STAKEHOLDERS AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: CO-CREATING A VILLAGES' IMAGE

A.M. GULPE[1]   A.G. BRICIU[2]

Abstract: *Despite their need to attract tourist and investors to ensure long term sustainability, small towns and villages are often overlooked in place branding research. With increasing migration to metropolitan areas, these communities face significant challenges. This paper emphasizes the role of stakeholder involvement in shaping a place`s digital image through effective communication, fostering authentic narratives that enhance visibility and support local development. The study focuses on Şirnea, Romania, using a case study and content analysis approach. It analyzed digital content from 2023 to identify stakeholders, platforms, and key themes. The findings fill a research gap on digital place branding for small rural communities.*

Key words: *digital communication, place branding, stakeholder communication*

1. Introduction

   In recent decades, rural villages and small towns have faced increasing challenges due to severe depopulation and migration of residents to metropolitan areas (The European Union, 2024). Although rural areas offer several benefits, such as lower cost of living, less pollution, the primary challenges include limited job opportunities, low infrastructure and services (Baker, 2019). As a result, the younger generation is increasingly inclined to migrate to metropolitan areas in search of better opportunities (Kummitha et al., 2020).

   In Europe, this trend is particularly pronounced, as the continent faces significant population decline and aging, holding the distinction of having the world's oldest population, with a median age of 41 as early as 2013 (Ceccorulli et al., 2015). This demographic shift is especially visible in rural areas, which are losing inhabitants at a faster rate than urban centres (Newsham & Rowe, 2022). According to the World Bank, the rural population in the European Union has increasingly declined, from 42% in 1960 to just 24% by 2024, with countries such as Romania, Austria, and Croatia being among the most affected. In this context, Romania stands out as a particularly relevant case for this study, given the significant decline of its rural population. According to the

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[1] Universitatea din Bucureşti, gulpe.anamaria@gmail.com corresponding author
[2] *Transilvania* University of Braşov

Romanian Encyclopaedia, while the urban population has grown from 21% in 1930 to 56% by 2014, the rural population has decreased from 77% in 1930 to just 45% in 2014. The severity of this phenomenon is evident in villages like Făget in Alba County, which has only 15 inhabitants, the youngest being 53 years old as reported by Romanian local news stations.

As these changes threaten the vitality of smaller settlements, local stakeholders are seeking new strategies to sustain their communities. At the same time, technological advancements have transformed society, enabling widespread access to information and digital communication (Machidon, 2021) with over 80% of worldwide households now connected to the internet according to Statista. One such approach involves actively shaping and promoting a compelling place image, aiming to increase visibility, attract residents or visitors, and strengthen local identity (Anholt, 2010). This research investigates how these place-making efforts respond to contemporary demographic and social transformations.

2. Literature Review

Branding is a multifaceted process that differentiates products through rational, tangible, or emotional attributes that create distinctiveness within a competitive market (Kotler & Keller, 2006). This foundational understanding has been extended to the context of places, giving rise to the concept of place branding, which adopts similar strategic approaches to define and distinguish geographic locations. Place branding refers to the strategic application of branding principles to build a positive image, foster development, and enhance the visibility of a location (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). However, place marketing is a related concept, referring to the promotion of a location's products, services, and attractions in a more effective manner, focusing primarily on selling rather than directly managing the place's image and reputation (Anholt, 2010). While city branding differs from product branding due to its greater complexity and the large number of stakeholders involved in shaping and managing the brand (Belabas, 2023), nation branding serves as a strategic tool to gain competitive advantages in the global arena, promoting the country to its audiences, enhancing its appeal, and reinforcing diplomatic initiatives (Ocke & Platt, 2021). Destination branding, on the other hand, is primarily the responsibility of the private sector, which promotes the tourism services of a specific area, while the public sector is tasked with managing the overall image of the location (Anholt, 2010).

Place branding emerged as a strategic response to increasing global competition among regions, cities, and nations, which are actively aiming to attract resources such as tourists, talent, investment, and businesses (Anholt, 2010). It encompasses a range of intentional practices and communication strategies aimed to build a positive image, foster development, and increase visibility, ultimately shaping how a place is perceived by external audiences (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). This process is often linked with attracting tourists, as evidenced by studies highlighting its role in tourism marketing and the establishment of loyalty (Kumar & Panda, 2019). It is important to note that there is considerable conceptual ambiguity surrounding place branding, as its implications

extend across multiple fields of practice. Moreover, the use of related terms within these domains further complicates efforts to clearly delineate its meaning. As Dinnie points out, place branding involves the strategic adaptation of commercial branding principles to support urban development, regeneration, and the improvement of quality of life (Dinnie, 2011).

In this context, the concepts of place image and identity are crucial. While place identity refers to intrinsic and intangible elements of a place such as its cultural heritage, symbols, and historical background, place image represents the public perception, and the associations people hold regarding that place (Nogueira & Carvalho, 2024). While cities are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, political, and social factors, their perceived identity is also significantly influenced by the way their image is constructed and projected (Van Ham, 2008). These constructed images are not naturally occurring but are shaped intentionally through strategic efforts aimed at targeted audiences. As Braun et al emphasize, the image of a place is not inherent, but rather formed through strategic communication directed at specific target audiences, ultimately shaping how the location is perceived, evaluated, and remembered (Braun et al., 2014). Thus, place branding represents an intentional and strategic process of shaping perception, relying on coordinated communication to position locations competitively in relation to others. It functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a framework for articulating and projecting the distinctiveness of a place.

While place branding focuses on shaping perceptions through strategic communication, the rise of digital technologies has transformed how these messages are disseminated and received. At the core of this transformation lies the fundamental role of information, which has always underpinned societal development. Since ancient times, the transmission of information has played a vital role in ensuring human survival and progress by facilitating the communication of essential knowledge. Communication, as the process through which information is transferred from sender to receiver, is driven by a basic human need: the desire to remain informed about the world (Graur, 2001).

Furthermore, the introduction of technology has fundamentally changed the way information is produced, processed, and shared. Therefore, the digital era has significantly altered communication models, distinguishing between traditional and virtual forms. Virtual communication enables real-time, device-mediated interaction, which offers numerous advantages, such as faster information dissemination, broader access to data, and the elimination of geographical boundaries. However, it also introduces challenges, such as the anonymity of participants and concerns regarding the security of transmitted information (Machidon, 2021). As communication now encompasses hybrid forms, such as textual, audio, and visual dialogue, this evolution has contributed to a greater sense of impersonality, as face-to-face interactions are replaced with virtual exchanges (Crețu, 2021). As Bill Carmody highlights, the use of new media offers several advantages, such as rapid dissemination, immediate feedback, greater control over messaging, low costs, mobility, and the potential for viral spread. However, it also presents challenges, including the increased demand for customer service and the unpredictability of outcomes due to a lack of prior experience with such platforms (Carmody, 2001).

Digital communication has become an essential tool for enhancing place branding efforts, enabling real-time, widespread engagement with diverse audiences. In light of the technological revolution, it is crucial for brands to align with current trends to maintain competitiveness. However, Rubinstein argues that the fundamental principles of branding remain the same in both online and offline environments; the key difference lies in the greater transparency and immediacy of transactions in the online space (Rubinstein, 2002). In this context, it is crucial for place brands to establish a strong digital presence, allowing them to gain visibility, interact with global audiences, and easily disseminate information. Embracing digital platforms is essential for effectively managing place image and staying competitive in an increasingly interconnected world.

While digital communication has transformed place branding efforts, the involvement of stakeholders is essential for shaping and maintaining a place's image (Källström & Siljeklint, 2023). Effective stakeholder engagement ensures that the brand accurately represents the interests of all parties involved and contributes to its long-term success. The role of stakeholders in shaping and promoting a place's image has become increasingly relevant in contemporary place branding practices.

The concept of stakeholder involvement is well-established in both business and academic literature (Science Direct, 2024, where it is recognized as a foundational element of organizational success (Phillips, 2003). Stakeholders are individuals or groups that play a significant role in the functioning and sustainability of an organization. They may influence or be influenced by the organization's objectives and are essential to its ongoing existence and strategic direction (Sage Publication, 2024). Stakeholder theory, originally developed in the context of organizational management, posits that firms must create value for a broad network of stakeholders in order to ensure long-term viability. This approach emphasizes responsibilities that go beyond financial performance, encompassing social, ethical, and strategic considerations (Chung et al., 2008). To be noted that not all the stakeholders are involved equally in decisions; organizations selectively engage groups based on an analysis of scopes, values, responsibilities and outcomes (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

In regards to place branding, stakeholder involvement plays a critical role in co-creating and legitimizing the brand narrative. Places, unlike corporations, involve a diverse and often fragmented set of stakeholders—including residents, local businesses, policymakers, investors, tourists, and media—each with distinct interests and expectations. Engaging these actors is essential not only for building a coherent brand image but also for fostering a sense of ownership and authenticity in the branding process (Kavaratzis. 2012). The participatory nature of stakeholder engagement in place branding contributes to the alignment between projected and perceived images of the place. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the branding process becomes more inclusive and reflective of local identity, which in turn enhances credibility and community support.

In conclusion, place branding is a complex, strategic process shaped by digital transformation and strengthened through stakeholder involvement. Digital communication has redefined how places project their image, enabling broader visibility and engagement. At the same time, involving stakeholders ensures the brand reflects

diverse interests and enhances authenticity. Together, these elements highlight the importance of inclusive and adaptive approaches to building competitive and credible place brands.

3. Methodology and Research Approach

This study employs a quantitative research approach to analyze the digital communication of stakeholders involved in the place branding of the village Șirnea. The main objectives were to: O1: identify the key stakeholders involved in digital communication; O2: determine the primary communication channels used; O3: identify the main thematic areas addressed; O4: examine the key characteristics of the village communicated by each stakeholder. In order to reach the study aim, a case study method was applied. Since it investigates a contemporary phenomenon in real life context, it uses multiple data sources and it enables to identify nuances of managed communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Yin, 2003). The research technique applied was content analysis as it represents a message decoding system, the possibility to compare the context of many texts and it aims to describe with the utmost objectivity, precision and generality (Agabrian, 2006). In this study, we employed a coding scheme adapted from the work of Li et al. (2015).

Located at 1,244 meters at the base of the Piatra Craiului Mountains, Șirnea preserves many aspects of traditional Romanian village life. According to its official website, in 1968, Șirnea was declared Romanian's first tourist village as part of a tourism promotion project. Its promotion has attracted international tourists, investors, and residents, including notable figures as British Tv presenter Charlie Ottley according to national news outlets. What makes this village particularly noteworthy is that, given the limited efforts in the digital realm by governmental authorities, stakeholders have independently shaped its image, utilizing the official website, local press, blogs and social media. In this context, it serves as a compelling case study, illustrating an innovative approach to place brand image creation through active stakeholder involvement.

The study sample was represented by digital content published by the stakeholders from several platforms: news outlets, blogs, website and social media. The selection criteria were based on the following: date (01 January – 31 December 2024), keywords (Șirnea in the title), language (Romanian) and relevance (only posts that include photos and texts with descriptions of Șirnea, therefore posts that only used #sirnea were excluded). In order to extract the content, we used two tools: Google tools for news outlets, blogs, websites and Apify for Facebook and Instagram posts. As such, the study sample included 379 social media posts on Instagram and Facebook using #sirnea, 24 digital news articles and 54 blog posts that include Șirnea in the title and 1 official website managed by Șirnea stakeholders.

4. Research Results

The results provide valuable information regarding stakeholder communication in place branding, an essential component in shaping a place`s image. While a place image is influenced by multiple factors, it is also constructed through its communication to the targeted audience (Braun et al., 2014). The primary objective of the study was to identify the key stakeholders involved in co-creating the village's digital image. The results reveal two groups of stakeholders: primary and secondary. Primary stakeholders, responsible for 53% of the online content, include 40% investors, 8% residents, and 5% governmental authorities. Secondary stakeholders contributed to approximately 27% of the content, with 23% from tourists, 3% from mass media, and 1% from NGOs. The online audience accounted for 21% of the content. While investors such as tourism service providers (hotels, restaurants, tourist activities) are the most active stakeholders involved in digital communication, governmental authorities have minimal digital presence. Tourism experiences shared online play a significant role in shaping the place brand.

Next, we examined the primary communication channels used. The results indicate that 77% of content is disseminated through social media posts, 12% via blogs, 10% through news outlets, and 5% on official websites. Investors and tourists use mainly social media (over 80% followed by blogs, 8%). Residents communicate mostly through social media and news outlets, while governmental authorities favour traditional media (41% news outlets). Social media emerges as the dominant channel, effectively targeting tourists as the primary audience.

Furthermore, we examined the main themes addressed in the digital content. The overall findings reveal that 20% of the content showcases the natural environment, 17% focuses on natural resources, 16% highlights the place's atmosphere, 15% discusses tourism infrastructure, 12% covers cultural elements, 9% addresses general infrastructure, 8% features tourist activities, and 3% emphasizes environmental issues. Investors communicate primarily on: natural resources, infrastructure, tourism, and natural environment, around 20% each. Residents mainly communicate on: culture and natural resources, around 20% each, followed by local atmosphere and general infrastructure, around 10% each. Tourists showcase the natural environment, natural resources and the local atmosphere, around 15-18% each. The governmental authorities communicate mostly on culture, 30%. While investors and tourists predominantly highlight the natural setting, atmosphere and general infrastructure of Şirnea, culture remains a significant topic, particularly for local authorities and residents.

In the final stage, we examined the main characteristics of the village communicated by stakeholders. The overall results indicate that Şirnea is primarily portrayed as offering quality accommodation 13%), features beautiful landscapes (11%), enjoyable weather conditions (8%), is described as an exceptional location (7%) with beautiful countryside (7%), offering impressive mountain views (6%) and an enchanting atmosphere (6%). Additionally, it is portrayed as a relaxing and calming destination (6%), and as a place well-suited for hiking experiences (3%) with notable local hospitality (3%). According to investors, Şirnea is located in the mountains (17%) has wonderful landscapes (17%)

and hotels (17%) and offers great weather (12%) and a relaxing and enchanting atmosphere (12%). According to residents, Şirnea's location is its best feature: situated at 1.400 m altitude, surrounded by mountains (11%), it showcases the beauty of the countryside (9%) and it has amazing festivals (9%). Tourists especially appreciate the natural landscape (10%), the beauty of the countryside (10%), great hotels (10%) and the enchanting atmosphere (8%). Lastly, governmental authorities highlight amazing festivals (10%) that take place in these magnificent landscapes in which Şirnea is located (9%) as well as the place`s unique and enchanting atmosphere (8%). In conclusion, the village`s characteristics are evenly distributed, with a focus on its natural beauty and idyllic atmosphere (enchanting and relaxing). While tourists and investors emphasize the amazing landscapes and hotels, the residents and governmental authorities highlight remarkable festivals and authentic countryside lifestyle.

The research concludes that Şirnea exemplifies how a small village can successfully construct and promote its image through stakeholder-generated digital content. Through the combined efforts of investors, residents, governmental authorities, tourists, media, and NGOs, the village is portrayed as a place of natural beauty, idyllic atmosphere, and rural charm. Each stakeholder highlights different aspects—while some emphasize landscape and cultural identity, others, such as investors, focus on available services. The diversity of communication channels used by these actors contributes to a digitally co-created image of Şirnea. These findings enhance the existing literature by addressing the underexplored role of digital communication in shaping the image of villages and small towns.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown how the digital image of Şirnea is shaped through the independent and combined efforts of various stakeholders. Rather than following a centralized or coordinated strategy, the village's online presence reflects a mix of contributions from investors, residents, tourists, and local authorities. These contributions, shared across multiple digital platforms, offer a diverse yet consistent portrayal of Şirnea's key characteristics. While the research does not assess the effectiveness of these efforts, it documents how stakeholder participation—particularly from private actors and visitors—can play a central role in maintaining the visibility and perceived appeal of a rural location. By focusing on a small village, the study contributes to a better understanding of how rural areas are represented online and adds to the limited body of research on digital place image construction in non-urban settings.

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