The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at:
https://www.emerald.com/insight/1753-8335.htm

Received 16 December 2019
Revised 4 May 2020
19 September 2020
8 January 2021
Accepted 11 January 2021

The inevitability of essentializing culture in destination branding: the cases of *fika* and *hygge*

Laura Caprioli
VisitBritain, London, UK

Mia Larson
Service Research Center, Karlstad Business School, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

Richard Ek
Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden, and

Can-Seng Ooi
School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to focus on the re-presentation of the cultural phenomena *hygge* in Denmark and *fika* in Sweden in destination branding and address the inevitability of their essentialization through the branding process.

Design/methodology/approach – Three relevant semi-structured interviews with destination marketing organisation's employees were conducted, as well as a content-based analysis of three social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). A total of 465 posts in total were analysed (140 Facebook posts, 109 Twitter posts, 216 Instagram posts).

Findings – This study demonstrates how, when communicated through social media, intangible cultural assets are transformed into tangible elements. It explains why the re-presentation and place branding processes necessarily simplify and essentialize the destination.

Originality/value – Destination branding scholars have traditionally criticised the flattening and essentialization of culture in destination branding and have called for a more nuanced approach to presenting a destination. This paper situates destination branding as a process that necessitates the manipulation of the presentation of the destination, which inevitably essentializes the place; this is intended. Critical destination branding researchers need to rethink their criticisms and acknowledge the inherent essentialization goal of destination branding.

Keywords Destination branding, Social media communication, Essentialization, *Fika*, *Hygge*, Intangible cultural assets, Nordic destination branding, Mediatization

Paper type Research paper

Journal of Place Management and Development
Vol. 14 No. 3, 2021
pp. 346-361
Emerald Publishing Limited
1753-8335
DOI 10.1108/JPMD-12-2019-0114

© Laura Caprioli, Mia Larson, Richard Ek and Can-Seng Ooi. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Introduction

A growing number of studies claim that destination brands should reflect a distinctive and attractive image highlighting a destination's unique features, identity and culture (Cai, 2002; Yúdice, 2003; Blain *et al.*, 2005; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Sinclair-Maragh, 2018). Culture is often used to assert that distinctive and attractive image. But as Scaramanga (2012) observes, culture is often superficially represented, as there is a focus on tangible expressions and manifestations of culture, such as landmarks and cultural facilities, rather than the intangible (Bianchini and Ghilardi, 2007; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2010, 2015).

Another challenge of using culture in destination branding is that culture is dynamic, contextual and situational. Any attempts at capturing it, requires "packaging" (Ooi, 2007) and any attempt at characterising a particular society in cultural terms essentializes the culture (Ooi, 2019). Essentialization is an attempt at simplifying and reducing cultural complexity into core enduring elements (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2018). This packaging has attracted critiques from cultural studies for decades, with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) ground-breaking study being as relevant today as it was first published. For instance, some destination branding campaigns may even "Orientalize" (Said, 1979) the places (Turner, 1994; Lape, 2002; Ren and Ooi, 2013). For instance, Singapore is an ultra-modern and cosmopolitan city, but still the Singapore Tourism Board taps into the colonial imagination of the island in its destination branding, referring to Orientalized and essentialized cultural attractions, such as the trishaws, being served in the colonial Raffles Hotel, and tacky souvenirs (Ooi, 2011, 2014).

Scholars of place and destination branding have also criticised destination marketing organisations (DMOs) in their superficial ways of equating places, culture and products, and exclusively focus on the tangible expressions of destinations, reducing the richness of the places as well as their cultures in the process (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2010; Scaramanga, 2012; Campelo *et al.*, 2014; Vanolo, 2019). Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) discuss this disconnection between tangible and intangible culture and the hijacking of culture through superficial representations of material or tangible culture (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2015). This paper continues on the same topic but takes an alternative direction. While Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) are critical and eventually focus on a possible way to do the richness of culture justice in destination branding theory and practice, this paper argues that contemporary destination branding practice and its result in "banal" (Billig, 1995) expressions of destinations' cultures are intentional and inevitable. We show that destination branding necessarily essentializes the culture of places. With our cases of *hygge* and *fika* in Denmark and Sweden, respectively – with the focus on their social media presentations – we highlight that DMOs intentionally want a simple message to reach global audiences. To criticise these DMOs and destination branding campaigns for being essentialistic is to ignore the exact purpose and context of their branding exercises.

So, the essentialization of culture is a crucial and deliberate part of the cultural diplomacy and politics of representation of places. This reasoning runs parallel with and complements the discussion on the embedded ideological nature of social media, and the re-presentation of places as part of cultural work and immaterial labour (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). Such an interrogation is a semiotic and conceptual attempt to unfold, refine and theoretically re-evaluate the practices, purposes and understanding of place branding (Giovanardi, 2012; Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013). We draw inspiration from this diverse body of literature in accepting that the work of DMOs is always ideological. The elevation of tangible and material culture, plus the translation of intangible culture into consumable tangible tourist products in the industry, are intentional and are ideologically embedded. Consequently, we depart from the criticising the shallowness of representations in

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

destination marketing and move further and into analysing how ideologically infused representations of space come to being.

Ergo, this paper aims to show and problemise how intangible cultural practices of Swedish *fika* and Danish *hygge* are moulded, co-created and communicated in Nordic destination branding practices. *Fika* is considered an endearing tradition in Sweden of taking a break and having a cup of coffee (Brones and Kindvall, 2015). *Hygge* is the Danish concept that connotes an "atmosphere characterised by a particularly informal and relaxed spirit of being together, or even being alone" (Bille, 2015, p. 257). By analysing *fika* and *hygge* as cultural practices used in destination branding, we show how intangible cultural "assets" are essentialized and further entrenched into the local host society through social media. But instead of just criticising the DMOs on the shallowness of their approach to these complex social cultural phenomena, we reveal the dynamics of how *fika* and *hygge* are made tangible and visible, simplified, commodified and commercialised.

Destination branding, culture and social media

The dominant understanding of culture within destination branding literature is often considered inadequate as there is a disconnection between the destination brand and the local culture (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2015). Bianchini and Ghilardi (2007, p. 285) state that destination branding "should be more 'cultured', knowledgeable and critically aware of [...] the cultural life and cultural representations of a particular locality." Campelo *et al.* (2014, p. 155) argue that it is important to consider the "shared sense of the spirit of the place and [...] its representation and expression." Acknowledging the complexity and the nuances of a place will provide "an understanding of the layers of meanings upon which the uniqueness of each place is generated" (Campelo *et al.*, 2014, p. 161; Ooi, 2004, 2019). However, as argued by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015), the local culture is often "hijacked" and instrumentalized by DMOs. The consequence is that intangible local cultural practices and values become distorted, superficial and caricaturized, i.e. essentialized.

Similarly, social media destination marketers deliver messages to targeted consumers in a non-ambiguous, simple, visible and informative way (Miletsky and Smith, 2009; Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Lim *et al.*, 2012; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015; Parlov *et al.*, 2016). DMOs still largely keep control over the narratives evolving in destination branding communication on their platforms and social media accounts; thus, they use a mimetic approach to social-media marketing (Munar, 2011; Munar and Ek, 2015). DMOs select content reducing the complexity of messages, transforming the messages into unifaceted, uniform, simple and sometimes even misleading messages (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2015). DMOs may also choose to include user-generated content (UGC) by reposting on Instagram, sharing on Facebook or retweeting on Twitter in a process where they find and select UGC congruent to the messages they tell (Fujita *et al.*, 2019). As the UGC may not reflect or provide the same message promoted by DMOs, engaging and interacting on social media may allow DMOs to comprehend other points of view and direct the discussion accordingly (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, social media destination branding undergoes a mediatization process through which selected core elements of the intangible cultural assets assume a tangibility or perceptibility in media form. The symbolic content and the structures of the cultural assets are influenced by the media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon, not the least ideologically (Hjarvard, 2007; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). Mediatization combines a technological logic with a commercial one, meaning that technologies co-create and co-generate the contents of a communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005; see also Schulz, 2004). Visitors now consume mediated representations, which may change their experiences

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

when they are visiting a destination, but also have a profound impact on all social interactions and ways of communication (Ek, 2012, 2013; Månsson, 2015). Hence, mediatization and the logic of social media influence the form communication takes and are integrated in their genre of practices. Owing to globalisation, such communication practices are available to everyone, but any complex message is very often transformed and simplified not the least through increased immaterial labour through user engagement (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Scaramanga, 2012; Munar and Ek, 2015). So, as Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015) argue, the consequence for destination branding is that host culture is superficially promoted on social media for marketing purposes.

Hence, while any destination brand presents a simplified brand message of the host culture, the use of social media introduces another set of dynamics enhancing and complementing aspects of the re-presenting culture process. The presented image of the destination is now co-created and co-defined by people around the world (Munar and Ooi, 2012; Ooi and Munar, 2013). But the image remains simplified and possibly increasingly so as "outsiders" make sense of the already simplified presentation of the destination. Regardless the intangible expressions of culture are more or less made tangible in social media (Giovanardi, 2012; Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013) and while the public have embraced *fika* as quintessentially Swedish and *hygge* Danish, the respective DMOs have been able to largely manage the dissemination and perpetuation of the desired understanding of these ideas in simple packaged forms. We will show that while scholars such as Ashworth and Kavaratzis criticise DMOs and their failures to communicate complex ideas in a constructive way, their criticisms fall on deaf ears. Destination brand messages have been diluted and inaccurate because destination branding is a deliberate process of having to sell complex ideas to diverse audiences and by necessity essentialize the destination. The use of social media serves the same branding purposes. So, we intend to add to the debate on the essentialization of cultural assets in destination branding by pointing out its inevitability in contemporary media environments, and critical scholars need to demonstrate that they understand the context of destination branding and to engage DMOs at a more nuanced manner.

Methodology

The criteria for choosing *fika* and *hygge* were:

- the strong connection of the cultural assets with the respective countries;
- the integration of the cultural assets in the destination branding process; and
- the strong representation of the assets on social media. The data collection was carried out in March and April 2019 by the first author.

Three qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with four marketing managers of the national DMOs of Denmark (VisitDenmark) and Sweden (VisitSweden). These interviews provide insights about the DMOs' branding processes and social media communication practices. The interviews lasted around 40–60 min each and were conducted via Skype or phone. An interview guide was used as a flexible framework. It focused on how *fika* and *hygge* are perceived as relevant for the destination and on the use of social media in branding campaigns. The interviews were recorded and transcribed right after so the level of detail in the transcription is high. To minimise errors, and for ethical reasons, all the interviews have been approved and validated by the interviewees.

Furthermore, inspired by the netnographic approach, the first author collected and analysed content on social media. Kozinets (2010) highlights how netnography is focused on

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

cultural insights and treats online communication as social interaction and embedded expressions of meaning, not simply as content. In this study, the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of the two DMOs were studied. These specific platforms were chosen because they are the main ones used by DMOs in their branding and marketing process. While VisitDenmark also used other platforms (to a less degree), such as YouTube, Pinterest and Flickr, the three mentioned were the only ones used by VisitSweden. The communication of the DMOs over three years, from January 2016 till March 2019, was incorporated in the study. This choice is because of the following two reasons:

(1) while *fika* and *hygge* always have been considered part of Swedish and Danish culture, respectively, their usage for branding the destinations is relatively new; and

(2) a point of data saturation was reached. To capture data on *fika* and *hygge* the hashtags #*fika* and #*hygge* were used in the data collection process. A total of 465 posts in total (140 Facebook posts, 109 Twitter posts, 216 Instagram posts) from the DMOs and users/consumers were gathered.

The considerable differences in the number of units per platform are because of that DMOs use some platforms more extensively than others.

The software NVivo was used to assist in looking for relevant and emerging themes in the data. The analysis was oriented at the ladder of analytical abstraction as presented by Carney (1990) as it applied some basic steps of thematic analysis. First, the sample was identified and the data gathering started. A codebook was created and the coding process underlined the common themes related to *fika* and *hygge*. An open coding was used, organizing and interpreting the data, and also providing alternative viewpoints (Bryman, 2012). This procedure led to a creation of concepts, which were grouped and organised into categories by analysing relationships and making comparisons (Bryman, 2012). For the categorization, Spiggle's (1994) procedures of data manipulation operations were applied, i.e. data were categorised to classify and identify patterns of data. Furthermore, the abstracted groups were categorised into more general and conceptual classes. Thus, the analysis moved from many specific categories to fewer more general ones. Finally, comparisons between *fika* and *hygge* resulted in identifying differences and similarities between the case studies.

The flattened picture: *fika* and *hygge* as presented

Expressing intangible cultural assets

Fika and *hygge* occupy an important role for the DMOs in Sweden and Denmark to promote their respective destinations, which can be shown by the mere amount of social media posts on the concepts. For instance, in December 2020 there were more than 1.4 million #*fika* and 6.9 million #*hygge* on Instagram not including related hashtags such as #*fikabröd* [coffee bread] and #*hyggelig* [cosiness]. When looking at the most frequent words used in the 465 postings included in the study, we grouped the expressions with stemmed terms. By identifying most frequent words we not only explicate the content of the posts but also illustrate how these intangible cultural assets are communicated.

As an indication, the most mentioned terms related to *fika* are (in order of frequency): *cake, Sweden, cinnamon bun, coffee, day, love, Gothenburg, photo, baking, great, happy, Midsummer, new, strawberry, guide, recipe, like, break, favourite, Stockholm* and *tradition.* These terms correspond to Brones and Kindvall's (2015) translation of *fika* as a moment of break, drinking coffee, eating treats and chatting. By translating the word, it may lose significance and become a mere coffee break, but the Swedish *fika* is just as much about

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

socializing. Defined as "a social cup of coffee" (Sweden, 2019), the essence of this social cultural phenomenon is making time to take a break and spend time with people, while eating lovely goods and drinking great coffee. As an important part of Swedish culture, *fika* is an everyday life habit, and it is considered a way to socialise with other people. Hence, *fika* not only represents an entire culture but also carries the meaning of a Swedish form of social engagement (Brones and Kindvall, 2015). So, while the concept of *fika* is represented in a simple way, its meaning is much more complex. As an informant in Visit Sweden explains:

> It's a very big part of the Swedish lifestyle that you take a break. While you take a break, you have some quality time with your family, colleagues or friends. [. . .] Yeah, and also that it's a rooted tradition, and I don't think that Swedes think that much about it. It's so rooted, it's been in Sweden for like 100 years, so it's so obvious to us. It's something we do all the time.

It can be noted that the most frequent terms in the study include *Sweden, Gothenburg* and *Stockholm*, thus, highlighting the relation between the cultural asset *fika* and the destination. Moreover, we can discern other terms more closely connected to tourism activities, such as *photo* and *guide*.

Also as an indication, the most frequent terms related to *hygge* are (in order of frequency): *Denmark, Danish, Copenhagen, Christmas, find, happy, like, photo, cosy, lovely, VisitDenmark, day, winter, life, perfect, atmosphere, friends, family, enjoy* and *travel*. According to Howell and Sundberg (2015), *hygge* is hard to explain but can be defined as the national feeling of Denmark. Firstly appeared at the end of the 18th century, the concept of *hygge* is embraced by Danes (VisitDenmark, 2019a). Roughly translated into "cosiness," *hygge* encompasses much more than that. It means "creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good things in life with good people" (VisitDenmark, 2019b). An informant in VisitDenmark tried to give a definition of it:

> It's a very conscious sort of status of wellbeing. It's something that is very social. It's also something that it's in our DNA, something that we grew up with. And it is about [. . .] it's not about money or wealth, it's about feeling good about yourself. Being conscious about that.

In a similar fashion, the frequently used terms *happy, cosy, lovely, life, perfect, atmosphere, friends, family* and *enjoy* point to the sense of what *hygge* really is. The concept of *hygge* can also be applied to almost everything. For instance, there can be intimate *hygge* (being alone), social *hygge* (together with other people), neighbourhood *hygge* (seeing everyday familiar faces), as well as a Christmas *hygge* (Bille, 2015). Interestingly the terms *Christmas* and *winter* are frequently used. In fact, Christmas is the high season for *hygge*, and *hygge* is considered "the main ingredient in the recipe Danes use to cope with the cold winters" (VisitDenmark, 2019c).

Just like the terms connected to *fika*, the terms connected to *hygge* show a strong connection between the destination and the cultural phenomenon. In the case of *hygge*, this connection may even be stronger, since we here also find the DMO, *VisitDenmark*, as one of the most used terms. The reason for this can be explained by the fact that *hygge* is strongly used by VisitDenmark to promote the country as a tourism destination. This is evident on the social media platforms, where VisitDenmark repeatedly connects Denmark to the concept of *hygge*.

Visualising intangible cultural assets

The DMOs use visualisations to inspire potential visitors, catch their attention and get them to engage. Unsurprisingly, *fika* and *hygge* were often communicated visually, with text as support, in the various social media channels. VisitSweden communicates *fika* by using

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

many images of sweets, such as *Kanelbullar* (cinnamon buns), *lussekatter* (saffron bun) and *semla* (shrovetide bun). Moreover, most of the messages on *fika* are connected to so-called "pastry days," such as the *Kanelbulledagen* (Cinnamon Bun Day), *Semledagen* (the Shrovetide Bun Day), *Pepparkaksdagen* (the Gingerbread Day) and *Kladdkakedagen* (the Chocolate Cake Day). Also, the DMO shares recipes, *fika* experiences, and recommends cafes and bakeries in Sweden. It focuses on specific attributes of *fika*, like cakes and coffee, and is not a very nuanced and sophisticated representation of this Swedish phenomenon. The informants mentioned that *fika* is actually a wide concept, but at the same time easy to grasp. They argued that providing images on cakes and coffee is the easiest way to get people engaged (Figure 1).

Hygge is usually expressed with inspirational pictures of the environment such as on the beach, in the forest or in the big city. VisitDenmark does not focus on specific attributes, but tries to communicate the overall atmosphere *hygge* creates, making people understand what it is like to live it. While some images speak for themselves, others are accompanied by text describing the concept of *hygge* and suggestions on where to experience it. Thus, differently from VisitSweden, VisitDenmark focuses on communicating the unique, and also more psychological, even experiential aspect of *hygge*. It is also evident that *hygge* is used more frequently during the Christmas period (Figure 2).

The experience and social context embedded in *fika* and *hygge* cannot be properly represented. The relationships people share with each other at that time and the atmosphere that is generated are more complicated than those images. But these images are proxies. And destination branding requires the messages to be simple and endearing, as we will discuss next.

Unpacking *fika* and *hygge*

The social cultural phenomena of *fika* and *hygge* presented on social media are powerful and seductive. They nonetheless offer only an essentialized view of the respective concepts. Social media encourage communication that is simple and informative (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2015; Parlov *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, *fika* and *hygge* are presented in ways that are easy to grasp, albeit in vague forms (Hjarvard and Petersen, 2013). They are

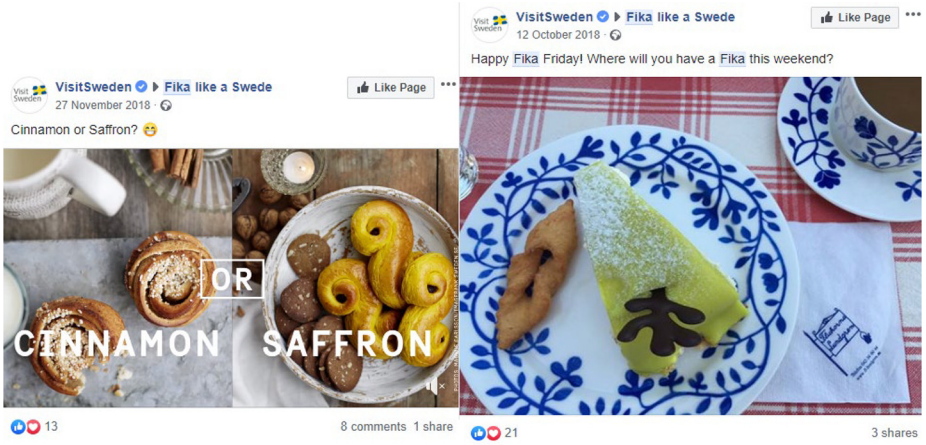


Figure 1. Representation of features of fika

Source: Facebook (2019b)

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Source: Twitter (2019)

Figure 2. Representation of hygge at Christmas

selected and packaged (Ooi, 2007). The selection and packaging processes inevitably essentialize the destinations Sweden and Denmark via *fika* and *hygge*, respectively. These processes are defined by three interrelated perimeters, as based on our data and analyses. First, social media communication transforms hard-to-grasp cultural phenomena into something tangible, and secondly simplifying the phenomena while doing so. The third process is the commodification and commercialisation agenda in representing these complex phenomena. The essentialization processes are co-created and co-generated on social media by the DMOs, locals, tourists and interested parties. The DMOs are regardless orchestrating these processes to a large extent. They are able to communicate the complex ideas of *fika* and *hygge* in more nuanced and explanatory ways, but they also want mileage for their marketing efforts. To criticise DMOs for the inadequacy in communicating complex cultural ideas is to misunderstand the purpose of destination branding and be blinded by marketing-speak of authenticity and uniqueness. Let us elaborate.

Transformation of intangible social cultural phenomena into tangible commodities

Tourists, to a large extent, want to experience local communities and cultures (Jorgensen, 2020). Therefore, VisitSweden and VisitDenmark promote intangible cultural assets in their branding efforts to entice tourists. In the case of *fika*, VisitSweden talks about the importance of taking a break and enjoying some quality time with friends and family in the country. In the case of *hygge,* VisitDenmark alludes to the feeling of cosiness. The DMOs understand the social and personal experiences in these cultural practices, the social media posts show how they have transformed these positive Scandinavian characteristics into perceptible and tangible representations.

For instance, to reiterate, VisitSweden suggests typical Swedish pastries to try throughout the year and recommends local cafés to promote places to get a *fika*. Indeed, *fika* is to a large extent transformed into a tangible asset, i.e. the importance of being social and having a break are central, but *fika* has been reduced to the simple tourist activity of (usually buying and) drinking coffee and eating sweets. VisitDenmark also associates *hygge* with more easily graspable elements such as apple slices, candles, interior design, restaurants and accommodation, but do, to a larger extent than Visit Sweden, refer to the warm feeling of cosiness, which is the "core" of *hygge*.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

These proxy tangible representations are meant to generate a warm positive image of the destination and are only an allusion to the "real thing" (Blain *et al.*, 2005). Simplification is necessary in the processes of re-presenting the destination in its branding campaigns. Arguably, what visitors and potential visitors can do and easily understand take precedence in the representation, over complex meanings of *fika* and *hygge* that require the acquisition of local knowledge and local emotional connections. Losing some of the values of the cultural assets is intentional to reach out to the global market of potential tourists. Making *fika* and *hygge* visual is part of the branding process, and the social media technology also strongly encourages, even necessitates, visualisation of tangible features of *fika* and *hygge*. To communicate effectively DMOs select a few visuals to essentialize *fika* and *hygge*.

Simplification

With the focus on honesty and authenticity, Rausch (2008) argues that multidimensionality is an important factor for using culture in destination branding. Although *fika* and *hygge* are broad concepts that can be portrayed in multiple ways, the DMOs shape their communication to simplify *hygge*, and, in particular, the practice of *fika*. Although words such as *tradition* and *atmosphere* are mentioned, the discourse on *fika* and *hygge* are simple and executable by outsiders. They are further simplified when promoted and communicated visually on social media. The multidimensionality and complexity of *fika* and *hygge* presented are thus marginalised and ignored. So, just as Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015) would argue, the intangible culture assets *fika* and *hygge* are oversimplified and are promoted superficially. But an informant in VistitDenmark explains, it is easier to reproduce a simple image of the asset that is already prevalent in consumers' minds:

> I think, when you portray *hygge*, the communication can be stereotypical because that's what tourists want. It is important for us to give a full representation of *hygge* and communicating what it is, but at the same time it is easier to communicate what some people already envision when they think about *hygge*.

The affirmation of tourists' perceptions is a common and effective practice in tourism promotion (Prentice and Andersen, 2000; Ooi, 2011). By doing so, the DMOs frame their communication and focus on specific attributes that are more effective. Unsurprising then VisitSweden and VisitDenmark transmit their simple and one-sided messages of *fika* and *hygge*. That is necessary for any packaging of culture; the presented culture will never be the same as cultural practice in social life (Ooi, 2007). So inevitably the communication of *fika* and *hygge* often only focuses on some aspects, for instance, the connection between *hygge* and *winter*. Social media communication demands and perpetuates the simplified presentation of *fika* and *hygge*. The simplified and superficial communication was also mentioned by an informant in VisitDenmark when describing how a branding campaign on *hygge* on social media was performed:

> It was very much trying to give people the opportunity to express themselves, in terms of how hygge they were. So, there were a number of questions in terms of how you would do different things. So, this was obviously a simplified way.

So, in short, *fika* and *hygge* become simple cultural resources for tourists to experience Sweden and Denmark – in their own ways. The simplification is not only deliberate for the purpose of reaching out through the media buzz and attract potential tourists but also any presentation of culture will always be limited.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Commodification and commercialisation

For DMOs, to present cultural assets in social media is to commodify these assets. *Fika* and *hygge* are explicitly treated as objects of trade, of economic value, intended for exchange. DMOs acknowledge that tourists are interested in experiencing the local culture, thus they try to provide it to them in a way that can be consumed. The way in which *fika* and *hygge* are communicated on social media is meant to commodify these cultural phenomena. This may mean that by transforming *fika* and *hygge* into commodities they lose their inherent complexity. This commodification process can lead to the reimagination and framing of these cultural phenomena that are re-introduced to residents (Hjarvard and Petersen, 2013). In that context, destination branding shapes local cultural practices, i.e. destination branding processes – inadvertently or otherwise – socially engineer society (Ooi, 2005, 2018).

As already stated, and closely related to commodification, while one may claim that *fika* and *hygge* are non-commercial assets, DMOs promote them with the ultimate goal of attracting more visitors. A fundamental social media promotion goal is to increase tourism revenues. *Fika* and *hygge* are not simply commodified elements, they are also commercialised. They are sold, like any other tourist attractions. There must be *fika* and *hygge* products that will monetize these cultural assets. For instance, VisitSweden commercialises *fika* by suggesting typical Swedish pastries to try throughout the year, recommending local cafés and promoting the best Swedish places to do *fika*. *Fika* tours are created in the town of Alingsås, the "capital of *fika*," to commercialise this revered Swedish practice; an informant in VisitSweden explained:

> We have Alingsås, a small town in Sweden that they call themselves the *Fika Town*, and they have a lot of cafes and bakeries in this small city, and they also have created *fika* tours, so you can walk with a guide to different cafes and eat different pastries and *fika* in different ways. So, it's a really specific way of producing a product around this. And it's very popular.

VisitDenmark has various business partnerships for various marketing campaigns on *hygge*, such as Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), different Danish interior design brands, Tivoli (theme park) and other attractions. An example is a collaborative campaign with SAS championing "*Hygge* Starts in the Sky." It is evident that VisitDenmark promotes *hygge*-oriented activities and places, including accommodation and restaurants, to commercialise *hygge*. For instance, VisitDenmark posted on Twitter:

> In Copenhagen food isn't just about filling your belly. Do like the Danes and create moments of #*Hygge*, taking time to enjoy each other's company whilst indulging in Copenhagen's world class food space (Twitter, 2019).

Deploying intangible cultural assets for destination branding transforms intangible cultural assets from something that can be simply enjoyed, into something that can be bought. The use of social media has become an important channel for this commercialisation process (Lundby, 2009). Criticisms have been levelled against that because these cultural phenomena would not be authentic, and are flattened. They are presented in a simple, short and informative way, and their core character is reduced to consumable products. But this is necessary to communicate complex cultural phenomena. Their social media engagement shows that people are able to engage with these ideas and have claimed some form of understanding of *fika* and *hygge*. For non-Swedes and non-Danes, without the local knowledge and social environment embedded in doing *fika* and *hygge*, this is arguably as close as one can get to appreciate *fika* and *hygge*. It is unrealistic, if not an impossibility, to demand that DMOs present local cultures in its complexity and yet be commercial. Their agenda is to communicate effectively and bring in visitors. There will always be a representation gap between the presentation of culture and the culture itself.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Controlled co-creation of intangible cultural assets on social media

In addition to understanding how DMOs communicate intangible cultural assets on social media, the study shows how social media communication of *fika* and *hygge* is supposedly co-created by users. But engagement with the public is managed and controlled.

The involvement of users on social media is relevant to DMOs, as co-created and co-generated content contributes to creating a more authentic sense for the promoted culture by showing popular support, broad acceptance and diverse ways of engagement with *fika* and *hygge*. So, the DMOs use different social media co-creation strategies to activate users (Gyimothy and Larson, 2015). However, consumers understand the context too; the presented messages are tangible, simplified, commodified and commercialised pictures of *fika* and *hygge*, and they will experience and communicate them accordingly. This is also what the DMOs desire; they appropriate public support and the semblance of authenticity for the brand. Thus, the communication from DMOs influences not only how *fika* and *hygge* are experienced by users but also how users themselves represent them on social media. As a result, users' re-presentations give credibility to what the DMOs want to communicate. An example is when VisitSweden opened a Facebook group named "*Fika* like a Swede" to encourage "crowd sourcing" (Gyimothy and Larson, 2015), with the purpose of engaging users in the topic of *fika*. Here, VisitSweden asks for opinions, creates polls and tries to involve people on social media. The UGC posted is mostly on recommendations for good cafés, like in the post in Figure 3, and just as importantly giving the idea that everyone can do *fika* (in their own ways). The DMO succeeds in the way that people communicate with each other on the platforms, giving suggestions and recommendations. And with the coaxing, users share images of coffee and cakes, as well as recipes and tips of cafés. This is what Gálvez-Rodríguez *et al.* (2020) propose as best practices for online engagements via

Figure 3.
Post by VisitSweden in the Facebook group "Fika like a Swede"

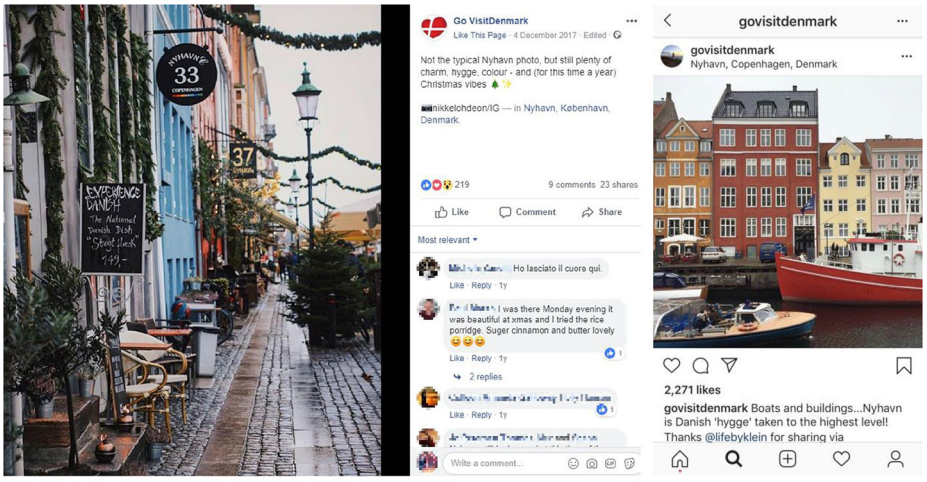
Source: Facebook (2019a)

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Facebook for DMOs – to ensure that posts are congruent with tourists' interests and that they convey positive sentiments.

DMOs interact with consumers and generate crowd excitement by asking for opinions, answering polls and stimulating public discussions to spawn a feeling of community (Gyimothy and Larson, 2015). Moreover, users communicate and co-create content, giving suggestions and recommendations. However, it is evident that users share images of coffee and cakes, as well as tips on what cafes to go to, because this is how VisitSweden steer the communication and has established a genre for the postings. Users are supposedly allowed to post anything related to the topic of *fika*, but anything other than the tangible, simplistic, commodified and commercialised pictures of *fika* will stick out inappropriately. The DMOs have largely succeeded in building an online community through, for instance, 95% of photo posts on Instagram by VisitSweden and VisitDenmark are shared from users in their communities. The UGC is still controlled by the DMOs as these organisations encourage and persuade users by amplifying selected photos by reposting. Figure 4 show examples on how VisitDenmark repost UGC, connect the pictures to *hygge* and engages people to post.

Another strategy that DMOs apply is customer insourcing (Gyimothy and Larson, 2015). Organisations work strategically with influencers and other types of content creators to enhance engagement on their social media channels and boost UGC. Nevertheless, the communication is still managed. The influencers must support the established and promoted image of *fika* and *hygge*. The re-generation and mass production and perpetuation of similar *fika* and *hygge* images provide a sense of broad recognition of what those two concepts are, and that these representations are thus accepted and authentic. But this so-called co-creation on social media is part of how cultural authenticity is manufactured and staged by DMOs (Lovell and Bull, 2018). The DMOs promote engagement and the perpetuation of these images, and the popularity of these simplified interpretations is part of the exercise of verifying that simple essentialized understanding of Sweden and Denmark.



Source: Facebook (2019a), Instagram (2019a)

Figure 4. UGC shared by VisitDenmark

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Conclusions

This paper shows how social cultural phenomena are framed as assets and are used in destination brand communication on social media. In particular, it sheds light on how social media communication is part of the processes of making intangible cultural assets tangible, of simplifying, commodifying and commercialising them into products. As products, they are intentionally meant to essentialize the host destination. *Fika* and *hygge* are important elements of destination branding for Sweden and Denmark, respectively, to assert these countries' uniqueness. The global embrace of *fika* and *hygge* would enhance the ideological soft power of these Scandinavian countries, embracing values of social cohesiveness (Cassinger *et al.*, 2019). As pointed out earlier, researchers have constantly criticised DMOs on how they have simplified, commercialised and commodified cultural elements in their branding exercises. This paper argues that the representation of culture will always be limited because of the representation gap; the packaged culture will always be an ideological selection and a representation, and not the culture itself. Furthermore, we highlight the commercial agenda of DMOs. Criticisms against them seem to reflect a lack of understanding of the nuances and complexity of working in the industry.

So, thanks to the DMOs, *fika* and *hygge* are internationally communicated in a simple way, marginalising, if not ignoring, the complex and layered connections to Danish and Swedish cultures and lifestyles. The communication focuses on specific, tangible traits, simplifying their meanings and reproducing only selected elements, and definitely not capturing the cultural complexity of the society. Indeed, *fika* and *hygge* are considered central social cultural practices in Sweden and Denmark and are considered symbolically significant of these Scandinavian countries. The importance of *fika* and *hygge* gains more currency if social media users perpetuate that message, giving them a sense of general acceptance and authenticity; that mass support has been appropriated by the DMOs of the respective destinations. This is part of the politics of destination branding.

References

Ashworth, G. and Kavaratzis, M. (2015), "Rethinking the roles of culture in place branding", Kavaratzis, M., Warnaby, G. and Ashworth, G. (Eds), *Rethinking Place Branding: Comprehensive Brand Development for Cities and Regions*, Springer, Heidelberg, pp. 119-134.

Bianchini, F. and Ghilardi, L. (2007), "Thinking culturally about place", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 280-286.

Bille, M. (2015), "Lighting up cosy atmospheres in Denmark", *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 56-63.

Billig, M. (1995), *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, London.

Blain, C., Levy, S.E. and Ritchie, J.R.B. (2005), "Destination branding: insights and practices from destination management organizations", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 328-338.

Brones, A. and Kindvall, J. (2015), *Fika: The Art of the Swedish Coffee Break, with Recipes for Pastries, Breads, and Other Treats*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley.

Bryman, A. (2012), *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Cai, L.A. (2002), "Cooperative branding for rural destination", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 720-742.

Campelo, A., Aitken, R., Thyne, M. and Gnoth, J. (2014), "Sense of place: the importance for destination branding", *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 53 No. 2, pp. 154-166.

Carney, T.F. (1990), *Collaborative Inquiry Methodology*, University of Windsor, Division for Instructional Development, Windsor, Ontario.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Cassinger, C., Lucarelli, A., and Gyimothy, S. (2019), "The Nordic wave in place branding: moving back and forth in time and space", Cassinger, C., Lucarelli, A. and Gyimóthy, S. (Eds), *The Nordic Wave in Place Branding: Poetics, Practices, Politics*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 1-9.

Coté, M. and Pybus, J. (2007), "Learning to immaterial labour 2.0: MySpace and social networks", *Ephemera*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 88-106.

Dean, J. (2005), "Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics", *Cultural Politics: An International Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 51-74.

Dijkmans, C., Kerkhof, P. and Beukeboom, C.J. (2015), "A stage to engage: social media use and corporate reputation", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 47, pp. 58-67.

Ek, R. (2012), "Topologies of human-mobile assemblages", Wilken, R. and Goggin, G. (Eds), *Mobile Technology and Place*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 39-54.

Ek, R. (2013), "Tourism social media as a fire object", Munar, A. M., Gyimothy, S. and Cai, L. A. (Eds), *Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture*, Emerald, Bingley, pp. 19-34.

Facebook (2019a), "Go visit Denmark", available at: www.facebook.com/denmark/ (accessed 6 April 2019).

Facebook (2019b), "Fika like a swede", available at: www.facebook.com/VisitSweden/ (accessed 7 April 2019).

Fujita, M., Harrigan, P. and Soutar, G. (2019), "The strategic co-creation of content and student experiences in social media: an identity theories perspective", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 50-69.

Gálvez-Rodrígez, M.D.M., Alonso-Canadas, J., Haro-de-Rosario, A. and Caba-Pérez, C. (2020), "Exploring best practises for online engagement via Facebook with local destination management organisation (DMOs) in Europe: a longitudinal analysis", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 34, pp. 1-11, Article100636.

Giovanardi, M. (2012), "Haft and sord factors in place branding: between functionalism and representationalism", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 30-45.

Giovanardi, M., Lucarelli, A. and Pasquinelli, C. (2013), "Towards brand ecology: an analytical framework for interpreting the emergence of place brands", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 365-383.

Gyimothy, S. and Larson, M. (2015), "Social media co-creation strategies: the 3C's", *Event Management*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 331-348.

Hall, E.T. (1976), *Beyond Culture*, Doubleday, New York, NY.

Hanna, S. and Rowley, J. (2011), "Towards a strategic place brand-management model", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 27 Nos 5/6, pp. 458-476.

Hjarvard, S. and Petersen, L.N. (2013), "Mediatization and cultural change", *Mediekultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, Vol. 29 No. 54, pp. 1-7.

Hjarvard, S. (2007), "Changing media – changing language: the mediatization of society and the spread of English and medialects", paper presented at the International Communication Association 57th Annual Conference, San Francisco, May 24-27, 2007.

Hofstede, G. (2018), "The 6 dimensions model of national culture by Geert Hofstede", available at https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/ (accessed 3 May 2020).

Howell, J.P. and Sundberg, T. (2015), "Towards an affective geopolitics: soft power and the Danish notion of 'hygge'", *Environment, Space, Place*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 97-120.

Instagram (2019a), "Go visit Denmark", available at: www.instagram.com/govisitdenmark/?hl=en (accessed 8 April 2019).

Jorgensen, M.T. (2020), "The attraction of the mundane: how everyday life contributes to destination attractiveness to in the Nordic region", *Tourist Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 467-484.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G. (2005), "City branding: an effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick?", *Place Branding*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 183-194.

Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G. (2010), "Place branding: where do we stand?", Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G. (Eds), *Towards Effective Place Brand Management: Branding European Cities and Regions*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 1-14.

Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G. (2015), "Hijacking culture: the disconnection between place culture and place brands", *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 86 No. 2, pp. 155-176.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998), *Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, The University of CA Press, Berkeley.

Kozinets, R. (2010), *Netnography – Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, Sage, London.

Lape, N.G. (2002), "The politics of representation in Asian American literature", *College Literature*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 144-151.

Lim, Y., Chung, Y. and Weaver, P. (2012), "The impact of social media on destination branding: consumer-generated videos versus destination marketer-generated videos", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 197-206.

Lovell, J. and Bull, C. (2018), *Authentic and Inauthentic Places in Tourism: From Heritage Sites to Theme Parks*, Routledge, London.

Lundby, K. (2009), "Introduction: mediatization", Lundby, K. (Ed.), *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, Peter Lang, New York, NY, pp. 1-18.

Månsson, M. (2015), *Mediatized Tourism: The Convergence of Media and Tourism Performances*, Department of Service Management and Service Studies, Lund University, Lund.

Miletsky, J.I. and Smith, G.L. (2009), *Perspectives on Branding*, Course Technology, Boston.

Munar, A.M. (2011), "Tourist-created content: rethinking destination branding", *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 291-305.

Munar, A.M. and Ek, R. (2015), "Relationbits: you, me and the other", Miller, T. (Ed), *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 137-148.

Munar, A.M. and Ooi, C.-S. (2012), "The truth of the crowds: social media and the heritage experience", in Smith, L., Waterton, E. and Watson, S. (Eds), *The Cultural Moment in Tourism*, Routledge, London, pp. 255-273.

Oliveira, E. and Panyik, E. (2015), "Content, context and co-creation: digital challenges in destination branding with references to Portugal as a tourist destination", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 53-74.

Ooi, C.-S. (2004), "Poetics and politics of destination branding: Denmark", *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 107-128.

Ooi, C.-S. (2005), "The orient responds: tourism, orientalism and the national museums of Singapore", *Tourism*, Vol. 53 No. 4, pp. 285-299.

Ooi, C.-S. (2007), "Un-packing packaged cultures: Chinese-ness in international business", *East Asia*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 111-128.

Ooi, C.-S. (2011), "Branding and the accreditation approach: Singapore", In Morgan, N.J., Pritchard, A. and Pride, R. (Eds), *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation*, Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 185-196.

Ooi, C.-S. (2014), "The making of the copy-cat city: accreditation tactics in place branding", Berg, P.O. and Bjoerner, E. (Eds), *Branding Chinese Mega-Cities*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 232-248.

Ooi, C.-S. (2018), "Global city for the arts: weaving tourism into cultural policy", Chong, T. (Ed), *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, World Scientific, Singapore, pp. 165-179.

Ooi, C.-S. (2019), "Asian tourists and cultural complexity: implications for practice and the Asianisation of tourism scholarship", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 31, pp. 14-23.

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026

Ooi, C.-S. and Munar, A.M. (2013), "The digital social construction of ground zero", Munar, A.M., Gyimothy, S. and Cai, L.A. (Eds), *Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture*, Emerald, Bingley, pp. 159-175.

Parlov, N., Perkov, D. and Sičaja, Ž. (2016), "New trends in tourism destination branding by means of digital marketing", *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 139-146.

Prentice, R. and Andersen, V. (2000), "Evoking Ireland: modeling tourism propensity", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 490-516.

Rausch, A.S. (2008), "Place branding in rural Japan: cultural commodities as local brands", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 136-146.

Ren, C. and Ooi, C.-S. (2013), "Auto-communicating micro-orientalism: articulating 'Denmark' in China at the Shanghai Expo", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 129-145.

Said, E.W. (1979), *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, NY.

Scaramanga, M. (2012), " "Talking about art(s): a theoretical framework clarifying the association between culture and place branding", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 70-80.

Schulz, W. (2004), "Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept", *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 87-101.

Sinclair-Maragh, G. (2018), "Destination brand potency: a proposition framework", Gursoy, D. and Chi, C.G. (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Destination Marketing*, 1st ed., Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 179-192.

Spiggle, S. (1994), "Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 491-503.

Turner, B.S. (1994), "Orientalism", *Postmodernism and Globalism*, Routledge, London.

Twitter (2019), "Go visit Denmark", available at: https://twitter.com/GoVisitDenmark?lang=en (accessed 6 April 2019).

Vanolo, A. (2019), "Cities are not products", *Tijdschrift Voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 111 No. 1, pp. 10-17.

VisitDenmark (2019a), "What is hygge?", available at: www.visitdenmark.com/denmark/culture/what-hygge (accessed 29 March 2019).

VisitDenmark (2019b), "Hygge: the Danish art of cosiness", available at: www.visitdenmark.com/denmark/culture/hygge-danish-art-cosiness (accessed 29 March 2019).

VisitDenmark (2019c), *Top Christmas Hygge Experiences in Copenhagen*, available at: www.visitdenmark.com/copenhagen/attractions/top-christmas-hygge-experiences-copenhagen (accessed 15 April 2019).

Yúdice, G. (2003), *The Expediency of Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Zwick, D. and Bradshaw, A. (2016), "Biopolitical marketing and social media brand communities", theory", *Culture and Society*, Vol. 33 No. 5, pp. 91-115.

Corresponding author
Mia Larson can be contacted at: mia.larson@kau.se

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**

Downloaded from ftp.nowpublishers.com/jpmd/article-pdf/14/3/346/1583252/jpmd-12-2019-0114.pdf by guest on 18 October 2026