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a meta-synthesis

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Rural place branding processes: a meta-synthesis

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

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 and Marsden 2014). Globalization threatens the identity of rural places, which have become more interchangeable (de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona 2015), with dominant thinking across many places turning to competitive imperative (Horlings and 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 2018) 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, Mærsk, and Randløv 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 2011, Kavartzis 2004), tourist destinations (e.g. Hankinson 2010a, b, Kerr 2006, Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2003, Zenker, Braun, and Petersen 2017) and nations (e.g. Foroudi et al. 2016, Kotler and 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 and Jacobsen 2015), islands (e.g. Grydehøj 2011) and rural places (e.g. Donner et al. 2017, Horlings 2012, Vuorinen and 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 and Campelo 2011, Medway et al. 2015). There has, therefore, also been a paradigmatic shift in understanding place branding processes (PBP) advocating a stakeholder- and process-oriented approach to brands (Kavartzis 2012). Warnaby (2009) proposes the application of S-D logic (Vargo and 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, Frost, and Weiler 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 and 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 and Marafa 2013, Gertner 2011, Lucarelli and 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 and 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, Lucarelli, and Pasquinelli (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, Terlouw, and Gorp (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 and Capelli 2017). In relation to rural places, place branding is seen as one way of adapting to the New Rural Paradigm (Horlings and 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 and 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.

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 et al. 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 and 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 and 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 and Vargo 2011). Some political/administrative and mixed initiatives see more actors as a resource and therefore apply a more participative PBP (e.g. Lee, Wall, and Kovacs 2015) than the governmental bodies who limit the resources integrated to fewer actors such as consultants (e.g. Wheeler, Frost, and Weiler 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, Wall, and Kovacs (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 and 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 and 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 and 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, Dessein, and Rogge 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, Frost, and Weiler 2011), consumers of regional products (e.g. Donner et al. 2017, Willemsen and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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, Lucarelli, and Pasquinelli 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.

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 was 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 et al. 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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