CITIZEN VOLUNTEERS AS PLACE BRAND AMBASSADORS?

Colophon

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Content

Preface

rethinkIMPACTS reports are an important outcome of the cooperation between Aarhus University and Aarhus 2017 in contributing with new knowledge on many different aspects of being European Capital of Culture. The reports will convey the results of the different research - and evaluation projects that will be conducted in the upcoming of, during and after 2017 as a part of rethinkIMPACTS 2017. The aim is to make these new findings and insights accessible to a broad audience.

This report is the result of the research project *Citizen Volunteers as Place Brand Ambassadors* conducted by Associate Professor Leila Trapp, Department of English, Aarhus University. She has engaged with a core activity of the volunteer program: The greeting of cruise ship visitors to Aarhus. The analysis of this part of Aarhus 2017 is even more relevant due to the fact that this activity was handed over to Visit Aarhus in the beginning of 2018, testing whether this should be a permanent activity.

N. Leila Trapp conducted the gathering of data during the course of 2017. She wishes to thank all the interviewees who shared their time and insights to make this project possible.

1.0 Introduction

For any European city, being chosen as a European Capital of Culture by the Council of Ministers of the European Union is an immense achievement. Since 1985, more than 40 cities across Europe have had the honour of being a Capital of Culture, and while each city has had its own unique set of expectations for the outcomes of the event, mega-events are generally viewed as having significant economic, cultural and social impacts on the host city (Liu 2016). This is strongly reflected in the expectations set out by the Aarhus 2017 Secretariat: "Aarhus 2017 focuses on cultural content and the legacy of our year will be capacity building and cultural, social and economic development" (Simonsen 2017:3). Specifically, in terms of economic development, Aarhus has focused on increasing international awareness of the city, and its potential as a tourist destination (ibid). A key program established to help meet these objectives was the volunteer program, which included volunteers intended to take on an ambassador role and welcome tourists arriving to Aarhus aboard cruise ships.

Because the volunteer program was an initiative in which the volunteer program manager, staff, and collaborators were given free reigns to design and run the program in a rather ad hoc, learn-by-doing and learn-from-others manner, the purpose of this research project has been to explore the nature of, and outcomes of, their efforts in order to gain insights into the value and challenges of this type of volunteer program.

In particular, this study focuses on the volunteers who greeted cruise ship tourists and examines the volunteer program by asking **how the volunteer role has been managed, carried out and understood from several perspectives.** With reference to the Aarhus 2017 Secretariat's intention to strengthen the city's potential as a tourist destination, this study also focuses on the extent to which the volunteer role can be understood as involving **place branding efforts.**

This report is organized as follows: I first describe the Aarhus2017 volunteer program, and then present the research method and relevant theory. I subsequently present the findings in the main section of the report. Finally, I reflect

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more broadly on the findings in the implications section, highlighting the key takeaways of the study and suggesting how to move forward to better understand this sort of volunteer program and its potentials and challenges.

2.0 The case: The Aarhus 2017 volunteer program

The Aarhus2017 volunteer program started already in 2014 in plenty of time for the manager and volunteers to gather experience, recruit and plan. The first activities began in 2015, and welcoming cruise ship guests was a key activity from the start. By the end of 2017, 4,535 volunteers had in one way or another participated in the program (Lund 2018:29) . Three management pillars of the program included "identity" (to ensure members identified as volunteers), a feeling of "community" (to ensure comradery amongst volunteers), and "anchorage" (to ensure a link between volunteers' interests/motivations and activities)(Lund 2018:5-6).

The volunteer program was inclusive and open to anyone who wanted to take part. It included a wide range of non-obligatory training courses, outings and informative seminars for volunteers. Of particular interest for the cruise ship hosts were the English and German language courses, inspirational walks through Aarhus with trained tourist guides, and short courses in how to be a good host. Also, volunteers were very fond of the outings in which they were invited to behind-the-scenes cultural events and exciting, exclusive tours of local places that they might not otherwise have had a chance of seeing (Lund 2018:11).

The volunteer program has been widely viewed a big success, and it therefore continues to exist, thanks to several public and private supporters. Organizationally, it has been moved from the Aarhus2017 framework to being a part of the city's tourist organization; however, it is physically separate from the tourist organization. The volunteer program's formal purpose is now "developing/rethinking volunteerism in Aarhus to market Aarhus as a vacation and travel destination" (Lund 2018:32).

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3.0 Method

This research project has been carried out as a qualitative case study with a primary focus on interviews. To gain a holistic understanding of the volunteer program and to form accurate impressions of the volunteers' intended roles within the Aarhus 2017 context, I have examined relevant documents, observed and participated in volunteer program activities (see below), spoken informally with the Program Coordinator and volunteers. Finally, I conducted the formal interviews.

The activities I observed or participated in include:
- Several informal visits to the volunteer center ("GeLinde") and numerous informal conversations with volunteers.
- A city walking tour (29 October 2016) with an experienced city guide, intended to teach volunteers more about Aarhus, and how to communicate with tourists.
- A workshop for volunteers on "Successful Hosting" (17 November 2016), led by a staff member from the Aarhus tourist agency VisitAarhus, intended to teach volunteers how to appropriately greet cruise ship guests.
- A reception celebrating the volunteer program's continuation beyond 2017 (28 June 2018)

The interviews I conducted include:
- A focus group interview with 6 volunteers (23 May 2017, 54 minutes)
- An individual interview with the program's Volunteer Coordinator (27 June 2017, 50 minutes)
- An individual interview with Aarhus' tourist agency's Guest Service and Cruise Ship Coordinator (16 November 2017, 32 minutes)

Interviews: data collection
Participants of the focus group interview were invited on a volunteer basis. Because the cruise ship hosts are predominantly retirees – both men and women, the focus group was composed of the first three retired men and three retired women who accepted the invitation to participate. All participants were either Aarhus natives, or had lived in Aarhus for the majority of their adult lives. The volunteer program for welcoming cruise ships started as a pilot project in mid-summer 2015, and also ran during the summer season of 2016. Therefore, for

two of the volunteers, 2017 was their third season of welcoming cruise ships. For three of the volunteers, 2017 was their second season, and one volunteer started in 2017.

I used two slightly different interview guides; one guide for the focus group interview and one for the volunteer coordinator and cruise ship coordinator (see below). All of the interviews, however, focused on perceptions regarding the role of the volunteers, the intended outcomes of the program, the purpose of the various activities offered to the volunteers, and the potential of involving volunteer citizens in place branding. Interviews were conducted in the participants' native language: Danish.

Questions for the focus group interview:
1. How do you see your role(s) in the Aarhus 2017 project?
2. What (role) do you think the Aarhus 2017 team expects/wishes from you? And how do you feel about that?
3. Have you felt equipped to fulfil the role(s) (your own and other's expectations)?
4. Is there something Aarhus/Aarhus 2017 could do to prepare you better? Training? Would you like that?
5. Do you view yourself as a promoter of Aarhus? Is that okay with you?
6. Do you know what characterizes the Aarhus "brand"? Do you think it is accurate?
7. What are some of the most important outcomes of your participation?
8. Any other comments?

Questions for the individual interviews:
1. When the year is done, what do you hope to have achieved with the cruise ship volunteer program? (intended outcomes of the program and the volunteers' roles)
2. Are there other actors who have different intended outcomes?
3. What are the intended outcomes of the various activities for the volunteers (tours, workshops on hosting, storytelling, etc.)? Who plans the activities, and have they led to the wished-for outcomes?
4. Does the volunteer program work with the concept of place-branding? Do you see the volunteers as place-brand ambassadors? If not, do you see a potential for this? Do you think the volunteers would be interested in this?
5. Any other comments?

Box 1: Condensed versions of the interview guides

Interviews: data analysis
The interviews were first transcribed and then coded. The coding was the first step of a two-step qualitative data analysis process, as described by Coffey and Atkinson, which includes coding and interpreting data (1996). The interview data were first coded according to data-driven themes and patterns that were deemed relevant to the research question: **How has the volunteer role been understood, managed, and carried out?** In the subsequent analysis phase, the move from coding to interpreting the data involved "playing with and exploring the codes that were created" to extract meaning (*ibid*:46). Much of this interpretation involved relating the data to relevant contemporary theoretical ideas. Specifically, **the volunteer role was examined in light of the place branding literature**.

4.0 Theoretical framework and literature review: Place branding

Many theoretical and case studies have recently been conducted to explore the potential of "residents in place branding" (Braun, Kavaratzis et al. 2013), "citizen brand ambassadors" (Rehmet and Dinnie 2013), "participatory place branding" (Zenker and Erfgen 2014, Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015), "brand co-creation" (Hatch and Schultz 2010) and "resident destination brand ambassadors" (Wassler 2014). The current project takes its point of departure from this literature because, as noted, both the Aarhus 2017 Secretariat and the City of Aarhus expressed an interest in encouraging ordinary citizens to take on an "ambassador" role on the city's behalf. More specifically, the Aarhus 2017 Secretariat intended volunteers "to be trained to be ambassadors for Aarhus 2017, welcoming tourists, acting as guides, supporting cultural events and much more" (Rasmussen and Erenbjerg 2015:36), and Aarhus' on-going, general approach to city branding includes as a key aim "to make citizens good ambassadors, so each of them can tell their story about Aarhus in their own way" (Borgmesterens-afdeling, my translation).

As with any concept, which refers to a complex phenomenon, "place branding" has a great number of definitions, and it is also used as an umbrella term for the more specific *destination branding, nation branding and city branding* concepts. Although the place branding concept and its practices were originally embedded in place promotion as urban policy, it has subsequently become tightly linked with marketing, mostly in terms of tourism and visitor destinations (Hankinson, 2010). The intensified global competition for resources, visitors, residents and work places, among countries, global cities, capitals, tourist destinations, and even smaller cities is an often-noted key driver for place branding efforts (e.g. Braun, Eshuis et al. 2014, Acharya and Rahman 2016). To help make sense of the complex place branding concept, I categorize relevant understandings and approaches according to three different foci below: (city) marketing practices, (consistent) consumer images, and strategic place brand management and communication.

4.1/ Focus on (city) marketing practices

Some see the essence of place branding as "the application of marketing to a special sort of product, namely places" (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2010:8).

From this point of view, place branding is seen as a tool. As Lucarelli & Berg (2011) explain, the place marketing approach has to do with marketing tactics employed to promote places. In a similar manner, Kavaratzis (2004:16) refers to city marketing as "a set of instruments and activities at the disposal of the marketer", also known as the "marketing mix", which can be used to gain a particular market response (van Waterschoot 2002 in Kavartzis 2004), **or** to gain competitive advantage (Kotler, Asplund et al. 1999 in Kavaratzis 2004). One well-known, promotional instrument is of course advertising, but, importantly in this European Capital of Culture context, mega-events and cultural regeneration efforts are also considered city marketing tools, seeking to transform "previously productive cities into spectacular cities of (and for) consumption" (Hubbard and Hall 1998 in Kavaratzis 2004:61).

As noted, the intended outcome of city marketing is competitive advantage. A key concept in this regard is 'place image'. Indeed, competitive advantage is said to be achieved by positively influencing a place's image. As Kavaratzis states, "the object of city marketing is not the city 'itself', but its image." (Kavaratzis 2004:62). Therefore, the place brand literature is also concerned with place image, as described below.

4.2/ Focus on (consistent) consumer images

In this approach to place branding, focus is on the perceptions, or images, that individuals have of a place. For example, Berg's understanding of (place) branding is "the purposeful symbolic embodiment of all information connected to a city in order to create associations and expectations around it" (Berg 2009 in Lucarelli & Berg 2011:21). As can be gleamed from this quote, those who work with place image management often point to the importance of creating a clear, consistent, and distinct place identity, which in turn will lead to a powerful image. As Konecnik & de Chernatony (2013) argue, the creation of a distinct place brand identity also makes it possible to send clear and consistent messages to diverse target audiences. In this way, place branding is seen by some as a practical solution which provides a framework for identifying, gathering, and consolidating various intended images for a city into a single city message or brand (Kavaratzis 2004:63). However, the complexity of

this task often presents a major challenge in practice. In the case of tourism, for example, destinations will typically have a broad range of actors, such as local governments, tourist attractions and national tourism authorities, who will invariably send several, often conflicting, messages. To address and describe this challenge, Ooi has coined the term "the poetics of destination branding", which he defines as a complex "process of inventing and presenting a unique and attractive brand story to tourists and tourists-to-be about the destination, so as to influence their perceptions of the place in a positive direction" (2004:109).

Other scholars suggest that it is too complicated, and thereby futile, to create a single, consistent place brand. Instead, they recognize and allow for a diversity of messages and images. Braun & Zenker capture this option in their broad definition of place brand: "A network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place, which is embedded through the aims, communication, values and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design"(2010:5). Importantly, they also note that various target groups can have very different perceptions of a place, depending on their perspectives and interests (2010:1).

In any case, it is evident that establishing and maintaining a successful place brand identity is not an easy task. For this reason, the literature is also very focused on strategic place brand management.

4.3/ Focus on strategic place brand management and communication

The place brand literature on strategic place brand management follows general management practices by tending to focus on the development and implementation (or communication) of place brands. In this literature, we also see the above-mentioned distinction between those who seek to conquer the challenges associated with developing and maintaining a consistent place brand, and those who underscore the important role that multiple stakeholders play, including residents themselves, in creating a more holistic and dynamic place brand. For the purpose of this study, the second approach is examined below, with a focus on residents' roles.

4.4/ Residents as stakeholders, co-branders and ambassadors in place brand formation and delivery

As noted, the idea that place brands should be developed by multiple stakeholders, including residents, is becoming more and more prevalent in the literature. The suggestion is motivated by the well-known suggestion that brand management in general should consist of participatory co-branding processes in which a multitude of stakeholders who encounter and appropriate the brand collectively engage in a set of dynamic, dialogic and on-going processes (e.g. Hatch and Schultz 2010). In this context, place brand is understood as an evolutionary process, fluid and open enough to compass a multitude of interpretations (Hanna and Rowley 2011). Key motivations for this shift include the wish to uncover an authentic place brand for consumers which resonates with the local population, thereby strengthening acceptance of the brand.

One prominent management model, Kavaratzis' City Image Communication Model, grasps the complexity of influencing factors on place images, and illustrates how image communication takes place (2004)[1] (see Figure 1). Importantly, this is the model which illustrates Aarhus' approach to branding, according to the city's website (www.citybrandaarhus.dk/da/om.aspx). The model was originally developed with the idea that residents are "the most important city marketers" (2004:69). Basically, it rests on the idea that everything a city consists of, and everything that takes place in a city, holds functional and symbolic meanings that contribute to the city's image, and these meanings can be communicated through three distinct types of communication: primary, secondary and tertiary (Kavaratzis 2004).

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[1] The model also complies with Vermeulen's position that because "all encounters with the city take place through perceptions and images...It is the image of the city that needs to be planned" (Vermeulen 2002 in Kavaratzis 2004).
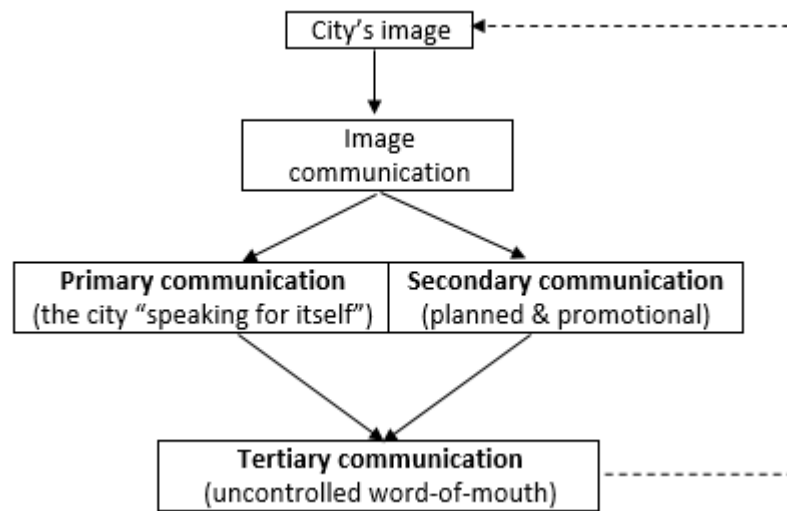
Figure 1: City image communication (adapted from Kavaratzis 2004)

Primary communication includes "the communicative effects of a city's actions when communication is not the main goal of these actions" (Ibid:67). Examples include landscape strategies such as urban design and architecture, as well as the city's behavior, including services provided by the city and events, including mega-events.

Secondary communication refers to formal, planned communication which aims at promoting the city.

Tertiary communication refers to uncontrollable word-of-mouth. Positive tertiary communication is considered the goal of all branding processes, including primary and secondary communication. The model indicates that word-of-mouth influences the city's image (indicated by the dashed line), creating a sort of cyclical, on-going development of the city's image.

The roles of residents in place branding was also taken up by Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker (2013). They found that residents play three different roles: an integrated part of a place brand; ambassadors for the place brand; and citizens. The first role refers to local people as the "bread and butter" of places (ibid:20). In this role, residents' interactions with each other and with visitors are considered a critical dimension of the formation of place brands. Examples of this interaction includes the degree of friendliness of the locals (see e.g. Freire 2009) and the telling of personal stories (see e.g. Colomb and Kalandides 2010). The second role refers to the information about a place that stems from

residents' word of mouth. Besides the well-known recognition that consumers consider word of mouth to be particularly authentic and trustworthy, resident involvement in place branding efforts is also said to increase the likelihood that they will behave as brand ambassadors (Braun, Kavaratzis et al. 2013). The third role also refers to resident involvement, but in a more governmental sense, including citizen participation in brand development to increase acceptance and ownership of city brands.

Table 1: The three roles of residents in place branding according to Braun, Kavaratzis et al. 2013

An integrated part of the place brand. The "bread and butter" of a place.	Information from residents' word-of-mouth. Ambassadors.	Residents as participants in place branding governance processes.

Finally, a study of the use of ambassador networks in place branding found that there are four main categories of networks based on the type of participants, purpose and selection of members (Anderson and Ekman 2009). The first category is especially relevant to the current study: the inclusive, citizen-focused network, which is exemplified by Liverpool's volunteers who welcomed and helped tourists during the city's year as European City of Culture. The other three categories include business-oriented networks, fame networks, and specialized or niche networks. Four relevant points include the notion of place brands as "relationships between the place and all its stakeholders" (:44); the notion that ambassadors are not only seen as communication channels, but as developers of a place to enhance its competitiveness; the notion that word-of-mouth provides "credible testimony of the distinctive character of the place and its attractiveness" (:43); and the suggestion that important criteria for network success include providing clear expectations regarding the ambassador role, and integrating or closely coordinating the building of ambassador networks with the overall brand management process

5.0 Results

In summary, with regard to RQ1, **how the volunteer role been understood, managed, and carried out**, the interviews revealed that all three actors (the volunteer coordinator, the cruise ship coordinator, and the volunteers) identified three types of volunteer roles: personal hosts, providers of information and place promotors. However, the various actors prioritized each of these roles differently, and occasionally had different understandings of them, and how they should be managed. These differences are described in sections (the ones beginning with "*The Aarhus2017 volunteer coordinator (VC)" and ending with "The volunteers")* below.

With regard to RQ2**, to what extent the volunteer role can be understood as involving place branding efforts**, the interviewees understood place branding as a conscious and strategic marketing effort rather than an unintentional outcome of their endeavours.

As a staff member of the tourist agency, the cruise ship coordinator viewed the volunteer program through a marketing lens, describing the group of volunteers as a unique, local attraction which can boost the tourist agency's efforts to promote the city. Although the cruise ship coordinator (CSC) preferred not to use the concept of place branding, preferring instead "the city's DNA" or "reasons to go", CSC's understanding of the volunteers' roles reflects the concept of city branding as a marketing practice, as described above in section X:"Focus on (city) marketing practices"

In contrast, the volunteer coordinator (VC) and the volunteers were largely uninterested in the concept or practice of place branding. Instead of viewing volunteer activities as promotional, their focus was almost exclusively on the quality and personal outcomes of the meeting between volunteers and tourists.

Finally, the interviews revealed that it was not possible to talk about the volunteers' roles without discussing how they compare to the roles of paid-for guides and tourist office student helpers, who also met and greeted the cruise ship tourists. The volunteers found this topic to be important because without clear

role distinctions, they, and others, could be concerned about displacing paid workers. For this reason, the volunteer manager collaborated with the cruise ship coordinator to define and maintain distinct roles for volunteers, guides and student aids[2]. Despite these distinctions, the volunteers expressed a need to ensure that they do not soften, and they speak of "marking their territory". For example, because the volunteers are periodically invited to fun, yet informative, outings to the city's attractions, there is some worry amongst the volunteers that these outings may be an attempt to soften the volunteer-guide boundary:

> "...no, but it can seem like they [the volunteer managers] are actually trying to make us better and better at also being tourist guides, right?"

The sections below provide a more detailed account of the results for each actor. They are followed by a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications.

5.1/ The Aarhus 2017 volunteer coordinator (VC)

As indicated in Table 2, VC sees the role of personal host to be the most important. In this role, the actual meeting between volunteers and tourists is central. VC underscored that, as hosts, it is important for volunteers to be polite, and to enter into dialogue with tourists, so that the tourists will have participated in a positive and personal experience.

Table 2: Relevant themes from interview with the Aarhus2017 volunteer coordinator

Volunteer Roles:	**Personal hosts** (dialogue, politeness, participatory experience) Providers of information Place promoters
Place branding?	No place branding yet

In the roles as providers of information, VC noted that unique and personal tips and anecdotes from the locals, rather than strictly useful information that can be provided by professional guides, are especially valuable. In fact, volunteers

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[2] Basically, guides are hired by tourists to show them around and share their extensive knowledge about Aarhus; student aids are paid to greet the tourists and promote the tourist office's sponsors (stores and attractions) in a timely manner; and the volunteers are intended to greet tourists in their own unique way in order to help the tourists enjoy their visit

are not required to have any particular level of knowledge about the city to participate.

The final role, which VC touched briefly upon only once, is that of promotors of the city. In this role, the purpose of greeting tourists reaches beyond providing a positive experience:

> *"It is a completely unique greeting that the tourists receive in Aarhus, which hopefully will get the tourists to return."*

In terms of place branding, VC indicated the volunteer program is not branding the city yet, at least not in a strategic manner, but that the program has potential, if funding for that purpose becomes available. VC also mistakenly indicated that Aarhus' place brand slogan is the now outdated *City of Smiles.* This provides clear evidence that VC does not consider place branding to be a central concern of the program.

5.2/ The guest service and cruise ship coordinator (CSC)

The guest service and cruise ship coordinator clearly views place promotors to be the most central role for volunteers (see Table 3). The personal host role was also quite salient in the interview.

Table 3: Relevant themes from interview with the guest service and cruise ship coordinator

Volunteer Roles:	**Place promoters** (Element of city marketing)
	Personal hosts (authentic story-tellers, participatory experience)
	Providers of information
Place branding?	Volunteers as part of the city's DNA

CSC's understanding of the volunteers' roles heavily reflects that fact that the Aarhus tourist agency, CSC's workplace, is a marketing organization focused on strengthening economic growth in the city. In this way, CSC describes the volunteers as an important element of city marketing and thereby place promotors. Rather than focusing specifically on what the volunteers do, it is the mere fact of their existence that is valuable in a marketing context in which Aarhus needs to compete against other cruise destinations in the vicinity, e.g.

Gothenburg, Bergen, and Tallinn. As noted, the volunteers are understood as a positive "part of Aarhus' DNA" or "Reason to go", or, as Braun et al. put it, the "bread and butter" of the city (2013). GS suggested that it would be valuable to make this explicit to the volunteers; CSC's suggestions on how to do this include providing the volunteers with a course on Aarhus' DNA, referring to them as part of Aarhus' DNA, and possibly getting this down on paper: "

> "We have some people here who have Aarhus in their hearts, and we are proud of them. We want to make them an attraction."

In terms of the personal host role, CSC repeatedly underscored the value of volunteers' authenticity; while staff at the tourist office are paid to promote particular stores and attractions, volunteers are free to say whatever they want, and they can spend as much time as they please doing so. For example, they can tell about their own favourite cafés, or even discourage tourists from visiting overly-hyped attractions. Actually, it took CSC more than a year to learn to value the volunteers' freedom, rather than to fear what the volunteers might say. CSC also learned to value the personal meeting between locals and tourists in terms of the positive experience it provided tourists, noting that the most valuable memories from traveling often include meeting locals who are genuinely interested in sharing a conversation. CSC explained that the volunteers add a "valuable layer of coziness" to the visitors' experience.

Finally, CSC notes that the volunteers are providers of information. Initially, CSC primarily viewed the volunteers as extra hands to boosting the number of individuals who could provide information to tourists, but with time CSC realized that due to the local volunteers' genuine enthusiasm about their city, the value of the volunteers' efforts is found in the quality of the personal conversations with tourists, rather than in the amount of information dispensed.

As noted, CSC does not work with the concept of place branding; instead, CSC regards the volunteers as the "central DNA chain" of Aarhus, and as a "reason to go" in line with other attractions. CSC pointed out that tourist destinations may be remembered for their museums, shopping and cultural events, but smiles, friendly ambience and conversations with locals tend to be even more remarkable.

5.3/ The volunteers

As indicated in Table 4, the volunteers primarily view themselves as personal hosts and providers of information, but there was agreement that they are also promoting the city.

As personal hosts, their central focus is on assuring that the tourists feel welcome. Many of the greetings involve a rather standard exchange of questions and answers, but quite often the volunteers engage in dialogue with the tourists, which typically ends up being a positive experience for everyone. In this way, the volunteers pointed out the importance of being good listeners and encouraging a fruitful conversation if the tourists seem interested. There was some disagreement regarding which topics were appropriate to discuss, such as politics, but the volunteers are free to do as they please, and this freedom is respected. When asked if they often told stories to the tourists, the volunteers replied that it was mostly the other way around! One volunteer even received a marriage proposal.

> "I was not at all expecting that people who come to a foreign city would tell so much about themselves. I am surprised! Getting so many good stories."

The role of place promoter is not unknown to the volunteers, but a concern for the city's economic interests is certainly not their motivation for being a volunteer; instead, they expressed civic pride, being part of a social group, and a wish to meet and help tourists as key reasons for volunteering.

> "Especially during these [frightening] times when there is so much going on [in the world] around us, it must be nice that there is at least one place where it is nice to be. I would like to contribute to that."

As noted, the volunteers almost exclusively focus on the quality of their encounters with tourists, but due to their civic pride, they want visitors to get a good impression of the city. They were also unaware of the city's brand, and also mistakenly referred to the City of Smiles slogan. It was at that point that the only mention of an ambassador role was made, together with the wish to live up to the City of Smiles slogan. In general, however, the volunteers were quite adamant that they were not concerned with fulfilling anyone's expectations or

meeting any particular objectives; greeting tourists is something they do for enjoyment, and they don't want to feel as if they are at work.

Table 4: Relevant themes from interview with the volunteers

Volunteer roles:	**Personal hosts** (participatory experience, dialogue)
	Providers of information
	Place promoters (ambassadors)
Place branding?	Not city branders

6.0 Implications

The key learning point of this case study is that to understand resident, volunteer roles in terms of place branding theory, management and practice, **it is critical to recognize the distinction between residents as *intentional place brand ambassadors* and *unintentional city image influencers***. I have found the Aarhus2017 volunteers to be unintentional city image influencers due to the fact that they were not involved in any form of managed, promotion-focused, branding process. This distinction has important implications for the management of resident volunteers as well as volunteer practices and program outcomes.

Implication I: It is not necessarily constructive to involve resident volunteers in branding processes
We saw in the literature that a key management concern with residents in a place branding context is how to engage residents in (co-)branding processes (e.g. Hatch and Schultz 2010) in order to uncover an authentic place brand (e.g. Anderson and Ekman 2009, Braun, Kavaratzis et al. 2013). The current study has revealed that resident volunteers just want to be themselves, and do not seem to be familiar with, or concerned with, place branding; indeed, neither the volunteers, nor their manager, consider promoting the city to be a central aim of their efforts. This evokes the question of whether they would be interested in participating in (co-)branding processes. It is doubtful, according to a study of Amsterdam residents who were involved in a city branding process:

> "...findings indicate that the local residents do not easily see themselves in the role as a participant in the efforts to brand the city, and therefore there seems to be a rather limited support for Amsterdam Marketing's ideas and attitude to resident involvement." (Wraae 2015: abstract)

It is also noteworthy that an inherent tension seems to exist in this type of volunteer program: Despite the relative disinterest in promoting the city compared to personally hosting visitors, the mission of the new, post-2017 volunteer program is "to market Aarhus as a vacation and travel destination" (Lund 2018:32).

Volunteer program managers can address this tension by recognizing that the promotor and host roles are not necessarily exclusive. As we have seen, engaged hosts can naturally have a positive influence on a city's image.

Implication II: It is likely that resident volunteers are most authentic when their interaction with visitors is uncontrolled

In the current study, we saw that providing information and high quality personal exchanges with tourists take center stage. The volunteers appreciate not having to perform or fulfil any particular expectations and can interact with visitors as they see fit; therefore, I suggest that it is precisely because the volunteers are *not* involved in promotional place branding efforts, that their behavior and verbal messages are so authentic:

> "I think we are always told that they [volunteer program managers] don't expect anything in particular from us. We should just be ourselves."

Implication III: Resident volunteers grasp the value of dialogue with visitors as opposed to one-way communication

As we have seen, the place branding literature typically presents consumers as one-way receivers of an intended city message or city brand (Kavaratzis 2004), or "unique and attractive brand story" (Ooi 2004). In a similar manner, we see in Braun, Kavaratzis et al. (2013), that residents are providers of information. In contrast to the literature, this study has shown that as unintentional city brand influencers, the Aarhus2017 volunteers were concerned not only with providing messages or stories about Aarhus, they were at least as interested in hearing visitors' stories, engaging in dialogue, and thereby creating a particularly hospitable environment and a good experience for everyone.

Implication IV: This sort of resident volunteer program is likely to weaken any official attempts to create and manage a consistent place brand

Another result of this unmanaged communication is that the city, and any affiliated actors within the tourism industry, must forfeit control of the brand message (see e.g. Hatch and Schultz 2010); indeed, instead of conveying a clear and consistent brand, the volunteers inevitably gave visitors diverse, and perhaps even contradictory, impressions of the city. This diversity was surely strengthened by the fact that the Aarhus2017 volunteer program did not include instruction about the city's brand, just as applicants were not screened.

This implication is not necessarily negative; as we saw in Hanna and Rowley (2011), there can be positive aspects to perceiving place branding as an evolutionary and fluid process which is open enough to include a multitude of interpretations (2011). Indeed, as the mayor's office in Aarhus writes, "We don't see city branding as a campaign or a single initiative, but as a journey that we in Aarhus are on together" (Borgmesterens-afdeling).

Implication V: The importance of establishing clear roles for volunteers
Finally, this study has reinforced the importance of providing clear descriptions of the roles which volunteer residents are intended to take on. I suggest that managers can refer to the three roles identified here as a point of departure when defining the distinctions: Personal hosts, Providers of information, and Place promoters.

Where to go from here?
Based on this study's findings, I suggest that although the place branding literature has helped us to understand resident volunteers' roles, and the ways volunteers can contribute to a positive city image, place branding may not be the most fruitful concept with which to better our understanding of the potential and challenges of resident volunteers in cases such as this one where volunteers are functioning as unintentional city image influencers. In moving forward, I suggest turning to the hospitality literature and the experiential marketing literature (e.g. Williams 2006, Binkhorst and Den Dekker 2009) as these can contribute with insights on the value and nature of actual meetings between hosts and visitors, as well as insights on the growing (economic) value of providing experiences to consumers.

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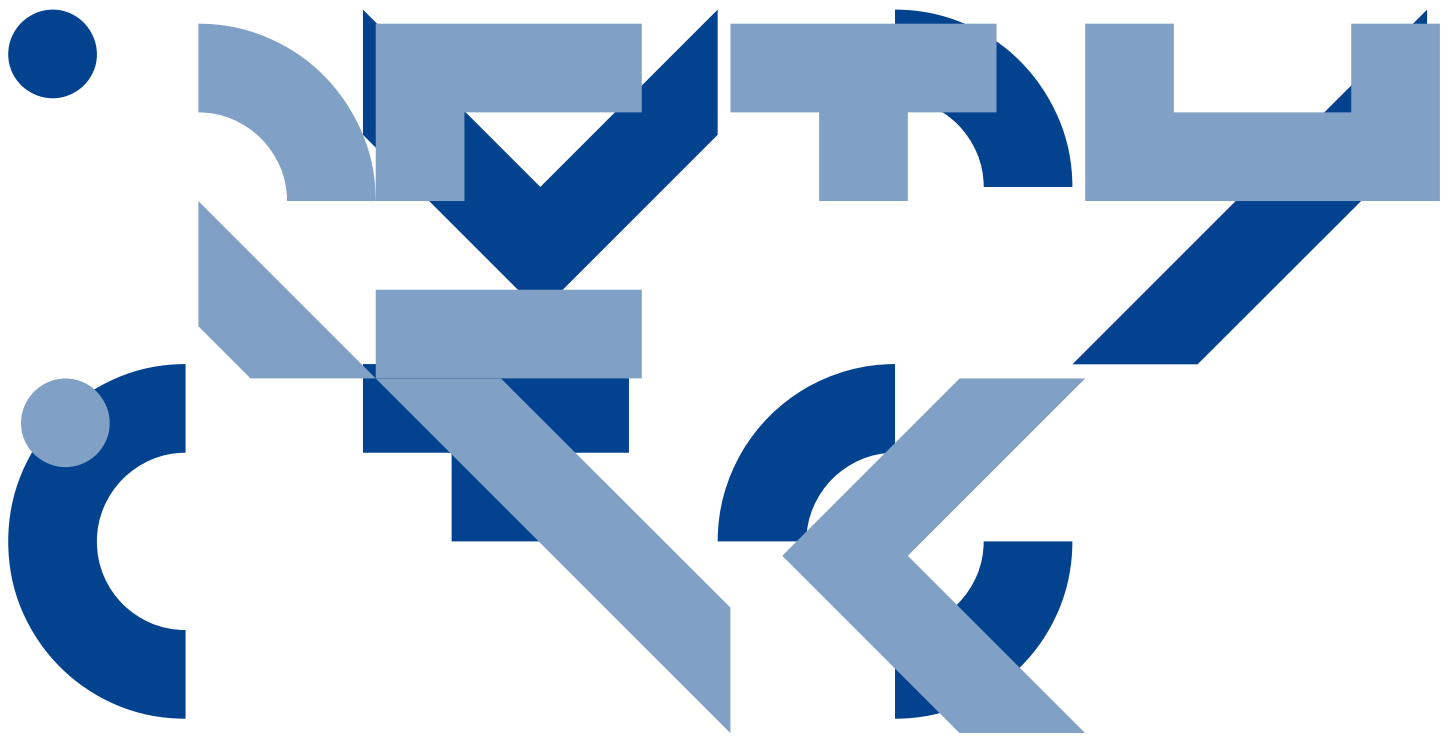
In connection with Aarhus, being the European Capital of Culture 2017, the city has focused on increasing international awareness of the city, and its potential as a tourist destination. A key program established to help meet these objectives was the volunteer program, which included volunteers intended to take on an ambassador role and welcome tourists arriving to Aarhus aboard cruise ships. Because the volunteer program was an initiative in which the volunteer program manager, staff, and collaborators were given free reigns to design and run the program in a rather ad hoc, learn-by-doing and learn-from-others manner, the purpose of this research project has been to explore the nature of, and outcomes of, their efforts in order to gain insights into the value and challenges of this type of volunteer program.

In particular, this study focuses on the volunteers who greeted cruise ship tourists and examines the volunteer program by asking how the volunteer role has been managed, carried out and understood from several perspectives. With reference to the Aarhus 2017 Secretariat's intention to strengthen the city's potential as a tourist destination, this study also focuses on the extent to which the volunteer role can be understood as involving place branding efforts.

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