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"Damn, Norway": Place Branding as a Function of Local Campaigns and Global Actors

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ABSTRACT

"Damn, Norway": Place Branding as a Function of Local Campaigns and Global Actors

Place branding has become a diffuse task. Various and uncoordinated actors in digital networks can contribute to what the public associates with a place. One of the key questions in nation and place branding is which messages become dominant in the local-global sphere and especially, *who* is responsible for these messages. Kaneva (2018), drawing on Baudrillard, has suggested that "we can see nation brands in a new light, namely, as *simulacra* which exist within a transnational media system for the creation, circulation and consumption of commodity-signs" (p. 633). This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of the role of global actors in place branding in a transnational digital media ecosystem and the mediating role local actors as transnational interlocutors.

This paper thus takes 1) a local–transnational approach, premised on the idea that place branding happens at the crossroads of local and global fields of power; and 2) a networked approach, reflecting today's hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2017). Empirically, the paper draws on a dataset of a full year of Twitter data on Norway, effectively a collection of all mentions of Norway on Twitter from June 2019 to June 2020; as previous literature has suggested, place branding is both event-oriented, and a cumulative effect. Moreover, Norway offers a useful case study because of its status as a relatively small and remote European country, making it less subject to traditional word-of-mouth and more reliant on mediated publicity. Network analysis is applied to find the key influencers in transnational Twitter networks. Using location and linguistic metadata, we identify "locals" and "internationals" – that is, actors inside and outside Norway – who contribute to the discourse around the country's image. To help flesh out the data, a content analysis is applied to the most popular tweets of key actors.

Preliminary findings suggest that online actors can transmit a sense of authenticity that is beneficial to place branding practitioners, but these online actors also present challenges. Specifically, the diverse nature of the online media ecosystem means that place branding is subject to various lenses – including those related to political economy. This can distort the way local developments are viewed, much to the frustration of local intuitional and non-institutional actors. The paper concludes with suggestions for how practitioners can navigate online networks.

KEYWORDS

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Sommario

Contributi

SEZIONI A 3T - LETTURE FUORI LUOGO

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SEZIONE FUORI LUOGO

Jessica Yarin Robinson[1]

"Damn, Norway": Place Branding as a Function of Local Campaigns and Global Actors[2]

Introduction

Place branding has become a diffuse task. Various and uncoordinated actors in transnational digital networks can now contribute to what the public associates with a place (Ingenhoff *et al.*, 2021). One of the key questions in place branding is which messages become dominant in the local–global sphere and especially, *who* is responsible for these messages. The aim of this paper is to better understand the role that global actors take – that is, those once considered the *targets* of campaigns – in crafting a place's brand in the transnational media ecosystem.

Previous research has considered the role of the public, mainly focusing on citizens as "ambassadors" (Braun *et al.*, 2013) and "co-creators" (Hereźniak, 2017). Yet so far less attention has been devoted to the role that international networks and foreign citizens play. It has also been suggested that the role of global media and news events is not sufficiently studied in place branding literature (Bolin, Ståhlberg, 2015; Rasmussen, Merkelsen, 2014). This paper thus takes 1) a transnational approach, premised on the idea that place brands are built at the crossroads of local and global fields of power; and 2) an events-conscious approach, reflecting the rapidity of today's social media environments (Bruns, Burgess, 2015).

The paper focuses on the social media platform Twitter, which has more than 200 million daily active users worldwide (Twitter Inc, 2021, p. 43). It is among the top sites used by place brand practitioners, both as a means for disseminating campaigns, and for monitoring user-generated content about a place (Ćurlin, 2019, p. 103). Twitter is also heavily used by celebrities, journalists, and other opinion leaders (Burgess, Baym, 2020, p. 4) and Twitter communication has been found to have a wider geographic reach than, for example, Facebook (Ghemawat, 2016, p. 40). Empirically, the paper draws on a year-long collection of what Crescentini *et al.* (2021) call "spatial–temporal Big Data" (p. 131). Twitter data on Norway was collected from June 2019 to July 2020, effectively all tweets mentioning the country in that time. As previous literature has suggested, place branding is a long-term, cumulative effort (Volcic, Andrejevic, 2011, p. 599). Moreover, Norway offers a useful case study because of its status as a relatively small and remote European country, making it less subject to traditional word-of-mouth from tourists and more reliant on mediated publicity.

Methodologically, computational text analysis methods are used to understand the topics and sentiments people associated with Norway. These discourses are further explored through the use of location and linguistic metadata to identify "locals" and "internationals" – that is, actors inside and outside Norway. To help flesh out the data, a qualitative analysis is applied to the tweets that drove temporal peaks in attention over the course of the year.

The findings suggest that, rather than challenging place brands, global publics may largely reinforce them. Counterintuitively, even news coded as "negative" may reflect positively on Norway, though users frequently use or exploit Norway's brand in discussions of cultural conflict and political economy. The single most popular tweet in the data is one in which a foreign user highlights the contrast between Norwegian and American welfare infrastructures, remarking "Damn, Norway". Thus, the paper contributes to the growing literature on how online media rapidly shape places through various lenses – including those that may distort the way local events are viewed. This is particularly relevant as attraction, aesthetics, and perception become more intertwined in international relations (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2022, p. 230), further blurring the line between politics and place branding.

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The article is structured in five sections. First, I investigate the existing knowledge on place branding, particularly in reference to social media, the involvement of the public, and the role of events. Following this, I set up the particular case and data studied here, and describe the methods used for analyzing that case. The results of the analyses are followed by a discussion and conclusion that summarize the contributions and limitations of the study.

1. Literature review

1.1 Place branding and 'networks of associations'

A place brand has been called the "defined DNA of a place, that is, its unique, distinctive character, marked by what we perceive as its personality and identity" (Kaefer, 2021, p. 7). It sets a city, country, or region apart from other places, or what Anholt (2007) has called "competitive identity". Place branding as a professional practice and concept emerges from marketing and tourism in the 1990s – billed as a necessity to compete for tourists, workers, and investment in a globalized world (Kaneva, 2018, p. 634; Kaefer, 2021). However, it has taken on a wider scope. "Place branding is increasingly viewed as a public management activity and governance process" writes Hereźniak (2017, p. 129), having implications for local development (Boisen *et al.*, 2018), and even citizens' perceptions of national identity (Aronczyk, 2013; Bolin, Ståhlberg, 2015; Hanna, Rowley, 2015). Thus, place branding goes beyond logos, slogans, and color palettes; it is meant to not just sell a locality, but to instill a mediated image of that place and its identity in the minds of people who have never visited the place (Boisen *et al.*, 2018; Szondi, 2008, p. 16).

Scholars of place and nation branding emphasize that places do not stand alone, but are part of a constellation of other locations, people, products, and corporate brands (Andéhn *et al.*, 2014; Hanna, Rowley, 2015, pp. 88-89; Medway *et al.*, 2015, p. 66). Braun *et al.* (2013) call this the "network of associations", formed through both cognitive and affective associations in the consumer's mind. These are networks that connect different visual, verbal, and embodied associations, contributing to a visceral understanding of a place (p. 19). Governance, exports, tourism, investment, culture (especially films, music, and books), and famous people all contribute to this network (Anholt, Hildreth, 2004). Scholars argue this network of associations creates a brand that can be transported from one arena to another (Pamment, Cassinger, 2018), such as when *Lord of the Rings* fans visit national parks in New Zealand, or as Bergvall writes, "in the heyday of Nokia … it was almost enough to be Finnish to get money from U.S. investors" (p. 195).

Prior to social media, scholars emphasized a top-down creation of these networks of associations. Kavaratzis (2004) theorized that place brands were formed through three forms of communication: the physical experience of a place (primary); marketing campaigns (secondary), and finally, news media and word-of-mouth, considered tertiary forms of image-formation. Szondi (2008) suggested place branders have "control over the message", and that this message "tends to be simple and concise and leaves little space for dialogue and interactions" (p. 16). Not surprisingly, then, the foreign target audience were considered "passive" (p. 13).

Present media dynamics are a different story. Particularly on social media, messages are no longer simple nor controlled, nor are audiences passive, as the next section explores.

1.2 Place branding and Twitter

Digital platforms have given people new means of interacting with place brands and presenting their own positive or negative views of a place – in a way that's accessible to a huge audience (Hanna, Rowley, 2015, pp. 92-93). This raises questions about the role of these new

technologies in crafting a place brand (Acharya, Rahman, 2016; Andéhn *et al.*, 2014; Govers, 2015). Barnett *et al.* (2017) suggest that social media are not only a source of insight into how the public perceives foreign places, but are now also part of the media environment that help *shape* the image itself (p. 38), potentially enabling "a more open and bottom-up" creation of place brands, writes Hereźniak (2017, p. 137). For example, Ingenhoff *et al.* (2021) find that on Twitter, independent opinion leaders "play a more dominant role than states or other political actors in creating and disseminating content related to country image" (p. 1).

Twitter lends itself to recreating people's networks of associations described by Braun *et al.* (2013), due to the largely public nature of communication on the site and the huge number of topics (Burgess, Baym, 2020). Twitter is distinctive from sites like Instagram and Flickr, which are foremost photo-sharing sites; while users can share photos on Twitter, it is foremost a text-based platform. This arguably allows a wider breadth of content, including from users who have not visited a place, as found by Tenkanen *et al.* (2017). They argue that while Instagram invites users to share personal experiences (and the photographic evidence), Twitter is for circulating "thoughts and ideas" (p. 5). Andéhn *et al.* (2014), in their study of Stockholm, Sweden, document how these thoughts and ideas connect to place brands. Through an analysis of concept "assemblages" (p. 7) – a semantic manifestation of Braun *et al.*'s (2013) network of associations – Andéhn *et al.* demonstrate the importance of not only topics related to travel ("hotel" and "museum") but also famous figures ("ABBA") and more indirect conceptual associations ("Stockholm Syndrome"). In this way, the authors argue Twitter serves as a highly public arena in which the meanings attributed to a place are generated by users (p. 2).

Practitioners have sought to harness this new form of electronic word-of-mouth through "co-creation" and "curatorial" approaches – that is, campaigns that invite public participation (Braun *et al.* 2013; Govers, 2015; Hanna, Rowley, 2015; Hereźniak, 2017). Examples include #IAMAmsterdam (Govers, 2015), the "B-Berlin project" (Hereźniak, 2017, p. 137), and the @sweden Twitter account, aka "the world's most democratic Twitter account" (Christensen, 2013). Hereźniak (2017) suggests that such efforts using new communication can make place branding more inclusive and increase the legitimacy of the brand (p. 136).

Yet scholars have noted Twitter and other social media have also enabled challenges to brand hegemonies by consumers who wish to "tell a different story about the brand to that which the brand owners seek to disseminate" (Hanna, Rowley, 2015, p. 93). For example, in response to Rio de Janeiro's branding efforts in advance of the 2016 Olympics, a group of residents launched a "counter-branding" campaign to draw attention to the lack of local infrastructure, with the slogan "Rio Olympic City – Champion of Urban Immobility" (Maiello, Pasquinelli, 2015, p. 122). Similarly, residents of Amsterdam have responded to "I Amsterdam" with "I AMsterdamned" (Braun *et al.*, 2013, p. 22). Moreover, it is not just the expected celebrities, journalists, and politicians who act as opinion leaders online. Research on Twitter finds that ordinary users are also able to exercise influence through viral moments and the native features of the platform (Andéhn *et al.*, 2014, p. 5).

Such developments have added weight to the line of literature that is critical of the underlying commercial values of place branding (Christensen, 2013; Pamment, Cassinger, 2018). Volcic and Andrejevic (2011) suggest place branding is a form of "commercial nationalism", turning national identity into a strategic asset (p. 614), and even constraining place identity so that it is always positive and profit-oriented (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 163). Kaneva (2018), drawing on Baudrillard, describes nation brands as "*simulacra* which exist within a transnational media system for the creation, circulation and consumption of commodity-signs" (p. 633). Scholars have critiqued the strategy of co-creation like the @sweden campaign as one that draws on the labor of citizens to help reproduce commercial symbols (Christensen, 2013; Lury, 2004; Pamment, Cassinger, 2018). They suggest further investigation should be done into the *un*coordinated circulation of images and associations by residents of a place (see also Acharya Rahman, 2016).

To this I would like to *non-residents* of a place. Word-of-mouth from friends, family and fellow

tourists has always been influential in the impression people have of foreign places (Kavaratzis, 2004). But now word-of-mouth is on transnational platforms (Kaneva, 2018). These platforms include review sites and travel blogs, but also sites not ostensibly oriented around travel, such as Twitter, but on which impressions of cities and nations become part of the ambient flow of information. This raises the question of how *foreign* publics contribute to the processes of place branding. The role of foreigners is hinted at to some degree in Andéhn *et al.*'s (2014) study of semantic assemblages and Ingenhoff *et al.* (2021) investigation of opinion leaders (p. 7). Even so, in much place branding literature foreign publics tend to still be viewed solely as *targets* of place branding campaigns.

Given that news coverage and media have also been traditionally considered part of word-of-mouth (Kavaratzis, 2004), it is also necessary to consider the temporal and sporadic nature of brand-formation. In the final section here, I discuss the role of news events.

1.3 Place branding and news events

Place branding literature has become more interested of late in the connections between place image and news events. One focus is mega-events like the Olympics, Eurovision, and the World Cup (Bolin, Ståhlberg, 2015; Govers, 2015; Maiello, Pasquinelli, 2015). These events draw attention to the place in question and practitioners often work closely with organizers to ensure that attention is positive. However, these are *planned* events. Here I am thinking of *un*planned events, which may be local or international in scope, that have bearing on how a place is perceived.

Scholars have taken up this thread through examinations of scandal, such as Bigi *et al.*'s (2011) study of Silvio Berlusconi's negative impact on Italy's brand. Recently, several studies have considered the crossroads of place branding and crisis communication, such as Rasmussen and Merkelsen's (2014) study on the Danish Cartoon Crisis, Vaxevanidou's (2017) investigation into Greece's rebranding following the Euro crisis, and Ketter's (2016) research on Nepal's efforts to restore its image after the 2015 earthquake. Often, crises are associated with negative sentiment, particularly if they fit national stereotypes and dominant media narratives (Avraham, Ketter, 2017, p. 785). However, Lee and Kim (2021) point out in their study on South Korea during the Covid-19 pandemic that crises, if handled well, can improve a country's image.

Twitter is especially attuned to such unplanned events (Bruns, Burgess, 2015; Mitchell *et al.*, 2021), allowing users to follow user-generated reactions in real time. Research demonstrates tweet volume is highly reactive to events, though these variations are not always in line with traditional news coverage. Govers' (2015) analysis of tweets about Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Bahrain found that diplomatic summits, while generating a large amount of press coverage, produced relatively little Twitter response, while protests generated enormous amounts of online attention. Twitter allows unfolding events to be easily blended with more stable associations with places. For example, Ingenhoff *et al.*'s study on #Austria, #Switzerland, and the #Netherlands found a third of the influencers' posts referred to what they called "functional" themes: the economic, political, and educational systems of the countries, including references to news events (pp. 6-7). However, research examining unplanned events and temporal aspects of place branding is still limited. To some degree, this may be due to a perception of place branding as a depoliticized economic endeavor (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 128; Szondi, 2008). Bolin and Ståhlberg (2015) argue place branding scholars should move away from *campaign analysis* – typically analysis of official materials and interviews with consultants – and consider the role of media and current events in shaping place brands (p. 3068; see also Rasmussen, Merkelsen, 2014), a thread I seek to take up in this study. In the next section, I detail the particular case and research questions to be investigated.

2. Case background: Norway, the brand

Norway is a northern European country of 5.4 million people. Despite its size, the country has amassed considerable soft power according to Nye, thanks to involvement in peace talks and the Nobel Peace Prize (2004, p. 112). Norway comes in at 11th place on Simon Anholt's Good Country Index, which ranks countries based on their contribution to the global good (Anholt, 2022) and in 2019, was No. 3 on the World Happiness Report (Helliwell *et al.*, 2019). In Norway's current 10-year place branding strategy document, planners propose focusing on Norway's dramatic landscapes, *friluftsliv* (outdoor activities), and its commitment to climate-friendly initiatives (Innovation Norway, 2021). These themes are reflected in posts by the country's official Twitter account, @visitnorway.

Norway is part of the Nordic Region, which also includes Finland, Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway comprise Scandinavia). While not an official administrative demarcation, the Nordic countries share similar culture, history, and strong welfare states. Pamment and Cassinger (2018) note that the Nordic countries have been especially attuned to nation branding, due in part to their size, remoteness, and wealth (pp. 565-566). Cassinger *et al.* (2021) write that the Nordics have a long tradition of associating their brand with the regional geography, akin to the Mediterranean countries, in which national identities are framed as "endogenous to a confined geographical or cultural context" (p. 257). Nordic countries have used a contrast between wild, snowy landscapes and modern innovation, progressiveness, and openness (Pamment, Cassinger, 2018, p. 566), acting as examples of the "power of these ideas" (Ingebritsen, 2006, p. 101).

Among these ideas is the "Nordic Model", which during the Cold War became known as a "third way" between capitalism and socialism (Ingebritsen, 2006, p. 101). The model has taken on other meanings in recent years, including in the United States where some politicians have argued for a Nordic-style health care system. At the same time, the Nordic region has also become a focal point for cultural conflicts arising from immigration (Colliver *et al.*, 2019; Robinson, Enli, 2022), which poses a challenge to the region's self-presentation as tolerant and open (Rasmussen, Merkelsen, 2012).

2.1 Research questions

In light of the previous literature on place branding, social media, and events – and taking inspiration from the research gaps identified by Acharya and Rahman (2016, pp. 308-309) – the following exploratory research questions are posed:

RQ_1 (A) What thematic "network of associations" does Norway evoke on Twitter, and (B) are the associations positive or negative?
RQ_2 What is the role of news events in bringing attention to Norway?
RQ_3 What are the roles of international users in contributing to Norway's brand on Twitter?

These questions will be answered using a year's worth of Twitter data on Norway and a mixed-methods approach, as detailed in the following section.

3. Data and Methods

A data collection of 5,726,683 tweets were captured in real time from June 13, 2019 to July 7, 2020 using the DMI-TCAT tool, which accesses Twitter's Streaming API (Borra Rieder, 2014). Tweets were captured using the case-insensitive keywords *norway, norwegian,* and *norwegians*. This method finds both words in hashtags (as employed by Ingenhoff, *et al.* 2021), as well as in the normal text of tweets and URLs in the tweets. English-language keywords were chosen because, as noted by Mocanu *et al.* (2013) English is the unofficial lingua franca of Twitter; it is also the language used by @visitnorway; and it is spoken by most Norwegians in addition to the Norwegian language (Education First, 2019).[3] Initially, the collection period was scheduled to be a year, from June 2019 to June 2020, but because of greater activity following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the period was allowed to run into July (see Leetaru, 2021, on the rise in Twitter use in 2020).

Given that this represents a relatively new area in place branding research (Bolin, Ståhlberg, 2015; Ingenhoff *et al.*, 2021), a mixed-methods approach was selected. The methods employed are as follows.

Geoparsing. Because this paper seeks to understand the role of non-residents, it was necessary to develop subsets of what Crescentini *et al.* (2021) call "spatial–temporal Big Data" (p. 131). The temporal dimension is already contained in the metadata of each tweet. The spatial dimension was found using geoparsing – that is, natural language matching of place names or toponyms (Crescentini *et al.*, 2021, p. 133).

First, all users providing a location in their profile were identified. Then, a set of "locals" was created by matching users' Location-field data against a list of Norwegian toponyms developed by Bråte (2021). Additional locals were added to the set by finding toponyms and Norwegian language markers (å, ø, and æ) in the Description and Realname fields, as well as selecting users with a Norwegian country domain (.no) in their personal URLs, if provided. Users who were not identified as locals using this method, but who did provide location data in their profile, were termed "internationals" (Users: N_{locals} = 38,209; $N_{internationals}$ = 1,689,756). Of course, there are undoubtedly locals in the international set and vice versa, but Bruns *et al.* (2014) have found geoparsing to be effective on an aggregate level for large amounts of Twitter data.

Topic modeling. The "network of associations" as described in the literature is operationalized through concepts identified through topic modeling. This is a computational text analysis method that uses unsupervised machine learning to identify "topics" or groups of words based on probabilistic combinations – that is, words that frequently occur together. The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model from the Scikit-learn Python library was applied (Pedregosa *et al.*, 2011). While computational, this method requires the researcher to have knowledge of the data in order to program the algorithm (including how many topics to select) and then interpret those topics (Müller, Guido, 2016).

It was discovered during testing that, due to the "rich get richer" dynamics of attention on Twitter (Lu *et al.*, 2014), keeping retweets resulted in topics based solely on the text of popular tweets. Duplicate text was therefore removed so that highly retweeted tweets did not overwhelm the results (URLs and @mentions were also removed). This decision means the results capture repeated themes and ideas, regardless of viral content. Viral content will be accounted for in the temporal analysis.

3 This is different from *geotagging*, a Twitter function that marks the latitude and longitude of a tweet. Users must opt in to this feature and only an estimated 1% of users have done so. Geoparsing is also different from *geocoding*, in which text data is matched to a list of places with known latitudes and longitudes. Since the purpose here is only to locate users in and outside of Norway, this level of precision was not necessary.

Computational sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis assesses the positive–negative valence of messages, based on word lists that have been assigned positive or negative connotations. Because positive sentiment is a key goal of branding, this method has also been used frequently in branding literature, including by Lee and Kim (2021) and Govers (2015). This paper uses the open-source Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner or VADER tool (Hutto, Gilbert, 2014), which is designed for social media text. In addition to English-language words, VADER's dictionary includes emoticons, emojis, acronyms, and common slang. VADER measures the degree of negativity and positivity, returning a compound score between -1.0 (negative) and 1.0 (positive), with 0 being neutral. Because of the computational toll of this calculation, a representative random sample of tweets is used (N_{sample}= 250,000).

Temporal analysis. The timeline of tweet volume was constructed in the analytics program Tableau using the date and time collected on each tweet. For the purpose of this analysis, the time-series data is grouped by daily frequency. The year is then divided into *ambient* and *peak* days, where a peak day has 30,000 or more tweets, or one standard deviation above the mean (M=14,742; SD=12,055); these peak days comprise about 20% of the data. For each peak day, a manual analysis of the underlying data is then performed: the tweet text for the peak day is arranged in descending order by frequency of occurrence – effectively identifying the most retweeted text. The top text or texts – up to 15% of the total tweets for that day – are then examined. The event is then qualitatively identified and labeled as 1) *planned* event, such as a promotional event; 2) *unplanned* news, such as a disaster; or 3) *viral* event, meaning it is the tweet itself that is the source of the peak. The original user(s) responsible for the top tweet(s) was/were also examined and labeled *local* or *international*.
The findings from these analyses and are presented in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1 Network of associations (RQ1-A)

The first task was to summarize the network of associations in the year's worth of data. After testing the topic modeling algorithm on a random subset, the number of topics was set to 15. Figure 1-A shows the output for the full set of data. As seen here, associations include the adjectives "good", "beautiful", "love", and "great". Tourism-related terms such as "cruise" and "travel" are also in several topics. Notably, *other* countries are also frequently mentioned – more so even than the capital city, Oslo. Further inspection of the underlying data indicates that Norway appears frequently with other countries for a number of reasons, including people tweeting out the results of their genetic ancestry tests, the ranking of happiest countries (the number 10 seems to be due to top 10 lists), and the comparative cost of social services in other countries.
Based on Ingenhoff *et al.*'s (2021) findings that foreign and domestic audiences have different interests, the topic modeling algorithm was also applied separately to subsets of tweets from the locals and internationals (figures 1-B and 1-C). In general, the topics are similar to those described above. However, the term "travel" for internationals is associated with "cruise", while for locals it's associated with "coronavirus", reflecting incoming vs. outgoing flows of tourism. (Although as we will see later, "cruise" may be only tangentially related to Norway.) We also see a difference in the associations to other countries: the internationals reference more far-flung countries like Australia and Canada, while the locals reference neighboring Finland, Sweden, and Denmark.

4.2 Sentiment (RQ1-B) and news events (RQ2)

To further understand the underlying sentiment in the data, the VADER tool was applied (Hutto, Gilbert, 2014). As foreshadowed by the positive words found in topic modeling, the average sentiment score was positive (M=0.271; SD=0.45), though locals (M=0.43; SD =0.39) were more positive than and internationals (M=0.26; SD=0.46), and had less variation than internationals.

Next, the temporal data for the entire year is graphed in Figure 2; labels summarize the findings of the manual analysis of peak days. The peak days are further detailed in Table 1. In Figure 2, the events have been labeled for type of event: *planned event, unplanned news event,* and viral *Twitter event*. Six out of the 14 events are Twitter events. One, the Christmas tree given to London by Norway, was labeled a hybrid between a planned event and an event native to Twitter: On the one hand, the tree itself is an annual tradition, honoring the role of the British in defeating the Nazis. However, the peak is largely due to Twitter activity making fun of Katie Hopkins for her comments about the tree. As noted in the timeline, in two cases, the peak is due to several events (see Dec. 1, 2019 and June 17, 2020).

To understand the role of sentiment over time, the results of the VADER analysis are graphed against the time-series data in Figure 3. As suggested by the cumulative results above, we see most of the content is classified as neutral or positive. However, as suggested by previous literature (Govers, 2015) peak days tend to be more negative (M=0.19; SD=0.52) than ambient days (M=0.28; SD=0.44), though there's much more variation on peak days. Interestingly, the most negative day, Oct. 22, 2019, is not a peak day; on this day, an armed man and woman hijacked an ambulance in Oslo and injured several pedestrians, including a family with children. The man later testified that he planned to deliver narcotics. However, at the time, Rita Katz, a terrorism analyst in the U.S. with 60-thousand followers, tweeted:

> #BREAKING Both alleged perpetrators of today's attack in #Oslo #Norway have been arrested, w/ police confirming both the man and woman were known to have ties to far-right extremism. A shotgun and Uzi were found with the suspects.

The VADER tool gave this tweet a score of -0.863.

4.3 Role of international users (RQ3)

Finally, to better understand the role of international users in the flows of information about Norway, the time-series data is segmented between the locals and internationals subsets. In Figure 4, the daily tweet volumes have been calculated as percentages of each group's tweets, in order to account for the fact that there are many more international users than local users. Figure 4 shows that international users are largely responsive to events, while the local users have a more constant level of tweeting about Norway, at least in English. The implications for this will be discussed further in the Discussion section.

A. All data

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Topic 1	did	right	europe	italy	does	spain	france	switzerland	ireland	germany
Topic 2	countries	way	really	iceland	switzerland	better	denmark	sweden	eu	canada
Topic 3	time	live	years	10	2019	home	air	better	2020	year
Topic 4	think	today	yes	better	years	got	time	uk	country	10
Topic 5	oslo	going	government	beautiful	2020	travel	home	2019	work	better
Topic 6	english	news	make	canada	ireland	10	better	world	read	denmark
Topic 7	finland	sweden	uk	germany	denmark	2020	australia	netherlands	canada	france
Topic 8	good	need	look	better	work	like	really	want	time	uk
Topic 9	people	day	free	better	work	home	want	country	live	sweden
Topic 10	like	sweden	denmark	better	countries	country	iceland	want	canada	switzerland
Topic 11	know	oil	coronavirus	said	better	uk	did	country	new	want
Topic 12	country	world	cruise	got	read	work	better	best	2020	home
Topic 13	just	wood	man	better	read	got	want	like	love	home
Topic 14	new	love	year	want	best	2020	coronavirus	better	10	time
Topic 15	eu	great	say	come	travel	uk	switzerland	better	want	iceland

B. Internationals

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Topic 1	country	year	today	live	uk	english	best	10	eu	countries
Topic 2	time	think	right	need	news	2019	best	countries	uk	10
Topic 3	want	years	really	did	got	better	home	work	best	countries
Topic 4	sweden	denmark	finland	countries	germany	canada	france	netherlands	italy	australia
Topic 5	just	world	great	does	russia	ireland	best	countries	canada	look
Topic 6	good	know	day	eu	say	deal	come	best	canada	uk
Topic 7	like	way	beautiful	iceland	switzerland	countries	eu	look	best	uk
Topic 8	new	oil	love	wood	2020	look	europe	best	australia	canada
Topic 9	people	cruise	travel	coronavirus	10	make	line	best	countries	2020
Topic 10	oslo	free	going	air	said	man	read	government	best	countries

C. Locals

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Topic 1	like	world	years	er	week	look	winter	really	old	countries
Topic 2	live	sweden	hope	thank	lot	northern	really	countries	time	great
Topic 3	work	travel	norge	coronavirus	news	use	denmark	sweden	winter	countries
Topic 4	just	new	think	really	got	week	old	make	say	countries
Topic 5	people	best	happy	want	did	days	countries	big	really	know
Topic 6	today	day	know	going	make	2019	really	yes	happy	old
Topic 7	love	english	need	10	beautiful	read	really	old	know	good
Topic 8	way	right	home	og	say	på	oil	better	im	old
Topic 9	year	country	2020	government	uk	finland	sweden	denmark	countries	old
Topic 10	oslo	time	good	come	great	got	free	really	week	old

Figure 5. Topic modelling ($N_{A\text{-}tweets}$=5,726,683; $N_{B\text{-}tweets}$= 3,664,740; $N_{C\text{-}tweets}$=209,066)

Table 1. Peak days analysis

Date	Event
Aug. 11, 2019	An armed man opens fire in a mosque near Oslo
Oct. 5, 2019	A photo of Stryn, Norway, goes viral
Oct. 11, 2019	The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali by the Norwegian Nobel Committee
Nov. 22, 2019	An anti-Islam group clashes with counter protesters during a Quran-burning in Sandefjord
Nov. 24, 2019	U.S. President Donald Trump tweets that he's appointed the ambassador to Norway to be Navy secretary general.
Dec. 1, 2019	Several landscape photos from Norway go viral (See Figure 6) Also on this day, a far-right commentator in Norway tweets about the Norwegian government funding the conversion of church buildings to mosques
Dec. 6, 2019	Far-right British commentator Katie Hopkins accuses London's Muslim mayor of erecting an ugly Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square, not knowing that it's an annual gift from Norway. A number of tweets pointing out her error go viral.
Dec. 22, 2019	A tweet praising Norwegian drug prevention posters goes viral. "Look at these drug prevention posters from Norway. That's it. That's how you freaking stop people from dying", the tweet reads. (The posters explain what to do in case of an overdose rather than trying to dissuade people from using drugs.)
Dec. 27, 2019	A Norwegian woman is asked to leave India after protesting a citizenship law that excludes Muslims
March 13, 2020	Trump tweets about halting cruises (including Norwegian Cruise Line) due to Covid-19
March 16, 2020	A viral tweet shows a screenshot of a Norwegian university asking students abroad to come home, "especially if you are staying in a country with poorly developed health services and infrastructure and/or collective infrastructure, for example the USA", the message reads. The American user who tweets the screenshot comments, "Damn, Norway". (See Figure 5.)
May 31, 2020	Six days after George Floyd is murdered, an account with around 2,000 followers tweeted "the uk is racist. italy is racist. france is racist. norway is racist. every country is racist. if you say 'but my country isn't racist' you're choosing to ignore the obvious racism that is present within every country. no country is innocent"
June 4, 2020	A landslide in Alta, Norway, destroys eight houses. The disaster is captured on video.
June 17, 2020	An account called @Locat1ons tweets an image of waterfalls supposedly in Norway. (As replies to the tweet point out, the waterfalls are in Iceland.) Also on this day, a fan account for the K-pop group Stray Kids tweets the countries where the band is topping the iTunes charts, which includes Norway

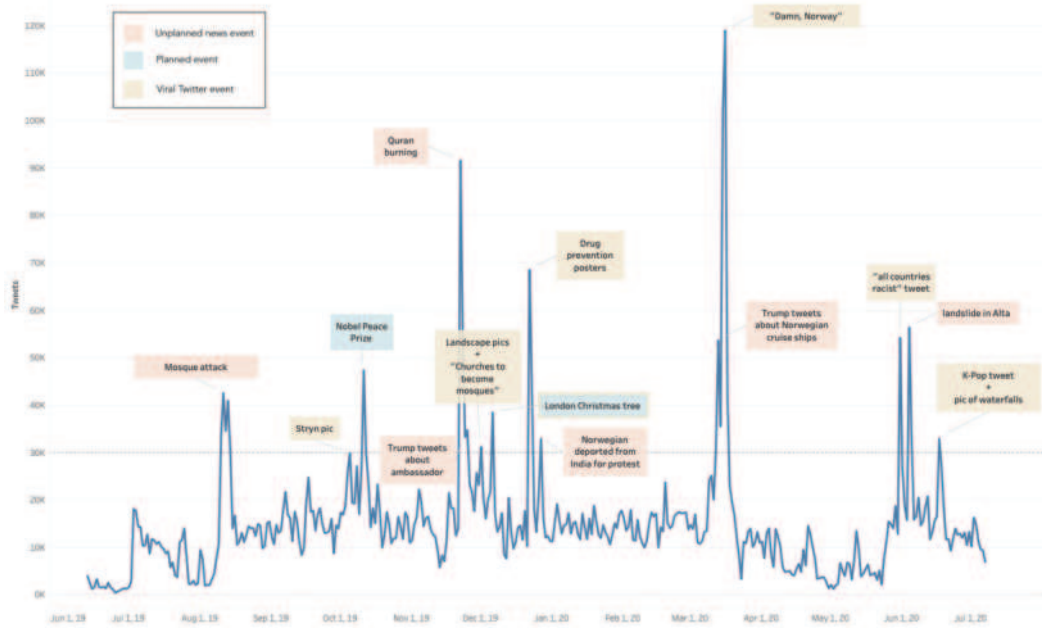

Figure 6. Timeline of tweets about Norway, with peaks labeled ($N_{tweets\text{-}all\ data}$=5,726,683)

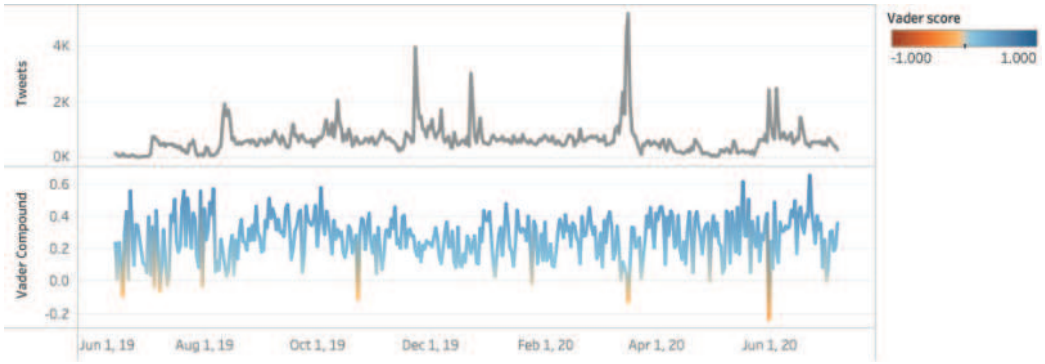

Figure 7. Sentiment timeline ($N_{tweets\text{-}sample}$=250,000)

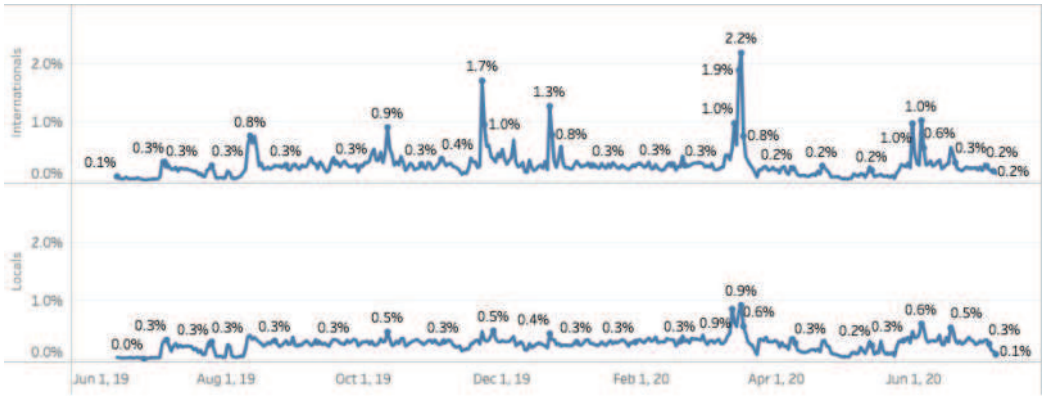

Figure 8. Timeline: Locals vs. Internationals ($N_{tweets\text{-}internationals}$=3,664,740; $N_{tweets\text{-}locals}$=209,066)

4.4 Summary of main findings

Regarding the networks of associations formed around Norway on Twitter (RQ1-A), the results indicate that these include happiness and high quality of living. As the sentiment analysis confirms, these are largely positive associations (RQ1-B). Although travel related concepts are an element of the network of associations, they are not the dominant theme. As has been suggested in the literature (Andéhn *et al.*, 2014; Hanna, Rowley, 2015; Medway *et al.*, 2015), Norway is also connected to other brands, for example other Nordic countries. However, there is a difference between how locals and internationals configure the network of associations with other nations, with internationals making not just geographic connections, but also connections related to political economy, such as Switzerland and the Netherlands, and more distant Canada and Australia. Regarding the role of news events (RQ2), six of the 14 peak days were driven by news events (see Figure 2), although it could be argued that Trump's appointing a new secretary of the Navy (Nov. 25) and halting cruise ships (March 13) were only tangentially connected to the country of Norway. Moreover, only two peaks were responses to *planned* events, but as noted, the London Christmas tree is a debatable case. The rest of the peaks were driven by viral events native to Twitter. A border case is the drug prevention posters on March 16; they were released online in English by a drug reform advocacy group in Norway and are presumably a case of intended virality.
Finally, regarding the role of internationals (RQ3), the findings show users outside of Norway play a bigger role than locals in circulating content about Norway - not surprising, given their numbers – but also in *creating* content. Of tweets analyzed on the 14 peak days, only two of the peaks appeared to be driven by content from a user in Norway. The first was a tweet on Dec. 6, 2019, about churches being converted to mosques; the second was a tweet on June 4, 2020 featuring video of the landslide in Alta.[4] Most important, Norway's official branding account @visitnorway did not drive any peaks. In fact, of the most retweeted accounts in the data, @visitnorway ranks 50th.

In the following section, I will discuss what these findings mean for the way social media, and especially foreign users on social media, contribute to the circulation of brand associations, as well as the role of events these constructions.

5. Discussion: Networks of associations, created by globalized networks

Place brands – their reputation and image – have traditionally been seen as the outcomes of place branding campaigns (Kavaratzis, 2004; Szondi, 2008). However, cause and effect are blurred online. The brand is not only the outcome that a place evokes in the mind of the public; the public can turn the image they have in their mind into pictures and text, further shaping the place's identity (Barnett *et al.* 2017). However, the findings suggest that online, the interpretations of the consumer are potentially more wide-reaching than the messages of the official marketers. This throws into question whether consumer word-of-mouth is still a "tertiary" source of communication (Kavaratzis, 2004).
Overall, the findings highlight the wide-ranging nature of networks of associations made possible on social media, and especially Twitter. This is hinted at in the three-month study of Stockholm by Andéhn *et al.* (2014), but further underlined in the year-long collection of data presented here. Associations include those related to tourism to Norway, yes, but also the country's welfare state structures, quality of life, and similarities to other countries – and not just nearby countries, as emphasized by regionalist approaches to place branding (Cassinger *et al.*, 2021, p. 257)

4 The official @NobelPrize account was also highly retweeted on Oct. 11 when the Peace Prize was announced, but this account is run by the Nobel Foundation in Sweden.

Importantly, attention to Norway is also highly driven by *unplanned* events – both news events, as well as viral moments native to Twitter. A fifth of the tweets about Norway in a year occurred during the 14 peak days. And the most visible tweets were largely created and recirculated by the international audience. Yet while peak days were more negative than ambient days, they were still positive on net. This is in contrast with the negative effects of news described in crisis-focused literature (Avraham, Ketter, 2017; Bigi *et al.*, 2011; Vaxevanidou, 2017). International users shared news stories that reflected positively on Norway, even as they may reflect negatively on another country (the United States, India) or a person (Katie Hopkins). In this way, the content is largely consistent with Norway's stated branding goals – even when, counter-intuitively, the underlying sentiment is negative.

As an example of several of these findings, let's take a closer look at the "Damn, Norway" tweet, which prompted the biggest peak in traffic in the period studied. (See Figure 5.) The tweet was a screenshot of a Facebook message from the Norwegian university NTNU in Trondheim. For NTNU, this was a case of what Brabham (2012) has called "unexpected publics"; and in fact, the university later edited the post. The story behind this tweet is revealing of how word-of-mouth works online. In personal communication with the American Twitter user who wrote the viral tweet, I was told by him that the screenshot came from a Mexican friend studying at a college in Molde, Norway, who had himself discovered the screenshot on Reddit. "I tweeted it, not thinking much of it. I think some famous person retweeted it very early, which was why it took off," wrote the tweet's author. The attention was unplanned, in other words.

The sentiment of this tweet was coded as negative by VADER (-0.40) due to the word "damn". And for the United States' brand it indeed probably is negative. However, in pointing out the differences in welfare state services between the U.S. and Norway, the tweet in effect highlights one of the long-time selling points of Norway, and its "power of ideas" (Ingebritsen, 2006, p. 101). Thus, events spur moments of activity and attention, and also moments of *reinforcing* Norway's place brand.

Other tweets have a similar theme. The tweets making fun of Katie Hopkins highlight Norway's role as a diplomat. The tweet about drug prevention posters highlights Norway's progressive approach to social problems. And of course, the tweets with photos of Norwegian landscapes and wooden homes highlight the picturesque qualities of the country.

From a critical perspective, this might be a further sign of the way place brands have become simulacra (Kaneva, 2018): they are reproduced by audiences who have never been to the place. As Pamment and Cassinger's (2018) argue, place brands become media objects that can be transformed and transcoded from one context to another (p. 562; see also Lury, 2004). When Norway's tree is besmirched on Twitter, international users jump in to defend Norway and the history of its arboreal gift. "Norway gifts the United Kingdom a Christmas tree every year to say thank you for supporting them in defeating Nazism 75 years ago," one highly retweeted tweet explains, "It's a staple of Anglo-Norwegian relations and history." The dustup in effect helps circulate a brand, enlisting both locals and international as "ambassadors" for an identity Norway has sought to convey (Braun *et al.*, 2013).

At the same time, it is not always clear the network of associations about Norway, though positive, are maintaining a *competitive* identity, or at least not a unique and specific identity (Anholt, 2007). Often Norway acts as a stand-in for a political ideal – a happy, wealthy, and wise country with picturesque landscapes and free college tuition. Norway is deployed as a useful symbol in messages that are more about politics in *other* countries than it is about Norway, such as the "Damn, Norway" tweet, when the commentary is more on the U.S. In another example, a British user tweeting about the 2019 happiness rankings writes:

> Top 3 happiest countries in the world: 1. Finland 2. Norway 3. Denmark. All three use a political model very similar to Labour's current manifesto with sensible policies like public owned railways, decent housing for all free education. Just saying

This message is more about the U.K. than Norway. In these cases, Norway becomes a political tool in a separate national debate. To borrow from Aronczyk (2013), Norway's brand becomes an "amorphous figure" (p. 169), its competitive identity turned into a generic product enmeshed with other countries' politics.

Finally, the results also make clear the relevance of cultural conflict to Norway's network of associations: four of the peak days revolved around Muslims and Islam. This may reflect the major events of the year – the 2019 attack on a mosque was certainly big news – but also reflects what international users found salient. As Manfredi-Sánchez (2021) writes, the present moment is characterized by a move toward "deglobalization" – diminished global cooperation and increased resistance to outsiders. The rise of anti-immigration sentiment in the Nordic region, whose brand is openness, has attracted global interest (Robinson, Enli, 2022). Thus, attacks on Muslims and Islam may be particularly attention-grabbing exactly because they *challenge* Norway's brand. Or, more perniciously, for those sympathetic to nativist politics, these events may represent a threat to their perception of Norway as a Christian, ethnically homogenous country. As the right-wing commentator remarking on the conversion of churches to mosques (Dec. 1 peak) wrote, "Looks like we are getting new culture!" Because the Nordic region relies so heavily on its mediated reputation (as opposed to the direct experience of tourists) this presents a delicate set of associations for practitioners to navigate (Rasmussen, Merkelsen, 2012).

Figure 9. The most popular tweet (source: Twitter). See Table 1 for the complete text.

Figure 10. Popular tweet (source: Twitter)

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how foreigners, the former *targets* of place branding campaigns, have become *participants* in place branding. Drawing on a year's worth of tweets mentioning Norway or Norwegians, the study took a spatial–temporal approach to place branding. Computational and qualitative methods were used to identify the location of users, and analyze the topics, sentiment, and temporal patterns of the attention to Norway. Though some previous literature suggests that the diffuse and chaotic nature of social media pose a challenge to the hegemony of place brands (Hanna, Rowley, 2015; Maiello, Pasquinelli, 2015), the main findings here are that the "network of associations" around Norway were generally positive, and bought into Norway's official branding strategy. However, international users are much more responsive to news events and viral tweets than local users, providing more support for the idea that foreign and domestic audiences have different agendas (Ingenhoff *et al.*, 2021). In particular, the international users may be particularly interested in using Norway's brand as a symbol in political debates.

The study contributes to the understanding of how digital global publics participate in shaping place brands, particularly for small countries, and underlines the importance of considering news coverage and unplanned events in place branding studies (Bolin, Ståhlberg, 2015). For practitioners, the good news is that foreigners may help reinforce the place brand rather than challenge it; the bad news is that most of the peaks in attention could not have been anticipated.

Particularly on Twitter, place branders must be nimble enough to navigate huge fluctuations in response to unplanned news events or viral tweets, often created by users with little connection to Norway.

The empirical material presented here is limited to one country and one social media platform. Moreover, the country is a wealthy one in a region with a tradition of place branding, predisposing it to a positive image. Further research could investigate other platforms and other countries. Instagram and TikTok, for example, are more visual and less news-oriented than Twitter, and may reflect different networks of association. The literature on social media and place branding also lacks documentation of the cumulative effect of online chatter on nations' global reputations, if any. Finally, it is interesting that Norwegians' tweets were overall more positive than internationals – at least in *English*. It may be that locals are more negative in their national language, preferring to put forward a happier face to a global audience. The dual role that locals occupy online, as both citizens and de facto brand ambassadors, warrants future inquiry.

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