance with the expectations of the customers. The comparison of perceptions and experiences was valuable as it revealed the shortcomings of the official marketing strategies. According to the interviewees, the product of Estonia is pretty good, but the experts also implied that the strategies could be improved.

Brand ambassadors play an important role in introducing the identities of small countries to the world. To succeed with the “Introduce Estonia” concept (created in 2008), Estonian citizens, residents, foreigners who live in Estonia, official representatives, and enthusiasts elsewhere are the most important groups to get actively involved in its promotion. This is why the strategies have to be easy to understand and well disseminated. Conceptual communication must be clear, realistic and distinctive. Furthermore, unless the attributes that determine the choice of a country are identified and can constitute an advantage appealing to travellers, a tactical campaign should not be elaborated. When customers are unable to perceive the value of an offering, the investment in its production and promotion is wasteful because people will not be interested.

A salient finding from the interviews is that accurate information about Estonia is lacking abroad, and the country is not attracting the attention it deserves in part because very little is known. A constructive interpretation of these findings is that Estonia still has the opportunity to build a positive image for itself if a competitive and realistic brand identity and authentic experiences are carefully selected. Academic research and assessments similar to this study are so far the only open forums offering discussion and proposals advocating a more effective strategy and an innovative brand image, and promotion of the country.

6. Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This article focused on the interconnections between several marketing concepts, the classification and comparison of experiences, and on the search for authentic experiences that could be used for country branding in Estonia. It recommends the use of experience marketing and continued research based on its three perspectives combined: cognitive, affective, and conative. The findings of the study provide guidance for creating a marketing strategy that could affect the tourism policy of Estonia more positively than the strategies currently in place. In addition, categories and subcategories for future research on experiences and a theoretical model of interconnections between the main constructs were proposed. Thus, the contribution is theoretical as well as empirical.

From the literature review and the context-specific evaluation of the Estonian case, the following conclusions could be highlighted. Firstly, experience marketing and country branding are related through experiences, with authenticity being a crucial factor in gaining positive, meaningful and memorable experiences, which are the preconditions for inducing a positive country image. To illustrate this, a model was proposed indicating the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences, and country image. Secondly, the division of experiences into three categories and subcategories is suitable for mapping and organizing country-based experiences. Experience marketing is an innovative solution in the context of country branding, especially for small countries. Thirdly, the most authentic Estonian experiences resulting from this study are the Song Festival, food, nature, the Old Town of Tallinn, and its Christmas market. There are more real Estonian experiences than those created for tourists. Authentic experiences related to spas, manor houses, e-solutions, islands, and other unique propositions could be added to the strategic options. Fourthly, an insufficient understanding of what consumers think, feel and want in relation to Estonia establishes the demand for more research. It is essential to monitor country brands continuously, to understand how the country is perceived abroad and to evaluate how distinguishable the brand is. This research emphasizes that it is important to conduct research on all three perspectives – not only on cognitive and affective aspects separately – in order to discover an accurate and holistic understanding of the phenomenon of experience marketing in country branding. To that end, 32 subcategories were proposed, from which 7 grew out of this study. Finally, the findings of this study show that the Estonian marketing strategies should be revised according to the real situation and proposals. Taking into account economic changes and new market conditions, it is necessary to develop a new marketing strategy that encompasses tourism development trends, especially in priority markets. The existing strategies contain many suggested topics and experiences that are not noticed by the target group and vice versa. Furthermore, the overall concept “Introduce Estonia” is fragmented and needs to be simplified. It is important to create meaningful experiences and identify authentic examples that may add value to existing options, but the explanation needs to be clear to all stakeholders, otherwise the messages sent by different people could be contradictory.

The main limitations of this article are the specificity of the case study that was only based on one country and the sampling selection criteria (the interviewees could have come from any place, and have any background). The analysis drew on very personal opinions and unique experiences of visitors to Estonia and did not include locals. Although the interviewees came from different countries, cultural influences were not considered in the analysis of the findings but could be used in further research. In addition, a case study is unique and its

analysis subjective, but the proposed categorization system does nonetheless comprise a potential resource for DMOs of other countries.

Achieving a better understanding of the audience is a critical step in the formulation of strategies that seek to influence people's perceptions or improve communication tactics; the selection of the identity and experiences for country branding should be consistent with the development of strategies and tactics (campaigns, images, and promotional materials). If this study were built further and its research questions taken to the next level, the sample of interviewees could be expanded to obtain greater coverage; the subtopics of the interview guide could be emphasized and the subcategories proposed could be used, and then proposals formulated. Indeed, the country's DMO could use this research or develop its own new theoretical framework and brand systems, and conduct research to monitor the brand. In addition, it is essential to understand different aspects of experience marketing in order to make proper use of them in country branding. The conceptualization developed in this study could be utilized by other small countries in their branding using experience marketing.

Future research could focus on the critical drivers for experience marketing in the country branding context, and on how countries rank against their competitors across the perspectives influencing experience marketing, by asking questions about their competitors (e.g. comparing with other countries). One option is a large-scale research project to establish which perspective among different targeted foreigners affects their attitude most. Finally, future studies should at least include the consideration of motivations because of their interaction with and influence on the cognitive and affective perspectives. Moreover, improved scales and determining categories are necessary to map and assess country-specific cognitions, affections, and conations and overall authenticity.

Ultimately, the Estonian brand today communicates fewer positive messages and experiences than it could. Its derivative concepts and tactics are therefore flawed from the onset if we consider, as much scholarship has, that a country brand is a multifaceted and complex concept that consists of many components of value, that it requires coordinated efforts to sustain and take advantage of its potential and that it should be a constant work in progress. To that end, the proposed model, the classification of country-based experiences, and other recommendations are also useful for other countries.

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