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Landscape identity: Approaches to its conceptualisation, capture and integration into place branding processes

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LANDSCAPE IDENTITY: APPROACHES TO ITS CONCEPTUALISATION, CAPTURE AND INTEGRATION INTO PLACE BRANDING PROCESSES

Contents

Abstract
The integration of spatial identity is seen to be a crucial factor for successful place branding. However, spatial identity is often insufficiently conceptualised. In light of this, this article presents a theory-based approach to using spatial identity in an applied context such as place branding. This is done using the example of the Regiobranding research project. This project systematically surveyed landscape identity – a specified variant of spatial identity. Starting from social-constructivist approaches to landscape, landscape identity is presented as an individual and social interpretation of landscape distinctiveness and character and the associated place attachments. In the empirical part, individual interpretations of landscape identity are qualitatively recorded in a rural case study region and evaluated across all the cases. This cross-case analysis visualises the appropriated identity-forming landscape, in other words, the reference points that are repeatedly interpreted as distinctive or characteristic in relation to the space and/or that are frequently activated as components of individual place attachments. The results show an extensive range of different reference points: those interviewed describe these reference points in various ways, connect them, and use them as cognitive/emotional reference points. Furthermore, the cross-case analysis revealed contradictory patterns of interpretation. Our empirical findings highlight that landscape identity is predominantly an individually constructed reality, which is neither unambiguous nor without contradictions. Against this background, specific actions are recommended for using landscape identity in place branding processes.

Keywords
Spatial identity – landscape identity – place branding – spatial planning

1 Introduction

Place branding is a strategic instrument used in spatial planning that can contribute to sustainable spatial development (Oliveira 2015; van Assche/Lo 2011). Strictly speaking, the term 'place branding' refers to strategies used to develop positive place brands, in other words, to create positive associations with a space on the part of those external to it (Braun/Zenker 2010). The implementation of such strategies often goes hand in hand with the development of innovative products and services as well as new types of partnership (Lee/Wall/Kovacs 2015; Domínguez García/Horlings/Swagemakers et al. 2013). That is why place branding, in the broader sense of the word, can also be seen as a (re)shaping of the human-space relationships through which circumstances conducive to non-sustainability can be changed (San Eugenio Vela/Barniol-Carcasona 2015).

Integrating spatial identity is an important factor in the success of place branding (Campelo/Aitken/Thyne et al. 2013; Braun/Eshuis/Klijn et al. 2018). In general, this is understood as the unique character or 'distinctiveness' (Zeitler 2001) that stakeholders perceive a section of space to have. On an individual level, this can justify cognitive-emotional place attachments (Christmann 2010; Weichhart/Weiske/Werlen 2006). Spatial identity can be a central reference for place branding to activate residents and stakeholders and integrate their self-images (Campelo/Aitken/Thyne et al. 2013; Messely/Dessein/Lauwers 2010). On the one hand the integration of different perspectives lays the foundation for sustainable spatial development (cf. Hofmeister/Mölders/Thiem 2014), and on the other hand authentic brands can be developed by establishing spatial identity patterns (Giles/Bosworth/Willett 2013).

Despite its well-known potential, it is evident that in some place-branding literature, spatial identity is not conceptualised at all or is done so in a simplistic manner. One such widespread simplification, for example, is the view that there exists a homogeneous, largely unchanging spatial identity that can only be identified using academic or empirical methods and which then must be communicated (Kavaratzis/Hatch 2013; Mayes 2008). Against this background, this article aims to present a theory-based approach to using spatial identity in an applied context such as place branding. This is done using the example of the Regiobranding research project,[1] in which an identity-based branding process was initiated and supported in a rural region.

The following section presents an introduction to the Regiobranding research project. Theoretical and conceptual considerations regarding spatial and landscape identity,

1 Funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung)* as part of 'Innovation groups for sustainable land management' (*Innovationsgruppen für ein nachhaltiges Landmanagement*) (www.regiobranding.de; Funding Code 033 L121 AN); cf. www.regiobranding.de

which then lead to a qualitative research design (section 4) form the basis of the third section. The empirical results (section 5) are summarised in the final section (section 6), and tangible recommended actions for the use of landscape identity in place branding processes are formulated.

2 The Regiobranding research project

The Regiobranding research project attempts to use landscape to develop plausible place brands at a regional level. This approach is in keeping with research findings that emphasise the potential of landscape for place branding (Maessen/Willms/Jones-Walters 2008; San Eugenio Vela/Nogué/Govers 2017). The goal of the project is to develop and highlight engaging and authentic interpretations of regional landscape. This valorisation of the cultural landscape functions from the inside out, i.e. it is not controlled from the top down but is rather developed in cooperation with regional stakeholders. A participatory process, in which stakeholder networks are built and expanded, is key here. The role of this network is to agree on certain interpretations of the cultural landscape, to work together on communicating those modes and to develop joint model projects during the course of the project. The latter goals are mainly geared toward the long term and represent a first step in 'outward communication'. A fundamental assumption is that knowledge about spatial identity can have a positive influence on the shaping of place branding in terms of both process and content. For this reason, spatial identity connected with landscape – hereinafter referred to as landscape identity – should be systematically fleshed out and integrated from the start of the project.

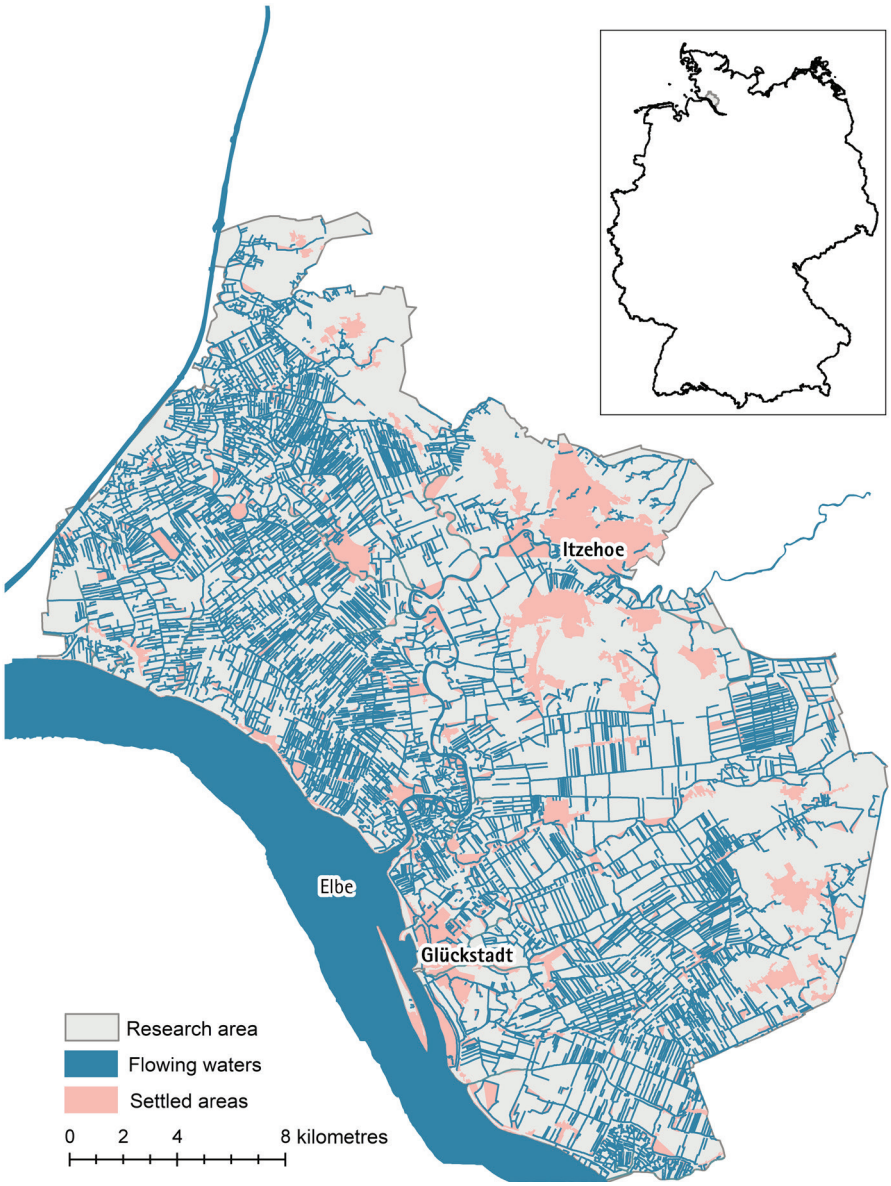

Fig. 1: Location of the Steinburger Elbe marshes / Source: Falco Knaps' own representation

The Steinburger Elbe marshes, a rural region in Northern Germany (Fig. 1), serves as the research area. The open marshy landscape characterised by flowing waters and grassland is undergoing great change. Since 1999, the number of agricultural holdings has decreased by approx. 30%, which is linked to challenges in maintaining the traditional operating structures and their characteristic manifestation (Malottky 2018). At the same time, there has been a massive expansion in wind turbines: 178 turbines are

currently producing wind power and still more are in the planning stages, which sometimes leads to conflicts in relation to land use (Ruge/Huusmann 2018).

3 Landscape identity – theoretical considerations

A theory-based conceptualisation of landscape identity is based on social constructivist understandings of landscape. In the broad discourse surrounding different approaches to landscape, landscape is understood as an *'individual and/or collective construct which continuously undergoes change'* (Gailing 2014) or as a socially preformed *'mental image'* (Meier/Bucher/Hagenbuch 2010). The diverging interests of social constructivist landscape research mean that the material substance is given varying degrees of attention (Leibenath 2014). Because place branding is seen in an application-related context, a relational understanding which systematically includes physical objects, in addition to individual and societal constructions, is used (Levin-Keitel/Mölders/Othengrafen et al. 2018). For this reason, the (relational) understanding of landscape according to Kühne (2008, cf. also 2009, 2018) has been chosen as the theoretical starting point. This approach conceptualises landscape as a comprehensive view within one's consciousness of spatially arranged objects, but also as a spatial ensemble comprising different dimensions.

> The foundation is the 'physical space', understood as an initial physical/material substrate that comprises all perceivable spatial objects regardless of whether they contribute to constituting landscape or not.

> The 'social landscape' is understood as society's stock of knowledge of all socially accepted patterns of constructing, associating and interpreting landscape. While the overall social landscape tends to encompass fundamental patterns of interpretation, more specific social landscapes (e.g. milieu- or region-specific patterns of constructing landscape) create pre-formed bases for individual interpretations.

> The 'individual's social landscape' represents patterns of constructing, associating and interpreting landscape on the part of each individual. This is the subjective modification of the social landscape, which is interpreted and then construed as reality in light of personal experience of the world and preferences.

> The 'appropriated physical landscape' is the sum of physical objects in space which is drawn on or visually consolidated to construct the social landscape and individual's social landscape. This dimension thus represents a subset of the total physical space interpreted as landscape.

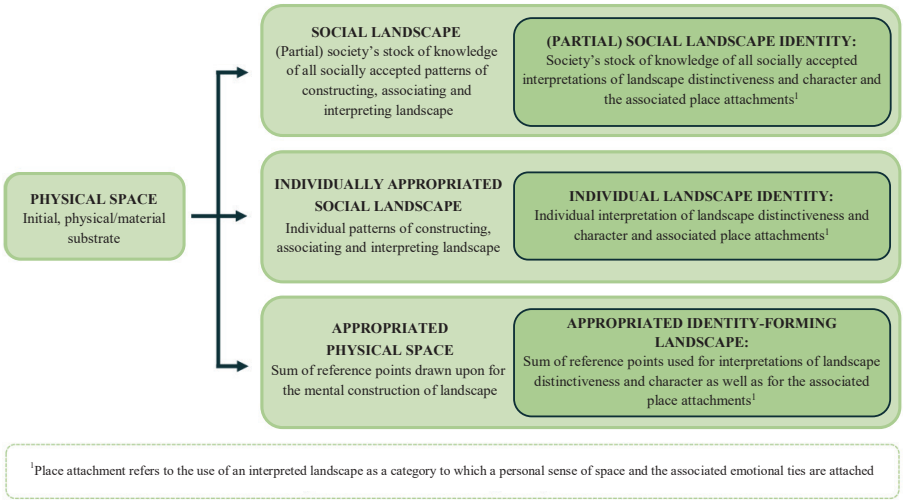

Fig. 2: Dimensions of landscape following Kühne's concept of landscape (2008; light green) and the resulting understanding of landscape identity (dark green) / Source: Falco Knaps' own representation

For a theoretically-based understanding of landscape identity, these general approaches to landscape become sharper when it comes to interpretations of landscape distinctiveness and character as well as to the associated place attachments. 'Place attachments' refer to the activation of an interpreted landscape as a component of social identity, in other words as a category to which ideas of a personal sense of place and the associated emotional ties are attached (Christmann 2010). In addition to physical/material objects, aspects of (assumed) landscape knowledge (e.g. about landscape history and customs) may also form the foundations of such interpretive and attachment patterns. Thus, in these three approaches, landscape is not restricted to physical objects but rather includes related immaterial reference points. Figure 2 illustrates a conceptualisation of this.

4 Approach and methodology

Based on the understanding developed in the previous section, some preliminary methodological considerations can help to capture landscape identity for an application-oriented context such as place branding. Empirically, only individual landscape identities are directly accessible. It is, however, assumed that these identities are constructed in a highly heterogeneous manner, which would be reflected in limited usability for branding processes. The reasons for this heterogeneity can be found in the variety of (partly) social beliefs and the highly subjective impact of personal interpretations. For this reason, it is more expedient to focus on the appropriated identity-forming landscape. This requires comparative analyses

Characteristics		N
Age	< 20	1
	21-40	3
	41-60	20
	> 61	15
Background	Long-established	28
	Migrated	11
Gender	Male	27
	Female	12
Category	Private sector stakeholders	5
	Representatives of interest groups	9
	Stakeholders in policy and administration	7
	Private individuals with specialist knowledge of the landscape	5
	Other private individuals	13

Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewees / Source: Falco Knaps' own representation

of individual landscape identities. These analyses reveal reference points that are repeatedly interpreted as landscape distinctiveness and character and that manifest as anchor points for place attachments, even though they can differ significantly from person to person.

Individual landscape identities were captured during the course of 39 semi-structured interviews. In accordance with the principle of contrasting sampling, the cases selected were as diverse as possible (Table 1; Kruse 2015). The surplus in the higher age groups can be attributed to the fact that representatives of interest groups and stakeholders in policy and administration are typically older. In the interviews, participants were given guided questions and asked to outline their personal interpretation of landscape distinctiveness and character and to describe the landscape that is relevant to and emotionally tied to their personal space of belonging. All of the interviews were transcribed and evaluated using a reconstruction analysis based on Kruse (2015) (Fig. 3). The goal of the data analysis was to determine the appropriated identity-forming landscape.

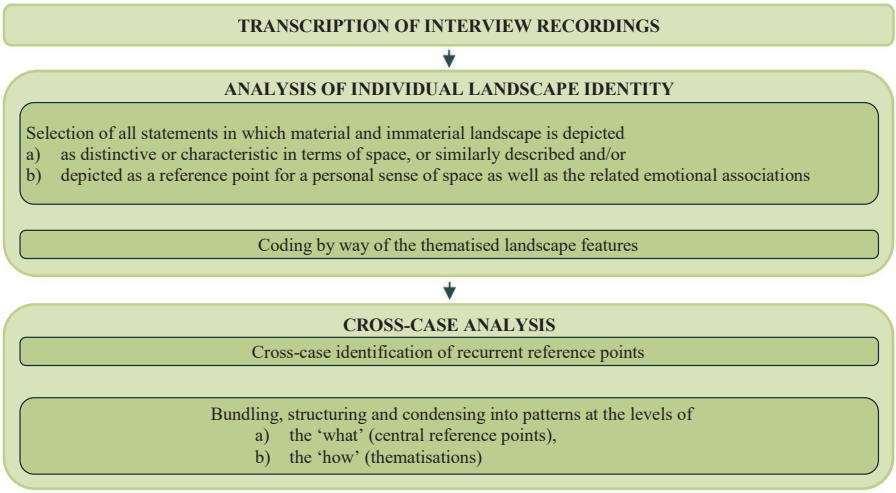

Fig. 3: Evaluation methodology of qualitative interviews to determine the appropriated identity-forming landscape / Source: Falco Knaps' own representation

Main group	Reference points	Considerations
Physical/ material landscape	North Sea	Spatial proximity to the North Sea, tidal range of regional flowing waters
	Maritime climate	Constant wind, rapid changes in weather
	River landscape (including the associated built structures)	High frequency of flowing waters, Elbe (regional border, living environment, width, part of the estuary), dykes, historical and contemporary built structures that are associated with lowing waters (harbours, shipyards, locks, lighthouses)
	Marsh landscape	Flat topography, openness, location below sea level, historical growth of the drainage infrastructure, special soil properties, moors
Built structures	Agricultural structures	High density of historical agricultural structures, farms with thatched roofs, individual farms in remote locations, construction methods specific to the region
	Villages	Scattered settlements, ribbon villages on marsh land, small, attractive village structures
	Other historical buildings	Historical town halls and churches, historical built structures in small towns

Land use	Types of land use in the past	Peat extraction, orchards
	Grassland utilisation and livestock farming	Historically evolved types of land use, consequences of location factors specific to the region, (sub-regional) dominant type of land use, attractive scenery, dairy products specific to the region
	Vegetable cultivation and arable farming	Historically evolved types of land use, result of location factors specific to the region, (sub-regional) dominant type of land use
	Wind energy use	(Sub-regional) high density of wind turbines
Characteri-sations	Peace	Found in the landscape, emanating from the landscape, depending on remoteness
	Proximity to nature	Diverse landscape, semi-natural landscape, small-scale structures dotting the landscape, minimal traces of anthropogenic activity
	Historically evolved landscape	Narratives of artificial land reclamation since the 16th century

Table 2: Points of reference for the appropriated identity-forming landscape in the Steinburger Elbe marshes / Source: Falco Knaps' own representation

5 Results of the case study

5.1 Central points of reference for the appropriated identity-forming landscape

The data analysis resulted in various main groups, making it possible to illustrate the central reference points of the appropriated identity-forming landscape (Table 2). Each of these main groups contains several reference points, which were then discussed based on various individual considerations.

5.2 Thematisations of the landscape

5.2.1 Thematisations of landscape distinctiveness and character and the associated place attachments

The spectrum of individual attributions of distinctiveness and character aspects ranged from lists of features with no context to individual, sometimes complex cause and effect chains. The latter is illustrated by a statement made by I13[2], in which narratives of artificial land reclamation depict it as the cause of certain soil conditions, indirectly describing grassland farming as typical:

2 'I' stands for 'interviewee'; the number represents the anonymised identification of the person in question.

'Yes, and that we are a grassland region and have little arable land.
(...) Some boggy places too. That's because the Wilster marsh was dyked
too early by the Dutch. That was back in the 14th century,
15th century. And, yes, we can only operate and farm
[*grassland farming – F. K.*]
the way we do now.'

The way in which the interviewees described their place attachments was also extremely varied. Theoretically different approaches were then evident due to the way in which the place attachments were described. Thus, landscape was depicted as a category to which a personal sense of place is attached and by means of which the interviewees described themselves as 'members' of a landscape-based space with certain properties. This is evident, for example, in a statement by I5:

'I realised at some point that for me there was a really special connection,
usually in the summer when the grass is being cut, the smell of hay.
As soon as I make that connection I feel like:
this is your, your home, your region.'

I7 made a similar argument, referring to a more emotionally charged concept of a personal 'home':

'[...] *what for me is my home: the lush, green fields and lots of water,*
lots of ditches, little streams and then the Elbe.'

The broad field of emotional attachments was also made clear in statements like 'I also love the vastness' (I8) or 'For me that is also the charm of the landscape, because it is something peaceful' (I22).

5.2.2 Contradictory associations of the appropriated identity-forming landscape

Cross-case data analysis showed that some reference points of the appropriated identity-forming landscape were contradictory. A total of four mutually exclusive patterns of association were identified in the interview material.

Identity-forming vs. non identity-forming: For some interviewees, the use of wind power through technical infrastructure represented a positive reference point for landscape identity. Wind turbines were interpreted as 'images that characterise the landscape' (I5) or a 'unique feature of the landscape' (I32) as well as emotionally charged ('somehow home' – I31). One interviewee saw them as the continuation of a historical use of wind energy:

'But wind is good too because in modern times wind turbines produce electricity and about 200 years ago there were also lots of wind turbines around [...] *at that time they were used to drain the water'* (*I11*).

For other interviewees, however, wind turbines were non identity-forming landscape structures. For example,'no wind turbine' (I7) was explicitly highlighted as an actual characteristic of the region and wind turbines were disparaged as 'intruders in this landscape' (I22).

Careful use vs. over-use: Contradictory associations of this type were expressed in connection with two reference points. Some interviewees interpreted grassland utilisation and livestock farming as careful production methods associated with environmental compatibility and minimal impact intensity. According to I11, despite intensive dairy cattle farming there is 'still enough potential nature', while I28 described the agriculture as expressly not industrialised:

'When I [...] *get to the area of the landscape that is no longer characterised by* [...] *industrialised agriculture, I feel like I'm home again.'*

Other interviewees referred to the minimal use of pesticides and to the presence of environmental protection measures related to the grassland. Contradictory to that, this type of land use (at least for part of the land) also prompted negative connotations of overuse (without, however, questioning the actual identity-forming character). This was illustrated by statements about ever increasing cattle herds (I25) disparaged as 'intensive livestock farming' (I26) or 'constant silage manure management' (I17), as well as about the negative effects on the identity-forming permanent grassland.

The reference point of wind energy use was not directly described as a careful form of land use. Some interviewees felt, however, that the extent of the current expansion was minimal or at least acceptable. In contrast, there were other categorisations of wind energy use as over-use of the landscape. In these cases, the increasing density of the installations was criticised as an excessive or endangering factor for other identity-forming features, such as the special image of a landscape made up of farmhouses dotting the countryside, vastness and drainage ditches, as described, for example, by I14: 'Today, farms are being torn down to make way for even more wind turbines.' *Still preserved vs. already lost:* this pattern of interpretation also became clear based on two different reference points. Firstly, grassland use in the form of pasture grazing was recognised as an identity-forming production method that has been largely preserved, as illustrated in a statement by I10: 'Evenly farmed marshland is a very beautiful image, with the red cattle on it. And we have actually mostly preserved that.' Opposite interpretations include those that describe this type of land use with images of loss. This referred both to the decrease of grassland use and livestock farming as a whole and to a reduced connection with origins or authenticity due to the loss of the significance of traditional breeds and production techniques. Nowadays, for example,

'the traditional cattle breed [...] has relatively little significance' (I30) and historically evolved pasture grazing 'is basically non-existent today' (I30).

Secondly, agricultural structures were deemed to be 'still preserved'. Individual interviewees referred to 'lovingly restored old buildings, rebuilt in the proper style' (I10), and to still present 'traditional thatched cottages' (I34) and 'beautiful, sometimes very well preserved houses' (I14). In contrast, there are also perceptions of a decline in these built structures and a loss of authenticity or a connection with origins. I5, for example, described the historical countryside dotted with farmhouses as 'important built cultural heritage', but saw in it a negative change from the original image due to a decline in the number of typical thatched roofs: 'farmsteads are all well and good but without thatched roofs [...] something typical to the landscape is lost.' *Large vs. small:* Finally, contradictory thematisations pertaining to agricultural areas (grassland and arable) were evident. I19 described the latter as 'very fragmented, parcelled [sic], there are not that many large farmed areas'. In contrast, there were also representations of large agricultural areas in which a broader split can be seen: on the one hand, the 'wide marshland with its very large, structured areas' (I14) was perceived as a positive component of landscape identity. On the other hand, the expansion of agricultural areas was deemed a modern phenomenon in the context of agricultural intensification that some interviewees associated with negative effects on the identity-forming drainage system.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This article conceptualised landscape identity for an application-related context (place branding) and, based on this, a method for capturing such identities was developed and applied. The appropriated identity-forming landscape was central throughout. The latter is the sum of all material and immaterial reference points which are drawn on to interpret landscape distinctiveness and character as well as associated place attachments. The variety of reference points evident in the results, their disparate thematisations and sometimes contradictory associations, confirm the theoretical considerations: landscape identities are individually constructed realities that are depicted by the interviewees as alleged certainties but which are neither unambiguous nor uniform. This substantiates current research findings which also show multi-layered meanings ascribed to the same materiality (Dossche/Rogge/van Eetvelde 2016; Knaps/Herrmann 2018).

Based on these research findings, it is now possible to formulate recommended actions to integrate landscape identity into place branding. First, uniform interpretations of landscape identity should neither be required nor pursued (Schönwald/Kühne 2014). Second, the appropriated identity-forming landscape can be used strategically to activate stakeholders by regularly putting central reference points on the agenda. This may provoke an emotional reaction in potential stakeholders and increase their willingness to support the process (Soini/Vaarala/Pouta 2012). In the process, reference points that are 'inhabited' in different ways by the stakeholders should be used in order to provide points of connection to as many and as wide a variety of stakeholders as possible (cf. Schönwald/Kühne 2014). In the Regiobranding research

project, this was implemented through formats such as workshops (discussion of intermediate results with the participating stakeholders; Herrmann/Kempa/Osinski 2016) and public forums. The topics of the discussion rounds at these events were formulated with knowledge of the appropriated identity-forming landscape. Examples include 'Using and experiencing artificial landscape, shaping change' (with a focus on regional forms of land use as well as the marsh landscape and its historical genesis) or 'Recognising regional built culture as a resource and developing it' (with a focus on agricultural structures). Third, inconsistently embraced reference points should neither be completely excluded nor unilaterally preferred. By excluding them, it would not be possible to deal with dichotomous interpretations of landscape identity as they would remain unresolved conflicts (in objectives) and block any sustainable development. One-sided preferential treatment, on the other hand, would be tantamount to ignoring any 'other' topics and stakeholders. From a constructive perspective, the question to ask is rather about 'in-between spaces' organised beyond contradictory interpretations. These kinds of (new) strategies, approaches or measures may already exist – but as 'special cases' beyond the dominant patterns of action and thought (Forschungsverbund „Blockierter Wandel?" 2007). This was made clear in the Regiobranding research project, e.g. by way of the 'wind energy use' topic. This 'contested' topic was neither excluded nor exclusively discussed in a problematising way. Instead, creative solutions such as a *Windkraftcent* ('wind power penny' – a levy from the profits of wind energy use allocated to care for the cultural landscape) were topics of discussion, although this topic was not pursued further.

Overall, the study showed that it is possible to understand landscape identity on the basis of a solid theoretical foundation as well as how this is possible. It also revealed which approaches can be used to analyse and integrate landscape identity. However, the initially required theoretical foundation should not be seen as the academic purpose in and of itself. On the contrary, from the outset it brings into focus the ambiguity and contradictory nature of landscape and spatial identity, which is reflected in the recommended actions. The appropriated identity-forming landscape discussed in this article takes this complexity into account. At the same time, due to the strong spatial connection, it is linked to the ways of thinking and acting in place branding as well as to other spatial development processes. This prevents the theoretical and conceptual nebulousness from hindering a full exploitation of the potential of spatial identity for sustainable spatial development.

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