



## Decentralised place branding through multiple authors and narratives: the collective branding of a small town in Sweden

Emma Björner & Lars Aronsson

To cite this article: Emma Björner & Lars Aronsson (2022): Decentralised place branding through multiple authors and narratives: the collective branding of a small town in Sweden, Journal of Marketing Management, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2022.2043415](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2043415)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2043415>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 01 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 282



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Decentralised place branding through multiple authors and narratives: the collective branding of a small town in Sweden

Emma Björner<sup>a</sup> and Lars Aronsson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Gothenburg Research Institute, The School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>The Department of Geography, Media and Communication, The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

Increasingly, place branding is regarded as stakeholder-centric, participatory and inclusive. However, a central assumption permeates the place-branding literature that there is a dominant organisation of some sort working strategically to organise the place-branding process. In this article we question this assumption and explore how multiple ‘authors’ create narratives and contribute to the branding of places. Using interviews, observations and printed and online material, we study a small town in southwest Sweden. Our illustrative case study reveals a decentralised collective production of narratives by multiple authors that together constitute the branding of a place.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 October 2020  
Accepted 10 January 2022

## KEYWORDS

Place branding; authors; narratives; branding; inclusive; small place

## Introduction

Places around the world engage in branding, and adopt concepts from business, marketing and management when doing so (Hospers, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004). For decades, place branding has primarily involved top-down approaches (Anholt, 2005; De Chernatony, 2008; Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Kotler & Gertner, 2002) led by governments and agencies working toward economic or tourism development goals (Aitken & Campelo, 2011).

In branding theory, the established strategic brand management (SBM) approach proposes that the organisation is the locus of control (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). Recently, however, the marketplace has shifted its power base to consumers (Allen et al., 2008) suggesting that brand equity is increasingly influenced by activities outside the control of companies (Keller & Lehmann, 2005). Consequently, a socio-cultural approach to branding has emerged that views brands as socially constructed and reliant on multiple actors collectively developing brand identity (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). Related to this socio-cultural approach is a view of ‘authors’ who create narratives that inform brands (Allen et al., 2008; Anholt, 2004; Holt, 2003).

In recent decades place-branding research has proposed a stakeholder-centric approach that focuses on the interests of different actors – residents, tourists, business owners, governing agencies and various organisations – in place-branding practices (Cassinger & Thelander, 2018; Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Hudak, 2019; Ooi, 2011). This

**CONTACT** Emma Björner  [emma.bjorner@gu.se](mailto:emma.bjorner@gu.se)  Gothenburg Research Institute, The School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

focus has induced concepts like stakeholder involvement and stakeholder engagement in the context of place branding (Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Van Gelder, 2010), place-brand co-creation (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), DIY place branding (King & Crommelin, 2013), diversity branding (Ren & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2011) and participatory and inclusive place branding (Jernsand, 2016; Jernsand & Kraff, 2015; Kavaratzis & Giovanardi, 2017).

Despite the move toward participatory and inclusive approaches to place branding, a central assumption that still permeates the place-branding literature is that there is a dominant organisation of some sort working strategically to organise the place-branding process. Although this organisation may invite and involve various stakeholders at different stages, it retains dominance over the place branding process. In this article we question this assumption. For example, in smaller places with limited financial resources there may not be a dominant place-branding organisation orchestrating the process, but there may be multiple actors – defined as authors – informing the place brand.

This study explores how multiple authors create narratives and contribute to the branding of a place. Three research questions guide the study. First, who are the place-brand authors? Second, what narratives do they create? Third, how do the authors and their narratives inform the brand of a place?

This article focuses on the branding of a small town in southwest Sweden. We chose a small town because, although there may not be ample resources for strategic place branding by organisations, there may be a need for place branding to meet the challenges of depopulation in all its forms and to update its small-town rural image. Furthermore, in contrast to large towns, it is more feasible to map the authors and the narratives that impact the place brand of small towns.

The article starts with a review of various conceptualisations of place branding, stakeholder-centric and inclusive approaches in the literature, and authors and narratives. We then present the case and our method. This is followed by a discussion of the findings. We conclude with contributions, practical implications and suggestions for further research.

## Literature review

### *Conceptualising place branding*

Many places have adopted corporate branding concepts (Hankinson, 2010; Hospers, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Skinner, 2008) to develop their brand. Place brands and place branding have been conceptualised in various ways (e.g. Braun, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2008; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), stemming partly from the myriad perspectives on brands found in mainstream marketing studies (Braun, 2011).

Branding theory can be seen as dominated by two schools of thought, namely SBM approaches, where the organisation is the locus of control, and socio-cultural approaches, where brands are socially constructed and dependent on multiple actors that collectively develop the brand (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). Recently, the marketplace has shifted its power base to consumers (Allen et al., 2008) meaning that brand equity is increasingly influenced by activities outside the control of companies (Keller & Lehmann, 2005).

Zenker and Braun (2010, p. 5) define 'place brand' as 'a network of associations in the consumers' mind' based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place embodied in the aims, communication, values and general culture of involved stakeholders and overall place design. This view highlights that place brand comprises a multitude of often unaligned associations (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) regard place brand as a 'network of place associations', arguing that place associations are interactive and continuously change as the place is experienced.

Place branding has also been depicted as applying marketing techniques and brand strategy to the economic, social, cultural and political development of places and destinations, including nations, regions, cities, districts and destinations (Anholt, 2004; Kerr, 2006). It has also been understood as an approach to urban governance that incorporates multiple activities and methods to forge and project a desirable image of a place (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). We subscribe to the view that place branding is related to, and is a tool for, place development (Kalandides et al., 2012; Pasquinelli, 2010). Moreover, place branding has been likened to a community-building exercise whose central aim is to 'identify common ideas and directions for the future of the community and to produce collectively generated stories and visions' (Ashworth et al., 2015, p. 6).

Concepts related to place branding include, e.g., place identity, place-brand culture and image. Place identity is commonly linked to historical events that characterise the place (Deffner & Metaxas, 2010). Place identity develops through historical, political, religious and cultural discourses and socio-material practices (Govers & Go, 2009). Place-brand culture has been described as the internal definitions of identity and the core of the place brand as lived and created by local populations and other actors linked to the place (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

We use Kavaratzis (2004) 'City image communication framework' to guide this study. The framework proposes that the image of a city is communicated through: primary communication (the communicative effects of a city's actions, where communication per se is not the main goal); secondary communication (the formal, intentional communication often found in marketing practices such as advertising, public relations, graphic design, etc.); and tertiary communication (word of mouth, i.e. reinforced by the media, competitors' communication, etc.). Although tertiary communication is not controllable by marketers, a common goal is to evoke and reinforce positive tertiary communication (Kavaratzis, 2004).

### ***Toward stakeholder-centric and inclusive approaches***

For decades, place branding primarily involved a top-down approach (Anholt, 2005; De Chernatony, 2008; Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Kotler & Gertner, 2002) led by governments and agencies working toward economic or tourism development goals (Aitken & Campelo, 2011). A key risk with top-down approaches is that they may exclude residents and local communities in the place-branding process and communication (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Kerrigan et al., 2012; Pasquinelli, 2010).

Information and communications technology (ICT), social media and new multi-channel communication systems and patterns in a networked society have been described as important factors challenging hierarchical, top-down, government-led place-branding strategies, allowing for more organic, horizontal and grassroots patterns of

identity to form in the public domain (Castells, 2007; Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Kavartzis & Ashworth, 2005; Ripoll Gonzales & Gale, 2020). Greenberg (2008) suggests that new media technologies can enable the weakest and most under-represented social groups to counterbalance hegemonic narratives (Pasquinelli, 2010).

Recently, scholars have argued for a bottom-up or grassroots approach to place branding, starting from the people and reflecting different interests in society (e.g. Gnoth, 2002; Ooi, 2011). Anholt (2007) holds that a vision should not be imposed hierarchically but should instead emerge from interacting 'loose networks' of enthusiastic and spontaneous actors (Pasquinelli, 2010). Related to this, there have been calls for a focus on the interests of different stakeholders in place-branding practices, including residents, tourists, business owners, governing agencies and, e.g., nonprofit, religious, social and academic organisations (Cassinger & Thelander, 2018; Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Hudak, 2019; Ooi, 2011). According to Stubbs and Warnaby (2015), stakeholders in the place-branding context include politicians, government organisations, promotion agencies, cultural and sports bodies, academic organisations, universities and schools, religious groups and residents. The participation in place branding of a wider variety of stakeholder groups has induced concepts like stakeholder involvement (Van Gelder, 2010) and stakeholder engagement (Houghton & Stevens, 2011).

Zenker and Beckmann (2013) have divided 'place branding target groups' into three main 'market segments' – visitors, residents and workers, and business and industry – however the authors recognise that the targeting of groups in place-branding practice is more complex. For example, residents can be subdivided into current and potential residents, while tourists can be leisure or business visitors (*ibid*). Other market segments include: students and the 'creative class' (Florida, 2004); public services, private companies and non-governmental organisations (Zenker & Beckmann, 2013); and the media, including newspapers, TV and magazines (Avraham, 2004; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013).

Emergent research that acknowledges residents as central participants in place branding (e.g. Baker, 2007; Braun et al., 2013; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Jernsand & Kraff, 2017; Kavartzis & Kalandides, 2012) proposes that residents have the right to be fully engaged throughout the place-branding process, not just at smaller events or in the start-up phase (Jernsand & Kraff, 2017; Kavartzis & Kalandides, 2012; Zenker & Beckmann, 2013; Zenker & Erfgren, 2014). A bottom-up approach to place branding engages local communities to shape more inclusive place brands (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). Promoters of a bottom-up approach support more inclusive, open and participatory methods to place-brand development (Kavartzis & Kalandides, 2012).

Kavartzis and Hatch (2013) argue that residents should be seen as one among various stakeholders who own and co-create the place brand. 'DIY place branding' implies place branding by residents; it is not a rejection of an official place brand but an assertion of alternative place meaning (King & Crommelin, 2013). Muñiz Martínez (2016) study of the creation of a place brand for Colombian coffee examines the network of interrelationships involved in the process – 'network branding' – that involves multiple stakeholders. Martínez attempts to demonstrate the evolution of place branding into a networked, multi-party and holistic process in which multiple stakeholders are co-creators of the place brand and a wide range of local stakeholders are invested (Muñiz Martínez, 2016). Likewise, other studies conceptualise participatory,

bottom-up approaches to place branding in relation to brand co-creation (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2010), highlighting that brands are co-created by multiple social actors who encounter and appropriate them (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Pryor & Grossbart, 2007).

Concepts like participatory and inclusive place branding are appearing more often in the literature (Jernsand, 2016; Kavaratzis & Giovanardi, 2017), stressing the inclusion of multiple and possibly diverging voices of a place (Jernsand & Kraff, 2015). This implies a shift away from traditional branding approaches that assume that clarity is key and that place branding is about creating a coherent and unique identity (Therkelsen, 2007). More studies now suggest that the diversity of a place should be celebrated (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Kerrigan et al., 2012), partly because a fragmented, non-coherent place brand is much more authentic than a formulaic one (Kalandides, 2006; MacCannell, 1973). Acknowledging the diversity of a place can lead not only to a more credible, appealing and differentiated place brand but also a richer and more complex one (Ren & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2011).

An interactional view of place brands has also been proposed, emphasising the interactions between stakeholders 'who actually construct the place brand, give it meaning and suggest its potential' (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015, p. 1378). Likewise, some studies advocate place brands as 'grassroots identity platforms' that are negotiated and communicated through residents, and are thus regarded as more legitimate and effective than brands manufactured by place managers or marketing agencies (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). Jernsand and Kraff (2015) propose that place branding be viewed as comprising numerous ongoing processes involving various stakeholders. Increasingly, place branding is being regarded as a set of intertwined collective subprocesses, rather than a single managerial process, that allows for interwoven developments to occur simultaneously (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Supporters of such inclusive models argue that place-branding authorities should adopt a facilitator role in collaborative networks where the identity of a place evolves continuously (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Ripoll Gonzales & Gale, 2020).

### ***Authors and narratives***

In much of the place-branding research, stakeholders, actors, target groups, audiences and market segments are terms used when referring to the various parties involved in the place-branding process. We interpret these concepts as strategic, structural and institutional and associated with an SBM perspective. In aligning with a socio-cultural approach to branding i.e. inclusive and participatory, we propose to use the term 'authors' as a key concept instead, as we believe it is more in tune with an organic, dynamic and complex place-branding process.

Authors have been elaborated on in branding theory and in a corporate context. Allen et al. (2008) propose that there are two main brand authors, namely the firm and the broader cultural production system. The marketer is but one of many significant meaning makers, with consumers and broader cultural production systems playing important, and at times primary, roles (Allen et al., 2008). Muñiz and Jensen Schau (2005) even found that the collective *became* the marketer, and sustained the brand over time.

Holt (2003) outlines four main authors that create stories that inform the brand: companies, popular culture, influencers and customers. While companies and customers can be understood relatively easily, popular culture and influencers may require some elaboration. Popular

culture encompasses films, television, books, magazines, the Internet and the media. Representations depicted by popular culture can have a powerful influence on brands (Holt, 2003). Influencers include, e.g., trade magazine reviews, opinions of connoisseurs and retail salespeople. The narratives created and circulated by the authors come in the form of stories, images and associations, and often interact in complex ways (ibid). Holt moreover acknowledges 'co-authorship' and the value of social networks (Pryor & Grossbart, 2007).

The use of the term authors is also relevant in a place-branding context, where we can expect more complexity (Merrilees et al., 2009). This complexity is related to the democratic foundation of many places, and the idea that an elected government should embody the will of the people (Henneberg et al., 2009; Jernsand & Kraff, 2017). This complexity is also related to residents and other stakeholders increasingly being regarded as brand owners in a place-branding context (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2012). Place brands moreover aspire to tell a story of their society from the bottom up, and the brand story has an impact on how we interpret the place (Ooi, 2011).

Heilbrunn (1998) has emphasised that it is a collection of stories, or narratives, that create brand meaning. Brands have also been described as semiotic engines (Heilbrunn, 2006), comprising meanings, symbols and values (Berthon et al., 2007) that influence and reveal the creation of identities, both individually and collectively (Askegaard, 2006). Holt (2004) discusses brands as icons, and argues that icons come to represent a certain kind of story, or identity myth, that consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties. Brand stories moreover have plots and characters, and rely heavily on metaphors to communicate and spur imagination (Holt, 2004).

Pasquinelli (2010) has highlighted the usefulness of stories, arguing that they imply interaction among multiple parties leading to more inclusive place branding. She has also proposed that stories can improve place image since they are a spontaneous outcome of local actors' interactions. Pasquinelli (2010) reasoning resonates well with the stance taken in this article. However, Pasquinelli's proposition that stories offer opportunities to 'orchestrate' local conversations hints at the common assumption that there is a dominant stakeholder strategically organising the place-branding process.

Julier (2011) has discussed the writing of new stories and alternative narratives for a place, and tied it with design activism. Subversion or rewriting of brands has become common in activism, and is often associated with a critique of dominant actors and processes within neoliberal capitalism. Activism habitually takes place in large conurbations through contestation of place-branding activities and campaigns orchestrated by place-branding organisations, with documented examples in Leeds, Birmingham (Julier, 2011) and Amsterdam (Braun et al., 2013).

## Materials and methods

### *The case of Dals Långed*

Situated around 170 km north of Gothenburg, Sweden's second city, Dals Långed is in the Steneby district of Bengtsfors Municipality in the province of Dalsland in south-west Sweden. The town hosts many national and international students who come to study at the two design schools of HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design at the University of Gothenburg and Stenebyskolan (hereafter referred to collectively as

Steneby). Some students stay on in Dals Långed after graduating. Dals Långed has hosted migrants from Syria in recent years, especially since 2015. Summer tourism is an important source of income for the town, located in such beautiful surroundings. Some tourists come for the first time from afar, others are regular visitors who live nearby.

Dals Långed has a long industrial history. The small community has experienced changes over time as traditions have made way for new ideas and tourism has become increasingly important. Its industrial history goes back to the first half of the 19th century, when a mill and a sawmill were built along the watercourse that connects the area's lakes (Grönlund, 2016). The 20th century saw several large wood and paper companies establish themselves in the area. Today, only one major manufacturing industry remains, although there are many small-scale enterprises in the area, including cultural and creative enterprises started by alumni from Steneby (ibid).

We chose to study Dals Långed partly because of its diverse range of authors contributing to its place brand. Moreover, we found the town's creative international and cultural environment interesting. In addition, there are local associations and groups in the region committed to making Dals Långed a better place for visitors and residents. We thought that these factors together allowed to make Dals Långed's brand more visible, varied and dynamic and thus timely to study. Finally, the town's relatively small size (around 1500 residents) made it more feasible to map all the authors and narratives impacting the place brand compared to a conurbation.

### ***Method, materials and analysis***

Our primary focus in this illustrative case study is the various authors that contribute to the brand of Dals Långed, the narratives they create and what the branding process looks like. An abductive approach guided this study, i.e. we started with open research questions that we refined over time in an interplay between theory and empirical data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We conducted fieldwork for three months from June to August 2019 in Dals Långed and its surroundings. We gathered multiple empirical data from interviews, observations and printed and online materials. We chose a mixed methods approach to gather a variety of empirical data to provide a broad but representative account of the relevant factors in our study (Dubois & Gadde, 2014).

We conducted three sets of interviews. The first set of interviews were in-depth interviews, lasting between 65 and 115 minutes (see Table 1). We selected eight interviewees based on their knowledge of Dals Långed and its branding and sent interview guides with questions to the interviewees prior to the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees have reviewed and accepted the quotes and statements included in this article, and given us permission to include their job titles in Table 1.

Lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, we conducted four semi-in-depth interviews with Syrians who had been living in Dals Långed or the surrounding area for a few years. We wanted to include Syrians in our sample because they represent the largest refugee group in Sweden and are still in the process of integrating into society (unlike other refugee groups before them; see Bucken-Knapp et al., 2018) and so we wanted to better understand how they contribute to Dals Långed's brand. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.



**Table 1.** In-depth interviews.

Interviewee title	Organisation	Date and time
CEO	Dalsland Tourist [Dalslands Turist AB]	17 June 2019, 65 min
President	Dals Långed Development Council	18 June 2019, 100 min
Manager	Mötesplats Steneby [MPS, Meeting Place Steneby]	17 June 2019, 115 min
Deputy principal and education leader	Stenebyskolan [Steneby School]	18 June 2019, 85 min
President	Not Quite	28 August 2019, 80 min
Job coach and internship coordinator	Bengtsfors Municipality	27 June 2019, 105 min
Destination developer	Bengtsfors Municipality	28 August 2019, 70 min
Head of culture and leisure	Bengtsfors Municipality	9 September 2019, 90 min

We conducted a third set of shorter, informal interviews with 18 residents or visitors to Dals Långed. We set ourselves up at the campervan parking site at Laxsjöns Camping, near Baldersnäs Mansion (a hotel) and next to the local food store, so we could meet a variety of authors with a connection to Dals Långed. These interviews were not recorded, yet careful notes were taken and written up within 24 hours.

In addition to data from our interviews, empirical data comprise printed material such as marketing material, brochures, posters, documents and media clips. The empirical material is complemented by online material comprising depictions of Dals Långed and the surrounding area on websites, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, apps and YouTube. The authors of this online material include Bengtsfors Municipality, West Sweden Tourism Board, Visit Sweden, Trip Advisor, Dalsland Canal, Dalsland's Activities, Baldersnäs Mansion, Laxsjöns Camping, Steneby, Mustadfors Mill and Café Schuckert. Throughout the fieldwork, we supplemented our data with personal observations, documented in the form of field notes and photographs.

As part of the analysis we discussed the empirical material and our observations throughout the fieldwork. All empirical material was analyzed thematically, inspired by an abductive approach and following the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006). We related the empirical material to the aim and the research questions of the study throughout the analysis to enable interplay between theory and empirical data.

In the first phase we printed out and read through all the gathered material once to familiarise ourselves with it and to note our initial thoughts and identify any interesting patterns emerging from the data. We generated initial codes as a basic way to segment the data in the second phase. We then coded the data set manually by reading it line by line, coding the data by writing notes in the margin and by highlighting the codes with colored pens. We gave similar codes the same color. Finally, we listed all codes and related colors (*ibid*).

In the third phase we refocused the analysis on themes rather than codes. We analyzed the codes to see how different codes could be combined to form all-embracing themes. We used mind maps to assist in visualising and structuring the codes into themes. For example, one mind map consisted of the various authors and the connections between them. In the fourth phase we reviewed the themes by assembling excerpts for each theme, reflected on whether they seemed to form a consistent pattern and combined some of them by similarity. We then reread the entire data set to make sure that the themes accurately represented the data set, and coded any additional data that we missed in the previous coding stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the fifth phase we defined and named the themes, and reflected on their essence. We wrote an analysis for each theme, describing the 'story' that the theme told, while considering how each theme fitted into the overall narrative. Thus, we reflected upon each theme, possible sub-themes and the relationships between them. We completed a final analysis and write-up of the thematic analysis in the sixth phase. We looked for vivid and compelling extracts to include in the presentation of our findings and in the discussion of the same (ibid).

## **Discussion of findings**

### ***Place-brand authors***

In this section we elaborate on the authors that contribute to Dals Långed's brand. The author categories, presented and discussed next, emerged from the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In an abductive manner (Charmaz, 2006), previous research on authors, stakeholders and related concepts, as discussed in branding and place branding literature, also guided the analysis and the categories formed.

Many of the place-brand author categories outlined next are interrelated and overlap. For example, influencers and bloggers of popular culture can also be tourists or residents, some academic authors are also cultural authors, some cultural authors are also in the tourism industry and the idea-based sector includes residents.

### ***Place-branding organisations as authors***

The official place or destination branding organisation in the region is Dalsland Tourist (*Dalslands Turist AB*). According to its CEO, it is a traditional destination company:

We work with marketing and we run a tourist information office. We also work with business and product development, with everything from the most basic such as web and social media.

Another author is West Sweden Tourism Board, a destination management organisation (DMO) whose mission is to brand Dalsland and two other provinces. Visit Sweden, Sweden's national tourism organisation, can also be regarded as an author since Dalsland is part of its branding of Sweden, primarily targeting international audiences.

### ***Public sector authors***

Various people and functions work with place branding in some form in Bengtsfors Municipality, e.g. related to culture, destination development or business development. The municipality communicates with residents and visitors through its website, focusing e.g. on cultural activities, sports and events, and, as such, engages in secondary communication (Kavaratzis, 2004). The municipality also contributes to the narratives created by hosting activities and events, maintaining and improving infrastructure, and developing the destination and the business environment. Thus, it also contributes to the place brand through primary communication (Kavaratzis, 2004).

### *Academic authors*

The two education and training centers at Steneby together represent a key academic author in Dals Långed. A destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality says that much of Dals Långed's soul is tied with Steneby, that it contributes greatly to Dals Långed's identity and that many are proud to have Steneby in the municipality.

Steneby primarily markets educational programmes to potential students in Sweden and abroad. Steneby also markets summer courses in metalwork, machine knitting, silversmithing and furniture restoration, attracting new visitors to Dals Långed.

At the time of this study, Mötesplats Steneby (MPS) was an internal organisation at Steneby with a mission to create connections between the educational programmes and wider society – local residents, companies, the municipality – by supporting ideas, cooperation, seminars and entrepreneurship in the fields of culture and art. Since January 2021, MPS is run by GU Ventures, an incubator and investor organisation tied to the University of Gothenburg, with the aim to create new companies.

There is a library at Steneby, which also acts as an unofficial tourist information center according to the deputy principal and education leader. The same respondent described current and former students at Steneby as important ambassadors:

Alumni students are the most important part of Steneby's marketing. The majority of the students move abroad or to other parts of Sweden after graduation. Lecturers and international contacts that we stay in touch with are also important, partly because they provide legitimacy for the school.

### *Idea-based sector authors*

Dals Långed Development Council is another key author in Dals Långed. The council was founded in 2000 and aims to increase well-being in Dals Långed by coordinating and supporting ideas from residents, associations and companies. According to the president of the council:

Our goal is to create a better place, both for permanent residents and for visitors. We work with improving the physical aspects of the place, and aim to generate job opportunities.

The development council is described as an umbrella organisation for most local companies, associations and, increasingly, private individuals. Council members together run a guest marina and a parking lot for camping vans in Dals Långed. The council president describes the hosts' role:

Every host from the development council has a mission to be a bit of an advertisement agent for Dals Långed and Steneby, to tell visitors about the town and the school.

Many respondents emphasise the importance and uniqueness of the development council. For example, a destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality states

The development council is a very strong force in Dals Långed. The council contributes a lot to the image of Dals Långed, and invites everyone to participate in the development of the town. It is rather unique to have such a strong non-profit association as the development council, that takes on and drives development issues. This is not the case in other towns in the region.

Hence, the development council enables residents and local communities to influence the development of Dals Långed, which can be interpreted as contributing to shaping a more inclusive place brand (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017).

Another idea-based sector author is Kafé Schuckert, a café run by an association that organises handicraft and food events, language cafés and other events. A job coach and internship coordinator in Bengtsfors Municipality describes Kafé Schuckert as ‘an important meeting place’, especially for residents.

Additional authors include the local community association, sports associations, youth activities and two community houses, which can be used as meeting places and to host various activities for the residents of Dals Långed. These meeting places, activities and events can be seen as forms of community-building that produce collective stories (Ashworth et al., 2015).

Several respondents emphasise that Dals Långed is populated by enthusiastic people with the will and drive to do something for their neighborhood, which is important for the envisioning and development of a small town. This can be tied to Anholt (2007) and Pasquinelli’s (2010) statement that visions of a place should emerge from enthusiastic and spontaneous actors.

### ***Cultural sector authors***

Some of the authors discussed in the previous subsections can also be categorised as cultural sector authors, such as Steneby, MPS, the library and Dals Långed Development Council, due to their focus on culture in various ways.

Steneby, e.g., focuses on culture in courses and programmes, seminars and events. MPS supports various cultural projects - one of which is Artifex, which is about the business development of cultural and creative enterprises.

Not Quite is an arts and handicraft collective, a company association and a cultural center founded and run by alumni from Steneby. It occupies a former mill, approximately 18 km from Dals Långed. Not Quite is described as a ‘creative force field’ that has developed into a unique visitor center where visitors can see exhibitions of arts and crafts, enjoy what the café has to offer and buy handicrafts from the boutique. It is also described as an important, independent place for cultural producers.

Not Quite acts as an umbrella organisation for several cultural authors, including artists and mobile units – such as a handicrafts truck and a puppetry bus – operated in collaboration between Not Quite, schools and the municipality. This corresponds with an interactional view of place brands (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015) proposing that the interactions between these cultural authors construct the place brand.

Other cultural authors include Steneby Art Gallery, Gallery Different (*Galleri Olika*), Steneby Culture Association, Dalsland Art Association, the music association MF Decibel, and events like Voracious for Dalsland (*Glupsk på Dalsland*), Party without borders (*Kalas utan gränser*), Dal Film Festival, Culture Week and Lights Night.

### ***Residential authors***

As emphasized earlier, residents are increasingly proposed as a central author in place branding (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Dals Långed’s population comprises people born and raised there, students, former students and staff at Steneby, and (mostly Syrian)

immigrants. The deputy principal and education leader at Stenebyskolan says that many creative people live in Dals Långed. The manager at MPS says that local residents are proud of Dals Långed's traditions.

Some say that the town's domestic and foreign student population, together with the immigrants, contribute to an international and multicultural environment in Dals Långed. Others say that immigrants are almost invisible in local society. The immigrants we interviewed for this study perceive the residents of Dals Långed as kind and helpful. They also say that they have all they need, including a school and a library, and that the town is good for families with children.

### *Tourists as authors*

Many tourist types visit Dals Långed and its surroundings and contribute to the image of Dals Långed. According to the head of culture and leisure in Bengtsfors Municipality:

From my perception, anyone who has ever been to Dals Långed, and has experienced it as it is, becomes a good marketer of the place.

Many visiting tourists are 'nature tourists', meaning cyclists and canoeists that come with their campervans. Other regular visitors include people with roots in Dals Långed who now live elsewhere but visit with their families, and students attending summer courses at Steneby.

There is a parking lot for campervans next to Steneby, which is used frequently in the summer. Passenger and private boats also pass by Dals Långed via Dalsland Canal, whose 15th lock gate is a visitor attraction.

Dalsland Tourist aims to attract what the DMO calls 'curious hedonists', people who enjoy hiking and cycling in nature. The CEO elaborates:

My favourite target group are those that want to do what I call 'enjoy hike' ['njutvandra' in Swedish, i.e. hike or walk in beautiful nature with light luggage, enjoy delicious food, and stay at comfortable hotels], meaning picky consumers that want to enjoy good accommodation and eat even better, that want to hear exciting stories and experience just enough endeavour in a beautiful environment.

Visitors to Not Quite are described as people with a car and time: older people, families with young children and older parents with grown-up kids. The majority of visitors in June and July are Swedes, while German, British and Dutch tourists predominate in August.

### *Tourism industry and business authors*

Various tourism and hospitality companies located in the region contribute to Dals Långed's brand. Baldersnäs Mansion's restaurant and barns are used for craftwork, exhibitions and events. Laxsjöns Camping has a restaurant and a small store, and offers canoeing, rowing, swimming and other activities.

Dalsland Activities arranges various nature-related activities, not only for schools and youngsters but also for companies and sports associations. Camp Dalsland is a tourist organisation that attracts visitors to Dalsland through sports tourism, events and sports competitions, as described by a destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality:

The purpose of Camp Dalsland is to attract visitors [...] that the local tourism companies can benefit and make money from; to be a locomotive for the tourism and hospitality industry and market the place.

Another business author is 'Dalsland in Growth', a business initiative that aim to provide a skilled workforce for companies and the public sector in the region. Large industrial companies and mills used to be important authors in Dals Långed, and still impact the place brand to some extent despite their closure, in line with Deffner and Metaxas' (2010) reasoning.

### **Popular culture authors**

Popular culture authors as defined by Holt (2003), Kavaratzis (2004) and Avraham (2004), include films, TV, books, magazines, the Internet and the media, including newspapers and magazines. While Holt (2003) includes influencers as a unique category, we regard influencers as popular culture authors since their content is available on social media and the Internet.

Several films have been made in Dalsland, and Bengtsfors Municipality has positioned posters from some of these movies at the entrances to towns in the region. According to a destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality:

This makes some people proud and some not. I don't think the films have meant that much for the image of the region, or we may not have been able to tap into it.

Parts of the series 'Ronja, the Robber's Daughter', based on a famous book by Astrid Lindgren, were filmed in Dalsland. 'Hiking in Ronjaland' is an offshoot arranged by an association for people interested in seeing and experiencing the filming locations.

Examples of books contributing to narratives about Dals Långed include the anthology *Voices in Dalsland* and *Dalsland's History*, distributed by Dalsland Tourist.

Dals Långed Development Council advertises all its events in the local press, while its website is still to be developed and engagement on social media is limited. As an organisation i.e. aiming to enable residents and local communities to influence place development, the development council could benefit from engaging in ICT and social media due to its potential in opening up for more organic, grassroots patterns of identity formation (Castells, 2007; Houghton & Stevens, 2011; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Ripoll Gonzales & Gale, 2020).

Dalsland Tourist arranges various press trips annually, sometimes with the help of West Sweden Tourist Board, related to Visit Sweden campaigns. One example is The 72 Hour Cabin campaign – initiated by Visit Sweden in collaboration with West Sweden Tourism Board – and its related glass houses, which attracted much attention and drew journalists to Dalsland, according to the CEO of Dalsland Tourist:

We have had the largest Italian TV channels and the largest French morning TV covering lengthy reportages by their own journalists that have visited Dalsland and spent time here. It has had a huge impact.

The glass houses have also attracted influencers and bloggers to the region. The CEO of Dalsland Tourist explains that the DMO does not target influencers, they just come: some on their own, others contact Dalsland Tourist.

Compared to Holt's (2003) categorisation of brand authors – companies, customers, popular culture, and influencers – the authors in a place-branding context offers more complexity (Merrilees et al., 2009), which can be traced to the democratic foundation of places (Jernsand & Kraff, 2017) and the emerging view of residents and other stakeholders

as brand owners in place branding (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2012). The authors identified in this study resemble the stakeholders identified in previous place-branding research (Cassinger & Thelander, 2018; Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015). However, in contrast to much of previous place-branding research, there is no official organisation orchestrating the Dals Långed brand.

### ***Collection of narratives***

We identified three overarching narratives, or all-embracing themes, in our analysis of the empirical material: nature, culture and periphery. We discuss them next, starting with nature.

The focus of Dalsland Tourist's communication is the area's beautiful natural surroundings, and activities such as hiking, canoeing and cycling. Cultural activities are mentioned less, and indeed everything else comes second to nature. The CEO of Dalsland Tourist says:

We market nature, have nature as our starting point, and try to create an edge around that. We want to become even clearer about putting nature in our display window, and we work especially with profiling Dalsland as a nature destination.

Dalsland Tourist promotes Dalsland's untouched and pristine natural environment, which represents an excellent place for rest and recovery from a stressful work life in the big city. Narratives include:

Our nature is untouched.  
Back to nature.  
Need to chill out and boost your energy levels.  
Welcome back to nature. And to yourself!

In a similar vein, West Sweden Tourism Board also focuses on Dalsland's natural environment, depicting an idyllic, romantic image on its website and on social media platforms such as Instagram. On the website one can read:

In Dalsland we have all the conditions to give you a real boost of both recovery and well-being. Our nature is untouched and our experiences are genuine.

The website features various activities, such as paddlesports, trekking, fishing and cycling as well as guided tours along Lake Vänern. Images portray families and friends enjoying outdoor activities in an idyllic setting.

The CEO of Dalsland Tourist says that the above-mentioned 72 Hour Cabin campaign was successful, adding:

It was about selling Swedish nature not as dramatic, but as a place to feel good, to recover, to reduce stress. The idea was to measure how much better a person can feel by spending 72 hours in the Swedish forest. As part of the project, a number of glass houses were built around Dalsland.

Related narratives include:

Do you long for peace and silence, and wonderful nature experiences? Then you should rent this glass house, or another glass house located in Dalsland.

Dals Långed is part of the image of Dalsland, and traveling to Dalsland is about experiencing nature and about finding oneself. Dalsland's natural environment promises to boost the well-being and health of stressed-out city people.

A destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality describes its development of leisure tracks for trekking and cycling:

We think the leisure tracks will have much impact and attract visitors. The target groups we aim for are between 45 and 60 years old and travel in pairs or groups. We focus on Denmark and Germany, large cycling nations with people interested in our area. But also Swedes, especially as 'staycation' becomes increasingly common.

Other authors also emphasise nature. For example, Steneby's web content and images depict the school setting as something from a fairy tale where nature itself is a piece of handicraft.

Furthermore, Dalsland Canal's communication centers on adventure, experiences of nature, enchanted forests and proximity to wildlife. The images have a summery feel, with photos of nature, canal locks and boats. Likewise, Dalsland's Activities focuses on adventures in the forest and on land, promoting activities such as a beaver safari and horse riding.

Baldersnäs Mansion combines a focus on nature with a focus on well-being, promoting the glass houses and The 72 Hour campaign, enjoying wine tasting and yoga courses.

As for social media, students and locals post images on Instagram of sports events such as canoeing, marathons and cycling competitions held in Dals Långed's natural setting, and tourists post images and relate their own adventures on Facebook and Instagram. Visitors to Laxsjöns Camping – such as two Danish retirees, two Swedish families and an older Norwegian couple – highlight nature and the fresh air and find the area beautiful and brimming with wildlife. The couple from Norway tell us that:

We see hares, deer, birds and squirrels in the campsite. We also appreciate the walking area and the swimming place by the campsite.

A retired couple from Gothenburg, parked up at Dals Långed in their campervan, tell us that they love Dals Långed, that they appreciate the peace and quiet and that they use Facebook to share their experiences. An older woman from Germany, also parked up in her campervan, tells us that, for her, it is the forests, the lakes and the water that make Sweden in general, and Dals Långed in particular, so special. Like the tourists and other authors, a local woman from a small community near Dals Långed agrees that it is the water and the forest that makes Dals Långed and the surrounding area so special:

Dalsland has a lot of forest and water, which is beautiful. Especially all the water, in the form of lakes and canals, is beautiful. It attracts nature tourists, tourists travelling with motorhomes and caravans, as well as cyclists and canoeists.

The immigrants we interviewed also appreciate the beautiful surroundings and the tranquility of Dals Långed. A man originally from Syria, who has lived in Dals Långed since 2015, says that Dals Långed's natural setting makes for an ideal meeting place, and that people like to meet on the beach by the lakes.



### *Dalsland's cultural capital*

Dals Långed is depicted as a cultural and creative place. The head of culture and leisure at Bengtsfors Municipality says that she often talks about Dals Långed as Dalsland's 'capital of culture'. A destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality moreover depicts Dals Långed as an art community:

There's a lot of handicraft and culture in Dals Långed. In this regard, Dals Långed is quite different from other places in the municipality.

Another respondent, the deputy principal and education leader at Stenebyskolan, says that many people who live in Dals Långed have a creative background, which shapes the image of the place.

Related to this, the president of Dals Långed Development Council says that there is an incredible creativity and advanced culture in Dals Långed, adding that the town has great potential to become a hub for creativity in Sweden.

The president of Not Quite described the combination of Dals Långed's location with its cultural and creative atmosphere:

I often describe our environment as the Wild West of Sweden, partly because we are on the west coast of Sweden. We are located between a lot of culture and business. We are close to a number of larger cities, like Gothenburg and Oslo. At the same time, you can get away with a number of adventurous projects out here and test new ideas, which the students see increasingly as a possibility. Some things that take place here wouldn't work in an urban setting. The smaller format we have here allows for more creativity.

The art and handicraft collective Not Quite appears in the narrative as a cultural center and a creative place: 'a place that leaves no one unmoved', 'a pulsating cultural mecca, right in the heart of Dalsland countryside'. In their brochure about crafts in Dalsland Not Quite's environment is depicted:

In an exciting environment, craftsmen and artists create their shared vision of a vibrant art and cultural centre. There is a growing number of studios as well as summer studios for guest artists.

The CEO of Dalsland Tourist expresses fascination for Dalsland's considerable cultural engagement: everything from international book events to blues festivals and art walks. The DMO also focuses on the culture of Dalsland in its operations:

Even though we primarily market nature, in practice we work a lot with culture and cultural events too, for example by distributing the book *Dalsland's History*.

Steneby has contributed greatly to the cultural and creative atmosphere in Dals Långed, e.g. by helping small handicraft and culture businesses grow, according to a destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality. The deputy principal and education leader at Stenebyskolan says that people at Steneby feel a great responsibility for culture and design development, which is expressed in various parts of, and events arranged at, the school

In the library there are tools for painting and drawing. We also give a whole series of really interesting lectures and exhibitions that are open to the public. In the summer time, the exhibitions also attract tourists.

The creative, cultural and educational environment at Steneby features on the school's website, where the handicraft tradition and the international study environment is depicted. Furthermore, Steneby communicates a great deal with study counselors and staff at schools around Sweden who work with art and culture. MPS also works actively to create the right conditions for artists to be active in the area.

Multiculturalism is apparent in the narratives. A local man, born and raised in the town and now in his early 30s, says that Steneby contributes to Dals Långed in many ways, one of which is that it assists in creating a multicultural setting through its students and staff from around the world. The deputy principal and education leader at Stenebyskolan says that the school promotes multiculturalism and carefully selects images that represent diversity. Kafé Schuckert is also mentioned among respondents as an author that promotes culture, multiculturalism and integration, hosting activities aiming to get people from different cultures to meet, such as language events. Furthermore, events such as Voracious for Dalsland and Party without borders welcome people from all cultures.

Dals Långed Development Council is also regarded as an author that promotes culture and multiculturalism. The council arranges cultural events of various sorts for families and children, such as Walpurgis night celebration and Easter parade.

### *On the periphery or an attractive alternative*

The head of culture and leisure at Bengtsfors Municipality says that, today, the city is the norm, and that the countryside is seen only as a recreation area for weary city people. Popular culture contributes to this norm as it often ridicules people who live in the countryside, she says:

What you see on TV about the countryside is limited to comedy shows about boors or documentaries where you get to follow peculiar people with certain interests. We have to create our own norm, based on the needs we have here. We should be better at conveying our norms, ideas and images of the landscape and the cultural society we live in. The better we are at communicating that, the prouder we become of the place, and the more interest in it we create among others.

We met a man in his mid-30s from Norway (although he resides in Stockholm) with his family, visiting his in-laws who live in Dals Långed. He says that Dals Långed is a typical countryside town, that the Swedish countryside seems run-down and that the future does not look bright. Nevertheless, he sees some potential in Dals Långed and Dalsland:

It is actually located very centrally in relation to Oslo, Gothenburg and Stockholm, and provides opportunities for good life quality.

A destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality says that a Dals Långed architect who has recently returned from being away for a while is currently designing properties aimed at people who do not necessarily live in the town but want access to an occasional office space.

A young Dals Långed couple, who have moved to Dals Långed from elsewhere in Sweden and are alumni of Steneby, say that not much happens in Dals Långed, but that the area has a special vibe and that there is a sense of community, safety and belonging – in stark contrast to large cities like Stockholm.

Some of the Syrians who live in Dals Långed say that they have all they need in Dals Långed, and that they appreciate the tranquility in the town. However, one difficulty that some of the Syrians experience – especially those without a driving license – is the inadequate public transportation in the area. A destination developer in Bengtsfors Municipality elaborates:

There are many challenges in small towns. Decreased community service such as schools, libraries and public transportation hit small towns first. Stores suffer from globalisation, and e-commerce is a tough competitor. My idea is to consider what we have here that cannot be moved, and what is unique about the place.

Dalsland, like other rural areas, is facing depopulation, with small towns like Dals Långed losing its youth to outmigration and brain drain. Steneby attracts many students, yet most leave after graduation, moving abroad or to bigger urban centers elsewhere in Sweden.

Not Quite's president says that they want to create a place where people want to stay after graduation from Steneby. The head of culture and leisure in Bengtsfors Municipality thinks Not Quite already contributes to more people staying. The deputy principal and education leader at Stenebyskolan thinks that the municipality's strategy should incorporate incentives for graduates to stay.

One of MPS's focuses is on how small societies can develop qualities that make people want to stay or that attract incomers. The manager continues:

We want to communicate those qualities so that we become a small society that can be an alternative to urban places. People are scared to move here. And then they come, and fall in love with the place. Many enjoy getting away from the large cities.

The president of Not Quite also described Dals Långed as an attractive alternative to urban life:

I think many see Dals Långed as an exciting part of an alternative movement to city life. Perceived possibilities include to seize the idea about rural development and an alternative to urbanisation.

An event on this theme was a two-day seminar titled 'Advantages of floating in the middle of the sea', organised by Dals Långed Development Council and MPS in Dals Långed in March 2019. The focus was on creating good meeting places and developing local communities together, as well as discussing factors that can hinder and enable development. One speaker stated that there are many nuances to what is central and what is peripheral, maintaining that the urban is too often glorified:

Should the countryside only be nostalgic places that tell a story of how it once was, or can small places also be role models for innovation and development? We have many visions of how urban societies work; we don't have that many visions of how smaller societies work. We need more visions and more solutions, and we need images to show what we can achieve.

### ***Co-creating the place brand***

In this subsection the discussion centers on how the authors and their narratives inform the brand of Dals Långed.

Various respondents discussed connections and collaborations between authors. The CEO of Dalsland Tourist says that, broadly speaking, the DMO works with branding by initiating, maintaining and developing collaborations. The DMO has collaboration agreements with 120 companies, organisations and associations, such as museums, tourism companies and grocery stores. Dalsland Tourist also work closely with West Sweden Tourism Board, collaborates with cultural directors and business strategists in Bengtsfors Municipality and cooperates with various actors that work between tourism and culture, such as Not Quite and Steneby. Moreover, the DMO participates actively in 'Dalsland in Growth' to attract a skilled workforce to the region.

Other connections between authors include Bengtsfors Municipality and Steneby, e.g. through financial support from the municipality to the school. The municipality also supports events arranged by Camp Dalsland, such as swim-runs and cross-country races. The leisure tracks for cycling are developed around tourist attractions that Bengtsfors Municipality thinks the target group is interested in, such as Dalsland Canal and Baldersnäs Mansion.

There is also a clear connection between Steneby and Not Quite. Moreover, MPS has collaborated with Not Quite and Dals Långed Development Council. MPS also creates meeting places and facilitates connections between residents, businesses and the municipality.

The connections and collaborations between authors resemble an interactional view of place brands (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), as well as previous research on network branding in the context of place branding (Muñiz Martínez, 2016), and thus position branding as a more networked, multi-party and holistic process. It also ties into Holt's (2003) acknowledgment of co-authorship.

In the case of Dals Långed it is clear that some authors have more influence than others, and level of influence appears to be related to, e.g., organisational size, fiscal resources, track record and eagerness to do something for your town. Authors identified as influential in forming the Dals Långed brand include academic authors and idea-based sector authors such as Steneby and Dals Långed Development Council. Nonprofit organisations are also regarded as stakeholders in previous place-branding research (e.g. Cassinger & Thelander, 2018) but with less influence over a place brand than in this study. Dals Långed Development Council and the enthusiastic residents who run the council and have the will and the vigor to develop their town, are described as influential. Current students and alumni at Steneby are moreover highlighted as important in the marketing of the school, and consequently also impact the place brand. All residents, including immigrants, who do not engage in the work of the development council are portrayed as less influential authors.

To some extent, the narratives of Dals Långed tie in with its past (Deffner & Metaxas, 2010), seen e.g. in the legacy of the mills and the impact that Steneby has had on the place brand. However, Dals Långed's industrial past is now less visible in the narratives of the place. As Dals Långed's profile shifts from industry to tourism – in line with the rise of ICT, social media and new communication patterns (Castells, 2007) – so tourists, influencers and bloggers' influence on the place brand is increasing as they narrate their experiences through word of mouth and social media. Likewise, companies and organisations in the tourism industry in and around Dals Långed are becoming increasingly influential. Cultural authors are also gaining influence in forming the Dals Långed brand.

Similar to other rural and small communities that are facing a time of transition, and thus re-envision and reposition themselves for new roles and functions (Duxbury & Campbell, 2011), the narratives that inform the brand of Dals Långed evolve, and coalesce. As tourism has become increasingly important, various authors' narratives center on nature and culture, assets of Dals Långed, and attractive to tourists. Nature and culture are also important to residents and enterprises, and can be used to cope with challenges of depopulation. Dals Långed is by some authors narrated as an attractive alternative to urban life: a place that offers possibilities to be creative and engage in adventurous projects, and where one can be close to nature and outdoor attractions. Onwards, small places like Dals Långed can reap benefits from offering affordable housing and flexible office spaces, in a post-Covid era when people increasingly question urban life, move out of the large cities and work remotely (Farmer, 2021).

## Conclusion

This illustrative case study supports previous research that identifies residents (e.g. Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) and other stakeholders (e.g. Muñoz Martínez, 2016) as co-creators of place brands, and that emphasises stakeholder involvement (e.g. Jernsand & Kraff, 2015). This study explores how multiple authors create narratives and contribute to the brand of a place, focusing on who the place-brand authors are, the narratives they create and how the authors and their narratives contribute to the place brand.

This study questions an assumption permeating place-branding research that there is a dominant place-branding organisation that works strategically to organise the place-branding process, also apparent in research proposing participatory, inclusive and bottom-up approaches to place branding. Our findings show that there is no dominant place-branding organisation coordinating Dals Långed's brand. Instead, multiple authors – some more influential than others – create narratives that inform the place brand. This is in line with a socio-cultural approach to branding, and thus a view of brands as socially constructed and reliant on multiple actors collectively developing the brand (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

What we see in Dals Långed can be related to various ideas and concepts discussed in place-branding research, such as bottom-up, inclusive and participatory approaches that enable local communities to influence their place (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). What we identified in Dals Långed is less like design activism as defined in the place-branding literature – since that often involves contestation of place-branding activities and campaigns orchestrated by place-branding organisations (Julier, 2011) – and more like DIY place branding (King & Crommelin, 2013), although here it involves more authors than residents alone.

Using the lens of Kavaratzis (2004) 'City image communication framework' what we see in Dals Långed is a dominance of tertiary communication, such as word of mouth, and thus narratives not controlled by a dominant place branding organisation. Primary communication, meaning the place's foundation, assets and actions, come to the fore in the narratives relating to the three themes of nature, culture and periphery. Secondary communication, and thus the formal, intentional communication by marketers such as place branding organisations, is present but has more limited influence.

A central contribution of this study is its conceptualisation of a decentralised, collective production of author narratives that constitute the branding of a place. As such, it questions an SBM approach to place branding, and contributes to socio-cultural research on place brands by illustrating the power of various authors. Another contribution from this study is the use and conceptualisation of place-brand authors in the context of place branding. We argue that such a concept is valuable when aligning with a socio-cultural approach to branding and when viewing the place-branding process as organic, complex and evolutionary.

The place-brand authors identified in this study may differ from those influencing the brands of other, larger places. Moreover, levels of influence and connections between various authors and their narratives are likely to vary from one place to another. Hence, how authors influencing place brands are categorised and described, together with their respective motives, represents an area worthy of further research (Cassinger & Thelander, 2018; Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Hudak, 2019; Ooi, 2011).

Mapping place-brand authors and their narratives will help place-brand practitioners identify not only who influences a place brand and how, but also how to foster connections between authors to develop a place brand. Practical implications include the importance not only of identifying which, and to what extent, authors influence a place brand but also how best to exploit the narratives they create and communicate, and to follow the narratives as they evolve over time (Kalandides, 2011). When narratives to a limited degree are controllable by marketers, a common goal for place-branding organisations can be to reinforce positive tertiary communication (Kavaratzis, 2004), e.g. by devising a digital strategy to exploit the narratives that influencers create.

Furthermore, policymakers, authorities, DMOs and others engaged in place branding can get behind enthusiastic people and associations that take the initiative, work with place development and create place-based narratives. This is in line with Anholt's (2007) proposal that visions should not be imposed hierarchically but rather emerge from interacting 'loose networks' of enthusiastic and spontaneous actors. It is also in line with suggestions that place-branding authorities should transition to a facilitator role or engage in collaborative networks (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Ripoll Gonzales & Gale, 2020).

As illustrated in this study, small towns like Dals Långed often lack the resources to engage in comprehensive and strategic place branding. However, small towns need narratives designed to meet challenges like depopulation and to change stereotypical and one-dimensional images of the countryside and small towns. Accordingly, it can be worthwhile to know what narratives are currently circulating in order to consolidate or, in some cases, counterbalance them. For example, in Dals Långed's case, it would make sense to consolidate narratives of culture and creativity and counterbalance narratives of periphery, while narratives of nature are already positive and well established. We support the development of more complex, diverse brands (Ren & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2011) and agree with those proposing that the diversity of places should be celebrated (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

Further research could more closely examine the roles of diversity, inclusion, multiplicity and multiculturalism in the branding of places and destinations, and zoom in on depopulation in relation to place branding. Our findings can shed light on the situation of other small towns, although Dals Långed's strong cultural and creative atmosphere may be unique. Further research could seek to identify common factors among small towns.

Finally, while this study identifies connections and collaborations between authors, as well as their relative levels of influence or power, it does not identify significant conflicts, which is something further research could assess.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of the interviewees, without whom this study would not have been possible. We very much appreciate the help of Eva Maria Jernsand, researcher in TiMS, and Alice Hultdin, research assistant in TiMS, for their help in gathering field material in Dals Långed. We also appreciate the generous input we received from colleagues attending various seminars and conferences. Furthermore, excellent guidance from the editors of the *Journal of Marketing Management* and three anonymous reviewers has helped us improve the article significantly. Last but not least, Fergus Paton's support with proofreading the article has been invaluable.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This study is part of the project The Role of Tourism in Multicultural Societies (FR-2018/0010) funded by the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development, FORMAS. Karlstad University has also supported the study.

## Notes on contributors

**Emma Björner** is a researcher at Gothenburg Research Institute (GRI), the School of Business Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg. At GRI Emma works in the research project The Role of Tourism in Multicultural Societies (TiMS). She is also a member of the Centre for Tourism, the Centre for Consumption Research, and Managing Big Cities. Emma is also senior lecturer at the Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, and senior expert at the International Organisation for Knowledge Economy and Enterprise Development (IKED).

**Lars Aronsson** is Professor of human geography at the Department of Geography, Media and Communication at Karlstad University. His research has included tourism, local and regional development, place making, sustainability in the highly mobile society, and cultural economy.

## References

- Aitken, R., & Campelo, A. (2011). The four Rs of place branding. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27 (9/10), 913–933. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2011.560718>
- Allen, C. T., Fournier, S., & Miller, F. (2008). Brands and their meaning makers. In C. P. Haugtvedt; P. M. Herr, & F. R. Kardes (Eds.), *Handbook of consumer psychology* (pp. 781–822). Taylor & Francis Group/Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Anholt, S. (2004). Forward. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 1(1), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990001>
- Anholt, S. (2005). Some important distinctions in place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 1(2), 116–121. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990011>

- Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*. Palgrave.
- Ashworth, G., Kavaratzis, M., & Warnaby, G. (2015). The need to rethink place branding. In M. Kavaratzis, G. Warnaby, & G. J. Ashworth (Eds.), *Rethinking place branding: Comprehensive brand development for cities and regions* (pp. 1–11). Springer.
- Askegaard, S. (2006). Brands as a global ideoscape. In J. Schroeder and M. Salzer-Morling (Eds.), *Brand culture* (pp. 91–102). Routledge.
- Avraham, E. (2004). Media strategies for improving an unfavorable city image. *Cities*, 21(6), 471–479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2004.08.005>
- Baker, B. (2007). *Destination branding for small cities: The essentials for successful place branding*. Creative Leap Books.
- Berthon, P., Holbrook, M., Hulbert, J., & Pitt, L. (2007). Viewing brands in multiple dimensions. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 48(2), 37–43.
- Braun, E. (2008). *City marketing: Towards an integrated approach* [Doctoral dissertation, Erasmus Research Institute of Management]. <https://repub.eur.nl/pub/13694/>
- Braun, E. (2011). Putting city branding into practice. *Journal of Brand Management*, 19(4), 257–267. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2011.55>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, E., Kavaratzis, M., Zenker, S., & Kalandides, A. (2013). My city – my brand: The different roles of residents in place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(1), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331311306087>
- Bucken-Knapp, G., Fakih, Z., & Spehar, A. (2018). Talking about integration: The voice of Syrian refugees taking part in introduction programmes for integration into Swedish society. *International Migration*, 57(2), 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12440>
- Cassinger, C., & Thelander, Å. (2018). Spaces of identity in the city: Embracing the contradictions. In M. Kavaratzis, M. Giovanardi, and M. Lichrou (Eds.), *Inclusive place branding: Critical perspectives on theory and practice* (pp. 70–81). Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 238–266. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/46/35>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- De Chernatony, L. (2008). Adapting brand theory to the context of nation branding. In K. Dinnie (Ed.), *Nation branding: Concepts, issues, practice* (pp. 16–17). Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Deffner, A., & Metaxas, T. (2010). Place marketing, local identity and branding cultural images in southern Europe: Nea Ionia, Greece and Pafos, Cyprus. In G. J. Ashworth & M. Kavaratzis (Eds.), *Towards effective place brand management: Branding European cities and regions* (pp. 49–68). Edward Elgar.
- Dooley, G., & Bowie, D. (2005). Place brand architecture: Strategic management of the brand portfolio. *Place Branding*, 1(4), 402–419. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990037>
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(00\)00195-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(00)00195-8)
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L. E. (2014). Systematic combining: A decade later. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(6), 1277–1284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.03.036>
- Duxbury, N., & Campbell, H. (2011). Developing and revitalizing rural communities through arts and culture. *Small Cities Imprint*, 3(1), 111–122. <https://smallcities.tru.ca/index.php/cura/article/view/39/75>
- Eshuis, J., & Edwards, A. (2013). Branding the city: The democratic legitimacy of a new mode of governance. *Urban Studies*, 50(5), 1066–1082. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012459581>
- Farmer, L. (2021, September 15). The small cities benefiting from remote workers. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizfarmer/2021/09/15/the-small-cities-capturing-remote-workers/?sh=668ce32a10f2>
- Florida, R. (2004). *The rise of the creative class*. Basic Books.
- Gnoth, J. (2002). Leveraging export brands through a tourism destination brand. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4/5), 262–280. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540077>



- Goulart Szejnberg, R., & Giovanardi, M. (2017). The ambiguity of place branding consultancy: Working with stakeholders in Rio de Janeiro. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 33(5–6), 421–445. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2017.1319404>
- Govers, R., & Go, F. (2009). *Place branding: Virtual and physical identities, glocal, imagined and experienced*. Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Greenberg, M. (2008). *Branding New York: How a city in crisis was sold to the world*. Routledge.
- Grönlund, L. (2016). *Långed: En bildberättelse (Långedprojektet) [Långed: A picture story (the Långed project)]*. Västra Götalandsregionen.
- Hankinson, G. (2010). Place branding theory: A cross-domain literature review from a marketing perspective. In G. J. Ashworth & M. Kavaratzis (Eds.), *Towards effective place brand management: Branding European cities and regions* (pp. 15–35). Edward Elgar.
- Hanna, S., & Rowley, J. (2011). Towards a strategic place brand-management model. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(5/6), 458–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02672571003683797>
- Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2010). Towards a theory of brand co-creation: With implications for brand governance. *Journal of Brand Management*, 17(8), 590–604. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2010.14>
- Heilbrunn, B. (1998). My brand the hero? A semiotic analysis of the consumer-brand relationship. In M. Lambkin, G. Foxall, F. Vaan Raaij, & B. Heilbrunn (Eds.), *European perspectives on consumer behaviour* (pp. 370–401). Prentice Hall.
- Heilbrunn, B. (2006). Brave new brands: Marketing paradiso between utopia and a-topia. In S. Brown & A. Patterson (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Marketing Paradiso Conclave* (pp. 222–235).
- Henneberg, S., Scammell, M., & O’Shaughnessy, N. (2009). Political marketing management and theories of democracy. *Marketing Theory*, 9(2), 165–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593109103060>
- Holt, D. B. (2003). *Brands and branding*. Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding. Harvard Business School Press.
- Hospers, G. J. (2010). Making sense of place: From cold to warm city marketing. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 3(3), 182–193. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331011083925>
- Houghton, J. P., & Stevens, A. (2011). City branding and stakeholder engagement. In K. Dinnie (Ed.), *City branding: Theory and cases* (pp. 45–53). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hudak, C. K. (2019). Resident stories and digital storytelling for participatory place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15(2), 97–108. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00117-7>
- Jernsand, E. M. (2016). *Inclusive place branding: What it is and how to progress towards it* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Gothenburg]. Ineko. <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/49535>
- Jernsand, E. M., & Kraff, H. (2015). Participatory place branding through design: The case of Dunga Beach in Kisumu, Kenya. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 11(3), 226–242. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2014.34>
- Jernsand, E. M., & Kraff, H. (2017). Democracy in participatory place branding: A critical approach. In M. Kavaratzis, M. Giovanardi, & M. Lichrou (Eds.), *Inclusive place branding: Critical perspectives on theory and practice* (pp. 11–22). Routledge.
- Julier, G. (2011). Design activism meets place-branding: Reconfiguring urban representation and everyday practice. In A. Pike (Ed.), *Brands and branding geographies* (pp. 213–229). Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Kalandides, A. (2006, September). *Fragmented branding for a fragmented city: Marketing Berlin*. [Paper presentation]. The 6<sup>th</sup> European Urban and Regional Studies Conference, Roskilde, Denmark.
- Kalandides, A. (2011). The problem with spatial identity: Revisiting the “sense of place”. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 4(1), 28–39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331111117142>
- Kalandides, A., Kavaratzis, M., & Boisen, M. (2012). Special edition of the place branding conference: “Roots-politics-methods” [Special issue]. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 5(1), Eds. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpmd.2012.35505aaa.001>
- Kavaratzis, M. (2004). From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands. *Place Branding*, 1(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990005>

- Kavaratzis, M. (2008). *From city marketing to city branding: An interdisciplinary analysis with reference to Amsterdam, Budapest and Athens* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Groningen]. <https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/files/33151144/volledigedissertatie.pdf>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Ashworth, G. J. (2005). City branding: An affective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick? *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, 96(5), 506–514. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2005.00482.x>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Ashworth, G. J. (2006). City branding: An effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick? *Place Branding*, 2(3), 183–194. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990056>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Ashworth, G. J. (2015). Hijacking culture: The disconnection between place culture and place brands. *The Town Planning Review*, 86(2), 155–176. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2015.10>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Giovanardi, M. (2017). *Inclusive place branding: Critical perspectives on theory and practice* (M. Lichrou, Ed.). Routledge.
- Kavaratzis, M., & Hatch, M. J. (2013). The dynamics of place brands: An identity-based approach to place branding theory. *Marketing Theory*, 13(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593112467268>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Kalandides, A. (2012). From “necessary evil” to necessity: Stakeholders' involvement in place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 5(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331211209013>
- Kavaratzis, M., & Kalandides, A. (2015). Rethinking the place brand: The interactive formation of place brands and the role of participatory place branding. *Environment & Planning A*, 47(6), 1368–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X15594918>
- Keller, K. L., & Lehmann, D. R. (2005). *Brands and branding: Research findings and future priorities*. (MSI Special Report No. 05-200), Marketing Science Institute.
- Kerr, G. (2006). From destination brand to location brand. *Journal of Brand Management*, 13(4–5), 276–283. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540271>
- Kerrigan, F., Shivanandan, J., & Hede, A.-M. (2012). Nation branding: A critical appraisal of Incredible India. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 32(3), 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146712445788>
- King, C., & Crommelin, L. (2013). Surfing the yinzernet: Exploring the complexities of place branding in post-industrial Pittsburgh. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 9(4), 264–278. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2013.24>
- Kotler, P., & Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 249–261. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540076>
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *Journal of American Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225585>
- Merrilees, B., Miller, D., & Herington, C. (2009). Antecedents of residents' city brand attitudes. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(3), 362–367. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.05.011>
- Muñiz, A. M., & Jensen Schau, H. (2005). Religiosity in the abandoned Apple Newton brand community. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 737–747. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426607>
- Muñiz Martínez, N. (2016). Towards a network place branding through multiple stakeholders and based on cultural identities: The case of “the Coffee Cultural Landscape” in Colombia. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 9(1), 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPM11-2015-0052>
- Ooi, C. S. (2011). Paradoxes of city branding and societal changes. In K. Dinnie (Ed.), *City branding* (pp. 54–61). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pasquinelli, C. (2010). The limits of place branding for local development: The case of Tuscany and the Arno valley brand. *Local Economy*, 25(7), 558–572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690942.2010.532358>
- Preece, C., & Kerrigan, F. (2015). Multi-Stakeholder brand narratives: An analysis of the construction of artistic brands. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(11–12), 1207–1230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2014.997272>
- Pryor, S., & Grossbart, S. (2007). Creating meaning on main street: Towards a model of place branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(4), 291–304. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000080>

- Ren, C., & Stilling Blichfeldt, B. (2011). One clear image? Challenging simplicity in place branding. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 11(4), 416–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2011.598753>
- Ripoll Gonzales, L., & Gale, F. (2020). Combining participatory action research with sociological intervention to investigate participatory place branding. *Qualitative Market Research*, 23(1), 199–216. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-02-2018-0028>
- Skinner, H. (2008). The emergence and development of place marketing's confused identity. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 24(9/10), 915–928. <https://doi.org/10.1362/026725708X381966>
- Stubbs, J., & Warnaby, G. (2015). Rethinking place branding from a practice perspective: Working with stakeholders. In M. Kavaratzis, G. Warnaby, & G. J. Ashworth (Eds.), *Rethinking place branding* (pp. 101–118). Springer International Publishing.
- Therkelsen, A. (2007). Branding af turismedestinationer - muligheder og problemer. [Branding of tourist destinations - opportunities and problems. In A. Sørensen (Ed.), *Grundbog i turisme* (pp. 215–225). Frydenlund.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914>
- Van Gelder, S. (2010). City brand partnerships. In K. Dinnie (Ed.), *City branding: Theory and cases* (pp. 36–44). Palgrave-McMillan.
- Zenker, S., & Beckmann, S. C. (2013). My place is not your place – Different place brand knowledge by different target groups. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(1), 6–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331311306078>
- Zenker, S., & Braun, E. (2010, June 1-4). *Branding a city: A conceptual approach for place branding and place brand management [Paper presentation]*. The 39th European Marketing Academy Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Zenker, S., & Erfgren, C. (2014). Let them do the work: A participatory place branding approach. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 7(3), 225–234. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-06-2013-0016>