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Mussels, Tourism and Community Development: A Case Study of Place Branding Through Food Festivals in Rural North Jutland, Denmark

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Abstract Rural areas are facing prospects of marginalization and peripherality in an age of globalization where the attention of governments and media focuses increasingly on the (lack of) competitiveness of urban and metropolitan regions in Europe. Many rural areas have, therefore, searched for ways to improve their position vis-à-vis other localities by mobilizing local resources and employing policy tools that are believed to foster indigenous social and economic development, including place branding. Unsurprisingly, using food as a means to profile rural localities has become widespread, with branding efforts revolving around local food festivals that commodify local cultural resources. The article attempts to illuminate the challenges faced by branding processes in rural areas through a case study of Løgstør, a small rural town in North Jutland, Denmark, which builds its branding efforts around an annual mussel festival. The analysis focuses on the relationship between stakeholders and branding strategies, and in particular aims to uncover the role of the food festival in aggravating or alleviating inherent tensions between different stakeholders and target groups. It is argued that in the case of Løgstør making a food festival pivotal, a signature event for the place branding efforts has been created, which appeals to both external and internal audiences, and that this may hold wider lessons for place-branding initiatives in other small towns across Europe.

1. Introduction
Rural areas are facing prospects of marginalization and peripherality in an age of globalization where the attention of governments and media focuses increasingly on the (lack of) competitiveness of urban and metropolitan regions in Europe (European Commission, 2008). Many rural areas have, therefore, searched for ways to improve their position vis-à-vis other localities by mobilizing local resources and employing policy tools that are
believed to foster indigenous social and economic development (Pike et al., 2006; Kneafsey, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, using food as a means to profile individual localities has become widespread (Ilbery & Saxena, 2009; Sims, 2009), and thus food has become an integrated part of attempts to apply place branding practices—originally primarily used in cities or tourist destinations (Blichfeldt, 2005; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2010)—in the context of rural areas and towns (Vik & Villa, 2010). Specifically, food festivals have come to play an important role in many rural development and branding strategies that revolve around the commodification of local cultural resources (Jenkins et al., 1998; Hall et al., 2003; Kneafsey, 2007).

Although food festivals may be characterized as niche events, these events are increasing in numbers across the globe, built around e.g. wine, beer, seafood, meat products, particular vegetables or special dishes (Griffin & Frongillo, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Einarsen & Mykletun, 2009). Many of these festivals attract quite a number of visitors, especially relative to the often small host communities, by offering visitors a series of experiences they apparently cannot get elsewhere and thus a “reason to go”. Such festivals serve a multitude of purposes: to provide (to some extent voluntary) work for local residents; to enhance place images in the eyes of potential settlers and/or business; and to celebrate group and place identity (De Bres & Davis, 2001). This multi-functionality makes food festivals well suited to be integrated into wider efforts to position localities through place-branding activities, which may also be used to appeal to a wide range of target groups (Kotler et al., 1999; Hankinson, 2007; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008; Getz & Andersson, 2010). As argued by Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005, p. 512) “the city is simultaneously a place of residence and a place of work for the people that live in it, a destination for the people that visit it (or plan to do so), a place of opportunity for the people who invest in it”.

This is reflected in the general literature on place branding that has highlighted potential difficulties in accommodating different stakeholders and target groups within place branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Therkelsen & Halkier, 2010).

(a) Should attraction of, e.g. tourists, be given priority over creation of identity within the community itself?
(b) Through which communicative and/or physical means should these strategies be pursued?
(c) How are different stakeholders involved in the process of designing and implementing a place brand?

In some cases particular combinations of interests and actor strategies may create a relatively consensual process, and it is therefore interesting to explore how these generic conflicts are played out in the context of relatively small communities, where two alternatives scenarios would seem to present themselves. Either the urgency of the task of branding small peripheral communities with no or relatively low public profile could lead to short-term “boosterism”, which has a focus on maximizing the appeal to external place users while running the risk of neglecting diverging interests and/or internal community building. Or, the smallness of the place branding and the geographical and social proximity of key stakeholders form the basis of a relatively harmonious branding process,
leading to a focus on activities building local pride rather than attraction of additional place users from outside.

A third option—that several small places engage in joint place-branding activities on the basis of perceived similarities—is not being considered in the current article due to the nature of the empirical case study, but while inter-local coalitions will, undoubtedly, add to the complexities of stakeholder relations, the coalitions could also facilitate focusing of branding efforts on the (presumably relatively few) commonalities between the localities involved.

This article attempts to illuminate the challenges faced by branding processes in small rural communities/towns through a case study of Løgstør, a small rural town in North Jutland, Denmark, which builds its branding efforts around an annual mussel festival. The analysis focuses on the relationship between stakeholders and branding strategies, and in particular aims to uncover whether the role of the food festival is aggravating or alleviating inherent tensions between different stakeholders and target groups. The text proceeds in three steps. In the following two sections, the theoretical and methodological approach, including the case study area, will be presented. Thereafter, the findings pertaining to the place-branding process and the mussel festival in which a multiplicity of actors and objectives intertwine are presented. On the basis of this the conclusion discusses the implications of the case study for the understanding of branding processes in small rural towns/communities and the potential role of food festivals as vehicles of branding.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study takes its point of departure in the existing literature on place branding and food festivals, both of which are reviewed below.

The term “place branding” refers to the efforts of cities, regions, countries, tourist destinations—indeed any place—to position itself in the competition for tourists, visitors, investors, residents, resources, etc. (Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Place branding is often perceived as the application of marketing and branding techniques by those who market a place (often a destination marketing organization (DMO) or local government). As a result, place branding is often defined as DMO’s communication about the place in question to various target groups. However, as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005, p. 508) remind us “the boundaries of the brand construct are, on the one side the activities of the firm and on the other side the perceptions of the consumers. The brand becomes the interface between these two”.

Place branding is, therefore, not only about what “the firm” (or DMO or local politicians) does, but it also incorporates consumers’ (or local residents’, local businesses’, tourists’, potential residents’, investors’, etc.) perceptions of the place. Accordingly, a strong place brand is one that key target groups are aware of and hold strong, unique and favourable associations to. Accordingly, the core ideas underlying place-branding theory and practices are:

(a) that places compete with each other for a series of valuable resource
(b) that it draws upon place identity.

Place identity (i.e. the meanings that various groups of people, such as residents, business people, policy-makers and tourists attach to the place) is thus at the heart of place branding. However, this identity is not a fixed and given entity but must be seen...
as negotiated, (re)constructed and “used” in a variety of ways (Massey, 1991; Blichfeldt, 2005). Moreover, place brands address multiple groups of stakeholders (e.g. local residents and tourists), have high levels of complexity and intangibility, incorporate multiple identities and represent various communities (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Dematteis, 1994; Hankinson, 2004; Blichfeldt, 2005; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

Focusing on the supply side, Allan (2007) argues that place branding draws upon a series of key stakeholders (i.e. tourism, private sector, people, government, culture, education, government, investment and immigration) who all need to (both collaboratively and individually) invest in and communicate what is happening in the place. This diversity has important implications because both the ends and means of place branding must, therefore, be seen as the result of a more or less open political process through which the profile of the specific place brand emerges (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008, 2010). In the following we outline two of the key dilemmas facing place-branding initiatives, namely the relationship between external and internal target groups, and between different types of branding activities.

With regard to target groups, place branding has often been interpreted as a more comprehensive form of place promotion (Morgan & Pritchard, 2001; Keller, 2003), aiming to attract more tourists, investors or residents to a particular area by increasing awareness and positive connotations among external audiences. This view has, however, increasingly been challenged by an interpretation stressing the importance of the internal audience, i.e. the role of place brands in building or sustaining identity within the branded community (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Hankinson, 2007)—although it should be stressed, of course, that the two audiences can be highly interrelated as, for example, tourism impacts upon place identity and might even create “the materiality and social meaning of places” (Britton, 1991, p. 452) while place identity and particularly historically and culturally significant artefacts and heritage shape tourism.

Similarly, place-branding initiatives can employ different types of activities in order to bring their message across. Often the emphasis has been on creation of a new communications platform with logo, slogans and brand values (Short, 1999; Jensen, 2007) but recently increased importance has been given to the creations of tangible objects or activities that manifest the place vis-à-vis the community and potential external visitors/users through, e.g. signature buildings or events that link a particular activity with a specific location, such as Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum or the Cannes Film Festival (Gomez, 1999; Kotler et al., 1999; Arcodia & Robb, 2000; Eckstein & Throgmorten, 2003).

The empirical focus on the present article is on a specific form of signature event as part of place branding, namely a food festival. According to Janiskee (1980, p. 97) festivals are “formal periods or programs of pleasurable activities, entertainment, or events having a festive character and publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact” and hence potentially useful in relation to place-branding initiatives, whether focusing on internal community building and/or external attraction of, e.g. tourists. In the tourism literature the role of food as a potential driver of travel is widely recognized (Hall et al., 2003; Blichfeldt & Therkelsen, 2010; Halkier, 2012) as is the potential for using food as a central part of place-branding activities (Boniface, 2003; Lee & Arcodia, 2011).

However, during the last decades, linkages between local identity and festivals have become a topic subject to research (Smith, 1993; Boyle, 1997; Davila, 1997; Getz, 1997; Waterman, 1998; De Bres & Davis, 2001; Rotherham, 2008). For example, Hill (1988) argues that festivals may serve the aim of building “pride of place”; Hall (1992)
argues that they may assist in development and/or reinforcement of community identity and Getz (1997, p. 7) claims that they may even qualify as “celebrations of the community itself”. Research devoted to the study of food festivals (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Hall & Mitchell, 2008; Hall & Sharples, 2008) suggests that food festivals may be particularly intertwined with senses of place and pride due to their grounding in local produce and local culinary traditions.

As suggested by previous studies (Einarsen & Mykletun, 2009), success of such festivals depends on strong networks, entrepreneurship and public planning. These events may also give locals the opportunity to partake as hosts and as guests, thus both generating income and providing recreational and leisure activities for locals (Long & Perdue, 1990; De Bres & Davis, 2001).

Interestingly, the effects of festivals may, furthermore, be particularly important in smaller places, and Aldskogius (1993) found that in smaller places a larger proportion of the community both produces and attends festivals. This makes local citizens important stakeholders in, e.g. a local food festival, but of course events may celebrate some parts of the community, while neglecting, or even deliberately excluding, other parts (Getz & Andersson, 2010) and, thus, like in place branding, studies of the links between stakeholder involvement and decisions about event profiling remain important.

All in all it is clear that signature events like local food festivals are not only well suited to contribute to the branding of a particular locality, but also that they face some of the same key challenges as place branding in general, namely the potential tension between internal and external audiences, and the need to manage complex stakeholder relations. It is, however, also important to stress that food festivals in small localities would seem to have the potential to transgress some of the traditional dilemmas by providing a vehicle for extensive community involvement in activities that, at least potentially, may appeal to tourists, and other external place users, by creating a setting for unique and pleasurable experiences.

3. Methodology

If the aim is to uncover not only behaviour but also the lines of reasoning that guide behaviour, we need to adopt a research strategy that enables us to produce rich and thick data on the topic at hand. The research strategy that is probably best at generating rich and thick data is case study research (Yin, 1981, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989). Case study research focuses on “how” and “why” questions about a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Leonard-Barton, 1990). In the same vein, Yin (1984, p. 23) defined case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. Furthermore, a key characteristic of the case study method is the use of multiple sources of evidence (e.g. observations, qualitative interviews, questionnaires and internal as well as external secondary data) in order to (a) triangulate sources of evidence and (b) produce rich and thick data.

Single-case studies are often criticized for generating large amounts of data that are context-bound to such an extent that they do not produce knowledge that transcends the case in question (Blichfeldt, 2009) and hence, they may lack external validity. However, this problem may be minor insofar as one studies the kinds of cases that Teddlie and Yu (2007) categorize as typical. According to Seawright and Gerring
(2008) a typical case is one that is representative for the population of cases and thus, in our situation, it would typically represent all place-branding activities in rural areas involving food festivals as signature events. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know at the time when one chooses which case to work with whether it is, indeed, typical, as one only knows enough about it to determine this after case study research has been conducted. Muslingebyen Løgstør was, however, deemed a typical case on the basis of extensive reviews of the literature on food festivals and, especially, by applying the criterion that Patton (1990) labels “theoretical sampling” according to which a case is chosen because it is deemed “theoretically useful” and is thus likely to refine, enrich and extend extant theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In accordance with Yin’s (1981) recommendations, the case study accounted for in this article draws on a variety of sources of evidence. First, the article draws on interviews within the “inner circle” of the festival organization. Second, official festival documents, media coverage of the festivals and the official website (and other marketing materials) of Muslingebyen Løgstør were analysed. Third, participant observations were conducted during the 2010 and 2011 festivals. Furthermore, during participation in the festival, photography was used extensively and hundreds of pictures were analysed and used as supplements to interviews and participant observations. Moreover, a series of interviews as well as more informal conversations with both hosts and guests were undertaken during the festival.

As mussels are a food product that many people (at least in the Danish context of this case study) do not eat, 20 interviews were also conducted with people who did not attend the festival. Furthermore, during one of the festivals the researcher participated in a “mussels cooking class” and a guided “mussels tour” at the local museum to experience how local actors apply storytelling to the mussels concept. As for the interviews and conversations that were done at the festival, the goal was to obtain accounts of “how those being studied feel about and understand events”; in this case the mussel festival event (Neuman, 2003, p. 185).

In situ interviews and conversations included a variety of stakeholders, e.g. tourists, one-day visitors, local visitors, volunteers, organizers and local businesses (accommodation, restaurants, cafes, shops, etc.). In total, around 50 interviews and more informal conversations were conducted—supplemented by around 200 photos and various souvenirs, programmes, flyers, folders, etc.

In the next sections, we present the key findings that emerged during analysis.

4. The Town, the Brand and the Festival

Løgstør is a market town situated in the rural parts of the North Jutland region in Denmark (see Figure 1). Until the end of 2006, Løgstør was the administrative centre of a local government area, but following a major reform of local government it was incorporated in a larger municipality, “Vesthimmerland”, within which competition between localities appear to continue unabated. Løgstør is located on the coast of Limfjorden, an extensive saltwater bay, and although fishery is less important for the local economy than in the past, the common mussel is the most important catch for local fishermen.

Apart from fishery, the town also has a factory that processes mussels, and at present about 90% of the mussel production/harvest is exported. Apart from traditional mussel
fisheries, mussel farming has recently been introduced in the area, and local actors have no doubt that mussels will continue to be important to the area.

The town markets itself as “The Town of Mussels” and heavily emphasizes mussels in its place-branding efforts. For example, the first thing one sees when visiting the town’s official website (targeting tourists, potential settlers, business, etc.) is a logo in which some of the letters are substituted by mussels, as illustrated by Figure 2.

Furthermore, most of the local restaurants emphasize mussels in their communication, or, as one of the restaurant websites proclaims “of course, mussels are on the menu”. Accordingly, only a few fast food restaurants (i.e. pizza parlours, etc.) do not have mussels on the menu. Furthermore, the town’s largest visitor attraction, “Limfjordsmuseet” focusing on fishing and seafaring, is heavily involved in the festival and also offers “from bay to table” outdoor cooking classes for children, and collaborates with local chefs on a series of “mussels cooking classes”. Importantly, in the Løgstør case

![Figure 1. Map of Denmark with Løgstør.](image-url)
branding, emphasizing mussels is not only evident in the communication of the tourism DMO but used by a wide range of actors: the festival organizers, local restaurants, the “Limfjordsmuseum”, etc. Previous research (Hankinson, 2004; Blichfeldt, 2005; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) has questioned the use of branding techniques in a destination context, primarily because DMOs cannot control the “product” a place offers to its guests, but merely has the capacity to emphasize certain elements in its communication and hope that the products offered by various stakeholders (e.g. restaurants, accommodation, attractions, etc.) and the relevant communication align with the brand elements.

Yet a striking feature of the branding of Løgstør as “The Town of Mussels” is that the mussel theme is adopted by a wide range of local stakeholders as well as by those responsible for the festival, thus suggesting that many stakeholders’ products and communication draw on the same values and the same basic story. Accordingly, although Løgstør may have multiple identities (Dematteis, 1994; Hankinson, 2004), the identity as “Muslingebyen” (i.e. The Town of Mussels) is a core identity that the vast majority of stakeholders emphasize in their communication (Figure 3).

The first picture shows the sacks of mussels that are to be served during the peak event; in the background volunteers prepare for the cooking of the mussels. The next picture shows some of the people lining up for free mussels. The last two pictures show people, who have had their bowls of mussels (the white bowls held by the two buys and the pregnant lady).

The signature events of the Løgstør place brand, the “Mussel Harvesting Festival” in April and the main “Mussel Festival” in July, have taken place each year since 2005. The Mussel Festival is a four-day event (Thursday to Sunday in the second week of July) with a programme that includes a series of concerts, open galleries and artists’ workshops, and various forms of maritime experiences such as sailing trips, which incorporate storytelling about the bay and the town, rental of small traditional boats, “open ship” events, etc. The festival also relies a great deal on the arts, and local artists were heavily involved in the mussel festivals from the very start in 2005, when local artists were asked to decorate a number of mussel sculptures which still dominate the sea front area and are part of the townscape.

**Figure 2.** The official Løgstør website.
*Source: Løgstør—http://www.muslingebyen.dk/*
Nonetheless, the primary event at both festivals is that mussels are served to all attendants free of charge, with usually between 1500 and 2000 people. Although 2000 attendants may not seem much, for a small place like Løgstør (4412 inhabitants) this event is crucial for the town and, indeed, its place-branding efforts.

In 2010, the mussel festival gained substantial media coverage and, furthermore, the organizers were very pleased with approximately 5000 attendees. Because of very bad weather, the 2011 festival was attended by a lower number of guests, but it still received significant media coverage (Figure 4).

Even though the festival incorporates arts, music, gastronomy, maritime elements, etc. mussels are the concept that ties the various elements of the festival together, and thus the festival aligns well with Janiskee’s (1980) argument that festivals are public celebration of a “certain concept” and, indeed, clearly supports the overall place branding of Løgstør as “Muslingebyen”.

5. Branding Løgstør through a Food Festival

The process of branding Løgstør by means of a food festival began in 2004 when a local painter invited a number of other residents to an informal discussion about the problems experienced in the town at that time, i.e. vacant stores and shops, dramatically decreasing housing prices and few new residents. In this first, informal meeting local artists, the mana-
ging director of the town’s largest production company—a person who had just moved to the area and who had experience in events—and representatives from the town fair, the local jazz festival, the local trade association, the local restaurants and the local tourist organization discussed whether “something could be done” to make the area more attractive (Andersen & Damgaard, 2010).

These people soon decided that the theme for this first, informal meeting should be whether it was possible to identify “something” that was unique for the town, and they reached consensus about mussels being both unique to the area and something that could be used to brand the town. Kearns and Philo (1993, p. 36) argue that turning a place into a tourist site often involves the “conscious and deliberate manipulation of culture”, and with regard to the Løgstør mussel festivals this seems to be the case; the festivals did not start as local bottom-up celebrations but instead originate from a deliberate decision to communicate this aspect of the place to external audiences in order to brand the place. Compared to traditional conceptions (Long & Perdue, 1990; De Bres & Davis, 2001; Hall & Sharples, 2008) of specialized festivals and events in rural areas as something that is started by a few “dedicated souls” with a special interest in a particular theme (e.g. jazz music, knitting or folk dance) the Løgstør case stands out because the festivals were started by a series of people that

(a) represented all key stakeholders in the town;
(b) deliberately sought a theme that could brand the town and make it stand out from other towns;
(c) did not have any particular theme or festival in mind; and

Figure 4. Mussel sculptures in the city centre.

Source: Blichfeldt’s 2010 images.
Accordingly, this group of people did not set out to make a festival; instead, they strove to “do something” that would positively affect the brand equity of the place Løgstør. Andersen and Damgaard (2010) argue that the main purpose of the mussel festivals is “to attract newcomers/new residents to a town with a dramatically decreasing of the population”. In the same vein, one of the organizers explains that the reasons why the organizers spend a great deal of time and resources on the mussel festivals are as follows:

It has to do with getting people to come here and experience what we have to offer—and perhaps what we have to offer is also more unique than we tend to think ourselves—and for them to think that this is a nice place. And when they have visited us a number of times, they might start thinking about that small house in Fjordgade [the name of one of the streets close to the sea front—translates roughly into “Bay Street”] that is for sale.

Or as this was phrased by another festival organizer:

The festival and things like that are a means to an end, but the end goal is settlement—and the support from the local population is the precondition.

As evident in all these explications of the aim of the mussel festivals, the purpose is through the generation of (often one-day) tourist visits to make people aware of Løgstør and to form strong, unique and favourable associations to the Løgstør brand. Given the fact that the festivals do pull guests to the destination, the festivals seem to fulfil this purpose. However, what is especially interesting is that the mussel festivals—from the very start—first and foremost were place-branding initiatives targeting external audiences and not celebrations of community identity. Furthermore, from the very start the organizers drew on branding knowledge and competencies and the branding vocabulary (to “brand” Løgstør, to identify and use something that is “unique”, to create “awareness” and to facilitate memorable “experiences”) is present in both the interviews and in the various speeches, etc. that were given at the festival.

Accordingly, the mussel festivals are far more than simply food festivals in rural areas as they are both perceived and enacted as place-branding efforts, the purpose of which is to strengthen the equity of the Løgstør brand. Moreover, the ease with which local stakeholders from the public and private sector came together with representatives of the cultural and artistic communities around a common brand and an associated signature event would seem to suggest a high level of consensus, at least amongst these key actors.

It is, however, interesting to note that the organizers of the festival are aware of the fact that what is decisive for positive place brand equity is not that people visit the destination, but instead that they have positive and memorable experiences during the stay and henceforth, form positive, favourable and unique associations to Løgstør. As such, the festival organizers are aware that they (as DMOs) can (only) make people come to the destination, whereas the experiences people have at the destination heavily depend on both local
businesses (e.g. accommodation, restaurants and shops) and on the ways in which local residents interact with the guests.

A central mantra of the festival organizers (and one that was repeated both during the interviews and in the official speeches during the festival) is, “In Løgstør, we don’t have tourists. We only have guests.”

This mantra is interesting as it clearly states the roles and obligations of the host community. Furthermore, these roles and obligations are not enacted as something only those directly involved in the festivals and/or in the tourism/hospitality sector should take on. On the contrary, the expression “we” means that all actors in Løgstør (including the residents) are to take on the role as a host in relation to the guests (and potential residents) that the festivals pull in.

Consequently, the festivals are also manifestations of a place-branding strategy according to which the notion of hospitality does not only encompass the commercial hospitality offered by those who directly profit from tourists, but also the more informal encounters between the tourists and the local residents in non-commercial contexts. Fortunately, the way in which the food festival has been organized leaves plenty of room for this kind of informal encounter, as local citizens both make a major contribution to the event by acting as volunteers in a wide range of activities (putting up tents and other facilities, cooking and serving mussels, cleaning up after the event, etc.) and, of course, also make up a significant part of the audience participating in the festival.

The third important group of stakeholders in the mussel festival consists of the participants in the signature event. The interviews and informal conversations carried out during the festival revealed that festival visitors are rather heterogeneous in terms of length of stay, type of accommodation, etc. Some visitors are one-day or short break tourists who drive to Løgstør to experience the festival; other guests are tourists who are already in the area staying in holiday houses or at caravan sites and coming to Løgstør for one or two days to experience the event. Another group of visitors are (predominantly Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) tourists, who sail around the Limfjord during the holidays and port at different coastal towns for shorter periods of time, often planning their multiple-stop vacation to incorporate a stop-over at Løgstør during the mussel festival.

The observations of the various groups of guests that the festival attracts are in line with the organizers’ and the media’s perceptions of who the guests at the festival are (Nordjyske Stiftstidende, http://www.nordjyskestiftstidende.dk/vesthimmerland/forside.aspx). Furthermore, all guests interviewed during the festival knew about the festival “before” they came to Løgstør. As this case study predominantly draws on data that are qualitative in nature it is not possible to verify that the mussel festival qualifies as “reason to go” for “all” guests. However, the interviews suggest that the festival is “reason to go” for “some” tourists. For example, a woman living in another area of Denmark (i.e. Zealand) explained why she was at the festival as follows: “My husband has tried this before and I’m very interested in food and very fond of shell fish, so here we are.”

To visitors such as the woman quoted above, the mussel festival qualifies as a reason to go, thus making people who would otherwise not visit Løgstør come to the town. This is a feature that sets the mussel festival aside from “the ordinary town fair” as such fairs rarely attract additional faraway visitors, although tourists who are already in the area may “swing by”. In the case of Løgstør, visitors especially seemed to be motivated by the fact that it focuses on mussels: to learn about mussels and to have freshly made
mussels, both at the Friday night free mussels event and at the restaurants, were peak experiences for nearly all visitors the researcher talked to (albeit not a reason to go for all of them).

As mentioned previously, the study also includes a series of interviews with people that did not attend the festival. These interviews revealed that many people do not eat mussels and if they do so, only few of them (i.e. 3 out of 20 interviewees) prepare and cook mussels at home, and thus this group remained excluded from the event due to their gustatory preferences. In contrast, the in situ interviews and conversations suggest that the vast majority of guests at the festival both cook and eat mussels. For example, most participants in the mussel cooking class were highly experienced “mussel cooks” and predominantly participated in the cooking class to meet experts (i.e. the chef) and to get inspiration so that they could refine their own preparation of mussels at home. As another example, observations at the restaurants in the area suggest that mussels and mussel soup were the dishes ordered by most guests.

Furthermore, many visitors define themselves as people with a special interest in food and particularly in foods such as mussels, or as one visitor put it:

“We love mussels but I think that is because we have travelled so much and especially our travelling in France has made us appreciate gastronomy and seafood such as mussels. That is also why we eat mussels at home—because we’ve been inspired to do so when we’ve been in France.

As indicated by the quote above, it seems that a substantial number of the visitors at the festival are people who take a special interest in food, especially in “food as gastronomy” and people who define themselves as less neophobic (i.e. less afraid of novel and unfamiliar food) and more neophylic (i.e. attracted to novel food stuff) than “most people”. Although highly tentative in nature, the empirical study thus indicates that the guests at the mussel festival may resemble Park et al.’s (2008) guests at a wine and food festival insofar an element of “social status” qualifies as a rather important motivational factor.

The festival is, however, also visited by locals and some of these guests are more motivated by the fact that the festival is something that locals support than by the gastronomic dimension, or as one of the locals (who smilingly referred to herself as a “tourist from Løgstør”) said:

“It’s my impression that everybody supports the mussel festival. When I look around I see many townspeople that I know. But this is also what Løgstør has become known for and it’s not like something that is invented; this is about what Løgstør is and always has been. And it is the biggest event in town and something that pulls people in from outside.

Although the local resident quoted above rarely eats mussels and does not work as a volunteer at the festival, she still sees the mussel festival as something that locals ought to support. As such, although the cooking and eating of mussels are not part of her identity as a Løgstør resident, she acknowledges mussels as a “celebration of the community” (Getz, 1997) and as an integral part of both place identity (i.e. what Løgstør “is”) and place image (i.e. what Løgstør is “known for”). Accordingly, it seems that the mussel festivals do provide a “pride of place” (Hill, 1988) for local residents—not so much because the
locals find the mussel theme personally relevant, but because they are proud of the awareness of, and visits to, Løgstør that the festivals create, and thus the signature events of Løgstør’s place-branding initiative would seem to have made itself worthy of resident support.

6. Conclusion

In Section 3, the attempt to brand the town of Løgstør by using the mussel festivals as a signature event was classified as “a typical case” (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008) that represents other place-branding initiatives in rural areas revolving around food festivals. The Løgstør case is both clearly and explicitly positioned within the group of festivals, the purpose of which is to “do” place branding whereas it is not—nor was it ever intended to be—a means for community self-celebration. On the contrary, as one of the organizers pointed out, Løgstør has a town fair that serves that purpose. The success (or not) of a festival, the aim of which is to celebrate community identity is likely to be measured by the extent to which local residents define this festival as a celebration and/or the extent to which it enhances community identity. In the same vein, a festival with a destination-branding background is mostly measured by the number of tourists it pulls in, the money spent by these tourists, the actual experience or satisfaction that these tourists have, etc. The mussel festivals are successful insofar as they enhance brand equity for the town of Løgstør, i.e. if they create awareness of, and visits to, Løgstør and if the end result of these visits is that guests form favourable, strong and unique associations to the Løgstør brand; associations that may spur positive word-of-mouth communication and increase guest re-visits as well as settlement in the longer run.

The research undertaken demonstrates that the Løgstør initiative built around the mussel festival signature events has managed to transgress several traditional dilemmas in place branding. First, communicative efforts and tangible place-making have been integrated, thereby strengthening the credibility of the brand with target audiences. Second, by organizing the appeal to the prioritized external audience in a way that involves large numbers of local residents, it has indirectly helped to strengthen community identity and pride, although this was not originally a central aim of the Løgstør initiative. The key to addressing these perennial dilemmas effectively would appear to be found in a fortunate combination of political-organizational conditions and strategic choices. On the one hand, the ease with which key stakeholders came together in the early stages of the initiative is striking and suggests that, unlike in larger cities (see, e.g. Therkelsen & Halkier, 2010), the combination of social and spatial proximity within the local elite may have been crucial in setting things in motion. On the other hand, the choice of a signature event which could legitimately claim to be rooted in the locality and would allow ordinary citizens to become involved in a variety of ways quickly made what originally had all the hallmarks of a top-down initiative a much more inclusive activity. In short, in the case of Løgstør, using a food festival as a signature event has proved to be helpful in giving lasting momentum to local place-branding activities.

To what extent can this success be replicated in other small rural towns? Three factors would seem to be important here, namely:

(a) that the locality was big enough to be able to mobilize the social and economic resources needed to establish a signature event with the potential to reach external audiences
that it was possible to build the event around a theme which was appealing to potential visitors without being divisive within the host community, and last but not least that the signature event allowed community involvement which not only added to local identity and pride but also gave the event a more authentic character in the eyes of external visitors.

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, rural areas face prospects of marginalization and peripherality, and many rural areas search for ways to improve their position vis-à-vis other localities by mobilizing local resources and employing policy tools that could foster social and economic development. So what can other rural areas learn from the case of Løgstør?

First and foremost, the lesson to be learnt from this single case study is that, if rural areas wish to engage in commodification of local cultural resources to improve their position and foster development, it is imperative that they choose to focus on stories and events that both appeal to internal and external audiences. The strength of the Løgstør initiative seems to stem from the fact that the choice to focus on mussels appeals to both sets of audiences, and thus the key criterion when seeking to mobilize local resources by means of festivals—and particularly food festivals—should be that the resources emphasized both appeal to the community itself and to external audiences. On a more general node, the case study also demonstrates that applying policy instruments such as place branding that were originally conceived and applied in much larger and/or urban contexts may actually also work in the context of small rural towns, provided due diligence is exercised with regard to the process, strategies and design when branding places that are off the beaten track.

References


