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

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Place branding and sustainable rural communities: Qualitative evidence from rural areas in Denmark

Abstract

Several significant societal and economic shifts threaten the sustainability of rural places. More rural communities and municipalities have started to employ place branding to attract residents and businesses and to maintain the service level required to sustain their communities. This study aims to better understand the potential benefits of place branding for the sustainability of rural communities. An exploratory, qualitative research design using case studies from rural places in Denmark was applied.

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

Keywords: rural places, place branding, sustainable communities

Introduction

Due to significant economic and societal shifts including globalization, urbanization, and demographic changes, rural areas around the globe are facing several challenges that threaten their sustainability (e.g., Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Further, economic opportunities provided for rural development through targeted funding programs and grants have diminished (de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015). For example, smaller Norwegian municipalities face out-migration, which “leads to a downward spiral that produces a negative effect on municipal revenues, service provision and sustainability” (Wæraas, Bjørnå, & Moldenæs, 2015, p. 1284). In Denmark, the debate centres around so-called “Udkantsdanmark” (outskirt-Denmark), regions and villages that are geographically distant from the main cities and face substantial depopulation challenges (Sørensen, 2018). Jørgensen (2016) identified various environmental aspects, “economic issues such as the development on the real-estate market” and “social issues of segregation of gender, age, income or educational level in the outskirts” (p. 2) as challenges to the sustainability of rural places. Sørensen (2018) emphasized that image or reputation can have significant impact on

a geographical area, and “a marketing strategy of Danish rural areas..., including local branding” (Sørensen & Svendsen, 2014, p. 7) has been recommended to improve people’s perceptions of rural places. Indeed, in Denmark, the number of both villages that have developed their own brands (Andersen, 2015) and municipalities that have spent considerable amounts of money on branding has increased rapidly. However, the effects of these efforts are not always clear (Jydske Vestkysten, 2017).

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

For the purpose of this paper, we adopted the definition established by Boisen (2015), who referred to place branding as “the conscious process of creating, gaining, enhancing, and reshaping the distinct presence of a place in the minds and hearts of people” (p. 14). While researchers have repeatedly emphasized the impact of place branding initiatives on the sustainability of rural places, most studies have focused on the relationship of place branding and the economic sustainability of places (e.g., Donner et al, 2017; de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol Carcasona, 2015). However, studies have not sufficiently investigated the contributions of rural place branding to the social and environmental sustainability of communities. In this study, we focused on social sustainability and investigated how place branding can help smaller municipalities, towns, and villages to survive and maintain or increase their quality of life. More specifically, we aimed to better understand how place branding can support rural places in ensuring accessibility of services for their citizens, fostering community feelings and pride of the place, and preventing or reversing demographic decline. The study focused on two research questions:

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

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

In answering these questions, this study makes two main contributions. First, it identifies the dimensions of social sustainability on which place branding can make an impact. Second, it provides empirical evidence showing that collaborative place branding leads to the most

favourable social sustainability outcomes. The study's findings enable rural stakeholders to adapt their place branding approaches so they can contribute to social sustainability goals. In the following section, we review the existing literature concerned with sustainable communities and rural place branding. We then present the theoretical framework underlying our analyses, as well as the data and applied methodology, and discuss the findings on the relationship between place branding and social sustainability in rural communities. Finally, we outline the practical implications and limitations of this study and suggest further areas of research.

Place branding and sustainable communities

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

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

Such identification is facilitated by place identity, a concept used in place branding, which refers to what the place is actually like (Barke & Harrop, 1994), the essence of the place, what makes the place unique and distinguishes it from others (Warnaby & Medway, 2013), or the distinctive characteristics that provide the place with its character (Deffner & Metaxas, 2010). Place identity, constituted of place image, materiality, institutions, relations, and people and their practices, is never fixed but rather has to be understood as a process (Kalandides, 2011). Further, “the identity of a place takes shape when similar perceptions are shared across a community” (Aitken & Campelo, 2011, p. 922).

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

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

In their study of the relationship between rural branding and economic development, de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona (2015) suggest that a locally defined place identity and economic development strategies lead to a restructuring of the local economy to better serve local communities, thereby contributing to sustainable, long-term development. They find that a branding process involving community stakeholders can unite different interests involved in the local development, while leading to a higher acceptance of the brand among citizens. To support sustainable perspectives for rural regions, different stakeholders within the community need to co-create a joint storyline or brand with stakeholders that adds value to local products (Donner, Horlings, Fort, & Vellema, 2017; Horlings, 2012; Horlings &

Marsden, 2014). The main objectives of place branding in rural regions in Europe often include sustainable development strategies aimed at improving or maintaining quality of life, preserving cultural and natural heritage, creating a common sense of place identity, and supporting regional economies in terms of competitiveness, income, and employment (Donner et al., 2017). The sustainability of stakeholders' livelihood is a central objective in the case of food clusters for rural development in Savour Muskoka (Lee, Wall, & Kovacs, 2015). For food clusters to contribute to a more sustainable economic future for their stakeholders, they need strong leadership and a clearly defined branding strategy that can create synergy between different sectors involved in the cluster, thereby harnessing "the economic, cultural and environmental strengths of a place" (Lee et al., 2015, p. 143). In the absence of strong leadership and a clear strategy, the various stakeholders, especially public and private sector representatives, might not be able to foster the necessary collaboration and partnership. Yet, this collaboration might be possible through shared leadership and a networked approach, as demonstrated in Het Groene Woud, NL (Horlings, 2012). In this case, the aim is to contribute to the broad sustainable development of the area through a focus on landscape quality, recreation, agricultural entrepreneurship, and development of the regional economy, all of which contributes to the sustainability of the place. The case study of New Norcia in Western Australia most clearly describes the relationship between place branding and sustainable communities (Ryan & Mizerski, 2010). The town monks generate revenue through the production and creation of different products and experiences under the "New Norcia" brand, which allows them to maintain their lifestyle. At the same time, "the sustainability of their lifestyle is imperative to the ongoing success of the brand" (Ryan & Mizerski, 2010, p. 52). This case demonstrates the fine balance that can be achieved between economic sustainability and the maintenance of the monastic lifestyle. All these studies show the importance for place branding of bottom-up, community-based, network approaches, strong citizen involvement, and community responsibility on the one hand and strong leadership, clear strategy, and organization on the other. Furthermore, many of these studies show how economic sustainability leads to social sustainability and that the two are often interdependent (e.g. de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010).

While several authors suggest positive implications of place branding for economic development (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015), creation or maintenance

of jobs, higher market value of local products (e.g., Donner et al., 2017), and income generation (e.g., Ryan & Mizerski, 2010), these studies often focus on brands created for local products and services (e.g., tourism) instead of applying a more holistic approach to the place (Pasquinelli, 2013).

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

To guide the analyses in this research, we used the social dimensions of sustainable development described by Dempsey et al. (2011): education, quality of life and well-being, community, community cohesion, social interaction, sense of community and belonging, employment, residential stability, and active community organizations (p. 291).

Theoretical framework

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

Service-dominant logic

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

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

might have an impact on the type of engagement facilitated by it, where platforms provided by a focal actor tend to be more rigid, with lower level of engagement. Furthermore, the duration and level of actor engagement are key engagement properties.

In service ecosystems, every actor is both a resource provider and beneficiary of the exchange, and all actors are resource integrators (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). This principle of mutual service provision applies regardless of the level of activity or actor engagement. Place branding is commonly driven by one or more actively involved actors, while others, even though they may benefit, are not actively engaged. To simplify the argument, actively involved actors can be understood as the main service providers, but resources from rather passive actors are also integrated into the process. From a social sustainability perspective, the outcome of place branding is shared by the local community as a whole, regardless of their level of participation, i.e., both active and passive community members benefit.

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

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

Given the complexity inherent in place brands, Hankinson (2004) proposes a model of destination brands called “relational network brand” (p. 114), in which “the place brand is represented by a core brand and four categories of brand relationships”, i.e., consumers, primary and secondary services, and the media, that all extend the brand experience or reality. These relationships are dynamic, strengthening and evolving over time, and, as in

service ecosystems, the stakeholder partners may also change as the brand develops and repositions. Kavaratzis (2012) calls for a stakeholder-based approach to place branding. Rather than a single managerial process, branding is a “set of intertwined collective sub-processes” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 79). The authors propose a model of place branding where four processes – expressing, reflecting, mirroring, and impressing – link culture, identity and image, thus constructing identity. The four processes “take place simultaneously in a non-linear manner” (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013, p. 81), constantly interacting in no specific order. Braun, Kalandides, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2013) call for a change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach to place branding, which will require sharing ownership and control besides of the meaning of the place brand.

Methodology

While rural communities in many countries are challenged, in Denmark, there has been an ongoing discussion about “Udkantsdanmark” (Outskirt-Denmark), i.e., villages and towns that are geographically distant from the main cities. These places typically face depopulation challenges, raising questions about their sustainability (Jørgensen, 2016; Sørensen, 2018). There is also an urban/rural divide in terms of people’s income and age (Statistics Denmark, 2020a, 2020b). In rural municipalities that are farther from metropolitan areas, the average age of the population is typically higher and their income levels are lower than those of residents of bigger cities. In addition, rural places in Denmark have increasingly implemented place branding strategies (Andersen, 2015; JydskeVestkysten, 2017).

For these reasons, we selected 11 rural places in Denmark for this study and applied an exploratory qualitative method to provide a better understanding of place branding in these places (table 1). The three municipalities and eight smaller places were identified through their response to an open call for participation in a workshop on rural place branding, followed by purposeful sampling (Emmel, 2013) to match the municipalities with villages within them. Table 1 provides a brief description of the three municipalities VK, EK and SK and the smaller villages, including their sizes and socio-economic characteristics, as well as an overview of the interview partners. Rural places are very diverse in many aspects. For this study, we chose to include places of different sizes as well as places with and without administrative power to enable comparisons of different place branding approaches. In the

Danish context, municipalities have administrative and political power, and place branding is usually a task of a municipal communications department, while the individual, smaller towns and villages have voluntary citizen organizations that engage in place development, including place branding.

We conducted between one and ten semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) in each place and used snowball sampling until the point of information redundancy (Jennings, 2010). We first approached residents responsible for or involved in place branding and then asked them to recommend additional participants. Yet, as this approach runs the risk of only getting similar participants, we also approached other stakeholders involved in the place branding who were not suggested by other interviewees. This maximum variation sample provided a wide range of data, representing various points of view on the phenomenon studied, and ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2013, p. 136). The interviewees were both professionals involved in place branding as well as local community members for whom involvement in place branding was a volunteer activity (see table 1).

Table 1. Overview of cases and interviewees.

Place	Interviewee	Interviewee description
VK (a municipality of app. 50,000 people, with the main city of app. 14,000 people)	VK1	Municipality, senior management consultant
	VK2	Municipality, development consultant
	VK3	Municipality, communication employee
	VK4	Company owner (outdoors furniture, huts, timber products)
	VK5	Company owner (food products, restaurant)
	VK6	Designer, owner of local design bureau
B (a village of app. 550 people, located in VK)	B1	Previous chairman of the parish association, volunteer (retiree, B&B owner, farmer)
	B2	Member of the parish association, volunteer (cheese and meat producer)
	B3	Editor of the website, volunteer (designer)
	B4	Chair of the parish association, volunteer (fulltime job, shop owner, also member of the business and real estate association)
	B5	Chair of the business and real estate association, volunteer (retired company owner)
	B6	Editor of the website, volunteer (fulltime job)
O (a small town of app. 2,900)	O1	Chair of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job, member of municipal council)
	O2	Member of the citizen and business association, volunteer (fulltime job)

people, located in VK)	O3	Retired craftsman, ex-member in different associations, including in municipal council
EK (a municipality of app. 115,000 people, with the main city of app. 72,000 people)	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
D (a village of app. 900 people, located in EK)	D1	Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job)
	D2	Member of the local sport club's board, volunteer (fulltime job)
	D3	Volunteer, responsible for website etc. (retiree)
G (a small town of app. 1,800 people, located in EK)	G1	Chairman for the local citizen council, volunteer (fulltime job)
	G2	Local company owner
	G3	Editor of the parish magazine, webmaster for the town's website, volunteer (fulltime job)
Ri (a small town of app. 8,300 people, located in EK)	Ri1	Head of marketing at the public-private municipal business organization
	Ri2	Head of tourism at the municipal business organization
	Ri3	Museum director, has been both a member and a chairman of municipal business organization
	Ri4	Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job)
	Ri5	Chairman for a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job)
	Ri6	Chairman for the local citizen council and a volunteer-based festival, volunteer (fulltime job)
	Ri7	Director of the hostel in the town, chairman of the official festivals/events, board member at the municipal business org.
	Ri8	Vice-chair in the local trade organization, local journalist
	Ri9	Museum director, chairman for the town's tourism marketing network
SK	SK1	Team leader, communication department at the municipality

(a municipality of app. 46,000 people, with the main city of app. 20,500 people)	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
F (a small island of app. 780 people, located in SK)	F1	Head of the local development and branding group, museum inspector
R (a village of app. 900 people, located in SK)	R1	Member of the branding association board for the marketing working group, volunteer (retiree)
	R2	Member of the local development association board, head of the marketing working group; volunteer (fulltime job)
	R3	Chairman of the local development association, volunteer (fulltime job)
S (a village of app. 270 people, located in SK)	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)

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

We recorded and transcribed all interviews, which lasted between 17 and 89 minutes in length, in the original language (Danish). We used open coding to thematically analyse the data (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). We further applied deductive coding using the framework by Dempsey et al. (2011) for a detailed understanding of the social outcomes of place branding. Rather than generalizing to some finite population, we aimed to develop theoretical ideas with general validity (Gobo, 2008). Therefore, we analysed the qualitative

data to identify some general social structures in different rural place branding situations, providing for “theoretical generalization” (Kelle, 2006). Rather than being generalizable, the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to other place branding initiatives undertaken in contexts similar to those included in the study. After the analysis, we translated the data into English for the purpose of reporting our findings.

Findings and discussion

In the following, we first present an overview of the social sustainability-related goals that were addressed in the place branding strategies adopted in the various rural places in the sample to demonstrate that social sustainability outcomes are not “by-products” of rural place branding but strategic achievements. We then describe how the cases differed in terms of their degrees of institutionalization of the place branding processes and actor engagement. In the final part of this section, we related the different patterns of institutionalization and actor engagement in place branding, i.e., the different types of place branding approaches, to social sustainability outcomes and the challenges to achieving these outcomes.

Reasons for applying place branding

All interviewees described the purpose of their branding initiatives as including the attraction of new residents; the growth and development of the place; the growth of local businesses; the attraction of employees; the maintenance of schools and other institutions, services, and retail establishments; and the improvement of residents’ well-being. Many of these purposes have both economic and social implications. In this study, we focused on the social outcomes of place branding initiatives, guided by Dempsey et al.’s (2011) overview of factors contributing to the social dimension of sustainable development of places. An exemplary quote of the purpose of the place branding initiatives is that of R1:

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

Several interviewees mentioned the reversal of population and economic decline, while only one of the places had a focus on attracting tourists as the main objective. Interviewees’ word choices – “so it continues” (B3), “to develop the village” (B4, O3), “it shall survive” (B5, D3,

G2, SK5, O3), “if it is to exist as a village” (D1), “it is to maintain” (D2), “to reverse the ‘collapse’” (F1), “we need to secure it for the future” (Ri7), “to develop and take care of the town” (Ri9), “that we can keep” (R1), “so you keep life in the shops and schools” (S1), etc. – illustrate the relevance of place branding for the sustainability of communities. Yet, while all agreed on the purpose of place branding as it related to sustaining local communities, many questioned the actual effects. These doubts were mainly related to two aspects: the measurement of the effects of place branding initiatives and the effectiveness of place branding for the specific purpose of resident attraction. At the same time, however, residents involved in some of the successful, strong brands could see clear benefits of their efforts. For example, G2 said, “people move to the village, so that we don’t depopulate the village, and that means, after all ..., that there are some employees available in the village. Because without workers, the companies can’t grow, right.” Ri9 talked both about the attraction of residents and employees to the town and the satisfaction of the existing residents. In addition, many participants saw place branding as important for getting funding for the place, as donors knew the place because of its strong brand.

Table 2 provides an overview of the purposes of the place branding initiatives in the different cases. The dimensions identified by Dempsey et al. (2011) that were particularly highlighted by our respondents included residential stability, community cohesion, social interaction, sense of community and belonging, education, and employment.

Table 2. Reasons for applying place branding.

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

Institutionalization and engagement

We identified different degrees of institutionalization and engagement in the different cases. In the municipalities (EK, SK, VK), branding was led by the municipal communications department, which collaborated with branding consultants and a few other stakeholders. While the broader community was, in some cases, asked about the identity and values to be used in the brand definition, there was not much community involvement. The place branding process was strategically led, but only a few actors were engaged in it. SK3 illustrated this situation:

I think we all know that it is the municipality's brand, but I think there are really many who do not have an idea about what the content really is. So, it is necessary to make it more visible, or at least more present for the ordinary people who do not work in marketing or anything similar, so they would know what the municipality wants to build upon. (SK3)

According to another participant, the administration in this municipality hoped that "people will come to think that this is so valuable to them that they also would use it, ... so we have to begin with some involvement, ownership activation, so we can get this snowball started that should roll and build up to something more" (SK1).

Five small towns and villages (F, G, Ri, R, S) had started place branding initiatives several years earlier. They had defined strategies for the process and formed institutionalized networks to work with them. Ri1 expressed "that it is definitely an advantage that there is this marketing body, where we pool some money and make sure to get the message out". R3 explained, "Since 2004, yes, when we started with the strategic village development, and then built on, ... at the time, we said, if there is to be development in the *village*, then we can't sit down and wait for the municipality and others to come to do it. We have to head it ourselves, and we have to impact it all the time ...". There was also a broad range and high degree of actor engagement in these five places, as illustrated by Ri8, "When something has to happen here, then we support it, just as you do in the small communities. And I believe we have become better at it." Although there was high degree of actor engagement in the remaining three small towns and villages (B, D, O), these actors had not yet been able to organize their intentions to create a strategic approach to place branding, and their initiatives were therefore of a rather ad-hoc type. Some had tried to set up marketing working groups under their local citizen organizations, but these often failed due to lack of resources (time, skills).

But, as D3 explained, “I believe that there for sure is a growing awareness that we have to do something actively in *the village*.”

Contributions and challenges of place branding for sustainable communities

The benefits of place branding for the sustainability of communities can be grouped into three categories: resident attraction and satisfaction; economic development and provision of services; and reputation and recognition (table 2). However, our findings show that achieving the benefits of place branding was not a straightforward process for these communities. Therefore, we also briefly discuss the challenges that the places faced in their branding activities.

Resident attraction and satisfaction

For many rural places, the main objective of place branding is the sustainability of the community in the sense of its survival. Initiatives in many of the places we analysed were aimed at attracting new residents. This was achieved in some cases, according to the interviewees. F1 said, “There is a powerful in-migration to the island ... and that’s simply the prerequisite for us to sustain this local community.” For the most marginalized villages, however, the question was not so much one of growth as it was of slowing the decline. As R3 said, “We have slowed down the decline because we haven’t gone back roughly as much as other comparable places would have gone back, so that’s a victory in itself.” Yet, G1 expressed doubt:

Well, I can’t say anything about whether the branding we do, that’s what’s difficult with branding, because it is difficult to measure. Why is it that, that we suddenly this year have sold eight building grounds in the village? Well, is it because we have really done a lot out of telling the good stories on Facebook...? (G1)

She further expressed that it was difficult to know what would have happened if they had not done anything. Nevertheless, the interviewee could “see right now that the village is in positive development, and we get more new residents – we have a lot of young people who move back ... Because that’s what we need too, to have a sustainable village in the longer term.” All of these places were characterized by broad actor engagement with an institutionalized branding process.

Some of the interviewees expressed concerns about whether the chosen brands really fit with the overarching purpose of their place branding initiatives. This was especially an issue in the

municipalities, where the process of place branding was an institutionalized, rather top-down one that was led by the administration and engaged only a few actors. EK2 questioned the whole idea of place branding with the aim of attracting new residents, citing the many overall factors that influence people's decision to move to a place. Often, the brands that municipalities created, however "cool" (EK2) they were, were not necessarily relevant for the attraction of residents. "It's, at any rate, very simplified to believe that branding alone solves it" (EK2). SK3 did not believe any companies had established themselves in the municipality because of the brand nor that anyone had moved there because of it. "I think it has had zero effect. And then you can say, then the question is whether it has been a waste, but... you can work further with something that isn't necessarily negative, but it requires that you work further with it."

The place branding initiatives in these rural areas also contributed to the satisfaction of the residents of the place, especially in the places where there was high engagement with the place branding efforts. Ri2 talked about his place being a living, active town for the residents, with a lot of events and an amazing number of shops considering the size of the town:

So, there's no doubt that it is a huge advantage for the whole town, for the residents, for those who have shops *here*, that there are these opportunities. It maintains life in, in everything. It also causes the housing prices to follow on nicely, and in that way, it also has implications on settling down. It's an attractive place also to settle down. (Ri2)

Ri8 linked the events and active side of the town to the fact that people in their 30s and 40s, who were moving back to the town from big cities to start families, "like being here. The value is also that people actually think about moving here". While the process of place branding was institutionalized in Ri, engagement of a broad scale of actors had not yet spurred the creation of institutionalized service ecosystems for place branding in other places. For example, B4 expressed doubts, "[W]ell, but I simply don't know. Because now we have got this *supermarket*, right up here, but has it opened because we have kind of tried to tell how good it is to live *here*? I don't know that, right." Nevertheless, a number of interviewees were convinced that place branding was helping retain important services such as schools (e.g., B, D).

In VK, the focus was more on the potential of the "vision", as they called their place branding, to "increase the cohesion internally. And that's of course a strength when we talk settlement" (VK2). At the same time though, this interviewee admitted that, "we have to, somewhere in

this process with the vision, to say, that it can't everything either. It can't make people move, but it, at the same time, is a strength we have to highlight about our area." Still, this municipal employee hoped, "in the longer term, ... the vision can be used to articulate our identity in the municipality, with a spillover effect so our residents will get a citizen pride and go out and talk about the area they come from" (VK2). Civil pride about the place was seen as an outcome of branding by a number of place representatives (e.g., S, R, D). Hence, while the institutionalized municipality branding initiatives that lacked broader engagement had hoped to create civil pride and strong identity, in places with high degrees of engagement, even when they had not yet institutionalized the place branding process, identity and pride had already been created.

Economic development and provision of services

The interviews show some evidence of positive economic impact for the integrated place brands as well. In their work on developing the village to keep it attractive for the existing but also potential new residents, B4 said, "[B]y starting the independent school, ... you can say we have generated some jobs in the town" (B4). In another town, where visitor attraction was the main objective of place branding initiative, Ri9 stated, "[The fact that] there is a good and strong brand, it also influences, for instance whether I can attract employees. And I can clearly feel that when I ... have jobs posted, ... the applicants know very well what it is for a town, and they give the impression that they want to come and work here." Further, according to this same interviewee, the town, unlike many other towns with high tourism appeal, did not really experience an off-season. In addition to attracting job applicants, the strong brand provided an advantage in funding applications. Ri3 also talked about how those involved in the branding of the town "contribute to create a local economy", because the visitors shop in the shops, eat out and sleep there, so *the town* earns significant income through tourism. Ri is an example of a place branding process in which a large number of highly engaged actors had created an institutional network for the purpose of branding a long time ago. Since then, the network had kept growing and attracting new actors, thereby adding benefits to all.

Reputation and recognition

Interviewees also mentioned that place branding initiatives had added to the positive reputation of their places. B4 believed that "[E]very time some branding, or what we should

call it, tells something good about the town, it is, it has an effect somehow. It's not sure it will come today, or tomorrow, but somewhere it has an effect." SK5 expressed the relationship between the sustainability of small villages and their reputations and recognition:

I think that the four villages up there survive now. And they have also become more, well, they have also come more together around being an area where those kinds of things happen. And they win prizes in a row Well, they are on countrywide TV and countrywide press and ... get seen and heard on both the national and international levels. So, you can't say other than that the brand really has succeeded. (SK5)

The actors involved in the place branding initiatives in S also mentioned reputation as a positive effect when they explained how they had won a prize in a regional competition regarding SDG 17, which focuses on partnership. Their project was recognized for the collaboration between the municipality, citizens, and artists. While the first example is from a village with a large number of highly engaged actors but no institutionalized place branding network, the other two examples were brought up by representatives from S, a village with actors engaged in an institutionalized place branding initiative.

Place branding approaches and sustainability outcomes

Table 3 shows the classification of the different rural places included in this study, which were determined based on the approach they had taken to place branding, and presents the social sustainability outcomes discussed by participants from each place. The five rural places that were characterized by broad actor engagement and institutionalized eco-systems for their place branding initiatives achieve the most significant sustainability outcomes. Interestingly, while two of the three places with broad actor engagement but no institutionalized networks for place branding did achieve sustainability outcomes similar to those of the first five villages, the third one did not. One potential explanation for this difference is that the survival of this place was not as seriously threatened as that of the others. Therefore, the interviewees might have been less focused on sustainability issues reflecting the lower prioritization of such issues in the place branding efforts. Furthermore, their place branding might have been more focused on target groups other than (potential) residents and, therefore, less centred on social sustainability issues. In contrast to the smaller places, the three municipalities had institutionalized their branding processes, but actor engagement was narrow and not

representative of the overall place's ecosystem. Despite their similar place branding approaches, the three municipalities differed in terms of sustainability outcomes. While VK's representatives expressed that they saw the potential to achieve sustainability outcomes, those outcomes had not yet been realized. The biggest of the municipalities, which had a strong focus on branding, had achieved the most outcomes.

Insert 'Table 3. Overview of place branding approaches and sustainability outcomes'
around here

This study adds to the findings of previous studies on place branding which focused on the economic sustainability of rural places (e.g., de San Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Donner et al., 2017; Ryan & Mizerski, 2010), by providing empirical evidence supporting the ability of place branding to contribute to the social dimensions of sustainable development in rural places. Furthermore, similar to what previous studies findings for cities (e.g., Braun et al., 2017), our study shows that by improving a place's reputation and attracting attention to the place, place branding initiatives can influence potential residents to move to rural areas. Previous research has further shown that local pride (Andersson & Ekman, 2009), identity and community cohesion (Giles et al., 2013), and the existence of services (e.g., schools; Zenker et al., 2013) can successfully be used in place branding. Our study extends these findings by showing that place branding processes can further strengthen these important community assets. In addition, the availability of services and strong local pride and identity have been shown to contribute to resident satisfaction and loyalty in cities (e.g., Insch & Florek, 2008). Our study shows that this also applies to rural areas and that satisfaction and loyalty lead to positive demographic outcomes and thereby contribute to the social sustainability of the communities. These findings show that place branding aimed at external target groups can have positive impacts on the internal stakeholders of the place as well. These findings could serve as inspiration for further, possible quantitative research on the relationship between the approaches to place branding and the sustainability outcomes achieved.

Conclusions

We found a relationship between how places have approached and organized the place branding process and its benefits for the sustainability of the communities. Places where the

service ecosystem was institutionalized around the place brand as an engagement platform with a broad range of highly engaged actors acquired the most social sustainability benefits. Where few actors were highly engaged and the network around the place brand as an engagement platform was not really institutionalized, actors expressed more doubts about the effects on social sustainability. Finally, when the place brand was defined by a strong focal actor, creating broad actor engagement was more challenging and representatives only rarely commented on the contributions of the place branding initiatives to the places' social sustainability.

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

From a theoretical perspective, this study makes a contribution by applying S-D logic and its concepts of service ecosystems and actor engagement for the analysis of outcomes of place branding.

For place branding professionals, policy makers, and community leaders, this study sheds light on the aspects of sustainability that can be addressed through place branding and suggests that a collaborative, yet institutionalized, approach that engages a broad range of actors is best suited for achieving the desired social sustainability outcomes.

This research is subject to several limitations, which suggest potential avenues for further research. Because this study is based on qualitative data, the suggested relationships between place branding and the social sustainability dimensions could be tested in a quantitative study. Further, this study was based on rural places in Denmark, and it would therefore be informative for further research to examine other countries to investigate the influence of the macro-context on the potential outcomes of place branding. This study focused on the impact of place branding on social dimensions of sustainability. Further research should broaden the focus to include environmental dimensions and ultimately the combination of all dimensions of sustainability.

Since place branding's influence on social sustainability has generally not received a lot of attention, further research should also investigate this relationship in the context of cities. The relative impact of place branding on the different dimensions of social sustainability is most likely dependent on context and would be different in urban compared to rural places. For example, the sustainability challenges faced by different types of places (e.g.,

depopulation vs. overpopulation, lack of visitors vs. overtourism, different needs related to environmental conservation) would need different approaches to the place branding process. Furthermore, we suggest extending this research to cities and urban places to better understand the contributions of place branding to social sustainability in this context. As the size, and therefore the complexity, of places increases, more challenges for reaching the desired outcomes might arise. Therefore, a look at brand architecture and relations between different scales of places, such as cities and countries, could be applicable. More in-depth research is also needed to better understand the relationship between the general place branding approach (top-down vs. bottom-up) and level of community engagement and the sustainability outcomes.

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Appendix A. Interview guide

Appendix 1. Interview guide

Purpose of the interview and use of data

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

What can you expect to get in return?

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

The interview

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

The concepts – ask first how they understand brand and branding

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

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

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

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

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

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

The interviewee:

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

Place brand:

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

7. What is the brand based on? Is it based on the place-specific resources, or is it developed as a reaction to an external demand?
8. How big a role do the local/place-based resources play for the brand? Resources that are closely related to your place.
9. What is the aim/purpose with the brand?
10. Which other ways to reach the aim have you considered?
11. Have you considered a different focus for the brand than the current one? Explain ...
12. Which relation is there between the general development in the area and your brand or branding process?
13. Are there other similar projects in your area, and are they done in the same way as yours?
14. Is there, in general, a good collaboration between associations and the municipality in your area?
15. How is the relationship between your and other branding projects? Brands of other smaller or bigger or similar places? And what about local or other company brands?
16. Has the branding process contributed to strengthen the identity of your place, internally and externally?
17. How is your place's identity reflected or represented in the brand?

Other actors:

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

Collaboration:

1. How do you organise your collaboration?
2. How did you get together?
3. How long have you been discussing?
4. Who, if anybody, is in control of the process? Who has more or less responsibility and influence?
5. Who makes sure that all the actors get together around the purpose?

6. *How structured is the process – don't ask directly, but see if they will come with a story that could answer the question*
7. How often do you meet? Or how often do you communicate?
8. How do you communicate?
9. How do you think that your collaboration in regards of branding process has worked?
10. Which challenges have there been with the collaboration in the branding process?
11. Which benefits have there been in the collaboration?
12. *Regarding strong network with stable relations that brands the place (don't ask directly, but if it won't be clear from the rest, then ask)*
13. Would you say the actors trust each other? That they have trust in each other and the brand?

Brand use/adoption/expression:

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

Evaluation: Value/benefits:

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