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Shared places, different meanings: Resident narrative positioning in rural place branding

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Research Article

Keywords: place branding, resident narratives, narrative authority, participatory governance, place meanings, rural tourism

Posted Date: November 24th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11718730/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Shared narratives do not necessarily mean shared meanings, consent or power. Yet place branding often treats similarities between institutional narratives and residents' accounts as evidence of local endorsement. Challenging this assumption, this study examines how residents negotiate, appropriate and contest institutional tourism narratives across two rural destinations in Portugal and Wales. Drawing on 42 interviews with 21 residents, two focus groups, institutional materials, and participant observation, it advances a critical distinction between narrative correspondence (shared references to place attributes) and narrative positioning (how residents interpret, negotiate, and challenge their meanings, priorities, and authority). Three overlapping modes emerge: narrative contestation, selective appropriation and interweaving. In Portugal, shared references to landscape and conservation coexisted with conflicts over stewardship and institutional regulation, while tourism resources acquired meanings rooted in everyday livelihoods. In Wales, tourism-engaged residents intertwined institutional narratives with lived place identities, although their support remained conditional. The findings challenge a central assumption in participatory place branding: representing residents' place attributes does not necessarily mean representing their voices. By foregrounding narrative positioning, the study offers a sharper conceptual lens for examining whose meanings shape destination brands, whose interests prevail and whether apparent narrative alignment reflects genuine participation or merely representational convergence.

1. Introduction

Two narratives can name the same landscape yet make competing claims about what it means, how it should be used and who should shape its future. This creates a central problem for place branding: similarity in the attributes represented may suggest community agreement while concealing disagreement over their meaning. Place branding involves more than images, slogans and formal marketing strategies. Places are represented through narratives about what makes them distinctive, how they are experienced and which futures are desirable. These narratives are not controlled solely by destination organisations and public institutions: residents also contribute through everyday practices, relationships and accounts of place (Braun et al. 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015; Stoica and Kavaratzis 2026). The question is not simply which attributes are projected, but whose interpretations give those attributes meaning.

This has encouraged a shift towards residents as participants, co-creators and meaning-makers in place branding. Research challenges approaches in which residents are primarily audiences or ambassadors for institutionally defined representations, emphasising participation, legitimacy, and the inclusion of diverse voices (Casais and Monteiro 2019; Bisani et al. 2024; Ripoll González et al. 2025). Recent scholarship further identifies intentional and informal practices through which residents contribute to place-brand meaning (Leicht et al. 2026; Stoica and Kavaratzis 2026).

Yet visibility is not equivalent to narrative authority. Institutional actors may curate resident voices to support a projected image (Hay et al. 2026), while consultation can coexist with limited influence over decisions (Bisani et al. 2024; Jánová et al. 2025). This matters because place branding is connected to public policy, not only to communication: institutional representations can inform development priorities and the governance of shared resources (Potapovs 2024). The critical distinction is between residents appearing in a place narrative and their interpretations shaping how that place is represented.

How institutional tourism narratives relate to residents' lived understandings of place remains particularly important. Residents may recognise features of an official place image while questioning its overall representation (Belabas 2023), or generate counter-narratives that challenge dominant tourism framings (Lüthje and Turnbull 2026). These studies demonstrate that institutional narratives are neither simply received nor uniformly reproduced.

These insights suggest a further analytical problem. Relationships between lived and institutional narratives are not always adequately captured by alignment and opposition alone. Residents and institutions may emphasise the same landscapes, heritage, cultural practices or environmental qualities while attaching different meanings, priorities and claims to them. Agreement over which attributes matter may therefore coexist with disagreement over what they signify, how they should be used, who should benefit from them or who is entitled to define their future.

Residents may also use concepts and resources that circulate within tourism discourse without reproducing institutional meanings unchanged. They can connect tourism-related elements to locally grounded priorities and desired futures. Where tourism is embedded in livelihoods and community activity, tourism-related and lived meanings may also become difficult to separate. Narrative similarity can therefore reflect neither passive acceptance nor formal co-creation.

This paper addresses the problem through narrative negotiation, which serves as an analytical orientation for examining how residents relate to meanings already circulating within tourism and destination institutions. It does not imply formal bargaining or direct interaction. Instead, it draws attention to how residents may challenge, reinterpret, qualify, reproduce or integrate elements of institutional tourism narratives within their own articulations of place.

The analysis therefore separates two dimensions. Narrative correspondence concerns thematic similarity between resident and institutional accounts: whether they refer to the same place attributes. Narrative positioning concerns how residents relate to the meanings, priorities and claims attached to those attributes. Separating these dimensions makes it possible to examine shared content without treating it as evidence of consent, endorsement or shared authority.

The study asks:

How do residents negotiate institutional tourism narratives in articulating place, and how do these relationships extend beyond simple narrative alignment or dissonance?

The article makes three contributions to place-branding scholarship. First, it shows why narrative correspondence and narrative positioning must be distinguished: repeated place attributes can conceal different understandings of stewardship, development and legitimate representation. Second, it identifies three non-linear, potentially coexisting modes of positioning—contestation, selective appropriation and interweaving—that explain why resident–institution relationships cannot be reduced to a single scale from resistance to acceptance. Third, it translates this distinction into a practical diagnostic question for participatory place branding: do residents merely recognise the attributes represented, or do their interpretations and desired futures shape the narrative? These are interpretive findings and a diagnostic proposition, not measurements of policy effects, institutional power or formal co-authorship.

2. Place-brand narratives, residents and meaning

2.1 From institutional destination representation to resident meaning-making

Earlier approaches to place and destination branding tended to centre institutional actors in this process. More relational perspectives have challenged this view by understanding place brands as continuously formed through interactions among multiple actors rather than as messages controlled by a single organisation (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015). Residents are therefore increasingly recognised not simply as audiences for destination representation but as actors who contribute to its meanings through everyday practices, stories and interactions (Braun et al. 2013).

Recent work has reinforced this shift by examining residents as participants, co-creators and interpreters of place-brand meaning (Leicht et al. 2026; Stoica and Kavaratzis 2026). This is particularly relevant in tourism destinations because residents experience place primarily as somewhere to live, while simultaneously encountering its representation as somewhere for others to visit. Their understandings of landscape, heritage, community or sustainability are consequently rooted in experiences that may differ from the purposes for which the same attributes are mobilised within tourism narratives.

Place attributes therefore cannot be assumed to carry stable or universally shared meanings. A landscape may function institutionally as a tourist attraction, a conservation resource, or a component of destination positioning, while also representing livelihood, memory, everyday recreation, belonging, or historical use for residents. The same attribute may thus be present in both narratives without carrying the same meaning.

This distinction is important for participatory approaches to destination and place branding. Research increasingly argues that residents should have opportunities to influence how their places are represented rather than simply endorse institutionally produced destination images (Casais and Monteiro 2019; Bisani et al. 2024; Ripoll González et al. 2025). Yet recognising residents as meaning-

makers does not in itself explain how their lived narratives relate to the tourism narratives already circulating around them.

2.2 Institutional narratives and narrative authority in place branding

Place-brand narratives involve selection. Some characteristics, histories and identities become prominent while others remain marginal or absent. This makes representation a governance concern as well as a communicative one: the capacity to define valued attributes can shape which uses and futures of a place appear appropriate. Potapovs (2024) argues for treating place branding as a public-policy concern, with implications for transparency and accountability. In the present study, narrative authority refers more narrowly to who can influence which interpretations of place become institutionally prominent; it is not treated as a direct measure of policy power.

Participatory and co-creative approaches seek to broaden this authority by engaging residents and other local actors. However, including resident testimony does not necessarily mean that residents determine which meanings are promoted or which development priorities are pursued. Brand co-creation and the legitimacy of representation must therefore be examined rather than inferred from participation alone (Bisani et al. 2024; Jánová et al. 2025).

Belabas (2023) shows that residents can recognise elements of official place branding while questioning the projected image; Lüthje and Turnbull (2026) describe counter-narratives that challenge dominant tourism representations. These contributions move beyond assumptions that residents simply receive or reproduce institutional narratives. Yet even an alignment–opposition distinction may be limiting: residents can question how one attribute is interpreted while supporting another, or draw on tourism vocabulary while attaching different lived meanings to it.

2.3 Narrative negotiation: correspondence and positioning

This paper uses narrative negotiation as an analytical orientation for examining how residents relate to institutional tourism narratives. Negotiation is not used here to imply a formal bargaining process or direct interaction between residents and destination organisations. Rather, it refers to the ways residents encounter, interpret, reproduce, qualify, challenge or rework meanings already circulating about their place.

To make this distinction explicit, the paper separates two analytical dimensions: narrative correspondence and narrative positioning. The first identifies whether institutional and resident accounts emphasise the same place attributes; the second examines whether these attributes carry comparable meanings, desired uses, stewardship responsibilities and claims to influence. Considering both dimensions prevents the repetition of tourism vocabulary from being mistaken for consent or co-authorship.

Narrative correspondence refers to the degree of thematic or content similarity between resident and institutional narratives. It asks whether different actors emphasise similar place attributes and themes—for example, landscape, heritage, conservation, community or tourism.

Narrative positioning refers to how residents relate to the meanings, priorities and claims associated with those narratives. It concerns not only what residents talk about, but how they interpret the institutional meanings attached to those same attributes.

The distinction is important because correspondence does not necessarily imply agreement. Residents and institutions may both value a landscape while understanding its appropriate use, stewardship or development differently. Likewise, residents may use concepts that also appear in institutional tourism discourse without reproducing their institutional meaning unchanged.

Separating correspondence from positioning also avoids treating resident–institution relationships as a single continuum from resistance to acceptance. Relationships may vary across issues and within individual accounts. A resident may support tourism development while contesting governance arrangements, reproduce elements of destination discourse while giving them locally specific meanings, or articulate tourism-related meanings as part of everyday experience.

This relational approach complements recent research on place-brand co-creation. Stoica and Kavaratzis (2026) demonstrate that residents participate in place-brand meaning through diverse practices and roles, including support, reinterpretation and contestation. The analytical emphasis here is different but complementary. Rather than asking primarily what role residents perform, this study asks what relationship exists between the meanings residents articulate and those already circulating institutionally.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Comparative design and analytical focus

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design informed by a constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. It examines two rural tourism contexts: Carvalhal de Vermilhas in Portugal and Llangorse and Bwlch in Wales. The cases were selected within a wider research project concerned with resident participation, place meanings and place representation.

The present analysis does not compare cases to assess levels of resident attachment or participation. Instead, it uses them as contrasting contexts for examining the relationship between lived place narratives and institutional tourism narratives. Both cases contained institutional efforts to represent and develop place through natural, cultural and tourism resources, while residents occupied different relationships with tourism organisations, community initiatives and destination institutions.

In Carvalhal de Vermilhas, tourism and conservation were being integrated into municipal rural development strategies, including the creation of the Vouga-Caramulo Nature Park. In Llangorse and Bwlch, tourism development took place within the Brecon Beacons National Park and alongside a local sustainable-tourism network. These contexts provided analytically useful variation in the institutionalisation of tourism, residents' involvement in tourism-related activity and the relationship between local and institutional representations of place.

The comparison is interpretive rather than causal. Differences between the cases are not treated as explanatory variables, nor are the participant groups considered representative of the wider populations of either destination. Instead, the two settings provide contrasting empirical contexts through which different relationships between lived and institutional meanings can be examined.

The collaborative visual methodology and the Carvalhal de Vermilhas component of the wider research programme have been described previously (Anonymous 2020; full reference supplied separately to the editors). This article draws on the broader comparative corpus from both countries but addresses a distinct question: how residents position themselves towards institutional tourism narratives, including when residents and institutions appear to emphasise the same attributes. The contribution is thus a focused interpretive reanalysis of narrative relationships, not a new account of the visual co-creation process.

3.2 Empirical corpus: lived and institutional narratives

The resident corpus comprises 21 distinct participants: eleven from Carvalhal de Vermilhas and ten from Llangorse and Bwlch. All participants completed an initial semi-structured video interview and a subsequent interview incorporating video elicitation, producing 42 interviews and more than 90,000 words of transcription. These are two interview rounds with the same 21 residents, rather than 42 independent respondents. The purposive, self-selected sample enables in-depth interpretation in contrasting settings, not statistical representation of either community.

The initial interviews invited participants to describe place in their own terms, including what made their village special, experiences that expressed their relationship with it and what they wished others to know. The second interviews revisited themes from the first stage and used short video excerpts of participants’ accounts as prompts for reflection. This combination produced evidence not only about place attributes but also about meanings, practices, relationships and desired futures.

The interviews were complemented by one focus group in each case. These involved collective viewing and discussion of the collaboratively produced material, video elicitation, written reflection and group discussion. Focus-group material was used to contextualise individual accounts and identify points of agreement, qualification and difference within each case.

The participant groups differed in ways relevant to interpretation. The Carvalhal de Vermilhas sample included residents of different ages, occupations and histories of connection with the village, with varying levels of organised participation. Participants in Llangorse and Bwlch were recruited through

Discover Llangorse and Bwlch, an independent local sustainable-tourism group, and were consequently more tourism-engaged and organisationally active. This difference is treated as an important contextual feature rather than as evidence that the two wider communities differed systematically in their views.

The institutional and contextual corpus was assembled from documentary material, exploratory interviews and participant observation undertaken during the wider fieldwork. In Carvalhal de Vermilhas, this included municipal and Nature Park materials on tourism, conservation, and local development, as well as exploratory interviews with the mayor and municipal tourism officer. In Wales, contextual material included National Park documents and material related to the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority's Place Ambassador programme, as well as eight exploratory interviews with individuals involved in that programme.

Participant observation provided further context in both cases. This included engagement with local activities and meetings and, in Wales, participation in activities associated with the National Park Ambassador scheme and Discover Llangorse and Bwlch. The latter is analytically distinguished from the National Park Authority: Discover Llangorse and Bwlch was a bottom-up local tourism initiative rather than part of the official institutional narrative examined in the study.

3.3 Focused narrative reanalysis

The wider project originally employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach. Interview transcripts were coded inductively, with broad sensitising attention to place meanings, place representation and participation. NVivo was used to organise and code the interview material, while observational and visual materials were organised separately and used for contextual triangulation.

For the present article, the existing qualitative corpus was subjected to a focused comparative reanalysis oriented specifically towards the relationship between resident and institutional narratives. This did not involve recoding the entire dataset from the beginning. Instead, the analysis returned to relevant coded material, transcripts and contextual sources to examine how the same or related place attributes were represented across the two narrative domains. The reanalysis proceeded through four interconnected stages.

First, the principal institutional tourism narratives in each case were reconstructed from documents, exploratory interviews and observational material. Attention was given to the attributes and development priorities through which place was institutionally represented, including nature, conservation, cultural heritage, tourism activity and local development.

Second, resident accounts were revisited to identify the place attributes participants themselves emphasised and the meanings, practices and relationships they associated with them. The purpose at this stage was not merely to record whether particular themes appeared in both narrative domains, but to establish how residents understood their significance.

Third, areas of apparent correspondence were examined more closely. Where institutional and resident narratives referred to similar attributes, the analysis compared the meanings attached to them, the uses considered legitimate or desirable, the futures associated with them and, where relevant, claims concerning stewardship, representation and decision-making authority.

Fourth, the analysis examined how residents positioned themselves towards elements also circulating within institutional and tourism discourse. Particular attention was paid to moments in which residents challenged institutional meanings, incorporated tourism-related elements while reconnecting them to lived priorities, or articulated tourism and everyday place meanings in ways that were difficult to separate.

This process led to an analytical distinction between narrative correspondence, referring to similarity in the themes and place attributes emphasised, and narrative positioning, referring to how residents related to the meanings, priorities and claims associated with those narratives. Three forms of positioning—narrative contestation, selective appropriation and narrative interweaving—were developed through the comparative interpretation of the empirical material.

These forms were not predetermined resident types, nor were participants assigned exclusively to one category. They represent relational patterns in the data and may coexist within the same account or in relation to different aspects of place. Contradictory and qualifying evidence was retained rather than treated as anomalous, particularly where residents supported tourism or conservation while simultaneously questioning their institutional framing or implementation.

3.4 Rigour and reflexivity

Several strategies strengthened interpretive rigour. The study combined two rounds of resident interviews with focus groups, institutional and contextual documents, exploratory interviews and participant observation. Triangulation examined convergences and divergences rather than seeking a single objectively correct account. Repeated encounters supported a deeper interpretation of participants' understanding of place, while the self-selected groups limited the range of perspectives examined. Findings are presented as situated relational patterns, not estimates of their prevalence across the wider populations.

The comparative interpretation also remained sensitive to asymmetries between the two cases. The Welsh participants were recruited through a tourism-oriented local network and therefore occupied positions from which tourism discourse was likely to be particularly salient. Stronger correspondence between their narratives and institutional tourism discourse cannot therefore be generalised to residents of Llangorse and Bwlch more broadly. Similarly, institutional materials differed between the cases in form and volume and were used contextually rather than as equivalent datasets.

Researcher embeddedness was also relevant to interpretation. Fieldwork involved sustained engagement with the communities rather than one-off interviews. In Carvalhal de Vermilhas, this included an extended period of collaboration with local participants and a community-based cultural

organisation. In Wales, repeated visits and participation in tourism- and community-related activities extended over more than a year. This involvement provided contextual knowledge but also required reflexive attention to how familiarity with participants and institutional actors shaped interpretation.

4. Findings and discussion

Across the two cases, recurring attributes in institutional and resident narratives did not necessarily imply shared meanings or representational authority. Three non-sequential, potentially coexisting modes of narrative positioning were identified: contestation, selective appropriation and interweaving. The modes describe relationships between lived meanings and institutional tourism narratives; they are not categories of residents or stages of a branding process.

4.1 Shared attributes, contested meanings: narrative contestation

Carvalhal de Vermilhas illustrates particularly clearly why thematic correspondence should not be equated with narrative agreement. The municipality positioned tourism as an important component of rural economic development and incorporated the Vouga-Caramulo Nature Park within its wider tourism and place-branding strategy. Natural assets, particularly the mountain and its oak forests, were framed simultaneously as resources to be conserved and as a basis for nature tourism, recreation and economic development. The municipal tourism officer described this approach through the idea of a ‘green economy’, whereby protecting the oak trees and connecting them to the municipal brand could enable tourism to generate employment and new sources of income.

Residents also placed nature, the mountain and the oak trees at the centre of their narratives. At the level of content, therefore, institutional and lived accounts showed considerable correspondence. However, this similarity concealed different relationships with the same place attributes. For residents, the mountain was connected to agricultural practices, family histories, timber and water, everyday leisure and a long-standing sense of use and collective stewardship. The oak trees were not simply environmental or tourism resources but part of the village itself. As Noémia expressed:

My village without the oak trees would not be my village.

This distinction is also important in relation to Belabas’ (2023) analysis of Rotterdam. Belabas demonstrates that residents can recognise individual components of an official brand while rejecting the overall representation because it does not correspond with the complexity of everyday urban experience. Carvalhal de Vermilhas presents a related but somewhat different pattern. The disagreement did not arise primarily because institutional actors selected the ‘wrong’ assets or omitted the attributes residents valued. Indeed, they often selected precisely the same ones. The dissonance emerged through different meanings attached to shared attributes.

The Nature Park designation made this distinction especially visible. Restrictions associated with the protected area affected practices that residents understood as historically embedded in their relationship with the mountain. José explained:

The legislation of a Nature Park limits a lot our use of the mountain and this made us get revolted… the community and mountain always coexisted… now if we want timber, from the trees we have planted, to warm our houses in the winter and we cannot cut it… this is not good for us, actually it will only hold back the village development… it will end up in more fires… because now is not ours anymore…

The disagreement was therefore not principally over whether the mountain should be valued. It concerned what that value meant in practice: conservation through institutional regulation on one side and conservation embedded in use, maintenance, livelihood and historical stewardship on the other.

Boager et al. (2025) show how residents' place narratives involve situated relationships and rights. Carvalhal de Vermilhas extends this concern to resident–institutional relationships: actors may refer to the same landscape while making competing claims over its meaning, use and governance.

Importantly, opposition to the Nature Park should not be interpreted as opposition to conservation. Pedro explicitly connected the oak trees and animals to village identity while arguing for their protection:

The animals and the oak trees are part of the village… the oak tree is part of the village identity and the animals too… there is the need to preserve… we have to preserve… the oak trees are centenary… they were here before us… we need to preserve them.

This complicates a reading of conflict based on a simple sustainability–resistance divide. Residents were not contesting the environmental value institutional actors sought to protect. They were contesting how protection was defined and enacted and, more fundamentally, whose knowledge and practices were recognised as legitimate forms of stewardship.

This matters for research on participatory place branding and destination governance. Bisani et al. (2024) argue that legitimacy and inclusivity require more than the formal presence of community actors; they depend on processes that allow representation, advocacy and meaningful co-creation. Jánová et al.'s (2025) systematic review similarly identifies persistent tokenism where participation does not entail meaningful influence. The Carvalhal de Vermilhas material shows why this is also a narrative question. Evidence of public discussion does not, in itself, demonstrate that residents could shape the institutional meanings attached to the mountain, conservation or development. What the resident accounts directly reveal is a conflict over how these shared place attributes should be understood and governed.

Narrative authority therefore concerns more than the ability to contribute a local voice. It concerns whether residents can influence the categories through which place is interpreted in the first place. A process may invite residents to comment while retaining institutional control over the central meanings attached to nature, conservation or development.

The study uses narrative contestation to capture this relationship. It occurs when residents challenge the meanings, priorities or claims embedded in institutional representations, including where substantial thematic correspondence exists. In this sense, contestation is relational: it may be strongest not where actors talk about entirely different places, but where they talk about the same place differently.

4.2 Making tourism narratives locally meaningful: selective appropriation

Contestation was not the only way Carvalhal de Vermilhas residents related to tourism and institutional narratives. Residents also articulated visions of tourism that overlapped with themes already circulating in municipal and destination discourse. However, rather than simply reproducing these narratives, they connected them to their own experiences, local practices and desired futures.

This was particularly visible when residents discussed what visitors should experience in Carvalhal de Vermilhas. The PR9 walking trail had already been developed as part of the Nature Park and could therefore be understood as an institutional tourism product. Paulo also promoted the trail, but the experience he described went beyond landscape consumption:

I would like visitors to experience our trail. There is a hiking trail that I would like them to try because if they do it they will see how beautiful Carvalhal de Vermilhas is. In particular, the circular trail that it's easy to complete and shows people what Carvalhal de Vermilhas really is… I am almost sure that if they follow the trail, they will find people working in the fields or taking care of their cattle.

The trail was meaningful because it enabled visitors to encounter Carvalhal de Vermilhas as Paulo understood it: not simply scenery but agricultural work, livestock and everyday village life. The tourism infrastructure remained present, but the meaning attached to the experience was locally reworked.

Inês similarly prioritised encounter over visual consumption:

Walking around is the best way of discovering the village… be open-minded and be willing to interact and ask the local inhabitants about the place, because only that way we can experience the place's stories.

António recommended walking routes, water streams, oak trees, the Lapa da Meruje dolmen and locally made goat cheese:

I would tell you to follow our walking routes… some of them are completely pristine… to eat something under the oak trees' shadow and if you were interested in megalithic art, I would suggest you see the 'Lapa da Meruje' dolmen… I would also recommend you taste our goat cheese, which is still handcrafted in the village…

These recommendations resemble familiar rural tourism narratives: walking, landscape, heritage, and local gastronomy. Yet they were also closely connected to what participants valued themselves. Tourism

representation was therefore not separate from lived meaning, but neither was it simply an institutional narrative adopted unchanged.

Stoica and Kavaratzis (2026) examine residents' varied practices and roles in place-brand co-creation. The present analysis addresses a complementary question: what happens to the meaning of an existing tourism narrative when residents use it? A trail, heritage site or sustainability claim may be retained but reinterpreted through everyday practices, community relations and local priorities.

The same pattern was evident in discussions of sustainable tourism. Some participants envisaged tourism as one possible response to ageing, depopulation and declining agricultural opportunities. Sustainable tourism was connected to agriculture, rural accommodation, local gastronomy, nature-based activities, rehabilitation of empty houses and the use of endogenous resources. These ideas clearly resonate with the wider sustainable tourism discourse. Yet, in residents' accounts, they were tied to a particular desired future: keeping the village inhabited, giving younger people reasons to remain or return, sustaining agricultural practices, and ensuring that local people benefited from change.

This distinction prevents the study from treating the use of institutional or tourism language as evidence of institutional influence. The data do not establish that residents learned these ideas from the municipality, nor is such a causal argument necessary. The relevant finding is that residents could take up elements also circulating within tourism-development discourse and re-ground them locally.

The study describes this as selective appropriation. Residents neither reject the wider tourism narrative nor reproduce it wholesale. Instead, they retain certain elements and reconnect them to local experience, priorities and desired futures.

This finding adds nuance to research that distinguishes support from resistance in place-branding processes. Casais and Monteiro (2019), for example, found that residents may perceive congruence with city-brand identity while still seeking greater involvement in its co-creation. Such findings already demonstrate that perceived fit and participation are not equivalent. Selective appropriation takes this argument further: even when resident narratives appear substantively compatible with tourism representation, residents may be actively reinterpreting what that narrative means.

The coexistence of contestation and appropriation is theoretically important. It shows why the three forms of positioning identified in this study should not be treated as stages or mutually exclusive categories. The same resident or community can reject an institutional interpretation of one issue while drawing productively on other elements of tourism discourse.

4.3 When tourism becomes part of lived place: narrative interweaving

A different relationship was more visible in Llangorse and Bwlch. Here, correspondence between institutional and resident narratives was generally stronger, particularly around landscape, outdoor recreation, sustainable tourism, environmental stewardship and visitor experience. However, stronger

correspondence did not mean that one narrative could simply be understood as the reproduction of the other.

The Brecon Beacons National Park Authority promoted sustainable tourism while also emphasising protection and enjoyment of the Park's special qualities. The Place Ambassador scheme was explicitly designed to provide participants with knowledge about the National Park and help develop a shared narrative for visitors. Its content included history, wildlife, geology, archaeology, dark skies, sense of place, authenticity and customer care.

For the participants in Llangorse and Bwlch, however, tourism was also part of everyday and professional life. All were members of Discover Llangorse and Bwlch, an independent, local sustainable tourism group. Some operated accommodation or visitor businesses, worked as guides or had completed the National Park Ambassador programme. The roles of resident, host, community participant and environmental steward therefore frequently overlapped.

Mark described the relationship explicitly:

Being a Brecon Beacons National Park Ambassador you have an ambassadorial slant to things in everything that you do… so if you meet people you tend to engage with them a bit more… and perhaps friendlier and take an opportunity to try to promote the park.

This quotation could be interpreted as straightforward evidence of institutional discourse shaping resident behaviour. Yet Mark's wider narrative complicates such a reading. Outdoor recreation, landscape and community were also part of his everyday experience and reasons for living in the area. Tourism promotion therefore overlapped with meanings that were already biographical and lived.

Yet correspondence does not, by itself, establish passive internalisation or institutional control. Among these tourism-engaged residents, elements of destination discourse were embedded in work, leisure, community activities and relationships with place. Tourism-related and lived meanings could therefore be closely articulated without implying that residents had authored institutional narratives.

Freya's account illustrates this overlap. Walking and cycling were activities she personally valued, but her narrative also drew on the experiences of visitors staying at her holiday accommodation. The same landscape functioned simultaneously as a home, a leisure environment, and a visitor experience. It would therefore be difficult to categorise her account as either a purely ‘resident’ narrative or a purely ‘tourism’ narrative.

Emma's position as a mountain guide produced a similar articulation of professional and personal meanings:

I just feel very privileged… to give people opportunities to come here and make memories and enjoy just being somewhere really beautiful…

The landscape is presented as something to offer visitors, but her account also conveys her appreciation of it and the meaning she derives from sharing it.

Hilary's use of tourism terminology is even more explicit:

If they took the time to spend maybe even just an hour… a couple of hours walking around the village… go to the pub and speak to local people… they would see that they're getting a truly authentic experience… the people who live here like to spend time with you and like to hear your stories and like to tell you their stories as well…

“Authentic experience” closely resembles tourism-marketing language. Yet the content Hilary associates with authenticity is rooted in ordinary social relationships: walking through the village, visiting the pub, meeting residents and exchanging stories.

Garrison and Wallace (2025) describe how personal, cultural and tourism stories may be woven together. Although their tourism setting differs, their account challenges one-directional models of storytelling and helps situate the close articulation of professional and personal meanings observed here.

The study's concept of narrative interweaving addresses a related but distinct relationship. Here, what becomes difficult to separate is institutional/tourism discourse from the meaning of place in residents' own accounts. This does not mean that the two become identical. It means that tourism has become part of the social context through which these participants live, work and make sense of place.

Freya described residents as stewards and guardians and prioritised environmental protection if tourism threatened the landscape. Rae similarly supported tourism only where it remained consistent with environmental protection:

I would find it very difficult… if tourism… didn't evolve around protecting the environment…

Emma also accepted some additional tourism but drew a clear boundary around its scale:

A few more wouldn't hurt but we wouldn’t want too many… I think it’s a nice balance here…

These qualifications matter because they demonstrate that interweaving is not the same as consensus. Tourism and stewardship could form part of the same lived narrative while participants still exercised judgement over what forms of tourism were acceptable.

Role categories alone cannot explain these relationships. A resident may act as an ambassador while qualifying the promoted narrative; another may use tourism vocabulary because it has acquired personal meaning rather than because they have formally adopted an ambassadorial role.

This is where Leicht et al.'s (2026) emphasis on resident–place relationships becomes particularly relevant. If residents assign value to place through lived relationships, the meanings they communicate

cannot be understood solely through their functional position in tourism. Their place narratives may simultaneously carry residential, professional, social and institutional elements.

Interweaving should therefore not be treated as evidence of institutional success in creating a unified destination narrative. Nor does it demonstrate participatory authorship. It describes a relational condition in which tourism discourse and lived meanings have become closely articulated.

The composition of the Welsh sample remains critical here. All ten participants were members of Discover Llangorse and Bwlch and were therefore unusually tourism-engaged. Several had direct tourism roles. The findings cannot support the claim that residents of the two villages generally share the National Park's tourism narrative. Instead, the case demonstrates how interweaving may occur among residents positioned at the intersection of tourism, community activity and everyday place experience.

4.4 Why correspondence is not consensus: contributions to place branding

The central theoretical finding is not simply that residents can disagree with official destination narratives; existing research already establishes this. It is that disagreement may remain hidden within apparently corresponding accounts of the very same place attributes. Narrative correspondence identifies the attributes that recur in institutional and resident representations; narrative positioning identifies how residents interpret their meanings, uses, priorities and claims. Treating these as separate dimensions reveals relationships that a single alignment–dissonance scale obscures.

This distinction is significant because similar content may coexist with markedly different relationships. In Carvalhal de Vermilhas, residents and institutional actors frequently highlighted the same natural and cultural assets; however, this shared emphasis coexisted with disputes over their use, stewardship, and governance. Residents also selectively appropriated tourism-related elements by reconnecting them to agricultural practices, community relationships and locally desired futures.

In Llangorse and Bwlch, correspondence was stronger and narrative interweaving more visible. Tourism, landscape and environmental stewardship were closely connected within participants’ own lived and professional understandings of place. Yet participants continued to qualify acceptable forms and levels of tourism. Strong correspondence therefore did not amount to unqualified agreement or demonstrate participatory authorship.

Table 1
Narrative correspondence and positioning across the two cases

Case	Narrative correspondence	Narrative positioning	Interpretation
Carvalhal de Vermilhas	Partial to substantial correspondence around nature, conservation, heritage and tourism	Narrative contestation and selective appropriation	Shared attributes carried different meanings concerning use, stewardship and governance, while tourism elements were also re-grounded in lived priorities.
Llangorse and Bwlch	Stronger correspondence around landscape, sustainable tourism, recreation, stewardship and visitor experience	Narrative interweaving, with qualification	Tourism and lived meanings were closely articulated among tourism-engaged participants, although environmental and community limits remained.
Analytical implication	Captures similarity in what is represented	Captures how residents relate to those representations	Content similarity cannot be used as a proxy for consensus, participation or shared narrative authority.

The distinction extends rather than replaces established accounts of place-brand co-creation. Research on counter-narratives explains how residents challenge dominant representations (Lüthje and Turnbull 2026); scholarship on co-creation identifies diverse resident roles and practices (Stoica and Kavaratzis 2026); and research on resident–place relations clarifies how attributes acquire meaning through lived experience (Leicht et al. 2026). The contribution here is to connect these insights in a two-dimensional reading of resident–institutional narratives: are actors referring to the same attributes, and are they assigning comparable meanings, priorities and claims to them? This explains why similarity and contestation need not be opposites.

Bisani et al. (2024) emphasise representation, advocacy and co-creation, while Jánová et al. (2025) document persistent tokenism in destination governance. The present study does not independently establish who ultimately controlled institutional narratives or decisions. It shows, more precisely, why narrative similarity cannot be used as evidence of residents' endorsement, meaningful influence or shared authorship.

Hay et al. (2026) further show that resident voices may be deliberately curated to fit projected images of the destination. This reinforces the need for caution when interpreting narrative correspondence. Yet the Welsh case also demonstrates the opposite problem: similarity should not automatically be attributed to institutional curation or passive internalisation. Tourism-related meanings may genuinely form part of residents’ everyday understandings of place.

The three modes are relational possibilities rather than stages. Contestation, selective appropriation and interweaving may coexist within the same account, and none automatically constitutes meaningful co-creation or institutional endorsement. Treating them as a continuum from resistance to acceptance

would reproduce the binary the distinction is intended to avoid. Figure 1 summarises the analytical framework.

Figure 1 presents narrative negotiation as an analytical relationship between lived-place narratives and institutional tourism narratives. It separates correspondence in content from positioning towards meanings and claims. Context, including governance relationships and residents' involvement in tourism, shapes interpretation but is not modelled here as a deterministic causal mechanism.

This framework reframes a practical question for place-brand practitioners. A destination organisation should ask not only whether residents recognise the assets featured in a brand narrative, but also how they interpret those assets, which uses and futures they consider desirable, and whether these interpretations can change the resulting representation. Repeated attributes may signal narrative correspondence; they do not, by themselves, confer narrative legitimacy or demonstrate participatory authorship.

4.5 Implications for place-brand practice

For practitioners responsible for a place brand, correspondence and positioning should be examined separately rather than collapsed into a single measure of community 'buy-in'. A first step is to identify the place attributes that recur across institutional material and resident accounts, without taking frequency as endorsement. A second is to explore what each attribute means to residents, which futures they associate with it, and where claims about use, benefits, stewardship or authority diverge. A third is to bring these differences into deliberation and record whether, and how, residents' interpretations influence the final narrative or associated choices. This is a diagnostic and deliberative prompt, not a validated scoring instrument or proof that a particular governance process is inclusive.

The distinction guards against opposite errors. Shared reference to a landscape may be read as consent when residents disagree over its protection or management, as in Carvalhal de Vermilhas. Conversely, correspondence may be dismissed as passive uptake of official messages when tourism-related meanings are genuinely part of residents' working and everyday lives, as among the Welsh participants. Place-brand managers should make qualified support and disagreement visible, and examine whose voices remain absent from the process.

5. Conclusion

Speaking about the same place is not the same as sharing authority over its meaning. Across rural Portugal and Wales, this study found that institutional and resident accounts could highlight the same landscapes, heritage, conservation concerns or tourism resources while attaching different interpretations and priorities to them. This is why correspondence in place-brand narratives should not be mistaken for consensus, endorsement or participatory authorship.

The study's principal conceptual contribution is to distinguish narrative correspondence from narrative positioning. Correspondence concerns whether institutional and resident accounts emphasise the same

attributes; positioning concerns how residents interpret, qualify, challenge or incorporate the meanings and claims associated with them. The distinction moves analysis beyond a binary of agreement and resistance, without assuming that an apparent match in content reveals the distribution of narrative or decision-making authority.

Three forms of narrative positioning emerged from the analysis. Narrative contestation occurred when residents and institutional actors valued similar place attributes but differed over their meanings, uses, stewardship, or governance. Selective appropriation described situations in which residents drew on elements also present in tourism narratives but re-grounded them in everyday practices, local priorities and desired futures. Narrative interweaving captured contexts in which tourism-related and lived meanings had become closely articulated within residents' own understandings of place. These forms are not sequential stages and may coexist within the same destination or resident account.

These findings shift the question for participatory place branding from whether residents and institutions use the same place vocabulary to whether their interpretations can inform representation. For destination organisations and planning authorities, shared references to landscape, heritage or sustainability cannot establish resident endorsement or influence. The evidence presented here diagnoses interpretive relationships; it does not measure who ultimately determined institutional brand content or policy. That distinction is precisely why meaningful participation must be examined as a matter of influence, not inferred from similarity in narrative content.

The study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings. The analysis is based on two rural cases and is not intended to represent rural destinations more broadly. The participant groups also differed in their relationship with tourism. In particular, all participants in Llangorse and Bwlch were members of a local sustainable tourism group, making them more engaged with tourism than residents generally are. This 21-person sample provides depth and contextual contrast rather than coverage of tourism-disengaged or marginalised perspectives. It cannot establish how common the three modes are in either community or isolate institutional effects from participants’ prior relationships with tourism. The analysis therefore does not imply that the stronger narrative correspondence identified in the Welsh case characterises the wider community. Nor does the study establish causal relationships between institutional narratives and residents’ understandings of place.

Future research could examine narrative correspondence and positioning across other destination contexts, including urban places, destinations experiencing rapid tourism growth or overtourism, and places where tourism is less embedded in everyday livelihoods. Longitudinal research could trace how positioning evolves with changes in tourism, governance and institutional representation. Studies that observe the actual production and revision of place-brand narratives could then test whether resident interpretations alter institutional decisions, rather than inferring influence from shared vocabulary. The wider implication is clear: to evaluate participatory place branding, it is necessary to ask not only whether residents' place attributes appear in a brand, but whose meanings count in defining that place and its future.

Declarations

Author Contribution

C.R. was solely responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, research design, methodology, data collection, qualitative analysis, interpretation of findings, and writing, reviewing and editing of the manuscript. C.R. also prepared the tables and figures, approved the final version of the manuscript and takes full responsibility for its content.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to the residents of Carvalhal de Vermilhas (Portugal) and Llangorse and Bwlch (Wales) who generously shared their experiences, perspectives and knowledge. Special thanks are extended to Binaural–Nodar and the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority for their support in facilitating the original fieldwork. The author also acknowledges Professor Terry Marsden and Dr Abid Mehmood for their guidance and support during the doctoral research from which this study draws.

Data Availability

The qualitative research data supporting the findings of this study, including interview and focus-group transcripts and participant-observation records, are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, the potential identification of research participants and restrictions arising from the original informed-consent arrangements. These restrictions are intended to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

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Figures

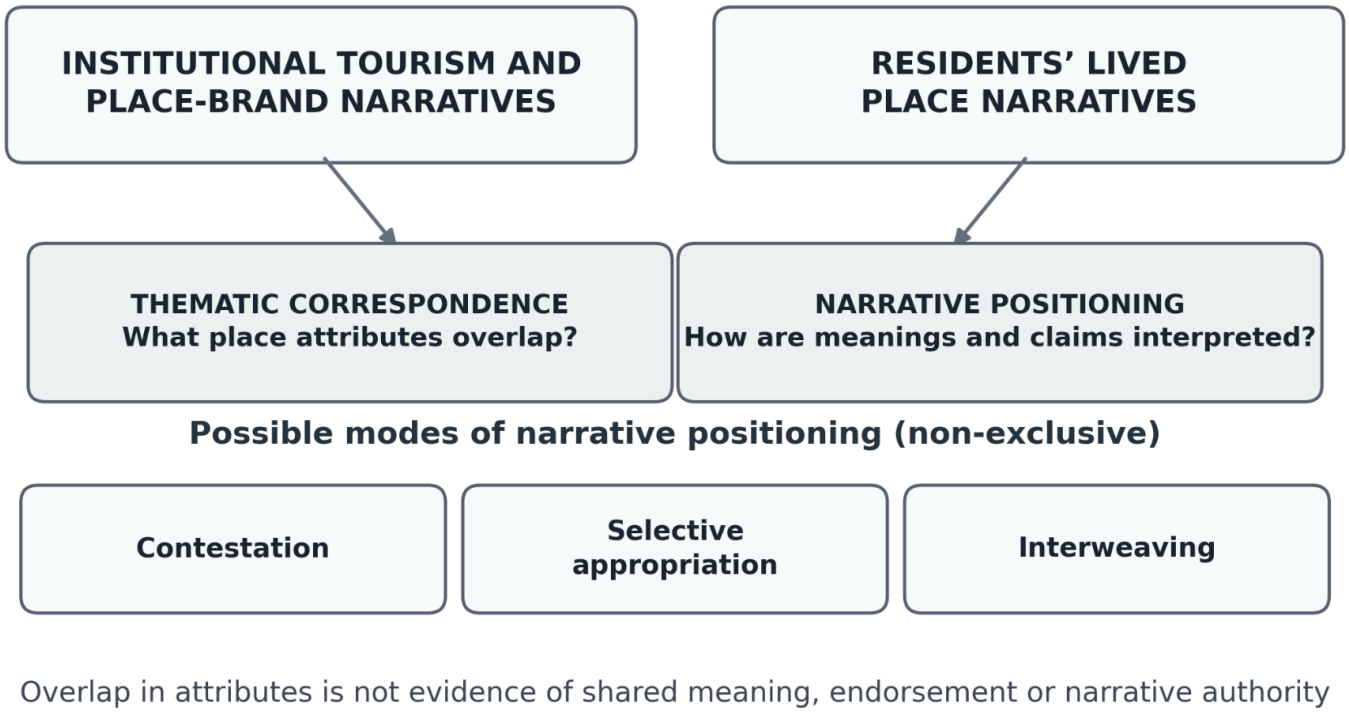

Figure 1

Analytical framework for reading resident–institutional place narratives. The modes may coexist and are not causal stages.