Reconciling tensions and tradeoffs between supply side network actors as Tourism Brand Making: the case of Burren Eco-Tourism Network

Introduction

In this paper we will explore how a destination brand is brought into being (after Onyas and Ryan, 2015) through the “dynamic processes and practices that take place between the context-bound interconnected actors” (Saraniemi and Kylanen, 2011, 136). As such we consider the destination brand as co-constructed by the many and varied actors operating within the destination. We position our work at the nexus of three academic discussions. One, we have the emergent significance given to the supply side of destination brand (Bregoli, 2013) success, where actions of destination ‘stakeholders’ are recognised as key to the successful delivery of a coherent brand experience to the end consumer. However, rather than take the brand as pre-given to which stakeholders must adhere, we consider the brand as co-created, involving many tradeoffs and tensions between actor mindsets and actions. Two, we consider Baerenholdt et al (2004) who suggest that tourism studies should pay attention to the practicing and performing, and that the production and consumption practices create spatiality. This counters the more traditional view where tourism destination research has tended to privilege a static view of destinations. In taking a constructivist approach we instead consider how destinations have become understood as “socio-culturally constructed spaces that actively shape their own future” (Saraniemi and Kylanen, 2011, 138). Three, we consider the brand as an outcome of network activities rather than pre-given entities. These include suppliers and consumers, and not just the latter, but also non-human actors such as standards and certification process, training programmes and including an array of symbolic and discursively loaded media content (Nakassis, 2012). Importantly this position does not privilege any one actor over another and points instead to the relations between actors and their configuration within the network, which hold together constellations of characteristics and meanings. Further, this process is not viewed as predeterminable, or as a fait accompli on the part of the brand ‘sponsor’. Instead, the process is likely to be characterised by disagreements between market actors, which steer the ‘realisation of the brand’ in differing directions, triggering adjustments within the assemblage, which leaves the outcome open to multiple adjustments (Onyas and Ryan, 2015).

These themes will be explored in a single case study involving tourism providers in the Burren, Co. Clare. Specifically the case addresses concerted efforts by tourism providers to cohere a eco-tourism brand for the region in the formation of the Burren Eco-tourism Network.

Literature Review
Given the small to medium sized nature of many tourism firms and the importance of geography/location there has been a surge in interest in tourism business networks. These take many forms and are initiated for different reasons (Wang & Krakover, 2008), but ultimately they form a new entity in the tourism market. These entities are by nature quite difficult to manage and structure requiring collective efforts by members who still remain, independent businesses with their own strategic objectives (see Wang & Krakover, 2008). In

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this paper we take the view that tourism providers act as interdependent actors within complex networks, which they shape through market practices. From this perspective networks are constantly being constructed by the interactions between organizations (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). According to Araujo et al (2008 pg 6) “markets should be studied as sites of multiple and often conflicting practices, and attention should be directed towards the forms markets take as a result of the efforts to shape them”. This approach is founded on the premise that markets do not pre-exist as stabilised entities but are ever-changing performances enacted, reproduced and shaped by the interplay of routines, activities and material devices. This concurs with the approach suggested by van der Duim et al (2013 pg8) which suggest that “In order to generate an understanding of the complex multiplicity of tourism, we suggest bringing attention to the networked and fluid capacities of actors.”

In a recent article from Onyas and Ryan (2014) the notion of brands as market shaping devices was proposed. More specifically the paper draws on the work of Callon (2005, 2007), to consider the brand’s world as an assemblage consisting of heterogeneous and diverse entities in which the brand enacts itself and influences action. The authors build upon the recent stream of research from the sociology of brands to explore in detail, ‘what brands do’ as it coordinates relations and activities in markets. The brand is not seen to ‘act alone’ however. Rather it is a participant in the brand’s world where its marketing shaping ‘outcomes’ can be ‘observed’. The brand’s world can consist of multiple human actors, such as consumers, brand sponsors’/owners, local tourist operators, and non-human actors such as standards and certification process, training programmes and including an array of symbolic and discursively loaded media content (Nakassis, 2012). Important this position does not privilege any one actor over another and points instead to the relations between actors and their configuration within assemblage (van der Duim et al 2013), which hold together constellations of characteristics and meanings. Further, this process is not viewed as predeterminable, or as a fait accompli on the part of the brand ‘sponsor’. Instead the process is likely to be characterised by disagreements between market actors, which steer the ‘realisation of the brand’ in differing directions, triggering adjustments within the assemblage, which leaves the outcome open to multiple adjustments (Onyas and Ryan, 2014). Indeed as Saraniemi and Kylanen (2011 pg139) suggest, “Destinations are being constantly produced and reproduced through complex practices and discourses: to some tourists, tourism companies, local people, and other market actors, the destination may appear totally different in terms of shape, content, and relationships”

Method

The research design for this work is following a case study approach. The focal case is the Burren Eco-Tourism network (BEN), based on the west coast of Co. Clare, Ireland. Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) was established in 2008 as a business network, with the objective of promoting the Burren region as an internationally-recognised sustainable tourism destination, ensuring the future economic, social growth and sustainable development of communities and environment. All members of BEN are located in The Burren & Cliffs of Moher region, a UNESCO-supported Global Geopark, whose status shows its significant geological, ecological and cultural value, as well as sustainable tourism practices (BEN website). BEN is one of the largest certification based eco-tourism networks in Ireland, with currently 38 businesses certified through Eco-tourism Ireland. This involves a complex and relatively costly process for each member, with the benefits including: eco-training on energy, water and waste management, co-marketing activities and the ability to act as part
of a larger entity thus giving SME and micro tourism organisations the opportunity to travel to trade fairs, Tourism Ireland training opportunities as well as attracting press ‘fam trips’.

The research design is phased in nature. The initial phase involved 12 interviews with 12 business owners and members of BEN. These interviews took place in two locations in the Burren in February 2014, with a further round of interviews planned for Summer 2015. The interviews were co-ordinated by the researcher’s main contact and chairman of BEN. Six interviews took place in each location, allowing for a general introduction to the research and the research method to be explained to business owners. The interviews were carried out by students undertaking a module in a module on Strategic Tourism Marketing, a module which took a relational perspective on the topic. The interviews were supervised by one of the co-authors. The discussion guide was developed by the lead researcher with input from the students. The interviews utilised network pictures as a device to think about their various connections, both within BEN and outside of the network. We followed discussion guide that followed Ramos and Ford’s (2011) protocol in this regard. Topics addressed included: 1. Scale and structure includes depiction and analysis of existing direct relationships; the number of those relationships, the focal actor’s position in the network. 2. Process elements such as a) actor bonds: power relations, degrees of commitment, and to what, closeness, personal ties, level of trust, co-operation, understanding; b) Resources: transfer and transformation and included human, informational, relational, financial, organisational, legal, physical; c) activities engaged in with network partners - what are they doing together? 3. Positioning within the network. Each interviewee signed a research consent form and each was recorded in full. Each network picture was also recorded and kept for purposes of analysis.

The analysis followed a three stage process. Firstly each interview was analysed individually with regard to the research objectives and network picture analysis. Each interviewer, along with the lead research engaged in an open discussion regarding common themes emerging out of the individual interviews. A key insight to emerge from this was the degree of variation and difference between network members approach to and activities within the network. After a two hour long discussion three themes emerged: 1) positioning in the network and degree of connectivity between network members. 2) organisation of the network including an analysis of how the structure of the network impacted on every day interactions and 3) a rich analysis of the varying mindsets and approaches within the network. It is this last theme that will be foregrounded in this paper. The rationale for this is that this theme in particular reveals best how tourism providers create “versions” of the tourist destination through a multiplicity of discursive, performative and socio-material practices at the tourist destination (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011).

**Findings**

Our analysis of BEN members’s network stories evidences important variations in what it means to be an ‘eco-tourism business’ and what the role of their network relations play in the framing of the Burren as an eco-tourism destination. We begin with the providers accounts of ‘sustainability’.

Having an environmental mindset is one of the prerequisites for being accepted as a member of BEN. Each new member must undertake training in the area of environmental protection and energy saving. From the interviews conducted, it is clear that there are varying levels of interest in the environment. While all have some interest in the environment, many cite the opportunity to grow their businesses through networking as being their
primary reason for joining. One particular business owner states that her main focus is in protecting the landscape of the Burren and because of this it is important that business owners monitor their energy consumption, waste production and water conservation each year. While this viewpoint is common, it is not uncontested. For example, for one business owner stated that he “incorporates environmental practices” in order to cut costs and that his business has benefitted from significant cost reductions from implementing energy saving measures. In addition, other business owners have indicated that they view BEN primarily as a business support resource with one owner stating that he wants to “base myself fulltime in the area….to set up a number of complimentary business ventures in the area….using BEN as a starting point”. Another member stated that they joined BEN to obtain business advice and that they view BEN is a network where they can “not just get other business….but learn ideas”.

Having such differing mind-sets could be harmful to the network. On the one hand, members may view each other’s opposing mind-sets as being an obstacle to achieving the network’s goals. Members who believe foremost in protecting the environment may not want to network with those members they consider to be in it for personal and monetary gain and those who are business-orientated may view the environmentalists as not fully understanding the benefits a network can bring to their businesses. These conflicting approaches can play themselves out at meetings, leading to time wasting, tension, poor relationships, lack of trust and an eventual breakdown of the network. However, differing mind-sets can also benefit a network. If members are allowed the freedom to have their own individual focus while at the same time respecting and adhering to the environmental ethos of BEN, with each member being aware of each other’s main motive, then the lines of communication will be open and growth will occur.

**Independent Mind-set versus Relational Mind-set**

The mind-sets discussed under this heading examine the different attitudes observed of BEN members regarding their connections made with other businesses. We have established that there were varying motivations and objectives of the members within this network and as a result, to find differing levels of independence among them was not surprising. The tendency emerged among those who had larger businesses to be more independent. Therefore, an interactive mind-set was witnessed in those smaller business owners who relied on creating actor bonds and resource ties to sustain their ventures. However, there are exceptions to this and there were those who were in between both approaches. The firms with a more interpersonal attitude may grasp the functions of a network more clearly than those who feel they are an independent entity within the network, which is quite a paradoxical mind-set to have as a member of BEN.

There are risks and benefits associated with each mind-set. Businesses observed to be more independent within the network do not seem to be utilizing the network to its full potential. As one member admitted after the interview to ‘doing our own thing’ in the network and admitted to being quite independent. Bonds and resource ties are at times not being actively sought, which could lead to lack of awareness of that particular business among the network members or even a perceived lack of commitment or trust. This outlook could hinder growth within the network and could effectively isolate the business. Nonetheless, there is a system of referrals in which each member is taking part in to some degree, indicating that no member is completely independent of other businesses, however small they may view the relationship between them. Conversely, a relational mind-set indicates a networking approach, which could be seen as ideal for members of BEN. As an ecotourism network, the overall sharing of knowledge and business support leads to a greater
cohesion among members willing to communicate and commit to joint offerings. Enthusiasm was noted amongst most members who were interviewed to link up and share activities and information with others. Moreover, with this particular mind-set, there were different degrees of dependability on other businesses detected; those that ran smaller businesses had to rely greatly on others (partly out of necessity but also because of the wish to network and form relationships with others). This is one of the risks associated with a relational mind-set. Too much interdependence within the network could jeopardize the businesses were something to affect one in the relationship. This danger would reinforce the benefits of independence.

Business owners with a relational mind-set would benefit more within BEN as this attitude and approach allows for a more interconnected network. Were each business to have an independent mind-set, it would lead to a fragmented and disjointed project. An ideal situation would be to have a mind-set positioned within one of relational and independence, which was witnessed in some BEN members as there are advantages to both and the risks related to being overly dependent on others, or separated from a cohesive network, would be lessened.

Passive Mind-set versus Active Mind-set

It is apparent that there are members of BEN who possess either a passive mind-set or an active mind-set. A number of the business owners that were interviewed showed that they were strongly active in the network, seeking out joint ventures and opportunities with other firms, while a number of other business owners came across as extremely passive and almost uninterested in the network. There were also members of BEN that could be a mix of attitudes. These people were active within the administration side of the network, though were not so active in the networking elements of BEN. There are many factors that would affect the member’s attitudes towards the network and their ability to work within the network. One of the major problems facing the network is the lack of participation from a number of the businesses i.e. those with a passive stance. This in turn will affect the attitudes of the active members of the group. Some active members of the group have explained that they have reduced their amount of referrals to these businesses and will avoid working with them. This becomes a major problem for the network as it reduces their ability to work as a connected entity and lobby together for important projects. Passive members also voiced their concerns within the network. It became apparent that a number of these people were extremely interested in working with the network with a naturally active mind-set; however, time was their problem. Many of the businesses in BEN are micro businesses (e.g. A Surf School) and may have as little as one person running the entire company. This meant that though they were referring business to other BEN members and attempting to participate within the network but were unable to due to restricting circumstances but they were seen to be inert and unwilling to put in the effort. This causes communication problems for BEN and it causes tensions and possible resentment within the group.

There are a number of businesses within BEN that are seen to be completely uninvolved and who would seem to portray a passive mind-set. A number of these members are large organisations / companies who are not participating in meetings or events. However, in some cases these members will attend free training days and make full use of marketing opportunities that arise within BEN. Participative members seem to be concerned with these affiliates. They see these big companies as opportunities for referrals and joint ventures but due to the lack of involvement from them they do not have the ability to build these relationships further.
On the other hand, 40% of the members are seen to be very active. Many of these members are involved in BEN committees and organise workshops for the network along with meeting, training days and marketing campaigns. These members meet regularly and use the network to the best of their abilities. Some of these members get little to no rewards for their efforts but yet they strive to keep the network going for the good of their area which is rooted in the mind-set that they possess. This effort could be hindered by the lack of involvement from passive members.

In conclusion, it is clear that the different mind-sets possessed by different members motivate their behaviours and attitudes within the network.

Conclusions

In this study, one ecotourism network that is marketed as a destination brand was examined from the perspective of contradictory actions and mindsets performed by supply side stakeholders of the destination. We identified three main contradictory mindsets of these actors: environmental vs. business orientated; independent vs. relational and passive vs. active mindsets. These findings show that destination brand is socio-culturally constructed (cf. Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011) and consist of multiple voices that should be taken into a consideration. Although tensions exist, benefits gained through openness lead to mutual understanding and mutuality, which is needed for successful brand co-creation between stakeholders involved (see e.g. Leitch & Richardson, 2003).

Thus, the brand is not seen to ‘act alone’. Rather it is a participant in the brand’s world where it’s co-constructed ‘outcomes’ can be ‘observed’ and transformed into commonly acceptable meaning in terms of organisation and governance of the destination brand.
References


