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Places in good graces: The role of emotional connections to a place on word-of-mouth

Carola Strandberg[a,*], Maria Ek Styvén[a], Magnus Hultman[b]

[a] Luleå University of Technology, 971 87 Luleå, Sweden
[b] University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

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ABSTRACT

The role of emotional connections to places has largely been studied with a focus on place visitors. However, while residents are considered integral to the place brand, their perspectives generally have been overlooked. This study aims to increase the understanding of the relationships between place image, self-congruity, place attachment, and positive word-of-mouth among residents and visitors of a place. A conceptual model is advanced from identity and attachment theories. Responses from 654 residents and visitors in two Swedish cities were collected through an online survey, and the conceptual model was tested across the two city samples using structural equation modelling. Findings indicate that affective place image is positively related to positive word-of-mouth and that this relationship is mediated by place attachment for both residents and visitors. The results further show that self-congruity acts as a mediator between affective place image and place attachment for visitors but not for residents.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an upsurge in interest from both practitioners and academics regarding the way nations, regions, and cities are viewed and branded (e.g., Hultman, Yeboah-Banin, & Formaniuk, 2016; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009). The place brand encompasses "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 & Braun, 2010, p. 3). As competition for limited resources is getting fiercer, places turn to place branding in order to build a good reputation and attract residents, visitors, and investors (Anholt, 2008; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). To succeed, places are in essence dependent on the actions and communication carried out by some of their most influential stakeholders groups: the place users; i.e., their residents and visitors (Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018).

The literature recognizes interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth (WOM) as key influencing factors in consumer decision-making (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). They are often regarded as even stronger impactors on individuals than advertising and other mass communication tools (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Due to new technology, social media, and innovative commercial messages, WOM is becoming more pervasive and amorphous. One of WOM's key characteristics is the perceived independence of the message source (Litvin et al., 2008). Positive WOM entails specific beneficial consequences to a brand and is characterized by the degree to which the consumer not only communicates about, but also offers praise of, a brand to others (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Understanding why place users become brand ambassadors by engaging in WOM communication, and mobilizing them to participate, is crucial as it is considered a highly, if not the most, influential means of place communication (Braun, 2012; Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Sartori, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2012).

Notwithstanding the above, there are certain idiosyncrasies associated with place branding that makes it a complex phenomenon. One is the vast number of stakeholders and elements involved in the branding of places (Hultman et al., 2016). A city brand, for instance, constitutes a combination of elements such as educational facilities, cultural institutions, sporting associations, shopping, and housing opportunities, to name a few. These are, in turn, co-created by multiple stakeholders that are either consuming or managing the city elements in one way or another (Hankinson, 2007; Hultman et al., 2016), making place brand management more akin to complex corporate brand management rather than simple product branding (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2013). For this reason, place marketers face a daunting task of managing multiple stakeholder experiences towards a unified brand image

* Corresponding author at: Department of Business Administration, Technology and Social Sciences, Luleå University of Technology, 971 87 Luleå, Sweden.
E-mail addresses: Carola.Strandberg@ltu.se (C. Strandberg), Maria.Styven@ltu.se (M.E. Styvén), M.Hultman@leeds.ac.uk (M. Hultman).

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and vision (e.g., Hankinson, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2009; Zenker & Braun, 2017), especially as a place brand's success largely depends on the stakeholder's perceived alignment between values, vision, purpose, and future prospects (de Chernatony, 2001). Zenker and Beckmann (2013) highlight that there is a need for more differentiated communication, as well as a deeper involvement and participation from stakeholders in the place branding process. Given the importance of multiple target audience management in place branding, surprisingly little empirical research has been carried out taking a multi-stakeholder perspective (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011).

Central to place branding is place image, defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place, which should be valid, believable, distinctive, and appealing (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Places play an important part in individuals' identity creation and help them position their self in their social environment, both in terms of attachment and differentiation, and in terms of interpretation and expression of the self (Hummon, 1990). Given the above, place attachment and self-brand connections are considered key influencers of place-related behavior such as loyalty, revisits, and recommendation intentions (George & George, 2004; Litvin & Goh, 2002; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), and of positive WOM (Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2014; Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012; Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). However, research has mainly focused on assessing the match between visitors to destinations and neglected the resident perspective (Chen & Šegota, 2016), despite the fact that residents are considered an integral part of the place brand (Braun et al., 2013). Moreover, research shows that residents have an important role to play as place ambassadors (Braun et al., 2013) and constitute an influential and highly credible source of travel destination-related information among tourists (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010). Hence, residents are highly interesting to tourist marketers as a source of organic place communication.

The current study aims to address this gap in the literature by drawing on place branding literature and investigating the relationships between place image, self-congruity, place attachment, and positive WOM among multiple stakeholder groups, specifically the residents and visitors of a city. To achieve this, a conceptual model is developed based on identity, congruity, and attachment theories. Empirical data are collected through an online survey of residents and visitors in two different cities, and the conceptual model is then validated and tested across these two samples.

This research contributes to place branding theory and practice in a multitude of ways. Theoretically, given the aforementioned complexity in place brand management, our multi-stakeholder approach facilitates the discovery of interesting differences and communalities between visitors and residents of places, thus shedding further light on the roles played by attachment and self-congruity in generating promoting behaviors towards places. From a practical viewpoint, place brand managers will gain valuable insights into what drives positive WOM across different stakeholder groups and the underlying mechanisms behind such behaviors, thus guiding more effective place branding strategies towards different audiences.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

The current study rests on the central tenets of the inter-related theories of identity (Sirgy, 1982) and self-congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997), along with attachment theory (Altman & Low, 2012). These theories have long been used to explain consumer attitudes, emotions, and behavior, both in general and in relation to places. According to Stets and Burke (2000), places are tightly connected to the self-concept and identity and constitute a part of forming in-groups (such as residents) and out-groups (such as visitors). By integrating these theories in an overarching framework of place brand image, we can explain the mediating mechanisms of self-congruity and place attachment. Each of the focal constructs and theories are further described in the following sections, leading up to a conceptual model and four testable hypotheses.

2.1. Affective place image

Customer-based brand equity logic posits that positive brand outcomes are a function of customers' perceived brand loyalty, brand awareness, quality, and brand image (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Aaker, 1996). In place marketing, the image dimension has received heightened attention and is often conceptualized as either the place's cognitive image (people's knowledge and beliefs about a place) or its affective image (people's feelings about it) (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007). Theorists suggest that cognitive image has a positive effect on affective image and that these two image constituents interact in a network to create overall place image (e.g., Zenker & Braun, 2017). Affective, cognitive, and overall place image are all found to influence intentions to engage in WOM communication (Papadimitriou, Kaplanidou, & Apostolopoulou, 2018; Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). However, affective image has greater influence than cognitive image in forming an overall place image and on intention to recommend a place, especially for tourists (Stylidis et al., 2017). Furthermore, research shows that affective aspects often supersede the cognitive ones when it comes to shaping brand outcomes, as the former is more directly connected to benefits and the latter to attitudes (Cai, 2002; Keller, 1993).

WOM is considered especially important for brands with intangible offerings that are difficult to evaluate in advance, as is the case with destinations and places (Litvin et al., 2008). Consumers may spread WOM based on both a desire to help others and to help the place itself (Chen et al., 2014). In particular, brands that are in harmony with the consumers' perceived self, to which consumers are emotionally attached, tend to inspire WOM (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014). Enhancing authenticity perceptions and targeting consumers with messages resonating with their inner self may thus increase positive WOM behaviors. Taylor, Strutton, and Thompson (2012) posit that online message-sharing behaviors are motivated by self-enhancement needs and urges to express a sense of identity when ads are perceived as consistent with internet users' self-concepts. In accordance with the above argumentation, the bulk of research on place image also finds that affective place image relates positively to tourists' intention to recommend a destination to others, as well as on residents' positive WOM towards a place (Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Stylidis et al., 2017; Zenker & Rütter, 2014). Therefore:

H1. Affective place image is positively related to positive word-of mouth.

2.2. Self-congruity

Self-congruity theory explains that consumers use objects and brands not only for their utilitarian value but also for their symbolic benefits, and tend to prefer brands with an image congruent with their self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruity (sometimes referred to as self-image/product-image/self-brand congruity or congruence) comprises a consumer's perceived congruence resulting from a psychological comparison between the product–user image and the consumer's own self-concept (Sirgy et al., 1997). A good match in images leads to a high self-congruity experience and, in turn, influences consumer behavior based on motives such as a need for self-consistency and self-esteem (Sirgy et al., 1997).

Self-congruity with places concerns the matching process and perceived resulting match or mismatch between the symbolic cues or stereotypic images of a place's users, such as its visitors, and an individual visitor's self-image (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Studies on self-congruity show that individuals tend to identify more with places they use. Research further shows that self-congruity with a place has favorable outcomes

with regard to a range of behavioral intentions such as to visit and return to a place (Ahn, Ekinci, & Li, 2013; Litvin & Goh, 2002; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), as well as to brand advocacy behaviors such as positive WOM (Kemp et al., 2012; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Previous research on self-congruity in place branding has mainly focused on the image of tourists as a reference point for comparison (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Yet, 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 place consumers' minds (Braun et al., 2013). Therefore, in this study, while place attachment covers identification with the image of the place, self-congruity is conceptualized as the match/mismatch between the individual's self-image and the place residents' perceived image. In relation to the previously discussed influence of place image on positive WOM, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H2. Self-congruity positively mediates the relationship between affective place image and positive word-of-mouth.

2.3. Place attachment

Place attachment refers to the emotional and affective bond that individuals develop to specific places or environments, which contributes to individual, group, and cultural self-definition and integrity (Altman & Low, 2012; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Lewicka, 2011). It may develop independently of residence time and differ in reasons of attachment, but is evidenced to exist for both a place's residents and visitors (Lewicka, 2011). Place attachment has its roots in psychoanalytic theory and falls under object-relations theory (Altman & Low, 2012). According to identity theory, the more similar an object is to the self, the stronger is the tie to the self and the feelings of value and attachment (Sirgy, 1982). Similarly, place attachment is dependent upon the degree of connection between a place's image and the individual's self-concept, and explains how a place may help its users to reinforce and express their actual or preferred identity (Tsai, 2012).

Zenker and Petersen (2014) argue that residents with higher identification levels towards a place are more likely to experience higher place attachment. Place attachment has been conceptualized as comprising attachments of two kinds; a functional attachment, through place dependence, and a more affective attachment through place identity (George & George, 2004; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Tsai, 2012). The behavioral effects of affective place attachment can be expressed in a number of ways, such as a will to visit, return, remain in or close to a certain place, expressions of pride and love, as well as loss when being away (George & George, 2004; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place advocacy research shows that place attachment feelings positively influence restaurant patrons' WOM intention for a place (Line, Hanks, & Kim, 2018), tourists' intention to recommend a destination to others (Prayag & Ryan, 2011), and residents' positive WOM towards places (Chen et al., 2014; Zenker & Rütter, 2014). There is, specifically, research indicating that place identification and place attachment particularly generate positive WOM for places that help individuals express their own self-identity (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Zenker et al., 2017). Since place attachment appears to be partly driven by affective place image (Fan & Qiu, 2014), which, in turn, influences WOM, a strong affective place image should also increase the likelihood of positive WOM behaviors. Therefore:

H3. Place attachment positively mediates the relationship between affective place image and positive word-of-mouth.

H4. Self-congruity is positively related to place attachment.

Based on the theory and conceptual background outlined in the preceding sections, Fig. 1 shows the study's conceptual model by incorporating the focal constructs and the hypothesized relationships between them.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Study design and sample

Data were collected during spring 2018 from resident and visitor stakeholder groups in two Swedish cities of different sizes and geographical locations. A purposive sampling approach was taken in order to include one larger and one smaller place, with different characteristics in terms of physical landscape and urbanism. Hence, one sample could be used for calibration and one for validation of the model, which increases the applicability of the results. Web-based surveys were distributed through the Facebook page of a local destination marketing organization (DMO) and Swedish online consumer panels, comprising residents of both cities as well as visitors residing in other parts of the country.

The aim was to capture emotional connections and perceptions of each city from the perspectives of residents as well as previous and recurrent visitors. After screening out non-visitors and former city residents, 713 responses were retained and subjected to survey engagement quality checks. Unengaged respondents were identified and subject to elimination based on the time spent on the questionnaire and the number and quality of inputs provided. Specifically, 13 responses were removed due to missing values exceeding 15 percent (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), and 46 respondents who completed the survey in less than two times the median speed, and/or answered all grid questions with the same scale point, were excluded. The remaining 654 responses (92 percent of the original target sample) were therefore used in the subsequent analysis.

Sampling error was calculated based on the populations of the two investigated cities (approximately 1.1 million people in total). The error calculation for a 95 percent confidence interval yielded a 2.0 percent error term. Power analysis suggest that a minimum sample of 303 respondents is appropriate (effect size = 0.5; α *err prob* = 0.05; *power* = 0.95, df = 197; *critical* $\chi 2$ = 230.74), so the obtained sample was deemed suitable for the study purposes.

3.2. Respondent characteristics

The sample distribution was balanced with 52 respondents pertaining to the larger city and 48 percent to the smaller city. Fifty five percent of respondents were residents and 45 percent previous visitors. In total, 48.6 percent of the respondents were male, 50.8 percent female and 0.6 percent other/did not want to disclose, with only smaller variations between resident and visitor groups and across cities. The median age category of residents was 35–44 years and for visitors 45–54 years. Approximately half of the respondents were 44 years or younger, with only minor differences across the cities and resident-visitor groups.

About half of the visitors (49%) were regular to frequent visitors and had visited the city more than five times (60% for the larger city and 40% for the smaller). Fourteen percent were four to five time-visitors (16% for the larger city; 12% for the smaller), while a fifth (21%) of the visitors had been to the city two to three times (17% for the larger city; 24% for the smaller). Seventeen percent had visited the city only once (7% for the larger city; 24% for the smaller).

Within the residents category, three quarters (74%), had either lived in the city their whole life or lived some time elsewhere but considered the city their hometown (79% for the larger city and 65% for the smaller) and the median time of residence was 25 years (28 years for the larger city; 20 for the smaller).

3.3. Study instrument

A questionnaire was developed using best practices for survey research methodology (Evans & Mathur, 2018). The survey was based on English language constructs that were translated into Swedish by the

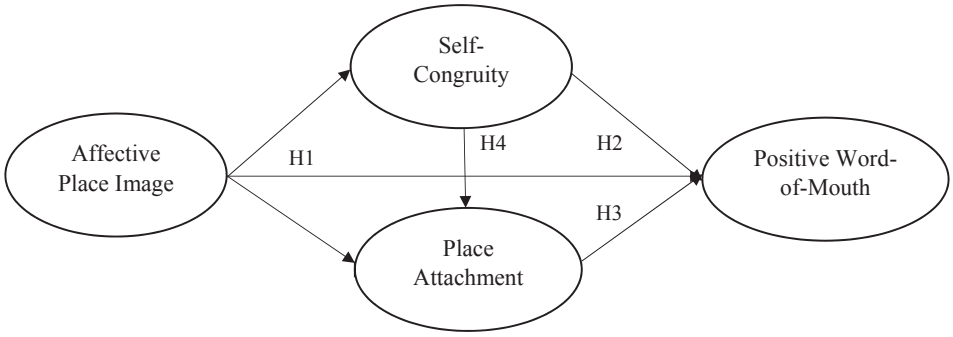

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

researchers following recommended back translation procedures (Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005). A qualitative pre-test was also conducted on a small sample of consumers, researchers, and place branding practitioners to increase content and face validity of the instrument. This resulted in minor rewording of some items.

All survey measures (listed in the Appendix A) were based on existing scales, some of which were adapted to fit the context of place branding. The constructs in the conceptual model were measured using multiple items and comprise the following: *affective place image* (adapted from Hosany et al., 2007), *place attachment* (adapted from Lewicka, 2008), *self-congruity* (adapted from Taylor et al., 2012), and *positive WOM* (adapted from Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). In addition, a single-item construct measuring overall place image (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011) was included for control purposes. Before proceeding into the closed-response questions, respondents also answered an open question aiming to capture their top-of-mind associations of the place.

To limit the risk of potential common method bias (CMB), several procedural remedies recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012) were applied. These included re-phrasing and pre-testing of scales, the use of a cover letter with the purpose of the survey, providing an estimated response time and instructions to answer truthfully, and an assurance of the anonymity of answers. CMB was also controlled for statistically as explained below.

3.4. Data analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was used to test the conceptual model. Preliminary data analyses were undertaken to test potential assumption violations before conducting SEM. Specifically, the data was examined with regard to outliers, resulting in the removal of 32 Mahalanobis distance outliers ($p < .001$), reducing the sample size to 622. Assessment of normality showed that the distribution was acceptably normal (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). Slight deviations from normality can be tolerated when the sample size is large as is the case in the current study (Hair et al., 2010). Missing values pertaining to 2 percent of the sample, ranging from 0 to 0.3 percent per variable, were imputed using Expectation–Maximization (EM) approach as it introduces the least amount of bias into structural equation models (Hair et al., 2010).

Prior to conducting SEM the measures' psychometric properties were examined in four steps by: (1) evaluating the data factoring adequacy, (2) testing for potential CMB, (3) assessing reliability and validity of scales and measurement model fit, and (4) assessing measurement and structural invariance to ensure measurement robustness and avoid influences on the hypothesis tests. The SEM was conducted in two steps, splitting the sample city-wise, using the sample from the larger more well-known city for calibration and the smaller one for validation (Sin et al., 2005).

3.4.1. Measurement validation and psychometric assessment of measures

An initial exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Promax rotation was first conducted, resulting in the exclusion of two items (PI5 and PA4, indicated in Appendix A) due to low communality and factor loadings. The EFA supports factor analysis with a KMO of 0.945 and Bartlett's test of $10522.835_{(136\ df)}$, $p < .001$ (Pallant, 2013). A subsequent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 25 assessed the constructs based on model fit indices, factor loadings, communalities, and standardized residuals. The CFA resulted in two more items being dropped from the place attachment measure (PA3 and PA5).

Measures were thereafter statistically examined for potential CMB by comparing the model fit statistics to the fit of a single-factor model (Boyer & Hult, 2005). The one-factor model yielded a $\chi^2_{(90\ df)} = 3426.525$ ($p < .001$) and a considerably worse fit compared to the measurement model ($\chi^2_{(84\ df)} = 314.040$, $p < .001$), suggesting that common method bias is not a serious threat in the study. The final measurement model evidenced acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.739$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.967, RMSEA = 0.066, SRMR = 0.035), indicating that the model fits the data well (Iacobucci, 2010). Cronbach's alphas ranged between 0.881 and 0.949 and all standardized factor loadings were > 0.7, indicating convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). All average variances extracted (AVE) were above the desired cutoff value of 0.5, and the respective AVEs for all constructs were higher than the shared variance for all pairs of constructs, indicating discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The CFA results are presented in Table 1.

3.4.2. Measurement invariance

Multi-group CFA tested for invariance between the calibration and the validation subsamples, as well as between the resident and visitor groups within each city sample. Following Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998), full configural, metric, factor, and covariance invariance was established between residents and visitors in both the calibration and validation sample. The models were compared using cutoff criteria of 0.01 for ΔCFI and 0.015 for ΔRMSEA (Chen, 2007). Invariance tests between the calibration and the validation samples were also conducted, constraining path estimates to be equal across groups. No significant differences between the samples were found, providing support for the relationships proposed in the model.

Table 1
Reliability, AVE, squared correlations and correlation matrix (CFA results).

	α	AVE	Φ^2	PI	SC	PA	WOM
PI	0.881	0.652	0.247-0.381	**0.807**			
SC	0.949	0.823	0.247-0.335	0.497	**0.907**		
PA	0.915	0.737	0.277-0.645	0.526	0.579	**0.858**	
WOM	0.943	0.851	0.335-0.645	0.617	0.579	0.803	**0.923**

Note: Diagonal values in bold represent the square root of AVE. All correlations are significant ($p < .001$).

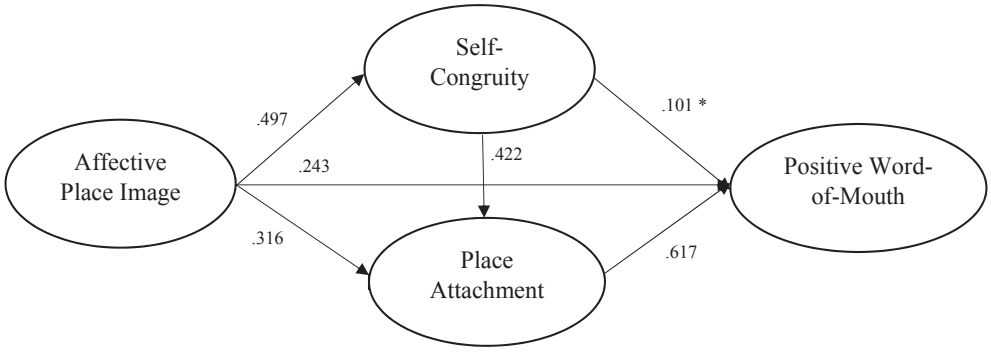

Fig. 2. Conceptual model tested. Note: All paths significant at $p < .001$ except path marked * which is significant at $p < .01$.

4. Results

4.1. Model and hypothesis tests

With acceptable model fit of the overall structural model ($\chi^2/df = 3.739$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.967, RMSEA = 0.066, SRMR = 0.035) and a simultaneous multi-group analysis between residents and visitors ($\chi^2/df = 2.664$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.044), the structural path coefficients were used to test relationships between the constructs. All of the relationships depicted in Fig. 2 were found significant and in their hypothesized directions.

Invariance across resident and visitor groups was tested through a series of chi-square difference tests constraining the path estimates to be equal across the groups and testing the model fit against the baseline model. All paths except two, the path between place image and positive WOM and the path between self-congruity and positive WOM, were identified as significantly different ($p < .05$) between the groups. The paths that were invariant across groups are marked with an asterisk (*) in Table 2 where results from the unconstrained model are reported. The unconstrained model explains 29.5 percent of the variance in self-congruity for residents and 17.2 percent for visitors. For place attachment, the model explains 52.9 percent of the variance in the residents group and 35.7 percent for visitors. Finally, 70.5 percent of the variance in positive WOM for residents is explained, compared to 63.3 percent for visitors.

The mediating role of self-congruity and place attachment on positive WOM was tested using bias-corrected (BC) bootstrapping in AMOS 25 (with 500 bootstrap samples and 90 percent BC confidence intervals) (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results in Table 3 indicate a positive direct relationship between affective place image and positive WOM, in support of H1. This relationship is partially mediated by place attachment, as evidenced by an indirect effect which is stronger for residents (59.7%), and weaker for visitors (25.8%), supporting H3. No mediation is however indicated for self-congruity on the affective place image–positive WOM relationship for any of the groups, which suggests H2 is not supported. Instead, results suggest that there is a partial mediation from self-congruity to WOM through place attachment, explaining 31.2 percent of the place image–place attachment relationship mediated through self-congruity for residents, and 59.2 percent for visitors, in line with H4. Consequently, there is full mediation from self-congruity to WOM through place attachment for both groups.

4.2. Additional analyses

To investigate assumptions underlying this research and enhance confidence in the results, additional model analysis was carried out. First, although there is extant research indicating the key role of affective image vis-à-vis cognitive image in place image formation (e.g., Stylidis et al., 2017; Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou, & Andronikidis, 2016), arguments can be raised that focusing on a single place image component might be overly simplistic (Stylos, Bellou, Andronikidis, & Vassiliadis, 2017). In response to such arguments, a single-item global construct for overall place image (see Appendix A) was added as an additional exogenous variable predicting self-congruity, place attachment, and WOM. For estimation purposes, the single-item construct was assumed to have a reliability of 0.90 and an error term of 0.10 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The additional analysis results reveal that overall place image indeed positively relates to all three endogenous variables ($p < .001$) but also that the original pattern of hypothesis testing results remain unchanged, thus enforcing the important effect that affective image plays in generating positive place outcomes.

The relative importance of the affective element of place image is further evidenced through qualitative data from the open question in the survey asking what the respondent associated with the place in question. In fact, a clear majority (50.5%) of respondents mentioned emotionally charged aspects with the city in question when first prompted, such as ‘stressful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘active’, ‘dynamic’, ‘boring’, ‘calm’, ‘arrogant’, whilst a minority (38.9%) mentioned more functional

Table 2
Test of path estimates.

Relationship	Standardized path estimates (Unconstrained model)				Significance difference between path estimates under constraint	
	Residents (n = 340)	*p*	Visitors (n = 282)	*p*	$\Delta\chi^2$	*p*
PI → WOM*	0.191	< 0.001	0.264	< 0.001	*0.021*	*> 0.050*
PI → PA	0.450	< 0.001	0.149	< 0.050	12.781	< 0.001
PA → WOM	0.666	< 0.001	0.597	< 0.001	6.541	< 0.050
PI → SC	0.543	< 0.001	0.414	< 0.001	5.910	< 0.050
SC → WOM*	*0.053*	*> 0.050*	*0.092*	*> 0.050*	*0.181*	*> 0.050*
SC → PA	0.377	< 0.001	0.520	< 0.001	6.079	< 0.050
Model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.664$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.044						

Note: All paths are unequal between groups except for the paths marked by an asterisk (*). All values are significant at $p < .05$ except for SC → WOM which is not significant for both groups.

Table 3
Mediation analysis results.

Relationship	Residents (n = 340)				Visitors (n = 282)			
	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Indirect/Total	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Indirect/Total
PI → SC → WOM	0.198	ns	0.198	0.0%	0.262	ns	0.262	0.0%
PI → PA → WOM	0.198	0.293	0.491	59.7%	0.262	0.091	0.353	25.8%
PI → SC → PA	0.451	0.204	0.655	31.2%	0.149	0.216	0.365	59.2%
SC → PA → WOM	ns	0.244	0.244	100.0%	ns	0.317	0.317	100.0%

Note: Standardized estimates. All values are significant at $p < .05$ except for SC → WOM.

aspects such as 'access to water', 'many cars', 'university', 'churches', 'sports'. The remainder (10.6%) mentioned a combination of emotional and functional qualities.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study investigates the role of emotional connections towards a place on positive WOM behaviors. To achieve this, the relationships between affective place image, self-congruity, place attachment, and positive WOM among city residents and visitors were examined. Results show, in line with previous research (Stylidis et al., 2017), that there is a positive relationship between affective place image and positive WOM. The relationship is similar across both residents and visitors, indicating the importance of instilling all stakeholders with feelings associated to a place rather than focusing specifically on one or the other. The focal relationship is also strongly mediated through place attachment for residents and to a lesser extent for visitors, suggesting that the emotional bond to the place itself influences both groups' WOM behavior. Interestingly, while the connection between affective place image and place attachment is stronger for residents, as can be expected, the connection between place attachment and positive WOM is solid also for visitors. A reason for this may be the relatively high number of frequently recurring visitors in the sample. Simpson and Siguaw (2008) found that transient tourists (or switchers), staying only for shorter periods, are least likely to have an identity salient with the place. However, validation across the two cities with a lower degree of recurrent visitors in the validation sample did not indicate any significant differences. An alternative explanation for the findings could lie in the fact that visitors were all visitors within their home country, which is likely to increase the perceived place attachment also for first-time visitors. Another reason might be that the primary travel motivation for several of the visitors is to see friends and family (Shani & Uriely, 2012).

5.1. Implications for theory

While the study finds a positive relationship between affective place image and self-congruity for both residents and visitors, results fail to evidence self-congruity's mediating affective place image–positive WOM relationship. Nor did the findings support any direct effect between self-congruity and WOM. This interesting finding contrasts previous research (e.g., Kemp et al., 2012; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). An explanation may lie in this study's focus on congruity with residents' image in particular, whereas extant work on self-congruity and WOM tends to focus on the self-congruity with tourists' image. The current findings suggest that residents' image may not offer sufficient symbolic value or serve self-expressive needs in the same way (Taylor et al., 2012).

Kastenholz (2004) investigated a more multi-faceted approach in comparing tourists' self-image with the affective destination image by using a 16-item semantic scale-by-scale comparison of items including the destination residents', visitors', and symbolic image attributes, but found no influence on WOM. The author concluded that a scale-by-scale comparison might not be appropriate if the two image objects do not share the same semantic domain, but rather that a single semantic differential scale best represents the destination-self-congruity measure and is more appropriate for the person than destination (symbolic image) domain. Conversely, Wassler and Hung (2015) found a higher congruence level when comparing self-congruity with the image of tourists (destination user image) to the self-congruity with the brand personality image (human characteristics associated with a destination brand), and argued that this is because the latter is more difficult for tourists to envision. Their findings suggest that selecting a specific facet is likely to bias the results of self-congruity measurements and that both self-congruity with brand users and with the brand itself may well be antecedents of an overall congruity between consumer and brand (Wassler & Hung, 2015). This study contributes towards this aim by focusing on a primary but so far neglected category of brand users in the place branding context; i.e., residents.

The current results further show a significant relationship between self-congruity and place attachment, and evidence of self-congruity mediating the affective place image–place attachment relationship, which is stronger for visitors than for residents. This suggests that while emotions associated to the place image do have a positive relationship with perceptions of a match between residents' image and the self for both groups, it has a stronger impact on visitors when it comes to place attachment. The results may seem counterintuitive, as the self-congruity of residents could be expected to be higher than that of visitors, having lived in the city and formed a part of this very image. On the other hand, following residents' experience of living in the city and forming both social and physical bonds to the place (Altman & Low, 2012; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001), it is possible that resident image offers little of value in the formation of their place attachment. Thus, it might be of more relevance to visitors. Additionally, as the investigated visitors were of the same nationality as the residents of the cities, they may have a sense of familiarity with the resident image, which may have a positive influence on place attachment.

Overall, findings reveal that, with the exception of the relationship between self-congruity and WOM, the proposed model can be applied across both resident and visitor groups, but that significant differences exist across groups on a number of relationships. However, while the magnitude of the relationships differs between residents and visitors, the nature and direction of relationships do not. Yet, as the conceptual model's overall explanatory power is higher for residents than visitors, the pattern of results suggest that there might be some unexplained mechanisms in place, especially in the case of visitors. Overall, the study contributes to theory by validating previous findings regarding the influence of emotional connections on positive WOM, as well as by shedding more light on the self-congruity with residents' image in place branding.

5.2. Implications for place marketing practice

From a managerial standpoint, the current study contributes to the field of place advocacy and place ambassadorship, as well as to the field of self-congruity and place attachment by providing empirical evidence for the relationships between affective place image, self-congruity, place attachment, and positive WOM among residents and visitors of a

city.

The study confirms the importance of affective place image in designing marketing campaigns towards both tourist and resident segments to improve the positioning and image, as well as in enhancing positive WOM. Therefore, place brand managers would be wise to design promotional messages with emotional appeals as well as encouraging active participation and engagement with official marketing and brand messages. Our finding is also reflected in marketing practice as many of the most successful city branding campaigns of recent times are indeed focused towards affective and emotional appeals (e.g., I ♥ NY, **I am**sterdam, mydubai) whilst also encouraging visitors as well as residents to actively engage with the city brands through positive WOM and hashtags on social media. As place attachment acts as a strong mediator on WOM, fostering attachment among its stakeholders is vital. Place marketers and policy makers therefore need to successfully reflect the self-concept of key stakeholders in communication messages in order to strengthen the emotional brand connections. When targeting residents, communication is best centered around aspects related to the place identity. Communication related to residents' image may be more relevant for visitors as it might increase the probability that recipients will act as brand co-creating ambassadors and share the message further.

5.3. Limitations and future research avenues

Naturally, this study is not without its limitations. Analyzing data on residents and visitors within the same framework is challenging as the groups tend to differ in terms of experience and meaning ascribed to the place. The current research could therefore be seen as an exploratory attempt to enhance understanding on the differences between groups in this regard. The study is based on a multi-attribute measure, in the form of a semantic differential scale to capture destination image, which may be incomplete and not incorporate all relevant characteristics of destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

Further, while the use of non-probability sampling tends to be cost- and time effective and helpful when the sample frame is unknown, as is often the case in place branding research, it also means reduced generalizability of the findings to other places. Future research should therefore expand the context and scope investigated here to a multitude of contexts and stakeholder groups. Along the same lines, since the study concerns constructs related to the individual and social self, it is important to consider the influence and limitations of culture. Specifically, the study is reflective of two cities from one country. Meanwhile, self-expression values have been found to differ between cultures (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), which suggests that there is scope to investigate the viability of the conceptual model in a cross-cultural context. Finally, the research does not take into consideration stipulated sub-dimensions of social versus physical attachment (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001) or civic versus natural place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), which may be of interest to investigate.

Some of the findings also open up avenues for further research. The connection between place attachment and positive WOM was found to be almost equally strong for visitors as for residents. Part of the reason might be the nature of travel motivation for these visitors. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to investigate the impact of different travel motivations on the investigated relationships as this might unveil additional insights into the mechanisms underlying emotional connections and WOM behavior.

Moreover, results suggest that residents' image may not offer sufficient symbolic value or serve self-expressive needs, as self-congruity did not have any direct effect on positive WOM. These interesting and somewhat contradictive results constitute a fruitful future research avenue as it implies that the role of self-congruity is more complex than initially anticipated. It appears to vary depending on the reference point towards which the self-congruity is measured.

The pattern of results also suggests that there might be some unexplained mechanisms in place, especially among visitors. There is therefore a future research opportunity in identifying and testing additional mediating mechanisms and how these potentially differ across stakeholder groups. Finally, the study focused on WOM as the ultimate dependent variable, which may potentially be restricted to the respondents' friends and acquaintances. Since it is today clear that electronic WOM (eWOM) also plays an important role in destination visit decisions (e.g., Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013), future researchers could successfully incorporate eWOM as an additional dependent variable to further enhance the generalizability of our findings.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A

A.1. Measures

Place Image – Top-of-mind associations (Adapted from Atadil, Sirakaya-Turk, Baloglu, & Kirillova, 2017; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991)

Measure: Open response

What do you associate with [the place]? Please list all descriptive words, thoughts, or characteristics that come to mind when you think of [the place].

Place Image – Overall Image (Qu et al., 2011)

The overall image that I have of [the place] is…

Measure: −3 = Very negative, 0 = Neither positive nor negative, +3 = Very positive

PI – Place Image (Adapted from Hosany et al., 2007)

Measure: Seven-point semantic differential scale

1. Boring/Interesting
2. Ugly/Beautiful
3. Unpleasant/Pleasant
4. Superficial/Authentic
5. Stressful/Relaxed *

SC – Self-Congruity (Adapted from Taylor et al., 2012)

Measure: Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by "Strongly Disagree" – "Strongly Agree"

1. The image I have of [the place] residents matches how I see myself
2. People who live in [the place] are like me
3. I am very much like the typical person who lives in [the place]
4. I can identify with people who live in [the place]

PA – Place Attachment (Adapted from Lewicka, 2008)

Measure: Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by "Strongly Disagree" – "Strongly Agree"

1. I miss [the place] when I am not there
2. I know [the place] very well
3. I defend [the place] when somebody criticizes it *
4. I feel secure in [the place] *
5. I am proud of [the place] *
6. [The place] is a part of myself

7. I want to be involved in what is going on in [the place]

WOM – Positive Word-of-Mouth (Adapted from Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006)

Measure: Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by "Strongly Disagree" – "Strongly Agree"

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

*items omitted during scale purification process

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Carola Strandberg is a PhD Student in Industrial Marketing at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden.

Maria Ek Styvén is Associate Professor in Industrial Marketing at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. Her main research interests are consumer behavior and branding, primarily within the tourism and hospitality and retailing industries. Dr. Ek Styvén has published articles in journals such as *Journal of Business Research, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, Journal of Tourism Futures,* and *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*.

Magnus Hultman is an Associate Professor of Marketing and Deputy Director at the Global and Strategic Marketing Research Centre (GLOSMARC) at University of Leeds. He holds a doctorate in industrial marketing from Luleå University of Technology. His main research interests revolve around international marketing strategy issues, various aspects of tourism marketing, branding, and supply chain management. His research has been published in journals such as *Industrial Marketing Management, International Business Review, International Marketing Review, Journal of Business Research, Journal of International Marketing, Psychology and Marketing,* and *Tourism Management*, among others