1. Introduction

In the last decade, popular culture\(^1\) has consolidated its role in the promotion of localities. Its continuous interactions between ‘the people’ and the cultural industries, on the global and local scales, seem to be the ideal instrument to convey a level of ‘authenticity’ to a place, making it attractive for tourists and newcomers. At the same time, it seems to provide a *raison d’être* for a widely accepted and inter-class local pride\(^2\).

The purpose of this paper is to present the ‘Nordic Oddity’ campaign, conceived by the Helsinki City Tourist and Convention Bureau\(^3\). The aim of this campaign is the promotion of Helsinki as a city-break destination, addressing mainly young adults. Nevertheless the way this campaign has been conceived, its visual and textual production could be also analysed as implementation of popular culture for city-branding purposes and raises some new and challenging issues about the branding of Helsinki as a whole.

Lately, the importance of urban tourism has grown significantly within larger and smaller municipalities and it has been recognized as a basic instrument of economic growth. Its significance can be connected to the contemporary overlap of culture and economy and the spread of the so-called ‘symbolic capital’.
During the second half of the 20th century cities lost much of their centrality in commerce and economic production. At the same time, information technology has often despised cities, often preferring to cluster in non-urban areas. Nonetheless cultural industries remained in the cities. The urban environment is in fact fundamental for the production of symbolic capital, which is defined as a capital based on products and practices, consumed for their emotional or intellectual contents⁴.

City-breaks, the new frontier of European urban tourism, could be seen as expression of this kind of socio-cultural situation. Urban tourism is nowadays increasingly marketed in Europe as a chance to take part in the consumption of local symbolic capital. The city-break represents the perfect package for this kind of experience, because it implies the brief visit – a ‘long weekend’ at the most – of a city and the participation/consumption of its ‘culture’ (here meant as including everything from nightlife to film festivals, from museums to karaoke). One of the European capitals of city-break is Barcelona, which is visited every year by millions of tourists eager to walk down the rambla and to participate in the never-ending nightlife.

It could be claimed that this kind of tourism reflects the event society, where the Erlebnis represents a unique, collective, interactive, fragmented and in time and space delimited experience⁵. The city-break constitutes an event because it is marketed and experienced as a unique experience, which can be arranged according to the individual tastes. It involves taking part into collective (gigs, disco nights, bar hopping) and interactive (karaoke, shopping) experiences.
2. The Branding Campaign

Nordic Oddity’s first aim is to establish Helsinki as a city-break destination on the world market. The main problem with Helsinki has always been the neutrality of its image, which was able to attract middle-aged tourists looking for tranquillity, good services and human dimension. Until then, the most common length of time to visit Helsinki was only 1.8 days. This meant a significant turn-over of tourists, who were not consuming enough and were bound to follow the usual paths leading them up and down from Senatintori (the Senate Square) to Stockmann (Helsinki’s Harrods) and back. No real alternatives were offered and the tourist was confined to the main peninsula, which constitutes Helsinki ‘city centre’.

The campaign was first launched in 2003 under the longer brand ‘Delightful Nordic Oddity’ and aimed principally at young adults. ‘Delightful’ was later dropped and the long-lasting campaign became simply ‘Nordic oddity’.

‘Nordic’ refers to the geographical location of Finland, at the same time it has also a cultural connotation, being more neutral than ‘Scandinavian’, in defining the North of Europe. ‘Oddity’ could be interpreted more widely: the use of the word with a spatial connotation – in this case ‘Nordic’ - recalls immediately in the mind of a pop music fan ‘Space Oddity’, a single of the British pop star David Bowie – released in 1969. While the narrative of the song is connected to oddity in space as experienced by an astronaut on a space ship – the oddity contained in these brochures is something that can be experienced as a tourist in Helsinki. The connection to the pop song is of course the first catching element and is clearly addressed to a public of tourists, which could be defined as urban - young - popular culture interested. In addition, ‘oddities’
(in the plural form) also refers to ‘something worth collecting’. The Nordic Oddity flyers in fact contain a list of offers (normally between 20 and 24) which can be collected, by a tourist as individual Erlebnisse. On the other hand ‘odd’ usually refers to something strange, not common. The creator of this branding campaign wanted it to be a cultural statement: Helsinki is a strange city, because of its being in essence ‘between east and west’; a city where the layers of the Swedish and Russian dominations left a unique imprint on the autonomous urban culture. This imprint is supposed to have shaped Helsinki’s architecture, cuisine, festive traditions, and party culture.

In conclusion to this analysis of the ‘oddity’ dimension of the campaign, it seems important to note its success. The term has been used in reference not only to Helsinki, but to Finland as a whole, for example after the 2006 Eurovision victory of the band Lordi, which could be fittingly addressed as ‘odd’. In addition, it could also be stated that the Kaurismäki brothers’ filmography has been frequently addressed, around the world, as ‘odd’, for the laconic attitude of its protagonists and for the surreal dimensions of settings and plots. The coincidence between the birth of the oddity branding and the international response to some successful expressions of Finnish culture is definitely a conscious decision.

The first series of three brochures (2003) had the following titles: ‘Happy Scandinavian Design Anarchy’, ‘Original Slavic Bohemian’ and ‘Sexy, Urban & Natural People’. The three flyers came in a nice retro square-shaped format, with rounded corners. The fonts used for the texts were connected to the seventies, with the golden age of Finnish design in mind. The main stress was set on the fashion, design
and the music scene. These flyers were delivered in all workshops and fairs abroad as well in Helsinki. There are many elements which stand out from the conventional presentation of Helsinki in tourist material; in particular I would like to stress the use of ‘Slavic’ in the title of one flyer. Slavic has a linguistic connotation in connection to the Indo-European family, including Russian, Serbo-Croatian and Polish. In this brochure the term is apt at increasing the curiosity for the Eastern roots that could be found in Helsinki. At the same time there is also the reference to Scandinavia in the title of another brochure, stating the duality of Helsinki’s cultural landscape.

In 2005 the campaign was renewed: the brochures were re-designed, updated and re-launched with new titles. Again the campaign is divided into three brochures: Bohemian Nordic Oddity, Smooth Nordic Oddity and Groovy Nordic Oddity. Bohemian Nordic Oddity offers ‘24 solid things’ and introduces original hangouts like subcultures and pub areas. It is interesting to note that ‘Slavic’, probably judged too daring, has been replaced by ‘Bohemian’. It is interesting that both terms refer to Eastern Europe (Bohemia is a region in the Czech Republic), although, of course ‘bohemian’ has acquired a new meaning in reference to the Paris artist community at the end of the 19th century and now widely used to refer to districts, historically linked to artists and students. The 24 examples of the so-called bohemian Helsinki include restaurants like Elite, Zetor, Marechiaro and Seahorse, the rock club Tavastia, the Orion film theatre and the Kaapelitehdas (Cable Factory). These elements are consolidated in the city imagery of the inhabitants as ‘bohemian’ and are longstanding elements of Helsinki’s cultural life.
Smooth Nordic Oddity offers ‘24 pure things’, genuine Helsinki ‘classics’, ranging from the tram rides with 3T and 3B to the Swimming Stadium, from Esplanadi to Viiskulma (five corners) record shops. These elements are shown as classics in the Helsinki experience; they are the tasteful elements, which any tourist should not miss.

Groovy Nordic Oddity offers ‘24 hot things’ and refers to what is really ‘hot’, in fashion, right now. Examples are connected to underground music, jazz and design.

This is definitely the most difficult brochure, the one that needs to change every month in order to try to follow the continuous shifting of fashion and musical tastes that are available in Helsinki. The fact that the campaign will be implemented also on the Tourist Office website allows it to be updated more frequently, keeping up with the ever-changing moods and flows of the various scenes.

The campaign was set a-new again in 2007 and 2009, trying to anticipate trends and fashions that urban tourists will search for, facing at the same time the need to make it durable. In 2009 the three main themes were re-labelled as ‘Alternative’, ‘Bliss’ and ‘Chill Out’. The campaign is no more divided into three brochures, but gathered into one single compact booklet. Fascinating is the map, printed on the inner side of the back cover. It is folded in two, as it stretches outside the main centre and includes the northern area of the centre (after the Long Bridge), which is normally left out of tourist maps.

3. Conclusions

The most interesting and main purpose of the campaign was to extend the duration of the average city-break in the city. In this sense, it could be considered successful, as it
has collaborated in increasing the average overnight from 1.8 (2002) to 2.08 (2005) in just three years. This was achieved by enlarging the tourist mental map and offering spots, which were well behind the usual and extremely limited borders of the city centre.

At the same time there is a series of issues, raised by the campaign, which have been used for the first time, in reference to the branding of Helsinki. The first one is tolerance. The campaign in fact promotes Helsinki as a city which is welcoming gay tourists and underlining the presence of successful gay clubs around town. This seems to follow Richard Florida’s theories which stressed the incidence of homosexual population, as creative boosting factor.

Secondly the campaign confronts the idea of safety. Safety is one of the three stress points for tourists (the other two being food and accessibility). An academic study about the safety issue in urban areas, as felt by citizens and its relation to gender was commissioned by the Tourist & Convention Bureau in preparation of this campaign. The results were then translated from the experience of citizens to the one of tourists. Extending the tourist routes to the ‘blank areas’ of Helsinki centre, especially beyond the Pitkasiltä (the Long Bridge, which connects the centre to Kallio, the former working class district), meant challenging the tourists’ fear of getting into troubles by entering a non-safe district, street or location.

Thirdly, Nordic Oddity refers to authenticity. The quoted places and activities are chosen and presented, for the fact that they have not been conceived especially for tourists. On the contrary, they are supposed to facilitate the meeting of local people;
they are ‘honest’ places, where it is possible to get a share in Helsinki’s everyday. In addition, through authenticity, the campaign also succeeds in overcoming the usual division between a ‘culturally loaded city-centre’ and the ‘not culturally loaded’ (and therefore uninteresting) surroundings and adopts popular culture as main ingredient in Helsinki’s specific urbanity.

Finally the ‘East meets West’ theme is coincidentally featured by the ‘TIME OUT’. The magazine, in its winter/spring 2006 edition states that: ‘if Istanbul is southern Europe’s ‘East meets West’ frontier town, then Helsinki must surely be its northern equivalent – a fascinatingly multifaceted city, where Soviet sobriety meets Scandinavian chic.’ Apparently, this could be the way to go.

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¹ For a definition of popular culture see John Fiske *Understanding popular culture* (London: Routledge 1989).


5 Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnissgesellschaft: Kultursozioologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Kampus, 2005).


8 *Time Out* winter/spring 2006