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***Communication of intangible cultural
assets on social media***

**A multiple case study about destination branding in
Scandinavian countries**

Master's thesis (30 credits)

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ABSTRACT

In a globalized, commercialized and mediatized world, destination management organizations (DMOs) promote cultural assets of the respective destinations to distinguish themselves, gain competitive advantage and attract potential tourists. Although literature acknowledges the role of culture for branding purposes, there is a lack of research about its intangible elements and how they are communicated. Therefore, this study examines the usage of intangible cultural assets in destination branding, shedding light on how these concepts are transformed and reproduced on social media. Indeed, social media are considered a valuable tool for destination branding, but they can also alter the meaning of what they communicate. The aim of this study is to investigate how DMOs communicate intangible cultural assets on social media and how their image is communicated when co-created by users and DMOs. The cases of fika, friluftsliv and hygge are chosen as examples of how VisitSweden, VisitNorway and VisitDenmark deal with this phenomenon. The theory of mediatization is employed as framework in order to address the shortcoming identified. By conducting semi-structured interviews with DMOs' employees, and a netnographic study on three social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), the results demonstrate that, when communicated on social media, the intangible cultural assets are transformed into tangible elements, result simplified, commodified and commercialized. The study also shows that the image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge is mediatized, even when co-created with users. In the end, the research demonstrates that the tendency to rely on social media can give the reverse effect of what DMOs intended: a distorted, superficial and stereotypical communication of the intangible cultural assets that may provoke a disconnection from the brand as well as the destination's identity. With the findings identified, this thesis not only contributes to existing literature on social media communication in destination branding but can also be used as a basis for DMOs to develop a communication strategy where intangible cultural assets are advertised in a more effective and authentic way.

Keywords: destination branding, intangible cultural assets, social media communication, mediatization, fika, friluftsliv, hygge

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the first chapter is to introduce the thesis by providing an overview of the topic chosen. It begins with an introduction on the phenomenon, followed by the formulation of the research problem and the objective of the study, including the proposed research questions.

1.1 Background

In today's world, tourism is one of the most powerful exemplars of globalization. With the spreading of tourists around the world, tourism has generated an intense global competition among destinations (Shaw & Williams, 2002). For this reason, destinations need to develop and manage brands that represent them in order to attract tourists (Campelo et al., 2014). A growing number of studies have claimed that destination brands should reflect a distinctive and attractive image which highlights a destination's core features, identity, and culture (Cai, 2002; Blain et al., 2005; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Specifically, it can be very important for a destination to promote its culture, since it can provide value and competitive advantage (Yúdice, 2003). For example, culture can generate positive associations with the destination by creating a unique experience and attracting visitors that would like to get to know a different culture. For this reason, we may argue that culture is a valuable element for destination branding.

Nevertheless, even if the importance of culture for destination branding is acknowledged, its understanding is considered superficial and potentially ignored (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). As Scaramanga (2012) observes, culture is superficially understood, since most literature focus on landmarks, arts, history, events and cultural facilities as the main aspects that characterize a culture (e.g. Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010). But culture is not simply that. Culture includes also intangible assets which are difficult to identify, define and circumscribe. For instance, Throsby (1999) says that "culture is seen as a set of attitudes, practices and beliefs that are fundamental to the functioning of different societies. Culture in this sense is expressed in a particular society's values and customs, which evolve over time as they are transmitted from one generation to another" (p. 6). Hence, it can be argued that culture is also an expression of group or collective aspects of people's behaviour, demonstrated in their daily activities and social practices, and it can exist both in a tangible or intangible form. Similar is what mentioned by Bianchini and Ghilardi (2007), who claim that not just the tangible but also the intangible

heritage of a place is part of a destination's cultural resources. Therefore, even though literature does not effectively consider intangible assets, destination branding need to consider these additional elements in order to effectively and authentically promote the culture of a destination. Social practices, feelings, traditions and sense of place are indeed what really shapes the way people experience the destinations (Campelo et al., 2014). In this research, intangible cultural assets are therefore the core of my analysis on destination branding.

Relevant examples of intangible cultural assets, according to the aforementioned definition of culture, are the Swedish *fika* (having a coffee break), the Norwegian *friluftsliv* (open-air living), and the Danish *hygge* (feeling of coziness). These cultural resources help locals and the DMOs to narrate their culture, and at the same time tourists can understand and experience it through the branding of these culturally-typical intangible assets (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). This explanation accounts for the importance of narratives, namely the importance of an effective and authentic communication for destination branding. Indeed, these intangible cultural assets are crucial to the narrative of the places, as they contribute to destination branding not only with its positive connotations, but also by providing a connection to the locals and the destinations' culture (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). Moreover, they create and circulate meanings, helping destinations to avoid the perception of standardization (Ulldemolins, 2014). Thus, they are considered important assets within the logic of branding destination for their respective country.

While deploying intangible cultural assets can strengthen the brand identity and create authenticity (Ulldemolins, 2014), their communication could give the reverse effect. In particular, this can happen on social media channels, which are considered the main marketing tool of DMOs nowadays. On one hand, one may think that social media could be a good channel to communicate intangible assets since they can constantly provide to the audience information, pictures and videos of experiences. However, social media could actually distort the image of an intangible asset and eventually weaken the identity of a destination brand. Specifically, due to the role social media have in society nowadays, they can shape and distort social communication and interaction (Hjarvard, 2008). In fact, social media can influence the content, as well as the sender and the receivers of the communication. As social media favour the simplicity and brevity to communicate intangible cultural assets, easily capturing attention, DMOs need to provide a framework of what the destination brand and the intangible cultural assets can mean (Arvidsson, 2005). Thus, by using social media for destination branding,

DMOs can apply a media logic which can change the communication about a destination and its culture. This could lead to a stereotyped and superficial reproduction that does not reflect the complexity of the intangible cultural assets. Therefore, I argue that the previously mentioned intangible cultural assets may be reproduced in simplified form, not capturing their complexity, or they may be transformed into something different. This is, I argue, the problematic part of this phenomenon, as it could lead to an alteration of tourists' expectations and can contribute to a disconnection from the brand identity.

Thus, with this study, I aim to investigate how DMOs communicate intangible cultural assets in destination branding, focusing on how these are communicated and co-created on social media. The theory of mediatization is used to address the problem identified and analyze how communicating on social media may produce a distorted image. Sweden's use of *fika*, Norway's use of *friluftsliv* and Denmark's use of *hygge* are employed as case studies. *Fika* is an old tradition of taking a break and having a cup of coffee, which is now a social phenomenon (Brones & Kindvall, 2015). *Friluftsliv* is a "philosophical lifestyle of outdoor life that creates a deep involvement and engagement with the more-than-human world" (Gelter, 2000, p. 91). *Hygge* is a feeling that connotes an "atmosphere characterized by a particularly informal and relaxed spirit of being together, or even being alone" (Bille, 2015, p. 257). These cultural assets are disseminated in different countries and cultures, also thanks to the spread of information that social media generate. Therefore, using these case studies enables me to reach the aim of this research, which is presented in the following section.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The present research will attempt to expand the current knowledge on intangible cultural assets as important elements for destination branding, by applying the lens of social media in order to study the subject from a communication perspective. The purpose of the research is to investigate the usage of intangible cultural assets in destination brand communication on social media, shedding light on how social media contribute to the reproduction of these intangible cultural assets in the destination branding process. After analyzing how DMOs use intangible cultural assets for branding purposes, I will use the Swedish *fika*, the Norwegian *friluftsliv*, and the Danish *hygge* as cases to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do destination management organizations communicate intangible cultural assets through social media?

RQ2. How are intangible cultural assets communicated on social media when co-created by destination management organizations and users?

These research questions will help fill a lack of destination branding literature that accounts for the usage of intangible cultural concepts in destination branding processes, and mainly investigate how social media shape the reproduction of these intangible assets. Answering the first research question will shed light on how DMOs communicate intangible cultural assets, both in words and pictures, focusing on how the concepts are portrayed on social media, while with the second research question, I will examine how the image of intangible cultural assets is communicated when is co-created with the help of users.

Existing theories (e.g. Campelo et al., 2014; Kavartzis & Ashworth, 2010; Scaramanga, 2012) fail to recognize the importance of intangible cultural values, such sense of life, feelings, and traditions, at the core of destination branding processes and how critical is their effective communication. By analyzing *fika*, *hygge* and *friluftsliv*, and answering the aforementioned research questions, I hope to add another layer to the numerous existing studies about the utilization of social media in destination branding (e.g Hays et al., 2013; Lim et al., 2012; Moreno et al., 2015; Munar, 2012; Yan, 2011). By investigating how intangible cultural assets are communicated and co-created on social media by DMOs, the study will highlight the role and the power of media in reproducing intangible assets. Lastly, the findings will also help to understanding the complex interrelation between culture, destination branding and social media communication. With the analysis specific cases, I aim to contribute to build a better comprehension of how intangible cultural aspects should be communicated in destination branding processes also in practice by providing recommendations for DMOs.

1.3 Disposition

The thesis is structured in the following way. The next chapter introduces existing literature and theories about cultural assets, destination branding and social media, highlighting the gap that the thesis aims to cover and providing a framework for this study. After this, the research design and the methods applied in this study are illustrated. The presentation and analysis of the empirical data follow in the fourth chapter. The data is divided into 3 main sections: in

section one, a descriptive overview of how intangible cultural assets are deployed by DMOs for destination branding purposes is proposed; in sections two, how intangible cultural assets are communicated by DMOs is examined; while in section three, the image of the intangible cultural assets co-created on social media is investigated. The thesis ends with a concluding discussion of the results, answering the research questions. In this chapter, contributions and limitations are discussed along with suggestions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The aim of this chapter is to examine and discuss previous research that can be relevant to this study. The theoretical background starts with a discussion about destination branding, and its main characteristics as foundations of the study. Thereafter, the fundamental role of culture is examined, focusing on the usage of intangible assets for destination branding. After this section, the topic of social media communication is examined, in order to understand the communication perspective of this study. Finally, the theory of mediatization is introduced, outlining the framework that is used in this study.

2.1 Destination branding

Destination branding has become extremely important in recent years and has been widely discussed. The subject interests not only academics, but also policy-makers. In fact, destination management organizations (DMOs) at all levels are employing the concept in order to face global competition successfully (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Indeed, destination branding has been considered a fundamental tool to market a destination's culture, history, lifestyle, as well as quality of place in order to gain power and opportunities in a competitive environment (Evans, 2003; Morgan, et al., 2002). As basis for this research, it is now important to define the concept of destination branding. One of the most widely accepted definitions comes from Blain et al. (2005), who defined destination branding as follows:

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

Given this definition, it is possible to say that the main objective of a destination branding process is to establish name recognition among potential visitors and an associated identity for the destination, creating a strong connection between them. For sure, the process is used to

develop a unique identity and personality to differentiate a destination from all the competitors. However, understanding the uniqueness and the identity of a destination is not an easy process. Besides physical attributes and possible functional benefits, a brand includes other aspects such as emotional benefits, self-expressive benefits, brand personality, customer relationships, user imagery, trust, and country of origin connotations (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013). Companies try to create intangible value propositions as well as physical offerings to address and satisfy consumers' needs (Kotler & Keller 2012). Indeed, brands are valuable assets and tools of differentiation in marketing products or services. Thus, brand managers should distinguish their products by emphasizing attributes that will match their target audience and developing an image coherent with the perceived self-image of the audience (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000).

As a tourist destination is a complex entity based on different products, services and experiences, and managed by different stakeholders, the creation, development and implementation of its brand might be challenging (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Different factors are believed to contribute to this complexity. In particular, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) highlight identity and image as the most important factors, because they help differentiating a destination from its competitors. These concepts are explained in more details in the following section.

2.1.1 Brand identity and image

Much attention has been dedicated to the concept of brand identity (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Ghodeswar, 2008; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Konecnik & Go, 2008). A destination should firstly ask itself: *Who am I? What do I stand for? What are my core values?* Indeed, Kapferer (1998) explains the concept in a very simple and clear way: "Before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are" (p.71). Reflecting on this means defining a purpose and a strategic direction for the destination brand. Certainly, identity is crucial as it shows what the brand stands for (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Identity is seen as a brand fingerprint, making the brand one of a kind. According to Aaker (1996), brand identity is:

A unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members (p.68).

From this perspective, branding means creating and communicating brand associations that are unique to the destinations. Intangible cultural assets are an example of it. Therefore, brand identity is crucial for value creation and communication, and identity building is considered a vital phase to develop a prosperous branding strategy (Kapferer, 1998). Moreover, some scholars (e.g. Lichrou et al., 2017; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) claim that identity is not static. Rather, it is a process which influences and is influenced by the culture and the image of destinations (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

In fact, brand identity, which represents how a brand wants to be perceived, is strongly connected to brand image, which deals with the way a brand is perceived by consumers. According to Herzog (1963), a brand image is the sum of the impressions that consumers receive from various sources. It is simply a mental picture of the brand which is subjective for every consumer. A brand image is formed by brand associations, classified as attributes, benefits and attitudes, and is developed in the consumer's mind (Keller, 1993). Therefore, the brand perception, or brand image, is always on the consumer's side (Kapferer, 2012). As images are perceptions in consumers' minds, through branding, destinations can communicate positive information, influencing the image in the direction the destinations aim to convey to tourists. Based on what has been addressed so far, it is possible to say that "image is nothing without strong identity" (Perry & Wisnom, 2003, p. 5), meaning that identity is an active part of the image-building process that can shape consumers' perception of a brand (Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Upshaw, 1995). Thus, while brand identity derives from DMOs and represents an organization's reality, brand image is received by consumers and represents their perception (Nandan, 2005). From this perspective, DMOs need to frame their communication of the intangible cultural assets so that it stays "within the boundaries of the intended brand identity" (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 244).

Echtner and Ritchie (1991) offer a conceptual framework, illustrated as a three-dimensional figure (see Figure 1), in order to better understand the brand image that DMOs communicate and the aspects they focus their communication on.

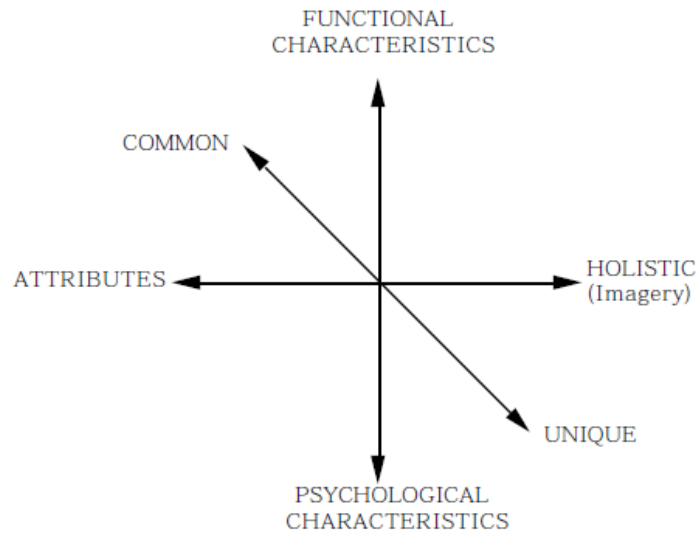


Figure 1. The components of brand image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991)

According to them, a brand image consists of three image continuums: (1) attribute–holistic; (2) functional–psychological; and (3) common–unique. The first continuum suggests that images can be perceived by features and attributes of the destination, but also by holistic impressions, focusing on beliefs or ideas that people have of the place (Kotler et al., 1993). The second continuum ranges from functional attributes, which can be directly observed, to psychological attributes, which can only be experienced, but not measured objectively. Gallarza et al. (2002) noted that the most common image attributes range from the most physical (functional) attributes, such as activities, landscapes and nature, to the most abstract (psychological) attributes, such as friendliness, service quality and safety. The third and last continuum of the framework ranges from common attributes, which can be found and compared in all destinations, to unique attributes, which are exclusive to a specific destination. Both common and unique can have functional or psychological traits. In conclusion, a brand image can consist of both attribute-based and holistic impressions, each of which can be based on both functional and psychological traits, and can be unique or common to all destinations (Shani & Wang, 2011).

Echtner and Ritchie’s model provides more details about how brand image can be communicated. Even if it has been created to better understand the overall image of a destination, it can also be applied to specific destination traits that DMOs communicate. In this study, the model helps to investigate the communication of the image of intangible cultural assets. For example, do DMOs focus on a general impression of the intangible cultural assets?

Or do they also communicate the single attributes that belong to them? Intangible assets can be communicated with more functional elements, such as their physical manifestations, but also with psychological attributes, such as the atmosphere and the feelings they create. Additionally, are DMOs able to represent the unique attributes of a culture that cannot be found anywhere else or do they represent just the common features that can be found also in other destinations? Therefore, this model will be helpful in the data analysis to examine how DMOs frame their communication of the intangible cultural assets and if they are able to represent their unique reality.

In conclusion, DMOs communication connects what the destination is (identity), what they want to communicate and how tourists perceive it (image). These foundations are believed to be beneficial for understanding the role of culture, specifically intangible cultural assets, in destination branding. In particular, they are beneficial to comprehend how culture is strongly connected to identity and image, and therefore a valid element to use for branding purposes.

2.1.2 The role of culture in destination branding

In addition to the importance ascribed to brand identity and image, a growing number of studies have acknowledged the significant role of culture for destination branding. It emerged that, since a destination brand should have a distinctive image, its culture should be portrayed (Campelo et al., 2014), as this is unique for each destination and part of a destination's identity. However, the dominant understanding of culture within destination branding is considered inadequate by Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2015), who recognize a disconnection between destination brand and the local culture. Also, Bianchini & Ghilardi (2007) mention that destination branding "should be more 'cultured', knowledgeable and critically aware of [...] the cultural life and cultural representations of a particular locality" (p. 285).

As mentioned in the introduction, culture is a broad, complex and dynamic concept, difficult to define. Acknowledged the definition of Throsby (1999), culture can also be defined as "a shared system of meaning that helps people make sense of the world" (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015, p. 157). Indeed, culture is a socially defined process, it is something that people are involved in, not an end result. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus is not on disclosing the meaning of culture, but rather how it is communicated for branding purposes, therefore how it is socially defined. Following this logic, culture is "something the place is rather than something the place has" (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015, p. 164). As claimed by Bianchini &

Ghilardi (2007), it is an integral part of a destination. It creates the uniqueness of a destination experience and it is the basis of how destination brands are articulated (Campelo et al., 2014). It is part of a destination's identity and sharpens the destination's image (Kavaratzis, 2011). Therefore, culture is seen as a powerful tool that can make destinations unique and distinctive.

As destinations are complex and multi-faceted entities, distinctive cultural assets can be helpful tools for successful destination branding. More precisely, the assets that contribute to cultural value (Throsby, 1999). These assets are considered part of a destination's cultural resources, both in tangible or intangible form (Bianchini & Ghilardi, 2007). Indeed, locations, sites, buildings are assets with cultural significance, but it is also important to consider the "shared sense of the spirit of the place and [...] its representation and expression" (Campelo et al., 2014, p.155). Personal and collective experiences, social interactions, as well as affective engagements are fundamental elements which create the sense of a destination. Beliefs, traditions, expressions, language, ideas, practices and values are also intangible cultural assets which identify and connect a given group of people (Throsby, 1999). Acknowledging these constructs and how they determine the sense of a destination provides "an understanding of the layers of meanings upon which the uniqueness of each place is generated" (Campelo et al., 2014, p. 161). A deeper understanding of the peculiarities and distinctiveness of a destination is required in order to better represent its complexity and developing effectively a destination and its brand, which is culturally and socially informed. Indeed, intangible cultural assets are peculiar and unique to each destination. Consequently, their role is fundamental for defining brand meanings and representations (Campelo et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, intangible cultural assets can be wrongly used for branding purposes. On one hand, DMOs search for an authentic image where locals can identify in. On the other hand, they look for a unique image and a competitive advantage. The result is that intangible cultural assets are both an authentic element for destinations and an instrument for reaching DMOs objectives. As argued by Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2015), the local culture can be "hijacked" for DMOs interests, instrumentalized for the purposes of branding destinations. Branding views culture as a destination asset, something the destination has and that DMOs can use, rather than something the destination is. The consequence of such thinking can be a distorted communication of intangible cultural assets when branding destinations.

2.2 Social media communication

Communicating a brand, specifically its identity and intangible cultural assets, is an integral component of the destination branding process. The goal of DMOs is to provide information, while communicating a value proposition to the targeted audience and reminding them about the unique attributes of a destination (Armstrong et al., 2014; Keller et al., 2008). Creating, communicating and delivering messages that have value for consumers, partners, and the whole society in general, is fundamental for destinations as it helps to increase recognition and embeds expectations in consumers' minds (Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Miletsky & Smith, 2009).

The branding and marketing tools mainly used by DMOs are social media, whose significance for communicating a brand cannot be denied (Lim et al., 2012). Social media are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). They are composed of online interactive platforms, with the main purpose of social interaction. According to Scott (2010), social media allow people to communicate online in a social way, transforming the nature as well as the content of consumers' conversations. Indeed, the usage of social media allows to reach a broader audience at relatively low costs, while involving consumers through a direct interaction and having a high level of efficiency. Moreover, they can contribute to develop, collaborate and distribute content, enhancing collaboration and sharing information online (Hvass & Munar, 2012). Hence, a communication strategy focused on social media is considered a successful choice for DMOs. As a result of the rise of social media, many DMOs have incorporated their branding techniques, in order to promote the destination and communicate their brand identity, thus strengthening the brand. They took advantage of these tools with different purposes: for instance, DMOs can strengthen their brand image, target specific markets, build and support the brand, increasing communication, engaging with stakeholders, and changing behaviour or perceptions if necessary (Kiráľová & Pavlíček, 2011). Moreover, social media allow interactivity, making possible for DMOs to engage with consumers and increase their identification with the brand and its features, such as intangible cultural assets (Yan, 2011). In short, social media allow DMOs to be more social, thus reducing the distance with potential tourists (Hays et al., 2013).

As consumers can experience locations through their representation on social media, branding strategies on these channels are very critical. The way a certain location is represented can

modify the images that people have of destinations and their cultural background, which is considered a key concern in destination branding (Anholt, 2007). On one hand, with the implementation of social media, marketers can easily and successfully deliver messages to targeted consumers in a non-ambiguous, simple, visible, and informative way (Parlov et al., 2016). Moreover, social media favour the immediate to capture attention, as well as the simplicity and brevity to convey a message. This makes easy to communicate on social media tangible assets, such as events, arts and landmarks, since they have concrete features. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it is more difficult to represent the intangible side of culture, and here the usage of social media could drive to a simplified and superficial reproduction as well as a commodification of the intangible cultural assets. This could be driven by various reasons. First, this can be generated by the fragmented nature of social media. Social media have different specific features that diversify them and that characterize a different communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This can limit the DMOs communication that will not reflect the complexity of the intangible cultural assets. For instance, Instagram enables a communication uniquely via images, with text as support. While images may have more impact and can be more engaging than text alone, they somehow limit the communication. Second, DMOs have control over what is communicated and how. It is important for them to recognize the existence of powerful narratives and how these frame consumers' stories. For this reason, DMOs should strategically plan their social media communication, in order to attract potential tourists and provide them a preview of the experience they can have in the destination. DMOs, therefore, can be accused of a selectivity that reduces the complexity of the intangible cultural asset to a unifacted, standardized and blandness image. The diversity and authenticity of the assets can decrease, giving space to uniformity, superficiality and misleadings (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015). This can also happen when the assets are co-created with users.

2.2.1 Co-creating on social media

A particularly important aspect of social media is that they allow everyone to participate and get engaged in the development of a destination brand image (Lim et al., 2012). If before information was totally disseminated by DMOs, today it can be generated also by consumers. They comment, share opinions and information with other users on social media platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media have empowered them with active role and participation, modifying the process of market communication. Thus, the role of users has shifted from passive receiver to active producer (Rathore et al., 2016).

When marketing the destination, DMOs may choose to include user-generated content (UGC). They can do that by reposting on Instagram, sharing on Facebook or retweeting on Twitter, for instance. DMOs find and select UGC, focusing on what stories they tell and ensuring their relevance and interest (Fujita et al., 2019). This generates a co-creation process where both destination organizations and tourists have an important role. On one hand, there are DMOs who communicate the destination brand through promotional, interpretative and market research strategies. On the other hand, there are tourists who share content and construct their own brand image (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). As the content shared by users may not reflect or provide the same message promoted by DMOs, engaging and interacting with them on social media may allow DMOs to comprehend other points of view and develop a brand image accordingly (Dijkmans et al., 2015).

Given that, DMOs would achieve better results by applying strategies that engage tourists on social media. For instance, Gyimothy and Larson (2015) distinguished three social media co-creation strategies: (1) *Customer insourcing*, such as recruiting users to disseminate information, and posting and boosting UGC; (2) *Crowdsourcing*, meaning involving users to generate new ideas and identify problems; (3) *Community consolidation*, by contributing to the collective experience by posting and sharing UGC. In these ways, DMOs can involve tourists in the whole destination branding effort, integrating UGC and co-creating a brand image with them. However, it is important to remember what previously mentioned. The fragmented nature of social media influences also the users' communication, thus UGC may result shaped as well. The image of intangible cultural assets that users provide can appear superficial, also because they might not be aware of the complex reality of the assets. Moreover, even if users share a different perspective of the intangible cultural assets, DMOs have the power to select and share what they think is consistent with the brand identity, and especially with what they want to communicate.

In conclusion, while social media channels are excellent tools to spread content, messages and narratives, allowing DMOs to develop a voice online (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015), they can also lead to distorted image. This is due to the content communicated by DMOs as well as what is created by users that DMOs decide to share. A superficial and distorted reproduction might generate a change in tourists' expectations, as well as a disconnection from the destination's identity. In order to address the shortcoming approached, the theory of mediatization is introduced.

2.3 Mediatization

Although social media can be a powerful communication tool for DMOs since they reach a broad audience and they allow a co-creation of the content with the users, social media communication can also have drawbacks. I suggest the image of the culture of a destination communicated on social media can be distorted because of the mediatization of its content. A definition of mediatization has been provided by Hjarvard (2007), who defines it as following:

As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g. politics, religion, language) assume media form. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activities are influenced by media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon. (p. 3)

Even though the concept has been developed from various perspectives, mediatization places emphasis on how media shape social communication and interaction (Hepp et al., 2015). Therefore, it can be used to analyze in a critical way the interrelation between changes in media and communications. Couldry and Hepp (2013) also add changes in culture and society. It is a useful concept for understanding the relation between media, culture and society. In the specific, it emphasizes the transformative aspects of media as society is becoming increasingly dependent on it (Månsson, 2015). Based on what mentioned, mediatization is considered an appropriate theoretical concept that can work as a “framework for analyzing and building a theoretical understanding of how the media may interact with other social and cultural processes” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 4). While this is a theory that refers to media in general, it can be also specifically applied to a social media context. Moreover, it can be applied to the analysis of the intangible cultural assets of destinations since it focuses on culture and society. Therefore, it is considered valuable for this study.

One of the main effects of mediatization is the adoption of a media logic that shapes interactions and routines. Hjarvard (2008) explicitly refers to media logic as society and its institutions depend on. With that, it is possible to “understand their organizational, technological, and aesthetic functioning, including the ways in which media allocate material and symbolic resources and work through formal and informal rules” (Hjarvard, 2007, p. 3). It combines a

technological logic with a commercial one, meaning that technologies can shape communications' content. A media logic is also part of four processes identified by Schulz (2004), where media shape human communication and interaction. The first process - *extension* - focuses on how media extend human communication in both place and time. For instance, tourists can share photos and experience on social media while travelling, in every moment and in every place (Månsson, 2015). The second process - *substitution* - deals with how media substitute social activities that previously took place face-to-face (Hjarvard, 2008). The third process - *amalgamation* - underlines that "media activities not only extend and (partly) substitute non-media activities; they also merge and mingle with one another" (Schulz, 2004, p.88). This means that face-to-face communication can combine with mediated communication in the everyday life. The fourth and last process - *accommodation* - highlights the media's influence on sectors outside the media sphere (Månsson, 2015). Thus, many actors apply a media logic in their communication and need to adapt their behavior to accommodate the media's formats and routines (Hjarvard, 2008), including DMOs.

A clearer connection between mediatization and communication is given by Krotz (2009). He mentions that "the mediatization concept defines communication as the core activity of human beings" (Krotz, 2009, p. 31). Given that, it is possible to say that mediatization is an ongoing process where media technologies as well as organizations change human relations, behavior and everyday practices. As most of social interaction takes place on social media nowadays, mediatization theory can be used to demonstrate the influence of social media on human activity, especially in communication, engagement and interaction (Hjarvard, 2008). While on the one hand social media became a part of organizations like DMOs, on the other hand they have a media logic to which DMOs respond. Therefore, it is a double process: social media influence DMOs, which are also influenced by other sources. According to Månsson (2015), this double process can be an example in which social media influence destination branding and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is not only DMOs that are influenced. Hjarvard (2008) stresses that even some aspects of people's lives can be mediatized. For example, the language, the content, and in general the communication and co-creation of images by users can also be influenced. Therefore, social media reflect, refine, and contribute to negotiating social interaction within destination branding (Altheide, 2013).

Moreover, the concept of mediatization can be intertwined with the consumption of images. Tourists now consume mediated representations, which may change tourists' experiences when

they are visiting a destination, but also have a profound impact on all social interactions and ways of communication (Månsson, 2015). Hence, mediatization, in particular the logic of social media, influences the form communication takes. It influences the nature and function of social relations, as well as the sender, the content and the receivers of the communication (Hjarvard, 2008). In the specific, social media are now integrated in all cultural practices that they evoke cultural changes. Due to globalization, cultural practices are available to everyone, but their nature is very often transformed (Scaramanga, 2012). Of course, culture is not mediatized to such an extent that all of its meanings are mediated by social media. However, according to Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2015), culture is portrayed as an oversimplified content, which is superficially promoted on social media. It appears meaningless and can, actually, detach from the brand identity.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that social media can influence the communication of the intangible cultural assets. These concepts may appear mediatized, thus reproduced distorted, either amplified or simplified. The image communicated may not reflect their complex reality. The theory of mediatization is therefore used in this study to analyze the DMOs communication on social media, and how these influence communication, co-creation and social interactions. In the specific, it will be used as framework to address the identified shortcoming of distorted reproduction.

2.4 Summarizing remarks

In this era of globalization, destination brands occupy an important part as destinations are facing an intense global competition. In order to gain competitive advantage, it is crucial for destinations to promote their distinct characteristics, aiming for a presentation of a unique identity (Kavoura, 2014). This chapter provided an overview of previous research, which led to the lack of an intangible cultural approach to destination branding research, highlighting the contribution that this study can give. Moreover, reviewing existing literature and theories, it also emerged that social media play an important role in shaping the destination brand, its cultural assets and the communication of them, both in a positive and negative way. Keeping the above into consideration, I assume that: (1) social media may facilitate the communication of intangible cultural assets, since they have the advantage of communicating in a frequent way aspects of the everyday life; (2) however, social media may shape and distort the communication of the intangible cultural assets, slowly changing their nature; (3) even though

DMOs would like to communicate a realistic and original version of cultural assets, it happens that the assets are shaped in a way that can be more beneficial for the mere promotion of the destination, which may lead to a simplified reproduction of the actual culture.

The cases of *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* are valuable examples of intangible cultural assets used by DMOs in a social media context, and they are the ones which are analyzed in this study. In order to answer to the previously mentioned research questions, this study's empirical data is analyzed based on the literature and the theoretical foundations presented in this chapter. In particular, the theory of mediatization is fundamental to both address the problem identified and analyze the empirical data. The research design and the methods used in the study are discussed in further details in the next chapter.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the research approaches and methods used for collecting and analyzing the data. First, the chapter starts with presenting the philosophical standpoint of the study and continues with the research approach and strategy. Second, the usage of case studies for this research is illustrated. Third, the data collection as well as the data analysis of both interviews and netnography is explained. Last, the chapter ends with a discussion about quality criteria and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research philosophy

This study is conducted from a social constructionist perspective. Social constructionism roots come from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who introduced the concept in the book “The Social Construction of Reality” (1966). They saw a relation between individuals and society: people continually construct the social world, which becomes the reality they must live in. The everyday life of individuals has significant impacts on how we see the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). However, Burr (2003) claims that people cannot construct it in any way they want, as when they were born, they were entering a world already constructed by their predecessors. A world that looked like an objective reality. Hence, reality is constructed between people and is dependent on people’s relation to it. This also means that reality can never be fully measured but can only be approximated by applying multiple methods (Burr, 2003).

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), there is no single and objective reality, but “multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature [...] and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (p. 111). Therefore, even though the world is perceived individually, our perceptions are embedded in social interactions. In particular with narratives, individuals construct and co-create social reality. They make sense of their experiences mainly in this form (Lichrou et al., 2017). Since this research aims to examine the communication of intangible cultural assets by DMOs, it is important to understand how the organizations want to use these assets, which meanings they give to them, and how they construct their communication. Moreover, social constructionism is a suitable for communication studies on social media. In fact, these are part of people’s everyday lives, and they influence them continually and socially

(Krotz, 2009). According to Krotz (2009) “media have become increasingly relevant for the social construction of reality as people in their communicative actions refer more and more to the media and use them” (p. 24).

3.2 Research approach and strategy

The aim of this study is to investigate the communication and co-creation of intangible cultural assets on social media. The formulated research questions require the appropriate methods and data to be answered. For this research, a more abductive approach has been adopted. This means that a certain amount of theory was used to approach the process of data collection, but it did not influence the collection strictly (Bryman, 2012). The approach used is also iterative, involving a weaving back and forth between data and theory (Bryman, 2012). As suggested by Silverman (2013), the theoretical background should only be completed after the analysis of the data, when the researcher is aware of what is relevant and what is not. Moreover, the study is qualitative in nature as it is interested in finding meaning and understanding how people interpret and construct a specific phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In the specific, it seeks to understand how intangible assets are constructed and communicated by destination organizations on social media. A multi-perspective approach has been used in this study. By working with more than a single method, data can be examined from different perspectives, and looking at their intersection can provide more relevant and robust insights. For this study, both semi-structured interviews and netnography were used. These methods were chosen as the most relevant ones to operationalize (Bryman, 2012) and answer the formulated research questions. Interviews were conducted with marketing, communication and market managers in the respective DMOs. Interviews were used to gain insights about the DMOs branding processes, the intended communication of intangible cultural assets, and the importance and role attributed to co-creation. They also shed light on the role of these assets and the usage of social media for the assets’ communication. Moreover, interviews were supplemented by netnography. Here, the DMOs Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts that contain presentation of the intangible cultural assets - *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* - were analyzed. This method helped to understand the effective communication by DMOs as well as co-creation of the intangible cultural assets on social media, thus allowing a comprehensive answer to the research questions. The following table provides more details about the units of analysis, the interviews conducted and their duration.

	VisitSweden	VisitNorway	VisitDenmark
Interviews	1	2	2
Duration	45 minutes	45 - 60 minutes	40 - 45 minutes
Interviewees	Marketing manager in the communication department (interviewee 1) and communication manager in the food tourism programme (interviewee 2) <i>[Interview 1]</i>	Market specialist in sustainability and market opportunities <i>[Interview 2]</i> Market and media specialist <i>[Interview 3]</i>	Market director <i>[Interview 4]</i> Marketing manager <i>[Interview 5]</i>
Netnography	DMOs' Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts		
Units of analysis	140 Facebook posts 109 Twitter posts 216 Instagram posts <i>465 posts in total</i>		

Figure 2. Research design

The considerable differences in the number of units per platform are due to the limited usage of some DMOs accounts and an intensive usage of others by DMOs.

3.3 Research design

As already mentioned, qualitative case studies were used for this research. Case studies are characterized by an in-depth analysis of specific units, aiming to understand the dynamics of a distinct phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Thus, a case study is considered a suitable research design for this thesis. Doing a case study means investigating a phenomenon in a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). This makes easier to identify the phenomenon occurring. Merriam (2009) recognizes it as the benefit of this method: understanding how a specific phenomenon is occurring in a specific context. However, it also makes harder to understand the phenomenon outside the system. Hence, to generalize.

Gummesson (1988) distinguishes two types of case studies: the first focuses on a single case, drawing specific conclusions; the second focuses on a limited number of cases, drawing general conclusions. For this research, a multiple case study was adopted. First, every case was treated by its own. Second, they were treated in a cross-case analysis. Merriam (2009) argues that in a multiple case study, the data should be gathered so that the context can be understood as much as possible. The multiple case study helped to construct a comprehension of how DMOs use intangible cultural assets in their communication, and how the concepts are reproduced by the organization on social media. Three cases – the concept of *fika* for VisitSweden, *friluftsliv* for VisitNorway and *hygge* for VisitDenmark – were selected to arrive at specific conclusions. These case studies were picked with the assumption that they could provide a representation of the phenomenon that I want to study. The criteria for choosing *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* are: (1) the strong connection of the cultural assets with the respective countries, (2) the integration of the cultural assets in the destination branding process, and (3) the strong representation of the assets on social media. The case studies were carried out in March and April 2019, applying specific methods that are illustrated in the next section.

3.4 Data collection

The data were collected in diverse ways in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the intangible assets' communication by DMOs. The two methods, interviews and netnography, are now illustrated.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

By using interviews, it is possible to gain rich insights into people's experiences, views, perceptions and opinions (May, 2011). The aim is to enable the interviewer to elicit complex information from the respondents (Bryman, 2012). For the purpose of this research, semi-structured interviews fit better than structured or unstructured interviews, as they allowed to have a set of predefined questions as well as enough freedom to probe beyond the interviewees' answers. Questions did not necessarily follow the schedule and some that were not included in the interview guide were asked. Semi-structured interviews also enabled dialogues with the interviewees, who brought up interesting aspects. For this study, interviews were conducted only with a few interviewees in order to understand and elaborate the DMOs communication of intangible cultural assets.

Altogether, I conducted five interviews from mid-March till mid-April. The interviewees were selected based on purposive sampling, since they were chosen to suit for the purpose of this study. In fact, an important condition during the sampling was that the interviewees must work within the branding or marketing department in the organization, or that they specifically work with intangible cultural assets of this study. However, since I did not have an established contact within the DMOs, it was also a convenience sampling based on the availability of the employees in the respective departments. Some of them specifically work with the intangible cultural assets studied. The interviews lasted around 40-60 minutes each and were all conducted via Skype or phone. No disruptions occurred for bad connection or technical failure. All the interviewees were informed in advance about the research and its aim. It was assumed that the demanded information was accessible for them. The interviews have been audio-recorded for later transcription with the consent of the participants, which also agreed for an analysis of the content.

An interview guide was used as a basis for the interviews. It was used as a frame, but it was spontaneously adapted, and additional questions arose during the conversation. Thus, the interview guide was a flexible framework. In one case, the interviewee asked for the guide beforehand to prepare for the interview, but this did not stop to probe further. All the interviews started with some small talk, trying to create a comfortable situation for both parties. The questions were formulated based on the aim and research questions of this study. Different kinds of questions were used such as introductory, follow-up, probing, structuring, interpreting questions, but also silence (Bryman, 2012). Based on the theoretical background, I focused on how the intangible assets are relevant the destination, but especially on how the DMOs express and co-create them on social media, both in text and images. The questions were also grouped into different sections, in order to have a clear division among the topics discussed. The complete interview guide is available in the appendix.

The last step before analyzing the data collected has been transcribing the interviews. Transcription has the advantage of reporting the exact words of the interviews, guaranteeing more accuracy as it shifts audio to text (Bryman, 2012). In this study, the interviews were transcribed right after and the level of detail in the transcription is considered high. Attention to details provided verbatim interview transcripts, which accurately represented the

respondents' use of language. Other sounds such as laugh or silence were also included in the transcript, and appropriate consideration was given in the analysis.

3.4.2 Netnography

The term netnography is a mix of the words “internet” and “ethnography”, introduced by Robert Kozinets. Ethnography is a strong form of constructionism that assumes that personal engagement with the phenomenon is the key to understanding it. Thus, the researcher immerses himself in a setting, becoming part of the group in order to understand and study the communication and the meanings people give to the phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010). When using the Internet as setting, it is possible to talk about netnography. The concept has been explained as “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork. It uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Thus, netnography is a branch of ethnography that analyzes individuals' behavior online. In this study, I used netnography as I believe it can provide great insights about the DMOs communication and co-creation of the intangible cultural assets considered.

Kozinets (2010) highlights how netnography is focused on cultural insights and treats online communications as social interaction or embedded expression of meaning, not simply as content. Netnography pays more attention to context, language, meaning, type of interaction, among others. Moreover, netnography is open to rapid changes due to the continuous technological development. In particular, social media have become an important space for netnography (Kozinets, 2010). This space is complex, and the information varies among social, informational, or for specific purposes, for instance. Social media is part of this investigation, as it is considered the main tool used by DMOs to communicate the brand, market the destination, attract visitors and, of course, interact with consumers.

In order to conduct a netnographic study, a specific guideline should be adopted. In particular, netnography follows six steps: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets, 2010). In this study, I chose to analyze the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of three DMOs. These specific platforms were chosen because they are the main ones used by DMOs in their branding and marketing process. While VisitDenmark and VisitNorway also use other platforms, such as YouTube, Pinterest and Flickr, the three mentioned are the only ones used by VisitSweden.

Therefore, in order to have an equal comparison, only these social media have been considered for this study. After choosing the social media platforms, the data collection started. A temporal limitation has been added: it was analyzed the DMOs communication of the past 3 years, from January 2016 till the moment of data gathering. This choice is due to two reasons: (1) while the three intangible cultural assets studied in this research have always been part of countries' cultures, their usage for branding the destinations is relatively new; (2) a point of data saturation has been reached, since no new information was available in the previous data. As Kozinets (2002) points out, there are two ways of gathering data. The first one is when the researcher directly copies from the computer-mediated communications, while the second is when the researcher inscribes observations of the community, its interactions and meanings. In this case, I observed and also copied the DMOs communication and their interactions with consumers. However, I gathered data which was specifically addressing the intangible cultural assets studied in this research. The hashtags #fika, #hygge, and #friluftsliv were used to accelerate the study.

In a netnographic study, data can take three forms: (1) archival data, (2) elicited data, and (3) field note data (Kozinets, 2010). Archival data serves as an historical record and a cultural baseline. It comprises any data that researcher gathers from social media that does not involve him/her in creating it. Elicited data is created through interactions between the researcher and the community members. It could be the researcher participating in ongoing discussions, or even netnographic interviews. Fieldnote data is the one the researcher records. The keeping of fieldnotes can have the function of recording and reflecting the realm of online communication. In this specific study, the data gathered are of the archived form, since I was not involved in the creation of data. Hence, data were collected exclusively through observation among social media platforms and websites. Observations of the DMOs communication have been transcribed in the process.

3.5 Data analysis

Qualitative research generates rapidly a large database, including field notes, interview transcripts, and documents. However, analyzing a big amount of material can be a challenge (Bryman, 2012). Different approaches for data analysis can be used. Examples are grounded theory, analytic induction, thematic or narrative analysis (Bryman, 2012). For this study, the software NVivo has been used in order to analyze the data, looking for relevant and emerging

themes. When interpreting both interviews and netnography, I oriented my work at the ladder of analytical abstraction as presented by Carney (1990), I applied some basic steps of grounded theory, and I conducted a thematic analysis. Specifically, after having defined the research questions, a sample has been identified and the data gathering started. Right after, I began coding, which is “one of the most central processes in grounded theory” (Bryman, 2012, p. 568). In this study, the coding process underlined the common themes related to the phenomenon. By analyzing transcripts, field notes and documents, the dense and complex data has been managed, labeled and organized. An open coding has been used, organizing and interpreting the data, but also providing alternative viewpoints (Bryman, 2012). A codebook was created, in order to be the most objective as possible during the analysis. This process led to a creation of concepts, which have been grouped and organized into categories by analyzing relationships and making comparisons (Bryman, 2012). Coding and categories were established, tested and also modified during the process. For the categorization, I applied Spiggle’s (1994) description of data manipulation operations. She mentions that categorization is used to classify data and identify patterns. Later, abstraction groups categories into general and conceptual classes. Thus, I moved from various concrete categories to fewer more general. Finally, comparison helped me to notice differences and similarities within the data collected, identifying possible correlations among the case studies. In general, the analysis was an ongoing activity as it allowed me to be more aware of emerging themes or adjustments for later data collection.

3.6 Quality criteria

Two important criteria for assessing the quality of a research are validity and reliability. However, these concepts are mainly applied in quantitative research. According to Bryman (2012), validity and reliability can be applied in a qualitative context, but the meanings of the terms need to be altered. Different stances have been taken by qualitative researchers, who suggested that qualitative studies should be evaluated according to different criteria. For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose two primary criteria for establishing and assessing the quality of a qualitative study: trustworthiness and authenticity.

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria, each of which reflects the ones used in quantitative research. They are (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. Even though there are several possible accounts of an aspect of social reality, it is the credibility

of them that determines its acceptability to others. This entails how congruent the findings are with reality (Bryman, 2012). In this study, in order to minimize errors and possible bias, all the interview transcripts have been approved and validated by the interviewees, ensuring that there were no misunderstandings. Moreover, the credibility of the research is strengthened by the multi-perspective approach which has been applied. Combining interviews and netnography is seen as an advantage of the research. Evidence is collected from different sources, hoping to increase the richness, deepness and credibility of both data and research. Data collected from interviews provided valuable insights that were later checked when conducting netnography. Regarding the latter, the concept of rich data has been achieved by the large amount of content found. Moreover, this research entails the study of multiple cases, which share certain characteristics. The findings may tend to be oriented to a contextual uniqueness and significance of what has been studied (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless, to ensure *transferability*, sufficient data and context have been provided. This “thick” description would enable the readers to judge whether the findings can be applied to other situations and context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also propose the idea of *dependability*. According to them, sufficient details and documentation of the methods employed is needed, so that the study can be scrutinized and replicated. For this study, all the interviews have been tape-recorded and later transcribed, while all the netnographic material has the characteristic of not vanishing as it is always available online. Therefore, the same images, texts and comments can always be found. However, this criterion might be difficult to achieve, because “what is being studied in the social world is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual, because information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative study precludes a priori controls” (Merriam, 2009, p. 222). Lastly, the criterion of *confirmability* refers to ensuring that the study’s findings are the result of the experiences of the informants. Even though complete objectivity is impossible in social research, no personal values or theoretical inclinations have affected the research and its findings.

In addition to these four trustworthiness criteria, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest *authenticity* as fifth criterion. Authenticity, they say, is demonstrated if the researcher presents a range of different realities. In this study, three different intangible cultural assets and DMOs were taken into consideration. Moreover, having more than one interviewee for each DMO provided value differences, and views. Therefore, it can be argued that this study can help to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied, to stimulate some form of action, and to

empower members to act. Nevertheless, this study lacks to appreciate the viewpoints of other people rather than DMOs. Further research should consider investigating the phenomenon from other perspectives, such as the tourists' side.

In conclusion, as claimed by Bryman (2012), the five criteria outlined are not universally accepted as appropriate criteria for qualitative research, but they are parsimonious, and they are frequently referred to in literature. Therefore, they have been considered appropriate for this study.

3.7 Ethical considerations

There are some general criteria for ethics in qualitative research. One of the main aspects is transparency. For this study, the interviewees were informed about the aim of the study and their contribution to it. They participated voluntarily, and the interviews were made in consent. They also had a general awareness of what I would have asked. This helped to make them feel comfortable, as well as getting the most out of the interviews. There was no invasion of privacy or deception. Moreover, they agreed to be recorded and were informed that their data was handled confidentially. In order to avoid any harm or risks for the interviewees, all the interviews are handled anonymously. The only data available is the DMO they work in and their role in the company. With the informed consent and confidentiality, but also by minimizing stress for the interviewees within the interviews, I tried to meet the moral criteria that Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) introduce. Regarding the transcriptions, I made sure the written text was loyal to oral statements. This was done by sending the transcripts to the interviewees for them to check, in order to avoid any misunderstanding and guarantee their correctness. Moreover, Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) pinpointed indicators for interview quality. The answers should be spontaneous, specific, rich and relevant. The fulfillment of these criteria became evident in the transcriptions.

Regarding netnography, Bryman (2012) discusses that online research ethics are in a state of flux. First, it is important questioning what is private and what is public in online spaces, as this can raise concerns about privacy. Moreover, Kozinets (2010) mentions that social, political, moral, legal, but also cultural implications of social media are continually transforming. Thus, netnography evolves and adapt simultaneously. For this study, I made sure

that all the data is publicly available, that no password is required to access, that the material is not sensitive in nature, and that no stated site policy prohibits the use of the material.

Lastly, I am aware that my pre-established opinion about the case studies may have influenced the research process. In particular, it could have affected the questions in the interviews and my interpretation of the data collected. However, I am convinced that this study can contribute with valuable knowledge.

4. EMPIRICAL DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter the empirical data gathered for this study are examined and analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework. The first part provides an overview of the intangible cultural assets, giving a first impression of their usage by DMOs. The second part illustrates how the intangible cultural assets are communicated by DMOs on social media, shedding light on how these concepts are reproduced and transformed online. The third and last part explains how the intangible cultural assets are communicated when co-created by users and DMOs, focusing on the role of users in co-creating an image.

4.1 Descriptive analysis

Intangible cultural assets, such as fika, friluftsliv and hygge, are considered a powerful tool that highlights destinations uniqueness and distinctiveness. In contrast to what claimed by Scaramanga (2012), these cultural assets are not specifically selected for destination branding, rather they became trends before being used for this specific purpose. Since fika, friluftsliv and hygge are now societal trends, their usage for branding purposes can only bring advantages. As the objective of the study is to investigate the communication of intangible cultural assets on social media, which are relevant communication channels that need to be understood for an effective destination branding. Intangible cultural assets are the basis of how culture is articulated (Campelo et al., 2014), hence providing a descriptive overview of how fika, friluftsliv and hygge are expressed in text and images is considered a main and important part for this study.

4.1.1 Expressing intangible cultural assets

First of all, the software NVivo has been adopted to determine the most frequent words used by DMOs in posts about the three intangible cultural assets on the platforms analyzed (see Figures 3-4-5). The expressions have been grouped with stemmed terms. The aim of the collection of frequent words is not only to explicate the content of the posts, but also to express and illustrate which aspects of the intangible cultural assets are communicated, and what meaning is given to them.

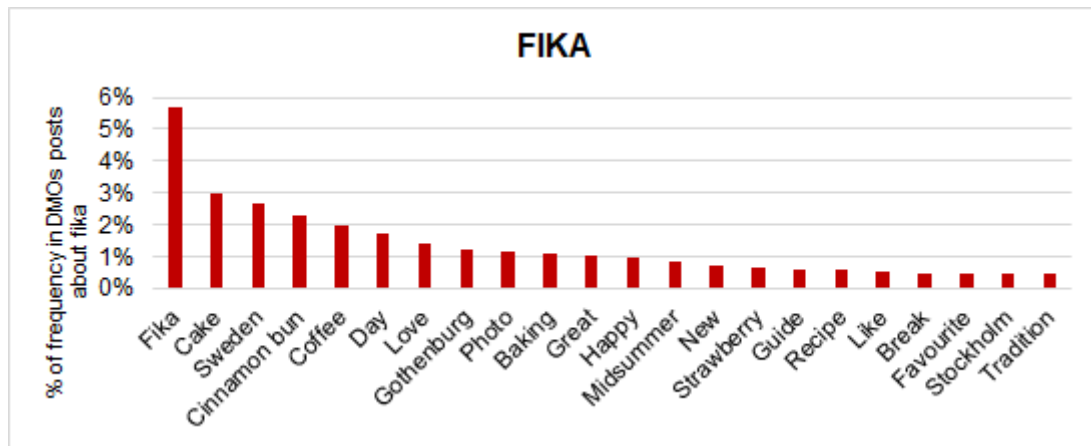


Figure 3. Most frequent words in posts about fika

Cake, cinnamon bun, coffee, baking, recipe, and break are some of the most mentioned terms related to fika, often used to explain the concept. Roughly translated as drinking coffee, eating treats and chatting, fika is a moment of break (Brones & Kindvall, 2015). By translating the word, it may lose significance and become a mere coffee break, but fika is more about socializing than drinking coffee. Defined as “*a social cup of coffee*” (Sweden, 2019), the essence of this cultural asset is making time to take a break. It is about spending time with people, while eating lovely goods and drinking great coffee. While the concept of fika is simply represented, its meaning is much deeper. Fika, the word mentioned the most, is later followed by *Sweden, Gothenburg* and *Stockholm*. These 3 terms immediately highlight the relation between the country and the cultural asset. As an interviewee 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. (Interview 1)

As an important part of Swede’s life, deeply rooted in the Swedish culture, fika became a habit, and it is now considered a way to communicate with other people. Hence, fika not only represents an entire culture, but it carries a meaning for social engagements (Brones & Kindvall, 2015).

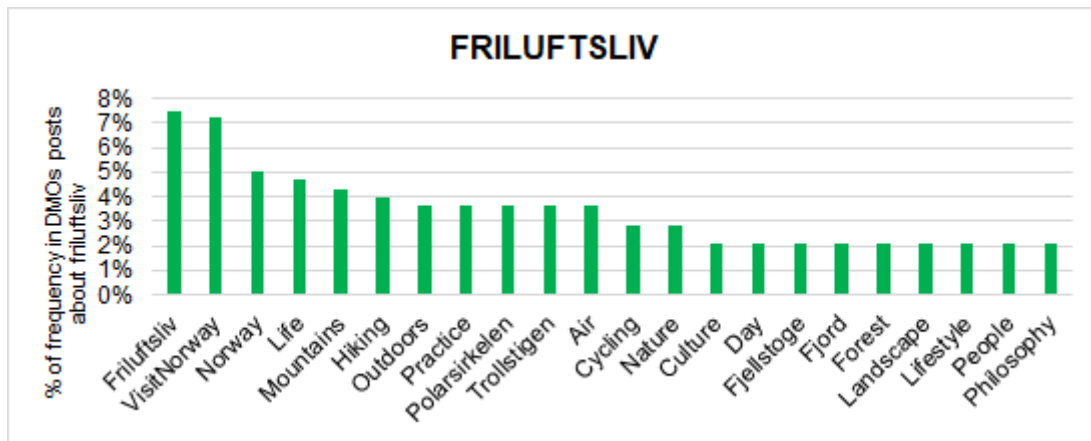


Figure 4. Most frequent words in posts about friluftsliv

As visible from the bar chart, *friluftsliv* is the most mentioned word. Defined by the DMO as “an important part of Norwegian culture” (VisitNorway, 2019), *friluftsliv* is about identity, about touching and being touched by free nature.

It’s the way of behaving outside home, in the nature and how nature is impacting your daily routines. The way of considering the nature, basically. Of acting in the nature. (Interview 3)

Even though it can be found all over the world, *friluftsliv* as specific philosophy is unique in Scandinavia. The roots of *friluftsliv* come from the self-image of the inhabitants, who are nature loving people and have this concept rooted in their soul (Gelter, 2000). It is not a case that VisitNorway and Norway are the second and third most mentioned words, followed by various popular attractions such as *Polarsirkelen* and *Trollstigen*. *Life*, *mountains*, *outdoors*, *nature*, *culture*, *lifestyle*, *people* and *philosophy* are particularly important words as they can briefly summarize the whole concept of *friluftsliv*. In fact, it is a fundamental part of Norwegians’ lives and it is a way of living close to nature. It is a Norwegian spirit, described by a BBC journalist as “somewhere between a hearty pastime and a state religion” (Savage, 2017). Literally translated to “free air life”, *friluftsliv* is a philosophical lifestyle based on experiencing the freedom in nature and connecting with it. It implies people being in the open air, involving free nature and harmonizing with it (VisitNorway, 2019). When looking at the bar chart, it is possible to notice other terms such as *hiking* and *cycling*, which are very connected with how *friluftsliv* can be experienced. It is important to mention that *friluftsliv* is

not an activity, but a lifestyle, a philosophy and a feeling, and it has a value in itself (VisitNorway, 2019).

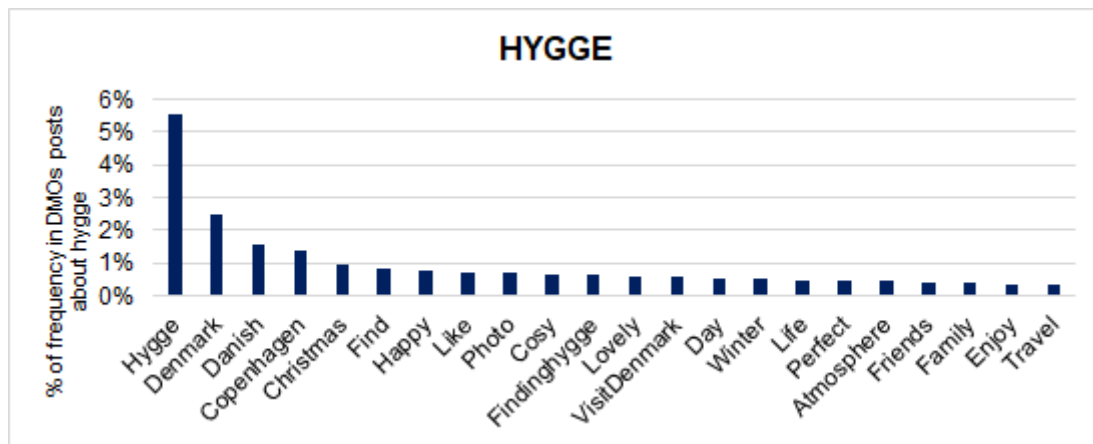


Figure 5. Most frequent words in posts about hygge

As for fika and friluftsliv, *hygge* is the word mentioned the most, together with stemmed words such as *hyggelig*. It is followed by *Denmark*, *Danish* and *Copenhagen*, showing a strong connection between the country and the cultural asset, like fika-Sweden and friluftsliv-Norway. The reason why these are the first 4 words can be explained by the fact that *hygge* is strongly used by VisitDenmark to promote the country as a travel destination. This is evident on the social media platforms, where VisitDenmark repeatedly connects Denmark to the concept of *hygge*. Hard to explain as well as to pronounce, *hygge* can be defined as the national feeling of Denmark (Howell & Sundberg, 2015). Firstly appeared in the end of the 18th century, the concept of *hygge* has been embraced by Danes since then (VisitDenmark, 2019a). Roughly translated to “cosiness”, the meaning of *hygge* encompasses much more than that. *Hygge* means “*creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good things in life with good people*” (VisitDenmark, 2019b). An interviewee 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 grow up with. And it is about [...] it’s not about money or wealth, it’s about feeling good about yourself. Being conscious about that. (Interview 4)

Looking at other frequent words, terms like *happy*, *cosy*, *lovely*, *life*, *atmosphere*, *friends* and *family* give evidence to this quote and demonstrate what *hygge* really is. It is also known that

the concept of hygge can be applied to almost everything. There can be an intimate hygge (alone), a social hygge (together with other people), a neighborhood hygge (seeing everyday familiar faces), as well as a Christmas hygge (Bille, 2015). Interesting in the bar chart are the terms *Christmas* and *winter*. In fact, Christmas is the high season for hygge, which is considered “*the main ingredient in the recipe Danes use to cope with the cold winters*” (VisitDenmark, 2019c).

Very curious is the fact that most of the words associated with the cultural assets are functional and tangible elements. This is already an important finding, showing that social media tend to make the assets more tangible and simplifying the intangible side. However, also intangible and psychological words have been mentioned (e.g. tradition, lifestyle, atmosphere). I argue that the DMOs communication should focus more on that, providing a more realistic representation of the assets. Moreover, social media do not limit the communication of the assets at expressions or simple descriptions, but they communicate the intangible cultural assets also visual wise. This topic is more discussed in the next section.

4.1.2 Visualizing intangible cultural assets

Even though DMOs use text and links in their communication, in order to engage more people, it emerged that this is not the main way DMOs communicate the intangible cultural assets. The empirical data show that fika, friluftsliv and hygge are very often communicated visual wise, with text as support. Visual is by far the strongest way of communication, and it is considered by DMOs easier to inspire potential visitors, catch their attention and get them engaged.

Visualizing something intangible is more difficult than visualizing concrete assets, because trying to communicate feelings and lifestyles through pictures is not an easy task. Hence, communicating fika, friluftsliv and hygge might be a challenge for DMOs. What emerged is that the intangible concepts can be represented in different ways, but the content of the pictures seems related to the most frequent concrete words identified in the previous section.

VisitSweden tries to communicate fika by using many images of sweets. Kanelbullar, lussekatter and semla are the most popular. Moreover, most of the fika marketing is connected to what they call “pastry days”, such the Cinnamon Bun Day, the Semla Day, the Pepparkaka Day, the Kladdkaka Day and so on. Indeed, these are great occasions to talk about fika, but it is the sweet, not the cultural asset, that is mainly connected to them. Also, the DMO shares

recipes, fika experiences, and suggest places in Sweden with nice cafès and sweets. It focuses on specific attributes of the asset, like cakes and coffee, but does not provide an overall impression of fika. Even though the interviewees mentioned that fika is actually a quite wide concept, it is at the same time something very quick to grasp. As long as you take a break, enjoying some quality time, with a cup of coffee or tea, it is possible to talk about fika. Therefore, providing concrete images about cakes and coffee can be argued to be the easiest way to get people engaged. Focusing on the asset functional traits is thus simpler than on its psychological ones.

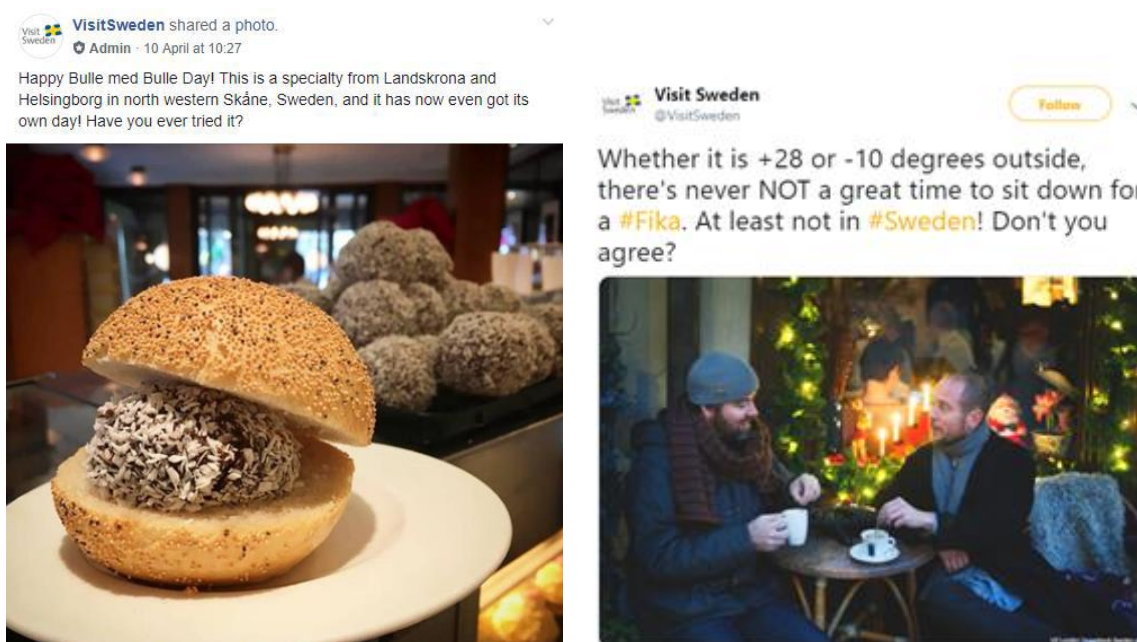


Figure 6. VisitSweden posts about fika (Facebook, 2019b; Twitter, 2019b)

Hygge is usually expressed with inspirational pictures, and it is visualized with candid sights or environments where visitors can dream into. Being on the beach, in the forest, in the big city, it doesn't really matter. 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 may speak for themselves, they are often accompanied by text which describes the concept of hygge, suggests where to find it or simply inspires potential visitors to travel to Denmark. Therefore, differently from VisitSweden, VisitDenmark focuses on communicating the unique and also more psychological traits of hygge. Nevertheless, it is evident that most of the posts are connected to Christmas time, which is identified as the hygge

season, or the communication of hygge increases in that period. Hence, the DMO focus on that its communication.



Figure 7. VisitDenmark posts about hygge (Facebook, 2019a; Twitter, 2019a)

While hygge emphasizes the importance of coziness combined with social connectivity, the Norwegian term friluftsliv highlights the human need to get close and interact with nature. VisitNorway, in fact, communicate the concept of friluftsliv by showing nature, the ways in which people can connect with it. What VisitNorway does is filling nature with activities, showing what to do in the nature and how to enact friluftsliv. Hiking, biking, and fishing are examples of nature-based activities that VisitNorway uses to express and visualize the concept of friluftsliv. Moreover, friluftsliv is mainly communicated with summer pictures. Indeed, summer is the high season for Norway and friluftsliv, and most of the social media communication focuses there. It is very rare to find a picture of friluftsliv in winter, even though the cultural assets can be experience friluftsliv in every moment of the year. Thus, the DMO communication seems limited. VisitNorway provides both images about specific attributes of friluftsliv as well as overall impressions of it but tends to focus on more functional and common elements, which can be found as well in other countries. What distinguish them is simply the association with friluftsliv.

In short, it is possible to affirm that fika, friluftsliv and hygge are three broad concepts that can be experienced and portrayed in multiple ways. This is evident by the posts on social media. The possibility to express fika, friluftsliv and hygge in different forms can be seen as an advantage, because people experience the assets in different ways. Indeed, multidimensionality is an important factor for employing cultural elements in destination branding (Rausch, 2008). If the cultural assets were too specific, the content and the type of communication would be one-sided and too limited. However, this is what is happening on the DMOs social media platforms, as the organizations frame the concepts on the basis of their goals and the impulses they want to create. It can be noticed from this descriptive analysis that DMOs shape their communication thinking at what is important for them to advertise, generating a limited communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge. Only specific images of the assets are disseminated. Thus, the multidimensionality and complex reality of fika, friluftsliv and hygge is undervalued.

To summarize this first part of analysis, some initial findings emerge. Firstly, even though there is not much written in literature about the usage of intangible cultural assets for branding purposes, it is evident from the descriptive analysis and the amount of material collected that DMOs do deploy these concepts for branding their destinations. Secondly, this descriptive overview not only shows what the DMOs connect the intangible cultural assets to, but also make the cultural assets more graspable and understandable for people who never encountered them. This can be an advantage on one hand, but at the same time it can oversimplify the real meaning of these assets. Lastly, it is evident that the DMOs communication focus on connecting the cultural assets to the respective countries, thus highlighting their relevance for destination branding, but it also focuses on the way the asset can be experienced, limiting to some extent the communication. In conclusion, this subchapter provided insights on how fika, friluftsliv and hygge are used for destination branding and what DMOs focus their communication on. This descriptive section is considered a relevant background in order to understand how the intangible cultural assets are communicated and how their image is co-created on social media channels.

4.2 Communicating intangible cultural assets on social media

Even though there is a lack of research about intangible cultural assets at the core of destination branding processes, which may imply that intangible cultural assets are not frequently

communicated for branding purposes on social media, with my study it results that the situation is the opposite. Indeed, fika, friluftsliv and hygge occupy an important role for DMOs to promote the respective countries. This is evident both from what said by the interviewees, but especially from the netnographic data. For instance, on Instagram more than 600 thousand posts use the hashtag #friluftsliv, around 1 million #fika and more than 4.5 million #hygge. Only some of the posts are created or shared by the DMOs, but these numbers highlight the popularity of the intangible cultural assets among social media users and their potential to be communicated on social media platforms.

On one hand one may claim that communicating the assets on social media highlights the uniqueness of the destination. The concepts, in fact, result communicated in simple and informative way, making them very easy to grasp. Moreover, social media are a vital part of destination branding, as they allow to spread the culture and provoke attention. On the other hand, social media can have drawbacks since they influence and shape the DMOs communication, generating distorted images of the intangible cultural assets. This is supported by Hjarvard and Petersen (2013), who assume that integrating social media does not only make cultural practices more available, but also changes their nature. The way in which the influence of social media is described in literature seems that it only has positive effects on branding. Social media are such a vital part for DMOs that their influence is bigger than thought, and it brings also to negative effects. From the descriptive analysis, it is evident that DMOs communication is framed to catch attention and engage potential visitors in the destination organizations communication. What I argue is that the communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge is mediatized in four ways: (1) the assets are transformed into something tangible, (2) the assets are simplified, (3) the assets are commodified, and (4) the assets are commercialized. The next subchapters will deal with each issue identified.

4.2.1 Transformation of intangible into tangible

Expressing and visualizing feelings and lifestyles on social media, especially in pictures, is not an easy task and requires lots of effort. VisitSweden, VisitNorway and VisitDenmark try to communicate the intangible reality of the assets with the aim to increase tourists' interest for cultural aspects of their respective nation. For instance, VisitSweden may want to talk about the importance of taking a break and enjoying some quality time with friend and family; VisitNorway about the feeling of spending time in the open air, being surrounded only by nature and harmonizing with it; VisitDenmark about the feeling of coziness, and it can do that

by posting about atmospheres. While all the DMOs do that to some extent, it emerged from the netnographic study as well as from the previous descriptive analysis that the assets are always connected, or even transformed into some tangible elements. I argue that this is due to the fact that DMOs primarily think at attracting and engaging potential visitors. Therefore, they frame their communication by showing how visitors can practically experience this part of the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish culture. Nevertheless, in the case of VisitNorway, there is awareness that their communication lacks on the intangible side.

I said also previously that we are more focusing on the tangible aspects, I guess. What we are doing now is moving forwards another focus, towards a more motivational base communication [...] we will also be focusing more on the intangible aspects of friluftsliv, referring more to the Norwegian personality, the lifestyle, the fresh outdoor lifestyle, being close to nature, living close to nature and doing everyday activities in the nature. So, I guess you can say it like that, that we are maybe moving towards [...] focusing more on the intangible aspects as well, the term friluftsliv, the outdoor life. (Interview 2)

This quote shows that at the moment VisitNorway often connects friluftsliv with spectacular natural spots to visit or activities to do in the open air. However, the DMO aims to develop its communication in order to represent the aspects undervalued till now. The same cannot be said about VisitSweden that merely suggests typical Swedish pastries to try throughout the year, recommends local cafès and promotes the best destinations where to get fika. Indeed, fika is the one among the assets which is mostly transformed into tangible. The importance of having a social break is darkened by the simple activity of drinking coffee and eating sweets. Of course, the latter is a valuable part of having fika, but it is not the core. VisitDenmark can be found in a middle way as it associates hygge with æbleskiver, candles and interior design, as well as hyggelig restaurants or accommodation, but still tries to communicate the feeling of coziness, which is the core of hygge.

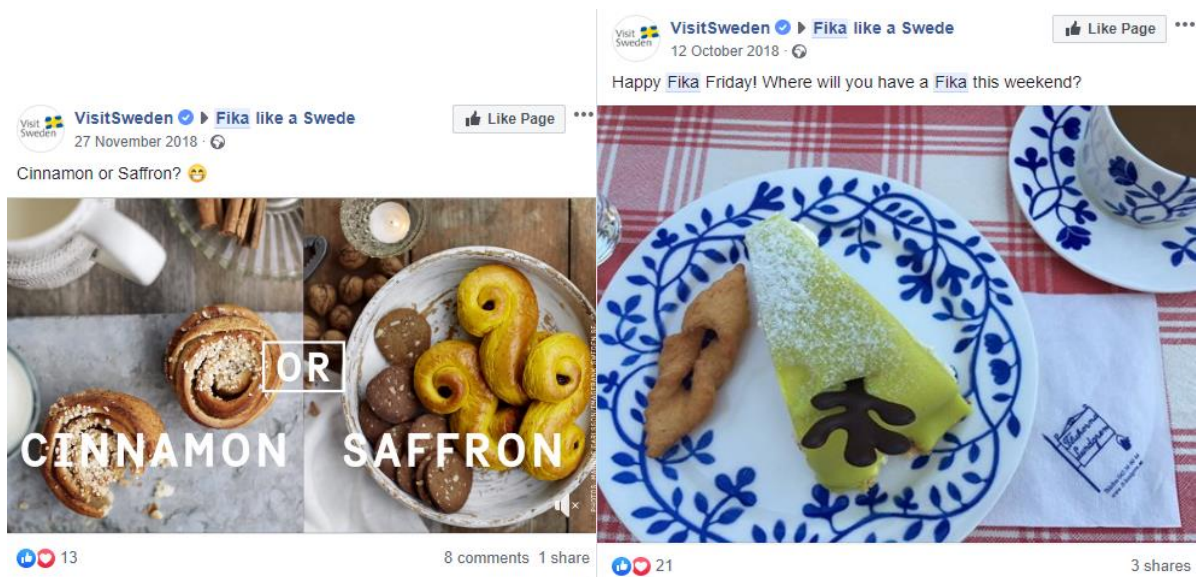


Figure 8. Representation of tangible features of fika (Facebook, 2019b)

All the cultural assets seem connected with other well-known associations that make easier the comprehension by tourists of what fika, friluftsliv and hygge are about also show how they can experience the three cultural assets when visiting the countries. Providing tangible examples may be helpful to shape a positive image of the destination. This point is crucial because creating a direct experience is an integral part of destination branding (Blain et al., 2005). However, a distortion of the assets in this way does not reflect their reality and creates distance with the destination's identity. A tangible representation of the cultural assets creates some misunderstandings as fika, friluftsliv and hygge are now seen more as tangible elements that everyone can try and experience. I argue that this is a superficial representation of the cultural assets because it provides a one-sided image. Moreover, it is an example of how mediatization impact on destination branding, as fika, friluftsliv and hygge are assuming a media form. Thereby, even though it is easier to focus more on functional characteristics rather than psychological, it might not allow to experience the complex reality and understand the cultural meanings of the assets. This implies a simplified communication.

4.2.2 Simplification

The most evident result is how the intangible cultural assets look simplified on social media. As already mentioned, it is not an easy task for DMOs to communicate something intangible, as well as representing every aspect of the assets. Moreover, the three concepts are very broad, and they can be represented in various ways. According to an interviewee, it is easier to reproduce a certain image of the assets 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. (Interview 5)

Even though this quote refers to hygge and VisitDenmark, it can also be true for the other two DMOs. By doing so, they frame their communication and focus on specific attributes, the ones it is more advantageous for them to communicate. It emerged from the netnographic study that DMOs tend to transmit a simple and one-sided message, which I argue makes easier for consumers understanding the assets, but it doesn't reflect their complex reality. Moreover, I claim that using social media as communication channel increases this simplification, because the fragmented nature of social media and the diversified functions of different platforms frame as well the communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge.

DMOs and social media tend to present the intangible cultural assets in a simplified and stereotyped way. The communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge often only focuses on some aspects, which presents a threat to the variability of the concepts. For instance, I can point out the connection between hygge and winter. Looking back at the descriptive analysis, Christmas and winter are among the most mentioned words that VisitDenmark connect to hygge on social media. Christmas is usually mentioned as a stereotypical and superficial way to describe hygge. And it simplifies the concept, which can be experienced throughout the year.



Figure 9. Simplified representation of hygge at Christmas (Twitter, 2019a)

Another example is a hygge campaign that VisitDenmark launched this year. It consisted of an increased and targeted communication towards specific markets. The aim was to inspire for travelling to Denmark, to create awareness and interest. It was a way of engaging people with the concept of hygge and talk about it. However, the communication was superficial, as also mentioned by an interviewee:

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. (Interview 4)

These examples show how the nature of the intangible cultural assets can be altered. The focus shifts on the mere experience of certain aspects. The culture and the lifestyle are often missing in the communication. This point also emerged from an interview with VisitNorway.

We see that Norway, when it's perceived by foreign tourists, they perceive beautiful nature, good activities, good experiences, adventure, etc. But they don't see the people, and they don't see the culture. So, we need our strategies to work on these angles. So, lifestyle, Nordic lifestyle. (Interview 3)

Fika, friluftsliv and hygge become more and more dependent upon social media environments that their communication is to some extent limited. The idea expressed by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) that locals can narrate their culture by using the destination brand is partly wrong. It is the DMOs who frame their online communication, according to the media logic they apply. Finally, I claim that the risk of this simplified representation is that fika, friluftsliv and hygge become a mere resource for tourists to experience what they think is typically Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. This is also evident in the way the intangible cultural assets are commodified.

4.2.3 Commodification

Another important finding of this study is that the cultural assets are not only transformed into tangible or simplified on social media, but they are also commodified. Namely, fika, friluftsliv and hygge are treated as objects of trade, of economic value, intended for exchange. It is undeniable that culture has become a commodity nowadays. DMOs acknowledge that tourists

are more and more interested in experiencing the local culture, thus they try to provide it to them like any other product or service they can offer. This is what emerged from the interviews and the netnographic study. The way in which fika, friluftsliv and hygge are communicated on social media is not only to promote destinations, but rather to gain economic advantages. They look commodified, transformed into products and services, available to everyone.

While on one hand it seems that DMOs use intangible cultural assets to distinguish from competitors, on the other hand they are not able to reproduce completely the uniqueness of these assets. In fact, by transforming them into commodities, they lose their authenticity which is the intangible cultural assets' main characteristic. When communicating them on social media, fika, friluftsliv and hygge shift from being a local and unique phenomenon into a global and standardized one. Thus, I argue that the images of these commodified assets provide an inauthentic perception, distorting their real meaning. This situation is problematic because while social media make cultural assets more available to everyone, they can also modify their nature. The intangible cultural assets become adapted to this environment. This is the point where mediatization theory departs from: the fact that the integration of media shapes cultural practices and evokes cultural change (Hjarvard & Petersen, 2013).

On social media, it is evident that DMOs sell these intangible cultural assets, by suggesting and promoting activities and experiences, in order to attract more visitors. The intangible cultural assets turn, in this way, into commodities that are then advertised and sold. By transforming intangible cultural assets into commodities, DMOs aim not only to promote the destination and attract visitors, but also to commercialize activities and experiences. This theme is discussed in the following section.

4.2.4 Commercialization

While one may claim that fika, friluftsliv and hygge are essentially non-commercial assets, as they are something a destination is and not something a destination has, one of the main findings of this study is that DMOs sell these intangible cultural assets, with the ultimate goal of attracting more visitors. It emerged from the data collected that while apparently the DMOs communication seems attractive and inspiring, it is also based on specific business purposes. Fika, friluftsliv and hygge are not simply commodified elements, but they are also commercialized. They are sold, like any other tourist attraction, and this may distort their real meaning. This becomes evident mainly with fika and hygge. For instance, VisitSweden

commercializes fika by suggesting typical Swedish pastries to try throughout the year, recommending local cafès and promoting the best destinations where to get fika. Even the fika tours created in the town of Alingsås, the capital of fika, are an example of commercialization.

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. (Interview 1)



Figure 10. Example of fika commercialization (Facebook, 2019b)

Hygge as well is very much commercialized. On the one hand, it is evident that the DMO promotes hyggelig activities and spots, including accommodation and restaurants. The cultural asset is associated with tangible elements and commodified, in order to be sold. On the other hand, VisitDenmark has various partnerships for its hygge campaigns. From the interviews, it emerged that the DMO partners with the airline SAS, Danish interior design brands, Tivoli and other attractions. Connecting the concept of hygge with business partnership, I argue, increases the commercialization of the cultural asset.



Figure 11. Example of hygge commercialization (VisitDenmark, 2019d)

Regarding *friluftsliv*, the situation is slightly different. It is acknowledged that the main resource of Norway is nature, thus VisitNorway proposes different activities to do in the open air and suggests the best spots in nature to visit in order to experience *friluftsliv*. It is evident to some extent that *friluftsliv* is sold to tourists, but VisitNorway mainly present the concept by connecting it with nature. Even though they recognize that it is what tourists want to experience nowadays, they try to sell nature and experience in nature, not mainly *friluftsliv*. This may be due to the fact that the concept of *friluftsliv* is the less known among the three used as case studies.

Transforming the assets in something tangible, simplifying and commodifying them are for sure issues raised by the mediatization of the cultural assets that shapes their identities. However, I argue that by commercializing *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge*, their meaning completely changes. They are not anymore social practices that can be simply enjoyed, but they become something that can be bought. These cases imply that deploying intangible cultural assets for destination branding might increase their commercialization but using social media for their communication indeed transforms them into products. Thereby, using social media does not allow to communicate the real cultural meaning, which should be free to enjoy. I argue that this is a result of a commercial media logic adopted by DMOs. According to Lundby (2009), the increasing commercialization of society and media might have caused it.

To sum up the previous four points, it is possible to conclude that while the intangible cultural assets are presented in a simple, short and informative way, their nature seems to be altered. Their communication is framed to catch attention and engage potential visitors in the destination organizations communication. Indeed, *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* are mediatized assets, the image communicated is distorted. This, I argue, is due to the media logic that DMOs apply. This media logic leads to a stereotyped and superficial reproduction that does not reflect

the complexity of the intangible cultural assets. As this problem can create a disconnection from the brand identity and alter tourists' expectations, it is considered valuable to analyze how the image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge is communicated when the users co-create it with the DMOs.

4.3 Co-creating intangible cultural assets on social media

In addition to understanding how DMOs communicate intangible cultural assets on social media, thus how the communication is shaped on these platforms, I also investigate within this study how the image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge co-created by users and DMOs is reproduced. The aim to investigate if even the co-created image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge results distorted and mediatized. This part of the analysis, therefore, investigates how VisitSweden, VisitNorway and VisitDenmark deal with this task.

A particularly important aspect that emerged from the data collected is that the communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge on social media has the objective of generating engagement. The involvement of users on social media is considered particularly relevant for DMOs, who believe that having visitors talking about the cultural assets, rather than themselves, is probably the strongest way of talking about it. Together with users, DMOs can comprehend other perspectives and co-create with them an image of the intangible cultural assets, trying to get a full picture. Indeed, fika, friluftsliv and hygge are very broad concepts. Therefore, they can be perceived and experienced in many different ways, and various points of view can emerge. In the specific, an interviewee from VisitNorway acknowledge the importance of co-creation on social media in the following way:

It has a great impact on branding and the brand image of Norway. That's why I think Norway, throughout the year, [...] Norway has always had spectacular nature and that's why we have this fairly strong position globally as a strong destination for activities in nature, for friluftsliv in many senses. Because that is what we communicate in all our channels, including the social media channels, and that is also what is shared by other users. They are sharing their outdoor experience in Norway and that is, of course, reinforcing the image of Norway being a country which is [...] which has a great potential for outdoor activities. (Interview 2)

Based on literature, co-creation would help to show a more realistic image of the cultural assets. Thus, as co-created by multiple people, fika, friluftsliv and hygge would be represented for what they really are, showing all their faces, and reinforcing the image of the countries. Nevertheless, even if DMOs try to engage consumers and build an image with them, I argue that the co-created image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge results mediatised. The communication from users tends to be similar to what is communicated by DMOs. That is probably due to the fact that consumers understand the assets from what is communicated by DMOs on their social media channels - tangible, simplified, commodified and commercialized - and then experience and communicate them in the same way as they acknowledged them. Therefore, I claim that the distorted communication from DMOs influences not only how fika, friluftsliv and hygge are experienced, but also what consumers believe about them and represent them on social media. An interesting example comes from VisitSweden. The DMO has opened a Facebook group named “Fika like a Swede”, with the purpose of engaging users with the topic of fika.



Figure 12. Post by VisitSweden in the Facebook group “Fika like a Swede” (Facebook, 2019c)

The group allows crowdsourcing. DMOs interact more with consumers, ask for their opinions, create polls and try to involve them in their communication. Also, consumers talk to each other, giving suggestions and recommendations. However, the main evident result is that users share images of coffee and cakes, as well as recipes and tips, because this is the way the DMO does. While here users are allowed to post whatever they want, as soon as it is related to the topic of fika, the user-generated content shared by DMOs on their official platforms is controlled.

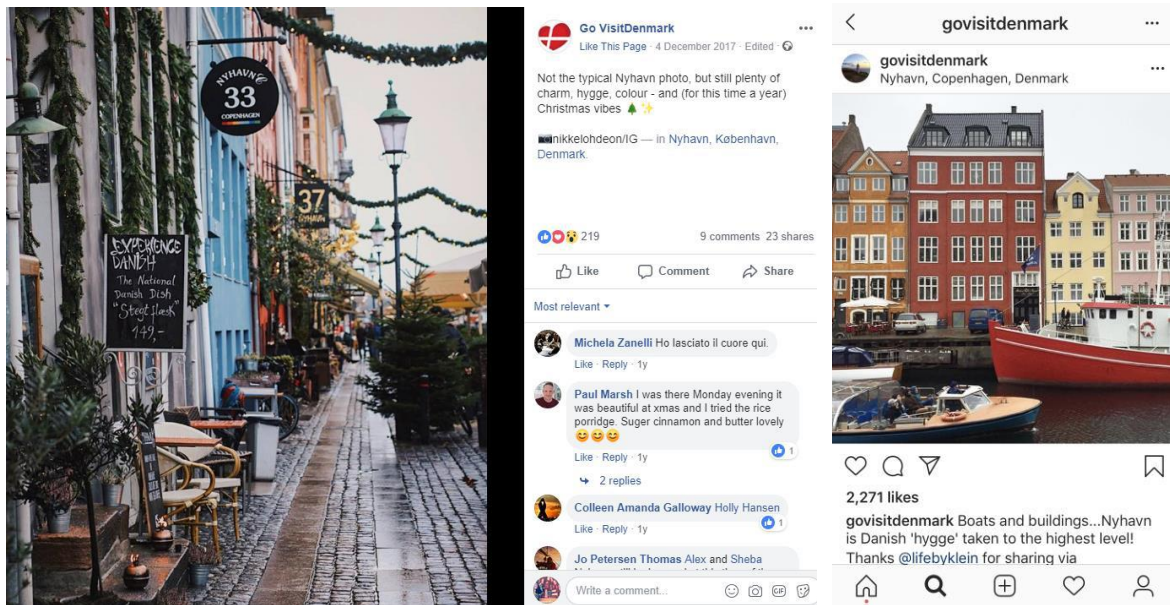


Figure 13. UGC shared by VisitDenmark (Facebook, 2019a; Instagram, 2019a)

On one hand, it is evident that DMOs consolidate the community as the 95% of posts on Instagram by VisitSweden, VisitNorway and VisitDenmark involves the sharing of UGC, in particular the photos they take. However, they specifically decide what to share or not, and they adapt UGC to their needs. Very often, DMOs take images shared by users, give them the credits, but adjust them to their communication. Another strategy that DMOs apply is customer insourcing, where the organizations work strategically with influencers and other types of content creators in order to enhance engagement on their social media channels and boost user-generated content. Nevertheless, even here the communication is distorted. DMOs hire influencers and other personalities to promote a specific image of the assets. Indeed, it is evident that their communication is coherent with what shared previously the DMOs: a tangible, simplified, commodified and commercialized image.

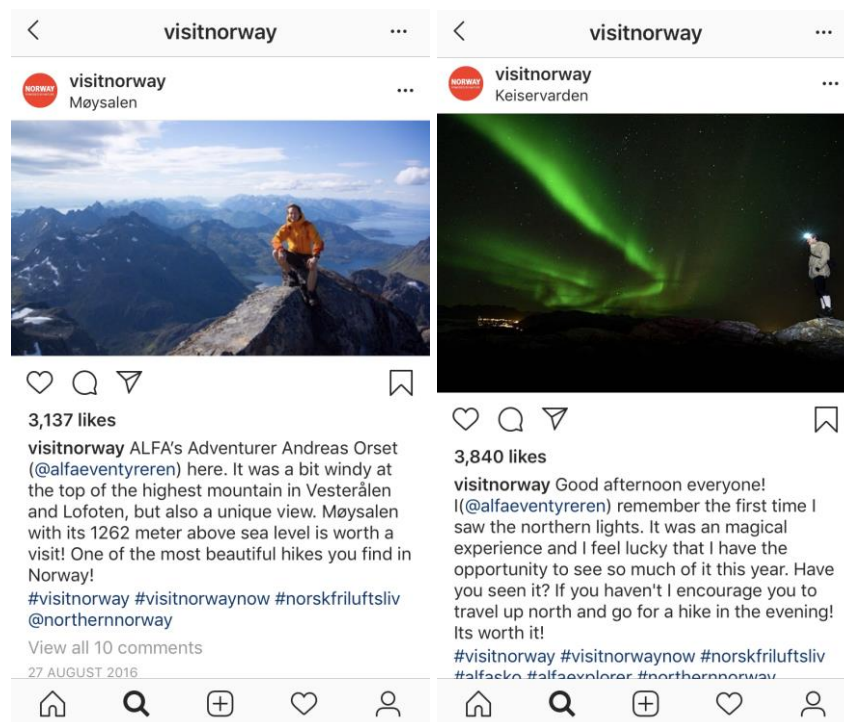


Figure 14. Customer insourcing by VisitNorway (Instagram, 2019b)

Hence, I argue that it is not possible to talk about co-creation when all the social media content is mediated, because the role of users in creating an image of the intangible cultural assets is almost nonexistent. DMOs have control over it, shaping the communication in the way they want. Even in case of co-creation, the communication results are mediated, and the media logic applied by DMOs is evident.

4.4 Summarizing remarks

The analysis shows how *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* are communicated by DMOs and co-created with users during the destination branding process. As these intangible cultural assets are nowadays trend words in several countries, they are considered special cases of how DMOs use the intangible side of culture for branding purposes. It is evident that culture, in the specific intangible cultural assets, is an important component for DMOs to build and communicate a strong destination brand. However, culture seems to be turning into a tangible and simplified commodity, often commercialized, when used for branding purposes. This is done in order to fulfill tourists' needs but implies a partial loss of its uniqueness. When communicated on social media, the intangible cultural assets are shaped in a way that can be more beneficial for the promotion of the destination, as DMOs focus their communication on the aspects that can give them a better image and make them achieve their ultimate goal. One might claim that when the

images of fika, friluftsliv and hygge are co-created with users, a more complete image may be communicated. However, it becomes evident how even the co-creation on social media is mediatized and how DMOs modify and frame their communication according to their media logic. In conclusion, the cases of fika, friluftsliv and hygge show how everyday culture transforms into brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). When used, but especially communicated for branding purposes, the intangible cultural assets lose part of their authenticity. This urged me to realize that there are several aspects that DMOs need to account for when deciding to use intangible cultural assets for branding purposes. Hence, in the following discussion part, I try to build a better comprehension of how intangible cultural aspects should be communicated in destination branding processes, shedding light on the theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter the conclusions of the research are presented. The main purpose is to answer the research questions. Theoretical and empirical contributions are clarified. Later, the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are explained.

The results of the present research allow to reach the aim of investigating the usage of intangible cultural assets in destination brand communication on social media. In particular, they shed light on how social media contribute to the reproduction of these intangible cultural assets in the destination branding process. Considering the context in which such a study has been conducted, which is a context of intense global competition among destinations, the results suggest that fika, friluftsliv and hygge are relevant elements for destination branding, in particular for providing value and competitive advantage to destinations. In fact, they are not only considered inspiration for a better leaving, but they are unique and authentic characteristics that tourists want more and more to experience. Although fika, friluftsliv and hygge have not been created with the purpose of destination branding, they are considered fundamental assets that DMOs use to brand and market the countries, provoke attention and attract potential visitors. Their strong usage for branding purposes became evident in the first part of the analysis chapter. Nevertheless, the way the assets are communicated and co-created on social media does not seem to fully reflect the authenticity of these concept. I argue that this is caused by mediatization, in particular the logic of social media, that influences the form that communication takes. DMOs apply a media logic in their communication and adapt their behavior to accommodate these media's formats and routines. They combine their commercial logic with a social media environment, thus shaping their communications of fika, friluftsliv and hygge. Not only the content, but also the way in which the assets are communicated is influenced by social media. Indeed, it is visible that the three intangible cultural assets are not mediatized to such an extent that all of its meanings are transformed. However, their communication results distorted, superficial and oversimplified. The research questions formulated helped to understand the problem identified. The findings were able to explain the way in which fika, friluftsliv and hygge are shaped and reproduced on social media, thus showing how intangible cultural assets are used by DMOs for branding purposes. The two research questions are now answered separately.

The first research question (i.e. how intangible cultural assets are communicated on social media) can be answered as follows. Fika, friluftsliv and hygge seem, at first sight, communicated in a simple and informative way. This is definitely true, and it is also evident that social media facilitate the communication of intangible cultural assets. Moreover, the content is communicated in an easy form, making the intangible cultural assets graspable to everyone. However, it appears distorted and meaningless, almost detached from the brand identity. It results that in most of the communication, fika, friluftsliv and hygge are represented or associated with functional traits, while their psychological side is way less considered. The connection of the assets with the local culture and the local lifestyle is not immediately evident. Sometimes, it is not even contemplated. Moreover, the communication tends to focus on specific traits of the assets, simplifying their meaning and reproducing only one side, not capturing the intangible cultural assets complexity. This type of communication tries to highlight the uniqueness of the assets but fails in that. Indeed, fika, friluftsliv and hygge are authentic social practices of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, all with a certain symbolic and imaginary importance in the imagined community of the three Scandinavian countries. However, by simplifying what their image, DMOs tend to communicate common traits of the assets, which can be replicated in other destinations. Moreover, the image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge results distorted because they assets are commodified and commercialized by DMOs, in order to attract potential visitors and to reduce the distance between them and the experience of the assets in the destinations.

The second research question contributes to better understand how the image of intangible cultural assets is co-created with users on social media and which are the consequences for destination branding. DMOs consider the involvement of users fundamental for branding destinations. Indeed, having tourists talking about the intangible cultural assets makes the communication stronger. Indeed, users have the opportunity to express themselves, engaging with the assets and talking about that. Moreover, the findings show that interacting with tourists, asking for their opinions, and generally involving them in their social media communication reinforces the image of the countries. Nevertheless, the study shows that even the image DMOs co-create with users results mediatized. The communication from users is very similar to what DMOs represent on social media. Tourists nowadays consume mediated representations. These shape tourists' experiences, but also have a profound impact on their ways of communication. The intangible cultural assets appear superficial and simplified. In addition, DMOs decide what to share or not, and also how UGC can be used and adapted to

their communication. Hence, their media logic frames the co-created image of fika, friluftsliv and hygge. In short, even when co-created the communication of fika, friluftsliv and hygge is distorted, because it is relevant and coherent with what previously shared by the DMOs.

In conclusion, I argue that while one may think that deploying intangible cultural assets, like fika, friluftsliv and hygge, for branding purposes can be only an advantage for destination, it appears that the communication of the assets on social media is a challenge. It might create advantages but also disadvantages for the destinations, especially when the distorted reproduction of the cultural assets provokes a disconnection from the brand as well as the destination's identity.

The present research provided substantial contributions. First, while previous research has focused on the communication of tangible assets of a destination culture (e.g. events, arts, landmarks), with this research I analyzed the underexplored ways to communicate intangible aspects of a destination culture. Second, within the discussion on the communication of intangible cultural assets on social media, the study does not only contribute to the understanding of how the intangibility of culture can be communicated, but it also clarifies how the DMOs communication on social media is framed. The strong relation between destination branding and social media highlights the importance of mediatization for understanding the shortcoming identified. Indeed, the usage of mediatization theory has been fundamental. In addition, with this study it emerged that both social media and communication managers frame the communication about the intangible cultural assets. Hence, this thesis contributes to the numerous existing studies about the utilization of social media in destination branding, highlighting the relevance of mediatization in reproducing intangible cultural assets. Third, the findings also helped to understanding the complex interrelation between culture, destination branding and social media communication, shortly describing the advantages of deploying intangible cultural assets for branding purposes but shedding light on the disadvantages of a communication online.

Moreover, this research also prompts some practical implications. The findings of this research can be indeed used by DMOs to promote in a more effective and authentic way the culture of their own destinations. First, to ensure a diverse communication, the cultural concepts used for branding should be broad enough so that they can be express in different forms, and later experienced in different ways. If the cultural assets were too specific, the content and the type

of communication would be one-sided and too limited. This makes *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge* suitable for destination branding, in particular the Norwegian and Danish ones. Second, the local and the whole destination should identify with the cultural assets, in order to use for branding only characteristics with a symbolic and imaginary importance in the social imagination of the countries. In addition, they should reach the audience on an emotional level, not just providing general information. They can do that by focusing on the authentic and unique side of the assets, without commodifying and commercializing them. Tourists demand more and more authenticity, thus there is no need to frame and sell cultural assets in a different way from what they are. Moreover, DMOs could consider alternative and complementary forms of communication, besides social media, in order to ensure a complete representation of all the aspects of the intangible cultural assets. For instance, they could do that by creating events where tourists can experience these cultural assets. These findings emerged from this study can be helpful to consider when adopting intangible cultural asset for destination branding in practice.

The study also presents several limitations. Having employed a qualitative approach means that the results cannot be generalized beyond the subjects studied. In this case, only the usage of intangible cultural assets by Scandinavian countries has been analyzed. Therefore, this sampling strategy has limited the transferability of the results. Greater insights can be gained by carrying out the same studies in other countries, thus strengthening the relevance and the applicability of the study. Moreover, in the netnographic study, only three social media platforms have been analyzed (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), thus excluding other media channels or any printed material, which might be taken into account in further research. Finally, this study focused on branding communication aimed at tourists, analyzing the DMOs perspective. It did not examine the phenomenon from a tourist's side, since I interviewed just members of DMOs and analyzed to social media content of DMOs. By analyzing that side, appealing results could be gained, and it would allow to get a fuller picture of the intangible cultural assets communication. A comparison of the DMOs communication, the tourists' perspective and the experienced reality of the intangible cultural assets can also be interesting.

As it regards possible research extensions, further studies could use the present research as basis to analyze how consumers experience intangible cultural assets in the destinations. For instance, it could be analyzed how the images of the assets that consumers have in their minds changes after having experienced *fika*, *friluftsliv* and *hygge*. Further research could also

investigate if the communication of the intangible cultural assets in other channels used by DMOs is effective or not, and also if the meaning of the assets would be distorted. Also, researching about the evolution in time of the DMOs communication regarding the cultural assets on social media could also generate great insights. This is because the adoption of intangible cultural assets for branding purposes is relatively new, thus their usage and communication could have been different when they have been first used and it also might change in the future. Finally, I analyzed the general communication of DMOs, but it could be interesting to analyze how their communication of the assets differs in various markets, as the perception and the knowledge about the assets are different in many countries and the DMOs adopt different communication strategies, keeping into consideration who their audience is.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

For my master thesis in Service Management, I am researching about the communication of intangible cultural assets for destination purposes. In the specific, I am studying how concepts like fika, friluftsliv and hygge are communicated and co-created on social media.

This interview will take about 40-45 minutes and will be audio-recorded for me to facilitate the transcription. I will be the only one listening to the recording and your input will be handled anonymously in the thesis. I will send you the transcription for you to approve and to ensure that there were no misunderstandings.

I am primarily interested in how you work with communicating fika/friluftsliv/hygge as cultural assets, what your communication focuses on, how you reproduce the assets on social media, and how the image is influenced by user-generated content. There are no right or wrong answers; any experiences and thoughts about this issue are appreciated. Feel free to ask questions before we start.

Introduction

1. Can you tell me about your role in the DMO?
2. For how long have you been working here?
3. How are you involved in the communication of fika/friluftsliv/hygge?

The intangible cultural asset

4. How would you describe fika/friluftsliv/hygge? (What is it for you?)
5. Can anyone experience it?
6. Do you think fika/friluftsliv/hygge nowadays resonate with people? Why?

Connection with the destination

7. How much importance does fika/friluftsliv/hygge have to Sweden/Norway/Denmark?
8. Why is fika/friluftsliv/hygge suitable for branding the country?
9. Do you believe fika/friluftsliv/hygge is connected with the brand identity?
10. What is your aim with using fika/friluftsliv/hygge in branding and marketing the country? How do you use it?

Communication on social media

11. Which social media do you use for your communication?
12. How can fika/friluftsliv/hygge be expressed online? How can it be visualised?
13. How do you communicate fika/friluftsliv/hygge in different media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? Are there any differences among them? (Do you think fika/friluftsliv/hygge is easier to communicate in text or in pictures?)

14. In what ways does fika/friluftsliv/hygge, as it is portrayed on your social media, match with how Swedes/Norwegians/Danes experience it? (E.g. is it presented in a simplified way? Is there a focus on certain aspects? Is a stereotyped image?)
15. What are the challenges in communicating fika/friluftsliv/hygge on social media?
16. Could the representation of fika/friluftsliv/hygge on social media shape how people experience it? How?
17. How can the communication of fika/friluftsliv/hygge on social media reinforce the country?
18. To whom are most of the social media efforts directed to?

Co-creation on social media

19. What is the role you give to social media users? Do you use user-generated content about fika/friluftsliv/hygge when promoting the country online? Can they engage with you?
20. Do you think users post and communicate a different representation of what fika/friluftsliv/hygge is?
21. Do you think users have a role in co-creating the image of fika/friluftsliv/hygge and influencing your communication online?

Conclusion

22. Do you plan to develop the communication of fika/friluftsliv/hygge on social media in the future? How?

Final thoughts

First of all, thank you for answering to all my questions! We have been talking a lot about your work with fika/friluftsliv/hygge. Is there anything else you want to share with me that could be important for me to know?

Thank you again for your time and input! In case I forgot to ask you something, can I contact you again? Also, If there is something else you would like to add, don't hesitate to contact me.

I will send you the transcription within the week for you to check it.