

A STUDY OF PLACE AND IDENTITY: THE MAIN FEATURES OF DISTINCTIVE PLACE BRAND IDENTITY

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Abstract

Place branding as an integral part of competitive place development strategy became a relevant topic for urban and rural municipalities in Latvia relatively recently, at the beginning of 2000. In particular, the issue of narrative exploration of place identities in Latvia has become a key subject, linked to sustainable demonstrations of the attractiveness of places, and the listing of their unique benefits in order to increase economic value and improve social welfare for place residents and other stakeholders. The article seeks answers to a range of interdisciplinary research questions related to the topic of place branding: how can a place brand identity be created that is relevant to place residents and expresses the distinctiveness of the place; what are the main features of belonging to place; and what intangible and/or tangible attributes of the place can provide an authentic and convincing identity narratives for place brands? The empirical part of the article is based on a qualitative research methodology, in-depth semi-structured interviews with place branding experts, and analysis of the content of brand identities of Latvian cities and regions. The article reveals how place branding as a strategic marketing process is managed by local municipalities and involved stakeholders, provides a critical view of local practices and strengthens appreciation of one of the most important reference stages of the place-branding development process: cooperation in finding the key narratives for place identities.

Keywords: *place branding, place, identity, narrative, sense of belonging, tangible and intangible attributes.*

Introduction

Place branding is an increasingly relevant topic in academic studies [Ashworth, Kavaratzis and Warnaby 2015: 2] and is a well-established concept that covers some of the hardest philosophical questions one can tackle: the nature of perception and

reality, the relationship between objects and their representation, the phenomena of mass psychology, the mysteries of national identity, leadership, culture and social cohesion, and much more besides [Dinnie 2011: 16]. Place branding is a complex interdisciplinary concept that contains different levels of expression – a sense of belonging to places, and therefore to their own town, municipality and country. Many international academic studies propose that identity is ascribed as interactions developed between people and the surrounding environment [Kavaratzis 2015: 57]. Due to the understanding that people have changing relationships to place in late modern society, a senior lecturer in Psychology and Social Sciences at the Open University, Stephanie Taylor, states that the recognisable, even clichéd belief that there is a connection to place (perhaps one's home, hometown, home country or native land) which is derived from successive generations of family residence and also a long-term personal connection [Taylor 2019: 22]. Taylor emphasises that this personal connection produces a sense of belonging and an identity as a person *of* that place. Taylor relates this idea to Anthony Giddens' discussion of identity in contemporary or "late modern society", explaining that Giddens suggested that such connections were a feature of traditional culture but have largely lost their importance in contemporary society [Taylor 2019: 22]. People are mobile and the local traditions which have bounded and constrained them are fading or acquiring new associations. Taylor names this making of sense of belonging "a reflective identity project" [Taylor 2019: 22]. French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu provides a deeper definition: "*habitus*", as a socially constituted cognitive capacity, long-lasting symbolic capital in whatever form [Bourdieu 1986: 27]. Joanna Richardson, Professor of Housing and Social Research at De Montfort University, states that *the relationship between people and place is a circular, self-defining process. I make sense of my place and my place redefines me* [Richardson 2019: 27]. Richardson's opinion is that Bourdieu's "habitus" is the link between place and self: home [Richardson 2019: 27]. Richardson emphasises that the "habitus" is our language of home – *it is comprised of ideas, expressions, and possessions: reflections of identity* [Richardson 2019: 21]. In the context of place branding, habitus operates as interactions bringing together the social, natural, and – particularly – the cultural values of the place. These values embedded in the brand identity seek acceptance from the residents of the place. This view is supported by marketing researcher Adriana Campelo, who states that four interconnected components are required for the development of a place brand: recognition from local people, acknowledgement of local cultural values, idiosyncrasies and a sense of place [Campelo 2013: 162]. Therefore, Bourdieu's proposed "habitus" concept is related to a sense of place and others and can reveal meaningful research material for the development of the place brand identity. Mihalis Kavaratzis uses dialogue as a metaphor to describe place branding as leading to active

and equal relationships between stakeholders, as well as residents. However, Simon Anholt, a place branding researcher, has an opposing view that a focus on dialogue creates the wrong impression: cultural relations can hope to achieve a wide range of multiple and diverse conversations between people [Anholt 2010: 32]. Anholt emphasises the notion of place brand purpose, as an idea of uniting groups of people around a common strategic vision can create a powerful dynamic for progress, and that brand management is first and foremost an internal project [Anholt 2010: 12]. Despite the level of understanding of the purpose and development process of place branding, local municipalities must totally rely on a place branding process that includes local stakeholders: the public, private and voluntary sectors, and residents. These are commonly referred to as dominant groups and objects in the place branding research and design process. In addition to other decision-makers, place residents play a major role in providing individual-based or group-based views of the influence of “habitus”, and the meanings of place brand identity, moving towards a common collective perspective that all involved parties can agree on. Kavaratzis states that one of the approaches to place brand construction are groups of individuals. Different groups of individuals form different brands as they experience and appropriate a place and its brand in their own particular ways [Kavaratzis 2015: 5]. Therefore, residents are the identity-holders of a place. Residents have views and perceptions about who (or what) they are as a place. This sense of identity, and the representation and communication of identity by individuals expresses ideas of belongingness – that is, what Kavaratzis calls *attachment, to various collectives* [Kavaratzis 2015: 66]. Ideally, the identities held by residents need to be considered as fundamental research sources within place branding strategies. Compared to other academic researchers, Anholt brings the understanding of the concept “place branding strategy” closer to the definition of place identity – who the nation is (who you are) and where it stands today (both in reality and according to internal and external perception); knowing where it wants to get to; and knowing how it is going to get there [Anholt 2010: 13]. Within this statement, a place-branding strategy emphasises aspects of place identity – the narratives of values and meanings by residents as among the most significant reflections on belonging to the place. Therefore, place branding first and foremost includes the detection and evaluation of views on and meanings of place identity, as well as experiences. Place identity is itself social interaction.

The cultural context of place brand identities

Academic studies of the term “identity” include various interdisciplinary definitions. The vast literature on nationalism and national identity examines the concept as the complex and varied means by which nations become aware of themselves [Aronczyk 2013: 15]. Anthony D. Smith, historical sociologist in the

interdisciplinary field of nationalism studies, defines five fundamental features of national identity: an historical territory (homeland); common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members and a common economy with territorial mobility for members [Smith 1991: 14]. Smith states that the nation provides a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions [Smith 1991: 16]. Symbols of national identity such as flags, coinage, anthems, uniforms, monuments, and ceremonies provide a common heritage and cultural kinship, as well as the sense of common identity and belonging. Smith stresses that identity and a sense of belonging to the place are perceived today as a taught and mastered *belonging to culture*; it can be rational and based only on a sense of belonging to a common history and experience in which language plays an important role. Therefore, the past and present culture of the *folk* provides the material for the blueprinting of the *nation-to-be*. From the point of view of folklore studies, Simon Bronner argues that everyone has traditions, and the term “folk” describes modifier signals, expressive forms such as stories, games, rituals, houses and crafts that are learned and transmitted in the unofficial social settings of family, play, work and community [Bronner 2011: 20]. Bronner’s understanding of traditions appears to be that they are collective, similarly, to Smith, involving common heritage, continuity in time, and implied social connections and recreation. The term “traditional” in the context of shared values connotes stability, known and familiar features that are often exploited in place brand visual and verbal identity concepts. Bronner defines the use of tradition in “traditional values” as *culturalism*, a belief that social stability is gained by a process of sifting out undesirable trends, as a result of values being handed down from one generation to another [Bronner 2011: 17]. This kind of tradition provides a sense of belonging to a shared experience judged to be preferable to others.

Referring to an approach to place marketing introduced by Philip Kotler in the early 1990s, brand identity was defined as a meaning designing of place to satisfy the needs of the target markets [Kotler 1993: 99]. The concept of brand identity has come to the fore in recent years with an increase in academic work on the subject, as well as growing commercial interest. According to Melissa Aronczyk, the academic discourse of national identity studies has slightly changed to a political and social project of special representation and as a producer of value and values – it has been altered by its conception as a brand [Aronczyk 2013: 14]. Branding expert Jean-Noel Kapferer points out that the concept of brand identity is more complex than it was 10 or 20 years ago due to the constant and increasing pressure of competition. Similarly, Anholt believes that the “logos and slogans” approach can still be effective, but that the “policy-based” approach of competitive identity is far more challenging, since implementation consists of proving a vision, rather than just communicating it

[Anholt 2010: 33]. In practice, brand identity is primarily expressed as a technique of verbal and visual elements; the notion of narrative and belonging to place have come to the fore. Place branding expert Keith Dinnie defines place brand identity as the shared assets of the place, its personality and desirable attributes. Mechanisms and the environment must be conducive to encourage community participation and support of the brand strategy [Dinnie 2011: 13]. Similarly, Hidalgo and Hernandez use a definition of place attachment as *an affective bond or link between people and specific places* [Kavaratzis 2015: 42]. Many aspects of belonging to place as an asset of brand identity are still under-explored in academic literature: how to define the unique meanings and discourses that surround the place and its people, and that can be used as a core of the symbolic and ideological representation of place identity? It is a reference of the beliefs, values and impressions that people associate with a place. According to Kavaratzis, the main resources for place brand identity formation are narrated in the *main story* of the place by all possible stakeholders of storytelling. Due to the social characteristics of place identity, it is necessary to understand the notion of the sense of place. In a commentary paper by Seamon and Sowers there is a reference to Edward Relph's book *Place and Placelessness*, published in 1976, where the author emphasises his research method, *a phenomenology of place* [Seamon 2008: 2]. Seamon and Sowers think that Relph considers a sense of place is based on the relationships between people in a setting created through a variety of experiences. People in general tend to define an individual's identity in the context of a network of affiliation, as part of larger system such as family, group of friends, associates, or fellow residents [Pogorzelski 2018: 172]. The notion of shared identity is crucial to creating an authentic place brand – a summary that captures the true story and uniqueness of a place [Dinnie 2011: 57]. Intangible cultural heritage described as traditional culture, folklore or popular culture is created or practiced in close connection with a place that provides assets for better understanding the place's identity. The definition of intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with them – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognise as being part of their cultural heritage [UNESCO 2003]. According to Bronner, a quality which tradition and authenticity have in common is one of "inherent authority" that comes from being handed down [Bronner 2011: 32]. The use of traditional symbols such as ethnographic patterns is a familiar and common experience in place brand identity, due to the visual attractiveness of the patterns and their meanings and can be defined as transformed authenticity. Similarly, Relph examines ways in which places can be experienced authentically or inauthentically (a term borrowed from phenomenological and existential philosophy). An authentic sense of place is *a direct*

and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places – not mediated and distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions [Relph 1976: 64]. Professor Walter Fisher highlights the term “the narrative paradigm” [Fisher 2018: 298]. Fisher defines *narration* as *symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them* [Fisher 2018: 299]. The understanding of human beings as fundamentally storytelling creatures, and narration as a form of communication rooted in time and space provides a theoretical framework for capturing a sense of place. The other, more practical understanding of the concept of narrative is articulated in place branding as a research methodology to find out the relationships between the recognisable intangible and/or tangible attributes of a place and the way people define their belonging to place. Taylor provides an approach to narrative as both a resource for talk and a construction in talk. Taylor refers to American psychologist Jerome Bruner and his concept that *the canonical narrative encompasses the narrative or story of belonging to a particular culture and society, told and retold, with variations that also have recognisable aspects* [Taylor 2010: 36]. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that a narrative discourse (the way how the story is conveyed [Abbot 2015: 15]) can be true or false, historical or fictional. The process of developing a place brand identity is a process of self-knowledge and self-awareness, a series of educational activities that progress towards a construction of self-identity. The search for narratives of place identity requires unique and competitive stories, without which the existence of place brands cannot be taught. For the place brand to become a strategic development tool, a narrative must build a bridge of meanings and signifiers of a communal sense of place between the past and the future, to become a living story itself. Although place identities are created through individual interpretations of place, very often in statements of pride or love. Place brands belong to the public; they are not owned by any organizations or groups of shareholders. Therefore, place branding can be considered successful only when residents feel that they have become ambassadors of their place.

Empirical study

To explore the theoretical issues discussed in the article, four in-depth interviews were conducted with Latvian place branding experts. The research questions in the empirical study were related to intangible and tangible attributes of place brand identity, the role and potential of intangible cultural heritage in the development of place brand identity, the possibilities of using narrative to revitalise place brand identities and to describe the most crucial aspects of the place branding process.

As a result of administrative-territorial reform and transition of local government, on 3 January 2011, the Republic of Latvia was divided into 110 counties and

76 towns/cities, of which nine cities were given the status of republican cities: Rīga, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jūrmala, Jēkabpils, Liepāja, Rēzekne, Valmiera and Ventspils. In total 27 Latvian town and region branding concepts and identities were considered and analysed. In general, place branding is seen as a potential marketing tool for place development in various forms, depending on the defined brand purpose. One of the most common forms is a tourism destination.

As a social and relational concept, place identity can have its roots in various intangible and tangible attributes of a place. The fundamental question is how to define these conceptual and unique place identity attributes and considering the strategic potential of these attributes, taking the residents of the place into consideration. All the interviewed place branding experts agreed that the purpose of place branding is to create a sense of belonging, what does the place want to communicate about itself? How strong is this message, and how convincing?

How many places are ready to talk about their uniqueness? These attributes need to check out, because in most cases, the attributes are situational. Local governments are divided into dreamers; we have the beautiful triangle of Cēsis, Kuldīga and Liepāja... Ventspils simply has a lot of money, the rest act pragmatically and functionally. Most often they are shocked by the question: what are your strategic goals? They can be described as having a lack of vision. As far as Valmiera and Cēsis are ambitious; they are strategically sharp. In the others, like Gulbene, only a small proportion of residents want to change things, but the vast majority – seniors want stability, the nostalgia of swans (the symbols in the Gulbene coat of arms); only a small proportion try to understand who we are. (Branding expert No. 3)

Interdisciplinarity and a confirmation of place branding as being first and foremost an internal process of communication and collaboration is also demonstrated in the responses of branding experts. To understand a place's identity, it is necessary to explore the versatility of the place. Family, roots and home are confirmed as being one of the most common reasons for a sense of belonging to place:

To the question of what you are proud of: the vast majority answer – living here is great but I cannot tell you why. They say it is my home, my family is here, or I returned here because it is my grandmother's home. If you can externally provide the place attributes to be proud of why you live here, then residents will think. Geographical and cultural heritage matters: there are places with history, beautiful nature, and destinations, and then there are sad places that need help, which have a hard time finding stories, finding ways forward. (Branding expert No. 1)

Regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the place-branding process and finding perspectives for a place brand identity requires mutual co-production and an integral meaning-making process between all stakeholders:

First and foremost, place branding is a perfect process of internal therapy for local government and also for place residents. This does not mean that we have to organise residents' forums. But you have to gather together everyone: culture, education, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, seniors, farmers, repatriates, new moms, you must capture what they agree on. (Branding expert No. 1)

Due to different groups of place residents, characterised by their relationships and level of belongingness to place, place identity interpretations may occur as multiple values and meanings. These socially constructed interpretations of place identity can be influenced by sources within and outside the place (image). Place branding has a critical role in providing reflections of attributes co-created by the residents regarding the meaning of the place identity:

The most common problem often occurs within the internal audience: the residents are tired of place stories because they hear them every year, as it seems for eternity. Due to their ethnographic behaviour or their slightly low self-esteem, they need to repeatedly demonstrate that what they see is exceptionally good. (Branding expert No. 2)

To research for the authentic yet traditional values branding experts referred to the strong prioritisation of place-specific natural, architectural, historical, and cultural values and attributes, which resonates with the collective concept of memory and experience. This attitude of place identity can be so strong that it can create a long-lasting opposition and disapproval of created place brand:

Any unofficial brands are bestsellers: for example, RIGA. It was a private initiative. What comes from the people is without resistance and political side-effects. Rēzekne's positioning is as a town that is brave, although at first they categorically did not want to abandon the historical castle ruins. I asked, are you really a town of ruins? Then they wanted a statue of Māra, but it is too narrow for the town's identity. (Branding expert No. 4)

Place branding experts admitted that they do not see strict boundaries between tangible and intangible cultural heritage when it comes to research into the attributes of place identity. It goes without saying that cultural heritage values that are recognised locally and internationally are much more acceptable than the unique values of the place. This acceptance very much correlates with the image of the place

that is promoted for a domestic audience as well as internationally, at the level of the national identity symbols of Latvia:

Identity has its roots in dreams and pain! You strive for dreams and you heal pain, but to rationalise, it is very interesting how stable place resident groups want to use their heritage, for example, The Old Town of Kuldīga with its UNESCO heritage – the waterfall of Ventas Rumba, capitalising on cultural heritage, capitalising on Latvian ethnographical patterns. (The expert is referring to the brand identity of Talsi.) Then at the next level of place identity symbols, we look for images and elements that describe the national identity. (Branding expert No. 2)

The use of traditional cultural elements such as ethnographic patterns in place brand identity is a familiar and common experience due to the visual attractiveness of the patterns and the visual attractiveness of the symbols and their meanings:

The logo of the Talsi region is the traditional Talsi sun, which has been given a new form and with a new colour scheme. The colour palette for each town and parish is designed with consideration to the history, heraldry, symbols and values of the place. Along with the logo, the basic element of the visual identity of the place is thematic, informative and iconic symbols of cities and parishes, which include the values of the county that already are widely used as decorative symbols. The individual pictograms form the pattern of the county, which refers to the traditional symbol of the county – the Talsi skirt. (By the author of the article)

The next level, which is more complicated, is the intangible cultural heritage that has a potential of a dominant narrative of place identity. The result very much depends on the *local ambience* – or, in other words, the sense of place. This is an important component, but it is difficult to translate and, highly probably, it will be inclined to be stuck in the past rather than searching for continuation and contemporaneity:

Cultural heritage needs a product, such as Beverīna socks or Sigulda walking sticks, which show that those stories are attractive parts of the identity of a place. A place brand can be an educational tool for the residents. To give a reason to find out and be aware of cultural intangible values. The problem is in our own relatively fragile self-confidence: we praise culture at national holidays, in houses of culture, in places specially designed for it; at other times we tremble. (Branding expert No. 1)

If in a state of uncertainty, traditional cultural values and symbols provide comprehensible, acceptable meanings of the place identity and can be experienced as a legacy known to all. This assumption can be very misleading in terms of the competitive potential:

Elements of intangible cultural heritage in place brand communication appear as experience, not place brand identity. This thesis is challenging in terms of brand concept. Intangible cultural heritage from the 17th or 18th century does not seem the same now as it did then. Latvian ethnographical costumes were everyday fashion then. Now these costumes are expensive holiday wear. It is the same case with so-called authentic ethnographic signs, for example, the auseklis/auseklītis [a Latvian symbol representing the morning star] is used by Latvians, Arabs and Indians. We cannot operate with such symbols in a multicultural space. We do not own these patterns. Is the town of Škaume really the epicentre of the all-Latvian auseklis/auseklītis? How relevant and unique is this? (Branding expert No. 2)

In many cases, place brand development in Latvia began as a marketing initiative, for example, with “*Sigulda aizrauj!*” (Sigulda excites!) and “*Dobele dara!*” (Dobele does!). Both slogans reflect an active attitude and a call for engagement, and their original purpose of the place brand development was slightly different. In the case of the town of Sigulda the primary aim was to develop an attractive marketing proposition for tourists:

Sigulda is exciting! Sigulda is the most beautiful town in Latvia. There are not many places in the world where nature enters the town in such a beautiful way, becoming an integral part of it. There are no large factories in our town, but there are hills for skiing in winter and winding roads for cycling in summer. Our slogan – “Sigulda excites!” – confirms our mental and physical activity. (By the author of the article)

In the case of branding for the municipality of Dobele, the development of the place brand grew out of an appreciation of the local community, primarily of the local domestic producers and craftsmen:

The origin of the place brand name is related to the promotion of the entrepreneurship movement of domestic producers, craftsmen, and farmers in the region, which is characterised by genuine and creative creators. Thanks to their tireless willingness to develop, their knowledge-inspired entrepreneurship and their generosity with natural resources, we are proud of the Dobele municipality brand – “Dobele does!” (By the author of the article)

A focus on *doing things* highlights proven experience and being in the process of promising growth is also characteristic of other place brands of municipalities in Latvia, for example, “*Ķekava augam!*” (Ķekava county. We are growing!), “*Smiltene sanāk!*” (Smiltene makes it happen!):

When interviewing people within the project, we saw that Smiltene region is mostly perceived as a quiet and peaceful place. However, an in-depth study showed that the region is full of energy, that people are active, and that the place also has a good reputation for business and sports. The positioning of the Smiltene region as an active and energetic place is expressed in the concept “Smiltene makes it happen!” This concept will also be the basis for the development of a further communication strategy. (By the author of the article)

These previous place branding examples reflect not only a progression from specific place marketing projects to strategic place brands, but also demonstrate broader and ambiguous concepts of place branding including indefinite proof of the success of these places. This brand promise must be an authentic and attractive living identity concept during the implementation of the place brand:

Transferring local stories to a brand identity is a big challenge; the question is about the local capacity for brand implementation. The brand stories of Rēzekne and Talsi have potential, but they should have stronger ideas regarding the power to change. There is a growing awareness of this in the minds of local government and service providers, as we put more emphasis on implementation of the brand than on making it. Otherwise place brands will remain at the level of decoration. (Branding expert No.1)

When it comes to the concept of place branding, it is crucial to understand the capacity of the place and the power of the unique assets of the place earlier described as intangible and tangible attributes of the place:

The fact that the 110 counties in Latvia are making brands for themselves is a horror. It is difficult to imagine all 110 counties being unique place brands. Most of them are to a large degree artificial such as Staicele – “the town of storks”. It is not possible to develop a brand platform of place on such a narrow concept. It is highly necessary to be thinking seven moves ahead and to know what you’re going to do. Therefore, Sigulda’s concept of “excitement” allows a wider range of identity interpretation. (Brand expert No. 2)

Regarding the statement about competitive place brand identity, two conceptual directions can be observed. The first direction is the physical, obvious, generally understood, accepted existing attributes of place belonging that form a directly decorative brand identity structure. Among shared tangible attributes are geographical location, such as nature, landscape and space, which are linked to places’ cultural and historical heritage:

Jēkabpils: one town – two riverbanks. Jēkabpils is a unique town due to its history. Its traditions and the twists and turns of the city's destiny have been formed by the two parts of the town on either side of the Daugava. The Daugava has always been the dividing line between the historically significant parts of the town, but now the bridge of the Daugava unites the right bank, historic Krustpils, and the left bank, historic Jēkabpils. (By the author of the article)

The second conceptual direction of place brand identity attributes is place narratives. The place brand identity interactions that occur within physical settings have different degrees of tangibility and could be represented as a communication form through narratives. But place could be regarded as a social construction, and in marketing terms is represented as much through narratives. Indeed, both conceptual directions of place brand identity assets together create the belongingness of place. However, place brand identity narratives are more intangible in terms of emotional bonds and find materiality through habitus, lifestyle, history and the elements of local culture. The search for narratives of place identity requires unique and competitive stories, without which the existence of place brands cannot be taught:

Narrative as the brand's identity story works for all audiences. Often, narrative is more important than visual identity. Local governments tell stories. Creating a narrative is an enormous amount of work, and we pay too little attention to it. An easy and common practice is to create a catchy slogan. One is to write an emotionally involving story about who you are and develop a story, and another is to work with current and external audiences about the messages – who we are. (Branding expert No. 1)

In interviews, branding experts emphasise the professionalism of place brand developers and the ability to offer strategically bold and credible place identity narratives, as well as the local government's confidence and capacity to provide these brand identity messages consistently and regularly:

The shyness of brand implementers appears in applications of place narratives, because it is often easier to create a beautiful logotype. The job of brand consultants and advisors is to teach to nurture the narrative, with self-confidence, to develop further, to reflect this narrative and to stop being shy. We do not know how to conduct a critical dialogue; as soon as there is opposition or criticism, doubts appear. This is the moment when narrative is important. The significance of narrative is high, but it is low in place branding. (Branding expert No. 3)

It does not matter how visible and recognisable place narratives are; it is a matter of purposeful research and a clear vision, where we want to be and how we can transform:

None of the brands have ready-made narratives, but I see them as threads that can be woven into the big identity story of the place. The ornament of the Sigulda walking stick is more symbolic than the walking stick itself. (Branding expert No. 2)

It is quite a common practice to ensure an ongoing and engaging place brand identity: Sigulda excites, Dobele does, Ķekava grows and Valmiera wins. These examples demonstrate narratives of symbolic meaning – places that are transforming and developing and both the place and its inhabitants as mutual beneficiaries on the path to prosperity. The context of place brand narrative is a cluster of cultural ideas and due to living expressions provides a meaning of belonging to a place. It is essentially important to search for not only compelling, but also influential narratives – both authentic and inauthentic:

Marginal stories about storks, rye bread and smooth cakes, they disappear without trace. It is dangerous to toss out stories without any direction, because without thorough research, you cannot realise their true potential. Each story needs to have the power to build marketing and branding and also an attractive series of stories. Sigulda and Ventspils win, because there is consistency, if additional steps are needed are needed, they can be invented. (Branding expert No. 2)

The author of the article investigates the key features and attributes of place identity, focusing on the creation of place brand identity and what makes meaningful connections between people and place. The specific conceptual attributes that combine to construct a place's brand identity, origin, values, personality, residential composition and shared assets such as identity narratives overlap with each other and are reflected in the image of the place. The concept of place brand identity in the majority of cases of place brands in Latvia is demonstrated by visual and verbal decorativeness and a lack of sustainable narration. The term "decorativeness" is understood as expressions of brand identity in the form of a designed logo and slogan, characteristic of consumer communication, which mostly includes interpretations of tangible place attributes, such as the most characteristic natural landscapes of a town. The challenging issue is identifying the necessary place identity attributes and engaging residents in the process of co-creating their place's brand, in order to develop an identity that is credible, competitive and sustainable in the minds of the stakeholders it serves. Therefore, the concept of place brand narrative requires in future an empirical exploration of the relationships and experiences of places and their residents.

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