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Co-creating and managing resident-place relationships in place marketing and branding: a place brand equity approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Successful place marketing and branding necessitate a solid understanding of how residents evaluate and relate to their living environments. Using a place brand equity perspective, this study provides new insights into how the perception of valuable place aspects affects residents' attachment with places and place-supportive attitudes. Furthermore, we investigate how residents attribute meaning and value to specific place aspects.

Design/methodology/approach: Our research is based on mixed methods. In order to confirm the constituents of (resident-based) place brand equity, we first develop and test an empirical model with a cross-sample from different places ($n = 597$). In the second part of the research, we use semi-structured interviews ($n = 32$) with residents from a city and a rural community to explore our quantitative findings on a deeper level and offer new insights into the processes through which residents attribute residential value to places.

Findings: We identify that access to nature, cultural activities, social bonding, place attachment and pro-place consumption attitudes constitute dimensions of resident-based place brand equity. Our findings thus demonstrate that perceptions of valued place attributes foster residents' attachment with places, which fuels consumer localism. We further show that the perceived value of residential places is co-created through residents' relationships with places at the individual (micro), group (meso) and societal (macro) level.

Originality: Our research provides empirical insights that were validated in a cross-place context and go beyond summative assessments of place image. We show that residents' perceptions of valuable (leisure) place attributes enhance their affective place attachment, which plays a mediating role in explaining pro-local consumption preferences. Considering the lack of studies into how (resident-based) place brand equity is actually expressed, our research also offers new explanations of how residents co-create meaning and attribute value to their place of residence.

Keywords: Place marketing, Place branding, Person-place relationships, Place brand equity, Value co-creation, Resident participation, Place attachment

Co-creating and managing resident-place relationships in place marketing and branding: A place brand equity approach

Introduction

The recent contribution of Reynolds et al. (2023) has revamped the debate in this journal on the application of branding and marketing principles to spatially-extended products such as cities and countries (Casidy et al., 2019; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2018; Merrilees et al., 2012; Demirbag Kaplan et al., 2010). Over the last few decades, place marketing and place branding have been receiving growing scholarly attention as instruments that enhance the perceived attractiveness of cities and other types of spatial entities (Medway and Warnaby, 2008). In fact, marketing managers and public authorities are investing remarkable (financial) resources to create and manage attractive living environments where residents enjoy a good quality of life and benefit from a high leisure value (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2019).

Arguably, it is crucial for marketing practitioners to comprehend how residents perceive and relate to their places of residence and to enact measures that contribute to a place's residential attractiveness. Previous research in this context (e.g., Gilboa et al., 2015; Merrilees et al., 2012) has drawn much attention to the role of place image, which is expected to inform residents' place-related attitudes. However, the existing literature is affected by three major limitations. First, a gap exists in the literature regarding how the perception of specific place aspects influences residents' affective attachment to places and place-supportive consumption attitudes (e.g., Tasci, 2020; Mullis and Kim, 2011; Miller, 2001). Second, since most of the existing place marketing and branding research focuses on cities or tourism destinations, few studies have investigated how the local populations of different types of places (e.g., towns, rural communities), as crucial stakeholders of places, develop affective place relationships

towards their place of residence (e.g., Hanna and Rowley, 2013; Lewicka, 2011). Lastly, and perhaps most critically, even though some knowledge exists about why residents attribute meaning to their places, further work is still needed to unpack how residents actually attribute residential value to specific place aspects (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013).

To address these gaps, our research uses the concept of place brand equity as a theoretical lens to clarify which place aspects constitute residential value and meaningful place relationships in the eyes of residents, and how residents attribute value to specific place aspects. Our inquiry thus addresses the following research questions: Which place-related aspects constitute the perceived residential value (i.e., sources of place brand equity) of different types of places (RQ1)? How is the perception of such place aspects related to residents' affective place relationships and place-supportive attitudes (RQ2)? And how (through which processes) do residents attribute value to these place aspects (RQ3)?

These questions are addressed through a two-stage, mixed method research design. The first part of the study aims to verify the constituents of what we call "resident-based place brand equity" by specifying and testing an empirical model. The second part of the study is exploratory and employs qualitative interviews to offer a deeper theoretical understanding of the processes through which residents attribute value to place aspects (Bryman, 2006).

The findings reveal that access to nature, cultural activities and social bonding enhance the perceived value and leisure quality of residential places. Furthermore, we find that residents' perceptions of these place aspects increase their affective place attachment, which mediates place-supportive attitudes in the form of pro-local consumption preferences. The qualitative study shows that residents co-create the value of these place aspects at the individual, group and societal level through their interactions with their place of residence.

By providing these empirical insights, the present paper contributes to the existing literature

in three relevant ways: First, we offer a deeper understanding of the place-related aspects that residents find important with regard to the residential value (or “brand equity”) of places (e.g., Coelho et al., 2020; Merrilees et al., 2012; Demirbag Kaplan et al., 2010; Zenker et al., 2013). Furthermore, our research addresses a gap in the place marketing and branding literature by demonstrating an empirical link between perceptual place dimensions and attitudinal outcome variables, which also affects consumption preferences. By so doing, we extend prior studies that remained at a conceptual level and encourage a more efficient (financial) resource allocation for public authorities that allows marketing practitioners to justify expenditures in pro-local branding campaigns (Iversen and Hem, 2008; Tasci, 2020). Finally, we show how the perceived value of residential places is co-created by resident-place interactions, thus integrating the dominant qualitative literature on participatory, resident-focused place branding (e.g., Reynolds et al., 2023; Braun et al., 2013) and prior studies investigating only one type of spatial entity (Hanna and Rowley, 2013; Lewicka, 2011). This is accomplished by providing a more encompassing view of the processes whereby residential value is co-created at different spatial scales.

The paper first summarises the existing literature on place perceptions, resident-place relationships, and the concept of place brand equity. We then outline the development and testing of an empirical model. In the next part, we use semi-structured interviews with residents to explore how the tested model dimensions from the quantitative section are co-created between residents and places. The last section discusses the study’s contributions and offers actionable implications.

Literature review

Residents' perceptions of places

In a world marked by concerns about attractive residential places, the perceptions and personal relationships that residents develop towards their living environments have been receiving increasing attention (Romão et al. 2018; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2019). Literature on the psychology of place (e.g., Lewicka, 2011; Manzo, 2003) highlights that perceptions and evaluations of places – be it on the regional, urban, community or neighbourhood level – are generally based on human experience and meaningful associations that are constituted in the minds of individuals. According to Potter and Cantarero (2006), the process of evaluating residential environments is based on people's cognitive assessment of their social and physical surroundings, taking into account subjective experiences, needs and expectations.

In this context, literature focusing on places as social constructions (e.g., Cresswell, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) highlights the dynamics through which individuals define the socio-cultural significance of places. Here, a two-way relationship unfolds in which (groups of) people create and sustain environments that, in turn, influence their thoughts and condition their actions (Amin and Thrift, 2016). Individuals generally endow the environment, and by extension, places, with value as they get to know them (Tuan, 1977), so that seemingly simple places (e.g., public parks) become meaningful and confer value (retreat, etc.) to their users (Manzo, 2003). This theoretical argument has trickled down into the domain of marketing (Medway and Warnaby, 2008; Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013). Place marketing and branding scholarship has thus highlighted that residents are not passive actors that simply consume place-related offerings. Instead, they actively define in which ways places are meaningful (Samuel et al., 2018). However, few studies in place marketing and branding have explored in detail how residents attribute meaning or value to place aspects.

Furthermore, available scholarly evidence has produced inconsistent findings in terms of which place aspects actually constitute the attributed value of residential places. Zenker et al. (2013) for instance show that “urbanity & diversity”, “nature & recreation”, “job chances” and “cost-efficiency” influence how satisfied residents are with their place of residence. Gilboa et al. (2015), on the other hand, find that “municipal facilities”, “leisure”, “security” and “public services” constitute domains of city image. Further integrative research that confirms the constituents of resident-place perceptions across places is thus necessary, taking into account more than one type of place (e.g., urban and rural) (Hanna and Rowley, 2013).

Evaluating residents’ relationships with places

While prior studies have for instance established a link between residents’ place perceptions and place satisfaction (e.g., Zenker et al., 2013) and place reputation (e.g., Delgado and de Quevedo, 2018), there is a gap in the literature with regard to how residents’ perceptions of favourable place aspects enhance their affective relationships with their living environments and place-supportive attitudes (Tasci, 2020). Residents’ attitudes and personal relationships with places can be conceptualised in terms of place attachment, which generally consists of place identity and place dependence (Boley et al., 2021). Place identity describes “those dimensions of the self that define the individual’s identity in relation to the physical environment” (Proshansky, 1978; 155). Since place identity defines individual self-categorisation, it is based on the integration of local norms and values into residents’ belief system (Zenker and Petersen, 2014). Place dependence, on the other hand, affects a place’s potential to satisfy residents’ functional needs and indicates to which degree residents are dependent on places and thus willing to stay in a place (Anton and Lawrence, 2014).

Place attachment can thus foster different forms of (attitudinal, behavioural) resident-place relationships. Alexander and Hamilton (2016) for instance show that civic engagement and

community participation can result from people's personal identification with places. Chen and Dwyer (2018) find that place attachment influences residents' word-of-mouth, ambassador behaviour, and participation in tourism planning. Ramkissoon et al. (2013), on the other hand, establish a link between place attachment and pro-environmental behaviours.

However, prior research in the field of place marketing and branding has neglected how residents' place attachment affects their consumption patterns (Tasci, 2020). In fact, positive attitudes and preference for local products and shops may be a result of residents' ties with their places (Miller, 1998; 2001), which means that residents may preferably choose products and firms from their geographic area as a result of being attached to their place of residence, "with the aim of supporting the local economy" (Yildiz et al., 2018; 139-140). A better understanding of this link is thus required for place marketing and branding, as many promotional campaigns aim to strengthen local place brands (Iversen and Hem, 2008).

A place brand equity perspective to analyse resident-place relationships

As strategic tools for influencing the perceptions of places, place marketing and place branding have been extensively used to develop place brands (Medway and Warnaby, 2008). The conception of place brands generally requires a thorough understanding of how different user groups of places, and residents in particular, experience places (Braun et al., 2013). Since few studies in place marketing and branding have put resident-place relationships and its potential outcomes in the focus of the investigation, it becomes critical to better understand how such place relationships can be managed (Hanna and Rowley, 2013).

Previous studies (e.g., Boo et al., 2009; Coelho et al., 2020) have attempted to provide such insights by using the concept of brand equity in a place context. Brand equity theory offers a holistic perspective on how attributed place meanings and place evaluations influence interactions between the users of places and place brands (Florek and Kavartzis, 2014).

Considering local residents as active agents in the construction of place-related meanings thus underlines the relational aspects of value attribution in place marketing and branding, which has not yet been fully explored in the context of place brand equity. Put differently, further research is necessary to reconcile the existing attempts to measure place brand equity and to derive relevant dimensions that prove valid in research contexts beyond cities, also taking into account how the populations of rural communities or towns attribute value to places.

Most of the existing studies into place brand equity have either relied on qualitative approaches, including interview analysis (e.g., Donner et al., 2014) and analysis of social media (e.g., Belenioti et al., 2019), or quantitative methods based on conjoint analysis (Shafranskaya and Potapov, 2014), regression analysis (Jacobsen, 2012) and measurement scale development (e.g., Konecik and Gartner, 2007; Bose et al., 2016). Yet, existing measures of place brand equity are inconclusive with regard to its constituents (Benedek, 2020). As observed by Górska-Warsewicz (2020), existing studies have struggled in identifying and measuring common dimensions of resident-based place brand equity. For instance, Bose et al.'s (2018) place brand equity model contains the dimensions "place brand salience", "perceived quality" and "place brand engagement", while Coelho et al.'s (2020) model includes the domains "image", "identity", "attachment" and "satisfaction". Another issue is that existing models of place brand equity often rely on established product branding dimensions without problematising whether these constructs actually fit to the (spatial) aspects of places and residents as target groups of marketing and branding (Jacobsen, 2012).

Taking into account residents' interaction with their local living environments is however crucial, since existing research (e.g., Samuel et al., 2018) highlights that residents are a fundamental stakeholder group in defining what places mean and in the consumption of place-related products. It is thus necessary to establish a solid understanding of the place

aspects that are valuable for residents across different types of places and to provide insights into how the perception of such aspects defines residents' place relationships.

Hypotheses development

As outlined in the introduction, our research first aims to develop an empirical model that shows which place aspects add value to residential life. Merrilees et al. (2009) find in this context that especially nature and environmental attributes, social bonding and cultural activities are important when residents evaluate their place of residence. While amenities, infrastructures and economic factors also represent relevant place aspects (e.g., Delgado and de Quevedo, 2018; Gilboa et al., 2015), cultural dynamics, social aspects and environmental factors can be even more critical with regard to (residential) place attractiveness (Romão et al., 2018). In fact, social interaction possibilities, cultural offerings and access to natural environments are tied to the liveability of residential places, putting emphasis on the (hedonic) qualities and thus leisure value of residential places (Merrilees et al., 2009), while job opportunities for instance often fulfil rather aspirational purposes. According to Chen (2019), socio-cultural and natural place attributes constitute relevant elements of place brand equity and have the potential to be transformed into promising place brand themes.

Social interaction possibilities, cultural offerings and environmental attributes are thus supposed to inform residents' attitudes towards places (Merrilees et al., 2009; 2012) and foster an affective connection between residents and places that is expressed by residents' attachment to their place of residence (Zenker and Petersen, 2014). We thus hypothesise that access to nature, cultural activities and social bonding enhance residents' place attachment:

H1a: Access to nature increases residents' place attachment

H1b: Cultural activities increases residents' place attachment

H1c: Social bonding increases residents' place attachment

Residents' affective relationships with places are likely to influence their place-supportive behaviours (e.g., Chen and Dwyer, 2018). While prior research has focused on the effects of place attachment on pro-environmental behaviours for instance (e.g., Ramkissoon et al., 2013), there is a gap in the literature with regard to how residents' place attachment affects their consumption attitudes and preferences in their place of residence (e.g., Miller, 2001). In fact, residents expressing high levels of place attachment tend to show pro-local consumption preferences as they support local businesses (Mullis and Kim, 2011). This observation seems logically plausible, since residents' pro-place attitudes might increase their willingness to support the place financially by engaging in some form of consumer localism (Yildiz et al., 2018; Miller, 2001). Yet, few studies in place marketing and branding have investigated the link between residents' affective place-relationships and consumption attitudes (Tasci, 2020). Furthermore, as noted by Yildiz et al. (2018), previous research on the relationship between place attachment and local in-shopping has provided inconsistent results. Mullis and Kim (2011) for instance found no significant direct relationship between community attachment and local shopping behaviour, making additional research that tests the link between attachment and place-supportive consumption patterns necessary. We thus propose that residents' attachment to places informs their pro-local consumption preferences:

H2: Residents' place attachment increases consumer localism

Prior studies (e.g., Ramkissoon et al. 2013; Ramkissoon and Movando 2015) have proposed that place attachment mediates the empirical relationships between positive place evaluations and place-supportive behaviours. The rationale for this conceptualisation is that residents' place-supportive attitudes are usually grounded in positive evaluations of physical and non-physical properties of places (Romão et al., 2018). Focusing on place attachment as a

mediating variable offers a new contribution to the place marketing and branding literature as it establishes a link between cognitive, affective and attitudinal domains, and extends prior research into the antecedents and outcomes of place attachment (e.g., Lewicka, 2011).

As shown in Figure 1, we thus propose that residents' place attachment is influenced by the perception of valuable place attributes (i.e., access to natural areas, cultural offerings, social bonding) and expected to foster pro-place consumption attitudes. Residents' attachment towards places is expected to act as a mediator of place-supportive consumption attitudes, since a place's social, cultural and physical or natural offerings that are valuable to residents do not only increase residents' affective relationships with places, but also inform their consumption preferences. We thus formulate the following hypotheses:

H3a: Resident-place attachment mediates the relationships between perceptions of access to nature and consumer localism

H3b: Resident-place attachment mediates the relationships between perceptions of cultural activities and consumer localism

H3c: Resident-place attachment mediates the relationships between perceptions of social bonding and consumer localism

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Study 1: Developing and testing a model of place brand equity

Measure development

As outlined before, we use a mixed method design to address our research questions. The first part of our study aims to verify the dimensions of resident-based place brand equity, while the second part aims to explore the testing results on a deeper qualitative level.

In order to first verify the constituents of resident-based place brand equity, we designed an online questionnaire. The questionnaire included measurement items from established scales to avoid redundancy (Hair et al., 2013). Access to nature, social bonding and cultural activities were measured by adapting items from Merrilees et al. (2009; 2012). In order to measure residents' place attachment, we adapted scale items from Droseltis and Vignoles (2010) and Lewicka (2011). Lastly, residents' preference for local products and sellers (i.e., "consumer localism") was measured by adapting items from Yildiz et al.'s (2018) ethnocentrism construct, noting that "consumer localism" was considered as an expression of consumer ethnocentrism with a more spatial connotation.

The scale items were to be rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 ("fully agree") to 5 ("fully disagree"), including a neutral middle point ("don't know/not sure"). In order to avoid sequence effects, item orders were randomised for each participant and negatively worded items were included too (Hair et al., 2013). The survey link was also shared with participants from a pilot study to assess face and content validity. Feedbacks about the comprehensiveness of the questionnaire led to the ejection and re-labelling of multiple items. To mitigate social desirability bias, all participants were informed that data was going to be analysed anonymously without identifying single persons (Hair et al., 2013).

Research approach

For the development of the research model, convenience sampling was used. Data was collected via social online networks. Prospects were invited to take part in the study via postings in social network discussion groups that were related to the target research settings. The samples were thus non-probabilistic, since only web users that were visiting networks in which the survey link was published were part of the final data sample. Convenience or

snowball samples have drawbacks in terms of limited representativeness, but as shown by our research, they are useful to probe new empirical relationships.

Different eligibility criteria were chosen to recruit participants with a certain level of knowledge about their place of residence (e.g., permanent residence in the place, age of at least 18 years). The questionnaire used to collect the data thus included questions about people's relationship with their place of residence (place of birth, etc.), positive and negative place evaluations, people's attachment to the place, and pro-local consumption attitudes.

The data sample was derived from places of different sizes to ensure that the model testing was based on a cross-place sample: A major city (around 600,000 inhabitants), two mid-sized cities (between 150,000 and 230,000 inhabitants), a town (approximately 90,000 inhabitants) and a rural community (almost 10,000 inhabitants). All places were located in Germany.

In total, 597 responses were collected. In order to develop and validate the research model, the full data sample was split into three sub-samples (Hair et al., 2013): A first sample for the model development with factor analysis ($n = 199$), a second one ($n = 199$) for the re-assessment of the factorial structure, and a third sub-sample ($n = 199$) on which confirmatory factor analysis was applied. Following Hair et al. (2013), the full sample ($n = 597$) was used to test structural relationships and mediation effects between the constructs.

In the first step, the data patterns of the 597 responses were checked for normality and outliers (Hair et al., 2013). As shown in the Annex, kurtosis and skewness levels were in the acceptable range of -2 to +2 for kurtosis and -10 to +10 for skewness (Collier, 2020).

Qualifier statistics showed that most participants (71.7%) had lived in the place for more than five years. Most participants were not born in the place (74.5%) or brought up in their place of residence (76.5%), but reported "good" or "very good" familiarity with the place (85.8%).

The sample included a slightly higher percentage of female participants (55.4%) than male participants (41.9%). Most participants were younger than 50 years (77.9%) and had an educational background based on university diploma (54.9%). The social status of most participants was “single” (47.9%) and “married” (35.8%). Most participants were “employed” in terms of professional occupation (55.8%) and did not have children (61.0%).

Research model development

In order to assess the selected scale measures psychometrically, factor analysis in IBM’s SPSS was performed on each of the identified domains (i.e., perceptual, affective and attitudinal). A total of 199 resident responses was used for this purpose. Since the aim of factor analysis was to assess the domains in terms of their common variance, common factor analysis based on principal axis factoring (PAF) was performed. The choice to use principal axis factoring was led by the fact that the research model’s constructs were supposed to be reflective of their measurement items, so that principal components analysis (PCA) was not permissible (Lee and Hooley, 2005).

A cut-off value of .55 for factor loadings was chosen to purify the measures (Hair et al., 2013). This means that all items with loadings of less than .55 were removed one-by-one. As shown in Table 1, setting this threshold resulted into a research model with five factors and 14 items. The rather restrictive cut-off value of .55 led to three factors that were composed of two indicators respectively. However, as the items contained in these factors showed acceptable inter-item correlations and loadings $>.65$ on the respective factor, we decided to retain them and re-assess their psychometric properties. In general, item loadings ranged from .596 to .903 and all factors met the minimum value of .6 for Cronbach alpha. Besides, all factors had variances explained of $>70\%$ (Hair et al., 2013).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Re-assessment of the factorial structure

In order to re-evaluate the derived model structure based on five distinct factors, all retained scale items were again subjected to factor analysis by using a new sample ($n = 199$) in IBM's SPSS (Hair et al., 2013). Since the factorial structure was based on only 14 items and since factor extraction based on eigenvalues is less reliable when the number of items is less than 20 (Hair et al., 2013), the number of factors to be extracted was fixed to "5".

The findings (see Annex) showed that most factor loadings were above the .55 level that was used as a threshold for the first factor analysis. In particular, almost all loadings were above the .45 level that is generally required when using sample sizes of less than 200 responses for item loadings to be significant (Hair et al., 2013). Only one item had a loading below the .45 threshold so that we paid specific attention to the properties of this item in subsequent analyses. The analysis also revealed an acceptable level of item communality, with most values above the .5 threshold (Hair et al., 2013). We therefore decided to retain the used items and constructs based on the results of the re-assessment of the factorial structure.

Validation of the empirical model

In order to further assess the validity and reliability of the model derived from the factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to a new sub-sample of 199 responses. For this purpose, a measurement model was specified in IBM's SPSS AMOS in which all measurement items were reflective of their construct (Hair et al., 2013). For identification purposes, the variance of one item per construct was fixed to "1". Maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was used to estimate the parameters (Collier, 2020).

The model results showed that all inter-factor covariances were positive and significant at least at the $p < .01$ level (Collier, 2020). In order to assess discriminant validity, composite

variables were computed in IBM's SPSS (Collier, 2020). Table 2 and Table 3 show that the squared inter-factor correlations were lower than the average variances extracted of each factor, which proved the model's discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2013).

INSERT TABLE 2 AND TABLE 3 HERE

With regard to convergent validity, Table 3 shows that all factors had average variances extracted $\geq .5$ (Hair et al., 2013). Since this threshold is rather conservative, the convergent validity of constructs might still be adequate as long as composite reliability is $\geq .6$ (Collier, 2020), which was the case for all constructs. An inspection of different model fit indexes (e.g., RMSEA = .065, CFI = .957, IFI = .958) indicated that the model reflected the data well (Collier, 2020). Standardised residuals were also assessed, but no values $> |4|$ were identified, meaning that the model did not seem to suffer from misspecification issues (Collier, 2020).

Structural relationship testing

The next step consisted of testing the structural relationships between the dimensions. For this purpose, the full data sample ($n = 597$) was employed (Hair et al., 2013). Considering prior studies (e.g., Merrilees et al., 2009; 2012), it was first hypothesised that the constructs "access to nature", "cultural activities" and "social bonding" would all have a significant and positive covariance between each other, since these factors were all supposed to reflect resident perceptions of valuable place attributes and thus sources of place brand equity.

The testing results confirmed that "access to nature" and "social bonding" ($\mu = .260$; $p < .001$), "access to nature" and "cultural activities" ($\mu = .226$; $p < .001$), and "social bonding" and "cultural activities" ($\mu = .350$; $p < .001$) indeed had significant covariances.

In the next step, a higher order confirmatory factor model was specified in IBM's SPSS AMOS in which "access to nature", "cultural activities" and "social bonding" were linked to

a higher-order factor “place perception” whose variance was fixed at 1 (Collier, 2020). It was hypothesised that all three factors would significantly load on the higher-order factor.

The model testing results confirmed that “access to nature” ($\beta = .668$; $p < .001$), “cultural activities” ($\beta = .687$; $p < .001$) and “social bonding” ($\beta = .960$; $p < .001$) had a positive and significant relationship with the higher-order factor “place perception”. Model fit indices showed that the model reflected the data well (e.g., NFI = .942, CFI = .949, IFI = .950). Our data thus confirmed that the retained measures for access to nature, cultural activities, and social bonding formed a scale reflecting resident perceptions of valuable place aspects (i.e., sources of resident-based place brand equity) that was developed in a cross-place context.

In order to establish a link between these perceptual domains, resident-place attachment and attitudinal outcome variables (i.e., consumer localism), all three perceptual domains were specified in a new structural model as antecedents of resident-place attachment. As stated in the hypotheses development, we expected that residents’ perceptions of access to nature, cultural offerings and social bonding opportunities foster residents’ place attachment.

The findings (Table 4) confirmed that favourable perceptions of “access to nature” ($\beta = .479$; $p < .001$), “cultural activities” ($\beta = .183$; $p < .01$), and “social bonding” ($\beta = .233$; $p < .01$) were positively and significantly related to residents’ place attachment.

As outlined before, we also expected that place attachment leads to consumer localism.

The testing results showed that this hypothesis was also validated ($\beta = .384$; $p < .001$).

Fit indices showed that the model reflected the data well (e.g., RMSEA = .052; CFI = .969).

In order to assess whether residents’ affective attachment to their place of residence was indeed a mediator of the linkages between the perceptual place domains and consumer localism, mediation tests were performed in IBM’s SPSS AMOS. As recommended by

Collier (2020), bootstrapping and the bias-corrected percentile method were used, which treats the sample like a pseudo-population and then takes a random sample with replacement to identify if an indirect effect lies within a certain confidence interval ($p < .05$).

The results revealed that access to nature had a non-significant direct effect ($\mu = -.226$; $p = .122$) on consumer localism, but a significant indirect effect ($\mu = .390$; lower bound = .232; upper bound = .665; $p < .001$). Besides, cultural activities had a non-significant direct effect ($\mu = .104$; $p = .196$), but a significant indirect effect ($\mu = .075$; lower bound = .027; upper bound = .156; $p < .05$) on consumer localism. Finally, social bonding had a non-significant direct effect ($\mu = -.055$; $p = .604$) on consumer localism, but a significant indirect effect ($\mu = .134$; lower bound = .026; upper bound = .275; $p < .05$). In summary, the mediation testing confirmed that place attachment acted as a full mediator of all structural relationships.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Multiple assessments of common method bias were performed. First, a factor analysis of all scale items did not yield a factor accounting for more than 50% of the variance (Hair et al., 2013). Second, confirmatory factor analysis was applied to a model in which all items were linked to one common factor (Collier, 2020). The findings showed that fit indices deteriorated a lot in the one-factor-model. Third, we also added a distinctive latent factor (“housing & facility infrastructure”) to our empirical model and performed confirmatory factor analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The testing results indicated relatively low levels of correlation, suggesting that common method variance was not having a major impact.

Summary of the quantitative study

Our quantitative study addresses research questions 1 and 2 by showing that resident perceptions of valuable (leisure) place attributes, such as access to nature, cultural activities

and social bonding, predict their affective place attachment, which results into consumer localism. These findings confirm prior assumptions about the sources of place brand equity, but go beyond existing studies in establishing an effect between place attachment and pro-place consumption attitudes. Since prior research has come short in exploring the processes through which residents attribute residential value to the aforementioned place attributes (research question 3), we address this limitation in the following qualitative study.

Study 2: Qualitative exploration of how residents attribute value

This second study aims to provide novel insights into how the identified place attributes (access to nature, cultural activities, social bonding) become valuable for residents. By doing so, Study 2 examines the quantitative findings of Study 1 on a deeper theoretical level (Bryman, 2006), allowing us to unpack the processes through which residents attribute value to specific place aspects. Thus, a phenomenological view (Flick, 2014) that investigates residents' subjective accounts of emplaced experiences underpins our qualitative study.

In total, 32 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in two places in Germany were carried out (average length: 48 minutes). In order to derive cross-place insights, we selected the city with approximately 600,000 inhabitants and the rural community with approximately 10,000 inhabitants as research settings in which we also collected data for the model testing. A total of 36 persons were interviewed, since two interviews were conducted with two interviewees (i.e., married couples) and one interview was held with a mother and her daughters. The sample included persons with different social situations (e.g., single, married), education degrees (e.g., school, university) and professional backgrounds (employee, etc.) (Table 5).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with small paper adverts published in publically accessible locations (e.g., supermarkets). The sampling was purposive in the sense that it served to recruit individuals fulfilling certain criteria of interest for the purpose of this

study: Familiarity with the place, length of residence, etc. Interview responses were collected until theoretical saturation was inferred from the data, which means that the data collection continued until we identified recurring response patterns (Flick, 2014).

The interview guide was informed by previous studies into place marketing and branding (Merrilees et al., 2012; Bose et al., 2018; Zenker et al., 2013) and environmental psychology (Manzo, 2003; Potter and Cantarero, 2006). The interview questions thus focused on a person's relationship with the place (identification with the place, etc.), evaluations of place aspects and behavioural predispositions (place-supportive attitudes, consumption behaviours, etc.). Demographic data was collected at the end of the conversation (see Annex).

The interviews were arranged as an open dialogue, following a narrative approach that gave participants much freedom to elaborate in-depth accounts of their lived experiences in their place (Flick, 2014). The conversations started with informing participants about data privacy and confidentiality. The transcripts were analysed with thematic analysis using QSR's NVivo and following the procedural recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process started with transcribing and (re-)reading the transcripts, using an iterative approach of coding and analysing while at the same time collecting further data. The coding process was followed by grouping text passages into categories and identifying links between categories (Flick, 2014). When coding the data, attention was paid to include residents' verbatim to support emergent findings, which we present in the following section.

Findings from the qualitative study

The interview findings show that residents attribute residential value to their living environments through processes of co-creation based on their continuous interaction with the place and its (social, physical, etc.) aspects. In particular, our analysis unveils that residents co-create the perceived value of their place of residence on the individual, group and societal

level. We thus conceptualise our findings in a framework (Figure 2) illustrating how residents co-create the residential value of their living environments and showing how individual perceptions (micro level) inform group perceptions (meso level) and result into collective representations (macro level). We explain each of these levels in the following sections.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Co-creation at the individual level

Evaluating their place of residence “as a place to live in” (Merrilees et al., 2012; 1096), our data first of all shows that residents’ perceptions of valuable place attributes such as access to nature, cultural activities and social bonding opportunities were shaped by their personal interaction with such attributes. Depending on their personal expectations and interests, various informants for instance reported how well they perceived the cultural offerings of their place and confirmed that such offerings strengthened their place-supportive attitudes:

“I moved here relatively recently... [the cultural offer] is so wide-ranging here from music, festivals in general... mass events... Jazz Open... here is everything I need... I don’t miss anything... it is simply worth having the mentioned offer.” (Steven)

“If you grew up here [you get to know the local] cafés, jazz-club, then of course the singing club, music club, library events, then we have the culture days every year, starting soon, our association also organises events... this is also an enrichment... I think that life here is worth something for us.” (Marta)

As illustrated by Marta and Steven, cultural offerings add residential value to places, as they fulfilled residents’ needs for entertainment and diversion. Participants from both the urban and rural sample also illustrated how they co-created the environmental value of their place. Through their regular walks, Harald and Sina for instance found that natural places offer (physical, mental) benefits, increasing their attachment to and support for the place:

“I like to walk around, and sometimes go here and there... this great hilly landscape is fabulous, you rarely have that in Germany... and then so much loosed green that isn't popped up with skyscrapers, super (...) I have to say I am very connected to [the city].” (Harald)

“There is something [special] here, you can get your head free, go for a coffee... there is a lot of nature... I think it's good that a lot of fruits and vegetables are also planted here so I'll use [buy, consume] that... I'm satisfied to live here and also happy because it fulfills everything I need in my everyday life.” (Sina)

George and Eugen also explained how their interaction with social place aspects created residential value. Both explained that the presence of others provided social resources that addressed salient needs in specific life situations. George enjoyed that social contacts facilitated his integration in the city, while Eugen appreciated a trusted community network to rely upon. Their social contacts also seemed to foster attachment and pro-place attitudes:

“I applied here again, came back... then I had so many friends... that was in June, and it was sunny, I was in such a trainee program ... with 40 people, young people. We (...) did a lot together, celebrated... much was offered, and then I got to know [the city] from a completely different side and learned to love it.” (George)

“I feel comfortable here, here I am, here I know myself, here, I have connections to people and here I can go to the town hall, the mayor knows me, the majority of the municipal council knows me and I have to all a certain connection... yes, we basically buy what is possible here [from local providers].” (Eugen)

At the individual level, our interviews thus illustrate that residents' interaction with specific place-related aspects that fulfil salient (social, etc.) needs of residents constitutes the basis for attributing residential value to places and thus place brand equity. Our findings suggest that when residents accumulate favourable experiences in their place, they tend to construct representational meanings that result into value attribution to specific place aspects.

Co-creation at the group level

Our interview analysis further suggests that residents' value attribution to place aspects such as access to nature, cultural activities or social bonding on the individual level was

strengthened at the group level. In particular, residents' constructed place image, resulting from their interactions with place attributes, led them to engage in some kind of reflectivity of how their place is distinctive or better vis-à-vis to other places (Zenker and Petersen, 2014). Residents thus developed in-group and out-group reflections (Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010), as many participants explained how they preferred their place of residence over other places:

“Here everything is simply big... the leisure activities... culture... the neighbourhood, living with each other, the green belt... all this together is the peculiarity [of this city], you won't find it anywhere elsewhere... as I said I have lived for a long time also in [other cities], not comparable to here.” (Steven)

“[This place] is always very attractive... I like to compare it with the [neighbour town]... probably it is also due to the association work. There are actually people that have always lived and stayed here because they find it nice and good here... there is pretty much everything offered here... the feeling of home is probably such a thing where you feel lifted; that you know, if you need help, there are always enough people to talk to...” (Chris)

As shown by Steven and Chris, residents' common perception that their place of residence was offering more than other places, which was grounded in salient perceptions of the places' socio-cultural possibilities in this case, seemed to reinforce their affective ties with the place.

At the same time, our interviews suggested that a more varied set of participants within the urban sample co-created the perceived residential value of the socio-cultural offerings of cities compared to smaller places. As shown by David, for instance, this comparison seemed to reassure participants as they identified themselves as “urbanites” that value the socio-cultural options of cities, while rural areas were believed to be less diverse or stimulating:

“It's just a difference like day and night, here (...) you have a cultural offer and leisure activities that don't exist in the rural... usually in the countryside you say "hey, in a week we go to barbecue" and that's it. Here you can just go to the art exhibition, to the cinema... It's definitely charming, I find it quite nice.” (David)

In a similar vein, Hannelore argued that the feeling of living in the state capital, with all its cultural and administrative offerings, made the place more attractive than other places:

“I mean well, the state capital always has advantages compared to other places, we have the theatre, we have the opera, we have concert halls... the cultural possibilities simply correspond to my needs, and therefore, I would never move away again... I feel strongly connected with the city.” (Hannelore)

However, within the rural sample, Sina was also complacent of the socio-cultural possibilities of her place of residence, which she found more attractive than her home town:

“The big difference [to other places] is that you have much club life here... the place where I come from, it's much quieter...this here is a big village (...) that offers a lot of club life, that is animated a lot.” (Sina)

Jill's account further shows that various participants within the rural sample highlighted the advantages of living in the countryside versus other types of (urban) places. In this context, natural “compensation areas” were considered as crucial prerequisite for attractive places:

“We feel comfortable [here]... I also find our orchards very beautiful, these fruit belts around the village (...) I find it beautiful to experience the seasons. From an ecological view it is valuable... [we support local farmers] who probably need additional earnings, specifically if they sell their fruits.” (Jill)

In summary, participants from both samples expressed how individual place interactions resulted into more visibly shared group representations of places, which were mobilised to co-create the attributes that mark the uniqueness or distinctiveness of their place compared to other (types of) places and thus its perceived place brand equity. Participants thus explained how their identification with the place characterised their perception that the place was in some sense even more valuable from a residential value view than other places in the region.

Co-creation at the societal level

Our interviews further explain that residents' value attribution that unfolds at the group level results into aggregated place representations on an even broader, societal level. In particular,

our findings suggest that the symbolic significance of places in the minds of residents resulted into representational narratives that seemed to create and sustain the image of places, which, in turn, seemed to influence residents' beliefs about the place. Our interviews thus show that collective place representations were extended from a regional to a wider geographical scale (e.g., inter-/national level), so that the salience of specific place aspects provided the basis for co-creating representational images on the macro level. For instance, several participants, like Lara, reflected about the representational power of their place compared to other (inter-)national places. Even though she believed that the city did not have an "outstanding" international reputation, she often "defended" its pleasant way of life:

"[The city] is actually a pleasant place to live, but it's not kind of such an outstanding city that leaves a special impression... it doesn't have such outstanding sites like Munich, which is more interesting... from an international view.... but yes, I identify with the city here." (Lara)

Considering their perception of which local place aspects might best represent and emphasize the value of the place on a wider societal level, our findings suggest that the meanings unfolding in the context of resident-place interactions can become self-reinforcing due to the co-existence of real and imagined attributes (Soja, 1996). In fact, many participants were wondering about an appropriate way to summarise or describe what the place stands for. In the urban sample, Susanne for instance reflected that the city's former marketing slogan was "big city between forests and vineyards". While the size aspect ("big city") and nature ("forests and vineyards") were deemed appropriate by many informants, negative place aspects such as traffic networks were also highlighted, showing that abstractions of places are co-produced, but also negotiated (Hatch and Kavaratzis, 2013), as discussed by Susanne:

"It is true, we are the capital of traffic jams, and we are the ones with the dirtiest corners.... now if I would work in city marketing, I would advertise that we have the largest amount of mineral water in Europe, we have the largest share of forest." (Susanne)

Rural residents highlighted in this respect that the perceived environmental quality of rural landscapes can be a strong representational asset in favour of such types of places. Naomi, for instance, explained that while rural places are often believed to be less modern, many people, even urbanites, actually liked the environmental value of such places:

“A lot of people actually like the rural, so the moment you say "it's beautiful there, here you have a natural landscape, you don't have any fine dust, here you have something to like", then people find it positive again... depends on whether you prefer the rural or urban environment... For me, it is just where I come from... where I feel comfortable.” (Naomi)

The co-creation of places' representational power on the societal level was also reinforced as residents extended place attributes to the local population. Informants from both samples summarised how the locals in the region are often perceived on an (inter-)national level:

“Not so flippy, but still somehow progressive and also modern... almost cosmopolitan, also interested, but also traditional, also aware of what they have... rather diligent, very performance-oriented and ... planned... committed people live here... I never worry too much if it would be better elsewhere.” (Christine)

“So I think per se, [people here] are rather a bit reserved at the beginning, but when you have taken the first hurdles, people are open-minded, cordial, honest... down-to-earth, reliable, and [committed]... the location, family, even neighbours, friends; this is the feeling of home for me.” (Eleonore)

To conclude, participants expressed how specific (social, cultural, environmental, etc.) place aspects were transformed into common place representations at the societal level. These perceptions affected the reputational power and thus also the brand equity of places, as residents commonly co-created and negotiated their meaning in terms of residential value.

Discussion

In summary, the quantitative part of this research argues that access to nature, cultural activities and social bonding increase residents' place attachment, which mediates place-

supportive attitudes in the form of pro-local consumption attitudes. The qualitative part complements these findings by suggesting that residents co-create the value of these place aspects through personal interactions with their place of residence and by attributing meaning to place characteristics at the individual (micro), group (meso) and societal (macro) level.

Theoretical contributions

Based on the aforementioned findings, our research extends prior research into place brand equity (e.g., Bose et al., 2018; Coelho et al., 2020) by showing which attributes of places foster favourable resident perceptions and resident-place relationships in terms of increasing residents' place attachment and pro-local consumption preferences. Tasci (2020) notices the lack of empirical insights into the link between affective consumer dimensions and financial outcomes. The present research fills this gap by providing evidence on the relationships between cognitive, affective and attitudinal domains, offering a new empirical model that is not restricted to perceptual domains such as place image, as it enables a more holistic view on the processes through which residents evaluate their place of residence. The present study thus extends existing place marketing and branding research that relied on case-specific investigations and solely used qualitative research methods, by offering an empirical model that was tested based on a cross-place sample (Hanna and Rowley, 2013).

Furthermore, this study provides new insights into how the local population of different types of places engages with its place, which existing literature on place brand equity has tended to overlook (Tasci, 2020). We thus advance prior research (e.g., Merrilees et al., 2012; Bose et al., 2016) by demonstrating that residents co-create the perceived value of places as they attribute meaning to different place aspects through their (regular, sometimes lifelong) interactions and relationships with them. The elements that residents evaluate and appreciate in their place (identified by this study as access to nature, cultural activities and social

bonding) play a crucial role in co-creation processes because, as residents attribute (symbolic) value to specific place aspects, they actively participate in the representational construction of place brands. This means that the factors discussed here are not only valuable for defining place brand equity (Florek and Kavaratzis, 2014) but also help understand what residents value as resources in the co-creation process. Our study thus establishes a link between place brand equity and place brand co-creation, which has not been fully evident in extant literature.

Thus, this study equips marketing scholars with an enhanced understanding of how residents evaluate places and how such evaluations result into resident attachment and place-supportive attitudes, which not only constitute resident-based place brand equity but also become their input into the place brand co-creation process. Our study thus extends prior research (e.g., Casidy et al., 2019; Alexander and Hamilton, 2016) by showing how residents' engagement and identification with a place's perceived attributes become the basis for co-producing place representations on the group and societal levels. This implies that place brands cannot be considered as the mere product of a marketing team or authority but, rather, as the outcome of a dynamic process between a place's stakeholders (e.g., residents) and the place's attributes (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). This assertion can be considered as a relevant attempt to respond to Reynolds et al.'s (2023) call on the opportunity to give due recognition to the role and contribution of local stakeholders in place branding and marketing.

Managerial implications

Based on its empirical results, this study can inspire three main sets of implications for public marketers and place branding managers. First, we showed that place perceptions are informed by the (favourable) perception of local attributes that constitute the value added of places and foster affective ties between residents and places. A strategic approach towards place (brand)

management is thus to instrumentalise local attributes (e.g., cultural offerings, environmental quality) to forge place attachment. Our interview findings suggested that cultural activities and social ties for instance can be a great opportunity to create resident interactions with places, which implies that place marketing managers should try to promote such (public) opportunities for residents to experience their places.

The research model equally demonstrates that place attachment is likely to favour residents' support for local shops and products (Mullis and Kim, 2011; Miller, 2001). Demonstrating the link between intangible and perceptual domains and consumption preferences, which is explained by residents' attachment to places, can be helpful for place brand managers in retaining their funds for future promotional campaigns (Tasci, 2020). It is important to acknowledge in this context that the research settings represent economically "affluent areas". Nevertheless, as shown by prior research (e.g., Samuel et al., 2022), residents do not only conceive their place in terms of its functional (or aspirational) offerings, but also in terms of its potential to afford socio-cultural experiences that satisfy different types of needs.

Second, empirical investigations (e.g., Zenker, 2014) show that practitioners are reluctant to adopt academic constructs, whereas standardised measurement tools might be a solution to perform cross-place benchmarks and performance tracking over time. Measurement scales are useful to investigate residents' place evaluations as "each brand association is quantifiable to give diagnostic feedback" (Merrilees et al., 2009; 363). Since marketing practitioners often lack "a proper success measurement for assessing the results" of branding expenditure (Zenker, 2014; 158), there is a need to offer new empirical models.

Our research also shows that if assessments of positive and negative place perceptions are paired with other forms of research focusing on the substance of such attributes and how they potentially change over time, place brand managers obtain in-depth insights into how their

place is perceived (Florek and Kavaratzis, 2014). Thus, we suggest that marketing managers should use standardised performance measures in combination with inductive (qualitative) approaches to better understand the essence of the meaning of places in the eyes of residents and further improve the place's offerings (Zenker et al., 2013).

Third, and in line with Alexander and Hamilton (2016), we suggest that place marketing and branding initiatives should empower residents to become an active part in the co-creation of latent knowledge and representations around the place. Especially public policy makers should be interested in place attributes that enhance residents' experience of places, since local residents are powerful stakeholders of places (Reynolds et al., 2022; Braun et al., 2013).

Place brand equity theory offers a holistic understanding of how attributed place meanings affect resident-place relationships and inform residents' attitudes towards places (Florek and Kavaratzis, 2014), which enables a more effective place brand management. Our research thus emphasizes that involving resident views in the assessment of place brands is crucial for place brand equity. Since residents interact with their place on a daily basis, they can define the whole place product and so co-create place-related value (Warnaby, 2009). Involving residents in place branding thus offers many opportunities for authorities, as they may become place ambassadors and develop brand responsibility (Braun et al., 2013).

Limitations and further research avenues

While the present research has offered new empirical insights, different limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the data samples used for this research were based on convenience sampling. The findings of this study should thus be confirmed in new contexts with new samples. Further research may re-test and further develop the research model by including additional items for measuring place perceptions in order to substantiate its external and predictive validity in places with different characteristics. As mentioned by Górska-

Warsewicz (2020), we recognise that place brand equity can be conceptualised in a number of different ways. Furthermore, the use of an inversed scale for the measurement items, which aimed to address sequence effects, might have confused survey participants and impacted the reliability of our quantitative data.

Our model showed that consumer localism was an outcome of place attachment, but it also needs to be acknowledged that consumer localism might depend on which products can be bought and supplied locally. Besides, we recognise that the used measurement items for localism gauge attitudes rather than actual behaviours or specific intentions.

Future research may therefore test other place-supportive outcomes of place attachment and so extend this study and prior research (e.g., Ramkisson et al., 2013; Chen and Dwyer, 2018) by integrating other concepts into models of place brand equity such as urban liveability (e.g., Martinez-Bravo et al., 2019). Future research may also explore in greater detail how place brand equity is linked to the concept of place brand co-creation (e.g., Kavartzis and Hatch, 2013). By putting local populations and other stakeholders' engagement with places in the focus (e.g., Reynolds et al., 2022), further research into the link between place brand equity and co-creation can pave the way for a renewed debate about participatory approaches in place marketing and branding.

Declaration of interests

Not applicable, no conflicts of interests to be declared.

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