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a comparative study of three Danish cities
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Chapter 10  Study 4

Intra-organizational Brand Resistance and Counter-narratives in City branding – a Comparative Study of three Danish Cities.

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Structured abstract
Purpose: The aim is to contribute to an increased understanding of intra-organizational city brand resistance by identifying and discussing different types of counter-narratives emerging from the political and the administrative arenas.
**Design:** The empirical material consists of secondary data as well as six in-depth semi-structured interviews with Danish mayors and city managers in three different municipalities in Denmark.

**Findings:** Intra-organizational counter-narratives differ from inter-organizational counter-narratives but resemble number of issues known from extra-organizational resistance. Still significant differences are found within the political arena: lack of ownership; competition for resources; and political conflicts. Lack of ownership; internal competition for resources; and distrust of motives; play an important role within the administrative arena. Mayors are aware of the needs for continued political support for branding projects but projects are nonetheless realized in spite of resistance if there is a political majority for it.

**Research implications:** We point to the implications of city brand resistance and counter-narratives emerging from the ‘inside’ of the political and administrative arenas in the city, here defined as “intra-organizational counter-narratives”.

**Practical implications:** It is suggested that politicians and municipality staff should be systematically addressed as individual and unique audiences and considered as important as citizens in the brand process.

**Originality/value:** So far little attention has been paid to intra-organizational stakeholders within the municipal organization and their impact on the city branding process approached from a narrative perspective.

**Keywords:** Intra-organizational brand resistance, intra-organizational counter-narratives, inter-departmental competition, city branding, political arena, administrative arena, brand resistance.

**Article classification:**
Research paper
Introduction
Marketing and branding became part of city management in the rise of the so-called ‘entrepreneurial city’, a term first formulated by Harvey (1989) to depict how cities are administrated in more business-like manners. Today scholars like Braun (2011), Eshuis & Klijn (2012) and Kavaratzis & Hatch (2013) argue that place branding has become ‘business as usual’ for cities wishing to increase their attractiveness for various target groups and that city branding is an integral part of the political processes of cities (Braun 2011). Less
attention has been paid to the points made by Baker (2012) who finds that branding essentially is a process of change management. Brand management or brand governance is often described as a rather linear straightforward and conflict-free situation but it actually does involve challenges and conflicts between different stakeholders and other groups involved in or affected by the process (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2014, Moilanen 2015). Managers tend to underestimate the varieties of reactions to change and overestimate their power to influence those responses (Schlesinger and Kotter 1979). Such reactions often manifest themselves as resistance. Besides existing research on city and place branding generally acknowledges that city and place brands may be contested and/or take on a variety of meanings for different stakeholders (Zenker and Braun 2017). A number of authors argue that citizens and citizen participation play a central role in city branding (Hankinson 2004, Kavaratzis 2004 and 2012, Braun et al. 2013, Zenker et al. 2016), and that city branding should include bottom-up initiatives (Kavaratzis 2012) in order to reduce resistance among residents, as identification with their place of living can be regarded as both an aim and facilitator (Zenker et al. 2016). Hereby, residents are seen to act as integral parts of the place brand, emitting symbolic messages about the city through explicit place representations and emblematic behaviors (Green et al. 2018), as ambassadors for the brand and as citizens and voters vital for the political legitimization for the brand (Braun et al. 2013).

Resistance against what has been referred to as ‘the official story’ (Jensen 2005, 2007) has been discussed by means of terms such as ‘brand alienation’, ‘brand resistance’ and ‘counter branding’. ‘Brand alienation’ is characterized by non-affiliation with the official story while ‘brand resistance’ includes acts of resistance among citizens and other city stakeholders. ‘Counter branding’ may involve coherent and strategically orchestrated initiatives directly challenging the official brand (Jensen 2007). Particularly the introduction of urban transformations and mega-events as parts of branding strategies have traditionally led to dramatic public resistance (Sanchez and Broudehoux 2013, Gray and Porter 2014, Maiello and Pasquinelli 2015). Even though these three concepts, in different ways, try to address how resistance is an integral part of city branding processes, they fundamentally define resistance as something that emerges ‘from the outside’ and opposes what ‘the’ political entity responsible for the brand project wants, hereby portraying the ‘inside’ political entity as harmonic and well-orchestrated. Conflicts and resistance may also develop in inter-organizational context between organizations involved in city brand management (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2014).

Little attention has so far been paid to the fabric of potential resistance emerging from internal stakeholders who are active in the political and the administrative arenas within the city organization.
Internal stakeholders are people working directly for governmental entities while citizens, business owners, and tourists are seen as external stakeholders (Zavattaro 2013). This study reveals that brand leadership may be challenged by an internal organizational perspective involving politicians as well as municipality employees. Very little is known about these challenges and the character of such internal brand resistance. The article introduces the concept of ‘intra-organizational counter-narratives’ to address such internal resistance and how it affects the city’s political and administrative leadership and how this may influence management and directions of city branding initiatives. Thus the aim of this article is to contribute to an increased understanding of internal resistance processes by identifying and discussing different types of counter-narratives emerging from internal stakeholders (in this article defined as local politicians and municipality employees).

Based on these findings, the article analyzes how these narratives influence the city’s top management and political decision making as integral parts of a city branding process. The paper concentrates on brand resistance and counter-narratives emerging from within the political and the administrative arena, both seen as internal arenas. Findings relating to the external arena will only be mentioned when they more directly affect processes in the two internal arenas; e.g. when residents’ counter-narratives are acted upon in these two arenas. Thus an important contribution of the paper is the introduction of ‘intra-organizational counter-narrative’ as a concept that can contribute to better understandings of resistance and counter branding as integral parts of the more political dimensions of city branding processes that take place in the two internal arenas.

Literature Review:

*Counter narratives and brand resistance*

Zenker and Braun (2017, p. 275) define city brands as “network[s] of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of a place and its stakeholders. These associations differ in their influence within the network and in importance for the place consumers’ attitude and behavior”. As a consequence, place branding is seen as identity-driven and represents an inside out approach that seeks to express selected values and narratives of the place (Boisen et al. 2017), casting the task of place branding as reputation management (Eshuis and Klein 2012, Hankinson 2015). Terlouw (2017) observes that the identity of a brand is frequently contested by both public and private stakeholders, and thus frequently becomes a topic subject to political debate. Such frequent contests may trigger both resistance and the emergence of counter-narratives.
One of the most cited definitions of counter-narratives is offered by Andrews’ (2005, p. 1), who defines counter-narratives as narratives that ‘only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering’, accentuating that ‘the very name identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category’ (Andrews 2004, p. 1). Accordingly, counter-narratives only exist insofar they counter a competing (and usually a ‘master’) story or account of events. As such, the master narrative is to be understood in a reciprocal relation with its counter-narrative(s) in the sense that the counter-narrative presupposes the existence of a master narrative (Lundholt 2017, Gabriel 2017). Bamberg depicts the master narratives as ‘the back-drop against which counter-narratives can be drawn up’ (Bamberg 2004). In its nature, this positional relation involves an asymmetric relation as counter-narratives are positioned against the master narrative (Lundholt 2017, Boje 2001). This implies that, at the outset, the master narrative is the story or account of events that is depicted as powerful. Power may also be related to the source of the story as pointed out by Nelsen (2001) who analyzed the stories of individuals and groups of people (such as Gypsies and transsexuals) who have been disempowered by dominant narratives perpetuated by people with the power to speak for them. As such, the emergence of counter-narratives may be related to an asymmetric relation among inter-actants.

Extra-organizational brand resistance involving external stakeholders

Although the term ‘counter-narrative’ has not been applied to city branding so far, we can trace some related terms depicting a conflict between the strategic vision of the municipality and various counter-reactions among stakeholders. For example, Jensen (2005) points to ‘brand alienation’ in situations, where the city brand is disconnected from urban dwellers and local identities, leading him to define brand resistance as acts of resistance towards ‘the official story’. However, to Jensen (2005, 2007), brand alienation is not coherent or strategically staged forms of opposition, but more un-orchestrated community voices speaking out in public about their disapproval, disengagement etc. Such disengagement, branding resistance or simply negligence may be found among citizens, companies, NGOs and other representatives of the local community. Whereas such resistance and negligence are traditionally seen as un-organized practices, more fundamental counter-branding initiatives can involve putting more concerted and organized narratives into circulation to counter the master narrative (Jensen 2005, 2007). Accordingly, acts of counter-branding such as strategic and deliberate circulations of counter-narratives are processes that challenge the master narrative.

There are only a limited number of studies of brand resistance and counter branding and typically, they are case-studies focusing on grass-root, bottom-up initiatives by local citizens. For example, Insch and Stuart
(2015) interviewed local residents in Dunedin City, New Zealand (with a track record of unsuccessful city branding campaigns) and found four themes or factors leading citizens to disengagement with the city brand: Lack of brand awareness/knowledge, lack of brand identification, disapproval of local government actions, and cynical attitudes towards involvement when residents are disengaged from the city brand process. In Hamburg, citizens protested with the label ‘Not in our name’ against the city’s marketing activities as the successful attraction of the ‘creative class’ and tourists resulted in gentrification of several city districts (Zenker and Beckmann 2012). When the organization responsible for marketing the city of Amsterdam introduced the ‘I Amsterdam’ brand, a group of residents responded with an ‘I Amsterdamned’ counter narrative (Braun et al. 2013). Recently, Vallaster et al. (2017) described how the German city Munich’s branding as an open and tolerant place was jeopardized by the refugee crisis when citizens' collective actions co-created and eventually deconstructed the city brand. In the Danish city Randers (locally seen as ‘the city of violence’) a municipal organized branding campaign led to a logo feud where the official branding logo (a capital R) was challenged by an alternative logo, the R with a junkie needle, beer bottles, a motor bike and dog dirt attached to it (Smidt-Jensen 2004). The anti-branding logo was meant as a protest against what was perceived as a socially exclusive branding process by illustrating some of the ‘silenced voices’ and silenced issues in the city. The ‘Bielefeld Conspiracy’ forms a very special counter-narrative case. It relates to a running gag among internet users who state that the German city Bielefeld does not actually exist. This framing was generated by a student at the University of Kiel, 350 km. away in 1994 and was not a reaction to any organized branding campaign by the city, but has defined the city’s reactions afterwards (Hospers 2010).

*Inter-organizational resistance between external and internal stakeholders*

Lucarelli and Giovanardi (2014)studied the regional brand building process of Romagna (an Italian territory belonging to four neighbouring provinces) based on a selection of official documents, web pages and promotional materials produced by the organizations involved in brand governance, and in-depth interviews with six representatives of the same organizations. None of the interviewees held political positions. The authors found that the brand governance emerges as a negotiated and contested mechanism and they identified five interpretive repertoires; ‘Chaos and fragmentation’; ‘The politics of scale’; ‘Tension between public and private space’; ‘Tension between inland and coastal area’; and ‘The politics of memory’. The special socio-political environment of the territory can be seen as a constricting...
factor where local parochialism and competition from within deeply affects the branding process, and they see brand governance as a more disordered, fragmented and contested process.

In a comparative study of 10 European cities (Moilanan 2015) interviewed 17 key informants representing the main organizations in charge of city brand management (but only 4 interviewee’s represented the local government authority). He found nine major challenges faced by city brand managers: ‘Large numbers of stakeholders with conflicting and parallel activities; a limited understanding of branding within the network of stakeholders; insufficient buy-in from public sector organizations including political support, the private sector and citizens; securing funding; slowness and time related issues; conflicting opinions of key stakeholders and a lack of clear leadership; operational brand management; formulation of strategy of the brand; and monitoring and poor situational awareness’.

Intra-organizational brand resistance involving internal stakeholders

It is generally accepted that branding is a part of the political process (Braun 2011, Jørgensen 2015) but there are different views on the role of local politicians and mayors – ranging from Kotler et al.’s (1993) notion that “under effective mayors, cities can often succeed in dramatically improving of their conditions”, to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) who do not see leadership in a brand process as political leadership and the view of Braun et al (2017) “city governments cannot brand places on their own”. On the other hand, Eshuis et al (2011) point to a necessary focus on political brand leadership due to organizational resistance.

Eshuis et al. (2011) made a web-based survey with professionals and city administrators involved in branding of cities, towns and villages in order to study bottlenecks in place marketing in The Netherlands. A key finding was that coordination of city marketing activities within the municipality and the embedding of city marketing in place development were considered to be more problematic than development of city marketing content. The respondents did not consider political support as a key bottleneck, but found the most important bottleneck to be that budgets for city marketing were too low. The survey included as well external professionals and consultants working for the city as internal employees within the city organization and politicians. It indicates that the political and administrative arenas contain a series of challenges for city branding that are not addressed by the studies that emphasize counter-narratives originating from the external arena. This finding is contradicted by Moilanen (2015) in his comparative study of 10 European cities. Practitioners in 9 out of the 10 cities were challenged by the lack of political support from the public sector and city hall contradicting the findings from The Netherlands. Jørgensen (2015) describes how Danish mayors are deeply involved in city brand projects developed in close circles involving the city council and administration and semipublic organizations. Jørgensen (2015) mentions how
nine out of 25 cities in his study had experience with aborted branding projects due to change in political leadership, political conflicts and/or a general loss of political support.

A Danish municipality is organized with a unity of command and a power of direction set by the council and executed by the City Management in a ‘top down’ or top management structure where the master narrative represents the strategic brand vision of the city council, which is anchored with the mayor and the local politicians. But master narratives in the form of brand visions and values are not ‘set in stone’ and therefore, counter-narratives may arise among internal stakeholders challenging the master narratives and giving rise to brand resistance. At the same time, counter-narratives existing among external stakeholders may influence internal stakeholders and decision makers insofar such external counter-narratives are enacted, and acted upon, by politicians and municipality employees. In situations where there is a strong opposition among residents or other external stakeholders, the counter-narratives from the external arena may be subsumed within the internal arena and internal stakeholders such as politicians in opposition may simply adapt and engage the external counter-narratives and let them work for their agenda.

The political arena in Danish municipalities is formed by the city council and the committees. The council is chaired by the mayor who is elected by and among the members of the city council and is the formal head of both the political and the administrative organization. Local politicians occupy a bridging position to citizens in the sense that they are local residents but politically elected and therefore responsible for the city’s economy and for the employees working for the city. The council allocates funds to, among other purposes, branding, in competition with other public priorities and hereby provides city brand projects with political legitimacy. In that sense they have a decisive influence on the master narrative and are responsible for transforming and converting the master narrative into action in an environment supported by the strong tradition of consensual, corporatist style of decision making in the Nordic countries including Denmark (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004). This ‘Nordic model’ has recently been described by Pedersen and Kuhnle (2017) as consensual governance or by Knutzen (2017) as decentralized co-operative governance. In a specific Danish context Klausen (2009) use the word ‘shareholders’ to describe the political responsibility to the development of the city, since they act as ‘owners’ of the public sector on behalf of the citizens. This places the politicians in a different position compared to internal (employees) as well as external stakeholders, and it is unthinkable to imagine a Danish city brand project without political involvement and support (Jørgensen 2015). Besides city branding projects are often managed by communication officers with direct access to and sometimes sitting next door to the mayor and/or the city manager.

The administrative arena is led by the city manager, who is a civil servant employed by the council to be the daily head of administration in close collaboration with the mayor. Together the two can be defined as ‘the top management in the city’ in what Berg and Kjaer (2005) describe as a ‘shared leadership’ or ‘partners in a
complex joint venture’ as concluded in a pan-European survey (Alba and Navarro, 2006). Even though civil servants in the administrative arena might also be residents, they are in a different position compared to non-employees since they work for, and represent, the political organizations responsible for, and investing in, city branding projects. They are expected to be loyal to the strategic vision of the city council to ensure that city branding is characterized by authenticity and is not ‘purely cosmetic’. Still, they may feel alienated with the whole idea of branding, disagree with the political priorities or simply dislike the choice of brand values. Nevertheless, they are in a different position than the external stakeholders since it is usually difficult for them to express their attitudes publicly. Instead they may find ways to communicate their critical attitude internally in the organization.

The literature accounted for above points to a number of examples of open city brand resistance among local citizens and indications of intra-organizational resistance, Insch and Stuart (2015), Smidt-Jensen (2004), Zenker and Beckmann (2012), Braun et al. (2013), and Vallaster et al. (2017). There are also examples of more subtle inter-organizational unsolved resistance involving public administration and the political level (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2014, Moilanen 2015). But knowledge about the character and origins of intra-organizational brand resistance and counter-narratives in the political and the administrative arena within the city organization and ways in which they may affect the political and administrative brand leadership is both sparse and needed.

Methodology

Based on an interpretivist approach, the aim of the empirical study is to gain in-depth insight into the experiences and reflections of key ‘insiders’ in city branding projects. The study therefore does not seek to uncover any ‘ultimate truth’ about city branding projects, but tries to uncover various realities of these projects, based on key actors’ meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels. The empirical material consists of secondary data as well as six individual in-depth interviews with mayors and CEOs (in Danish) in three Danish cities (Odense, Kolding and Horsens). The interviews were semi-structured and based on an identical interview guide (see appendix) for all informants consisting of questions regarding the following themes enabling exploration and in-depth discussions of the topic:

Political ownership to the strategy
Awareness of the strategy among stakeholders
Communication of the strategy internal as well as external
Resistance and counter-narratives among internal and external stakeholders
An interview team of three persons was established, authors MWL and OHJ and cand. negot. Marie Claire Andsager, and involved two persons in each interview. The interviewers and informants engaged in a formal interview with open-ended questions enabling the interviewees to freely express their views formulated in their own terms. Each interview session involved two of the authors taking turns as interviewers. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were taped and afterwards analyzed, particularly emphasizing the recording and analysis of all examples of counter-narratives that arose during the interviews. All interviewers were well informed about the three cities. One was member of the advisory board in the project in Kolding, one had been employed in the Communication Department in Odense and the third was the former city manager in Horsens.

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this study is to identify different types of counter-narratives emerging from key internal stakeholders in city branding processes and to analyze how they influence top management and political decision making. To ensure diversity and analytical generalizability of results, the selection of cases was based on a goal to both include cities with a top-down approach to city branding and cities with a bottom-up approach. In order to ensure the selection of relevant cases, 25 Danish city branding projects (for further information see Jørgensen 2015) were initially analyzed using Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen’s participation, subsequently leading the research team to pick three cities as the most relevant cases: Kolding, Odense and Horsens.

The three cities were chosen because they all work intensively with city branding, but employ fundamentally different strategies and face very different challenges in terms of internal brand resistance. Kolding’s brand motive is based on the aspiration to attract more citizens. For a number of years, the city has had a negative balance between people moving to Kolding and people moving away. The mayor aimed for high levels of citizen involvement in the process and more than 650 citizens took part in the process leading to the formulation of the city’s new vision ‘Kolding – we design life’. This vision was subsequently unanimously approved by the city council.

Odense represents a top-down process based on a decision by the council and was chosen as a case because there had been considerable political conflicts in the city council. Odense’s brand motive grew from a loss of 40% of the city's industrial jobs during the international economic crisis in 2008-2009, a weakened economy, lack of self-confidence and an impression that ‘nothing works in Odense’ – (translated from Danish ‘der går Odense i det’). In 2010 a strategy called ‘New reality – New welfare’ (available in Danish on the city’s homepage, www.Odense.dk) was introduced, known as New-New. The CEO described how many employees saw this as a euphemism for budget cuts and service reduction. In 2012, the council decided to pursue a revised strategy with 5 welfare targets and 3 growth targets, all based on three tracks –
New welfare, Urban and mental transformation and Conditions for growth. Part of the third track was the establishment of a more visible city profile through a public-private partnership ‘Odense Sport & Event’. At the same time a new slogan, (‘Odense - daring for the future’) was formulated.

Horsens was selected because it represents the only well-documented, long term successful Danish city brand project so far (Jørgensen 2014). Horsens’ brand motive was a negative image predominantly based on strong and negative associations to the large state prison located in the city. More than half of Denmark’s population related the city’s name to the prison, and in the 1990s the city had a periodically stagnant or declining population. In 1998, the city council decided to invest in a branding campaign based on development and attraction of national and international events (Jørgensen 2014).

In table 1, the most relevant background information of the three cities is summarily introduced based on both secondary data and information retrieved from the mayors and city managers during the interviews.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Odense</th>
<th>Kolding</th>
<th>Horsens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200.000</td>
<td>90.000</td>
<td>87.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The mayors party</th>
<th>Social democratic</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Social democratic</th>
</tr>
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</table>

| “Reason to launch” | A strong sense of urgency – based on an earlier impression that “Der går Odense i den” (“Nothing works in Odense”), the fact that the city was below average in almost everything in the region and due to a 40% loss of jobs in the local industry during the economic crisis (extract from review with the city manager) | More citizens moving away from than into the municipality (extract from interview with the mayor) | A negative image dominated by a large state prison (Jørgensen 2014) |

| Strategy | An urban transformation plan | Music and great |
including planned and expected investments for 4 billion Euros over the next 10 years, attraction and development of high tech industries, welfare-tech, support to entrepreneurs and a more visible city profile. (the latter organized in the public private partnership “Odense Sport & Event”) (extract from interview with the mayor)

“Together we will design the possibility for a better life through entrepreneurship, social development education and knowledge – using design processes to improve quality of municipal service” (translation from Danish as found on the city’s homepage, https://www.kolding.dk/om-kommunen/vi-designer-livet/vision-kolding-vi-designer-livet/kolding-kommunes-vision)

| Annual investment in branding, Euros per capita | 13 | 2 | 10 |

The character of citizen involvement in formulation of brand and brand articulation. The description is based on information collected as responses to the question “Who were involved in development of the project?” from the questionnaire

The Odense-project was decided upon by the city council (extract from interview with the mayor)

The city council invited 650 citizens representing institutions, organizations and active citizens to a Vision Forum with interviews and creative workshops where they have worked with alternative future scenarios for Kolding. The city council decided to follow the proposed vision from the citizens

The project in Horsens was originally initiated by the city council and eventually developed into a public-private partnership with private companies and involving hundreds or even thousands of volunteers in supporting the individual events
Table 1. Background information of the three cases extracted from interviews with mayors and city managers, city home pages and literature.

As shown in table 1 brand motives vary across the three cases, but they share a motivation emerging from negative trends and tendencies. Also the articulation of initiatives varies. Odense and Horsens have formulated very concrete plans: urban transformation and events respectively, whereas Kolding’s vision is more abstract as it concerns the implementation of design processes. The budget for annual investments in the brand are high in Odense and Horsens (13 and 10 Euros per capita respectively), but relatively low in Kolding (2 Euros per capita). Also with regards to the longitude of the city branding process the municipalities stand out. Kolding and Odense initiated their city branding activities in 2012, whereas Horsens took the first steps in 1998. Despite the very different premises and focus of attention, the three cases share some common counter-narrative thematic constructions as will be illustrated in the following.

Findings

As mentioned in the introduction of the paper, political leadership may be challenged within the political arena (politicians) and the administrative arena (employees within the municipality). The following analysis reveals that some challenges are experienced by all three municipalities whereas others are unique and only experienced by one or two of the cities. This can mainly be explained by the different situations of the municipalities, their various motivations behind the city branding projects, diverse budgets, and the dissimilar nature of the strategic visions of the cities. Despite the various prerequisites of the branding
projects, the material points to central challenges municipalities may experience within city branding processes. The presentation of these challenges is structured so that it reflects the political and administrative arena respectively. It includes statements made by the mayors and city managers in relation to brand resistance and counter narratives while reflections and findings across cases will be dealt with under the sub heading ‘Discussions’. The findings described below are depicted in short form and compared to the literature reviews on extra-organizational and inter-organizational brand resistance in table 2.

**Counter-narratives within the political arena**

Common for all three cases is the awareness of a need for continued political support to city branding projects. In Kolding the mayor estimated that support for the vision in the political arena is almost non-existent despite the fact that the council had unanimously adopted the citizen proposal ‘Kolding – we design life’ four years earlier. He reflected that ‘they are not against it (‘it is really fine, this design-thing’) but only very few fight for it’. This view is supported by the recently appointed city manager, who observed that ‘We do have ambassadors among our politicians’, but at the same time, ‘we have some politicians who hardly identify themselves with the strategy’. Some politicians are uncertain and worried, which is reflected in questions like, ‘What does it mean for the care of elder people or the policy for disabled citizens?’ According to the city manager, the city management had ‘not been able to describe the potential to the politicians’. This conclusion is supported by the mayor who claimed that ‘Some politicians do not see the purpose; some may feel that they have lost influence to the citizens in the process’. This last point reveals some of the dynamics at stake between politicians and citizens. Thus one reason for the lack of political ownership was according to the mayor the initial bottom-up process putting a lot of effort into the involvement of citizens. This observation was supported by the city manager who made the following observation: ‘But I can be unsure as to whether the very engaging process made the politicians feel that they were involved. Only citizens and businesses were involved but what about the politicians?’ When asked how he would have handled the branding process, knowing what he knew now, the city manager responded that he would have involved the politicians in the start-up process.

However, our three cases also reveal that it is not a question of either focusing on politicians OR citizens, but rather a question of understanding the dynamics between those two stakeholders. According to the mayor of Kolding, the citizens play an active role when it comes to getting buy-in from the politicians. He observed that ‘When the citizens experience a value of the vision, then there is a value in it for them [i.e.
the politicians] as well’. The mayor explained that this is due to the politicians’ motivation for getting votes’. As such there is a reciprocal relation between the buy-in of the citizens and the buy-in of the politicians. In that sense, these two stakeholders seem to be decisive to the overall buy-in of the strategic vision and should therefore be considered key target groups with regards to the strategic communication.

Unfortunately the follow-up communication with the citizens had, according to the mayor of Kolding, been inadequate. He experienced the vision as a ‘well-kept secret within the organization’. The mayor supported this observation with self-critical reflections such as ‘We have also become aware that we have not informed enough about what is going on’; ‘We have become too introvert’, and ‘We have completely forgotten that there is also something called citizens’. As the citizens have not been continually exposed to the strategic communication of the vision, they seem to lack the understanding of the vision. This has a negative impact on the support of the politicians. After proof-reading and accepting his comments the mayor has informed the authors that the city has changed the ‘slogan’ to ‘Together we design life’ and the city vision is made more extrovert and targeted.

The reciprocal relation between the citizens’ and politicians’ ownerships of the brand vision also played a key role in the branding process in the municipality of Odense. The transformation of Odense was defined by city top management as more than ‘just’ a city branding project. The regeneration plan includes not only brand visions, but also a series of tangible, infrastructural changes; among other things a change of harbor functions and closure of a central road through the city. According to the mayor, many of the proposed changes were criticized by citizens to an extent where ‘People in Odense were furious’. The mayor explained that he has “been scolded so much” and ‘They [i.e. the citizens] sometimes stood in front of the City Hall shouting at me’. These reactions had an impact on the processes taking place within the political and administrative arena. One consequence of the public protests was according to the mayor that the liberal party decided to change political position on some of the infrastructural issues. The mayor described how the political conflict eventually became a key issue in the municipal election in 2014. The election was won by the mayor and his Social Democratic party. He considered this result as a de facto public support for the project and for the transformation in general. The council is still divided but the transformation of the city continues. The mayor justified this decision by arguing that ‘You should listen – but you must also decide’, ‘You must take political leadership’ and ‘As a politician you cannot serve everybody’s wishes’ pointing to the need for political brand leadership in spite of eventual reactions from arenas outside the political arena.

The mayor of Horsens was also aware of the importance of political support but did not articulate the reciprocal connection between citizens and politicians. This may be due to the fact that he experienced full
support by the politicians: ‘the project is supported unanimously by the city council’ and that his ‘colleagues from the Socialist People’s Party, who used to be against the project, have turned 180 degrees’. The mayor was more concerned about whether the prioritization of tax money would be a potential issue as illustrated by his following comments: ‘When ‘Horsens and Friends’ has been in need of money I sometimes heard reactions such as ‘Is it wise to go in and support them?’’. He has also ‘met companies who thought it was better to spend money on asphalt than on developing the old prison’. Finally, he mentions that a prerequisite for a continuous support of the project is an adequate level of welfare. With this comment he indicated, that it would be problematic to argue for economic support of the city branding project, if the citizens experienced a decrease in social welfare. The mayor of Odense pointed to similar concerns as he initially experienced challenges from the liberal party which he overcame: ‘we can get more teachers for this amount of money’. When asked about this challenge, the mayor in Kolding did not recognize the problem but did acknowledge that it typically is a challenge. This could be related to the fact that Kolding is the municipality with the lowest city branding budget.

A final observation only identified in Horsens relates to new citizens. The mayor of Horsens raises a specific concern regarding the longitude of the branding project as it has a long prehistory, starting with an aborted city marketing campaign in the 1980ies. Within the city branding period – initiated in 1998 - the city image has changed from a former dull industrial city with a prison to an image recognized for its national and international events. The mayors reflection was that newcomers and younger generations may not find the image of the city as extraordinary if they are not acquainted with the history of the city and its prior image. Thus he found it ‘important to tell them the story of the city’.

Counter-narratives within the administrative arena

The administrative arena concerns the internal stakeholders in the municipality, i.e. the employees. The counter-narratives related to this arena mainly consist of issues pertaining to these employees’ involvement in, and understanding of, the city branding project. The mayor in Kolding explained the importance of buy-in from within the organization as follows: ‘If we do not have the top of the organization with us […] we will fail’. He experienced an increasing support to the project in the organization but is also aware of the fact that there still were leaders and employees within the organization, who do not see the value of a creative design process ‘that eventually will lead them to a conclusion already known beforehand’, as they explained it according to the mayor. According to the mayor, these ‘resistant’ leaders and employees would only see the value when working with the design process themselves. As such, it is
not important to the mayor whether the employees know the vision, what is most important is that they experience the value of the vision.

A similar reflection can be identified in the interview with the city manager of Odense municipality as he posed the question: ‘Should every employee (there are 14,500 in the city) know the story?’ and added the following elaboration: ‘I do not think they should be instructed. They will take on their own opinions in dialogues with their neighbors, those who live in the municipality’. However, the aim of a unison brand message was still an ideal being pursued by the mayor who asked the following question: ‘Can we develop a story in the organization that we can lean on so that we speak more strongly with one voice?’. It should be mentioned that the economy in Odense has been very tight over a number of years and there have been a series of spending cuts. As a consequence, the administration developed a strategy ‘New reality – new welfare’ in 2010-2011. The city manager stated that ‘these ‘New-New’ initiatives were considered by the employees as framed as innovation but experienced as budget cuts, and as a consequence, top management lost credibility within the organization’. Therefore the employees had been skeptical about the new city branding project and the unison message has been challenged. However, according to the mayor, the attitude had recently been changing towards more positive reactions.

The city manager in Horsens experienced a dilemma within the municipal organization in spite of the success of the brand project. ‘I experienced that the whole city was engaged but that employees at city hall were more reluctant’ he said, and ‘Internally in the organization there was a little jealousy especially between the technical department and the cultural department’, and he described it as a ‘conflict between granite and entertainment’. After a change in management there is now full support among the directors. This illustrates how individuals may be resistant and that political ownership in itself will not guarantee organizational support. The city manager added: ‘I am sure that I can find individual employees who think this is a waste of time’ and his personal reflection was that ‘sometimes I can get an uncertainty inside myself, is the event and concert theme going to last?’ But then I am corrected – ‘the position is so strong in the system it is almost self-suggestive’. On the other hand he mentioned a situation, where there was a request for good stories from the schools. The responsible director reflected that ‘we should be careful because at least one teacher would then come out and tell about something that went bad’, which is also an example of how self-containment may lead to attempts to control bad news from jeopardizing the brand.

Table 2

<p>| Extra-organizational | Inter-organizational | Intra-organizational |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>resistance</th>
<th>resistance</th>
<th>resistance, politicians (left) and administration (right)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-affiliation</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negligence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct countering activities</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand deconstruction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chaos and fragmentation</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>(particularistic attitude of stakeholders)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The politics of scale</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>(multilevel governance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tension between private and public space</td>
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<td>Tension between different geographies</td>
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<tr>
<td>The politics of memory</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(experience of collaboration in the past)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political conflicts — may be seen as parallel to direct counter-activities from citizens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of ownership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative and political competition for resources and attention</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distrusting motives</td>
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<td>X</td>
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</table>
Discussion

The political and the administrative arenas

City branding is part of urban politics but the roles of politicians is disputed as some authors see politicians – especially the mayor – as important for the branding process, while others do not. National differences in political and administrative organization may partly explain these differences. A comparative study of European mayors in 20 countries showed that Danish mayors combine strategic orientation with authoritarian exercise of power to a higher degree than mayors in any of the other studied countries. These findings are corroborated by our three cases, as all three mayors demonstrated strong personal and political ownership, and spoke enthusiastically and in great details about ‘their’ branding projects. As chairmen of the city council, they were all very conscious about the general political attitudes and (or lack of) support in the city council. Political ownership was an essential issue whether it was in Horsens where all council members now support the brand project, in Kolding where a number of council members felt alienated from the project, or in Odense, where the project led to a deep political conflict, dividing the council and turning the dispute into an election theme. Bringing the dispute into the election process is probably the most comprehensive and far-reaching expression of resistance within a democratic framework and this may be seen as a parallel to the concerted and organized extra-organizational counter narratives mentioned in literature. The resistance is made visible in all arenas and to everybody and can be contested compared to the master narrative. In Odense, the voters supported the master narrative which is now maintained by the council majority. This is the only example of open political conflict in our cases. However, across the three cases, there are a number of more subtle counter narratives that may influence the brand process. Subtle narratives exist within the political and the administrative arena and they are normally unknown to the public, but these ‘silent’ intra-organizational counter-narratives’ can be very influential. An interesting perspective from the political arena was mentioned in Kolding. If part of the council may feel that a potentially successful brand project is ‘hijacked’ by individual politicians or a particular party, it could lead to resistance in the political arena no matter how the project is understood, organized and/or accepted by the citizens. Furthermore, disengagement, non-affiliation and lack of ownership were key issues in Kolding in spite of – or maybe because of – the high levels of citizens’ involvement in the process. The council unanimously supported the brand vision proposed by the citizens, but nevertheless did not feel empowered in their political work and were not ready to bear the consequences of the project.

Within the administrative arena, employees are in a different position compared to citizens in general because they work for and represent the political organizations responsible for and paying for the branding
project. Since municipalities in Denmark are large organizations with thousands of employees any brand project would obviously benefit if they could be convinced to be ambassadors in the project. From a political point of view this could be very attractive as mentioned in Odense, but none of the city managers had that perspective in mind. Lack of authenticity and lack of affiliation with the brand were found in both Odense and Kolding, but in both cities the city managers felt that this was a ‘matter of time’ and that support was growing within the organization. In spite of the unanimous political support in Horsens there had been conflicts inside the administration.

Table 2 is an attempt to categorize the different types of intra-organizational resistance and relate them to external and inter-organizational resistance. In the political arena disengagement, negligence, and disapproval may be compared with external stakeholders (in spite of earlier formal political accept) while lack of knowledge, alienation and brand deconstruction are not. Open political conflicts may be compared to countering activities from external stakeholders. Intra-organizational resistance shares a lot of issues with external resistance but there are some important differences. In the political arena lack of ownership, competition for resources and political conflicts are essential while lack of ownership, internal competition for resources, and distrust of motives play an important role within the administrative arena.

A brand project is a long-term process but the turnover of politicians and employees is likely to affect the organizational memory as well as attitude in both the political and the administrative arena. The Danish election period at municipal level is 4 years, and 43 % of local politicians were changed during the election in 2013 (Brandsen and Petersen 2013). Furthermore, the average annual staff turnover in Danish municipalities exceeded 21 % in 2016 (VIVE 2016). To avoid that lack or loss of knowledge should be seen or perceived as acts of resistance politicians and employees should be understood and treated as individual and unique audiences where intra-organizational information and communication must be repeated frequently to new politicians and employees.

Theoretical implications

The findings in this study show that influential resistance and counter narratives emerge from the political and the administrative arena within the city organization itself. We suggest that these counter-narratives should be labeled as intra-organizational counter-narratives to separate them from external stakeholders and inter-organizational counter-narratives. Intra-organizational counter-narratives differed significantly from inter-organizational counter-narratives in this study. Intra-organizational resistance shares a lot of issues with external resistance but there are important differences, see table 2. In the political arena lack of
ownership, competition for resources and political conflicts are essential while lack of ownership, internal competition for resources, and distrust of motives play an important role within the administrative arena. The study underlines the significance of political support demonstrated as political governance or if necessary as political government. When the council has decided upon a specific project, branding is a long-term project, and political interest and support must be maintained over years. It is suggested that the political and the administrative arenas should be addressed as individual and unique audiences just as important as citizens in the brand process, not least due to the high turnover of employees as well as politicians. Besides, the findings have pointed to an area hitherto rather unexplored. As internal stakeholders municipal employees work on municipal institutions, drive municipal cars and may even wear municipal uniforms. In other words, they ‘communicate’ the municipality to the citizens. But as mentioned above their role is uncertain and not well understood.

Limitations and further research
This study is qualitative and limited to three municipalities in one country. The Danish examples should not be seen as a definitive list of origins and manifestations of intra-organizational counter narratives, as political and administrative arenas differ between countries. Further research is therefore needed in different political and administrative settings. The role of politicians and city councils in brand governance is disputed in literature and the authors find that this theme should be given more scientific attention in the future since city brand projects usually rely on public funding. Further studies are also needed to understand how the rapid turnover of politicians and employees may influence the intra-organizational support to a brand project. Besides, the findings have pointed to an area hitherto rather unexplored. The municipal employees work on municipal institutions, drive municipal cars and may even wear municipal uniforms. In other words, they “communicate” the municipality to the citizens. But are they non-combatants, ambassadors for the brand project or are they free to have whatever attitude they wish?

Conclusions

Brand resistance occurs as extra-organizational resistance, inter-organizational resistance and intra-organizational resistance. The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate intra-organizational brand resistance and counter-narratives in the political and administrative arenas in Danish municipalities and how this affects city branding initiatives. The study indicates that brand resistance is produced in the political arena as well as in the administrative arena within the city’s organization. Brand resistance within the political arena relates to lack of political influence, lack of political ownership and identification, potential political competition and reactions to counter-narratives among citizens. Although mayors are
aware of the importance of continued political support for branding projects, the cases suggest that projects will be realized in spite of resistance if there is a political majority to take responsibility. Brand resistance among employees relates, among other things, to competition between departments and to general skepticism towards new branding initiatives. Furthermore, the high turn-over/replacement rates of politicians and staff are likely to affect organizational memory and should be taken into account when city brand initiatives are planned and executed. All of these issues points to the necessity of further investigations into the phenomenon of “intra – organizational counter-narratives” among politicians and within the municipal organization.

References


