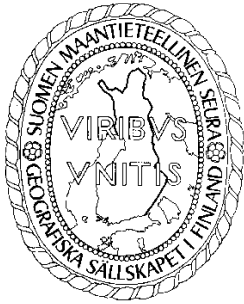


Santa Claus, place branding and competition

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Santa Claus has been described as the world's strongest brand. Although Santa Claus has been examined in the context of product and retail branding, the Santa mythology has been little discussed with respect to place branding. The article examines Santa Claus in relation to place branding and competition and provides a number of international examples where Santa is integrated into place branding strategies in order to construct regional advantage, particularly with respect to attracting tourists. Such strategies are regarded as extremely significant for peripheral areas which otherwise do not have the resources available for place branding that urban areas do. The paper concludes by noting potential future issues for Santa related place branding and Christmas tourism including the impact of climate change and issues of authenticity.

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Place competition

Place branding is an integral part of contemporary place competition. Place branding, also referred to as place marketing and place imaging and reimagining, is regarded as an important component in the attraction and retention of mobile capital, firms, people (including skilled and unskilled workers, domestic and international migrants, and domestic and international tourists), and in the promotion and sales of locally produced goods and services (e.g. Kotler et al. 1999; Danmarks Turistråd 2000; Kotler & Gertner 2002; Halkier & Therkelsen 2004). Although the value of place competitive strategies, such as place branding, is often highly contested many policy makers remain enthusiastic about the place competitive discourse and the opportunity to become winning places (e.g. Karppi 2001; Malecki 2004; Bristow 2005; Hall 2005, 2007; Nyseth and Granås 2007).

Nordic cities and regions appear increasingly concerned with how their places are branded and perceived in the national and international marketplace. However, the majority of research on place branding in the Nordic, as well as international context, appears primarily focussed on cit-

ies and urban regions rather than the more peripheral areas (Jansson & Power 2006). In one sense this is not surprising as it reflects ongoing competition between metropolitan areas to be positioned as cosmopolitan cores and, in some cases, so called 'world-class cities'. Yet ironically it may well be the peripheral areas that, in comparative terms, arguably most need the benefits of attracting new capital, people and firms (Müller & Jansson 2007).

Urban place competition discourse tends to focus on such regional policy ideas as cultural quarters, growth poles, technopoles, cultural cities, creative cities, urban revitalization, networks, clustering and innovation (Malecki 2004; Hall & Williams 2008). However, with the exception of the last two concepts, much of the place competition discourse does not transfer easily to the 'simpler' economies of peripheral areas, especially given some of the attributes of peripherality such as lack of accessibility and a relative sparse population. Nevertheless, changes in regional policy thinking are still relevant to peripheral areas. For example, Cooke and Leydesdorff (2006) argue that there has been a significant shift in the terrain of thinking of regional advantage from one that fo-

cuses on competitive or comparative advantages of regions to one that focuses on the constructed advantages between regions.

Brands are clearly important contributors to the construction of regional advantage. Although the concept of a brand is consistently debated in the marketing literature the American Marketing Association definition of a brand, 'A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers' provides a useful working definition for present purposes. Place branding is therefore the development of a place brand and its promotion in order to differentiate a place from other locations so as to gain advantage for its firms, organizations, people, products and services. Place branding is also multi-directional. Internal place branding is concerned with brand development and construction in relation to place identity, including community pride and the creation and maintenance of an attractive environment. External place branding is concerned with the communication of brand and brand values, including place attributes, to external markets in order to fulfil place branding goals and objectives.

Place branding is undertaken via a mix of material and intangible means. Material strategies include such mechanisms as flagship projects or signature developments, often as part of broader planning strategies or redevelopment projects. Immaterial strategies include the use of advertising, slogans, media placement and the development of new place myths (Jansson & Power 2006). For urban areas there is usually sufficient capital to seek to develop flagship projects. Such a strategy is often much more difficult for peripheral areas given the smaller economic resource base, although it can be done, as exemplified by the development of the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, which has proven to be a far more significant branding element for the region in terms of media coverage than the nearby mine at Kiruna. For many peripheral regions, and particularly northern areas, one possibility for place branding may be the use of a natural feature. For example, Finnmark in Norway makes substantial use of North Cape as a socially constructed flagship element in its branding. Another natural feature that may be used is an icon animal or plant. For example, Churchill on the shore of Hudson Bay in Manitoba, Canada, promotes itself as the 'Polar Bear Capital of the World'. However, many northern peripheral areas have a number of common natural features that make it

extremely difficult to utilise them for branding purposes as a means of differentiation, such as winter snow, conifers and beech trees, although they are still important aspects of place, especially for tourism. Therefore, in such situations, the place branding focus moves towards the immaterial and intangible, often through the development of new place myths and slogans. Urban examples of such place slogans include "Espoo – a City for Creativity and Expertise" and Vantaa "The Good Life City" (It should also be noted that the latter slogan is also used by Albany, Georgia, USA, which is also the 'Pecan Capital of the World').

The world's strongest brand

Although stemming from different historical sources Santa Claus (also referred to as Saint Nicolas) and Father Christmas have become combined in much of the world's popular and commercial imaginations. Santa Claus has been described as the world's strongest brand (Arruda 2003) (see also Aaltonen 2004 for a commentary in the Finnish media). According to Arruda (2003), 'Santa Claus is the envy of brand managers everywhere. His brand attributes are clear and desirable to virtually everyone. Even parts of the world that have no connection to the holiday know who he is and what he stands for'. The presence of Santa in shopping centres, retail outlets and homes clearly provide a strong visual presence for the Santa brand while the connection with Christmas clearly encourages consumption, gift-giving and expenditure as part of what is termed the 'Christmas spirit' (Clarke 2006, 2007). In the United States for example, 1.9 billion Christmas cards are given each year while 20.8 million Christmas trees were cut on farms for purchase in 2002 (US Census Bureau 2005).

Although some may decry the loss of much of the historical connection to notions of charity and the spirit of Yuletide there is no doubting the contemporary retail importance of Santa both as a general part of seasonal shopping (e.g. Said 2006; Snellman 2006a; Coca-Stefaniak et al. 2008) and seasonal advertising in general. In addition, the commercial use of Santa as part of 'advertainment' may be associated with particular product requests (Otnes 1994; O'Cass & Clarke 2002; Pine & Nash 2002; Pine et al 2007). The growth of Santa as a brand, particularly in those places with no traditional cultural connection to Father Christmas or

Saint Nicolas is also arguably a potent commodified symbol of globalisation (Ger & Belk 1996).

However, while there is substantial academic and media literature on Santa as a brand, there is surprisingly little academic discussion of the contribution that Santa makes to place competition in northern latitudes and the extent to which different locations have sought to claim the Christmas character as their own. Pretes (1995), for example discussed the development of 'the Santa Claus industry' as a form of postmodern tourism with respect to the development of the Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi. Although he noted that an essential element of the Rovaniemi strategy was 'convincing the rest of the world that Finland was the real home of Santa Claus – against rival claimants in Alaska, Sweden, Norway, and Greenland' there was no discussion of the various uses of Santa Claus as a part of place competition. Similarly, Haathi and Yavas (2004) provided a useful account of the image of the SantaPark in Rovaniemi but do not provide a comparative perspective. The following section discusses the different ways in which places use Santa for place branding purposes.

Santa Claus and place branding

Table 1 provides examples of the way that Santa Claus or related myths are used for place branding. It should be emphasised that this is by no means an exhaustive list and instead represents some of the more overt examples of connections between Santa Claus and place for reasons of place branding and competition. With the exception of Santa Claus, Indiana, which is included by virtue of its postal significance all of the examples are from high latitudes. This therefore ignores theme parks such Santa's Workshop, North Pole, Cascade, Colorado (<http://www.santas-colo.com/>) which is open from May to December each year. Although Santa's Workshop does provide a postal service, Santa and Christmas is not integrated into place branding of the local jurisdiction (Pikes Peak). Similarly, while the Office of the Turkish Prime Minister, Directorate General of Press and Information notes that the villages of Demre and Patara in Anatolia were homes of the Bishop of Myra – the historical origins of St. Nicholas – and the connection is noted on a number of tour company websites it is not being used as a formal part of place promotion by local bodies. Nevertheless, this may well happen in the future due to the in-

creasing coverage to the historical connections and the potential to increase Christmas season tourism (Seal 2005).

Lapland has been described as the 'Santa tourism superpower' (Snellmann 2006b) and it clearly has had first mover advantage with respect to Santa Claus related tourism at an international level. Focussed initially on Rovaniemi which has the greatest concentration of Santa and Christmas related infrastructure in terms of theme parks and activities as well as the most overt use of Santa in branding, Santa tourism has also become an important Christmas season tourism activity for a number of other locations in the region. For example, as of April 2008 Visit Finland reported that for the UK market alone there were 20 tour operators offering Christmas packages to Lapland with flight destinations to Ivalo, Kajaani, Kittilä, Kuusamo and Rovaniemi while air access is also available from Kirkenes (Norway) and Kiruna (Sweden) as part of package tours (Visit Finland 2008). Undoubtedly, Santa tourism has contributed substantially from an economic development perspective (Lähteenmäki 2006) with tourism being the largest contributor to the GDP for any Finnish region except Åland (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2006; Hall et al. 2008). Halpern (2008) also estimates that airport-related international tourism in Lapland contributed 36 million Euros to the regional economy in 2005 with most arrivals occurring during the Christmas season via charter flights. Santa tourism and branding is also extensively supported at the national government level and by Finnair the national carrier. Visit Finland, for example, provides a booklet written for the marketing purposes of tourism related to the Christmas season which emphasises the supposed Finnish nature of Santa Claus: *Why does the real Santa Claus live in Finland? You can meet him on any day of the year, without any charge, only in Finland. Santa Claus' own animal, the reindeer, lives in Finland. There is snow on the ground during the Christmas season. At the Arctic Circle, Santa Claus has a post office of his own and the world's only Main Santa Post Office. The Finnish Santa Claus receives by far the most letters from the children around the world. The only real amusement park of Santa Claus, the SantaPark, is situated in Finland. There are wide circles in Finland that have committed themselves to help Santa Claus* (Visit Finland 2007).

Nevertheless, despite the undoubted significance of Santa tourism to the region and the re-

gion's present leading status in terms of numbers of visitors, substantial long-term issues for place competitiveness remain. Within Lapland itself, there is the potential for increasing competition for locations to be associated with Santa. Although Rovaniemi is clearly the market leader the rise of international travel to other destinations presents substantial challenges, especially as travel operators to other Lapland destinations increasingly promote holiday packages as being more 'authentic' than those available in Rovaniemi. In the longer term the fact that there are so many Santa tourism options available in Lapland may even call to question the uniqueness of the Lapland Santa experience (e.g. *Activities Abroad* 2008). Although perhaps the harshest comments can be found with the Scan Meridian tour company

A long time ago, we hit upon the idea of taking children to meet the real Father Christmas. And in Lapland we found exactly what our young and young at heart travellers wanted. Then as now, the secret lay in travelling to villages in the snows where traditional Finnish Lutheran customs are played out on a small scale. There, Father Christmas can service his sledges and reindeer against a background of snow covered forests. And teams of huskies can happily bark up all the wrong trees, whilst you enjoy snowmobile rides and experience the habits and habitats of the reindeer and the huskies. Unfortunately (one might say) the idea caught on so well that the mass-market operators felt they had to come crashing into the act. However, some villages were not big enough for their masses, so they persuaded the inhabitants of Rovaniemi, the so called capital of Finnish Lapland, Saariselkä and Levi to put on snow-dusted plastic replicas of the real thing with discos, bars and other home "comforts" the mass-market seems unable to do without. Such trips have all the magic of a visit to a shopping centre in Croydon after a freak fall of snow (with apologies to Croydon). But such once-in-a-lifetime experiences, we feel, need to be just that – genuine, traditional, memorable, mystical and exciting. We offer tobogganing and snowmobiling, not discos; ice-fishing, not fast food; pine clad rooms or open-fired log cabins, not soulless cell blocks; and herds of huskies, not people. To avoid the masses, we've retreated to just three special places, Harriniva, [Ylläshumiina] and Kakslauttanen. We have departures... for no more than 50 people at a time. If you would like to join us, we would love to have you but please remember: no discothèques, no fruit ma-

chines and no television. Just a family Christmas or New Year with like-minded people (ScanMeridian 2006).

In terms of place branding Rovaniemi is not differentiated even within Finland. Although Rovaniemi is 'the Christmas city', Turku promotes itself as the 'Christmas city of Finland'. Authenticity is also regarded as integral to the Turku Christmas experience. Dodson (2007) writing in the *Guardian* recommended to readers, 'So unless you want to entertain small children, avoid Lapland this Christmas and head for a weekend in old Finland instead. Go to the city that's so good they named it a capital twice'. Although the two cities are arguably positioning themselves for different markets, with Turku concentrating on longer stay visits, the branding of the two cities raises the wider issue of the international competitiveness of Christmas place brands.

Snellman (2006b) notes that 'cities compete quite fiercely for the tourists' custom' with Christmas markets in the German towns and cities receiving an aggregate of approximately 160 million visitors. Munich's Weihnachtsmarkt alone attracts around 3 million visitors from home and abroad. In the Baltic region Stockholm's Christmas Market at Skansen is advertised in Finland. Tallinn declared itself the 'Nordic Christmas Capital' in 2001, while Pärnu in Estonia and Riga in Latvia have given themselves the title of 'Baltic Christmas City'.

Two Norwegian towns have also positioned themselves with respect to Christmas tourism, although unlike other Nordic countries Norway has lagged substantially behind with respect to developing Christmas tourism. The Norwegian towns' Christmas tourism is based on the character of Julenissen as well as elves and trolls and has developed a strong linkage to the Japanese market as well as the Norwegian diaspora in the United States.

In Alaska, the town of North Pole near Fairbanks is seeking to develop its Christmas focus via the development of a theme city concept and its promotion is getting increasing international coverage (e.g. Rush 2007). The town's post office also receives considerable mail for Santa which also presents substantial branding opportunities for the town. Surprisingly, the country that receives most Christmas mail for Santa, Canada, has not connected Santa to a specific place branding strategy and instead promotes the idea of Santa being at the North Pole. Although given current develop-

ments with respect to Arctic Sea sovereignty claims, the promotion of such a national or even international imagining may not be completely politically innocent (Shukman 2007) and may represent a significant tourism opportunity for a northern community. Greenland also promotes itself as Santa's home and Nuuk, the capital, has lain claim to Santa by having the world's biggest post-box situated outside of Santa's post office at the tourist information centre. However, the capacity of Greenland to respond to letters to Santa is under substantial threat because of public spending cuts, which is not likely to help the long-term development of Santa tourism. In contrast, the Finnish trade ministry financially support the replies to letters to Santa in Rovaniemi (Smith and Bagenal 2006), again emphasising the linkages between Santa and place branding.

Conclusions: The future of the world's strongest brand

Santa Claus and Christmas clearly has a powerful influence on consumer spending, including holiday decisions. The increasing association of Santa Claus and similar mythical characters with places illustrates the significance of such mythologies for place branding in both material and immaterial forms. Rovaniemi and Lapland have been at the forefront of Santa related place branding but other locations, some within other slightly different Christmas traditions such as in Norway, are also seeking to utilise Santa and Christmas in order to construct place advantage over other regions. This is especially important in the northern peripheral context given the relative absence of other potential competitive factors, but is also extended to other peripheries.

Nevertheless, new factors are emerging that may challenge some of the developments that underlie Santa branding and tourism. The issue of commodification and perceived authenticity of the Santa experience is obviously one dimension that is already starting to influence travel companies in their destination choice. However, perhaps far more importantly in the longer term will be assurances to the customer that some of the environmental images that have been developed as part of the brand, such as snow and reindeer, will be available for visual consumption. In the wider context concern over the melting Arctic sea ice and ice caps is already starting to develop a link

between climate change and Santa (e.g. Robison 2007), while in Finland concern is being expressed about 'snow security' for the Christmas tourist season with Rovaniemi being portrayed as a potentially riskier destination than other resorts areas. For example, a story from the French AFP press agency with respect to the impacts of climate change on Lapland and the relative climate advantage of Enontekiö over Rovaniemi (Branchereau 2007) was widely covered internationally. Furthermore, at least two travel companies are using assurances on snow cover as part of their promotions. In their FAQ page Canterbury Travel (2008) stated: *Will there be snow? A strange question to ask perhaps, but in the year 2003 one location in Lapland, namely Rovaniemi City, and its immediate environs, initially suffered from lack of snow. Following this occurrence Canterbury Travel transferred passengers on our day tours to a northern location where there was plenty of snow. As a result we have decided not to feature day tours to this immediate area. We still operate 2 one-day tours via Rovaniemi Airport (namely Christmas Past Christmas Present and the North Pole Post Office) to locations where snow levels were not a problem.*

Similarly, Santadays (2008) stated with respect to snow availability, 'There will be snow in Lapland! Reports of lack of snow were exaggerated in previous years and only applied to a small area near Rovaniemi. The better quality trips take place in the far north of Lapland where snow is virtually guaranteed and counted in metres not inches!'

Place branding is a slow process with no guarantee of long-term success. To date a number of locations have achieved success with their branding in terms of Santa and Christmas. However, for place brands to succeed in the longer term they have to be believable and reflect local assets and characteristics. Unfortunately, for a number of the northern locations that are seeking to use the mythology of Santa as their basis for constructed advantage, climatic change may well lead to the loss of the Christmas environment that sets the all important context for the authenticity of the brand.

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Table 1: Examples of Santa Claus related place branding

Country	Location	websites	Christmas character / brand	Localisation message	Material evidence of brand
Canada	North Pole H0H 0H0 (official Canadian postal code for mail to Santa Claus)	http://canadapost.ca/santas-corner	Santa Claus (In English); Father Christmas (In French)	North Pole	More than 11,000 current and retired Canada Post employees referred to as the Postal Elves reply to the more than a million letters that are received and over 40,000 emails (Canada Post 2007)
Finland	Rovaniemi	http://www.posti.fi/postimerkikeskus/jpp/en_index.html (Santa Claus' main Post Office) http://www.santaclaustolive.com/ http://tourism.rovaniemi.fi/?deptid=6335 (tourism information service) http://www.santaclaus.fi/?deptid=14561 (A Fairytale of Christmas) (Rovaniemi Development Agency)	Santa Claus; 'Rovaniemi – the Christmas City'	The capital city of Lapland, Rovaniemi is a unique destination both with respect to location and services. Located where Lapland begins, you can cross the Arctic Circle, meet Santa Claus and enjoy the brightness of the summer nights or, in winter, admire the northern lights. Rovaniemi is an adventure in itself. The Arctic Circle is where you'll find Santa and his elves when they want to come out of their secret places and meet people. The magic of Christmas is reality here.	Santa Claus' Main Post Office received over half a million visitors and letters a year. (The Rovaniemi tourism website claims 700,000); Santa Park; Santa Claus Village
Finland	Turku	http://www.christmascity.com/ (Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Turku)	'Christmas city of Finland'	'The genuine atmosphere of the Turku Christmas City is based on the long traditions of the city' 'Turku the Christmas City of Finland, glows of warmth and traditions from the end of November and far in January'.	Christmas Street, festival events
Greenland	The North Pole (Greenland as gateway)	http://www.greenland.com/ (Official tourism and business sites of Greenland) http://www.santa.gl/	Santa Claus	'Regardless of which version of Santa Claus you believe in, however, there is only one thing you need to know – that Santa Claus lives in Greenland.'	Nuuk has Santa's post office and post box. (50,000 letters a year)
Iceland	Dimmuborgir in Myvatns-sveit	http://www.santaworld.is/	Santa Claus, Yule Lads	'From time immemorial Santa Claus has lived at Dimmuborgir in Myvatnsveit, carrying out his work of gladdening young hearts of all ages over the Christmas period. For many years now Santa has been answering letters from children, leaving gifts in their shoes and bringing people presents at Christmas. All this he has done from his home in Dimmuborgir'.	Christmas market, Santa Claus post office, Santa in residence from late November
Norway	Drøbak	http://www.julehus.no/sak/000003.asp (Tregaarden's Christmas house)	Julenissen ('Christmas elf) also misser		Julehuset (the Christmas House) (10 months a year), post office (20,000 letters a year)
Norway	Savalen	http://www.julenissen.no/barnnisse.html	Julenissen ('Christmas elf) also misser (gnomes)		Santa Street, Santa's house and workshop (seasonal); tours from UK with Activities Abroad

Sweden	Mora (Dalarna)	<p>http://www.santaworld.se/</p>	Santa Claus	<p>'Where the Spirit of Christmas lives Year round' Santa Claus is also featured on the town's emblem 'When developed as a fully implemented theme city, we will enthusiastically say, "Santa has prepared a secret city, a romantic place, full of light and the magic of Christmas year-round. Come Visit North Pole, Alaska!'"</p>	<p>Santa World – Tomteland (Year round) Santa Claus House, 12m Santa statue, Santaland RV Park, Santa's Suds Laubdromat, Post Office, street banes all have Christmas themes (400,000 letters a year)</p>
USA	North Pole, Alaska (near Fairbanks)	<p>http://www.northpolealaska.com/ http://www.northpolealaska.com/Theme-City/Welcome.html http://www.santaclaushouse.com/</p>	<p>Santa Claus Santa Claus and Abraham Lincoln (the county was his boyhood home) are used in the county's promotion</p>	<p>No mythological account of Christmas location given instead an historical account is provided, 'Come explore the history of our magical town; it's a great place to visit with free admission!' (Santa Claus Museum) Santa Claus Post Office is located in the Kringle Plaza</p>	<p>Main road through town is known as the Christmas Boulevard; Santa's Candy Castle; Santa Claus Museum; Holiday World; Santa's Lodge; Lake Rudolph Campground; Christmas Lake Village themed gated community; Post Office; volunteers ensure that each child received a reply from Santa Claus (10,000 letters a year)</p>
USA	Santa Claus, Indiana	<p>http://www.santaclausmuseum.org/ http://www.legendaryplaces.org/ (Spencer County Visitor's Bureau and link to Post Office and other attractions)</p>	<p>Santa Claus Santa Claus and Abraham Lincoln (the county was his boyhood home) are used in the county's promotion</p>	<p>No mythological account of Christmas location given instead an historical account is provided, 'Come explore the history of our magical town; it's a great place to visit with free admission!' (Santa Claus Museum) Santa Claus Post Office is located in the Kringle Plaza</p>	<p>Main road through town is known as the Christmas Boulevard; Santa's Candy Castle; Santa Claus Museum; Holiday World; Santa's Lodge; Lake Rudolph Campground; Christmas Lake Village themed gated community; Post Office; volunteers ensure that each child received a reply from Santa Claus (10,000 letters a year)</p>