

## **Abstract**

Place branding is increasingly being applied not only by cities, destinations and nations, but also regions and rural places with the aim of improving the places' reputation. Despite a growing number of place branding studies from rural places, most theories in the field of place branding are based on research on cities and tourism destinations. Research on place branding of cities and destinations is increasingly focusing on the importance of local actors', including residents', support for place branding and calls for more inclusive and participatory practices to create ownership, identification and engagement have been made. But, while in cities and destinations, there is often a local government or a Destination Marketing Organization leading the place branding, in rural places the practice is almost naturally more co-creational. Public authorities play a minor role, and place branding rests more on private actors from the local community. This raises the question of how these actors organize the process of place branding. Since rural places are diverse, the same can be expected for their approaches to place branding and its impact on local actors and communities and their support for place branding. Therefore, there is a need for further development of place branding theory in relation to rural places, especially focusing on the processes that actors engage in to brand rural places.

The main objective of this Ph.D. study is therefore to investigate the place branding processes applied in rural places and how different rural place branding processes affect local actors. By drawing on empirical data, the study contributes to the academic and practical discussion by (a) identifying different types of place branding approaches local actors apply depending on the contextual characteristics of rural places, (b) describing the interactions of place branding initiatives of places on different vertical levels, (c) investigating the impact of different types of rural place branding processes on ownership, identification, legitimacy and engagement behavior of local actors, and (d) exploring the impacts of different types of rural place branding approaches on social sustainability of the rural communities. The dissertation aims to provide guidance to actors in rural places regarding the choice of place branding approaches according to the place's context and to achieve desired outcomes, including local actor support and engagement as well as community outcomes.