Place branding in the eyes of the place stakeholders – paradoxes in the perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding

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Abstract

Purpose – Although the place stakeholders play a key role in participatory place branding, surprisingly little interest has been shown in the people involved in participatory place branding initiatives. The purpose of this study is to explore place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on two cases of participatory place branding, and the research design is inspired by participatory action research. The empirical material comprises observations, qualitative questionnaires and interviews.

Findings – This study identifies and describes four paradoxes in place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding, embracing the target group (internal vs external), the objective (explore vs exploit), the stakeholders’ role (active vs passive) and the main value of place branding initiatives (process vs outcome). Furthermore, in this study, the place stakeholders’ paradoxical perceptions of place branding meant that, during the participatory processes, the authors encountered and needed to manage various opinions and behaviours, for example, “critics”, “innovators” and “relators”.

Originality/value – This paper contributes with a new perspective on participatory place branding. By capturing place stakeholders’ perceptions and understanding of place branding, this paper develops our knowledge and understanding of the starting point of participatory processes.

Keywords Place branding, Participatory place branding, Place stakeholders, Paradoxes, Participatory action research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over 10 years ago, Kavaratzis (2012) started discussing a new conceptualization of place branding in which stakeholders have a prominent role. This can be understood in light of residents and other place stakeholders being seen as not only “consuming” the place where they live but also shaping it and playing crucial roles in forming and communicating the place brand (Braun et al., 2013; Rozhkov and Skriabina, 2015). Place branding is increasingly seen as a collective exercise, whereby the voices of stakeholders are integrated using
participatory methods and the meaning of the place is jointly defined, rather than being a managerial or consultant’s task. Today, interest in participatory and inclusive place-branding practices is growing in both practice and theory (Jernsand, 2016; Källström and Siljeklint, 2021; Lichrou et al., 2017).

Previous studies have examined the consequences and effects of including stakeholders in the place-branding process. Klijn et al. (2012) research showed that stakeholder involvement in branding matters in terms of both a clearer brand concept and increased effectiveness in attracting new residents, visitors and businesses. In the same year, Zenker and Seigis (2012) supported the effectiveness of participation in general, specifically highlighting the sense of being respected as a success factor in the early involvement of residents. More studies have followed, further supporting the positive consequences of participation, such as unifying residents, creating a legitimate brand (Martin and Capelli, 2017) and making residents “owners” of the brand (Hakala et al., 2020). However, although there seem to be wide acceptance of engaging stakeholders in the place branding process and “letting them do the work” (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014), place branding studies often fail to provide clear guidelines for how to successfully involve, engage and empower place stakeholders (Rebelo et al., 2020). Although participation is often highlighted positively, it entails inherent challenges that must be acknowledged, and participation should be practiced with caution (Jernsand and Kraff, 2015). Källström and Siljeklint (2021) demonstrated that the participatory approach comes with difficulties, as it can reveal conflicting images and power relations and evoke resistance to giving participants real power to actually influence the output. As participatory practices are growing, there is a risk of place stakeholders being invited to the place branding process in the name of citizen participation but without a real possibility of actually influencing the process. Such participation can be traced to the lower rungs of participation in Arnstein’s (1969) participation ladder, referred to as non-participation and manipulation. Considering this, there has unsurprisingly been a call for further exploratory studies to improve our understanding of participatory place branding (Lichrou et al., 2017).

In participatory place branding, the place stakeholder indubitably plays a key role; nevertheless, surprisingly little interest has been shown in the place stakeholder’s understanding and perceptions of place branding. In Moilanen’s (2015) study examining challenges faced in city branding processes, the limited understanding of branding within the network of stakeholders was identified as one of the major challenges faced by city brand managers. On a similar note, Golestaneh et al. (2022) specifically conclude that further studies are needed to address the level of internal stakeholders’ knowledge of place branding. Thus, although there seem to be an understanding of the purpose and scope of place branding in the place branding literature, place stakeholders’ perspective on and perceptions of the practice remain to be explored. We are, therefore, interested in the people involved in participatory place branding and ask: How do place stakeholders perceive and understand place branding? From a practical perspective, as more and more place branding initiatives follow the principles of participatory place branding, it becomes crucial for place managers to have knowledge of place stakeholders’ perceptions of place branding, to plan and manage the process effectively.

Using two cases in which place stakeholders were invited to advance the development of place brands, we discovered that the understandings of place branding entering the process were so diverse that paradoxes could be used to illustrate the different perceptions. According to Farjoun (2010), paradoxes include diverse and ambiguous, yet interrelated demands or expectations, with opposites and contradictions simultaneously being part of a unified whole; we accordingly use the paradox concept to categorize and make sense of our
findings. To use paradoxes to illustrate the diversity and ambiguity in the perceptions of place branding, it makes the differences visible and the extensive literature on paradoxes can offer guidance towards how these differences can be handled. The paper, thus, contributes to the participatory place branding literature, rather than to the extensive literature on paradox theory.

The aim of this study is to explore place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding. By examining stakeholders’ perspectives, we advance the current understanding of place branding, usually described from the “owners’ perspective”, especially relevant at a time when participatory place branding is growing in popularity. We claim that by understanding how place stakeholders perceive place branding and the associated paradoxes in their perceptions, the place stakeholders invited to participate in place branding processes can be empowered and meaningful participation facilitated.

Theoretical framework

Place branding as a collective exercise

Place branding should not only be used for intentionally communicating a favourable image but also be a basis for strategic thinking about the development of places, and it is increasingly used as a governance strategy for managing perceptions of regions and cities (Eshuis et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2010; Zenker and Martin, 2011). Furthermore, place branding is increasingly seen as a collective exercise in which various stakeholders together form the place brand, in contrast to being viewed as a managerial or consultant’s task (Kavaratzis, 2012). A broad categorization of place stakeholders is to separate the external stakeholders, that is, tourists, new investors and firms, new residents and incoming students, from the internal stakeholders, that is, existing investors and firms as well as current residents. However, the place stakeholders can also be grouped in different ways, for example, into tourists, investors, companies and talented employees (Therkelsen et al., 2010) or into visitors, residents and businesses (Zenker and Martin, 2011). These place stakeholders differ with regard to not only their structure but also their particular place need and demands (Balakrishnan, 2009; Zenker and Martin, 2011). Insch and Florek (2008) as well as Zenker et al. (2013) have argued that a place’s residents are the most valuable group among all stakeholders. However, the heterogeneity also among the residents should not be forgotten, and the residents should not be treated as one homogenous group (Hakala, 2021). According to Braun et al. (2013), residents can play three major roles in forming and communicating place brands, being seen as an integral part of the place, as ambassadors of their place and as citizens. Ambassadorship and citizenship behaviours were emphasized by Taearchungrroj (2016), who defined citizenship behaviours as actions that contribute to the city by helping other people and participating in events that improve the city. Although most studies of how residents shape the places where they live emphasize how residents contribute positively to their places of residence, Echeverri and Skálén (2011) and Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) stressed that interactions between providers and users do not always lead to the co-creation of value but can also lead to its co-destruction.

As place stakeholders are seen as playing various key roles in the place brand, participatory and inclusive place branding practices have been emerging. Participatory place branding and inclusive place branding share many similarities, although participation and inclusion can be regarded as independent dimensions of public engagement (Quick and Feldman, 2011). As the focus of this study primarily has been to involve place stakeholders to obtain input on place-branding processes, it is best described as participatory place branding, a growing research stream addressing the involvement of place stakeholders in place branding, and integrating the voices of different stakeholders through participatory
methods (Kavaratzis, 2012; Källström, 2019; Lichrou et al., 2017). Typically, participation is oriented to increasing input for decisions, and in striving to enrich the input received, it becomes important to make the process broadly accessible to and representative of the general public (Quick and Feldman, 2011). One path towards participatory place branding can be to engage the wider community of stakeholders in a systematic reflection of current and possible alternative practices (Ripoll González and Gale, 2020), where Hakala (2021) emphasizes the importance of effective and genuine “listening”. Interest in involving stakeholders is of course not limited to place branding processes, but rather is an issue for the entire public sector where, for example, public participation in urban planning and management goes back as far as the 1970s (Li et al., 2020).

There are several strong arguments for involving stakeholders in the place branding process, for example: to improve the general quality and effectiveness of place branding (Kavaratzis, 2012; Klijn et al., 2012; Källström and Siljeklint, 2021), improve the place reputation (Braun et al., 2018), enhance democratic legitimacy and public confidence in the work of government (Eshuis and Edwards, 2012; Klijn and Edelenbos, 2012; Martin, 2009) and strengthen identity and the senses of belonging and citizenship (Kavaratzis, 2012; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). However, involving stakeholders also leads to questions of ownership, power relations and who benefits from and engages in place branding initiatives (Jernsand, 2016). Participatory practices have been criticized for being a “lipstick approach” (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014) and even more seriously for being manipulative and further marginalizing certain groups of people (Jernsand and Kraff, 2015). The differences among participants in terms of how they engage in and shape the discussion can also lead to ineffective dialogues (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019), exposing conflicting images of the place and the complexity of the place-brand identity (Källström and Siljeklint, 2021).

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) suggested that place identity can be considered a constant dialogue between stakeholders and between the internal and external. The intimate relationship between place identity and place brand suggests that place branding also needs to be thought of as a dynamic process. We refer to the participatory place branding initiative as an ongoing process and not as a project managed by a project owner; in this way, the process can also be seen as an ongoing conversation (Weick, 1995).

A multiverse creating paradoxes

Including place stakeholders in the place branding process means that the stakeholders come with different experiences, opinions and pre-understandings of what a place brand and place branding are. In practice, this means that stakeholders with very little or no experience of place branding are included, as well as stakeholders with extensive experience. Maturana (1988) argued that we must exchange our understanding of the world as one universe for a perception of the world as a multiverse:

The multiverse entails that existence is constitutively dependent on the observer, and that there are as many domains of truths as domains of existence she or he brings forth in her or his distinctions (p. 5).

This perspective is especially relevant to participatory place branding. The participants do not share one common reality; rather, a set of many realities, domains of truth – the multiverse – and perspectives is joining the process. The participants are all equally important, and their differences are important aspects and play a role in the process (Maturana, 1988).

When viewing the world as a multiverse, competing demands are unsurprising. Consequently, the presence of competing demands or expectations is recognized in studies
of organizations and has long been the subject of organizational inquiry (March, 1991). This inquiry centres on resource allocation, tensions and prioritizations and often encompasses the delicate managerial task of deciding what road to take (Smith and Lewis, 2011). The field of competing demands has been conceptualized in divergent ways, leading to ambiguity regarding how it is used and interpreted, limiting its further applicability. Endeavouring to advance our understanding of organizations and, in turn, help managers understand competing demands, Gaim et al. (2018) presented an overarching systematic comparison of five types of competing demands: dilemma, trade-off, dialectic, duality and paradox. The comparison is based on seven core features resulting in a more nuanced understanding of different types of competing demands. Paradoxes, understood as one type of competing demand (Gaim et al., 2018) or competing values (Cameron and Quinn, 1988), include diverse and ambiguous, yet interrelated demands or expectations, with opposites and contradictions simultaneously being part of a unified whole (Farjoun, 2010; Smith and Lewis, 2011). The dialectics of “either/or” and “both/and” in terms of place branding having multiple targets and purposes make the paradox concept particularly relevant. Although the first reaction to paradoxes tends to be to resolve them, it is suggested that managers should instead recognize, become comfortable with and even profit from paradoxical tensions, as they can generate creative insight and change (Lewis, 2000). Handy (1994) argued that it is important to try to understand the puzzles in the paradoxes and strive to minimize the inconsistency; however, like Lewis (2000), he also argued that paradoxes cannot be escaped from or resolved, so we need to learn how to use them, balancing their contradictions and inconsistencies. If paradoxes are accepted, then they can be highlighted in the process (Cameron and Quinn, 1988) and used as a source of power, as they are described as both synergistic and persistent (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Methodology and research context

The aim of this paper is to explore place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding, indicating a qualitative research approach with the goal to create a deeper understanding of stakeholders’ perception. To facilitate this aim, two cases are used. The cases exemplify participatory place branding, as the purpose in both cases was to increase and enrich the input for decisions by making the place branding process broadly accessible to the general public (Quick and Feldman, 2011). The research design is inspired by participatory action research, allowing us to be part of, intervene in and critically reflect on the place branding process (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014). As participatory action research seeks to unite theory and practice, researcher and subject, it allows us to closely follow, observe and critically reflect on the studied process (Burnes, 2004). We see place stakeholders as not sharing a single common reality, but rather a set of many realities or truth domains (Maturana, 1988), so the ideas of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) underpin this research. We believe that knowledge is constructed and that the empirical context and material become known to us through interpretation in which, based on our pre-understanding, we perceive certain things while ignoring others. Despite a strong belief in the empirical material, we recognize the need for interpretation to condense and make sense of the material.

The first case is a place branding project called “My Green Heart” (Mitt gröna hjärta), intended to develop and strengthen the current place brand “Skåne’s Green Heart” (Skånes gröna hjärta) of Östra Göinge Municipality, a small rural municipality in Sweden with 15,000 inhabitants (see a case description in Appendix 1). Skåne’s Green Heart is the brand of the place Östra Göinge, with Östra Göinge Municipality being a key stakeholder and bearing responsibility for the brand, even though it is clearly communicated that Skåne’s...
Green Heart is not the municipality’s brand, but rather the place’s brand. Although the place brand and logotype were developed over 10 years ago, they meant little to the place’s residents, businesses and visitors. The My Green Heart project was designed with participatory place branding as a backdrop and was intended to strengthen the Skåne’s Green Heart brand identity and to implement the brand. To facilitate the process, stakeholders were engaged to contribute ideas and were encouraged to take ownership of the brand. Place stakeholders were engaged in the planning and implementation phases.

My Green Heart included 15 workshops, conducted between March and December 2020, which focused on the place brand identity, personality and the value propositions of the place brand. In total, 185 people participated in the workshops, representing different life stages, genders, occupations and ethnicities. The participants were all internal stakeholders and represented different stakeholder groups (e.g. residents, the voluntary sector, businesses, politicians and public officials). The participants often belonged to more than one stakeholder group, for example, they were residents and business owners or residents active in the voluntary sector or residents and politicians. Several workshops were openly advertised, inviting anyone interested to attend. Participant observations were conducted at all workshops with place stakeholders, and stakeholder perceptions were also captured during the project’s various phases using qualitative questionnaires in form of learning reflections about the participants’ perceptions of place branding and the current process. In this way, we collected altogether 185 reflections and captured the perceptions of the place stakeholders.

The second case is Kristianstad Municipality’s rebranding of the Kristianstad place brand. Kristianstad is another small municipality in Sweden but with 85,000 inhabitants, located near Östra Göinge (see a case description in Appendix 2). Unlike much other research on place branding, which empirically investigates well-known and populous places, the present cases can both be defined as typical and fairly ordinary places. The purpose of typical case selection is to illustrate or highlight what is typical, normal and average (Patton, 2002). In Kristianstad, a new logotype and a video marketing the place were produced and the intention was to include the place stakeholders in the implementation phase. In this case, the municipality was interested in stakeholders’ opinions about the content and design of the current communication material, such as the video and graphic profile.

In Kristianstad’s participatory place branding project, two workshops with a total of 28 invited place stakeholders representing different groups of internal stakeholders such as residents, businesses, public officials and the voluntary sector were conducted to get input for the process. As researchers, we could listen to and observe the interaction and dialogue at these workshops. The observations of the first workshop were complemented with a qualitative questionnaire including questions such as “How do you relate to the place brand Kristianstad?” and “How did you experience the workshop?”. Furthermore, nine interviews were conducted with workshop participants to deepen our understanding of their perceptions of place branding and the process [1]. This gave the stakeholders the opportunity to reflect on the process and on their own and others’ perceptions of the place brand. The interview guide included questions such “Who do you think is responsible for developing the place brand, and why”, “If you were responsible for the place brand, what would you do to develop and market the brand” and “How do you feel you can influence the development of the place brand”. The empirical material is summarized in Table 1, sources of empirical material collected between March 2020 and June 2022. Our roles as researchers differed between the two cases. In Östra Göinge, we were co-designers as well as observers of the process, whereas in Kristianstad, we had a less extensive role. Apart from observing
the process in Kristianstad, one researcher was a member of a reference group established to advise the process, but with no responsibility for its design.

Because of the exploratory and inductive nature of this study, the collection of the empirical material and the analysis were interconnected. We wrote memos (Charmaz, 2014) throughout the research process as a way to share and coordinate our ideas, facilitate preliminary analysis and focus the collection of empirical material. Even during the first workshops and observations, the issue of the “diversity” of participants’ perceptions of the task at hand and of the place branding concept already stood out. A first reading of the qualitative questionnaires also revealed that the participants had scattered perceptions of the purpose and scope of place branding. The initial coding process (Charmaz, 2014) started with looking closely at the qualitative questionnaires, followed by coding participants’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding by assigning a descriptive label that allowed us to identify related content across the empirical material. In the second round, we looked further into these codes with an open mind, trying to “create codes that fit the data” (Charmaz, 2014). This second round resulted in four themes capturing different aspects of the participants’ perceptions. Within these four themes, we saw very scattered perceptions. To illustrate these diverse, yet interrelated, perceptions, we found the paradox conceptualization of competing demands useful (Smith and Lewis, 2011). With this framework, four paradoxes were constructed covering eight second-order categories. Here, it is important to stress that although the four paradoxes emerged through the codes from the qualitative questionnaires, equally important were the impressions from the observations and interviews, which served to validate the questionnaire findings. The observations were also used to identify three behaviours emerging from the participants’ paradoxical perceptions of the purpose and scope of place branding. To validate the credibility of the analysis, member checking was used by discussing the findings with the project owners to check the accuracy and for resonance with their experiences. Practically, this was done during the project at different project meetings, but the findings have also been presented and discussed after the project ended.

**Findings**

*Diverse perceptions of the purpose and scope of place branding*

Places are multifaceted and complex, co-created by multiple autonomous organizations and stakeholders and having both tangible and intangible elements. A place has not only varied providers but also a plurality of users with different structures, needs and demands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant observations</th>
<th>Qualitative questionnaires</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Role researchers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Östra Göinge municipality</td>
<td>15 workshops (185 place stakeholders) 5 project meetings March–December 2020</td>
<td>185 participants March–December 2020</td>
<td>3 public officials June and November 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristianstad municipality</td>
<td>2 workshops (28 place stakeholders) 6 project meetings December 2021–June 2022</td>
<td>20 participants May 2022</td>
<td>9 place stakeholders E.g. residents, business owners May 2022</td>
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**Table 1.** Sources of empirical material collected between March 2020 and June 2022

**Source:** Created by authors
This variety of places and the multipurpose nature of place branding are familiar to most place branding researchers, although not to all place stakeholders. The analysis of the two cases indicates that the place stakeholders participating in the place branding processes have diverse and contradictory perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding initiatives, allowing four paradoxes in their perceptions to be identified, according to Farjoun’s (2010) definition of paradoxes. However, the stakeholders did not themselves grasp the diversity of place branding and, therefore, struggled to identify and accept these paradoxes and see them as contradictions, still parts of the same unified whole. Rather, the different perceptions initially created ambiguity and confusion among the stakeholders. The paradoxes concern the primary target group of place branding, the main objective of such initiatives and the place stakeholders’ role and main value of place branding initiatives (see a summary in Figure 1, Paradoxes in place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding, with illustrative quotes from the empirical material).

The first paradox, concerning for whom place branding initiatives are primarily intended, shows that the participants saw a varied target group for place branding in general. This is in line with much previous research (Zenker and Martin, 2011), which highlights that a place should attract many different place consumers with very different place needs and demands. Some participants saw only external purposes and target groups for place branding; for example, when asked about the purpose of place branding, it was described as “to increase immigration to the municipality” or “to sell Östra Göinge as a place worth visiting”, whereas others, in contrast, emphasized the internal aspects, such as creating a sense of “us” or a stronger community and sense of shared responsibility. One participant described the purpose of place branding as “to raise self-esteem and pride among we who live and work here”, and another stressed that “together we create faith in the future for an even better municipality”, both stressing the internal target group as important in place branding projects. A paradox, thus, exists, capturing different perceptions among the participants concerning who the primary target group is.

The second paradox concerns the objective of the place branding initiative. Place branding is defined by Braun (2008, p. 43) as “the coordinated use of marketing tools [...] for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging urban offerings”. Place branding initiatives, thus, include multiple aspects and steps. The objective of a place branding process can be to explore the place to create not only new place offerings but also consensus about what is already there, to exploit it. In our study, we can observe both perceptions. Several participants said that they saw the objective as finding a way to exploit the many great things the place has to offer, for example, describing the importance of place branding in terms of “everyone has to be able to identify themselves with the brand” and “we need to convey a unified image to the surrounding world”. On the other hand, answering the same
reflection question, many others thought of the importance of exploring new perspectives on the place, writing about everything from “the need to create more job opportunities” to “finding ways to develop Östra Göinge in order to realize the vision”. We conclude that there were also paradoxical perceptions among the participants when it came to the objective of place branding, and it was rare to see initial acceptance for the multiple aspects of place branding.

The third paradox concerns the participants’ view of their role, that is, the place stakeholder’s role in the success of the place branding initiative. It is a specific feature of place branding that place stakeholders such as residents not only consume the place where they live but also shape it (Rozhkov and Skriabina, 2015). In this study, it is very clear that many of the participants saw themselves as part of the place brand and that they wanted to contribute in different ways. As highlighted in Braun et al.’s (2013) study of residents’ role in forming and communicating place brands, the participants saw themselves as place ambassadors and explicitly expressed this by statements such as: “I contribute by being a good ambassador for the place”. They also said that they always described Kristianstad or Östra Göinge as places worth visiting, being eager to for example hashtag the places on social media. Several participants also stressed that they contributed by participating in local events and initiatives, in what Taecharungroj (2016) called citizenship behaviours. However, another group of people did not see themselves as having an active role in the place branding, saying, for example: “Don’t mix up the individual with the municipality’s marketing” and “I believe that my role as an individual is secondary in this case; I have nothing to do with tourism or increased immigration – that is the municipality’s responsibility”. We, thus, can identify a paradox in the participants’ perceptions of the place stakeholder’s role in the success of place branding initiatives.

The fourth paradox concerns how the participants viewed what constitutes the main value of place branding initiatives. Several participants identified the process as central, that is, the opportunity to interact with other place stakeholders and together discuss crucial questions for the place and the place brand. When they wrote about their view of place branding initiatives, they, for example, emphasized that “participation in the project creates commitment and fellowship with other people, which makes you part of the brand”. Other participants instead mainly reflected on the importance of the project’s outcome, that is, establishing and defining a place brand. For example, the main value of branding was described by one participant as “to concretize an image so that residents, employees, tourists, partners, etc., will have a good idea of what Östra Göinge stands for”. Thus, the process is not in focus when asked to reflect on the place branding initiative. Comparing these two statements, it becomes clear that there are very different perceptions of what constitutes the main value of place branding initiatives.

Discussion
Paradoxes leading to diverse behaviours in participatory place branding processes

In participatory place branding initiatives, the place stakeholders play key roles (Jernsand and Kraff, 2015; Källström and Siljeklint, 2021; Rebelo et al., 2020; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). However, in the two studied cases, these place stakeholders entered the place branding initiatives with very different expectations, because of their different perceptions of place branding. We set out to explore the place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding, noticed the different experiences and competing values and, later, ended up identifying four paradoxes, illustrating the diversity of stakeholder perceptions. In this study, we could see that the paradoxical perceptions of place branding contributed to various behaviours during the process. In what follows, we discuss examples of behaviours
we encountered that can be connected to the participants’ different perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding.

Firstly, in this study, we encountered several participants that expressed that they saw solely external target group for place branding (paradox 1), such as visitors or potential new residents, and thus, they tended to highlight outcomes (paradox 4) in discussions, that is, a place brand platform. These participants, therefore, had a hard time seeing the value of participatory place branding. As it in their mind is the outcome that counts for an external target group, they believed it would be more effective to let a professional marketer handle the place brand, which some of them openly expressed. Furthermore, they tended to believe that the place stakeholders, including themselves, had a passive role in place branding (paradox 3) and were, therefore, inclined to criticize participatory designs, as it was not obvious to them what and how they could contribute with and why they were important to the process. These participants can be described as “critics”.

Secondly, we also frequently encountered participants in the workshops who quite the opposite saw place stakeholders as having an active role in the development and success of the place brand (paradox 3). These participants expressed that they saw the objective of place branding initiatives as developing the place and its offerings and consequently they came ready to explore and discover new things about their place (paradox 2). This showed through engaged, active and outspoken participants who often expressed that they were excited about being involved in the project and looked forward to contributing with new ideas. These participants can be described as “innovators”, and we discovered that they could be used as a strong innovative force in the place branding process.

Thirdly, other participants made clear that they saw an internal target group for place branding (paradox 1) and that place stakeholders ought to have an active role in this process (paradox 3). This, together with a belief that the project’s process is more important than its outcome (paradox 4), meant that they were enthusiastic about networking and creating affiliations. These participants were often observed prioritizing interactions and were frequently engaged in conversations and discussions. Words such as “we” and “our place” were often used. The participants with this profile support the togetherness aspect of participatory place branding and the high level of contact and interactions often associated with such initiatives and they can thus be referred to as “relators”. As a result of appreciating inclusion and the possibility to “come together”, we found that it could be difficult to get these participants to focus, as they struggled to tear themselves away from conversations.

To summarize, we suggest that the paradoxes in the place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding mean that you encounter stakeholders with different understandings and values during a place branding process. By describing three examples of behaviours we encountered and discuss how these behaviours relate to the participants’ standpoints in relation to the identified paradoxes, we have illustrated some of the consequences of the paradoxes.

Conclusions

Theoretical contribution

In this study, the four paradoxes in place stakeholders’ perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding highlighted and increased the complexity of the participatory process, as it meant that we encountered, and needed to manage, various behaviours during the process. The paradoxes did reflect not only the differences in the participants’ perceptions but also their competing values concerning the target group, the objective, the stakeholders’ role and the main value of place branding initiatives. As paradoxes have been
identified here, the large body of literature on paradox theory could be valuable for the field of participatory place branding and offer guidance for how to deal with the paradoxes (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Cameron and Quinn, 1988). It tells us that the paradoxes need not be negative; rather, they can be used as forces whereby opposing expectations create tension that leads to valuable discussions and the development of the place brand (Lewis, 2000). For example, Cameron and Quinn (1988) argued that it is important to be aware of existing paradoxes and to accept them to identify and explore them in the process. All these different perceptions, values and behaviours are potentially equally important but could vary depending on individual and organizational experience and context. Similarly, Lewis (2000) highlighted the necessity of learning to live with paradoxes, rather than trying to resolve them. Embracing paradoxes also implies having the courage to tolerate uncertainty and allow ambiguous and vague goals, at least as a starting point. If interest in and respect for participants’ viewpoints are shown, by for example genuine “listening” (Hakala, 2021), then the place stakeholders will likely feel respected – previously identified as a success factor when involving residents in place branding (Zenker and Seigis, 2012). In conclusion, managing a participatory place branding process is a complex task. It entails handling many diverse place stakeholders, as this study shows, the process also comes with paradoxes and diverse stakeholder behaviours. According to previous studies of paradoxes (Cameron and Quinn, 2011; Denison et al., 1995), the way forward is to embrace the paradoxes and make them a force in the complex process of place branding. This is further elaborated on, under Managerial Implications.

Managerial implications
The paradoxes identified here should not be seen as needing to be resolved; rather, people responsible for place brands must be aware that they exist so that they can work with the inherent conflicts and not be surprised by or ignore them when they appear in participatory place branding processes. The paradoxes can, for example, be used as a starting point for discussion and as a force for developing the place brand. A survey or a structured discussion dealing with the participants’ view of their own role for the place brand as well as their view of place branding’s target group, objective and main value can offer important insights for the responsible brand manager and be a good way to start the process. By letting participants experience and work with paradoxical expectations, new perspectives and new ways of thinking can emerge. In the studied cases, we have observed how participants have learnt from one another and broadened their perspectives when differences in perceptions have been recognized. The participants’ varied stances all have roles to play, facilitating learning from multiple perspectives. It is important to make these paradoxes visible, obvious and explicit, however, so all participants can recognize them and not lose interest or trust in the initiative. If the paradoxes are recognized, accepted and emphasized, then they can be a synergetic driving force and source of creativity and adaptation (Smith and Lewis, 2011). However, hidden and unrecognized, they remain obstacles to a participatory place branding process, as they will likely be experienced as resistance to change and to others’ perspectives. Consequently, the place brander should allow sufficient time for early discussion of what a place brand is, to create a better understanding of the different perceptions of diverse stakeholders. The current study does not only suggest that place stakeholders have paradoxical perceptions of place branding but also indicate that this means that a place brander is likely to encounter, and need to manage, varied behaviours. To be aware of these differences in behaviour is essential to create an environment that is open and safe for discussion and development and to make the most of the dynamics in the group.
Limitations and avenues for future research

Here, two cases are used for the analysis, and paradoxes are identified in both. The focus is on similarities between the cases, although there are of course also differences, and exploring these differences could be an avenue for future research. Furthermore, we focus on involved place stakeholders' perceptions of the meaning and scope of place branding. It would also be interesting to explore average residents or business owners, not involved in a place branding initiative, and their perceptions of place branding. Also, we have not explored differences in perceptions between different stakeholder groups such as residents, business owners and politicians, which could be a subject for future research. Finally, in our study, we discuss three examples of behaviours encountered in the participatory place branding processes. These should be regarded as just that – examples. We argue that these behaviours can at least partly be connected to how place stakeholders perceive place branding, but there are other potential explanations of their behaviours, such as personality and past experiences, which could be another avenue for future research. Still, we believe that these illustrative examples offer insight into how the paradoxes can become visible during a participatory place branding process.

Note

1. The interviews were conducted by Carl T. Neldemo and Albert Ostman during their thesis work at Kristianstad University. The authors recognize and are thankful for their contribution.

References


Further reading


Appendix 1. Case description Östra Göinge
Source: Created by authors

This appendix presents a description of the municipality and the place Östra Göinge, the place brand “Skåne’s Green Heart” (Skånes gröna hjärta) and the place branding project “My Green Heart” (Mitt gröna hjärta). The description is based on information retrieved from the municipality’s website and, thus, presents the municipality’s own perception of the place brand and project.

Östra Göinge
Östra Göinge is positioned in Skåne in the south of Sweden. Here, the landscape changes from open farmland with large estates and farms, deciduous forests and meadows in the south to coniferous forests, houses and lakes in the north. Helge River flows through Östra Göinge from Östanå in the north to Hanaskog in the south. Today’s Östra Göinge harbours rich diversity. Here, you will find cosy villages and wild forests, large castles and small towns, genuine crafts and modern art. Östra Göinge has many people with “fire souls”, fulfilled by the unique “Göingeandan” – a combination of stubbornness and ingenuity.

“Skåne’s Green Heart”: the place brand
Skåne’s Green Heart is Östra Göinge’s place brand. Our place differs somewhat from many other places. There are no big cities, no stress and no queues. Instead, we take advantage of the natural in life. Here, time goes a little slower and the impressions are stronger. Of course, people of all ages who come here have lots of natural and cultural experiences. But they also discover themselves. The Skåne’s Green Heart symbol is designed to be used by anyone who wants to spread a positive image of the place Östra Göinge. It can be used by the municipality, associations, businesses or private individuals. Everyone who feels an affinity for Östra Göinge is encouraged to show their pride and stand behind the symbol of the place, Skåne’s Green Heart. The symbol stands for all the good values that are found in us in Östra Göinge.

“My Green Heart”: a place branding project
The place branding project My Green Heart was a collaborative project planned by Östra Göinge Municipality and Kristianstad University conducted in 2020–2021. The goal was to develop and strengthen the place brand Skåne’s Green. Practically, the project aimed to let the place’s stakeholders – residents, entrepreneurs, the non-profit sector and municipality – together develop the place brand and clarify the identity with the aim of laying the foundation for a vibrant brand in the future. By opening up the branding process and by involving various actors, the branding is implemented in parallel with the development of the branding platform. With the project My Green Heart, we want to contribute to Östra Göinge’s positive development when it comes to being a place where you want to live and work or come and visit. We need to do the work of developing and strengthening the green heart of Skåne together, so people from Östra Göinge will be involved in the project in different ways. The more people who are involved in the development of the brand, the better, says Patric Åberg, Chair of Östra Göinge Municipality.

Appendix 2. Case description Kristianstad
Source: Created by authors

This appendix presents a description of the place Kristianstad and of the place brand “Kristianstad”. The description is based on information retrieved from the municipality’s website and, thus, presents the municipality’s own perception of the place brand and project.
Kristianstad

Kristianstad in southern Sweden is a fairly typical Swedish municipality in terms of size and population ranking – for example, Kristianstad has around 85,000 inhabitants, around 40,000 of whom live in the city centre. Kristianstad is the largest city in the north-eastern part of the region and is a commercial city. Here, you will find tranquillity with varied nature as well as exciting and different experiences, just an hour’s train journey from the metropolitan area at Öresund. Kristianstad municipality belongs to Greater Copenhagen, one of the fastest growing regions in Northern Europe. Trains run almost around the clock via the Öresund Bridge to Denmark. The municipality’s profile is “Spirit of Food – food and experiences for all senses”. Every day, almost all Swedes, and many in other countries, eat something that comes from Kristianstad. Our sense of food and drink was founded generations ago. It is also a university city, with 14,000 students currently studying at Kristianstad University. The city is also well known for its wetlands, which are a biosphere reserve.

Kristianstad is today in the process of implementing its third place brand in less than 20 years, the brand Kristianstad.

Kristianstad: a place brand

Kristianstad is a place brand intended to build a common story about the place Kristianstad. The initiative was taken in 2019, and one of the main reasons for it was a survey showing that Kristianstad was in the bottom range concerning awareness and attractiveness, compared with other, similar municipalities in Sweden. A new logotype and a video marketing the place have been produced. The communication materials include a visual brand platform incorporating keywords and narratives that can be used when talking about and describing the place. In the implementation phase, the place stakeholders have been invited to give input to the branding process. Kristianstad is described in the following way:

On the surface, we offer miles of sandy beaches, lovely sea bathing, distinctive wetlands and lakes. Beneath the surface lies a completely different world. In our location, unique groundwater is collected in Northern Europe’s largest groundwater reservoir. So, underground we have a large lake with clean, good water. It’s very cool. The proximity to the water means that we actually see water (pretty much) everywhere we turn.

Water in different forms is, therefore, seen as the unique place characteristic that ought to be used as a defining feature of the place brand. According to the place brand Kristianstad, keywords used to describe Kristianstad are “Creative, proud, welcoming!”

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