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Resident-Centred Rural Development Through Place Marketing: Complexity, Sustainability, and Economic Indicators

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Abstract

Despite the growing importance of rural development, research on place marketing remains fragmented, with no comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) addressing this field with such focus and detail. The study aims to systematically map scientific publications on place marketing, with a particular focus on the perspectives of the general public in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The research design follows the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the search process. Using VOSviewer and complementary content analysis, we identified conceptual clusters and traced major thematic trends, revealing the persistent marginalisation of residents' perspectives and the dominance of competitiveness-oriented approaches. The findings highlight underexplored areas such as community participation, social well-being, and governance mechanisms. Building on these insights, we propose a resident-centred decision-support framework that integrates economic indicators, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability dimensions into rural governance. This framework not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides practical guidance for policymakers and local leaders seeking more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive rural development pathways—particularly within the underrepresented contexts of Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: rural development; economic indicators; place marketing; resident-centred governance; community participation

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1. Introduction

Place marketing, often referred to as territorial marketing, has become a strategic priority in regional development, aiming to attract financial capital, talent, and visitors to enhance local economic performance and overall community well-being. Despite growing recognition of its effective implementation, it remains inconsistent due to insufficient understanding, limited stakeholder engagement, and challenges in aligning policy objectives with marketing strategies (Vuignier, 2016; Mabillard, 2022). Recent research underscores the need to integrate place marketing with broader frameworks of sustainable development, territorial competitiveness, and inclusive community planning (Zenker & Braun, 2017). This integration is further echoed in higher education initiatives that promote sustainability through cross-sectoral planning and stakeholder collaboration and long-term action planning to support territorial and environmental resilience (Németh et al., 2023).

While numerous scientific studies have explored various aspects of this field, including place branding, place marketing, territorial image, destination management, stakeholder involvement, and political influences, there remains a notable gap in research focused specifically on rural municipalities. As Teodorescu and Lequeux-Dincă (2024) argue, "Rural governance was defined by the latest studies 'as a new, negotiated, multi-stakeholder process and a collaborative system of decision design and decision making', obviously encompassing an important participatory component and registering in recent decades a shift towards a bottom-up approach, in which the local population plays an important part". The unique challenges and opportunities faced by these areas often differ significantly from those of urban centres. Addressing this gap could provide valuable insights into how rural municipalities can leverage their distinct characteristics to foster sustainable development and to attract investment, retain population, and strengthen territorial identity (Maheshwari et al., 2015).

As Petruzzellis (2017) argues, positioning regions as desirable destinations is not only a promotional task but also a governance challenge that involves coordinating public and private actors, fostering social cohesion, and balancing local identity with global competitiveness (Johansson, 2011). While the literature has extensively explored urban contexts, rural areas face distinct challenges: demographic decline, infrastructure deficits, weaker institutional capacity, and limited access to digital tools (OECD, 2020; Hospers, 2011). As Lukács and Völgyi (2018) note, large-scale trade agreements reflect broader efforts by states to maintain open economic cooperation in the face of rising global protectionism. Addressing these gaps is crucial to fostering sustainable rural development and mitigating territorial disparities.

This study presents analyses based on the topic of the Web of Science (searches title, abstract, keywords plus, and author keywords) studies found with the term "place marketing" on the Web of Science database between 2002 and 2025. In the next sections of the study, we refer to this as follows: keywords. Through the keyword analysis, utilising VOSviewer 1.6.19 software, it identifies and examines variables influencing the sustainable development of rural place marketing, and as a result, proposes an integrated model.

Scope and Definitions

To ensure conceptual clarity and transparency in the screening process, three core terms were operationalised prior to data collection:

Rural. Following the OECD (2020) typology, rural areas are defined as territories with a population density below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre and without the functional characteristics of metropolitan regions. In the context of this review, studies were considered "rural" if they referred to small towns, non-metropolitan regions, or peripheral localities with predominantly agricultural, natural, or mixed-use economies. Publications focusing exclusively on large urban centres or national-level economic analyses were excluded during abstract screening.

Resident-centred. The term resident-centred refers to approaches in which local inhabitants are conceptualised as active stakeholders in shaping place identity, governance, or marketing processes, rather than as passive beneficiaries. During inclusion screening, articles were flagged as "resident-relevant" if they contained any of the following keywords in their abstracts or author keywords: residents, citizens, community, inhabitants, local people, or population.

Place marketing. In this review, place marketing is used as an umbrella term encompassing communication and management activities aimed at promoting a locality's assets to internal and/or external audiences. The search deliberately focused on "place marketing" rather than broader synonyms such as "place branding" or "destination marketing" to

maintain conceptual precision. Studies using these alternative terms were only retained if their abstracts explicitly addressed economic development, governance, or stakeholder participation aspects consistent with place marketing.

For the purposes of this study, "rural" refers to settlements below 50,000 inhabitants and characterised by lower population density and mixed land use (OECD, 2020). "Resident-centred" refers to analytical or strategic approaches in which local inhabitants are treated as active stakeholders in decision-making or identity formation, rather than passive audiences. "Place marketing" is operationalised as any marketing-oriented territorial policy or initiative aimed at promoting a locality's assets to internal and/or external stakeholders. Throughout the paper, "place marketing" is used as an umbrella term encompassing branding activities where relevant, except where the cited authors explicitly distinguish between them.

The research aims to present the population perspective in scientific publications on local place marketing, with particular emphasis on a management-oriented approach to the population's needs. The study also aims to develop a resident-centred systems theory model that supports community decision-making, strengthens local identity, and promotes the achievement of sustainable development goals in place marketing practice.

Question: To what extent are the needs of the population integrated into the discourse on place marketing?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Evolution of Place Marketing and Branding

Place marketing—also referred to in some contexts as territorial marketing—has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing regional economic activity and community development by promoting a region to attract financial investment, tourists, and new residents, thereby contributing significantly to the area's growth and prosperity (Kline & Moretti, 2014).

Place marketing has evolved from promotional campaigns to sophisticated, multi-stakeholder strategies aimed at fostering sustainable economic and social growth. The field increasingly focuses on integrating local culture, heritage, and the genius loci ("spirit of place") into branding narratives that resonate with internal and external audiences (Campelo et al., 2014). This approach strengthens community identity, promotes resident involvement, and differentiates regions in competitive global environments.

Place branding, a key component of territorial marketing, functions as both a symbolic and practical framework for constructing and communicating territorial identity. It encompasses tangible and intangible elements: infrastructure and amenities, but also stories, symbols, and multisensory experiences (Eshuis & Ripoll González, 2025). Effective place branding aligns stakeholder perceptions and expectations, ensuring that branding efforts reflect authentic local values while also adapting to evolving economic and social trends (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011).

Aitken and Campelo (2011) underscore the importance of stakeholder dynamics in creating a "sense of place," which is crucial to the success of place marketing. Engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process fosters a shared vision that can enhance community pride and investment in the region's future. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the marketing efforts but also ensures that the unique attributes of the place are authentically represented, resonating with both residents and potential visitors alike (Eshuis et al., 2017).

Petruzzellis (2017) emphasises the importance of place marketing in positioning a region as a desirable destination for businesses, tourists, and residents alike. However, the complexity of place marketing arises from various factors such as local culture, infras-

tructure, and the competitive landscape, all of which can influence the effectiveness of the marketing strategies employed.

2.2. Recent Developments and Digital Transformation

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed place marketing. Social media, data analytics, and online storytelling platforms now enable even small or rural municipalities to reach global audiences with limited resources. Recent studies highlight how digitalisation empowers local actors to co-create branding content, engage residents, and build resilient narratives that highlight unique regional assets (Zenker & Rütter, 2014).

For rural areas, digital platforms provide cost-effective opportunities to overcome traditional barriers related to geographic isolation and limited infrastructure. Eshuis et al. (2017) and Pasquinelli (2013) point out that cooperative strategies, including regional alliances and digital content-sharing networks, further amplify rural visibility and competitiveness.

2.3. Challenges and Research Gaps

Despite progress, challenges persist. Implementation often suffers from fragmented governance structures, inadequate policy integration, and limited local capacities (Cleave et al., 2016; Stylidis et al., 2014). While urban-focused research offers robust frameworks, studies specifically examining rural municipalities remain scarce. Existing literature rarely considers how demographic decline, socio-economic volatility, or weaker institutional frameworks affect rural place marketing efficacy (Hospers, 2011; OECD, 2020).

Mabillard et al. (2023) note that many public administrations struggle with a lack of understanding and practical know-how in applying marketing principles to territorial management, frequently leading to suboptimal outcomes. Cleave et al. (2016) explore these challenges by examining practitioners' perspectives on place branding's role in local economic development, revealing the complexities involved in aligning branding strategies with policy objectives. Furthermore, the disconnect between various stakeholders, including government agencies, local businesses, and community members, can hinder cohesive branding efforts, resulting in fragmented messages that fail to resonate with target audiences.

To address these challenges, municipalities must adopt a more integrated approach that combines marketing strategies with community engagement and policy development (Stylidis et al., 2014).

Moreover, while recent scholarship has expanded the conceptualisation of place branding to include multisensory and experiential dimensions (Eshuis & Ripoll González, 2025), empirical studies examining these approaches in rural contexts remain limited. There is also a gap in understanding how digitalisation can be harnessed by rural areas, not just to promote tourism, but to support broader sustainable development goals and community resilience.

Despite the growing body of international literature on place marketing and branding, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remains underrepresented in both conceptual and empirical contributions to the field. The unique socio-economic history, governance structures, and post-socialist transformation of CEE countries shape the way local identity, community engagement, and policy integration evolve in rural place marketing strategies (Kovács & Musterd, 2013; Hospers, 2011). While Western European and North American case studies dominate the discourse, CEE contexts are often treated as peripheral or transitional rather than as sites of theoretical innovation. This marginalisation limits the transferability of existing models and overlooks the nuanced mechanisms of participation, resource mobilisation, and symbolic identity-building that emerge in this region (Lang & Görmar, 2019). Recent studies have begun to explore these differences, but a coherent regional perspective

remains lacking (Sotarauta et al., 2021). Strengthening the visibility of CEE-based empirical insights could significantly enrich the global theoretical discourse by introducing alternative governance logics, identity constructions, and adaptive strategies relevant to rural and small-town development. Therefore, integrating CEE contexts into mainstream place marketing research is not only a matter of geographic representation but also essential for building more inclusive, context-sensitive, and globally relevant theoretical frameworks.

2.4. Towards an Integrated Framework for Rural Place Marketing

Addressing these gaps requires a more nuanced, interdisciplinary framework that combines marketing theory, territorial development, sustainability science, and stakeholder governance. Recent studies emphasise the importance of participatory approaches: involving residents, local businesses, and civil society in crafting shared narratives that highlight unique local assets while building social cohesion (Campelo et al., 2014). Similarly, partnerships with educational institutions and digital platforms can enhance capacity building and foster innovation, crucial for long-term success (Eshuis & Ripoll González, 2025).

As emphasised by recent studies, the effectiveness of place marketing in rural contexts often depends on the community's shared perception of identity and the ability of local stakeholders to convey it through coherent branding narratives (Karagkouni & Dimitriou, 2025).

Moreover, the role of education and capacity building in rural place marketing cannot be overstated. Equipping local stakeholders—such as community leaders, entrepreneurs, and residents—with knowledge about effective marketing strategies and digital tools can foster a more empowered and proactive approach to promoting their unique offerings. Campelo et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of a sense of place in destination branding, arguing that a deep connection with local culture and heritage is essential for creating compelling and sustainable place marketing strategies. This connection not only enhances the authenticity of the marketing efforts but also encourages community pride and involvement, ultimately leading to a more vibrant and resilient rural identity.

2.5. Community-Centred Place Governance and Participatory Decision-Making

In recent debates on place marketing and branding, the role of citizens has shifted from passive recipients to active stakeholders in shaping place identity and influencing strategic direction. Scholars increasingly emphasise that enhancing community governance and embedding citizen participation not only adds legitimacy but also strengthens public value outcomes (Jäntti et al., 2023).

Citizen participation is most effective when integrated across strategic, managerial, and operational layers of local governance. Jäntti et al. (2023) illustrate this in their study of Finnish municipalities, where participatory mechanisms—when institutionalised—offered deeper insights into residents' everyday experiences and enhanced the responsiveness of municipal decision-making.

Place marketing must therefore adopt a governance perspective that incorporates citizen engagement not only in brand communication but in strategic co-creation. As Eshuis et al. (2014) argue, stakeholder dynamics and resident involvement are central to generating authentic place narratives and fostering a shared sense of place. This approach moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward empowering residents to shape their environments and community identity.

In the digital era, community engagement also relies on co-creation through online platforms. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), as well as Saxton et al. (2012), show how nonprofit organisations and public institutions increasingly use social media to engage stakeholders, foster relationships, and build dialogic participation rather than merely transmitting information. These insights are transferable to municipal branding, where digital strategies

can facilitate inclusive, two-way communication and enhance collective ownership of place identities.

Conceptually, this shift is supported by participatory governance frameworks such as Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation" and Fung's typology of participation mechanisms. These models highlight a continuum from tokenistic consultation to full empowerment and help evaluate the degree to which citizens are included in shaping place development (Fung, 2006).

By embedding such participatory practices in place marketing strategies, local governments can shift from image-building to decision support systems that reflect genuine community needs and aspirations—particularly important in rural and post-socialist contexts, where top-down approaches have historically dominated public discourse.

Given these conceptual and empirical gaps, this study focuses on mapping the widest possible body of literature, without year restrictions, as a first step toward understanding how rural and resident-centred dimensions of place marketing have evolved within the CEE context.

3. Methodology

In our preliminary research, we approached the topic of place marketing using multiple methods: conducting analyses of SAGE, SCOPUS, and Web of Science (WoS) databases, examining trends via Google Trends, and qualitatively analysing various case studies. This comprehensive process aimed to reveal gaps in the literature where further research could produce both theoretical contributions and practical applications (Reicher et al., 2023). Based on our research experience thus far, it can be stated that the filtering criteria used by the SAGE database differ significantly from those of the other databases, rendering its results not directly comparable with the lists obtained from the other two sources. In the Scopus database, place marketing plays only a marginal role, with a considerably lower number of publications related to the topic. Consequently, we concluded that the Web of Science database provides the most comprehensive and representative dataset for the purposes of our study.

The long-term goal of the research is to develop a complex, practice-oriented system model that supports the alignment of place marketing with local residents' needs, management decision-making, and increasing community acceptance. To lay the groundwork for our research, we first applied the methodology of systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019) as an independent research procedure, the aim of which is to examine the existing scientific literature on a given topic in a comprehensive, objective, and methodologically repeatable manner. It collects and synthesises the results of existing research to provide a clear picture of what we already know about the topic. It identifies areas where knowledge is incomplete, contradictory, or underrepresented. It helps to systematise theoretical models, concepts, research methods, and results. It provides researchers, practitioners, and decision-makers with well-founded, aggregated knowledge on a given topic. It uses transparent and reproducible procedures to exclude subjective biases and ensure objectivity (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Okoli & Schabram, 2010). For the sake of transparency and reproducibility, we predetermined and clearly documented the search strategy. We defined the search keywords, the filtering criteria, the method of handling synonyms, and the structure of the filtering logic. The predetermined research questions also furthered the researchers' awareness. We conducted the search in the WoS scientific database in a methodologically consistent manner, resulting in the processing of 549 publications. In addition to text analysis of the keywords and abstracts of the 549 publications, we also performed bibliometric network analysis using the VOSviewer software (version 1.6.19), a software tool designed for constructing and visualising biblio-

metric networks based on citation, co-authorship, and keyword relationships. We used it for keyword co-occurrence patterns and the detection of thematic clusters, offering valuable insights into the intellectual structure of place marketing research. We standardised the keywords using a thesaurus file that can be used in the software (Supplementary File S1).

The thesaurus file helps to create a clear, accurate, and meaningful bibliometric network. It allows us to analyse not only word frequency but also a meaningful conceptual structure behind the data. When checking the selected keywords, we excluded terms that could have caused distortion (e.g., country or region names, general methodological concepts). Although the complete dataset covered the period between 2002 and 2025 (Supplementary File S2), due to the significant increase in publications (229 articles in five years, compared to 320 articles between 2002 and 2019), a separate analysis was conducted for the period 2020–2025 (Supplementary File S3). This allowed for a more nuanced examination of the impact of recent thematic shifts, such as COVID-19 or sustainability, on place marketing. The analysis of the shorter, more recent period minimised potential bias from earlier dominant paradigms and enabled the identification of new conceptual structures.

The publications were identified on the Web of Science Core Collection database on 26 March 2025, using the following search criteria:

TOPIC = "place marketing" AND
LANGUAGE = English AND
Open Access = Yes AND
REGION = Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia AND
WoS Categories = Economics, Business, Management, Business Finance, Social Sciences Interdisciplinary, Urban Studies, Communication, Agricultural Economics Policy, Regional Urban Planning

During the search, we identified 51,344 hits. Of these,

- 36,725 hits were excluded because they did not meet the language and access criteria,
- and a further 888 studies were excluded based on the WoS category filter.
  To ensure transparency and replicability of the systematic review process, we applied language and access restrictions as eligibility criteria. Only English-language publications were included, as English is the dominant language of international scholarly communication, thereby enhancing comparability and accessibility. Additionally, we restricted the dataset to Open Access articles to guarantee full-text availability, enabling in-depth content analysis of abstracts, keywords, and core arguments. This also aligns with open science principles, supporting broader dissemination and validation of our findings. To maintain thematic consistency and relevance to our research focus, we limited our search to Web of Science categories related to place marketing, economic development, community needs, and strategic management. These categories—such as economics, business, management, urban studies, and interdisciplinary areas of social sciences—encompass the theoretical and applied contexts in which resident-centred perspectives are most likely to appear in place marketing. The exclusion of unrelated categories (e.g., engineering, natural sciences) helped to minimise noise and improve the clarity of the bibliometric analysis.

- **Keyword:** place marketing (51,344 records)
  The search term "place marketing" was chosen as the primary query because, based on our preliminary research and prior professional experience, this keyword most accurately captures the conceptual core of the field under investigation. It is broad enough to include all relevant studies, yet specific enough to maintain conceptual consistency. The term represents the most direct link between marketing logic and

territorial development policy. While cognate terms such as "place branding," "territorial marketing," and "destination marketing" were initially considered, pilot tests showed that these yielded a high proportion of tourism- or corporate-focused results that diverged from the intended scope of rural governance and resident-centred development, whereas the closest synonym, "territorial marketing," produced very few unique records, most of which overlapped with the "place marketing" corpus.

- **Language:** English-language studies (46,404 records)
  To ensure accurate interpretation and consistency in content analysis, only English-language publications were included. This decision reflects both the dominance of English as the primary language of high-quality international scholarship and the need for methodological transparency when analysing abstracts and full texts.

- **Access:** Open access status (14,619 records)
  Only open-access publications were included to guarantee full-text availability and allow comprehensive content analysis. This also reflects the current trend in academic publishing, where most reputable international journals operate under open-access models. Preliminary tests without the OA filter produced similar cluster patterns, confirming that this restriction did not bias the results.

- **Geographical focus:** Central and Eastern European countries
  (Romania (217), Bulgaria (29), Czech Republic (164), Estonia (35), Croatia (95), Slovakia (106), Hungary (103), Poland (617), Latvia (53), Lithuania (61), Slovenia (64))
  Our research interest specifically targets EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). As researchers based in this region, we are particularly interested in its shared socio-economic, historical, and geographic characteristics, which provide a coherent comparative context. These countries exhibit similar post-socialist transitions, economic structures, and rural development challenges, indicating that studies on place marketing from these contexts tend to share a common analytical focus. Moreover, CEE ruralities often face funding volatility and institutional capacity constraints, making resident-centred tools especially relevant for sustainable territorial governance.

- **WOS categories**: Economics (287), Business (143), Management (138), Business Finance (58), Social Sciences Interdisciplinary (30), Urban studies (27), Agricultural Economics Policy (20), Communication (1), Regional urban planning (25).

In our judgement, these categories are the most likely to contain genuinely marketing-focused studies within the territorial development domain, while remaining close to our conceptual scope.

- **Time interval:**

  2002–2025: 549 records
  2020–2025: 229 records
  2002–2019: 320 records

Given the marked increase in publications during 2020–2025, we analysed this subperiod separately to capture recent shifts (e.g., digitalisation and crisis-related topics) and to compare cluster structures and thematic emphases with the longer baseline period.

Given the well-documented noise introduced by Keywords Plus in WoS searches, we pre-specified a two-step search: an initial TOPIC-based retrieval for coverage and a secondary TITLE–ABSTRACT–KEYWORDS run for precision. The latter is designated as a sensitivity check, while the former served as the primary dataset.

After the screening and eligibility assessments, 549 scientific publications remained that fully met the predefined inclusion criteria and were available in full text for analysis.

- Duplicate records: No duplicate entries were identified; hence, no removal was necessary ($n = 0$).
- Automated tools: No automated screening tools were applied during the selection process.
- Additional registers or external sources: None were used beyond the Web of Science Core Collection ($n = 0$).
- Access issues: All records retrieved were open access; therefore, no access-related exclusions occurred ($n = 0$).

These conditions ensured the transparency and reproducibility of the systematic review, enabling comprehensive full-text analysis without bias introduced by restricted access or automated filtering mechanisms.

The relevance of the publications included in the resulting database was assessed based on their titles and abstracts, and the review process was completed by reviewing the full texts.

As a result of the validity test and content analysis, we identified 80 publications out of 549 studies that contained terms (residents, citizens, population, community, local residents, inhabitants) in their titles, keywords, or abstracts that directly referred to the population. These were subjected to a more in-depth content analysis, in which each study was evaluated based on its full text.

The evaluation criteria were as follows:

- Does the study actually address the needs of the population?
- Does it use a management-oriented approach?
- Is it related to supporting local decision-making?

The PRISMA 2020 flowchart (Figure 1) summarises the step-by-step process used to identify, screen, and include studies for this systematic literature review. Starting from an initial 51,344 records identified on the Web of Science Core Collection, a multi-phase filtering process was applied based on language, access type, geographic affiliation, and scientific category. After removing irrelevant records and assessing eligibility, 549 articles remained that met all inclusion criteria. From these, 80 studies were further selected for in-depth full-text content analysis, based on explicit references to residents, citizens, or community-related terms. The process followed PRISMA's core principles of transparency, reproducibility, and systematic rigour.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the bibliometric procedure, both authors independently conducted the WoS filtering and VOSviewer mapping using the refinement criteria detailed above. The resulting visualisations and cluster structures were consistent across both runs, confirming the robustness of the applied methodology.

We acknowledge that the exclusive reliance on the Web of Science Core Collection and open-access publications introduces limitations. While our approach allowed for full-text access and methodical control, it may have excluded relevant but paywalled or grey literature. Additionally, although the use of a thesaurus file increased keyword precision, it may have introduced minor distortions in cluster formation. However, all filtering steps were conducted independently by multiple researchers and reconciled for consistency to mitigate subjective bias.

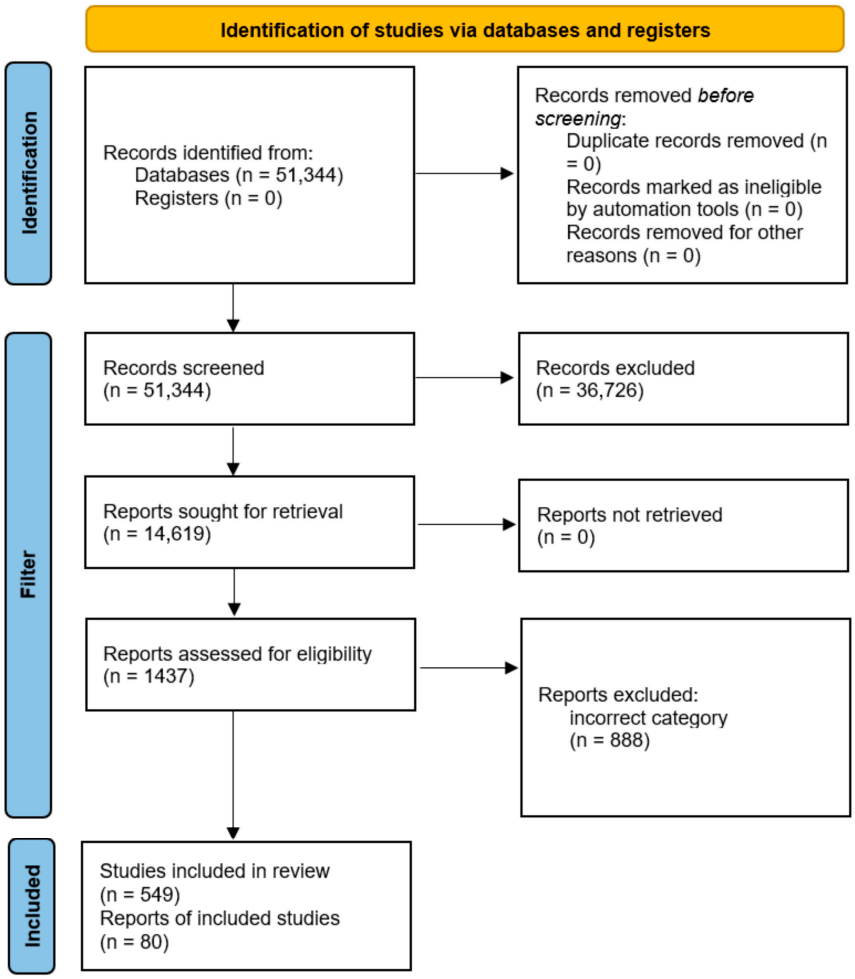


Figure 1. The research process: PRISMA diagram.

Below, in Figure 2, the research process is also shown graphically.

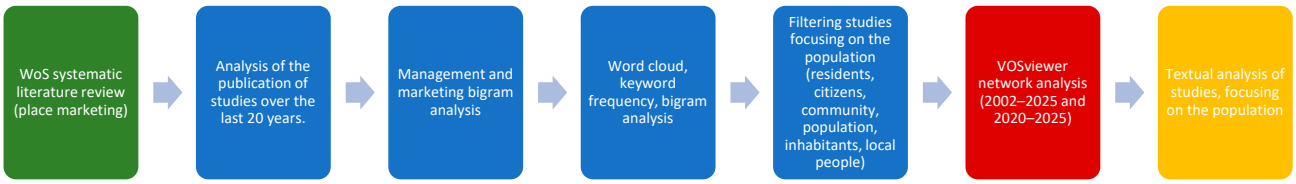


Figure 2. The research process.

4. Results

As a first step in our research, we examined how the number of publications containing the term "place marketing" in the topic category (title, abstract, keyword plus and author keywords) has changed over the past 25 years.

We can see that at the beginning of the millennium, only a few people were interested in the topic. The number of publications rose slowly until 2010. At that point, the topic began to gain popularity, and in 2019, 70 studies had been published with this keyword. However, interest is waning again, even though the problems of small towns are far from disappearing. The appearance of the term "management" in studies examining the relationship between community marketing and the population suggests that addressing the population's needs is not only a sociological or communicational issue, but also an organisational and strategic one. This perspective brings us closer to truly putting marketing tools at the service of community value creation. In these publications, the term

"management" appears only 81 times among the keywords. It appears in 93 abstracts, but only 23 times on its own (Figure 3). In other cases, it is associated with various terms, such as marketing management, knowledge management, innovation management, supply chain management, strategic management, quality management, process management, portfolio management, and project management.

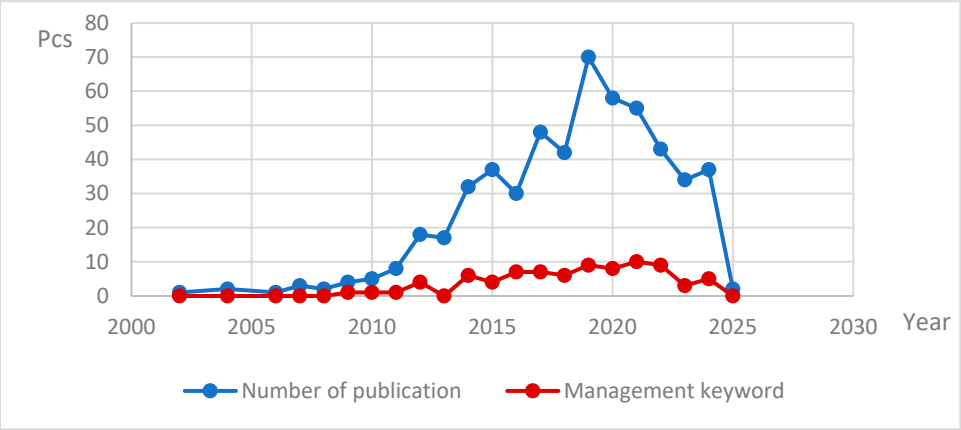


Figure 3. Place marketing keyword in topic and management keyword in abstract—number of publications.

The most common words and bigrams in publications with the keyword management are marketing (78), digital (32), innovation (47), business (38), companies (55), organisation (25), enterprises (42), digital marketing, b2b marketing, marketing management, organisational culture, knowledge management, strategic management, and Industry 4.0. The keywords and bigrams tourism (25) (which ranked relatively high but was not dominant), place marketing (6), sustainable development (8), and destination management (which appeared only once in the list of keywords) refer to the topic of tourism. Publications discussing settlement/population topics include the keywords social media (5), labour market (5), emerging markets (7), and income inequality (5) in a list with the keyword management. However, the terms population and residents do not appear anywhere, and the term urban appears only marginally. It is therefore clear that the dominant focus is on the corporate and organisational context (business, companies, enterprises, organisational culture), with digital transformation and strategic management as well as B2B and marketing-oriented topics also appearing. Tourism does appear, but it is not the main topic, as tourism only appeared 25 times in the management keyword group. Terms focusing directly on the local population or communities were practically absent from this group. Instead, macroeconomic or competitiveness aspects dominate (economic development, competitiveness, innovation).

The word cloud visualisation shows the frequency of keywords, clearly illustrating the dominant economic innovation discourse and the marginalisation of community dimensions. Based on the visualisation, the main themes of the research are economic growth and competitiveness, a market-oriented approach, innovation processes, and management strategies. The words community, residents, citizens, and participation appeared to a lesser extent or marginally, indicating that the perspective of the population is underrepresented (Figure 4).

Figure 4 also highlights the 10 most frequently occurring terms in the abstracts. The word "market" (668) ranks first as the most frequently occurring word, which clearly indicates that settlement marketing literature is primarily interpreted in an economic and competitive context. The words "research" (462), "paper" (311), "analysis" (306), "study" (298), and "results" (264) indicate a methodological and publication context. What

type of study was conducted, and what were the results? The word "place" (370) shows that the local dimension is present, but only in connection with market logic. Development (328) also represents an economic and strategic perspective. Finally, economic (289) indicates that the topics have a strong macroeconomic approach, and marketing (260) shows that the main focus is on marketing, but does not necessarily apply a population-based approach.



Figure 4. Word cloud with all abstracts (2002–2025) (own research).

The list does not contain any terms that refer to the public experience (e.g., citizens, residents, community, engagement, satisfaction) or emphasise social dimensions (e.g., well-being, participation). This clearly shows that scientific discourse does not consider community value creation to be its primary focus, but rather the priority of economic and development goals.

In addition to word frequency, we also examined word combinations, i.e., the most common word pairs. As a result, we can say that many bigrams are methodological or publication phrases, e.g., aim paper (35 occurrences), aim article (27), paper aims (24), etc. The reason for this is obviously that many authors describe the publication process itself in the abstract. The next large group refers to social and economic topics, e.g., labour market (70), social media (44), economic development (24), young people (20), etc. Based on this, it can be said that a significant proportion of the publications discuss the labour market, social trends, economic growth, and competitiveness. Thus, place marketing and economic analyses are strongly embedded in a socio-economic context. The third large group was the territorial and geopolitical focus; these 549 records were affiliated with institutions located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Figure 5 presents the distribution of included studies by country and publication year. Poland and Romania dominate the regional output, together accounting for more than half of all CEE publications (198 and 100, respectively), followed by the Czech Republic (74) and Slovakia (48). The remaining countries—Hungary, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Estonia—show markedly lower publication activity, yet their presence confirms the region's gradual engagement with place marketing and rural development research.

When examined over time, the number of CEE-affiliated publications has increased steadily since 2015, with a particularly sharp rise between 2020 and 2025, reflecting growing attention to sustainability, digitalisation, and community participation themes in post-pandemic local development strategies.

The last large group consisted of phrases referring to sustainability and marketing, e.g., sustainable development (52), guerrilla marketing (20), and digital marketing (19). This suggests that new marketing strategies related to digital marketing are emerging. The bigram analysis complements the single-word frequency list well because it provides more precise expressions rather than just word fragments. It can be seen that the majority of word occurrences are based on an economic-logical framework, with the dominance

of "place" and "marketing" only partially focused on the local community, but rather on strategic development.

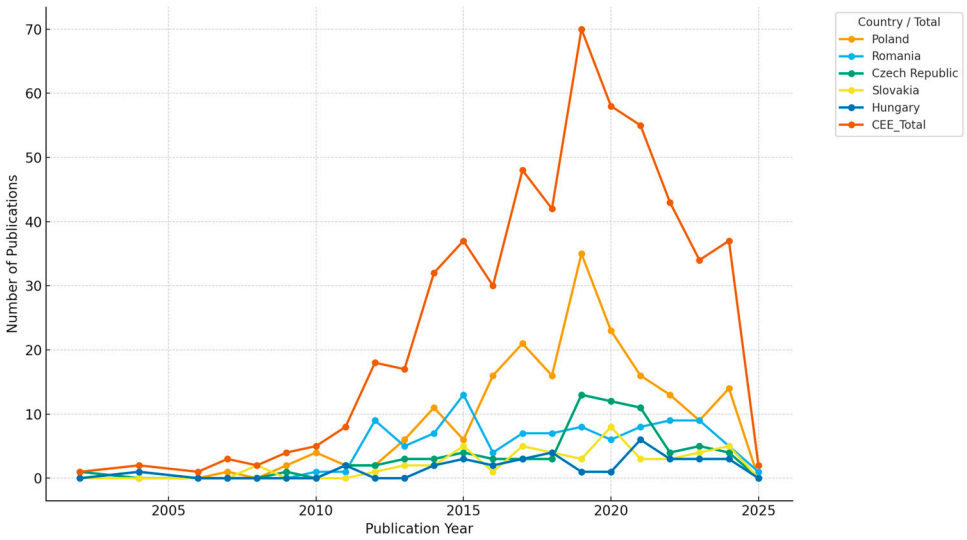


Figure 5. CEE publication trends (2002–2025): total and main countries (own research).

As a next step, we analysed the 549 publications to find studies that deal with the population. We used the keywords residents, citizens, community, population, inhabitants, and local people for filtering. We were able to identify a total of 80 publications that mention the population of the municipality under study in some way. The publications can be divided into three main topics. That is, at least one of the filter words appeared among the keywords, and there was another keyword that was common to these publications. This formed the group. These are Regional/Local Development, Quality of Life, and Social Media.

The main focus of settlement marketing research is Regional/Local Development. This is where most of the studies (32) were produced. Their main topics are often regional competitiveness, urbanisation, and rural development. The studies are well documented on regional economic processes, such as housing estates, smart cities, urban development, and rural areas. However, the publications are very macro-level. Little is said about the subjective experiences, identity, and participation of the local population. The topic of quality of life appears sporadically. It is more characterised by the examination of topics such as ecological awareness, health, and improving the quality of life. The appearance of keywords such as quality of life, health consciousness, and lifelong learning indicates this. It can be concluded that the issue of quality of life is underrepresented in the discourse on place marketing. Resident satisfaction, well-being, and social integration are not prominent topics. This is particularly important because the acceptance of local communities is one of the keys to place branding. The third topic is social media, which appears in only two publications. The role of digital communication and social media in involving the population has hardly been researched, even though it is a key tool for local identity formation, participation, and reputation management today. Several studies have been published on this topic in the field of tourism marketing, but the local community aspect is poorly represented. The remaining 36 publications could not be grouped and did not contain any keywords other than our filter words. Thus, in 44 of the 80 publications, we clearly found at least one "category keyword," while the remaining 36 publications contained, for example, citizens or community, but none of the other filters (regional, life quality, social media, etc.), so they were not assigned a topic group label.

As a next step, we analysed the network map of 549 publications extracted from the WoS database using VOSviewer. The VOSviewer keyword network is a visual research map that not only reveals the current scientific structure but also supports strategic decisions, the development of research focus, and the formulation of new scientific questions.

In the initial phase, the analysis relied entirely on the default settings of the software; no thesaurus file was applied, no keywords were excluded, and the co-occurrence threshold was kept at the default value of five (Figure 6). The aim of the bibliometric analysis was to explore the co-occurrence of key concepts and identify the dominant clusters of scientific discourse.

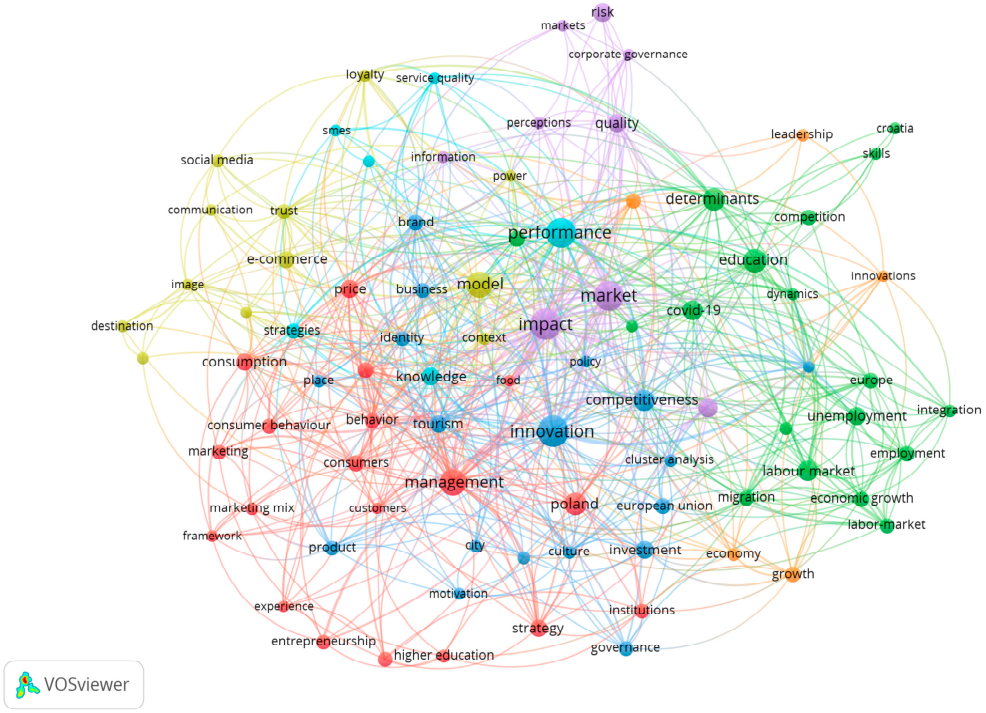


Figure 6. VOSviewer network diagram between 2002 and 2025 (own research).

There are six clusters in the network. The first cluster (yellow cluster) covers innovation and competitiveness. Its key concepts are innovation, competitiveness, market, governance, investment, risk, and quality. This group shows the connections between economic growth, competitiveness, and innovation management. Typically, strategic and macroeconomic research is related to this cluster. The second cluster (blue cluster) deals with the analysis of performance and the economic environment. Its key concepts include performance, competition, determinants, financial crisis, growth, economy, etc. The group organised around performance shows the relationship between corporate performance, competition, financial crisis, and economic institutions. This group focuses more on the macroeconomic environment. The third cluster (green cluster) revolves around management and marketing. It includes key concepts such as management, consumers, marketing mix, price, product, etc. Here, management is linked to consumers and products from the perspective of marketing management. This cluster represents the basis of classic marketing management research. The fourth cluster (purple cluster) contains key concepts related to the labour market and social integration, such as labour market, migration, unemployment, employment, education, integration, etc. This cluster has a strong socio-economic orientation and examines the relationship between the labour market, migration, and sustainability. It is characterised by a strong social policy and employment focus. The fifth (red) cluster deals with consumer behaviour and digital communication. It includes keywords such as

trust, loyalty, brand, satisfaction, social media, e-commerce, consumer behaviour, etc. This group captures the topic of digital marketing and consumer behaviour. The emergence of COVID-19 shows the latest trends and the impact of the pandemic on consumption. The last, sixth cluster (light blue) contains keywords related to local identity and branding, such as city, identity, place, tourism, satisfaction, and globalisation. This smaller cluster focuses more on local identity, city branding, and tourism. It is particularly relevant from a place marketing perspective.

The analysis of the clusters shows that the local community experience (community, residents) is almost completely marginalised. Social media is less related to place marketing and more to consumer behaviour. The quality-of-life dimension is underrepresented in the key network, which means that studies have not examined this aspect.

With the help of overlay visualisation, we can also examine trends and shifts over time (Figure 7).

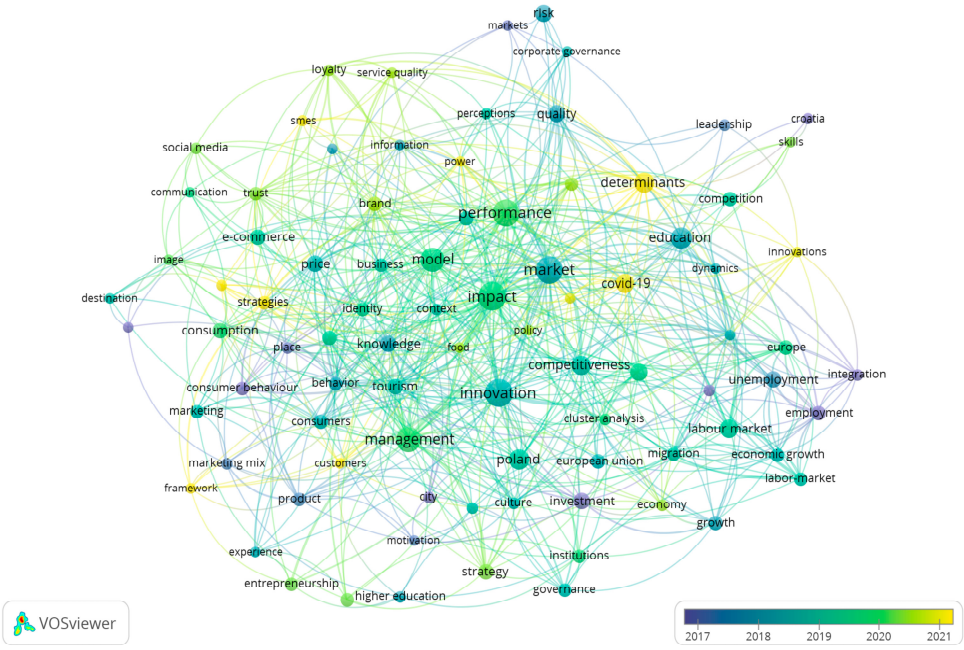


Figure 7. Overlay visualisation—6 clusters (own research).

In Figure 7, we can see that in the period up to 2017, the terms city, identity, competition, financial crisis, institution, economy, and growth were dominant. These are traditionally long-studied areas of place marketing. Topics that have been present for a long time and are still present today include innovation, market, management, performance, education, and sustainability. These topics reinforce the economic and development focus and are constantly present in the literature. The most recent concepts, appearing after 2019, are COVID-19, social media, e-commerce, trust, loyalty, and management. These concepts are pandemic- and digitalisation-focused that bring residential and consumer aspects to the fore. This is particularly interesting because they are already partly closer to issues of community experience, even if the management discourse remains within an economic framework.

The temporal distribution of studies appearing under the topic of "place marketing" showed that more than half of the literature was published after 2019 (Figure 3). Since the entire study covers a very long period (22 years), the first 18 years were less active in terms of publications; they carry the same weight as the very active last 5 years, so we analysed these 5 years (2020–2025) separately to see what changes the latest research trends have brought.

When analysing the keywords, in the previous phase, we discovered that the same terms often appear in both singular and plural forms, and that clear synonyms are also common, so we introduced a thesaurus file to harmonise synonymous terms and improve the clarity of keyword clustering. The content of this file is as follows:

innovations → innovation;
labour-market → labour market;
markets → market;
perceptions → perception;
sustainable development → sustainability;
customers → consumers;
strategies → strategy.

The use of the thesaurus file is very important because the raw VOSviewer cannot automatically handle word stems, so this makes the network more accurate and the nodes more precise.

When constructing the network, we applied different minimum co-occurrence thresholds (4, 5, 6), which allowed us to distinguish between main topics and peripheral concepts. We tried to filter out weaker, random co-occurrences. At the end of the process, we removed keywords that would have clearly interfered with the content analysis. These included terms referring to the methodology, such as antecedents, cluster analysis, model, or terms referring to the research region, such as European Union, Poland, etc. These were thematically neutral or distractingly common words (mainly geographical and methodological) that would have distorted the clustering process. As a result, we obtained a consciously filtered, thematically refined set of words showing the dominance of the main conceptual clusters, which clearly reveals which concepts are closely related. By removing the local context, regional aspects were pushed into the background, and the thematic focus became more pronounced without model- and impact-type general words.

Based on preliminary tests, we decided to set the co-occurrence threshold to 4, as higher values resulted in overly fragmented networks. During the period under review, 229 publications appeared. Thus, the previous value of 6 proved to be too strict. The number of edges was only 18, which made it unsuitable for network analysis. No clusters emerged, and it was challenging to identify topic groups. With a value of 5, the number of edges increased to 33, but the above-mentioned problems remained. With a setting of 4, the number of edges was 56. Well-defined clusters could be observed. In a corpus of this size, this can be considered an ideal number of edges. Medium-strength connections were also clearly visible, but the appearance of many weak connections was not disturbing. New topics such as COVID-19 and social media were also observed. With setting 3, the number of edges was 95. Countless marginal connections appeared, and the possibility of clustering was lost again.

During the analysis, with a co-occurrence of 4, we identified five clusters (Figure 8). We can see a Labour Market and Economic Dynamics cluster, in which the terms labour market, unemployment, education, and employment play a major role. This group reflects explicitly the labour market and socio-economic context. These topics are mainly related to crisis management, structural challenges, and human capital development. We identified a digital consumption and attitudes cluster. This cluster links the topics of the pandemic and digital consumption and is complemented by social and cultural dimensions (social media, e-commerce, consumption, COVID-19). The context of trust, attitudes, and digitalisation is prominent—this is a recent trend, especially due to the impact of COVID-19. The third cluster focuses on management and performance. This is the core of the classic management and innovation discourse, where marketing and strategy are linked to performance and consumers. Although the main traditional place marketing

analysis is found here, it is presented from a more economic and corporate perspective. The fourth cluster covers the concepts of economic growth and sustainability and is based on the topics of macroeconomic growth and sustainable development (economic growth, sustainability, competitiveness, economy, governance, infrastructure). It interprets place marketing primarily as a competitiveness and development goal. The last cluster is related to the topic of market and influence. This is a transversal group that includes concepts related to market and performance measurement. The concepts of "impact," "quality," and "determinants" are central to the research, but these are often more methodological in nature. The clusters were named according to the sets of concepts they comprised. These interpretive labels were chosen to best reflect the thematic focus and meaning of the terms within each cluster.

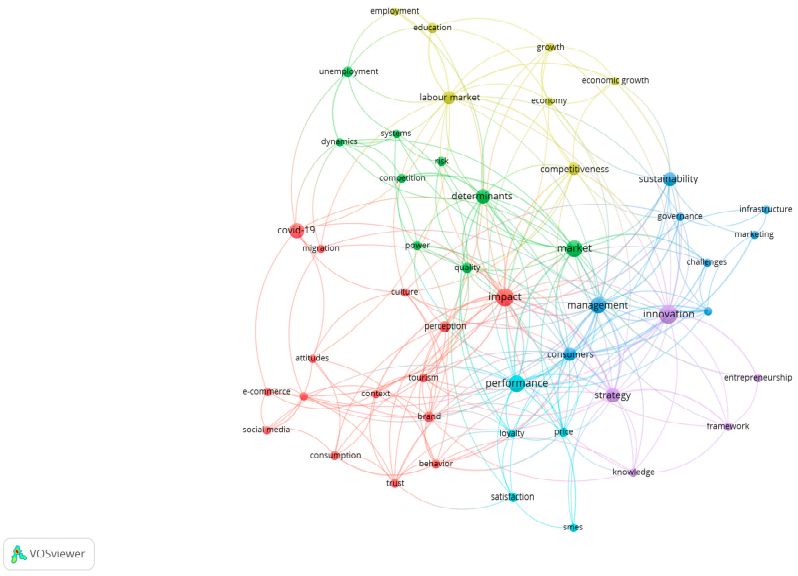


Figure 8. Network visualisation of publications between 2020 and 2025 with a co-occurrence setting of 4 (own research).

Most studies continue to be based on economic logic (market, performance, competitiveness) (Table 1). New topics revolve around digital consumption (e-commerce, social media) and the impact of the pandemic (COVID-19). Public participation, experience, and community aspects are only indirectly related (trust, attitudes), but they are not dominant in this new period either. It is clear that in recent years, the pandemic and digitalisation have brought new topics into the discourse, but they have not replaced the economic focus, only complemented it. The city, place, identity cluster has receded, although it was not dominant before. Community dimensions and studies related to local identity have been pushed even further into the background. The economic focus in studies has become even stronger. The concept of management remained linked to classic competitiveness and innovation. Recent literature is even less concerned with the integration of management with the needs of the population.

Overlay visualisation allows us to examine the appearance of keywords in chronological order and see how topic trends have changed. The visualisation clearly shows (Figure 9) a gradual shift in topics. Between 2020 and 2021, the topics typically focused on innovation, economic growth, competitiveness, and infrastructure. This changed in 2021–2022. Digitalisation (e-commerce, social media), sustainability, and the labour market became the focus of studies. In 2022–2023, the impact of labour market crises and the pandemic (COVID-19, unemployment), trust, and consumer behaviour (trust, loyalty, behaviour) became more prominent topics. The economic and market focus of the discourse remained dominant

throughout (market, performance, management). New focuses emerged as a result of the pandemic. Community dimensions (citizens, residents, participation) continued to be less prominent, even in recent publications.

Table 1. Network comparison of studies for the entire period and the most recent 5 years (own research).

Perspective	2002–2025 Network	2020–2025 Network
Diversity of topics	Wider (competitiveness, identity, migration)	Closer (economy, digitalisation, COVID)
Place brand, identity	Marginal, but present	Practically disappeared
Digital consumption	Less prominent	Strongly reinforced
Sustainability	Stable cluster	Less central
Management focus	Competitiveness logic	Digital and pandemic connection
Resident perspectives	Marginal	Even more peripheral

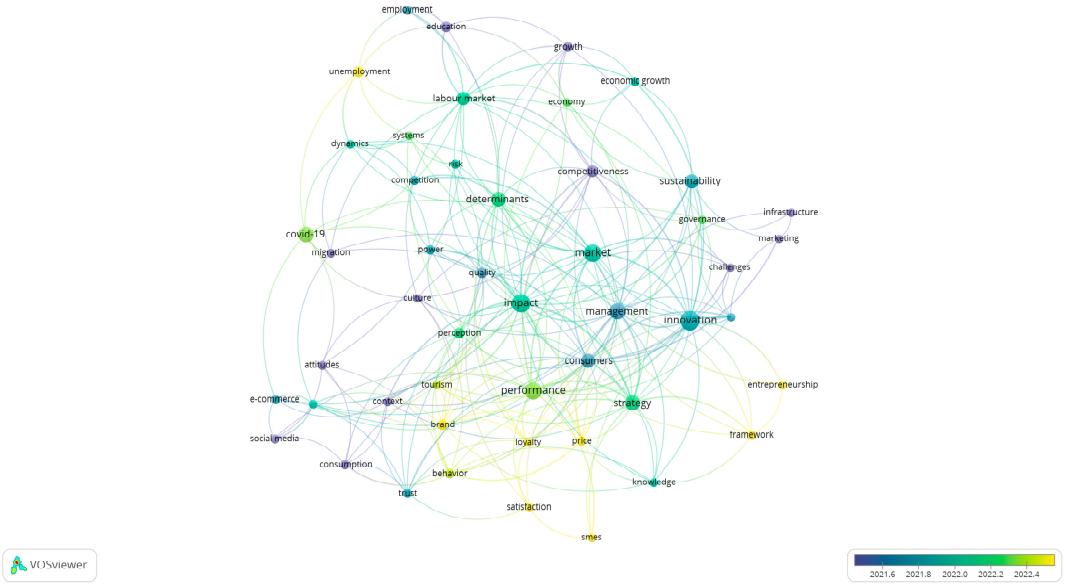


Figure 9. Overlay visualisation of publications between 2020 and 2025 with a co-occurrence setting of 4 (own research).

The word cloud visualisation provides a quick overview of the main concepts and focal points of the research discourse. We also created a word cloud from the abstracts of scientific papers published between 2020 and 2025 (Figure 10). It can be seen that the most frequently occurring word is market. This clearly shows that the topic of place marketing is primarily approached from a market logic and economic perspective. In second place is research, and the list also includes some research methodology concepts (study, analysis, result, paper), suggesting that a significant proportion of the studies use a theoretical and analytical approach. The word "place" is relatively further down the list (in fourth place). This confirms the earlier conclusion that although the selection was based on the keyword "place marketing," many publications do not actually focus on the spatial, local community context, but rather approach the issue from the perspective of marketing or management. The focus on "develop" and "use" recommends that some publications are application-focused, examining various tools and approaches and presenting strategies. The similar occurrence of "economic" and "place" confirms the economic focus of place marketing research. The keywords "resident," "citizen," "community," and "local" do not appear in the top 10. The residential perspective did not receive much attention during

this period either. The terms "participation," "needs," "governance," and "identity" also appear only as minor, peripheral elements. "Sustainability" is also not among the most common words; although it appears in the network diagrams, it is not dominant in the entire corpus.



Figure 10. Word cloud with all abstracts (2020–2025) (own research).

It is therefore clear that the majority of the literature examined is market-oriented, research-oriented, and based on economic logic. There is a need to broaden the approach towards a resident-centred, management-based place marketing approach.

Comparison with the word cloud created from the entire database (Figures 4 and 10). The words "market" and "research" appear at the top of both word clouds, indicating a stable focus on these topics throughout the entire period. The word "place" is prominent in both word clouds, confirming the focus on "place marketing" in the publications examined, although its relative importance has decreased in the more recent period (2020–2025: fourth place). The word "marketing" was not in the top 10 in the 2020–2025 period, while it ranked 10th in the 2002–2025 period, suggesting that the marketing framework was more prominent in earlier publications. The words "paper" and "analysis" are much more prominent throughout the entire period, indicating the predominance of a scientific, analytical approach, especially in earlier publications.

The word cloud for the period 2020–2025 shows a trend towards practical application, with words such as "use," "development," and "result." In both periods, there is a lack of terms related to the residents' perspective (e.g., residents, citizens, community), which confirms the observation that the residents' perspective rarely appears in scientific discourse, and when it does, it is only superficially (Table 2).

Bigram analysis also supports the changes seen in recent years. Phrases analysis of the titles and abstracts of scientific papers published between 2020 and 2025 showed that economic and social crises had a substantial impact on the content of scientific studies on place marketing. In response, researchers examined trends in digital communication and labour market adaptation. During this short period, the most common bigram was "COVID-19" (64 occurrences), closely followed by "19 pandemic" (34). This clearly shows that one of the strongest elements of research between 2020 and 2025 was the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the frequency of the terms "social media" (38) and "labour market" (44) also indicates that social and communication changes have taken centre stage.

The relatively high frequency of the bigram "sustainable development" (36) shows that sustainability remains an important research dimension. This suggests that the SDG goals are also incorporated into municipalities' branding and development strategies. Bigrams such as "decision making," "governance model," "policy measures," and similar terms indicate that many studies approach place marketing from a governance, management, and strategic perspective. However, bigrams such as "digital marketing," "consumer behaviour," "competitive advantage," "value added," and "economic growth" also appear, suggesting that market logic and competitiveness remain essential issues.

Table 2. Comparison of the first ten keywords (2002–2025 vs. 2020–2025).

	Entire Period 2002–2025	Period 2020–2025
1.	market (668)	market (550)
2.	research (462)	research (303)
3.	place (370)	use (262)
4.	development (328)	place (253)
5.	paper (311)	study (238)
6.	analysis (306)	develop (227)
7.	study (298)	result (217)
8.	economic (289)	analysis (178)
9.	results (264)	economic (169)
10.	marketing (260)	paper (161)

Although the bigram list for 2020–2025 is rich in economic, communication, and environmental terms, bigrams such as "resident," "citizen," "community," and "local needs" continue to be underrepresented, which reaffirms our conclusion that the resident perspective does not play a significant role in the place marketing literature.

Overall, in this short period, the focus of research is on responses to crises, digital and sustainable development challenges, and strategic decision-making and competitiveness.

Comparing the two significant periods of the total data set (2002–2019 vs. 2020–2025), we can say that the earlier period focused firmly on the transition period of post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, regional development, and the effects of EU accession. The research sought answers to the macroeconomic and political integration of the region, as well as to its structural differences. In contrast, the most recent period has been dominated by the examination of crises (e.g., COVID-19) and analyses of digital and sustainability responses to them. Comparing the research focus of the two periods, the nature of the terms used, and the target group of the research, the differences and changes are clearly visible. While significant changes have occurred in the first two areas, the community perspective remains absent from scientific work (Table 3).

As the final step of our research, we planned to conduct a full content analysis of 80 studies that contained any of the following keywords in their abstracts: residents, population, citizens, community, local people, inhabitants. The textual analysis of the downloaded studies yielded surprising results. Out of the 80 studies, only two were directly related to place marketing (Pickerill et al., 2023; Bartkowiak & Krzakiewicz, 2018).

Pickerill and colleagues illustrate, through five examples of eco-community strategies, how urban ecological futures can be made more sustainable and socially just.

In their study, Bartkowiak & Krzakiewicz explore how internal municipal relations can be utilised as part of a territorial marketing strategy to enhance a city's competitiveness and image.

Both studies approach the population as a decision-making partner, emphasise the role of sustainability, and seek innovative solutions to address the issue. Each of the studies

aligns with the research theme. One presents strategic city management tools, while the other introduces alternative urban models.

Table 3. Thematic comparison based on bigram analysis (2002–2025 vs. 2020–2025).

Aspect	2002–2025	2020–2025
Main thematic focus	Macroeconomic and regional development	Crisis response, digitalisation, sustainability
Context	Post-socialist transition, EU integration	COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty
Nature of expressions	Geographical, historical, institutional	Global trends, digital economy, management
Typical bigram examples	economic transition, post socialist, regional development, regional development, European Union	COVID-19, social media, sustainable development
Resident perspective	Rare, mostly in political or sociological framing	Still marginal, mostly from consumer behaviour angle

Our initial data collection relied on the Web of Science (WoS) TOPIC field, which indexes terms from the title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. While this approach maximises recall, our qualitative screening revealed a notable signal-to-noise problem: numerous hits mentioned "place marketing" only tangentially or were drawn in by Keywords Plus (algorithmically derived terms that are not chosen by the authors). In practice, this meant that papers primarily about regional development, sustainability, or generic economic issues were included even when place marketing was not the central lens or theoretical framework.

To probe the robustness of our findings, we designed an alternative query strategy, using a sensitivity analysis. We kept the core keyword "place marketing", but restricted matching to the Title, Author Keywords, and Abstract fields connected by the OR operator, thereby excluding Keywords Plus. All other parameters (language, regional filters, WoS categories, period, open-access status) were preserved to ensure comparability.

This alternative query identified 529 studies, closely mirroring the temporal shape of the TOPIC-based dataset. As in the original corpus, publications increase rapidly after the 2010s and dip slightly after 2020. When we compared the two corpora directly, 487 documents appeared in both sets, indicating strong convergence. The residual differences were limited: 60 studies were unique to the TOPIC query (mainly due to Keywords Plus), while 40 were unique to the alternative query (Title/Keywords/Abstract only). This pattern already suggests that removing Keywords Plus reduces noise without materially altering the overall landscape.

Across both the initial (TOPIC-based) and the alternative (Title/Keywords/Abstract-based) corpora—and across both the long (2002–2025) and short (2020–2025) windows—the resident perspective remains underrepresented in the intellectual structure of the field. Economic development, innovation, and competitiveness dominate; sustainability and crisis response have become more visible, especially post-2020; and consumer behaviour/branding persists as a stable strand. However, resident needs, co-decision, and community value creation are typically subsumed under other themes, not foregrounded as a distinct, theory-building focus.

Using the alternative query strategy (excluding Keywords Plus and limiting matching to Title, Author Keywords, and Abstract) served as a sensitivity check on our earlier results. Despite modest differences in corpus composition and slightly cleaner thematic maps, the substantive conclusion is unchanged: the resident-centred perspective in place marketing—particularly in rural contexts—remains marginal in both volume and structural prominence. This convergence strengthens our inference and justifies our resident-centred system model as a timely contribution aimed at addressing a demonstrable gap in the literature.

Our research aimed to develop a population-centred systems theory model that supports the construction of a complex methodological system. The development of this

methodology will form the basis for our future research. The integrated model proposed in Figure 11 was developed through an iterative synthesis of our bibliometric and qualitative findings. First, the six VOSviewer clusters identified across the 2002–2025 corpus revealed four persistent thematic domains—management and innovation, sustainability, digitalisation and communication, and governance and participation—that collectively structure the existing discourse on place marketing. Second, the content analysis of the 80 "resident-relevant" articles allowed us to isolate those dimensions that explicitly involve local communities as active stakeholders, highlighting engagement, identity, and decision-support mechanisms as underrepresented but conceptually critical. By integrating these two strands of evidence, we distilled a four-pillar framework—resident engagement, digital capacity, strategic alignment, and sustainable development—that reflects both the dominant and missing elements in the literature.

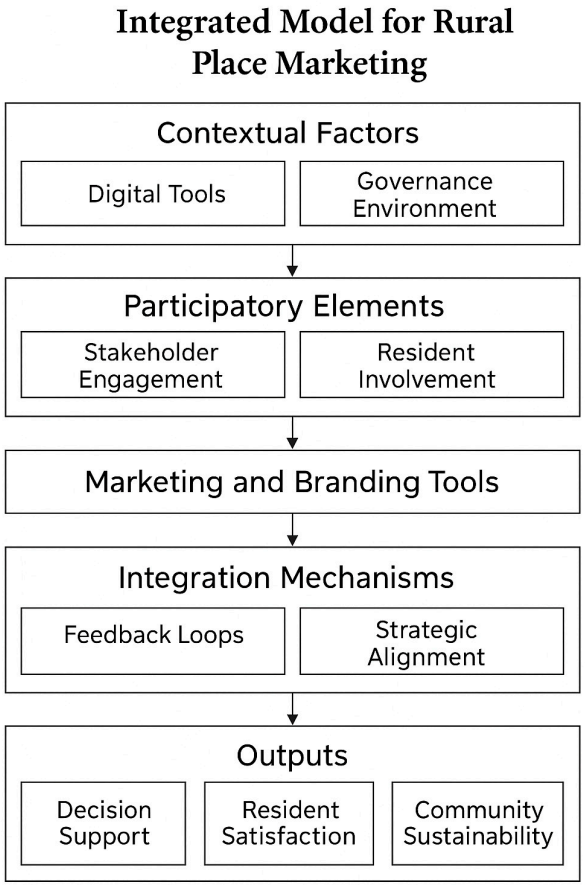


Figure 11. Integrated model for resident-centred rural place marketing.

Rather than claiming empirical validation, the model should be viewed as a conceptual synthesis that translates bibliometric patterns and qualitative insights into a coherent, resident-centred framework. It is intended to guide future empirical testing in rural and Central and Eastern European contexts, where the systematic incorporation of residents' perspectives into place marketing remains limited. In this sense, the model bridges analytical findings and practical application, offering a structured pathway for developing evidence-based, community-anchored rural governance strategies.

By identifying thematic gaps and structural weaknesses, this research lays the groundwork for future studies aimed at developing a system model to support evidence-based place management and community-oriented development. The proposed model will serve three interconnected purposes:

- To support community management by offering decision-makers an integrated framework for aligning place-based strategies with the lived needs of local populations.
- To enhance citizen participation and legitimacy, ensuring that marketing and development initiatives are not only effective but also socially anchored.
- To promote long-term sustainability by incorporating value co-creation, community satisfaction, and identity-building into the operational logic of place marketing.

In sum, while the academic literature on place marketing has evolved significantly over the past two decades, it remains overly focused on economic and branding priorities. This research emphasises the need for a paradigm shift—one that centres residents not as passive recipients of branding but as co-creators of sustainable, identity-rich, and participatory local development strategies.

This conceptual model (Figure 11) serves as a foundation for future empirical validation and practical application in municipal decision-making processes, particularly in Central and Eastern European rural contexts where resident involvement and sustainable development remain underrepresented in place marketing strategies. As a next step, this model will be empirically tested and expanded through case studies in rural municipalities. It is contributing to the development of a transferable methodological system for place-based decision-making.

5. Conclusions

Our research was limited to the work of researchers in Central and Eastern European countries. Our regionally focused review confirmed these patterns and verified the same imbalance. In their studies, researchers paid limited attention to residents' experiences and expectations and to integrating their participation into the place marketing discourse.

Bibliometric cluster analysis further reinforced this finding. While innovation, economic growth, performance, and competitiveness emerged as dominant clusters, topics related to local identity, civic engagement, or city branding were only visible in peripheral clusters, often as secondary topics. Similarly, qualitative text analysis of the 80 studies focusing on residents revealed that only a negligible number of articles actually examined local communities from a marketing or strategic management perspective. Most studies only touched on community aspects rather than embedding them in operational or planning frameworks.

This significant gap in the literature highlights the relevance and necessity of our research. The development of practice-oriented system models that not only explore but also actively integrate community perspectives into urban decision-making processes fills a significant gap in the current academic discourse. Such future-oriented frameworks can extend the scope of place marketing from a predominantly economic narrative to a more holistic, participatory, community-based development model.

In our research, we identified the importance of the field of management and examined its appearance in academic works. It was found that researchers mostly use the term management in conjunction with other concepts and do not appear in relation to community leadership.

The temporal distribution of studies on "place marketing" showed that more than half of the literature was published after 2019, so we analysed the last five years (2020–2025) separately to examine the changes in the latest research trends.

We analysed the titles and abstracts of studies identified using the keyword "place marketing" and visualised word frequency using a word cloud. The analysis revealed that, based on word frequency, economic and methodological concepts typically appear. Comparing the periods 2002–2019 and 2020–2025, it is clear that the focus of the studies has shifted. While the earlier period was characterised by an examination of social

changes and the impact of EU accession, today's studies tend to focus more on social and economic issues.

We used VOSviewer to analyse the keyword network of the literature database. As a result, we identified six clusters.

1. Innovation and competitiveness;
2. Performance and the economic environment;
3. Management and marketing;
4. Labour market and social integration;
5. Consumer behaviour and digital communication;
6. Local identity and branding.

Analysis of the clusters shows that local community experiences have been completely marginalised. The identification of six different bibliometric clusters provides a solid basis for understanding the different trends in the literature on place marketing. This thematic mapping not only highlights the economic and strategic impacts but also shows the marginal position of public participation.

The methodology used in the study provides a transparent, reproducible way to examine the structure of the literature on place marketing. Through multi-level filtering, rigorous thesaurus-driven keyword standardisation, and comparative time-series bibliometric analysis, we uncovered the structural limitations of the existing body of knowledge.

To ensure the reliability of our findings, we applied a new query strategy that is similar to a sensitivity analysis. Despite minor differences in the corpus, the essential conclusion remained unchanged: especially in place marketing studies conducted in rural environments, the resident perspective remains marginal in both quantitative and structural terms.

To conclude our research, we created a conceptual model that summarises and frames the results of our research to date. This model forms the basis for continuing our research, in which we plan to record and analyse case studies and collect empirical data.

In summary, although the scientific literature on place marketing has developed significantly over the past two decades, it continues to focus too much on economic and brand-building priorities. This research emphasises the need for a paradigm shift that focuses on residents not as passive targets of brand building, but as co-authors of sustainable, identity-rich, and participatory local development strategies.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/economies13110304/s1; File S1: Thesaurus file for the reproduction of the VOSviewer analysis. File S2: to enable the reproduction of the VOSviewer analysis (Figure 6). File S3: the reproduction of the VOSviewer analysis (Figure 8).

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