



This is a draft chapter/article. The final version is available in A Modern Guide to Creative Economies edited by Roberta Comunian, King's College London, UK, Alessandra Faggian, Gran Sasso Science Institute, Italy, Jarna Heinonen, University of Turku, Finland and Nick Wilson, King's College London, UK, published in 2022, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd

<https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/a-modern-guide-to-creative-economies-9781789905489.html>

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The authors acknowledge the support of the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Framework Programme under [grant agreement number 822314].

Experiences of belonging to the creative economy: Narratives from Northern micro-entrepreneurs

Lenita Nieminen and Arja Lemmetyinen

Abstract

The present study reports on how creative and cultural micro-entrepreneurs experience belonging to the local creative economy or whether they identify more with the creative place brand. Furthermore, the study focuses on the micro-entrepreneurs' social embeddedness in the entrepreneurial process comprising social structures and entrepreneurial networks. We conducted phenomenological interviews with four entrepreneurs representing the areas of heritage, art, design, and creative services and utilized Wenger's community of practice approach as a lens in the narrative analysis. Theoretically, the study contributes to both place branding and entrepreneurship research. The narratives of micro-entrepreneurs in a province in Finland portray an ecosystem that can be a precursor for a place or city becoming a creative place brand, but, at the point at which they were interviewed, the micro-entrepreneurs did not associate themselves or their enterprises with the creative place brand.

There has not been as extensive a focus on social structures and entrepreneurial networks in the context of culture and creative business as there has in other entrepreneurial contexts. When analyzing how the entrepreneurs perceived their sense of belonging to the creative economy it was obvious that entrepreneurship as such was not the primary feature defining their identity. The micro-entrepreneurs did not refer to themselves as entrepreneurs but described themselves as artists or art lovers.

Keywords: creative economy, place brand, belonging, ecosystem, micro-entrepreneur

Introductions

This study contributes to place branding theory (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019; Maheshwari et al., 2011; Pasquinelli, 2010) and entrepreneurship research on the social embeddedness of an entrepreneurial process (McKeever et al. 2015; Jack et al. 2010; 2008; Jack and Anderson 2002) combining place branding with micro-entrepreneurs' narratives on the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to the local creative ecosystem. Prior studies have explored the interface between branding theory and marketing/entrepreneurship to investigate how the corporate branding process influences emerging entrepreneurial opportunities (Gaddefors, 2005). A recent study focuses on the relationships between the creative economy and place branding, thus combining the phenomenon of the creative economy with a specific location and creating a city as a brand (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019). Their study does not perceive the local creative ecosystem of the micro-entrepreneurs as a brand and instead argues that the ecosystem could be regarded as a precursor that may evolve into a brand of an ecosystem, place, area, or city. The prerequisite for an

ecosystem to evolve into a brand is that the actors within it feel an affinity for the place brand (Lemmettyinen & Go, 2010).

Creative and cultural industries (CCIs) have recently been researched in connection to entrepreneurship (Artico & Tamma, 2018; Konrad, 2018; Borin et al., 2018; Schulte-Holthaus, 2018) alongside their value in promoting change and development (Goldberg-Miller & Kooyman, 2018), including regional and destination development (Mikic, 2018; Eisenbeis, 2018). However, there has not been any extensive research on cooperative networks and ecosystems in the context of culture and creative industries (CCIs). Typically, ecosystems cross industry boundaries and connect various types of business and innovation networks in an exchange that is embedded in an institutional and socio-technical environment (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017). The ecosystem approach, as an extension of the concept of network management, views the issue as a question of the broader societal system environment in which the business networks are embedded (Möller & Halinen, 2017). How to create suitable conditions and an ecosystem favorable for start-ups and entrepreneurs, especially focusing on how to best prepare a region for a future within the creative economy, and how to become less dependent on the automotive and machinery sectors have been topical issues in regions like Stuttgart (Eisenbeis, 2018). A start-up ecosystem in any region has every chance of success if it is based on the principles of smart selection, smart connection, smart capital, and smart culture (Eisenbeis, 2018). The city branding process focusing on stakeholder engagement in the post-industrial cities of Sheffield in the United Kingdom and Essen in Germany has been the topic of research (Henninger et al., 2016). In the context of country branding, stakeholders' engagement with a place brand identity has been explored (Helmi et al., 2019).

The purpose of the present study is to discuss and illustrate how micro-entrepreneurs in CCIs engage with the creative economy. Our research question is: *What characterizes a micro-entrepreneur's sense of belonging in relation to the creative economy?* The concept of the

local creative ecosystem in the context of the creative economy enables connections not only between people but also between their ideas and practices as part of the connected communities (Comunian, 2011). The current research applies the concept of the local creative ecosystem (Comunian, 2011) to examine micro-entrepreneurs in CCIs and the local creative ecosystems they are supposed to be part of. In the analysis, we utilize Wenger's community of practice approach as a lens to illustrate how micro-entrepreneurs in CCIs are engaged with the creative economy. Recent context research emphasizes the more subjective features of contexts and suggests that entrepreneurs actively enact or create contexts (Welter et al., 2019; Welter, 2011). For example, a longitudinal ethnographic study (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2017) shows how context determines what becomes entrepreneurial.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we introduce the reader to the concepts of creative industries and the creative economy and present research on the creative economy from the perspectives of entrepreneurship and ecosystems. The relationship between the creative economy and a place brand and entrepreneurial networks and embeddedness is discussed in the theory section of the study. In the methodology of the study, the context of the research and the data analysis are described. Finally, the narratives of the micro-entrepreneurs are presented, and the chapter ends with a discussion, implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

From an unhappy city to a creative place brand?

Creative economy and place brand

Cultural entrepreneurs operate in the complex landscape of the creative industries¹ in which their integrated development, including place branding, contributes to the efficacious utilization of their physical, economic, and social assets. Accordingly, the shift of power from large media enterprises to networks of adaptive local entrepreneurs who create value propositions in collaboration with their audiences signals a change (Go et al., 2015) that could bring a new kind of entrepreneurship to the field of creative industries called ‘everyday’ or ‘mundane’ entrepreneurship (Dodd et al. 2021; Welter et al., 2017).

Focusing on the relationship between the creative economy and place branding combines the phenomenon of the creative economy with a specific location and, therefore, creates a city as a brand (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019). This follows the stream of research that investigates the influence of the creative sector on the development of cities (Boccella & Salerno, 2016; Cooke & Lazzeretti, 2008); studies focused on place branding and its importance for local development (Pasquinelli, 2010; Maheshwari et al., 2011); and studies concentrated on the process of place branding with the use of the presence of creative industries (Evans, 2015; Mengi et al., 2017). The authors of these studies see the creative city as an entity with a well-developed creative sector (*economy*), a dynamic creative community (*society*), and well-designed strategies to support creativity (*policy*).

Following the reasoning above (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski 2019), a creative place brand acts as a kind of umbrella brand. A local creative ecosystem, introduced originally by Comunian (2011), may, in turn, be seen as a pre-stage of a creative place brand, to which the micro-entrepreneurs in creative industries attach themselves. In other words, the entrepreneurs feel an affinity for the creative economy, but not necessarily for a specific place (brand) or umbrella brand. Local creative ecosystems play a role in ensuring creative industries flourish.

¹ The UNCTAD classification depicts four broad groups of creative industries: *heritage*, including cultural sites and traditional cultural expressions; *arts*, including performing and visual arts; *media*, including publishing and audio-visuals; and *functional creations*, including new media, design, and creative services. (UNCTAD. *Creative Economy Report 2008. The Challenge of Assessing the Creative Economy: towards Informed Policy-making*. United Nations.)

We suggest there is a relationship between the creative economy and a creative place brand, and the role of the micro-entrepreneurs' engagement with a creative economy as a prerequisite of the creative place brand cannot be neglected.

In our interpretation of the literature of place brands and creative ecosystems, the *creative place brand* (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019) is the most developed form of the creative economy and is preceded by the *local creative ecosystem* (Comunian, 2011). Interestingly, Magala (2011) considers places that are distinctive but do not yet have a unique selling point or that are unique enough to differentiate them from other “unhappy cities.” Further, Magala (2011, p. 16) explains city branding as the cultivation of imagined identities—with an emphasis on the creative input of artists, thinkers, researchers, and designers playing a role in the place brand reputation game: “Without a film festival most people would never have heard of Cannes; without pilgrims, of Rome, Mecca or Jerusalem.” According to Magala (2011), cities have a distinct brand, hence Czestochowa in Poland with its Black Madonna is different from Cannes with its beaches and film festival.



Figure 1 From unhappy cities to the creative place brand

How the local creative ecosystems and creative place brand are related is illustrated in Figure 1, which combines the concepts of the creative place brand introduced by Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski (2019), the concept of the local creative ecosystem by Comunian (2011), and the idea of unhappy cities presented by Magala (2011).

Entrepreneurial networks and embeddedness

Our research question investigates what characterizes a micro-entrepreneur's engagement with the creative economy and its local creative ecosystem. This kind of approach, focusing on social structures and entrepreneurial networks, has not been as extensive in the context of culture and creative business as in other entrepreneurial contexts. Earlier research emphasizes that the content and nature of networks and the nature of interactions between network actors (for example, what goes on in and between ties) should be considered more extensively (Jack, 2010; Jack et al., 2010). Jack et al., (2010) claim that networking is not just about resource acquisition but is also about softer, socialized issues, such as social learning and confidence building through interdependence and the sharing of experience.

The often-cited study on the effects of embeddedness on the entrepreneurial process by Jack and Anderson (2002) confirms that being socially embedded not only enables knowledge, contacts, advice, information, and support but also creates opportunities, thus shaping and sustaining business. They showed that the opportunities existing in a local milieu were not available to those not embedded. It seems that place becomes something of value for entrepreneurs, offering something very special, valuable and rare that is hard to imitate and substitute—and that is a source of sustainable competitive advantage (McKeever et al., 2015).

It is evident that embeddedness is a reciprocal process of becoming accepted in the local context and learning about and accepting the local rules (Jack & Anderson, 2002; McKeever et al., 2015). Similarly, Jack et al. (2008) perceive entrepreneurs as a product of their social

environment and opportunities as influenced by social interaction. McKeever et al. (2015) talk about “local belonging” and “community belonging” that enable community members to understand the nature and habits of their place and how to “play the same game.” This can only be achieved by knowing the local context and the rules of engagement.

This paper explores the ways in which micro-entrepreneurs describe their sense of belonging to the creative economy. In the language of Wenger (1998), engagement with the locality means that individuals accept or reject opportunities to belong to a community of practice depending on how well those opportunities fit with their sense of self and how they interpret what they do. The newcomer participates in practices valued by a community by mimicking others and picking up the jargon, behavior, and norms of a social group (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), thus attaining expertise in doing, knowing, and being in a community of practice. A lack of identification with a community or a lack of access to participation may also lead to marginalization, conflict, or exclusion from a social group.

Figure 2 illustrates the framework of the study presenting how belonging to a social community integrates micro-entrepreneurs’ experiences (the micro-level) to the local creative place and its place brand (the meso-level).

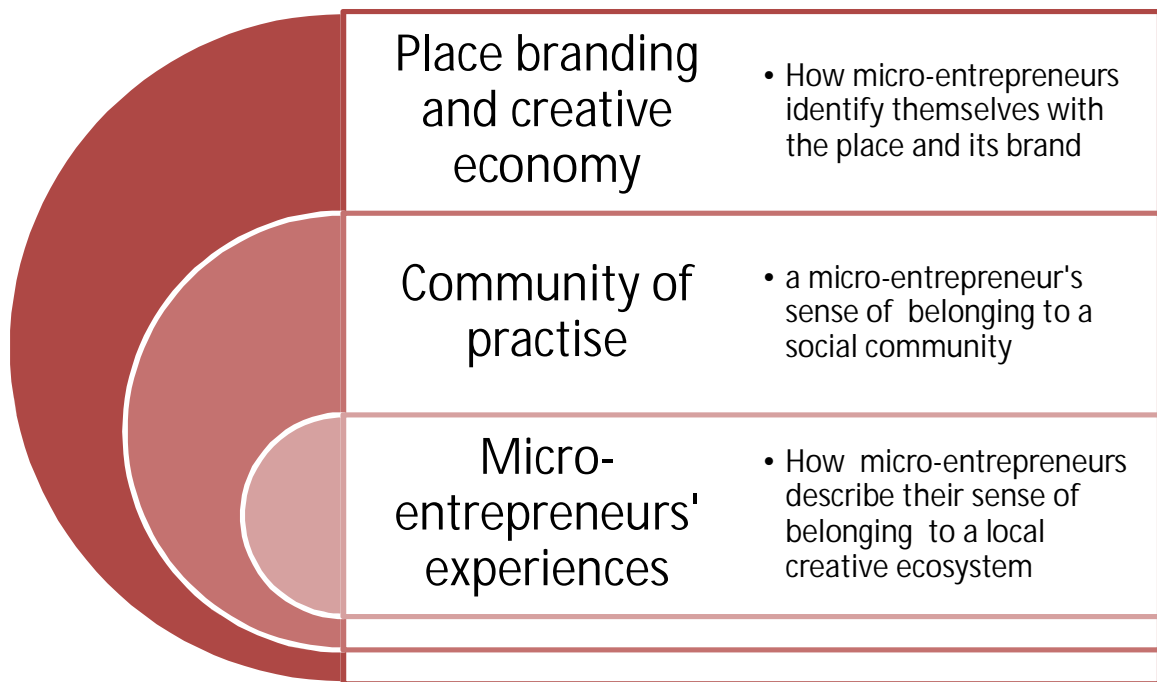


Figure 2 The theoretical framework of the study

In the following section we present a context of our study and findings of the narrative analysis of how the micro-entrepreneurs describe their sense of belonging to a local creative ecosystem viewing it as a social community in which the entrepreneurs participate.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is ideal when a holistic view of the phenomenon is required (Yin, 2009). To study the nature of networks and network dynamics, more qualitative, longitudinal, and multi-method work is encouraged. Jack (2010) and Jack et al. (2010) among others claim that ethnography, participant observation, interviews, and surveys provide a mechanism to study networks in context and appreciate how networks operate and how they are formed, created, maintained, and utilized and also to recognize the impact of network emergence, change, and evolution. There is also a need for qualitative studies to develop ideas about entrepreneurship and the market/entrepreneurship interface, where qualitative studies allow the researcher to

take account of specific characteristics such as the complex, interactive, and personal nature of entrepreneurship (Gaddefors, 2005).

Context of the Research

Over the period 2009–2019, we followed the “emancipation” of the creative economy in a rural province in southwest Finland. During this period, cooperation projects with local cultural and creative actors included workshops and seminars with international expert speakers; developmental projects, and student projects within the field; and practitioners contributing to classroom teaching and seminars. The initiative offered the authors access to longitudinal and intense interactions with creative and cultural entrepreneurs who were self-employed, freelancers, artists, or other cultural workers and non-governmental organizations representing a wide range of CCIs. The situation also allowed us to follow Chalmers and Shaw’s proposal “to adopt methodological resources that will facilitate development of a more dynamic and context-including programme of research” (2017, p. 20) and to reduce the gap between research findings and the lived world. For this study, we conducted phenomenological interviews (Cope 2005) with four entrepreneurs in CCIs representing heritage, art, design, and creative services. Formal and informal conversations and several encounters at various events with entrepreneurs and also our observations have inevitably influenced the narratives.

We perform a narrative analysis, in which “the researcher organizes and interprets empirical data that describe some more or less consisting events, happenings and actions in a way that they construct one or more narratives that will be interpreted and discussed” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 221). This kind of analysis is based on a dichotomy that distinguishes between the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis (Bruner, 1986; Polkinhorne, 1995). The first involves researchers collecting stories told by people and then analyzing them using

various techniques. In the case of narrative analysis, the focus, as in this study, is on a narrative itself as a mode of analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 221).

Analysis of the study

In our narrative analysis, we apply Wenger's (1998) framework on belonging to a community of practice. The community of practice approach is the understanding that we identify with some communities strongly and not at all with others and define ourselves by what we are not as well as by what we are—by the communities we do not belong to as well as those we do. These relationships change, and we also move from one community to another, and in doing so, we carry a fragment of each with us. We can also be a member of many communities at the same time (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Wenger (1998) presents three forms of belonging—engagement, imagination, and alignment—and suggests that they work best in combination. *Engagement* requires authentic access to and interaction with other participants, that is, doing things together, talking, and producing artifacts. *Alignment* means becoming part of something big by connecting local efforts to broader discourses. The work of alignment often entails convincing and inspiring others. *Imagination* refers to viewing oneself through the eyes of an outsider, being “in someone else's shoes” (Wenger, 1998).

Narratives of micro-entrepreneurs

In this section, we present the narratives and our interpretation of the ways in which Wenger's forms of belonging manifest in the micro-entrepreneurs' narratives.

Pamela—Visual Artist

Pamela is a visual and performance artist who operates an art gallery and a perfume shop. She has created cultural service packages for tourists around her artistic activities. Pamela identifies herself as an artist, and she says that “art is my number one [interest] and doing art and showing it to people is my first priority and then comes my shop and tourism.” It is apparent that art is her true passion and an outlet for sharing her feelings with her audience. She lives and works in her family home, and it is quite evident that, for Pamela, family history is the basis for her creative work.

Pamela says that her mother’s cosmetics shop (established in 1936) was the first of its kind in rural Finland. The local perfume shop back then sold the same lipsticks used by actors Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. Twenty-five years ago, when her mother died, Pamela inherited the shop and was unsure what to do with it. For her mother, the shop was “quite an ordinary shop,” but for Pamela, it developed into something different. Now, clients book an appointment at her perfume salon, and they are served sparkling wine while Pamela conducts a “tasting” to identify an appropriate perfume in the unique milieu of her grandparents’ old house decorated with her colorful paintings. For Pamela, perfume tasting is not a sales tactic, but more of an art performance.

In addition, Pamela and her husband arrange an annual open light art event in November at the darkest time of the year in the yard of the art gallery. The two-week art event has a grand opening in which Pamela exhibits a dance performance that attracts a great number of visitors, as well as a lot of media attention. Pamela states that she has learned from the local art council that every time a new exhibition opens, it is of the utmost importance to send a press release and arrange a press conference. She says, “I’m a gallerist so I’ve collected a list of about 100 people who I bomb with invitations to my exhibition.”

Pamela reports belonging to a couple of cultural networks. One is an association for artists in a nearby town. She has also been a member of a local network that consists of about five to

10 entrepreneurs in arts and handicrafts with whom she has had some sporadic business connections. The local cultural office has also helped to coordinate a network between local artists. Pamela's product packages are also available in a tourist office in the nearby town and on the internet.

Pamela definitely sees parallels between her own entrepreneurship and her family's traditions. In our interpretation, *imagination* appears in the narrative in her honoring of her family's history. For example, she has decorated a room for a small perfume museum in the art gallery where she displays the cosmetics from the period when her mother ran the shop. Both the museum and the perfume shop are decorated with furniture made by her grandfather. Pamela identifies herself as a performance artist and considers the four pillars—an atelier, a perfume shop, a gallery, and a residence—her “complete artwork.” In our interpretation, the perfume museum is a kind of an artifact that connects Pamela's efforts to a broader discourse, thus indicating *alignment*. She has also created service packages for tourists around her artistic activities. Every time she opens a new exhibition, she sends a press release and arranges a press conference. She has managed to get a few contacts among the journalists who visit her four or five times a year. Pamela is seemingly quite independent, and her *engagement* with her entrepreneur colleagues in the local ecosystem hardly exists.

Ellen—Owner of a Design Sauna

Ellen set up her business in 2010 in what could be termed a designer sauna. The building was designed by the world-famous Finnish architect Alvar Aalto in the 1940s. At the time, it functioned both as a sauna and a laundry for the workers in the neighboring factories. Today, the property houses an elegant cafeteria decorated with Aalto furniture, a sauna, a design shop, and an art gallery. In 2005, Ellen's father noticed that the sauna was for sale, so Ellen and her

brother decided to buy it. Ellen says, “It feels like this building is meant for us.” The building has a lot of sentimental value to her. Ellen’s family was born in the Ironworks Village,² and her mother, father, and grandfather all worked at the factory. They lived in a house that was also designed by Aalto, and Ellen describes how she grew up in this architectural environment, even though her family belonged to the working class. Ellen says that she has her roots in the Ironworks Village and the sauna, so it is rather easy for her to tell people about its history.

Ellen has a wholehearted commitment to the Ironworks Village. She has been devoted to the area since childhood, and her affinity for the village has become even stronger since she began her business in the area. So far, the process of becoming an entrepreneur has taken so much of Ellen’s time that she has been too busy to develop her products. Ellen describes her working days as a circus and says, “I still have to learn how it works ... I have dreams for this.” Before owning the sauna, Ellen worked as a caretaker at an institution for people with disabilities, and it is her dream to combine her background as an art therapist with the design sauna. It is noteworthy that like the other interviewees, she does not use the word “business” when she talks about her entrepreneurial endeavors.

Ellen explains that she belongs to a network of local artists and artisans and was a bit surprised but happy that she was asked to join these networks. She also notes that some of the handicraft artisans have closed their businesses and some have moved away from the area. Ellen mentions several times how pleased she would be to collaborate with others, but it is not so easy for her to leave the “house.” She also spoke of a local cultural festival that was arranged

² Having emerged around iron and paper industries, the Ironworks Village is considered a culturally relevant destination. In the heart of the industrial area is an old ironworks that was set up in the late 15th century. A large corporation owns most of the historic buildings in the area that formerly housed company officials and employees. The corporation also operates a line of service businesses targeted at business-to-business clients. A well-known Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, left his footprint in the area during the 1940s by designing buildings, most of which are owned by the corporation. Quite recently, the corporation announced that it would sell most of those buildings. During the last ten years, the municipality has coordinated development projects that attempted to attract tourists and new residents to the area by strengthening a brand based on the cultural heritage of the Ironworks Village.

a couple of times, but the cooperation was not “very rosy,” and she and her brother had to do a lot of work on their own.

For **Ellen**, *engagement* appears in the way she speaks of belonging to a group of local artisans, artists, and micro-entrepreneurs in the tourism business. She is proud of having been invited to participate in the community of CCIs. She would welcome greater collaboration with other local entrepreneurs but her involvement with her own business based around her house constrains her. Ellen has a wholehearted commitment to the brand identity of the place. She has been devoted to this area since childhood, and this feeling of affinity has become even stronger since she began her business in the area. However, many practical routines have taken so much of Ellen’s time that she has been too busy to develop her products. Ellen’s endeavor to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the place can be categorized under *imagination*. Her dream is to combine her background as an art therapist with her work at the design sauna, so she seeks to connect her competence and activities to a broader context, indicating *alignment*.

Kate—Owner of an Art House

After inheriting an old family estate in 2005, Kate had the idea to start a cultural center to display her artwork and paintings, and also to generate some income to cover the costs of the house. For Kate, the house itself is important, and it represents the heritage she values most, that is, that embodied by authenticity. In all her activities, she tries to find ways that could bring income for the maintenance of the house. Kate organizes cooking, reading, music, poetry, and art, for example. She says, “When I inherited this house, it was obvious that I would do everything that I could afford to keep the house and myself alive, so I thought I could create a cultural center where the doors would be open and I could provide people with different

services, experiences and, most importantly, my art, which is the most essential way to make ends meet.”

Kate categorizes herself as a handicraft artist. She sees a resemblance between the Ironworks Village and the area of Fiskars village, which is a popular and fast-growing community of local handicraft artists and micro-entrepreneurs in southern Finland. Kate says that activities in Fiskars are concentrated in a small geographical area, which makes it easier to develop the area. Kate’s art house is not located at the heart of the Ironworks Village, so she feels somewhat excluded. She is critical of the tendency of the municipality to concentrate on the development of the Ironworks Village, which excludes the handicraft artists and entrepreneurs on the outskirts of the village: “I have a feeling that the Ironworks Village takes all the potential visitors.” Kate, therefore, plans to offer a cultural package of her own, encompassing two minor tourist attractions located nearby. She says that for her, Facebook has been a good way to market her cultural products and services.

In summer, Kate’s products are available in the café in the Ironworks Village. She has also distributed brochures and business cards. She often attends exhibitions around the region, but she finds it rather time-consuming and requiring too much effort; however, she recognizes it is an important route to selling her art: “One should try all the time to get to the places which give you and your products more visibility.” Kate seems somewhat disappointed that the locals do not show that much interest in her art. She considers handicraft artisans, including herself, to be very talented and believes that although they differ from one another, they are all creating their art from their hearts.

When asked about the networks she might belong to, Kate says that professionally, she does not have any. She does not belong to the local artists’ association, and now does not take part in local development projects, feeling that they have not helped her. She feels strongly that she alone will have to be responsible for her business: “I do not want to take part in those events

anymore, since I am doing this work alone and everything that happens here is because of me. I plan and make my products, I market them, and try to communicate about them, I clean my house and do everything by myself.” However, Kate evidently sees the benefits of more intense forms of local cooperation.

For **Kate**, the house itself is important, and in all her activities, she tries to find ways that could bring in income to support the maintenance of the house. She does not mention the local community of artists and handicraft entrepreneurs. When Kate speaks of Fiskars village, which is a famous community of artists, artisans, and cultural entrepreneurs in Finland she *imagines* it as a creative place brand. She does not see *engagement* in a local creative ecosystem as relevant for her. Neither does she belong to the local artists’ association. She feels very strongly that in the end she alone has to take responsibility for her business. Kate promotes her products through traditional media and Facebook, but it seems that her efforts to *convince* and *inspire* her audience remain insufficient.

Maria—Former Owner of a Small Spa and Resort

Maria is an entrepreneur and the former owner of a small spa and resort that was located in a historic villa area outside of a larger industrial town. Maria is interested in the cultural heritage of this historic area of summer homes that dates back to the 1850s and is among one of the best-preserved villa areas in Finland. She bought an old villa and renovated it to create both a spa and a private home. Maria’s vision was to offer customers the experience of country living as it used to be albeit modified in a modern style. In her blog, Maria introduces herself as a conceptual designer for the lifestyle and service business. She writes about her inexhaustible enthusiasm for the lifestyle world, service concepts, and the creation of unique experiences for

customers and says that it is just this that makes her approach to business unique. In 2020, she introduced herself as a creative leader and brand ambassador.

In formal and informal conversations with Maria and at local cultural business events, she always speaks with great determination and conviction of her vision of an umbrella brand she refers to as “Nordic Country Living.” She believes in the attractiveness of the Nordic lifestyle, which is of interest to tourists from around the world—in the same way, the Danish concept of *hygge* (coziness) exemplifies how cold has become “cool” and how coziness, comfort, and social connectivity create a good quality of life marked by simple pleasures. She envisages her spa business as part of such a joint brand.

Maria is not afraid to speak out about how the local authorities have shown no interest in revitalizing the villa area and how the regional destination management organization sees no value in rebranding it as a cultural tourism destination. She says that she has been left alone by her “own people”: “But I cannot do this alone. What is needed is cooperation between education, research, and the regional development agency, and also the city [administration] needs to be for the idea.”

A year ago, Maria was forced to give up her spa business. However, she still believes in the concept of Nordic Country Living and eco-luxury cultural services. She says that only recently had she been able to gather “a tribe” of people “with the appropriate mindset and story” that believes in her. Maria is proud of listing the expertise she has managed to gain, for example, in “digitalization and systems thinking, concept design, business, interior design, investment, tourism, strategic management, brand storytelling and preservation of cultural heritage.” Currently, Maria runs a start-up project with the aim of developing a platform for companies offering “luxury services in unique cultural destinations for niche travelers.”

Maria *envisioned* how a brand ecosystem could be constructed through a virtual network of relationships with business partners. She has taken an initiator role in co-creating an

ecosystem in cultural tourism. Apparently, Maria's *engagement* in a virtual creative ecosystem is strong, while her engagement in a place is weak. She is extremely good at developing interactions with people whose competence matches with the ecosystem, and she is constantly searching for such people. Moreover, she is *convincing* and *inspiring* when visualizing a virtual platform combining service providers, investors, consultants, and experts, and professionals from a range of fields. Speaking of ecosystems and branding is characteristic of her.

In the following section, we discuss the implications and conclusions of our narrative analysis of how micro-entrepreneurs feel an affinity with the local creative economy and place brand.

Discussion and implications

This study contributes to both entrepreneurship and place branding research and complements earlier studies on branding and entrepreneurship focused on embeddedness and networks (Gaddefors, 2005; Möller & Halinen, 2017; McKeever et al. 2015; Jack et al. 2008; Jack and Anderson, 2002). We combined the meso-level concepts of a creative place brand and a local creative ecosystem (Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski 2019; Comunian 2011) with the micro-level experiences of the creative and cultural small business entrepreneurs to illustrate how they identify with the local creative ecosystem and the place and its brand. Indeed, some perhaps perceive the place and its brand as not sufficiently unique to differentiate itself from other places (Magala 2011).

For the micro-entrepreneurs in CCIs, the local creative ecosystem may be important in the sense of how the intangible heritage of the place becomes a core of their service offering. However, the commitment to a place brand is rather limited if the reason for running a business is to generate income, for example, for the maintenance of an old family house. The commitment to a place brand is strong when a brand ecosystem is constructed through a virtual network of business partners who are mainly not from the local area. Interestingly, the creative

place brand then acts as a kind of an umbrella brand linked more closely to the vision of network cooperation than to a specific place.

When analyzing how the entrepreneurs perceived their sense of belonging to the creative economy, it became obvious that entrepreneurship as such was not the primary feature defining their identity. The micro-entrepreneurs did not refer to themselves as entrepreneurs but characterized themselves as artists or passionate art lovers. They did not use the word *business* when they spoke of their entrepreneurial endeavors. For some of the micro-entrepreneurs, their individual family history and passion for art are the most dominant characteristics of their sense of belonging to the local creative ecosystem. For some micro-entrepreneurs, the preservation of the family estate and the architectural infrastructure provides the reason for their entrepreneurship.

The micro-entrepreneurs contributing to our study represent a typical mundane or everyday form of entrepreneurship (often referred to as necessity entrepreneurship) with little potential for innovation and economic growth (Welter et al. 2019) other than maintaining a family property. In focusing on entrepreneurship as an everyday activity propelled by a variety of motivations other than the economic (Dodd et al. 2021), for example, honoring an ancestor's life's work or the architectural heritage of a place, this study offers a more multifaceted view of both conducting and training for entrepreneurship.

Limitations and future research avenues

As a long-term qualitative study utilizing various data-gathering methods the study is not easily replicated. In using narrative analysis as a data analysis method, the researchers' interpretation of what is relevant plays a major role in how the narratives are constructed. The purpose of narrative research is not to produce one definite truth about something that is out there, but to offer one version of it (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 226) and "it is always possible to

narrate the same events in a different way.” Riessman’s (1993) criteria to evaluate narrative studies ask whether the interpretation is reasonable and convincing and let the readers evaluate that. The correspondence between the researchers and the participants has allowed the participants to check the interpretations. We have followed the micro-entrepreneurs in their natural environment for a decade to show that the resulting interpretation is more than an ad hoc judgment. As a research paper, the study will be useful as a basis for future research, suggesting that a similar kind of research setting may be used in other cities or places.

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