

Chapter 63

Branding Various– Sized Destinations: A Study of Millennial Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Place branding has focused on larger cities with an inherent attractiveness and a strong appeal to various stakeholders, or destinations that have undergone a transition. This development is strongly intertwined with urbanization. Drawing upon a rich qualitative and quantitative data set, our research attempts to relate inhabitant preferences to the stream of research that deals with branding to create growth in eight various-sized Swedish municipalities. When inhabitants don't agree with place branding efforts confusion emerges rather than, as intended, brand enforcement. Rural areas may have a clear advantage since there are fewer competing ideas on the place identity but have too little activity to arouse interest among a broader audience. Our research questions economic growth to be the key driver of place success. Politicians and policy-makers should consider trying to find a balance between ambitions to grow and making sure that the local community supports the efforts. Branding efforts that lack anchorage among inhabitants are unlikely to take effect.

INTRODUCTION

Place branding and city branding researchers have dealt extensively with place branding of larger cities in particular, but also to an extent smaller cities. The cases studied often represent either metropolitan areas with an inherent attractiveness and a strong appeal to various stakeholders, or destinations that have undergone a transition. The former group is experiencing *automatic growth*, while the latter group represents *best practice* when it comes to place branding. With few exceptions, areas with more than 100,000 inhabitants benefit from 'automatic growth' while rural areas struggle to maintain the number

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of inhabitants and the level of economic activity. This development is strongly intertwined with urbanization. Since 2008, the number of people in the world that live in cities exceeds those living in rural areas and by 2050 the share is expected to have risen to 75 percent (Newton & Doherty, 2014). Over time, urbanization has created a fundamental transition of economic activity from rural to metropolitan areas. Moreover, rural areas suffer disproportionately from financial crises and economic downturns since the industry structure in many rural areas makes them vulnerable to mass dismissals and factory closures (cf. Freudenberg, 1992; Naldi et al, 2015; Winson & Leach, 2003).

There is a lack of place-branding research that deals with various-sized places, including intermediate cities and rural areas. At the same time there is a challenge for all municipal administrators to provide service for the inhabitants, albeit in various ways. In large cities this implies establishment of new housing facilities and apartments for the growing population. For rural areas it is about keeping their population and reducing the services provided to make it consistent with the number of inhabitants (Brorström & Parment, 2016). Considering that metropolitan areas, with few and rare exceptions, grow automatically, our research explores differences across various-sized areas in terms of inhabitant preferences. Hence, we attempt to relate inhabitant preferences to the stream of research that deals with branding efforts to create growth (Ladd, 1994; Lombardi et al, 2011; Therkildsen et al, 2009). We are using the de-marketing concept to discuss what will happen when a place is marketed and how that varies depending on the place at hand, since there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. On top of this, Sweden is one of the European countries with the most rapid urbanization (Eurostat, 2015), and evinces the second highest number of refugees and migrants per capita, circumstances that make Swedish municipalities of various sizes interesting to study, in particular how these municipalities deal with various challenges.

Against this background, this article aims at filling the gap of comparing branding and underlying attractiveness in various-sized cities, an area that has largely been neglected by place branding scholars. We attempt to do this by applying a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how various-sized places attempt to increase attractiveness and brand their efforts. In doing this we question the practice that municipalities with inherently different preconditions act in similar ways and we attempt to illustrate what consequences this herd behavior implies. Moreover, we focus on millennial attitudes since this generational cohort show the highest likeliness to move from one place to another. Accordingly, their attitudes in choosing one place over another are useful in developing the place brand and attracting new inhabitants.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The empirical study consists of two parts. First, case studies of seven Swedish municipalities, and secondly, a quantitative study to enrich the understanding of individuals that show the highest propensity to move: young inhabitants – i.e. the millennials. To start with, seven municipalities were chosen and a qualitative case study approach was applied as it is a preferred method for identifying patterns (Yin, 2003), making conceptual contributions (Siggelkow, 2007), and achieving methodological fit for emerging theory (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). By building a case on municipalities instead of focusing on individual interviewees, a more comprehensive understanding with regard to the aim of this article is believed possible as all actors and contextual factors might be considered in the analysis.

The second part of the empirical study is a survey distributed to millennials that aims at in a systematic way collecting opinions to find patterns of how attitudes in metropolitan areas, intermediate cities, and

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