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**Developing Destination Experience and Digital Marketing in Co-creation Process –
Case Cooperation of Ranua Municipality and Lapland University of Applied Sciences**

This paper introduces a co-creation process of developing destination experience and digital marketing involving a peripheral tourism destination and an educational organisation in Finnish Lapland. The case discusses the concrete steps of a practical process where students with teachers co-create value related to destination experience and digital marketing with the representatives of a tourism destination. This helps the destination to recognise and highlight the most relevant features of the local culture for its tourism target groups and invite also customers to the value co-creation process. The key issues are tight interdependence among the co-creative partners, openness and trust.

Key words: co-creation, tourism destination, education, destination experience, digital marketing

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Introduction

This paper introduces a co-creation process related to developing destination experience and digital marketing involving a tourism destination and an educational organisation, more specifically the municipality of Ranua and the Lapland University of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Rovaniemi, in Finnish Lapland. The case is implemented within the Research and Development project “Destination Experience Development Model” (DEDM) funded by the European Regional Development Fund and managed by the Regional Council of Lapland.

Today, tourists have more choices of destinations than ever before and the competition between the destinations is hard. The challenges for the destinations are to understand what the tourists are really interested in, how to find the competitive advantage and how to differentiate from other destinations. It is not always easy to recognize the special features of the destination especially when the interest is related to everyday life at the destination. It is becoming increasingly obvious that tourists are interested in local culture and authentic life in the destination (Urry, 1990; Paloniemi, Jutila & Hakkarainen, 2018). Thus, it is crucial that the destination planners and companies recognise, perceive and highlight the relevant features such as local culture and heritage of the region, and are able to design tourism products accordingly and to communicate about them efficiently also online.

Co-creation is a consumer-oriented marketing approach that emphasizes consumers' active participation in the service creation process together with the company, service provider or destination (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Kima, Stepchenkovab & Babalouc, 2018). As value shifts to experiences, the market becomes a forum for conversation and interactions between tourists, traveller communities, companies and destinations (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Tourists are increasingly and voluntarily co-creating value with and for

the destinations; thus, we can say that tourists are the value co-creators of products at different stages of product development and marketing (Vargo & Lush, 2004). In the co-creation process, destinations can better identify consumers' needs and wants, increase satisfaction and enhance brand loyalty (Kima, Stepchenkovab & Babalouc, 2018). Tourists can be considered as 'consumers' of tourism and co-creators of tourism products and services (Cooper & Hall, 2016). Destination branding as an effective marketing tool helps a tourist destination distinguish itself from its competitors. In the co-creation workshops of our case, both Finnish and international students - representatives of the future target groups - helped the destination to see the potential in the special features of the destination and also new ways on how to communicate them in the digital marketing world.

Co-creation process

One of the objectives at the Lapland UAS tourism studies is to execute deep working life cooperation with regional tourism destinations and companies. Our study units and projects are integrated with real working life destinations, so-called Living Labs (LL), ie. open, user-centric ecosystems of learning, research and innovation that are executed with local society. The LL environment offers a real-life context supporting all participants' learning that is enhanced with a variety of co-creation methods. (see Kruger, Caiado, França & Quelhas, 2018, p. 403.)

Characteristic of our process is the tight interdependence among co-creative partners, involving direct openness, trust and human centricity. When relating our process to Adner's (2017, p.41) 'Ecosystem as an affiliation', there are deep similarities in the quality of feelings towards other participants that present various roles and personalities. Because of mutual trust, our system of holistic co-creation allows us to work in a cycle of repeating a pattern where the process proceeds together and apart. The planning and launching are executed

together, experimental actions are conducted apart, checking, analysing and evaluation are done together.

The Lapland UAS has long roots of collaborative cooperation in tourism with the municipality of Ranua that is located about 80 km south of Rovaniemi. The focus groups of Ranua are the representatives of the destination management organization (DMO) Visit Ranua, tourism and service business entrepreneurs, leaders and participants of non-profit organizations and residents (Figure 1). Ranua can be described as a peripheral tourism destination. The term ‘peripheral’ is often used to refer to a region that is remote, sparsely populated, characterised by a lack of public and private services and limited in accessibility (e.g., Brown & Hall, 2000). Tourism has become a development catalyst for promoting social and economic welfare in peripheral areas in Lapland, also in Ranua.

TOURISM AND SERVICE COMPANIES IN RANUA

Companies that had a homepage and were easily found online in June 2018

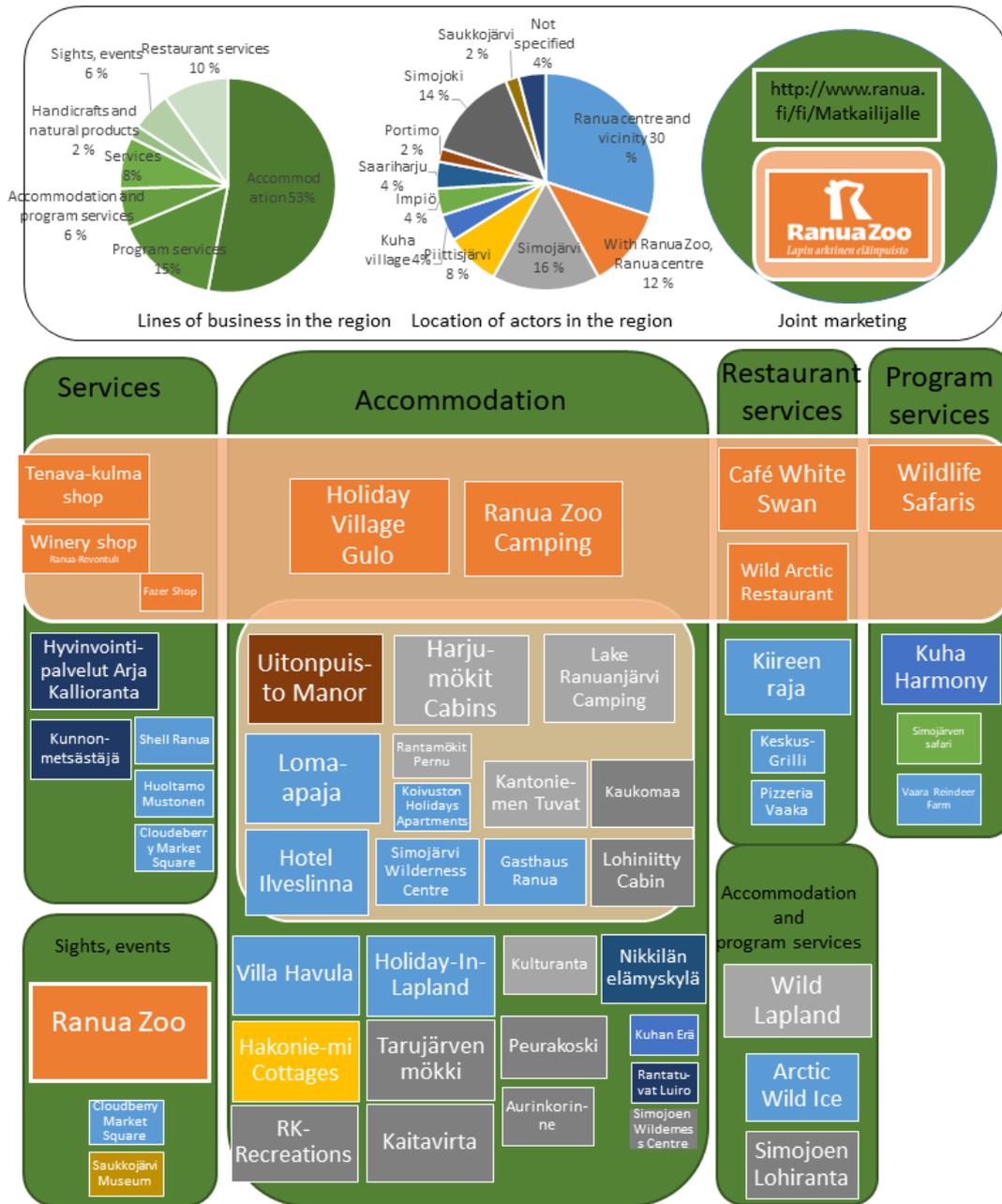


Figure 1. Tourism and service companies as tourism focus groups in Ranua based on online observation in June 2018 (Destination Experience Development Model 2018)

Framework for developing destination experience and digital marketing

This paper introduces the strategic framework for developing destination experience and digital marketing in Ranua. The first phase of the development process was to define the

identity of the destination and to form Ranua's identity prism (Figure 2) in a co-creation process involving Visit Ranua, Ranua municipality leaders and entrepreneurs, as well as Finnish and international tourism students and teachers from the Lapland UAS. The identity prism presents the stakeholders' assessment of Ranua's personality, physical features, culture of action, customer relationship, customers' image of service and its users as well as customers' self-concept. The identity prism (Kapferer, 2008) is one way to present the base of the destination identity. The idea behind is that the product and marketing planning starts from the authentic elements of the region that is affected by the special characteristic factors of the destination and tourists (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, pp. 868-869). It is crucial that the local stakeholders, entrepreneurs and residents are involved and dedicated in designing the content of the identity prism.

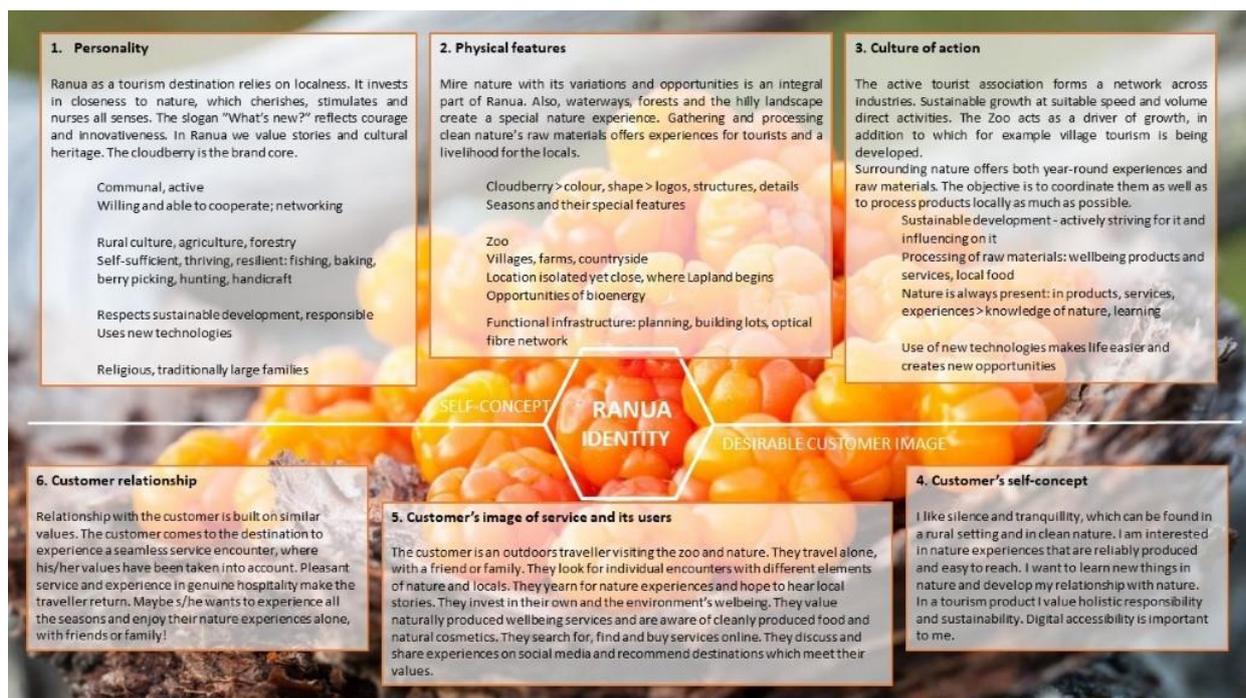


Figure 2. Identity prism of Ranua (Destination Experience Development Model, 2018)

The next step was to plan and implement the identity prism content into digital marketing actions in a semi-structured service design workshop that was held for the focus groups in Ranua in April 2019. The facilitators of the co-creation workshop were another

group of Lapland UAS tourism students and their teachers. There were multiple methods used in the co-creation workshop to support the open atmosphere for sharing information and knowledge among the participants. The topics of the ideation tables were, firstly, the present condition and image of Ranua's digital marketing, secondly, suggestions of online actions and, thirdly, online customer service and responsibility. The students encouraged and helped the entrepreneurs to start with Instagram, which was chosen as the main social media tool of the workshop. The co-created workshop outputs were then collected, documented and further processed in several learning project portfolios.

The teachers and Visit Ranua representatives provided relevant pre-reading material on the destination for the students who planned the workshop content to meet the project objectives. Furthermore, lectures, digital skills classes, coaching sessions and rehearsals were provided to enhance students' competences and to support them to process their operational workshop responsibilities.

Though the DEDM project still continues, there already exist concrete, outstanding results of the process, such as integrated studies and digital development actions in Ranua (Figure 3). In autumn 2019, the value-based segmentation of tourism target groups for Ranua will be finalized. All the relevant data and learning results gathered during the DEDM project will be used for this work in further co-creation workshops. The students will have an even greater role in analysing, utilising, reflecting and creating content such as presentations and theses that form the base to proceed with development discussions and implementation of practices. The final part of the DEDM project finishing in March 2020 includes the construction of a holistic Destination Development Experience Model for Ranua that emphasizes the identity prism content and is a tool to implement experiences into destination practices.

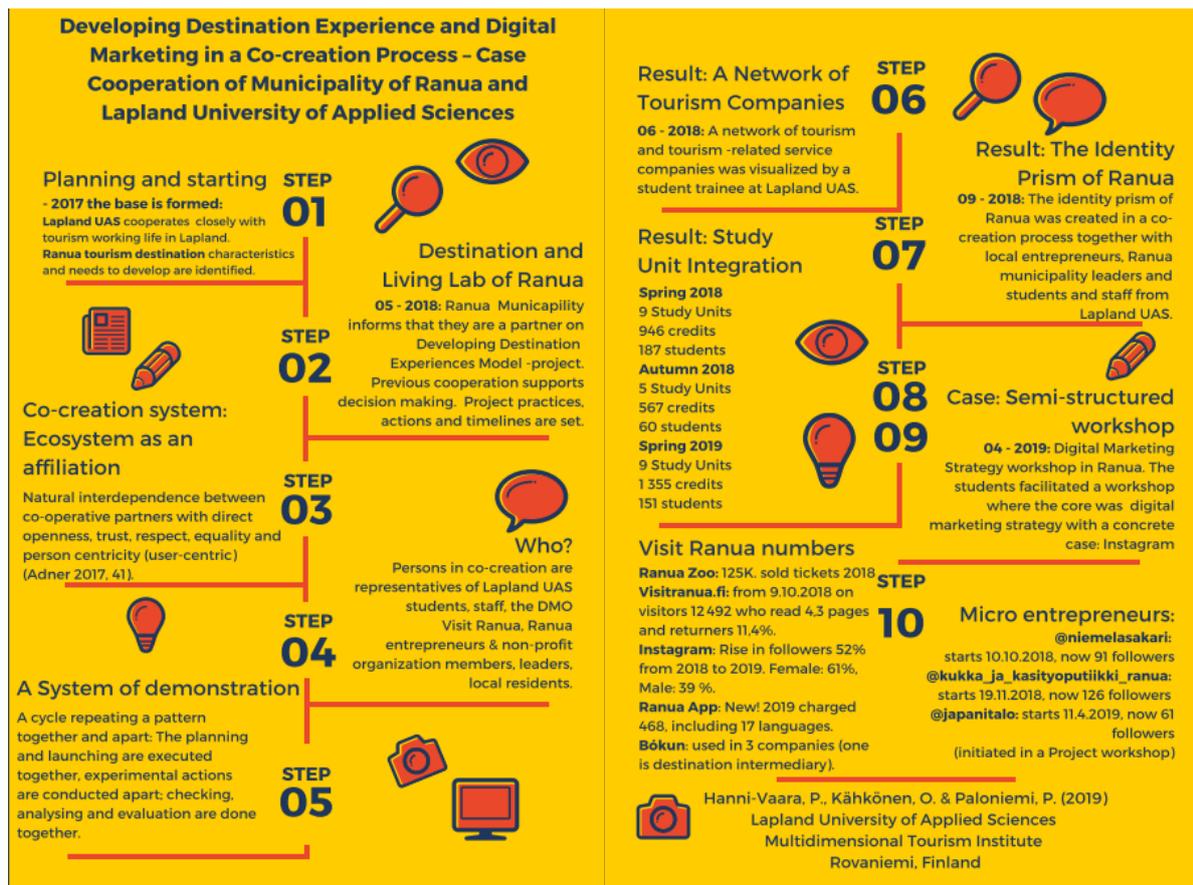


Figure 3. Approximate process phase description of the system and results gained

Conclusion

This paper introduces a co-creation process related to developing destination experience and digital marketing involving a tourism destination and an educational organisation. The case in focus explains about the trusting and holistic co-creation process of the municipality of Ranua and the Lapland UAS. As a result, we can recommend a similar co-creation model as a development practice to other tourism destinations and educational institutions. The challenges that we have faced during the process are mainly related to the differences in the working cultures and practices of the stakeholders. When the obstacles are discussed and solved, there are mainly positive implications to various parties in the co-creation process. The close relationship between an educational institution and a destination enables the students – and teachers – to learn in a real working life environment, which

increases their professionalism. In addition, all parties form a network that can be used in the future e.g. when recruiting personnel and creating development projects. Furthermore, students create fresh ideas and bring the perspective of a younger generation and future target groups. Also, the positive image of all parties is strengthened, creating possibilities for even tighter cooperation in future.

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