

Actor participation in rural place branding processes

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Short Abstract:

Many rural places adopt place branding practices to improve their reputation. Yet, rural place branding has received less academic attention than cities. This study aims at determining how different types of rural places impact on actor participation in place branding processes, whereby the focus is on the administrative delineation of the place. Eleven rural places in Denmark, representing different administrative status, were included in this exploratory study. Focus groups and interviews with representatives of these places were conducted. The results reveal that the distinction between administrative and non-administrative rural places affects actor participation regarding two aspects: the existence of a focal actor and the degree of involvement of various stakeholders. The findings provide local place branding decision-makers with knowledge about the stakeholder constellations and their engagement in rural place branding processes. Future research should investigate the reasons for these different stakeholder constellations, e.g. stakeholders' motivations for participation.

Keywords: place branding, actor participation, rural places

Introduction and Research Aim

Rural places all over the world are facing a number of challenges, not least because of globalization, urbanization and demographic changes (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). In order to compete for tourists, investments and residents, rural places need to improve their reputation (Sørensen, 2018) and many have therefore started branding initiatives. Rural places represent a specific context, with specific stakeholder constellations, resources and institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). It is therefore assumed that rural place branding processes will be distinct from those of cities.

While larger cities often adopt a corporate branding approach (Kavaratzis, 2012) and rely on a strong central organization, in rural places, such a central actor regularly does not exist. Instead, various stakeholders collaborate in the place branding process (Vuorinen & Vos, 2013). Hence, it is important to understand actor participation in rural place branding processes, i.e., which actors participate and how they are involved. However, rural places are not homogeneous (e.g. Halfacree, 1993). They have specific characteristics and are embedded in different contexts. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the relationship between type of place and actor participation in place branding. The following research question is addressed:

RQ: How does the type of rural place determine actor participation in rural place branding processes?

Theoretical Background

Rural places differ in their size, administrative authority, and existence of institutionalised delineation. Examples of different types include specific administratively delineated villages (e.g. Vik & Villa, 2010), towns (e.g. Gibson & Davidson, 2004), municipalities (e.g. Lee, Wall, & Kovacs, 2015) and regions (e.g. Martin & Capelli, 2017). Other places share sociocultural, natural or historical commons, but do not necessarily correspond to a delineated administrative territory. These can be smaller communities (e.g. Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011), groupings of municipalities, sub-regions (e.g. Giovanardi, Lucarelli, & Pasquinelli, 2013) or even cross-border regions (e.g. Domínguez García, Horlings, Swagemakers, & Simón Fernández, 2013). Since the territorial size and constellations of places, and especially their administrative embeddedness might lead to different constellations of power and legitimacy of the place's stakeholders, it can be assumed, that the type of place matters for the participation of various actors in the place branding process.

Four general types of actor participation in rural place branding can be identified in the literature. The first type is a rather top-down approach, in which a focal actor, often a local council, initiates and leads the branding process (e.g. Porter, 2013). In many cases, a consultancy is used to support. The second type is characterized by leadership of a focal actor, that cooperates with few, often important, local stakeholders (e.g. Michelet & Giraut, 2014). In the third type of process, there is still a coordinating focal actor, but this actor collaborates with a broader group of local stakeholders. Hence, it is a more cooperative approach to place branding (e.g. Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema, 2017). The fourth type is the most participative approach. In this type of process, the initiative itself comes from individual local stakeholders, such as farmers (e.g. Donner et al., 2017), or local entrepreneurs (e.g. Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014) and a broad part of the community participates in the branding process.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative method was applied to provide insight into the role of the type of place for actor participation in rural place branding processes. Through convenience sampling,

17 participants were invited to a workshop. These represented nine different rural places in Denmark, including municipalities, islands, small rural areas, regional organizations and consultants. Participants were divided into three focus groups, each moderated by a researcher, in which the participants' approaches to their respective place branding initiatives were discussed. In particular, participants were asked to highlight, which actors are involved in their branding processes, how these actors contribute, and in which phases of the branding process they participate. To facilitate understanding and support the discussion, participants were further asked to visualize actor participation in their place branding process. An additional interview and e-mail correspondence covering the same topics with two more community-based rural place branding initiatives were conducted. Content analysis was applied to analyse the transcribed focus group and interview data (Krippendorff, 2013).

Results

In Denmark, only some bigger islands and municipalities are distinct administrative units, while most islands, villages and rural regions do not have a separate local administration. The analysis of the focus group interviews reveals that places with and without their own administrative authority differ in actor participation in their place branding processes.

In the administrative places, the local authority is always the focal actor that steers the place branding process. The focal actor is regularly supported by a consultancy, that is responsible for involving other stakeholders in the process, typically through meetings, focus groups and interviews with the local community. The main purpose of the broader stakeholder involvement is to identify values, that are shared by the community and that can serve as an identity to build the place brand on. However, the focal actors' motivation to involve other stakeholders is mainly to ensure legitimacy rather than providing a direct value to the community.

The non-administrative places generally apply participatory approaches, in which the local businesses and the place residents are highly engaged in the place branding process. A focal actor as well as public authority support for the place branding initiative are typically absent. Different types of stakeholders (e.g., local businesses, residents, non-profit organizations, etc.) often collaborate closely and are highly involved and engaged in the place branding process. Furthermore, the participating actors do not necessarily seek legitimacy for the branding but are rather interested in capturing individual and collaborative value from it.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study shows that actor participation in rural place branding processes differs depending on the type of place. More specifically, it has been shown, that places, that are administrative units at the same time, typically apply rather top-down place branding processes dominated by a focal actor, whereas branding processes in places without administrative delineation are characterized by broad stakeholder involvement and high levels of collaboration among them. Those involved in place branding should therefore be aware of the variations between different types of rural places when starting a place branding initiative.

While this study shows the relationship between type of place and actor participation in place branding, future research should provide a better understanding for the reasons of these different stakeholder constellations and for example investigate stakeholders' motivations to participate in place branding processes depending on the type of place. Furthermore, the influence of other contextual factors determining the type of place, including size, geographical location and distribution of the place's population, on the type of place branding process and actor involvement herein should be investigated.

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