Conceptualization of Experience Marketing and Country Branding from a Marketing Management Perspective

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Declaration:
Hereby I declare that this doctoral thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the doctoral degree at Tallinn University of Technology has not been submitted for any academic degree.

Siiri Same

Elamusturunduse ja riigi brändimise kontseptualiseerimine turunduse juhtimise vaatenurgast

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LIST OF ARTICLES

I Same, S., & Larimo, J. (2012). Marketing Theory: Experience Marketing and Experiential Marketing. In R. Ginevičius, A. V. Rutkauskas, & J. Stankevičienė (Eds.), selected papers of the *7th International Scientific Conference "Business and Management 2012"*, 480–487, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Press. (ETIS 3.1)

II Same, S. (2012). Country Branding and Experience Marketing: a Perspective on Sensemaking and Cognition Theories. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Economy & Business*, *6*(3), 286–303. (ETIS 1.2)

III Same, S., & Solarte-Vasquez, M. C. (2014). Country Branding and Country Image: Insights, Challenges and Prospects. The Case of Estonia. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, *4*(1), 137–165. (ETIS 1.2)

IV Same, S. (2014). Experience Marketing in Country Branding: Theoretical Developments and an Estonian Case Study. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, *6*(1), 65–88. (ETIS 1.2)

Contribution to the articles:

Article I. The author of this thesis generated the research idea and structure, made an extensive literature review, proposed two models on experience marketing, and advanced her previous three definitions that the text provides.

Articles II. The author of the thesis conducted the theoretical and methodological design and composition of this article.

Article III. The author of this thesis co-wrote the article, conducted interviews, and based on their analysis proposed the categorization system for country branding, and conducted the document analysis, and the comparison of codes.

Article IV. The author of this dissertation is solely responsible for writing the article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Experience marketing and country branding stimulate consumption and have a positive effect on economic development and growth by influencing travelers' attitudes, behavior, and decisions, and providing a stronger competitive position. Countries compete with each other to attract the attention and trust of tourists, investors, international media, events, and talented people. To attract the target audience (particularly international or foreign travelers), a powerful and positive country brand could provide a crucial competitive advantage. According to Morgan et al. (2002), places are the world's biggest tourism brands. **Place** is a generic term that includes countries, cities, regions, counties, states, and specific locations. The differentiation of messages, activities, and channels used by countries is as important as competitiveness in being distinguishable from others and unique. Country branding helps to deliver what the country and its brand have to offer customers: experiences and services that can only be obtained 'there'; these are features that acquire the attention of potential and existing customers. As branding activities require considerable effort and resources (e.g. time, money, and people), coordinated actions and well-conceived official strategies are needed. Based on the most recent marketing practices, the implementation of effective experience marketing and country branding strategies can help increase a country's competitiveness and preference.

This study explores the conceptualization and development of experience marketing and country branding, which are the **key concepts** of this thesis. Customer experiences are the cornerstones of contemporary marketing and tourism as well as of country branding. Experiences affect attitudes, judgments, and other aspects of consumer behavior. Unlike the traditional features-and-benefits marketing approach, which lacks a fundamental basis and an insightful understanding of customers, and considers the rational economic view in which costs and benefits are the most important variables; experience marketing is grounded on the psychology of the individual customers and their social behavior where emotional aspects are also important (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Already in 1999, Schmitt declared that we were "in the middle of a revolution" in marketing and proposed a shift to experiential marketing by making a clear distinction from traditional marketing.

As experience marketing is a wide concept, it is necessary to focus on some aspects such as place marketing and more specifically country branding and the marketing management perspective. Anholt (2007) defines a country brand as the perception of the place that exists in the minds of the audience. The purpose of country branding is to create awareness and contribute to a positive image of a place to potential and existing customers. In most cases, the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) is in charge of managing the brand of a country, and the function of country brand managers is to administer the branding

process, strategies, promotion, marketing research, and the dissemination of the brand identity to its target audience.

Pike and Page (2014, 203) acknowledge that so far in place marketing (umbrella term for places), the main concern has been solving marketing management decision problems using a "fragmented applied research approach rather than theory building." Kavaratzis (2005, 2009) and later Niedomysl and Jonasson (2012) tried to develop a place marketing theory, and Hankinson (2004, 2009) laid the foundation for the development of a theory of destination brand management. In addition, Dinnie (2008) developed a conceptual model of nation-brand identity and image, and Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) an identity-based approach to place branding theory, but a proper country branding theory for research in this field seems to be still missing; thus, this lack was addressed in detail. The same problem applies to experience marketing, which in general terms is based on the experience economy theory/concept (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999). Notwithstanding the amount of research that has been conducted based on this theory, some authors consider that it is still in the pre-theory stage (e.g. Boswijk et al., 2007) or the explanations are too general and the theory is prescriptive (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). As a result, research gaps and opportunities were identified in order to contribute with a relevant academic work. In addition, Tynan and McKechnie (2009), in the review article "Experience marketing: a review and reassessment", concur on the lack of clarity that prevails in regard to what exactly comprises an experience and the diversity of terms related to experience marketing. The extensive literature review conducted during this research revealed a compelling need for unification and clarity in the field; therefore, it was necessary to define the concepts.

Most of the country branding research is based on single case studies, providing insufficient grounds for comparison or a 'best practice' sample. Research on country branding, in particular focusing on experience marketing, is limited by extent. This is the case with the studies by Blain et al. (2005), Hankinson (2009), Hudson and Ritchie (2009), and Nikolova and Hassan (2013) who have emphasized the importance of experience marketing as well as the analysis of perceptions in understanding consumer behavior.

The research problem originates, on the one hand, from the lack of persuasive conceptualizations on the key concepts and the ways in which they relate to one another or support each other (i.e. their interconnections); and on the other hand, from the lack of knowledge and understanding of practices and frameworks on how to interpret and evaluate a country brand situation. In general, the problem lies in the tough competition between countries in the context of globalization and the necessity to find differentiation and competitive advantage. Although the literature supporting this thesis reveals the importance of experiences in country branding, the key constructs are complex and multidimensional. Thus, it is necessary to explain the connections between them and fill a perceived gap in the theoretical developments in the field. In addition, it is necessary to raise the awareness among organizations responsible for place brands about the possibilities of experience marketing when applied to country branding. Thus,

the motivation for the research stems from the need: 1) to understand existing concepts of experience marketing and country branding and to develop them further, 2) to gain an understanding of the mind-set of customers because of the competition and choices, and 3) to advance our understanding of the country brand situation. Furthermore, the interest in pursuing this research rests on its topicality, relevance and innovation opportunities.

The **aim** of the thesis is to develop theoretical frameworks and analyze the current country brand situation in Estonia to understand and conceptualize experience marketing and country branding and how they are interconnected to the brand image and experiences of a country in the context of the strategic marketing management of competitive brands. This could be accomplished by proposing new models, definitions and categories, and understanding how foreign travelers (**foreigners**) perceive and experience a country and its brand to interpret a current brand situation in one specific country (Estonia). The focus is on aspects of place brand management and the perspectives of the DMOs who need to understand the concepts in order to find and create unique selling propositions and appropriate experiences, and attributes for promoting the country. The perspectives of travelers are also considered important and are taken into account as necessary feedback for the DMOs.

More broadly, one central question emerged: How to understand the perceptions of country branding and country-based experiences to conceptualize the key concepts? Figure 1 presents the research **questions** (RQ) and their links to the research tasks (T).
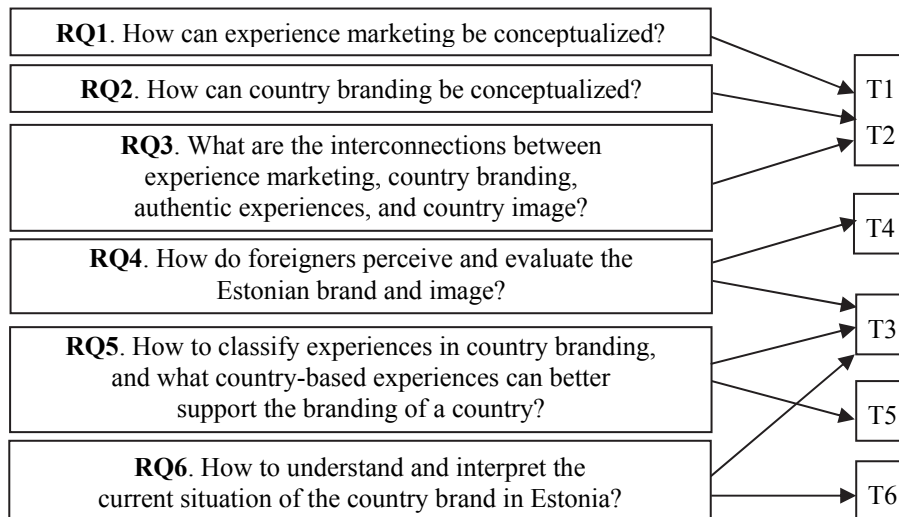
Figure 1. Research questions and tasks for the thesis (compiled by the author)

To achieve these aims, seven research **tasks** were set. T1: to analyze and synthesize academic literature for conceptualizing experience marketing and country branding. T2: to develop conceptual models explaining the key concepts

and their interconnectedness. T3: to conduct empirical research among the target audience to explore the perceptions of a country brand and its image and experiences. T4: to formulate categories (main topics) for country branding (research). T5: to classify experiences for country branding and identify authentic experiences. T6: to interpret the current situation of the country brand in Estonia, including analyzing previous studies and official marketing strategies, and comparing the findings of interviews and documents (to find differences between country brand identity and image). T7: to make proposals for future research and provide managerial implications and suggestions.

The author relies on social constructivism, which allows us to understand and interpret the social world in qualitative terms by exploring two complex and socially constructed phenomena, and by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of foreign travelers using a single case study approach. In addition to the customary literature review, this qualitative research draws on two main methods for gathering data: interviews and analyzing documents. The data were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis of interviews, document analysis of Estonian marketing strategies, and the analysis of previous studies of Brand Estonia (publications and official reports of studies on Estonia's image and brand) ordered by the country DMO.

Country branding is the focal point of the dissertation based on a case study – Estonia, a small country with a population of 1.3 million people, located at the heart of the Baltic Sea Region, in Northern Europe. The Estonian DMO is Enterprise Estonia, which is a government-supported organization promoting business and regional policy in Estonia, consisting of divisions such as the Estonian Tourist Board, the Investment and Trade Development Division, the Export Division, the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centre among others. All divisions use the same country brand attributes in their marketing promotion. Currently, the marketing strategies managed by the country DMO provide one common basis to introduce Estonia to the world as a place of interest for visiting (tourism), a good place for doing business (investments, export), and for living, studying, or working. The Estonian brand is called **Brand Estonia** and it consists of a sign, a slogan, cornflower pattern, selected colors, photography, and typography, brand communication, and marketing strategies.

Substantial problems with the Estonian brand have been noticed in earlier research (see section 1.4). The studies ordered by the country DMO are mostly quantitative, and for balance and better insights into customer minds, qualitative research is required. Previously, few authors such as Dinnie (2008), Moilanen and Rainisto (2009), Andersson (2007), and Szondi (2007) have included the Estonian case in their studies; however, referring to the data from the first phase of the branding process conducted in 2001–2002, not the changes that took place in 2008 and later.

Country branding requires implementing innovative ideas and effective marketing concepts and activities that could have an overall impact on the economy and society. Government support is recommended by other authors; however, in Estonia, its involvement has not been active or direct in recent

years. The 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia will be celebrated in 2018. The ongoing preparations make it more relevant than ever to raise questions about the efficacy of the country brand, which adjustments might be required, and how innovative marketing techniques should be used. So far, research concerning marketing strategies is insufficient and discussions of the need for change are scarce. In the Estonian case, the state, one of the most important stakeholders, has discontinued its direct involvement and the brand has not been subject to scrutiny and academic research for a long time. Thus, it is important to understand and interpret the perceptions of foreigners, and explore how existing strategies correspond to contemporary marketing and branding practices, and the rapid transformations and events affecting the economy and the social reality. This work corresponds to an objective need to encourage the DMO in its task, as well as to explore with academic rigor the intuitive perception that people have had about the brand. Solid grounds for future research will also be established as a contribution of this thesis.

The thesis is based on **four research articles** that have a common thread on experience marketing and country branding. Articles I and II are conceptual, providing theoretical argumentation and explanations of the concepts and new models; Articles III and IV are empirical, based on an Estonian case study. All articles are designated using Roman numerals throughout the thesis. Figure 2 shows the connections between the four articles and the structure of this thesis.

The two dashed-line arrows in the figure show the use of the elements in the following articles. For example, the essential elements from Article I (cognition, affection, conation) are used in Article IV for the classification system as the main categories. In addition, some fundamental elements (identity, image) from the model of country branding introduced in Article II, were used in the research for Article III. In this way, the author thought and acted strategically throughout the whole research process thereby giving the conclusions a solid basis, enhancing its relevance for the development of the key concepts.

Article I (Appendix 1) explores marketing terminology, identifies and highlights major differences between experience marketing and experiential marketing, and proposes a conceptual model of experience marketing.

Article II (Appendix 2) examines the key concepts in association with cognition and sensemaking theories, and analyzes and synthesizes academic literature to create a conceptual model of country branding. The article describes a model that helps understand the essence of country branding and pave the way for further research.

Article III (Appendix 3) aims at a better understanding of foreigners' perceptions of a country brand and image, and the options for enhancing Estonia's brand image, and formulates the categories for country branding. In addition, it focuses on the Estonian brand effectiveness by finding coincidences between the image and the brand formulation premises, provides an overview of previous studies of Brand Estonia, and presents the current challenges for the brand.

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│            Conceptualization of the key concepts                     │
│                                                                       │
│   ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐             │
│   │    Article I     │              │    Article II    │             │
│   │Experience marketing│            │ Country branding │             │
│   └──────────────────┘              └──────────────────┘             │
│                                                                       │
│   ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐             │
│   │Concepts in experience│          │Concepts in country│            │
│   │marketing (section 1.2)│         │branding (section 1.3)│         │
│   └──────────────────┘              └──────────────────┘             │
│                                                                       │
│   ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐             │
│   │Conceptual model of│             │Conceptual model of│            │
│   │experience marketing│            │country branding   │            │
│   │(section 3.1.1)   │              │(section 3.1.2)    │            │
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│   │    Article IV    │              │   Article III    │             │
│   │Experiences of a country│        │Country brand image│            │
│   └──────────────────┘              └──────────────────┘             │
│                                                                       │
│   ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐             │
│   │Classification system│            │Categorization system│          │
│   │of experiences for │             │for country branding│           │
│   │country branding (section 3.3)│   │(section 3.2)     │            │
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│   ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐             │
│   │Model indicating the│            │Place brand management,│        │
│   │interconnections between│        │previous studies on Brand│      │
│   │experience marketing, country│   │Estonia (section 1.4)│          │
│   │branding, authentic experiences,│└──────────────────┘             │
│   │and country image (section 3.1.3)│                                │
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│                                     │Comparison of the country│      │
│   ┌──────────────────┐              │brand identity and image, the│  │
│   │Authentic Estonian experiences│  │brand situation (section 3.5)│  │
│   │(section 3.4)     │              └──────────────────┘             │
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          ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐
          │       Conclusions (section 4.1)          │
          │  Contributions of the thesis (section 4.2)│
          │   Ideas for future research (section 4.3) │
          │  Managerial implications (section 4.4)   │
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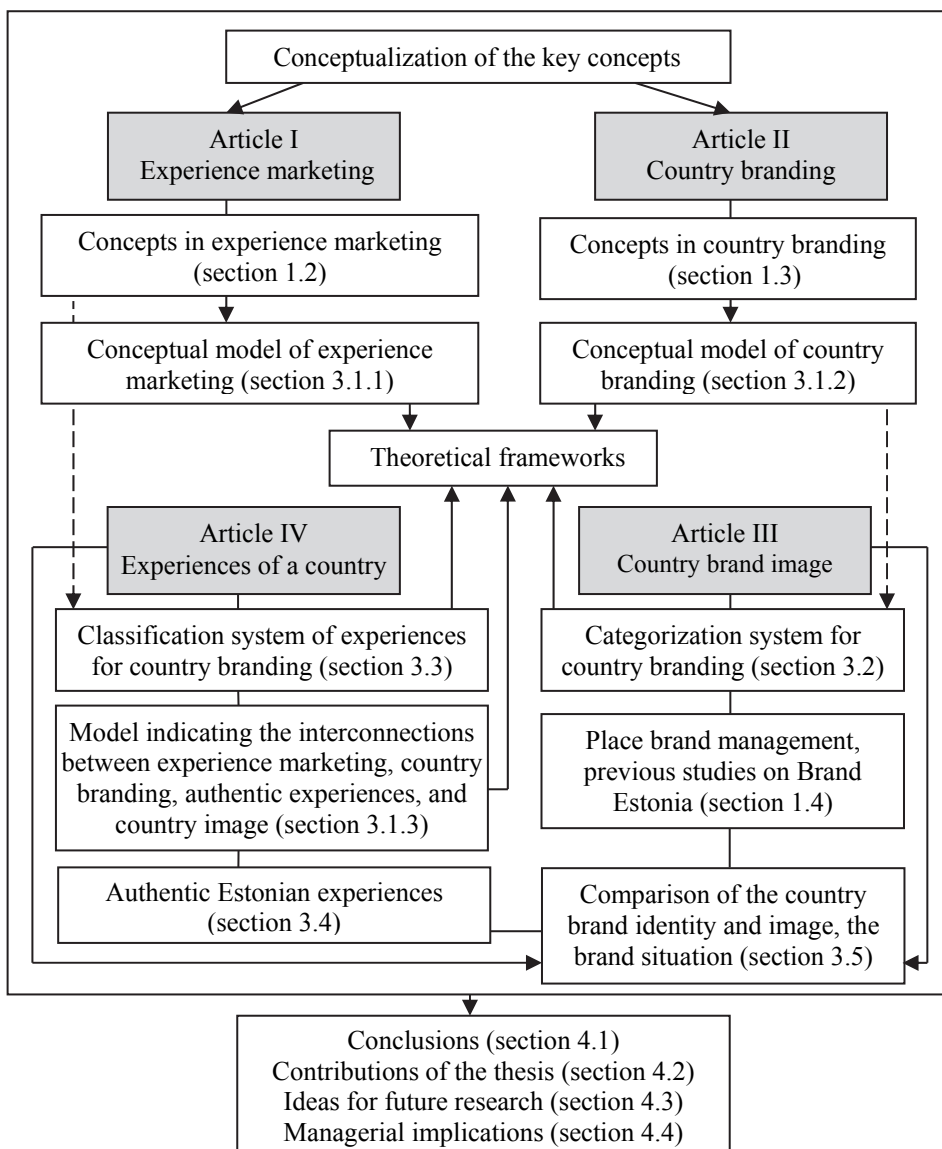
Figure 2. Interconnections of the articles and the structure of the thesis (by the author)

Article IV (Appendix 4) establishes links between the concepts by showing the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences, and positive country image. In addition, it aims to understand how foreigners perceive Estonia and describe their experiences, discovers authentic experiences, compares the experiences of the interviewees with those recommended in the marketing strategies, and proposes a classification system of experiences for future research. The comparative analysis is necessary to identify the gaps between the country brand identity and image.

This doctoral thesis **contributes** to the development of the concepts of experience marketing and country branding, constructs three novel models, builds a categorization system for country branding and creates a system for classifying experiences, and interprets the current country brand situation and the effectiveness of the Estonian brand. It explores how travelers perceive the country and its brand and image, and based on the findings offers recommendations for future research and suggestions for marketing professionals and DMOs. To understand and bring clarity to the key concepts and marketing terminology, Articles I and II proposed new models and definitions. Articles III and IV have both theoretical and practical contributions and could be the basis for future research for other countries. Although the work focuses on the tourism perspective (often referred to as destination branding), country branding could also be applied to other place marketing priorities; thus, this research is applicable to other sectors as well, such as foreign investments, exports, and immigration. Most importantly, country branding and experience marketing in the context of this work both consider all kinds of travelers, not only tourists. This thesis could raise the awareness of scholars, marketers and DMOs dealing with place marketing since this research can also be used when branding other places (e.g. cities, regions). Insights obtained during the research could provide input for marketing strategies that can be adjusted accordingly. Section 4.2 explains the contributions of the dissertation in more detail.

The research has been reported in various conferences, including: "European Marketing Academy 41st Annual Conference" (Portugal, 2012); 7th International Scientific Conference "Business and Management" (Lithuania, 2012); "International Marketing Trends Conference" (Italy, 2012); and 2nd "International Marketing Spring Conference" at TUT (Estonia, 2014).

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical foundations, including the positioning of the research, the concepts in experience marketing and country branding, and their connections to place brand management and the study's foundations – the case of Estonia and its previous studies. Chapter 2 explains the epistemological perspectives, research design, and methodology applied, including data collection, analysis, and comments on its trustworthiness. Chapter 3 reveals the findings: explains the new conceptual models, introduces the categorization and classification systems based on the interviews, highlights the authentic experiences and finally presents a comparison of the country brand identity and image to understand the brand situation. Chapter 4 synthesizes the conclusions, highlights theoretical and practical contributions, and provides implications for future research and suggestions for marketing managers and DMOs. The chapters are followed by references, the abstract, and appendices containing Articles I–IV.

Abbreviations used in this thesis:
DMO – Destination Marketing Organization
INT – Interviewee
WTE – Welcome to Estonia

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter introduces the theoretical foundation for the creation of the conceptual frameworks (presented in Chapter 3) by explaining the key concepts, and elaborating on the foundations and underlying basis for the empirical research. The first section presents the positioning and focus of the research, and the next two introduce the concepts within experience marketing and country branding. The last section covers place brand management, the challenges that DMOs face today, and an overview of previous studies conducted on Brand Estonia.

1.1. Positioning and focus of the research

Tourism has always been relevant in marketing research, much more so now that branding extends to places, countries, and beyond. Even though a number of specialist disciplines link to the key concepts of this thesis, such as foreign direct investments, export, human geography, cultural and heritage studies, (graphic) design, symbolic economy inter alia, they remain outside the scope of this research. Instead, the focus is on marketing concepts – experience marketing and country branding – which both rely on marketing management. Because human psychology is closely related to the key concepts, some psychological aspects are also included.

The positioning of this interdisciplinary research is illustrated in Figure 3. 1) In relation to experience marketing, the focal point of the empirical research is on country-based experiences and aspects of customer behavior taking into account the cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. 2) In regard to country branding, the emphasis is on tourism and the perceptions of the target audience of the country and its brand and image. 3) Since both key concepts belong to the marketing discipline that is a business function and management process, they are interrelated through marketing management. In fact, brand management is one of the most important functions within the broader concept of place marketing management. Here, the focus is on the strategic marketing of

Figure 3. Positioning of the research (compiled by the author)

DMOs that contributes to the competitiveness of a place and is connected to a specific case study of Estonia. When awareness about a country increases, it attracts more travelers, and preferences as well as a positive country image emerge. In turn, the economy of the whole country benefits, resulting in increased economic revenue and well-being for the locals, boosting the whole economy. Therefore, place brand managers should employ effective marketing strategies to promote places.

Table 1 shows additional aspects of this research that reflect the research focus by giving an overview of the fundamental decisions.

Table 1. Research focus (compiled by the author)

Research dimension	Selected focus
Key concepts	Experience marketing and country branding
Theoretical positioning	Marketing management, the empirical study is from the perspective of DMOs
Type of place (context)	Country
Case study	Estonia
Target audience	Travelers (visitors, tourists), in this study foreigners

The most relevant theories concerning this study were found to be: branding theory, place marketing theory, experience economy, consumer behavior theory, and marketing management theory. Consumer information processing, consumer culture, and behavioral decisions are subfields of consumer behavior theory (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010), providing special consumer insights into experiences, the core object in experience marketing. According to Schmitt (2010), marketing strategy and marketing models have contributed to experience marketing to the same extent, and consequently, they are covered on an equal basis in this research. In this thesis the term 'strategic marketing' is used in reference to the field of study, and 'marketing strategy' in regard to the organizational strategy construct and the latter may be defined as an organization's integrated pattern of decisions (Varadarajan, 2010) necessary for country branding. The study adopts the perspective of the marketing management of DMOs trying to contribute to their best knowledge in theoretical and practical terms.

Estonia is the place selected for the case study. It is located in Northern Europe, and shares borders with Finland, Sweden, Russia, and Latvia. The researcher is an Estonian and aims to contribute to the improvement of country branding activities with academic and practical expertise of more that 15 years in work related to both key concepts.

Many kinds of target groups for country branding exist; for example, tourists, investors, foreign students, business travelers, talented people, and transit visitors. A tourist travels to a place for pleasure and is thus not a business traveler or investor covered in this research. A visitor who is also a particular type of traveler takes a trip to a country for some main purpose, including business and professional activities. Thus, this research focuses broadly on

travelers defined by The United Nations World Tourism Organization as "someone who moves between different geographic locations, for any purpose and any duration"[1], but also divides this category into domestic and international travelers. On the other hand, a foreigner is a person born or coming from outside a country. Hence, the definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary "a person belonging to or owing allegiance to a foreign country"[2], best describes the sample of the research.

Opting for country branding as a key concept reflects important assumptions. Several sub-divisions of place branding are closely related to country branding; destination branding and nation branding are commonly used interchangeably (see section 1.3). Based on the literature analysis, destination branding refers only to the tourism sector (see e.g. Morrison, 2013), while the results of this research can also be applied to other business sectors. In addition, provinces, counties, cities within a country can also be destinations. Finally, since the case study refers to a whole country instead of its parts, country branding reflects the content with precision. Nations, on the other hand, are unified by a collective identity and a sense of unity that awakens in the group a solidarity that no other force can trigger. Not all countries are formed on the basis of a nation or could consist of more than one. Some nations might not have a territory with borders, and a government as a political entity. Consequently, the concept of nation branding was not as useful to guide the study. A country is the equivalent of an administrative unit with a geographic territory where several nations can co-exist and are connected by legal and political rights rather than by ethnic or cultural identities. Furthermore, for this reason, nation branding was not preferred; instead, country branding seemed best. Although, in some parts of the thesis, 'place' and 'country' are used synonymously, 'place' is considered to be the umbrella term.

1.2. Concepts in experience marketing

In Article I important distinctions are established to separate experience marketing from related theoretical proposals, such as experiential marketing and customer experience management to better understand the concepts and the relevant marketing terminology, because the common use of these terms as synonyms in academic literature is misleading. The confusion arising from this lack of precision has been detected earlier. Tynan and McKechnie (2009, 502) refer to a lack of clarity in the marketing literature with regard to "what exactly constitutes an experience and the conflation of terms associated" with experience marketing. They recognize the problem, but propose no terminological development. Schmitt, the initiator of experiential marketing, wrote in 1999 a seminal article and a book "Experiential marketing"; but ten years later in a joint publication with Brakus and Zarantonello (Brakus et al.,

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[1] Source: http://media.unwto.org/en/content/understanding-tourism-basic-glossary
[2] Source: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/foreigner

2009), and in his later works (e.g. Schmitt, 2010), he refers to the same concept with the expression 'experience marketing'. A prerequisite to advance the theory is to depart from precise definitions of its main concepts.

One of the possible reasons for this terminological confusion and different focus is attributable to the existence of three schools of thought, representing different aspects of the same phenomenon. Pine and Tarssanen (2008) refer to other authors and differentiate: the American school focusing on marketing management and economy (e.g. Schmitt, Pine, Gilmore); the Nordic school on the design of experience products and services (e.g. Gelter, Tarssanen, Kylänen); and the Central European school on experience based learning (e.g. Boswijk, Thijssen, Peelen, Snel). A German school of *Erlebnismarketing* (marketing with emotion) (Weinberg) could be added to this list. The focal point in this thesis is on the American school of thought as it focuses on marketing management.

To understand the level of complexity in the essence of experience marketing, the first concept to explore is **experience**, which indicates the main component and also the type of marketing. The departing assumption is that experience is a complex phenomenon that affects the understanding of all related constructs. No agreement on a definition is available in the marketing literature (Carù & Cova, 2003; Poulsson & Kale, 2004); the lack of clarity lies in the different ways in which experience can be understood. Besides, it differs greatly when translated into different languages, acquiring special connotations depending on the particular context, even within the same concept. People perceive a difference between the simple pleasure of an ordinary experience (e.g. everyday experience) and the enjoyment of an extraordinary one (e.g. river-rafting, skydiving). Pine and Gilmore (1999) distinguish four different types of experiences: escapist, entertaining, educational, and aesthetic. In addition, we can differentiate between consumer and consumption, mundane and flow experiences. Furthermore, Edgell et al. (1997) separated four types of consumption experience: family, friendship, citizenship, and consumer experiences. From a different angle, people can differentiate and describe several types of experiences; for instance, physical, emotional, mental, sensational, spiritual, social, and virtual. Additionally, Tynan and McKechnie (2009) explain that being a noun and a verb, experience can convey a process (participating in the activity), affect a feeling, or be even an outcome as a skill or learning. Furthermore, Carbone and Haeckel (1994, 9) add qualifications; they explain that an experience "may be good or bad, lasting or fleeting, a random phenomenon or an engineered perception." There is no unique approach, and definitions vary according to different aspects and factors that have affect. Table 2 identifies some of the various dimensions that authors have proposed on the analysis of experiences over the past 50 years.

Poulsson and Kale (2004, 271) explain that an experience is a result of the interaction between a customer (subject) and an experience provider (object), and the act of co-creation between the two. Walls et al. (2011) define consumer experience as "multidimensional takeaway impression or outcome, based on the

Table 2. Summary of terminology used

Authors	Year	Approach to experience
Maslow	1964	Peak experience
Holbrook, Hirschman	1982	Experiential aspects
Csikszentmihalyi	1990	Flow experience
Arnould, Price	1993	Extraordinary experience
Carbone, Haeckel	1994	Customer experience engineering
Pine, Gilmore	1998	Distinct economic offering, experience economy, memorable
Schmitt	1999	Experiential marketing
Poulsson, Kale	2004	Commercial experience
Boswijk, Thijssen, Peelen	2005	Meaningful experience
Tarssanen, Kylänen	2007	Experience pyramid, personal change

Source: Author's compilation (Same & Larimo, 2012, 481)

consumer's willingness and capacity to be affected and influenced by physical and/or human interaction dimensions." This thesis focuses on brand experiences defined by Brakus et al. (2009) as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli" that are part of a brand's identity and design, communications, and the environments in which the brand is marketed or sold.

The initiators of experience marketing are Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) and Schmitt (1999, 2003, 2010). The growing use of experience marketing plays a fundamental role in what Pine and Gilmore (1998) have described as the experience economy, stating that experiences are the fourth economic offering and illustrating the progression of value from commodities to experiences by showing how experiences differ from commodities, goods, and services. In addition, Pine and Gilmore (1999, 12) declare that "while commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable." Thus, experience is defined by Leppiman and Same (2011, 247) as an "economic offering and a meaningful relationship, communication between the company, brand, service, and customers who perceive and meaningfully experience it."

Experiences affect attitudes and other aspects of consumer behavior; however, it may be the other way around when new experiences result from changes in attitude or behavior. As claimed by Evans, Jamal and Foxall (2009, 105), **attitude** is a "complex mental state involving what we know, our feelings, our values and dispositions to act in certain ways." Attitudes shape social orientations, or the inclination to respond to something either favorably or unfavorably. The components of attitudes are **cognitive** (thoughts and beliefs), **affective** (feelings and emotions), and **conative** or behavioral. Myers and Alpert (1968) explain that they are evaluative reactions demonstrating one's beliefs, feelings or intended behaviors. Most prior research is based on the cognitive component alone, which provides relevance to the assumption this thesis departs from: all three components are necessary for a holistic view of marketing.

Despite the fact that experiences are key competitive resources, there is no consensus on the definition of **experience marketing** and the context in which it is used. Leeflang (2011) suggests that this important topic has received insufficient attention and Schmitt (2010, 63) acknowledges that experience marketing is a recent and exciting concept, and describes it as any form of "marketing activity that creates a connection to customers." Lee, Hsiao and Yang (2010, 356) explain that experience marketing aims to request "marketing staff to emphasize the overall experience quality for consumers passed by brands, including rational decision-making and sentimental consumption experience." Baron, Harris and Hilton (2009, 346) define experience marketing as "the creation of a memorable episode based on a customer's direct personal participation or observation"; but at the same time, they use exactly the same definition for experiential marketing.

Already in 2004, McCole described experience marketing as a new way of thinking about the discipline, and argued that going back to the traditional feature-and-benefit marketing practice results only in customer satisfaction; but in the experiential paradigm, emotional attachment is of great importance. This thesis goes beyond and emphasizes the need for a holistic view of experience marketing; that is, taking into account three attitudinal perspectives of experiences, analyzing and combining customer emotions, beliefs, and intentions, and not only emotions. Schmitt (2010) suggests 1) experiential value, 2) different types of experiences, 3) experience touchpoints, and 4) the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences as the **key concepts of experience marketing**. He considers experiential value mostly as a hedonic value; in terms of types of experience he takes sense, feel, think, act, and relate experiences; in terms of experience touchpoints, stimuli that evoke experiences (e.g. names, logos, designs, store elements); and the differentiation based on the extraordinariness or exceptional nature of the experience as the main way of classifying the experiences.

When Schmitt (1999) explains the idea of Pine and Gilmore's experience economy, he uses the phrase 'experiential economy', showing that the concepts are used interchangeably. He proposed a framework for **experiential marketing** based on two aspects: 1) strategic experiential modules (SEMs), which form the strategic underpinning (i.e. five types of experiences that marketers could create for customers: sensory, affective, physical, behaviors and lifestyles, social-identity experiences); 2) experience providers (ExPros), which are the tactical tools (such as communications, visual and verbal identity, product presence, electronic media). However, both of these modules can be seen as marketing tools or tactics, because the type of experience does not make it automatically strategic. Holbrook (2000), with whom this thesis concurs, criticizes Schmitt for positioning this rather modest conceptual framework as a key strategic planning tool of experiential marketing.

Other explanations and definitions of experiential marketing are proposed, for instance, by Evans et al. (2009, 500), who define it as "where markets encourage consumers to use multiple senses to experience a brand, at any or all

the pre- and post-purchase stages of the buying process", and You-Ming (2010, 190), who explains it as a "kind of face-to-face communication method, which mainly raises customers' physical and emotional feelings so that customers expect to be relevant and interactive to some brands and to feel and experience wholehearted." Smilansky (2009, 5) describes it as a "process of identifying and satisfying customer needs and aspirations profitably, engaging them through two-way communications that bring brand personalities to life and add value to the target audience." Yuan and Wu (2008, 388) confirm that it can be seen as a marketing tactic designed by a business to stage the entire physical environment and the operational processes for its customers to experience. Carù and Cova (2003, 278) are critical of the American romanticism (Schmitt, Holbrook, Pine, Gilmore) suggesting that this allowed Holbrook to propose the logical sequence: "experiential consumption → emotional responses → pleasure, and to insist on the fact that in this experiential approach, sensations are more important than the consumers' rational thoughts." Various definitions of experiential marketing indicate that it is directly and mainly related to emotions, feelings, and senses; and not directly to cognitions and intentions. Thus, experiential marketing does not apply to strategic marketing, but to tactical and operational level actions, where the main question is how to implement and carry out marketing campaigns or other activities in experiential ways.

Schmitt (2003) later defined the concept of **customer experience management** (CEM) that represents the methodology or a process used to comprehensively manage a customer's cross-channel exposure, interaction and transaction with a brand or company. CEM is like a program (Cantone & Risitano, 2011) or schedule, based on five steps or concrete recommendations for marketing activities. The CEM strategies induce the customer's involvement at different levels (Gentile et al., 2007): sensorial, emotional, rational, physical, and spiritual.

There is a lack of unified positions and instead rather polarized opinions prevail in the marketing literature. This thesis introduces definitions that seem clear and encompassing to resolve these differences: experience marketing is the "strategic marketing of experiences that take into account the affective, cognitive, and conative perspectives of consumption experience" (Leppiman & Same, 2011, 249); and experiential marketing is a "marketing planning tool, which focuses on tactical and operational level actions where the main question is how to do marketing experientially" (p. 251). This thesis raises the question of the need to draw a clear line between experience marketing and experiential marketing, to prevent further conceptual confusion and establish that the two are not interchangeable concepts. The author recommends the use of experience marketing. It is important to highlight that lexically 'experience' is a noun or a verb, whereas 'experiential' is an adjective and means involving or based on experience, stressing the importance of experience as the basis of the field.

1.3. Concepts in country branding

Article II shows that terminological confusion applies to country branding as well. Different concepts refer to place/country branding in the marketing literature and authors are often engaged in terminological debates. Hanna and Rowley (2008) dedicate an entire article to analyzing this problem; Fetscherin (2010) observes that the concepts of nation and country branding are used interchangeably; and Pasquinelli (2010) describes the various ways in which place brand is presented, according to the specific aspect that is taken into consideration. Before elaborating and discussing country branding, the fundamental concepts of brand and branding need to be explained.

Place/country **brand** according to Dinnie (2008, 15), is the "unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the place with culturally-grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences." This definition describes the essence well but does not clarify the specific elements and target audiences. According to Riezebos et al. (2003), the brand is a subjective mental picture shared by a group of consumers or audience. A brand is a core concept in marketing; many consider it like a promise (e.g. Olins, 2005). Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2001) see it as the impact that perceptions and generalizations about a place have on a customers' evaluation of the place's brands and products. Herstein (2011) highlights the two dimensions of place brands: representational (attributes linked to the individual's way of self-expression, intangible characteristics) and functional (utilitarian aspects of the destinations – sun, reefs, sky, culture; tangible characteristics). Braun and Zenker (2010, 5) define country brand as "a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design." This definition summarizes the concept quite well.

In this thesis, **country branding** refers to the promotion and introduction of the brand through the elements and a story; and its mission is to support the creation and strengthening of a positive image; and to measure, build and manage a country brand. Thus, country branding is a systematic and planned process and very broadly, it means applying corporate branding techniques to countries as they address multiple groups of stakeholders and must take into account a long-term development. Many authors (Anholt, 2002; Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2005; Pasquinelli, 2010) declare that managing place brands might be more like managing corporate brands because they have similar characteristics. According to Kavaratzis (2009), both have multidisciplinary roots, a high level of intangibility and complexity, and the need to consider social responsibility. Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) compare a country to a corporation that produces many products; and Nikolova and Hassan (2013) claim that despite their specifics, country brands compete globally on an equal footing with consumer and service brands. Many authors (e.g. Warnaby & Medway, 2013) agree that a country could be regarded as a product.

Fetscherin (2010) classified country branding into four main subjects: 1) country image or country-product image (Agarwal & Sikri, 1996), 2) country identity (Hall, 2002; Keillor & Hult, 1999), 3) destination branding, and 4) country of origin (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1996; Roth & Romeo, 1992). As these are relevant topics in country branding, the first three are explained in detail. The fourth, country of origin effect (COO) is also known as "Made in" labeling and refers to the country a product comes from, describing how customers' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase decisions are influenced by a product's country of origin; but this is not within the scope of this research.

Two fundamental constructs are brand identity and image. Country brand **identity** refers to how the brand owner (DMO) decides it should be presented. It is a choice that "represents the vision of how the place should be perceived in the marketplace, with the aim of achieving differentiation" (Pike & Page, 2014, 211). Country branding aims to communicate a country's unique identity. At the same time, country brand **image** is about how people perceive and experience the brand in reality, and how it exists in the minds of the customers and consumers. Anholt (2007, 5) defines brand image as "the perception of the (place) brand that exists in the mind of their consumers or audience." On the other hand, brand identity could be enhanced based on a customer's brand image (Qu et al., 2011). Customer-based brand **equity** is related to country image and to the investment a country makes in effective brand development, and according to Garcia, Gomez and Molina (2012), brand equity occurs when the customers familiar with the brand have formed positive and unique associations with it. The country image is never fixed or certain (Brown et al. 2006) because each person develops his/her own representations about the places and focuses selectively on the elements that are real or appealing. People are influenced by attitudes, opinions, beliefs, ideas, impressions, and other cultural constraints (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Myers & Alpert, 1968; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012).

In addition, authenticity is of growing importance. Scholars claim that authenticity is central to brand status, equity and corporate reputation (Beverland et al., 2008; Chhabra et al., 2003; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Some researchers even suggest it is one of the foundations of contemporary marketing. Napoli et al. (2014, 1091) describe brand **authenticity** as a "subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers." They state that the construct is multifaceted and built around the perceptions of heritage, nostalgia, cultural symbolism, sincerity, craftsmanship, quality commitment, and design consistency. Authenticity is a fundamental quality of a brand when considering that due to an excessive commodification and marked decreasing faith in marketing, people tend to perceive many things to be fake. This also gives rise to a higher demand for alternative consumption offerings. The craving for authenticity has changed the overall consumption landscape and marketers need to reassess their strategies. Countries, products, and services have become easily substitutable, and it is difficult to distinguish them and to differentiate. At the same time, this is essential for increasing the overall competitiveness of a country and in general, of all brands.

The other important concepts and research topics in country/place brand management are brand strategy, positioning, brand associations, and performance (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Hankinson, 2009; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Morrison, 2013; Pike, 2004). Country branding covers the branding of tourism as well as exports, foreign direct investments, immigration, and education. The focus on tourism in this thesis does not exclude other fields, in particular when tourism branding interrelates and overlaps with these because they use the same country brand attributes and policies. For example, business travelers or official visitors might also engage in tourism; thus, country branding is equally important for them.

Destination branding has mostly been used in relation to countries, and in tourism promotion; this is why destination branding is placed as a subset of country branding, although their activities seem similar. Blain et al. (2005, 337) explain that destination branding consists of marketing activities that 1) support the creation of a logo or other graphic that "identifies and differentiates a destination; that 2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that 3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that 4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk." They highlight that while the definition addresses Aaker's (2002) core branding concepts, it derives from experience marketing. Furthermore, it explains the activities performed in country branding. Ooi (2004, 109) defines destination branding as the process of "inventing and presenting a unique and attractive brand story to tourists and tourists-to-be about the destination, so as to influence their perceptions of the place in a positive direction."

For the last 20 years, a growing amount of research has become available about country branding (Fetscherin, 2010), place branding (Govers & Go, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2005), as well as destination branding (Baker, 2007; Hankinson, 2005; Michelson, 2014), and nation branding (Anholt, 2002; Dinnie, 2008; Fan, 2006; Olins, 2002). In addition, the interest in city branding (Braun & Zenker, 2010; Dinnie, 2011; Hospers, 2003), region branding (Andersson, 2007; Hall, 1999), and branding of smaller places (e.g. provinces, counties) is increasing too. All of those specific concepts can be placed under **place branding**, an umbrella concept first used by Kotler and Gertner in 2002. Niedomysl and Jonasson (2012, 225) define it as the "measures taken by actors appointed to govern a place, to improve the competitive image of that place with the explicit aim of attracting capital from elsewhere." Anholt sees place branding as the "management of place image through strategic innovation and coordinated economic, commercial, social, cultural, and government policy" (2007; cited in Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009, 7). In this light, we can say that country branding equals place branding. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) reveal three types of place branding (often confused in the literature), which are operations with three different objectives: geographical nomenclature, product-place co-branding, and branding as place management. Interest in this thesis lies in the latter.

While Lee (2009, v) defines **nation branding** as an "ongoing and iterative process to develop and maintain the nation-brand system and to influence the sustainable competitiveness of a nation"; Fan (2010) establishes it as a "process by which a nation's images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience." Olins (2002, 247) declares that in nation branding, people can be "motivated and inspired, and manipulated" with the same techniques the companies used to brand products because "branding businesses and nations does have a lot in common." In countries, such as the United Kingdom, nation branding is officially referred to as public diplomacy.

A nation is a concept that involves connotations beyond the scope of marketing and management; it is different from a country and is a more complex term that involves a sociological perspective that is possible to explain through shared identities, language, cultural values, heritage, and usually ethnicity. Fan (2010) compared several definitions and found differences in the focus, purpose and outcome of branding the nation in terms of remolding national identities; enhancing a nation's competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Lee, 2009); embracing political, cultural, business and sports activities; promoting economic and political interests (Szondi, 2007); and altering, improving a nation's image/ reputation (Gudjonsson, 2005). Instead, Fan proposes the term nation image management. Anholt (2007) who coined and introduced nation branding equates this to competitive identity, a term for synthesizing brand management with public diplomacy and tourism, trade, investment, and export promotion.

With regard to country branding, Pike and Page (2014) claim that a greater part of place studies have focused on cognitive attributes and only recently are cognition and affect towards destinations being studied alongside (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Hosany et al., 2006; Kim & Yoon, 2003; Konecnik, 2005; San Martin & Del Bosque, 2008). One reason is that approaches to terms and the understanding of concepts differ. For a holistic view, conative aspects are also vital. From the **cognitive** perspective, Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011, 1259) state 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." From the **affective** perspective, many authors (e.g. Yüksel and Akgül, 2007) have used the affective image scale developed by Russell and Pratt (1980), including four diametric (bipolar) adjectives: unpleasant–pleasant, sleepy–arousing, distressing–relaxing, and gloomy–exciting. From the **conative** perspective, Pearce and Lee (2005) examined the relationship between travel experience and travel motivation, and their results show that the core considerations behind travel motivations are escape and relaxation, novelty, 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. These subcategories are

used in the findings section attempting to link theoretical considerations with the experiences of the Estonian case.

Although prior research indicates that a country is investigated more often than any other type of place, country branding is a relatively new concept facing a lack of academic empirical research. This study uses and recommends the use of country branding when a country is at the core of the research, which makes it easier for the reader to understand the research focus.

1.4. Place brand management and the case of Estonia

Marketing **management** is a business function involving the management of marketing activities. According to Kotler and Keller (2012), in the 21st century, it addresses the following seven tasks: developing marketing strategies and plans, capturing insights and performance, connecting with customers, building strong brands, shaping market offerings, delivering and communicating value, and creating successful long-term growth. The need for differentiation driven by experience marketing and the demand to facilitate a dialogue between a brand, its network members, and customers, together with the requirement to build positive and strong impressions communicating the experience to customers, all point to the centrality of **branding** in the experience process (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Some concepts are common both to experience marketing and country branding, such as identity, image, authenticity, communication, cognitive–affective–conative perspectives, brand equity, and attitudes (as explained in Articles III, IV).

Building and managing the place/country brand requires a long-term commitment and so countries need to adopt a strategic view. Branding is not accomplished only by creating an attractive logo, an advertisement, or a political campaign, but it requires a comprehensive national effort on the part of all the country's stakeholders to create and manage the identity of their country. Country branding incorporates activities that attempt to reduce the gap between the desired identity (on DMO and country's side) and the actual image held in the minds of consumers (on receiver's side). In this sense, according to Same and Solarte-Vasquez (2014), successful place marketing and effective country branding strategies are the fundamental keys to a positive country image. Branding experts (e.g. Aaker, 2002; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2008) agree on the importance of working on the identity first as it is the most compelling tool for the differentiation of the country brand, and the formulation of a powerful strategy. A country brand is "**effective** when its image matches the identity promoted" (Article III). A country branding strategy introduces a vision and a framework for it to be implemented. The state contributes with tourism policies and should be engaged in branding activities given the impact on economic and social development that can be expected from a successful brand. This thesis concurs with Hanna and Rowley (2011) by emphasizing that brand **evaluation** (including assessment and audit) is usually the first stage in every country brand project.

A DMO is any organization, at any level, responsible for the marketing of an identifiable place. Their jurisdictions may cover a country, state, province, region, or city, and they are a critical component for the country. DMOs are frequently the only advocates for a holistic tourism industry for a place facilitating dialogue between the private and public sector, and other stakeholders. Competition is intense and differentiation is crucial. This thesis stresses that a strong country brand contributes to the development of a country and the challenges of remaining competitive in the global market can be helped only when the brand has been adequately formulated, assessed and managed. As country brand managers who usually work within government organizations focus on marketing from the supply-side or sellers' perspective, **place brand management** is responsible for answering the question: How should countries market and promote themselves? According to Lee (2009), this process has to be managed by a strategic approach to create and improve a country's identity and image.

Fyall et al. (2012, 22) state that places face an "ever-growing array of challenges and opportunities." A number of authors, such as Kotler et al. (1999), Moilanen and Rainisto (2009), Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002), and Morrison (2013), have highlighted the challenging nature of country branding. For example, Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) refer to the following challenges: closeness to politics, limited financial resources, difficulties in monitoring, the customer builds the product, the experience centricity of tourism products, seasonality, and development. According to Kotler et al. (1999), competition intensifies but resources are scarce and places are increasingly at risk because of the change in the global economic and technological environment, and the inevitable process of urban evolution and decay. More challenges exist; for example, government policy could favor centralized management, a board of directors may govern strategic direction, challenges within the DMOs, businesses and individuals may favor fragmentation, 'complaining' versus 'doing', lack of sustainable financial support and so on. Morgan et al. (2002) highlight the challenges related to politics, the external environment, the destination product, and creating differentiation. Places, like companies, face challenges as new technology and telecommunications have changed the global economy.

Furthermore, such a "complex experience is difficult to guarantee every time, given the variable nature of tourism products and the fact that all its elements are not under the […] direct influence of the DMO" (Blain et al., 2005, 329). Still, DMOs need to give direction and suggest tools, otherwise the messages can conflict. Country branding is a continuous responsibility, one value proposition for the world market is not enough. The emotional connection that could attract travelers and trigger the desire to experience the uniqueness a country has to offer cannot form before accurate and well-communicated information has reached its audience. On the other hand, desirable experiences are difficult to create, stage, monitor, and control (Articles III and IV), and therefore, a good strategy is crucial. Different companies, tourism and transport operators, and

agents manage the experiences; but still they should use the same strategies, toolkits, attributes, manuals, and directions given by the DMO if communicated properly to them.

Article III describes **studies of Estonia's image and the development of its brand**. Brand Estonia includes its conceptual strategies, the 'Welcome to Estonia' (WTE) sign, the 'Positively surprising' slogan, the cornflower pattern, the required use of colors, photography, and typography, and communication. Analysis of previous studies shows that the Estonian brand initiative was prompted by a victory at the Eurovision song contest in 2001. The country DMO (Enterprise Estonia) commissioned five qualitative survey reports to begin the process of developing a brand together with an Interbrand. The concept and a brand manual were ready in 2002. In 2001, TNS Emor studied the image of Estonia in five countries: Finland, Sweden, the UK, Russia, and Germany. Five in-depth telephone interviews with tourists who had visited Estonia were conducted in each country and became the baseline for the analysis. The study found that common symbols of the country identified by the respondents were Tallinn's Old Town and its architecture, but also that people knew little about Estonia, especially in Germany and the UK. In addition, they conducted a study about the attractions and values of Estonia among the local inhabitants. In 2003, Erm and Arengu claimed that the brand concept was prepared on the basis of Interbrand's internal know-how. The brand was launched inside the country and received criticism because of its high cost (€860,000) (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009, 66). The WTE sign aimed at becoming the brand signature for stories that elaborated on the positive transformation; emphasis was added to the European abbreviation of the country (EST) and the irregular shape the words formed. In 2003, the government ceased to provide financial support for the maintenance of the brand (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009), illustrating how country branding can be affected by political considerations.

The next studies were conducted in 2008. GfK Custom Research Baltic investigated the recognition and reputation of the WTE sign in Finland, Sweden, Germany, Norway, and the UK. The results showed that the level of recognition was still low. Most respondents considered it nondescript; it raised no interest, did not seem innovative, and was not associated with quality, friendliness or trustworthiness. In 2008, the Estonian market research company Turu-uuringute AS conducted a domestic quantitative marketing study divided into two parts: the first, of the opinions of Estonian residents about the sign and the country's reputation abroad; and the second of Estonian companies' attitudes toward the Estonian brand. The results revealed that image building was considered very important and that the sign is memorable, warm and friendly, and yet nondescript. Those who disliked the sign said that it does not stand out, is not attractive, and that it is hard to read and understand. The second study showed that Estonian businesses were highly familiar with the sign, but it had not played its expected role abroad and that it is nondescript.

The country DMO recognized the need for updates; nevertheless, the development of the brand concept in 2008 was a matter of "evolution" not

"revolution". The process resulted in formulation the slogan 'Positively surprising' that is still the basic idea and message for the positioning of the Estonian brand (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Sign 'Welcome to Estonia' and slogan 'Positively surprising'
Source: http://brand.estonia.eu/en/home/design/graphics

In 2008, a newer philosophy of Brand Estonia, called 'Introduce Estonia' was developed that consists of an integral system that helps by means of its core value matrix to construe the cornerstones of the Estonian brand by assigning values and symbols to them. The matrix was constructed to create stories introducing Estonia in order to establish surprising contrasts in four areas of communication (international tourism, domestic tourism, immigration, and business). However, at the time, marketing strategies were only prepared for the first two. The most recent title of the marketing strategy for tourism is "An Old Country in a Shiny Package" combining four sub-strategies.

To summarize previous studies and the development of Brand Estonia, it was discovered that customer-based research has been insufficient, and mostly conducted using quantitative methodologies. Enterprise Estonia (DMO) commissioned the main studies in 2001 and 2008. The first official marketing strategy was created in 2002, and renewed in 2008 together with the slogan modification from 'Positively transforming' to 'Positively surprising', as well as exchanging the folk embroidery pattern for cornflowers. The changes applied in 2008 were limited to the slogan and pattern change, but less successful of all, the WTE sign remained the same even though it had not met the expectations placed on its use abroad, and it had "expired" (initially created in 2002 for a campaign only, for a limited use of up to five years).

Improving marketing effectiveness can be achieved by employing superior marketing strategies and through activities to achieve a competitive market position. Most well managed branding processes begin with brand evaluation to assess the current situation. As countries change, so does the need to change the DMOs and this could be accomplished by creating successful long-term growth through differentiation, new offerings, continuous development, and innovation. Marketing strategies and country promotion are effective only when the image of the country in people's minds coincides and corresponds to the intended identity (based on the identity formulation).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter will first introduce the epistemological perspectives, research design and methods, and justify these choices. Next, an overview of the data collection, and clarifications on the sample selection for this research are presented, followed by data analysis. The final section covers the evaluation on the quality of the research and elaborates on ethical considerations.

2.1. Epistemological perspectives and research design

This thesis regards marketing management activities as a foundation for constructing experience marketing perspectives and dimensions in country branding, including perceptions and meanings constructed by customers through their experiences. As experience marketing, country branding and marketing management are seen as complex social constructs, **constructivism** was applied to this research as a paradigm. Constructivism is reflected in this work in that the meaning of the "social world is not discovered but is constructed by history, society, ideas and language" (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012, 25). The purpose of constructivist inquiry is "understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold" but is open to new interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 113). Constructivism proposes that people actively construct their knowledge; its ontology assumes that social reality is produced and reproduced by social actors, and is a "preinterpreted, intersubjective world of cultural objects, meanings and social institutions" (Blaikie, 1993, 203). Because in any social situation multiple realities exist, constructivist relativism assumes that social realities may change when their constructors become more informed. Gibbs (2007) adds that the world we experience arises from socially constructed realities and these constructions are created because people want to make sense of their experiences. Our ideas about the world are anchored in the mind and are "limited by our perceptions of the world – how it appears to us – a world of phenomena" (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012, 29). This research extended constructivism into social settings and took its epistemological starting points from the social constructivist perspective, on the one hand, trying to understand and interpret the constructs of key concepts, and on the other hand, the perceptions and experiences that foreigners have related to a country and its brand. Social constructivism as an epistemological view sees that the "phenomena of the social and cultural world and their meanings are not objective but are created in human social interaction" (Gibbs, 2007, 152).

 As the emphasis of this research is on interpretation and understanding, **interpretivism** was chosen as a methodological approach. Interpretivists try to understand the social world that people have constructed; nevertheless, people constantly interpret their world (situations, behavior), and develop meanings for their activities, and have ideas about what is relevant (Blaikie, 1993). Therefore,

it was necessary to explore the perceptions of social actors, which Blaikie calls the 'insider view'. The author of the thesis searched for socially constructed meanings, and reconstructed them in scientific language (Mason, 2002).

The overall **research design** of this thesis was exploratory, aiming at getting an understanding of marketing phenomena, new insights, and ideas. The problems and gaps identified during the analytical literature review paved the way to the formulation of the six research questions. The orientation of the study is phenomena-driven that led to theory development. This research turned new knowledge about key concepts into theoretical models and categories, and presented empirical evidence within a specific context (Estonia). Because of the ontological and epistemological choices, the methodological design was **qualitative**, fundamentally interpretive and context-dependent. The methodology followed the best practices advice summarized by Mason (2002) and Patton (2002). The choice of methodology helped to understand the complex and the elusive in a systematic way to increase and challenge theoretical understandings, address gaps in knowledge, and extend debate.

The **case study** investigated phenomena in depth within its real-life context by achieving a rich and focused understanding of a complex topic, and by looking into consumer behavior and examining management issues. The single case study helped to uncover patterns, determine meanings, draw conclusions and build theory. Simonson et al. (2001, 269) claim that a systematic, "substantive phenomena-driven research has the potential to produce major contributions to theory." The case provided and added data for conceptualization. In this work, contextualization and conceptualization are interwoven and emphasize different aspects of theory generation and development. Contextualization here refers to what Gummesson (2005, 318) said on the need to "place single data in a broader context, that is, generate theory." The research has some aspects of constructivist grounded theory.

The majority of previous studies on country branding have also focused on case studies; for example, Spain (Gilmore, 2002), Yugoslavia (Hall, 2002), Denmark (Therkelsen, 2003), Latvia (Endzina & Luneva, 2004), England (Wetzel, 2006), and Canada (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009). The studies are mostly descriptive and are mainly based on focus groups and interviews. As the researcher saw the foreigners' perceptions and experiences as the primary data source, which can best be (re)constructed in interviews, she chose qualitative **interviews**. The author focused on foreigners' perceptions, as her ontological position suggested that "people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality" (Mason, 2002, 63). A sense of foreigners' perceptions, reasoning, judgments, and insights into their opinions and attitudes was obtained by asking and listening to them.

This research relied on multiple sources of evidence. As the **document analysis** is the exploration of the social world through textual analysis, the previous studies and the official marketing strategies were interpreted in the context of what they represent and what meanings they have. This analysis

allowed contextualizing the phenomena and collecting more information; furthermore, interpreting documents and comparing them added a further dimension of construction as well as reflexivity. In addition, a **visual method** was used for the conceptual models to present the relationships between the concepts and elements, and the models were also interpreted in the context of how they were constructed and what their meanings were.

The author of the thesis was not a bystander, but used her theoretical knowledge and professional expertise during the inquiry. The author's views on the methodological issues and research design of this thesis are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Epistemological perspectives and research design (by the author)

Methodological issue	View or approach
Aim of research	Understand, interpret
Philosophical frame	Constructivism
View of the research process	Interpretivist
Ontology	Constructivist relativism
Epistemology	Social constructivism, subjectivist
Methodology	Qualitative, interpretive
Research strategy	Case study
Data collection methods	Interviews, analytical literature review, historical inquiry, document analysis
Data analysis method	Qualitative content analysis

To summarize, the philosophical frame of this research is constructivism, the research process is interpretivist, qualitative, and mostly inductive; it involves a case study, and several methods for data collection and analysis. The starting points for this research are the constructed nature of social knowledge and the assumptions that the social world is interpreted, and knowledge and evidence are contextual, situational, and interactional.

2.2. Data collection

The purpose of the **analytical literature review** was to broaden the horizons of the researcher in systematizing prior research, to identify gaps in knowledge, and to discover the essence and connections between the concepts.

Interviews were used to interact with the audience and improve the researcher's understanding of their perceptions, experiences, and impressions about the country and its brand, including the brand attributes, such as the WTE sign and slogan. Primary data were needed because the research questions could not be answered based on secondary data alone. A semi-structured instrument was composed to conduct 31 interviews between April 2012 and March 2014. The purpose was to interpret how foreigners perceive, evaluate, and describe Estonia, its brand, and experiences. All interviews lasted between 60 and 95 minutes.

The sample was criteria-based and representative in qualitative terms. The interviewees were selected according to the aims of the study, and so purposeful

strategic **sampling** (Mason, 2002) or purposive sampling was adopted (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) necessitating a strong theoretical reasoning in the selection process rather than based on empirical representations. This made it possible to construct a sample that was meaningful theoretically and empirically as it built upon certain criteria. A main concern was to identify interviewees with experiences, practices, perspectives, or behaviors to match the focus of the study. In addition, it was an information-oriented selection to "maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases", based on the expectations about the content (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 34). The following criteria were used to select interviewees who were foreigners that: 1) had visited the country more than once or lived in Estonia for more than five years, or were working for a DMO outside Estonia, 2) had country-based experiences and knowledge on Estonia, and were probably familiar with the brand, 3) had higher education and were preferably knowledgeable about the topic, 4) (to add expert judgment) had knowledge of marketing or place branding was an advantage, and 5) were willing to be interviewed for a minimum of one hour.

As previous studies have shown that the country is not well known in the world, the interviewee had to have visited the country. Foreigners from the priority markets for tourism were the first considered for the research. For a wider perspective, interviewees from America and Australia were included. Foreigners who lived in Estonia and were more familiar with the context could discover aspects of Estonia that people not living in the country might not recognize. In addition, the country DMO representatives were interviewed to ensure that their voice was heard to provide a potentially more holistic study. Twenty-four interviews were conducted with foreigners living abroad, four with foreigners living in Estonia, and three with DMO representatives. Nine of them were branding experts – academics or experienced marketing professionals who understood the topic and could provide valuable recommendations on country promotion. In total, the interviewees came from 17 countries: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the UK, Hungary, the USA, Australia, Japan, Colombia, Uruguay, Scotland, Canada, Germany, Ukraine, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Age (35+) and gender (22 male, 9 female) had no effect on the answers as far as this research is concerned. This became obvious while conducting the interviews; everyone was focusing on the Estonian context. The features that mattered for the study were satisfied: sufficient experiences and connections to the country, information exposure, and willingness to participate and provide meaningful insights and ideas. Other criteria were insignificant considering that in tourism every potential traveler is a target audience and this work sought not to formulate new branding strategies. When expertise influenced an answer, it was noted in the articles.

The general **interview guide** approach (Patton, 2002) was used. Explanations about the nature and purpose of the research were given at the beginning of each interview. The interview spectrum and sample were expanded for Article IV, as different issues were stressed and the variety of experiences the interviewees had was of great relevance. The interview guide (Appendix 5) was developed for this

study consisting of 26 questions on experiences of Estonia, authentic experiences, perceptions of Estonia's image, recommendations for promoting the country abroad, associations and impressions with Estonia and the brand, etc. In Article III, the following questions were taken as the baseline of the analysis: "How do you see the image of Estonia? Does Brand Estonia mean anything to you (sign, slogan, etc.)? What do you see as the symbols of Estonia? How could Estonia be promoted in your country?" While for Article IV, the questions were: "What is your Estonian experience so far? 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, emotions and feelings, or motivating arguments to visit Estonia?" In addition, they were asked to provide a story of Estonia. Data collection stopped when there was saturation.

Secondary data sources included reports and available records on studies of Estonia's image and brand (ordered by the country DMO), and the official documents of the Estonian marketing strategies (available on the website www.brand.estonia.eu). Previous studies (from 2001 to date) were necessary for an historical perspective to discover the gaps in earlier research and to understand the current brand situation. The Estonian marketing strategies, managed by the DMO, provide recommendations to those disseminating the brand and promoting it in the world. Altogether six marketing strategies were analyzed: the overall concept, the tourism strategy, and its four sub-strategies.

2.3. Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns forming in the data. In the analysis, a coding scheme was developed (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012) and a named code represents the idea or concept. Gibbs (2007) describes codes as a way of organizing thinking about a text. The categories were generated from reading, annotating and coding texts through the identification of patterns and main topics. In the categories or groups of codes, meaningful patterns emerged.

For analysis, the **concepts** were 'broken down' into essential components to gain an understanding of their nature and connections. The literature review concentrated on the essence and interpretation of the concepts, their meanings and previous research. In all articles, the analytical literature review involved content analysis. In the development of new theoretical models and definitions, multiple theories were consulted and considered. This theory-based (data) analysis supported the proposal of new conceptual models.

To analyze the **interviews**, specific procedures proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) were used. In addition, a comparative analysis was conducted on all the experiences and symbols that the interviewees reported.

In Article III, a conventional content analysis was preferred, which resulted in an inductive category development (Mayring, 2000). The aim was to find codes (patterns) from the data, select the most prevalent ones to form the cate-

gories, and to build the categorization system. Following Hsieh and Shannon (2005), at first data were read to acquire a sense of the whole, then read again to derive codes by highlighting words that capture key thoughts or concepts. Then labels of codes emerged (initial coding scheme) and the codes were sorted into categories. Two researchers read the transcribed texts several times and had several discussions to agree on the most important codes and categories.

Article IV used a different two-phased analytical approach, namely in the first phase, directed content analysis was exploited, where an "analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for the initial codes" (Ibid., 1277) to corroborate a prior theoretical frame. The analysis focused on the country-based experiences of foreigners based on three categories (cognitive, affective, and conative). In addition, 25 existing subcategories were supplemented (driven from the previous research). Seven new subcategories were created based on the analysis, and a classification system of experiences in country branding was built. New subcategories were formulated when the codes from the answers did not fit into existing (predetermined) subcategories, or when it seemed necessary to facilitate systematization. Theoretical saturation occurred when the data fitted the identified categories (Jennings, 2005) and no new evidence or (sub)categories emerged. As the process attempted to look at Estonian experiences from different perspectives, the concept-driven coding continued in the second phase of the research with data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2007) that relied on conventional content analysis to find the codes for country-based and authentic experiences. The codes were compared with those that resulted from the document analysis. Moreover, it was necessary to find which authentic Estonian experiences among the interviewees better support the strategies.

The historical analysis of **previous studies** of Brand Estonia consisted of exploring the prior research to understand what was known to the country DMO before concerning the brand and country image. The interpretation of the current brand situation added a different perspective to the case, and was part of exploring and describing the context of the study.

When analyzing Estonian **marketing strategies**, qualitative content analysis was also used. The documents were analyzed in terms of content to identify and generate codes assigned to the experiences and symbols recommended for promoting Estonia. In addition, it was essential to examine the strategies in order to complete the interpretation of the brand situation and the effectiveness of the Estonian brand. The analysis of the strategies inevitably involved comparing the codes of the experiences recommended in the documents with the codes resulting from classifying the interviewees' experiences. The comparative analysis that concentrated on the differences was valuable because on the one hand, it showed the weaknesses of the strategies, and on the other hand, it revealed the opportunities for improvement. The combined analysis of data depicted the differences between the country brand identity and image that was a crucial part of interpreting the brand situation.

2.4. Evaluation and ethical considerations

The main criteria for judging the quality of this work would be trustworthiness because understanding is a fundamental concept for qualitative research that deals with meaning. As Guba's (1981, cited on Shenton, 2004) criteria for qualitative research are widely accepted, these are also applied here. The **trustworthiness criteria** are: 1) credibility (corresponding to internal validity), 2) transferability (paralleling external validity/generalizability), 3) dependability (resembling reliability), and 4) conformability (paralleling objectivity).

Through **credibility** researchers attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomena is presented (Shenton, 2004). This also refers to authentic representations of the experience (Reid & Gough, 2000), and how accurately the data reflect the social phenomena. In this research, evidence in support of credibility took several forms. All four types of triangulation distinguished by Patton (2002) were performed: methods, data, investigator (or analyst), and theory triangulation. Credibility as a qualitative researcher – the major instrument of data analysis (Ibid.) – and interviewer is linked to gaining access to the field. As in a high-quality analysis of case studies, expert knowledge is an advantage, this research concurs with Yin (2009) and Levy (2006), who encourage the researcher to apply prior knowledge and personal experience rather than to be a detached observer. In addition, tactics to help ensure honesty in the interviewees were used, as each person was given an opportunity to refuse to participate so as to only involve those who were genuinely willing to take part and contribute. To give a broader perspective (as the goal is to promote Estonia all over the world), the research used a wide range of informants from different countries, close and far.

Transferability deals with the level of applicability of the research to other situations or settings (Wahyuni, 2012), and to that end, the researcher provided sufficient depth of the context of the study for the reader to decide. To enhance this, a thick and rich description of the concepts, background, and characteristics of the sample were provided. Regardless of the criticism of some authors (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2006) that case studies do not deliver generalizable results, Yin (2009) states that case studies are generalizable for theoretical propositions. Thus, the findings of this research are appropriate for analytical generalizability because empirical generalization for a wider population (i.e. all travelers visiting Estonia) was not possible. The model generation and research processes can be replicated analogously and it is possible to use the data in a different setting. For example, the categorization system for country branding and the classification system of experiences are applicable to other countries as well. In addition, the author believes her research has presented a theoretical framework and 'baseline understanding' with which the findings of other scholars doing similar research in other countries could be compared.

Dependability concerns whether one can "track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008,

78). In this research, a detailed explanation of the research design and methodological descriptions facilitate other researchers following a similar research framework. Furthermore, the interview questions are presented in Appendix 5 and the decisions based on the sample are elaborated in detail.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which biases or the perspectives of the researcher influence interpretations (Reid & Gough, 2000). Regarding the interviews, this means the extent to which others can confirm the findings to reflect the understandings and experiences of the interviewees (Wahyuni, 2012). To achieve confirmability, it was necessary to take steps to demonstrate that findings emerging from the data (e.g. illustrative quotes, examples of codes, positive as well as negative examples). Investigator triangulation was especially relevant for reducing any bias in analyzing and reporting the data. For Article III, several rounds of separate reading and analysis, and discussions by two authors were carried out. Similar discussions took place regarding Article IV on the new subcategories. In addition, looking for variations in the understanding of the phenomena, theory triangulation was used to explore the key concepts through different lenses. It is important to point out that the prior abstractness of key concepts in this thesis was a challenge, and continues to be so. Although content analysis was difficult to carry out, inductive empirical research was an excellent source of inspiration, helping to advance our understanding of questions where no good prior practice or applicable research results were found. Confirmability was also assessed in terms of the recognition of the limitations in the study and explaining the researcher's beliefs and assumptions. To minimize bias, the interviewer showed brand attributes on official visual material, to be sure that they are talking about the same things. During the interview, she did not interrupt, asking additional questions when necessary.

Ethical issues of confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, informed consent, intrusiveness, interviewer-interviewee relationships, and gaining knowledgeable content were taken into account. To that end, rigorous research techniques were combined with human qualities, like common sense, insights, sound judgment, and empathy. The interviews involved close personal interaction and extensive expressions of opinion; and these were time-consuming to analyze. No concerns on confidentiality and privacy should emerge, because the interviews were anonymized and revealed no close connection to any of the interviewees. It is always interesting to read if the interviewees had common frames of reference and over which points the perceptions differed, but personal characteristics and cultural meanings seemed to play no significant role in the context of this study, as the empirical research focused on Estonia and its brand, which are unique.

In sum, trustworthiness, precision and ethics were important throughout the research, the basis of which was essentially qualitative, interpretive, and subjective; data generation, interpretation, and analysis were systematic. The case study offered depth and comprehensiveness for understanding the key phenomena.

3. RESULTS

This chapter introduces the development of conceptual frameworks for understanding the key concepts and their interrelations, and presents three original conceptual models. Next, a system for categorizing country branding is proposed and the classification of experiences for country branding is explained. The final two sections describe findings concerning authentic Estonian experiences, and the results of the comparative analysis applied to show the differences between the country brand identity and the image.

3.1. Theoretical development of conceptual frameworks

Three conceptual models from Articles I, II, and IV are introduced through graphical representations. To better understand the phenomena, the constructs were diagrammed within the theoretical frameworks. The concepts and related elements of the models are explained in the text, and marked in italics. To answer RQs 1, 2 and 3, a visualization was used for model design to communicate the ideas, mapping the most important elements and delineating the fundamental interaction between these. The purpose was to clarify and find linkages between concepts, to provide context for interpreting and to explain the influencing factors as well as to encourage theory development. The interconnectedness between the concepts was presented in Articles II, III, and IV.

3.1.1. Conceptual model of experience marketing

To gain a better comprehension of the first key concept and to answer RQ1, the conceptual model of experience marketing is presented in Figure 5, and illustrates the process from stimulus to different kinds of value.

Based on the definitions of experience by Poulsson and Kale (2004) and Walls et al. (2011), this research explains the essence of experience marketing. To visualize the construct, a conceptual model is proposed, where experience is the outcome of the interaction between a brand/company and a customer (shaped by the characteristics of a customer and a brand). The other essential components are value co-creation and consumer behavior, which together with experience have ultimately meaning, effect, and value for different stakeholders.

The whole process starts from a stimulus or irritant that initiates the interaction between the brand and the customer. A stimulus is an input, energy pattern, or information source registered by the senses and it constitutes the basis for perception and eventually for behavior. This impulse can be static or dynamic, simple or multi-dimensional; or sensory, such as color, sound, or odor. A stimulus can be intra or interpersonal, such as between the customer and the service personnel. The interaction is influenced from both sides, as customers bring their personality, background, skills, values, motives; and the brand that has its communications, logo, color, etc. Moreover, on the customer's side,

Poulsson and Kale (2004) recommend examining the predispositions (the customer adds to the experience) and feelings and sensations occurring during the experience, and on the brand or experience provider's side, the tools and processes used for creating those feelings and sensations.
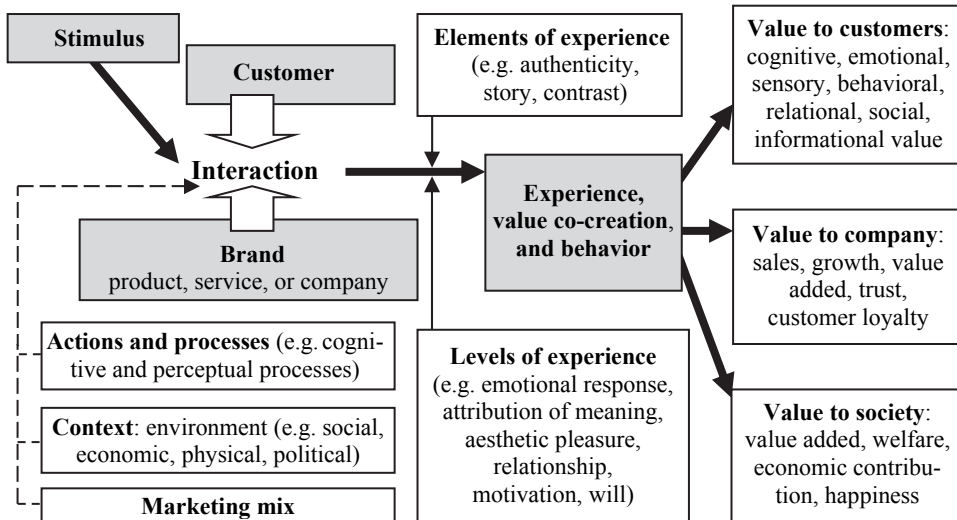

Figure 5. Conceptual model of experience marketing. Source: Compiled by the author, further developed on the basis of Article I (Same & Larimo, 2012, 484)

Many more components affect the interaction (see the three dashed lines); for example, customer perception and the attitude it encourages are directly influenced by marketing communications and marketing mix activities (e.g. advertising, events, PR). For example, Schmitt's (1999) experience providers (e.g. visual identity, product presence, spatial environment) represent elements of the marketing mix. In addition, Desmet and Hekkert (2007) claim that from the very beginning, all actions and processes that are involved contribute to the experience; that is, physical actions, cognitive, and perceptual processes, such as perceiving, exploring, comparing, remembering, and understanding. Furthermore, the context, which is the environment where the interaction takes place, depending on the economic, cultural, technological, or other background or setting, also influences the process.

In the middle of the model, experience, value co-creation and consumer behavior emerge, affected by the elements and levels of experience. People also have experiences as the result of their body's reaction to stimulation. In the context of the experience pyramid model, Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007, 139) assert that by influencing the elements of experience, "individuality, authen-ticity, story, multi-sensory perception, contrast […], it is possible to offer a guest [customer] something memorable and unique." It is obvious that experience is multilayered and could be affected and evaluated on different levels. Hekkert (2006) differentiates three levels: attribution of meaning, emotional response, and

aesthetic pleasure; but this research argues that more levels exist, for example, the conative level that takes into account the desires, wishes, motivations and willingness of a customer to behave in certain ways. The elements and levels of experience influence value co-creation, purchase decisions, and behavior. In this phase, consumer behavior is also affected by internal (e.g. knowledge) and external influences; psychological factors include individual's attitudes and beliefs, while personal factors comprise income level, lifestyle, and so on.

In the last phase, an ultimate outcome is formed for different stakeholders – the value to the brand/company, customer, and society as a whole. This is in line with Poulsson and Kale (2004, 270) who define a commercial experience as an "engaging act of co-creation between a provider and a consumer wherein the consumer perceives value in the encounter." In 2007, the American Marketing Association renewed the official definition of marketing (Keefe 2008, 29) as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." This definition also conforms to the model.

In short, the most important parts of the model are: 1) stimulus, 2) interaction between the customer and a brand/company, 3) experience, value co-creation, and consumer behavior; and 4) value as an outcome for different stakeholders. According to Same and Larimo (2012), these are the **cornerstones of experience marketing**.

Compared to Schmitt (2010), in this research, the diversity of experience types is presented (not only ordinary and extraordinary, and based on the five senses), utilitarian value is as important as hedonic, and experience touchpoints mean all contacts with customers. Thus, it was important to show (in Figure 5) that Schmitt's list is not exhaustive and that other aspects, such as interaction, levels of experience, value co-creation, consumer behavior, and different value for stakeholders could also be considered and evaluated.

Article I also contains a model that illustrates the difference between experience marketing and experiential marketing. Based on that, a meaningful relationship causes an interaction in a life/consumption situation that influences attitudes, which combines three components: cognitive, affective, and conative. A meaningful experience is a complex constructed reality, and a broad concept, including a cognitive and a practical dimension (human action) and is a result of an interaction (Kozlarek, 2014). Although each marketing situation is context dependent, and thus different, the outcome is a brand as a co-created experience. As experiences are a source of value creation for companies and customers, they generally result in customer satisfaction, or, as life situations constantly change and undergo transformations, in new realities that may cause changes in their attitudes, opinions, and behavior.

One reason for the distinction between experience and experiential marketing is the confusion in terminology and the semantic difference in languages. The former relates to a meaningful experience, and the latter to a particular (emotional) experience. Eventually, this explains the difference between experience marketing and experiential marketing.

3.1.2. Conceptual model of country branding

The conceptual model of country branding in Figure 6 is slightly upgraded to better understand its logic. The model draws on Article II taking into account experience marketing, and represents brand identity, image, experience, and the value issues of a country to answer RQ2. The author received inspiration from Dinnie's (2008) conceptual model of nation-brand identity and image.

The model is tri-layered and could be interpreted at three levels: 1) the cycle of the branding process (from top to bottom), 2) the context and influencers (the environment and what affects it, indicated by the ovals), and 3) the value generation chain in country branding (from left to right and back again, indicated by the numbers). These layers are elucidated in the same order below.
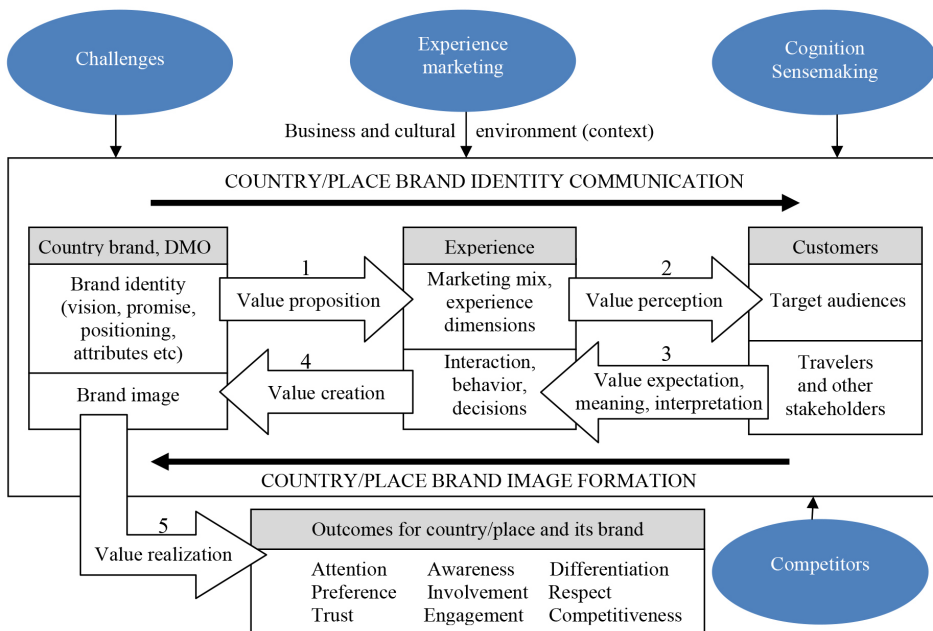

Figure 6. Conceptual model of place/country branding. Source: compiled by the author, upgraded from Article II (Same, 2012)

The first layer of the model, the simplified **branding process**, depicts the fundamental concepts of country branding starting from brand identity (upper part), continuing to country image (lower part), and ending with the outcomes of the process. The left side of the figure shows a country brand and DMO, and the right side customers. In the middle, intermediate experiences, an implicit argument in this theoretical development, shows that experiences are crucial to the branding result. This viewpoint is consistent with Gentile et al. (2007). The process starts from brand identity formulation that originates from the place/country (which is specifically the DMO's task), representing the brand's values, vision, attributes, and other aspects. The upper arrow points to where identity is communicated to customers. In this process, experiences are

influenced by the marketing mix, and can be perceived on different dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, or behavioral. Since a country brand is complex, a wide range of customers or target audiences exist, or as Hatch and Schultz (2003) call them stakeholders: travelers, investors, suppliers, regulators, special interest groups, and local communities.

While brand image refers to customer perceptions of the brand, on country brand image formation (see lower part), experiences and value are co-created at multiple points of interaction, as according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), the basis of value is a co-creation experience. The service-dominant logic in marketing (logic for value creation) views marketing as a social and economic process where the concept of interaction is central (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). In this logic, value is embedded in personalized experiences. In general, value is evaluated through a total of interactions with the brand. Brands, environment, products, and marketing actions all involve and carry experience. As stated earlier, place brand managers can influence the brand image that exists in the mind of the audience. According to Kotler and Gertner (2002, 250), brands "incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviors" and country image is "likely to influence people's decisions related to purchasing, investing, changing residence and traveling." All this in turn, influences brand image, and the potential and desired outcomes and benefits for a country and DMO shown in Figure 6. In fact, the outcomes of this process are useful for both customers and a country and its brand, but this model takes a supply-side or DMO marketing management perspective and focuses on the latter.

The whole process must be understood in terms of the holistic combination of resources, in the context of the **business and cultural environment** because the social, political, legal, economic, and technological environment influences it. Country brands face many challenges, such as a lack of resources, macro-trends, externalities, DMO management, and political pressures; nevertheless, effective branding can still be accomplished. Experience marketing activities have an effect on customer experiences by inducing them to be engaged and related to a country, and thus, have a stronger impact. In addition, cognition and sensemaking affect the process and are therefore essential to understand in country branding. Cognition refers to how customers perceive, remember, learn, and think about a country; and sensemaking is a process through which they give meaning to experience (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is the construction of reality, understanding and negotiating, and creating understanding between people. With regard to organizational theories, identity is linked to sensemaking theory, while perception is related to cognition theory. Besides, attention (noticing, encoding, interpreting, and focusing time and effort) (Ocasio, 1997) is a key concept in country branding. Competitors (other countries) need the attention of customers as well. Thus, creating differentiation and communicating effective messages become crucial to obtaining competitive advantage.

The **value generation chain** begins with the DMO's value proposition (1) leading to the value perception (2) of the target audiences; then continues with

value interpretations and expectations by customers (3), and value creation (4) by both customers and DMOs/companies, which leads to value realization (5).

Clarifying the brand from the value perspective has been recently defined as a "cluster of functional and emotional values that enables organizations to make a promise about a unique and welcomed experience" (De Chernatony et al., 2011, 31). In addition, Kotler et al. (2013, 21), define marketing as the "process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships to capture value from customers in return." A country brand **value** is a function of its ability to satisfy customers' emotional, functional, symbolic, psychological, and economic needs, and the value relies on what the customer receives through effort and application. The attributes that satisfy those needs must be orchestrated as the place's unique value proposition (1), an invitation to participate in the process of co-creating value, superior to competitor offerings (Lusch & Webster, 2011). From the customer's perspective, perceived value is the overall assessment of the effectiveness of a brand based on perceptions (2) of what they receive and give. Per se, value is a function of human experience realized by customers when they perceive what they have gained or achieved. According to Morgan et al. (2002), the proposition must have the potential to last, thus, it is crucial to get it right. However, for differentiation purposes, a promise must indicate what a country can in reality offer. To match value expectations (3) it is important to explore customers to identify their needs and wants. In addition, the relationship itself has an impact on the total value received by the customer, as according to Vargo and Lusch (2008), he is always a co-creator of value. Value creation (4) is a desirable goal and inter alia occurs in the process of meaning creation or via dialog and learning. Grönroos (2011) argues that value creation does not only indicate the customer's creation of value-in-use, but refers to the entire process of development, design, and delivery as well as marketing activities, because the DMO/company is also a co-creator of value. Value co-creation occurs during the interactive set of experiences and interactions, where a company aims to facilitate customer value. Value creation depends on consumer behavior and purchase decisions, and how they respond and interact with a country, and consume and evaluate its brand, products and services. Thus, value emerges from the whole spectrum of customer-brand interactions. Value realization (5) takes place through the desired outcomes, the ultimate goals for customers, DMOs, and companies.

3.1.3. Model of conceptual interconnections

The model showing the interconnectivity of seven concepts is presented in Figure 7. This system was elaborated in detail in Article IV to answer RQ3, filling the gap in the literature on the relationships between concepts. Although the importance of experiences in country branding has been pointed out; however, as the key concepts are complex and multidimensional, the connections between the main constructs had to be clarified. The pyramid was

chosen as a form to explain the hierarchy of the concepts and their interconnections. The aim was to create a sense of how the levels are bonded and to envision seven levels. A pyramid's structure combines all the concepts.

The model illustrates the steps by which a customer develops a positive image about a particular country brand. For marketers, this shows the manner/ process of how experience marketing is connected to the positive image of a country. At the broadest level of the pyramid, experience marketing, as opposed to traditional marketing, is shown. Already at this level, experiences can be provided and evaluated from the cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. The main claim is that cognition, affection, and conation are equally important and could be applied to all levels. Research on place brand image has addressed these; however, little attention has been paid to the levels in the middle.

With every level, customer engagement increases; during country branding, customers are simply aware of country brands and have overall experiences via traveling, but at the next level, they pay particular attention to the experiences based on a certain country (meaningful country-based experiences), and at the next, they concentrate on authentic experiences. This leads to a country brand authenticity in their minds. At the highest and narrowest level (positive image), customers have already established a meaningful relationship and in their mind the brand image is hopefully positive towards a specific country.
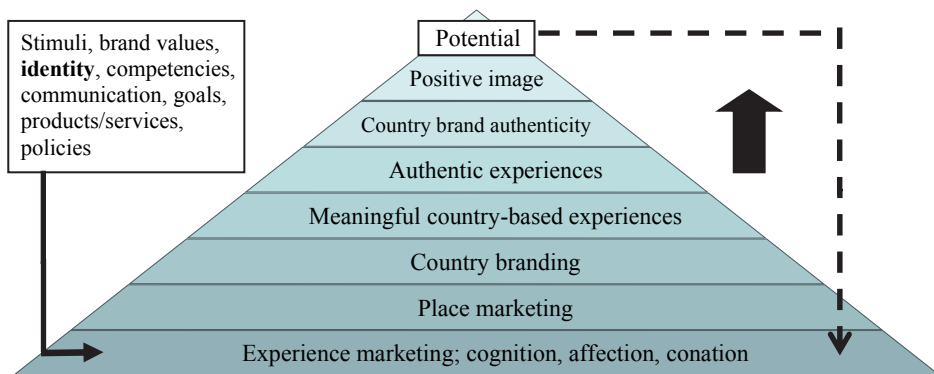

Figure 7. Model indicating the interconnections between concepts. Source: Article IV

The model illustrates the interconnections between the concepts in an integrated, hierarchical manner. The wide arrow indicates the upward direction in order to interpret the diagram from a marketing management perspective. Starting from the bottom, the input to experience marketing is; for example, stimuli, brand values, identity. Experience marketing corresponds to the largest baseline, because it could be applied to different sub-fields of marketing, such as place marketing, event marketing, services marketing, marketing of non-profit organizations. One of them is place marketing that, in turn, is an umbrella term for places (countries, cities, etc.). The purpose of place marketing is to create an awareness and a positive image of the place for potential and existing customers.

As branding is a subset of marketing, it is one of the components of place marketing and guides us to country branding that can be applied to tourism as well as to business promotion. Next, meaningful country-based experiences are uniquely associated with one specific country. These brand-relevant experiences are described to be memorable, meaningful, and relevant to the customers, and originate from the interaction between them and a country brand, implying the customer's involvement at different levels: cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical (Verhoef et al., 2009). Among these meaningful experiences, some are authentic, helping in differentiation and competition. Authentic experiences are not only unique, they must also seem genuine and real, people remember them when they think of a country. This leads to brand authenticity that is a subjective evaluation of genuineness attributed to a brand and includes the voice of the customer. Country authenticity is associated with experiencing its offerings, information, settings, and engagement; and in addition, relates to evaluations of the degree to which their country-related expectations and impressions remain true during a visit. If the outcome is positive, it produces a positive country image, the ultimate goal in country branding that fulfills a fundamental function in the choice process. Country image influences mental constructions about a place's attributes, affects customers' behavior, and as a consequence, the decision-making process (Bigné et al., 2001). Moreover, Yüksel and Akgül (2007) found that countries with a clear image that is well-defined and positive are more likely to be chosen by travelers. Therefore, it is necessary to provide DMO activities that serve to develop a country image that influences a customer's choice positively. However, the country's image can also be negative; but presumably, no marketer makes efforts in that direction. Finally, when a country has a positive image, it generates the potential for higher brand equity, tourism income, and possibilities to obtain the desired outcomes.

This model broadens our understanding of the interconnectedness of experience marketing and country branding by providing visual links between the concepts that are directly related, and demonstrates the important role of brand authenticity and image. The model also shows that the process does not end with the potential; this outcome is a feedback loop that gives input to experience marketing activities, and the process starts again.

3.2. Categorization system for country branding

As constructivism accepts the presupposition that the interpretations of the social world are understood within one's frame of reference, it made sense to hear a researcher's voice, as well as the voice of the interviewees, or as Botterill and Platenkamp (2012) call them, 'co-researchers'. A categorization system (categories, subcategories, and main codes) for country branding was developed to answer RQ4. During the analysis of the interviews, four categories (I–IV) and 16 subcategories emerged; a summarized visualization of the synthesis is available in Table 4. Four categories that resulted from the qualitative content analysis are reported in detail in Article III.

Table 4. Categorization system for country branding (based on an Estonian case)

I. Image of Estonia (perceptions on the country)	**II. Brand Estonia** (brand performance)
1. Estonia Very little is known, Tallinn, the Old Town, image is fine, small, vibrant, Soviet legacy, technology, young, energetic, economic success story, infrastructure, media, culture, history, art, leaders **2. People** Welcoming, active, helpful, friendly, individualistic, too serious, cynical sense of humor, speak languages **3. Positive surprise about Estonia** The Old Town, good quality, clean, safe, improvements, sandy beaches, the Song Festival, good English, local food, airport, discovery time, snow, four seasons **4. Sense of belonging** (Nordic, Baltic or EEC), yes/no, co-branding is cost effective, countries are different, multi-destination strategy, euro, EU	**5. Country branding activities** Important and necessary, need for unique brand identity and positioning, promise, studies, brand ambassadors, government policy, DMO, PR, materials (ads, videos, brochures etc.) **6. Sign 'Welcome to Estonia'** 60s and 70s, retro, old-fashioned, disliked, difficult to read (EST-onia), nondescript **7. Brand attributes** Ineffective sign, 'Positively surprising': surprising factor (slogan is accepted), pattern unnoticed or not recognized **8. Meaning and connotations** Based on the Estonian perspective alone, Estonian humor, negative connotations of 'An Old Country in a Shiny Package', little information
III. Branding potential of Estonia (potential and promotion)	**IV. Experience of Estonia** (country-based or related experiences)
9. Promoting Estonia Part of tourist packages, Nordic with a twist, swamps, beaches, high-tech, better communication, co-branding, regional promotion, PR strategy, reasons to visit **10. Possible key messages** Romantic capital of Europe, safe, close to Finland and Sweden, "Let's go to Europe via Estonia", "the undiscovered gem of Europe", many spas, unspoiled nature, alternative things to do, freedom, e-Estonia, always surprising **11. The story of Estonia** A short promotional story about Estonia, a story to tell others **12. Recommendations on branding** Customer-based research, offer what the audience wants, find right symbols, realistic identity formulation, target right audience, continuous monitoring	**13. Personal experiences, expectations** Cheaper, shopping, value for money, events, historic atmosphere, Soviet past, fast changes, folklore, countryside, sea, Skype, working and living in Estonia, friends, local products, clean **14. Experience marketing** Experiential elements, differentiation, personal impressions; meaningful, relevant, wow customer experiences; relaxation; what people think, feel and want about Estonia **15. The symbols of Estonia** Associations, symbols (e.g. the Song Festival, swamps, food, sandy beaches, forests) **16. Authentic Estonian experience** The Old Town, the Christmas market, the Song Festival, nature, spa, manor houses, islands, food

Source: Author's compilation based on Article III (Same & Solarte-Vasquez, 2014)

The first category (I) image of Estonia reflects the perceptions of the interviewees of the country as a whole and includes four subcategories: Estonia (overall image of a country), people, positive surprise about Estonia, and the sense of belonging (Nordic, Baltic, or Eastern European). The interviewees were convinced that in their country, Estonia's image is fine, and that if people knew about the country, it could be positive. The people are perceived as welcoming, industrious, active, and enthusiastic, but at the same time, reserved, individualistic, and too serious. Still, the country continues to surprise visitors; many having low or no expectations, later acknowledge having had very positive experiences and unexpected surprises. Regarding belonging to a larger area/zone, around half of the interviewees could link Estonia with the Nordic neighbors/region, but the other half could not, referring to it as Baltic or Eastern European.

The second category (II), Brand Estonia, is about brand performance and contains country branding activities, the sign, brand attributes, and its meaning and connotations. The sign 'Welcome to Estonia' was separated, as it raised the most consistent reviews and seemed to be the least effective tool according to all interviewees who returned to the topic when talking about other brand attributes. They answered similarly that the sign is old fashioned, reminiscent of the 1960s or 1970s, and particularly that its shape and message gave the impression of being random. The division of the words 'Wel-come' and 'EST-onia' resulted in confusion, especially to the English native speakers as they had to guess and decipher the sign. The cornflower pattern was noticed less than the sign and the slogan remained mostly unknown, although it sounded good. The title of the tourism strategy 'An Old Country in a Shiny Package' seemed confusing, misleading, and had negative connotations; whilst the word 'shiny' raised the majority of objections, the interviewees were not thinking of the country as old.

The third category (III), branding potential of Estonia, involves the potential and possibilities that could lead to future success in country branding and comprises promoting Estonia, possible key messages, the story, and recommendations on branding. For example, to promote the country, the Nordic-Scandinavian image appeared to be more favorable than Eastern-European. Regarding the messages, one expert suggested Tallinn as the romantic capital of Nordic Europe, as so far no one is claiming that position and assumed that it "would work particularly well in the Asian market" (INT 13). Among recommendations for branding were: to promote local food and the Soviet past, show that Estonia could be part of a wider tourist destination, such as the Nordic area, think of something not promoted yet, do more customer based research, correct the current strategy, find a magnet for Tallinn, show the high-tech capacity, support regional promotion, etc. Furthermore, the interviewees were asked to tell a short story about Estonia that indicated what they value and how they perceive the country, providing valuable insights into the attributes that could realistically appeal to foreign travelers.

The fourth category (IV), experience of Estonia, covers the issues of country-related experiences and expectations, experience marketing, the symbols of Estonia, and what could be authentic experiences in the country. The

interviewees expect to have one-to-one experiences and "personal stuff: farms, forest, sea, all sort of things personal like local person-to-guest experiences" (INT 6), not ferry tourism. They promote Estonia to their friends and love to come back as they like the local food, the countryside, look for cheaper prices, relaxation opportunities, etc. Not all interviewees were familiar with the meaning of experience marketing but for experts this was the preferred option and they gave valuable examples based on their own visits and ads and word-of-mouth. Non-experts were less familiar with the experience marketing concept but made many proposals for what they would like to do in Estonia and described experiential elements that mattered to them. The interviewees also emphasized the historic atmosphere, events, spas, exoticism of wild berries, Russian feeling, and ease of access to regional areas. The symbols and authentic experiences are elaborated in sections 3.4 and 3.5.

During the analysis of the relationships within the categorization system, it was evidenced that categories I and IV, and II and III could be connected in some exceptional cases, since some codes fell into both categories. However, the reason for their differentiation was the context-related answers to certain interview questions; for example, the Song Festival was a positive surprise about Estonia (as a part of country image) but at the same time, a strong and authentic experience because it is rare and unique, and consequently could constitute even a symbol of Estonia. In addition, the interviewees liked the picturesque Old Town of Tallinn, which was the most commonly known fact about Estonia, and mentioned it several times. Nevertheless, some more logical relationships between the categories were found: country image (I) and experience (IV) could be related in the same way as the potential for country branding (III) and the country brand (II) as these topics seemed more connected. Moreover, regarding that categories II and III could be related to the brand identity, these four categories are based on the most relevant concepts in country branding (identity, experience, and image), additionally showing elements as subcategories that constitute these. Furthermore, these links were covered in the model indicating the conceptual interconnections.

To sum up, the categorization system consists of four categories to which different codes were aggregated based on the specific content and context of the interviews. These categories reflect the most important topics in country branding, and could thus be used in the study of place brand assessment.

3.3. Classification of experiences for country branding

Article IV addresses RQ5 by analyzing the interviews and classifying the experiences from three perspectives or categories described earlier – cognitive, affective, and conative – that are related to (the model and) the definition of experience marketing. Table 5 shows the categorization and coding that results from systematizing the country-based experiences drawn from the interviews, with examples to illustrate such a division and explain the characteristics. The table shows 25 subcategories selected from prior research by Brijs, Bloemer and

Table 5. Classification system of experiences for country branding and examples

Category, perspective	Subcategories and examples of Estonian experiences
Cognitive (what is known about a country; brand awareness, knowledge, beliefs) What do travelers know about Estonia?	**Cultural identity**: beautiful Old Town of Tallinn, the Song Festival, architecture, cultural events, art, language **Economy**: EU member, economic success story, fast changes, Skype, IT savvy, Nordic/Scandinavian ties **People**: friendly, multilingual, entrepreneurial, reserved, helpful, too serious, energetic, compliant with agreements *Services*: good quality services, bad flight connections, free Wi-Fi *Overall impressions*: small, unknown, clean, compact **History**: long national history, the Soviet past, Hanseatic town **Climate**: four seasons, snow, cold winter **Landscape**: flat, no big mountains, close to sea **Political climate**: politically stable, famous president *Basic knowledge that visitors might be assumed to have*: places to visit, symbols, belonging, proximity to Finland, short distances *Knowledge before and after visiting*: surprising factor
Affective (feelings, emotions linked to a country) What kind of feelings, emotions do travelers describe?	**Pleasant**: good food, atmosphere, local produce, musical experience, countryside, good hosts, cultural similarities **Relaxing**: peaceful, sea, quiet, perfect location for anything slow **Exciting**: illuminated Christmas market, discovery time, the Soviet era feeling, feeling of freedom, medieval experience **Arousing**: things happening all the time, energy, vibrant, changes in environment over time, sitting around bonfire, singing together *Country-based memories*: related to history, events, friends **Distressing**: prices have gone up, closeness of Russia, focus on Tallinn **Unpleasant**: ferry tourism, criminals crossing into Scandinavia **Gloomy**: shadow of the Soviet past, Soviet architecture
Conative (intentions, motivation related to a country) What can travelers do in Estonia?	**Novelty**: going to a sauna, experiencing something different (e.g. places that have the aura of the Soviet era) **Escape and relax**: nice big spas, cross-country skiing, Tallinn zoo **Nature**: being close to unspoiled and untouched nature, national parks *Wishes and desires*: people want to eat well, come to live in Estonia **Host-site interaction**: attending local parties, visiting Estonian homes *Incentives*: health tourism, inexpensive shopping, plans to visit neighboring countries during the trip **Stimulation**: St. John's Day celebrations, driving on ice, hunting **Security**: feeling personally safe, meeting respectful people **Relationship**: visiting friends or family, working and living in Estonia **Isolation**: walks in the swamps, visiting rural areas and islands **Personal development**: learning, conferences, studying in Estonia **Romance**: visiting cozy cafes in Tallinn's Old Town or manor houses **Autonomy**: people are free to do and be who they are

Source: Author's compilation based on Article IV (Same, 2014)

Kasper (2011), Russell and Pratt (1980), and Pearce and Lee (2005). In addition, seven new subcategories marked in italics that emerged during the analysis are integrated into the table since they were meaningful and necessary.

The **cognitive** perspective contains facts about the country: its cultural identity, economy, people, services, overall impressions, history, etc. Estonia appears to be organized and arranged neatly, being home to an international business community and thus high quality services can be expected. According to the overall impressions, Estonia seems a stable, westernized, and creative country, with a "dynamic, 'can do' attitude" among its "young, educated, and motivated population" (INT 20). Comparing knowledge before and after visiting, reveals that the country continues surprising visitors and the place exceeds expectations because products have good quality and it is cleaner and safer than they imagined before. As Wi-Fi is everywhere, many are surprised by "the know-how in digital infrastructure" (INT 31), often referring to the internet and Skype. When commenting on how to promote the country, the interviewees suggested to refer to its location, belonging, attractions, and proximity to Finland – data grouped under the knowledge that visitors might be assumed to have. On how to present the offerings, the interviewees recommended being succinct – place, experience, and 1-2-3 minimal facts – 'less is more' to prevent overloading people with information they cannot relate to.

The **affective** perspective refers to the connections categorized as pleasant, relaxing, exciting, arousing, as well as distressing, unpleasant, gloomy, and country-based memories. Estonia could be the perfect location for anything slow – "slow food, slow life, and slow sea, slow everything" (INT 15), and is re-commended to be considered a relaxing place where it is possible to enjoy the peacefulness – "sit down and appreciate what it is, do not run around like a fool. It is not Paris or London" (INT 6). The interviewees were getting excited with the illuminated Christmas market and they advise everyone to visit it due to the medieval surroundings and the unique emotional sensation that this atmosphere generates. They like to "feel the narrow passages between the buildings" (INT 9) and the specific smell of the city, especially during Christmas. The interviewees loved the energy, as one put it: Estonia is "a new country and people are making things happen, and there are new developments all the time" (INT 18). Nevertheless, they had country-based memories that brought back the old times and were used for comparison because of quick changes in the country. They admired many things in Estonia, but felt some negative experiences as well.

From the **conative** perspective, the interviewees advised demonstrating what the country has to offer; that is, what to do, where to go, and which attractions to see. The intentions behind their recommendations for activities are grouped under subcategories, such as novelty, escape and relax, nature, wishes and desires, host-site interaction, incentives, etc. Nature was of great interest offering varied activities outdoors; in addition, many interviewees suggested exploiting the possibilities that the Soviet past offers. Considering wishes and desires, the interviewees want to visit beautiful manor houses, islands and local homes, to eat well, and (especially Scandinavians) would like to visit spas. The

interviewees proposed incentives, such as to bring in international slow-cuisine chefs, develop innovative products around the Old Town, promote the ease of access to regional areas since "anything within a 2-hour radius of Tallinn has got good potential" (INT 13), advertise the spas, gastronomy, cultural experiences, events, history, and discovery or adventure travel.

Since attitudes toward features that are "most closely related to preference or to actual purchase decisions are said to be determinant" (Myers & Alpert, 1968, 13), DMOs need to identify those decisive aspects for which the place is perceived positively. Thus, Article IV presents guidelines (in Table 5) for managing the process of identification and monitoring of country-based experiences from three perspectives: 1) cognitive: cultural identity, economy, people, services, and overall impressions; 2) affective: pleasant, relaxing, exciting, and arousing experiences; 3) conative: novelty, escape and relax, nature, wishes and desires, and host-site interaction. These 14 key subcategories (but not only) could be addressed in future research on classifying and mapping country-related experiences, and are considered determinant. Moreover, if these are perceived and realized as positive, they contribute to a positive country image.

Comparing the findings with previous research, unlike Brijs et al. (2011), no examples for the cognitive subcategory religion were found in this study, but services, overall impressions, assumptions about basic knowledge (that travelers might know before a visit), and knowledge before and after visiting were added. The subcategories language and cultural identity proposed by Brijs et al. could be merged, as language was taken as a manifestation of culture. The interviewees spoke about quality services, which are cheaper than in other countries but the quality standards are high. They also conveyed overall impressions that could not belong to other subcategories, as they were broader than the rest. Knowledge before and after visiting provides valuable information, as many interviewees expressed surprise when their expectations were exceeded; moreover, a comparison between previous and current experiences about the country provides valuable insights for DMOs. Contrasting with the results of Russell and Pratt (1980), experiences relating to the affective subcategory sleepy were not detected; instead, this research adds country-based memories that have not been covered so far, as the interviewees had visited the country before and had old memories of it conveyed in an emotional way. Compared to Pearce and Lee (2005), who recommend conative subcategories, such as nostalgia, recognition and self-actualization, this research found no coincidence on these. In fact, incentives, and wishes and desires emerged as new. Incentives did not qualify under other subcategories, and as the essence of wishes and desires is directly related to what people want, it was supplemented.

In summary, Table 5 explains the perspectives influencing experience marketing in the country branding context, systematizes the examples based on the three categories or perspectives in experience marketing, and proposes the classification system with subcategories applicable for further research. Since the country is not well known, information about Estonia is insufficient; however, during the analysis four new cognitive subcategories emerged.

Nonetheless, the interviewees confirmed the effectiveness of affective promotion; it seemed that prior subcategories proposed by Russell and Pratt were sufficient, only one new affective subcategory, country-based memories, emerged. Although two new conative subcategories were developed, the interviewees talked the least about that perspective.

3.4. Authentic Estonian experiences

In order to answer RQ5 and find which country-related experiences can better support Estonian marketing strategies, part of the research (for Article IV) dealt with filtering out the authentic experiences. To that end, a selection followed certain criteria: the uniqueness of the experience, availability only in Estonia or originally established in the country, a consensus on its authenticity, its traditional character, often spoken of, and/or a kind of permanence.

In accordance with the majority of the interviewees, one rightfully authentic Estonian experience is the Song Festival; thus, they encourage people to see the engaging, stunning, and extraordinary musical performances that involve thousands of singers. According to one expert, it is heart-warming to see how "40,000 singers come together and hold hands with strangers" (INT 24) and she knows people living on another continent, eager to travel to Estonia to see that. In addition, the Old Town of Tallinn, described as "a jewel" (INT 28), is very authentic, and recommended for more active promotion. Going to the swamps, being close to nature, and the islands and manor houses seemed very authentic. The beaches are attractive because "here you get the real thing that has the sun and it is not extremely hot,… the sea that is not salty, it is perfect" (INT 25); and these are "very empty, and this is great, and they do not have people just selling you stuff" (INT 11). The interviewees spoke enthusiastically about close-to-nature situations, like hiking in the forest and having "the experience of being dependent on nature" (INT 3). They referred to wild berries, the smell of flowers, hay and animals, local fruits, and suggested to present "every kind of season with its smells, with its characteristics, and colors" (INT 19). Authentic experiences were told to be visiting saunas, the coast and the seaside, St. John's Day celebrations with its spiritual ritual feeling, visiting Soomaa National Park, using e-solutions, driving on ice, and cross-country skiing, etc. Most of the interviewees liked tasty local food, describing it as being organic, healthy, fresh, and delicious-looking, and they appreciated the mixture of modern and traditional food. One interviewee pointed out that people in Estonia are truly authentic being highly patriotic and extremely attached to their land (INT 25). Furthermore, the Christmas market and its traditions were attractive to most of the interviewees because the extraordinary old-world atmosphere is unusual. Many towns were bombed during the Second World War and could not preserve their medieval architecture, therefore, for example for Finns "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. In summary, as the authentic experiences support country branding, Estonia should

promote the Song Festival, the Old Town and the Christmas market more widely and find out better ways of promoting its nature and food.

3.5. Differences between the country brand identity and image

A comparative analysis was conducted to compare the data from the interviews and the official documents to answer RQ6. Moreover, according to Gummesson (2005), comparison is a key to qualitative research analysis. After filtering out the codes of Estonian experiences from the interviews (reflecting brand image), these were sought in the official marketing strategies (identity side) as grounds for comparison, thus helping to identify the gaps and differences between the brand identity and the image, to understand the brand situation.

The marketing strategies for tourism set the goal of making Estonia a new memorable and exciting travel destination for people from all over the world. Tourism as the priority area for the promotion of Estonia has four sub-strategies: city, cultural, wellness, and nature holidays. In these, special **symbols** (objects, events, phenomena, or landmarks) of the country to support its promotion are the basic elements of stories of Estonia or sources of inspiration for that. Each sub-strategy includes several symbols presented in the central part of Figure 8 and these were searched from the transcripts. The symbols were selected for the first comparison, as these are important elements of country-based experiences.
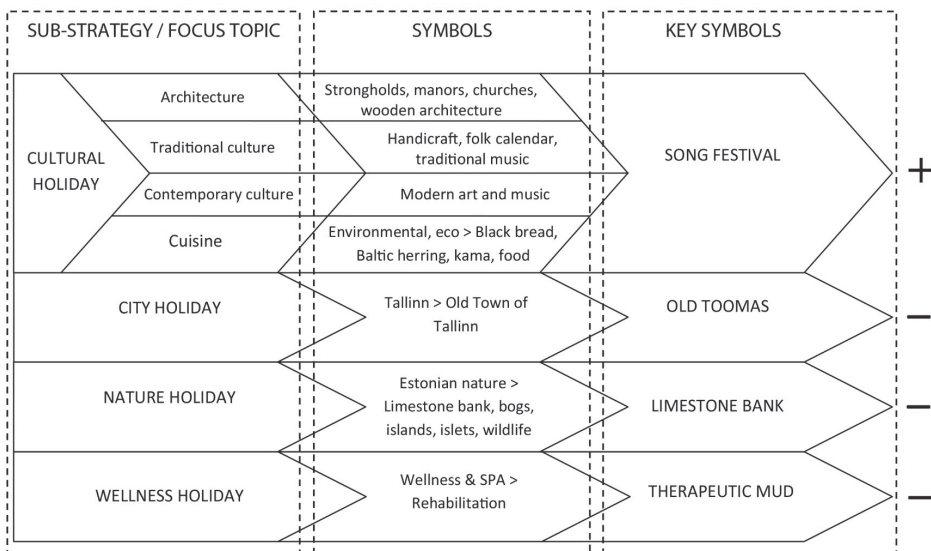
Figure 8. Symbols by sub-strategy (adapted from marketing strategy for tourism, 12) Source: http://brand.estonia.eu, modified by the author (Article III)

Four **key symbols** for promoting Estonia were chosen by the DMO as the most differentiating and competitive, but only the Song Festival (the key symbol of a cultural holiday) corresponded to the opinions expressed in the interviews. This could indicate that the promotion of the symbols has been ineffective or

that the selection did not cover what foreigners consider interesting. No proof was found on why Old Toomas, therapeutic mud or limestone bank should be important references or attractive in representing Estonia abroad. Instead, in the opinion of the interviewees, sandy beaches, swamps and forests were the references for a nature holiday; no one spoke of limestone banks. Only a few interviewees from countries where wellness holidays are popular showed interest in health related visits but no one mentioned therapeutic mud. In the interviewees' opinion, good, tasty, and authentic food and the Estonian nature were common references that could be associated with wellness. Tallinn and its Old Town are well known but Old Toomas (key symbol of a city holiday) remained unknown. The lack of key symbolic associations indicates that customer-based research for the Estonian brand is needed. No evidence of considering the target audience was found during the document analysis either. Consequently, Estonia cannot expect high brand equity to take place.

After **comparing the codes** (experiences, promotional symbols), which are the result of analyzing the strategies with the codes of the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees, a mismatch was visible. The interviewees spoke about experiences, attributes, and symbols that are not mentioned in the documents. For example, many spoke about one common symbol in culture holiday – food – but the other symbols selected by the DMO are products that do not appear to be well known, such as Baltic herring, black bread, and *kama*. The strategies recommend symbols and experiences like rehabilitation, limestone, islets, wildlife, strongholds, churches, the folk calendar, medical establishments, and eco, but these did not even arise during the interviews. Furthermore, the interviewees did not speak about famous Estonians, film festivals, juniper, Estonian National Opera, museums, sports events, golf, or blacksmith shops, which are suggested in the strategies. The strategy sees Estonia as the spa kingdom of the world but spa holidays appeared to be attractive only in the neighboring Scandinavian countries. To add here, the experts among the interviewees tended to think that the strategies do not do justice to the potential of the country. One of them suggested revisiting the content, another recommended stepping back, formulating the strategy rather with the target markets and segments in mind, and developing the necessary tools to achieve the goal. Some attributes and experiences that the interviewees spoke enthusiastically about are not reflected by the strategies. Nevertheless, the country continues to surprise foreigners because the product offer is of good quality and that improvements are happening quickly, also since it is a safe and clean country.

In Article IV, the marketing strategies were analyzed from another point of view, as the analysis had a different focus. To that end, the content of the strategies was coded similarly to the interviews and a comparative analysis (i.e. contrasting country-based experiences from the interviews and the strategies) was conducted to identify differences. The system for classifying experiences from Table 5 was the frame of reference for the comparison to test its transferability and practicability. As a result, from the **cognitive** perspective, the

strategies do not include any that could be linked to subcategories services, political climate, and economy. The reason services are not elaborated could be that the interviewees talked about relevant, value adding or less expensive services. In addition, for example, inconvenient flight connections cannot be used as a positive promotion. These last two are not represented in tourism promotion presumably, as they belong to the marketing strategy for the business environment. From the **affective** perspective, experiences that belong to subcategories distressing, unpleasant, gloomy, and country-based memories are absent from the marketing strategies. It is apparent that a country does not promote experiences that are not positive or discourage foreigners; conversely, the interviewees also described negative and less favorable experiences. Nevertheless, the strategies could stress pleasant country-based memories that could influence consumption choices in a positive direction. When comparing experiences from the **conative** perspective, then those that could fall under subcategories, such as personal development, autonomy, wishes and desires, and stimulation, are not mentioned in the strategies. The reason could be that such experiences are related to personal well-being, but the documents are a practical tool helping everyone interested in promoting the country to foreigners, without considering very individual interests.

In addition, the comparison of the marketing strategies and the **authentic Estonian experiences** expressed by the interviewees concerning activities in the countryside like hiking in the forest, or in the cities such as living the Christmas market tradition, revealed that many popular choices had little to do with the official strategies. As claimed by one branding expert, the phenomenal success of Tallinn's Christmas market has been an exceptionally good example of tourism marketing in Europe during the last five years (INT 6) and it responds to excellent tactics. Surprisingly, many interviewees recommended capturing the value that the Soviet past has. It was found that the Song Festival, the Old Town of Tallinn, food, and nature are elaborated in the official documents, but the Christmas market is not. Moreover, driving on ice, new e-solutions, wild berries, and snow were pointed out as authentic by the interviewees, but were not recommended for promotion in the strategies.

In conclusion, secondary data (marketing strategies) have diversified and complemented the research, enabling the case to be explored from different perspectives and adding a more comprehensive voice from the DMO.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The first section synthesizes the conclusions of the four research articles that compose this thesis work and presents answers to the research questions. The following sections elaborate on the theoretical and practical contributions of the research, point out the limitations, and list implications for future research, as well as for DMOs and marketing managers.

4.1. Conclusions

This research was inspired by the need to advance our understanding of experience marketing and country branding and their interconnectedness from a marketing management perspective, and to explore foreigners' perceptions of a country, its brand and experiences, as well as to interpret a specific country brand situation. This research was necessary to contribute to solving the problem of the low awareness of key concepts and their interrelation on the one hand, and intense competition between countries in the global market on the other hand. In addition, relationships between experience marketing and the actual situation and the effectiveness of a country brand were not clearly identified. Therefore, the aim of the thesis was to develop theoretical frameworks and analyze the current Estonian brand situation to understand and conceptualize experience marketing and country branding, and their interconnections to brand image and the experiences of a country.

As Gummesson (2005) claims, a single case study does not merely help us understand a particular case, but could give general lessons about marketing. Moreover, in order to deserve the label of 'marketing intelligence', a study must consist of knowledgeable interpretations, conceptualizations and theory generation. This thesis contributes theoretically and empirically to broadening the horizons of scholars, marketers, and DMOs by explaining the concepts, proposing conceptual models and definitions; and attending to customers by exploring how they perceive and experience a country and its brand to develop new categories and classifications, and identify the experiences that are authentic. Furthermore, evaluation is the first stage of every brand's development (Hanna & Rowley, 2011); thus, a specific analysis of brand interpretation was conducted to gather feedback on the brand image and experiences that included the examination of the consistency and coherency between the envisaged brand identity held by the DMO and the brand image of the Estonian brand projected by the interviewees. Identifying similarities and differences between the data and analyzing previous research of Brand Estonia was necessary to understand the current situation/state of the brand, and this also provided hints on how to improve the official marketing strategies.

This thesis allows the following **general conclusions**. First, the aim was achieved through the examination and development of the concepts that

contributes towards a better understanding and new knowledge about experience marketing and country branding, including proposing conceptual models and definitions, developing novel categorization systems and exploring a specific country brand case. Second, the research contributes to the further development of the theory by clarifying and conceptualizing the key concepts, advancing theory and providing implications. Answers to all of the research questions were found and the seven research tasks were completed. Third, the selected philosophical starting points, constructivist paradigm with interpretive approach guiding the qualitative research and following the strategy of the case study, proved appropriate for investigating two socially constructed phenomena and their interconnections. As interpretive research attempts to comprehend the phenomena through accessing the meanings (people assign to them) and allows us to study systematic divergences in meaning between the analysis of interviews and documents, it was a suitable choice. Using a case study to understand real-life phenomena in depth facilitates explaining them comprehensively and interpret the current brand situation in Estonia. Fourth, the analysis made it possible to acquire original insights and findings.

The six research questions proposed were answered as follows:

RQ1. How can experience (and experiential) marketing be conceptualized? Article I introduces the first key concept and elaborates on its essence using a conceptual model that shows how experience marketing is based on strategic marketing management and deals with stimulus, customer-brand interaction, experience, consumer behavior, value co-creation, and different kinds of value for stakeholders. In addition, definitions were developed further to resolve the prevailing terminological confusion and find what the essential difference is between experience and experiential marketing. Experience is defined as an economic offering and a result of interaction between the brand and its customers who perceive and give meaning to it. The author defines an experience in the context of this thesis as a memorable emotional, cognitive, or motivational event from exposure to the brand, company, product or service. An experience is certainly a complex constructed reality that individuals perceive. Experience marketing is defined as the "strategic customer-centered and holistic marketing of relevant (and meaningful) experiences" that consider customer attitudes and behavior (Same & Larimo, 2012, 485). It is outlined as a growing field of study, which deals with the strategic marketing of experiences considering the affective, cognitive, and conative perspectives of consumption experiences, and requires strategic planning where the brand identity and customer motivation and engagement are parts of a well-planned strategy. Experiential marketing is seen as an activity (within a marketing campaign) or a marketing tool dealing with tactical and operational level actions to create sensations and emotions, rather than a strategic approach that marketers should consider central to their activities.

Based on the model illustrating the difference between experience and experiential marketing, a particular (or emotional) experience refers to the question "How does it make you feel?", whereas a meaningful experience raises

the issue of "How does it make you feel, think and act?" Thus, it was concluded that experience marketing is a broader and a more comprehensive concept than experiential marketing. To make the distinction, experiential marketing could be seen as a subset of experience marketing because marketers have to manage cognitive, affective and conative perspectives, not only affective ones. Furthermore, 'experience' is a noun emphasizing the basis of the field (as in relationship or place marketing), whereas 'experiential' is an adjective. As experience marketing is the whole field, a more extensive area, its platform is strategic and wider in scope. The main claim is that experience marketing is a fundamental concept based on strategic marketing management and used to manage inter alia customer interaction and value issues. Experiential marketing, on the other hand, handles marketing tactics to design the operational process of customer experience. It focuses on how to conduct marketing campaigns in experiential ways to raise sensory and emotional appeals. Moreover, experience is subjective, and therefore, created or "produced" with absolute uncertainty; however, the settings for experiences could be objectively staged to affect the emotions, being the task of experiential marketing.

RQ2. How can country branding be conceptualized?
Article II discusses the second key concept and proposes the conceptual model. Country branding can be defined as the creation, management, and communi-cation of a country brand through its attributes and story with the aim of differentiating, promoting the country and supporting the creation of or strengthening an existing positive image (to receive more tourists, sell products in foreign markets, attract investors, etc.). It was concluded that country branding is a complex phenomenon and that experience marketing offers useful tools for countries when confronted with intense competition. As influencing the image of a place and building effective country brands are difficult, comprehensive, and long-term tasks, they require above all an understanding of the customers' mind space.

The three-layered conceptual model explains the essence of the place/country branding process (the first layer) from the selection of identity through the stages necessary for the effective formation of an outcome for DMOs/companies that evidences the brand image in the mind of the target audience. Experiences that connect a country brand and customers, and the communication to them should aim to influence customers to interact in a positive way. Although the process is influenced by the business and cultural environment (the second layer), which in turn is affected by challenges (for DMOs), experience marketing activities, cognition and sensemaking processes, and competitors, effective branding can still be achieved. Furthermore, combining experiences, value, aspects of service-dominant logic, and the branding process for a model of country branding broadens our understanding of the concept as the process is additionally explained in a value-creating way (the third layer). As value is a strategic objective per se, DMOs and companies must focus on the value of customers that leads to positive outcomes (e.g. preference, engagement, trust) and hence allows a greater competitive advantage. It is important that the experiential

offerings are designed to support the creation of value from the customers' side, since value creation is the outcome of the whole spectrum of interactions between foreigners and a country brand and leads to value realization that is the ultimate goal.

RQ3. What are the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences, and country image?

To develop a theoretical understanding of the connections, it was necessary to create another conceptual model to illustrate how key and related concepts are interrelated. The model consists of interconnected conceptions that are positioned within a logical and sequential design. The modeled pyramid is original and shows the direction in which the concepts will narrow, starting from experience marketing and ending with the branding potential. The author concludes that experience marketing and country branding are related through experiences, and authenticity is of great significance to gain memorable and meaningful experiences, which are the preconditions for giving rise to a positive country image. To illustrate this, Article IV proposed a model showing the inter-connections between experience marketing, place marketing, country branding, meaningful country-based experiences, authentic experiences, country brand authenticity, and the positive image of a country. The foundation of this logic is elaborated and the interconnectedness between the concepts described.

RQ4. How do foreigners perceive and evaluate the Estonian brand and image?

Articles III and IV elaborate on how foreigners perceive a country and its brand; examples are presented in the articles and briefly in this thesis. Regarding the image of Estonia, Article III concluded that the country is predominantly an unknown abroad, but its image among foreigners is positive in principle. The WTE sign received the most negative evaluations by the interviewees who represented the right audience to evaluate its significance given that it is primarily targeted at foreign public. In addition, it was argued that the image of Estonia and its brand among its most important target audience (foreigners) does not correspond to the Estonian brand identity, as many differences were found between the perceptions and experiences of interviewees and the suggestions proposed in the marketing strategies.

During the analysis of the interviews, four broad categories emerged and thus codes were grouped accordingly, although it was necessary to use 16 sub-categories to illustrate the content and meaning of these categories: image of Estonia, Brand Estonia, branding potential of Estonia, and experience of Estonia. The 16 subcategories: Estonia's overall image, people, positive surprise about Estonia, the sense of belonging, country branding activities, the sign, brand attributes, meaning and connotations, promoting Estonia, possible key messages, the story, recommendations on branding, personal experiences and expectations, experience marketing, the symbols, and authentic experiences, opened and elucidated the scope of major categories. This categorization system can be used by other countries as well to analyze their country brands. This thesis presents the framework and provides Estonian examples to highlight parallels, as the

name of the country could be easily changed since the categories represent the main topics that could be covered in the assessment of any country brand.

RQ5. How to classify experiences in country branding, and what country-based experiences can better support the branding of a country?

In Article IV, the author concludes that the division of experiences into three categories (cognitive, affective, and conative) and subcategories was appropriate for mapping and organizing country-based experiences. Thirty-two (32) sub-categories were proposed to classify the country-related experiences; of these 14 were considered leading and decisive from three perspectives: 1) cognitive: cultural identity, economy, people, services, and overall impressions; 2) affective: pleasant, relaxing, exciting, and arousing experiences; and 3) conative: novelty, escape and relax, nature, wishes and desires, and host-site interaction. The classification system can be utilized as a systematized guide that can be useful for other countries in mapping or categorizing their country-based experiences in country branding. Seven new subcategories were proposed, constituting part of the original contribution of this research. This research emphasizes that it is important to conduct research on all three perspectives (not only on one or two of them separately) to discover an accurate and holistic understanding of the phenomenon. It was also concluded that experience marketing is an innovative proposal in the context of country branding.

The research data showed that the most authentic Estonian experiences are the Song Festival, good quality food, unspoiled nature, the memorable Old Town of Tallinn, and its illuminated Christmas market. However, more real Estonian experiences were mentioned; for example, authentic experiences related to the islands, swamps, spas, e-solutions, and manor houses. This selection among all country-based experiences could be promoted more actively because it can contribute to more effective branding and are considered authentic experiences – being one step closer to a positive country image.

RQ6. How to understand and interpret the current situation of the country brand in Estonia?

It is necessary to study brand image regularly, as it reveals an important part of the brand's present situation in the market; in addition, it forms the basis for future marketing planning and actions. From the context-specific evaluation of the Estonian branding case (Articles III and IV), six conclusions were highlighted. First, as sufficient understanding of what and how the foreigners think, want, and feel about Estonia as a tourist place is missing, its potential is unexploited, which establishes the need for more research. Second, the selection of the current brand identity including the symbols and experiences in support of Brand Estonia, which are all recommended in the official marketing strategies, are not entirely effective or sustainable. Third, the Estonian brand is not well monitored and evaluated nor sufficiently developed or enhanced over time, but should be since it is a valuable asset for the whole country. Fourth, some of the most significant and influential stakeholders (e.g. foreigners, state) are not included and participating in the Estonian brand development, and play no meaningful role in improving or disseminating the brand. Fifth, a substantial

flaw in the marketing strategies (intuitively tackled by many interviewees) is that the brand in general appears to be the outcome of guessing what the audience could like about Estonia instead of knowing how to promote the positive side of the country more effectively and develop appealing offers or value propositions. Sixth, the overall strategy is fragmented and complex, and needs to be simplified and made easier to understand for all disseminating its content, otherwise messages sent by different people could conflict. Article III demonstrates the problems in the Estonian branding process already in earlier stages and proposes considering a new attractive sign. The fact that the image of Estonia is not yet positioned abroad is a fair opportunity to improve the detected limitations, to correct past formulation mistakes, improve dialogue with the target audience, extend this research, and take advantage of experience marketing opportunities.

In addition, the author found that the symbols suggested for promotion in Estonian marketing strategies (identity side) do not correspond to those mentioned by the interviewees (image side). From the four official key symbols, only the Song Festival coincided with the opinions expressed in that study. The importance of the empirical research is how it has captured foreigners' real interests. Moreover, when comparing experiences described in the interviews and those in the strategies, a discrepancy becomes evident. The official strategies contain recommended experiences and topics that are not detected by the target audience and vice versa. The strategies should be reassessed and revised according to the actual situation and should include the Christmas market. This is essential to develop marketing strategies that are based on customer research.

All research tasks were completed: tasks 1 and 2 were performed in Articles I, II, IV, and this thesis; task 3 was implemented by Articles III and IV, task 4 was solved by Article III, task 5 was completed by IV, task 6 was met by Articles III and IV; and task 7 was realized by all the articles and this thesis.

To sum up, a professional DMO constantly monitors the brand's effectiveness and overall trends in different markets, capturing value from customers to create the equity and desirable outcomes for the whole country. For effective branding, the voice of customers should be consulted and analyzed, to gain a thorough understanding of the target audience and their attitudes and behavior. Only now are companies and DMOs starting to understand the power of experience marketing and country branding to reach the minds and hearts of the customers. Despite a series of challenges, there are opportunities and prospects that this work has highlighted to comprehend these complex phenomena.

4.2. Theoretical and practical contributions

This thesis has advanced our understanding of marketing terminology, proposed new models, revealed the reciprocal interconnectedness between key concepts, provided new knowledge on customer perceptions and experiences, suggested categorization and classification systems, and interpreted a country brand situation – in other words, contributed in theoretical and practical terms.

Theoretical and methodological contributions

This research has resulted in novel theoretical advancements of both key concepts through its focus on the conceptualization and development of experience marketing and country branding and their interconnections. Terminological clarifications resolved the existing confusion in understanding the essence of the key constructs under scrutiny. As the marketing literature uses experience marketing and experiential marketing interchangeably, it was necessary to establish the essential difference between the two, and explain the nature of experience marketing. To that end, the author further developed the definitions of experience and experience marketing, and proposed a model of experience marketing to explain its essence.

The second key concept also required clarification that was achieved by presenting a distinction between country branding, destination branding, and nation branding. A conceptual model of country branding was also developed. The author proposed a multilevel model introducing three layers of country branding that could offer a foundation for future research as it integrates the key concepts and service-dominant logic of value. Thus, it goes beyond Dinnie's (2008) model on nation-brand identity and image (cf. Article II).

Furthermore, the author introduced a model showing the interconnections between key and directly related concepts. The aim of developing conceptual frameworks was to make the theoretical findings of the research meaningful; they function as useful methodological tools. Moreover, the descriptions of the conceptual models help to increase our knowledge in the field by explaining why the relationships exist, and also providing directions for further studies.

Since theory generation – moving from raw data to conceptualization and contextualization – is the most valuable contribution a researcher can make (Gummesson, 2005), the empirical phase of the research was conducted within a specific context. The identified categories and subcategories of country branding (that resulted from the interview analysis) are special, distinctive, and contain examples. The categorization system refers to original research for the assessment of country branding describing the main topics that could be used in future research. It was necessary to establish the categories to understand the nature of the key concept, as no appropriate categories for this research were found in the literature (the majority of studies in this area have adopted quantitative approach). The existing categories based on particular arguments and cases, elaborated from different perspectives, seemed unsuitable. Similarly, appropriate options on how to interpret a country brand in the context of experience marketing were not found. Therefore, a novel categorization system was developed. Furthermore, the proposed classification system of experiences provided useful logic as a basis for how to distinguish experiences. This functions as a meaningful categorization of the experiences that foreigners encountered. The author integrated prior subcategories from research by Brijs, Bloemer and Kasper (2011), Russell and Pratt (1980), and Pearce and Lee (2005), and developed a system by adding seven novel subcategories.

In addition, the research has presented a methodological approach for how to interpret a country brand situation combining and comparing primary and secondary data, and investigating prior research on a specific country brand. In addition, this research has contributed to the debate on the topic and made recommendations for future research.

Practical contributions

This dissertation has contributed to studies and the body of knowledge in the field of marketing; its applicability extends to marketing and tourism. It broadens the horizons of scholars and marketing professionals, helping them to advance our understanding of the concepts and their interconnections in future research. The categorization system for country branding could be used to monitor and assess place brands, comprising a variety of elements necessary for a holistic view of any country. This research also shows how to interpret a country brand situation, which is useful for other countries in their brand evaluation process. Marketers can replicate a similar process and use the interview questions and descriptions of the data collection and analysis. The research findings directly benefit DMO marketing managers, executives, and policy makers who are responsible for the development of place brands and the formation of marketing strategies, but are also useful for advertising agencies and communication professionals, assisting them in this process.

The classification of experiences serves as a systematized guide for explaining the three perspectives of experience marketing complemented with 32 subcategories, and shows the companies and DMOs how to classify and investigate experiences. This system was the frame of reference for the comparison, so its practicability has been tested and could be used by others.

The research provided empirical evidence of how foreigners perceive a country and its brand. The mismatch between country identity and image was evidenced and could be presented for the first time in a systematic way at the academic level. The problems of the ineffectiveness of Brand Estonia are now given the relevance that the topic deserves.

In addition, the thesis research has introduced the criteria for selecting authentic experiences and emphasized their importance in a positive country image. Furthermore, the thesis highlights the significance of experience marketing in country branding (generally in place branding), since many marketers manage the brands of countries, cities, states, or regions, and it can even apply to smaller locations. As few place marketing experts advise many countries simultaneously, an opportunity arises to advance the understanding of DMOs; thus, this thesis could become a valuable source of inspiration. In addition, marketing professionals could examine their strategies to develop new ones using the proposed logic, categories and classification systems as tools. Moreover, this thesis has made a managerial contribution to knowledge in providing implications and suggestions for brand managers and DMOs.

4.3. Limitations and implications for future research

Articles I and II filled the gaps in scholarly discussions that had not established a solid theoretical foundation regarding the terms related to key concepts. The articles attempted to solve some of the problems but not without constraints. The most considerable limitation was that they did not provide empirical evidence through exploring the proposed models. In addition, Articles I and II were written years ago, and as the iterative research process has been continuous, the models have been slightly advanced. Furthermore, because of constant improvements in theory development, every inquiry could always expand and be more detailed. Consequently, it is necessary to continue to examine the key concepts and investigate the interconnections between the concepts presented in the model of country branding more thoroughly. Most importantly, the proposed theoretical models should be fully tested empirically and could be even more developed by adding elements or dimensions. Other directions could be to develop experience economy theory and to continue advancing the theoretical foundations of place branding theory (from a country's perspective).

Articles III and IV have limitations; the most important constraints lie in the specificity of the case study based only on one country, and the sample selection criteria, as the audience of country branding is wide and the interviewees could have come from any place and have any background. In other words, instead of knowledgeable and highly qualified interviewees, a random sample could be appropriate, but still starting from people who know Estonia. In addition, the analysis derived from the unique perceptions and experiences of foreigners and included no locals, and despite the fact that the interviewees came from different countries, cultural influences were not examined.

This research could be continued by exploring customer perceptions of authentic experiences, concentrating on innovative ideas about how to promote a truly Estonian experience. To that end, the sample could be expanded. In addition, it is necessary to evaluate the holistic tourist experience of Estonia, and study whether the suggested proposal about positioning Tallinn as the romantic capital of Northern Europe is a good idea or is better to advertise city breaks, and how Estonia is perceived in the sense of belonging in order to use advantages of co-branding. Furthermore, export, foreign direct investments, and other fields could be covered in future research as the country brand serves equally their interests. Moreover, a comparative analysis could be conducted between Brand Estonia and other small countries confronted with similar challenges.

The studies could be continued and enriched based on the contribution of this research using the proposed conceptual models, categorization system for country branding, classification system of experiences, and the criteria for authentic experiences, or on how to interpret in qualitative terms a case that compares brand identity and the image of a country. Further exploration of the key concepts has both conceptual and applied appeal, and can provide directions

for examining how country-based experiences change consumer behavior and vice versa. Thus, future studies should include conative perspectives because they are interrelated with the cognitive and affective. One option is a large-scale research to establish which perspective out of the three, among different target groups, affects attitudes most and then elaborate on that. In future research, the perceptions of visual aspects of tourism brochures, and websites, could be evaluated from cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. The potential of this topic is remarkable also in collaboration with other disciplines.

Future research could focus on investigating the use of experience marketing in place/country brand promotion and the effectiveness of a place brand. This is a feasible approach to contributing with original research. Cross-cultural and national studies are other options, and it is equally important to study the locals because they promote the country abroad and receive foreign guests. The experiences of a country and proposals are not permanent as they change over time, and therefore, must be constantly examined. Gaining a thorough understanding of the audience is a crucial step in the formulation of official marketing strategies attempting to influence people's perceptions and improve communication. Moreover, it is necessary to investigate the coincidences between the experiences of the target audience and the marketing strategies, and if required, to form new documents. Finally, this study suggests that some elements of the concepts of experience marketing and country branding, such as brand authenticity, differentiation, engagement, and value creation could provide substantial and relevant areas of investigation.

4.4. Managerial implications and suggestions

Experience marketing is definitely a broad field and its core lies in the insight that customers look for experiences and have a need to interact, and these experiences affect and even change or transform their lives. This is echoed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) that customers desire experiences, and more companies are responding by designing and promoting them. Any experience marketing initiative must allow for communication; moreover, companies need to create meaningful experiences as they search for interaction with customers to meet their goals. In addition, the author of this thesis recommends the use of experience marketing in country branding to increase the competitiveness of a country. Understanding and appreciating the key concepts provides opportunities and allows a broader context for development and innovation in marketing.

Marketers could use the proposed conceptual models to understand the connections between the concepts, as it is important to identify which marketing possibilities are linked to a positive image. Moreover, it is important to understand the linkages between the identity, country-based experiences, authentic experiences, and image, and the potential of country branding. Researchers have already predicted that customer-driven experiences will prevail over company-driven experiences, so the customer must be consulted more often in branding processes.

This work could be applicable for the assessment of place brands because these could be evaluated using the categories and methodology proposed here. In addition, as brand evaluation should be a continual process, it is advisable for every country to examine their brand regularly to understand how the country is perceived abroad, and to assess how distinguishable and recognizable their brand is; which also applies to companies. Assessing the country brand's effectiveness includes also evaluating how differentiating and consistent the messages are across various touchpoints. To that end, strategies provide a valuable source; in addition, these must be actively disseminated. Therefore, it is necessary to develop effective marketing strategies and translate them into experience marketing tools addressing target audiences, their expectations, attitudes, needs, and values.

Regarding the Estonian case, the country DMO could develop its own new brand systems and frameworks based on the proposed models and categories, and use the information that has been gathered to reflect on the opportunities to improve the monitoring and evolution of the brand. Since they have the capacity to reach out, they could advance the categories and classification system, conduct more interviews or design questionnaires to understand the target audience, especially in priority markets. The country DMO could also engage a wide spectrum of institutions and other stakeholders: hotel managers, tourist agencies, media, branding experts, local developers, transport managers, etc., in the discussion of the holistic tourism experience. The country DMO could coordinate the process and set a direction, but feedback and reflection from the target audience is also needed. Workshops or events (e.g. conferences) would be effective ways to raise awareness of these problems and collect ideas for how to further differentiate a country. Experience marketing can offer new opportunities for country branding, also thanks to the internet-driven media revolution; digitalization and virtualization provides an advantage for Estonia, one of the frontrunners in this field. In addition, Estonia could initiate a series of workgroups to start to develop new marketing strategies, and furthermore, design a new sign and find proper symbols to promote the country. The current Estonian marketing strategies stand on exactly the same premises as formulated years ago. This is one part of the debate that further evaluation, research, and actions are required. This thesis could motivate change because the findings are original and have practical value for the country.

Some suggestions are directed to DMOs to help them manage their country brands more effectively. First, it is important to conduct comprehensive customer-centered research to understand what travelers think, want, and feel in relation to a country. This can be achieved by asking questions related to experiences, which would provide useful hints for future activities. In addition, exploiting the system for classifying experiences in their studies helps to systematize country-based experiences. Next, it is vital to identify and ascertain a realistic place identity and link the selection to effective communication, using attractive and unique messages, which help to differentiate the country in the customers' minds, and ultimately provide competitive advantage. As the global

market is saturated with many similar places and messages, differentiation becomes the only way to survive. Country brand identity is at the core of the brand building process, and a powerful brand must be distinguishable and memorable to lead to a meaningful response. As it is important to create a unique identity, the storytelling is becoming more relevant for marketers and DMOs, and thus it is necessary to develop stories about the place. Furthermore, it is essential to evaluate the country brand continuously, and if required, renew it over time. It is useful to establish a coordinating unit, which could bring together DMOs and different stakeholders, and add the efforts of companies, as well as export initiatives, investments and other government agencies to develop more powerful messages and activities. In addition, scholars and experts in the field should be consulted during the process. It is also necessary to inform tour operators in the target market about the options and tourist products. Evidence from the Estonian case shows that the brand communicates fewer positive messages today and initiates less authentic experiences than it could, because its strategies are flawed and misled.

A country brand is a multifaceted and complex construct, consisting of many attributes and value components and involving a variety of stakeholders. Therefore, continuous work and coordinated efforts are required to support it, and to take advantage of its positive image. Finally, the results of this thesis suggest that marketing managers would benefit from exploring how to use experience marketing in country branding more effectively. Although this empirical research is based on an Estonian case, the findings could stimulate insights, ideas and guidance for brand managers and DMOs in other countries. Moreover, they could utilize the conceptualization developed in this study. As both key concepts are emerging and evolving, comprehensive discussions of the interconnections and their operationalization and evaluation are almost absent. This research has initiated a discussion linking the two concepts and hopes that the debate continues.

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KOKKUVÕTE

Riigi bränd ja kuvand mõjutavad tarbijate hoiakuid, veendumusi ja käitumist ning tekitavad emotsioone, seetõttu on vaja mõista riiki külastavaid välismaalasi, et leida ja luua konkurentsieeliseid. Brändi arendama ja vajadusel muutma peab, kuid probleem on mõlema võtmekontseptsiooni ehk elamusturunduse ja riigi brändimise olemuse vähene tundmine, sest varasemad uuringud käsitlevad enamasti konkreetse juhtimisprobleemi lahendamist, mitte teooria loomist või arendust ega paku riigi brändi analüüsimiseks sobivaid lahendusi. Vähe on uuritud kontseptsioonide olemust ning nende seoseid. Teema on aktuaalne kogu maailmas, sest elamused aitavad nii ettevõtetel kui ka riikidel konkurentsis püsida. Eestis pole seni uuritud elamusturunduse kasutamist riigi brändimisel, riigi efektiivsemat turundamist ega brändi arendamise vajadust.

 Doktoritöö eesmärk on arendada teoreetilist raamistikku ja analüüsida Eesti riigi näitel brändi olukorda, et mõista ja kontseptualiseerida elamusturundust ja riigi brändimist ning nende seoseid riigiga seotud elamuste ja kuvandiga turunduse juhtimise vaatenurgast. Töö autor otsib vastust põhiküsimusele: kuidas mõista/tõlgendada ning kontseptualiseerida riigi brändimist ja sellega seotud elamuste tajumist? Sellest lähtuvalt keskendub doktoritöö järgmistele uurimisküsimustele: 1) kuidas kontseptualiseerida elamusturundust? 2) kuidas kontseptualiseerida riigi brändimist? 3) kuidas mõista elamusturunduse, riigi brändimise, autentsete elamuste ja riigi kuvandi vahelisi seoseid? 4) kuidas tajuvad ja hindavad välismaalased Eesti brändi ja kuvandit? 5) kuidas klassifitseerida riigiga seotud elamusi ja millised neist toetavad enim riigi brändimist? 6) kuidas mõista ja tõlgendada Eesti brändi praegust olukorda?

 Eesmärgi saavutamiseks ja vastuste leidmiseks püstitati seitse uurimisülesannet. Esmalt analüüsiti ja sünteesiti varasemaid elamusturunduse ja riigi brändimise teooriaid ja kontseptsioone (ülesanne 1) ning loodi kontseptuaalsed mudelid, mis seletavad võtmekontseptsioone ja nende seotust (ülesanne 2). Empiirilise uuringuga analüüsiti riigi brändi ja kuvandi ning Eestiga seotud elamuste tajumist ja tõlgendamist ning intervjueeritavate soovitusi riigi paremaks turundamiseks (ülesanne 3). Parema arusaama loomiseks oli vajalik välja uurida riigi brändimise kategooriad (ülesanne 4), klassifitseerida riigiga seotud elamused ning valida nende seast välja autentsed (ülesanne 5). Eesti brändi olukorra tõlgendamiseks analüüsiti varasemaid uuringuid ja ametlikke turundusstrateegiaid ning võrreldi tulemusi intervjuude analüüsiga, et leida erinevusi Eesti brändi identiteedi ja kuvandi vahel (ülesanne 6). Lisaks tehti ettepanekuid tulevasteks uuringuteks ja anti juhtimissoovitusi (ülesanne 7).

 Uurimus tugines materjali tõlgendamisel sotsiaalkonstruktivistlikule paradigmale. Interpretatiivse lähenemisega püüti mõista subjektiivseid tähendusi ja kontekstist lähtuvat tegelikkust, töö empiiriliseks aluseks oli juhtumiuuring. Töös kasutati kvalitatiivset uurimisviisi, andmeid koguti 31 süvaintervjuu ja dokumentide analüüsi kaudu ning analüüsiti kvalitatiivse sisuanalüüsiga.

Doktoritöö baseerub neljal teadusartiklil (lisad 1–4), mille uurimistulemused ja põhijäreldused on järgmised. Elamusturundus on kliendikeskne ja holistiline elamuskogemuste strateegiline turundamine, mis võtab arvesse tarbija elamuste kognitiivset (teadmuslikku), afektiivset (emotsionaalset) ja konatiivset (käitumuslikku) hoiakuaspekti, mida tarbija kogeb brändiga kokkupuutest. Erialases ingliskeelses kirjanduses kasutatakse termineid *experience marketing* ja *experiential marketing* sünonüümidena, kuid töö järeldab, et esimene tähendab holistilist elamusturundust, mis tegeleb elamuste loomise ja strateegilise turundamisega ning on seotud kognitiivsete, afektiivsete ja konatiivsete aspektidega, teine elamuslikku turundamist, mis seisneb taktikalistes ja operatiivsetes tegevustes (nt sündmuse elamuslikuks muutmine või tausta häälestamine), et mõjutada tarbijate meeli, ja on seotud peamiselt elamuste afektiivse poolega (artikkel I).

Riigi brändimine (*country branding*) on riigi brändi loomine, juhtimine ja kommunitseerumine selle elementide kaudu, mille eesmärk on eristuda, riiki reklaamida ja kaasa aidata riigi positiivse kuvandi kujunemisele või parendamisele (mis aitab tuua rohkem turiste, müüa tooteid välisturgudel, meelitada ligi investoreid jne). Töö loob ka terminoloogilist selgust: riigi brändimise sünonüümidena on kasutusel *nation branding* ja *destination branding*, mis kõik kuuluvad koha brändimise (*place branding*) alla, kuid keskenduvad eri aspektidele (nt etniline kuuluvus, sihtkoht kui turismi objekt). Uurimuses rõhutatakse, et riigi brändimises mängivad tähtsat rolli kaks komponenti: brändi identiteet ja (tarbija peas olev) kuvand. Kolmas põhikomponent on elamused, mis aitavad vähendada kahe eelmise komponendi vahelisi erinevusi (artikkel II).

Doktoritöös on autor loonud kolm kontseptuaalset mudelit: elamusturunduse olemus, riigi brändimise olemus ning kontseptsioonide seoste mudel. Viimase põhjal võib elamusturundust mõista kui baasi, millele rajada kogu turundustegevus. Elamusturundust võib kasutada eri turundusvaldkondades, näiteks kohaturundus. Koht on ka riik, mille brändimine hõlmab turismi, eksporti, investeeringuid ning sisserände ja hariduse edendamist. Konkreetse riigiga seotud elamused omavad tarbija jaoks tähendust, osa neist on autentsed ja aitavad riigil teiste seas eristuda. See omakorda viib riigi brändi autentsuse ja eeldatavasti positiivse kuvandini. Kui riigi kuvand on tarbija jaoks positiivne, mõjutab see tema peatuskoha valikut, sest tarbija valib hoiakute mõjul meeldiva ja kasuliku, vältides negatiivset ja ebausaldusväärset.

Intervjuude analüüsi baasil töötati välja kategooriate süsteem: neli üldkategooriat ja 16 alamkategooriat, et mõista, milliseid põhiteemasid uurida riigi brändimisel. Uurimusest selgus neli üldkategooriat: Eesti kuvand, Eesti bränd, brändi potentsiaal ja Eesti elamused, mida ka teised riigid saavad kasutada oma brändi tõlgendamisel ja hindamisel, vahetades vaid riigi nime. Analüüs selgitas välja, et Eesti ei ole veel välismaal piisavalt tuntud, kuid sellele vaatamata on kuvand külastajate seas valdavalt positiivne. Me ei tea veel täpselt, mida välismaalased Eestist kui atraktiivsest peatuskohast teavad, mis tundeid see neis tekitab, mida nad siit ootavad või siin teha tahavad, ja seda kasutamata potentsiaali tuleb uurida. Praegune brändi identiteet ja strateegiad, mis peaksid

Eesti brändi toetama, ei ole piisavalt arusaadavad ega tõhusad. Kolm välja-pakutud põhisümbolit neljast, mille kaudu soovitatakse Eestit tutvustada, ei tekita välismaalastes huvi või pole nad neid märganud. Lisaks osutub, et Eesti brändi ei ole seni piisavalt uuritud, kuigi see on vajalik ja et välismaalastel võib märk "Welcome to Estonia" tekitada negatiivseid assotsiatsioone (artikkel III).

Uurimustöö tulemusena leiti, et välismaalased tajuvad Eestis kõige autentse-mate elamustena laulupidu, maitsvat toitu, kaunist loodust, Tallinna vanalinna ja sealset jõuluturgu; lisaks võib esile tuua spaad, mõisad, e-lahendused ja saared. Varasemad uuringud baseeruvad peamiselt kognitiivsetel aspektidel, kuid käes-olevas doktoritöös pakuti kolm üldkategooriat ja selgitati välja 32 riigi brändi-mise uurimiseks vajalikku elamusturunduslikku alamkategooriat. Eesti näitel on neist olulisimad järgmised: 1) kognitiivsed: kultuuriline identiteet, majandus, inimesed, teenused ja üldmuljed; 2) afektiivsed: meeldivad, lõõgastavad, põne-vad ja erutavad elamused; 3) konatiivsed: uudsus, põgenemine ja puhkus, looduslähedus, külastajate soovid ja unelmad ning nende kohapealne kaasamine. Kategooriad moodustavad klassifitseerimissüsteemi, millest seitse uut alam-kategooriat loodi intervjuude analüüsi tulemusel: üldmuljed, teenused, riigiga seotud mälestused, teadmised enne ja pärast külastust, eeldatavad teadmised riigi kohta, külastajate soovid ja unelmad ning ergutusajendid. Töös võrreldi ka Eesti brändi identiteeti ja kuvandit, et näha, kas välismaalaste tajutud elamused vastavad neile, mida soovitatakse turundusstrateegiates, ning leiti, et esineb mitmeid erinevusi ja strateegiate loogika ja sisu vajab ülevaatamist (artikkel IV).

Kuna kõik brändiga seotud elamused ei ole afektiivsed, soovitab töö autor uurida (tarbimis)elamust kolmest aspektist: kognitiivsest, afektiivsest ja kona-tiivsest, et saada kliendikogemusest tervikpilti. Peale selle soovitatakse hinnata Eesti brändi, välja töötada turundusstrateegia, mis on brändi ja sõnumite levitajatele arusaadav, ning kaaluda märgi väljavahetamist. Tulevikus võiks uurida, milline on Eesti terviklik turismikogemus ja kas Tallinna võiks reklaamida kui põhjamaist romantilist keskust.

Doktoritöö panus seisneb elamusturunduse ja riigi brändimise alaste teoreetiliste käsitluste edasiarendamises, nende kontseptuaalses selgitamises, seoste süsteemses esituses ja uudses metodoloogilises lähenemises, mis aitab tõlgendada riigi brändi olukorda. Töös konstrueeriti kolm teoreetilist mudelit, mõistmaks võtmekontseptsioone ja seoseid elamusturunduse, riigi brändimise, autentsuse ja kuvandi vahel, ning loodi kategooriad, mida saab kasutada tulevastes uuringutes. Töö rakenduslik panus sisaldab riigi brändimise kategooriate ja elamuste klassifitseerimise väljaselgitamist, mis annab turundaja-tele töövahendid oma brändi hindamiseks. Uurimus panustab akadeemilisse diskussiooni, analüüsib, kuidas tajuvad ja tõlgendavad välismaalased Eesti brändi, ja selgitab välja kõige autentsemad elamused, mida Eestit reklaamides esile tuua. Doktoritöö originaalsus seisneb võtmekontseptsioonide teooria arendamises uute mudelite kaudu, uudsete kategooriate ja klassifitseerimis-süsteemide ja definitsioonide loomises ning unikaalses Eestit puudutavas empiirilises uurimuses, millel on praktiline väärtus ka teistele riikidele.

ABSTRACT

Country brand and image affect customer attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, and generate emotions. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the perceptions and experiences of foreign travelers to identify and create competitive advantage. It is crucial to develop a country brand; however, awareness of both key concepts – experience marketing and country branding – is low. Previous research has mostly addressed specific management problems, describing problem-solving processes rather than building or advancing the theory, and has not offered appropriate solutions for analyzing country brands. Few studies have covered the interrelations between the concepts, and minimal attention has been paid to their essence. The topic is promising worldwide because experiences help companies and countries remain competitive. In Estonia, the use of experience marketing in country branding has not been explored, and no efforts have been made to initiate academic debate to improve the promotion of the country, and develop its brand further.

The aim of this thesis is to develop theoretical frameworks and analyze the current country brand situation in Estonia to understand and conceptualize experience marketing and country branding, and the interconnections to brand image and experiences of a country from a marketing management perspective. The author seeks to answer a fundamental question: How to understand the perceptions of country branding and country-based experiences to conceptualize the key concepts? On this basis, the thesis focuses on the following research questions: 1) How can experience marketing be conceptualized? 2) How can country branding be conceptualized? 3) What are the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authentic experiences, and country image? 4) How do foreigners perceive and evaluate the Estonian brand and image? 5) How to classify experiences in country branding, and what country-based experiences can better support the branding of a country? 6) How to understand and interpret the current situation of the country brand in Estonia?

Seven research tasks were set to accomplish the aim. First, the existing concepts and theories were analyzed and synthesized (task 1) to develop conceptual models to explain the key concepts and their interconnectedness (2). Then, empirical research was used to explore the perceptions and experiences of a country brand and its image (3). To gain a better understanding of the key concepts, it was necessary to develop categories for country branding (4), as well as to classify experiences, and indicate authentic experiences (5). To interpret the current country brand situation in Estonia, the official marketing strategies were analyzed, and the data were compared to identify differences between the country brand identity and image (6). Finally, proposals for future research, and managerial implications were presented (7).

This research adopts the social constructivist view that allows comprehension and interpretation of the social world by exploring two complex phenomena, and

by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of foreigners using a single case study approach. This qualitative research draws on interviews and document analysis. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

This thesis is based on four research articles (Appendices 1–4) that have reached the following conclusions. Experience marketing is defined as the strategic customer-centered and holistic marketing of relevant (and meaningful) experiences considering the cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotional), and conative (behavioral) attitudinal perspectives of the consumption experience. Experience marketing and experiential marketing are used as synonyms, but this work claims the former means strategic marketing – engaged in the creation and communication of experiences related to cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. The latter is tactical or operational marketing activities (e.g. to make an event experiential or to change the setup or background) to influence customer emotions and is primarily associated with affective aspects (Article I).

Country branding can be defined as the creation, management, and communication of a country brand through its attributes and a story, to differentiate and promote a country and support the creation of or strengthening of a positive image, which helps to bring more tourists, sell products in foreign markets, attract investors, etc. The work brings terminological clarity since nation branding and destination branding have been used indistinctively, but they belong to place branding, though they focus on different aspects (e.g. ethnicity, a tourist destination). This research emphasizes that two fundamental constructs on country branding are brand identity and image; the third crucial component is the experiences, which help to reduce the gap between these two (Article II).

The thesis introduces three conceptual models: the essence of experience marketing, a three-layered model of country branding, and a model indicating the interconnections between the concepts. Based on the latter, experience marketing can be viewed as the basis for building all marketing activities. It has a wide range of applications in different sub-fields of marketing, one of which is place marketing. In country branding, it can encompass the promotion of tourism, business, immigration, and education. Country-based experiences have meaning for customers, but only some are authentic and help to differentiate a country. The authenticity of the brand strengthens a country image. If customers perceive a country image to be positive, this in turn affects the choice, because travelers favor what they consider pleasant and interesting places, avoiding the negative and unreliable.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, a categorization system consisting of 4 categories and 16 subcategories was developed to understand which main topics could be used in country branding research. Four key categories evolved, such as image of Estonia, Estonian brand, branding potential of Estonia, and experience of Estonia that could be used by other countries in their country branding evaluation by changing the name of the country. This research revealed that Estonia is not yet sufficiently known abroad, but has a positive image among foreigners. So far, we do not know exactly what foreigners know about Estonia as an attractive place, which feelings it creates, or what they expect or

want to do in Estonia, so there is unexplored potential for research. The current brand identity and the marketing strategies that should support the brand are not effective and understandable for proper dissemination. Three out of four key symbols recommended by the DMO to present the country abroad do not capture foreigners' interest and remain unnoticed. The 'Welcome to Estonia' sign is the least appealing attribute of the brand to foreigners (Article III).

The research found that foreigners perceive the Song Festival, food, nature, the Old Town of Tallinn and its Christmas market as most authentic in Estonia. The interviewees referred also to the spas, manor houses, e-solutions, and islands. Previous studies are based mainly on cognitive perspectives, but this thesis proposes examining all three categories and identifies 32 subcategories for country branding. For Estonia, among the most important are: 1) cognitive: cultural identity, economy, people, services, and overall impressions; 2) affective: pleasant, relaxing, exciting, and arousing experiences; and 3) conative: novelty, escape and relax, closeness to nature, wishes and desires of travelers, and host-site involvement. Seven new subcategories were developed: overall impressions, services, country-based memories, knowledge before and after visiting, assumed knowledge that travelers might have, wishes and desires of travelers, and incentives. Furthermore, the question of whether the brand identity corresponds to the image was analyzed to see if perceived experiences meet those described in the marketing strategies, and a number of differences were found (Article IV).

As not all brand experiences are emotional, the author suggests exploring consumption experience simultaneously from cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives to obtain a holistic picture of the customer experience. It is recommended to evaluate the Estonian brand, develop a new marketing strategy, and the country DMO could also consider replacing the sign. In the future, it is advisable to examine the holistic Estonian experience and explore whether Tallinn could be advertized as a romantic capital of Nordic Europe.

The contribution of this thesis consists of the development of theoretical frameworks, conceptual clarification of experience marketing and country branding, a systematic presentation of their interrelations, and a novel methodological approach, which helps to interpret the situation of a country brand. The author constructed three theoretical models explaining the key concepts and the interconnections between experience marketing, country branding, authenticity, and positive image; and proposed categories for future research. The work includes a practical contribution of the identification of country branding categories and the classification of experiences, which gives marketers tools for interpreting their brands. The study contributed to academic discussion, analyzed how foreigners perceive and evaluate the Estonian brand and image, and identified the most authentic experiences that could be highlighted in the promotion. The originality of this thesis lies in the advancement of theory through the new models, definitions, novel categorization and classification systems, and the creation of a unique empirical study concerning Estonia, which has practical value for other countries.

Appendix 1. Article I

Same, S., & Larimo, J. (2012). Marketing Theory: Experience Marketing and Experiential Marketing. In R. Ginevičius, A. V. Rutkauskas & J. Stankevičienė (Eds.), selected papers of the *7th International Scientific Conference "Business and Management 2012"* (pp. 480–487). Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Press.

MARKETING THEORY: EXPERIENCE MARKETING AND EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING

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Abstract. Despite the fact that experiences are regarded as key concepts in marketing today, there are different views and interpretations about the content of terms. The main objective of this article is to analyse the concepts of experience and experiential marketing. Based on the literature review the authors found that experience marketing is a strategic and a broader term than experiential marketing. We define experience marketing as a strategic and holistic marketing of relevant (and meaningful) experiences, and experiential marketing as a tactical tool that helps to do marketing experientially. At the end of the article a conceptual model of experience marketing is proposed.

Keywords: experience marketing, experience, experiential marketing, customer experience, value.

Jel classification: D11, M31

1. Introduction

Increasing amount of people are searching for meaning, happiness, sensations, new forms of fulfillment and core values, which they often find in market offerings (Fortezza, Pencarelli 2011). Experience marketing is a new approach to marketing and business. Compared to traditional marketing it is an innovative and creative approach, and is going to be a major growth area in next years.

Already in 1999 Schmitt declared that we are in the middle of a revolution that will replace traditional feature-and-benefit (F&B) marketing with experiential marketing (Schmitt 1999 a). In 1998 Pine and Gilmore (1998) introduced experience economy as the next economy following the service economy. Experience is the main component of experience marketing and according to LaSalle and Britton (2003) and Schmitt (1999 a) it is key marketing in future. Although experiences are regarded as key concepts in marketing today, there are mixed views and interpretations about the content of terms. Experiences are seen in different ways and varying approaches are available. Some terms are sometimes used as synonyms, for example confusion arises when defining experience marketing, experiential marketing, and customer experience management (CEM).

Tynan and McKechnie (2009) in the review article "Experience marketing: a review and reassessment" refer to lack of clarity in marketing literature with regard to "what exactly constitutes an experience and the conflation of terms associated with experience marketing". The seminal article and book "Experiential marketing" was written by Schmitt in 1999. In the articles written by Schmitt (2009, 2010) ten years later the keyword is surprisingly experience marketing.

This article seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge of experience marketing. The key research questions are: 1) what are experience, experience marketing, and experiential marketing?, 2) what is the difference and relationship between the terms?, 3) how to conceptualize experience marketing? The goal of this theoretical article is based on the analysis of key concepts and earlier research in the field to propose a conceptual model of experience marketing.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we provide an overview of key concepts of experience and experiential marketing. Second, we examine some theoretical approaches and formation of experience marketing, and also relationships between the terms. Finally, we propose the conceptual model of experience marketing to understand the essence of experience marketing and pave the way for further analysis and research.

2. Definitions of experience

As a concept and empirical phenomenon, experience is not as established as other consumer and marketing concepts, such as choice, attitudes, consumer satisfaction, or brand equity (Schmitt 2010). Poulsson and Kale (2004) observe that no attempt has been made to systematically define an experience in marketing terms. The lack of clarity lies in different ways in which the term can be understood. Tynan and McKechnie (2009) explain that experience is both a noun and a verb and "it is used variously to convey the process itself, participating in the activity, the affect or way in which an object, thought or emotion is felt through the senses or the mind, and even the outcome by way of a skill or learning". In addition, experiences are even more complicated because there is a difference between the simple pleasure of an ordinary or mundane experience and the enjoyment of an extraordinary or flow experience (Carù, Cova 2003). For example flow experiences describe a form of intrinsic motivation and are characterized as states of intense concentration, focus, and absolute absorption in challenging activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Carbone and Haeckel claim to have launched the "experience movement" in 1994 (cited in Tynan, McKechnie 2009), but Holbrook and Hirschman wrote already in 1982 an iconic article on the consumption experience. Thus, almost 30 years ago marketing researchers discovered the importance of experiential aspects of consumer behaviour. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) developed a useful model contrasting the differences between the information-processing (rational) and the experiential view (irrational).

Carù and Cova (2003) confirm that the concept of experience is still ill-defined and in the field of marketing we must use a "typology of consumption experiences which goes beyond an ideological view" where every experience is extraordinary. Their analysis showed that in the social sciences and philosophy experience is defined as a "subjective episode in the construction/transformation of the individual with, however, an emphasis on the *emotions* and *senses*". By experience Carbone and Haeckel (1994) mean the "takeaway" impression formed by people's encounters with products, services, and businesses – a perception produced when humans consolidate *sensory* information.

Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) define experience as "*emotional* experience that can lead to personal change", Pine and Gilmore (1999) as memorable events, and Pitkänen and Tuohino (2006) as

affective events that have a strong impact on the perceiver.

Veijola (2002) describes two dimensions of experience: 1) experience (in German *Erfahrung*), as already perceived or experienced, and 2) experience (in German *Erlebnis*), not previously experienced. Snel (2011) assures that *Erlebnis* is isolated and immediate, but *Erfahrung* is a continous process of doing and undergoing, giving and taking, causes and consequences, action and reflection, etc. German, Dutch, Estonian, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and Japanese languages make a distinction between these two words, but English has only one word 'experience'.

Despite the frequent use by scholars of the term 'experience', its definitions in the literature tend to focus on different elements (Table 1).

Table 1. Lexicon of experience

Authors	Year	Experience
Maslow	1964	Peak experience
Holbrook, Hirschman	1982	Experiential aspects
Csikszentmihalyi	1990	Flow experience
Arnould, Price	1993	Extraordinary experience
Carbone, Haeckel	1994	Customer experience engineering
Pine, Gilmore	1998	Distinct economic offering, memorable, experience economy
Schmitt	1999	Experiential marketing
Poulsson, Kale	2004	Commercial experience
Boswijk, Thijssen, Peelen	2005	Meaning experience
Tarssanen, Kylänen	2007	Experience pyramid, personal change

In summary, experience is a complex and layered construct. There are even more dimensions – Carbone and Haeckel (1994) explain that experience "may be good or bad, lasting or fleeting, a random phenomenon or an engineered perception".

An experience as a noun is something that affects the way you feel or knowledge or skill from doing, seeing or feeling things. An adjective 'experiential' means *based on experience*. That stresses the importance of experience as a basis of the area.

3. Experiential marketing

According to Schmitt, the initiator of experiential marketing, the framework of experiential marketing has two aspects: 1) five types of experiences,

called strategic experiential modules (SEMs), which form the strategic underpinning of experiential marketing, and 2) experience providers (Ex-Pros), the tactical tools (Schmitt 1999b). Holbrook (2000) criticizes Schmitt for positioning this rather modest conceptual framework as "a key strategic planning tool" of experiential marketing. We stress that marketing planning tool is tactical, not strategic. Experience marketing concept is based on experiences, not only on specific activities that are experiential in nature.

Carù and Cova (2003) are critical towards American romanticism (Schmitt, Holbrook, Pine, Gilmore, etc.) and confirm that this allowed Holbrook to propose the "logical sequence: 'romanticism → experiential consumption → *emotional* responses → pleasure', and to insist on the fact that in this experiential approach, *sensations are more important than the consumers' rational thoughts"*.

Smilansky (2009) defines experiential marketing as a "process of identifying and satisfying customer needs and aspirations profitably, engaging them through two-way communications that bring brand personalities to life and add value to the target audience". Experiential marketing helps to create experiences and *emotions* to the customers. International Experiential Marketing Association (2011) states that experiential marketing "allows customers to engage and interact with brands, products, and services in *sensory* ways". According to You-Ming (2010), experiential marketing is a "communication method, which mainly raises customers' physical and emotional *feelings"*. Hauser (2007) describes experiential marketing as a *holistic* approach to the customer/brand relationship.

Cantone and Risitano (2011) confirm that many firms are adopting CEM strategies, in which „the role of emotions, feelings, sentiments, passions and experiences" are emphasized in consumer-brand relationships. According to Yuan and Wu (2008), experiential marketing can be seen as a marketing *tactic* designed by a business to stage the entire physical environment and the operational processes for its customers to experience. We highlight that all these definitions indicate that experiential marketing is mainly related to *emotions, feelings*, and *senses*; and has less to do with cognition and human intentions.

When Schmitt (1999a) explains the idea of Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) experience economy he uses the phrase experien*tial* economy. It shows how those terms and words are used interchangeably.

4. Experience marketing

According to Leeflang (2011) one of the specific topics that have not yet received enough attention is experience marketing.

Experience marketing is generally based on experience economy theory. Pine and Gilmore (1998) claim experiences to be the fourth economic offering. They explain the progression of value from commodities to experiences by showing how experiences differ from goods and services (Table 2). Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 12) declare that "while commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are *memorable"*.

Table 2. Economic distinctions (Source: adaptation of Pine and Gilmore (1998))

Economic offering	Goods	Services	Experiences
Economy	Industrial	Service	Experience
Nature of offering	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable
Key attribute	Standardized	Customized	Personal
Seller	Manu-facturer	Provider	Stager
Buyer	User	Client	Guest
Factors of demand	Features	Benefits	Sensations

Experience economy (Exponomy) is of increasing focus. Although the concept was born in the business field in 1998, it has gone beyond its boundaries to tourism (Leighton 2007), retailing (Grewal *et al.* 2009; Verhoef *et al.* 2009), architecture, sports, branding (Brakus *et al.* 2009; Gentile *et al.* 2007), entertainment and arts (Petkus 2004), urban planning, hospitality and other fields.

Experience economy is also considered as a main underpinning for customer experience management (CEM). According to Schmitt (2003), the term 'customer experience management' represents the "discipline, methodology and/or process" used to comprehensively manage a customer's cross-channel exposure, interaction and transaction with a company, product, brand or service. CEM is more like a program (Cantone, Risitano 2011) or schedule, based on five steps. The CEM strategies impel the customer's involvement at different levels (Gentile *et al.* 2007): rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual.

Walls *et al.* (2011) define 'consumer experience' as "multidimensional takeaway impression or outcome, based on the consumer's willingness and capacity to be affected and influenced by physical and/or human *interaction* dimensions".

Experience marketing offers engaging, interactive, and entertaining brand experiences. Brakus *et al.* (2009) define brand experience as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related *stimuli*" that are part of a brand's design and identity, communications, and environments in which the brand is marketed or sold.

Experience marketing is also related to consumer behaviour theory. Consumer behaviour as a field has expanded to three dominant specializations (subfields): consumer information processing, consumer culture theory, and behavioural decision theory (MacInnis, Folkes 2010). These subfields have all provided consumer insights on experiences. However, Schmitt (2010) regards that also two other main marketing disciplines (marketing strategy and marketing models) have also contributed to experience marketing in addition to consumer behaviour.

According to Schmitt (2010) the key concepts of experience marketing are: 1) experiential value, 2) different types of experiences, 3) the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences, and 4) experience touchpoints. Consumer behaviour and experience marketing fields are open to adjoining disciplines, e.g. psychology, economics, communications, sociology, anthropology, and culture. These fields may be useful to better understand consumer behaviour and experience marketing.

4.1. Definition

To simplify, as the wording suggests, the focus in experience marketing is on experience. The other important components are the customer and experience co-creation. "Experience marketing can create emotions by making entertainment for customers, by allowing them to escape from the reality, by educating them and giving them aesthetic objects or places to see" (Pine, Gilmore 1999).

The diverse perspective and translations on experience has made it difficult to understand the concept and also define experience marketing. There is no consensus today on what the term 'experience marketing' refers to, and the context in which it is used. Lee *et al.* (2010) explain that experience marketing aims to request marketing staff to emphasize the overall experience quality for consumers passed by brands, including rational decision-making and sentimental consumption experience. Baron *et al.* (2009) define experience marketing as "the creation of a memorable episode based on a customer's direct personal participation or observation". But at

the same time they use exactly the same definition for experiential marketing.

4.2. The difference between experience and experiential marketing

The formation of experience marketing is a process from a stimulus up to a change in customer behaviour, learning or attitude. Experiences occur in response to some stimulation (Schmitt 1999a), e.g. marketing mix. The stimulus can be interpersonal (between people) or intrapersonal (within a person); it can be marketing stimulus (e.g. 4P) or environmental (e.g. economic, technological, cultural).

For its subjectivity experiences depend on the expectations and values of the customer (Tarssanen, Kylänen 2007). Experience can involve a perception on which one builds his/her own state of reality; a reality based on his/her interaction with the environment (Fig. 1).
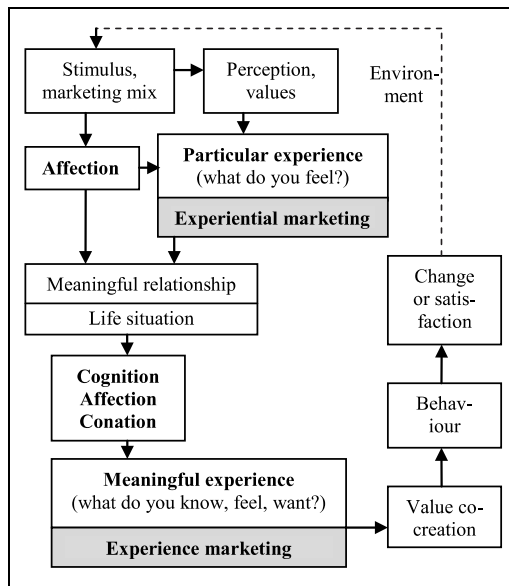

Fig.1. The difference between experience and experiential marketing (Source: adaption of Leppiman, Same 2011)

A customer creates meaning to all he/she perceives. Experience represents a meaningful relationship between a person's perceptional activity and a life situation, and is of particular significance to the person (Perttula 2007). When the customer experiences something to be important, this forms his/her life situations consisting of everything he/she is in meaningful relationship (Leppiman, Same 2011). Experiences are formed out of

these relationships and life situations. Fortezza and Pencarelli (2011) call it "packaging moments of life".

Experiences may result in changes in attitude or behaviour. Customer attitude consists of three components: cognitive (mental images, understanding, interpretations), affective (feelings, emotions), and conative (intentions, actions, behaviour). "The most common sequence that takes place when an attitude forms is cognitive → affective → conative" (Clow, Baack 2007). This sequence can form a meaningful and relevant experience. *Meaningful* experience is composed of feelings, knowledge and beliefs (Leppiman, Same 2011). Thus, meaningful experience is broader than particular, which is mainly related to emotions and feelings, as seen on Fig. 1. A holistic experiential feeling may lead to changes in personal opinions and attitudes of a customer. Fig. 1 highlights that the platform of experience marketing is strategic and larger than experiential marketing.

4.3. Conceptual model of experience marketing

An experience is important in business and technology because to the mind every economic offering is experienced (Van Doorn 2006). Experience is broadly speaking an interaction between a company (brand/product/service) and a customer. Experience is shaped by the characteristics of the customer and those of the product, company or brand. Desmet and Hekkert (2007) explain that "all *actions and processes* that are involved, such as physical actions and perceptual and cognitive processes (e.g. perceiving, exploring, using, remembering, comparing, and understanding), will contribute to the experience".

Consumer behaviour is influenced by internal influences, e.g. demographics, personality, motivation, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. The behaviour is also influenced by external influences, e.g. culture, past experience, lifestyle, marketing mix. Psychological factors include individual's motivation, perception, attitude and belief, while personal factors include income level, personality, age, occupation, lifestyle, etc. In addition, the experience is always influenced by the context – environment in which the interaction takes place.

The most important parts of the model (Fig. 2) are: 1) offering or stimulus, 2) interaction between the customer and company, 3) experience and value co-creation, 4) value. We believe these are the cornerstones of experience marketing.

Hekkert (2006) distinguishes three levels of experience: attribution of meaning (experience of

meaning), emotional response (emotional experience), and aesthetic pleasure (aesthetic experience). These experiences influence value co-creation, purchase decisions and behaviour.

At the level of meaning, cognition comes into play. Desmet and Hekkert (2007) confirm that contrary to popular belief, "an emotion is the result of a cognitive, though often automatic and unconscious, process".
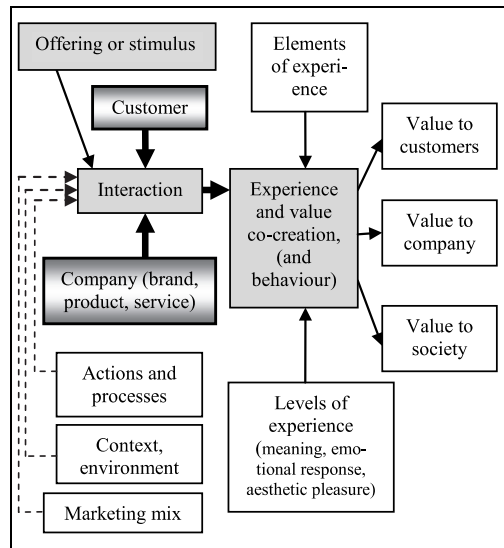

Fig. 2. Conceptual model of experience marketing

The ultimate outcome for the company is e.g. sales, value added, loyalty, etc. There is also outcome for the customer and ultimately to society. Tynan and McKechnie (2009) assert that experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational value to customers, to which social and information based value can be added.

In 2007 the American Marketing Association adopted a new official definition of marketing (Keefe 2008): "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and *processes* for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging *offerings* that have *value* for *customers*, clients, partners, and *society* at large." This definition also supports the model.

5. Discussion

Experience marketing is more complex than the traditional marketing of the post-industrial era (Fortezza, Pencarelli 2011). We claim to have experience-driven organizations, experience-oriented

strategy and experience-based activities using the word 'experience', but still many authors use experiential marketing (for the whole approach) while knowing that everything is based on experiences. As for parts of speech, 'experience' is a noun and a verb, while 'experiential' is an adjective. The company's marketing approach and activities can be experiential in nature, but everything is *based* on experience(s) or driven by experiences. The authors of this article recommend the wider use of the term 'experience marketing', because at the broadest level it is strategic marketing, a field of study, a broader concept referring to the "world of experiences". In this article the term *strategic marketing* is used in reference to the field of study and *marketing strategy* in reference to the organizational strategy construct and the latter may be defined as organization's integrated pattern of decisions (Varadarajan 2010).

Experiential marketing is part of experience marketing. Experiential marketing is a tactical, rather than a strategic approach that marketers should consider central to their integrated marketing communications plans, including techniques, which are part of the core experience marketing strategy. Experiential marketing shows us the ways how managers can create experiences (Schmitt 2003). Smilansky (2009) explains that experiential strategy is the campaign's main concept. Through the best practices Smilansky (2009), Schmitt (2003), and other authors show how to involve and engage the audience.

We can conclude that experiential marketing is limited in scope, and more executive in nature, e.g. it may consist of a single campaign or involve only one media channel. The focus of experiential marketing is on specific business objectives, largely on creating or modifying the environments in which customers interact. Tactical decisions are marketing mix decisions (e.g. promotion, communication) and they define how the strategic decisions will be implemented (Varadarajan 2010).

Everything marketers do is experiential at some level – from the brand identity creation to the packaging, store design, media communication, or Web site. These are tactical decisions and activities. Experience marketing is strategic marketing of experiences (according to Pine and Gilmore (2002) the experience is the marketing). Experiential marketing helps to market experiences, answers the question how to do marketing experientially.

6. Conclusions

Drawing from the extant literature and considering all most relevant scientific contributions we define

the terms. *Experience* is an economic offering and an interaction between the company/brand/service, and customer, who perceive and meaningfully experience it. *Experience marketing* is strategic (customer-centric) and holistic marketing of relevant (and meaningful) experiences that takes into account the affective, cognitive and conative perspectives of consumption experience. *Experiential marketing* as a marketing planning tool is concerned on tactical and operational level actions where the main question is how to do marketing (campaign) experientially.

Experience marketing is strategic marketing management and is used to manage customer interaction, cross-channel exposure, and value co-creation. We found that experiential marketing focuses on tactical and operational level actions where the main question is how to do marketing experientially. To be successful, Poulsson and Kale (2004) argue that a marketing experience should have personal relevance for the customer, be novel, offer an element of surprise, engender learning and engage the customer.

Fig. 1 presents the formation of experience marketing and should assist marketing professionals to understand the difference between the terms. Here are two important dimensions: experiential marketing (connected to particular experience and affection) and experience marketing (connected to meaningful experience; cognition, affection, and conation). Our analysis of the literature leads us to conclude that experience marketing is more comprehensive in scope and strategic in nature than experiential marketing. Experience marketing is holistic and seeks to understand the value of customer experiences and besides affective perspectives regards cognitive and conative perspectives. This observation is important in order to understand the difference between the terms.

The conceptual model (Fig. 2) is a figurative representation of the domain and thus attempts to explain the essence of experience marketing. The model should assist marketing professionals to understand the essence of experience marketing.

The consensus on what does and does not constitute experience marketing and what distinguishes it from other fields is far from clear. Further empirical research is needed to analyse the specific dimensions of experience marketing and explore the relationships between the elements. More research is needed to fully understand the experience construct and its impact on customers. For example, according to Walls *et al.* (2011), additional exploration is needed to understand the relationship between experiences, emotions, cognition, and multisensory elements. Also openness

to adjoining disciplines can add insights to experience marketing.

Finally, we proposed a conceptual model of experience marketing that should be tested empirically. Marketers need to understand the conceptual framework and principles of experience marketing, because experience marketing is the only way to gain competitive advantage in tough competition. From the company's perspective it is useful as a differentiation strategy. Experience marketing can lead to greater impact for the customer, increased effectiveness, and even cost savings compared to traditional marketing.

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Appendix 2. Article II

Same, S. (2012). Country Branding and Experience Marketing: a Perspective on Sensemaking and Cognition Theories. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Economy & Business*, *6*(3), 286–303.

COUNTRY BRANDING AND EXPERIENCE MARKETING:

A PERSPECTIVE ON SENSEMAKING AND COGNITION THEORIES

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Abstract

In a globalized world countries compete with each other to attract the attention, preference and trust of investors, international media, tourists, and talented people. A powerful and positive place brand provides a crucial competitive advantage. Branding is a popular strategy for countries to differentiate themselves on the world stage, promote investment and strengthen commercial performance. The purpose of this paper is to fulfill a perceived gap in research by exploring the possibility to apply experience marketing as a central marketing approach to the country branding process. This work concentrates on examining place branding and experience marketing concepts in association with cognition and sensemaking theories. The central argument of the study is that countries using experience marketing techniques in branding might be more successful than those that use traditional marketing methods. With this in mind, the paper attempts to provide a theoretical overview for creating a model of country branding.

Key words: *country branding, place branding, experience marketing, cognition, sensemaking*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, all places (countries, nations, regions, cities) compete fiercely to attract the attention and trust of tourists, investors, international events, clients for their products and services, international media and talented people of other countries. Competition takes place at every level. Although we all know that a powerful and positive place brand provides crucial competitive advantage, it is difficult for small countries (or cities) to compete with big well-known countries and the topic is currently "hot."

Many terms in this field are used interchangeably, but place branding is the umbrella term, that is preferred in marketing literature (e.g. Gould & Skinner 2007; Hankinson 2004; Hanna & Rowley 2008; Kavaratzis 2005; Kotler & Gertner 2002; Papadopoulos 2004, Pike 2009; Rainisto 2003). Place branding is one of today's 'hottest' topics among place marketers – from New Zealand and Switzerland to Las Vegas and Helsinki. It is essential for countries to understand how they are seen by others and how their achievements and failures, people and products are reflected in brand images. More countries around the world nowadays use place branding in order to differentiate themselves on the world stage and to strengthen their economic performance, primarily in terms of exporting, inward investment and tourism.

Place/country branding refers to building and managing the image and reputation of the country as a whole. In place marketing, the brand is normally a country, nation or city. Marketing practitioners have come to realize that understanding how consumers experience brands is critical for success and developing marketing strategies. Hence, most of the research on experiences to date has focused on

utilitarian product attributes and category experiences, *not on experiences provided by brands* (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello 2009). Country branding is more complex than product branding, and it has to be dealt as corporate branding because they are similar in many ways. This is why research on this field is very much needed.

Although experience marketing could help to support the economic, social, and cultural development of a country, research has been insufficient. Fulfilling this gap requires consideration of the experience marketing options, to find the one that would suit best for managing and promoting a given place brand identity. Further, it could lay the theoretical grounds for managing brand experience in particular cases, such as Estonia, a small country facing tough competitors.

The purpose of this paper is to construct and present a conceptual model of country branding which takes into account experience marketing and the cognition and sensemaking theories' perspective. Country/place branding is examined with the methods applicable to experience marketing and according to cognition and sensemaking theories. These organizational theory concepts have been useful to analyze corporate branding, and in this study help also supporting the argument that analogical interpretation is valid and place brand identity can be seen as organizational identity.

The main argument of this study is that countries that use experience marketing as their central marketing approach of place/country branding, and concentrate on developing a country brand are more successful than those using traditional marketing methods. Consequently, the next stage in development and promotion of country brand identity is experience marketing.

To achieve satisfactory results, and propose the use of experience marketing to refine and develop a country brand further, the following research questions need to be addressed: 1) what are country branding and experience marketing?, 2) how the theories of country branding and experience marketing are related to cognition and sensemaking theories?, and 3) how to conceptualize country branding?

Place branding in experience marketing from the cognition and sensemaking theories perspective is a novel contribution to the field, and has not been studied so far. In the following pages the hypothesis proposing country brand´s competitiveness through experience marketing will be studied, synthesized to a point where further research challenges can be identified. In a first section, an overview of the basic terms will set the foundation for the optimal elaboration of a conceptual model of place/country branding, one that can also incorporate the organizational theories relevant. Ultimately, this paper can be used as a reference to overview what has been learned as it assembles data in a way that continuing research challenges can be clearly identified.

The conceptual part is followed by the selection of the theoretical tools applicable and an explanation on the way they relate to each other in the formation of place/country branding. The last section explains the proposal of a conceptual model of place/country branding analysis that would help to understand the essence of country branding and pave the way for further research.

2. COUNTRY BRANDING

2.1. Definition of country branding and place branding

There are different terms to refer to place/country branding in marketing literature and authors are often engaged in definitional debates. Fetscherin (2010) reports that, the terms of nation and country

branding are used interchangeably in the literature. Pasquinelli (2010) notes the many different ways in which place brand is presented, according to the specific aspect that is taken into account.

The literature of place branding reflects a picture of separation between place branding, country branding, city branding, destination branding, and region branding; but they should not be separated. According to Herstein (2011), despite the differences, marketing a place (country, region, or city) depends mostly on understanding how people *perceive* one another. The perception is related to cognition theory.

In any event, „place branding" is the umbrella term preferred by marketing professionals and scholars. *Within* place branding, some studies focus on country/nation branding (e.g. Dinnie 2008; Endzina & Luneva 2004; Gilmore 2002; Wetzel 2006), region branding (e.g. Andersson 2007; Hall 1999; Hornskov 2007; Szondi, 2007), and city branding (e.g. Ashworth & Voogd 1990; Hospers 2003). Tourism studies and vacation marketing tend to use the term destination branding (e.g. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride 2004; Therkelsen 2003). Garcia, Gomez and Molina (2012) argue that a more general theoretical framework approach underpinning place branding is attributable to researchers such as Kotler and Gertner (2002) and Hankinson (2004, 2007, 2009), and to the attempts of establishing relationships between literature on place branding with classical branding theory and new marketing paradigms (relational and emerging Service Dominant Logic).

According to Kavaratzis (2005), the trends in place branding are: place of origin branding (e.g. Kotler & Gertner 2002; Papadopoulos & Heslop 2002), nations branding (e.g. Anholt 2002; Van Ham 2001; Gilmore 2001), culture/entertainment branding (e.g. Greenberg 2003), destination branding (e.g. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride 2002), and place/city branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005; Hankinson 2004; Kavaratzis 2004; Trueman, Klemm & Giroud 2004; Rainisto 2003).

Place/country brand may be defined as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the place with culturally-grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences" (Dinnie 2008, p. 15). It is a subjective mental picture shared by a group of consumers or audience (Riezebos 2003). Anholt (2007) defines place/country brand as the perception of the place (brand) that exists in the mind of their audiences. Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2001) see it as the impact that generalizations and perceptions about a place have on a person's evaluation of the place's products and/or brands.

There is no single definition of place/country branding. Country branding refers to building and managing the image and reputation of the country as a whole. Nation branding considers how the nation as a whole behaves, interacts, presents and represents itself to other nations. Defining the nation branding, Fan (2006) argues that it concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image.

Braun and Zenker (2010, p. 5) define a place brand as "a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design".

Place/country brand building requires a long term commitment. Places/countries need to adopt a long term, strategic view when building their brand. Country branding is not merely creating an attractive logo, an advertisement or a political campaign, but is a comprehensive national effort from all country´s stakeholders to build and manage the image and reputation of their country in front of their target audiences.

Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005, p. 337) propose a revised definition for place/destination branding and define it "as the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily *identifies* and *differentiates* a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel *experience* that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk". Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice.

When Fan (2006) focuses on the question what is being branded, he states that nation branding and nation brand are two different concepts. "A nation has a brand image with or without nation branding" (2006, p. 5). It is important to mention what Herstein (2011) characterized as having two dimensions: representational (attributes linked to the individual's way of self-expression, analogous to intangible characteristics) and functional (utilitarian aspects of the destinations – sun, reefs, sky, culture, and so on, analogous to tangible characteristics).

According to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), there are at least three different sorts of place branding which are often confused in the literature but are quite different operations conducted by different producers for different objectives. The first is geographical nomenclature, the second product-place co-branding and the third branding as place management.

Destination marketing organization (DMO) is any organization, at any level, which is responsible for the marketing of an identifiable place/destination (Pike 2004). DMOs jurisdictions may cover a country, state/province, region, or specific city or town (Blain, Levy & Ritchie 2005), and they are a critical component for the place/country.

2.2. Country branding and corporate branding

Aaker (2004) defines a corporate brand as a brand that represents an organization and reflects its heritage, values, culture, people, and strategy. A corporate brand is defined primarily by organizational associations, and thus can develop and leverage organizational characteristics, as well as product and service attributes. According to Hankinson (2009, p. 98), „recent literature with regard to corporate brands in particular, suggests that they have several characteristics that align them with place/destination brands and that managing place brands might therefore be much *like managing corporate brands* (Hankinson 2007; Karavatzis 2004; Trueman et al. 2004; Rainisto 2003)".

Marketing specialists acknowledge place branding's importance and the applicability of the general branding principles to cities, regions, and countries (e.g. Keller 2008; Kotler & Gertner 2002). Anholt (2004) states that countries, cities, and regions behave like product brands. Kotler and Gertner (2002) suggest even a place/country without a brand marketing strategy still behaves as a brand and evokes images influencing people's decision to visit or buy products originating from there. Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002, p. 308) claim that „a country is like a corporation that produces many products". Nikolova and Hassan (2011) state that despite their specifics, place/country brands compete globally on equal footing with consumer and service brands. Pasquinelli (2010) claims that product and corporate marketing have been deemed a source of tested logics and techniques, which can be translated into tools for place management.

It is widely accepted (e.g. Trueman et al. 2004) that places are very complex and varied brands, serving varied aims and targeting varied groups and individuals at the same time, which makes them much more difficult to control than conventional product brands (cited in Kavarazits 2005, p. 334). But, Kavaratzits (2005) argues that as some commentators have noticed (e.g. Trueman et al. 2004; Kavaratzis 2004; Rainisto 2003), there are significant similarities between corporate brands and place

brands, which bring the two concepts close and provide a starting point for a better understanding of place branding. Also in 2009, Kavarazits (p. 27) notes that „a recent stream of publications has specifically dealt with the concept of corporate branding, attempting to adjust its basic elements and specific methodologies in place branding (Rainisto 2003; Hankinson 2007; Trueman et al. 2007)". According to Kavarazits (2009, p. 26) „corporate-level marketing is suggested as the closest that marketing theories have ever come to addressing the distinct demands of cities, …concentrates on the similarities between these two forms of branding and extracts major lessons from corporate level marketing concepts".

Anholt (2002) points to the relevance of the „metaphor of *place as corporate brand"*. According to Kavarazits (2009, p. 29) „they both have multidisciplinary roots, both address multiple groups of stakeholders, both have a high level of intangibility and complexity, both need to take into account social responsibility, both deal with multiple identities, both need a long-term development. …It could serve as a basis for the refinement of place/city marketing theory".

Hankinson (2007) provides five guiding principles for destination brands *based on corporate branding theories*. He argues that there are sufficient similarities between these two types of brand to allow useful lessons to be drawn and suggests that efficient destination branding depends upon (a) a strong, visionary leadership, (b) a brandoriented organisational culture, (c) departmental coordination and process alignment, (d) consistent communications across a wide range of stakeholders and (e) strong, compatible partnerships.

Kavarazits (2005, 2009) tries to develop a place marketing theory; Hankinson (2004, 2005, 2009) lays the foundation for the systematic development of a theory of destination brand management.

3. EXPERIENCE AND EXPERIENCE MARKETING

Experiences are regarded as key concepts in marketing today. Experience analysis is essential for understanding consumer behavior, and according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), even a foundation for the whole economy. Experience is the main component of experience marketing and according to LaSalle and Britton (2003) and Schmitt (2003) the marketing of the future. During the past years, experience marketing has become an important topic also in the branding world.

As a conceptual and empirical phenomenon, experience is not as established as other consumer and marketing notions, such as choice, attitudes, consumer satisfaction, or brand equity (Schmitt 2010). Poulsson and Kale (2004) observe that no systematic attempts have been made to define what constitutes an experience in marketing terms or context. The lack of clarity lies in different ways in which the term "experience" can be understood. Tynan & McKechnie (2009) explain that experience is both a noun and a verb and it is "used variously to convey the process itself, participating in the activity, the affect or way in which an object, *thought* or emotion is felt through the senses or the mind, and even the outcome by way of a skill or learning."

Experience represents a relation of significance between a person's perceptional activity and a life situation and is of particular significance to the person (Perttula 2007). Tarssanen and Kylänen (2007) state that an experience is a holistic experiential feeling, that may lead to changes in personal opinions and attitudes of a consumer. Experience is composed of feelings, new knowledge and beliefs acquired by the consumer through an experiential service or an event (Same 2012).

Experience in its most general and broadest use is the mental state that occurs in any individual, at any conscious moment (Poulsson & Kale 2004). Pine and Gilmore (1999) explain that "while commodities

are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable". An experience is a result of the interaction between the customer and the experience provider (e.g. destination marketing organization (DMO)), and the act of co-creation between the two. On the consumer's side, we need to consider the preconditions the consumer brings to the experience and feelings and sensations that take place in the customer during the experience. On the provider's side, we need to examine the tools and processes that are used to create those feelings and sensations. In doing so, we provide meaningful and relevant experiences (Poulsson & Kale 2004).

Experience marketing differs from traditional marketing because traditional feature-and-benefit (F&B) marketing is designed to appeal to rational buying side of the target audience. Traditional marketing is hardly a psychologically-based theory about customers and how they view and react to products and competition (Schmitt 1999). Experiential marketers view consumers as rational and emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable and memorable experiences. There are five different types of experiences that marketers can create for customers: sensory experiences (sense); affective experiences (feel); creative cognitive experiences (think): physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (act): and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a target group or culture (relate). These experiences are implemented through so-called experience providers such as visual and verbal *identity*, communications, product presence, electronic media, etc. (Schmitt 1999). The main question in experience marketing is *what do you know, feel and want*? (Same 2012).

Experience marketing is generally based on the theory of experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 1999), which encompasses the most developed theoretical discourse about experience marketing (Gilmore & Pine 2002; Schmitt 1999, 2003).

To broaden the understanding on what exactly constitutes experience marketing the definition of *experience marketing* as "strategic (customer-centered) and holistic marketing of relevant (and meaningful) experiences that takes into account the affective, cognitive and conative perspectives of consumption experience" (Same & Larimo 2012) is preferred. For an experience to provide meaningful utility, it should also be perceived as personally relevant and include elements of novelty, surprise, learning, and engagement (Poulsson & Kale 2004).

Schmitt (2003) asserts that experience marketing can deliver sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational value to customers, to which social and informational based value can be added. Customers obtain value from *sensory meaning* through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell associated with the experience (Schmitt 1999), while *emotional meaning* extends to incorporate different kind of emotions attached to the experience (Richins 1997).

The need for differentiation which drives much of experience marketing and the requirement to facilitate a dialogue between customers, the organization (or in this case place/country) and its network members and the brand, together with the need to build strong and positive impressions to communicate the experience to customers, all point to the *centrality of branding in the experience process* (Tynan & McKechnie 2009).

Brand experience is conceptualized as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello 2009).

Customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction (LaSalle & Britton 2003). This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational,

emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual) (Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2009). This response may be multifaceted: cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical, as Verhoef et al. (2009) delineate it.

The essence of experience marketing has a history within the specific services marketing fields of retailing (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 2002; Verhoef et al. 2009), tourism, entertainment and the arts (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982; Pine & Gilmore 1998), branding (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello 2009; Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007), and hospitality, etc.

Many authors (e.g. Blain, Levy & Ritchie 2005; Hankinson 2009; Hudson & Ritchie 2009; Nikolova 2011) who study place or country branding have already pointed out the importance of experience marketing. As the competition is high, future research needs to identify how experience marketing can more effectively support the branding of a (small) country on the international market.

4. COGNITION AND SENSEMAKING THEORIES PERSPECTIVE

4.1. Cognition and sensemaking theories

The essence of a brand is a rich source of sensory, affective, and cognitive associations that result in memorable and rewarding brand experiences. Today, customers take functional features and benefits, product quality and a positive brand image as a given. What they want is products, communications, and marketing campaigns that „dazzle their senses, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds" (Schmitt 1999).

Marketing is a battle fought inside the consumer's mind (Ries & Trout 1986). Whenever you create your own meaning or grasp someone else's, you make things, feelings, ideas, experiences, values, and expectations into ideas or concepts. In doing this you explain yourself and your world (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006). Cognition is the scientific term for "*the process of the mind*", i.e. how humans perceive, remember, learn and think about information. According to the cognition theory, cognition means the processes of knowing (including attending, remembering, and reasoning); also the content of the processes, such as concepts and memories. Cognition is used to refer to the mental functions, mental processes (thoughts) (Smith & Hitt 2005).

Sensemaking is the process by which people *give meaning to experience*. Sensemaking is about "placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning" (Weick 1995, p. 6). Sensemaking is the construction of reality, understanding and negotiation, creating understanding between people.

Sensegiving is giving meaning to an object (such as people trying to make sense to the organization, which, in turn, to society) (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). It is seen as social process, its cognitive aspects and its usage in construction of meaning for symbols and action that inform change (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005; Maitlis 2005). Sensegiving is also defined as "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). A place or a country may be also seen as an organizational reality.

Sensemaking is connected to understanding and cognition; while sensegiving is related to influence and action (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991).

The concept of sensemaking is well named because literally it means the making of sense (Weick 1995). The seemingly transient nature of sensemaking belies its central role in the determination of human behavior. Sensemaking is central because it is the primary site, where *meanings* materialize that inform and constrain *identity* and action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005).

Sensemaking is, "importantly, an issue of language, talk, and communication. Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld 2005). In the same way, places/countries are also "talked into existence." From this perspective, sensemaking is a shared and communal activity that produces knowledge appropriate for action, but biased heavily on the "individuals doing the sensemaking – each group of people who have the various sensemaking conversations will "talk into existence" a very different set of situations, organizations, and environments" (Kolko 2010).

A number of researchers investigate sensemaking, coming to various and abstractly consistent but specifically different conclusions. Some of the views are tied to individual problem solving, while others focus on the organization and its ability to make meaningful decisions. Some of the views describe sensemaking as an activity that has a start and end, while others view it is a long-term approach that serves as an underpinning for other activities (Kolko 2010).

Sensemaking postulates making people's ideas and points of view the focus of organizing and managing (Weick 1989). Some major tenets of sensemaking are: 1) that it is grounded in identity construction; 2) enactive of sensible environments; 3) social; 4) ongoing; 5) focused on and by extracted cues; 6) driven rather by plausibility (Smith & Hitt 2005).

A main point arising is that organizational behavior is the result of how organizations channel and distribute the attention of their decision-makers. What decision-makers do depends on what issues and answers they focus their attention on (Ocasio 1997). Also a place/country branding depends on decision-makers.

The findings from Gioia and Thomas's (1996) study suggest that during change, top management members' perceptions of identity and image (especially a desired future image) is the key to the sensemaking process and serve as important link between the organization's internal context and the members' issue *interpretations*.

Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) propose a relevant discussion that focuses on how stories facilitate the crafting of a new organizational *identity* that serves as a touchstone upon which legitimacy may be conferred by investors, competitors, and consumers, opening up access to new capital and market opportunities. Stories help to create competitive advantage also for countries.

4.2. Sensemaking and identity

Identity construction is seen by many to be one of the two basic properties that differentiate sensemaking from basic cognitive psychology (Gililand & Day 2000). The other property is the use of plausibility as the fundamental criterion of sensemaking. Mills (2003) made a similar point when she organized her study of culture change around identity construction, which "is at the root of sensemaking and influences how other aspects or properties of the sensemaking process are understood".

Discussions of organizational *identity* tend to be anchored by Albert and Whetten's (1985) description of identity. From the perspective of sensemaking, *who we think we are (identity)* as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects *what outsiders think we are (image)* and how they treat us, that in turn stabilizes or destabilizes our identity. Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others, which means our categories for sensemaking lie in their hands. If their images of us change, our identities may be destabilized and our receptiveness to new meanings increases. Sensemaking, filtered through issues of identity, is shaped through the question "*how can I know who*

we are becoming until I see what they say and do with our actions?" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, p. 416).

The pathway from image change to identity change is discussed by Gioia and Thomas (1996). Their work suggests that if managers can change the images that outsiders send back to the organization, and if insiders use those images to make sense of what their actions mean, then these changes in image will serve as a catalyst for reflection and redrafting of how the organization defines itself.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) set the stage for many of the current concerns with identity and image in their early findings that sensemaking is incomplete unless there is sensegiving, a sensemaking variant undertaken to create *meanings* for a target audience. The refinement of this demonstration is the finding that the content of sensegiving affects how people interpret the actions they confront. Yet to be examined is the effect of efforts at sensegiving on the sensemakers. In the sensemaking recipe "how can I know what I think until I see what I say?" sensegiving corresponds to the saying. When you hear yourself talk, you see more clearly what matters and what you had hoped to say. Sensegiving therefore may affect the sensemaker as well as the *target*.

It is clear that the stakes in sensemaking are high when issues of identity are involved. When people face an unsettling difference, that difference often translates into questions such as *who are we, what are we doing, what matters, and why does it matter*? As Coopey et al. (1997, cited in Brown 2000) note, the "efficacy of established patterns of *meaning* and associated behavior, individuals attempt to make sense of ambiguous stimuli in ways that respond to their own identity needs". They are able to draw creatively on their memory – especially their personal *experience* – in composing a story that begins to make sense of what is happening while potentially enhancing their feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The story is a sufficiently plausible account of "what is happening out there?" that it can serve as a landscape within which they and others might be able to make commitments and to act in ways that serve to establish new *meanings* and new patterns of behavior" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005).

5. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF COUNTRY BRANDING

5.1. Country brand identity and image

Identity and image are two basic concepts to understand country branding. Identity refers to what something truly is, to its essence (reality). We could say that brand *identity* originates from the place whereas brand *image* refers to consumer perceptions. This can be applied to the case of places (nations, regions and cities). In other words, brand identity originates from the place or organization, whereas brand image refers to consumer *perceptions*. Identity and image are thus distinct, but related concepts. Place/country branding activities attempt to *reduce the identity-image gap*.

Fetscherin (2010) argues that there are four main marketing fields which relate to country branding: „country of origin" (Roth & Romeo 1992; Shimp et al. 1993; Nebenzahl & Jaffe 1996), „destination branding" (Hankinson 2007), „country image or country-product image" (Parameswaran & Yaprak 1987; Agarwal & Sikri 1996; Brown et al. 2006), and „country identity" (Hall 2002; Keillor & Hult 1999; Anholt 2007). These fields are important for this reasearch.

Place/country brand identity plays a fundamental role in building and managing the country brand. The essence of any country brand derives from its "culture" in the broadest sense – land, history, people, language, literature, music, architecture, cuisine, traditions, pop-culture, education, heritage, visual symbols, etc. – the aspects that represent the "soul" of a country. The place/country brand must

be rooted in the reality of the place´s culture which is the most authentic and genuine element of differentiation that a brand can have. The factual presentation of a place is called a place's identity. Barke & Harrop (1994) indicate the factual presentation clearly: "the 'identity' (of a place) may be regarded as an objective thing; it is what the place is actually like."

Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993) believe that places' decision makers can create and design identities for places. Although there are certainly elements of a city's factual presentation that can be influenced by civic leaders, such as the physical environment or the people, one could easily argue that it is nearly impossible to design a complete new identity for a place. Because that factual presentation is so widely accepted by the place/country communities, and rooted so deeply in their beliefs, expectations and daily routines, that changes in the identity will occur slowly. Country branding is a long-term approach and the results in perceptions or in the decisions of potential consumers cannot be guaranteed. The change takes a long time.

In branding theory there are three key elements of the brand: Brand identity, Brand positioning, and Brand image (see also Pike 2004). The following model (Figure 1) displays the multidimensional nature of identity and image constructs in a place-brand context.
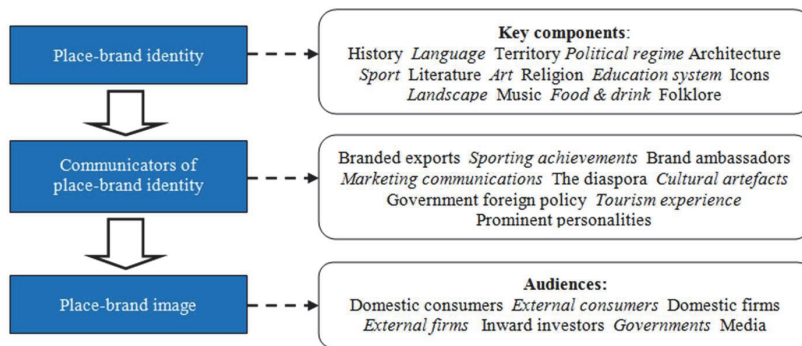

Figure 1: The conceptual model of place-brand identity and image (Dinnie 2008)

Identities play a vital role in socio-economic development, being "people's source of meaning and experience" (Castells 2004). The image reflects how the target groups or consumers see or perceive the country and it has of great importance for every place or country.

5.2. Conceptual model of country branding

The conceptual model that this research proposes is put together for country branding taking into account experience marketing, from the perspective of cognition and sensemaking theories. The model (Figure 2) explains identity, image and value issues of a country. On the left side of the figure is country/place brand and on the right side the target audience. There is a wide range of *target audience* or as Hatch and Schulz (2003) call them – stakeholders – investors, suppliers and other business partners, regulators, special interest groups and local communities. In the middle of the figure are *experiences* that can be perceived on different dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, or behavioral.

While there are added pressures and *challenges* in place marketing (challenges of creating differentiation, place product, external environment, politics etc.), effective branding can still be accomplished. Gilmore (2002) draws attention that, in the countries context, the use of the positioning diamond makes brand *positioning* easier when taking its four factors into consideration: macro-trends, target audiences or stakeholders, competitors, and core competencies. Like brands, also places satisfy functional, symbolic and emotional needs (Rainisto 2003) and "the attributes that satisfy those needs need to be orchestrated into the place's unique *proposition*" (Ashworth & Voogd 1990; Kavaratzis 2005). Also Blain, Levy & Ritchie (2005) indicate that effective place branding gives visitors an assurance of quality experiences, reduces search costs, and offers a way for places to establish a unique selling proposition. According to Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2002, p. 21) "whatever proposition is used it must also have the potential to last, to grow old and to evolve in a long-term branding campaign, so it is essential to get it right. However, the point of differentiation must reflect a promise which can be delivered and which matches *expectations*".
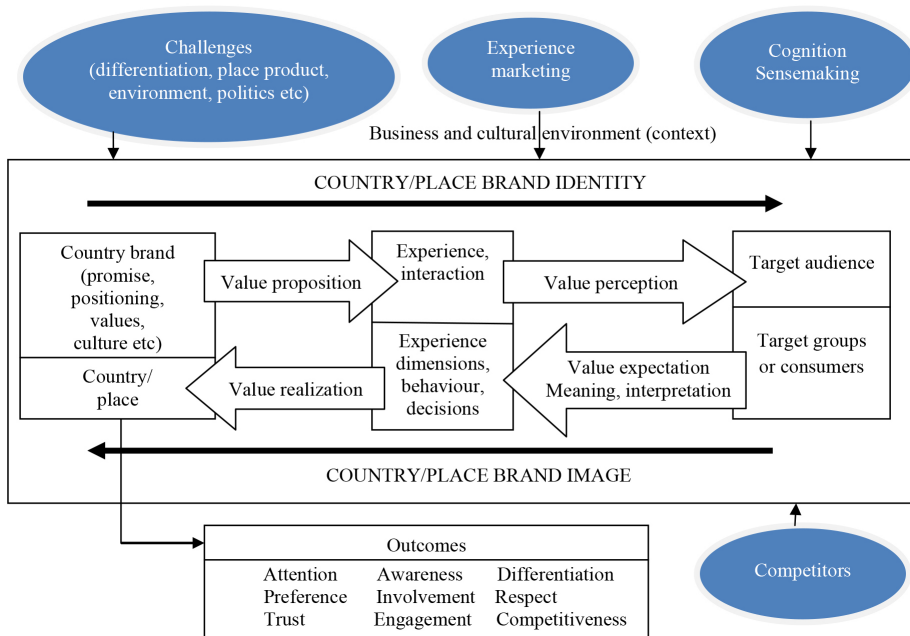

Figure 2: Conceptual model of country branding (adapted from Gentile et al. 2007, Same 2012)

According to Anholt (2007, p. 5), the place brand managers can influence the brand *image* – "the perception of the brand that exists in the mind of the consumers or audience". According to Kotler and Gertner (2002, p. 249), „brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt *behaviours*" and „place/country images are likely to influence people's *decisions* related to purchasing, investing, changing residence and travelling" (p. 250). All that influences the *outcomes* seen on Figure 2.

One factor "identity" is connected to sensemaking theory; the other "perception" to cognition theory. Attention (noticing, encoding, interpreting and focusing of time and effort on both issues and answers (Ocasio 1997) is also a key term in these theories. The same applies to the concept of experience. In Consumer Culture Theory (that is related to experience marketing) *value* is created in the process of meaning creation (sense making), which is above all culturally bound.

The variables in the model are taken from various sections of the paper, where they are marked in Italics.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The aim of this paper was to provide a theoretical overview of country branding, experience marketing and cognition and sensemaking theories, and to create a new model. Cognition and sensemaking theories are good focal points for researching issues related to experience marketing and place's identity. The cognition and sensemaking theories focus on individual`s abilities on making and giving sense of various events surrounding them. In these pages it is suggested that bringing cognition and sensemaking, and identity views together through the study of place branding can usefully broaden our understanding of how we should use experience marketing in the place branding process.

The proposal presented in this paper of implementing the principles of experience marketing into place branding, is coherent with the natural evolution of the discipline towards a more experiential practices. Strategic management of experience marketing as a concept is one proposition countries may find useful when confronted with complexity and instability of their environment and overall economic situation in the world.

One of key implications of this paper is that DMOs need to become skilled cultural operatives who can develop stories about the place/country (who they are) and how their resources or ideas will lead to future benefits for consumers and society. Lounsbury & Glynn (2001) assure that in constructing a story, it is important "to balance the need for legitimacy by abiding by societal norms about what is appropriate with efforts to create unique identity that may differentiate and lend competitive advantage".

The findings of this study are therefore important in determining future research perspectives in the field and inquiring whether and in which direction the country branding concept has to be developed further. Three theoretical propositions inviting future research, result from this paper as follows:

- P1: Experience mediates between country brand and target groups (or customers)
- P2: Experience dimensions and attitude mediate between the target groups and the outcomes (e.g. attention, preference, trust).
- P3: Experience dimensions mediate between value expectation and value realization.

Other promising research questions to continue with this topic may be: how does experience marketing help to promote the identity of a place/country brand? What kind of experience do we want to create in the long-term for our consumers, and how can we get it done in an unusual, interesting, eye-catching way? How does experience marketing promote the branding efforts of a place/country? How does experience marketing promote competitiveness of a place/country brand on the global market?

The study continues onto three particular tasks: 1) to study the relationships between place brand identity (promotion) and experience marketing; 2) to propose alternative and additional possibilities to achieve competitive advantages of place brands on the international market (especially for a small country); 3) to test the model in analyzing or measuring place/country brand experiences. Finally, the proposed conceptual model of country branding should be tested empirically.

In contrast to more analytical and quantitative methodologies of traditional marketing, the methods and tools of experience marketing are eclectic, diverse and multi-faceted. Experience marketing is not bound to one methodological ideology, it is interdisciplinary. Thus, qualitative methods for experience marketing research are needed, including the verbal methods (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups) and visual materials (photographs, videos).

Changing the place/country reputation and building country brands are difficult, complex and long-term challenges which require above all an (empathetic) understanding of the consumers' mind space. Clear vision is vital in terms of place's marketplace, competitors and consumer targets.

Place branding could provide a crucial competitive advantage for countries and is therefore a very important topic. Country branding and experience marketing offer new opportunities (also thanks to the Internet-driven media revolution), so that even the smallest countries can benefit from these strategies.

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Appendix 3. Article III

Same, S., & Solarte-Vasquez, M. C. (2014). Country Branding and Country Image: Insights, Challenges and Prospects. The Case of Estonia. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, *4*(1), 137–165.

Country Branding and Country Image:
Insights, Challenges and Prospects. The Case of Estonia

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Abstract: *Gaining understanding about customers' mindset and information on their experiences is a precondition for the formulation of an effective country branding strategy. What potential tourists might learn and how they can be made to feel about a place can help small and not very well-known countries compete with bigger and more popular tourist destinations. The article focuses on the effectiveness of Brand Estonia and claims that it is still a challenge, despite the existence of an ongoing strategy. It also favors the revision of the brand identity selection and the promotion of Estonian brand, and supports a customer-based approach for their assessment. Documentary and empirical evidence show that the image of Estonia among its most important target audiences in the field of tourism does not match the Estonian brand identity. The gap in-between was evidenced by the results and content analysis of 24 in-depth interviews made with a selected group of people well acquainted with the country as well as some branding experts. This article contributes to the existing case study literature with findings that also manifest opportunities to strengthen the country brand, if its formulation develops a realistic brand identity and its promotion is based on accurate, unique and appealing ideas. It proposes academic support to innovative or alternative concepts for the country branding, and comments on applications of this study to more specific fields and further research.*

Keywords: *country branding, country image, destination, Estonia, experience, place marketing*

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1. Introduction

Place is a generic term that encompasses countries, regions, cities and specific locations. However, theoretical conceptualizations in the social sciences have turned it into an important and complex notion that refers not only to its geographical meaning. A sociological and anthropological dimension considers cultural, social and personal imprints on places (Cuba & Hummon, 1993); a psychological approach focuses on the cognitive and emotional relationships that individuals establish with their environment (Stokols, 1995), also on the identities and attributions that influence people's perceptions and how they construct significance around places (Folkes, 1988); and marketing assigns relevance to places for strategic marketing management and development purposes, particularly in the way they affect image and consumer behavior. Country brand compares with corporate brand and in this analogous conception is subject to management in the most popular research topics of place brand management in literature: brand strategy, identity, positioning, brand associations, image, and performance (e.g., Anholt, 2007; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Hankinson, 2009; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Morrison, 2013; Pike, 2004). This interdisciplinarity has implications that reflect on the growing amount of academic and empirical research about country brand management. Anholt (2007, cited in Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009, p. 7) puts it clearly: "Place branding is the management of place image through strategic innovation and coordinated economic, commercial, social, cultural, and government policy". Other implications regard not only the multidimensionality of the concept in itself, but also the physical object of analysis.

Country is not one static political entity with defined borders but it is also formed by smaller differentiated units with their own characteristics. Any of these could constitute a decisive element for the creation of a unique brand and affect the performance of the whole. While a brand is part of the deliberate creation of a product (Nikolova & Hassan, 2013), perceptions of it take place at the personal level, depending on the capacity, competence and adopted conventions of each individual. Attitudes are formed therefore far from the direct control of brand experts or managers. Appreciations of meaning and value are subjective and multifaceted processes, difficult to trace and verify. This is how perceptions about countries are embedded with beliefs and why emotions turn into attitudes, in the same way it happens about other people, products, ideas, or companies. Kotler and Gertner (2002, p. 249) assure that "brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviours." Developing innovative, sustainable and effective brand strategies is beneficial to promote tourism, but

not only; as Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) have argued, the implementation of a good country brand is of far reach. It has a positive impact on businesses, financial markets, public diplomacy, citizens' identity and their self-image as well. Garcia, Gomez and Molina (2012) relate to Kamakura and Russell (1993) to describe the investment that a country makes when developing an effective brand, explaining that brand equity occurs when customers familiar with the brand have formed *favorable, solid and unique associations* with it. They call it "customer-based brand equity" and it is a notion linked to country image.

Significant problems with the Estonian branding process and its impact have been noticed in earlier research (see section 4.1). The article elaborates on these, and presents the most current challenges and opportunities that the Estonian brand is facing. It departs from the assumption that a better understanding of the relationships between countries and people is necessary for the development of a strategy for an effective country brand, its management, sustainability and evolution.

The following pages will present a qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of the Estonian brand, based on an empirical analysis of the country branding process and the opinions of the target audience represented in a set of 24 interviews. The aim is to learn about people's perceptions of the brand, their match with its formulation premises, Estonia's image abroad, and how to enhance the experiences of it. The country brand concepts, symbols, slogans, and its sign are used as referents.

This article is restricted to the first stage of a wider work that seeks to support the renewal of the branding strategy for the country, built on accurate and updated understanding of the product (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002; Warnaby & Medway, 2013) and its stakeholders' roles, engagement and expectations. The specific threefold research objective includes: 1) a systematic revision of earlier studies, the content of the Estonian brand strategies, and the brand manual; 2) an analysis of the interviews on country branding and country image; and 3) a proposal on categories for the construction of a conceptual framework applicable to future research. It starts by confirming arguments from the previous initiatives with updated, deeper and more complete research on recent creditworthy materials; then analyzes data, identifies problems and opportunities, and introduces the phase that should follow. This long-term project must be performed in a holistic manner with an emphasis on qualitative methodologies but alongside data collection that could also be subject to quantitative assessment.

2. Theoretical background

Dinnie (2008, p. 15) defines country brand as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the place with culturally-grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences". Country brand may be defined as "a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design" (Braun & Zenker, 2010, p. 5).

Two fundamental constructs on country branding are brand identity and image. *Brand identity* is a choice that "represents the vision of how the destination should be perceived in the marketplace, with the aim of achieving differentiation" (Pike & Page, 2014, p. 211). It should refer to what the country really is and how it chooses to be defined (Same, 2012). In contrast, *image* reflects how the public perceive the country; image might or might not match reality or identity, in addition it varies from person to person. The literature also points to a third element in branding theory—*brand positioning* (e.g., Aaker, 2002; Kapferer, 2012; Pike & Page, 2014). Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) hint that brand positioning involves destination's name, logo, and value proposition—the slogan. Pike (2012, p. 101) states that "brand positioning is the attempt to enhance congruency between brand identity and brand image".

Marketing theory has established that the link between identity, experience, and image is fundamental in place marketing (Govers & Go, 2009). Here is where the importance of country branding activities attempting to reduce the gap between identity and image resides. Branding experts and scholars (e.g., Hankinson, 2009; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2008; Kotler & Gertner, 2002) agree on the importance of working on the identity first, as it turns into the most persuasive and effective tool for the formulation of a powerful branding strategy, and the differentiation of the country brand messages and its image. The identity is at the core of all constructs and once chosen, developed or set, needs to match the perception of people: locals, potential visitors, etc. At this level uniqueness plays a fundamental role in creating a comparative and durable advantage. Success stories often mentioned in the literature are Australia, Spain, Ireland, New Zealand, Virginia ("Virginia is for Lovers"), New York ("I love NY"), etc.

According to Anholt (2007, p. 5), place brand managers can influence the brand image—"the perception of the brand that exists in the mind of the consumers or

audience." Pike (2012, p. 101) says that brand image has "an external market orientation, and stands for the actual image held by consumers." In that light, research investment is critical to understanding how the country is perceived as are its products and services, what is the image of the country and the quality of its offerings, as Elliot, Papadopoulos and Szamosi (2013) have also emphasized. One could add that this also measures the consistency and veracity of the brand and its derived constructs and its capacity to promote its products. *A country brand is effective when its image matches the identity promoted*. The state should be engaged in these activities and assist with policies given the impact on the social and economic development that can be expected from a successful country branding. It also represents the country and helps deliver to customers what the brand offers: *experiences and services that can only be obtained in "there"*.

Studies and research have also monitored the evolution of customer reactions, views, sentiments and preferences. This is important, given that the differentiating features that set a country apart from others do not have a permanent impact on the public; customers' interests are changing (Pike, 2012). Country image is never fixed or immobile (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Furthermore, not all important and differentiating attributes of a place, even if accurate, are appealing to people, or consistently taken into account when deciding on travel destinations. Each person develops own representations about places and focuses selectively on factors that can be real or perceived. They are influenced by beliefs, ideas, attitudes, impressions, opinions and other cultural constraints (Myers & Alpert, 1968; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012). An additional constraint to consider is that mistakes and confusion cannot be completely prevented in communication with a wide audience. For example, stereotyped images are much easier to perceive and remember because they are simplifications of a much more complex reality.

Place branding is an encompassing expression that is also the preferred umbrella term in the marketing literature on this field. Country branding is covered by it. Fetscherin (2010) further classified country branding into four main subjects: country image or country-product image (Agarwal & Sikri, 1996); country identity (Hall, 2002; Keillor & Hult, 1999); destination branding (Hankinson, 2009); and country of origin (Roth & Romeo, 1992; Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1996). This list is not all-inclusive, for instance nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008) and in some cases region branding (Andersson, 2007; Hall, 1999) could also be added to it.

Although country image research is one of the most widely reported in the tourism literature, it has remained descriptive and based on small convenience samples (Gertner, 2011). Pike and Page (2014, p. 212) argue that in destination marketing, the main concern has been solving management problems by "fragmented applied research approach rather than theory building." Pike had found in an earlier review of 264 destination image studies (Pike, 2002; 2007), that more than half of them referred to one destination only. The majority of previous studies have focused on case studies (Botterill & Platenkamp, 2012), for example, based on countries such as Canada (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009), Yugoslavia (Hall, 2002), Spain (Gilmore, 2002), Latvia (Endzina & Luneva, 2004), England (Wetzel, 2006), New Zealand (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002), and Denmark (Therkelsen, 2003). In qualitative research into tourism marketing, the most used methods are interviews and focus groups.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research was performed on the basis of 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between April 2012 and January 2014. The purpose was to understand how foreigners perceive and think of the case study proposed: Estonia and its branding and image. People from the European Union, especially in the priority markets for tourism were the first group considered.[1] To include a wider perspective, participants from America and Oceania were also invited.[2] Criteria for the selection sought to include people that have been to Estonia several times, or have been residing in the country for more than five years. Importance was assigned to the fact that they could be familiar with the brand and have an opinion on most of its features. Seventeen interviews were conducted with foreigners living abroad, four with foreigners living in Estonia, and three with representatives of Enterprise Estonia, the country destination marketing organization (DMO). They all have higher education degree. Six of them are branding experts: academics or experienced marketing professionals.

This study has been proposed as an assessment of perceptions similarly to Hankinson's (2009) "of people who can provide ideas and insights" on the issues under consideration, in an "*experience survey*"—like inquiry. Perceptions cannot be evaluated with quantitative methodologies, as far as their meaning and extent

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[1]   Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Germany, the UK, Latvia, and Spain.
[2]   The group includes participants from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, Denmark, the UK, Hungary, the USA, Australia, Canada, Japan, and Scotland.

is concerned. The interviews propose a dialog, are open to debate and highly dependent on context: the people involved, expertise, subject, and field. Their aggregate does reveal insight. For marketing research, the limitations of science are too restrictive to deliver convincing conclusions on human perception, hence the increasing importance of using qualitative methods (Bellenger, Bernhardt & Goldstucker, 2011; Creswell, 2012).

All the interviews lasted between 60 and 95 minutes. The sign, slogan and pattern were shown for guidance. The interview guide consisted of 26 questions with sub-questions. The interviewer was free to move from one topic to another regardless of their sequence, and avoided interruptions to become conversational and help the dialog. When the interviewees volunteered information that was not within the framework of the study but seemed useful, additional questions were asked. The sample reached saturation when responses became redundant, and additional interviews would not contribute with any more relevant information to the records (Patton, 2002). All sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Secondary data was also used: the marketing strategies, the brand manual and publications on previous research. These materials were analyzed on their substance. Document analysis was used because case studies using multiple sources of evidence could be rated higher in terms of overall quality (Yin, 2009).

The content analysis followed the standard procedures of categorization, and coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). In-depth interviews yield rich amounts of data that were helped with software screening methods. The transcripts were additionally processed using Atlas.ti[3] to group the codes and verify that all possible categories were taken into consideration.

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[3]   Available at www.atlasti.com.

4. Findings

The findings will first review earlier research and marketing strategies, and proceed with a categorized account of the interviews' content on Estonia's image, Estonian brand, potential for country branding, and Estonian experiences.

4.1 Studies on Estonia's image and the development of Brand Estonia

The Estonian brand initiative was prompted by the exposure that the country received after winning the Eurovision song contest in May 2001. In December, a series of five qualitative survey reports[4] were commissioned by Enterprise Estonia (DMO), to begin the process of developing a brand concept. A brand manual was ready in 2002; the brand itself was created by Interbrand, the same company that discussed and prepared the surveys' guidelines. Five in-depth telephone interviews were conducted in five countries and this became the baseline for the analysis. The interviewees were tourists who had visited Estonia. From their opinions, analyzed by TNS Emor, it was drawn that common symbols of the country among respondents were Tallinn's Old Town and architecture, and that people knew little about Estonia, especially in Germany and the United Kingdom. In 2003, Erm and Arengu (2003, p. 24) published a work in which they stated that "no public testing took place" and that "the concept and creative solutions were prepared on the basis of Interbrand's internal know-how." The brand was launched inside the country at a small scale. Unwelcomed and lacking support by the public, it also received criticism because of its high cost (860,000 euros) (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009, p. 66). Estonia became the first former Soviet country to develop its country brand (Szondi, 2007).

The official brand manual expanded on the brand strategy: "designed to launch and establish Estonia as a unique, fascinating and positively transforming country." It described *Brand Estonia* as multidimensional with the sign 'Welcome to Estonia' (WTE), slogan 'Positively transforming', pattern, and distinct colors, photography, and typography. The sign was created for a campaign only, of a limited use of up to five years, and aimed at becoming the brand signature/trademark of the stories that elaborated on the positive transformation, certifying their authenticity. It was supposed to visually represent change; emphasis was

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[4] The surveys were published under the following titles "Image of Estonia in Finland and Sweden", "Image of Estonia in the United Kingdom", "Image of Estonia in St. Petersburg", "Summary report Germany, In-depth Explorations with German Tourists, Investors and Importers in Estonia", and "Attractions and Values of Estonia through the Eyes of Local Inhabitants".

added to the European abbreviation of the country (EST) and the irregular shape the words formed. WTE should have been inviting to the audience and communicate openness, accessibility and proactivity. The expression itself was supposed to confirm Estonia's unique positioning: a country where expectations would be transformed.

In 2003, the government ceased to provide financial support for the maintenance of the brand (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). This soon confirmed that country branding can be affected by politics and thus be challenging for DMOs.

The next documented study took place in 2008. GfK Custom Research Baltic, on request of Enterprise Estonia, tested the awareness, recognition and reputation of the WTE sign among Finnish, Swedish, German, Norwegian and British residents. In Germany and the United Kingdom, GfK conducted omnibus study whereas in the other countries 1,000 responses were collected from participants through online questionnaires. The findings showed again that the awareness and recognition level of the sign was low. On its reputation the results were no better: most respondents considered it nondescript, it aroused no interest, and did not seem innovative. In addition, it was not associated with quality, friendliness and/or trustworthiness. British respondents even considered the sign to carry negative connotations.

Also in 2008, Enterprise Estonia ordered a domestic quantitative marketing survey from the Estonian market research company Turu-uuringute AS. The survey was divided in two: the first, on the opinions of Estonian residents about the sign and the country's reputation abroad (1,027 respondents, omnibus study); and the second on Estonian companies' attitudes towards the Estonian brand (289 interviews). The first results revealed that image-building abroad was very important to people and that the sign is memorable (39%), warm and friendly (32%), and yet nondescript (34%). Those who disliked the sign mentioned that it does not stand out or describe the country, and is not attractive. The second survey showed that Estonian businesses were highly familiar with the sign, but the majority said it had not played its expected role abroad (58%), that it is nondescript (47%) and associated with some negative aspects. Seventy per cent did not know about the existence of a brand manual or the opportunities for using the sign. They agreed on that Estonia needs to invest in branding because after six years, the image campaign would be exhausted.

Enterprise Estonia recognized the need to update the slogan and the rest of the brand concept developed in 2002, and declared in 2010 that developing a brand concept in 2008 was a matter or "evolution," not "revolution," rendering

the visual side, including the sign WTE, and all the information researched on them, secondary (*Välisministeeriumi aastaraamat*, 2010). With the transition phase behind, innovation, openness, and development were the new features to emphasize. An expert workgroup combined efforts with international consultants on a workshop that resulted in the formulation of the slogan 'Positively surprising'. This is still the basic idea and message for the positioning of the Estonian brand (Fig. 1).

Figure 1.   Sign "Welcome to Estonia" and slogan "Positively surprising".

Small and relatively unknown countries greatly benefit from information dissemination initiatives. In 2008, the Estonian advertising agency Tank developed 'Introduce Estonia', a newer philosophy of Brand Estonia. It consists of a marketing concept with strategies on four focus areas. Tourism is the most important area in this context. The title of the marketing strategy to promote the country as a travel destination is "An Old Country in a Shiny Package" and it consists of an integral system for presenting the country. Four sub-strategies—cultural, city, nature and wellness holiday—have identified special symbols of the country to support its promotion.[5] In the concept, those *symbols* (objects, events, phenomena or landmarks) are the basic elements of stories or sources of inspiration for developing a topic in accordance with the 'Positively surprising' platform. Each sub-strategy comprises several symbols which are graphically represented in Figure 2.

One goal is to communicate the country as a memorable and an exciting travel destination to anyone through these symbols. The 'Introduce Estonia' concept's *effectiveness* also depends on how actively it is used. Enterprise Estonia claims that it can be developed and improved through constructive feedback and actual experience.

In 2012, an additional marketing strategy "A fresh and forward-looking nation" was launched for the business environment.

To sum up, Brand Estonia consists of conceptual strategies, the sign, slogan, pattern, colours, photography, typography, and brand communication. The sign

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[5]   More detailed explanations on the strategies can be found online at: http://www.eas. ee/en/introduction-of-estonia/estonia-as-a-tourism-destination

has not played its expected role abroad and is still the same, but in 2008 the slogan was changed from 'Positively transforming' to 'Positively surprising' and the pattern from folk embroidery to cornflowers. The concept has been developed over the years to promote Estonia through arguments and symbols, but customer-based research has been insufficient and mainly done applying quantitative methodologies.

Figure 2.   Symbols by sub-strategies (adapted from marketing strategy for tourism).[6]
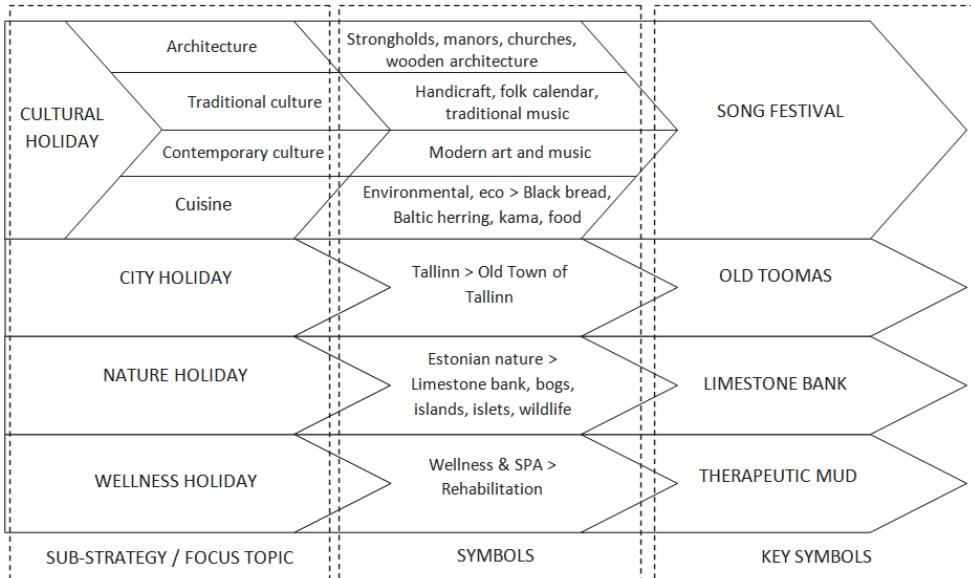
4.2   Categorized interview report

ǀ Estonia's image

The interviewees believe that in their countries, Estonia's image is good and that if people know about the country, it should be in positive terms. Tallinn is the most visible place in their opinion, and its Old Town is considered a valuable destination. It was repeatedly mentioned that Estonia is a world reference in technological terms: "Estonia is a tech-savvy society, technology is very advanced." Countries closer to Estonia, especially in Scandinavia, appear to have a more accurate perception of its potential and advantages, such as the quality of its food, the character of people, and the favorability of prices.

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6   The strategy can be found online at: http://brand.estonia.eu/en/home/brand/

Freedom was a value noticed by some of the interviewees who suggested this should link to favorable conditions for entrepreneurship and business ventures. At the same time, they are familiar with negative aspects created by recent events in the Estonian history (the Soviet legacy: architecture, social problems, people's lifestyle, etc.).

In remote regions, interviewees believe that little is known about Estonia, apart from the fact that it is a small country with little if any influence in world affairs, but young, energetic and up to the challenge of rebuilding its self and its image. This knowledge has been increased by the media coverage of the recent economic crisis that ranked Estonia very well on its management and recovery among other European countries. However, the interviews did not elaborate with comments on the microeconomic level. Opinions about Estonians mostly had to do with the interviewee's personal experiences, therefore they contrast greatly and are difficult to summarize. Most noticeably, people are perceived as reserved and individualistic, with a cynical sense of humor, and too serious: "they could smile more often." At the same time, they are considered to be welcoming and industrious, active and enthusiastic. It is observed that the more superficial the contact with the country, the less criticism was expressed in the answers. It is possible that for this group of foreigners to interact with locals and to develop opinions is eased because communication in English and other languages in Estonia is not problematic: "Estonians are charming, they are friendly, very helpful, speak terrific English." In general, the image abroad is not homogeneous or fixed on special characteristics. When asked, about half of the interviewees could link Estonia with their Nordic neighbors, but the other half could not, referring to them as European, Baltic or Eastern European. The country continues to surprise visitors: many who have low or no expectations about it, later admit having had very positive experiences, liking the places they saw, the products it has on offer, and how clean and safe Estonia is. The airport and its neat appearance and efficiency, for instance, left to one of the interviewees such a good impression that conditioned his views on what was to come next. It was surprising that people appear to be very well off, compared to others in wealthy countries of Europe, as one comment indicated: "People, at least in Tallinn, seem to have better and newer cars than most of us […]" The long sandy beaches and the flat topography were, for those who have traveled more extensively, also unexpected surprises. Many in the group mentioned the Estonian Song Festival. Some commented on the educational system that in their opinion is much better than they imagined.

Food in Estonia received very good reviews; not only seasonal produce, but also manufactured, processed food and that offered in restaurants. The mixture of

modern and traditional, tasty, healthy, natural, and varied foods is appreciated by many. In several interviews, the sudden and steep rise in prices of the latest years came up, suggesting that it has been a discouraging sign for many tourists of countries were Estonia was promoted as a shopping destination.

II Estonian brand (Brand Estonia)

The brand sign WTE was noticed by all but one of the people interviewed. All expressed negative opinions about it while only few could say anything positive or neutral, such as that it has been used consistently or could be considered "cute". Answers were similar in that the sign is old-fashioned, reminiscent of the 1960s or 1970s, too simple, and especially that its shape and message seemed random. The division of the words 'wel-come' and 'EST-onia' caused confusion, in particular to the English native speakers. Having to guess and decipher the sign annoyed people. They questioned the message: "Why welcome to Estonia when any country welcomes visitors? Is the contour supposed to be the map of the country? If so, who would possibly care about this?" An expert stated: "It is a mess, and doesn't say what it is trying to say. And it doesn't say anything new [...], it could be welcome [to] Australia or Fiji or what it happens to be. So I think it is over-complicated and a poor piece of communication." There were two instances in which the sign said nothing to the interviewee. This question reflected the least favorable opinions of all. The construct Brand Estonia (sign, pattern, slogan, selected colors, font style, etc.) appears to be more complicated for the interviewees to comment on. The pattern was noticed much less than the sign; the slogan remained unknown for the most part, although it sounded fine. When asked, most replies reverted to the previous question and repeatedly criticized the sign and its lack of readability; they called it amateurish, for its randomness or unclear communication scheme. Some argued that the brand was made from the Estonian perspective; one proposed to invest more inquiring about the image of Estonia abroad to be better able to understand and connect with the audience and modify the strategy. Brand Estonia did not seem innovative to the group; the cornflower was mistakenly taken as a snowflake, if noticed at all. Foreigners do not know that it is the national flower, and because it is not presented in its real colors, they cannot recognize it.

The title of the Estonian tourism strategy "An Old Country in a Shiny Package" was considered misleading, confusing, with negative connotations or simply disliked. While the word 'shiny' appeared to raise the most objections, interviewees also said that the country is not thought of as old. The experts believe that research is missing because the brand in general seems to be based

on guessing, instead of knowing, what foreigners should like about Estonia, to better advertise, present and communicate the positive side of it and attract visitors: "the problem with Estonian tourism and tourism across a lot of destinations is not enough investment in research".

III Potential for country branding

On branding cooperation—the possibilities to associate the country either with the other Baltic states or the Scandinavian neighbors—the responses were mixed. It is clear that collaboration reduces costs, and that differentiation can come later, through experience. Many visitors would not travel only to Estonia, if exploring the vicinity was not possible or on offer; this is how one interviewee explained it: "They would not travel this far, literally to the other side of the world, just to go to Estonia. We went to spend some time here, we went to Finland, Russia, Latvia, and Denmark." On the other hand, promoting Estonia independently was not objected, because they know well what differentiates this country from the rest. They suggested that other Baltic countries would benefit more from this cooperation than Estonia.

It was discussed in detail that to improve the branding strategy for Estonia, positioning in neutral markets is needed, as they have no fixed notions of what the country is like, and that detaching from the Eastern-European image could be more beneficial to that end. This is why associations to the Nordic-Scandinavian image appeared to be more favorable than others, as one expert proposed: "I think that if you look at what tourism brand is then your strategy would be 'Nordic with a twist', I think is quite good. And certainly talking a bit about moving yourself away from the negativity associated with brand Eastern Europe." One mentioned that Tallinn is already regarded as the southern part of Helsinki.

Interviewees were aware of the need for a deliberate strategy and suggested to use disseminate information when promoting Estonia on: local products and singers; entertainment; people speak English; Christmas market; snow; surprising people and spaces; people are freedom- and nature-loving; alternative travel opportunities such as hunting; the historical experience; closeness to the Finnish culture; spas; diversity; advanced e-solutions; swamps; beaches; plenty of things to do; a potential test market and co-production site for investors; good food, etc. At the same time, it was recommended to unfold the country within, making it desirable for people to travel to cities other than Tallinn, such as Pärnu, Haapsalu, Narva or the islands. Words most linked to the country during the interviews were: nice, safe, organic, clean, authentic, small, vibrant, open,

beautiful, comfortable, etc. The interviewees said that the words 'discover' and 'experience', as well as diverse information distributed in innovative formats, should raise the interest of potential visitors from countries far away. Suggestions for branding included: to turn Tallinn into the romantic capital of Europe; show that Estonia could be part of a wider tourism destination such as the Nordic area or the Baltics; do more customer-based research to understand the audience preferences; think of something not promoted anywhere yet; revise the current strategy; find a magnet for Tallinn; target the right audience; show the high-tech capacity; promote with innovative phrases such as "let's go to Europe via Estonia" and "the undiscovered gem of Europe," etc.

It can be observed that the country has the opportunity and potential to attract more tourists than those identified so far, and that the strategy could be more dynamic and adaptable to different audiences. The need to disseminate more information, and make the country more appealing to the public, to compensate the lack of awareness and possible misconceptions about the country, was evident. Two branding experts commented: "Let's have probably a PR or strong media strategy or visiting journalists program strategy to try to shift some of those positions with different segments", "tourism marketing these days is incredibly scientific and layered", "the old days of saying let's go out and have one brand that is going to suit all markets does not really work anymore". Another thought that "We have solutions for you," referring to the Estonian technology capacity, would be a good slogan. A non-expert stated: "safety would be my number one concern, number two—the city and things to do, number three—comfort and uniqueness perhaps of hotels and accommodation". Better access to the regions, could create, in the opinion of the group, interest to discover different places of Estonia, its culture, heritage, and even its Soviet past.

IV Estonian experiences

The experiences of the interviewees had to do with their personal expectations and varied according to their place of origin and their links to Estonia, for the most part. They mentioned that the more intimate, one-to-one experience is always a much better option than appealing to mass tourism (like ferry tourism) possibility: "I would focus on personal stuff: farms, forest, sea, all sort of things personal like local person-to-guest experiences." For some of the interviewees, to visit local homes and to be at Estonian parties had a special appeal. When asked to describe a truly authentic Estonian experience, the Song Festival was the most common choice. Other examples were the Christmas market, cultural events, the islands, exotic manor houses and architecture, unique nature (swamps and sandy beaches with pine trees), IT development, the Old Town, a Russian

feeling (resembling the Soviet times), saunas, driving on ice, something is always happening, fast changes, etc. In contrast, one expert associated an authentic Estonian experience with the word 'slow', in the sense of meaningful, relaxing and calm. Food was told to be a channel to communicate authenticity because it could deliver a really unique experience. Non-experts who were less familiar with experience marketing made also proposals that resemble this concept. The interviewees emphasized on the historic atmosphere, spas, exoticism of wild berries, ease of access to regional areas, etc. One person compared the country to an onion—"every time there is something new to discover or something that surprises".

Most people in the group have promoted Estonia abroad talking about the country or answering questions when asked about it; all would recommend a visit. They anticipated that visitors would be positively surprised about Estonia. Many believe that the best promotion is made by the word of mouth so that visitors could become efficient disseminators of a positive image. One of the branding experts explained: "developing brand advocates, people who have spent time in your country and using/harnessing them […], because people are going to believe what I say, my friends at a dinner party, more than picking up a brochure saying welcome to Estonia." Some said they would love to come back, few of them have moved here permanently. For these people, it was obvious that to understand people's experiences in Estonia is important to stage and deliver authentic Estonian experiences to all visitors, and attract more. A summarized visualization of the categories (I–IV) and subcategories (1–16) that formed during the analysis of the interviews is available in Table 1.

Table 1.   Categories, subcategories, and main codes (framework for future research).

I Estonian image (perceptions on the country)	**II Brand Estonia** (brand performance)
1. Estonia Very little is known, Tallinn, Old Town, freedom, image is fine, small, vibrant, Soviet legacy, technology, young, energetic, economic success story, infrastructure, media, national heritage, culture, history, land, art, leaders **2. People** Welcoming, active, helpful, friendly, individualistic, too serious, cynical sense of humor, speak languages **3. Positive surprise about Estonia** Old Town, good quality, improvements, clean and safe, sandy beaches, Song Festival, good English, food, airport, discovery time, snow, four seasons **4. Belonging** (Nordic, Baltic or EEC) Yes/no, co-branding is cost-effective, countries are different, multidestination strategy, euro, EU	**5. Country branding activities** Important and necessary, need for unique brand identity and positioning, promise, studies, brand ambassadors, government policy, DMO, PR, materials (ads, videos, brochures etc.) **6. Sign 'Welcome to Estonia'** 60s and 70s, retro, disliked, difficult to read (EST-onia), old-fashioned, nondescript **7. Brand attributes** Ineffective sign, 'Positively surprising': surprising factor (slogan is accepted), pattern unnoticed or not recognized **8. Meaning and connotations** Based on the Estonian perspective alone, Estonian humor, negative associations of 'An Old Country in a Shiny Package', little information about the brand and the country
III Potential for country branding	**IV Estonian experiences** (how to sell Estonian experiences and what is authentic)
9. Promoting Estonia Part of tourist packages, Nordic with a twist, Winter market, swamps, beaches, high-tech, PR strategy, better communication, co-branding, regional promotion (e.g., Pärnu, Saaremaa), reasons to come **10. Possible key messages** Romantic capital of Europe, close to Finland and Sweden, "Let's go to Europe via Estonia", "the undiscovered gem of Europe", spa kingdom, nature, alternative possibilities (things to do), safe, freedom, e-Estonia, always surprising **11. The story of Estonia** How people describe Estonia, a story to tell others **12. Recommendations on branding** Customer-based research, offer what the audience wants, find right symbols, realistic identity formulation, target right audience, continuous monitoring, understand the audience first	**13. Personal experiences, expectations** Cheaper, shopping, value for money, events, historic atmosphere, Soviet past, fast changes, folklore, countryside, sea, safe, Skype, working and living in Estonia, friendly people, local products, clean **14. Experience marketing** Experiential elements, differentiation, personal impressions, meaningful, relevant, wow customer experience, relaxation; what people think, feel and want about Estonia **15. The symbols of Estonia** Associations, (see Fig. 2 and Discussion) **16. Authentic Estonian experience** Song Festival, Christmas Market, Old Town, nature, spa, food, manor houses, islands, capture the reality, unique propositions

5. Discussion

Place marketing is a highly competitive field: destinations seek to develop and offer potential visitors competitive advantages and differentiating features that could set them apart from the rest and captivate or retain more tourism. Effective differentiation is thus a critical aspect in times when so many markets can simultaneously offer similar products that become substitutable (Pike, 2004; Morrisson, 2013). Pike and Page (2014) highlight, referring to Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002), that it is estimated that National Tourism Offices all around the world are competing for only 30 per cent of the total of international travelers because the remaining 70 per cent of them are visiting only ten countries. In that sense, places are interchangeable and easily replaceable because people seek convenience and unique experiences. The offer is so vast that attracting visitors requires destinations to have a clear identity definition without which a brand will not stand the tests of time and competition (Pike, 2012).

The interviews confirmed that while Estonia is a country that people around the world know very little about, its image among visitors is positive. The group subject to the interviews have more information about the country than an ordinary traveler which indicates that to that extent, their experiences and perceptions are valuable to assess effectiveness. Also, their opinions on the perceptions of people in their countries are useful and reliable as they have traveled to Estonia several times and some of them are experts in the field of this study. It can be argued that this audience is not the priority for brand managers because they already have formed an image of Estonia and possess links with the country. Therefore, confirming their opinions on the public at large would be convenient, if combined with an exploratory research on preferences and expectations. The closer their country of origin is located, the more specific opinions they expressed. The reported impact of the country on people's minds is useful to capitalize on the visitors' interest and to correct possible misconceptions that could negatively affect Estonia abroad. Understanding customers is a key factor to develop and maintain a good branding strategy. Although the country brand has been operational for more than a decade, its promotion has had shortcomings from the beginning. At present, the concept 'Introduce Estonia' is a practical tool that should aid everyone interested in selling Estonia to foreign tourists. It provides leads and priorities for tourism promoters, but its conceptual communication fails to be appealing, clear and distinctive. Information is a key factor to take into account because major flaws could be corrected by simplifying concepts and improving the messages that reach the audience.

Considering the theory and empirical research developed in the past decades on country branding, it appears that the planning stage in the Estonian case was weak from the start. The identity selection was not justified by a persuasive consideration of the stakeholders' interests. Enterprise Estonia commissioned some research and incorporated expertise into the branding project but studies were few, shallow and limited. The problems of this process became evident later, when the brand did not adapt to the rapid evolution of the country. Estonia became a member of the supranational system of the European Union and other international organizations that directly affected its status and capacity. The world has undergone dramatic technical, economic, social and political developments in the last years, and its domestic situation has substantially transformed as well. At the same time, new attributes and opportunities for the country have arisen, to better position the brand abroad, but they have apparently remained undetected. If a country develops, the brand should evolve with it. In this light, a work in constant progress would imply periodic revisions and continuous input from the institutions involved in its maintenance. Country branding requires coordinated efforts so the potential of the country and the sustainability of the brand can be expected. The state was last involved in the direct support of branding initiatives more than ten years ago. Presently, it funds no studies or participates in the development and maintenance of the brand. As this fundamental coordination is missing, it can be asserted that the Estonian strategy does not fit into Anholt's definition of place branding. Fragmented efforts and dissociated stakeholders are unlikely to keep the country brand on check and guarantee its effectiveness. Estonia and its brand cannot be actively supported by a public that knows nothing or little about them. For promotion, the choice of brand imagery has proven ineffective because the expected outcome was not achieved.

Some aspects of the Estonian brand have evolved, seemingly in disconnected and unstructured ways. While the sign WTE has become a static symbol, different promotional concepts were proposed in 2008 (see Fig. 2). The sub-strategies on tourism are represented by four key symbols. They were chosen as the most differentiating and competitive, but only the Song Festival (the key symbol of culture holiday) matched the opinions expressed during this study. The selection of key symbols did not tackle what people consider interesting or important, making it appear arbitrary. This could also indicate that the promotion of those symbols has not been effective. In any case, there is no persuasive reasoning that could explain why Old Toomas, limestone bank or therapeutic mud were determined to be interesting references or that they could be attractive and representing Estonia abroad. No evidence on that the target audience's mind was taken into account was detected during the documentary

analysis either. Consequently, the country cannot expect high brand equity to take place. If to conceptualize brand equity as a combination of awareness, associations and appeal/interest in the country as this study has suggested, the Estonian brand managers face a serious challenge. A mismatch between the disseminated messages and the actual image about the country prevails among the different publics. In the interviewees' opinion, sandy beaches, forests and swamps were the preferred references on nature holiday; nobody spoke of limestone banks. Only few people from a country where wellness holiday is common showed interest in health-related visits, but with no mention of the therapeutic mud. Instead, in the opinion of the group, good organic and authentic food and the Estonian nature were common references that could be linked to wellness. Tallinn and its Old Town are well recognized and appreciated assets but Old Toomas (the key symbol of city holiday) remains unknown. If the brand concept had been addressed and examined from the perspective of the public, the strategy for tourism would have a clear effect on the consumers' image of the country. The lack of key symbol associations that consistently showed during the interviews indicates that customer-based research for the Estonian brand is still needed.

An effective promotion should be made on the grounds of objective and attractive attributes of a country, the unique services it offers and its best products, tailored to the customers it aims to attract. The Estonian brand places its hopes on what the brand managers think is a competitive and differentiated identity, but it does not hold on the public perceptions. Therefore, the real potential of the country to attact visitors is wasted.

Increasing the availability of information has been a way to affect potential visitors (brochures, books, videos, webpages, etc.), and yet it has had no verifyiable impact on the public that the interviewees represented. Many and mixed messages disconcert the audience. The whole brand concept is too complex, far-fetched, obscure and affected. A simpler set of strategies and messages, combined with an attractive sign could communicate more efficiently to the potential traveler as to what are the unique features the country has to offer. This is not a weakness in itself given that it allows for a constructive interpretation: the country has the opportunity to enhance its image after the selection of proper identity attibutes are made, and efforts are focused onto disseminating the assurance of quality touristic experiences. That "quality" should be linked to the needs, interests and expectations of a well studied market.

Experience marketing, closely related to place marketing, can help differentiating the country. Studies on what could be the authentic Estonian experience and

how to promote it are necessary. These interviewees' proposals are not sufficient to elaborate on the matter. Instead, they suggest directions for further research: to explore more options, and select the most convenient for brand managers to focus on.

Also, despite support on co-branding, to assert its realistic advantages is not possible in the absence of more specific studies. However, it appeared to be that pursuing associations with regions nearby might be more feasible and less compromising on the countries and their national identities than to associate with one only, or few others. At the same time, the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) brand could be an overly ambitious project (Andersson, 2007) because it involves many countries, each with the potential for alternative destination brand strategies.[7] Until now, Estonia is partly linked with the Eastern European image, but this reference was somewhat balanced. It does not have a strong Nordic or Scandinavian image yet, as the Baltic connotation often repeated. Joining efforts with bigger and better known countries such as Finland or Sweden should be convenient to promote multi-destination travel; people from remote places mainly visit Estonia when it is part of a bigger package. To what extent and which regional and bilateral associations or cooperation with other countries could facilitate or not the promotion of the Estonian brand abroad are questions that remain open, but experts persuasively argue that this will be the norm in the future. These are intriguing topics to complement this analysis.

The sign WTE received the most consistent reviews. It is the least effective promotion tool according to all the answers. The interviewees are the right public to evaluate its significance, because this sign was supposed to cater to a foreign audience. It reflects the most the mismatch between customer views and the brand. The unexplicable and unidiomatic division of the phrase requires great deciphering efforts, especially from the English native speaker. Someone could think that changing a sign that has been used for so many years could be risky, but to consider the costs of maintaining an ineffective sign for longer is more necessary. Proposing its replacement or update should not lack supporters given that from the beginning of the Estonian branding process this choice was highly controversial. More complete and independent research procedures, and assessments inside Estonia and abroad should appraise all related issues. Proposals on whether to reformulate this sign, and how to do it, cannot be implemented on the basis of the existing materials alone.

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7   The BSR includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, Poland and a part of Russia.

In contrast, the slogan 'Positively surprising' has been a welcomed expression that resembles the experience of most of the interviewees. They all agreed on that the reality exceeded their expectations. The cornflower pattern was not objected but it requires more visibility.

This article subscribes to the idea that a strong country brand could contribute to the development of a country and the challenges of remaining competitive in the global market can be helped by the brand if it has been adequately assessed and managed (Kleppe & Mossberg, 2006; Fetscherin, 2010). In this sense, country branding is a continuous responsibility; one value proposition for the world market is proven not enough. It is demonstrated that the emotional connection that could attract travelers and trigger the desire to experience the uniqueness Estonia has to offer cannot be formed before accurate and well-communicated information has reached its audience. Estonia's image is not settled among foreigners and particularly abroad where information about the country is scarce. Nevertheless, the incipient development is positive and the public is open to learn more about Estonia. It is necessary to rectify formulation mistakes from the past, inprove the dialog with the target audience, expand this research and take advantage of newer and more outreaching marketing opportunities. Furthermore, any assessment must aim first at studying people's experiences and obtain better understanding of their perceptions, associations and emotions about the country.

6. Conclusions and prospects for future research

Country branding strategies derive their strength from their responsiveness to customer needs, interests and expectations. In the case of Estonia, despite noticeable efforts to establish a differentiating brand identity, the formulation of a complete country brand strategy has been a challenge. This article emphasized that understanding the audience enables country brand managers to influence people's choices and effectively promote the country. This is a critical step that should have preceded the formulation of marketing strategies. It was also clarified that the selection of the identity should be realistic, unique, and consistent with the development of concepts and tactics. The Estonian brand concept is too complex, fragmented, abstract, and largely unknown, and this causes the image of the country not to be affected in the way intended.

The following context-specific conclusions could be drawn:

1) Estonia is largely unknown abroad, but its image among visitors is mainly positive.

2) Sufficient understanding of what the target audience appreciates, needs and wants from Estonia as an attractive tourist destination is missing. Its potential is unexplored.

3) The selection of current brand concepts, identity and strategy for tourism, as well as the promotion of initiatives in support of the Estonian brand are not effective or sustainable.

4) The Estonian brand is not well monitored, maintained and enhanced over time, but must be.

5) Some of the most relevant stakeholders (for example foreigners, state) are not involved in the Estonian brand management and development, and play no meaningful role in supporting or disseminating the brand.

That the image of Estonia is not yet positioned abroad is a good opportunity to correct the detected shortcomings. Experience marketing could be applied to the country branding process.

This study phase is not without limitations. The most important of all lies in the reliability of a small sample group of highly qualified interviewees. The audience of a tourism strategy is wide so a random sample could be more appropriate, but still attending to priority markets first. The findings are not generalizable for two reasons: first, because a case study presents unique characteristics and second, because qualitative research works on the basis of subjective analysis.

To complete a proposal of practical application to improve the Estonian brand experience is not possible in a single article. Continuing the study is important, as well as considering a mixed methodological approach to handle big amounts of relevant data. A greater body of research can better justify the design of future marketing concepts, and for rigor and creditworthiness, it should be interdisciplinary. The perception of visual aspects of tourism brochures, and websites, for example, could be evaluated from the cognitive, affective, and conative perspectives. The next stage will continue to assess customer opinions but will concentrate on innovative ideas and alternatives about how to promote a truly Estonian experience for tourists. Later, the study group will be expanded also to cover a greater representation, and the instrument will emphasize on the interviews' subcategories. During the coding process other important gaps were

identified. They could turn into primary components later. This is the way to go beyond the identification of problems to the formulation of proposals.

Enterprise Estonia (DMO) could benefit from the insights that this study has highlighted and improve the monitoring of the brand. The potential of this topic is remarkable alone or in collaboration with other disciplines. For example, in the interest of academic inquiry a comparative analysis could be made between the Estonian brand and countries facing similar challenges: small, remote, not very well known, etc. Also exploring the experience marketing in the communication of country brand concepts and destination promotion is a feasible way to contribute with original research based on the Estonian case study.

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Appendix 4. Article IV

Same, S. (2014). Experience Marketing in Country Branding: Theoretical Developments and an Estonian Case Study. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, *6*(1), 65–88.

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.

JEL classification codes: L83, M31
Keywords: experience marketing, country branding, cognition–affection–conation, authenticity, Estonia

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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

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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

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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
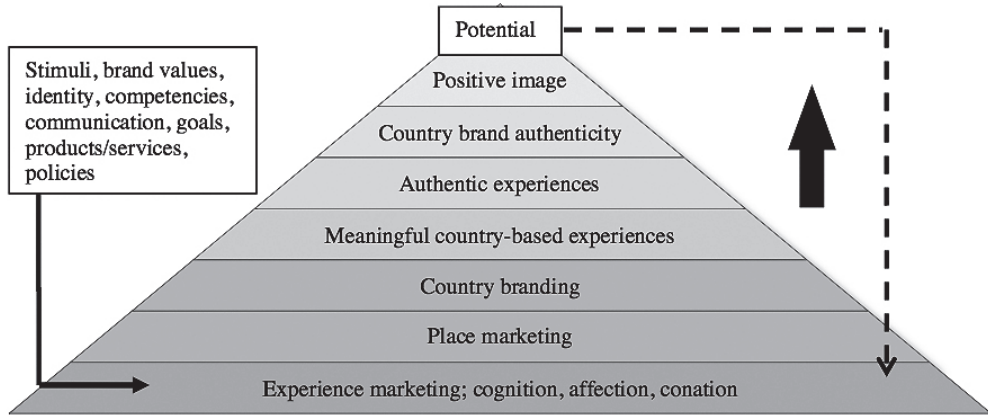
Source: Author's illustration

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)	**Cultural identity**: beautiful Old Town of Tallinn, the Song Festival, architecture, cultural events, art, language (Finno-Ugric, similar to Finnish) **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 **People**: friendly, bi-/multilingual, entrepreneurial, well educated, reserved, helpful, too serious, energetic, compliant with agreements and time limits *Services*: good quality services (hairdresser, beautician, etc.), abundant and cosy restaurants, good accommodation/hotels, bad flight connections, free Wi-Fi *Overall impressions*: small, unknown, good value for money, more Western than other Baltic countries, not easily accessible, innovative, clean, compact **History**: long national history, the Soviet past, Hanseatic town **Climate**: four seasons, snow, cold winter **Landscape**: flat, no big mountains, close to sea **Political climate**: politically stable, no government debt, famous president *Basic knowledge that visitors might be assumed to have*: location, capital, places to visit, symbols, short distances, belonging, proximity to Finland, north-eastern, attractions **Knowledge before and after visiting**: surprising factor

| Affective (feelings and emotions linked to a country)

What kind of feelings/ emotions do visitors describe? | Pleasant/ unpleasant; relaxing/ distressing; arousing/ sleepy; exciting/ gloomy (Russell and Pratt, 1980) | **Pleasant**: good food, gourmet meals, atmosphere, local produce, musical experience, handicrafts, folklore, countryside, good hosts, theatre, cultural similarities
Relaxing: peaceful, sea, quiet, cosy winter experience, new art, privacy, perfect location for anything slow (slow food, pace of life)
Exciting: illuminated Christmas market, discovery time, the Soviet era feeling, like an onion, feeling of freedom, nice culture of equestrian show-jumping, medieval experience
Arousing: things happening all the time, energy, vibrant, changes in environment over time, sitting around bonfire, singing together
Country-based memories: related to history, events, friends, the Soviet period
Distressing: prices have gone up, closeness of Russia, too focused on Tallinn (equivalent to Estonia)
Unpleasant: ferry tourism, criminals come through Estonia to Scandinavia
Gloomy: shadow of the Soviet past, Soviet architecture |
| Conative (intentions, motivation related to a country)

What can visitors do in Estonia? | Novelty, escape and relax, relationship, autonomy, nature, host-site interaction, stimulation, personal development, safety, self-actualize, isolation, nostalgia, romance, recognition (Pearce and Lee, 2005) | **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)
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
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
Wishes and desires: people want to eat well, come to live in Estonia
Host-site interaction: attending local parties, visiting Estonian homes, discovering other towns than Tallinn, events (e.g. Viljandi Folk)
Incentives: 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
Stimulation: St. John's Day celebrations, driving on ice, hunting, outdoor experience (camping, canoeing, hiking)
Security: feeling personally safe, meeting respectful people and good scientists, plans to re-visit Estonia
Relationship: visiting friends or family, working and living in Estonia, summer farm work programme, recommending a visit
Isolation: walks in the swamps, going to beaches that are not crowded, visiting rural areas and islands (Saaremaa, Kihnu)
Personal development: learning, conferences, studying in Estonia
Romance: visiting cosy cafes in Tallinn's Old Town or manor houses (e.g. Vihula), long summer nights
Autonomy: you are free to do and be what you are; people are independent and free, nobody wants to depend on others or anything |

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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Appendix 5. Interview guide

1. When did you first visit Estonia and what did you know about the country then? Your first impressions? What motivated your visit to Estonia?
2. What are your perceptions and impressions about Estonia, what is your Estonian experience so far? Has it changed over the time? How do you describe your Estonian experiences?
3. How do you see the image of Estonia? What could people from your country know about Estonia and what do they think of Estonia's image, reputation?
4. What could surprise your fellow compatriots positively about Estonia (as the slogan says)? Is there anything that surprises you about Estonia?
5. How do you understand country (or destination) branding (as all countries design signs, organize advertising campaigns, try to attract tourists)?
6. What associations does the sign 'Welcome to Estonia' have for you? Have you seen it before? Does Brand Estonia mean anything to you (sign, cornflower pattern, slogan 'Positively surprising', colors, font style, marketing concept or strategies)? What do you think about it (associations, first impressions, do you like it)? Is Brand Estonia modern?
7. How might people in your country perceive Brand Estonia? Is it more positive or negative? What do you think of the Estonian Tourist Board concept 'An old country in a shiny package' (just the title name)?
8. Should we promote Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together as a Baltic brand? Where does Estonia belong or fit best: is it more like an Eastern European country, Baltic or Nordic country?
9. How do you see Estonia compared to Nordic and Scandinavian countries? Please describe Estonians.
10. How could Estonia be promoted in your country? What deserves special attention in introducing Estonia abroad? What could be three main selling arguments in your country?
11. In what ways could we improve the image or reputation of Estonia?
12. What is more convincing when promoting a country: rational facts (new knowledge about Estonia), emotions and feelings, or motivating arguments to visit Estonia (incentive to do something, e.g. win a trip)?
13. How could Estonia differentiate itself from other countries in branding and in promotion?
14. How can we develop Brand Estonia further?
15. How often are you as an ordinary citizen engaged in promoting Estonia (to friends, partners)? How do you promote your own country?
16. Which three main places or attractions in Estonia you would definitely show a friend?
17. What do you see as the symbols of Estonia? Please name 3–5 top-of-mind (priority) associations related to Estonia.

18. How would you introduce Estonia to a friend? Please tell in 1–2 sentences a short story about Estonia (how you see and describe it).
19. Can you bring an example of a country which has a particularly positive image, and why? Any example of a country, which has a negative image?
20. How does your country promote itself and what do you think of it? Do they promote the whole country or regions, cities separately?
21. What are the main advantages of the main competitors to Estonia for tourists from your country?
22. What kinds of experiences do you expect to have in Estonia? What kinds of experiences are you looking for?
23. What could be an authentic Estonian experience? What kinds of experiences should we promote?
24. How do you see it, is experience marketing a better way to promote Estonia than traditional marketing?
25. Why come to Estonia? Have you visited official websites www.visit Estonia.com and www.estonia.eu, and what do you think of these?
26. Do you want to add anything or make any more suggestions about how to promote Estonia?

ELULOOKIRJELDUS

1. Isikuandmed

Ees- ja perekonnanimi	Siiri Same
Sünniaeg ja -koht	21.02.1969, Tallinn
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2. Hariduskäik

Õppeasutus (nimetus lõpetamise ajal)	Lõpetamise aeg	Haridus (eriala/kraad)
Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	2015	Ärikorraldus, doktorikraad, PhD
Tallinna Tehnikaülikool (TTÜ)	2006	Ärijuhtimise magistri kraad (*cum laude*)
Tartu Ülikool	1994	Turundus ja kaubandus, diplom võrdsustatud magistrikraadiga (*cum laude*)
Tallinna 7. Keskkool	1987	Keskharidus, inglise keel

3. Keelteoskus (alg-, kesk- või kõrgtase)

Keel	Tase
Eesti keel	Kõrgtase
Inglise keel	Kõrgtase
Vene keel	Kõrgtase
Soome keel	Kesktase
Rootsi keel	Algtase
Prantsuse keel	Algtase

4. Täiendusõpe

Õppimise aeg	Täiendusõppe korraldaja nimetus
11.–21.12.2013	Prof. Petri Nokelainen, Tampere Ülikool, "Äriuuringute ajalugu ja areng", TTÜ
8.05.2013	Prof. Gerrit Borchard, Genova Ülikool, "How to Publish a World Class Paper", Tallinna Ülikool

21.–22.03.2013	Prof. Paula Kyrö, Aalto Ülikool, "Defining the concepts for the methodological choices", "Methodological choices in my research process", TTÜ
28.02.–1.03.2013	Prof. Helle Neergaard, Arhus Business School, "An overview of different research approaches", "How to plan and implement case studies in entrepreneurship research?", TTÜ
7.–8.02.2013	Prof. Hans Lanström, Lundi Ülikool, loengud ettevõtlusuuringutest, TTÜ
11.10.–20.12.2012	Akadeemiline inglise keel, Merike Saar, Primus programm
19.01.2012	PhD Colloquium, International Marketing Trends Conference, Venice: Marketing Trends Association, ESCP Europe
28.–30.10.2011	Prof. Anu Valtonen, Lapi Ülikool, kursus „Ethnography", TTÜ
2.–4.03.2011	Prof. Paula Kyrö, Aalto Ülikool, Ettevõtlusteooriad, TTÜ
15.–18.02.2011	Prof. Helle Neergaard, Arhus Business School, "Focusing on how to get from research question to data collection and analysis", "Doing a literature review, creating theoretical framework for research", "Publication of Qualitative Research"
12.10.–16.12.2010	Prof. Petri Nokelainen, Tampere Ülikool, kursus "Scientific Writing" ja "Quantitative Research Methods", TTÜ

5. Teenistuskäik

Töötamise aeg	Tööandja nimetus	Ametikoht
2013–2014	AS Äripäev	Best Marketingi müügi- ja turundusjuht
2011–2012	Ettevõtluse Arendamise Sihtasutus (EAS)	Rahvusvahelistumise divisjon, turundusjuht
2008–2010	Tallinna Tehnikaülikool	Turundus- ja kommunikatsiooni-osakonna juhataja
2007–2008	Santa Maria AS	Turundusjuht
2006–2007	Kalev Chocolate Factory AS	Tootejuht
2002–2005	Hansa Liising Eesti AS	Reklaamijuht
2001–2002	Hansa Capitali Grupp	Turundusspetsialist
1993–2000	Estline AS	Turundusdirektori abi, laeval peakassa

6. Teadustegevus

Publikatsioonid

Same, S. (2014). Experience Marketing in Country Branding: Theoretical Developments and an Estonian Case Study. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, *6*(1), 65–88.

Same, S., & Solarte-Vasquez, M.C. (2014). Country Branding and Country Image: Insights, Challenges and Prospects. The Case of Estonia. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, *4*(1), 137–165.

Same, S. (2012). Country Branding and Experience Marketing: a Perspective on Sensemaking and Cognition Theories. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Economy and Business*, *6*(3), 286–303.

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Same, S., & Larimo, J. (2012). Marketing Theory: Experience Marketing and Experiential Marketing. R. Ginevičius, A. V. Rutkauskas & J. Stankevičienė (Toim.). *7th International Scientific Conference* "*Business and Management 2012*", valitud artiklid, 480–487, 10.–11. mai 2012. Vilnius, Leedu: Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Press "Technika".

Same, S. (2012). Understanding Experience Marketing: Conceptual Insights and Differences from Experiential Marketing. J.-C. Andreani & U. Collesei (Toim.). *International Marketing Trends Conference*, 1–24, 19.–21. jaanuar 2012. Veneetsia, Itaalia: Marketing Trends Association (Paris-Venice Association), ESCP Europe.

Leppiman, A., & Same, S. (2011). Experience Marketing: Conceptual Insights and the Difference from Experiential Marketing. G. Prause & U. Venesaar (Toim.). *Regional Business and Socio-Economic Development 5: University-Business Cooperation*, 240–258. Berliin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

Konverentsi ettekanded
Töö tulemusi on esitatud neljal rahvusvahelisel konverentsil: Veneetsias, Lissabonis, Tallinnas ja Vilniuses.

Õppetöö
Loengud ja eksam magistrantidele aines "Brändi juhtimine" TMM1490, november 2010 – jaanuar 2011, 5 EAP aine, Tallinna Tehnikaülikool.

Juhendatud lõputöö
Kadri Tolsberg, magistritöö (2013). Brändi identiteedi ja kuvandi võrdlus AS Santa Maria näitel. Juhendajad: Anu Leppiman, Siiri Same. Tallinna Tehnikaülikool.

7. Teadustöö põhisuunad

Elamusturundus, brändi juhtimine, kohaturundus, riigi brändimine, turunduse juhtimine, strateegiline turundus, turunduskommunikatsioon

8. Lisainfo

Osalemine Majandusteaduse ja innovatsiooni doktorikooli rahvusvahelises doktorantide suvekoolis 2011. ja 2012. aasta suvel

Eesti Suhtekorraldajate Liit, liige

CURRICULUM VITAE

1. Personal data

Name	Siiri Same
Date and place of birth	21.02.1969, Tallinn
Citizenship	Estonian
E-mail address	siiri.same@gmail.com

2. Education

Educational institution	Graduation year	Education (field of study/degree)
Tallinn University of Technology	2015	Business, Doctor of Philosophy, PhD
Tallinn University of Technology (TUT)	2006	Master in Business Administration (*cum laude*)
Tartu University	1994	Marketing and trade, diploma equivalent to a Master's degree (*cum laude*)
Tallinn Secondary School No 7	1987	Secondary education

3. Language competence/skills (fluent, average, basic skills)

Language	Level
Estonian	Fluent
English	Fluent
Russian	Fluent
Finnish	Average
Swedish	Basic skills
French	Basic skills

4. Special courses

Period	Educational or other organization
11–21.12.2013	Prof. Petri Nokelainen, University of Tampere, course "History and Development of Business Research", TUT
8.05.2013	Prof. Gerrit Borchard, University of Geneva, "How to Publish a World Class Paper", Tallinn University

21–22.03.2013	Prof. Paula Kyrö, Aalto University, "Defining the concepts for the methodological choices", "Methodological choices in my research process", TUT
28.02–1.03.2013	Prof. Helle Neergaard, Arhus Business School, "An overview of different research approaches", "How to plan and implement case studies in entrepreneurship research?", TUT
7.–8.02.2013	Prof. Hans Lanström, Lund University, lectures on entrepreneurship research, TUT
11.10–20.12.2012	Academic English, Merike Saar, Primus program
19.01.2012	PhD Colloquium, International Marketing Trends Conference, Venice: Marketing Trends Association, ESCP Europe.
28–30.10.2011	Prof. Anu Valtonen, University of Lapland, course "Ethnography", fieldwork, learning diary, at TUT
2–4.03.2011	Prof Paula Kyrö, Aalto University, Entrepreneurship Theories
15–18.02.2011	Prof. Helle Neergaard, Arhus Business School, "Focusing on how to get from research question to data collection and analysis", "Doing a literature review, creating theoretical framework for research", "Publication of Qualitative Research".
12.10–16.12.2010	Prof. Petri Nokelainen, University of Tampere, Course "Scientific Writing" and "Quantitative Research Methods", TUT

5. Professional employment

Period	Organization	Position
2013–2014	AS Äripäev	Best Marketing, Sales and Marketing Manager, Event Manager
2011–2012	Enterprise Estonia	Investment and Trade Development Division, Marketing Manager
2008–2010	Tallinn University of Technology	Head of Marketing and Communication Office
2007–2008	Santa Maria AS	Marketing Manager
2006–2007	Kalev Chocolate Factory AS	Product Manager
2002–2005	Hansa Leasing Estonia AS	Advertising Manager
2001–2002	Hansa Capital Group	Marketing Specialist
1993–2000	Estline AS	Assistant Marketing Director, Chief Cashier

6. Research activity

Publications

Same, S. (2014). Experience Marketing in Country Branding: Theoretical Developments and an Estonian Case Study. *Research in Economics and Business: Central and Eastern Europe*, *6*(1), 65–88.

Same, S., & Solarte-Vasquez, M.C. (2014). Country Branding and Country Image: Insights, Challenges and Prospects. The Case of Estonia. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, *4*(1), 137–165.

Same, S. (2012). Country Branding and Experience Marketing: a Perspective on Sensemaking and Cognition Theories. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Economy and Business*, *6*(3), 286–303.

Same, S. (2012). Experience Marketing: Conceptual Model, Difference from Experiential Marketing and a Pilot Study. *European Marketing Academy (EMAC) 41st Annual Conference proceedings* (p. 458), 22–25 May 2012. Lisbon, Portugal: ISCTE-IUL Business School.

Same, S., & Larimo, J. (2012). Marketing Theory: Experience Marketing and Experiential Marketing. In R. Ginevičius, A. V. Rutkauskas, & J. Stankevičienė (Eds.), *7th International Scientific Conference "Business and Management 2012"*, selected papers (pp. 480–487), 10–11 May 2012. Vilnius, Lithuania: Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Press "Technika".

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Leppiman, A., & Same, S. (2011). Experience Marketing: Conceptual Insights and the Difference from Experiential Marketing. In G. Prause & U. Venesaar (Eds.), *Regional Business and Socio-Economic Development 5: University-Business Cooperation* (pp. 240–258). Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

Conference presentations

The study results were presented by the author in four international scientific conferences: in Venice, Lisbon, Tallinn, and Vilnius.

Teaching

Course to Master students on "Brand Management" (TMM1490), November 2010 – January 2011, 5 ECTS, Tallinn University of Technology.

Thesis supervised
Kadri Tolsberg, Master's thesis (2013). *Brändi identiteedi ja kuvandi võrdlus AS Santa Maria näitel*. (Comparing Brand Identity and Image on the Example of Santa Maria AS.) Supervisors: Anu Leppiman, Siiri Same. Tallinn University of Technology.

7. Main research topics

Brand Management, Experience Marketing, Place Marketing, Country Branding, Marketing Management, Strategic Marketing, Marketing Communication

8. Additional information

Participation in the Doctoral Summer School organized by the Doctoral School in Economics and Innovation in 2011 and 2012

Estonian Public Relations Association (EPRA), member

DISSERTATIONS DEFENDED AT
TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY ON
ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

1. **August Aarma**. Segmented Analysis of Bank Customers and Banking Information: Estonian Case. 2001.

2. **Enn Listra**. The Development and Structure of Banking Sector: Retail Banking in Estonia. 2001.

3. **Tatyana Põlajeva**. The Comparative Analysis of Market's Attractiveness. 2001.

4. **Tuuli Tammeraid**. Modeling Flow of Funds for Estonia. 2002.

5. **Ivo Karilaid**. The Choice in General Method for Investment and Performance Evaluation. 2002.

6. **Hele Hammer**. Strategic Investment Decisions: Evidence from Survey and Field Research in Estonia. 2003.

7. **Viljar Jaamu**. The Methods and Instruments for Solving the Banking Crisis and Development of the Banking Sector in Estonia. 2003.

8. **Katri Kerem**. From Adoption to Relationships: Internet Banking in Estonia. 2003.

9. **Ly Kirikal**. Productivity, the Malmquist Index and the Empirical Study of Banks in Estonia. 2005.

10. **Jaanus Raim**. The PPP Deviations between Estonia and Non-Transitional Countries. 2006.

11. **Jochen Sebastian Heubischl**. European Network Governance – Corporate Network Systematic in Germany, the United Kingdom and France: an Empirical Investigation. 2006.

12. **Enno Lend**. Transpordiühenduse ja logistikasüsteemi interaktsioon (Saaremaa ja Hiiumaa näitel). 2007.

13. **Ivar Soone**. Interrelations between Retail Service Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty: A Holistic Perspective. 2007.

14. **Aaro Hazak**. Capital Structure and Dividend Decisions under Distributed Profit Taxation. 2008.

15. **Laivi Laidroo**. Public Announcements' Relevance, Quality and Determinants on Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius Stock Exchanges. 2008.

16. **Martti Randveer**. Monetary Policy Transmission Channels, Flexibility of the Economy and Future Prospects of the Estonian Monetary System. 2009.

17. **Kaire Põder**. Structural Solutions to Social Traps: Formal and Informal Institutions. 2010.

18. **Tõnn Talpsepp**. Investor Behavior and Volatility Asymmetry. 2010.

19. **Tarmo Kadak**. Creation of a Supportive Model for Designing and Improving the Performance Management System of an Organisation. 2011.

20. **Jüri Kleesmaa**. Economic Instruments as Tools for Environmental Regulation of Electricity Production in Estonia. 2011.

21. **Oliver Parts**. The Effects of Cosmopolitanism on Estonian and Slovenian Consumer Choice Behavior of Foreign *versus* Domestic Products. 2011.

22. **Mart Nutt**. Eesti parlamendi pädevuse kujunemine ja rakendamine välissuhetes. 2011.

23. **Igor Novikov**. Credit Risk Determinants in the Banking Sectors of the Baltic States. 2011.

24. **Mike Franz Wahl**. Kapitaliühingute lõppomanike alusväärtuste ja tahte uurimine ning omanikkonna tüpoloogia konstrueerimine. 2011.

25. **Tobias Wiebelt**. Impact of Lease Capitalization on the Development of Accounting Standards: A Theoretical Research. 2012.

26. **Sirje Pädam**. Economic Perspectives on Environmental Policies: The Costs and Benefits of Environmental Regulation in Estonia. 2012.

27. **Juhan Värk**. Venemaa positiivse hõlvamise poliitika ja teiste välispoliitiliste liinide mõjud Eesti-Vene suhetele aastail 1991–2011. 2012.

28. **Mari Avarmaa**. Implications of Capital Structure and Credit Constraints for Company Performance: A Comparative Study of Local and Multinational Companies in the Baltics. 2012.

29. **Fabio Filipozzi**. The Efficiency of Interest Rate and Foreign Exchange Markets in the Euro Area and Central and Eastern Europe. 2012.

30. **Aleksei Netšunajev**. Developments and Determinants of Intra-Industry Trade in the Baltic States. 2012.

31. **Aleksandr Miina**. Critical Success Factors of Lean Thinking Implementation in Estonian Manufacturing Companies. 2012.

32. **Angelika Kallakmaa-Kapsta**. Before and After the Boom: Changes in the Estonian Housing Market. 2013.

33. **Karen Voolaid**. Measurement of Organizational Learning of Business Schools. 2013.

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38. **Alar Kolk**. Co-evolution of Capabilities' and Alliance Portfolios: Multinational Firms in Global ICT Industry. 2014.

39. **Svetlana Raudonen**. Impact of Corporative Taxation on Foreign Direct Investments: Evidence from the European Union. 2014.

40. **Riina Koris**. Customer Orientation at a Higher Educational Institution: The Perspective of Undergraduate Business Students in Estonia. 2014.

41. **Merle Rihma**. Ethics Audit: A Management Tool for Assessing of Corporate Social Responsibility and Preventing Ethical Risks. 2014.

42. **Anu Virovere**. The Role of Management Values, Knowledge Management and Conflict Management for Improvement of Organisational Sustainability. 2015.

43. **Kristina Hunke**. Conceptualisation and Management of Green Transport Corridors. 2015.

44. **Eneken Titov**. Management Paradigm Values in Real and Propagated Level as Prerequisites of Organisational Success. 2015.