



# The SWOT of Damocles: challenges in shaping inclusive place marketing audits

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## Abstract

This paper extends existing research on inclusive place marketing by advancing methodological reflections on how to rework research instruments toward greater inclusivity. Our methodological reflections intend to encourage the dialogue between place marketing theory and practice, as well as reflections on the role that academic researchers take on while co-creating territorial development and promotion projects with a variety of non-academic stakeholders. This is done in the form of a self-reflective account of the multi-disciplinary tourism research team engaged in “RECOLOR” (Reviving and Enhancing artWorks and Landscapes Of the adRiatic). This is an INTERREG project funded by the European Commission that aims to enhance the tourist potential of secondary urban and natural resources in Croatia and Italy, with a view to generating sustainable development. Academics and consultants can replicate the research methods suggested in this paper when conducting participatory audits in other destinations.

**Keywords** Place marketing and branding · Tourism · SWOT analysis · Participatory planning · INTERREG · Sustainability

## Introduction

Even though it is widely acknowledged that destinations and territorial products are more complex than commercial corporations (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005), traditional management planning tools have remained in the toolbox of consultants that market and promote places (see, for example, Parkerson and Saunders 2005), both as metaphors (Govers 2011) and beyond. Urged by contemporary policy recommendations to facilitate inclusive and socially responsible place marketing (Kavaratzis et al. 2018), both academics and practitioners are called to transform those ethically infused

principles of inclusivity into everyday consulting practices that are able to rework and adapt traditional management research toolkits.

Even though the recent place marketing literature is not lacking examples of the ongoing translation of research tools and procedures (e.g., Kalandides 2020; Rebelo et al. 2020), this paper revamps the attention of place marketers interested in the nexus between the *disciplinary* and the *problem-based* knowledge emerging from the experience of everyday research. In particular, our methodological reflections intend to encourage the dialogue between place marketing theory and practice, extending previous work on the exchange between academic researchers and practitioners (Kavaratzis 2015), as well as on the role that academic researchers can take on while co-creating territorial development and promotion projects with a variety of non-academic stakeholders (Rinaldi et al. 2020). This is done in the form of a self-reflective methodological account (see Kalandides 2011) of a multi-disciplinary tourism research team engaged in “RECOLOR” (Reviving and Enhancing artWorks and Landscapes Of the adRiatic). This is an INTERREG project funded by the European Commission that aims to enhance the tourist potential of secondary urban and natural resources in Croatia and Italy, with a view to generating sustainable development.

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The paper is organized as follows: “[Theoretical background: place marketing and the quest for inclusivity](#)” section contextualizes the paper into appropriate conversations unfolding within the place marketing literature; then, after discussing the methods and the research context (“[Methods and research context](#)” section), “[The tools and procedures implemented](#)” section illustrates the research tools and the procedures developed during the intervention, while “[Critical appraisal: from strategy to knowledge co-creation](#)” section critically examines the intervention by teasing out three main sets of methodological challenges. Final remarks are provided in “[Conclusion](#)” section, together with a discussion of the main limitations.

## Theoretical background: place marketing and the quest for inclusivity

Over the last decade or so, the scholarship on place marketing has brought forward an increasing moral disposition that is geared toward the achievement of more responsible territorial marketing practices (Kavaratzis et al. 2018). Appropriating critical human geographers’ arguments (Philo and Kearns 1993), this emerging awareness has started challenging ‘from within’ many of traditional corporate marketing’s pillars, by criticizing both the effectiveness (Deffner et al. 2020) and the legitimacy (Sevin 2011) of standard copy-and-paste marketing protocols when applied to spatially extended products (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Crucial disputes in this respect are the capacity to represent the needs and interests of the least powerful, namely local communities, residents, family-run businesses and other marginal socio-economic actors that usually fall outside the main scope of *grand* city marketing projects such as Olympics-related initiatives (e.g., Maiello and Pasquinelli 2015). As a result of this critique, definitions of inclusive place marketing and branding have been recently emphasized by calling for more socially responsible marketing and branding research into territorial domains (Kavaratzis et al. 2018; Giovanardi et al. 2018; Rebelo et al. 2020).

And yet, qualms persist as to how these ethically infused principles come to terms with the reality of place-specific stakeholder negotiations (Kavaratzis 2012), political resistance to change, scarce inclination to collaboration, or simply the practical context where financial or human resources may shape and limit the scope of a project’s implementation (Eshuis et al. 2013; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2015). Thus, actual place marketing consulting practices might be less ‘enchanted’ than what an inclusive place marketing philosophy might suggest (Goulart Szejnberg and Giovanardi 2017), with practitioners having to reach compromises with clients’ positions or even their own principles. Also, the bottom-up dynamics in place marketing would be actually

very difficult to perform in institutional contexts located far from those where these business approaches were born. Discussing the case of Cartagena, Bassols and Leicht (2020) have recently admitted that cases of top-down city marketing are still more common than assumed, and that the pursue of “mixed” approaches, rather than purely bottom-up ones, might be a more realistic solution to support constructive change in a given destination.

The present paper extends recent scholarship on inclusive place marketing by reflecting on the research work necessary to translate inclusivity principles into deliverable and actionable practices. The disconnection between theory and practice and its difficult dialogue, in fact, are at the center of a crucial conversation that is bringing together academics and practitioners alike. Once simply “strangers in the night” (see Kavaratzis 2015), academics and practitioners in the field have recently engaged in an explicit debate in order to recognize the mutual benefits that can stem from a closer collaboration. Recent work has argued that we can look at this dialogue going beyond the utilitarian ideas of reciprocal benefits or mutual interests. Indeed, academics and higher education institutions can take on an active role as contributor to local development and co-create territorial projects with a variety of stakeholders, including public authorities, consultants, and private entrepreneurs (see Rinaldi et al. 2020).

Consistently with the work presented above and in line with similar examples of self-reflections (Kalandides 2011; Goulart Szejnberg and Giovanardi 2017), this methodological paper illustrates the efforts of multi-disciplinary research team during the identification of needs and assets in the RECOLOR project’s partner areas. During this phase, a number of informed decisions were made as to which research tool would best operationalize inclusivity principles into an inclusive place marketing audit, in collaboration with non-academic stakeholders. The next section contextualizes this research effort by providing preliminary information on methods and then presenting the INTERREG Italy–Croatia project RECOLOR.

## Methods and research context

### Methods

Reporting accounts of consultancy interventions that unpack consultant–client dynamics has become a classic *genre* not only in general management studies but also in place marketing (e.g., Kalandides 2011; Goulart Szejnberg and Giovanardi 2017). The ultimate goal is providing ex-post critical assessments and identify areas of further improvement (Johnson and Duberley 2003; Vince and Reynolds 2009), as well as sharing knowledge with other (academic)



consultants operating in other countries. This is consistent with a view that considers (academic) consultants as “reflective practitioner[s]” (Schön 1983), who can shape improved consulting environments and relationships by promoting a dialogue between theory and practice. In line with a relational approach to marketing research as applied to spatial objects (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2019), researchers were aware of “bringing their assumptions, vested interests, and managerial philosophy into the public management mechanisms, thus influencing local politicians through the act of scientific consulting” (p. 95).

The self-reflective account developed in this paper is based on two types of materials. The first includes the official documents and plans that were produced during the design and implementation of the research intervention. This first type of materials is largely used to reconstruct the research tools created during the project as well as the procedures enacted by researchers and underpins the illustration of the intervention articulated within “[The tools and procedures implemented](#)” section. The second type of materials include field notes and meeting notes taken by researchers during project meetings and project missions, which were useful in “[Critical appraisal: from strategy to knowledge co-creation](#)” section to develop a critical appraisal of research tools and the procedure adopted. Accordingly, three main themes are discussed in this section.

### Research context: the project setting

RECOLOR (Reviving and Enhancing artworks and Landscapes Of the Adriatic) is a project funded within the European Interreg V-A Italy–Croatia 2014–2020 cross-border Cooperation Program that aims at achieving the objectives defined by “Environment and Cultural Heritage” Program’s Priority Axis. European cross-border cooperation has been established to support cooperation between NUTS III regions of at least two different member states that are directly on or adjacent to their borders. Cooperation aims to address common challenges in border regions, with a view to exploit their growth potential as well as to strengthen collaboration toward balanced European development. The Italy–Croatia program supports regional and local partners in sharing knowledge and experiences, developing and implementing joint pilot actions, testing the feasibility of new policies, products, and services, and supporting investments by fostering innovative business models (see <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/>).

RECOLOR has the overall goal to enhance the tourist potential of undiscovered urban and natural landscapes available in the partner areas on both sides of the Adriatic Sea. In particular, the project is expected to promote the existence of valuable but less-known artworks that can be marketed to attract the attention of cultural tourists, encouraging them

to visit urban and natural landscapes located outside main established tourism itineraries. As such, the project aims to achieve more sustainability in the partner destinations through two main ‘routes,’ one of which is spatial (extending destination boundaries) and one is temporal (reducing seasonality). Both of these routes were already acknowledged in the place marketing literature as “demarketing” strategies (Medway et al. 2010) long before that overtourism became a popular academic discourse (Koens et al. 2018). Accordingly, destination boundaries extension and a reduction in seasonality are considered effective ways to influence demand and get some control over flows of visitors, thus reducing negative effects of intensive consumption of tourist attractions.

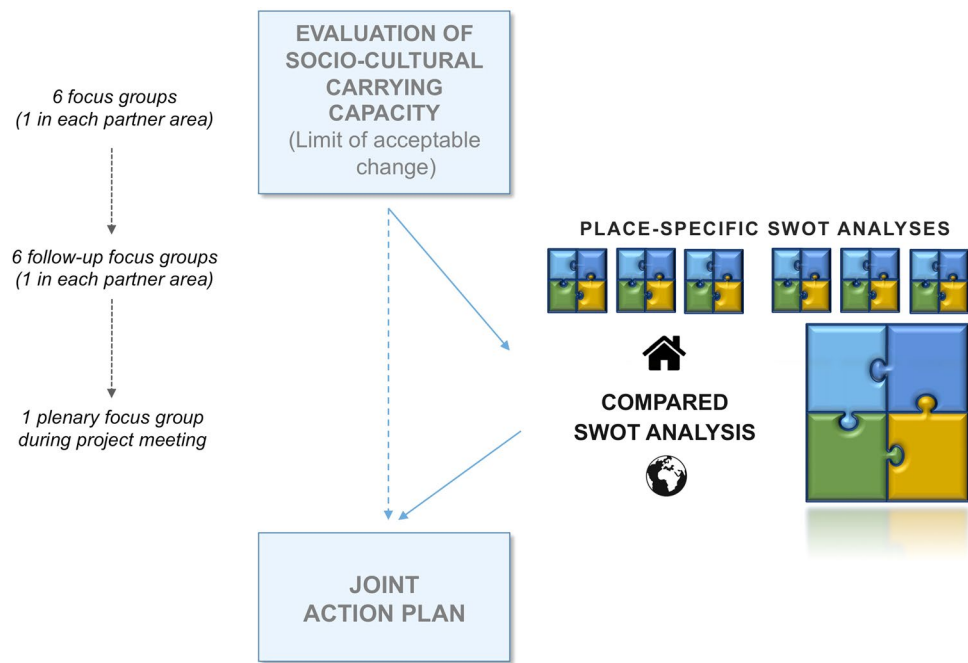
The lead partner is the Emilia-Romagna Region (Italy), aided by a tourism research of a famous University as a scientific partner, in addition to three territorial partners for each country, for a total of six destinations. All these six partner areas incorporate UNESCO heritage sites or are in proximity of a major European cultural route. Some of them possess significant landscapes resources, while others feature significant art-based resources. It is also worth noting that notable differences can be observed between two sets of partner areas: while Croatian destinations rely on established seaside mass tourism attractions and suffer from evident overtourism, Italian destinations are prevalently rural areas located nearby famous coastal destinations.

Particularly meaningful to inspire the project concept and the grant proposal has been the pilot action designed by the Italian region of Montefeltro. The pilot initiative “Montefeltro Renaissance Sights” were the outcome of innovative landscape research tools (Nesci and Borchia 2013) that enabled the identification of some still-existing natural landscapes that had been actually portrayed by famous Renaissance painters, such as Piero della Francesca, Raffaello (who was a native to this region), and Leonardo da Vinci (for a thorough illustration of the tourist products enabled by pilot actions in partner areas see <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/recolor>). For sure, the readers of this journal are already acquainted with the challenges inherent in the reimagining of rural places, as multiple stakeholders need to work arm to arm and achieve greater collaboration (see Vuorinen and Vos 2013).

Even though the final results are still to be delivered, particularly meaningful have been meanwhile the capacity building activities on destination marketing prescribed by the research team according to the gaps outlined during the audit exercise. Here, partner areas were invited to use service co-design tools (e.g., Kankainen et al. 2012; Liburd et al. 2020) in order to articulate at a local level the transnational strategy suggested by the researchers. These elements included, for example, the agreement on a value proposition for the place-specific pilot actions, the reflection



**Fig. 1** The different research stages of the participatory audit



on preferable consumer target personas, and the identification of ideas on how to extend the cross-border collaboration and, ultimately, give more substance to the RECOLOR “landscapes of art” brand.

## The tools and procedures implemented

The intervention was part of the work carried out within a dedicated research-based work package (WP) named “Identification of needs and assets in the partner areas.” This WP was expected to support subsequent project WPs and can be seen as a participatory audit that facilitated the identification of needs, assets, and potentials by maximizing stakeholders’ involvement in the partner areas. In fact, remarkable has been the effort to shape occasions for social encounters and exchange, which is a classic theme in place (Stubbs and Warnaby 2015) or destination marketing and branding (Saraniemi and Komppula 2019) when working with stakeholders.

Specifically, the WP included two key deliverables: the design of a “compared SWOT analysis” and the creation of a “Joint Action Plan,” based on the findings outlined in the first deliverable. This paper focuses on the former as the crucial cornerstone of the audit exercise, leaving the illustration of the action plan to future dedicated publications. A SWOT analysis is a common instrument used by scholars and managers to generate strategies (e.g., Dyson 2004) and was included in the project proposal during the pre-award phase. In order to address the limitations of this tool when applied to complex spatial products like territories,

researchers decided to implement SWOT analysis in the form of a participatory process that was based on a dialectic relationship between local stakeholders and scientific advisors. Figure 1 illustrates the different stages of the participatory audit, describing which research tool has been employed in each stage.

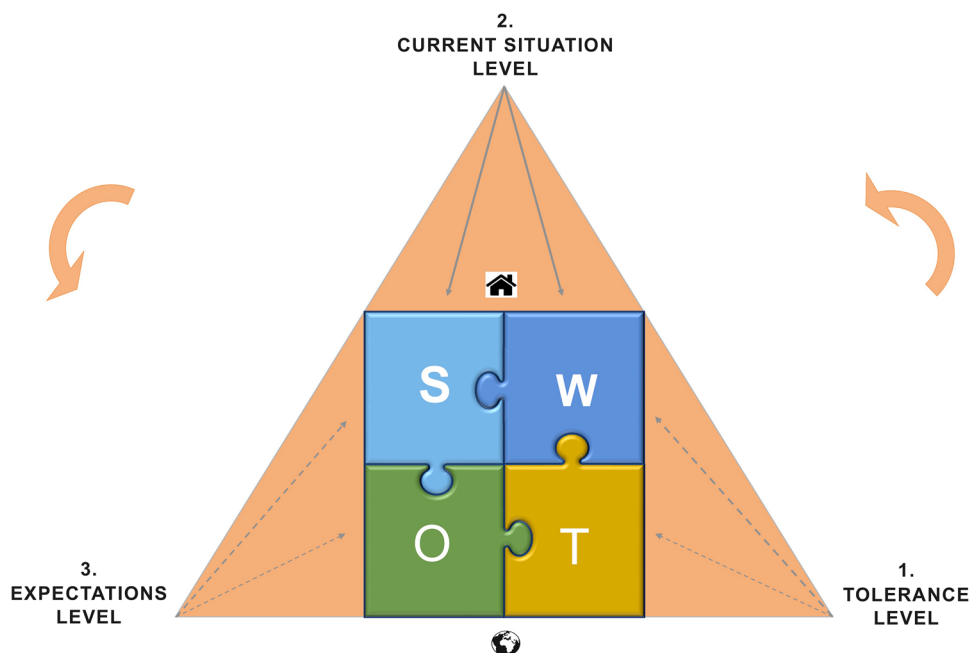
## Investigating socio-cultural carrying capacity

In order to ground the SWOT analysis exercise into the perspective of partner areas, the research team decided to perform an investigation into the “socio-cultural carrying capacity” of the host communities. This effort followed the procedure that Mansfeld and Jonas (2006) adopted to investigate the socio-cultural carrying capacity through the lens of the “limit of acceptable change” (LAC) (Cooper 2000). Crucially, this perspective is relevant for place marketers pursuing inclusivity, because it seeks to assess the “acceptance of tourism impacts among various stakeholders in communities facing future or current tourism development” (ibid., p. 584). Specifically, this method aims at revealing host communities’ perception about (a) the tolerance level (i.e., those tourism developments they would not be able to accept, the “red lines” that place managers should not cross<sup>1</sup>), (b) the “current situation level” (i.e., the current

<sup>1</sup> The first focus group question asked participants to discuss those impacts of tourism development that they would not be capable to tolerate in future.



**Fig. 2** The nexus between the investigation into the socio-cultural capacity and SWOT analysis



impact and characteristics of the tourism industry<sup>2</sup>), and (c) the “expectations level” (i.e., the impacts of tourism that are seen as desirable in the long run<sup>3</sup>).

Communities’ perceptions were gathered during six focus group sessions, one for every partner area, where local stakeholders were invited to evaluate those tourism developments that would be socio-culturally sustainable or not. In the three Italian destination, focus groups were held in Italian, under the direct facilitation of the research team, while the Croatian academic partner facilitated the three focus groups in Croatian within the Croatian destinations. Every partner area was asked to identify a representative sample of stakeholders that should meet two criteria: a balanced representation of *public* and *private* actors; and a balanced representation of *tourism* and *cultural* practitioners or operators. A formal rating technique took place to help participants prioritize issues and opportunities, the full account of which will be illustrated in a dedicated publication.

### From focus groups to place-specific SWOT analyses

Researchers distilled the findings of the six focus groups into six place-specific SWOT analyses. Figure 2 describes the relationship between the investigation into the socio-cultural

carrying capacity and the SWOT analysis boxes, where the communities’ perceptions regarding the three levels correspond to sets of strengths, weaknesses, favorable external factors, and unhelpful external factors. Researchers intervened to systematize the themes and organizing them along the two dimensions entailed by the SWOT analysis (internal vs external; positive vs negative). The themes related to the current perception level were the most relevant for populating the internal boxes and discerning between positive (strengths) and negative (weaknesses) elements of the territory (see solid arrows). As the dotted arrows suggest, themes related to both the tolerance and expectations levels played a minor role in defining the SWOT boxes, by contributing to the definition of, respectively, some unhelpful and favorable external factors.

To further validate the place-specific SWOT analyses, researchers organized additional stakeholder workshops with a view to stimulate additional public discussion. A shortlist of four local stakeholders (including a balanced representation of public and private, tourism, and culture) were asked to evaluate and integrate the list of SWOT items distilled by researchers. Generally, no further insights emerged but in some cases workshops were useful occasions to reword more appropriately some SWOT items and to verify if some items were prevalently negative or positive in the eyes of the communities’ perception. In the case of Montefeltro, for example, “low prices—limited average tourist expenditure” had been erroneously considered by researchers as a positive feature of supply and the workshop permitted to redress this mistake.

<sup>2</sup> The second focus group question asked participants to discuss the current impacts of tourism development.

<sup>3</sup> The third focus group question asked participants to discuss what would be the impacts of tourism development that they would consider the most desirable in future.



## Toward a transnational SWOT analysis

Researchers gathered the findings of the second stakeholder workshop and compared the six place-specific SWOT analyses, in search of common strengths, weaknesses, and favorable and unhelpful external factors. Spelling out a consistent set of families of dimensions was the most important task in this phase, as it allowed the team to better compare Italian and Croatian destinations, thus aiding the transnational analysis promised in the project proposal. Here, the SWOT analysis allowed to better profile the two different sets of needs and to identify ways to reconcile these.

Considerable attention was committed to unpacking the challenges characterizing the internal resources (i.e., strengths and weaknesses), by distinguishing two main levels: one more structural and related to the contextual characteristics of territorial systems (“strategic foundations”); one more specific and related to the “landscapes of art” products that partner areas were expected to develop and market (“core delivery”). These were labeled by taking inspiration from the “UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Online Toolkit”.<sup>4</sup> The strategic foundation’s block was in turn revealing three dimensions (see Table 1): one related to the governance, organization, and leadership; one focusing on the characteristics and infrastructure, as well as supply-related features; and one covering the characteristics of tourism demand. A final focus groups was held during a project meeting to further validate the transnational SWOT analysis and gather stakeholder perceptions about possibly crucial missing dimensions. No significant amendments were suggested during the workshop. Table 1 illustrates the final version of the deliverable “Compared SWOT Analysis,” which overall emphasizes a focus on removing obstacles and creating internal capacity over scouting market opportunities or prescribing competitive strategies.

## Critical appraisal: from strategy to knowledge co-creation

Even though “past research continues to lack quantifiable findings on the success of the SWOT analysis” (Helms and Nixon 2010, p. 215), the SWOT analysis format continues to be included in project proposals as an establishing tool for generating strategies (Dyson 2004). And yet, in the context of this project, several strategic elements had already been prescribed in the project proposal during the pre-award phase, such as the outline of the main tourists segments (i.e.,

“cultural tourists” and “culture vultures”), as well as the overall product development strategy based on cultural and art resources. Therefore, rather than a tool for strategy making, SWOT analysis was conceived as an occasion to co-create shared knowledge among academic, public, and private partners involved in the research. If the SWOT exercise provided hints on how to calibrate obstacle-removal and suggest some tactical actions to pursue the mission of RECOLOR, we want to emphasize its main value as a knowledge-, rather than a strategy tool.

This section teases out three main sets of challenges faced by the research team in reworking the SWOT analysis toward greater inclusivity, making it into an appropriate instrument for carrying out participatory place marketing audits. The first challenge regards the functionalistic character of SWOT as a top-down, outward-oriented strategic management tool; the second regards the transition from multi- to inter-disciplinarity within the research team; the third regards the area of improvement of citizens’ participation.

## From top-down and outside-in to bottom-up and inside-out

It resulted immediately evident that implementing a traditional SWOT analysis exercise was not in line with the aspirations of carrying out an inclusive place marketing audit. Researchers had thus to re-discuss the definitional and conceptual limits inherent in applying SWOT analysis to complex spatially extended products such as cities or regions (e.g., Lichrou et al. 2008). Meeting notes emphasize that the definition of internal and external factors and their positive or negative roles easily became complicated and arbitrary, as any factor can be positive or negative according to the point of view adopted by the SWOT analysis developers (Valentin 2005). This problematizes the question as to what is the actual point of view on which a place audit should be built upon, and to which should be the main stakeholders to listen to. During the analysis of focus groups, for example, the dimension spanning from “internal vs external” became very contested, due to the ambiguous task of placing resources or assets inside or outside of the partner area’s boundaries. This means being able to distinguish what is ‘at the destination’s disposal’ and therefore a controllable and manipulable asset, from what is instead an uncontrollable trend or phenomena. By adopting a non-functionalist posture, researchers tried to focus on the intra-destination decision-making processes involved in determining potential destination development pathways. In this perspective, strategic choices are not entirely imposed by external systems (such as the competitive environment) but mainly result from organizational intentions. This approach goes beyond the traditional top-down, outside-in stance as it recognizes the interdependence between the organization and the external subjects relevant

<sup>4</sup> The toolkit is available at <http://whc.unesco.org/sustainabletourismtoolkit/sites/default/files/UNESCO%20toolkit%20PDFs%20guide%201C.pdf>



**Table 1** The “compared SWOT analysis”

Strenghts	Weaknesses
Strategic foundations	
Governance, organization & leadership	
Presence of established forms of tourism governance in some partner areas that can share their experience and collaborative skills (e.g., synergies and cooperation between tourism stakeholders in Croatian destinations)	Uneven collaboration between tourism- and culture stakeholders within most partner areas Limited level of tourism stakeholder cooperation in some partner areas Potential language-related problems slowing down communications between Italian and Croatian public servants or entrepreneurs
Characteristics of destinations, infrastructure and supply	
Richness and complementarities in the offerings overall provided by partner areas (i.e., combination of rural, coastal and urban resources)	Partner areas placed at various stages of the tourism area lifecycle (consolidated vs emerging tourism systems), thus experiencing different issues / priorities and offering overall an inconsistent quality level of facilities and servicescapes
Good/fast transport connection between some partner areas (e.g., Cividale and Labin; Zadar and Sibenik)	Poor/slow transport connections between most partner areas (e.g., Montefeltro and Campobasso; Campobasso and Zara; Montefeltro and Sibenik) Uneven degree of professionalization of tourism workers; diverging training needs
Characteristics of tourism demand	
Existence of profitable tourist catchment areas nearby those partners that need to consolidate demand	Diverging problems in managing demands among partner areas (problem of carrying capacity vs need for creating or consolidating demand) Limited or fragmented information available on tourist behavior and expenditure
Core delivery	
Resources and potential of landscapes of art	
Availability of at least one appealing pilot action in each partner area	Uneven balance of artworks- and landscape assets across the partner areas and, thus, presence of dissimilar resources to be translated into landscapes of art
Presence of several UNESCO heritage sites within or nearby most partner areas	The link between artworks and the identity of the destination is not equally captivating and intimate in all partner areas
Existence of established cultural planning skills in some partner areas	
Favorable external factors	
Pestle analysis	
Croatia becoming a member of Schengen area	Political instability in Europe and potential economic stagnation
Availability of European funds for cultural heritage promotion and preservation, as well as mobility and transportation development	Decreasing of Regional and European funds for culture and tourism
Growing interest for cultural tourism in Europe; abundant presence of cultural tourists (or day-trippers) in the provinces of Northern Italy and Europe in general	Declining interest for work in tourism and hospitality businesses in Croatian partners
Rise of new outbound travel markets (Asian countries)	Inconsistency of regional and national legislation on tourism
Global warming that might contribute to extend the tourist Summer season	Potential increasing ecological pollution of the Adriatic due to cruise ships
Competitive environment	
Availability of attractive competitors near some partner areas with whom it is possible to develop collaboration	Fierce competition in the Mediterranean area, where we can find more established, accessible and connected destinations, cultural routes and itineraries

for attaining the organizational goals (Thompson 1967, p. 25–30).

Furthermore, there might be tradeoffs between some of the SWOT items (van Wijngaarden et al. 2012) that may depend on SWOT developers' perception. Researchers agreed that stimulating a discussion among local stakeholders around these items was more important than coming up with a clear-cut prescriptive array of managerial directions.

This inside-out perspective is in line with an aspiration to inclusivity, because of the crucial importance attributed to place-specific (i.e., internal) capabilities and resources over 'gaps out there in the market.' Consistently, less work was devoted to organize the content of the outward-oriented part of the SWOT (opportunities and threats), which was relabeled into favorable and unhelpful external factors to prevent the usual confusion that arises between the concept



**Table 2** The contribution of the different disciplines

Discipline	Conceptual contribution	Methodological contribution
Business history	Focus on cultural heritage and endogenous entrepreneurial dynamics of cultural and tourism sectors	UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Online Toolkit
Marketing	Focus on marketing and branding as applied to complex spatial products (“inclusive place marketing”)	Contribution on coding focus groups results
Organizational Studies	Non-functional approach to organization dynamics such as decision-making	Contribution on coding focus groups results
Geography	Attention on place-specific resources and development processes	Focus on evaluation of socio-cultural carrying capacity (Mansfeld and Jonas 2006)

of opportunities, often mistakenly considered as the appropriate actions that organizations might undertake. For the reasons above, the place marketing audit conducted seems to come closer to “product development” rather than “market development” (Font and McCabe 2017), probably also because the internal work on stakeholder management and governance emerged quite clearly from the voice of several participants.

### From multi- to inter-disciplinarity

Academic consultants viewed themselves as facilitators (Kalandides 2011), tasked with the responsibility of guiding and empowering public and private stakeholders, facilitating moments of interaction and public confrontation on how to create sustainable tourism products. The multi-gender and multi-disciplinary team included a business historian, an economic geographer, an organizational studies scholar, a marketing scholar, and a post-doc research assistant specialized in economic history. Piecing together a multi-disciplinary team was not just functional to an effective execution of the intervention, but was also inspired by a vision of place research (and researchers) that should promote a holistic understanding of tourism as a multidimensional phenomenon. Table 2 demonstrates that co-presence of different research profiles ensured conceptual and methodological richness to the intervention.

However, translating multi-disciplinarity (namely the co-presence of different varieties of competences in the team) into inter-disciplinarity (namely the creation of some highly integrated knowledge) is an enduring process that could be improved in future audit exercises. In fact, echoing the limitation emphasized in “From top-down and outside-in to bottom-up and inside-out” section, it seems that the traditional outward orientation of marketing has been diluted in the encounter with more inward-oriented disciplines, such as Business History or Organizational Studies. It may appear ironic that the main methodological contributions featured in the intervention (see the third column of Table 2) have been proposed by experts in history and geography, who were particularly eager to promote an inside-out perspective

that harnesses the value of endogenous resources and capabilities. More attention on the demand side could have, for example, resulted in developing specific research tools to gauge the views of current and potential cultural tourists, or to measure the place brand equity of each partner area.

### Citizens’ engagement

The theme of citizens’ engagement is a key concern of inclusive place marketing (Giovanardi et al. 2018) and branding (Zenker and Erfgen 2014). And yet, this is a concern that our audit could have taken into a more explicit consideration upon the selection of the focus group participants. On the one hand, participants were selected on the basis of their official role within the local economy, with most of them being either tourism/culture entrepreneurs or public officers. No ordinary dwellers were thus explicitly sampled, meaning that the voice of citizens could have been given more prominence by involving at least one representative of the local community, or a student (for a similar argument see Kalandides 2020). On the other hand, this shortcoming was partially mitigated by two factors: first, almost all focus group participants were *also* residents of *small* destinations, mostly being able to genuinely articulate a vision for the place; second, the project entailed the design of specific citizen involvement programs in subsequent phases. More can be done in future projects to cover residents’ perspectives in the selection of relevant place dimensions to be addressed in the audit and, therefore, in action plans (for a similar argument, see Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2007).

### Conclusion

The present paper has sought to revamp the dialogue between theory and practice in place marketing through a methodological account of an academic consultants team. The previous sections have illustrated the tools and procedures enacted during the Italy–Croatia INTERREG cross-border cooperation, which has been a hotbed for experimenting the delivery of place marketing research that





translates inclusivity into actionable practices. In doing so, the methodological reflections offered in the paper have tried to address two sets of mounting concerns: the fatigue in fine-tuning effective place-specific tools out of the traditional mainstream managerial toolbox and repertoires (see Kavaratzis et al. 2018), and the often difficult dialogue between academics and practitioners involved in the discipline (see Kavaratzis 2015).

The evaluation of the main obstacles encountered by researchers during the design of a place marketing audit has emphasized the task of reworking the functionalistic character of SWOT analysis promised in the project proposal, with researchers negotiating all the space they could to express their *agency* as advocates of bottom-up practices and participation (Goulart Szejnberg and Giovanardi 2017). The findings have stressed the value and the challenges implied by the shift from multi- to inter-disciplinarity, where the role of disciplines like Organizational Studies or Geography may become more prominent than marketing itself and contribute to altering its native outward orientation toward and augmented inward orientation. As such, the place marketing audit discussed in the paper seems to promote an explicit inside-out approach to place development, whereby internal capabilities and resources emerge as primary research concerns, overweighing a focus on external audiences demand or on scouting marketing opportunities. Future experimentations are called to identify and assess an alternative balance of *inside-out* and *outside-in* stances, by re-discussing the role of marketing within the more humanistic, inter-disciplinary approaches that have been magnified by recent socio-cultural perspectives (Kavaratzis et al. 2018).

Among the limitations of the study, we should acknowledge the specific structural conditions of the INTERREG cross-border cooperation funding context, which contributed to shape the space for academic consulting. Shepherd and Ioannides (2020) emphasize the constraints reported by tourism stakeholders involved in INTERREG projects, admitting that recognize that these projects can be perceived “top-down in nature,” with limited participation of the private sector and citizens, and the pressure caused by the project plan’s tight deadlines, tempting practitioners to produce quick-fix results to give an impression of progress, and, thus, possibly constraining the delivery of long-lasting cross-border cooperation (ibidem). We recognize that different funding contexts would provide researchers with a different space for action.

Further work is still necessary to translate the principles of inclusive place marketing into a widely accepted sets and protocols of research procedures. While encouraging case studies and ex-post empirical evaluations of projects is coming to the fore, more focus on the bearers of inclusive place marketing practices should be promoted, together with transparent and honest accounts of

the obstacles, compromises, and frustration experienced along the way (e.g., Kalandides 2020). We hope that our reflections will inspire colleagues from non-European countries to share their academic consulting experience and further discuss the challenges in bridging the gap between theory and practice in line with the principles of inclusivity. Perhaps, this would require going forward with the re-discussion of the terminology and frameworks used, as well as of the boundaries between disciplines such as marketing, geography, organizational studies, and business history. We are confident that the effort for this conceptual redefinition is worth what is at stake.

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