

# Model application in sustainable municipality development

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**Abstract:** In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on boosting domestic tourism. Municipalities need economic and management skills. Different marketing strategies may be appropriate in different regions. Local marketing significantly impacts local economies and is crucial to regional and urban development. Local advertising positively correlates with tourism expenditure. Our previous systematic literature review reviewed publications published in place marketing and place management. The research reviewed can be divided into case studies, model analysis, and qualitative or quantitative research on stakeholders. Identification of variables that significantly impact a settlement's sustainable economic and social development through a comprehensive systematic literature review of 20 case studies. Once characterised these variables will reveal their interrelationships. Our research is based on a thematic analysis of selected literature from the WoS and Scopus databases. Based on the text analysis, we compiled and characterised the variables. An expert focus group tested the variables. Our analysis will result in the creation of a practical and easily interpretable set of variables that will serve as a user-friendly tool. This practical tool offers an easily interpretable overview for future researchers and practitioners. The methodological basis of the new type model allows researchers to move away from the most common and traditional research methods and explore the field from a new and innovative perspective with fresh methods. Limitations and future research directions: The variables need to be expanded, and the relationships need to be further tested with the involvement of participants.

**Keywords:** place marketing; municipality; management; variables of system model

## 1. Introduction

Place marketing, also known as territorial marketing, plays a crucial role in enhancing business activity within a region and contributes significantly to the development of local communities by attracting both financial and human resources. Despite the increasing emphasis on marketing within public administration over recent years, several challenges persist. These challenges include a lack of comprehensive understanding, recognition of its necessity, and practical implementation in territorial management (Kline and Moretti, 2014). As noted by Petruzzellis (2017), place marketing is essential for positioning a region as a desirable destination for businesses, tourists, and residents alike. However, effective implementation often encounters significant issues, particularly regarding the effectiveness of local government policies aimed at regional development. These challenges include enhancing territorial competitiveness, developing strategic plans for territorial growth, and attracting investment to the regions, as discussed by Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015). While numerous scientific studies have explored various aspects of this field, including place branding, place marketing, territorial image, destination management, stakeholder

involvement, and political influences, there remains a notable gap in research focused specifically on rural municipalities. The unique challenges and opportunities faced by these areas often differ significantly from those of urban centers. Addressing this gap could provide valuable insights into how rural municipalities can leverage their distinct characteristics to foster sustainable development and enhance their appeal to both residents and visitors (Maheshwari et al., 2015).

Place marketing and branding are not only tools for promoting a region but also frameworks for identifying and leveraging key variables that influence sustainable local development. By emphasizing local identity and the *genius loci*, these strategies help to align economic, social, and environmental objectives with the unique attributes of a place. For instance, as Campelo et al. (2014) highlight, the integration of local culture and heritage into place branding fosters a deeper sense of belonging, which in turn supports sustainable growth. Similarly, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010) emphasize that successful place branding must balance the preservation of local identity with the demands of global competitiveness.

The *genius loci*, the “spirit of place” embodies the unique atmosphere and character that differentiates a location, shaped by its cultural, historical, and natural attributes. By preserving and enhancing the *genius loci*, communities can foster deeper connections between residents and visitors and the place itself. Similarly, strengthening local identity not only builds cohesion within the community but also enhances a region’s competitiveness and attractiveness on a broader scale.

In the context of this study, the identified variables play a central role in creating a holistic model of sustainable development. They enable communities to capitalize on their inherent strengths while fostering inclusive growth and resilience. As Zenker and Braun (2017) note, tailored place marketing strategies are essential for addressing the diverse challenges and opportunities faced by different regions. This interplay between place branding and sustainable development serves as a foundation for strategic territorial planning and long-term viability.

The research presented in this study forms part of a broader research process that began with a systematic review of international studies published between 2018 and 2022 related to place marketing, as found in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Utilizing VOSviewer software, we conducted a keyword analysis, filtering the studies and ultimately selecting the most relevant articles for further analysis. The primary objective of this research is to identify variables that significantly impact a settlement’s sustainable economic and social development through a comprehensive systematic literature review of 20 case studies. Each researcher independently read and thoroughly analyzed the selected case studies to compile all variables related to the topic, followed by the grouping of variables, which could later contribute to the development of a model.

### **1.1. Overview of place marketing**

Place marketing, or territorial marketing, has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing regional economic activity and community development by promoting a region to attract financial investment, tourists, and new residents, thereby contributing significantly to the area’s growth and prosperity (Kline and Moretti, 2013).

Petruzzellis (2017) emphasizes the importance of place marketing in positioning a region as a desirable destination for businesses, tourists, and residents alike. However, the complexity of place marketing arises from various factors such as local culture, infrastructure, and the competitive landscape, all of which can influence the effectiveness of the marketing strategies employed. The success of these strategies is often contingent upon the active involvement and collaboration of local stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and governmental entities. Aitken and Campelo (2011) underscore the importance of stakeholder dynamics in creating a “sense of place,” which is crucial to the success of place marketing. Engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process fosters a shared vision that can enhance community pride and investment in the region’s future. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the marketing efforts but also ensures that the unique attributes of the place are authentically represented, resonating with both residents and potential visitors alike (Eshuis et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the role of place branding has been extensively discussed in the literature, particularly in the context of how it shapes regional identity and competitiveness. Govers and Go (2009) explore the concept of place branding by examining how virtual, physical, and imagined identities are constructed and experienced, which adds a new dimension to traditional place marketing strategies. Moreover, the increasing importance of digital marketing tools has expanded the reach of place marketing efforts, allowing rural and urban regions alike to engage broader audiences. This evolution in place branding emphasizes the need for a cohesive narrative that resonates with both locals and visitors, fostering a sense of belonging while promoting unique cultural attributes.

## **1.2. Place branding and territorial image**

Place branding is a key component of place marketing, focusing on creating a unique and compelling identity for a region. This identity is crucial for differentiating a region from its competitors and thereby enhancing its attractiveness to investors and visitors. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) argue that effective place branding can significantly enhance a region’s competitiveness by leveraging its unique cultural, historical, and economic assets. The concept of territorial image, closely linked to place branding, plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of a region. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) discuss the evolution of place marketing, highlighting how place branding has become an integral tool for managing territorial image and identity in increasingly competitive environments. As regions strive to cultivate a positive territorial image, they must engage in strategic storytelling that resonates with both local communities and external audiences.

In addition to strategic branding, stakeholder engagement emerges as a critical factor in the success of place branding initiatives. Actively involving local communities, businesses, and governmental organizations in the branding process fosters a sense of shared ownership, which not only enhances the authenticity of marketing efforts but also builds resilience against external economic shocks (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). This participatory approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of local assets and challenges, enabling tailored solutions that resonate

with both residents and visitors. Lucarelli and Berg (2011) provide a comprehensive review of the state of place branding research, emphasizing the need for inclusive and sustainable branding practices that reflect the diversity of stakeholder interests. Moreover, they argue that successful place branding must evolve continuously, adapting to changing social dynamics and economic conditions while remaining true to the core identity of the place.

### **1.3. Challenges in place marketing implementation**

Despite the theoretical and practical advancements in place marketing, several challenges persist, particularly in its implementation within public administration. Mabillard et al. (2023) note that many public administrations struggle with a lack of understanding and practical know-how in applying marketing principles to territorial management, often leading to suboptimal outcomes. Cleave et al. (2016) explore these challenges by examining practitioners' perspectives on place branding's role in local economic development, revealing the complexities involved in aligning branding strategies with policy objectives. Furthermore, the disconnect between various stakeholders, including government agencies, local businesses, and community members, can hinder cohesive branding efforts, resulting in fragmented messages that fail to resonate with target audiences.

To address these challenges, municipalities must adopt a more integrated approach that combines marketing strategies with community engagement and policy development (Stylidis et al., 2014).

This involves not only promoting local assets but also fostering partnerships among stakeholders to create cohesive branding efforts that reflect the region's identity. Pasquinelli (2012) discusses the concepts of competition, cooperation, and co-opetition in place branding, highlighting the need for strategic alliances to enhance regional branding effectiveness. These alliances can facilitate resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and collaborative marketing initiatives that amplify the region's unique attributes while ensuring that all voices are heard in the branding process.

### **1.4. Place marketing in rural areas**

While there is a wealth of research on place marketing in urban settings, studies focusing on rural municipalities remain limited. This limitation leaves a significant gap in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas. Rural areas are characterised by: slow dynamics of farm productivity, widespread income inequality and volatility of agricultural income; considerable outward migration flows to urban areas that result in depopulation of rural areas; a lack of efficient physical, technological and information technology (IT) infrastructures; public and private services that are more costly to provide and more difficult to access than in urban areas (OECD, 2020).

Hospers (2011) explores the dynamics of place marketing in shrinking European regions, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies that address the specific challenges of rural areas, such as population decline and economic stagnation. To effectively engage these communities, it is crucial to develop marketing initiatives that

highlight local assets, foster community involvement, and promote sustainable development practices.

To address the unique challenges faced by rural municipalities in place marketing, it is essential to explore innovative partnerships and collaborative frameworks that can amplify their visibility and appeal. For instance, forming alliances with local artisans, agricultural producers, and tourism operators can create a comprehensive narrative that highlights the region's distinctive offerings while fostering economic resilience. By integrating non-wood forest products into these narratives—such as through farmers' markets or community-supported agriculture initiatives—rural areas can enhance their attractiveness to eco-conscious tourists seeking authentic experiences (Zenker and Rütter, 2014). Additionally, leveraging digital platforms to showcase these partnerships can further expand reach and engagement, allowing rural municipalities to connect with a broader audience and share their stories in compelling ways.

According to Eshuis and González (2024), place branding can be examined from three different perspectives: symbolic constructions, the images and associations in the minds of target audiences, and experiential, multisensory constructions. In their research, they describe place brands as symbolic constructs that identify and differentiate places from others. The second approach views place brands as images and associations that exist in the minds of target groups, where brands reside in individuals' cognition. The third approach considers place brands as experiential, multisensory constructs. In their view, place brands function as marketing systems, composed of dynamic performative assemblages of symbolic, discursive, institutional, and material elements, which selectively evoke specific multisensory and embodied experiences of the place for stakeholders and target audiences (Eshuis and González, 2024).

Moreover, the role of education and capacity building in rural place marketing cannot be overstated. Equipping local stakeholders—such as community leaders, entrepreneurs, and residents—with knowledge about effective marketing strategies and digital tools can foster a more empowered and proactive approach to promoting their unique offerings. Campelo et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of sense of place in destination branding, arguing that a deep connection with local culture and heritage is essential for creating compelling and sustainable place marketing strategies. This connection not only enhances the authenticity of the marketing efforts but also encourages community pride and involvement, ultimately leading to a more vibrant and resilient rural identity.

## **2. Materials and methods**

Our previous research was grounded in a systematic literature review, which provided a robust foundation for constructing a literature database with a methodical narrowing technique tailored to the research objectives (Xiao and Watson, 2019). This approach guided our selection of studies published between 2018 and 2022, focusing on works in English within the field of economics that appeared in journals indexed in WoS or Scopus, or as full papers in conference proceedings. The studies selected were open-access and identified using the following keyword clusters:

- place marketing–branding;
- place marketing–destination;
- place marketing–management;
- place marketing–tourism.

In the earlier stages of our research, we employed a novel approach to classify studies in the field of place marketing, identifying four major clusters: branding, destination, management, and tourism (Reicher et al., 2023). Interestingly, we found that sustainability does not emerge as an independent cluster but instead intersects all other clusters, highlighting its pervasive influence (Kádár et al., 2023).

The subsequent phase of our research involved examining the methodological foundations of papers published within the last five years (2018–2022). These analyses were performed using NVivo 12 Plus software, which facilitated automatic coding of the abstract texts. We conducted a visualization analysis of 121 literature reviews using VOSviewer software. Further analysis of the characteristics extracted from these studies was carried out using MS Excel and SPSS 29 software, employing simple descriptive statistical methods due to the nature of the data.

These analyses culminated in the selection of 20 studies that utilized a case study approach, which we further examined through a thematic analysis of literature sourced from WoS and Scopus databases. Through text analysis, we compiled and characterized the variables.

Since our research is qualitative in nature, we formulated the following research questions:

Q1: In what thematic areas have case studies on small communities been conducted over the past 5 years?

Q2: What factors can be used to define the areas of investigation?

Q3: What variables can be used to describe human factors?

The analysis and evaluation of the case studies were conducted by three independent researchers simultaneously. After jointly reviewing a few case studies, the researchers reached a consensus on what could be utilized from each study. Following the synthesis of the results, a unified standpoint was established, ensuring the exclusion of researcher bias.

The relationships between the variables identified in the case studies were developed based on the literature. These connections were further refined through two focus group discussions. A focus group is a qualitative method that enables a carefully selected group of participants to jointly generate data through a focused discussion on a specific topic that is the subject of the research (Nyumba et al., 2017). Focus groups typically involve 4–15 participants and are led by one or two trained researchers who act as moderators (Krueger, 2014). To facilitate the discussion, the moderator(s) must spend significant time examining the participants' experiences, asking them to share and compare their opinions and experiences, and discussing how much they agree or disagree with one another (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014).

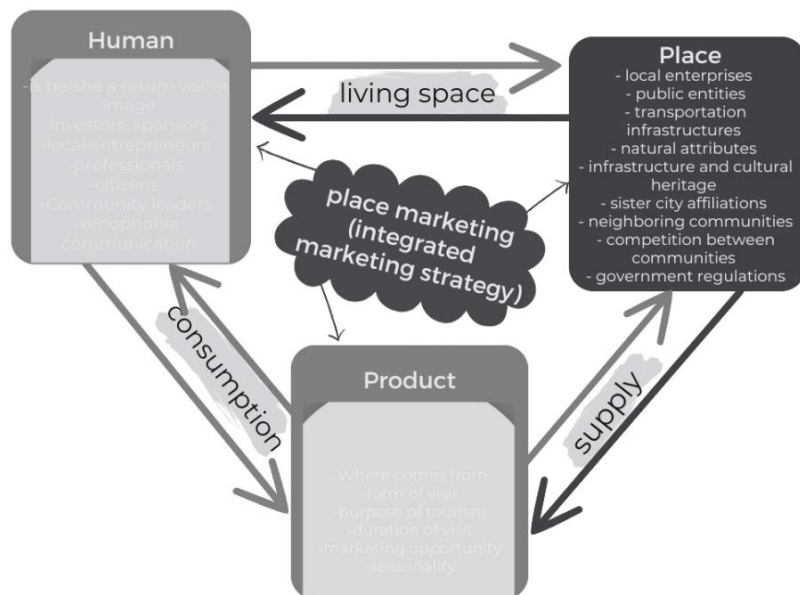
One of the focus group discussions was held at the Budapest Business School, involving 5 city dwellers who enjoy rural tourism. The second session took place with municipal employees from a small settlement. Both focus groups followed the same script and lasted 1.5 h. The discussions centered around the following questions and topics:

What do you think about the development opportunities of small settlements?  
 Who participates in the development of a settlement?  
 Who influences the development of a settlement?  
 How do these actors influence each other?  
 The variable groups identified are presented and analyzed below.

### 3. Results and discussion

In this research, we analyzed 20 scientific sources that focused on small settlements and were based on case studies. The studies examined were open-access, English-language journal publications from the last 5 years, indexed in the WoS or Scopus databases. These publications were identified using keywords such as place marketing, along with terms like branding, destination, management, or tourism. The primary focus of the case studies was on tourism. Eight studies dealt with the issue of place branding, while four examined the role of brand-building. Two studies analyzed the opportunities in city marketing and food tourism, and an equal number explored issues related to identity awareness. One study each focused on value creation, decision-making challenges, political engagement, and overtourism.

As shown in **Figure 1** our results indicate that the variables identified through the case studies can be categorized into three groups. These three main groups are closely interconnected. The first factor is the concept of place, which was examined in some form in every case study. The second factor is the notion of a marketable “product,” which also appeared in all studies with varying purposes. The third identified factor is the human element, which was central to all aspects of the analyzed studies. The human aspects encompass the interactions between the various stakeholders.



**Figure 1.** Integrated place marketing strategy concept.

Source: own research.

Our study focuses on the issue of place branding, with the variables identified here defining the place as a brand.

Local enterprises serve an essential function in the economic framework and progress of a community. They generate employment opportunities for local inhabitants and enhance the identity and cultural fabric of the community. The goods and services they provide frequently embody the distinctive essence of the locality, thereby increasing its appeal to tourists. Furthermore, local business owners can serve as pivotal collaborators in place marketing initiatives, especially when their offerings align with and bolster the area's brand identity. Nevertheless, they encounter a variety of obstacles, including the seasonality inherent in tourism, economic variances, and regulatory limitations, all of which may impede their expansion and sustainability. Local entrepreneurs need to consider the importance of personal and environmental fit, interpersonal interactions, teamwork, peer support, community experiences, and working conditions in retaining staff (Gelencsér et al., 2022).

Public entities, including educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and cultural organizations, substantially enhance the living standards for local inhabitants and deliver vital services. These entities also have the capacity to attract prospective residents and investors, as high-caliber educational and health services can elevate the desirability and market value of a community. In addition, public institutions may engage in the organization of local events, which can stimulate tourism and enrich the community's overall reputation. Various research studies suggest that public institutions in smaller municipalities frequently encounter difficulties in formulating and executing cohesive marketing strategies, predominantly due to a deficit in specialized knowledge.

Transportation infrastructures constitute a pivotal element in the advancement of a community. Effective and accessible transit networks benefit local populations and render the area more enticing to visitors and investors alike. The caliber of these networks significantly impacts the ease with which tourists can reach principal attractions and services. Moreover, well-established transportation systems hold the potential to foster sustainable tourism development by facilitating visitor movement, particularly during high-demand periods; however, numerous instances illustrate the challenges stemming from deficiencies in transportation.

Natural attributes – such as mountains, lakes, forests, and protected areas – serve as significant draws for tourists. These natural resources play a crucial role in defining the community's image and the variety of tourism it can attract. The sustainable management of these ecological assets is imperative, as inadequate stewardship may jeopardize the long-term economic and environmental viability of the locale. Ecotourism and sustainable tourism initiatives are particularly pertinent for communities endowed with substantial natural resources.

Infrastructure and cultural heritage – comprising utilities, communication systems, transportation networks, and historical edifices – are vital for preserving the allure and functionality of a community. Cultural heritage not only contributes cultural and historical significance but also serves as a critical attraction for tourists. The quality of infrastructure, including access to essential services such as water, electricity, and internet connectivity, is crucial for both residents and visitors. The sustainable utilization of heritage sites significantly influences the community's tourism strategy.



Sister city affiliations can augment the global presence of a community and generate new economic, cultural, and tourism – related prospects. These partnerships can facilitate the attraction of new investors and tourists while also providing a framework for knowledge exchange and collaborative project initiatives. Such connections can bolster the community’s international profile and enhance its competitiveness in the global tourism arena.

Neighboring communities – Adjacent communities present prospects for regional advancement through collaborative efforts. Cooperative tourism endeavors, cultural initiatives, and infrastructural projects can augment the attractiveness and competitiveness of the larger region. Synergy among proximate communities can favorably influence enhancements in transportation and stimulate regional economic development. Conversely, discord among neighboring communities may adversely affect the overall progress of the region, thereby rendering cooperation a strategic imperative.

Competition between communities – Rivalry among communities, particularly within the tourism sector, poses a persistent challenge as they compete for visitors and investment capital. Proficient place marketing and effective brand differentiation are crucial for setting a community apart from its rivals. Competition with neighboring communities can also catalyze innovation in tourism offerings, foster infrastructural advancements, and encourage the sustainable stewardship of both natural and cultural assets.

Government regulations – Regulatory frameworks established by governmental entities, encompassing building codes, environmental legislation, and tourism strategies, significantly influence the development of communities. Governmental incentives and support mechanisms can play a pivotal role in facilitating infrastructural growth and enhancing the tourism industry. Nonetheless, stringent regulations – such as environmental safeguards or construction limitations–may obstruct development initiatives if not judiciously managed. Smaller communities frequently encounter constraints in resources necessary to adhere to such regulations, rendering adaptation a considerable challenge.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of this study illuminate the intricate complexities and interdependencies of diverse elements that impact the sustainable advancement of small communities. The variables identified, classified into three principal categories– locale, offerings, and populace–are intricately interconnected, indicating a comprehensive method to place marketing and branding. Furthermore, the involvement of the community in these branding initiatives cultivates a sense of ownership and pride, potentially augmenting the overall allure of the settlement to both tourists and prospective residents (Eshuis et al., 2017).

The notion of place, encompassing local enterprises, public services, and infrastructure, emerged as a fundamental component in shaping the identity of a settlement. Specifically, local enterprises and infrastructure are crucial in sustaining the economic dynamism of a settlement, whereas public services enhance the social framework by elevating residents’ quality of life (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

The efficacy of place branding initiatives is significantly contingent upon the optimal utilization and communication of these resources to external stakeholders. The significance of sustainable tourism further accentuates the necessity of safeguarding both natural and constructed environments, as these elements are vital for preserving the enduring attractiveness of small settlements (Pasquinelli, 2012). Furthermore, the engagement of the community in these branding activities nurtures a sense of ownership and pride, which can augment the overall allure of the settlement to both tourists and potential residents (Petrina et al., 2023).

## **5. Conclusion**

This research contributes to the expanding corpus of literature on place marketing by identifying and scrutinizing essential variables that influence the sustainable progression of small settlements. The results indicate that a holistic approach to place branding, which acknowledges the interconnected functions of locale, offerings, and populace, is crucial for promoting long-term sustainability. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of leveraging local culture and heritage as distinctive selling propositions, which can set small settlements apart in a competitive landscape.

The research further emphasizes the necessity of involving local stakeholders throughout both the planning and implementation phases of place marketing initiatives. By cultivating a sense of ownership and active involvement, small settlements can not only enhance their attractiveness to external audiences but also fortify community resilience and social cohesion (Kline and Moretti, 2013). Moreover, the incorporation of digital platforms for narrative dissemination can amplify these initiatives, enabling small settlements to engage broader audiences while highlighting their unique stories and experiences.

Future inquiries should aim to broaden the spectrum of variables considered and empirically test the identified relationships across a wider array of contexts. Additionally, as place marketing strategies evolve, there is an imperative to further explore the role of digital platforms in promoting small settlements, particularly regarding their ability to engage global audiences and manage local stakeholder dynamics. Such exploration could unveil innovative methodologies for community engagement and underscore best practices that may be adapted in varying locales.

The practical ramifications of this research are evident: by implementing a cohesive and inclusive place marketing strategy, municipalities can capitalize on their distinctive assets to promote sustainable economic and social development, all while addressing the challenges associated with tourism seasonality, regulatory limitations, and constrained resources.

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