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a Danish example**

Gulisova, Barbora; Horbel, Chris; Noe, Egon

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

## Abstract

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

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

## Introduction

Part of the inherent complexity of place branding rests in the administrative overlap of places as well as the definition of the place boundaries (Hankinson 2007, Syssner 2010). Place brands, i.e., the associations that are made with the place (Zenker and Braun 2017) interact on both a horizontal, e.g., a city and a city, and a vertical, e.g., a city and a region, level (Syssner 2010).

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

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

The interactions among places and their place brands are generally quite complex, as they involve relations both within and beyond the given place. In this study, we focus on the vertical relation, that is, the interactions and relations of places with those on levels above or below them. We adopt the view of a municipality as a place (Wæraas, Bjørnå, and Moldenæs 2015) and study them as places on a higher vertical level and towns and villages belonging to the municipalities as places on a lower vertical level.

There are a variety of perspectives on the concept of place. Some are concerned with the particularity and distinctiveness of places as localities (Cresswell 2015), some see places as socially constructed (Harvey 1996), and others have argued that the geographical place is the phenomenon that brings the social, cultural and natural worlds together, and partly produces

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

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

As more rural places use place branding to improve their reputation and compete for residents, visitors, or business (Horlings and Marsden 2014, Sørensen and Svendsen 2014), there is an increasing interest to better understand the approaches taken to place branding and how the place brands relate to others on the same and on different levels. For example, in Denmark, there is a widespread use of place branding in municipalities, including rural municipalities (DenOffentlige 2017), and more and more small towns and villages have also begun to implement place branding (Andersen 2015, Ugeavisen 2019). The administrative setup in Denmark, with many rural municipalities and other non-metropolitan municipalities which include rural areas with small towns and villages besides of the main city, was deemed an ideal context for the study of place branding from a multi-level perspective. More specifically, we focus on the vertical link between municipalities’ brands and the place brands of individual towns and villages within them and aim to provide a better understanding of the interactions

between the brands on these two levels. Our aim is therefore to address the following research question:

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

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

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

## Literature review

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

### Place branding from a multi-level perspective

Few place branding initiatives relate to the branding of solely one specific place. Instead, “many places comprise, or are included in, several place-branding initiatives at the same time” (Syssner 2010, p. 38). Place brands on different hierarchical levels may nest comfortably within each other, with possible mutually reinforcing brands, or they may interact less comfortably or contradict. Particular place brands can both seek to associate with the brands of other places and their perceived benefits and avoid getting associated with certain other place brands and their respective identities (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2018).

Associations to places at another level can be made in both directions. Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp (2011) argue that associations with a country or a region can be transferred to individual cities within the area, especially if the individual city lacks strong associations itself, while the

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

#### Place brand architecture

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

Stevens (2019) distinguishes three forms of place brand architecture according to the amount of coordination a central actor exerts on individual stakeholders: a central, a cascade, and a lateral form. While the central place brand architecture is the most controlling one, the lateral place brand architecture is the most ‘laissez faire’ one, and the cascade place brand architecture is an intermediary form between them. The types differ in terms of power distance between

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

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

Hanna and Rowley (2015) proposed the Place Brand Web Model that applies "a perspective that views the brands associated with a place as 'contributing brands'" rather than competing place brands (p. 108). In the Place Brand Web Model, the place brand is positioned at the core of a co-creation process, that is focused on co-branding relationships with partner brands, i.e., negotiated, dynamic agreements based on mutual benefits. The commitment of the different partners will depend on their resources as well as the potential value their organization will gain from the co-branding relationship (Hanna and Rowley 2015, Kahuni and Rowley 2013). Different levels of commitment are associated with different forms of co-branding, such as placing each other's logos on websites and documents, promoting each other, and developing

shared identity and articulation. The place brand managed by a central organization is consciously contributing to “the perceptual entity, The Place Brand” (Hanna and Rowley 2015, 109), but The Place Brand “is co-created by the various contributing brands, either consciously (through partnerships) or unconsciously (as a result of brand owners focusing solely on their own brand)” (Hanna and Rowley 2015, 109).

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

#### Local government and community approaches

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

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



## Theoretical framework

Based on the literature review we propose six dimensions that may have an impact on the interactions between the higher- and the lower-level place brands. An overview of these determinants is provided in table 1. First, based on Syssner (2010)'s concepts of 'spatial anchorage' and 'spatial positioning' we suggest that the interactions between the two levels can either be unidirectional, if only one brand is associating with the other or bidirectional. According to Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp (2011), stronger associations with one place are more likely to be transferred to a linked place, indicating a higher likelihood for a one-way interaction, either from the higher level to the lower level or vice versa. Second, the interactions will depend on how the power is distributed between the brands on the different levels. This relates to Stevens (2019) categorization according to the degree of control into the central, cascade or lateral form of place brand architecture. It can further be related to the regulatory powers of the higher-level, administrative places (Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp 2011, Braun 2012). Third, the interactions will be influenced by the benefits that each partner could gain from the interaction and association with the other level's brands. It might be beneficial to be associated with certain brands (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2018), while in the best possible case mutual benefits of associations might accrue (Hanna and Rowley 2015). Among the benefits for the lower level are implications for its development by getting recognition from the higher-level (Syssner 2010, Rebelo, Mehmood, and Marsden 2019). Fourth, the interactions will depend on the existence of incentivization strategies to relate to each other's brands. This dimension is based on Syssner (2010)'s finding that lower-level brands were more likely to position themselves as part of the higher-level place brand they received support from the higher-level. Fifth, the interactions will be affected by the communication between the actors involved in place branding of the place brands at the different levels. This is related to the degree of coordination and strategic alignment in different place brand architecture types. In a multi-brand architecture, each brand will largely be managed by itself, without much alignment. On the contrary, for endorsed brands some alignment between the core identity and the extended identities exists (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu 2016). Finally, the governance structures for the place brands at the different levels will impact the relationship. A professionalized, administrative/political process for creating one brand (Boisen, Terlouw, and Gorp 2011, Braun 2012, Kavaratzis 2012) and a community or volunteer-based process for the other brand (Blichfeldt and Halkier 2014, Vik and Villa 2010) might lead to conflicts when the

involved stakeholder try to build relationships between the different brands (Greenop and Darchen 2015).

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

Table 1. Determinants of interactions between vertically linked place brands

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

## Methodology

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

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

also vary in population and their distance to the central city in the municipality. More detailed information on the municipalities and the individual small places within them can be found in Appendix 1.

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

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

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

Table 2. Overview of interviewees

As the interviews were conducted as part of a bigger research project, they covered several topics, the relationships between the different place brands being only one of them. The interviews were guided by an interview guide (appendix 1). The interviews, 17 to 89 minutes

long, were recorded, and transcribed in the original language (Danish). Further, secondary data such as websites and documents were used for crystallization (Tracy 2013). Deductive coding based on the proposed theoretical framework to understand if and how previously identified interactions between different levels apply to the rural place branding context was applied. The six determinants for the interactions between vertically linked place brands served as initial codes which were then refined to differentiate between different manifestations of these dimensions. Rather than generalizing to some finite population, the study develops theoretical ideas with a general validity (Gobo 2008). The analysis of the qualitative data shows some general social structures working in different rural place branding situations. Rather than generalizable, the findings are transferable (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to other place branding initiatives in similar contexts as those included in the study.

## Findings

The aim of this study was to better understand the interactions between rural place brands on different vertical levels. More specifically, this study focuses on the interactions between place brands, where the brands on the higher level are related to a place with administrative authority, whereas the places on the lower level are smaller places without autonomous administrative institutions. It follows that place branding at the higher-level municipalities was professionalized, driven by the administration as the focal actor and usually being supported by consultants. In the lower-level individual villages and small towns, the approach to place branding was based on voluntary engagement of local actors with an interest in the place brand. In the following, we present the findings regarding the determinants of the interactions of the vertically linked place brands as proposed in the theoretical framework. The direction of the associations between the two levels' brands can either be one-way (from the higher to the lower level or vice versa) or two-way. We first focus on the one-way associations by presenting how higher-level place brands relate to the lower-level and afterwards, how the lower-level place brands relate to the higher-level. Based on these findings, we propose four archetypes of interactions between the higher- and the lower-level place brands in the rural context, in which we include the two-way associations between the brands.

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

Our findings reveal that the municipalities use the place brands of individual towns and villages in their branding only to some degree. Although in the bigger Esbjerg municipality, the focus

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

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

From the municipalities’ perspective the benefits of associating with the brands of the smaller places were perceived as minor. Even those responsible for place branding in Esbjerg municipality expressed their doubts about doing place branding that involves the whole municipality. A major challenge was seen in finding a common place identity because of the differences between the places within the geography of the municipality (EK2). Furthermore, it was argued, that potential residents choose a more specific place, for example a town or a

village, and not the municipality (EK1). However, a more coordinated place branding approach including a closer interaction with the lower-level places' brands was not seen as beneficial, either. Varde municipality took a different approach by changing their branding strategy to focus less on the municipality brand, and more on the lower-level place brands, because this was seen as beneficial for resident attraction initiatives (VK1).

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

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

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

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

The lower-level places sometimes used the municipal brand in their branding. Most commonly they used the municipal brand logo on their website (B3), in their slogan (O1), or used merchandise with the municipal brand as gifts for their guests (S3). Although the smaller Skive



and Varde municipalities managed to create brands that fit well with the reality of the lower-level places, the municipal brand was only rarely used as a reference by the smaller places (B1, B4, O1, O3, R3). The reason was often a lack of resources in the municipality and therefore insufficient outreach and facilitation of the branding initiatives of lower-level places to ensure their brand positioning relates to the municipal brand (B4, S3).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

as the third type. The fourth type is ‘resource provision’. The interaction in this type is characterized by provision of a variety of resources including financial, administrative of knowledge-related resources by the higher-level to the lower level. The resource provision usually is a one-way directed interaction from the higher level to the lower level, yet it may result in the creation of place brands at the lower level that the higher level can use in their anchorage, especially if the provided resources are tailored to the place branding process. Furthermore, by getting the resources, the lower-level places are often then motivated to use the higher level for their positioning.

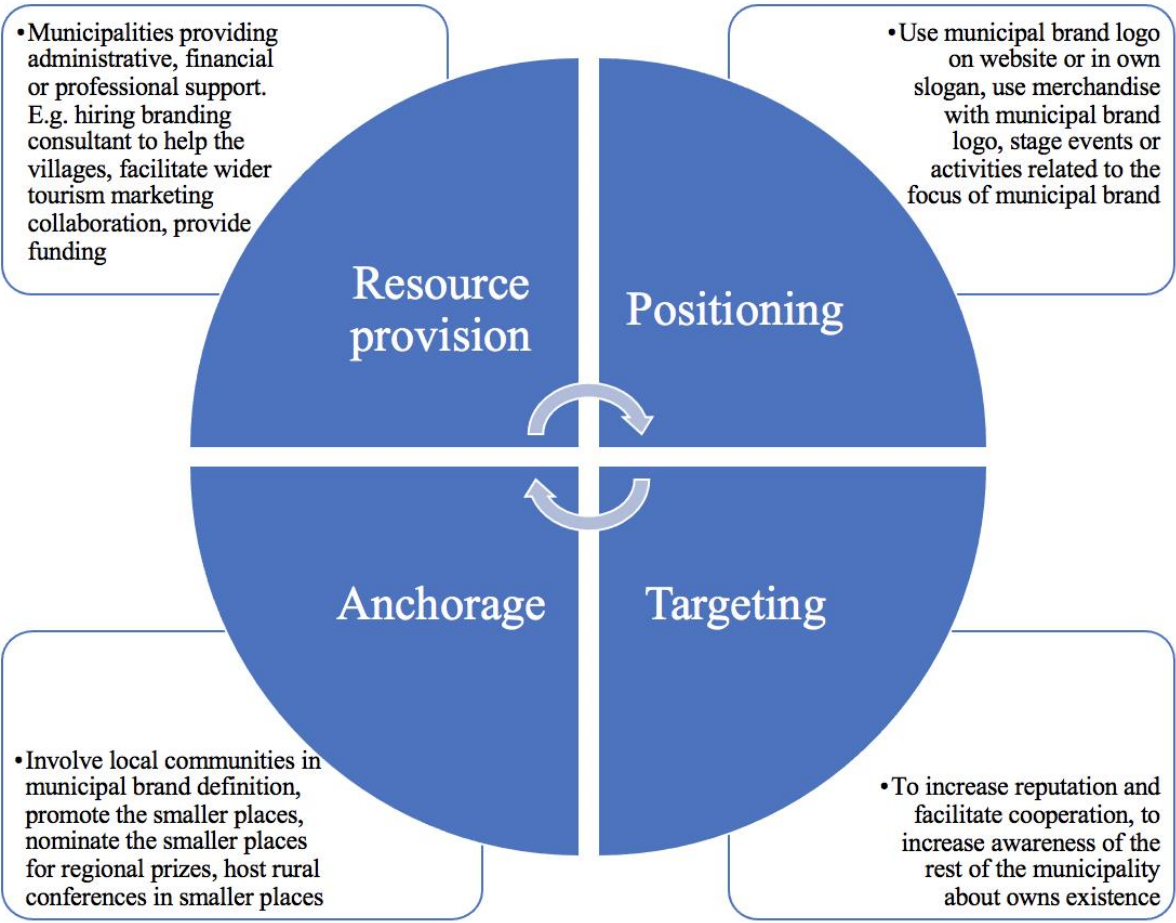


Figure 1. Archetypes of interactions between vertically linked place brands

### Discussion

When taking outset in the fact that any higher vertical level place (e.g., a municipality) with smaller places within it (e.g., towns and villages) can be seen as a house of place brands (Kerr

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

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

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

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

The lower-level places also expressed the need for awareness and reputation building towards the higher-level municipalities. This is in line with previous studies that either investigated hypothetical brands (Rebelo, Mehmood, and Marsden 2019), or brands at a higher vertical level with administrative actors steering the branding process (Syssner 2010). On the other hand, it could also be observed that the municipalities tried to provide resources to the lower-level places to support their voluntary-driven branding initiatives leading to a lack resources, be it financial or skills.

## Conclusion, limitations and further research

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

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

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

The findings provide guidance for place branding officials and others involved in the initiatives regarding the role the higher-level place administration can play in the lower level's place branding, for example through providing funding, advice and skills. Furthermore, the people responsible for the lower-level place brand should be made aware to put focus on building good reputation towards the higher-level place administration to gain easier access to resources and to be included in the higher level's branding. For example, when there is a focal actor (i.e., a municipality or other administrative body) steering the place branding, they could focus on creating a place brand that the whole municipality can associate with in order to facilitate spatial positioning. At the same time, the higher-level place branding initiatives need the resources to better engage with the lower-level places' brands and potentially also using them for spatial

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

Since our study was focused on the interaction between vertical level place brands in the specific context of administrative rural municipality place brands and community-driven small place brands, a broadening of the focus to cover other constellation of connected place brands is necessary. This could include both other types of vertically connected place brands as well as horizontally linked brands. Furthermore, it would be interesting to introduce other kinds of places (e.g., national parks, natural areas, etc.) and other kinds of local brands (e.g., attractions, companies) into the relationship. The findings for the interaction between villages and municipalities, could possibly be compared to the interactions between neighbourhoods and urban municipalities.

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## Appendix 1. Overview of the places included in the study

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

			in the local citizen council and its working group focused on branding.
Darum	896	1.1	<b>Darum</b> is a residential town 16 km from Esbjerg. There are some businesses, a school that implemented an innovative organizational structure, and it is located at the border to the Wadden Sea National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Their slogan is 'Byen bag diget' (EN: 'the town behind the dike'), they organize a 'Vadehavsdag' (EN: 'Wadden Sea day') event, and the branding is very much based on the surrounding nature and the community. The slogan has been around for many years, while the event was started in 2018. The branding here is done by few of those involved in the local citizen council.
Skive Municipality	45,851	683.5	<b>Skive municipality</b> is located on a peninsula in Mid-Jutland region, in northwest Denmark, with Skive being the main town. The branding here started in 2011, based again on a number of workshops with different sectors of the community (education, culture, industry, business, local communities). The initial phase was, also here, led by external branding consultants, while the graphical expression was done by a local design bureau. The brand, 'Rent Liv' (EN: 'Clean Life') has been controlled by the municipal communication department and has been revitalized in 2019 to sharpen its focus, which now is mostly related to sustainability, including green energy.
Rødning	895	0.8	<b>Rødning</b> is a village located 17 km from Skive. There has been an organization working with local development since 2004, while in 2008 a project started on branding the village as 'Rødning – Æblets By' (EN: 'Rødning - the town of the apple'). In 2016 the latter changed to be an organization too, and a working group on marketing was established to serve both organizations. The apple organization, as well as the development organization, are voluntary based. There's a yearly apple festival attracting visitors from afar, while the whole village is implicated with apples in one way or another (having apple trees, making apple must, cooking with apples, apple decorations, etc.).

Fur	767	22	<b>Fur</b> is a small island in the northern part of Skive municipality, 3 minutes sailing away from the peninsula. Tourism is an important industry on the island, and most people know it through their vacation experiences. The branding is part of the local development here too, and it started through a project in 2009. As a result of this, a new local development association was established, that continues to brand the island.
Selde	270	0.4	<b>Selde</b> is a village located 27 km from Skive. Their branding initiative began with an art project in 2012. The project was a result of discussions about ideas for area renewal, where some local citizens expressed a wish to get more art into the village. It developed very much in relation to a local gallery, which continues to be the focal point. After the initial project ended in 2014, the 'Skulpturlandsby' (EN: 'Sculpture Village') was established, with recurrent events where the sculptors create and install their pieces in the village.
Varde Municipality	49,961	1,240.1	<b>Varde municipality</b> is located just north of Esbjerg municipality, on the western coast of Denmark. Varde is the main town, and while there is a number of bigger companies in different industries, the municipality is home to a number of popular tourist destinations along the coast. The current branding started in 2014, after a series of workshops with citizens and other local stakeholders. This was again led by an external consultancy, and a local design bureau created the visual identity for the brand. 'Vi i Naturen' (EN: 'we in the nature') combines the richness of nature in the municipality, and the cooperative spirit.
Oksbøl	2,837	2.3	<b>Oksbøl</b> is a town 14 km from Varde, close to many of the most popular beaches in the area. Many people associate it with the military barracks located there, while it was also a location of the biggest German refugee camp after WWII in Denmark, which sets the background for an upcoming museum on refugees. The branding here is very much focused on the residential life—the community, safety, and active association life. Some ad-hoc initiatives have started to highlight the local history as part of the branding initiatives. The work is mainly done by the volunteer-based

			local citizen and trade association, and some highly engaged citizens. There is a logo with the slogan 'Oksbølby – Tryghed midt i naturen!' (EN: 'Oksbøl town – safety in the middle of nature').
Billum	578	0.6	<b>Billum</b> is a small town located 11 km from Varde. There is a number of small entrepreneurs or small businesses, who put an effort into the development and branding of the town. Among the most important initiatives the town is proud of is an independent school. Otherwise, much is done on an ad-hoc basis, with some things undertaken by the parish association, and some by the local business and investment association. Similar to the other small towns and villages, also here the focus is on the nature-rich location, and the active and friendly community. A slogan on the webpage says 'Billum – Landsbyen på toppen af Ho Bugt' (EN: 'the village at the top of the bay Ho').