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## Multilayered spatial categories in tourism marketing and branding

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role and significance of spatial units in online tourism marketing and branding. The analysis is based on the application of different regional typologies as categorization units in understanding and analyzing quantitative and qualitative properties of tourism websites. The study combines four distinct ways of classifying regions into a spatial framework to systematize the properties of online tourism data. The research questions are addressed through data collection from Finnish municipalities, focusing on online tourism marketing websites. Results indicate that large municipalities, urban areas, and popular tourism regions are more invested in online tourism marketing and branding in comparison to smaller municipalities, rural areas, and less popular tourism regions. Rural municipalities locating close to large urban areas have low scores in the investigated variables, suggesting that they rely on their proximity to urban areas for online tourism marketing and branding. While likely advantageous, the use of distinct marketing tools (logos, slogans, locational highlights, and interest hotspots) is relatively limited in the data. The paper concludes by stressing the need for strategic and comprehensive approaches, collaboration with stakeholders, creativity, and innovative methods in tourism management, particularly for smaller municipalities.

### 1. Introduction

This paper analyses the role and significance of spatial units as means of categorizations in online tourism marketing and branding (Vuignier, 2017) – or ‘e-branding’ (De Rosa et al., 2019). Here, spatial categorization refers to applying different regional typologies as units (see literature overview in detail). Commonly, they are either administrative units or thematic units (such as ‘tourism regions’) depicting the presence of a function or activity in a particular spatial unit. Spatial layering approach combines data collected from municipalities with four distinct ways of classifying regions into a spatial framework that systematizes quantitative and qualitative properties of tourism marketing websites. The distinction between spatial units and layers is as follows: Spatial units refer to the same level of criteria in spatial structure (horizontal, such as are municipalities here); and layers are either narrower or broader categories/hierarchies than the previous one or the reference (vertical, such as postal codes vs. municipalities vs. regional units). Spatial layers can be constructed according to administrative status, functionality, or presence of target variables and indices.

At its core, tourism marketing and branding involves the promotion of a particular location or destination to attract visitors and investment

(e.g. Andersson, 2015; Ashworth, 2009; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2007; Cudny, 2019; Dinnie, 2011; Gold & Ward, 1994; van Hoose et al., 2021). The goal is to create a positive image and reputation that will differentiate a location from competitors and enhance its economic and social viability. While the field has a long research tradition (e.g. Feeney et al., 2019; Florek et al., 2006; Gertner et al., 2007; Gonzáles, 2011; Inkinen, 2010; Paganoni, 2015; Tschirhart, 2008), complex spatial layering has not been extensively applied in the study of destination management and even less so in the context of online tools. Therefore, there is a gap in the analysis of the potential interplay between tourism marketing and branding in different spatial scales of destinations and regional typologies.

Regional typologies aggregate spatial patterns and processes that occur at different levels, ranging from local areas to global regions. They play a crucial role in understanding geographical contexts, as they provide a framework for analyzing the relationships between regional types and phenomena. In order to succeed in their efforts, tourism marketers and branders need to consider the unique characteristics of the location, its target audience, and the competitive landscape (Bose et al., 2015, 2021). One of the key theoretical concepts that underpin tourism marketing and branding is the notion of place identity that

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refers to the distinctive features giving a location its character (Boisen et al., 2011, 2018). By promoting and emphasizing these features, tourism marketers and branders can create a unique image that sets the location apart from competitors.

Tourism marketing and branding have become increasingly important in the modern world as cities, regions, and countries compete for attention and investment. The theoretical foundations are rooted in a variety of disciplines, including tourism studies, economics, geography, psychology, and sociology. Tourism marketing and branding relies on geography of location and their spatiality (Hospers, 2011). These theories suggest that businesses and individuals are attracted to locations that offer economies of scale and scope, as well as access to key resources and networks or, in the case of tourism, attractions (Wu, 2018). Branding management and urban governance have co-existing needs and goals (Eshuis et al., 2013; Eshuis & Klijn, 2012). By highlighting the unique advantages of the location, tourism marketers and branders can attract businesses and individuals who are seeking these benefits and places to visit for touristic purposes.

The discussion on place identity and locational advantages underlines the importance of spatial marketing analyses and spatial layering approach for a variety of reasons. They allow researchers to identify the unique characteristics of different regions and understand the factors that shape them. At smaller scales, contextual case studies may examine the characteristics of (local) communities, neighborhoods, and individual motivations towards hospitality and tourism. At larger scales, regional analyses indicate economic gains, sustainability deficits, and characteristics of significant tourism regions. This allows better understanding of the complex relationships that exist between different regions with varying spatial scales, their tourism and locational growth, and the factors that drive these relationships.

Based on these considerations two research questions have been formulated.

- 1) Are spatial categorizations useful in detecting systematic regional differences in online tourism marketing and branding properties?
- 2) What municipal marketing tools (logos, slogans, locational highlights, and interest hotspots) and target groups are identifiable in the data?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative (tourism website) data was collected from all Finnish municipalities (N = 309). The data justification and considerations are detailed in the methods section. The analysis uses both quantitative and qualitative assessment of onsite properties and collaborative arrangements in online marketing organizations (also Halme, 2020; Jacobsen, 2009).

## 2. Literature overview and framework

### 2.1. Tourism marketing and branding of cities and municipalities

The concepts of tourism marketing and branding are often understood as synonymous, although in research literature they mean different things (Vuignier, 2017). In practice, separating them has proved challenging and they cannot always be dealt with separately. Branding is now more widely defined than in the past, and is even more commonly used as a concept than tourism marketing, especially in English-language research literature. Accordingly, marketing is a broader term and includes the administration of a place, while branding means creating a brand through advertising means. Thus, branding can mean a more practical term, while marketing describes a more general phenomenon. However, there is no consensus among researchers on these terms, as e.g. Bose et al. (2015) present a different view considering branding to encompass traditional and non-traditional marketing approaches. To consolidate this debate, the paper defines these concepts in line with Skinner (2008) who views that (the concept of) marketing is wider and suited for addressing places' overall management: all places

have a certain identity – including history, culture, heritage, natural environment, etc – that can be marketed to investors and tourists. Branding encompasses efforts aimed at actively creating a distinct (purposefully build) identity in the minds of various target groups. As such, branding is more active than marketing as it involves, not just telling others about your place's identity, but also attempts to mold the image (as the branders wish it to be presented) that others have on the place.

In earlier research, Fernández-Cavia et al. (2014) proposed a quality index for web-based tourism sites indicating a set of twelve parametric measures relevant for quality assessment. The empirical stance in this paper is based on similar considerations, even though the applied variables designs are more straightforward here. Additionally, Tanrisevi and Duran (2011) studied tourism websites from a customer perspective in four countries (destinations: Egypt, Greece, Spain, Turkey) with a survey method. Their ANOVA testing indicated that significant differences are present in tourism marketing and that the results are likely to produce applicable information for analytical marketing. Their results are relevant here as small and medium-sized municipalities' local marketing has been studied relatively little (Andersson, 2015; Feeney et al., 2019). Site marketing strategies are often described as general solutions that apply to all locations regardless of their characteristics. However, this is not entirely true, because small cities may have difficulties in terms of population decline and economic resilience (Makkonen et al., 2022). Such issues increase the complexity of the local marketing of small – particularly rural (Zhou, 2014) – municipalities in relation to large cities.

Hospers (2011) considers target marketing to local people and organizations rather than external visitors or new coming businesses in the context of shrinking cities. The starting point is therefore to give priority to the local. This approach is sensible, but there are variations and differences between small and medium-sized cities, as they can provide better quality of life than large cities (Richards & Duif, 2019). It is important for small municipalities to market themselves with the very qualities that are unique and most attractive. Today, remote connections have also increased, so employment opportunities are not as location dependent as before, which is one of the marketing factors for smaller cities. Often the most attractive feature of small municipalities is that they are 'nice places' to live and visit, but this may lead to a lack of ambition and goals.

Sizes of cities matter as the largest global cities are in a well-established position in tourism development. They commonly possess more diversity and variety in resources, making them more attractive to different target groups (Cudny, 2019). Smaller cities compete against each other more locally. Small municipalities may copy the marketing methods of larger cities, but instead of copying, a better option would be to make marketing strategic and comprehensive, involving all relevant stakeholders. Cooperation with stakeholders has increased its importance in the marketing of all cities, as it is often the cooperation of different parties that ensures the success of marketing. In practice, cities and municipalities alone are not responsible for local marketing, as they use private operators and other organizations. However, this cooperation is often complicated, as different parties may have different objectives and views, and it is not always easy to reconcile them.

In addition, creative, innovative and original marketing methods are particularly important for small cities, as they do not have the resources to do the same things as large cities. Richards and Duif (2019) present two strategies that allow small cities to compete alongside larger ones. The first is specialization, where small municipalities market themselves through creative experiences and facilities to narrow target groups. The second strategy is 'size-loaning', which means close cooperation with a close larger city, thus increasing the reputation and potential of a smaller municipality or city. In addition to these, however, there are many other ways of marketing small municipalities. It is not a question of small cities becoming large in terms of quantity, but rather of qualitative growth.

According to [Ma et al. \(2021\)](#), three levels of local marketing, namely advertising, marketing and branding, are linked to urban development. Their survey of Chinese cities shows that the largest and most developed cities are carrying out the most branding, while in smaller and less developed municipalities more advertising measures are available. Small localities spend their resources mainly on advertising to attract tourists and residents, while larger cities focus on attracting companies, investors and experts through marketing. However, successful branding is more difficult and, only a few of the largest cities in China have succeeded at least partially.

Tourism marketing and branding are influenced by sociological and cultural theories. These theories suggest that places are not just physical spaces, but also social and cultural constructs that reflect the values, beliefs, and identities of the people who inhabit them. By promoting a particular image or narrative of the location, tourism marketers and branders can shape and reinforce social and cultural constructs. The size of the city is an important factor in their ability to exploit technology, as large cities are often able to use it more widely than small cities ([Feeney et al., 2019](#)). Local marketing is therefore important for both small and large cities. The use of technology and digitalization in local marketing is essential, and the majority of marketing is done via the Internet, municipal and marketing websites, and social media. Commonly, creative and innovative marketing tools are the best way to promote the city's familiarity. Site marketing includes different levels and different ways, depending on the target groups and the size of the city.

To summarize, the previous literature on assessing web-based destination marketing and branding provides insights when operationalizing these concepts into measurable indicators (discussed more in the 'research design' section). However, and as noted above, the previous literature has more often focused on analyzing well-known tourism destinations (large cities) or larger spatial scales (countries) than small and medium-sized municipalities. The gap in understanding on destination marketing and branding in all types of regions (including less-known smaller tourism destinations) has significance for the successfulness of such efforts: copying best practices from large well-known tourism cities – without regional realism ([Hospers, 2006](#)) – rarely works well in smaller or less-popular locations. Without knowledge on the full spectrum of destination marketing and branding in all types of destinations, it is impossible to derive practical and policy recommendations fitted for regions 'off the beaten track'. This gap may be addressed by comparing different spatial categories and their municipalities with primary online tourism data.

## 2.2. Spatial categories and classes in tourism data analysis

The second main strand of this paper deals with spatial categorization and 'scaling' effect of spatial layering ([Ahlqvist & Inkinen, 2007](#); [Makkonen et al., 2022](#); [Makkonen & Inkinen, 2014](#)). As discussed by [Leiper \(1990\)](#) different types of destinations have different spatial patterns: some can be described as regional (meaning that they may be found throughout a designated region) whereas some are narrower (specific city or location). Therefore, the analysis of both larger as well as smaller spatial units are relevant for understanding tourism attraction systems and as argued here, destination marketing and branding. There are numerous ways to categorize regions. The most common one is to use administrative (or statistical) units. As Finland locates in Europe, EU's NUTS (Statistical Territorial Unit) and LAU (Local Area Unit) classifications are standard. However, there are also other classifications, and some of them are particularly designed for the needs of tourism such as the tourism-macro region categorization used in this study.

Spatial units, such as regions, are always aggregates and the larger the scale, the larger the level of generalization. The spectrum of variable fineness gains importance. In other words, the start is from dichotomies (0 or 1; yes or no) moving towards the infinite continuum of diversification ('the between') within given intervals. One important aspect of

regional spatial scales is their ability to identify the spatial patterns that exist within different regions. For example, at a small scale, researchers can identify the spatial patterns of land use within a city, such as the location of commercial areas, residential areas, and industrial areas. At a larger scale, they can identify the spatial patterns of population distribution across a country (or even continent or other spatial units such as political alliances and international organizations). By understanding these spatial patterns, researchers can better understand the factors that shape them and develop policies and strategies to address specific processes and dynamics in tourism marketing and branding.

The following regional classes are applied to indicate aggregate units, in which observed municipalities (LAU-2) belong ([Fig. 1](#)).

- NUTS-2 areas in mainland Finland (4 classes)
- Municipal size according to population (4 classes)
- Urban–Rural classification created by the Finnish Environment Institute (4 classes)
- Regional tourism categorization used by Business Finland (4 classes)

As indicated, four different regional typologies are used to classify the Finnish municipalities. The first one is the official NUTS-2 level division of Finnish regions into: 1) Helsinki–Uusimaa, 2) Southern Finland, 3) Western Finland, 4) Northern and Eastern Finland and 5) Åland. However, since there is data from only one municipality (city of Mariehamn) from Åland region, it is excluded from the analysis (because all spatial categories have the same number of classes, thus including Åland would skew the results). The second categorization is according to the population size of the municipality: 1) large (more than 100 000 residents,  $N = 9$ ), 2) medium-sized (40 000–100 000 residents,  $N = 18$ ), 3) smallish (10 000–40 000 residents,  $N = 63$ ) and 4) small (less than 10 000 residents,  $N = 219$ ) municipalities. The used categorization is suitable for the Finnish case that has a small total population and understandably small cities. However, this classification would work also in other countries with similar populations and urban hierarchies (such as other Nordic countries).

The third categorization, and perhaps the most interesting one, is the Finnish Environment Centre's Urban–Rural typology. It classifies Finnish municipalities into: 1) urban areas, 2) rural areas close to urban areas, 3) rural heartland areas and 4) sparsely populated areas. The typology is research-based ([Helminen et al., 2020](#)), and it considers the regional structural factors (including population, workforce and workplaces, buildings and dwellings, road network and commuting as well as land use and coverage) of Finnish municipalities. They affect the business environment where the tourism sector operates. It has been designed for the needs of academic research (e.g. [Makkonen & Mitze, 2022](#)) and regional (rural) policy (e.g. [Kattilakoski et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, tourism macro-region typology developed by Business Finland's tourism marketing division 'Visit Finland' is applied. It classifies Finnish municipalities into: 1) Helsinki region (capital region), 2) the archipelago and coastal Finland, 3) the Finnish Lakeland and 4) Lapland. Out of these categories, the capital region and Lapland are the most popular in terms of international arrivals ([Business Finland & Visit Finland, 2020](#)). It is expected that online tourism marketing is more likely to have evolved towards branding and that it is more complex (in terms of social media usage and different languages available) in large municipalities, urban areas and the most popular (particularly internationally visited) tourism macro-regions than in their smaller, rural and 'less-popular' counterparts.

To synthesize, the novelty of this study comes from applying a spatial layering approach that jointly considers four distinct categories of regions in order to assess the online attributes used in the tourism marketing and branding by single municipalities. It is important to keep in mind that regional statistical units are interrelated through their boundary overlapping and liminality. The boundaries between regions can have a significant impact on the statistical data. For example, if a functional city region is split between two or more administrative units

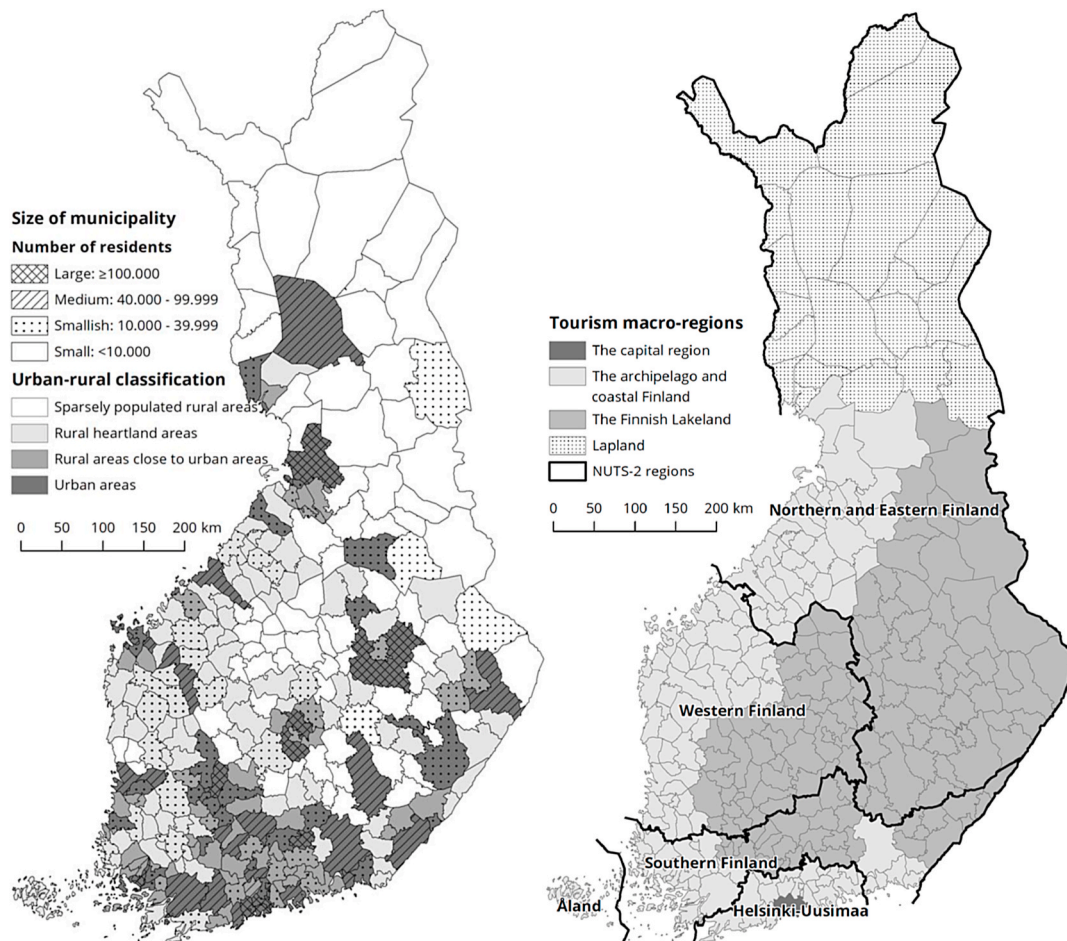


Fig. 1. The selected four regional categorizations in the data illustrating spatial overlapping and municipal diversity.

or vice versa (an administrative region is split between two or more functional city regions), this can affect the accuracy of data on population, income, or other variables. This interrelation highlights the importance of consistent and standardized boundaries for regional statistical units. This distinction and recognition of the spatial construction of regions give novelty to this approach both methodologically and empirically. Similar spatial layering approaches have only rarely been applied in tourism research (Chi & Liu, 2023) and, thus far, not in relation to destination marketing and branding, motivating the research design.

### 3. Research design with tourism website data

The starting point for the analysis was to identify those municipalities that have dedicated tourism marketing websites. After reviewing the webpages of all 309 Finnish municipalities, 142 municipalities with such sites were identified. The second step was to operationalize the online tourism websites into measurable indicators. To this end, they were labelled according to 1) their focus on marketing/branding (dichotomy). This operational distinction was done on the qualitative judgment of the research group. The more straightforward and explicit the website is, the more likely it has been identified a branding site. More general and descriptive the site, more likely it is classified as marketing relying on its existing properties. At the ends of the spectrum, the distinctions are easy to do but the middle sites are more difficult to classify in predetermined categories. This is recognized in the analysis, and it is one of the limitations in the study. However, this is managed by using supportive variables of qualitative judgement on the website structure extent (extensiveness of available information, ordinal five

step variable starting from 'very low' and ending with 'very high') and content focus (nominal six scale variable) including categories such as 'specialization', 'creativity', and 'local needs'. Additionally, 2) Social media use in marketing and branding is treated as a dichotomous variable (yes/no). The coding was supported by nominal eight scale variable identifying target groups such as 'visitors', 'businesses', 'inhabitants', and their combinations. 3) The number of social media sites was also calculated (N of social media platforms); and finally 4) the number of available languages on the websites was counted (N of languages and nominal variable what the languages are). The indicators are, admittedly, relatively simple. However, at the same time they are also observable and verifiable. The only indicator that includes subjective coding is the level of marketing/branding. The coding guidelines are based on the earlier literature discussed above. The coding was done by the second author and verified by the research team.

Similar indicators have been used in earlier studies. Stoklosa et al. (2019) have utilized the use and number of social media sites by a municipality in online tourism marketing as an indication of 'web maturity' (see also Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). Bastida and Huan (2014) have utilized the number of available languages as an indication of tourism websites' quality. Finally, brands – as symbols, slogans, names, designs, or combination of these elements that comprise clear and distinct images that differentiate them from competitors – have been in the focus of tourism marketing studies for decades (Hall, 1999). These indicators were contrasted with the four spatial categories: 1) NUTS-2 areas; 2) population size; 3) Urban–Rural classification; and 4) regional tourism categorization (Fig. 2).

In practical terms, the data was coded and analyzed in spreadsheet (Excel) and statistical (SPSS) programs. The classification of the website

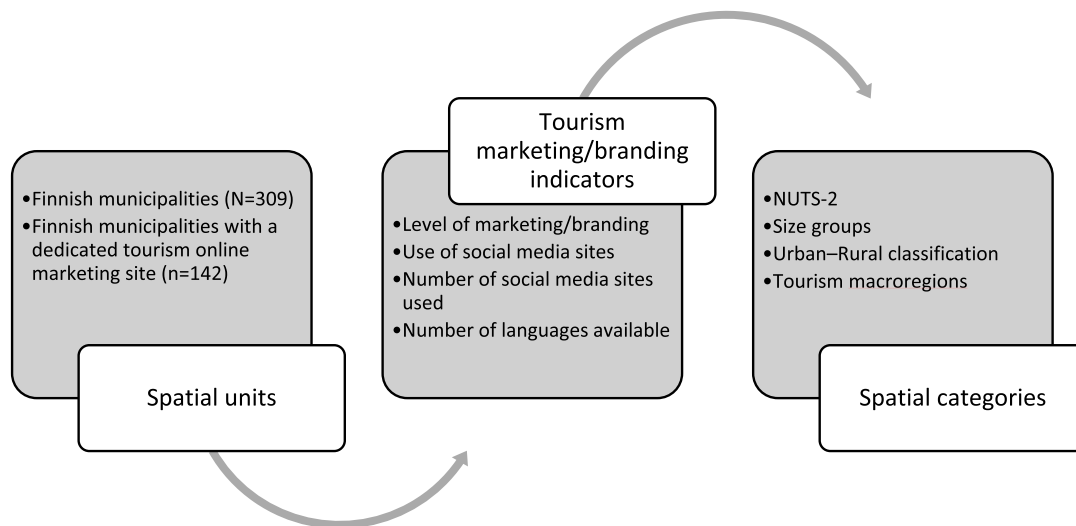


Fig. 2. Research approach.

properties was done during the coding and thus the data includes an element of qualitative validation in itself. Attention was paid to consider visual elements (such as logos and slogans) and other marketing and branding tools, assessment of their targeting to specific target groups, level of actively done branding vs. level of passive advertising, and other means of place promotion. The data was collected between November 2022 and April 2023.

The second methodological decision was made to use four spatial ways to categorize the primary data (municipalities). Thus, the logic behind this spatial layering approach goes that the large spatial units are analyzed statistically, and the most prominent differences are presented and interpreted. Municipalities are then considered according to their online marketing contents (primary data content). The following interpretations highlight customer segmenting of (international) target groups via social media and consider the delicate change from marketing towards actively produced branding.

The research design involves the implicit methodological element of the Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP). It refers to the phenomenon – first observed decades ago (Openshaw, 1984) – in which statistical analysis and interpretation of geographic data are influenced by the choice of spatial unit or scale at which the data are aggregated. This is particularly interesting issue in the case of the four Finnish ‘tourism macro-regions’ that are ad-hoc designed entities based on administrative regional classes (see Fig. 1). The MAUP is a significant challenge in spatial analysis because there is no universally ‘correct’ or optimal way to define geographic units. Different researchers or analysts may make different choices based on their research questions, data availability, or other factors. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the potential effects of the MAUP and to consider the implications of the choice of areal units for any spatial analysis. In order to manage this spatial scales approach towards a content (online tourism marketing and branding) enables a broad spatially motivated view of understanding regions and their sub-division variety (municipalities as the source units of the data).

This paper provides an analysis-based indication of how regional categories covariate and how the content (tourism marketing and branding) varies according to these spatial units. Research has identified various methods of creating spatial category models (Györi, 2023) enabling more robust view on the locational development. Overall, the use of multiple spatial layers indicates that MAUP can be tackled in interpretations, particularly with multilayered approach. This provides more reliable picture of the overall condition of online marketing and its spatial properties. MAUP has the most impact in assessing ‘administrative’ units (municipalities, official administrative regions, and large spatial units such as NUTS in the EU). The approach shows that the use

of tourism area typology or Urban–Rural classification helps identifying detailed profiles particularly in branding. This is an important consideration in the case areas (spatial units), which are tourism reliant local economies (particularly in Lapland in the data). The use of spatial layering and understanding the impact of MAUP provides a more diverse picture of tourism online marketing in small observation units (not only large cities are branding driven but also other tourism focused locations with varying background variable profiles) in comparison to simple one scale spatial analysis.

The research approach, depicted in Fig. 2, allows for the identification of regional differences and similarities. For example, when analyzing tourism data across different regions, spatial layering can help to identify areas that are more prone to tourism in general, locating significant large events or happenings, and areas that experience similar visitor profiles (e.g. nature and activity tourism). This information enhances the development of more targeted policies and interventions to address the unique challenges faced by each region. Another benefit of spatial layering is that it can help to reduce the impact of misinterpretation on statistical analyses. By organizing data into distinct layers based on regional scales, spatial layering improves the accuracy of the results (Chi & Liu, 2023).

There are varieties of alternatives in order to create the multilayered view on tourism marketing and branding. For example, regional scaling can be achieved through a mix of techniques (such as geo-statistics, spatial regression analysis, and spatial clustering). Similarly, spatial clustering involves grouping data points based on their proximity to one another, allowing for the identification of spatial patterns.

Conceptually, spatial scaling may also be looked as dualisms. Here, concepts such as absolute–relative, physical–social, material–mental, abstract–concrete, dynamic–static can be the starting point for developing a theoretical basis. The construction of reality of spatially bound phenomena involves tensions in divisions between rationalism and empiric, objectivity and subjectivity, materialism and idealism (Madanipour, 1996). This will help in defining desired regional spatial scales to separate processes that occur within and between regions. For example, at a small scale, researchers can study the processes that shape the growth of a neighborhood or community, such as changes in land use or demographic shifts. At a larger scale, they can study the processes that shape the growth of entire regions, such as changes in economic activity and locational (place) branding. By understanding these processes, researchers can develop policies and strategies that address the challenges and opportunities presented by different regions.

**Table 1**  
Tourism marketing and branding according to NUTS-2 classification.

NUTS-2	Level of tourism marketing/ branding		Use of social media in tourism marketing		Number of social media sites used	Number of languages
	Marketing	Branding	No	Yes	Average	Average
Helsinki–Uusimaa	3	13	2	14	3.00	2.75
Southern Finland	9	17	2	23	2.75	2.62
Western Finland	13	30	6	37	2.09	2.35
Northern and Eastern Finland	16	40	7	49	2.38	2.75
N	141		140		139	141

**4. Results: systematic regional differences in online tourism marketing and branding**

The data corresponds to the municipalities that have a designated site for tourism (commonly named as ‘Visit X’). The final sample consists of 139–142 municipalities, depending on the regional typology and individual variables utilized. In relation to the first research question, Tables 1–4 show the differences of tourism marketing and branding per the different spatial categorisations used.

The first categorization (administrative NUTS-2) did not produce statistically significant (see below) or meaningful results: there are no clear patterns and statistically differences between the official EU categories. Thus, the official NUTS-2 division of Finland – build up for statistical purposes based on geographical contiguity – does not produce any relevant results in terms of the utilization of online tourism marketing and branding of Finnish municipalities. The result is in line with earlier accounts on the (lack of) utility of NUTS categorization for spatial analysis in Finland (e.g. Inkinen, 2005).

As expected, based on earlier research (Ma et al., 2021), it is more likely that online tourism marketing has evolved into branding efforts the larger the municipality in terms of its population. The same applies to the Urban–Rural typology: cities use online tourism branding, whereas the different categories of rural municipalities are less likely to do so. In the case of the different tourism macro-regions, those municipalities belonging to the most popular (internationally visited) ones are more likely to have branding traits in their online tourism marketing than the ‘less popular’ municipalities in the archipelago and coastal Finland and the Finnish Lakeland (Fig. 1, Tables 1–4).

The results are similar in terms of the use of social media sites in tourism marketing and branding where large municipalities, urban areas (cities) and popular tourism macro-regions are more likely to utilize social media than small municipalities, rural areas and ‘less popular’ tourism macro-regions. As such, it comes as little surprise that the average number of utilized social media sites is also higher/lower as described above. However, interestingly the category of municipalities belonging to rural areas close to urban areas has the lowest average number of utilized social media sites. It, thus, seems that they might be ‘loaning size’, as previously discussed by Richards and Duif (2019), from the urban areas they are in close proximity to. That is, as the close-by urban areas are likely the main local attractions that tourists visit, the municipalities close to them seem to rely on (or hope) that the tourism benefits will spill over from cities to their countryside. A similar pattern is detectible from the number of languages that the online tourism

marketing and branding materials are available: municipalities belonging to the category of rural areas close to urban areas have the lowest average score.

The differences in the number of social media sites and languages can be verified (as statistically significant) by using the Kruskal–Wallis test (an extension to the Mann–Whitney *U* test for comparing more than two groups). The differences are significant at the level of:  $p < 0.01$  for the typology per population size class for both social media sites and languages;  $p < 0.01$  for social media sites and  $p < 0.05$  for languages in the Urban–Rural typology; and  $p < 0.05$  for social media sites in the tourism macro-region typology. The NUTS-2 classification produced no statistically significant differences between the indicators. The similarity between the distributions per the population size classes and the Urban–Rural typology is logical as the two are significantly correlated with each other. As population is among the key indicators for constructing the Urban–Rural typology (Helminen et al., 2020), the largest municipalities are commonly urban areas, whereas the smallest municipalities are commonly sparsely populated rural areas.

The obtained results indicate that spatial layering is an essential concept in tourism studies. Regional categories and their interconnections enable a detailed and nuanced analysis of marketing data, providing insights into the relationships between solutions and their impacts on different regional contexts. By identifying spatial differences and similarities, layering can help to develop more targeted policies and interventions to address the unique challenges faced by each region and municipality. There are many cases when local efforts support larger units and some cases when it does not, particularly in the sense of locational brand building. Additionally, as shown also by Chi and Liu (2023), spatial layering can help to improve the accuracy of the results (recognition of spatial autocorrelation).

To summarize an answer to the first research question, spatial categories are useful in detecting systematic regional differences in online tourism marketing and branding properties. The results (Tables 1–4) also indicate clearly that regional statistical units are important tools for collecting and analyzing data on regional differences and for understanding the dynamics of economic, social, and demographic change. These units are interconnected in various ways, through their administrative, statistical, and functional characteristics, as well as their boundaries. These interrelations enable policymakers, researchers, and practitioners with comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics and develop effective strategies to address regional disparities and promote regional development. Thus, this paper also has wider relevance that goes beyond the empirical focus on online tourism marketing

**Table 2**  
Tourism marketing and branding according to different population size classes of Finnish municipalities.

Size class	Level of tourism marketing/branding		Use of social media in tourism marketing		Number of social media sites used	Number of languages
	Marketing	Branding	No	Yes	Average	Average
Large	0	9	0	9	4.33	5.11
Medium-sized	0	16	0	16	3.50	3.44
Smallish	10	40	8	42	2.16	2.36
Small	31	36	10	56	2.06	2.27
N	142		141		140	142

**Table 3**

Tourism marketing and branding according to the Finnish Urban–Rural typology.

Urban–rural	Level of tourism marketing/branding		Use of social media in tourism marketing		Number of social media sites used	Number of languages
	Marketing	Branding	No	Yes	Average	Average
Cities	5	41	4	42	3.09	3.20
RACs	8	10	4	14	1.89	1.89
RHAs	17	30	8	38	2.00	2.47
SPAs	11	20	2	29	2.32	2.39
N	142		141		140	142

Notes: RACCs = Rural areas close to urban areas; RHAs = Rural heartland areas; SPA = Sparsely populated rural areas.

**Table 4**

Tourism marketing and branding according to the Finnish tourism area typology.

Tourism macro-regions	Level of tourism marketing/branding		Use of social media in tourism marketing		Number of social media sites used	Number of languages
	Marketing	Branding	No	Yes	Average	Average
Capital region	0	3	0	3	4.67	3.67
Archipelago and coastal Finland	16	47	8	54	2.31	2.65
Finnish Lakeland	23	37	9	51	2.25	2.33
Lapland	2	14	1	15	2.94	3.31
N	142		141		140	142

and branding.

The second research question [What municipal marketing tools (logos, slogans, locational highlights, and interest hotspots) and target groups are identifiable in the data?] identifies that approximately 26 % of municipalities employ resident-entrepreneur stories in their marketing (calculated from the total data, N = 309), indicating the involvement of locals in promoting their municipality, with personal narratives serving as compelling content for target audiences. Local visualizations are applied both in logo designs and photographic images. All municipalities have a ‘logo’ and the majority of their design includes both graphics as well as text (73.1 %; N = 309). While logos are often accompanied with slogans (Hildreth, 2013), surprisingly only a minority (42.4 %; N = 309) of Finnish municipalities apply the latter. In general, the most important single variable determining variety and diversity of marketing is population size. The relation is not linear so that variety differences tend to level out in municipalities larger than 10,000 inhabitants. This result is in line with earlier research on municipal e-services (Inkinen, 2010). Understandably, as expected based on earlier studies (Feeney et al., 2019), the largest cities have the most functional and the highest quality websites with the most extensive and interactive tools for visitors.

Current tourism online marketing highlights interactivity and collaboration. Similarly, Ma et al. (2021) state that stakeholder engagement plays a crucial and advanced role in branding. Active business promotion (in the municipality) also attracts more companies and investors, as observed by Bose et al. (2015). Finnish municipal websites reflect this by highlighting successful industries, listing operating companies, and providing detailed information about them. However, only around 2 % of Finnish municipalities (N = 309) incorporate competitive success and honorable mentions in their marketing, despite Hospers (2011) affirming their reliability and appeal as marketing methods. The absence of acknowledgements of, e.g. municipal quality rankings, done by think tanks and consultancy firms regarding ‘high quality services’ or ‘nature beauty’ rankings, indicate that this type of thinking and marketing applications can still develop in Finland.

The analysis identified implementations of literature-based tourism marketing tools. For example, Ashworth (2009) proposed a personality-based approach in tourism marketing, i.e. leveraging the fame of local individuals to promote the municipality. However, this is very rarely used method in Finland: it is employed only by approximately 4 % of Finnish municipalities (N = 309). Another proposal by Ashworth (2009) involves utilizing recognizable buildings and designs,

predominantly showcased through images on Finnish city websites in the data. However, only a few municipalities (the largest cities such as Helsinki, Tampere, or Turku) in Finland have effectively created a brand identity based on well-known structures in the context of their websites.

## 5. Discussion: understanding online tourism marketing and branding through spatial categories

The results indicate clearly that regional categories are important tools for collecting and analyzing data on regional differences and for understanding the dynamics of economic, social, and demographic change. Tourism marketing and branding is a tool for attracting both people and business, fundamentally aiming to increase local economic activity and prosperity. Spatial interconnections between local (municipal) and regional (collective) are best realized when the properties of municipalities are similar enough with each other. Spatial categories based on large contiguous units, such as NUTS-2 regions, have statistically non-significant relation to their municipal tourism marketing and branding. This is an important finding particularly for spatial analysis that often rely on data from statistical geographical units. Spatial layering approach shows considerable regional variation in the tourism marketing and branding activities within applied spatial layers. This variation naturally complicates interpreting and generalizing results based on data from large macro-regions. Makkonen et al. (2022) have reported similar findings in terms of population dynamics.

The results are clearer in the case of ‘macro tourism-regions’ indicating that they function better as a classification category for tourism marketing and branding. The result is a logical one, since this regional typology has been created for tourism marketing purposes (Business Finland & Visit Finland, 2020). However, it is the population size and Urban–Rural typologies that are best able to group the municipalities into similar classes based on their online tourism materials. Similarly, the latter two regional categories are interconnected – not least due to the importance given to population statistics in the creation of the Urban–Rural typology (Helminen et al., 2020) – in various ways, through their administrative, statistical, and functional characteristics, as well as their boundaries. These interrelations enable policymakers, researchers, and practitioners with comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics and develop effective strategies to address regional disparities and promote regional development.

First, a relevant comparison can be made with Okrasa’s et al. (2020) work who provided a methodology driven approach for understanding

spatio-temporal dynamic of community development. Active tourism branding aims to support similar outcomes through attracting visitors and investments. Okrasa et al. (2020) applied multivariate statistical methods in order to gain understanding of subjective well-being in a location. Similar goals are visible in this data. Even though the methodological stance is significantly different from each other, both studies indicate the importance of regional background variables (size, economic condition, relative position in national urban hierarchy) in understanding of online tourism marketing and branding. In other words, the results support the existing knowledge of an urban premium: large cities have more capabilities and resources, in comparison to their smaller counterparts, to invest on online tools and contents in tourism attraction.

Second, Miliadis and Psyllidis (2021) provided an interesting, detailed view on digital place representation. They use 'points of interest' data that are categorized for the needs of social media and other travel systems widely applied by the travelers. Their work includes a consideration of the definition of used categories, their functionality, and applicability in order to provide the best possible view on the tourism geographies. Similarly, spatial layering is a way to organize data into distinct regional types. The data within each layer can be analyzed and compared independently of the other layers. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of the data, as it takes into account the specific characteristics of each region together with their broader spatial environments as advocated by Leiper (1990). However, simple options are often the most suitable ones in terms of the practical implications of the results. Thus, political districts (such as municipalities) often make the most sense as the observation units in spatial analyses (Makkonen et al., 2022). This is because they are the spatial scales that have the administrative capacities to directly affect local development efforts and therefore utilized as the key spatial layer of interest in the analysis along with the regional typologies used for categorizing the data as indicated regarding MAUP.

Third, research on jointly used regional categories in online municipal website marketing is very limited. However, the data includes a diverse range of approaches, with a primary focus on highlighting their unique locational characteristics. Similarly, Oliveira and Hersperger (2021) recognize the importance of introducing distinctive features and offerings in municipal marketing in their European and U.S. focused analysis. Compared to the (more) innovative approaches to destination marketing and branding discussed above, Finnish municipalities place emphasis on the traditional promoting of physical natural attributes, services, affordability, and attractions. In this regard, there is plenty of room for improvement and experimentation.

Fourth, the results indicate, at least indirectly, that smaller municipalities with similar socio-economic conditions behave differently in tourism marketing and particularly in branding. This suggests that municipalities, even small, do recognize and actively conduct tourism policy in their local efforts that considers their comparative advantages as also stressed in earlier literature (e.g. Bose et al., 2015, 2021). The result, thus, indicates that tourism marketing and branding is very much an issue of recognising local and regional strengths and making good use of these attributes. This is important (speculative) interpretation that involves conceptual implication of 'smart' development (growth or decline), widely studied in Urban-Rural literature (e.g. Grant, 2009; Makkonen & Inkinen, 2023; Rhodes & Russo, 2013).

Finally, the use of major annual or unique events that generate attention for a municipality is an efficient instrument of tourism marketing. Several Finnish municipalities have annual events that contribute to their identity, but they often do not actively use these events to brand the municipality. However, the upcoming designation of Oulu (the fifth largest city in Finland) as the European Capital of Culture in 2026 serves as an example of utilizing this instrument, as it is prominently featured on the websites of Oulu and neighboring municipalities. Thus, there are examples where Finnish municipalities leverage such large-scale events as part of their site marketing efforts. The

implications of these events (as attractions) are spatially interlinked, as larger regions or host countries use events of various sizes in their marketing strategies (see Di Vita & Wilson, 2021).

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1. Theoretical outcomes

Spatial layering is a powerful tool for understanding the geography of tourism and place branding. Unique characteristics of regions are provided in order to give a context for the Finnish case. This is needed in order to understand the current condition of online tourism marketing and branding. The complex relationships that exist between different regions and tourism strategies pinpoint the challenges and opportunities presented by regional variation. They also poses new interesting theoretical implications in term of social construction of technology and tourism marketing via technology platforms. As this study demonstrates, complex modeling should include more spatially-bound objects as the empirical results show that size matters in municipal marketing and branding.

Theory-based results, informed by a spatial layering approach, support the discussion around Leiper's (1990) attraction systems and the interconnectedness of different spatial scales. Smaller regional units, such as municipalities, do not exist in a vacuum: they are always parts of larger units. Therefore, from a methodological perspective, to gain a more thorough understanding, the analysis of tourism marketing and branding should include the analysis of smaller spatial units together with an analysis of their wider regional environments. These implications can be particularly important for resource allocation in tourism as well as in the general understanding and representation of current tourism and travel information in different spatial contexts (also Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2021).

Spatial modeling of tourism and travel marketing and branding can bring both theoretical and empirical advances for the field. A new potential venue is to consider spatial intra- and interregional functionality. This means short and medium distance mobility within the site of visitation. The identification of these patterns of economic or social activity could be distilled further in the light of spillover effects and externalities. The interrelations between regional statistical units are, however, complex and multifaceted. Administrative regions can be nested within statistical (such as the tourism macro-region here) or functional regions, and vice versa. This interrelation allows for the integration of data across different types of regions and for a more comprehensive understanding of tourism dynamics in a spatial context.

From a conceptual point of view, the decision to analyze tourism online marketing and branding as separate concepts (Skinner, 2008), rather than treating them as synonyms, produced interesting results visible through the utilized spatial layers. The relatively simple dichotomous variable depicting the two 'behaved' as expected indicating that particularly large urban areas have incorporated branding traits into their online tourism marketing material and creating a detailed spatial overview of the two concepts. The results, thus, provide a platform for future studies on tourism marketing and branding to operationalize the two concepts that, while related, are still clearly separable according to the level of active creation of a recognizable identity or the lack thereof done by tourism destination organizations.

### 6.2. Practical considerations

The results support the earlier literature on the topic showing that population size is a decisive explanatory factor behind the complexity of tourism marketing and branding, since larger cities have more resources to invest on it (Feeney et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2021). However, interestingly, municipalities belonging to the regional category of rural areas close to urban areas are less invested than their 'more rural' counterparts. The results also indicate that regional categories designed to

create large continuous macro-regions do not really help in identifying systematic differences in tourism online data. There are some weak but identifiable patterns between the different tourism macro-regions. However, NUTS-2 categorization produced statistically non-significant results. Thus, as indicated also in earlier studies (Inkinen, 2005; Makkonen et al., 2022), the use of macro-regional data hides considerable within regional variation. This naturally complicates drawing specific (beyond a very general level) policy and practical recommendations based on such aggregate data. As such, spatial layering is a key tool – offering improved accuracy by taking into account both the specific conditions of individual municipalities as well as their wider regional surroundings (see Chi & Liu, 2023) – for researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in addressing the specifics of locations, their strengths, and highlights.

From a practical perspective, the above results indicate that municipalities have different avenues to market themselves and to build their tourism brands. They should cooperate with other near-by destinations to ‘loan-size’ (Richards & Duif, 2019) and benefit from their attractions or more preferably to ‘create-size’ in terms of quality by jointly marketing interesting (collaborative) regional tourism products online. At the same time, they should benchmark their tourism sector, attractions, and branding material against other near-by locations together with locations of similar size to identify their key-strengths and characteristics that differentiate these tourism locations from their ‘competitors’ in terms of attractiveness. This also helps building a distinctive tourism brand that is based on these strengths and attractions. This approach should help in target marketing and branding via social media to identify specific tourism (customer) segments, interested in specific local tourism products and particular attractions. Finally, it is important to remember that the mere copying of best practices from other regional contexts rarely works (Hospers, 2006). Therefore, municipalities are encouraged to experiment in finding the most suitable (innovative) online tools for marketing and branding their place-based strengths and attractions to stand out from the crowd of competing tourism destinations.

### 6.3. Social implications

In terms of social implications, this research entails that the study of collaboration between authorities operating in the same locational context but on different administrative scale is needed. Regional interests and local municipal interests should drive towards unified goals and targets in their place and location marketing efforts that are further connected to national marketing strategies and investments. Interaction, knowledge sharing, and connectivity in tourism marketing and branding require more studies. This also implies questions and research designs of regional policy analysis, travel behavior changes, and tourism sustainability associated with their economic and spatial impacts.

Tourism marketing and branding can have significant social implications, influencing both the destination and the visitors. The main driver is that spatially enhanced tourism marketing can promote cultural specifics that can lead to a better understanding and appreciation of different travel locations. Spatially analyzed tourism marketing may also contribute to local economic development by more efficient visitor attracting that has a potential of creating job opportunities not only to the tourism sector but also to other related sectors (Wall, 1997), thus stimulating business growth. Further implications include improvements in life standards and infrastructure. However, in term of social implications it should be acknowledged that the influx of tourists might also lead to economic inequality as overreliance on tourism can make a destination vulnerable to economic downturns (Gounder & Cox, 2022). Spatially aware practical implementations of tourism innovations may help in this potential social consequence. Sustainable and responsible approaches are essential to ensure positive social impacts and the long-term well-being of both the destination and its residents.

### 6.4. Limitations and future research

This research has some limitations in capturing the full spectrum of online marketing tools based on the Internet sites. First, the prominence of the marketing efficiency is partly attributed to the classification structure. This is a common problem in applied spatial analyses and MAUP is discussed in the methodology section accordingly. However, despite this structural influence, the collected data are considered robust, offering valuable insights into the online marketing and visitor experience improvement in Finland. Second, the utilization of the data collection technique may have inadvertently skewed the emphasis in interpretations towards emphasis of gains and efficiency impacts obtained from larger units. While this bias is acknowledged, it does not negate the fundamental reality that economic principles and goals aimed at enhancing marketing efficiency that are notably pronounced in the data. Third, these limitations are recognized and considered according to the nuanced nature of qualitative multifaceted dimensions that contribute to the overall interpretations made in this research. It is also crucial to acknowledge additional potential limitations, such as the generalizability of findings, the influence of cultural biases in interpretations created by researcher backgrounds and contexts, and the continuously evolving nature of technology and its impact on cross-sectional studies such as this.

To conclude, there are several future research tasks identifiable with digitalization and online tourism marketing. First, combination of different statistical resources (e.g. related to mobility and migration) to tourism information data, such as applied here, is an important future topic. Second, analyses focusing on regional differentiation and environmental stress between travel destinations requires further work. Third, digitalization enables more personalized travel experiences through enhanced information sharing. This also raises a need for research dealing with digital privacy and security in the case of social media and other online platforms that are collecting tourism data from individuals. Finally, detailed research on marketing impacts on tourism behavior still requires further attention, particularly in the context of responsible and sustainable travelling choices.

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### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Tommi Inkinen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Maria Heikkonen:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Teemu Makkonen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Simo Rautiainen:** Visualization, Software.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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