Multi-stakeholder perspective on the role of universities in place branding

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to create a conceptual framework to demonstrate the role of universities as a knowledge partner in place branding networks.

Design/methodology/approach

This research adopts a case study strategy to explore the perceptions of institutional and community stakeholders in Northamptonshire. The objective is to examine the regional activities and engagement of a single player university in a peripheral region and explore its potential for widening stakeholder participation. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups and thematically analysed.

Findings

The university played a complementary 'partnership' role to other institutional stakeholders, particularly the public sector. As a knowledge partner, the university filled gaps in information (know-what), skills (know-how) and networks (know-who). The last two aspects are potentially unique to the university's role in place branding networks and require further development.

Research limitations/implications

The conceptual framework demonstrates the potential of a single player university in a peripheral region to enhance the capabilities and skills of stakeholders in place branding networks and widen stakeholder participation. Future researchers can use the framework to develop recommendations for universities' role in place branding based on their unique situation.

Originality/value

There has been limited research on how universities participate and influence participation in place branding. The exploration of this topic in the context of a rural, marginalised region is also novel.

Introduction

Collaborative multi-stakeholder processes for regional development are not novel, but they are usually inhibited by complex management issues and power-politics. Place branding has been applied as a stakeholder-led strategy for creating a distinctive identity and narrative about a place or location to gain recognition and competitive advantage. A stake and interest in the economic performance and cultural vibrancy of the place is a crucial factor for the formation of vital coalitions in place branding (Donner *et al.,* 2017). Capacity to bring capital such as economic, social, cultural and symbolic determines which stakeholders are included in place brand governance (Reynolds, 2018). The usual participants are the public and private sector stakeholders, and more recently, the voluntary sector has been recognised (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018).

Universities have a natural stake in the economic performance and cultural vibrancy of the place to maintain institutional assets and attract faculty, staff, and students (Ehlenz, 2018). As knowledge institutions, they contribute significant knowledge infrastructure and amenities to the place and can be an influential stakeholder in decision making in local governance (Salomaa, 2019; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). Despite ample evidence on the institutional influence and embeddedness of universities in their locale, research on the role of universities in place branding remains scarce. Few researchers have cited the involvement of universities in place branding (Henninger, 2016), with some description of their role as a partner, educator and facilitator in place brand networks (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013). This paper contends that universities' main contribution to place branding is enhancing the capabilities and skills of stakeholders within the network. This role is significant as it may contribute to widening stakeholder participation in place branding policy and practice.

There is a gap in the place branding literature regarding how universities participate and influence participation in place branding. In response, an in-depth case study was conducted in Northamptonshire, a rural county-region in England which has one university within its boundary. Northamptonshire's regional characteristics of rurality, stark income inequalities and limited public finances, situates the county as apropos for this study on the role of the university in place branding. Previous research has shown that in rural regions, universities face increased expectations to take leadership outside academia in the absence of other local knowledge institutions (Salomaa, 2019; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015; Boucher *et al.,* 2003). Moreover, University of Northampton has pledged to embed civic responsibility in their daily activities, working with other anchor institutions to serve the educational, economic and societal interests of the local communities and the place (Brabner, 2019). Given the regional needs and university's civic role, this case study examines stakeholder expectations of the University of Northampton's engagement and role in place branding activities in the county. The research aim is to create a conceptual framework to demonstrate the role of universities as a knowledge partner in place branding based on the case study of Northamptonshire. The research objectives are:

- To examine stakeholders' perceptions of the role of the University of Northampton in relation to the other institutional stakeholders in place branding networks
- To explore the potential role of the university in widening stakeholder participation in place branding.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The literature review section critiques a typology for stakeholders in multi-stakeholder place branding based on the extant studies and research on the role of universities in place branding. The third section discusses the research design and case study context. In the fourth section, findings from the data are analysed. Finally, the discussion and conclusion address the contribution, limitations and scope for future research.

Literature review

Multi-stakeholder place branding

Place branding refers to the development of brands for geographical locations such as cities, regions and nations with the aim to trigger positive associations and distinguishing a territory or location from others (Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004). In this highly globalised world, places, like products and corporations, find themselves competing for survival. Zenker and Braun (2010, p. 5) define place brand as "a network of associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place and its' stakeholders". Several scholars have recognised the potential of place branding for endogenous local and regional development (Donner *et al.,* 2017; Pasquinelli, 2010; Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013; Cleave *et al.,* 2016). Creating distinctive identities is a means to attract students, visitors, businesses, investors and residents who can bring socio-economic prosperity and cultural vibrancy to the place. Place branding may therefore be considered as the means to shape perceptions and reputation by exploiting the identity dimensions of materiality, practices, institutions and representations (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

At the outset of the place branding process, a common language for framing place branding goals and actions is needed (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018). The process can enable shared learning and negotiation among place stakeholders through articulation and shared awareness of policy goals and vision statement (Pasquinelli, 2010; Nathan *et al.,* 2019). Translating vision into action requires the strategic use of policymaking, building assets strength through infrastructure and service planning, and finally, marketing and communicating what the place has to offer (Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004). Throughout this process, the various stakeholders of the place need to be consulted, involved and aligned to realise the goals of place branding (Hanna and Rowley, 2015; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Hereźniak, 2017).

Place branding has traditionally been seen as the sole responsibility of the government authorities and the public sector (Braun *et al.,* 2013). Increasingly, it is led by public and private sector partnerships prompted by the pressure to finance place branding initiatives in the face of austerity and diminishing resources (Slocum and Everett, 2014). Public sector (managers and

politicians) and private sector (scholars and consultants) are viewed as 'experts' since they are heavily involved in the conceptual and strategic stages of place branding (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018). They have been classified as 'primary' stakeholders because they 'enforce' the strategy, make decisions and create distinctions between stakeholders whose opinions matter (Henninger, 2016). They have 'direct' vested interest in the place brand and exhibit active and vocal partnership (Vasudevan, 2008). These stakeholders occupy managerial or executive positions in institutions of place governance and are capable of directly influencing resource allocation and decision-making in line with their institutional goals. Hence they are deemed as 'institutional stakeholders' in place branding (Bisani, 2019).

The notion of 'participatory' and 'inclusive' place branding has gained popularity, whereby all stakeholders of a place should at least have the opportunity to be involved in place branding as co-producers of the brand identity (Hanna and Rowley, 2015). However, civil societies and residents are categorised as 'indirect', and 'quaternary' stakeholders, as their participation depends upon the will of the institutional stakeholders (Henninger, 2016; Vasudevan, 2008). Residents are commonly viewed as 'consumers' of the place. They are the least engaged internal stakeholder group in place branding even though residents are ambassadors, citizens and an integrated part of the place brand (Braun *et al.,* 2013). They are deemed as 'community stakeholders' as they play an active role in the civic, social or voluntary aspect of community life through their pride and sense of belonging to the place (Bisani, 2019). They are likely to exhibit physical, social or emotional ties to the place. These typologies provide evidence of the vertical hierarchy in place branding, where different stakeholders have different levels of power and access to express their opinions.

Universities in place branding

It is common for cultural, educational and sports organisations to be part of the place branding process. Universities, among other cultural institutions, are categorised as 'secondary' stakeholders as they perform the function of communication and consolidation (Henninger, 2016). While maintaining a link with the place brand, these stakeholders are able to retain the autonomy of their brands. The university-place relationship is described as co-branding or cross-marketing, whereby the 'brand of the city' and 'brand of the university' need to cooperate for mutual promotion (Popescu, 2012). As an 'anchor' institution, universities are a part of mental associations of a place, as evidenced through the notion of 'university town' and 'university city' (ibid). Owing to their ownership of property and power and control relations, institutions are in a position to play the role of mediators between social spaces and social practices (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015).

As communicators of spatial imaginaries, universities' contribution in the selection and shaping of place identity and future vision to attract high-value target audiences such as students, entrepreneurs and investors, further contributing to the innovation potential and networks in a place is considered vital in regional networks (Nathan *et al.,* 2019). Universities' reputation, networks and facilities are an asset for place marketing and branding and show the potential for assuming the role of 'reputational intermediary' between the local and global

(Lebeau and Bennion, 2014). Research on university and place marketing have found congruence between university branding and city branding, in shaping the 'image' of the city and nation, especially among (international) students (Popescu, 2012; Aziz *et al.,* 2016). These studies tend to focus on students' expectations, needs and satisfaction with the urban infrastructure and amenities of their university city. This is because students are a high-value target audience for universities and regions, through their contribution to economic and human capital (Zenker, 2009; Wesselmann, 2019). Additionally, they can play the role of brand ambassadors through their lived experience of the place, which they carry back to places of origin (Aziz *et al.,* 2016). These studies are concerned with universities' influence on place image, spatial regeneration and talent attraction and retention in the context of cities. However, little attention has been paid to universities' engagement and role in multi-stakeholder place branding governance. The town and regional context also remain underexplored in place branding literature, which tends to focus on well-known cities and nations (Popescu, 2012).

Regional leadership and knowledge transfer

Universities' role in regional development, particularly regional innovation networks, is well documented in the works of Arbo and Benneworth (2007), Charles (2006) and Goddard *et al.,* (2014). These authors agree that universities contribute to regions through graduate employment, university-industry collaboration and as partners in policymaking and regional innovation system. Beyond their economic contribution, universities are 'civic' institutions, whereby they are expected to be engaged in their local and regional economies (Salomaa, 2019; Taylor and Luter, 2013). However, their level of engagement is context-specific and dependent on factors such as position in the higher education market, embeddedness in the local economy, culture and policy networks, and the number of universities and the hierarchy of relationship between them (Lebeau and Bennion, 2014; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). The last two factors relating to embeddedness in the region and the relationship between institutional stakeholders are particularly relevant to the case analysis in the present study.

Embeddedness occurs when a strong connection or 'loyalty' exists between the university and the place, defined through a combination of geographical, socio-economic and policy factors (Lebeau and Bennion, 2014). In rural and marginalised regions, universities face increased expectations to take leadership outside academia due to the lack of other local knowledge institutions (Salomaa, 2019; Boucher *et al.,* 2003). 'Single player universities in peripheral regions' find themselves at an advantage since their relative size gives them the ability to shape the institutional environment in the region to their ends, which gives them the capacity to actively engage and shape the regional agenda (Boucher *et al.,* 2003). These studies illustrate the territorial and structural embeddedness of single player universities in peripheral regions.

Further, the 'third mission' and 'engaged scholarship' research indicate the motivation for university-regional engagement is to enhance understanding and drive agendas for both academics and communities (Ntounis and Parker, 2017; Molas-Gallart *et al.,* 2002; Charles, 2006; Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013). Universities fulfil their third mission through "the generation, use,

application and exploitation of knowledge and the interactions between universities and the rest of society" (Molas-Gallart *et al.,* 2002). In the field of regional development, the triple helix model is used to illustrate the 'knowledge transfer' between university, industry and government (Salomaa, 2019; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). According to Charles (2006), universities contribute to regional innovation through knowledge transfer in three forms: commodified knowledge (know-what), human capital (know-how) and social capital (know-who). In light of the third mission of universities, Cavicchi *et al.,* (2013) studied how the engagement of Higher Education Institution (HEI) can help bridge the knowledge gap in rural development and branding of the Italian Region of Marche. In their view, universities can contribute to place branding as partners, facilitators and trainers in public-private partnerships.

Foremost, universities' role has been described as a technical or scientific 'knowledge provider' in local and regional governance and development. In this function, university staff are knowledge producers, assimilators and interpreters (Ntounis and Parker, 2017; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Boucher *et al.,* 2003) who turn locally held knowledge into intellectual property for the university through applied research and consultancy projects (Charles, 2006). It is hoped that the appropriation and commodification of knowledge will enhance understanding of concepts, phenomena and processes of academics and communities (Ntounis and Parker, 2017). Based on these descriptors, it can be inferred that universities could 'fill evidence/insight gaps' (know-what) in place branding networks by engaging their staff and students in subject-specific research and consultancy.

The role of universities as 'educators' and 'trainers' in regional development is well documented. As a contributor to human capital and talent for the labour market, they occupy a potentially strategic position in the constitution of professional and industry networks (Lebeau and Bennion, 2014). Further, they can utilise their education and training function to attract and develop innovation (through research staff and PhD students) and entrepreneurship in the region (Charles, 2006; Fernández-Esquinas and Pinto, 2014). As part of their job, research staff create knowledge innovations that can be informally and formally transferred to industry and society through networking, teaching, presentations and publications (Boucher *et al.,* 2003). Based on these descriptors, it can be inferred that universities could 'fill skill and capability gaps' (know-how) in place branding networks through their expertise in education and training. Further, in line with research objective two, the case study will seek to understand how this function can be applied to enhance the engagement capacities of community stakeholders in place branding.

From a knowledge transfer perspective, universities' role is described as a 'facilitator' or 'mediator' of stakeholder networks and relationships. This role requires utilising information about who knows how to do what and the social capability to establish relationships to special groups in order to draw on their expertise (Charles, 2006). Cavicchi *et al.,* (2013) noted that the university performed this function by providing a neutral venue for hosting events and forums, and created opportunities for networking, brainstorming and discussion among the public and private sector. In the initial stages, similar values and position of power of the network members helped strengthen the university's position as a network broker (Rinaldi and

Cavicchi, 2016). It can be inferred that universities could 'fill network gaps' (know-who) in place branding networks by utilising their social influence and connections among institutional stakeholders.

While these studies illuminate universities' knowledge transfer role in facilitating networking among public and private sector stakeholders, the potential to widen participation by including community stakeholders has not been exploited. Engaged scholarship research provides some indication that academics as facilitators can enable participation and collaboration in communities through their theoretical understanding and values (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015; Ntounis and Parker, 2017). Engaged scholars and action researchers not only engage with government and industry but also form linkages with civil society and community groups. These linkages and networks can be significant in implicating community stakeholder engagement and participation in place branding. Thus, this particular dimension of place branding will be explored in the case study.
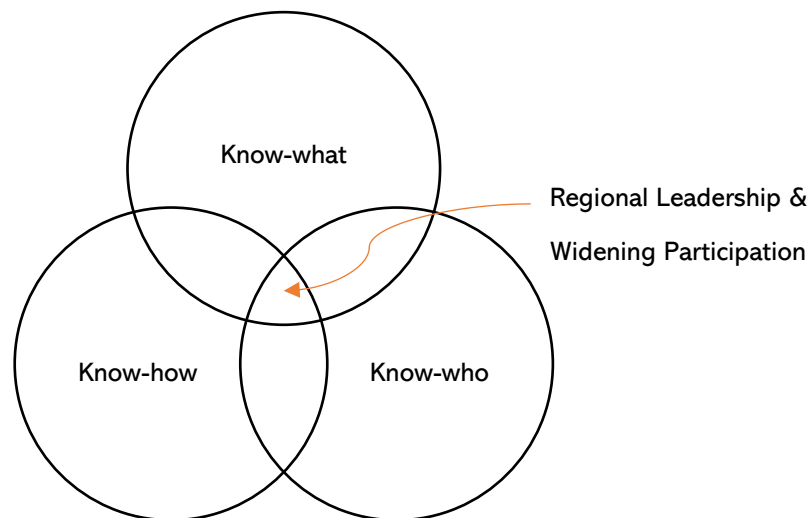

Figure 1: Universities' knowledge transfer role in regional development and place branding based on the literature.

These descriptors serve as a starting point for examining universities' knowledge contribution and (potential) role in place branding. The conceptual framework emerging from the literature is illustrated in *Figure 1*. This framework is then applied to the analysis of data gathered as part of broader research on stakeholder collaboration in region branding of Northamptonshire.

Methodology

The study is rooted ontologically in social constructionism and interpretive epistemologies and seeks to gather rich data from those who experience the phenomena or process through an in-depth, qualitative single-case approach (Stake, 1995). The case study approach is appropriate for exploring under-researched topics, as noted in place branding studies concerning the roles of single stakeholder groups such as place marketing professionals (Warren and Dinnie, 2018),

artists (Mittila and Lepisto, 2013) and Higher Education Institutions (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013; Popescu, 2012).

This study was conducted in two iterative phases. Phase I was conducted between January and September 2019. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 institutional and community stakeholders. Sampling included institutions and individuals who were active in Northamptonshire community. They were identified through independent research on institutions of place promotion and governance in the county, also listed in secondary documents and media. Participants' details have been anonymised by referring to broader stakeholder groups and organisations (*Table 1*). The interviews captured participants' perceptions of engagement and collaboration in place branding. The questions were kept broad so as not to insinuate that the university was an expected leader or critical player in place branding. The current and expected role of the university was an emergent theme from participants' responses. Respondents spoke about the projects and capacity in which they were involved, motivations for engagement, who else was involved, who should be included and in what role, who should lead place branding, their experiences of collaboration with other stakeholder groups, and benefits and challenges of collaboration from an institutional and regional branding perspective.

Table 1: Interview and focus group participants

Stakeholder group	Codes	Number of participants	Description of institutions/groups
Phase I: Semi-structured interviews			
Local Government	ISH-G	2	• Politician; • Economic Development Officer.
Business	ISH-B	4	• Business Improvement District; • Business consulting/networking (2); • Big corporation.
Voluntary Sector	ISH-V	6	Executive/Chair: • Rural development agency; • Community foundation; • Heritage forum; • Town promotion group. Coordinator: • Tourism promotion; • Placemaking project.
University	ISH-U	6	• Academics (4); • Senior management (2).

Community	CSH	5	• Community project; • Arts group (2); • Blogger; • Small business owner.
Phase II: Focus groups			
Community	CSH-F1	4	• Small business owner (2); • University professional services staff; • University recent graduate.
	CSH-F2	6	• Local government employee; • Museum staff; • University recent graduate (2); • Residents (2).
	CSH-F3	4	• Chair of local resident association; • Active volunteer; • Voluntary sector staff; • Resident.

In Phase II, 3 focus groups were conducted to further explore community perceptions on stakeholders' roles and widening community participation. These sessions were used as a tool to stimulate thinking and discussion on stakeholder roles in place branding. This method was effective in enabling participants to go beyond merely responding to the researcher's questions to evaluating points made by the group and sharing their opinions (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Heterogeneous sampling was employed to identify community stakeholders with varied backgrounds and residing in different locations within the county (*Table 1*). They were recruited through voluntary sector participants and county-based social media pages. Based on the emergent themes from the interviews, participants were prompted to discuss issues relating to place brand leadership and governance in the county, community engagement challenges and strategies and the role and capacity of institutional and community stakeholders. Respondents spoke about their experiences of engaging with the university, and the current and potential role of the university in regional partnerships and place branding.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed alongside data collection. Audio duration on average was one hour for interviews and two hours for focus groups. Data were inductively coded on NVivo12 and analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for coding and generating themes. After open coding all responses, codes were categorised into stakeholder groups, i.e., public sector, private sector, voluntary sector, university and local community. For each group, roles were analysed from their own perspective and compared with the expectations from other stakeholder groups. Further, the implication of stakeholders assumed and expected roles on community participation were noted. Finally, the findings on

the university's role in regional networks and place branding were triangulated by thematically analysing the documents listed in *Table 2*. Data source triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings and interpretation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Table 2: List of documents analysed

Document name	Published	Responsible organisation
Raising the Bar at the University of Northampton: A review of 5 years of the Changemaker initiative 2010-2015	2015	UON
UON Changemaker Challenges *(4)*	2015	UON
Northamptonshire Heritage Strategy	2016	Northamptonshire County Council
UON Social Impact Report 2016-2017	2017	UON
UON Strategic Plan 2018	2018	UON
UON Operational Plan 2018 - 2022	2018	UON
Northamptonshire Destination Management Plan 2019-2024	2018	Northamptonshire Surprise Group
UON Annual Reports *(4)*	2016-2019	UON

Case study context

Northamptonshire is a rural county-region in the UK. It is located in the strategic South East Midlands region of England, linking Oxford, Cambridge, London and the Midlands. About 77% of the land area is occupied in farming, while 70% of the population lives in the urban, large towns of Northampton, Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough (NCC, 2019). Much like local governments across the UK, following the central government austerity programme in 2010, Northamptonshire had its budget drastically reduced (refer to indicator 1 in *Table 3*). In 2017, Northamptonshire County Council was in a financial crisis.

On the one hand, the county is surrounded by well-known, wealthy counties of Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire which are home to England's renowned universities, as well as, innovation centres, incubators and heritage and cultural venues. On the other, the more homogeneous counties of Leicestershire and Derbyshire boast similar characteristics in terms of the natural and rural landscape, heritage attraction sites and market towns. This geographical position means that Northamptonshire is faced with competition from its high and low profile neighbours for attracting visitors, residents, students, investors, businesses and workforce. Thus, place branding is significant to this county-region to distinguish itself by working collaboratively within the county and with regional partners.

Northamptonshire has higher levels of deprivation in comparison with most of its neighbouring counties, in terms of education, income and employment (indicator 3). In addition to these indices, participants in the study relayed the image and reputation of inequality, deprivation

and 'missed opportunities' for development n the post-industrial market towns of the county. At the time of the study, the county was also lacking an independent economic development agency which is found in the neighbouring counties, such as Local Enterprise Partnership or Destination Management Organisation. Due to resource constraints, tourism spend in Northamptonshire remains low (indicator 2). Since 2016, key influencers in Northamptonshire's visitor economy, the Heritage, Cultural and Creative sector, have formed a Project Board to promote Northamptonshire as 'Britain's Best Surprise'. The University of Northampton has been a critical partner in the various place management and branding networks in the county, including Nenescape, Northampton Forward, Northamptonshire Heritage Gateway Board and Northamptonshire Surprise.

Table 3: Northamptonshire compared with neighbouring counties based on socio-economic indicators

County Name	Area sq.km	2018 Population ('000s)	2010-2017 Change in total government grants[1] (%)	2017 Tourism spend[2] (£m)	2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation[3] (IMD) (average score)			
					Education	Employment	Income	IMD average
Cambridgeshire	3,046	651	34	267	16.612	0.063	0.080	13.858
Oxfordshire	2,605	688	49	328	15.153	0.053	0.069	11.656
Northamptonshire	2,364	748	63	75	24.207	0.083	0.104	18.605
Leicestershire	2,083	698	81	107	17.919	0.065	0.078	12.330
Derbyshire	2,547	796	4	82	23.805	0.099	0.112	18.392

The University of Northampton (UON) is a public university based in Northampton town. It has a teaching and vocational focus since it has grown out of a diverse set of training colleges and was granted University status in 2005. A document analysis of the university's mission and engagement strategy between 2015-20 revealed that UON has been leading with a 'changemaker' brand and social impact agenda. At the beginning of 2015, UON set the goal of social value creation through four changemaker challenges with the aim to 'Make Northamptonshire the best county in the UK for..' (i) education, (ii) health and wellbeing, (iii) tourist attraction and (iv) enterprise. The strategic plan lays out guidelines for initiating and

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[1] Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2010-11 and 2017-18 individual local authority data (Gov.uk, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government)
[2] UK tourism numbers 2006-2017 (Visit Britain)
[3] English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (Gov.uk, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government)

leading projects for enhancing the reputation of the county by collaborative working with partners and leveraging and coordinating expertise across the university departments. The role of UON in shaping the image of the region and its engagement in place-based (regeneration, marketing and branding) initiatives in the county are analysed in the following section.

Findings and analysis

In all of the university's engagement in regional development and branding networks, its knowledge institution identity was significant. The university fulfilled its role as a 'knowledge partner' through the provision of know-what-how-who.

Know-what

The university played a strategic role as a supplier of research and insight in line with its four Changemaker challenges. In 2017-18, 30% of university staff were involved in delivering the changemaker challenges through research and enterprise activities with the aim to increase this to 50% by 2020-21 (UON Operational Plan, 2018). UON is driven by its dual ambition of strengthening the 'Changemaker' brand and 'placemaking' to improve the quality of the town for its students and staff (UON Annual Report, 2019). This was evident in the university's engagement as a key partner for securing funding for 'Nenescape' project; it is a river regeneration and landscape scheme led by environmental agencies and East Northamptonshire Council. UON's engagement aligns with Changemaker Challenge (iii) for enhancing development opportunities for its staff and students and wellbeing in the county through the provision of leisure, educational and heritage activities (UON Annual Report, 2018). This university respondents' account reinforces this finding:

> ".. that's a two and a half million pound project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. There are lots of opportunities for students to get involved and for my colleagues to be funded to do bits of research [..] part of what we're looking to do is to develop a broader suite of cultural assets and events that occur regularly and let people know that they are part of the university." ISH-U-04

Institutional stakeholders and community stakeholders were cognisant to the university's economically driven pursuits and vested interest. The main critique of the university's role as a knowledge provider was that they were more interested in "selling academic studies" (ISH-B-03) rather than offering practical solutions to real-world problems. The perception that university researchers were primarily concerned with appropriating knowledge to create intellectual property and reputational value for the university, created a preference towards external consultants as knowledge partners.

> "Universities in local areas could take a lead by being, seem to be 'balanced' in the approach [..] one of the problems, it can become quite academic, theoretical, with very little true practical knowledge of delivery, particularly around place marketing." ISH-B-03 (participant's emphasis)

Participants who favoured university students and staff as consultants on place branding projects valued their scientific objectivity, as they felt that the university was in a unique position to provide evidence-based insights. The financial troubles of the local government created a favourable position for knowledge institutions to take a more leading and active role. In addition to UON's role as a partner in spatial regeneration, it is supporting the public sector through research on service improvements and innovation in healthcare (UON Changemaker Challenge, 2015). In the context of place branding Northamptonshire, this community stakeholder (CSH) explains their positive disposition towards knowledge institutions:

> "But I'm just thinking given the dire financial situation of county council [..] if it can't be afforded to have probably quite expensive consultants come in, could the universities and the colleges come together and make it one big project for the people who are studying that sort of thing?" CSH-F3-02

As the only Higher Education Institution in the county, UON occupied a favourable position to play the role of knowledge partner in regional networks (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013; Salomaa, 2019). UON's activities reflected the interdependency between the public sector and the university to shape the place image and spatial regeneration, and its structural embeddedness in regional partnerships for achieving its strategic and operational objectives (Boucher *et al.,* 2003). However, a key challenge was managing the expectations and outcomes of knowledge transfer. While academics and researchers were motivated by enhancing conceptual knowledge and understanding, other stakeholders emphatically lamented on the practicalities of place branding. The differences in the interests of researchers and their regional partners were noted in terms of a theoretical and practical divide (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). The discrepancy can be attributed to a lack of shared understanding of the aims and outcomes of place branding.

Know-how

The university was perceived to possess the skills and capability that the public sector was lacking, described in terms of creativity and expertise in place marketing and branding. While the private sector is seen to possess this expertise, most participants were suspicious of their economic interest. Relatively, the university was perceived to offer an "impartial" and "holistic" view as a knowledge institution with expertise in multiple fields. In one instance, the university filled the 'skills and confidence gap' through their expertise in community engagement and participatory practice which was not possessed by other ISH. These accounts describe the 'facilitator' role of the university in public-private partnerships, as well as between ISH and CSH:

> "It's not public authority so it's immediately not got any of the red flags and the raised eyebrows [..] it's not really got the agenda of what we're big business and we're paying for this, so this [Northamptonshire Surprise] campaign can look like we want it to. The

Uni has an impartial place and actually will take a more holistic view of things [..] quite a unique role I think, facilitator." CSH-F1-01

".. we got planners and policymakers in conversation with young people and local residents, they all really benefited from those experiences and they may act on quite a lot of the things that were suggested. But beforehand, they [decision makers] were telling us they were quite anxious about going into it, and that they wouldn't be able to do it themselves because they didn't have the knowledge, training, skills." ISH-U-03

However, in terms of enhancing the skills and capabilities of ISH and CSH, their role was limited. The university primarily contributed to the upskilling of students engaged through research, volunteering or work placements in regional networks and enhancement of business/entrepreneurial capacity (Northamptonshire Heritage Strategy, 2019). A voluntary sector respondent explained that partnership for the filling of the 'know-what' gap alone was not sustainable in the long run. There may be untapped potential for the university to take up the role of inhouse training partner for enhancing institutional stakeholders' skills and capabilities.

"We commissioned the university to do it [research], we won't be asking them to do it again, because we've invested in our own open source data platform [..] So we'll be able to do live data research in house. The problem with it was fantastic report and a wonderful piece of work but as you know, research goes out of date very quickly when it's in paper form [...] it's also about skilling people in house." ISH-V-03

".. [our] department here in Northampton we are always trying to engage the public wherever we can [..] the stuff that we write is accessible to a lay person [..] we do quite a lot with local community groups, we go out and talk to schools [..] we see it as part of our mission, in engaging the public with [our subject area]." ISH-U-01

Universities as boundary organisations are in a favourable position for expediting multidisciplinary expert knowledge (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013) as well as training place leaders on matters of complex collaborations (Bowden and Liddle, 2018). Further, through their public engagement, linkages in local community groups are formed. In the unique role as educators, the university can widen participation beyond traditional public institutions undertaking consultation for planning and policy (Charles, 2006). It can contribute to the strengthening of community capacity for involvement in local issues (Fernández-Esquinas and Pinto, 2014) by engaging CSH in co-designing spatial imaginaries through service learning, public lectures, conferences, training workshops and engaged scholarship research (Boucher *et al.,* 2003; UPP Foundation, 2019).

Know-who

As a key player in Northamptonshire, the university's leadership team has representation on the Boards and Committees of various regional partnerships and forums. These representatives

were gathering information on potential partnerships and projects for academics and students, in line with the strategic priorities set out in the Changemaker Challenges. Through their 'presence' on various networks, these actors can influence the regional agenda by utilising their social networks and influence. This was evident in UON's role in securing the title for Northampton as a 'Social Enterprise Place'. The operational team comprising of research and professional services staff initiated the bidding process. They planned and gathered evidence for the application by researching the social enterprise landscape in the town and county (know-what). Next, they approached the university's leadership team to utilise their social networks among ISH in the town, particularly politicians and big corporations, to grant legitimacy to the initiative.

> ".. we went to the university, and we said, look, this is what we're doing, it's beginning to take off. But we would like now the university's blessing to take this on and make this happen. [..] We were having difficulties getting the big corps on board, [name of UON senior management member] said that they if they are proving difficult, we [university] could try and wine and dine them. [..] The university has some clout in this town, it's a big thing, they know people and people know them" ISH-B-02

These well-connected university representatives described their role as a "coordinator", ensuring that "the right people are talking to each other" (ISH-U-04). In place branding networks comprising of partners with equal resources and power, university' ability to mediate trust and mutually beneficial relationships between stakeholders has been previously noted (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013; Rinaldi and Cavicchi, 2016). In this role, the university was valued for occupying an 'intermediary' position between various stakeholder groups. As this stakeholder expands:

> ".. half the reason why we've got all these amazing little projects happening in complete isolation, it's because there isn't that mechanism, or that kind of forum for people to come and have that kind of collaborative space [..] the council's got better things to worry about. But somebody from the university feels like a natural fit for that." CSH-F1-01

Further, the findings indicate that through their social linkages with various stakeholder groups and favourable intermediary position, they can tackle the issue of fragmentation of stakeholders' efforts in place branding. However, the challenges relating to access and power imbalance were noted by stakeholders with lesser resources and power, such as the voluntary sector and community stakeholders. As the account below indicate, stakeholders who are not already connected with the university may find it challenging to find the entry point into the network.

> ".. university is a kind of entity in itself. And with any university as well, it's about knowing who to talk to." CSH-03

The challenge for interaction and engagement between institutional and community stakeholders due to the differences in power, resources and legitimacy is evidenced in the literature (Insch and Stuart, 2015; Reynolds, 2018; Braun *et al.,* 2013). Filling network gaps

would require the intermediary actors to balance their high levels of power and power of other well-resourced ISH and create more opportunities for open and accessible participation for communities (Purdy, 2012).

Discussion and conclusion: Towards a framework for the role of universities

University as 'knowledge partner'

The prime objective of this paper was to examine the role of the university in relation to the other institutional stakeholders in place branding networks. The key finding from the analysis of UON's role in Northamptonshire place branding is that the university is seen to play a complementary 'partnership' role to ISHs in general, and the public sector in particular. The case study illustrated that the university entered in partnership arrangements for regional development and branding as there are symbiotic gains for both the local government and the university as they are faced with dwindling public funding and resources.

Across the UK, local governments faced with austerity measures are increasingly collaborating with public, private and voluntary sector partners for a wide range of local and economic governance functions, from service delivery to planning local industrial strategy to destination management (Slocum and Everett, 2014; Emerson *et al.,* 2012). For local governments, universities are a natural partner as they are independent in technical areas and serve the social and economic area in which they are seated (Sarabia-Sanchez and Cerda-Bertomeu, 2018). In Northamptonshire, the situation is even direr due to the bankruptcy of the County Council, which has denigrated public trust and perception of leadership. The socio-economic-political conditions have widened the scope for other (institutional) stakeholders to take the lead in telling a positive story and defining the brand identity for Northamptonshire.

For place branding leadership, expertise in marketing, branding and creativity was perceived to be the most critical feature by ISH and CSH. The university occupied a favourable position as the only knowledge institution in a peripheral region who could fill the 'know-what' gap by providing evidence-based insights (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013; Salomaa, 2019). However, the main critique from the regional partners was the mismatched expectations and outcomes of knowledge transfer. It is suggested that beyond the creation and assimilation of knowledge on place symbols and meaning, academics as consultants should promote a shared understanding of the aims and outcomes of place branding. With regards to influencing the process of place branding, academics as consultants should provide "evidence to relevant audiences as to why it may be best for place practitioners to avoid creating and imposing a place brand and instead help shape it from the views of stakeholder constituencies" (Medway *et al.,* 2015).

Interdependencies between institutional stakeholders have been known to pave the way for collaborative partnerships in regional networks (Arbo and Benneworth, 2007; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). Despite, and one might argue that owing to, the recent pressures to internationalise and funding challenges, universities (especially in 'left behind' places) have been called on to embrace their civic role and take up a regional leadership function

(Benneworth and Fitjar, 2019; UPP Foundation, 2019). The university emphasised its embeddedness and social impact activities to show a commitment to the region and its regional partners, which strengthened the university's leadership position in regional networks (Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). This is in contrast with the practices of traditional universities in core regions as they tend to emphasise their national and international reputations in teaching and research in order to maintain a global reputation (Boucher *et al.,* 2003; Popescu, 2012).

Widening stakeholder participation

The second research objective was to explore the potential role of universities in widening stakeholder participation in place branding. A key finding from this multi-stakeholder exploration is that the university's knowledge institution identity is central to its role in place branding. Since universities have limited resources and capacity, they should focus on areas of engagement where they can make the most contribution (UPP Foundation, 2019). Our case analysis reveals that UON is uniquely placed to fill the knowledge gaps relating to 'know-how' and 'know-who' in place branding networks. Further, UON can use this position to influence the process and outcomes of regional development.

Adopting the concept of place branding as a social learning process where stakeholders discuss and articulate goals and vision (Pasquinelli, 2010), universities as educators and trainers are uniquely situated to facilitate learning among stakeholders through skills and capacity building. For instance, training on creative thinking, branding and participatory techniques can give institutional stakeholders confidence and capabilities for leading complex collaborations (Bowden and Liddle, 2018; Bichler, 2019). Further, the training function could extend to the strengthening of community capacity for involvement in local issues (Fernández-Esquinas and Pinto, 2014; Moscardo, 2011). For the university, assuming the role of in-house training partner can leave a long-lasting impact on place branding and governance processes, further embedding them in place structures as well as protecting against institutional memory loss when researchers leave.

University respondents saw their role as an 'intermediary' between various stakeholder groups. The university was fulfilling the 'know-who' function by enabling social networks and connections between institutional stakeholders (Cavicchi *et al.,* 2013). Through its civic infrastructure and public engagement activities, UON showed potential to foster connections with and between business and community organisations (Taylor and Luter, 2013; UPP Foundation, 2019). A key challenge to fulfil this role was balancing their high levels of power and power of other well-resourced ISH and creating more participation opportunities for communities (Purdy, 2012). For the university, this role can contribute towards their social impact agenda and strengthen their position as a 'change agent' in creating a more democratic, just and equitable society (Taylor and Luter, 2013). From an endogenous regional development perspective, the changemaker role of the university can serve to broaden the focus of development beyond economic concerns to include societal and civic concerns (Pike *et al.,* 2007).

Research implications and limitations

This paper addresses a gap in the literature regarding how universities in rural and marginalised regions participate and influence participation in place branding by exploring multi-stakeholder perceptions. The main contribution of the study is that it holistically covers the three forms of knowledge gaps universities can fill through their participation in place branding. The conceptual framework has validity based on the literature as it integrates knowledge about universities' contribution to the economic and societal goals of regional development. The inferences cannot be generalised but may be transferrable to other single player universities in peripheral regions since their civic and social ethos, and knowledge institution identity may create a legitimate claim to their engagement as 'facilitators' in place branding. Whereas, in core regions and cities, this role is likely to be played by a dedicated place management and marketing agencies such as Destination management organisations or Local Enterprise Partnerships. These agencies may further engage external consultants to fill the knowledge gaps.

The case study illustrated the potential of the university to go beyond its knowledge transfer contribution to become a 'knowledge partner' in the dimensions of 'know-how' and 'know-who', particularly by enhancing the capabilities and skills of stakeholders within the network. This recommendation emerged in response to the university's strategic orientation as a single player in a peripheral region. Future researchers may use this framework to analyse universities' knowledge contribution in their regional development and branding context and suggest universities' role in place branding based on their unique situation. As for this paper, the research aim was fulfilled by exploring the university's role as a vital, knowledge partner in place branding, with scope for widening stakeholder participation.

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