What’s Love Got to Do with It? Place Brand Love and Viral Videos

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim is to explore the role of brand love in place brand communication by incorporating potential antecedents and behavioral outcomes of place brand love in a social media setting.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were gathered from 281 residents and visitors of a place through an online survey focusing on a place brand video. Structural equation modelling was employed to examine the research model.

Findings – Results show that place brand love has a strong direct relationship with positive word-of-mouth, and an indirect effect on intention to share the place brand message. Self-expressiveness of the place brand message also seems to influence place brand love as well as intention to share the message.

Research limitations/implications – The role of self-related concepts and brand love to a place has theoretical implications for research in place branding and eWOM. The study has limitations to its generalizability in terms of cultural aspects and sample representativeness.

Practical implications – Place marketers need to successfully reflect the self-concept of key stakeholders in communication messages in order to increase the probability that recipients will engage in positive word-of-mouth and share the message.

Originality/value – Research on place brand love is scarce and previous studies have focused solely on brand love in connection to tourists. The main contribution of the current study is the exploration of the role of brand love in connection to residents, who are vital co-creators of the place brand.

Keywords Place brand love, Identity theory, Social identity theory, Self-congruity theory, Self-brand congruity, Self-expressiveness, Word-of-mouth, Message sharing, Intention to forward, Social media, Viral marketing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Place branding, which concerns place identity creation and place image management (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013), is a relatively new and growing field of research. Competition for tourists, investors, companies, residents, and qualified workforce has increased over time (Braun et al., 2014). Places therefore need to differentiate themselves from each other externally to attract resources and achieve various economic, political, or socio-psychological objectives (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). However, since branding concerns identity as well as power, places also need to instill a sense of belonging into their residents and communicate a clear self-concept internally (van Ham, 2008). Place brands encompass “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design” (Zenker and Braun, 2010, p. 3). Thus, place branding is a means to create or influence a place image in the minds of target audiences (Rainisto, 2003). Since places are so complex and multifaceted, involving many different stakeholders with highly varying needs and objectives, place branding comes with unique challenges compared to the branding of goods and services (Demirbag Kaplan et al., 2010; Vuignier, 2017).

While the majority of research in place branding has focused on an external visitor (tourism) perspective (e.g., Usakli and Baloglu, 2011), the internal perspective of place residents has more recently gained attention (Balakrishnan, 2009). Extant research suggests that residents are vital in the formation and communication of place brands (e.g., Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Zenker et al., 2017; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014), and have a pivotal role to play as online place ambassadors (Uchinaka et al., 2019). In their role as internal stakeholders, residents are considered the ”first customers” of a place. As such, they internalize and deliver the corporate brand values (Sartori et al., 2012), and they personally reflect the core values and influence the experience of a place (O’Leary and Deegan, 2003). Local residents have detailed first-hand knowledge of a place (Zenker et al., 2017) and are naturally considered to be
informal, authentic, and the most believable insider sources of information about the place. This makes them not only important ambassadors but also co-creators of the place brand communication and brand experience (Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012). Hence, there is a need to understand why residents become brand ambassadors and engage in word-of-mouth communication (Braun et al., 2013; Sartori et al., 2012). The commitment of residents is considered crucial for tourism to be sustainable, especially for small communities and medium-sized, non-capital cities that are dependent on tourism for their economic viability (Uchinaka et al., 2019).

Research shows that both cognitive and affective place image factors have a positive effect on word-of-mouth intentions for residents and tourists alike. However, affective image tends to have a more enduring effect (Papadimitriou et al., 2018). While emotional dimensions of people’s feelings toward a place have been studied in the form of place attachment (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Zenker and Rütter, 2014), the concept of brand love has only very recently been addressed within the area of place branding, and not yet investigated in relation to residents. The brand love construct helps explain and predict variation in desirable post-consumption behaviors among satisfied consumers (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). In product branding contexts, it is proposed to have a positive effect on co-creation (Kauffmann et al., 2016), and has been shown to positively influence word-of-mouth (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Ismail and Spinelli, 2012). From a destination perspective, Swanson (2017) found that tourists who had developed feelings of love for destinations and their brands tended to maintain those relationships and displayed increased loyalty and visitation intentions. A recent study also indicated that domestic tourists’ destination brand love had emotional as well as behavioral effects, including attitudinal and behavioral loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Aro et al., 2018).

While conventional, “offline”, word-of-mouth naturally becomes limited to people one already is acquainted with, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) makes it possible for the message to quickly reach a large number of people; known as well as unknown (Camarero and San José, 2011). Hence, in the context of place branding, social media provide great opportunities for residents to easily transmit messages, contribute to discussions, and reinforce or reject messages about their place (Braun et al., 2013). When a message reaches a wider audience, spreads at a greater speed, and receives a more positive response amongst individuals, it is considered to be “viral” (Camarero and San José, 2011; Vilpponen et al., 2006). As this also means that consumers assume the cost or effort of spreading the message (Camarero and San José, 2011; Hinz et al., 2011), achieving such positive organic eWOM is of huge interest to businesses and organizations.

Although many studies in place branding have focused on various indicators of motivations and activities of social media users, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, none have studied brand love in relation to place brand communication. Research suggests that messages are more likely to be forwarded and become viral when they evoke emotion (Dobele et al., 2007); thus, brand love could potentially play an important role in the marketing of places. Against this background, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of brand love in place brand communication by incorporating potential antecedents as well as behavioral outcomes of place brand love in a social media setting. In doing so, we address traditional word-of-mouth as well as eWOM. The study focuses on consumers who are already familiar with the place, which involves perspectives of residents, former residents, and frequent visitors. The theoretical scope of the study is delineated in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). All concepts are described and explained in the following section.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1 Place brand communication and consumers’ place identity
The communication of a place brand can be divided into three different aspects. Primary communication concerns the place’s physics and actions (including that of residents), while secondary communication is the formal promotional communication of the place, and tertiary communication refers to
communication not controlled by the place’s marketers (Kavaratzis, 2004). As Braun et al. (2013) state, residents are a vital part of forming the place brand by negotiating and communicating the brand identity and offer, as well as by constituting a part of the brand experience. In essence, the place image and place experience are thus co-created prior to, during, and after actual exchange(s) and use(s).

People’s role identities, as well as their social identities, influence their perceptions, emotions, and behavior (Stets and Burke, 2000). Places are considered tightly connected to the self-concept and identity and constitutes a part of forming in-groups (such as residents) and out-groups (non-residents) (Stets and Burke, 2000). The community place identity helps the individual to position the self in the social environment in terms of belonging and attachment vs. differentiation, as well as in terms of interpretation and expression of the self, partly in order to enhance their self-esteem (Hummon, 1990). This dual nature of identity – affiliating and differentiating – enables goals of identity and identification (Hummon, 1990). In this way, there is both an internal and an external dimension to the use of place in individuals’ formation and communication of identity. Similarly, there is an internal and external dimension in the participatory process of residents co-creating a place. The current study thus rests on the tenets of three inter-related theories: identity theory (Sirgy, 1982), social identity theory (Abrams and Hogg, 1990), and self-congruity theory (Sirgy et al., 1997). The theoretical foundation captures both the perceived image match between the individual’s self-identity and the image of residents, and the perceived ability of an online advertisement to express the personal identity of an individual to others.

This self-expressiveness fulfills inner needs of self-esteem and self-consistency, as well as social needs of feeling and communicating in-group belonging. In turn, this is dependent on a self-congruity evaluation as well as an evaluation of how the individual wants to be perceived by others.

2.2 Place brand love

Brand love is a relatively recent concept (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015), with roots in the research by Belk (1988) on the internalization of possessions into the extended self, and by Fournier (1998) on the intimate relationships that consumers may form with brands. First defined by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), the brand love construct concerns the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand. Hence, brand love is much more intense than simply liking a brand. The construct is considered to involve an integration or assimilation of the brand into the individual’s sense of identity (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Beyond self-brand integration, brand love also comprises a component of positive emotional connection or attachment to the brand, and passion-driven behaviors such as the willingness to invest resources in a brand (Batra et al., 2012). A person cannot feel love toward a brand if it is not liked and valued highly (Batra et al., 2012). It is thus purely a measure of positive affect and excludes negative brand feelings (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Not only does brand love involve an integration of the brand into the self, but identification with the brand also has a positive influence on brand love (Albert and Merunka, 2013). The more a brand reflects a consumer’s inner and social self, the stronger the brand love (Huber et al., 2015).

As stated, place is an important part of human identity (Proshansky et al., 1983), and important places may become vital to our self-definition (Stedman, 2002). Emotional bonds to a place may develop independently of residence time and has been found to exist for both residents and visitors of the place (Cheng and Kuo, 2015; Lewicka, 2011). While emotions and attachment seem to be overlapping in the marketing literature, environmental psychology and tourism research has identified emotions in relation to places as a construct distinct from place attachment (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Hosany et al., 2015). So far, brand love for a place has only been addressed in three studies, all of which focus on the place as a tourist destination: Lee and Hyun (2016), Swanson (2017, expanding preliminary results reported in Swanson, 2015), and Aro et al. (2018). Swanson (2015) describes the love that consumers experience in relation to places as “a complex mix of love for the place itself and love for the brand values associated with the place” (pp. 144-145). Similar to Aro et al. (2018), this study views the place brand as an entity to which the place and its associated characteristics are essentially related. Thus, the concept does not distinguish between love for the place itself and love for the brand values, as these are seen as intertwined.
2.3 Self-brand congruity

According to identity theory, an individual has a personal identity, or self-image, and the level of congruence between the personal identity and an evaluated other identity defines the perceived identity fit or congruence (Abrams and Hogg, 1990). Social identity theory posits that individuals can bolster their own self-perception through identification with social groups or categories (Abrams and Hogg, 1990). Furthermore, self-congruity theory postulates that consumers who use brands for their symbolic benefits (i.e., not only for utilitarian value) tend to use and prefer brands with an image congruent with their self-image (Sirgy et al., 1997). Previous studies indicate that customer and brand identification may cause consumers to fall in love with a brand (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). A positive relation between self-brand congruity and brand love has been found, making consumers more likely to love brands which express their own self-identity (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2016).

Studies on self-brand congruity in place branding have so far mainly focused on tourists. A range of different units of brand image congruence have been employed, such as the image of the brand or place itself (Matzler et al., 2016), the image of the place branding (Kemp et al., 2012), the affective place image (Kastenholz, 2004), the image of the place personality (Kumar and Kaushik, 2017; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011), the type of vacation (Hung and Petrick, 2011), and the image of the tourists of a place (Ahn et al., 2013; Beerli et al., 2007).

Residents are stated to be crucial in the place branding process as they themselves, their characteristics and their values constitute a core part of the place brand in the minds of place consumers (Braun et al., 2013), and they play a vital role as online place-ambassadors (Uchinaka et al., 2019). Moreover, they are critical for the legitimization of place branding in their role as citizens and voters (Braun et al., 2013). However, as far as the authors can discern, no studies in place branding have investigated the self-brand congruity of stakeholders based on the image of residents. Studies point to brand identity and sense of community, i.e., the affiliation a customer feels with other people associated with the brand, as antecedents of brand love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). Similarly, Aro et al. (2018) found that people associated with the destination, and associations with people at a destination, are important in the formation of brand love. Consumers’ feelings of community with other users of the brand are thus positively related to stronger feelings of brand love. In this study, self-brand congruity is conceptualized as congruence between the individual’s self-image and the image of place residents. Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize:

H1: Self-brand congruity positively influences brand love for a place

2.4 Self-expressiveness

Consumers prefer brands whose image is congruent with their own self-image (Sirgy, 1982) based on self-identity motives such as self-consistency and self-esteem (Sirgy et al., 1997). They also tend to like brands that allow them to enhance their social identity in social exchanges online (Wallace et al., 2014).

For a brand to achieve a favorable image that resonates with its recipients, promotional efforts need to be designed to enhance positive images towards the most receptive target markets (Leisen, 2001). Because of their symbolic role, brands can assist individuals in defining, enhancing, and communicating their self-concepts to themselves and others (Aaker, 1996; Batra et al., 2012; Matzler et al., 2016). The higher perceived fit between self- and brand image in marketing communication, the more it resonates with the consumer’s self-image, and the better it will be to express the consumer’s identity. Based on identity theory, self-expressiveness can be seen as the consumer’s perception of a given product’s or service’s ability to express personal identity dimensions (Thorbjørnsen et al., 2007). By associating with a prototypical brand user, consumers verify their self-image and distinguish themselves from users of other brands (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). In the context of sharing online advertising, research has shown a positive effect of self-brand congruity on self-expressiveness (Taylor et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study, we adopt Taylor et al.’s (2012) definition of self-expressiveness as the extent to which consumers perceive that a place brand message supports and enacts their self-concept and will be recognized publicly as such. The following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Self-brand congruity positively influences self-expressiveness of a place brand message

A place can be seen as a vehicle that allows its users to reinforce and express their actual or preferred identity. Therefore, it must correctly capture and convey a symbolic meaning that fits with the
We hypothesize:

**H1**: Brand love for a place positively influences positive word-of-mouth

2.5 Positive word-of-mouth

Strong emotional attachment to brands motivates consumers to engage and actively invest their own time, energy, and resources in the brand to maintain their brand relationship (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Park et al., 2010). Moreover, brands to which consumers are emotionally attached are not only in harmony with the consumers’ perceived self, but also inspire consumers to communicate those perceptions to others (Wallace et al., 2014). This finding holds true also for residents of a place (Zenker et al., 2014). In doing so, they engage in word-of-mouth (WOM), which is defined by Harrison-Walker (2001) as “informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service” (p. 63). While WOM may be negative as well as positive, the focus in this study is on positive WOM as an outcome of brand love. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) conceptualized positive word-of-mouth as the degree to which the consumer praises the brand to others. These authors found brand love to significantly influence positive WOM in the context of consumer-packaged goods. Using similar conceptualizations, later studies have confirmed the link between brand love and positive offline WOM for other consumer brands (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Ismail and Spinelli, 2012; Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Based on a qualitative study, Aro et al. (2018) suggest that positive WOM is a consequence of destination brand love. We therefore expect that:

**H2**: Brand love for a place positively influences positive word-of-mouth

2.6 Message-sharing behavior

Online (electronic) word-of-mouth behavior – eWOM – differs from offline WOM in some important aspects. While offline WOM is mostly spoken and generally occurs on a one-to-one basis, eWOM mostly involves written or visual communication and may be addressed to many people simultaneously (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). A specific form of eWOM is the transmission of advertising messages, such as websites links or videos (Taylor et al., 2012). Following the rapid growth of streaming video technology and the popularity of sites such as YouTube, videos are increasingly used as tools for viral marketing (Hsieh et al., 2012). The term viral marketing describes “the phenomenon by which consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information, initially sent out deliberately by marketers to stimulate and capitalize on word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior” (Hinz et al., 2011, p. 55). As this approach completely relies on consumers’ forwarding behavior (Hsieh et al., 2012), practitioners as well as academics are seeking to identify factors that motivate consumers to share online commercial messages (Taylor et al., 2012). In the context of place brands, studies suggest that social media have major potential to change city branding by facilitating and promoting interaction between users as well as generation of content (Priporas et al., 2019).

According to Taylor et al. (2012), consumers share advertisements to express their sense of identity, especially when the ads are perceived as consistent with their self-concept. Subsequently, the social process of engaging in eWOM may offer symbolic value and serve self-expressive needs. These authors also found empirical support for a positive link between self-expressiveness of an online promotional message (a viral video) and the likelihood to share the message online (Taylor et al., 2012). Moreover, self-expressiveness of a brand has been found to influence positive eWOM on Facebook (Wallace et al., 2014). In a similar vein, place branding studies have shown that place brand identification has a positive effect on place brand advocacy and promotion (Hultman et al., 2015; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H3**: Self-expressiveness of a place brand message positively influences brand love for the place
H5: Self-expressiveness of a place brand message positively influences intention to forward the message

Messages are more likely to be forwarded when they evoke emotion (Dobele et al., 2007; Rimé et al., 2014). Brand love has been shown to increase positive eWOM both in a specific social media context such as Facebook (Wallace et al., 2014) and in a more general online environment (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). The latter study included eWOM as well as offline WOM and found that both were positively influenced by brand love (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Moreover, brand love is argued to be directed towards objects that require investments of time and energy (Ahuvia, 2005), as is the case of places. A qualitative study of tourists indicated that positive WOM is an outcome of destination brand love, and those that talked positively about the place had also liked, shared, or commented on postings of the destination (Aro et al., 2018). Based on this background, we hypothesize that:

H6: Brand love for a place positively influences intention to forward place brand messages

H7: Positive word-of-mouth positively influences intention to forward place brand messages

The hypotheses formulated in the preceding sections are illustrated in the research model below (Figure 2).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Data collection and sample

The study was conducted in collaboration with a Swedish municipality’s destination management organization (DMO) which had successfully launched a series of short promotional videos that had been shared virally, largely by residents in the area. The place promoted is the county capital with 70-80 thousand inhabitants, corresponding to a medium-sized Swedish city. It is mainly visited by people from the region for shopping purposes and by more distant visitors for its nature and climate. Internet penetration of the Swedish population (age 12 or above) was 98% in 2018, with a majority reporting daily use of Internet (90%) and social media (63%) (Davidsson et al., 2018).

According to the DMO, the first two videos together reached almost 700,000 views within a few months on their website, Facebook, and YouTube (VL, 2016). To test the proposed research model, one of these promotional videos was incorporated into an online survey constructed in the web-based tool Qualtrics. In consultation with the DMO, the chosen video was the first one in the series as this was the most successful one in terms of number of views, and because it shows various aspects of the place across different seasons, with an emphasis on experiencing the nature. The video, which is about 1½ minute long, was integrated into the online questionnaire so that it was mandatory for survey participants to watch it in order to be able to continue answering the questions.

General recommendations for survey research methodology (Evans and Mathur, 2018) were closely followed. Before launching the survey, we conducted a qualitative pre-test on a small sample of consumers, researchers, and place branding practitioners, which resulted in minor adjustments of wording in some of the items. The survey was distributed through three different channels: (1) At the DMO’s Facebook page, which is followed by current and former residents as well as visitors of the place. (2) Via e-mail invitations to students at the city’s university, using a systematic random sampling approach. Students constitute an interesting group in this context, as many of them had moved fairly recently to the municipality from other places in Sweden. Moreover, this sampling frame included some students from one of the university’s external campuses in other cities, and some studying in distance-based programs, which means that they could reside anywhere in Sweden but would generally be at the main campus for a few weeks each semester. (3) To men and women, 16-75 years, who were members of an online consumer panel in the county; i.e. they were residing within the same larger geographical region as the focused place. By combining these methods of distribution, we could effectively reach some main target groups engaged in spreading positive WOM and sharing content online. These included current and former local residents, previous visitors following the destination on Facebook,
visitors in the form of residents in other places within the same larger geographical region, and visitors in the form of students living in other places but with experience of staying in the studied city.

When closing the survey, 289 responses had been gathered. Four responses were removed due to missing values exceeding 15% (cf. Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, four respondents were removed as they had never visited the place and thus did not belong to any of the intended target groups. Hence, the remaining 281 responses were used in the analysis. Of these, 117 responses were collected from the DMO’s Facebook page, 53 resulted from the e-mail invitations to students, and 111 came from the online consumer panel. In total, 59 percent of the respondents were female, and the median age category of the sample was 35-44 years. Among all respondents, 43 percent were working, 32 percent were students, and 18 percent retired. Slightly more than half (54%) of the responses came from people who were currently residents (i.e., lived in the studied municipality). Consequently, the remaining respondents were classified as visitors, or “non-residents”. Within this category, almost half (47%) had previously lived in the municipality at some point, while 23 percent indicated that they were frequent or regular visitors. Thus, the sample consisted of people with extensive first-hand experience of the place brand.

3.2 Measures
The questionnaire was constructed based on existing scales adapted from previous research to fit the context of place and place brand communication. Scales were chosen by first specifying the domain of each construct, then generating a sample of items for each construct, which were carefully assessed by the researchers in order to find those that were most suitable to the study context (cf. Churchill Jr., 1979). In order to avoid a too lengthy questionnaire, shorter scales were preferred over more extensive ones. Among the constructs, self-expressiveness and intention to forward were related to the video (i.e., place brand communication), self-brand congruity was related to residents of the place, while brand love and positive WOM focused on the place itself, as depicted in the framework in Figure 1. All constructs were measured using multiple items on seven-point Likert-type scales, anchored by “Strongly Disagree” (1) and “Strongly Agree” (7). Items are listed in the Appendix and comprise the following: self-brand congruity (adapted from Taylor et al., 2012), self-expressiveness (adapted from Taylor et al., 2012), place brand love (adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Rodrigues and Costa, 2017), positive word-of-mouth (adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), and intention to forward (Hsieh et al., 2012).

3.3 Procedural remedies for common method bias
As in all self-report surveys where the same respondents answer questions related to independent as well as dependent constructs, there was a risk of common method variance (CMV) influencing relationships between independent and dependent variables (e.g., Podsakoff and Organ, 1986; Ul Islam et al., 2018). CMV leads to bias in the results when the method itself causes significant and nontrivial divergence between true and observed relationships (Fuller et al., 2016). To limit this risk, the researchers applied techniques recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003). A cover letter was formulated and posted together with the survey, providing the purpose of the study, the approximate time it would take to answer, and researcher’s contact information in case of questions. In the beginning of the survey, respondents were again informed of the purpose and the estimated time, as well as assured of the anonymity of their answers. To the extent it was possible without disturbing the logical flow, measurements of predictor and criterion variables were proximally and temporally separated. Scale items were adapted to make them as comprehensible as possible, and pre-tested as earlier described. Negatively worded items were removed or kept to a minimum. Moreover, as neither the framework nor the model was disclosed in any way, respondents did not know which questions referred to independent and dependent variables, respectively. This further reduces the risk of common method bias (Glanfield et al., 2018). Ex-post statistical tests were also used to control for common method bias. These tests are described in the Measurement validation section (4.1).

3.4 Data analysis
The research model and the related hypotheses were tested by means of structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation. The software used was IBM SPSS Amos 24. It should be noted that the overall aim of this analysis method is to assess functional relationships and influences among constructs, rather than trying to test strictly causal hypotheses (cf. Bagozzi and Yi, 2012).
Structural equation models can perform well also with smaller samples (even as small as 100), provided that the model does not have too many constructs, data are normally distributed (particularly concerning kurtosis), item communalities are high, measures are reliable, and there are at least three items per construct (Hair et al., 2010; Iacobucci, 2010). The model tested in this study meet these criteria; hence, the sample size of 281 could be regarded adequate to perform the desired analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement validation

After removal of the four respondents with missing data exceeding 15%, very few missing values remained. Little’s MCAR test showed that these could be classified as missing completely at random ($\chi^2_{116.02, p=0.968}$). However, since SEM estimation requires complete data to obtain certain output (e.g., modification indices), we used the Expectation–Maximization method (EM) to replace all missing data in the quantitative variables. According to Hair et al. (2010), the EM approach introduces the least amount of bias into structural equation models. Furthermore, assessment of normality – univariate as well as multivariate – showed that the distribution was acceptable in all variables, with skewness and kurtosis values within recommended ranges (Hair et al., 2010).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run to evaluate and refine the scales (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). Based on assessments of model fit indices, factor loadings, standardized residuals, and modification indices, one item was dropped from place brand love and one from self-brand congruity, as indicated in the Appendix. Fit indexes of the final measurement model suggested acceptable fit between the model and the data, with a $\chi^2$ of 258.725 at 125 degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df=2.070$), CFI=.980, and RMSEA=.062 (cf. Hair et al., 2010).

Discriminant and convergent validity among constructs was assessed by examining whether (1) all standardized factor loadings were significant and higher than .50; (2) the correlation between each pair of constructs was less than the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct; and (3) the AVE was higher than .50 for all constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). All of these criteria were met. Internal consistency of the scales was evaluated by calculating composite reliability and Cronbach’s alpha. These values well exceeded the commonly suggested threshold of .70 for all five constructs (Hair et al., 2010).

Factor loadings, composite reliabilities, and Cronbach’s alphas are shown in Table 1, while AVE and correlations between the constructs are displayed in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]
[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

After passing the checks for validity and reliability, the measurement model was tested to uncover whether common method variance (CMV) existed at biasing levels. First, as collinearity tests could provide an indication of common method bias (Kock and Lynn, 2012), we ran a linear regression on the criterion variable Intention to forward using the other four variables (Self-brand congruity, Self-expressiveness, Place brand love, and Positive WOM) as predictors. The variance inflation factors for these four constructs ranged from 1.387 to 4.503; i.e. below the most common thresholds of 10 (Hair et al., 2010) or 5 (Kline, 1998).

Then, the unmeasured latent factor method was applied to the measurement model in order to check whether CMV might cause bias in relationships. With this method, questionnaire items are allowed to load on their theoretical constructs and on a latent CMV factor simultaneously, thereby detecting the variance common among all observed indicators (Chang et al., 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). The indicator loadings on the unmeasured latent factor are constrained to be equal to each other (Lowry et al., 2012). Then, factor loadings are compared between the models with and without the unmeasured latent factor (hereafter referred to as CMV-corrected model and baseline model, respectively). Results of this test showed that all loadings were still high and significant after adding the latent factor, but that
they overall had decreased. On average, factor loadings in the CMV-corrected model were 21 percent lower than in the baseline model, with the largest differences found in the Self-brand congruity and Place brand love constructs. According to Fuller et al. (2016), who used simulations to measure biasing levels of CMV, actual values of CMV cannot be determined in real data. However, by comparing the $\chi^2$ of the two models, it is possible to get an indication of whether the CMV is large enough to be likely to cause bias (cf. Schaller et al., 2015). The $\chi^2$ of the baseline model was 258.725 at 125 degrees of freedom, while the $\chi^2$ of the CMV-corrected model was 250.423 at 124 degrees of freedom. This difference ($\Delta \chi^2=8.302$) exceeds the critical value of 3.84 at $\Delta$ df=1 and the 5% level (Schaller et al., 2015), which suggests that common method bias might be a concern. Therefore, we took a conservative approach and retained the unmeasured latent factor in the structural model, which means that the influence of common method bias on model results could be effectively controlled (Lowry et al., 2012; Schaller et al., 2015).

4.2 Structural model of place brand love

To test the structural model and the stated hypotheses, we ran the CMV-corrected model in Amos 24 using maximum likelihood estimation. The fit measures indicate that the model fitted the sample data well ($\chi^2=257.901$ at 127 degrees of freedom, $\chi^2$/df=2.031, CFI=.980, and RMSEA=.061). The squared multiple correlations of the dependent variables (analogous to $R^2$) show that the model explains 8 percent of the variance in self-expressiveness, 30 percent of place brand love, 67 percent of positive WOM, and, ultimately, 51 percent of the intention to forward a place brand message.

Standardized path estimates and levels of significance provide support for five of the seven hypothesized relationships. H1 is rejected as self-brand congruity did not have any significant influence on place brand love ($\beta=.02$, $p=.83$). However, the path coefficient from self-brand congruity to self-expressiveness showed a moderately strong and significant relationship between these two constructs ($\beta=.28$, $p<.01$), as hypothesized in H2. The relationships between self-expressiveness and place brand love ($\beta=.54$, $p<.001$), and from self-expressiveness to intention to forward ($\beta=.43$, $p<.001$), were also positive and significant, providing support for H3 and H5. As hypothesized in H4, place brand love was strongly connected to positive word-of-mouth ($\beta=.82$, $p<.001$). In turn, tendency to speak positively about the place (positive word-of-mouth) also increased the intention to forward a place brand message ($\beta=.37$, $p<.001$), thus confirming H7. Surprisingly, however, brand love for a place did not affect the intention to forward the message ($\beta=.05$, $p=.61$); thus, H6 is rejected.

An overview of the path results is provided in Figure 3. Overall, the extent to which respondents perceived that the promotional video reflected who they are (self-expressiveness) increases the likelihood that they would share the video with others. The intention to forward the video is also amplified by their general tendency to talk positively about the place shown in the video. Four of the five significant path coefficients between the independent and dependent variables were in the range of moderate to substantial, while place brand love had a very strong influence on positive word-of-mouth (cf. de Vaus, 2002).

4.3 Comparison between residents and non-residents

In order to compare the results between residents of the place and people who did not reside there, a multigroup analysis was performed in Amos. As previously described, 54 percent of the sample ($n=153$) was constituted of residents (i.e., people who lived in the studied municipality). The rest of the sample ($n=128$) was classified as “non-residents”, since this group included both visitors and people who had previously lived in the municipality at some point.

Before proceeding to multigroup analysis of the structural model, we tested for measurement invariance between the two groups. Overall model assessment of the two-group model showed satisfactory fit ($\chi^2$/df=1.805, CFI=.970, and RMSEA=.054), and no significant differences in factor loadings ($p=.194$) nor in structural covariances ($p=.146$) were found. Thus, the structural model was considered sufficiently invariant to allow for comparisons across the two groups (Byrne, 2004; Hair et al., 2010). Then, the model was tested with each path coefficient constrained to be equal in both groups (i.e. at one
degree of freedom). As indicated in Table 3, the results showed no significant differences between residents and non-residents; possibly because of the relatively large proportion of former residents in the non-residents group.

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1 Discussion

While brand love has been studied in different branding contexts, it has so far very rarely been addressed within the field of place branding. Understanding the antecedents and outcomes of stakeholders’ emotional connections to a place is of utmost importance in place branding, as this has the potential to increase the possibility of a brand message becoming viral.

Two antecedents to place brand love were included in the study: self-brand congruity, conceptualized as the congruence between the individual’s self-image and the image of place residents, and self-expressiveness, conceptualized as the extent to which consumers perceive that a place brand message supports and enacts their self-concept and will be recognized publicly as such. Results indicate that while self-brand congruity with residents of the place does not exert any direct influence on place brand love, it is connected to self-expressiveness of the place brand message. That is, in line with identity, social identity, and self-congruity theory, if an individual perceives that he or she is similar to people living in a particular place, it is more likely that this person also will feel that a video communicating the place brand reflects who he or she is. Since this self-expressiveness in turn is quite strongly related to emotions for the place in terms of brand love, it is likely that self-brand congruity plays at least an indirect role in explaining place brand love.

Behavioral outcomes of place brand love were studied in terms of positive word-of-mouth about the place in general and the intention to forward a specific place brand message. In this case, the message was a streaming video that was available online. Findings suggest that residents and non-residents with feelings of brand love for a place are much more likely to recommend and talk positively about the place to others. Those who engage in positive WOM then also seem more inclined to forward commercial place brand messages, which can be seen as a particular form of eWOM. While model results showed a positive and significant relationship between WOM and intention to forward, the correlation was only moderately strong, which implies that a person’s general tendency to speak well about a place does not necessarily mean that he or she will actively spread promotional videos online. However, as supported by identity, social identity, and self-congruity theory, the chance that the individual chooses to do so increases if he or she feels that the message (video) communicating the place brand to some extent is an expression of his/her self. This behavior is fueled by a need for self-consistency, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the feeling of love for a place has no direct influence on the intention to share such messages. It seems that while place brand love is a very strong predictor of positive word-of-mouth, it only has an indirect influence on message-sharing behavior when it comes to commercial place brand messages.

Within the context and boundaries of this study, there were no significant differences between residents and non-residents in the measured relationships. This might be attributed to the fact that a relatively large number of respondents in the non-residents group previously had lived in the studied municipality at some point, and that many of the other non-residents were very frequent or regular visitors. Hence, the results should not be interpreted as representative of “tourists”, but rather as indications of the role brand love could play in the communication of a place brand among people with extensive first-hand experience of the place. These are key target groups for any city or destination that want to achieve positive WOM and viral spread of place brand messages (Uchinaka et al., 2019), as personal sources such as residents, former residents, and frequent visitors are seen as highly knowledgeable and credible information sources (Zenker et al., 2017).
5.2 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to extant research by addressing a topic understudied in place branding, namely brand love. While place attachment has received much attention, brand love towards places has not (Aro et al., 2018). Earlier research has identified emotions in relation to places as a construct distinct from place attachment (Aro et al., 2018; Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Hosany et al., 2015), but brand love has so far only been addressed from a tourist destination perspective. The results of this study add to the understanding of place brand love by evidencing and assessing the construct in the context of residents (current as well as former) and frequent visitors of a place.

Moreover, the important role of place brand love for positive WOM is highlighted. While findings confirm previous studies concerning the connection between brand love and traditional WOM for consumer brands (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Ismail and Spinelli, 2012), the lack of a direct relationship to eWOM in terms of message-sharing behavior contradicts earlier research (Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2014). Possibly, this is due to the particularity of the brand – that is, a place rather than a product – or of the message, as sharing or forwarding a video implies a more active effort than some other forms of eWOM, such as clicking “like”. Nevertheless, these results point to offline and online WOM as two separate concepts, which may have different functions and antecedents in models of consumer behavior.

Concerning antecedents, the concept of self-brand congruity in place branding has been measured using a range of different units as reference points for comparison with self, such as image of the place, place brand, place brand personality, and tourists’ image (see Ahn et al., 2013; Hung and Petrick, 2011; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). Another theoretical contribution of this study is thus the investigation of the congruence between individuals’ self and the perceived image of residents of the place. This seems to be a dimension of self-brand congruity that previously has received little, if any, attention. Results indicate that the perceived congruity with the image of residents of a place could have some indirect influence on brand love and intention to forward a place brand message, mediated by the self-expressiveness of this message, which is rather strongly related to both of these dependent constructs. Hence, as identity and social identity theory suggest, places are connected to people’s self-concept (Stets and Burke, 2000). In line with self-congruity theory, places congruent with stakeholders’ self-identity may help reinforce a feeling of self-consistency and a sense of belonging. Moreover, stakeholder engagement in WOM and message-sharing behavior may stem from motives of self-esteem and communicating social identity in social exchanges, and this has an important role in spreading the good word about places they feel strongly for.

As Uchinaka et al. (2019) point out, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the variety of residents’ roles since only a few studies have taken into account the different types of residents, especially with regard to the factors that motivate the behavior and actions of place-brand ambassadors. The current study finds that not only residents, but also previous residents, have an important role to play as online place ambassadors. Their deeper knowledge about the place leads potentially to a higher identification with the place and may add credibility to the tertiary communication (Zenker et al., 2017).

5.3 Managerial implications

For managers of DMOs and tourism entrepreneurs, it is essential to know what drives consumer ambassadorship and advocacy in order to strengthen brand communication, instill positive brand associations, and differentiate the brand from others. Word-of-mouth is considered one of the most efficient and trustworthy types of communication; therefore, knowing how to encourage and leverage resident involvement in place brand communication may become a competitive advantage. Achieving positive WOM and virality of commercial messages online is important as this means lower advertising expenses in comparison to distribution through paid media channels. The outcomes of this study are therefore of direct relevance for place branding practitioners, especially in small and medium-sized cities, and in light of the growing importance of social media.

The main finding of the study is the significance of brand love for positive word of mouth, and in extension its influence on the intention to forward commercial messages. It is thus vital for place brand
managers to focus on fostering such feelings among its stakeholders. In order to instill these emotions, marketers should strive to capture essential aspects of the place and its residents in their brand communication. If key stakeholders of the place, such as residents, former residents, or frequent visitors, think that the place brand message reflects who they are and expresses an image they want to display to others, they are more likely to feel a stronger emotional connection to the place and to act as brand co-creating ambassadors by sharing the message online. Former residents could be a group of particular interest for those involved in managing and communicating the place brand. Their experience of the place, and their emotional connections to it, makes them as likely as current residents to talk positively about the place, which opens for possibilities to spread the word across a larger geographical area and reach a wider audience. Thus, place brand managers could view former residents as a primary target group when it comes to attracting not only visitors, but also new potential residents.

Moreover, the self-expressiveness of the message is stronger for consumers expressing a high level of perceived fit between self-image and the image of residents. Therefore, it is not enough to consider only utilitarian or functional place aspects in the communication of the place brand. An intimate understanding of stakeholders’ self-identity and how it fits with residents’ image is also required in order to design messages that resonate with recipients, instilling a sense of self-consistency and belonging. Place marketers could for example use focus groups followed by surveys, or experiments testing different prototypes of the commercial message, to identify key aspects of the residents’ and the place brand image. In the case used for this study, the video captured a variety of scenic spots, locations, and activities that are very familiar and popular among many residents. Composing messages that resonate with residents’ image increases the authenticity and credibility of communication and may help build or reinforce consumers’ place identity. Thereby, they can be motivated to participate not only explicitly in the co-creation of marketing communication but also implicitly by “living the brand”, thus influencing the place brand experience as well (as suggested by Zenker and Erfgen, 2014).

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As all research, this study has some limitations, which should be considered in light of the findings. First, the study was conducted via the Internet in a social media setting which may have implications on the sample representability. However, as the study concerns the forwarding of messages online, this was considered inevitable.

Second, similar to many other studies in online contexts, the study relied on a non-random, purposive sampling strategy, which raises issues of representativeness. About a third of the respondents were students, and many of the “non-residents” in the sample were former residents. The relatively small size of the groups “former residents” and “visitors” compared to the “residents” group meant that it was not possible to test differences between these categories as three separate groups. At the same time, the sampling frames were chosen based on the possibility to collect responses from people with high awareness and experience of the studied place. The results should not be interpreted as representative of tourists, but as a first step toward an understanding of the role of brand love in the communication of a place brand, with residents as key stakeholders and co-creators of the brand. Further research could strive to collect data from larger and more varied samples, including a greater number of occasional or one-time visitors, in order to enable comparisons between tourists, residents, and previous residents.

Third, since the study used a cross-sectional design, functional relationships can only be inferred, not causally proven. Besides watching the video in the survey, the intention to forward the place brand message could be affected by a number of existing associations with the place, which the questionnaire did not capture. Future studies investigating similar relationships would be advised to incorporate other measures of place associations and to use a control group to isolate the effects of the actual message. Moreover, while the measurement of positive WOM relied on previously validated scales, it cannot be ruled out that some respondents also could have been thinking about recommending the place in social media. However, considering that eWOM was measured as the intention to forward a specific place brand message (video) online, and results indicated satisfactory discriminant validity, these two constructs seem to capture different aspects of brand ambassador behavior.
Finally, since the constructs and measures used are tightly connected to self- and social identity, it is important to consider the influence and limitations of culture. Consumers in different cultures may be used to and prefer interpreting and expressing love in different ways (for an example of a Nordic perspective of destination brand love, see Aro et al., 2018). Self-expression values have also been found to differ between cultures (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Since place is an important part of human identity and self-definition (Proshansky et al., 1983; Stedman, 2002), and the identification with a place and group is tightly connected to the self- and social identity (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996), these constructs are inherently related to place and culture. The current study offers a contribution through a Nordic perspective on the construct of brand love in a place-branding context, which is a limitation to its generalizability, but also suggests a rich ground for future cross-cultural studies on the topic.

As previous research has shown that self-brand congruity with a place can stem from a number of different sources, it would be of interest to take a more holistic approach to the concept. This could entail investigating the influence of aspects such as the perceived image of residents, visitors, place brand personality, and the actual place characteristics, on the self-brand congruity of different stakeholders in place branding. Moreover, as this study could not demonstrate a significant direct relationship between self-brand congruity and place brand love, it would be interesting to investigate this connection and whether there are differences depending on the unit of measurement for congruity comparison. Similarly, the nature of the mediating effect of self-expressiveness between self-brand congruity and place brand love should be further studied.
References


Swanson, K. (2015), "Place brand love and marketing to place consumers as tourists", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 142-146.


Appendix

Self-Brand Congruity (Adapted from Taylor et al., 2012)
1. People who live in [the place] are like me
2. I am very much like the typical person who lives in [the place]
3. The image of [the place] residents matches how I see myself
4. I can identify with people who live in [the place]*

Self-Expressiveness (Adapted from Taylor et al., 2012)
1. Passing along this film would communicate who I am
2. This film is consistent with how I want to present myself to others
3. I can identify with this film
4. My reaction to this film would tell others something about me
5. This film reflects who I consider myself to be

Place Brand Love (Adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Rodrigues and Costa, 2017)
1. [The place] is a wonderful place
2. Being in [the place] makes me feel good
3. Being in [the place] makes me very happy
4. I have no particular feelings about [the place] (R)*
5. I love [the place]!

Positive Word-of-Mouth (Adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)
1. I have recommended [the place] to lots of people
2. I “talk up” [the place] to my friends
3. I try to spread the good-word about [the place] in general

Intention to Forward (Hsieh et al., 2012)
Measure: Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “Strongly Disagree” - “Strongly Agree”
1. I think this film is worth sharing with others
2. I would consider recommending this film to others
3. I would consider sharing this film to my friends through Internet

*) Item removed during measurement validation (CFA and reliability tests).
(R) = Reverse-scored item.
Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Figure 2. Research model
Figure 3. Structural model of place brand love (CMV-corrected)
Table 1. Factor loadings, composite reliabilities, and Cronbach’s alphas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Loading</th>
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<td>.949</td>
<td>SBC1</td>
<td>.891</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SBC2</td>
<td>.940</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.954</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.952</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>IF1</td>
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Notes: CR=Composite reliability. All loadings significant at p<.001.

Table 2. Inter-construct correlation matrix

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<th>Construct</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>SBC</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>PBL</th>
<th>PWOM</th>
<th>IF</th>
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<td>Place brand love (PBL)</td>
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<td>.704</td>
<td>.688</td>
<td>.702</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Notes: Items on the diagonal represent the square roots of AVEs. All correlations significant at p<.001.

Table 3. Multigroup comparison: residents vs. non-residents

<table>
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<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>p</th>
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<td>.674</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBC → SE</td>
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<td>.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE → PBL</td>
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<td>1.303</td>
<td>.254</td>
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<td>PBL → PWOM</td>
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<td>.870</td>
<td>.351</td>
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<tr>
<td>SE → IF</td>
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<td>2.559</td>
<td>.110</td>
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<td>PBL → IF</td>
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<td>1.095</td>
<td>.295</td>
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<td>PWOM → IF</td>
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