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An image worth a thousand words? Expressions of stakeholder identity perspectives in place image descriptions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how place identity can be expressed in residents' place image descriptions, addressing differences and similarities in place identity expressions between residents' descriptions of the image of their place and the image of the place as described to others.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth interviews were conducted with residents of a Swedish city. Place image descriptions were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Findings – Different types of identity perspectives manifest in the place image descriptions of residents. Respondents' associations reflect place, person and social group identity perspectives, including their own perspective as residents, but also as visitors, or a combination of both. Priming is needed when gathering place image perceptions, to establish which underlying identity perspective is expressed.

Research limitations/implications – This study offers a Nordic perspective on the organic communication of place image. The scope and qualitative nature of this study is a limitation to its generalizability but also suggests a rich ground for future cross-cultural studies on the topic.

Practical implications – Results point to the importance of accurately formulating questions to catch stakeholders' place image. Insights are offered into how stakeholders communicate Nordic place image perceptions when engaging in communication about a place and into the effects of identity on organic place brand communication.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is among the first to explore how key stakeholders' lenses to interpret a place brand are activated in the communication of place image, and how this influences their descriptions of the place.

Keywords Place branding, Place identity, Stakeholders, Residents, Identity theory, Social identity theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Places in the Nordics face a number of challenges connected to urbanization and centralization of the population and economy, ageing populations and loss of traditional industrial jobs (Hedström and Littke, 2011; Heleniak and Sanchez Gassen, 2019). To attract resources and target groups like residents and tourists, place managers are increasingly turning to place branding (Acharya and Rahman, 2016). Recently, the notion of place branding as a linear process has been called into question in favor of a more interactive

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approach (Cassinger and Eksell, 2017). This view of place branding as an ongoing, co-creative dialogue or negotiation of meaning among different stakeholders (e.g. visitors, residents, investors) has shifted the focus toward the multiplicity of stakeholders and the influence of culture in the brand building process (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Merrilees *et al.*, 2012). Kalandides (2011) as well as Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) put forth an identity-based view of place branding, with identity creation and image management of the place brand at the core of place managers' agenda.

Recent research suggests that residents play a vital part in the formation and communication of place brands (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Zenker *et al.*, 2017). Residents' place advocacy is essential, especially for small- and medium-sized cities that depend on tourism for economic purposes (Uchinaka *et al.*, 2019) – a common situation for many places in the Nordics. Despite this, research is criticized for lacking a comprehensive answer to the question of what a place means to its residents (Merrilees *et al.*, 2018). Previous studies investigating stakeholder perceptions suggest that different stakeholder groups might use different filters, or lenses, to interpret a place brand and that stakeholders may have a multi-perspective of a place (Braun *et al.*, 2013; Merrilees *et al.*, 2012; Zenker *et al.*, 2017). However, there is a gap in knowledge on how this lens is activated in the communication of place image and how it influences the place image descriptions of different groups. Place advocacy is linked to identification (Palmer *et al.*, 2013) and examining residents' perceptions toward place branding requires an understanding of how residents express their place identity (Insch and Walters, 2018). This paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring how the expression of stakeholder identity can be discerned in the description of a place's image. In doing so, the following research questions are addressed:

RQ1. How is place identity expressed in residents' place image descriptions?

RQ2. What are the differences and similarities among residents' image of their place as such, versus their image of the place as described to others?

Theoretical foundation

The study is based on identity theory (IT) (Stryker and Serpe, 1982), social identity theory (SIT) and its subset self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.*, 1994). These theories can explain that different stakeholders, audiences or target groups have different perspectives of a place and that one individual may hold different images of a place. The self is a construct comprising a sense of who and what we are, through which our activities can be understood (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Identities are "meanings one has as a group member, as a role-holder, or as a person" (Stets and Burke, 2002, p. 132) and the self can be divided into the following:

- *person(al)* or *self-identity* ("I" and "me"), the internal component or internalized meanings of our roles in society, distinguishing oneself from others through unique characteristics, abilities, interests goals and desires (Stets and Burke, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 1994); and
- *social (group) identity* ("we" and "us"), identity-related descriptions of self that help people locate themselves and others within the social environment, based on people's categorization as members of specific social (in-)groups *vis-à-vis* out-groups (Stets and Burke, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 1994).

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Identity and role are reflections of each other, a role being the external (performance) part of an identity, expressed and performed in relation to others (Stryker, 1968). People simultaneously occupy a role and belong to a group. Therefore, role identities and social identities are concurrently relevant to, and influential on, individuals' perceptions, emotions and behavior (Stets and Burke, 2000). Combining the two theories expresses how the self exists within and is influenced by society and how it is influential *on* society. IT is essential to place advocacy as identities, once activated, are the basis for role performance and social behavior, inspiring behavior in line with group or person standards and objectives (Stryker, 1968). Which identity a person behaves in line with depends on which identity is active, self as a person (*I*), or self as a group member or representative (*we*) (Brewer, 1991). Therefore, IT and SIT provide a suitable foundation to address the aim of this paper, focusing on how stakeholder identity is expressed in residents' descriptions of place image.

Place and identity

Place is described as a framework and structure through and within which human subjectivity, experience and self-identity is to be understood (Malpas, 1999). Place is constitutive of our character and identity as humans; something that defines us, that we are defined by and through, and that we define both in meaning and by shaping it into a reflection of ourselves (Malpas, 1999). Casey (2001) argues that places become part of our self, making the self and body a vehicle of expression or reflection of place. *Place identity* has been studied from different perspectives. Environmental psychology has focused on the role of place in the construction of self and identity (Insch and Walters, 2018). Introduced by Proshansky (1978), place identity is defined as:

> [. . .] those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment (p. 155).

Later, Proshansky *et al.* (1983) described place identity as comparable to a social identity, encompassing different types of place identities (such as urban identity), highlighting place as a dimension of social roles. The place is therefore part of both person and social identity formation (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983).

Place identity has also been conceptualized as representing one of three elements of meaning attached to a place by a person or group. Here, it represents the symbolic values of the setting in the form of self-referent cognitive associations between the place and the self, while the other two dimensions, place attachment and place dependence, reflect affective and conative components (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). Others conceptualize place attachment as the overarching concept comprising the two sub-dimensions of place identity and place dependence (Prayag and Ryan, 2012).

From a social psychology perspective, place identification tends to focus on social identity and identification with a place (Chen and Šegota, 2016). Place identity has been conceptualized as a type or dimension of social group or category connected to place, such as citizen (Reysen *et al.*, 2013), resident or inhabitant (Lewicka, 2008; Palmer *et al.*, 2013). This is sometimes denoted through metonymic substitution, using the geographical entity to refer to the group (e.g. "Sweden" wins the World Cup), or as a type of person or identity denoted by a specific place, settlement, or geographic entity, such as urban or country person (Hummon, 1986; Knez, 2005; Proshansky *et al.*, 1983). Another example is a so-called place-related social identity such as "Londoner/Milanese/Californian" (Uzzell *et al.*, 2002). Identities can be subjectively claimed and collectively ascribed. However, implacement, the

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meaning of one's being in a place (Casey, 1993), dictates that while a person may willingly appropriate elements of a place by consuming its products, visiting it or taking up residency there, a native inhabitant cannot really escape the references others make to the place (Andéhn *et al.*, 2020).

Place identity can also be seen as a feature of a place (Lalli, 1992; Lewicka, 2008). Places can be perceived as having a character and an identity of their own, given from elements both within and outside them (Malpas, 1999). Humans are part of place and symbolically extend their own selves to include their surroundings, thereby imposing their identities on their surroundings and vice versa, making place a part of self (Belk, 1988). The reciprocity between the self, "personalized" by place, and place, physically and mentally "personalized" or "humanized" by self, enables a perception of place as having a certain identity. As such, it may display human attributes, making mental, social and spatial representation of the identity of a place both a product of and constitutive of self-identity (Malpas, 1999). Kalandides (2011) describes place identity as a place's distinctive personality or character in relation to other places, the elements of which (materiality, institutions, practices and representations) are so interwoven that they are impossible to dissociate. According to Zenker (2011), place identity is the driver of place perceptions based on "the visual, verbal and behavioral expressions of a place, which are embodied in the aims, communication, values and general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design" (p. 42). This comprises both the material aspects of the place and the mental aspects of how it is perceived, making place image an integrated part of place identity (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

Place identity may thus involve identification and identity of the person, the group and the place. It may refer to the following (see also Kalandides, 2011; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Uzzell *et al.*, 2002; Zenker and Petersen, 2014):

- a type, aspect or part of a personal or social group identity;
- identification as a (type of) person, member of a group or a place;
- identification with a group or a place on a personal and social level; and
- identification of a person, a group or a place itself, based on its distinctive features.

Places and their images, like brands, consequently play an important part in individuals' identity creation, helping them position their self in their social environment; both in terms of interpretation and expression of the self and in terms of attachment and differentiation (Hummon, 1990). Residents may activate a number of different identities when communicating about their place – each with their own meanings, perspectives and objectives.

Conceptualization

This study adopts the conceptual definition of *place image* as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place, which should be valid, believable, distinctive and appealing (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). As shown, *place identity* is a more fuzzy notion seen both as a form of place image and as an objective reality opposed to place image (Kalandides, 2011). A distinction is made between place *brand* identity, as the intended or desired image in the consumer's mind from an internal stakeholder perspective (e.g. place brand managers) (Wäckerlin *et al.*, 2019) and place identity in the form of expressions described in the section above, which is the focus for this study. Mental representations of places are mediated through narratives and discourses (Kalandides, 2011). This study is therefore based on the place-related declarative knowledge of facts, beliefs and feelings emitted through discourse (Kihlstrom and Klein, 1994).

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Methodology

Case

The empirical study comprises a case study of a contemporary social phenomenon in a real life context (Yin, 2014), and the unit of analysis is residents' place image accounts. The selected case was a medium-sized, coastal city in northern Sweden. People from the region typically visit it for shopping purposes, whereas distant travelers come for its nature and climate. Like many other peripheral Nordic cities, it is struggling with attracting and keeping residents and qualified workforce. Recently, the city has garnered attention for a successful place branding campaign that went viral primarily owing to its residents who shared the promotional videos in social media, reflecting a sense of pride about the place. For the initiated, this may seem somewhat paradoxical as the city is renowned to be governed by "Jantelagen" (the law of Jante) – a well-known concept in the Nordic countries (Trotter, 2015). This "code of modesty" covers a set of social rules imposing symbolic control over people often used to explain Scandinavian values and attitudes (Trotter, 2015). The associated traditional stereotype of the local population and the identity comprises descriptions such as reserved, quiet and backward but also direct, authentic and reliable (Eriksson, 2010; Syssner, 2009). These identity stereotypes and ideals are often used and reproduced in place marketing, movies, the news and politics (Eriksson, 2010) but are also seen as obstacles to overcome in place branding (Nordström, 2015), making resident buy-in and advocacy more challenging but also important.

Sample and method

Owing to the exploratory purpose of the study, we took a naturalistic inquiry approach to answer the research questions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with residents to capture rich insights on aspects of identity in place image expressions. In line with Lincoln and Guba (1985), a sample was selected based on a maximum variation approach. Using purposive and snowball sampling, we strived to recruit a mix of participants in terms of gender, age, education level, occupation and time of residency. Sampling stopped when informational redundancy was reached (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), that is, when no new insights on themes were generated from additional data. This resulted in 15 interviewees from diverse backgrounds, aged 16–71 years, who had lived in the city between 7 and 50 years.

The interviews took place face-to-face in locations that were comfortable for the interviewee (e.g. his/her office, a conference room or a café) and were conducted by two researchers jointly. We used a semi-structured interview guide to address the research questions in similar ways in each interview while remaining open for probing and for respondents to answer freely (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The initial questions aimed to capture interviewees' overall feelings and associations toward the place, followed by questions on how the respondent would describe the place to someone who has never been there. The remaining part of the interview guide contained questions intended to provide more details from both perspectives (i.e. top-of-mind place image versus image as described to others). Interviews were conducted in Swedish, recorded and transcribed, and the results were translated upon writing the paper.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, accepting that meaning making is subjective and depends on the social context (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We followed the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006), as also reported by Insch and Walters (2018) in their study of residents' engagement with place branding. This involves the following phases:

- familiarizing with the data (including transcription and reading);
- generating initial codes for interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion;

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- searching for themes;
- reviewing themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set;
- defining and naming themes; and
- producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As the study took its starting point in research questions and theory, the thematic analysis was "theoretical" rather than purely inductive, thus resulting in a detailed analysis of some aspects of the data rather than describing the data overall (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, data reduction occurs continuously throughout the qualitative analysis.

Trustworthiness

Means to increase the trustworthiness of the study included investigator triangulation, variation in observations in terms of time and place, checking for discrepant data and keeping an audit trail (i.e. saving all recordings, notes and other documentation such as files pertaining to the thematic analysis) (Lewis, 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Research worker reliability was addressed in terms of analysis methods, answer reliability, coder reliability, critical checking, asking follow-up questions, avoiding leading questions and ensuring correct transcriptions (Kvale, 1996; Lewis, 2009).

Findings

Through the thematic analysis process described above, three key identity perspectives emerged from the residents' place image descriptions: *personal, social (in- or out-group)* and *neutral (place) perspective*. Identity expressions are reflected in the identity perspective of the subject, as well as in the content describing the identity of both the place and people in it (from an object perspective). In line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), findings are visualized by presenting the quote(s) best illustrating each theme and its underlying meaning, along with researchers' interpretations.

Personal perspective

An illustrative answer describing top-of-mind place image evidencing personal identity:

> *I appreciate* the size of the city, *it's* a small town but with a big city feeling. *Personally, I appreciate* that *we have* gotten quite a few restaurants. Culture, both theater and the House of Culture, concerts [. . .] *I am* a sports geek and have an annual pass to the ladies' basketball (R12).

Rather than simply stating perceived "facts" about the place, the answer portrays the *subject's identity* from a personal (*I*) perspective. The emphasis on personal preferences and the instrumentality of the place to fulfill one's goals reflects personal identity needs to distinguish oneself from others through one's characteristics, interests and desires (Stets and Burke, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 1994). This relates to place identity as enabling (or an aspect of) personal identity, represented by how cognitions of place attributes (identity) helps define personal character, preferences, goals, behavior and status. These stem from a place's potential to serve a person's needs (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983), thus giving rise to place dependence (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). Descriptions evidence the overlap between personal and social identity, e.g. "*Personally, I* appreciate that *we* have [. . .]" (Stets and Burke, 2000).

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Social perspective

Expressions of social identity are more clearly discernible from an activated resident identity perspective:

> Right now, *it's* a city where a lot is *being built*. *We have* a *nice* coast, many *nice* islands [. . .] with the House of Culture, *we have* received more and more artists, *it's* a good cultural scene. [It's] *fun* with both female and male professional sports teams in hockey and basketball. *We have* varying seasons, *we have* snow, [a] summer when it can be 30 degrees, everything in short distance, it takes very little time wherever you are going and whatever you are doing, in maximum 20 minutes you have arrived everywhere (R3).

These depersonalized expressions from an in-group perspective stem from the activation of a specific *social identity*, reflected by a shift in expressions from I- to we-statements (Stets and Burke, 2000). The sense of ownership, highlighting positive aspects of the place as something "we" (residents) have, rather than "the place" has, corresponds with a merging of self and place in the extended self (Belk, 1988) and with Casey's (1993) view of how we identify ourselves through places. Hence, it reflects the function of place identity to fulfill needs of personalization and social value (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983).

Furthermore, some expressions reflect residents assuming the perspective of visitors:

> The archipelago. Then it is the [UNESCO] world heritage. That is *what people know* of, [the Church Town] (R4).

This demonstrates role behavior through coordination and tailoring of place descriptions to role partners (Stets and Burke, 2000), assuming an *out-group perspective* of the place as a *place to visit*. Identifying (IT) or self-categorizing (SIT) as an in-group member, regulating and evaluating role-performance, entails both reflexivity (taking oneself as an object) and social comparison of self with others, including taking the role or perspective of others (Stets and Burke, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 1994). These shifts in perspective demonstrate differences of subjectivity (the view from one's own perspective), self-subjectivity (taking oneself as a subject) and other-subjectivity (taking the perspective of others) (Malpas, 1999). The content of place-to-visit descriptions differs quite substantially from the *in-group, place-to-live* descriptions:

> The nature, the proximity to everything. *We can have* so much – jobs, houses, day care, summer houses, shops, education [. . .] (R9).

These role-related descriptions of place correspond with place identity as a *dimension of social identity* (e.g. resident, tourist, spouse, parent, professor) reflecting the cognitive place attributes that support role performance and social value on a collective level (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983). Furthermore, it connects to the notion of *habitus*, and the human conditioning in a place, forming the basis for action in any given place (Casey, 2001). Compared to place-to-live descriptions, place-to-visit descriptions focus more on unique attractions, sights to see and leisure-time activities, while attributes such as restaurants, shopping and cultural offerings tend to be relevant to both perspectives. Mixed accounts tend to start rather general and then turn into place-to-live or place-to-visit descriptions or a combination of both, explaining how the place has a lot to offer to both visitors and tourists.

Some responses revealed a clear perspective only after follow-up questions were posed:

> Well, *it's* a city that feels bigger than it actually is. After all, *it is* quite isolated from bigger cities. *One has* to take care of things oneself (R10).

The gender-neutral, indefinite pronoun "one" may refer to a person, or people in the place, or to the place itself, indirectly meaning people in/of the city. This reflects metonymic

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substitution; the place serving as a symbol of people living in or working for the city (Wallwork and Dixon, 2004). It highlights an interdependence between place and people and can be seen as a passive expression of social identity, conveyed through other-subjectivity of the in-group identity (e.g. self-sufficiency of residents).

Neutral perspective

Neutral accounts, not exhibiting any active subject identity, tend to center on the place itself, describing the "place in general":

> One of the biggest cities in the north of Sweden. Small, compact city center, with fairly good restaurants. *The inhabitants are* rather aware, sporty, [have] a strong interest in sports, basketball, football and all that. A relatively large amount of *people who like* to be outdoors, outdoorsy people, not as much as in Tromsö, but *a large part who like* to be outdoors and exercise, but also quite *a lot who are* only generally interested in sports. History, [the city] has been a *working-class city*, but *it has turned* these past years, with the House of Culture, events, cultural scene [. . .] in recent years. When it comes to shopping there are only three big malls, but not a lot of unique, niched, stores, a lot more chain stores (R13).

No activated personal or social identity is clearly exhibited; however, *epithets* such as "working-class city" are used. Relating to the history or activities traditionally associated with the city can be tied to the "humanization" or "personalization" of place (Malpas, 1999), connected to the social identity and activities of the working class. This conveys a holistic meaning, relating to the ambiance, history and culture of the place and depicts place identity as embodied in the culture of its stakeholders (Zenker, 2011).

Residents' identity is also explicitly described as an aspect of the place image (Braun *et al.*, 2013) from a subjectively "neutral" perspective. Here, residents are referred to as the" population" or" people", rather than "we" or "one." Descriptions comprise resident features such as population diversity, or inhabitants being "aware," "sporty" and "outdoorsy." The incorporation of residents in the overall image of the place alludes to the collective attribution of identity characteristics and performance of the resident identity (Andéhn *et al.*, 2020). The human embodiment of place (Casey, 2001) resonates with place identity in the form of behavioral expressions of a place (Zenker, 2011).

Other identity-neutral accounts center on attributes of the place:

> *A beautiful city*, surrounded by water, an amazing archipelago, many good hotels and restaurants, beautiful sunsets in summer [. . .] (R11).

These "place-in-general" descriptions tend to focus on the physical and natural setting or attributes, size and location, climate/weather/seasons and natural phenomena, accessibility, amenities, attractions and activities. These neutral or fact-based descriptions of the place without any clear stakeholder perspective match descriptions of place identity as comprising the character or feature(s) of a place (Kalandides, 2011; Lewicka, 2008), emanating from various elements within and outside the place (Malpas, 1999). That the place-in-general perspective does not evidence any identity activation does not mean that it is objective. Rather, it is an other-subjective perspective as one's subjectivity is always singular, lacking direct experience of any other perspectives, although others' perspectives can be imagined (Malpas, 1999).

Place image descriptions to those unfamiliar with the place

Some key points emerge when analyzing responses in relation to the second research question. Expressions reflecting *personal identity* subject perspectives can be discerned in the descriptions:

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> *I do that* quite often. *I mostly write* in English [when describing the place to others]. *I think they should come* in the winter because then *it is most beautiful*, with the northern lights that is so very popular. You can drive on the ice, which many cannot believe – that is a big exclamation mark. The [mountain outside the city] *I think is absolutely amazing*! (R4)

This highlights not only personal preferences, feelings and evaluations of the place but also previous behavior in similar situations ("I talk/write about"). These affective, evaluative and conative responses can be tied to the activation of role expectations as a resident advocating the city to an outsider and to personal identity and the need for self-verification, distinctiveness and self-esteem (Stets and Burke, 2000).

Furthermore, a higher *social identity* activation is expressed:

> *I would talk* about the ice road, especially *to those* not from Sweden. In the winter the river freezes, and the sea, and then *we use* this huge space for skiing, snowmobiling, skating, *you can* drive a car on the ice. *If they* ask about northern lights I would say that yes, *we see* it quite a lot, but *I don't go out* looking for it, but *we live* here so it's not the same big thing [for us] (R13).

Descriptions evidence the overlap between personal and social identity (Stets and Burke, 2000) through interpersonal resident role-performance (e.g. advocating the place and highlighting personal deviation from role expectations or stereotypes) and by comparing and contrasting in-group and out-group member perspectives. While the out-group perspective in the first response set often was mentioned as an afterthought, or upon follow-up questions, it was consciously emphasized in the second response set. Moreover, interviewees tend to actively consider the specific out-group (international, Swedish or local) visitor perspective, exhibiting variations in other-subjectivity (Malpas, 1999) based on the place-related affiliation or origin of the social out-group (Lalli, 1992; Lewicka, 2008). From a place perspective, no place-to-live descriptions are exhibited in this response set, only place-to-visit and place-in-general accounts. Some participants initially claimed that they would "say the same thing" but still modified or elaborated the response content.

Finally, this response set also depicts resident characteristics as part of the place descriptions:

> It's a small city, not a lot going on. *We are* very introverted people living here (R5).

Expressions shift from other-subjective ("people/residents") to reflexive or self-subjective ("we") statements, describing the identity of the social in-group from an active resident identity perspective. This social stereotyping distinguishes in-group from out-group characteristics and is a cognitive outcome of social identity (Stets and Burke, 2000). Descriptions of residents as introverted or outdoorsy resonate with descriptions of the place as remote, secluded and close to nature. This matches local identity stereotypes (Syssner, 2009) in the form of a place-related social identity (Uzzell *et al.*, 2002) and highlights the reflection of self-in-place and place-in-self (Malpas, 1999).

Discussion

Top-of-mind descriptions differ in content, both in *what* residents describe (place and people *object* identity perspective) and *how* they describe it, reflecting which identity lenses are applied (personal, social or neutral *subject* identity perspective). The place identity perspectives manifest in the different place image descriptions: place-to-live, place-to-visit, and place-in-general. The identity activation is revealed in responses reflecting respondents' own personal and social identity perspective as residents but also varying visitor perspectives.

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The content of the place-to-live and place-to-visit descriptions, e.g. specific place attributes mentioned, can be connected to a particular social identity in relation to place (e.g. resident or visitor). It could be said to depict the identity or role of the place, related to its function to support role performances. Expressions of the role of the place – to live in or visit – reflect different stakeholder lenses, in line with previous research (Merrilees *et al.*, 2012; Stylidis *et al.*, 2015). However, the place perspective is not limited to the activation of a place-related in- or out-group identity (resident or visitor) or a place-related social identity (e.g. a label such as "Londoner"). It could also be expressed from any other social group or category identity perspective, such as parent or woman, evidencing the place aspect of social roles (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983). Residents place-to-visit descriptions further evidence both subjective (from personal visitor view) and other-subjective (from other visitors' view) perspectives (Malpas, 1999).

Place-to-visit perspectives naturally increased in descriptions of the place image to someone who has never visited the place. There were also fewer mixed perspectives and fewer ambiguous answers. Descriptions generally became less general and increasingly detailed, with more examples of attributes, amenities and activities relevant to a visitor. Furthermore, the content of descriptions was tailored depending on the assumed out-group identity perspective of the unknown visitor (e.g. the ice road was considered noteworthy to international visitors).

Overall, descriptions reflect how residents use place to express personal identity and preferences but also emotional place attachment and conative place dependence evaluations relevant for individual goal fulfillment and well-being (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). The increase in cognitive, affective, conative and evaluative outcomes in the second response set reflects a stronger identity activation and a shift toward in-group versus out-group perspectives, in line with SIT. Moreover, the activation of social identities sparks comparison between in- and out-group perspectives and performance of role standards stemming from a need for self-verification and self-esteem (Stets and Burke, 2000; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996), thereby increasing the propensity for place advocacy (Palmer *et al.*, 2013).

While some interviewees became more positive in the second set of place descriptions, others became more negative or defensive (e.g. "not a lot going on"). These humble or self-deprecating statements resonate with the stereotype of the local people as modest, reserved and introverted (Syssner, 2009). The more negatively worded statements came primarily from younger participants, which may be explained in part by a failure of the place to support their specific identity needs. Alternatively, assimilation to esteem-enhancing group standards, such as place advocacy, may rely on a self-selected group membership (Brewer, 1991). The characteristics of the city as peripheral and left to fend for itself may have shaped a tight-knit society, with a strong social cohesion and identity for more settled residents. In contrast, younger residents may not yet actively have chosen to stay in the city, leading to a lower social identity activation and role taking. Furthermore, the comparatively more positive descriptions from older respondents beg the question of a potential shift in mentality away from "Jantelagen."

Findings highlight not only the identity of the place but also residents' identity, characteristics and behavior as part of the place image. Individuals and in- and out-groups related to a place are embedded in the place and its image, as illustrated in Figure 1. Identity meanings permeate the different layers reciprocally. Physical and social place characteristics are internalized into the personal and social group identities, which in turn influence the perceived identity of the place (e.g. labeled a "worker city" based on the human activities). These meanings distinguish between the more generic social identity of being a

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"resident in general" from the more specific meaning of a place-related social identity, being a "resident of place X," which is inherently imbued with the characteristics of the place in question.

Conclusions and implications

To conclude, identity entails seeing the world and self from different perspectives. Place identity can be analyzed both from a subject point-of-view through personal and social identity perspectives reflected in place image descriptions and from an object identity perspective of the place as a place-to-live, place-to-visit and place-in-general, each varying in content. The study emphasizes the importance of residents' identity not only as a subject identity but also as a component of the object identity. Table 1 summarizes the potential identity perspectives based on the findings of this study.

Research implications and limitations

Researchers highlight the need to understand how residents express their place identity (Insch and Walters, 2018). Three levels of identity perspectives are expressed and identified in residents' place image descriptions as follows:

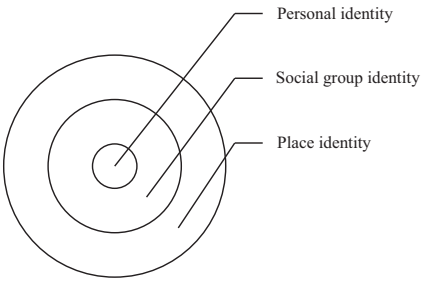

Figure 1.
Three levels of identity

Object identity perspective \ Subject identity perspective	*Personal* (as unique individual)	*In-group* (as resident)	*Out-group* (as visitor or other outsider)
Individual (person)	Personal view of myself (as an individual or group member)	Resident view of me (as an individual or group member)	Outsider view of me (as an individual or group member)
In-group (residents)	Personal view of residents	Resident view of residents	Outsider view of residents
Out-group (visitors)	Personal view of visitors	Resident view of visitors	Outsider view of visitors
The place (the city)	Personal view of the place. . . – in *general*, – as a place to *visit*, – as a place to *live*	Resident-view of the place. . . – in *general*, – as a place to *visit*, – as a place to *live*	Outsider-view of the place. . . – in *general*, – as a place to *visit*, – as a place to *live*

Table 1.
Potential identity perspectives

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(1) a *personal level* through the features, characteristics and behavior of the individual (Proshansky, 1978);

(2) a *social level* through the features, characteristics and behavior of a social group or member thereof (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983); and

(3) a *place level* through the features, characteristics and behavior of a place (Zenker, 2011).

Results offer insights on the different types of place identity expressed in place image descriptions. These expressions match the place identity dimensions of personal and social identity described by Proshansky *et al.* (1983) but also the concept of place dependence by Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) and place identity in terms of the features or character of a place (Kalandides, 2011; Lewicka, 2008; Malpas, 1999). Future research may delve deeper, analyzing the specific place-related self-meanings of personal and social identity concepts, including related concepts such as person-based social identities, relational social identities, group-based social identities and collective identities (Brewer, 2001).

Previous research highlights that conceptualization of what place identity actually is remains shrouded in ambiguity (Wäckerlin *et al.*, 2019). Literature is riddled with approaches and applications on various levels, comprising different place aspects (Lalli, 1992). A possible interpretation of this study's findings is to view place descriptions lacking subject identity activation as expressions of place image, while descriptions evidencing identity activation reflect personal and/or social place identity features. Future research may focus on clarifying the definitions, elements and interrelations of the various place identity concepts and the related concepts of place image and place culture on a stakeholder level (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

Results highlight the need for prompts when gathering place image perceptions to establish which underlying identity perspective is activated. The study shows an increase in affective, conative and evaluative expressions generated by the use of prompts, activating residents' role performance, which is relevant in relation to resident place advocacy (Palmer *et al.*, 2013). This has implications for research design and methodology. To know what type of place image the respondent is actually describing, researchers need to thoroughly consider priming and question formulation. Thereby, they can pose appropriate follow-up questions to tease out the underlying meaning or perspective of expressed place descriptions. When using quantitative methods, prompts may be used to prime respondents and indicate which place perspective the instrument is intended to capture.

Limitations in the methodology provide potential avenues for future research. As in any exploratory, qualitative study, results cannot be generalized beyond the studied context. This study focused on a Nordic setting. Transcribing findings and conclusions into English text could result in the loss or misinterpretation of cultural or linguistic nuances, calling for replications in English-speaking countries and across cultures for further verification. To gain insights on residents' image of a place without the possible influences of researcher–interviewee interactions, future research could investigate place image expressions in social media through content analysis. Further studies could also include different target groups (e.g. previous residents, entrepreneurs, visitors from different countries). Finally, as the study focused on a medium-sized, peripheral city with a strong local identity, investigating potential similarities and differences against a bigger city might be of interest.

Practical implications

Overall, residents and their characteristics, which tend to reflect the place characteristics, are a recurring part of place image descriptions, indicating an interconnection between the

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two. Not only are residents a part of the place and its image but also their identities are vital for place advocacy and reflected in how they communicate about the place. Prompting respondents to describe the place to someone who has never visited it has several benefits. As social identity is activated, residents assume, compare and contrast in- and out-group perspectives rendering place-to-visit descriptions more prevalent and accounts better tailored to match visitors' perspectives (e.g. recommending ice road sightseeing to international visitors). An activated resident identity inspires role performance; behaving in line with group goals and standards, upholding a positive regard of the group and place (e.g. "selling" northern lights). Campaigns should therefore focus on a message built on appeals to identity that resonates with residents' identity and helps them construct favorable self-images. Thereby, they are primed to activate their social identity and to act as group and place ambassadors, engaging in positive place advocacy. Despite the traditional norm of modesty associated with "Jantelagen" and the mentality of northern Sweden (Eriksson, 2010), positive expressions dominate in the place-to-visit descriptions. As the norm is to be humble yet reliable, priming residents to activate a depersonalized role of helping a potential visitor may encourage other-subjective perspectives and place descriptions, making place advocacy congruent with the norm.

While it may be relevant to capture general top-of-mind place image associations, it is equally important to gather insights into the different place perspectives to tailor communication to different stakeholder groups (Zenker *et al.*, 2017). The study highlights the need for practitioners to thoroughly consider market research design, such as priming and question formulation, to capture the place image from the stakeholder perspective it is intended to measure. Thus, campaigns resonating with their identities can be designed to better appeal to each target group. This may instill pride and inspire stakeholders to forward them, thereby creating a favorable image and increasing self-esteem on both a personal and a social level.

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