Partnership working in enhancing the destination brand of rural areas: A case study of Made in Monmouthshire, Wales, UK

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Abstract

This paper outlines the challenges of destination development and branding in rural tourism destinations, for example a lack of coherent destination propositions, lack of iconic structures, lack of differentiation in their tourism product portfolio and a high incidence of micro-businesses. Such factors mean that the creation of a coherent destination brand is often difficult and yet, at the same time essential, for such destinations. This paper explores the role of collaboration and partnership amongst public, private, and voluntary sector agencies in formulating a product brand which is coherent, asset- based and community-led. Using a case study of the Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) brand, an Adventa-led initiative which serves as a quality benchmark for food, drink, arts and crafts produced within and around Monmouthshire, the article demonstrates the role of collaborative development in the creation and development of a destination brand.

Keywords: Destination branding Rural tourism Collaboration Partnership

1. **Introduction**

Tourism is often adopted as a tool for local, regional and national development (Sharpley, 2002) indeed, in the United Kingdom (UK), there has been increased involvement in tourism at all levels of governance, as a growing number of agencies have sought to capture the economic benefits of tourism. These interventions are underpinned by the growing recognition that rural areas, as well as urban areas, play an important role in economic growth. Indeed, Phillipson et al. (2011) identified that rural areas in England now contribute 19% of Gross Value Added to the national economy, have more businesses and start-ups per head of population than urban areas (excluding London) and exhibit higher levels of   entrepreneurial activity. A contributing factor to rural areas growing economic importance has been the shift away from agriculture to the service sector (Cochrane, 2009).

As Shucksmith   (2012,   p.   4) observes   'an   increasingly   important element of economic development strategy for many   rural com- munities is making   money   from   the   appeal   of landscapes, rural environments and local cultural; heritage'.

In Wales, rural tourism makes more of a contribution to the rural economy, than it does in England and Scotland. The Welsh Assembly Government (now Welsh Government) (2010) for example estimates that rural tourism accounts for 49% of trips and 43% of spend compared to only 42% of trips and 36% of spend in England. Indeed the nine predominantly rural counties of Wales (Denbighshire, Conwy, Gwynedd, Ynys Môn, Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Monmouthshire) account for 68% of trips to Wales made by UK staying visitors. An annual total of d1075 million of staying visitor spend or 62% of total staying visitor expenditure in Wales takes place in these nine counties (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). It is clear therefore, that tourism makes a vital contribution to the economy and communities of rural Wales in terms of exports, revenue, supporting local businesses, especially food, drink and arts and crafts.

However, despite the importance of tourism in rural areas, the industry faces a number of challenges if it is to remain competitive. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) for example warn that, as new destinations compete against entrenched tourism destinations, many regions face challenges to tourism growth. The OECD (1994, p. 13) also recognise that in relation to rural destinations, whilst they possess assets 'worthy of preservation' the 'global condition has become steadily more urban'. Thus rural destinations are competing in a difficult, crowded and competitive marketplace (Williams & MacLeod, 2005). In order to ensure that rural destinations can compete into the future, they will need to have 'stand out' differentiated products as destination distinctiveness is going to be critical (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009). Thus the challenge for rural destinations is to identify, develop and promote such differentiation through a coherent destination brand.

Such distinctiveness is particularly crucial for rural tourism in Wales where, despite its important economic contribution, the average spend per trip and per night is lower than the Welsh average, largely because of fewer spending opportunities. In addition, international visitor data indicates a lower proportion of overseas trips to the rural counties, accounting for 49% of trips, but fewer than 40% of nights and under 39% of spend (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). Another challenge is that the rural tourism industry in Wales, like many other rural destinations, is dominated by small-scale businesses and there is often competition, rather than co-operation, in addition to low awareness amongst small-scale businesses and other destination stakeholders about the importance of developing and implementing local rural tourism strategies that positively, competitively and sustainably harness the attributes of the destination and which reflect the local nature and qualities of the landscape, arts and crafts, food, drink and traditional skills.

Against this backdrop, it is of no surprise that the Welsh Government is keen to strengthen rural tourism in Wales through the development of public–private–voluntary sector partnerships. The intention is that whilst tourisms contribution to economic growth will largely be achieved through private sector-led activity, the public sector will play a key role in facilitating such partner- ships and thus maximising tourisms economic impact (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010). Thus product development, through public–private–voluntary partnerships has been identified as a way of creating

competitive advantage for tourism destinations by ensuring that local communities are part of the process of deciding how destinations are managed, marketed and developed. In Wales, partnerships are seen as integral to the development of this competitive advantage by improving the quality of the tourism product, visitor experience, skill levels, local supply chains and business opportunities; as well as enhancing community involvement in tourism. Against this backdrop, this paper uses a case study approach to explore how partnership working has been utilised in rural Wales, specifically the role of a LEADERþ funded initiative (Adventa) to facilitate a partnership between local tourism businesses and acting as the catalyst behind the creation of a coherent destination brand. Its focus is the Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) partnership, an Adventa-led initiative, which has involved bringing together local food, drink, arts and crafts producers to develop MiM as a destination brand. The paper demonstrates the pivotal role of Adventa in instigating, co-ordinating and nurturing this asset-based community partnership.

2. Theory

2.1. Rural tourism

Rural tourism is not a new phenomenon, as rural areas have always attracted tourists (Alexander & McKenna, 1998; Edgell & Harbaugh, 1993; Lane, 2009; Sharpley, 2007); however, the escalation in rural destination consumption is more recent. Urry and Larsen (2011) assert that traditional rural life is being transformed by increases in rural tourism destination consumption, tourist preferences for real and natural experiences and changes in modern agriculture. The OECD (1994, p. 14) list the following characteristics of rural tourism: located in rural areas; functionally rural – built upon the rural worlds special features: small scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, "traditional" societies and "traditional" practices; rural in scale – both in terms of buildings and settlements – and, therefore, usually small-scale; traditional in character, growing slowly and organically, and connected with local families….sustainable – in the sense that its development should help sustain the special rural character of an area, and in the sense that its development should be sustainable in its use of resources… of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy and history.

Rural tourism development in whatever its form, is often adopted as a tool for rural restructuring and improving rural economies (George & Reid, 2005; Mair, 2006; Lane, 2009; Scott, Christie, & Midmore, 2004; Sharpley, 2007; Sharpley & Craven, 2001; Sharpley & Vass, 2006; Williams & Ferguson, 2005; Williams & MacLeod, 2005; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & van Es, 2001). However, the inherent characteristics of rural destinations and the distinct lack of differentiation between rural destinations and rural tourism products is a challenge. Many such destinations have similar assets in terms of landscape, food, culture and heritage and tend to lack iconic structures. Therefore, it is difficult to create a strong sense of identity which has implications for destination branding. In addition,

the topography of rural destinations reduces destination visibility and profile by exacerbating geographical dispersion and isolation, which can subsequently have a negative impact on destination branding. Dispersion and isolation might also have a detrimental effect on the way micro-businesses interact with each other, ultimately affecting the development of a coherent destination brand.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, rural destinations are realising the need for sustainable competitive advantage to differentiate themselves from other destinations. Thus many rural areas are working hard to attract and retain visitors through innovative packaging of those aspects of their destination, which are difficult to replicate in other rural destinations. These are then reinforced with a strong destination brand. In achieving this, many rural areas have recognised that cultural distinctiveness, particularly in relation to arts, crafts and local food and drink assets is one way to differentiate their tourism offer (Bessière, 1998; Cole, 2006; Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1998; Richards, 2007) and to develop a destination brand (Kuznesof, Tregear, & Moxey, 1997; Spilková & Fialová, 2013).

2.2. *Destination branding*

Many authors have emphasised the crucial role of destination branding in rural areas. Spilková and Fialová (2013) for example recognise that regional branding can promote rural regions and products by creating links between small or medium sized enterprises. Furthermore, 'branded products combined with the opportunity to meet the producers and visit their workshops or farms strengthen the attractiveness of a region for tourists' (ARZ, 2011 cited Spilková & Fialová, 2013, p. 181). Indeed Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011, p. 4) assert that destinations 'exist only through the act of marketing'. In other words, 'a "place" only becomes a "destination" through the narratives and images communicated by tourism promotional material'. Against this back- drop it is essential that rural tourism destinations, in the face of increasing competition from other tourism destinations (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009), and their lack of differentiation, consider how their indigenous assets can be cohered into a destination brand. In the words of Morgan et al. (2011, p. 5), 'having a strong brand is hugely important for any destination whatever its size in the fight to combat increasing product parity, substitutability, and competition'.

However, the challenge for many destinations is in developing distinctiveness and a brand, particularly in rural areas where the product can be offered by others (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). The fragmentation that exists within rural destinations, as a result of the multitude and interdependence of services and businesses, also makes the development of a coherent brand challenging (Fyall, 2011; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005). A further challenge of destination branding, as asserted by Moilanen and Rainisto (2009, p. 113), is that '[the] tourism product consumed at a particular destination is assembled from the variety of products and services available, but this assembly is conducted largely by the consumer, not by the producer'. Furthermore, destination brands are often based on the entire destination, not a single product, what Moilanen and Rainisto

(2009) refer to as the Network Brand, with no individual or company having overall ownership. This results in pluralism and disparities in brand equity, creating challenges not only in terms of brand development and management, but also in meeting the expectations of network members.

Nevertheless, many destinations are attempting to overcome destination complexities and apply branding approaches to differentiate themselves and emphasise their uniqueness (Govers & Go, 2009; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002). The perceived benefits of developing a destination brand include differentiating themselves from competitors, creating emotional benefits and facilitating decision-making for visitors; assuring quality, value-adding partnerships and networks across public–private–voluntary sectors; building a coherent destination product; representing destination identity; building a positive internal and external destination image (Besanko, Dranove, & Shanley, 1996; Govers & Go, 2009; Kapferer, 1992).

In creating a strong destination brand Cai (2002 cited Govers & Go, 2009) asserts that working co-operatively can create stronger brands and develop brand communities (Govers & Go, 2009), involving groups of people with shared interests, attached to an entity, i.e. a destination, with a shared goal of improving the destination, for the good of themselves and the destination brand. Taking into account the human element in these branding approaches, they can be related to the argument (Morgan et al., 2011) that places become destinations through the communication of narratives and images – most of which is created by people, whether visitors or local communities. This approach exemplifies the holistic approach proposed by Cooper and Hall (2013, p. 222), which considers 'the brand as greater than the sum of its parts'. Therefore, it is possible for rural tourism destinations to develop their own destination brand through working in partnership with each other. Indeed, many destinations are finding that partnership working between a range of stakeholders (Morgan, Hastings, & Pritchard, 2012) is a way of overcoming fragmentation and disparities in brand equity in rural destinations.

2.3. *Partnership working in rural tourism development*

Whereas the post-war model of rural development was top- down (or exogenous) and often in the hands of outsiders with no local knowledge of the area (Lowe, Murdoch, & Ward, 1995), recent approaches have taken a more balanced approach, combining both bottom-up and top-down development, referred to as networked or 'neo-endogenous' development (Lowe et al., 1995; Shucksmith, 2012), in which the public, private and voluntary sector work in partnership. Such partnerships are often facilitated by external agencies who act as coordinators or enablers, rather than leaders, and whom bring the funding, organisation and skills to support such development. Shucksmith (2012, p. 9) argues that this approach has led to a re-conceptualisation of power in rural development, so that it is now a matter of 'social production (groups capacity to act) rather than of social control (by Government or elites)…local actors are cast as the catalysts for change in their local area through collective, networked action', often building on co-operative

values, which supports the concept of brand communities.

Such participatory approaches to rural development have been applied to tourism and been found to be an effective way of allowing local communities and businesses to focus on their distinctive economic, environmental and cultural assets. This in turn has allowed them to develop products appropriate to the locality which enhance the value of local products and services (Oliver & Jenkins, 2005). Networked development or partnership working of this sort, Shucksmith (2012, p. 13) observes, results in asset-based community development (ABCD) 'an approach that is driven by the community for their own local development'. Oliver and Jenkins (2005) also maintain that development of this sort leads to more co-operative (not competitive), participatory forms of local alliances. This leads to a sense of empowerment in which local people feel that they have control over their products and decision-making, which in turn, increases their self-esteem.

2.4. *The LEADER þ approach*

The European Union (EU) LEADER Initiative is a programme which has actively encouraged partnerships. The programme is one of four initiatives financed by EU Structural Funds and is designed to help rural stakeholders consider the sustainability of their local region through the implementation of integrated, high-quality and innovative rural development strategies with a strong emphasis on partnership and networking (European Commission, 2007). LEADERþ is one funding scheme under the LEADER portfolio of programmes. One of its main objectives has been to promote alternative approaches to rural development, in particular projects which demonstrate a wider benefit to target groups, local communities and businesses. The characteristics of LEADERþ projects are that they are area-based to assist specific regions and communities, have a bottom-up approach from within the community and are partnership-led (Shucksmith, 2012).

From a Welsh perspective, the purpose of the LEADERþ initiatives are to encourage innovative rural destination development, thereby creating a more sustainable rural society, economy and environment. LEADERþ initiatives in Wales are designed to address three themes: improving the quality of life for rural communities; adding value to local products; making best use of natural and cultural assets (Welsh European Funding Office, 2011). The emphasis on co-operation and partnership within the LEADERþ programmes, exemplifies the assertion (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006; Mitchell

& Hall, 2005; Shucksmith, 2012) that co-operation, community involvement and networking are key to the success and sustainability of rural tourism.

Following consideration of the relevant theory, what are the issues surrounding partnership working within a rural tourism context in order to develop a destination brand? Firstly, unifying a disparate set of small-scale businesses in order to develop brand communities for the destination.

Secondly, ascertaining appropriate partnerships and funding mechanisms to develop the destination brand. Thirdly, identifying indigenous assets which establish differentiation and can create a destination brand. This paper provides insights which might enhance understanding of the issues surrounding partnership working within a rural tourism context in order to develop a destination brand, using a case study of MiM, an Adventa-led project in Monmouthshire.

3. **Methodology**

In this research a holistic, single case study (Gray, 2009; Yin, 2009) approach was adopted. Bryman (20 08, p. 52) identifies single case in-depth analysis as 'the basic case study' and provides numerous examples of single case research, e.g. single community, single organisation, single event, single family. The case study approach is associated with a number of benefits particularly its role in allowing researchers to study phenomenon in depth and thus capture the 'meaningful and holistic characteristics of real-life events' (Yin, 2009, p. 4). In this research, Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) was selected as the case study as it represented a unique case in Monmouthshire which addresses the research question about issues surrounding partnership working within a rural tourism context in order to develop the destination brand. In this respect, MiM is not comparable.

In examining the case study, a combination of documentary evidence, participant observation and a semi-structured interview were used. The analysis of documentary evidence included a range of publications relating to the case study including a systematic analysis of official documents and statistics in order to understand the policy context for rural tourism development in Monmouth-shire (e.g. Arkenford Ltd & Yellow Railroad, 2012; Mabis, 2008; Strategic Marketing, 2004; TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012). This data was complemented with the use of participant observation which was used to gain contextual insights into MiM, allowing as it did, opportunity for the researchers to interact with members of MiM and Adventa, to observe their range of products, their marketing, work settings and use of exhibition spaces. As part of this process, the different venues at which MiM members exhibit and sell their products were visited for example the Court Cupboard Craft Gallery and Hilston Park these visits allowed the researchers to meet some of the producers, observe their interactions with visitors, view their works in situ and their use of the MiM branding label. A semi-structured interview was then undertaken with the Treasurer of MiM, one of the organisations founding members. In qualitative studies of this nature, Becker (n. d cited Baker & Edwards, n.d., p. 15) suggests that 'one interview is sometimes quite sufficient'.

4. **Case study context**

4.1. *Monmouthshire, Southeast Wales, UK*

Monmouthshire is one of ten unitary authorities in Southeast Wales, located on the Wales–

England border. As with other rural destinations, Monmouthshire's dependence on agriculture is economically unsustainable so there has been a need to create and maintain a sustainable high-value tourism industry. Monmouth- shire as a rural tourist destination has many product strengths including its landscape, which includes the Brecon Beacons National Park, Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Usk Valley, all of which provide numerous opportunities for outdoor activities. The county's industrial, social and cultural heritage, shaped by invasions and other historical events, also forms the basis of its contemporary tourism appeal, including Tintern Abbey, churches, castles, as well as a high number of reputable hotels, restaurants, pubs and gastro-pubs. Tourism plays a vital role within Monmouthshire's economy, generating just over d158 million in 2012 (GTS (UK) Ltd/Monmouthshire County Council (2013)) (Fig. 1).

However, despite its assets, Monmouthshire does not have any stand-out destination appeal (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012) and has therefore had to 'think creatively and courageously in order to identify how it might be able to differentiate itself and how it might do so with limited marketing resources' (Arkenford Ltd & Yellow Railroad, 2012, p. 8). In addition, the legacy of Monmouthshire's chequered industrial and socio-cultural heritage makes it difficult to find consensus on destination branding. To this end, the tourism industry has aligned itself to other geographical identifiers, e.g. the Wye Valley and Vale of Usk (http://www.visitwyevalley.com). Whilst these are well-established tourism destinations, the difficulty of branding Monmouthshire is exacerbated by this dilution of the brand – based on other geographical areas – and the lack of consistency in Monmouthshires branding strategy. Furthermore, the Monmouthshire Destination Development Plan 2012–2015 (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012), whilst identifying many product development opportunities in relation to food tourism, points out that there are limited opportunities to buy and sample Monmouthshire food and drink products. Aligned to this, the Destination Development Plan (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012) recommends increasing off-peak demand through developing arts and crafts events and festivals.

4.2. Adventa

In 2002, under the theme of 'Adding Value to Local Products', Monmouthshire County Council received d1.1 million funding to deliver a EU LEADERþ programme and in 2004, the county secured a further d1.7 million to include festivals and events. Using this funding, the Council established Adventa, Monmouthshires LEADERþ rural development delivery team, which receives funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Welsh Government and Monmouthshire County Council (Adventa, 2011). This funding enables Adventa to encourage, support and integrate high-quality and innovative rural development with an emphasis on cross-sector activity through co-operation and networking. Adventa is responsible for the Axis 4 activity of Monmouthshire County Council's Rural Development Programme, which takes the LEADERþ bottom-up approach to rural development and places a strong emphasis on the involvement of

rural communities and partnerships between public, private, voluntary and community groups. Axis 4 supports small- scale businesses and infrastructure, so is considered appropriate for rural tourism development (Panyik, Costa, & Ratz, 2011). In Monmouthshire, Axis 4 funding is used to implement high-quality and innovative rural development projects under the theme of adding value to local products (Adventa, 2011; Welsh European Funding Office, 2011).

Adventas aim is 'to encourage spend in the local area with a view to improving and sustaining the local rural economy' (Adventa, 2011). Their approach to achieving this is to improve marketing and raise the profile of local products; whilst increasing linkages between makers, producers and the tourism industry and by offering business advice and support for food, tourism, timber, festivals and events in Monmouthshire. In doing so, Adventa act as a catalyst for rural community development and regeneration by making structural changes to the way in which local producers make, distribute and market products. For example by developing direct farm–processor–retailer linkages, developing the supply chain, identifying new ways of developing the county's natural and cultural resources; exploiting new and sustainable markets for tourism and food products and advancing technology usage. Any Monmouthshire-based business, individual entrepreneur or com- munity, active in food and wine production, tourism and hospitality, timber and associated trades, events, festivals visual arts or local trails is eligible to work with Adventa.

Fig. 1. Map of Monmouthshire.

4.3 Made in Monmouthshire (MiM)

One of Adventas flagship projects has been the Made in Monmouthshire (MiM) initiative, launched in November 2005. MiM was originally identified as a way of bringing together local food, drink, arts and craft producers to help them benefit from working together and to become more sustainable in an increasingly difficult marketplace. In addition the intention behind the formation of MiM was to underpin Adventas aims of increasing cross-sector activity through co-operation and networking, innovation, new product development and joint marketing initiatives. In order to establish MiM, Adventa initially organised a series of networking meetings for local arts and craft makers (covering ceramics, fabrics, glass, jewellery, metal, painting, photography, sculpture, stone, textiles, weaving and wood) and food producers (covering meat, game and poultry, fish, dairy and eggs, fruit and vegetables, bakery, cakes & preserves, and beverages). As the scheme progressed, Adventas role gradually expanded to providing funded training opportunities including marketing and branding workshops. To raise the profile of MiM, Adventa also supported a range of events through which MiM participants could sell their products. However, perhaps the most significant initiative of Adventa was the creation of a brand under which MiM participants could market their goods.

The MiM brand is promoted in a number of social media and conventional ways. For example, there is a MiM website (http://www.madeinmonmouthshire.com), Facebook page with over 700 followers and Twitter account. More conventional approaches include showcasing the work of MiM members in various outlets, e.g. craft centres, tourist information centres and museums in Monmouthshire, as well as exhibiting at local festivals and events, such as the Abergavenny Food Festival. MiM also exhibit at similar national events and MiM members are able to participate in these events for a reduced fee. This co-operative approach to exhibitions enables MiM members to have far greater exposure to potential markets than they could have achieved independently.

In 2011, Adventa began its exit strategy leaving the producers with the dilemma of whether to continue independently or cease the initiative. Members, sensing that there was still a great deal of momentum in the group, decided to continue as a not-for-profit co-operative company managed wholly by its members. Funding, they decided, would be raised by charging d50 for membership. The following section uses MiM as a case study to reflect on how partnership working in a rural tourism destination can be used to enhance and develop the destination brand, whilst also high- lighting some of the challenges.

5. **Discussion**

5.1. Unifying a disparate set of local arts, crafts, food and drink producers in Monmouthshire to develop a brand community

MiM would seem to complement the objectives of Mon- mouthshires Destination Development Plan 2012–2015 (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012) which include: achieving a more strategically driven and co-ordinated approach to developing the visitor product of Monmouthshire; focusing on priorities in order to make the best use of available resources; engaging with tourism businesses and stakeholder organisations in productive partner- ship working that is relevant to their interests and makes the best use of available budgets and manpower resources; developing year-round visitor demand; increasing visitor satisfaction with the Monmouthshire visitor experience; driving up tourism business performance. Aside from the benefits of practical application, MiM illustrates the value of a network brand and brand community (Govers & Go, 2009; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009) as a way of partnership working to retain the brand as an overall priority for the destination as a whole and beyond any self-interest of the individuals involved. This is further demonstrated by the co- operative nature of MiM, which allows for a greater sense of ownership and a more holistic approach, as the MiM Treasurer emphasises:

If you are a co-operative every member owns the co-operative and has a stake in it, that's not to say that a hundred per cent of the people put their all into it because they do not but there are a lot of people that will do that…a good core of people who feel that they own it, they control it and they are going to work for it.

This demonstrates the strength of co-operative, community-led brands and supports those that argue that rural co-operatives are more socially cohesive and firmly based in local communities. In turn, this cohesion and localism accentuates the journey from place to destination (Morgan et al., 2011) and can help to address the challenges of fragmentation, interdependence and disparities in brand equity (Fyall, 2011; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005).

The route to MiM membership also epitomises the strength of brand ownership amongst the MiM

community. In order to join MiM, applicants have to submit photographic evidence of their work. In doing so, one of the key roles of MiM is the endorsement of the creative skills of local makers and producers. This ensures traditions that have shaped the cultural landscape are maintained and retains quality benchmarks through peer assessment. Aside from being a quality benchmark, MiM has also helped to establish place connection, through MiM products which are associated with Monmouthshire as a rural destination. MiM showcases how, through arts and crafts and food and drink, local identities can be developed and integrated into tourism products by linking landscape, food, culture and heritage in order to harness the heterogeneity of the destination and create competitive advantage (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2005, 2008, 2010) thus enhancing Monmouthshires Sense of Place. In addition MiM has the capacity to boost off-peak demand by developing festivals and events focused on arts and crafts and/or food and drink, for example Hilston Park Arts and Abergavenny Food Festival. This is very much aligned to Monmouthshire's Destination Plan and its emphasis on developing year-round visitor demand (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012). On a more practical level, the workload for MiM members in terms of exhibiting and marketing their products is shared.

Whilst the Monmouthshire Destination Development Plan 2012–2015 identifies many product development opportunities in relation to food tourism, it also highlights the limited opportunities to buy and sample Monmouthshire food and drink products (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012). However, MiM has found it difficult to harness and take advantage of these opportunities. Unfortunately, the lack of engagement from food and drink producers to be part of MiM is disappointing as they have the potential to help develop a distinctive destination image and enhance the visitor experience as well as connecting the area to its traditional food producing role (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012). Indeed, the Monmouthshire Destination Development Plan (TEAM Tourism Consulting, 2012, p. 10) identifies that food is 'the core brand around which Monmouthshire's marketing messages should be structured, and as a basis for economic development in terms of food and drink related products and skills'. The inability to engage food and drink producers might mean that this strategy is jeopardised.

5.2. *Ascertaining appropriate partnerships and funding mechanisms within Monmouthshire to develop the destination brand*

The MiM approach exemplifies many aspects of the new Visit Wales Tourism strategy, *Partnership for Growth* (Welsh Government, 2013), which emphasises the need, through partnerships, to develop more innovative, unusual and distinctive products that can enhance positive associations with Wales. The partnership approach promoted by the strategy encourages businesses to work together more collaboratively to take advantage of tourism potential. In this sense, MiM is a useful example to illustrate how public–private– voluntary partnerships, within a rural destination, can be used to attract and retain visitors through asset-based community development. Creating a destination brand through innovatively packaging destination assets based on local arts, crafts and food and drink, which are unique and

therefore difficult to replicate in other areas gives Monmouthshire competitive advantage.

To ensure this happens, funding and financial security is critical. To this end, the self-sustaining co-operative nature of MiM is particularly appreciated by members because it means that they are not vulnerable to cuts in public sector funding:

If a co-operative can stand on its own two feet then you do not have to do silly things because you are getting funding from somewhere and they expect that of you. Theres a lot to be said for doing what you want to do in the way that you want to do it without being beholden to anybody else. I mean we have seen recently where there have been cuts in public spending, it can be devastating. We are not devastated by having funding withdrawn (MiM Treasurer).

Furthermore, their status as a non-profit co-operative organisation means that they have improved chances of securing grant aid 'If you are a non-profit distributing co-operative actually a social entity, you have a better standing in terms of grant aid, in terms of any sort of project that you want to apply for or take part in, it^{0}s a plus' (MiM Treasurer).

In 2011, Adventa began its exit strategy from MiM in order to concentrate on other initiatives, but also because funding for the MiM initiative was drawing to a close. This created a watershed moment for MiM and its members, as the removal of funding and co-ordination by Adventa could have signified the end of MiM. However, for MiM members this was not an option, 'we all thought this is something good and we do not want to let it go and it would be such a shame to see this brand disappear' (MiM Treasurer). This demonstrates that, not only do MiM members have a clear sense of ownership of MiM, but they also recognise the value and power of the MiM brand in promoting Monmouthshire (Morgan et al., 2011; Spilková & Fialová, 2013). Today, MiM remains a thriving organisation with over 100 members and, as such, is a great example of asset-based community development (ABCD) in which the local community have drawn on their strengths and assets to build tourism capacity (Shucksmith, 2012). This achievement is remarkable given the fact that research (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007) has shown that in rural businesses, take up of business support is traditionally very low. The Wales Rural Development Plan 2007–2013 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007) for example identified that 41% of the rural businesses they interviewed had never used support offered by national public bodies and 45% had never used support offered by enterprise agencies.

The longevity of MiM is not assured but it is a recognised brand which the members' value and have a desire to maintain. Despite the self-sustaining nature of the organisation today, there is recognition amongst the group that, without Adventa seed funding, MiM would probably not have formed.

Without Adventa, I cannot think that MIM would have got off the ground. If it had been left to chance, if you'd had to set it up and think about what you did with it, it would not have happened. It's the fact

that they [Adventa] made it happen, they created the brand and organised a number of events. (MiM Treasurer)

In this respect, Adventa was able to take the financial risk out of trialling such a partnership and thus able to create an organisation (MiM) which individual producers and makers were not able to do. This highlights the critical role of LEADER and public sectors bodies like Adventa in initiating such projects and providing, not just funding, but leadership and co-ordination.

5.3. *Identifying how Monmouthshire's assets establish differentiation and create a destination brand*

Identifying distinctiveness is critical for a destination, like Mon- mouthshire, to stand out from similar destinations. As Arkenford Ltd and Yellow Railroad (2012, p. 8) observe 'without finding a Destination's distinctive character or competitive identity will…confine the destination to the realms of merely modestly appealing places that fail to differentiate…' In this case, local arts, crafts, food and drink have allowed Monmouthshire to showcase its rich culture. The local galleries, craft centres and workshops that are part of MiM are playing an important role in providing a link to the past, sustaining rural traditions, keeping people in touch with the natural environment and shaping Monmouthshire's future. Local craft centres also promote local artists and craftspeople using local produce and materials, as traceability authenticates arts and crafts, as well as food and drink, thus increasing the value and desirability of work and ensuring quality. In this respect, MiM also certifies high quality items produced locally from sustainable resources in an environmentally-responsible way. Similarly, the food element of MiM is also an important expression of the region, spurred on by annual events such as the Abergavenny Food Festival. At the destination-level, MiM provides a vehicle for enhancing destination identity and sustainable competitive advantage.

A key characteristic of MiM is its unified, strong brand which is now recognised as a brand in its own right with a strong local and external marketing identity that enables MiM to promote high quality art, crafts, food and drink produce to both locals and visitors. The MiM swing label is also important in terms of confirming the provenance of items. The members, under the banner of MiM, display their products at Tourist Information Centres in Chepstow and Abergavenny museum. This in turn enhances the economic impact of visitors and supports the rural economy. Many of the members have reported an increased level of turnover as a result of the improved marketing and networking opportunities and, as a result have extended their product range. Members of the MiM initiative have also found that they have not only gained from a stronger brand by working under one banner, but also in terms of improved economies of scale through combining distribution and exhibition costs and being able to negotiate higher discounts at events and fairs.

Although Adventa have stepped back from the MiM initiative, they have not totally disengaged and this demonstrates the importance of ongoing support. Adventa have maintained contact and regularly attend meetings. Adventa still have a presence, there is 'still dialogue, they are still there in the background but we are in the driving seat' (MiM Treasurer). In addition, the co-operative structure of MiM signifies the need for MiM members to take an active, rather than passive role in the co-operative venture. However, whilst the partnership approach fits with current tour- ism strategies and academic schools of thought (Oliver & Jenkins, 2005; Shucksmith, 2012; Welsh Government, 2013), there is no denying that the co-operative structure of MiM means that it is very reliant on the goodwill of MiM members in maintaining the website and networking through a constant social media presence. These types of activities are very time-consuming and MiM could be viewed as a victim of its own success, in that as it has become more established, it requires more administrative support to maintain its role and continue to promote the destination brand, especially given the loss of Adventa's public sector leadership and co-ordination. In recognising the key role played by Adventa in facilitating the creation of MiM, it is also important to acknowledge the role of LEADERþ. Without this programme, it is unlikely that Adventa, and thus MiM, would have ever existed. Unfortunately, the future of LEADER programmes is uncertain (under the European budget proposals, for 2014–20, funds for rural development are decreasing with 89.9 billion proposed against 96.0 billion for 2007–13) (European LEADER Association for Rural Development, 2013).

6. Conclusions

It was not the intention of this paper to generalise from this single case study, but to develop insights which might enhance understandings of destination branding within rural tourism destinations. Thus, what the case study has revealed is that for some rural destinations, to achieve competitive advantage and develop their destination branding they have to utilise their asset base wisely. To this end, rural communities need to identify and draw upon existing capacities to develop their tourism offer within the destination. This paper has highlighted the role that collaboration; partnership and working together can play in achieving this. This is particularly important in rural areas which lack iconic attractions and where the businesses involved are generally small-scale and fragmented. Using the case study of MiM, an Adventa-led initiative in Monmouthshire, the paper has

Identified how LEADERþ funding allowed the area to develop community-led partnerships to identify the regions assets and use these as the basis for creating a quality benchmark for local food, drink, arts and crafts produced within and around Monmouthshire. This in turn has enhanced the quality, uniqueness and competitiveness of local tourism businesses. At the same time, the study has highlighted the pivotal role that public bodies such as Adventa, can play in acting as a catalyst for such partnerships. Whilst the initial grant funding was relatively small, this seed money yielded enormous benefits. Furthermore, at the destination-level, MiM provides a vehicle for enhancing destination identity and sustainable competitive advantage through a coherent destination brand which, if embedded across the destination, could address the lack of consistency in Monmouthshires branding strategy. Ultimately, this case study clearly shows the value of networked, partnership development in rural tourism development and destination branding.

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