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Regional imagery and Irish tourism promotion

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Introduction

Regional images may be defined as representations of places which consist of one or more of a variety of elements which may include people, landscapes, flora or animals (Gold and Ward, 1994; Kneafsey, 1997). Sound, when sound media are used, and, arguably, taste and smell through their evocation, may also function as regional images. Individually and collectively these elements serve to convey characteristics of places. Regional imagery is identified by both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) as having important contributions to make to the marketing of the products of rural economies. A recent OECD (1995) report on *Niche markets as a rural development strategy*, refers to specific landscapes, cultural traditions or historic monuments as creating territorial linkages which can function as a niche marketing strategy. The commercial value of regional imagery for rural economies that have become isolated from mainstream activity is also recognised by the EU Committee of the Regions. In an Opinion document of 18 September 1996 on 'Promoting and protecting local products- a trump card for the regions', it is stated that "a region's image may contribute to that of products and services offered on wider markets" (CEC, p. 2). Regional identification marks (labels) are viewed as enabling a link to be forged between the product and "a region's landscape and culture" (ibid.). Regional images as constructs are therefore being defined increasingly as having a commercial value for the products and services of underdeveloped areas.

This paper explores the use of regional imagery in tourism promotion in the context of selected quality tourism products from two rural regions of western Ireland. The products are accommodation and recreational activities (angling, golfing, cabin cruising, heritage attractions and adventure sports). These products were selected for study in early 1998 with reference to a series of quality criteria which include: (i) certification either through self-regulation or possession of a quality mark or symbol; (ii) association with or traceability to a particular region; (iii) specification of the method of production, the materials used or ownership; and (iv) attraction as defined by design, appearance, premium price or personal attention by the producer. Each of the selected businesses possesses one or more of the above quality characteristics. All are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which employ 50 persons or less and all use materials or products which relate to the region of production.

The Northwest region comprises counties Leitrim, Sligo and Roscommon and the Southwest region, county Kerry and west Cork (Figure 1). Both regions provide many opportunities for tourism businesses but differ in terms of their physical landscapes, their economies and their history as tourism destinations. With the exception of county Sligo, which has an extensive coastline, the Northwest study region is primarily an inland area. Counties Leitrim and Sligo adjoin the Border with Northern Ireland. Sligo town (pop. 17, 786 in 1996) is the only town of any significant size in the region and is the centre of the 'Yeats country' immortalised in the poetry of the Nobel laureate, William Butler Yeats. There are extensive expanses of lakes in the east and northeast. The uplands rarely exceed 600 metres in height but they include distinctive limestone plateaux on the Sligo-Leitrim

boundary (Plate 1). By contrast with the Northwest, the Southwest region of county Kerry and west Cork has an extensive coastline with many inlets (Plate 2). Carrauntoohill, the highest peak on the island (1041m), is one of the Macgillycuddy's Reeks of south Kerry. The Dingle Peninsula in west Kerry and the Lakes of Killarney in south Kerry are long-established touring areas. West Cork is also a touring area of importance. The region contains a number of large towns, notably Tralee (pop. 19, 056 in 1996) in county Kerry, and Cork City (pop. 127, 187 in 1996), the second largest city in the state, lies to the east of the region.

This paper consists of four main sections. First, the use of regional imagery in Irish tourism promotion is discussed. Secondly, key features of the businesses that were studied are described briefly. Thirdly, supports for promotion and marketing are discussed and, fourthly, the use of regional imagery by the surveyed businesses is reviewed. A conclusion follows.

Regional imagery in Irish tourism promotion

Tourism and its promotion are of growing importance in the economy of the Republic of Ireland in general (Government of Ireland, 1994). Tourism is also being assigned increased importance in the economy of rural areas where reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) requires new sources of income to be sought to supplement declining incomes from agriculture (Bord Failte, 1994; Gillmor, 1994). Several studies have been conducted in recent years which focus on the use of regional imagery in promoting and marketing Irish tourism (Bell, 1995; Kneafsey, 1997; O'Connor, 1993; Quinn, 1994). The emphasis in these studies is on the themes being invoked in promotional materials used by agencies and development groups of various kinds. In this respect they differ from the empirical research reported here which focuses on the use of imagery in promotion and marketing by individual entrepreneurs. A number of the studies conducted to date illustrate that a regional representation is frequently used deliberately to create a national image. Kneafsey (1997) described the use of regional images to promote County Mayo and identified their broader roles in the promotion of Ireland *per se* as a tourism destination. Nash (1993) defined the image of the landscape of the west of Ireland, as portrayed in promotional materials, as being a symbol for the landscape of Ireland in general.

Studies of regional representations created for tourists identify a number of key themes. Kneafsey (1995) identified themes of exoticism, otherness, Celticity and rurality in materials relating to County Mayo. O'Connor (1993) described a number of themes that continue to be reproduced for tourist consumption in international marketing by Bord Fáilte (the Irish Tourist Board): the image of Ireland as a picturesque, unspoiled, timeless country with a friendly and quaint people, and a place where past traditions and ways of life still exist; in other words, a pre-modern society. Quinn (1994) analysed the verbal and visual presentations in brochures, produced to promote Ireland as a tourist destination in Continental Europe, and identified the following main themes: a world apart from modern society; an attractive, unspoiled environment; friendly people; a relaxed pace of life; a vast cultural heritage; and a large array of sporting opportunities. Ireland as a country with a high quality 'green' environment is also invoked increasingly in the marketing of tourism.

The evolution of the use of imagery in Irish tourism promotion undoubtedly has been influenced by Ireland's traditional dependence on the British and the United States of America tourist markets where sizeable components of the population are of Irish descent. Tourism promotion tapped into the pre-existing images related to aspects of heritage and tradition in both of these countries. Whilst new contemporary images of Ireland are being promoted, there is evidence of a reluctance to abandon traditional images. A new 'Brand Ireland' tourism imagery, developed in 1995 by Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist

Board, was designed, in part, to counteract the traditional image (Anonymous, 1995). Ireland is now being promoted as providing an emotive experience and affording opportunities for a wide range of recreational activities (Logue, 1996). Ironically, the logo which was selected for the new promotional campaign which replaced the shamrock (one of Ireland's national symbols), with an image of two figures embracing in friendship, has not found universal favour with tourism business interests in Ireland. As a result, the shamrock has been reinstated in a modern design in the promotional material of Bord Fáilte.

The marketing of Ireland using regional imagery is long-established and major historical and archaeological sites, scenic mountains, lakes and landscapes tend to function as national representations. The use of imagery in promotional materials at regional and local levels is less well developed but is emerging. The various Regional Tourism Authorities (RTAs) employ key landscape and cultural characteristics and regional slogans in their marketing. The North West RTA uses mountains, green grass and sea and the slogan 'To the waters and the wild' (a line from a poem by Yeats); Ireland West RTA uses mountains, water and a setting sun and the slogan in Irish and English 'The heartland of Irish culture'/'Croilár chultúr na Gaeilge'; and the South West RTA uses mountains, water and yellow grass and the slogan 'The spectacular South West'. The logos being used do not differ perceptibly from each other. This lack of precision in symbolism reflects a lack of strong regional branding and, possibly, experimentation to identify the image that is most successful.

Other regional and sub-regional marketing groups have also begun to adopt imagery in their promotional materials. Each of the membership groups of the Rural Community Tourism Co-operative has adopted a regional label, including *Corrib Country* in county Galway and *Úna Bhán* in Leitrim, Roscommon and south Sligo. Five coastal golf links in counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Donegal are being marketed jointly in the Northwest-Border area as *West Coast Links* (1997). The *Úna Bhán* tourism group is linking with a tragic romantic story focused on a lake in north county Roscommon (Burke, 1995; *Úna Bhán Tourism*, 1997). The LEADER Co-operative in West Cork is actively developing an image based on its relative isolation in a campaign named 'West Cork a place apart' (West Cork LEADER Co-Op Society Ltd., 1997). The purple *fuchsia* flower has been adopted as a regional symbol. A tourism promotional campaign for county Mayo uses the slogan 'Mayo naturally' (Higgins, 1996). County Sligo's tourism literature uses the slogan 'Sligo, land of heart's desire'.

Selected quality tourism businesses

The businesses discussed were selected for interview deliberately on the basis of their status as SMEs, their possession of quality criteria and their use of regional raw materials. Some 28 entrepreneurs were interviewed in the Northwest and 29 in the Southwest. Several features of the businesses reflect the longer-established status of the Southwest region as a tourism destination.

Table 1. Selected characteristics of rural tourism entrepreneurs

| Characteristics | Northwest (n=28) | Southwest (n=29) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| % male | 50.0 | 51.7 |
| % female | 35.7 | 17.2 |
| Modal age group | 55+ | 46-55 |
| % with 3rd. level education | 42.9 | 58.6 |
| % with training relating to marketing | 28.6 | 27.6 |
| % with previous experience | 67.9 | 51.7 |

Note: the difference between the totals of male and female ownership and 100% is accounted for by joint and membership ownership

Table 2. Selected characteristics of rural tourism businesses

| | Northwest (n=28) | Southwest (n=29) |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Mean age (years) | 18 | 19 |
| % farm based | 39.3 | 3.4 |
| % family owned | 78.6 | 55.2 |
| Mean number of full-time employees | 5 | 10 |
| Mean number of part-time employees | 2 | 3 |
| Modal turnover (ECU) | <12, 963 | 64,817-97,224 & 259,264-388,894 & 388,895-648,157 |

The businesses include a large proportion of the quality SMEs in each region but, because they were not selected randomly, they do not represent tourism businesses in general in the two regions. The businesses include fewer female than male owners, particularly in the Southwest, although there is more joint ownership there. Membership owned enterprises, which are not included in the table, consist primarily of golf clubs and are owned, in the main, by males. A majority of entrepreneurs are middle-aged. Higher education is more prevalent in the Southwest region than in the Northwest. Some 28% of owners have training relating to marketing in both regions and previous experience of the business is more common in the Northwest. More owners are from the study region in the Northwest than in the Southwest where investment in tourist businesses by in-migrants is more common. The businesses have been established for substantial periods of time, on average, in both regions. Almost 40% of the businesses are farm based in the Northwest but only 3.4% in the Southwest, reflecting the fact that open farms and farm-based accommodation were included in the former region. Family ownership is considerably higher in the Northwest than in the Southwest. Businesses in the Northwest are also considerably smaller in terms of employment and turnover than in the latter, a feature that is related to many being part-time farm accommodation enterprises.

Whilst the businesses were selected on the basis of quality criteria, entrepreneurs were asked to identify the quality features as perceived by them. Little inter-regional differentiation was apparent in the responses received. Entrepreneurs in both regions referred most frequently to food, furnishings and facilities as being the quality characteristics of their businesses. Maintaining standards of cleanliness, hygiene and service; close involvement by the owner in the business; and a good management structure and staff resource were also ranked highly. In the Northwest, friendliness was mentioned by a number of respondents. Official quality certification, by Bord Fáilte (the Irish Tourist Board) for

accommodation or by the appropriate certification body for recreational activities, was high: 93% in the Northwest and 66% in the Southwest reported certification. The larger tourist market in the latter region may reduce the need for certification to attract custom. Quality regulation by membership marketing groups is also important. Unofficial certification, including membership of certain quality marketing groups, citations in recognised guidebooks, recommendations by clients and reputation, is seen as being more important than official certification.

Availability of assistance for promotion and marketing

The promotion and marketing of products is influenced in part by the availability of financial and other forms of assistance and advice. In the majority of businesses in both regions, marketing of products takes place through a wide range of marketing groups to whom membership fees are paid. The majority of entrepreneurs belong to at least one local, regional, national or international marketing body. Direct marketing to consumers, which was of prime importance in the early stages of business development, is less significant now because of repeat business, personal recommendations, citations in recognised guidebooks and publicity. Marketing also tends to be closely targeted on specific areas and segments. Almost two-thirds of respondents in the Northwest and the majority of those in the Southwest have access to the Internet, and either have their own website or are included on another site (usually that of their marketing group). A high proportion takes bookings over the Internet, via email. Most of the marketing groups have quality criteria built into membership, and a number provide a central reservations service for members.

Bord Fáilte was and is the main source of marketing advice and funding in both regions. In the Northwest, other sources include the European Regional Development Fund, LEADER, County Tourism Committees, an Integrated Rural Development Company, the International Fund for Ireland and marketing membership groups. Assistance was obtained from Shannon Development, Údarás na Gaeltachta (the Authority for Irish-speaking areas), and West Cork LEADER in different parts of the Southwest. Financial assistance was obtained in both regions for marketing feasibility studies, inclusion in organisational promotional activities, funding of brochures and attendance at trade shows. Sources of advice include, notably, Bord Fáilte, the Irish Hotels Federation, and the farm tourism advisory service of Teagasc (the Agriculture and Food Development Authority). Regular contact takes place with a wider range of organisations in the Northwest than in the Southwest, including county and local tourism committees and a variety of tourism membership groups.

The range of assistance available for the promotion and marketing of tourism products has increased in recent years in both regions, associated with funding being provided by the EU through LEADER and other programmes which form part of Ireland's *National Development Plans* (Government of Ireland, 1989; 1993). Additional funding from the EU and other international sources applies in the Northwest region associated with its Border area status. The production of promotional materials and participation in promotional and marketing fora (trade fairs, use of the Internet etc.) are among the activities assisted. Producer marketing membership groups are also of growing importance. The majority of businesses feel that the institutions with which they liaise are effective in product marketing. Reported difficulties relate in the main to bureaucratic procedures and to a lack of understanding of the needs of small-scale producers. The individual region was cited as receiving less attention than is felt desirable in marketing: Ireland as a country and particular products are viewed as being emphasised more.

Use of regional imagery in producer promotion and marketing

The use of 'regional imagery' in promotion and marketing is defined in this study as use of a placename or other features of place (environmental, historical and cultural) in the promotion and marketing of products. Before identifying their use of imagery, producers were asked about their image of the region in which they live. In the Northwest, two-thirds of the entrepreneurs described the image of the region in positive terms associated with the unspoilt landscape, beautiful scenery and the opportunities for leisure, particularly water-based activities. Cultural and historical aspects are also important, especially the link with W. B. Yeats in Sligo. The negative responses relate primarily to the absence of a well-defined regional image. The region is seen as a place that people pass through, or do not even know exists. Some see it as having a negative, backward, poor image. All of the respondents in the Southwest viewed their region as having a positive image, which was described in terms of the beauty of the scenery, the rural and unspoilt nature of the landscape, and the friendly people. The traditional culture of the Gaelic-speaking Gaeltacht is a distinguishing feature. Responses which referred to a negative image relate to the over-commercialisation of the region. Whilst positive images of both regions dominate overall, the majority of entrepreneurs in both regions feel that the image of the region could be improved through increased marketing, developing the tourism product and environmental improvements. Overall, the image of the region held by the producers tends to relate to specific features and environmental qualities and to an identifiable cultural heritage which contrasts to some extent with the more generic and romanticised images that are invoked in international tourism promotional materials.

A majority of entrepreneurs use regional imagery in marketing. Approximately 80% of respondents in the Northwest and 90% in the Southwest use some regional imagery in their marketing and most see their location as being an advantage in using regional imagery and believe that this marketing strategy could be developed further. They were asked about the elements involved in the images they use and what the images are supposed to convey to customers and consumers. The majority in both regions use local images. A local or regional placename is most commonly used in the name of the product, notably the house or hotel in the case of accommodation. A placename is often used in conjunction with physical or cultural features which are employed to convey an attractive image of an area as a pleasant place to take a holiday. This seems to represent an attempt to associate the positive features of an area with the placename and thus with the product. The promotional tools which use regional imagery include business logos, the Internet and advertisements. In the majority of enterprises it is the owner who decided on, and in most cases designed, the image used. Outside consultants such as graphic designers were used by a limited number of respondents in both regions in designing promotional imagery. Most of the entrepreneurs felt that the use of regional imagery has contributed to the success of their product.

There was considerable awareness among producers of the potential to develop the use of regional imagery further. In the Northwest, entrepreneurs suggested using a wider range of images of the region in their promotional materials, using more marketing tools and developing an identity for the region, as methods of developing this marketing strategy further. Entrepreneurs in the Southwest suggested using a wider range of marketing tools with regional imagery and developing the product in the region and thus enhancing the regional image.

A substantial number of respondents in the Northwest region are members of the *Úna Bhán* producer tourism marketing group. By contrast, few tourism entrepreneurs in the Southwest are involved in the West Cork LEADER regional labelling initiative, based on the *fuchsia* symbol. Some respondents in the latter region proposed that a group of producers should come together to jointly develop a regional label or to use the *fuchsia* symbol. Almost

all of the respondents in both regions would be willing to participate in collaborative efforts with other local producers to develop a regional imagery-based marketing strategy. Some 85% would be interested in forging links with producers in other European countries for the purposes of exchanging information, sourcing markets and developing the concept of regional imagery. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents in both regions are aware of other groups trying to promote the development of regional imagery. By contrast awareness of EU initiatives to promote regional labelling is low.

Conclusion

Regional imagery has been in use for a considerable period of time in promoting Irish tourism. The emphasis in such promotion, which has been pursued primarily by Bord Fáilte, the national tourism promotion and marketing agency, has been on Ireland as a destination rather than on particular regions as tourism destinations. The imagery used tended, in the past, to evoke a romanticised view of the country as an area where a traditional culture survived and which remained apart from mainstream contemporary life. Current promotional materials seek to counteract the perceived negative aspects of this image by emphasising contemporary features of Irish music, dance and culture, and the opportunities for leisure activities.

The research reported in this paper illustrates that the use of regional imagery for regional tourism promotion is of growing importance in Ireland and that the forms of imagery being used are becoming more place specific. The media used for promotion are also becoming more sophisticated. These developments are associated, in part, with the growing importance of tourism in regional and local economies and with an increased awareness of and need for regional differentiation. They are associated also with enhanced supports being available in recent years for the promotion and marketing of tourism from the national government, the EU, and from other sources. The Northwest study region benefits in particular from international funding for tourism promotion because of its border location adjoining Northern Ireland. Special funding has been allocated to the Border region in general in the wake of the cessation of violence, as a means of contributing to economic growth.

Links to place are being invoked by many entrepreneurs as a form of differentiation, although in some instances this may reflect a common practice rather than a formal marketing strategy. Associations with particular places are also being used by individual quality tourism providers and by marketing groups as part of deliberate marketing strategies. The images employed include placenames and actual physical features as well as more traditional generic images of rurality and evocations of remoteness and romanticism. A limited number of examples of labelling involving the use regional imagery exist and there is considerable interest in developing this strategy further. The use of regional imagery involves a wide range of media of communication, including the Internet which is also used for booking accommodation and activity holidays. There is also a professed interest in linking with producers at regional and trans-European level in joint marketing efforts based on regional imagery. The results of the research illustrate a growing interest in and use of regional imagery by tourism providers in rural Ireland as a method of promoting their products.

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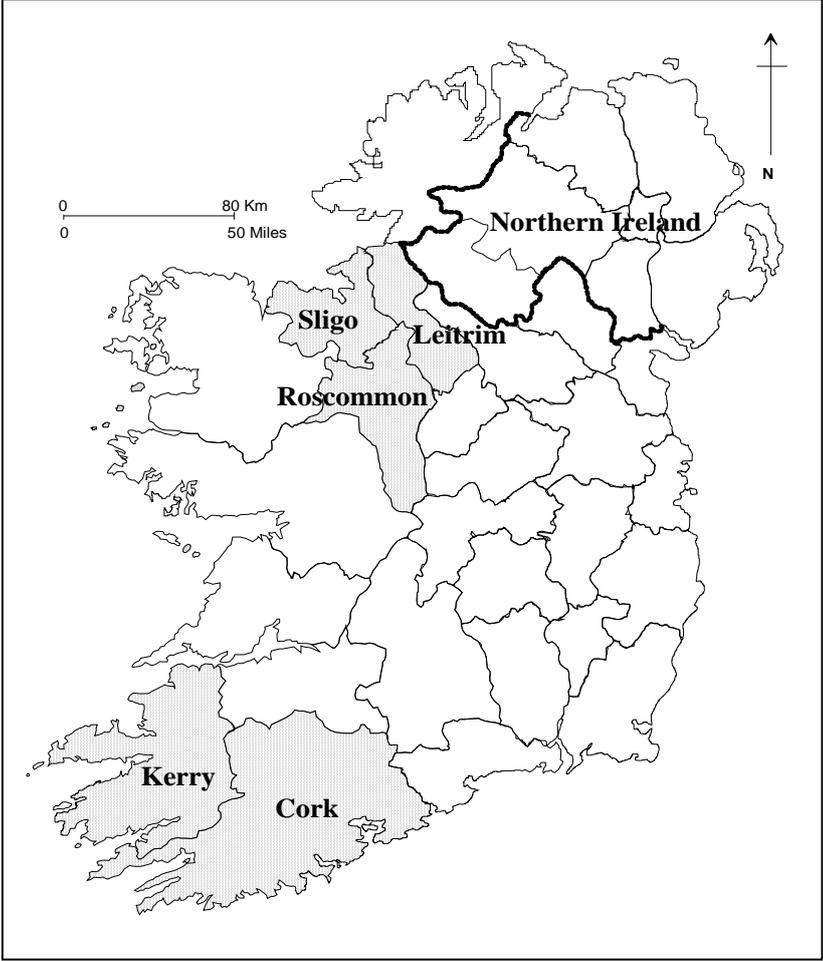


Figure 1. Study areas