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Gulisova, Barbora

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PHD DISSERTATION

Approaches to rural place branding and their
impact on the local stakeholders

Barbora Gulisova

*Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics & Danish Centre for Rural
Research*

Faculty of Business and Social Sciences

University of Southern Denmark

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Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | 5 |
| Abstract | 6 |
| Resumé..... | 7 |
| Terminology | 8 |
| Introduction to the dissertation | 9 |
| <i>Background</i> | 9 |
| Rural places, place brands and their interactions..... | 13 |
| Local actors' role in place branding..... | 14 |
| Context of the study | 17 |
| S-D logic, service ecosystems, and actor engagement | 19 |
| Methodological approach | 23 |
| <i>Papers – an overview</i> | 29 |
| Paper 1 | 30 |
| Paper 2 | 31 |
| Paper 3 | 32 |
| Paper 4 | 32 |
| Paper 5 | 33 |
| <i>Research implications and future research</i> | 33 |
| <i>References</i> | 36 |
| Paper 1: Rural place branding processes: a meta-synthesis | 47 |
| <i>Abstract</i> | 47 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 48 |
| <i>Place brand, place branding and rural place</i> | 50 |
| <i>Methodology</i> | 51 |
| <i>Findings</i> | 54 |
| Contextual factors | 54 |
| Type of process | 58 |
| <i>Discussion</i> | 60 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 62 |
| <i>Limitations and further research</i> | 64 |
| <i>References</i> | 66 |
| <i>Appendix 1. Overview of articles and cases included for analysis</i> | 71 |
| Paper 2: The organization of rural place branding processes: engagement in service eco-systems | 73 |
| <i>Abstract</i> | 73 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 74 |
| <i>Literature Review</i> | 75 |
| Place brands and place branding | 75 |
| Actor involvement in place branding | 77 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>Theoretical Background</i> | 78 |
| Service eco-systems | 78 |
| Actor engagement | 79 |
| Theoretical Framework | 81 |
| <i>Research Design</i> | 82 |
| <i>Findings</i> | 85 |
| Existence and type of focal actor | 85 |
| Other actor groups and their engagement | 86 |
| Organization of the collaboration | 88 |
| Typology of rural place branding processes | 89 |
| <i>Discussion</i> | 93 |
| <i>Conclusion, limitations and further research</i> | 94 |
| <i>References</i> | 96 |
| <i>Appendix 1. Overview of the cases included in the study</i> | 99 |
| <i>Appendix 2. Interview guide</i> | 103 |
| Paper 3: Rural place branding from a multi-level perspective: a Danish example | 107 |
| <i>Abstract</i> | 107 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 108 |
| <i>Literature review</i> | 110 |
| Place branding from a multi-level perspective | 110 |
| Place brand architecture | 111 |
| Local government and community approaches | 113 |
| <i>Theoretical framework</i> | 114 |
| <i>Methodology</i> | 115 |
| <i>Findings</i> | 119 |
| The higher-level's interaction with place brands of lower-level places | 120 |
| The lower-level's interactions with place brands of the higher-level places | 122 |
| A framework of interactions between higher level and lower-level place brands | 123 |
| <i>Discussion</i> | 125 |
| <i>Conclusion, limitations and further research</i> | 127 |
| <i>References</i> | 130 |
| <i>Appendix 1. Overview of the cases included in the study</i> | 142 |
| Paper 4: Rural place branding processes as drivers of local actor engagement | 146 |
| <i>Abstract</i> | 146 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 147 |
| <i>Place branding and local actor engagement</i> | 148 |
| Brand ownership and identification | 149 |
| Legitimacy | 149 |
| Actor engagement behaviour | 150 |
| Conceptual framework | 151 |
| <i>Background of the study</i> | 152 |
| <i>Methodology</i> | 153 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| <i>Findings</i> | 154 |
| Type 1: Administration-led place branding processes..... | 155 |
| Type 2: Experience-based process | 155 |
| Type 3: Transitional process..... | 156 |
| Type 4: Ad-hoc process..... | 156 |
| <i>Discussion</i> | 157 |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | 159 |
| <i>References</i> | 161 |
| <i>Appendix 1: Illustrative quotes</i> | 165 |
| Paper 5: Place branding and sustainable rural communities: qualitative evidence from Danish rural areas | 170 |
| <i>Abstract</i> | 170 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 171 |
| <i>Place branding and sustainable communities</i> | 172 |
| <i>Theoretical framework</i> | 175 |
| <i>Methodology</i> | 178 |
| <i>Findings and discussion</i> | 182 |
| Reasons for applying place branding | 182 |
| Institutionalization and engagement | 183 |
| Contributions and challenges of place branding for sustainable communities..... | 184 |
| <i>Conclusions</i> | 189 |
| <i>References</i> | 191 |
| <i>Appendix 1. Interview guideline</i> | 195 |
| Appendix 1. Overview of the places included in the study | 199 |
| Appendix 2. Interview guides | 202 |
| Appendix 3. Interviewee overview | 208 |

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Abstract

Place branding is increasingly being applied not only by cities, destinations and nations, but also regions and rural places with the aim of improving the places' reputation. Despite a growing number of place branding studies from rural places, most theories in the field of place branding are based on research on cities and tourism destinations. Research on place branding of cities and destinations is increasingly focusing on the importance of local actors', including residents', support for place branding and calls for more inclusive and participatory practices to create ownership, identification and engagement have been made. But, while in cities and destinations, there is often a local government or a Destination Marketing Organization leading the place branding, in rural places the practice is almost naturally more co-creational. Public authorities play a minor role, and place branding rests more on private actors from the local community. This raises the question of how these actors organize the process of place branding. Since rural places are diverse, the same can be expected for their approaches to place branding and its impact on local actors and communities and their support for place branding. Therefore, there is a need for further development of place branding theory in relation to rural places, especially focusing on the processes that actors engage in to brand rural places.

The main objective of this Ph.D. study is therefore to investigate the place branding processes applied in rural places and how different rural place branding processes affect local actors. By drawing on empirical data, the study contributes to the academic and practical discussion by (a) identifying different types of place branding approaches local actors apply depending on the contextual characteristics of rural places, (b) describing the interactions of place branding initiatives of places on different vertical levels, (c) investigating the impact of different types of rural place branding processes on ownership, identification, legitimacy and engagement behaviour of local actors, and (d) exploring the impacts of different types of rural place branding approaches on social sustainability of the rural communities. The dissertation aims to provide guidance to actors in rural places regarding the choice of place branding approaches according to the place's context and to achieve desired outcomes, including local actor support and engagement as well as community outcomes.

Resumé

Place branding bliver i højere og højere grad anvendt, ikke kun af byer, turistdestinationer og lande, men også af regioner og landdistrikter, med det formål at forbedre stedernes omdømme. Trods et stigende antal studier af place branding i landdistrikter er de fleste teorier om place branding baserede på forskning fra byer og turistdestinationer. Forskningen fra byer og turistdestinationer fokuserer i stigende grad på vigtigheden af lokale aktørers, heriblandt borgernes, støtte af place branding og kalder på en mere inkluderende praksis med mulighed for bred deltagelse for at skabe ejerskab, identifikation og engagement. Men mens der i byerne og turistdestinationerne ofte er en lokal myndighed eller en Destination Marketing Organization, som leder place branding, er fremgangsmåden i landdistrikterne naturligt mere samskabende. Offentlige myndigheder spiller en mindre rolle, og place branding ligger i højere grad hos private aktører fra lokalsamfundet. Dette rejser spørgsmålet om, hvordan disse aktører organiserer place branding processen. Eftersom landdistrikter er alsidige, kan det samme forventes af deres tilgange til place branding samt deres effekt på lokale aktører og lokalsamfundene og deres støtte til place branding. Derfor er der behov for videreudvikling af place branding teori relateret til landdistrikterne med særligt fokus på de processer, som aktørerne er engagerede i for at brande landdistrikterne.

Hovedformålet med dette Ph.d.-studie er derfor at undersøge place branding processer anvendt i landdistrikter, og hvordan forskellige rurale place branding processer påvirker lokale aktører. Ved at trække på empiriske data bidrager undersøgelsen til den akademiske og praktiske diskussion ved (a) at identificere forskellige typer af place branding tilgange, som lokale aktører bruger afhængigt af kontekstuelle karakteristika i landdistrikterne, (b) at beskrive hvordan, place branding-initiativer forskellige steder på vertikalt niveau interagerer med hinanden, (c) at undersøge effekten af forskellige typer af place branding processer på ejerskab, identifikation, legitimitet og engagement hos lokale aktører, og (d) at udforske effekterne af forskellige typer af rurale place branding tilgange for social bæredygtighed i lokalsamfundene. Afhandlingen sigter mod at tilvejebringe vejledning til aktører i landdistrikterne angående valget af place branding tilgang baseret på de lokale aktørers engagement, og hvordan forskellige tilgange til rural place branding kan anvendes for at opnå de ønskede effekter, herunder støtte fra lokale aktører såvel som resultater i lokalsamfundet.

Terminology

While definitions of many of the following concepts are included in the main text of the dissertation, a brief clarification of the most important concepts used in this thesis follows here:

Place brand: the associations people attach to the place based on its identity, values, people, culture, and overall design

Place branding: the practice of consciously trying to shape and manage the associations about a place in the minds of the people

Rural places: a group of places that include villages or small islands with small population, but also municipalities that spread over a larger geographical area with resulting lower population density and bigger distances to the nearest administrative centre

Actor: describes both individual and collective actors (organizations) of place branding

Focal actor: the actor (often an organization) that steers or coordinates the other actors involved in the place branding process

Actor engagement: actors' contribution of resources to the engagement object which here means to the place brand

Resources: refers to all kinds of resources actors could contribute into place branding, such as time, energy, money, all kinds of skills, knowledge including ideas and opinions, facilities, etc.

Bottom-up: when place branding is initiated by members of the community

Top-down: when place branding is initiated by the local authorities

Introduction to the dissertation

Background

Places all over the world are competing for tourists, residents, investments, and businesses. Places therefore need to establish a distinctive image and reputation in order to differentiate themselves from others and increase their competitiveness on the global market (Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Keller, 1993). This has led to an increased focus on place branding, which also has gained considerable scholarly attention (Gertner, 2011; Lucarelli & Olof, 2011; Vuignier, 2017). As a multidisciplinary field of study (Hankinson, 2010) it has been approached from disciplines such as public management, marketing, political science, geography, tourism, economics, and others.

Due to the diversity of people, activities and identities they encompass, places are complex entities, and a single logo or slogan can hardly influence the awareness or reputation of everything and everyone that a place represents (Govers, 2013). Place brands have been defined as “representations of place identity building a favourable internal and external image” of the place (Govers & Go, 2009, p. 17). “Every place is a brand” (Boisen, 2015, p. 15), because people attach meanings to place names (Boisen, Terlouw, & Gorp, 2011; Govers, 2013). These brands are based on the expressions of a place communicated through the values, aims, and culture of the place’s stakeholders as well as its overall design (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Further, place brand meanings are socially constructed (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Brodie, Benson-Rea, & Medlin, 2017). Therefore, interactional, holistic views of place brands highlight the interdependence of place actors and their interaction in constructing and giving meaning to the place brand (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

Place brands build upon the identity of places, i.e., the “features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish” or can be used to distinguish one place from others (Paasi, 2002, p. 140). Place identity, as the unique essence of the place distinguishing it from others (Warnaby & Medway, 2013) is constituted of place images, mentality, relations, institutions and people and their practices, and is therefore never fixed, but should be understood as a process (Kalandides, 2011b). In order to facilitate the process of constructing the identity of the place and to catch all the diverse identities, as well as to allow the development of and work with different meanings and interpretations, a place brand needs to be conceptualized as open and fluid (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Accordingly, the place brand needs to be responsive to different messages from different internal and external actors (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

It is this holistic, interactional view of place brands as being the representation of the identity

of the place co-created by internal and external actors, with the aim of improving the general reputation of the place that is adopted for this thesis.

Notably, place branding goes beyond creating the name, graphical elements and slogan representing the place brand (e.g., Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017). Among other things, place branding is used as a tool for strategic spatial planning (e.g., Oliveira, 2015) and other "policy making at different levels and in different contexts" (Kalandides, 2011a, p. 289). As an "established aspect of public administration" (Hankinson, 2009, p. 106), and part of the political and administrative context of cities (Braun, 2012), place branding is "about reputation management" (Govers, 2013, p. 71). It is therefore often a governance strategy used to communicate and influence perceptions and behaviours of citizens and visitors (Karens, Eshuis, Klijn, & Voets, 2016). Because of the inherent diversity of place stakeholders, the complexity of their interests and relationships (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), as well as the lack of control over the whole place (Hankinson, 2007), place branding is further seen as a "selective political process" (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1378). This political understanding of places conflicts with the need for certain unity in place branding (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), which after all is aimed at the formation and communication of a common place brand (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014).

Place branding in general has been defined as "the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people" (Boisen, 2015, p. 14). Yet, Donner, Horlings, Fort, and Vellema (2017) distinguish between nation or city branding and rural branding. According to them, rural branding usually focuses on local development and the capacities and needs of local people, whereas nation or city branding often aims to attract new residents, tourists and investors (Donner et al., 2017). Finally, there is a dual aim of place branding. On the one hand, it should create visibility and distinguish the place to the outside, while on the other hand, it should reinforce the local identity at the inside (Colomb & Kalandides, 2010).

Due to the abovementioned complexities, the entirety of the place can only be captured by place branding "if it focuses on paying tribute to the unique, local particularity of the ways in which place-making elements combine and interact over time" and it therefore needs to be understood as an "open-ended process" (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1379). Further, place branding should build on the identity of the place. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) have proposed to see place branding as a facilitator of the place identity process. This identity will then inform the character and quality

of the brand experience. Several researchers have questioned seeing place branding as a single managerial activity (Hankinson, 2004; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), and have emphasized the need for brand leadership, coordination, and stakeholder partnerships as critical aspects of the process (Hankinson, 2009). Accordingly, place branding should be understood as a set of intertwined collective sub-processes (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

As a result of the increasing acceptance of the complexities of places and place brands, and of seeing these as co-created by diverse stakeholders, a paradigmatic shift towards a stakeholder- and process-oriented approach (Kavaratzis, 2012) or a participation-dominant approach (Braun, Kalandides, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013) has taken place. Under this paradigm, place branding, rather than being a top-down managerial process led by few managerial objectives, is based on the collaboration of the place's multiple, interdependent stakeholders (e.g., public authorities, businesses, residents, visitors, educational and sports institutions and associations, media, and others). Despite this shift, city and destination branding strategies are often similar to those of corporations (Hankinson, 2010a), driven by a strong central organization, such as a Destination Management Organization (DMO) or a city council, that creates and communicates the core of the place brand. While such a top-down approach can be more effective and efficient in goal achievement, communication, fundraising etc. (Lee, Wall, & Kovacs, 2015), it can also risk alienating the different stakeholders. Alienation, caused by low identification of the stakeholders with the brand, can result in stakeholders' unwillingness to communicate or further develop the place brand (Kavaratzis, 2012; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2011), or even in rival branding campaigns against the central one (Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun, 2012).

In rural areas, a strong, easily identifiable, focal actor might not exist and either no actor will feel responsible for the brand, or several organizations might claim the steering role. The place branding process in rural places will therefore, almost naturally, be a process of value co-creation by various stakeholders (Vuorinen & Vos, 2013). These types of bottom-up processes are suggested to increase the stakeholders' identification with and commitment to the brand, as well as their willingness to sell the place to external target groups (Kavaratzis, 2012; Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011). Even though a strong place brand can develop organically (Wheeler et al., 2011), the existence of a brand facilitator (Brodie, Benson-Rea, et al., 2017) that creates the environment for (brand) value co-creation, is also expected to be an important factor in the co-creation of the rural place brand.

While it has mainly been cities (e.g., Kavaratzis, Warnaby, & Ashworth, 2014), regions (e.g.,

Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015), tourism destinations (e.g., Pike, 2005) or nations (e.g., Anholt & Hildreth, 2004) that have been subject to place branding studies, and therefore, a number of place branding frameworks have been proposed based on city, nation or destination branding (e.g., Baker, 2012; Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Muñiz, 2016), rural places have only recently started receiving some scholarly attention (e.g., Donner et al., 2017; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013).

It has been argued that rural places, regardless of their size face a number of challenges (e.g., Jepsen & Busck, 2019; Pedigo, 2020) and apply place branding as one strategy to deal with them. Many rural places are confronted with economic and population decline (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), related to globalization, urbanization or changes to the agricultural sector and the landscape (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). These changes have implications for the identity of rural places (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). They challenge the sustainability of rural regions which therefore increasingly adopt competitive thinking (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). This competitiveness is related to a multi-sector, place-based rural development (Horlings & Marsden, 2014), valorising local resources through a bottom-up approach based on inputs from local actors, as has been suggested by the ‘New Rural Paradigm’ (Horlings & Marsden, 2014; OECD, 2006; Sørensen, 2018a).

Besides of the competitive imperative (Anholt, 2010) which makes it necessary for rural places to use marketing and branding, rural places also face other challenges. The unique personality of rural places is often disturbed by internal inferiority complexes, that are further stereotyped by external actors (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). Further, when powerful regions have negative constructs of peripheral regions, the latter ones are in a weaker position in respect to development (Willett & Lang, 2018). Their development is, among other things, dependent on the ability of the places to attract new residents and to keep the young from moving away (Sørensen, 2018a; Thuesen, Mærsk, & Randløv, 2018). Therefore, to counter the negative perceptions, and to strengthen the local identity, create local development and sustain rural life, rural places need to increase their reputation, which they often do through place branding.

Yet, due to the different size and constellation of actors in rural places as compared to cities, but also among the different rural places, it can be expected that different approaches are applied to place branding in different types of rural places. The investigation of these different approaches, their interrelations, and the impact of the different approaches on local actors and communities is the main concern of this research project.

Rural places, place brands and their interactions

Rural places are a diverse class of places, witnessed by the lack of an all-encompassing definition of the rural (Halfacree, 1993). While for policy purposes different typologies of rural regions exist (Fertner, 2012; OECD, 2011), the meanings of rurality depend on the context, and one's personal experiences and objectives, which questions the feasibility of a single definition of the term rural (Eupen et al., 2012).

In the Danish context, Søgård (2011) writes that rural places are characterized by lower population and population density, and bigger distances, including to the nearest administrative centre, as compared to cities. It is due to these demographic, administrative and geographical differences, that rural place branding approaches are expected to be different from those of cities, regions, tourism destinations and nations.

Further, the diversity of rural places is expressed in the different types of places that have been studied in rural place branding. These include specific administratively delineated regions (Martin & Capelli, 2017), municipalities (Lee et al., 2015), towns (Gibson & Davidson, 2004) and villages (Vik & Villa, 2010). Other places share natural, historical or sociocultural aspects, but do not necessarily correspond to an administrative entity. Such places include smaller communities (Wheeler et al., 2011), groups of municipalities, sub-regions (Giovanardi, Lucarelli, & Pasquinelli, 2013), or even cross-border regions (García, Horlings, Swagemakers, & Fernández, 2013). These different rural places are also vertically nested in each other. That is, a small community or a village can be part of a municipality or a region, which again can form part of a bigger region.

This nestedness, the definition of the place boundaries and administrative overlap of places are parts of the complexity of place branding (Hankinson, 2007; Syssner, 2010). Consequently, place brands and branding of the different places on a horizontal, e.g., a town and a town, and a vertical, e.g., a town and a region, level interact with each other (Syssner, 2010), as seen in the concept of place brand architecture (Sarabia-Sanchez & Cerda-Bertomeu, 2016; Stevens, 2019). Therefore, place brands always relate to other place brands (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014), and the interaction of place brands at different horizontal and vertical levels can be quite complex (Giovanardi, 2015). In rural places, the different size, constellation of actors, and especially the administrative powers of the different places determine resources available for place branding and, therefore, the approaches at the different vertical levels. Consequently, in addition to the need to investigate the different place branding approaches applied by the individual places, it is necessary to understand how the place brands and branding initiatives at the different levels interact and how

they potentially influence each other.

Local actors' role in place branding

The organization of rural place branding processes, including whether they are rather top-down or bottom-up approaches, has an effect on the place's stakeholders' identification with and commitment for the place brand, and, ultimately, on the success of the place brand. There are numerous and diverse stakeholders in a place branding process. These include public authorities, such as municipalities (e.g., Therkelsen & Halkier, 2011; Wæraas, Bjørnå, & Moldenæs, 2015), the DMOs (e.g., Hankinson, 2007; Pike, 2005), the private sector (e.g., Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Michelet & Giraut, 2014), and farmers in case of rural places (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Mettepenningen et al., 2012).

There is further an increasing focus on residents' role in place branding. They are studied as participants in the place branding process (e.g., Inch & Walters, 2017; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014), as inherent part of the place brand image (e.g., Braun et al., 2013; Freire, 2009), and as internal targets for the place branding (e.g., Pedersen, 2004; Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). It has been investigated how place branding can affect residents (e.g., Lichrou, O'Malley, & Patterson, 2010; Mayes, 2008), how they form attitudes towards place branding (e.g., Compte-Pujol, de San Eugenio-Vela, & Frigola-Reig, 2017; Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009), and how satisfied they are with the place brand and branding (e.g., Walters & Inch, 2018; Zenker & Rütter, 2014).

Local public authorities, local businesses and entrepreneurs, and residents, but also different educational, sport and cultural institutions and associations form the local community. They are the actors engaged (or disengaged) in the place branding processes, and they are the actors and the local community affected by the place branding. The impact of place branding process can be seen either from the individual actor's perspective or from the community's perspective.

Stakeholder engagement is necessary for the success of any place branding strategy in order to create a sense of ownership which will lead to the stakeholders' willingness to embody and express the brand (Houghton & Stevens, 2011). A sense of shared purpose and belonging are necessary to generate self-motivated internal engagement, yet developing local pride, brand knowledge, and the shared purpose and belonging all take time (Govers, 2013). A number of researchers have therefore suggested a rather participatory (Kavaratzis, 2012) or open place brand process (Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018), which will involve a diversity of actors, in order

to create a higher adoption and advocacy of the brand.

Identification with the place and place brand have also been proposed to increase local actors' advocacy of the place brand through positive word-of-mouth and loyalty (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Zenker et al., 2017; Zenker & Petersen, 2014). The importance of positive word-of-mouth for the success of any place brand cannot be underestimated as it is the most important communication channel people use when forming their perceptions (Govers, 2013). On the other hand, lack of brand awareness and identification have been found to be some of the reasons for residents' disengagement with a city brand (Insch & Stuart, 2015).

Further, lack of support from and involvement of local people can lead to citizens opposing against the official place branding campaign or even creating counter branding campaigns (Braun et al., 2013). Similarly, in smaller places it has been shown that excluding the local community from the process can lead to the rejection of the proposed brand (Mayes, 2008). Leaving place residents out of the branding decisions increases the risk of disconnecting from the 'sense of place'. This can lead to lower levels of identification with the brand among local stakeholders, and challenges to "promote authenticity, recognition, acceptance and commitment by the local community" (Aitken & Campelo, 2011, p. 918).

Another issue that can create disengagement with the place branding are local actors' legitimacy perceptions (Insch & Walters, 2017; Martin & Capelli, 2017). Local actors can disapprove of the goals of the branding campaign, which can question the issue legitimacy of the initiatives. Further, negative attitudes towards the focal actor of the branding campaign can also threaten organizational legitimacy of the endeavour (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Inch & Walters, 2017; Martin & Capelli, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, place branding processes in rural places are almost naturally a co-creative (Vuorinen & Vos, 2013). This may lead to the assumption that rural place branding processes succeed in creating good relationships with local actors and gaining their support in the form of perceptions of ownership, identification with the brand and legitimacy, and thereby local actor engagement for the place brand. However, this is not happening automatically. As rural places apply a variety of place branding processes, it can be assumed that these different types of rural place branding processes may differ in their potential to create positive relationships among local actors and support for the place brand and branding. These differences should be understood to provide guidance to place branding professionals regarding the organization of rural place branding process to facilitate ownership, identification, and local actor engagement.

While the type of place branding process affects the individual actors' relationship with and support for the place brand and branding, it also has implications on the community level. Giles, Bosworth, and Willett (2013) suggest that by leaving much of the brand ownership and related responsibility upon local communities, the social and societal aspects will come to the heart of the place branding message. Further, place branding is used to foster social inclusion, cohesion and place identification, to support economic restructuring, to increase engagement and participation, and enhance overall well-being of residents (Oliveira, 2015).

Therefore, place branding can contribute to socio-spatial and spatial-economic improvements of places, because it uncovers and creates place narratives and assets (Assche, Beunen, & Oliveira, 2020). Studies of urban place branding have measured its outcomes on factors such as place attachment, satisfaction, loyalty, and enjoyment (Cleave & Arku, 2017). Many of the studies Cleave and Arku (2017) reviewed, explored the positive influence of place satisfaction, loyalty, and enjoyment on resident attraction, resident retention, and investments in the place.

Place branding in rural areas is also used for the conservation of natural (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Horlings, 2012; Messely, Dessein, & Rogge, 2015; Mettepenningen et al., 2012), or cultural (e.g., Ryan & Mizerski, 2010) assets of the place, or a combination of them (e.g., García et al., 2013). Maheshwari, Vandewalle, and Bamber (2011) suggest that "place branding plays an important role in the sustainable development of a place", and "these sustainable developments help promote the place and thereby create stronger place brands" (p. 198). There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between place branding and sustainable development of communities.

Further, while García et al. (2013) found the application of place branding as a tool for "enhancement of sustainable development" to have both potential and challenges, they emphasized the importance of rooting the branding in the local environment. While several authors have emphasized the impact of place branding initiatives on the sustainability of rural regions, these have mostly been focused on the economic sustainability of the places (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Donner et al., 2017).

Social and environmental sustainability have received less attention in this context, even though they can be expected to be as relevant in rural areas as they are in cities. Therefore, focusing on the social sustainability, investigating rural place branding from the perspective of sustainable communities seems timely. Sustainable communities are addressed in United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 'Sustainable cities and communities' (UNDP, 2020), and while the goal's

focus is on cities, sustainable development is also relevant for rural places (e.g., Horlings & Marsden, 2014; Jørgensen, 2016; Wæraas et al., 2015). Furthermore, since the local anchorage of place branding has frequently been emphasized for a positive impact of place branding (Assche et al., 2020; Donner et al., 2017; García et al., 2013). It therefore seems an obvious extension of this PhD project to shed some light on how rural place branding in general and different rural place branding approaches in particular, can contribute to the social sustainability of rural places.

In cities, destinations and nations, there is often an easily identifiable focal actor to lead the branding process. While a focal actor exists in some rural places, e.g., rural municipalities in Denmark, in others, e.g., smaller towns or villages belonging to such municipalities, a focal actor might be missing. The process of place branding in places without a focal actor is expected to be different and having different impacts on the local actors. It is therefore necessary to identify the different types of place branding processes applied in rural places and investigate how they affect rural place stakeholders. Rural place branding professionals and public officials, but also rural communities that wish to initiate place branding, would benefit from this insight when setting up or improving the structures for place branding depending on the local actors and their resources. Public authorities could further benefit from a better overview of their potential role in rural place branding as either a focal actor, a facilitator or a supporter of the process.

Uncovering how the different types of rural place branding processes affect local actors and communities, will further clarify which type of approach is most suitable for inducing desired local actor engagement behaviours and achieving preferred outcomes for the community.

Overall, a typology of rural place branding approaches and their different implications on local actors and communities could serve rural places to choose the right approach for their specific situation.

Therefore, the main objective of this PhD project is, *to investigate the types of place branding processes applied in different rural places and how the different processes affect local stakeholders.*

Before introducing the theoretical perspective and the methodology of the project, the context for this project is presented in the following section.

Context of the study

Rural places all over the world face a number of challenges. Denmark is no exception. The

challenges of rural places in Denmark are commonly labelled under the term “Udkantsdanmark” (Outskirts Denmark), and have filled a lot in the public discussion (Svendsen, 2017) witnesses. Outskirts Denmark relates to villages and regions which are geographically distant from the main cities, and often face demographic and economic challenges (Jørgensen, 2016). “The rotten banana” (Ekerøth, 2017) is another often used expression for these places indicating their image of places in degradation.

Studies of young people’s migration from Danish rural areas to the bigger cities, have shown that not only study and job opportunities, but also cultural and symbolic values matter (Thuesen et al., 2018). While there is a general perception of rural places as low status, there are also favourable attitudes towards the development of Danish rural areas (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2014). Notably, regarding their perceptions of quality of life, residents in rural areas are at least as satisfied as those resident in cities (Sørensen, 2018b).

Further, Sørensen (2018a) highlights the relevance of image or reputation for the depopulation challenges of small rural communities in Denmark. Sørensen and Svendsen (2014) recommend “a marketing strategy of Danish rural areas..., including local branding” (p. 7), and there is broad agreement that improving the reputation of rural places, especially with the goals of retaining and attracting residents is imperative.

Indeed, place branding has become a common activity in villages and municipalities around Denmark (Andersen, 2015; Skovholm, 2017). The municipalities often spend considerable amounts of money on their branding, and it has therefore come under much public scrutiny, as the effect of these investments are not always clear (DenOffentlige, 2017; JydskeVestkysten, 2017). Further, a report on Danish Small Island communication found that there was often a lack of strategic orientation in communication activities (Horbel, Noe, Randløv, & Mærsk, 2018). This raises the question how the actors in different rural places in Denmark organize to apply place branding.

As the aim of the project was to uncover different types of rural place branding approaches, it was necessary to include different rural places, in order to gain insight into the diversity of approaches. Therefore, both administrative municipalities and smaller places were included. Denmark is divided into 98 municipalities, that, fulfil the role of local authorities (Ministry Of Social Affairs And The Interior, 2020). Except for the most metropolitan/urban ones, the municipalities include a number of towns, villages and rural areas.

While the administrative and political authorities are located in the main municipal city, the

smaller towns and villages have a local citizen council, citizen association or parish association which represents these smaller places in their contact with the municipality (e.g., Esbjerg Kommune, 2020b). Such councils or associations are based on the local citizens' voluntary contributions of their time and skills (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2010).

S-D logic, service ecosystems, and actor engagement

The aim of this PhD project is to investigate the place branding processes in rural places, and how these affect their stakeholders. Due to the co-creational nature of place branding, the framework of Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, with its concepts of service ecosystem and actor engagement (Vargo, Koskela-Huotari, & Vink, 2020) guide this project.

In the co-creation process, as explained in the Service-Dominant (S-D) logic (Lusch & Vargo, 2006), the distinction between customer and producer vanishes. This is especially relevant in place branding. While tourists and residents have often been treated as the target groups of place branding (e.g., Niedomysl, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2004; Zenker et al., 2017) due to the complexity and character of places (Greenop & Darchen, 2015; Hankinson, 2007), the distinction between the user and the producer of the place brand is often blurred, especially in rural places (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Messely et al., 2015), and in the case of residents (Braun et al., 2013). Residents and other stakeholders of the place brand are at the same time creators and users of the brand. Therefore, similar to branding in general (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009), place branding is a co-creation endeavor (Brodie, Benson-Rea, et al., 2017; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), which makes the application of a comprehensive framework such as S-D logic ideal for the study of place branding approaches.

Further, while developed within service research and marketing, S-D logic and its concepts have been studied in many fields, including tourism, management, political science and public administration. Answering the increasing calls for participatory views of place branding, the application of S-D logic on place branding seems natural. It enables the development of novel insights into how value is co-created in the supporting systems around place branding (Vargo et al., 2020).

In addition, S-D logic has evolved from diverse research streams (Vargo et al., 2020), including institutional theory (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Scott, 2014) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). It is applicable for interdisciplinary research, as well as for research dealing with various aspects of network behaviour, institutional processes, and value creation. As a holistic

metatheoretical framework, S-D logic accommodates different focal actors in value co-creation, which is particularly relevant for the expectations of diverse focal actors in rural place branding processes, and different value conceptualizations, as compared to other metatheories (Vargo et al., 2020). Value in S-D logic does not refer to the worth of something or profit, but rather is defined as “an emergent, positively or negatively valenced change in the well-being or viability of a particular system/actor” (Vargo & Lusch, 2018, p. 740). Such a general theory of value co-creation is relevant for research on environmental and social sustainability (Vargo et al., 2020). With the increased focus on residents, as well as the context of rural place branding, where many rural places are in risk of decline, this ability of S-D logic to conceptualize value as social impacts also makes it relevant for this study.

In the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), service is defined as “the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself” (p. 2). In the process of place branding, different actors (‘entities’) come together to apply their competences and resources in order to create the place brand that then will benefit not only themselves but also other actors and the place itself. In S-D logic “value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary” (FP6, Axiom 2) and “value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (FP10, Axiom 4) (Vargo et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 8). Therefore, the value of the place brand will be co-created by different actors in the place, i.e., the place’s residents, visitors, businesses, etc.

Further, the place branding organization or network cannot define the value of the brand, but only, as Vargo and Lusch (2014) write, “offer value propositions” (p. 11). According to Chandler and Lusch (2015), the value proposition “invites actors to serve one another in order to attain value, whether it is economic, financial, or social value or some combination of these” (p. 6). As different actors can be invited to engage in a service experience, those who choose to accept the value proposition will contribute through different sets of connections and dispositions, and each emergent service experience will therefore be unique (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). Accordingly, every place branding process will be unique, as different actors will choose to engage in place branding, each bringing their diverse connections and dispositions to the process. This further implies that the focal actor behind the brand needs the other actors for the value to be created.

The value proposing actors interact in “a spontaneously sensing and responding spatial and temporal structure” (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010, p. 20), also called a service eco-system. The

actors, their dispositions and connections, will move through time, adapting and adjusting as needed (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). A resident working as a web designer might join the place branding group when they decide to improve their website to express the town's identity better. Hence, the network is dynamic as new actors might engage while others might disengage (Li, Juric, & Brodie, 2017).

Institutions, as “the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2014, p. 56), play a central role in value co-creation by enabling increasing levels of collaboration among the actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Institutions play an important role in co-creation, as they provide the foundation for the increasingly complex, interrelated activities of resource integration in ecosystems organized around shared objectives (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), such as place branding. In addition to coordinating the process of value co-creation among multiple actors, institutional arrangements provide criteria for value determination (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Vargo et al., 2020).

Therefore, institutional arrangements play an essential, coordinating role for the understanding of value co-creating processes. In a service eco-system, mutual service exchange takes place, as actors join their sets of potential resources to integrate them. The context, including the potential resources, is actor-dependent and evolves continually (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Li et al., 2017). Therefore, the available resources, such as skills and knowledge, will vary contextually (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016). For example, small rural places, might lack expertise for place branding among local actors and therefore need to include external actors.

In order to participate in value co-creation, the actors have to serve each other in a way that is useful for reaching their goals (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016). Actors themselves become resources to others through their competences or access to other resources (Chandler & Vargo, 2011). While actors in place branding need to be seen as valuable for the process and reciprocally see each other as such, they should also see the place brand as a useful resource to reach their shared objectives in order to come together in a network around the brand (Taillard, Peters, Pels, & Mele, 2016).

The usefulness of any specific resource from one actor will depend on the availability of other potential resources from other actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). That is, the usefulness of an actor's attributes for the place brand will be determined by the other place branding actors' resources. Hence, an initiative from one single actor will need the collaboration of other actors in

the place, including their agreement on the intentions of the branding, in order to create a strong place brand (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016; Taillard et al., 2016).

While stakeholder theory is used to better understand how managers can create value for different stakeholders (Freeman, Rusconi, Signori, & Strudler, 2012), the S-D logic concept of actor engagement is about mutual value creation (Hollebeek, Kumar, & Srivastava, 2020). In the same line, Hollebeek et al. (2020) explain that stakeholder theory usually applies a firm's perspective (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), while "S-D logic argues for the existence of more complex and dynamic exchange systems within which value co-creation" occurs among different actors rather than placing the firm as the primary value creator (Vargo et al., 2020, p. 15; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Therefore, S-D logic recognizes the social and economic interactions and exchanges across and through networks as venues for value creation.

Pre-assigned labels, designations such as 'producer' and 'consumer', and other role specific terms are avoided in S-D logic, which instead simply refers to actors. All actors engage in the same generic activities of service exchange and resource integration (Vargo et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). That is, "all actors provide service –apply resources for another's benefit – to receive similar service from others" (Vargo et al., 2020, p. 9). According to Vargo and Lusch (2016), such generic actor designation is intended to disassociate actors from their predesigned roles, rather than seeing them all as identical (Vargo et al., 2020). In place branding, where the distinctions between place users and place producers are blurred, and no single entity owns and controls the place and the place brand as a whole, this conceptualization of actors and of mutual value co-creation is more applicable than stakeholder theory with the focus on a central organization creating value for others.

Different actors need to come together and engage in a shared service ecosystem to co-create value. Actor engagement, a concept developed from customer engagement, is suggested as a micro-foundation for value co-creation (Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016). It refers to both the disposition of actors to engage and the activity of engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016). Further, actor engagement is the voluntary contribution of resources to the object of engagement, and this contribution occurs through interaction with other actors or the engagement object (Alexander, Jaakkola, & Hollebeek, 2018), such as a place brand.

Four categories of customer engagement have been identified (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), and proposed to be applied to the broader actor engagement concept (Alexander et al., 2018). These four broad categories are (1) augmenting, (2) co-developing, (3) influencing, and (4) mobilizing behavior (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Applied to place branding, actors could provide

knowledge, skills and time to (1) augment the place's offering (e.g., develop a place-based product related to the place brand); they could engage with the place brand by (2) co-developing some events with the focal actor; through their positive word-of-mouth of the place and its brand they can (3) influence others' perceptions about the place; and finally, actors could use their resources to (4) mobilize others to visit or move to the place.

The concept of actor engagement allows for the study of individual actors and actor groups and their engagement disposition and behaviour in the different rural place branding approaches. Further, the service ecosystem perspective allows for the identification of how the actors join each other to co-create value centred on the place brand, and how they integrate their resources in order to co-create value through place branding initiatives. Lastly, with the broader conceptualization of value, the S-D logic framework allows for the study of the impact that rural place branding approaches can have on local communities.

Methodological approach

While research in marketing as well as other management disciplines has been predominantly quantitative (Crick, 2020), the field of place branding has been dominated by qualitative research (Vuignier, 2017). And although the number of studies published within the field has been increasing (Gertner, 2011), place branding research has not approached a maturity stage yet, which also means there is still a considerable lack of solid theoretical foundations (Vuignier, 2017). When there is a need for more research to build a theory, the best suited approach is qualitative research (Crick, 2020).

This research is guided by the social constructivist approach suited for the analysis of the social world or phenomena that are complex and ambiguous (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020). Since qualitative methodology is used to understand “the complex and elusive in a systemic perspective” (Gummesson, 2005, p. 312), it is appropriate to the study of complex phenomena such as place branding approaches. Theories are shaped in qualitative research based on in-depth, subjective information that would not be possible to collect with the objective and rather descriptive quantitative methods (Crick, 2020; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Similarly, qualitative methodologies allow for evaluation of complex issues in ways that quantitative methods cannot uncover (Crick, 2020; Styles & Hersch, 2005). Moreover, through in-depth meanings assigned to the data, qualitative methodologies find explanation for a phenomenon that would not be possible with aggregated quantitative results (Crick, 2020; Suddaby, 2006).

Through theory-building, qualitative research further generates propositions that can be

tested later by quantitative research (Crick, 2020; Gummesson, 2005). There are six different kinds of theory-building research objectives in case-studies (George & Bennett, 2005). Among these are ““building block” studies of particular types or subtypes of a phenomenon” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 76). In this case, the phenomenon is place branding, the subtype of it is rural place branding, and the aim is to contribute with a typology of approaches taken to value co-creation in such a context.

Case study research is applied, involving the study of cases “within a real-life, contemporary context” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96; Yin, 2014). Based on these studies of several cases, conclusions about the phenomenon are generated (Gummesson, 2005). Further, case studies are stronger in determining what factors matter to an outcome, rather than how much they do so (George & Bennett, 2005). Studying several cases is therefore suitable for the investigation of the factors which distinguish rural place branding approaches.

In qualitative research, the empirical context is used to contextualize knowledge, access knowledgeable informants, and acquire sufficient information to understand the complexities and subjectivities related to the phenomenon studied (Crick, 2020; Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011). The empirical context for this project are Danish rural places. In order to obtain stronger evidence and maximum information, different rural places have been identified through theoretical and purposeful sampling (George & Bennett, 2005; Gummesson, 2005).

Case selection

The selection of cases for the study started with an open invitation to rural municipalities and smaller rural places for participation in the project, which was distributed through the newsletter of the Danish Centre for Rural Research (CLF) and published on the centre’s website (Center for Landdistriktsforskning, 2018). An initial workshop was held for the places that expressed interest. In the workshop the project was presented and initial information about the places and their branding initiatives were collected through focus group interviews. A risk with this case selection method is that only the places that subscribe to the newsletter or follow CLF’s website could be included, causing a self-selection bias (Brady & Collier, 2010). Therefore, an additional search for Danish rural places with place branding initiatives was conducted. Researchers with expertise on the Danish rural context were asked for recommendations of suitable places, local newspapers were reviewed for references to places with branding initiatives, and an online search

for such places was conducted.

The final set of places included in the project was selected based on several criteria. Most importantly, we aimed at selecting places, where both the municipality and some smaller places within it engaged in place branding initiatives. We also intended to include rural places representing a certain variety. More specifically, we aimed to include both smaller and bigger villages, towns or islands, as well as places from different parts of the country. Further, the places selected are those that volunteered to participate in the project. This is a pragmatic case selection method based on considerations of access, which according to Seawright & Gerring (2008) is legitimate, while still needing a methodological justification. In this sense, it is necessary to understand how the chosen cases relate to the rest of the population. Brady and Collier (2010) point out not to include observations that are not analytically equivalent, i.e., come from different contexts or are at different levels of analysis, as this will hinder rigorous and valid findings. For the present research that means, that the selected cases exist in the same context. This is ensured by selecting cases among rural places in Denmark, which are embedded in similar contexts regarding their opportunities and challenges.

Based on these criteria, 11 places were selected for the project: Esbjerg Municipality with the towns Ribe, Gørding, and Darum; Varde Municipality with the towns Oksbøl and Billum; and Skive Municipality, with the towns Rødding and Selde, as well as the small island Fur.

Esbjerg Municipality is the biggest of the three municipalities, and its branding is dominated by the business and education focus of its main city (Business Esbjerg, 2020b; Esbjerg Kommune, 2020a). Ribe is the second-largest town in the municipality, and rich in history and culture. It is a popular visitor destination (Esbjerg Municipality, 2021). Gørding is a smaller, residential town with a central location (Gørding, 2020). Finally, Darum is even smaller, located between the city of Esbjerg and Ribe, and bordering the Wadden Sea National Park (Darum, 2020).

Varde Municipality is a popular tourist destination because of its coastline and attractions. It is further the fifth largest municipality in Denmark by area (JydskeVestkysten, 2019; Varde Kommune, 2018). Oksbøl is a small town with an interesting history, which is also used for its branding (Oksbølby, 2020). Billum is even smaller, closely located to several bigger towns, as well as nature. It has a number of small local entrepreneurs, and a successful independent school (Billum, 2020).

Skive Municipality, in the central part of the Jutland peninsula, has a lot of focus on green energy and production, but also has a number of tourism destinations (Skive Kommune, 2020a).

Rødning is a small, but active town engaging in various local-development projects. Their place branding is mainly focused on apples, because apple farming has a long history in the town (Rødning, 2021). Selde is a village where art has become the focus of branding (Fursundegnen, 2020). Finally, Fur is a small island mainly known as a tourism destination (Furnyt, 2020).

The choice of these places reflects the consideration of including cases with different characteristics. While one of the municipalities has a big central city which sometimes maybe is incompatible with the municipality's smaller places, another has much success as a tourism destination, and the last one is located in a different part of the country with both tourism and green technology focus. Also, the smaller places vary both in size, location, and focus of their branding. More detailed information on the selected places can be found in Appendix 1.

Data collection

According to Gummesson (2005), data in qualitative research are generated, since they are created in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. This is in line with the interpretivist or social constructivist approach (Crick, 2020), which acknowledges that data are displays of the interviewees' and researcher's perspectives.

The data here were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, structured interviews and secondary material (websites, documents). In-depth interviews are an appropriate data generation method when the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of a certain topic, behaviour, or process without limiting the respondents' answering options to predefined closed-ended questions (Fontana & Frey, 1994). For the in-depth interviews, people responsible for place branding in the selected places were approached first to ensure that the informants are knowledgeable on the phenomenon under study (Crick, 2020; Gummesson, 2005).

Snowball sampling was used to identify additional actors engaged in branding of the places. The sampling stopped when information redundancy was reached (Jennings, 2010). Further, the researcher approached additional actors which were not mentioned through snowball sampling in order to avoid a too high similarity among the participants and ensure access to different perceptions of the same phenomenon (Anderson, 2010; Yin, 2011). This maximum variation sampling approach ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2013), and provided opportunities for evaluation of similarities and differences in the findings (Crick, 2020; Doz, 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989), where counterintuitive findings could challenge or extend existing research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For the structured interviews, the aim was to include local actors that are not directly

involved in the place branding, but who might have some interest in it (e.g., local schools, businesses, cultural institutions, residents). To identify these informants, a combination of random purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

First, in a snowball sampling approach, the focal place branding actors that participated in the initial phase of semi-structured interviews were asked to identify potential other interviewees from the community. Second, the researcher identified and contacted organizations and individuals for whom the place branding could have been expected to be a relevant issue. While there are potentially many such actors, for pragmatic reasons (Crick, 2020), this random purposeful sampling was limited to local museums, schools, sport associations, and businesses. These interviews aimed at investigating the relationships between the rural place branding processes and the actors' relationship with the rural place brand.

For both the semi-structured and structured interviews (Lee & Aslam, 2018) an interview guide was used, which was developed based on previous research on the subject and theoretical considerations (Crick, 2020). 50 semi-structure interviews lasting between 17 and 89 minutes, and 24 structured interviews lasting between 13 and 45 minutes were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original language (Danish).

In both rounds of interviews, multi-level data, i.e., data from different individuals within the same organization (i.e., the same place) were generated, providing more powerful datasets, which allowed for triangulation of findings between the different informants (Crick, 2020; Welch et al., 2011). Besides self-selection bias for cases, in all interview situations there is the risk of participant bias. Interviewees can provide answers taking the research in a wrong direction due to emotionally driven perceptions of the phenomenon being studied (Boddy, 2016; Crick, 2020). Further, rather than their honest perception, the interviewees can provide answers they believe the researcher wants to hear (Anderson, 2010). The researcher has tried to minimize such biases by building rapport with the respondents, as well as noticing non-verbal cues during the interview that could signify untrustworthy data (Anderson, 2010; Crick, 2020). In addition to the interviews, secondary data (whenever available), such as documents, articles, brochures, books, and websites were used for familiarization with the cases, but also for triangulation purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crick, 2020).

Data analysis

The rich datasets generated through the interviews were organized in NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018), and coded manually. According to Crick (2020), when researchers have collected the data themselves, with the knowledge they already possess about it, they are able to code themes based on this knowledge, and manual coding is therefore an effective data analysis technique in such cases. Since the interviews were theoretically underpinned, deductive coding, based on existing place branding literature and the concepts of service ecosystems and actor engagement, was used for the data analysis.

Overall, though, it can be argued that abductive methodology was used. Such a combination of deductive and inductive approach can use either qualitative or quantitative data, and by delving in and out of theories, it can confirm or reject what is already known, thereby extending certain strands of literature (Brodie, Nenonen, Peters, & Storbacka, 2017; Crick, 2020; Storbacka & Nenonen, 2015). Abductive methodology further includes comparing the empirical data with existing theory (Crick, 2020; Gummesson, 2005; Styles & Hersch, 2005). Continually comparing data is further important to understand how insights differ between informants (Crick, 2020; Suddaby, 2006). A key to qualitative analysis, continuous comparison is part of the process where patterns emerge and turn into categories, concepts and finally theories (Crick, 2020; Gummesson, 2005). Such comparison was applied throughout the research process to identify variations between the place branding processes. Further, bracketing, i.e., presenting the data in the words of the interviewees as illustrative quotes, is used in order to minimize misrepresentation and to reduce researcher biases in analysing the data (Crick, 2020; Tosey, Lawley, & Meese, 2014).

It is not the purpose of qualitative research to generate generalizable findings, but rather to obtain in-depth, subjective information about a phenomenon (Crick, 2020; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, the aim of this study is not to generalize the findings to the whole population. Instead, Yin's (1994, 2010) concept of "analytic generalization" is applied. Here, the purpose is to expand and generalize theories. In other words, case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, rather than to populations. Specifically, this research proposes a conceptual claim showing how the findings from the case studies relate to service ecosystems and actor engagement in place branding research. This theoretical addition, or new theoretical framework, might then later be applied to other similar processes. In addition, in line with other qualitative research, the theoretical contribution made here can be used as basis for future quantitative research (Crick, 2020).

In qualitative research, credibility is the term encapsulating the validity and reliability of the research (Gummesson, 2005). Credibility relates to obtaining trustworthy findings (Morrow, 2005), which is achieved by generating adequate data, i.e., data of sufficient quality and quantity (Crick, 2020; Patton, 1990), while minimizing the researchers' involvement in the interview situation and maximizing the role of the informants (e.g., by presenting findings in the words of the interviewees) (Crick, 2020). Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) propose nine validation strategies and advise engaging in at least two of them in any qualitative study. In the present study, several have been applied.

First, triangulation of multiple data sources to shed light on the phenomenon from different perspectives, including multiple informants were used (Crick, 2020; Doz, 2011; Styles & Hersch, 2005). Second, "points of intrigue" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261), i.e., disconfirming evidence, and contradictions were discovered and reported. During the first round of the interviews (semi-structured), the researcher spent much time in the field and familiarized herself with the site and the participants before data collection. This was more challenging to do during the second round of interviews (structured, via telephone). Nevertheless, the researcher built on her previous knowledge of the context and culture of the places and tried to build rapport with participants and gatekeepers in both rounds of interviews. This fulfilled the requirement of "prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 262). Finally, the data and research process have all along been debriefed with the supervisors and in some cases also peer reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263).

Having introduced the background of the study, the further structure of the dissertation is as follows. The next section presents the setup of the dissertation, including a discussion of how the five papers are interrelated. This is followed by the research implications, as well as future research suggestions based on the five papers. Finally, the five papers are presented in detail.

Papers – an overview

This dissertation consists of the introduction and five papers introduced in the following (table 1.)

| Paper | Title | Co-authors* | Focus | Methodology | Status |
|---------|----------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| Paper 1 | Rural place branding | | Literature review identifying | Meta-synthesis | The paper has been published |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| | processes: a meta-synthesis | | contextual factors and types of processes | | in <i>Place Branding and Public Diplomacy</i> |
| Paper 2 | The organization of rural place branding processes: engagement in service eco-systems | Chris Horbel Egon Noe | Identifying types of place branding processes based on focal actor, other actors' engagement and organization | In-depth, semi-structured interviews | Ready for submission |
| Paper 3 | Rural place branding from a multi-level perspective: a Danish example | Chris Horbel Egon Noe | Relationship of rural place branding at different vertical levels | In-depth, semi-structured interviews | Manuscript accepted for publication in <i>Place Branding and Public Diplomacy</i> |
| Paper 4 | Rural place branding processes as drivers of local actor engagement | Chris Horbel Egon Noe | Ability of different processes to create positive actor relationships and engagement | Structured interviews | Ready for submission |
| Paper 5 | Place branding and sustainable rural communities: qualitative evidence from Danish rural areas | Chris Horbel | Possible implications of place branding on the social sustainability of the communities | In-depth, semi-structured interviews | Manuscript in 2 nd round of review in the <i>Journal of Strategic Marketing</i> |
| *Co-author declarations are submitted as separate documents | | | | | |

Table 1. Overview and status of papers

The aim of this PhD is to identify the different approaches to place branding applied by rural places and investigate their impact on the place's stakeholders. This is done in the five papers, presented here.

Paper 1

Paper 1 presents a literature review of rural place branding with the focus on the process and the context it is embedded in. A meta-synthesis is applied to identify certain patterns of the approaches based on the original case studies included in the study. A framework of six contextual factors of a place, which influence the application of different place branding processes, is

developed. The six factors are type of place (i.e., administrative vs. non-administrative), initiative (political/administrative, community or mixed), support base (political/organizational, community, strong identity, or external), brand purpose (competitiveness, identity building or conservation), target groups (residents, local businesses, tourists, general public, or consumers), and type of place brand (sectoral or integrated). These factors appear in typical combinations leading to the application of typical place branding processes. Based on the original case studies, five different types of place branding processes applied in rural places are identified. These range from rather top-down, focal actor steered processes to bottom-up, collaborative ones. They differ regarding the centrality of the focal actor for the process, as well as the involvement of other actor groups. Finally, typical relationships between patterns of the contextual factors the place branding process applied are uncovered.

The literature-based, typology proposed in paper 1 is further elaborated on and developed in paper 2. Further, the contextual factor ‘type of place’, i.e., administrative vs. non-administrative place was taken as the starting point for the case selection for the project.

Paper 2

Paper 2 builds on and further elaborates the typology of rural place branding processes proposed in paper 1. In this paper, the in-depth, semi-structured interviews are used to study actor engagement in different rural place branding processes in the Danish cases. A new typology is proposed here, taking into account the type of focal actor (i.e., a pre-existing or an emerged one), other actors’ engagement in the process (i.e., the engagement properties including time, type of engagement, and resources contributed), and finally the organization of the collaboration (i.e., its formalization, centralization and strategic direction). Four types of place branding approaches are identified here. The administrative-led place branding process type (type 1) is highly formalized, centralized under the leadership of a public administration and strategically oriented. The other three types are community-based approaches. The experience-based place branding approach (type 2) is formalized, rather centralized around a focal actor and strategically driven. The transitory place branding type (type 3) is somewhat formalized, centralized and strategically focused, yet to a lower degree than the previous types. And finally, the ad-hoc place branding process type (type 4) is a non-formalized, decentralized approach without a clear strategy, where the place branding rests on ad-hoc initiatives of a variety of actors.

The remaining three papers use the typology of rural place branding processes as a starting point and investigate the relationships between different place brands (paper 3), the different

approaches' impact on local actors' relationship an engagement with the brand and branding (paper 4), and the implications of place branding for social sustainability of rural communities (paper 5).

Paper 3

Paper 3 studies place brands in the context of place brand architecture. More specifically, it investigates the relationships between place brands on different vertical levels. Based on the semi-structured interview data, the paper sheds light on the relationship between the municipalities as higher vertical level places and the individual, smaller places within them as lower vertical level places. While strategic place brand architecture has not been applied in these places yet, four different archetypes of interaction between the place brands and their branding initiatives are identified. The four archetypes of interaction are positioning, i.e., the lower-level places use the higher-level in their branding; targeting, i.e., the lower-level places target the higher-level to gain awareness, recognition and other benefits; anchorage, i.e., the higher-level places use the lower-level in their branding; and finally, resource provision, i.e., the higher-level places provide resources to the lower-level. The paper also shows how these four archetypes of interaction relate to each other and discusses how the types of place branding processes that the individual places adopt, affect these relationships. Further, challenges related to the implementation of strategic place brand architecture are discussed.

Paper 4

The objective of paper 4 is to investigate the ability of different rural place branding processes to create positive relationships with and engagement from local actors. The typology of rural place branding approaches developed in paper 2 serves as the basis. Data generated from structured interviews is used to illuminate how the different approaches succeed in creating ownership and identification among local actors that are not directly involved in place branding, and positively influence their legitimacy perceptions of the branding to encourage actor's engagement with the branding. The findings show that there are some differences in the ownership and identification that actors feel towards their place brands, but these differences are not substantial. Local actors can often identify and engage with the place brand despite not being involved in the official place branding process, and therefore not feeling a high sense of ownership. Further, actor engagement was very similar in all the types, which could be related to the high legitimacy perceptions of place branding among the interviewees. Overall, type 4, the non-organized, decentralized place branding process was found to have the best ability to create ownership and identification among local actors, yet the other types did not lag much behind.

Paper 5

In paper 5, the effects of place branding on the social sustainability of rural communities are explored. Hence, the focus is moved from individual and place brand related implications, to the implications that place branding can have on the community. Using data from the semi-structured interviews, it is found that rural place branding can support social sustainability of the communities through resident attraction and satisfaction, economic development and provision of services for the residents, as well as through increasing the place's general reputation and recognition. Further, the paper investigates the relationship between the type of place branding approach and potential social sustainability outcomes. Most benefits for social sustainability are acquired in places where place branding is strategically organized and engaging a broad range of actors. In places with few highly engaged actors and weak organization structure of the place branding process, less benefits were achieved. Finally, in processes with a strong focal actor, where creating broader actor engagement is challenging, outcomes of place branding for social sustainability were rarely mentioned.

Research implications and future research

Rural places are increasingly applying place branding for a number of different reasons (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Donner et al., 2017; Horlings & Marsden, 2014). While it has been acknowledged, that in contrast to cities, destinations and nations, in rural places the local community plays a bigger role in the branding process than the authorities (Gulisova, 2020; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013), most place branding theories still build on city, destination and nation branding. Despite a growing number of publications on place branding of rural areas (e.g., Donner et al., 2017), the research has been fragmented, often based on single case studies, and focusing on other aspects than the organization of the process with the diverse actors involved (Gulisova, 2020). There is therefore still a need for a clearer understanding of the different approaches to place branding in rural places, as well as their impact on the actors and the communities.

This dissertation therefore aims at identifying different types of place branding approaches applied in rural places, according to actor engagement and organization of the collaboration. In addition, it studies how those different approaches interact when place branding actors at different horizontal levels use, support or target each other. Further, this thesis investigates how well different rural place branding approaches attain local actor support and contribute to social

sustainability outcomes for rural places.

The dissertations' aims and outcomes are relevant from both a societal and an academic point of view. The dissertation presents a typology of different rural place branding processes, their interrelations and their impact on local actors as well as the communities. It further contributes to the ongoing academic discussion on inclusive and participatory place branding practices, and on actor engagement in brand value co-creation. It thus provides insight and guidance to local actors involved in rural place branding to apply a process that suits their local context, especially the resources they can draw on and is useful to achieve the desired outcomes of a place branding initiative. Further, local communities and place branding practitioners can use the findings of the study critically evaluate and revise their approach applied to place branding, in order to achieve more strategic direction, create local actor engagement, and facilitate social sustainability of the community.

Further, the findings highlight the importance of external resources for the implementation of rural place branding, especially in small places. They can therefore be interpreted as a call to municipalities and other external funding bodies to provide funding and other resources to local branding initiatives.

While the dissertation addresses a number of research gaps and questions within rural place branding, several areas for further research must be highlighted. First, findings of this study and the frameworks and typologies proposed should be applied to other contexts, e.g., rural places in other countries, or other types of rural places, but also cities, tourism destinations, and nations, in order to further develop general place branding theory. Second, the frameworks and typologies from this study should be tested in quantitative studies to find further evidence for the findings. Third, additional contextual factors should be integrated in the typology, especially the place's natural, built or cultural resources, as these are often used as anchors to shape the image and meaning of the place brand. Fourth, the outcome of the place branding could be incorporated into the typology. The suitability of the different types to create specific outcomes should be investigated. Fifth, it should be studied how external target groups can be reached, their perceptions of the place brand be influenced and engagement among them for the brand can be created. Finally, actor engagement on the individual level should be studied more thoroughly. Our data indicates that there are often some individuals with much higher engagement for the place branding than others. For example, there might be differences in both engagement levels and specific contributions between long-term residents and new residents of a place. Therefore, a study of

motivational factors for actor engagement in place branding, would be beneficial and contribute to both actor engagement and place branding literature.

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Paper 1: Rural place branding processes: a meta-synthesis

Barbora Gulisova¹

Abstract

Like cities and nations, rural places have adopted the practice of place branding to improve their reputation and increase their competitiveness to attract residents, tourists, and consumers. This review aims to synthesize case studies of rural place branding in order to identify different types of processes applied and relating them to the contextual factors underlying their application. A typology of five rural place branding processes (PBP) is proposed, based on the existence and dominance of a focal actor, and other actors involved in the process. Six contextual factors that affect the application of the various PBP are identified: (1) type of place distinguishing between places with or without administrative power, (2) initiative referring to the difference between political/administrative, community, mixed, (3) support base for the branding distinguishing between strong political/organizational, strong community, strong identity, (4) brand purpose, i.e. competitiveness, identity, conservation; (5) target group, and (6) type of place brand referring to the difference between sectoral and integrated place brands. Patterns of the contextual factors have been identified that seem to be typical for the application of the different PBP types. The findings provide guidance to rural place managers and communities to apply a PBP that matches their specific context.

Keywords: rural places, place branding, processes, co-creation, resource integration, contextual factors

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¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

Introduction

Many rural places are facing a number of challenges. Not least due to urbanization, rural places have been experiencing economic and population decline, challenging the sustainability of rural regions (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Globalization threatens the identity of rural places, which have become more interchangeable (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), with dominant thinking across many places turning to competitive imperative (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). The 'New Rural Paradigm' (OECD, 2006) recommends valorising local resources through a bottom-up approach where progress should be based on the inputs from local actors (Sørensen, 2018a) calling for a multi-sector, place-based rural development (Horlings and Marsden, 2014). Further, Anholt (2010) writes, in the age of global competition, countries, cities, regions, and by extension also rural places, all need to market themselves.

De San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona (2015) emphasize the unique personality of rural places, which is often disturbed by internal inferiority complexes, while being externally stereotyped. Willett and Lang (2018), in their discussion of why some peripheral regions develop, while others do not, found that powerful regions, because of their often-negative constructs of the peripheries, keep the latter in a weaker position in respect to development. This shows the need for rural places to focus on improving their reputation if they are to attract new residents (Sørensen, 2018) and keep the young from moving away (Thuesen et al., 2018). One way of supporting local economic development and improving reputation of rural places is through the practice of place branding. Through place branding, value is added to local products and services, and by communicating the place qualities through the place brand, the image of the place is expected to improve with the audiences. Although most of the literature on place branding concerns cities (e.g., Braun et al., 2013; Hankinson, 2001; Kalandides, 2011a; Kavaratzis, 2004), tourist destinations (e.g., Hankinson, 2010a, 2010b; Kerr, 2006; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003; Zenker et al., 2017) and nations (e.g., Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen, 2016; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Muñiz, 2016), in recent years also other types of places have received attention, such as different kinds of regions (e.g., Falkheimer, 2016; Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015), islands (e.g., Grydehøj, 2011) and rural places (e.g., Donner et al., 2017; Horlings, 2012; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013).

While many places, especially larger cities and tourist destinations, have adopted strategies similar to those of corporations (Hankinson, 2010a) with a strong central organization creating and communicating the core of the brand, in the past decade it has also been recognized that place

brands are socially constructed meaning systems (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Medway, Swanson, Neirotti, Pasquinelli, & Zenker, 2015). There has, therefore, also been a paradigmatic shift in understanding place branding processes (PBP) advocating a stakeholder- and process-oriented approach to brands (Kavaratzis, 2012). Warnaby (2009) proposes the application of S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) in place marketing in order to integrate various place resources through the involvement of different actors. In this more stakeholder- and process- oriented approach, place brands are increasingly being understood as co-creative processes among diverse stakeholders instead of an outcome of rather top-down processes led by managerial objectives.

As Vuorinen and Vos (2013) write, in rural areas there might not exist a strong, easily identifiable, focal actor to steer branding in a top-down process. Therefore, either several organizations might claim the steering role, or no actor will feel responsible for the brand. The PBP in rural places will thus – almost naturally - be a process of value co-creation by various stakeholders (Vuorinen and Vos, 2013). Such bottom-up process is suggested to increase the stakeholders' identification with the brand, their commitment to the brand, and willingness to sell the place to external target groups (Kavaratzis, 2012; Wheeler et al., 2011).

Even though rural areas have recently received more attention in place branding research, knowledge created about rural place branding still lags behind branding research on countries, cities, and tourism destinations. Yet, because of the different stakeholder constellations, institutional arrangements and resources available (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) it can be assumed that PBP in rural contexts are distinct from those studied in city, country or tourism destination contexts. This paper will make conceptual contributions by systematizing contextual factors that underlie place branding and the involvement of actors within the domain of rural place branding (MacInnis, 2011). While place branding as a discipline has seen a number of literature reviews within the last decade (e.g., Andersson, 2014; Chan & Marafa, 2013; Gertner, 2011; Lucarelli & Olof, 2011; Vuignier, 2017), the domain of rural places has so far not received much specific attention. Yet, more and more rural places also turn to the practice of place branding in order to manage their reputation. It is therefore time to summarize, take stock of what has been written on the processes of rural place branding, distilling the knowledge found in the disparate studies to simpler, manageable conclusions that will provide guidance to the practice of rural place branding (MacInnis, 2011). Contextual factors are identified and linked in an organizing framework to provide a simpler overview of the relationships between the context and the type of place branding process (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016). The purpose of this paper is to identify types of rural

PBP based on the actor groups involved and relating them to the contextual factors underlying their application. Thereby, this literature review aims to answer the following research question: Which combination of contextual factors leads to the application of different types of rural place branding processes?

Place brand, place branding and rural place

Place brands have been conceptualized in different ways. According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), the identity, which “emerges in the conversation between stakeholders and what brings them together” (p. 82), is the building material of a place brand. Zenker and Braun (2010) define a place brand as “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design.” (Zenker and Braun, 2010, p. 3). Giovanardi et al. (2013) adopt a brand ecology concept to suggest “a more holistic understanding of the brand-place relationship” as being crucial in “explaining the place-as-a-brand appropriately, instead of adopting a reductionist interpretation that tends to stress either functional or representational aspects” (Giovanardi et al., 2013, pp. 377-378). They conceptualize the place as a brand from a brand ecology perspective that integrates syntactical (functional) and semantic (representational) dimensions through pragmatic analysis. In this view, places can be treated as brands “even if formal institutionalized forms of branding efforts have not been implemented” (p. 378). Therefore, “it is possible to argue that place brands exist even without place branding” (Giovanardi et al., 2013, p. 379). Anholt and Hildreth (2004) discuss the rather loose use of the term ‘brand’ when referring to people, organizations and places, writing that “at heart, a brand is nothing more and nothing less than the good name of something that’s on offer to the public” (Anholt and Hildreth, 2004, p. 10). Therefore, place brands can also be understood as the reputation of the places (Anholt, 2005). For the purpose of this paper, a place brand is defined as the expression of a place’s identity that is perceived as distinguishing the given place from others.

According to Papadopoulos (2004) place branding refers to the efforts of governments and industry groups to market the places and sectors that they represent. Boisen et al. (2011) write “the process of place branding is to provide added value and specific meanings to a place by consciously orchestrating and managing this brand” (p. 142). Elsewhere, Boisen (2015) defines it as “the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people” (p. 14). By asking “what a place wants to be” (García et al., 2013),

place branding is also a public management tool to develop places (Martin & Capelli, 2017). In relation to rural places, place branding is seen as one way of adapting to the New Rural Paradigm (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Similar to García et al. (2013), Horlings and Marsden (2014) write that “place branding concerns not only what a region is, but also what it aims and desires to be in the future” (p. 16), which can lead to new ideas, products, services and forms of organization. Donner et al. (2017) comment on the difference between rural and nation or city branding. While the latter often focus on attracting tourists, investors and immigrants, rural branding “seems to be directed towards the capacities and needs of local people and development ‘from within’” (p. 288). Based on these different definitions, for the purpose of this paper, rural place branding is defined as the strategic process through which value is added to the rural place by creating and managing a place brand in order to develop the place internally, consolidate its identity and improve the place’s reputation externally.

Halfacree (1993) discusses the different definitions of rural, including both descriptive and those based on socio-cultural characteristics, concluding that “there is a growing realization in the literature that the quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible” (p. 34). While different typologies of rural regions exist for policy purposes (Fertner, 2012; OECD, 2011), a single definition of the term ‘rural’ is not feasible due to varying meanings of rurality depending on the context and one’s personal experience and objectives (Eupen et al., 2012). Halfacree (1993) argues that we should distinguish “between the rural as a distinctive type of locality and the rural as a social representation – the rural as space and the rural as representing space” (p. 34). Due to the international differences in rural places (UN, 2017), for the purpose of this paper, a rural place is defined as any non-urbanized region or smaller geographical unit, such as a small town, village, municipality, community or island, or a place being socially represented as rural. Notably, the geographical category is a continuum, where the transition between rural, urban and metropolitan is fluent and highly dependent on wider national or regional contexts. Further, for this study, it is the original authors’ classification of places as ‘rural’ that was used.

Methodology

As a methodology suitable for the discussion of contextual matters (Hoon, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994) meta-synthesis is guiding this review. As Hoon (2013) writes, in a meta-synthesis, insights from primary studies are extracted and analysed in order to identify emerging patterns, while the original studies’ integrity is preserved. It is defined as an “exploratory, inductive

research design to synthesize primary qualitative case studies for the purpose of making contributions beyond those achieved in the original studies” (Hoon, 2013, p. 523). In order to retain the contextual diversity of the case studies included, while also synthesizing the insights without oversimplifying, there is a need for a broad yet still manageable set of studies to be included (Hoon, 2013). The meta-synthesis uses the original case studies’ researchers’ understanding and interpretation of data instead of their primary interviews or observations. The method is suitable for theory extension, refining or generation. According to Hoon (2013), new relationships or constructs can be identified that are not accounted for in the existing theory, or existing constructs can be substantially reconceptualized throughout the meta-synthesis. In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Pratt, 2008), Hoon (2013) proposes a meta-synthesis protocol for substantiating the certain logic and path of the meta-synthesis. Table 1 shows the 8 steps meta-synthesis protocol of this paper, while Appendix 1 shows an overview of the articles included for the analysis. The final sample includes 26 case studies of a variety of rural places, from across Europe, Australia and Canada. Both, the contextual factors and the categories under them were developed in a process of inductive coding of the descriptions available for the case studies. In an initial coding the text passages including relevant information on the PBP type and on contextual factors were extracted. In the next step of coding main categories were identified, which were either descriptions of the PBP or of contextual factors. In the last step, sub-coding of all text passages under the same main categories resulted in the categories under each contextual factor. For example, the existence or absence of a clear administrative authority in the place and whether the place was constituted through a clear administrative or institutional delineation emerged as a factor from the case descriptions and resulted in the two categories administrative and non-administrative places. The same approach was used to identify the other contextual factors and respective categories under them.

| Steps in Meta-Synthesis | Analytical goal | Strategy/Analytical Procedure Used | Outcome to Generate a Theoretical Contribution |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 1) Framing the research question | Conceptually embedding the synthesis in the field of place branding, more specifically, place branding of rural places with the focus on the place branding process; identifying a clear research question addressing the | A priori specification | Identification of a well-specified research question facilitates accurately operationalizing variables and extracting appropriate data from primary rural place branding studies |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| | issue of stakeholder participation in rural place branding processes and the role of contextual factors that determine the type of PBP | | |
| 2) Locating relevant research | Identifying the body of place branding research relevant for the research question of interest; extensive literature search to prevent exclusion of important information, thereby strengthening the findings because of a broader base | Determining the keywords; search string; formulating an exhaustive search strategy entailing main and complementary search steps | Through a search for the words “rural”, “territory”, “provincial”, “region”, “remote”, parish”, “small” and “place branding” on the databases Science Direct and Scopus, plus through Google Scholar, and references, a sample of 124 studies was identified; final sample of 82 qualitative case studies published in 37 journals and 4 book chapters; ensure reliability |
| 3) Inclusion criteria | Specification and application of precise inclusion and exclusion criteria, to determine which studies to include in terms of the theoretical foundations, research focus, and quality | Developing inclusion/exclusion criteria | Limiting the 82 qualitative case studies to a set of 26 papers, with 35 cases finally incorporated in the meta-synthesis; providing clear exclusion criteria; ensuring validity, reliability |
| 4) Extracting and coding data | Carefully reading the full text of each study. Coding study characteristics as well as the insights of the primary studies according to the research question on contextual factors and actor participation in rural place branding processes | Developing and pretesting a coding form | Order, code, and categorize evidence from each of the studies; valid coding form; sensitivity for contextual considerations |
| 5) Analysing on a case-specific level | Identifying a sequence of contextual factors that have been found in each case to be the most influential to determine the type of actor participation in rural place branding process | Case-specific causal networks | Identifying themes, core concepts, patterns, or relationships in each case |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| 6) Synthesizing on an across-study level | Merging the case-specific causal networks into a meta-causal network. Accumulating the contextual factors at a cross-study level to arrive at a general pattern among these factors | Meta-causal network, variable ratings | Identification of a pattern; contextual factors that determine actor participation in rural place branding processes as central variable; rating of the factors to ensure validity |
| 7) Building theory from meta-synthesis | Identification of the impact of contextual factors in the determination of actor participation in rural place branding processes; demonstrate a significant contribution | Linking the results back to the literature on rural place branding and its processes | Identification of a framework of contextual factors determining actor participation in rural place branding processes; arguing for a contribution to the place branding research |
| 8) Discussing | Discussion of the results of the meta-synthesis study and potential limitations | Discussing rigor, reliability, and validity | Legitimizing the validity and reliability of the procedure and activities used |

Table 1. Meta-synthesis protocol

Findings

A number of contextual factors influencing the application of different types of PBP are identified, and a typology of PBP determined by the involvement of different actor groups is proposed.

Contextual factors

Six contextual factors, i.e., type of place, initiator, support base for the brand, brand purpose, target group, and type of place brand, were identified from the literature (figure 1) and will be discussed in the following.

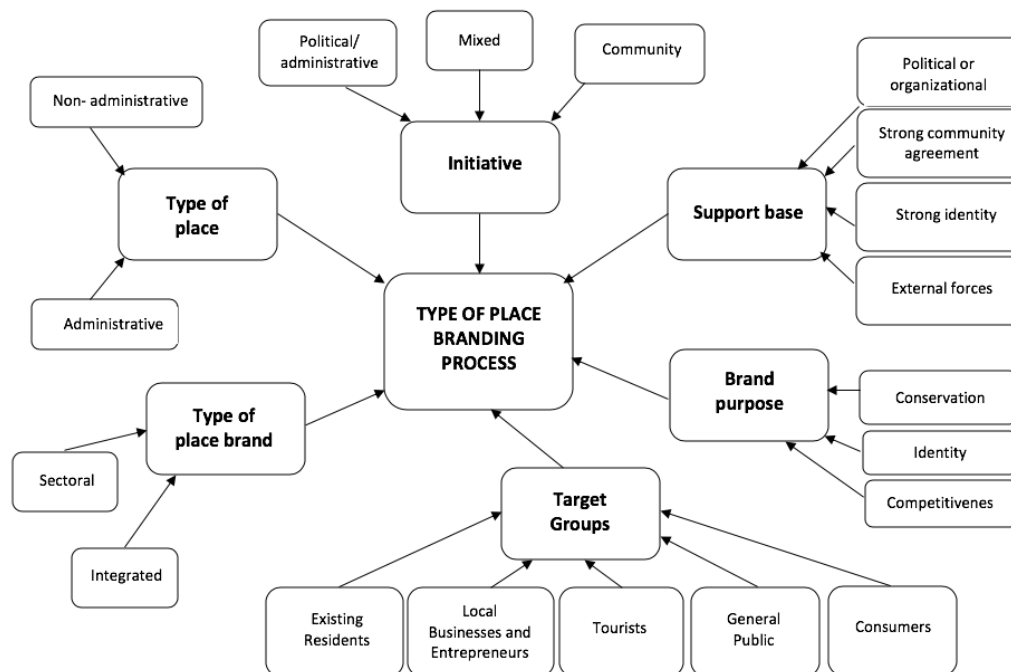


Figure 1. Framework of factors influencing the place branding process. Author's own figure.

Type of place

The first factor is the type of rural place according to their administrative framework. Here, the distinction is made between administrative, institutionally recognized places and places without administrative power.

In the case of non-administrative places, branding can function as the means to integrate the region (Paasi, 2002). Branding can serve to establish an identity as part of a wider institutionalization process of a region (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). In such a context, the need for diverse stakeholders' collaboration will require the collaboration of a higher number of actors and will therefore lead to more bottom-up collaborative PBPs (e.g., Horlings, 2012). In places where strong collaboration is the norm (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and is societally embedded (Donner et al., 2017), the actors know they can depend on and benefit from each other (Fehrer, Woratschek, Germelmann, & Brodie, 2018) which allows for the functioning of the rather bottom-up process. Further, there is a need for both a brand manager and willingness of the stakeholders to collaborate (Charters & Spielmann, 2014). In the administrative places, the rather top-down PBPs involving fewer actors are applied. Hence, only certain parts of the community are seen as valuable resources to be integrated in the PBP (Koskela-Huotari and Vargo,

2016). As administrative regions, the institutional arrangements in these places can constrain the process of resource integration (Koskela-Huotari and Vargo, 2016), if the administrative brand owner does not see the broader community as a valuable resource to involve in the process. With the lack of the institutional framework (Hess, 2004; Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016) for a wider network cooperation in the non-administrative places, the PBP in these cases is most often a collaborative one.

Initiative

The second factor relates to the initiative for the place brand, which can be a political/administrative or a community initiative or a mix of both.

The difference in the PBP related to what kind of initiative it is can be traced back to which actors are seen as providing valuable resources in the given context and which are not (Chandler & Vargo, 2011). Some political/administrative and mixed initiatives see more actors as a resource and therefore apply a more participative PBP (e.g., Lee et al., 2015) than the governmental bodies who limit the resources integrated to fewer actors such as consultants (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2011). The community initiatives recognize the need to integrate more actors and their skills in order to succeed with the place branding (e.g., Horlings, 2012). An example of how the initiator of the place branding affects the PBP, which then affects the collaboration among stakeholders, leadership, funding situation and the communication strategies applied, is shown by Lee et al. (2015). In their study, the non-profit organization ‘Savour Stratford’ was established in alliance with the local government and applied a rather top-down PBP, while the non-profit organization ‘Savour Muskoka’ was established by different local, decentralized groups of stakeholders. While the first enjoyed stronger partnerships with local governments and better funding opportunities, the latter was disadvantaged on these aspects. Similarly, ‘Savour Stratford’ could afford to designate a portion of their budget on marketing and communication activities, which ‘Savour Muskoka’ could not.

Support base for the branding

Related to the initiator is the support that the process receives. Three main kinds can be distinguished: strong political/organizational support, strong community agreement, and strong identity. In a few cases, external forces played a role as well.

In some cases, the identity of the place is so strong, that combined with the community

support, it leads to the emergence of a strong place brand almost naturally, as in the case of King's Valley, VIC, AUS, where the heritage and lifestyle of the people built the origin of a strong brand (Wheeler et al., 2011). A strong identity can also be counterproductive for the process supported politically, as was the case in the Shetland Islands, UK, where the brand that the consultants proposed did not fit with the identity of the place, and therefore was not accepted by the community (Grydehøj, 2008, 2011; Horlings & Kanemasu, 2015).

In the case of Tamworth, NSW, AUS, the support for the place brand, based on a music festival, came from a strong agreement by part of the local community (Gibson & Davidson, 2004). Part of the reason for the strength of the place brand were the national media and general public mythology surrounding the rural and country music, taking up the theme of the country music festival and thereby having an important role in the creation of the brand. This shows how the visitors to the festival, who helped in popularizing the image of the town as a 'country music capital', and other external stakeholders take part in the value co-creation process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2016). Another example of how outside, societal factors support the strengthening of the brand is that of the New Norcia (AUS) brand. Here it was the increasing societal interest in the values that the brand represented, as well as the interest "in local cultural identity as a reaction to global identities and brands" (Ryan & Mizerski, 2010) that played an important role in the brand's success.

Brand purpose and target group

The most common purposes of rural place branding identified are to increase the competitiveness of the place, to build/consolidate the identity of the place, and to support conservation of cultural or natural landscape. While competitiveness was the objective of all the places – in agreement with e.g., Anholt (2010) for place branding in general and Horlings and Marsden (2014) for rural places specifically - relatively few place brands had identity building/consolidation or conservation as a purpose. In the cases with several different purposes (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), as well as in cases where identity was a purpose in addition to competitiveness (e.g., García et al., 2013; Horlings, 2012; Messely et al., 2015), rather collaborative PBPs were applied.

In regards to the competitiveness, the target groups for the place brands were often tourists (e.g., Mettepenningen et al., 2012; Wheeler et al., 2011), consumers of regional products (e.g., Donner et al., 2017; Willemsen & van der Veen, 2014), or a combination of both (e.g., Donner et

al., 2017; Horlings, 2012). Local residents were seen as a target group when the branding process aimed at building, strengthening or consolidating the local identity (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), while in cases where the place brand was meant to add value to the local products, the entrepreneurs or local farmers were the targets of the branding initiative (e.g., Donner et al., 2017).

Type of place brand

Pasquinelli (2013) writes about the difference in “the function that branding is supposed to carry out” (p. 5) and distinguishes between two kinds of brands: sectoral or integrated. The sectoral place brands target visitors or support export and consumption by being applied to consumer goods. The integrated place brands take a holistic approach to place branding. The distinction between a sectoral and integrated place brand is important as it affects the complexity of the place branding process (Hankinson, 2001). Also, according to Anholt (2010) there is a difference between e.g., targeted destination branding, where marketing communication can be effective in reaching the desired outcome, and general place branding, where specific promotion might have little, if any, effect on the place’s overall image. The sectoral and integrated place brands are often interrelated, with reciprocal relationship among them. Martin and Capelli (2017), in this regard, write “the core idea is that local product promotion enhances the attractiveness of the region, and the attractiveness of the region enhances that of local products” (p. 831). In many cases, the distinction between sectoral and integrated brand is not straightforward, yet most of the cases found are sectoral brands, often for tourism destinations or place-based products. The sectoral brands often build on local values and identity (Donner et al., 2017), and therefore have the potential of developing into integrated place brands. While most of the types of PBP are applied to create both integrated and sectoral brands, most of the brands created under the most collaborative PBP type are sectoral. This might be due to the complexity of the integrated place brands (e.g., Willemsen & van der Veen, 2014). Therefore, it might be easier to unify different actors related to a single sector and co-create a bottom-up brand rather than for the place in general. Further, for integrated place brands, legitimacy and political issues (e.g., Braun et al., 2013; Martin & Capelli, 2017) might play a role, and therefore political involvement might be required.

Type of process

The cases included in this meta synthesis allow for the identification of five different types

of rural PBP based on the existence of a focal actor and other types of actor groups involved. The typology of PBP is shown in figure 2 and further explained below.

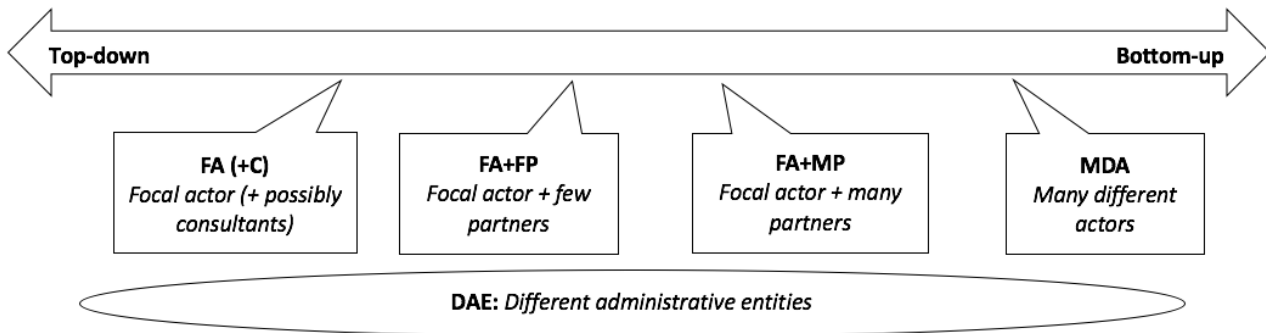


Figure 2. Typology of PBP. Author's own figure.

The first type of PBP in rural areas is characterized by a focal actor, that takes the main responsibility for the creation of the place brand, often with the support of consultants ('focal actor with possible consultants' involvement'; FA+C). In most cases, it is the local council (e.g. Porter, 2013) or a steering group consisting of high-profile public and business actors who act as the FA and often hire consultants to create the brand. The second type, 'focal actor with few partners' (FA+FP), is often a process of collaboration between the public authorities and a specific local industry (e.g., Donner et al., 2017). The third type, 'focal actor with many partners' (FA+MP) is typically a project sponsored by the European LEADER (ENRD, 2019) initiative, where the local action group (LAG) composed of different local stakeholders collaborate with either local tourism and product departments (e.g., Messely, Dessein, and Rogge, 2015) or other local actors, such as farmers and producers (e.g., Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014). The fourth type, 'many different actors' (MDA) refers to the processes when, although the initiative might come from one actor, the place branding is a shared responsibility of different actors (e.g., Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). Finally, the fifth type 'different administrative entities' (DAE) is often applied when several municipalities or other administrative units decide to co-brand their region (e.g., Giovanardi et al., 2013; Pasquinelli, 2011).

The types of actors that are involved in rural place branding can be divided in six actor groups: local residents, local businesses, local authorities, university/researchers, regional or local organizations including NGOs or national parks, and external actors. Taken together, all of the actor groups are to some degree involved in the most collaborative PBP types, MDA and FA+MP,

while only four of them are involved to some degree in the less collaborative PBP types FA+FP and FA+(C). Regional or local organizations, including NGOs or national parks, and university/researchers are the two groups that were not involved in the rather top-down processes in the sample. Only one actor group, the local authorities, is involved in DAE.

Most of the cases identified fall into the most collaborative types, i.e., FA+MP and MDA, which corresponds to Vuorinen and Vos (2013)'s finding that "place branding of rural areas is seen as a participative process" (p.162).

Discussion

Table 2 provides an overview of the cases included in this meta study. The cases are sorted according to the type of place branding process that was applied. For each type of place branding process type some patterns of contextual factors can be identified, indicating that depending on the constellations of contextual factors the application of certain place branding process types is more or less likely.

| Type of PBP and Case | Actors Involved | | | | | | Type of Place | | Initiative | | | Support Base | | | | Brand Purpose | | | Target Group | | | | | Type of Place Brand | |
|---|-----------------|----|----|---|---|----|---------------|---|------------|---|---|--------------|----|----|----|---------------|----|----|--------------|-----|---|----|----|---------------------|----|
| | LR | LB | LA | U | O | EA | NA | A | P/A | M | C | P/O | CA | SI | EF | CP | ID | CS | ER | LBE | T | GP | CR | S | IG |
| Many Different Actors; MDA | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Løgstør, DK | X | X | X | | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | | | X | | X | X | |
| River Minho Estuary, PT+ES | X | X | X | | | | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | | X | | X | X | | X | X | |
| Romagna, IT | | X | X | | | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | | | X |
| Het Groene Woud, NL | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | X | | | | | X | X | |
| Meetjesland, BE | | X | X | | X | | X | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | | X | X | | | | X |
| Fjærland, NO | X | | | | | X | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | X | | | X | | | X |
| the King Valley, AUS | X | | | | | | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | | X | |
| Marche region, IT | | X | X | X | | | X | | | X | | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | X | | |
| Bretagne region, FR | | X | | | | | X | | | X | | | X | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | X | |
| Tamworth, AUS | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | X | X | | | | X | | X | | | X |
| District Municipality of Muskoka, CA | | X | X | | X | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | X | | |
| Groene Woud, NL | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | X | | | X | | X | | | | | X | X | |
| New Norcia, AUS | X | X | | | | | X | | | X | | | X | X | | X | | X | | X | | | X | X | |
| Utrechtse Heuvelrug region, NL | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | X | | | X | | | | | | | X | X | |
| Different Administrative Entities; DAE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Val di Cornia, IT | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | X | | | X |
| Parc Naturel des Deux Ourthes, BE | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | X | |
| Gaume, BE | | | X | | | | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | | X | | | | X | |

| Type of PBP and Case | Actors Involved | | | | | | Type of Place | | Initiative | | | Support Base | | | | Brand Purpose | | | Target Group | | | | | Type of Place Brand | |
|--|-----------------|----|----|---|----|----|---------------|---|------------|---|---|--------------|----|----|----|---------------|----|----|--------------|-----|---|----|----|---------------------|----|
| | LR | LB | LA | U | O | EA | NA | A | P/A | M | C | P/O | CA | SI | EF | CP | ID | CS | ER | LBE | T | GP | CR | S | IG |
| Focal Actor with possible Consultants; FA(+C) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Shetland Islands, UK | X | X | X* | | | X | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | X | | X | |
| Auvergne, FR | | X | X* | | | X | | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | | | | | X | | | | X |
| Blue Mountains, AUS | | X | X* | | | X | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | | | X | | | | X |
| Victoria's High Country, AUS | | X | X* | | | X | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | | | | | X | | | X | |
| Focal Actor with Few Partners; FA+FP | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Languedoc-Roussillon, FR | | X | X* | | | | | X | | X | | X | | | | X | | | X | | | | X | X | |
| Valais, CH | | X* | | | | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | | | | | X | | X | X | |
| Bargo, AUS | X | X* | X | | | X | X | | | | X | X | | | | X | X | | | | | X | | | X |
| FA+MP | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| El Llucanès, CAT, ES | X | X | X* | | | X | X | | X | | | | X | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | X |
| Black Forest region, DE | X | X* | | | X | | X | | X | | | | X | | | X | | | | | X | | X | X | |
| Montefeltro, IT | | X* | X* | | | X | X | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | | | X | | | | X |
| Heuvelland region, NL | | X | X | X | X* | X | X | | | | X | X | | | | X | | | | | X | | X | X | |
| Pajottenland, BE | | | X | | X* | X | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | X | | X | | | | | | X |
| Pajottenland& Zennevallei, BE | X | X | X | | X* | X | X | | X | | | X | | | | X | | X | | X | X | | | X | |
| Haspengouw, BE | | X | X | | X* | X | X | | X | | | X | | | X | X | | | | X | X | | | X | |
| West Cork region, IR | | X* | X | | | X | | X | X | | | | X | X | | X | X | | | | X | | | X | |
| Monmouthshire, UK | | X | X | | X* | X | | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | X | | X | X | |
| the city of Stratford, CA | | X | X | | X* | X | | X | | X | | | X | | | X | | | | | X | | X | X | |
| Westhoek, BE | X | X | X | | | X | | X | X | | | X | | | | X | X | | X | X | X | | | | X |

Legend: LR – local residents; LB – local businesses; LA – local authorities; U – university/researchers; O – organizations (local, regional, NGO, national park, etc.); EA – external actors; NA – non-administrative; A – administrative; P/A – political/administrative; M – mixed; C – community; P/O – political/organizational; CA – community agreement; SI – strong identity; EF – external forces; CP – competitiveness; I – identity; CS – conservation; ER – existing residents; NR – new residents; LBE – local businesses and entrepreneurs; T – tourists/visitors; GP – general public; CR – consumers; type of place brand: S – sectoral; IG – integrated
 *= focal actor

Table 2. Patterns of place branding types

FA+(C) is usually applied when the initiative comes from a political or administrative body. This is often the case when there is clear administrative power. At the same time, there is generally also mostly political or organizational support for the branding. While different groups of actors are involved to different degrees, the local authorities usually act as the focal actor. External consultants regularly are involved in brainstorming about local identity and values with the residents. Local businesses are also often involved. This type of process is applied in places where competitiveness is the sole purpose of place branding, yet the place brand can be both integrated and sectoral. The most common target group of place branding processes in this category are tourists.

The initiative for the cases in the FA+FP category was usually mixed, but always with

political or organizational support. It was mainly found in administrative places. The target groups of the cases in this study were diverse and the branding mostly resulted in a sectoral brand. Often, the focal actor is a chamber of commerce or other kind of local business association. The purpose for this type is generally competitiveness, except when the target group is the general public, in which case place identity is also among the goals of the branding initiative.

The process of FA+MP is often applied in non-administrative regions. The process often starts with a collaborative initiative by different groups of actors, one of which then takes the role of a focal actor. There is often a convergence of political or administrative initiative and community support, or mixed imitative and political or organizational or community support for the place branding, when this type of process is applied. Further, it is this type that is most often applied when the branding is done to achieve a combination of purposes. As for the previous types, the target groups are consumers and tourists. Additionally, local residents and especially local businesses and entrepreneurs are more often among the target groups. Therefore, the place brand is often a sectoral brand.

The most collaborative type of process, MDA, is applied when the initiative comes from the local community or from a group of actors. While a focal actor is missing in these cases, notably the involvement of external actors is often also low. This type of process is applied in both administrative and non-administrative places. In line with the lack of a focal actor and the community initiative, support for this kind of place branding usually comes from the community. Therefore, it is quite typical a strong identity forms the basis for the brand. Besides of competitiveness, this type of branding process is applied when the purpose is the conservation of natural or cultural landscape or heritage. The most common target groups for this type of PBP are tourists and consumers. Therefore, the type of place brand created is most often sectoral.

When the process type DAE is applied, the initiative and support base are political/administrative, and authorities are the only actor group involved. This place branding type is often applied when the branding is done for a non-administrative region, in order to increase the region's competitiveness or for conservation purposes, for example the creation of a natural park that stretches over different municipalities. The created brands are often sectoral brands targeted at tourists.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to review the literature that studies rural places' approach to place

branding and to analyse how contextual factors are related to the choice of the type of place branding process that is applied. It has mostly been within the last decade and a half that rural place branding has received academic attention. Relatively few of the existing, mostly qualitative, studies focused specifically and solely on the PBP. Although rural places are quite diverse, this study identified six main contextual factors– type of place, initiative, support base, brand purpose, target group, and type of place brand – that are related to the application of the various process types. Further, five different PBP types: ‘focal actor with possible consultants’ involvement’ (FA+C), ‘focal actor with few partners’ (FA+FP), ‘focal actor with many partners’ (FA+MP), ‘many different actors’ (MDA) and ‘co-creation among different administrative entities’ (DAE) emerged from the cases that have been reviewed and included in this meta study. These range from rather top-down ones to participative bottom-up processes. In addition, constellations of the contextual factors have been identified that were characteristic for each of the PBP types. The most decisive factors are the type of place, the type of actors that initiate the PBP and the type of support for the place brand. However, some contextual factors seem to be rather general and, hence, do not have influence on the type of PBP that is applied. For example, competitiveness is a general purpose of place branding, that applied to all cases in the sample. The non-administrative type without a focal actor (MDA) is mostly used for sectoral brands, rather than integrated place brands, while the other PBP types are used for both types of place brands.

While all PBP types can in principle be applied in any kind of place, including urban places, the likelihood for the application of the most participative types (FA+MP, MDA) is probably higher in rural vs. urban places. These PBP types are typically applied in absence of an administrative structure for the place. In rural places, administrative structures are increasingly non-existent due to mergers of rural areas into larger administrative entities. Therefore, bottom-up PBPs are more often observed there. The typology and the findings on the relationship between PBP and contextual factors can provide rural place managers and initiatives engaging in rural place branding processes with guidance for applying a place brand development process that suits their regional context and purpose. The initiative-taking actors can for example use the framework to choose the most suitable PBP based on which parts of the society they know they have support from for the place branding. Further, if they have several goals with the place branding beyond competitiveness, the rather collaborative PBP should be aimed for.

Limitations and further research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, due to the limited number of studies on the topic so far, case studies on place branding, place marketing as well as place promotion have been included in the review. This might have affected the analysis due to the different (lower) degree of complexity in place promotion and place marketing than in place branding (Boisen, Terlouw, Groote, & Couwenberg, 2018).

Second, the variety of places included in this review is quite big. One could question the comparability of these places. But the reality of rural places is characterized by diversity, and the places are often comprised of different public authorities, private businesses, organizations and residents. This reality makes rural place branding challenging, complex and distinct from that of bigger cities or nations where the physical and administrative borders are often much clearer. Further, the rural places included in this meta study apply place branding as a means to deal with similar problems and challenges. All cases in the sample represent rural places in the developed world. No cases from developing countries, or cases that were not facing development issues such as population decline, negative image, economic struggles or lack of common identity were included.

Third, this review is based on the information found in the published works reviewed which naturally different degrees of detail available on each of the cases. Fourth, it has to be stressed that this review did not aim at identifying the most effective or successful place branding process. In some cases, it was possible to include the results of the branding process, but often the articles included in this study did not offer much insight on this.

In light of these limitations and the general lack of research on rural place branding, various avenues for future research are suggested. First, it would be interesting to incorporate the success (or failure) of the place brand into the framework. Which process type is more effective in developing a place brand that is capable of gaining a widespread internal support from its stakeholders? Which process type is the most efficient one in developing a place brand that achieves success with external stakeholders? And which process type achieves both? Second, the roles and degrees of involvement of the different actor groups is rarely specified in the cases included here. Therefore, for future research it would be interesting to go in depth with the roles of various actor groups in the different PBP types. Third, how do the place stakeholders 'use' the brand? Or, rather, for which place stakeholders would the brand be a valuable resource? Is it the public authority, the business community, some sector of the local economy, the residents, or all of

these, and possibly other place stakeholders, that will integrate the place brand in their lives, businesses, organizations, policies, and communication? And how will they do that and for which purposes? Finally, future research should test the proposed framework. Comparative studies of different kinds of places could find evidence for the relative importance of the different contextual factors for the choice of a PBP type in rural and places and test the interrelationships among the contextual factors.

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Appendix 1. Overview of articles and cases included for analysis

| No. | Author (Year) | Journal | Place |
|---|---|---|---|
| <i>Obtained from main search</i> | | | |
| 1 | Blichfeldt & Halkier (2011) | European Planning Studies | Løgstør (DK) |
| 2 | Cavicchi, Rinaldi, & Corsi (2013) | International Food and Agribusiness Management Review | Marche region (IT) |
| 3 | de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona (2015) | Journal of Rural Studies | El Lluçanès, (CAT, ES) |
| 4 | Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema (2017) | Place Branding and Public Diplomacy | Bretagne region (FR); Languedoc-Roussillon (FR); Black Forest region (DE); West Cork region (IR) |
| 5 | García, Horlings, Swagemakers, & Fernández (2013) | Place Branding and Public Diplomacy | River Minho Estuary (PT + ES) |
| 6 | Gibson & Davidson (2004) | Journal of Rural Studies | Tamworth (AUS) |
| 7 | Grydehøj (2011) | Space and Polity | Shetland Islands (Scotland, UK) |
| 8 | Horlings (2012) | Place Branding and Public Diplomacy | Het Groene Woud; Heuvelland region (NL) |
| 9 | Horlings & Kanemasu (2015) | Land Use Policy | Shetland Islands (Scotland, UK) |
| 10 | Lee, Wall, & Kovacs (2015) | Journal of Rural Studies | the city of Stratford; District Municipality of Muskoka (CA) |
| 11 | Martin & Capelli (2017) | Public Management Review | Auvergne (FR) |
| 12 | Messely, Dessein, & Rogge (2015) | Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie | Westhoek; Pajottenland & Zennevallei (BE) |
| 13 | Mettepenningen et al., (2012) | Sociologia Ruralis | Meetjesland; Haspengouw; Parc Naturel des Deux Ourthes; Gaume (BE) |
| 14 | Michelet & Giraut (2014) | Revue de Geographie Alpine | Valais (CH) |
| 15 | Porter (2013) | Journal of Landscape Architecture | Blue Mountains (NSW, AUS) |
| 16 | Ryan & Mizerski (2010) | Place Branding and Public Diplomacy | New Norcia (WA, AUS) |
| 17 | Willemsen & van der Veen (2014) | Journal of Place Management and Development | Utrechtse Heuvelrug region (NL) |
| <i>Obtained from complementary search</i> | | | |

| | | | |
|----|--|---|---|
| 18 | Giovanardi, Lucarelli & Pasquinelli (2013) | Marketing Theory | Montefeltro; Romagna; Val di Cornia (IT) |
| 19 | Grydehøj (2008) | Island Studies Journal | Shetland Islands (Scotland, UK) |
| 20 | Haven-Tang & Sedgley (2014) | Journal of Destination Marketing & Management | Monmouthshire (SE Wales, UK) |
| 21 | Kerr & Johnson (2005) | Place Branding | Bargo (NSW, AUS) |
| 22 | Mayes (2008) | Place Branding and Public Diplomacy | Bargo (NSW, AUS) |
| 23 | Messely et al. (2010) | APSTRACT | Groene Woud (NL); West Cork (IR); Pajottenland (BE) |
| 24 | Pasquinelli (2011) | Book chapter in Pike (2011) 'Brands and branding geographies' | Val di Cornia (IT) |
| 25 | Vik & Villa (2010) | Sociologia Ruralis | Fjærland (NO) |
| 26 | Wheeler, Frost & Weiler (2011) | Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing | Victoria's High Country; the King Valley (VIC, AUS) |

Paper 2: The organization of rural place branding processes: engagement in service eco-systems

Barbora Gulisova¹

Chris Horbel²

Egon Noe³

Abstract

While there usually exists a central organization to steer the place branding process in cities and tourism destinations, in rural places a focal actor often does not exist. At the same time, rural places are diverse, and it can be expected that there are different approaches to place branding processes among rural places. We develop a theoretical framework based on the concepts of service eco-systems and actor engagement that is applied to analyze qualitative data collected from several Danish rural places. We identify four different types of rural place branding processes based on a combination of three dimensions: (1) the existence and type of focal actor, (2) the type, extent and temporal properties of other actor groups' engagement, and (3) the organization of the process, including its formalization, centralization and strategic focus. Type 1 is a highly formalized, centralized and strategically driven process under the leadership of a public authority. The other types are community-based approaches. Type 2 is formalized, rather centralized, and strategically directed process. Type 3 is somewhat formalized, centralized and strategically focused. Finally, type 4 is non-formalized, decentralized process with ad-hoc initiatives. The typology can provide guidance for rural communities and place branding practitioners regarding the organization of the place branding approach depending on local actor properties and their willingness to engage in place branding.

Keywords: place branding, actor engagement, service eco-systems, rural places, focal actor

Status: manuscript ready for submission

¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

² Associate Professor, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

³ Professor, Danish Centre for Rural Research & Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

Introduction

Due to challenges such as economic and population decline, loss of identity (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), and urbanization (Horlings & Marsden, 2014), rural places need to focus on reputation improvement in order to attract new residents (Sørensen, 2018), as well as to keep the young from moving away (Thuesen, Mærsk, & Randløv, 2018). A common approach to support local development and to improve reputation is the practice of place branding (Anholt, 2010; Gyimóthy, 2019; Horlings & Marsden, 2014). While there has been a growing number of publications on rural place branding, relatively little is known about the organizational approach of rural place branding initiatives (Gulisova, 2020). Studies of the processes applied to develop place brands have so far mainly been done in the context of cities, destinations and nations (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Muñiz, 2016). This research highlights that the leadership of place branding is usually seen as the responsibility of local governments or Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) (Hanna & Rowley, 2015) and tourism offices, and involving marketing and branding professionals (Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014). Contrary to cities, rural places are characterized by lower population density, and larger distances to the nearest administrative center (Søgaard, 2011). Due to these geographical, demographic and administrative differences, it can be expected that the organization of place branding applied in rural places might deviate from those of cities, nations, and tourism destinations. Vuorinen and Vos (2013) found that place branding in rural regions rests mainly on the efforts of private stakeholders, while the public organizations are needed to create the conditions for a joint approach.

Especially since the emergence of service-dominant (S-D) logic in marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and its adoption to the place marketing and branding field (Warnaby, 2009), place branding scholars have called for the application of more inclusive, participative approaches to place branding (e.g., Kavaratzis, 2012). In destination branding, it has been suggested that different branding strategies may be required depending on the administrative context, the type and diversity of involved stakeholders and other place-specific factors (Hankinson, 2009). Furthermore, Gulisova (2020) revealed that different kinds of rural places apply different place branding processes depending on their administrative set-up, the initiator and the goal for the branding initiative. Hence, a place's institutional arrangements – its system and structure of “rules, norms, meanings, symbols, practices, and similar aides to collaboration” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 6) - matter for the type of branding process to be applied.

The aim of this paper is therefore to provide a better understanding of the relationships

between institutional arrangements of rural places and their approaches to place branding. While Gulisova's (2020) typology highlights the diversity of rural place branding processes depending on contextual characteristics of the place, it largely excludes the roles of the local actors in this process. This study therefore aims to extend and modify this typology, by investigating the type, extent and temporal properties of local actor engagement in the place branding process. This is combined with studying the different forms of organization of rural place branding processes. In addition, the dynamics of rural place branding processes and their evolution over time are investigated.

The following research question will guide the analysis and conceptual development:

RQ: How does the organization of rural place branding processes relate to the type of involved actors and their engagement in the process?

To answer this research question, the theoretical perspective of actor engagement and service eco-systems (Vargo, Koskela-Huotari, & Vink, 2020) is applied to show how various place stakeholders collaborate in the process of place branding. Thereby the paper contributes to place branding theory by revealing organizational configurations of rural place branding processes depending on the constellation of local actors and their engagement in rural place branding.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, the concepts of place brands and place branding will be introduced. Thereafter, an overview of various approaches to place branding, as discussed in the literature will be provided. This is followed by the theoretical framework focusing on service eco-systems and actor engagement. Following an overview of the research design, the findings are presented and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework. Finally, some remarks regarding limitations and suggestions for future research are made.

Literature Review

Place brands and place branding

It has been argued that place is not an object, but rather a "dynamic holistic entity" (Greenop & Darchen, 2015, p. 382), built upon the identity, relations and history, which are subject to ongoing changes. Consequently, it has been suggested that different actors and stakeholders interact in constructing and giving meaning to the place brand (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Medway & Warnaby, 2014). Place brands are more than their slogans and logos. A place brand is the set of associations in people's minds "based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of

a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design" (Zenker & Braun, 2010, p. 3). Hankinson (2004) suggests that a place brand is a "relational network brand" (p. 114) that is built by extending "the core brand through effective relationships with stakeholders" (p. 116).

The relational network perspective of place brands implies that presenting a consistent brand proposition is challenging. Place branding is "a coordinated process rather than a managed activity" (Hankinson, 2004, p. 112). It has been defined as "the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people" (Boisen, 2015, p. 14). Due to the inherent complexity of place branding resulting from the diversity of place producers and users, administrative overlaps, and lack of control over the place (Hankinson, 2007), it is important to understand it as an "open-ended process". Place branding must pay "tribute to the unique, local particularity of the ways in which place-making elements combine and interact over time" (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1379). It needs to involve the relevant stakeholders in all stages of the process (Kavaratzis, 2012). Consequently, calls for a change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach in place branding have been made (Braun, Kalandides, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013).

In the context of cities, place branding is often a governance strategy to communicate and influence perceptions and behaviors of citizens or visitors (Karens, Eshuis, Klijn, & Voets, 2016) and a tool of policy making at different levels and in different contexts (Kalandides, 2011). As such, place branding for cities is typically part of the administrative and political context (Braun, 2012), and an "established aspect of public administration" (Hankinson, 2009, p. 106). At the same time, it is often a "selective political process" (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1378), due to the diversity of its stakeholders, their interests, and often complicated relations among them. This political understanding of places often contradicts the need for certain unity in place branding (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

The inherent complexities in place branding have been accounted for in proposals of more collaborative place branding models. Hankinson (2009), for example, identifies brand culture, brand leadership, departmental coordination, brand communications, and stakeholder partnerships as critical managerial practices for destination branding. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) propose to understand place branding as a facilitator of a place identity process, which then informs the quality and character of the brand experience. Consequently, they support the notion of place branding as a set of intertwined collective sub-processes, instead of a single managerial process (Kavaratzis &

Hatch, 2013).

Actor involvement in place branding

Place branding as a complex and dynamic phenomenon calls for an inclusive and democratic process, with the need to involve those with weaker voices or who are harder to reach along with the powerful stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2012). According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) place brand managers are meant “to initiate, facilitate, and stimulate the place brand construction process as it is undertaken by stakeholders” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 82). Therefore, it is necessary to invest in facilitating “the participation of the widest possible set of stakeholders” and to engage in a dialogue with them (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 83). Similarly, instead of managing or controlling the brand, Brodie, Benson-Rea, and Medlin (2017) suggest that the marketing agent’s role is to initiate and facilitate the processes among various actors in the network, who develop and enhance brand identity meanings. Through interactions focused on and with the brand the actors develop shared brand meanings, as well as individual, specific and in some cases diverse meanings. Brodie et al. (2017) further acknowledge risks inherent in this approach of allowing the collective of stakeholders to define the brand. This could become an issue when individual actors prefer to have control of place branding for economic or political reasons.

Place branding for cities and tourism destinations, but also for rural places, is often a top-down process under the leadership of professionals at the city council, DMO, or municipal administration (e.g., Anholt, 2010). However, rural places with fewer resources are often dependent on a diverse group of actors and residents to engage in place branding (Gyimóthy, 2019). Waade, Pasgaard, Meldgaard, and Nielsen (2019) identified the practice of “collaborative place making” (Waade et al., 2019, p. 105) to have the potential to increase community wellbeing while also functioning as place branding. This bottom-up practice has been found to be common in Nordic rural places, that are often characterized by self-organized, communitarian initiatives (Broegaard, Larsen, & Larsen, 2019; Waade et al., 2019). The inclusive and networked character of the recent Nordic rural place brands further show that local support is not limited to finding trusted brand ambassadors. It is also “resource optimizing and crowdsourcing of labour, ideas and immaterial property” (Gyimóthy, 2019, p. 156). While such communitarian initiatives are often characterized by inclusiveness, resource scarcity is typically the main driver, because “all available resources are considered valuable and vital” (Gyimóthy, 2019, p. 156).

Gulisova (2020) developed a typology of rural place branding processes according to the

involvement of place stakeholders in them. More specifically, the identified place branding process types differ due to the existence (or non-existence) of a focal actor and whether and how other actor groups, including local residents, local businesses, local authorities, researchers, regional or local organizations (e.g., NGOs, national parks), and external actors, are involved (figure 1). These types include approaches where a focal actor takes the steering role and is supported by consultants (FA+C), those where a focal actor collaborates with few (FA+FP) or with many (FA+MP) local actor groups, and those where many different actors (MDA) share the responsibility for the branding (Gulisova, 2020). It has been shown that the application of these types is determined by six contextual characteristics of the place, including the initiator, the support for branding, the purpose, the target group, the type of place brand, and the administrative setup of the place (Gulisova, 2020). Furthermore, for branding of larger regions, collaborations of different administrative entities (DAE) are common.

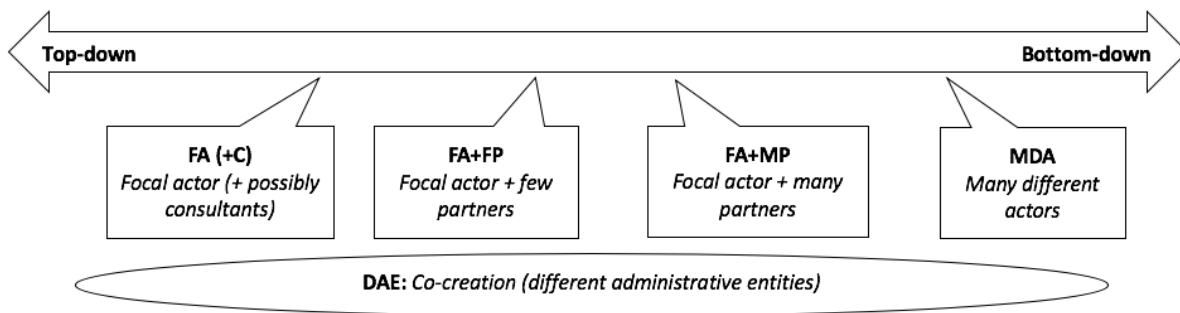


Figure 1. The typology of rural place branding processes, from Gulisova (2020).

Theoretical Background

Because of the complex, multi-actor nature of place branding processes (Hankinson, 2009; Kavartzis, 2012), this study applies the theoretical perspective provided by S-D logic. More specifically, place branding processes in this study are understood as processes of value co-creation, during which multiple actors provide and utilize resources to jointly create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Service eco-systems

According to Vargo et al. (2020), value co-creation occurs in a so-called service eco-system defined as a “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service

exchange” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, pp. 10-11). Actors exercise their individual agency to create value for themselves and others (Lusch & Vargo, 2014), but to improve resource integration and mutual value creation, they also coordinate their actions to shape the service eco-system (Taillard, Peters, Pels, & Mele, 2016), for example, by coming together in a network to coordinate the resources they each can contribute to place branding.

Service eco-systems are partly planned for and partly emergent and, hence, cannot be completely designed by a focal actor (Li, Juric, & Brodie, 2017; Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016). Taillard et al. (2016) “conceptualize service ecosystem formation as an emergent process in which individual and collective agency, together with the institutional arrangements of the social system in which they operate, are mutually constitutive entities of that system” (Taillard et al., 2016, p. 2972). Shared intentions contribute to the formation of service eco-systems (Taillard et al., 2016). Hence, place stakeholders’ agreement on the need and goal for branding facilitates the formation of a place branding service eco-system. Taillard et al. (2016) further suggest that routine practices need to be sufficiently established to support the development of shared intentionality. Individuals will then be able to rely on others’ support and commitment for value creation and relationships can be formalized, i.e., the formation of institutional arrangements takes place (Taillard et al., 2016). As mentioned earlier, service eco-systems are self-adjusting (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). When the shared intention and its perception by the actors changes, actors might choose to enter or leave the system (Li et al., 2017). Furthermore, dynamically developing relationships among resource-integrating actors can expand the service eco-system (Brodie, Fehrer, Jaakkola, & Conduit, 2019, p. 179). For example, once a group of actors have formalized their intentions and a place branding service eco-system is established, additional actors might begin to engage in it.

Notably, actors are involved in a number of concurrent co-creation processes with others (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), which suggests that “they face multiple, potentially conflicting contexts in which they are engaged” (Alexander, Jaakkola, & Hollebeek, 2018, p. 334). Therefore, actors might face conflicts between their involvement in place branding and other roles they hold.

Actor engagement

Actor engagement describes “actors’ disposition to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system” (Brodie et al., 2019, p. 174). It has been suggested as a micro foundation for value co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016), as it serves to conceptualize actors’

involvement in value co-creation processes. In the context of place branding, the engaging actors can be individual actors, including residents, entrepreneurs, politicians, and businesses, or collections of individual actors, including citizen or trade associations or municipal departments (Lusch & Vargo, 2014; Storbacka et al., 2016). Actors' engagement disposition in a particular service eco-system is influenced by the institutional arrangements of the system and actors' need to balance roles in multiple engagement contexts (Alexander et al., 2018). Both affect actors' propensity to take up interests and ideas and invest their resources for their and/or the other actors' benefit in a particular service eco-system (Brodie et al., 2019; Taillard et al., 2016). Furthermore, engagement behaviours' temporal properties need to be taken into account (Storbacka et al., 2016). These include the duration of actor engagement, its frequency, recency, and regularity, e.g., whether an actor has been regularly involved in the place branding initiative or has only engaged irregularly with it. In addition, the level of actor engagement varies, from providing suggestions and comments, to participation in specific forms of co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). The different actor engagement behaviours may include augmenting, i.e., adding to the place brand; co-developing, i.e., facilitating development of the brand; influencing, i.e., word-of-mouth; and mobilizing, i.e., recommendations (Alexander et al., 2018; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Hence, engaging actors may contribute through their skills, knowledge, time, funding or other resources. The integration of these different resources is the core activity for the actors to co-create value, including the creation and support of the place brand.

The perspective of actor engagement implies that actors' contributions of resources such as time, effort and energy, go beyond what is elementary to transactional exchange (Alexander et al., 2018; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). In place branding, this is especially relevant, as the engagement of many actors, such as local residents, and their contributions of time and energy, are voluntary activities.

Actor groups in the place branding service eco-system can be shifting; some exist before the engagement occurs, some form because of the engagement process and may dissolve when the interest for the process fades. Therefore, eco-system evolution and development is driven by actors' constant entry and leaving (Li et al., 2017). Place branding service eco-systems can for example involve more actors in an initial phase (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), than once the place branding activities are implemented or vice versa. Due to multiple, and possibly conflicting, engagement contexts, actors might withdraw resources from some of them and permanently or temporarily disengage (Alexander et al., 2018, p. 342). For example, a local businesses' branding

might conflict with the place branding, leading to a withdrawal of the businesses' support for the place branding.

Theoretical Framework

Gulisova (2020) has developed a typology of five rural place branding processes. While this typology differentiates rural place branding processes according to the existence of a focal actor, and other actor groups involved in the place branding, it does not provide insight into the roles of the involved actors in the place branding process. This study therefore aims to refine this basic typology by including the determinants of actor engagement in place branding, and how these relate to the social, structural and administrative context of places.

For this purpose, place branding will be understood as a service eco-system and a process that is driven by the engagement of various actors. Based on the literature review of rural place branding processes and the application of the theoretical perspective of service eco-systems and actor engagement, the following needs for the further development of the typology of rural place branding processes have been identified (see also table 1). First, besides the existence of a focal actor (Gulisova, 2020), the emergence of this actor should be included. The focal actor might pre-exist or be established for the specific purpose of place branding. This may have an impact on its role within the process (Li et al., 2017). Second, in addition to the identification of the actor groups involved in the process of place branding (Gulisova, 2020), their specific actor engagement properties including duration, frequency and regularity of their engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016), termination of engagement (Li et al., 2017), resources contributed, as well as their specific engagement behaviours (Alexander et al., 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Storbacka et al., 2016) need to be understood. Third, the organizational properties of the place branding process as a service eco-system, including its degrees of formalization and centralization should be included. The intentionality of the formation of the place branding eco-system should be considered (Li et al., 2017; Taillard et al., 2016), as this affects the formalization of the branding process. Furthermore, while the role of the focal actor determines the degree of centralization of the process (Storbacka et al., 2016). Finally, both the formalization and centralization of the place branding process are interdependent with its strategic direction, which therefore should also be determined (Hankinson, 2009; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015)

| Dimension | Sub-dimensions | Description | Source |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Focal actor | Existence of a focal actor | Does a focal actor exist to lead the place branding process? | Gulisova (2020) |
| | Type of focal actor | Was the focal actor pre-existing or did it emerge because of the place branding? | Li et al., (2017) |
| Actor engagement | Actor groups | Which actor groups besides the focal actor are engaged in the process (e.g., local businesses, local authorities, residents, organizations, external actors)? | Gulisova (2020) |
| | Temporal properties | When in the process do the different actor groups engage? How long? How frequently? How regularly? | Li et al., (2017), Storbacka et al., (2016) |
| | Behavioural properties | What kind of behaviour (augmenting, co-developing, influencing, loyalty) do the actor groups engage in? | Alexander et al., (2018), Jaakkola & Alexander (2014), Hollebeek et al., (2014) |
| | Resources | Which resources do the actor groups contribute (e.g., time, skills, knowledge, opinions, expertise, funding)? | |
| Organization | Formalization | How institutionalized is the collaboration? | Li et al., (2017), Taillard et al., (2016), Storbacka et al., (2016), |
| | Centralization | How centralized is the network around a focal actor? | Hankinson, (2009), Kavaratzis & Kalandides, (2015) |
| | Strategic orientation | Is the place branding oriented towards achieving strategic outcomes? | |

Table 1. Theoretical framework of actor engagement and service eco-system in rural place branding processes

Research Design

To provide the empirical data, a number of rural places in Denmark were chosen for the current study. Similar to other countries, many rural communities in Denmark are challenged due to depopulation (Sørensen, 2018). In addition, they suffer from negative press coverage and low status attached to living there (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2014). In a study on the Danish population's attitudes towards rural areas, it was recommended to use marketing strategies, including local branding, in order to improve their reputation among the public (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2014). In line with this, many small towns and villages in Denmark started to develop their own brands (Andersen, 2015), and most Danish municipalities have spent considerable amounts of money on branding (JydskeVestkysten, 2017). It was therefore deemed timely to study the different approaches applied for place branding in the different types of rural areas in Denmark. One of the typologies of Danish municipalities, which are the local level authorities in the country, categorizes them as city-, middle-, rural- or outskirt municipalities (Social- og Indenrigsministeriet, 2020). However rural places do not only include municipalities, but also small towns, villages, islands and

other rural communities that administratively belong to one of the 98 municipalities. For the purpose of this study, we chose to include different types of rural places, including villages, small towns, an island and rural or outskirt municipalities. Thereby, we aimed to gain insight into the relationship between different types of place branding approaches and the social, geographic and administrative characteristics of the places. The places were identified through a workshop on rural place branding, a rural research conference and a call for participation in the newsletter of the Danish Centre for Rural Research (Center for Landdistriktsforskning, 2018). The goal of the selection was the coverage of the different types of rural places. An additional search of places was conducted by the researchers to complete the selection. An overview of the cases is provided in Appendix 1.

Communication departments, responsible for place branding at the municipalities and heads of local citizen associations in the smaller places were approached first. Snowball sampling was used to find more actors engaged in branding of the places, stopping when information redundancy was reached (Jennings, 2010). Further, to avoid a too high similarity among the participants, the researchers approached additional actors which were not mentioned through snowball sampling. This maximum variation sampling approach provided a wider range of data, with wider points of view on the phenomenon studied and ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2013). The final number and a brief description of interviewees in each of the places is shown in table 2.

Qualitative, explorative methodology was applied. Semi-structured interviews (Lee & Aslam, 2018) using an interview guide (Appendix 2) were conducted with 50 representatives of the rural places. The interviews lasted between 17 and 89 minutes, were recorded, transcribed in the original language (Danish) and thematically analysed (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). Deductive coding according to the theoretical framework was applied for the analysis. The concepts of service eco-systems and actor engagement from S-D logic served to develop the dimensions of the typology and hence for the identification of generic place branding types (Jaakkola, 2020; Lindgreen, Benedetto, Brodie, & Jaakkola, 2020). Documents, including websites, were used for triangulation in order to enhance the internal validity (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The findings are therefore transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to other place branding cases in similar contexts to those studied here, rather than generalizable.

| Place | Interviewee and interviewee description |
|----------------------|---|
| Esbjerg Municipality | EK1 - Head of the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK2 - Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| | EK3 - Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK4 - Museum director, vice chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK5 - Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK6 - CEO of an international company based in the city |
| | EK7 - Head of one of the educational institutions in the city, board member of the municipal business org. |
| | EK8 - Co-owner of a local design bureau |
| Darum | D1 - Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D2 - Member of the local sport club's board, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D3 - Volunteer, responsible for website etc. (retiree) |
| Gørding | G1 - Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | G2 - Local company owner (construction supplies, etc.) |
| | G3 - Editor of the parish magazine, webmaster for the town's website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Ribe | Ri1 - Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | Ri2 - Head of tourism at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri3 - Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of municipal business organization |
| | Ri4 - Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri5 - Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri6 - Chairman for the local citizen council and a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri7 - Director of the hostel in the town, chairman of the official festivals/events, board member at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri8 - Vice-chair in the local trade organization, local journalist |
| | Ri9 - Museum director, chairman for the town's tourism marketing network |
| Skive Municipality | SK1 - Team leader, communication department at the municipality |
| | SK2 - Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | SK3 - Director of the local radio |
| | SK4 - Radio host, chairman for the biggest local music festival |
| | SK5 - Artist involved in different projects in Selde and its neighbouring villages, hired by SK |
| Rødding | R1 - Member of the branding association board for the marketing working group, volunteer (retiree) |
| | R2 - Member of the local development association board, head of the marketing working group; volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | R3 - Chairman of the local development association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Selde | S1 - Owner of the local gallery and other artist facilities in the village (retiree) |
| | S2 - Chairman for the self-owned institution called 'sculpture village', involved in many diff. things, volunteer (retiree) |
| | S3 - Co-owner of the local gallery etc. (retiree) |
| Fur | F1 - Head of the local development and branding group, museum inspector |
| Varde Municipality | VK1 - Municipality, senior management consultant |
| | VK2 - Municipality, development consultant |
| | VK3 - Municipality, communication employee |
| | VK4 - Company owner (outdoors furniture, huts, timber products) |

| | |
|--------|---|
| | VK5 - Company owner (food products, restaurant) |
| | VK6 - Designer, owner of local design bureau |
| Billum | B1 - Previous chairman of the parish association, volunteer (retiree, B&B owner, farmer) |
| | B2 - Member of the parish association, volunteer (cheese and meat producer) |
| | B3 - Editor of the website, volunteer (independent designer) |
| | B4 - Chair of the parish association, volunteer (fulltime job, shop owner, also member of the business and real estate association) |
| | B5 - Chair of the business and real estate association, volunteer (retired company owner) |
| | B6 - Editor of the website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Oksbøl | O1 - Chair of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job, member of municipal council) |
| | O2 - Member of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | O3 - Retired craftsman, ex-member in different associations, including in municipal council |

Table 2. Overview of interviewees

Findings

In this section, we present the findings of the study related to the existence and type of focal actor, other actor groups and their engagement, and the organization of the place branding process. A typology based on these dimensions is presented before the findings are discussed in the following section.

Existence and type of focal actor

In the places with administrative and political power, i.e., the municipalities, the communication department takes the role of the focal actor. In some municipalities, a public-private business organization shares the role with the municipal communication department. In the smaller places without such an administrative unit, there are different types of focal actors.

In some places, various local actors come together to form either a joint marketing group, a development council or a special interest group to coordinate the branding, i.e., to function as the focal actor. In Ribe, *“something called Ribe Joint Marketing was created”* (Ri9) by the business association, the four cultural institutions, various accommodation providers as well as restaurants and cafes. In this network, they pool resources and use them to attract visitors to the town. In towns with more limited resources, where branding is often integrated in the general place development, local actors form a development council to optimize resource use and apply a more strategic approach to place branding. A head of a local development group explained that *“it wasn’t just supposed to be a working group under an existing association... No, we simply had to establish a*

new organization, that was supposed to work strategically with it” (F1). The development councils are formed by the local businesses, citizen and tourism associations, local foundations, sport and other associations, where the representatives from each association or company report back to their respective organizations. Place branding can also develop from a special-interest initiative, for example an arts initiative, where the special interest group becomes the focal actor.

In small towns that only recently started to consider place branding, no new organizations have been set up. Instead, the local citizen councils initiate and coordinate the branding approach. Sometimes, the number of actors involved in the branding is very limited:

We are us two, right. But every time we agree that it is the easiest, ... we work well together, think a lot in the same way, and want the same things. I think it's easier than to involve all possible others and to be so democratic....it is not to exclude anybody, But it's such a field of interest and I think that, because we now are Wadden Sea Ambassadors, so, that's something you commit to. (D3)

Finally, there are small towns where several groups or individuals work towards the same goal, yet without a strategic plan or coordinated efforts. For example, in Billum, they established a PR group, but it was only responsible for updates of the webpage (B3). Two other associations became involved as well, the parish association working with resident attraction, and the property- and business investment association concentrating its efforts on business attraction.

Other actor groups and their engagement

In the municipalities, the communication department was supported by the municipal council and manager and was dependent on their continuing support for the brand (SK1). Professional branding consultants were hired for the initial phase, during which the local business community, cultural and educational institutions and (sometimes) citizens were invited to workshops to discuss and develop the place's values and identity. Afterwards, a local design bureau created the visual expression of the brand based on the consultants' proposal and the municipal council approved the design. In some places the designers engaged throughout the entire process of brand definition, design and implementation, and in further work with the municipality, while in other places, they disengaged after the initial phase when the value propositions started to further develop. For example, one of the designers mentioned that, *“after some time, I pushed it away ..., and I didn't really think that the municipality understood the task they should be doing” (VK6).* Hence, in the longer-term local actor engagement was decreasing, and only a few actors kept engaging with the municipal branding. A representative of a festival organization explained that their engagement

with the brand was *“nothing else than that we of course apply for the ‘Rent Liv’ fund for subsidies”* (SK4). Nevertheless, they also try to live up to the values of the municipal brand.

In Varde Municipality, a group of business owners presented to other companies how they used the municipal brand in their businesses in order to inspire these other companies to engage with it. The lack of a brand coordinator was perceived as a problem for the engagement with the brand by several interviewees in Varde Municipality, especially for the business community (VK4, VK5, VK6, but also B2). Further, a business owner pointed out, that there was a difference in the working cultures of the municipality and the businesses, since *“the municipality backs out as soon as we start talking about something concrete, they like to talk about it, but then they back out”* (VK4). Throughout the place branding process, some local actors realized, that it is not the formal organizations alone that create the brand, but that other actors, though informally, have an influence on the brand and contribute to brand co-creation. For example, a museum director and vice chairman of the municipal business organization expressed that *“there is the informal, if you can say it that way. And there are all the companies that define what Esbjerg Municipality is, based on what they do. ... then there is the civilian population ...”* (EK4).

In the smaller places, residents, individually or as members of associations, local businesses and (e.g., sports) associations were often involved in the branding. Many activities in Ribe, for example, were driven by residents. Some even created an association to take care of the historical buildings. Yet, it is often the same people who are involved in the different activities. An interviewee from the island of Fur stressed that except for the strategy development, it is *“residents on the island, who actually are the ones making the difference in the end”* (F1).

While in some places not many residents were involved in the development of a strategy for place branding, the willingness to volunteer when practical help with concrete tasks was needed, was high (D3). A resident in Oksbøl mentioned, it was easier to find people *“to work with some ad-hoc tasks, because then they can relate to what their task is. And they know that it ends at some point in time, it’s not like coming into the board, where you get tied to something”* (O3). Further, many local *“business owners, choose to take their time”* (B2) to be involved in the branding, or support it *“either with arms or legs or financially”* (G2).

In some places the municipality was also engaging with the smaller place brands, either through knowledge exchange, communication of the brand, or through provision of funding or skills. For example, in Fur, Rødding, and Selde the municipality contributed external skills. A representative from the apple festival in Rødding mentioned that Skive municipality had hired a

consultant to provide advice on “*different areas here, to help with places where you can do events*”, and that different small towns could ask for help by the consultant and discuss their ideas with it (R1). Further, in some places, other external actors, e.g., researchers, architects, artists, were involved at some point during the process.

Organization of the collaboration

The organization of the place branding processes in terms of their formalization, centralization and strategic orientation varied considerable across the different places. In the municipalities, an official municipal brand was created as a result of workshops led by branding consultants. Hence, the municipal communication department as the focal actor in the process had the responsibility for the brand development. Despite this strategic approach to branding centralized at the municipality, other actors, though informally, shaped the brand through their actions and some of them even developed their own place-related brands. As an example, the director of the local radio station in Skive Municipality distinguished between the paid radio spots they do for the official municipal brand, and the organic interviews or news stories about positive things happening in the municipality. This highlights how other actors co-create the brand and contribute to create its meaning, despite the leadership of a strong focal actor.

The smaller places had different ways of organizing the collaboration. The highest degrees of organization were observed in smaller places that have been doing place branding for a long time. Here the process was formalized and centralized around the focal actor, and there was a high strategic focus. In Ribe, the joint marketing network worked well “*because we have the collaboration we have, and we know each other so well, and sit often around the same table, talk together, so therefore it is easy to find out what makes sense*” (Ri2). In Rødding and Fur, the development councils have been formed to take care of the strategic aspects of the branding, while leaving the daily tasks to other associations. In this way, some resources were released, and more people could engage with the branding as they could just choose to engage on an ad-hoc basis, while the strategic part was taken care of by others. In Selde, the few local people interested in art formally engaged in the strategic branding process, as the place branding had developed from what “*started 40 years ago, as something completely different. It has never been the idea that it should brand Selde*”. It has survived due to their “*stubbornness... and so, the story has taken a new turn, now it has become something to gather around, and so you can brand the town, because you have something to show*” (S1).

In small towns that only recently have begun with branding, no new organizations have been set up, but the local citizen councils try to initiate and coordinate the branding process. For example, in Gørding, *“there are four people in the branding group... who are from the local council, and then we have our webmaster, who isn’t in the local council”* (G1). Hence, there is some formalization of the process, and it can be seen as centralized to some degree around the branding group. Further, there is some strategic direction to their initiatives, but not as much as in the municipalities and the places with long-term branding experience.

Finally, there are small towns where the place branding is a rather ad-hoc activity. Several groups or individuals work towards the same goal, yet without a strategic plan or coordinated efforts. There are often many good intentions, but there is a lack of strategy or focus, *“I actually think that branding in relation to Oksbøl suffers because there is no guiding strategy”* (O2). Instead, the branding is very fragmented with each local association doing their own activities. In Billum, there were two associations cooperating on some aspects, but they did not really coordinate their efforts. This also created some tensions, *“it’s also cool that they say, well we’ll take that park and renovate it. But it is a bit frustrating when too many things pass by us, then we¹’ll become less and less valuable to be here”* (B2).

Typology of rural place branding processes

Through our analysis, we further identified four typical combinations of the dimensions of the theoretical framework and, hence, four types of rural place branding processes (table 3), that will be further explained in the following.

Three of the place branding process types are community-based initiatives that mostly differ regarding the degree of organization of their place branding process, and the type of focal actor. The fourth type includes all municipalities and is substantially different, as the branding here is rather centralized, with the administrative authorities as the focal actors. The rural place branding processes range from the administration-led type (type 1; here: the three municipalities), that is highly formalized, centralized and strategically driven, through the experience-based process of type 2 (here: Ribe, Rødding, Fur, Selde) that is formalized, strategic and rather centralized and the medium-level formalized, centralized and strategic transitional processes of type 3 (here: Darum, Gørding), to the ad-hoc, non-formalized initiatives of type 4 without a major focal actor (here: Billum, Oksbøl).

¹ ‘We’ here refers to the parish organization.

In addition to the forms of organization, and the types of focal actors, the types also differ regarding the temporal and behavioural actor engagement properties. While the focal actor is engaged throughout the process in all the formalized types, their engagement in the ad-hoc type 4 is rather periodical. On the other hand, residents and local businesses are engaged throughout the entire process in the community-based types, and mostly periodically or punctually in the administration-led type 1. External actors' engagement in experience-based processes (type 2) is more regularly recurrent than in administration-led (type 1) and transitional processes (type 3), where it is rather punctual, while in ad-hoc processes (type 4) no external actors, such as consultants, artists, or researchers, have been mentioned. The engagement of different local associations (sports etc.) does not seem to differ among the types of approaches. Further, the level of municipal engagement increases from the ad-hoc type 4, where it is rather punctual, through the transitional and experience-based types (3 and 2), where it becomes more regular. Finally, in administration-led processes (type 1) actor disengagement from the place branding process was observed.

While focal actors in all types engaged in similar behaviours, their resource contributions were different. In administration-led and experience-based processes (types 1 and 2), the focal actors provide mostly funding and skills, while in the community-based approaches (types 2, 3 and 4), in addition to skills, they also provide time. Further, residents and local businesses in mainly contributed their opinions in the initial phase of administration-led processes (type 1), and some of them contributed their skills later in the process. In the other types, it was skills and time that these actor groups contributed, not opinions. In ad-hoc processes (type 4), they also contributed with funding. Interestingly, the engagement behaviour was similar in all types, but residents or business engaged more actively in community-based (types 2, 3, and 4) than in administration-led (type 1) processes.

External actors, including consultants, artists, and researchers, contributed the same type of resources – skills – in all types of processes, but they engaged in a broader variety of behaviours in the communitarian experience-based and transitional processes (types 2 and 3), than in administration-led approaches (type 1). The engagement behaviour of different local associations was similar among the approaches, while their resource contribution differed in the same way as that of residents and businesses. They contributed opinions in the initial phase of the administration-led process (type 1), as opposed to time and skills in the community-based approaches (types 2, 3 and 4). Finally, the municipalities contributed mostly funding to ad-hoc

processes (type 4), while they contributed both funding and skills to transitionary and experience-based processes (type 2 and 3).

The three community-based approaches (type 2, 3 and 4) could be seen as a progression. That is, a community might start place branding through some ad-hoc activities (type 4), where the actors are not necessarily coordinated around an overall strategic goal, perhaps due to low interest by some of them or a lack of resources. When the actors start discussing branding more strategically, they might establish a branding or marketing working group under the citizen council/association and adopt a transitionary process type (type 3). While such group might not represent many local actors, the group will be assigned responsibilities for the place branding process and become increasingly visible for actors interested in getting engaged with branding. Finally, impulses from external actors (e.g., a municipality, a researcher, a consultant) or internal realization might lead to the establishment of a new association to implement a more strategic and professionalized approach to place branding and gather more actors around it (type 2). The progression might take years, emphasizing the importance of time in service eco-system formation (Storbacka et al., 2016; Taillard et al., 2016).

| | | | Administrative led | Community-based | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| | | | Type 1: Administrative led | Type 2: Experience-based | Type 3: Transitionary | Type 4: Ad-hoc |
| Focal actor | Existence of focal actor | | Yes | Yes | Yes | Partly |
| | Types of focal actor | | Existing (administration) | New | Existing (community) | Existing (community) |
| Actor engagement | Focal actor | Temporal properties | Throughout | Throughout | Throughout | Periodical |
| | | Behavioural properties | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing |
| | | Resources | Skills Funding | Skills Money Time | Skills Time | Skills Time |
| | Residents | Temporal properties | Punctual Some periodical | Many regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical | Some regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical | Some regularly Some ad-hoc Some periodical |
| | | Behavioural properties | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing |

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---|-------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| | | | | | | Mobilizing |
| | | <i>Resources</i> | Opinions Skills | Time Skills | Time Skills | Time Skills Money |
| | <i>Business community</i> | <i>Temporal properties</i> | Punctual Some regularly | Many regularly Some ad-hoc | Some regularly Some ad-hoc | Some regularly Some ad-hoc |
| | | <i>Behavioural properties</i> | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing |
| | | <i>Resources</i> | Opinions Skills | Time Skills Money | Time Skills Money | Time Skills Money |
| | <i>Educational, cultural, sport organizations</i> | <i>Temporal properties</i> | Punctual Some periodical | Periodical | Periodical | Periodical |
| | | <i>Behavioural properties</i> | Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing |
| | | <i>Resources</i> | Opinion Connections | Time Skills Connections | Time Skills Connections | Time Skills Connections |
| | <i>Municipality</i> | <i>Temporal properties</i> | Long term | Periodical | Periodical | Punctual |
| | | <i>Behavioural properties</i> | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing |
| | | <i>Resources</i> | Political and admin. approval | Skills Funding | Skills Funding | Funding |
| | <i>External actors</i> | <i>Temporal properties</i> | Punctual Some long-term | Periodical Punctual | Punctual | N/A |
| | | <i>Behavioural properties</i> | Co-developing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | Augmenting Co-developing Influencing Mobilizing | N/A |
| | | <i>Resources</i> | Skills | Skills | Skills | N/A |
| Organization | <i>Formalization</i> | | Highly formalized | Formalized | Somewhat formalized | Not formalized |
| | <i>Centralization</i> | | Highly centralized around the focal actor | Centralized around the focal actor | Medium | Decentralized |
| | <i>Strategic orientation</i> | | High strategic focus | High strategic focus | Some strategic orientation | No strategic orientation |

Table 3. Overview of characteristics of four types of rural place branding processes

Discussion

In this section, the relation between the dimensions in each type is discussed first. In administration-led processes (type 1), the focal actor, i.e., the municipal communication department, provides the brand, yet, to create actor engagement by a wider community, investments in human resources, such as a person responsible for coordinating the resource integration of different actors, or investment of financial resources in either sponsorship, or as incentives for communities and events to engage with the municipal brand are necessary.

In experience-based processes (type 2), the importance of shared and externalized intentions and the formation of institutionalized arrangements (Taillard et al., 2016) were clear. In all four cases new networks have been created (Li et al., 2017) for the purpose of branding and, unless the focus of the branding was very specialized (i.e., art), many actors engaged with the branding.

In transitionary place branding processes (type 3), the focal actor was very often the local citizen council, and, more specifically, a small group of people that had the interest to engage with the branding. In Darum, they had not yet had discussions about the need for more organized place branding, i.e., the shared intentionality was not yet there, so the few like-minded people took it on themselves to do something about the branding. Hence, the place branding service eco-system is only just emerging (Taillard et al., 2016). In Gørding, the shared intentions had been formalized, and a new focal actor in the form of a branding working group (Li et al., 2017) under the local citizen council emerged to engage in the branding. In both cases, though, there was support from the business community and local citizens, especially when help with practical tasks was needed.

Even in ad-hoc place branding processes (type 4) there are identifiable focal actors, i.e., the citizen and business association or the parish association, yet they have not been focused on strategic work with branding so far. Many actors engaged in the branding and shared intentions, but the degree of institutionalization of the place branding service eco-system is still low (Taillard et al., 2016). This could be due to a lack of resources, such as time or competencies, which different interviewees mentioned as an obstacle to levelling-up the place branding activities.

Interesting findings were made related to actor engagement over time. In administration-led processes (type 1) there was broad actor engagement in the beginning, i.e., when the brand was being defined. Once the brand was 'alive', the engagement decreased, and incentives were needed to (re-) create it. This is similar to the issue presented by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) who found that citizens were only involved in the initial consultancy phase of place branding. Yet, our findings suggest that this is not only the case for citizens, but also for other actor groups, unless

they have a special interest in the brand (e.g., the few businesses in Varde municipality that use the municipal brand to promote their products). In contrast, in the community-based approaches (type 2, 3, 4), actor engagement stretched over a longer period. Yet, while in some places there was broad actor engagement (Ribe, Rødding, Fur, Billum), in others fewer actors engaged (Selde, Darum). Therefore, even in the community-based place branding process types, engagement of a broad variety of actors is not necessarily the norm. Still, actor engagement in the community-based approaches lasts longer throughout the process.

Further, in the community-based types all actor groups engage in similar actor engagement behaviours, especially augmenting, co-developing, influencing and often also mobilizing behaviour. In contrast, in administration-led processes (type 1), there are several actor groups that only engage in one particular engagement behaviour, for example the sponsored sport clubs in influencing or the consultants and designers in co-developing behaviours. Further, municipalities contribute more resources and engage more in experience-based and transitional branding processes (type 2 and 3) than in ad-hoc processes (type 4). Finally, a higher number of external actors is engaging in transitional place branding processes (type 2) than in the other community-based approaches.

In the municipalities, the tension between engagement with the brand created through the formalized approach and other branding initiatives were pointed out by the interviewees. Similarly, in the community-based approaches, regardless of the degree of formalization, it was pointed out that there were those directly involved in the specific branding initiatives, but there were also other businesses, associations and local people contributing to the branding of the place. These informally or indirectly contributing actors also engage in co-creating the brand's meaning continuously (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). This also allows for more organic communication (Hankinson, 2004) which does not take place with the official brand when the audience does not see the connection between the place and the brand. This point was especially mentioned by interviewees in the municipalities. But, the informal type of engagement is often unstructured, not necessarily supporting the presentation of the same brand identity.

Conclusion, limitations and further research

Different types of rural places take different approaches to place branding. While in those with administrative authorities, the obvious focal actor to facilitate and lead the process of place branding exists, in those without such authorities, the focal actor has to emerge, or the approach

will lack the strategic focus by being fragmented.

Based on the existence and type of a focal actor, the engagement of other actors, and the degree of formalization of the place branding approach, we have identified four different types of rural place branding approaches. The formalized, administration-led approach (type 1); the formalized, experience- and community-based approach (type 2) where place branding has been done for some time; the somewhat formalized, transitional community-based approach (type 3) where a focal actor has begun to take steps towards more organization; and the ad-hoc, community-based approach (type 4) where the formalization and coordinated approach is mainly missing yet. While the first type is applied in municipalities with administrative power, the other three approaches are applied in non-administrative, rural places. The types have implications for actor engagement, especially in respect to the number and variety of actors engaging in the process and the duration of their engagement.

This study contributes to the field of place branding by proposing a typology of rural place branding approaches based on the type of focal actor, engagement properties and behaviours of different actor groups and the level of organization of the processes. The findings provide guidance for those involved in place branding to form an association or a group of local actors to take the role of the focal actor in order to formalize their place branding and adopt a strategic approach to it. The degree of formalization and strategic direction of the place branding process determines the opportunities to attract external resources, for example public funding, and the engagement of other actors in the branding process. Place branding practitioners can further use the typology to identify what kind of resources they can expect the local actors to contribute.

This qualitative study is based on a sample of rural places in Denmark; therefore, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to other countries or contexts. Yet, this also provides ideas for further research. Firstly, it would be interesting to investigate how suitable the application of the different place branding process types is to achieve various place branding goals. Second, for the community-based process types, it would be important to understand how individual actors' different backgrounds, motivations, and specific resources (education, professional skills) influence place branding and its outcomes. Third, international comparative studies, or at least studies in other countries could shed light on the applicability of the typology to other contexts. Fourth, testing whether similar differences exist in major cities and their neighbourhoods (corresponding to the municipalities and smaller places here) would be worthwhile for a further development of a general place branding theory.

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Appendix 1. Overview of the cases included in the study

| | Population | Area (km ²) | Description |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|---|
| Esbjerg Municipality | 115,483 | 795.3 | Esbjerg Municipality is located on the west coast of Denmark. The main city is Esbjerg, a port city, with a position as capital of the country's offshore sector. In a number of focus groups/workshops, different stakeholders representing different sectors (education, culture, business, etc., but not residents) agreed on focusing on 'energy' for the municipality's brand. The process started in 2010, and the definition phase was led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The EnergiMetropol is still the main brand but realizing that people mainly associate it with the energy sector, the municipality has begun to focus more on the main city with this brand and tries to find alternatives that more people could support. It is the municipal communication department, and a public-private business organization that control the brand. |
| Ribe | 8,317 | 7.3 | Ribe is located 32 km from Esbjerg. It is the oldest town in Denmark, with a well-preserved medieval centre. A lot of cultural attractions and events are based in the town, which is a popular tourism destination. Here the branding is done by an association created by the main attractions, accommodation places, restaurants and other visitor businesses. The local trade organization is also involved, as is the municipal business organization (incl. the tourism office). There are many community-based events taking place throughout the year, many building upon and contributing to the brand of the town. The special marketing organization has been created in 2007. |
| Gørding | 1,736 | 1.5 | Gørding is a residential town 30 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, it is located near a highway with easy access to bigger towns in the area and has a good school. The focus of their branding is its attractiveness due to an active association life and having nature close by. Their branding started with a professionalized website in 2012-13, and a slogan 'En grøn by i bevægelse' (EN: 'a green town in movement'). The branding here is done by the volunteer residents involved in the local citizen council and its working group focused on branding. |
| Darum | 896 | 1.1 | Darum is a residential town 16 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, a school that implemented an innovative organizational structure, and it is located at the border to the Wadden Sea National Park |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------|-------|---|
| | | | (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Their slogan is 'Byen bag diget' (EN: 'the town behind the dike'), they organize a 'Vadehavsdag' (EN: 'Wadden Sea day') event, and the branding is very much based on the surrounding nature and the community. The slogan has been around for many years, while the event was started in 2018. The branding here is done by few of those involved in the local citizen council. |
| Skive Municipality | 45,851 | 683.5 | Skive municipality is located on a peninsula in Mid-Jutland region, in northwest Denmark, with Skive being the main town. The branding here started in 2011, based again on a number of workshops with different sectors of the community (education, culture, industry, business, local communities). The initial phase was, also here, led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The brand, 'Rent Liv' (EN: 'Clean Life') has been controlled by the municipal communication department and has been revitalized in 2019 to sharpen its focus, which now is mostly related to sustainability, including green energy. |
| Rødning | 895 | 0.8 | Rødning is a village located 17 km from Skive. There has been an organization working with local development since 2004, while in 2008 a project started on branding the village as 'Rødning – Æblets By' (EN: 'Rødning - the town of the apple'). In 2016 the latter changed to be an organization too, and a working group on marketing was established to serve both organizations. The apple organization, as well as the development organization, are voluntary based. There's a yearly apple festival attracting visitors from afar, while the whole village is implicated with apples in one way or another (having apple trees, making apple must, cooking with apples, apple decorations, etc.). |
| Fur | 767 | 22 | Fur is a small island in the northern part of Skive municipality, 3 minutes sailing away from the peninsula. Tourism is an important industry on the island, and most people know it through their vacation experiences. The branding is part of the local development here too, and it started through a project in 2009. As a result of this, a new local development association was established, that continues to brand the island. |
| Selde | 270 | 0.4 | Selde is a village located 27 km from Skive. Their branding initiative began with an art project in 2012. The project was a result of discussions about ideas for area renewal, where some local citizens expressed a |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------|---------|--|
| | | | wish to get more art into the village. It developed very much in relation to a local gallery, which continues to be the focal point. After the initial project ended in 2014, the ‘Skulpturlandsby’ (EN: ‘Sculpture Village’) was established, with recurrent events where the sculptors create and install their pieces in the village. |
| Varde Municipality | 49,961 | 1,240.1 | Varde municipality is located just north of Esbjerg municipality, on the western coast of Denmark. Varde is the main town, and while there is a number of bigger companies in different industries, the municipality is home to a number of popular tourist destinations along the coast. The current branding started in 2014, after a series of workshops with citizens and other local stakeholders. This was again led by an external consultancy, and a local design bureau created the visual identity for the brand. ‘Vi i Naturen’ (EN: ‘we in the nature’) combines the richness of nature in the municipality, and the cooperative spirit. |
| Oksbøl | 2,837 | 2.3 | Oksbøl is a town 14 km from Varde, close to many of the most popular beaches in the area. Many people associate it with the military barracks located there, while it was also a location of the biggest German refugee camp after WWII in Denmark, which sets the background for an upcoming museum on refugees. The branding here is very much focused on the residential life– the community, safety, and active association life. Some ad-hoc initiatives have started to highlight the local history as part of the branding initiatives. The work is mainly done by the volunteer-based local citizen and trade association, and some highly engaged citizens. There is a logo with the slogan ‘Oksbølby – Tryghed midt i naturen!’ (EN: ‘Oksbøl town – safety in the middle of nature’). |
| Billum | 578 | 0.6 | Billum is a small town located 11 km from Varde. There is a number of small entrepreneurs or small businesses, who put an effort into the development and branding of the town. Among the most important initiatives the town is proud of is an independent school. Otherwise, much is done on an ad-hoc basis, with some things undertaken by the parish association, and some by the local business and investment association. Similar to the other small towns and villages, also here the focus is on the nature-rich location, and the active and friendly community. A slogan on the webpage says ‘Billum – |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| | | | Landsbyen på toppen af Ho Bugt' (EN: 'the village at the top of the bay Ho'). |
|--|--|--|---|

Appendix 2. Interview guide

Purpose with the interview, and the use of data

This interview is one of several interviews for a study on the different branding processes taking place in rural places. The study forms part of a PhD project at the Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics and the Danish Centre for Rural Research at the University of Southern Denmark, Esbjerg. The data will together with the other interviews be used to analyse and define the branding process in the specific case. Followingly, the different cases will be compared in order to see which kind of different processes are taking place and which factors determine what kind of process is applied in each of the cases.

What can you expect to get in return?

Once the data have been analysed, we will organise a seminar for the participating municipalities, villages and parishes, in order to share the results and experiences with you.

The interview

There are 6 main question topics that I would like to cover in this interview. These are: you (the interviewee), the place brand, the other actors, the collaboration, brand communication, and the attained value (evaluation).

The concepts – ask first how they understand brand and branding

Branding – includes all the initiatives that the place does to create a joint narrative, identity, become more attractive.

Brand – the narrative or identity that the place tries to build and live. That what characterises the place and is contributing to differentiate it from other places. That, what infuses the place with an emotional aspect.

In this project, the focus is NOT on tourism, but rather on the ‘everyday’ place brand. It is, though, clear that in many places, a tourism brand and branding will be natural part of the overall brand and the overall perception of the place.

Actors – all the people and organisations (private as well as public) who are participating in the branding process, or who contribute by doing something to create the place brand or to brand the place.

Stakeholders – all those whom the brand and branding process impacts, without them necessarily being actively involved in the process.

Value – here it is not necessarily only the economic value, but on the contrary value in the wider sense.

The interviewee:

1. Tell me about yourself (also in relation to the brand, the place...)
2. How would you describe your role in the branding process?
3. What motivates you to participate in the branding process? To work with/develop the brand...
4. What would you say is your contribution to the brand? And to the branding process?

Place brand:

1. How would you describe you branding? Can you start by telling a little about what started this branding process and where you are now in the process? *Here also whose initiative it was to start this branding process; which phase the brand is in now (beginning, ongoing development/work, done and only promoting the brand now, ...), how much does the brand change or develop? Is it an ongoing process?*
2. With the starting point in the current status, how would you describe the brand? What is the brand? What are the current results of the brand and the process?
3. How much does the brand cover? E.g., who (besides of those who actively contribute to the branding process) does the brand have an impact on? Who is not covered by the brand?
4. How general (holistic, meaning embracing the whole area) is the brand? Or does it rather focus on a specific sector or part of your area (municipality/village)?
5. Which target group is the brand aiming at? (if any...)
6. How big support do you perceive there to be for the brand (among the actors, the local community, the local administration, etc.)? Who, or which part of the local community supports the brand the most?
7. What is the brand based on? Is it based on the place-specific resources, or is it developed as a reaction to an external demand?
8. How big a role do the local/place-based resources play for the brand? Resources that are closely related to your place.
9. What is the aim/purpose with the brand?

10. Which other ways to reach the aim have you considered?
11. Have you considered a different focus for the brand than the current one? Explain ...
12. Which relation is there between the general development in the area and your brand or branding process?
13. Are there other similar projects in your area, and are they done in the same way as yours?
14. Is there, in general, a good collaboration between associations and the municipality in your area?
15. How is the relationship between your and other branding projects? Brands of other smaller or bigger or similar places? And what about local or other company brands?
16. Has the branding process contributed to strengthen the identity of your place, internally and externally?
17. How is your place's identity reflected or represented in the brand?

Other actors:

1. Who else is involved in the branding process and how?
2. When have the different actors been part of the branding process? In which phase(s)?
3. What motivates the other actors to participate in the process?
4. How do you perceive the other actors' contribution to the process?

Collaboration:

1. How do you organise your collaboration?
2. How did you get together?
3. How long have you been discussing?
4. Who, if anybody, is in control of the process? Who has more or less responsibility and influence?
5. Who makes sure that all the actors get together around the purpose?
6. *How structured is the process – don't ask directly, but see if they will come with a story that could answer the question*
7. How often do you meet? Or how often do you communicate?
8. How do you communicate?
9. How do you think that your collaboration in regards of branding process has worked?
10. Which challenges have there been with the collaboration in the branding process?

11. Which benefits have there been in the collaboration?
12. *Regarding strong network with stable relations that brands the place (don't ask directly, but if it won't be clear from the rest, then ask)*
13. Would you say the actors trust each other? That they have trust in each other and the brand?

Brand use/adoption/expression:

1. How is the brand communicated?
2. How do you communicate or use the brand?
3. How do the other actors communicate or use the brand?
4. How has the communication changed throughout the different phases in the branding process?
5. How is the brand communication or use related to your purpose with the brand?

Evaluation: Value/benefits:

1. Who, in your perception, gets any value of the brand? And from the branding process?
2. Which value do you get out of being involved in the process?
3. Which value do you think other stakeholders get from the brand and the branding process?
4. Which value do you think the place/your area in general gets from the brand and the branding process?

Paper 3: Rural place branding from a multi-level perspective: a Danish example

Barbora Gulisova¹

Chris Horbel²

Egon Noe³

Abstract

Few studies have looked at the interaction of place branding practices of geographically linked places. Moreover, the different administrative contexts of the linked places and the resulting different place branding approaches have not been taken into consideration. This study provides insight on the interactions of the brands and branding initiatives of higher-level administrative rural places and lower-level places within their territory. A qualitative study was conducted based on the cases of three Danish municipalities and eight smaller places within them. Although none of the vertically linked places under investigation had applied a strategic approach to manage place brand architecture, four archetypes of interaction between the place brands at the different vertical levels are identified. The findings provide guidance for place branding officials and others involved in the initiatives regarding the role the higher-level place brand can play in the lower level's place branding, while making the lower level aware that their place branding should also focus on building good reputation towards the higher-level place. The study further reveals challenges regarding the strategic implementation of place brand architecture and highlights important areas for future research on the topic.

Keywords: place branding, rural places, place brand architecture, vertical levels, reputation

Status: The paper has been accepted for publication in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*

¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

² Associate Professor, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

³ Professor, Danish Centre for Rural Research & Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

Introduction

Part of the inherent complexity of place branding rests in the administrative overlap of places as well as the definition of the place boundaries (Hankinson 2007, Syssner 2010). Place brands, i.e., the associations that are made with the place (Zenker and Braun 2017) interact on both a horizontal, e.g., a city and a city, and a vertical, e.g., a city and a region, level (Syssner 2010). Consequently, place brands have a variety of relations with other place brands, as Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi (2014) illustrate using the example of four tourism destinations that are vertically linked to the brand of Catalonia: the city of Barcelona, Costa Brava, National Park Aigüestortes and Sant Maurici Pond, and Port Aventura Theme Park. While these four brands share a horizontal connection, they represent themselves different types of place brands: a city, a (smaller) region, a national park and an artificial place. In addition, places such as national parks or larger regions overlap different place and administrative boundaries (Giovanardi, Lucarelli, and Pasquinelli 2013, Mettepenningen et al. 2012). Consequently, the interactions among place brands at different levels is both complex and creates a distinctive combination of relationships among the images of cities, villages, regions and nations (Giovanardi 2015).

Places are unique, particular and complex entities, not only distinctive from each other, but also internally heterogeneous (Malpas 2017). As such, places only exist in relation to other places, while every place also contains places that are related within it (Cresswell 2015, Malpas 2017). Investigating how the place brands at different levels interact is necessary in order to understand how place branding efforts for different places potentially influence each other. Place branding refers to “the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people” (Boisen 2015, 14). Place branding can also be characterized as building the reputation of a place (Anholt 2010). Place branding is applied for a large variety of places, such as tourism destinations, cities, regions or nations. However, since place brands at different levels interact with each other, they could also be consciously orchestrated through marketing and branding (Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp 2011) to reach different target groups. Through associating the place brand with (better known) places at other levels, for example associating a strong city brand with a weaker region brand or vice versa, benefits for all connected brands can be created. The interactions among places and their place brands are generally quite complex, as they involve relations both within and beyond the given place. In this study, we focus on the vertical relation, that is, the interactions and relations of places with those on levels above or below them. We adopt the view of a municipality as a place (Wæraas, Bjørnå, and Moldenæs 2015) and study them as places

on a higher vertical level and towns and villages belonging to the municipalities as places on a lower vertical level.

There are a variety of perspectives on the concept of place. Some are concerned with the particularity and distinctiveness of places as localities (Cresswell 2015), some see places as socially constructed (Harvey 1996), and others have argued that the geographical place is the phenomenon that brings the social, cultural and natural worlds together, and partly produces them (Sack 1997, Malpas 2017, Cresswell 2015). For the rural context, Halfacree (1993) argues that we should distinguish “between the rural as a distinctive type of locality and the rural as a social representation” (p. 34). While a universal, single definition of rural is hardly feasible (Halfacree 1993, Eupen et al. 2012), the most commonly used criteria for categorizing a place as rural is a low population density, big distances to other places, and challenges to the provision of services (Søgaard 2011). Despite these common characteristics, different kinds of rural places exist, including administratively delineated municipalities (e.g., Lee, Wall, and Kovacs 2015), as well as smaller communities within a region (e.g., Wheeler, Frost, and Weiler 2011) that do not necessarily correspond to an administrative entity. This diversity of types of rural places and their administrative setups also plays a role for the approaches to place branding taken by actors representing the place (Gulisova 2020). Rural municipalities, for example, have a central organization to steer the place branding process, and thereby often adopt a corporate branding approach (Kavaratzis 2012). On the other hand, the communities within these rural municipalities might not have such a strong focal administration or other organization to lead the place branding process. Therefore, their approach might rather be a collaboration of various stakeholders (Vuorinen and Vos 2013).

The different governance structures that influence the place branding process of different types of rural places might also have an impact on the relations between the place brands on the different levels. Despite the practical relevance of the interaction of place brands at different levels and the respective place branding processes, research on this issue is scarce (Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp 2011, Giovanardi 2015).

As more rural places use place branding to improve their reputation and compete for residents, visitors, or business (Horlings and Marsden 2014, Sørensen and Svendsen 2014), there is an increasing interest to better understand the approaches taken to place branding and how the place brands relate to others on the same and on different levels. For example, in Denmark, there is a widespread use of place branding in municipalities, including rural municipalities (DenOffentlige 2017), and more and more small towns and villages have also begun to implement place branding

(Andersen 2015, Ugeavisen 2019). The administrative setup in Denmark, with many rural municipalities and other non-metropolitan municipalities which include rural areas with small towns and villages besides of the main city, was deemed an ideal context for the study of place branding from a multi-level perspective. More specifically, we focus on the vertical link between municipalities' brands and the place brands of individual towns and villages within them and aim to provide a better understanding of the interactions between the brands on these two levels. Our aim is therefore to address the following research question:

How do the place brands of higher-level administrative rural places and lower-level places within them interact?

To answer this research question, we apply an exploratory qualitative methodology that enables us to understand how local actors involved in place branding perceive and relate to the interaction of place branding practices applied by higher-level administrative rural places and lower-level places within them.

In the following, relevant literature on place branding is presented, which then leads to the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. More detail on the context of the study as well as the research process is described in the methodology section. Thereafter, the findings are presented and discussed and the contributions and practical implications from our research are highlighted. Finally, some main limitations are outlined and suggestions for future research are made.

Literature review

This paper is guided by the literature on place branding from a multi-level perspective, place brand architecture, and the difference in local government and community approaches to place branding. While we have chosen to focus on vertical levels of places, others have used concepts such as 'spatial levels' (Syssner, 2010) or 'scalar levels' (Giovanardi, 2015) to denote the different types of places. The original author's language is kept throughout the review. In the following, each of these streams of literature are briefly reviewed.

Place branding from a multi-level perspective

Few place branding initiatives relate to the branding of solely one specific place. Instead, "many places comprise, or are included in, several place-branding initiatives at the same time" (Syssner 2010, p. 38). Place brands on different hierarchical levels may nest comfortably within each other, with possible mutually reinforcing brands, or they may interact less comfortably or contradict. Particular place brands can both seek to associate with the brands of other places and

their perceived benefits and avoid getting associated with certain other place brands and their respective identities (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018).

Associations to places at another level can be made in both directions. Boisen et al. (2011) argue that associations with a country or a region can be transferred to individual cities within the area, especially if the individual city lacks strong associations itself, while the associations of a city can also be transferred to a region or a country. Syssner (2010) introduces the concepts of ‘spatial anchorage’ and ‘spatial positioning’ within a multi-level perspective of place branding. ‘Spatial anchorage’ refers to a common place branding technique where the brand does not reflect the place as a whole. Instead, a selection of spatial characteristics (e.g., locations, landmarks) function as anchors to represent the place, i.e., a spatial category that is in fact much wider (Syssner 2010, 39). Another widely used technique in place branding is ‘spatial positioning’. This technique is often applied in branding of lesser-known places, when they are presented in relation to a larger, more well-known place. Together, anchorage and positioning “create a complex web of branded places” (Syssner 2010, 43), because place brands frequently reference and relate to “spaces that are above, below or outside their territorial competence” (Syssner, 2010, p. 43). In a study of a Swedish neighbourhood, municipality, functional region and county, Syssner (2010) found that while within the functional region, the countryside and its municipalities were promoted as convenient places to live, it was the urban centres in which the branding of the region was anchored. Further, the neighbourhood was usually positioned within the city, unless they received support from the county institutions and organizations, in which case it was also positioned as part of the county. Gaining recognition from governmental actors was an incentive for branding the functional region as “such recognition would mean a lot for the future development of the region” (Syssner 2010, 42).

Place brand architecture

Place brand architecture refers to the organization of a portfolio of brands, as well as the establishment of valuable relationships among them (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014; Harish & Nafees, 2010). While a place brand architecture exists almost by default consisting of the connected places on the different vertical and horizontal levels (Kerr and Balakrishnan 2012), the strategic organization of place brands is proposed as a strategy to avoid internal conflicts, create synergies and leverage the value added to each brand (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014; Harish & Nafees, 2010). In the following, different types of place brand architecture are introduced.

Stevens (2019) distinguishes three forms of place brand architecture according to the amount

of coordination a central actor exerts on individual stakeholders: a central, a cascade, and a lateral form. While the central place brand architecture is the most controlling one, the lateral place brand architecture is the most ‘laissez faire’ one, and the cascade place brand architecture is an intermediary form between them. The types differ in terms of power distance between stakeholders, the kind of brand message communicated to the target audience, and how tightly controlled the communication is by the coordinator. The strictest coordination, with one clear message and tight control by the coordinator characterizes a central place brand architecture. More autonomy and decision-making rights, multiple stories and either no communication control (lateral) or only general guidelines (cascade) characterize the other two forms (Stevens 2019). Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu (2016) describe three similar approaches to place brand architecture: a monolithic architecture that builds on a single identity and unitary communication; an endorsed brand architecture where a core identity is at the centre and extended identities consistent with it represent other areas; and a multi-brand architecture consisting of different place brands without links among them. The latter one can be a result of political conflicts, but also of “a ‘*laissez faire, laissez passer*’ territorial management policy. Thus, each territory develops and manages its own place brand with no strategic alignment among brands” (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu 2016, 54).

The spectrum of strategies to manage brand architecture, i.e., House of Brands, Endorsed Brands, Sub-brands, and Branded House (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), has also been introduced into the place (destination) branding literature (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014; Dooley & Bowie, 2005). A House of Brands consists of independent brands with their own values and characteristics. Endorsed Brands are those where a supra-brand is associated with a number of related brands, providing them with credibility. Sub-brands occur when the supra- and the sub-brands have a tight relationship with shared associations. In a Branded House strategy, the supra-brand leverages its name and transfers its values to all of its extension brands. While a nation, by default, can be interpreted as a house of place brands (Kerr & Balakrishnan, 2012), only few, if any cases of a clear, strategically planned place brand architecture have been identified so far (Hanna and Rowley 2015, Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi 2014).

Hanna and Rowley (2015) proposed the Place Brand Web Model that applies “a perspective that views the brands associated with a place as ‘contributing brands’” rather than competing place brands (p. 108). In the Place Brand Web Model, the place brand is positioned at the core of a co-creation process, that is focused on co-branding relationships with partner brands, i.e., negotiated, dynamic agreements based on mutual benefits. The commitment of the different partners will

depend on their resources as well as the potential value their organization will gain from the co-branding relationship (Hanna & Rowley, 2015; Kahuni & Rowley, 2013). Different levels of commitment are associated with different forms of co-branding, such as placing each other's logos on websites and documents, promoting each other, and developing shared identity and articulation. The place brand managed by a central organization is consciously contributing to "the perceptual entity, The Place Brand" (Hanna and Rowley 2015, 109), but The Place Brand "is co-created by the various contributing brands, either consciously (through partnerships) or unconsciously (as a result of brand owners focusing solely on their own brand)" (Hanna and Rowley 2015, 109).

In a study on destination branding, Hankinson (2009) found that regional branding is more complex than city branding, because regional branding needs to find an overarching brand that fits the individual cities and other sub-areas as well. Therefore, Hankinson (2009) proposes to create an umbrella brand on the higher level together with a brand architecture for the place brands on the lower levels as a solution.

Local government and community approaches

Places exist within a vertical hierarchy, and they often have administrative and political entities that are responsible for them. Consequently, place branding is often practiced on the levels of these political-administrative units, because the respective authorities are the drivers of the place branding and marketing processes. However, place branding is not only practiced through administrative/political processes by the regulatory entities (Boisen et al., 2011; Braun, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2012), but also through volunteer and community-based action, especially in smaller places (e.g., Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Vik & Villa, 2010).

Giovanardi (2015) suggests that place branding should be thought of as a multi-scalar phenomenon, emerging from actions on many scales that co-exist and interact in a tangled manner. Greenop and Darchen (2015) show the difference in approaches to place branding between two different vertical levels within one metropolitan area, where a centrally steered approach is taken for the overall city brand mostly focusing on the city centre, while a community-based approach is taken in one of the outer neighbourhoods. Tensions might arise between these two contradicting approaches when trying to build relationships between the brands. In a study on the creation of a hypothetical place brand for a Portuguese rural community, that included a municipal and a smaller place brand, Rebelo, Mehmood, and Marsden (2019) found that actors on the lower vertical level were highly interested in communication with the local authorities to make them aware of the assets

of their small area and become more attractive as a target for rural development (Rebelo et al., 2019).

Theoretical framework

Based on the literature review we propose six dimensions that may have an impact on the interactions between the higher- and the lower-level place brands. An overview of these determinants is provided in table 1. First, based on Syssner (2010)'s concepts of 'spatial anchorage' and 'spatial positioning' we suggest that the interactions between the two levels can either be unidirectional, if only one brand is associating with the other or bidirectional. According to Boisen et al. (2011), stronger associations with one place are more likely to be transferred to a linked place, indicating a higher likelihood for a one-way interaction, either from the higher level to the lower level or vice versa. Second, the interactions will depend on how the power is distributed between the brands on the different levels. This relates to Stevens (2019) categorization according to the degree of control into the central, cascade or lateral form of place brand architecture. It can further be related to the regulatory powers of the higher-level, administrative places (Boisen et al., 2011; Braun, 2012). Third, the interactions will be influenced by the benefits that each partner could gain from the interaction and association with the other level's brands. It might be beneficial to be associated with certain brands (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018), while in the best possible case mutual benefits of associations might accrue (Hanna & Rowley, 2015). Among the benefits for the lower level are implications for its development by getting recognition from the higher-level (Rebelo et al., 2019; Syssner, 2010). Fourth, the interactions will depend on the existence of incentivization strategies to relate to each other's brands. This dimension is based on Syssner (2010)'s finding that lower-level brands were more likely to position themselves as part of the higher-level place brand they received support from the higher-level. Fifth, the interactions will be affected by the communication between the actors involved in place branding of the place brands at the different levels. This is related to the degree of coordination and strategic alignment in different place brand architecture types. In a multi-brand architecture, each brand will largely be managed by itself, without much alignment. On the contrary, for endorsed brands some alignment between the core identity and the extended identities exists (Sarabia-Sanchez & Cerda-Bertomeu, 2016). Finally, the governance structures for the place brands at the different levels will impact the relationship. A professionalized, administrative/political process for creating one brand (Boisen et al., 2011; Braun, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2012) and a community or volunteer-based process for the other

brand (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Vik & Villa, 2010) might lead to conflicts when the involved stakeholders try to build relationships between the different brands (Greenop & Darchen, 2015).

| | Dimension of the interactions | Based on: |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | Direction of the interactions between the two levels': one-way (from high to low or vice versa) vs. two-way | Syssner (2010); Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp (2011) |
| 2. | Power distribution between the brands on the different levels | Stevens (2019); Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp (2011); Braun (2012) |
| 3. | Benefits for each partner to associate with the other brand | Syssner (2010); Rebelo, Mehmood, and Marsden (2019) |
| 4. | Incentivization strategies to relate to each other's brands | Syssner (2010) |
| 5. | Communication between the actors involved in place branding at the different levels | Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu (2016) |
| 6. | Governance structures of the individual place brands | Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp (2011); Braun (2012); Kavaratzis (2012); Blichfeldt and Halkier (2014); Vik and Villa (2010); Greenop and Darchen (2015) |

Table 1. Determinants of interactions between vertically linked place brands

In the following, we introduce the context of the study and methodology, before presenting the findings.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative method was applied to provide better understanding of the interaction of vertically linked place brands. The research was undertaken in Denmark, which is divided into five regions, which cover 98 municipalities, that fulfil the role as local authorities (Ministry Of Social Affairs And The Interior 2020). Most Danish municipalities, with the exception of the most urban/metropolitan ones, include a number of towns, villages and rural areas. The political and administrative authorities, while elected by and representing the whole municipality, are located in the main municipal city. The smaller towns and villages are represented by a local citizen council, citizen association or parish association in their contact with the municipalities (Esbjerg Kommune 2020b). These associations or councils are voluntary based, i.e., local citizens volunteer their time and skills to be involved in the functioning of their town.

This study is part of a larger project that investigates a variety of aspects of rural place branding. The selection of cases to include in the study started with an open invitation to rural municipalities and smaller rural to participate in a research project on rural place branding. The invitation was sent through the newsletter of the Danish Centre for Rural Research (CLF) and was published on CLF's website as well as sent out pr. E-mail (Center for Landdistriktsforskning 2018). In addition, a search for Danish rural places that engage in place branding initiatives was conducted, and key stakeholders were directly contacted via email and telephone. Representatives from those places that expressed interest in the topic were invited to a workshop, in which the research project was presented and initial information about the places and their place branding initiatives were collected through focus group interviews. The final selection of places for this part of the overall study was based on several criteria. Most importantly, we aimed at selecting places, where both the municipality itself and smaller places within it were engaged in place branding initiatives. Moreover, we tried to identify places which differed in terms of size, location, major business activities, and dominance of the main city within the municipality. Based on these criteria, 11 places were selected: Esbjerg Municipality with the towns Ribe, Gørding, and Darum; Varde Municipality with the towns Oksbøl and Billum; and Skive Municipality, with the towns Rødding and Selde, as well as the small island Fur. Esbjerg Municipality is the biggest among the three. It's main city with its focus on business and education is quite dominant within the municipality (Esbjerg Kommune 2020a, Business Esbjerg 2020). Varde Municipality is the fifth biggest municipality in Denmark by area, the westernmost one, and with its coastline and attractions, a popular tourist destination (JydskeVestkysten 2019, Varde Kommune 2018). Skive Municipality, located in the central part of the Jutland peninsula, also has a number of tourism destinations, and a lot of focus is put on green energy and production (Skive Kommune 2020). The choice of these three municipalities reflects the consideration of finding cases with different characteristics. Esbjerg Municipality, located on the West Coast, is one with a big central city, where the core brand characteristics are related to job and business opportunities. Varde Municipality is also located on the West Coast, just north of Esbjerg municipality. It comprises a much bigger area than Esbjerg Municipality, but has a considerably smaller population. It is known for its popular tourism destinations and therefore, the main city, is not as dominant within the municipality. Its core brand characteristics are related to nature and the communitarian spirit. Skive Municipality is similar in population to Varde Municipality and has the smallest area of the three municipalities. It is located in a different part of the country, and its core brand characteristics include both community, nature, and green technology. The eight smaller places also vary in population and their distance to the central

city in the municipality. More detailed information on the municipalities and the individual small places within them can be found in Appendix 1.

In each of the municipalities the communication department was contacted, while in the individual places it was the head of the local citizen council or association. From there on, snowball sampling was applied to find interviewees. Additional stakeholders involved in the place branding, but who were not suggested by other interviewees, were directly approached by the researchers in order to ensure a maximum variation sample. This provided wider range of data, representing wider points of view on the phenomenon studied and ensured multivocality (Tracy 2013, 136). The inclusion of additional interviewees was stopped at the point of information redundancy (Jennings 2010). As shown in table 1, between one and ten semi-structured interviews (Lee and Aslam 2018) with a variety of representatives were conducted in each place.

| Place | Interviewee and interviewee description |
|----------------------|--|
| Esbjerg Municipality | EK1 - Head of the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK2 - Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | EK3 - Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK4 - Museum director, vice chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK5 - Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK6 - CEO of an international company based in the city |
| | EK7 - Head of one of the educational institutions in the city, board member of the municipal business org. |
| | EK8 - Co-owner of a local design bureau |
| Darum | D1 - Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D2 - Member of the local sport club's board, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D3 - Volunteer, responsible for website etc. (retiree) |
| Gørding | G1 - Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | G2 - Local company owner (construction supplies, etc.) |
| | G3 - Editor of the parish magazine, webmaster for the town's website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Ribe | Ri1 - Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | Ri2 - Head of tourism at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri3 - Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of municipal business organization |
| | Ri4 - Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri5 - Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri6 - Chairman for the local citizen council and a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| | Ri7 - Director of the hostel in the town, chairman of the official festivals/events, board member at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri8 - Vice-chair in the local trade organization, local journalist |
| | Ri9 - Museum director, chairman for the town's tourism marketing network |
| Skive Municipality | SK1 - Team leader, communication department at the municipality |
| | SK2 - Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | SK3 - Director of the local radio |
| | SK4 - Radio host, chairman for the biggest local music festival |
| | SK5 - Artist involved in different projects in Selde and its neighbouring villages, hired by SK |
| Rødding | R1 - Member of the branding association board for the marketing working group, volunteer (retiree) |
| | R2 - Member of the local development association board, head of the marketing working group; volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | R3 - Chairman of the local development association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Selde | S1 - Owner of the local gallery and other artist facilities in the village (retiree) |
| | S2 - Chairman for the self-owned institution called 'sculpture village', involved in many diff. things, volunteer (retiree) |
| | S3 - Co-owner of the local gallery etc. (retiree) |
| Fur | F1 - Head of the local development and branding group, museum inspector |
| Varde Municipality | VK1 - Municipality, senior management consultant |
| | VK2 - Municipality, development consultant |
| | VK3 - Municipality, communication employee |
| | VK4 - Company owner (outdoors furniture, huts, timber products) |
| | VK5 - Company owner (food products, restaurant) |
| | VK6 - Designer, owner of local design bureau |
| Billum | B1 - Previous chairman of the parish association, volunteer (retiree, B&B owner, farmer) |
| | B2 - Member of the parish association, volunteer (cheese and meat producer) |
| | B3 - Editor of the website, volunteer (independent designer) |
| | B4 - Chair of the parish association, volunteer (fulltime job, shop owner, also member of the business and real estate association) |
| | B5 - Chair of the business and real estate association, volunteer (retired company owner) |
| | B6 - Editor of the website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Oksbøl | O1 - Chair of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job, member of municipal council) |
| | O2 - Member of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | O3 - Retired craftsman, ex-member in different associations, including in municipal council |

Table 2. Overview of interviewees

As the interviews were conducted as part of a bigger research project, they covered several topics, the relationships between the different place brands being only one of them. The interviews were guided by an interview guide (appendix 1). The interviews, 17 to 89 minutes long, were recorded, and transcribed in the original language (Danish). Further, secondary data such as websites and documents were used for crystallization (Tracy 2013). Deductive coding based on the proposed theoretical framework to understand if and how previously identified interactions between different levels apply to the rural place branding context was applied. The six determinants for the interactions between vertically linked place brands served as initial codes which were then refined to differentiate between different manifestations of these dimensions. Rather than generalizing to some finite population, the study develops theoretical ideas with a general validity (Gobo, 2008). The analysis of the qualitative data shows some general social structures working in different rural place branding situations. Rather than generalizable, the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to other place branding initiatives in similar contexts as those included in the study.

Findings

The aim of this study was to better understand the interactions between rural place brands on different vertical levels. More specifically, this study focuses on the interactions between place brands, where the brands on the higher level are related to a place with administrative authority, whereas the places on the lower level are smaller places without autonomous administrative institutions. It follows that place branding at the higher-level municipalities was professionalized, driven by the administration as the focal actor and usually being supported by consultants. In the lower-level individual villages and small towns, the approach to place branding was based on voluntary engagement of local actors with an interest in the place brand.

In the following, we present the findings regarding the determinants of the interactions of the vertically linked place brands as proposed in the theoretical framework. The direction of the associations between the two levels' brands can either be one-way (from the higher to the lower level or vice versa) or two-way. We first focus on the one-way associations by presenting how higher-level place brands relate to the lower-level and afterwards, how the lower-level place brands relate to the higher-level. Based on these findings, we propose four archetypes of interactions between the higher- and the lower-level place brands in the rural context, in which we include the two-way associations between the brands.

The higher-level's interaction with place brands of lower-level places

Our findings reveal that the municipalities use the place brands of individual towns and villages in their branding only to some degree. Although in the bigger Esbjerg municipality, the focus has mainly been on the main city (EK1), recently *“the municipality has begun to draw attention to places that maybe aren't known in the municipality”* (D3). Still, only a limited number of places are being promoted by the municipality and these are the relatively bigger towns (G2). While a representative from Varde municipality said, *“there is local anchorage from the beginning”* (VK2), it was not the smaller towns or villages they focused on in their associations. Instead of specific smaller places, events and attractions are used for anchorage here. For example, a soon-to-be-opened museum in Oksbøl which the municipality is co-funding will be used as an anchor in the place brands of both Oksbøl and the municipality. Another famous museum in a different small place in the municipality attracts significant external attention and is therefore used in the municipality branding. Skive municipality invited some of the smaller places to present themselves to newcomers during an event. However, a representative from Fur criticized that this failed, because the event was mostly about the main city (F1). Representatives from Selde reported that the municipality nominated their art project for a regional competition (S2). The municipality also hosts village-life related conferences in the place or invites representatives from Selde to events in the wider region to benefit from its positive image (S3). Yet, when representatives of the municipality were asked which brands, they found worth associating with the municipality brand, they only mentioned some companies, but none of the lower-level place brands (SK1, SK2).

The power distribution between the brands on the different levels is closely related to the availability of resources and to regulatory tasks. The municipalities generally have a powerful position because they can provide resources to the smaller level-places for their place branding. This was the case in Esbjerg municipality, which provided support to place branding initiatives in the lower-level places through administrative, financial and professional support (D3). The municipality's power was also exemplified in Varde municipality, where it was a requirement for the lower-level places to present some financial resources for an initiative themselves, before getting additional funding from the municipality (O3). Furthermore, some small places in the municipality were not able implement their branding initiative due to hurdles imposed by the municipality administration (B1, B4, VK4).

From the municipalities' perspective the benefits of associating with the brands of the smaller places were perceived as minor. Even those responsible for place branding in Esbjerg

municipality expressed their doubts about doing place branding that involves the whole municipality. A major challenge was seen in finding a common place identity because of the differences between the places within the geography of the municipality (EK2). Furthermore, it was argued, that potential residents choose a more specific place, for example a town or a village, and not the municipality (EK1). However, a more coordinated place branding approach including a closer interaction with the lower-level places' brands was not seen as beneficial, either. Varde municipality took a different approach by changing their branding strategy to focus less on the municipality brand, and more on the lower-level place brands, because this was seen as beneficial for resident attraction initiatives (VK1).

Both smaller municipalities tried to incentivize the lower-level places to use the municipal brand. In Varde municipality, funding was provided for events and activities that represent similar values and identity as the municipal brand (VK1, VK2). Skive municipality used a similar funding strategy (S2, SK2, SK3). Furthermore, help from a consultant was offered to the smaller villages with their branding initiatives, among which were Rødding and Selde.

The communication between the actors involved in place branding at the different levels often involved several parties. Esbjerg municipality, for example, acted as a facilitator for engaging the smaller towns in a wider regional tourism marketing collaboration (Ri2). In Varde municipality, the smaller places felt insufficient coordination and regulatory support by the municipality to bring projects forward (VK4). This was mostly related to a lack of communication due to the unavailability of the brand coordinator.

The governance type played a role here with respect to the expectations of the lower-level places towards the municipality. In Varde municipality, for example, the lower-level places expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of resources the municipality used for branding. Most importantly, they expressed the wish that the municipality should use resources to establish a coordinator at the municipality level who would function as the link between the smaller places and the municipality (O1, VK4, B2). While there was some support available to the smaller places from Skive municipality, R3 expressed, *"we can't restrict ourselves to that the municipality has some employees who work with tourism and business, ..., because they don't have the time and resources at all to go into it to the extent, we wish them to go into it"*. Similarly, in Esbjerg municipality, especially Gørding felt sometimes left behind (G3). On the contrary, D1 and D3 mentioned how they tried to be less expecting and more open in the collaboration with the municipality.

The lower-level's interactions with place brands of the higher-level places

The lower-level places sometimes used the municipal brand in their branding. Most commonly they used the municipal brand logo on their website (B3), in their slogan (O1), or used merchandise with the municipal brand as gifts for their guests (S3). Although the smaller Skive and Varde municipalities managed to create brands that fit well with the reality of the lower-level places, the municipal brand was only rarely used as a reference by the smaller places (B1, B4, O1, O3, R3). The reason was often a lack of resources in the municipality and therefore insufficient outreach and facilitation of the branding initiatives of lower-level places to ensure their brand positioning relates to the municipal brand (B4, S3).

Since the lower-level places are often dependent on regulatory decisions or resources from the municipalities, they also target the municipalities through their branding. This was illustrated by representatives from Darum, where it is part of their strategy to increase their reputation and build a good relationship with the municipality, because it makes it easier to get administrative help or succeed with funding applications for local projects, including branding (D1, D3). Fur and Rødding in Skive municipality have chosen a similar strategy and invested in a good cooperation with the municipality. This approach has been quite successful because the municipality started to highlight their approach as a best practice to other small places. Some representatives of small places expressed that their places' engagement in branding is in fact necessary to even gain the attention within the municipality, as for example expressed by S3, *"because, the rest of the municipality isn't aware of Selde"*.

Some smaller place representatives expressed that their place does not get much, if any, benefit from being associated with the higher-level brand. In Esbjerg Municipality, the biggest of the three, it was pointed out that the municipal brand does not cover the whole place (EK2) and that it is not suitable to smaller places within the municipality (Ri9). The municipal brand image is primarily associated with the main city (Ri2) and therefore excluding the small towns and villages (G2). As a consequence, Darum and Ribe, whose communities did not feel included in the municipal brand, rather used the national park in their geographical area as a brand to associate with instead of the municipal brand.

However, some small places also succeed getting recognition and funding and become involved in the municipality's brand. This was typically the case, when the small place had to offer something unique, as in the case of Selde, the art initiative in the village is recognized in the whole country and provides benefits for the whole region and Skive municipality.

Skive and Varde municipality provided funding opportunities to individuals or associations that wanted to stage events or activities related to the municipal brand. Yet this also meant that the municipal brand only got exposure in the public when it was paid for, because it was perceived to be a rather artificial brand that did not include touch points for association or narratives for the lower-level brands.

The lack of a clear communication and coordination of the municipal brand in Varde municipality was repeatedly expressed to be a challenge for a collaboration by the smaller place representatives (O3, B4). Similarly, in Esbjerg municipality, communication between the smaller places and the municipality was scarce and indirect, as the smaller place representatives usually communicated with the rural development instead of the communication department (D3).

The two different governance structures applied to place branding at the different levels, that were perceived as different ‘cultures’ by many respondents, provide both ground for misunderstandings and challenges towards creating mutually beneficial relationships between the brands. B2 expressed this from the perspective of the communities on the lower level; *“when things become too professionalized, and when it’s not on voluntary basis, ... It’s something that we just don’t understand. And, ownership, there’s none.”* Similarly, F1 expressed the contradiction between both approaches, when mentioning that Skive Municipality applied *“such a top-down model. And we really do it completely the other way around. We are bottom-up over here.”* In the smaller towns, initiatives were driven by local people, also spurring pride amongst them, and when something was pushed on them from the municipality, they tended to react with anger (Ri1).

A framework of interactions between higher level and lower-level place brands

While our findings reveal that all six determinants of the interaction between the place brands on the different levels play a role, the most influential factors that shape the type of interaction are the direction of the interaction between the two levels’ brands, the benefits for each partner to associate with the other brand, the incentivization strategies to relate to each other’s brand and the governance structures of the individual place brands. Based on these findings, we identified four types of interactions between place-brands at different vertical levels in rural areas (figure 1). The first type, that we label ‘positioning’ is based on Syssner (2010)’s strategic positioning model. In this type of interaction, the lower-level places use the higher-level in their branding, often because the higher-level provides incentives to do this. ‘Targeting’ is the second type. In such kinds of interactions, the lower-level places target the higher level, to gain recognition, awareness, and other

benefits from the higher-level places. Targeting is a predominantly one-way directed interaction from the lower level to the higher-level. However, the lower level might achieve benefits from this strategy, when the higher-level place brand uses the lower-level brand for anchorage (Syssner 2010). Therefore, we identified ‘anchorage’ as the third type. The fourth type is ‘resource provision’. The interaction in this type is characterized by provision of a variety of resources including financial, administrative or knowledge-related resources by the higher-level to the lower level. The resource provision usually is a one-way directed interaction from the higher level to the lower level, yet it may result in the creation of place brands at the lower level that the higher level can use in their anchorage, especially if the provided resources are tailored to the place branding process. Furthermore, by getting the resources, the lower-level places are often then motivated to use the higher level for their positioning.

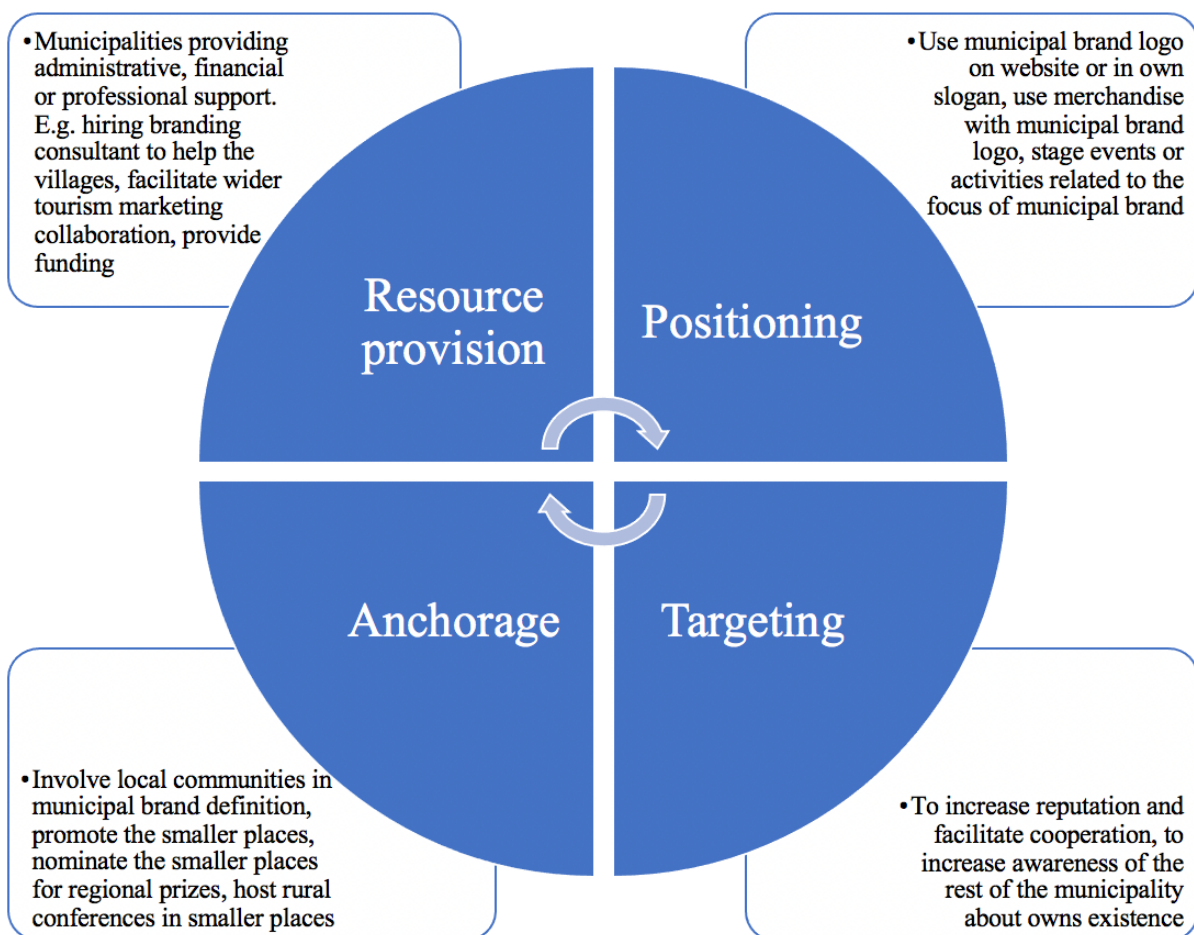


Figure 1. Archetypes of interactions between vertically linked place brands

Discussion

When taking outset in the fact that any higher vertical level place (e.g., a municipality) with smaller places within it (e.g., towns and villages) can be seen as a house of place brands (Kerr and Balakrishnan 2012), the cases present in this study would exemplify three houses of brands. Consistent with other previous findings (Datzira-Masip and Poluzzi 2014, Hanna and Rowley 2015) in none of the cases under investigation, a strategic brand architecture approach was applied. One reason for this lack of strategy with regards to place brand architecture can be seen in the different approaches to place branding applied by the municipalities vs. the individual towns and villages. As our findings revealed, the different place branding approaches can be a source of conflict between the place branding actors at the different levels. Based on our data we are therefore unable to clarify whether a strategic place brand architecture approach, with a central coordinator and more alignment and control of communication, would be beneficial to the involved places and their place branding. While associations with other stronger brands might provide benefits (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018; Boisen et al., 2011), at other times, it might be preferable to avoid any associations (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). This might be the case when the higher-level place brand is associated with very different values than the lower-level place brand, as in one of the cases in our study. In such cases, creating an overarching brand that would fit all the sub-brands might be very challenging (Hankinson, 2009).

A strategic place brand architecture, while it could create synergies and avoid internal conflicts between the place brands (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014; Harish & Nafees, 2010), as well as creating mutual benefits (Hanna & Rowley, 2015), will also require alignments of values, identity and communication, which not only might be difficult to do, but also exclude some places. Similar to Hanna and Rowley's (2015) findings, some of the municipal employees involved in place branding questioned the idea of a single place brand identity for the whole municipality. At the same time, none of the municipal employees expressed intents on building a place brand architecture by including the lower-level places. A challenge for implementation of such house of brands strategy would be very dissimilar contents of the municipality's brand and the brands of the smaller places, as it was the case for Esbjerg municipality and the towns of Darum, Gørding and Ribe. In such cases, more suitable strategies could be the lateral form of place brand architecture (Stevens 2019), or even a multi-brand architecture with different place brands without many links among them (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu 2016).

Further, Syssner (2010)'s concepts of spatial positioning and spatial anchorage do also apply

to the rural context of this study. While in Varde and Skive municipality specific smaller attractions or places, respectively, were used for spatial anchorage of the municipal brand, the brand of Esbjerg municipality was mostly anchored in the main city. In the latter case, this could be an explanation for the lack of strategic place brand architecture approach, as it could mean a lack of interest in or even recognizing the value of the smaller places' brands. The brands of Varde and Skive municipality were more anchored in the identity of the municipality, and therefore relatable for the smaller places. Yet, Varde municipality, so far, promoted local attractions and events rather than the smaller places. In Skive municipality, all of the participating villages mentioned how the municipality actually promoted them both internally and externally to the wider region, i.e., the even higher vertical level. While more recently Esbjerg municipality has also begun to promote the smaller places, the municipal brand had already been very specific and tailored to the main city, bearing the risk that smaller places are excluded from engagement. Spatial positioning (Syssner 2010) in relation to the municipal brand is, therefore, difficult and requires repositioning the municipal brand.

Different levels of commitment both from the municipal level to the smaller places' brands and vice versa (Hanna and Rowley 2015) were observed in our cases. In Esbjerg municipality neither examples of the use of the municipal brand's logo nor other forms of commitment of the small places to the municipal brand were observed, despite the initial steps taken by the municipality to promote the smaller places. In Varde municipality, the smaller places included the municipal brand logo on their website, or in their slogan. In Skive municipality, the smaller places only included the logo of the municipal brand in their material when they received funding to do so. The use of funding opportunities as an incentive for the smaller places to position themselves within the municipal brand has also been shown by Syssner (2010). In line with Zenker and Erfgen (2014)'s place brand management model, Skive and Varde municipalities have created the funds to support initiatives related to the municipality brand. However, the case of Skive municipality also revealed, that the support for the municipal brand by the smaller places is more difficult to achieve, when the brand does not include the place name. Both the incentivization of the municipal brand promotion through funding and the promotion of the smaller places by Skive and Esbjerg municipality could be interpreted as initiating steps towards a house of brand structure in the municipalities.

The lower-level places also expressed the need for awareness and reputation building towards the higher-level municipalities. This is in line with previous studies that either investigated

hypothetical brands (Rebelo, Mehmood, and Marsden 2019), or brands at a higher vertical level with administrative actors steering the branding process (Syssner 2010). On the other hand, it could also be observed that the municipalities tried to provide resources to the lower-level places to support their voluntary-driven branding initiatives leading to a lack resources, be it financial or skills.

Conclusion, limitations and further research

Different approaches are taken to place branding in rural municipalities vs. the individual places within them, yet they are often interdependent. The individual places not only have to build strong brands for the direct competition for residents, visitors or consumers, but they also need to take care of their reputation towards the municipality in order to get easier access to municipal resources. The smaller places can use spatial positioning in relation to the municipal brand, yet they rarely do so unless some funding follows with it.

The municipalities can support the individual places and consequently use their brands in their own promotion. However, not all municipalities use their smaller places for spatial anchorage. If at all, they do so for specific target groups (e.g., newcomers, visitors). However, the municipalities in our study can and do provide support for the smaller places' branding initiatives. This support can either be financial, administrative, or by providing skills and knowledge. It is common that the municipalities that invest resources in the lower-level place brands, are also those that use these brands for spatial anchorage within their own branding.

This study contributes to the existing place branding literature by providing better understanding about the interactions between lower level, non-administrative place brands and higher level, administrative place brands. More specifically, four vertical place brand interaction archetypes have been identified, that are commonly applied in the rural context. However, since all four interaction archetypes include limitations regarding the coordination of the branding strategies at the different vertical levels, applying a strategic approach to create a place brand architecture could be beneficial for all involved places and their brands. Our study refines previous findings on the multi-level perspective on place branding and broadens the perspective of place branding by highlighting the need for a relational, multi-level approach in place branding.

The findings provide guidance for place branding officials and others involved in the initiatives regarding the role the higher-level place administration can play in the lower level's place branding, for example through providing funding, advice and skills. Furthermore, the people

responsible for the lower-level place brand should be made aware to put focus on building good reputation towards the higher-level place administration to gain easier access to resources and to be included in the higher level's branding. For example, when there is a focal actor (i.e., a municipality or other administrative body) steering the place branding, they could focus on creating a place brand that the whole municipality can associate with in order to facilitate spatial positioning. At the same time, the higher-level place branding initiatives need the resources to better engage with the lower-level places' brands and potentially also using them for spatial anchorage. The findings also point to some challenges related to implementing a strategic place brand architecture, that the officials should take into account, including the compatibility of the meanings and identities created for the different brands. As this study is based on three Danish rural municipalities and individual smaller towns within them, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to other countries or contexts. The administrative setup might differ, including the administrative powers and the resources available at the different vertical levels, which might change the relationship between the places. There are several aspects that would be worthwhile investigating to refine the findings of our study. First, it would be interesting to better understand if and why specific kinds of smaller places are more successful than others to acquire resources from the higher-level places. Second, for spatial anchorage, an investigation of the factors which play a role in the decisions of higher-level places to relate to lower-level place brands would be useful. Such factors might include the target groups of the brand, characteristics of the smaller place's brand, or collaborations among the places. Third, for spatial positioning, further research is needed to identify how smaller places could be engaged to relate to the municipal brand other than through funding and if this would lead to different types of brand positioning. Fourth, it would be interesting to find places where a strategic approach to place brand architecture has been implemented to better understand if and how this would provide better outcomes than the 'laissez faire' approaches for the places and their brands. Fifth, on the actor level, based on place attachment and identity theories, future research should study how individual actors (residents, municipal employees, entrepreneurs, businesses, etc.) could better engage with brands at various levels and contribute to creating more beneficial relationships between them.

Since our study was focused on the interaction between vertical level place brands in the specific context of administrative rural municipality place brands and community-driven small place brands, a broadening of the focus to cover other constellation of connected place brands is necessary. This could include both other types of vertically connected place brands as well as

horizontally linked brands. Furthermore, it would be interesting to introduce other kinds of places (e.g., national parks, natural areas, etc.) and other kinds of local brands (e.g., attractions, companies) into the relationship. The findings for the interaction between villages and municipalities, could possibly be compared to the interactions between neighbourhoods and urban municipalities.

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Appendix 1. Overview of the cases included in the study

| | Population | Area (km ²) | Description |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|---|
| Esbjerg Municipality | 115,483 | 795.3 | Esbjerg Municipality is located on the west coast of Denmark. The main city is Esbjerg, a port city, with a position as capital of the country's offshore sector. In a number of focus groups/workshops, different stakeholders representing different sectors (education, culture, business, etc., but not residents) agreed on focusing on 'energy' for the municipality's brand. The process started in 2010, and the definition phase was led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The EnergiMetropol is still the main brand but realizing that people mainly associate it with the energy sector, the municipality has begun to focus more on the main city with this brand and tries to find alternatives that more people could support. It is the municipal communication department, and a public-private business organization that control the brand. |
| Ribe | 8,317 | 7.3 | Ribe is located 32 km from Esbjerg. It is the oldest town in Denmark, with a well-preserved medieval centre. A lot of cultural attractions and events are based in the town, which is a popular tourism destination. Here the branding is done by an association created by the main attractions, accommodation places, restaurants and other visitor businesses. The local trade organization is also involved, as is the municipal business organization (incl. the tourism office). There are many community-based events taking place throughout the year, many building upon and contributing to the brand of the town. The special marketing organization has been created in 2007. |
| Gørding | 1,736 | 1.5 | Gørding is a residential town 30 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, it is located near a highway with easy access to bigger towns in the area and has a good school. The focus of their branding is its attractiveness due to an active association life and having nature close by. Their branding started with a professionalized website in 2012-13, and a slogan 'En grøn by i bevægelse' (EN: 'a green town in movement'). The branding here is done by the volunteer residents involved in the local citizen council and its working group focused on branding. |
| Darum | 896 | 1.1 | Darum is a residential town 16 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, a school that implemented an innovative organizational structure, and it is |

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| | | | located at the border to the Wadden Sea National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Their slogan is 'Byen bag diget' (EN: 'the town behind the dike'), they organize a 'Vadehavsdag' (EN: 'Wadden Sea day') event, and the branding is very much based on the surrounding nature and the community. The slogan has been around for many years, while the event was started in 2018. The branding here is done by few of those involved in the local citizen council. |
| Skive Municipality | 45,851 | 683.5 | Skive municipality is located on a peninsula in Mid-Jutland region, in northwest Denmark, with Skive being the main town. The branding here started in 2011, based again on a number of workshops with different sectors of the community (education, culture, industry, business, local communities). The initial phase was, also here, led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The brand, 'Rent Liv' (EN: 'Clean Life') has been controlled by the municipal communication department and has been revitalized in 2019 to sharpen its focus, which now is mostly related to sustainability, including green energy. |
| Rødning | 895 | 0.8 | Rødning is a village located 17 km from Skive. There has been an organization working with local development since 2004, while in 2008 a project started on branding the village as 'Rødning – Æblets By' (EN: 'Rødning - the town of the apple'). In 2016 the latter changed to be an organization too, and a working group on marketing was established to serve both organizations. The apple organization, as well as the development organization, are voluntary based. There's a yearly apple festival attracting visitors from afar, while the whole village is implicated with apples in one way or another (having apple trees, making apple must, cooking with apples, apple decorations, etc.). |
| Fur | 767 | 22 | Fur is a small island in the northern part of Skive municipality, 3 minutes sailing away from the peninsula. Tourism is an important industry on the island, and most people know it through their vacation experiences. The branding is part of the local development here too, and it started through a project in 2009. As a result of this, a new local development association was established, that continues to brand the island. |
| Selde | 270 | 0.4 | Selde is a village located 27 km from Skive. Their branding initiative began with an art project in 2012. The project was a result of discussions about ideas for |

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| | | | area renewal, where some local citizens expressed a wish to get more art into the village. It developed very much in relation to a local gallery, which continues to be the focal point. After the initial project ended in 2014, the ‘Skulpturlandsby’ (EN: ‘Sculpture Village’) was established, with recurrent events where the sculptors create and install their pieces in the village. |
| Varde Municipality | 49,961 | 1,240.1 | Varde municipality is located just north of Esbjerg municipality, on the western coast of Denmark. Varde is the main town, and while there is a number of bigger companies in different industries, the municipality is home to a number of popular tourist destinations along the coast. The current branding started in 2014, after a series of workshops with citizens and other local stakeholders. This was again led by an external consultancy, and a local design bureau created the visual identity for the brand. ‘Vi i Naturen’ (EN: ‘we in the nature’) combines the richness of nature in the municipality, and the cooperative spirit. |
| Oksbøl | 2,837 | 2.3 | Oksbøl is a town 14 km from Varde, close to many of the most popular beaches in the area. Many people associate it with the military barracks located there, while it was also a location of the biggest German refugee camp after WWII in Denmark, which sets the background for an upcoming museum on refugees. The branding here is very much focused on the residential life– the community, safety, and active association life. Some ad-hoc initiatives have started to highlight the local history as part of the branding initiatives. The work is mainly done by the volunteer-based local citizen and trade association, and some highly engaged citizens. There is a logo with the slogan ‘Oksbølby – Tryghed midt i naturen!’ (EN: ‘Oksbøl town – safety in the middle of nature’). |
| Billum | 578 | 0.6 | Billum is a small town located 11 km from Varde. There is a number of small entrepreneurs or small businesses, who put an effort into the development and branding of the town. Among the most important initiatives the town is proud of is an independent school. Otherwise, much is done on an ad-hoc basis, with some things undertaken by the parish association, and some by the local business and investment association. Similar to the other small towns and villages, also here the focus is on the nature-rich location, and the active and friendly community. A slogan on the webpage says ‘Billum – |

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| | | | Landsbyen på toppen af Ho Bugt' (EN: 'the village at the top of the bay Ho'). |
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Paper 4: Rural place branding processes as drivers of local actor engagement

Barbora Gulisova¹

Chris Horbel²

Egon Noe³

Abstract

Rural places increasingly apply place branding to improve their reputation and attract and retain residents. Different approaches are taken to place branding, ranging from rather top-down, centrally steered one, through differently organized community-based approaches, to a rather ad-hoc, community-based approach without much coordination. This raises the question of how these approaches differ in their ability to create ownership, identification, and legitimacy perception, all leading to actor engagement with the place brand, such as advocacy. To answer this question, we interviewed local actors in eight different rural places in Denmark, where place branding is a common practice. The evidence suggests the least organized, community-based approach to be the best one to create ownership, and identification, while the other types do not lag much behind. Actor engagement is though similar in all four types of approaches, possibly due to place branding being perceived as legitimate. While the study is explorative, it provides foundations for further, possibly quantitative research into the topic. Its qualitative aspect provides more specific guidance to the place branding practitioners, including possible reasons behind the actors' sense of ownership and identification, legitimacy perceptions and engagement behaviours.

Keywords: rural places, place branding approaches, ownership, identification, legitimacy, actor engagement

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¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

² Associate Professor, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

³ Professor, Danish Centre for Rural Research & Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

Introduction

“Every place is a brand” (Boisen, 2015, p. 15), understood as a set of associations in people’s minds related to the place name (Boisen, Terlouw, & Gorp, 2011; Kerr & Balakrishnan, 2012). These associations are based on different expressions of a place, embodied through the communication, aims, values, and culture of the stakeholders of the place and its overall design (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Place branding is about the formation and communication of a place brand (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014). It is the “process of consciously trying to influence and even orchestrate” the process of developing the meanings, identities and images of the place (Boisen, 2015) in the minds of its audiences. While city branding often focuses on attracting new residents, tourists and investors, rural branding is more commonly focused on the needs and capacities of local people and the local development (Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema, 2017). Rural place branding therefore focuses on adding value to the rural place “in order to develop the place internally, consolidate its identity and improve the place’s reputation externally” (Gulisova, 2020), and different approaches are taken to do that.

In some rural places, there exists an administrative authority, such as a city council (e.g. Mayes, 2008) or a regional tourism authority (e.g. Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011). In such places, there is often a clear focal actor, such as a communication department, or a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) that is responsible for place branding, very often supported by consultants (Gulisova, 2020). In other rural places, such as individual towns, villages or communities more communitarian approaches to the practice are taken, where different associations, including citizen or trade associations, and local residents are responsible for place branding (e.g., Vik & Villa, 2010; Vuorinen & Vos, 2013).

Participatory, inclusive place branding practices have been proposed to build support (Kavaratzis, Giovanardi, & Lichrou, 2018) among local actors. This is crucial for any place branding, since the local actors are an inherent part of the place and their support is needed for the trustworthiness of the branding (e.g. Braun, Kalandides, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Houghton & Stevens, 2011). Local actors’ support is often a result of ownership perception and identification with the brand as well as legitimacy perceptions of the place branding, and expressed through actor engagement behaviour, such as positive word-of-mouth (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017).

While rural places tend to use participatory approaches to place branding, there are different ways to do so and different degrees of community involvement. The variety of rural place branding processes (Gulisova, 2020) calls for an investigation of how the different approaches succeed in

creating local actor engagement through ownership, identification, and legitimacy. Such findings will provide guidance to place branding professionals in rural places regarding the attitudes and behaviours to expect from local actors, depending on the approach they apply to place branding. Most importantly rural place branding practitioners will be enabled to understand how they potentially can change their approach in order to increase actor engagement behaviour to the level they need.

The aim of this study is to explore how different types of rural place branding approaches are perceived by local actors, especially how effective they are in creating ownership and identification, and thereby actor engagement with the place brand and branding. Therefore, this study will be guided by the research question:

How capable are different rural place branding approaches in creating brand ownership, identification and legitimacy among local actors and ultimately encouraging local actor engagement?

We then proceed to the discussion of the importance of brand ownership, identification, and legitimacy, and actor engagement for place branding. The literature review is synthesized in a theoretical framework. Thereafter, we introduce the context of this study, including the types of rural place branding processes that we differentiated before the methods of data collection, informed by the theoretical framework are described. The presentation of the findings is followed by a discussion comparing the actor engagement outcomes of the different place branding process types. Finally, the main limitations of the study and potential avenues for future research are outlined.

Place branding and local actor engagement

Participative, inclusive approaches to place branding have been advocated as they lead to actors' advocacy and support of the place brand (e.g., Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018; Kavaratzis et al., 2018; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Similarly, the shortcomings of rather top-down, centrally steered place branding processes have led to suggestions of organically developed, local community based place brands being more sustainable (Wheeler et al., 2011). But, when actors have limited resources (time, money, energy) to collaborate, the coordination between them can be difficult (Riege, Perry, & Go, 2002), and a brand facilitator who creates the space for brand engagement and value co-creation is therefore necessary (Brodie, Benson-Rea, & Medlin, 2017).

As rural places apply a variety of different approaches to place branding, it is important to understand how effective they are in creating engagement for the brand among actors that are not directly involved or interested in place branding. In the following we therefore briefly review potential outcomes of place branding and determinants of actor engagement that have been identified in the literature.

Brand ownership and identification

Brand ownership and identification have been shown to be important for actors', especially residents', engagement in place branding. Ownership has been defined as actors' notion to "see themselves as potential co-owners of the brand and feel the commitment to the brand" (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013, p. 1081). Actors are more likely to embody and express the place brand message, if they feel they have been involved in shaping it, having a greater sense of ownership (Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Further, actors might begin to advocate the brand, when they can identify with it (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012; Zenker & Braun, 2017). Identification has been defined as "the degree to which the brand expresses and enhances" one's identity (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001). Hanna and Rowley (2015) have shown that actors need to identify with the place brands' core values for the engagement to function efficiently, rather than feeling the values being imposed on them (Hanna & Rowley, 2015).

Yet, while "stakeholder buy-in is important" in place branding (Kemp et al., 2012, p. 511), opposition from actors not feeling represented by the brand will make full support unlikely (Zenker & Braun, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of brand identification has been identified as a reason for residents' disengagement with a city brand (Insch & Stuart, 2015; Insch & Walters, 2017). Leaving residents out of the branding decisions might lead to lower levels of identification with the brand, thereby leading to less authenticity, acceptance, recognition and commitment from the local community (Aitken & Campelo, 2011).

Legitimacy

While ownership and identification are important drivers of actor engagement in place branding, Insch and Walters (2017) found that residents' negative attitude or lack of involvement can be caused by their disagreement with the goals of the branding and its legitimacy.

There is no clear ownership of a place and, hence, the place brand. Consequently, it can always be discussed who has the authority to engage in place branding, making legitimacy an

inherent dilemma of the practice (Sevin, 2011). Legitimacy has been conceptualized as a perception, i.e., individual and collective evaluation or judgement, of the appropriateness of an entity or of an issue (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019). According to Martin and Capelli (2017), legitimacy implies that “the means used to reach organizational goals, as well as the goals themselves, are in line with certain purposes and needs recognized by society” (p. 824). For place branding, both legitimacy of the issue, that is the place branding itself, and perceptions of the legitimacy of actors, especially a focal actor, engaging in it are relevant (Chung, Berger, & DeCoster, 2016). Martin and Capelli (2017) found region branding to raise questions of legitimacy among residents, because they were doubtful about the initiators of branding, the objectives as well as the proposed brand promise. Most importantly, they were worried that their regional identity gets lost, if the proposed branding was successful. Accordingly, Insch and Walters (2017) challenge the implicit assumption of place branding literature that residents perceive branding of their place as appropriate. Disagreement with the goals of a place branding campaign might lead to negative attitude and disengagement of residents. Instead, residents can be expected to be more supportive of external promotion, if they perceive the underlying place values being respected (Insch & Walters, 2017). Further, those who in general dislike marketing and branding might oppose place branding and make full support for it unlikely (Zenker & Braun, 2017). Consequently, to create local actor engagement for place branding, it is necessary that local actors perceive place branding as a legitimate activity and the involved actors as legitimate entities.

Actor engagement behaviour

The value of a brand is co-created by all its users, emphasizing the need for broad actor engagement in place branding (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016; Warnaby, 2009). Actor engagement, conceptualized as “both the disposition of actors to engage, and the activity of engaging” (Storbacka et al., 2016, p. 3009), relates to the actor’s voluntary contribution of resources to the engagement object (Alexander, Jaakkola, & Hollebeek, 2018), i.e., the place brand. In place branding, this means strongly involved citizens demonstrating “positive behaviour beyond their ‘normal’ duties” (Braun et al., 2013, p. 21), and “individual, voluntary behaviour which enhances the performance of the brand, going beyond expectations” (Hankinson, 2009, p. 99). Actor engagement behaviour can be augmenting, e.g., posting pictures about the place and tagging the place brand; co-developing, e.g., constructive proposals for improvement of the brand; influencing, i.e., positive communication about the brand;

and mobilizing, i.e., recommending the place brand to others (Alexander et al., 2018; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Roy, Balaji, Soutar, Lassar, & Roy, 2018). Other studies identified brand advocacy through word-of-mouth (Zenker et al., 2017) and loyalty (Fehrer, Woratschek, Germelmann, & Brodie, 2018; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017) as potential actor engagement behaviours resulting from place branding.

Conceptual framework

Based on the above considerations, we propose the conceptual framework presented in figure 1. We suggest that the different types of rural place branding approaches differ in their ability to create actor engagement through ownership, identification, and legitimacy. The framework starts with the place branding process types, determined by their focal actor, other actor groups' engagement in the process, and the organization of the process. We then have the three dimensions of brand ownership (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013), identification (Kim et al., 2001) and legitimacy (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Chung et al., 2016). The legitimacy dimension consists of two sub-dimensions, issue legitimacy (i.e., of place branding as such) and organization legitimacy (i.e., of the focal actor). Finally, actor engagement is the outcome dimension. For the purpose of our study, we focus on four types of actor engagement behaviours. These are co-developing, influencing, and augmenting behaviour (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), as well as loyalty (Fehrer et al., 2018).

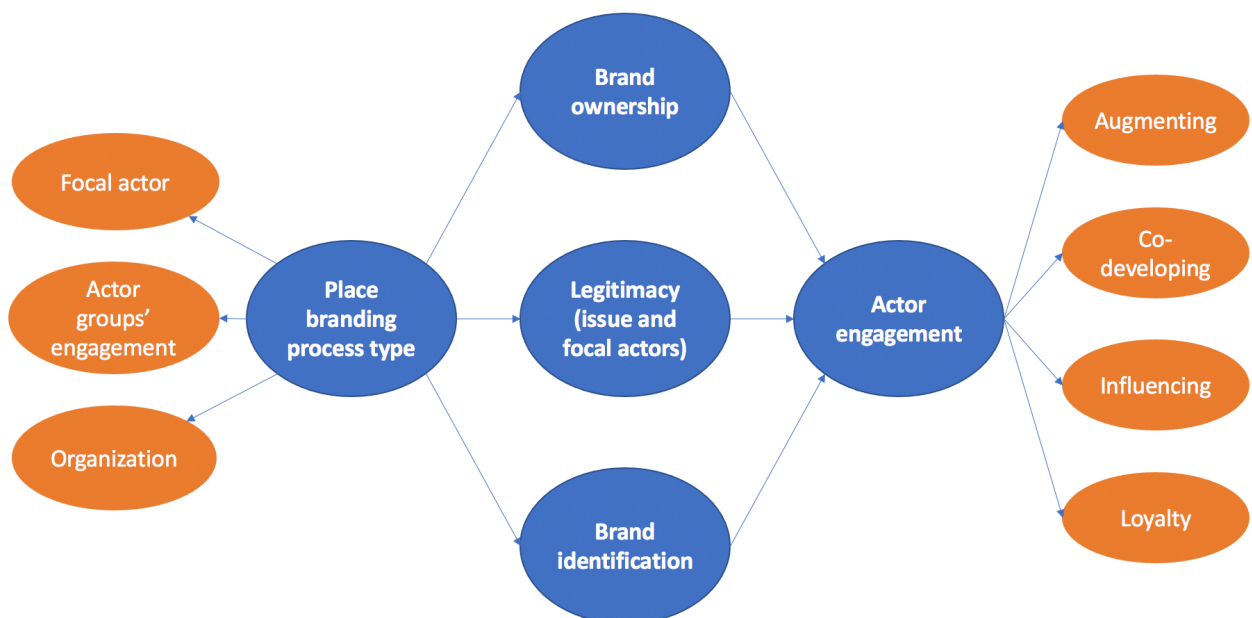


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of place branding types and actor engagement related

outcomes

Background of the study

Within the last decade, place branding has become widespread in Denmark, with the municipalities often spending large amounts of money on branding (JydskeVestkysten, 2017), while also individual towns and villages have initiated place branding activities to improve their reputation and attract new residents (Andersen, 2015).

Denmark is administratively divided into 98 municipalities, which act as local authorities (Ministry Of Social Affairs And The Interior, 2020). With the exception of the most urban municipalities, they include a number of smaller towns, villages and rural areas, for which the authorities located in the main municipal city are responsible. In the smaller towns and villages, there is typically a local, volunteer-based, citizen council or parish association that acts as representative of these places towards the municipalities and other external actors (e.g., Varde Kommune, 2020).

It must be expected that the place branding approaches applied in the municipalities and the individual towns and villages differ due to their dissimilar administrative setups. A preliminary study was therefore conducted to identify the different rural place branding processes applied in rural places (Gulisova, Horbel, & Noe, 2021). Based on 11 places, differing in their administrative setup, size, location and focus, four types of rural place branding processes were identified (table 1). The administration-led process type 1 is a formalized and centralized approach strategically applied in administrative places, where the local authority acts as a focal actor, and involvement of other local actors is minor. Type 2, the experience-based process type, is a formalized, community-based approach, where different local actors form a new organization to coordinate the branding. The strategic work is rather centralized with this newly established focal actor. Often, many other local actors are involved throughout the process. The transitional process type 3 is a less formalized, community-based approach, where few people from an already existing citizen association collaborate for place branding. Such subgroup of the association then acts as the focal actor and works somewhat strategically with place branding. Type 4 is an ad-hoc place branding approach. It describes non-formalized, decentralized rural place branding processes without a clear strategic focus. Even though there might be a citizen association that is perceived as the focal actor, place branding here is based on rather ad-hoc initiatives of different local actors.

| Type of rural place branding process | Characteristics of the process | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| | Focal actor | Actor groups' engagement | Organization |
| Type 1: Administration-led process | Strong focal actor Local authority Pre-existing actor | Many actor groups engaged in the beginning Fewer engaged on a longer-term basis External actors engaged in the beginning | Formalized Centralized Strategically driven |
| Type 2: Experience-based process | Strong focal actor Community-based Newly established | Many actor groups engaged throughout the process External actors engaged during the process | Formalized Rather centralized Strategically driven |
| Type 3: Transitional process | Middle strong Community-based Pre-existing actor | Many actor groups engaged throughout the process External actors engaged during the process | Somewhat formalized Somewhat centralized Strategically focused |
| Type 4: Ad-hoc process | Weak focal actor Community-based Pre-existing actor | Many actor groups engaged throughout the process Few external (if any) actors engaged during the process | Non-formalized Decentralized Ad-hoc (lack of strategy) |

Table 1. Types of rural place branding approaches, table adapted from Gulisova et al. (2021)

Methodology

For the present study, we included eight places, two of them representing each type. For type 1, the administration-led process type, we included Varde municipality and Skive municipality, smaller municipalities with a lot of nature, tourism (coast), but also different types of industrial activities (JydskeVestkysten, 2019; Skive Kommune, 2020). For experience-based place branding process type (type 2), we included Selde and Rødding, two villages with a strategic approach to place branding. Selde's brand is art focused (Fursundegnen, 2020), while Rødding is branded as "the town of the apples" (Rødding, 2021). Darum and Gørding represent transitional place branding processes (type 3). In both places, the local citizen councils have recently begun to apply a more strategic approach to place branding. Darum's brand is nature-based and related to the neighbouring national park (Darum, 2020), while the brand of Gørding focuses on the place's central location, nature and activities for everyone (Gørding, 2020). Billum and Oksbøl are the cases to represent ad-hoc place branding processes (type 4). Billum focuses on the independent school, the community, and a number of small local businesses (Billum, 2020), while Oksbøl uses its active association life, history, and an upcoming museum for their branding (Oksbølby, 2020). A commonality of all places in the sample is their main goal to attract newcomers, especially younger adults and families with children, and attracting visitors as a minor goal of the place

branding initiative.

Qualitative methodology was applied to investigate the attitudes and behaviours of actors not working with the place branding, but who might have some interest in it or for whom the branding could be expected to make a difference (e.g., local schools, businesses, cultural institutions, residents). A combination of random purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, the focal actors in each place were asked for possible interviewees from the community. Second, we identified and contacted organizations and individuals for whom the place branding could have been expected to be a relevant issue. We limited this random purposeful sampling to local museums, schools, sport associations, and businesses.

In each place, between 2 and 4 individuals were interviewed. While some interviewees were local citizens responding in their role of residents, most participants were representing organizations. Their responses should reflect the organization's perspective, yet personal opinions could not be avoided as the interviewees at the same time are residents of the place. There is often consistency between these different identities and roles of people (Lee & Aslam, 2018, p. 2), yet, in some instances the organizational and the personal perspective differed. In such cases, this was pointed out by the interviewees themselves or checked by the interviewer.

Structured interviews were conducted to allow for easier comparison of the data (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020) between interviewees, and in this research especially between the different types of rural place branding approaches. The interviews were conducted over telephone, as this is more efficient, allowing more flexibility with regards to scheduling, as well as geographical concerns (Harvey, 2011; Holt, 2010). While responses acquired through telephone interviews are presumably less comprehensive than responses from face-to-face interviews, they provide more detailed insight than written surveys (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Nevertheless, it is generally seen as appropriate to conduct structured interviews over telephone (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

The data collection and the subsequent deductive analysis were informed by the preceding discussion of the literature on ownership, identification, legitimacy and actor engagement. The data were subsequently thematically analysed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

In this section, we briefly present the findings regarding the outcomes of each of four rural place branding types. Additional illustrative quotes can be found in appendix 1.

Type 1: Administration-led place branding processes

Some of the respondents from places that applied a type 1 place branding process have been involved in the participatory sessions at the beginning of the process, and their respective organizations collaborated with the municipality to some degree. Still, ownership here was not especially high, while identification was only slightly higher. The place brands expressed some of the values that the represented organizations could identify with, while not all of their values. While issue legitimacy was high, there were some doubts about the specific brand positioning (1VK1). At the same time, the perceptions about the legitimacy of the branding actors were not as high.

Co-developing engagement behaviour was generally low, but still varied. In Skive municipality, the museums developed some ideas to use the municipal brand in their activities, but they did not suggest improvements to the brand (1SK3). In Varde municipality, the museums were more active. They provided suggestions and were involved in different working group discussions in the municipality (1VK1). Influencing engagement behaviour was high, as local actors talked positively about the municipality's brand (1SK2). Augmenting engagement behaviour was relatively low. Nevertheless, one resident reported that she engaged much in sharing posts (1SK2), while the museums in both places tagged the brand in their social media posts when it was relevant (1SK3, 1VK1). Finally, loyalty was high, as the interviewees *"definitely will"* (1SK2) support the municipality and its brand in the future.

Type 2: Experience-based process

The interviewees expressed an even lower sense of ownership for the place branding in the places that applied a type 2 place branding process compared to those of type 1. This was also the case with identification, which was lowest among all process types. Identification was especially low for the art-focused brand of Selde. One interviewee expressed that he could identify with *"something really a lot, and something not at all"* (2S1). Branding was seen as a legitimate issue here, but the legitimacy of the central place branding actors was again somewhat lower. Co-developing engagement behaviour was generally low. Although one interviewee in Selde historically proposed a lot, and still tried to stay involved in the branding (2S1), others did not. The interviewees mostly reported a lack of knowledge about the brand focus (art) as reasons for their low involvement (2S4). Influencing behaviour was prevalent here. Participants frequently expressed that they very often (2S1) or *"always talk positively about"* (2S4) the town. It was the opposite with augmenting behaviour, which again was low here. Many people in Selde do generally not use social media much (2S1, 2S3, 2S4), while in Rødning the café owner reported that he did

not post anything *"unless I make food for the apple town, then of course I do it"* (2R2). Loyalty was high here, with actors intending to support their town and its branding *"as much as possible"* (2R2).

Type 3: Transitional process

The expressed sense of ownership was low among the participants of the places that applied a type 3 place branding process, mainly due to a lack of direct involvement in the branding. In contrast, identification was high, as the place brands represented the local actors' values. Issue legitimacy was also high here. Perceptions of the legitimacy of the main branding actors was lower than in the other types. This might be related to the perception that the local level was not the most appropriate. One interviewee mentioned that branding of the larger region would be more beneficial (3D3). Another interviewee doubted the proposed slogan to work well, but he thought nevertheless, that branding *"benefits the whole town"* (3G2).

Co-developing engagement behaviour was not commonly applied by the local actors. Few interviewees have *"actively"* (3G3) made suggestions and contributed (3G1) to the branding in Gørding, while none have done so in Darum. Influencing behaviour was most prevalent in this type. Some said they talked positively about the town when they were in contact with their customers (3D3), while others just generally *"do that a lot"* (3G1). Augmenting behaviour was low, with people either not being very active on social media (3D2) or posting about their business without relating to the place and its brand in the post (3D1, 3D3). Loyalty, as the intention to support the town's branding, was also high in this type. In Gørding, the head of the sports hall intended to support the branding in the future, and also added that he would support the town whether it is with this branding (slogan) or any other (3G3).

Type 4: Ad-hoc process

Interviewees from places with a type 4 place branding approach expressed both high sense of ownership and identification. As a local priest said, *"well, I think you have a role in it, and responsibility in it, and in that way, it is also my own"* (4O2). It was further stressed that being involved in the activities (4B1) and being part of the community facilitated identification (4O2). In addition, just like in the other types, place branding's issue legitimacy was perceived as being high. Legitimacy perceptions of the main place branding actors was again somewhat lower, mainly because branding was perceived as benefitting mostly those directly involved in it. Nevertheless, this was seen as being fair and a form of compensation for those who put most effort in the place

branding (4B2).

Co-developing engagement behaviour was not commonly performed by local actors. One interviewee from Billum expressed that she had only lived there for a too short time to engage more, but she expected to do so in the future (4B3). Another respondent did not engage in co-developing, because she felt it is the responsibility of the specific councils to discuss the proposals (4B2). Influencing behaviour was high among the local actors. The interviewees explained that they emphasized the positive aspects of the town when talking with others (4O3). A local artist, for example, said she does so, *“in the atelier... so it is the direct contact where I can... talk about the good narrative”* (4B2). Augmenting behaviour was mostly performed by sharing others’ posts when they seemed relevant (4B1, 4B3). However, one resident in Oksbøl said that she posts about Oksbøl *“all the time, because when I post something about my business, then I tag Oksbøl in it. So, I do that all the time”* (4O3). Finally, loyalty, i.e., the intent to support the town and its brand was also high here. One interviewee mentioned that her intention to support the place has *“only become more positive”* (4B1) over time.

The findings regarding the capability of the four different place branding process types to create ownership, identification and legitimacy and, ultimately, actor engagement, are summarized in table 2.

| Type of process | Outcomes | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------|------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| | Ownership | Identification | Legitimacy | | Actor engagement | | | |
| | | | Issue | Focal actor | Augmenting | Co-developing | influencing | Loyalty |
| Type 1 | Medium | Medium | High | Medium | Medium | Low | High | High |
| Type 2 | Low | Medium | High | Medium | Low | Low | High | High |
| Type 3 | Medium | High | High | Low | Low | Medium | High | High |
| Type 4 | High | High | High | Medium | Medium | Low | High | High |

Table 2. Actor engagement outcomes of the four rural place branding process types

Discussion

Since most of the interviewees were not or only to a minor degree involved in the place branding, their perceived ownership levels were generally low. However, the interviewees reported that their ownership tended to increase over time. An exception were the ad-hoc place branding processes (type 4) where the interviewees indicated the highest ownership levels. Furthermore, ownership perceptions were generally higher when the actors were involved in the branding. However, this did not lead to higher engagement influencing and augmenting behaviour, as suggested by previous studies (Braun et al., 2013; Houghton & Stevens, 2011). Overall, higher

levels off ownership perception did not result in higher local actor engagement indicating that brand ownership might not be the most important factor for stimulating local actors to embody and express the brand.

While there was not much difference between the types regarding identification, the interviewees expressed higher identification with their place brands when transitionary and ad-hoc place branding processes were applied (type 3 and 4) than for the other types. This could be related to the latter's more formal approach, which leads to more focused and specialized brands, that exclude some of the local values that actors find important. As only few local actors are involved in the creation of the brand, others might perceive it ambiguously. However, in contrast to previous research, that suggested that lower identification has a negative impact on the support for the brand (Zenker & Petersen, 2014), the findings of our study reveal high levels of influencing behaviour (word-of-mouth) and loyalty across all types of place branding approaches.

While place branding was perceived as a legitimate issue by all interviewees, lower perceptions of the legitimacy of the main branding actors were common. Issue legitimacy was slightly lower for administration-led processes than for the other types. Despite that, the perception of the legitimacy of the main branding actors was higher for administration-led and experience-based processes than for the other types. An explanation might be the awareness of the focal actors, especially in administration-led processes (the municipality), for the potential scepticism of the local actors regarding their legitimacy to steer the place branding process and their subsequent efforts to establish a good relationship with the local communities to increase trust in the branding initiative.

The generally high perception of issue legitimacy of place branding could be an explanation for the high local actor engagement despite rather low ownership perceptions in most cases. This supports the need to explain the goals of place branding to local actors to gain their support for it (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019; Chung et al., 2016). Our findings show that high legitimacy perception can create high engagement among local actors, and thereby indirectly provides support for Insch and Walters (2017)' finding of lack of engagement as a consequence of low legitimacy perception. Our findings contradict Martin and Capelli (2017)'s finding of residents raising questions about the legitimacy of place branding, yet this might be related to the goals and approaches of the initiatives. While different approaches are taken to branding in our cases, all are locally anchored. In addition, branding here is about more than marketing of the place, but rather developing the place, supporting the internal cohesion, and generally improving the place's reputation. Further,

the cases in our sample are smaller rural towns or municipalities, that all face challenges in attracting and retaining residents. Hence, local actors' attitudes towards place branding might be more positive as it is perceived as a potential solution to the problem, and this might influence the relationship between the actors and their place brand engagement (Insch & Walters, 2017).

Finally, local actors' engagement behaviours were quite similar across all types. Influencing behaviour and loyalty were generally much more prevalent than co-developing and augmenting behaviour. This could be related to the different resources (time, energy, skills) needed to engage in the different behaviours (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). More resources are necessary to contribute with suggestions for improvement or actively promote the place brand via social media compared to talking positively about the place (brand) or generally intending to support the place and its branding in the future.

Overall, in line with the advocacy of more participative and inclusive place branding approaches (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Kavaratzis et al., 2018; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), when comparing the four place branding process types, ad-hoc place branding processes enable highest ownership and identification, as well as actor engagement. This finding is in line with Wheeler et al. (2011), who suggests that local community based, organically developed place brands might be more sustainable, than top-down steered brands. Notably, even when formalization is only somewhat higher than in ad-hoc or transitional place branding processes, it has a downward impact on ownership and identification. Further, the top-down administration-led processes characterized by a central authority high formalization, enable similar levels of ownership and identification as the community-based, yet strategically focused and organized transitional and experience-based processes. This can possibly be explained by the generally high issue legitimacy perception of place branding for all place branding process types included in this study.

Conclusion

Participatory, inclusive approaches to place branding have been advocated, as they enable higher ownership and identification among the local actors, who therefore are more likely to advocate the place brand. In this study, we investigated how four different types of rural place branding approaches, ranging from rather top-down, central administration steered approaches to ad-hoc, community-based approaches, succeed in creating ownership, identification and legitimacy perceptions among local actors and through this stimulate local actor engagement. We found qualitative evidence for the bottom-up, community approach with least formalization to most effectively induce ownership and identification with the place brand. However, even a top-down,

administration-steered approach can create a level of ownership and identification among place stakeholders that equals more formalized community-based approaches.

Notably, engagement behaviour was relatively similar in all types of place branding approaches. The interviewees expressed similar levels of augmenting, co-developing and influencing behaviour and loyalty across the types of approaches. The most common engagement behaviours across all cases and types were influencing (positive word-of-mouth) and loyalty behaviour, whereas augmenting and co- developing behaviours were generally less prevalent.

The similarity in the support for the place brand and branding among the four types of rural place branding approaches could be a result of local actors' high perception of issue legitimacy of place branding as it is understood as an important practice in contemporary society. Despite that, legitimacy perceptions of the focal and other involved actors were generally somewhat lower indicating that scepticism towards place branding actors might be an issue.

Overall, this study contributes to the place branding literature by finding evidence and explanations for how different rural place branding approaches are capable of building ownership and identification and supporting actor engagement among local actors. Further, it contributes to the discussion about legitimacy of place branding by supporting the notion that legitimacy is a central factor in creating local actor engagement.

Several limitations of this study need to be noted. First, while the study provides insight on how the implementation of different place branding approaches affects local actors, generalizations cannot be made due to the qualitative research approach and the small sample size. Second, this study has been limited to ownership, identification, and legitimacy as antecedents of actor engagement with and support for the place brand and branding. Third, the study is set in rural places in Denmark. In this context, many places face similar challenges and have therefore similar or even the same goals for place branding. This might have implications for the legitimacy perception of place branding, which might be different in other places and countries. Future research should be dedicated to quantitatively testing the conceptual framework. This should include a broader representation of the various local actors and actor groups. Future studies should further identify and investigate additional determinants of local actor engagement for place branding, for example, place attachment. Furthermore, future research should investigate other places, for example cities, or rural places in other countries to get a broader and more contextual understanding of the relationships between place branding approaches and ownership, identification, and legitimacy and, ultimately, actor engagement behaviours.

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Appendix 1: Illustrative quotes

| | Type 1 | Type 2 | Type 3 | Type 4 |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Ownership | <p>A resident in Skive municipality said, <i>"I don't have any ownership that way"</i> (1SK2).</p> <p>For the museums in Varde municipality, <i>"well, if I felt it gave more meaning then I'd set it on 5, but as long as it is the municipality's brand and vision, then I'll of course use it a lot"</i> (1VK1).</p> | <p>A resident in Selde said, <i>"it's not really my identity narrative"</i> (2S3).</p> <p>In Rødding, a respondent who lived elsewhere but headed the local school said, they felt ownership as a school <i>"because I think we have a big part in it"</i>, while as a private person her ownership was lower because she did not live in the town (2R3).</p> <p>A local café owner in Rødding didn't think anybody felt ownership for the brand, because <i>"there's nobody who owns it as such, if I remember right, it was an association"</i> (2R2).</p> | <p>An interviewee in Darum explained why she felt some but not much ownership, <i>"because I'm part of it, but at the same time it's not something I have been involved in at all, but you're a part of it, you are by living here"</i> (3D3).</p> | <p>In Billum, even an outsider, only implicated with the town through a child attending the independent school, perceived the brand narrative as her own (4B1), while a very recent newcomer expressed, she expected her ownership to increase with time (4B3).</p> <p>The local priest in Oksbøl said, <i>"well, I think you have a role in it, and responsibility in it, and in that way, it is also my own"</i> (4O2).</p> |
| Identification | <p>In Skive municipality, <i>"it's more the museum that kind of follows the municipality's as well as possible"</i> (1SK3) by adapting their values, while for sport associations, <i>"there is difference in which sport you do"</i> (1SK1).</p> <p>In Varde municipality, the museums <i>"can identify with it, well it's definitely a part of us and our identity,</i></p> | <p>A resident in Selde said, <i>"I can easily identify with it"</i> (2S3).</p> <p>In Rødding, the café owner could not really identify with the brand because <i>"I can't do that because it is not something to do with me. So, I don't use it to identify myself"</i> (2R2).</p> | <p>An interviewee in Darum had lower identification, because she has <i>"not been as active as I should have been"</i> (3D2).</p> <p>Another resident in Darum said, <i>"it's not that way that I identify myself. Well, I identify myself as a 'vestjyde' (a person from the West of Jutland), as one who lives by the Wadden Sea and</i></p> | <p>An interviewee living in but not involved in branding of Oksbøl but with a child attending the independent school in Billum and therefore involved in many activities through the school's parent organization, could highly identify with Billum's brand, but <i>"I can't do that a lot, because I'm not part of it"</i> in Oksbøl (4O3).</p> |

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| | <i>but it's not the whole" (1VK1).</i> | | <p><i>loves the Wadden Sea, but it's not especially because of Darum" (3D3).</i></p> <p>The head of the sports hall in Gørding said, <i>"yes, I think we don't have a problem in being part of it" (3G3).</i></p> <p>A resident in Gørding could identify <i>"also, to a high degree" (3D2).</i></p> | <p>Just living in the place (4B2) and being part of the community (4O2) facilitated for identification, which has over time increased, <i>"well, it's from that you were a guest here, to taking ownership, that you were kind of a newcomer and now you're a Billumer" (4B2).</i></p> <p>The local priest in Oksbøl said, <i>"well it has been a dream parish for me to come to" (4O2).</i></p> |
| Legitimacy | <p>The museum director in Skive municipality said, <i>"well, I think it is very important in today's Denmark, in today's world that areas brand themselves in relation to positive narratives. Especially the rural areas... for them it is really easy to get some negative narratives for different reasons, and there you simply have to, even though it's a lot of money, and it's a lot of resources you use on it, you can say, it's crucial that you can influence the narrative you want people to hear about you, and how you can influence it in a positive direction in relation to the development of the local community. So, I</i></p> | <p>According to the school representative in Rødding, branding is, <i>"something with the value base... well, it's because we are located where we are, we are located out in the countryside and that it is just important that we have this cohesiveness, and that we at the same time also are good at inviting others into this cohesiveness and community we have here. the good narrative has to contribute to that" (2R3).</i></p> <p>A resident in Selde said, <i>"It influences the attractiveness of the town, and</i></p> | <p>According to a resident in Gørding, branding plays <i>"in 2020, an important function, you have to make things visible these days, because otherwise you'll be forgotten" (3G1).</i></p> <p>The head of the sports hall in Gørding also thought, <i>"I think it is absolutely important, ... well you have to have a story about yourself all the time when you are such a community as Gørding is" (3G3).</i></p> <p>According to a resident in Darum, branding <i>"contributes to give a direction and to set some frames for</i></p> | <p>According to a resident and head of the sport centre in Oksbøl, it is important <i>"to have the right DNA outwards" (4O1), that it is the true values you project.</i></p> <p>According to the local priest, the importance of the role branding here plays is <i>"very high, well because it is part of the spirit of the time also, and it is incredibly important currently" (4O2).</i></p> |

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| | <p><i>think that rural municipalities, and even if you say outskirts municipalities, ... they need to get some stories told so that they don't all fall together into a grey mass of non-city" (1SK3).</i></p> <p>The director of museums in Varde municipality said, <i>"I think it is important to have a common narrative. I just don't think it's the absolutely right one we have right now. Well, so if the question is how important it is to have a common narrative, then it is 5, if you ask how important 'Vi i Naturen' (the current brand/ vision) is as a common narrative, then it is closer to 2 or 3" (1VK1).</i></p> | <p><i>that's also the opponent of it, I also think he gets positive impact from it" (2S1), but it was not necessarily all residents who could see the benefits.</i></p> | <p><i>the things that take place" (3D2).</i></p> <p>Another resident said, <i>"I think it is important to have a common story/narrative for the region, but whether it is especially important for Darum, I don't really think so. Well, I believe equally much on the broader collaboration around the Wadden Sea region, as I believe that each small village promotes itself. but I think it counts more, if you think about how it affects outwards, then I don't think, if there is somebody in France thinking about coming to the Wadden Sea region, then I actually think he/she doesn't care about whether they will end in Darum or in Vilslev" (3D3).</i></p> | |
| Co-developing actor engagement behaviour | <p>In Skive municipality, <i>"the brand is, or the strategy is there, so in that way I think that whatever you would have wanted said or changed or done better or differently, I think that it actually lies in the process that has taken place" with the revitalization (1SK1).</i></p> | <p>In Rødning, the café owner said, <i>"when I do that, then we talk about making a cookbook, when we make something with apple dishes, and apple drinks and so on" (2R2).</i></p> | <p>A resident in Darum said, <i>"I don't contribute actively there; I have to say that" (3D2).</i></p> <p>A resident in Gørding missed, <i>"that the local citizen council creates a forum where we can come with feedback for</i></p> | <p>A resident in Billum said, <i>"well, it's probably more in those councils you are in, well in the parochial church council... when you have something constructive, it's in the different councils you are in" (4B1).</i></p> |

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| | In Varde municipality an interviewee said, <i>"it's kind of an ongoing process, ... because there's something all the time"</i> (1VK2). | | <i>us who work, it's a bit of a challenge"</i> to find time to the few meetings they have (3G2). | A resident in Oksbøl said, <i>"I don't come with anything"</i> (4O3). |
| Influencing actor engagement behaviour | For the museum in Skive, the municipal branding <i>"figures in our dissemination... Well, it's not no. 1 priority, but it is pretty high up"</i> (1SK3). | A newcomer in Selde said, <i>"when I talk with people from the outside, also when we have friends and so on visiting"</i> (2S2). | The head of the sports hall in Gørding said, <i>"I only talk positively; it would be stupid otherwise"</i> (3G3). | An artist resident in Billum said, <i>"in the atelier... so it is the direct contact where I can... talk about the good narrative"</i> (4B2). |
| Augmenting actor engagement behaviour | <p>A resident in Skive municipality who shares municipal branding posts said, <i>"It's pretty consciously I do such things because, well we want some more young people back to Skive, that's our big worry"</i> (1SK2).</p> <p>The museums in Skive municipality posted something with the municipal brand if they had <i>"some exposition or activity or something like that that is related to"</i> it (1SK3), while those in Varde municipality <i>"we probably do it a lot, we post pictures of nature on social media and on websites"</i> (1VK1).</p> | <p>The local school posts something <i>"every time we have something with apples to do"</i> (2R3).</p> <p>Local café owner said, <i>"I don't do such things.... Unless I make food for the apple town, then I of course do it"</i> (2R2).</p> <p>A resident in Selde said, <i>"I don't really post anything on social media... I generally don't do it"</i> (2S3).</p> | <p>In Gørding, a new member of the branding group said she did not post <i>"so much, because ... in the local citizen council, we have agreed that there are a few who post it, so that it won't become too flickering"</i> (3G1).</p> <p>A resident in Darum said, <i>"I don't do that at all, well I'm not active in that direction. But I actually think that there is somebody at our institution who does that"</i> (3D2).</p> <p>A resident in Darum said, <i>"right now, I post mostly about my shop here ... well, so I don't have such that I post pictures of Darum, no. but I shout out loud if there is something I think should be advertised, but I'm</i></p> | <p>The artist in Billum mentioned it was not <i>"so much social media, it's more when I write articles or I'm interviewed in newspapers, that I say I come from Billum"</i> (4B2).</p> <p>A parent resident in Oksbøl but engaged with Billum through the school her child attends said, <i>"I do that when I post the school on my FB-page. ... if they post something, then I share it"</i> (4B1).</p> |

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| | | | <i>not the one who does it" (3D1).</i> | |
| Loyalty | In Varde municipality, the intention of the museums has not changed, as they will <i>"support what makes sense to us at any time.... We'd like to support it, but we'd also like to press for getting it to make even more sense"</i> (1VK1). | In Selde a resident said he would <i>"like to be loyal to it, If just I know what there is, then I can support around it"</i> (2S2). | A resident in Darum said, <i>"well, I think it is as now.... But I shouldn't be able to tell that things won't change, but I don't have any plans about it"</i> (3D3) The head of the sports hall in Gørding intended to support <i>"all that I can"</i> (3G3). | An interviewee in Oksbøl also said her intent increased since she also has begun working in the town, besides of living there (4O1). The parent engaged in Billum through the school said, <i>"well, I only intent to do that"</i> (4B1). |

Paper 5: Place branding and sustainable rural communities: qualitative evidence from Danish rural areas

Barbora Gulisova¹

Chris Horbel²

Abstract

Several significant societal and economic shifts threaten the sustainability of rural places. More rural communities and municipalities have started to apply place branding in order to attract residents and businesses and to keep the service level they require to sustain as communities. This study aims to better understand how place branding can affect social sustainability in rural communities. An exploratory, qualitative research design using case studies from rural places in Denmark is applied.

The findings show that the levels of institutionalization of the place branding approach and the scope of actor engagement influence the type and strength of social sustainability outcomes. Future research should broaden the scope to include both environmental and economic sustainability dimensions. Furthermore, the impact of place branding on sustainability in other spatial contexts such as cities or countries should be investigated.

Keywords: rural places, place branding, sustainable communities

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¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics, University of Southern Denmark

² Associate Professor, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

Introduction

Due to significant economic and societal shifts, including globalization, urbanization and demographic changes, rural areas around the globe are facing several challenges that threaten their sustainability (e.g., Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Further, the economic opportunities provided for rural development through targeted funding programs and grants have also been diminishing (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). For example, smaller Norwegian municipalities face out-migration which “leads to a downward spiral that produces a negative effect on municipal revenues, service provision and sustainability” (Wæraas, Bjørnå, and Moldenæs. 2015; p. 1284). In Denmark, the debate centres around so-called “Udkantsdanmark” (outskirt-Denmark), which are the regions and villages that are geographically distant from the main cities and that face substantial depopulation challenges (Sørensen, 2018). Jørgensen (2016) identifies various environmental aspects, “economic issues such as the development on the real-estate market” and “social issues of segregation of gender, age, income or educational level in the outskirts” (p. 2) as challenges to the sustainability of rural places. Sørensen (2018) emphasized that image or reputation can have significant impact on a geographical area, and “a marketing strategy of Danish rural areas..., including local branding” (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2014, p. 7) has been recommended to improve people’s perceptions of rural places. Indeed, in Denmark, both the number of villages that have developed their own brands (Andersen, 2015), and the municipalities that have spent considerable amounts of money on branding has been increasing rapidly. However, the effects of these efforts are not always clear (JydskeVestkysten, 2017).

Place branding efforts in rural places have become a common approach to attract people to fill available jobs, live in the community, send their kids to the local school, and/or undertake entrepreneurial activity. Hence, sustaining life and the quality of life in the community is often the focus of rural place branding. Other motives include attracting the creative class (Florida, 2004; Herslund, 2012) and lifestyle migration from cities to rural places that is not connected to employment.

For the purpose of this paper, we adopt the definition by Boisen (2015) who referred to place branding as “the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people” (Boisen, 2015, p. 14). While the impact of place branding initiatives on the sustainability of rural places has been repeatedly emphasized, most studies so far are focused on the relationship of place branding and economic sustainability of places (e.g., Donner et al, 2017; de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol Carcasona, 2015). However, the

contributions of rural place branding to social and environmental sustainability of communities are not yet sufficiently understood. In this study we focus on social sustainability and aim to investigate how place branding can help smaller municipalities, towns and villages to survive and maintain or increase their quality of life. More specifically, we aim to better understand how place branding can support rural places to ensure accessibility of services for their citizens, foster community feeling and pride of the place, and prevent or reverse demographic decline. The study focuses on two research questions:

RQ1: How can place branding contribute to social sustainability of rural places?

RQ2: Which place branding approaches provide most support to social sustainability outcomes?

In answering these questions, this study makes two main contributions. First, it identifies the dimensions of social sustainability on which place branding can make an impact. Second, it provides empirical evidence showing that collaborative place branding leads to the most favourable social sustainability outcomes. The study's findings enable rural stakeholders to adapt their place branding approach so it can contribute to social sustainability goals.

In the following section, existing literature concerned with sustainable communities and rural place branding is reviewed, followed by the theoretical framework. Afterwards, the data and applied methodology are explained, before the findings on the relationship between place branding and the social sustainability of rural communities are presented and discussed. Finally, practical implications, limitations of this study and further research are outlined.

Place branding and sustainable communities

A sustainable community seeks a better quality of life for its residents, develops its resources to revitalize the local economy, emphasizes sustainable employment, and ensures decision-making based on a rich civic life and shared information among its members (Centre for Sustainable Development, 2020). Sustainable communities are also addressed in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 11 'Sustainable cities and communities' is focused on the creation of "career and business opportunities, safe and affordable housing, and building resilient societies and economies" (UNDP, 2020). It further involves the improvement of "urban planning and management in participatory and inclusive ways". While the goal's focus is on cities, sustainability is relevant for smaller towns, villages and rural regions as well (e.g., Horlings & Marsden, 2014; Jørgensen, 2016; Wæraas, Bjørnå, & Moldenæs, 2015).

Previous research on sustainable development in the urban context has identified social equity and sustainability of community as underlying factors contributing to social sustainability. Social equity includes the accessibility of different facilities and services, such as supermarkets, banks, schools, sport and recreation facilities, or community centres (Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011). Sustainability of community relates to the ability of the local community to sustain and reproduce itself, i.e., maintain a balanced demographical development and relative stability in terms of net migration. In addition, it involves social interaction and networking between community members, as well as "a positive sense of identification with, and pride in, the community" (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 294).

Such identification is facilitated by place identity, a concept used in place branding, which refers to what the place actually is like (Barke & Harrop, 1994), the essence of the place, which is unique and distinguishes the place from others (Warnaby & Medway, 2013), or the distinctive characteristics that provide the place with its character (Deffner & Metaxas, 2010). Place identity, constituted of place image, materiality, institutions, relations, and people and their practices, is never fixed, but rather has to be understood as a process (Kalandides, 2011). Further, "the identity of a place takes shape when similar perceptions are shared across a community" (Aitken & Campelo, 2011).

The relationship between place branding and sustainable development of communities can be interpreted as mutually enhancing. For instance, Maheshwari, Vandewalle, and Bamber (2011) suggest that "place branding plays an important role in the sustainable development of a place", and "these sustainable developments help promote the place and thereby create stronger place brands" (p. 198).

Increased tourism, investment in and preservation of the traditional business base, positive media involvement, better quality of life, and infrastructural developments contribute to the sustainable development of a place. Maheshwari et al. (2011) suggest that place branding can be a "key driver in the sustainability of the place, facilitating economic growth, social harmony, employability, financial confidence and environmental sustainability" (p. 210). Communities also play a role in maintaining "the local conditions that generate the local identities that undergird the perceptions and experiences of others" (Giles, Bosworth, & Willett, 2013, p. 11) including tourists, in-migrants, and entrepreneurs. Giles et al. (2013), therefore, suggest conferring much of the ownership and responsibility for the brand to local communities in order to create authentic and sustainable marketing campaigns.

In their study of the relationship between rural branding and economic development, de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona (2015) suggest that the locally defined place identity and economic development strategies lead to a restructuring of the local economy, so it better serves local communities and thereby contributes to sustainable, long-term development. They find that a branding process involving community stakeholders can unite different interests involved in the local development, while leading to a higher acceptance of the brand among the citizens. To support sustainable perspectives for rural regions, there is a need to co-create a joint storyline or brand with stakeholders that will add value to local products (Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema, 2017; Horlings, 2012; Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Local sustainable development aimed at quality of life, cultural and natural heritage preservation and common identity as well as support for regional economies in terms of competitiveness, income, and employment are often among the main objectives of place branding in rural regions in Europe (Donner et al., 2017). The sustainability of the stakeholders' livelihood is a central objective of the case of food clusters for rural development in Savour Muskoka (Lee, Wall, & Kovacs, 2015). For the food clusters to contribute to a more sustainable economic future of their stakeholders, there is a need for strong leadership and a clearly defined branding strategy, that can create synergy between different sectors involved in the cluster and thereby harness the assets based on "the economic, cultural and environmental strengths of a place" (Lee et al., 2015, p. 143). In the absence of such a strong leadership and clear strategy, fostering collaboration and partnerships, especially between public and private sector representatives, might not be achievable. Yet, it might be possible to do so through shared leadership and a networked approach as stressed by the author in the case of Het Groene Woud, NL (Horlings, 2012). Here, the aim was to contribute to a broad sustainable development of the area, through the focus on landscape quality, recreation, agricultural entrepreneurship, and development of regional economy contributing to the sustainability of the place. The study most clearly describing the relationship between place branding and sustainable communities, uses the case of New Norcia in Western Australia (Ryan & Mizerski, 2010). The monks of this town managed to generate revenue through the production and creation of different products and experiences under the 'New Norcia' brand, which allowed them to maintain their lifestyle. At the same time, "the sustainability of their lifestyle is imperative to the ongoing success of the brand" (Ryan & Mizerski, 2010, p. 52). The case thus demonstrates how a fine balance between the economic sustainability and the maintenance of the monastic lifestyle can be achieved. All these studies show the importance of, on the one hand, bottom-up, community-based, network

approaches, strong citizen involvement and community responsibility, and on the other hand, the importance of strong leadership, clear strategy and organization for place branding.

While several authors have suggested the positive implications of place branding for economic development (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), creation or maintenance of jobs, higher market value of local products (e.g., Donner et al., 2017), and income generation (e.g., Ryan & Mizerski, 2010), these studies were often focused on brands created for local products and services (e.g., tourism), instead of applying a more holistic approach to the place (Pasquinelli, 2013).

Few studies have looked at place branding's effectiveness in attracting new residents. Klijn, Eshuis, and Braun (2012) looked at a combination of target groups (i.e., visitors, new residents and companies) and found that stakeholder involvement improved the effectiveness of place branding. Braun, Eshuis, and Klijn (2014) showed that brand communication had a positive effect on both visitor and resident attraction. Yet, based on his study of migration data in the Netherlands, Hospers (2010) raises doubts about the effectiveness of place marketing for attracting new residents, because, especially in Europe, residents tend to show 'spatial self-preference' and prefer to move only short distances and to places to which they already have a strong attachment. Place brands and the reputation of places affect decisions, behaviour and views of the place's target groups (Anholt, 2005; Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2017; Sørensen, 2018). Satisfaction of local residents with their place has been linked to the support for their place brand and the loyalty to their place in several studies (e.g., Inch & Florek, 2008; Zenker, Petersen, & Aholt, 2013; Zenker & Rütter, 2014). Local citizen pride (e.g., Andersson & Ekman, 2009), community cohesion and local identity (e.g., Giles et al., 2013), availability of events (e.g. Richards, 2017) as well as availability of shopping and other different services and cultural attractions (e.g. Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) all contribute to citizen satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of place brands is difficult to measure (Bell, 2016; Go & Govers, 2012; Zenker & Martin, 2011). Furthermore, the complexities of place brands in aiming at different target groups and the importance of working with these differences in order to reach the desired outcomes have also been pointed out (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017; Zenker, Kalandides, & Beckmann, 2013).

Theoretical framework

This paper is guided by the S-D logic as a general theoretical perspective with focus on the key concept of actor engagement for the study of place branding approaches.

S-D logic

As a metatheoretical framework, S-D logic can be used to explain value co-creation at different levels (Vargo, Koskela-Huotari, & Vink, 2020). S-D logic identifies service, i.e., the application of resources (e.g., knowledge and skills) for the benefit of other actors or oneself, as the fundamental basis of social and economic exchange (Vargo et al., 2020; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Axiom 2 of S-D logic says, “value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary”, while axiom 4 says “value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 18). The actors involved in the exchange cannot define the value, but only “offer value propositions” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 11). The value proposing actors interact in a so-called value network or service ecosystem, a “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors that are connected by shared institutional logics and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Lusch & Vargo, 2014, p. 161).

A key concept to understand value cocreation in service ecosystems is actor engagement, recognized as a midrange concept bridging the meta-theoretical lens of SD-logic with the empirical domain (Alexander, Jaakkola, & Hollebeek, 2018). Actor engagement refers to the actors’ dispositions to voluntarily contribute resources and actively engage and interact with the engagement object and other actors in the dynamic and iterative process of resource integration within the context provided by a service ecosystem (Alexander et al., 2018; Brodie, Fehrer, Jaakkola, & Conduit, 2019; Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016). One of the conditions for actors to engage is the presence of an engagement platform, defined “as multi-sided intermediaries that actors leverage to engage with other actors to integrate resources” (Storbacka et al., 2016, p. 3011). When additional actors join the platform, they strengthen it, while relational, informational, and motivational benefits acquired from joining the platform are related to the number of other actors engaged in it. According to Storbacka et al. (2016), the engagement platform can be provided by a focal firm or organization, other actors, or even by a place in the natural world. The provision of the platform might have an impact on the type of engagement facilitated by it, where platforms provided by a focal actor tend to be more rigid, with lower level of engagement. Further, the duration and level of actor engagement are key engagement properties.

In service ecosystems, every actor is both resource provider and beneficiary of the exchange, and all actors are resource integrators (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). This principle of mutual service provision applies regardless of the level of activity or actors’ engagement. Place branding

is commonly driven by one or more actively involved actors, while others, even though they may benefit, are not actively engaged. Hence, for matters of simplification, one could argue, that actively involved actors are the main service providers, but it needs to be recognized, that resources from rather passive actors are integrated in the process as well. From a social sustainability perspective, the outcome of place branding is shared by the local community as a whole, regardless of their level of participation, i.e., both active and passive community members are beneficiaries.

(Place) Brands and actor engagement in (place) branding

In the general branding literature, the logic of brands and branding has evolved similarly to the evolution of S-D logic, and the conceptualization of brands has shifted from properties provided by firms to brands “as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders” (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009, p. 329). Merz et al. (2009) identify four eras of branding, in the most recent of which, scholars began to adopt a stakeholder perspective to brands, denoting that “(1) brand value is co-created within stakeholder-based ecosystems, (2) stakeholders form network, rather than only dyadic, relationships with brands, and (3) brand value is dynamically constructed through social interactions among different stakeholders” (Merz et al., 2009, p. 337). Reflecting this development, Brodie, Benson-Rea, and Medlin (2017)’s theoretical framework for integrative branding involves two interrelated processes: one concerned with developing identity, which is initiated by a marketing agent, the second one involving “a set of coordinated and uncoordinated, or emergent, branding processes taking place within the net to co-create value” (p. 7).

With the complexity inherent in place brands, Hankinson (2004) proposed a model of destination brands called “relational network brand” (p. 114), in which, “the place brand is represented by a core brand and four categories of brand relationships”, i.e., consumers, primary and secondary services, and the media, that all extend the brand experience or reality. These relationships are dynamic, strengthening and evolving over time, and, as in service ecosystems, the stakeholder partners may also change as the brand develops and repositions. Kavaratzis (2012) calls for a stakeholder-based approach to place branding. Rather than a single managerial process, branding is a “set of intertwined collective sub-processes” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 79). The authors propose a model of place branding where four processes – expressing, reflecting, mirroring, and impressing – link culture, identity and image, thus constructing identity. The four processes “take place simultaneously in a non-linear manner” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 81), constantly

interacting in no specific order. Braun, Kalandides, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2013) call for a change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach to place branding, which will require sharing ownership and control besides of the meaning of the place brand.

Methodology

While rural communities in many countries are challenged, in Denmark there has been an ongoing discussion about "Udkantsdanmark" (Outskirt-Denmark), i.e., the villages and towns geographically distant from the main cities. These places typically face depopulation challenges, which has raised questions about their sustainability (Jørgensen, 2016; Sørensen, 2018). There is also an urban/rural divide when looking at people's income and age (Statistics Denmark, 2020a, 2020b). In rural municipalities with larger geographic distances from the metropolitan areas, the population's average age is typically higher, and their income levels are lower than in bigger cities. At the same time, rural places in Denmark increasingly implement place branding strategies (Andersen, 2015; JydskeVestkysten, 2017).

For these reasons, 11 rural places in Denmark were selected for this study. An exploratory qualitative method was applied to provide better understanding of place branding in these places (table 1). The three municipalities and eight smaller places were identified through their response on an open call for participation in a workshop on rural place branding, followed by purposeful sampling (Emmel, 2013) to match the municipalities with villages within them. Table 1 provides a brief description of the three municipalities VK, EK and SK and the smaller villages in terms of their size and socio-economic characteristics as well as an overview of the interview partners. Rural places are very diverse in many aspects. For this study we chose to include places of different sizes as well as places with and without administrative power to enable comparisons of different place branding approaches. In the Danish case, the municipalities have administrative and political power, and place branding is usually a task of a communication department at the municipality, while the individual, smaller towns and villages have voluntary citizen organizations that engage in place development, including place branding.

Between one and ten semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) were conducted in each place. Snowball sampling was used until the point of information redundancy (Jennings, 2010). Participants responsible for or involved in place branding were approached first and were then asked to recommend additional informants. Yet, as this approach runs the risk of only getting similar participants, the researchers also approached other stakeholders involved in the place

branding who were not suggested by the other interviewees. This maximum variation sample provided a wide range of data, representing various points of view on the phenomenon studied and ensuring multivocality (Tracy, 2013, p. 136). The interviewees were both professionals involved in place branding as well as local community members for whom the involvement in place branding is a volunteer activity (see table 1).

| Place | Characteristics | Interviewee | Interviewee description |
|---------------------------|---|-------------|--|
| VK (municipality) | Population: app. 50,000 Area: 1,240 km ² Average age of population: 43.7 years Average pre-tax income: 302,034 DKK | VK1 | Municipality, senior management consultant |
| | | VK2 | Municipality, development consultant |
| | | VK3 | Municipality, communication employee |
| | | VK4 | Company owner (outdoors furniture, huts, timber products) |
| | | VK5 | Company owner (food products, restaurant) |
| | | VK6 | Designer, owner of local design bureau |
| B (a village in VK) | Population: app. 550 | B1 | Previous chairman of the parish association, volunteer (retiree, B&B owner, farmer) |
| | | B2 | Member of the parish association, volunteer (cheese and meat producer) |
| | | B3 | Editor of the website, volunteer (designer) |
| | | B4 | Chair of the parish association, volunteer (fulltime job, shop owner, also member of the business and real estate association) |
| | | B5 | Chair of the business and real estate association, volunteer (retired company owner) |
| | | B6 | Editor of the website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| O (a small town in VK) | Population: app. 2,900 | O1 | Chair of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job, member of municipal council) |
| | | O2 | Member of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | O3 | Retired craftsman, ex-member in different associations, including in municipal council |
| EK (municipality) | Population: app. 115,000 Area: 795 km ² | EK1 | Head of the communication department at the municipality |
| | | EK2 | Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | | EK3 | Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of the municipal business organization |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--|-----|--|
| | Average age of population: 42.4 years average pre-tax income: 312,077 DKK | EK4 | Museum director, vice chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | | EK5 | Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | | EK6 | CEO of an international company based in the city |
| | | EK7 | Head of one of the educational institutions in the city, board member of the municipal business org. |
| | | EK8 | Co-owner of a local design bureau |
| D (a village in EK) | Population: app 900 | D1 | Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | D2 | Member of the local sport club's board, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | D3 | Volunteer, responsible for website etc. (retiree) |
| G (a small town in EK) | Population: app. 1,800 | G1 | Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | G2 | Local company owner |
| | | G3 | Editor of the parish magazine, webmaster for the town's website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Ri (a small town in EK) | Population: app. 8,300 | Ri1 | Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | | Ri2 | Head of tourism at the municipal business organization |
| | | Ri3 | Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of municipal business organization |
| | | Ri4 | Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | Ri5 | Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | Ri6 | Chairman for the local citizen council and a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | Ri7 | Director of the hostel in the town, chairman of the official festivals/events, board member at the municipal business org. |
| | | Ri8 | Vice-chair in the local trade organization, local journalist |
| | | Ri9 | Museum director, chairman for the town's tourism marketing network |
| SK (municipality) | Population: app. 45,900 Area: 683 km ² Average age of population: | SK1 | Team leader, communication department at the municipality |
| | | SK2 | Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | | SK3 | Director of the local radio |
| | | SK4 | Radio host, chairman for the biggest local music festival |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-----|--|
| | 44.6 years Average pre-tax income: 294,754 DKK | SK5 | Artist involved in different projects in Selde and its neighbouring villages, hired by SK |
| F (a small island in SK) | Population: app. 780 | F1 | Head of the local development and branding group, museum inspector |
| R (a village in SK) | Population: app. 900 | R1 | Member of the branding association board for the marketing working group, volunteer (retiree) |
| | | R2 | Member of the local development association board, head of the marketing working group; volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | | R3 | Chairman of the local development association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| S (a village in SK) | Population: app. 270 | S1 | Owner of the local gallery and other artist facilities in the village (retiree) |
| | | S2 | Chairman for the self-owned institution called 'sculpture village', involved in many diff. things, volunteer (retiree) |
| | | S3 | Co-owner of the local gallery etc. (retiree) |

For a comparison, the two main metropolitan municipalities in Denmark have the following characteristics: Copenhagen municipality: population app. 632,300; area 90 km²; average age 36.1; average pre-tax income 339,700Dkk.

Aarhus municipality: population app. 345,000; area 468 km²; average age 37.7; average pre-tax income 320,150Dkk.

Table 1. Overview over places and interviewees

The interviews were conducted as part of a bigger research project. They were based on an interview guideline (see appendix 1), that involved a variety of themes, for example the perceived value of place branding for the interviewee as well as for the place as a whole. The interview guide was informed by insights from studies of rural place branding in terms of place branding strategies, actors' engagement and outcomes of the approaches (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Donner et al., 2017; Horlings & Marsden, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010). However, not all themes are relevant for this study. Further, due to the background and experience of the participants, the focus of the interviews varied between participants and not all of them were very specific about sustainability.

All interviews, lasting between 17 and 89 minutes, were recorded and transcribed in the original language (Danish). Open coding was used to thematically analyse the data (Clarke, Braun,

& Hayfield, 2015). Rather than generalizing to some finite population, the aim of the study is to develop theoretical ideas with a general validity (Gobo, 2008). Therefore, the analysis of the qualitative data shows some general social structures in different rural place branding situations providing for “theoretical generalization” (Kelle, 2006). Rather than generalizable, the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to other place branding initiatives in similar contexts as those included in the study.

Findings and discussion

In the following we first present an overview of the social sustainability-related goals for applying place branding in the various rural places in the sample to demonstrate that social sustainability outcomes are not a ‘by-product’ of rural place branding, but strategic achievements. Afterwards, we describe how the cases differ regarding their degree of institutionalization of the place branding process and actor engagement. The different patterns of institutionalization and actor engagement in place branding, i.e., the different types of place branding approaches will then be related to the social sustainability outcomes and challenges to achieving them in the final part of this section.

Reasons for applying place branding

All interviewees mentioned the attraction of new residents, the growth and development of the place, the growth of local businesses, the attraction of employees, the maintenance of schools and other institutions, services and retailing, and the creation of welfare as the purpose of their place branding initiatives. An exemplary quote of this is that of R1:

“well, so we won’t become such a depopulated village, well also so we can keep ... the two shops we have, the butcher and the co-operative over there, we can maintain part of our school, well that we can maintain some things out here that makes that people also would move here” (R1)

Several interviewees mentioned the reversal of population and economic decline, while only one of the places had the focus on attracting tourists as the main objective. The word choices of the interviewees, such as “so it continues” (B3), “to develop the village” (B4, O3), “it shall survive” (B5, D3, G2, SK5, O3), “if it is to exist as a village” (D1), “it is to maintain” (D2), to reverse the “collapse” (F1), “we need to secure it for the future” (Ri7), “to develop and take care of the town” (Ri9), “that we can keep” (R1), “so you keep life in the shops and schools...” (S1), illustrate the relevance of place branding for sustainability of the communities. Yet, while all agreed on the

purpose of place branding as related to sustaining the local communities, its actual effects were questioned by many. These doubts mainly touch upon two aspects: the measurement of the effects of place branding initiatives, and the effectiveness of place brand for the specific purpose of resident attraction. At the same time, though, some of the successful, strong brands could see clear benefits of their efforts. G2 for example said, “people move to the village, that we don’t depopulate the village, and that makes after all ..., that there are some employees available in the village. Because without workers, the companies can’t grow, right.” Ri9 talked both about the attraction of residents and employees to the town and the satisfaction of the existing residents. In addition, place branding was seen as important for getting funding for the place, as the donors knew the place because of the strong brand.

Table 2 provides an overview of the purposes of the place branding initiatives in the different cases.

| Place | Reasons for applying place branding | | | |
|-----------|--|---|-------------------------------|--|
| | Attraction of new residents and/or employees | Growth and development of the place and/or local businesses | Maintenance of local services | Community/ identity creation for the local community |
| F | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| G | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Ri | N | Y | Y | Y |
| R | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| S | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| D | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| O | Y | Y | N | Y |
| EK | Y | Y | N | N |
| SK | Y | Y | N | Y |
| VK | Y | Y | N | Y |

Y = yes, N = no

Table 2. Reasons for applying place branding

Institutionalization and engagement

Different degrees of institutionalization and engagement were identified in the different cases. In the municipalities (EK, SK, VK), branding was led by the communication department at the municipality, which collaborated with branding consultants and a few other stakeholders. While the broader community was in some cases asked about the identity and values to be used in the brand definition, there was not much community support. The place branding process was

strategically led, but only a few actors were engaged in it. SK3 illustrated this situation: "I think we all know that it is the municipality's brand, but I think there are really many who do not have an idea about what the content really is. So, it is necessary to make it more visible, or at least more present for the ordinary people who do not work with marketing or anything similar, so they would know what the municipality wants to build upon." The administration in this municipality hoped that "people will come to think that this is so valuable to them that they also would use it, ... so we have to begin with some involvement, ownership activation, so we can get this snowball started that should roll and build up to something more" (SK1). Five small towns and villages (F, G, Ri, R, S) had started place branding several years ago. They have defined strategies for the process and formed institutionalized networks to work with them. Ri1 expressed, "that it is definitely an advantage that there is this marketing body, where we pool some money and make sure to get the message out". R3 explained, "Since 2004, yes, when we started with the strategic village development, and then built on, ... at the time, we said, if there is to be development in the *village*, then we can't sit down and wait for the municipality and others to come to do it. We have to head it ourselves, and we have to impact it all the time, ..." There is also a broad range and high degree of actor engagement in these five places, exemplified by Ri8, "when something has to happen here, then we support it. Just as you do in the small communities, and I believe we have become better at it." In the remaining three small towns and villages (B, D, O), while there is high actor engagement, these actors have not yet been able to organize their intentions to create a strategic approach to place branding, and their initiatives are therefore of a rather ad-hoc type. Some have tried to set up a marketing working group under their local citizen organization, but these often fail due to lack of resources (time, skills). But, D3 explained, "I believe that there for sure is a growing awareness about that we have to do something actively in *the village*."

Contributions and challenges of place branding for sustainable communities

The benefits of place branding to the sustainability of the communities can be grouped into three categories: resident attraction and satisfaction; economic development and provision of services; and reputation and recognition (table 2). However, our findings do also show that achieving the benefits of place branding is not straightforward. Therefore, the challenges that the places face in their branding activities are also briefly discussed.

Resident attraction and satisfaction

As mentioned above, for many rural places the main objective of place branding is the

sustainability of the community in the sense of its survival. Therefore, the initiatives are aimed at attracting new residents. This was achieved in some of the cases, according to the interviewees. F1 said that “there is a powerful in-migration to the island. ... and that’s simply the prerequisite for that we can sustain this local community.” But, in the most marginalized villages, it is not so much a question of growth as it is of slowing down the decline. As R3 said, “we have slowed down the decline because we haven’t gone back roughly as much as other comparable places would have gone back, so that’s a victory in itself.” Yet, G1 doubted, “well, I can’t say anything about whether the branding we do, that’s what’s difficult with branding, because it is difficult to measure, why is it that, that we suddenly this year have sold eight building grounds in the village, well, is it because we have really done a lot out of telling the good stories on Facebook...” She further expressed that it is difficult to know how it would have been if they hadn’t done anything. Nevertheless, the interviewee could “see right now that the village is in positive development, and we get more new residents, we have a lot of young people who move back ... Because that’s what we need too, to have a sustainable village in the longer term.” All of these places were characterized by broad actor engagement with the institutionalized branding process.

When talking about their place branding initiatives, some of the interviewees expressed concerns about whether the chosen brands really fit with the overarching purpose. It was especially an issue in the municipalities, where the process of place branding was an institutionalized, rather top-down one, led by the administration and only engaging few actors. EK2 questioned the whole idea of place branding with the aim of attracting new residents, because there are many factors overall that influence people’s decision to move to a place. Often, the brands that municipalities created, however “cool” (EK2) they are, are not necessarily relevant for the attraction of residents. “It’s at any rate very simplified to believe that branding alone solves it” (EK2). SK3 did not believe any companies have established themselves in the municipality because of the brand, nor that anybody has moved there because of it. “I think it has had zero effect. And then you can say, then the question is whether it has been a waste, but... you can work further with something that isn’t necessarily negative, but it requires that you work further with it.”

The place branding initiatives in the rural areas also contributed to the satisfaction of the residents with the place, especially in the places with high engagement with place branding. Ri2 talked about his place being a living, active town for the residents, with a lot of events, and an amazing number of shops considering the size of the town. “So, there’s no doubt about that it is a huge advantage for the whole town, for the residents, for those who have shops *here*, that there are

these opportunities. It maintains life in, in everything. It also causes the house prices to follow on nicely, and in that way, it also has implications on settling down, it's an attractive place also to settle down" (Ri2). Ri8 linked the events and active side of the town to the fact that people in their 30s and 40s who were moving back to the town from big cities to start families "like being here. The value is also that people actually think about moving here". While the process of place branding is institutionalized in Ri, the engagement of broad scale of actors has not yet spurred a creation of an institutionalized service ecosystem for place branding in other places. For example, B4 expressed doubts, "well, but I simply don't know. Because now we have got this *supermarket*, right up here, but has it opened because we have kind of tried to tell how good it is to live *here*? I don't know that, right." Nevertheless, a number of interviewees were convinced, that place branding was supportive to retain important services such as schools (e.g., B, D).

In VK, the focus was more on the potential of the 'vision', as they called their place branding, to "increase the cohesion internally. And that's of course a strength when we talk settlement" (VK2). At the same time though this interviewee admitted that, "we have to, somewhere in this process with the vision, to say, that it can't everything either. It can't make people move, but it, at the same time is a strength we have to highlight about our area." Still, this municipal employee hoped, "in longer term, ... the vision can be used to articulate our identity in the municipality, with a spill over effect so our residents will get a citizen pride and go out and talk about the area they come from." (VK2). Civil pride about the place was seen as an outcome of branding by a number of place representatives (e.g., S, R, D). Hence, while in the institutionalized municipality branding with a lack of broader engagement, civil pride and strong identity were potential outcomes they hoped for, in the places with high degree of engagement and even when they had not yet institutionalized the place branding process, identity and pride were already created.

Economic development and provision of services

The interviews show some evidence of positive economic impact for the integrated place brands as well. In their work on developing the village to keep it attractive for the existing but also potential new residents, B4 said, "by starting the independent school. ... you can say, we have generated some jobs in the town..." (i4). In another town, where visitor attraction is the main objective of place branding, Ri9 expressed that the fact that "there is a good and strong brand, it also has influence on, e.g., whether I can attract employees. And I can clearly feel, that when I ... have jobs posted, ... the applicants know very well what it is for a town, and they give the impression that they want to come and work here". Further, according to this same interviewee,

the town, unlike many other towns with high tourism appeal, did not really experience an off-season. The strong brand, besides of attracting job applicants, was also an advantage in funding applications. Ri3 also talked about how those involved in the branding of the town “contribute to create a local economy”, because the visitors shop in the shops, eat out and sleep there, so *the town* earns a lot of money through tourism. Ri is an example of a place branding process where a large number of highly engaged actors have created an institutional network for the purpose of branding a long time ago. Since then, the network has kept growing, attracting new actors, and thereby adding benefits to all.

Reputation and recognition

The interviewees’ also mentioned place branding initiatives adding to the positive reputation of their places. B4 believed that “... every time some branding, or what we should call it, tells something good about the town, it is, it has an effect somehow. It’s not sure it will come today, or tomorrow, but somewhere it has an effect”. How the sustainability of the small villages is related to their reputation and recognition, was expressed by SK5, “... I think that the four villages up there survive now. And they have also become more, well they have also come more together around being an area where those kinds of things happen. And they win prizes in a row, ..., well, they are on countrywide TV and countrywide press, and ..., get seen and heard on both national and international level. So, you can’t say other than that the brand really has succeeded”. Reputation was also mentioned as a positive effect by the actors of the place branding initiatives in S, when they explained how they won a prize in a regional competition regarding the SDG 17 on partnership. Their project was recognized for the collaboration between the municipality, the citizens and the artists. While the first example is from a village with a large number of highly engaged actors, yet without an institutionalized place branding network, the other two examples were brought up by representatives from S, a village with actors engaged in an institutionalized place branding initiative.

Place branding approaches and sustainability outcomes

Table 3 shows the classification of the different rural places included in this study according to the approach they have taken to place branding, and which outcomes related to social sustainability the interviewees have mentioned. The five rural places that are characterized by a broad actor engagement while also having institutionalized eco-systems for their place branding,

achieve the most sustainability outcomes. Interestingly, while two of the three places with broad actor engagement yet without institutionalized networks for place branding do acquire sustainability outcomes similar to those of the first five villages, the third one does not. A potential explanation is that this place has not been as threatened on its survival as the other ones. Therefore, the interviewees might have been less focused on sustainability issues reflecting that such outcomes are also less prioritized in the place branding efforts. Furthermore, their place branding might be more focused on target groups other than (potential) residents and therefore, less centred on including social sustainability issues. In contrast to the smaller places, the three municipalities have institutionalized their branding process, but actor engagement is narrow and not representative of the overall place ecosystem. Despite their similar place branding approach, the three municipalities differ in terms of the sustainability outcomes. While VK's representatives expressed that they see potential to achieve sustainability outcomes, they have not realized them yet. The biggest of the municipalities, which has a strong focus on branding, has reached most outcomes.

| Place | Approach to place branding | | Sustainability outcomes | | |
|-----------|--|---|--|---|----------------------------------|
| | Actor engagement (Broad=B; Narrow=N) | Institutionalized service eco- system | Resident attraction and satisfaction | Economic development and provision of services | Reputation and recognition |
| F | B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| G | B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Ri | B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| R | B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| S | B | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| B | B | N | Y | Y | Y |
| D | B | N | Y | Y | Y |
| O | B | N | N | N | N |
| EK | N | Y | N | Y | Y |
| SK | N | Y | Y | N | N |
| VK | N | Y | N | N | N |

Y = yes, N = no

Table 3. Overview of place branding approaches and sustainability outcomes

This study adds to the findings of previous studies on place branding which focused on the economic sustainability of rural places (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015;

Donner et al., 2017; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010), by finding support for the ability of place branding to contribute to the social dimensions of sustainable development of rural places. Furthermore, similar to what has been found for cities (e.g., Braun et al., 2017) our study shows that by increasing the places' reputation and attracting attention to the places, place branding initiatives can have positive impact on the decisions of potential new residents to move to rural areas. Previous research has further shown that local pride (Andersson & Ekman, 2009), identity and community cohesion (Giles et al., 2013) and the existence of services (e.g., schools) (Zenker et al., 2013) can successfully be used in place branding. Our study extends these findings by showing that place branding processes can further strengthen these important community assets. In addition, the availability of services and strong local pride and identity have been shown to contribute to resident satisfaction and loyalty in cities (e.g., Insch & Florek, 2008). Our study shows that this also applies to rural areas and that satisfaction and loyalty lead to positive demographic outcomes and thereby contribute to social sustainability of the communities. These findings show how working on place branding that aims at external target groups, can have positive impacts on the internal stakeholders of the place as well. These findings could serve as inspiration for further, possible quantitative research on the relationship between the approaches to place branding and the sustainability outcomes achieved.

Conclusions

A relationship can be seen between how the places have approached and organized the place branding process and the benefits of it for the sustainability of the communities. Places where the service ecosystem is institutionalized around the place brand as an engagement platform with a broad range of highly engaged actors acquire the most benefits for social sustainability. Where few actors are highly engaged, but the network around the place brand as an engagement platform is not really institutionalized, the actors have more doubts about the results for social sustainability. Lastly, when the place brand is defined by a strong focal actor, creating broad actor engagement is more challenging and the place representatives only rarely commented on contributions of the place branding to the places' social sustainability.

The findings show how place branding can contribute to some of the dimensions of social sustainability of the smaller places, i.e., resident satisfaction and attraction, economic development and provision of services, as well as the reputation of the place.

From a theoretical perspective, this study makes a contribution by applying S-D logic and

its concepts of service ecosystem and actor engagement for the analysis of outcomes of place branding.

For place branding professionals, policy makers, and community leaders this study shed light on the aspects of sustainability that can be addressed by place branding, and that a collaborative, yet institutionalized approach with a broad range of engagement is best suited for the desired social sustainability outcomes.

This research is subject to several limitations that should be noticed and provide avenues for further research. Since this study is based on qualitative data, the suggested relationships between place branding and the social sustainability dimensions could be tested in a quantitative study. Further, this study was based on rural places in Denmark, and it would therefore be interesting for further research to look at other countries and how the macro-context could influence the impact place branding can have. This study was focused on the impact of place branding on the social dimensions of sustainability. Further research should broaden the focus and include environmental dimensions and ultimately the combination of all dimensions of sustainability.

Since the place branding influence on social sustainability has generally not received a lot of attention, further research should also investigate this relationship in the context of cities. It can be assumed that the relative impact of place branding on the different dimensions of social sustainability is dependent on the place context and, hence, different in urban compared to rural places. For example, it could be expected that the challenges to sustainability that different types of places face (e.g., depopulation vs. overpopulation, lack of visitors vs. overtourism, different needs to environmental conservation) would need different approaches to place branding. Furthermore, we suggest extending this research to cities and urban places to better understand the contributions of place branding to social sustainability in this context. As the size of the place and therefore the complexity increases, more challenges for reaching the desired outcomes might arise. Therefore, a look at brand architecture and relations between different scales of places, such as cities and countries, could be applicable. More in-depth research is also needed to better understand the relationship between the general place branding approach (top-down vs. bottom-up) as well as the level of community engagement and the sustainability outcomes.

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Appendix 1. Interview guideline

Purpose with the interview, and the use of data

This interview is one of several interviews for a study on the different branding processes taking place in rural places. The study forms part of a PhD project at the Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics and the Danish Centre for Rural Research at the University of Southern Denmark, Esbjerg. The data will together with the other interviews be used to analyse and define the branding process in the specific case. Followingly, the different cases will be compared in order to see which kind of different processes are taking place and which factors determine what kind of process is applied in each of the cases.

What can you expect to get in return?

Once the data have been analysed, we will organise a seminar for the participating municipalities, villages and parishes, in order to share the results and experiences with you.

The interview

There are 6 main question topics that I would like to cover in this interview. These are: you (the interviewee), the place brand, the other actors, the collaboration, brand communication, and the attained value (evaluation).

The concepts – ask first how they understand brand and branding

Branding – includes all the initiatives that the place does to create a joint narrative, identity, become more attractive.

Brand – the narrative or identity that the place tries to build and live. That what characterises the place and is contributing to differentiate it from other places. That, what infuses the place with an emotional aspect.

In this project, the focus is NOT on tourism, but rather on the ‘everyday’ place brand. It is, though, clear that in many places, a tourism brand and branding will be natural part of the overall brand and the overall perception of the place.

Actors – all the people and organisations (private as well as public) who are participating in the branding process, or who contribute by doing something to create the place brand or to brand the place.

Stakeholders – all those whom the brand and branding process impacts, without them necessarily being actively involved in the process.

Value – here it is not necessarily only the economic value, but on the contrary value in the wider sense.

The interviewee:

5. Tell me about yourself (also in relation to the brand, the place...)
6. How would you describe your role in the branding process?
7. What motivates you to participate in the branding process? To work with/develop the brand...
8. What would you say is your contribution to the brand? And to the branding process?

Place brand:

18. How would you describe you branding? Can you start by telling a little about what started this branding process and where you are now in the process? *Here also whose initiative it was to start this branding process; which phase the brand is in now (beginning, ongoing development/work, done and only promoting the brand now, ...), how much does the brand change or develop? Is it an ongoing process?*
19. With the starting point in the current status, how would you describe the brand? What is the brand? What are the current results of the brand and the process?
20. How much does the brand cover? E.g., who (besides of those who actively contribute to the branding process) does the brand have an impact on? Who is not covered by the brand?
21. How general (holistic, meaning embracing the whole area) is the brand? Or, does it rather focus on a specific sector or part of your area (municipality/village)?
22. Which target group is the brand aiming at? (if any...)
23. How big support do you perceive there to be for the brand (among the actors, the local community, the local administration, etc.)? Who, or which part of the local community supports the brand the most?
24. What is the brand based on? Is it based on the place-specific resources, or is it developed as a reaction to an external demand?
25. How big a role do the local/place-based resources play for the brand? Resources that are closely related to your place.
26. What is the aim/purpose with the brand?

27. Which other ways to reach the aim have you considered?
28. Have you considered a different focus for the brand than the current one? Explain ...
29. Which relation is there between the general development in the area and your brand or branding process?
30. Are there other similar projects in your area, and are they done in the same way as yours?
31. Is there, in general, a good collaboration between associations and the municipality in your area?
32. How is the relationship between your and other branding projects? Brands of other smaller or bigger or similar places? And what about local or other company brands?
33. Has the branding process contributed to strengthen the identity of your place, internally and externally?
34. How is your place's identity reflected or represented in the brand?

Other actors:

5. Who else is involved in the branding process and how?
6. When have the different actors been part of the branding process? In which phase(s)?
7. What motivates the other actors to participate in the process?
8. How do you perceive the other actors' contribution to the process?

Collaboration:

14. How do you organise your collaboration?
15. How did you get together?
16. How long have you been discussing?
17. Who, if anybody, is in control of the process? Who has more or less responsibility and influence?
18. Who makes sure that all the actors get together around the purpose?
19. *How structured is the process – don't ask directly, but see if they will come with a story that could answer the question*
20. How often do you meet? Or how often do you communicate?
21. How do you communicate?
22. How do you think that your collaboration in regards of branding process has worked?
23. Which challenges have there been with the collaboration in the branding process?

24. Which benefits have there been in the collaboration?
25. *Regarding strong network with stable relations that brands the place (don't ask directly, but if it won't be clear from the rest, then ask)*
26. Would you say the actors trust each other? That they have trust in each other and the brand?

Brand use/adoption/expression:

6. How is the brand communicated?
7. How do you communicate or use the brand?
8. How do the other actors communicate or use the brand?
9. How has the communication changed throughout the different phases in the branding process?
10. How is the brand communication or use related to your purpose with the brand?

Evaluation: Value/benefits:

5. Who, in your perception, gets any value of the brand? And from the branding process?
6. Which value do you get out of being involved in the process?
7. Which value do you think other stakeholders get from the brand and the branding process?
8. Which value do you think the place/your area in general gets from the brand and the branding process?

Appendix 1. Overview of the places included in the study

| Place | Population | Area (km ²) | Description |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|---|
| Esbjerg Municipality | 115,483 | 795.3 | Esbjerg Municipality is located on the west coast of Denmark. The main city is Esbjerg, a port city, with a position as capital of the country's offshore sector. In a number of focus groups/workshops, different stakeholders representing different sectors (education, culture, business, etc., but not residents) agreed on focusing on 'energy' for the municipality's brand. The process started in 2010, and the definition phase was led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The EnergiMetropol is still the main brand but realizing that people mainly associate it with the energy sector, the municipality has begun to focus more on the main city with this brand and tries to find alternatives that more people could support. It is the municipal communication department, and a public-private business organization that control the brand. |
| Ribe | 8,317 | 7.3 | Ribe is located 32 km from Esbjerg. It is the oldest town in Denmark, with a well-reserved medieval centre. A lot of cultural attractions and events are based in the town, which is a popular tourism destination. Here the branding is done by an association created by the main attractions, accommodation places, restaurants and other visitor businesses. The local trade organization is also involved, as is the municipal business organization (incl. the tourism office). There are many community-based events taking place throughout the year, many building upon and contributing to the brand of the town. The special marketing organization has been created in 2007. |
| Gørding | 1,736 | 1.5 | Gørding is a residential town 30 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, it is located near a highway with easy access to bigger towns in the area and has a good school. The focus of their branding is its attractiveness due to an active association life and having nature close by. Their branding started with a professionalized website in 2012-13, and a slogan 'En grøn by i bevægelse' (EN: 'a green town in movement'). The branding here is done by the volunteer residents involved in the local citizen council and its working group focused on branding. |
| Darum | 896 | 1.1 | Darum is a residential town 16 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, a school that implemented an innovative organizational structure, and it is located at the border to the Wadden Sea National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Their slogan is 'Byen bag diget' (EN: 'the |

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| | | | town behind the dike'), they organize a 'Vadehavsdag' (EN: 'Wadden Sea day') event, and the branding is very much based on the surrounding nature and the community. The slogan has been around for many years, while the event was started in 2018. The branding here is done by few of those involved in the local citizen council. |
| Skive Municipality | 45,851 | 683.5 | Skive municipality is located on a peninsula in Mid-Jutland region, in northwest Denmark, with Skive being the main town. The branding here started in 2011, based again on a number of workshops with different sectors of the community (education, culture, industry, business, local communities). The initial phase was, also here, led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The brand, 'Rent Liv' (EN: 'Clean Life') has been controlled by the municipal communication department and has been revitalized in 2019 to sharpen its focus, which now is mostly related to sustainability, including green energy. |
| Rødding | 895 | 0.8 | Rødding is a village located 17 km from Skive. There has been an organization working with local development since 2004, while in 2008 a project started on branding the village as 'Rødding – Æblets By' (EN: 'Rødding - the town of the apple'). In 2016 the latter changed to be an organization too, and a working group on marketing as established to serve both organizations. The apple organization, as well as the development organization, are voluntary based. There is a yearly apple festival attracting visitors from afar, while the whole village is implicated with apples in one way or another (having apple trees, making apple must, cooking with apples, apple decorations, etc.). |
| Fur | 767 | 22 | Fur is a small island in the northern part of Skive municipality, 3 minutes sailing away from the peninsula. Tourism is an important industry on the island, and most people know it through their vacation experiences. The branding is part of the local development here too, and it started through a project in 2009. As a result of this, a new local development association was established, that continues to brand the island. |
| Selde | 270 | 0.4 | Selde is village located 27 km from Skive. Their branding initiative began with an art project in 2012. The project was a result of discussions about ideas for area renewal, where some local citizens expressed a wish to get more art into the village. It developed very much in relation to a local gallery, which continues to be the focal point. After the initial project ended in 2014, the 'Skulpturlandsby' (EN: 'Sculpture Village') was established, with recurrent |

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| | | | events where the sculptors create and install their pieces in the village. |
| Varde Municipality | 49,961 | 1,240.1 | Varde municipality is located just north of Esbjerg municipality, on the western coast of Denmark. Varde is the main town, and while there is a number of bigger companies in different industries, the municipality is home to a number of popular tourist destinations along the coast. The current branding started in 2014, after a series of workshops with citizens and other local stakeholders. This was again led by an external consultancy, and a local design bureau created the visual identity for the brand. ‘Vi i Naturen’ (EN: ‘we in the nature’) combines the richness of nature in the municipality, and the cooperative spirit. |
| Oksbøl | 2,837 | 2.3 | Oksbøl is a town 14 km from Varde, close to many of the most popular beaches in the area. Many people associate it with the military barracks located there, while it was also a location of the biggest German refugee camp after WWII in Denmark, which sets the background for an upcoming museum on refugees. The branding here is very much focused on the residential life– the community, safety, and active association life. Some ad-hoc initiatives have started to highlight the local history as part of the branding initiatives. The work is mainly done by the volunteer-based local citizen and trade association, and some highly engaged citizens. There is a logo with the slogan ‘Oksbølby – Tryghed midt i naturen!’ (EN: ‘Oksbøl town – safety in the middle of nature’). |
| Billum | 578 | 0.6 | Billum is a small town located 11 km from Varde. There is a number of small entrepreneurs or small businesses, who put an effort into the development and branding of the town. Among the most important initiatives the town is proud of is an independent school. Otherwise, much is done on an ad-hoc basis, with some things undertaken by the parish association, and some by the local business and investment association. Similar to the other small towns and villages, also here the focus is on the nature-rich location, and the active and friendly community. A slogan on the webpage says ‘Billum – Landsbyen på toppen af Ho Bugt’ (EN: ‘the village at the top of the bay Ho’). |

Sources: (Bertelsen, 2020; Bertelsen, Jeppesen, & Østergaard, 2013; Billum, 2020; Business Esbjerg, 2020a; Danmarks Statistik, 2020; Darum, 2020; Eriksen, 2014; Esbjerg Municipality, 2021; Furnyt, 2020; Fursundegnen, 2020; Gørding, 2020; Kirk & Holm, 2010; LEAD Agency, 2010; Oksbølby, 2020; Petersen, 2020; Rødding, 2021; Skive Kommune, 2020c)

Appendix 2. Interview guides

a) In-depth, semi-structured interview guide

Purpose with the interview, and the use of data

This interview is one of several interviews for a study on the different branding processes taking place in rural places. The study forms part of a PhD project at the Department of Sociology, Environmental and Business Economics and the Danish Centre for Rural Research at the University of Southern Denmark, Esbjerg. The data will together with the other interviews be used to analyse and define the branding process in the specific case. Followingly, the different cases will be compared in order to see which kind of different processes are taking place and which factors determine what kind of process is applied in each of the cases.

What can you expect to get in return?

Once the data have been analysed, we will organise a seminar for the participating municipalities, villages and parishes, in order to share the results and experiences with you.

The interview

There are 6 main question topics that I would like to cover in this interview. These are: you (the interviewee), the place brand, the other actors, the collaboration, brand communication, and the attained value (evaluation).

The concepts – ask first how they understand brand and branding

Branding – includes all the initiatives that the place does to create a joint narrative, identity, become more attractive.

Brand – the narrative or identity that the place tries to build and live. That what characterises the place and is contributing to differentiate it from other places. That, what infuses the place with an emotional aspect.

In this project, the focus is NOT on tourism, but rather on the ‘everyday’ place brand. It is, though, clear that in many places, a tourism brand and branding will be natural part of the overall brand and the overall perception of the place.

Actors – all the people and organisations (private as well as public) who are participating in the branding process, or who contribute by doing something to create the place brand or to brand the place.

Stakeholders – all those whom the brand and branding process impacts, without them necessarily being actively involved in the process.

Value – here it is not necessarily only the economic value, but on the contrary value in the wider sense.

The interviewee:

9. Tell me about yourself (also in relation to the brand, the place...)
10. How would you describe your role in the branding process?
11. What motivates you to participate in the branding process? To work with/develop the brand...
12. What would you say is your contribution to the brand? And to the branding process?

Place brand:

35. How would you describe your branding? Can you start by telling a little about what started this branding process and where you are now in the process? *Here also whose initiative it was to start this branding process; which phase the brand is in now (beginning, ongoing development/work, done and only promoting the brand now, ...), how much does the brand change or develop? Is it an ongoing process?*
36. With the starting point in the current status, how would you describe the brand? What is the brand? What are the current results of the brand and the process?
37. How much does the brand cover? E.g., who (besides of those who actively contribute to the branding process) does the brand have an impact on? Who is not covered by the brand?
38. How general (holistic, meaning embracing the whole area) is the brand? Or, does it rather focus on a specific sector or part of your area (municipality/village)?
39. Which target group is the brand aiming at? (if any...)
40. How big support do you perceive there to be for the brand (among the actors, the local community, the local administration, etc.)? Who, or which part of the local community supports the brand the most?
41. What is the brand based on? Is it based on the place-specific resources, or is it developed as a reaction to an external demand?

42. How big a role do the local/place-based resources play for the brand? Resources that are closely related to your place.
43. What is the aim/purpose with the brand?
44. Which other ways to reach the aim have you considered?
45. Have you considered a different focus for the brand than the current one? Explain ...
46. Which relation is there between the general development in the area and your brand or branding process?
47. Are there other similar projects in your area, and are they done in the same way as yours?
48. Is there, in general, a good collaboration between associations and the municipality in your area?
49. How is the relationship between your and other branding projects? Brands of other smaller or bigger or similar places? And what about local or other company brands?
50. Has the branding process contributed to strengthen the identity of your place, internally and externally?
51. How is your place's identity reflected or represented in the brand?

Other actors:

9. Who else is involved in the branding process and how?
10. When have the different actors been part of the branding process? In which phase(s)?
11. What motivates the other actors to participate in the process?
12. How do you perceive the other actors' contribution to the process?

Collaboration:

27. How do you organise your collaboration?
28. How did you get together?
29. How long have you been discussing?
30. Who, if anybody, is in control of the process? Who has more or less responsibility and influence?
31. Who makes sure that all the actors get together around the purpose?
32. *How structured is the process – don't ask directly, but see if they will come with a story that could answer the question*
33. How often do you meet? Or how often do you communicate?

34. How do you communicate?
35. How do you think that your collaboration in regards of branding process has worked?
36. Which challenges have there been with the collaboration in the branding process?
37. Which benefits have there been in the collaboration?
38. *Regarding strong network with stable relations that brands the place (don't ask directly, but if it won't be clear from the rest, then ask)*
39. Would you say the actors trust each other? That they have trust in each other and the brand?

Brand use/adoption/expression:

11. How is the brand communicated?
12. How do you communicate or use the brand?
13. How do the other actors communicate or use the brand?
14. How has the communication changed throughout the different phases in the branding process?
15. How is the brand communication or use related to your purpose with the brand?

Evaluation: Value/benefits:

9. Who, in your perception, gets any value of the brand? And from the branding process?
10. Which value do you get out of being involved in the process?
11. Which value do you think other stakeholders get from the brand and the branding process?
12. Which value do you think the place/your area in general gets from the brand and the branding process?

b) Structured interviews

Introduction

This interview is about the branding of XXX.

(there was a short introduction of the specific place brand here)

When I'll ask about the common identity narrative under this interview, it is the one around this brand that I'll ask you to think about.

| | |
|---|---|
| General / introduction | |
| Could you begin by explaining a little about what your relation to the town/municipality is? (in relation to family/ childhood here; time – how long have you lived here; work – own company, employee, etc.) | |
| Questions about the process | |
| Knowledge about branding | What do you know about the common identity/brand of the town/municipality? |
| | What do you know about the activities the actors do to promote the common identity/brand to the outside world? |
| Reason for branding | What is, in your opinion, the reason for branding the town/municipality this way? |
| Ownership | Whom have you experienced as being active in this process? |
| Engagement Personal involvement (action) | Have you also been active in this process yourself? If yes, how? |
| Engagement disposition | How big interest do you have for being involved in the process? |
| Change in engagement disposition | Is there anything that has changed in relation to your interest for being involved since the beginning of the process and until now? Please, explain... |
| Mobilization | To what degree have it in general been possible to be involved in the process? |
| | What have you experienced being done to involve the town's/municipality's residents and other actors in the process? |
| Questions to the effect | |
| Identity-image match | To what degree do you think the common identity/brand fits the town/municipality? |
| Attitude | To what degree do you like the chosen common identity/brand? |
| | How has your attitude to the common identity/brand changed over time? |
| Ownership | To what degree do you perceive the common identity/brand as your own? |
| | How has this perception changed over time? |
| Co-developing engagement behaviour | To what degree do you come with constructive proposals to how you could improve your common identity/brand? |

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| Influencing engagement behaviour | To what degree do you tell positive things about your common identity/brand to others? |
| Augmenting engagement behaviour | How much do you post pictures of the town/municipality on social media and mention your common identity/brand in the post? |
| Loyalty | To what degree do you intent to support the town/municipality and its common identity/brand in the future? |
| Engagement/loyalty | How much has your intent to support the common identity/brand changed over time? |
| Identification | How much does the common identity/brand reflect your values? |
| | To what degree can you identify yourself with the common identity/brand? |
| | To what degree can you use the common identity/brand to communicate to others who you are? |
| | How much does it interest you what others thing about the town/municipality? (please, clarify why) |
| | How much has the degree how you can identify yourself with the town's/municipality's common identity/brand changed? |
| Legitimacy | To what degree do you think that the common identity/brand benefits the whole town/municipality? |
| | To what degree do you think that the common identity/brand only benefits those directly engaged with it? |
| | How important function do you think the common identity/brand plays? |

Categories for "to what degree" or "how much" questions:

(1) not at all, (2) a little, (3) to some degree, (4) a lot, (5) very much

Appendix 3. Interviewee overview

a) In-depth, semi-structured interviews

| Place | Interviewee | Interviewee description |
|----------------------|-------------|--|
| Esbjerg Municipality | EK1 | Head of the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK2 | Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | EK3 | Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK4 | Museum director, vice chairman of the municipal business organization |
| | EK5 | Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | EK6 | CEO of an international company based in the city |
| | EK7 | Head of one of the educational institutions in the city, board member of the municipal business organization |
| | EK8 | Co-owner of a local design bureau |
| Darum | D1 | Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D2 | Member of the local sport club's board, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | D3 | Volunteer, responsible for website etc. (retiree) |
| Gørding | G1 | Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | G2 | Local company owner (construction supplies, etc.) |
| | G3 | Editor of the parish magazine, webmaster for the town's website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Ribe | Ri1 | Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization |
| | Ri2 | Head of tourism at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri3 | Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of municipal business organization |
| | Ri4 | Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri5 | Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri6 | Chairman for the local citizen council and a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | Ri7 | Director of the hostel in the town, chairman of the official festivals/events, board member at the municipal business organization |
| | Ri8 | Vice-chair in the local trade organization, local journalist |
| | Ri9 | Museum director, chairman for the town's tourism marketing network |
| | SK1 | Team leader, communication department at the municipality |

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| Skive Municipality | SK2 | Newcomer coordinator under the communication department at the municipality |
| | SK3 | Director of the local radio |
| | SK4 | Radio host, chairman for the biggest local music festival |
| | SK5 | Artist involved in different projects in Selde and its neighbouring villages, hired by SK |
| Rødding | R1 | Member of the branding association board for the marketing working group, volunteer (retiree) |
| | R2 | Member of the local development association board, head of the marketing working group; volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | R3 | Chairman of the local development association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Selde | S1 | Owner of the local gallery and other artist facilities in the village (retiree) |
| | S2 | Chairman for the self-owned institution called 'sculpture village', involved in many diff. things, volunteer (retiree) |
| | S3 | Co-owner of the local gallery etc. (retiree) |
| Fur | F1 | Head of the local development and branding group, museum inspector |
| Varde Municipality | VK1 | Municipality, senior management consultant |
| | VK2 | Municipality, development consultant |
| | VK3 | Municipality, communication employee |
| | VK4 | Company owner (outdoors furniture, huts, timber products) |
| | VK5 | Company owner (food products, restaurant) |
| | VK6 | Designer, owner of local design bureau |
| Billum | B1 | Previous chairman of the parish association, volunteer (retiree, B&B owner, farmer) |
| | B2 | Member of the parish association, volunteer (cheese and meat producer) |
| | B3 | Editor of the website, volunteer (independent designer) |
| | B4 | Chair of the parish association, volunteer (fulltime job, shop owner, also member of the business and real estate association) |
| | B5 | Chair of the business and real estate association, volunteer (retired company owner) |
| | B6 | Editor of the website, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| Oksbøl | O1 | Chair of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job, member of municipal council) |
| | O2 | Member of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job) |
| | O3 | Retired craftsman, ex-member in different associations, including in municipal council |

b) Structured interviews

| Type of place branding approach | Place | Interviewee | Interviewee description |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|--|
| Type 1 | Skive Municipality | 1SK1 | The secretariat director for the umbrella sports association |
| | | 1SK2 | School secretary, local resident |
| | | 1SK3 | Director of local museums |
| | Varde Municipality | 1VK1 | Director of local museums |
| | | 1VK2 | Director of the municipal department for Children, Youth and Job; local resident |
| Type 2 | Rødning | 2R1 | New head of the apple association, business owner |
| | | 2R2 | Chef, tenant of the café at the local sports hall, local resident |
| | | 2R3 | Head of the pedagogical department at the local school |
| | Selde | 2S1 | Local resident, proponent of more focus on art, recently retired |
| | | 2S2 | Recent newcomer, commutes for job elsewhere |
| | | 2S3 | Recent newcomer, commutes for job elsewhere |
| | | 2S4 | Local resident, retired schoolteacher |
| Type 3 | Darum | 3D1 | Local resident, owner of a part-time fodder shop, commutes for job |
| | | 3D2 | Head of an institution for mentally vulnerable; local resident |
| | | 3D3 | Owner of a farm, farm shop, Bed & Breakfast; local resident |
| | Gørding | 3G1 | New member of the local citizen council and its branding group; local resident |
| | | 3G2 | Recent newcomer, commutes for job elsewhere |
| | | 3G3 | Head of the town's sports and culture hall |
| Type 4 | Billum | 4B1 | Member of the independent school board and parents' association; lives in Oksbøl |
| | | 4B2 | Local artist and resident |
| | | 4B3 | Recent newcomer, commutes |
| | Oksbøl | 4O1 | Head of the sport hall, local resident |
| | | 4O2 | Parish priest in the local church |
| | | 4O3 | Local resident, owner of a part-time shop, commutes for job |